

MYRA TRUDEA OKUMU

FREDDY

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The Caoine of the Banshee

The ground was rotting.

It emitted a smell so foul the dead stirred in their slumber.

Sticks and bones stuck out from the uneven, and muddied ground, and the acne of horror stretched on for miles.

Bodies were buried so deep into the ground it would take months, maybe years, to find all the pieces and make them fit.

Freddy had ripped through with a fury that left nothing unturned and untouched; flattening even the oldest trees, uprooting lives with a violence Tala couldn't wrap his head around. He waited, hoping for any sound, any sign of life but there was only silence, so loud and still it felt like the world itself was holding its breath.

In the aftermath of Freddy, not even the faintest call of a bird could be heard.

It was the horrifying beginning of an eternal silence.

Every hut, fence and wall had been peeled away by Freddy's fury, and a tomb remained on what used to be a village full of life, laughter and stories. Talandira's hands shook as he wrapped them around his battered and muddied body, trying and failing

to keep himself from shattering into the debris. His small frame was caked in dry mud and his clothes were tattered. The only thing that held him together were prayers.

The cyclone had raged for days. It had swallowed lives whole and spit out a wasteland that was unrecognizable and obscene.

Tala had survived, and somehow, that felt worse.

He vaguely remembered the warnings.

A storm was coming, the chief had said, but we had seen storms before and lived through many.

Each time the village was hit, they had rebuilt and this would be no different. The people had faith in the land and in their strength.

The soft rain had been innocent, Tala could still feel the water droplets run down his cheeks.

“Get out of the rain!” his mother, Salima, had shouted, hurriedly removing clothes from the line. The neighbors hauled buckets to catch the rainwater and children playfully splashed around in the puddles that formed.

“The rain is just beginning.”

“What does that mean, mama?” he had asked, but she shook her head. Her smile was thinning.

The harrowing winds came with the night.

An chilling whistle that slithered its way through the trees, and made the hairs at the nape of the villagers neck stand. Tala had laid on his mat, surrounded by the darkness of the room, and listened as the wind picked up speed and groaned loudly through the walls.

He could make out his father’s figure as he peered through the hut.

His tall frame sat cross-legged, staring at the ceiling and listening to the brewing storm.

“Does the wind sound different, baba?”

Baba nodded slowly, and pressed his index finger to his lips, silently asking him to lower his voice and not wake up his mother.

“It does,” he had murmured. “It has a weight on it.”

The next morning, everyone worked hurriedly to secure their homes, tying down thatched roofs and closing wooden shutters. Their faith was failing them; they could sense, feel and taste doom in the very air.

“It’s just wind,” Musa said. He tugged at the ropes around his family hut. “Our fathers have seen worse.”

The winds moaned as the day descended into the darkness of night. It was a mockery of their resolve.

Threads of air circled through the village. They hissed through leaves and tall grass. The trees groaned as they bent and branches cracked.

The rain poured in from the sky in a continuous stream. It did not have a beginning and the end would only be witnessed by Tala. The air was so thick with water even the children that usually rushed to play in the waterfalls, and laughed as they splashed around in the water were quiet and clung to their mothers.

Each flash and crackle of lightning eroded the villagers’ courage.

They had never seen such glaring flashes of light. It felt like an omen.

Tala watched the onset from the threshold of his home. Fear like he had never known ripped through his body and gripped his father’s hand tightly.

Roofs lifted slightly as the wind combed through; trees bent and broke as the wind picked up speed and strength, and clawed

the village.

Thunder rumbled; so loud, so fierce, the ground vibrated through the earth and beneath their feet.

The caoine of the banshee tore through the village, a terrible, guttural roar that drowned out every sound.

Roofs ripped away and spun through the air.

Screams rang through the air but were quickly drowned out by the laughter of the rain. Debris hit the huts in loud bangs, and rock flew aimlessly into walls, and trees.

“The storm...it’s not like the others. It’s watching us.”

Salima had always been superstitious and in that moment of turmoil, her old coded beliefs surfaced. Goosebumps rose on her skin as she stared into the fury of the storm.

Tala’s father, Eli, placed a hand on his wife’s shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. “It is only a storm.”

She did not believe him, Tala thought as he watched his mother move closer to her husband like he could somehow make it all go away. He was a strong man and he made his family feel safe with his presence alone. He was his son’s hero and his family’s stronghold. A head taller than everyone in the village, biceps the size of a toddler’s head and skin so rich and dark, it almost shimmered.

But Tala’s mother was right.

It was not just any storm.

It was certain death, the end of many bloodlines and a full stop to many untold stories and unsung songs.

The village was surrounded and its inhabitants trapped.

Tala heard the sound of the earth ripping and outside the window of their house, they witnessed in stunned horror as Musa’s family hut was lifted clean off the ground.

The old hut was thrown like a rugged doll and rose almost

gracefully at first.

Salima gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. Her breathe caught in her body and stayed there. Tala could hardly breathe. His heart was beating from his stomach as he watched the hut hang in the air, and was seemingly held by invisible strings.

The beams of the house and thatch came apart as they watched on, and scattered in the wind and rain.

What was left of the house flipped and hurtled end over before it came crashing down, landing in a twisted and broken heap a few feet from their house.

Goosebumps rose on their skin and tremors shook through Tala and his mother. Fear trickled down their bodies, seeping into every pore and sinking into their bones.

The crush of the hut sent mud into the air, and the roof caved in with a sickening crunch.

Gone. They were all gone.

There was no way they could have survived, neither by prayer nor miracle.

Musa's house and his family had been reduced to rubble.

Tala's stomach lurched and twisted. He had no idea how long he stood there and stared at the mess. He did not feel his father's hand grip his shoulder as he tried to pull him down as if that would save any of them from the storm.

All the encouraging words were lost.

FREDDY

The rain poured from the sky in sheets.

It hammered against the ground and turned the earth to thick, sludgy mud that oozed into their hut. It filled the room with the smell of wet earth and leaves.

They crouched at the opposite end of the door, and watched as the muddied water swept their belongings outside. The wind had broken down their door and ripped away their makeshift windows.

What time was it? Tala silently wondered from behind his father. They had been inside their dilapidating hut so long, they had lost all sense of time. They had not eaten for so long. None of them had slept a wink and their bodies strained under the weight of sleepless hours.

The rain blurred everything into shadowy shapes and broken forms. The water and winds consumed their world.

Tala's whole world held onto one another against Freddy, waiting on death and praying that they could survive the weapon fashioned against their lives.

The winds would pause every once in a while, just for a

heartbeat it would calm down. It took a second to catch its breath and gather its strength before it floated through the village, shrieking with so much rage, hearts faltered.

Faint screams sounded through the air every now and then, but they were quickly swallowed up. They were cries of desperation, full of soul wrenching fear.

Every sound vanished into the storm and the ones that still had breath listened with helplessness.

Would no one come to their aid? Had the world forgotten about them?

The ground under Tala's family shook and shuddered, bracing to give way beneath them.

When their own roof buckled and caved, Tala's father pulled him and his mother out.

He led them into the storm.

The rain stung like needles as it landed on their skin and seeped through their clothes. The violent gusts of air felt like they would peel their skin away.

Tala's father kept moving, half-crawling, half-running as their home crumbled behind them. He grabbed Tala firmly to his side and held his wife's hand tightly, knowing it was the difference between life and them being swept away.

They could hear water roaring in the distance, but through the assault of rain and water, they could not make out where the monstrosity of gathered water was flowing from or towards.

They only prayed it was not in their general direction.

His father yelled something to him, but the words were swallowed by the storm, and all Tala could do was follow. Their feet sank into the mud. plunging into the mushy earth and struggling to surface. The earth begged to swallow them whole.

They reached their neighbors' home.

And it was gone.

A gaping sinkhole had taken the place of the house. The ground had collapsed and filled with black water. From where they stood, it looked like an abyss but with each strike of water, waves rippled on the surface.

Where was Chisomo and her newborn baby, Josephine? Where was her ailing mother and noisy toddler?

Gone is where they were and Tala's stomach tightened into a hard knot.

Death had surrounded them and snared at everyone they knew. Tala could feel the cold, indifferent presence of death itself as it swept through the village without a hint of mercy.

He felt his father squeeze his hand, his grip cold. They didn't have time to mourn; the storm was about to swallow them too.

"Here!" his father shouted, guiding them toward an empty house at the far edge of the village, a shelter they hadn't dared look at before. The walls were intact, the door left ajar, swinging slightly with the gusts. They ducked inside. They were breathless and soaked, and huddled against the walls. They tried and failed not to think of who had lived here, or where they had gone, or if they'd had any chance to escape.

It was a small, and cramped place, but it did not matter in the slightest. They crouched close together in the corner with their mud-streaked hands. Tala's father's hand stayed firmly on his shoulder, grounding him, and keeping him steady as the walls creaked and moaned under the pressure. Tala tried to keep count of the seconds, to find some sense of time, but his thoughts were jumbled.

The howling wind and thunder seemed to go on forever.

Their lives were no more precious than the splinters of

bamboo or the fragments of thatch being ripped from the earth.

The world was breaking outside, but deep in the pit of the valley, they could barely understand how close the destruction was.

Tala and his parents clung to each other. when suddenly a strange sound rose over the roar of the storm. It was a low rumbling roar that grew louder and louder, until the ground beneath them shuddered. The faint sound of drums beat in the devastation outside and the whistling of the wind picked up speed. Their breathing came in shallow gasps

“*Napolo*,” Tala’s mother shakingly whispered before bursting into tears.

She couldn’t take it anymore.

They were going to die. All of them.

Napolo was the big snake with many heads that rested in the mountain. It was made of mud and ravaged everything in its path. She was punishment to the people for forgetting their beliefs. *Napolo* carried with her fire, mud and rocks and everyone she took with her was never seen again.

“What is *Napolo*?” Tala asked. He had to scream slightly to be heard. His father shook his head and looked away.

Napolo was their retribution.

The hill above them had given way, and a massive river of mud and debris was surging down. It roared as it barreled toward the village. The water slithered down, and shook the earth on which it passed. *Napolo* was a devastating spirit, whose story was passed on from generation to generation; from the people of Zomba to the people of Ulumba and Ntonya mountains to the Mulanje district.

There was no shrine for *Napolo*; nobody prayed for her salvation or her materialization.

The walls around them shivered and crumbled with a sickening crack, and they felt the floor tilt slightly as the foundation that held the house began to give way.

Tala screamed as his left foot lodged into muddied ground.

Tala's father pulled them to their feet, and his voice shook for the first time. "We have to go," he urged. He guided them toward the back of the house.

Everywhere they turned, the earth seemed to be shifting. The mud had come alive and swallowed in gulps everything in its path. Craters and pits quickly formed inside the house and took the place of solid ground.

They stumbled back out into the storm, and watched in horror as *Napolo* and her many heads swallowed entire sections of the village.

"*Akundiwotcha!*" someone screamed in the distance and then silence.

Fear gripped Salima and her body felt heavier than it had her whole life. The rain pelted her skin and the wind threatened to push her into the water. They did not know whether their next step would land on solid ground or be their demise.

They were surrounded by fallen trees, dissolved houses and the unforgiving maw of *Napolo*.

A few standing structure remained in the village and people's lives floated past them; clothes, basins and mats.

Salima felt as though they were living through a nightmare. Everywhere they turned, there was destruction, and holes in the ground where they could have sworn there had been solid earth just moments before.

Salima broke free of her husband's grip and began to run.

Blindly paddling her bare feet through darkness and screaming at the horror. She was driven by fear and she did not know

which way was up. Fear had possessed every vein, every nerve.

Tala could barely make out his father's face through the thick sheets of rain and darkness. His eyes were wide with desperation, and his grip on Tala unyielding.

"Salima!" Tala's father yelled but she was too far gone. Her silhouette had disappeared into the darkness. Her frantic screams had been swallowed by the chaos. "Salima, please!"

No answer came to his desperate cries. His wife was gone in the blink of an eye. Grief swallowed him and choked him as he carried Tala into his arms. The rain continued to beat down on them as if punishing them for being alive.

"Salima!" Tala's father screamed until his voice gave out. He stepped carefully on the trembling ground, praying that it would hold just long enough for him to find the love of his life.

Eight years of beautiful marriage were gone. Like the rest of the village.

Houses had fallen, and souls had been ripped from the bodies in which they were housed and very little stood. Their history had been erased from the face of the earth.

"Wait here," Tala's father said, setting him down on what was left of the maize mill.

It was far enough from the running water and the path of *Napolo*.

"I have to find your mother." He crouched down and caressed his son's face. Tears were streaming down his face and his heart was full of emotions he could not begin to comprehend.

He had known grief, but nothing like this.

His woman was out there, scared and alone, and he had to go find her and bring her to her son. She was his everything

and more. He could not imagine a life without the light that brightened his days.

“Baba, I am scared,” Tala cried He was choking on his own tears as he spoke. He was scared and scarred. He wanted to close his eyes and find that it was all a horrid, god-forsaken nightmare. That the storm had not drowned his whole life. That the *Kachere* tree still stood at the centre of the village. Musa and him would walk to school, hand in hand.

“It will be okay, Tala., His father lied. “Be brave, I will be right back.

With that he took off into the darkness.

Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes into hours, but Eli never came back for his son. Hunger plagued Tala but he was too scared to move. In case his parents came back for him and he was not around. The house crumbled around him and soon, he was backed up into a corner.

Water rushed around him. It roared and beckoned him into the brown waters. It kissed his feet and retreated, repeatedly soaking his body.

The sounds as the rain poured and the winds howled felt almost normal.

“Baba!” Tala screamed, but his voice cracked from thirst.

“Ma!” he cried.

Exhaustion overtook his body and Tala’s body slumped onto the muddied floor.

Buried in Silence

When he woke up, he was greeted by the sickly light of a cloudy morning, and the storm was finally quiet.

What time was it? What day was it?

He rose unsteadily and saw his village was buried under the thick, and oppressive layers of mud. Only a few jagged beams and scattered belongings stuck out from the earth; a basin here and a mat there.

The smell hit him first: a thick, sour scent that stuck to his throat and made it difficult for him to breathe. It was the smell of decay, of bodies rotting beneath the mud as the earth pressed down on them.

Entombed in the muddied earth were the people he had grown up with, including his parents that had not come back for him.

Memories swallowed by a nightmare.

Bile rose in this throat and burned him from the inside at the thought that he'd been spared or cursed to bear this silence. He wanted to cry out, to scream against the emptiness, but even his voice felt swallowed up in the silence that surrounded him.

FREDDY

He was alone, the last witness to a life that had been erased.

4

I lied.

Dear Reader,

I lied.

Cyclone Freddy was far worse than I have described. The horror I've portrayed is but a fraction of the truth. In many villages, there were no survivors. Entire communities were swallowed by mudslides, buried in sinkholes, or carried away by raging floods. Those villages remain, even now, as unofficial mass graves, unmarked and unremembered by all but the storm's survivors.

The bodies rotted in the ground for days. The heavy and foul stench of decay clung to the air, and saturated the earth. The land itself mourned, and exhaled the grief of countless lost lives. Eventually, even the smell faded, leaving a haunting silence in its place.

Many tried to piece together what remained. But where could they even begin?

There were too many lives.

Each effort to rebuild seemed futile in the face of the sheer scale of destruction. Freddy had left nothing behind but

heartbreak and mud.

Endless lives were lost, and so many more were uprooted.
Entire families vanished.

Many came back to their homes and found their families
swept away.

I write this not to horrify you, but to remember. To honor
the villages that did not survive, the people who were lost and
buried under the storm.

Their stories deserve to be told.

Their lives deserve to be remembered.

I write this to remind you of the devastation Freddy left
behind, to ensure the storm's victims are not forgotten. Freddy
was a force that left scars on the earth and on all who bore
witness to its fury.

These tears, my friend, are wrung

From a heart shattered

By the apocalypse




That was Napolo.

-Steve Chimombo

About the Author

Myra Trudea Okumu is a Malawian author, newspaper columnist and blogger. She is a microbiologist by profession but spends her days writing and reading with her dogs, Coh, Olly and Ghost. “After the clouds, the sun” is Myra’s second book after her anthology, “Uncharted territory”. She is also the owner of ‘Inkspire’, a literary magazine in Malawi.

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