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He sat up the stairs like a drugged heifer watching the world through a fog of stupefaction. The big head thinly haired had long given up the complex processes of gathering, analysing, storing, assimilating, and utilising data on this unfathomable world. His big head, big stomach, big eyes, big cheeks, were enough data in themselves which remained buried in his fog.

Manu, son of Morkor. He was one week short or rather one week beyond his first birthday. It was a day the mother would rather not dredge out from the last days in the sea of time. The trip to the hospital for the emergency childbirth was a complete surprise just as the pregnancy was. The labour pangs hit her like a missile in the middle of her petty hawking in the streets of Accra. A passer-by managed to hold her before she hit the tarmac. In the labour ward, the pain was murderous, horrible! It was sheer torture! They gave all sorts of reasons why she
Morkor should suffer so under age, malnutrition, failure to attend antenatal clinic, etc.

But why should she suffer just because of a baby she didn’t want? A useless, worthless baby? Her plans to desert the baby immediately after the childbirth came to naught only because she felt too weak even to keep her eyes open. By the time she could sit up on the bed, the nurses had firmly inflicted her baby on her. Just not to come into conflict with the law, she had to live with the baby.

The cracked stairs led to a couple of similarly cracked rooms which were barely lifted above the slum compound of stagnant moss-infected marsh and almost carpeted of poultry droppings. The house itself seemed to be giving up the will to support itself above such luckless grounds. But it was in good company as some two hundred of such human dwellings built of mud bricks, plastered with cement and roofed with rusted corrugated iron sheets, spread out uglily in this old part of the city. Nima.

What was left to be said about the slum of Nima? Nothing. What was left to be done? It was all there on paper. The old part of the city. Nima.

The fish piece was gone. He didn’t know whether he had eaten it or lost it to the predator fowls.

Predictably, it ended up in a fight. It wasn’t the first nor would it be the last. As always, it was Morkor who took the initiative to patch up. She needed to borrow money from the relatively better-off Kweiki. Just enough money to get her onto a tro-tro van for her ritual baby feed.

You wanted your own baby, Morkor.

I beg you Kweiki. Just this once. I’ve got to see Aunti Dora today and she’s ten miles away. And I have to walk. I don’t have money.

Tie him onto your back. You always do. She did that even as she hawked. Looking at her slight physique, it was a wonder she had enough strength to carry another human being even if under-weighted like Manu. She had to tie him to her lean back and run and dodge as the city task force men appear suddenly to drive hawkers like her off the street.

Naturally, Morkor was lighter and a shade taller than the average woman. Her long face and thick lips meant she had to work hard to attract men. She hadn’t done too badly by her expectations. The only thing was the one fatherless child. Manu. It was a name she picked for him in defiance of tradition and customary practice. Manu was a common Akan name and she was insisting the father was Akan. If she would be absolutely honest with herself (which she never was), she picked that name because that was the name of the richest man who ever slept with her. He rode a brand new Honda bike and he worked with a courier service. Unfortunately, he was only interested in a one-time scene. The curtains fell and he always zoomed past Morkor as if she was a litter bin. But he etched the name Manu indelibly on his lusty mind.

‘Why don’t you ever do me this favour Kweiki. I always ask and you always refuse.’

‘You wanted a baby and you have it. Wanted this ugly thing.’

‘You know damn well I didn’t want him.’

‘I never believe you. How can a serious abortion fail, eh?’

‘Must I repeat my curse? This boy here is a devil. I used all the herbs. I doubled the coffee. I almost killed myself with the chloroquine overdose. This baby stuck to my womb like a mistletoe.’ She gave Manu a knock on the head to make her point. Kweiki liked that. If a baby wasn’t wanted antenatally it wasn’t wanted post-natally. She deliberately teased Morkor about the failed abortion to make her beat the baby. She had a mysterious satisfaction of seeing the baby beaten. Perhaps it was the unconscious fear that it could
also happen to her. To her, babies like Manu had no business messing up with young girls like her.

That was not to say they had no business in the pleasures of making babies. No, no. How else could they eat and permit their hair and wear their second-hand clothing and second-hand shoes and go to watch the latest films and be a little better off than Kweiki? It was their life - the only kind they knew. Grow up to thirteen, just past or even right in the thick of puberty, drop out of school and drop under a new kind of tutelage - the business of handling men. You got fruiting buds on your chest to show for this kind of fortuitous age, you got the well-rounded and unruly arse to support yourself. Parents would give up. Some would even nudge you on. You had a whole range of men. You got to be smart and know how to milk well. Carpenters, drivers, masons, just call them artisans. Of course some office staff too - salaried workers shifting files redundantly in public offices. Or even good 'should-have-been-responsible' men - the type they called senior staff. The masters invariably were even handing over to their betters. Already, the hair was perm ed and the lip-stick was riotously red and thick; and the second-hand clothing had adequately brought out the teenage resources available, and everybody heard this girl in that neighbourhood had grown up into such a juicy one. You were open to all categories of men upwards. That surely was the way to the top. At thirteen.

Still, only you and your friends knew how very grown up you were; how very tidily you handled the messy things like babies with your own antedotes which often would and could not fail. Until curses like Manu incarnated.

Of course there was a father - often fathers in fact. How could there ever be none? In the case of Manu there certainly was one. Morkor chose a father who had two wives and a fitting workshop. Forty-three-year old, father of eight children, tenant of one chamber and one hall apartment in a compound house, drinking often and not quite able to stay many days without getting drunk, he refused flatly that he was the father.

After Manu's birth everybody said the baby resembled him. But his business was collapsing and he was loosing his clients to smarter and more sober competitors. Even his expertise in Japanese vehicles was waning like his youth. He refused fatherhood to the end standing on the ground that he knew three other men who as he put it, ate in the same cooking pot with him. How could he distinguish meat cooked for him from meat cooked for the others? Morkor threatened him with civil action at the family tribunal. He just laughed and stuck to his denial. He had been summoned to family tribunals on countless occasions. Rumours had it that, his first wife of thirty-seven who was invariably the main prop of his family swore to pack bag and leave him if he accepted the child with the sixteen-year-old whore. He didn't even need that kind of threat to make him deny his son to the very end. As it were, he had chewed a piece of sugarcane and he was left with some bagasse. It was up to him to decide whether to let it remain bagasse and discarded, or gathered for the home for some good work. That was a simple decision to make really. Let bagasse remain bagasse.

But, well, right now it's very much okay. It's another plausible index of life of the suburb in addition to the others: drop-out rate by end of second-cycle education, thirty per cent for boys, sixty per cent for girls; infant mortality rate, 120 per thousand births; teenage pregnancy, fifty per cent of girls give birth well inside their teens; average number of persons inhabiting a standard ten feet by twelve feet room, eight. The additional index of fatherless children (including those claimed but with shirked responsibility), those left for bagasse, only tidies up on the figures of demerit. Sixty out of every hundred!

It was like... Morkor dumped him up the stairs, thrust the quarter kenkey in his hand and waved goodbye. Manu was crying, Kweiki was applying bleaching soap to the face with a broken mirror. She was chewing stick. She took out the stick, spat and shouted at Manu to stop sneezing bad luck into her day.

'Shut up there! Devil. You said you wanted to be born. You've been born. What again? Your mother is gone. Even if she were here I could still beat you at will. Shut up!' As if Manu was a grown up, not a year-plus-or-minus-old baby incapable of handling data about his living world, Kweiki went up the stairs to put her bleaching face close to Manu's kwashiorkor face. 'Alright, don't stop crying, okay. Cry all the tears and fill the Volta up. Maybe it will reduce your kwashiorkor face.' Kweiki pulled the ear sharply to make Manu give a yelp.

'Tears will not bring back your mother. As for your father, whoever he is, he is as good as dead. Nobody cares one hoot about you. Why don't you just die? Nobody will even notice when you stop crying. So is this world and you chose to
come in. You’ve got to suffer for it. Hei, I say stop sneezing badly into my day, devil! She gave the baby a whack almost dislodging the kenkey from his hand before turning to dance away from him, as he seemed to choke on his tears. Oh how good she felt when she saw this devil in such anguish! That would teach all babies to think twice before pulling tricks on unsuspecting girls. Stupid babies! Agents of witchcraft!

In real good spirits, she lifted up her broken mirror and turned to her face-bleaching.

Kweiki was a pretty girl. Far prettier than Morkor her cousin and younger by a couple of months. She was black (a complexion she hated). With persistent bleaching she had browned in the face, neck and on the arms. She had a supple body, and apart from the round, pretty, smart face, men couldn’t easily tear their gaze from the flourishing butts that rolled under her blouse when she walked. She knew this too well and she missed no chance to use them as her prime weapons in her war on men. The arse and the thighs could immobilise her victims.

Altogether she hadn’t done badly in the neighbourhood and beyond. She had graduated into working the streets by night. At circle, she made good bargains to come home with some thousands of good cedis. She’d begun dreaming of nights at circle, she made good bargains to come home with some thousands of good cedis. She had graduated into working the streets by night. She was careful and had that to do to snatch a square meal for the day. This was life in the city; life in the margins. There were cousins of all ages scattered onto various trajectories from the house. Manu was the only one left of a house inhabited by at least fifty human beings - old people, middle-aged people, young people like Morkor and Kweiki, children and babies younger than Manu. It sometimes happened. By day, the whole house was deserted. In the night it filled up for the filthy compound to become sleeping places to the immense joy of mosquitoes.

Working there. With that visionary goal why should she condescend to a life with babies? Indeed she would forever remain in raptures to see nuisances coming in the name of babies placed in physical hell. To her, Manu was the personification of all the hateful babies rolled into one.

So, as soon as some friends called and the talk was serious enough to excite her (only talks about men were serious talk), she rushed off to clothe herself and leave giggling with her friends. Manu was totally forgotten. Even if she had remembered, would she throw a chance to meet a new man for a baby? Madness!

He was king of the house which was empty but for the livestock - rebellious chicken, goats, cats and dogs and... well the houseflies. There were grandmas and grandpas and many other adults but they were gone to their multifarious businesses. The grandma and grandpa had a funeral to attend. The aunts and uncles had this and that to do to snatch a square meal for the day. This was life in the city; life in the margins. There were cousins of all ages scattered onto various trajectories from the house. Manu was the only one left of a house inhabited by at least fifty human beings - old people, middle-aged people, young people like Morkor and Kweiki, children and babies younger than Manu. It sometimes happened. By day, the whole house was deserted. In the night it filled up for the filthy compound to become sleeping places to the immense joy of mosquitoes.

What was the use of crying? Kweiki was right: Who cared? The tears stopped automatically. The eyes were left clear to stare at a blank world of emptiness. When the senses connected the blank images there remained this fog of stupefaction. It was a kind of fog which made it impossible for his kind of brain to distinguish between a real world and an unreal world. In any case what was his point of reference? That kind of fog permitted no access to any baseline data even if he could assemble, analyse, store, retrieve, disseminate, handle such data like any functional neural system.

He sat on his stair still clinging to his kenkey as if it was his only reality. The flies were also reality enough. They were doing their concertoes on the kenkey and on his stupefied hairless head and all over his kwashiorkor body. For he had soiled himself. The sun was also exacting its own penance in a snow-balling reality. The rays hit him like bullets of AK47. The hairless head, the parched skin, the running nose and tear-dried eyes felt like skewed meat thrust onto an open fire.

Because of that he decided to descend. His crawling even at his first birthday showed very little confidence. Healthy children walked. He was careful and hesitant. He debated how to do it with the kenkey in hand. He was still debating when his grip on it failed and he saw the kenkey roll down the stairs. He watched it with an involuntary gaze. The rebellious chicken met it half way on its fall and preyed on it. The dogs jumped on them to snap it away. That was the end of a kenkey meant more as a companion than a means of meeting the need for food.

Manu waited as if ruminating on this bit about the end of his kenkey before finally continuing his descent. Everything for him was uncertain. Where was he going? Why was he going? Where he was going? What was the objective? What were the chances? What were the options? What principles, what ethics, what rights were involved? Probably by a cosmic intuition he would know that such abstract things - ethics, rights, etc. - existed. But how would he define them with reference to his reality? It was all a tumble of strangeness. For the din of the capital city life was reaching him, the life of traffic and commerce and... generally society. Right around him, in spite of his fog, there was the burning sun and flies, and his own excreta and desertion of every human being.

He fell on the last but one stair which would have brought him into shade and into more flies - a filthy marsh and the stench of putreifying things. He didn’t even have the will to cry although he felt some kind of pain somewhere in his body. He was just content to lie flat on his thin back and swivelled buttocks and look up to the roof which was rusted and peeling away. As he looked, he did not miss the ubiquitous brightness of the sun and it sent him squinting with tears.

A dog came to lick his ear.

The children who came to the house to find him prostrated thus were on their normal trucancy from school.
School was such a pain in the throat. They didn't need an excuse to run from it. What they needed was the will. Fortunately, the fathers and the mothers who had to obstruct their truancy from school were partly on their own manner of thinking that, school was such a pain in the throat—a pain stuck somewhere internally, where one simply could not reach with the hand and excise.

Back from school they would hunt in every corner of the house and if necessary break into locked containers. If there were monies, they were the lucky ones. The aunties and the uncles would come and scream, shout and curse and threaten lightening by the power of voodoo and other principalities, the monies would remain stolen.

That day, the children were frustrated. There was not a cedi anywhere. It was Manu who had to suffer for it. Coming down the stairs they saw him lying there with his faithful flies. One child suggested his head gave the best promise of a good kick. Haha-ha-he-he-he-hel! He liked creating laughter. And, he also liked doing things to show how tough he was. So, he took his time to march down the stairs and took a footballer position behind Manu's head. Haha-ha-he-he-he-hel!

It was the grandparents who came to save him and drive the dangerous gang away. The grandma picked the baby, raining insults on the mother for leaving the helpless thing to fend for itself. When she noticed she would have to do some work on Manu, clean him of his excreta, she snorted at Manu and turned her scolding on him. 'Silly baby! always shitting and soiling himself! I have never picked you clean without stench. It’s jinx on you Manu, shame!' She screamed at him to shut up as she found some cold water and threw it at him.

The grandpa went up the stairs grumbling that the wife was not minding her own business. If Morkor could not look after her own child, who was she an old hen to take over that job? Did Morkor ever give them a morsel to eat knowing that they had to suffer for it? Coming down the stairs berating his old wife. It was the exact position where Manu sat a while ago wielding a piece of kenkey like a talisman. The old lady climbed up after her husband holding the crying Manu like an abominable package not bothering to wipe the water off him.

Because the baby cried, the stranger who entered the house had to raise his voice several times to announce his presence. Grandma came out to invite him into the room where they sat. It was a very spare room indeed. There was a hard head down, the other took position and kicked. As the baby shrieked, the children squealed with laughter. Oh what fun!

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bed which sometimes doubled as a seat for both of them. They had a couple of stools and a small table. Even if they needed more than these furniture, where was the money to buy some more? Through and through, they had grown very used to this room and its meagre furnishing.

The stranger mentioned as an afterthought, a woman who needed a child. Was it possible they could help?

'She wants to take a maid?'

'Whatever. Maid, houseboy, babies....'

'Babies?'

'Yes, babies.'

'Is she barren?'

'Yes. She wants a child to have as her very own. In fact she prefers a child just about a year - just walking.'

They looked at each other and being married for so long, forty-eight years, their minds worked as one. The one we have here is barely a year. Probably a year. Nobody knows. But he is not walking. Not even crawling properly - duldest of babies.

'That's even better,' the fortune teller said through his colo-nutted teeth. 'If you are willing....'

'Well, the mother is not here.....'

'If you have to bring in the mother then forget it. She never deals with mothers. It was a terrible and reckless way to approach a dangerous deal as this one. But the stranger had used it often and he knew it worked. Perfectly.
The grounds for its success were prepared during the fortune-telling. The whiteness he foretold in their hearts were pure whiteness of greed.

'Then she has bought babies before', the old man shot back at him. It was quite a surprise to the oldman that the oldman could match his daring and bring it all in the open as if they were discussing the topping of a palm tree.

'Well...okay, yes she has bought babies before.' He looked directly into the eyes of the oldman, exposed the redness in his gums and teeth and added impersonally, 'then they are all dead.'

Would the oldman dare to continue along the path of truth? It was a challenge he waited for him to take.

The silence which descended was a replica of the grave's. 'They are all dead...all dead...dead' It was the key thing they needed to know before coming to the decision. The fortune teller waited, happy and he had passed on the burden to them.

Some of their likes were so cunning they would leave you with the burden of guilt though strictly speaking they made all the decisions and made the deal possible. The old couple looked at each other and then at Manu lying forlornly on a torn mat in a corner of the room, sobbing. Each waited for the other to speak.

'How much?' asked the old man. He was the man, he would play his manly role. 'You quote your price', the stranger spat out cola mucus.

They mentioned their price. Sky-high, enough to repair their leaking roof and to leave some cash for square meals for sometime. They were surprised the stranger did not flinch. Nor he ask for any reduction. He immediately reached into his luggage to count the money. They were so surprised they kept giggling and letting flies into their mouths freely. That was the kind of scenario which met Kweiki as she entered the room.

Occasionally she brought her men to the house. This one did not appear to need much time. She had to pass by the old couple's room before getting to her door. She saw their door opened and she knew that they had come from the funeral. When she entered, sighted the money, and sighted the stranger, she knew something was amiss. If she wasted time, if she played dull, if she missed a false step, she would miss a chance to take a good cut of the deal.

Fortunately, she had heard the rumours that these foreigners had been buying babies. She didn't believe grandpa and grandma could be up to that sort of thing. But all that dealing with men had made her discover things about the unpredictability of man.

She went straight to where the stranger was counting and picked two bundles. 'That's my share of the Manu's fortune' the oldman jumped at her. 'You put that money down.'

'I could put it down...here. See, you have it back. I'm going to the police.' The old woman jumped up to block her way, pleading.

That was how she got her suspicions sealed. She went on to force the truth out of the oldwoman who knew for a fact that Kweiki would be all for the deal. If nothing at all, they would all be rid of the dullest baby on earth Manu.

Yet, contrary to their expectations, she declined picking her share of the money. When the stranger looked at her, she smiled and told him, 'I think we can have a little chat together. You tell fortune, don't you? Come into my room next door. No, not right away. There is a man with me. In about five minutes, I'll call you. Come tell my fortune.' She eyed the stranger's money bag and gave him a lipstick smile.

Grandpa and grandma wondered what tricks this shameless tart had up her sleeves. The stranger knew what it all was about and he was happy 'I'm prepared for everything.'

'Tell me my fortune first.'

'You must cross my palm.'

'You are going to cross, really cross, my palm.' She was happy to place the emphasis where it ought to be. She was extremely happy. This is fortune telling. Very spiritual, I can't see any fortune if my palm is not crossed.'

Kweiki gave in and pulled a two-hundred-cedi note from what her man had given her. She made a mental note to be sure she demanded that specific cedi note back in addition to whatever she took.

She spread out her palm and listened keenly to the fortune to be sure she demanded that specific cedi note back in addition to whatever she took.

Kweiki remembered Morkor. When the stranger was gone with the baby drugged into his luggage (he kept a bottle of chloroform on him), Kweiki remembered Morkor. She ran up to the old couple who had immediately locked themselves up to recount their money.

Kweiki laughed at them pouring scorn on them 'at your age, what do you want that kind of money for? You give me my cut, right now.'

'But didn't the stranger pay you?' asked grandma incredulously.

'I only invited him to come into my room and tell my fortune.' Grandma looked dubiously at her. Grandpa felt like running after the stranger and asking him. He knew his grandchild was as greedy as a hyena.

'So how much do you want?' asked the grandma, grandpa looking at Kweiki with distaste.

'I like my bundle. What made it all the more believable and feasible for her. She was satisfied. Her fortune had been told. She was a tigress and she deserved to devour all babies. The truth rang in her soul. Death to all babies. Death to all babies!'
I picked, and grandpa wanted to eat me up. It carried the highest denominations and she was taking more than half the money. Grandpa wanted to protest, grandma not wanting trouble with Kweiki personally picked the money and handed it to her.

"That's very good. You've done the right thing now. But look let's look ahead, right. Sit down grandpa, and you grandma sit down. I'll sit here."

"What else do you want, Kweiki?" Sheer loathing for their grandchild was making their skin twitch.

"Softly, softly, grandpa. Walls have ears. See, what do we do to Morkor?" It was clear they hadn't seriously thought of the question.

"Nothing," said grandma furtively.

"You mean Morkor will come back home here and when she asks for her Manu, each of us will look into her face saying nothing. Doing nothing?"

"We'll tell her the baby is lost," said grandma trying to settle the matter convincingly. "And she wouldn't ask how the baby got lost? Who carried him the last time? Where the baby was lost? I mean not that Morkor is that intelligent but a mother is a mother. She has rights where her baby is concerned. You know that."

"She did hate giving birth to the baby."

"Right on target, grandma. So, we take it from there. We act on that basis. That is our best defence. Our best hope. We don't hide anything."

"But," the old woman was alarmed. "How can we tell her?"

"You put her share of the money in her hands, before you open your mouth with the truth. I swear, she'll quickly make another baby and give it to you to sell."

So again grandma saw their money cut down by the half of what ever remained. They could not protest. They could not talk. They just prayed that Kweiki would be done, gone out of their room and leave them in peace.

"See how cleverly I've handled everything for you? You should cross my palm in gratitude." At that point, grandpa would have thrown the money at her and strangled her. But she was only joking and she danced, actually danced merrily out of their room, overjoyed at the birth and sale of Manu.

Morkor returned in the night pretending to be sorry for overstaying, Kweiki, made sure she would get her to talk to immediately before anyone else. Not that the old couple were up to the task. 'Why did you always have to come home late, Morkor? Go ask the time. It's nine o'clock.'

"I tell you, it's my customers. And I couldn't get vehicle. Morkor tried to make the lies genuine even as Kweiki pretended she was open to conviction.

"You have put me into a terrible situation, Morkor. I don't even know how to begin."

What is it, Kweiki?"

"Aren't you going to ask of your baby?"

"Oh that! She made a face and apologised for burdening Kweiki with that despicable thing for so long. She was afraid she would get into a fight with her cousin. "Kweiki, I'm terribly sorry I came this late. But I managed to make a little extra, so here. I'll pay your loan back and add a little extra. Thanks for your patience." You put the money down here, but you must know I've lost the baby."

"You've lost Manu? Morkor's surprise was completely undefinable. Instant shock and instant pleasure! She had the good sense not to rejoice openly. She was free of the leech. Free. Freedom at last! But Kweiki was smart to notice. She saw that it was safe to go on, 'I took this your stupid baby out with me. I had a man. He was talking a lot of money!'

"Oh yeah! Kweiki caught the glint of envy in her cousin's eyes. She went on, 'He had to take me somewhere under a tree.'

"And of course find some money to bribe the officer on the job...."

"I don't have a pesewa!"

"Hoo! You should have rested your soul, Kweiki. Me, go to the police to report? Kweiki knew it, she would do anything on earth to stay clear of the police. 'And the bribe. Where am I supposed to get the money from. If the thief had come to me personally and asked for him, I would have gladly given him this one....' She continued to speak the language Kweiki wanted to hear. Thoroughly satisfied with herself, she decided it was time to celebrate. 'Well, Morkor, I'm sorry your baby is lost. But let me tell you of my richman. Go take your bath, put on your best second-hand dress and let me take you somewhere we can have a beer."

"You offering me a beer? You really did have a richman!"

"Hurry up Morkor and I take you to where he took me. If you are lucky, you can get a man. It's time for another baby."

"Oh not damn, damn all babies. Damn all babies forever!"

Each in her own way was so happy with the fortune of Manu that they came together and danced out, singing a popular hit with an arm wrapped round the other's neck. The people of the house saw the two enemies mysteriously happy and united and wondered. Grandpa and grandma smiled to each other happy to know the secret and happy that their good old age had given them wisdom to take a chance on a baby, when that chance came their way. GR