

Viewing At Dombo Lodge

By Yaba Armah

The early arrivals dotted the church pews like black flies in surgical masks.

"They should be wearing black **and** red," said a middle-aged aunty. She stroked the crimson scarf around her neck.

"The family specifically requested black," replied a lady one bench over. She did not know the woman with the red scarf. Had never met her. So she spoke to the wind and hoped it carried.

"Or white. When children die, the colour is white," said another, ignoring the wind whisperer.

"No, no," interjected the crimson-scarfed woman. "Above 18, it should be black and red."

A soft but steady hum billowed into the cavernous chamber.

"Oh it is so sad," said a grey-wigged Madam two pews down. She turned this way and that in search of the source. Someone was crying with perfect pitch.

"It had better be a closed viewing," grumbled her husband.

"Of course!" She pulled down her mask, "It has to be, given the circumstances."

There was a sudden and sharp exhale and the two of them whipped around : the man in defence while the woman buzzed with excitement. Directly behind them, a young woman sat, her face hidden in her lap .

"Oh poor thing. Don't cry," cooed the elderly woman. She reached out to pat the girl's shoulder,"Death is not the end." But her husband caught the wandering limb.

"Six feet apart!" he whispered.

"So I can't console her?"

"Not with your hands!" he replied.

But Kwabea was not crying. She was frantically trying to reduce the volume of her phone. She jabbed incessantly at the mute button as the machine, possessed, insisted on doing the opposite. A week ago, she had said yes to a software update and now the ghost of the previous operating system was haunting her. Sometimes it would open a dozen different apps all at once and other times, like today, it would start to play videos... loudly.

Two brown blobs writhed on the phone screen. One of the blobs groaned. The other gasped. Kwabea whacked the machine against the wooden bench and before it could recover from the shock, she jammed her thumb down on the power button. The phone whirred. She kept her thumb down. She would choke the thing until it literally blacked out. A minute later, breathing raggedly, she let go, her thumb throbbing. It had been a bad idea when Nii first suggested they make a 'special' film and it was a bad idea now.

"That's right sweetheart," said the old lady. "Let it out."

The church organ began to play.

"Let it out."

#

"And that is why Jeesuuusss..." the freelance pastor stretched the Son's name as chimes from the church down the road rolled through the local bus "... is punishing us!" The driver hit the brakes. The trotro hissed.

"Amen!" cried the passengers. The bus sank into a pothole and stopped. The traffic on Atomic started from the Haatso roundabout and would not break until they had squeezed through the artificial bottleneck caused by Transition, the funeral church at the end of the road . It was the perfect route for a mobile pastor.

"But I hear the vaccines have come oh," said a bodiless voice from the back.

"And do you trust them more than God?" demanded the pastor. Naturally, he would have to share a fifth of his collection with the driver and first mate, but that was business.

"They should let the politicians take it first! If they don't die, we will follow!" The trotro rattled with laughter. By the door, a smartly dressed man bounced his knee unable to join in. Church bells. He was going to be late. He motioned at the trotro's conductor-- "Uncle, are we near?" -- and the first mate grinned. A respectable man in white gloves and vest had called him 'uncle'. He was barely seventeen.

"Yes. Do you see that poster?" He pointed through the dust baked windscreen at a mostly obscured billboard. The words 'Gone Too Soon' peaked above the traffic. "The church is right opposite."

"Then I will alight here," said the man. Traffic was crawling. It would be faster to run. The mate threw open the doors and he jumped.

Five minutes later, the man jogged past the billboard and crossed the busy street. Atomic was choked with cars, and motorcycles, beggars and street sellers.

"Yessss, ice wata!"

"Fresh pineapple!"

"Windscreen wipers!" cried the hawkers.

Red dust clung to the heated air.

"Hey you!" shouted the traffic police at a motorbike attempting to ignore the red light. The cyclist stopped. "Mask up!" The cyclist obliged, pulling up an overused surgical mask before driving on.

The respectable man, slipped through the gates of Transition and snaked across the crowded car park.

By the time the church doors slid open, he stood at the head of the coffin. Meanwhile, the rickety trotro had crested the hill and was speeding past the billboard.

"All COVID Protocols will be observed," threatened the poster in Times New Roman. But the words were nothing but a white blur.

#

Kwabea stood as twelve men in white vests, white gloves, and white masks carried in the longest casket. The automatic doors closed behind them. When the rich mahogany box inched past her pew, she turned away. Nii was in there. Her mirrored sunglasses did a fine job of hiding her eyes. But they could not trap the single tear that rolled out. Beneath her mask, it blazed a trail of anguish and betrayal across her carefully painted face.

As the pallbearers approached the pulpit, a voice on a loud speaker rang out.

"Due to COVID protocols, only those with an invitation will be allowed into the church. Everyone else is welcome to follow the service from YouTube or in the courtyard. We have set up tents and screens." And right outside the pneumatic doors, a long line of ticketed guests stood like first class passengers waiting to board.

At the altar, the white gloves placed the head of the coffin on a broad mantle before twisting it at the foot. The rectangular box cracked on a hidden hinge in the middle. The extra long coffin became two medium-sized ones.

"And now we will begin the File Past as we say our final farewells to Nii Akoto Sowah and his beloved fiancé Yaa Akyia Frimpong." The doors hissed open and a tide of black flowed down the aisle. Kobbi waited until the first mourners had reached the steps of the altar, before she slipped out of her empty pew and joined the wave. The line shuffled forward. Photographer bulbs flashed and video cameras blinked red. Every head was bent. Every face masked. This was a sombre affair.

"Dem crack the coffin?" asked the man directly in front of her.

"E be Lamborghini casket," said his friend. Kwabea's jaw tightened. Behind her, a woman whispered viciously into her mobile, "No, I said boil the water before you add the yams!" She cupped her phone at the mouth. "How did you burn water?!" Kwabea scanned the hall for a red scarf. But her mother was lost. Immediately after the file past, they would leave. That was the agreement. Arrive early so the family knew you came and then leave.

"Chale, do you recognize anyone?" asked the man in front.

" Nah, the masks are confusing. I thought I saw Kobbi though."

"Kobbi the guy or Kwabea Kobbi?" And Kwabea instinctively ducked, despite the fact that she was standing behind them.

"Who be Kwabea Kobbi?" Before the man could reply, someone screamed and Kwabea leaned out of the queue. A chesty woman had thrown herself over one of the coffins.

"Is that the mother?"

"No. Maggi is sitting down. I think they hired a professional wailer," said a familiar voice. It was the elderly woman that had tried to console her.

"Stop touching your face!" said her husband.

"But I'm sweating Will! Salt is entering my eye!"

"So blink!" Kwabea leaned back into the line.

On her left, standing by the pew, a man in a brown suit whispered to another in a black cassock.

"It's a bit crowded, isn't it?"

"Government protocol said less than 100. We are 99," said the man in black.

"Yes, but what's the capacity of the church?"

"87" replied the cassock.

They reached the altar where the twin coffins lay. The first casket was all wood. A creased A4 photograph taped on its lid, suggested that a smiling, pink haired woman was resting within. The second coffin was also wood, but where the first had a photograph, it had a small glass window. Nii smiled up at Kwabea from beneath. He looked so peaceful. Like he was dreaming. She touched the glass. For weeks Kwabea had raged between madness and heartbreak. Her boyfriend had died in a car accident with another woman, four hours after leaving her bed. But seeing him lying in state... Death had a way of making forgiveness look reasonable.

"Oh my God, he looks like he was mid orgasm!" squealed a tinny voice and Kwabea had a sudden urge to smash the pane.

#

The night Nii died, Kwabea had begged him to stay.

"Don't go," she said, naked under the sheets.

"Boy's night. You know the rules," he replied.

"Even in the middle of a pandemic? When I'm cold and alone and need protecting?" She let the sheet slip.

"I love you...but yes."

Why had he said those words if he didn't mean them? More importantly why had she believed him? How could she have been so foolish? How could she have been ... so... foolish? Every day, for the last thirty days, Kwabea woke up to this question, went to bed with it and often she scrubbed her palms for the recommended twenty-seconds to the tune of it. On some days, she felt like the court idiot and the entire world was laughing at her. On other days, she knew the truth was worse.

"Did you know the girl?" asked the squealer

"I didn't even know Nii was dating" replied her companion.

No one was laughing at Kwabea because no one knew she existed. So why was she here?

"Because the Sowah's are very close to Uncle Tettey and I promised my brother I would represent him," her mother had said.

"But we're in the middle of a pandemic Ma!"

"We have to at least show our faces. For Aunty Charry's sake."

"She isn't the one who lost a son!"

"Yes, but she's uncle Tettey's very good friend and the Sowah's..." In the end, they had agreed to file past and leave. At least none of her classmates recognised her.

"Kobbi!" shouted her mother. The middle-aged aunty in the red scarf shuffled up to Kwabea. "Try to get a photo of the ..." she pointed wordlessly at the coffins, "But only when

you feel it's appropriate. I'll be taking care of Aunty Charry." Behind her, the squealers gawked. They recognised her.

"Kobbi? Is that you?! It's us! Kiki and Ama!" They pulled down their masks as though it would help confirm their identities.

"Hi!" said Kwabea, her voice climbing several pitches higher than was necessary.

"Oh my God! What are you doing here?" asked Ama.

"You were the last person we expected to see," confirmed Kiki.

"Did you know the girl? Are you related?"

"No," replied Kwabea.

"So why..." Kiki dropped the question. She picked it up again, "It's just, I didn't know you knew Nii."

"Weren't we all in the same classroom for twelve years?"

"Right, of course, of course!" said Ama. "God I hate these masks, you can't recognise anyone! But you have to sit with us," she continued, tugging Kwabea's hand. "We have so much to catch up on!"

"I wish I could," Kwabea lied. "But my mother and I are actually leaving soon."

"I don't think so," said Kiki. She pointed in the direction of a red scarf. Her mother was seated in the Sowah family pew, her arm entwined protectively around Aunty Charry. Ama dragged her towards the last free seats in the back.

"Why at all had she come? And when had the church become so full?" thought Kwabea. They were still sidling into a crowded pew when an usher motioned for them to move in closer.

"What about social distancing?" Kwabea asked. If she shifted any further, her arm would rub up against Ama's.

"Madam," said the man with 'Yaw' scrawled on his name tag, "The President is coming. I beg, make space." She moved. He sat. Then someone behind them sneezed.

#

Ali had not meant to sneeze quite so loudly. He had allergies. The mask didn't help either. Every time he wore one, the loops pulled at his ears and the cup gave him the unnerving feeling that he was about to suffocate. As soon as the 'pandemic police' had allowed him into the church, he had ripped the damn thing off. Then he sneezed.

"Sir! Please! No mask, no entry!" snapped a man in the pew ahead.

"No," thought Ali, "Correction. Usher. His name tag said 'Yaw.'"

"Should you be... sitting?" asked Ali. The usher opened his mouth to respond but from the aisle, another uniformed man tapped him on the shoulder and 'Yaw' scuttled away. Ali relaxed, letting his head fall back. Soon, he would be on duty. But right now...

"Oh my God! Li! Is that you?" squealed a tinny voice. Ali froze. Ama. He wondered if he could get away with pretending he did not recognize her.

"It's us! Ama and Kiki!" she pulled down her mask so no such mistake could be made.

"Oh! Hey!" said Ali, his voice several pitches higher than its resting bass.

"I know right! It's been too long!" They had seen each other four weeks ago. "It's so sad that our reunion is under these circumstances." He'd bought her one drink. Then Ama turned to the woman on her right.

"Kobbi, this is Li. He and I were together" she stressed the word 'together', "...the night Nii left us."

The woman turned, "I am so sorry for your loss" and Ali's heart tripped. She was wearing mirrored sunglasses and a double mask, but her voice had not changed.

"Hi Kwabea, it's nice to see you again." The woman just stared.

"Wait! You know Kobbi?" asked Kiki, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"We've met once."

"We have? I'm so sorry, I'm drawing a blank," said Kwabea

"It was many years ago. At Nii's" he replied.

Kiki spat, "You know where Nii lives?" They both ignored her.

"Well, hello again... Li?"

"It's Ali." Kwabea offered up a wave and Ali waved back. Then his trousers began to buzz.

"Sorry, one sec." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out his phone and scanned the new message on its screen. "Where are you? You're supposed to be sitting with Aunty Maggi!" It was his mother.

"Err," began Ali, returning the phone and getting to his feet. "Duty calls. But it was nice seeing you again," he said to Kwabea. He slipped on his mask and walked towards the first pew to sit on the right-hand side of 'God'.

"I'm sorry I took so long Aunty Maggi," said Ali, sinking down beside a crumpled rag of a woman. How else were you supposed to look when your son passed away before the age of thirty. "I shouldn't have left." Gently, he took her hand in his.

#

Maggi squeezed her nephew's hand as another volley of guilt rippled through her spine. The tremors had worsened as the funeral drew nearer. When her son was dying ten minutes away from their front gate, Margaret had not felt a thing. Now she visibly shivered.

"We call on Ms. Charity Sowah to give us the opening scripture," said Pastor Annor. Her sister-in-law, Charry, walked up to the podium. The service had begun and Margaret took that as permission to close her eyes. Earlier on, after the coffin had been deposited, one of the pallbearers sat beside her and offered his condolences.

"Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you," he said.

"Make this stop!" she'd wanted to scream. "Make this sham of a funeral-wedding go away!" Instead, she smiled, said, "Thank you," and directed him to the back of the church, where the rest of the ushers would be gathering.

When she was alive, her mother loved to recount the story of the day Maggi's arm popped out of its socket.

"I heard you in my sleep. Screaming my name," her mother would say. "So I shot out of bed, jumped in the first trotro and reached the boarding school by midnight." And Maggi remembered the event. One minute she'd been asleep and in pain, and the next she was awake and still in pain. But her mother was there, an hour away from home, telling her it would be okay. Had Nii not screamed for her when his car somersaulted down Boundary Road? Was he too busy screaming for someone else? Or had she simply not heard him?

"All rise," instructed Pastor Annor as Charry walked back to her seat. The entire congregation rose. The opening bars of 'I Surrender All' began to play. But Maggi remained seated. The police report estimated that the accident occurred between the hours of two am and four. She would have been awake. Nii had promised to drive her to her All-Night Service, and she'd been waiting for him since midnight. Had she been watching television when his heart stopped? She remembered laughing. At 8am, when he still hadn't shown up, it did not occur to her to worry. She simply rolled off the couch and into her bed. That was Nii. Sometimes, he made promises with the explicit intention of breaking them. At 2pm, the police rang the door bell.

"And now we call on the family to bring the biographies. It will be given by Mr. Ali Ekow Sowah, cousin to Nii and friend of the dearly departed couple." Maggi felt a weight lift off her, Ali released her hand, and another volley of guilt shot up her spine.

"Charry was so lucky," thought Maggi as the man climbed the steps to the podium. Her sister-in-law had a son that had grown into a successful man: Harvard for undergrad and sec-

ond degree from Yale Law. On the contrary, when the police called Maggi to identify Nii's body, there were still bits of prostitute attached to his groin.

"Nii Akoto Sowah came into this world with the morning sun..." began Ali and shame coalesced behind Maggi's eyes. It was gathering momentum for its final attack. She rubbed at her temple. The problem wasn't that she hadn't heard her son leave the world. The problem was that when Maggi was told, her only thought was relief. She blinked. Fat salty tears dripped silently into her lap. And relief was all that remained.

#

Charry watched her son and her sister-in-law from the left aisle, three pews down. If it had been up to her, she would have chosen to sit with them. But Maggi and her brother Mensah were no longer on speaking terms. And Charry had to remind herself that her last name was Sowah, not Duncan. In any case this was better. With Ali beside Maggi and herself behind Mensah, she had a hand in both pies.

"So I said to Kobbi, pandemic be damned, we simply have to be there for Charry and the family," whispered Comfort. Charry smiled at her. The woman had dared to wear a red scarf when the obituary had insisted on all black.

"God bless you," said Charry.

"Oh please, it's simply what you do," said Comfort and the sentiment caught Charry off-guard.

"Thank you," she said. And this time, she really did mean it. Comfort had always been Tettey's little sister to her. But she was here. She had shown up where Charry's best friend, Korkor, had not.

The hand written apology read, "Due to the current pandemic and our ages, the family has decided to refrain from all social gatherings until we've been fully vaccinated. Love Korkor and Matthew. " Charry ripped the card into several pieces. What the hell did they mean? Korkor and Matthew were both younger than she was! And this was after Charry had personally delivered their invitations. Everyone else had to pick up theirs. Charry patted Comfort's arm and said, "People these days. We are so focused on ourselves, we forget to have a care for others."

"That's what I told Kobby! That's exactly what I said," said Comfort. But Charry had gone back to not listening, her eyes focused on her son.

"The Frimpong family could not be here with us, but they wrote a tribute for their beloved Yaa. I shall read it on their behalf," said Pastor Annor. Charry inhaled deeply then released. Nii's death was unfortunate but it really could not have come at a better time. Margaret Duncan's family owned the country's largest law firm and although Nii was not qualified to sell ice water at cost, he was expected to inherit the firm when Maggi retired. Ali, on the other hand, had been groomed for the role.

"If he can only be the son Maggi needs for today." she thought. If he could pretend to be the man she raised. It had always been the two of them against the world. Ali was her boy, and she'd done everything for him. When he wanted to spend a year in France, she found the money. When he got accepted into Yale, she paid off his Harvard loans. It was unfortunate

that he was the spitting image of his manipulative father, but that was why she'd worked so hard to make sure he was hers: A desperate attempt to ensure the outward appearance didn't dictate his insides.

And Ali had not disappointed. Her son was smart. She'd known that by the time he was five. With each year, he challenged her mind and her heart. They debated about everything: The bible, the role of men and women, human rights and what constituted its abuse. He encouraged her to consider positions she could never admit to her friends. He cheered her on when she beat him with arguments she knew the church would find indefensible. And then one night, his computer screen unlocked, he betrayed her.

"The spitting image of his manipulative father," thought Charry.

"Why is he standing there?" asked Comfort.

Charry looked up, "Who?"

"The usher. By the coffins. He's just standing there."

#

Two rows ahead, Mensah, Nii's father, glared at the misplaced usher, "Somebody needs to move that idiot," he snarled.

"Why is he just standing there?" asked Ato, his best friend.

"I really don't care about the why," said Mensah "He needs to move."

"I'll get it sorted," said Ato. He snapped his fingers at the usher until he caught his attention and then made a gesture that could only be interpreted as, "LEAVE!"

Above it all, Pastor Annor's voice boomed, "Yaa was the kind of sister that would do anything for her family. And yet she never allowed her penchant for hard work to interfere with the business of play." Mensah glared at the lost usher as he scurried away. This was a very important day. His throat tightened. The President was coming.

Across the aisle Margaret, his ex-wife, sat like a discarded black rubber bag stuffed into the corner of the pew. This was her fault. If the boy had been staying with him, if she had not kicked him out... He unclenched his jaw. It was better to focus on what could be gained from the tragedy than on the tragedy itself. The national elections were over and Mensah had done his part. They had won. The victory was messy but they had won. The party would reward him. They had to. His son was dead.

"I'll make sure they do," Ato promised. Mensah checked his watch. The President was late. He chanced another glance at Maggi. Whenever he was nervous, looking at her helped. His anxiety always seemed to cower when confronted by the bulwark that was her self-confidence. Even now, broken as she was, Margaret was still stronger than him. His tension began to dissipate.

Ali, his nephew, sat beside Maggi and Mensah saw his sister's work written all over the placement. Charry wanted Ali to inherit the law firm. Five years ago when Maggi kicked him out of the house and the opposition was in power, Mensah might have cared. But a lot had changed since 2016. For one thing, his party had won and--

"The President is here," whispered Ato, the church doors wheezed open and the President of the Republic of Ghana, surrounded by body guards, marched down the aisle. The congregation stood without prompt as Pastor Annor tried and failed to introduce a man everyone

knew. The President circled the caskets and ignoring Maggi's side of the pew, headed directly towards him. Mensah bowed. The President nodded. Then he was gone, leaving the church through a side exit.

For the first time in a month, Mensah tasted tears behind his eyes. No one could say what his boy would have amounted to, had he lived. But before the age of thirty, Nii had President's circling him. Mensah patted himself on the back. He'd done something right. He was a good father.

"Ladies and gentlemen, His Excellency President Nana Akuffo-Addo," said Pastor Annor rather belatedly.

#

Two hours later, Kwabea stood outside the church building feeling utterly abandoned. The funeral was over and her car was gone.

"Left early. Dropping Aunty Charry. Stay safe and see you at home," read the text from her mother. The woman had left her at a funeral during a pandemic and she had the audacity to say 'stay safe'. Kobbi whipped out her hand sanitizer and dumped a glob of the clear gel in her palm. In the last year, it had become a sort of anxiety tic, like cracking knuckles or biting nails. She rubbed her palms together furiously. It would be fine. She would call an Uber and it would all be fine.

"Kwabea!" said a deep voice. She jumped. It was Ali.

"The one who remembers me...Nii's cousin. Why is my brain so slow," she thought. In her head, she pictured a glob of gel clogging up a set of interlocking wheels.

"Hey," she said as he sauntered towards her, "Nice to see you again." He ignored her platitudes and asked. "Are you heading to the burial?"

"I don't qualify," she replied. The echoes of Pastor Annor's final announcement hung in the air between them "Due to COVID protocols, only close family members are invited to the burial."

"What about you?" she asked. She'd seen him sitting by Nii's mother, "Shouldn't you be heading there?"

"No my duties in that department are done. Aunty Maggi has gone home," Kwabea nodded with understanding. In Ghana, the mother of the deceased usually went to the burial site the day after the coffin was deposited. Something about not seeing your child returned to dust. Ali cleared his throat. She nodded again. Then just when she'd gathered the courage to say, "Well, goodbye," he asked, "But you're coming to the Viewing right?"

"What viewing?" asked Kwabea. Hadn't they spent two hours with Nii? What else was there to view?

"It's like a reception, but for close friends and family, saying goodbye in a less formal setting." He quickly added, "Kiki and Ama will be there." Kwabea laughed, "Then I definitely don't qualify for that either. According to those two, Nii barely knew my name."

"Don't be silly," said Ali. "I remember you. You qualify." Two words. Two words and that was all it took for Kwabea's dam to break. One minute she was fine and the next she was sobbing in the arms of a stranger, when protocol demanded they not even shake hands. They

stood there like that, Kobbi crying wordlessly against Ali's chest, and Ali absorbing the violent shudders of her silent tears. It felt like eternity. It was only thirty seconds.

"Hey, listen, where are you parked?" Ali eventually asked, rubbing her shoulders.

Kwabea pulled back. She took off her mirrored sunglasses and dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

"My mother took the car and left."

"Wow" said Ali. He chuckled. Kwabea looked down at her feet. The inside of her mask was coated with snot. She juggled between disgust at the mess underneath and gratitude that she had a mask to hide said mess.

#

"Okay, let's go to the viewing in my car and I will make sure you get home safely," said Ali. Kwabea searched his face. That was the look he remembered.

"Or you could offer to drop me home instead of kidnapping me and pretending it's a kindness."

Ali cringed as she began rummaging in her bag. That was exactly what he had done.

"Don't worry, I'll order an Uber," she said, pulling out her phone.

"No, no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have--" he was bungling it. "Please," desperation licked the word, "The truth is if I wasn't solely responsible for organizing this send-off, I would drop everything to drive you home. Please come, and once everyone is settled, I will drop you

home myself... You would honestly be doing me a favour." She bit her lip, mentally weighing her options.

Finally, she said, "Okay."

"Okay?" asked Ali. He hadn't expected that. He'd hoped for it, but he hadn't expected it.

"I can either order an Uber or I can go with you. In both scenarios, there is a strange man, dropping me home." explained Kwabea.

Ali grinned, " Great! Um, wait right here and I'll bring the car around." He jogged towards the parking lot, turning back every few steps to make sure she was still there. He hadn't been this giddy since he was ten years old.

In five minutes, Ali had organized a bus full of the funeral ushers to meet him at La Palm, wheedled his Jeep out of the parking lot traffic jam and even picked up a stray.

"Did you miss the usher bus?" Ali asked the man.

"I wasn't hired to--" But Ali wasn't listening.

"I'll pay you 500 extra and drive you there myself. We need all hands on deck." The man jumped into the back seat. When Ali pulled up to the curb where Kwabea was waiting, he opened the door for her. She slid into the front passenger seat, with a surprised "Thank you."

The next ten minutes of their ride was fairly talkative, only they were not talking to each other.

"Yes, just ask the receptionist for Dombo Lodge," repeated Ali, call after phone call. On the other side of the gearbox, Kwabea was also repeating herself. "You left me Ma! You left me stranded!"

"But who forced you to go to a party?" retorted her mother from the other end of the line.

"You did Ma! When you left me!" And in the back-seat, the usher sat so silently, they both forgot he was there. When the last guest had been directed to "La Palm Hotel not Labadi!" and Kwabea's mother had come as close to remorse as she was physically capable, "It wasn't my fault!" Ali asked Kwabea the question that had been ping-ponging off the walls in his skull ever since she'd turned around in the church pew.

"So you really don't remember me?"

"I was just thinking the same thing!" Kwabea confessed. "You said we met at Nii's?"

Ali flashed his right indicator as he exited the Haatso roundabout.

"Yeah it was his communion party."

"Ah," said Kwabea. Understanding dawned. They'd all gotten their first communion at the age of eleven. "That was a long time ago." The jeep turned onto the main road and Ali switched to third gear.

"It was you against the rest of the party, arguing about homosexuality." Kwabea laughed. She still didn't remember but it sounded like her.

"Nii kept shouting, 'But the bible says!' and you came in with a list of all the other ridiculous things the bible says," said Ali.

"Oh God, I did, didn't I?"

"At one point, you grabbed his Kebab, held it up and declared, 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is pork! Unclean meat! Nii, you are going to hell!'" Kwabea roared with laughter.

"I remember that! He was so mad! But where were you?"

"I was standing with my mum and Aunty Maggi. I was ten. Not cool enough to hang with the eleven-year olds."

"And you remember that?" A cool breeze, wafted into the Jeep, carrying with it the scent of fish and salt, chocolate and sewage. They were on the beach road, and she couldn't even remember the route they'd taken.

"Who wouldn't?" said Ali. All three of them had watched eleven year old Kwabea hold court and when she rested her case Aunty Maggi had clapped. "That's the day I decided I had to be a lawyer."

"And are you... a lawyer?"

"Yes." He slowed down, indicated left and pulled into the La Palm Beach Resort. "So thank you for that." There was a genuine warmth to his voice and for a while Kwabea had the impression that he wanted to say more. When nothing followed, she said, "You are welcome," A wide grin was plastered on her face, "But I'm pretty sure most of that was all you."

#

The Viewing was in full swing by the time they walked up to Dombo Lodge. Except for the funeral ushers and pallbearers that carried trays of champagne flutes, mini quiches and

squares of tiramisu, no one else looked like they'd come from a funeral. Many of the guests had changed from their black attires into summer pastels and those that hadn't, were talking and laughing entirely too jovially to be considered 'in mourning'.

"Send-off eh?" teased Kwabea. This was a party, masquerading as a party.

"Sir, where do you want me ?" asked the stray usher. Ali turned around in surprise. He had forgotten about the man. Suddenly, he was self-conscious. What exactly had he said during the car ride? Ali pointed in the general direction of a white door, "Just head into the kitchen and the head waiter will tell you what to do." The usher left, following Ali's finger and when he'd gone through the door, Ali turned to Kwabea.

"I wasn't completely honest with you before." She smiled up at him.

"Oh, so I'm not responsible for your glittering law career?" Ali laughed, "That was definitely all you. But also... I'm gay. And I remember you because that was the first time someone had explained to me that it was okay." A flurry of guests walked in. New arrivals to a Late party. "In fact, I just came out to my mother. Well, I say came out, but really, I left my computer screen open with a message to her because I was too afraid of telling her face to face, and she didn't take it so well. So seeing you today—"

"Li and Kobbi!" squealed a tinny voice. "Oh my God! It's us! Kiki and Ama!" But Kwabea ignored the two women as she reached out and hugged Ali. She whispered in his ear, "Was it only me or did you also forget the usher was in the car?"

#

The white door did not lead into a kitchen. Instead, it spilled open into a generous living room in which very important men in beach shorts drank, gossiped and chewed kebabs. The usher froze, unsure whether to leave or pretend like he was part of the wall.

"Ato! You and I both know that the new voter's ID was completely unnecessary! Not in the middle of a pandemic!" said one of the men

"Unnecessary for whom?" demanded the man he'd just called Ato.

"For the nation!"

"Please! It won us the presidency and last I checked the party and all its supporters are part of that nation!"

"My point is--" began the man.

"My point is!" interrupted Ato, " Mensah came through, he deserves to be rewarded!"

"We can't give him post oh. Not with IMANI on our backs, insisting that the whole venture cost a hundred and fifty million dollars." A skinny man with a pot-belly, choked on his kebab stick, "Did it?"

"No!" shouted Ato, "It was closer to two hundred." The room guffawed so loudly, a grey-bearded gentlemen on the couch slipped out a fart and no one noticed.

"The point is," said Ato once the laughter died down, "Without Mensah's IDs, without his brilliant--"

"Hm!" someone sniffed.

"No it was! It was brilliant! Without his brilliant idea to redraw the regions, we would never have won the Volta!"

"We didn't win the Volta, half of them didn't vote" said his opponent.

"Same difference!" yelled the farter. The room broke into gales of laughter and the usher turned for the door.

"Hey you!" He froze. "Yes you!" barked one of the men, "Come here." The usher turned around. It was the one they called Ato. The man's eyes raked over him, pausing only on his name tag, "'Yaw'... can we get another plate of kebabs and refill the ice chest with more Club Beer?" It was a command, laced as a request.

"Yes sir," said Yaw.

"And add diet coke!" chimed the skinny man with the pot-belly.

"Kojo, drink the beer," said Ato to the pot-belly.

"No! No! No! My doctor said I have to watch my sugar." The room chuckled and Yaw headed for the door.

Outside the room, music pulsated off the walls. Yaw had just closed the door when a man in an apron bumped into him. Before he could note his name tag, Yaw pointed at the door and said, "Room One wants a fresh plate of kebabs, a refill of Club and six cans of diet coke."

"Yes sir!" said the aproned man before moving on. Then Yaw unclipped his name badge and slipped it into his trouser pocket. It would be easier to move in this crowd, if people weren't constantly giving him drink orders.

#

Yaw Frimpong did not know why he said yes to Ali in the car park. He grabbed a flute of champagne from a floating tray and sipped as he walked.

"Uncle Will!" squealed a tinny voice, "We heard the vaccines are in!" Yaw stopped. He recognized the pitch. She was the one they called Ama. He shuffled closer towards two short women and an elderly gentleman.

"Yes, yes, yes" said the gentleman. His mask dangled from one ear while a glass of champagne tilted dangerously between his fingers. "Roll-out will begin on the second of March with front-liners and those over sixty ," he said, smacking his lips.

"That's very impressive!" squealed the women

"Oh yes, Oh yes, We've done solid work," said the gentleman, expanding under the praise. "We even have, a, uh, a, uh" he snapped his fingers, " Info graph! It shows the journey of the roll-out," and his hands moved in an arch as though he were pulling back clouds to reveal the rainbow path to vaccination, hidden beneath.

"So what about us young ones?" asked the other woman. Yaw thought her name was Kiki.

"Oh well--" but before Uncle Will could continue, Ama chimed in.

"Because we have to travel to the States in June for a wedding and I'm terrified of flying without a shot!"

"Well--"

"Me too!" squealed Kiki "The thought of sitting in a flying tin, unprotected makes me cringe!"

"Well girls, girls, girls " said uncle Will determined to get a word in. "Listen, I'm not supposed to tell you this but, although we have a roll-out plan, official policy is that anyone who shows up for a vaccine will not be turned away." The girls stopped.

"Really?" asked Ama.

"Really!" said Uncle Will. "If you show up at Medifem on the second, I can't turn you away."

"I'll be first in line!" squealed Ama.

"We open at 9,"

"Then I'll be there by 8!"

"That is incredible!" said Kiki.

"Yes! Oh yes!" said Uncle Will "They're estimating that many Ghanaians will not turn up due to fear so rather than have the vials go to waste, give it to whomever wants one." Yaw threw back the rest his drink and moved on. He did not know why he'd agreed to a job he was never hired to do but so far it had been absolutely worth it.

#

When Yaw received the news about his sister's death, he'd just been released from the hospital. He and his grandfather had been admitted two weeks earlier with symptoms of COVID-19 and the old man had died within forty-eight hours. The death certificate said

Malaria. When the hospital refused to release the body, he called Yaa and a police officer answered the phone.

"The Sowah's have offered to take care of everything... given the circumstances," said the inspector and Yaw had replied, "Okay." He didn't know what 'circumstances' the officer was referring to, but with two dead bodies and no money to bury either, he wasn't about to argue.

"Listen son," said the man on the phone "My advice is stay low. Rich people like to feel guilty. Call to find out when and where the funeral will take place and let them do the rest." Then he gave Yaw a phone number.

Yaw dialled the number after thanking the Inspector and a Pastor Annor picked up.

"I will be officiating the funeral for the dearly departed couple."

"Where they a couple?" asked Yaw

"For our purposes, yes," replied the Pastor. Yaw did not argue.

"So what would you need from me?" he asked

"A picture, a few words about her life and a tribute," said Pastor Annor, "You can send it by WhatsApp" and Yaw agreed.

Then he said, "I do have two small requests ..." The Pastor remained silent. " I would like to help carry my sister's coffin and given the severity of the accident, I would like to tape a picture of her on the casket."

"If you print it, you can tape it," said Pastor Annor before ending the call.

A month later, with a pair of borrowed gloves and his grandfather's vest, Yaw and eleven others carried his sister and another up the altar steps of Transition. After placing the casket on the mantle, he offered his condolences to the mother of the boy. She smiled warmly and dismissed him, "They're waiting for you at the back."

It was only after a man in uniform scribbled his name on a badge and wrote down his phone number -- "Payment will be by Mobile Money Transfer"--that Yaw realized he'd been mistaken for the hired help. His phone pinged. The message said, "You have received one thousand Ghana cedis from the funeral of Nii and Yaa." Yaw swore. He'd never received that much money in lump sum before, and he hadn't even done anything.

#

Yaw had shuffled into the centre of Dombo Lodge when he spotted the woman from the car. She stood at the foot of the stairs and next to her was Ali. For a second, he considered hiding, afraid they would see him. Then he remembered the car ride. The two of them had been oblivious to his presence in the back-seat. They wouldn't notice him now, not when she was shouting, and he was beaming. What was her name? Akwabea? Kwaba? Kobbi! There was a look of both indignation and excitement etched into her face. She looked very different from the sad woman he'd squeezed next to in the pew.

"Are you kidding me? The Ghanaian government has failed its people! It has absolutely failed!" Kobbi shouted.

A man in sunglasses at the top of the stairs shouted back, "That is such ignorant bull! Ask any international organization and they'll tell you that Ghana's initial response to the virus

was fantastic! At Kotoka airport, every new arrival was tested, and quarantined for a period of two weeks before--"

"That was in the beginning! Before the elections! What about now?" asked Kobbi.

"Now we have 600,000 vaccines--"

"For a population of 30million?"

"That's what we were given!" said the sunglasses, his arms outstretched like Oliver Twist. "Don't forget, we are a developing country! Beggars can't be choosers!" The crowd snickered.

"Says the man in two hundred dollar glasses," Ali chuckled

"Please! What do my sunglasses have to do with anything?" He took them off and inspected them as though searching for their relevance to the current conversation.

"It shows that we aren't a country of beggars. When we want to, we can afford nice things," Kobbi replied.

"Er, I hate to break it to you sweetheart, but I am not representative of the whole Ghana or even the Ghanaian government."

"Aren't you the minister's son?" The man went quiet. Kobbi continued, "My point is, we got 600,000 vaccines for free. What stopped us from purchasing more?"

"Do you know the cost a vaccine?" shouted a coward in the crowd.

"Do you?" retorted Kobbi. When no one answered, she continued, "Pfizer is fifteen dollars a dose, Moderna nineteen something and AstraZeneca--"

"So thirty dollars per person for thirty million people, that's getting to a billion! Ghana doesn't have a billion dollars, " said the man on the stairs.

"Ghana doesn't have a billion anything," said the coward in the crowd. Kobbi waited until the laughter subsided.

"And AstraZeneca is four dollars per dose." The hall went quiet. "Two doses per person, let's call it ten." The crowd began to count their fingers.

"We are thirty million--" she said.

"Three hundred million dollars is still a lot!"

"But not all thirty million would qualify for the vaccine" said Kobbi.

"We maybe have an adult population of fifteen million," said Ali.

"So it would have cost us roughly one hundred and fifty million dollars to vaccinate a majority of the nation. Instead, we are fighting over six hundred thousand shots because... its free." The man on the stairs sneered at her.

"And what? You think Ghana has one hundred and fifty million dollars lying free in its coffers?" The crowd tittered.

"You're the Finance Minister's son. You tell me. How much did those completely unnecessary voter IDs cost?" Someone whistled. Another whispered, "IMANI said a hundred and

fifty million oh." But Yaw, standing in the centre of the room, knew the truth. It was closer to two hundred.

#

It was 6am, the streets were empty and the rickety trotro was already on its third trip, moving people from the Haatso roundabout to Medifem, the clinic after Atomic Junction.

"Jeesuuusss wants you take this vaccine!" cried out the mobile pastor, "Jeeessuuusss wants to save you! And today I have my good friend Yaw here to explain why the vaccine is holy water!" Yaw Frimpong got up and smiled at the travelling congregation.

"God is good all at the time!" he called.

"All the time, God is good!" they responded. Then Yaw Frimpong told his passengers everything he'd learned from the Viewing at Dombo Lodge.

By 8am, when Kiki and Ama arrived at the clinic for their COVID vaccines, the queue was one hundred and fifty Ghanaians long.