

Chronicles Of Quarantine



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DEDICATION

To our brave front-line health workers, your sacrifices in combating the COVID-19 pandemic are note worthy and your names are carved in gold.

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It is nothing but sheer luck, to be surrounded by great and wonderful people. The inputs of those mentioned here and others, too numerous to list are deeply appreciated.

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June, 2020

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CHAPTER ONE THE HOMECOMING

It was quarter past six in the evening and long before the sun would set, the streets were empty. This is the ideal situation in my area. I live on the outskirts of a major cosmopolitan city but after all, *city na city whether na road or corner*. The setting here is typical of rural people living in an Urban area. The influence of people's culture is so strong. For instance, every child in the neighbourhood was seen as everyone's child. It is not uncommon to see children eating from places other than their homes. It is also never illegitimate for any child to be spanked by an elder if he or she erred. The scene of kids playing in groups is also a common sight. We all are one big family. Here was where I lived with my parents and siblings. However, a couple of years back, my address changed. I had gotten an offer to study in one of the nation's prestigious Universities. Saying goodbye brought me so much joy and pleasure.

It is mid-March, the time of the year when school was supposed to be in session. However, boys and girls in their teenage years and early twenties, myself inclusive who were schooling in other places have started returning home. Distant couples also started reuniting. It is a full house or rather, a full community. The

government had initially ordered the closure of schools, religious houses and public places. There have also been restrictions on mass gatherings of every sort. All of these sudden developments were due to the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The whole world was being held on a rampage and as COVID dictated, so did we. The situation required that we followed several guidelines. This includes frequent washing of our hands, the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, observance of cough etiquette, keeping a social distance of at least six feet and so on. Later on, offices, private establishments, markets and virtually everywhere had to be closed.

So, I was back at home and this time, it was not the usual 'summer' break. We were going to be home for God knows when. I had anticipated boredom and truly, those thoughts were seeming to be true. Many of my childhood friends had relocated and others had become 'big boys.' The saying is after all true, that twenty kids cannot play together for twenty years. One of those who had relocated was Alex who was my closest friend.

Alex was arguably the brightest chap in the whole of his secondary school. He even won the award as the overall best student from Jss1 up until his graduation, there is no gainsaying the fact that he is smart. Alex is the perfect definition of an all-rounder. His intelligence coupled with his exceptional skills in gymnastics and music wizardry has made him a wonder of some sort to his peers.

Omo Dudu is what the majority of our neighbours called him. He is neither too tall nor short. His well-built body frame with his cute, spotless round face would yield him the trophy in any pageant. He is that endowed!

Alex is a miracle child. His parents had been barren, ever since the tragic incident that claimed the life of his elder brother

whom they gave birth to fourteen months after their marriage. While she was pregnant with him, his mother had a few medical complications. His parents, therefore, were so scared but intensified their prayers. It was on the eve of their nineteenth wedding anniversary that Alex was born. As one would have expected, he had the best of things. His parents, however, did not over-pamper him.

Alex's father, like mine, is a chip off the old block who had been tutored by the Catholic Reverend Fathers and so, both men are particular about discipline. We had a fun childhood. Our adventures ranged from playing with friends to going to swim in the nearby stream, plucking fruits and so on. We sometimes played pranks and got into trouble. Trouble could have been a rather huge word to use. We were on those occasions, simply spanked on our buttocks or we received knocks and were told never to do that again. I remembered all of those with nostalgia. Alex was however currently undergoing the compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme. He had been posted to one of the northern states to serve the nation.

The environment had not changed except for the fact that some buildings were now painted and so, had a face-lift. The roads were the same dusty, untarred roads. Most of the trees had fallen 'prey' to the saws of the loggers who took them to the nearby sawmill. The people are still warm and lovely. As soon as I alighted from the *taxi*, many of them rushed at me. The little ones scrambled for my bags while the elderly women greeted me and patted my back. The usual handshakes and hugs had been done away with. I was double sure the press had done a good job with public enlightenment. One of my neighbours prepared a special meal to welcome me back from school. It was a delicacy of Pounded yam and vegetable soup for which I was more than grateful.

A few weeks after I arrived, the government imposed a ban on travelling abroad. Before this, overseas returnees were required to self-isolate for fourteen days. This was based on the medical information available. Scientists had researched and they speculated that the virus has an incubation period of two to fourteen days. Another twist to the situation is that some infected people can be asymptomatic. Now, everybody had to be 'always guiding.' In the words of one of my father's co-workers, *"No be only people wey dey cough or dey sneeze get COVID o. He dey hide for other people body, no gree show himself and since we no get e odeshi and medicine never dey for am, na to dey sharp remain."*



CHAPTER TWO GBAS, GBOS, GBAS

It was a bright Sunday morning. I have had to work late into the morning and so, I wasn't expected to be part of the early risers. Although the original plan was to wake up by midday, it was the Lord's day and the morning service must hold. At about 6 a.m., my sweet sleep was disrupted by shouts of curses and crying. My anger was two-fold. First, my sleep had been interrupted and second, it was a Sunday morning for God's sake. In utter disgust, I stood to see what the matter was. Mr Allen and his wife were in the middle of one of the toughest fights I had ever seen. It was a fierce show. Neighbours trooped in to settle the score.

My thoughts, as I sat back on my bed were on how unfortunate it was that lips that said 'I do' will hurl such horrible abuses at each other. I found it so appalling, that bodies that were cliched in love, will exchange blows, slaps and bites. I could still hear the crying of their kids and their screams of 'daddy please' and 'mummy please.' The couple were however ready to fight it to the end and all plea fell on deaf ears. As I was only a young man, I left the task of score-settling to the elders and proceeded to the bathroom to have my bath.

Mr Allen is a Civil Servant who works in another state and would usually not be home this time of the year but for the prevalent global crisis. We had always known both he and his wife to be though lousy but easy going. I would later realise, that the bone of contention was a mere misunderstanding that began the previous night.

Neighbours had a great deal of time making faces, exchanging glances and giggling. This is in no way a surprise. I was sure the matter of the Allen's was the subject of discussion for the week. The community's gossips had already taken vantage positions as soon as they heard the noise. To their utmost disappointment, the scuffle between the couple was eventually settled.

Iya Dayo and *Iya Keji* are the community's talebearers. They had the latest info about everything and everyone. They were the ones who knew what meal people ate in their homes. I guess the nature of their job also required some sort of intelligence. They were the ideal busybodies who paid little attention to the care of their husbands or children but are more focused on those of other people. *Iya Dayo's* children are always seen moving about unclad, looking so unkempt and reeling off some kind of bad odour. Rather than pay attention to giving her young ones proper care, the businesses of others were what mattered most to her. She definitely must be a thorn in the flesh of her husband, the Carpenter. The kind of drama shown by Allen's family was a frequent thing in *Iya Dayo's* house. The best prayer would have been for the woman to pack out of the community but rather, unfortunately, they live in their own house. She is therefore here to stay.

Soon, the dark clouds appeared and just before I could hurry to get my clothes off the line, it had started to rain. The chilling effect that it had was refreshing. As I settled in bed, with my ears

plugged and eager to pull the blanket over my body, there was a knock on the gate. You can tell, that I was beyond annoyed. Upon opening the gate, Roland's mother was standing there, drenched in the rain. From the look on her face, it was evident that something was amiss. She asked if Roland was at our place. My reply was in the negative. I also told her that I had only seen him in the morning when we made plans to pluck mangoes later in the evening. By now, it was getting dark and she was worried. I assured her that Ronald was going to return home soonest but the womanhood code would not allow her rest until her son had been found. She thanked me and continued her search. Unknown to me, Ronald had gone ahead despite the rain to pluck mangoes. On his way back home, he had stopped by the shed in front of Mr Etuk's house. Mr Etuk's was a friendly man in the community who was loved by most people. Earlier that evening, his children had gone on a stroll with their big police dog and had forgotten to chain the beast upon their return. As soon as the dog sighted a figure in the dark, it started barking. It was expected that the dog would be tied and was just 'running its mouth' and so Ronald stood still. To his utmost surprise, the dog pushed against the gate and flung it wide open. Ronald had never been swifter. As he turned the bend, to the road leading to my house, the dog's teeth got the edge of his flabby pants and ripped the clothing off his waist. For some strange reasons, I had forgotten to lock the gate and so, Ronald, left with his dirty shirt and blue underpants, escaped from the dog. His ancestors were certainly not asleep in their graves. The sight of my friend in those ridiculous costume brought a rush of emotions. Seeing his state, I resisted the urge to make a joke out of the situation. I, later on, accompanied him home, after he had showered, eaten and was clothed in one of my trousers.

It indeed is a Sunday to remember!



CHAPTER THREE

WELCOME TO IYA AYO'S ENTERPRISES

As one would have expected, the bad eggs of the community, who are students of one of the nation's prestigious university located in my city, did not travel. Why would they anyway? *Iya Ayo* who was their plug for every brand of cigarette and 'hot' drinks was on standby. In any case that she is unavailable, *Ayo* herself, was up to the task. Her compound provided the much desired 'solace' and comfort. There are benches to sit or even sleep on and her fireplace was the lighter for the broke asses who are only rich enough to buy cigarettes. I forgot to also add, that her provision store was the community's favourite. She sold biscuits, sweets, soft drinks and so on. My humble self is a regular caller at the mart section of her 'enterprise.'

Ayo, the pretty eighteen-year-old secondary school student is so good at trading. This is no surprise to we the residents of the community. She got the genes from her mother was the usual comment. Hanging from the top of their shop is an inscription in her handwriting which reads "no credit today, come back tomorrow." True to that inscription, *Ayo* never sells to anyone on credit. She had also learnt the 'there's no change skill' and many more gimmicks. Her arithmetic is sound, as evidenced in

her promptness in calculating the 'bill.'

Ayo and her mother were nominal Christians, the 'pray for us o' faction who bids everyone going to church bye. Anyway, they never miss the December 31 cross over services. Sundays were usually busy days for them too as their customers will need to be attended to. *Iya Ayo* was a full-time businesswoman and had little time to spare for 'frivolities.' I guess she had a prophet on standby whom she could approach once things seem to go the other way. You know, those 'contract' prophets whom you pay to help you fast or appease God. She, therefore, had no reason whatsoever to be afraid.

Mr David, a gatekeeper at one of the nearby Primary schools is their regular customer. His devotion to drinking and cigarette smoking is mind-blowing. He drinks until he has spent the last *Kobo* in his pocket. His devotion to the enterprise has earned him access to collecting items on credit. I have heard about men who are never sober but not up until this moment have I seen one. It did not matter to Mr David whether it was midday or night, he was a 'man of the sticks.' On hearing a little narrative on his experiences, I reckoned with the saying that there is truly no smoke without fire. A man of many woes, he is believed to be under the influence of 'his village people.'

The periods when I visit their shop to buy snacks are usually coincidental with the coming of some of their customers. They would prefer to answer me hastily so I can take my leave to prevent me from knowing what the orders of the real men were. I was after all the revered innocent brother of the community. On this particular occasion, *Ganja* was the one I met. *Ganja* is a ruffian in every sense of the word and one of the bad boys in the community. In what seemed to be a rather strange action, he took to his heels upon sighting me. While I was momentarily

surprised at what could have lead to such behaviour, later on, my thoughts raced back to the events of the previous day.

I had slept at quarter past ten in the night. It was one of those 'dream days.' Slowly as I aroused from my sleep, there was a little sound and some sort of movement was going on above my head. As I turned to see, an intruder who had jumped into our compound had gained access through my open window to my bed. He had slit the net and was using a long stick to pull my phone. At that moment, I was both surprised and scared. My shouting drew the attention of other people in the compound and the thief escaped. While I had always mapped out strategies to deal with emergencies of such nature, I laughed at myself for being such a coward. I had 'fallen my own hand' and this was the annoying part. As for the phone, I cared less about it. It is old and had sustained enough blows and bruises. As it was a failed operation, the identity of the thief must be found. I jerked back from my thoughts. *Ganja* was the thief. A dull thief at that!



CHAPTER FOUR EVENTIDE

Evenings are the best part of my day. Those are priceless moments of deep thoughts, soliloquy and ‘stroll-singing.’ I can never trade them for anything. The strolls are for an average of sixty minutes every evening. Often, I get to the highway leading to the University located in my city. Either side of that busy road is littered with residential apartments including student hostels, eateries, sorts of business establishments and so on. That area of the city is full of life. The university folks are usually seen in clusters or just alone all by themselves. The burst of colours created by the street lights and rays from the coloured bulbs in the night bars, eateries and barbershops are simply beautiful! My walk is to me, a soul serenade. The times are however not especially happy. One can hear a pin drop on the coal tar. The serenity I now enjoy made my walk feel like some sort of therapy.

On the tarred road adjoining the highway, is a relatively small building that had the most number of coloured bulbs. The building had a black gate and there is no inscription whatsoever on what manner of activity was done there. All that there is, on one side of the gate is a *Gulder* sticker. As I returned from

my stroll every night, at dusk when everyone was expected to close for the day, was when they commenced operation. Their speakers blared loud music. So loud that I felt sorry for the ears of their neighbours. But for the hefty men who sometimes stood at the gate, my curiosity would have taken my feet behind that 'damn' black gate. One fateful day, as I passed by, I noticed an 'array' of ladies who were barely clothed. What a sight! The unfolding before me were horrible visuals, the type that sent strange shivers and sensations of warmth all over my 'Christian body'. In what seemed an answer to my wish, the gates were open and there were more ladies inside than were outside. There was no need for further clarifications on what their jobs were. They indeed needed no signpost or advertisements of any sort. Some of their customers were running, with cigarettes dangling from their mouths. To my surprise, a number of them had a stopover at the Pharmacy shop overlooking the building. Now that it is lockdown season, every establishment was supposed to be shut down, or so I thought. While workers rendering essential services continue to work, my *brethren* in 'the building' never took a break too. As I strolled past their establishment every evening, I noticed that music was now played softly, fewer cars are parked outside and the black gate remained shut. I assume, however, that their *modus operandi* has not been affected by the pandemic except that prices might have gone up. The physical distancing directive would have been complied with as I assume there will be enough rooms to go round.

To the far left of 'the building' were these group of boys who played draft every evening. As I watched from afar, I could tell what the 'stay-at-home' order had done to them. Of course, such gathering could not be devoid of noise, jesting and crying. At times, I saw as they watched with keen attention, probably with the hope of having a glance at what happens in 'the building.' I presumed the thoughts in their hearts to be "someday when I am

as old as these *egbons*, I would pay a visit to this place.”

I had seen enough of the disgust. Just as I moved to continue with my ‘journey,’ I heard someone scream my name from the front of ‘the building’. Although the voice sounded so familiar, I was not pleased with the loud manner with which he called my name. I pretended not to hear and he shouted again, this time, calling me by my surname. It was sure, that whoever this person was, knew me so well. As I turned to see who it was, I saw *Tolu*, my former school mate running towards me.

I and *Tolu* were together in JSS2A. In the first term, I had become friends with him, a rather lanky, dark-complexioned guy who was repeating JSS 2. We had grown from the usual ‘hi’ to becoming real Gees. One fateful Thursday morning, *Tolu’s* brown bag pack was so heavy. The content of the bag had been tagged gist for later. As soon as the bell went for a break, I hurried from my seat to the back of the class. As we sat on the desk, to see what was in the bag, I could not believe my eyes. *Tolu’s* bag contained CD’s. My surprise was neither about the fact that he owned those nor in their number. The CD packs, however, had naked men and women in some weird positions. Some went bent over, tied and others lying in some of the strangest positions I had ever seen. I was about twelve years old at this time. I had heard from church, older people and even friends talk about blue films and pornography and here they were, staring me in the face. Up until that moment, I thought it incredibly crazy, the idea that grown-ups will be willing to pull off their clothes talk more be video recorded indulging in ‘dirty things’. I had seen the ‘unseeable.’ According to *Tolu*, the best time to watch them was at night when his parents and siblings had gone to bed. Little wonder, *Tolu* was always sleeping in class and never paid attention.

The condition in which he was that night, although pitiable, did not surprise me. He was reeling of alcohol and cigarette smoke. As we progressed in our conversation, he told me that he came over to 'the building' for a nice time. He explained how 'the building' had a lot of beautiful and 'well endowed' ladies. He went on and on, telling me of how excited he was to see me. We had not seen each other for close to a decade. He had to leave school as he again repeated JSS 2. I watched as he recounted, with pleasure his many escapades and how that he was making enough money and that School is no more than a scam. He even invited me to come to have a drink in the exquisite bar, pointing his middle finger at 'the building,' promising to sponsor me. In his characteristic manner, he carefully dodged every attempt to make him realize that he was treading the wrong path. We exchanged phone numbers and he hurried away. I presume that his beautiful and 'well-endowed' lady was ready as she would not stop beeping his phone.

Another everyday feature is the *Suya* seller. I seldom stop over to buy except it was some 'special' occasion. The lessons on prudence and wise spending are critical in these critical times. Often while I pass by, the sight of the animal flesh dabbed with red pepper would make me salivate but *as to say money no dey nko*.

My evening tours are nothing short of *wow* moments. The sanctity of my stroll had to be kept.



CHAPTER FIVE QUARANTINE BABY

B*aba Ibeji's* house is two houses from my residence. As the name suggests, he had twin children. This is in addition to his other two children - a male and a female. In response to some bedroom conversations, his wife's belly started protruding. As at the time of *the return*, the pregnancy was near full term. It is a common adage in our culture, that *one does not count a person's children for them* so, everyone minded their business. This was although their last born was just taking her steps and learning to walk. Well, who am I and what do I know? Perhaps, they had this ideology of the more, the merrier. On my way to my regular evening stroll, one evening, I overheard his discussion with his wife. They had made arrangements for her to visit a drug merchant to whom the inhabitants of my community have given the MB; BS degree. Dr *Olamide*, a senior school leaving certificate holder, is the community's 'doctor.' *Iya Ibeji* and her husband were not buoyant enough to register for ante-natal so they resorted to Dr *Olamide*. For the records, let me say that I am no eavesdropper. I merely overheard them. Moreover, *Iya Ibeji* knows no such thing as a bedroom voice. Every word is usually uttered in loud, deafening tones.

The pregnancy tales are not mine to tell as I was neither the pregnant one nor a member of her family. My concerns were about the safe delivery of her baby, which carried with it, the promise of jollof rice and meat. The new addition to the family came on a Friday morning. She had given birth to a bouncing baby girl. Before it was evening, both mother and child had returned home. *Iya Ibeji* belonged to the *pako* class. This delivery was in no way an exception to the ease with which her children are usually delivered. Well, whatever accounted for this was not so important at the moment. The atmosphere was joyful as friends and family came to rejoice with them. We had soon forgotten or should I say we ignored the instruction on physical distancing. I guess this was because we stayed on the city's outskirts and so, we were out of reach for the law enforcement agencies. To further fuel our 'effrontery,' our state had not recorded any confirmed case of the disease as at the time. I had intended to say a quick hello to the parents of the newborn. However, for several reasons, many of which I consider unnecessary, I had to wait a while. Moreover, I wanted to enjoy the cool breeze a bit.

As I looked from the entrance of their house, I saw six men whom as they drew closer, I recognised to be friends of *Baba Ibeji*. They smiled and grinned from side to side as they congratulated their *padi*. They cracked jokes and passed funny remarks amidst occasional episodes of hysteric laughter. Possibly because the break had been somewhat boring, I found the jokes funny that I drew nearer to the place where they were sitting. When asked what the sex of the child was, knowing full well what the answer was and that most of the men in that circle were barely educated, I was more interested in their comments. I marvelled as they were excited, pointing out examples of *Iwela*, *Sirleaf*, Thatcher and other prominent women who had made positive impacts. I watched with pleasure as *Baba Ibeji* raised his shoulders with pride.

I was dumbfounded at such level of good sense demonstrated by individuals who were barely educated. In the early days, a man who gave birth to a girl-child is usually termed a weakling - one who was defeated by his wife in the game. Indeed, this is enough proof that there is hope for the world!

Soon, it was the next Friday, the day to christen the baby. With our noses and mouths covered, we went to witness the occasion. Earlier that morning, I had promised myself to comply with the physical distancing rules. I wanted just this last chance. Upon getting there, I found out that not many people were invited. We were about twenty-five in number. The usual naming ceremony homily was "Children are a heritage from the Lord" and the Pastor did not disappoint. After the baby had been christened, as is the norm, relations present each gave the child a name. All along, I noticed that I was not perceiving the smell of cooked food and I wondered if my hopes for *jollof rice* would not be dashed. Well, here we were at the end of the ceremony and truly, we were served biscuits and soft drinks. The times are hard, I muttered to myself and made my way back home

As I sat back at the desk beside my bed, I had flashbacks to the funny scenarios that happened during the day. To the glaring shock on the faces of people like me who had anticipated *jollof rice*, the off-key singing and most importantly the Pastor's gentle caution. In a manner we call *style style*, he remarked that the couple should consider putting a full stop to childbearing. In all, it had been a good day. At this time, I was beginning to dose off. I said my night prayers and went to bed.



CHAPTER SIX TALES OF LOVE

Long before we proceeded on the 'lockdown break' as this period has been mischievously tagged, I had some butterflies roaming in my belly. There is this lady whom I had known for three years now. Sola is the name of this 20-year old light-skinned beauty of average height. Her appearance gave me the impression she is the 'book' type and oh my God! She is more intelligent than I thought. The way she wore those lenses and run up the stairs in the University library was simply incredible. She had these dimples that make my heart warm whenever she smiles. To cap it up, she's caring and warm. The relationship I had built with Sola was the usually *hi, hi* thing. I, however, had her phone number - a rather perfect arrangement.

Initially, I refused every 'temptation' to either call or send her a text. I was yet to fully heal from my past hurts (don't ask me what they are). I had been beaten more than twice and I was a hundredfold shy. My first love was a Law student who showed me what *my gees* call 'Street.' It was in my first year at the university and if there exists a word to depict more innocence than naive, I was it. I attend a University where we were required to dress corporately to class. This made matters so bad. I vividly

recollect how that on one occasion, I wore a navy blue trouser with a *fuchsia* pink shirt and then donned a satin tie with black and white stripes. To complete the equation was a brown belt and my black pair of loafer shoes. As if that was not enough, I, an undergraduate had my heavy bag pack strapped at my back. Well, I had perhaps listened to a lot of 'you can do it' motivational talks. I say this because, in retrospect, I wondered how on Earth I expected that elegant and classic chic to have given me any attention. She was the cynosure of every eye at that time. As you probably might be thinking now, my contenders were the real big boys and I stood no chance. Well, after this incident, there has been some other shots. While I thought I had the swag, right words and all, *na lie*. They were all shots off target. Sometimes, I jokingly remarked that my desperation has gotten to the peak and even if it will be a 'hit and run,' I would not mind.

I eventually summoned enough courage. My start off was an unfinished conversation that started the self-same day the announcements came for us to vacate the school premises. At that instant, it seemed like she had been waiting for me to initiate a conversation all the while. After the initial conversation, it became a part of my daily routine to always check up on her. You, know, that kind of 'check-up' when you, the *checker* is pretty sure the 'checked' is doing well. The responses I got were superb, the type that suggested to me that we were beginning to 'gel.' I was falling head over heels with this young lady. However, every step of the way brought some sort of fear. It is a pattern that I had seen over time and I was not ready for a repeat of those ugly situations.

Another reason that accounted for my sceptic poise was a quote that I read online. It reads thus "don't fall in love this quarantine, everyone is bored." My mind started giving these words serious considerations. I wanted to be sure the feelings

were genuine and not because I was bored and that the attention she returned was not because she had little or nothing to do too. Well, my excuse was that it all started even while school was in session and the workload was heavy. Although I had answered for myself, I had no idea what the case was with her.

To tell the truth, our shared affection (at least as I perceived it to be) helped in no way to cushion the effects of the break. I was showered with much more love than I had anticipated. Indeed, two is better than one. Our conversations changed gears and moved from the mundane to more important things. I was finally having the glimpse of the light at the tunnel's end. Sola is ten thousand-yard wife material and I guess I was trying too but who am I to my blow my own trumpet. While all of these were going on, my lips were still sealed and I was yet to confess my feelings. I did not confide in any of my friends. My initial plan was to keep sticking close and been good friends with the 'babe' till the quarantine is passed. Then I remembered the brother zone thingy and how that I was warming up for some premium tears should another bro outsmart me. It was on a cool Friday evening, that fate smiled at me. While I will leave you to figure out what her response was, all I look forward to is the beginning of our living happily ever after.



CHAPTER SEVEN

STAY AT HOME, PRAY AT HOME!

In the pre-COVID days, a weekly feature in the itinerary of virtually everyone is public worship. We as a people are highly religious. I once heard someone say, that “if religion were all that is needed to build a great nation, our country will be the greatest.” This is so clear as worship centres are located in every nook and corner. From being housed in the small makeshift structures to the big ultramodern architectural masterpieces, congregants gather to offer prayers of all sort.

Being a Christian, Sundays are a special day of the week. Christians all over the world, throng Church premises in their number. From the flamboyant dresses to the sound of instruments and shouts of praise, it is indeed a special day. I usually say that one category of church attendees on Sunday are those who are faithful ones. These are the folks who attend the mid-week services and other ‘extra-Sunday’ church activities. Another category is those who have come to take the week’s dose of their Sunday-Sunday pill. We also have those who belong to the group of show-offs. More often than not, this group also housed the late-comers. They are usually elegantly dressed, waiting for others to take their seats before making ‘an entrance.

As soon as you hear *ko-ko-ka*, you know it is about an hour to the close of service. Sundays have however changed its look.

The first Sunday service in the lockdown felt so awkward. I was used to sitting in pews at the choir stall, adorned in my cassock and surplice but here was I, in my father's sitting room. To be honest, I had wished for the service not to hold and up until that morning, I hoped for my wish to come true. At about half-past eight in the morning, my mother's voice pierced through my ears, waking me up to prepare for service. As usual, there was no breakfast. Every eating had to be on hold until when service ends by noon. One can tell, that the yawnings and stretchings are usually endless.

The sitting room serves as our sanctuary and we had the 'sitting room chairs' to sit on rather than pews. The 'church dresses' have gone on holiday. As there is no need for any special clothing, they have been temporarily laid off. Every service begins with a Sunday school class by 9:00 a.m. As opposed to what happens at Church, the class is a very small one and we all have to contribute to the study. We sang hymns, prayed and gave our offerings. I particularly enjoy the hymn singing part of our services. Although I am a huge fan of highlife and contemporary music, the hymns had such lyrical composition that got me enthralled. When it was time for the sermon, my father motioned to me to speak. While I thought this was only for that Sunday, it has become a regular pattern. I have become the official homilist of the family. The lockdown has made a Preacher out of me and so, feel free to address me as His Lordship. Offering time is usually another funny moment. Everyone dropped theirs on the centre table and so, you knew the amount each person gave. In the church, offerings are usually collected in some bowls or 'bags' and so, we can be 'coded' about it. This has saved my face on those 'small offering' days. Services are usually brief, lasting just

a little over an hour.

I miss the good old days - the company of warm people, the ride to and fro Church and the chilled communion wine. I reckon that many other people are 'Church lorn.' All we can do at this point is to pray the siege of the virus comes to an end. The first Sunday after this period would be *fantabulous*. I can already picture it as a day of dancing, singing, jumping and rolling.

The rest of the day is usually for eating, drinking, sleeping and generally, enjoying the sabbath. The sacredness of the day has seemingly been amplified. The cool blue skies, chirping of the birds, and the trees are the additional sacred elements. Thanks to the lockdown, it had now become a must to 'keep the sabbath day holy.'



CHAPTER EIGHT CHALLENGE AFTER CHALLENGE

Humans have been described as social animals. This description has been confirmed by the lockdown and its several restrictions. I see as each day goes by, how that people long to go back to the normal life of endless banter, warm embrace and firm handshakes. They wear long faces and stretch their necks as if looking to see when the whole place would bubble with life once again. I am quite sure that the importance of social media has not been more appreciated in history than it is in these times. Some educational centres and schools had to resort to e-learning. Although social media provides an avenue for fun, education, information and so on, it is a rather expensive way to have fun.

In the bid to get people productive and creative, some people came with the idea of having one ‘challenge’ or the other. While this word, with its adjusted meaning, is not alien, it is now enjoying more participation. People who would have erstwhile been busy at their works are now home and so, why not do a challenge? I had loads of fun, seeing people let out their fun side. The ‘challenges’ also brought some juice as the big wigs were doling out cool cash to people who were creative enough.

First, it was the *dontrushchallenge*. Indeed, *school no make us sabi fine girl o*. I had no idea how much of glamour and glitz that I had been blinded to all this while. Whenever I caught the sight of a lady holding a makeup brush, I knew that was her 'entry.' I guessed the male folk were tired of being boxed in the background and before I knew it, the *bopdaddychallenge* came up. The legendary *Falz* had started the challenge and wow! Videos of 'fine men' in an array of lovely dresses ranging from casual wears to suits and traditional attires, were bursting on my sight. Before long, ladies were taking part in the 'challenge' too. There was also the *somethingnewchallenge*, *mostlikelytochallenge*, Girlfriend, Side chick and Housewife challenge and many others. As exciting as those were, who wants a beardless bop daddy and so, I kept my video to myself. I was content with watching the macho *men*. Of a truth, I was not the only one who desired to participate in the 'challenge' but could not. A dear friend of mine's complaint was that she left her best clothes back in school and cannot afford to appear as a 'screp.' Much more than the fun and laughs, all of these appeared as a potent way to fight boredom and depression.

The *efiko's* and my Church geng were not left out in this challenge of a thing. While theirs was in a way different from those I had earlier described, it proved to be worth it. Courtesy of this innovation, a lot of people stayed faithful to reading their bibles and many inspirational books, grooming their skills in spoken words, poetry, acting and so on. I have now started seeing a lot of 'lockdown groomed' poets, motivational speakers, preachers, cooks and so on. The lockdown was proving to be productive after all.

I was particularly happy with the turn of events. This is because many people have expressed pessimistic opinions of how dull and rusty people's brains, minds and hands will be by

the time the 'break' is over. Alas! People are becoming more creative and improving themselves even in the heat of the seeming unfavourable situation. What a wonder! They have made the saying true, that 'when life throws lemons at you, make a lemonade.' What a wonder these things are!



CHAPTER NINE

NEVA EXPECT POWER ALWAYS

It is no news that the power supply in my nation is terrible. It is however even worse in my community. This has been the case ever since I was old enough to know when there was 'light,' as my country people say. Not until a few years back, I had always felt it was 'legit' to make supplications 'for them to bring light.' It is even so hilarious that this what something that we had paid for. The electrical distribution company was once known as NEPA, an acronym for National Electric Power Authority. They were however rechristened Neva Expect Power Always. This was possibly out of frustration and a desire not to put high hopes on them. Truly, it is a merited appellation. Courtesy of their 'performance,' virtually every household has a generator. The implication of this is that some country, far away from ours, have been provided with a market for the generators they manufacture. Moreover, our affinity for 'international' products will hinder us from buying the 'locally made' generators. Isn't God just good to our customers? Down the line, their name changed from NEPA to PHCN and now, the sector had been privatised, with its companies having different names depending on geographical location. Despite this, the name 'NEPA' had stuck already. This probably accounts for their

poor performance to date.

Our plight is even better these days. In the era when there were no prepaid meters, *we dey smell our yansh*. How we dread those monthly visits by the 'light people.' Funny enough, they never come when they are expected. Every household was given a bill. This was supposed to be according to power consumption. The bills were however outrageous. This is synonymous to rubbing salt on a wound as we are made to pay for services that are not provided. It is even more painful, that it was either that you paid or risk your 'lines' being disconnected. I saw as members of my community, my parents inclusive, comply to avoid 'disconnection.' This was rather a surprise to me and I could not but question whatever emotional attachment that they had to see the 'lines' connected to their houses. Well, the English people say half a loaf is better than none but this was no half loaf at all.

The 'light people' usually come in a group. The team is usually led by one Mr Ben, a rather huge man with a big pot belly who wore flabby pants and a black polo shirt. Mr Ben always wore an angry face and speaks harshly to everyone. The other officials are the ones who distribute the bill and look out for those who had illegal connections. Ever since Mr *Aliyu's* illegal connection had brought him a lot of 'penalty,' every household had learnt their lesson. I presume that Mr Ben's disposition to us, in our community was because we had not learnt the art of appeasing the gods. Many members of the community are now free from the grip of Mr Ben and his people. We now had our prepaid meters and can do *shakara*. While this did not change the erratic power supply, it saved us the stress associated with 'bill-paying.' Moreover, it is a 'pay as you consume' system and so, there is no cheating.

I expected that with the lockdown, the power supply would

improve but *NEPA* just had to live up to its name. The supply was irregular and most times, the voltage was so low that it can barely lit up my room talk more power household appliances. Mr James, one of the newlyweds in the community visited us one night. He came to charge his phone when we turned on our generator. He went on and on, lamenting how that he risks receiving a query from his boss. His workplace had mandated them to work from home but he has not been meeting up with his deadlines. The reason was obvious, we had no 'light' and so could not power his device to work.

Although I was double sure the situation is the same or even worse in many parts of the country, I attempted putting a call through to one of my friends. Since we had not seen each other in a long time, I decided to video call him. To my utmost surprise, my friend hung up and almost immediately, sent me a message. His phone battery was on two per cent and he had only come online to reply to an urgent message. They have not had 'light' for about a week and he could not tell when next that would be. What a pity! I cannot but wonder the difference that regular power supply will make in the lives of the citizens. As one of my friends will always say 'regular power supply is on its own, is a potent empowerment scheme.' We keep *saying e go beta* but I guess it is high time we start making conscious efforts to see the *beta*.



CHAPTER TEN STOMACH INFRASTRUCTURE

It is a common saying, that once hunger ‘enters’ one’s body system, it obstructs every other thing. This was soon becoming the case as the lockdown persisted. Many folks in my community who are ‘coloured collar’ workers were affected. Some of them, are ‘daily earners’ and so, depended on the earnings from each day to survive. Although this ‘spend it all’ philosophy is defective, the time to cast stones is not now. Other individuals who are white-collar workers were either being owed salaries, paid late or having to endure a cut in their pay. In short, hunger was beginning to ravage the people.

It was saddening, seeing people lament terribly on how that they were finding it difficult to eat. It is even so bad, hearing full grown-ups express bitterness on their inability to feed their families. Soon enough, government and other well-meaning individuals in the society started addressing the ‘hunger issue.’ Private sector leaders in the country formed the Coalition against COVID-19 (CACOVID), to support the government’s effort in overpowering the disease. This kind gesture by religious institutions, business corporations, citadels of learning and philanthropists shows that the task of nation-building is not

exclusive to the government. It is indeed our joint responsibility to build our country. Food items, toiletries, face masks and other items which have been tagged Palliatives were distributed. As usual, the distribution is another drama about to unfold.

I had volunteered to work with one of the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) which was providing relief materials to members of my immediate community and the neighbouring ones. At about noon, on a fateful day, people began to troop to the 'designated distribution centre' which was located in my community. The 'centre' is a government-owned primary school close to where I live. It has been said, that a hungry man is an angry man. What then happens with a crowd of hungry men and women? Your guess is probably as good as mine. We had made arrangements for the people to be attended to in groups but it appears they could not withstand the hunger anymore. The people came 'battle-ready' with backpacks and all manner of 'storage devices.' One big task was getting the people to line up, leaving a distance of six feet from the next person. It was as if they had sworn never to be organised or orderly. I watched as people 'chanced' each other. Soon, a fight ensued. From afar, I could see that a dark-skinned, short man had engaged a young adult of about my age in a fight. As far as I was concerned, the duo was not fighting. The 'short man' was dealing his 'opponent' in severe blows, you know when the *Oyinbo* people say "he beat him blue-black." Upon getting to the scene, I quickly recognised the 'superhero' as *Pyro*. He already had a reputation for being a troublemaker. He was one of those who disturbed people who newly acquire lands in my community. Together with his gang, they always demanded money before those people could start to build. They were indeed a menace to society. I later discovered that he had tried to 'shunt', an attempt which the young man was not willing to allow. This got him infuriated and he wanted the other person to '*sabi who he be.*'

The presence of the Civil Defence Corps helped to achieve decorum. It was funny how people quickly comported themselves, for fear of the hefty men in blue. They probably have either experienced or heard how ruthless, those guys can be. The beneficiaries were so thankful. As if with their last ounce of energy, they muster a warm thank you. You can tell the manner of joy that filled my heart. I was more than excited, that I was contributing my quota to societal development. After all, it is our promise to our dear nation, to “serve her with all our strength.”

Of course, the palliatives from the government too came. The media had reported on the huge sums of money that had been spent in this regard. The people were, therefore, expecting something big. It was as if we were in a trance when we were handed the ‘palliatives.’ I presumed, that the ‘middlemen’ had done ‘justice’ to the distribution. They had reserved the ‘juicy part’ for themselves and their friends while the masses were fed the remnants. Even at that, the distribution was not devoid of favouritism. I guess that by now, this was not alien to us and so, most people were not bothered.



CHAPTER ELEVEN LOCKDOWN OR KNOCKDOWN?

The lockdown is taking a toll on my pocket. By now, it had been almost two months since I left school and the regular pocket money has been halted. This was the usual drill whenever I was on holiday. Well, I guess my old man sees no need to provide me ‘feeding allowance’ when I had been eating at home. Worse of all, I have been feeding fat and so, in the words of the famous mask musician, ‘nothing for you.’ By the way, he had been ‘accused’ of having privilege information into future events. This according to the comedian, inspired his mode of ‘COVID-compliant’ mode of dressing. The little money that I had saved up before returning home had been spent on data and my bank account was reading red. I then decided to explore my ‘cash-generating options.’ I felt it would be big ridicule to my ‘bigmannism,’ to participate in the online giveaways. Not that I did not want the money but I hated how that my name and details will be posted online, as ‘evidence.’ *Tufiakwa!* Next on the list was to reach out to some of my uncles and aunts. This seemed the best and most reliable option. It was funny how that thought brought me so much pleasure. I was in my seventh heavens already with one of Chief Commander’s classic blaring from the stereo set in my room, I was sure cash was on its way.

It seemed to me, that the best time to call Uncle *Seye* was in the cool of the day. For whatever reasons, I think Uncle *Seye's* *mumu* button was softer in the evening. I had carefully rehearsed my speech and how that it will be punctuated with emotions. As soon as it was 5 p.m, I picked up my phone to call him. The response I got from the other end of the receiver was the frustrating “the number you are trying to call is not reachable at the moment, do hold on or call back later.” To say I was annoyed will be an understatement. My next line of action was to call his second line but before then, I thought it wise to pray. After all, the bible says that “the righteous taketh it by force.” What mattered to me at that point was neither theology or the appropriateness of the scripture. All I needed was money and every obstacle had to be cleared off by force! Surprisingly, his second line went through by ‘force’ and his ‘hello’ rang loudly in my ears. Lord God! *See as money make my uncle voice sweet*, I thought.

I had mastered my ‘presentation’ and truly, Uncle *Seye* had not changed a bit. He was still the same caring person. Our conversation was a roller coaster until the money issue came up. His response this time, was rather alarming. He first let out a long, dry laugh. Unknown to me, the pandemic has badly affected the establishment where he worked. The business owners had to painfully let off much staff and unfortunately, he was one of those affected. He went on to narrate how that he had been having a rough patch. Luckily for him, however, his wife was working and so, she had been the sole provider for the needs of their home. I was moved to tears. My sadness was twofold. My Uncle *Seye*, the nicest of them all had lost his job and of course, my hope for some cool cash had been dashed. By now, I was beginning to regret my decision to call him. The call lasted longer than I thought it would be as I had to express sympathy and say words of reassurance to him. My loss was piling. I had

almost exhausted my 'credit' and my red account balance was still staring me in the face.

Uncle *Bidemi* is in no position to be called. He typifies the 'promise and fails' character. Ever since I was a kid, he always had one excuse or the other whenever it was time to give me money. It was either that his wallet was stolen on his way to our house or his employer owed him salary arrears. This was the usual narrative after he would have eaten to his full at our place. I was no mood for explanations and I did not want the 'face-your-book' exhortation.

The time was now 10:00 p.m. I was back from my routine evening stroll and as had become the custom, I proceeded to the bathroom to have my bath and wash my face mask. As usual, I had a large dose of 'mental therapy' from my stroll. At the moment, what bothered me was the entitlement mentality that I had unconsciously developed. In the real sense of it, I am only 'entitled' to whatever I work for. It was my resolve to change this mode of thinking. My thoughts were interrupted by a loud sound coming from my phone. I remembered that I had put the ring volume to the maximum while I was on the call with Uncle *Seye* in the evening.

I had expected the message to be the usual NCDC 'admonition' and truly, it was. The National Center for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC) had been faithful to the cause of public enlightenment ever since the pandemic started. The message this time, was as follows, "Take Responsibility! Wash your hands frequently with soap under running water. Avoid touching your face and high-contact surfaces to prevent coronavirus spread." To my utmost surprise, however, there was a second message. A credit alert! My maternal aunt, Agnes, had sent me money out of the blues.

Auntie Agnes, a middle-aged woman lived in another city, thousands of kilometres from where I lived. Of all my aunties, Auntie Agnes is the prettiest. Her beauty is second to none, well, except my mother. She also had these 'minus' marks on either side of her face. I learnt that she had been born after my grandmother suffered a miscarriage. At infancy, she often fell ill and had been given those marks to provide some spiritual protection. A few years back, she requested for a loan from her sister - my mother. She had a keen interest in agriculture and decided to delve into the business. Truth be told, I irked at the idea of her becoming a 'farmer.' As if to shut up the mouth of naysayers, her agricultural business boomed and she is in big money. Much more than that, the pandemic has got nothing on her. She had no fear of being sacked or getting a pay-cut. The commodities in which she traded in - crops and frozen foods are essentials and she was making money daily despite the lockdown. It truly pays to follow one's dreams. I quickly called to say a 'fat' thank you. It is now appearing to be true, that Agriculture is the 'in-thing.' I have always been an advocate for economic diversification but it seems our nation is still enjoying its romance with crude oil. There are no truer words than that we are a blessed nation and it is ours to either choose prosperity or penury.



CHAPTER TWELVE LOCKDOWN MUST GO

The people in my community are the real hustlers. The stay-at-home order left them in low spirits. In what seemed an answer to their prayers, the government announced a date for the gradual easing of the lockdown. On the eve of the said date, neighbours exchanged loud pleasantries and clapped their hands for joy. As soon as it was dawn, it was time to leave. The various dramatic expressions were priceless. While some had an extensive period of praying for protection, some others were less concerned. All that mattered to *my people* at the moment was going out to make some cash.

Little children of about seven years old had already positioned themselves on the streets. They were selling face masks. Whether the masks were one fits many, I do not know. All I saw was the funny manner in which people ‘tested’ about two or three of the masks before finally settling to buy ‘their size.’ There were however the serious people, who had theirs on before leaving the house. Some even went to the extent of wearing gloves. I also noticed the fashion-savvy fellows who decided to put on masks matching their outfit, what we usually referred to as ‘to match.’ Rather, unfortunately, there were the *I don’t care* people

who cared less about face masks or whatever it was.

Motorists and *Okada* riders were having the time of their life. This had allowed them to hike transport fares. They were kings at the moment as the demand for their services exceeded the supply. Once you haggled the price, they would just zoom off. This was no surprise to me. Corruption is in our very fabric and this wicked nature never misses an opportunity to express itself.

Two days down the line, my laptop started misbehaving. I had tried the trick of removing the battery and putting it back but the device would not just come on. By now, there had been several cases of the disease confirmed in my state. While I dread going out, at this moment, I was left with no other option than to go fix it. You can tell, that I had my face mask on and my spray sanitizer was in my pocket. The drastic times call for drastic measures. The number of people who were out on the roads was so disturbing. I looked with disdain as people hugged each other and the careless manner of coughing and even spitting. These are the same people who have refused to be tested for the disease. This could be because they had heard the rumour that the test kits are bad and so, whether one had the disease or not, the result would be positive. I had ridden in my father's car to the 'computer clinic.' The plan, however, was for me to return home via public transport as he had some official duties to attend to. In less than two hours, the repairs had been done and it was then time to return home.

After waiting for about fifteen minutes, I flagged down a taxi. The driver was a dark old man who had a very dirty, horrible looking face mask dangling from his ears. I sat in the front seat beside the driver. He was the ideal taxi driver. The type that knows who the amateur drivers are, speeds a little and hates the Police. Intermittently, he would bite his fingernails and make

some funny sounds with his mouth, as if to expel bits of the nail he had bitten. I was horrified. My joy knew no bounds as we approach the bus stop where I was to highlight. Unknown to me, we were not done with our 'bromance'. He had no 'change' and so after I had highlighted, he spent almost half an hour, looking for whom will help him out. Finally, he handed me a couple of dirty, rumpled currency notes and drove off. He indeed is the 'ideal taxi driver.'

Just as I arrived home, before I could take off my clothes, my phone beeped. It was a message from a school-mate, lamenting his 'incarceration' and expressing pessimism over the possible effects of the gross disregard for physical distancing and other protective measures. The ten-minute conversation ended on the usual 'all is well' note. As at this time, there have been thousands of confirmed cases in the country yet, people just dey *waka up and down*. The general idea was that we as a people possessed some sort of luck and would always be on top of every situation. Well, I wish us luck!



CHAPTER THIRTEEN A HAPPY ENDING?

It has been a long way coming and the end is not even in sight. I watch with teary eyes, as the number of cases increases per day. This was beginning to seem like a dead end. By this time, I was tired of being bored. *My tired is tired*, as many of my friends would say. The routine was the same with the exceptions of Sundays when the morning worship added a bit of spice.

Although the restrictions are virtually no longer existent, I was not interested in daring the Brother COVID. I watched as my country people all in the name of hustling, troop out every day, and act as if everything is normal. Worse of all are those funny individuals who have no business with being outdoors. Yet, you find them loitering around banks and other public places. Chris, who lived in one of the twin flat adjacents my house is one of such people. Chris hits the road as early as he can, going from checking his bank account balance to buying ₦300 petrol into his 'jalopy' and then visiting his friend who had constipation. His reasons are usually not only flimsy but unreasonable. Well, I guess he's old enough to know that COVID kills.

I woke up the next morning to rather disturbing news. The

social media troublemakers were at it again. Their claim this time was that there's no such thing as the coronavirus. Accompanying their claims was a video of middle-aged men and women dancing in one of the isolation centres. It was as if they were at a social gathering. This was further reinforced by a statement from one of the country's elder statesman. According to him, he paid an unexpected visit to an isolation centre in the same region as those of the 'dancers' and to his surprise, he met 'the sick people' feeding fat. All I could do was sigh and hope that that news was false.

Soon, there was another news. I and many others found it too good to be true that the Malagasy had found a cure. There were different reactions of *Iro ni o, ope o, Oluwa Seun o* and so on. There has been some news on notable scientists within the country who have been exploring probable indigenous treatments. I am also aware of hundreds of research works going on around the globe aimed at finding a solution to the coronavirus disease. I was so thrilled at this pleasant news. The gloom over people's faces disappeared in a jiffy. I saw as people laughed hysterically, rolled their eyes and stretched their hands as if to say *waka Corona*. It was evident that people were in deep pains as regards the issue of the pandemic. To further take people's excitement to another level was an announcement from the government on her decision to import the said cure. *Hurray!* This was a breath of fresh air amid the chaos. Like is almost becoming the custom, people soon started making jokes about the drug. It was hilarious, hearing people make jokes on how those traders will hike its price and how bottles upon bottles of it will be consumed. One that got me laughing to tears was a joke on how those *Aba boys* will manufacture their drug as soon as the original lands. As one would expect, the 'good news' brought a fresh level of disregard for the safety guidelines. It was carelessness at its peak!

These have been challenging times. However, I have watched as some of my optimistic friends evolved into achievers and wonderful men and women. In *Chika's* words, 'the pandemic is not that bad after all.' Many other people spend the whole day lamenting and asking when the 'mess' will be over. Yet, irrespective of whatever is done, days keep running into weeks and months. It is so sad that time is never on lockdown and COVID or no, we countdown to the grave daily. The importance of making each moment count can never be overemphasised. You probably have heard it said that 'death is no respecter of age.' We have had people who died while they were in their teenage ages, some in their twenties, thirties and others at ripe ages. Life is however not about the 'quantity' but quality. It is high time we place a premium on living life intentionally and leaving a good legacy. The unfortunate thing is most individuals just wake up to grey hairs with a few missing teeth. They then realise that time has gone - for which nothing meaningful can be accounted. The question of how well we have lived can never be evaded. We all owe posterity an explanation on how we spent our lives. While we keep believing and praying, let us hope that the day comes and that soon enough when we can live our 'normal' lives once again. In the meantime, however, I am yours in quarantine.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Home, sweet home has been the usual saying since time immemorial. What then becomes of this sweetness when a strange ailment issues a global holiday? Join the author on this bumpy ride as he tells the non-fictional story of his 'holiday' experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Author, Adeyemo Victor Ayodeji, is a Poet, Radio Presenter and an Undergraduate Medical Student at Bowen University, Iwo. He hails from Okuku, Osun State. This is his second publication, the first being a collection of poems titled 'How Amazing.' He is an advocate for a better Nigeria.



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