THE YEAR OF FREE BIRDS

Stories Featuring Visually Impaired Protagonists

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Dedicated to visually impaired citizens all over the world.

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IMAGINING BETTER

BASIT JAMIU

Human beings are partly blind, considering that people have limited knowledge of themselves, others, as well as the future. It is safe to reflect as such in the grander scale of thought. The world has millions of totally blind citizens; some, unknown to many, are professors, doctors, businessmen, lawyers, athletes. Centuries of misrepresentation and discrimination against blind people have created a dismal picture in the mind of many people. Interestingly, it is hard to find literary books that capture the life of a blind person that doesn't come with many tired stereotypes. For many years, I have studied closely the lives of blind citizens. I have had conversations with some of the blind people I met on the street, and I've read about some of the greatest men who have contributed immensely to the world in their state of blindness, from Geerat J. Vermeij to Jacques Lusseyran and the Nigerian musical producer, Cobhams Emmanuel Asuquo; and I have found that they are,

amongst many things, humans like everyone else with triumphs, fears, and anxieties.

In all the literary output centered on blindness, only very few were written by African writers. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's "Whispering Trees" and Tope Folarin's "Miracle," which were both shortlisted for Caine Prize in the same year, are stories exploring blindness. It appears that there is a subconscious erasure of blind or disabled people from literary representation in African literature. This erasure is not as a result of the fact that Africans do not have blind people or haven't closely lived with blind people. This is because it is, as some have argued, hard to write about something you have never directly experienced or deeply care about. This is also the position of writers who have written terrible stories about blind people. How does it feel to be visually disconnected from one's own world if you have never lived that way? The easy answer is, we may never truly know if we have never been blind, but we can imagine, and if we must imagine through fiction, then it is our social responsibilty to imagine better, to imagine with a sense of just openness, without stereotype, dehumanization or sentiment.

Imagining better — this is what this collection is all about. In 2018, we invited African writers to richly imagine the lives of visually impaired citizens via fiction, to write stories that revolve around a visually challenged character, stories that show the anxieties, travails, and triumphs of the blind as they

grapple with their condition. Writers were urged to use the richness of their human imagination to craft memorable blind protagonists devoid of sentimentality and dehumanization, blind protagonists with naturalness and normality, human beings full of flaws, full of hopes and aspiration, capable of joy, sadness, and breathing. The emphasis is on stories that challenge stereotypes of blindness.

From the pools of submission, there were memorable stories, remarkable prose for which African stories are known, and beautiful sentences that made us pause for a moment, that gave us more hope about the future of African literature. In the end, I chose four stories that best capture our lofty expectation for the anthology. The four stories in this anthology were contributed by Manu Herbstein ("Ama"), Prosper Wilton ("The Hartcliffe Extension"), Ahmed Maiwada ("Apple, Again"), and Jason Mykl Snyman ("The Centennial Game").

This anthology is dedicated to all the visually impaired people across the world. I am indeed grateful to Uzoma Ihejirika, Tope Akintayo as well as the entire Afro Anthology Team. Thank you sir Kayode, the Boss. Thank you sir Dairo, my Egbon. I am indeed grateful to Lizzy Attree for her support and faith in this project.

Basit Jamiu,
Lokoja, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

LIZZY ATTREE

Those of us reading these words on an electronic screen have the privilege of sight. We can see; we can read. In our increasingly LCD centred worlds, the rise of visual power in our virtual universes on smart phones and in social media has led to a proliferation of iconophilia that must be unprecedented in human history. One benefit for lovers of letters is that the 'image+text'-based nature of the internet means that reading and writing (albeit in shorter and shorter bursts) have risen alongside the hacking of our brains by 'free' apps and advertising. Rates of literacy on the African continent are often foregrounded and contested when African literature is championed/discussed and yet rarely mentioned in such debates are the over five million blind citizens of Africa, whose ability to read is secondary to their inability to see anything at all, with their eyes at least.

According to the World Health Organisation "Approximately 26.3 million people in the African Region

have a form of visual impairment. Of these, 20.4 million have low vision and 5.9 million are estimated to be blind. It is estimated that 15.3% of the world's blind population reside in Africa." (https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/eye-health).

So where can we find these stories? Who is writing them? And are they written or read by the blind themselves? Those reading using braille are using touch to detect, translate and understand the words in stories. Those hearing stories read or spoken aloud rely on their aural skills to imbibe and pick up meaning, detecting registers and intonations that are perhaps lost on other readers. The gift of sight is but one of humanity's five senses, and yet the absence or loss of sight is often considered one of the most life-shattering experiences a person can endure. But life doesn't end with blindness (indeed it can begin in that state). Life continues, altered, transformed, reconceived.

In order to challenge stereotypes of blindness, in 2018 a call for submissions was made for short stories by African writers centred around a blind protagonist or that has blindness as its core theme. Writers of African citizenship or African descent were invited to send manuscripts that revolve around a visually challenged character. From a pool of 87 submissions, four stories were selected to form this anthology, curated and edited by Basit Jamiu and Uzoma Ihejerika on behalf of the Afro Anthology Series.

The four contributors to this anthology, Manu Herbstein (South Africa), Prosper Wilton (Zimbabwe), Ahmed Maiwada (Nigeria), and Jason Mykl Snyman (South Africa) have all written intriguing responses to the theme of blindness. All four writers chose to focus on completely blind protagonists whose lifespans include: gambling with longevity (in 'The Centennial Game'), avenging and reclaiming slave history (in 'Ama'), battling with false prophets (in 'Apple, Again') and facing Murambatsvina (in 'The Woes of Hatcliffe Extension').

Snyman's description of Abidan Cointe's world in the Hodegetria Gardens, "built for the perfumes and textures and… tastes" rather than for the visual beauty of plants and flowers, are evocative and sensual, deftly drawing the reader in to Cointe's consciousness where eyesight is no longer important. Referencing Dylan Thomas, Terry Pratchett and Ingmar Bergman, Snyman's cleverly constructed confrontation with mortality in 'The Centennial Game', draws the reader in to the eternal battle between life and death with wit and compassion.

In contrast, Ahmed Maiwada's 'Apple, Again', clearly sets visual impairment or blindness alongside mental delusions and/or intellectual blindness. Suspicion and anger grow in the darkness between a cynical retired thief and his wife of twenty years whose movements and perfume suggest betrayal to her bitter, housebound spouse. Amusing plays on the dialectical nuances of Kano Hausa and Zaria Hausa rub

alongside comic gems describing "the Naira [wife] that he knew and the honey badger were one and the same animals, uncaring." and the surprisingly sinister: he knew her body "It was quite warm to the touch, like newly passed urine that was sealed in a nylon bag." Confounding expectation in the final twist of the story, Maiwada leaves the reader unclear whether the invisible world does exist after all.

Prosper Wilton's central character Raviro imagines and hears a great deal as she walks through Harare clutching a prescription she cannot afford from her doctor, so it is not until the second page that the reader realises she is completely blind. The reminders of the dire poverty of residents of the northern suburbs which was compounded by the destruction of houses and shacks in 2005 ordered by Mugabe would be shocking if conditions in Zimbabwe were any better today. In 'The Woes of Hatcliffe Extension" Wilton succeeds in conveying the tragedy of preventable blindness describing Raviro's cataracts as "slight milky cloudiness" that slowly became "fully blank vision" – purely as a result of marital abuse and neglect and crucially, lack of money for desperately needed "medical redemption".

Manu Herbstein received the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Award for "Best First Book" for his searing first novel *Ama, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2000) and he submitted extracts to this collection from that novel and *Brave Music of a Distant Drum* (2012). Both novels focus on the blind protagonist Ama, whose right eye was taken out by "Knagg's

whip". The excerpted sections form an abbreviated taste of Ama's story which she explains has to be told because it "lies within me, kicking like a child in the womb, a child whose time has come". It is a great privilege to be able to include Herbstein's writing in this collection, these short extracts powerfully illuminate the horrors and complexities of African slavery such that Ama is not portrayed as the only character that is blind, when humans can be blind to each other's humanity.

In Sophocles' Antigone, as well as in other Greek literature, Teiresias is a prophet, sent by the gods to reveal truth to those who will hear him. Ironically, this prophet, or seer, is literally blind though he is able to figuratively "see" the truth as well as the future. Achebe too used blindness as a metaphor for wisdom when he said that "The story is our escort, without it we are blind." We need stories to understand the past, decipher the present and prepare for the future. As Stevie Wonder once said "Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn't mean he lacks vision".

I always urge readers to listen for silences, look for gaps in representation, to read carefully and critically. I hope this brief introduction to a stimulating, original collection of short stories will encourage readers and writers alike to consider blindness more thoughtfully so that visual impairment does not simply function as a plot device, a routine draconian punishment, a blessing or a curse, an

impossible disability, but as an opportunity to consider the world differently.

AMA

MANU HERBSTEIN

AMA

I AM BLIND.

Knaggs' whip took out my right eye many years ago; and now my left eye, too, is only good for shedding tears. My hand can still hold a quill but, without guidance, the marks it makes are mere scribbles.

I have a story to tell. It lies within me, kicking like a child in the womb, a child whose time has come. If I had died last night, my story would by now be lying with me in my shallow grave; but I did not die last night and I will still tell my story. It is true that Wono and Ayodele have heard parts of it, and Olukoya and Josef, too, but though they are all still blessed with good eyesight, none of them can write, at least not well enough to be my scribe.

Tomba was my husband, father of our only child, Kwame. After Tomba's death, Miranda took Kwame away to the city. Her husband, Senhor Gavin Williams, is the British Consul there. According to the laws of Brazil, I am Miranda's

property. So is Kwame.

Now Kwame is a grown man with a wife and a child of his own. Today he will bring them to meet me for the first time. I must not think of it; it makes my heart pound in my chest. But I cannot control my thoughts any more than I can control the beating of my heart. My granddaughter Nandzi Ama, named after me, is two years old. I shall take her in my arms and hold her close to me.

I taught Kwame his letters and numbers. Miranda—and I bless her for this—let him share the lessons she gave to her daughter Elizabeth, who is just one week older than Kwame. She had to keep it secret, because it is against the laws of the Portuguese to teach slaves to read and write. When Kwame was grown, Miranda persuaded Senhor Gavin to give him employment as a clerk. Just think! He was still a small boy when he was taken from me, and now he is a man, and although like me he is a slave, he gets paid for his work.

I pray that Kwame will bring ink and paper with him as I asked. Then I will tell him the story of my life, from the beginning; Tomba's too, such of it as I know; and he will write it all down. And one day Nandzi Ama will read it; and her children, too. Then they will know who their ancestors were and where they came from; and they will understand that the shame of their enslavement lies with the slave traders not with the enslaved.

JOSEF

She was sleeping when we arrived at the *senzala*, sitting on her low stool with her back against the wall, fast asleep. I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently to wake her.

"Sister Ama," I told her in Fante (we always speak Fante when we are alone together), "he has arrived. Your son is here."

She was confused.

"I am sorry," I said. "You were dozing. I woke you."

She tried to get to her feet. I had to help her up.

Now they were standing face to face; but Sister Ama is blind and, of course, she couldn't see him. I sensed that she expected him to embrace her.

"Zacharias," I told him in Portuguese, "this is your mother, Sister Ama."

She started.

"Zacharias?" she asked. "Is it not Kwame? My son Kwame Zumbi?"

I tried to reassure her.

"Sister Ama," I told her, speaking again in Portuguese so that Zacharias could understand, "Senhora Miranda calls him

Zacharias. You remember, that is the name he was given at his christening? That is what they call him in Salvador."

The chance for them to embrace one another had passed. Zacharias stood there, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Take my hand," she said.

He did as she asked. He still hadn't said a word.

"Let me feel your face," she said.

ZACHARIAS

My name is Zacharias Williams. I am employed as a clerk and scribe by Senhor Gavin Williams, Consul of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland to the Portuguese Viceroyalty of Brazil in Salvador, Bahia.

Soon I will be a free man. Senhora Miranda has promised to give me my freedom, with a proper certificate of manumission to prove it.

Senhora Miranda is the wife of Senhor Gavin. She owns the sugar plantation and mill known as the Engenho de Cima. She inherited it from her father when he died.

That is where I am now.

Senhora Miranda says she was born here and lived here until

she married Senhor Gavin. She tells me that I was born here, too, but that she took me away to Salvador when I was a small boy. I do not doubt her word but I remember nothing of this place. It is as if I have come here for the first time.

My mother, the slave woman Ama, lives here. She is old and blind and unwell and, I have to say it, ugly. I don't remember her at all. She is a stranger to me. Indeed, I wonder whether she really is my mother. How could a mother give up her only child, and to a white woman at that? There is something else I don't understand: she speaks good English, much better than Senhora Miranda does. Senhora Miranda speaks English with a strong accent. Senhor Gavin laughs at her English and that makes her angry. Senhora Miranda is a rich white lady. My mother is an old black slave, dressed in a torn, faded dress. Most slaves can't even speak good Portuguese. Yet my mother also speaks English almost as well as Senhor Gavin does. And he is an Englishman, a genuine white Englishman. My mother's perfect English is a mystery to me.

I don't know what to call my mother. If she were just another old African slave woman, I would call her by her name, Ama. But I cannot do that. If she is really my mother, I must treat her with respect. "Honor thy father and thy mother," it says in the Holy Bible. I think I shall call her My Mother.

My name, as I said, is Zacharias. But my mother refuses to use it. Senhora Miranda says that I was baptized with that name. She was my godmother and Senhor Gavin was my

godfather. But my mother calls me Kwame. She says my name is Kwame Zumbi. That is not a Christian name. She says that that is the name my father gave me. I am on the point of asking her to tell me about my father but I am too shy.

She wants me to write down the story of her life as she dictates it to me. She says she should have written it herself before she lost her eyesight, but she was lazy and, what is more, she did not have ink and paper. Amazing. A *ladina*, an African-born slave, who says she could read and write. Who could have taught her? It is against the law to teach slaves to read and write. Senhor Gavin took a risk when he agreed to let Senhora Miranda teach me. But the Senhora insisted. She said that no one in Salvador would trouble the Consul of the English king. She was giving lessons to her own daughter Elizabeth, Senhorita Elizabeth, and she said she could not let me remain ignorant. She told him, "I owe it to Ama." I didn't understand what she meant. I still don't. Was she talking about my mother, Ama? What could Senhora Miranda owe to a poor old slave woman like my mother? I should not have come here. This place is full of mysteries, disturbing mysteries.

Josef brought the message. Josef is the old slave who takes messages and things between Salvador and the Engenho. He is a boatman. It was Josef who brought me here across the bay today. I didn't want to come, but he told Senhora Miranda that my mother had been ill. The Senhora crossed

herself and said, "I would never forgive myself if Ama were to pass away without seeing Zacharias again." She said I should take my wife, Iphigenia, and our baby daughter Carlota, but I told her that Carlota was too young to make the journey. She said I should stay here for a month.

ZACHARIAS

She puts her hand on top of my head.

"You are taller than your father was," she says.

She runs her hands over my face, feeling my forehead, my eyebrows, my nose, my lips; and then my jacket, my shirt, my trousers. I am fortunate; my master's hand-me-downs fit me well. I sense her approval.

"Kwame," she says, "To me you will always be Kwame and that is what I shall call you. Kwame, where is your wife? And where is my granddaughter, whom you named after me?"

That is a surprise. I gave our daughter a Christian name. I called her Carlota, after the Princess of Brazil.

Josef catches my eye. He waves his index finger at me. I understand his silent message. He invented the story that I named our baby girl after my mother. He is warning me. He doesn't want me to tell her the truth.

"My Mother," I tell her, "Your granddaughter had a fever and we didn't want to expose her to the journey across the bay. Iphigenia had to stay behind to look after her."

"Who is Iphigenia?" she asks.

"Iphigenia is my wife," I tell her.

***

Now Tomba was bound to the foremast. Williams descended to the main deck and swung the cat at his naked back. He inflicted the same punishment on Ama. Then he returned to the quarter-deck and watched as each member of the crew took a turn at lashing each of the two rebels. Only Butcher was exempt: his job was to count the lashes, making a tick in his record book for each. They took their time. Sometimes five minutes elapsed from one lash to the next. The first lash hurt Ama most. Some of the knotted ends of the whip drew blood from her back; some wrapped themselves around her and struck her naked belly and breasts. While she waited for the next she closed her eyes and tried to discipline her mind, forcing herself to concentrate on Itsho, numbing herself to all else. Then Knaggs threw a bucketful of sea water over her. She had not seen it coming and she screamed at the sting of the salt.

At every stroke, the watching slaves raised their voices in unison, sharing the agony of the victims. A moment later there came an echo from the holds, whose inhabitants could only imagine what horror was being played out above their heads.

While this beating was in progress, the long boat was swung out and the two coffins were lowered into it. It was rowed some distance out to sea. The ship's flag was lowered to half mast, Bruce blew a tuneless blast on a trumpet and one of his mates beat a monotonous boom-boom-boom on a drum. At a signal from the chief mate, in command of the long boat, Williams read from the Book of Common Prayer and Arbuthnot, a quarter mile to seaward, did the same. *The Love of Liberty* fired its guns in salute twenty times at half minute intervals, one blast for each year of the life of Harry Baker, the age of George Hatcher being unknown. During the homage, the long boat crew tipped each casket in turn into the water.

After the burial at sea, the time between the lashes became shorter. Ama tried to keep count. She was telling herself, *fifty, fifty, fifty* when Knaggs' turn came round again. He twirled the cat around and swung high, aiming at her head. One knot tore at her left ear. A bunch struck the back of her head. The knot on the longest strand took out her right eye.

Butcher ticked his chart. Then he put it down and went to examine her.

"Captain Williams," he called up, trying to contain his anger, "any more and I shall not be responsible for this woman's life."

"Surely it does not make sense," he begged, "to destroy merchandise of such potential value?"

Williams said nothing. He just indicated with a swing of his index finger that the victims should be carried away. Then he retired to his cabin.

***

ZACHARIAS

I tell my mother that our stock of paper is running low. She says to stop writing and just listen. She tells me about the rest of their journey in Captain Williams's prison ship, *The Love of Liberty*.

"For weeks and weeks," she says, "we lay becalmed in the middle of the ocean."

Food and water ran low, and every day more slaves were thrown overboard, dead, "to feed the sharks," she says.

She says that once she had made a partial recovery from the whipping, she vowed that she would never again speak to a white man, but that Senhor Gavin ("your Senhor Gavin," she

calls him) broke her resolve by reading aloud to her.

"What did he read?" I ask her.

"I forget," she says. "Some English novel. *Tom Jones*, perhaps. Have you read *Tom Jones*? Senhora Miranda told me once that *Tom Jones* was her favorite."

AMA

I looked to my left. Sitting two men away was Tomba himself. He had been watching me. He smiled. Then he showed me a clenched fist. It was our first communication since the rebellion.

He put his finger to his right eye and shook his head sadly.

I mouthed a silent reply, knowing he would understand: "It is nothing. It was not your fault."

***

An old white man with a walking stick and two personal slaves in attendance stopped in front of Ama. He wore a white beard and moustache and in one eye, a monocle. He stared down at Ama, evidently intrigued by her missing eye. Then he removed the pipe from his lips and silently crooked a finger to summon an usher. The usher

forced Ama to her feet. Tomba protested but two more ushers came up at once to suppress any trouble.

"Tomba, it is all right," Ama told him.

The old man stretched out over the barrier and, putting his hand under her chin, drew Ama's head forward. When he had examined her eyeless socket to his satisfaction, he turned aside and moved on. Ama felt totally crushed. Not for a moment had the old man looked into her seeing eye. Neither had he spoken. He had treated her as if she were no more than a tethered one-eyed goat up for sale in Yendi market.

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Luiza looked at her, astonished at her naïveté; but she saw that the question had been innocently put.

"I am a prostitute," she said.

She used the Portuguese word.

"A prostitute?" Ama asked, repeating the word. "What is that?"

"A whore," Luiza explained, using another Portuguese word.

Then seeing that ma still did not understand, she tried again.

"I sell my body to men. I let them fuck me and they pay me for it."

Ama turned to her, baffled.

"What kind of men?" she asked.

"What kind of men? What do you mean *what kind of men*? Black men, white men, mulattos, Indians. They are all the same. Any man with some money in his pocket and a standing prick between his legs."

Ama turned the situation over in her mind.

"Is that what he will do with me?"

Luiza took her pocket mirror and gave it to Ama.

"Look at yourself," she said. "You are lucky. No man would look at you. You couldn't earn one Milréis in a week, let alone a day."

Ama hesitated. She hadn't seen her face since losing her eye. Then she clenched her teeth and raised the mirror. She took one look and put it down again. Sitting quite still, she closed her eye. Luiza was watching her.

"I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean. . .."

Ama pulled herself together and wiped her face with a corner of her cloth. Then she raised the mirror again.

"It's nothing. It's not your fault. Only this is the first time. . .," she said and broke down again.

"Tell me," she asked when she had recovered. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, three, four years now."

"But," Ama looked at her, "you can't be more than seventeen?"

"I think I'm sixteen, but I'm not sure. I came with my mother. She was already sick when we got off the ship. She died soon after the master bought us. He said he had been cheated; that he had wasted his money and that he would make me pay back every Milréis he had spent on her. He used to take everything from me. It is only since last month that he has let me keep anything I earn above six Milréis a week. Now I am saving up to buy my freedom."

****

The accountant was a mulatto called Vicente Texeira.

"Be careful how you answer his questions," Josef warned

her as they approached his office. "He is the Senhor's creature."

Texeira was a small wiry man. He had inherited his broad nose and fleshy lips from his African forebears, but his skin was as pale as the Senhor's.

"Name?" he asked, looking at the waybill which Josef had brought from Cardozo.

"They gave her the name Ana das Minas," Josef said.

Texeira made a tick against the name.

"We already have one Ana das Minas," he said. "We can't have two of the same name: it will confuse the records. I will enter her as 'One-eye' for the time being. When she is baptised she will be given a proper Christian name."

Josef was silent.

"Tell her what I said."

"Senhor Texeira says I am to tell you that until you are baptised with a proper Christian name, you will be called 'One-eye.' I am sorry. The man is like that."

"It is nothing," Ama replied.

"What does she say?"

"She says she understands."

"Ask her what happened to her eye."

Josef translated.

"Tell him it was an accident."

Texeira wrote a chit authorising the store-man to issue Ama with a length of coarse homespun cloth.

As they came out of the store, they met a tall, muscular white man. *A giant,* Ama thought, *like an executioner.*

"Who is this?" he asked Josef.

"The new woman I spoke to you about this morning, Senhor. You told me to take the morning off to show her around the engenho."

"Don't you tell me what I told you, boy," Senhor Vasconcellos replied. "You didn't tell me that she is missing one eye."

Josef said nothing.

"We celebrate the start of the *safra* tomorrow. The day after she will join the cane gang. Today you can keep her with you. You may spend the morning showing her around. In the afternoon I want you in the mill. Bring her with you. The sooner she gets to work the better. Do you

understand?"

"Yes, Senhor."

"Who is he?" Ama asked when they were out of hearing.

"Jesus," replied Josef.

"How?"

"His name is Jesus Vasconcellos. He is the *feitor-mor,* the general manager. We say that on this engenho the Senhor is God. Senhor Vasconcellos, who sits by his right hand, is Jesus. I am talking about his power, mind you, not his compassion or his mercy. It is he who runs this place and he does so with an iron fist. If you want to live a peaceful life keep on the right side of him. If he takes a dislike to you, for whatever reason, he will make your life a misery. What Senhor Jesus demands is subservience. If you grovel before him, you will have no trouble.

AMA

There was a vacancy. One of the house slaves had died in childbirth. This time, the old Senhora was determined not to recruit another candidate for the bed of the old Senhor, who had so often in the past been the agent of her shame.

She told Jesus Vasconcellos, the manager, "Bring me the six

ugliest wenches you have."

Of course, the news got round; there are few secrets at the Engenho de Cima. When I learned that my name was on the shortlist of the ugly, I felt crushed. I ran to my cabin, buried my head under my blanket, and cried until I could cry no more. I suppose it was vanity. Men had admired me—two kings of Asante and a Dutch governor, amongst them. Now I had to come to terms with my disfigured appearance.

Jacinta, who shared my cabin and who had lost both her lower arms in an accident in the mill, tried to console me.

"Look at me," she said, holding up her stumps.

But that only set me off on a fresh fit of sobbing.

Then old Benedito took up his Christian duty and came to visit me, misquoting Ecclesiastes on vanity. I bit my tongue, thanked him with the humility and respect due to his years, and sent him on his way.

It was Wono, Josef's wife, who at last brought me to my senses.

"Don't be stupid, sister Ama," she said. "After all, who cares about what Vasconcellos or the other whites think? In a way, you are lucky—at least Senhor Jesus might keep his hands off you if that is what he thinks. And if the Senhora selects you, just think, you will be better fed and better clothed and you won't have to work so hard. What is more, you will keep

us informed about what is going on up there."

AMA

I was kept busy in the kitchen. I hadn't seen so much food since Kumase. Wono was there, too. And Josef would be serving at table.

The Senhora was flustered.

"We are short one server," she said. "Ama, do you think you could manage?"

"Of course, Senhora. At least, I shall do my best."

"I hope the guests won't be frightened by your bad eye; but there is no one else. Go to the seamstress's and get yourself fitted."

Wono took my hands and we did a little dance together.

* * *

Father Isaac rose and said grace. When the guests had added their amens, we stepped forward to serve them, one of us for each guest. I poured red wine into Miranda's glass. As I did so, Williams noticed me. He might have been struck first by my missing eye. Then he took another look and at once, he

knew me. He sat back in his chair and stared. I put down the bottle and retired to my position behind my young mistress. I raised my head, returning his stare, but giving no indication that I recognized him as anything other than just another visiting white man.

ZACHARIAS

It is Saturday. Josef tells me that we are going to spend the night in the forest. He doesn't tell me why, just to bring my sleeping mat and blanket, a plate, a spoon, and a mug. My mother will be coming, too.

We meet in the dark near the allotments. There is much shaking of hands. I gather that they do this several times a year, but it is a long time since my mother last went. We set off in single file. The dry leaves speak to our bare feet. My mother stumbles behind me, holding on to my backpack with both hands. As soon as we are out of sight of the big house, torches are lit and passed back along the line. Now it is easier for me to follow those ahead of us but, for my mother, the torches make no difference. They start singing quietly, songs that I have never heard before.

* * *

I lie awake, listening to my mother's regular breathing.

The picture of the terrible punishment which my father inflicted on the Portuguese man will not leave my mind. My father had no right to do what he did. He should have left the rapist to the judgment of God. I fear that he must be burning in the eternal flames of hell.

My mother has been carrying this burden of memory all these years. Now, with its telling, she is at peace. I can hear it from her relaxed breathing. She has passed the burden on to me. I must bear it now. For her, "it was a long time ago," but for me, it is as if it happened today.

Kneeling, I pray, "Dear God, my father acted in passion. Please forgive him, please forgive him."

THE CENTENNIAL GAME

JASON MYKL SNYMAN

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Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight,
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
- Dylan Thomas

i

By the time he was near a century old, Abidan Cointe had lost his eyesight completely.

Over the seemingly eternal years which followed, he lived in a world assembled with fleeting shadow and darkness. He had forgotten the concept of color and knew nothing of waning sunsets or the gentle rise and fall of yellow sunflowers in a breeze.

He could not explain to those who cared to listen, the profound blue of the ocean, the clear azure of the vast skies above, or that space out on the horizon where the one melted into the other.

His words could do no justice to the beautiful, terrible autumn — the bitter whites of the winter or how dead leaves drifted like blistering embers. He could not tell of the lush greens which exploded from the earth beneath his feet, nor could he begin to fathom the timeless splendor of the stars as they burned holes into the heavens above.

Abidan, at about one hundred and eighty years old, could not remember any of these things, but he knew the fading warmth of the setting sun as it crept over him.

He knew of the ensuing loneliness. He understood the weight and the waxy, bristly feel of a sunflower head resting in his hands. He could smell and taste the salt in the air as he sat listening to the ceaseless roar of the ocean, and he could feel the roar calling out to his own weary heart.

He knew the scent of the dry autumn leaves, and the crunch as he trod them underfoot. He knew the bite of the frost, and the rain, and the cold which rattled his body. He enjoyed, often, the tickle of the grass against his wrinkly skin as he lay down on the lawn, listening to the buzzing of the insects and the deep, celestial sigh of the earth.

He knew all of this, and more, and there was no counting the

amount which he had forgotten over all these long years. He was an old man — the oldest man amongst all old men he had ever known, and his mind had often felt like it could hold no more.

Eyesight, however, was of no importance in the Monastery, where the blind successfully led the blind and Abidan Cointe rode the waves of echoes and acoustics through the ancient hallways, out into the Hodegetria Gardens.

For in these mysterious gardens, navigable only by the sightless, one did not require eyes to see. Only compassion.

ii

The Hodegetria Gardens were astonishingly beautiful. Beauty, it seemed to some, which went entirely to waste — the gardens had not been designed for the pale orange flowers of the Sweet Osmanthus, but for its fruity, exotic aroma. The old creators had not the whites and yellows and rare reds of the Jasmine in mind, or the enchanting purple and lilac of the Syringa.

These gardens had been built for the perfumes and textures and the sweet tastes that lingered to dance upon the tongue, and not for visual beauty. From the Wintersweet and White Cedar to the Magnolia, Dogwood, Horse Chestnut or even the Japanese Fatsia, the gardens boasted an uncounted abundance of plants and flowers, most of which were labeled

in Braille upon little plaques poking rigidly from the soil.

Three very different footpaths took you deep into the foliage, which was sealed almost entirely from the outside world, both visually and hermetically, by a thicket-like hedge of fresh-smelling pine trees.

If you followed these paths, they would lead you into a little clearing in the very heart of the grounds. In the early evening, Abidan Cointe sat quietly in this clearing at a small table with two modest little chairs. Upon the stone table before him, lay an ancient Rosewood chessboard with the pieces set neatly in their places.

The blind man cradled a fatigued head in his large, unusually aged hands and waited, listening. Far overhead, the pine trembled in a breeze which whistled down the thick and scaly, spiraling branches. The little stream cooed by, amassing into a large, round pond encircled with rocks and Yellow Iris.

The pond was filled with the shiny, shimmering copper and silver of coins cast over the shoulders of men who believed in wishes. Drifting a little above, the white and pink flowers of the Victoria were just beginning to open themselves up to the night.

Around him, his fellow blind tended the bordering gardens and loosed weeds from the soil with hand-held shovels and busy fingers. He listened to them now as they tore at the

earth, turning Mother Nature upon her head in the tiniest of ways. Breathing hard and sweating, they panted like thirsty dogs in the humidity and slurped running water from the stream.

The birds above sang their goodnight songs to the world as the sun slipped away beyond the faraway mountains in the West, and Abidan mourned what might come to pass as his final day alive in this beautiful world.

He waited, and he listened. Plucking the thinning hair from his head in frustration. He waited, and he listened.

Finally, all about him fell into a deep silence. Mother Nature herself held her breath, every green leaf in the garden shuddered. Garden tools came to a halt. The little stream was barely a whisper in the dark. Abidan sat, waiting and listening, until at last he could hear the light, calculated footsteps coming firmly toward where he sat.

He lifted his head from his hands and looked up into the darkness, and not for the first time, a tremor ran down his spine as he heard the extraordinary voice sing from the night.

The Centennial Game is upon us

The blind man smiled.

Hello, he whispered. Old Friend.

The mysterious figure sat himself down into the little chair

opposite him, he heard the seat creak, and the grin in the stranger's voice.

Sysyphus

Oh! Very witty, Old Friend, chuckled Abidan. Very witty indeed.

Your people are staring at us, whispered the stranger. *I thought everybody living here was blind?*

The old man, who could no longer remember his own birthday, or country and place of birth, peered at the visitor, seated on the other side of the chessboard.

We may not be able to see you, he said, nodding, managing a meek smile. But we hear your wings beating from a mile away.

The stranger grinned again.

Well then! As Eliot once wrote; we shall play a game of chess

The old man, who could no longer re-collect his own birthday, had tallied every day since the awful moment he had met this stranger, a century ago to the day.

Pressing lidless eyes

As the old man lay upon his deathbed that night, something sinister was put into motion. A game of chess had been

played upon this very Rosewood, as it would be played once more tonight, for the one-hundredth time.

And waiting for a knock upon the door.

The old man, who trembled now in the company of Death itself, attempted once more to match the grin of his fearsome opponent, and listened woefully as the dark visitor lifted a piece to make his first move upon the board.

iii

Upon crossing the threshold of the great Monastery front doors, stretched across the first wall one sees, hangs a magnificent, ancient painting depicting the Theotokos — the Virgin Mary cradling the Child Jesus gently in her arms, and gesturing to Him lovingly as the salvation of mankind.

Commanding the immediate attention of all who enter the Monastery, those who could see, stood gripped with wonder until golden dust settled upon their shoulders and boots. And those who were blind, who had journeyed from far and wide, put the gentlest of fingers and trembling lips upon her, reading the brushstrokes with a kiss.

When a blind monk shuffled in to take them lightly by the crook of their elbow, even the sightless would turn back again and again to look upon the glorious Hodegetria, only to be overwhelmed with emotion.

It made sense to all who beheld these unsighted travelers who, upon laying clouded eyes upon her, kissed the robes and hands of the sacred God-bearer and wept. For in Greek, the word *Hodegetria* means "she who shows the way," and by following their own weary feet they were shown to her doorstep.

iv

Abidan made his first move upon the board, sliding his black Pawn forward to challenge Death's King's Pawn opening.

King's Pawn, declared the old man. To E5.

Abidan smiled, lifting a trembling hand to his collar, tucking his wrinkled fingers in between cloth and clammy skin.

You plan to fight for the centre?

Merely re-establishing symmetry, Old Friend, said Abidan, swallowing hard against the back of his fingers.

Pawn to F4, Mr. Cointe.

Death sat back in his little chair.

With his tremulous free hand, Abidan grasped his Pawn between his thumb and index and moved it to F4, capturing its white equivalent.

He sighed, and placed the captured piece down on the table beside the Rosewood board.

He sat back in his little chair, already drained and doubting every promising move rolling through his brain.

King's Gambit accepted, he said.

Death responded by moving his Knight to F3, developing his first piece.

Abidan could hear him grinning again, and though he had long since forgotten the fearsome, human appearance of his opponent, the sight of those perfect, white teeth forming such a wicked smirk remained burned upon every part of his mind. It terrified him.

You seem a little more ill at ease than usual, I can't help but notice, murmured the gloomy figure of Death, knitting his slender fingers across his lap.

Abidan shifted in his seat.

I am a practiced and competent chess composer, Old Friend. I do not doubt my confidence, nor my skill upon the board. I have beaten you nine and ninety times before today, do not forget.

And as if to further drive the point home, Abidan sat forward, and advanced a black Knight to F6, threatening his opponent's Pawn and completing the Schallop Defense.

The nimble fingers of Death moved, advancing his Pawn to intimidate the black Knight.

Pawn to E5, he whispered. It has always amazed me

He returned his chalk-white hand to his lap.

How you have continued to best me, with this little sans voir of yours. How is it that you do it, pray tell?

You are a wicked opponent indeed, said Abidan. You play to my vanity tonight, Mr. Ill Tidings.

A nervous smile pirouetted upon his lips.

You seek to confound me with your silky words. You aim to distract me from the true nature of yourself. You are my adversary on this dark and beautiful night.

With a trembling hand, the old man slid his Knight away to safety at H5.

You seek to blind me, Old Friend, he said, sitting back in his chair.

Blind you? inquired Death, mockingly. He chuckled with the toneless drone of a far-away cosmos.

The blind man smiled.

You don't need eyes to see, he murmured. You seek to blind my mind with your flattery; I will not allow this on such an

imperative evening.

Indeed, affirmed Death. *It seems I have allowed you to gain the initiative.*

In quick succession, Death developed a Bishop to E2, and the old man responded by advancing a Pawn to protect his Knight.

Pawn to D4.

Bishop, said Abidan. To G7.

Sneaky, said Death. *Yet cautious.*

We must often substitute courage for caution, answered the old man.

Caution is boring, said his opponent. *Humanity has never advanced through caution or sobriety. Oh, yes, I think Kingside castling!*

Nine and ninety games later, Abidan replied, It remains difficult to defend against a danger you never fathomed could exist.

He gently moved a Pawn to D6.

Knight to C3, said Death, developing another piece. He grinned from across the board.

Now it is you who attempts to blind me.

Abidan performed a Kingside castling of his own.

Knight to E1, responded Death. *All this talk of caution. Yet, you are about to capture a second Pawn, undoubtedly, and I will still have none.*

Wasted time, murmured Abidan, who indeed moved to capture the foremost Pawn, and felt only vaguely uncomfortable about it.

And how do you feel about your own wasted time, Mr. Cointe?

In the game? I have wasted none! he said, insulted.

No, clarified his dark opponent, leaning forward across the chessboard. *Your life, Mr. Cointe.*

Blind eyes swirling with clouds and fatigue met with the dreadful, astonishing gaze of Death, and for the very briefest of moments, the old man could see.

He could see the eyes of Death upon him now, and he could see the universe in those eyes, with all the imploding stars deep within the folds of an unplumbed blackness.

How do you feel about wasting your LIFE?

Material equality, remarked Death.

Eight black and white chessmen stood in a neat line beside the Rosewood board. Abidan and his foe had captured a pair of Pawns each, as well as a Bishop and Knight respectively.

We have both lost our beloved Queens, said the old man, sourly.

Death chuckled coolly.

Sooner or later we all dance with the Reaper. Knight to E3.

Bishop to E4, said Abidan, placing his black piece beside a rival Bishop.

I was there when King Canute made an illegal move upon the board and infuriated Earl Ulif. Knight to F3.

F Rook to E8.

So angry, the Earl was, that he cast the board from the table and stormed off, continued Death, moving his Knight once more.

Knight to G5. That threatens your Bishop.

Bishop to G6, answered Abidan, irritated.

I was summoned, later that night, to deliver the good Earl to a better place. Why, I was there too in Bavaria

Death moved his Knight into a threatening position, claiming the center of the board.

When the promising son of Prince Okarius thrashed the son of King Pippin again and again, the son of the King became so enraged that he struck his young opponent upon the temple with one of his Rooks and killed him on the spot. Knight to D5.

Bishop to E5, responded Abidan, capturing another Pawn.

I was there in a freezing Soviet Antarctic base, when a Russian man, having lost a game, buried an axe into the head of a colleague. Knight to C7, and I reclaim a Pawn.

Bishop to C7, and I capture your marauding black Knight.

Those were bizarre times, sighed Death. *The Soviets banned all cosmonauts from playing the game.*

The long, white fingers of Death used his Bishop to capture its counterpart.

We're running amok here, he mused. *Bishop takes Bishop.*

A Rook to C8.

The old man's palms had become sticky and hot with sweat. His hands trembled from the elbow down and his brow shook with concentration.

Bishop to G3, chuckled Death. *Neighbors have killed*

neighbors. Brothers slay brothers. Knees have buckled and lifeless bodies have fallen into my open arms. I saw it all, Mr. Cointe. Why, I was there in Sweden with Antonius Bl—

Old Friend, interrupted the blind man. Might we, I wonder, sit in silence for a while?

He could hear Death grinning at him again now. The grin of the wolf, as it spots a lamb straying from the flock, he thought.

Knight, he said. *Knight to D4.*

Death chuckled once more, cold and rasping.

No fan of history, the oldest of old men says. The blind bargainer. The chess master of the hidden garden.

Abidan managed a nervous smile.

This dear game and I have been dance partners far longer than you might imagine, old man, said Death with a smirk, looking down at the chessboard with adulation.

We were together long before I walked in to discover you hiding beneath your blanket like a coward. We were together, he said. *At the very beginning.*

Abidan listened intently. His heart hammered within his throat.

The mad King of India had commissioned the ancient Brahmin, Sessa, to create a game of unrivalled superiority. The result was Chaturanga, the ancestor of Chess, which Sessa then presented to the mad King.

He quietly leaned forward to *advance* a Pawn by a single square.

Pawn to C3.

Death sat back in his chair, crossing his legs and clasping pale hands over his lap.

So pleased with the result, was the King, that he asked the Brahmin to name his own reward. Sessa gave the King a choice: his own weight in gold, or the King could put one grain of wheat upon the first square of the board, two upon the second, four upon the third, eight upon the fourth, said Death with a swirling hand motion.

And so on, and so on, doubling the grains of wheat with every square for sixty four squares. I wonder, he asked of the blind man, if you had been the King, which would you have chosen, Mr. Cointe?

Abidan, exhausted, ran over the remaining positions upon the Rosewood board before him.

I'm not sure, he said at length. I would have given him the wheat, I think.

As did the King! answered Death, grinning. *Hastily, I might add, being not too arithmetically attentive, much like yourself. But the King and his treasurer soon discovered, he continued, sitting back once more, that it would take more than all the assets of the kingdom to pay the Brahmin.*

Death sighed, drifting off into that distant memory.

The second half of the board alone would have required over a trillion tons of wheat, a value crudely comparable to the collective mass of all life upon this dishonorable little planet. I came later that night to fetch the unfortunate Sessa, he continued monotonously. *The King had ordered him murdered, of course.*

Abidan nodded.

His trembling hand moved to shift a piece upon the checkered board.

Knight to E2, he said with a smile. Discover check.

VI

Abidan had been afraid of dying his entire life. Even as a child, when oblivion had been nothing more than a faraway rumor to the young, he was always aware of that merciless, ceaseless tick of the clock.

His father had once told him the infamous tale of a servant in

Baghdad who overheard that Death was searching for him in a marketplace. The servant ran home to his Master and explained that he needed to flee. The Master gave his servant the fastest horse in his stable and instructed him to escape to the neighboring town of Samarra.

Later that night, there came a knock upon the Masters door. He opened it to discover Death standing before him. Death inquired after the servant. The Master lied that the servant was asleep in bed and indisposed with sickness, and therefore could not come to the door. Death, naturally, smiled at the Master and replied:

That's funny, that he should be here in bed, for I have an appointment with him later tonight, in Samarra.

Death never takes a wise man by surprise, his Father had told him, so many, many years ago. A wise man fathoms dying for the first time when Death places a hand upon the ones he loves. The young Abidan had been introduced to the uncompromising nature of his formidable chess opponent at his own Fathers passing.

How do you feel about wasting your LIFE? Death had asked, and in truth, Abidan could not have been more mournful. He had spent the greater part of his existence fleeing from the long shadow of Death and looking over his shoulder with dread until, at last, he could see no longer.

Every knock on the door, every darkening of his doorstep,

brought the old man's heart to a thunderous stomp. He lived for the flight, moving from town to town, attempting to avoid his eternal pursuer. But like the servant in Samarra, he entered a new home to find that the footprints of his Old Friend had already been there. There was nowhere to hide.

He had undeniably wasted much of his borrowed time.

For every person ran on not one great clock, but two. First, there was the outer clock, which loudly marked the moments away into extinction. Brave days were swallowed by the dreadful night and Time brandished its scythe without discernment. Years swept by, and every passing decade stole something new until at last, the swinging pendulum thieved from you, from your very self.

Then there was the internal clock, where you could be your own timekeeper and control the pace of your own beating heart. Where you could not be subjected to the wastes of time, or forced to die as fast as children grew.

Sometimes though, the inner clock grinds to a halt before the outer one, and we witness a dead man going through the motions of the living. Abidan could almost see the sands diminishing, his time running out, swallowed down into a dusky gullet.

A man who didn't fear the final death, died but only once, the old man realized. In game after game, year after year, he had died so many little deaths that it no longer mattered

when the final curtain fell.

Perhaps his night had finally come, he mused, and the outer clock had run its course into completion. His own clock had paused with only a second to spare, nine and ninety long years ago. Perhaps Death would embrace him this night, as a true Old Friend, and the clock would tick over into unconsciousness.

Living here in the Monastery amidst the blind and the beautiful, every night he swam in the most gorgeous scents and flavors. They were so lovely that his mind could barely comprehend them. He thought he had come here to learn how to live, when in truth it seemed he had instead learned how to die.

Abidan had checked his mighty foe no less than three times this game, and now moved a Pawn to F5, opening up a line of attack upon the rival Rook from his Bishop.

Knight to E6, responded Death. *And check.*

Abidan sighed aloud. To pour life into death and death into life, he thought, without leaking a droplet.

King to F6, he said.

Rook to E7, returned Death. *Can you feel the end closing in on you, Mr. Cointe? Can you feel the pieces moving to ensnare you?*

Abidan shuddered, and hoped his foe hadn't noticed.

Death chuckled. He had.

G Rook to E2, he said defiantly. *I have some fight in me yet, son of Night and Darkness! If my old punished soul is what you want, you will have to come and earn it!*

My oh my, there's that passion which has been so absent in the last decade or two, teased Death, moving his Pawn one square forward and further enclosing Abidan's King.

Do calm down, old man. We wouldn't want you suffering a massive heart attack, now would we? Pawn to D5.

C Rook to D2, replied Abidan.

The old man sat back staring down toward the board, exhausted and wilting beneath the wraithlike glare of his opponent.

In the briefest moment of silence between thought and application, the lonely call of a bright yellow night bird rang mournfully from the pine rooftops high above them.

Both players paused and craned their heads upward, hopeful of viewing this daring creature, but the bird had now fallen back into silence. Death smiled, turning his undivided attention back toward the chessmen before them.

E Rook to B7, he sang. *Capturing Pawn.*

Bishop to F7.

Just what are you up to? wondered Death aloud. *B Rook to F7, capturing Bishop.*

The Centennial Game was in its final throes, Abidan realised. It would all come down to who made the first mistake.

King to F7, capturing Rook, he said, working toward a plan.

Rook to F5, said Death. *Check.*

Abidan perspired with dread and clasped the black King between quaking fingers. *King,* he said swallowing hard. *To G8.*

He placed the piece down firmly.

The cold fingers of horror, so slowly, crept over his heart and squeezed. He realized his dreadful error.

Wait! he cried.

The old man leapt from his little chair in panic.

Death chuckled.

Too late, he hissed coldly. *You elude me no longer.*

Long, pale fingers made the final move upon the board.

Rook to F8, he said. *Notice check, and incidentally, Mr. Cointe - mate.*

VII

Tick, Death snapped his fingers.

He rose from his chair. Abidan Cointe stood frozen in time before him, grasping at his wrinkled face in absolute trepidation.

Suspended in time and waiting, thought Death, for the final swing of the scythe. Looking into Abidan's motionless, cloudy eyes, he sighed audibly, tired, and turned slowly away.

Death sailed along the edge of the clearing, running his skeleton-thin hands across the cool surface of the motionless stream, pausing to inspect a colorful flower.

This truly was a place of speechless beauty, he thought, but still could not fathom why the living clung to life so dearly. He came to liberate their flesh from hard service and desire. He came to uncloud their minds from the vagaries and the urges which so stubbornly ruled them. He came to break the chains of impulse and free them from the puppetry and slavery to which all living men were shackled.

Slaves to society, slaves to the church and even as offspring

— slaves to their mother's breast. The living were a hopeless crop, and he was the reaper and their savior. How could they not long for a time when they might slumber without burden? How could they not yearn for the eternal rest? He alone could deliver the peace their riches could not purchase.

Yet, they squandered. He alone could remove the agony their physicians could not cure. They bargained and stalled and labored against their remedy. Death shook his head mournfully as he strolled through this striking and terrible place. A shame, he thought as he looked down in passing upon stationary blind men working in the dirt.

Blind was the entire world, it sometimes seemed. There were few here that could see. Terrible, he thought, glancing once more at the lovely garden surrounding them. A shame, and terrible, that they would never get to see any of this.

VIII

Death looked up at the Child Jesus.

He mouthed the words *I remember you,* quietly to the darkness, and then sat down cross-legged upon the ground with his back to the great front doors of the Monastery. The magnificent, ancient painting of the Virgin Mary and Child hung before him, and moonlight pouring through a high, silver window danced across the cracks and strokes.

Perhaps, he wondered as he sat and looked up at the massive portrait, he had grown bitter toward the living. He envied them, their mortality. How strange an experience it must be, he mused, to live so close to oblivion.

Sooner or later it dawned on all of them that they might not be here for much longer. When you have such a short amount of time to exist, one easily fell into the habit of filling that time with as many important moments as possible. Just as the waves made for the rocky shore, so too did minutes hasten toward their end. They were in love with living.

Immortality on the other hand, he felt, was a fate worse than dying. Upon the timeline of eternity, a century was but a tiny drop in a really great, murky pond. Yet, Death could not help but feel connected to the blind man, Abidan Cointe, in some small way.

He enjoyed the company of the daring chess composer as much as he had any living person in recent memory. The world was growing less intelligent, he had slowly begun to realise. Nobody bothered to challenge him anymore. They leapt as lemmings into his bitter embrace without fear or uncertainty, and all interaction had diminished into something barely human at all.

Death sighed, drawing circles in the dust with a chalk-white finger. The problem with immortality, of course, was that it tended to go on forever.

IX

Death sat down into his little chair and looked down at the chessboard.

Time had been wound back, and the chessmen stood as they had, seven moves earlier. The old blind man sat once more across from him, ancient brows knitted with tense concentration.

Tock. Ahem, said Death, starting the great clock of the universe with a snap of his fingers.

Oh, my! cried Abidan. Umm, I seem to have gone astray in thought there. My apologies, Old Friend. C Rook to D2, it will be.

The old man sat back, exhausted and wilting beneath the wraithlike, piercing glare of his opponent.

Not to worry.

In the briefest moment of silence between thought and application, the lonely call of a bright yellow night bird rang mournfully again from the pine rooftops high above them.

Abidan craned his head upward, hopeful, in absolute vain, of viewing this daring creature.

Death smiled, staring at the old man.

Well, he said. I'm not too sure how to proceed.

Abidan turned his attention back to the board. His dark opponent grasped his Bishop gently and sighed.

I think— Yes, I think Bishop to B4.

He swiftly placed the piece down upon the little black square. The old man frowned, furious calculations sweeping through his brain.

But, he said.

But?

Abidan rubbed at his thinning temples. Nothing, he said, shaking his old head. Nothing at all. He scanned the board in his mind, frowning. Well, he said at last. Rook to H2. Discover check, Pale Rider.

Death smiled, surveying the board.

You seem to have bested me once again. If I am correct, your next move will safeguard checkmate and victory, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

Abidan radiated, quivering with restrained joy, clapping his frail hands together with delight. He had once more evaded the clutches of this daunting opponent, and secured another year of time among the flowers.

Ha! he yelled, smacking the table in celebration.

The one-hundredth victory is mine!

Death rose quietly from his little chair, smiling only slightly.

Well done, Mr. Cointe. Masterfully played.

See you next year, Old Friend, said Abidan, grinning from ear to ear as Death turned to walk away.

No hard feelings?

Of course not, called Death over his shoulder.

Gracefully, he paced to the end of the clearing without looking back.

After all, Mr. Cointe. It is but only a game.

+

THE WOES OF HATCLIFFE EXTENSION

PROSPER WILTON

No one had believed it. No one had chosen to believe the contemptuous rumours. The idea had sounded preposterous – comical, even. But now, hearing a serious, nasal voice make the announcement on Radio 3, Raviro's heart lurched and she suddenly felt queasy. For her, it never rained but poured problems. At that moment, her head didn't feel like her own – it felt heavy, at the verge of splitting into two.

"Amai imi, I dont have the whole day you know!"

The impatient clerk forced her out of her reverie. She had, for a confused moment, lost her bearing. Raviro often mused about how public service employees were rude. She would try to reason that they were serving large queues. Never ending queues that meandered round and round along the

walls, out of the doors and around the trees outside the gates. Some part of her also knew that it had always been like that, before the inflation and before the winding queues.

"Sorry mwanangu. How much is the bill?"

She imagined him, the clerk, to be a rotund man with wobbly flesh hanging loosely on his frame, burdening his skeletal system. Perhaps he would have beady eyes, a squashed nose and a nauseatingly wet smile. She smiled, glad that the unassuming man couldn't read her thoughts.

"Two million dollars, payable by end of month. Failure of which would be disastrous." She shuddered at the thought of the unspecified course of action. Then she wondered what the debt collectors would confiscate from her paltry belongings before stifling derisive laughter threatening to escape from her. Her face clouded over. They wouldn't take anything because by the evening of the following day she might not have a home at all.

They – the government of Zimbabwe – were calling it Operation Murambatsvina. Murambatsvina, a disparaging name loosely translated to denying or repudiating dirt. The announcement had been clear. Squatters and owners of shacks, the kind who'd built sprawling suburbs on council's land reserved for other uses, would have to demolish these illegal structures by nightfall or risk the wrath of the police demolition teams. Neither of the options was palatable.

Illegal vendors and black market money changers also had to cease operation forthwith or risk arrest.

She imagined the legislature: fleshy old men with protruding bellies and balding heads seated in a sumptuously furnished room agreeing that, "Yes, yes. We need an intensive clean up. I say we demolish their homes and arrest all the vendors, that way they have no incomes and homes, so naturally they will return to their rural homes and depopulate the city." They all laugh, an indulgent laugh. "Do not leave out the money changers whom we supply with the foreign currency to deal with on the black market. After this, trust me, they will vote us into power again." The gluttonous men laugh again and shake hands before leaving to meet in yet another colloquium.

With a grim face and a firm hold on her walking stick, Raviro navigated her way out of the crowded hospital, leaving behind the smell of death and antiseptic. Outside the gate of the hospital, the usual hustle and bustle of the big city hummed. Raviro could hear the noise of the vendors trying to draw attention to their merchandise. "Bananas. Cheap bananas sister." She heard the hooting of emergency taxis as they manoeuvred their way in the city, breaking all road regulations along the way. She realised that she still had her prescription in hand. A prescription she couldn't afford, so she crumpled the piece of paper into a small ball and threw it behind her.

"These people rob us in broad daylight." She talked to herself. She couldn't fathom why she had to pay such an astronomical bill when all she'd done was sleep a few hours in the hospital. In the morning, harassed by a very young and uncultured nurse, Raviro found herself with a prescription worth a million dollars. She'd had a fever and a migraine that still hadn't ebbed away and all the doctor had done was write a prescription for drugs they didn't have.

"You have to take these, three times a day after you have eaten," the obviously bored doctor had said in a deeply monotonous rumble. Raviro scoffed. "Who could still afford three meals a day?" All she ate were the evening meal and heated leftovers for the morning, only to wait until it was evening again.

Mulling over her misgivings, she collided with someone on the street.

"Can't you just look at where you are going old lady?" a man shouted in a gruff voice before proceeding to curse her in a way that a few would have the liberty to repeat. Raviro was getting used to the insults. It was sad how the socio-economic status of the country was desensitising people. Everyone seemed to be rushing somewhere in search for a living. Just a week ago, she had been mugged on her way from her marketing stall.

Finding transport was the next nearly impossible hurdle, doubly complicated by Raviro's blindness. The fuel

shortages were at their peak. At times, cars queued at empty service stations for days on end with the hope that the precious liquid would eventually come. Other vehicle owners resorted to the black market at their own peril. People were so hellbent on profiteering that they began to mix the fuel with either paraffin or water, just to double on their profits. The fuel shortages meant that there were few public taxis and so people had to fight in order to secure a place.

Thankfully, Raviro had a bit of luck. Her friend's son, Roda, was a conductor at the terminus and managed to secure a place for her so she didn't have to fight, for once.

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The atmosphere was muted and sombre in Hatcliffe Extension. It was quiet. Even the battery powered radio at MaRuvas unlicensed bar that often blasted until well into the night was silent. This was the second time Raviro had heard the radio silent, the first being when BaRuva had died. Even MaShero, a vivacious gossip was subdued.

"Saka tichadii?" What will we do?

"It surely cant be true." Lizzy said.

Lizzy was a renowned husband snatcher. Stories were told of how she never spent two nights in a week with the same man. Raviro found herself wondering, as she often did, what it was they found appealing in her, because she couldn't place any nice quality in the owner of the voice.

"Yes, no normal government would allow for something this callous. I mean…"

Shango was cut short by a voice Raviro couldn't place. The faceless voice laughed patronisingly.

"But our government isnt normal at all. Is it? If it was, it would have fought the unilateral withdrawal from the commonwealth and…"

"Nonsense! Watch your mouth Tapera, it will surely get you into trouble one day. And no, the government won't legitimise such inane atrocities, so please don't lose sleep over it. "

VaBere, the war veteran, dismissed the preposterous assertion that the government would attempt to demolish people's homes. VaBera was a man who made up in girth for what he lacked in height. His disbelief quenched everyone's vestiges of doubt. As a war veteran, he had earned himself an elevated position in society – perhaps even more so due to his humility and silence, only talking when it was necessary. This silence often gave people the impression that he knew more than he divulged. So after he had voiced his thoughts

as a confident affirmation, everyone left the clearing to go to their homes, ready to prepare for the evening meal.

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"Welcome, Amai."

Raviro was welcomed by her two children: the eight-year-old Tongai – a gangly boy who was a bit thin for his age and the pre-pubescent Tariro, her mutinous daughter.

"Hello my children, are you alright?" she asked, taking a seat on her makeshift bed, glad to be home at last. It wasn't much, a one-roomed plastic shack, but it still was home and it was better than being homeless.

"We are both well, Amai. How are you feeling?" Tariro asked her mother, referring to her throbbing head.

"I'm well my daughter, thanks for the concern." She lied with a smile on her face.

"Here are todays sales from the market." The unassuming Tariro handed her mother a thick wad of money – worthless money as it was often called, unlovingly. It wasnt wise to keep them. They had to be used as soon as one got a hold of them or they would lose value. Getty liked to talk about how one day, the price of margarine and bread had gone up more than her teaching salary before her turn on the till in the

supermarket. How she had wept, feeling dejected, until a kind woman had paid for her.

"Maita vanangu,thank you." Raviro clapped in appreciation, smiling. She then asked for Tongai to hand her a cabbage so that she could slice it. She often thanked God for having Tariro to cook everyday, who worked with only the slightest hint of reluctance. Raviro could cook but cooking on the open fire hearth was something else. As it was, Hatcliffe Extension didn't have electricity – not that it would have helped much with the rate of power cuts – and paraffin was as scarce as petrol, so people had to use plastics and firewood.

Now, their meals were sadza with either boiled cabbage on regular days or boiled beans on special days. Tomatoes and onions were an expensive luxury and there was simply no cooking oil in the shops so the beans and cabbage were only salted and taken with an unhealthy looking imported mealie meal paste.The supermarkets simply had no basics, like cooking oil, sugar, bread and soap. If one wanted these, one had to know someone who worked in a supermarket or wake up at the crack of dawn to go on to queue at a shop that would be rumoured to have received a delivery of either of the essentials.

Since Raviro wasn't privileged with the former she performed the latter with her children, praying that maybe they would get three times the ration. Unfortunately, queueing didn't mean one would get the commodities

because people ended up fighting for places and then the strategically positioned riot police would disperse the growing crowd by baton. When they had successfully turned the crowds away, they'd proceed to buy the commodities themselves.

This was a hassle with which Raviro could not put up. So she retired to her fate of thick porridge and boiled cabbage, of salted porridge deprived of sugar.

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Raviro did not sleep well that night. Her thoughts kept her awake. Her migraine, which had not fully subsided did not help either. Raviro's children, lost in deep slumber, snored. Both of them shared a tattered blanket that had seen better days – probably in the beginning of the decade – on the cold ground. She worried a lot about them but there was nothing more she could do, except make sure they had a meal a day and a roof over their heads.

"If only Tichaona was here,"she whispered, staring into nothingness.

Raviro tried her best not to think about Tichaona, but it was impossible. Everything around her, every impediment, made her think of the lost patriarch of her house. She remembered how only three years back, a time which now seemed

galaxies away, they had been a complete family. They hadn't been a happy family, but they had been complete and sturdy.

It was strange how thinking of Tichaona in retrospect didn't rouse her frustrations and anger. When she thought about him, it wasn't about the nights he spent away from home, how he always smelled of another woman on the rare days he came back home. It wasn't even about how he would pummel her with unforgiving fists, bursting a lip and bruising her face. When Tichaona was around, her body was always adorned in bruises. They told of the violent nights they had, but when she thought about him, she thought about hope. About how they had shared responsibilities, how he was cruel but made sure his children were fed and most importantly how her life had been like before she was blind, before the cataracts.

The cataracts were unexpected. They were a storm that had put an unyielding strain on Raviro and Tichaona's relationship. This was saying much, considering that theirs had been a relationship already dead. The first time she noticed the slight milky cloudiness in her vision she had put it off, trivialising the issue while going on with her business. After a month, her vision had become noticeably vague and she panicked.

Tichaona had looked at her and said that he didn't have any money. "Are you not the one who wakes every day to go to the marketing stall?"he'd asked. "You should spare some and use it for your bills." Now, this had happened at a time when

the hospital would detain a person who hadn't paid their bill in full, in turn adding to an already unaffordable bill.

But if Raviro had known that she would one day wake up to fully blank vision, she would have tried harder and borrowed money from her neighbours and rushed to the clinic. If she had known that the hospital would later say her vision had become impaired beyond medical redemption she would have sold Tichaona's shoes. Even if it meant that he would maim her. At least she would have been a seeing paralytic.

However, she became blind and Tichaona recoiled, repulsed by his now blind wife, left. Now, Tichaona rented a room in Hatcliffe with Grace, a sex-worker he had been rumoured to be seeing since long back. She also felt her children slip away through her fingers, ashamed of their mother's disability.

The first months had been frustrating for Raviro. She seemed to have forgotten where everything was in their room. Her children seemed to forget things in her way and she would fall on her face often. But with determination, she found strength for the sake of her children. Tongai's swollen abdomen and sparse red hair which had started to fall out in tufts, shook her back to sanity.Raviro, a person who had tasted independence and solely relied on the works of her hands was too proud to resort to begging in the streets and buses. She also knew how wary people were of beggars, so she kept to vending with Tongai's help who, because of the family's financial constraints, was not yet in school.

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Raviro fluttered in her sleep. Judging by the loud buzz of activity outside, she knew that she had slept – no doubt - in a drowsy lethargy brought by her migraine. She was appalled that she had missed an early start to her market stall. She felt for her walking cane on her right side with the ease of someone who knew the room well.The room was quiet, meaning Tariro had left for school and Tongai was outside playing. They had tried their best not to disturb their mother.

She heard an uncharacteristic pandemonium outside, and Raviro's heart fluttered. She wondered what the matter could be. She tied her headscarf loosely on her aching head and navigated her way out of her shack into the morning breeze.

Raviro felt despondency thick in the air. It hung like a blanket over Hatcliffe Extension, threatening to choke them all. Even MaRudo's dogs were unusually quiet and MaMoyo was not shouting at her husband. She heard the long-time enemies, Getty and Alice, conversing in panicked voices.

"I'm not lying asikana, they started beating the vendors just like that," Alice said.

"Hmm, I never thought the rumours could be true. Zvakaoma. You say they are demolishing the stalls." Getty laughed, a dreary laughter, bereft of mirth, clapping her hands together.

"You must be joking Alice," Lizzy said, shocked.

A small crowd was gathering, Raviro could feel the growing uneasiness as their feet shuffled and arms flailed.

"What do you know Lizzy, except for dishing out thighs?" Alice retorted sharply, before proceeding to say in a hushed whisper, "MaShero has been arrested." There were collective gasps of disbelief. Raviro heard rushing footsteps approaching.

"They are coming," Shango said, visibly shaken and breathless.

"What? Who is coming?" A voice Raviro could not place asked.

"The demolition team. They…they are coming. I saw them…just now…with my own eyes. They have bulldozers," Shango said in between gasps for air.

"Haiwa, Shango isn't it that you are a fully grown man? Do not be such an alarmist." VaBere said in a calm and measured voice. "Nothing of that nature will ever happen."

Raviro heard an approaching convoy of vehicles and smelled the dust in the air at the same time. Her heart thudded.

A young but authoritative voice boomed through a loud speaker.

"Good Morning residents. As you are aware Operation Murambatsvina is underway in full force and we have the mandate to do an in-depth clean-up of the capital. We are demolishing illegal structures built on the council's land. If you haven't destroyed your shacks, we are giving you fifteen minutes to evacuate your properties before the bulldozers run over the shacks. I repeat, fifteen minutes."

Raviro could feel, for a confused moment, the hesitation around her. Then, VaBere scoffed.

"The nerve. They dare come here to threaten me. I fought the liberation struggle. I fought a more daring lot than they did. Let them dare me and risk the wrath of my fury. Do not listen to them, they would never destroy your property." Raviro thought it was better safe than sorry. She would just evacuate her room and if the threats proved to be spineless then she would put her belongings back. There was nothing to lose with a bit of caution.

She hurried to her squalid shack as fast as her legs could carry her then halted. Where was Tongai when she needed him the most?

"Tongai! Tongai! Have you… Has anyone seen Tongai? My Tongai?" She searched in increasing panic but people were going on about their businesses hurriedly, trying to save their measly belongings.She tried to empty the small room, but she toppled over a stone while hurrying towards the door and fell flat on her face. She broke two of her fingers but was too

stunned to feel the pain. It was when she was wiping her dust caked feet that the demolition started. They started with Shango's shack. VaBere's was next in line then MaShero's before hers.

VaBere was a difficult man. People gathered interestedly at his house because they were almost positive that the demolition team would not go past him.

"Is there anyone in the house sir?" The young but authoritative voice asked.

"So you do have manners? Yes, my children are in there." He replied feigning equal authority.

"Then call them out before our bulldozers get in."

"But there are no bulldozers getting in. This is my house and I am a war veteran." VaBere was adamant.

"If you choose not to value the lives of your children, its up to you. We will just let the bulldozers in." The police officer said.

"Havent you been listening young man? I am a war veteran and I have firearms in my house. I will shoot you before you get anywhere near my family," VaBere said.

"So be it sir, so be it," The police officer said in mock pleasantry, his tone poisonous.

VaBere's resolve was flattened. He must have climbed on the roof, because Raviro heard people negotiating with him, trying to bring him down. The police officer, as obstinate as ever, was saying that they should leave him be. "Why deny him the pleasure of choosing his own death?" VaBere finally yielded, his family was brought out and the ten roomed house was pulled down to the ground. VaBere was left dazed, muttering to himself.

"Years fighting for Zimbabwe's independence and I get this? Used years and years of my war veteran's allowance to build this house.He became delirious, simultaneously laughing and crying." That was how VaBere became mad.

MaShero's house demolition was even more sobering. Since MaShero had been arrested earlier that morning at her marketing stall, nobody had known that the three-year-old Shero was asleep indoors. Not until the bulldozers had went in and they had heard a faint wail, Shero's dying cry, masked by the heavy droning of the bulldozers' engines. Had the demolition team been humane they would have stopped and left. They would have bewailed for Hatcliffe Extension with Hatcliffe Extension, but they didn't stop. They just exhumed poor Shero's pulped body from the rubbles and went on to Raviro's house.

Now, Raviro had only brought out one blanket and the thick wad of worthless money from the previous night before her shock-induced anaesthesia began to wear off and she started

to howl in pain. When the demolition team arrived, she had not yet recovered.

"You stupid woman, get away from the shack, unless you want the bulldozer to put an end to your misery," the police officer said. The police laughed as if their lives depended on it. Someone led Raviro away from her shack. From the smell of the cheap perfume her dainty body was doused in, it must have been Lizzy. As soon as they were out of the way, the demolition team wasted no time and ran over the shack.

There were murmurs of dissent all around her and something, something taut, loosened in her brain and she screamed. A loud guttural scream that was in parity to inhumanity, that people thought she would lose her voice on top of her impaired vision. She mourned.

"These hands, these callused hands, have worked hard to feed my family and put a roof over our heads but all of that has been for nothing. All I have worked for has been taken away."

People tried to console Raviro, but she was inconsolable. As though she had made a conscious decision not to be contained, she ran. She ran wildly. She ran fast. She ran as a woman possessed. She ran past MaVaida's house where the whole family had refused to come out and were beaten heavily by the crude police officers before their house went down with all their belongings. She ran past Getty's, where she had been manhandled. She ran past Roda's where they

had killed his rabid dog, unleashed as a desperate attempt to turn them away from the house. She ran past the bereaved lot and composed an elegy for them in the rhythms of her furious heartbeat.

In the moment that she ran, she thought sadly of her children and mourned their doomed fate. The fatherless, gangly Tongai and the mutinous Tariro. She had tried but failed. The government had broken her.

It was Shango who found her mangled body, sliced into three by the railway line. Her head was still intact though and her face in a gentle surprise as though she had finally understood a mystery at the verge of death.

+

APPLE, AGAIN

AHMED MAIWADA

He could perceive her plan to leave him in the big house, alone and at the mercy of the newly acquired blindness. It was like an architecture she was crafting. It rose, against his wish, before his mind's eye. The scent of Premier soap, which invaded his nostrils from her newly bathed skin and the clank of an empty iron bucket she dropped at the entrance door, served as the last two blocks completing a gothic structure. At that moment, his giant frame was coiled in a deckchair at a parlour ten feet by six, covered from the neck down to the knees with a light-brown babban riga. His legs crossed each other, veined. They curved down from his bulbous knees at the hem of the chair's calico seat to his paddle feet, asleep on the nylon carpeted floor.

A bulge of anger against her, the size of an apple, grew in his throat.

He listened to her footsteps invade his ears. First, they came in his direction, from the entrance door opened to a bare sandy and morning-sun-flooded compound. Then they veered off towards their bedroom, a cubicle with an open doorway three yards away to his left. Squeaks from the steps she took in her wet rubber slippers added a notch of anger to the apple in his throat.

The apple was growing into a melon.

He had packed his home with grandfather clocks, among other items of luxury, from his trade of picking the goods and cash of Kano's patricians. Two of those clocks sat on the parlour walls, one each at his right and left. The time boxes, black and brown, busied at pouring tic-toc antiphons into the sombre air in the parlour where she had just left him shaking and trembling at the advancing loneliness. And, since reaching a decision is often easier when the clock is ticking, his decision that morning to stop her from leaving the house, once and for all, did not cost him so much time. Blessed with size and muscles, he would squeeze the life out of her tiny frame by his hug.

Time though, tooled up for deleting decisions left on its path, swiftly deleted this. In its place, he concluded that she deserved, rather, the death of the apostate she was in addition to all other things. He concluded on her death by the blade.

To further this cause, he stretched his arms under his chair. He located his wooden staff. He picked it carefully and then

shoved it across the carpeted floor towards the extreme wall at his right hand. Then, he began to wave his large palms over the smooth surface of the floor. He wiped the floor now and then, until one palm collided with a plastic kettle at his right, knocking it off and causing a jubilant flow of water down his flank. When he, with arms growing in tremble, knocked off the metal bowl of his leftover tamarind gruel breakfast, the bored, thick yellow liquid that tumbled, travelled shorter than the water. It settled down quickly, an amoebic patch around the capsized bowl, and quickly fell asleep.

He swallowed the drying drop of saliva left in his mouth. The swell in his throat bobbed a few times, like a calabash resisting drowning in a basin of water. His arms, trembling still, rose from the floor and started ferreting above his head, which was capped. They crawled along the wall at his back, stopping only at contact with the lower hem of another babban riga which hung from a nail high up in the wall. He seized the hem with an arm and pulled downwards. The nail came loose and hurtled down over his head, along with the gown, the plaster sand and the paint from the wall. The nail, missing his head by whiskers, went flicking across the floor till it took refuge beneath a large cupboard packed with china and brass bowls at the wall to his right. The gown fell on him, like a kettle of vultures swooping at a corpse.

He listened. There was no whisper of her presence in that parlour. She was still in the bedroom, possibly painting her

lips and pencilling her eyebrows and dotting her cheek dimples with a black pencil and applying kohl on her eyebrows, making herself up like Hema or Rekha, the female Indian movie stars about whom all the cinema-going local boys he knew were crazy. She was still in there making herself up for her lover.

He gathered the gown on his head and heaped it on his lap. Then he began to frisk it, quickly. His trembling hands made contact with many objects which he had stored inside the big front pocket of the gown. Then they finally found the jack-knife hiding in folds of the clothing. That brought a sigh of relief from the big lungs in his big chest. He whisked the knife out and from under the gown for maximum caution, in case she was watching, and flicked its cold stainless steel blade a few times.

There was not one person he knew who carried on his type of business for up to a year without taking at least a life. Yet, he had nobody's blood on his hands, not even after four decades as a merchant of the night, which started at age thirteen, when having passed his Qur'an memorization exams at school, he had faced a worse reality of fending for himself, all by himself, in a big city renowned for its wealth and privation and a huge gulf in-between. Until his forced retirement as a result of blindness, he had barged into a thousand of chiefly patrician rooms across Kano and picked choice chattels and money. Yet, there was no occasion when he had as little as scratched anybody's skin. Therefore, he

needed no arithmetic of victims at this moment to know that she would be his first, for he would surely do it. The day had not come, nor had the sun shone on any such day, when he would decide on doing a thing and fail to do it. His time that she had wasted by tarrying in the bedroom, making herself up as though she was surely going out into the city of Kano rather than departing from the land of the living, could only add pain to her dying. As for him, after waiting all these decades for the first kill, he could afford a few more minutes.

And so, while she took her time, he took a trip, back to his younger days, when his name was not patience, when he would have stormed the bedroom and delivered her package of death right there instead of waiting for her in the parlour. Now though, sitting in that full consciousness of his current standing in the scale of patience, he began to wonder if she had changed her mind about leaving the house. He recalled that she did not even tell him about going anywhere. He had only assumed she was leaving him, once again, just from images her sounds around him had constructed. How insecure the loss of eyesight could make a man who, like the owl, had feared no darkness.

At this realisation, he concluded that his ears, which had played sentry all the while for the sound of her re-entry into the parlour, had alarmed him falsely. Little wonder the soreness in them, which was causing him discomfort and therefore needing a relief. And, for the big retired thief, relief could come in only that tonic which had kept him focused on

nights he had lost the drive to go out and toil. He bent over and stretched a hand beyond his big and calloused toes, until his fingers nudged his radio/cassette box on the floor. He hoisted it on his lap, on top of the gown concealing his weapon.

The box posseted the dull voice of a male soloist, accompanied with a seven-strong male chorus and as many kalangu, beaten to the rhythms of these lines:

Muhammadu, merchant of the night
Not chin in the palm, but tears, son of Sani
You have caused men to cry
Pick! Pick! Pick! you son of Sani
Adamu, the goblin
Oh, people, hiding things in the bush is nothing hidden
As this matter stands today
Even hiding things in the room is nothing hidden
Only let Allah protect you
You just bid Allah to protect you

Kassu Zurmi, the praise singer of Hausa land's thieves, was in the thick of calming him by the cassette rolling in the music box on his lap when his wife's Binta Sudan perfume invaded his nostrils. It jerked him back into reality. He sat up in the chair quickly and put the radio/cassette box down nearby, in which Kassu and his men were still singing:

Work is weariness, people

Practising religion is weariness
Oh, stealing is weariness
You either meet someone in the room
Or someone meets you there
One could meet a wide-awake owner
And, you'd see him pulling at his chattel
And you'd see the non-owner pulling at the same
Why not release it, chattel owner, so he doesn't finish you off?

This same music, which had impelled him to melt through walls and pick chattels and money that belonged to other people, was now to him a sore vexation. He stretched out an arm and turned it off. The clic-cloc from the walls baptised the parlour air with an instant silence. Then, as though a part of those ticking rhythms himself, he pulled out a pack of cigarette and a box of matches from the pocket of the babban riga. He pulled a stick from the opened pack with his lips. He picked a matchstick from the matchbox with the fingers of his unarmed hand. He held the matchbox in one end of his lips and struck the matchstick against it. He then spat the matchbox on the floor at his side and guided the flaring matchstick to the end of the cigarette away from his lips.

Smoking the cigarette long and hard and then pulling it off his lips, he watched a streak of thought blaze across his mind, of setting the house on fire when he was done with her, so when the police came around they would find no

body in a lake of blood from open knife cuts, like his wide open eyes that observed no blink.

Then, hearing her sudden footsteps across the parlour, and counting them for extracts of her distance and direction, he tightened his grip on the knife in the hand concealed under the gown on his lap.

"Going out?" he said in a voice measured to her distance.

The footsteps stopped at the cushioned chair near their bedroom door, from where the scent of Binta Sudan assailed his nostrils with added antipathy. He could hear her throw what could have been a shawl on the chair. And if she were Naira, the daughter of Garban Wajen-Gari, his wife of twenty years, he knew she was casting a penis-shrivelling glare at him. He could tell she was looking directly at his wide open, unblinking and unseeing eyes in the light streaming from the door where she had dropped that bucket earlier on.

"Haba, Sarkin Barayi," she said, cajoling him by his favourite title of King of Thieves. "I know what it means to be alone all by oneself in this house. But, I'm not taking long."

It was confirmed. She was planning to go out. His sentry ears were not wrong, after all. Apologies to them. And thanks to them, for they, not abandoning duty, heard her footsteps receding towards the door opened to the compound yard,

where the footsteps stopped abruptly. He could tell she was standing in the doorway, most probably auditing the powder and the kohl and the paint and the pencil on her face in that small round mirror held in an outstretched hand.

"You are taking much time to dress up," he observed, speaking calmly, but loud and clear enough for her to hear him at the distance she stood from him. "One is left confused on whether it is the same bed of your false prophet or the bed of a new lover."

"You're becoming impossible," he heard her say, after a few seconds. She might have about-turned to face him, for he could tell her words needed no turn of the corners at her mouth to find him. The mirror in her hand might have dropped at her thigh. She must be glowering at him, through eyelashes fortified with the dark powder of kohl in liberal proportion. The few seconds interval before she had responded might account for her brief reconsideration of the response.

"I see!" he said. "A broken, sick and old thief must not inquire of his wife's business, else he is becoming impossible. But when he didn't do so in time past, thinking she was responsible enough, she went ahead to become an apostate."

When she responded, he knew she had turned her back to him, for her words circled their way to him from the corners of her mouth. "I can see your plan of keeping me from going

out. It is there all over the floor around you. You expected me to at least say something about it. I refused. That's why you're looking for a quarrel. Good news; I wish you can see the creatures you have invited for exchange of words, the thousands of flies already in attendance at the feast you've made them. I can only hope nobody comes into the house while I am away, so there would be no cleaning up, and therefore no interruption."

"I'm already debating with the flies on whether it's your false prophet's bed still, or another man's. I was hoping you could tell us the answer, in order to know the winner between them and me."

Her next response issued to him from a corner of her mouth, meaning she had merely turned her face to one side without the rest of her back-turned body following. "Maybe I should indulge you on this issue one last time," she said, half-heartedly. "Show me any man who can predict the future and I'll show you a man with a right to be called a prophet. Therefore, the man you kept on calling a false prophet is indeed a prophet. Allah has already used him to help me find the prison where the magistrate has locked up my son. And Allah shall also use him to bring my son out. I hope your eyes would have been restored by then, to see for yourself."

"Allah shall also use your body to pay for all those services."

"I will ignore that blackmail," she said. "However, you have committed a blasphemy, for which you must make an atonement."

"There would surely be an atonement," he replied. "But, it would be for your apostasy and nothing else."

"Any apostasy that could guide me in rescuing my son from prison cannot be an apostasy, except if there is no justice on earth. But, you do need to atone for that blasphemy against Allah. By the way, do you recall that the late Sardauna had deposed the Emir of Kano, Muhammadu Sanusi during his time as Premier of Northern Nigeria?"

"Do not make me laugh, woman," said the thief, flippantly. "What do Zaria people, with their fat thighs, know about Kano's history?"

"I'm happy to see that you're actually joking about this. But then, we know quite a lot about Kano. Besides, the Prophet told me this particular history, as one involved, though not a native himself. He told me this, that Emir Sanusi couldn't have been deposed if he hadn't earlier on deported the Prophet from Kano to his native Cameroon, for the same fairy tale reason."

"I am very serious," he heard her saying, while he raised his face to the ceiling and laughed out loud. And, hearing her footsteps coming towards him, slowly, he heard her say to him, in a raised voice, "Even Audu Bako, your former State

Governor, put Prophet Muhammad twice in prison here in Kano. The same Audu Bako got his deserved recompense, when he was disgraced out of office soon afterwards!"

"Now you're sounding foolish," he said, getting serious. "The impostor prophet has totally deceived you, and you no longer have sense. But, listen: Audu Bako had to leave office suddenly because Murtala had toppled Yakubu Gowon in a coup. It had nothing to do with that superstition."

"I think you should be warned about being hostile to Prophet Muhammad. Your situation could get worse."

"I'd have paid him a visit tonight if I still had my eyesight, just to prove to you that the powers I have in my body are bigger than he can ever boast of."

"I see," he heard her say, from a distance that he could guess to be the center of the parlour. "Now I think I have finally discovered the reason for your blindness. You got struck with a magic broom by the owner of the house that you had entered at midnight, which became a lake surrounded by black snakes and prevented you from escaping till you got caught at daybreak. You have claimed this to be ill omened. But I have just observed now that it was a mercy from Allah, for without it you would have ended up in a bigger disgrace for attempting to go stealing at Prophet Muhammad's house."

"Tell him he is lucky I am blind," said the thief gravely. "I'd have brought you his head for a soup for the hunter's mongrels, even at the risk of breaching the conditions and losing my own powers. Maybe that would have proven to you that the evil foreigner who came into our midst from Cameroon, set up a circus and performed some tricks before his gullible crowds, has turned your senses!"

"There is no doubting his prophecy. And prophecy can only come from Allah, who gives to whom He desires and denies the ones He has decided to be denied."

"You shall occupy a special corner of hell with your false prophet, woman. I have told you."

"What corner of paradise are thieves going to occupy, especially grand thieves like you?"

He could hear her footsteps walking away towards the exit door. He could hear them stop at the doorway, as abruptly as they had commenced walking.

"Stealing like I did, against the rich, of whom this city can boast of thousands, was a virtue. You can't compare that to apostasy."

"Congratulations. I'd surely look from my corner of Hell for what you could spare me of your wine and houris."

He heard her footsteps disappearing into their bedroom. He heard them emerge shortly afterwards, reinforced by the

slaps of her slippers on the carpeted floor, which he first heard her throw down from her hand as she would have hurriedly thrown down coins to a cobbler after a service. It was the clearest sign of her readiness to leave. He could tell that by now she had a handbag hanging by the straps from her small shoulder.

Shuffling rapidly in those slippers, he heard her going towards the cushion near their bedroom door. Then, he heard the determined slaps of them against the soles of her feet as she made to exit the parlour.

He was scrambling in his mind for the best tricks, not only to stop her from leaving but also to turn her around and back to his chair. In that despairing moment among a constellation screaming for a pick, he was left without a choice than to speak, to say any word, either of command or of plea or anything that could first possess his tongue.

"Wait!" he heard himself call out loud. There was a pant in his big lungs threatening to inflate and deflate his ribs in a manner that could give his desperation away. "Wait and carry this final task for me, I beg of you. After that, you have my permission to go."

The clocks on the wall raised their tic-toc voices in the silence that her sudden pause at the door had enthroned.

"Come," he pleaded, aware that she had stopped and even turned to face him. He sat up in the chair and carefully

removed the burning-out cigarette from his lips, which he snuffed on the floor under the chair.

"You must not take my time by whatever it is you want done," he heard her warn.

"Where is my staff? It's grown some legs. Find it for me. I've searched for it until I knocked off the kettle and my bowl of gruel, as you've observed."

"Your staff has always been under your chair," he heard her say. "But it's there at the wall. Who could have taken it there?"

"I was surprised when I searched but didn't find it," he said. "So, it has travelled all the way to the wall?"

"See it right here," he heard her say, from the spot where he had pushed the staff earlier on. "And there is no other person in this house!"

Somewhere in-between a tic and a toc from the walls, he could pick the sounds of her bending down and of her picking up the staff. He could hear her slow and deliberate steps in those slippers, advancing towards him.

He began to rise and stretch out a hand in the direction she was approaching him, saying, "Isn't it ignorant of you to assume that we're the only beings in this house, when we both know that the invisible world has been with us since Adamu and Hauwa'u?"

He perceived that her arm held one end of his staff when he felt the other end nudge his fingers. If she were another woman, he would have imagined she had perceived danger from him and was keeping a safe distance. But the Naira that he knew and the honey badger were one and the same animals, uncaring. If she was keeping a safe distance now, it was only because she did not want to be delayed. Yet, whatever her reason, he was determined to get her. And, as a creature of darkness, a python on a hunt, his blindness could not rob him of his meal that keen sense had guaranteed. Therefore, he, like a coiled python, sprang forward in her direction. He closed the distance between them with perfect precision, such that his firm grip coiled around her wrist in the space between a tic and a toc. He had no need of doubt it was her he had caught. He knew her body. It was quite warm to the touch, like newly passed urine that was sealed in a nylon bag.

Down at the floor, the python and the honey badger danced the dance of death in rapid steps. In the space between the first and the third strikes of the clock, he poured her abuses from his saliva-wanting mouth, twisted the wrist in the coil of his arm. She, attempting to lessen the pain, spun around till her back was at his front. He, sensing that she was at the right position, quickly raised the penknife, which he held in the other hand. He flicked it and dropped the sharp edge of the parched blade on her neck. But, to his utmost surprise, her blood did not flow. Rather, the knife's blade melted against her skin and flowed down his knuckles.

"That is it," he said to her, his mouth to her ear, "I can see that the false prophet has boiled you hard with medicine. But let me see if he has also prepared you against this other one."

He released the remains of the knife. It fell on the floor. He, with the other hand in support, seized her around the ribs, for as brief as one strike of the new hour. Then he tossed her up in the air and charged towards the wall from under which she had picked his staff earlier on. He stopped only when the wall had received her frame with a thunderous impact. This told him that she had no power as melting through objects like he did, else she could have led him through the wall. In the next three strikes of the hour, he lifted her up in his arms, in a single swirl away from the wall and, with her legs and arms kicking and her groaning rising above the strikes from the clocks, he applied all the squeeze his big muscles could generate into her ribs, one arm gripping the other at the wrist. He felt the breath in her lungs slowly ebb away.

And, as he waited for her to be still, he plunged into a lake of recollections. It was in prison, he recalled, that he became friends with her father. He was a neophyte thief, before he became the scorpion-in-the-trousers whom Kano must put forward in contests of thieves. It was his first jail term, for picking one inconsequential chattel he could not remember from a house in the city that he could not recall either. Her father then was still a young man, jailed for possessing, at his house in Zaria, goods stolen from Kano. Since then, her father would become his chief disposer of the property he

had stolen from Kano's patricians. It was at that house in Zaria that he met her, then a young mother of two, divorced over an allegation of stealing something belonging to her ex-husband. He was overripe for marriage, but his reputation in Kano was a barrier to all of Kano's women of virtue. Naira, though a Zaria woman, met his basic taste for women with glowing copper skins and radiant smiles. She even exceeded his fancy for charged conversation, the kind stewed with profanity and spiced with the innocence of foreign dialect, like the Zaria Hausa was to a Kano Hausa speaker. It was to him always good conversation when, for instance, they had disagreed on the correct Hausa name for the tail. He would call it bindi or jela, in his Kano dialect. She would call it wutsiya, in her Zaria dialect, which, in his Kano Hausa dialect, stood for the penis. Sadly, she had learnt the Kano dialect and abandoned her own, with all its interesting foibles. And that was the core of his problem with Kano, which said that all must be one: no poor people, no foolish citizens, no illiterates, no hunters, and most certainly, no thieves.

His mind was darkened by this sad thought when, out of nowhere, he felt a crash of pain in both his testicles, which he had left dangling freely all along from between his spread legs. The red-hot irons sent an instant weakness in his limbs and a whirlwind dizziness in his brain. His grip on her wrist came loose. The tight coil of his arms around her chest went loose. And, while he was starting to fade and crumble, he felt something like two hands sweeping one of his legs off the

floor, with such violent force. He crashed on his back. Then, a hammer dropped on the burning testicles between his legs. The darkness thickened behind the thick veil of the blindness, in which he had lived since his last outing in the city of Kano as a thief in the night.

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