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amma birago

SHORT STORY



# **THE LIVING ROOM**

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## PART ONE

### I

At the Van Dijk residence on Consular Row on April 29<sup>th</sup> at 0443 hours, via double story glass walls and facing the observer, Ludwig Jr. in a pair of white boxer briefs hanged eight feet above polished wood floors from a Serengeti chandelier, the ticket on a jute string at his wrist reportedly bearing the message 'I'm better off'. Within the hour, by when the police arrived, an establishing shot of the scene had made it to four different consular networks managed by telecommuter tech-heads who then set the tongues of BlackBerry Messenger services wagging. It was six years to the day we lost his little sister to malaria.

The following day, with three national newspapers profiteering from said shot and whatnot, at the Cantonments police headquarters, more out of deference to the supposedly celebrated and twice bereaved Van Dijk couple, formal investigation was under way to locate the unusually serendipitous and rather hawkish remote-controlling operator who with such gross disregard intruded No. 5 Consular Row, flagrantly and most callously violating privacy rights. Taken at morning twilight while focusing on a double story glass wall, the shot served up a sharp enough superimposing reflection of the inviting terracotta forecourt of the midsection of the very handsome desert landscape architecture at the same time letting into the high ceiling gallery and expertly framing the body of the Van Dijk boy hanging dead center from the chandelier, the immense scaffolding just about gleanable behind him.

A month later, dubbed 'the hoister', the intruder of No. 5 Consular Row was still at large, the matter as expected worrisome to the nation's most exclusive enclave and most expensive residential address known especially for its impenetrable security; it soon becoming a running joke of sorts, given how Consular Row immediately conjures towering walls garnished with electric fencing permitting views of no part of the villa type residences except the crowns of moonflower and suchlike trees of the pockets of woodland through which their circular driveways go.

### II

A family of four, the Van Dijks arrived at the end of February of '95 from New York where representing the Netherlands, Ludwig. Jr. had very successfully completed a two-year art residency program. Theirs then became the first ever on Consular Row to be occupied by a non-representative of a sovereign country since May of '61 when the arboreal series of fifty-two plantation-styled colonial residences were completed.

Six months before their arrival was when the very discreetly undertaken series of extreme redesign processes were begun at No. 5 often bringing to mind the biblical account of the construction of the First Temple by the house of Israel. Utterly quiet and seamless, were it not for the two trucks which daily and right early in the morning so noiselessly rolled up in there, both with loads of materials and then out with pilings of construction debris, one was forgiven imagining a deity of some sort already taken up residence at the hub and heart of the location.

At the onset of the harmattan season, a couple of days before Christmas, a peculiar experience got the attention of some in the lower rungs of the consular community; pedestrian auxiliaries - domestics, drivers and groundsmen, security guards also - they pointed to this sense-feeling which decidedly came over one when on the walkway right along No. 5, more than likely it was believed, indicative of a consecratedness. Immediately out of range, it was often added, there was thankfully a letting up but then a conspicuously lingering holdover of grief most appropriately described in the first couple of days of the unusual occurrence as though one had just climbed out of a dream about a very distressing loss. This sensation, in both senses of the word, was by the New Year and right through to Easter not at all contested, if anything it was quietly revered, and in two cases, an outright solicitation.

It did not at all therefore come as a surprise that in the several months after the very tragic loss of the young Van Dijk girl, right before their gate, over and over again, in their hurried walks to and fro, pedestrian auxiliaries, stopping, they slightly would bow their heads for a reverent moment before carrying on walking, the superstitious and or the devout amongst them crossing themselves first.

Six years later, in support of the reunion of the Van Dijk couple, both losses were commemorated in important expat circles, the three or four different invites to the reception as though coordinated bearing watermarks of Rembrandt's Jeremiah Lamenting The Destruction Of Jerusalem, exactly what inspired the third of three murals the Van Dijk young man achieved just before securing himself to the chandelier and stepping off the scaffolding.

## PART TWO

### III

I saw him do it. One minute, Junior was up there as though sitting on a lonesome quarter moon working and reworking sailor's knots, the next minute, with a noose firmly secured around the chandelier, he slipped the other around his neck and then stepped off the scaffolding meeting a spasmodic series of tremolos head-on. Not once looking at his body come to rest facing the glass wall, as soon as he stepped out of it, propelled by what was left of the mischievousness, as though a weary marathon runner having just broken the tape, Junior manifested outside across the lawn reaching for the forest elder trees where joyfully jumping up and down he punched the predawn and darkly lit air.

Sorely disappointed, it was the moment my heart altogether turned away from my brother; from he who remains unable to hear and or see me, his new status after the horrendous misdeed notwithstanding.

Retreating indoors and to the basement, I tried to catch up with this breaking heart as it went past the sliding doors bearing the 'Out Of Bounds' sign. In the studio proper left of the hallway there was a pile of the rope on the floor and on one of two workbenches a tray of tools, a palette of assorted knives and ferules, spatulas, several pieces of silverware, also a verdigris antique compass. On the workbench right at the window, there was Rembrandt And His Circle: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paint Media Re-Examined. Seated on the bar stool, I lifted the cover of the book in which quietly and deeply I buried myself so to re-join the heart.

An hour later, the day had broken and also the news; there was a police car in the driveway.

### IV

The year before our arrival was when due to mechanical failure a bosom friend and colleague of father's fatally crashed during the San Marino Grand Prix championship. No longer able to stomach the risk, mother talked father into retiring even though just a year shy of the eight contracted with Ensign. After the residency program, from our vacation in the Canaries en route the Mauritius, father suggested, much to mother's displeasure, that we visit her country of birth. The house, a gift for mother, was a total surprise. The plan was that we stay till June.

Vanderpuije moved out of ours a year into the stiff silence of mother's total absence which, in the first place, is what brought on the stroke father suffered on the day of the burial. Suspended between the wife who undoubtedly blames him for their daughter's death and the daughter whose demise grieved without her mother's comfort will surely drown him, father is halfway held up by the healthcare staff of the agency which I later discovered belongs to none other than Vanderpuije who, by the way, has since gotten with mother. Of this last statement I do not need proof; I feel it in my bones.

As the years wore on, with father remaining bedridden and mother nonnegotiable absent, I kept at work to keep at bay the desire to rope myself.

### **PART THREE**

#### **V**

It was on a Sunday that Ludwig Jr, referred to in prestigious international art circles as Junior Rembrandt, committed suicide. That morning telecommuter tech-heads for the select number of EU consulates woke up to an anonymously sent digital photograph. Rather clever and very well-thought-out, the text wrapped around the image indicated time, date and address, however the subject matter and as well the whole approach of it one minute looked planned and then the next improbably so. The photograph presented a reflection of the sumptuous forecourt of No. 5 on the glass wall of their double-storied gallery space in the interior of which about a span of white encircled what at first sight looked like a centrally positioned raw wood beam.

Definitely worth more than a thousand words, the establishing shot in the hands of consular tech-heads set off a most unusual phenomenon and one never before seen in all of my career as consultant; six years into my retirement at that time in April of 2001, and before that thirty-eight manning the desk as attaché de presse, senior press officer with the embassy.

With the growing chain of BlackBerry Messenger text messaging, there was a gradual taking to intra-consulate chatrooms with several correspondents in Europe. Within the hour, from one such virtual space, scanned and uploaded images harvested from back copies of a Swedish architectural digest showed the Van Dijk living room gallery very sparsely furnished as though an important museum space with nothing but two solidly built wood seats like step stools. Minimal in design the stools looked like miniature Stonehenge arches facing each other in the middle of the proud quiet of double story glass walls and brilliant wood floors. Six feet below the twenty-foot high ceiling of exposed raw wood beams, looking on approvingly at the nonverbal and stringent communion of austere seats, the accompanying article dated April of '95 carried on, the chandelier evoked an air of a high priest's totem pole decked with the imposing spread of two pairs of prominent and elaborate antlers - cherished prizes of the estate of a great European hunter born and raised in Kenya and known for having kept company with the likes of Hemingway and Jung in East Africa.

Right after my second cup of tea, our tech-head, my housemate, he drew my attention to a stockpile of photographs of the Van Dijk family on vacation in the Canaries, in lots of ten or twelve, tumbling in from an obviously very newly stitched-up PHP-driven depository effectively dishing out the images worldwide. Shockingly, the forty or so photographs then showed up on Google along with several of the Van Dijk boy's works exhibited in museums in Amsterdam and in New York. Jacked up by international electronic mailing lists, it was explained, intra-consulate chatroom inquiries by four tech-heads in the capital city of a West African country virtually spawned marathons of curatorials and punditries shuttled back and forth all corners of the globe, there being the dragging out of all that could be dragged out and untiringly pulled apart.

By sundown a junkheap of trivia electronically shuffled around ended up centre stage. One such was by a fellow in Burbank in the San Fernando Valley of California mentioning how a film production house of the movie 'White Man's Burden' had an assistant producer, in May of '95, set to come out to assess No. 5 Consular Row as location for a sequel. Needless to say, the virtual persona went on, said trip was called off due to the tragic loss of the daughter of the Van Dijks, at which point, from an intern manning the desk of the assistant of the Maltese

consul in Paramaribo in Suriname, images of the daughter of the Van Dijks, literally from her cradle to her grave, were fielded and for no reason at all.

What is the world coming to? A racket in the vein of vandalism was unfolding, unrestrained and unchecked, as though the matter of the loss of the life of the young man had caused his family to succumb to a virulent globetrotting virus or that by an otherworldly means it had contractually opened up the privacy and the dignity of his family to the inner workings and terrorizing of a primordial host of scavenging birds of prey.

## VI

The following day, a Monday, respectively and combined, record sales were achieved by the top three national newspapers with frontpages billboarded the same master shot of the midsection of No. 5 Consular Row. The record-breaking sales was of course due to the nationwide interest in the exclusivity and especially the inaccessibility and preciousness associated with Consular Row. Unspoken, though, was the fact that all across the country, that year in particular, an undercurrent of a not-so-crass populism sentiment of ‘the rich be damned and be hanged’ factored into the equation. With the expat society, on the other hand, polite society and all that, one realized there was an overarching nonchalance, a certain kind of quiet relief and not exactly disbelief or grief.

Scratching the surface of the matter in a couple of phone calls to confidants, I gathered, in short, that the Van Dijks had somewhere along their third year in the country been blackballed by the community grown resentful for having precious and yet thanklessly held space for them from day one of their first loss.

True, I thought, that immediately after their first loss, broken and respectively held hostage by sorrow, the Van Dijks had gotten off the scene and gone under the radar however that for years they refused to get out of the proverbial sackcloth and ashes and in good enough spirits come out to ensure the release of the sort of spell of sorrow in the hold of which the community claims to have been left warped, cramped, ... I found that rather preposterous and outrightly juvenile if not callous.

A poke in the eye, as my mother used to say. Tired of waiting for a piece of the celebrants, in this case the bereaved, broken and bedridden celebrity couple, sulking at a delayed communal sacrifice, an exclusive community of participants or fans, feeling entitled, ruin the party by abandoning participation. A couple more years in and the second loss of the celebrants is quickly borrowed as a vehicle for catharsis so to put the disgruntled community out of what it petulantly refers to as its misery.

In a simulatory manner, I later realized, the community has been participating in communally conjured and clandestinely organized Mosaic Day of Atonement ritual ceremonies where the Van Dijks were concerned. Like the populist discontent countrywide this tangible and rather disquieting attitude of the expat community, as one would expect, has remained unacknowledged even when it was as though on that fateful Sunday at predawn the young man

imbued with the resentment of the community was ritually driven out and committed to the ends of the earth.

## VII

In the office at half eight, to get away from the still raging virtual marketplace of primordial hosts of scavenging birds of prey set to dismantle Abram's sacrifice and to scatter the remnants of the carcasses all over and abroad, I took it upon myself to go obtain a written permit from the Cantonments police station so I could access No. 5 to properly document the murals of the living room gallery. Both tasks completed by eleven, I had a chat with the guards, one of who mentioned that of the three murals his favourite was the one inspired by the sacrifice of Isaac which he was dead sure was what triggered the boy to do the thing.

To think that the professionally-built scaffolding assembled right here just a year ago could lend itself to such tragedy, the newest guard, deeply struck and perplexed weighed in on the matter. Moments later, looking closely at me, a little nervous, he stepped forward from our circle, hesitantly recounting how curiously on Tuesday the week prior, in the dead of night, Junior must have barged in and out of the rooms of the boy's quarters and one after the other on finding no one in them left the lights on and the doors ajar till in the fourth one where, off duty, he was in the dark and at it with this girl, he said laughing a little.

And a tad violently, one other chipped in engendering peals of laughter.

The sight of the spread out nailed to the wall as though the crucifixion must have been what blew the boy's mind, another clamoured ensuring a mildly accusatory tone.

Wide-eyed and unshaven, the defendant riposted in the middle of the soaring laughter of his colleagues, he more was the scary-looking insomniac fixture and like a something had fallen on him, he insisted layering it on. As for this beautiful residence, he said carefully, regretfully, when the last round of laughter had ebbed away, it cannot but be haunted.

Those of us still here when it happened back then with the young girl, the most senior guard hesitantly explained breaking his silence, from time to time we have recognised the dress in which she was buried as though worn by an invisible thing drifting about in the living room gallery, its pair of long sashes floating behind her fluid in big waves.

The night she died, there was a presence outside, the one other unable to help himself added. The old woman from Nzemaland. And sir, I was raised in a family of shrine officiators in the hinterland and I can tell you plain-plain that her craft is champion.

You hear 'Agoo. Agoo feeyaay ha', the most senior guard said and with a look as distant as it was burdened added, and then there is total black out but not in the residence across or the two adjacent. An Ezohile woman. 'Agoo feeyaay ha. Agoo.' Over there in Nzemaland, he informed the attentive group, their main god Amanzule is known to have several times shifted into the shape and function of a lighthouse so to ensnare white people's boats at which point he shows his powers by pulling them from the horizon ashore and aground.



## PART FOUR

### VIII

Late in the morning the day after Junior Van Dijk committed suicide, in Osu Ako Adjei, at the exclusive beauty salon belonging to the girlfriend of the lead architect of the firm which undertook the project of redesigning No. 5 Consular Row, court was held with her high society ladies each as usual decked with a tall glass of gin and tonic, loads of ice cubes, good hints of mint and fine wedges of lime. Through trimming sessions of split ends and bumper curling of flat-ironed perms and as well a series of manicures, pedicures and ultra-solid varnish applications by silent nail bar technicians like pitstop engineers, talk like wild ivy framed the several items on the docket the most prominent of which was soon placed on the pedestal; Pookie Van Dijk, her gorgeously dark chocolate skin tone, her signature bald look accentuated by her Nefertiti head shape, her cheek bones as high and as wide as the Nzema plains, her debut on New Year's Eve in '78 with the unveiling of the striking portrait of her on the most imposing water tower of the textile manufacturing district of Helmond and with a facial expression of an ecstatic win and roar as though having taken a bite of the full moon.

The thought of Ludwig alone at the graveside five hours after the burial, bemoaned the art gallery owner effectively evoking one of the several motifs of the Van Dijk sorrow song which over the years sure-fire collapsed hearts and minds.

Word was that, ten days after the burial, Ludwig's mother had their embassy try to remove him, the journalist offered. Hardly able to shuffle or string two words together, the man resisted all intervention. He won't leave the country without his Pookie.

When tragedy befalls such a beautiful family, a former national beauty queen said and contemplatively, it knocks out and clean all that green with envy.

Say it again.

I have for all these years found it difficult to believe Pookie's story flipped and just like that, the matchmaker for the expat society repeated after a couple of minutes of quiet as the many and diverse strands of conversation eddied the air.

Thing is that after the first one no one could imagine it getting any worse, the daughter of a former president of the country emphasized.

But then, how could Pookie leave her husband shackled to the burden of such enormous guilt, asked the early morning TV program host in the middle of some rather posh hair treatment and conditioning process. Plus, their fifteen-year-old son cooped up in there and for six years?!

Doesn't sound like it went too well with Vanderpuije splitting power of attorney with the matriarch, Jackie, the owner of the salon, careful not to say too much and not taking her eyes off the bone straight coif job she was finishing, weighed in just as the free refills arrived.

September of '94, SoHo, New York, at this very high-profile charity event; that was the first time I met Pookie, the professional matchmaker recounted. Girl was walking for Marc Jacobs,

his debut. I was seated two rows behind her uber-sexy race car driver husband; fit, fun, fabulous energy, totally in love with Pookie and an alertness, also a sweetness about him.

Can you imagine?!

Doesn't Pookie look more the true expression of her build when in five-inch heels? I always found it interesting she not being as tall as one thinks.

Though not quite five-eight, the former beauty queen now the owner of a modelling agency explained, her type of slender on five-inches compellingly hits all of the notes of that certain kind of skinny svelte fullness.

Definitely born for those five inches, girl more so and literally came out of the womb dancing, the journalist added, and not folklore, my friends, she underscored, pure fact and as reported way back when she won the national championship.

Oestrus! I remember now, said the one of the two or three lounging between school runs. An unusual word. Often escapes me.

Pookie's stage name back in the day, responded another, as though on cue as she patted the timely recall into place.

I always wanted that to be rumour, the gallery owner appealed.

At fifteen, the sponsored dance program was ongoing when Pookie kind of got disappeared, the journalist swooped in waving prosecutorial discretion. Was she kidnaped? Who knows? Only for her to surface in the summer the following year with a fast-tracked authorisation, and well on her way up the ladder in the most exclusive of gentlemen's clubs in Europe.

Something else, isn't it? To hear her speak that hesitant English and with a full-blown Afrikaans accent. The exact reason why it is impossible claiming her as ours.

Pookie Maud. National dance champion crowned 'Yaa Ghana' and in seven short years First Lady of Helmond. What a story?!

So tragic. Such gorgeous kids!

The radiant Sofya Van Dijk came across much older, I heard. Eleven going on fifty-three, extraordinarily smart and also composed in a prim and proper elderly woman sort of way.

Pookie's daughter. Her full thicket of brown curls!

And her mother's exact same big Bambi eyes!

Those eyelashes!

To die for!

A walking commercial for the most natural-looking God-given falsies.

Last night, in one of the emails with photos of Pookie and Ludwig at this Formula One event, they looked so fabulous together you want to forgive slavery, colonialism, apartheid and all of their attendant ills.

The most fabulous of fabulous couples. Both of them born on Independence Day!  
And in fifty-seven!

I know, right!? ... Outright twin flames, aren't they? That cosmic spark.

As usual a little before noon, Jackie's sister hauled in a buffet of light lunch and more importantly news from very reliable sources; the week prior, on the Sunday as a matter of fact, with a private nurse accompanying, Pookie, emaciated, vacuous eyes and a distracted look, she was seen early in the morning at the Swiss American fertility clinic.

At forty-four!

What can one say? Asked the bearer of the news in sudden akimbo. Girl wants her daughter back.

Surprising too, wasn't it? That the very day it happened Pookie returned to the village, to her grandmother who raised her and for good it seemed at the time.

A year and three months is a long time in that corner of the country so far flung even for locals.

As for their Nzema language, one must be allowed to say it is just as darkly as the people.

No one can make chocolate with any of that, as the Dutch say.

I heard Van Dijk's people are Jewish.

So, I heard.

He doesn't at all look Jewish.

Reminds me of this article in an international arts magazine, the gallery owner segued, which explained Hitler collected all Rembrandts he could find as though to celebrate the artist after the war however more so to showcase Jews as inferior, sub human.

Nowhere cool.

Bozomgboke. The title of the Van Dijk boy's art collection which won the New York prize the summer before they arrived.

Bozomgboke, repeated another voice. Pookie's hometown. The rocky cliff island on which their reef god dwells. People from across the borders and from as far as Liberia and Cameroun go there to consult.

## PART FIVE

### IX

Right over Junior's dead body Vanderpuije chiefly representing Pookie Maud's interest he comes through here as though of the mendicant order making arguments for the harvest of semen, asking to have my Ludwig put under anaesthesia for an electroejaculation; probes full of electrical current to be inserted in my baby's rectum and repeatedly. How dare you?! Pookie, unable to rouse from her supposed-to-be depression, she sure knows to plot claims of the estate. A lien to the pound of butter. Most certainly, we get that piglet washed this time.

When the evidence was brought to my attention in '79 a week or so after Ludwig at Junior's age informed me that Pookie was five months pregnant and that he had already married her, ... Before she was picked up as an international model, she had as a minor been several times featured in unsavoury magazines, this Pookie who fell with her nose in butter. Beguiling and then derailing good young men from their very well-respected families, it is how Pookie snatched up my Ludwig and that by the scruff of the neck.

There you are, Sofya, my schatje! Did you see? I put a skullcap on Ludwig. To protect and to cradle his spirit. In Yiddish, the yarmulke. And it was just this week blessed by the rabbi in Helmond. I haven't told you this, my Sofya, but we are a little Jewish, you see? Both sets of your great grandparents, orthodox and practicing Jews. Our great-great-grandfathers were all of the lineage of the directors of the East India Company investing in and transporting goods including Rhenish wine to various parts of Europe and from both Dutch and English ports around the Caribbean sugar, tobacco, also indigo, from India calicoes and in the East Indies spices assorted and also porcelain. In New Jerusalem, in Batavia, it is our forebears who ensured the Coen Jewish community. Did Ludwig ever tell you my Opa was the founder of the art school in Helmond? My Opa. I was at just five when, bless his heart, he took his own life.

Have you seen Junior's works, my Sofya? So proud. One realizes and with a mouth full of teeth that he does indeed have something under the knee. Come along with your Oma to the basement to see his new collection of works.

In the margins of these ones there is a kind of fibrousness, scratchings through wet paint as though to expose dead colour. These others, translucencies of sephia with tinges of atrophy, a botched haphazardry of texturized gypsum and sculpted paint, ... Like this one which from a little distance expertly achieves the costumes of the important figures, allowing also for some conjurations in the one dimension.

Here, his rendition of Rembrandt. Slightly greying. This other one is Suzannah Surrounded By The Elders. Will that then be Pookie surrounded by the elders of her homeland? Here we have the Jewish Bride, the dead colouring of vermilion accentuated with carmine and glaze, Junior's rendition of Rembrandt's portrait of Isaac and Rebecca, ... By the scruff of the neck, didn't she? Anyway, ... Here, we have a bird's eye view of Helmond. With its moat stone castle, its artisanally engineered canals and enchanting cobbled-stone narrow lanes. These days touted a ghost town, Helmond is nothing but Jewish, my dear.

There you are, Junior darling. You remember we visited Helmond castle several times when you were little? Now Sofya, that was where Ludwig played duels with boys his age. Well, did I tell you, Junior? Castle Helmond now houses a museum. I will have your works shown there. Your Opa will be so proud. Ah! What do we have here? Your newest work? A drawing by sanguine pencil on sanguine paper. An old negerin with a glass utensil atop her head? A pair of ducts in her hands. Will that be Pookie's grandmother?

## X

Agoo feeyay ha. Agoo.

Yaba. Yaba Pokua, as clan priest I stand here before our noble elders and in all of my duties ensuring commonwealth and our chief interest; and so, do please grant me hearing on this day, daughter of my daughter, so that this matter is put to rest.

Pokua, you whose dancing at shrines and religious festivals, at royal courts and funerals, you whose dance steps, gestures and significations inform and instruct priests. Pokua, ours was what favoured you enough, both at home and abroad, and by that kept upholding you. Daughter of my daughter, do therefore know on this day that where you are concerned, I am capable of no wrong. Pokua, if your turmoil and loss incalculable is of my unique manufacture, ... Were I guilty of making of you and yours a sacrifice on the altar of our entire clan of which I am priest, may Azele Yaba kill me. Before this here gathering of our elders, if I am at fault, may Azele Yaba kill me and may all bundles of living sacrifices, where the entire clan is concerned, weigh heavily on my particular cervix.

Agoo. Agoo feeyay ha.

## XI

On the Saturday of the last weekend of Easter break the last of four expat beach parties was held near Winneba. During the entire eleven-day vacation, Sofya often unusually tired, too easily she would fall asleep at odd times and for hours. We thought it was the weather having finally gotten to her.

Late that night at the beach party, with two of the hotel chefs grilling spicy goatmeat and a couple others ensuring cold beers, with three bonfires raging, the party was on till way past midnight when the several rounds of volleyball came to an end and the last lot of us retired to bed. Right at noon, with Sofya asleep in the backseat, we left for the two-hour drive back to the city because mother was on the plane back home later that afternoon.

At the airport, back in the carpark, in a loose navy-blue classic Bardot one-shoulder jumpsuit, mother was handling father's BlackBerry which suddenly beeping several times in a row showed six messages and eleven missed calls. The housekeeper was reporting having had difficulty rousing Sofya from sleep. Right then a call came through and mother picked up repeating what the housekeeper was saying; that the ambulance she had called had just arrived. On finally comprehending that it was more because Sofya had a very high temperature and in addition was foaming at the mouth, mother left off speaking English and began chanting what must have been appellations in the language of her people.

At the hospital emergency, with an IV setup of two bags near her head, each system dripping at a fast rate into either jugular and from a socket in the wall a tube leading into both nostrils, two doctors and a nurse immediately attended to Sofya stripped naked and laid out flat - a pretty voodoo doll darted with big syringes on her thighs, points from which she bled as though a thing to be drained of its blood.

...haemolyzed, severe collapses, the doctors repeated after a focused and diligent however a futile jabbing and feeling around for a reliable enough pulse on Sofya's limbs, hopeful access for two other IV systems and ports ready for the transfusion of blood.

Seated at the top end of the bed, mother, so tearful, she between kisses and caresses of her baby's head spoke lifelines in the language of her people as she kept at wiping the build-up of foam.

After about ten minutes, as the ECG toddled at flatline, father slipped out and so did I. In the empty waiting room, amongst the pews and the wide swaths of weak sunlight from somewhere near the roofing, with his forehead pressed to one of the series of rectangular columns, openly father wept.

Within the minute, a war cry strangling the air and exiting the ER ruptured into a harangue; mother's bark and bite backing an invisibility out into the courtyard where the two wrestled each other until the bout abruptly came to a halt, the force of mother's resistance throwing her forward and down through the disappeared invisible bulwark against which she pitted and with every fibre of her being. In an attempt, when she got up, to contain or rather to be contained and so also to hold on to what seemed a ton of residual force, sweating like cooling pig iron, mother's breathing was a series of lowered snarls as barefoot she stood there standing her ground in the middle of a collapsed spectacle, holding firmly on to her fighting chance and a supposedly coming second round.

In that bubble of tart and parched smell of phenol, I have since remained in the widening gulf between my parents - with father broken at the wailing wall and in the courtyard mother a one-woman theatrical act unforgettable in her decidedly lopsided aspect - the outer part of the right leg of her floor-length outfit split all the way to her upper thigh and the other still intact right above her knee, her big toes bloodied and bleeding.

That was the moment mother's quizzical look latched me in its crosshairs, and for a long and very uncomfortable minute during which, in a most iconic fashion, she foregrounded the blood-red sun which was like a strongman championing the skies, a bodacious groom eloping with his virginal bride, a matador equipped with his muleta swiftly riding his way and escape below the western horizon.

Right about then, a kindly and bespectacled elderly woman in white and with a thick head of hair all grey and held in a French roll updo appeared in the doorway. On sizing up her audience, she went towards mother clearly the one of us three with standing, the bedraggled and bleeding warrior ornamented with stars and stripes, the sole and rightful owner of the young girl. An umpire standing clear away, wordlessly the matron announced that the thread by which the life of the young girl was hanging had within the last minute come undone.

## XII

Agoo feeyay ha. Agoo.

With a single egg from the hatchery of our clan upon my head, this here craft like a newly-born in my hands and built for Yaba Pokua is uniquely for the rendering of our daughter's daughter. With this clear glass utensil and its pair of ducts, we have here the craft of a white people's medicine through which Bozomle, our clan deity renders our daughter's daughter.

Agoo. Agoo feeyay ha.

### AUTHOR BIO

An artist and creative writer, amma birago enjoys Cultural Anthropologist and holds close the one objective of shaping spaces for conversation critical in the pursuit of the implications of identity and community. She includes theatre and narrative art installations as part of her process of engagement. Two of her most recent titles; *Starbucks Atlantica* – identity making by coastal Atlantic Africans spellbound by modernism – and *Karen and Last Danish Governor* which is shaped by the journal entries of the last Danish governor on the Gold Coast.

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