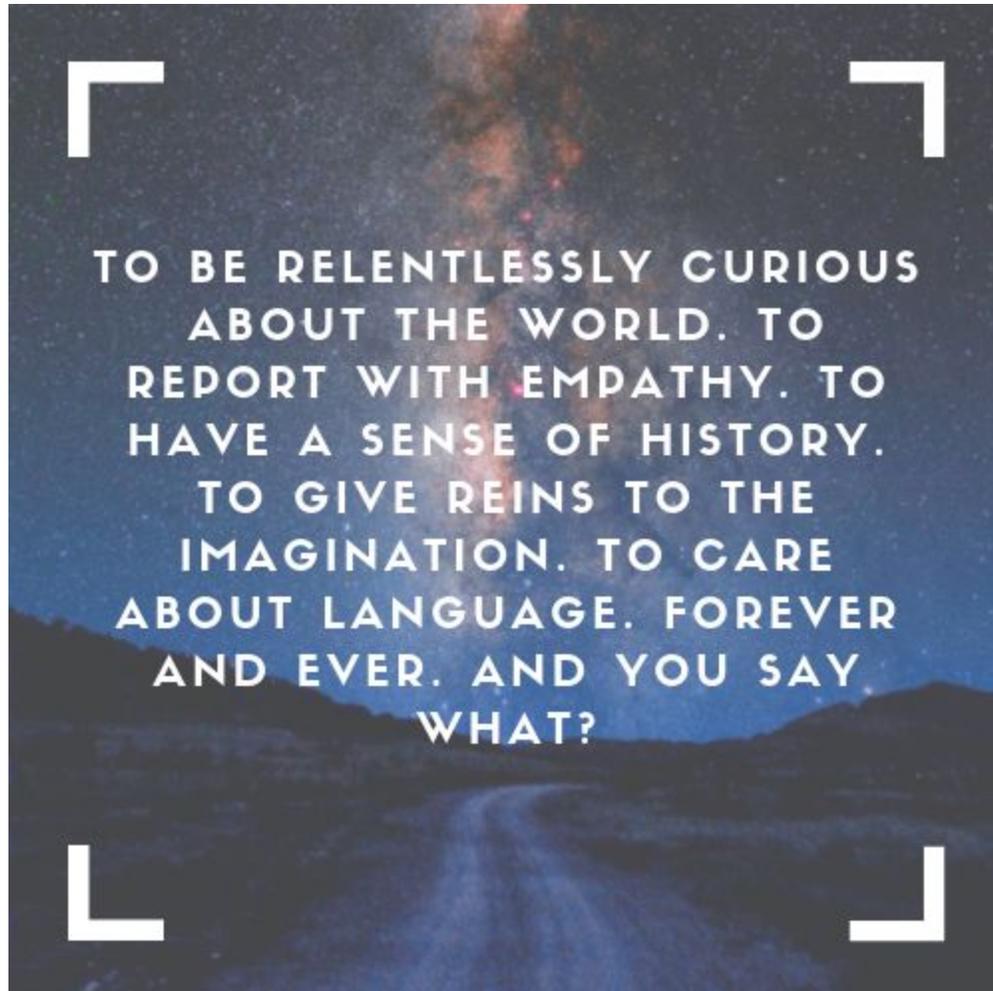


**THE
QUE
STION
MARKER**

ISSUE 12

THE **Q**UESTION MARKER

THE **Q**UESTION MARKER



TO BE RELENTLESSLY CURIOUS
ABOUT THE WORLD. TO
REPORT WITH EMPATHY. TO
HAVE A SENSE OF HISTORY.
TO GIVE REINS TO THE
IMAGINATION. TO CARE
ABOUT LANGUAGE. FOREVER
AND EVER. AND YOU SAY
WHAT?



ISSUE NO. 12

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Issue No. 12

It's been a memorable year. We started with very little and were able to do some great work. But we couldn't have done it without the amazing writers, editors and illustrators that worked with us. We certainly, also, do not forget our readers. Thank you. Now we are looking to 2020 which will see us suspend the magazine and focus on web publishing.

This month's issue is focused on the celebration season. Carl Terver muses on the meaning of Christmas and Adaobi Peter-Kingston lets us into her Christmas dilemma. There is also a short story about four kids who go on a strange New Year Eve adventure.

I hope you enjoy this issue and, on behalf of the entire team, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. ✚

Eke Jude
Co-editor
December, 2019

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The Saviour's Day

What is Christmas if not a preparation for death?

Carl Terver



Here comes December again, clothed in fancy garbs of yuletide preparations, with the harmattan and the familiar, dewy smell its wind carries, and Christmas. Harmattan has promised to return over the years; the earth still insists on revolving and entering the solstice that produces grand stories.

Christmas story. Many have drifted from their Christian upbringing but still confess the profound impression of the religion in their lives. I am one of them. One of these impressions is the story of Christmas, of baby Jesus, the Saviour of the World. Of Herod's fear of an infant growing to fulfil a prophecy of ending his kingdom, of Three Wise Men following a star (and the accompanying hymn 'We Three Kings of Orient Are'), of pictures in *My Book of Bible Stories* showing shepherds in turbans, keeping watch over their flock under a starlit night sky, and the manger Jesus is born.

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It's hard to say how enriching our Christmas experience was comparing others'. This, however, is sure: it is hard getting the story of Christmas out of one's head after childhood. Not because the celebration is recycled every year. But for its profundity.

Growing up as a good Catholic child, this story was most fascinating, after that of Joseph, because it is about children. And the story's structure, of the underdog to surpass forces against him, produced the desired result: to strengthen one's belief in the might of God for his own.

It is sad how enlightenment ruins this innocence. 'Stop reading too many books', is usually the caution. The fear: you shall corrupt your religious beliefs, as it surely did for me. Some of us didn't wait for adulthood to cause an atrophying spirit for Christmas; accumulation of knowledge, translated to subtle doses of unbelief, did. Unbelief and doubts about God or his son. Knowledge of the distorted history of the Church and the fusion of Roman pagan holidays and rituals with Christianity by Constantine. Or at the end of the day, distrust in the story of Christmas because of the feeling of non-proprietorship to its superstructure that is European, and as an accessory of imported religion.

But no one can take away the great significance of this holiday celebration and its surprising timing towards each year's end. Carols, for example, can transport the mind to places only imagined. Or is it the smell of fried meat in the house? The gifts, new toys and clothes; the joy effused during this time? The visits to parks and beaches, or constipation after taking two bottles of Mirinda?

Before I talk about my estrangement with all these today, a certain thing befuddles me. This is expressed in the first paragraph of Adam Gopnik's essay ['In With The New,'](#) that what is heady today, like the celebration of Christmas, becomes a mere disturbance once it is over, as he judges the business of Christmas trees as wholly entrepreneurial:

... after the first week of January, those same trees, anxiously selected and triumphantly lofted home, are heaped brutally on the sidewalk, bits of tinsel still clinging to their needles, for the Department of Sanitation to haul away.

Yet the human psyche pursues euphoria. (Our religious leaders in the country know better: the human psyche is 'wired' to euphoria.) This is how Christmas has been reinvented over the years by capitalism – to promote unhinged joy.

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Till the day of its celebration, the marathon begins. The ambitions and plans. The dreams that will come true. The lady to go out with, if she accepts. The car that must be bought. The last minute hairdos. The new house that must be moved in to. The new things that must be acquired. The impressions we have to make. All for a day's celebration; and not even one of the days – of being born or death – the good book says is important in one's life.

The ancient Greeks had two festivals dedicated to the god of wine and fertility Dionysius: the *Rural Dionysia* and the *City Dionysia*. The rural Dionysia, a prelude to city Dionysia, was a procession, a *pompe*, where members of the *phallophoroi* carried a huge phallus representative of the god Dionysius. This festival which was similar to the Roman Saturnalia happened during winter solstice, the same time we celebrate Christmas today. What ensued at the festivals was inhibited frenzy, jollity and sybaritic manifestations. This spirit is inherited in Christmas today, a celebration traced to these festivals, minus the birth of Jesus Christ.

That is why some denominations like the Jehovah Witness, Church of Christ, Deeper Life, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adopt a 'scriptural', 'Bible-believing' way to celebrate the birth of the Saviour in a way that it is not robbed of its sanctimony. The good eggs of Christianity, so they believe themselves, always bear the burden of being right in a world that evolves waywardly. They point us in the right direction this time: that jollity is in vain if we are not prepared for what comes next, the death of the same Saviour. Although in Jesus' time people waited for thirty-three years; today it only takes four months.

To insert Adam Gopnik's concern here – how does this celebration of joy becomes that of sorrow? This, after all, is the mystery in which religion, and the world ultimately, works. So when it is time to rejoice and be glad, when Christmas is here, we do, as we'll always prefer joy to sadness. Even if it results in a proliferation of desire. Christmas!!

It is also a strange time. Road accidents are many for those travelling after a long time away from their villages. People die from über-indulgence: excessive drinking and drug overdose. Drownings at the beach, food poisoning, sexphyxiation?

I remember some Christmases I sat at home and watched on TV children of the middle class dancing at parks and in company with Barney, Pooh, Mickey Mouse and Boy Ajasco, and feeling left out. There's that kid out there, too,

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about to witness the same thing. But I can give him my two-naira thoughts in retrospect: he shouldn't sweat it.

For the last eight years, I have become suspect at anything too European. Christmas, for example. The carols, the deer, the snow, *Santa Claws!* Something in my gut protests against these images. *The Passion of Christ*, a classic tragedy, resonates better with me.

Yet I can never do away with the demons of Christmas that must haunt me everywhere I look and go this season. A sweltering bottle of beer. Fried meat? Salad? Carols that rekindle childhood memories. A carol still haunts me today. Never known the lyrics, I only hum it. I have searched the Christmas songs section of the Catholic hymn book, humming its tune to the words of the less familiar songs therein. Once I was able to match it with 'Long the ages roll and descend . . .' in a Christmas carol book. Not sure if the words are exact, but long, Christmas has always been here, ages rolling and descending, as there will be, without end. ✚

Carl Terver is an Editor at Praxis Magazine.

Looking For Certainty

Christmas is what you make of it, not what it is

Adaobi Peter-Kingston



I can't remember a memorable Christmas. The memories appear similar. The food, the lights, the carol, the harmattan sweeping through the streets. So what else is there to hold on to, especially if one doesn't believe in virgin births and a magical man garbed in red bearing gifts? It feels hollow, like an empty well that has no bottom. It was Shakespeare who said variety is the spice of life; if nothing changes, perhaps one can be forgiven for giving into despair.

But it is not true that Christmas has no dynamism. The celebration has changed over the centuries, subject to the same evolution that gave birth to we Sapiens. At first, Christians debated whether it was even appropriate to celebrate the saviour's *birth*. Wasn't his *death* what we should be full of joy with? Why

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celebrate his birth when there is still death ahead?¹ But humans love beginnings. We like to know how things started, as much as we love how they end. Our reality is framed by these two anchors. A beginning and a conclusion. It doesn't occur to us that the true physics of our reality might not correspond to this box, that there could be no beginning and no end; but we are slaves of time, no not time per se, but clock-time, measuring what we see, rulers and protractors in hand, ignoring what we cannot.

That Jesus - the most important man in all of history? - was born on a given day was an idea the early Christians could not resist. So they set a day and became like the pagans before them. And thus Christmas was born into the world. A day like any other but also signifying the beginning of something we, with all our knowledge and books, have yet to understand.² And, of course, it became a human thing. At first glance, it serves to bring the Saviour³ closer. But that's an illusion. Christmas serves no extra-terrestrial communication purpose, except to reveal what is in us, our deepest desires.

This year, on my street, there are few fireworks, even if it is just a few days to Christmas. Ordinarily one would expect a barrage of sounds tearing into the atmosphere, shrieking, disturbing the peace. But there has been relative calm. Someone could point to Buharinomics, typified by the border closure and selective stifling austerity, a kind of pseudo-socialism but without a clear direction.⁴ Or, maybe there are fewer fireworks because more people are now glued to their phones, thinking up the next Facebook post, tweet or Tik-Tok move. More screentime means less time to hit the streets and set it on fire. Whichever answer (and I am sure there are more) one chooses to stick with, it is evidence for the dynamism of Christmas - that no two versions are alike and that the day is what we make of it, not what it is.

Of course, my Christmases look alike because my holidays have always looked alike. Holidays - those brief moments that jar us from the brutish monotony of capitalism - are when I have the time to pursue those half-formed ideas in my notes, to pore over those unfinished books, to find some extra sleep and to eat a little, okay maybe not a little. It barely changes, year after year, this indoor routine. So one doesn't get to see what the world makes of it, except on TV and now social media. I can't deny that it leaves me curious, because I have a theory that if by chance and some crooked level of ingenuity one could gather

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all Christmas experiences in one place and aggregate, it is possible to figure out what Christmas really is.

So maybe you can start by telling me what you do on Christmas. Where do you go to and why? What kind of gifts do you like to receive? Should I send you a postcard and would you write me a letter by hand?

Perhaps, that Christmas isn't marked in heaven⁵, shouldn't be a tragedy. After all, what is Christmas if not human joy and gratitude for life and companionship. Angels have no need for these. So we do it for us. Shouldn't that be enough? Of course, it should, but it isn't, because Christmas's promise is too gargantuan to be left to the frailness of human interpretation.

The birth of Christ and how we remember it teaches us one important truth about life - that the unseen is more important than the seen. But everything can be seen if we have the right lenses. The Magi saw the star. Newton saw gravity. Jobs saw the iPhone. The unseen is all around us, but do we see? Jesus said, for they have eyes but cannot see. Embedded in our carols, our gifts, our rice and chicken, embedded in our dance routines, the full laughter at dinner, the long hug at the airport, the reunions, embedded in them is the remembrance that a guy who had it all chose to leave it all for folks who couldn't care less whether he shit himself or not. It's not even about the story's veracity, it's the incredulity - why would anyone do that? Because the most important things are those we do not see, yet.

And this is how we can beat depressive days - the assurance that something is coming. Something new, something glorious. Something that is not *beginning* and *end*. Something that is not clock-time. Today, we talk about the end of the world, climate change and the collapse of our system. But we can hope and fight like Greta because a new world is indeed possible. Like King, when nothing about race in America made sense, we can raise our voices and declare that we have a dream. Sure, life can take away my body, pummel it and crush it to dust, but it will not take possession of my soul. Because I believe. ✚

Notes

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1. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, during the first two centuries of Christianity, there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. Numerous Church Fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays when, in fact, saints and martyrs should be honoured on the days of their martyrdom—their true “birthdays,” from the church’s perspective.
2. Christmas, in its varying forms, has survived for centuries. If a thing has such lasting power, there is no doubt in my mind that an underlying truth sustains it. But what is this truth?
3. The Saviour, here, is a metaphor for the initiator of the universe, a role Jesus (as part of the Trinity) plays in the imagination of billions.
4. Since he became Nigeria’s President in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari has implemented economic programs that seek to cut costs, limit the role of market forces and emphasise the welfare of the poor. However food prices have skyrocketed, insecurity has worsened and there is a general feeling that Buhari hasn’t applied the austerity measures to himself and those within his circle.
5. Christmas is not celebrated in heaven because December 25 has no cosmic marker. What I mean is that there are no comets flying across the atmosphere every Christmas. Or maybe a star that looks brighter? Or a particular rainbow with dazzling colours? Which really leaves me confused.
How on earth is it possible that the birth of history’s most important man (?) has no cosmic marker?

Adaobi Peter-Kingston is a Staff Writer at The Question Marker.

Naked Faces

“Our faces lit up with hope.”

Ekus



Photo Credit: Fabrizio Conti

Every New Year Eve, I follow my parents to church. This year’s was no different. We had left the house as early as 7 pm and trekked the fairly long distance since we could not afford the bus fare. The path was always a lonely one with thick mass of bushes on both sides of the narrow road. My parents would let me and my sisters walk just in front of them and warn us not to stray too far or else we were liable to be spanked mercilessly.

“Chike, biko hold your sister very well oh and slow down.” My father would scold me when it seemed I was zooming further ahead.

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The truth was I was always in a hurry to get to the church as early as possible so I could join my friends in lighting up the sky with fireworks and shoot all manner of explosives at each other. For Christ's sake, it was almost the beginning of another year and we were drawling across a lonely path in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes I would feel like just running away, leaving everyone behind. But I knew the consequences of that rebel act: my father would have skinned me alive.

That night, as we walked along, a constant rumbling followed us. When we stopped, the rumbling stopped, when we moved, it continued. I stared into the eyes of my Father and I could see a yellowish shade of fear in his eyes. It seemed like we were being followed.

We walked faster. The rumbling behind the bushes also increased its pace. My little Sister, Adaobi, held my hands very tightly as we walked in front of our parents. I could hear my mother breathing heavily and whispering words into my father's ears, words that I could not decipher.

We kept on walking despite the apparent danger that was just meters away from us.

After walking for quite some time, we bent the corner that led to the Church building and I could feel the air of my father's exhale brush the nape of my neck. We had left the path of the bushes and for a moment, all seemed to be well.

On getting to the Church, I asked my Father, "Papa, what was that sound that was following us the other time?"

My father paused for a while, apparently trying to gather his thoughts. "Will you shut up? Nothing was following us. Have you heard me?" His face was twisted with anger and blank seriousness.

I nodded in fear.

"And do not let go of your sister's hand! Have you heard me?"

"Yes sah."

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My father turned around to face my mother. She was watching the scolding scenario with a presence of disgust that I assumed she did not agree with my father's bold theory that nothing had happened earlier on the deserted, lonely path.

"Let us go," he grabbed her hand and they left for the adult congregation.

For a moment, I stood at the point where they left us, petrified and all the same confounded about the audacity of my father's denial that nothing had followed us. Was papa lying? No, it could never be. Was it not the same Papa that flogs daylight out of me whenever I attempted to bury or just even disguise the truth? My father hated lies with passion. So, it must have been my imagination that we were being followed. Maybe it was the rustling wind that appeared the magician that had just bamboozled my puerile senses; maybe I was going psychic. I had always imagined . . .

"*Nwannem Nwoke*, let us go," My little sister broke my thought sequence. I held her little, small hands and dragged her with me to the Children auditorium where I was looking forward to catch-up with my friends. Immediately, I sighted Emeka and Dennis, every thought of what happened at the deserted, lonely road flew through the window of my mind. I could already see their pockets bulging with various sizes of explosives.

In my innocent mind, it was going to be another cracking New Year transition.

*

Emeka and Dennis were a set of twins. Though they were born on the same day, there was nothing similar between the two. Emeka was slim, energetic, and very handsome with a compassionate face that looked like that of an angel. However, Dennis was more robust in terms of physical statistics; he had a rough but gentle face and was the laziest person I knew during my childhood. The duo, despite their huge disparities, stuck to each other. They bonded well and since I was friends to both, I was always welcome in this brotherly circle of oneness.

"Hey! Ada my princess," Dennis shouted as soon as he saw me walking towards them with my sister.

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“Shut up joor,” Emeka playfully slapped Dennis on the cheek, and he stepped up to lift Adaobi on his shoulders. The young girl giggled and we all laughed.

We started scheming on how to utilize all the fireworks that the twin brothers had brought along with them when Dennis brought up an issue.

“Ha! I have even forgotten.” His face turned sour.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Mother told me that bangers are no more allowed in church vicinity.”

“What!” Emeka shot a dishonest look at his brother. “When did she tell you that one?”

“What do you mean by that question? You think I’m lying,” Dennis shot back.

“I never said that. I just asked for proof.”

“You are not serious. Go and shoot now and let the security catch you. Father would flog you very well.”

“I will shoot,” Emeka retorted, “and nothing will happen.”

“Emeka, just calm down,” I intervened. “Are you sure your mother said we cannot shoot?” I turned to face Dennis.

“Yes,” He replied

“Okay, but then why did she buy the bangers in the first place then?” I continued my probe.

“Please help me ask him oh!” Emeka hissed.

Dennis paused for a while before he answered. “She said that we will shoot them tomorrow.”

“What!” Emeka was staring unbelievably at his brother.

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“Yes na!” Dennis continued, “was that not the reason I told you not to let Father see the bangers this evening.”

“That’s true ooooh!” Emeka put his hands on his head.

The noise in the auditorium shielded the reality of the silence that dawned on our conversation. For the first time in our lives, we were going to be crying Happy New Year without the accompanying vibrating sounds of fireworks that set our adrenaline at its highest level.

“I have an idea,” Dennis broke the silence-ice.

He shared it. We argued over it, strengthened it and then accepted to execute it.

That night, two hours to the New Year, we set out on the deserted, lonely road.

*

Dennis’ idea was very simple. We had decided to travel into town and spend the first minutes of the New Year blowing our fireworks, then travel back to the Church, before we were missed by our parents.

So, we set out in the dark of the night, along the deserted, lonely road.

We had not walked more than a mile when the rumbling I thought my family experienced earlier resurfaced again. The bushes were shaking beside us as we moved, the air seemed to swivel at a more frantic pace and everything seemed so cold that I had to wrap my hands across my chest.

“What’s that?” Emeka’s voice was laced with fear.

“I don’t know.” I said, holding Adaobi close to my side. I had brought her with me for fear of her being seen by my parents alone, and questions being raised about my whereabouts.

“Wait,” Dennis spoke. The rumbling also waited. “Is this bush following us?”

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Dennis stepped further into the middle of the road; he was already fidgeting from fright. "I think we should go back."

"No," Emeka said, "We've gone too far."

"Yes," I chipped in, "It makes no sense to abandon our mission when we are so close."

"True." Dennis sighed and we continued our journey.

Finally, after walking for a few more minutes, we burst into a bustling junction with people engaging in diverse activities. Everything looked harsher here. The wind was colder, the night seemed to be darker and life on the face of the people we passed seemed almost nonexistent.

"Where are we?" Emeka asked.

"I do not know. Let us ask around," I said.

So, we walked up to a shop just beside the road.

The shop attendant was an old man with smart glasses. "Sir," I spoke, "can you tell us where we are."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Seventh Junction."

"Seventh Junction?"

"Yes," the man shrugged. "Any problems?"

"No worries sir, please can you tell us what time it is," Emeka put in.

He looked at us with an incredulous glare on his face. "What time it is?"

"Yes Sah," I looked keenly into his visage.

"I'm sorry my children, time does not exist here."

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The shock on our faces did not really summarize the fear that dropped into our hearts when we heard those words drop from the old man's mouth. We looked back, and to our greatest surprise, the deserted, lonely road was no more, all that could be seen was now a long street bustling with commercial activities and its surface gleaming with tar.

"Where are you children from?" The old man asked.

We told him the town where we came from.

"Can you remember the precise moment in time you were in when before you stumbled here?"

"1992," Dennis answered the question.

"1992," the old man repeated with almost a reminiscent sparkle in his eyes. "I was a young man then you know."

He paused for a minute, went into the inner recluse of the shop and came out with a small book that had a brownish cover and jagged edges, like they had been feasted on by house rats.

My friends were afraid, I could see it in their eyes. I too could feel my heart thumping beneath my chest. Adaobi, still resting on my legs seemed the most peaceful among us. Maybe, I thought, she did not understand the magnitude of the fix that we were in; but I would come to understand later in life, that her peaceful demeanour was not borne out of ignorance but the innocence of purity that guarded one even from the greatest fears.

"My friends," the old man placed the book on the counter, "can you give me the date you embarked on this journey."

"It was on New Year's eve, the last day of the month of December, of the year 1992." Dennis answered again.

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“New Year’s eve?” The old man repeated, his face falling into lines of despair and revealing an agony that had somehow not been visible since we met him. “New Year’s Eve is bad,” he said, almost talking to himself.

“Sir, time is going,” Emeka moved forward towards the counter that separated us from where the man stood in the shop, “we need to get back before our parents start looking or else, or else we would be in trouble.” His eyes carried the desperation of a man whose life was being threatened.

The old man’s face bore into each of our eyes, one by one; and when he spoke, he picked his words carefully, like he was afraid we may not have understood if he had said them in a hurry. “My young friends, like I earlier intimated you earlier, time does not exist in this place where you have found yourself. In the world of time, where you have come from, seasons are marked based on the revolutions of the universe measured by an instrument called the clock and policed by a set of numbers which you know as the calendar.”

He coughed and then continued. “My friends, here, the universe is static and our lives are measured by the revolutions of air.”

“What?” Dennis exclaimed, that’s impossible.

The old man smiled, “That’s what we all say when we first got here.”

“Can you explain sir?” Dennis said.

“I do not think that is necessary Dennis,” Emeka shot at his brother, “the most important question should be how we are going to get out of here and return to the church as quickly as possible.”

“True,” I added.

“I am afraid, my young friends, the revolution of air that brought you here does not come around until the next season.”

“The next season?” Emeka said, “When is that sir?”

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The old man peered into his brownish book and shook his head, “Your season, which is that of the New Year, converted into the system of time in your world, equals 1000 years.”

“How’s that possible?” Dennis spoke, fear in his voice.

“Well, you can see how well-populated this place is, my very inquisitive friend,” the man’s eyes scanned ahead, “it’s not because we never wished to go back. But before the particular season that brought us here would come back again, death would have stolen our lives.”

At the instance of that revelation, despair shrunk into my heart, and the misery that welled up in my spirit was beyond measure. I was never going to see my parents again. I was never going to see my village again. I was never going to see the real world again.

“My friends, I think you should come inside for some tea,” the old man said, “you’ve been standing there all day.”

“No sir, we cannot come in, we have to get back.” Emeka was almost in tears as he spoke.”

“Yes sir, we have to get back,” Dennis also said.

“Yes sir, we have to get back.” It was my little sister affirming the desire.

I stood, tears in my eyes and sorrow in my heart and completed our voices of solidarity, “Yes sir, we have to get back.”

The old man was touched, he looked into our eyes, and his face drew a contortion of compassion. “My young friends, there is little I can do for you.”

“Then do it,” Emeka said.

“There is a way you can get back.”

Our faces lit up with hope.

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“Oh no, my young friends, I strongly urge you not to consider that route, for it is one that wields the certainty of death.”

“We are ready to confront even death,” Emeka said, stepping forward.

We all nodded.

“Are you sure about this?” the old man closed the book. “You will have to evade the naked faces on the mountain.”

“Naked faces on the mountain?” I asked.

“Yes, naked faces. Scary monsters that have no skin on their faces.”

“What!” Emeka exclaimed.

“Yes, my young friends. It has been said that they guard the mountains which is the one single portal that can actually send one back to the real world. Many have tried and have never returned,”

“But doesn’t that mean they got back to the real world?” Dennis inquired.

“Noooo my boy, we hear screams down here, and every morning we see the traces of blood trickling down the mountain. Those creatures are deadly, and I beg you my young friends, stay with me miserable in this world of nothingness. Do not embark on this journey which promises of no return nor reward.” The old man’s eyes were teary.

We stood in front of the shop, speechless and unable to confront the fear of the mountains.

“Sah, have you seen them before?” My little sister, Adaobi, asked.

“No, my daughter. But I have heard stories, countless stories.”

“You mean you have not even tried to get to the mountains,” she went on.

“No, my dear. It is better to be a weakling and live, than be brave and be massacred like chickens on Christmas day.”

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“I do not agree sir,” I said. “I believe bravery is a virtue, and the fear of death or failure, a vice.”

The old man’s compassionate look dissipated. “Then go. Will yourself to death and relieve yourself of the pain of this dark world. Go! My young friends, for I see that death has seduced your callow hearts and you have fallen for this lustful desire. Go!” And he pointed to a faraway mist of darkness to our left. “That is the mountains of the naked faces; enjoy your trip, my young friends.” He said, a scowl on his face and went into the shop.

And so we were left outside, in the biting cold and to the mercy of the tortuous winds. I carried my sister on my back as she was already falling asleep as she rested on my waist. I peered into Emeka and Dennis’ eyes and the same resolve that was in my eyes was also in theirs.

That resolve was to dare fate and head for the mountains.

The old man had called it *the mountains of the naked faces*.

And all I could imagine was the most despicable horror.

But something more shocking I found on those mountains.

*

The mountain itself seemed to wrap the city in which we found ourselves. And the nature of its structure was enough to put enough fear into the mind of the bravest men. It was covered with abundant plantation and could be described as a forest with amazing height. When we got to the foot of the mountain, in truth, we saw human skeletons lying indiscriminately on the ground. The aroma of death was no doubt in the place.

“Should we go back, it seems the old man was right,” a panicky Dennis offered.

“No brother, there is no going back,” Emeka responded and moved ahead. “We have chosen this path, and on its reality we must tread.”

The mountain had a sort of route that one could follow to the top, and we stuck to this charted route. With my sister at my back, I found it extremely

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difficult in climbing the steeples and finding good anchors for my hands and feet, but still, I ventured on, determined to return home.

Precisely at the middle of the mountain, we reached a flat landing, and on the wall was pasted a sign: CLIMB NO FURTHER, DEATH AWAITS.

And almost immediately, we could hear chanting and cries at the top of the mountains. I looked up, but all I could make out was pure darkness.

“Look,” Dennis pointed to something lying just across the landing where we stood. And what lay on those floors itself were too grotesque for me to rest my gaze. Bodies of people were hung on the walls of the mountains with their bodies intact, but their faces had been peeled off and one could see the outlines of the skeletal frame of their head. The bodies, which were naked, still looked fresh and on each was written the words: THESE TOO TRIED TOO ESCAPE.

I looked away in disgust and utter shock.

“The old man was right, let us go back.” Dennis started.

This time, even Emeka was shaken. He had no reply to his brother’s protest.

“Can you not see what awaits us? Death. Let us go back.” Dennis continued.

“I think you are right,” Emeka conceded and looked me in the face to find my decision. “What do you say, Chike?”

What do I say? I peered into the eyes of my friends and felt the fear they felt. I was afraid beyond description but I just could not tear away the words my father had placed into my heart: BRAVERY IS A VIRTUE AND THE FEAR OF DEATH OR FAILURE A VICE. Father was not a man that told lies, and if it were not true, he would not have said it. It was my belief in those words that formed the confidence of my reply, that fateful night.

“My friends,” I said, “we have come this far, why retreat? Did we not know, from the beginning, that this journey was pregnant with the certainty of death? Why now, when our faith and resolve is being tested, have we chosen to give in to the fear that resides in our hearts? Why, my good friends? It is better to try and

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be defeated than not to try and live with the regret of not knowing whether we would have won. Be strong, brothers, and let us complete this last part of our journey. For bravery is a virtue and the fear of death or failure a vice.”

The two brothers stared at me with sheer unbelief, “Can you not see, Chike?” Emeka spoke, “this thing is real, we would get killed and no one would remember our stupid bravery.”

“It is wisdom to flee.” Dennis offered.

“Yes, that is true,” Emeka said, “and if you choose to continue with your innocent sister, remember that her blood rests on your indiscretion and foolishness.”

“Goodbye, Chike.” Dennis said.

And with that, the two brothers started their descent back to the foot of the mountain and, something told me, back to the old man’s little shop.

*

What is fear? Alone in the middle of the mountain, I was not afraid. Instead, something greater than fear enveloped my being. I stood for minutes, nothing made sense to me and life seemed so unfair to my young experience. I decided to follow my friends.

My sister woke up and slid from my back and since I was not going to let her out of my sight, I thought it wise to seek her counsel. I held her in my hands and looked into her young innocent eyes.

“Ada.”

“Yes, brother.” She answered, rubbing her eyes with her palms.

“How are you?”

“I am not fine.”

“Why?”

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“I am hungry and tired. And where is mama?” She said, her voice heavy with the childish intonation akin to children.

“I’m sorry, Ada. But I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

“I know you want to go home and to get there, we need to get to the top of this mountain.”

“Okay,” she led me on.

“But up there,” I pointed my finger skyward, “up there, we have bad people who want to kill us. Should we go up or should we stay here.”

“Let us go up,” she quickly replied.

“But why?” I asked.

“I do not want to stay here,” she cried. “Or do you want to stay?”

“No, Ada.” I replied.

“Then, if you really want to go home, let us go up.” She was in tears.

That was the biggest lesson of my life. When you want something, I mean when you really want something, damn the consequences, and go for it.

I rested her head on my bosom and shed my own tears.

We had made our decision.

We had chosen to go for what we wanted.

Home.

And not even the possibility of death was going to stop us.

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I put her on my back and we continued our ascent to the top of the mountain. The wind was getting tougher and I struggled harder to maintain my balance on the branches I held on to for anchor. I felt Adaobi cling to me very tightly, her warm body magnetizing with mine and forcing me to push my endurance to the limits and get to the top of the mountains. It was not easy climbing those rocks; what of the fear of darkness and wild animals which constantly haunted me? Still, I kept moving, I persevered.

When we got to the top of the mountain, it was not what we expected. The top was flat, almost like a football field with lush green grass. I put down Adaobi and held her little hands. Then, though slowly, we began to walk to the other end.

Then, we heard a voice. A very familiar voice.

“Stop, please stop!”

I looked around, I saw no one.

“It is a trick,” the voice came up again, “there is no way back except through the Seasons. I know you must have seen the other bodies too, they were tricked. Please go back, my young friends.”

Then, I knew the custodian of such a voice, it was the old man in the shop. Was he in charge of the Mountains of the Naked Faces? We kept on walking, I was shivering in the cold.

“Please do not die.”

“Death does not scare me,” I shouted back and increased my pace.

We were almost at the other end of the mountain, my pulse was beating faster and my lips quivered from the expectation of the inevitable.

My pace increased.

My sister was struggling to keep up.

So I bundled her into my arms.

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And broke into a run.

“Nooooooooooooooooo.” The voice echoed behind us as I got to the other side of the mountain.

What I saw was beyond the horrors I had imagined.

It was wonder.

*

The other side of the mountain opened up a free fall into a pool of water beneath the mountain, and just some few metres beside us was a sign-post that read: JUMP IN TO GO HOME, TURN BACK TO SAVE YOURSELF!

“Home means Heaven, my young friend,” it was the old man’s voice again.

I stopped for some few seconds, and since my mind was already made up to face even death, I looked into Adaobi’s eyes. “Are you ready to go home, sister.”

“Yes brother,” she replied.

Then, my sister in my arms, I jumped into space, down into utter darkness and the unknown consequences of fate.

During our descent, I heard the old man’s voice say, “You truly deserve to get home.”

“How? I’m going to die anyway,” I replied.

“No, my young friend, you are not going to die. You have passed the test.”

I pondered his words for a minute. “So you tricked us to believe there was some sort of danger ahead.”

“No, trickery is too negative. I gave you options.” The old man said.

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“No, I do not think so,” I countered. “You made it seem like we were going to die, that is why my friends went back. That is why they will never attempt to leave that terrible place.”

“Well, is it my fault? I hold them not prisoners. It was their decision to make.” the old man chuckled. “You know, my young friend, such is life.”

“I do not understand.”

“Why did you continue?”

“Because I chose to.”

“Why did they turn back?”

“Because . . .” I saw his point.

“You see, my young friend, that you do not have to hate me. No matter the circumstances, life is a sum total of all your choices.” The old man’s voice faded with these last words of his.

And so it ended, we were already engulfed in the wind that was to take us back home and I lost myself in thoughts. My friends had returned. And I wished they had not. The old man’s last words continued to re-echo in my head: YOU SEE, MY YOUNG FRIEND, NO MATTER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, LIFE IS A SUM TOTAL OF ALL YOUR CHOICES.”

After that experience of my life, I came to fully understand the words of my father: BRAVERY IS A VIRTUE AND THE FEAR OF DEATH OR FAILURE A VICE.

Those words were the weapons that helped me fight the greatest battle of life.

The battle against fear.

The old man had called it *Naked Faces*.

Maybe because it really leaves a man naked against the storms of life. ✚