

ONLINE  
EXCLUSIVE!

# LEVELTER

Enyeribe  
Ibegwam

“FRAGMENTS”  
*Fiction*

---

# FRAGMENTS



Enyeribe Ibegwam

# Noon

I am a thirty-six-year-old man, sitting in a criminal detention center. Since my confinement, I have discovered joy in studying the faces of strangers. Moreover, knowing that the stranger is aware of my gaze is a delicate act of blamelessness. So, I'm staring at the woman seated opposite me. She adjusts her elbows, which sit in triangulation near my cuffed wrists. Her movement is genteel. The air around her smells sweet, different from the entire air in this room. Her complexion is the skin of russet potatoes. Her browning rope-like dreadlocks, rests on her sea-green blazer. A wan smile reveals the artificial whiteness of her teeth, and her wide-set eyes study her open palms—like they are old shoes with intricate details she's just noticing—hoping not to embarrass me. She understands quietude, the gratification it gives the speaker. When she speaks, she speaks with her eyes, a kind of private estrangement.

Now, her palm cups her face, the rings on her ring finger: a wedding band; silvery newness, maybe like her marriage, and another silver band adorned with a small amethyst gem.

“What do you remember?” she asks. In fragments of memory, I remember my childhood.

Like a dream, I'm a child again. I see myself; the ten-year-old boy that pooled weeks of lunch money, and hoarded his father's change from errands, just to buy old copies of DC Comics that smelled of mildew.

“From America,” the fedora-wearing peddler always began, “New York, to be exact,” he'd finish to me and my boyhood clique without being asked, as we pooled our monies to buy them from him. There I was, ten, always I'm ten. Standing by the door of the listless aired room, the comic magazine rolled just like a sugarcane, the faint scent of mosquito coils accompanied by wafting grey colored smoke. She beckoned on me from where she stood, asking me to squat. I knew what to do.

“Use your tongue first, before you put your fingers in,” she said, gesturing downwards on her body. I did as she said, because if I didn't she would report to my father. He took the holiday lessons she was supposed to be teaching me very serious, no one throws that away. Even back then, I knew. My mother wouldn't entertain impure talks without proof, like dirty underwear; they were better unseen. Everyone knew.

She had offered to teach mathematics to my younger sister and me. My parents were always busy—not like they knew what to teach. My father worked the double shift at the UAC factory, and my mother, an ice-cream factory. They returned from their shifts in their scented dirty-blue overalls from being worn around

factory ovens—not just of sweat, but of butter, and milk, and heated sugar, even the putrid whiff of raw egg. In those days—and this was more than twenty years ago—my mother sang daily, about the difficulty of finding someone to keep an eye on my sister and me while our father worked. So, I had to obey Auntie Apollonia. She was a neighbor, not a relative.

“Only children without home training call elders by their names,” my mother said in wicked hisses. “And adults that challenge the Head of State have worthless lives. After all, the coward will live longer than the brave, you hear me?”

We lived in the same building with my Aunt Apollonia, each family to a single room, which served as bedroom and parlor. The window to my family’s room presented a fine sight of the choppy lagoon water with its anchored canoes. In retrospect, I cannot imagine living in a room like that. Inside, ours was divided with a hanging green curtain—doubling as clothes hanger—so washed it had become see-through. It demarcated the quilt-laid bed of conception, from a slumped armchair and a cane-rack that housed old VHS tapes, a battery radio and piled loose hinge books in varied shades of mold. I recall nights in that room; icky proclamations bursting from my parents somewhat controlled breathes, the slapping sounds and subsequent whiff of after-sex, as they fanned themselves with my magazines. While I lay beside my sister on a thick sleeping-mat tossed by the foot of the bed, I hoped my sister never woke up—to hear them. As far as I know, she never did. They stopped, after my mother birthed stillborn; twice, then my sister died of complications from juvenile diabetes—something we had never heard about before then.

We lived in Oceanview, a castoff town with houses sprawled like shards of broken china wares, scattered along the coastal line in almost innumerable pieces. Our house was one of the derelict buildings—with broken-off plasters, revealing cement-bricks beneath. It was amongst the few on land that formed the teeth of Oceanview, the majority, inside, were stilt houses; lifted above the Lagos Lagoon shore by wooden walkways. The walkways yoked houses together, petering to the northern side of town, by the tip of the stucco water-channels. Coated green with algae, the government had forgotten about the channels, so mossy branches shielded them as latrines. It was there my mother almost had what became her last stillbirth. Right beside the small cubes of standalone bathroom made with brown rot wood and rusted iron-sheets.

Oceanview was near perfect for us, everyone got along just fine. We gossiped about ourselves but never let it get in the way, men returned daily, broken, crushed, but rose each morning as though the previous day had never happened and the children, we looked out for each other, took care of each other, and played with each other. Even the animals got along just fine, narrow-looking dogs and feral cats, chickens and ducks had their way amongst themselves. There was once a story in Oceanview, that a dog and gilt in heat grew so close that their owners feared the worse and ended their lives. It was all good, except for threatening plagues: swarming dragonflies like fighter jets during the day, and cowardly mosquitoes—gladdened by the dragonflies’ nightly retirements—dashed around heads like there was something of theirs in our ears. There were threats of demolition too, by military-backed monstrous bulldozers with jaws that could break cement

walls and grind wood. Auntie Apollonia shared a room with her mother, two rooms away from ours. From my earliest memory, her father was never there. I heard later that he had thrown himself into Bar Beach.

“Agreed, the machine at the shoe factory accidentally sliced his fingers, but is that enough reason for a man to take his own life?” Neighbors still questioned, long after his bloated body was discovered.

“Even people with complete fingers have no work, he shouldn’t have done it,” they agreed. Her reputation preceded her, before her father’s suicide could. Neighbors knew she was studying accountancy (such a difficult course) and praised her resilience—to study at night with the halo from a kerosene lantern— and the first-class degree that would bring an aspired oil company job. My mother praised her most.

“Apollonia’s brain is like magnet, any man that she marries is lucky. She deserves a government scholarship,” my mother whispered.

“Look at England, they give everything. Even milk for school—”

“Milk?” My father interrupted, “the Iron Lady has ended that.”

My mother tittering, as words jabbered, “politics in England isn’t the same with the UAC factory.” She held on to her disbelief, until the year her London uncle Fabian visited and confirmed that my father had been right, there’s no milk for schoolchildren.

Auntie Apollonia and my mother had a chain of Saturday activities, which I tagged along. First to Kingsway Store on Martins street—where I saw my first elevator— then to Leventis Store on Marina Road; where my mother bought the cheapest canned tomatoes available, after hours of gallivanting like we owned the store. Finally, the UAC store at Apongbon; there she used my father’s voucher to collect his employee ration of sliced honey-bread, frozen chicken thigh, and margarine in a squared foil. I remember those weekly activities, plus, the walks under Apongbon Bridge, like vagabonds, staring long at wares in open trays. With my mother recalling that Lagos used to be as fine as London.

“Everyone was here, long before we sent the Ghanaians back,” she said. “Now Lagos is rubbish, like parts of London. Over there, people sleep in the streets, and their government gives them money for not working. Yes! *Nda* Fabian said so,” she concluded, tapping her plastic shopping bag wedged under Auntie Apollonia’s armpit, since none of us seemed to believe her. The swallowing dusks brought roadside market women to sell their wares in night-markets that erupted under the bridge without government sanction, so that the *War-Against-Indiscipline* soldiers wouldn’t bother them. With feigned familiarity, market women called my mother, *customer*; pointing out that she and Auntie Apollonia looked like sisters—few years apart

“Na your junior sister be dis?” Different market women cajoled each week. Flattered, she always lied that

Auntie Apollonia was indeed her immediate younger.

“This na your carbon copy, very fine o! So, customer you go buy my fish?”

“Taste and buy my groundnut, even your boy want am.”

“Buy toothpaste!”

“Sugar too!”

Voices rose in wheedling crescendo. From their cajoling I noticed similarities between Auntie Apollonia and my mother: dark brown skins, round faces, slender bodies and solid hips—that only Auntie Apollonia had.

Months strolled, but years ended fast. As my proficiency in long divisions and square root equations grew, so did my inhibitions fade. With mastery my hands wiggled inside her blouses to free her breasts from the clutches of bothersome bras. She had started to lie in bed then, to direct me. Afterwards, I ran my fingers through her slender body, and she told me how much I meant to her, “I love you,” she said tersely, before singing and finger-snapping to Michael Jackson’s *Billie Jean*, then *Beat it*,

“Patience,” she said, “your moonwalk will be better than Michael’s,” she assured, from the bed where she watched my dancing. And like that, I discovered the willingness of her *love* for me.

I still don’t know what it was that drew her to me—there were many boys in Oceanview after all. She liked to surprise me, with second-hand dungarees and more comic magazines, sometimes; chocolates—before my little sister died. Slowly, there became no need for surprises. I had grown comfortable: a sense of inexplicable infatuation towards her. On some nights, while our parents worked the non-stop double shift, she would sneak into the unlit corridor. Unbothered by scurrying vermin night-rats and cockroaches, soft-tapped at my family’s room door, which I opened without complaint, so we could be together. By mornings, our parents were always grateful she had offered to spend the night there—this was the period just after my sister’s death. They suspected nothing, so it grew. When she wasn’t in the mood, I caressed her till her giggles betrayed what I thought was happiness. Once, during one of our trysts, my mother came home early, startling us. I was seated beside Auntie Apollonia, my fingers nearing the meeting of her thighs, when my mother walked in. She shut the window before whispering. The *War-Against-Indiscipline* soldiers had whipped her at the bus stop—queues hadn’t been orderly.

“Not just me, we were many,” she said. It had rained earlier that day, so commuters skirting puddles had disrupted the bus queues,

“Before we could say *Indiscipline*, soldiers appeared like ghosts. Look at my body.” In that moment

Auntie Apollonia dabbed a wet napkin on blood caked welts and began nursing her fractured arm to health.

But abruptly it ended. She graduated from the university. Married a Sandhurst-trained, lanky Major General with a lopsided grin, as his third wife, and naturally moved to the moneyed Victoria Garden City with him. We lost contact. Later that year the monsoon came; clouds darkened, the lagoon belched, and its strong wind unstitched the roof of our building, plunging it into the lagoon. Then it dawned on my parents to move. They licked fingertips, counting their savings. My mother found a one-bedroom-flat with an adjoining private bathroom stall on the second floor of a five-story apartment building in Jakande Low-cost Housing.

Two years after we left, Oceanview was demolished and sand-filled above sea level by military-backed developers.

“They are wasting their time. No one wins a fight against the government,” my father said, as news of Oceanview residents protesting against the demolition spread.

“Who’s the government?” my mother hummed. “Aren’t we?”

“Wait, so I married a Cambridge lawyer, or are you now Aristotle?” he asked.

Following decades of military regime, election results were annulled, and democratic governments ceded to military coups. But amid cataclysm, sex consoles, whether delicate or tedious. So, while everyone cried for real democratic change, more children were born. By the fifth month of ’99, democracy blossomed. The day the democratic president was sworn-in, my parents remember he was once an army general.

“Remind me of that old saying,” my mother said, as we watched the ceremony.

*“Old soldiers never die. Yes?”*

Way after pleas of *we followed orders* by military oppressors at the Human Rights Violation Commission had died, came cycles of sensationalized news reports, football leagues followership, thieving politicians, phony religious miracles and the internet. With sex elevated to the grandest of our pleasures, family-planning television jingles aired, reminding us that many children required plenty of money.

“Only god provides for a child,” my mother said, snapping during those jingles, memories of my deceased siblings brought back. So, from secondary school through university, I engaged in beautifully dirty things, and to avoid laying pregnancies in the bellies of those girls, I used condoms. Most times offbeat, but not so bad. Sometimes quick, sometimes tender, otherwise annoyingly unsatisfying. Inevitably, I thought about Auntie Apollonia and masturbated. This desolation, I masked with a kind of churchliness that had no desire for dogmas.

“World Bank and IMF insist our economy is growing, jobs are already available,” my father said, parodying the new president on television. “Well, since graduation, my engineer son here has no job,” he continued before spitting.

In my third year of joblessness, I sat in a crackling rickshaw headed home; tie unknotted, shirt unbuttoned and drained of hope after an employment test turned out to be scam. I had looked out of the rickshaw as a figure stepped out of an expensive looking car, and into a supermarket. I recognized her, though it had been years, those years had been kind; short hair in babyish-curls, with facial features contoured by makeup and her dark brown skin had turned a rich caramel from expensive lotions and soaps and idleness. Her womanly curves still noticeable after years of childbirth. She remembered me too.

“My husband is a federal minister now,” she informed, after my obeisance. Then I brought up the past, “aren’t there enough troubles in the world now, why recall the past? We were young. You know, we usually think our futures will be outstanding, but then it turns out differently,” she squinted and placed her braids behind her ears then continued, “we look for something in our past to blame; living with the blame like birthmarks.” I realized in that moment, that *we*, meant nothing to her. I have to say, that I felt slightly cheated by her reprimand.

“Do you like being a third wife?” I changed the subject.

“Like? Are third wives somehow unhappy? Well, I’m not. There’s happiness in everything. Even kept-women find theirs,” the sly calculating expression in her eyes, made me uncomfortable as I joined her in the back seat of her car, her driver’s angular head didn’t move.

“This shopping-mall infected town used to be Oceanview, do you remember?” She took a swig from a whiskey flask, “do you remember?”

The supermarket didn’t have her brand of English mango tea. From a wallet-sized photo she showed me her teenage children—two boys and a girl— in front of a suburban house. They were plump, like people with breathing troubles. Squinty eyes, as mouths formed a small *O*, like an ice-cream was behind the camera, delighting them.

“The boys are preparing for A’ levels at Harrow, and the girl is a boarding student at Charterhouse.” Another swig of whiskey, coupled with a promise to speak to her husband, about my unemployment.

The phone call came a week after, from a foreign-owned GSM operating company. Her husband and the Managing Director were friends; they played Polo together at a Country Club in Abraka. On my employment confirmation, I called to thank her. With irritation in her voice, she blurted, “now go on with our life. Besides, everyone wants a piece in telecoms, forget oil companies.” I coughed and said nothing.

“You know, my husband is marrying a new wife,” she continued, “but tell me, why is it so difficult for him to be content?” I heard gulping sounds, and imagined her with her whiskey flask, as she got off the phone. My salary was well above graduate-entry level, only because her husband had provided solid recommendation. I never heard from her again, that’s how serendipity works. While undergoing my medical check-up for the job, I met Ifunanya—the woman I married.

“Not to sound rude, but I keep telling myself you aren’t up to six feet,” I started. She smiled, a dimple in one cheek, obviously accustomed to that line, then answered, “I’m five eleven.”

She was a doctor at the hospital, where I had done my employment medical tests. Her glowing bronze complexion, and short afro assured second stares. As it happened, we had schooled at Ibadan.

“If you hadn’t been a medical student, I would have met you at least once,” I joked, on one of our lunch dates at The Wheatbaker Hotel in Ikoyi.

We got married two years after—she was twenty-seven, three years younger than me— my mother had encouraged me.

“Marriages are better when young; because love ages, but years of friendship can keep couples together,” she whispered on my wedding day. People marry for choices, other than love, I thought to myself.

My parents remained awe-struck at my rise in the GSM Company, which brought indigent relatives eager to have their children live with me, so I could help with school fees.

“He sees the entire Lagos from his high-rise glass office and found a good wife; the Central Bank director’s daughter,” my father boasted to needy relatives, before smiling out of modesty. They moved back to Emekuku; our hometown, where I built them a house— “Life is easier there.”

But we were wanting people—Ifunanya and I, that is. What we both could boast of after the fanciful ceremony was loneliness. For four years, we lived without children—Ifunanya unable to fall pregnant. Numerous tests confirmed I was the infertile one; her decision not to leave the marriage stunned me. My impotency stayed between the two of us. Nobody mentioned adoption, except the doctor at the expensive fertility hospital in Victoria Island. He mentioned sperm banks and IVF too.

2 P.M.

I relax; my back rests on a straight-back chair, so my cuffed wrists are on my thighs and off the table. Prison wardens are watching through the clear-glass window behind the dreadlocks lady. I know.

I recall one of my mother's visits—we lived in a three-bedroom-flat then. She brought a dark green elixir from a *dibia* in our hometown, advising Ifunanya on when to drink it—automatically concluding that Ifunanya was the problem.

“Marriages are like guns, useless, without bullets. Children will carry family name’s,” my mother said in a soft voice, the day she left for our hometown. Same message my mother-in-law furthered in a roundabout way as she persuaded us to a spirit-filled-church.

The large auditorium housed a band with their musical instruments, and worshippers that raised hands, sky-bound in unending proclamations that seemed like glossolalia to me. Oh, the cacophonous attempt at language, bursting from the mouth of a sweating woman beside me. The pastor was a small man with hungry eyes, in sweat wrinkled brown suit and Italian shoes. After the service, my mother-in-law led us into his air-conditioned pastoral office. In it, his much younger portrait and theological certificates adorned walls. He began to pray before we could speak. He prayed so loud and shook so violently, I thought he might pass out. Somehow, he brought my thoughts to rest, asking, “Is anything too hard for our god?” There was quiet. It wasn't a question. “The god of Evidence of Miracles Ministry is in the business of signs and wonders, and thus sayeth; ye shall multiply. Windows of heaven are open,” he continued, and touched Ifunanya's stomach with his fingertips, entering another realm of glossolalia. It seemed like cold-reading to me; a young couple—we wore our wedding bands—and an older woman, was enough to guess the problem was childlessness. I despised his guts, wished something else had taken us there, just to defy his audacity. So that my mother-in-law's thundering, *Amen*, would've be whispers. He handed Ifunanya a small bottle of olive oil, instructing her on how we were to use it.

“Declare a thing,” his voice instructed. “Hallelujah, it is done,” my mother-in-law took up his tone.

“Brethren our god does only big miracles,” he pointed to a glass offertory bowl, as he stressed the importance of tithing and blessed-oils and things available at their sales-stand. His expression reminding us that: Dollars and Pounds and Euros and Rands were heaven's currencies. Masking an indifferent demeanor, I pretended not to notice his hardened face, at the Naira bills I offered.

The next time my mother inquired, Ifunanya was pregnant. A miracle! My mother confirmed the *dibia's* potency, “Anya Nke Kamalu has never been known for failing elixirs,” she bragged over the phone. She seemed to have found a convenient union between her faith and the potency of the *dibia's* elixirs. When my mother-in-law visited, her prayers filled the vacuum of the night, exclaiming the sole divinity of the god

of Evidence of Miracles Ministry, as though there was a competition. Of course, we didn't tell them that Ifunanya had been raped. Something strange happened, about a month before her father was confirmed as the new Central Bank Deputy Governor, the same week we planned to try an Artificial Insemination. It had been an apartment by apartment robbery—we still lived in the three-bedroom-flat then. Once in our apartment, they took our valuables, yet unsatisfied, commanded Ifunanya to the living room floor, taking turns on her. I knelt with a gun pointed to my head, and my eyes shut.

“Open your eyes or we waste you and your wife,” a smoky voice barked. When they left, she sank her head on the slope of my shoulder, bone against bone, our collarbones stroked, as we whimpered. Sniffing and blowing, like our noses were external gadgets. Between us, we knew we would never speak about it.

So, with his attained office, my father-in-law appropriated a five-bedroom-flat in highbrow 1004 Estate, bequeathing it to us. A high walled neighborhood with looming apartment buildings separated by rounded grassy patches in whimsical styles. The asphalt-laid street was always so black, so clean. Besides flower hedges, soldierly trees bore flowers—people in 1004 Estate didn't bother with fruit trees. When they wanted fruits, they knew where to go.

“Ignore the Brazilian oranges in ShopRite, further down that aisle are those from Florida,” I overheard a party of women saying to Ifunanya at the Estate pool party. “And South African plums are really the best. Others are chemically grown balderdash.”

My neighbors lived concentric lives in a country where all things can be arranged. Their accents dipped in foreign currency education. With no poverty in their past—unlike me—and their present spent parasailing cleaner beaches abroad. “Remember to register at the boat club,” someone said to me at the pool party. I nodded, sipping my white wine.

It could have gone right. She took morning after pills and a battery of HIV tests. Yet, it went wrong; Ifunanya fell pregnant. Serendipity, again? A decision came at her father's promotion party, she had complained of tiredness.

“Tired?” One of her aunts repeated, her stare filled with outlandish disbelief. Unable to comprehend, what could tire a childless woman, where were the pestering children? Hadn't mothers at the party, powdered children-inducing fatigues from their faces? So, what was Ifunanya's justification? Her aunt questioned with her eyes. Later that night, Ifunanya whispered to me with a kind of drunken sincerity in her voice,

“We're keeping it.”

“People can bring themselves to love all children,” I said. What is marriage, if not giving happiness to one’s spouse? A peeling away of self to allow for togetherness. Ifunanya returned from Alberta with the twins—a girl and a boy. After her maternity leave, my mother moved in to help care for the children before they turned one, and could go to the crèche in Victoria Island, run by a British proprietress.

## 2:30 P.M.

“I’m sorry Kemakolam,” the dreadlocks lady says, “I never—” she blinks back tears. I smile, resting my wrists on the table again. She curls her fingers around mine, gently— I wonder if the papery feel of my palms irritates her. The twins were nearly seven months when my mother brought her.

“She can help play with the children,” my mother started.

“Play? I don’t need a house-girl,” I insisted.

“Is it a crime for your cousin to spend her holiday in your house? Heh,” my mother asked. After a pause, she sighed, “or her very first time in Lagos.”

“It’s okay Mama, she’s welcome,” Ifunanya said, eyeing me for support.

“Well, its fine I suppose,” I finished, as my mother led the girl into her room. A needy uncle’s daughter, she looked no older than fifteen, slightly paunchy, her hair in cornrows. Her eyes lacked naivety. The flat screen television on the wall thrilled her, and the bathtub and gas-cooker locked her fascination.

It happened as all things do: the day before the twins turned ten months, I was promoted at work. By the next day, the excitement had doubled—having longed for children after much wait, joy raised every day to a milestone. That morning Ifunanya and I left late for work. At the office, I realized I had forgotten some work papers on my nightstand. I went home to pick them up. I let myself into my apartment and straight to my bedroom without entering the living room. I heard my mother’s tunes from her bathroom, and the soft giggles of the twins in the living room. The cleaning lady must have left. I peered into the living room, expecting to see my cousin—I never bothered with her name. What I saw failed me. All those years of my boyhood brought back. As though, I had brought it upon my children. There she was; fingers circling the

twin-boy's penis, as if taking liberty with him, oblivious of my presence. An instant foreignness filled my mouth, I remember shouting. Startled, she straightened up, started to speak, stuttered. Silence. It comes back to me now in dreamlike flashes, with the pure madness of a cornered animal, I grabbed her neck. The twins wailed, as though they had been deprived of goodness. I still cannot understand why I did what I did next.

I turned, picked up the twin-boy—his cry was the loudest— shook him with rage, saying “you don't deserve this,” and then I tossed him to the sofa. Instead, in a sickening thud, he landed, head first, on the linoleum floor. Momentarily, there was a silencing precision, quieting twin-girl. I choked my cousin to the floor, knelt over her, howling, slamming her head on the linoleum floor, refusing to stop even when I saw blood on the floor. My mother rushed into the living room, in a towel-wrapped lathery body, questioning and screaming as she snatched twin-girl—that had started to wail—from the sofa. I continued to slam her head, until my face was covered in blood.

“Jehovah! Aru emee,” my mother screamed in fear, yet no one came knocking at the door in curiosity. That's life in 1004 Estate, people never come out for commotion. Preferring to mind their business and enjoy the sea breeze on their open balconies as though their neighbors don't exist. They must have dialed the Rapid Response Police from their flats.

Her tongue had darkened by the time the police arrived. A police woman rushed to her limp body and gasped in horror at the head. Maybe she had hoped to resuscitate her. My mother appeared from her room, shuddering, voice lost in exhaustion and twin-girl in her arms. I still remember being under the dining table—settled on my haunches, jaded, sweat soaked, and twin-boy's limp body snuggled in my arms. Twin-boy looked pinched, his nostrils caked with blood. I stared at the officers with apprehensive eyes. When they ordered me out, I didn't move. In his knifed voice, an officer snarled,

“Surely, god must punish you, evil man!”

“Heartless Children Murderer”—a newspaper headlined. I have come to realize that in indifference, people will say what they mean to say.

## 3 P.M.

“I too was violated like you,” the dreadlocks lady whispers.

I look at her, as if I will find madness in her eye.

“There’s always a way Kemakolam, always,” the dreadlocks lady says. Her jittery fingers curl mine, her voice—almost as kind as Ifunanya’s—accentuated by optimism. Ifunanya visits me every day here, and with all that she knows, she’s readier than the rest of the world to forgive me, always futuristic about life after here.

“We can appeal on the grounds of insanity,” dreadlocks lady continues. She reels off about a doctor that can help, and about an asylum. “It will make—”

“We? But I’m not insane,” I cut in. She understands the brittleness of having something worth living for, she says, “in these times, that that same thing must first be tested as being worth dying for.”

I’m trying to make sense of it to her, with the love of a parent; not experienced from birthing a child, but from nurturing one with empathetic patience. For some people, this experience becomes an unputdownable burden of a lifetime. I wonder if I am a good man, as she claims. Perhaps, if I believe it, it will be true. Life often plagues the good ones with cruelty, I recall reading somewhere.

“Tomorrow harbors the unknown, huh?”

She doesn’t answer, just brushes off a drop of tear, smiles weakly, and her grip around my lax fingers tightens. I study her, beneath her optimism, is bleakness. Perhaps like Ifunanya, she too tries to mask my desolate future, something they have no mastery of. I should tell her about the reoccurring visions; in them I abandon my adulthood for a childlike familiarity. But, isn’t reminiscing, just the disguised end of everything?

“You’re a thirty-six-year-old man,” I say, as if I’m reminding myself of forgotten memory.

“Are you talking to yourself about yourself?” she asks in confusion; a small frown rumples her forehead. Something throttles my speech, as the wardens open the door to tell her that my visit time is up.

Enyeribe Ibegwam was raised in Lagos, Nigeria. His work has been a finalist for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and is a recipient of a Kimbilio fellowship. His stories are forthcoming in Kweli Journal and Auburn Avenue. He lives near Lake Murray in Columbia, South Carolina