

A GAME CALLED CHASKELE

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At the office, he held a cigar between two fingers which he sucked like a patient on an oxygen cylinder. He did not realise how often he did that – more than seven within the space of the minute I had been there. He rubbed his face with his other arm as he loosened his tie and removed his suit. His shirt was soaked-wet. He folded the arms of his shirt to reveal the scar on his left arm. He sucked the cigar again. Only a piece of it remained. He took it from his mouth and brought it a little away from his body and looked at it closely. He mumbled something under his breath about manufacturers cheating people recently and took one long suck. When he puffed the smoke, it formed little rings in the air that filled the room.

It slid through my nose mask and stung my nostrils. I turned my head away and forced a smile. He gave me a weak smile and pressed the tip of his cigar against the glass ashtray that sat on his table to quench it when he realised that I was watching. Then he pointed the incompletely extinguished cigar butt at me as if he was going to say something. Another bout of odour pierced my nose. My throat burned. I kept my eyes on him and swallowed the saliva that had formed in my mouth.

A call came through.

“Sorry, work.” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat.

I smiled.

It was his secretary. Her soft voice was faint through the telephone handle he held close to his ears. She seemed nice on the phone with him. If it had not been my fourth time at the office already, I could have bet anyone who would be willing, a lifetime of servitude with my miserable life, that it was a different person who had chased me away on my first three attempts to see the Minister at his office. This morning, when I had entered her office, she had greeted me with a smile and given me a hero's welcome like I was returning from the World War III. She had chauffeured me herself into his office this time like I was his saviour.

I took one good look at the man whom I had been friends with since our primary school days and the scar on his arm. I could swear on my life that no one in that office of the Ministry of Health would believe me if I told them it was I who had given their Minister that mark – that he and I played together when we were children. I could see the thrashed can in his arms and the old wooden *banku* ta in mine as he threw it and I smashed it with all my might.

Chaskele.

I caught myself smiling.

For he, I, and the other boys at the village, that game was such fun until that day when he got hit by the can that I had smashed and got injured. That would be the last time we would play it. He was just a skinny little boy whose father had brought him to the village to live with his grandmother for a while. I myself could not believe how much of a transformation he had been through since then and even after only eight years when he had resurfaced and first sought my help with the boys for his campaign. I stared at that scar on his arm as I watched him talk on the phone. He rubbed his face again to clean the sweat that was slithering down his shirt.

I wished that things would have been different and that it had not taken me to have told him of the people's plot to oust him that year.

They had planned to take to the streets and burn tyres against his candidature for a Member of Parliament and any future ministerial appointment he may get. In communities like ours, plagued with perennial poverty, going to school and securing an office job, and the luxury of good healthcare were dreams we knew would never become a reality.

Our mirage.

That is why we would hang on to any opportunity that had the potential to change our fortunes. It is not that the youth are not hardworking enough or do not desire to see success in their lives. It is just that in life, some things are meant for certain groups of people. That is how society has made it. Or people in society, I should say. This is why when he came running to us, the people readily accepted him. “With someone whom they knew, someone who had seen their struggles, things were going to be different,” so they thought. But he turned out to be another fairy tale – appearing a few months to the election and disappearing afterwards.

He was still on the phone.

“Chief of where?”

“Please tell him I am in an important meeting,” he said.

I heard her turn him away on the phone.

Hmm... important meeting. I smiled again.

He did not notice that he was still rubbing his palms on his face.

“And wait... cancel all my appointments for the day.” He dropped the handle on the phone before him.

He reached for his cabinet and brought out another cigar which he lit with the speed of lightning. He began the ritual all over again.

My heart wept for him. If only he had allowed me in earlier. If only he had not instructed his secretary to turn me away or the delegation from our chief or had not refused to answer our calls, things could have been a little different.

“A priest, huh?” he finally spoke to me. Clearing his throat again.
“Ah. Yes.”

“A fetish priest. Very powerful,” I answered.

He walked over to the door and locked it making sure that no one was eavesdropping. I saw his belly for the first time since I entered his office. It was almost dropping.

“Is it someone I know?” He walked over to where I sat and sat at the edge of his table. He kept his voice low.

“No. This one is new. He came after you had left,” I answered.

“Good. Good,” he nodded.

He kept nodding even when he had finished talking. His mind seemed far away.

“And you say he can help me...” He did not complete it this time, expecting me to know what he was talking about.

I nodded. “If only you do everything he would say.”

He nodded and his mind drifted far away again.

“But there is a slight problem.”

He turned to look at me, lowering the spectacles he wore to his nose as if to watch me well.

“Mmmh?”

“This one is expensive,” I said.

“Expensive, huh?” he said, scratching his head and slipping off again.

I did not answer that.

“But it works, uh?”

“Oh yes, very powerful man. Some of your friends come to him.”

He looked at me again, nodding severally.

“OK,” he said, “I will see about it.”

I left his office and headed back to the village. In the car, my mind took me back on a ride down the path of our lives, when he had come to us and the change he had brought us to. When you put the miseries of your miserable life aside to stand in the sun to vote for someone, you know you deserve so much from them than no

jobs, poor roads, poor network and empty promises. When life is whipping you so hard, the last thing you need is for anyone to make it any harder for you. It is not that we expect these people to turn the fortunes of our lives around in seconds or wave magic wands to make things happen. It is just the promises they make and how they play with our minds as they enrich themselves and their families while we wallow in poverty. They tell us that our vote is our power when in actual fact our vote is their power – the power that empowers them to enrich themselves at our expense. From where I come: the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. And it seems someone up there somewhere is working so hard to make sure things stay like that. Even the luxury of basic healthcare is not something we could boast of. Over here, we are *born poor, live poor and die poor*. When your mother has to access healthcare several miles away; mostly on foot and if she is lucky, on an *aboboyaa* (a tricycle meant for transporting items from the farm) before you are born, at your first breathe on earth, you know you are in for a long haul.

This is our song. A song we've sung for far too long. And then at every election year, you would find people wallowing through the mud to solicit for your votes and make another round of empty promises. Promises. Visitations. Aids. That would be the order of the day. After disappearing for four years, they would reappear for re-election and be visible in almost every corner. When we were growing up, I remember how my mother and the other adults would wear the shirts of these men, singing and dancing with brass bands and sometimes music on moving cars and asking people to vote for their favourite people. Sometimes, out of curiosity, we would follow them and dance to the music as well. You would hear the adults engage in conversations about the looks of one person and

how the other one was too short and something about voting for the more handsome one because... well... he was handsome. Sometimes, you would also hear them strongly argue about which party has performed worse than the other and which one is more corrupt as if performing worse and corruption was anything to be proud of. And then after the election is won these politicians would vanish again. That was it. A cycle.

Later, my people were not falling for the trick anymore. And then there was a change of plan. A year to the election, the politicians would send a bulldozer to *cut* the road or start erecting poles as if they were going to connect electricity. But nothing came out of it. That is why that year we thought of our Government Official who had been in power for eight years. Eight years of power and there was nothing to show for it except for the nice cars he cruised and that pot belly he had acquired.

As the light of dawn seeped into my room, a call came through. It was him. I rubbed my bleary eyes and stepped out of bed. The sky was a pearly glow. By the next hour, we were already on our way combing through the bushes. He parked his car away at the outskirts of the town. I made sure of that. He wore a long black dress that covered every part of his body. He wore dark glasses that made it difficult to recognise him in the dark. He held in his hands a medium-sized *efewuara soa me* bag which I suspected contained cash. I walked before him with my cutlass in my hand, making sure that no one could follow our trail. He barely spoke but his voice shook whenever he did. I took him through the forest, through the hideous parts. The trees looked like humans

when the reflections from the moon touched them; the owls and yips hooted. I could see him trembling even in the dark as we waded through the forest, sometimes through spider webs, where insects had been trapped. He kept rubbing his palms on his face. Poor soul.

He plugged his earpiece to listen to music, maybe to keep his mind from the forest. We were headed to the deepest part where I had some of the boys waiting for us.

A wise man once said, *“People change for two main reasons: either their minds have been opened or their hearts have been broken.”* It was time – a time for us to have our last game with him.

No. We were not taking to the streets anymore. We were tired of that. It was just a simple game – *Chaskele*.

The boys and I had not had much time to put all the things together but now that we had our sticks ready and the trash can in the basket. I hoped that we could pull this off, for the last time.

In the middle of the forest, where we were headed was the shrine. Around us were red bands, carefully tied to the trunks that had these *abaduaba* and the heads of dead animals hanging on them. In the middle of the shrine sat the priest, constantly waving his *bodua* like a flag. His attendants poured powder on him and chanted appellations. Drums rolled, incantations were made, cowries were thrown. As the blood of the sheep gushed, ‘Honourable’ held on to me, shaking like a two-year-old boy. His heart was almost dropping. “The money,” the priest said after he was done with his rituals.

He pushed a calabash to ‘Honourable’.

“Kneel and lick the blood of the sheep on the floor,” the priest said. He obliged. His mouth was smeared with mud and blood when he lifted his head.

“Now, put a stack in it and say whatever you want.” He looked at me and I nodded.

“I have brought you this money from my Ministry that is meant for

COVID-19 relief items but I do not mind. Because I know you will help me to win the election and when I win, I can easily replace it in days,” he began his empty promises again. His voice trembled. He looked at me again and I nodded once more.

“Please make me win this election,” he continued, looking intently at the money in the calabash he was speaking on.

“There is a set of appointments that would be coming up very soon after the elections. I would like the President to appoint me into a higher office,” he said.

The priest took the calabash from him, poured some powder on it and made some incantations. He looked intently into a pot of water before him and said, “Go now and eat. Victory awaits you. I see you sitting on the seat of the Speaker. You will be the next Speaker of Parliament. Now, the rest of the money.”

He handed the *efiewura soa me* bag to the priest’s attendant. The attendant opened it to reveal stacks of cash. It was packed like cigarettes more than any amount of money I had seen my entire miserable life.

We left.

On the eve of the election, after the votes had been counted, a radio announcement: “The Member of Parliament for Sumina Constituency, who also doubled as the Minister for Health Minister, Honourable Blankson Adorye has lost his seat to a farmer.”

Game over.