

*Health of Mother Earth Foundation*



# *aWalk in the Curfew*

AND OTHER  
PANDEMIC  
TALES





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This publication was birthed through the enthusiastic contributions of the authors of the short stories. They looked at the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic through their creative lenses and now we can share their views through the fictional characters representing the large inexpressible experiences of many caught in the web of the turmoil.

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed global vulnerabilities and challenged individuals and nations to wake up from slumber and take actions that recognize our planetary limits. The responses to the pandemic have revealed a high level of unpreparedness across the world. Lockdowns and other measures crushed the poor and heightened their exposure to the virus. The informal sector, already unsupported, got thrashed by repressive response measures.

Total lockdowns in societies with a high proportion of citizens eking a living in the informal economic sector were simply suicidal. Imagine 70 percent of Nigerians doing informal work and earning incomes on the go having to go for days with nothing coming in. While the people struggled to survive, polluting entities were classified among essential services, although they served only their pockets and that of their shareholders.

The pandemic showed the huge and raw inequalities in our nations and the corporate capture of state structures.

Despite the challenges of collapsing state structures and economies, we took this as a time to think and find ways to overcome the miseries presented by the failed systems. We took this as a time to organise, even if we are/were physically isolated. We reminded ourselves that the virus will not change anything that we (the people) won't change. In other words, the change that will frame the post pandemic era will come from humans, our relationship with each other and with Nature. The push for change will inevitably revolve around our interpretation of what is happening around us and our resolve to act. This revolves around the narratives that we frame, formulate and allow. Understanding that our lives are framed, powered and guided by stories, we sought the interpretation of the socio-ecological and health crises through the tales in this collection. We welcome you to the trip in the imaginaries.

Read. Enjoy. Share. Tell your tales. Organize. Act!

Nnimmo Bassey  
Director, HOMEF  
September 2020



# ***It was a year***

By Mfoniso Antia

Her soft palm touched my shoulder. I turned, only to be greeted by tons of questions. “Mummy, why do you always sigh and shake your head whenever someone mentions the year 2020? What really happened that year? It couldn’t have been a totally bad year. Or was it? Tell us today; we really want to know, my 10 years old daughter continued as she signalled for her 9 years old brother to come closer. Apparently, unknown to me, both of them have noticed my reaction whenever something reminded me of the year after 2019.

Every effort to postpone the discussion to the future was abortive. In a few minutes, I ran out of excuses, so I made up my mind to take my children through the dreadful journey of that year.

“Sit down here both of you,” I beckoned them. “This tale is a long one.” I sat down myself as I began the journey back into 2020. Flashes of events began to flood my head as I shared. It felt at some point like reliving the year all over.

My dear children, like every other year, that year began at the end of the last day of the previous year. With mixed feelings. To some, there were a few regrets and unfinished plans. To others, it was a year well spent as they were able to mark ‘accomplished’ on all the plans for the year. One thing was common to everyone however; a hope for a better new year. It was that hope that drove people to set new goals, plan for exotic trips across the world, make resolutions (I chuckled as I remembered), strategise on career shifts. Some made beautiful plans to have a talk-of-the-town wedding. The hope was so strong that even those who never visited a worship place throughout the year, made out time to do so on crossover night. Oh, how that year made true the saying that for man it is to propose and for God it is to dispose.

As it has been our culture, myself, your aunties, uncles, grandparents and other family members gathered on crossover night in my village to sing praises to God for keeping us while placing our requests and plans for the next year before Him. Your grandpa would usually insist that everyone came home for family crossover vigil. Many times, we had to beg him to move the family vigil to some other time as we all wanted to be in our different parishes for service, but he wouldn’t budge. As I grew, I began to appreciate his methods and desire to knit the family together at that time.

It was 00:00hrs when the village church bell rang. With so much joy, sense of purpose and hope, we all shouted “Happy new yearrrrrrr.” It was left to be said whether or not the new year was really going to be a happy one. My kids adjusted in their chairs as they knew from my tone that I was about to get into the main story.



I gave off a little smile as I continued.

Somewhere around November 2019, we heard of an outbreak of an unknown illness abroad. “Arrrrhh, well, whatever that sickness is, it won’t come to us here,” many Nigerians declared. Oh, how wrong we were.

You see, my children, even though there are national and continental boundaries and some criteria one must meet before crossing those boundaries, I have come to know that there are certain things that do not need the permission or clearance from immigration officials to cross the borders.

We all went about our businesses and endeavours as usual in the first and second month of the year as the news of the disease which had turned into an epidemic in China spread. By mid-February, the disease had started leaving China to other countries, killing people in their numbers. Bans were imposed on international travels to curb the spread. The poor and average Nigerians thought to themselves: “well, it is a good thing that we don’t have enough money to fly in the sky or travel to luxury places.” – It appeared that only the people in the upper social class stood the chance of being exposed to the virus which was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation.

They were wrong! Wrong to think that COVID-19 respected the poor. At the time international travels were banned, there were already carriers of the disease in the country. The worst part was that, these ones didn’t show symptoms until it was late. Today, you will learn a new word my dear children. Those people who didn’t show symptoms although they were infected were said to be asymptomatic. “Mummy wait,” my boy said to me. Let me spell that. A-S-Y-M-P-T-O-M-A-T-I-C. Correct! I echoed. He beamed a smile that gave off a sense of fulfilment.

“In a few weeks,” I continued. “We started recording deaths in the country. The disease spread so wildly, even the countries with good health care system were brought to their knees. People died in hundreds of thousands around the world”.

You remember that woman, Mama Idara from the market? I asked them. Both nodded in the affirmative. Mama Idara is a peasant. She lived in the North and farmed wheat, millet and maize which she sold to make ends meet for her family. No one believed that the disease could get to people in her class. Unfortunately, it did. The disease took the lives of her husband, who was also a farmer and their three children who were in their 20s. She was so devastated that she moved back to her village the moment the ban on interstate road travels was lifted. She wasn’t always this sad and angry. She used to be a very active, happy and easy-going woman. The disease ravaged her home and left her with the sadness you now see.

People were forced to wear masks in the streets, and it got to a point in that year when we were banned from leaving our houses. Ahhhhhhh! Both kids exclaimed. Mummy, how did you cope with staying indoors all day? What about food? How did the market women survive? Mummy, how about daily paid workers and beggars? Who fed them? The questions kept coming as they wondered how the poorest of the poor survived during a total lockdown.

My dear children, it was very difficult for them. A few good-willed people tried to help here and there but it just wasn't enough. Some hospitals were totally shut as they were afraid of the spread, while others were shut against people who had other diseases as their wards were filled with patients who contacted COVID-19. People with other sicknesses died for inability to access health care during that time

It was hard for a lot of people, but it was hardest on the poor and vulnerable. There used to be a man on my street then with his daughter. Both were daily workers who provided services to marketers. When the lockdown was suspended, I saw the daughter and asked about her dad. "Papa died", she said to me, sadness evident in her tone. They said he got the disease from a rich man who gave him money after he helped do a job.

"Mummy," my older child called. This is such a sad story. I really feel sad that the poor people felt the impact of the pandemic more. This just sounds like the lessons we learnt about Climate Change in our Environmental Club, how the poor and vulnerable countries are suffering from the impacts of climate change caused by the outmoded fossil fuel energy system. "Exactly, my dear," I responded. It is an unbalanced world we live in. The rich get away with their actions while the poor suffer and bear the brunt.

So, mummy, how was the disease defeated? What did the government do to drive it away and keep people safe? Both asked with eyes wide in curiosity. Well my dear children, there was hardly so much our government did. There were reports of some funds and food stuff given to people by the government as palliatives here and there, but that was mostly in the papers.

There were daily updates on the pandemic from the Centre for Disease Control. It was a tale of how many people got infected and how many died on a daily basis. It was terrible. Horrible. With time, doctors became better with managing patients with the disease, and this reduced the number of deaths. People became more conscious of their health and boosted their immune system which helped protect and prevent more people from contacting the virus.

Wow, mummy. So, in 2020, while the world was faced with the challenge of how to mitigate the impact of climate change, it was hit by this deadly disease? I answered in the affirmative.

It was indeed a year! The exclaimed as they turned and looked at each other.

Yes, it was. It was a year that we learnt very important lessons as individuals and as a people. It was a year we appreciated the importance of relationships and of government systems that put the welfare of its citizens first. It was a year we won't forget in a hurry.

Both kids fell into my arms. In a tight, warm embrace.



# ***A Walk in the Curfew***

by Onome Olive Etisioro

“Man is the pollution.”

Evelyn huffed as she remembered her father’s favorite saying. It wasn’t like she hadn’t believed him; it was just that she was still quite surprised at how true his words had been in the end.

Made her wonder, really, what things would look like if there was no man. Or woman. Or anyone of their ilk at all. Maybe then, the waters would always remain this clear. The air would always be clean and clear. Maybe Mother Earth would finally be able to breathe easy.

She stared a little longer at the photo of the clear waters of the canal on her phone before she closed her eyes and drifted off into visions of a tropical paradise.

It was a strange idea, and maybe even a little bit funny, but she imagined that the animals would throw a rave party when all of humanity finally snuffed out along with all their carbon emissions and hubris. She’d had a dream like that once; where animals were the ones hunting down men and locking them in pens and cages because they were the real savages. Because they were the true predators.

Evelyn shook her head. “What are you even going on about now?” She said to herself as she fumbled with her scarf and face mask. She didn’t have time to think about silly things like this, yet, here she was, doing exactly that.

There was, at least, three hours before the government-imposed curfew took effect for the night. Evelyn smirked at the idea of it all. Curfews. She honestly didn’t see how any of that was going to change anything. What would locking people in do, if you were just going to let them all out en masse a few hours later?

She remembered the complete human rush that happened that first Monday after the first lockdown was eased. She remembered how the people teemed out in droves, carelessly ignoring the safety precautions made by the government to keep the virus spread contained. The way they packed together like sardines inside the molues like everything that’d been happening around the world, and even in their own state for the past few months, didn’t have anything to do with them.

Nigerians just didn’t want to believe the pandemic was real—there were people whom she followed on Twitter and she’d believed to be totally reasonable who really believed that it was all ‘politics’ and propaganda. Well, she shouldn’t have expected any sort of intelligence from anyone on some social media platforms. All they really cared about was the next trend and the next unfortunate soul to fall into their ravenous jaws.

But she knew that the virus was real, and that it was right here in the country, whether they believed it or not. She knew that much.

Evelyn sighed and put on her mask, hooking the elastic bands behind her ears and grabbing her umbrella as she turned the knob.

She was only vaguely aware of what she was doing; leaving the safety of her small apartment to ‘go for a walk’ down the darkening street, when most people were beginning to close up, and it wasn’t like her area was as secure as those high end areas. She didn’t think anywhere was safe, anyway. “Staying inside for so long has finally fried your brain.” She muttered to herself as she turned the key in her door and locked it behind her.

When she finally faced the ‘Great Outdoors’, however, she shrank into herself a little bit. Staying indoors wasn’t some sort of punishment to her as other people seemed to take it. She actually enjoyed being indoors, by herself, and away from other people. There was only so much human pollution she could endure—even social media tried her patience far quicker than one would suspect.

“Man is the pollution.”

Evelyn couldn’t turn back now, however. She didn’t want to turn tail and run. She wanted to do this, or she would probably go mad with the “what if” of it all. No, she wasn’t that much of a philosopher, neither was she so much of an activist as her father was. But lately...

Lately, the urge had bubbled up from the depths of her, pulsing through her veins, pushing and pushing her to answer the unyielding call. She knew why, and for a while she’d tried to ignore it. Hoping it would go away. But every day, it had grown stronger and stronger until it had brought her to this moment, this time she couldn’t escape.

Because she couldn’t very well escape her father. Not even now, in death. Evelyn’s chest tightened until she thought her heart was too big to stay in it, until she thought it was in her throat and she was soon going to throw it up right here, in the ‘Great Outdoors’. She pressed a clawed grip to her chest, her throat, trying to push her heart back down, to keep her heart where it belonged.

But she wasn’t doing a very good job, and she knew it. Her heart hadn’t been where it belonged since she got the news. That he didn’t make it. That her father lost the fight to the dreaded virus sweeping the nations of the world. That her father was part of the statistics now. And she couldn’t help wondering at the irony of it all: the man who gave his all for the earth; for the grand ecosystem of the world, had lost it all to the same system. To this faceless, ruthless and careless

virus born of that same ecosystem. She wanted to say how vain it all was. How contrived.

“Man is the pollution.”

Evelyn laughed as her father’s words kept echoing in her head, but she wasn’t laughing for the morbid humor of it. She didn’t think she was at a place now where she could laugh at it. But it was ironically funny. He’d always said that man was the pollution, and if he was right, he was as much part of the pollution as anybody else was. And Mother Earth had taken care of the problem in her own way: using the pollutants against themselves. One less pollutant to deal with, maybe.

Evelyn didn’t know why people thought the Earth was helpless. That she was dying. All was without form and void before there was even any life, in the beginning, and the Earth hadn’t seemed to mind then. Why did they think she minded now?

“Wow, now you’re waxing biblical.” She huffed under her breath as she stood there, in front of her door, still facing the ‘Great Outdoors’, unable to take a step.

It was just the street. That was all it was, Evelyn knew that intellectually. And there weren’t many people roaming about anymore. She supposed she should have been scared about the outright dangers of walking down an almost deserted street by herself, but she was much more afraid of her own head and her own fear.

Somehow, going out was starting to become something that produced anxiety in her. As if the very air was a big bad wolf waiting to snatch her up and eat her. As if the earth was crouching outside her door, laying wait for her so it could crush her as soon as she left the four walls of her apartment. She knew this fear was irrational and being scared of the outside world would only cripple her even more. She didn’t want to disappoint her father either. He’d been a soldier, facing the earth’s pain and wrath, and soothing her with everything he did.

Besides, she was the pollution, like he was. Ever since she’d heard of his passing, this image had been stuck in her head: this image of Mother Earth wearing a face mask and lying ravaged on a hospital bed, the same way her father had been. Had that been the message? Had the earth been trying to paint a picture of herself using this pandemic?

That she was tired of having to wear a face mask, so the humans had to wear them instead? That she’d been bedridden for so long, and could no longer taste anything, so the humans had to go through it too?

Evelyn closed her eyes. She realized she was imagining so many things at once that she was contradicting her own self. Hadn't she been the one wondered why people thought the Earth was helpless? And here she was, doing the exact same thing.

Well, no. Not the exact same thing. After all, she wasn't imagining Earth helpless. She was imagining Earth vengeful. There was a difference, wasn't there?

Evelyn was hesitating. She knew. Knew that she was being a coward, but she couldn't let herself catch a breath. Not yet. Not when the 'Great Outdoors' loomed over her, waiting for her to make a move.

Well, what was it expecting her to do?

She opened her Android again, trying to find courage in the articles she'd been scouring for weeks already, and probably already knew by heart. Articles about the effects of the pandemic on the environment. Maybe...maybe if she could show the 'Great Outdoors' that it was healing itself, maybe it wouldn't swallow her whole. Maybe the air wouldn't choke her to death.

The lockdown had done really good things for the Earth. The air quality had improved a lot because of the dip in carbon emissions, so maybe Mother Earth was breathing easier now. And the waters were settling, the canals and creeks were clear now. Undisturbed.

Then what about the waste problems? Or do you think the Earth doesn't know about those?

Evelyn froze, her eyes widening on the article as the letters seemed to grow bigger and bigger and bigger. Unrecyclable waste has grown in volume, and the halting of agricultural and fishery exports has generated more organic waste. The local market wastes left to decay would produce methane emissions both in the crisis and post crisis months. And the halting of recycling activities by local governments due to the fear of the propagation of the virus and the lockdown orders were making the waste problems even worse.

Evelyn turned the phone off, as her heart hammered in her chest. Why in God's name was she acting like a child caught doing something bad? Why did she think of the Earth as this vengeful spirit out for her blood?

It was clear, either way, that humans just couldn't do anything good without leaving some trace of trash behind. It was a human thing. So, her father had been right.



Man was the pollution, and he was really bad at cleaning up after himself. At washing himself clean. Not without defiling the earth he stood on.

But Evelyn knew what she should do. For her father, as well as for the Earth itself. She should clean up after herself. Just like her father had done.

Man might be the true pollution of the Earth, and they might always be, but her father never stopped trying to clean up after them, never stopped trying to get them to do the same themselves. She could do that too. She could be just like her father: she could become an activist for the Earth.

“Starting now.” She murmured and took those first steps away from her door and out into the streets, her eyes taking in the litters on the ground, and the waste carelessly heaped along the walls. She would start fighting for the Earth from here, her darkening street...

She took in a deep breath. Her steps echoed on the paving stones. She smiled as the night gave her a hug.



# ***Echoes of Pain***

By Hope Okpuwara

Mama Kola was running. She'd run forward and then stopped, indecisive on what direction to take. She looked crazy with her hair spiky, eyes bloodshot and face lined with dried tears.

The road was unusually quiet; not a single car drove by. Mama Kola was frantic. She was praying and beckoning on God to help save her son, Kola.

Earlier that day, Kola had gone out to deliver smoked fish to a few women in the neighbourhood who had paid for their order the previous day. After running the fish errand, his mother had instructed him to proceed to buy milk and sugar for the family's breakfast. He was on his way home from the errand when he was run over by a hit-and-run driver trying to get away from the task force officers that ensured nobody violated the nationwide curfew and lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mama Kola had heard noise from the street; women wailing loudly and men snapping their fingers in disbelief. When she got where the mini crowd gathered, much to her horror she saw Kola lying seemingly lifeless, with his legs twisted at an impossible angle. She screamed like a banshee as she held her boy. He breathed heavily and suddenly passed out.

The crowd was getting thicker and the air hotter. The sun shone like it was out on a vendetta. Ropes of sweat ran down the sides of her face. Her throat was hoarse from screaming. Her mouth was unusually dry. Heart making two beats at a time, she felt lightheaded.

A good Samaritan offered to take him to the hospital. They went through roadblocks with ease because the task force officers saw that it was really an emergency.

They barged into the hospital screaming and asking for a doctor. Nurses approached but wouldn't touch him because of the fear of COVID-19.

"Please at least give him some first aid", other patients joined in pleading with the nurses.

The doctor had been summoned that there was an emergency. "Can you at least admit him so he would lie on the bed instead of leaving us here in the lobby?" Mama Kola croaked as her throat was sore from all the screaming.

"No oh, we cannot admit you now oh, you may have to check another hospital" one of the nurses replied.

"Do I look like I have COVID-19? Does he look like he's infected?" Mama

Kola pleaded, getting angry. She was shocked at the treatment they were receiving. If this much stigma is meted to an accident victim owing to the dreaded virus, she wondered what her fate would have been if she had come with symptoms of the virus. The thought alone made her shudder.

The doctor arrived an hour later.

“Why is this young man not admitted? Why is he out here?” Doctor Bola was irritated at the insensitivity of the nurses. Soon Kola was given a bed. The nurses made sure they had no physical contact with Kola or his mother.

“What sort of rubbish is this?” Mama Kola cursed under her breath.

“Your son needs immediate surgery ma’am” The doctor said to Mama Kola in private.

“Okay? Please get on with it”.

“Hmm, that’s the problem”. Doctor Bola bit his lower lips as he normally did when nervous. Mama Kola couldn’t help but notice how young he looked. Kola was seeking admission to study medicine at the state university. She had so much faith in the boy. The one who was now struggling for his life.

“Your son’s blood group is O negative. He can only receive blood from O negative,” he paused gauging Mama Kola’s expression. “We have run out of O negative blood type in the hospital’s blood bank,” he said, taking a deep breath.

Mama Kola was too shocked to scream. Her heart raced, thumping noisily in her chest. She looked away and closed her eyes, hoping she would snap out of this nightmare.

“So- so- so you mean you cannot operate on him? Look at him, he’s dying, do something,” she stuttered.

“Help my son, help my son. Okay, okay, take my blood and use it for the surgery or can you operate on him without the blood?”

“Madam you were tested. Your blood is compatible with his, but you are low on blood right now yourself. Taking even a pint from you would kill you, I’m so sorry.”

He paused, waiting for his words to sink in. The blank stare from Mama Kola worried him. Had she heard him? She should at least say something. Mama Kola, as if reading his mind, nodded slowly.

“So what are you saying? We should watch him die?” Her eyes widened, popping out look like a saucer.

“O negative isn’t rare, find someone to donate and we will get on with the surgery,” the doctor advised.

She ran out like a mad woman but couldn’t find anybody in the streets. Nobody wanted to defy the curfew. She walked from street to street with no purpose. She didn’t know what she was looking for. If the town were as busy as it used to be, she would have pleaded with everyone in sight till someone helped.

The hospital wasn’t in a residential area, she would have knocked on every door. She remembered her colleague in fish business, Mama Jumoke, once mentioned she was O negative when her daughter had to be transfused whilst birthing her twins. If only she could find her way to Mama Jumoke’s house, she would probably get some help to save her only child’s life. But there was no way to get to Mama Jumoke’s place right now.

She sat in the middle of the road, beckoning on God to make her wake up from this nightmare. Her son, her only son, her only child was dying.

A patrol van full of task force officers drove towards her. It screeched to a halt just a few inches short of hitting her.

“Madam are you crazy, won’t you get yourself out of the way?” a tall dark man from the van spat at her, nostrils flaring. He had unusually wide nostrils for someone as slender as he was. They stretched across his face. He could easily breathe for two persons.

“Quit shouting at her, she’s old enough to be your mother,” a second officer said.

Mama Kola muttered inaudibly to herself.

“Madam, what is it?” the second one asked, genuinely concerned.

Mama Kola explained what was wrong, in between sobs.

“Madam I am actually O negative,” the first officer informed her.

“I can be of help, where is the hospital located?”

Mama Kola couldn’t believe it.

She jumped up excitedly, pulling him for a hug. She later realized his name

was Wale. Social distancing was far off her mind. It was a bear hug crushing the tall man with her unbelievable strength. So much energy in an old woman, he thought. She jumped into the van and they were on their way to the hospital.

Mama Kola was all smiles as she rushed into the hospital to brandish her trophy. The atmosphere seemed tense. The nurses looked at her sadly. She didn't mind, after all, she has gotten someone to donate some blood.

She called for the doctor while going to her son's bed space. He wasn't there. Did they go through with the surgery without blood? Or maybe someone donated. She was glad, at least he was in surgery. The next few months would be hell, she thought to herself. Kola would have to learn how to start walking all over again. Saddening but she was grateful.

"Madam," Doctor Bola whispered, walking towards her.

"Doctor aren't you supposed to be in the theatre?" She was visibly angry. Why would they delay?

"Madam, I'm sorry, we have tried our best. I just heard you are back. We don't need the blood anymore."

Mama Kola slumped into a chair, too dazed to scream. She stared blankly at the wall. She suddenly found herself in a trance, happily and impatiently awaiting the fishers returning to the beach with boats loaded with tons of big fish. Other women dashed into the water to ensure they had the first right of purchase. She succeeds; literally drags the boat ashore with thoughts of huge profits and sumptuous meals. She saw herself paying Kola's fees as he gained admission into the university to read medicine. He graduates in brilliant colours and settles down with a beautiful wife. His elaborate wedding made an internet sensation. Then suddenly she wakes up on the hospital bed. Where Kola had laid. She was being transfused. The slim officer's face hovered over her. His flared nostrils breathing for her...

"You will be okay," he whispered.

But why was she in the hospital? She squinted at the little crowd around her. "What am I doing here? I should be at the waterside selling fish. Right? Where is the boat? Why am I being transfused? Where is Kola? Kola? Kola!"

"Calm down, madam," The doctor urged Mama Kola. "The surgery was successful. Kola is out of danger. Someone came in as soon as you went out and donated the blood we needed."

"That's wonderful news. Thanks be to God," Mama Kola gasped. "Where is my fish?"



# ***Hook, Line, Sinkers***

by Onome Olive Etisioro

He may not survive this.

Harry squeezed his shirt into his nose, trying to avoid breathing in too much of the rotting fish that was his current affliction. Not that it helped much. Not when he himself smelled like dead fish.

“Abi make I just row far enter water so?”

Harry looked up and around, his face scrunched up in worry, sweat visibly trailing down the sides of his face. He knew this feeling all too well. He’d woken up with it; that helpless feeling that today was just going to be another fruitless day of harvesting dead, rotting fish like offerings on a platter.

It was just that these weren’t offerings. They were more like a curse. Or a nightmare he couldn’t wake up from no matter how hard he tried. And by God, did he try. He woke each day hoping that it would be better than the previous, inching deeper into the ocean waters in his simple boat in the hopes of a big catch. Or even a normal catch; the type he used to get. But all he came back with now were the dead fish vomited up by the ocean, a cruel omen they could neither escape nor understand.

“If I enter pass here, e go dey dangerous o.” This was his daily internal conflict; toeing the line between merely surviving and living. But in the end, even he wasn’t sure if he cared about danger anymore.

Not when there was so much at stake—not when it meant risking another fruitless day catching nothing but already rotten fish. Not when it meant going back to witness his wife and children’s eager expressions crumble right before his eyes one more heart breaking time. He couldn’t afford another fruitless day. Not this time. Not when a state-wide lockdown was being imposed upon them due to this global viral pandemic that was apparently taking lives in the millions. He didn’t know how he and his family would survive it with nothing but rotten fish and no source of livelihood. He didn’t know how his community would survive this time.

The community was slowly wasting away, and they along with it.

In the beginning, when they woke up to the obscene amount of dead fish dotting the coastline, Harry had been excited. He didn’t think about the reason why so many fish died overnight; all he had cared about then was the fact that the fish had come to him. But that excitement was short lived.

The fish rotted at an alarming speed and, in the end, they were useless. The rot



set in under thirty minutes, and if they weren't fast enough, the dead fish became putrid and their day ended in loss. It was then, that he'd started to wonder why.

Why were the fish dying in such great numbers and stinking up the coastline with the smell of death? No one had a clue what the reason was. But they had their opinions, and everything pointed to the diverse oil companies planted on their land, destroying it just so they could mine oil upon oil without thoughts of ever giving back to the communities they were invariably destroying one mine at a time.

Harry's jaw ticked, and his hands clenched into fists as his thoughts turned to the mega oil rigs stinking up their waters. What made him even angrier was the way they wouldn't accept the responsibility for this deadly infestation. Heh, it wasn't as though they took responsibility for anything in the first place. Harry wished someone would take responsibility for this. If not, then at least, tell them what they were up against. Was it a natural or supernatural attack? Harry was desperate to know how to fight this outbreak, desperate for everything to return to normal.

That was all he hoped for before he went to bed at night, and when he woke in the morning; that this nightmare would vanish the same way it came. That the next day, when he cast his net to fish, it would catch healthy fish, and not drag in the sickening multitude of fish already long dead and rotten.

It was clear that he hoped for too much. And nothing was ever going to be normal again. Not for him or his family, or his community.

He was stuck between his very limited options, swaying back and forth between them, his eyes watery from the extremely pungent smell of fish that seemed to sink into his very being.

They were rotting along with the fish, each and every fisherman that scoured this coast hoping, each and every day, that it would all go away. He was rotting too—from the hunger and the insecurity of it all, from the inside out.

The hopeless options that twisted like little arrows inside him every day sought to burrow even deeper until he was sure his heart would implode on itself. Should he run the risk of rowing further into the water or turn back and hope upon hope that at least some of the dead catches remained usable by the time he reached the shore?

Both options were equally dangerous, and each time, he struggled to pick the one that would help him survive in the end. Yet, at this point, he was already at the end of his line, and he didn't think there was any left to toe around.

In that moment, just staring into the waters, Harry realized that he was almost at the end of everything. At the end of his very life as he knew it. Looking down at the heaps of fish lying limp in his boat, he realized the futility of each day, each moment he spent hoping and hoping. And hoping.

He'd once heard that hope was what kept a person alive, but it looked like he was the exception to that rule. Because this hope? This hope that anything would change? It was slowly killing him until he couldn't bear to hope anymore. Until he didn't want to hope.

What was the point? There was nothing that he could do to change this fate. Nothing none of them could do but keep scouring the waters for living fish that were all but abundant because the pungent smell of dead fish in the waters and on the coastline seemed to keep them away.

And even if he did catch some fish, it wasn't as though he would make much of a profit from it anyway. The government had banned them from selling or eating the dead fish, and the little healthy ones they did catch, they couldn't even sell them at full price anymore due to the government ordered interstate travel bans and decreased demand for their products. Whatever he did manage to gain would never be able to cater for his family in the coming period of forced lockdown in the towns and communities.

"Abi make I just enter water so?" It was a helpless question and all it would birth was a helpless answer.

It was an option he couldn't escape, especially now when he couldn't go back empty handed. To do that would be suicide.

Harry froze at the thought. Hooked. It was an option he hadn't known he even had or would have even considered at all.

But in that moment, he was the fish, hooked on the bait of that thought, and he couldn't shake it off.

This was the end of the line for him. It looked like what remained for him was to sink. To let go and deliver his weight to the grieving waters. If he couldn't go back empty handed, wouldn't it be better if did not go back at all?

He didn't think he would even make a difference to the seething body of water. He leaned forward, drawn to the sparkling ripples, sunlight bouncing off the flowing surface like dancing ghost lights. Intriguing him with their fluidity. Would the ocean accept him? Or would it spit him out on the shore, unsatisfied with his sacrifice?

Or was it cowardice?

And for a split second, his family flashed before his eyes; the worried and resentful gaze of his wife, and the disappointed and hungry stares of his children. He wondered if it would make a difference to them. If he became like one of the fish dotting the coastline, lifeless from some mysterious causes.

Harry leaned back and let out a fearful breath. Of course. Of course, it would make a difference to them. He was here because he couldn't afford to see them starve but he wasn't running away from them. If he could return to these barren waters, day after day after day, because of them, then it wasn't because he was running from their despair. Instead, he was trying his possible best to wipe it away completely.

He realized how close he'd been to surrendering to his own fear and selfishness and letting the weight of his own despair sink him until nothing left of him would ever be found.

Literally.

Harry picked his second option without hesitation, quickly picking up his oars and rowing with a single-minded focus for the shore. And he decided that he would continue to hope, even if it killed him. He would continue to hope that when he woke up tomorrow, things would be better. Back to normal. That at least some of the fish he'd caught today would still be salvageable by the time he reached the shore.

It was true that he might not survive this, that he'd almost let the fishes bait him into sinking.

But at least, today, he was still a fisherman. Even if the ocean wanted nothing to do with him.



# ***Murfu***

By Faith Amadi

The doctor at the general hospital had warned Nana to stay away from the fumes. It wasn't good for her health and the pain in her eyes were signs that could very much be signs of cataract. But she had a family of 10 to feed. Her husband was retired early because of an arthritis caused by a bike accident.

Nana hails from a small community in Kaduna state. Married with six children and two children from her husband's late second wife, she had the weight of responsibility on her shoulders.

Her famous waina attracted several persons who regularly lined up in front of her house to buy breakfast. Today however, seemed to be different. The pain in her eyes was so intense she thought at some point she could not make out the colour of her bedroom curtain. She definitely couldn't light the Murfu – a stove made of three or more large stone that props her cooking pot.

"Abdul!" she yelled for her son. "Go and light up the firewood for me please. We have customers to feed today!"

She continued to stir the rice mixture as she hummed a local song. She had sung halfway into the song when she heard the sound of an explosion, followed by the loud cry from Abdul. Her heart skipped a beat and, in a bid to rush outside, she knocked off the bowl in which she had the slightly fermented rice mixture. She could barely keep her balance as she slipped on the mixture poured on the floor.

A crowd had already gathered. What had happened? Where was Abdul? Fear swept through her and suddenly streams of sweat coursed down her face. Abdul was sprawled on the floor, screaming in pain from burns on part of his face and arm.

Her family must be under a curse, she thought as she waited in the lobby of the hospital where Abdul was rushed to. She had been selling waina for five years. Her husband's condition had forced her to take up the reins and become the provider for the family. They didn't have much resources available to them and this business has been the source of subsistence for her family. What was she going to do? Abdul usually helped her set up the fire in the Murfu because of her eyes. Now he would be disfigured. If he survived the burns.

She felt a gentle tap on her shoulder.

"Nana," the doctor said. "Your son is stable. However, he may need to undergo surgery."

“Thanks to God,” she quickly replied, wiping tears from her face with her wrapper.

“How did it happen?” the doctor asked.

Her son had poured some kerosene on firewood to light a fire for her Murfu. He kept the jerrycan with kerosene close by as he blew air on the embers to get the fire started. That was when the jerrycan exploded. I am told this was no ordinary kerosene. She wept uncontrollably

“Enough, enough,” the doctor said patting her shoulder.

Just then, her sister ran frantically into the hospital. The doctor excused her.

Nana let the tears roll down again. Her sister who lived in the next village had heard the news. The whole family would be talking about her now. They must think she is the worst mother on earth.

“The doctor said he is stable,” Nana told her sister. “But that they might have to do a surgery. I am really scared and uncertain. What if things got more complicated?”

“Ah, God forbids it!” her sister replied.

She hugged Nana and they chatted about her waina business, family struggles and life in the COVID-19 pandemic. The restriction of movement was seriously hindering economic activities. Citizens were required to wash their hands under running water, but many did not even have standing water. COVID-19 added a layer to illnesses in Nana’s community and surrounding ones.

“You see, health conditions like cataract, tuberculosis, lung cancer and even asthma are caused by the air pollution from unclean cooking. Unclean cooking is responsible for several premature deaths annually. Let’s not even forget to mention the sexual violence our young girl’s face when they go to farm to collect firewood,” Nana’s sister said.

Nana then remembered the stinging pain in her eyes and her mother’s early blindness that was said to be a result of many years of cooking with firewood. Her mother had earlier complained about the same stinging pain she now had.

Nana shifted her thought back to her sister and listened with rapt attention.

“Did I tell you about the incidence with my neighbour’s daughter?”

“No,” Nana said. “What happened to her?”

“Hmmm... their thirteen-year-old daughter went to fetch firewood for the evening meal and wasn’t back home till dusk. She was later found bleeding and unconscious along a bush path close to the family’s farmland. Another victim of the increasing violence against girls and women this season.

At this point Nana held up her hands in shock, imagining the pain the girl’s parents must have felt and also recalling the painful incidence with her own son. Her attention shifted once again to her son, her boy of eleven years. The pain he must be feeling and the disfigured look he would have to live with for the rest of his life. She fought back the tears that burned in her eyes.

“Nana,” her sister called. “This is probably the right time to tell you this.”

“Tell me,” Nana responded, drawing closer.

“I have always worried about the smoke you inhale as you cook waina with the Murfu. You are asthmatic and you know bad air isn’t good for you.”

“That’s why I asked Abdul to make the fire,” Nana replied. “To add to that, this morning I was feeling a lot of pain in my eyes. The doctor said it could be signs of cataract”.

“Wow!” her sister exclaimed. “You really should pay more attention to your health Nana. It is good that you asked Abdul to assist you, but it is definitely not good enough”. “No one is exempted from the evils of unclean cooking.”

“Some women who cook with the Murfu in my village use a kind of cooking stove that does not emit much smoke. They don’t even use those huge logs that you call firewood.”

“You are not serious, my sister,” Nana was incredulous. “What kind of fire is that? Is there fire without smoke? You must be trying to make me forget about Abdul’s impending surgery. Let me tell you something. You can tell me those magical tales after Abdul gets well. You met me crying not only because of his injury, but because I cannot afford the hospital bills for the surgery. I have no money. Without making and selling waina I cannot afford the medical bills. Can you see why I cannot stop using the Murfu?”

“You can learn how the women in my village make waina without tears and sweats mingling on their faces,” her sister told her.

“Fire without smoke? What would the food taste like? The smoke is what gives my waina a special flavour,” Nana argued. “Smoke, firewood, asthma, eye pain. I can bear these until Abdul graduates from secondary school, gets a job and takes

care of me.”

Nana’s sister knew how stubborn she was and how difficult it would be to draw her away from the firewood smoke-flavoured waina. Was that not the same reason men misbehave at wedding parties when they swoop on smoke-smothered jollof rice? Most Nigerians will swear that jollof cooked with firewood has no rival and that’s why Nigerian jollof is better than the ones made in other countries including the famous wolof.

“Nana,” she called after a long period of silence.” I didn’t tell you, but I have started making waina also!”

“Please don’t joke,” Nana replied. “The hospital may have a theatre, but this is not the type where they entertain people with comedy shows.”

Just then a nurse interjected, shouting loudly. “Yes, here we have medics, not comics.”

“Come nearer, let me whisper something to you. This busybody nurse should have been a newscaster.”

“I heard that,” the nurse quipped. “Be careful about what you say as it may be added to your bill.” She laughed as she picked her phone, dialed a number and began to focus on whoever she had called.

Nana’s sister narrated that she learned how waina was made when she had a friend come visit her. Then she got to learn of the improved stoves that did not use firewood but in fact cooked with dust from the sawmill. She got some youths to make briquettes that she uses to cook.

“And, do you know what? Uncle Waziri ate my waina one day he came over to my home and was delighted that he could find waina that did not smell of firewood smoke. Would you believe that? And then he placed a standing order for me to supply his hotel with smoke-free waina! That’s not all. Now other hotels are coming to me. My sister, I cannot even meet the orders.

I had planned to come tell you about the improved stove and ask you to partner with me before this sad incident.”

Nana looked at her sister, mouth agape. “Smoke-free waina?” She muttered.

“Yes, Nana,” and I came with one of the stoves and some briquettes. They are at your house. I also brought some cash as an advance for the supplies we need to meet.”



Just then the doctor stepped into the waiting room.

“Excuse me, madam,” he said walking towards Nana. “I’m happy you have dried your tears. Your son doesn’t need surgery, after all. The burns were superficial, and the explosion did not do any serious harm.”

“We thank God. Thank you, doctor,” Nana replied. “Can we see him?”

“Yes. In fact, you can take him home,” the doctor answered. “He would only have to come to dress the burns as an outpatient.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Nana repeated, nonplussed at her good fortune. “Can we have the bill?” She was now confident to ask since her sister had pressed a wad of notes into her hands.

“You won’t have to worry about the bill,” the doctor replied, turning to the nurse. “Did you say she makes smoke-free waina? She should make a supply for the breakfast meeting we are having next week. Deduct her bill and pay her the balance.”

Nana was overjoyed. She thanked the doctor again and whispered to her sister, “this nurse must have a radio antenna in her ears.”

“I heard that!” the nurse interjected.

They all laughed...



# ***On Our Behalf***

By Onome Olive Etisioro

“You hear wetin don burst again for the area?”

Fegor was used to hearing about things that burst: pipelines, oil tanks, full grown men’s heads. The most important of all: scandals. He had a sneaking suspicion that it was the last, most interesting sort that his brother was referring to.

“I never hear.” He answered shortly, trying to keep himself focused on his task of fixing his torn net. Because, honestly, he was tired of hearing about one scandal or the other, and everybody knew that no justice ever came out from all the probes and noisemaking. It wasn’t as though it was even a secret — how depraved and corrupt the government was—they flaunted it in the open, as if daring people to take offense, to push back.

And when they finally did, when they finally pushed back, incensed at the blatant insult and disregard; when they took to the streets to protest, what did the government respond with? Sheer, brute force, as though they were crushing insurgents. And these were the people they termed ‘terrorists’, ‘militants’ ‘lawless monsters’, and they proceed to come after them with the police force, and the army and navy and air force, as though they were going to war with their own citizens. As though their cries for reform was violence and their throats had to be crushed.

Fegor knew first hand that people reacted in two different ways when oppressed: either they rebelled, or they adjusted to the oppressor’s regime in order to save their skins. Fegor knew the path the militants had taken: rebellion. And look how that had turned out for them. So many years after, and their region was still as underdeveloped and messy as ever.

“You no hear say NDDC Managing Director — abi wetin dem dey call am — you no hear say dem steal forty billion naira?”

At this point, Fegor couldn’t even pretend to be shocked. And even though he was now interested, he knew the story would be exactly the same as the ones that came before. The thief would walk away relatively unpunished.

The organization that has been created to help foster rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that should be, by itself, economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful just happened to be the same organization that is digging the people deeper into poverty and stealing from them. Their own kinsmen.

Fegor wasn’t even that enthused as he asked, “EFCC catch am?”

His brother waved his query away with a gesture that said, “Guy, you no know

the levels?” just as loudly as if he had actually spoken.

“House of Senate dey probe am now,” the brother said and Fegor noticed that he was rather a little more excited about the idea of the MD being caught. Fegor wondered if, just if, justice would be served this time.

“Im go go jail?” And really, he didn’t want to be the type of person who rejoiced over another person’s calamity, but he couldn’t quite keep his interest from peaking.

His brother scoffed. “Jail ke.” He shook his head, his lips turned down at the corners. “MD wey dem dey probe, na im he faint for im seat, people come dey rush am. Dem be wan kiss am join.”

Fegor sighed and closed his eyes for a very brief moment before turning back to the task at hand. No one could argue that he hadn’t given them the benefit of doubt now, even though he already knew what a hopeless cause that was. Fainting? Falling ill right before trials or even during them? He had seen these happen so many times that it wasn’t even a stretch anymore to see that they were all being played and taken for fools.

Fegor tried not to think too much about things like these because, if he did, he would face the bitter truth of how their very own government has no regard for people’s intelligence or power. Did he, as a citizen, have any power even? Fegor felt more like a slave than a citizen who had the power to choose his leaders. No one in this country had any power to choose their leaders, really. All they ever got were hard options — picking between the devil and the deep blue sea, and look where that got them—with government institutions that feed off their own people like parasites and then proceed to feed off other nations in that same way.

“All dis one dem dey do so,” his brother continued, very excited about the gist that he didn’t notice that Fegor couldn’t bring himself to care less. “All na initial gra gra. Dem no go do anything e. Dem just wan act like say dem go arrest am. The thing no go get head!”

That could be the truest thing any Nigerian understood, and even more so for a Niger Deltan like him, but deep down, Fegor hoped that just this once—if only this once, justice would prevail, and the criminal would be charged for his crime. He was also aware of the fact that he was furnishing a wild fever dream that might never ever come true. Even when it was what the people deserved.

“You know the part wey vex me pass?” His brother was shaking his head as he talked. “The MD truly open mouth talk say dem use a whole N1.5 billion naira take take care of their staff. You dey hear am so? One point five billion naira, dey

talk say dem give them make dem take weather this COVID-19 period. You dey hear am?”

And that was the part that got to Fegor the most. That was the part that made his hands go perfectly still as the sheer wickedness in the tale he was listening to unfolded in his mind’s eye.

These were hard, trying times for so many Nigerians with most of them, himself included, trying to survive the lock downs, the border closures, as well as trying to make up for the strain it put on their sources of livelihood. The hike in food prices made it nearly impossible to feed properly these days and here were the same people put into power to make sure that the public had better opportunities and economic stability—here they were selfishly throwing billions of naira on their own heads.

Here he was, much more terrified of running out of income sources than he was of contracting this deadly virus spreading across the world. Here he was, going out to sea day after day only to come back with dead and rotten fish that mean nothing to him in these crucial times. He was constantly reminded of the careless gas flaring of the oil companies inhabiting their communities, seeing the oil blackened waters and just knowing that he would find no catch.

They were all living in a state of limbo, a terrifying game of luck and chance where they were more likely to die from hunger than they would from the virus. Fegor was reminded, rather brutally, of the truth that every Nigerian was aware of - that they were on their own. They were all on their own. No one was going to rescue them; they were going to have to fight for themselves. That was what being Nigerian meant to him, as well as to many others.

Because the very system they had sent ahead to fight on their behalf had never truly intended to do so.

They were all on their own.



# ***Stomach Politics***

By Onome Olive Etisioro

“Dem don chop the money! You go soon see!”

Francis glanced at the man who had spoken, agreeing with him as a chorus of voices joined in.

“Ah ahn, you no know before?” A woman spoke this time. “All those billion billion wey dem dey call for news, everybody know say them go don divide am share am amongst themselves.”

“Dis one na country?” Another man scoffed. “I know say nothing tangible go come out of this thing, I just come here make I collect the small thing wey dem go give take complement the foodstuff wey I get for house.”

“E go pass carton of indomie?”

The people around him laughed. “Ah ahn, carton too big now. Just dey expect four packs of indomie and one rubber of rice.” A particularly bitter man said.

“Make dem bring am, we go take.” Another woman said, shaking her head. “You no know how many people dey depend on this palliative. Many people no even fit stock up for this period as everything for market don go up. Many no just get.”

People were hungry—starving—and Francis knew very well that whatever will be given would not be enough.

He already understood that fact even as he sweated and hoped and waited. He knew that whatever he would leave with will not be nearly enough.

The truth was that, everyone who waited with him knew, in their bones, that whatever the government deemed fit to give them there, in the name of palliatives, were nothing more than crumbs from their table; the insulting remains of a mere quarter of what they could easily provide.

But what could he do? What could any of them do? After all, it was a man well fed who could think straight. Maybe that was why...that was why they—the powers that be—kept them in perpetual hunger; that state just shy of true suffering. And, they kept raising the bar day after day after day.

Francis held in his cough and shifted on his feet, his leg muscles begging for respite after standing for over forty minutes. He couldn't relieve the ache. He couldn't move from his spot, else, he would lose his chance. He took one backward glance and see how the line winded all the way from the front of the Local Government Secretariat, out of the compound and down into the street outside. He would be a fool to even think of leaving his spot in the line now—not when everyone was looking out for his/her own interest, and leaving his spot for

even a few seconds would allow the man behind him take his place and not let him back in.

It was morbidly funny how, in situations like these, everyone forgot what it meant to be their 'brother's keeper'. Here, no one knew the other and everyone fought tooth and nail for his own interests. Francis was aware of his own hypocrisy; for his own interests. He would bite off the very hands of the same person to feed him. It wasn't his fault; the country was a dog fight, and you had to give up something if you wanted to survive inside it.

And for most, Francis included, this place chipped away at their humanity, until all they knew was greed and envy and total disregard for their neighbor. Until all they knew was striving to stave off their hunger.

This was the absolute truth: everyone in this country was hungry. Hungry for money. For power. For influence. For food. He was certain that ninety eight percent of Nigerians knew the trauma of going to sleep without food in their stomachs. And waking up to another day with the feeble hope of half a meal for the entire day.

And now. Now, the government expected them to survive on the crumbs from their tables during a state-wide total lock down for two whole weeks. As if they didn't know how many Nigerians survived on daily work. As if they didn't know that most Nigerians couldn't even afford up to five hundred naira a day to feed themselves.

Francis scoffed under his breath. Of course, they knew. They just didn't care. They didn't care as long as money even their great grandchildren would never be able to exhaust entered their foreign bank accounts and stayed there. They didn't care how the same citizens, who voted them into power, fared during these trying and terrifying times. The public not only had to contend with the fear of inevitable hunger in the coming weeks, they also had the growing fear of the virus sweeping the country, starting from the very top.

Francis found a small measure of satisfaction —and he knew most other Nigerians did — in the fact that the corona virus was spreading amongst the money hoarders we call our government. Most people even now called it 'Government Virus', certain that it was God visiting judgment upon them for their iniquities.

Francis believed that it was their excesses that made them susceptible to the sweeping pandemic, and he wasn't going to pretend that he was even a little bit sympathetic towards any and all who caught the virus in the government.

He thought it was what they deserved for their neglect and corrupt ways towards their own citizens. Citizens who died daily from hunger and malnutrition.



Mothers had to sit helplessly and watch their children waste away from the lack of good food, or even a grain of food at all while some others grew fat from all the laundered money and stolen funds meant to feed millions.

“I no tell you?”

Francis snapped his head up and he saw the government officials coming out of the secretariat with workers behind them lugging out wheelbarrows with cartons of noodles, and some twelve bags of rice.

“E no dey pass indomie and rice.” The man who’d first spoken said. “As if government no give them money make dem provide o. Dem get the money, but dem no wan just share am for the people.”

“How six packs of indomie and one rubber of rice wan do anything? These people no get conscience.” Another woman complained, shaking her head as she did.

Francis sighed as he eyed the underwhelming number of bags of rice in front of them, as well as the cartons of noodles, and he knew that these so-called palliatives weren’t going to get to even half of all of them waiting. It was in that same moment that he realized that whatever kinship they’d all managed to garner while waiting was nothing now.

They were all strangers, and they had to fight for their own stomachs. The idea that had been funny not more than ten minutes ago, was now a grim reality, and it was this: there was no such thing as a ‘brother’s keeper’. He could not afford to care about anyone there but himself. He had to make sure that he got something from all this waiting and hoping. And he didn’t care if he was going to have to scratch out the eyes of the man in front of him to get it.

The truth was that, everyone there knew that they were coming to war, and only the most ruthless would emerge victor. So Francis straightened up slowly and readied his claws.

“Everybody, make una listen o!” The government official standing above the lifted porch of the Secretariat building shouted. “Make una no push o. No fight! Everybody dey orderly, the food go reach your hand!”

But if there was one only thing Nigerians knew their government were capable of doing: it was lying. This wasn’t a reunion. No, this was war.

A war for their stomachs. And although Francis knew that whatever he would leave with would not be nearly enough, he knew that, ‘not nearly enough’ was a whole lot better than ‘empty handed’.



# ***The Fishers' Pain***

By Kome Odhomor

We all rushed out to the shout from people at the riverbank. I saw my mother with her hands on her head, my father standing akimbo.

“Excuse me,” I said as I tried to push my way through the crowd, but the people would not even hear my tiny voice. I stood wondering what the cause of the wailing could be.

“Call the community chief,” a woman screamed as she turned to leave.

“This is sacrilege. We must find out what happened,” Wariso, the head of the fishing settlement, said in a low tone as he also left.

One by one they left, and I got the chance to get close to riverbank. Just then my mother pulled me off as she, too, turned to leave. We walked back home quickly but in total silence. I turned occasionally to catch a glimpse of the riverbank.

“Who has contaminated our water, and killed our fish?” I kept asking as we settled back into our house. No one had any answers. “Why don’t I rush to market to sell these off before they get rotten too?” my mother asked pensively as she sorted through her remaining smoked fish. My father simply nodded.

She carried the basket of fish and beckoned on me to follow her.

“Mummy, what happened at the riverbank today? I couldn’t get a glimpse of the whole area,” I asked, looking up at her. She was too upset and lost in thought that she didn’t respond to my question. I knew I shouldn’t press her.

It was quite unusual to find so many traders at the market square as it wasn’t a market day. Theresa, my mother’s friend came by and greeted while we arranged our wares.

“Mama Tari, you came out today?” She asked.

“I can’t afford to lose these fish. If I wait till market day, people may confuse them for the ones we saw at the riverbank today,” mother replied sadly.

“I have sent my children to pick some for me,” Theresa whispered. “You never can tell; they may be a blessing from God. Have you ever seen fish been washed ashore?”

My mother kept quiet. I knew she was pondering on the statement, but she knew she wouldn’t dare bring up the idea of picking up dead fish in front of my father.

“You may be right, but my husband will not have me do that. Can your

children pick some for me? At least I can use them for soup tonight.”

She nodded in agreement to my mother’s request. Just then we heard the gong from the palace guard followed with the messenger’s announcement.

“The king has ordered that nobody should pick, sell or eat from the dead fish that were found at the Kiama waterfront. They are to be taken for testing to know the cause of the death before we can say the next line of action. Be warned that if you are caught picking them you will be heavily penalised.”

The market became very noisy as everybody spoke at the same time. People argued over whether eating the fish would kill. Others said that the cause of the death was pollution from the big oil company in our village. Some others said it was a result of having too much dirt in the river.

Father returned with an empty basket, a frowning face and a heavy heart. It was obvious he couldn’t catch any fish. It’d been five days since the dead fish washed up our shores. They appeared to have scared every living fish away. The smell that oozed from the dead fish was lethal. Our air was contaminated. Hunger took residence in every home.

“Welcome Dede,” my mother greeted as she stood up to get father’s basket and fishing net. “Another failed attempt today. Why don’t we do like the others? We can’t keep eating palm kernel, look at your children. I can’t stand seeing my children suffer because you want to maintain an upright position. Have you seen anyone being caught?” She queried.

“My children will not contaminated fish. Are they dead from eating the kernels? Are they sick? No one will know what they eat if you keep your mouth shut. I have made my point and I will say it again. I will not have that dead fish in my house, never.” Father was exasperated.

He stormed out of the house.

That afternoon, we saw some people from the city who came to take pictures and ask questions about the dead fish. They promised to get the government to address our plight and bring solutions.

I and my siblings had not had good food in the last five days; hunger had become a normal part of our lives. We became used to drinking garri with palm kernel.

One evening as we were eating, we heard a very loud sound from the river that caused people to take to their heels. We also ran for safety.

Soon, we realized it was a big pipe in the river that ripped open and gasses were leaking into the air. No fish in the river and now we can't even have safe drinking water. How bad can things get!

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"Tamuno, Tamuno, wake up. It's morning" Theresa called as she opened the windows of their small bedroom. When there was no response from her husband after the repeated calls, she went close and... he was dead.

Theresa couldn't stop screaming as his corpse was taken out of their thatch house to the community mortuary. Tamuno had died in his sleep after he complained of a little fever before he went to bed the previous night.

We heard of more than seven deaths with three days. Kiama was becoming a ghost town. Fear enveloped the entire community.

We did not know who would go next. We did not know the cause of the deaths. The government had said our fish died from a natural cause and the big company in my village said the damaged pipe did not cause harm to anybody. Did we believe them? Can we trust them?

"There is a big sickness in the country. My papa said several people have died from it and many more will die. I pray it doesn't enter our community" Diepreye my friend in the neighbourhood said as we walked along the seashore.

"You pray it doesn't enter?" I looked at her sadly. "The sickness is here already. What do you think killed the seven people that died last week? I hear eight other persons have died since then, and the government is planning to bring an army of gun men here to keep us from going out. The sickness is called Covid-19 and we must learn to wash our hands and clean our environment regularly."

Father is doing his best to enlighten my younger ones and I as well my mother. He stresses on the need to wear face masks. He takes social distancing seriously, saying that we have to stay far from people because the disease can easily be transmitted from person to person.

Fourteen days after the government enforced the total lockdown in the country including in Kiama, we have totally run out of food stuff. We don't even have garri to drink.

Something has to be done. And fast. Our community desperately needs help because we suffer from more than the pandemic. We have nothing but hunger, poverty and a degraded environment to show for the many years of exploration of crude oil from our land. Now with COVID-19, we may as well all die.



# ***Spare Change***

By Onome Olive Etisioro

Adukè was about to lose her mind.

She was sure of it.

“Madam, the increase in the price for these foodstuffs is not our fault o,” the buxom yam seller said, spreading her hands in a gesture of helplessness. “This yam comes from the market at nine hundred and fifty naira. When I add transportation cost and my little profit, you don’t expect me to sell it at one thousand naira.”

Adukè had known this would happen. The entire city was in a rush to stock up their houses, with the impending lockdown looming above their heads, and she just knew that the sellers would take advantage of the panic.

Well, she wasn’t having any of it. “All of you sellers are the same,” she spat, angrily gathering her bags in preparation to stomp away. “Any small opportunity you get, you want to use it to cheat customers out of all their money.

The seller frowned. “Ah ahn, Madam, e never reach like that now,” she said, wiping at her face with the hem of her wrapper. “Why you go talk that kind thing? Abi you think say na only una dey struggle to carry foodstuffs put for house?”

Adukè clenched her jaw, her anger wavering, as she stared at the woman’s pitiable mien.

“You know say you be my customer,” the woman went on, shaking her head this way and that. “I no go fit to cheat you now. How I go do that kind thing? Na the truth I dey tell you so.”

Adukè sighed, her hands clenching and unclenching on her grocery bags as she debated. At that point, it was pretty hard to hold on to her anger, not when the woman looked even more frustrated than she did. Honestly, the circumstances were very unfair for everyone. She shouldn’t take her anger out on another innocent, struggling woman. Not in the middle of this madness, she told herself.

But now Adukè was in between a rock and a hard place. Even though she sympathized with the woman, she still wasn’t sure she could buy the yams in the end. They were frankly too expensive, and she was shopping on a budget. There were still so many foodstuffs to buy, and she couldn’t let herself use up any more than she’d intended to on any one product.

Do you even really need yams? The thought popped into her head, and she found herself seriously considering it. Were the yams a necessity at this time? She still needed to buy some garri and rice. At least, those were essentials to her.

She had to be careful with how much she spent here today. Her family's survival rested in her hands.

"Abeg," she said, shifting her hands this way and that, as if searching for something even as she gathered up her bags of bought goods. "I go come back. Make I go buy small rice come."

She knew very well that she was not going to return at all, but what else could she do? Even though she was panic-buying as much as everybody else was, she couldn't afford to lose her mind. No matter how close she was to doing so.

Honestly, Adukè had already been panicking before it became the state craze. And, at this point, she was already in such a constant state of flux that she was sincerely shocked how she could still function at such high levels. How else was a woman to react to the fact that her husband had just been relieved from work all because of a global pandemic and the lockdown order?

Her mind was whirling in all directions, thinking, panicking, never resting. And for all that, she still couldn't say she'd found any kind of solution to their predicament.

Her predicament. Because her husband's work was the only reason he was never fully around to nit-pick at every single little thing and get angry at whatever it was he thought she did wrong. And now he no longer had that job, so all that focus that he would have given to his job—that she happily let him give to his job—was going to fall on her. She was going to be his scapegoat, and the mere idea of that sent panic coursing through her body as if it was her lifeblood.

Adukè's hands shook as she gripped her bags tighter and maneuvered her way through the market, struggling with one hand to pull her face mask back up to her nose.

But even as she did it, she wondered. Whether it was all worth it. As things stood, she was much more terrified of being in the same space with her bored husband than she was of this virus getting her. As the panic heated her blood, she even found herself hoping that the virus would get her. And that maybe she would die, because that was the only way she knew of to be free of him.

And with each step she took away from the yam seller, she tried to come up with a way to explain why she hadn't bought any yams after all. She knew that she was playing with fire, she knew how her husband liked her to buy yam tubers and pound them rather than the already processed yam flour most people ate nowadays. She also knew that he would find a way to taunt her about it, but even



then, she didn't turn back around.

Because there simply wasn't enough money to waste, and even though the evidence was right in front of their eyes, she knew that he wasn't going to believe her; that he would accuse her of deliberately deciding not to buy more things because she wanted to steal money from him. Which was rather ironic, seeing as it was her money she was using to buy the foodstuffs for stocking up.

Not that he even thought that. He thought that he was entitled to her money because he was the one who funded her with part of the money she'd needed to buy that sewing machine. To him, her little job was just an extension of his own pocket. He owned her, and everything she had, even when it was clear that she didn't think so. He never seemed to care about what she did or didn't think. Adukè knew well enough not to antagonize him about anything, because he could just easily blow up in her face.

Adukè almost lost her footing as the razor-edged memory of the time he slapped her until her ears rang and how the bruises wouldn't fade for weeks surfaced in her mind.

No, the idea of spending a whole two weeks locked down inside the same space with her own husband filled her with so much dread that it was becoming harder and harder to appear sane. Or, at least, as sane as anyone could manage to be in these times.

Adukè couldn't stop moving, but she made herself take in a deep breath even as she wove between Lagosians who seemed to be dragging their own worries around with them.

"Good afternoon o," she forced a smile as she stopped in front of a man sitting behind his wheelbarrow of rice. "I want to buy two paint rubbers of rice. One paint rubber is one thousand eight hundred naira, abi?"

If she bought two rubbers of rice instead of three, she might be able to buy two rubbers of garri instead of just one. That sounded like a better plan. Or she could buy the new cheap beans she heard was made in a laboratory. Yes, those beans, or cowpea, what did they call them? Genetically engineered beans that kills weevils that try to eat them. She knew her husband had sworn he would not eat insecticides. He called the beans insecticides!

The man shook his head, his lips turning down in helpless disagreement. "Ah, madam, no be so o." He said and Adukè's heart dropped. "Price don go up o. We no dey sell paint rubber one eight again o."

She was almost afraid to ask. In fact, she almost turned around to get on the first bus she found heading for home. It was the idea of meeting her husband behind closed doors with nothing but ‘excuses on her lips’ that kept her immobile.

“How much you dey sell now?” She sounded subdued, even to her own ears. Resigned. Helplessly trapped in the jaws of a cold-blooded predator. Only now she didn’t know which one it was: her husband, or the unyieldingly callous jaws of a pandemic that was out to make her sell her very soul.

“One paint rubber na two thousand nine hundred now o, madam. Two paint rubbers go be five thousand eight hundred.”

That was more than she could even afford to spend. And just like before, Adukè was stuck between two very hard decisions. She just didn’t have that much money to spare, and now she was going to have to buy two rubbers less than what she’d originally intended to buy. At that point, she dreaded asking about the price of garri, wondering if she’d even be able to buy any in the end.

“Oya give me one rubber.” She felt like her very lifeblood was being drawn from her as she conceded to him at last, but there was nothing else she could do.

On both fronts, she had already been defeated. Life, it seemed, didn’t plan on sparing her any time to catch her breath. Adukè’s fists clenched and unclenched on her bags, but it wasn’t like she was going to fight. She couldn’t change anything.

And that was the problem.

The look of things might make it seem like she was stocking up as much as she could now, but the truth was plain to see for anyone who cared to look that she was the one being sucked dry.

In the end, she was losing a lot more than just her mind. She was losing her very self. There was nothing left of her to spare.



# ***The COVID-19 Test Centre***

By Nnimmo Bassey

The aroma from the tilapia on the grill wafted around the street corner, entering every home through the front door and exiting through the windows.

Everyone in the neighbourhood knew when Mama Ogie had set up shop for the morning and when some tilapia sizzled on her open grill. The pull was magnetic.

It was 10am on Thursday and as usual, a line of community folks and passers-by had formed even though the first servings were yet to land on the plastic plates that crowded the tray on the rickety wooden table that served as her bukateria.

“I’m grateful to Mama Ogie,” Ola said to his neighbour as they moved forward on the line. “Her grill is so special, but I don’t come here because I am hungry.”

“You don’t come here because you are hungry? Please, say something else,” his neighbour interrupted him. “What do you come here for? To learn how to cook?”

“I come here,” Ola calmly replied, “because whenever I perceive the aroma of the tilapia, I am assured that I am well. You know one of the symptoms of COVID-19 is the loss of sense of smell.”

“So, this is your testing centre? Why don’t you smell the aroma from a distance instead of wasting my time by taking the space before me?”

“I would gladly have done so and saved some cash,” Ola replied. “Unfortunately, I have to eat the fish to be sure that my sense of taste is intact as well.”

“Hahaha. We all know how you eat your fish though. Through your nose!” his neighbour scorned. Ola usually bought either plantain or fish. Mostly only plantain as it was cheaper.

Mama Ogie looked up at the customers lined up before her and splashed some vegetable oil on the grill. Today will be a good day, she told herself.

Ogie, her 10-year-old son, shared a broken wooden chair with his friend, Idemudia. The two were inseparable. They had big dreams of becoming either business tycoons or politicians. Every day they had the same debate: what is the difference between a politician and a business tycoon?

“Who will be the politician and who will be the tycoon?” Ogie asked.

“That is easy to know,” Idemudia laughed. “Who makes promises and never keep them?”

Mama Ogie turned the fish and nodded, satisfied by how they were turning out. The roasted plantain and fish made a perfect lunch for those who could afford them. Just a few months ago most of her customers bought a combination of fish and plantain but since the pandemic, only a few could buy both. They had to decide whether to snack on fish or pile their belly up with plantain.

Soon it was Ola’s turn to place his order.

“That’s Mr Social Distancing,” Ogie whispered to Idemudia.

“Yes,” Idemudia agreed. “We will see if the plantain will keep a social distance from the fish today.”

Ola looked around furtively and signalled his neighbour to maintain his distance. He drew in as much of the aroma from the fish as he could. He wished he could get a mouthful of the delicacy through his nostrils. Then he bent forward, got closer and closer to the fish...

“Mr Man,” Mama Ogie yelled. “Be careful! Maintain your social distance.”

“Social distance is between people,” Ola replied, “never between man and fish.”

“This bridge is crossed with Naira,” Mama Ogie stated sternly. Then she laughed. What does your pocket say today? Can it close the gap between the fish and the plantain?”

Ogie winked at Idemudia. No social distance between man and fish? Has he ever been to the river or even a pond? Ogie always enjoyed the banter between her mother and the man. This was their street corner school. They learned the habits of the neighbours just sitting here besides Mama Ogie’s Fish is Ready shop.

Ogie thought they should prepare a signpost to brand his mother’s business. Maybe even produce some business cards, Idemudia suggested. We could even start a fish delivery service. Mama Ogie’s Tilapia Special. That sounded nice. Since Idemudia’s father was a fisher, they could ensure there is enough supply of fish. We will be rich! We can turn it into a joint business. Mamas’ Special Tilapia?

Trouble was that Idemudia’s mother was a dealer in catfish. While Mama Idemudia was engaged in aquaculture, her husband would not tolerate any

fish that was not caught at sea. He had no qualms killing fish but believed that the fishpond was restrictive and punishing for the fish. Eating farmed fish to Idemudia's father was like eating chicken bought from the big poultry farm across the city. "Fat, lazy chicken", he would say. You could kick them, shove them and they would not be moved. They can't move.

Papa Idemudia believed that for chicken to land on his plate it must have been chased across the neighbourhood and be able to fly over buildings. The chicken has to fight for its life before he would be satisfied. Just the way he chased fish when they dragged his line in a futile attempt to escape his grasp.

Fishpond fish or fish from the sea. This was the contention at the dinner table most nights when Papa Idemudia was not out at sea. One day he had a bout of runny stomach after dinner and accused Mama Idemudia of having cooked some of her catfish.

"You can tell by the length of their whiskers, can't you?" she asked her husband. "You know everything about fish and can tell which is from the pond and which is from the sea by looking at them or simply by looking at how they lie in the pot."

"Of course," Papa Idemudia answered. "I can tell which is which even in the darkest night. In fact, when I am out fishing, I just have to whistle a tune for a particular fish to jump into my net. Or to swallow my hook. There is one particular fish I know by sight. It likes playing around my boat. Sometimes I pat its head with my paddle. I think it may want to come home with me, except that I do not think it would like your pond."

Ogie's eyes widened as a big car pulled up. Mama Ogie urged Mr Social Distance to pick up his roasted plantain and move on. He looked wistfully at the fish he could not afford. He couldn't just saunter off. He hung around to test his sense of smell a little bit further. Maybe his belly could be filled through his nostrils as the doctors say at times.

The door of the big car opened, and Mama Ogie was certain that the man who approached her had never stopped by before. She was effusive in her welcome. There was to be a party the next day and the man wanted to give invitees a special treat of street food.

Some people still hold parties in these times, Mama Ogie thought. But she wouldn't be bothered about that. Her business was to deliver the large order that was placed for grilled fish and plantain. Tomorrow at 12 noon sharp. A wad of cash exchanged hands and the car zoomed off, tyres screeching, water splashing.

“Street Food. How could anyone call her special food street food! In any case, the money was good. No receipt. No guarantee. That person may love street food, but certainly he had no street sense”, she concluded.

Ogie eyed Idemudia. That’s the sign to confirm that we are in business. Mamas’ Special Tilapia. And Catfish! Yes, Mamas’ Special Tilapia & Catfish.

They would sell the idea to their mothers, and their mothers will sell it to their fathers.

They gave themselves a congratulatory high five and fell off their broken chair, almost knocking down the grill. They looked plaintively at Mama Ogie. Would she hit them with her ladle?

“Go home, both of you,” Mama Ogie shouted, alarmed. “Idemudia, what will I tell your mother? That I poured hot oil on you? Go home now!”

“Yes, home, children,” Mr Social Distance spat. Then unable to stifle a sneeze, he let out an earth-shattering burst, tripping over a pile of charcoal. His plantain flew out of his hand, and landed in a puddle by the roadside, making his enviable dive to capture it completely useless. He sat in the puddle lamenting his misfortune.

Although his olfactory organs functioned okay, he would have no way of knowing if his taste buds were yet in good order. No way to know today, except someone offers him a morsel to bite, that is. And nobody did. Not yet. His neighbour walked close, clutching his plantain and the head of a tilapia. He wouldn’t offer him even the eyes of the fish.

“Go home!” Mama Ogie shouted again. “What must I do to you two?”

Idemudia began to pull Ogie by his shorts. Blame it on Mr. Social Distance. No, blame it on the broken chair. No piece of grilled fish for them today. Just then Idemudia’s father came by on his bicycle.

“Good morning Papa Idemudia,” Mama Ogie greeted. “I will need plenty of fish tomorrow morning.”

“W-o-n-d-e-r-f-u-l!” Papa Idemudia replied slowly. “That sounds like music to my ears. Some big contract abi? Or are you celebrating something?”

Ogie wanted to step forward to greet Papa Idemudia but his friend pulled him back. Too late.

“Idemudia! Idemudia! What are you doing here at this time? Papa Idemudia yelled. “You should be at home. These days no one knows who is spreading the virus and you should be helping your mother feed her fish. Come with me quickly.

“The pond is empty,” Idemudia whispered as his father drew him and made to leave.

“Wait!” Mama Ogie called after him. “Please, take a deposit for the fish.”

That was a new one for Papa Idemudia. Getting paid before he goes fishing? Was that a good or bad omen? And did she say, please? Wonders will never end. Mama Ogie, pleading with him to collect a deposit for fish he was yet to catch?

Where will the fish even come from? His fishing expedition of last night had confirmed a recent pattern. He had toiled all night but what did he come home with? A pitiful catch that could hardly fill up a bucket. What a rough time it was.

Even for his wife. Didn’t he help her pick fish from the pond two weeks ago? Just one throw of his net and everything came up, flapping this way and that. But three days ago he saw Mama Idemudia peering at the pond. She threw a few scraps into the water, expecting a fight for her offering. But there was no stir. The only ripples she saw came from what she dropped. Her heart thumped. The pond remained silent.

Yesterday he had gone to the sea with hope. He had to stay in the shallow waters as a naval blockade stopped movements into the deep waters. Did COVID-19 come from the deep? These days, throwing nets at the shallow waters mostly yielded debris, plastics and invasive weeds. He caught only a few wiggly creatures.

“The Navy is keeping us at the shore while international thieves come with big trawlers and take everything away unseen, unchallenged”, Papa Idemudia scoffed.

It was annoying that they were stealing the fish to make animal feed, not even for eating. What more rotten ideas would humans come up with? Thieves trawled in the deep and oil spills coated the coastal waters. And the oil companies not only polluted the waters, they slashed through the mangrove forests creating canals for their barges and monstrous machines.



Our freshwater creeks are turning brackish. Adding salt to injury. He began to see sense in what some other fishers always said that fish is better than oil. He had dreamt of Idemudia on an oil rig. Of becoming a big man and caring for him when he retired from fishing. But we cannot eat oil. We cannot drink oil. Oil is forcing him into premature retirement. Should he give up?

Will tomorrow be better than last night? What if it isn't? Will I betray Mama Ogie? Pandemic. Pandemonium.

I should take the cash. And then what? The pond was silent! The sea? He could only hope for better tomorrow.

"Here is the money," Mama Ogie stretched her hands to Papa Idemudia, jolting him back to the reality in front of him.

"Ammm," Mr Social Distance cleared his throat, still seated in the puddle, his plantain sinking deeper into the mire. Out of sight. "I need to test my taste buds."



# ***Uprooted***

By Onome Olive Etisioro

Emeka prepared for the absolute worst.  
He just had to.

With each step he took closer to his farm, his hands shook, and his heart pounded. He could barely lift his feet each time. He was a man on autopilot, moving and being without any express effort or thought on his part.

Which was rather funny, seeing as all his thoughts were geared towards his and his family's being. What would he find at the site of his farm when he got there? Pest eaten crops? Wilting plants? Or uprooted stalks? These were his nightmares, ones he hoped he wouldn't have to see come true before his very eyes.

Emeka would rather not envision such despairing things, but he couldn't stop himself from doing that any more than he could stop himself from walking forward even when he dreaded the very place he was headed to. He never thought he would ever see the day he would dread returning to his farm, but that day was here, and that day was today, apparently. His wife and son had wanted to come along with him, but he couldn't stomach the thought of seeing their faces when they got to the farm, and everything wasn't as it should be. Fear and hopelessness already shadowed their every action for the past two weeks of the lockdown due to the global pandemic sweeping through many nations and taking lives as it went.

And that was the thing. Emeka was much more terrified of coming face to face with the realization that his source of livelihood has been destroyed than he was of contracting this virus. Without his farm, there was no way he and his family would even survive, so what was the threat of some invisible and rumoured virus compared to that? He wasn't even so sure this virus was in the country in the first place. He had a sneaky suspicion that it was nothing but government propaganda, as always. But whatever he thought of this whole pandemic business and resulting lockdown, he knew one thing: he had to prepare for the worst as he returned to take stock of his farm.

Back home, he knew his wife was wringing her fingers together in worry; he was certain she was too worried to function or do anything else, and even though he knew that all this wasn't his fault, he couldn't help but feel responsible for it all. He already felt bogged down by what he would say if things didn't turn out alright on the farm. He couldn't even imagine what he would say to them if everything was totally destroyed, and there was nothing to salvage. Should he have sprayed his farm with the cancer-causing herbicide that was so popular in the market? No! He was determined to learn to use biological means of countering the pests.

Where would he even start from? Where would he even begin? No matter how

much he thought about it, he couldn't find any silver linings whatsoever to look forward to. Even if his farm wasn't in dire straits now, it will be later, and very soon, in fact. Even if hoodlums looking for food in these times didn't attack his farm like he feared they would, he was still at risk of losing almost eighty percent of his dry season investments. Ever since the nationwide lockdown, all he'd been able to use was the organic manure his father had always favoured, and while he knew those worked best, they'd also been insanely expensive. Even more so with the lockdown so he knew he wasn't using as much as he should have been using.

That was mostly the backbone of his worries; he had been totally unable to enrich his farm as much as he needed to. Whatever he was going to find when he got there would all be due to that dire inability of his. With the looming threat of yet another lockdown on the horizon, Emeka was well aware of the fact that he and his family might be approaching the worst times they'd ever encountered yet, and he wasn't at all confident that they would be able to weather it as much as they'd done in the past.

Because even if his crops were in salvageable conditions, and even if he could harvest anything, it would mostly be for his family's use, and then what about other needs? Needs that were met by selling his crops as products to traders? What about the income he relied on to survive day to day? How were they going to make do? The government enforced lockdown also made it virtually impossible to transport foods or goods to other parts of the country. He could not bring himself to think of using the toxic herbicides and chemical fertilizers that were now even very expensive because of the border closure and travel bans. Even if he wished to use them, he could hardly afford them. And the regular supply of seeds they as farmers usually received were slow in coming this year; he was yet to receive any packages. So even if he planned to replant, he had nothing to plant with. This was never the case when his parents used to save seeds and even obtain seeds from neighbours.

Whatever route he chose to follow, he would still end up stuck in one position. That knowledge alone was enough to drive him mad.

Emeka paused and took in a deep breath. Maybe he was thinking too much about this. But what else could he do? What else could anyone do, when stuck in limbo, neither moving forward nor going backwards? And what else could he do when there is the possibility that, when this limbo is lifted, he would only be going backwards with thoughts set around his head like an ill-fitting halo he neither wanted nor could throw away.

When Emeka stepped onto his farm, what waited for him made him freeze. Literally. He even hoped he was dead. Or dreaming.

And then he was crumpling into a bone shaking heap on the soil, his body humming with an electric kind of shock, the type that made him want to leap up and down. At the same time, his body was loose with such relief that he found that he really couldn't even move.

Yes, the relief flushed through his entire body, from the crown of his head to the ends of his slipper clad toes, making for a rather curious sensation as both the sharp sparks of shock and excitement charged through his blood at the same time. The relief flowed over him with two distinct emotions at war in his body.

But what else could he feel, honestly? What else but this strange mix of elation and muscle melting relief that made him just want to lie there amidst the stalks and take a nap? A really long, well deserved nap for all the stress he'd let himself go through these past weeks. And what of his wife and son? His heart swelled inside his chest as he imagined just how overjoyed his wife would be—it is going to be a feast this night.

This was something worth celebrating! Because his farm— was doing just fine! Here he'd been, worrying his head off about coming to meet a ruined farm and a ruined livelihood. What he met was a miracle; his crops were growing exponentially well!

All his previous worries were no longer of any importance. He no longer needed to rely on those so-called improved seeds that the government supplies or have to pay through his nose to buy those toxic herbicides and chemical fertilizers that he frankly didn't trust. His farm was faring rather well, and he wasn't going to let the lockdown deter him from making sure his farm continued to run smoothly, even if it meant returning to the old ways of his fathers. In fact, he rather looked forward to heading backwards if that is where true progress was.

Emeka was ready for the absolute worst. Now, how would he handle the best? He had come here dreading to find that there would be nothing left. Nothing. He'd come here expecting to find his entire life upended from beneath the soil by forces he couldn't control, uprooted from the very roots.

What he'd found instead, was that the roots of his fears withered away in a moment while he stood grounded.

Completely immovable.

# About HOMEf

HOMEf is an ecological think tank and an advocacy organization promoting environmental/climate justice and food sovereignty in Nigeria and Africa.

Our main thrust is examining the roots of exploitation of resources, peoples and nations. We nurture movements for the recovery of memory, dignity and harmonious living with Mother Earth.

HOMEf believes in the rights of Mother Earth, the need to equip communities to push back oppression and the need for justice for the environment, our food systems and natural cycles at every level of policy engagement.

HOMEf believes in contextual solutions over externally generated and imposed ideas and is firmly rooted in the ideals of solidarity and dignity.

Our Core Values: justice& equity in all circumstances, people and the planet in harmony and free from exploitation, dignity (respect), action (solidarity), and knowledge.

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Despite the challenges of collapsing state structures and economies, we took this as a time to think and find ways to overcome the miseries presented by the failed systems. We took this as a time to organise, even if we are/were physically isolated. We reminded ourselves that the virus will not change anything that we (the people) won't change. In other words, the change that will frame the post pandemic era will come from humans, our relationship with each other and with Nature. The push for change will inevitably revolve around our interpretation of what is happening around us and our resolve to act. This revolves around the narratives that we frame, formulate and allow. Understanding that our lives are framed, powered and guided by stories, we sought the interpretation of the socio-ecological and health crises through the tales in this collection. We welcome you to the trip in the imaginaries.

Read. Enjoy. Share. Tell your tales. Organize. Act!

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