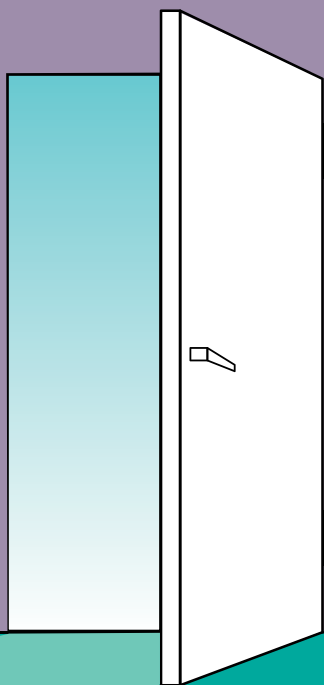


Opening Doors Through Stories: Remembering

WRITING FROM NEWCOMERS TO REGINA



A project of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and the
Regina Open Door Society

The year 2021 is here, along with our third year of *Opening Doors Through Stories: Remembering*. Canada benefits from, and is recognized for, the value it places on diversity, inclusiveness, and the strength of newcomers. At the Regina Open Door Society (RODS) we say, let's value our diversity and build stronger communities by helping newcomers settle well in Regina and area.

This year, like the past three years, RODS' Welcoming Community for Newcomers (WCN), along with its long-time partners, the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and Gail Bowen, organized and facilitated a Creative Writing Workshop. The workshop was designed to support newcomers who are passionate about writing and enthusiastic to further develop their skills to tell stories.

In November 2020, meeting for five sessions every Saturday morning through Zoom for two hours, a dedicated and talented group of newcomers helped write our 2021 Chapbook. RODS' WCN and our partners are very proud of the success and achievement attained by this year's participants who devoted their time, energy and creativity to entertain us with their stories. We are grateful and honoured to have worked with each and every one of our contributors.

Our humble hope is to open your heart to learn and acquire new experiences, and to bring a smile of enjoyment to your face, laughter, tears, through reading each story. To this end, we would like to encourage newcomers to keep up with their dreams and aspirations to become terrific writers and work hard to make it happen. All the best to everyone and enjoy the diversity and inclusiveness of Canadian multiculturalism.

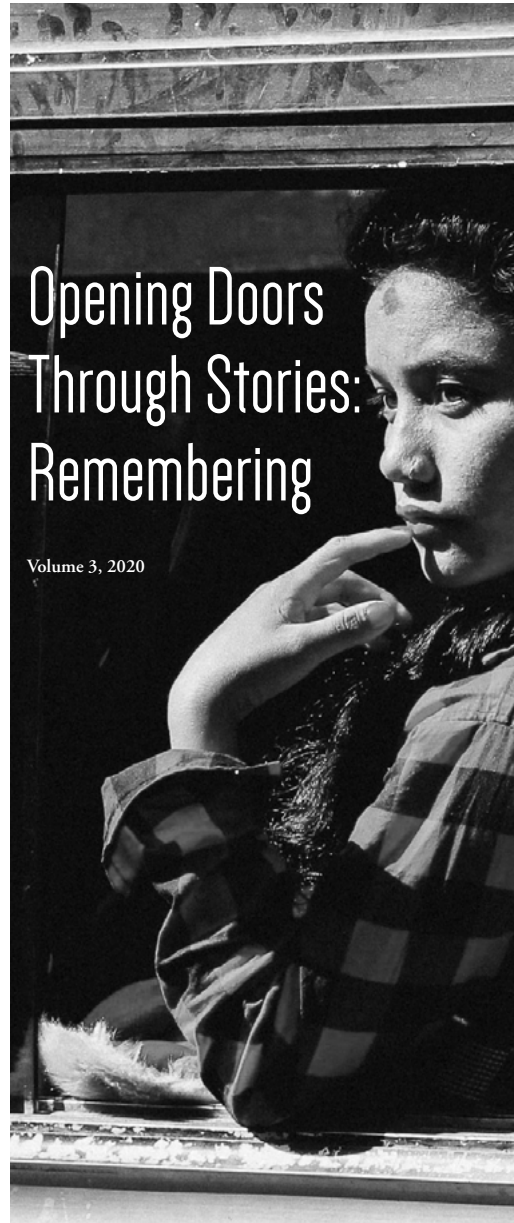
The Regina Open Door Society's
Welcoming Community for Newcomers Program

In 2020, the SWG and RODS continue our partnership to offer writing opportunities to newcomers to Canada. This year presented unique challenges: Covid-19 not only impacted the way we gather—we moved our annual workshop series facilitated by Gail Bowen online—but it also inspired the stories we write. In the pages that follow, you'll see pandemic-inspired reflections in addition to memories and experiences that help us grow. Because our writers shared their memories with us, they become our memories, too. Enjoy!

Cat Abenstein
SWG Program Coordinator

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INTRODUCTION

A wise elder once said, “The world is not composed of atoms alone; it is also composed of stories.” In this chapbook, our writers delve into the events that shaped people’s lives and determined their worldview. There are stories of coming of age, of standing up for your beliefs and of learning what truly matters in life. The stories are set in China, Timbuktu, Nigeria, and in an unnamed country in South Asia, but the themes our writers explore will give all readers fresh insights into what it means to be human.

Gail Bowen



CHAPTER I: THE WAYWARD DAUGHTER

BHOOMIKA DONGOL

Long before I was born, a capricious palm reader visited my mom when she was five months pregnant. The palmist had a crimson trident painted on his forehead counterfeiting an experienced clairvoyant.

With a strong aversion to devices that predict gender, my mother relied on a semi-acquainted palmist who was a friend of a friend of a friend. Come to think of it, that was a strange time when people trusted each other more than investigative internet toolbars.

The palmist told my mother that she would give birth to a boy. He would become the torchbearer of the “Suwal” family (one of the sub-castes within the Nepali community) and would have greatness thrust upon him. Three months later, I was born—as feminine as I could be with all my female parts intact and swamped in all my feminine tendencies—a girl with no inclinations to greatness. A wayward daughter!

Until I turned twelve, everything that happened in my life was pretty mundane. My mother diligently obliged to every traditional ritual that her only child was supposed to indulge in. I was to marry the sun-god before my menstrual bleeding started. This cultural ceremony, known as the Barha ceremony in colloquial terms, is a

coming-of-age ritual observed in most parts of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal. Young girls entering the Barha ceremony are not supposed to see other men during the eleven days of their confinement in a sunless room. At the end of the twelfth day, the sun's brides-to-be are wholesomely adorned with a red sari, a red shawl and bejeweled with golden ornaments so as to be rightfully wedded to the sun-god himself.

My cultural identity obligated me to remain chaste and tethered for eleven days in a sunless room before my coming-of-age ceremony. While they waited for their own turns for their coming-of-age ritual, some of my girlfriends from our neighborhood visited me during the eleven days and brought gifts and goodies. We played inside the designated Barha room, painted our nails in pink and rouge, and waited for the eleven days to be over.

“Last year, my Didi (honorary role for an elder sister) wore my mom’s wedding-day sari.” Gazing intently at her freshly painted blue nails, my friend Sami asked, “What about you Maya? Have you tried a sari yet?”

“I have not but I can’t wait until tomorrow . . . about my hair, do you think, maybe I should try the French twist? I have—” I was just about to finish answering Sami’s question when Bini interrupted.

“No, you don’t have a good length of hair to try the French twist!” I knew that Bini secretly envied my wavy curls, but I never knew the reasons why. Bini had the finest of hair, the prettiest of eyes, and flaunted the finest chiseled chin in the entire neighborhood. She had no reason to envy anyone.

“Enough of this hullabaloo. Let’s have fun. Let’s turn off the lights and summon the Khyaa, the Barha ghost,” Isha exclaimed.

Isha was three years younger than me but was the bravest one in our group of four. She was always excited about playing “Barha Khyaa” in which all the girls would muster at a corner of the room with the lights turned off to invite the Khyaa to come and play with them. Unlike evil spirits, the Khyaa was like Casper, the friendly ghost. It was assumed that he was a juvenile ghost himself and could come and go as he pleased—the only boy, although imaginary, allowed in the room of the virgin girls. I had never seen a ghost, but the girls

proclaimed that he was not much trouble.

And so, the girls turned off the light, and we all squatted with our knuckles brushing against each other. Sumi and I looked like two peas in a pod, and we were both the most frightened ones. Yet somehow, I sadistically savored the play because it required detailed attention to navigate our thoughts through the darkness. The darkness gives an ample scope for a myriad of imagination. Sometimes, we would cover our eyes and then gently open them—whispering in Morse code about the apparitions we thought we saw in the darkness. Although nobody actually “saw” anything, it was more fun to assume that each one of us had seen “something” even if it was just a fleeting figment of our childhood imagination.

“Did you see that,” asked one.

“That shadow just moved,” said the other.

We nudged each other and spoke in muffled voices until one of our bravest girls dared to turn on the lights. And then, all of us heaved a sigh of relief.

No wonder, it was the most fun-filled eleven days of my life, and I cannot say with certitude if I will ever be bestowed with the same euphoric spirit ever again.

I remember going to bed that night with the most profound thought ever. I was about to be the bride of the sun-god tomorrow. I would be glowing exquisitely with a crimson aura around me, and the boys in the neighborhood would be drooling to see a bride so bright!

Out of nowhere, I felt a sudden chill—a sudden cramp surging from the core of my naval which went spiraling all the way throughout my spine. Something was not right. I felt wet, and I found out that it was not in the right place or in the right part of my body. I screamed in agony.

“What’s wrong Maya?” Mama came to my room in a jiffy and stared at the crimson blotches on the beige carpet. “Don’t tell me you are bleeding,” was all that she could utter.

Next to the door was the metallic wind chime. Under the wind chime

was a big transparent jar of natural exfoliants homemade by Aji (grandmother) for the bride-to-be. Next to the big jar of exfoliants was the rectangular beige carpet. At the center of the beige carpet was the twin bed where I stood—the crimson blood dripping through my vulva.

“Ka syaata - doomed! What are we going to do with you now, Maya? You have begun your menses! Exactly what I had been dreading about! Oh no, oh no.” Mama was pale, I had only seen her this nervous when she had to break the news that my little pet canine Goofy had died. She bore the same apprehension, as if someone had died or was about to die.

“Mama, what is wrong?”

“Shh, don’t freak out, I think you have begun your menstruation. This is not good. This is not right. We will have to get you out of the confinement and ask Aji about what to do next.” Mama kept repeating in panic, “This could not be happening.”

“Mama please let me be a bride, please! Don’t take this away from me.” I started to cry begging my mother to let me be covered in crimson for my big day tomorrow.

Just because I bled before the designated-day I was to marry the sun-god does not make me any less of a woman. Crude, maybe yes; but not impure! Irrespective of the fact that I was to remain a tender girl of twelve, I have come a long way from becoming ten, becoming untouched, and unadulterated. Why won’t the sun-god “have” me? In my brain and my brawn, I knew that I had not lost my innocence; so why was I being asked to give up my right to be a beautiful bride, to be divine, to be righteously married to the sun-god just like the other girls from the block?

“Aji will never understand. Let it just be a secret between us Mama.”

Mama came closer and hugged me. Over her shoulder, I saw the scarlet blotch turn grey on the carpet.

“Ssh, stop crying now. You go take a shower, and I will teach you how to use a cotton pad.” Running her fingers fondly through my

hair, Mama said, “We will try to make this alright. Hush now.”

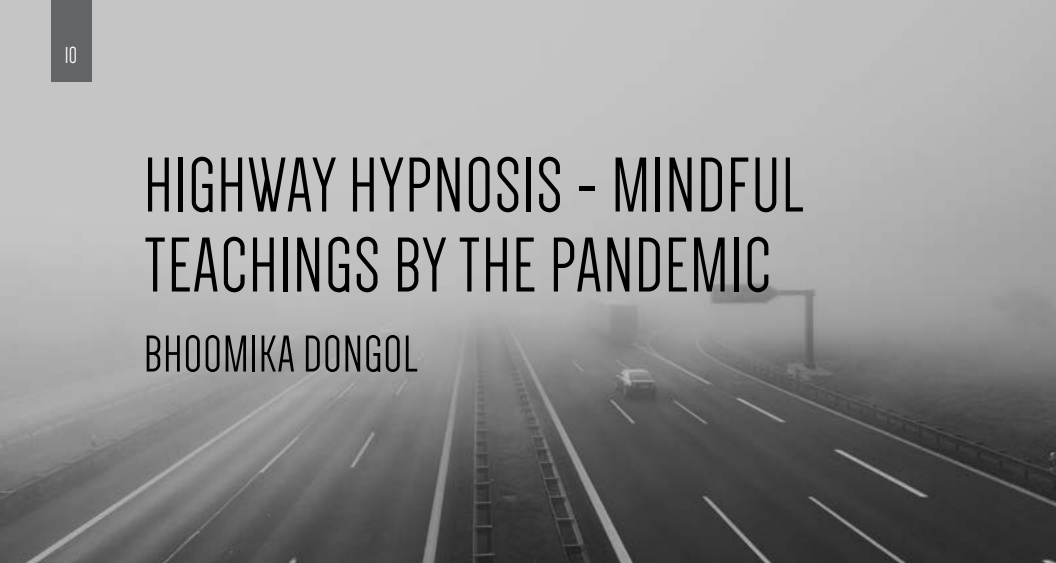
In the wee hours of the twelfth day of the ritual, Aji escorted me blindfolded to our balcony. Aji had not known. She did not need to know! What happens in a woman’s body is her own business. So why should Aji know, I wondered.

With a red sari draped around my neophyte feminine body, I was feeling precious. Golden earrings dangled from the edge of my earlobes, and its amber reflection against my cheeks made me feel celestial. When Aji removed my blindfold that morning, the sun was bright and bold. I dared to stare straight at the sun, completing my coming-of-age ritual. The sun, like the groom of a naïve juvenile, had shown up in all his vigor. It felt as if the entire universe was witnessing my holy matrimony with the sun-god.

That night, after the completion of the Barha ritual, I had a dream of swallowing the sun. In my dreams, my synapses once again enacted the entire ceremony. For one more time, I was being escorted up to the balcony, blindfolded by a red scarf around my black kohled eyes. But instead of a sunny balcony, in my dreams I saw an overcast sky. The sky was grey as if the sun never existed. When I opened my mouth, everybody exclaimed in awe to see the entire sun veering into my throat. I had swallowed the sun. A highly revered stellar object was being consumed by his young bride—perhaps the most mutineer bride he ever had!

HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS - MINDFUL TEACHINGS BY THE PANDEMIC

BHOOMIKA DONGOL



The pandemic inflicted a different range of emotions among different people. For me, I started to dream of apocalyptic horizons, evoking the darkest emotions on the spectrum. Suddenly, I was savouring dystopian movies and documentaries. I was writing about the end of the world, positioning myself at the edge of the world. Perhaps many of us felt that way, and I did too! The end of the world was approaching. Maybe it was not the infamous meteorite that led to the extinction of the dinosaurs? Maybe the pandemic was trying to unfetter us from our perceived notions and our laws of logic?

To resurrect myself from this dystopian dreaming, I started to take driving lessons. Even after almost three years of being in Canada, I have not secured a valid class 5 driver's license. Call it the fear of highways or an over reliance on my own two feet. I have never seriously learned how to drive a four-wheeler. But this year, during May, I took up driving lessons seriously and became committed to passing my driver's test. One of the mandatory sessions during the driving class is to learn how to drive on the highway at 110 km per hour.

In my life span of thirty years, I have never driven above the speed of 50 km per hour—let alone drive to a full throttle of one hundred! So when my driving instructor told me to “Gas up, gas up,” I had to unsheathe my poor heart out of my chest and trample it against my foot to keep accelerating until I reached 110 km per hour.

After the speedometer blinked bright at 90km per hour, driving started to become more adventurous and fun. Right when the highway session was about to be over, my adrenaline suddenly started rushing exponentially! My instructor looked at me and said, “Be careful as we enter the city now with normal driving speed. You might experience highway hypnosis with no recollection of having consciously been driving around.”

Highway hypnosis, I thought. With my right foot against the accelerator, pushing to above average speeds, my mind accelerated beyond its threshold. I was learning to let go—to let go of all those things beyond my control, and to let go of the need to control. Since the pandemic happened, I had felt powerless and cooped up, just like everyone else, within the confinement of limited social interactions. But the highway helped me to let go of the feeling of being trapped. After all, there is nothing we can do about it, can we? These are strange, testing times. Perhaps the wisest course is to simply step back and contemplate over the things that have happened so far.

Maybe life gives very few opportunities to recede and unlearn what we have been considering as reality and truth. Perhaps it is time to let go of our passive, passenger mindset and be mindful about what the pandemic might be hoping to teach us?

HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS

BHOOMIKA DONGOL

I dream of apocalyptic horizons
advancing towards my windshield
a full throttle, I speed up in haze
the highway has me hypnotized
the silhouette of your face
dappled among the clouds
the contours of your chin, pale and grim
I keep driving south, further south,
until my dreams collide with yours
stellar dynamics, cosmic collisions
and then I tell you
what my dreams are made of
synapses of somber songs,
amber strips on dark asphalt, highway hues
under sanguine skies, we'll find a home
for we can't really undo how we feel,
can we? All we truly need is
just a safe memory to latch onto
you, me and our safe memories.



THE UNION ASSIGNMENT

PETER ODION OMOIJIADE

It was almost noon. I stepped out of my office. Looking towards the gate, I saw Oghene—the secretary for Workers Union with Union Bank in Ughelli, Nigeria—driving into the compound in his Volkswagen beetle. It was an old rickety car. The bolt securing the bumper was off, and the bumper itself was held together with a wire.

Oghene brought the car to a complete stop and walked towards me. “Aaaaah, Comrade,” I said. “You are in our enclave today.” When Oghene replied ‘yes’, I asked, “What is your mission?”

“The situation in my unit is very desperate,” Oghene said. “The workers are restless. They are not happy with the management because they are not being paid for working overtime.”

To lessen the burden I was carrying, I carefully rearranged the Nigerian Marxist Monthly Magazine and some books that were held together with a newspaper. I placed the items on the bonnet of a car at the parking lot. I removed my red beret from my head and placed it on my highly treasured publications. To gain a firm balance while standing, I went ahead to rest my back against an iron pole.

I knew the situation had to be resolved before it worsened. I went back into my office with Secretary Oghene. He was a tall, masculine, and black complexioned man in his thirties. He was spotting a walrus mustache and trimmed beard—a trade mark of the radical left. I calmly welcome him into my sparsely furnished office.

When he greeted me, it was clear that the secretary knew the situation was serious. After politely turning down my offer of refreshment, I got straight to the point. After explaining to me the workers’ concerns with management, I asked, “What are you doing about this problem?”

He looked me straight in the eye and said, “We’ve held a meeting with the manager. He tells us he is checking the accuracy of the calculated overtime.” At this point, the secretary shook his head and gave me a slight smile. “You know our manager,” he said. “He is a perfectionist who is impervious to the arguments of workers. He believes workers should accept orders without questions. Like children, we should be seen but not heard. As of now, our grievances remain unresolved.”

I thanked Oghene for the steps taken towards addressing the issue of unpaid overtime. “The situation is really desperate,” I said, “I shall be in your branch tomorrow to establish your manager’s constraint in attending to legitimate claim.”

Looking unhappy with my position, Oghene said in a low tone, “The workers will not be happy. They require an immediate action from your end.”

“What do you suggest,” I asked Oghene.

In quick response, he said, “Follow me immediately to Ughelli for an

urgent meeting with the manager.”

“That will not be a bad idea,” I replied. Oghene waited while I obtained management’s approval for my trip.

I went to my manager to inform him about the plight of the workers at Ughelli. He was magnanimous in giving approval of my oral application to travel to Ughelli on a trade union assignment. I returned to Oghene who was waiting for me. I tapped him on his shoulder and said, “Let us hit the road. We are good to go.” He stood up and we went downstairs. I entered his car, and he accelerated towards the ever-busy Ring Road.

We left the Ring Road and navigated towards Sapele Road enroute to Warri-Patani Road, Ughelli. The car was bouncing and diving excessively because its shock absorbers were out of commission. To cushion the effects of the bumps, I adjusted my knees and seating position at irregular intervals. We got to Ughelli towards evening time. Although the bank was closed to customers, the manager and the employees were still in the office. Through the rear door, we stepped into the banking hall. I greeted the workers.

I met Comrade Joe Ihonde, Chairman of the Union. He was an amiable man in his early forties. I gave him a bear hug, and I shook his hand. His face was familiar. In the past, we met in several meetings at the state level.

Along with Joe Ihonde, Oghene and I entered into the manager’s office. Agofure, the manager, welcomed us. I saluted him and told him of my mission. He appeared rattled but managed a plastic smile. I pleaded for a meeting with him after my meeting with the workers. He granted my request. We left his office for the general meeting with the workers.

We met the workers who were gathered for the meeting. I was formally introduced to the workers as Comrade Peter Omoijiade, Chairman of the Bendel State Council of the Bank’s Workers Union. Raising my clinched fist, I greeted the workers. In response they shouted “SOLIDARITY” in unison. To enable us to explore the atmosphere of an authentic, working-class movement, we rendered the solidarity song written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915 during the

West Virginia coal miners' strike:

SOLIDARITY SONG

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
 There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
 Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one, But the
 union makes us strong.

Chorus:

Solidarity forever,
 Solidarity forever,
 Solidarity forever,
 For the union makes us strong.
 Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite, Who would
 lash us into serfdom and would crush us with his might?
 Is there anything left to us but to organize and fight?
 For the union makes us strong.

Chorus:

All the world that's owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone. We have
 laid the wide foundations; built it skyward stone by stone.
 It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own.
 While the union makes us strong.

Chorus:

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn, But without
 our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn. We can break their
 haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn
 That the union makes us strong.

Chorus:

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold, Greater
 than the might of armies, multiplied a thousand-fold. We can bring to birth a
 new world from the ashes of the old
 For the union makes us strong.

After the solidarity song, Joe Ihonde called on me to give an opening
 remark. In my opening remark, I said:

Ours is an exploiting society where, the state and the owners of
 capital are in alliance against the citizenry. The state intervention

in industrial relations is geared towards protecting the interest of the owners of capital at the expense of labour. To change the narrative, the workers cannot remain silent; their action or inaction will determine the length of their servitude. The legal system required for the promotion of equality is never blind. Justice can only be blind when it is administered by equals, to equals among the equals. The workers must unite and be vigilant. The collective action of the workers, combined with the efforts of all that contributes to their importance must therefore be cultivated. The working class must confront every unjust system as we can no longer breathe. When we revolt, it is not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for my reasons we can no longer breathe (Fanon, 1952). Let us direct our actions towards curtailing the ability of Management to act arbitrarily. New ideas that guarantees equality to all and remove burden from the back of men should be explored.

The Chairman of the Union, Ihonde, thanked me on behalf of the members for the opening remark. He added, “The manager is a tiger. He legitimately worked overtime, but the workers are not paid.” He called on the Union’s leadership to address the immediate concerns of the workers. I thanked Ihonde. While acknowledging the grievances of the workers, I quickly reminded them that it is difficult to clap with one hand. I added, “For an enduring settlement, we must also hear from the manager as it is difficult to shave a man’s hair in his absence.”

We retired from the general meeting into the meeting with the manager. Once again, the manager welcomed us into his office. I thanked him for his hospitality.

The Union requested an explanation for his failure to approve payment for the overtime worked by the workers. The manager refuted the charge that he refused to approve the overtime payment. He went further saying, “I was merely checking the arithmetical accuracy of the overtime.” I thanked the manager for checking the overtime. I reminded him that checking the overtime should not continue perpetually. Ihonde noted that the reason advanced by the manager was a mere excuse to camouflage an illicit act against the workers. The manager stood up and collected a file that was resting on the fireproof cabinet behind him. Thrusting the file on the table,

he said, “This is the file containing the overtime in contention. The checking is almost concluded. I assure the Union that the overtime will be signed and sent to the Financial Accounts Department for payment by tomorrow.” I was grateful for the manager’s swift response to our demand.

I told the manager to always communicate with the Union and its leadership. I added, “The right of the Union to disagree with management must be recognized. To enable the Union’s institutional identity, they must disagree with management and act on the disagreement. A trade union that is always agreeing with management is no longer a trade union. Management must respond to the ‘needs of the workers’. This has been stated by Davis (1973) as the iron law of responsibility, which states that, ‘In the long run, those who do not use power in a manner which society considers responsible will lose it.’”

The meeting came to an end, and the Union leaders and the manager shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. The success of the meeting was reflected in the smiles on everyone’s faces.

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THE PANDEMIC

PETER ODION OMOIJIADÉ

It was December 2019. Armed with my International Passport and other travelling documents, I drove through a flooded street. I got to my destination in Lagos Island. I walked into the VISA Facilitation Services office located at the Island in Lagos. I was greeted by smartly-dressed security men. After the security checks, I entered their building. I was momentarily lost in the quagmire of protocols. The officials demanded duplicate copies of documents, some relevant and some irrelevant. When I finally met their demands, I was full of hope. I thought to myself, *it won't be long before the approval of the Permanent Resident form that would enable me to move to Canada.* Towards the end of March, I received a rude shock. The land, air, and sea borders of Nigeria were closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. My International Passport was trapped in the Canadian

Embassy in Accra, Ghana.

The forced quarantine of citizens started. The economic fallout from the lockdown was severe due to the globalised and highly integrated nature of modern economies. The highly mobile population also accentuated the spread of the Coronavirus. I found myself in a world where the only certainty is uncertainty. There appeared to be a nexus between the government and business. While government policies could ameliorate the challenges facing business organizations, and enhance social welfare, corporations were exerting powerful influence over government and regulators so that regulations promote their interests rather than promote social welfare. It reminded me of Friedman's right-wing economic perspective, or the fundamentalist version of capitalism. This perspective is deeply rooted in the triumvirate of withdrawal of subsidy, free market economy, and trade liberalization, which often culminates in right wing dictatorship and de-industrialization of developing economies (Klein, 2007). In the face of the ferocious assault on my tranquility, the reactionary government of my country expertly exploited the desperation of economic emergencies to push through policies towards increasing the economic hardship of the people—hardships such as a withdrawal of petroleum subsidy. Despite this induced burden, the greatest beneficiary of government are business organizations. I was not surprised with the sordid realities before me. As noted by Russell and Parker (2020), big business has often been characterized as heartless—a behemoth that crushes ordinary people and vampirically extracts the profits of labour from the laboring class.

The restrictions on my personal freedom were evident during the pandemic. My movement is curtailed. The police and armed forces are deployed to prevent assessment of public and private spaces. Hotels, restaurants, schools, places of worship, and more are closed. The pandemic seems to have allowed the government to advance arguments about prudence and liberty. The state's power is exercised in ways reminiscent of a desert storm.

I picked up my phone for an update on WhatsApp. I saw a post by Okafor, Class of 1996 from the University of Lagos. She reported that some worshippers in one of the churches were arrested for violating the lockdown regulations.

A member of the Group, Nkechi, was vehement in berating the actions of the police. She went biblical and said, “The battle against Covid-19 is not canal. Government should encourage spiritual battles for it is written in Ephesians 6:12 (NLT): ‘For we are not fighting against flesh—and-blood enemies, but against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in heavenly places.’” In response to Nkechi’s argument, I referred her to Romans 13:1-2, which says:

“Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and they will be punished.”

I got a commendation from Emenike for my response to Nkechi’s perspective. He asked, “Will some others on the platform agree with you?” I replied, “Yes.” I continued, “I am further validated by the position of Jesus Christ when He said in Matthew 22:21 (NLT), ‘...give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belong to God.’” As the drums of Armageddon intensified with fundamentalist zeal, the sanity which I was seeking on social media was transmogrified into insanity.

I went to my living room to listen to news. My wife, Christiana, was already in the living room watching a religious program on the television. I sat on my favorite sofa at the corner. Looking at the screen, I saw an anointed one on the pulpit. He was alone without a congregation. He was giving a sermon. In driving home his message, he wasted no time in referring the viewers to Isaiah 24:10, which states, “In the city, everything is chaos, and people lock themselves in their houses for safety.” He also quoted Jeremiah 9:21: “Death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces, to cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares.” The man of God thundered, “This is the coming of the apocalypse.” He went ahead to say, “We are seeing the fulfillment of the prophesy in Isaiah 24:10-11, which states that ‘the city writhes in chaos; every home is locked to keep out intruders. Mobs gather in the streets, crying out for wine. Joy has turned to gloom. Gladness has been banished from the land.’” The preacher admonished viewers and added, “We are in end time. Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

I told my wife, “Let us explore other channels. That’s enough of the reminder about end time.” She obliged. Alas! A Public officer was on air! He was educating the viewers on the exponential growth in the settler calamity. Covid-19. Then, another potentate overseeing the economy mounted the pulpit and increased our hopelessness. He cleared his throat and sipped water from the glass beside him. He started, “Our economy is declining inexorably. The projected growth in the real sector is not in sight as imported raw materials required for production are yet to find their ways to our ports. Inflation peaked at 15 per cent and household consumption is declining as a result decline in the ability of consumers to pay for goods and services.”

Turning to my wife, I said, “That’s it! Adams Smith’s postulation is fast becoming a reality. The means of sustenance and population are growing at an arithmetical and geometrical progression respectively.” Looking at the Television aimlessly, my wife said, “He told us about our economic problems; what about the solutions?” I replied, “What do you expect when men of marginal intelligence are managing affairs?” I continued, “That is the irony of life.” I went further, “It is written in Ecclesiastes 10:5-6 that ‘there is another evil I have seen under the sun, Kings and rulers make a great mistake, when they give great authority to foolish people and low positions to people of proven worth.’”

The Covid-19 lockdown provided discomfort for me to reflect on the paradox of my busy life. I now realize the virtue of work and rest. The two variables should be utilized equitably. Inspirations for innovation often come when you are not busy at work. Innovative ideas may also not come when you are in a comfortable zone. Creative and critical thinking may remain elusive when you are too comfortable. This is in line with the popular saying of my grandmother: “An overfed child is often senseless.”

Although I was imprisoned in my home by the authorities, I elected to emancipate myself from mental incarceration. I carried out a critical review of the cultivation of kinship between institutions and their environments. Since the prosperity of institutions is embedded in their clients’ prosperity, it is no longer sufficient to interpret only financial ratios, analyse income, expenditure, and monthly, quarterly or yearly statistics of accounts. Organizations must go beyond these

routines and tactics, since tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. To enable them to contribute to the prosperity of their clients' businesses, the knowledge of the business of clients should now be the business of their business.

Leveraging on my four decades of knowledge and experience in banking, strategic human resources management, and organizational development, I utilised the lockdown to develop an innovative idea for capturing organizational development and business advisory functions in a software. The software will offer a deeper insight into the organizational levers which drives capabilities with a view to enhance business prosperity. It will interface between an institution and their clients and consultants for the purpose of rejuvenating business, mitigating the level of failures, and enhancing growth. It is built on the principle that by empowering the individuals and organizations to realize their aspirations and advance their success, a better organization and a better society will be attained. This will help the country and people to rise above the challenge of economic recovery and achieve the maximization of their productivity and prosperity.

While on forced confinement, I sat down to reflect on a question that was blowing in the wind. What is that question? Will nations, organizations, and individuals learn any valuable lesson from Covid-19? While nations, organizations, and individuals worship at the altar of success, they shun failures and refuse to gain insight and understanding from sordid experience. Again, I sat back to reflect on my fears. I remember when I took over management of the Union Bank in Nigeria Plc, Falomo Branch, Lagos, Nigeria in 1998. It was a loss-making entity that was over ten-years-old. Within a period of six months, I, and the employees I met on ground, transformed it to a position of profitability. The deposit base of the branch went up by more than 500 per cent. The corporate headquarters was only interested in the enhanced deposit base and profit. They were not interested in the stories behind the figures. As a result of distribution of advantages and disadvantages, which were within the rubrics of organizational politics, I was rewarded with a transfer to another loss-making branch. My incumbent branch was given to a favoured crony of one of the company's top executives.

After a long period of waiting, I received my approved PR in August

2020. On October 5, 2020, I left Nigeria for Canada, and I landed in Canada the next day. The lockdown provided a valuable opportunity for me to reflect—to conduct a critical review with a view of making meaning out of my existence. Surely the pandemic was a blessing in wolf's clothing. To the discerning mind, opportunities abound in adversity.

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ewe BRIDE

Content warning: This piece contains depictions of graphic sexuality.

BY: SHUCHEN HU

Miya can talk with animals. At least, she thought she talked with Mrs. Pindu's cat when she was five-years-old. Miya told her parents that she had a conversation with the cat stuck in the basement, and she knew the cat wanted to get out and sought help from Miya. Miya had no chance to save the cat because she rushed home to tell her parents to come. The only thing she could remember is that she was laughed at by her parents badly that day. She went back to the cat, but she lost its presence. Since then, Miya never talks about her gift to anyone. Not even once.

Now, Miya is a tall and well-nourished thirteen-year-old girl. She has smooth skin, strong legs, and is as white as snow. Her white skin is envied by people, including her mother Sophia. Sophia is a woman in her forties, is thin, and has a pinched yellow face. Sophia always says, "You are lucky to have your father's skin tone. It is the only good that useless man gave you." Miya feels no pride in the

compliment. She doesn't think it is her strength to stand out since Miya is not a good looking girl.

She often wears a plaid blouse in light blue, dresses in baggy jeans, and carries a huge backpack to school. People may notice her pink-white skin when she pants for breath after climbing to her classroom. But that is all. As you look from far at some attractive goods in the window, you lose interest when you come close because of the displeasing craftsmanship.

Miya never hunches in front of people, like some of her female classmates do to hide their developing breasts. Miya loves her breasts—the steady and small knobs on her chest with no bra to hold them well. The girls in her classroom often talk meanly behind Miya's back, and Miya cannot figure out if there is a reason why she is targeted. She thinks, "My clothes? My pony tails? What?" Miya is annoyed and bummed when she senses all the giggling and whispering behind her back. Today, none of the girls talk or play with her. Not even one. "Maybe it is because of the math test," she says to herself. "They are not doing as well as I am."

When Miya gets home from school, Sophia is cooking the meal. There is smoke in the kitchen and a burning smell.

"Where have you been, ah?"

"I didn't go anywhere." Miya feels that Sophia had a bad day. "It is only 3:45pm. You know my school ends at 3:30pm."

"Go to do your homework. Quickly."

"You burned the food? Do you need any help?" Miya hesitates to bring that up because she doesn't want to offer help to Sophia.

"Like you can help," Sophia scorns. "You are useless like your father," says Sophia.

"Yeah. I know," Miya responds to Sophia silently like always.

As usual, Miya's dad, Justin, comes home late. His clothes are covered with dust and asphalt and smell stinky with sweat, like a filthy body soaking in vinegar for the whole day. When Justin takes off his socks, the strong odor floats to every corner of the house. It

makes Miya feel nauseous. She wants to say something, but she just closes the door. With the door closed, Miya can hear Sophia's sharp voice and complaints. She knows that, after a bad day, Sophia wants to fight. She also knows that, as usual, Sophia cannot win. Miya puts on her earphones to do homework, and she knows it is best for her to pretend she doesn't exist at all.

"Miya! Miya! Do you have ears?" Sophia throws the door open and pulls Miya's earphones off her cheeks. Sophia's face is red. If you can see the air, you will see the vapor from Sophia's boiling face. "I have shouted at you for five minutes to tell you the dinner is ready." Sophia apparently has a very solid reason to be so angry at Miya.

"I am listening to the music." Miya knows her excuse is in vain.

"You didn't know I was cooking when you got home?" Sophia fiercely poked Miya on her forehead.

"I am sorry, mom," Miya says quietly. "I should always be sorry for everything," Miya tightly purses her lips. The dinner is delicious. Justin buries himself in a big dish of rice and pork ribs.

"I need five dollars for a school trip," Miya says slowly.

"Where? Did you just have a school trip in April?"

"This is a different one," Miya doesn't want to explain too much.

"Money, money, money. Who knows if you want to use money to buy nail polish again?" Sophia stares at Miya and doubts it.

Miya lowers her head to see her hands. Miya thinks, "My fingers are slim and long. They could be beautiful if I painted my nails with red polish." Miya says, "If you don't give me the money, I will carry the bottles to sell tomorrow." Justin doesn't say a word as he is going to finish his soup.

"The bottles are worth 10 dollars. You think I don't know?"

"Then you give me five dollars." Miya gives Sophia a last strike.

"Fine, fine, fine. You go sell all the bottles, and I am done with all the messes in my garage."

Miya knew she would win.

The garage is messy. Justin usually throws Coca Cola cans and plastic bottles randomly to the corner, and he is not a good enough shooter to make them pile all in one place. Soft drink stains are everywhere on the floor, leaving brown marks that look like dried blood. When she crosses Justin's steel shoes on the stairs, Miya tightly holds her nose. She doesn't control her body well and kicks one of the steel shoes off the stairs. "Oh boy." Miya quickly walks down the stairs and picks the shoe up. It is not wise to have Justin yell at her or Sophia, especially if he cannot find both shoes on the stairs tomorrow morning. The stinky smell from the shoe almost makes Miya faint. She finds that the shoe has been broken on the front and that debris sits in the openings. Miya slowly puts the shoes down. She suddenly feels a burst of pity for Justin. "Will he get hurt in the construction site?" Miya knows little about Justin's job, but she starts to worry.

Miya organises all the bottles, cans, and milk jars. She thinks it is a good idea to explore Justin's car for extra empty bottles. She knows she can collect another three to five. Miya tries the handle. The car is not locked. When she opens the passenger side, she sees an open Lays chips bag on the seat, another twisted Lays chips bag on the floor, and five Coca Cola cans. The car is messy with a slight stinky odor. Justin's gloves, vest, and helmet are also loosely thrown on the floor. Miya removes Justin's stuff and starts to clean the trash and put the cans in the bag. On the floor, her hand suddenly touches a used, pink condom without any obvious marks of semen. Miya throws two cans back and quickly shuts the car door. Her face flushes. She quickly ties the string of the bag and returns home.

She washes her hands for at least five minutes. Without turning off the faucet, she watches the water rise up to the edge of the sink. Sophia notices that Miya has come back from the garage, but she has no interest in speaking to Miya. Miya tightens her shoulder like a cat and hears Sophia moving away. This is for the best. Miya looks at herself in the mirror.

Miya goes back to her bedroom and locks the door. She has a very fast heartbeat. She knows the reason for why she is sent every Sunday afternoon to learn pencil sketches, even though she is not good at it

at all. She knows it is the time of the week when Sophia and Justin have sex, especially since they always look fresh after their shower and the washer is always washing the linens when Miya comes home. Justin works from dawn to evening six days a week. He barely talks with Sophia and Miya except on Sunday. There is enough proof, although Miya doesn't see any other clues. She just knows. Miya crawls into the quilt, and she feels desperate. Justin shouldn't need to use any condom with Sophia because Miya comes from the mercy of the infertility clinic. Sophia has told this story again and again from the time Miya was very young. She typically rambles on about how hard it was to conceive Miya and how Justin horribly neglected her during that period. Will they get divorced? Do they really have sex at home on Sunday afternoons? Miya cannot help her thoughts. She thinks, "No, I must have seen it wrong. It cannot be a condom." Miya remembers hard and tries to figure out what she really saw. "Maybe you are not paying enough attention in class because a condom was presented," Miya tells herself. She finally falls asleep.

In her dreams that night, Miya dreams of herself at the age of nine or ten. She is wearing very thin pajamas. She lies beside Justin. Justin is touching her. Justin rubs her breast—the tiny, pink, round tips and then just the breast. Miya feels nothing. She is not afraid or curious. Then, she wakes up and feels hollow. She starts to touch her breast. She enjoys its steadiness and warmth. Her breasts are not big. They just fit nicely into Miya's palm. Suddenly, several images flash through her mind. Miya is seeing herself having sex with a man that has a blurred face. In the dream, the girl is choked to be silent. She has no pain or fear as the man inserts himself again and again. Miya forces herself to shut off the movie in her brain. She cannot move. She feels speechless, guilty, and joyful. Her brain and her body are completely aroused. Her underpants are wet with transparent liquid. She doesn't allow herself to remember what happened in her dream. "Miya, you know it is just a weird dream. You know it," Miya says to herself and finishes touching her breasts.

Miya waits to cool off, and she hears Justin brushing his teeth. Miya sneaks out and pulls her math test out from her backpack. "Dad, Mme. Shyanne asks parents to review and sign the test." Miya approaches Justin—a half-bald man in floppy short pants with proud

flesh above his waistline.

“Just put it aside,” he says. Justin spits the water in his mouth. It seems he has no plan to question Miya about why she didn’t talk with Sophia about her math test last night.

“I got 99%.” Miya wants Justin to notice her achievements.

“It is not 100%, Miya. You need to get 100%, Miya.” Justin frowns.

“I will work harder, Dad.”

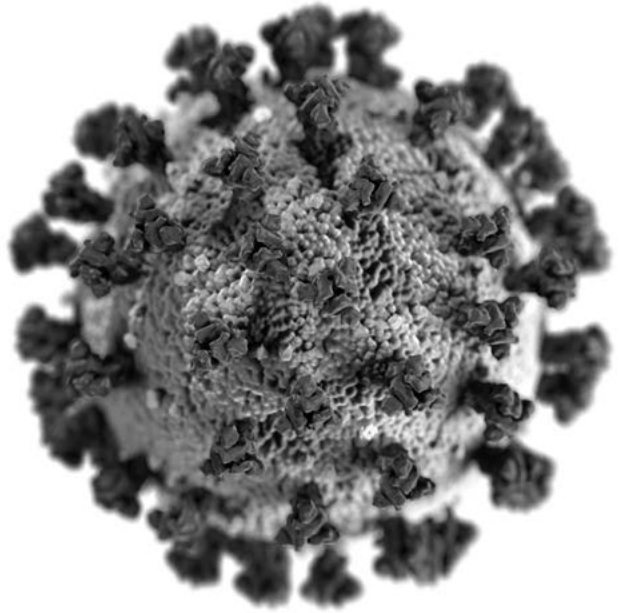
Justin quickly signs his name with a big vertical J on the top covering some headings of the test. Miya looks at it and feels it is like a scar on her test paper, mocking the 99%. Angered, she wants to say, “You only graduated from Grade 10.” Miya cannot say it out loud. Instead, she says, “Thanks, Dad.”

Like many normal days before, it is another day for Miya. But today, she needs to sell the bottles to get the money to buy the beautiful red nail polish. Miya has the most beautiful hands in the class. When she does her nails, girls don’t laugh at her. Instead, they come to her to praise the beautiful color on Miya’s nails and tell her how much they like the shape of her hands. She thinks, “Yes, what a perfect day to polish my nails.” Miya waves goodbye to Sophia. She really wants to give Sophia a hug, but Sophia is rushed to go to the clinic to see her doctor. As she has for the thirteen years of Miya’s life, Sophia totally ignores Miya and storms out the door.

Miya walks to school. She sees an ewe, with black skin and a pair of purplish-blue eyes, standing beside the road. Such a beautiful creature! The ewe gazes at Miya and turns its head towards her. Miya stops and wants to touch the ewe. The ewe doesn’t back out. Miya touches its smooth neck, and she thinks she’s known this ewe for a very long time. Its firm muscles flex under its short, natural hair that shines as if glazed. Its strong legs make the body tall and straight. When the ewe suddenly opens its mouth, Miya notices the ewe has several crooked teeth. Just then, the ewe sways its head and says to Miya, “Congrats. You go grow up, bride.” Miya is a bit surprised to hear the ewe talking to her, but she smiles and says, “I will.”

THE VIRUS CANNOT KILL US

SHUCHEN HU



“Everyone is a hero for themselves, and we are
all heroes in everyday life.”

-Shuchen Hu

Story 1

Jenny and Ted have been sleeping in different bedrooms for a couple of months. As a wife in a ten-year marriage, Jenny has an intuitive feeling that something is wrong between her and Ted. Ted has different excuses to sleep alone, and the frequently used excuse is that he needs to read books. Besides sleeping alone, Ted is never in a good enough mood to talk with Jenny when he comes home. Also, he has stopped doing the household chores to keep the house clean. Jenny has become more and more worried. She tried several times to communicate with Ted, but her attempts turned into unpleasant quarrels before Ted impatiently left the room.

One day after midnight, Jenny anxiously peeks into Ted's bedroom. She finds Ted's room is dark, except for his cell phone. Half of the

phone's screen glows in the air and half is dim under the quilt. Ted reclines against the wall, frowning behind his black framed eyeglasses. "He is a liar," Jen angrily thinks. She purposely slams the door of the washroom. When she sits on the toilet, Jenny cannot help thinking about many negative things. "If he wants to give me the silent treatment, then two can play at that game. I don't need to care about him. Let's see," she says. Jenny decides not to think about it anymore. At least, she really needs to have a good sleep.

After three days, the city declares a lockdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Ted moves back to sleep with Jenny. "I am sorry, Jenny. I guess I don't need to worry about my job anymore. The Coronavirus is here, so we are all laid off." Ted sounds sad but also relieved.

Jenny suddenly understands everything. "Oh, Ted, you weird boy. Don't worry. You still have me." Jenny hugs Ted. Ted hugs Jenny tightly and holds Jenny's hand. He quickly falls asleep. Jenny looks at the bedroom ceiling, and she feels peaceful. She holds Ted's hand and falls asleep too.

Story 2

Lyla's school is closed after the Covid-19 outbreak. Lyla feels so happy that now she can sleep very late and get up very late whenever she wants. She is free of all her regular morning routines as a six-year-old kid. She no longer needs to be quick to organize her backpack for when her father waits in the courtyard. She is free like a bird. How can a bird not be happy, Lyla giggles?

She doesn't know what Covid-19 is and why her school is closed. When her mom is not available, she is told to just play in the basement. Every time she asks her mom to leave the computer to play with her, she is told to play by herself for a while. Lyla cannot understand why her mom needs to face the computer almost all day long. Sometimes, her mom wears an earphone and loudly talks with a smile to the computer's screen. Lyla recently hasn't been getting smiles from her mom as she did before. Lyla thinks it is not fair that her mom smiles towards a screen. What is mom doing? Lyla thinks the computer's screen should have a mirror in it. Otherwise, who

will smile at it? Lyla goes down the stairs and goofs around in the basement, which is her territory. Her books are scattered everywhere, and her toys are thrown into different packaging boxes. With torn paper here and there, the basement looks like a crime scene. When Lyla is bored, she knows to open her iPad to watch her favorite cartoons, like Peppa Pig.

Usually when she gets really bored, her dad comes home. Lyla loves when her dad comes home. Recently, her dad started to come home with different cookies, soups, chocolate pies, and other delicious food she doesn't even know the names of. Her dad asks Lyla and mom to have the food, which he made by himself in his classroom. That is a really cool school! Lyla pictures a classroom with food on the desks and not a single book. Lyla's dad hasn't had a job for a very long time, but now he can bring food from his school. Lyla thinks it is great. Lyla's mom asks her dad when he can finish his training and get a job in a kitchen. Apparently, Lyla's dad is not happy to hear this question. Lyla thinks her mom is not clever to ask this question because everybody must want to stay at a school with food instead of books. Lyla wants to go to her dad's school to get delicious food every day.

Lyla's mom finally shuts off the computer. She tells Lyla she is so tired, and she needs to lay down for a while. Lyla refuses to go to nap with her mom, but her dad calls her to finish her math homework. Lyla hates number addition. She cannot remember what is five plus three. Her dad will get mad if Lyla cannot answer this damn question. She decides to go upstairs and take a nap with her mom. Lyla's mom holds Lyla and starts to snore, but Lyla is not sleepy. She gently moves her mom's arm, slips down to the carpet, and starts to play with her stuffy, Mr. Owl. Lyla is like a bird, free and happy.

Story 3

Suzanna works in a long-term care facility as a continuing care assistant. She hates her job. She walks almost 20,000 steps a day, resulting in multiple corns torturing her feet. Besides the tedious labor, Nurses, LPNs, and, of course, her patients can boss her.

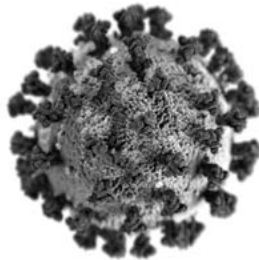
Suzanna lives at the bottom of the facility's employee chain, so she has many reasons to dislike her job. More absurdly, she can understand English, but she cannot understand the muttered English spoken by some seniors, especially from Mr. Smith. One time in the morning, she rashly brought a blue pie to Mr. Smith. That day, Mr. Smith actually wanted a blue tie to complement his shirt for when he attended a group performance. Without surprise, Suzanna got a complaint because Mr. Smith thought she was making fun of him. This anecdote was broadly spread among her colleagues and other patients, making Suzanna want to quit her job. Suzanna has a side job as a waitress for a feast and catering company. Although it is a physical job, at least the tips are decent, and nobody wants a tie when she serves breakfast.

When Covid-19 comes, she really wants to quit the job and find another long-term care facility to work at. She wants to keep working, especially after her waitress job is immediately cut by the catering company. Suzanna feels lucky that she has skills to take care of the seniors and keep the job. It shouldn't be too hard to find a job in another facility, but Suzanna doesn't want to voluntarily quit her current job. She knows her supervisor doesn't like her, and she suddenly comes up with an idea.

In the morning, Suzanna comes to work. She notices the air is tense. She is asked by her supervisor to wear PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). Everybody seems so busy in the morning. Suzanna notices that several colleagues are not showing up for their schedules. Her supervisor throws her a new shift sheet and asks her to sign the paper as soon as possible. To protect the seniors, the new policy asks one employee to serve only one working place. She didn't expect everything to change so quickly. Suzanna believes if she didn't leave that day, she would stay in her job forever. Her supervisor finds Suzanna just standing there, so he urges Suzanna to go to Mr. Smith's room to do the morning routine. It occurs to Suzanna that she should grasp this last chance to get another complaint from Mr. Smith. Then, her supervisor should become angry enough to send her away.

Suzanna walks into Mr. Smith's room. Mr. Smith's eyes are still closed. He is lying very still. Suzanna plans to purposely upset Mr.

Smith. So without even asking, she opens the drapes. Then she turns on the lights and makes lots of noise by moving chairs. Mr. Smith struggles to open his eyes, but he doesn't say anything. Suzanna goes near the bed and prepares to present a hostile attitude when saying good morning to Mr. Smith. Suzanna suddenly notices that Mr. Smith rubs his eyes. Several tears fall off on his wrinkled face. Suzanna is shocked and frozen. She wants to make an apology, but Mr. Smith tells her that he can never see his son again because of the new visitation policy due to Covid-19. Suzanna holds Mr. Smith's hand and promises him that the policy is just temporary. It is not true that he can never see his family again. Mr. Smith asks several times if he can believe Suzanna's promise. Suzanna firmly nods her head and says, "I will not go anywhere. I will just stay with you until you can see your son again." Suzanna is not sure if Mr. Smith clearly hears her words as she uses a warm wet cloth to gently wipe Mr. Smith's tears.





AARON'S ENIGMA (DEATH: 1 - AARON: 0)

MEHWISHAN JOOHI

I'm Aaron, and I have developed games my whole life. At first, I developed games to amuse myself, then to have something to play with my friends, and then to earn a living. Games have been the only constant in my life. Yet, until last Friday, I never realized that my life itself was just a game.

In the weekly wrap-up meeting on Friday, Dave dropped a few names of people whom he'll be following in the next industry-wide gamers' conference that is scheduled next week. As is customary for a curious person like me, I went on an online background search to know if any of these people would be of use to me. I was impressed by one named Larry McCamish, who has an impressive technical portfolio and a noteworthy social media following. Larry could be a useful contact for my next career move. Not that there's anything wrong with my current job. Sitting back in my cozy little office, I can plan the next upgrade to my life without a care. This is a luxury I can now afford. That's a life worth living, and that's a life I struggled to get for more than thirty-two years.

While most things about Larry's online activities were as I expected, one thing caught my eye, or rather caught me off-guard. Larry had a handful of posts on Facebook wishing to commit suicide, which was a shock like no other. Here I was visualizing him mentoring me

through my next career phase and passing his secrets of success to me, but there he is wishing to die. I could not think of a bigger let down.

I could not for the life of me imagine a person wishing to die while they checked all the boxes off of a successful life. How could I? For my whole life, I had seen death lurking at my heels. It boggled my mind to imagine what could be the thought process of a person who is inviting death instead of avoiding it. I had no clue. This little mental confusion spiraled me down into infinite flash backs from my life. It was as if I was looking at myself playing a game—a game to cheat death.

Level 1: Intro

My father missed my birth—missing it by only two weeks. Due to a stroke, he passed away without ever meeting me. That was my introduction to death, even if I did not know what it was. Dying of stroke before thirty-years-old is not in any way natural, but who could one blame for this seemingly natural death?

There were many other kids around me who had lost either one or both of their parents to street crime, an armed robbery, stray bullets, or bombing. They all had someone to blame and someone to hate. My frustration and deprivation were aimless. Someone should have been held accountable for giving me this unwanted gift. But nobody took this blame, so death became the overarching theme of the game of my life—becoming the form of an unresolved grief and an uninvited fear that always accompanied me.

Level 2: Getting Along

I can never forget my first friends: Mario, Alex, and Sal. I was so fascinated with Mario, who was tall, strong, and always had a way with other kids. Despite his bossiness, Mario was a great friend. From dawn until after dark, he was in the streets. He knew how to make a boring day fun. He knew all the best hiding places where our mothers could not find us and drag us back home. He invented fun games, such as racing on the trunk of a dead tree without falling into the sewer water that the tree was submerged in. He also showed us how to tie a thread to the torso of a dragonfly to see whose ‘helicopter’ went highest in the air. The list of games goes on and on. He might as well be my first inspiration who showed me how to make games

out of nothing. I took my first game developing lessons from the production of a dragonfly helicopter! Without a father, a young boy only has his own judgement of picking the leader to follow. Mario was my first leader. I visualized becoming strong, well-liked, and resourceful just like him.

Regardless of my big aims, I was written off before I was born and doomed to either become a gang member or a victim to a gang. But I defied all odds. I did not become a worthy recruit for gangs. I did not have physical strength, people skills, or street smarts that any gangs could use. I just got along with everyone; that's all that mattered to survive. My strengths were sneaking a favor here, learning something there, and being unnoticeable.

How I managed to stay alive might as well be sheer luck. After all, Alex was just like me. Yet, he could not stay alive to see his ninth birthday. Like me, he was very unassuming, so he could have made it through without getting in the way of ongoing violence. But during a crazy rainstorm, he was running barefoot in the street and stepped on a live wire, falling victim to an electric shock. He was my first close friend to die, and I felt that shock for far longer than what Alex would have suffered before dying. However, life went on. I kept on acing the game of getting along in life.

Level 3: Getting Out

Despite all of his amazing qualities, Mario was not one to excel in school. When I first went to school, he was two years my senior. In the next three years, he became a junior to me. In a few more years, he was not in the school at all. A lot of other things changed too. Playing with Mario was not as much fun anymore, since his resourcefulness shifted from making fun games to making money. He had been caught at least a dozen times while shop lifting. Although he did try to lure me into a new adventure, a coward little boy like me was of no use to him. I had no strength to outrun the shop owners if they followed me or the guts to get a beating from my mom if she heard about it. As a consequence of this choice, I had to tolerate Mario's anger and bullying.

On the other hand, Sal shined bright in school. Teachers trusted him

with special tasks and gave him a pass when all other kids in the class got punished. That power lured me into his circle. He knew how to work with others and what to say when you want to get something done. That's something that made him stand out from the rest, and that's how Sal replaced Mario as my role model. I wanted to be well-liked just like Sal.

Another thing that brought me closer to Sal was that he was also avoiding Mario. Sal's mom was very protective of him, and he dared not mingle with a mischievous kid like Mario. As a result, Sal and I started inventing new strategies to avoid Mario, such as changing our route to go home or lingering around school long after everybody left. This avoidance started innocently. But over the course of the next few years, the avoidance turned into a mission when Mario and his new buddies graduated from petty crime to actual crime that involved other neighbourhoods.

When the influence and intensity of Mario's group expanded, so did our anxiety about facing him. Sal and I started daydreaming about getting out of our neighborhood. We were not the first ones to come up with this world-changing idea. Getting out of that place was the de-facto mission inherited by anyone who did not have a stake in the unceasing violence. I doubt there was any family that was living in that neighborhood by choice. Who would choose a place where crime was common, water and electricity were scarce, and scarcer still were the employment options? People were there either because they happened to be born there and had no idea there was life outside that hellhole, or they were too poor to afford living anywhere else.

People whose relatives lived on the 'better' side of the city were the elite and treated with immense respect. These were the people with the best chances of getting out, so it was important to stay on good terms with them. Sal's uncle lived in the south end of the city, and Sal's brother had already gone to live with his uncle as an apprentice at his bookshop. It seemed just a matter of time until Sal would also go to work at his uncle's shop. The thought of Sal leaving me was too much to bear. Instead, I started thinking about making my own plans to move to the south end of the city where Sal would be going.

But life treated me better than my expectations. Our mathematics teacher picked Sal and me to compete for the entrance exam to a cyber technical college. For five months, we prepared for the exam day and night. We got accepted at the college. We were the first students from our school to ever make it to that prestigious college. The best part was that our accommodation was also paid for. Yes, we were getting out of the hellhole!

Little did I know that this will not be my only 'getting out' story. It was just the beginning. One time in college, we realized that our college was not immune to the gang violence. Although violence was in the name of the student union, but their effect was the same as that of the gangs in our neighborhood. The location just changed, but the drugs, bullying, and the terror was still the same. It did not take us long to know where things will go from there. So, Sal and I started working on another 'getting out' plan.

After completing one year of college, we applied to transfer into a college located in the capital city. There, we spent some quiet months before we saw the true face of this new place. A conflict between two groups of students engulfed the entire campus, leading to a week of class boycotts. Police officials had to intervene and negotiate a peace deal between the student groups. But after two months of uneasy silence, an exchange of heated words among a few students in a café snowballed into ugly ethnic violence. The college campus looked like a battlefield. Who would have thought that in those two months of silence, all student groups were gathering their forces, collecting weapons, and planning an ambush?

I saw seven of my classmates killed and dozens injured. Worst of all was that I lost Sal. The urgency of survival was so intense that it did not give me a chance to grieve for Sal. That was a grief in itself. Following that catastrophe, my memories related to the time are just a blur. The only feeling that I clearly remember is that I had enough. Once again, I needed to 'get out' of it all. By then, I had excelled at the game of 'getting out'.

Level 4: Getting Freedom

I had gotten out of my neighborhood, my city, and my province. Yet, freedom did not come from exchanging one hellhole for another. I

needed to ditch this whole country that created this perpetual unrest in one form or the other. For only one day of freedom from this unseen fear that would not stop haunting me, I was willing to leave my life, the love of my life, and my mother all behind. That was the level of my desperation.

Canada was a dream land for me. A land where, despite their backgrounds, people were welcomed and systems were not broken. This was a place where I wouldn't have to choose between my family and my life. I set out to work for this big dream. I had to make new friends, ask for favors, find a way to qualify for immigration, and stay alive in the process. That took me ten long years to achieve. I completed my college, started a job, started another degree to qualify for the university degree condition for immigration, took standardized tests, and saved every penny I earned. I jumped through so many hoops set by the Canadian government. Finding and overcoming hurdles became a lifestyle for me, but I did it. I landed in the Toronto airport with my mother and my girlfriend, and I felt this huge burden lift off my shoulders.

But I celebrated a bit too early. The struggle was not over yet. The burden that I felt lift off my shoulders was back again the very next day. Only this time, it was a different burden. Although I was not threatened to die by a bullet or a bomb, I faced the threat of going homeless if I did not find a job before my savings ran out.

I did get an entry-level job, but it was not easy surviving on minimum wage while also finding a full-time job. Getting through day to day in a place where you don't know anyone, or anything, is hard. Due to my previous experiences, I was so worked up that I had a hard time trusting anyone. I had no one to look up to. There was no one like Sal coming to my rescue. I didn't want to admit it, but I missed the familiar hellhole that I passionately hated. When in need, at least I knew the places to avoid or people to reach out to. But those nostalgic moments quickly passed. I was back in the present where I still had to find a way to support myself and my family.

One day, I met Jane while packing her groceries at the superstore. She was on the phone—passionately talking about the difficulty of finding a game developer to help her with a looming deadline. As soon as she got off the phone, I shared with her my game-developing

experience and offered help. That was the beginning of my first true connection in this new place. It was only after meeting Jane, working with her, learning from her, and hanging out with her that the burden on my shoulders finally started to lift again. That's when I finally aced at 'getting freedom'.

Level 5: Getting Disillusioned

Precisely on Friday, September 27th, 2019, I had a chance to clearly see the final level of my life's game. I saw that my life's sole villain is invincible. The sole source of fire that fed my passion to do more, be more, have more, and strive for more was never my self-proclaimed goal of 'realizing my potential'. I was all a heart aflame with the urge to defeat the undefeatable. A repulsion to weakness, born out of survival instincts, had gone awry and turned into a revenge on death.

In my own eyes, I was an intellectual carefully carving my way out of one difficulty after another. I had seen myself as a survivor who never gave up. Now, I know I was no better than a monkey climbing from one tree to the other out of instinct to avoid predators. My most sophisticated schemes were plain and useless for the game I was playing.

Now that I've gotten all that I thought would relieve me of this fear, I know that death is right here, staring me in the eyes with a smile on its face. I will end up just like Larry McCamish, who has everything but is still fixated on death. Back then, I knew that death had the power to chase me wherever I go and use fear to dictate my path in life. Now, I know that death also has the mysterious power to charm and lure people into its trap.

What was the point of all of my suffering and running around? Was it all to have death take me in a comfortable chair instead of being taken barefoot like Alex? What did I get out of this life anyway? I suffered the loss of so many beloved people and kept moving on in life. Now, I see no point in moving on. Maybe the point was to live in all those moments I had with Alex and Sal? But I have already lost those moments, so what is there to live for? Maybe there is nothing for me, but maybe I can tell Larry to look for such moments and live a little before falling in the trap of death? He looks like a fine person to have a chat with over drinks, so why not?! After all, the game is not over as long as I'm still breathing.

CRAZY JENNY

MEHWISHAN JOOHI

A hot day, finally giving away
Its warmth to a wave of wind
Out comes a lady from the bar
A stunning beauty with a style
Lacy blouse and sheer skirt
Fluttering in gusts of wind
The latest knock-off clutch and
Sky-high Stilettos in hand
Soft, bare feet on hard gravel
Catching me staring at her feet
She says, "hey, I'm not crazy"
"A nail went through my shoe
That's why I'm walking like so"
Bewildered, I stammer
"Oh, I never thought you were"
Oh how I wish I could say
I was just mesmerized by

your beauty and innocence
I couldn't say that under the influence
Of her bewitching beauty,
And her stunning charm
"That's impolite, you know
To ogle at someone like so
Those are the manners that
A guy should never forget"
That's what my mom would say



She's talking on the phone
I wait for her, so I could apologize
And redeem myself in her eyes
From the corner of the street
A young guy looks at her
And whistles, grinning by himself
He yells her name: "Jenny, Jenny.."
What a rude person he is, I think
She is lost in a conversation
He is impatient at the corner
He yells again, and again
Then picks up a handful of rocks
and throws them at her
What a horror to witness
Jenny turns her head to look
Smiles, hangs up the phone
Walks toward him without a cringe
All of her grace now looks out of place
I'm left there, alone, thinking
That my mom would say:
"you are wrong Jenny
You indeed are crazy
But not for taking off your shoes;
you are crazy for inviting a jerk in your life"
Thinking to myself, I wish her comfortable shoes
and a partner who respects her without fail
That's all a gentleman can do;
My mom would agree!



KNOCK ON THE DOOR

MEHWISHAN JOOHI

February 2020: Fingers Crossed

After more than two years of struggling to find a job, I have landed a volunteer internship that has a great chance of transforming into a real job. All that I'm focused on is making a great impression and giving my best work performance. It seems like I finally have my foot in the door.

As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours. One day, I get an interesting email from a person who worked at a non-profit I interviewed at last year. He told me that the same position was vacant again. He also said that if I was interested, I could apply. I was elated. If the volunteer internship did not turn into a real job, then this could be my back-up plan. I agreed to apply and promptly sent my updated resume with all the bells and whistles attached.

That's not all. This month, nature seemed to be showering me with opportunities. I received an opportunity to interview for a role with a leading airline. The interview process was going really well, and I was progressing through their various recruitment stages. I was over the moon. I thought it's certain that I'll land at least one of these roles.

In other news, the Covid-19 infections were starting to spread across the globe. It seemed like only a matter of time that it'll reach Saskatchewan. My life was hanging by a thread.

March 2020: Crap Hits the Fan

Things took a turn for the worse in the second week of March. First, the company where I was doing the internship decided to ask employees to work from home due to safety precautions related to Covid-19. That announcement had an ominous feeling to it. The company's CEO was talking about applying for government funding, postponing new product launches, and other things—all signs of a struggling business. I felt like the ground was slipping from beneath my feet. Then came the second blow. Given the current situation, the person who asked me to apply to his company told me that they were not hiring anymore at this time. Lastly, I received a call from the hiring person at the airline company. They were halting all hiring processes for the foreseeable future.

April 2020 – June 2020: A Blur like No Other

After yet again seeing my dreams shatter, I had all the time in the world to mull over the state of affairs. My obsession with the news was quickly followed up by an aversion to the news. Also, I was again obsessed with applying to jobs. It seemed like another rinse and repeat for job hunting. In these past three months, one good thing that happened was that I had enough time on my hands to finally study for a certification exam that I had been postponing for more than five years.

July 2020: Is This For Real?

I scheduled my certification exam for July 7th. On July 4th, I got a call from the same person who had asked me to apply to their company. He told me that they were now able to hire for a part-time role. After going through the roller coaster of hope and disappointment so many times, I was cautious with my expectations.

Long story short, I appeared for a phone interview on July 6th, passed my certification exam on July 7th, and got a confirmation on July 8th that I was hired. In three short days, I saw results after nearly

three years of struggles. It still took me a few more months to believe that the job offer was real this time.

Whose Door is Being Knocked Down?

Ever since July 2020, things seem to go smoothly. My job allows me to mostly work from home—with an occasional visit to the office until it's safe to return to the office full time. All of my colleagues seem to be nice. I love the work that I'm assigned. I couldn't have asked for a better job.

I've been incredibly lucky that the Covid-19 pandemic has not caused long-term damage to my life. All of my loved ones are safe, and I hope it stays this way. With my career struggles at least sorted out for now, it seems like the pandemic's grip on my nerves has loosened. The pandemic is one of the scariest things I've encountered, but it's knocking down someone else's door. For now, I'm sitting in a little corner of my room with my laptop, hoping that the pandemic does not see and knock down my door.

CONTRIBUTORS

Bhoomika Dongol is a strong advocate for resilient communities and has been working in the non-profit sector for over nine years. At heart, Bhoomika is a poet and storyteller. With her work in the post-disaster scenario in Nepal and South Asia, Bhoomika's stories are inspired by stories of resilient people living during some of the most extreme and evolving circumstances.

Shuchen Hu comes from China and she landed in Regina in January 2017. She believes she is at her best age to explore her spiritual world and finish the reconciliation with the world after her early year's trauma caused by family violence. She never denies this unpleasant history and she wants to devote herself to fighting against family violence, especially to women. She likes writing and thinking, and she believes she can change the world using her pen. She hopes she can use her enthusiasm and smile to light other people's lives. She is now living with her husband and daughter in Regina.

Chief Peter Odion Omojiade is a Nigerian. He is an alchemist, altruistic, and intuitive individual, who abhors injustice and illicit investment in reactionaries. His experience in banking, management consultancy and working class struggle spans over four decades. He believes that our existence is better captured through history, philosophy and storytelling embellished with metaphor. Omojiade is a strong advocate of the attainment of justice and equality through the liberation of human mind from philistinism with literary works.

Mehwishan Joohi moved to Canada 3 years ago and has been enjoying her journey so far. She loves to read and tell stories, so coming to Canada has been an excellent opportunity for her to discover new stories. Canada's multicultural society gives her all the opportunities to explore new cultures and discover the stories weaved in these cultures.

EDITOR

Gail Bowen. A Reflection in the Lake, the 20th novel in Gail Bowen's Joanne Kilbourn Shreve series, will be published in September 2021. Gail has just completed a play, *The Happiest Girl*. She has also written four Charlie Dowhanuik novellas for Orca books. *Sleuth: Gail Bowen on Writing Mysteries* was published in March 2018. In addition, she has written plays for CBC Radio and for theatrical production across Canada. She lives in Regina with her husband Ted.

Thank you to all of the staff, volunteers, and participants of the 2020 Regina Open Door Society Creative Writing Class.



Top L-R:

Peter Odion Omoijiade, Mussarat Parveen (RODS),
Gail Bowen (Instructor)

Middle L-R: Aziz Qaderi (RODS), Shuchen Hu, Mehwishan Joochi

Bottom: Bhoomika Dongol



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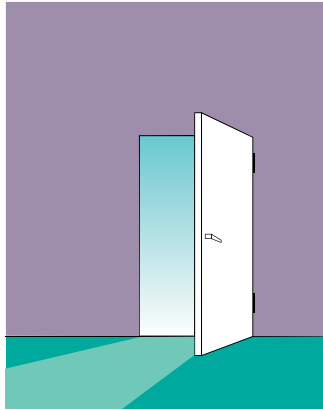
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