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Corpse No. 4

(A Short Story)

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With his iron pipe stuffed in-between the lips of his toothless mouth, he walked hopelessly across his courtyard into his old, dusty, muddy, thatched house. He was returning from his nearest neighbour's compound where a young man had just given up the ghost. The young man of about twenty four had surrendered to the immune-killing disease.

Earlier in the morning, another young man who had failed the competitive entrance examination into the National School of Administration had been found dead, having hung himself behind his father's house. Ten minutes later, the corpse of a young girl had been brought in from Yaoundé, the capital city of the nation. Her life had been snatched away from her by cholera, but many fingers were also pointing at the HIV...

When Babe James Ndoawa finally entered his house, he did not realize that nothing had gone down his throat since morning. He walked over and opened three cooking pots adjacent to his rag-ridden bed and discovered nothing to eat in any of them. He did not really expect to see anything in those pots because he had not cooked for the past one week. He just opened the pots for the sake of opening them; he just opened

them like a hunter checking his traps in a cold morning. He then sat himself down on the bed, removed the pipe from his mouth, spat thrice into the hearth, and looked across the smoke-darkened walls of the room to be sure that all the animal skin bags, fibre bags, snail shells, and calabashes containing his professional traditional concoctions were all intact. He took out a five hundred Franc CFA coin from his breast pocket and looked at it fixedly for about a minute. After serious meditations, he couldn't make out any food item that could be bought at 500 Franc CFA. Once more, he began to draw and puff thick, dark curls of smoke from his pipe. After everything, life had to continue!

As he drew and puffed the smoke, he held the money in his left hand without knowing what to do with it. The thought of the three sad deaths of that chilly morning came back to his mind all afresh. The present state of affairs in the country persistently worried him, forcing him to try to compare the past and present life of the country. Behind him laid a glorious past. The good old days of their work in the Santa Coffee and Maize Estates began to unravel themselves vividly before him.

In the early 80s, they were enjoying the eclipsing days of Cameroon's prestigious and hopeful past in the Santa Estates. James Ndoawa was not only an estate worker, but also a renowned *tradi-practitioner*. He also combined all his activities with fun; he could make a mourning widow laugh. Everyone in the estates knew him and wherever he was, all faces were compelled to put on heavy, continuous smiles. He was fond of insulting people, especially young people who misbehaved around him. He would tell them: '*You are a very stupid indomitable fool, my friend.*' When a young man did something seriously amiss, he would say: '*How can you be disobeying your elders in our absence while we are there? Are you mad and sick in the head? Eh, my friend?*'

At the end of every month, his sense of humour usually got heightened. His seventy five thousand Franc CFA salary would make him tell all the stories in his memory, occasionally including even secrets. During one of such *month ends*—as they called the end of a month in the camp—he came to visit his Mbesa friend, Baa Charles who was residing in Camp A. They had a nice time together; they shared whiskey, food and other niceties. In those days, they were living a life which could be described

as being just a little below a luxurious life and more than 100km above the miserable life of *les grandes ambitions*. In those days 50,000 Franc was more valuable than 300,000 Franc CFA today; things were also very cheap and very durable. Oh, those days!

In the midst of the conversation that punctuated their nice time that day, he told Baa Charles the following story. Mr. Awemo, who was also an estate worker, had come to see Docta Ndoawa some days earlier. The former wanted some traditional medication against syphilis, a sexually transmissible disease he had contracted from a woman during intercourse. *'I be di sleep woman and yi give me this sick, Docta,'* said Mr. Awemo. Babe James responded: *'If you di sleep woman and you discover say yi done give you some sick, just pissam back for yi.'*

At this juncture, everybody in Baa Charles' household, including young Manuel—Baa Charles's nephew, burst into irresistible laughter. They laughed and laughed and laughed. In the end, the story teller lost the flow of his story and so nobody ever knew its end, except its author.

By the time their laughter died down they heard some five or six little children playing, singing and dancing on the grass lawn in front of the camp houses. The children were holding each other's hand in the form of a semicircle while singing and dancing:

Sha wound sha leg inside the chair,

Little Mary told her Mom.

If you played you shall saw what I will done to you,

Mary's Mamma told her child.

Mamma yeee, yayato'o.

Mamma yeee, yayato'o.

English yeee, yayato'o.

English yeee, yayato'o.

The children were mocking Mamma Mary, a woman in the camp who was notorious for her bad English. Baa Charles and Babe James held their breath and fought hard to contain any form of laughter. They left for Cattle Gate Market where they hoped to meet other friends of theirs and drink corn beer with them...

Babe James Ndoawa who was sitting on his bed in his old, dusty, muddy, thatched house smiled for the first time since the beginning of that sad morning. The fire in his pipe had long gone out. He did notice this and so kept on drawing and puffing from it to no avail. He did not even notice the loud roaring of his one-week empty stomach. Worst still, the people who were to come from Alimeh to see him for soothsaying had not yet come. That too, he did not notice. The old man only went back unconsciously into his dream world. There was no hope and no food for him. So, the best thing for him was to devour the sweet stories of the promising days in Santa. He continued eating down his memory lane. Even the serious wailing over three corpses in the village could not disturb him from eating this food of life. Hunger, death, misery, despair and...had already disconnected him from the present world for the moment.

Back to Santa. This time around, he remembered Pa Martin, the Awing man, who usually entertained estate workers with his sleeping sickness. Pa Martin used to create a lot of fun during maize harvesting, and even during maize selection—they used to handpick maize in order to separate good grains from bad ones. In times of maize harvesting, he would hold a maize cob, begin to doze off, and will eventually throw himself down like a falling tree during timber exploitation in Edinau. While doing maize selection, Pa Martin would dip his two hands into a hip of corn grains, start sleeping and end up falling facedown into the maize. Then, his co-workers will laugh out their lungs.

One day, Pa Martin climbed into the wagon of a tractor loaded with maize cobs. He was right at the top of the tractor, in the company of other estate workers. Suddenly, he fell asleep while the tractor was in motion, and began to fall. Instantly, the other people began shouting in order to alert the tractor driver. If the driver had not stopped the tractor spontaneously, Martin's soul would have left his body there and then.

He landed on his back as helpless as a mass of lifeless material falling from space. That day! Babe James vividly recollected memories of that day; he remembered how the scene had generated mixed feelings and reactions from those present: laughter and pity, confusion and anxiety.

Babe James Ndoawa remembered some young boys he had met with around Cattle Gate one afternoon during the last week of July. The boys, about seven in number, were very glad as they returned from the Estate Pay Office where they have each received 18,000 Franc CFA as monthly pay for their holiday services rendered in the estates. Amongst them was Manuel, Baa Charles' nephew. They were chatting joyfully about their money. Each and every one of them was making a rough budget of his sweat-earned salary.

They also talked about their elderly brothers and sisters who were in the University of Yaoundé. University students were angels in those days; they were given monthly feeding allowances of 50,000 Franc CFA, and adequately fed by the government. Jobs were already guaranteed for them... The young men whom Babe James met on his way could not therefore resist the urge to go to the university too. They all said in unison that they will go there as soon as they graduate from high school.

Babe James kept on eavesdropping the young people's discussion without their knowledge of his presence. Motivated by the joy of their salaries, some of them decided to imitate some humorous people in the estates in order to entertain themselves. One of the young men chose to imitate Paul Fogham, a very serious clown from Awing village. One morning, Paul had been digging holes for the planting of yams in a small farm he used to cultivate in the camp. Thereafter, Paul came late to the morning general assembly of estate workers.

'Paul, where have you been? Why are you late?' the Estate Manager asked, standing in front of the assembled workers.

Paul adjusted the collar of his shirt and replied: *'Excuse me, Sah. I dugged the ground until my back bented...'*

According to the boy's tale, at this particular moment, the whole camp went into an ecstasy of laughter. Yet, Paul continued his explanations:

'I wanted to planted coco yams so that we should eat tomorrow,' he pressed on.

The boys almost laughed out their lungs.

Another boy assumed the role of the teller and told the group how Paul usually reacted when people made him angry. He said that Paul would say: *'You people can make somebody to be assassinated. I don't want all this. Wona di only humbock me; do this, do that...'*

At this stage, Babe James remembered that he then made himself seen to the boys. He too had been laughing, but very lightly. As he walked past the boys who were now a little afraid of him, in mid anger and mid joy, he said to them: *'You people are stupid indomitable fools. How can it possible that you imitate your fathers like this? Eh, you big heads?'* After having said this, he passed them and went his own way, leaving the boys to assimilate their insults in a fist of laughter. Oh those days! They were days of joy and happiness. Everything was available.

As he went away, he began to realize that truly 'the story outlives the event'. The boys had enabled him to re-live the power of stories and fun. He mentally recollected some funny stories in the Estates many years ago which involved him too. He now thought that if the young boys were also aware of those stories, they would use them too for fun and entertainment. One of the first story involving him and Manuel as central characters ran thus:

It took place on Devil Street—a long, unbending street of about three kilometers separating Cattle Gate and Camp houses. There were so many stories about devils which inhabit that street at night and so it came to be known as Devil Street. At night, almost everybody who passed through that street, children and adults alike, was afraid of one thing or the other.

One night, Manuel had been sent to go and give a bush lamp in one house somewhere around Cattle Gate. He was so much afraid of the

street that he had to blow off the lamp. He preferred darkness as many children often believe that it is safer to hide from danger in darkness than in light. He did not know that Babe James had been drinking beer in a bar in Cattle Gate Market. The drunken Babe was now on his way back. Fear too had overwhelmed him and he was dead silent. In the darkness of the night, Babe and Manuel collided into each other like a lorry and a bus on the Cameroonian *triangle of death*—the highway linking Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam and Yaounde. Without talking, Manuel skipped like a cat and hid himself at the edge of the road. Babe asked thrice: ‘Na who? Na who? Na who?’ Manuel recognized his voice and yet, was afraid to reply him. Having heard no reply, Babe concluded that he had collided with a devil and fled like a horse in a PMUC race. Young Manuel continued his journey, fighting hard to conceal any form of laughter that could make Babe recognize him in turn.

The following morning, Babe James came to tell his friend Baa Charles that he had bumped into a devil at Devil Street the previous night. Manuel listened to his tale while smiling constantly like a young man whose wife has been put to bed for the first time. Little did Babe know that the devil he was talking about was staring him in the face right there. When he came to the end of his story, Baa Charles told him:

‘You collided with a child at night and ran away like another child...’

‘What did you say? What child?’ asked Babe, in total confusion, trying to read his friend’s face to no avail.

‘Was that not Manuel who was going down to give a lamp at Cattle Gate? Drunkenness, really, is not good, Docta,’ retorted Baa Charles.

Babe was quite confused and surprised and asked Manuel whether that was true. Manuel confirmed Baa Charles’ story. And Babe got dumfounded.

This story and many others were still fresh in Docta’s memory. He continued recollecting them in his dreamy journey down memory lane after having left those young boys there.

He vividly remembered the time Dan used to assist him as night watch at the estate warehouse. The two of them operated on a two-shift programme that ran from 7:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight and from 12:00 midnight to 6:30 a.m. The two shifts were called evening shift and late night shift. One day, Dan had gone for the evening shift. He climbed into a tractor in front of the warehouse where he fell asleep, leaving his gun and cutlass beside him as he slept. For more than four hours, Dan's colleague, Babe James, did not hear the bell they used to ring at intervals of one hour when on duty to signal that they were still alive. Babe James then decided to go earlier to work and find out whether Dan was alive or not. When he arrived there, he did not see Dan. He called out several times in vain. Then he decided to climb into the tractor's cabin. There he found Dan dead asleep. He took Dan's gun and cutlass before trying to wake him up. By the time Dan got up, he jumped down from the tractor and disappeared into the black night. Dan did not seem to recognize his colleague's voice that ran after him calling and saying: 'Dan, na me Babe James, your colleague...' Babe then took over duty from his run-away colleague. Early in the morning, Babe waited patiently until there were enough people at the warehouse to whom he recounted Dan's comedy of the previous night.

Babe did not know that he will soon live Dan's fate. One week after Dan's incident, Babe went and got drunk in Awing Market. He came back to work too and fell asleep, leaving his gun lying by his side. That night, the Estate Manager came there to inspect the night watchman and met him sleeping soundly as if he were in his bedroom. The manager removed one foot of the drunk's rain boots, collected his gun and one bag of maize from the warehouse. The following morning, the manager asked Babe:

'Do you know that thieves operated here last night and went away with a bag of maize, Docta?'

Babe didn't answer. In his mind he certainly added: 'And the thieves also went away with my gun and one foot of my rain boots.'

He was so guilt-stricken that he did not find words with which to answer the manager despite the latter's insistence. When the manager finally narrated the events of the previous night to all those present, the

laughter that broke out among them was beyond expression. However, neither Dan in the first case nor Babe James in the second had been sacked from their posts...

It was 3:00 p.m. when the old helpless Babe James Ndoawa sitting on his bed in his house came out of the dream world of the happy old days of Santa. He was still smiling following the last story he had visualized, the one involving himself. He noticed that the fire in his pipe had long gone out. He once more remembered that he had eaten nothing since morning. He recalled that he had been expecting some people from Alimeh. Yes. But, none of these people was there. He thought of the three young corpses in the village pending burial the following morning. In his confused mind, he deployed frantic efforts to compare the Cameroon of the 60s, 70s and 80s on the one hand with that of the New Deal.

He pondered on his present situation in 2010. He had no food to eat, no clothes to wear and nothing to hope for. He remembered the days of a salary of 75,000 Franc CFA in the Santa Estates. His fading mind reminded him that 500 Francs could not buy anything substantial and he could not compromise this with the value of 25 Francs in the days of Northerner. In his mind, the lack of jobs for the youths in the 21st century contrasted sharply with the jobs for children and young people in the estates. He resolved to find an answer to one question which kept on cropping up in his mind: Why did the present government close the Santa Estates, the Wum Coffee Estates, the Ndop Rice Project, etc.?

His wondering memory stopped to reflect more about the young man who had hung himself. The young man had attempted so many competitive entrance exams into professional schools like ENAM, IRIC, EMIA and ENS, always in vain. He was very brilliant in school; he passed in 11 papers at the GCE Ordinary Level and 5 papers at the GCE Advanced Level. So, there was nothing in terms of knowledge that could prevent him from enrolling into any of these schools. But, to his greatest dismay, he was always amongst those who were never born to go there. On several occasions, he had been asked either to bring a small wad of money or to surrender his anus to some big men connected to these schools before he could guarantee a place there. In

frustration and anger, he had taken his own life, just like that. Babe tried to compare victims like this young man to the group of seven boys in his Santa stories with monthly salaries of 18,000 Francs. He thought of the University students with monthly allowances of 50,000 Francs. He remembered the massive recruitments of all university graduates in those days. He shook his head in despair...

The fate of the young man who had surrendered to the immune-killer was not different from that of the one who had committed suicide. The former had been frustrated by the system, things he could neither understand nor explain. His dream of becoming a journalist had been shattered and scattered by the regime like an egg thrown against a cement wall. The young girl who could not win the fight with cholera went to Yaoundé to study English in the University of Yaoundé I, got frustrated by things beyond her control and ended up commercializing her body in Miniferme.

Babe couldn't explain how the capital city of a country would be ravaged by cholera in the third millennium. Neither could he account for the several road accidents that were claiming lives in the country these days. He did not understand why old fellows like him would be abandoned to fend for themselves by their own children who claim to be the government. Could they ever receive old age pensions? May be their children will receive when they grow old in turn, but for now his questions had no positive answers. Where were the *greater ambitions* they had been waiting for since 2004? May be he was the only person who was blind to these achievements.

His stomach roared louder and louder now. He felt a certain unusual pain around his heart and discovered that he could no longer move his legs. His legs had got frozen; his eyes began to turn gradually in their sockets. He knew that hunger and despair could hasten his journey home any moment from now. But the fact that he had lived two distinct eras was enough food for him. If there was no food and hope for him, he was certain that there had been food and hope when they were in Santa. Whether he was going to die or to live, he knew that in 2035, people shall also have so many questions to ask like him. They will

hardly ever have answers to give to the questions, but the country was going to be emerging, whether they liked it or not.

Then, Babe James collapsed into his bed. He had not yet eaten anything. There were still three corpses for them to bury the next day. His heart began to fail him rapidly. The unusual coldness in his legs continued to climb up his entire body...The following morning, the number of corpses to be buried in the village had already risen to four. Babe James had surrendered to death at night.

***Nsah Mala** is the pen name for **Kenneth Toah Nsah**. He is a teacher of English and French, a critic and a writer. He is the author of *Chaining Freedom* (poetry), *Bites of Insanity* (poetry), *Mounting the Stairs of Challenge*, and *Do You Know Mbesa?* He recently turned down a Turkish Government Scholarship for an MA in African Studies and International Relations. Nsah Mala is research assistant to Professor Charles Ngiewih Teke who is at the University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon.