

Creators of Justice Awards 2023

HONORABLE MENTION

Short Story

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Before Dawn

by Andrew Worthy

I've always been considered a strange child by my friends, a few family members, and church folks. This is because I possess hyperactive senses and an intelligence that is beyond my age. I can hear the sound of rain before the clouds gather. I can taste a pinch of herb diluted in volumes of water. I can perceive the smell of a rose in the midst of orchids. I can see a crystal of salt in a congregation of sand, and I can feel pain even before it is inflicted on my flesh. I am what many would call *a gifted child*. Whenever anyone asked me what I want to be when I grow up, I'd say an astronaut. No child in my village aspired to be an astronaut. I was probably the only one who knew what the word 'astronaut' meant, as I had to explain it to anyone who asked me the question of my future profession.

“You have quite a weird mind,” one of my school teachers would always say to me.

It is this weird mind of mine that alerts me whenever and wherever there is danger... It is this weird mind of mine that woke me up at about 1:00 a.m. sometime in June, just two months before I turned eleven years old. This was the umpteenth time that I'd randomly wake up in the middle of the night. I began to fantasise about my future. I had plans of relocating to the big city after my high school education and enrolling in college as an engineering student. I was going to make it happen... for myself... for my parents... for my community. My teacher, Mr. Ahmad, said that I could do anything I put my heart to do, as long as I believed in myself. I smiled in satisfaction.

I shut my eyes and tried returning to my sleep state, but my mind wasn't cooperating. It was trying to warn me. I suddenly began to feel uneasy. I raised my body from the rubber mat on which I lay and rested my back against the wall. The only window in the one-room apartment that I, my sibling, and my parents shared, allowed a very dim stream of moonlight into the room. The stream of light was surrounded by a mass of darkness.

I managed to gaze at my younger brother, who was fast asleep by my side. A bright light suddenly shone on my face from the bed on which my parents lay.

"Zainab, why are you awake by this time?" my father questioned, pointing the light from his little battery-powered torch in my direction.

"I can't sleep," I replied.

"What's bothering you?"

I knew my mind was bothered, but I didn't know why. "Nothing. I..."

Before I could sound the remaining words, I heard a faint cry from a distance. A cry of agony.

I paused for some seconds.

"Why can't you sleep then?" my father asked.

"Nothing baba," I replied.

It was just my mind, playing tricks on me again.

"Lie down and close your eyes; sleep will come," my father instructed.

"Yes baba," I replied and put my body back on the mat.

The moment I shut my eyes, the cry came again, with the faint sound of a gunshot this time.

"Did you hear that?" my father asked. He heard it too.

The cry wasn't an abstract one; it was real, and now I was sure that it was this same noise that had woken me from my sleep.

"I heard it, baba," I responded.

The cry was followed by a string of other sounds - sounds of chaos.

My father climbed down from the bed and walked towards the door.

"I'll be right back," he said as he opened the door and walked out.

Trouble! Trouble! That little weird mind of mine kept resounding this word to me. Growing up in the northern part of Nigeria was hard, especially for those of us who were born in slums. Every noise of dispute during the day was a cause for alarm, and every strange sound at night stole sleep from our eyelids.

I tried to shake off the thought from my adolescent mind, but it just wouldn't go away.

My father ran back into the room with a foreign look on his face; the kind I had never seen on him before. He rushed towards the bed and grabbed my pregnant mother by the arm. Startled, she hurriedly lifted her back off the bed.

"They are here," my father yelled; terror entrenched in his voice.

"Who?" my mother inquired. "The gunmen!"

She gasped.

"Wake your brother!" my mother screamed at me.

I quickly held my younger brother who was still drunk with sleep, and pulled him up from the mat.

"Follow me," my father ordered, as he held my mother's hand and walked out of the door.

As soon as we got outside the house, I saw them - the men with guns. There were scores of them. Many of them were clothed with guns, while others were adorned with machetes and daggers.

They had set fire to most of the houses in the village. Some of the inhabitants they killed with bullets, while others, they butchered with their machetes.

The air was filled with a blend of sounds - endless gunshots from all manner of firearms, the heavy footsteps of people running to safety, the wails of mothers whose husbands had been beheaded and husbands whose wives had been butchered like cheap meat...

There was a lorry parked on one side of the street, and my friend, Maryam, was sitting in the cargo bed of the lorry. But not just her... there were about thirty other girls in the lorry. Some of

the armed men dragged more girls from their homes, onto the truck, while about four of the men stood beside the truck to ensure that none of the girls escaped.

I had heard stories about these men... stories about how they went from one village to the other, abducting teenage girls. I had heard the story of the Chibok and Dapchi girls... I had heard stories.

On this night, I saw them as they killed innocent people and took away their daughters – my friends.

My teenage mind was frozen with fear... I couldn't stand being separated from my parents.

My father held my mother with his left hand and me with his right, as I also held my younger brother.

We ran, but not for too long. My mother's pregnancy had made her hypertensive; whatever caused her to panic automatically increased her blood pressure. She had begun to pant heavily; she couldn't run anymore.

"Run to the church with your brother and wait for us there," my father said.

I and my sibling ran through the valley of the shadow of death as we made for the church – the place of refuge – which was a safe distance away from the house. When we got there, we met about two dozen other persons who had escaped from the madness that was going on and had come to seek safety within the four walls.

My little brother and I sat on one of the wooden benches in the church, waiting for the angel of mercy to bring our parents to us.

We waited with our guts stuck in our throats, in fear and in hope, amidst the continuous rain of gunshots and the terrifying smell of death that saturated the ambience. We waited for an hour... two hours... three hours... till dawn... but our parents never came.

It's been over three months since the night those madmen invaded our village, bringing with them destruction. Yet, my parents did not come to meet us in the church as they promised. And from that moment till now, my adolescent mind has kept asking questions, yearning for answers.

Why did these men carry out the assault on our village? What crime did we commit to deserve such punishment? When did humankind become this barbaric, as to slaughter its own without a scratch on its conscience?

My heart has neither been comforted by the encouraging words of sympathisers, nor consoled by the reassuring songs that have been sung by a government that has failed to do the needful.

Over three months after that dark incident, I still stand outside the church, every night, waiting, expecting my parents to come for me, before dawn.

Breast Ironing

by Tripurari Kumar Sharma, India

The sun was about to set. At one particular moment, it seemed as if the sharp peak of the hill had sunk into the chest of the sun. Drops of stale blood started dripping from the morning eyes. The nearby brown hills on which the ink of night had been scattered a few moments ago were now looking red. When a yellow piece of sunlight fell on the window glass, the whole room filled with the sound of light. The corner of Alina's eyelids became wet with the dew of dreams. A drop of tear rolled down her cheeks. She tried to wipe off the tear with her fingers. She felt like it had frozen on her cheeks. She tried to scratch it with her nails but couldn't find even the ashes. Only a few red spots formed on her sand like face. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was bruised at many places. She was not even aware that she had scratched her face while trying to scrape off the tear. Slowly her face started to bleed. The blood passed through her neck and reached the chest. She felt a stream of blood reaching her navel. The mirror slipped from her hand and fell on the floor. The blood was moving downwards from the navel. For a moment it seemed that she had lost her legs, but the moment blood started flowing on her legs, she shuddered. She noticed that the entire floor had become red with blood. She stood like a stone. She could only see the colour red everywhere. She turned towards the window and saw that the red blood was flowing in the river behind the house. She picked up a piece of the broken mirror and looked at herself again. Her face was still bleeding. The clear sound of dripping blood was echoing in her ears. She screamed loudly. Her eyes suddenly opened like a rose bud bursting into a flower in a moment. When she looked up, found that the picture of her father hanging on the wall

had tilted. She wanted to get up from the bed but couldn't. It felt as if all the strength had been taken out of her legs.

It was the first time when something like this happened with Alina. The first thing she recalled was her friend's advice, "It happens with every girl. If not today, it will happen tomorrow for sure. Don't be nervous!"

Alina wasn't nervous at all. She was afraid of only one thing- 'the ritual of breast ironing' that happens after the first period. It wasn't a choice but a compulsion for every girl in the whole village.

Once just after two days of the ritual when a friend exposed her chest to Alina, she couldn't bear to look at it. She suffered more than her friend could. That very day Alina decided to save herself and all the girls of the entire village from the ritual.

There were five widows appointed for the ritual in the village. They were known as 'Panchdev'. If one of those five died, another widow was chosen with the consent of the remaining four. It was their responsibility to perform the ritual with all the girls after their first periods. Many people didn't agree with this ritual but could not speak due to the fear of Panchdev. However, Panchdev believed that it's an old tradition and is only for the betterment of girls. After the ritual, men's views change and the occurrence of rape becomes negligible. When school going girls tried to explain that being a woman isn't the reason of rape but the mentality of men, they were scolded and silenced. As the influence of Panchdev increased the difficulties for the girls also increased. After the death of Alina's father, her mother was also chosen to join Panchdev. She had performed the rituals on many girls till now.

That day, Alina walked to the bathroom on her shaking legs. She tried to clean the bed sheet but the red stains of blood were still partially visible. She put the bedsheet on the terrace and placed a towel over it. Then she got ready for school. Before she could leave the house, her friend had arrived. Both of them left for school. Alina wasn't very comfortable while walking. Looking at Alina, her friend asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't want to tell anyone."

"Do you think you can hide this?"

"Hmm..."

"...but how long? One day or the other they will definitely know. Then?" "Then what?"

"No girl could escape this ever in this village and..."

"But I will and all the girls in the village too!"

There was a deep confidence in Alina's voice. They kept walking silently on the hilly roads until they reached their school. Alina didn't talk much that day. She didn't even have lunch. When the teacher interrupted, she said she wasn't feeling well. Somehow the day passed under the shadow of pain. While returning from school she saw the sunset behind the hill. A thought came to her mind, how nice it would be if the stains on the bedsheet also disappeared like the sun. She didn't share this thought with her friend who was walking with her. Both were still silent. Her friend looked at Alina. She was lost in her thoughts. That day neither of them stopped at Majnu's sweet shop nor did Alina smile at Majnu like usual. There was a fire ignited inside her and she was in search of water. She fell asleep as she reached home.

When Alina's mother went on the terrace, she noticed the blood stains on the bedsheet. She was shocked. She thought of hiding it first, but no one can avoid the future. She never felt bad at all while performing the ritual with the daughter of others. But the thought of performing the ritual with her own daughter made her uncomfortable. She suddenly recalled her childhood. When she was just ten years old. Some women of the village had forced themselves on her in the name of ritual. She went into the room and stood in front of the mirror. Exposed her breasts and looked at them. She saw nothing except feeding Alina. A little girl who doesn't even have teeth. Who has milk on her lips. Suddenly the smell of fresh milk started filling the room.

She recalled something that Alina's father used to say, "Unless the accident happens to our own, we don't realize the sorrow of others."

Alina's mother felt for the first time the pain of all the girls with whom the ritual was performed. She felt a river of sorrow flowing inside her. She didn't feel this much sadness even after the death of her husband. Grief was no longer a word for her but a world full of screams. A world that she had created for herself knowingly or unknowingly. For the first time she felt that being a part of 'Panchdev' was an extension of her ego. She searched her mind and found that a woman wanted to take revenge for the atrocities done to her. She was taking revenge from her next generation for the wrong deeds done to her by the previous generation. She realized her mistake for the first time but it was too late. She also realized how helpless and weak she was. She was trying to be tough but was deeply broken from within.

Even on the second day of Alina's periods, the sun knocked at the door at the right time. By now the entire village knew that the ritual will be performed with Alina today. Her mother was aware

that this ritual could not be avoided even if one wanted to. She peeped into the room and saw that Alina was sleeping in her bed. A thin line of sunlight had appeared on her face and chest. For the first time Alina's mother realized how beautiful and innocent her daughter is. She also recalled the happy time when she got married. She was only 14 years old and her husband was 21. While lifting the veil on the wedding night, her husband had said, "I want a daughter exactly like you." She was shy and curled up in her own arms. Her husband kept removing the jewelry one by one and she kept knitting her daughter's face. Exactly nine months later when a daughter was born there was no limit to their happiness. She also recalled the wretched day when she was crying on the bier of Alina's father. 7 years old Alina was holding her father's fingers. She couldn't understand why her mother was crying. She remained seated for some time. When her father didn't wake up, she came to her mother and started crying. Seeing Alina crying, the villagers took her away from there. Her mother kept crying until the bier was taken away. Memories were being revealed layer by layer. Alina's mother was drowning into them.

Suddenly, someone knocked at the door of Alina's house. Alina's mother saw that four women were standing outside the house. Everyone was wearing black clothes. Panchdev had arrived. Alina's mother didn't utter even a single word. All the four women came inside the house. Alina was woken up from her sleep. She could understand what was going to happen next. She looked at the picture of her father. She thought that if her father would have been there he would have driven away all the women by beating them with sticks and save her. Her father would have said to everyone that it's not necessary that everyone should adopt the tradition which has been followed for years. Every girl can live as per her wish. No one is forced to follow baseless rules and regulations of society. But it was just a picture of her dead father. It neither said anything to the

women nor tried to save Alina. And her mother knew that if she tried to save her daughter today, the girls of the entire village might turn against Panchdev. The question was about satisfying her ego. Today, for the first time, Alina saw a helpless woman in her mother who knows the answer to every question but doesn't want to share.

Alina was forced to lie down on the bed. Panchdev held her hands and feet. She was unable to free herself even if she tried a lot. A fire had been lit up in one corner of the room. A piece of wood was being oiled and heated on the fire. The shirt was removed from Alina's chest and stuffed into her mouth. Then Alina's mother was called. Alina's mother placed the oiled and heated piece of wood on Alina's budding breasts. Alina screamed. Her scream filled the entire room. Tears of helplessness burst from her eyes. The heart continued to be hurt with every scream. The ritual was completed. Gradually the scream converted into silence. Her father's face was floating before Alina's eyes. The moisture in the pupils had dried up. She closed her eyelids. She felt that she was dead. The silent cry of all the girls of the village echoed together on the hill. When Alina woke up she found herself in a hospital room. She saw that her friend and Majnu were talking to a doctor and a yellow patch of sunlight was smiling at the window glass. She was unaware that the 'Panchdev' had been arrested.

(Note: Breast ironing is a widespread traditional practice especially in Cameroon, Togo and Guinea. The goal is to slow down the development of the breasts by a massage made with heated objects (crushing stone, pestle, spatula) and keep protected girls from sexual harassment, possible rape, early pregnancy and allow them to pursue education rather than be forced into early

marriage. The practice is typically performed by a close female figure to the victim, traditionally fulfilled by a mother, grandmother, aunt, or female guardian.)

Silent Liberation

by Nnedimma Ifechukwu Okoli

My mother pulled me forward into the bus one early morning in August. We had finished school for the year and grandma requested I spend the holidays with her. Grandma claimed she was lonely, but I knew better; she needed me around to run errands and cook her meals. This was why grandma never requests for my two brothers; they were terrible at cooking.

I've never refused spending my holidays with grandma because I enjoyed leaving my house. I had some freedom anytime I stayed with grandma. She never questioned me like my mother would whenever I stayed outside longer than usual. Telling grandma I needed to buy something outside was enough excuse to stay outdoors for an hour and she wouldn't ask me questions. That was how I met the other teenagers living in the twin three-storey building housing eight flats in our compound. Sometimes, I think grandma no longer kept track of time for her not to question why I waste so much time outdoors, or maybe she wanted me to love the freedom I get from staying with her. That way, I would want to come to her place again for the next holiday.

Grandma had a young girl employed by Father who comes from Mondays to Saturdays at designated times to help her out with errands. The girl was in charge of cooking grandma's meals, cleaning the house and running errands for her but she never satisfies grandma who once told me

that it was dangerous for outsiders to prepare your meals. They could easily poison the food, she said. When I get to grandma's house, I knew I would take charge of cooking her meals while the girl does every other chore.

Earlier that morning, I argued with Mother before we left the house together. She insisted on taking the bus with me from Awka to Onitsha; to make sure I arrived grandma's place safely. I argued that at fourteen, I was a grown-up enough young lady to take the bus alone. To my embarrassment, mother refused. I turned to Father, asking him to intervene, but he only smiled and walked away. Not like I expected my father to challenge my mother; he never does that.

Since childhood, we were taught at school and church that mothers were in charge of cooking, taking care of the kids and the house, while fathers were in charge of bringing in the money and taking decisions. My father never took important decisions in my family. Mother took all the decisions; it was her who always chose the schools we attended, Mother always selected the yearly design modifications to be made in our house, and she decides what we eat in the house every day.

As we settled comfortably at the back of the bus, a preacher entered with a megaphone. I sighed, I hated the level of noise the preachers caused. Now that the megaphone would be with us inside the bus, I prepared my mind for some ear blasting. Ordinarily, the preacher wouldn't have needed to amplify his voice for us to hear him, but the loading spot was noisy and filled with activities.

The sound of the preacher blowing air into the megaphone to test it got mixed with the loud music from a nearby shop selling CDs. I lifted my hands to my two ears to block away the sounds

but it was no good. A boy pushing a wheelbarrow filled with cooked groundnuts kept shouting repeatedly... “Buy fresh groundnuts!” as he passed. The conductors of different buses shouted for passengers as they drove past us. A young man with a wheel barrow full of iron scraps kept shouting... “Iron condemn!” “Bring your iron condemn!” as he went past us. I looked at my mother to see if her ears were aching like mine, but she simply sat there looking around like things were normal.

The preacher started with singing praises, then drifted to worship. Mother’s eyes occasionally went to my face as it all happened. She wanted to make sure my lips were singing and my hands clapping along with the other bus occupants. Mother knew I didn’t like the preachers to some extent.

On one particular occasion when I took the bus with my mother to the market, I didn’t join the prayers when a bus preacher came. Mother later questioned me when we got home and I explained to her how the preachers do everything they did for money. It was always the same pattern; they sing, worship, preach, pray and finally ask everyone to support their ministry. I often watched the way they asked for the support and how they dwelt so much on it till they’ve gotten a substantial amount of money, then they would leave the bus and move onto the next one. “It is all business, mother,” I said. Mother had scolded me in anger. That was the day Mother spoilt my Hand Game when it missed me and hit the wall.

Mother said a lot of things to me that day. She said I was too small for the things I said, that my brain was not yet developed enough to understand how certain things worked. She told me how stupid I was not to pray at any slightest opportunity I got. “The Holy Bible says you should pray

without season,” she said repeatedly that day. I wasn’t sure if the last word was ‘season’ or ‘ceasing’.

The preacher’s loud voice came, “Begin to pray for this journey to be smooth. Open your mouth because a closed mouth is a closed destiny!”

I was muttering with the others. I knew my mother was looking at my closed eyes and muttering lips.

He continued, “Stretch forth your hands to the direction of your destination and command the roads to ...” suddenly, his words were cut short and a heavy sound of something hitting the ground and breaking followed. I opened my praying shut eyes to see it was the megaphone.

Someone had dragged the preacher out of the bus. In my confusion, I tried to watch the drama and listen at the same time.

This intruder was similarly dressed like our preacher; wearing an unmatched trouser, shirt, coat and tie under the hot sun. Most street preachers dressed that way; looking like they wanted to appear professional on a low budget. The intruder held the preacher by the collar, saying in an angry loud voice, “You went to preach in my bus, you thief! You’ve went to preach in my bus again!”

Above the sound of the loud music coming from the CD shop, I strained to hear the preacher’s voice, “John,” the preacher cried. “Leave my shirt alone or I’ll slap you! Leave my shirt John!”

I saw embarrassment fill the face of the preacher as his eyes darted with swift succession from the bus to his assailant.

The intruder continued, refusing to leave the preacher, “I will teach you a lesson today! Next time, you will avoid my buses. You finish in your buses and you come to steal in mine, you love money too much!”

“I didn’t see you around, so I thought I could help you to...” a loud slap landed on the preacher’s face and he swallowed his words. I saw that two buttons were now missing from his shirt which exposed the faded white singlet he wore inside.

I heard some gasps escape the mouths of the occupants of our bus. The passengers were the only ones bothered by the fight as they argued and tried to talk to the preachers, people in the street just went about their activities, stopping to stare briefly before moving on.

Just then, the ignition of our bus came on, our driver must have entered the bus when my attention was on the two preachers. I watched the driver seem nonchalant to the fight that originated from his bus. I concluded it wasn’t the first time he was witnessing something of this nature.

I withdrew my eyes from the driver and placed them on my mother’s face instead. I smiled broadly when I saw a mixture of shock and disbelief on my mother’s face. My mother couldn’t believe what had unfolded before her; two preachers fighting to preach in the bus.

I imagined all the questions possibly forming on her mind. Was it not the same word of God that the preachers wanted to preach in the bus? Was a preacher; God’s representative on earth supposed to fight, especially in public? Does it matter who preaches?

One important question I wished Mother was asking herself was whether her daughter was right when she said that the preachers were running a business and nothing more?

I smiled as I relaxed into my chair feeling satisfied. I was sure of one thing; my mother would never force me to pray inside the bus again.

The Greatest Bakery

by Piyumi Kapugeekiyana

The secretariat is a stodgy grey building, a beached whale on Colombo's unwelcoming shores. As Nara walks through its dank corridors, she feels a sudden weariness. An overhead fan creaks from a wooden beam, agitating humid air and doing little to relieve the discomfort of the man at the counter, fanning himself with the *Lankadeepa* newspaper. Nara doesn't want to be in this tired edifice but she has heard that the secretariat offers 5,000 rupees in monthly living assistance to people like her. It isn't much but it's better than nothing.

The man at the counter barely glances at her before sliding a sheet of paper over. The application form is long and the questions are invasive. Tired and bedraggled after two bus rides to the capital, she takes her time filling it out in careful block letters. But when the man studies the completed form, he heaves a loud sigh. "Sorry, not eligible."

Nara is confused. "What do you mean *not eligible*? I have a medically verified condition, like the form mentions," she says, pulling out a thick medical file from her canvas bag.

The man at the counter tells her to put the papers away. He says her flat face and stubby nose tell him more than the file ever will, but the secretariat has strict rules for disbursement. If she had bothered to read the notes in the form, she would have noticed that the allowance is for people

with severe disabilities, for families with more than one disabled person, or whose breadwinner is disabled. He sighs again, as if exhausted by his own condescension.

Nara puzzles for a moment, bristling at his words and her failure to read the fine print. Her eyes flit from his receding hairline to his dull skin. He is like the building, grey and inhospitable.

When she doesn't respond, he stands up and leans over the counter. "*Therenawa da?*" he asks slowly in Sinhala, elongating each syllable, as though peeling gum off the bottom of his shoe. *Do you understand?*

Finally, Nara nods. "What about housing assistance?" she asks. "Can I apply for that?"

She rents a small room with peeling blue walls above a *saiva kade*, next door to a night 'spa' called Velvet Touch. The room is a kindness from the parishioners of Moratuwa, corralled into action by the nuns at the Convent of the Holy Cross, who taught her to read and write. If not for noisy neighbours, Nara would be more grateful for it. From the eatery, she hears the clattering of plates, the sizzle of oil and the thrum of diners at all hours of the day. At night, the flickering neon lights from the spa cast a mean red glow into her bedroom and she can't fall asleep for the grunts and moans issuing from within its squalid halls. When their business is complete, the men thud down the iron staircase outside her window, followed by women hiding behind curtains of hair. The metal steps groan under their weight, and turning in her bed, Nara groans too, longing for quiet.

"You own land?" the man at the counter asks, jolting her back.

"Why would I be here if I had land?" she says.

"Housing assistance of 250,000 rupees is available. You can apply if you own land."

Nara stares again. It seems to rile the man further.

“Look, funds are not from my pocket, okay? The rule is that you get housing assistance if you have land and want to build a house. Come back with an estimate and house plan. Technical officer will give you a signature and stamp,” he says, gesturing to a rotund woman next to him.

Nara cannot believe her ears. “No housing assistance unless you own land? How is this fair?”

The man at the counter clicks his tongue and folds his arms, “Don’t ask me about fair.”

It is a most disappointing visit. Nara has no choice but to leave. On her way out, she overhears the grump mutter to his robust colleague, “*Puruwe kala pau thamai.*”

Sins committed in a past birth.

Nara grits her teeth. If only they doled out benefits by the number of times that tired line trotted her way. “Get your facts straight,” she tells the man, “It’s a chromosomal abnormality. It can happen to anyone.” With that, she turns on her heel and storms off, not noticing the amused young man in the corner.

*

“Engrisi puluwanda?”

Nara is still smarting from her conversation with the man at the counter. She spins around, ready to snap at her new interlocutor. He’s tall and lean, with a wry smile.

“Yes, I speak English,” she says. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m Aravind. I own the bakery across the road,” he says, gesturing at a cheerful shopfront. “It’s brand new.”

Aravind's skin shines like toffee but there's no symmetry to the man. The left side of his body is muscled and sinewy but his right arm is skinny and curved like a scythe, his right hand frozen into a claw. As he walks toward her, Nara notices that his right leg drags ever so slightly, like a rake across the sand. From left to right, Aravind looks like he's melting in Colombo's heat.

"The doctors call it hemiplegic cerebral palsy," he says, watching her eyes drift. "I like to say I forgot to exercise the other side of my body."

"I didn't ask."

"I'm answering the unspoken question."

"What does this have to do with speaking English?"

"I couldn't help but overhear that sorry conversation in there," he says, gesturing at the grey building. "I'm looking for someone to run my bakery. Chat with posh customers, manage the team, that sort of thing."

"So, your hiring strategy is to follow people and eavesdrop on them?"

"*Aiyo*, don't bite my head off. I was at the secretariat putting these up," he says, handing her a flyer. "You happened to come in at the right time."

She glances at the paper. It reads like an advertisement for the circus.

Come one, come all! The Greatest Bakery beckons! We're looking for a talented manager to steward prodigious artisans, novel processes and a one-of-a-kind café. Join us in serving delectable treats to Colombo's elite!

"Why me then?"

“Held your own in there, didn’t you?”

Nara glances over at the bakery. “Thank you, but this isn’t what I had in mind,” she says, trying to leave.

“Perhaps,” he says, smiling. “But it’s better. Don’t take my word for it. Come see.”

Nara remembers that she has two bus rides back to a lonely blue room and reluctantly agrees.

*

Across the street, Aravind swings the doors open with a flourish and a brass bell welcomes them loudly.

For a moment, Nara is stunned. The space is nothing like she expected. Her eyes wander along the high ceilings from which basket pendant lights dangle, casting a warm glow over pine wood tables and teal sofas drowning in batik cushions. Potted plants dot the shelves along the length of the space, interspersed with colourful books, cement *karapincha* leaf dishes, teardrop lanterns, coconut shell ornaments, and little painted wood figurines. Pigeon-toed nesting tables stand on either side of the shelves, topped with lotus lampshades. The walls are decorated with painted metal latticework, an effect resembling the leaves of the forest.

Surprisingly, none of this tropical fanfare distracts from the treats in the glass display case. Nara had expected to see local ‘short eats’ like fish rolls, patties and puffs with more air than filling. Instead, she finds Danishes pastries dusted with icing sugar, cradling juicy apricot and fresh ricotta. Nara’s mouth waters as she studies the rows of baklava layered with nuts and drizzled with honey, lines of lemon meringue tarts with tufts of lemon curd nestled within a crisp meringue, strawberry-topped chocolate tarts and thick slices of dulce de leche cake. A tower of profiteroles

sits on a stand, with gleaming caps of chocolate glaze. There are stacks of sunburnt loaves, crusty sourdough rolls splitting at the seams, braided chocolate brioche, and flaky almond croissants.

Nara can barely remember the grey building or the man at the counter. She looks at Aravind with admiration. Before she can say anything, a door opens in the back and a sweet medley of vanilla wafts over. A young woman emerges from the kitchen, holding a tray of choux pastry. The server introduces herself as Aisha. She offers them a few pastries to taste, flashes a radiant smile and disappears behind the glass counter to display the rest. She moves with such ease that it takes Nara a moment to realize the woman is blind.

The puffs are buttery and light as air. Nara basks in the decadence of the confection, surprised at her sudden hunger. The bakery is a revelation and she's puzzled by why it remains empty.

“Where are your customers?”

“They'll come when we're ready,” Aravind says, mysteriously. “Would you like to meet the rest of the team?”

Nara nods eagerly this time.

*

“I hire people like us,” Aravind says, pushing the blue swing door to the kitchen. “If anyone has a will to work, I find a way to help them do it.”

“How big is the team?” she asks.

“Six for now, seven if you say yes.”

Nara smiles and looks around. “We'll see.”

The kitchen is a hive of activity, compared to the quiet oasis up front.

“There are no tight corners in here,” Aravind says. “I wanted a generous, isometric space where people can thrive. As you can tell, I like all things equal.”

Nara immediately notices the tactile floor indicators. “For Aisha?”

“Yes, for Aisha. And others who need it. The place is up to scratch. Proper laminar flow, clean work sequences, no crisscross movements of materials. But the real test of the design is whether it works for people with diverse abilities.”

As if on cue, a young man in a wheelchair rolls past them to a shelving unit and reaches for a bag of flour. Instinctively, Nara moves to help him but Aravind pulls her back. “That’s Demodara, our apprentice baker. We set up low shelves in here so that people can reach for things on their own, regardless of body size, posture, or mobility.”

Sure enough, Demodara grabs the bag with ease and wheels back to a counter where a stout, sweet-faced man slices a motherlode of dough with a scraper, separating, weighing and flouring with arms that move like a windmill.

“This is our wonderful head baker,” Aravind tells Nara. “What’re you making today, Roshan?”

“Crusty rolls, soft rolls, large bloomers, small bloomers, bit of multigrain,” he says, simultaneously rolling two fistfuls of dough into soft boules with an ambidexterity that leaves Nara impressed. Roshan is the first person she’s met who looks like her.

Behind him, Nara can see trays of bread baking inside a tall oven. She moves closer to watch the loaves rise and basks in the warm glow. There’s a brightly coloured chart stuck to a corner of the oven with illustrated baking instructions. A small vector image of a crowd with a red line struck

across with the words ‘Don’t crowd the oven’. A symbol of an open eye with the instruction ‘Check food frequently toward the end of cooking’. It makes her smile.

“I see you’ve spotted the pictograms,” Aravind tells her. “They make the oven easier for anyone to use.”

“I can’t help but wonder who’s going to eat all this,” she says, again worried about the treats going to waste. “There were no customers out front.”

“If you bake it, they’ll come,” he says, maddeningly confident, and leads her toward a trio of women working nearby.

“Nara, I present to you the high priestesses of cakes and pastry. Ladies, tell us about your work.”

“I prepare pieces of chocolate for decoration, sort through almonds, and scoop fruits for jelly,” says Radhika, a petite woman in plaits. She speaks in a quiet monotone and doesn’t make eye contact.

“And I decorate the cakes with glazes, icing, buttercream and edible toppings!” booms an abundant woman called Imalka. She looks over her shoulder and sings, “Sugar roses, come to mama!”

Nivedya is the quiet artisan behind the bakery’s sugarcraft. Her workbench has an assortment of piping bags, moulds, sculpting tools, and an abundance of iced figurines, bows, ribbons and lace patterns. Aravind explains that she’s aphasic.

“What’s that?” Nara asks.

“It’s a language disorder, darling,” Imalka pipes in. “Niv has trouble speaking.”

They watch her work instead.

Slowly, Nivedya affixes a polystyrene bud on wire and creates soft petals from a dusty rose gum paste, thinning the edges with a ball tool to create the illusion of movement. She paints each delicate sliver with edible glue and wraps them around the bud with expert fingers, weaving a luscious bloom before their eyes. The whole process is meditative. Nara breaks out in applause at the end.

“We divide all bakery workflows into smaller, constituent tasks. That way, each person can move at their own pace,” Aravind says. “The schedules are adapted according to ability and fatigability. We’re a small outfit but everyone here has a permanent contract and is a valued member.”

“This place feels magical,” Nara agrees and asks the question she’s been pondering all along.

“How did you pull off all this?”

“Angels,” he says. “They’re big on impact investing.”

Nara searches his face to see if he’s pulling her leg but Aravind is perfectly serious now. She has no idea what he means but nods along, making a mental note to research everything later.

*

At the end of the tour, Aravind takes her into a bright, airy room with a minimal desk and a modular bookshelf bursting with philodendrons and Zanzibar gems.

“This is the manager’s office, should she choose to accept.”

Strolling around the room, Nara spies a frame of black and white squares on a teak side table and her eyes widen with surprise. The chessboard is unlike anything she’s ever seen. The chessmen are painted wooden figures in the style of the ancient Kandyan kingdom. There are elephants instead of horses and stupas replace castles. The queen stands tall, with a slicked-back knot of hair.

“I learned to play chess at the convent,” Nara says breathlessly, “but I have never seen a board so beautiful.”

“Does it seal the deal?”

“You haven’t even interviewed me yet,” she says, suddenly shy.

“What did you think that tour was?” Aravind asks.

“All I did was look around and ask questions.”

“You cared,” he says, “and you asked the right questions.”

“If that’s all it takes, my answer is yes!” Nara laughs.

From the café, the proud peal of the brass bell reaches them.

“Customers!” Aravind smiles. “Right on time.”

Notes:

saiva kade – vegetarian restaurant

aiyo – an exclamation, used to express a range of emotions.

karapincha – curry leaf plant

Beneath the Weight of Stigma

by Michael Chukwudi

His name is Eloka, affectionately called Elo by family and close friends. Elo is likely in his early twenties and is a third-year student in the Department of Biology at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. He has an average build and is tall, with a light complexion, and takes good care of his skin. Those who have encountered him would attest to his remarkable intelligence. He is often described as exceptionally bright. Elo hails from a Christian home, and he grappled with what he considered a peculiar personality trait. He tried to suppress these feelings, as his religion disapproved of them. He often recalled his pastor's sermons warning that those who engage in such behavior would face eternal damnation. Elo remained faithful to his beliefs, enduring inner turmoil until he entered university. It was during this time that he crossed paths with a man on Facebook.

They became friends, and this man, a middle-class Igbo resident of Enugu, not far from Nsukka, played a significant role in Elo's life. Their interactions on Facebook were ordinary, filled with affectionate terms like "my own" and "my love." After years of living in secrecy, Elo decided to have a clandestine relationship with this man, whose name he chose not to disclose. They met in his second year, engaging in unprotected sexual encounters. Despite his academic success from the first year to his current level, Elo lacked knowledge about sexual health and education.

On this fateful day, things took a turn for the worse. It was the first semester of his third year when Eloka was chosen from his faculty to embark on a six-month internship in Japan. However, before departing, he was required to undergo a series of medical tests, including one for Human

Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV). For Elo, HIV was the last disease he ever anticipated contracting. He had, after all, been monogamous since he accepted his own sexuality. Elo had completed nearly all the tests listed on the paper, and the results had been reassuring, but there was one test that shattered him..

He sat in the stifling waiting room, his heart pounding with anxiety as he anticipated the last test result. The clock on the wall read 2:00 pm, and the blazing sun directly overhead turned the room into an oven, causing everyone to sweat profusely. Despite the electric fan blowing, the environment remained unbearably hot. Elo's restless eyes darted around the room as he waited for his result. Other patients came and went, engrossed in their own concerns. Then, finally, the door to the doctor's office opened, and she appeared. She was a woman in her late thirties, with a rich chocolate complexion and an undeniable air of beauty. Her high-heeled shoes seemed like a natural extension of her feet, and her captivating dark eyes drew the attention of everyone in the room. Whispers about her natural beauty circulated among the patients.

"Hello, Igwe Eloka, please, can I see you in my office?" she said calmly and unhurriedly.

"Alright, Dr.," Eloka replied, following her into her office almost immediately. As he entered, she gestured for him to take a seat. "Thank you," he said as he sat down, taking a brief breath to calm his racing heart. His eyes wandered around the office, which, despite its compact size, was neatly organized. There was a single narrow window fortified with chicken wire, and medical books were neatly stacked on the office table.

He leaned back in the chair and craned his neck to peer out of the window. The sky outside was a brilliant, cloudless shade of deep blue, almost blinding in its brightness. The doctor remained

silent, her head bowed low, creating an atmosphere of tension that seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

Elo found himself lost in thought, desperately avoiding the idea that his test result might be unfavorable. The doctor, meanwhile, continued to speak in a roundabout way, leaving him on edge. Finally, she raised her head and spoke directly, her words hitting Eloka like a freight train.

"Eloka, there is something I'd like to tell you," she said gently. He sat there, his ears pricked, looking at her with an unwavering gaze as she continued, "You're a young man with dreams ahead of you. I believe that nothing should deter you from your life's journey. Challenges make life interesting, and overcoming them gives life meaning. Where there is life, there is hope." She paused, and Elo's heart plummeted into his chest as he felt a cold shiver run down his spine. His heart raced as he braced himself for what came next.

"This is not the end of your life. I'm sorry to say that the result came out positive." The words hung in the air like a heavy cloud, and Eloka's mind raced, contemplating the bleakness of his situation and searching for a way out of the misery that had suddenly engulfed him.

After the doctor had offered her words of comfort, she handed Eloka the test results. She strongly advised him to begin treatment immediately to prevent the situation from worsening, emphasizing that it might allow him to lead a relatively normal life and achieve his goals. Eloka accepted the results, his head hung low, shoulders slumped with the weight of his newfound reality. He left the doctor's office, walking home like a soldier afflicted with the limbs of a mosquito—frail, defeated, and burdened by an invisible weight.

When he arrived home, he found a moment of solitude, with no other students around. It was then that he took all of his test results, set them ablaze, and watched as they turned to ash. To an observer, it would seem as though he had just lost a beloved family member, for the vitality and enthusiasm that had defined him earlier that day had vanished within a matter of hours.

Before that fateful day, Eloka had been brimming with the vigor of life, but now he was a mere shadow of his former self. The diagnosis had changed everything, leaving him feeling isolated and burdened by the heavy secret he carried.

The following day, Eloka visited his faculty with a letter in hand. He handed it to his Head of Department (HOD), who read it with great interest. After perusing the content, the HOD looked at Eloka inquisitively and asked, "Eloka, do you realize the kind of opportunity you're turning down?" He appeared somewhat puzzled by Eloka's sudden and unconventional decision.

Eloka responded, feigning composure, "I apologize, sir. I understand how this opportunity could change my life. However, I've decided to pursue my industrial training here in Nigeria instead." He pretended that everything was normal and that his decision was made without any underlying issues.

After considerable negotiation, the HOD reluctantly accepted Eloka's choice, allowing him to proceed as he wished. Eloka left the office, carrying the fragments of his shattered self-esteem with him. The news of Eloka rejecting the opportunity to go abroad for his internship spread throughout the campus. Students found it hard to believe that anyone in their right mind would turn down such a promising offer.

His friends attempted to inquire about the reasons behind his peculiar decision, but Eloka provided them with an explanation they found unconvincing and unsatisfying.

As weeks turned into months and months into a year, Eloka's physical condition began to deteriorate visibly. He experienced a rapid and noticeable weight loss, and black spots began to mar his once flawless skin, resembling the early morning sunspots. Eloka resorted to wearing long-sleeve shirts as he became increasingly self-conscious about his appearance. The thought of undressing in front of others filled him with dread, and his self-esteem plummeted.

Despite the doctor's advice to register and begin taking antiretroviral drugs, Eloka hesitated. He feared running into fellow students who might recognize him while on his way to the Art center for treatment. Even though he occasionally fell ill, the stigma associated with his condition had him trapped. He withdrew from social interactions, stopped seeing his friends, and his academic performance suffered. In the final semester of his university education, students would mock him for the rashes on his skin. Some well-meaning individuals suggested antibiotics or herbal remedies, but none of these treatments brought any relief.

Eloka also attempted to reach out to his male lover from Enugu, but the man had disappeared without a trace. His phone numbers remained unreachable, and Eloka blamed himself for engaging in unprotected sex with a stranger, a decision that had led to his current predicament.

Over the course of two years, Eloka attempted to manage some of the rashes that plagued his skin by using whitening creams. Unfortunately, these creams not only altered his natural skin color but also made him appear somewhat malnourished. By this point, he had completed his ed-

ucation and decided that it was finally time to seek proper treatment for his condition. If he had waited any longer, his health might have deteriorated irreparably.

Despite his initial reluctance, Eloka's family had tried on several occasions to take him to the hospital when he experienced bouts of illness. Each time, he had lied, attributing his symptoms to malaria rather than revealing his true condition. In the period leading up to his decision to begin antiretroviral therapy, he had relied on various antibiotics, none of which had yielded any significant improvement.

One night, Eloka's life hung in the balance as he faced a severe health crisis. It was a near-death experience that served as a wake-up call. The following morning, he rushed to the hospital, determined to commence the treatment that might give him a fighting chance to reclaim his life.

Arriving at the hospital, Eloka was overtaken by fear. His eyes darted anxiously, scanning the faces of those present, searching for any acquaintances who might recognize him. He desperately sought to avoid eye contact and hide his face from anyone he knew. This constant apprehension left him perpetually distracted and feeling like a drenched fowl in the rain, exposed and vulnerable.

While he had begun taking the prescribed drugs, the daily routine became a recurring nightmare for Eloka. Sharing a room with his family, he had to adhere to a strict schedule, rising at six every morning to take his medication. However, this routine posed a significant challenge. Eloka devised a clever strategy to evade suspicion.

Each night, he would prepare the medication he needed for the following day and discreetly slip it into his pocket before going to sleep. In the morning, he would quietly slip out of the room,

making his way to a water source located by the side of the house. There, he would take his medication in secret, hidden from the watchful eyes of his family.

Living like a shadow in his own family home was not easy for Eloka, but he saw no other choice. He was determined to continue his treatment and maintain his health, even if it meant living a life of secrecy and deception to avoid stigma and misunderstanding. His younger brother, aware of his secretive early morning rituals, often teased him as "the one who sneaks out when everyone is still sleeping." Despite the challenges, Eloka knew that his health and future were at stake, compelling him to persist in his clandestine routine.

Despite the life-threatening situation he faced, Eloka's determination and resilience shone through. He managed to graduate with a second-class upper division, an impressive feat by any standard. In fact, he had the potential to graduate as the best student in his faculty, but life's challenges had struck him at the most inopportune time. His health condition forced him to be selective when it came to job applications, especially avoiding those that required a health certificate. This disease, though a constant threat, did not erode Eloka's self-esteem; instead, it molded his future. His perseverance and academic prowess earned him two postgraduate scholarships in China. Unfortunately, he had to decline these opportunities when the institutions requested health certificates that included an HIV test.

His mother, growing increasingly concerned, had taken him to various prayer houses, but nothing changed his medical condition. Eloka's willingness to work was evident when he applied for a banking job and impressed the interviewer, securing the position on the spot. However, once

again, he had to withdraw his application during the documentation stage when the bank required all employees to undergo testing at a specified hospital.

This pattern of rejecting opportunities due to his health status piqued his father's curiosity. Nigeria faced an unemployment crisis, yet his son consistently turned down job offers. To outsiders, it may have seemed as if Eloka had a magical tree from which he could pluck job opportunities at will, but in reality, his HIV status remained a closely guarded secret, one that shaped his life choices and closed doors that would have otherwise been open to him.

In an attempt to escape the torment he experienced in the place where he should have found solace, Eloka made the life-altering decision to leave his family home. He embarked on a journey to the bustling city of Lagos, seeking a fresh start and respite from his abusive father. Although he had no relatives in Lagos, he believed that facing the challenges of the unknown was preferable to enduring his father's cruelty on a daily basis.

Life in Lagos, however, proved to be unforgiving. Eloka resorted to earning a meager livelihood by hawking second-hand clothes, commonly referred to as "okirika" in the city. His dreams of pursuing a white-collar job and achieving his aspirations were shattered. The hardships he faced had taken a toll on his self-esteem, and the path to regaining it seemed uncertain. Despite the adversities he encountered, Eloka found solace in one constant: the antiretroviral drugs that sustained his health. The true burden he carried was not the disease itself, but the heavy weight of stigma that society placed upon him due to his HIV status. This invisible "thing around his neck" was the judgment and prejudice he faced daily, a constant reminder of the societal discrimination he endured as he navigated life in Lagos.