Beans Without Korkor?
And other stories

Sustainable Development Goals as interpreted by young writers from Africa

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
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Foreword
The stories in this Anthology by African youth remind us of the hope that mobilizes Africa around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the frustrations that go with realizing them in the context of the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the immediacy of the impact of the climate crisis. The stories represent different genres and perspectives by youth across the continent, aged 15-35 years, most of whom are being published for the first time. The narratives reflect the lives of African people and how development relates to them. The perspectives remind us that the SDGs are not just a list of 17 Goals, which have been agreed upon by a group of diplomats in New York. More than just about the numbers and statistics, they remind everyone involved in implementing them that they can be realized.

While visiting Brazzaville and hearing about the beliefs encapsulated in River Congo, I learnt about meeting our needs by respecting nature and recognizing its power. Through the craft of storytelling, we are reminded that community narratives do not define sustainable development in terms of numbers. The Goals are fundamental objectives that are achievable and have meaning in the daily lives of individuals, especially young people. Yet, development often gets caught up in the language of diplomacy, which is often complex and inaccessible. Therefore, storytelling as an art form forces us to translate this language into simple daily experiences. For instance, how do we feed ourselves? If the way we feed ourselves is harmful to nature, there must be a way to recalibrate and go back to many of our traditions and do so more sustainably. How do we educate ourselves? How do we achieve our goals and aspirations
as individuals in a way that enhances society and contribute to a better world and a better planet?

The importance of this storytelling initiative resides in giving voice to young people, giving power to their imagination, and translating the sustainable development goals into our daily lives in a simple way. In these stories, we see the interlinkages between development and people, and it is this link that makes sustainability important. Simply taking the amount of wealth in the world and dividing it by the number of people does not tell us how well the world is doing. And this fallacy of GDP as a measure of development is one of the challenges that we must tackle head-on. Therefore, we must go beyond the statistics and find ways of giving meaning to the SDGs in people’s daily lives. Herein lies the power of artistic expressions such as storytelling, poetry and the spoken word. Through the written and spoken word, we can capture the essence of how people feel. We can also capture the hopes and significant frustrations across different generations, which is also an essential part of measuring how we are going about the sustainable development goals. Doing so moves us beyond that simple measure of wealth to one that seeks to measure what wealth means for individuals, their communities, and peer groups.

Thus, the SDGs are about situating us within a world where we know that we can create wealth to be shared, hopefully, more equally. But, most importantly, we also want to contribute towards creating that wealth in a morally correct and sustainable way that improves people’s livelihoods without exploiting them. To reiterate the main message of the 2021 African Regional Sustainable Forum
in Brazzaville, we need to redefine and develop economic models that incorporate the protection of natural resources, the promotion of renewable energies, the development of green and resilient infrastructure; as well as inclusive digitization. An awareness must inform these models of the value of our human capital. This is the power of the storytelling initiative because it gives agency to individuals, no matter who they may be and whatever their age may be. It draws on the power of words and the power of imagination and links them with the SDGs in unusual but essential ways.

Jean-Paul Adam

Technology, Climate Change and Natural Services Division, Director, Economic Commission for Africa
Overview
The Anthology of Short Stories project was born out of the idea that implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would benefit from engaging creative writers to mine the issues through fiction. Produced in the African Union Year of Arts, Culture and Heritage, which also happens to be one marked by the spectre of a global pandemic, the Anthology offered a unique space, rarely accorded in the UN system, for creative writers to explore the width and breadth of the issues that confront us. The result of this engagement with creatives are found in this collection of forty stories and one poem written by young Africans aged 15 to 35 from across the African continent. In addition, the Anthology includes some stories that have been translated into English by the authors. Among the writers are entrepreneurs, students, artists, teachers, bloggers, and development practitioners from Burundi, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

In these stories, the writers address poverty, climate change, gender, food security, natural resources, health, urbanization, employment and related existential concerns spanning a range of perspectives within their preferred genres. We deliberately retain their language and style, in order to remain as true as possible to their voice. Their commitment to growing in their creative pursuit was evident throughout the process, which included a writing competition that began with a call for short stories, followed by creative writing sessions, one of which took place during the 2021 African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.
Mufasa the Poet (Kenya), who spoke truth to power during his Spoken Word performance at the opening session of the RE-Imagining the SDGs creative writing webinar during the ARFSD, sets the tone for the Anthology in his poem, Phone With Features. He takes us along a journey of questioning development and his own commitment to the change he has in mind, “I want to write poems that will plant thoughts about planting trees then call those poems poetrees...”

The winning entry is the delightful Beans Without Korkor?, by Ghana’s Ekow Manuar Smith. In his review of the short-listed stories, leading African writer and novelist Peter Kimani, who led the creative writing webinars, describes Manuar as a writer of great promise. “Out of this house of hunger, he delivers plentiful of mirth and food for thought about the continent’s inability to feed her people, and gestures towards a recalibration that could secure a lasting solution.”

Five authors were selected for special mention as listed below (in alphabetical order):

- Edeyan Omoweh (Nigeria) focuses on gender-based violence in her moving story, A Thousand Deaths.

- Foly Najoli (Kenya) explores in her story, Faceless Battles, traumatic events, including suicide, HIV and a new virus – COVID-19 through an exchange between two siblings, looking back on their lives.
Outhmane Lamoumni (Morocco): The story, A New World is about a philosophy teacher, who has lost passion and purpose and is struggling to do his job. It explores his journey of trying to regain that passion while tackling the spread of COVID-19 conspiracies.

In his compelling story, A Pot of Beans, S. Su’eddie Vershima Agema (Nigeria) writes a moving metaphor for single parenting, courage and resilience among urban female poor.

Thakhani Rayofafrika (South Africa). The Shebeen of Khayelitsha is an Africanfuturistic exploration on land, sea and air, while travelling back in time and into the future. The main protagonist flies on water using a bionic flying fish, combing the oceans for microplastics and harvesting seaweed that has been used to feed the minions in the famished lands of the Kalahari. It touches on the restoration of indigenous foods to the continent's main menu to prop up Africa's food security.

Mercy Wambui
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The team is indebted to the TCND Director, Jean Paul-Adam, for his belief in the Anthology of Short Stories and his guidance, support and oversight right from the project’s inception. The team is also grateful for his constructive engagement with young African writers during the 2021 ARFSD side event hosted in Brazzaville and the staff at TCND, notably Nassim Oulmane, Charles Muraya, Kidist Belayneh and Tigist Makonnen, for their unwavering support at various stages of the process.

The Anthology benefitted from tremendous inter-divisional support, and we thank Said Adejumobi, Director, SPORD, for his encouragement, commitment and support to its production. We are also grateful to colleagues for their involvement at various stages of the project. They include Chigozirim Bodart and Aida Opoku-Mensah (OES); Keiso Matashane-Marite and Thokozile Ruzvidzo
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We recognize the 200 writers from across Africa and the Diaspora who submitted their work and the 40 writers whose stories we selected for publishing in the Anthology. In addition, we acknowledge the many who undertook painstaking revisions, even while facing many personal challenges.

Lastly, we thank Carolina Rodriguez, Danielle Ferreira, Mandy Kabasa, Atenaga Collins Otega and Jeanne Lassus of Dilucidar Pte Ltd for design and layout. We appreciate the thoughtful approach to the cover concept, where the designers used warm colours to juxtapose nature and reality against inspiration and creativity. The splash of vivid colours denotes the bursting creativity of young Africans who have a lot to say about reality.
PHONE WITH FEATURES

Mufasa The Poet (Kenya)

The world is not the addition of all the countries
It is the ability of human beings to be in reach and
to reach out within and beyond borders.

Peace & Justice is the fabric mix that nationhood
wears at the states gala and steals the show.

I want to write poems that will plant thoughts about
planting trees then call those poems poetrees.

If we couldn’t set the ocean on fire, we surely
exploded it with plastic.

Last night in the news, Amazon was burning, Mau
was falling, the rivers were leaving, the weather was
faulting
And it was our entire fault.

Where I come from, bottled water is the face
of clean water.
That means clogged waterways are another way
we pay the price.
That also means the safeness of water cannot
continue to exist only inside a bottle.
Life is a flight upstairs for people in wheelchairs. Buildings where the stairway is the only way, are expecting them to fly.

Skyscrapers in Nairobi do not mean development for the country. They are just good enough for Spider-Man to swing from building to building but Spider-Man hasn’t been bit by a spider yet. He is still a normal kid growing in Mathare where last night when it rained, their house flooded with water.

Bad roads do not have the face of a monster. They cannot be used to scare children to sleep. But they have made businesses disappear.

Farmers are searching for reasons why it is easy for the country to import food at high prices. But difficult to buy food from local farmers at good prices. They have not found answers. They will keep digging.

When the riot came from the people of Lamu, it was to say coal cannot be the light at the end of their tunnel. In this age, it is a reintroduction to dark ages.

The people are not safe in a city where tap water is not safe for the Governor to drink.
Yesterday, Muthoni Nyanjiru led a protest after the arrest of Harry Thuku
And my history teachers forgot to mention her.
She asked the men to take her dress and give her their trousers
But my textbooks forgot to mention that.

Any education is key.
But quality education gives you a bunch of keys.

In my country, public hospitals are those hospitals our leaders visit when they are well
And refuse to go when they are unwell.

War has taught us to look at advanced weapons as security.
Hunger is still trying to teach our governments how to look at surplus food
As a way of beefing up our security.

The other day, I heard a stranger at a barbershop say If his child dies with a hospital bill, he will not sell his tiny piece of land to bring a dead body home There might be no land left for burial.

For as long as young people choose to ignore politics and leadership the future will never be in our hands What we will continue to have is a phone with features.
Dawn in Dzorwulu was always a dazzling affair. The orange hue from the horizon reflected on its many highrises a transcendent cool of colours. The blushing pink of the Adu-T Building for Fashion, blue of the towering Stanbic Bank Heights, and jade from Green Ventures’ Blocks, were but a few standouts on the main street.

On the street level, pedestrians made their way to their daily business acting as the fillers in this geometric glass work of art. Every so often a procession of runners would march past, soldiering through the middle of the road. Bikers in commute, and some for sport, were also in motion. All the while the autonomous trams had the unpleasant business of stopping and waiting for long periods to accommodate this movement.

Sister Mercy watched this show every morning, munching on her chewing stick as she inserted commands for the automated hoovers to sweep the floors of her inherited waakye spot. Often times she stopped, as she did this morning, to wonder when her mornings would be for herself. From dawn to dusk her every exertion was devoted to her patrons. To fulfilling their needs.

Just thinking of her patrons, a sharp chill ran down her spine. Today was going to be a heated day! Not in terms of temperature (well
that too). How was she going to tell her patrons that her famous red-red was finished?
Every morning she had a devoted and dedicated clientele that simply could not begin their day without her mouth-watering red-red. It had been declared ‘the finest in the land’ by Mayor Smith, and a ‘splendid dish’ by the visiting UK Prime Minister. Mercy’s mother, the late Aunty Grace, had forged the recipe from the annals of their family’s ancestors. Crafting the perfect blend of stews to cook the beans in. Fashioning the finest slices of plantain ever known to man. Crisped black at its end, absorbedly red on its body.

However, ever since the flows of plantain had reduced from the hinterland, she had had to seriously ration her portions and increase the price. The clients weren’t happy with this. It caused her most devout customer, Sammy the fitter, to threaten that he would go to Ama’s *Slammah Cuisine* if Mercy continued to increase her prices. But these were empty threats. All of them knew that they were dependent on Mercy’s, and Mercy’s red-red alone. Nothing else would suffice.

It wasn’t just the red-red. It was the ambience of the place. The white palladium that shielded you from the scorch of the sun. The deep seaters and long couches one sunk into to feast. The mist-fan cooling the immense heat of the day. The subtle afro-jazz melody vibing from unknown and unseen speakers. The drums of Blue Skies’ *asana, sobolo*, and fruit blends standing patiently in the corner, waiting to be drank. The monitors rolling through a selection of clips from which the customers could pick. Old videos of Ghanaians back in the day dancing to *One Korna* or sending goodwill messages from abroad. The leg rests positioned tactfully to transition the heavy eaters
from satisfaction to sleep, as seamlessly as possible. And the smiling customers themselves as part of the experience. Food-friends sharing in the common love for Mercy’s red-red.

Then there was the certainty of service, knowing that no matter how long the line was, or which bogger tried to cut in front, waiting at the end was a hearty bowl of red-red to feast on. And Sister Mercy would be there to scoop healthy amounts until your eyes were bigger than your mouth, stomach and nose put together.

But today, Mercy would have to disappoint.

It had happened before, the plantain drought. Back then, she supplemented with a lower grade plantain from the Local Foods Association. The Association always had reserves for their respective sects. But the Association had sent out a message that plantain was finished and there would be no more for the foreseeable future. In fact, there had been increasing talks about the possibility of plantain becoming entirely extinct! Mercy had felt the reality of the gossip impact her pocket. Over the months the quality of the plantain she sourced kept reducing and the price increasing. She hoped that those suggestions of extinction would turn out to be just whispering voices with stories to tell and conspiracies to spin. But there were also those who talked about climate and how it was shifting and turning everything inside out.

For the last thirty years, Ghana’s intensified exposure to the World had introduced her many foods to global mouths. And of all of them, the most popular was red-red. So invariably, Greater Ghana Alliance (GGA), the incumbent political party for the last twenty-plus years, streamlined plantain as a cash crop and inserted it into
its export-agricultural machinery. Plantain farmers became rich overnight. The industry was booming.

But over the last five years, those who study soils and crops and those who examine how climate keeps changing, said that in the near future there could be a sudden and permanent drop in plantain yield. This was due to changes in temperature and moisture to which plantain was very sensitive, they said. The GGA and the plantain farmers weren’t going to give up a new-found golden goose so easily. So they bogged down and forced all local traders to sell to their lucrative offshore customers leaving very little produce for the local market.

Sister Mercy found herself on her knees shoveling through kitchen utensils searching for at least one misplaced finger of plantain. At least a single one. For the hope it would instill in her customers that more bountiful days were ahead. Without that red-red money, Mercy wouldn’t be able to buyout her brothers’ shares from the chop bar. To give herself that breathing space to conduct her work in peace.

She didn’t need to search hard. There it was. Cradled in the corner of the drawer. A lonely blackened yellow finger. Ripe and ready. Innocent and unsuspecting.

Mercy shoveled some more in case there were more but alas her search was in vain. The finger would only be enough plantain for one dish. It seemed that the prospect of serving only one dish was more treacherous than simply saying there was none. She couldn’t imagine giving it to one person. Not even eating it herself. That was out of the question.

She could just imagine the look on everybody’s face.
‘No. At least one person should be served,’ she resolved. That is how she would do it. That’s the way her mother would’ve done it. Aunty Grace had never seen a plantain drought. The closest she got were the times of the year when it wasn’t in season. But the era of seasons was long gone in Ghana. The widespread use of machines in farming had removed Ghana’s dependence on rain (thank God, because the rain was hardly predictable anymore). The country could produce at will.

Almost, at will.

Sister Mercy asked her Kitchen-bot, Ama, to heat the deep fryer and boil water as she began the arduous task of hand-grinding the spices for the bean stew. Aunty Grace always insisted that the toil and sweat were part of the recipe and so as little robot involvement was necessary. But she needed Ama since her brothers believed themselves above the work.

Before long, one of her newer patrons, Gonzalo, was stretching his limbs and lumbering up to the front of the stall having finished his morning workout.

“Good morning, madam Mercy,” he sang.
“Morning Gonzalo. How are you?” Mercy replied from behind the counter, looking up to see the young Latin American.
“I had a great run, and my stomach is ready for your red-red, please. No rush, I don’t have any deadlines for this month,” he said, rubbing his stomach and searching for Mercy over the counter.
“How nice. Work has been good?” The onions were stinging her eyes as she tried to find Gonzalo.
“Very good! Your country is so advanced with its urban association policies. There is local government, but it is just
supporting everyone to do their own stuff. And when someone needs a hand – pop – they support, then step back. So I am learning a lot.”

Mercy had many Latin customers, but Gonzalo was the most chatty of them.

“That is good to hear Gonzalo. Your friend, the animator, is he still around?” Gonzalo had brought a friend who was researching a new animated series idea. It had caught Mercy’s eye because it was her lifelong dream to start an animated series of her own. One chronicling how her mother started this business of selling red-red in the now World famous Dzorwulu Borough.

“Oh, no. He left, madam Mercy. Maybe he’ll be back for the Easter.”

The annoyed figure of Sammy had just dragged up behind Gonzalo.

“You haven’t even started cooking? Sistah! Some of us get work, oh! I beg, do my own first before dis one,” Sammy said pointing his eyes at Gonzalo.

“Good morning to you too, Sammy. Please, you will wait like everyone else,” Mercy pleaded.

“Yo! I already told you, dat me dier, Ama’s red-red was very good. So I hope you are not going to mention dat your prices you were mentioning last time?” Sammy said.

“Hmmm.”

Mercy was sure to keep herself busy with her duties so as not to make eye contact with the ever discerning Sammy.
Little Cynthia was also just tip-toeing up as well. Her eyes glued to her palm-screen. Her finger flicking from side to side. She came every other week to get red-red for her and her ailing grandmother who was an old friend of Aunty Grace.

“Little Cynthia, how is your grandmother?” Mercy asked, hearing the girl’s squeal from across.

Without looking up Cynthia responded, “Fine, thank you. She sends her regards. Oh wait-wait, I win, I win! Can I use my gold coins to buy?” The little girl said in a rush.

“We haven’t installed that one into our POS yet, my little bofrot.” This time she did spare a glance but quickly turned away as she saw Sammy trying to make eye contact.

A small black kantanka pulled up by the stall. Soon, the strapping Joshua Prempeh, the Deputy Coordinator of the Dzorwulu Borough, stepped down. All sister Mercy’s usuals had arrived.

“Aye Sammy, you de? Little Cynthia darling? Sister, wassup? Please the usual,” Joshua announced, filling up the line further. “Don’t be mentioning my name like dat, Mr. Joshua. I haven’t eaten dis morning and Mercy is playing some sort of games. But anyway, you, I get mattah with you!” Sammy said agitatedly.

“What matta is this?” Joshua said, chuckling to himself then looking amusedly at the others. “You don’t know what I am talking about, eh? You aren’t on the platform?” Sammy continued. “Please, I am here for my red-red, the time and place for our discussions is during association meetings.”
“Oh, you don’t worry. Beh, I go see you?” And with that Sammy continued fidgeting about himself.

Then there was a calm silence among the patrons. Each preparing themselves for the experience they went to bed dreaming about the night before. The deliciousness of the caramel-like plantain, eaten with a mouthful of steaming peppery beans. The burn of the dish hardly detracting from the temptation of getting that first bite of heaven. Yes, the patrons waited for sister Mercy in silence. Waiting for their dreams to come to reality.

Sister Mercy was feeling the heat of the kitchen and the eyes of her customers. What on Earth was she going to do about this? Four hungry expectant clients, all wanting red-red. Needing red-red.

Thinking it couldn’t get any worse, Shin-Shin, the neighbourhood alcoholic, stumbled into the line bringing with him his trademark smell of oriental liquor and Chinese soy.


No one in the line minded Shin-Shin who was not affected by this coordinated affront.

“Hip-hip-hip, hurray!” he bellowed happily.
“But you, when will you go back to China?” Sammy spat at the drunkard, finally acknowledging his presence.
“Please, my friend. Do not bring yourself. I am more Ghanaian than you,” Shin-Shin pointed at Sammy.
“I beg, sister Mercy, hurry with my order so I don’t have to stand with this buffoon,” Sammy said, shaking his head at the drunk.

There was no response from Mercy, who was switching over to slicing the plantain hoping everyone was too distracted to notice it was only one finger.

“But do you know, Sammy, that you owe me? Do you know who built your... your... your little fitter shop? My late uncle, Mr. Steven. What a great man he was! From the countryside in China, to the bustling booming metropole of New Accra. Glittering like the Blackstar she is. My uncle came and made this place his home, and home for many others – including your father, Sammy. So do not come here telling me to go back to my country. You should go back to your village. Stupid mackerel!”

That induced a laugh or two. Sammy wasn’t pleased at all. But he thought it unwise to argue with a drunk. The wise saying playing in his head, ‘When you argue with a mad man, no one can tell who is mad or not from afar.’

But Shin-Shin wasn’t done.

“Ah, and look who is calling me a buffoon? Can you imagine?” He appealed to the small crowd. “Sammy, the one who left his wife to marry the bountiful Aunty Grace, only to be rejected without even getting to his knee. Oh! Can you imagine?”
Sammy was having to replay the wise saying over and over again in his head. ‘It wasn’t worth it getting involved with this pathetic drunkard. It wasn’t worth it at all, especially on an empty stomach.’ He kept repeating this to himself, shutting off Shin-Shin’s tirade.

“His sweet loving wife that dedicated herself to him and supported him through the recession, depression, se-session and all that. To leave her, to marry Aunty Grace. Only to be rejected. Oh-oh-oh.” Shin-Shin was opening a virtually empty bottle of schnapps, tipping it over into his gaping mouth. “If I am a buffoon, then you, my friend, are a man with an imp’s mind.”

At that, Sammy flung himself at the drunkard, but Joshua had been reading the situation and used his large frame to block the fitter from attacking Shin-Shin.

“Sammy, Sammy! Calm down and listen!” Joshua pushed at Sammy. “You can take your red-red first then cool down, eh! The nice young man doesn’t mind?” Joshua said of Gonzalo who had jumped out of the way of the wrestling men, but was in agreement to Joshua’s suggestion.

“You will take your dish and go and work. Mercy’s red-red will cool you down, okay? Okay!” Joshua’s grip on Sammy was so fierce that the fitter wasn’t able to get a look at Shin-Shin, who had stepped back almost colliding with a passing bicyclist.

“Foolish! Stupid!” he snarled and resigned himself to the compensa-tion of receiving his red-red first.

Everyone in the group let out a collective sigh.
On the flip side of the counter, Sister Mercy was about finished preparing the one dish and was not any closer to knowing how she would resolve the issue of who to serve it to. Biding for time, she offered her clients the option of her other dishes.

“Aye, if anyone wants a change of flavour. We have yam and kontomire, fresh from the Dzorwulu farms. I even ate some yesterday. So sumptuous! We also have eba that you can have with the bambara bean stew. Or, or my gari foto deluxe, you liked that one the last time, bra Joshua. With the boiled egg, red snapper fish, shitto!” she exclaimed.

“Sister Mercy, please. We have all come here for one thing. One thing only. Do not try and distract us from our task. We are here for strictly red-red. We know that you have vendors across the city. I helped in that cause,” Joshua said pompously patting his chest and looking around for witnesses. “So even though we can get red-red from any of your chop bars, or other chop bars, we flock here because yours has a special magic. There is something about your hand that turns this particular red-red to gold,” Joshua stated and everyone agreed. Even the little girl nodded, momentarily ungluing her eyes from her palm-screen.

“Sister Mercy, in fact, you have been very some-way today. What is going on? Be frank and speak. We won’t harm you,” Sammy said softly, cooled down from the earlier fracas. Mercy heard Sammy and lifted her eyes to finally meet with his and she dreaded having to tell them the truth. But there was no way around it.

“Mmm...” She started but stopped, staring at the crowd before her. How was she going to put this tragedy into words? How was she going to tell the simple and honest truth that only one
could have their beans with *korkor*? It was a truth that was harsh, possibly unacceptable to those who had gathered in front of her stall this morning. Was it not the hope of getting her red-red first that had calmed Sammy down? Was it not her red-red that had made Shin-Shin save his money rather than spend it on more booze? And for little Cynthia, her ailing grandmother. Gonzalo as well, being the first to arrive today. And big man Joshua providing so much support when her business needed it most. These were not merely customers. They were part of the DNA of *Grace’s Grace* chop bar. It’s lifeblood. Her mother would be disappointed of having such loyal patrons unsatisfied. Such was the gravity of the situation, but Mercy needed to find a way. The truth could not be held for long.

She stepped out from behind the kitchen counter, wiping her stained hands on her apron as she approached her patrons.

“Well. Mmmm. How do I say this?”

*Full story on https://abdallahsmith06.medium.com/beans-without-korkor-a-national-tragedy-575437f69fd4*
“How are you doing my little one,” asks Wambulwa in his strained Geordie accent. Ever since he moved to Newcastle, North East of England suddenly his tongue rolls differently. He probably wouldn’t think twice about changing his name to a McBroom or one of those strange English titles.

“Enhe! Just a little over seven years is all it took to forget where you came from?” I tease. “Mama isn’t just turning in her grave. I bet she doesn’t mind swapping places with Lazarus,” I add. Ma’ Shukri though having converted to Christianity after she met Papa had always made sure that we all attended Sunday mass ever since we were young. And not just any kind of mass, it had to be the first service which began at 7:30 am. On such days we had to wake up early enough, finish house chores before heading to Church. Wambulwa or Bobo as we always call him at home and I served as altar boys at St. Concord Catholic Church few meters from home. Hence our Christian jokes that we seemingly carried to our mid-thirties.

“I am doing quite fine myself.” I respond. “How about you and my nieces? All good over there?”

Wambulwa had relocated to the United Kingdom after the company he was working for offered him a position in the world’s most revered financial hub. At the time, he was a well-known lead
strategist here in the big city, and he wasn’t willing to move away to a foreign land to be a small fish in a big pond. It took a few weeks of convincing before he agreed to it. Furthermore, it was such a great career move, anyone would kill for such an opportunity.

“They are all well. Their mother says that Furaha is tired of staying indoors and misses her friends from school. Somehow her attitude is rubbing off on Amani who throws tantrums here and there. I really don’t blame them because I’m just as tired as they are about the times we live in. They’ll soon adapt, just as I did to the weather,” Wambulwa says.

And with that, we burst into laughter. We both know that seven years later, he still complains about the London weather. Wambulwa has always been adventurous, extroverted and free spirited which is the complete opposite of who I am. Just as is our physical appearance. I can’t begin to count the number of times that Ma’ Shukri introduced us to some of her acquaintances and almost each time they questioned my relationship with Bobo. Their shock was always evident in the words they said afterwards, it was all written in the bewildered look on their faces. We could tell from how they constantly looked at Bobo and me as if trying to find a distinct but common feature and in the end most would say “Yeah, I see it now, they have the same kind of smile just like their father.”

By the time Bobo was turning 15, he had been to quite a number of hospital wards than most boys around our age. Usually it was a small scratch, broken arm or twisted ankle. But the peak of all his intrepidness was Saturday 18th April 1998, a day after his thirteenth birthday. That afternoon we were playing in our neighborhood before he tried convincing me to accompany him check out a newly opened play area in the next neighborhood. “We’ll be back
before the sun sets. Besides it will be a great opportunity to test
the bicycle that Papa got me for my birthday.” Those were his exact
words. An offer that I declined. Later that night, he would come
home with a bandage wrapped around his head and a broken leg.
But all this changed the day that we found Papa hanging from the
ceiling in our old house. Bobo became quieter and has remained
detached ever since.

Papa worked for the National Railway Company, and he was hardly
ever around. Once in a while, he’d come home unexpectedly and
leave without notice after conversations with Ma’. Over the years, the
months he was away outnumbered the days we saw him at home.
Never once did he stay long enough to read the letters that I wrote
him. Suffice to say, my relationship with Papa was non-existent after
he landed the job at the Railway. Still, I loved him, and he loved us
and maybe his way of showing us and making up for the lost time
was the gifts he’d always bring back home.

After Papa’s contract came to an end, it became hard for him to
secure another job opportunity. Slowly by slowly our lives shifted.
Staying in school was now a luxury we couldn’t afford and every so
often we were sent back home for lack of school fees. Ma’ Shukri
opted to take-up extra shifts at her workplace in order to fend
for our daily needs, but even then the irregular allowance wasn’t
something we could continuously count on. All this coupled with
the rejection he faced from his most trusted group of friends, Papas
only solace became the bottle. Cheap liquor brewed by most locals
was perhaps the only way to numb his pain.

Three years after we buried Papa, Ma’ Shukri’s health deteriorated.
I had just been admitted to Tigoi Medical College to pursue my
Nursing degree. This was a dream come true – more like a ticket to
greener pastures. I remember the day we received the news of my acceptance to the school which came with a full scholarship offer. I was in Ma’ Shukri’s room helping her put away clothes that had been cleaned earlier that morning when Kinyanjui the grounds man came knocking. With him was a brown envelope addressed to me. That was the second time I ever saw Ma’ shed a tear. And unlike the first time, I could tell these were the good kind of tears. The ones that are like a thank you note to the gods – tears of joy, they call them.

Six months later, I reported to school and truth be told, the first few weeks were difficult. Actually the first month was brutal to be precise. I might have missed around four lectures because my alarm never went off. Maybe I may have prolonged my lunch break unknowingly, hence my lateness to some lectures. College was such a weird place, it took me quite a while to adjust. Some days I’d only have one lesson and even then, my mind would drift back home to Ma’ and Bobo. It therefore didn’t come as a surprise when I was summoned to the administrative office after my Medical Microbiology class. I knew I was about to face disciplinary action for skiving classes, but I wasn’t expecting to see Uncle Saiid seated in the boardroom alone. I mean it was only four lectures, well five at most but I was trying my best to catch up. In my opinion, it wasn’t necessary to have Uncle Saiid come all the way from Kaduna village to intervene in the issue. A little warning, or perhaps a slap on the wrist to wake me up. Not that I was faulting the administration for doing their job.

Soon enough I learnt that just like a child doesn’t come with a manual, life doesn’t give any warning signs. And death in particular, creeps up on you and strikes when you least expect it. It is said that when all is going well is when death comes knocking at your
door. But in Ma’s case this wasn’t entirely true. This visitor didn’t come knocking at our door, didn’t even bother sending any message announcing their intentions. Common courtesy was a foreign language to death and clearly, patience was an attribute that he lacked since none of us invited him into our home. He simply forced himself in, and like a thief, left with our most treasured possession. Probably the only one that we ever had or rather the only one that we had left. Today would have been her fifty-third birthday and I can’t help but wonder would life have been any different if she were here.

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Most of my memories with Papa are quite blurred except for one when I had just turned thirteen. At around 9.00 pm, just after we had had ugali, mrenda and chicken – Papa’s favorite meal, Bobo and I retreated to our room, where he helped me fold a paper into a makeshift envelope for the letter I was going to present to Papa before he left. We had just finished the final touches when we heard some commotion coming from the sitting room. This wasn’t uncommon whenever Papa was around and with time, we had learnt to block out their conversations.

But there’s something about the conversation that night that seemed off. It wasn’t as loud as the ones they had before. Instead, in an even but terse tone, Ma’ kept asking: “Why? Why? Why Nebarth?” I don’t recall hearing Papa’s voice that night. It was as though Ma’ Shukri was having a one-sided conversation. That night their bedroom door was never banged shut as usual and when we woke up, Papa wasn’t on the couch, when we crept in early in the morning to see if he was really watching the television or snoring at different
pitches, which would send us into such fits of giggles that our ribs would hurt. Even when there was a funny film on television, Papa couldn’t keep his eyes open. The snoring always gave him away. Still I told myself that the next time I’d wake up earlier to show him my letters and other writings.

Lately, I find myself having one-sided conversations with Papa. In the past two months I have written to him more than I’d like to admit. Partly because the news reminds me of him or maybe I genuinely miss him. Last night there was a lady who lost it during a live news coverage on TV because she couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t let her accord her husband a rightful sendoff. “They wouldn’t even allow us to view his body,” she begun. “The priest wasn’t allowed to give him the viaticum,” She went on and on and on. “The other day when I went to the shops, one shopkeeper refused to let me buy from his shop,” Another chimed in, moving closer to the journalist’s microphone, “My children can no longer freely interact with anyone by virtue of my association with the medical field. Why are we punishing them for something they have no control over?”

There was nothing new or interesting to read in the newspapers either. That much, Odoyo, the newsie who sells across the street could agree with.

Long after the news bulletin, I could still hear the pleas in their words, the pain in their eyes and the weight of trying to comprehend what the world was reduced to. What their lives had been reduced to. There is a sense in which the whole episode reminded me of Papa’s funeral. His was different from the burials I had attended. His was rushed as though the mourners wanted him gone as soon as yesterday. Only a handful of people attended the rites. He was buried before the break of dawn as was tradition.
During the sermon there were whispers here and there because we all knew, even I knew, that the thing that had claimed many lives in most parts of the country had finally found its way to Kaduna village. With Papa amongst the first drivers, it landed and was now living amongst us. This was the first time I ever saw Ma’ Shukri cry. And like the women on the news yesterday, I knew their cries were beyond mourning. It had more to do with the uncertainty of the journey ahead and how those they trusted to be their shoulders in times of need chose to point fingers instead. Years after Papa’s death, Ma’ Shukri still carried the weight of his promiscuity in her system. But there’s only so much that her body, now reduced to bones could handle. And even with the aid of antiretroviral drugs, her hope was becoming a fragile seed, and it was only a matter of time before she gave in.

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“How about you Bobo how are you doing,” I persisted.

Bobo had made arrangements to come visit Kenya during the summer holidays for the first time in seven years as he tried to figure out his next career move. The company he worked for had downsized in order to shield itself from the declining economic conditions across the globe. They worked from home for quite a while but since the economy didn’t seem to be revert back to normal anytime soon, the company decided to completely stop its operations for an undisclosed time frame. All his plans were halted nine days ago since Bobo had tested positive for the coronavirus. What troubled me
the most was his seemingly lack of concern about the severity of this situation. His calm demeanor and usual contagious smile across his plump cheeks.

“You worry a lot my little one. Do you remember what Ma’ used to say to us every time?” he asked.

Of course I did. They were the words we settled on as her epitaph. *Even as time goes by, all that I am to you I will still be.* And with that Bobo disconnected our video call just in time for my afternoon rounds at the hospital.

Today more than ever, I hope that I will still be who I’ve always been: for though I have travelled along this path long enough to know the stop signs, something about this particular journey has made the experience bumpier.
“Life is a pot of beans,” Iveren said, and everyone in the staff bus laughed. They had been talking about their various challenges as workers, and her statement seemed to summarise it all for them. They were on their way home at the end of a long shift. The journey had got to that slow crawl where after every five minutes, someone would alight. It was a cold night, the streets were quiet, and only a few houses had lights on. Iveren glanced at her watch. It was a few minutes to midnight. She thought of how peaceful it would be to curl up beside her children and rest her aching muscles. They were not so far from her bus stop. She let out a small sigh, navigating her thoughts back to the bus discussion.

“I know that saying is meant to mean that life is full of ups and downs. But I love beans and hate rice! So, why don’t you just say life is a pot of rice?” James, the driver, shouted from his seat.

“You are alone on that!” Iveren shot back at him, as her colleagues cheered. There were a few shouts of How can anybody hate rice! from various corners. It was soon time to alight, and she bid them all farewell. As she passed him, James held her hand and said softly, “No matter how long the night, there will be morning and smiles. Be strong.”
“Thanks. See you at six o’clock, James,” she said, returning his smile. He was like that, sensitive and kind. He was one of those few people who could see through her daunting exterior and offer words of comfort when she needed them. To her colleagues, she was the jovial, yet principled lady, who never took her job for granted. Her ebony complexion, petite height and easy charm made her a target of her male colleagues’ interest and lusts. Several of them made their advances at first, but it did not take long for them to realise that she was also firmly principled. It became a running joke around the office that Iveren was more of a man than most of them. She always seemed in control, and so, hardly anyone noticed when things were not right with her.

Iveren remembered a day when her youngest daughter, Awa, had badly scraped both her knees while playing. Although Awa’s wounds were treated at the chemist near her house, Iveren had spent the whole day brooding at work. Her colleagues did not notice her mood, or if they did, did not comment on her disposition. It was James who had seen past her hurried smile that replaced her brooding drawn lips. He probed her till she confided in him. Afterwards, he had squeezed some money into her hand and asked her to be strong. She had looked up to his kind bushy face and saw his eyes glinting with warmth. Yes, James was like that, she thought.

She stared at the bus as it moved on with her colleagues, who were still laughing at some jokes. Life was not easy for any of them, she thought as she dragged herself from the church junction to her house, which was a ten-minute walk away. Her body suddenly felt too heavy for her aching feet. Her thoughts strayed to her children again, who would be sleeping at the moment. Iveren rarely spent time with them.
She always arrived home past midnight, when there was hardly anybody about, then wake up at four to join the staff bus at five to head back to work. It was a strained routine, six days a week. She often wondered whether she was raising them properly when the only quality time they spent together was on Sundays. But it was the only way to survive as a mother of three with no support from anywhere else.

It also had its joys. She remembered the day that she had brought the television home. She had woken her children up, and they had screamed in delight. They wouldn't have to go to the windows of neighbours to push curtains aside to watch television. It had come in handy as they had also watched all the football matches of the Atlanta ’96 Olympics. The soccer Dream Team had delivered and given hope to the nation, picking the gold medal. Chioma Ajunwa had iced the cake with her gold medal too in the long jump. And they had watched it all, on their own TV. It did not matter that there were only wooden benches for furniture in the sitting room. She was just glad that the job had provided.

Iveren smiled. Life was not all that bad. She rummaged through her bag for her keys and unlocked the door. Her niece, Torkwase, who helped her take care of the house and the children stood up immediately.

Her words came out in a rush, “Auntie, welcome. Tordoo is shivering.”

In the next second, Iveren was beside her son.

“What happened?”
“I don’t know, auntie,” Torkwase replied in tears. “He has been shivering all evening. He had a convulsion too.”

“Muum…” Tordoo called out, weakly.

His body was a small inferno.

“Let’s go to the hospital,” Iveren said.

His eyes rolled in their sockets, and she screamed. With Torkwase’s help, she backed the boy and rushed out of the house telling Torkwase to stay with her other children. It was now well past midnight. The nearest health facility was a small private clinic at the other end of town. She walked as fast as the weight of her son could allow her. She sighed as several thoughts came pouring in torrents.

Life is a pot of beans and had always been.

Iveren had lived a million people’s worth of sorrow in her life already. She had come a long way from her humble roots. Memories of her past came to her. Her family’s poverty had kept her from achieving much. Her mother had inspired her to aspire to greatness, no matter what stood in her way. Thus, from a young age, she had sworn to do all she could to be as educated as possible. She remembered how she would trek several miles, from their village to go to school at the Queen of the Rosary in Gboko, the closest town. With no one to visit, and hardly any food, she had lived on the charity of the school’s reverend sisters till she graduated to the polytechnic. While the other girls at the polytechnic had their cupboards full of provisions, the fanciest clothes and much more, Iveren simply watched with the admiration of one who saw good things but could not touch them.
Somehow, she always smiled. Who would have believed that the smiling girl wore stitched worthless materials from tailoring shops as her sanitary towel? This was only one of her many problems but somehow, she persevered to the end.

After school, she had to stay in her parents’ house since they did not believe that a single lady should be on her own. Thus, Iveren after going to school and getting urbane was forced to get back to the rudiments of rural life. Eventually, she met Tor Bua, a man ten years her senior who wanted to marry her. Though he was not her ideal man, she jumped at the offer. This was a visa out of her parents’ compound and a chance to make something out of her life.

Her husband provided for her as much as he could and was faithful in all his ways. Life, for the first time, was kind. Iveren gave birth to three children in quick succession. They lived happily. But just when she got comfortable, fate struck. Tor fell ill, and medical bills swallowed all his money. When he eventually passed away, it was Iveren who borrowed money to give him a decent send-off. The burden of single parenting as provider and nurturer fell on her frail shoulders, in addition to catering to the needs of her ageing parents. With no one to cast her cares upon, she ventured to the saturated job market. She found out soon that employers preferred university graduates over those from polytechnic.

Iveren decided to get into business, but each venture seemed to go wrong. Eventually, she found work as a labourer at a cement site. At first, the men laughed at her, wondering how a woman would carry head pans, do the dirty work and all. She soon proved herself a worthy colleague, working as hard as they did, and sometimes, even more. Her colleagues gradually warmed up
to her and openly admired her hard work. The thought of her children willed her to work on, even when her body threatened to buckle under the job’s strain.

Fortunately, her qualifications opened the door to a better opportunity for her. She got a job at a hotel as a supervisor, but even there, she had to work two shifts to keep up with her responsibilities and a few treats, like the TV. It was also nice to have James’s support once in a while. He had asked her out, but she had declined, telling him that the only space she had in her heart was for her children. He had remained her friend. At that moment, Iveren began to wonder if the burden of all her responsibilities was not a weight she should discard. She remembered what her mother would always say: *Children never ask to be brought into the world, and if you are blessed to birth them, you owe it to them to provide what you can.*

She plodded on through the quiet streets, carrying Tordoo, her thoughts keeping her company. They had to pass by a cemetery on the way to the health centre. In the silence, Tordoo’s small voice spoke, “Mummy, I am sorry to have put you through this. I am sorry, mummy. Mummy, sorry. Maybe I should die so you will not suffer again.”

She felt a sudden pain in her heart that made her stand still for a moment. Her eyes burned with tears that soon trailed down her face. With a set face, she wiped her eyes and continued the walk.

“Don’t ever say that again,” she said. “I love you, and nothing will happen.”
Years later, that boy would grow to be one of the greatest authors their parts had known. He would mention that the night in question was the one that had changed his life’s course and strengthened his determination to succeed. He would say that he never could understand how he had bounced to play the next morning while his mother simply resumed work like it had been a regular night. With every achievement, his first dedication would be to the woman on whose back he rode like a donkey to the distant clinic. The same lady whose work became the foundation for the life he enjoyed as well as that of his siblings…

But all that was many years in the future. At that second, they had no idea. They simply moved on, clutching to the torch of hope with which they groped through the darkness.

For my mother, Chris Nguamo, for many miracles
SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA
I had a feeling I couldn’t continue to stay in the house when I saw our New Daddy going to his bedroom on Wednesday night, after looking strangely at someone, standing at the kitchen door. It was also the night I knew I was going to be a lawyer, judging cases for rich people with big money, sometimes for poor people too so that they could call me the big oyibo name I liked so much... what was it again? Ehen, ‘humanitarian’. I really liked that word, because they said it meant you were a good person who helped people like the poor and widows. Even on that night, I already knew I would not do ‘charge-and-bail’ law at all. In my mind, it was rich people’s case equals big money, poor people’s case equals big fine oyibo name: humanitarian.

After all, didn’t old wise people always talk about paying in cash or in kind? That was also the night I knew I would not be having any children of my own and that, if I got married, I would not be wearing a wedding ring. Oh! I would like to get married but I would hide the wedding ring to look for trouble.

I knew that the Aproko market people in our town, who instead of minding their small businesses, preferred to help other people manage their business with plenty words would talk about me. I could already hear them: ‘Omo oni Erriga kwi ubiosa vwiyor re jo kpo ron vwe re, Mama Erriga’s daughter is married but wears
no ring. That child has been stubborn since she came out from the womb, with big dreams and funny ways. What kind of a wife hides her wedding ring? How does a husband cope with a wife like her?’ Ignoring them, I would come down from my car and walk past their stores, with big glasses on my nose, my head turning this way and that.

It was a night of revelations, one slowly easing into another. Like one of the latest films we used to watch back then with Papa. One scene introducing the rest, all done effortlessly. I later changed my mind about having children, but only a long, long time after the night of revelations.

I’d just finished massaging Grand-Mama’s ankle as she was always complaining of body aches. Sometimes, I think she did it deliberately, especially when she saw all of us going out. Me, I didn’t mind doing her massage with our special natural oil, brought by women of Ijaw-land from across the big rivers. It always smelt so dusty yet freshly tingly. I could never understand it. Grand-Mama had told me the oil was free from the white man’s wahala. She said it was good for Ugboma-Eri-Vo-otor, the body, soul and land. Even though I did not fully understand her words, they sounded nice so I liked them and liked using the natural oil too. I told her this, and then, she told me she sometimes hated being left alone by herself. I’d wanted to ask if that was why she complained of aches, but I didn’t.

Even after we told her she could watch television, she had promptly replied, “You know I don’t like this white man’s box. All these people talking inside have strange voices. Even the music sounds like a song by heavenly spirits, in some language humans can’t understand. In our time, if we wanted to relax, we went to the village square. We clapped, we sang and we made sure the songs were in the language
all of us understood: Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri and others. Not these strange words I hear sounding like they are coming from the nose, not the mouth.”

Grand-Mama had a lot of interesting ideas about a lot of things. She didn’t believe in using an electric blender but always insisted on millstones. She said the blender killed the taste of the pepper and the food, and that it was Oyibo magic. She believed it was wrong for young women to sit on the entrance to homes, that it would cause false labour in the future. She also said the same thing if you swept the house and didn’t pack away the dirt immediately—you would be in labour for days.

Sometimes I felt she just wanted to teach me how to be a lady, but most times I was afraid she could be right so I sat properly in a chair, with legs crossed, avoided sitting at the entrance of the house, and I dutifully packed away the dirt whenever I swept.

She also believed speaking too much English was wrong as it was a borrowed language. She would often twist my mouth and say, “Iyibo chapra chapra... you, this girl stop speaking this English. You can never be a white girl even if you speak all their English in this your mouth.”

The last word would be punctuated with a tight pinch on my mouth, which would coincide with a tight twitch of her mouth. It was as if she wished she could pinch my mouth shut with her fingers so no English words could escape from it.

The only thing from the white man’s land that Grand-Mama tolerated was the small radio her late husband left her and a broken mirror which she refused to call mirror but would always call
Ugbebe Oyibo, which funny enough still meant white man’s mirror. Grand-Mama claims that the radio was a boxed form of village town criers and traditional singers and that was why the languages were Urhobo, Itstekeiri or Ijaw.

She did not know it was Ada who put in those channels so that we could watch the television in peace. I did not bother to tell her too. It was on this radio that we all first heard about the strange flying virus. I still remember her shouting that the white man had come again with their wahala. When the newscaster said everybody should wear a face mask and always rub a special cream on our hands, she surprisingly agreed after Ada, my older sister, explained that the cream had mostly alcohol. Grand-Mama would rub a lot of alcohol from Mama’s drinking bottle. She also said that she would only wear a mask made from adire or pieces of osebagbaniku wrapper, the type she used to wash in rivers in Okitipupa in Ondo State before strange speaking boxes, dirty rivers or flying colonial diseases came into existence.

Ada had quietly told her it was Corona, not colonial disease. But that did not stop her so Ada made a mask for her using a piece of adire wrapper, so that everybody could once again have peace.

It was always a matter of keeping peace with Grand-Mama. Besides, New Daddy said we didn’t really need expensive, special masks so we all agreed to wear the ones Ada made from adire. I felt it made us look like a close, cool family. Sometimes, Grand-Mama’s strange opinion was not so bad.

Grand-Mama also believed that a woman who was not married could never gain respect. She said even in big cities where they drove big cars, they did not respect such women. I told her many
Nigerian actresses were unmarried and doing well. She said it was just *degen pose*, that was Grand-Mama’s word for pretence. “Check them! They wet their pillows every night and face trouble with people every day! Now go and don’t disturb me with your I-too-know-questions!”

Her strong belief in marriage is how we came to have this New Daddy. After Papa died, she insisted that our mother should marry him because he could take good care of us. She said the care with a twitch of her mouth and we all knew we had little choice. Mama, though, tried to delay but things became hard. There was no more electricity to watch television. We started using the kerosene lamp. Many times, the lamp would flare up because we bought local kerosene cooked by the river-boys. It was cheaper but it sometimes flared. One time it flared and caught fire, burning part of Grand-Mama’s wrapper.

She cried the whole week that it was better to kill her with poison than fire. Me too I cried because I was also secretly tired of not watching television, hawking with Mama, packing dirty rice from the floor of trailers that came to the market from the North because Mama could no longer buy rice, and buying kerosene from funny river-boys who looked hungry and stared at me like I was also a type of food. That week was when Mama agreed to marry New Daddy.

After the marriage, we got a new house. Our kitchen was full with foodstuff, and there was even a stocked fridge. We were grateful not to be drinking *garri* and eating palm-kernel nuts for lunch anymore. We all liked New Daddy. Everyone was happy that Mama was also now a married woman again.
Then after Papa’s death, whenever we went to the market, that was almost the first thing people asked about. ‘Ah see fine woman like this. Why struggle when you can find another husband?’ The ones who didn’t know us so well would simply shake their head at Mama’s complexion that was now baked a dull brown from the sun, her sunken eyes and collarbones and ask, ‘Why struggle alone? Can’t you get married?’ Mama never answered. She just tied the edge of her wrapper, balanced her tray on her head and kept walking.

So that was how on Wednesday night, I finished Grand-Mama’s massage and was coming into our room. Everywhere was quiet, but then it had always been quiet since Papa’s death. Quiet in the house, quiet between me and Ada, quiet when Mama used to serve us soup and we looked at it because there was no fish, and when New Daddy came and our soup became filled with meat, and even the expensive periwinkle, it was also quiet.

The silence of that night did not bother me at all, and when I saw New Daddy going to his room after looking at Ada who was standing at the kitchen door, it was the strange look that bothered me. Not the silence.

I stood watching in the shadows so New Daddy would not see me. He walked passed me, and his door closed with a click. I remained standing for some minutes and could hear Mama snoring from their room.

Many times, Mama took a sip of alcohol that did not seem to digest well in her intestines. She would then sleep and snore loudly. I was sure even if the whole house was on fire, she would not have heard.

Mama’s snores were especially loud on Wednesday night, maybe because that was the day Papa died. I was now familiar with
the sound of her snores and her door locking with a click. Sometimes it was loud, sometimes softer. Sometimes I was in Grand-Mama’s room, sometimes deep in sleep but the sound was there. Click. Click. Click. I didn’t understand what the sound was telling me till that night. The meaning was not clear maybe because it was a language that I was not yet supposed to understand, the way Grand-Mama did not understand the English sounds in the white man’s box. That night, the click combined with other sounds and words to send me a clearer message.

As I got into my side of the bed, I turned facing the wall, careful not to lay on Ada’s side as she complained it made it too warm for her. I closed my eyes and forced the sleep to come because early the next day I was to start work as a tailor’s apprentice. I didn’t want to, but New Daddy said it was for the best.

I desperately tried to sleep. When the sleep didn’t come, I started counting in Grand-Mama’s language: ovo, ive, era, ene...

I must have finally fallen asleep because the next thing I heard were quiet voices. I heard a strong voice and whispers. The strong voice said, “Sorry. Sorry ehn.”

And then several loud grunts. I stayed very still, wishing I could disappear into the opposite wall with the painting of Genevieve Nnaji that Ada and I had bought at Igbudu market.

I lay there willing that breath would stop coming out of my nostrils, for fear even the sound of my breathing would be too loud. The grunts kept coming and the occasional ‘sorry.’ I must have died a thousand deaths for every grunt I heard that Wednesday night.
My mind could not believe what my ears were hearing. They always called me a child, omotete. But I was also a child who read a lot and I knew from my books that New Daddy should only be doing to Mama what he was doing to Ada! Ewooo!

After what seemed like forever, there were footsteps and then I heard our room door closing with the sound I knew was now crafted in my memories forever. Click. This time it was softer than it had been earlier that evening but it was unmistakable to my ears.

I laid still and pretended I was alone in the bed. My brain was busy revealing different things to my mind. I stayed that way for a long time and then the sniffles started coming. First quietly, then louder, until the side of the bed where me and Ada kept our heads without pillows started to feel damp. Suddenly I couldn’t take it anymore, I needed all the sounds to stop!

The click. The grunts. And now these sniffles. I needed the now familiar silence of the house. I preferred it to even the softest of sounds.
I turned on the bed, angry.

I was sure the plea in my eyes was as sharp as the torch the police pointed every evening at the market junction when stopping everyone including Mama for change. I was not sure Ada would answer me.
She took a pause and then looked at me, her usual brown bright eyes now red like the eyes of the men in our neighbourhood when they had smoked a heavy dose of the leaf New Daddy called marijuana. She looked much older than the beautiful sister I knew who turned 14 two months ago.
After a while she replied, “I do it because I’m made for it. This is what I am made for. New Daddy told me so. You hear?... and... and... if I don’t do it, we will have nowhere else to stay. Mama cannot take care of us. Grand-Mama is already sick so I’m helping take care of her too. Mama can also now be respected as a married woman. I don’t like people talking to her anyhow as they did after Papa’s death. Or you prefer our old life?” It was like she was reading a script for me.

I don’t know if it was because of her simple words or the quiet, peaceful way she spoke them, or something else I didn’t understand yet that night. My eyes stopped seeing Ada clearly because tears formed a shade in them. I remained there, looking and yet not seeing my beautiful sister.

My mind was trying to see more clearly, everything my eyes wanted to deny. Why was Mama drunk almost every night? Is that why New Daddy chose Ada? Should Ada drink to stop this? Will he then come to me? Did Grand-Mama know? Can we chase New Daddy and keep the new house or do we have to go back to our old life with flaming kerosene and dirty rice?

There were a thousand questions on my mind, and looking at Ada’s peaceful face I thought: if I died a thousand times just hearing New Daddy grunt like a pig on top of her, she must be dying one million deaths to give us this life! Can the big city lawyers, the ones they call humanitarians, help?

As I sat there, I got another revelation. I knew, whether the lawyers helped or not, I was going to be a big, big lawyer. One that would help Ada, Grand-Mama and Mama kick New Daddy out, and keep this new house and new life.
My tears fell harder. I reached out to touch her face and we hugged closely, rubbing faces. Our tears combined to form small rivers down our faces, before dropping down, breaking up into tiny, thousand pieces, on the new floor, in our new house to which New Daddy brought us to live a new life.

GLOSSARY

_Aproko_  
Gossip

_Adire, Osebagbaniku_  
Ethnic fabrics/wrappers in Yoruba and Urhobo cultures, respectively

_Ewoo!_  
An exclamation of intense surprise/disbelief

_Iyibo_  
English language in Urhobo language

_Oyibo_  
A Caucasian/light-skinned person

_Wahala_  
Trouble/complication
“Science and technology have been developing steadily in the past century. How about the human mind – are we finally approaching full awareness and consciousness?”

Right after hearing this sentence, Yassine yawned as he looked at his watch hoping that the boring philosophy class would end. He wanted to get ready to watch the football match. He had been waiting for it over a long period. To a casual observer it may have looked as if Yassine didn’t like philosophy or even school. This is because he admired and appeared obsessed with a sport that is widely popular in this country. He always knew which team played when and with whom. But he was, in fact, doing well in his studies. He had managed to finish the first semester very well. He was among the best three in his class, which clearly made him a candidate to graduate from high school in the next two years with a good grade that would provide him a promising future.

Yassine was living his normal teenage years surrounded by a limited circle of friends. He was having a kind of a “rare” relationship nowadays, with his old grandpa. In fact, Yassine was practicing philosophy without realizing it, as they got into conversations and discussions, even sometimes heated debates. He actually enjoyed these moments. It was one of the main reasons that drove him
to thrive each time he headed to that red door, holding a basket of cakes and delicious traditional bread-like pieces to a man who decided to live his last days in a partial loneliness.

So what was actually different at school? Was it because of the absence of interactions with the Professor who did nothing but gave assignments and used hard words to communicate? Or was it because of him taking time to discuss the structure of an argumentative text more than the ideas it contains? Or maybe, it was the eternal disputes he was having with disorderly students? Or could it be just simple as putting a philosophy course at the end of the day when everyone is tired?

People live and then they die as life continues. Yassine was aware of this truth as his old grandfather passed away, even though he wasn't able to hold his sadness and sorrow for losing such a person. A wise man said, “People die when they are forgotten.” Indeed this was the case since he can't imagine ever forgetting the man who took him out of an endless dark whirlpool where many people are still stuck even today. And what greater honor would it be than dedicating his life to do the same?

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It is 7:00 am. This means that there is a train to catch up as backing out could not be a choice. It is still hard to pass through that half-awake transit state. After all these years, waking up doesn't become easier.

It is a rainy day. Yassine or “Dr. Yassine,” as some people called him, waved for a taxi.
Yassine stood at the front door of the station recalling the same view he saw 10 days earlier. It was a very short vacation, or kind of. Now he needs to go back for work. The class is waiting for him. Some 8 years ago he would have been excited to work again, to do what he loves to do, and to go for what he chose to dedicate himself to someday. At that time, he was convinced that he's at the right position to act, when he became a philosophy teacher. For him, it wasn't an easy mission, and results weren’t satisfying, as he struggled to get the attention of the students to the importance of what he was saying.

Was it because the lack of good teaching skills? He was quite convinced in his methods. However, he continued with the same energy, driven by his ambitions, and maybe by some of the few brilliant students he encountered from time to time. Unfortunately, this energy was wearing off, social media invaded the world more than ever, and he was finding himself spending more than a quarter of an hour asking students to put their phones aside. Until one day, when he found two of his students watching a football match during the class. That picture showed him a normal act for him at a certain age. But things are totally different. And now, he's heading back to class, with no ambition or excitement, to perform what have become nothing more than a ‘job’.

The train left the station, as Yassine started to scroll his phone looking for at least one article to read before falling asleep. He stopped suddenly when he saw a well-known symbol of a zoom in-eye: “Illuminati.”

The word brought nightmares into Yassine’s earlier life. Alongside one of his best few friends, the two struggled from the heaviness of the ‘information’ they carried; information that was on the Internet,
uploaded by a guy who happened to possess all the undeniable truth about this world. Yassine was actually terrified. He became obsessed with ideas such as ‘the end is near’, ‘everything is planned by them.’ It was like falling into a swamp, where mud would drag you down every time you walked more into that swamp and when getting out it was harder.

Unlike some other memories of his life, Yassine did not have the vibes of shame or cringe. He was aware of the situation and was fully convinced of the outcome. The huge load of information he was receiving made due to the increase in availability of internet connection and in absence of a critical thinking methodology had shone light on what might happen.

Yassine started to lose hope. It is in moments like these in our lives, when the person needs a ‘guide’. It may be an excerpt from a book or a movie scene. It might perhaps be a daily life situation that changes our perspective. Whatever it is, the influence might be way more effective, when that ‘guide’ is a person, a close person, and when only interaction can be sufficient to overcome hard times. In the case of Yassine, that guide was his grandfather.

In popular culture, the grandfather is basically conceived as a symbol of the family’s unity. His presence is the essence of family reunions during celebrations and special occasions. Otherwise, he is considered a person who only needs physical care to be provided, while he can only communicate to people of his age, mainly neighbors, or old time friends if there are still any. This absence of interaction with older people seems like a ‘generational break-up’, which is kind of natural, as the majority of grandfathers, weren’t well educated, the reason behind this difficult contact. Yassine was lucky. His old man was that wise person that listens very well, responds gently, often with a smile on his face.
It is true that in his early days of Conspiracy’s fantasy, Yassine was disappointed by his ‘brainwashed’ grandfather, after the latter showed less interest to his huge discoveries. However, as his vision shifts from his phone to the train’s window, he can’t forget how impactful his words were, how for an old man that happened to encountered and even befriended some of intellectual and cultured people during his days as a Café’s waiter, to bring him out of the mess, and help him find a proper way of thinking in life.

“You see, Yassine, everything can be convincing. It’s all about the way you choose to represent it. This is how people build lives, and this is how people lose lives too. When you’re convinced, it is either mind or emotion. So you mustn’t go blind after your emotions. You should make sure to build a strong mind that does not take things for granted. Think, ask questions, and try to find answers: build your own knowledge.”

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On the blackboard, he wrote:
*What is truth? How can we reach it? Prepare this for the next class. See you next time.*

Pr. Yassine wrote these words on the board. This used to be his favorite problematic to start a 2 hour discussion trying to involve students to participate and express their opinions. But today, it’s homework for them. Pr. Yassine will collect the essays, correct them, and prepare students for the final exam.

After a long day, he headed to his apartment, where he chose to live in partial loneliness. At the balcony, he carried his guitar and played a smooth piece that fitted a calm and starry night. It seems like he hasn’t lost all of his passion after all.
On December 31st 2019, the municipal health commission of Wuhan in China reported dozens of cases of pneumonia due to an unknown cause. Days later, the responsible agent was determined. It was a new virus that was referred to afterwards as COVID-19. Things started to develop quickly and significantly. The World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 had become a pandemic due to the alarming levels of its spread and severity of sickness. This turning point put the whole world in shock, fear, confusion, stress. There was a mix of almost all varieties of emotions between those who didn’t manage to express their true feelings and those who chose several strategies to hide their stress. Everyone was asking, “How did we get here? What is going to happen next? Is this it? What and why?”

And then there were no one in airports, in parks, in malls, on the streets. The whole world went through quarantine. It was a sight that brought chills, the same way Yassine felt when he was heading back home after he bought some foodstuff. He heard no car noises and no street vendors’ voices. Nothing but silence reigned. He sat at the balcony in the evening to feel that silence again, before it was interrupted by a phone call.

“Hello Mum, how you doing?”
“Yassine my boy, how is it going there dear? Is everything okay?”
“Good! How’s father doing, Zineb and Hamza?”
“Everything’s fine for the moment. Your father was wondering why you didn’t join us before the lockdown. I thought the same.”
“It wasn’t an option. Everything came suddenly before I finished some work. I’ll definitely join you as soon as possible.”
“At least you can go and stay with your cousins Mourad and Zakaria?”
“It’s okay Mum. I feel good where I am right now.”
“You’re going to stay alone for God only knows how, and especially in moments like these?”
“There’s no need to worry. I’m going to be totally fine.”
“You really remind me of him, you know?”
“You know better.”
“Love you, stay safe, bye!”
“I love you too Mum!”

The “quarantine era” felt indeed as a long stretched period. Some countries chose to minimize restrictions, while others denounced completely the state of emergency. Cities, roads and streets felt alive again, and all sights shifted to the newest hot topic: vaccines. The vaccination operation had been initiated in several countries. Soon after, the vaccine became controversial. It was the topic. The uncut war of words started up everywhere on social media. The anti-vaccination movement has been spreading faster than the virus itself, linking vaccines with some deep master-plans that aimed at reducing world’s overpopulation density or to control people’s lives with tiny microchips. For many, it was indeed all part of a conspiracy.

Yassine was surrounded by debates everywhere: in the news, social media, at the market, the streets, even the school. Today, Pr. Yassine received questions from his students about the vaccine. He felt that their questions were more driven by a curiosity to know his opinion more than seeking information. However, he responded: “Actually, you should ask the biology Professor. She will be a better choice to explain and answer all of your questions.” But before the students collected their stuff, he interrupted: “Everything can be convincing.” (Silence) “Next time, you’re holding your phone, or you’re talking to someone, and you receive new information, try to ask questions. Is it presented as a fact? If it’s a fact, ask for evidence then. If it’s a conclusion, ask more questions: Why? How? What if? Because
facts aren’t every statement that follows ‘scientists found that...’ and theories and conclusions aren’t every argumentation that involves ‘logic’. Let’s take an example...

As soon as Pr. Yassine started to explain the example, and the students were listening, he felt surrounded by a different atmosphere. And on his way back home, the feeling kept with him. He was well aware of what happened, but he was convinced that it’s not enough to take that kind of a decision.

*All roads lead to Rome. By pulling all strings together, we can see the full picture.* Titles that covered articles and videos all around the web, good-looking well-talking persons who claimed their eligibility were raising the heat of the debate by throwing shots at those who were hiding in the shadows and, planning and trying to decide their fates. People were and will always be having grudge for governments and billionaires. It is always a belief that those who possess wealth, possess power, and will always thrive to control everything, and of course, the idea of being controlled wasn’t a favorite one for people.

Following news hasn’t been quite the right thing to do after work for Yassine, even though he had to do it somehow. At least he’s not forced as he used to fill his social media accounts with posts sharing his opinions on actualities. It’s better for him now to enjoy being a spectator. Or is it? He thought well about that idea, while he remembered his meeting with Zakaria today at 5:00 pm.

At the café, Yassine turned left and right before he caught a big hand waving at him, it was Zakaria with his big smile. The two greeted as they chose a quiet place to talk. And after a half an hour speech, Zakaria asked his guest:

“So, what do you think?”

“Let’s understand this. Elders are going to be the first to be vaccinated. There is a small group of intellectuals in your
neighborhood you say, who are likely to convince people to not take the vaccine. Now, a lot of elders, adults and youngsters are refusing to be vaccinated. And you’re afraid that your mot... my auntie will become the same.”

“Every time I go to visit her, she asks me if it’s safe. Maybe being a doctor is a major reason. She trusts me blindly without even understanding my attempts to explain it scientifically. But those little doubts, with my absence and the presence of some of her friends that were completely washed by the ideas of that group, make me nervous. And what about the other people who are also threatened if they continue believing in those conspiracies?”

“I don’t think I can change anything. You’ve tried to talk to them right?”

“Yaaaa... Yeah but, that’s not the thing, I’m not you! I’ve come to you knowing who you are, what are you capable of, and what were your ambitions. For God’s sake you were the one to convince the stubborn Brahim to let Soukaina pursue her studies!”

“We will see. Let’s hope everything is gonna be good.”

Small protestations begin to attract more and more people that even turned up in some places into riots.

This was all what filled the news during that week, after the ending of the first semester. Yassine took this first week of the vacation as a chance to rethink Zakaria’s proposition. Recall that situation, that day in school, recalling his first years as a teacher, remembering his words, “People die when they are forgotten.” He should never forget. What could he have told him right now?

The rioting groups continued to commit more destruction while protests continued to yell their united slogans. Yassine is riding in a taxi to work. Then the driver crashes into a street light after barely
avoiding two escaping rioters. A burned tire is thrown at the middle of the road, while stones are thrown everywhere.

Seeing the injured driver barely breathing under the chairs, Yassine wondered, “Why?”
In a sudden silence that was maybe due to his temporary hearing loss he asked, “Why?”
He wasn’t a rioter, neither an enemy of the rioters, “So, why? Why is he the victim? Why is he laying here waiting for his death?”

He wants to live more. He started losing sight, as he felt his consciousness slowly fading.
Yassine opened his eyes. It’s the same dream again. And he didn’t know how or why this dream was haunting him all week along. He covered his face with his hands as one tear fell down. It’s been very long since the last time he cried. Even if he couldn’t relate to it, he felt it was a need.

On an early morning of spring, the classroom felt alive with voices of young students talking and babbling before they sensed a silhouette entering the class. A partial silence reigned, followed by the sound of chalk, as the students looked at the blackboard: *Science and technology have developed throughout the recent century. Can we say the same about the human mind? Are we finally approaching fully aware and conscious societies.*

“Today we’re having a free discussion. Shall we begin?”
Buzzing naval drones startle me every time, mistook them for danger. As a microplastics cleaner volunteer, I’m just as worried of the same people these drones hunt. They scan me untill they’re satisfied I’m no threat. Naval drones can’t always keep us volunteers safe, from Cape Town’s gangs-turned-pirates. They’ve established their territories on our once poorly protected Southern ocean. We also fear them taking our tech. Opportunists. The sun caresses my skin and I smile at my two BFF, the bionic flying fish. Altered descendants of the famous Atlantic flying fish species who’ve adapted here since the oceans warmed. I begin applying my face paint. Tradition. It’s as my Amakhosa ancestors used to living near the coast of the Eastern Cape Province. It’ll be scorching hot soon. Life in 2073. Last night, after finishing my Marine Biotechnology research on bionic flying fish, I concocted this traditional white paste. I start applying the paste, looking carefully at my phone’s front camera. “Nosipho come back, it’s too risky today!” My concerned ex-girlfriend texts.
Notifications also pop in from friends. I avoid them. My face paint dries, sticking on my dermis. It’s the best sunblock. I throw my bff up in the air and they glide effortlessly. They ride in the air. I steady myself on this plastic speed boat, tethered to a different boat by rope.

I pet down my Afro into a dome and switch on my high-tech Afro comb. It creates a buffer zone of wireless networking like Wi-Fi, linking to my bff and high-tech beaded bangles on either wrist. One swift wave of my arm and the fish follow, turning in the air. The fins that help them fly like wings are laced with soft metals. Their speed impresses me every time. I press play on my phone and it blasts my Amapiano hits. Grooving to the beat, I dance feeling the music flowing through me. My arms wave around in the air, guiding the fish. I dance directing their paths like a puppet master pulling invisible strings. Down underwater, shoals of more bionic flying fish swim following my bff leading from the air. They fly through the water polluted with micro-plastics. Their bionic gills filter micro-plastics and deposit marbles of plastic balls into artificial stomach pouches.

My dancing routine of side to side hip tossing, has the boat bopping on the surface. Bff rise and dive underwater every now and then. Their friends in large shoals follow the patterns of how I direct them. I usually do this every other day along with other residents of Khayelitsha. Solo today. Seeing the temperature climb I clutch my fist, signaling for my bff to return to my boat. They land breathing heavily, inflating and deflating. Quickly, I put them into closed tanks of regenerative water. Shoals of those other fish swim closer, spitting out marbles of plastics out of their artificial stomachs into my other smaller open boat. It quickly fills up.
I take a sack full of kitchen wastes from households, hotels and restaurants that Khayelitshans turn to feeds and compost. I throw as much as I can into the water. The fish come to feed on their rewards, as we taught them. The water surface bubbles and ripples like a boiling pot. A feeding frenzy. Even other species join the delicious feast. I start my boat. I miss the steady ground. But my heart is beating faster now. Looking over my shoulders, weary of what I’ve been warned online.

My boat speeds, heading towards the coast. It’s an hour away. Maybe I’ll make it. I speed looking over my shoulders as minutes die. That’s when I hear that buzzing. Their engines roar just as much as their rage. Just like I was warned online. The glider surfer pirates of the Eastern Cape seas. I was warned that they’re unpredictable in the afternoons. No use crying now. Honestly, I figured I’d be done earlier. Their gliders speed straight for me. “Hand over everything! Those bionic fish! No one outruns us!” One shouts.

I realize that they want to sink me. They’re teen girls with a mean spirit and when I see their neon-red braids, long, flowing in the air I’m terrified. They’ll take my tech and boat. Getting control of our trained bionic flying fish could help them expand territory over the oceans. I can’t lose my tech, so many depend on my work. Where’s those drones when needed?!

“Uzofa today!” Their pirate captain shouts that I’ll die. A warning I don’t take lightly, swerving my boat to my right. I continue speeding, practically flying over the waves, hoping my plan works. I see long ropes of seaweed farms. We grow thick chunks of varying edible seaweed that covers the ropes here. This bioengineered superfood seaweed mostly feeds inlanders where Kalahari Desert cities struggle with food. I grab one rope, hoping they’ll take the bait.
They get closer. I turn my boat lifting the rope out from the waters. One after another, they struggle to turn in time. Their wind-catching glider blades hit the rope, breaking immediately and tossing the glider pirates into the waters. My heart races. I’ll truly be safe once I’m on land. I speed to the coast thinking it’s over. Soon, I see a big shadow cast over my boat.

“Mxm!” I slam the boat with my fist, enraged. I look up to see the pirate captain. My heart trembles. She’s turned her sails into wind gliders to fly instead of surfing the water waves like a glider. I should’ve known.

“Noo! What?!” I yell. Today’s work can’t be in vein. I open the water tank, thinking fast on my feet.

“Sorry guys but we must sink her first,” I say to my two bff, scooping them out. I throw them in the air before they know it. Spreading their fins, they glide in the air circling around the pirate captain.

Eventually they take turns diving into her sails turned wing blades. They puncture holes into the blades in mastery aerial assault. I raise my hand and they fly back to my boat. Her wind glider struggles to catch the wind. She goes crashing into the water, making one big splash. There’s no time to celebrate. I harvest the few seaweeds I see into my boat with a raker until it’s enough.

The coast of Khayelitsha Metropolis appears in the distance growing bigger into my view. I’m more determined than ever to go to the party at the Climate Shebeen. We’ll celebrate how far Khayelitsha Metropolis has come today. Today’s victory. Almost losing my tech.

We’re descendants of those who were once amongst the poorest in society. Khayelitsha townships and informal settlements as they were once known. Change started after our then new ‘RDP housings’ were a success. An architectural experiment by Africa’s best eco-architects whom found each other at Shebeen of
Khayelitsha’s lively events. It became a “Climate Shebeen” where many gathered for climate expo events. Building apartments from old shipping containers led to schools, a hospital and malls. Changing how we governed we truly saw a second wave of change. We elected a council instead of mayors. All government funds, payments and other expenditures were made public, online 24/7. Knowing Khayelitsha’s transactions made all the difference. Ideas birthed at the shebeen.

Salaries increase with executing one’s leadership goals, but not things that were your responsibility. We made leadership a position frustrating to those with nefarious agendas, but attractive to the selfless visionaries who wanted to develop us. With radical new-tech industrial revolution changes, Khayelitsha became a metropolitan city. A city adapting to a changing climate like the once pioneering Kalahari desert cities, so its citizens never struggle. I’m proud of Khayelitsha.

Reaching the busy coastline market, I deliver my plastic marbles and seaweeds. Everyone’s glad I’m back with so much. Later, I shower getting rid of the ocean smell, those damn pirates. The shebeen party is what we’re longing for as a metropolis. Tonight I come alive. The biggest climate leaders could be there mingling. Many more ideas we’ll never know, birthed there.
My goodness I could be silly sometimes. I missed the morning bullet train to my Khayelitsha Shebeen gig. Still, I can’t wait to perform for that prestigious Climate shebeen. The bio-fulled bullet train goes from Musina Metropolis here in inland Limpopo Province, all the way down to Cape Town Megalopolis, neighbouring Khayelitsha. It’s an hour away by this train which connects to the whole African continent minding no colonial borders. The train became a catalyst to changes to migration laws. A free ride for all Africans. It’s always booked. After debuting at the Khayelitsha Shebeen of legends today, this train might facilitate my musical tour, like Climate-musician legends before. I’m desperate.

I re-watch a viral video of the Amapiano dancer at the shebeen I’m going to. Her white face paint and energy has had the internet ablaze for days. I’m standing at a station platform where street markets infrastructure lines streets. People awaiting future employment work here selling farm produce donated by citizens of Thohoyandou from street gardens. I buy dried Thungulu berries and deep fried locusts. Mmm!

Deciding to hitchhike, I put out a message for everyone to know I need transport fast on Ubuntu hitchhikers app. I’m quickly overwhelmed with the love online. I notice five people going to Cape Town and pick one with the best reviews.

I’m carrying a Mbira guitar invented in the 2040s. It’s got metal tines that I pluck, singing like my Vhavenda ancestors during rituals. Mbira, the spiritual musical instrument of my ancestors. When
nervous, I sing Zwidade songs just as my grandmother would to me when I got injured. I remember. Adapting to desertification, old mud huts were rebuilt with solar panel walls, even the conical roofing which was my job to fix. The weather like today, putting on new solar panels, replacing traditional thatched roofing grass. I fell so hard. Crying, grandmother sang me to sleep. I woke up to a rare soft platter of rain that night. Like today's rare rains. Rain is good luck.

“Come in Langanani!” the driver calls. My ride's here. An old woman drives a monster truck with seats in the back. “Ndo livhuwesa!” I thank her after she scans my card. She smiles gleefully. Her gold grills shimmering. She's happy that the government will lower her bio-fuel prices since she's giving us a free ride on the app. There's one other passenger. I wave hello. He seems uninterested. I am prepared for an awkward ride.

We pass slope fields of polyculture farms in Makhado Megalopolis where old women clubs race organic pesticide drones. I'm intrigued. Children cheer on from the roadside and I can tell it's a norm. I log to local trends and the children flood local hashtags with posts about who'd win.

The old woman slows down to talk. “We won't go through Polokwane Megalopolis! There's stuff happening in the outskirts!” she announces. She swerves west. The other passenger looks at me puzzled. We hold on as she drives past a former nature reserve. Other cars line up on the roadside. We peek out. Wildlife rangers chase poachers on the now dusty reserve.
“Get them! Get those monsters!” our driver shouts out rallying on the rangers. She stops the car. Poachers turn around near the fencing. Flipping over, their car rolls spitting out passengers and the stolen rhino horns. A cloud of dust lingers while the rangers grab the injured poachers.

“I hope you filmed that! Those rangers planted GPS nanobots in those rhino horns. I’ll need to see the footage. I just had to come to see it,” our driver explains excitedly.

I nod repeatedly, forwarding that footage to her. Wasting no time, she drives off. It’s quiet again. Johannesburg Megalopolis is only minutes away.

I must’ve fallen asleep not long ago. I wake up to chantings I know very well. Toyi-toyi as South Africa calls our special kind of protests and strike marches. Birthed during times of fighting against the apartheid regime, toyi-toyi had become common even into democracy. We look outside the windows. People jump and dance on the blocked road. A classic toyi-toyi.

“It’s a climate justice protest,” the other passenger explains. He’s scared just like the rest of us. Protests are so rare these days. They can turn violent. People sing and chant shouting at the Department of Climate Solutions. Many beam up hologram board signs and relevant hashtags of a protest.

“I’ll be getting off,” I announce. The driver opens the door so I jump out. I wave bye one last time. These protesters are my crowd. I squeeze through the crowd of protesters, feeling their grief and anger sweating off on me. Some begin to recognize me. They turn their phones in my direction, everyone in my face.

Making it to the front, more phones and eyes are on me. They stop chanting and dancing. No toyi-toyi. Instead, they hum together. My Mbira guitar intrigues everyone as I start singing from deep inside
where images of desertification in our Vhembe district homelands feel like they mist up to my throat. My voice whispers sweetness into the tired crowd. I play Tshingondo music with the unique sounds of Mbira tines notes. Some raise fists. Soon, like a wave, everyone joins as fists rise all through the crowd, down the long streets. They sing along to my songs about climate policies and getting back lands occupied by the last remaining capitalist companies. I am tired of being in part utopias while in the farthest parts of this country, as it’s always been like this here, stay struggling and worst impacted by our crisis.

“All South Africans must be freed from the climate dystopia, even those far from our urban centres,” I speak one last time. I walk away as they cheer. The toyi-toyi resumes. Their leader follows me.

“We heard you’re headed to Khayelitsha. Well, your profile says so. Congratulations. Take one of our flight seats,” he talks in my ear. My phone beeps in my hand. He has sent me his flight tickets.

“Thanks!”

“It’s ok. I’ll get a reward from the government anyway! But get going before you miss the flight!” he says pointing me to a nearby hovercraft.

The hovercraft is big and green like a giant beetle. Their personal pilot scans my ticket and we’re off above Johannesburg, one with the clouds. The other passengers who were part of the protest recognize me. I’ve really found my kind, this crowd. Khayelitsha shebeen party awaits.
3
Khayelitsha Metropolis Shebeen.

LANGANANI

Upon landing, I’m escorted to my hotel near Khayelitsha bay. I don’t have time to soak in the ocean views of a thunderstorm rumbling with the most beautiful lighting strikes. I pace around in my free hotel room made of recycled plastic marbles. I view old videos of climate-musicians from across Africa who’s careers changed from here. My musical inspirations. I study lists of climate leaders, from scientists and politicians to artists, who’ll be watching from around the world. The phone rings, I’m startled knowing it’s time to go now. I take my Mbira guitar, plucking its metal tines to calm myself. I’m ready.

NOSIPHO

I queue with friends in the street, outside the shebeen. Other Khayelitshans dance together in the streets like a carnival. The bouncer robots check their carbon footprint cards. Most people fail meeting the rare carbon footprint mark, getting declined. We’re allowed in. I wear retro Mapantsula street fashions with neon sneakers and a bucket hat like all my friends. I’m the only one wearing my white face makeup in the very dim shebeen party. It complements my outfit while we sit at a small bar, ready to party the night away. Classic music from Sho Madjozi’s Kiswahili and Xitsonga rap to Brenda Fassie’s Afro-pop and Bubblegum sets the party vibes ablaze. People flood the shebeen’s center as the sun goes down. I hear notes of a beautiful instrument. I’ve heard it before, but not here.
My friends descend to the dance floor with everyone. The music is groovy and everyone is feeling it. Hips swinging, energetic footwork worships the upbeat electronic Tshingondo music. I look up to this artist breathing new life into the shebeen. She plays the Mbira guitar bobbing her head. Her own music intoxicates her. Her sparkling braids sway in the air. She’s owned her stage. Her rock band signals for her to sing along. Her voice casts a spell over the cheerful crowd who lose their morals, overwhelmed by joy, bathed in neon lights.

LANGANANI

I see someone amongst the party animals. A woman making fire with her footwork on the dance floor. As I finish playing my song I notice that luminous neon white makeup paint. The song ends. I did it. I waste no time leaving the stage. Another artist comes up. She looks around when the new song starts. She’s disappointed. When she turns to the bar, she sees my sparkling braids. It’s her. She’s beautiful. Attraction pulls us closer. We mirror each other with smiles. “You were so amazing up there! Congratulations!” she finds herself confessing.

“You were one hot white flame on the dance floor,” I say to her. We hold hands and start dancing. Upbeat and groovy is the music. We can barely talk. We stare intensely into each other’s eyes as our faces come closer.

“Never seen you here! You’re going far. Everyone will know your name!” she says into my ear. I smile, adoring the beautiful white face paint. She pulls me to a private balcony. While bands on stage play, we chat. We are watching the distant storm over the sea. We realise that we share a passion for justice, opening new ways of thinking climate solutions into each other’s minds.
THE REVOLT OF THE HEIRESS

Carine Désirée Yao (Côte d’Ivoire)

If you are familiar with Côte d’Ivoire, this West African country, sweet land of cocoa, home to elephants, and bordered to the south by the Atlantic Ocean, you should have probably heard of the famous Baoulé people. Located in the centre of the Ivorian territory and belonging to the large Akan ethnic group, the Baoulé people, originally from Ghana, are distinguished by their rich culture, exemplary organisation, and an atypical history whose fabulous episodes never cease to enchant the nightly talks organised in every moonlight’s evening.

Fleeing a fratricidal war of succession, the people that will later be known as Baoulé were led up to Côte d’Ivoire from the Ghanaian Empire by their Queen, the famous Abla Pokou. Pursued by their enemies and on the verge of being overtaken by the men of the bellicose Itsa – who assassinated Dakon, the brother of the young leader Abla Pokou – these people who sought a safe exile unfortunately, found themselves before the deadly and agitated waters of the Comoé River.

How to cross this torrent and escape the enemy? The Queen stood puzzled. She had to choose between the risk of drowning for her people and the ruthless sword of the enemy. She turned to the old diviner who consulted the spirits of the river. In exchange for their
help, the spirits required a great sacrifice: a human life! A boy! Heart bruised by the worst pains that only a mother can feel, Abla Pokou consented to sacrifice her own son, the only one she had and who was still, an infant. She threw him into the water, and as the boy disappeared into the depths of the river, a line of hippopotamus, whose black backs set one after the other appeared, forming a miraculous bridge connecting the two sides of the river, enabling the people of Abla Pokou to cross.

Once on the other side, the Queen burst into tears as she cried out, “Bâ wouli” which in the Ashanti language means, the child is dead. The exiled people bore the name Baoulé since, in memory of the sacrificed child to whom they owed their salvation. If it began with the courageous mother Abla, the history of the famous Pokou family has known an episode no less inspiring that today it is advisable to exhume from the dust of oblivion in which it has so long and so unfairly been buried.

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It all started on a calm and gloomy morning. The sun was rising quite pale above the houses and palaces that made up the Baoulé kingdom. Timidly, she stuck her head out of the horizon with faint rays, as if to reflect all the coldness and despair that had reigned over this village for decades. Sakassou was indeed no longer the same. Since the departure of Queen Abla Pokou, the village had become arid and sad. Plants only grew in places and the harvest seasons no longer offered their former beauties and fruits. Even the rooster no longer had the strength to stand up proudly and do his traditional coco riko that woke up the whole village. Everything in
this community seemed to have returned over the years to a general state of indolence. But what really happened to this once thriving and glorious tribe?

The day had barely risen, Adjua Pokou, the last great-granddaughter of Abla Pokou had just woken up, still lying on her mat, thinking about her day. This one would not be much different from all the others. Today, it was the turn of the women of her family to cook and take care of the King. Grumpy villain and torturer, he was as outcast as his father. Just to think of the idea that she should be at his service today was repugnant.

Adjua Pokou suddenly stood up proudly in front of the hut. She was a beautiful young girl with a flawless black complexion. From the top of her admirable height, she was only 17 years old. Outside, her mother and aunts had not waited for her to start the service. The pots were on the fire, and her cousins were already on their way to clean up the royal court. Adjua approached the group of women.

“Hello mother and aunts,” she said, sitting down next to them.
“Hello Adjua,” the women replied.
Her mother immediately continued, “Adjua, hurry up, take a shower and join the others at the royal court. We must avoid the wrath of the King and his guard.”
“Understood mother.”

Adjua quickly washed and dressed up before setting out for the royal court. Passing through the small forest between the village from the royal court, she admired the parched landscape and the few animals that remained there... She walked towards a hill at the top of which she could proudly see the majestic castle of King N’Zué with its massive gold gate. Few kilometres away, in the middle
of what was once a lush forest, you could hear the rumble of this monstrous warehouse, which gave off black smoke day and night. The smoke gradually polluted the pure and fresh air.

After the death of the Queen Abla Pokou, the succession to the throne was carried out normally, (in accordance with the matrilineal system for which the people had opted centuries earlier) until the fourth generation, where the sad fate of the people was repeated ... The great-grandfather of the current King had led a bloody revolt, overthrew the legitimate king and imposed a detestable regime of tyranny that his lineage had diligently worked to perpetuate to the detriment of the great Baoulé people. Since then, he, his guard and his descendants spread terror and selfishly captured the kingdom’s wealth and common heritage. The current King had received from the latter a fetish which gave them strength and power, and which helped them to maintain several people in their service.

The people worked for him: the men were assigned to his palace, his factories and his royal guard, and the women took turns to cook or to clean his quarters. Those who could cultivate the fields had to deposit the harvest in the kingdom. Additionally, the King endorsed the establishment of three chemical processing factories in the village. They occupied a large part of the space, polluting the air, river and soil. The King considered women as inferior beings and that the people made a mistake in entrusting their fate to this woman, Abla Pokou. All women had to take care of him, the great King. Arriving at the castle, Adjua met her cousins and immediately joined them for the service. King N’Zi, made his way into the large living room where they were working. He held a vial of caiman skin in his right hand. He stopped at the entrance to the living room, swept his gaze as if to intimidate those present and to verify that no
one was seeing him. Then he hurried to a door hidden by a black curtain. It led straight to the shrine, where he kept his fetish. He closed the door behind him. Adjua, curious, followed him and listened at the door.

In a loud voice, he addressed the big fetish: “Here I am! I am the only one, the grand master! The one who sows terror and reigns with an iron fist over Sakassou! Ah! Ah! Ah! The men are at my feet. And the women are even lower under my feet! Oh fetish, I want you to keep giving me power, power so great that I and my offspring can keep them forever under our yoke. I give you this blood of the most beautiful ram in my flock to express my gratitude to you.”

He turned and walked to the door. Adjua who was hidden behind the door hurried back to her task. She was so outraged and vowed not to let this situation continue. In the evening, sitting on a mat, the young woman told her mother what she saw in the King’s palace.

“Mother, my heart is broken. Why are our people suffering so much? Why are the women of the kingdom voiceless? Why do our fathers have to work so hard if it is to donate all the profit of their hard labours to this wicked King? Our brothers and sisters are dying of hunger every day while the King and his family live in luxury, unpunished corruption and with undeserved honours.”

Then, more resolutely, Adjua added, “Mother, we must act. We should walk in the footsteps of our ancestor Abla Pokou. A courageous woman who saved her people by offering what she had most dear. We must do something.”

Her mother, who had been listening intently spoke, “As you know my daughter, we come from a line of noble warriors. So
do not think that we have done nothing to change things and restore the grandeur of our tribe. All our attempts have been unsuccessful so far.”

“I understand. But trust me mother, there is still something that can be done. If we cannot change everything all at once, I know it is the sum of small actions that make great things to happen.”

“So, what do you suggest, my daughter?”

Adjua stood up and replied with a determined and fixed expression, “A revolt!”

Although she was at first reluctant to approve such an idea, the young girl’s mother decided to rely on her daughter’s confidence as Adjua explained her plan.

“We’ll organise the revolt with the women of the kingdom. They are less watched, and the King underestimates their power. Mother, you will talk to the older women while I talk to the younger ones.”

“Alright, Ajua. I will try my best. Let us meet tomorrow night behind the primary school.”

All the women secretly gathered at the appointed venue the following night.

Affoué the soothsayer of the village spoke, “To dethrone him, we must withdraw his fetish, his custody, and his property, without which, he is nothing. I will initiate the warriors who want to embark on this quest. They will have the necessary elements.”

Adjua was the first volunteer, followed by two other young girls, Ahou and Mienmo. Two days later, their initiation began. Affoué introduced her three disciples to the mysteries of the spiritual world which helped the great warriors of old to win battles: the Mli that granted a disappearing ability, the power of fire and the N’Zué, that of water.
At the end of the endowing ceremony, she gave them a last piece of advice, “Dear young girls, you have been endowed with the great powers that will help you fight the King and, we hope, defeat him. Work with unity of mind and action. Be courageous and stay focused whatever happens. The fate of our people relies on the light of your spirit, the strength of your youthfulness and the steadfastness of your noble hearts.”

Turning to Adjua she said, “Adjua, I admire your courage. You remind me of our ancestor. Lead your friends and deliver our people. May the ancestors be with you.”

“Thank you, Grandma Affoué, for all your advice,” the young women replied. “We will wait until the evening to get into the royal palace.”

That night, the three young Amazons, armed with poisoned arrows, waited behind the palace wall for most of the guards to fall asleep. Only ten of them stayed awake to patrol. Adjua recalled the strategy of the operation, “Remember sisters, here is the plan. We will use the Mli technique to move around, appear and disappear in the kingdom. As soon as we get in, Ahou and Mienmo, you will break into the guard dormitory, and blow the magic sleep powder. And the guards once awakened will no longer be under the yoke of submission by which the King has bewitched them. We will then tackle the other ten, enter the kingdom, destroy the sanctuary and finally face the King.”

Ahou and Mienmo nodded and did as Adjua had indicated. Once in the guards’ dormitory, the two young women blew the magic sleep powder and they all fell asleep immediately except one guard who was returning from the bathroom. He saw them and had only time to scream before sucking in the powder and collapsing. The other guards were on alert and headed for the dormitory. Meanwhile,
Adjua headed for the shrine to destroy it. When the King came out, dressed in his black mantle, he saw the commotion in the courtyard as well as Adjua who had entered the living room. He felt in danger, and with his magical powers, metamorphosed himself into a big black eagle flying over the room, crying loudly. Adjua immediately fired his poisoned arrows at the big bird, but the King was far too fast. She hissed to call her friends for help. Ahou and Mienmo ran to the rescue of their companion.

Once in the large living room, they saw the great eagle spitting fire and sulphur in the direction of Adjua. Her friends, who had arrived, launched fiery attacks on the great eagle. The latter turned and filled with fury, swooped down on the two young women. Adjua took the opportunity to slip behind the great curtain and enter the sanctuary. She found a room with red lights and big black curtains. Animal skulls on both sides and ostrich feathers on the ground. In front of her, at the back of the room, was the great fetish. He was about six feet tall and was carved from wood. He was the most unsightly and scary creature she had ever seen – he had the head of a warthog with snakes all around and his mouth wide open with the body of a monkey. She was seized with fear but remembered the plight of her people. Courageously, she used her fire power to set the room on fire, before stepping out.

The King saw the fire bursting before his eyes and uttered a terrified loud cry. He tried to fly towards the shrine, but fell to the ground. He had just lost much of his powers. He got up with great difficulty, full of dizziness. “No, no, that can’t be possible!” he exclaimed. “You are just children, poor, and girls on top of that. How did you do this? No, it’s impossible, I remain the King of kings forever, and my reign will not end like this.”
The brave Adjua and her friends shot arrows at the same time. The King fell crashing to the ground, regaining his original form. Mortally pierced in several places of his body, the tyrant sobbed painfully.

“No, no,” he whispered in distress.
“It is impossible! No, that cannot be true,” he said and after three consecutive sobs, the King died. Adjua and her friends rejoiced. They went out and broke the news to the others in the yard. The sun had already risen, and the guards were waking up from their long slumber. Their eyes opened and they wondered what they were doing there. The guards carried the young heroines to the village where everyone was waiting for them.

They marched through the streets of the kingdom and stopped at the public square. The village sage spoke, “I am incredibly happy for your courage, and I realise what young people can do to change things. The succession will be well assured. Dear villagers, I suggest that we leave the leadership of this village to the younger generation. Since Adjua, the worthy descendant of our illustrious Queen Pokou, has shown the way, may she preside over the destinies of our kingdom.”

Everyone nodded without hesitation. Adjua replied, “I am honoured by the privilege you are giving me. Youth is indeed the lifeblood of our community. We will give back our village a colour of hope and restore it to its former glory.” Under the leadership of Adjua, important reforms were made to the management of the public good, ranging from the dismantling of factories polluting the ecosystem to the installation of processing units for local products to creating financial
autonomy and selling the crops, through the practice of large-scale animal husbandry and environmental sanitation. Each family was empowered to be self-sufficient. Adjua’s mother was immensely proud of her daughter who, like her ancestor Abla Pokou, had shown courage to save her people.
The automatic gunfire erupted in the bustling main street of Bamenda. A chorus of screams pierced the hot October air as people scuttled for cover. Shoppers ran in all directions. Street-side stalls were upended and goods crashed to the ground. Cars hooted madly while hysterical people scattered all over, crossing the street at dangerous points, looking for a safe spot to hide. A car veered off-lane as the driver got hit. An oncoming taxi collided with the victim’s car head-on and stopped. Women with babies strapped to their backs screamed and panicked. Some of them unstrapped their babies as they crouched to safety.

Whilst the automatic rifles continued to cough and mow people indiscriminately, Meryline Sirri instinctively threw herself down. Her newly plaited hair with rebellious teenage blond cornrows scraped off the red dust as she rolled under Mr. Anyangwa’s red, beat-up Toyota SUV for cover.

Mr. Anyangwa parked his Toyota at the same spot every morning, opposite a hardware store. There were no parking meters on the unmarked streets, so the truck parked there all day long. He’d reverse into the spot, lock the truck and then unlock the door to his photographic shop-cum-studio. Anyangwa & Sons
had been in the hands of the same family for 50 years. For five decades it had been a feature on the recently renamed City Chemist Street.

From where she was hiding, Merryline watched in juvenile horror as bullets, flying over Mr. Anyangwa’s Toyota, shattered the huge shop windows. Shards of glass rained down on the dusty sidewalk besides her. Inside the shop, the photo frames, film canisters and cameras on display were ripped apart by the bullets. The bits flew up in the air and came scattering down to litter the polished floor. Mr. Anyangwa lay slumped over his counter. Blood, which from Merryline’s viewing point looked like carelessly thrown paint from an upstart portrait artist’s canvas, ran in lazy streaks down the side of his chest. Amid the horror, Merryline stifled her sobs. Tears ran down her caramel-coloured oval face. She was scared of making noise and alerting the shooters. From her hiding place, she saw casualties of the noon massacre who littered the unlined street and sidewalks. The unidentified gunmen walked around jumping over the fallen townspeople, and taking valuable items. There was no time, even purpose, to check for wounded people’s pulses. Those with a breath still laboriously twitching their riddled bodies were ceremoniously finished off without as much as a flicker of conscience.

From the west side of City Chemist Street, adjoining Sonac Street, a batch of unidentified gunmen in uniform, herded a group of captured young people towards the square. Merryline Sirri had never been so scared in her life. A warm, wet rivulet of pee down her thigh attested to the horror. All of her 20 years, she watched as the innocence of life expired before her eyes. She never knew, and certainly no one knew that a short trip to buy rice and some beans would end up as a witness to senseless killings. It felt as if the incident was staged, and it appeared like a movie but it was
real. Now Merryline began to comprehend why all the men were required to help the government army ward off separatist fighters. Her father Manjong had been one of those given the presidential order. The family was worried the day he was picked up. Without formal military training, he and others were forced to carry out national duty for which they were not skilled. Manjong was wounded in the spine. He lay home helpless and bedridden and could not cater to the tiny family plot anymore. The government had no policy in place to compensate fallen and wounded men. Even if it had such a policy, there was simply no money. Merryline’s mother Malah, God bless her, tried all she could to keep the family together. However, under these difficult circumstances she could not afford to feed Merryline and her six other siblings. Only three of Malah’s children attended school. Merryline was fortunate to be one of the three. The schools in Oldtown functioned intermittently. For much of the year, children were on the move, displaced by unpredictable fighting and sporadic attacks. Hunger and tent-hopping were constantly on children’s minds. Those lucky enough to escape malaria, as Merryline did, could get a few months of schooling in the year.

As Merryline laid still, unmoving under the truck, she thought about her family. Her mother, together with her brothers and sisters, were preparing the plot for the planting season. Were they safe? Did they know where she was? Had the unidentified uniform men got to her house? She stopped breathing and listened intently. The sound characterising the attackers was subsiding. The gunmen appeared to be retreating. Merryline could hear orders being shouted. Heavy feet hardened by months of jungle training, stomped past Mr. Anyangwa’s car. Merryline cringed and noiselessly shrunk away towards the centre under the car. After a while, which could’ve been hours, all traces of the gunmen’s southern accent faded away.
Still Merryline laid still, afraid to move a muscle. The sun was dipping down the western sky. Shadows filled empty spaces where the sun danced in heat waves before the gunmen struck. Merryline continued to hide a while longer. She could hear no ambulance sirens, no gunmen barking orders.

There was no one that came to rescue the victims. The town was overrun by gunmen, who were in control. Eventually Merryline flexed and cautiously rolled out from Mr. Anyangwa’s Toyota SUV. When she came clear in the hot afternoon sun, she sat and waited, listening for approaching sound. She feared that someone would see her and begin shooting. There was no one, not a soul in sight. Then she stood up and turned to look around at the damage. The buildings were pock-marked by gunfire. On the upper floors of the buildings, tattered curtains stirred in the breeze. A block away, a building was engulfed in flames. Countless bodies lay scattered on pavements and in the street. Each body was accompanied by a puddle of congealing blood.

Looking at all these, Merryline became sick to the stomach. She silently vomited outside Mr. Anyangwa’s Photographic shop. Standing upright, she wiped her mouth and legs where the spittle had run down.

Then looking up and down the street, she began walking, slowly and undecided at first, then hurriedly in the direction of her home. She had lost the money Malah had given her for groceries. Now she’d go home without the food parcels. In the thick silence of a decimated town, Merryline walked on. A well-fed dog came running past her, licking blood from its mouth. The canine sent fresh cold quivers down her spine. Whether it was its master’s blood or the remains of a sumptuous lunch, Merryline had no energy to ponder. After scaring her, the dog scuttled away in no particular
CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A CROSSFIRE

direction, sniffing endlessly. Merryline walked rapidly, her small feet noiselessly skirting one body after another. She passed a block with its opened, ruined shops. She arrived at an intersection, and stopped briefly to check for people. There was no one around, so she walked on and crossed the intersection.

She wished she could find someone or see someone to talk to, to ask for help. Questions she couldn't answer raced through her mind. The thought of being alone with so many dead bodies rattled her. Block after block, intersection after intersection, Merryline encountered no one. In a matter of hours, Bamenda had turned into a ghost town. Everything had happened in violent haste. Those who could, just upped and ran for the hills. Merchandise sold by small traders laid scattered in all directions. Street-side stalls selling food were abandoned with simmering pots that were now charred. The smell of burnt food, coupled with the sight of blood spilt, nauseated her and she vomited again. But she moved on to the next intersection. Then Merryline Sirri turned a corner and froze. Her small hands involuntarily flew up and covered her face as though she freed her vision.

Right ahead of her a platoon of gunmen, machine guns trained at her tiny body, stood menacing. Their cold eyes, burning with the desire to destruct, ravaged her small body. There must’ve been 50 of them. Merryline’s legs trembled violently. It was the first time she saw the gunmen face to face. And the sight was ugly. The helmets that the gunmen wore on their heads made killing and destruction a fashion statement. A thickly built soldier, who appeared to be their commander, yanked a cigarette from his thick-lipped mouth. He stepped forward, casually shaking his head. Probably not more than 30, he appeared to relish this moment of surprise. He handed his machine gun to a toothless, bare-chested soldier. The soldier
grinned mirthlessly. Then the leader drew his pistol and stepped towards Merryline. Merryline wished so bad she could turn and run away. She stood trembling and crying. Her legs could not carry her, and she reeled as if she would fall, then found the strength to stand upright. She wished her father could miraculously appear, slay the attackers and lift her to safety. But with Manjong crippled and helpless, the fantasy rapidly fizzled away to reality. She bent double, clutching her belly. The soldier laughed at this sick entertainment.

“Look what we have here!” the leader stuck the cigarette back where it belonged. The cigarette looked like a prop he was born with. Then his swollen lips curled back in a hideous smile, exposing his brown teeth. In a flash, the grin disappeared. Merryline could feel her bones rattle beneath the skin. She searched for words, longing to say something. Her mouth, dry, was wired shut by terror. She wanted to ask to be rescued, to beg to be taken to her family, to be given water – but all that came out was an inaudible hiss. The soldiers laughed at her attempt to open her mouth and speak. One shouted sarcastically: “Un soldat mute, commandant! Un bonus!” A mute soldier. What a bonus. Merryline started as a single gunshot rang out around the block. The leader sprang into action.

“Take her in, boys!” he ordered. “Bring her to base to join the others. There, along with other child captives, the process of brainwashing them into believing the supposedly good cause of the soldiers began. She was to be trained and turned into a fighter whose conscience, innocence and compassion would be pried out of her delicate brain. There in the jungle Merryline was instructed, and programmed to turn against her own folk, her kin, and unleash attacks of terror all in the effort to help win its war against the separatist of the north and south west region. A chilling warning that it was not ideal to be a girl child.
Nearly a year ago when the massacre in Bamenda at high noon took place, Merryline was at the wrong place. It was the wrong time to be in town. Her disappearance caused Malah’s heart palpitations. Manjong, who had rapidly lost the ability to comprehend dialogue, laid wide-eyed, with no way of knowing that his daughter was the next village attacker. As for Malah, it was a safe bet to believe that she would never see Merryline again. Alive.
“You are fired! You are fired! You are fired...” the words kept ringing in my mind as I slowly passed through Kibera, reputedly the largest tenement slum in the country with over 2.5 million dwellers. To be fired is one thing, but that they beat me up like a stray dog, I was still coming to terms with that three days later. I was terribly insulted. It hurts so much to know that many girls go through this torture every day. I pity those who are even younger than I am. You see, I am only fifteen years old. The younger ones wear scars like immortal gladiators who’ve been fighting all their lifetime.

Last week at the stroke of noon on New Year’s Day 2045, I refused to give a bribe to two guys from the electric company, so they cut off the power supply at SINNERS – a notorious local pub here in Kibera and a pit of sin for wild and rowdy men and women. Suffice it to say, in that pub you are forced to see what you shouldn’t see and hear what you shouldn’t hear.

Rumor has it that Mr. Benno murdered his older brother Wango Junior and took over the pub from him. But his outward image belied the rumor – a middle-aged stature with an overweight physique, simple in appearance, somewhat shy and too placid. I never saw him with a drink or a cigarette. He was the only father figure I’ve had since mine died. He has unsettled me a few times and I don’t like it when he says the stupid books I carry to read
during my breaks are making my head swell. But he started getting angrier and angrier ever since his pub was raided by some authority for underage drinking. Mr. Benno said he suspected me of having told someone who told someone else.

Then there were the rumours that I stole some of his premium booze and sold them outside the pub, in the streets, at a cheaper price. So, when the power supply was cut off, and the day the cops – not just any but those crazy, red-eyed Robotic Police - came to raid the pub, word spread quickly in the neighbourhood and the regulars stopped coming. On the second night, even the daytime strugglers did not show up. For the first time since I started working at Sinners, I feared for my life when Mr. Benno started shouting and spitting like a mad dog. When he threw a bottle at me, threatening to kill me, I ducked under the counter, and slipped away just on time. I know he would have had my hands burnt by one of his bodyguards or beat me to death. I’d heard he had done it to others. Since that night, my stomach has been grumbling for food. And I find myself wandering about looking for food in places I had never thought I would.

I’ve worked at Sinners since we closed school, which is about three months ago. Next week, the schools are reopening across the country, and I was looking forward to my would-be first salary. I had plans for it – I would clear last term’s fees balance, pay next term’s fees, buy a new uniform, buy food, and even buy some sanitary pads. You see, I never have sanitary pads so I either miss school or use a clean sock wrapped in toilet paper. The socks are absorbent, but they get bulkier and stain very quickly. The first salary, though small, would help.

This is not a country for people like us. Across River Kibera, just beyond the Kibera Dam, where the rich politicians and the slum
lords teleport or drive in flying vehicles is, Nairobi Metropolis City – it’s a sea of “parasitic structures” - modernist architecture attached with grids of moving pods developed in response to the need to solve problems such as high rent and lack of space. You can board any pod and it’ll adapt according to your needs. Each pod is complete with artificial ventilation and a sunlight simulator, designed so that the pods do not need windows. Instead, the walls are made up of screens that can be changed to form any desired backdrop. The structures inflate, providing their owners with a warm and dry place to sleep. They also shield residents from the dirty air they would have to breathe if they slept on heat grates directly. These parasitic pods have CloudFishers – an ingenious device that is designed to catch and condense fog into water droplets which, in turn, run down a stainless-steel mesh into a water storage container.

Mashimoni is where I call home. It’s one of thirteen villages that make up Kibera, where humans and machines are supposed to co-exist. But I’ve had to be my own parent. I’ve even learnt to stay clear of those robotic police who roam Kibera like vultures to prey and sniff for humans to terrorize. They’ll lock you up for just looking at them the wrong way. This village squats as a painful landmark – well all of Kibera is – but Mashimoni in general has been a little bit sour. As you can see, my life has been a little sour.

Nine years ago, I was scavenging with my father, Binda, my mother Wasse, and my two siblings, Ana, and Joe, 10 and 13 years respectively, at Mbolea Kuu – an extensive dumping site about a quarter kilometer from Mashimoni. It’s how we did it. At least that’s how my father termed survival. Looking keenly for trash to turn into treasure was what we did. Mostly it was coal - non-empty aerosol cans – that we fixed and re-sold- and sometimes food.
One day, we were at Mbolea Kuu when the Federal Government began testing their first ever A.F.Vs – Automated Flying Vehicles. My father had warned us time and again about these new machines that were meant to patrol for thieves and dangerous people in our neighbourhoods. We were to run and hide at the site of them. My brother, Joe, asked what we had done wrong. “Were we bad people?” he wondered. My father said we weren’t. It’s bad to be poor.

The first unit got underway flawlessly. We watched as they glided above us. Then away they went gracefully but imposingly. “Let’s work quickly and leave”, my father said, a disquiet in his voice. Soon after, came time for the second unit - about a dozen of them. These ones were a little bit amphibian-like, a little bit heavy, a little bit bigger but much intricate. Their engines growled with rage, like they were preparing for bloodshed. The roars startled a group of Marabou storks foraging all around us. I remember how quickly they deserted their breakfast – carrion and other food waste – and ganged up ready to get dirtier and uglier. They clattered their bills together in a battle cry and charged at the A.F.Vs. The air was thick with the noise of the furious birds swirling around the machines like angry wasps.

“Insufficient power! Heat Overload! Insufficient power! System failure!” We heard the panicky voices, moments later. We watched the unfolding battle above us in shock as the vehicles started to sway wildly – threatening to crash. Their alarms were screeching as the scavenging birds poked hard into them. “Run!” my father bellowed in fear as the bellies of the A.F.Vs yawned malevolently at us. The A.F.Vs swerved dangerously in the air – then careened out of the sky and plummeted towards us. I remember running as fast as my legs could carry me. I passed Joe...
who had a limp. I glanced backwards in time to see my father get to Joe, grab his hand, and push him forward. It was too late – they were pulverized.

“Mwanangu! My Joe!” Just ahead of me, my mother stopped and broke into tears as she registered what had just happened. While lost in the moment, a fast-spinning stray rotor blade sprang out at her from nowhere and decapitated her.

Everything happened fast. Too fast. Miraculously, I cleared the landfill and froze in position at a high ground. The now ablaze vehicles were spewing fireballs as soon as they hit the ground.

“Ana! Ana! Ana! Sister!” I looked around me and it dawned on me that my sister was not with me. Tears flowed down my face uncontrollably, blurring my vision. I walked back home alone. Nature had preserved itself by fighting off the machines. I lost everything that day. Some wounds remain sore forever.

Three years after that ordeal, every night I lay in this family makeshift shack that my neighbour Velma Inue helped me rebuild after acid rain corroded our old polycarbonate roofing sheets. My dreams are changing. They are full of green, and light and my mother is growing lush green plants – from mountain avens, saxifrages, poppies, cotton grass to white bell heather - while my father and siblings bask in their blooming serenity and quiescence. Maybe I can take Velma up on her promise to teach me to grow my own pumpkins. Despite her advanced age – 83 - she grows pumpkins that have survived the heat from excessive ultraviolet exposure and dry winds. She always asks me about my dreams. She can teach me how to plant and grow these things – maybe even grow the green from my dreams.
There are other dreams too. School has a place of escape for me. There, my friends – Taraji Pendo and Zawadi Guta – make me laugh. And on Sundays, I get to spend the afternoons playing Jump-Rope and Double Dutch with Pendo on the little patch outside their house. Ever since Pendo and Pendo’s mother, Zainab, said I was getting too thin, she makes sure I eat. Now with my job gone, I hope the pumpkins survive the scorching sun. I do not ever want to go back to the dumpsite – back to Mbolea Kuu. Zainab and her daughter are not rich, but they are not as poor as I am and Pendo’s cousin, Peter Muboro, who works as a software engineer for the Alpha Roboticops Company, lets us read his books and play his video games. Someday, I would like to write books and create survival video games.

At times like this, I wish I was one of these scavenging robot police flying A.F.Vs. They don’t fear death. Each is released to the world with a pre-installed –B.I.S.H.O.P.S– Biometrics Intense Self-Healing Operating System. This advanced program helps them to automatically self-repair damages without any external diagnosis of the problem or human intervention.

I’ve never seen a depressed robot and they can live for 100 years if pre-installed with B.I.S-H.O.P.S. I imagine it lubricates their internal systems so they do not need to eat or drink like humans do. But the way I see it, they must starve, and feed on blood and bone, for pain and shame. Perhaps they are designed to smell poverty from afar, for no poor person crosses their path and lives to talk about it. Velma tells me that humans controlled the police force, and they were brutal. But would they have been worse than these copper-legs and brass-arms marionettes? They are supposed to detect crime and prevent it from happening. But whoever created them, wired them to only go after the poor and the hungry. I read
in “Future of Transhumanism” that their C-Pro, Cerebrum-Pro, an intelligence program, also pre-installed in their brains, seems to be more powerful than the magic or witchcraft of our ancestors. They do come under fire for their brutality, but I’ve never seen them go to jail.

Over the last three days, this pain has reminded me of the things my father used to talk about. Like when Velma told me her dream would be to see a real President emerge from this neighbourhood. My art teacher says the same thing. During the last art class before we closed schools, she said the robot police roam poor neighbourhood because the law is bent in their favor. She said something about The Wretched of the Earth and that if Frantz Fanon rose from the dead, she would not be surprised.

It’s Sunday. I think I can get some good food from Velma. I will also ask her what a real President should be doing, so that one day when I become President, I can change things for the wretched of the earth. The last time I saw H.E. Richard Mubadi II, the Head of State, was during his much publicized visit in a hologram. He said:

“...We as a country have come from a very distant land. I know it. You all know it. We all know it. We used to die here while waiting for the White people to send in funds. Diseases killed us. Polio crippled our people, HIV killed our people, flu and cold gave us headaches, COVID-19 almost wiped us all. Same can be said of malaria. But when I came into power, I did what no one else did. Not even my father. I brought in an automated system for my people. I replaced doctors, chemists and pharmacists with intelligent robots that can diagnose and manufacture medicine, vaccines, antibiotics, painkillers, or treat you right there and then. You are a privileged society and you deserve the best.
I know without any shadow of a doubt, my distinguished deeds will hand me down to the annals of history as the President who fought hard and defeated malaria completely.

But here, in Kibera, the worst, most virulent form of malaria thrives. I almost died of malaria last year. We have become an experiment in sustaining poverty in the midst of plenty and the robot police guard the rich, making sure we remain in our place.

Oh! These feet. They still look bad, wounded and swollen. I know Velma has food and some herbs to make the pain go away. If she asks me about my dreams, I’ll tell her my dreams are changing. I do not want to drive a flying vehicle, teleport, or live in a parasitic pod. I’ll tell her about this old book I read on “The Future of Transhumanism”. I’ve read its prologue over and over again. The author Cael Kamau Situmbi says, “As smart people evolve, so do their houses. The house understands the inhabitant and provides for their needs. So, you won’t own a specific pod. You can board any pod and that pod will adapt according to your needs...”

My dream is to afford good shoes and create software that can remove the viruses of poverty, diseases, police brutality and violence.
Suddenly, 1980 sets in. The war torn trees began to heal the grass which had been trampled upon by many feet of soldiers who fought to liberate a people. The green grass stepped on seveally by civilian helpers who were in transit every second to relay messages to required destinations, or by soldiers who fought to retain colonisation, and betrayers who callously collaborated with the obstinacy of the people’s enemy. The grass, which had stubbornly resisted yet desperately bowed to the buzzing Alouette helicopters flying low dropping Rhodesian forces in war zones, started healing. Wild animals in the mountains had for a very long time been subject to the incongruous crack of rattling gunfire, whistling bombs and unforgiving machine guns, now 1980 too was their year.

Senzeni heard the silent breathing of women who participated in the liberation struggle, of the determination that took them into war frontiers, into the thick of battles, the blood, the warzone shouts, the deafening rumbles of bombs, gunfire, empty metal drums rolling off and about. She remembered the skulls of unfortunate comrades both female and male. They could not escape the obstinate accuracy of snipers who slowly eliminated those among the national liberation fighters. Fighters who had little training or somehow those who passionately joined the struggle to see their Zimbabwe become independent.
A wartime woman is like a leopard that has seen Noah’s time. That has seen the seams of life and death. Senzeni, unlike most girls of her age who prioritised education in missionary schools across Zimbabwe during the mid-1960s, felt it was betrayal to set herself before ink and paper while her fellow brothers and sisters were smouldering in war. They had chosen to defend everybody’s freedom, every wild and tamed animal’s freedom. They had stood up for those that never believed in freedom to be free ultimately.

Would post-independence Zimbabwe mean anything to those who knew how to use the barrel of the rifle to claim some God-given rights? Yes. No. Senzeni must have been among those who were unfortunate upon returning home, to realise that the independent Zimbabwe wanted the free citizen to hold at least ‘Standard 4’, an academic qualification in Rhodesia’s education system. That is, to qualify for blue collar jobs, to occupy the much revered middle managerial posts, the pride in making a sensible contribution to one’s economy. But the determination to exhibit much courage by joining the war as a woman! Wasn’t that enough? Who knew? Who knew the dust that choked her when mortar bombs missed her as a target and plunged into gravel tracks, cratering road networks.

The mournful horn of a train echoed across the valleys of the Mutare mountains in the province of Manicaland. Crossing through its lush vegetation, it disappeared into the thick fog and religiously followed its path. It was 3rd July 1983. Senzeni was heading to Harare, the capital city of the newly independent Zimbabwe. Getting across the meadows, she fell asleep and enjoyed the chugging tortoise pace of the train. The street lights on the morning of 4th July 1983 beamed with a heavenly glow that rendered the streets appear as if it was day.
Sex workers dashed across the streets holding inflated purses that either had some money fetched over the past ten hours or so up to the early hours near dawn. But the average lady must have been asleep or at least preparing to leave home for work somewhere in town, or the industrial parks such as Willow vale and Southerton. Heavy engines roared and whined in one of the busiest bus terminuses, Mbare Musika. They went past the thronged aisles with kempt and unkempt wanderers going about their businesses in the early morning hours, all dotted the whole scene as if they were ants convening for honey.

With determination, Senzeni took off her suitcase and grabbed a taxi. “Number 63 Chidziva Close, Ruwa,” she directed.

The taxi driver gently drove the green taxi, a Peugeot 504 sedan that looked like it must have been some white man’s because of stickers that faintly remained on the dash board with a few inscriptions reading, *White Farmers Union: The Rhodesia we want.* In no time, they were at number 63 Chidziva Close. One of Senzeni’s best old friends resided there in a single room that had only one window with sash bars and louvres. The ceiling of this room had visible protrusions that shouted loud messages about possible roof leaks during adverse weather. It originally must have been white but due perhaps to recklessness of the owner or the successive tenants who would come and go after perhaps failing to meet up the rental costs, it was brown.

Senzeni had to find a job, or be offered one by the newly created Women’s Support for War Veterans Fund. She spoke a lot with her friend, Martha who was working as a clerk at a tobacco auction floor in Norton, a small farming town just a few kilometres’ drive from Harare. She was in love with a ex-Rhodesian Zimbabwean soldier. Senzeni was sensitive about these stories. She knew how these
ex-Rhodies, as they were referred to, abused women during the war because they believed that they were serving the white government, believed to be an invincible system.

After resting for some hours, Senzeni proceeded to the Headquarters of the Women’s Support for War Veterans Fund. She left her letter and the receptionist told her to check after three working weeks. Three weeks later, Senzeni’s stay at Martha’s place started to become uncomfortable. Two issues kept bothering Senzeni. The first was the idea that she was inconveniencing her friend from having her own time. The second was the mounting pressure that woefully grew inside her. Was she going to be offered the funds? Who knew? She was getting anxious.

One Monday morning she found a taxi and left. The fine ladies putting on winter wear, the polo neck jerseys and trousers signified a new transformation in fashion. Senzeni had last worn trousers when she was in the war, a service uniform trouser. As she knocked on the secretary’s door, she was jolted by a male voice that boomed in the empty corridor.
“Hey, she is not around,” he said.

As he drew closer, Senzeni telepathically felt the insatiable grunt of a man who had just thought he would by any means prey on her for all imagined reasons. Yet, Senzeni was in fact in search for life, not the wants and needs it can offer.

“I am the one in charge today. Good morning, madam. You look pretty. I am sure you must be looking for your father, right?”

A fine lady in her early thirties, so serene, innocent and determined but sometimes impatient and uncaring if tempered with.
She looked on and politely responded, “I am sorry, morning. I need to see Miss Mahofa.”

There was a deafening wave of silent air that if one concentrated like a Zen Monk, even the crawling feet of unseen cockroaches would be heard. Silence. The heavy thuds of footsteps, that surely must have been a pair of feet for a gigantic man, could be heard ascending the stairs that would lead to this corridor.

The approaching figure had a usual characteristic, a known addiction to a wireless radio that he carried like a handbag wherever he was. His need for news made him alternate from one station to the other, listening to all the programs whenever his schedule opened a gap. His neck seemed like it was not there. It was swallowed up by his fleshy upper body, the combination of his bald head and the short neck coming to the shoulders was something that made him walk like he was leaning. He was at one time employed at a certain quarry mine owned by Russians in Mhangura area, an area infested with tin and ore. The unidentified man whose preying intentions were interrupted by the approaching wireless radio addict quickly disappeared to one of the corridor ends. He wanted to masquerade as the acting Secretary for a reason.

The radio man finally appeared, with his inflated belly slowly untucking his tucked shirt. He coughed, then said, “Welcome madam!”

The man was actually the one in charge Senzeni introduced herself. The man quickly figured what she wanted. It was the application for funds. The euphoria of independence coupled with inexperience to manage resources has caged many during Senzeni’s days. Her situation was not an exception. The Old Harare
The Old Harare Times had in that same article reported that government officials had used multiple pseudo war veteran accounts to get the money to buy huge vault-like Mercedes Benz sedans. These sedans were driven around with tinted glass for privacy and gloss black to increase the suspicion of an executive being hauled inside by the luxury. Senzeni was never given the letter but only told to reapply within six months. She had been robbed of a lifetime achievement. She had been taken to the edge of a cliff and asked to jump and get some bread and all the riches of the world. She was devastated. Senzeni. Her mother knew her daughter was a hard worker who believed in progress, both personal and impersonal. She had to leave.

The old brown fan continued to run slowly, slicing the air into apparent ripples that sounded like the tired rotors of a faulty helicopter. She made her way out and quickly realised that she had to look for a job soon.

Along Julius Nyerere Street, a thronging crowd was jostling to be the first on the queue. The bulk of the jostlers are young men and women, they are all carrying small envelopes and are dressed in smart casual. Among them, nobody is a young war veteran but college graduates baying for jobs. A man dressed in a blue overcoat appears holding a flat file, with spectacles that have supporting strings. He laughs as if to mock, or perhaps because a joke must have been said and they missed it. Suddenly, the indistinct hubbub becomes orderly then a few people drop out of the queue then
almost half of them drop out. Among the half Senzeni approaches and converses with one of the attendees. She hastily joins the queue and the man in a blue coat takes her identity card. After a while, their cards are returned and they are told to follow instructions on some yellow half pages.

Senzeni’s prayer could be answered. The man in blue returns, this time he asks everybody given the yellow page to submit their slips. He tells them to include an administration fee of five Zimbabwean dollars. In that day, that sum was not a mere penny. It is as good as booking an average motel for a night. Senzeni quickly searches in her handbag, finds her wallet and fishes out four dollars and fifty cents. She checks again and, finally, a fifty-cent coin rolls to the ground. She hastily picks it up then proceeds to submit as she was the only one left. She is told to go back the next day.

The busy Harare streets were congested that Tuesday morning. Light winter showers started to pour, catching by surprise all those pedestrians who had left their houses without umbrellas and mackintoshes. Haberdashers scurried for cover into verandas and under small flyover bridges where street children were curled up together like banana bunches. It is winter. Senzeni followed the address and with a huge smile on her countenance. After a while, she found it. Then made her way in directly to the reception. The Indian lady over the counter, Ranah, greeted and offered her a place to sit.

“How can I help today madam,” she inquired.

“I am Senzeni Moyo. The lady who came here yesterday. I was among those who were taken for the job by Mr Pauls, your Human Resource Manager,” she answered.
To express her consternation, Ranah did not take seconds. She rose up and grabbed her head as if she wanted it replaced. “You got conned! I mean... we don’t... my God!”

Far in the frontiers of war, Senzeni thought of how she had laid her heart to the nation’s welfare. She longed to see a day, to see the sun freely, to be her own boss, to sleep, dream and live the dream. She was conned. How can a fine woman who missed a raging war fire be conned? She had to go back to her Mother. Senzeni.
Pendo’s heart dropped after reading the email. A long sigh followed as if she had breathed her last. *All funding shall be stopped if this letter is not signed.*

The words echoed in her mind as she glared at nothing. ‘Where will I find 20 million to clear all the hospital bills and debts?’ she wondered.

Her heart had mastered to play amazing beats of suspense and tension. If you listened to her heartbeat, you’d feel like you were in the wrong turn movie, about to be eaten by cannibals. It had been ten months since the lockdown. The children were staying with their guardians all over Kumi. She had not yet visited them because of the troubles with *Forever True*, her donor.

*Forever True* was a small group of compassionate people who supported organisations in community development. ‘What happened?’ she wondered. It killed Pendo to imagine that many children were suffering in the village.

‘I cooked a soup of hope and spiced it with love. Served it to hungry widows and orphans for 10 years. Before their bellies were full, I snatched the bowl from them,’ she thought, condemning herself.
The community put its trust in *Upendo Ministries* knowing that their lives would change for the better. COVID-19 had laid a path of sharp blades on the road to cut all economies. And the lockdown was not helping. The virus filled the atmosphere like drones in a sci-fi movie.

‘Now, I have to engrave a signature on a document declaring all power and ownership of *Upendo Ministries* to my only donor? I’m sure there is a way to overcome this,’ she thought.

For 10 years, *Forever True* had provided all financial support to Upendo Ministries. Pendo believed that their relationship would last forever. They shared a vision to improve the lives of vulnerable people. What would change that?

She searched her memory hoping to find the source of the tsunami she was spinning in. But nothing! All her life, she had dreamt of helping widows and orphans. That is why she founded *Upendo Ministries*. All she ever wanted was to share love with those that the universe had pushed to the pit of helplessness.

Pendo grew up with her seven siblings and single mother Toto in a small village called Ogooma. Their home had four huts – two were bedrooms one for Toto and the girls, and the other for the boys, one was a store and the other a kitchen. The homestead was very peaceful and quiet.

All the girls learnt how to be good wives as the boys went to school. They spent hours in the garden and walked for long distances to fetch water. The girls wished they could go to school but they were told that it was not a place for them.
When Pendo was thirteen years old, she was considered ready for marriage and many suitors sought her hand. But Toto never wanted her eldest daughter to get married. This caused friction in the clan as dowry always added to a clan’s wealth. To get away from it all, Toto sent Pendo to live in Tilling village with Ija. Ija was Toto’s younger sister.

Pendo enjoyed her life in Tilling. She did not have to walk long distances for water and there was plenty of food. They had to walk though for about 10 kilometres to a nearby town to grind maize and cassava. Although initially this annoyed her, she came up with a plan.

Any time Pendo went to town, she sneaked into the school compound and eavesdropped from the window for one hour. Her excuse was that the millers were busy and that she had to wait in line for her turn. Pendo loved the new things she learnt from school and wanted to learn more. So she always watched the boys at home studying and joined them. She learnt how to read and write from them.

Pendo lived in Tilling for two years.
Her phone rang.

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Then a memory.
One day, she was tasked with taking cassava to the millers in town. Pendo was excited. As usual she would sneak into school for one hour and continue to town. As she walked to the millers, she felt a punching pain in her lower abdomen.
Since she was late, she decided to ignore it and headed for the shop. As the cassava was processed, she went to the bush to ease herself and realised that it was her menses. This was distressing and exhilarating. Pendo knew what this meant. Time passed and she could feel the flow. She knew what to do next.

A shortcut back to Tilling. She often heard the girls tell stories of a monster in the shortcuts, but she took it. Pendo paced through the bushes with a basin of cassava flour on her head. The blood was still flowing and it made her uneasy. She walked faster and like a miracle saw a stream of clean water.

‘I will clean myself,’ she thought.

Pendo placed the basin down and walked towards the stream. She stretched out her hand and scooped a handful of water to rinse her leg. When she stretched out her hand the second time, she saw a wide mouth coming from below the water. The creature had a human head but a body of a snake. She did not know where her strength came from but she ran – the basin of flour forgotten. She did not look back and collapsed as soon as she reached their compound.

Ija and the other women tried to resuscitate her and were almost giving up. She never stirred for three days and nights. On the third night, she woke up and took a bath refusing to talk about the incident. No one ever found the flour and nobody ever talked about that incident.

Pendo missed her mother and Ogooma. She wanted to back home. Ija was worried about her niece, she was never the same again. She rarely talked to anyone and so Ija granted her request and asked one of the boys to escort her back home.
Pendo had nightmares and cried at night after her return from Tilling. She barely showed her emotions and was cold to everyone. Her mother talked to Philip, who lived in Soroti, to take care of Pendo for some time. She felt that maybe she would become her former self after going to a new place. Toto trusted Philip as he was her friend’s son.

Her phone rang.

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It was Darrius – the president of Forever True. It was probably related to the Memorandum of Understanding MoU that was sent earlier. “Hello,” she said.

“When will you sign the MoU? If you do not send it in two days, we shall cut all ties with Upendo Ministries,” he warned without any pleasantries.

Pendo felt the words slice through her heart as she spoke to Darrius. For ten years, they had encouraged her not to be involved with other donors and to ignore grants from them since they would support her forever. She felt betrayed and deceived as she read through the document. Signing it meant that all the land and property of her organisation would be transferred too.

While in Soroti, Philip supported Pendo’s education... but she also bore him two children. Philip already had a wife and four children and so he could not marry her. This left Pendo as a single mother.
Putting her children to school was Pendo’s priority. Education was the key to all the treasure chests they would seek in the future.

“I know the struggle and pains of being an orphan and a single mother,” she told Darrius. “I will not sign that document out of fear and pressure to receive funds. I will work hard to make sure that I find more partners and supporters who will help me. The widows and orphans that Upendo Ministries are helping will suffer for a short time. They’ll get support and love for as long as they are empowered and independent.”

She was confident in her resolve.

“For ten years, we have provided free education to the orphans and helpless widows. This is the time that our 10-year impact will manifest when the community members finally become independent. I will be as an eagle pushing her eaglets off the cliff so that they can fly. I trust that the people will survive as we find more partners and means to save and empower them,” she said, with a tone of heroism.

“You do know that the education and wellbeing of all those widows and orphans will be affected if you don’t sign it. Right?” he replied with a spiteful voice.

“Yes, I also know the consequences of rushed and pressured decisions such as this one. So, I have to think twice,” she replied with power and authority.

Pendo recalled all the good times she had had with Forever True. The first time Paul and his team visited Ogooma, they listened to Pendo’s vision and hoped to transform the lives of the orphans and widows. At the time, she had started a group called Upendo Wetu. The group taught women how to save and earn so that they could educate their
children. It also encouraged parents to take their daughters to school. They also learnt human rights, numeracy and entrepreneurship.

Paul and his team were moved and touched by the humility of the group and decided to support Pendo’s vision by starting up an orphanage. Since then, Upendo Ministries became a home for the helpless orphans and also a refuge for the widows who struggled and suffered in the community.

Paul visited Ogooma annually and gave the orphans clothing and toys. With time, so many people volunteered to help raise funds for Upendo Ministries through Forever True.

But Paul was replaced by Darrius in 2017. Most of the people who worked for the organisation resigned. Darrius started to change the vision and foundation story of Upendo Ministries and Forever True. Pendo took a deep breath and prayed to her God for strength and courage to continue and support her project. Darrius cut communication with Pendo and tried all means to convince her to sign the document but she was adamant. He started rumours to tarnish her reputation but the community believed in Pendo. Pendo spent her days thinking of new ways to help her children, finding partners and donors. But it all just seemed out of reach. Her nights were filled with insomnia as she had nightmares of white and black snakes snatching her home and organisation from her. Until one day... one day there was hope.

The community members volunteered to help with the fundraising activities. The teachers volunteered to teach the orphans at no cost. Her YouTube channel went viral and her readers encouraged her to keep fighting and working hard.
A year later, the country was experiencing a lockdown. Upendo Ministries offices were bushy and deserted. But she walked through to feel the love she always felt. At least the children were getting sponsors who supported their education.

At 50, Pendo had experienced so many unfortunate events. But she was confident that Upendo Ministries could still be revived. As she walked through the bushes, she smiled and believed that she had created an impact. She sat under a tree and reflected on how education impacted her life. And she wished that more girls had studied during her years.

Pendo’s eyes landed on something shiny and bright. The sunlight made it glow. She moved closer to inspect what it was.

‘A broken glass?’ she wondered.
But curiosity drew her towards the object. It was not just a stone.
“Maybe I’m so desperate and I’m starting to think that this is a diamond,” she said looking at the stone suspiciously.
So many questions clouded her mind. She smiled beginning to feel confident that it was a diamond.
“I am confident that this land has more to give than I can see. I will do everything possible to revive Upendo Ministries and make my village a better place. My wrinkles trace love.”
She would take the stone to be inspected.
“When you leave your home, carry some of if its soil with you, so that when you are gone, your heart remains at home,” I was told.

Ntchou did just that.

When Ntchou proposed, my only condition was that he take me away from here. We tied the knot and first thing on his agenda, he brought me to Tsikor. I brought some soil from my home with me. But Ntchou would soon leave for a faraway land with the promise to return. He said he’d take me to some better place. A little after he left, I woke up one day feeling sick. My head turned. I vomited and felt exhausted. I’d soon realise it was rather health than sickness. I was pregnant. Twins were on their way. But their father had just left.

Now, sixty years later here we are. You sit there before me. You ask me to tell you a story. You say Lorlor was our father. Children, you ask me much; you ask me to pour out my soul after I’ve poured out the soil of my home over the tomb of my son. I am old. I was given life and I gave life back. I brought forth two boys, without their father to hold my shoulder. I bore them in my hands. I had to be strong because they needed my strength. Then they grew. And left.
Gbor and Gbor-gbor were one piece. They blessed my days until they too decided that they had to leave. They say the son always has in him more of his father than the father has of himself. The boys took off one day. I had implored them not to leave. They’d not listen. Why would they? I was already old, too old to them – I still had my sight then.

When we were young, there was a song we’d sing each time we saw someone blind. I don’t hear it these days. Well – when was the last time I ventured out the door, anyway? But you children should know the song:

\begin{verbatim}
I spend my days in the hoary shadows, 
My eyes closed to the world around 
Not for want of desire to, through narrow Lenses, see the world and return to the ground. 
Oh know, oh know you who see 
Know that in shadows are shades to see. 
Oh know, oh know you who see 
Though I see not as you see me. 
\end{verbatim}

Alas, you children!

Alas! My Lorlor!

You know when I was a child – my mother had died bringing forth to me – God rest her soul. My father – the man was what a man should be: compassionate, persevering and upright. I can remember walking by his side as he took me to school. I was full of innocence. The world was not bare to me then. The man broke his back to be a father, sacrificed comfort just to give me what I needed. I’d realise this only in retrospect, much after his poor soul departed, and I had to say adieu. I’ve always had his picture in my mind. Now, even more. I cannot see the world now, I cannot see your faces. It seems in the nature of things that we are allowed only a few faces in a limited time on earth. And when the time is over, nature shuts
our eyes, and that portal to the soul remains locked until the Grand Opening. They say that until one’s final day on earth, the door only lets others in. But on that final day, the door opens to let you out into the world. I have consumed my time of sight on earth. Now, I commune with the faces I’ve seen over these years behind this bleak curtain of blindness. But you cannot understand these things. You’ve not seen what my eyes have seen.

When the twins were born, I had to sell our belongings to survive. I had no one. I waited endlessly for my husband... And, I’m waiting still. Look at me, why am I here? Look at my body, battered and broken by the stripes of time. Have I not had enough of pain and loss? Have I not had enough of the world? But they say, one soul belongs to each sole. Here I am, alone: you cannot understand me. You see me sigh and you wonder why. Some have asked why I did not go for a second husband. Because I had one, and still do. And if in the will of things, I slip out of this wakeful sleep before he returns, then I hope – I hope to see him as he is. But I fear that just when I’ve walked out the door, he appears just in time to see me leave. Children, I’m still in love – madly in love! As from the day I first saw that radiant smile of a man who knew to prostrate in his own strength, to hold in his own weakness, to help in his own desperation. He had dreams – we had dreams. He promised to take me away from here. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I wait. I’ve borne children. I’ve groomed men. And that’s why you’re here today.

When the twins reached the age of knowledge, I told them about their father. But I made them understand that their place was here. I told them they had to stay upon this earth that is ours. I know! I know! We change. We change time as time changes us. Gbor and Gbor-gbor were all I had left. I’d put the two in school and ensured they got their basic needs. I was their mother, I had to whisper a
dream into their soul. That’s what mothers are for. At first, Gbor said
he’d be a doctor. His brother said he’d be a pilot. Gbor promised to
take care of me and give me all the medicine I needed. His brother
promised to take me to the land in the skies. I was proud. Which
mother wouldn’t be?

It feels like yesterday. The boys would run around playing. I would
go out in search of jobs. I did some sewing, some baking, some
serving, some farming... anything to keep alive. I’d tell the boys that
it was alright. That one day, things would be alright. “It shall be well.”
One day, they’d be doctor and pilot – my doctor and my pilot.
They’d return home from school lamenting the harsh comments of
their mates. They wore old, tattered clothes. Their shoes had holes
through the soles. They returned home with bruises and blisters.
I tended to their wounds with warm water and shea butter. I put
them to bed. I watched them sleep. Two angels. Their sleep was my
dream. At times, Gbor would turn and fling an arm at his brother
in sleep. Gbor-gbor would swing his leg at him in return. This went
on through the night. In the morning, the twins woke up arms tied
around each other in the embracement of oneness, as though in
the denouement of events, Armageddon was resolved, and the two
discovered that they were brothers made from the same substance.
Those two were a gift of peace for my soul.

Then the day came when they had to leave. Further education,
they called it. University. And then it dawned on me that I had one
fear in life: I feared the quiet of solitude, the silence of an empty
room. I implored the boys. I pleaded with them to stay. I needed
them to remain here with the knowledge they had from here. To
be doctor and pilot here. I was crazy then. You know what I mean.
Tsikor makes neither doctors nor pilots. And what was more, the
boys said they wanted to become other things. I didn’t understand
them. They’d made up their minds and I knew it was no longer in my hands to will. Indeed, time is a forger of will, wielding the hammer of fate upon the anvil of destiny. So wish took its place, and the two departed...

_Here, I stand at the source_  
_The stream dwindles_  
_down the hasty_  
_hill into the vague_  
_vale_  

_Now, I can hardly make it out – there_  
_Child, you’re gone away_  
_so far from me_

Please, do not weep for me. No, no! I’ve lived a full life, though I’ve lived it shattered on the floor like a broken pottery dropped by feeble hands. But the hands that made me, and that made you – you know full well – are no feeble hands. Therefore, I say that this shattered soul lies a prestidigitation for you children. I lie ridden, to be read. Maybe, there are signs for your days. Maybe, I portend things to come.

My sons have not returned. No words from those foreign shores. Years! Years! Years! Here I am alone, neither doctor nor pilot to grace my laboured loins. Agonising day and night, waiting in vain to see them. But alas! The winds have business elsewhere – who then will return my sons to me?

But we sit here today because if ever I was a widow, if ever barren, if ever bereaved, it is now. We sit today because we have returned from the fields. We do not return with our hands full, we bring nothing into the barns. There’s no harvest for us. Only loss.

Lorlor!
It was one of the worst times herein Tsikor. Right before the eyes of Gbor and Gbor-gbor. I don’t know if that changed something in them but it certainly struck a chord within me that since has left a haunting echo in my heart.

It was around the Christmas season and life took on a new air. The rising odorance of hope was gradually engulfing the stench of despair in those days. So much had been going wrong and no one knew why. It felt like it was the time of a plague of all evils. I remember in those days sessions and sessions of prayer and fasting going on. I had my little boys by my side, and watched them closely. Rumour after rumour paralysed us. No one could go out without a whiff of dread. An accident, a murder, some strange sickness...

In those days, I worked as a servant for a man I knew only as the Boss. He’d come from far away and looked nothing like us. He was a man of knowledge and had come to do philanthropic work in Tsikor. He was surrounded by men and women from the big city and some others from Tsikor. They wanted to help the farmers grow better crops and raise healthier animals. They wanted to teach the people of Tsikor how to live healthy lives. They wanted to teach us how to be more like the Boss. But Tsikor has its own ways. So they left. And then, I began lending my hand in deliveries to make a living.

One day, I was called upon to deliver a child urgently. I rushed to the house where the woman laboured. My two sons had come along because it was night and they were scared to be alone at home. The tide of the plague had been slowly ebbing and it seemed the Christmas spirit itself was the source of the force that purged the plague. By the time I was on my way to deliver the child, Christmas was only a week away. The scenery of Tsikor had changed and it seemed that most of us had forgotten the agony of the months before.
When I got to the house, the head of the baby was almost visible. The mother screamed in agony. What followed lasted less than three minutes. The baby was out, screaming and kicking. But the mother had suddenly gone silent. Then cold. And that was it for her. The poor husband was devastated. His heart was broken. He couldn't endure the sight of the child. That very night, the man walked into the cold silent night, and since, roamed the haunted streets of Tsikor until he was crashed by a car in his delirium. And so, I took the boy and named him Lorlor – love – because in a world so cruel, a child deserves his fair share of love. Lorlor has since been my son.

I'm still haunted by that night, holding the innocent Lorlor in my arms as his mother lay cold, the poor husband squeezing and imploring her idle body in vain.

I remember one of our poets:

You lived a youth
You died in your prime
You were covered with earth
Therefore
I'll shed tears upon this earth that holds you in its bosom
Until the seed you are sprouts green
And blossoms again.

Lorlor, you are my son. Lorlor, you are my son! Lorlor! That is why I have spread the soil of my heart over the specter of your grave. Ah, world! You thief! Nifty thief you are. I should have been laid down beneath the earth. Why do you keep me waiting while I have no eyes to see the sons and daughters of my son, and their own sons and daughters also? I gaze but dimly into the dark vale. In my vision, no light shines, only specters of the bleak night. But such is life. And I have lived it.
Ntchou has not returned. But he was a man, and men can hold on their own. Gbor has not returned, and I feel nothing in the wind of Gbor-gbor’s coming. Now, you are the children of love do not leave. Do not leave me alone here.
“Baba said he will be telling you the news himself,” Mama whispers faintly. She is standing by the window, staring blankly at the old mango tree by the fence. Mama’s usual stunning big-boned frame suddenly seems small and old. She has snuck into my bedroom early in the morning to warn me about Baba’s announcement.

“Ropafadzo!”
“On my way, Baba!” I shout already running to the dining room. Knowing my father very well, delaying him was calling upon ‘bitter-sweet old reliable’, a name he gives his whip designed specifically for Mama and I. Baba is sitting comfortably in his rocking chair. A small hill of snuff on the palm of his left hand, a pinch in his right. I watch him inhale the snuff in his right, following is a sneeze that shakes his whole frame. Mama follows a few moments later, makes her way straight to our little kitchen to make Baba his morning sadza.

“Madzibaba Eriya,” he pauses, pinches some snuff, inhales it and sneezes then continues, “Madzibaba Eriya from church dreamt about you being one of his wives. I have already given my permission. He will be here to take you to his homestead tomorrow by nightfall.”
Madzibaba Eriya, is an 85-year-old with 25 wives, 55 children, 22 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren. He used to have more. They died one followed by the other. But because the sect discourages hospitals and medication, nobody knows the causes of their deaths. We had recently learned about AIDS in school. The signs and symptoms they all portrayed were the same as those in the science book our teacher had made us read.

“I’m not interested,” my voice comes out as a whisper so silent and yet so loud, fully laced with anger and rebellion.

Baba lets out a cackle, before spreading the whole 8 inches of his palm across my face in one single clap. Darkness and death, mixed with traces of that awful stench of Baba’s patriarchal ego fills the moment. I look at Mama who I know is in as much trouble as I am for raising an ‘insubordinate daughter’ after failing to give birth to a son. Mama always gets the blame whenever I do anything Baba disapproves, yet he always gives himself the credit for my accomplishments.

“I had to accept to feed a female baboon, now it’s talking back at me?” Baba says through his teeth, coming towards me, fists drawn back ready to throw a punch.

I leap towards my bedroom, making a beeline for the door just in time to jump in and lock it from inside.

I try using my pillow to block out Mama’s cries, “Waandiuraya murume wangu! You have killed me, my husband!” Baba flogs her ruthlessly.

‘Sorry ma,’ I keep murmuring as I start running around my bedroom packing my basics in a small duffel bag. After I throw the bag out through the window, I peep out of my bedroom door’s keyhole hoping to take one last look at Mama before I run away.
There are cumulonimbus clouds lined all over the sky, a nice breeze is blowing lazily, a heavenly smell of lightly wetted mud all around, that delicious smell which makes you want to lie on your stomach and lick the dirt. *That* kind of atmosphere that would be appreciated under different circumstances. I try to ignore the dreadful feeling again, as if a thousand spiders are crawling in my hair. Looking up to the sky as if to ask God to take away the darkness of night, I dread having to sleep under that bridge on a pile of card boxes for yet another night. I have been living on the street for a whole week.

*Cyclone Idai: 1,300 feared dead,* my eyes keep lingering on the newspaper headline despite all my efforts to dodge it. The newspaper is a publication from two years ago. My mind takes me to March two years before.

“Ropafadzo, wake up *mwanangu.* The radio said it’s a cyclone and... and... we need to find high ground.”

Mama had woken me up in the middle of the night trying to hide the worry and panic in her tone. Baba, Mama and I survived this tragic event, losing *Gogo* and *Sekuru,* Grandma and Grandpa. The loss of our belongings, property, livestock and my grandparents led to Baba looking for a job in the city as a general hand, resulting in our migration to the city. The white family that Baba works for agreed that we stay in the two-bedroomed cottage.

A deafening thunder clap startles me back to reality. The cumulonimbus clouds are still lining up the sky promising heavy rain, the breeze now stronger, making the maize fields nearby hiss weirdly, the sun is setting, leaving creepy shadows to everything in sight. The shadow of one jacaranda tree looks like it has claws, ready to strangle me whenever I take my eyes off it.

“Ropafadzo!”
I search the perimeter, and there she is. “Mama?” I ask, trying to get up and run to her but I fail. She walks over, sits across me and says, “Mwanangu, my child. Life is what you make it. If life throws you lemons, it’s up to you to either make lemonade or cough syrup. You are not a failure, woman up and start living up to your standards, show them a taste of their spite.” Her tone is serious, her eyes focused deeply into mine like she can see directly into my soul. Heavy rain wakes me up just as I am about to ask Mama to stay. It’s just a dream.

“Dollar, dollar tops!”
“5-dollars skin jeans, they were worn by Rihanna! Sister!”
“Don’t walk around without underwear, what if your dress is lifted by the wind? Dollar for two all size pants!”

The paupers at Mupedzanhamo Musika market go on and on, calling for customers to buy second-hand clothes. The market is crowded with customers competing to find cheap second-hand clothes to buy. Following the morning of the dream, I had gone door to door in every factory, house and company looking for employment. One man had told me that people who are actually educated were jobless, me being a woman and uneducated, looking for employment was a lost cause. An older woman I had met earlier had advised me to forget employment and look for a husband instead. A man at the factory had offered me a cleaning job but I had to ‘scratch his back’ first. Two weeks searching for employment to no avail, having sat at a stone one day, tired and hungry, thinking for two hours, I stood up, went to Mbare and sold my phone. From that I got the capital to start a bhero selling business, selling second-hand clothes. I was now living in a mukuku, shack in Epworth.

“It only kills white people.”
“How can it only kill white people when it was created by them to wipe out the black race?”
“The president will be addressing the nation tonight concerning COVID-19.”

There is loud chatter at the bus stop where we are waiting for a combi, commuter omnibus. A lady with her brows nicely drawn, fake eyelashes glued on, beautifully manicured nails, and perfect makeup that goes nicely with her skin tone, swears that she has evidence that her prophet had prophesied about COVID-19 three years ago. Two men are debating on whether COVID-19 is real or not. Another man says that it was manufactured in a lab. An older looking woman argues her traditional-spiritual point of view.

These are the kinds of conversations that I hear on my way to and from my business every day. It is a few days after the president’s national address declaring COVID-19 a national disaster and announcing the start of lockdown, people are back to business as usual. People selling, customers crowded in the market, racing against time to grab stylish cheap second-hand clothes before the other person does. Four trucks full of armed soldiers and police officers pull up, throwing tear smoke to disperse the crowd. We all scatter running for our lives, if the tear smoke doesn’t get you on your heels then a button stick will do the trick. Suddenly, it’s just me and my thoughts back at my shack, reality finally settling in. I cannot go to the market anymore; I could sell at my doorstep but that would be impossible considering the fact that all our stuff has just been confiscated by the armed forces. Whatever did I really do to upset my ancestors? If I was born male would I be facing all these troubles or better still if it so happened, would I be facing it all alone? Hot tears roll down my
cheeks, no one is there to wipe them away for me. I realise how much I miss Mama, and for a moment I consider going back to Baba to ask for his forgiveness and get married to Madzibaba Eriya like he wants.

“'I would rather die,” I murmur. “How many pandemics does one person have to fall victim to in one lifetime?” I ask loudly, as if expecting the walls of my shack to give me an answer.

There is just a packet of mealie-meal and salt at the corner of my shack. I can only afford sadza and salt, for supper. Gatherings at the community water source exposes us to this deadly virus, but it is either dying from thirst or from COVID-19, the latter seems like a better devil. Having no radio, phone or television as most of the people in the illegal settlement, the community water source is the platform for breaking news. That is where I get information about the extension of lockdown and the deaths of those rich people whose lives are important to make breaking news. That is the same place I got to hear about Dzoka Kumba, the reality TV show which resolves family disputes. I had written a letter to them two days ago asking for them to mediate between Baba and I.

The days are dragging and I have lost track of dates since every day is basically the same, wake up, bath, sun bath then sleep. The sun is already high up, blazing hot. It’s still hard to believe that a season ago I was living under a bridge. The air is filled with a stench that is now familiar, the smell of sewage. I walk lazily to stand by the door of my shack, it’s like I am the only one feeling how hot the sun is. There is a group of children laughing, singing and screaming as they play chikweshe, a ball made from plastic bags. Occasionally, there is a man, woman or child who comes towards the growing pile of waste by the roadside to dump more
waste. The sky above the shacks is covered with thick black smoke from the fires used for cooking around the settlement. Three shacks to the left side of mine is a group of women sitting by the door who laugh and high-five after every 5 minutes. It’s like there is no COVID-19 or lockdown at all.

I make my way to the group of women joining in on the chatter and gossip. A young girl probably in her early teens speaks about how she has always wanted to be a preschool teacher and how she has given it all up because her husband is not comfortable with a working wife. Another slender, light-skinned woman talks about how her husband had dumped her for a mistress because she couldn’t give birth to a son. A stout and dark woman with a red eye, who had been quiet all this while speaks about how her husband had beaten her the other night for hurting their child by mistake.

“A man can kill you for hurting his child,” she says with what I can only hope I wasn’t mistaking for joy in her voice. The younger looking woman answers, “All hell will break loose that day, the whole husband’s family tree will rain down on you for hurting their blood.”

A child is never really a woman’s in Africa, they are their father’s blood. Isn’t it bad enough that a woman leaves her maternal home, her parents, her religion, her maternal surname and everything else that identifies her as an individual to go to a new place and start life from scratch? To carry the child for nine months, with everything that comes with it, the emotions, the sickness, the cravings? Unless biology says sperm carries blood, at what point does the child get their father’s blood? I’m frustrated, the chit chat of the ladies vanishes as I am deep in
thought asking myself unanswered questions. It is the little things that matter in the fight against gender inequality and for women empowerment. For example, there being only one title (Mr.) for every man, divorced, bachelor, young, older and married, and there being different titles which describe the struggle of life for women (Mrs. Miss, Ms.). A man’s title has no backstory or judgement whereas a woman’s title can say if she is married, divorced, young, widowed, a single mother, etc., which means women are pre-judged and vulnerable from the word go.

Spending time with these ladies makes me realise that women are brainwashed to believe that they cannot be anything other than disciples, and them spending more time with the children means the tradition of patriarchy continues as they teach their sons to lead and daughters to submit. Patriarchy, just like bullying in school, is some kind of bullying made normal by society. Bullies bully others because of their own insecurities and fears. Men need to be assured in some way that what women need is an equal partnership not total power and control. Women on the other hand, just like these women are ignorant on their potential. A small boy pulls me out of my thoughts when he hands me a letter from Dzoka kumba the reality TV show.

I wake up around 12 pm the next day, Dzoka kumba the reality TV show is on the way to take me to my father’s place. It’s a hot day, the sun is blazing, the journey ahead is tough but it has to be done. I scrub myself rigorously with an orange sack and water, a little bit of soap and lotion would have been really appreciated for this occasion but at this point in my life, it’s a luxury. I dread having to confront my father, but it has to be done, at least this time I have backup. The reality TV show’s truck is comfortable than both my homes (the bridge and the shack) combined a
million times. The camera is rolling all the way to my parents’ house as the presenter gets my side of the story.

By the time we reach the house, camera still rolling, I can make out Mama’s screams “Baba Ropafadzo kani! Ropafadzo’s father please!” I throw the door open in time to expose Baba connecting his whip with Mama’s skin using so much force. I swear the whip untangled with a bit of Mama’s skin.

“Invasion of privacy! Invasion of privacy!” Baba keeps shouting as if he has gone crazy, running towards me with his right hand wide open ready to clap. I duck behind the bouncer who in turn man-handles Baba while the producer calls the police. All this while, the cameraman is rolling his camera. Capturing the drama. Baba has been caught red-handed, the evidence is there to put him away for a long time. This was not my intention but it works too. The police arrive and Baba is taken into custody. The reality show is a hit; it follows up on Baba’s trial. I testify against Baba. Baba throws the apostolic sect leadership under the bus and they are all incarcerated. It’s been seasons since Baba’s incarceration. Its spring, trees are blossoming, the air smells nice. Mama is now working as a house help for the white family Baba worked for. That means we could still live at the cottage. I had moved back in since Baba’s arrest.

Mama is standing by the doorway, she barely notices me as I enter into the dining area, her gaze is focused on a red shoe box and envelope. She is glaring at them as if expecting them to melt from her glare.

“You ok?” She looks up, startled. “Good morning mwanangu,” she says evading my question.
“Ndumuka mamukawo Mama, I slept well.”

She points at the red shoe box. “I found that in your father’s belongings.”

Inside the red shoe box is a dried up rose stem, on the stem is my passport size photo tied in place with a red string. The rose stem is in a small bottle with dirty water, but the stem does not go all the way down to reach the water.

“Looks like Baba was using voodoo charms to throw all those hiccups in your life all this time so that you come back home and submit to his demands,” she says looking me straight in the eyes.

I wince.
“Don’t worry mwanangu, its exposed hence powerless,” she pauses and studies my face, “You are a fighter.” Mama’s smile is re-assuring. She hands me the envelope, “A letter from the State prison.”

I take the letter, stuff it in my pocket and join Mama on the doorway. Silence follows as we silently admire the sunset.
The dry and cracked earth spoke what the locals dared not to say: their home was dying. Never ending footpaths crisscrossed each other like careless drawings. It was mid-December, yet it had been weeks since rain clouds had last gathered over the town. As far as the eye could see, this part of the province had no trees except for sparse shrubs and distant mango trees with drooping leaves. After depleting the forest, the charcoal burners had indiscriminately gone after every other tree in sight to satisfy the market demand. Houses, mostly made of sun-dried bricks, sprawled the land that was once a thick forest. Some were spread farther apart while some were clustered together. Behind some of the houses, the land was tilled in neat rows with maize seeds underground, safe from the prying birds.

One of the houses with a small cultivated backyard, was on the verge of collapse. Smoke escaped into the evening sky through its shut door and dilapidated roof. Inside, smoke from the twigs on the brazier choking the small room, a son stared angrily at his ailing mother. For over an hour she had pleaded with him. Now, she placed her frail hands on his arm, pleas in her tearful eyes. Five of her other children, circled around the brazier, watched in silence.

“Son, it’s late, this will do for supper.” She pointed at the pot of boiling corn kernels on the brazier. Because there was no promise of the rains, the children had been digging
up the seeds they had planted weeks earlier. It had been their only food for days now.
“You don’t appreciate whatever I do for this family,” the boy said.
“No wonder Father left you!”
His mother quickly withdrew her hands and slowly sat down on the tattered rug, hurt written on her face. The boy looked away, unwilling to let feelings stop him from providing food for his family.
“Even without your permission, I am going to find supper.”
He walked out and shut the door behind him. While outside, he could hear the low sobs of his mother.

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With the sun long set, the slim moon smiled over the quiet town. The boy’s stomach groaned at the smell of roasted chicken hanging in the air. It had been long since he last ate chicken that he had forgotten what it tasted like. Imagining the grasshoppers and mice were chicken made it manageable for him to repeatedly eat them. He had always fought the temptation to steal chickens, his mother’s only warning that he had never dismissed. The boy respected his mother but lately, he trusted in his own understanding.
For as long as the boy could remember, his mother had been the one supporting the family with her fishmongering. Despite his father continually stealing her money, going on drinking sprees and physically abusing her, she had never complained. Even with a swollen eye and a bruised face, she still went out to the market. She had always kept her family fed. Then the market was closed earlier in the year after some traders had tested positive for a disease they called Coronavirus. The boy, like many other locals
thought it was only a common cold which would soon go away and life would get back to normal. With his father’s charcoal burning business long defunct, this had been the beginning of his family’s misery. His mother stayed home for months without selling, and soon all her fish stock had been consumed by the family. The boy was hopeful that life would change when the government gave the affected traders incentives to resuscitate their businesses. His mother received the funds on Friday, his father eloped with a local girl, the same age as the boy, on Saturday.

“I swear that you’ll never go hungry,” his mother, teary eyed, had promised the children. But her health and sanity seemed to have taken a downward spiral since then. She had been to the clinic many times before. After standing in a queue for hours, all they would give her were some paracetamol tablets and prescribe expensive medication for her to buy. If only he knew where they stored medicines in the clinic, the boy often thought, he would have long broken in to steal some for his mother.

The trail descended into a dry stream that always flooded and was impassable whenever it rained. But it had not flooded in a long time, not last year or the year before. Clusters of houses spread out before him. Except for the distant sounds of crickets, the night was silent. People locked themselves indoors early, sharing what little food they had with only their family. Even salt was no longer shared between neighbours.

This part of the province had always been known as poor and the Coronavirus had worsened its status. The boy used to unload goods for the traders from cars and then would ferry them inside the
market for a fee. But now the market was abandoned, bringing life in the small town to a standstill. Only a few traders sold in the market, yet had almost no one buying from them. Despite most families not being able to afford decent meals, the boy considered his family the poorest in the community, poorer than a church mouse. He was only seventeen, but he had seen enough to decide that people were never equal. The children of the rich grew up to procreate a generation of wealthy people, continuing their family legacy. Likewise, the progeny of the poor were poorer and very miserable humans. Life is not fair, he often mused. Since the rich never shared their wealth, the boy had decided to steal from them.

He left the trail and trampled over the low and dry grass, away from the big unfinished house in which he spent time with his peers, smoking while plotting illicit schemes. The boy knew his mission would be a failure if they saw him and decided to come along. He could hear distinct chatter come from inside, the smell of marijuana in the air. He quickly crossed the gravel road, looking behind to make sure that no one saw him get to the other side of town. He was in the residence of the affluent, away from the slums. The gravel and the name of the town was all they shared.

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In this part of town, they grew crops that they watered daily. Unlike the frog-infested wells in the slums, the water here was clean. They had abundant evergreen trees and plenty of food that they even grew maize for their cows. The land was divided into large farms that were each barricaded by barbed wires or electric fences, sometimes with both. The boy never went beyond the first
farm for his family’s food. He had done some piece works here before and he was certain the young looking owner would just let him go if he were caught.

The boy looked around him, convinced no one was watching, put on his face mask and stealthily went over the wire. He always made sure to wash the mask before putting it back in his mother’s worn out handbag. A few months earlier, the mask had helped him run away with a woman’s bread and sugar without being recognised after he had snatched the plastic bag she was carrying.

The maize leaves danced slowly in the gentle breeze. The cobs were huge and the boy wondered how anyone could grow a whole field of food for animals without considering the people across the gravel road. His mother would be glad he had gone to find supper for the family. He was not a coward... like his father.

The boy took off his flip-flops as he proceeded further into the field. He had made it a rule to always pluck from the stalks that were deep in the field. Plucking from the periphery of the farm would arouse suspicion and lead to the field being guarded.

The boy began plucking the cobs as noiselessly as possible, stopping quickly whenever he thought he heard any noise. He had just finished filling up the second plastic bag when he heard the voices. Although they were not very clear, he could tell that one was a man and the other, a woman. The boy listened in silence, craning his neck to pick up on the conversation. Then a thought occurred to him and he smiled. He quietly moved towards the voices. “I told you to wait for my call,” the man’s voice was shaky.

The boy recognised him. He was the farm owner. The two were on a small trail that lay between the maize and sorghum fields. The woman had her back to the boy, but he could tell she was from the
slums. When she spoke, her voice was high-pitched and piercing in the quiet night.
“I am hungry and your baby won’t stop kicking!” She moved her hands to her stomach.
“I told you to get rid of that thing,” the man said.
“I won’t!” There was a stubborn finality in her tone. “I can’t risk my life.”
“I can’t have a child in the slums.” This time the man raised his voice.
“We’ll see what your wife will say about it.” The woman walked passed him.

He pulled her back forcefully. The boy watched as the man took off his jacket, threw it on the grass and then hurled obscenities at the woman. While they argued, the boy had his eyes on the jacket. It would fetch enough money for a bag of maize flour, enough to sustain his family for weeks. The boy moved closer to the jacket and pulled it to himself slowly. It smelled of a beautiful perfume, then the boy bundled it under his shirt. As he picked his plastics to leave, the boy saw the man charge at the woman with fists while she held up her arms in surrender. The boy knew he would have a story for his friends if he waited a little longer.
When the woman fell down, the man got on top of her and circled his hands around her neck. The boy stood transfixed, eyes unblinking as the woman unsuccessfully tried to remove the man’s hands from her neck. She writhed like a snake but the man was too strong, she gave up struggling too soon.

The boy’s eyes went wide with horror. The argument had escalated too fast, and now the woman lay lifeless on the grass. The man still had his hands around her neck, perhaps oblivious that the woman was no longer alive. The boy stood motionless, unsure what to do. He then started to retreat backwards, further into the maize field
while he kept his eyes on the man. He had only taken a few steps back when he fell over a maize stalk, it went down with a sickening sound. The man’s eyes instantly went to the source of the noise. The two pair of eyes met. The boy ran blindly through the dense field, the heavy jacket under his shirt and a plastic bag full of maize cobs in either hand.

“Thief! Murderer, here!” the man yelled.

The boy’s legs gave in and he went flying over some maize stalks. He quickly picked himself up and without looking back, resumed running with the plastic bags still firmly in his hands. He could hear the footsteps of his pursuer closing in on him. When he glanced over his shoulder, the man had outstretched an arm and was about to pull him by his shirt. He ducked and the man went past him, missed a foot and fell down, flattening a few maize stalks.

“Somebody help! A murderer in my field!” The man quickly picked himself up.

The boy continued running ahead despite the weight of the maize, his thoughts racing. He was a thief, not a murderer. But if people heard the man’s calls and then waylaid him, the boy knew he wouldn’t be able to convince them otherwise. Much against his will, he let go of the plastic bag. His heart ached and his stomach groaned with hunger.

The boy’s legs carried him despite his mind willing him to stop. He could hear dogs barking in the distance but drawing closer. He looked behind but his pursuer seemed to have given up the chase. The boy turned his eyes ahead too late, he hit himself on the barbed wire. Ignoring the pain, he quickly went over the wire. He saw men with dogs charging towards him.

“Somebody stop the thief!” the men shouted.
The boy removed the jacket under his shirt, threw it and then crossed the road into the slums. If only he could get past the unfinished house, the boy thought, then he would disappear. Heart thumping, knees shaking and stomach grumbling, the boy felt something hit him in the side of his head. It was a dull thud, he fell forward. He could feel a warm and profuse flowing down the side of his face. He could hear the sound of feet rushing towards him, voices muffled. Stones and kicks landed on him. Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe, the mask was suffocating him. The last sounds he heard was the approaching barking of dogs. As he fell into darkness, the boy knew his family would starve.
A GAME CALLED CHASKELE

Nana Kwasi Boateng (Ghana)

At the office, he held a cigar between two fingers which he sucked like a patient on an oxygen cylinder. He did not realise how often he did that – more than seven within the space of the minute I had been there. He rubbed his face with his other arm as he loosened his tie and removed his suit. His shirt was soaked-wet. He folded the arms of his shirt to reveal the scar on his left arm. He sucked the cigar again. Only a piece of it remained. He took it from his mouth and brought it a little away from his body and looked at it closely. He mumbled something under his breath about manufacturers cheating people recently and took one long suck. When he puffed the smoke, it formed little rings in the air that filled the room.

It slid through my nose mask and stung my nostrils. I turned my head away and forced a smile. He gave me a weak smile and pressed the tip of his cigar against the glass ashtray that sat on his table to quench it when he realised that I was watching. Then he pointed the incompletely extinguished cigar butt at me as if he was going to say something. Another bout of odour pierced my nose. My throat burned. I kept my eyes on him and swallowed the saliva that had formed in my mouth.

A call came through.
“Sorry, work.” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat.
I smiled.
It was his secretary. Her soft voice was faint through the telephone handle he held close to his ears. She seemed nice on the phone with him. If it had not been my fourth time at the office already, I could have bet anyone who would be willing, a lifetime of servitude with my miserable life, that it was a different person who had chased me away on my first three attempts to see the Minister at his office. This morning, when I had entered her office, she had greeted me with a smile and given me a hero’s welcome like I was returning from the World War III. She had chauffeured me herself into his office this time like I was his saviour.

I took one good look at the man whom I had been friends with since our primary school days and the scar on his arm. I could swear on my life that no one in that office of the Ministry of Health would believe me if I told them it was I who had given their Minister that mark – that he and I played together when we were children. I could see the thrashed can in his arms and the old wooden banku ta in mine as he threw it and I smashed it with all my might. Chaskele.

I caught myself smiling.

For he, I, and the other boys at the village, that game was such fun until that day when he got hit by the can that I had smashed and got injured. That would be the last time we would play it. He was just a skinny little boy whose father had brought him to the village to live with his grandmother for a while. I myself could not believe how much of a transformation he had been through since then and even after only eight years when he had resurfaced and first sought my help with the boys for his campaign. I stared at that scar on his arm as I watched him talk on the phone. He rubbed his face again to clean the sweat that was slithering down his shirt.

I wished that things would have been different and that it had not taken me to have told him of the people’s plot to oust him that year.
They had planned to take to the streets and burn tyres against his candidature for a Member of Parliament and any future ministerial appointment he may get. In communities like ours, plagued with perennial poverty, going to school and securing an office job, and the luxury of good healthcare were dreams we knew would never become a reality.

Our mirage. That is why we would hang on to any opportunity that had the potential to change our fortunes. It is not that the youth are not hardworking enough or do not desire to see success in their lives. It is just that in life, some things are meant for certain groups of people. That is how society has made it. Or people in society, I should say. This is why when he came running to us, the people readily accepted him. “With someone whom they knew, someone who had seen their struggles, things were going to be different,” so they thought. But he turned out to be another fairy tale – appearing a few months to the election and disappearing afterwards.

He was still on the phone. “Chief of where?”

“Heard her turn him away on the phone. Hmm... important meeting. I smiled again. He did not notice that he was still rubbing his palms on his face. “And wait... cancel all my appointments for the day.” He dropped the handle on the phone before him. He reached for his cabinet and brought out another cigar which he lit with the speed of lightning. He began the ritual all over again. My heart wept for him. If only he had allowed me in earlier. If only he had not instructed his secretary to turn me away or the delegation from our chief or had not refused to answer our calls, things could have been a little different.
“A priest, huh?” he finally spoke to me. Clearing his throat again.
“Ah. Yes.”
He walked over to the door and locked it making sure that no one was eavesdropping. I saw his belly for the first time since I entered his office. It was almost dropping.
“Is it someone I know?” He walked over to where I sat and sat at the edge of his table. He kept his voice low.
“No. This one is new. He came after you had left,” I answered.
“Good. Good,” he nodded.
He kept nodding even when he had finished talking. His mind seemed far away.
“And you say he can help me...” He did not complete it this time, expecting me to know what he was talking about.
I nodded. “If only you do everything he would say.”
He nodded and his mind drifted far away again.
“But there is a slight problem.”
He turned to look at me, lowering the spectacles he wore to his nose as if to watch me well.
“Mmmh?”
“This one is expensive,” I said.
“Expensive, huh?” he said, scratching his head and slipping off again.
I did not answer that.
“But it works, uh?”
“Oh yes, very powerful man. Some of your friends come to him.”
He looked at me again, nodding severally.
“OK,” he said, “I will see about it.”
I left his office and headed back to the village. In the car, my mind took me back on a ride down the path of our lives, when he had come to us and the change he had brought us to. When you put the miseries of your miserable life aside to stand in the sun to vote for someone, you know you deserve so much from them than no
jobs, poor roads, poor network and empty promises. When life is whipping you so hard, the last thing you need is for anyone to make it any harder for you. It is not that we expect these people to turn the fortunes of our lives around in seconds or wave magic wands to make things happen. It is just the promises they make and how they play with our minds as they enrich themselves and their families while we wallow in poverty. They tell us that our vote is our power when in actual fact our vote is their power – the power that empowers them to enrich themselves at our expense. From where I come: the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. And it seems someone up there somewhere is working so hard to make sure things stay like that. Even the luxury of basic healthcare is not something we could boast of. Over here, we are born poor, live poor and die poor. When your mother has to access healthcare several miles away; mostly on foot and if she is lucky, on an aboboyaa (a tricycle meant for transporting items from the farm) before you are born, at your first breathe on earth, you know you are in for a long haul.

This is our song. A song we’ve sung for far too long. And then at every election year, you would find people wallowing through the mud to solicit for your votes and make another round of empty promises. Promises. Visitations. Aids. That would be the order of the day. After disappearing for four years, they would reappear for re-election and be visible in almost every corner. When we were growing up, I remember how my mother and the other adults would wear the shirts of these men, singing and dancing with brass bands and sometimes music on moving cars and asking people to vote for their favourite people. Sometimes, out of curiosity, we would follow them and dance to the music as well. You would hear the adults engage in conversations about the looks of one person and
how the other one was too short and something about voting for the more handsome one because... well... he was handsome. Sometimes, you would also hear them strongly argue about which party has performed worse than the other and which one is more corrupt as if performing worse and corruption was anything to be proud of. And then after the election is won these politicians would vanish again. That was it. A cycle.

Later, my people were not falling for the trick anymore. And then there was a change of plan. A year to the election, the politicians would send a bulldozer to cut the road or start erecting poles as if they were going to connect electricity. But nothing came out of it.

That is why that year we thought of our Government Official who had been in power for eight years. Eight years of power and there was nothing to show for it except for the nice cars he cruised and that pot belly he had acquired.

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As the light of dawn seeped into my room, a call came through. It was him. I rubbed my bleary eyes and stepped out of bed. The sky was a pearly glow. By the next hour, we were already on our way combing through the bushes. He parked his car away at the outskirts of the town. I made sure of that. He wore a long black dress that covered every part of his body. He wore dark glasses that made it difficult to recognise him in the dark. He held in his hands a medium-sized efiewuara soa me bag which I suspected contained cash. I walked before him with my cutlass in my hand, making sure that no one could follow our trail. He barely spoke but his voice shook whenever he did. I took him through the forest, through the hideous parts. The trees looked like humans
when the reflections from the moon touched them; the owls and yips hooted. I could see him trembling even in the dark as we waded through the forest, sometimes through spider webs, where insects had been trapped. He kept rubbing his palms on his face. Poor soul.
He plugged his earpiece to listen to music, maybe to keep his mind from the forest. We were headed to the deepest part where I had some of the boys waiting for us.
A wise man once said, “People change for two main reasons: either their minds have been opened or their hearts have been broken.” It was time – a time for us to have our last game with him.
No. We were not taking to the streets anymore. We were tired of that. It was just a simple game – Chaskele.
The boys and I had not had much time to put all the things together but now that we had our sticks ready and the trash can in the basket. I hoped that we could pull this off, for the last time.
In the middle of the forest, where we were headed was the shrine. Around us were red bands, carefully tied to the trunks that had these abaduaba and the heads of dead animals hanging on them. In the middle of the shrine sat the priest, constantly waving his bodua like a flag. His attendants poured powder on him and chanted appellations. Drums rolled, incantations were made, cowries were thrown. As the blood of the sheep gushed, ‘Honourable’ held on to me, shaking like a two-year-old boy. His heart was almost dropping.
“The money,” the priest said after he was done with his rituals.
He pushed a calabash to ‘Honourable.’
“Kneel and lick the blood of the sheep on the floor,” the priest said.
He obliged. His mouth was smeared with mud and blood when he lifted his head.
“Now, put a stack in it and say whatever you want.” He looked at me and I nodded.
“I have brought you this money from my Ministry that is meant for
COVID-19 relief items but I do not mind. Because I know you will help me to win the election and when I win, I can easily replace it in days,” he began his empty promises again. His voice trembled. He looked at me again and I nodded once more. “Please make me win this election,” he continued, looking intently at the money in the calabash he was speaking on. “There is a set of appointments that would be coming up very soon after the elections. I would like the President to appoint me into a higher office,” he said.

The priest took the calabash from him, poured some powder on it and made some incantations. He looked intently into a pot of water before him and said, “Go now and eat. Victory awaits you. I see you sitting on the seat of the Speaker. You will be the next Speaker of Parliament. Now, the rest of the money.” He handed the *efiewura soa me* bag to the priest’s attendant. The attendant opened it to reveal stacks of cash. It was packed like cigarettes more than any amount of money I had seen my entire miserable life.

We left.

On the eve of the election, after the votes had been counted, a radio announcement: “The Member of Parliament for Sumina Constituency, who also doubled as the Minister for Health Minister, Honourable Blankson Adorye has lost his seat to a farmer.” Game over.
In a piece of this beautiful world, located in Africa, a new stage had begun. When the clock struck punctually at 00:00 hours of that day, children, young people and adults took to the streets, overflowing with such joy like the waters of the Indian Ocean, and dressed in resplendent white robes that illuminated even the darkest spots, both in large cities and in the most remote areas. The beautiful beaches on the coast concentrated thousands of these angels, in an authentic pyrotechnic show that had taken place in the atmosphere. Screams of joy here and there, congratulations, hugs and renewal of mutual vows of prosperity, were what was seen and heard most in these places. It was the traditional celebration of the arrival of a new year. The beginning of a new journey for that nation.

So it happened in Xigubo too, a small poor area located in that part of the world. Two great friends, Mavuve and Ngoko, lived here. Together they had celebrated the achievements made in the previous year, and wished for great conquests also for the year that began. “Welcome to the new year ... Happy new year to everyone,” sang Ngoko. “Oh... yes! The year that ended was super fantastic for us. Having participated in the exchange and training in the USA has enabled us to solve the various problems that afflict our people and, perhaps, the world in general,” said Mavuve. “Yeah ... really friend! May this new year also be one of great achievements and victories.”
Mavuwe and Ngoko were very intelligent, visionary and, above all, dreamers, despite being from a disadvantaged social background. They were born and raised in that village, involved in environments of poverty, hunger, chronic malnutrition and low levels of schooling. Due to their brilliant school performance and imagination the previous year, they had won a scholarship to participate in an exchange programme in the USA, which increased their hope that one day they would make a major contribution to building a society of peace, security and fairness, in their homeland, as well as in the whole world!

Everything started when, in that same year, a strange bug named Corona visited this nation. However small it seemed, it had the wings of a great dragon, which allowed it to reach that nation in record time, coming from places so far away. Unfortunately, this bug was not a bearer of good news on his visit to that people. It had dark well-defined goals! It intended to weaken and overthrow the state's sovereignty, take the King's seat and, finally, begin to dictate new rules and norms of co-existence. Curiously, even the country's army troop could not stop it. Indeed, the country's autonomy was confiscated by this bug. The authorities were all shaken and a new law was enacted: whoever tried to resist the law did very badly. The bug installed in that place a great disease, highly infectious and deadly, that forced everyone to stay in their homes. The contagion levels were so high that there were an average of two hundred infections per day.

Mavuwe and Ngoko, who were in the project creation phase after the exchange in the USA, saw in the middle of this situation caused by the bug, a ready opportunity to invest their knowledge and skills in creating a solution. It was thus, that at the end of two weeks, they completed the elaboration of a sanitary-
economic restoration program, which they called ‘Real Change’, because they believed that it would be a way of effecting real and profound changes!

The government and the authorities carried out a series of actions to combat this disease, but it did not take long to prove to be a failure. Apparently, the people were on the edge of the precipice, not to mention that they had already plunged into it. The elite wanted to escape, but they were unhappy when they realised that the situation abroad was also out of control, perhaps worse. Everyone was confined in their home, living in fear. An authentic chaos was established in the country, the new concern became the search for a way to stop the bug and restore order in the territory, an issue that proved difficult to resolve because the bug had a genetics that was new for all.

In the meantime, the national economy was already shrinking, and the poorest group felt the most from the effects of this disease, many families and individuals lost their humble sources of income, and hunger consumed the people.

Tokolosha, the head of the nation did not know what else to do. He was talking to Rafael, the Prime Minister. “The people are dying from this plague. It will not be long before hunger also begins to cause deaths.”

“It is Your Excellency. The collapse of our economy is imminent. In a few days, we will be facing a crisis never seen in the country.” The two regretted being in the presidential palace, and wondered what the nation's salvation would be.
It was a Sunday evening, when Mavuve and Ngoko, seated around the fireplace, were listening to the news on Xigubo’s community radio. They always used Grandpa Mambonhe’s, Mavuve’s grandfather, old radio. The news predicted that there would be a major crisis in the country in less than a month, and that His Excellency Tokolosha, together with his entourage, could not find a reliable formula to solve the dilemma.

“The situation is very bad Ngoko; it is our lives and those of our brothers in this nation that are at stake.”
“It is true my dear friend. We are left to our own luck.”
“Now more than ever, we must try to implement our idea. I believe that we can save lives, and rescue our country’s economy.”
“Yes Mavuve, the idea is certainly promising. But how will we get to the capital or how will we even meet His Excellency Tokolosha so that he can listen to our proposal?”
After about a minute, Mavuve answered, “I have an idea! We can leave tomorrow for the capital. We will walk. If we are lucky we will hitch a ride... otherwise, we will walk!”
“What? That is out of the question. You need to review your thinking!”
“Ngoko, there are many lives at stake. We have to take a risk; we will succeed with God’s help.”
Mavuve and Ngoko discussed their plan for long until they agreed on what to do. They had to flee to the capital the next day, without the knowledge of their families, as they would not allow such a plan. That night, Ngoko slept at his friend’s house.

The next day, the boys left before anyone woke up. By the time Grandpa Mambonhe woke up, the boys were nowhere to be found. He immediately told Ngoko’s family and a search party was formed. But it was too late, the search party returned home with no sign
of Mavuwe or Ngoko. Their families were worried but prayed that they were safe.

Meanwhile, the two friends were making progress. They had hitched some rides which significantly reduced their walking distance and travel time. They each had a folder that contained 5 litres of water, two xima bowls and the papers with the sketch of the ‘Real Change’. After four days of travelling, Mavuwe and Ngoko arrived in the capital, the ‘land of the largest bridge in Africa’. The presidential palace was right in front of them.

“Ufff...finally we are here! Thank God” Ngoko said. He was so exhausted he could barely speak.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... huuff... ultimately!” Mavuwe replied after a while.

The two dragged themselves towards the palace. When they arrived at the palace, two security guards stationed at the gate trained their weapons on them. They just fainted. Concerned, the security guards immediately called the presidential nurse. After about 30 minutes, the boys felt stronger and spoke their intention.

“We are from Xigubo. We want to see His Excellency Tokolosha.”

“Please help us to get an audience with him. We have walked for about 221 km to get here. Our effort cannot be in vain! We have a solution to the crisis that the country is going through.”

After hearing their proposal, the nurse agreed to help them.

“Good morning, Your Excellencies,” the boys greeted the President and the Prime Minister. They tried to be brave although it was very clear that they were nervous.

“Sit down, and feel comfortable,” replied the Prime Minister.

“So... boys, I heard that you come from Xigubo. What really brings you here?” asked the President.
The boys quickly recovered from their nervousness and produced their sketches of the ‘Real Change’ inscribed in an old notebook. They gave the sketches to the President and the Prime Minister and began to explain their plan.

“Yes, Mr. President, we are from Xigubo. The documents you have are the representation of a national health and economic restoration program, designed by Ngoko and myself. We called the program ‘Real Change’ because it will bring real and lasting changes.”

“The program is based on three main pillars: Social Justice, Public Health and Food Security. The primary objective of the program is to eradicate this disease, preserve public health and rescue the national economy, by promoting the spirit of gifts and sharing, favouring support for the most vulnerable people.”

The President and the Prime Minister were increasingly being impressed by what they saw and heard. The relief and the feeling of having found salvation were already beginning to be felt!

Without wasting time, Mavuve continued with his explanation.

“In the first pillar of Social Justice, the country needs to focus on promoting national solidarity! First of all, the people need to be very united, not a union based on mere speeches, but based on real equality of rights, mutual responsibility and sharing of resources.

“The richest need to know how to use the resources they have for the benefit of the most disadvantaged, while they share the social values they have. All citizens must feel welcomed, in a just and supportive society.”

He took a break as Ngoko talked about the other two pillars.

Ngoko said, “In the second pillar of Public Health, the program will work to combat this disease. Families will be provided with sanitation and protection material against the disease while they
remain in their homes. In parallel, a scientific committee will be created to find a cure for this disease.

“In the third and last pillar, Food Security, we must guarantee access to basic food to all families. The reality is clear; in order to overcome this outbreak, families need to remain isolated in their homes as much as possible. In order to do this, all low-income families who work in markets, fairs and other places of greater risk, should remain at home!”

After 45 minutes of explaining about the ‘Real Change’, the President and the Prime Minister were impressed and they wanted to start its implementation immediately.

Thus, the President spoke in a soft and humble tone, “This is really a brilliant program. I invite you to stay here at the palace for the next few days so that we can carry out this plan and rescue our country from this precipice.”

“It will be our pleasure, Your Excellency. We accept your invitation.”

The days that followed were full of hard work, in the implementation and execution of the ‘Real Change’. Mavuwe and Ngoko gathered and trained young volunteers for the cause. They worked day and night to monitor all processes, investing all their energies in the cause. After periods of resistance, the Corona bug began to give in to the activities of ‘Real Change’.

Meanwhile their families at home had heard about what their children were doing through the radio. They were so proud of them. The results of the ‘Real Change’ were of immeasurable importance. Finally, the dictatorship of the Corona bug was overthrown, having been forced to abandon that nation. In less than two months, the contamination level dropped to less than five cases a day, as families did not need to break the isolation by looking for ‘bread’, instead the bread went to their tables every day thanks to the spirit of sharing that inhabited the hearts of the people. It
did not last long and the scientific research committee got a cure for the disease, thanks to the magnificent efficiency techniques introduced by Mavuve and Ngoko.

The spread of the disease stopped, and the economy grew exponentially every month, as the program provided for the nationalisation of some private economies, assistance to small producers, and the creation of sources of income for all disadvantaged families, through administration training in entrepreneurship and small business management. Everything had returned to normal and emerged for the best.

Mrs. Adelaide, a resident of Xigubo village tells how ‘Real Change’ saved her family from illness, rescued her from absolute poverty, and boosted the economy in her neighbourhood, when interviewed. “I don’t even know what to say ... this program is the best thing that could have happened for the country in general, and for me in particular. Thanks to the ‘Real Change’, my life was saved, because I no longer needed to put it at risk in search of sustenance. After training in entrepreneurship, and with the financing given, I created my own business, I am the largest producer of vegetables in the village. My family now lives in safe and dignified conditions, and I am an employer of more than 50 young people. The program taught us to value solidarity. Today, we know that only together can we overcome any threat to our lives. Part of what I earn from my business, I use in community initiatives to fight hunger and chronic malnutrition and emancipation of women.”

That year was proclaimed as the ‘Year of Solidarity’ and Mavuve and Ngoko were declared ‘Little National Heroes’. Other countries, seeing what would have happened to that nation, started to request the ‘Real Change’ to implement it.
Mavuve and Ngoko had a brilliant career. They became advisers to the presidency.

The courage and cunning of the two young men from Xigubo revolutionised the paradigms of life in that nation, opening a path of hope and prosperity for thousands of people – from chaos came salvation.

“... The people of this country, from the experience they have lived, can testify to everyone that a better world is only possible when everyone unites and takes responsibility for each other. Solidarity is a window of hope for everyone! Let the fears and uncertainties that deprive the youth layer to show its brilliance and better serve the community cease,” Mavuve addressed the people.
Some people are destined to greatness, defying the odds regardless of circumstances. This was the case of Mayi Dembele from Kona, a small village in Sahel’s heart. She did not cry when she was born. At six months, she already walked, and two years later, she talked better than many adults. Growing up in a typical outback village, surrounded by adobe constructions and vernacular architecture, she and her ten siblings received an education respectful of customary practices and traditions.

Mayi was bright and intelligent, so much so that her parents, who believed that children were better off working, did not hesitate to send her to public school. Mayi was also inquisitive, and communication technologies fascinated her. Her first passion had been her father’s radio, the tiny wonder that spoke and made music. When cellphones made it to Kona in the late 2000’s, she spent all her free time stalking the fortunate owners who could make calls from anywhere they wanted. At 11, Mayi already felt like a grown-up. Her mother trusted her to prepare the sauce for dinner, and soon, she would be allowed to go to the market by herself. Adulthood was around the corner; nonetheless, fetching water like younger children was still one of Mayi’s favourite duties. Every morning, before school, she would hit the laterite streets with her yellow
canister in her hand. The red earth and pebbles always crunched under her flip-flops marking the rhythm of her journey. At the water station, the pump set the beat to which Mayi and her friends, Celestine, Djelika and Nantoma, filled their containers. When the water flow stopped, conversations would start. Gossip, arguments, debates, Mayi relished it all, as outside of the classroom, these were her best sources of information. One conversation in particular profoundly impacted her.

“My cousin in Dobokoro is dead,” Nantoma shared.
“Your cousin? The one who was in our class?”
“Yes.”
“Djiiiiii! What happened to her?”
“My mother said that she was pregnant and that she died during childbirth.”
“Wait, but she was our age. How could she get pregnant?” Mayi asked, bemused.
“I don’t know, but she was,” Nantoma replied.
“Do you think it could happen to us too? That we too could get pregnant and die?” Mayi was dumbfounded by the possibility. One day, she, too, would be expecting a child. What would happen then?
“Do you know how one gets pregnant?” Mayi asked Celestine, the oldest of the group.
“All I know is that men are involved.”
“Men? But babies grow in women’s bellies.”
“Hey! Leave that alone. The one time I asked my mother about it, she almost beat me up,” said Djelika.
“Don’t talk! Never ask questions! This drives me mad! Everything is forbidden. We cannot stop bad things from happening to us if we are kept in the dark. If something affects us, we should be able to talk about it,” Mayi insisted.
“That’s right,” Nantoma agreed. “It would be nice to be able to ask questions and get answers sometimes. To have someone to turn to when we doubt, someone who helps when we need to take our own decisions.”

“No girl should ever end up like Nantoma’s cousin. I really believe that the solution can only come from us,” said Celestine in a decisive tone.

“The solution can only come from us.” Those words would echo in Mayi’s mind all her life.

Growing older, Mayi fully grasped the sad truth about women’s condition in her village. Every time one of her friends stopped coming to school, every time she had to give up her lessons and homework to help her mother, she remembered that she could not slack. She needed to learn as much as she could if one day she wanted to bring change for women around her. With every out-of-wedlock pregnancy scandal, Mayi’s determination to inform and educate young girls grew stronger, driving her to attend nursing school and study modern medicine. This was for her the first step to equip herself intellectually to one day flush injustice away. Mayi’s tenacity and curiosity were frowned upon in the village. Yet, these very character traits led her to the most incredible encounter.

One night, as she was musing in the compound yard, looking at the stars, she heard human voices mingling with the noises of the fauna. Curious, Mayi came out of the courtyard and saw a queue of men wearing dark cloaks covered with mirrors and bones walking away. She recognised without ever having seen them the Dakan Initiates, men versed in occult sciences.
They knew all the secrets of the outback and were likely on their way to a ceremony. Their procession moved towards the village’s outskirts, and Mayi followed them surreptitiously to the backwaters. There, without fear, she listened to their prayers and observed the sacred rites. Her thirst for knowledge did not yield to the fear of breaking taboos. Taking in all she could, Mayi did not leave the scene before they had finished, and the last Initiate disappeared into the darkness. As she walked back, someone was waiting for her with a burning gaze setting the night ablaze.

“It is late to venture out into the bush alone. Aren’t you afraid?” Caught red-handed, Mayi froze for a moment before replying, “I am a Dembele from Kona. I am not afraid of anything.” “Clearly, you don’t know what happens to women caught spying on the Initiates?” She knew but deflected. “Who are you?” “I am Tata. Dembele, you have broken an immemorial law. What do you have to say in your defense?” “Nothing. I broke a taboo because I wanted to know, to understand. Curiosity might be my downfall. Still, I don’t regret what I did. Do not worry. I have no intention of blabbing about what I learned tonight or revealing your secrets. It was enough for me to understand that a woman can attend a sacred event without being struck by lightning on the spot. All that matters is not to get caught.” “Dembele, you are guilty. You must pay for your offenses. What should your sentence be?” “I don’t know, Tata. I am at your mercy.” “Dembele, I don’t wish to punish you. I appreciate and value your courage and determination. However, what you have witnessed is for the eyes and ears of the Initiates only. Therefore, I cannot just let you walk away. The only acceptable reparation is for you to
become a Dakan Novice. What do you say? Are you ready to learn the secrets of Life and the Outback?”

For the second time that evening, Mayi was at a loss for words. Tata’s offer was unexpected but certainly not one that she could let go of. Taking a deeper breath, she solemnly answered, “I would be honoured.”

“Very well. Come back tomorrow at the same time with a hoe.”

“I’ll be here.”

As promised, the following night, Mayi met Tata at the exact same place and time with the requested object. There were no greetings between them, just an order.

“Dig!”

“Where?”

Her question was met with silence, so Mayi simply dug right where she was standing. She put all her might in shovelling dirt away because she had the intuition that half-hearted efforts would not be rewarded. And in any case, she had been given an unbelievable opportunity. She was not about to let it slip through her fingers.

Mayi dug for hours under Tata’s silent scrutiny, who remained entirely still until dawn when he finally released her from her task. “Leave now and come back tonight,” was all he said.

Three nights in a row, Mayi returned to dig. And every time Tata did nothing more than instructing her to start or stop. The fourth night, Mayi was exhausted. She barely had enough strength to hold the hoe anymore. Therefore, when she hit something hard, she gave up her tool and tried to release it with her hands instead. It took her a moment to identify that the roundish object buried in front of her was a human skull.
Horrified by what she had unearthed, she scurried away from the hole she excavated.

“Those are the remains of a woman who was sacrificed here a long time ago. There are many more bodies scattered around, reminders of a time when women were mere offerings.”

Mayi was petrified, unable to move or speak. How foolish of her to believe that she could break out of the norm. Alone in the dark, she was about to pay for her temerity with her life.

“Are you scared?” Tata asked. “Do you still want to become a Novice?” Mayi was shivering, torn between the desire to flee and the desire to overcome fate. This was a decisive moment, and no matter what, she could not cower away. So, she did the only thing that made sense to her. She stood tall, squared her shoulders, and looked straight at Tata.

“I will not fear the past or long-forgotten practices. If then women were offerings, today they can be Novices. I will become one with your help. I am standing here because I want to better understand the world around me and what nature has put at our disposal. If you are fair, you will teach me.”

“Dembele, you have stepped on the path of knowledge. You have accepted to look at what came before but focus on what is ahead. Tonight your education starts.”

That was how Mayi started following Tata’s teaching. Every full moon, she went to the backwaters to memorise primeval stories and be educated on Sahelian millennia-old philosophies and moral codes. She also learned about traditional medicine and how to
recognise and use healing plants. She studied trees, bushes and flowers. She picked petals, bark and leaves to prepare concoctions.

Mayi was a devoted Novice, opening her mind to a new world of spirituality and wisdom. Yet, Tata alone could not quench her thirst for cognition. Mayi relied as well on her nursing school and its modern training. Besides, she heavily explored the internet with a cellphone given to her by a cousin living abroad. Her favourite website was Exonet because it only published vetted facts and was almost misinformation-free. Painstakingly, Mayi built her own brand-new thinking system with all the knowledge she accumulated. She honed it for five years until one day, Tata instructed her to meet at the termite mound by the backwaters.

“Dembele, since the beginning of our journey together, you have listened, and you have obeyed. You made yours my teaching and brought it to new heights. You are now ready to stand on your own. Your education as a Novice is done.”

This announcement made Mayi profoundly happy and proud. Her hard work was finally rewarded.

“It is time for you to grow into your own truth and give back to your community. You must take the oath to devote yourself, body and soul to become a Dakan Apprentice.”

Mayi knew the words. She had waited a long time to say them.

“I willingly enter the apprenticeship. I accept the bond between me, my people and our land. I will not leave them for longer than the moon needs to show the same face. I swear to serve my community and put all my forces and mind into being a worthy Apprentice,” Mayi vowed.
"Mayi Dembele, you are now an Apprentice. I trust that you will never disappoint me as you are wise and mighty beyond your age. I first witnessed it all these years ago, when you looked right into my eyes and answered me with confidence and poise. This was an extraordinary feat. Even among the Initiates, not all can hear me, much less see me. There is strength in you, and I am honoured to see it every day."

Mayi was honoured with her new status, and she took her oath very seriously. Now that she was an Apprentice, she felt a greater sense of responsibility, and advancing in Dakan gave her confidence to use her medical knowledge. She had never forgotten that: *The solution can only come from us.* And now, she was ready.

"Tata, I am an Apprentice and a state registered nurse. I have been helping those around me with my medical abilities, but I want to do more. I want my voice to reach further."

"How would you do that?"

"I want to use the internet to teach young people about their health, particularly girls. I do not want to see any more of them waste their lives because of unwanted pregnancies or venereal diseases. I want women to have a safe space where they can get information and not fear judgment."

"I hear what you say, but how do you plan to reach women who do not have a phone or a computer?"

"I have it all planned. First, I will convince those in my audience to relay the questions and answers to those who need them. Second, we will set up a fund to subsidise the purchase of telephones for girls and women who don’t have one."

"If you achieve your goals, you will mix tradition and
modernity. My teaching will possibly reach the farthest corners of the world.”

“And not just traditional medicine, but everything I learned from you. From the importance of the holy to human and fraternal values. My voice will flow and tell how spirituality and reason are not enemies and how ancestral truths have their place in an increasingly technological world.”

With her idea in the ether, Mayi took a few days to get her plan underway. She started alone, rallying her friends who rallied theirs. Every day she posted short videos in the local language and gave health advice.

Soon she was joined by a midwife from the neighbouring village. Together, they contacted the administration to get permission to offer remote consultations and support their fundraising project. At the same time, the women in the network actively shared their experiences and knowledge. From discussions about health, sexuality and pregnancy, members moved on to conversations about markets, gardening, household finances and politics.

Within a few weeks, women from the surrounding villages joined the group. The fundraising also took off, allowing almost all women in the region to get a phone to access the exonet. Mayi was living her best life. She had a meaningful mission and a fulfilling job. Thanks to her consultations, she helped the community and earned a salary for the first time. The platform’s success was her pride and joy, but it took all her time, and she had less time to spend with Tata, which stalled her apprenticeship. Yet, the latter always showed her unfailing support.
“You’re really bringing the change you’ve always wanted. I have to say it’s a great source of pride to see you moving forward like this. You still have a long way to go to finish your initiation and achieve your goals, but my teaching is already bearing fruits.”

“Yes, we have reached so many people that the health of the villagers has improved significantly. For example, we have convinced many heads of households that even girls who have had a child out of wedlock deserve protection and education. This gave us a bit of notoriety, and we gained the support of the authorities. They offered to build us a training centre. They will give us a plot near the backwaters. Many grumpy old men are opposed to the project, but it is in vain. The village chief has already agreed.”

“Mayi, the villagers should stay away from the backwaters.”
“I know, but the project is already well underway. Plus, the piece of land is not directly by the backwaters. Don’t worry. It will be alright.”
“Some things shouldn’t be changed, and sometimes progress costs more than you are willing to pay. Mayi, again, no one should touch the backwaters.”

This was the last time Tata admonished Mayi. The centre’s construction started, and a week later, the body of water was no more. To prevent potential flooding, the engineers had decided to drain the pond. When Mayi learned the news, she ran as fast as she could, her lungs about to explode. She only stopped heartbroken at the dried backwaters. Filled with a cold terror, she called: “Tata!” No one answered.
“Tata? Tata? Talk to me.” Mayi called for hours, but Tata remained silent and never answered again. The fetish was no more. During the digging, an excavator’s blows had broken the statue that tethered Tata to the physical world. The ignorant construction workers did not know the implications of their actions. Afraid of being cursed, they had called a marabout to deal with the debris in secret.

When all was said and done, they simply resumed the Training Centre. Mayi never knew what exactly happened. As an Apprentice, she was not initiated to the secret of Tata’s physical form. She had only ever interacted with its human incarnation that had also vanished, leaving her an Apprentice without a Master. Mayi carried the wound of losing her mentor for the rest of her life. She felt that she had lost Tata for being too conceited and careless. Although she could not fix her mistake, the fetish’s teaching remained with her forever. And true to herself, Mayi continued her mission to help and educate using modern and traditional intelligence.
Dear Ina,

Remember our favourite poet? Warsan Shire? She once said, “Document the moments you feel most in love with yourself – what you’re wearing, who you’re around, what you’re doing. Recreate and repeat.” Although I do not think I have entirely found myself yet, I see this letter to my old self as proof and reminder that a new journey has begun. A journey towards discovering who I truly am, and what it means for me.

It started in the autumn of 2018, when I bumped into Axel, my high school deskmate, in Portland, Maine at the famous 207 bar. It was my first time there. Weeks before, after a stupid truth or dare game, I was dared to spend two hours at an exclusively Burundian bar. They knew I never spoke highly of my fellow Burundians. The diaspora community is just draining. They party every day and they don’t aspire to anything in particular. My parents had always warned me that abroad, people generally succeed when they stay away from their communities. Anyway, here I was at the bar because of a stupid game. Well, except that it wasn’t that bad, actually. The music was extraordinary – I really didn’t know Burundians sang good songs.
I remember sitting at the furthest table of the room, in a low-key dark corner with a friend I had just made that night. We ordered tequila shots.

“Ready for another one?” she said, after having posted her third story on Instagram asking people whether she should have another shot. They voted yes.

Eyes closed, I felt a burn slowly spreading inside my mouth and on my tongue as I poured the liquid down my throat, after licking a good amount of salt. We both dropped our glasses and reached for the slices of lime in the middle of the table. While I was still shivering from the bitterness of lime in my mouth, somebody approached our spot.

“Ina? Ina Katia? Is that really you?”
I was still recovering from the icy reaction I got from the lime (why don’t I ever get used to this?), and I turned my face up to see who had recognised me.

“Erega I saw you dancing earlier and was like, I know this woman! You have changed so much! You look amazing.”

Axel Ntahe. After these years. What are the odds of meeting an old classmate in a foreign country? I got up to hug him.

“It is so sweet to see you! You look great too. Haha and your beard has finally grown.”
We awkwardly laughed together. He waved hello at my new friend.

“So, how come I have never seen you around? Where in the States do you live?”

“Oh no. I don’t really live here. I am here for work.”

“Oh work? That’s interesting. What do you do?”
“I’m on contract. The organisation I work for in Burundi sent me here to hold a number of conferences,” he explained as though he were tired of being asked how he ended up here.

I congratulated Ntahe for his job and said I was happy for him. I also let him know that I would travel to Burundi in June of the following year. There was a final mourning ceremony to be held, dedicated to Uncle Ngabo who had passed months ago.

“Uncle Ngabo? Oh, I remember how close you two were. I am so sorry to hear he passed on.” He grabbed my left arm to comfort me. I retrieved my hand from his grip, even though his soft touch reminded me of how I had a crush on him in high school. But that’s a story for another day.

Our little chitchat got interrupted by his friends calling him. They had to leave.

“Oh, before I go, listen, if you’re still around later in June, please come by our high school reunion. I am sure that people will be happy to see you again.”

“Hmm, nah. Thank you. I don’t plan on staying in Burundi for that long. I need to come back here real quick.”

“C’mon, Ina! The event only happens every five years. You don’t wanna miss that. Trust me.”

“I don’t want to promise you anything. I might already be back here by the time the reunion happens.”

Nevertheless, he handed me his business card and waved goodbye.

“Ready for another one, sis?” my new friend asked. Mind you, she was now live on Instagram for a talent show.

“Oh my God, don’t tempt me. I have an early morning tomorrow.”
She frowned. “Okay hun, one last round and you let me go.”

On my way home from the bar, I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that Ntahe had made it here just for a job. How was that even possible? A Burundian person with a Burundian education working in the United States of America? This couldn’t be true.

Needless to remind you that though I was born to Burundian parents, I am no Burundian. I am American, my mother came here when she was six months pregnant. She gave birth to me, waited for me to get my American passport and American birth certificate, and took us back home to Burundi.

Between Mother doing my hair, and Father walking with me at Jardin Public, I never lacked for anything while growing up. They kept me quite busy by having me join activities after school. There was the national swimming team every Tuesday and Thursday, and the poetry club at the American Corner in Kamenge every weekend. While my age-mates were enrolled in clubs that taught traditional dances and songs, my parents sent me to read books at the American embassy.

“People who cling to their culture and traditions never prosper, darling. A waste of time! That’s why people living in the rural areas lead poor lives. But you, my little American, have got to evolve and live a life worth living,” my father would say, “at all costs.”

Of course I once asked my parents why I was born in America and not in Burundi. They said my future was brighter as an American. They would often remind me how blessed I was to have a secure future. “People will respect you, Ina, and you
can get any job you want with that passport,” mother often said, after giving me countless examples of unemployed people with good diplomas.

My parents were poisoned when I was fourteen. According to Uncle Ngabo, my parents had enemies who were jealous of them and their successful businesses. My father was the number one car dealer in the country, and my mother owned many spots at the marketplace. But you know, in a country where inequality hits hard, people will not appreciate your success; they will take all your belongings and kill you. I then went to live with Uncle Ngabo until junior year of high school, when it was time for me to come home to America, where I belonged.

Uncle Ngabo became my parental figure as he pushed me to keep up with the good grades. During the nights he was not teaching me to play chess, he would share with me anecdotes on his life. When Uncle Ngabo was younger, he had put his trust in the wrong people, thinking they were his friends. “Don’t repeat my mistakes,” he’d advise me. They betrayed him and submitted his family name on the list of people who were supposed to be decimated because of their ethnicity. Uncle Ngabo managed to flee to Kenya where he lived in a refugee camp for four years before coming back to a sort of stabilised Burundi.

Uncle Ngabo died of cancer in May 2018. He smoked a lot. I didn’t make it to the burial ceremony because I had just started my new job at a high tech company. I’m sure he would have understood. There was a final mourning ceremony happening in June 2019 anyways, and I was happy to finally pay my respects to him.
Recall that at the beginning, I didn’t want to spend a long time in Burundi. There was nothing for me there. Well, except the food. But Keza insisted. Maybe she thought I needed more time to process her father’s death, Uncle Ngabo?

So, June came.
I landed at night, and a charming heat welcomed me as I took a step forward out of the plane. I could hear mosquitoes, frogs, and other intriguing species making a concert-like noise from the tall grass that surrounded the airport.

Seeing how illuminated the city of Bujumbura had become blew my mind. There were light poles almost everywhere. Burundi did get better, I thought to myself.

I won’t spend time describing the mourning ceremony. It was boring and nothing worth noting happened. The high school reunion, on the other hand, was full of surprises.

I arrived when the drummers had just started their performance to announce the beginning of the event. They were about 20 drummers, aligned in a circle and wearing the colours of the country’s flag; red, green and white. They were fiercely beating the drums and chanting some songs in Kirundi. I observed one drummer turning his stick around his neck three times, before jumping and landing on his feet in a proud scream. I got caught in the enchantment, and could not even pick my phone to film. It felt as if the drums were directly speaking to me. They were loud, and my ears were beeping. I couldn’t hear anything else. I didn’t want to hear anything in fact, except the drums. As the drummers synchronously slammed their sticks on the cow skin that constituted
the top of the drum, and then its wooden sides, my heart felt the beat, again and again. I shed a tear.

“The American is crying, huh?” Ntahe had stepped from behind me. I wished he hadn’t seen me that vulnerable. “Can’t I admire this culture in peace? Argh!” I said, as I greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

Ntahe escorted me through the whole night, re-introducing me to people who might have forgotten me. “Who in the world can forget the American?” shouted Ciza, as he came to embrace me. I was impressed to see that most of my classmates had turned out well, unlike my parents’ predictions. Even Perera, who had failed three grades in a row was there, very well dressed, and throwing jokes around the room.

The time came for the fundraising, at the end of which a voting would be held. The most voted project would get the most money. They shared projects about sexual education, alcohol and drug policy in order to raise a self-aware generation. I was impressed by their ideas.

Of all the presentations, Perera’s blew my mind. See, I was so used to seeing her failing that I didn’t know she actually was capable of doing anything right. I remember the second time she failed a grade. We were all going into 10th grade, and she had to retake 8th grade. Everybody in the neighbourhood was talking about it. “Nijimbere’s child has brought shame on her family! Again!” my mother announced with a threatening voice, as a way of saying, “Don’t you dare do the same!” She continued, “N’akajuju karya. She will for sure end up tending her father’s sheep back in the village. She has no future with a brain like that.”
However, that night, I saw a Perera I didn’t know. She didn’t look like her ‘mistakes.’ She looked confident and very happy. At that moment, it didn’t matter that she graduated three years after us. Everybody was cheering for her and wishing her success as she was campaigning to become the next member of parliament.

“And you? What good thing do you bring to us, Miss America?” Ntahe shouted.

“Why can’t you just call me by my name?” I was kind of embarrassed. “You mean your American name?” somebody in the group responded, after which the whole room laughed.

All eyes were on me, now. People laughing and fingers pointing at me. It felt like I was in the wrong room, because I didn’t have a Kirundi name. I was triggered. My night was ruined.

Antways, let’s fast forward to the morning where, as we were having breakfast, Keza asked me to join her on her work trip in the countryside.

Side note about Keza. She is very different from her father, Uncle Ngabo. She is caring and doesn’t like to see people suffer. Her work involves visiting people living with disabilities, noting their needs, and presenting them to the governor’s office. She is demanding that everyone, despite their disabilities, be given easy access to facilities. She has already made a remarkable impact in Bujumbura. Now, buses are equipped with doors that enable wheelchairs to enter.

“Oh, by the way,” she said, while spreading her bread with avocado, “I’m moving to Gitega for work, indefinitely. My job has grown considerably and I can’t keep up with papa’s business here in Buja. I could use a brave and intelligent hand.”
“And you really think I’d give up the US for this? You’re funny, Keza.”
“Why not? People make good money here. Plus, this is home. You can’t stay there forever.” She bit into her bread, leaving green traces around her mouth. I realised I should have picked avocado too, instead of eggs.
“Why do you associate with those people, anyways?” I ask, while taking a sip of icayi.
“If I don’t, who will, Ina?” She was looking straight into my eyes.

“I don’t know. They should learn to live for themselves and not depend on outside help. That’s how courage is built.”
“So you think that you are where you are today solely because of your effort?”
“Of course.”
“Cut that crap, Ina! If it weren’t for your parents, for my father, the education you got, you wouldn’t be where you are today.”

I took another sip of icayi.
“Why do you hate us anyways? What’s so baaaaaad about being a Burundian?”
“The answer is simple: look at this country! Total mess and BS everywhere.”
“So what are you doing to clean it up?”
“It’s not my job to do.”
“Ohhh, ‘Coz you’re American, right? That passport of yours is just PAPER! Your blood is Burundian!”
Her sarcastic laughter echoed three rooms away from the kitchen, before she continued, “Listen, just come on my work trip with me, and see why it’s important to me.”
As I reluctantly travelled with Keza in the rural areas, I realised I had built wrong assumptions about the place. People weren’t doomed to poverty or misery. They just have different lives.

So, “What’s so bad about being a Burundian?”

I don’t know. I don’t know what’s wrong with it. I have never thought about it. Or maybe, nobody has ever taught me to love Burundi, Burundians, and our culture.

Days later, as boredom hit me, I went to spend time in the room where my parents’ affairs had been kept since their passing on. I guess I was hoping to find something that would remind me of the sound of my mother’s laughter. The place felt like a sanctuary or an antique museum because of the smell of old. There was a small box marked Katia stuff. I opened it by tearing the tape apart. On top was a torn book with a yellow cover, the one mother used to read to me before bed. I nervously opened it, and a photograph fell on the ground alongside a small red card. In the photograph, I saw my parents holding a baby dressed in white. There was liquid being poured on the forehead of that child. Is that me being baptised? I instantly grabbed the card to read what was inscribed: Ikarata y’iibatisimu. Inangoma Katia. 1995. I stood up and turned on the light to confirm I was reading clearly. Well, I knew that 1995 was the year my mother and I came back to Burundi: I was three. But did that mean my name had been Inangoma Katia all along?

“Keza! I have a Kirundi name!” I had tears in my eyes as I rushed into Keza’s room that Sunday afternoon.

“Inangoma?” Keza replied, with surprise ‘why are you surprised’ face.

“Wait, you knew?” I was baffled.

“Technically, I didn’t know you didn’t know. Everyone has a nickname. I thought you knew that was yours.”
“I am so angry, Keza. It looks like I’ve been lied to my whole life. I thought I wasn’t Burundian because of my name. And why do all my documents say Ina instead of Inangoma?”

“Girl, trust me, even if you were just Ina, you’d still be Burundian. You wanna know something? Inangoma means beholder of power. Isn’t that beautiful?”

Why was I called Ina while growing up? Apparently, when white people were writing my name on the birth certificate, they accidentally omitted the second part of my name. My mother hadn’t bothered correcting them. Since I wasn’t meant to become a Burundian she thought it was perfect. She told everyone to simply keep it short and call me Ina, her little American. Only God and the church knew I was Inangoma.

Well, Ina?

I could go on for days, but may this letter remind you that months ago, you hated Burundi and today, you’re starting to develop feelings for her and her people. It was certainly shocking to learn your real name is Inangoma. And you hold power apparently.

Gosh. I am left with so many questions. Were my parents’ view of life correct or they were just projecting their insecurities on me? All I knew is that my stay in Burundi has changed me and I can’t wait for my next trip there.

Yours truly,

Beholder of Power,
Inangoma Katia
THE NEW NORMAL

Elizabeth Dwamena-Asare (Ghana)

It’s another dull Monday afternoon. Welcome to Madina Market, which is, as usual, garnished with filth and polluted with deafening noise from a concoction of loud music booming from speakers, and shouts from street advertisers and traders. Today, the atmosphere is decorated with red dust. Roofs of shops and windows of parked vehicles are coated with thick layers of brown earth. Trotros and taxis are stuck in unmoving traffic, honking noisily at one another, and emitting harmful gases into the air. The stale air is also flavoured with stench emanating from a refuse dump where a concerned citizen stands akimbo, holding a bottle of petrol and a box of matches, ready to set it ablaze. The smoke from the burning waste will infuse the already polluted air and permeate the noses and clothes of passersby, causing them to move swiftly as they guard their noses with handkerchiefs, and with the hem of their clothes.

The Harmattan season has bowed out. Smiles and hope have embraced the faces of residents in Accra, who couldn’t bear the dryness in the air, and the cracking of lips and soles of the feet. Although many had sacrificed a percentage of their incomes to purchase and store large amounts of nkuto, it is currently of no essence as the Harmattan was not as severe as expected. It however will be kept in anticipation of the next Harmattan season. The only thing no one could still not fathom was why nothing seemed to have changed after its exit. Many are earnestly waiting for the rainy
season to come, unfortunately, there has not been any positive sign yet. The farmers are the most worried.

Tilling the stubborn soil was difficult as it refused to yield much. No rains meant that the crops would not thrive, leading to little or no harvest.

Nii, a thrifty young man, left the city at the start of the season as life was tough. He’d chosen to try his luck at job-hunting in the Savanna region while visiting his grandmother. Unfortunately, his employment search was fruitless. He appeared gloomy as he raced over his thoughts, wondering what the future held for him. As the car he sat in moved slowly towards the Madina Market, he noticed that nothing had changed although he had been gone for a couple of months.

Loud coughs and sneezes could be heard from different directions. Remnants of the Harmattan winds on the people. By the roadside, stood a heavily pregnant woman spitting on the ground right before the entrance to the bus station. And just a few meters into the station comfortably sat a half-full trotro. The driver, in a blue t-shirt with suro nipa written on it, was comfortably seated behind the steering wheel sneezing every few minutes without any form of nose covering. This was despite the warning that there was a new virus roaming in town. The passengers began to murmur, wearing uncomfortable looks on their faces due to the driver’s actions. They had been warming the seats in the bus for close to an hour. An unexpected heatwave from the sun visited them periodically, as they impatiently waited for the driver to start the engine once the remaining seats were occupied. Nii shook his head as he watched the scene outside the trotro parking lot in the bus station.
There was a long queue of buyers lined up at *Hajia Kande waakye’s* joint. Although the popular food seller is stationed just across from the market’s public restroom, the line is building by the minute. Notwithstanding her location and nasty attitude toward her customers, she still has them flocking to her little eatery since her cuisine is widely regarded as the most delectable in the area. A drinking bar adjacent to her is open from dawn to dusk. The bar, which is filled with the odor of booze and sweat, is primarily frequented by an aging bunch of drunkards. On some days, they would drink to bury their sorrows, but on others, they would party and pass out at the bar.

The heat is intense. Skins turn violet as people jostle and hurry to and fro. The sun’s rays hit hard on moving vehicles and the reflection cuts through the brown-and-white shells of numerous eyes busily trading under the scorching sun. It seems the rain has hibernated, for there was not even a drizzle. Sweat trickles down the faces of passersby soaking their clothes. The intense heat scorches the feet of *kayayie* carrying babies on their backs while balancing aluminum pans on their heads. They turn in various directions, trying to spot their would-be affluent clients shopping for foodstuff. For them, every day is a case of the survival of the fittest.

Nii’s thoughts are drowning him out as he examines the market scene. His thoughts return to the day when the newly elected Member of Parliament vowed to transform Madina into Monaco. He’d just learned that the MP’s pledge was a sham. Another ploy by a politician to sway the hearts of his constituents and get his votes.

Regardless of the harsh weather condition, there are lanky children with emaciated skin playing around the main *Borla* at the exit of the market. Of course, their hands will comb through the refuse dumps
and gutters before they’re dipped into unbalanced meals after the day is over. The majority of these children have nothing better to do with their days than walk the streets. They live in the lowest areas and cannot afford to attend school. Their self-imposed occupations include impersonating the station’s drivers and begging from the well-to-do on the streets as they pass by regularly. Unfortunately, not everyone is eager to accommodate them, and for others, they are a nuisance.

Just around the borla where the children are playing, there is a poor old woman with flesh dripping off her face, melted by age. She painfully bows her fragile body to collect pure water sachets in the market as a means of livelihood. Now and then, she shuts her mind to her body screaming for rest, and keeps working to earn an income relevant to her survival. People watch as she carries a big sack filled with empty sachets from the incinerator to the nearest recycling point. She will trade it for cash and buy herself a meal for the day. Nii reflects as he alights at the Ford bus station that this is a normal market day in Madina.

He weaves his way through the mob, his black wallet securely tucked under his right armpit. His other hand was tightly grasping his backpack while hanging on to his Nokia 3310 phone. He keeps an eye out for burglars that prowl the streets at all hours of the day and night. It is common to be mugged in broad daylight at Madina Market, and he is not prepared to be a victim.

Nii has a notion as he makes his way through the crowd at Madina Market. Last night, while watching late news, the newscaster mentioned a new virus that was fast spreading throughout the world. As a result, the government was putting in place safeguards to protect its residents. Will the administration keep its word? The
bulk of the population lived in slums, while some were homeless. What would happen if the virus struck without mercy?

‘Ye-es…! Circ, Circ, Circle! Kanesh, Kaneshie!’ shouts a bus conductor.

Nii dashes towards the vehicle and hops inside. He is fortunate to have gotten the last available seat, which is rather uncomfortable. The seat features an annular bearing that connects his nose straight to the conductor’s stinky armpit. However, it is preferable to put up with it for a time than a stroll in the blistering heat.

In the moving vehicle, the radio is switched on. Passengers pay attention as the government, as usual, informs its residents about the new normal for which they should prepare.

“Eiiih! It means we will all die.” an older woman panics attracting murmurs from both literates and illiterates.

“They say, our bodies shouldn’t touch each other, hmm!” another adds as she tries to keep her distance from the passenger seated next to her.

“And they say it is called Kofi 19. It is the great ancestor of Ebola,” a gentleman speaks in jest.

“As for me, it won’t catch me oo! I am covered by the blood of Jesus,” the driver adds while making the sign of the cross.

“Mate, Okponglo bus stop!” a slay queen dressed in flamboyant colours with overdone makeup yells from her seat as she noisily chews on a piece of bubble gum.
When the slay queen disembarks, a herbalist carrying his dusty bag filled with his wares boards the bus. He begins selling his medicinal herbs shortly after the bus departs.

“This particular seed is found only in Israel,” he begins. “If you chew it with coconut water, sickness will flee from your system forever. It is locally calledNsiah. Your body will be purged and you will have diarrhea continuously for a week. It will clear all the parasites from your body. In the process, it can cure over two hundred diseases – even diseases which have not yet been discovered,” he says as he looks at the faces of his potential customers.

The bus conductor smiles and shakes his head while muttering under his breath. He doesn’t trust the herbalist’s advertisement of the potency of this herb, nor does he like the fact that some passengers are patronizing it. He stares at the herbalist with disdain and asks him, ‘Can your herb cure the new virus in town?’

The herbalist first collects his money, then responds, “Oh yes! It can. The FDA (Food and Drugs Authority) has approved this herb for the treatment of all diseases.”

The herbalist alights at the next bus stop. He has thrown dust into the eyes of numerous passengers and successfully convinced them to buy. Mission accomplished!

Everyone fears death. No one ever feels ready to die. So it lays its icy hands on many unexpectedly – both the rich and the poor alike.

A lockdown was imposed a fortnight following the revelation of the country’s first reported case. Several businesses came to a halt. Layoffs from employment were commonplace. A huge number of
individuals reported symptoms of the new virus and were picked up for testing at regular intervals. Unfortunately, after they tested positive, they never returned. Only healthcare professionals and military personnel were spotted outside of residences. Even the mentally ill patients, who were normally dressed in scruffy clothing and roamed the streets, were no longer visible.

Does anyone know where the world is headed? Is this virus real? The thought of waking up to unpleasant news sends shivers down the spines of concerned citizens. Can we blame calamities that show up and so unexpectedly strike us? Do the young ones have a future? Of course, they do! However, it is one fraught with uncertainties and every soul must brace itself for better and or, for worse.

To avoid acquiring the virus, health professionals repeatedly reminded residents to strengthen their immune systems by eating nutritious foods, practicing excellent personal cleanliness, keeping a clean environment, and breathing in clean, fresh air. When they opted to leave their homes, every soul was required to wear a face mask, which many regarded as uncomfortable. The cost of necessities skyrocketed. However, the enormous increase in the cost of hand sanitizers and face masks made them impossible to purchase and use for the average citizen, so they turned to home cures.

Nii sits still in his bedroom, his face pensive. He fixes his gaze on a section of his wall, adorned with plaques and accolades from the Tertiary Football Club. The remainder of the wall is covered with quirky paintings by a well-known James Town artist. As he reflects on his day in Madina Market, a great sorrow comes over him, and he wonders if the people will survive this fight. The market
was strewn with dirt, and when the rains fell, the ground became clogged, resulting in floods that lasted several days.

‘Will people survive this deadly virus? Is there hope for survival? Does the government possess enough resources to fight it in all boldness? What if the majority of the youths are lost to it? What if no one manages to do business ever again? How will parents and guardians feed their young ones? How will the homeless cope? What about the orphans and street children?’ fear wells up in his throat as he questions no one in particular?

The grim expressions of the military personnel parading the streets are enough to convey how serious the lockdown is. Anyone who breaks the rules is dealt with — without question!

Nii sighs and shakes his head. He has worries about the government’s ability to care for its citizens. Fear overcomes him as he recalls how his entire family was moved to a separate facility after testing positive for the virus. The rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins and arteries sends him flying like lightning.

At dawn, he sneaks out of his neighbourhood shielded by the heavy fog which blinds the military men parading the streets from spotting him. Moving quietly through an unidentified path, he periodically ends up in vast artificial holes in the ground. He intends to cross the border into a neighboring country and seek asylum. He will return once everything has normalized. The road he takes is shrouded in dismal darkness, with no fireflies to illuminate the way. The region is filled with the quiet of the tall trees that appear to be spying on him, creating an uninterrupted hush. Nonetheless, he remains unfazed.
Nii arrives at the Ghana-Togo border on the third day of his journey. As he fixes his gaze on the signage, he flashes a boyish grin. His delight lasts only a few seconds before he notices military officers patrolling the border.

‘How will I cross over?’ he thinks to himself.

He dips his hand into his pocket and feels the bundle of cedi notes – his life savings to commence life afresh in another country. That might be his passport to cross the border. He marches towards the military guys, his duffel bag on his shoulder, his confidence restored.

“Hey! Stop!” he hears an order.

He becomes terrified as a result of this. His voice has been trapped in his throat. He instantly raises his hands in submission and carefully turns around, looking for the direction from whence the order was echoed.

“Where are you off to?” a military commander in shades asks. His hands are tucked into his pocket.

“Togo, Sir,” he answers briefly, stealing glances in different directions.

There are other Ghanaians, busily trying to manipulate the military men to cross the border.

“Are you a Togolese national?” the commander asks.

“Yes, Sir,” replies Nii.
“Passport.” the commander says while stretching his hand towards Nii.

‘Missing, Sir.’ He replies.

“Liar! Vous parlez français?” the commander inquires in French searching the young man’s face.

Nii is at sea. He cannot speak basic French to save his dear life.

“Very well!” the commander responds as he signals another officer to join them.

“Okay, okay.” Nii who has finally found his voice says, “I am a Ghanaian but I am crossing over to Togo. Officer, I have money. Take it.” He shoves the bundle of fresh notes into his hands.

The military commander smiles and says, “You may cross, but you do so at your own risk.”

“Thank you Sir!” he salutes and walks excitedly towards the border gate. If only he knew what awaits him.

Nii passes through the border town before boarding a bus bound for the main city. He is confronted with an unexpected scenario — the country’s position has deteriorated. There is disarray and mayhem everywhere. The community was in shambles due to a conflict and the problem of Covid-19. The rebels have taken control. Women are weeping for their husbands and children, who lay dead like fowls on the streets. Children appear despondent as they hunt for their parents.
“He-ey!” a young rebel yells.

Nii’s heart skips a beat, and he begins to run. Provoked by his actions, the rebel, aided by his companions, pursues Nii and ultimately captures him. He is unable to understand their language and is imprisoned in their camp to prevent him from fleeing. The independence he desired has vanished. Was it worth leaving his homeland for a foreign land where he was welcomed with such a cold treatment?

If he could only see his family once more. What if they had been sent home after the required 14-day quarantine period?

Nii awakens at midday two days after his incarceration, feverish. He coughs hard and feels his head, which has a high fever. He’s smoldering. His nostrils are congested, and he is struggling for air. His face is masked by lingering shock, and his sunken eyes appear forlorn. Had he been infected with the virus without realizing it? Thoughts of death invaded his thoughts, but he sought to avoid the unpleasant facts, which proved fruitless. He lowered his head and sobbed in remorse for his deeds. Wouldn’t it have been better to deal with the new normal at home instead?
Their new interstellar home was a lot like Earth in some ways and nothing like it in many other ways. It was in everything. The slight blue tinge to the grass and leaves, the slight green tinge to the sky, the two extra limbs of the animals. It was one of the few planets that Zambia had secured as a member of the New Federation and was the one closest in resemblance to the savannah that most were familiar with despite its oddities. So they called it Ongamika.

Twisted. Bent.

She had brought her family to Ongamika in the hope that they could outrun the disease that was tearing through their village. She had heard stories of the people that lived among the stars and thrived. Never going hungry and never sick but with technology you could never believe. So with her eyes fixed firmly upward, Mbao scraped enough cash from her hunts and pelt-making to bribe the ship steward of the next outward bound space ship. Even when the steward lasciviously told her that the price had gone up and that she would have to pay extra back in his quarters, she kept her eyes upward and thought of her family. She thought of her sisters and her frail mother. She thought of how they wouldn’t survive the disease that was blazing through their friends, their cousins and uncles. She thanked her ancestors that the steward had used protection.
Mbao may have been young, still a child by most people’s standards at 18, but she was the eldest and when her father passed away from the sickness he gave Mbao’s mother, Mbao was forced to grow up and grow up quickly. She knew that the world wasn’t kind to girls unless they opened up their legs. She knew that she would always be helpless and weak in most people’s eyes and that she would need to be savage and cold to protect and provide for her family. Mbao also knew when to choose her battles.

And so the ship steward she had bribed with her body had told her firmly to get dressed and be at the launch pad early the next morning before the sun rose.

Mbao rushed home to tell her family the good news and bursting through the doorway of their hut, her words died on her tongue when she saw the downcast gazes of her sisters, Kasuba and Nama. They wordlessly handed her twin slips from the nearby clinic and the ground slid from under Mbao’s feet.

Mbao knew her sisters were prone to flights of fancy and couldn’t resist the urge to flutter their eyelashes at the village boys. Mbao sometimes wished that she had the same luxury. But she thought that they would at least have the common sense to...

It didn’t matter. Not anymore.

As de facto matriarch, Mbao tried not to break any skin when she took her father’s cracked leather belt to her sisters. She tried not to put too much rage behind her swings and she grit her teeth against the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes.
Mbao only managed to feel bad when they were all safely sequestered in the cargo bay of the ship. It wasn’t the end of the world. There may be new tech, new medicine out there. New magic even.

Mbao’s mother had been a diligent student of the missionaries and thought that magic was an affront to God. And in some ways it was. If God was benevolent and giving, then magic was ambivalent and always got what it was owed at the end. It always bit back.

And so, once they were established on this strange rock floating in space, Mbao ventured out to hunt. She had procured a pair of heat signature goggles that helped her spot the animals that had adapted to remain hidden in the bright moonlight and a plasma-edged spear. She had also secretly performed the right charms and rituals to protect herself from any apex predators hoping that the ancestors would see her so many light years away. As always, she kept her charms small and perfunctory in an effort to make sure that she owed her magic as little as possible. For the first time in years, she was nervous before a hunt.

Mbao would have held off on the hunt longer but they needed food. Her sisters had their medication but it was no good if they had no food. Why had they fled their home world to avoid wasting away from the disease just to waste away from hunger on this backwards and backwoods planet? The government provided rations for the colonists – a word Mbao hated, especially when used in reference to her – but it wasn’t enough. Lord knows that everyone was too afraid to hunt and too entitled to learn how to farm the alien terra firma.

The irony was the transplantation of a Hunter’s Guild. A large group of young, strapping men that had dedicated themselves to the craft, the art of hunting. They believed only in brute strength
and savagery, the very epitome of hot-blooded males. They strutted around the village like they had subdued Ongamika in its strange fullness and were the kings thereof. When in reality they’d never ventured into the bush, insisting that they were training and growing strong for a bountiful hunt. But they were just as scared as everyone else. Mbao hated them.

She remembered approaching the Guild’s hut in the centre of the village. The hut was the biggest in the village, all roads leading to it like veins to a fat and malignant tumour. Mbao had stared at the building that seemed to loom over her threateningly. She had hoped to join the Guild.

Mbao had no interest in the feigned prestige of the Guild. She wanted to join purely for the practical reason of it being safer to hunt in groups. She had briefly considered that they might have something to teach her. But once she stepped into the hut and saw the muscle-bound forms of the men, no, boys, reclining as they luxuriously knocked back munkoyo, Mbao figured that they could probably learn more from her in five minutes than they had in the year they’d been on their new celestial home.

“I want to join you,” Mbao said, her chin tilted up defiantly at Muna, leader of the Guild and self-appointed chief of the settlers. He was no chief, he was a glorified school bully and nothing more.

The surrounding boys laughed uproariously, slapping their thighs and pointing at her mockingly. Mbao spotted a bow nearby that had been improperly strung and she scowled. Yeah. She was the laughing stock.

“I want to hunt,” Mbao said firmly, tone flat and unflinching.
“You? Hunt?” Muna asked incredulously. “You’re a girl! A thin, weak one at that.”
“I’m fast and quiet and much stronger than I look,” Mbao said, teeth grinding. “I go unseen at night...”
“Not surprising with skin that dark!” Muna scoffed and he was met with more raucous laughter.

Mbao glared at him.

“Look, I’m not trying to be mean,” Muna said seriously and Mbao stifled a scoff. “I know your family’s situation. You want to provide for your mother and sisters. Awe, who am I to begrudge you that? But I’m telling you as an elder, your best choice is to marry a rich young man that can take care of you and your family. I’m sure one of my boys would be willing to do you that favour.”

He said the last part with a slight smirk and Mbao nearly buried her dagger in his smug face.
“Hm,” Mbao huffed in bitter amusement. “Provide? How can any of you provide when you’re too afraid to go into the bush?”

Muna’s face contorted in anger but Mbao was already storming out, almost weightless on the wings of rage.

Mbao didn’t think her parting words would result in anything past the odd dirty look here and there and a happy spinsterhood but she was proven wrong when one of Muna’s boys ventured into the bush, taking Mbao’s words as a personal challenge.

No corpse was ever found. But sometimes, when the night was long and silent, they heard his voice on the wind. But it was ... wrong.
It was distorted and full of static like it was coming from an old radio far, far away.

Mbao, for the first time in years, was afraid. But she needed to hunt.
Mbao was finally in the tall grass of the savannah her plasma spear humming comfortingly in her hand. The grass was especially blue in the bright moonlight. She slipped her heat signature goggles on and allowed herself to adjust to them before kneeling down and drawing a rune into the soil. It glowed yellow for a moment before Mbao was engulfed in a strange warmth, insurance that she would return to that point. In what condition, she didn’t know. So she pressed forward into ominous and bony trees.

Her footfalls were light and her breath was shallow. One wouldn’t even know she was there unless they looked closely; part of it being her charms, part of it just being her nature as a huntress. Soon, she heard the snapping of a twig nearby and she turned her head in the direction of the sound. Nothing.

Mbao walked deeper into the trees, fear creeping up her spine at the unrecognisable terrain before her. She remembered why she was doing it, who she was doing it for and kept going. Another branch snapped nearby again and Mbao whipped in the direction of the sound again, her hand tightening on her spear. Her goggles didn’t pick up anything but Mbao had the distinct feeling of being watched. Like she was the one being hunted. She still pressed forward.

When another branch snapped nearby, Mbao felt, no she knew, that she was being mocked, being toyed with. The noises were following her and never came from the same direction. Mbao realised this
belatedly and she knew that she would have to cast a pretty powerful spell to find her way back. If she survived.

“Show yourself!” Mbao growled, holding her spear out, the edges glowing a dangerous red in the dim light.

Mbao hadn’t expected anything to happen, hoping that her defensive stance would scare away whoever or whatever was toying with her. But her grip on her spear faltered when from behind a thin, bone-white tree, a man stepped out. At least it looked like a man. Mbao’s goggles registered no heat from the man and she turned them off to see the person clearly.

The being, the thing, was shaped like a man, had a face like a man but there were several things that were just off. Its eyes were a little too big for its face, its nose flat with slits like a snake. Its fingers were tipped with dangerous claws and the fingers were a little too long. Its skin was pale, bone-white, like the surrounding trees and its thin, tall body made Mbao wonder if she was just looking at a tree and hallucinating. Mbao lunged warningly at the creature.

It didn’t flinch.

Mbao was breathing heavily at that point, unsure what this thing in a person suit was. Unsure of what it wanted from her, of why it was toying with her.

“Ru-run,” the creature, croaked. Its voice was a distorted unholy mockery of a human voice. Like it was embellished with static. It sounded like the boy... the boy who’d gone missing.

“What?” Mbao asked incredulously, chest heaving as she panted in fear and confusion.
“Ruuuun,” the creature wailed and its body loped forward, more quickly than Mbao thought it could move, limbs weirdly limp and stiff all at once.

And so Mbao turned and ran, her feet flying over leaves and branches, barely even touching them. She didn’t know where she was going and she didn’t know if the creature was right behind her or not. All she knew was that she had to get away.

The night was unnaturally silent and suddenly as dark as the darkest night on earth. She felt claustrophobic.

It was only when her legs started to burn with exertion and her lungs felt like they were bursting did she realise that she couldn’t hear anything behind her. It was only when the sweat was pouring down her skin did she realise that there was no noise besides her own panicked breathing.

And then a cold solid mass crashed into her back, knocking the breath out of her and her body to the ground.

It was heavy on top of her, bearing down relentlessly as it pressed her into the dirt. White coloured the edges of Mbao’s vision. She was panting heavily as she struggled fruitlessly beneath the unnaturally heavy creature.

“Witch,” the creature wailed into Mbao’s ear.

“No,” Mbao shouted, hyperventilating. “I’m not! I’m not! I’m not!”

Mbao didn’t know why she was pleading with the creature. Fear and the cloying smell of her own mortality was driving her to desperation. She knew in her heart of hearts that this creature was a mere facsimile of humanity. It was a poor imitation of a human
with only one base urge: consumption. It had no morals to appeal to and it would have no remorse when it took her into itself and would only be left with hunger once again.

“Witch... meat,” the creature croaked hungrily. Its breath fanned across her neck, cold as the grave and smelling of it too.

Mbao’s face was wet with tears and sweat, the dirt turning to mud on her face. She thought of her mother; frail and on death’s door, ushered into the next life by the sound of her eldest daughter’s corrupted and distorted voice at night. She thought of her sisters. Her sisters who were too kind and too soft for any world and who would waste away into nothingness. Mbao wept. In anger, in sadness, in fear. She wept.

And through her tears, she saw just to her right, glowing dangerously, her plasma-edged spear. It was just an arm’s reach if she could just get her arm out...

The creature suddenly flipped Mbao onto her back, a bony and cold hand pinning her down by her throat, and its claws digging into the sensitive skin. Mbao clawed at the hand to no avail, her nails chipping against the creature’s thick and hard skin. The creature suddenly straightened slightly where it was crouching over her and tilted its head back before giving a bone-chilling sound that seemed a cross between a croak and a screech.

Mbao felt the sound more than she heard it, deep in her gut, and deep in her bones. It shook her from the inside out until she felt like her teeth were about to rattle out of her skull. It was then that she realised that her body was convulsing, spasming in the creature’s grasp uncontrollably.
And then pain.

Scorching and blinding pain, as though her soul was trying to escape its mortal prison. But instead of her soul escaping her body, it was blood. Blood coming in thick and painful rivulets from her mouth, her eyes and her ears, floating out of her into the creature’s gaping maw. The creature gulped it down croaking in satisfaction, closing its too wide eyes.

No!
Convulsing still and almost blind with pain, Mbao was only aware of the spear and the anger that would allow her to use it. With shaking hands, Mbao drew a rune in the dirt, her finger wet with her own blood. It was a dangerous rune. A bargaining rune. A rune that said that Mbao would spill blood itself if only she could live, just one more day.

And then using her own convulsions, Mbao bucked and darted her arm out to grab her spear, seemingly forgotten in the dirt.

And like any hunter worth their salt, she did not falter, she did not waver. She simply swung her spear, no finesse or skill, and buried her spear in the creature’s neck in a flash of bright red light. And the creature lurched away with a screech, its far too human hand stifling the flow of viscous black blood from its neck and failing. The creature fell to its knees and Mbao understood that as monstrous and corrupt as this creature was, it was still flesh and bone.

Mbao now weak with blood loss and exhaustion got to her feet. She stumbled slightly but held fast to her spear, her rage flowing freely in the place of blood. Mbao pressed a pad on the side of her spear to extend the tip into a blade, the sides glowing and humming their signature, dangerous red. Perhaps Mbao was seeing things as
weak as she was but for a split second, she swore that she saw an expression of fear flash across the creature’s face.

Mbao was kind though. She beheaded it quickly, her blade cauterising the wound instantly. The creature’s head fell to the forest floor with a soft thud.

She bled the creature dry over her rune and a quiet hum sounded in her mind. Her debt was paid. This time. The hum in her mind telling her that there was more blood to be spilt still, blacker and viler as well.

She dragged its corpse back to the village and stood in the town square, right in front of the Hunter’s Guild. In front of Muna and his boys. And she spoke, her voice strong though her body was weak, her meticulously wrapped *chitenge* stained with her own blood and black splatters of the creature’s blood.

“This is what waits for you out there,” she said, holding up the creature’s head. “I know there are more out there and worse. I know they eat our flesh and drink our blood.”

Stunned and fearful faces stared back at her, lost for words at the sight of her bloody and exhausted but holding up the creature’s head, blankly staring at the ground, like a trophy.

“But I will hunt for you,” Mbao intoned. “I will keep you safe.”

Relief seemed to pass through the crowd in waves, sighs and ‘Praise Gods’ floating up amongst the throng.

Mbao knew that better than anyone, better than anyone *should* know. But regardless, the price would feed her family and the price would keep her village safe.
“For a price,” Mbao finished and the crowd became resentful before they became resigned. “Blood or milk, everything comes at a price.”

There was no need or time to negotiate. Mbao would need to rest and grow stronger and faster to outrun the things that dwelt in the pseudo-darkness.

Then it was time to hunt again.
GIVER OF LIFE
Lloyd Mazivarimwe (Zimbabwe)

Somewhere in the Republic of Uzumba, 2 hours earlier...

“Comrades, the end is nigh. The moment of reckoning is upon us. Uzumba has taken food from your mouths and your children’s. Uzumba has snuffed out the light in your homes, and has endangered the mere existence of a people! Just look at the giver of life, the Victoria Falls. One of the natural wonders of the world but now just a pitiful trickle! From it, generations have lived and from it, generations will continue to live, if not for Uzumba. It is thus upon us – as sons and daughters of the soil – to fight for our survival and the right to live. To have dominion over the earth as well as enjoy its fruits. Long live the Monomotapa Kingdom! This war is like no other. Remember why? As Winston Churchill once said, ‘Let us brace ourselves to our duties’, and so bear ourselves that, if the Monomotapa Kingdom lasts for a thousand years, men will still say this was our finest hour!” roars Colonel Bhimba as he rallies his special mission.

National Patriotic Movement Rally, Uzumba Unity Square Park, 23rd October 2050...

“History has continually shown that he who dares wins. As we take each day, uncertain of what the day will bring, you can rest assured knowing that I will put your interests first and fight for you,” His Excellency, Cole Magingo vows.
“Magingo! Magingo! Magingo!”
The emotionally charged-up crowd chants and after a moment, His Excellency raises his hand to a duly obliging gathering and continues, “A water crisis ravages much of the world, but God has been kind to us. It is, therefore, squarely upon Uzumba – a sovereign nation – to do as she pleases with her abundant water and natural resources. Let it be known to all our neighbours and the international community that the Republic of Uzumba will not be intimidated nor will she accept anything that impinges upon her sovereignty. Uzumba shall never be a colony again!”
The crowd bursts into songs of valour and tribute, glorifying Magingo and then out of the blue, Boom! Boom! Boom!
“What’s happening?” Magingo shouts.
Boom! Boom!
There is commotion, a stampede and within seconds blood everywhere.
“I can’t see, help, somebody!” someone shouts.
“My leg, help! I can’t move,” another cries out while trapped in the rubble as many others run from all directions to all directions.
“What’s going on?”
Sirens start to wail from a distance. I cannot shake off the ring in my ear from the high-pitched deafening sound of another blast and indiscriminate shooting.
‘Is this an assassination? Where is the President?’ I wonder, dazed and trapped inside an eruption of blindingly and suffocating smoke from the explosion.
“I can’t breathe!”
I pass out.
3 months later...

‘100 days have already passed!’ I thought to myself as I sat gazing at the Wooden Tablet inscribed: African Union’s Chair for Year 2051. I had solemnly sworn to faithfully execute the duties of the Office of the President of the Republic of Uzumba and to give the very best of my ability, in preserving, protecting and defending our hallowed Constitution. But as I stared at the Wooden Tablet, my Africanness demanded that I extend the duty of care towards my fellow Africans. More so, Uzumba had assumed the African Union’s Chairship – a development that aggravated already fraught circumstances of seemingly conflictual interests.

“Is His Excellency Magingo really gone!”

It may have been three months since 23rd October but I was still in disbelief that my mentor, brother and friend was no longer with us. Boom! Another explosion shakes the foundations of the City of Hope, again. It had been the third attack in a fortnight and the capital had indeed become Allepo.

The tales of cruelty and unconscionable crimes committed along the Zambezi – which some perceived to be retaliatory and justified – were often dismissed as fake news but people close to General Ganguly and his nemesis, Colonel Bhimba could not put such savagery beyond them. Abject poverty had turned many southern Africans into illegal immigrants; with millions flocking into the resource-rich Uzumba and thereby sparking dormant xenophobic attitudes amongst the locals. Brutal beatings, torchings and the tossing of immigrants into the crocodile-infested parts of the Zambezi had become familiar horror tales.

“So it takes very little to straddle the line between savagery and civility, just as depicted in the novel Lord of the Flies;’ I brood over with a chilling realisation that humans and animals may not be
different after all. If only Magingo had hearkened, perhaps, he could still be alive. General Ganguly and his cabal wielded too much influence on the Republic and had led the President and country on a dangerous slippery slope. But can you blame anyone for putting their country first in such times, I ponder! The world, as we know it, has changed so much so that even the optimists lack the merest of hope that we will ever get back our world.

Starvation, frequent droughts, environmental degradation and high mortality rates caused or worsened by climate change has left the Southern African Development Community teetering on the brink of its worst humanitarian crisis. To compound the crises, decades of high population growth patterns had made for a deadly scramble for resources, sparking tribalism, civil wars, terrorism and interstate wars which threaten to wipe-off everyone in the region and reverse the hard-earned socio-economic gains of the past decades. Climate scientists long beseeched the world to heed once upon a time. I blame past generations for not acting sooner. Why couldn’t they act! Isn’t the Brundtland Report written in 1987? They talked about posterity then, yet nothing was done to protect us! Such a selfish lot!

Much of the world has gone into a panic mode, and regional water instruments are being scorned resulting in the utter disregard of principles for equitable and reasonable utilisation of shared water resources and more importantly the duty not to cause significant transboundary harm. Construction of several dams and other projects is largely being done without any notification procedures – a situation that has adversely affected lower riparian states and triggered a chain reaction of reprisals and violence. The arid Kingdom of Monomotapa – heavily reliant on the waters for
hydropower generation and irrigation – has suffered the most from the unilateral diversion of the waters up-stream. ‘I am the President and must do something promptly,’ I muse as I sip a Bells whisky.

The assassination of Magingo has escalated tensions and strained relations with the Monomotapa Kingdom and anarchists, like General Ganguly, look to exploit the situation for political gain. I had ignored whispers within the corridors of power that the feared General was planning a *coup de tat*, but I could no longer deny the inevitable. He had led rebellious troops into avenging the assassination of Magingo across the borders, despite vehement denials by the Monomotapa Kingdom of their involvement in the 23rd October events.

“Had I moved to retaliate Magingo’s assassination, I would have lost the backing of the international community. We need the international community, especially for the Water Peace Accord,” I argue my rationale for restraint to Mazhindu, my top Aide.

“But your Excellency, the optics won’t look good; you will be perceived as weak and will lose the backing of some of Magingo’s powerful followers who already disregard your presidency on the basis that you are merely an unelected Vice President who assumed Office by chance. They are watching and waiting to see if you are deserving,” Mazhindu retorts without mincing his words.

Such was my dilemma, yet a hesitancy that allowed the Machiavellian General to swoop in for glory and inch a step closer to the throne.

To arrest the enduring crisis, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 678 on the deployment of peacekeepers and adopted a slew of other measures aimed at restoring peace and stability in the region. The conclusion of the Water Peace Accord is fundamental to the restoration of stability but Magingo, under the influence of
General Ganguly, had frustrated this process. This Accord, amongst other measures, paves the way for huge grants meant to rebuild the City of Hope as well as the lifting of sanctions whose crippling effect has not spared Uzumba’s economy in the slightest. As I listened to the news later that day, CNN’s Amira – a correspondent for the region reported that an Africa Development Bank’s study found that, “If the water crisis is not averted, 10 million more people would fall into poverty and that without the Zambezi River, arid countries like the Monomotapa Kingdom and the Kivhuku Republic face an uncertain future.”

I do not want their blood on my hands.

‘Help me God,’ I recall the last words of my oath as I sat there, deep in thought, having a faith crisis and wondering about the existence of God.

“Trust Him more and He will show you the way,” Devine offers reassuring words with her gentle yet authoritative voice. I had always wondered if the First Lady could read my thoughts.

“But how do I heal a nation, a region so broken when I am not even sure I will still have a job tomorrow?” I ask, rhetorically. With her usual calmness and a tender hand on my right shoulder, retorts that, “Hope is and will always be alive.” Nonchalant it seemed, yet so invigorating though only for a moment as my thoughts snappishly shift back to a nation, a region on the precipice of plunging into the abyss of full-blooded violence, lawlessness and economic ruin.

The far-right groups have polarised the region; with General Ganguly ramping up his nationalist populism and pandering to the worst instincts of the peoples of Uzumba. While engrossed in thought, I hear heavy panting from a distance, with each step drawing ever closer, “Your Excellency! Your Excellency! We have just received intel from the UN Peacekeeping Mission that General
Ganguly has perished in a battle at the Victoria Falls,” Mazhindu barges in shouting.
“And hundreds of women and children are some of the casualties... and my apologies for barging in like that President Guvheya,” he continued. His tone betrayed sadness, incredulity as well as relief. I just stood there, motionless, perplexed and as paradoxically overwhelmed by a pang of suffocating guilt, yet, lifted by a seemingly new lease of life. “I knew in my heart of hearts I could have done something to avert the situation; rather, I left General Ganguly to run amok and escalate an already difficult situation. That aside, I now could focus on leading and healing this country as a leader should,” I needed to act!

_African Union Headquarters, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: AU Special Summit, 31st September 2051_

“Your Majesties,
Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,
Your Excellency, Ms Ivy Eyram Williams, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.
As Chair to the African Union and President of the Republic of Uzumba, I extend to you my warmest regards on the occasion of our special and hastily convened AU Summit. There is a dark cloud hanging over our regions, our nations and communities and it is in such difficult unprecedented times that we gather here for the preservation of humanity. Fellow Africans and citizens of the world, three decades ago, the Global Commission on Adaptation indicated in its ‘Adapt Now’ Report that, ‘Climate change will stifle agricultural produce by 30%, increase the number of people lacking sufficient water, at least for a month, from 3.6 million to 5 billion as well as drive about 100 million people in the developing world into poverty by 2050.’
Ladies and gentleman, our plight is even grimmer! Our world is crumbling right before us and instead of joining hands with fellow brethren, we fight amongst ourselves, reversing the manifold achievements of our founding fathers. In the decades past, some believed climate change was a hoax but we have now witnessed the sheer devastation caused by this monster. Therefore, as we painfully and particularly look back to the events of the past two years that have brought us here today, let us take heed of the three most important lessons: one, cooperation, two, cooperation and three, cooperation. With billions of people experiencing dire water shortages and now awakening to the centrality of water for the continued survival of our people; anxiety, terror and panic gripped most of us, if not all. With all rationality and ubuntuism cast aside, our world went back to the dark ages, a time when the doctrine of absolute territorial sovereignty – championed by the then US Attorney General, Judson Harmon – was relied upon for disregarding the other. As it was then, it is so today with transboundary water conflicts ubiquitous. It is trite that without equitable and reasonable utilisation of the Zambezi River as well as any other transboundary waters across Africa, violence will always grip our regions. History will judge us for innocent lives lost, and rightly so. Nevertheless, these unfortunate events provide a timely reminder of the paramount importance of water resources and the urgent need for sustainable utilisation. More so, the need for cooperation in the sustainable utilisation of this precious resource thereof. Water may have caused conflict in times past, but water can and shall now be the catalyst to foster closer cooperation between states.

As we gather here to conclude the Water Peace Accord, I would like, on behalf of the Republic of Uzumba, to regrettably acknowledge and take responsibility for our role in exacerbating the water and climate change crisis and consequent atrocities of Victoria Falls and
many other places where innocent lives were lost. More importantly, we offer our utmost and sincere apologies to affected families and communities. I, therefore, wish to assure you of the full cooperation of Uzumba as well as reaffirming our respect for international law, regional water agreements as well as the rightful and important role of the SADC, AU and UN in the management of issues affecting international peace and security. Water is one such matter. As the dark cloud dissipates and clear skies return, let us all remember the importance of sustainable and integrated management of water resources for water is indeed the Giver of life!”

I conclude to rousing applause; shake hands and embrace His Excellency, Yegon Kipkoach of the Monomotapa Kingdom in a show of solidarity as he stepped to the podium. “Long live Africa!” we both shout and the entire auditorium quickly reverberates as the rest of the African leaders and heads of state and government enthusiastically cry out, “Long live Africa!”
The village was at peace and beautiful, until things fell apart. Previously, the people lived in harmony, cultivated their farms and fed the sick and the aged who couldn’t work. From their hard work, the farmers contributed money to put up a school and clinic in the village. Though the facilities were not impressive, they were happy to give their children a better life. The kind of life that had eluded them when they were growing up. The farmers made the village a haven for everyone until illegal mining activities ruined the beautiful rhythm that existed among the people.

The clean river that once served as a source of water for the villagers has been polluted by the miners. With all the vegetation gone, the land became bare, almost like a football pitch which couldn’t support agriculture. Water became scarce and the villagers had to walk for miles before they could bring a pot of water home for their chores.

Life became unbearable for the village folk. They couldn’t provide for their children as they used to. Indeed, it is true when they say ‘Where there’s gold, there’s poverty’. This adage was a true description of Kyebiase village where people had lost their source of livelihoods due to the work of the miners. The chief who could have helped the farmers get their ancestral lands back had turned against his own people and had joined the course of the foreigners who were illegally mining gold on their lands while rendering the farmers in poverty.
The chief’s son, Amoako, also amassed money from the mining at the expense of the farmers. His father’s alliance with the foreigners broke the peaceful bond that existed in the village. The farmers were agitated and protested every day to have the chief change his decision but none of the numerous protests brought the desired result. The miners continued to destroy their farms and polluted the river.

What infuriated the farmers most about the miners was the Tuesday ritual. Every Tuesday, a white goat was killed to the gods to help the miners get plenty of gold. The village folk hated the ritual because they were Christians and didn’t want to have anything to do with pagan rituals. They were worried that God would unleash His anger on the village. But their concerns and distress couldn’t bring any significant change.

The farmers once again marched to the palace in their red attire. They had a lengthy conversation with the chief who promised, as always, to talk with the miners not to encroach on their farms or pollute the river. Although the chief sounded convincing that afternoon, some farmers didn’t believe that the situation would change. The chief had been promising to talk to the miners but he never did and the situation was worsening.

Adjoa, one of the farmers who have suffered severely from the miners, told the chief that she wanted to sell her farm to the miners. The chief asked her to go back to the palace after two days so that they could sign the necessary documentation for payment to be made.

After leaving the palace, Kyei, the leader of the farmers confronted Adjoa for going against the plan.
“How do we fight for our farms when our own leader has turned against us? I don’t see anything changing, that is why I will sell my farm and buy another land and start over again,” Adjoa said.

“Start over you say! You know how difficult it is to start a new farm. Let’s fight for what is ours. We can win this when we are united,” Kyei appealed.

“We have already lost the land. I just want to make something from it before I lose everything. I am sorry, I can’t continue with this fruitless protest. My mind is made up. I will sell my farm to the chief.”

Adjoa sold her cocoa farm to the chief and used part of the money to buy a new piece of land. She planted cassava in her new farm. Meanwhile, the other farmers never got any help from the chief. Instead it was promise after promise.

Every day the cocoa, yam and plantain farms were destroyed by the miners in their quest to search for gold. No farmer dared to stand in the way of the miners. They were practically untouchable in Kyebiase.

The farmers grew tired of how they were treated on their own lands so they visited the palace again, this time to sell the farms since the miners were destroying their crops with poisonous chemicals. After hours of negotiation, the chief agreed to buy the farms. The farmers received their monies as promised. They used the money to venture into different businesses such as selling of water, groceries and cooked food.

The village folk soon adapted to their new life. After a few months, the government banned mining in Kyebiase. There was jubilation in the village as the mining activities had affected even their health. The women marched to the chief’s house dancing and singing. That night the chief did not come out of his house.
The next day, the military and police officers were deployed into the village to arrest the people who had been engaged in the illegal mining. They arrested the chief and some of the foreigners who were attempting to run from the palace. The people celebrated the arrest and followed them to the police station. However, by evening the people were shocked to see the chief back at the palace.

Amoako was one of the miners who managed to escape and had fled to Accra to start his life over again. He was excited and looking forward to the new opportunities in the city. He was visiting PK, one of his mining friends who was now working in the city as a mini-bus driver. PK used to work with Amoako at the mines but he stopped after he had made enough money to buy himself a car to start a transport business.

While in a bus to Accra, Amoako’s thoughts drifted back to Kyebiase. He thought of his wages that he couldn’t take from the foreign masters because of the ambush. He had planned to invest that money in PK’s transport business so that he could buy another car.

After alighting from the bus, Amoako clutched his bag tightly as he dialed PK’s number. He spoke briefly with PK then sat on a nearby bench. After hours of waiting, PK arrived. They exchange pleasantries and drove home. Amoako narrated how security officers raided the mining field.

“We had heard the rumours that the security officers would come but we were not worried because we always gave them money. But that day was different. They were hostile. Some of the workers were washing the minerals in the river while others were digging up new grounds. I was in one of the new holes when I heard a sound like horses racing on the field. My heart nearly stopped beating, I thought the pit was going to collapse on me. After some
time, the noise and struggling ceased. I peeped out and saw the military cars leaving the site. I quickly left the site, took my clothes and ran away,” Amoako narrated.

“You were lucky my friend. I pity those who were arrested. They are in big trouble. So how about the gold, did the military take that?” PK asked.

“They took everything we had that day, the money and the machines,” Amoako answered.

When they got to the house, PK showed him around. He took him to the public toilet and bathhouse. They also went to the beach, which was not far from where the public toilet was situated.

“This place smells badly.”

“Yes it does. Some people do not like to use the public toilet so they have turned the shore into a toilet. We also dispose of our garbage here,” PK elaborated

“There’s something you must know about Amoako. Since you will be staying with me until you rent your own apartment, we will have to share the rent and the light bills,” PK said.

Amoako agreed to the conditions of his friend and promised to honour his part of the deal for as long as he stayed with him. He expressed his gratitude to his friend for the accommodation he had offered him.

After PK and Amoako had taken their bath, they went to a ‘chop bar’, which is a local restaurant, for a bowl of kenkey and fish.

One day turned into many days and Amaoko soon became acquainted with the city. One evening, PK informed Amaoko that
he could start working as his conductor the next day. Amaoko was overjoyed. At least he would have a job.

After some days of trial and error, Amoako soon mastered the affairs on the street. He was full of joy whenever he had a full set of passengers.

Life in Accra was good for Amoako. He saved some money and occasionally sent some to his father in the village. Everything seemed to be working for him and he was glad that he had come to the city despite his previous apprehension.

One afternoon, when Amoako was busy taking money from the passengers in the car, he heard them talk about Coronavirus which was affecting several people in Europe and Asia. He joined the conversation and teased that, the virus couldn’t affect Ghanaians, since God himself was a Ghanaian. The passengers burst into laughter. The conversation in the car that afternoon was centred on the new virus. Many of the passengers boldly argued that, the virus couldn’t survive in Africa. Some made strong points based on religious beliefs and others doubted the existence of the virus. Finally, a man in transparent medical glasses who had been quiet for most of the journey, decided to speak up.

“\textbf{It will definitely come to Africa. It started in China and it will soon be our turn because Africa like China is overpopulated. This virus will kill many people in the process reducing the population of the world.}”

The car was silent for a moment until a woman at the front seat turned to the direction of the man to challenge him.
“We serve a living God. The Bible says in Isaiah 54: 17 that no weapon formed against us shall prosper.”

The woman prayed in tongues for a moment, and there was total silence in the car. No passenger said a word again.

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Tension was mounting in the city and everyone was afraid. Anybody who exhibited signs such as cough or runny nose was perceived to have the virus and was discriminated against.

Accra kept recording new COVID-19 cases almost every day. A virus that they once believed couldn’t affect black people was now at their doorstep. They feared for their lives, and for the first time, they were forbidden to hug or shake hands but rather wear nose masks so that they could prevent the spread of the virus.

Despite all these measures, COVID-19 cases kept increasing. The government ordered for the number of passengers to be reduced in cars to ensure proper social distancing. This directive affected Amoako and PK. The regular thirteen passengers were reduced to eight. Amoako’s daily pay was reduced. He couldn’t save or send money to his father anymore.

For fear of the virus spreading to other parts of the country, the government imposed a partial lockdown in the city. People were told to work from home, markets were shut down, schools and religious centres were closed as well. Amoako and PK could no longer go to work. They were gradually losing their savings and that terrified them.

City life became insufferable for Amoako. He had spent most of his savings on food and had little to sustain him and PK. Unsure of where their next meal would come from in the next few weeks,
PK decided to go back to Kyebiase. He was however, afraid that he might be caught and punished by the security officers who had been deployed to ensure that people stayed in their homes.

He devised a plan. He went to a drug store and bought a bandage. He tied his left hand as if he had been injured. He told Amoako that was his plan to get out of the city before hunger killed him. He went to the bus station with excuses of been injured and made it home.

That night, Amoako couldn’t sleep. Thoughts of how to survive the lockdown kept running in his mind. He had no family or friend to run to if he was hungry or sick. How to pay for electricity was also a puzzle for him since he wasn’t benefiting from the government’s free light and water.

In the morning, he heard that some of his bus conductor friends were planning to escape the city at night. They had learned that at night, some of the security personnel were not at post. He went to see his friends and they paid the driver a visit. They inquired from the driver the amount to be paid. Amoako was alarmed when he was told how much he was going to pay. He pleaded for some discount but the driver argued that, his life was at risk so he wouldn’t take anything less.

Amoako quickly came back home, took his mobile phone to a porridge seller and narrated his plight to her and begged her to purchase his phone. The woman agreed to buy the phone.

Deep in the night, Amoako picked up his bag and left for the driver’s house. To his shock, the mini-bus was full to its capacity. Most of the passengers were women and children and none of them wore nose masks. He joined them and they drove off.
Amoako was happy that he was heading back home. He knew that hunger would have killed him if he had stayed. After all, there was no place like home. Throughout the night on the road, they didn’t meet any security personnel.

When he got to Kyebiase, he met PK and some of his friends who had returned from the city as well. They spoke briefly about the effects of the virus such as loss of jobs. Amoako bid them farewell and decided to go and check on his bar before going home. To his horror, the wooden structure had been brought down and windows torn apart. Tears filled his eyes as he stood and gazed at his last hope. He sadly headed home where he was also greeted with another piece of sad news. His father, the chief, was sick. He was taken ill after Kusi, one of the returnees from the city, visited him.

The chief’s condition worsened and Amoako rushed him to the clinic. They both tested positive for Coronavirus. They were quarantined in the clinic. Weeks later, Amoako was declared negative of COVID-19 but his father had no such luck and he passed away. That evening, the chief was buried and no funeral was held for him.
The road lay clear that day. A stretch of tarmac across the fields of the Kenyan savannah. A herd of zebras grazed gracefully as the sun set below the horizon. The orange glow of the African sky caressed the animals, silhouetting them and creating a great picture. One with nature. This is what Almasi truly loved. His head resting on his knee, he gazed into the horizon. Something was missing. Perhaps the blue strokes of paint on his yellow shirt provoked the thought. Maybe he just loved the colour blue such that no picture was ever complete without it.

“Look Almasi!” his mother’s beautiful voice stole into his thoughts. He turned his head towards her. She was seated at the front passenger seat next to his father. “The mountains. I know you love the mountains.”

Almasi’s face brightened with excitement. He rushed to move to the other side of the back seat but the buckle held him back. There was no way this was keeping him from seeing the mountains. He unbuckled the seatbelt and reached for the window raiser but it was broken. It had always been broken. Still, this made him frown. Then the thought came. He leaned forward to look through his mother’s window. He smiled as he looked at the blueish horizon. The way the forest carpeted the mountain gave him great joy. Now, this is what was missing, he thought to himself. He wished the two horizons could join as one. That would create the perfect picture. Perhaps that was his role as a painter. To make a great picture, perfect.
“Careful now!” his father warned as he changed up the gear bringing his attention back. “We do not want you to catch the flu.”

Almasi had not realised that his mother had been coughing into a handkerchief. He leaned back to his seat and had one last look at the blue horizon through his dusty window. After all, the picture was in his head.

Almasi’s father turned on the radio. He twiddled with the radio knob and found the right channel. He used another knob to adjust the volume. His face glowed revealing his love for the song. He tapped the steering wheel to its rhythm as the lyrics filled the car. Setting his cloth cap upright on his head, he stole a glance at his wife as she leaned against the side window. She was beautiful. Sadly, the smile on his face turned into a frown as she let out a dry cough.

“It must be the cold,” he said as he raised his window.

“Don’t worry honey, we are almost there.”

“Stop! They said not to stay in a closed room.”

“But honey...”

She let out another cough. He decided not to argue with her but to let her rest. The news was on. A coup had taken root all over the country and no one was allowed to be outside after sunset. As they continued driving along the road, they saw a crowd of people up ahead. They carried banners over their heads. Some held torches of fire, others machetes and others held out spears. Almasi moved to the other side of the back seat to have a better look at the mob as they drove through it. He squinted his eyes trying to read what the banners said.

“Why would they be out at this time?” Almasi asked.

“Stop looking at them!” His father’s tone became razor sharp. “We don’t want to attract unnecessary attention.”
As he sat back, Almasi saw his father grab his lieutenant badge from the top of the dashboard and throw it under his seat. His mother kept her face low as she passed him a cap.

“Buckle up! And put on that cap!”

His father slowed down. The mob started banging the body of their Peugeot Saloon to a rhythm as they sang a song of rebellion to the government. To this family, it felt like time had frozen, fixing them in this uncomfortable situation. Almasi’s father put on a great show of mimicking composure as he drove past the mob. Eventually, it fell behind them.

“Did we lose them?” he asked.

Almasi looked through the rear window as his mother looked to the side-view mirror. They saw the mob carrying on with their protests behind them. They had left the savannah behind and were now in a town. Almasi’s father saw the poster to the Long Drive Hotel on his right side. In a hundred metres, he would take a right turn to get there. It had been a long drive.

“Watch out!” her voice carried a hint of horror.

The car swerved suddenly taking Almasi by shock. First, it was to the left then to the right and then to a halt.

“We didn’t hit them, did we?” she asked frantically, only no one had the answer. They all fell into silence. Looking through the rear-view mirror proved futile.

He put the handbrake on and unlocked his door. For a moment he stopped to think. Could this be a trap? Should he just drive on? No. That’s not the man he was. And besides, what would the two people he cherished most in his life think of him? He opened the door and got out.

“A...are you okay?” he paused and listened. “We... we didn’t mean to do that.”
With some of the street lights broken, the road was barely lit. In the darkness, he saw two human figures getting up from the road. These were dangerous times and no one could be trusted. It was enough to see them unhurt. After all, he had counted two people as he swerved to avoid the accident. He got back into the car and drove off, disappearing into a curve along the road behind some fixtures with makuti roofs.

It was not long before the street fell into a semblance of silence but the ambient sounds of a typical evening. The wind whispered secrets that no one was listening to and the palm trees that graced the terrain swayed in acknowledgement of this. A man stepped from the shadows and into the light. The orange colour of the street lights glistened nicely on his dark skin.

“Is he the one?”

“Yes he is,” another man answered as he too revealed himself from the shadows. His eyes glimmered with accomplishment. He picked a clock pendant with a vintage look and astronomical inscriptions that lay on the tarmac. “The coup has begun. We have no time to waste!” The street lights flickered on as they walked into the curve of the road.

“Mr. I can’t allow you and your family inside. You have disease,” his Indian accent could be heard from the furthest end of the hotel. The reception area was quite cozy with the decor mimicking the Swahili culture in every aspect.

“We’ll pay double,” he persisted.

It had been a long day. All it would take is for this man to hand him a key to any room. That would be enough kindness for one night. And besides, the keys were right in front of him. The excuse that there was no unoccupied room, as the man had earlier insinuated, could not stand.

Mr. Arjun brushed through some keys and picked the one for Room 14. It was the largest.
“Double?”
“Yes. Double.”
Almasi and his mother were outside by the car park. She leaned against the hood of their car as she made a call, while he sat at the back seat with the door open. With his lean body, he maneuvered to the driver’s seat and reached for the badge under it. The lights in the parking area flickered as he stared at it. In the distance, he saw a peculiar tree that stood magnificently. Curiosity got the better of him and he decided to have a closer look at this tree. He closed the door behind him.

A breeze whistled gently as he got closer. He had never seen such a tree before. It had two branches that formed the shape of an antelope’s horns. The trunk was wider than those of all the trees he had ever seen and the bark was thick. He lay his hand on it and felt one with nature.

Almasi’s father was walking towards the car when his wife ended the call.
“They will not allow anyone with the flu back to the city,” she broke the news.
“Well!” he let out a sigh. “That’s a problem for another day. We got a key.”
“And what did we have to sacrifice this time around?”
“We are paying double!” he responded as he walked over to the back seat. “The man went to fix the electrical problem.”
He knocked on the window of the back seat with his knuckle and signaled for Almasi to get out.
“Let’s get our bags and go.”
Almasi was confused. One moment he was by the tree and the next he was in the car. He tossed the badge back under the seat and opened the door, behaving like nothing had happened. His father
opened the front door and picked the badge. They all picked their bags from the boot and walked towards the hotel. Almasi looked at the tree one last time and followed his parents inside.

Efficiency is a necessity when it comes to running a hotel business and Mr. Arjun understood this. Holding a torch, he walked towards a cabin that lay a couple of yards from the main building. He held the torch with his mouth as he unlocked the door and switched on the lights. They flickered. He went for a red generator in the furthest corner of the room and pulled the cord until it roared to life.

“We want to borrow your electricity!” a mysterious voice came from behind him. Mr. Arjun turned from the generator and saw two men standing by the entrance of the cabin.

“We need that electricity,” Yala, the darker of the two men continued. “We must have that electricity!” Lukaku insisted.

The two men read out the inscriptions on the clock which, made it float into the air. Jolts of electricity flashed from the main generator that lay in the middle of the room and got sucked into the clock. The lights flickered violently until the flashing stopped. Mr. Arjun was shocked by all this. The clock slowly fell into Lukaku’s hand and the men turned to leave.

“Wewe ngoja!” Mr. Arjun shouted for the men to stop as he followed them outside. Yala and Lukaku looked at Mr. Arjun straight in the eye and suddenly a past tragedy became a reality. He vividly remembered trying to save his pregnant wife’s life when he rushed her to the hospital only to be denied the services since she was bleeding. This memory felt very real. He fell to his knees and begged for the doctors to take his wife in. Yala and Lukaku left for the reception area and took a key. They followed two men in room service uniform into the hotel.
Almasi sketched the tree to precision on his drawing board. He stroked his pencil on the paper as he drew the crown of the tree. He had sketched the two horn-like branches which, made it resemble the tree in the parking area even more. His parents were in their room. The doorbell rang and the words ‘room service’ came from the other side of the door. He heard a key turning and the door open. Yala and Lukaku got inside pulling a trolley and closed the door behind them. They got busy doing what any other room service personnel would do. They placed the food in the dining area, placed some clean towels by a towel rack and tidied up the room.

“That’s a nice drawing,” Yala said. He looked at the tree and knew he was in the right place. “Do you know the name of this tree?”

“No,” Almasi replied. He had never seen this tree before. To avoid suspicion, Lukaku continued with his activities around the room.

“This is a culturally treasured tree across Africa,” Lukaku said. “Rumour has it that it has special abilities. Ever heard of the Mugumo tree?”

This name rang a bell. He’d heard about the tree before but had never seen it. “I hear that if you go around it seven times you can change your gender?” Almasi announced.

Lukaku and Yala laughed.

“You want to become a woman?”

Almasi turned to Lukaku. “So you also know about the tree?”

“More than you know,” he replied. “We saw you do a little trick earlier tonight. That’s just a taste of what the tree can do. We can show you.”

“But my mother and father...”

“We’ll be back before they miss you.”

Almasi and the two men got out of the room and went by the tree. He could not help but marvel as the horn-like branches appeared to glow in the dark.

“Did you know that trees have souls? The older the tree, the greater the power it holds. We come from a time where the world is falling
apart. Nature is weeping from the destruction that man has caused and to cleanse itself from this, it unleashed the deadly flu. Back at home we call it vudu. The flu that destroys. We are from the future,” Yala explained.

Almasi was bewildered by this. Many thoughts flooded his mind, still, he could not explain how he got in the car when his father knocked on his window.

“Touch the tree,” Yala advised.

Almasi put his hand on the tree. The feeling was intense. Again, he felt one with nature. He heard his parents calling out for him. From the drawing, they knew where to find him. As they got closer, he could tell that his mother’s cough was more chronic than before. Suddenly, a bud grew from where Almasi lay his hand.

“Nature has its own way,” Lukaku said in marvel. “You are a quick study.”

“Your mother has the flu. Give her the bud.”

With all that had gone down, Almasi had no reason to doubt the men. Besides, his mother had nothing to lose. They all knew that the flu was fatal. Almasi gave the bud to his mother.

“Now inhale it,” Yala instructed.

“Trust him, mother,” Almasi convinced her.

With one slow breath, the pollen from the bud flowed into her nostrils. Her cough suddenly stopped. Lukaku felt convinced that this wonder would cast away all doubts.

“We are from the year 2025. The future of the world is doomed and man discovered a way to live in the past. Somehow, the flu found its way into the past too. Now the world is doomed.”

As outrageous as the revelation sounded, they did not doubt it. There was a lot of myths going around about the flu but this one seemed quite compelling.

“We have travelled to the past to cure the world of this rot. The coup, as written down in history, should go down as an attempted coup. It
has lasted longer than it should have. It is now obvious that people from the future are trying to take control of the past.”

“We have a heavy task ahead of us;” Yala declared

Almasi’s father was bewildered by this revelation but his love for his country was stronger than his doubt.

“Deforestation has seen the destruction of all trees including the Mugumo tree which, as revealed by scientists, is nature’s solution to the contagious flu,” Lukaku added.

“The three of us have the Mugumo spirit inside of us and only we can cure the world of this rot. Your connection to the tree is stronger and we cannot do this without you,” Yala concluded.

Almasi, filled with great intrigue, placed his hand on the tree and they all disappeared. With the little information that they had, they were willing to save the past.
Mabo learnt at an early age that education is the key to success. She figured that education was what she needed to make her dreams come true. And so that is all she ever did – she read and studied. Twenty-seven years later, she decided that maybe it was not true after all. She began to see a twisted perspective of the whole idea.

Mabo grew up in a small village in the rural parts of Eswatini called Salem. She lived with her aged grandfather who brought her up with his wisdom to become a sensible woman someday. She had known him to be her only guardian angel. He was there to pick her up when she fell. His love for her gave him the strength to move around to provide for both of them despite his old age.

When Mabo was seven years old, her grandfather became very sick. He began to move less and his health deteriorated every day. He could not provide for both of them the same way he did before. Mabo felt helpless. She did not know how she could possibly help her grandfather. Grandfather’s health became worse and he had trouble breathing. Mabo knew she needed to seek for help. She walked around the village seeking for someone to help her grandfather, but no one was willing to help her. She could not spend all her time searching. She had to go back to grandfather. He needed her. Upon her arrival, grandfather really looked at her, knowing she had done her best, then breathed his last.
Mabo rushed to his mat and shook him severally, calling out to him, hoping that he would wake up. Grandfather did not wake up. She went back to the community to report that her grandfather was no more. To her surprise, everyone was suddenly very concerned about her grandfather. The elders knew what to do, they handled everything after her grandfather’s demise. A month later, they took her to her aunt’s place at Big Bend. She had met her for the first time at her grandfather’s funeral. She had been told that she had to go and live with her for her own safety and also to be enrolled at school so that she can secure her future.

She dreamt of becoming the first doctor from her community. Her grandfather had died because there were no doctors or even clinics nearby. She wanted to end such untimely deaths by providing a quick service to her people. With such big dreams she knew that she had to work very hard in her studies. She dedicated her nights to her books because during the day she was occupied with many responsibilities. Her diligent and determined nature attracted leadership roles whilst she was in her community high school. Her teachers had spotted her great potential and she served as a school prefect in all her years there. She was an influential student who ran successful fundraising campaigns for the clubs she joined in school. Her teachers were positive that she was destined to achieve great things because of the dedication and hard work that was evident in all she did.

Unfortunately for her, her aunt, two nieces and uncle were not happy for her successes, hence they made her life miserable. Her aunt would buy presents for her children and exclude Mabo. Her nieces, although older than her, made her do all the house chores. Eventually she got used to it, realising that she was not a member of that family after all.
Mabo’s uncle was the worst of them all. He never ceased to remind her of her misfortune. He often reminded Mabo how her mother had chosen a lavish life over her and had abandoned her at three years old. He convinced her that she was worthless and a burden to everyone to such an extent that he threatened to kick Mabo out of his home if she refused to pay for her accommodation and meals with her body.

One Saturday, as she was cleaning her room, her uncle molested her and with that her innocence was stolen from her at fifteen years. She shouted for help but no one was around to help her since her aunt and nieces had gone to town. She reported the matter to her aunt who instead accused her of bringing it upon herself claiming that her husband was the victim. Emboldened by this, her uncle continued to molest her every chance he got, knowing he would escape with it. As such, life became even harder for her.

Her aunt later stopped paying for her school fees because she was jealous that her own children were not getting high grades as Mabo did. Mabo saw her dream of becoming a doctor shatter right before her eyes. She begged her aunt each day to pay for her studies but her aunt was adamant. She accused Mabo of wanting to break her family. Mabo wept sorrowfully as each day she watched her nieces continue with their education and hoped that her aunt would soften her heart.

When she realised that she was not going back to school, Mabo decided to seek for employment but she did not get any. Her uncle took advantage of the situation to make her his puppet. During the day all she did was herd her uncle’s cattle. She was convinced that her life was a mess and even her futile attempts at education had given her more reason to believe that she was not destined for success.
When Mabo was twenty-six years old, her uncle impregnated her and denied being responsible. Her aunt got furious at her and the ill-treatment she received became worse. Her aunt claimed that she was training Mabo to be a wife. She even beat her and it is no wonder that soon Mabo miscarried.

After she miscarried, Mabo decided to return to Salem, the only place she had known happiness with her grandfather. She had been away for over twenty years but she vividly remembered everything about the place. As she walked into the compound, she could not help but notice the abandoned home she so greatly treasured. It reminded her of her abandoned self and she cursed the day her mother had left her.

Mabo decided to rebuild her life and she knew the first step was to forgive herself. As she cleaned the house and dusted the furniture, she remembered the good times in that house. She dusted the portraits of her dear grandfather and hung them where they belonged.

Every day, she worked hard by clearing the yard and working in the garden. And at the end of every tiring and emotionally draining day, she would get comfort in thinking about her grandfather. ‘I remember all the wonderful moments I spent with my wise grandfather,’ thought Mabo as she sat under the palm tree of her farmyard. This particular maize farm had been passed down to her by her beloved grandfather who had also inherited it from his forefathers.

She remembered how her grandfather tirelessly tilled the soil and was always richly repaid by a bumper maize harvest. Her grandfather was well known in his community and beyond for producing the best maize yields each and every year. His community
always referred to him for farming tips and he would gladly share his knowledge. As young as Mabo was at that time, she picked one or two things about growing the best maize from her grandfather.

After a particularly tiring day, she recalled this one time she followed her grandfather to help him out in the farm. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her and she decided to ask him what kept him motivated to keep working in his farm. He responded by saying, “My child, it wasn’t until I was in my late thirties that I realised I had been trampling on my wealth.” Full of wisdom he had inspired his granddaughter to also depend on her skills to make a living for herself by making her realise at a tender age that she has all she needs in this life at her fingertips.

After two months of toiling hard, Mabo started seeing the fruits of her hard work. Her maize plantation was promising high yields. This gave her motivation to work even harder.

After four months, Mabo harvested her maize which filled more than three silos. Big companies like NAMBOARD came to buy her maize, ensuring a comfortable life for herself.

Mabo realised that her failed educational plans did not render her a failure in life. In as much as she could not attain her dream of becoming a medical doctor, she was still successful. She then made different goals that she aligned to her specialisation. She planned to expand her business by exporting her goods to nearby countries. She would then save some of the money to build her own clinic in the area, naming it after her grandfather, Mr. Maphanga.
I was never one to accept complete isolation. My cubical was extremely limited that I could barely stretch my legs from one wall to the next. The grey, made of wool uniforms we were given irritated my skin as I walked to the small window. When I tell you how bothersome the view was I say this with all sincerity in my voice. Nairobi was in shambles and complete turmoil. The sky had a severely dark tint to it. It felt like the sun’s rays were never to be seen again.

Of course I wouldn’t expect to see a bright globe glow on these times we were going through. In the distance I could observe the unlucky few who couldn’t make it in here with me – rough looking clothes, smudged all over with dirt. The usual upper-class weren’t around to flaunt their high fashion status anymore so the beggars didn’t exactly beg. They just sat in despair and awaited their last days. I wouldn’t consider myself fortunate, but things weren’t as facile as they seemed.

My fingers let out a crisp crack as I walked around the meagre space around me. I completed my normal daily routine as I watched the clock on the wall take its time to tick slowly in a soft, steady pace. I found it ironical. Here I was, keeping time yet I knew very well there
was nowhere I was heading to. If you thought curfews and social distancing were a challenge wait until you’re forced to do so in a desperate attempt to save the dwindling population. People hated to admit how most of the ways one could contribute to the society was labour. It felt like capitalism or socialism clashed together and at the same time didn’t exist in the way we lived in here. Being downgraded to simple means of living and life as we know it was difficult. Of course I wasn’t born yet when things were ‘normal’ but I gush every time I hear my older sibling speak about them, at least, when I get to see him.

We’d been given a certain amount of time to communicate with our loved ones, most of the time guarded by strict watchmen to see if we’re respecting the specific protocols. Sometimes, when were lucky, they set us free for a while. Usually we’re not allowed to do so but I genuinely couldn’t stop when I was firstly introduced to it by my older brother.

“Listen, Jabari, are you going to let the government take away your only chance at enjoying your youth?” Hamidi told me. That just evoked a sudden rush of adrenaline in me that I hadn’t felt before. We wouldn’t do much really, most of the time it was wandering around the halls while everyone was asleep and sometimes leaving the facility to see what the outside looked like.

The modern city skyline was not to be seen, most buildings looked dreary and miserable. There was an eerie silence as if we had just come from a war. No pedestrians on the sidewalks were to be seen, modes of transportation seemed to be non-existent because people weren’t moving from place to place. With at least fifty percent of our population gone due to the virus, the unaffected ones like me were
kept in here while, unfortunately, the victims were left to fend for themselves outside the high fences keeping us apart.

“You see that over there?” my brother asked as I squinted my eyes in order to see what he was pointing at.

In the distance stood a large tower that seemed to stand out against the rest of the depressing atmosphere. Made of an opaque glass of some sort that shimmered only when a ray of pale light shined through the clouds, it was quite a sight to see. This isn’t my first time seeing the city from this angle but it confused me how I never noticed it before. My brother had a fascinated look on his face as he admired the building from afar. He wasn’t one to express his feelings as much as a normal person should but when he did it was a wonderful sight to see.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve attempted to work there and observe how the vaccine is made. Just the process and role in helping out on curing our country would mean the world to me,” he sighed as he placed his head between his hands.

I glanced at the tower again. That’s where the vaccine was being worked on. With the virus constantly mutating and the need to contain each and every variation of it they needed more men in there to help out, yet for some reason new recruits weren’t let in. I gave him a pat on the back as a form of consolation and stared back at the building. There was something off with it I simply couldn’t put my finger on it. It felt like there was something being hidden from us, the normal people. It’s not new for the government to hide specific things from civilians, they do that all the time, my brother told me so.

That night I stared upon my bland ceiling. My brother told me in a normal African household we’d sometimes share a room with our siblings, we’d eat with our families in one room, and honour our
traditions as they come. A part of me admired those morals that spoke of togetherness and the value of a family. It’s funny how technology not only polluted the atmosphere around us but also the sense of community we had. Oh the stories I’ve heard of how everybody’s eyes were invested on a screen, mindlessly scrolling through it until they needed to be recharged. It seriously confused me why people would rather talk to someone miles away rather than somebody right in front of them.

I turned my head sideways towards the little window. From laying here on my rock hard mattress, I could see the glimmer of the tower my brother was talking about. I always craved adventure but I never expressed it explicitly. I wanted Hamidi to be happy, and I knew nothing else was going to please him except experiencing what was in that tower. There are a bunch of underground tunnels under this facility. Most of the information I know about them I got from listening to the stray discussions in the cafeteria. Apparently you follow a series of lines beneath the ground and you end up anywhere you want in the city. Part of me believes that this is just a myth while the other is curious to find out. I know my brother would appreciate a challenge but it truly would be a reward if we made it to the tower.

The next morning I was determined to know if what I heard about the tunnels were true. We weren’t allowed to sit close to each other, we had to be at least two metres apart so this consequently made my task harder. An older woman sat across from me but she was barely offering me a glance. I appreciated people who minded their own business because I never desired to be in the spotlight. I watched her giggle and whisper like a school girl with someone incredibly far from her which for some reason was incredibly ironical to me. She’s the one that I heard about the tunnels from. I prayed
inwardly hoping she’d bring the topic up on her own. My prayers were answered because she finally did. I noticed how her voice quieted down as she stared directly into the person she was talking to. One of the hidden talents I possess is lip reading.

“It seemed that most of them were shut down but a few were left untouched,” she said.
I smiled to myself because now I at least had a chance of helping out Hamidi in achieving his dream. I have never roamed through these halls on my own. It always felt illegal to walk around without my brother by my side but I needed to be brave. We were venturing into unknown territory and I had to be prepared for anything and everything. My hands felt moist as I knocked on his door. I was so nervous but I believed that this would all be worth it in the long run. Hamidi opened the door with a sleepy grin, surprised to see me there. But before he could even greet me, I grabbed his hand and started dragging him along with me. I could tell he was confused but he didn’t ask anything. Usually, I’m the one who’d be following him but today I was in charge and I appreciated how he let me be myself.

Running through the tunnels was a tedious task. The twists and turns followed but countless dead ends almost made me give up but for every sealed corner there were two others available to pass through. I ran my hands through the walls and admired the art on them. It seemed that many people had attempted to leave the facility but from the dry bones and skulls littered all over the tunnel floor – not all of them made it to freedom. It bothered my brother when he saw that I wasn’t as disturbed from the scene in front of us, I just kept my eyes straight as we got closer to the tower. I wouldn’t know if I had been desensitised from all the gore society had to offer. I’ve seen how people are treated but I’ve reached a point where I have had to swallow it up and move on.
We finally made it to the bottom of the tower, it took us approximately two hours to get there. I was exhausted. My brother didn’t say a word but I could tell his happiness. I felt proud of myself. For once I had contributed to my brother’s happiness. He did his best to keep me safe and I believe I owed him this feeling. I watched him touch the glass doors as if he couldn’t believe he was right there and I pushed the door open for him. The halls were empty just like they were in the facility but this time it felt different. The floors were lined with very delicately arranged tiles that seemed to be leading to an endless maze of rooms I could only imagine were filled with colourful tubes and countless chemists dressed in crisp lab coats hurrying to find a cure, the same cure my brother wanted a role in making.

We walked side by side looking at everything but too scared to touch should an alarm go off and we are caught trespassing. I held his hand as we went deeper into the building until we saw a silver elevator right in front of us. We pressed the button and ascended higher in the tower. My tummy had butterflies as I looked outside and saw the facility extremely far away from us. A soft blinking sound signaled we’d reached the highest floor.

The lab we were in had a sharp stinging scent of antiseptic and softly blinking machines in the background that speared their rays through the darkness. My brother turned the lights on and gasped loudly from what he saw. Around us were broad incubators with the most frightening organisms swimming into a sort of clear jelly-like substance. I felt my soul leave my body as I inched closer to one of the tubes and softly tapped on the glass, hoping these things were fast asleep and wouldn’t break out and rip us apart.

“It says here that these are test subjects for the vaccines they came up with. Most of them have turned into monstrous beings and I guess that’s why I wasn’t allowed in here. Most of these people aren’t
from the facilities but the lonely streets instead,” Hamidi said and I shook my head in disbelief.

Instead of helping the people who were infected by the virus, these people kidnapped them and experimented on them. I’m pretty sure without their consent. This was heartbreaking. My soul ached for these victims but I knew I had to be strong. These things happen all over our continent and they go unnoticed. We choose to remain in our comfort zones instead of venturing out and helping those who aren’t as fortunate as us.

Hamidi looked back at me with a gloomy face and I could tell he was ready to leave. I know he’s lost faith in humanity and so have I. The mood went from being exciting and adventurous to sad and dreary. His face read disappointment and I could tell he didn’t want to work here anymore. The thought of taking part in inhumane acts in the attempt to save others didn’t justify itself.

I leaned against his shoulder and closed my eyes as we walked back into the elevator, ready to head back home until I heard a distinct tap against a thick layer of glass. I glanced back at Hamidi in silence while I held my breath in anticipation. The elevator doors slid together to meet in the middle but before the final millimetre was covered, a sickly hand blocked the door. They had finally escaped.
Kanzi was a young, brilliant, and talented girl who studied in Primary Five at Kizito Primary School. She had pale-dark skin, copper-coloured scanty hair, hazel eyes, and a hooked nose just like her father’s. She had dimples that pressed down her hollow cheeks wherever she smiled which made her charming. She was also tall and slender in her early teenage years. She was a jolly girl who never carried her soul on her face. She lived in the small village of Katwe in a grass-thatched mud house that was neighbouring the seer’s enclosure.

Her parents had been invited to her school by the headteacher following the exceptional performance of the School Music Dance and Drama Club in the inter-regional competitions. Kanzi was the school entertainment prefect and this triumph had been as a result of a creative drama she had trained the club members. It was the best in the contest. Therefore, this invitation was for the recognition of her contribution to the glory of the school in the region. Besides, Kanzi had been the best performing pupil in her class from primary one.

Despite the invitation being for both parents, only Kanzi’s mother appeared in the headteacher’s office. She was clad in a faded and torn gomesi that exposed her shoulders. Her hair was covered with what seemed to be a once-white but now brownish cloth. She
had a blue-blackish swollen left eyeball and a potato-sized bump on her left forehead. The headteacher gave little attention to her appearance since it was common for mamas to appear like this in parents’ meetings.

“Good morning mama,” the headteacher muttered as he pointed to the bench adjacent to his messy office table.

Meanwhile, the conversation went on as Kanzi stood outside the office waiting for her mother to let her know of the proceedings of her visit. Kanzi had become so impatient and so she made up her mind to move closer to peep through the window and eavesdrop on the conversation.

“Thank you, thank you. God bless you abundantly,” her mother said kneeling.

The headteacher moved closer to pat her on the back (in a way of congratulating her) and went back to his seat leaving her in open-mouthed surprise.

In the meantime, Kanzi would not guess what the dialogue was all about. She was later called back to class. All her thoughts were on what may have transpired between the headteacher and her mother. She could not wait to get back home in the evening.

As usual, her mother welcomed her with some cassava but today her mother had a twinkle in her eye! Kanzi was curious.

“Mama, what did you talk about with the headteacher?” she asked.

“You can’t believe it my daughter. The school board members have decided to offer you a full bursary for your entire primary and secondary education,” her mother said.

Kanzi bubbled with excitement. She hugged her mother as tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. That evening, she could hardly
eat because of her excitement. At least her education was now assured and it would relieve her mother who always toiled in Mwangu’s shamba.

Her father had denounced her education referring to it as ‘wasting’ money on ‘someone’s wife’. He always claimed that he would rather buy meat for his dogs that would secure his fowl from wandering foxes than educate a girl child whose only duty was being a housewife. In their community, the recognised roles of women were producing children, tilling fields and preparing food for the home. Moreover, educating a girl was regarded as a form of deviance since it would make them ‘unruly’ wives.

That evening was jolly until its fate was sealed by the drunkard Kiwalabye in his zigzag movement. All the children were asleep and mama was finalising the chores before he kicked the door. With an old-brewery-like smell, he slurred, “W... where is m... my f...f...ood?”

His voice would prompt you to think that he was being choked by his tongue. He was wearing his knee-folded greasy trousers with his heaving barrel chest almost nude in an unbuttoned shirt. He was a tall man and thus couldn’t stand upright in their hut. The waving of his hands as he made inconsequential gestures gave way to a he-goat pong from his bushy armpits.

His arrival induced a shiver that crawled up mother’s spine. As he made his jumbled movements, he kicked the pot that had the food. The sweet potatoes rolled on the floor of the hut. He was livid with anger and a hefty slap landed on poor mother’s face. He picked up a rod behind the half-filled sack of beans and ruthlessly flogged mother. He did all this in the pretext of blaming her for
being careless and mishandling food which would annoy the gods and cause famine in the area. The fracas woke up Kanzi who tried to protect her mother but was also beaten together with her. That night, Kanzi and her mother slept in the nearby bush.

Her travails at home often made Kanzi sorrowful. She often pretended to be happy but this particular day, it was hard to pretend. She could not even concentrate in class. Her friends realised that something was not right.

It was a grimy, doleful afternoon. The sun exhibited a bizarre fascia that appeared to be stooping grudgingly in a grisly genuflection beneath the bosom of the sprawling sky. From her sitting position in class, Kanzi could see the small path adjacent to the school courtyard.

In disbelief and total shock, she saw her father cycling from the small bend in the bushy path that connected to the school courtyard. Her pulse rate almost tripled and sweat was being excreted all over her body. Her father had never come to school! He parked the bicycle and within no time was in front of the class.

“Kanzi, follow me!” he roared as silence roved all over the boisterous afternoon class. Swiftly she moved out of the class and sat on the bicycle carrier. The shuttered buildings of her school receded into the distance as they rode off and finally disappeared into the curved bushy path. Little did she know that it was her last day at the school. Her father’s ignorance, fiendish and treacherous attitude had made him forcefully withdraw her from school!

On arriving home, she was surprised to find an old man seated on a stool under the shade of the jackfruit tree in their compound. The unkempt forest of a grey beard gave him a look that was almost close
to that of a mountain gorilla. He seemed to have had a dry tenacious cough that made him recurrently clutch his torso.

Kanzi’s mother moved out of the hut and stood on the verandah with a pitiful gaze at her daughter who was kneeling to greet the strange man. Before she had even finished her greetings, her father cleared his throat.

“I now no longer owe you anything Munywanyi and you will have to clear my remaining beer in a fortnight. Take your wife and leave,” he said in a rough tone as he pointed to the path that linked their home to the village road.

This almost killed poor Kanzi! She could not believe her ears. She knew that such things had happened to her friends before but she had never thought she would be a victim. She had dreamt of becoming a pilot because she wanted to rescue her mother from the hardships of life and regular abuse and fly her to London. She had seen the beautiful city in the cinema while she had gone to represent her school in the debating competitions. She knew being studious was her only hope. But now it seemed books had to be forgotten, all dreams seemed shattered. Her heart was being torn apart in despair.

Her luggage had already been packed and handed to old Munywanyi who immediately rode off with his bride. The oppressive glare of the scorching sun accompanied them in their five-hour journey. However, all her thoughts were on her mother. How would she help her poor mother? “Oh Lord, take my life! I beg you. I want to die,” she pleaded silently as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and soon Kanzi was expectant. Despite all this, she still had to till the fields and fend for her elder five ‘children’ who were left behind by her
co-wife. Her back ached from hard work and her arms were heavy from hoeing.

One day while in the field, she felt sharp pain in the lower part of her tummy. She immediately fell heavily on the ground and the little girl she had gone with to the fields immediately ran to call the grandma. The renowned traditional birth attendant didn’t know that her ‘luck’ was only in grown-up mothers, not children. She ignorantly administered her concoctions on Kanzi. However, Kanzi’s condition required a professional. She had protracted and obstructed labour which resulted to life-long incontinence. In addition, she had a stillbirth.

The tales of how Munywanyi’s wife had had a stillbirth – a ‘bad omen’ spread like wildfire around the village. Kanzi had also developed an obstetric fistula complication which resulted in a disgusting odour from her dripping urine and fecal matter. People looked at her as cursed; a manifestation of the anger of the gods. She was secretly taken to the seer in Katwe who would consult the gods on her behalf. This did not bear much fruit and her condition worsened.

Munywanyi threw her out of his home and she decided to go back home. Her father on seeing her also chased her away. Kanzi had nowhere to go. To survive, she resorted to begging on the streets and sleeping in the bushes at night as no one dared to take her in because of the stench and they also believed that she was cursed.

As waning days waxed into swollen months, her appearance completely changed – the long hair, torn clothes, and untidy outlook made people perceive her as a lunatic!
One day, as Kanzi had given up and was on the brink of taking away her life, a kind woman passed by. She later learnt that her name was Pauline. Pauline asked her for her story and she decided to tell her since she had nothing to lose. Pauline asked her to get into her car and drove her to the hospital. Kanzi wondered why she seemed not to be bothered by her stench. Kanzi spent that night in the hospital. She also learnt from the nurses that Pauline was a prominent philanthropist who helped those in need.

After hours of excruciating surgery, Kanzi was successfully operated upon and her condition was corrected. A week later, Kanzi had fully recovered and she was dismissed from the hospital.

Time had healed Kanzi’s proverbial wounds. Aunt Pauline had wiped away all her tears. Life had given her a second chance.

One day, Aunt Pauline brought her mother to visit her. Kanzi’s excitement knew no bounds. She profusely thanked her ‘aunt’. She learnt that her mother had since separated from her father because of the constant abuse. Pauline decided to start up a food stall for Kanzi’s mother.

Pauline connected Kanzi to a scholarship through which she got enrolled in one of the best schools in the country. Despite her experience, she resumed her studious nature and as usual, she excelled. This time she had altered her dreams from being a pilot to becoming a specialised fistula surgeon. From experience, she knew that fistula plagued many women.

Years later, she graduated as a specialised fistula surgeon and decided to volunteer part time at the hospital where her life had been reinstated. She also started an organisation that offered free
treatment for fistula victims. She strongly advocated for girl-child education as a way of empowering women. Little did she know that her experience would give hope to an African girl-child! There is always light at the end of the tunnel!
This is set in the mid-1840s in Rabai.

His was a peculiar story. Not in the novelty of rebellion, obviously, but in the nature of his subversion. Curled up in a ball was cracked clay and creed. And in it was the story of Johann John Kalume.

The Kaya was a secretive place to say the least. Even the mention of the place elicited a sort of forbidden excitement in people. Of course, very few people had actually ever gone in, at least in the right way. Only elders. Only a few select elders for that matter. Nonetheless, whatever the people had not seen with their eyes had been seen in their mind through the powerful lens of the Rabai stories and traditions.

The gatekeepers of these traditions wore kangas and had braided hair. They were grandmothers, mothers and aunts. Often, they would convene in their characteristic coastal unhurriedness and share stories about the sacred forest with each other. Somewhere along the way, as it often is, these stories trickled down to the children, quenching their thirst for the Kaya and its mystery.

“Mama Tetu sneaked into the Kaya to collect twigs for cooking. As soon as Tetu took the first bite of the muhogo that his mother had cooked, he could see no more. Can you imagine! All that because of
her laziness in choosing to pick twigs from the nearby Kaya instead of walking the distance to the normal forest! Motherhood is not for the lazy. She should know.”
“Aisee! If you try to cut down a branch from a tree, your cutting tool will bounce back and cut your leg.”
“If you let out a sound, even a cough, while in the forest your voice will be taken away from you.”
“Because all ancestors reside in there, if you so much as set a toe in when you have committed any crime that upsets them, even stealing a sickly chicken, you immediately burn in flames.”

The Kaya was special. And rightfully so. Contained in the fortress of intertwined trees and the magic of impenetrable darkness was the intrinsic source of ritual power and the origin of their Rabai cultural identity. Beyond ancestors, spirits and mystic trees, the Kaya housed the Fingo. This was the soul of the Kaya and the community. The community’s Kaya had two Fingo buried. One at the entrance and one at the exit. (So really I should say Fingos. But it sounds off, so I will keep it as Fingo, sounds more 1840s.)

What is the best way to describe a Fingo? Imagine something perceived to be very powerful and mighty shallowly lying unassumingly in random ground. Except in this case it was not random ground. It was holy ground. A Fingo was a protective talisman from Shungwaya, the community’s ancestral home. It was a pottery vessel the size of a fat goat and it housed a cocktail of medicinal herbs that were periodically replaced by the chief elder. The stories about the Kaya never focused on the Fingo, that would be too taboo. Talking about the Fingo would undermine their power. They were simply just there.
Now, Kalume had been told that it was a place of continued frenzy. Never a place that bent into the coastal lull that enveloped the rest of Rabai. In itself it was living. If spirits were alive, they would be alive there. It had been said that in the stillness of night, one could hear chatter and laughter from the Kaya. Crickets were always cricketing, spirits spiriting and sounds sounding. There was always activity. Except on that day there was none. It was still.

Let me not bore you with the details of existentialism, life’s meaning and the meaning of identity that often overcomes a young man at some point in time. Instead, I will just say that Kalume was at that point in time. His decision to do the unthinkable was fuelled by a new found knowledge in seeing a structure far larger than he had ever seen stand firm just a few steps away from his homestead. Imposingly, it glistened in this unnaturally bright shade of white. There were holes in the wall perfectly cut out and replaced with clear walls that shone iridescently. On the roof were two things that looked like sticks but were far too perfect to be. One was long and vertical and the other short one lay on it horizontally. One wall had some black inscriptions on it that read: Church Missionary Society (CMS) Rabai. But Kalume could not decipher this. To him they remained intricate designs and he was okay with that. The building’s magnificence alone represented to him that whatever lived there was something truly greater if it was housed in such brilliance as opposed to a forest.

He, on a whim, had made the decision to prove, to himself if anything, that the sacredness of the Kaya and the power of the Fingo were after all unwarranted. So that is how he found himself in the unexpected eerie stillness of the Kaya that day.
Breaking the first Fingo at the entrance would have been cowardly. He was a man. He was to venture into the Kaya and break the exit Fingo for this expedition to mean anything of substance to him. He had seen the first Fingo, or what he thought must have been it. (Who really knew what it looked like exactly?) It was buried just a few steps into the Kaya, barely on the boundary between the commoner’s space and the holy of holies that was the Kaya. Kalume didn’t stop to examine it. His plan was simple, to dash in quickly, break the Fingo, prove to himself that nothing happened and then dash out. After all, behind all the bravery of, in essence, breaking a sacred belief was still a young boy that found discomfort in the embrace of darkness and unexpected stillness.

It was midday, but who could tell? The trees canopied and blocked out even the smallest ray. Kalume instinctively decided against his sprint through the forest. So instead he walked gingerly, holding his breath, ensuring that he did not make the slightest sound. I guess some part of him was scared of losing his voice. He tried to be as vigilant as the darkness afforded him. He felt a few fibrous roots touch his toes and limp leaves tuck themselves between them. He smelt moist soil and sea salt and honey. What was honey doing there? Did the spirits love its gooey sweetness? It was a strange kind of place.

To occupy his mind, he thought about what he should name himself. He would need a new name, surely. One devoid of a link to a culture he was going to disprove. While at this, Johann Ludwig Krapf immediately came to his mind—the mzungu who kept visiting his community elders (and anyone who would listen really) talking about someone who died for everybody who has ever lived—at least that was what his translator said he was saying. They all thought he was crazy. Maybe even the translator secretly thought the mzungu
was on the lunatic end of the spectrum of sanity. But Johann Ludwig Krapf came to Kalume’s mind because he was linked to that white building. So Kalume settled on naming himself Johann. He liked the way it rolled off his tongue, unlike the kinks and knots that the names Ludwig and Krapf had.

Johann Kalume.

Johann Kalume.

He repeated to himself. He liked the sound. He decided to keep the name Kalume as well because he reckoned that sometimes he would forget. And Johann worked well with Kalume anyway.

At last, he hit his foot against something that was not fibrous. It was sturdy. It was the Fingo.

Without thinking too hard, he kicked it hard. He felt and heard a shatter. He stopped in his tracks for a bit. Nothing. He was still there. He felt for the tiny broken clay piece on the moist ground and held it in his hand for a bit. He grasped it tightly in his balmy palms like a trophy and walked briskly towards the exit of the forest, following the little ray that now started to appear.

He was out.

It was a no brainer for Johann Kalume to head to the imposing white building now that he had broken his belief in the power of his community’s religious tradition. He was prepared to feel the primacy of Johann’s, his new namesake’s, religion. He walked towards the imposing building and stood at one of the more nondescript see-through walls and marvelled at it as he looked inside.
The words looked like they rolled off his tongue so delicately but they came out loudly and brashly. Johann Ludwig Krapf talked at the two people who were seated on wooden stools: his translator and a person who looked as pale as he did. The rest of the building was empty and the three looked like little ants in it. As he spoke, he held something in his hands that he periodically glanced at. Johann Kalume listened in intently from the outside window, hiding and somewhat shy. Although, he did not understand a word, he listened keenly to the sounds that came from Krapf, hoping that he would gain some closeness to this religion.

He did hear the word ‘John’ repeated over and over again. It sounded nice and because it had been repeated so much it must have been important. So Johann Kalume added the name John right there, outside the building, to his identity. It was tucked between Johann and Kalume. He was now Johann John Kalume. It was a mouthful. But a wonderful mouthful at that. He stayed on listening, braving the scorching sun and basking in the obscurity of one of the many nondescript clear walls. He would return a couple more times, only to marvel at the building really. His namesake did not make sense. Maybe he was crazy after all.

This is not a story where Johann John Kalume is suddenly tormented by spirits or things start falling apart in his community or he gets a deep calling to join Krapf’s religion or anything big happens afterwards. His rebellion fuelled by seeking to find himself, whatever that means, did not yield to him finding his identity in a new religion or reaffirming a belief in his ancestral one. Neither did he find himself by “looking within”. I cringe at such clichés.
He had a fragment of cracked clay and two new names. And Johann John Kalume was okay with that. So let’s not try and squeeze out a moral.

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This is set in the 22nd century in Rabai.

She finished the story in that grandmotherly way that was so typical yet very unique to her. ‘Let’s not try and squeeze out a moral,’ that stuck with me. Such an atypical ending. Usually, her stories would end up pointing to gratitude, honesty, patience... and all that good stuff. But this one was different. Was it that she was too tired to weave in a virtue to her tale? Was it that I was to find one myself?

The latter would be a real task to my imagination. First, I had to imagine a place where many trees stood side by side in a warm embrace. I had to imagine them being so many that their presence was imposing enough to block out any light from snaking in between them. I had to imagine the sound of a cricket, the feel of a leaf between toes. I tried to muster such creativity within me. I could not.
GLOSSARY

Fingo A protective talisman of the Mijikenda.

Johann Ludwig Krapf German missionary in East Africa. Started the Rabai Mission Station.

Kanga A light East African cotton fabric printed with coloured designs, used mainly for women's clothing.

Kaya A sacred forest of the Mijikenda people.

Muhogo Cassava.

Rabai One of the nine ethnic groups that make up the Mijikenda.

Rabai A location in Kenya, where missionaries of the CMS first established a Christian mission.
Bola had a fascination for colours. She had an uncanny ability to effortlessly identify different shades of colours. She believed her eyeballs protruded – or bulged like throbbing hearts – in order to pronounce their uniqueness and her pride thereof. She wasn't an artist and had no common impetus for her obsession. Maybe that's the reason why she kept it a secret. Although she prided herself as an adept secret keeper, she sometimes wondered whether people could decipher the essence of the rainbow keyring she had been keeping since God knows when. She believed we lived too fast, that her cosmic perceptions were too abstract and the keyring was her totem, although it wasn't chosen arbitrarily. She chose rainbow because of colours: her mystic fascination, her paraphernalia for taming the sweeping abstractness of life. She also preferred dresses with many strong colours and seldom wondered whether it could be another clue to her secret. But that was before she realised, after discreetly probing a few friends, that everyone only considered her weird. No one had eyes so piercing to see what happened monthly in her small, rotund head.

'People are too lazy,' she supposed. 'How many more traits, clues to interesting secret lives of individuals have been similarly reduced, with shrugs of indolence, to mere weirdness?'

The flaming curiosity with which she was born – and which she refused to starve when she became conscious of it – was the cause. She felt that atmosphere was too plain, too void to unimpeachably
caption life and its essentially supple meaning. She realised that she wanted to open her eyes to concrete, revealing novelties every now and then. And since she was typically too restless to live with whatever she deemed shallow, she was going to try in order to alter things for herself. She began to experiment and soon discovered that all she wanted in place of the permeating void was colours. She wanted to open her eyes daily to a hybrid of colours whose diverse elements, she hoped, would help to perceptibly demystify her days the way a coat of arms bared bellies of nations. She then began to name her months after colours and whenever she opened her eyes to the atmosphere, she would pretend to see whatever colour she had decided the month was. This way, her mind felt consummated with the soul of creation and her perceptions became less abstract. Her moods stopped getting lost intermittently like a purblind person’s sight. And she wondered no more why colours were important in India.

For her divination, she relied on her intuition, whatever it was that preoccupied her mind and traditional and cultural implications of colours. For instance, her January was magenta – a mix of restlessness of red and nobility of purple – because of the task she had to accomplish. Before the previous year ended, she got mobilised for her one-year mandatory national service after completing her bachelor’s degree. She was expected to be actively involved in community development services or CDS during her service year. She could join any CDS group she preferred and she would be given orientation during the initial three weeks she would spend camping: receiving patriotic indoctrinations, etcetera. She volunteered for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) CDS group and found her exposition to the goals quite inspirational. She left camp with a burning desire to make things happen, to make a difference in her service community. The SDG colour wheel also
fascinated her. She printed the colour wheel and then laminated it thickly. She perforated the edge, attached her keys and carried it as her rainbow totem.

For her primary assignment, she was posted to a junior secondary school in Kajola, an under-served agrarian community in Ondo State, Southwest Nigeria. She was to assist the school’s librarian and she realised the first storm she had to weather as soon as she stepped into the school’s library. The state of the school itself was nothing to write home about – the few structures standing were decrepit – and the shack they called their library housed spiders, cockroaches, lizards and probably snakes instead of books. When she moved closer, cautiously, to the rusty metal shelves, after greeting the librarian, she realised that her guess was correct: the few books available were outdated. She opened a decaying 5th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary and cockroaches fluttered into her face. She shuddered, screamed mildly. The librarian chuckled, but did it as if she was choked by something. Sardonic instincts? She heard her and was confused. ‘Let me rather not be rash,’ she thought and shrugged.

“And what do you do here every day?” she asked the middle-age woman after they had exchanged further bland pleasantries. She looked tepid and that appeared to be her permanent countenance. She was snacking on popcorn and groundnuts.

“What do you mean by that?” she countered with a gesture that eloquently suggested that she felt really offended.

Bola was not surprised. She had spent four years in university interacting with recalcitrant civil servants who were not perturbed by the disheartening state of public institutions in the country, since it allowed them to idle their days away and still get paid at the end of every month. She believed they were complicating matters and
had long concluded that the country’s civil service, perhaps more than her politics and leadership, would never let her progress. She knew she shouldn’t get into trouble with her and quickly retracted. She apologised and asked for a sheet of paper. She wrote speedily. Afterward, she took some pictures of the library, did a short video and left for the principal’s office.

He had endorsed her posting papers before she returned. He struck her as warm, polite and hopefully conscientious. She really prayed he was one of the few whose conscience hadn’t died yet. His office was not befitting but she could see that he had tried his best to keep it neat and habitable, although the chair he sat on was creaking. She presented what she wrote the other time, a request for approval of a community development project to refurbish the library.

“Young lady, I appreciate your concern,” he said as he quickly minuted his approval on the letter. “People have tried previously but they didn’t succeed. Your gusto, however, strikes like a difference and I must confess that I’m impressed and quite hopeful.” He stared at her, perhaps expecting her to blush a little. She didn’t. “Others used to start late, you know. And the few who started relatively early left all their plans to die on paper. I pray you’re different.”

“I pray I succeed,” she responded. “And thank you very much for your express approval.”

He didn’t respond but got busy searching his drawer. A penetrating silence that echoed the chirps of birds and rustles of leaves by the Harmattan breeze then pervaded. It revealed how sparsely populated the school was. She looked quizzically around and remembered she was supposed to be bothered by the stark rurality of the village. But she was rather feeling comfortable and she thought it was quite strange. Her spirit wanted to be here, she concluded.
The principal was a lanky man in his mid-fifties. His look and carriage grudgingly reminisced a fairly handsome youth. He eventually emerged with a document which he called the most recent budget for the renovation. He gave it to her.

“Thank you once again, Sir. This will help a lot.”

“Maybe you don’t have to thank me.”

“Fine,” she chuckled, “Maybe I should take my leave already. You know I must return the papers to our secretariat before work closes.”

“Yes please. We’ll be expecting you in January,” he said as he rose to shake her hand.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, beaming.

“And do not forget to bring us stuff from Lagos,” he said jokingly as she disappeared.

The local government inspector of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) was equally impressed by her enthusiasm, which she described as unprecedented.

“Don’t forget that you must never spend your own money, please,” she entreated after giving her approval.

“Very well, madam,” she said. “Thank you.”

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She planned to get busy raising funds for the project during yuletide by exploiting social media in order to tell compelling stories with the aid of the video clip and the pictures of the library that she had taken. She recorded little or no success when she started and felt it was because she wasn’t particularly social media savvy. She thought she needed help and began to reach out to influencers and celebrities. Many did not respond to her. The few who did first asked that she pay them. She then began to feel discouraged.
She was already thinking of quitting when a respected celebrity she didn’t remember hitherto retweeted one of her tweets. Likes and more retweets then came in thousands and so did money. She tweeted her gratitude and noted that she’d gotten enough donations on New Year’s eve. She spent her January supervising the project. The massive failure of Nigeria’s vision 2020 disappointed her greatly. It perhaps made her feel more urgent about everything. ‘This decade must be different,’ she often declared. She bought books at discounted rates. A few publishing houses also donated materials. It was her first time experiencing human generosity so massively and she was impressed.

Her February was teal – abundance of green and calming essence of blue – because she realised the infiniteness of life. Her success made her conclude firmly that the future of social development and inclusion was in the hands of privileged individuals who took their responsibilities to life very seriously; that real nation building is done outside of politics; that societies are built by men and women and not spirits. The coordinator of NYSC in her state of service was more than impressed.

“Your strides give us more hope and confidence in our purpose, especially at this time when some misinformed groups clamour that the Scheme be scrapped ...” he noted in a letter of commendation he wrote her. “Yours is an infectious patriotism and you should keep it up,” he concluded.

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The euphoria began to evaporate when the library began to function. The students would neither borrow books nor come to study unless they were forced. And when they did come, they only played about
and made noise. They looked dirty, tattered and malnourished. She realised that the project had earlier preoccupied her mind to such an extent that she was looking at them without seeing them. Each time she complained aloud, her superior, the tepid woman chuckled mockingly. She hated her the more. She became worried that she had only solved a ‘mild’ problem at the expense of a greater one. The students could barely read. She remembered an SDG implementation rule she learned in camp: subjects must be actively carried along in every project, and regretted that she didn’t consult the students. It made her feel bad, but rather than be weary, she resolved to spring to action in order to help improve their literacy. She informed the principal and was permitted to liaise with the school’s teachers. “There’s always more work to be done,” she resolved and got busy.

But the students progressed too slowly. They hardly paid attention in class. She then resolved to involve their parents. She wanted to inform them that they had to make their children realise the importance of education; that they had to tell them to take their studies seriously. But when she began to visit their homes, she was disappointed. Poverty was the air they breathed and hunger had grown vampire claws around their soul. She met mostly with women who complained that they had been rendered jobless by gun-wielding Fulani herdsmen whose cattle now grazed freely on their farmlands.

“Our husbands have gone far into the bush to plant cocoa. We women used to plant maize, cassava and vegetables in nearby farms so that our children do not starve, but since they (herdsmen) have come, we can no longer farm. If we decide to be stubborn, they threaten us with guns, they rape us. They have once kidnapped our king. Our men are too scared of guns and
the government has forgotten us. Help us Aunty, if you can ...” one woman effused bitterly and Bola was moved to tears. Her teal February ended pale.

The statement: *help us Aunty, if you can* kept ringing in her head and she grew sadder and sadder. The spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria complicated her plight. Schools were abruptly closed and she had to return to Lagos before she concluded on her next step. The crimson image of the Coronavirus displayed constantly by her favourite TV station partly sinisterly encroached her psyche and the darkness of her grief and fear did the rest. She would have called her March oxblood, but for her realisation of the need to add a tinge of blue – turquoise, *filament of hope* – which was the colour of *medicare* and nose masks worn majorly by people. She finally divined her March as *maroon* and felt she was very apt when she realised that the word could be stretched figuratively to describe the current state of the world and herself.

*Help us Aunty, if you can.*

She had nightmare after nightmare and her April was tense. She dreamt about the village. She saw vultures preying on emaciated corpses of her students in her dream and was scared to her marrow. She woke to news of more COVID-19 infections and deaths, and more conspiracy theories spread via social media. She called April *maroon* as well. She couldn’t also help feeling for the frontline workers.

She called her May *maroon* too.

The partial ease of lockdown and little normalcy didn’t really count for her because schools weren’t yet reopened. But she later began to feel better generally, especially when she met, online, a childhood schoolmate of hers who was serving in the northern part
of the country. He had before the lockdown, with a few colleagues, empowered some women with the skill of liquid soap production – homemade – in his service community. He recommended some YouTube videos for her. She couldn’t wait to replicate the same in her service community. She also wanted to educate them on COVID-19. She left in June even though schools were still closed. She left with many nose masks and hand sanitizers, which she distributed before they began their first meeting. She made them observe social distancing. The women were amazed that she was keenly interested in them and couldn’t wait to be taught by her. She was happy they liked her and left feeling elated. She would afterward divine her June as violet.

Later that night, she received a call from the village’s King. She had to stop the programme. He asked her to see him the next morning. She couldn’t stop wondering what could have gone wrong, although she wasn’t really bothered. She knew it would be easy for her to resolve any issue with the King because she knew him to be polite to a fault; he was well educated and civilised. He supported her while completing her first project. She slept a little soundly and dreamt about stars and the moon.

The King said he received a delegate of village men with a complaint that ‘she was teaching their wives how to become their husbands’. The allegation left her dumbfounded for seconds. What made them think the way they did? She didn’t want to think it’s scourge of gender inequity staring at her and was happy that the King understood her purpose when she relayed it. “Please carry on. I will speak with them,” he assured her. He further informed her that the men were seen around because an unprecedented storm and erosion wouldn’t let them farm in peace. They both expressed their concerns about climate change, how the
fast shrinking Lake Chad, etcetera, caused herdsmen troubles in
the South and so on.
“You must keep pestering the government for help. Your men and
women need to be helped,” she advised on a final note.
“We really need help, Bola. And thank you for lending a hand,” he
replied as she bowed in homage and made to leave.
“Perhaps we also need to learn to stand up for ourselves. We aren’t
supposed to be enslaved by our circumstances,” he added and Bola
nodded in affirmation.
She walked sprightly back home. On her way, few lines of Beautiful
Nubia’s Path came to her mind:
“There’s no reason to wallow in sadness
Face the truth and stand for justice
Provide shade for future wayfarers
Make this land better than we met it.”

She loved the lines and also liked to identify with another couplet:
“Don’t you worry about me.
I’m just a flash of light passing through.”

A fleeting lightning then struck and when she looked upward,
the sky was deeply blue. Rain threatened to burst in torrents. She
looked far eastward and saw a brilliant rainbow creeping forth
from the horizon. It fascinated her greatly and she remembered
her old totem with nostalgia. ‘Rainbow means that the rain
might not fall,’ she recalled the Yoruba myth, but quickened her
pace nevertheless.
(Yokolu Yokolu, kowa tan bi Iyawo gbo’ ko sanle, Oko yo ke.)
(It is now over, the wife has defeated the husband, and the husband
grows a hunch on his back.)

She repeats the song again, then again, moving her waist steadily
as she continues sweeping the littered compound.
Yetunde is a local petty trader who sells all sorts of alcoholic drinks
at Odo’ro Park. Her goods are the basic necessities in the NURTW
Park, because the drivers can scarcely do without stomaching strong
drinks and smoke cigarette. Some of her popular goods which are
also her customers favourites are ale, ato, ogidiga, jagaban, kick and
start, alomo bitters, tekanle, among many other concoctions.
She is popular among commercial drivers and motorcyclists at
the park, thanks to her beauty. Her popularity has also soared as a
result of her expertise in mixing alcoholic drinks, which she would
always swear makes the men perform ruggedly in bed with their
wives and concubines.

She always warns that failure to ‘perform’ after taking her specially
mixed ‘alcoholic concoction’ may lead to grievous repercussions.
The men know what she implies. She is also known for a unique
feature she possesses. Yetunde is plump with a huge backside that
calls the attention of men wherever she passes. This feature earns
her a nickname among the drivers, who all long to have a taste of her, but all their efforts seem to be futile.

They call her Iya Alagbo Fatty BomBom, a name no one knows if she likes or not. Daily, she goes about her business without minding the inspiration behind the name. Being the favourite in the park, with the passion of an ambitious woman and the level at which she works, she is worthy to be on ‘Forbes’ alongside other rich women but on her most lucrative day, the money she makes can be comparable to a secondary school student’s weekly pocket money. But even still, she never stops working for the upkeep of her family, and especially the schooling of her two children.

At home, there is a lanky and slightly tall man, with eyeballs threatening to run off their sockets. His eyes are always stained red like that of a tied cow awaiting the butcher’s knife. The redness of the eyes is as a result of a greedy addiction to smoking cigarettes and Indian hemp, and constant drinking of garri, the grain-like meal made out of cassava.

Isaki is Yetunde’s husband. They never got married legally, neither were they conjugally solemnised in church. They met when Yetunde was just finishing her secondary school studies. Yetunde fell in love with him, not because he was a handsome man, he was really not, but because as at that time, Isaki was a journeyman or lebira which means labourer. He helped the bricklayers to mix sand and cement and carry bricks, and when he was not doing this, he would borrow a friend’s motorcycle at night to make money by transporting people through short distances. So, he was at that time the richest man Yetunde had seen in her young life. Head over heels in love with the young man, their relationship only lasted six months when
Yetunde got pregnant. It is now four years, and they already have two children, carrying the pregnancy of the third.

On a sunny Monday, a busy working day even for the laziest worker, Isaki remains at home on the premise that there are no jobs in Nigeria. He even stopped working as a labourer claiming that it made him tired, without enough energy to satisfy his wife in bed. But if you ask Yetunde, she isn’t complaining. “I would rather stay home and dream,” he would always reiterate. After a long spree of smoking Indian hemp with street boys and urchins at their usual location, known as ‘three-flat’ because of its enormous capacity to contain many of the smokers at a time, he eventually finds his way back to his apartment. This is a one room-squalor where he resides with Yetunde, their two children, brown and wicked rats, unsatisfied and rough but high-flying cockroaches, dirty plates, scattered clothes and a rectangular black and white sharp television sitting on a diminutive shelf opposite a brown-clothed tattered long couch, of which beg bugs have colonised and exudes a repugnant smell of urine daily soaked in it by their children.

Isaki half-consciously lands on the couch stationed at one corner of the room. He struggles to mumble some words, and in less than a minute, begins to sing the Nigerian national anthem, unconscious of the lyrics, but totally given to passion, as if face to face with the 200 million Nigerians, and about to give an inaugural speech. He dramatically adjusts the position of his head, placing it slightly on the edge of the couch, so as to breathe freely; he drowns into Dream Land.

(On a TV show with a female journalist, Isaki elegantly dressed in Agbada sits opposite the journalist.)
Interviewer: Good morning to all our viewers. We welcome you once again to Political Watch. With me today is a seasoned legislator, philanthropist and servant to the people, representing Ijesa East Constituency, Hon. Itesiwaju Isaki. You are welcome, sir. It is an honour to meet you.

Hon. Isaki: It’s all my pleasure. Although I have been busy carrying out the people’s business but an occasion like this is worth it.

Interviewer: We are extremely delighted to have you on the show this morning. Briefly, tell us about the recent controversy surrounding the leaked video and pictures online, where you were caught holding an enormous calabash in your left hand, and numerous ladies’ underwear in your right hand. This has earned you the nickname ‘Night Crawler’.

Hon. Isaki: Miss Interviewer, there is no gainsaying, and I love your straightforwardness. You are right about the video and pictures in circulation but it hurts me because these are not meant for public consumption. You see, precarious moments require precarious steps. The event that was captured was a monthly prayer routine I do as a patriotic intercessor for this country against unemployment, corruption, bad governance and under-development. You see, I, as an Honourable, (adjusts his Agbada) love the youth in my state, and I want them to be successful in life. They are the leaders of tomorrow. So the prayer was specially organised to intercede for them.

Interviewer: Honourable, that is thoughtful of you, not all public office holders would have the interest of the youth at heart. And to make yourself that vulnerable just to pray for the youth every month beats anyone’s imagination. However, the next question is that what were the things contained in the calabash, and were they truly ladies’ panties?
Hon. Isaki: God bless you. A special prayer for our special land demands special sacrifices for the special gods, you know. Filled in the calabash was the blood of three able-bodied men, who volunteered to be eternally useful for the prosperity of our land, and also there was the need for twenty-one panties of virgins, who were carefully selected by my boys for the success of the intercessory prayer.

Interviewer: Indeed, you have the pain of the masses at heart. I hope you can tell the viewers, who have conflicting views about the viral video in detail what will be the outcome of the prayer.

Hon. Isaki: Thank you. Recently I have learnt that Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world, and I have decided to change the narrative. So I consulted my Pastors, Imams and Babalawos and they agreed that there is only one solution. You see, over time, you have heard that ‘yahoo boys’ (cyber thieves) kill people and also steal ladies’ underwear for money. This, according to my research, has truly been successful anyway. So I said to myself, as a thoughtful politician who has the pain of his people at heart that utilising this same style not for selfish reasons like that of the ‘yahoo boys’, but for the interest of the nation will be a national benefit. Instead of the ladies’ panties to be used by some boys to buy a Benz it can be used for the enrichment of the nation. And if you look at it critically, it is a way of diversifying our economy, from oil production and agriculture to human resources. It is a brilliant idea. This can add to our revenue and boost our economy. From now henceforth, we shall experience a new nation with no recession.

Interviewer: I salute your burning flair for the progression of this country. As we end the show tonight, I hope other public office holders and politicians will learn from you and also foreign countries
will pick a lesson or two from your nationalistic action. This is to be celebrated than the fight against apartheid by Nelson Mandela, Negritude by Leopold Senghor or The Civil Rights Movement by Martin Luther King Jnr. Thank you for coming to this show, Hon. Itesiwaju Isaki. I hope that you will come again to our show.

Hon. Isaki: I am responsible for the masses and I will do anything to make their dreams come true.
The months that followed marked the period for the general election. Hon. Isaki gained more popularity in his state, geopolitical zone and the nation at large. He declined many calls for interviews. Since granting that interview with the local TV station, tons of journalists from around the world tried to fix an interview with him for as short as five minutes, but he was always occupied. He was vying to retain a seat at the state house of assembly for the third time, which could also see him become the speaker of the house if he won.
A few weeks later, Hon. Isaki was announced as the winner of his constituency and as the house reconvened, he was voted as the Honourable Speaker of the sacrosanct house of assembly, with the unflinching support of all the members of the house.

He climbs the podium of the house, making him taller and visible to everyone. And in his exorbitant Agbada that still suffers the incapability of concealing his protruded belly, Honourable Itesiwaju Isaki bursts with an awkward loud voice, “Arise O compatriots, Nigeria call obey…”

On the other end of reality, Yetunde rushes into the room sweating profusely her wrapper almost falling off her waist. She checks her boxes to bring out the remaining alcohol and already packaged concoction but all have been consumed by Isaki and the street boys, and only the empty bottles filled a filthy basket placed under the couch. Yetunde, on seeing this is vexed to her bones. She storms
outside like a mad woman, carrying a big empty bucket, which she uses to fetch water from the well and adds in some granite. She rushes back inside and pours it on the dream-absorbed Honourable Speaker even as he continues to sing the national anthem loudly.

He vehemently jumps back to life as the cold granite water lands on him. He is drenched and wounded. And seeing the damage done to him by his wife, and to his biggest surprise and agony, he is woken from his glorious dream. Without uttering a word, he thunders a heavy slap on Yetunde’s cheek but she is all prepared for the altercation. She responds to Isaki with two roaring slaps which send him across the couch. Before Isaki can pull himself together, she pounces on him with several punches to his face, until he starts bleeding and cannot lift a limb.

She then sits on him, with her bottom pinning him down to the floor, knowing that Isaki is too weak to stand on his feet. She continues singing her song and dances to shame her husband who is now helplessly lying on the ground.

“Yokolu Yokolu ko wa tan bi, Iyawo gbo’ko san le, oko yo ke.” (It is now over, the wife has defeated the husband, the husband grows a hunch on his back.)
It is the morning of the first day of January 2063. Zamba was woken up by the ruffling noise of two cockerels fighting just outside her window. She was too lazy to get out of bed and her mind wasn’t clear yet as she picked up her phone to check her messages on WhatsApp. A nagging yawn overpowered her and she let it go, ending with one loud groan. Her mother making breakfast next door heard her and immediately burst into a loud laughter.

“You better drag those young bones of yours out of bed young lady. It’s 2063 and here you are still stuck between the sheets like a magnet. Come over and give me a hand,” her mother said. The relationship between mother and daughter was the envy of all relatives and friends. People took to calling them sisters.

“So, what do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Well, for starters, set the table for breakfast?”

As she went to the cabinet, her mother started humming a song she had never heard her sing before. It had something to do with life in the 20th century. Curious to know more, she asked her mother to tell her some inspirational story from that era.

“Around the late 20th century,” her mother started, “in a large African country called Nudas, was a beautiful, brave intelligent and hardworking young girl named Hipaingba. She lived with her extended family who included her mother, aunties, six younger siblings, grandparents and first cousins. Her mother was an
extremely hardworking woman who raised Hipaingba with her siblings single-handedly because her father was deceased.

“Hipaingba’s mother cultivated land and the produce was used for home consumption. The surplus would be sold and the money was usually saved for only essential things and school fees. Hipaingba and her siblings every day after school would help their mother either by selling the produce in the market or by farming in the garden. Even though they did not have much, they were surrounded with so much love. Hipaingba worked tremendously hard in school and at home with the hope of one day making a change in her family’s life.

“Unfortunately, Nudas, where Hipaingba and her family lived was experiencing many conflicts that was tearing it apart and making life quite unsafe for them. Hipaingba and her family therefore decided to flee to the neighbouring country of Carep with the hope of a peaceful and safe place to stay. While in Carep as refugees, life for Hipaingba and her family got even harder. Hipaingba had to wake up early in the morning to fetch water from the well before getting ready and starting the long trek to school. Though she was a bright child, she had little or no hope of continuing her secondary education, under these conditions. But she kept on, nevertheless.

“Little did she know that the United Nations was promoting girl-child education through what was called Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal number 4. Hipaingba was lucky to win a scholarship under this effort. She had hope of continuing her education as she knew that it was the only hope that she had for her family and herself.”

“Why are you telling me this mother?” asked Zamba.

“Because there are lessons for you here, my daughter that I want you to take as you enter 2063,” she responded.
“You see,” mother went on, “Hipaingba got pregnant and for a moment her world came crushing down. As you would expect, her family was disappointed in her and she too was disappointed in herself because it suddenly hit her that her future may never be the same. However, as it turns out, this experience only made Hipaingba more determined to continue with her education and succeed in life. She was lucky to have a family that continued to support her materially and morally.

“Hipaingba named her daughter Mboriundo, meaning God helps. Amidst all the odds, Hipaingba completed her education and was the first of seven siblings to graduate with a university degree. She secured a job that allowed her to live comfortably, support her family and even sponsor nearly all her siblings to school. Two of her siblings reaching up to the university level and helping her to support the family.”

Zamba’s mother paused for a moment, seemingly overcome with emotion at this girl’s determination and the thought that negative things that happen in life should not deter one from succeeding.

“Are you okay mother?” asked Zamba, now almost forgetting her breakfast.

Mother continued as if she had not been interrupted, “Hipaingba’s daughter Mboriundo became an international student living in Canada, but was so moved by her mother’s experience that she vowed to prioritise education above everything she did. She even set herself a goal of contributing to the development of Africa by empowering other young persons to stay in school because she believed that education was the way to a bright future.

“I am telling you this because 50 years ago, African leaders came up with a document that by this year 2063, all of Africa’s children would live decent lives, without harassment and with decent livelihoods. The United Nations also came up with the 2030 Agenda that was meant to achieve the same objectives. I want you to read
and understand all the goals and ideals in that document and how it can facilitate the progress and implementation of any form of developments in the world, so that you can see for yourself whether those goals have been achieved.

“At the same time, look at yourself to see what kind of life you are living. Does it meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals as planned, especially Goal number 4 on education? The future is in your hands, Zamba.

“Now eat some breakfast, my girl. I’m proud of you and I love you,” she concluded as she turned her head towards her daughter in a way that said, ‘You’d better not let me down girl.’ For an 18-year-old girl, this was too much to ask because she had not yet processed it properly. So, all she said was, “Don’t worry mother. I will be even better than that girl.”

At the back of her mind, she knew her mother was right. Zamba, after all, had just completed her high school and did not want to further her education. In fact, all she wanted was to get married to her boyfriend and be a mother of five children by the age of 25. But now she was reconsidering her decision. She decided to find out more about the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030.

What she found out was that girl-child education had become prioritised by all governments. Large budgets were being given to the initiative because the results were tremendous everywhere. Girls were not only performing better than boys in all subjects, but those who entered the job market were also excelling in their fields. Families were stable because, as they say, educated mothers are the backbones of stable families. Children were growing healthier and half of the presidents in Africa were women, all thanks to girl-child education. This inspired Zamba.
She then decided to look for work that summer of 2063 and save up enough money for college. Zamba enrolled into university and started pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work. Her mother was happy and so was she. Then tragedy struck just when she thought she was on track towards achieving her education goal. Her father passed away while she was in her fourth year.

The death of her beloved father devasted her so much that she lost her focus and vision. Zamba dropped out of university and started drinking and doing drugs until one day she was so intoxicated to the point of hospitalisation that she almost lost her life. Laying on the hospital bed with so many drips on her hands, she slowly opened her eyes and seated beside her was her mother. Their eyes met and she remembered the story of Hipainga.

She needed to get back on track, if only to make her mother proud. After being discharged from the hospital, she resumed her studies, eventually graduating with a degree in Social Work. With this near-death experience, she started a program at the university to help students facing similar problems. Her mother and the wider family could not have been prouder of their baby girl. But it also spoke to how parents need to be patient with their children and not give up on them, even in their most trying time. At the same time, family support is fundamental to the success of a girl-child, giving a new ring to the saying that it takes a village to raise a child.
You see mama

Patrick Nzabonimpa (Rwanda)

You stare at the picture of your mama who died in May 2020. Her eyes are still as beautiful as the waterfronts of the black sea. You can see her iris highlighting the compassion she had grown for a lifetime. Match it with her smile and recall the last time you corporeally laid your eyes on it. You had a video call; you were at home, lying on the couch and she was somewhere in Kigali at the hospital. Dive deeper into the memories and recall how she told you that she was not doing fine even though she tried to hide it with a sluggish grin. You knew she had diabetes but this time she was getting worse with the Coronavirus she had tested positive for, four days earlier. Recall how startled you were and how you strived to conceal your emotions but ended up shedding tears. Then, suddenly feel a grip on your torso and turn around in a haste with the tears still rolling down your cheeks. Your papa is sitting next to you on the settee. He has grown an agitated and yet contorted face that resembles your grandpa’s. You discern him taking off his big eyeglasses and sliding a little closer to you. He clears his throat and stares at you with understanding.

“Look, I know this is hard for you but you got to be a little strong,” he says.

You sob with sniffs for seconds then fall onto his chest and sob a little more.
“Papa, I hate this day. It always makes me sad,” you say.
“I know, Gatesi. Your mama was a phenomenal human being. I miss her so much,” he says.
“Papa, we need to be strong. That is what mama would expect,” you say, wiping away your tears with a handkerchief.

Papa nods.

You stand up and saunter towards your room. You notice your papa cleaning his eyeglasses on his kitenge shirt as he leads the way to the sink. Last night, you agreed that he will cook for you and then do dishes. You know he will make it because it is not his first time. You reach your room and fall on the bed. There is a blond pillow that looks like a jerry can-shaped teddy bear. It was your mama’s back in 2020. You cuddle it tightly.

You remember the good old days when your mama was in Nairobi. At midnight on the video call, she was with the same pillow. It was caressing her gentle cheeks and the strands of her raven hair. She had attended a seminar whose theme was on gender-based violence. You recall how she told you that she was enjoying her stay and that she’d come back in a week and think about giving birth to the sibling you’d been asking her for years; contending that not having one was the source of your loneliness. Your papa wanted it more but when your mama died, you both remade your minds and opted to remain a small family to take care of each other. As you remember this, you sob a little more then dash out of your room. You can sense the aroma of food and it is stunning. You know that your papa is a good cook but at this moment he is the best.

You watch him tasting the carrots and tiptoe towards him before you tap his shoulder.
“That is mama’s style!” you say when he turns around.
“Well, it is! Were you watching me? Mana we!” he mumbles.
“Yes of course! Do you remember how you hated cooking, cleaning
the house or even doing dishes? Hmm! If it wasn’t for mama, you’d
still think that men weren’t born to do those kinds of works,”
you say, bubbly.

“Look, Gatesi, your mama taught me what a family is. I know I used
to fight the feminist part of her but now I understand that she was
right. Your mama was brilliant just like you,” he says then turns
around to take the food from the stove.

You tell him how much you relish all he does and remind him that
you are to leave to Gisimenti. He nods and tells you to get ready
for lunch. You help him move the casseroles to the dining table.
You are incredible together. If Papa–Daughter love was a person, it
would reflect the two of you.

It is May 2040; twenty years have passed since the day mama died.
You are 28 now and your papa is in his 60’s. His hair has turned grey
but he’s still strong. You live in the compact neighbourhood that
surrounds Amahoro Stadium which is also alongside the incredible
wetland parks of Remera. Standing there on the balcony of your
home apartment, you can glare at the amazing view of Kigali which
is now a green city.

You descend the staircase to the ground floor then stride to the
main road. You see a bus stop a few metres away and two ladies
are standing there. You stand next to them and wait for the bus,
which usually departs every ten minutes. You enter the bus which
now drives through the Bus Rapid Transfer (BRT) lines. There are
no more long queues like it used to be back in the days with your
mama. Nowadays, green transport has also been promoted; there are cycle lanes alongside the main road. You can see three young men and an old woman cycling along the way. On the left side, there is a paved pedestrian walkway. It looks so tranquil and comfortable to pedestrians. The people on the bus look so smart and stylish. They all seem busy doing their work. Some are just enjoying the free 6G Wifi. You are sitting with your papa, next to a young man who is reading *The Legend of Ruganzu of Kwanda*, an Africanfuturism novel that is trending globally. You’ve read it before and got inspired to write yours and so far you have penned ten pages.

On the topmost side of the bus behind the driver’s seat, the president is addressing the nation and the event is being aired on national TV. She says that the country’s economy has increased by 10% from January. You stare at her and wonder how brilliant and phenomenal she is. Right after, you recall that it was your mama’s dream to see a woman running for the presidency and eventually being elected. You think of her excitement if she were still alive. You glance towards your papa. He seems to be in deep thought. You shake him and then lie on his lap.

As you lie down, you drift back to 2020 when you were not allowed to sit closer to a person in public buses due to COVID-19. You recall how everyone wore a face mask. At the time, your mama was in quarantine. She had been quarantined on her arrival from Nairobi. You think back to how she tested positive after a week and how you were scared of losing her. You recall all those sleepless nights when you prayed for her rapid recovery. You shudder remembering how your papa used to comfort you during those tough times. You remember how you cried on his chest when the Ministry of Health announced that your mama had gone the way of all flesh. You can discern everything in your vision but scratch that; you
have to be strong and the bus is already close to your destination. The passengers disembark the bus and so do you and your papa.

You are now at Gisimenti. It looks a bit crowded compared to your neighbourhood. The government has made it more of an edutainment hub. Along the way, you see schools, shopping malls and bars. Next to the bus stop, there is a garden with Rwandan cultural ornaments. You walk a few metres then descend to the Grand Sunken Plaza which is built underground. You’ve been going there since 2037 mostly after class. You can see an enormous shrine of a traditional Rwandan dancer, *Intore*. It is built in the middle of the plaza. The plaza also encompasses various shopping malls including your papa’s jewellery shop which is next to the First Daughter’s coffee shop. Most of the products in your papa’s shop are from Senegal, Nigeria and DR Congo. He usually flies to one of these countries every first and third Friday of the month. He no longer flies to Dubai to retail products but sometimes he takes you there for vacation.

It is Friday, your papa was supposed to fly to Nigeria but has cancelled it because it is memorial day. You both respect the day your mama died. It is around 2 pm and you have to be at Rusororo before 3 pm. You’ve been looking for a place where you can get flowers. You notice a shop with flowers on the entrance and dash to buy the flowers as your papa is locking the door of his shop. You give your papa one packet of flowers as you both ascend the staircase that leaves the Grand Sunken Plaza. You log in to ‘my taxi app’ on your Mara smartphone and order a taxi. The taxi arrives and your papa tells the driver to take you to Rusororo cemetery where your mama was buried.
You can see plants and green hedges on the ends of the road and in the roundabouts as you drive along Kigali. You remember how your mama wished to see that and how she loved nature. You turn around to your papa then reminisce what happened in 2021.

“Do you remember the day we got the COVID-19 vaccination?” you ask your papa.
“Yes I do. I remember that we drove along here as we headed to the hospital,” he says.

“I was afraid to lose you because you were likely to get the virus. You had stopped wearing the face masks,” you whisper.
“Those face masks made me feel like as though I was suffocating...”
“I know but thanks to God who made us get through it all. I heard that the WHO and the World Bank supported our government.”
“Yes, I guess so. Even though Coronavirus took away your mama, we still have to thank God and I hope she's doing fine in heaven,” your papa says staring at you.

You have reached the cemetery and you both know that the stay will not be awesome. You pay the taxi driver and head towards the reception and the security guards do their usual checks.

Stumbling through the aisle in the graveyard, you can see graves and they are startling. You reach mama’s grave but stand a metre away from it. You stare at your papa then shift your glance to the grave. There is the same picture of mama – the one you have at home. You bow once then trudge a bit forward and place the flowers on the grave. Your papa does the same. You are both holding back your tears. You hold your papa’s hand and nod, telling him to be strong. Now, you release your papa’s hand then knee before the grave. You stare at the picture of mama again.
“Mama, your daughter made it! She is now a strong woman. She will be promoted to be the Managing Director of Masaka Hospital and she’ll never cease to make you proud,” you tell mama and rise on your feet.
You move one step backward, bow again, and say, “Keep resting in peace, mama. I will always love you!”
You turn around and glance at your papa. He cuddles you with his lanky comforting arms. You leave the cemetery.
A malevolent blackness eerily wraps itself around Auba as he dredges through a haunted forest under a moonless sky. Scattered tree stumps are buried like charcoal tombstones, when a four-eyed owl with jade green feathers swoops down to dig into the ground and pulls out a luminous twin-tailed rat. Before the glowing squirming rodent can be eaten by the owl, Auba appears next to the owl just as it is about to fly away and sweeps his left arm across the air. He has on a thick furry pelt-like cloak. He cuts the head off the owl and reaches for an outlandish blade on his right hip with his left hand. He slices the owl up cleanly, with the feathers still floating in the air by the time he’s caught the skinned meat. He grabs it all with his left hand as the rat digs away to hide, and reveals the rest of the right side of his inner pelt, where there is space under his right shoulder for him to hang the meat. His entire right arm is missing, and it seems that that part of his pelt also has a strange cosmic like rectangular metallic box, which he stares at then turns away after securing his meat. Auba holds his cloak tightly with his left arm and looks towards a colossal mountain bathed in a heavenly glow that lights up the surroundings.
“Ehgo...” he whispers to himself solemnly.

A deep driving bassline is resonating within a space age metallic corridor. Yuna strides through calmly, wrapped in dark glimmering angel wings all over her body like a satin dress and almost matches
her complexion. Like an onyx panther on the prowl, she proudly walks up to a large vault like door which has four clunky low-tech droids standing guard. There is a loud mechanical groan and the droids quickly ready their blasters as the vault door starts to open slowly. A strange old looking hunched-back man comes hobbling out, and struggles to lift himself up to make his announcement, “Archangel Liyana greets Angel Yuna.”

He bows onto one knee.

“Where is she?” Yuna coldly replies with only disdain, and the old man slowly gestures for Yuna to walk before him.

“She is busy with Eden. Allow me to guide you to Heaven so that you may be in her presence.”

Auba has left the dreary forest and has made his way into a futuristic steampunk carnival underneath an outsize tent cover hovering over an area, which is surrounded by ruined concrete buildings. Many transfigured humans are dancing and basking in the pale white glow which looms from the colossal mountain, some are even praying towards it. Watching over the festivities in a room which is tethered to the centre of the tent, is a mysterious woman with muted onyx wings which are sylphlike as they sit on her lower back. She looks over to Auba as he steps in towards the crowded rows of street vendors and performers who are trying to earn their fair share of Luna-Skcor. She slowly pulls out a hand crafted mbira with petal-shaped tines made of the same strange metal as the relic Auba keeps under his cloak.

Auba simply eyes random vendors, but is moving swiftly as he notices that the mysterious woman who was watching him had suddenly vanished; he cannot even track her movements. Before he can make it down a grimy flight of stairs filled with androids who are gambling their limbs, the mysterious woman appears next to
him and tries to grab onto his right shoulder, but suddenly a robotic arm shoots out to stop her hand. A creep voice rings out from the shadows, “I think he’s here for me, Yenoh.”

A stone grey cyborg steps out with seven arms. “Kula, I have something I need to settle with him, stay back.” Her emotionless response causes some of the other cyborgs and androids to abandon their games and scurry into the shadows. Yenoh smacks the extended arm away with a flick of her wrist and vanishes only to reappear in between Kula and Auba. She lifts her mbira and plucks three tines to produce a sharp tone, and before the extended arm can return, it explodes violently. “Argh!” Kula screams out in pain.

He escapes into an old sewer without looking back. Yenoh has her eyes focused on Auba to make sure he doesn’t try to make any more rash choices. “If you’re looking for her, I can take you to see her,” Yenoh says calmly, but she keeps her delicate fingers on the soft tines. “But there’s a heavy price to get you into Heaven.”

Yuna stumbles for a moment after she has been walking for some time, and as she continues again, she notices an indistinct radiance that grows brighter and brighter. Eventually she enters a vast lush garden filled with snowy mountain peaks as well as pre-historic creatures which roam the moonless sky and cloud white soil. The scenery that Yuna is taking in starts to cause tears to well up. “Heaven ...” she mutters under her breath. She steps into the unreal garden and begins to trail slowly behind the hunched over man who is leading her. She looks up to see an expansive sky, but then she stops and becomes solemn as she thinks to herself, almost reminiscing about the past.
Yuna turns and sighs softly, “It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? That we Angels ended up tethered to the Ancient Garden, our Creator’s original home. I believe they called it ‘Earth...’”

Liyana trails off as she unpredictably appears before Yuna. Her powerful figure as well as her puffy afro make her seem harmless, but her razor-edged metallic wings which she spreads out like two shadow blades cutting through space. They have a much darker and bloodier feel than any others.

“You wanted to speak to me?” Liyana asks Yuna with a callous tone. Yuna musters some courage for her response, stating, “I only want to find out whether you have dealt with the traitor, Ehgo. Her execution will end DWN’s attempt to cause a revolution.”

Liyana sizes her up and turns around without saying a word. “Follow me,” Liyana nonchalantly tells her. Yuna follows Liyana down a narrow path, then they turn into a sunken area which looks like a large circular pool filled with turquoise water. In the middle of the pool floats a giant metallic cylindrical pod. It hovers with a low drone. As Liyana makes her way to walk over the water, large discs levitate from beneath the water to build a walkway for them. They both calmly continue, expecting the walkway to form as they stride to the giant pod. As they get near it, Liyana turns to Yuna calmly, “With Ehgo under my control, the DWN is no longer an issue. We can wipe them out without worrying about any retaliation.” Liyana laughs softly as she finishes her declaration.

Auba is being followed closely by Yenoh, who has her fingers still placed over the tines, but is now hidden by a sea blue satin cloak. Auba is forced to follow her instructions as he is taken down below into the sewer system, but the direction they are heading
in is towards the massive mountain which was emitting the eerie yet divine light. There’s a slow cackle which starts as they descend into an old broken down skyscraper which is now on its side in a gigantic wreck. Kula is standing above the building looking down on Yenoh with malice, “You really think we’d let you go back? We have a pact remember!” he yells.

Yenoh stares at him without any emotion, then walks up to stand next to Auba. “I can help you find her, but you have to help me get past DWN. Kula is one of their ‘revolutionaries’, but he’s just a guard dog for their secret entrance into Heaven,” Yenoh explains casually, even though all of this shocks Auba. “And after we get inside?” he turns slightly to look at her, “Don’t worry. Since I’m also a traitor, I won’t sell you out. Instead, I want to help you.”

Yenoh answers him without hesitation, “Ehgo was... she guided me to where I am now. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here.”

Auba cautiously side eyes her as she responds, then turns to face Kula who hasn’t moved from his position. Auba slowly lifts his left arm from underneath his cloak and in his hand is his metallic box. As he lifts it out, Yenoh unfurls her tiny wings which enlarge rapidly in size, and extend as if she is poised for flight. “Heaven’s Gate!” Yenoh exclaims as she stares at the box.

Boom! The metallic box explodes, but only to fall apart and then reassemble itself over Auba’s right arm to form a cyber-genetic arm which is pulsating with a light sapphire radiance. He slowly starts to step forward, then he suddenly teleports on top of the building where Kula is waiting. As Yenoh is shocked by Auba’s actions, there is a huge explosion where Auba landed, which triggers her to snap out of her daze and fly over to investigate. Before she lands, she stares at Auba clasp Kula’s wrecked body amidst the intense flames.
Yuna is staring into the pod that now has a clear window formed in front of it. Inside, there is a woman who is connected to a ventilation unit to breathe. She's floating around with thousands of iridescent metallic wires feeding into her body. Her eyes are closed for some time, then suddenly open wide, staring right at Liyana who is creeping up from behind Yuna. Liyana walks up to stand next to Yuna and calmly says, “Ehgo’s Alpha relic is nearby. I’m not sure how it was activated, but it was also near another Angel; Yenoh.” Yuna remains silent while looking at Ehgo, then suddenly turns around to leave. Liyana stares into the pod, calmly observing Ehgo’s reaction.

Yenoh is now following Auba as he powers his way through Kula’s hideout in search of the hidden entrance. Droves of cyborgs are being wiped out instantly by the sapphire light being cast by Heaven’s Gate. Yenoh is in complete awe. She has only ever seen one person wield the Alpha relic, and it is known to only obey those who were stronger than ordinary Angels, so in her eyes Auba was a being comparable to Archangels.

Yenoh bites her lower lip. “With Heaven’s Gate, even Liyana won’t stop us easily,” she mutters under her breath.

Auba finally incinerates the final trio who were about to escape through a hidden door. He pauses to gesture for Yenoh to follow quickly as he bursts through the door.

Auba pauses for a moment and puts his arm out to shield Yenoh from an auburn laser blast. His sapphire light turns into a flame which bursts out to shield himself in the same move, then illuminates the darkened opening that they rushed into. It’s an ancient cavern which has ancient paintings that depict beings with black wings painted with a numinous ink. The depictions also show non-winged beings praising the moon in the sky, then another depiction showing a vast moon-like mountain with two shadowy towers in front of it, that
is being praised. Standing in front of a cave leading out, is a young looking woman wearing a cape which looks like it’s made from a piece of the galaxy, pointing a blaster right at Yenoh. “You’re an exile from Heaven Yenoh. You have no business crossing DWN’s secret entrance,” the dangerous woman says harshly, still aiming at Yenoh, but her focus is rested on Auba since he lit up the cavern.

Auba is poised to attack, but realises that focusing on helping Yenoh could leave him in danger, so he remains quiet as he watches the blaster. Yenoh steps forward with the sapphire flames enveloping her head to from a halo-like crown. Her wings get flayed by the indigo embers and begin to burn with a cosmic flame. She absorbs the powers and spreads her fingers out to strike. The young woman blasts auburn lasers repeatedly at Yenoh in succession before Auba can react, but Yenoh deflects the lasers with her wings and teleports in front of the blaster to knock it away with her hands. Yenoh starts to slowly let her power fade and release the pressure she was giving off a moment ago.

“Lungile, I’m not here to break my vow. I only wish to guide him to Ehgo. As an Angel, it would be shameful to have to sneak into Heaven through The Divide,” Yenoh states plainly. Lungile watches Yenoh very diligently, then looks over to Auba and his right arm. “Fine. He can go. But since you took Kula out, you have to guide him there,” Lungile replies coldly. Yenoh turns waiting for Auba’s response. He blinks slowly as if to say yes, then he pulls his right arm away under his cloak to follow Yenoh and Lungile into the cave.

Yuna is standing in front of two gargantuan towers which are made of the same metal as Heaven’s Gate. Behind her is a holy temple which looks as if it was built by giants, and is also fitted with
futuristic holographic projections which depict a galactic civilisation situated on a rusty red planet which is apparently prosperous. Above the temple, a sign with the word HEAVEN has been carved into the misty silvery stone, but slashed over by a sharp tool as if it’s been crossed out. Yuna is facing away from the temple, looking into the distance. As she lets out a sigh and turns around to walk back, there is a huge explosion at the temple, shutting down the holograms and crumbling the sign down. Yuna starts to fume at this sacrilege, but has her wrath dampened by the sight of Yenoh, who walks out alone slowly.

More explosions erupt continuously as Auba rushes forward. Lungile is teleporting all over the interior on the temple, blasting away at machinery and pillars that could lead to more devastation. Her cape waves around with ripples, keeping her safe from any debris. Auba is moving through the pandemonium like a shadow possessed by lightning, making his way deeper into the temple, eventually reaching Eden, the garden Yuna had come from. As Auba enters, the entrance closes up behind him with the rubble from the temple outside. He steps forward cautiously, with his cloak still covering him up completely. Powerful rumbles reverberate into the vast garden, but die down quickly as Liyana appears from the sky, floating down menacingly.

“A sinner like you dares to violate Heaven and defile Eden with its presence!” Liyana screeches. But before she can swoop down on Auba, he’s already equipped Heaven’s Gate which he now has pointed right at her. Auba has already concentrated his power. He fires an azure orb which crackles through the air past Liyana’s face. She’s frozen in the air as there is an apocalyptic explosion that detonates beyond Eden, tearing a crater into the surface of Heaven.
Auba is still aiming at Liyana, who is still hostile towards him, but fears the absolute power he was able to bring out of Heaven’s Gate. That fact alone has forced Liyana to reassess Auba with the Alpha relic she had previously thought was not a factor, but worse than that, the being in front of her was able to wield high tier relics far better than any Archangel she had known.

She slowly retreats, there has been damage dealt to the pod where Ehgo was being held, and now the water that she was submerged in is flooding out, with the metal rod retracting from her body. Ehgo is released from her pod, and starts to cough as she struggles to catch her breath. She pulls herself up out of her pod and eventually her eyes focus on the scenery around her. She can see the giant dust clouds and unearthly flames which remain in the aftermath of Auba’s demolition of Eden and Heaven.

Ehgo stumbles and staggers along Eden as it’s burning in the distance. As she makes her way past a grove of primeval baobabs, she comes across Yenoh and Yuna, who appear to be praying in front of a dignified headstone. Yenoh opens her eyes first to spot Ehgo, who is still weak so she can’t say anything or even rush over, but Yenoh quickly flies over to her to pick her up and bring her to Yuna. “We were on our way, then we saw Mother’s grave. We wanted to say goodbye before we…” Yuna’s voice trails off as she looks back to Eden. Ehgo stares at the headstone, then asks, “Where’s Auba?” Before Yenoh can respond, Auba’s silhouette becomes visible to her, and her reaction causes Ehgo to turn slowly to look at his figure.

Auba’s cloak is in tatters, but he barely has any wounds that appear serious. Heaven’s Gate is still attached, with a few scratches and burns covering it. Auba appears exhausted, but once he sees Ehgo,
he smiles and hurries over to her to pick her up gently out of Yenoh’s arms. Ehgo smiles as she lifts her hands to touch his softly. “I’m sorry I took so long,” Auba says trying to sound calm, but he can’t hide his happiness as he hugs Ehgo tightly, with her celestial shadowy wings spreading open to bathe them both in a cosmic light as they kiss.
The village headwoman began speaking one afternoon several moons after the village took the initiative of ‘knowing all’ as it was termed. “My people, I have called you,” she began, “As you all are aware, we the people of Mulomba have made strides in developing our village through the use of information. It has not been an easy road but still we believe we can achieve great things with what we have. “Over the past moon, we have reached out to all the orphaned children whose parents died in the pandemic that struck us almost ten years ago, by using their abilities and passions after taking time to talk to them using the questionnaire that we developed locally, with the advice from the government office at Boma and assistance from our own child from this village, Tiyamike, we have been able to target the right beneficiary,” she paused to allow a cup full of the locally brewed sweet beer (thobwa) to descend down her throat while looking at the far end of the attentive and anxious villagers who were now murmuring and pointing at Tiyamike who was seating on a brown circular cattle hide which had patches of white markings about ten footsteps to the left of the village headwoman.

Mulomba, a small village located several kilometres away from the main tarmac road, had been almost isolated with no road other than footpaths to reach it. It was bordered on the North by the Zoombokali Mountain so named because of the bees that inhabited it in the early days of its existence and used to bite people who went
there looking for firewood. That was a long time ago when, as the old people used to say, ‘cattle used to lay eggs’ before Zoombokali had been cleared of all its trees. To the South and East of Mulomba lies Nswaizi River, which was so named, because clay potters, who used most of its banks for their crafts, used to chase children away from the river in order to prevent them from breaking the pottery, shouting ‘muswa izi’, and the Makolooto Forest Reserve is to the West. The land of Mulomba was hilly, with small streams running along its slopes. Due to deforestation, there were no big trees except a huge mombo tree outside the village headwoman’s house, centrally located in the village, and a few mango and guava trees. Banana plants grew throughout the village providing scenery of beauty like meandering rivers of green.

The lives of the villagers solely revolved around subsistence farming, with the exception of only a few industrious ones who sold potteries and other artworks, bananas, in the surrounding tea estates on pay days which came fortnightly and were popularly known as chombo. These fortnight market days presented a great opportunity for the people of Mulomba to access luxury goods, clothing, iron hoes, fresh fish and other commodities not locally produced or otherwise hard to get by. This was due to its remote location which made access to basic goods and services extremely difficult.

In their teens, Tiyamike and his friends counted days left for the next chombo which meant a chance to play football with teams from afar, an opportunity to taste roasted fish and many other luxuries that could not be enjoyed back home. It was during these days that even those stay-at-home grannies were reminded of the days of old with new porcelain plates that their wards used to bring back home. For some children of Tiyamike’s age, chombo meant an opportunity to experiment with the bitter drinks that gave their
fathers courage to speak the language of the azungu eloquently. Though Tiyamike could be with them during these endeavours he did not partake in their foolhardy. This meant that he had to carry some who could not even feel the call of nature down their tight fitting, multi-coloured and faded trousers. Owing to the passing of his father when he was only 8, Tiyamike made a vow not to associate with those beverages that had directed his father to an early grave. The death of his father was particularly painful due to the way he died and how he was buried. Since he was considered a useless drunkard, he was not given a ceremonial burial rather he was buried with his hands holding his face and facing downwards. No one was allowed to mourn him. For years, this was the talk of the village and it embarrassed Tiyamike. He devoted his time and efforts towards helping his mother and working hard at school though this did not mean education was easy to get by in Mulomba.

There was only one primary school made of mud and unburnt brick with only three teachers for the whole school. Most parents viewed school as a waste of time for their children. They gladly accepted help at the farm other than useless demand for such trivial things as notebooks. However, some students like Tiyamike, who were hard working with the help of their teachers, finished primary school. They did menial jobs like weeding banana fields so that they could buy school uniform, notebooks and ball point pens. For studying during the night, they used paraffin lamps which their parents or guardians would switch off as they were going to bed. This was to prevent witches from suffocating them in their sleep since they could not get it in their feeble minds the fact that it was carbon monoxide poisoning. The students usually carried roasted maize to school, the only thing they had for breakfast and lunch.
After completing their primary education, the students like Tiyamike joined secondary school. The only community day secondary school close to Mulomba was about 15 kilometres away from the village. This made life hard for those not lucky enough to be selected to a district secondary school which had boarding facilities. The combined daily 30km journey meant that many eventually dropped out of school. Tiyamike had scooped good grades and was selected to join Maphunziro Secondary School, one of the prestigious secondary schools in the country. He excelled further in secondary school and was among the 8% in the whole country who were selected to pursue a degree at the university. He studied statistics as he believed that data has a potential to change policies for the better and it can be used to reduce inequality which he had experienced throughout his life.

After completing his studies, Tiyamike returned to his home village and started a project, Knowing All. This is what the headwoman was talking about. This idea was born during the late night teas that Tiyamike and his nine friends at campus had. Unlike other students at the university who spent their spare time taking alcohol, Tiyamike and his friends engaged in many discussions. They also had a common background as village boys and so called themselves the ‘trads’ and were often seen together.

One Thursday evening, Mwamulima a tall, slender and particularly talkative member of the ‘trads’ said, “Gentlemen, I know we are the privileged few from our villages who have had the chance to pursue university education, see big cities and brush shoulders with the who is who of this nation. Can’t we find a way of helping our communities or at least have an impact on our fellow brothers and sisters back home?”
This formed their discussion for that evening. It was one of the most heated discussions they had ever had as some felt that it was the government’s duty to take care of its people while others maintained that they should take care of themselves and buy ‘big cars’ and live in luxury.

The discussion was almost getting out of hand and being the most sensible, Tiyamike decided to intervene. “Gentlemen, I know almost all of us come from terrible backgrounds, that is, why we are the ‘trads’. We may choose to blame someone from the past or the present for our misfortune, but that does not mean we cannot change the future. Remember, we are the ones who are best informed about the predicaments of our fellow brothers and sisters from our respective villages. No one can address their problems better than us. Remember, our government is already strained by the impact of the recent financial slump due to the pandemic that has affected almost all the sectors of the country’s economy. I suggest that we sleep over it and come up with solutions to the problems facing our villages, which we will discuss tomorrow evening,” he said.

The next day they gathered as usual, and had a sober discussion about the best solutions to the problems of their respective villages. It was agreed that everyone must use what he has learned as they were from different faculties and departments and later they would share their successes, failures and experiences.

A year later, they all graduated and embarked on different journeys of life. Tiyamike decided that he must use his knowledge of statistics and numbers to help his village. He first discussed with the village headwoman what could be done (with little or no cost) to the villagers and to himself. In their discussion, they agreed that they
should collect information about the villagers and help the most vulnerable in the village. Tiyamike, after designing a questionnaire, decided to also get input from the National Statistics Office authorities on data collection and how it could be done with ease and ensure that everyone participated. The questionnaire included such details as number of people per household, age, ownership of property, and many other variables.

Through these consultations, it was agreed that the data collection should be done by those who were literate enough and had undergone three weeks of intensive training. It was further agreed that they should conduct the exercise in the dry months of August to October when there was little farming activity going on in the village. This was to ensure that as many people as possible were interviewed. The data collection exercise was successfully completed and Tiyamike analysed it so that it made sense to the common man. He computed the dependency ratio (the ratio of over 65s and under-15s to the working population), poverty indices and other useful measures that could best address the problems of the village.

After completing all these, Tiyamike presented his findings to the village headwoman and the village elders, explaining in greater detail what the numbers meant and what their implications were. After the presentation and deliberations, key priority areas were drawn. That was nearly three months ago. It was agreed that they should use the information they had to reach out to orphaned children as Tiyamike had found this group to be worse off than the rest. They decided to use the resources they already had like land, hand craft skills, sports, literature and other forms of art, to help the people in the village.
About 25 young people benefited from the initiative as they made hoe handles, reed baskets and many other handcrafts using knowledge and resources from skilled and well-off members of the village as means of resource sharing. They sold their merchandise at the *chombo*. The result was unbelievable changes in the lives of these young people.

This is what led to the meeting that day. The village headwoman was overjoyed by the changes in the village. They celebrated the milestones they had made as she emphasized the importance and goodness of data to the development of the village. She commended the efforts of various people who reached out to the vulnerable and those who were ready to offer their help. She expressed her hope for a lot of things that can be accomplished in the village with reliable data and information. She concluded by posing a question: “Is it not better to make decisions based on data rather than heresy?”
He looked down at his audacious granddaughter, waiting to hear her plan.

Two days before.

“Adai, turn up the volume!” you politely ask your little sister after she insists on hogging the TV remote.

“Oh, so Blessing is now in this woman’s house to confront her about her sister?” you say with the certainty of a student who’s just solved a Maths problem. You are engrossed in a Nollywood movie you have been watching for three minutes and don’t know the name of when a thunderstorm starts. The picture freezes, the sound crackles and then the screen goes blank. If you weren’t so invested in the movie, you may have taken time to laugh at God’s humour. Load shedding plus bad weather never makes for good entertainment on a rainy day at home in Kampala.

“Banange¹ this weather! It’s January and it’s already raining!” Mama exclaims, “Ha, that means jam on the way. By the way, did you people buy the brown bread for Papa² and Kuku³?”

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1 Oh my goodness in Luganda.
2 Grandfather in Ateso.
3 Grandmother in Lugisu.
Today is the day you’re meant to go to Tororo. You stare at her blank-faced with a cheeky smile, remembering the detour you and Yaya\(^4\) took to the bakery section to buy *kabalagala*\(^5\), forgetting the bread. When the rain stops, you and Yaya stroll out of the house, laughing at the Nollywood movie, in search of the bread.

As you step out of the house, the air is thick with humidity but the ground is cool. It’s a weird atmosphere, between hot and cold but not warm. Your bodies adjust as you walk towards the gate. Strolling along the road the small rev of a *bodaboda*\(^6\) sounds from behind you and it soon slows past you as the rider nods his head. So you nod your head back. Then he stops.

“*Jjebale ko ssebo*\(^7\). *Ku Capital Shoppers meka*\(^8\) ?” you say with the confidence of a zealous student on a school trip to France using the French phrases they learnt in class ordering something from a Parisian crepe vendor.

“*Nkumitano*\(^9\).”

He senses your unfamiliarity with Luganda and, at first, charges you the *mzungu*\(^10\) rate. He’d take any chance to make an extra two thousand shillings after the lockdown. But Yaya sweeps to the rescue and bargains to a fairer price. It is funny – in a sad kind of way – how it’s assumed that you are rich because your Luganda is poor. Despite the concoction of dust and diesel fumes floating in the air, as you ride to the supermarket, you feel like you’re in a music

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\(^4\) Aunt in the Ateso language.

\(^5\) A Ugandan deep-fried pancake made with cassava flour and bananas.

\(^6\) A motorbike. It’s a common form of transport in Uganda.

\(^7\) Greeting to a man in Luganda.

\(^8\) *How much* in Luganda.

\(^9\) 5,000 Ugandan shillings.

\(^10\) Means a white person. Reference is made to tourist prices.
video. The sun is high in the sky, afro beats blare from the speakers in the dukas\textsuperscript{11} and the sound of Bobi Wine and Radio and Weasel from the campaign trucks, the breeze whips through your hair, but your hair isn’t sailing in the wind – it can’t. Especially today. It sits still on your head, curled in a million little coils because you were not bothered enough to comb it this morning.

Then. Toot toot.
Taxis\textsuperscript{12}.

One rattles past, almost knocking you both off the bike. Then, without indicating, it swerves and stops on the side of the road so you almost ram into it. It chugs a bit, lets out plumes of smoke and the conductor sticks half of his body out of the window and yells: ‘lukumi lukumi\textsuperscript{13} mu town’ trying to get customers. The bodaboda weaves through the cars. Stopping, starting, stopping. It takes skill and practice to sit and stay on a bodaboda in Kampala. It seems Yaya has mastered this skill. She can sit like a 19th century Elizabethan high-class woman on her pony, even for long distances. You don’t have that kind of strength, so instead, you sit astride. When you reach the supermarket, Yaya is smiling in a reminiscent sort of way.

“Naye\textsuperscript{14} you people,” you say, pushing her shoulder, “you had my whole childhood to teach me Luganda yet you laugh at me for trying to speak Luganda and complain that I don’t know the language.”

\textsuperscript{11} Small shops on the side of the road that normally sell household items, snacks and airtime.
\textsuperscript{12} Not to be confused with small cabs. In Uganda, taxis are 14-seater vans that are used as public service vehicles.
\textsuperscript{13} One thousand in Luganda.
\textsuperscript{14} But in Luganda.
“Gwe\textsuperscript{15},” Yaya responds, laughing, “don’t you remember how we tried, but you refused. You always said you were too exhausted from a long day at school, in Year 4!”

“Eyiii how can you expect a 9-year-old child, whose parents signed her up to multiple afterschool activities to finish all her energy before 8 pm, to voluntarily learn another language?” I ask.

But still, I tried. Whenever stories were being dished out after dinner, I’d always ask, “What are you saying?”

But the response was always, “Akoku\textsuperscript{16}, this conversation is for big people.”

To you, Luganda is a language that is familiarly foreign; one often spoken but rarely understood. You wonder for how much longer you can excuse your lack of knowledge on Yaya and your parents.

With no further lines of argument, you both smile and go in to buy bread.

On the way back home you tune up the Ugandan part of your accent and the bodaboda, thanks to your much improved Luganda, doesn’t charge you mzungu prices.

Just as you are approaching the house, the clouds swirl and change, like millet porridge on the stove, from smooth and light to volatile and dark in seconds. You are swept away from standing in the weird spot between hot and cold to one that is almost icy, reminding you of the Kenyan highlands. For a second you wonder whether you’re still in Kampala.

\textsuperscript{15} You in Luganda.

\textsuperscript{16} Female child in Ateso.
“Banange this weather! Now I have to do my hair again!” exclaims Yaya, running towards the house with the effort of an unfit child made to run laps.

You grin while running in the rain, knowing that you won’t have to do your hair again, because you never did it. Soon, brown streams with plastic bottles, *matooke* peels and the odd shoe flow out of the roadside gutters. This city is not built to be rained on.

Soon you are off to Tororo. Bustling through trading centres with *bodabodas* carrying logs, doors and everything in between, breezing past an old man dressed in an old pale ‘Harvard University’ shirt, knee-deep in a rice paddy and blazing across the grand, ivory Jinja bridge. The one some people say makes you ‘forget you’re in Uganda.’ You always cringe at that statement, as if Ugandan engineers can’t design and build such structures. But then you remember the morning’s headline: *Mulago imports 100 hospital beds* and the other cover story, *Government plans to expand the Buy Uganda, Build Uganda campaign for development*.

Entering the gate to your grandparents’ home, Adai flies out of the car and yells, “Papaaaaa” while running towards the glass door with white netting behind it. The kind of fabric that seems like an immutable trend in modern African interior design, particularly in homes of older people in towns and villages. It goes on chairs, armrests, tables, food and even the occasional *gomesi*17. She runs into his arms. Well actually his legs, she isn’t yet that tall.

“Praise God,” he says with a smile.
“Praise God,” you smile back.

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17 Traditional dress of Baganda women.
In your heart, hoping for Him to show up in that moment as He did to Moses in a burning bush. Knowing full well that’s not how He talks, at least to you.

That’s how Papa always greets you and you marvel at his faith and steadfastness. You almost hug him but then remember, COVID. After the ‘school is good, ‘home is fine’ and ‘ah this government’ conversation, Papa catches you up on the latest developments on his farm and starts getting ready to take you all on a trip there. You listen attentively, wondering why you weren’t taught this way about plants back in secondary school, maybe you would have done more than barely pass Biology and Geography. Adai, Kuku and Papa sit in the front of the pickup while you, Mama and Yaya get comfortable on the iron sheets at the back.

Again you and Yaya feel the wind in your hair but there is no background music this time, just the sound of the wind and the scene of rolling hills with maize and millet gardens. Reaching the farm, Papa gets out of the car barefoot. Without fear of stepping on manure or stones, he says with absolute confidence, “I know my farm.” Walking around the farm, dodging stones, sticks and cow dung, again, you marvel at his faith.

At dinner, the table is covered with steaming pots of atapa\textsuperscript{18}, eboo\textsuperscript{19} and meat. Kuku picks up her fork and starts serving, beginning with Papa. After serving him meat she puts some on your plate.

“No, thank you Kuku. I don’t eat meat,” you mutter.

\textsuperscript{18} A starchy dough-like food made with cassava and millet flour. It’s a staple of the traditional Ateso diet.

\textsuperscript{19} A type of leafy greens in Ateso.
From the looks on their faces, you sense an avalanche of questions. “You don’t eat meat? Why?” Kuku asks.

They all wait for you to respond. Mama and Yaya have slight smiles on their faces, knowing what you are going to say. “It’s not good for the environment,” you say.

Kuku looks shocked and intrigued. Papa looks like he is re-reading a complex argument in one of his philosophy books and Yaya and Mama are straight-faced. They are used to your speeches about saving the environment and being vegetarian.

“What does meat have to do with the environment?” he asks you. “Well, I was reading somewhere that in America, the production of red meat contributes more to global warming than all forms of transport combined. Also, cows produce methane which is a greenhouse gas. Besides, it’s inefficient. If I can reduce my demand for it and other people can as well, then we can reduce the supply and slow down the impact of climate change. If we don’t act now on climate change then we’ll all be doomed, basically,” you recite. This is your explanation for when you’re asked why you don’t eat meat during family dinners, half-cringing at yourself and half listening with pride.

The following day you take another trip to the farm and meet a stranger. He is dressed in an oversized brown suit, black gumboots and is slightly greying. Papa greets him like an old friend and he introduces himself to you all as Papa Junior. He greets you in Ateso, you stumble your way through to jokuna and he smiles,

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20 Greeting in Ateso.
disappointed, noticing you don’t speak Ateso. You’re disappointed in yourself too.

Soon he invites you to his home and you walk out of the farm and follow him along a muddy path to his homestead. His home also has that in vogue white netted fabric everywhere. As you sit down, he offers you tea as his wife prepares lunch. When lunch is served at the table you are offered meat but politely decline and recite your reasoning again, sparking tufts of laughter on the table. Adai insists on serving herself and so she reaches for the ladle, dips it into the chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard.

You all freeze. But you’re proud of her audacity.

“Young girl, that piece isn’t for you,” says Papa Junior.

“But I want it,” she replies, defiantly pouring some more sauce on the piece of chicken, and the plastic-covered table mat with a picture of fruit on it in the process.

“Young girls are not supposed to eat the gizzard. It is a piece for big men,” he says.

“Why? What is the gizzard anyway?” Adai asks, confused about the big deal surrounding this piece of chicken.

“It’s like the stomach of the chicken. Chickens have special stomachs that can grind food, pu-ro-pa-lé! ” answers your cousin.

“Why is it important?” she asks again.

“Well, traditionally the head of the house or important guests are given the gizzard since it is the best part of the chicken,” Yaya answers.

She looks at Yaya confused and offended. Adai looks at Mama to save her chicken piece. Mama sighs and is beginning to reassure her that girls can eat gizzards too when Tata Junior (you assumed

21 Properly.

22 Grandmother in Ateso.
since she is Papa Junior’s wife) picks it off her plate. She stops mid-sentence and looks at them unamused.

After lunch is finished, Papa Junior takes you around his home. Reaching his small, packed wooden cattle kraal, he stops and beams at it with pride. They all look well-fed and beneath the mud and purple insecticide, you can see their brown, black and white colours.

“That one is called Peace, the other Ejakait, the other Apese. They sustain my family and I. There is no way I can live without them, even if you people complain about the environment,” he says.

“But according to statistics ...” you smile like a lawyer about to rebut in court and start on your environmental campaign again. Not registering that this man depends on cows for a living, not just to enjoy his meal.

“Here in our village, we rely on these animals to survive. I don’t know about you people in Kampala but how can we think about the end of the world when we need to put food on the table?” he responds calmly.

Your insensitivity and hypocrisy slap you in the face.
“But Papa this is a serious issue,” you say, more timidly than before.
“If we don’t try and hinder global warming then the heavy rains or the hot sun of this week will happen more frequently and then what will be left of your cows? Won’t all their feed be destroyed? Won’t the blazing sun dehydrate them?”
“Okay. But today, I have to feed my family,” he says with a slightly resigned smile.
A thick cloud of awkward silence looms over you.
“Now what can we do about it?” asks Adai innocently.
“Well, we use solar energy at home, grow our food and take good care of our cows,” says Papa.
That eases her worries and when you get back to Papa’s home, she is bent on becoming an eco-warrior. But you aren’t comforted. Even if your country reduces its greenhouse gases, it still only contributes a minute fraction of emissions in the world. You think that the real decision-makers are in the boardrooms of global corporations, state houses and halls of parliament regardless of what you do.

Lord knows how much you want to stand in the middle of town, poster in hand and demand that your government does something. But you’d rather not taste teargas as well as dust and diesel fumes while moving around Kampala.

*Kuku* sets the table and you smell the steaming rice, reminding you of the farmer you saw on the way. You want to help him, but don’t know how if you can’t even speak to him in his language, what’s meant to be your language too.

“The headlines. The new Kiira Motors bus which runs on electricity took its first trip around Kampala today. This is the first of a thousand that the government has commissioned to be produced in the next five years,” the TV screen crackles on, interrupting your train of thought as you sit down to eat dinner.

A glimmer of hope, a glimmer only, but hope nonetheless. “When we get back home, we have to figure out how to make our house eco-friendlier. Oh, and we can also get our neighbours to do the same. Papa, what else do you think we can do to fight climate change?”

As *Papa* thinks about an answer to Adai’s question, he reaches into the pot of chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard, puts one on your plate and another on hers.
Twee-twee twee-twee... the birds sang in the dense green foliage above Nyonyozi’s head. Like a young giraffe stretching its neck to locate predators, she raised her head to look at them. Two of the flock broke into a frantic pursuit and the other dashed into a nest nearby like it was late for the feast inside. Her mind raced backwards.

“Free from any dangers and worries. Were we like them we would fly up, very far away from this village and its heartless people.”

“Helen, it’s not that everybody is bad.”

“Nyonyozi, a bad egg will spoil the whole omelet.”

Nyonyozi remembered this conversation very well. They were at the same forest for firewood, a few days after Helen’s mother found them and called her aside for a ‘woman-to-woman’ talk. They all knew what that meant.

“Don’t tell me those things again mother. I don’t need the knife to make me a full woman. I am content with the way God created me,” Helen had said to her mother. Nyonyozi watched them from a distance.

“Helen... will you watch your father lose his inheritance because you don’t want to face rotwet? We’ll see how far your God will protect you,” Helen’s mother said and stormed away.

Above them, the weaver birds were singing, flirting and playing. Helen looked up at them for a moment; bemused.
Look at them, they are free of all worries and dangers. Helen used to tell her.

“Dear Helen! My heart bleeds for you,” Nyonyozi mumbled as a tear dropped from her eyes.

The sky was slowly darkening as the sun hastened to hide behind the cloud. Soon, the hyenas and all other creatures of the night would come out for their daily hunt.

She remembered Walinga, the man-animal that was said to hang around the village. People said he was a man during the day but turned into a leopard at night. He ate young children that walked alone at night or made them his slaves. Nyonyozi threw the bundle of firewood on her head and hurried home.

The hen flapped its wings trying to chase away the eagles that hovered in the sky. Nyonyozi quickly placed the bundle of firewood in one corner of the kitchen near the fireplace and joined in the chase. She glanced at the hen. Coo-coo-coo-coo. It clucked and drooped its wings like a canopy of trees above young plants. The chicks needed no further invitation. They crept under for protection. Nyonyozi remembered similar moments in her life. Her mother always carried her in her chest like a kangaroo as if to protect her from hawks plying the sky.

Nobody was home. Being a Saturday evening, her mother, Kentaro was at church for a Mothers’ Union Program while her father Cheptoyek was most likely at a beer party at the trading centre. Nyonyozi heard Mayenje mooing for attention. She picked a milk calabash from the kitchen rack and rushed to the kraal.

Mayenje now behaved like a child throwing tantrums. She mooed and stamped swinging its long horns backwards, forwards and sideways. When she saw Nyonyozi, she stood still for a moment
and then started running as if challenging her to a race. Nyonyozi knew this game too well. She ran after her this time determined to drain the cheekiness out of her. They did two rounds around the kraal but Mayenje wasn’t about to give up. She increased her tempo and the mood grew more competitive scattering the rest of the herd into confusion.

Nyonyozi never saw the big stone that always sat at the edge of the door to the kraal. She tripped over crushing the calabash into pieces. She heard heavy feet and scornful laughter above her head. It was her grandfather!

“Ha-ha... coward! The prize of rejecting tradition. That cow wouldn’t have fought you had you been woman enough.”

Nyonyozi quickly gathered herself on her knees. Bowing down her head, she greeted, “Good evening Grandpa.”

“I can’t be your grandfather. Not to a coward. If your father won’t rule over your mother, I will take you for cutting myself. I, Kwerit, son of Kulany, the mighty Chief of Binyiny won’t stand to see our family desecrated. Cheptoyek failed when he married that uncircumcised goat, your mother. Then she denied him a son. All we have is you, filthy girl,” Mzee Kwerit roared as he raised his right foot and moved towards Nyonyozi. She ducked in time to escape the kick.

“I swear you and your mother will never have peace in this home unless you embrace our culture. Take the knife and become women.” He turned his back and started to move away. Then, he stopped and turned to address Nyonyozi, “Don’t deceive yourself. Educated or not, you must face the rotwet and bring us bride wealth. At your age, you would be breastfeeding your third child.”

With that, he trotted towards the trading centre.
Sounds of laughter filled Binyiny trading centre as the sun disappeared with a brilliant flash behind the bastion of mountains. The smell of wood from the cooking fires filled the atmosphere as men gathered around a pot sipping the locally brewed maize beer, using foot long straws.

“Clansmen, our next beer party will be at Cheptoyek’s household,” Cheborion, his elder brother shouted. There were murmurs in the gathering. As Cheptoyek stood in the middle of the gathering to raise the beer pot as a sign of acceptance, someone gripped his hand.

“Ha-ha, who would want to drink something prepared by cowards that never faced the *rotwet*?” Mzee Kwerit roared creating silence. “Neither my wife nor child is a coward. I won’t allow you to ruin their lives with your worthless *rotwet*. Tell me Chief, what happened to my sister Chespi? Why is she crippled? And Helen? Huh? Where is she? I have always told you that female circumcision will never be a mark for a woman into adulthood,” Cheptoyek hit back at his father.

“You are testing my patience, Cheptoyek. Uncircumcised women aren’t allowed to enter kraals. Yet your daughter and wife do so. Listen to me, I, the Mighty Chief of Binyiny, swear on my clan and ancestors that Nyonyozi will not skip the coming *rotwet* season.” He raised his walking stick in the air as some people cheered him.

The moon was a warm milky glow in the sky, making the tree trunks gleam as if they were brushed with iridescent paint. Nyonyozi sat with her mother by the fireplace in their hut. The walls were dark
with decades of wood smoke. Kentaro watched her daughter mingle the millet flour into a millet bread. She was proud to have groomed her into the lady she was.

“When you were little, your father always said your eyes shone like stars in the sky. That’s why he called you Nyonyozi. In my mother tongue, Nyonyozi means a star. You are our star. Don’t let anyone steal your gleaming light. Don’t mind people’s words. We love and support you. Right baby?” Kentaro asked her daughter who had now finished preparing supper and was lying on her lap as her mother gently stroked her hair.

“Right Mother. Do you think schools will open soon? Am worried that most parents are marrying off their daughters for bride wealth.”

There was a knock on the door and Nyonyozi hurried up to open. “Welcome back, father. How was your evening?” greeted Nyonyozi. “It was fine. How is my darling?” Cheptoyek said as he pecked his wife on the cheeks. He came home early today, and was surprised to find supper ready. He automatically knew that Nyonyozi was the one who cooked, not that his wife was a slow cook but because their daughter always prepared supper early. He sat on a wooden stool and looked at his wife and daughter on the mat beside him.

“Nyonyozi, I have good news for you. The president has directed schools to re-open next week.”

“What?”

Nyonyozi couldn’t believe her ears. “Papa, where did you get the news?”

“Everyone in the trading centre was talking about it. They said that the Coronavirus cases have reduced.”

Finally, she was going back to school!
Buildings with rusted iron sheets welcomed Nyonyozi to Binyiny High School. The iron sheets on the Form Six block had been blown off by the wind. She could see clouds gliding past the sky above her head. She looked through the window and saw the bushy compound outside. She remembered Helen’s fatigued face whenever they had to slash the compound. Helen. Helen. It can’t be true that she is gone forever. Helen was the only friend she had. Not that everyone at school hated her but Helen was the only one who could stand the pressure that came along with befriending an uncircumcised girl. She remembered how Helen often defended her whenever Chebet attacked her.

“Coward, that’s why you refuse to become a ‘full’ woman.” Chebet did not only bully her. She hated her.

Maybe Helen was tired of Chebet’s taunts that is why she decided to face the rotwet.

“Nonyozi dear, I have decided to face the rotwet,” Helen said one day as they were in the forest, collecting firewood.

“What? Are you serious? Is it because of that conversation you had with your mother last week? Helen please, you know rotwet has caused more harm than good. Do you choose it?”

“My dear, there are times when your choice doesn’t matter. You can’t fight the whole village, can you? You know, I have always wanted to live like those weaver birds. What big respect they have for one another! A male weaver bird builds a nest for the wife-to-be. But if she doesn’t like it, she tears it down and her decision is respected! Hmn. The male keeps building nests until she is satisfied. That’s how I hoped my life would be. To be able to make decisions that will be respected without any worries of me being a woman or not. But... that’s not possible now. Grandpa has threatened to disown my father. In order
to protect his inheritance, I have to face the knife. I am sorry, Nyonyozi.” Helen’s eyes filled with tears before she ran away, leaving Nyonyozi dumbfounded.

Days turned into weeks. Being uncircumcised, Nyonyozi couldn’t attend the ceremonies. After the circumcision, all girls were taken into isolation where no one was allowed to see them. Nyonyozi prayed and hoped that Helen was alright not until when her father and uncle Cheborion came rushing home.

The strong smell of disinfectant hit Nyonyozi’s nostrils as she entered the hospital room. Helen lay on the bed looking weak and pale. Nyonyozi’s face was near hers and there were tears on her cheeks. Helen put up a hand and brushed them away.

“Don’t cry Nyonyozi. I am gone.”

“No. Please Helen, don’t... You will be okay.”

“Nyonyozi, I lost too much blood. I am dying...”

“No, Helen. Don’t die... I am sorry. I didn’t protect you.”

Tears nipped her throat. She sank her face in Helen’s shoulder, not wanting her to see how broken she was.

“Dear, you don’t need to be sorry. You also had no choice. Though you have it now. To live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions that will be respected. To build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.” She closed her eyes. Her rasping breath ceased; her grip slackened.

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It was the second week. There was a low turnout of students. Her class which had twenty students before the Coronavirus pandemic, now had only eight. Nyonyozi’s mind kept drifting to Helen’s words.
She had to do something. It was towards December when the circumcision festivities would start. She walked to the headmaster’s office, and knocked on the door. She remembered the number of times she had knocked on this door pleading for more time to pay for her tuition fees. This time she was on a different mission. She wanted to help the girls.

“That’s a very good cause Nyonyozi. The low student numbers are worrying. You have our full support as a school. I will contact our District headquarters and other schools for support. Good luck and let the stars shine.”

The mountainous terrain of Kapchorwa made movement difficult. They traversed many villages sensitising people about the dangers associated with early marriages, teenage pregnancies and female circumcision. Nyonyozi bonded with most of her schoolmates except Chebet. Probably because Chebet’s grandmother, Chalengat, was a famous mutik, the surgeon. A good granddaughter would never stand against her grandmother’s cultural office.

“Ha-ha, a group of cowards. A coward at 18! Nyonyozi, you’re a coward forever. There is nothing to tell us when you haven’t faced the rotwet. Go away before something happens,” Mzee Kwerit threatened.

“There is no coward here, Grandpa. Helen didn’t face the rotwet to get rid of cowardice. She was forced. Where is she now? That’s why we are here. We won’t lose any more lives to the rotwet.”

“Shut up coward. I am your Chief, coward.”

“Don’t call me a coward again. You can’t reverse what happened to Helen or Aunt Chespi.”

“You’re getting on my nerves coward. I hope you’ll like what happens to you,” Mzee Kwerit gritted his teeth and moved away.
The resistance gradually decreased. Many school children supported Nyonyozi’s project. They traversed many villages holding placards with messages against female circumcision. This awakened the District officials who formally feared to lose their electoral offices.

Nyonyozi’s heart beamed with pride as she walked briskly back home. The District officials and her team prepared an event the next day where they would join hands to mobilise the communities. She heard an unusual sound. Suddenly, she was hit just over her left ear. She slumped to the ground without a word.

Nyonyozi opened her eyes but couldn’t focus. Her brain felt loose like she was floating on water.

“Good, you are awake!”

A voice of a man! Mzee Kwerit’s voice!

“Grandpa! What am I doing here?” Nyonyozi asked, sobbing.

“Ha-ha, of course you know why you are here. Congratulations! You will be a woman, finally.”

Mzee Kwerit was scornful. In a moment Chebet’s grandmother, the famous mutik, entered carrying the concoction of herbs in a calabash.

Nyonyozi seethed with fury. As Chalengat reached for her, Nyonyozi cracked a fist as hard as she could against the mutik’s jaw. As Nyonyozi got to her feet, Mzee Kwerit gave her a blow on the back of her head. She fell to the floor. Mzee Kwerit held her legs as Chalengat applied the pre-circumcision herbs.

“Silly coward. You try saving others when you can’t save yourself!” Mzee Kwerit mocked as Chalengat held out her curved rotwet ready to make Nyonyozi a full woman.

A sharp sound of drums and people chanting suddenly filled the air. Mzee Kwerit and Chalengat were startled. Mzee Kwerit ran to the entrance and came back worried. Angry voices shouted out their names.
“Get out. This must stop.” A group of young girls and boys stormed the compound. They carried sticks and pangas. With them were the police. Nyonyozi could hear the clanking noise of handcuffs as her captors were led outside.

Where had all these people come from? School children, men and women, young and old surrounded the hut holding placards while others beat the drums as they sang Nyonyozi’s name. She was still awestruck when her mother embraced her in a tight hug.

“I feared I had lost you,” Kentaro said with tears in her eyes. “Chebet, your classmate helped us. She heard Mzee Kwerit plan with her grandmother to cut you. News of your disappearance had spread throughout the village and everyone including the district officials were concerned. They all came to your rescue.”

“Today we celebrate the successful rescue mission. We still remind everyone that the law against Female Genital Mutilation enacted in 2011 still holds and will take its course on anyone who violates it. Nyonyozi has been appointed as the regional ambassador for children’s rights. Her project will be launched by the President officially soon,” Miss Chelimo, the Resident District Commissioner told the press.

Nyonyozi’s gaze shifted to Chebet who grinned at her. That’s when she realised that they were being recorded as cameras beamed at them. Her lips curved into a smile as they hugged each other knowing that the journey had just begun.

Nyonyozi knew that it would take time for all her people to accept change and allow it to settle in and take a firm root. But she wasn’t scared as she looked at the weaver birds that flew over to their nests in the trees. With their bright yellow and orange feathers, the birds re-assured her of life’s rebirth. She brought the hem of
her dress to dry her tear-filled eyes. Helen’s last words echoed in her mind. *Live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions. Build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.*
“I don’t want to see her...” my faint voice trails off. I am fortunate not to have found myself in this situation when hospitals were more cautious in admitting patients. No one wants to contract the virus that makes face masks, soap and sanitizers must-haves.

Nurse Vivian looks perplexed. She opens her lips wrapped in a white and blue coloured face mask to speak but closes them almost immediately. She steps out. After a brief mumbling behind the door with my mother, she enters but moves towards another patient. My mother’s footsteps can be heard fading away into the distance; people do say that she drags her feet while walking like a village girl. This is a visiting hour. Anyone but my mother can visit me.

Here, those who share food after being visited are everyone’s favourite. It is no child’s play to be sick and hungry at the same time. I hate the nauseating smell of the hospital and the rude behaviours of the nurses yet being here has changed a lot about me. I don’t have to share a tiny bed with mother. Uncle Imoh, our next door neighbour, also can’t fondle with my body any time I enter his room to watch TV; I don’t like it but he gives me food. I don’t have to hawk anymore before mother agrees to send me food. But I miss my legs; I would rather hawk under the scorching sun than live without legs.
Weeks ago, mother was in the room cutting vegetables. It was Sunday, the only day we enjoy her presence. I dropped the 50 naira worth of crayfish she sent me to get on the table beside her. Fish or meat was a luxury. She had reluctantly handed me the last 200 naira she had.

“Where is my change?” mother asked.

Change? I checked my hands and was holding nothing. I dashed out like lightning. My eyes stuck to the floor as if my life depended on it until I got to Mama Tina’s shop; I had bought the crayfish from her. I was sure I got the change but how it left my hand was what I couldn’t account for. Everything felt so dramatic.

Going back home terrified me. That money meant a lot to us. My eldest brother, who my late father had sold our two plots of land to send abroad for greener pastures rarely helped; he was probably trying to survive over there too. Mama Dozie once told my mother that white women were ‘merciless spenders’. She said they might be spending his money on makeup, weave-ons and surgeries.

My other siblings couldn’t help. Chima was an apprentice at a mechanic workshop. He didn’t like school. Chinonso would be through with secondary school soon. According to him, his teachers preferred talking to teaching. So, mother was saving to get him enrolled in an evening class. His friend, Nnamdi said that Chinonso was only interested in the lesson because his crush was a student there. Since mother started saving, we consumed soaked garri often. The desire to be called Mama Lawyer was enough motivation for her. I would have to stop school for some time; more hawking time meant more money. Money would be needed to pay Chinonso’s fees on admission into the university. I could continue my education afterwards. Mother didn’t tell me. I overheard her tell her best friend.
I wished I wouldn’t have to be my brother’s sacrificial lamb but I knew better. Disobedience to mother equaled hunger. Quitting school would be for a while unlike some girls in my neighbourhood. Iyabo, the daughter of the woman whose 6-year-old son was forcefully drugged by their neighbour, stopped schooling two years ago. She actually got pregnant and was ashamed to continue. She moved in with the taxi driver who impregnated her. Not all girls got such acceptance. They bore the responsibility like the cases of Ada, Mariam and Nofisat. Those were the cases I witnessed.

“How are you fine girl?” a masculine voice jolted me back to reality. I looked back to see a man smiling in a funny way. He was inside a black car.

“Why are you crying?”
I wiped my tears with the back of my right palm.

“What’s wrong? Come inside the car. Or do you want me to take you to Chicken Republic?”
I realised I had not eaten lunch and was hungry already. The man sounded nice. I wanted to ask him for money but what if after touching the money, I become a yam? He will just wrap me and put me in his car and use me for some money ritual. I took a few steps away.

“Fine girl come na!”
I did not bother to look back. My stomach mustn’t rule my head. Bukky, my former classmate had been missing for three years. Her family members have given up on seeing her. She might have been used to renew a wicked person’s charm, for money or for something else.
I sighted Aunt Mabel in her shop. She has been a nice woman. I felt shy to ask for her help but I couldn’t face mother’s wrath.

“The irregularity of power supply is getting worse o. I don’t even have any ice block to sell,” Aunt Mabel spoke with her phone fixed to her left ear. I was behind her.
She kept quiet at intervals to listen to the voice on the other end of the call.

“Muna is at home. Her schooling is one day on, one day off at the moment. She said it’s one of the ways the government is controlling the spread of the virus. Muna that doesn’t know how to read when school was from Monday to Friday! Is she the one that will know how to read when she goes to school thrice in a week?”

She continued, “Do you think I will be speaking with you for this long if not for WhatsApp call? You know it’s cheaper. Please, send us something if you don’t want hunger to end our lives before you come... Mama is also sick. The doctor said it is typhoid. It must be from the water we drink o. I will get her drug when Harrison gets to his shop tonight. I don’t trust that small girl in his shop o; a girl that just finished secondary school last two months already handling a chemist... My own is that Mama should just get better because I don’t have time to spend in that hospital. You can go in the morning and get to see the doctor in the afternoon. Hmmm... it’s not funny at all...”

She was in a tight situation. So, I left.

It was already dark. I stood at our room’s entrance afraid to go in. I moved back in fear when the door opened. Chinonso came out holding a small bowl of water. They must have just finished eating.

“Where have you been? Mother will kill you today.” He gestured with his right hand moving across his neck as a knife is used on a chicken.

“Don’t mind him. Mother is already sleeping,” Chima said as he stepped out.

I moved backward, scared that my troublesome brothers might force me into the room.

“See na,” Chima opened the door and moved the curtain aside.

Mother was in bed.
I entered the room, afraid, tired and hungry. Asking for food was not an option. I decided to lay my aching head. Carefully, I climbed the bed to lay quietly beside mother. Suddenly, the torch beside mother’s left foot fell and its annoying sound woke her up. I jumped up.

“Where have you been and where is my 150 naira?” she looked angry. I wanted to urinate. There was no one to plead on my behalf. Chima and Chinonso were outside.

“When did you become deaf and dumb?” she gradually stood up. I ran to the door.

“Where do you think you are running to?”

“I... I... I did not... I did not see... see it,” I stammered. Mother wanted to grab me but I was faster. I ran out of the room, out of the compound to nowhere. I continued running because I could hear my mother running after me. As I left our compound to cross to the other side, I felt something hard hit me to the floor. That was how I got here.

I’ve lost my legs. Moses, our landlord’s son studying Medicine in the university said that if the accident happened in a civilised country, my legs won’t be chopped off. I don’t know how true his words are but I blame poverty for making 150 naira my mother’s millions. I blame my mother for delaying in forgiving me. Her uncontrolled anger has cost me a lot. I blame the driver of the car that was on the move with a bad headlight; the tyres crushed my bones and put me through pain and discomfort. I blame the force personnel who might have ignored the careless driver in exchange for cash; they indirectly exchanged my legs in the process. I blame...

My mother has been mourning. Only a miracle can change my situation. I have stopped her from coming to see me. Chima and Chinonso share the duty of caring for me. It’s no easy task caring for
me though they don’t say it. Mother keeps pleading for forgiveness through them but I’m still angry.

Chima and Chinonso work in the factory on weekends to assist mother with the cost of caring for me. Our brother sent some money and promised to send more.

The ongoing conversation gets my attention.

“My boss lost two relatives to the South Sudan flood. He has not been himself since that incident. Yesterday, he received the news that his daughter studying abroad tested positive to Coronavirus. I really pity that man o... Such a nice man!” Mama Adeola’s visitor sounds hurt.

“What if he decides to relocate to be closer to his family? Many of us will become jobless because he may just sell off that company. It is really difficult to get a job during this pandemic period. The cost of living is also increasing.”

“Is the virus truly spreading again? I’ve heard something like the second wave...” Mama Adeola remarks looking paler than she was before her visitor arrived.

She must be worried for the safety of her children. Every patient in the ward looks curious except Eno. I heard Eno said that she has nothing to lose. Her parents are dead. Even if she contracts the disease and dies, there is no one to cry for her.

“Don’t even disturb yourself... Which virus? Go to the market and you will see how people move about freely. It is the ‘I too know’ set of people that do compress their nose inside this thing. The funny thing is that most of them don’t wear it properly.”

He tosses his face mask. “I only brought it along with me because it’s a criterion to enter here.”

“But you said that your boss’s daughter tested positive...” Mama Adeola says finding it difficult to be convinced.
“His daughter doesn’t stay here,” he defends his view, “What worries me is not Coronavirus but the conflict in the country. Those of us with children in the force can relate.”

I am confused. My brothers told me that Mr. Chuks, the man who lived in a better part of this state and promised to sponsor ten children from the slum where we stay, through school even to university level has died. He died of Coronavirus. Two distant relatives, according to Moses, lost their lives to the virus too. There’s a war within me. A war between what is and what isn’t. What is the fate of journalists whose news has lost the trust of many? What is the fate of a government far from the grassroots? What is the fate of a people who lack the necessary knowledge in a fast-paced world? “Doctor!” the visitor calls out to a team of medical practitioners passing by.

They stop and turn to face him. “Yes?” the lady questions, maintaining social distance. “I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the doctor,” he says, pointing at the only male in a team of two females and a male. “I’m the doctor,” she answers. “Oh! Alright madam. Please, my head is aching badly.” “Is that all?” “Yes doc...doctor.” It seems strange to him to call her that. “I have a terrible headache,” he says. “Nurse Johnson,” she says facing the male in the team, “administer analgesic.” “Okay ma.”

The visitor looks confused. Calling a man ‘nurse’ sounds odd to him. It is past visiting time. The visitors are leaving. Some will stay with their sick although the hospital does not provide any provision for them. They are therefore exposed to harsh weather and blood thirty mosquitoes.
Anita hobbles on crutches to Helen’s bed. Helen’s bed is next to mine. I know that an argument will soon ensue. That is how their discussions always end.

“See the posts on Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation. I’m so happy for her!” Helen says handing her phone to Anita.

“That is the point I was making the other day. If she hadn’t studied abroad, do you think she will get to that height?” Anita continues, “Who will see me and know that I’m a second-class upper graduate?”

“Everything is not all about studying abroad. Mamokgethi Phakeng achieved her BSc and MSc in Africa yet she is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town,” Helen replies.

“I have told you about my closest friend at home na!” Anita responds, ‘She graduated with a first class but her fiancé got involved in hard drugs to be able to pay her bride price. He was scared to lose her; her mother was already pressuring her to get married even though she was only 28 years old. He got caught and is still in prison. She is a psychiatric patient at the moment. If her uncle did not intervene financially, she would be among those mad people roaming the street, living in misery and wasting their potential.”

Helen pats Anita’s shoulder, “Have you given up on having a better country?”

Anita flings her hand away, “If the government subsidises the costs or offers free drugs, then those mad people will get healthy enough to contribute to the better country you are shouting about. As for me, I can’t wait to leave this country. Do people just wake up in the morning and decide to migrate?”

Anita sounds frustrated, “Mass migration and displacement here is because of poverty, violent conflict and environmental stress. Tell me, aren’t you stressed?”
Anita hisses, drops Helen’s phone and takes hold of her clutches, “Moreover, it’s a man’s world here. I’d rather go to a place where my worth will be appreciated.”
“It’s a man’s world as much as a woman’s world. If you treat yourself like the queen that you are, others will learn their role in your palace,” Helen asserts.
Anita looks at her like she just spewed trash and leaves angrily.
My eyes are heavy already. I adjust my bedspread while still sitting on it. A folded paper lay on my bed. Curious, I glue my face to it. Oh! It must have dropped from Anita.

Dear Anita,
How are you? Hope you feel better. I’m sorry about the barrier caused by the distance in your trying times. I’ve missed you so much and do think about you. It feels ridiculous that I’m writing a letter but your faulty phone gives me no option. I have gist for you.

Do you know that Madam Eno wanted to make me a prostitute when I got here? That one is a topic for another time. At the moment, I work as a nanny for Mr Stanley’s family. You still remember him? The man who used to lavish money in our village. The one who impregnated Kachi to be certain she was fertile before paying her bride price. He shouts at Kachi at will telling her how useless her life is without him. While plugging in his phone last week, my eyes popped. I think he has another family elsewhere. Little wonder he protects his phone more than his children.

I lost interest in watching news after I had to listen to talks about End SARS protest, the flood that ended lives and destroyed properties in South Sudan, hunger crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, displacement crisis in Burkina Faso, locust outbreak in Ethiopia, conflict in Mozambique... I was getting depressed.
This morning, on my way home, I passed by the COVID-19 vaccination centre though not sure I wanted to get vaccinated because someone said the vaccine can clot one's blood. Despite social distancing, someone stepped on me and still looked at me like I ought to apologise for her fault. So saucy! I couldn't contain my displeasure; I left the place. If I was in my homeland, there would have been no fear of expressing myself.

Hope you got the money I sent to you. Let me know when your phone gets fixed; it's been long since we video-chatted. Get well soon. Your friend, Onome.

I fold the paper, unsure of how I will hand it over to Anita. What if she demands to know if I read its content? Onome is right. Our homeland should provide the shell and freedom our sanity needs. It dawns on me that I am not useless. I don't have legs but I have hands and a brain to contribute to the formation of the country I desire. I choose to forgive my mother and others; strong families make for a standing society. I long for a place to call ‘home’. No one truly triumphs and nothing thrives in malice.
Maybe it’s because I am a woman. It may even be because I am black. All I know right now is that, over the past few months, this disciplinary committee has tried hard to tear apart my side of the story so much so that I even began to doubt that it actually happened at all. Before I tell you what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020, I would like to tell you a little bit about myself.

My name is Phelile Mahlalela but my friends call me Pheli. I cannot even remember when or why they started calling me that but I like it. Like all young people, after I completed my higher diploma in tourism and hospitality, the sky was my limit. I knew that I would immediately land myself a job with one of the big five hotels in Cape Town – read Emperor Hotel in Sandton. After my parents passed away, my grandparents took me in and brought me up as their daughter rather than granddaughter and so I wanted them to also enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Well of course without a job, I could not afford a house in the suburbs or one of the highrise buildings so I rented a three-bedroomed ‘weatherman shack’ in Johannesburg’s CBD. I call it that because you could tell by 5 o’clock in the morning just how hot or cold the rest of the day would be by feeling the temperature of the walls. I knew that we would not live there for long. One month turned into the next and the next and the next. I lost control.
One day, I overhead my neighbours discussing about a hotel that was hiring waitresses. One of them mentioned that they knew a waitress who earned R8 000 per month and this was before adding the tips. I knew that this was my chance. I had to get the job.

I went to the nearest internet café and can you imagine that the man charged me a whole R50 for just typing and printing out my CV which was only 2-pages long. Anyway, the R50 was not mine to keep as I had also silently borrowed it from my neighbour while she was deep asleep. And of course I also had to ‘shop’ for some clothes as well.

On the morning of the interview, I woke up very early as I had to wear my new clothes and leave before anyone else woke up. I was a definite sight to behold. But that did not matter. My eyes were set on the job. To cover myself, just in case I met someone from one of the places I had shopped, I wore my grandfather’s long coat. I was ready for the interview.

You may think that I should be ashamed of what I did that day to get here. But I am so unashamed about that day. In fact I always commemorate it with some tasty takeout for my family. That was the last time that I helped myself to something that was not mine. In hindsight, I might have had to continue living that way if I hadn’t gotten this job.

But I don’t have to live that way anymore. This is why I am so surprised to hear that the current manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton has accused me of stealing from one of our clients on 8th June 2020. He even managed to present an affidavit from the client in question who alleges that I stole her cell phone. I might as well have been accused of stealing all her belongings including the
hotel’s bed. I was not given a chance to defend myself and within no time, I was disgracefully chased from the hotel. But I am a fighter. There was no way I was taking my grandparents back to the weatherman shack. So I kept calling and I called the boss of my boss. Well call me lucky but she agreed to give me a chance. Maybe it is because she was a woman or maybe because she was also black. But there was a problem...

You see as soon as I went home, the next day, South Africa announced the first COVID-19 case and from there it took a turn for the worse. Johannesburg was a hot spot. I had to be vaccinated before I set foot in the hotel. Well, I am glad for my days living in my weatherman shack. Let us just say that I got the shots – two months apart before I set my foot in the hotel. I even have my vaccination card. I can show it to you if you want.

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Today is 25th September 2020. I am before the disciplinary committee. I have to explain my side of the story. I cannot mess it up. “Miss Phelile Mahlalela please tell us what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020 in this very hotel,” my boss’s boss asks. ‘Of course, it has to be in this hotel,’ I almost say but catch myself just in time.

I look at my boss’s boss then I look at my boss and I know that one of them will not like what I have to say.

“My dear disciplinary committee,” I begin, “Thank you for giving me an opportunity to talk about the events between the dates you have mentioned. As usual, we have to pick our tips from Mr. Walters here. So this particular Friday when I went to pick up my tip, I was
informed that Mr. Walters had temporarily relocated his office and I had to go and see him at the basement.

“I really needed my tips because I had to make some payment. I found him in this so-called office. It is a small room that is used occasionally by construction workers. Oh I forgot something, one of our clients had given me a cell phone as a gift. I showed it to Mr. Walters as I am required to do by the HR manual. This displeased him immensely.

“My dear lady and gentlemen of this disciplinary committee, there is a part of this story that I had hoped I would not have to tell. As we were arguing on my tips, I saw a bag with a lot of money. I knew that it was money that he had stolen from the hotel. I told him that I would report him to my seniors and that is when Mr Walters said that he would teach me a lesson that I would never forget.

“Lady and gentlemen, I cannot explain what happened without crying. Here is my medical report,” I finished as I handed the report to my boss's boss.
She read it and passed it on. Mr. Walters did not speak. That is the last I heard from and of him.

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This is another two months later ...
November 25, 2020
Phelile Mahlalela
Food and beverage services conductor
The Grand Emperor Hotel
807 Naledi Street
Sandton, GP

Dear Ms Mahlalela,

We would firstly like to offer you our deepest apologies at what you suffered at the hands of one of our managers. You have truly been brave, in expressing your story. In so doing, you are making our company a safer place for all women, from the highest-ranking ones to others, like you, who keep everything running at our various hotels.

Our initial investigation into a case of theft against you has been an evolving and dynamic one. In it we have had to investigate claims made against you, as well as the counterclaims which you presented to the committee.

Finding the truth has been a difficult and humbling journey for us as the committee. Be that as it may, we also respect the ways in which the work of this disciplinary committee has affected you. We suspended you and stripped you of your livelihood for six months.
This is just one of the many errors which we have made, as the disciplinary committee, that largely disadvantaged you. We have made some decisions which we hope you would accept as a token of our remorse.

- Your suspension at the company has been lifted.
- You will be awarded the full sum of the salaries withheld from you during your suspension.
- Those salaries will be awarded as a lumpsum plus interest at 2% above the rate of inflation.

Your accuser has been fired from the company. Furthermore, given the fact that his absence creates a vacancy, we are offering you the role of manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton. We wish that you will accept this offer as we have the utmost faith in your ability to serve the guests and employees of the hotel. We look forward to leaving the management and administration of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton in your very capable hands.

Sincerely

Charlize K. Theunissen
Chairperson of the Internal Disciplinary Committee
I have to hurry to go back home. I am getting impatient waiting for my fellow Chief Executive Officers to make their comments. We are discussing the current realities of the continent. Our continent has gone through a lot of changes and by sheer determination, grit, hard work and courage we have managed to beat all odds. In fact, our exchange rate is currently one of the best in the world – 1 Fikan is exchanging at 70 Dollars, 75 Euro and 70 Yuan. And this is the story I am burning to tell my grandchildren. The last time they all visited, we had a great time together. I can still remember their faces as I shared with them some of the lessons that I have learnt in life. This is why I cannot wait to get home and truthfully, this conference is wasting my time!

Today I will share with them something that is very personal to me. I do not know how they will take it. I hope that they will still consider me as their grandmother and not judge me so harshly.

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I am at home now. We have just had our supper and are seated on the verandah! It is a warm night. My grandchildren are all gathered around me. They are looking up to me ready to hear my story. I have to take the risk. I am transported to a far away time.
“My grandchildren, today I will tell you about me. I was born with the joy that heralded every birth of a child to a middle class family after several miscarriages and attempts at conception. However, my family still appeared disappointed just because I was a female. My Papa never failed to mention that he would have preferred a male child. He was a devout Catholic, and probably as a result dedicated and baptised me as was expected. I grew up knowing that my brother got whatever he wanted despite my superior grades in school. I was always trying to get better so that I would also have access to some of the things that he enjoyed. I always ensured that my uniforms were neat and clean and was always among the top ten of my class. My Papa would always say, ‘Do well in school to justify this huge expense and investment that I am making so that you can pay me back for not marrying you off despite the fact that you would not bear my surname for long.’ I always replied, ‘Papa I would do well and you would be proud.’

“I knew I was privileged to be sent to school because I had too many friends who were not allowed to go to school and were forced to marry so that they could provide for their families and protect the family name. While I resented the fact that I did many of the house chores along with Mother sometimes till midnight ‘to prepare me for my husband’s house’, I was grateful that such an experience was still far better compared to being married off. Father taught me that I should be submissive to all the men around us, claiming that was an injunction of the Holy Bible. He would remind me that the suffering and pain in the world was a result of the disobedience of Eve who cunningly lured her husband to eat the forbidden fruit, making him to disobey God. A woman could try to appease for her sins by being submissive. This would reduce her pain during childbirth, otherwise all her children would die at the birthing stool and in the afterlife, she
would endure a long purgatory if at all she made it to heaven. From an early age, I learnt submission.

“\textbf{I had always been submissive until the day my father met Sango. Sango was a merchant who promised lots of money if only he was allowed to take me with him overseas. Father had often been lured by the promise of a good life overseas. He was determined that I should go overseas despite Mother’s and my protests. I even promised to stop school to start working if he allowed me to stay but his mind was made up. I attempted to run away from home but Papa found me and brought me back. He then resorted to blackmail. Papa said, ‘Remember you promised to make me proud?’ What could I say? Indeed, I had and so I just nodded. Papa said sternly, ‘Do this act of selflessness and bring honour and respect to the family name. You will start earning money that will provide for us all and repay all the expenses I have incurred on your education.’ According to Papa, that was the end of the discussion and I had to prepare for my day of departure.}"

“The day arrived and although I knew that things were not quite right I had no choice. Mother sobbed loudly as we said our goodbyes. I was going overseas to study to protect the family name and bring back money to repay Papa. ‘Be the strong woman that I have raised you to be and the Lord will preserve you for your obedience,’ Mother said as I left. Papa on the other hand was smiling from ear to ear as he knew that within a short time I would start sending him some money.

“I braved the future. I did not want to bring shame to the family name. We were driven outside the city to a forest for purification. I wondered why this was necessary before we travelled. Little did I know that this was a trick. We were a group of twelve girls and before long we were surrounded by men. I was so scared
but remembered Mother’s words and feigned courage. We were taken into a secluded hut and the men surrounded the hut. There was no escape!

“They would escort us every day to a nearby stream where we would bathe using different soaps and herbs while swearing an oath of allegiance to the deity, never to run away. I wondered where this was leading to as no one ever explained anything to us. I often wondered what was going on at home. The final rites of initiation came. It was horrific as I had learnt about Female Genital Mutilation at school. This is all we were being prepared for.

“Sango believed that the girls who went to school were rude and looked down upon their culture which was not true. So he took it as his mission, together with his cronies, to ensure that we also went through the cut.

“That was the most painful experience I have ever gone through. Most of the girls succumbed to the pain and their bodies were disposed of in the forest. I wondered what Sango would tell their parents.

“My grandchildren, for several days I was in pain and I thought that I could not make it alive. I could neither eat nor sleep.

“Unknown to us, the authorities were monitoring Sango and finally the law caught up with him. Some of his cronies escaped but most were caught. We were four girls who survived. We were rushed to the hospital for care. It was too late; the damage had already been done.

“After spending almost a month at the hospital, we were discharged. I was filled with self-loathing and I had no self-esteem. I wondered whether I could look Papa in the eye without hating him for his selfishness or despise Mother for her weakness in not standing up for me. The journey back home seemed like a long road, a long road to freedom, freedom I didn’t feel or appreciate.”
I wondered whether I should continue with the story as any time I thought about it, it brought back very sad memories. But anyway, I had to continue. My grandchildren were all looking at me and I could tell that none wanted me to stop and yet, they did not know how to ask me to continue. After a long pause, I continued.

“On reaching home, I would not even talk to my parents. Their apologies and regrets fell on deaf ears. I wondered if Papa had really thought through what Sango had promised. I knew that I could not stay under the same roof with my parents. The bitterness I felt was too much. I decided to get solace in my books as that is what I enjoyed doing the most. I had to get away from home. I was determined to get an education even if it meant that I had to self-fund. And that is exactly what I did.

“I focused on my academics and got admitted into the university to study agriculture. Although I was doing well academically, my social life was not going on well. I could not seem to hold onto any meaningful relationships and within no time, I turned to hard drugs and alcohol to fill the void.

“Academic excellence, my only sense of accomplishment, gave me fully funded scholarships for my Masters and Doctorate degrees. It was towards the end of my Master’s program that I met Sekhukhune, your grandfather. As with every great relationship, we started out as friends. His unusual opinion about gender and nationality intrigued me. He didn’t discriminate, feel superior or ever use religious tales to seek subordination. He instead insisted that he believed that we were to be submissive one to another and to love our spouse better than our own selves. As we continued to get closer, his love, care, understanding and attention made me feel better about myself and eventually, I agreed to marry him towards the end of our doctorate program after so much persuasion. As he fondly reminded me, that I was the most difficult investor
he had to persuade to believe in him. He also convinced me to forgive my parents because like he always says, ‘Unforgiveness, bitterness and resentment are like poison that ravage the soul.’ He helped me to work through my issues with alcohol and drugs. I even forgave my parents and was re-united with them upon my return. Oh how I love my husband, my grandchildren!

“On our return, armed with a strong sense of purpose, we decided to start an agricultural financing company. It wasn’t a walk in the park, but certain strategies and determination made the growth of the company a worthwhile adventure. We worked tirelessly with the small-scale farmers training them on sustainable agricultural methods. This required patience and hard work. We shared with the farmers some of our experiences in the various countries that we had visited. We also convinced the Africans in the diaspora to invest back home.

“Our governments also created the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. This agreement allowed for borderless trade and allowed our market to become the largest trading area in the world. Seeing the benefits it brought to our economies, we decided to develop one currency, the Fikans. Of course our company, like many others benefited from the agreement that culminated into the largest agricultural conglomerate in the world. We have collaborated on many landmark projects and matters ranging from climate change, renewable energy, manufacturing, just to mention a few.”

I finished my story and was enveloped by seemingly grave yard silence. I was terrified to look at their faces. Despite all the accolades the world had given, if my family did not respect me or understand their grandma based on this new revelation,
I would have been shattered. The applause startled me. I burst into tears. The warm hugs and understanding faces, however, made me realise that although I could not change the past, it turned out okay.
Uma was disturbed. He didn’t know what the future held for him especially now that they were relocating to the village after his father’s retirement. All his life, fifteen years and four months to be precise, he had lived with his family in the city of Jos. Not once within this period had he ever visited the village. Whenever his parents were visiting the village, they left him in the care of Auntie Margaret, his mother’s elder sister who lived in the same estate with them.

He didn’t mind staying with Auntie Margaret but as he grew older, he wondered why he was never taken to his village. All he knew was that he was from Benue State, Gboko Local Government area and Ihugh Village precisely. The only extended family he knew were those who came to visit and a few others who he had seen in pictures. When he asked his father why he was never taken to the village, especially after a lot of his classmates at school told wonderful stories about their Christmas experiences in the village, his father told him it was because he was protecting him from their village people who had killed his first wife and his other children. “My son, I was born to the family of Tervershima, during the time of yam harvest. At that time, birth certificates were not known and women gave birth at home with the help of older women. Births were remembered by the season when the child was born. My father was a very wealthy man. He had large farmlands and storage space
for his farm produce which included yams, maize, beniseed, melon and guinea corn. It was very common for a man to show the extent of his wealth by the number of wives and children he had. My father had six wives and over thirty children.

“My mother, Iveren was the last wife. She was his favourite. It was that same year when I was born that modern education began to take root in our locality. For years the white people tried to convince people to go to the schools but a lot of parents weren’t interested. They believed that going to school would make their children lazy and unwilling to work on their parents’ farms. My mother convinced my father to let me go to school. Although mother wanted me to start immediately, the school administrator refused to enrol me as they said I was too young. I had to wait for another year. I was finally enrolled and began class one. I was at the top of my class until I finished class seven and proceeded to the Teachers College in Kaduna. After completing my studies, I was employed to teach in a school in Jos.

“I met and married my first wife two years after that. When she was seven months pregnant, I took her to the village to stay with my mother. It was the custom then to take your wife to the village as she would be taken care of by her husband’s mother before and after giving birth. Our first child was a boy but he was constantly ill. We still visited the village to bond with our relatives. My wife became pregnant again and this time she gave birth to triplets. The children kept falling sick over the next few months. Within two years, two of the triplets died and only one survived. She was however, very sickly.

“On the tenth year of our marriage, she gave birth to twins who died few weeks afterwards. Two years later, she gave birth to twins again.
They too were sickly and after a short while, one died. We now had three children – Andrew, Agatha and Anita – who were sickly.
“That same year, we all went to the village for Christmas as usual. When we came back from the village, the children became so sick and they all died on the same day, three months later. My wife fell into depression and she also died a year later.
“I know it was the witches in our village who didn’t want my happiness and progress. They killed them all and I don’t want that to happen to you. It was three years after her death that I met and married your mother and thankfully, we have been blessed with you and your siblings.”
This story made Uma to fear going to the village. He believed that there were witches in the village and even though he later learnt about genotypes, he did not want to be associated with his village. He knew that it was probable that his half-siblings were sicklers and were unlikely to survive into adulthood. This however, did not assuage his fears about the village.

When they finally moved to the village in November, Uma was surprised to see that his village had good tarred roads, piped water, electricity and well-built duplexes. He was shocked by the fact that a very large percentage of the people could even speak English and were well educated. He had had a very dreary idea of how life in the village would be. He was impressed with the level of hospitality the people displayed. Every home offered plenty of food when they went visiting and it amazed him that most people left their homes unlocked yet, there were neither cases nor reports of stealing.

By December, he was already in love with the village. He finally understood why most of his classmates back then never missed going to the village for Christmas. There was so much to do and
enjoy: picnics at the stream, village dances and masquerade displays, endless chatter between different age groups and extended family members, visiting people and eating a wide range of delicacies especially his new found favourite: pounded yam, with adenge soup and bush meat.

Uma enjoyed his stay in the village immensely and wished that he would be staying there longer. However, he had to go to the university. He was barely done with registration and settling down in school when disaster struck. Nigeria reported its first case of Coronavirus. Things quickly deteriorated as the cases were continually rising and many people succumbed to the disease. The government had to take stringent measures and soon schools were closed and lockdowns imposed.

He had to go back to the village. He hoped that the lockdown would be lifted but January turned into February and February into March. Soon it was April, the rainy season. Like all farmers, Uma’s family had to prepare their farms. Uma was excited as he would get to practise what he was studying at the university – agricultural engineering. He however, soon learnt that it was not easy as each family had to work on their own. Families were saving the little money they had and so could not afford to employ anyone. Also the government encouraged people to social distance and this affected the village life. Everyone stayed with their family members. The months rolled by and it seemed that Coronavirus was getting worse. Meanwhile Uma was so tired of working in the farm as it was too tiring. This inspired him to think of ways to make farming efficient especially for the small-scale farmers.

They had been out of school for a whole year. Schools started teaching online to cover the needed curriculum before the academic
year was completed. They had many assignments, seminars and even examination was done online.
One year later, the pandemic ended and students resumed physical learning. Uma was excited as he hoped to work on his ideas. He shared his ideas with his friends who laughed at him. He shared the ideas with his lecturer who also laughed at him. They cited lack of funds and inexperience as factors that would make him not to achieve his dreams. Uma was so discouraged that he shelved his ideas.

On his final year, Uma had to do a project before graduating. His supervisor was Professor Kyari. The professor rejected his proposals one after the other citing them as irrelevant to the society today. After more than ten trials, Uma was so discouraged that he almost gave up and went back to the village.
One day as he was contemplating his next step, Professor Kyari called him to his office. He told his professor about his experience during the pandemic period and some of the ideas he came up with. Professor Kyari was so excited and he agreed to guide Uma in working on the project. They worked day and night as they had a limited time. Uma did not even realise it as at last one person believed in his dream.

Finally, it was time for all the final year students to present their projects. Uma's project was a machine called the double M2. Its function was to harvest maize, peel the back and remove the kernels from the cob. The most impressive thing about it was that it was solar powered and very handy. Everyone was impressed by this and Uma got a grant from the government to start up his own business of producing the double M2 in commercial quantities, as well as develop his other ideas of the planter, weeder and tractor which were also to be solar powered whilst creating job opportunities for people within the community. Uma became a celebrity overnight as his invention helped to ease the burden on many small-scale farmers.
“You stir it like this ...” she stopped and watched as the boy struggled to imitate her motion.
She smiled, “No ... Kokio. You’re doing it wrong.”
Holding the boy’s hand, they stirred the mixture together, slowly.
Kokio stopped then looked at her. “I get it now mama,” he said.
Kokio had baobab powder all over his body – on his forehead, nose and chin.
“You look like a baby meerkat ...” she said laughing then she grabbed a little tissue, “Baby meerkat, let me wipe your face.”
“If you succeed this time, I promise to make for you baobab juice for the next three years ... every morning,” Mama said.
Koikoi looked at his mother. “Deal!” he said.

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From a small gourd, she poured baobab juice on a grave. “As promised my little meerkat,” she whispered.
She emptied the little gourd before putting it down. Liwe stood, looking at Kokio’s grave. Dawn was breaking over the horizon piercing the thin mist covering the graveyard. The mist obscured but didn’t hide the scattered tombstones, the sprinkled trees and leafy bushes. She could still see the red rope enclosing the cemetery or makabouri as they called it. In her culture, that rope meant that
the village marabout had exorcised and purified the site allowing the buried to rest in peace. This new makabouri was smaller than the makabouri of her ancestral village. She remembered that fateful day when armed rebels invaded their village killing anyone they could find and raping women and girls. Those who survived had to start anew.

“We have an unpeaceful life now, but we will have a peaceful after life and... life goes on,” Liwe muttered, looking at the tombstones around her.

The new makabouri was like her second home. She knew who was resting where. Kokio was laid to rest here with his favourite hat, next to Nandi, buried with her comb. Villagers buried their loved ones with things they liked to use during their lifetime. Buried six feet away from Nandi, she noticed Siya’s tombstone leaning back. Liwe froze.

“Bongi?” she gasped reading the name carved on the tombstone. “Siyi was ... is supposed to be buried there next to Siya his twin brother and not Bongi.”

She examined the suspicious grave, and then decided to inspect the area. Few minutes later she found Siyi’s headstone, stained with blood, on Bongi’s grave.

“Who could have done this?” her heart was beating faster, her jaw tightening.

“Calm down Liwe... this could be an animal... don’t jump to conclusions,” she mumbled.

Inspecting the grave, she noticed footprints on the burial mound. Hands clenched, she followed the prints with her eyes. Then she noticed it, a silhouette crouched at the entrance of the makabouri. Was it an animal or a human being? She inched closer... Then she heard a sound behind her.

She stopped and turned but all seemed normal.

“I guess it must have been all in my head,” she muttered.
She took a deep breath and was determined to find out what the silhouette was... but it was gone. She heard the voice again, this time louder. It was coming from the bushes behind her. She tiptoed to the bushes not to make a single noise.

She was petrified by the sight before her. She noticed his shirtless, hairy and bruised muscular back, arched like a bear then his bulky arms, sunburnt and full of scars. His big hands pinned the hands of a thin woman down. She recognised the green red dotted pair of trousers he was wearing, from the rebel army uniform. Beads of sweat ran down her face. Connecting pieces together, she knew what was about to happen. A feeling of nausea rose from her stomach. She covered her mouth.

The soldier mounted the thin woman. He pinned her down using his weight and immobilised both of her arms over her head using his left hand, restraining her movements.

The thin woman was trapped. She tried to scream but a tissue tied around her mouth muffled her voice and the soldier, taking his time, licked her neck.

“Mawa, if you stop resisting you might enjoy this,” the soldier was saying.

Liwe turned and walked away, shutting her eyes, covering her ears with her hands, mumbling, “I... I’m... I can’t... I’m sorry.” It was as if she was trying to erase from her memory what she saw. Images were flashing in her mind... soldiers... Kokio... screams... her hands are tied... she is on her knees, with ripped clothes... three soldiers are surrounding her... she is staring at the door of Kokio’s room, screaming, “KOKIIIOOOOO... DON’T COME OUT!”

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“Time to get serious ... Mawa ... you will enjoy it. Trust me they all do,” the soldier whispered in her ear. Mawa felt her heart pounding louder and louder.

The soldier slowly unbuckled his belt with his right hand, sweat trickling down his face, lips curving upward.

Mawa begged, Mawa cried, Mawa cursed, Mawa prayed, Mawa fought desperately trying to free herself, hoping for a miracle then she heard a shattering noise while the soldier was unzipping his pant. A noise coming from somewhere, behind the soldier. The soldier froze then collapsed on his left, revealing a crouched, concealed, Liwe behind. Liwe dropped the shattered gourd then gestured for Mawa to keep quiet. Liwe surveyed the surroundings before approaching Mawa. She untied the tissue around Mawa’s mouth.


Mawa nodded and grabbed Liwe’s hand. They heard footsteps.

“Come ... let’s go,” Liwe gestured to the opposite direction, deeper in the bushes.

The second soldier, seeing his companion lying on the grass, grabbed his AK-47 and scanned the surroundings. He knelt beside his companion and checked his pulse. “Wake up pal.” He followed his demand with a slap in the face.

Moko woke up with a jolt. Rubbing the back of his head and in pain, he looked at his companion and asked, “The... girl... where is the girl?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Something hit me on the back of my head... aaaaarghh... and I...” he groaned, wiping the blood off the back of his head.

“Wait... you mean... there was someone else? What the...?” he interrupted then face palming himself he continued, “You and your weird fetishes... I warned you to get rid of that cassava bread seller girl at the market. What is wrong with you Moko? The plan was simple... find the bag of coltan buried somewhere among these
graves before sunrise but noooooo... you and our fetishes ... now they saw us. Couldn’t you restrain your urges for once?” Moko stood and grabbed his machete hidden in the bushes. He examined what was left of the shattered pieces of the gourd then looking at his companion, he reassured him, “Calm down. They shouldn’t be far. We’ve been in worse than this.” “I was digging around the entrance ... and I didn’t see anyone coming here,” his companion said looking behind. “Which means they are still in this cemetery and the only place they could have gone hoping to hide is in that section over there,” he added. “You’re right. Look trampled grasses!” Moko exclaimed.

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Following Liwe behind and creeping among the graves, trees and bushes, Mawa slipped and fell, legs still shaking, blood dripping from a low back injury. Liwe knelt next to her and with a gentle tapping on the back tried to calm her, “It is okay now ... we need to get going.” They heard crackling noises. They both looked around then at each other, shivering. Liwe saw dense tangled bushes and gestured to hide there. From behind the bushes she kept scouting the surroundings when her head stopped, her eyes lit up. She turned, facing Mawa, “I think I know how we can get out of here.” The cracklings of footsteps kept getting louder and soon the women overheard voices too. “KLIKT!” they recognised the sound of a loading gun. Mawa bowed her head and closed her eyes, Liwe tried to calm down by taking deep breaths.
“We cannot risk to use a gun here. It will alert the villagers and they might have guns too,” one voice said.

“Fine let split up. We will cover more grounds and get over with this quickly before sunrise,” the other voice responded.

As soon as his companion disappeared among the trees, Moko, holding his machete, got down on his hands and knees and started sniffing the grass, crawling like an animal. Soon he found a fresh trail of blood. He smiled, “I am coming Mawa.”

Liwe grabbed a thick piece of wood lying next to her. “Here is the plan. On the count of three, I will throw this to create a diversion and we will run to the opposite direction toward that headstone. The bushes behind that headstone hide a red rope and on the other side of the rope there is plantations and people, good people. All we have to do is run as fast as ...” While she was talking, Mawa raised her head to nod but froze. Her skin turning pale, her mouth dropping open, her eyes wide staring at Moko. Moko was standing behind Liwe, holding his machete high, ready to swing down on Liwe’s head.

Mawa screamed pushing Liwe aside, causing the blade to miss its target narrowly and smash the ground.

Liwe fell on the side and turned. Realising that her aggressor was trying to regain his balance after missing her, she jumped up and grabbed his arm with both hands, preventing him from using his machete then looking at Mawa, she screamed, “TO THE PLANTATION... RUUUUNNNN!!!!!!!”

Mawa saw an open ploughed field and the sun rising on the horizon. She saw people, holding rakes and grape hoes, gesturing her to calm down.

She looked behind and pointed a finger at the graveyard saying, “There ... woman ... danger ... two rebels ... she ... help.” Coughing, trying to catch her breath she collapsed.
The following day Mawa, with her neck and left leg bandaged, and a scraped forehead, sat with two elders, a man and a woman, under the shade of a mango tree, protecting them from the hot midday sun. Facing them she told them her story.

After she finished, the old man stood and tried to summarise the story, “You’re from the Mangaribi village and you sell cassava bread for a living. One evening you saw a soldier dumping a body in the lac. Unfortunately, there was another soldier hidden, who caught you. Since you saw them, the soldiers discussed what to do with you. One wanted to kill you but the other one, Moko, suggested to keep you as a trophy after completing the mission. Moko knocked you out. Later you woke up in our makabouri and Moko was trying to take advantage of you and that is when a woman from our village saved you. Right?”

Mawa nodded. The old man took out a pipe, lit it and started smoking it before continuing, “Yesterday after the men brought you from the plantation, some went to the makabouri and they found the two soldier you described but they didn’t find the woman, even after searching for hours.”

Mawa slightly raising her voice responded, “I swear she is still there somewhere. Check again please.”

She paused, thought about the story again. Lifting her eyebrows and jolting she added, “Liwe ... that’s it ... her name ... tall with a green headwrap ...”

Before she could finish, she noticed the elders’ eyes getting wider and wider, the more she described Liwe. The man dropped his pipe. The woman slowly covered her mouth.

“What’s going on?” Mawa asked with a distressed tone, head tilting to the side.
The old woman stood up, took a deep breath before saying with a melancholic tone, “Liwe died two years ago. She stopped eating, sleeping. She was depressed and grieving. She never recovered from the loss of her son.”

Mawa went pale.

Author’s note

I was inspired to write this story by the long decade war in eastern Congo between the rebels and the Congolese army with the villagers caught in the middle, trying every day to survive.