



A WSA-Nigeria Anthology of Short Stories 2nd Edition

SURVIVAL

Fall

Barnabas Ekipma
1st Position

**Sacraments of Sex,
Sacrilige of Sorrows**
Chidiebere Udeokechukwu
2nd Position

Beyond The Ridge
Ademola Idowu
3rd Position

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Halieo Motanyane (Chief Editor)

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Survival

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Blossom: Survival: A collection of Short Stories

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NOT FOR SALE

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FOREWORD

One of the hallmarks of an excellent anthology is diversity and well-narrated stories that transport the reader to the story world with vivid imagery and great character depth. The Survival Anthology is just nothing short of an excellent anthology. It presents narratives that toy with the emotions of readers. On the one hand, the heart is racing and hoping, while on the other hand, there is a feeling of anger and occasional sadness. But then, having your emotions toyed with is perhaps the only way to survive the pages of Survival.

Survival presents stories with the theme: Survival. Each story is told uniquely from a perspective different from the other. Survival opens with Chime's *The Things in the Forest*. This piece is a survival story placing Kelvin in a dicey situation. Andy's *I Fought With Life On A Monday* takes us away from the forest to the world of broken dreams of becoming a top fashion designer. Ekipma's *Fall* reveals to us what Ubong did that was kept a secret for so long.

However, Idowu's *Beyond the Ridge* carries us away from the regular setting of Chime, Andy, and Ekipma's stories. Idowu takes us into the future with an Afrofuturism story that leaves you asking for more. Ogbor excels in *Breaking Free* with the mystery of the missing Bintu.

Omena's *Diaspora* reveals how being queer can be challenging as the protagonist navigates between family dislike and abandonment. Ojile's *Mortar* is a contemporary story about a young man struggling to survive a nationwide university strike.

Abubakar's *Neighbours* offers a compelling narrative on why neither ethnicity nor religion should matter or be a cause of division.

Udeokechukwu's *Sacraments of Sex, Sacrilege of Sorrows* recounts from the perspective of the protagonist her experience as a prostitute. Finally, Adeleye's *My Very Polygamous Family* exposes a dysfunctional polygamous family with five wives and 32 children, all of whom the protagonist blames for ill-fate.

Survival offers the best of all worlds. The pace is moderate in all the stories, and the authors gave great care and attention to character development. In all, this anthology is worth reading repeatedly.

Finally, I would like to say congratulations to the selected authors and the family of Writers Space Africa (Nigeria chapter). Let us continue to write and read.

Anthony Onugba (PenBoss)

Founder,

Writers Space Africa

PREFACE

From the exordium of humanity, since the first effect of disobedience of a man to God, a man is to sweat to live. Although we do not all base our beliefs in one book, we do agree that a human mind brings the same logic in a lot of things. What is to get without having to work for the result? It may be to steal, but even thieves study, strategize and attack to get what they want: that is how they sweat to survive.

Survival has by far proven to be a life-partner for us all, thus, is it not logical to start asking ourselves just what is to survive?

Survival is not what we do everyday to experience this life thing. Just as we want to live, we are compelled to do what we must to stay alive. Regardless of the above, we should still acknowledge that so many situations are not what a normal being should go through; to live as if nothing happened after being raped; to be expelled from work without any relevant reason; to sleep without food;

to not have a place to stay. These are not normal situations that one should live with. And so, to have to fight to get those, should be to try to survive in life.

The stories in this book are not just good stories in terms of storytelling, but they also pull one into the conscience of what the world has come to be. It may not be us, but there is at least one individual that we can relate to as we read these stories. We believe that all of us are surviving but truth be told, more people we lead are just living. Which one are you doing? Surviving or living? If we could be able to distinguish such, then we sure can reduce the sad generation and blame-shifting in our lives.

Survival is to be able to swim through the strong waves of the ocean.

Halieo Motanyane

Chief Editor



THE THINGS IN THE FOREST

Kenneth C. Chime

Kevin had always liked the forest. The sunshine through the tall green trees and the animals moving among them, the gentle breeze that smelled so fresh and clean, free from the pollutants of the city, the crunch of leaves below his feet, the sound of life all around him, and the feeling of inner peace he seemed to get whenever he was there. Kevin had always liked the great outdoors. That was until one of his friends was eaten by something straight out of a nightmare.

Where did it go wrong? Kevin wondered as he hid in a bush, his breathing heavy. He'd lost it for now but that meant it was going after the others. He gulped. Maybe it was when they decided to camp in the forest outside of town instead of the usual National park. Kevin heard a shuffle to his right and stiffened, trying to stay as still as possible while turning his neck very slowly towards the

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source of it to get a better view of what was making the sound. It jumped out and he almost screamed at the sight of the squirrel. He heaved a sigh that was equal parts relief and frustration. None of them would have been in this mess if they had never listened to Jeremy's brother.

"If you don't go there, there'd be no point in going at all." He'd just walked in on Kevin, Jeremy, and Beth as they sat in Jeremy's room, planning what they would do at their next camping trip. It'd become a sort of ritual; every week they would go on a small camping trip to the National forestry park downtown. They went for different reasons: Jeremy had a birdwatching catalog and even though he'd been at it for years, his blue eyes still lit up everytime he saw a bird that hadn't been recorded before, Beth was an artist whose works were as fiery as her auburn hair, who was as unpredictable as the wind and could be sitting still as a statue one moment, only to be pacing around frantically the next, and Kevin just simply liked being outside. It reminded him of a more peaceful time during his childhood. Everything was set until Andrew came in and planted the ideas in their heads. With his striking jet black hair, smooth tongue, and confident yet slightly cocky attitude, Andrew was a hard person to ignore. Why go to the regular park when the one outside of town was much better and not too far away? Since Jer-

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emy would see more birds, Beth would have more things she could draw or write about, and Kevin would still be outside, they agreed to go on the condition Andrew would drive them there. It was kind of ironic because if it wasn't for his dumb idea, Andrew would still be alive.

He would have to get up and find a place to shelter himself for the coming night. Up a tree? He considered it but realized that if he fell asleep up there, he'd have nothing to prevent him from falling. Kevin sat up and opened his camping bag that he'd been lucky enough to grab hold of when they ran. A sleeping bag, a flashlight, a sandwich in a zip lock bag, a couple of batteries, and a plastic bottle of water that was half empty. He kicked himself mentally for not putting more food in his bag. Even though the trip was planned to be a short one, they shouldn't have made Jeremy carry all the food. Maybe that was why the thing came after him first.

It wasn't a bear. Bears don't have five eyes that shine in the darkness like coals in a dying fire, don't walk like that thing did, on its hind legs with its back slouching and its long clawed paws touching the ground. Bears don't get back up after being shot four times at point blank range. Bears don't but nightmares do. Kevin prayed that there was only one of those things around as he stood up fully.

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His meagre supplies would have to do seeing as there was nothing he could do to change that, at least, not yet. He'd seen a lot of nature survival shows—never thinking he'd be in those situations of course—so he had a fairly good idea what to do. He would need three things: shelter, water, and food; shelter being the most important since he had some remaining food and water. He began walking as carefully as he could, cringing at every crunch his feet made on the dried leaves beneath him. Kevin hoped that Jeremy and Beth were okay since they'd run in different directions after the attack, each too scared to think it through. He walked for what felt like fifteen minutes through green shrubs and trees with a tight feeling in his chest before he found the abandoned camp site.

The large tent to the right of the fire pit was slashed with long jagged holes, its fabric dyed with crimson splotches that were definitely not part of its original colour. A cooler box had been overturned, spilling its contents of ice cubes and beer cans on the forest floor. There was a lingering smell of smoke from the dead campfire, and big, deep paw prints were everywhere— whoever owned this campsite had been attacked too. Kevin had to act as fast as possible because there was a chance that it might come back. He hurriedly emptied some of the beer and filled the cans with as much ice as possible which would melt

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later, giving him water although it might taste slightly like beer. There were a few packets of chips and some rations of food left in the tent along with a framed photograph of the couple that once owned it; a blonde haired man who was slightly taller than his brunette partner, both wearing matching smiles. Kevin decided to eat his sandwich and replace it with the food he had found. His mistake was thinking that it was safe enough where he was because, unbeknownst to Kevin, the things in the forest had an absurdly incredible sense of smell and so each and every one of them picked up on the aroma of his meaty sandwich the moment he unwrapped it. Now they were all heading for one place, or rather, one person.

Kevin finished his meal, drank some water, and explored the rest of the campsite before he heard the first growl. It sounded close by and so without missing a beat, Kevin looked for a place to hide. Since he wasn't sure where the sound came from, hiding in a bush would be akin to suicide. He looked up at the tall trees and sighed; it was that or nothing. The first one reached the camp site not long after Kevin had started climbing, and tracing the smell of the sandwich still on Kevin's breath, ran straight for the tree he was climbing and swiped at it, its mammoth paws barely missing Kevin's leg. Kevin scrambled up as fast as he could fuelled by a frantic sort of adrenaline he

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had never experienced before. But that feeling was short lived because as he reached a branch and looked down, Kevin's adrenaline was replaced with pure dread.

Multiple things had started coming out from the greenery around the campsite; more than twenty of the large, grotesque, bear-like creatures stalked and sniffed and prowled around the clearing. This was the end, the thought kept playing over and over in his mind much to Kevin's annoyance. Why did so many of them come out now? Even though he'd correctly predicted that they might come back to the camp, he never dreamed there'd be this many. Kevin shifted his weight to try and get a better seat on the branch because, as far as he knew, he was going to be there for a long time. But when he did, he heard a soft cracking sound. He stiffened instantly, holding his breath but even that wasn't enough; under the shifted weight of Kevin plus his backpack full of rations, water-filled beer cans, and other items, the low branch continued to crack. The branch just wasn't that strong and so, in a matter of minutes, it snapped and Kevin fell.

He hit the ground with a thud, landing on his backpack which helped to break his fall a little. Kevin got up and backed up against the tree. His heart was hammering frantically inside his chest as the things noticed him and

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began moving closer, one by one. The nearest one had black fur, and as it got closer, Kevin was dumbstruck as he realized something—all five of the thing's eyes were blue. Bright blue like Jeremy's. But that was just a coincidence, wasn't it? Kevin looked around at the other things and his heart stopped. One of them was at the back, sitting, looking at a bush only to suddenly leap up and rush to the side to make scratches against one of the rocks that made the fire pit. That erratic behaviour seemed so familiar it didn't take long to figure it out. That bronze furred creature was behaving just like Beth.

There was another black one prowling towards Kevin; this one was larger and darker than the one with Jeremy's eyes and moved with a confident and sort of lazy swagger. Andrew. Too many coincidences. He looked at the other creatures for any other thing he could recognize and saw the big one that had attacked them when they first got to the forest and two that were walking together side by side, one blonde one taller than the other brown creature. They kind of reminded him of the couple who owned the campsite. Kevin finally accepted what it all meant; where the creatures all came from. The only problem was that Kevin was so preoccupied with his observations, so lost in thought, that he had forgotten to run and by the time he remembered, it was too late.

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The creature with Jeremy's eyes pounced on Kevin, grabbing hold of his right arm between its jaws. Kevin screamed and tried to pull free but it was pointless struggling against the thing's insanely strong muscles. It pinned Kevin down and ripped his arm from its socket with a single jerk of its head, the muscles and tendons shredding like tissue paper. The pain was blinding. Kevin bellowed and tried to crawl away while the thing was busy with his arm but he was losing blood; blood that was sending the other things into a frenzy. They charged at Kevin—who had passed out in the middle of his desperate crawl—and ripped him limb from remaining limb, each one struggling to get as much of him as they could. The only parts of him they do not touch were his heart, skull and parts of his brain which began to pulse and throb and change and grow into something else.

So if you happen to visit the forest there's a chance you'll see these bears that aren't bears but monsters. There's a chance you'll see the one with blue eyes that watches the birds with so much intent, maybe the one with spastic behaviour, never able to quite decide whether it means to sit still or run around, maybe the couple, always together, or maybe you'll see a brown furred one that climbs trees, sitting at the top, breathing in the air like it

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simply liked being outside. Maybe you'll see all of them. Maybe you'll be lucky enough to survive the encounter. Or maybe—just maybe—you'll be lucky enough to never see any of them at all. That would make it much, much easier to survive.



I FOUGHT WITH LIFE ON A MONDAY

Mathias Andy

I laid up at 5:35 am, I watched the ceiling fan lose its life as the power company popularly known as “NEPA” switched off the electricity on my block, I was a little disappointed as I thought they would leave the lights on till 6:00 am, as I had plans of pressing my clothes for work this morning. It was a Monday morning, I had to resume at the office and get back to working on things I didn’t care about but I had to do it either way for a paycheck that could barely cover my bills. The electricity going off didn’t hurt me so much, as I embraced darkness a long time ago and easily felt at peace in it but with the heat and files scattered over my bed coupled with the unpleasant songs from the mosquitoes that filled my room, it destroyed whatever solace I hoped to find in the darkness of my room. I continued to lay up and stare at the

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fan as it stopped living fast and slowly lost its circular rhythm. *I wondered if that was what was going to happen to me, was my life going to stop moving anytime soon, would I stay still and probably never move again.*

My one-bedroom flat housed a lot more than just me and my bed, it held a lot of mannequins and a sewing machine with different fabrics scattered over it, they all patiently gathered dust due to my neglect. Broken dreams of becoming a top fashion designer had gone down the drain. Fashion designing was my first love, growing up I was intrigued by fabrics, prints, and designs. The texture of materials, and creating a complete outfit from scratch of sketches to a complete dress. I didn't need to have to try too hard to acquire the skill to create something off materials; it was more of a divine gift from the *Big man* up in the sky.

My university days gave me the exposure that I needed; I had created different unisex fashion trends from African to Contemporary wears which were rocked widely on campus. Awards graced me heavily for my fashion prowess throughout my five years in the university with high talks of me becoming the next big thing outside the four walls of the university. A smile spread on my face as I reminisced on my university days, but that

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smile quickly faded into a grimace as I descended from my glory days back to my actual life filled with failure. Fresh out of school and done with serving my country Nigeria for a year, life hit me hard and I couldn't keep up with the pace of my fashion dreams. I had to put it on hold to gather the fuel I needed to chase my dreams and so I came to the city of Lagos from Kogi state for I knew this was a land of opportunities and I needed a big opportunity. Still looking for my opportunity I had resolved to work for a small-scale advertising agency and my dreams seemed to take a back seat as five years had passed with all this feeling like normalcy.

My room didn't seem to have much of a "welcome to my humble abode kind of feeling" rather it looked like a warehouse stocked to the top which no one would love to enter. Feeling lazy and uninterested, I reached for my phone and sprang up from the bed like I had just seen a ghost. It was now 6:45 am and I wasn't on my way to work. Normally it shouldn't take 30 minutes for me to get to the office but due to the endless morning rush and traffic ever-present on these roads, it took me a solid 1hour and 30 minutes to get to the office each day. Here I was, still in my house while I was expected to be at work at 7:30 am, my boss had called me the previous day yelling on the phone with his tiny, sultry voice demanding I de-

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liver some files which I was yet to finish editing for him to sign off the first thing that Monday morning. Mr *Tunde razor* as he was popularly called was the manager at the media firm I worked in. I had always hated his guts, for someone who had a small build and somewhat cute face he sure had a razor for a tongue and he wasted no time tearing anybody down with his derogatory comments as he always found an opportunity to do so. Countlessly I had thought of doing some evil to him, not something too bad but something that would teach him some manners and respect for his fellow employees.

Rushing out of the bathroom, with water still dripping from my body. I quickly jumped into my pair of black trousers and blue shirt, both so oversized, worn out, and plain in colors they made me notice how bland my life had become. I had no time to think of my life at the moment because if tunde razor got to the office before me I might as well think of a future with me being fired. I ran a comb through my roughly grown hair twice, trying to get some loose hair into place as it seemed adamant to the effect of the comb. I got into my pair of black shoes, picked up the unfinished files from the sewing machine and bolted out of the room slamming the door behind me. I immediately flung the door back open as I realized I hadn't put on my cufflinks which helped hold my al-

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ready worn-out blue shirt at the wrist but for some weird reason, I couldn't find it. I checked around my room, from the bed to the side drawer to the sewing machine to my pocket but I couldn't find it. Perspiration ran from my hair down my body, I was getting soaked, looking at my watch it was past 7 and I hadn't even begun my journey to the office. There was no doubting it anymore, my *village people* were strongly after me today and they were succeeding at frustrating my life.

Leaving the search for the cufflinks behind, I locked my door and ran towards the bus stop with the files in my hand and me looking as distorted as a man on a wild goose chase. *I just had to deal with one issue at a time, getting to the office was the priority for this morning.* The cufflinks and my unironed clothes were just obstacles so I guess the saying was true "*there is no life without obstacles*".

On getting to the bus stop, I saw the longest queue yet for the next bus to *oshodi*. Everybody seemed to be extra unhinged today and many were cursing aggressively, with some others sitting on the roadside with gloomy faces as the public transport buses commonly known as *danfo* were nowhere in sight. A tanker had fallen within *Mile 2* which was the park for most of the buses thus blocking their and part and other private cars from accessing the

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road. At this point, I began to wonder what was wrong with my life. I had just raced to the bus stop like a mad man hoping to jump into any available bus and begin my journey to the office. But here I was, looking more perplexed than the next person with my eyes fixed on the road hoping for a bus to magically appear out of nowhere.

A bus suddenly started drawing closer to the bus stop. This wasn't a *danfo* but a private bus used for traveling out of Lagos but I guess the driver saw this as an opportunity to make some quick cash and decided to do "*kabu kabu*" by picking up passengers before the *danfo* buses could get there and the area boys could get him. As the bus drew closer, everybody suddenly became alert and ready to throw themselves straight into the bus as it wouldn't contain everybody. It suddenly switched into a game of *survival of the fittest* and I couldn't dare to lose.

Light on my feet with the files tightly under my arm, I pushed through a cluster of people trying so desperately to make their way into the bus. My body pushed through different body types with a mix of pleasant and repulsive smells. I struggled to make my way to the front seat close to the driver; I was so close to getting in, that my fingers almost grabbed the handle of the door when a chubby

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woman tossed herself right at me, pushing me off balance as she jumped into the seat I had so struggled for. I felt so pained and bruised from the struggle, but I didn't have time to shed tears. Instead, I held on to the edge of the bus as there wasn't any more space for me inside in the bus and my only choice was to hang on the bus till I got to my destination.

The driver didn't seem to complain about me hanging out as there were two guys hanging on the bus already and the passengers were yelling at him to go already as they were very late for work and to their various destinations like me.

"Hold your 200naira change for any bus stop, I no get time to dey find change for anybody this morning," the driver said. He stuck the key into the ignition, the bus came to life and he began to proceed quickly down the road for fear of him being caught. He then harshly told the chubby woman who sat close to him to properly shut the door next to her as he noticed it was slightly opened. She muttered something offensive under her breath, aggressively flung open the door, and swiftly pulled it back with a snare on her face at the driver, the driver opened his mouth to address her attitude but was interrupted by a scream from the door and a thud to the floor from his

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car with files flying freely through the air.

I lay on a hospital bed, with a bandage on my head and a POP on my hand. The unfinished files on the shelf were placed on the table across from me, I looked up at the ceiling fan as it slowly stopped moving fast. I couldn't feel anything through most of my upper body, with tears in my eyes I couldn't help but wonder if I would stay still forever and probably never move again.



FALL

Barnabas Ekipma

*Thine heart hasn't given up on thee yet,
Why give up on thyself?
- Ofem*

Mom and I walked home together on weekdays; it had become her routine to stop by my school — after her "daily job hunt".

I attended an "All girls public secondary school" — then, it was assumed that parents whose children attended public schools were either broke or not in their right senses, the standard was that low.

"...as soon as I get a new job, you'll return to your former school and everything will be fine. Just bear with me for this month...", mom had said, but three months

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had passed and mom still stopped by the public school to walk me home even though I was old enough to walk home alone. We would often engage in several conversations while we trekked.

On one occasion, mom had been standing at the door of my class looking out for me — I'd been engaged in a conversation with a classmate to notice mom standing by the door. A girl in my class called out in pidgin English, "Ajebutter! Your mama dae wait for you...", the whole class broke out laughing. My mom didn't know "Ajebutter" was an offensive slang for anyone who was regarded as an "overgrown baby", and so she was startled by the sudden laughter in class.

A day after that, I asked her to stop coming over after school, she smiled and I took that as a positive response.

The next day, at close of school, it rained heavily, everyone waited in their various classes waiting for the weather to be favorable for them to leave. After my conversation with mom the previous day, I looked forward to walking home alone.

But mom came, she had walked into my class, completely drenched, dripping water from every curve and edge on her body.

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"Ekemini, let's go home...", the weariness in her voice fell on everybody's ears like heavy drops of rain, she turned and started walking away— I knew better not to show resistance in front of the class. I simply hastened my pace to meet up with her, as she had already stepped into the rain, again.

We walked briskly under the rain like soldiers that had nothing to lose. My mom's file where she had often packed her resumé and important documents had been drenched, and at the time was also dripping water— she seemed not to care.

We'd walked for about ten minutes when she slipped and the file suddenly fell from her hands into the gutter by her side. I screamed, but mom only looked into the gutter as though to observe. I stared into her eyes for any sign of fear, her eyes only followed the direction of the file as it floated away and was finally out of sight— she showed no sign of loss.

It kept raining and mom had to take off her weaves as the wet strands of hair kept sticking to her lashes, and then I saw it— a streak of liquid that rolled down her right cheek slowly, a lot different from the regular drops of rain that fell on her face.

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She had been crying.

She noticed I was staring and I quickly darted my gaze back to the road, "...this rain sef! It has soaked my face", she said. I was only twelve and so I acted like I didn't know my mom was trying to lie, like we weren't both marching home under the rain like wounded soldiers. I ignored the fact that we'd suddenly become a spectacle on the road, a lot of people stood in shops, and different shades for shelter and everyone that saw us walk under the rain gave my mom a look that said " what kind of mother would let her daughter get wet under the rain?", but I didn't mind, because I remembered how often mom would let me sleep on her whenever I'd bed wetted my side of the bed.

The bed we slept on wasn't large, she often had to let me sleep on her till daybreak. I'd stopped bedwetting at eight but my body suddenly lost control several nights after dad left us to stay with Aunty Inem, after which the neighbors told us Aunty Inem was already pregnant with his child.

The night mom told me that daddy might never return home, I cried. I woke up a few hours later to realize I'd wet the bed, mom let me sleep on her. She didn't scold me like she often did each time I'd bed-wetted when I

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was younger.

Several nights after that, I kept bedwetting, she never scolded me. Not once.

We got home that day soaked to the sole. That was the last day mom walked me home from school.

It's been four years since then.

I'm on my way home from the shop where I work as sales personnel, it had suddenly begun to rain but I was halfway home already and didn't feel the need to stop for shelter. It rained so heavily, my dress got soaked— it made me remember the afternoon mom and I walked back from school under the rain. I remembered several other things— that the seven thousand Naira I was to receive as salary was one month and twelve days due and my boss had said nothing about it, nor had he given any reason for the delay.

It pained me.

I cried when my memories made me realize that mom's file didn't just fall into the gutter by accident.

She had let it fall, deliberately.

The same way I'd deliberately slept over at Ubong's house several nights ago. I'd fallen for his empty prom-

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ises— that he would give me money to register for JAMB into the university. I believed him, but I never told mom. Mom who now sells alcohol to old men that often fell into gutters on their way home from our joint.

My night at Ubong's place would be the first of many secrets' mom would never get to know, like the night Ubong paid twenty-five thousand naira to a roadside doctor to have the seed he'd planted in my womb aborted. I begged him to give me the money instead, that I would register for JAMB, keep the baby and would never interfere with his life again, but his mom refused. His mom who had been contesting for the office of a chair-lady in town and didn't want any scandal or whatsoever that would dent her reputation— let alone the thought of being called in-laws to my mom, who was now addressed as "the woman that sold ògògóró (alcohol) along Afaha Ekid road".

In service on Sunday, the preacher said God's word is like a seed that sometimes falls on wrong places and the birds of the air would come to take them away— I remember the night the doctor removed Ubong's seed from my womb. How I bled after the operation. How I cried.

Two abortions, still a secondary school leaver, five different jobs since I graduated from high school. I clocked

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twenty yesterday. People say I look twenty-six, that my mom looked old enough to be my grandmother— our wombs have borne more than they should, I often tell them.

Several things never leave you, even after they are long gone— an article I read recently in the newspaper stated that the more similar two or more events are to one another, the more likely interference will occur, psychology calls it the interference theory; it is difficult to remember what happened on an average school day two months ago because so many other days have occurred since then. Unique and distinctive events, however, are less likely to suffer from interference— your secondary school graduation, the abortion of your first child, the abortion of the second child and your mother's tears are much more likely to be recalled because they are singular events— days like no other.

Mom had never mentioned what happened to her right before it rained that day, what made her fall even before it rained, why she never stopped falling, why she'd never considered taking shelter, why she never made an attempt to save her file from the gutter, why she'd considered selling alcohol a better option than the hope of getting a white collared job, why she borrowed money

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to purchase three barrels of alcohol a day after that. She never talked back to the preacher when he came to our house to rebuke her for stooping so low as to start an ogogoro joint in front of the rented, dilapidated one room apartment we lived in. If she was hurting, she didn't show it.

On days it rained heavily, we're unable to sell much. Mom would look out the window for hours— I often wondered if she was really waiting for the rain to stop falling, or the heavy raindrops that pounced on our louvers reminded her of the gnawing hardship.

She placed her right hand on the louvers to wipe the water that had been dripping but paused, as though she had realized the water was dripping on the outside and wiping from the inside won't change anything. After a while, she turned away from the window and looked at me, her eyes begging to pour, "why won't it stop falling?", she asked.

I had no answer, or maybe I didn't know what she was referring to— the rain or her life.

I placed my right hand on her shoulder gently, and mustered the courage to tell her what I should have said eight years ago when she had let her file fall into the gutter, "...

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you're not falling mom". I sensed the relief in my own voice, she did too. This time, the rain couldn't hide her tears anymore— she wept, raindrops.

"...you've still got me, mom."



BEYOND THE RIDGE

Adedamola Idowu

00-00-11657

"We keep moving, Anya." Grandpa used to say. The only companion I could trust with my back. So I kept moving. Never once settling, except I was sure I could settle. Sometimes I wonder if the earth wouldn't rest until every one of us is dead or if, just if. Time-testers and Christians aren't as hopeless as us, we who are damned.

I call them Eaters, these giant shadow phantoms that swallow a being whole. I could see them from the very beginning. They tag along, slowly consuming a human, filling up emptiness from the inside out. They are Eaters because they feed on human emotions.

You know you are messed up when you see the world

SURVIVAL

from different angles or have strange startling features. I would like to know if there is anybody else out there like me. Who could see these phantoms, if, just maybe, I had one of these attached to my being, waiting to eat me whole?

Today I moved to the Centa, my goal is to see the Wyte-Not. Rumors have it that humanity has remained the same there. I guess I'm pouring in too much information at once. I have limited space in this book, but how do I begin? When humanity is nothing but a blot on the whole existence of the earth?

00-00-11658

I left the old book in the former car.

According to the time-testers, It's been centuries since humanity heard the Blare. What it was and why it was we do not know, all we know is that the Blare brought disasters like the Rumbles and sea of sand. We also know that Wyte-Not is nothing like Centa. It remains the same, traces of the old world remain unchanged, unsullied. Maybe they didn't hear the Blare?

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The Earth groans as mountains begin to unravel themselves, coming undone as though their creator was throwing a tantrum, the skies run hurriedly to a home man holds no knowledge of, still, Anya presses the accelerator, speeding up to who knows where.

She claims to have memorized the contours of the old map, like flies running in the direction of a rotten corpse, other trucks like hers follow in hot pursuit. To keep moving, keep going in hopes of one day meeting their dreamland.

00-01-11658

We call them Rumbings, the noise that's accompanied by the splitting of hills and earth. But these time-testers say they are Earthquakes. These time-testers spin tales, tall tales. This one tells me there used to be flying cars, in a land where its inhabitants had pale eyes and noses that stood like branches of a pine tree. I know a story that doesn't sound as far-fetched. When I was little, my grandfather told me that there used to be as many children as there are carcasses. That looks a little believable to me.

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It first began with a plague, one that turned the former inhabitants into hopeless waivers filling the streets. That was the Earth's first revolt against the human race. The plague ravished the children before the older humans became susceptible to it. Proudful humans dropping dead like old cow dung.

It is a windy morning, and the sound of adults whimpering is beginning to sound louder than the horrid sound of digging. Someone spotted an old oil well buried beneath the muddy track road. Anya rests against the dashboard, eyes closed calmly counting down. On her mark there came a scream from 50 meters ahead, and other people ran around trying to help. The screams hit an octave higher before the dead silence. It all stopped. Death.

She sighs, raises her head, and pinches the bridge of her nose. She hits the ignition, loudly zooming past the old muddied truck and taking a breather, on her way other trucks join her forming an envoy while others remain to dig around for imaginary treasures.

00-50-11658

No matter how I look at it, it makes no sense, it has the color of a dead human and smells like most people walk-

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ing around too. It looks like several outstretched fingers too, no way it is a human hand. My truck coughed up dust today. Figured it needed to rest soon. We are nearing the outskirts of the center too. According to the map, the center should be what old humans called the Red Sea. I'll rest here and seek a ride tomorrow. I'm holding on.

She pushes the dead truck right in the middle of the road as she lies in the backseat, before getting back into it and rolling down the four windows by a crack. Make sure it isn't noticeable. She buries herself beneath a swad of old decaying clothes before falling into a state of semi-consciousness as she imagines what Wyte-Not looks like and smells like. Images of old companions drift ashore in her mind. Loved ones are swallowed alive by despair and agony. The agonizing screams and the reality of man's helplessness splashed on your face. A car revs past, and she jolts awake. The car stops, while she keeps a pen knife digging into her hands, buried beneath her clothes.

"Let me just check for supplies, Ande needs food too!"

Carefully weighing her options, to attack this one, or

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not? Maybe wait for the next car to pass, but fewer trucks have made it this far. Once it is daylight trucks will move in crowds it will be harder to get another opportunity.

"I tell you, I'll zoom this shit away if you stay longer than you have to."

They are at most 2, maybe 3. No. If they were 3 two of them would have come to check for supplies. It isn't safe out here w key traversers know that.

"Okay. Okay. Just stop yelling."

He takes a few more steps, taking a look at the truck, his hand on the truck as if he were feeling for a pulse.

"No condensation, dead cold too!"

He takes three steps back, picks his pace, and rams his elbow into the front glass. After breaking the glass he enters the front seat. First checking the dashboard pocket he brings out a book, and a blunt needle falls out of the book. He scans the book and mutters to himself.

"Where did you get ink, brown ink too."

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With the torch in his hands, he drops the book on the dashboard and turns to rummage through the backseat. Touching a body he stills.

"Ice-cold" he mutters beneath his breath. And goes on to search the pockets. Swift like light, Anya's hand moved close to his neck forcefully tearing the arteries. His eyes open widely as the torch falls into the car seat. He feels wetness on his skin and the smell of death pervades his senses. The last thing he saw was a pair of darkly glowing eyes in the dark.

Anya picks the torch, hitting the led part a few times before it comes on. She flicks the light on and off, hoping to get the other person's attention. She bumps the truck loudly a few times trying to pique that old human curiosity. She waits a while moving the light around when she notices the truck ahead reversed. Still pretending to go through her truck Anya comes down from the other side while the person in the other gray truck comes down from the driver's side.

"Debo, you better not be playing! I told you-"

Anya walks to the side.

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"Is that his name? Debo?" The person turns around quickly.

"Gods! You scared me!!" Debo's partner puts their hands over their chest, "What are you doing out Where is Debo?! "

"In there" Anya points without turning her head.

Debo's partner turns habitually, taking their eyes off Anya for a second. "What's with your hair?" Their voice comes out muffled

That split second was all Anya needed before she struck with her knife. First the neck, then the gut. Wet fluid spills out of the person's mouth as they groan and whimper. The wetness splashes on Anya as she takes a step back and heads for the car that's still running. She goes around the car, circling it a few times. Certain there was no threat in it she entered and zoomed off into the night

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Time-testers say these events align with the old human stories of heaven, hell, and, rapture. An event where an angel -celestial beings with wings who are children of an All-knowing God- blows a trumpet sign signaling the

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end of the human race. In the wake of these events true servants of this God will ascend, just not their mortal bodies, their souls will ascend. Then the rest of humanity will suffer under the rule of darkness for a few thousand years. This All-knowing God is also merciful because he is so merciful after a few thousand years he will deliver the rest of the damned humans and conquer the king of darkness. Time testers and tall tales.

There was a child in the truck she stole. A child who shared her features. Pale brown skin with dark glowing eyes lying atop all those expired human food. The child was thin and could barely cry out loud. A little sickly thing, wrapped in several swads of dirty clothes, an attempt to conserve heat. Heat which its body was failing to produce, yet its heart was beating strongly. Beneath the dirty wads of clothes are white curls, one that looks surprisingly like Anya's. For days she considered dropping it with its old companions.

"Where are we going again?" Chylde asks as it climbs out of the cave fully turning its back on Anya.

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"Just beyond the ridge. Stop turning your back on people, haven't I taught you this?"

Chylde scratches his white curls and turns towards Anya with a wild grin.

"If you wanted me dead, I'd be long dead, Anya. You reckon there are others like us there?" He changes the subject.

Anya looks back towards the overgrown red reeds they had left a few days ago. What the old humans called the Red Sea. She looks at the huge mountain that had served as their sanctuary against the sand storm that raged for nights unending.

She looked at Chylde recalling stories grandpa had told her about children roaming around. And thought that maybe there was a time lifeless birds could soar in the sky. Grandpa never said they were children like her. An oddity walking the old human world.

"Anya, are they like us? Can they see them too?" Chylde asks.

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"Even if they aren't like us, there will be more like us."

She smiles at the kid, a wooden spear with a jagged piece of rock tied on its tip, in her left hand, her wild white hair flowing behind her.

"You and I, and in a few more years, just you. Maybe. You'll meet somebody like us. No matter though, we keep moving."

"Because grandpa told you to keep moving?"

Chylde asks, brown eyes glowing with an innocent smile as he stares at the growing Eater that's been accompanying Anya ever since he could recall.

"Grandpa told me to survive, Chylde. If not in Wyte-Not there has to be something beyond there."

00-00-00 (??)

I've been staring at this parchment for a while. Anya used to have a book. One she'd filled with meaningless scrawls: the dying remains of an old culture. A long time has passed. She said to keep moving, if the home isn't here then it has to be somewhere else. I couldn't tell her



BREAKING FREE

Favor Ogbor

“Jide, please come join the revolution. More lives are being taken without mercy and the world is coming to an end. Don’t you see? This government doesn’t give a hoot about the poor masses,” Amin pleaded. His deep voice floated through the phone speaker, tingling Jide’s ears.

Jide took a deep breath; he massaged his temples to soothe the nagging headache that kept him on edge. He’d thought things through when his friend called him the previous week to inform him of this new gang he was forming. Amin had spoken with enthusiasm and a pint of anger brimming in his tone. He wanted a revolution, fierce enough to disarm the Nigerian authorities. And as always, Jide’s reply was the same.

“I can’t. Sorry, man. I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“Is it until someone in your family disappears?” Amin

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asked. The line went dead.

Jide heaved a sigh, turning to look out the window. He hoped he was right; he hoped nothing bad had to happen. He rubbed his face, groaning in frustration. Jide couldn't risk it.

That night, Bintu didn't come home. Jide and his mother stayed up all night, keeping watch at the door like they were awaiting the second coming of Christ. He sat on the floor, resting his head on the faded walls and keeping his knees crossed. Jide could hear the clock ticking; the rapid beating of his heart; the worn-out sigh parting his mother's lips. He could tell that she was close to tears, but was trying to hold it in. To keep it together. Like she always did.

Jide never knew his father. He never cared. Most nights, he arrived drunk, staggering here and there as if he was just learning how to walk. He would grumble as he dragged his feet to his room door. One evening, he left the house after a flurry of heated arguments with his wife, and never came back.

His mother clapped her hand dramatically, halting Jide's train of thoughts. She placed her hands on her head, then on her waist. Her legs were moving in tune with her head

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which bobbed like an agama lizard.

“Don’t worry, mama. Bintu will come back. She hasn’t spent the night out before. Except she’s out visiting her friend,” Jide tried to assure his mother. But when she faced him, tears were shimmering in her eyes.

“You don’t understand. That her friend traveled to see her uncle in the village. She’s not around. Only God knows if those bad men have taken your sister away.” By now, his mother was wailing, spreading her arms on the couch.

Jide didn’t believe it. He refused to believe that Bintu was missing and he wouldn’t see her chubby cheeks again. He refused to believe that she would no longer poke her head into his space or distract him with her loud giggles whenever she talked to her best friend. The walls were thin and dry so he could listen from his room. Oftentimes, he chortled, unable to contain himself. He liked when his sister was happy and that made him happy too.

“Have faith, mama. I know she’ll be back.”

Bintu will come home. She can’t just abandon us. Those were the words Jide used to comfort himself as he stuffed Bintu’s favorite teddy under his arm. He’d searched everywhere he could, stopping passersby to flash her picture

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in their faces. They shrugged, answering in the negative. Anytime he passed his mother's bedroom, his heart sank deeper. Her blaring cries echoed around the house like a siren, mirroring his sadness.

He wished the bad men had taken him instead.

Bintu was too sweet to part with. On Sunday night while Jide lay huddled with his thoughts, he saw her skipping past his room. He hurried out of bed, almost tripping over the blanket wrapped around his bulk. Realizing it was just a figment of his imagination, Jide slowly dropped to the ground, giving way to the anguish bubbling in his chest. Soon enough, the rumors would start to spread.

Bintu went out for a night party. She got high and couldn't find her way home. So, she decided to crash at her boyfriend's place and stay a little longer. Jide could imagine his neighbors tossing the information about as laughter oozed out of their bellies. He didn't know what to do. But he had to do something.

Jide picked up his phone, punched in a few digits and waited for it to ring. Sweat caked his forehead, his lips trembled as if he had been caught doing something bad. Maybe he was. But he didn't want to dwell much on it.

"Hello," the voice said.

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Jide flicked his tongue over his chapped lips. “Just tell me when and where to meet.”

Jide waited until he was sure his mother was soundly asleep before tiptoeing out of his room. It was a rarity—she often prayed and spoke in tongues he never knew existed.

He closed the front door with a small creak and slipped into his sandals which were old and chopped off at the sole. He joined Amin in the backyard. Amin threw his arms around Jide’s neck and clapped his back. Jide sniffed, he struggled to suppress the burst of tears clamoring for release. He wanted to talk, but the words remained stuck in his throat.

Amin understood. He released Jide, handing over the yellow gallon that was by his side. “Thank you for agreeing to do this. It wasn’t easy at all. I know this because I lost my elder sister last year. The systems are fucked, man.”

Jide nodded, staring off into space. “I know who is to blame for this. And for the bad things happening in this country. They’re all gonna pay. Every single one of them.”

“That’s the spirit, bro.” Amin slapped his biceps and

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leaned closer as if he didn't want even the crickets to hear him. "So, here's the deal."

Jide easily scaled through the wired fence. He jumped, almost landing his face on the asphalt. However, he recovered fast, gesturing for Amin to throw the gallon. He caught it with a low grunt, looking around for any sign of security guards.

"Don't worry. They must be deeply asleep. Just use the keycard I gave you to access the lobby. Remember, take the stairs and head straight to the top floor. That's where you'll begin. And don't forget, everyone makes sacrifices."

Jide tipped his cap, then darted towards the building. His first assignment was to set the house of the senate building on fire. He had a momentary hesitation when Amin told him, but he pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind. Someone had to pay. And if that someone were those greedy politicians who passed new tax bills every month, so be it.

Jide wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow, using his free hand to swipe the card over the electronic scanner. The glass doors slid open, he was ushered in by a cool whoosh of air. Two uniformed guards were at the corner,

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slouched in their seats. They snored softly, unaware that an intruder had broken in. Jide took a right, down the dimly-lit hallways and up a flight of stairs. He walked on his heels till he got to the last floor. By now, he was breathing heavily.

He unscrewed the lid, raised the jar of fuel, and began pouring it everywhere. He poured it on the swiss leather, the gleaming tables, the newly painted walls, and the shiny floorboards. After he was done, he lit a match, throwing it in with a scowl on his features. The whole place went ablaze. Jide was proudly staring at his handiwork when the alarms started blaring. He started in the direction he'd come, only to see security officers racing over to where he was.

His legs followed the scattered movement of his eyes, in search of a way out. The windows were too high up and his only way of escape was blocked. The fire had increased its pace, rising to the arched ceiling. He ducked into a tight corner as he heard an uproar from downstairs. The officer who had already reached the entrance was forced to turn back. That was his cue.

Jide dashed out of hiding before the orange flames licked up a part of his face and feet. He ran so fast, he didn't know when he reached the front door. As he was about

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to turn the knob from inside, he heard it. But the fire had leaped to the landing of the second floor.

“Oh my God. There’s a little girl stuck here with a woolen sweater and a tie. Her pulse is fluctuating. I think she might be...”

Jide didn’t need to hear the rest. It was Bintu. Before he could utter a word, the flames burst out to the first floor, swallowing everything in their path.



DIASPORA

Janoma Omena

The sun was too fucking bright for 5am. I've been in this country for a year now and I still can't get used to the mid-noon mornings in this country.

The soft hum next to me eases the slight annoyance rising in my chest.

"You're so grouchy" she mumbled, pulling me closer to her. Her bonnet had fallen off leaving her pink braids everywhere.

"I'll never get used to this place" I grin, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

A year ago I would never have believed this would be my reality, waking up to the love of my life, going on dates in public, kissing her in coffee shops; it all felt surreal, like some dream that could disappear in seconds.

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It wasn't always like this. Tamara and I had been together for seven years now, for six of those we were in Nigeria, almost always hiding. The few times we felt comfortable were in our small group of queer friends and even that was tricky.

I could go on and on about how we met at one of the discreet gay bars in Lagos, how we talked for weeks after, flirted for months before committing to each other. I thought our relationship was going to end after a few months though, at most a year. I had never been with anyone longer than that, but Tam changed everything.

She became part of my daily routine, my parents knew her as my new 'best friend' and kept asking us when we would get husbands and have children, we'd always evade the subject with career goals or "waiting for the right man". We usually met in her apartment because I still lived with my parents at the time. We were careful, I tried wearing dresses whenever I went to her place, and sometimes I'd go with Akachi or some other friend during the day, to avoid suspicion. It was always better if no one suspected anything, one rumour could wreck you, one person says you're gay to the wrong person and just like that your sense of security is gone.

I remember how it all happened. It was our fifth year

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together and both of us wanted to do something to celebrate. So we got a few of our friends together and went to one of the overpriced restaurants in Lagos. We had so much fun that evening, the meals were decent, it was the restaurant's games and karaoke night so you can imagine. A lot of us got tipsy and Tam and I kissed a couple of times.

"Adaeze, oya come let's be going," Akachi said, pulling me off the chair. They had already seen the waiters staring at us.

"Abeg abeg, where to? Have you called uber yet?"

"Yes, Feranmi just called the uber guy, pick your things let's go, osiso." they whispered agitatedly at me again.

Tam pulled me up and guided me towards the door, she seemed sober enough for a drunk person, although I could sense it was because of how tense Akachi and Feranmi got. I could make out a few angry faces but I didn't care much, I was going to enjoy our anniversary for fucks sake.

"Why the fuck would you get careless like that!" Akachi shouted once we were in the uber.

"She looked pretty," I giggled, resting my head on Feranmi's shoulder.

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“I mean they’re quite drunk so it might not cause that much harm,” Feranmi said in our defence. He’s always been the optimistic one amongst the four of us.

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of what you just did, I suggested we go to one of the bars we usually go to and you said no, now we’re at risk.”

“We’ll be fine, don’t worry hm?” Tamara said comforting them. I don’t blame Akachi for getting agitated, they’ve been living on their own since they were outed at eighteen and it has been hell.

It wasn’t safe for any of us really, but we could only make do.

We dropped Akachi and Feranmi off before getting to Tam’s place. I already planned to stay the night and told my parents earlier.

We were cuddled together in bed too tired to do anything but light kissing. I remember sleeping off and then jumping awake to the sound of banging coming from the door.

“What the fuck is that?” Tam whispered loudly to me.

I thought of getting a knife when I heard the door fall off its hinges.

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“Where is that abomination?” it was a man’s voice, from the sound of shoes walking in they seemed to be more than one of them.

Tamara and I held on to each other, too scared to move, too shocked to think. Multiple scenarios of how this could all play out flashed through my mind, All the ways it could get worse. It didn’t take them for them to find us, it was a two-bedroom apartment and there were three men.

“Eh hen, see them here.” one of the men grunted, dragging Tamara by her hair. One of us or the both of us were screaming, I can’t remember clearly. Another man dragged me by my hair too and they threw us in the middle of the living room.

“Dem come fine small sef? How fine girls like una no go like dick eh?” one of them asked.

“Na you be the man inside the relationship abi?” this one seemed like their leader, he wore an Ankara shirt with khakis. I figured he was talking to me because of my haircut; a simple undercut that was growing out.

When none of us answered he was visibly irritated, “You think to say you strong pass man abi?” he snapped at me then slapped me with the back of his hand.

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I was disoriented for a minute or so... I could only hear the ringing in my ears and then Tamara's screaming brought me back to my senses and I stopped myself from falling.

They brought out a phone and ordered us to strip. Tam's hands were too shaky to unbutton her shirt quickly enough so one of them dragged it off.

They started asking questions;

Where did we grow up, if our parents were Christians?

"Dem know say na dyke you be? Eh?" I shook my head rapidly. "Oh, so you know what you're doing is not good abi? That's why you're hiding it now? It's all these oyinbo films that are entering your head."

"That's -that's not-"

"But it's true now!" one of them shouted using his belt on my back.

"Do they hide good things?" he shouted, whipping me again. By this time the three of them had joined in whipping the two of us and shouting insults. In hindsight, it went on for about five minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

Everywhere ached, my body was swollen and I could taste my own blood. The last thing I remember was seeing Tamara's skin slowly turning purple before I passed

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out.

By the time I woke up the men had gone, leaving a small bible next to us.

“Tam?” she didn’t move, my heart raced as I imagined the worst. “Tam! Wake up!” She wasn’t moving, fuck!

My head was still throbbing but my body was on autopilot. I think I called Feranmi. I’m still not sure. I remember choking on words while repeating myself on the phone.

“She’s not– Tam’s not- she’s not waking up”

“Ada? What’s going on?”

“She’s...she’s not waking up! She needs to wake up! Tamara wake up!”

“I’ve asked Akachi to call a cab, they’ll take both of you to the hospital near Tam’s house, We’ll meet you there.”

Everything happened so fast. One way or another we were in the hospital, Akachi found something for me to wear while Tamara was in the emergency ward. One of the nurses had me examined, apparently, sprained my elbow, and a broken rib.

Neither Akachi nor Feranmi asked what happened, I think they both knew. The doctors asked us to call Tam’s

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parents in case it takes a turn for the worse, one of them took care of it, and then called my parents also.

At that point everything was blurry, our parents came and started asking plenty of questions. I was dizzy and nauseous, only semi-conscious of what was going on around me.

Tam wasn't awake and that is all I could think about.

The doctor came out ages later to explain the situation, broken ribs, concussion stuff like that, but she was awake and conscious.

A few days after the whole ordeal, Tam was still in the hospital and I kept visiting every day. I remember it was a Saturday morning, I had just come back from the hospital. My mum sat me down in her room and practically forced me to explain what happened to us.

"Mummy... mummy say something." I hadn't realized I was crying until my mom's silence filled the room.

"Do you even know what you're saying? How can you sleep with another woman?! Are you a witch?" she shouted.

"But mummy-"

"Get out of my house! It's not me you'll drag inside your

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coven.”

“Mummy-”

“I don’t want to see you here by the time I get back shey you hear me? Better pack your things and leave this place”

Things turned from bad to worse... Nothing was getting better. My life was ruined. I didn’t hear from my parents again for nine months, Tam’s parents asked me to stop visiting her and I moved in with Akachi and Feranmi.

I slowly developed a routine, and then Akachi mentioned japa plans by seeking asylum in a different country. It wasn’t something I thought of before, but it was perfect. Tam and I still texted a lot despite her parents' request. I couldn’t help it, if soulmates existed then she was mine.

Processing the visa took a few months but eventually, we got it. Moving was quick and painful. When I told my parents, neither of them said anything, my mom just asked me to pick up my remaining things. It felt like I was doing them a favour by leaving again, staying far out of reach where I couldn’t disappoint them.

Sometimes I still feel the sting in my chest, knowing I left some of my friends in the country, that I wasn’t brave enough to fight for our rights. I see queer Nigerian people

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protesting, on the streets, starting organizations, finding some way to say no, to fight and I wish I was as brave as they are but I'm not. I try to remind myself that we did what we had to do to survive, that I couldn't relive that night again.

I look at Tam, still nuzzled up next to me, for a second the guilt goes away and all is well with the world. It's five-thirty now, and the sky still looks like it's mid-noon, but it ceases to matter.



MORTAR

Samuel Ojile

I scrubbed and combed my head very hard in the bathroom; cement had caked into small round stones on it. Water poured freely over my aching body and as I closed my eyes, I saw the smiling faces of boys like me at the building site. The faces turned into grimaces and dirt and the only thing left was empty bags of cement on the floor. I poured water again and relief felt like what was lying in my safe. It was a small box I still frequented when emergencies arose, I had dropped a thousand naira note in it after the day's job. Laughter erupted from my mouth as I juxtaposed activities; going to work clean as day, and coming back like a body of walking waste.

The mason, Maxwell was a jolly youth. I enjoyed working with him. We talked about a lot of things while we worked. He had asked me why I always showed at the building site properly dressed, with a laptop bag

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strapped to my shoulder.

“I wear my clothes ironed oo, even if they are old, plus, my laptop is like my android now.” I said, mechanically. He laughed.

“That is why they call you professor.” He said and I scoffed. Our faces and parts where our work rag did not cover were turning ash and white with stains of cement and dried mortar. Our work rag, soaked with water and sweat, looked almost the same as our dirty skin. Sweat would gather and disappear on our skin. Outside, I tried to lift a block, sleazily my fingers split sand particles and they sped into my eyes. It felt like pepper to have sharp sand in one’s eyes.

“What happened?” Maxwell asked; his muscles visible as he tied a yellow rope to a block. His eyes were now on the plumb, “You spent time getting the block.”

“Yes, I was just...sand got into my eyes.” I said, in a fashion that craved pity and assured him that I was not wasting time. We were maximizing every minute because our pay depended on how many blocks we laid.

“We’ll place at least 120 blocks today so that your money will come out” he announced, “I don’t work with time, I work with that first target.” He added, firm.

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“Hmm.” I complemented and we kept busy. We talked about the education system, our studies, the corrupt government and the upcoming elections. Most of us working at the site were students. Maxwell studies engineering at a polytechnic, I didn’t ask him whether it was civil engineering. I just assumed it was. We always assume things on the site. The first day on site, I found it difficult to get any task. The Engineer had assumed I was a student on I.T. because of my outfit.

Taadimma, one of the labourers on site, walked towards me like a wrecked block. His waist jolted to either side as he moved with a bucket of mortar on his head. When he had poured it into the beam, he stood still and announced,

“Today my God has tried for me and I will not try him by mixing another bag.” It was his fifth bag. He had sworn when the work started, that he’d mix ten bags of cement that day.

We all paused for a split second and what followed was hard, chorused laughter.

“What? eh, Professor.” Aka, a secondary school lad who was also bringing in mortar, asked and I told him what had happened, more humorously. The whole evening,

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we discussed the difference between soft-work, hard-work and smart-work while we cleared up. We helped each other complete tasks before nightfall. I had helped Aka to finish the mortar on the floor, packing it into a thick bucket and pouring it into a beam. The weight had flattened my hair and some of the semi-solid slid through my head covering. As I tried to wash my hair, it was packed, thick with caking cement. I resolved to do a proper cleaning at home.

“You dey always come site with your laptop, you dey do yahoo?” Taadimma asked me when the Engineer had paid everyone, “I want make you teach me oo.” He concluded. Carrying a laptop around was associated with being fraudulent. It was not the first time Taadimma mentioned ‘Yahoo’ in my presence; he was trying to get closer. He had asked me why I was doing the same work with ‘us’ in a way that ostracized labourers from good life and placed me on the advantaged pedestal. He did not know I was a hunter, a Wi-Fi hunter.

“I no be yahoo boy, oga” I am not a yahoo boy, I said, almost warning him.

“I no get big phone naim make, and I dey learn online with am via school Wi-Fi ” I said, pointing to Obuka Street, where people, especially students who had stayed

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back during the ASUU strike had gathered, their faces illuminated by their gadgets.

When I arrived home, that night, I needed thorough bathing in readiness for the next day's ordeal. As I lay down on the bed, it felt like my back was breaking and my spirit was taking the shape of pain. I wanted to be free but now, I was fending for everything I needed; a Smartphone, two square meals and emergencies like paying transport fare to a new distant site where I may be called to work. Gradually, I was becoming known as 'labourer' instead of 'student'.

RESTO CARREFOUR

RESTO CARREFOUR

BABY COACH

CAFE RESTAURANT
BANDI DUFFIE
BISQUITO - FANTA
BOLLON - FCYATI
BWO EUGIA - JUS
AMATA - KARIBI
NYTINIA



NEIGHBORS

Bashir Abubakar

Latifa

The market was silent not because it was Sunday that Christian traders were not opening their shops, but because the skyrocketing price of goods distanced the customers from visiting the market. My son, Sikiru was playing football with his sister, Sikira at the front of my shop. I started cleaning the dust that settled on the schoolbags that I sampled at the porch of the shop. Sikiru's wail hit my ears as I threw the bag that I held together with the rag and rushed to see what happened.

Seeing the ball in the hand of Alhaji Hudu, yelling at Sikiru who held his cheek assured me the fact that he was the cause of Sikiru's wailing. But, I wasn't surprised, because a slap wasn't a big deal compared to the hatred that Alhaji Hudu was showing me and my children. He beats Sikiru and Sikira like adults anytime he felt they offended him; his abusive words also stung in my soul like

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an arrows released by a great archer who never missed his target. If not I knew him for almost ten years — since before I born Sikiru — I might say he was mad at me because of the dwindling of his business; but Alhaji Hudu hates me because I am a Yoruba: a half Muslim who values her culture than her religion and teach her children immorality, as he always said.

"If you dare to slap him again, I will report you to the police," I said, pointing my index finger to his face. The appearance of Malam Shamsu forced Alhaji Hudu to swallow the words that he cooked in his mind. I understand that there was something bad that happened or about to happen to Alhaji Hudu who looked abnormal since morning. He threw the ball away while staring at Sikiru who was crying, "if you ever allow this ball to come close to me again, I will tear it, nonsense." He uttered his last word while following Mallam Shamsu who was looking at me with the angle of his eyes.

The hatred of Alhaji Hudu was lesser than that of Malam Shamsu. He cooked my soul with cold water and chewed it with the tooth of his silence. He was the one who was pouring fuel into the fire of my hatred in the heart of Alhaji Hudu; people called him Malam which was why despite him going to Saudi Arabia, he retained the title

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instead of "Alhaji". On so many occasions, I heard him telling Alhaji Hudu that: Yoruba Muslims are more like apostates, because most of their actions are not Islamic, like allowing women to run a shop, dealing with men.

Sikira went to pick up the ball as I kneel down weeping out Sikiru's tears with the edge of my scarf. " Sorry my son, I will buy a computer game for you to play in the shop, then you should play the ball at home or in school, right?" He nodded his head; I held their hands and went back to the shop, that was when I saw Malam Shamsu and Alhaji Hudu inside Alhaji Hudu's shop that was almost empty – only a few sacks and nylon bags remains which he was selling the retail instead of wholesale — the emptiness of the shop echoed the words of Malam Shamsu who was talking in shock at the time we stepped in the porch of my shop. "Taxi? Please you shouldn't leave the business, I will meet your landlord and beg him." Even though I love the news, I feel sorry for Alhaji Hudu whose life had punished him that way. Then I started thinking of finding a Yoruba trader to rent the shop before Malam Shamsu found another Hausa man that would join him to continue squeezing my life.

Ebere

If not Mr Bayo needs money desperately, he won't sell

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the shop to me, because Latifa tried to use the opportunity of being in the same tribe with him to persuade him to rent the shop to an Igala trader which she felt he was better since she didn't find a Yoruba that would rent it, but Mr Bayo said the rent money won't solve his financial problem. On the other hand, there was Malam Shamsu who hid under the shadow of Alhaji Hudu by giving him money to buy the shop, but they didn't reach the price tag of the shop. The only choice of Mr Bayo was Latifa and the other man who I didn't know his name. He – Mr Bayo – even gave them two more weeks to find one-third of the money and complete it later, but they couldn't make it. Since then, I started tasting the bitterness of their actions towards me especially when they heard that I am a dealer of alcohol; and that was what I would be selling in the shop.

Since I started opening the shop, Malam Shamsu has been blocking the wheelbarrow pushers from carrying my customer's goods. Even in front of me, he told them that if they carry beer, God would burn them in hellfire, because it was prohibited in Islam to carry it. One day, I heard Latifa warning her children never to enter my shop, because they – Sikiru and Sikira – were coming to play with my son, Eze. Latifa didn't chase Eze away from her shop as Malam Shamsu does, rather, she even

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bought chocolate for him when she bought it for her children. She gists with my wife, Ngozi, but never puts her foot in my shop.

I understand that Malam Shamsu wasn't a person that would engage in dialogue that could produce mutual understanding; he even became extremely mad at me when he saw some Muslims – old and young – were coming to buy beer. He abused our Constitution, saying if it was a sharia law we were practicing, I wouldn't be able to sell what was forbidden. Some of my customers that didn't know the shop told me that: my neighbours refused to show them my shop when they asked them. My wife started scaring, thinking they might hurt us physically.

I once confronted Malam Shamsu to know the reason he hates me up to a level that he didn't hesitate to abuse me in front of me. "Listen Ebere," he said, "I didn't hate you, because my religion didn't teach me to hate anyone. But, your affairs are contrary to my religion and culture, I am sure you are here on a mission to destroy us, so I can do anything to protect my religion and culture." I agreed that anything alcoholic was prohibited for Muslims, but I wonder if it was the main reason that Malam Shamsu hates me.

One day at noon, after I picked up Eze from school, I

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heard a yelling outside, "fire! fire! Please help! fire!" I didn't know when I carried Eze and rushed out together with my wife. It was Malam Shamsu's shop that was engulfed with fire. "Anas is inside." Someone said, from behind. I quickly dropped Eze and entered the shop where only smoke was coming out through the door. I pushed one of the men that were evacuating the samples of the bed sheets and curtains at the porch. I came out with Anas in my hands who had already fainted; that was when those who went to fetch water also came back; they poured some water on us because the fire caught our clothes. I went back to help those that were evacuating the remaining goods.

Malam Shamsu

It's painful to see the ashes of your wealth, but it's more painful to see someone you treated as an enemy lying on the bed motionless after saving your son and trying to save your wealth. I was flabbergasted when I heard that Ebere was the one who saved Anas from burning into ashes and went back to evaluate my goods despite the fire burning some part of his body. I heard that many of my neighbours were scared to go close to the shop, talk less of saving my son. I heard that some people who I called my brothers in Islam stole some of the goods that

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were evaluated. I heard that Ebere didn't listen to Ngozi's begging not to enter in fear of losing her husband. If it was me in Ebere's shoes, can I do what he did to me? the truth was no, I can't.

The doctor that was treating Ebere came and informed us that they needed blood because he lost a lot of blood through the wound on his head. Before anyone among the people that came together with Ngozi uttered a word, I quickly said, "Doctor, let's go and take mine."

"Stop behaving like you care, he will survive without your blood," Ngozi said, crying. I didn't know how she was feeling, but I believe that she was feeling hurt more than I did. As the doctor said he would come back to us in fifteen minutes to go and test our blood; I then rushed to the hospital's mosque and performed a special prayer for the survival of Ebere who was yet to regain his consciousness.

The blood of those who volunteered to donate their blood to Ebere didn't match with his own; it was only mine that matched. Ngozi protested; she didn't want my blood in her husband's vein. She asked the doctor to wait for Ebere's brother to come and take his own. Despite the doctor telling her there was no time to waste, she was determined. I didn't know when I was on my knees beg-

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ging her. "Please Madam, don't you see he is closer to me now than any other human being? don't you think it's a lesson that God wants to teach us by letting us know that my blood and his own are the same? Please, madam, I feel if he dies, I will also die. Please..." She kneeled down, and put her hand on my shoulder, "it's okay Malam." For the first time, a woman outside my family circle touched me intentionally.

I couldn't remember the time I felt happy more than the time I saw Ebere leaning against the wall of the hospital on his bed laughing with Ngozi when she was feeding him, while Eze played his computer game beside them. I stood against the door watching them, and thanking God in my mind for saving Ebere, because I couldn't bear the pain of seeing Ngozi and Eze without Ebere, while on the other hand seeing Anas in good health. "Malam Shamsu, why do you stand at the door?" Ebere interrupted my thought as Ngozi stood up and gave me a seat. She went out with Eze as Ebere looked at me and said, "thank you, Malam, I heard that you donated blood to me." A warm tear sneaked from my eyes. "Why do you do that? Why did you enter the shop that was burning?" I threw the simultaneous questions at him, looking at his head wound where the pillar collapsed on him.

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Ebere smiled at me, "I know you don't ask because you are not happy with what I did; you ask because you care about me which is amazing. So, what happened has happened, may God return what you lost to you in the shop."

I wish fire didn't burn his arm so that I could hug him, but I held his hand and looked into his eyes, "Ameen my brother, I wish you a quick recovery to come back, and continue living together as brothers."

"Ameen," he said, smiling at me.



SACRAMENTS OF SEX, SACRILEGE OF SORROWS

Chidiebere Udeoketchukwu

One punter left his sweat all over me
Another told me I belonged in a butcher
A cheap bit of flesh, bought to satisfy a hunger.
(Why Why Why)

12 Lord Lugard Street, Calabar,
Cross River State, Nigeria.
7 July 2019, 5:18 pm.

He is knacking me in a mad relentless craze. His rancid lustful breath overwhelms me. In his spree of unbridled lust and libido, he drools; burning an incense of energy like a zesty sex starved billy goat. Each thrust threatens to shift my womb. His brutish grunts are loud and

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so poor in masking his glee. In moments like this, I lose myself to time and space, to flee the shame I suffer every day.

For 4 years, I have slaved as an indentured prostitute. Father was forced to pledge me away to a pimp. My woes began on a watery Wednesday evening, at a moment when my mother was in the kitchen and I had just returned from school. While sharing pleasantries with her, the entrance door suddenly opened, and the scariest trio of men stormed in. The first of many I would encounter in the years that later came. Father closed the door after he walked in. His head was bent, in a way that shabbily disguised penitence. It dawned on me that a different breed of trouble was brought home when I was commanded by one of the men to call mother. She walked into the sitting room wiping her hands on her star dotted wrapper. I could tell from the look on her face that dad had been at his drinking best again. Last night as one of the men recounted, he had continued placing bets in card games even after he ran out of naira notes. When it became obvious that he would not stop, he was dragged home from the casino by the scary trio to recover the debt he had incurred.

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5:45 pm

A spank on my bum jilts me back to the present. My knees are numbed from the lingering minutes of kneeling. Sometimes, his burly bulk pins me down and so hard that I fear I may pass out; and there are moments I fight the retching as he bathes me in slobbering kisses. He pays good money, he always pays; but many of those who do not pay, leave me beaten, bruised and broken.

I am still stretched on the thin threadbare mattress. My face is turned towards the faded green, away from the trash bin by the window pane, recently emptied of used condoms. The red bulb aglow displays a near silhouette spectacle of his figure struggling to squeeze into his safari trousers. At the very least, I am solaced by the much this heaving hulk will pay. A faint grin spreads across my face; my father's debt is nearly done.

"Lollipop, you seemed off your game".

His strained grunts are now triumphal. He is nearly done buckling his belt. My mouth still wears the caustic flavour of his semen. I struggle so hard not to show my disgust. I turn to meet his stare in a feigned seductive grin; a smile that never fails to harden his member. I can

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see the rising bulge poorly hidden beneath the fabric he wears. What a monstrosity.

“Your girl has to work round the clock. Maybe you should visit very early in the mornings”.

The light suddenly fizzles out, interrupting our conversation. The air goes stiff and stale. The room now feels stuffy as the ceiling fan slowly whirls to a stop. In the ambience of the near darkness, he walks over to my side. He kneels and while caressing my thighs, he gently responds;

“You know that’s not possible”.

“Then you can book me for home service”.

“You know how much it would cost. I see you are not happy that you get to eat only Jara”.

6:40 pm

The enshrouding darkness reminds me of leaving the precincts of the brothel before 8:30. As the door groans to a close, I sit up to count the notes he whisked in the cover of darkness. No disappointments. He always pays.

When I can no longer hear his receding footsteps, I am nudged again into a mist of meditations. A fog of silence hovers low, pierced by slow whirls of the ceiling

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fan. That day that father pledged me away was the only time my mother failed to bail him once more from his gambling debts. She was barely managing. Her Mama Put business was just enough to make a few ends meet and dad offered little help. He was a legendary drunkard even before they exchanged nuptial vows. I keep wondering how he was able to woo her. Well, this time, there was no money at home.

Without warning, one of the men pointed a pistol at mother threatening to shoot if dad failed to pay. The two others were grinning devilishly. Things turned from bad to worse when my father was forced to choose between losing my mother and pledging me away to settle the debts. Well, his eventual choice turned out to be a fatal attraction. I remember my mother's anguished expression. She yowled in grief as I was bundled towards the door. Months later, I received news that my mother succumbed to a stroke after the man wielding the pistol accidentally shot my younger sister who tried to fight him. But I know she died of a broken heart. Every now and then, I wail myself to slumber each time I think of her.

On my first night as a prostitute, my Madame forced me to fellate elderly clients. Most of them paid double the price to savour the thrill of having their semen swal-

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lowed. There was the hostile flavour of cigarette and alcohol nearly in every gulp. On my second day, waking up late had proved costly. As punishment, my Madame had me raped by four men in quick successions. Four more followed after an hour of letting my frail body catch some breaths. As they took turns to have their fill of me, I began to bleed. I was bleeding rivers and was in so much pain, but my screams kindled anew and again their lascivious fantasies as they kept thrusting harder. I can recall that the bangings became more relentless and savage. I passed out eventually. I also remember being revived with a bowl of water. I could not stand and I could not eat. A stream of blood and semen ran down my thighs. I was an unholy sight.

For two weeks, my room and those of the other little girls were pilgrimage centres for punters. My torn dress turned brittle from the crust that had formed from the dried semen. At intervals, I would wash myself with hot water and a piece of cloth which I pressed to my vagina like a compress to temper the pain and swelling.

Round-about, Watt Market.

8:30 pm

It is a long and arduous trek to my lowly apartment. In marauding through an army of people clustered in the

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market, I do my best to avoid the leers and jeers of the road side traders. Oftentimes, I hear voices, calling me dirty and depressing names. I can recognise some of them. There's the husky but surprisingly loud voice of Amụ-agụ. That leech! Oftentimes he accosts me in semi dark corners of Clerks-Alley, begging for a quickie. He always reeks of cigarettes, beer or even garlic! Sometimes, when I try to push past him, I get a playful but annoying pinch on my buttocks or a light spank. Sometimes, he does this in the company of his delinquent friends. In the madness of their laughter, he bellows more insults at my direction;

“Ashawo! Nnegodi ka ike gi si buo ibu”

“Lollipop! igbugo m!!!”

“ọtụ gi n'eri m isi ooo!!!”

“Chai!”

The rippling laughter from his friends can only inflate his depraved bravado.

They've all visited me! To them, I am good enough to be loathed by day but loved in the dark. But not all men see me this way. Not all.

Ernest sees me differently.

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I can endure the gauntlet of insults and jeers from the likes of Amu-agu and his friends because I have come to slowly realize that in Ernest is a heart that truly sees me differently—not as some sex toy, but as a person. A human person in dire need of love and acceptance in this wicked world.

Ernest lives in a block not too far from where with the other girls, I am lodged. I can't really remember when or how we became very intimate. I guess it happened gradually. But I do remember meeting him for the second time in a kiosk. He had attempted to pay for the wares I purchased but I rudely refused. Yet he was nice and never wavered in trying to make me trust him. In the weeks that followed, I learned to be free with him.

Today, I do not know whether to call him a lover. Perhaps he is something of a cross between a lover and a mother. The day I finally paid him a visit, I cried on his shoulder as he learned of my tale. He cuddled me and comforted me. In my grief, I had made a move to kiss him, but understanding my state, he gently held me back, and professed his feelings;

“Rachael, even before daring to meet you at the kiosk, I had already known you for two months”.

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Incredulously, I asked him;

“How? I don’t understand. Have you been watching me? you already know I am a prostitute?”

“Yes”, he said with a grin that was between coyness and sincerity.

“But that doesn’t matter to me”.

I still wore my unbelief. He smiled sweetly and pressed on.

“I want you to understand that there are persons who would see you as the human you really are and not for what you do”.

“Perhaps, I may be one of those people. Perhaps you may still have your candid reservations about men in general, but I trust that in my case, you would judge me fairly”.

Trying desperately to fight back the tears, I stopped him from saying further; and holding his hands I came up close.

“Ernest, just shut up and kiss me like you mean it”.

8:50 pm

I am paces away from Ernest's block. I am solaced that he has gotten to know me in a way that society may nev-

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er comprehend. They fail to realize I am undeserving of my fate; they can never understand I was forced into this lane of life. I still wonder how my father fares with my younger siblings. The last time I saw him was the day he came to break the news of mum's untimely passing. He wore a shabbily disguised penitent look. A look he wore on the day he gambled me away.

18 Egerton Street, Block A, Room 5,

9:00 pm

Ernest is at his study table, preparing for his Bar Final exams. He relishes the idea of being my lawyer and lover. Naughty boy. In recent times, I have come to spend more moments with him even though Madame keeps a watchful eye over the block where she has lodged all her girls. In my area, there are eyes everywhere, watching us like hawks. I've always managed to evade attention. Perhaps, I have grown to love him more than I fear Madame. Sometimes, the urge to run away again is so overwhelming; but I bear the tattoo of an indentured prostitute, and until my father's debt is done, she has vowed not to release me.

Well, I can endure this life for a little while longer. His debt is nearly done and with Ernest's help, I will get back at them, all of them: The scary trio who whisked me away

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from home, Madame Melody, the Pimp, each policeman who made me kneel, and every punter that came upon me. But first, my father's debt shall be done.



MY VERY POLYGAMOUS FAMILY

Adeleye Josephine

I like to think that the beginning of all my problems came from the family I was born into. My family is a dysfunctional polygamous one, with five wives and 32 children- 10 girls and 22 boys. With so many arguments occurring every day in the house it was a warfare where you prayed to not be beaten or denied food because of someone's anger.

"Ada number 3" shouted one of the four of my step mothers. I grumbled under my breath. I was just about to sneak off to the lake to have my quiet time. Quiet time is impossible when you have a family like mine.

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All the while grumbling I walked to our kitchen that was big enough to be an apartment on its own. Once I stepped inside I knew I was going to be in trouble one way or the other even if I avoided it. On a stool in the center of the kitchen sat the first wife of my father. She did not cook unless Father wanted her to specially make a meal for him if she was in the kitchen it was to boss everybody else around. The only other wives present were the third and fifth wife. For a brief second I wondered where my own mother, the fourth wife, was. If she had been here my serving of trouble would have been reduced by a quarter albeit small it was something.

Ada number 1 and Ada number 2 were already in the kitchen wearing the same annoyed expression that I had on.

“Oya select six fat yams from the pantry and start cutting them”

“Yes Ma” all three of us said, rushing to pick knives from the drawer.

In my haste I made the grave mistake of forgetting to wash my hands as I cut a part of the yam I had carried. Before I could stand up from where I sat on the floor a hot Abara landed on my back. The pain was hot and

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reverberated through my whole body but I refused the urge to shed tears in front of these women who took pride in inflicting pain.

“Stupid girl!” screamed the third wife, as if the Abara was not enough she pulled me to my feet pinching my ear roughly twisting it so hard I feared it would fall off.

My step-siblings kept their gaze trained to the yams in front of them their backs tenses “Will you go and wash your hand you this stupid girl”

“I’m sorry ma” I said moving away when she released the hold she had on my ear. I started to walk to the zinc when the fifth wife put out a leg in front of my path.

I raised my head to look at her and she sneered and hissed “Is she the only one you’ll say sorry to? Is it not all of us that are going to eat the food?”

Before I could tell her sorry she raised her hand and delivered an accurate slap to my cheek. The force of it caused me to stumble and I held back a groan at the pain that was now blossoming on my face and my back.

“Rubbish girl” she hissed.

I bowed my head with my hands fisted by my side “I’m sorry ma”

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She dismissed me with a wave of her hand so I walked to the zinc making sure to make a brilliant show of washing my hands thoroughly. Thankfully for the rest of the time the food was being prepared I was only shouted at instead of being beaten.

I ate my food on the quiet part of the veranda with my step siblings who were in the same age range as me.

“Aunty Ada” my mother's last child. Blessing came walking towards me with her plate of half eaten porridge. I put my own food down beside me, collecting Blessing's food as soon as she reached me so that she wouldn't drop it. I wouldn't want her to drop it then face the punishment of wasting food.

“What happened, Blessing?” I asked her to use the edge of her cloth to wipe her oil stained mouth. Blessing looked left and right then leaned to whisper in my ear.

“I cannot finish my food Aunty Ada” she whispered, her breath smelled of porridge. One thing I've learnt in my family is that the walls have ears so you have to be more than careful with what you say.

I simply nodded at Blessing then under the watch of no one I scooped all of her food into my own. She smiled at me and I laughed because two of her front teeth were

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missing.

“Go and drop your plate inside” I told her. She whispered a thank you to me and cheerfully hopped inside the house.

By the end of the week I had new wounds added to the scars that would never fade from my body. Among them was the whip of a belt from Emeka, the third son of the family. He said I didn’t iron his shirt properly so he beat me for it, a kick to the stomach by the second wife for not sweeping her room when she asked me to, three strokes of cane to my buttocks for not fetching enough water to cook.

The days went by in a blur and I barely saw my Father as he was now living his last days on his sick bed, as my father’s health condition became worse each day so did the quantity of food reduce. All the younger children stopped going to school because the school fees were used to take care of our sick father instead we older ones arranged between ourselves to tutor our younger ones.

With no more school to go to I resorted to hawking our farm produce with a few of my siblings. It went like that for a while until one day all hell broke loose....

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Father had died and the whole compound was in confusion. I had been coming from the market that day so I calmly dropped my empty basket to the floor and watched as my family ran helter-skelter screaming at the top of their lungs at the death of the only true provider of the house.

I saw three of my step mothers wailing and rolling in the ground as if all had been lost. The younger children surrounded their mothers with tears on their own faces. The older ones like me stayed back, our chins wobbling because we did not want to shed a tear.

Later that night the news had reached the rest of the village and everyone came to share their condolences.

By the next month I barely recognized myself because I worked to no end and was beaten for the slightest of my mistakes. All the Ada's were to be married off, Ada number 1 and number 2 accepted their fates while I did not. In two days' time two men came with a few goats and sacks of foodstuff, by evening of that day both Ada's were already married which left me.

I faced even more hardship and every day I would beg no one in particular to take me out of this life I had been born into. I cried myself to sleep each night and in my

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sleep my own family members haunted me, chasing me with cutlasses to butcher me like cow meat. And every time I woke up covered in my own sweat and tears disgusted with myself and the bitter life I was living in.

One day I walked into the living room holding a tray that had a glass and a bottle of cold water. My mother had thrust it into my hand as soon as I appeared in the kitchen saying that we had a visitor and I was to serve him the water before the food arrived. I walked into the living room painting a fake smile on my face, the smile melted off my face as I locked eyes with Chad who was the visitor.

He smiled at me then I started shaking, driving madly into panic. In the next second the tray fell from my hands and the glass broke on the floor with an ear splitting sound that caused the second wife who was sitting beside her son, Chad to scream and jump to her feet. I jolted out of it as the second wife slapped me painfully.

“Is that how you will welcome my son you this idiotic disgrace of a human being?” she screamed at the top of her voice. “I’m supposed to even use this glass to make a mark on your forehead”

“Mama No”

SURVIVAL

I raised my head sharply as the second wife turned to look at her son in disbelief. Even I stared at him in shock and disbelief.

“You can punish her later but don’t use glass on her” Chad said looking like a peacemaker as he made his mother sit down. “How would you feel if someone used glass on my fine face?”

I scoffed internally nauseated at his stupid display of heroism.

“Ada pick up the glass and come back to sweep the living room so that someone else does not step on it”

I rushed out of the living room to where the brooms were kept. I wiped a stray tear from my face as memories of what Chad had done to me as a teenager resurfaced.

Chad’s arrival had catalyzed my decision of running away. If I stayed one more month I was sure I would die either way so before I got killed by the hand of my own family I was going to run away.

The thing about an abuser is that you can always trust them to do the same things over and over again so three days after Chad’s arrival I was not surprised when he crept into my room at midnight.

SURVIVAL

I pretended as if I was sleeping, my hand tightening around the stone I kept under my pillow.

Chad carefully slid into the bed behind me. He pressed a kiss to my sweat covered neck and I shivered disgusted. I woke up pretending to be surprised that he was in my room.

“My baby. Look at you, your breasts and bum-bum have grown bigger” he whispered, holding me closer to his body.

“Brother Chad please No” I pleaded in false pretense.

He might have had his way then when I was small and unable to fight back but I won’t let him have his way this time.

Just as he raised himself above me I kneed him in his private part then hit the stone as hard as I could against the side of his head.

He wailed as he rolled off me.

I jumped to my feet and strapped my bag to my back.

I ran.

I kept running until the family house was the size of an ant in the distance.

SURVIVAL

I can tell my story today because I survived from the vile creatures I thought were my family.