

Creators of Justice Awards 2021

Short Story

HONORABLE MENTION

Ebtihal Naily (Libya): *Can Darkness be a Fate*

Grace Suge (Kenya): *The Moon's Kraal*

Kathy Easton (United Kingdom): *A Long Time Coming*

Can Darkness be a Fate

By Ebtihal Naily

“What hurts you, blesses you. Darkness is your candle.”
— Rumi

-(October/2010)

“Now I’m 10-years old kid, I’ll never be afraid of darkness again!” that’s what mama told me to repeat it over and over to overcome my fear of staying in darkness.

Back then my mother perhaps thought that the way I see darkness will always be the same, I can’t blame her! She didn’t live what I lived as a kid and teenager in the next ten years after 2010, so how could she know?

Darkness after 2010 became a follower, stalker, and almost a fate!

-February/2011, the beginning of real darkness

The city of Benghazi/ Libya is my hometown, where I was born, grow, and express darkness, I can’t remember very well, how this city was before 2011, but all I can say that it was calm, not too crowded and the most importantly boring!

I used to beg my parents to take me to “Al Jmil” which is another city in Libya, situated on the west side of the country.

“Why don’t we just move there mom!?, there’s much fun more than Benghazi!” I would say.

Al Jmil is a small city where my great grandparents are from, my mother was born there also, my dad brought her to Benghazi city after

marriage, and he promised to take her there each year to see her parents and beloved ones.

We were enjoying our time there –me and my four sisters-
There were too many farms and cheeps!

People from there were so kind to us, they took us to parties, adventures, and beaches! and most frequently is the beach of “Zwarah city” which is considered one of the most magnificent places in the

country!

On contrary, life in Benghazi city was completely different, ordinary, and typical.

“it’s like a prison here!” I used to yell repeatedly. I couldn’t handle the idea of us being always trapped in rat called “home” whereas everyone out there is touring and having fun!

Move from room to room, playing in the backyard of the house with my little sister and cousins, but it wasn’t allowed for us to step out of the door, otherwise, we’ll be punished, “street isn’t for girls!” they told us. I got sick of this situation, I wished I have a different life, in a different country with different traditions and rules, instead of this dark life! with nothing new to see or express.

Someday, the 15th of February, and I remember this day very well, while we were in school, having the 5th class, the teacher had announced to us the following statement with a big smile in his face: “Today you will leave school a bit earlier than the usual time! And you’ll not have school tomorrow!”

One of my classmates had asked with a curious voice tone: “why is that for, teacher?!”

“for the revolution kids! we are uprising!” he said.

‘revolution and uprising’ too big words for young kids to understand, but we were certain of one thing! That there’s something extraordinary is about to happen to us!

After leaving school that day, like any other child, I was super glad about this sudden holiday! no classes! no waking up so early for several days!

All we do is playing, watching cartoons, and just having fun!

Initially, I thought it’ll be just for a few days, but those few days turned to be weeks! And those weeks turned to be months!

We ended up with almost a year without schools! In each time we watch TV news, they keep saying “schools remain closed!”

That situation became so suffocating! We didn’t achieve anything but staring at each other all the time, no clear vision for the future days, the whole country became under a state of fear and uncertainty, what will happen next? who will win this revolution?

The streets are almost empty! many men went to participate in that war! We were just waiting for the end, although we didn’t understand the real situation! We just wanted to get of this darkness!

The whole city entered a state called “partial lock-down”

Which starts from 7:00 pm, “stay indoors!!, that’s for your safety! “they kept saying, due to the tremendous and dangerous random shouting outside!

And above all this, electricity was absent several hours in the day! No TV, no lights only darkness! We were stuck at home; while others are protesting in the streets, we were stuck in darkness!

-Life after February/ 2011

People during that time had split into two groups: some supported the original regime system of the country which was led by “colonel Muammar Gaddafi” –the previous ruler of “Libyan Jamahiriya”. On the other hand, the other group was those who upraised against the country government and fought for a new system of the ruling, they were seeking change and wealthy life for every citizen, I was hearing phrases such these: “We are fed up with this dictatorial power!”, “We want freedom for Libya!”, “People need to overthrow the regime!” and many more, that we were hearing from the media.

“Gunshots, and tanks images” were what I had remembered the most from those dark days, roads between cities were closed, so we couldn’t manage it to go to ‘AL Jimil’ that summer!

I truly cried real tears over this! I got sad and angry! I put all the blame on that damned war!

To me, ‘AL Jimil’ was the only place where I found joy, love, and freedom, the place I used to recharge myself with positive vibes whenever I am there. I was waiting for the summer break each year of my life for a journey there, but now it’s impossible! “Accept it or not, you have nothing but darkness now Beta!” I used to tell myself.

Ramadan is the holy month for each Muslim all around the world, the time of the year when we fast the whole day until the sunset, and it’s

known for its light and colorful nights, as we call them ‘ Layali Ramadan’ where people stay up until the sunrise time or ‘ Sohor time’, we used to gather up, chat, play games, eat diverse types of sweets and candy ‘Basbousa, Qatayef, Balah El Sham, Luqmat El-Qadi, Baklava and the most famous one is Kunafeh’ we also drink a lot of Arabian coffee, and yeah! I was about to forget! We make Mahalabia with nuts and cinnamon, it’s so delicious!

Unfortunately, those light nights turned out to be dark for us!

With electricity being off most of the day, imagine yourself at the time

‘Al Maghreb’ when you should finally sit and start breaking your fast ‘Iftar’ unexpectedly, the lights go off!

“really? you couldn’t find a better time than this Darkness?” I used to grumble.

Just eat! Put whatever piece of food you touch in your month! And the second it meets your tongue, you’ll know its identity! Sometimes we used our phones’ flashlights during eating to see where our spoons should land on, and the funniest thing that when you try to sip the soup or ‘Sharbah’ which is the main dish for Iftar, then while the filled spoon is on its way to your mouth it pours.

Life wasn’t easy at that time, we spent most of our ‘Iftars’ with hand holding a phone for the flashlight, and the other is busy with eating! Furthermore, the sensations of terror, instability, and insecurity were felt instead of what we call it ‘Rouhaniyat Ramadan’ which means the condition when you are in Peace of Mind and calm, you feel no fear, you only feel blessed with the protection of Allah.

-(October/2011) finally end of darkness?

After about eight months in total darkness, boredom and solitude, we got back to our schools again!

Although the war was still carrying on, both groups refused to shut down the firings, neither of them chooses to give up for the other.

“We do not surrender; we win or die,” they said. Which is a famous quote, they had adapted from one of the greatest men in the Libyan history, if not in the world history, this hero is ‘Omar Bin Mukhtar’ a Libyan revolutionary who led the resistance against the Italian occupation in Libya.

Getting back to school under those risky circumstances, was a real challenge to us! But we did it anyway, we thought that education was the only weapon we were allowed to use.

“whatever they say about politics, just ignore it Beta!” my parents used to warn me over and over. They were scared if someone of the revolutionary group finds out that I belong to a family who still supporting the ‘colonel Muammar Gaddafi’ which can cause them deadly troubles.

A few days later, after our school return, taking our last class of the day, one of the teaching staff entered our classroom hastily and yelled with a victorious tone: “Sirte is completely free! We got Muammar Gaddafi down!”

20 October 2011, was the decisive day, we got back to our homes crossing the loud streets that were filled up with people celebrating the winning of ‘Sirte Battle’

Everyone was waiting for the historical moment, the end of Gaddafi’s government, after months of resisting and fighting, ‘we want him dead!’ the rebels demanded.

By the afternoon of the exact previously mentioned day, the TV breaking news had announced, Muammar Gaddafi, ousted in a revolt and later killed by rebel forces.

Three days after the death of Muammar Gaddafi, The Libyan National Transition Council deems the Libyan Civil War over and announced officially that Libya is comprehensively free of the old regime, coincidentally, that day was my birthday too! -Oct-23-2011 Which is, later on, became known as the darkest day of Libyan history yet!

“fabulous! Even my birthday now turned to signify darkness!” I cheered myself sarcastically!

So each year when I must celebrate the brightest day of my life! The rest of my country is crying over the darkest day of their history, “Youm Al Nakbah” they called it, which in the English language means “the day of the tragedy”.

-Three years later, May/2014, the darkness of “Al-Karama”

“get high grades in secondary school, and I’ll come to bring you with me again!” my oldest sister had told me when she was packing her things to leave the country, she was going to study medicine in Britain, after she had ranked the 4th over the whole country in the last year of high school, hence that she was rewarded with a fully-funded scholarship to

study overseas, I truly envied her! And wished to be in her place!

“congratulations! you’ll get out of this hell!” I used to tell her, she traveled with my dad, who chose to be with her until she settles on.

Even though life without a dad was extremely difficult, my mother was taking care of us as possible as she could, aside of her job as a teacher, she used to drive us to school and then back to home, doing all the housework on her own, and above all that, she was pregnant!

Unluckily, the country back then wasn’t in its finest state, as the “revolutionaries of 2011 civil war” had aimed to!

The circumstances of life in that time turned out to be miserable, and even worse than before! Vandalism, a proliferation of weapons, sectarian violence, murders, lawlessness, and battles over authorities. More specifically, the region where I live, “Benghazi city”, or as they call it “the spark of the revolution”.

The city became considered one of the most dangerous places in the world, people started to feel overwhelmed and frustrated. It’s like we jumped into another war! But at this time, it looks to be more threatening!

And yes! You guessed right, the electricity started to go off again! For hours and hours!

So here we back to the same old annoying scenario! I spent nights studying and doing my homework in the darkness, suffering all disabilities to achieve that task under such conditions, and I remember one night! In which I felt obliged towards darkness, yes! Darkness finally did something good to me, it showed up in the right time I just needed, my mother at that night had demanded me to bring her my

results of the 8th-grade assessment, which I didn’t do well on them! But suddenly lights go off, and my mother forgot about my grades at that moment, hence that, giving me additional time to cover up for myself!

Thanks, darkness!

Also at one of those nights, my mother had miscarried her fourth attempt to give birth to a male baby, and the boy was born dead. That kept happening to mom over and over, in each time she got pregnant, and the doctor tells her the baby’s gender is a male, he dies eventually. Some people say that’s a genetic problem, hence that we can’t have a brother! But it was fine actually for us! A house filled with girls only! We loved it.

May, was the month I finished the 8th grade in school, and one morning ‘may-16-2014’, while I was enjoying my sleep without school to interrupt it, big bombs and bullets firings had broken out the morning silence causing me to jump rapidly of bed! Which I had been told later, that it was Khalifa Haftar, who’s a Libyan-American soldier and the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army started his Operation Dignity or as it’s known by ‘Al-Karama’.

A few months later, my father decided to come back from Britain to finish my sister’s visa requirements, and that took a lot of time, it was

truly an exhaustive process!

As soon as the required procedures had finished, my sister was ready to leave again to Britain, but at this time, on her own, only with her dreams!

Since there were not any flights from Libya to Britain during that time, she had to travel from another foreign country, and that country was Jordan, we went all with her to 'Amman' initially, and my dad had booked her flight from 'Queen Alia International Airport' in the same day we arrived. And it was planned to leave the next day to Britain alone.

However, she didn't leave the next day! Unfortunately, my dad's family had called the night before, to show their rejection and dissatisfaction towards what he was planning to commit!

"Don't let her go alone!" they shouted. I was not surprised honestly! Because that was the price that every female who comes from a conservative society should pay!

My dad couldn't convince them with her choice, he was confused, and had nothing to do but cancel the whole arrangements!

My sister was sad at the beginning, but then she let it go and said "I'll accept my fate! Whatever it is."

Nevertheless, we returned to Libya, with the feeling of losing, and I welcomed the dark days as usual.

Since 'Al-Karama' was yet to finish, we were forced to stay out of our homes, because it was risky to get back there!

We stayed for six months in a city called 'Ajdabiya' near Benghazi, where my uncle and his family are living.

I and my little sister had enrolled in a primary school, we had been called 'the refugees' so the school members can distinguish us. But honestly, they were treating me and my sister in a very good manner.

After a few months later, we moved to 'Amman city/Jordan' and at that time, we chose to stay there for one year, until the 'Karama war' ends.

We engaged in the new culture and environment easily, we experienced the different playful life in 'Amman' we had a great and unforgettable time, for one year, each one of us forgot how the feeling of boredom is like! For one year I forgot how darkness is like! And without darkness chasing me in that year, I felt optimistic for my future fate!

-End of Karama, life is normal again in Benghazi, 2016-2017

Everyone was extremely happy about this victory, now our city is free from militias, and we can finally live in peace of mind. We were able to get back to our homes and start a new life all over again.

-The dream of 2018 was a candle in the darkness!

Before this year got started, I committed to myself to do all the effort needed to achieve my 'life dream' which is to be one of the top students over the nation and get a scholarship to study international law at the university of my dreams 'Harvard'

I studied days and nights, I did all it takes to get high marks in each exam, I worked hard to reach that goal. Then indeed! I got what I exactly wanted!

I ranked the 1st over my school and the 8th over the east nation, it was the biggest win in my life, and the greatest feeling I've ever felt.

The national government then organized a ceremony honoring the outstanding students all over the nation schools on the 17th of November of the same year, in a city called 'Al Qubbah' located in eastern Libya.

I was tremendously excited, sitting on a chair carrying my name, the governors and the education minister had arrived, hence that, the ceremony begins.

Everything was going well, we were cheerful and enjoying our time, then when we were about to get into the honoring stage to take our rewards and Shields of appreciation, the electricity went off, and the entire place turned out to be in darkness all of sudden!

"not today please!" I begged. It was unbelievable! I have not imagined such a thing to happen to me in my life!

My mates complained about their fortunes too, but even though we continued the ceremony in darkness, with our phones' flashlights, or more sincerely with our ambitious spirits! And a bright vision for the future..... (I'm the girl wearing the pink coat!)

I stood up with the strength of my determination, and the power of my desire, holding my victory symbol, hoping from my future dreams to light up the road for me.

-2020, the time I realized darkness wasn't only after me!

Things had changed, I didn't reach Harvard, nor joined a law school, I found myself taking different drift in my life, the country couldn't pay for my scholarship, and I remained in Benghazi city, my family wasn't

able to pay for my studying abroad too! Although they said “you can’t go even if you got the money, you’ll face the same thing your sister had faced before”

So I desperately changed my plans, I went to medical school instead! And it was fine to me if you want the truth, I started the first year with enthusiasm, and obligation to achieve high marks.

However, I didn’t finish the year yet, due to the coronavirus pandemic, we stayed at home for months, and I was worried about my future! The university didn’t release any successful plans to save that academic year! Distance learning was impossible, and you probably know why! Electricity wasn’t available all the time, people started to complain about this problem again, I nearly lost my tolerance over this situation. Furthermore, the university announced to resume the rest of the exams that were delayed due to ‘Covid-19’

I had one exam to do, that was in ‘Biochemistry’, so I started preparing for it in the hardest circumstances you will ever imagine! I studied in total darkness, my laptop which has all the materials I need for the exam was going off for hours with no electricity to charge it, I felt anxious, angry, and trapped! In a fate, I don’t deserve it!

I went to the exam anyway, hopeful and confident, leaving all the dark days’ memories behind me.

During the exam, everyone was concentrating, putting their best, and ignoring the irritating feeling from the masks! Only for the sake of success.

Lights got off, air conditioners stopped working, and we knew it! We knew it’ll happen!

Thank god the place where I was having my exam has windows! But even though, I got upset because of the hot atmosphere and the suffocating masks! Moreover, the tricky exam!

When I finished my exam, I was complaining from inside, that wasn’t a proper environment for a student to have an exam! But minutes later, I saw something which broke my heart, I saw a photo that made me feel selfish!

In the time I was whining over my bad fate, my other colleagues were having their exams in this manner! A hand holding a source for light and the other hand was writing the answers.

this picture had taught me too many things!

Darkness wasn't only after me! It was chasing them too, they expressed, survived it, and found a way to get out through it!

Ebtihal Nailly, second year medical student, also works as Kindergarten English Teacher, passionate about writing, reading and telling stories, I hope I can create successful content to tell stories about my nation, society problems and peace! I love to write creative stories, scenarios, poems, and journals. Writing taught me to be an active person to serve my community by bringing the real stories into existing, it helps me to treat myself kindly, and convert all my feelings into words. My goal is to write outstanding stories that will be transformed into movies and win great prizes in the future.

The Moon's Kraal

By Grace Suge

The events of that day have been indelibly drawn in my mind. I remember how I had clutched tightly onto Yeyo's ollekishopo shuka or wrapper that is suspended from the waist, and I wouldn't let go. My mother wiggled herself away until the ollekishopo came undone at the waist and remained in my hands. Meanwhile, Papa's cane was raised, bearing down heavily upon her, and Yeyo's steps grew apace, nearly denuded, holding the ologesena or wrapper that is knotted over one shoulder, at the edges as she took the shuka she had used to cover the child in her arms, to cover herself as she raced. My hands were stretched out in despair towards Yeyo when Papa came up from behind and grabbed me. My cries became frenzied, I was frantically kicking the air and Papa took me into our engaji or hut and sat me forcefully on the earthen floor. I curled and cried that day, as never before. I placed my head on Yeyo's ollekishopo and it drowned with tears. When it finally dried, the ollekishopo became my best costume, never to be washed. Although the cloth has shrunk and shredded now, I carry a piece with me and I've walked with the smell of my Yeyo since, for I find such comfort when her memory embraces me and lulls me to sleep.

Yeyo was a woman with a firm heart. When she was told to hand over the pale child, an engoki or a curse or evil omen, that she had just given birth to, she refused. That child was to be disappeared the same way such children were in our village. A transient myth had it, that, since the olden times, such a child was handed over to the engaitoyioni or midwife, who would lay it in the threshold of the cattle's enclosure, very early in the morning. When the cattle stampeded out to the fields, the child would be trampled down and its body was thrown in the forest for the hyena and the vultures to devour. Or it was

merely left as prey of death in the forest, its freezing cries being the knell, summoning the wild beasts to a feast, and it would be pulled away and devoured alive there, its terrified cries absorbed by the trees. I at first thought of this myth as a fable, just being told to the children to scare them to eat or be thrown into the forest like an engoki. But I saw the pale child snugly ensconced in Yeyo's arms. Yeyo held tight to it and papa gave her an ultimatum. She was to hand over the child to the engaitoyioni or leave his engang or kraal and was never to return. Yeyo too readily chose the latter, left Sironka, my brother, and me behind when the world was still new to us, our words still meaningless. It was rumored that she had gone to the engang e lapa or the moon's kraal. This was a settlement for the unwanted, the outcasts of society, and deep in a distant place, where the moon was their only protector in the dark.

It had been several days into the oladalu or the month that becomes scorched, right at the beginning of that year, when I followed Sironka as he took the flocks of our engang to the fields to pasture. I was barely out of titoisho or girlhood and Sironka, who was older than me, hadn't finished growing either, but the grass had finished. There was hardly a blade of green grass in the fields, most were sere and yellow, literally burnt up, and so we decided to go further down to the edges of the forest nearby. Although there was only one here and there, the grass in the forest was damp and grew high, so the cattle spread out like the grass and went deeper and deeper into the vast, with us in their backs.

Suddenly, I heard a woman scream, "Soila! Soila!". And just like the name, the voice broke familiarly in my ears. I looked out for this voice calling me, my eyes searching amongst the trees. I caught sight of a woman wending through, fully exposing herself to my view. My eyes stared unhindered at this woman. I can never forget my beautiful mother; her garments set well upon her, so much-ornamented. She wore her beautiful enkimeita or a belt embellished with colorful beads, over her ologesena, accompanied with the wide-toothed-dimpled smile that brightened dark corners. There was nothing as pure as my mother's face and this woman was her.

"Yeyo?" I whispered disbelievingly.

"eee... engoshoke ai or my womb, the child of my womb!" she exclaimed, took me in her arms, and embraced me tightly as we poured tears.

That close, I smelt her. That smell of hers that had been with me ever since she left. But this time it was filled with warmth, a warmth that only a mother can possess. My heart swelled with joy in that small moment. Tears guttered down my face and Yeyo's blinded her eyes. Each time Yeyo blinked the tears off, another stream formed. She caressingly

ran her hands along my face, my hands, my chin, my hair as if her eyes were now on her fingertips. It immediately dawned on me that we were near engang e lapa, where Yeyo was said to have been run to. I only knew of this land from hearsay, no one said it in an empty field.

Yeyo was flanked by a pale child, whom she pulled with her as she wended her way towards me. She later introduced her to me as Nkini, our now little grown sister. Yeyo was in Nkini's blood; her cheery disposition, her wide-toothed-dimpled smile, which made you want to like her. The only difference was Nkini's paleness, with a skin that seemed to be constellated with speckles. With an affectation of fervor, I sat down by Nkini, pulled one of her hands, and rested it on my palms. I felt the texture of her skin. Very pale, very supple, very beautiful. Skin which I thought would blister on touch, didn't blister, it glowed. I admiringly gazed at her; the limpid sapphire eyes, her blond hair. A kinship sensation wrung my soul and woke up the senses in there which could only be expressed more than spoken. I was completely smitten by the way her spirit shone. Nkini had oltau or spirit, just like me and in that very moment my fear of pale skin, the vague aversion of it, was carried off by love, for I loved her passionately.

Sironka's reception of our mother was a bit strange though. I glanced at him and noted that he did not look at Yeyo with a good eye when she went to greet him. Yeyo's outstretched arms were met by a wall of indifference. Sironka drew himself in and uttered nothing in response to Yeyo's greetings. He did not show the slightest interest in Nkini too; he just stood there eyeing her with frosty calm and when she innocently frolicked near to him, he edged her away. Her presence seemed to nettle him.

"Nkutuk ai, or my mouth," My mother endearingly called out to Nkini, pulling her away from Sironka and planting her on the flank.

I wondered whether the way papa and Yeyo's engaini or co-wife treated Sironka, can have embittered him so. Papa wanted to mold Sironka, using hot words, into an alpha male who would inherit cows to which Yeyo had milking rights, yet he was just but a child. Since he could not fulfill papa's expectation, it spoiled his heart, hence his infernal behavior. Or maybe he thought that if Yeyo were there he wouldn't have had it that bad. He might have blamed Nkini too for all these, for her pale skin. And maybe, just like our society, he saw pale skin as engoki.

Yeyo, on catching Sironka's hard eyes, was approaching him in a bid to embrace him, but Sironka held out his hand in a hostile manner, forbidding her further advance towards him.

"Why are you like this son?" Yeyo cried.

Sironka said that he was wroth and would not have the sight of her eye. Then Yeyo, in a great state of agitation, apprised us of five pale members' mysterious disappearance from engang e lapa. She sought our help in tracing them for; today they had searched for them and tomorrow they had searched for them without finding them. She told us a story of some strange people who came to engang e lapa and pounced upon one pale member. His hysterical dark-skinned mother offered herself to be taken in her son's stead,

"We don't want you. We want the molten-skinned albino." The abductors yelled to her. Then they bound, and made away with the pale one, heading towards the south, at the Kenya-Tanzania border.

Sironka listened to Yeyo, noted the acute note of distress in her voice, and did not attend to her words. Instead, he rebuked her for leaving us in preference to Nkini, with a voice thick with resentment.

"It would have been wastage of sin if that engoki were to be trampled by cattle. Overkill! I say overkill!" Sironka mulishly yelled, with a big voice, to Yeyo's entreaty as he pointed at Nkini. "The iltorrobo or hunter-gatherer's life that you lead now is a punishment that both of you deserve. Let those men find you and not leave you alive."

Sironka, without the pale of humanity, ignored their plight, motioned them away, and strode off; pulling me with him, with the venomous words further hardening his red spirit. His life continued normally even in the backdrop of this disturbing news.

"Are you satisfied with your behavior?" I asked Sironka.

"I will not trouble myself for them" he swore.

I was quite distressed by the news though and mentally joined myself with the search of the lost men, spending disquieted moments trying to figure out where they were taken. I ate myself on behalf of my people for visiting misfortune on the members of engang e lapa; with a life that had been so unkind. We cut them off from society believing that their eyes were not sound; they would gradually run out and cannot herd cattle. Their skin wouldn't withstand oladalu to feel the patter of the short rains at the end of the year, so they would rather sooner die than live out this fate.

I am sat in an art institute in the city, afar from the Maasai plains. It is the month of kushin or African pied wagtail, the weather is calm but my heart would not sit down in

one place yet I remained in the same place. My eyes wander to the window, and further over to the familiar Purkei or a group of hills, yonder, filled with their numerous yellow-topped acacia trees. Sitting alone with my thoughts, my elbow at the desk with the palm supporting my chin, memories explode in my mind; my childhood escapades at the Maasai plains, the bitter-sweet meeting with my Yeyo at the forest's edge. My eyes behold a river winding its way across the horizon. Mental images of the people of engang e lapa cross my mind. Now I am seeing obscured illusionary images of a great many pale people drawing themselves up over the hills, running to the dales. Now I am seeing Yeyo and hers going to draw water in the vale.

As I was thinking these thoughts, in the background, I can hear Halima, my colleague at the institute, recounting her escapades to Romana, my other colleague who wears a hat that slants to the side. Halima is talking about her visit to this or that witch doctor's shrine, seeking to have herself charmed. She has a well-polished sense of vanity and is quite superstitious too. Instead of inhaling fumes from sere juniper leaves, with its trance-inducing power, when she had been smitten by an illness of the head, Halima would succumb to a belief that she had been bewitched; a vulnerability that was willingly laid bare and in turn sustained by witchdoctors, who verily humored her vanities, made her pay through the nose and wagged her by the tail.

Halima has for long been distracting me from my cud-chewing by her manifestly incredulous stories; today being instructed to bring with her a red or black fowl, tomorrow; a monkey's tail or quid in its stead. She tells of witch doctors morphing into cats at night and casting spells on people's roofs. I was made blue by all these hairy stories that sounded like they were made up when the sun was bent and most of the times I heard her recount them, I rolled my eyes and I passed her bye. Sometimes, I laughed softly, but Romana heard them with docile ears. The blacks in her eyes enlarged, she blinked the hairs of the eyes rapidly, her heart pounded faster, she slunk further into her seat and her hat fell over the bare spot of her face as she gawked. Someone would think Halima a ghost whisperer.

Today Halima has not been herself; she has been uncharacteristically quiet and in a pensive mood. I thought the day dulled because Romana, the frightened sufferer, was on sick leave. Romana told us she felt a buzz in her head, like that of bees. I thought she merely had a heavy head, whilst Halima brought her a witchdoctor's charm, made from the hairs of a black cat, which she said was palliating for all pains. I see Halima approaching my desk.

"Thunder, are you busy?" I find myself cursing sotto voce, as I instantaneously bestirred

myself with something. I lay my thick notebook on the desk, turn the pages with such violence they seem to rumble and crackle in the air. Then I snap at a page randomly and start peeling it, rolling it from the top to the bottom, the sound reverberating as the page tares until I completely split it from the book.

But she still came, this interloper. My thunder was all to no purpose. I looked at the split paper and crumbled it to a ball.

“Soila, may I talk to you,” Halima asks gently.

“May the thunder that bade me destroy my book, collide and relocate you to your chair.”

I curse again in the head, and then I snap audibly to keep her at bay. “No. The sun has just climbed up Halima; it is just three hours of the day! Let us be happy. The day is long.”

I see people have disturbed your peace,” Halima mutters under her breath, ties her face, and betakes herself back to her chair. Her distorted face leaves me in the lurch. I don’t want to be a sight for sore eyes, so my mood yields, and I ask her the matter. I listen with little ease, for her tales are always rich in variety, waiting for a chance to flourish in eager ears.

“

Bakari, the witch doctor from Tanzania, has requested me to avail an albino’s body part. He said that this charm was warranted not to fail in my quest to have a mansion under a cool sycamore. He further told me that if I would be unable to get one, I would have to hire people at a fixed sum so that they may source it from a village settlement deep inside a forest, where the majority of those who abode there were albino.” Halima starts. My discomfort is evident, trying to think it an illusion or nonsense. The last time she indulged a fancy of swinging leisurely in a hammock by the ocean and it came at a fixed sum too.

“I saw it with my own eyes, a pale hand lying by the witch doctor’s side.” She swears and goes further to tell me that she is a person of conscience, which implored her to stop, vowing that she has parted from them; the witchdoctors and their charms. By this time the account has however succeeded to shake my nerves, anon splits my stomach.

“But doesn’t Mukogodo forest, where the albinos were got, lie by the wayside of your village?” Halima asks, but before she dilates more on the account, my feet are at the threshold of the door, heading to my father’s engang.

It is now ten hours of the day, I am seated in papa's orripie or male hut, beating my brains out; imagining the hand by the witchdoctor as part of the disappeared members of engang e lapas' mortal remains, how many more members have disappeared since the last time we were with Yeyo, how I am going to disclose Yeyo from the place we found her, at the edge of Mukogodo forest. Then, suddenly, I catch sight of Yeyo standing at the threshold of our enkishomi or gate and my heart drops. Nkini is not by her side. Yeyo's skins of the eye are swollen, the halo of her eyes reddened, and her dimple is hollow. Her ologesena's shoulder knot hangs loosely over her upper arm, the ollekishopo flutters in the breeze, her enkimeita no longer cleaving to her waist. Her body has fallen away. When I see her, I know it. I know I am going to mourn Nkini. I plank down and my vision blurs. It becomes dark.

THE END

Grace Suge is a native of Eldoret town in Kenya. She is a published author whose works have gone on to be published by the International Human Rights Arts Festival and in Octo- Emanations, the eighth volume of the critically acclaimed Emanations literary anthology series. Her short story, 'Laibon's prophesy' was awarded the second prize in the Creators of Justice Awards 2020 by the International Human Rights Arts Festival. Her first novel (fiction), 'Maasai in red' has been published on kindle. The book explores the lives of the Ilmaasae nation living in the Maasai plains during the pre and post-colonial period in Kenya's history and aims to preserve their heritage for the future generations. Currently, she is working on a sequel to the novel 'Maasai in red' which she purposes to publish by December 2021. She enjoys reading and listening to humorous stories.

A Long Time Coming

By Kathy Easton

I stand on the river bank watching a primary-coloured St. Vincent parrot swoop across heading for the forest. I wish I could fly like that, bird to reach the other side, but the only way for people to cross this river is by gripping the swaying, fraying rails of a decrepit rope bridge and praying for safety.

When I used to cross this bridge on my way to school, I never imagined it would still be in use twelve years later. Treacherous even then, but a little safer with an extra rope suspended above each side. Those ropes reassured me that in case of the bridge collapsing I could haul myself across upside down using hands and knees. But first one, then the other of the safety ropes tore away in storms, never to be replaced.

In those days I used to dream of becoming Governor of our Caribbean island. Fanciful beyond reason for a girl maybe, but perhaps a remote possibility if I devoured every scrap of education available to me.

So I read all the books I could lay hands on. Our school book room hardly merited the name library, with only two rickety shelving units displaying thumb-stained volumes with weakened spines, never to be taken away. Every afternoon when other pupils filed out after the final lesson, I stayed behind reading until the janitor had to shoo me out.

Once I lingered too long. Despite running all the way to the river, there was no option but to cross while swiftly-falling night closed in. I prayed for safety over each step as I gripped the rough sisal for dear life, eyeing the black water streaking below, glittering in moonlight.

The terror of that journey ensured I always stopped reading before twilight, but only by the skin of my teeth sometimes.

Tearing myself away from the final chapter of Jane Eyre proved impossible however. After secreting the book in my backpack to read at home by candle light, I endured the punishment of three strokes of the lash on my permanently chafed palms after returning it next day. The pain was as nothing compared to the thrill of discovering the ending.

I came top of the class that year and imagined a bright future, even going to college, until the hurricane struck.

My family's cabin and the school buildings, sited within the river basin, would likely be spared serious damage, but the wind howling all night signalled a warning to those on higher ground to prepare for the worst.

Next day pupils from the town side of the river whispered that seventy people had lost their lives.

I began to realise that this must have been the worst we'd ever experienced when foreign aid workers started arriving on the island a week or so later. The newspapers were full of pictures of smiling men shouldering plastic pipes below headlines calling them angels and champions.

But people whispered about them too, unspeakable rumours concerning their treatment of local people.

Anxious to see the aftermath of the hurricane for myself, I climbed the track up the hill behind the school. The scene that met my eyes made me clutch at the nearest vegetation for support.

The Governor's residence and the Town Hall were still standing, but every cabin and bungalow lay in shattered slabs, their roofs splayed yards distant, their insides ripped out and flung across the wreckage. Buckets, basins and chemical toilets spewed their contents, attracting rats and insects that fed off such detritus.

Sickened by the sight and stench, I turned towards a construction site near the foot of the cliff. Helmeted workers were erecting huts from breeze blocks being disgorged from gigantic trucks belching noxious fumes.

Some workers had already moved into the finished huts. A woman with loose hair wearing jeans and a white blouse emerged from one, carrying a tray laden with metal cans.

Male workers, all white or very light-skinned, clustered around making raucous noises which I was too high up to catch the sense of, sounding like derisive laughter. They peeled open the cans to drink from directly. One spat out a mouthful of liquid.

Ashamed to see such disrespectful behaviour, I climbed down, trembling

with an unknown fear.

Next day a new pupil joined my class, the daughter of an aid worker. She was blessed with red-gold tresses, woven into two thick braids hanging either side of her pale face.

“Hi,” she grinned at me, “I’m Sherrie. What’s your name?”

“Lydia,” I mumbled, eyes cast down.

“Hi, Lydia. I’m American. My Dad had to bring me with him 'cos my mother died and he was fired up to help you guys recover from the disaster.”

I smiled shyly, not yet daring to ask questions, but Sherrie asked a few of her own.

“Where’s the school café? My Dad says you only get beans for lunch, not even rice some days? And where is the bathroom?”

I showed her the outdoor toilet block, explaining that we ate our lunch outdoors, sitting on the ground on the shady side of the building, and it wasn’t always beans. Sometimes we did get rice too.

Over the few weeks Sherrie stayed, we became friends. She showed me a small screen she called a cell phone, more like a tiny TV set than any telephone I’d ever seen. It took photos too. Sherrie took one of us together on the river bank, which I wanted to keep..

“I’ll print it out when I get home and send it to you,” she offered, but although I waited for weeks and then months after she left, I never received that photo.

When Sherrie showed me pictures of her school in Miami, I gasped with excitement. A three-storey brick building with trees and grassed plots all around, it looked like the Governor’s residence, only bigger.

“I wish our school was like that,” I murmured. “That’s my dream.”

I checked Sherrie’s lagoon-blue eyes for acceptance, then told her.

“Some day I’ll be Governor of this island, or - OK – more likely marry the Governor. Either way, I’ll make sure he gets all the flattened homes repaired with breeze blocks. And this school ...this school will be made of bricks!”

Sherrie laughed. “That’s never going to happen here.”

The conversation died. I regretted sharing my dream with Sherrie, and pondered her words.

That's never going to happen here. Why did she say that?
I didn't know then, but I know now.

On the day Sherrie and her father were due to return to America she took me to see what the aid workers had achieved. She called it restoring the infrastructure, meaning the water pipes from the river to the Governor's residence and hand pumps near the main street.

While I was testing one, enjoying the splash of cool water on my hands, Sherrie's father strolled over to join us with another aid worker, who immediately offered to show me a new building behind the Residence.

I glanced at Sherrie for approval to go with him.
She just shrugged, slipped her hand through her father's arm and they wandered away together, leaving me alone with the stranger.
He led me behind the Residence towards a grove of breadfruit trees. I assumed they were part of the Governor's garden, but the aid worker said,

“We planted these for your people. You don't seem to grow much fresh fruit around here.”

Even as I realised that could not be true, since the trees were mature and already yielding fruit, he grasped my waist with both arms and hoisted me up to pick one.

What happened next is a blurred memory. There was no new building behind the Residence; only the trees offering shade and shadows and darkness to hide what he was doing to me.

I stopped myself from crying for help because it might get this man into trouble, but I wanted to scream. He was hurting me, after pushing my dress above my legs and lying on top of me.

When he finished he hauled himself up and walked away.
I found my way home walking painfully past the patched-up cabins near the Residence and the scarcely-touched ruins further away. Crossing the rope bridge that day was agony, but I didn't tell anyone what had happened.

I made an excuse not to attend school next day, or the day after, until my mother decided she needed me at home all the time. By then I had three younger siblings and my father had died a few months earlier.

So I never went back to school.

I shake off those oppressive memories as I stand on the river bank now, watching a dazzling parrot swoop across. I am on my way to market, carrying the garments I sew to earn a living.

Instead of going to college I spent my days in our cabin, cutting up old garments from the church mission to re-make into head wraps, bags and shawls on my mother's treadle sewing machine. I still use it today.

I also still dream about becoming Governor of this island but now I know it was never more than wishful thinking, as useless as hoping for the income generated from tourism to be spent on rebuilding homes.

The present Governor still lives in the Residence, which has expanded to include a new wing, extended gardens and tarred roads leading directly to the main street in one direction and out to the airstrip in the other.

I heard that he has a yacht in the bay and drives a Mercedes car to attend meetings at the Town Hall.

Of course he must keep up appearances as he entertains wealthy foreigners, doing business to promote tourism on the leeward side of the island.

All that entertaining and paying his staff, one or two of whom live locally, probably leaves nothing over for rebuilding damaged properties.

In fact I read in the newspaper that a decision was taken at the Town Hall not to repair the ravaged cabins, as they would most likely be smashed again when the next hurricane struck

Using the same logic, I suppose they decided not to repair the rope bridge either.

And that frightens me, because one day – maybe tomorrow - it is bound to collapse. Perhaps then, after somebody is swept away downstream, the Governor will pay for a proper wooden bridge to replace it.

I swat away a mosquito and shift the bundle on my back. Gripping the sisal rails I edge forwards while the bridge sways and jolts and bounces, praying and hoping against hope that one day something will change.

Kathleen Anne Easton (Pen-name Kathanne Easton)

Born 11.11.1960 in south east London, England

Writing career:

1988-81 Produced, edited and published fanzine Kimono, interviewing and photographing chart musicians for copy.

1985-96: Numerous features published in UK magazines including My Weekly; Ms. London; City Limits; the Literary Review: best of British,

1996 – 2017

Public speaker. Delivered self-scripted talks to special interest groups across SE England. Most popular talk, delivered more than 50 times, “The Art of Complaining” highlighted injustice on a micro scale, e.g. sharp business practices, unfair treatment, and extortion.

2017 - present

Fiction writing. Short stories commercially published so far include Spared (Unsafe Spaces anthology,, Earlyworks Press 2019) and I Wnna Hold Your Hand (YOURS Fiction Special magazine July 2020)