

METAMORPHOSIS

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION



FESTUS OBEHI DESTINY



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I want to Thank my Mom for the Edo names and languages that I used in this project, and my Dad for the history lessons that inspired Metamorphosis. Juliet, Jane and David, Thank you for the Interview about life in the University of Benin. To all those who support me in their own unique ways, Thank you.

Of course we knew all that but the world was changing and we must change along with it. One's feet must learn the dance of the world to survive. Change is needed. Change is necessary. Change is important. Isn't that the whole point of metamorphosis?.

Festus Obehi Destiny. Metamorphosis.

1897.

11th May 2020.

In the age when time was still buried in the womb of memory, when myth sprout grass that reality laid upon. The time when the earth was flat and the kings of the skies would sit and observe the earth float towards oblivion. It was a time before time itself and spirits roamed the galaxy in different forms and walked backwards. The world began when the Kings of the skies separated day from night and threw a rope into the well of damnation for the earth to save itself. History notes that the Kings of the skies were black beings. They wore no shades and their true majesty was in the divinity of their nakedness. The women had long hair that curled at their toe nails. The men were dandy and had long white beards that highlighted their black hair. They created seas and hills, animals and fowls, abstractions and concepts, rivers and deserts, sands and dust, air and death, light and darkness, sun and the moon. They spat out stars to keep the moon company at night and they let tears fall from their eyes to allow the earth receive rain. They sparked thunderbolts, flood and famine when they spoke in anger. And when their lust overcame them, allowing their lushed bodies cringed to their touch, the universe burned in reflection of their heightened intensity. Their brows would break as they climaxed. They would fly on their toes as their waist curved to release their spawns. Time saved these spawns from being destroyed and they grew up in different parts of the world. Wherever they landed, they grew and owned. They all had names that lived even after their death. Amadioha, sango, Moremi, Amina, oya, Ogiso, Oduduwa, and Bayajida were all children of the skies. In death, they were revered, in life, they were feared. Being children of the skies, they were all powerful. It was said that some walked on water and some traveled through different dimensions and moved easily through astral projections. They created men and beings as they chose and became the gods that men could see. This was the time that the Black men ruled existence. The children of men created altars for the children of the skies. The children of the skies ruled vast acres that eyes and thoughts couldn't cover. Men who walked to find the depth of their kingdoms lost their legs. The children of the skies commanded the tears of their creators to fall endlessly and they made the sun stand in one place. In their anger, the day ceased and the nights got pregnant and gave birth to more nights. They owned slaves and fame, lives and deaths, success and regret, love and hate, sand, blood and dust. Wars were rare in their time but when it happened, they returned wrapped in mountains of human heads. People who sought for their faces took days climbing these heads. When the children of the skies had lived to their full, they joined the Skies and became Rulers of the skies themselves. They were superior to death. Their kingdoms grew in strength and beauty. The children of the skies made love with the children of the world as their parents before them did. This act made them give birth to children. Hence, when they left, their children reigned in their stead. The people allowed this because there was nothing more sacred than the divine legitimacy bestowed than when gods ruled men. In the age when time was precious in the womb of memory, this was the legacy that black men lived and died to and although they were not written, the stories passed from mouth to ears and from one generation to the next.

When the White men came to the Black continent in birds and boats, they were amazed at the way the children of men had grown in the wisdom that the children of the skies had left behind. There was a particular empire that shared supreme greatness that the white men coveted most. A city whose nights were shielded by the burning lamplights that burned in the verandah and rooftops of the city. A city whose streets wore ivory and golden tusks. The beauty of the city sent lust to the desires of the white man and he wanted the city to satisfy his greed. A city whose history took a leap in time in 1987. When the British came to Benin, their lens kept shuttering and their lips broke its hinges and lost the ability to close. They had heard of a continent where the men slept naked and the women slept with monkeys. They did not see traces of blood and the skeletons of human heads on the streets. Instead, they saw red earth that glistened from the shadows of the skies. The fragrance of natural delicacies and sweat made their nose twitch. Their eyes were disappointed with the art the people possessed. They not only owned them, but wore them. The men had coral beads that rested on their succulent flesh and bracelets that sat on their protruded belly. The women wore beads around their locks, and rings that swallowed their ears. Their brown skin, colors of simple perfection. It was said that Benin had a night that glowed. The streets shone as if the earth was made from glowing diamonds. The silver that the chiefs wore woke up at night and made their hut look like a glowing cave. Each household owned a bamboo stick placed in front of their homes. A simple contraption that housed a lamp with fire that burned deep into the day. It was beautiful. With time, more foreigners came to see the black wonders of the world. These foreigners were poisoned with the delusion of superiority. They defined their upper hand because of the skin they wore and decided to rewrite our history so that the rest of their world would not stumble from the truth of the perfection of the black world. Where they saw beauty, they reported barbaric. Where diversity was accommodated, they called Paganism. When they saw the beautiful mothers that walked only with their glowing tribal tattoos, they called it indecency. They marveled when the people showed them the tricks that the children of the skies had taught them. The people of Benin walked on fire, healed broken bones and turned invisible. The white men called it devilish tricks. A practice from a demon that their own fathers had told them of. Benin grew in trade and beauty, the same way the children of the skies had ruled their empire. The white men practice grew from trade and then to humans. They fascinated Benin with their silver tongue and tried to teach the children their own ways. The western ways. But it was all about culture. It was the culture they feared. They knew that a people bounded by a culture they believed in could not be broken. It was like trying to cut water with a knife. Hence, they tried to introduce their philosophies and religion. They tried to poison the roots of our culture by preaching a code of morality that did not apply to them. They tried to combat truth with fear and lies. They saw the city that never fell to darkness and wanted to submit to their greed by owning the empire. They desecrated the altars of the children of the skies with their words and preached Exodus 20; 4 where their own Maker had preached against other gods. But Exodus 20; 17 didn't apply to the white men for they believed that it was their own divine right to own it all. Their ploy failed. The people of Benin told them blankly to leave the discussion open for trade talks only. 'Before you came, we had our own messiahs. They have

not forsaken us yet. Where was your god when Ogiso ruled the deserts and the seas? When he walked on water and commanded all beings to obey him? *Okpia ni wo?* Where was your god? We will not jump our boat when we know that the ways of the world cannot sink it.' They said. Years later, more men came, tried and failed again.

The white man's greed grew. He dreamt of guns and bringing war to the doorstep of the people of Benin. He wanted to sack the huts with neatly knotted palm fronds and use magic fire to burn the farms and villages. He wanted to spit on the sanctity and sacredness of the shrines. He wanted to rip the pages of the Benin history and desecrate our deities with his foreign tongue. With his gun pointed to Benin, he wanted to force his steps into the black history books. He dreamt of placing black men in mental and metal cuffs, sailing them through the Atlantic and compelling them to a life of servitude. He saw them tilling plantations and placing the fruit of their labor on the white man's table. He wanted to fill their tummies with leftovers and make sure they ate their own black children in harsh winters. He wanted to fulfill his dream in the same year he had it. 1897.

History recalls the event in 1897 as the dance of fire. The white man came in birds and boats with guns and gadgets whose only aim was death and destruction. They drafted plans on papers and sought the ways of their own fathers to take over the kingdom that the children of the sky had left behind. They sent two messengers to the Oba Ovonramwen of Benin, a son of the sky, asking him to surrender and submit to the order of the white force or face being deposed as the Oba of Benin. The messengers sang as they advanced to Benin, they walked haughtily to the palace, surveying the golden street that they would own and use as they wish. Before dusk, one of them returned to the camp holding a big box. Some soldiers had seen him dragging his feet and crying inaudibly. It wasn't until they got closer that they saw that his tongue had been cut off. With the aid of ink and paper, he told them that the Iyase, Prime minister of the Benin Empire had cut off his tongue after he had called Ovonramwen 'An effing Monkey'. A divine sacrilege. He was only spared so that he would live a fate worse than death. The colonel in charge promised to get a piece of Iyase if they met in the battle front. They buried the box without opening the severed body of the other messenger.

The next day, the day of the dance of fire, the white men advanced towards Benin. They met the warriors of Igodomigodo on the bush path. They rubbed coal on their faces and their feet were painted with mud. They sang and danced as the white men advanced. Somewhere distant, a drum was beating but the people could hear it as if it was close. It was a drum of war. When the white men had almost reached the warriors, they were surprised when a batch of invisible men appeared behind them. The white men took aim. Guns cocked but bullets were too scared to leave their cartridge. They heard footsteps and saw foottraces running but saw no one. Bodies that ran but were not seen. They heard voices and searched frantically for the beings that sang so ghastly. The forest breathed life and roared. Sands turned to glass and the sun stood in one direction. The white men were surrounded by voices but they felt alone in this war. They called

on their gods but their answers were not louder than the songs that the people of Benin sang. After what seemed like a long time, A priest walked up to the soldiers of the white men and pointed at an empty path behind them. '*Akian a ye ware*. Leave and never return'. Whether they were surprised with the orchestration that had displayed before them or fear had scared vigor out of their legs, they stood. Fear in their eyes and their faces buried in tears, they stood. It was the dry season but the chill of fear they felt left their fingers trembling and their lips chattering. The priest, known as Igueben, was one of the great grandchildren of the children of the skies and he had immense power. He let out a laugh that was echoed by the warriors of Igodomigodo that stood behind him. Then he spat and pointed at two white men. Immediately, they let out a deep piercing scream and turned into dust. He did this to three other white men as they all fled in different directions. As they ran, they heard the drums more clearly and their lips erupted into an uncontrollable flame of fire. Igueben had thrown a grenade of fear and curiosity in their mind and it had exploded and left behind shrapnel of trauma and regret. The kings of the skies watched as the white man ran and the people of Benin danced and ran with invisible bodies. The Kings of the skies celebrated and drank palm wine. When the wine left behind foam in the side of their mouth, they wiped it off and it caused a drizzle in the land. The people of Benin saw this as a sign of the gods celebrating with them and extended the celebration of the dance of fire for a month. As they celebrated on earth, the king and children of the skies celebrated, made love and shared nostalgia about a lonely age when time was still buried in the womb of memory and they alone, ruled the universe.

A slice of Happiness.

13th May 2020.

The women that I met in my line of work all had similar stories. They were either victims of rape at a very young unimaginable age, or their step fathers sexually molested them. The most common finger that pushed them into the ring of prostitution was poverty. Whenever I saw someone vomiting the bitter pill of their past that they had swallowed a long time ago, I had no choice but to stick my finger of shame deep into my throat and vomit my own lies of my own past. Many times I created different histories that never existed that it became difficult keeping up with the truth that never existed in the first place. Reliving memories I hadn't lived and shedding tears about a past I haven't visited yet. I did not have a temperamental dad who tore at my skirt when I turned thirteen and a mother who plugged pretense deep into her earlobes and chose ignorance over concern. I didn't grow up around cousins who took me to the bathroom to show me invisible lizard eggs and ask me to touch the extended finger between their legs. I grew up around dining tables with foods piled from the center to the edges, under painted ceilings, in a two storey building in the town of Ewohinmi, Edo state. At a young age, I knew desire. It drove me, sustained my imagination, and kept me company as I dreamt my way through the thrust of ecstasy. I started touching myself in places I didn't know exist when I turned fifteen. Our house had short walls and tall palm trees. During the rainy season, strong winds made the leaves beat themselves into a frenzy till it created a non-rhythmic sound. My mom always said the plants were living beings and they were simply paying homage to the rain. I often wondered if they heard me as I danced to their voices while my fingers kept digging in and out of me as I spiraled in and out of consciousness, keeping my breath galloping ahead of my imagination towards climax. Whenever my parents were in a business meeting, I would switch on the black and white TV set and watch the American music videos. The ones with half dressed women swinging delicate waists, bopping their heads and dancing seductively around other women. I preferred this to when they danced with men. The former to me felt so natural and in my naïve mind, I didn't imagine that society frowned at my fancies. I became an addict in my fantasies and soon the sound of running waters and the sight of Vaseline lotion made me uneasy. It was like a vampire's lust and disdain for blood.

I had defiled my mind and defined my lust a long time before a boy touched my body. The older I grew, the more conscious I became aware of my choices. In my thoughts, I was scared of being different, being a lesbian. When I was still in secondary school, the headmistress had caught two girls in the school bathroom. After giving them forty strokes on their buttocks in the assembly hall for doing 'Ungodly act' to each other, she expelled them. A week later, some hoodlums caught a gathering of men in Benin City who were masquerading a church for a secret hide out for homosexuals. They were caught, tied and burnt alive. The church was razed down under fire and spit. No one investigated the matter. Being gay is a crime in Nigeria and death is often the

judgment. And so I grew up with fear and a deep longing for my own sex. One day, the Pastor in our local church who always gave sermons in Ishan language decided to preach on homosexuality. I could tell that my parents were very uncomfortable. They kept glancing at their watches. Soon, they engaged in a whisper of chitchat about family affairs. I listened to the pastor with a running heart and sweaty eyes. I listened to his fears, his judgment and his hate.

“All of them will go to hell. The Bible forbids it. Jesus forbids it. It is a sin. How can a man love another man?” He laughed in disgust. The whole church echoed his disgust.

“Women can also love women too” I whispered inaudibly so that my mother would not hear me and hand me over to the pastor to throw me into the lake of fire.

‘*Osenobua e gua ne be dia rio.* God forbids it.’ The pastor added after the uproar had subsided. He broke into a song, which the choir picked up and the congregation echoed.

‘*Ekpokpo suwa onwha ghi ime re. uwa no si Ose. Oyi mhen ni re. Uwa no si Ose*’.

With the image of my body drowning in the lake of eternal fire, I thrust my body into the arms of my first boyfriend in SS3. I didn’t love him but he worshipped me and that was enough. To me, it was an experiment of self. And so I removed modesty from the attires I wore to his house and he wrapped his lust below my waist. It was futile. I had poured water on a basket. While he moaned and vibrated, I stood staring at the ceilings and counted the cobwebs at the edges of the room. I felt more when I was alone in the bathroom. After three more trials, I broke away and let myself free.

I became a prostitute at twenty. When I started, I realized that I was the oldest on the block. Everyone else had found their sexual potentials at sixteen and less. Perhaps I wouldn’t have ran from Ewohinmi to a dingy apartment with Adesua and five ladies in Upper Sakponba road if my mom hadn’t found me and a lady kissing ferociously in my room. Her name was peace. I had met her a few times in Agbado market in Egwa. I knew she was different like me when she smiled at me and held me longer whenever we exchanged hugs. A few times after hugging peace, I visited her shop one evening. When she tried to pull away after a short hug, I held her longer and planted my lips on hers. She drew back and cocked her head. I feared that I had misread platonic for intimacy. I stuttered and thought of a lie to cover my tracks till she smiled and said.

‘You are bold o. what if someone had seen you?’

‘Oh. I wasn’t thinking.’

‘It is all right. How did you know?’

‘I don’t know. I just like it when you hug me and I felt...’ words failed me,

‘We should meet at my house this weekend. My mother will not be around’

‘Okay’

‘Okay’

She wrote her address on a piece of paper. When I stretched out my hand to take it from her, she pulled me deep into her dark stall and kissed me. That was how my first relationship began. Peace and I rocked each other’s world. The comfort and temporary peace we enjoyed when we were together was the only time we were invisible to society’s judgment. We created a world of secrecy and ecstasy around each other. A world that burnt out of existence when my mother caught us in my room. Judgment was put on hold till my father came back from work. My mom told him the full picture. She added colors and exaggeration while I knelt down between them. My dad flogged me with the metallic head of his hard leather belt till my two eyes bloated out and I felt a rib in my thighs.

‘We should take her for Deliverance service. Pastor Erhomose is very powerful. He will exorcise the demon’ Mom said

‘I would rather have a prostitute for a daughter than a lesbian. This is your fault’ he turned to my mom.

They left me in my bruises and headed to the sitting room to explode in a full blown tussle of blames and choices. That night, I packed clothes into a travelling bag, stole money from my dad’s room and ran away.

I share a studio apartment with six women. Women who are young in age but old in bondage and lust. We stayed in Egbe Street in Upper Sakponba. Upper Sakponba road is the city of vices. Some would say it is the most populated area in Benin. It is a home for confra men and prostitutes. It is a normal sight to see buildings with churches and beer parlors in them. After a hot morning of listening to God’s word, people chilled their heads in the gallons of palmwine sold in the beer parlour. It was a sight to see young girls and protruding stomach. Most of our customers were yahoo boys and married men. Girls who couldn’t get into secondary school either learnt trade or spread their legs to climb the ladders that society had constructed for them. The city came alive at night. Prostitutes who stood at the edge of the road to attract the center of men’s attraction caused traffic congestion and the beer parlour allowed us to use their shops for finding customers. They made money from this. The nights were short and dull and the day was loud. We always shared our stories or sometimes if the room wasn’t too hot, we talked about our history. I was closest with Adeusa. She was the one who had found me, brought me to the apartment and let me heal for a month before she made me start trading pleasures for money. Adesua was the only one that knew I was a lesbian. I had told her everything when she found me.

One day, Ofure, one of the girls was narrating her experience about one of her customer Dr. Osaro. We all knew him. He was a quack who sold pregnancy pills and also performed clean abortions. He had tried to rape Ofure after giving her three bottles of Gulder. Ofure dramatically recounted how she insulted him and beat him up. Among us all, life had been toughest on her. Ofure had grown up with seven sisters and a prostitute mother in a one room apartment. Whenever any of her mother's lover came around, they all went outside and sat on the verandah. Some days when their mother forgot herself and moaned loudly, they sang so their voices would drown their shame. When Ofure turned fourteen, four of her sisters got pregnant at the same time. One of them said her pregnancy was of the holyspirit. She claimed that she was still a virgin. The girl's name was Magdalene.

After Ofure had finished her escapade, Ebosata began hers. Her voice was so tiny and she sang like a squeaking pipe.

'Babes, One *Ozwo* yesterday give me ten grand and he no do anything'

'Talk true' Omonigho, the youngest among us leaned in. I could see the vein stretching out her eye lid as she struggled to get the description of the man from Ebosata.

'And God go dy bring useless doctors come my side' Ofure hissed.

'Where you meet am?' The seventeen year old Omonigho asked again. She had been bombarding Ebosata with questions since she began leaving no space for her to answer.

'Na yesterday o. you know sey I package wella and I wear confirm make up as per we dy Easter. We gat to celebrate Jesus Christ. Na so this pure nigger reach my whisper sey he can be friend. Na so I charge five k for friendship so that he go run comot. Guy man bring out ten k. I chuck money inside bobby follow am'

'Imagine sey person use you do blood nko. You know sabi sey na so they dy use people do blood money?' I couldn't tell if Adesua's concern was sarcastic or genuine. She didn't like Ebosata.

'Or perhaps he was gay' I said.

'Na talk be that?' Ofure hissed. Slowly, the conversations dried up and the girls went back to their single space for reflections.

Later Adesua reprimanded me for bringing up any mention of gay in our discussions.

'It makes people suspicious' she said.

'How?'

'Just be careful.'

'I am.'

Be happy and content with here.'

'I really wish I could. I want to live in a world where I will be accepted as a lesbian and not a prostitute'

'You cannot'

'Why?'

'Because of the same reason you left home'.

Before Adesua could apologize, I had already run into the bathroom to cry my eyes out. I thought about Peace, my mom and the metallic head of my dad's belt and cried louder. Adesua kept knocking on the door. 'I am sorry Osas. I am sorry.' I opened the door and let her wrap her arms around my wet face. I slept in her bosom. When night came, we didn't transform into the women we were, instead we held eachother's arms and slept again.

I found a slice of happiness the day a car pulled up at me. It was almost midnight and I was standing at my favorite junction in Ogba Street when a woman in her twenties called me from the other end in the street.

'You are very pretty'. She said as I reached the car. There was a man sitting beside her with earplugs in his ears.

'Thank you'. I wanted to tell her how her golden locks made her look like a goddess. But prostitutes didn't give complements until after payment.

'What is your name?'

'Osas'

'Oh. Are you part of them' she pointed at the group of girls behind us.

'Yes'

'Good. How much for a night?'

She drove an expensive car. So, I gave an expensive price. Adesua would be proud when I tell her of this escapade. I imagined Omonigho tearing my attention to get the full details as Ebosata leer in jealousy.

'Thirty thousand'

'That's good. I will pay'.

She looked behind me again and stared ahead

‘Is he always this shy?’ I pointed to the man on the wheels.

She laughed out and spoke slowly without fear. ‘Darling, the service is for me. You see, I enjoy a different world of pleasure. So are you in?’

It felt like a trap. I looked behind if a police van was waiting for me the trap to hook me before coming. I looked behind and checked if a group of mean faced men were running towards us with fire and tires. I looked ahead if my mom and her pastor were coming with a chain to tie me and throw me into the lake of fire. I could smell the metallic head of my father’s belt. I bit my tongue to make sure it wasn’t a dream. The pain made me regret the action. The woman mistook my joy for doubt and added.

‘I will pay you double if you want’

‘No. it is fine.’

I threw myself into the back seat. The car drove a few minute before she told the driver to stop. She joined me in the back seat.

Her hands were stroking my laps and I felt a sensation that I had thought was lost a long time ago. A time when the rainy season made the palm fronds behind my window beat against themselves and made me imagine an ecstasy that only my fingers provided.

‘I think I am going to like you pretty’ she said.

I buried my lips in hers and added. ‘Me too’.

Hall Two.

(For Juliet, whose anecdote designed these empty pages with her words).

May 15th, 2020.

Saturdays were for reflection. The six bunk room became more spacious when some of the roommates left for the weekend, especially the squatters. They bore their discomfort until the weekend. In the third series in Queen Idia hostel was a six man room where ten girls resided. The room had three springy bunks. The last one was broken and the two bonafide had to put their foams on the floor. They ended up sleeping with their heads close to where meals were prepared and woke up with bed sheets that had been blackened from dirt and coal from kerosene stove. Of course, there was a kitchen but no one risked cooking in the dirty lands of Queen Idia's cuisine. One had to stay with the food at all times to avoid theft or sometimes the full disappearance of the whole stove and pots itself. The mattress used had slim foams and the loose springs made the bunks jumpy. It never seemed to fall no matter the weight it bore. Today, the room was half empty. Odegua, a bonafide in the room with three squatters had gone home to help her mummy in her restaurant at the busy ring road market. Fidelia had gone to visit her boyfriend Orukpe in Upper uwa. Her cousin Akhere was the only squatter around. Today, Akhere was taking a risk by cooking in the kitchen. She had tried it twice this week and she was successful in her quest. The first time she had attempted it, a roommate had objected to her cooking at night because of the heat it would generate and the stains on the bed sheets that were beginning to leave permanent marks. Frustrated, she had plunged herself into the kitchen, defying fear and odds. She came out successful. After a week of buying handouts, listening to boring lectures and copying assignments from hidden websites, the girls took their Saturdays for enjoyment. If there was no weekend party, home emergencies or night class preparations, they had Saturdays like this, free for discussion. They called it the weekends of gists.

Gists. The girls loved gists and their subjects danced sporadically from school stress, to sex, abortions, parties, examinations, boys, experience and family issues. There was always a shared experience or a contrasting opinion between them that sweetened the argument and made them oblivious to the passage of time. On some occasions, bonds had developed between some of them based on the intensity of the discussion shared. To them, these gists were life. It was the spice that turned boredom to delicious memories. In the discussion that brewed between them, they build bridges between their thoughts. Whenever one spoke, she made sure she provided a transparent window so that the others could peer and see the honesty in her words. On Saturdays like this, when they had riveting conversation that kept their tongues out of their lips hours after silence reigned, they threw themselves into a dark tunnel without light except rocks of gists that they could lean on.

Today, Akhere, Osas, Grace and Oseme were the only ones in the room. Lastweek, Akhere had almost been raped by some boys in Ekosodin, a space of houses and hostels in streets that were

situated at the backgate of Uniben. Ekosodin had been a home of confra-guys and the likes in the past and represented a dangerous territory. Before Akhere almost got raped, she was always the author of Ekosodin gists. Being the ninth and last child of her parents, her eight elder siblings had all gone to Uniben. They deposited in her memory mountains of Ekosodin stories and myths and she came to Uniben with that knowledge. Akhere had the current affairs of cult tussle that had rocked Uniben soil. She knew the exact details of the ghost stories, the execution of the final year medical student that had tried to escape from initiation, the juju incidents at the university guest house, the date of the birthday party that turned into a blood bath, the cult fights and the war of 2012, the deaths of Capones and the innocents. The fragile hearts among them found it difficult to urinate after Akhere's stories and many times, they had nightmares based on the pictures she painted for them.

The sun was throwing fire and fury and the east series of the hostel suffered the wrath the most. Osas, whose bed was closest to the window rolled away to the bed under her which had been untouched and cool since the owner had left earlier in the day. A girl was walking the corridor with nothing on except panties. Her firm breast rested on her chest as she sought for water to quench her heat. The veil of patience that the girls had put on in preparation for the gist was beginning to lose its color. Osas was the first to break the silence.

'How many food Akhere dy cook for kitchen sef? Based on one or two, I suppose go mail letter to my mama for toilet but I no wan enter room when una dy do closing prayer for the matter'

'Calm down. You sabi sey na weekend. She fit wan cook for today, tomorrow and warming for Monday' Grace said without turning away from the book she was pretending to read.

'E fit be that her owu kerosene stove wey she no wan change o' Osas snickered. The bed she had moved to was cool and comfortable. She removed her brassier so that the breeze that was sneaking into the room could touch more parts of her body. There, she lay naked and stared at the ceilings imagining the twist of Akhere's gists and counting the fading strokes on the ceilings.

'Abeg you get small change make we arrange Nadia bread so that we go use am marry Akhere's beans?' Grace asked. Osas hissed and turned her head to the fading cream and peeling brown walls of the hostel. She also wanted to bury her teeth in the delicious aroma of Nadia bakery bread and massaged herself with the beans Akhere was preparing. But like Grace, she was on a budget.

Just then, Oseme walked in with a small paint rubber that she used in defecating. The hostel toilet was rarely neat and most of the girls, scared of infections defecated in plastic bowl. Some used polythene nylons and threw them out the window. This was called shotput. People who passed by hall two at night were very careful so as to avoid shotput nylons thrown at them.

In the past, Osas and Oseme had had arguments on where she kept her plastic bowl. She was the only one that kept hers inside the room even after the roommated had complained that the sight

disgusted them. And today, Oseme had inadvertently put the bowl beside Osas's bag. Their beds were close to each other. A deep furrow appeared on the forehead of Osas's head in lines of anger as she dashed invectives at Oseme.

'Dirty fool. Sebi I don tell you make you no dy stain my bag with your rubbish'

'Abeg rest' Oseme waved at her nonchalantly and this infuriated Osas the more. She was about to burst into a long round of curses when Akhere walked in.

'Did you guys begin without me?' she sat and used a dirty cloth on her bed to wipe her hands. She smelled of crayfish and Maggi spice. Oseme hissed and walked out.

'Should we wait for her?' Grace asked

'Abeg abeg continue. She go watch highlight. She no wan hear gist before sef' Osas said

'Oya. Mastercraft do your thing'.

Akhere laughed at the name that Grace had designed for her because of her story telling gists.

'I am sorry I came late. I was having trouble fixing the owu in the kerosene stove. I will need to get an electric stove before the semester ends'.

Grace and Osas exchanged looks and Akhere understood that they had made fun of her kerosene stove in her absence.

Osas moved back to her bed since the sun had retracted its burning hands. She wanted to get a full view of Akhere's mouth. Grace kept the book she had been pretending to read. She concluded that she would pay for exam malpractice later. 'Book wey no enter head go enter exam hall'.

'So, last week sha. I went to a friend's birthday bash in BDPA. It was very loud. Popular guys and babes in campus were present. You should have seen different drinks and foods. I think they put something in the drink and cake because I noticed I was getting tipsy. Everyone in the party was behaving weird. I was supposed to leave by seven sha but I completely lost track of time. You know I was having fun sha. When it was nine, the guy I went with suggested we leave. So, I checked the time sha and I realized that it was very late. I wanted to come straight to the hostel but he begged me to accompany him to his home in Ekosodin, Newton Street'

Akhere stopped briefly so the girls could digest the little piece of the puzzle she had given them. The girls knew how dangerous Newton Street was. At night, boys would pretend to be vigilante and hold electric torch and rob people of their phones. Osas's friend, Jane had lost her phone in this manner. The boys had asked her to pay a sum of two thousand naira before they would release her phones. When she came back an hour later with two thousand naira and a face whose eyes were covered with sweat, the boys had left. Boys who were found empty handed were

beaten to a pulp. Girls suffered rape sometimes or mild sexual harassment. It depended mostly on the generosity of the night guard they met. No one noticed that Oseme was at the door, fondling with the broken door knobs.

‘So, when we got to Newton street sha. He was behaving really weird. He asked me where my faculty was, I told him that I was a student of English and literature in the faculty of art. He said that it was a shock that we hadn’t met. When I asked him what he was studying, he said he was a student of management science. He said his faculty was close to art sef. Na there my ears pick up sey this guy na fraud. The guy was trying to knock me for road sef. I just dy scope am sey I dy on my period. It was almost eleven when we almost reached his home. I saw two guys forcing one girl like this in front of the house. One was holding her and one was pushing her into an apartment. That was when I ran away. I ran and ran. Even when my phone and bags fell down, I didn’t stop to pick it, I kept on running. Na so I run comot for Ekosodin enter campus o. Na God deliver me’.

‘I pity the girl they were raping. Did you see her face? You for try help am?’ Grace said

‘Miss Samaritan. What if she had tried to be a superhero and got raped herself?’ Osas chipped.

Akhere was preparing to go into the kitchen to check up on her food when Grace threw her one last question.

‘The girl. Did you see her face?’

‘No. I was too busy saving my life to notice anything’.

Akhere walked quickly and she didn’t notice Oseme beside the door. Oseme waited for some minutes before going downstairs to wash her hands and face at the only tap that was working. For the first time that week, she smiled going downstairs and laughed as she washed her face. She was happy that her secret was safe. Akhere hadn’t seen her but she had seen Akhere. Not today, but a week ago when the boys had dragged her defiant body into the room and taken turns raping her. She didn’t struggle. One of them had pointed a pistol at Akhere’s head. The same way they had done to Oseme. They had just finished having fun with Oseme when they pounced on Akhere. The girls were blindfolded and they were ordered not to make a sound. The room was covered in darkness save for one of the boys who held an android phone whose torch he had switched on. After they had had their fill, one of the boys spat at Akhere and laughed with the remaining two. They took her phone and her bag and left her there, crying, she didn’t notice when Oseme stealthily loosened her blindfolds and walked out the door. Oseme had listened to Akhere recreate her past, fearful that she had noticed her amidst her silence. Perhaps if she had cried, her presence would have been discovered. Oseme walked back into the room. Grace had picked up the book again and Osas was looking for a bed that the sun had not touched. Someone was playing Johnny drille’s Count on you with a loud Bluetooth speaker in the next room and

Grace was bopping her head to the magical tune. Oseme removed her plastic rubber from underneath her bed and took it outside to keep at the corridor, where a pile of them laid.

Metamorphosis

23/05/20.

There was always grazes on our feet when we woke up. Our legs danced with the terrors of the night when we were asleep and left us to cry at the scars when we woke up. There were no carpet or soft rugs on the floor to keep the ants and sands from picking their way into our mouths when we slept. We had only a radio and a bamboo chair in our one room apartment and that was where my dad slept. If he wasn't around, my mum enjoyed comfort on the wooden benches. My siblings and I never got a chance to give temporary comfort to our aching backs because Mother was always around. When dawn broke, we went to the river where we always swam to fetch drinking water. While we took turns in placing the plastic gallon under the stream, we enjoyed a morning rush of air and water. Whenever we were sent to the farm, we joined the other kids in playing games of stick, stones and imaginary homes till an elder who was passing by sent us off to acknowledge our parent's errands. At night, we gathered around little fires and listened as Mother told us stories of ants that lifted mountains on their heads and dogs, whose mothers sent them food from heaven. The stories came with spices of songs that we tasted and enjoyed. These nights were quiet except for the crickets and frogs who sang into the dawn. Some nights of course were noisy with the constant cries of our stomach whenever we went to bed with empty stomach. Those were the nights when we slept with mouth open, half expecting manna from heaven to fall on our dry lips. Instead, we woke up spitting out sand and ants that strong winds had picked and thrown into our throats. We were rarely in school and when we were, it was easy for us to pick fights. The other children always found time to point at our torn dresses and our naked feet. After threats of expulsion, we found another way of exacting revenge. We bided time till dusk when the moon came out to dance in the village playing ground. After the children had danced and had their fill of the evening pleasures, we hid in the bushpath leading to their homes and listened for their footsteps. When we were sure that the shadows that approached belong to them, we jumped out, taunted them, beat them and poured sand into their wide opened mouths. It was a sign of our victory. After doing these four times to four different bullies, the insults in schools died. We weren't beaten much when we were younger. I remember being flogged twice or three times. Once, Obehi, my sister told me to stick a piece of broom under my armpit. She said it would make Father forget that she was going to flog us. It didn't work. When we woke up the next day, our faces were still moist and we avoided sitting down on our buttocks for a few days. We knew that we were poor but as we grew older, scales fell from our eyes and we became more sensitive to the things we lacked and the dreams we had. We couldn't go outside at night. It became more shameful to go out with torn panties when we started growing hair between our thighs. We had no friends. My siblings and I survived on the finger of companionship that we had grown used to holding as we grew up together. The garri and displeasing soup that we ate with eyes closed began to make us throw up. Being poor made me frustrated and it became normal to see my parents suffer and lean on the crutches of life. Many times, we felt the pains

they bore. In the last years that I shared with my siblings, the pungent memory that has survived the clutches of time was when we listened to the radio together in the harmattan season. The harmattan was so brutal in our village that one couldn't smile without causing a tear in the lips. We buried ourselves under old unwashed clothes and practiced the way the newswoman in the radio spoke. We acted job interviews and plays while trying to imitate the voice. Professionals that we were, we broke into laughs frequently and controlled the atmosphere with the exaggeration that we wanted our reality to become. We had no idea.

1976 was a time when boys pumped air of optimism into the bubbles of hard work and watched their effort disappear into dust. Even still in the era of new and promises, people wore ropes of this vision on their waist and swung with all their might until the burden of their effort wore them down. Suddenly, the village became too tight for their success to breakthrough to them and they sought their miracle elsewhere. Perhaps the gods they prayed to were deaf or the curses that their fathers had inherited from their own fathers were clawing down their legs from moving forward. Some of us went to Lagos. We, who didn't have the courage to put body parts into red calabash decorated with lizard eggs. We, who couldn't walk naked under the embrace of a white tunic while holding our conscience from falling after decapitating a family or a stranger. We had heard of the city with lights that defied the gravity of darkness, the market that sang from dawn to dusk, and the land where everyone's prayer got answered very fast. When we were younger, some of us who failed in learning the white man's arithmetic went to Lagos to learn a trade. We laughed at them. But our laughter caused blisters on our faces when these boys came back in the bodies of men. The cars they rode caused dust to hang in the clouds hours after they had passed. Recently an uncle of mine came back from Lagos with a magazine. Pride got pregnant on my doorstep and its children bore their heavy weight on my feet. Hence I couldn't move, but it didn't stop me from peering through the window. People who had gone to visit formed a line to touch and see few pages of the magazine. Any unnecessary exclamation or exaggeration of emotion was replaced by a thunderous slap by the next person in line. Even the elders who visited to hear news of the Lagos city in the guise of breaking Kola could not withstand the seduction of the pretty women in the Magazine. There was a particular woman in the front of the magazine. She had long black hair and put on a golden gown and leather slippers. Mere looking at it, one could already feel the comfort of lying on leather. Even the women who gathered around almost tore off the page in Jealousy of a woman who was smaller in appearance, had no beauty, and had too much Vaseline on her face. My uncle claimed that this woman was one of his wives in Lagos and she had presented this magazine to him when he asked of a photograph. He said it was Lagos life. No one saw the lies in his truth till thirty five years later when this woman didn't come for his first or second burial in the village.

So, in 1976, we planted a new dream of life in Lagos and watched it blossom in our reality. We had no idea how painful it would cost to reap the sacrifice of our harvest. Not all of us had the financial motivation for this migration. One of us, Osahon, stole his father's pension and ran to

Lagos to marry a Yoruba girl. His father was angrier at his choice of bride than the actual theft that Osahon had used to get the bribe. On his deathbed, Osahon Father cursed Osahon to be a butterfly till the day of his death, hopping from one bad situation to another. Osahon suffered in his youth and it was said that he was a very sad and angry man. They found him dangling on a rope that he had tied to his ceiling fan nineteen years later.

And so in 1978, people left buried plantation and unsearched dreams to pursue Lagos, the city where manna fell from the sky. Our minds were pregnant with curiosity and anxiety and it made us walk faster. Some of us had list of dreams we wanted to achieve before going back to the village to take a bride. Indeed we wanted to dance with white women. We wanted to work under Chinese and Lebanese men so that we could participate in discussions on how foreign men behaved and how weird it sounded to us when they spoke English. We were virgins in experience and we were quickly looking for tales to conceal our green horns. Of course, some of us who had stayed behind had preached patience. Some said we shouldn't be quick to forget the white men who had destroyed our empire in 1897. Of course we knew about 1897 and some of us could still point to the houses that suffered burns in the invasion. Our history teachers went a whole term crying about the tragedy of the travesty that occurred in our land, the sacrilege of the white man's tenacity and our mortuary that was still filled with our dead gods. Of course we knew all that but the world was changing and we must change along with it. One's feet must learn the dance of the world to survive. Change is needed. Change is necessary. Change is important. Isn't that the whole point of metamorphosis?.

Lagos was surrounded by water. My eyes turned misty when I tried to search the origin of the fog from the water. We found out that the city had a mainland and an island. Some of us still think that this disparity is marginalized based on material strength. We sought for cheapest homes and we had no choice but to move to the ghettos of the Mainland. Imagine the distraught on our faces when we saw homes with broken roofs packed so tight to each other till it was difficult to breathe. They were ugly brown puddles of mud, dirt and urine in front of the homes and one couldn't enter without holding the nose tight together to prevent the smell that erupted. If you inhaled the stench for more than five seconds, you nose would fall down and cease to become a part of your body. Four of us crammed our body parts into one room. The barns in our homes were four times the rooms but we refused to be discouraged. It wasn't the fear of failure that strengthened our defiance, it was shame. There is no better poison to reputation than shame. All we could afford was a mat and a standing fan. We searched for office jobs with our SSCE certificate. At first the 'We will get back to you' was a sign of promise and goodwill. Soon, it turned into a song that we had gotten tired of listening to. Except for the tribalism that haunted our job opportunities, we found out that our village schools failed to do a subject in our WASSCE examination. It was the subject of connections. It was why we were never successful in answering the last question of every interview. 'Who do you know?'.

After days of dieting only on an evening meal of garri soaked with dirty well water and almost two months of unemployment, we were running out of money and optimism. Some days, we

rarely talked to one another. It was as if we all secretly blamed each other for our own actions. Of course, we had no courage to give voices to our thoughts. In those days, we had the time to walk around Lagos and we discovered the ugly truths to the city. Of course, we were impressed with the cars that trailed the roads and the jewels that people hung on their necks. But we saw that the wealth only got to a part of the city and not all part. The wealth revolved around a certain table so carefully that a drop did not fall down from the table of the rich to the puddles of the poor people. We suffered whenever rain fell. We had to swim to our destinations. Sometimes, we woke up as early as four so that we could walk naked in the puddle and dress up after we had gotten to the safer end of the road. In the island, streets were decorated with green neatly cut grass and tall trees with spaces between them. The roads were smooth and rain only made the granite shine. The houses in the island were tall, had huge gates and decorated with the varieties of colors that I didn't know existed. There were no dumps piled at the sides of the road because of the expensive prices of Hausa waste collectors. There were a lot of men in Mushin who made choices in violence and whenever they was a tussle, we suffered the aftertaste of the earthquake. Sometimes, the gunshots were so loud that the bullet hit us in our dreams.

In time, the lucky among us got house help jobs. At first the thought of it made our mouths bitter and we vomited bile for days after the idea had been introduced to us by a friendly Igbo neighbor. He was working as a driver to a foreigner whose friend had recently arrived in Lagos and was looking for people to help him around the house. The pay was promising. Among us, the idea was firmly rejected by Erhonse. His father was a chief and had slaves. Living the life of a slave in Lagos when he could live like a royal in the village cut his pride deep. After a week, he packed his luggage and went back home. Eighteen years later, Erhonse had built three houses in Benin and sponsored his eight children's education in London. Some of us got our wishes. I was the chef while the others were driver and security man. We worked under a Lebanese man. It was a very hard year. Many times, the Lebanese man who was younger threw harsh words at older SSCE holders like us. We didn't know if it was because of the money he had or perhaps it was race. Perhaps we were having our fair share of Lagos experience mixed with racial discrimination. We consoled our bruised pride by saying that one day in the comfort of our duplex on the island; we would remind ourselves of these experiences as part of our success stories. None of us managed to own an uncompleted building talk less of a duplex. We worked. We suffered. We lost our brown skin complexion to the harsh sun. even when we heard that our ignorant mate who had chosen stay behind in the village had started buying homes, we stayed on, trudging through the tunnel of the metamorphosis hoping that one more step would bring us to the light at the end of the tunnel. In 1980, we decided to pay a visit to our folks in the village for Christmas. And so in June, we started saving a huge chunk of our salary. This meant surviving on the remains of our Lebanese master and our garri meal daily. When we took our annual leave in December, we bought fine expensive laces in Yaba market, foreign and Lagos magazines, cakes and sweets. It was very difficult spending the night without tearing our teeth into the cake that we had bought. The next day, we rented a car for two weeks and drove to the village enjoying high life sounds from the radio. After a week without our bleaching creams, our dark

lines emerged in full form. Our chameleon appearance was in accordance with the lies we had rode in to the village. We had shared cakes among the cousins we didn't recognize, slipped thin wards of cash into the hands of Old relatives who had more flesh on their skin than ours and placed the magazine in our sitting rooms and enjoyed the swarm of bees that gathered to lick the honey.

Truth is like smoke. It cannot be hidden for long. We were not ignorant of this fact when we went to the village. We just didn't think that our two weeks would become a month. In truth, it had been a long time since we saw freedom and we wanted to suck the gourd till our tongues turned dry. It became more difficult to convince people that we were the children of Israel that had not murmured in the face of setbacks and made it to the promise land. Our fathers started whispering about the dates of our return. Our mothers were hinting at the possibilities of grandchildren. Before the masquerade of our fat fallacy turned to deprived truths, we ran back to the bondage waiting for us in Lagos.

As we grew older in bondage, we emerged from the metamorphosis of our actions in chains and regret. Soon, time dissipated these emotions and we sought happiness in other places. We soon realized that time was not doing us a favor as we delayed the marriage proposals that our mothers kept whispering whenever we visited during Christmas. In Lagos, people fell in love before they got engaged. Our love journey began with music. In the 90's, we fell hard for the brass voice of Fela and the highlife of Victor Uwaifo. Falling in love with music was much easier than falling in love with women. People in Lagos allowed their women go to school. With education, these women became more aware of certain concerns and their relationships came with questions. We had not mastered the art of digging for answers to evaluate ourselves in relationships. All we knew was the handiwork of society conspiracy that our own fathers had practiced. In our world, the women were not trained up to standard six. They were only allowed the basic arithmetic. They were trained to pound yams, and fetch water. They are told that a woman who can effectively perform home chores will keep a lasting marriage. In Lagos, the society conspiracy failed. Or perhaps, it wasn't Lagos. Perhaps it is the emblem of the new generations. They come with questions that we would fail to answer. Once, a lady asked me what I wanted in a woman, I said 'I want someone to take care of my children, wash my cloth, and cook my food even if I have little or no money. A woman that never complains and knows her place among Men'. She threw an invisible spit at me and said 'if you want a slave. Go and meet your useless mother.'

And so we fell hard on the questions of love and marriage that life threw at us. We did not account for the future when we sent slim blanket of pounds back to our mothers to ship the women that they had picked for us. We looked for cheap accommodation in Mushin and Ajegunle. We married these victims of society conspiracies into our one room apartment and

more painfully, when they got pregnant, we anchored the new generation into the poverty of our actions. Indeed, a failed metamorphosis.

Five years old, air raids and Hausa men.

27th May 2020.

The Hausa people are coming. That is what my mommy say. That is why they are always throwing bomb every time. Before before, they used to be no bomb. Only us and no sound. Us children know that there is war. But on Sunday, our Chief say the war will not affect us. He say the war is far far away and nobody will disturb Bendel. Our area is south south and the war is between north and east. I don't know what is north, east or the other one but I am happy that the war is far far away. I want to enjoy televeshon with my friends and enjoy story time with my mother. I also wait for my baba to sleep so that I will hide in my mommy room and she will give me breast to suck. If baba catch me, he will use belt to flog me. That's why I go in the evening.

Even if I wee wee at home, mama will hide it from Baba. Baba also don't like when I suck my hand. It is sweet but baba say it is bad. Before the war, Baba say that if I keep sucking my hand, he will not carry me to school. I have not start school yet because if I pass my hand over my head, it will not reach my elbow. I am very short.

But all that one is before before. Now we have build pit behind our house because the bombing bombing is too much. The sound of shell breaking the earth used to cause vibration and make me lose balance. It is hard to sleep and many times, the bombing will make me wee wee at home. Also, food is now scarce. We eat only in the evening. Baba say that it is because of war. Soldier is stealing our crop. They did not join us and plant but they are eating our crop. We did not join them and start fight but how come the war is affecting us too? How come we are fighting in a war that we did not start? I do not understand. The question is hard. No one is around to give me answer. It is like palm kernel. If I use my own teeth to crack it, it will pain my body.

Everything is different and everything is affecting everybody. Even when I want to go to my friend house to play, I will use style and visit when they are pounding yam. The song that the mortar and pestle is singing is crying because the food is small. I will even follow my friend to fetch water. The stream is far and my head always pepper me. But when the food is done, they will not call me. Even the foo foo is small and the soup does not have meat. I pity them. I go back home. At night, they is no tortoise story again. The animals know that we do not gather under the moon to talk about them again. It is painning them. That is why when our hunters go to the bush, they do not see any animals. The animals are not happy with us.

When I use style and go to my mommy room so that she will put breast in my mouth, she slap my hand and my face. She say she have lean and ask me if I want to see her become a broom stick. I cry till the next morning. One day, she see that I wee wee, she did not give me new clothes. She beat me and make me wear my smelling cloth. Mama have change. Just like the way the war is affecting Baba, it is also affecting mama. That is how everything is now. Before

before, we used to eat plenty meat but now only Baba eat meat. Me and mama drink garri. I don't like garri. It make my stomach big and make my shit strong. Iyama. So now everybody build pit behind their house and when the bombing bombing starts, everybody enter the pit. Baba say the pit is bunkaa. The first time he say it, I did not say it well. He beat me and tell me to pronounce it well, I say rubbish again and suck my hand, he beat me and then I say bunkaa. Mama say Baba is not wicked. She say that it is war that is making him angry. But Baba is not fighting in war. He is here with us. I am not understanding.

Now, army people used to enter our village. Some beg for food and some steal food. Baba said these people are the beehafrans. He say they are the east people that is fighting. The beehafran will wait for us to sleep and they steal our food and our men. They used to hide in the bush. They will put green grass and *poto poto* on their body so that it will be hard and painful to see them. Baba says it is camouflage. I think he means to say that they look like chameleon. That is why we eat only garri in the evening. That is why many of our men are fighting in their camp. The Hausa people want to send the beehafrans away and that is why they send bombing. One day, when we wake up and see letter everywhere in the road. People say that the Hausa use airoplane to drop the letter. It is like commando film. The letter say that we should send the beehafran from our village. The letter say that they are rebels and the Hausa are the federal forces. The letter say the hausa are coming to save us. No, they did not say coming. They say advancing.

Now, everyday everyday, Bombing Bombing. Sometimes, we will sleep in the pit. Baba will bring lappa so that we will not lie down on the floor. One time, we see snake there that is eating rat, Baba kill the snake. But we did not move, we still sleep in the pit. One day, there is no more bombing, they are firing gun instead. Nobody move, we lie down flat on the floor. When we wake up, we see that the Hausa people have enter our village and they have kill the beehafran people. Some of our people that is hiding beehafran also die. If you are walking on the road, you will see fire, smoke and plenty blood. There is blood on the green grass sef. The people have shoot each other and stain the earth. But they will not kill us. Is our chief that tell us. He say we should obey the Hausa people. He say they have power. One hausa man is telling our chief what to say. The man is speaking English and our chief is saying our native language. The man look like commando. I don't know what is on his trouser. It is red. My thinking tell me that it is palm oil, but it looks like blood.

The hausa people bring food for us. Many food. My mommy push me and run so that she would pack many food from the lorry. Even my daddy is fighting with another man for garri. My daddy tear the man clothes and put sand in the man's mouth. I want my daddy to leave garri and run for rice and meat but I know that he will beat me if I go and complain. So, I just sit down and suck my hands. That evening, we did not sleep in pit. We sleep in our home. We cook stew that is smelling. It is sweet. I lick my hand. That night, I want to go to my mommy room so that she will give me breast. Since she is happy. But I see Baba using style to enter her room. I wait and wait for Baba to come out, but Baba did not come out till the another morning. The next time that I suck mommy breast, I smell Baba perfume there.

There is no more bombing and shooting and nobody is thieving our crop. But they are still stealing our men. Thank God that I am five. Mama say they carry big boys from fifteen to go and fight in the war and be doing shooting shooting. Mama say they carry her cousin. I know her cousin. His name is Osagie. He always smile and like to do work. When I see mama cry, me too cry. At night, Baba go into her room too to tell her sorry. He did not come out till another morning.

The hausa people build tent where they share food to us. They say we are both victims and collateral of war. They want to help us as long as we remain loyal to Nigeria. On Wednesday and Sunday, mama carry me and we line up to collect food. I see girls coming in and out of another tent. That tent is where the soldiers sleep. I ask mommy that we should join the girls that are entering the tent. Mommy slap me two times. I face front and suck my hand. One time, the curtain of the tent open and I see the commando general and two girls that did not wear anything. they rush rush and close the curtain. Now I see why mommy slap me.

Everything be like it has okay. Like the grass have green and even if elephant jump on it, it will not scatter. Everywhere is silent again and people have start to come out at night to play. Animal is coming out too. Everyone is becoming happy again. But it is temporary. But again, there is shooting and bombing. They say the beehafrans are fighting back. And soon, there is bombing again. We go back and start sleeping in our pit. Everyone start sleeping in pit again. There is snake in pit, but we kill snake, eat snake and sleep in pit. I stop going to my friend house because he stop giving me food too. I stay in my house and drink my garri till my stomach start going big again and my neck start to reduce. Baba stop going to mama room and mama start slapping me when I tell her I want to suck breast. The hausa pack and leave one by one and the beehafrans come. They start to steal again.

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