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weird is other people

NOWHEREVILLE: WEIRD IS OTHER PEOPLE

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# weird is other people

tales of the urban weird  
edited by Scott Gable & C. Dombrowski



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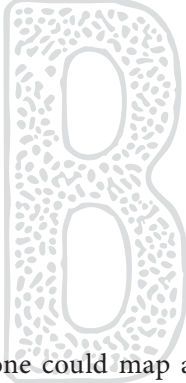
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# Introduction: Toward a Weirder Tomorrow



SCOTT GABLE



BETWEEN THE *IMPOSSIBLE* OF FANTASY AND the *Inevitable* (or at least *Very Plausible Given Our Current Understanding*) of science fiction exists the *Maybe* state of the weird. Simply put, weird fiction is the unknown. It lies between the real and the unreal, bringing our fear and ecstasy to life as we're confronted by what we don't understand.

If one could map all the stories ever told and yet to be told on a vast theoretical, multidimensional architecture, how might that look? Imagine each dimension, ticked off by different measures and serving as axes for plotting stories on this vast landscape. For the purposes at hand, we're only interested in the portion relating to speculative fiction, so let's spin the dials and shift our gaze through the appropriate porthole—

There! That particular spectacular and shifting lobe contains all of speculative fiction.

## *Charting the Weird*

If one were to attempt to map **speculation**, at one end might lie **fantasy** while at the other **science fiction**. And caught in between is the **weird**.

- ❖ **Fantasy** represents the *impossible*, at its core. These are the stories presenting pasts that have already happened (but differently) and the

stories relying on elements that the consensus has deemed impossible (see also magic and dragons, such that while perhaps there is indeed more to understand about Universe, there is nothing substantive pointing toward it ever actually happening). These are the tales, whether heroic or dark, that don't try to replicate our reality in every detail but that create worlds beholden only to their own internal logic, either from whole cloth or by reweaving the existing fabric of history (whether baldly or subtly).

- ❖ **Science fiction**, on the other end, represents that which is *inevitable*, that which is *perfectly likely*, and even that which *might very well happen to us as a species at some point in the future maybe*—at least based on how we understand ourselves and Universe here and now. At its core, it is an extrapolation of our current reality, building social and technological advances or curtailments as befits the time of the writing. It is all of our possible futures based on our current understanding.
- ❖ The **weird** (now that we've set a foundation) falls in between those prior two giants' extremes. It is more proximal to our current state of being. It is our *unknown*, us trying to give name and shape to the darkness and to the ecstatic—to that which we don't understand. It is often labeled as “supernatural” or “weird science,” depending on which side of the scale it tips, toward fantasy or toward science fiction.

Compared to fantasy, it is anchored more firmly in the *known*: rather than rewriting all that exists, it instead merely pokes holes and pulls strings, tearing down or building up, layering upon the *known*. (Supernatural horror and folk horror and fabulism are some weird subgenres that often tilt toward fantasy.) Compared to science fiction, weird fiction is less certain. It relies on established principles, on a “science” and “nature,” that while perhaps imagined they have no accepted model. (Slipstream and “soft” science fiction are often the more science fiction-leaning of weird tales, exploring themes of death, dreams, psychic abilities (even time travel and artificial life can be weird adjacent)—the very nature of reality—and similar realms where science's final word quite possibly hasn't yet been said.)

Now, back to our massive map! It is comprised of axes, each a continuum of some quality, each further expandable into its own multidimensional spectrum as needed. But the three such measures of a story that might be most helpful now are **proximity** (or time), **realism**, and **emotion**.

- ❖ **Proximity** is simply the past-present-future of the story, and this measures how close the reader is to the narrative in spacetime. Does it take place in a projected future or a derived past, or is it relaxing into a present-day approximation?
- ❖ **Realism** is how far the fiction deviates from consensus reality. (The zero point here is our consensus world—this is realistic fiction and not speculative at all—and the opposite extreme is absurdism, or bizarro fiction.) So to what extent does a story speculate? Is there only a touch of the unreal painted on an otherwise “healthy” reality (as in magical realism), does it enter the surreal, or maybe sail on clear to the absurd?
- ❖ Proximity and realism generally represent the setting of a story, the time and place and culture. But you still need to add in the plot and tension and mood, so there’s a third axis: **emotion**. This now makes such modes as horror, comedy, slice of life, and romance possible (all of which only intersect with speculative fiction some of the time, though they are free to intermingle with all speculative genres).

To counter the idea that weird fiction and horror are interchangeable, key takeaways here are that 1) weird is not solely horror (just as horror is not solely weird) and 2) horror need not be considered separate from science fiction and fantasy; science fiction horror and fantasy horror and weird horror are all perfectly valid.

I suggest here that all of speculative fiction could be measured on the space defined by **proximity**, **realism**, and **emotion**. We could certainly refine this by unpacking the axes further and even adding more dimensions, but at the core, this feels a good approximation of **speculation**. And it is independent of style (existing anywhere from literary to pop).

Weird fiction encompasses the stories that take place in the realms between science fiction and fantasy, between non-speculative fiction and bizarro—between its borders with other genres. And these frontiers are evershifting. The weird sits in an “uncanny valley,” or rather an “uncanny sea,” of speculation, snug between *impossibility* and *certitude*, *realism* and *absurdity*.

### *In Weird Times*

Perhaps more than other genres, weird fiction is very much a function of the era in which it is written. A given fantasy’s probably never going to stop being fantasy. Science fiction, of course, changes as we shuffle inexorably forward

in spacetime, relying on our current *knowns*, occasionally becoming dated subgenres of itself (such as steampunk and cyberpunk) and celebrated on their own merits (and perhaps becoming more fantastical in their continuation). Weird fiction, however, relies on our current *unknown*, on the fears and desires of a people, probing the accumulated questions and assumptions of an age. It is a speculative lens of its time.

By way of illustration, I'll invoke religion and folklore. Religion exalts the divine, building on the visions of its believers. It is real to the faithful, even if untouchable to scientific inquiry and unassailable to otherwise-believers. Likewise, folklore guards against the tribulations of an everyday life under constant scrutiny of ever-present supernatural malice and whimsy, circumstance proving causality in the face of need. My point for bringing this up is that these tales tend to slip into fantasy from our modern vantage: Gilgamesh no longer holds the same deific significance, the fair folk no longer curdle our milk in real time. But myth and folklore were all too real to people at one time, or rather all too weird.

- ❖ We revel in the ecstasy! Religion never dies, so there will always be a weird space for the ecstatic. Tales of the Greek pantheon may never again reach outside the bounds of fantasy, but there are more than enough religious experiences, whether modern or fictional, to feed the emerging weird.
- ❖ We brave the unknown! Eventually our fears get turned over, mulch for a new generation, but the bogeymen just change, again and again. They always change: demons and devils and faeries, witches and werewolves, vampires and ghosts, aliens and their gods. There's always a new monster of the era.

What we now view as fantastical may have once been just the other side of the darkness, just the other side of the known world. Those earliest tales would have fit right at home with our current estimation of the weird. The mythic and the fey are to the weird as steampunk is to science fiction—they are the “old weird,” the weird of a different era. As time moves on, our weird drifts with it. The words may not change, but how they reflect our relationship with the world certainly does.

But then we also, since those early days, started questioning reality itself. The previous examples illustrated the more supernatural side of the weird, but in later narrative, there emerged a more scientific bent. If not earlier, then at least

with *Frankenstein*, we saw scientific inquiry rise to high weirdness. And though we've come far, there's still much we don't know about Universe, so there's more than enough fanciful conjecture and uncertain outcomes to fuel all the weird science of our dreams and keep us always twirling into the future weird.

All this is to say that weird fiction is very much reliant on our perspective. What was once weird is no longer. What is now weird may not always be. And who can tell what tomorrow's weird holds. But let's find out!

### *Nowhereville: Weird Is Other People*

And that brings us to the book at hand. *Nowhereville: Weird Is Other People* contains nineteen original tales of urban weird fiction. These are the tales of the high weirdness inherent in clusters of people, in people interacting with others.

We cut right to the quick with the targeted, citywide body horror of Nuzo Onoh's "Walk Softly, Softly." From there, we zoom the microscope in on some very personal apocalypses with Maura McHugh's "Y" and P. Djèli Clark's "Night Doctors," dripping with agency and even popping back to 1937 America in the latter. Following that is a string of quiet personal horror and slice-of-life tales, focusing more on interpersonal weirdness, the weirdness that we impose upon ourselves and others, before we bounce into some tales of future weird landscapes. The last third of the book tends to intermix the personal with the sprawl of urban life until we send you back to your home reality with the final course of R.B. Lemberg's "Luriberg-That-Was" and Cody Goodfellow's "The Sister City"—both spiraling the reader through potent fabulist-surreal landscapes.

So that you can think on what you've done.

Many of these tales are dark, but as I've suggested above, it's not my intent to provide you with just a horror fiction anthology. There are horror stories in here, absolutely, of varying degrees. This is, though, an exercise in weird fiction, intentionally drawing from the various shores of weirdness, from the Uncanny Sea, to explore all that might entail.

(The stories herein were first published to our Patreon website, *Eyedolon*, over the previous couple of years. Going forward, similar such anthologies will be collected in the same year as the stories' online publication.)

Stay weird. Read books. Repeat.

September 18, 2019

(published in part to *Eyedolon* in 2018)

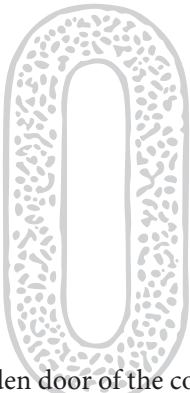
Scott Gable





# Walk Softly, Softly

NUZO ONOH

BI'S SLEEP WAS INTERRUPTED BY A BURNING URGE TO piss. The pressure in his groin was so great that he feared an embarrassing accident before he made it to the toilet across the corridor. His hand reached up to the light switch as he rushed toward the shut door of the toilet. The dusty bulb overhead flooded the dark corridor with a sickly yellow glow as he pushed open the rickety wooden door of the communal bathroom.

Earlier that evening, he'd gone overboard at the popular establishment Karma, Madam Joy's secret brothel, bingeing on the icy palm wine offered by the fat woman till his stomach could hold no more. The result had been the usual violence that accompanied the poison in his bloodstream. By the time he was done with his prostitute, her own mother would have struggled to recognize the battered features of the screaming girl. Madam Joy had thrown him out, threatening to ban him for good from her house of pleasure.

Obi had stumbled out of the bar, cursing, punching, and spitting at some of the waitresses within his vicinity. Their angry screams followed him out to the street where he'd boarded the three-wheeled keke napep to his bedsit in the decrepit building located in the notorious slum Nike, a drug-infested area of the city, boasting robbers, kidnappers, murderers, and witch doctors as residents. Karma was just a mile away. On a good night, he would walk his way home, just

as any other twenty-something, healthy, young man would. But on binge nights, he rode the bright yellow keke napep.

As he got out of the keke napep, he'd felt a sudden chill descend over him. It attacked him in waves, layering his skin with goose pimples and bringing an inexplicable dread to his heart. He shook his head vigorously, shouting out a loud greeting to some familiar figures, loitering neighbours hugging the railings of the balcony above his second-floor place. Their mocking laughter followed him into the building, together with someone else who walked silently behind him. Obi didn't know who it was that had followed him into the building, didn't really care to know either. Save for the person's massive black shadow that waved before him, obliterating his own like a total eclipse, he wouldn't even have known that someone else followed him up the stairs. The shadow seemed to grow, swell, spread across the uneven concrete like a solid black river.

That was when an uncomfortable sensation pierced through the drunken fog clouding his mind. The chill was back, this time with a vengeance. Obi felt the chattering of his teeth as his body trembled with a mixture of cold and terror. It was a terror that hit him without warning, a fear that came from the sudden awareness that he heard no footsteps behind him, felt no human presence with him despite the evidence of the dense shadow. His heart began to beat, pound with the thunder of a hundred war drums. He stopped midway up the staircase and turned.

He was alone. No one followed him. He swerved and stared at the solid black shadow that flowed upward like a blanket of tar, hugging the uneven angles of the stairs. He raised his arms and waved them frantically. The black shadow remained still, masking his own into invisibility. Obi began to run, race up the stairs in an attempt to overtake his dark companion. The black shadow raced with him, toyed with him, flowing first to his right and then to his left, before rushing ahead of him along the long narrow corridor that led to his bedsit. Obi saw it flow underneath the gap of his locked door as he fumbled for the room key in his pocket. His mind, cleared of its alcohol poison, pondered over the phenomenon. *Was he hallucinating from his binge? Had the bitch at the brothel spiked his drinks with some ganja to knock him out before robbing him? Was it his own shadow after all rather than some terrifying entity his muddled mind had conjured?* There was only one way to find out.

Obi turned the key and opened his door. He reached for the switch and flooded the room with light. He heaved a silent prayer of thanks. Power supply

was so erratic in the city that it was a miracle to have light on any given night. His red-hued eyes did a rapid scan of the room, seeking the black shadow. *Was it hiding under the thin blanket on his single mattress? Or perhaps lurking underneath the metal bed?* His frenzied search revealed nothing except his own familiar shadow, following his manic movements across the untidy bedsit littered with unwashed laundry and dirty plates. The chill freezing his veins vanished, together with the black shadow. In fact, Obi felt beads of sweat across his forehead as he slumped on his bed, overtaken by a sudden bone-weakening weariness.

Sleep had been an instantaneous and deep affair, filled with distorted dreams of sinister, cackling women and a faceless, fearsome entity that bore an eerie resemblance to fat Madam Joy of the dubious house of pleasure, Karma. Obi had tossed and lashed out in his sleep till the need to piss dragged him out of his sweat-drenched mattress. He didn't bother shutting the toilet door behind him as he reached inside his shorts, groaning softly in desperation.

His hand grasped nothing.

Obi froze. A sudden chill seeped into his marrow, chasing away the last of his sleep fuzz. His fingers began a frantic search, trailing the flat skin of his lower abdomen, his inner thighs, the terrifying emptiness of his groin, reaching almost to his rectum.

Nothing; no familiar turgid length and soft eggs nestled between his thighs. His palm was bereft of the expected warm hardness it had cupped from the day he abandoned his pee-deluged baby terry napkins for hand-directed aims. His heart skipped a beat, leapt into his throat, almost choking him. The movements of his hand underneath his shorts became more agitated, manic, almost violent. A low moan escaped his lips, a groan of agony. The pressure in his groin was now a scorching pain, drenching his face with hot sweat. *He had to piss; he must piss immediately or die.* He pushed down his shorts with frantic hands, kicking them off violently as if they were infested with squirming cockroaches. He leaned forward, bending low from the waist. Then his eyes widened, his mouth forming a silent O. His heart started to race, pound, tighten in a killing grip that stole his breath.

Obi began to scream.

By the time his housemates rushed to his aid, Obi had passed out on the cold, cement floor of the toilet. They found him unconscious, claspings the empty space between his thighs that had once housed the glory of his manhood. And

by the time the sun began its journey to the west that fateful day, four more men would experience the inexplicable, sudden disappearance of their prized rods, and the entire city would be thrown into dark terror.

## II

Sanusi bristled as he listened to the raspy voice of his boss, the state commissioner of police. His brow furrowed as he strove to contain his irritation. From his seated position across the commissioner's desk, he watched his boss light up yet another cigarette, leaving two half-smoked sticks smouldering in his ashtray.

"I expect you to round up this thing by the end of the week," the commissioner said, taking a puff of his cigarette before stubbing out the end in the ash-filled bowl on his massive desk. With reluctant fascination, Sanusi watched the commissioner pick up one of the half-smoked cigarettes and stick it back in his mouth, his actions distracted yet executed with expert precision. In the background, the humming air conditioner dispersed the smoke generously around the room. Numerous files littered the desk, awaiting the commissioner's attention. He pushed a thick file across to Sanusi, who eyed it with ill-concealed distaste.

"So far, there's been seven reports of men losing their genitals, all within a four-week span," the commissioner continued. "One of the victims claims his penis disappeared after shaking hands with a woman he suspects to be a witch. Another states he was offered cocaine-laced palm wine and a prostitute at some street brothel operated by a fat woman who later came into his dreams and stole his penis. However, two other victims of the 'vanished cocks' epidemic claim to have miraculously recovered their penises after intervention by their church pastors." The commissioner's fingers curved an inverted comma as he barked out a harsh laugh that ended with a hacking cough. He took a deep gulp from his Heineken can before drawing another long puff of his cigarette. "So that leaves us so far with five remaining victims, supposedly with vanished penises. Everything's in that file," the commissioner shook his head, amusement and exasperation dancing in his dark pupils. "These Igbo people! They fill their cities with churches and universities and yet allow themselves to be ruled by crazy superstitions."

"So why are we even bothering to investigate these stupid claims, sir?" Sanusi

could no longer contain his anger. “Why can’t we send out a local officer who speaks their language to investigate this stupidity?” The cultured tone of his voice was icily polite. Underneath the immaculate cut of his grey pinstripe suit, his wiry body quivered with rage. *He would be a laughingstock amongst his colleagues when they discovered he’d been assigned the case of the fucking vanished penises. He hadn’t spent three years at a top British university to come back to this farce.*

“Sanusi, you know you’re my boy. We come from the same tribe,” the commissioner smiled at his favourite detective. “Normally, I would send a police constable who speaks the Igbo language to investigate a ridiculous complaint like this one. But this time, we need someone who isn’t biased. I need someone who has a different culture from these people and is professional enough to deliver an accurate and objective report. I need someone with some brains. In fact, my brother, I need you. You’re the only detective here with a British degree, and like me, you’re not from the Igbo tribe. It seems one of the victims is somehow related to the governor, and he has requested my assistance as a personal favour. We both know there’s nothing to these claims. You should be done with it in a few days. Write up your report over the weekend and bring it to me first thing on Monday. You’ll be travelling with me to the UK for a seminar next week. So ensure you apply for travel leave without delay so that your allowances can be paid in British pound sterling.”

Sanusi’s heart leapt. He could not suppress the wide smile that wreathed the sharp features of his face. *He would face a million teases from his colleagues for the chance to get out of the country to his beloved England with its great pubs and available white women.* Sanusi still recalled his student years at Coventry University with nostalgia. But for visa restrictions, he would have stayed on for much longer after his degree. Nonetheless, he was grateful for the doors his British degree had opened for him in Nigeria. He knew he would never have earned a quarter of his present salary in England. But then, he wouldn’t have been expected to deal with ridiculous claims like this one he was now lumbered with, sweetheart deal and all. Still, as the commissioner said, there was no rationality to the claims, and he should wrap things up nicely within a couple of days and start packing for his trip to the UK. Sanusi smiled. *Who knows, he might even squeeze in a nice train journey back to Coventry, maybe look up that white whore, Sue-something or maybe Chloe-whateverherlastnameis, and enjoy a few days in those passionate arms. There would be no need to tell*

*his white women that he was now a married man with two children; no need to tell his wife that she couldn't do for his libido what those white whores could do. Women! Always the cause of every trouble in a man's life . . .*

### III

The street was unlike any other street Sanusi had visited at nighttime in the city. Due to the incessant power cuts, most streets were cloaked in darkness and silence, save for Sunday nights when Pentecostal churches blazed with generator-powered brilliance and Jehovah-powered shrills of the faithful. But this particular street was different, alive with a seedy brightness that reeked of corruption and desperation. Sanusi walked from shop to kiosk, restaurant to pharmacy, inspecting the displayed wares, the greedy sellers and hungry buyers. He'd heard that the Nike area of the city came alive at night, and it wasn't an exaggeration. The deafening roars of whizzing automobiles with their blasting horns competed with the loud music from a nearby record store and louder singing from a church. Generators spewed smoke and noise as they powered the street into dazzling brilliance. Hawkers shrieked out their wares—oranges, peanuts, batteries, handkerchiefs, bottled water, fried fish. Beggars harassed passersby, though Sanusi noticed that the male beggars avoided the women, no doubt afraid of losing their genitals. *Idiots!*

Sanusi fought to suppress his mounting irritation. The whole thing was a waste of his time as he'd known it would be from when he spoke to his last victim, some chap going by the name of Obi. Stupid man claimed that he'd been given spiked palm wine by a fat woman who ran a brothel and that he'd woken up to discover his penis had vanished. Yet when Sanusi asked to carry out a private inspection, Obi claimed his penis had miraculously returned to him the next day, just like all the other four victims he had interviewed . . . *fucking idiots*. By his own admission, the wretched man was so sozzled, it was a miracle he'd managed to find his drunken way back to his doorstep, much less locate his bloody penis. Sanusi was still to interview two of the seven complainants, one of them the governor's brother-in-law, the blasted man responsible for dragging him into this mess. Their families claimed the men had disappeared, vanished without trace into the big metropolis, Enugu, the Coal City. Sanusi thought the fools were too embarrassed to face him after coming to their senses. Left to him,

he would arrest the entire bunch and chuck them into prison for wasting police time . . . *his fucking time*.

Obi had refused Sanusi's request to go with him to identify his attacker at Karma. The look of pure terror on the man's face at the suggestion had left Sanusi no option but to carry out his investigation by himself. All he had was a description of the accused woman, Madam Joy, and the location of her brothel. The other victims had claimed not to know the identities of the various women they blamed for their sinister attacks. The only thing they all had in common was that their woes had been caused by women, evil witches wandering the congested streets of the city day and night, seeking unwary men to rob of their most prized possession, their genitals. Obi was the only victim who could pinpoint his attacker and her location.

One thing was clear to Sanusi: the entire male population in Enugu was living under a dark cloud of terror and suspicion. In the four weeks since the rumour first surfaced, there'd been an unprecedented spike in violence against women. The famed courtesy for which the Igbos were known had been thrown to the garbage dump. No one shook hands anymore or clasped arms in friendship. Men avoided all forms of body contact with women, even their wives . . . *especially their wives* . . . in homes where domestic violence had been the norm before the rumours circulated.

In the workplace, the situation was no better with bullying and harassment of women on the rise. Taxi drivers refused to carry women in their keke napep cabs, leaving women stranded in the streets at all hours. In the hospitals, men refused to be attended by female nurses, resulting in an alarming rise in male fatalities in emergency rooms. Religious institutions, previously the main stronghold of the womenfolk, now overflowed with male congregations. Churches were operating seven days a week, day and night, as spirit-possessed pastors spoke in mysterious tongues, casting out witches and returning lost penises to a multitude of traumatized men. Witch doctors, determined not to be outdone by the pastors, set up their mats and relics by the roadside, offering protection against witches and powerful charms to safeguard penises. Sanusi had been accosted by a couple of witch doctors in the few minutes he'd been in the Nike area. It was becoming clear to him that the entire Coal City was close to meltdown. *He was close to a meltdown with the fucking heat*. Sanusi dabbed his face delicately with a clean white cotton handkerchief. Left to

him, he would arrest anyone caught spreading the lies and dump them in the mosquito-infested jail at force headquarters. *That'll give them something to talk about, the fucking rice-brains.*

Sanusi made his way toward Madam Joy's brothel. It didn't take him long to locate the nefarious house where the crime against Obi had supposedly been perpetrated. It was a several-storey building painted a bright red and yellow, just as Obi had described. The massive signboard at the top twinkled from the multi-coloured neon bulbs used to write the name of the brothel, Karma. At the front of the house, there were several plastic chairs and tables overflowing with male diners under wide canopies, noisily enjoying an abundance of palm wine and local dishes. Loud music blasted from huge speakers mounted by the steps, leading up to the front door. Bright, alternating coloured light turned the place into a rainbow wonderland, hiding the vice and corruption in its radiance.

Sanusi paused at the entrance, surveying the clientele, mostly men. A fat woman in a dirty kaftan emerged from the building and greeted him with a cheerful smile, inviting him to one of the tables. *Madam Joy!* Sanusi recognized her instantly from the description given him by her erstwhile victim Obi. He forced himself to sit on the offered chair, resisting the urge to flee from the suffocating squalor of the place. Flies and ants fought for right of space with the humans who simply waved them away or squashed them underfoot before carrying on with their meal. Scantly clad girls served the men, allowing themselves to be pawed as they exchanged vulgar jokes with their favourites. Sanusi noticed that the pretty prostitutes received generous tips while the ugly ones were shouted at by the men and bullied by Madam Joy. He noticed two sour-faced prostitutes in particular who were on the receiving end of the worst of the abuse. He eyed them with contempt, revolted by their ugliness. One thing he couldn't abide was fat, dark-skinned women. He was ruthless in his interrogation when they fell into his trap. It would have been easier to simply pull fat Madam Joy aside, question her, slap her around her pig-face, and leave the filthy place. But he preferred to observe his quarry first before striking, disarm them, take them unawares, and beat the truth out of them.

"Oga, what you want drink?" Madam Joy spoke to him in pidgin English, automatically identifying him as a stranger in their midst. Sanusi still couldn't fathom how these blasted Igbo people could distinguish him from themselves, considering he was a Fulani man and as light skinned as most of them. But in the short time he'd spent in their city, Sanusi had come to realise that the Igbos



were a very cliquy tribe. They could spot their kind blindfolded. When they spoke to a person in English instead of their local lingo, they automatically consigned the person to the “stranger” realm. He gave an inward shrug, put his mobile phone into his pocket, and turned his attention to Madam Joy.

The fat madam bustled around him, crowding his meagre space with her sweaty bulk. A rank odor wafted from her body, a pungent stench of rotteness, sour yet sweet. Sanusi gave his nostril a discreet squeeze, leaning away from her. *Little wonder that idiot Obi had been convinced the woman was a witch. With a stench like this, she could easily kill the staunchest penis in the world. Wonder was why anyone would want to eat anything she offered in her filthy brothel.*

“Just a bottle of Coca-Cola will do.” Sanusi pulled out a naira note. The woman looked at him, a peculiar look in her small, dark eyes that were almost smothered within the sweaty folds of flesh on her face. Something pricked his neck, an uneasy dark cloak on his shoulders. He felt like the criminal and not the police, like a prisoner instead of the judge, a trapped insect under a microscope.

“Hurry woman, and don’t waste my time,” Sanusi’s voice was harsh, angry furrows on his brow. He felt the sudden thudding of his heart and hot sweat on his face. The woman looked at him for several seconds after his outburst, a considering gaze like one studying an unusual specimen.

Then she smiled, a wide obsequious smile that made his skin crawl. He wanted to get up and walk out of the filthy joint, put as much distance between himself and the woman. He wasn’t a superstitious man, not by a long mile. But he was a trained officer, and every instinct in him screamed that something was wrong with the woman. He could not pinpoint what the something was, but he knew evil when he came across it. In his job, he had encountered enough evil to bring the “No Vacancy” label to hell.

“Bottle of Coca-Cola sharp-sharp, sir,” the woman waddled away from him, taking her reek with her, bringing temporary relief to his fuzzy brain. Sanusi shook his head. He cursed himself for his fanciful thoughts. *Hell! This bloody case was fast turning him into an ignorant and superstitious fool like the rest of the wretched residents of the city. Damn it all! The sooner he questioned the bloody woman and wrapped up his investigation, the quicker he’d get home and prepare for his trip to England, back to civilization.*

The woman returned with his drink, a can opener in her hand. She made to uncork the lid, but Sanusi stayed her hand. He didn’t trust her. The last

thing he wanted was to leave with food poisoning and whatever else the vile woman had on offer. He felt a sudden kinship with the fool Obi. Having met the woman, he didn't blame the man for his suspicions despite knowing there was no truth to them. And yet a niggling feeling remained with him, something that couldn't be tidied away into a rational box, a wrongness about the five men he had interviewed, an unnatural defect in their makeup: their voices for one thing . . . *their identical high-pitched feminine voices.*

Each of the five men Sanusi had interviewed spoke in the same unnerving female shrill. All of them, together with their friends and families, swore they'd each owned a different voice, a deeper masculine tone that vanished the same day they lost their genitals. More unsettling was the black shadow they all claimed to have seen, coupled with the identical dreams they also shared, nightmares about a faceless, terrifying entity that bore an uncanny resemblance to Madam Joy. Now he'd met her, Sanusi could understand why she could haunt men's dreams. She was the stuff nightmares were made of.

*Except she was a total stranger to the men whose dreams she haunted.* With the exception of Obi, none of the victims had been to Madam Joy's filthy brothel. None of them had laid eyes on the fat woman. Yet each of the men he'd interviewed had described the madam with an accuracy that turned the hot sweat trickling down his spine into chilly, skeletal fingers.

#### IV

That night, Sanusi returned home and thrashed his wife to within an inch of her life. He had caught her without her veil, the second time in the week. The first time it happened, he'd put it down to an accidental oversight. This time it was different. Zainab had spent her day with more of her liberal Igbo friends, brash Kardashian-wanna-be women, drowning in thick makeup and expensive perfumes. They were fast leading his hitherto chaste Muslim wife into their liberal lives of Christian immorality. Sanusi was determined to nip things in the bud before they got any further. He derived extra pleasure in kicking his wife's bottom. *The stupid bitch needed the fat kicked out of her wobbly arse.* But for his need to keep on the right side of his commissioner, who was a right moralistic prick, he would have sent Zainab home as soon as she began piling on weight after their last son was born.

The next day, he woke up with a cold. It felt like the flu, and he could barely

speak. His throat hurt when he tried to swallow, and his body was a mass of shivers and aches. For a brief second, Sanusi wondered if he had picked up a virus from Madam Joy's brothel. But he'd been very careful and had even restrained himself from smacking the fat pig on her sweaty face when he interrogated her about Obi's missing penis. *He had restrained himself . . . he had definitely restrained himself. He was sure of that.*

Madam Joy had laughed at him when he posed his question, looked him squarely in the eyes without fear and laughed at him as if he were no more than one of her ugly servant girls. He'd raised his hand to knock out her front teeth, bring the swelling to her dark, piggy eyes. But his fist had refused to obey him. His right arm stayed stiff against his body; his left arm equally resisted him, bringing unfamiliar thuds of panic to his heart. And all the while, Madam Joy cackled, her laughter raucous and evil, glee glittering in her dark icy eyes. She walked away from him, waddled her way back to her business still laughing. Her laughter had rung in his ears for hours. Even as he thrashed Zainab, he'd still heard that maniacal screech underneath his wife's agonized screams.

He could swear he'd also heard that evil cackle in his dreams, though he couldn't recall the dream. Sanusi pushed away his morbid thoughts, swallowing a couple of paracetamol capsules. *He was probably coming down with malaria. Everyone knew malaria came with weird dreams.* For good measure, he took some malaria tablets and prepared for his final round of interviews. He planned to make a last attempt to contact the two missing complainants, get their statements, tie up some loose ends with Obi, and write his report for the commissioner before calling it a day with the stupid case.

Sanusi arrived at Obi's house a little after midday, having found the other two men still missing. All he could get from their terrified and confused families was that the men had disappeared with the same inexplicable suddenness as their vanished penises. Everyone had seen them retire for the night, but no one ever saw them awaken to the new dawn. They had both taken nothing with them, neither their clothes nor their car keys. In the case of the governor's in-law, the man's international passport was still intact with wads of dollar notes from his previous trip to the United States. Sanusi had initially suspected foul play as each of the men had several wives and mistresses who seemed to harbour little affection for them.

That was until he saw the dollars. No Nigerian felon, certainly no Igbo wife or mistress with murderous intentions, would abandon dollar notes, not for God

or country. But in the absence of any credible evidence, he could not pursue the case any further. He crossed out their files and walked away from their compounds. He was done chasing after the two men, especially the governor's wretched brother-in-law whose disappearance had sparked the investigation. *Bloody governor could stick it in his pipe and smoke it. The commissioner too.* The whole thing was simply some stupid urban hysteria that strong-arm police tactics should soon nip in the bud. He intended to recommend robust policing in his report, starting with that vile Madam Joy's brothel, Karma. He would give her karma, alright, and personally supervise the closure of the place and the vigorous whipping of the filthy woman in his police cell afterward. *That should cure her insolence, the dirty, fat bitch.*

## V

Obi was nowhere to be found when Sanusi arrived at his building. His neighbours said he had vanished the previous night. His mobile phone lay on his unmade bed, and his bedroom door remained wide open. Sanusi searched the room, looking for signs of a struggle, anything that would suggest foul play. But there was nothing out of place. The room had an air of normalcy as if the owner had just popped out for a shower or a chat with a neighbor. Except he never returned. Sanusi questioned the neighbours, searched their rooms vigorously. No one demanded a search warrant. Only a fool would risk his freedom and safety by making such a ridiculous demand.

He returned home that evening, fighting frustration and some unknown ailment. His malaria symptoms had disappeared only to be replaced by a feeling of anxiety and a nervous twitch that had him constantly glancing over his shoulder. He felt a dark claustrophobia shrouding his being as if the very air he breathed was littered with a million black eyes, following his every move. A sense of urgency drove him, rushing back to his house and up his staircase, ignoring his wife and kids in the living room. Halfway up his stairs, something halted his steps.

Sanusi stared at the black shadow spreading across his stairs. A sudden chill shook his body, swelling his head. A sense of déjà vu engulfed him, a bad recollection. He stared at the shadow, his brows knitted. He strove to bring some calm back to his stunned mind. *He was a detective, a British-trained detective,*

*versed in dealing with hard facts. There was no place for superstition in his world. He wasn't a fucking Igbo, ruled by fantastical beliefs and crazy conjecture.*

Sanusi stooped low to touch the carpeted flooring of the stairs. His fingers made contact with something old and cold, a slimy iciness that was as real as the burning pain it inflicted on his fingers. Sanusi shouted, leaping back, almost stumbling down the stairs. The black shadow jumped with him, seeming to fly over his head, engulfing him briefly in its icy molasses before streaming out of his house. Sanusi rushed up the remaining stairs, stumbling into his bedroom and slamming the door behind him. His breath came fast and hard, loud and harsh. Sweat poured from his forehead as if he'd been caught in a sudden tropical storm. His body shivered, his limbs trembled. He stumbled toward his bed feeling his head swell, expanding and contracting, bringing sudden darkness to his pupils. Sanusi crashed on his bed just as oblivion stole his mind.

## VI

*He is in a dark place, a place filled with women. It looks like a market, a night market run by women, fat black-skinned women who all bear an uncanny resemblance to Madam Joy. They all look at him and laugh at him, calling him names, vile names: Mr Little-Cock, Mr Wife-Basher, Mr Sexual-Disease-Giver, Mr Rapist-of-Beautiful-Female-Prisoners, Mr Love-Rat, Mr Adulterer, Mr No-Respect-for-His-Mother, Mr Big-Useless-Nothing . . .*

*By the time he hears the last "Mr," Sanusi finds himself drowning underneath the weight of countless, vengeful, fat women. They hit him with their plumb fists and slap his face with their saggy breasts. Their hot hands reach into his trousers, pulling his penis, squeezing and yanking till he can scream no more, and he gives in to the dark call of unconsciousness.*

*He awakens in another place, a different place from the night market of angry fat women. This time, he finds himself in a bright place, a place of light and colour, a place of beautiful light-skinned women and greedy men. The women look at him and smile. Their smiles are leers of corruption. They beckon him over, call him "Sister." He wants to tell them they're either blind or rude. He's no sister. He is a man. He starts to speak and instead ends up screaming. His voice mirrors their female tones, high, shrill, all woman. The women begin to giggle, cackle as evilly as the fat market women. The greedy men turn to look at him, rise to pull him*

*into their passion-crazed arms. Sanusi starts to run, seeking escape from the mad room of light and vice.*

*He doesn't run far. They catch him and hold him down. The men mount him and violate him. They hit him as he struggles, slap him as they take their pleasure on his body. And all the time, the women hoot at his ravishment, cackle in the identical voices of their fat market sisters. When they're done, the greedy men leave him where he's sprawled on the red carpet of the house of sin, covered in blood and snot, semen and tears.*

*He crawls toward the red door, feeling himself swooning, fighting the darkness that threatens to steal his mind and sanity. Just as he gets to the door, he feels a hand, a powerful hand, pull his arm, yank him forward . . .*

*Into a familiar place, a place he'd visited just the previous night. Karma! Madam Joy stands before him, tall, mammoth, powerful . . . and darkly deadly. Gone is the cheerful smile, the air of affable congeniality. She towers over twenty feet tall, her girth spanning several yards like the gigantic statue of an ancient, forgotten god. Except she's not a lifeless statue. She is all power and fury, a coal-black pitiless entity of malice and vengeance. Her black shadow flows down her body like a living river, flooding the floor in dark iciness. Sanusi feels his skin burn as Madam Joy's black shadow swirls around him.*

*"Foolish man!" her voice booms like the roar of thunder, bringing the shivers of terror to his jellied limbs. "Useless little man!" She stoops and lifts him till he dangles in front of her face, her terrible, dark face that brings the hot piss to his groins. "You men go through life abusing my daughters, stealing their pride, killing their hope. You believe your powers are from above, that you can stride the earth with your bold walk, your loud voices and hard fists, wreaking pain and misery on my daughters. My earth is flooded with the tears and blood of my daughters; their pains fertilise my soil. Yet I hold my rage because it is only by your seed that we can keep ourselves in existence. The seed of a good man is the perfection of unity I weaved for my daughters, a tree and its fruit: one, faithfully hard, the other, sweetly soft. But men like you, perverts, psychopaths, abusers, and manipulators, have soured that tree of paradise. Your brutality and wickedness have tainted the purity of my work. You would have been better off staying above with your creator than coming down to my earth.*

*Madam Joy pauses, piercing him with her terrible black stare. Sanusi shuts his eyes, trying to shut out the terror that quakes his heart, steals the final vestige of his male pride. Madam Joy's voice drowns out the pounding of his heart. "Listen*

*well, pathetic creature. I have made some cities female cities, cities that house my soul and my powers. All over your human world, there are male and female cities: cities that house the soul of my brother, Sky, and cities that house my soul, Earth—cities like this one, Enugu, the Coal City. Just as my daughters never fare well in my brother's cities, you men will never flourish in my cities. The wise ones amongst you know to walk softly in my cities, to speak softly and live quietly. But others like you, foolish men who insist on strutting my lands with brutal arrogance, get their comeuppance. Prepare for my judgment, foolish man. You'll soon feel what it is to be one of my daughters, the ones you abuse with impunity."*

*The mammoth terror lets out another loud cackle, her towering mass trembling like a river of black molasses. Fear steals his breath and sanity. He shuts his eyes but cannot shut out her voice, her chilling cackle. He gags from the terrible stench of decay oozing from her skin, the stench of death and putrid corpses. "Like all the others before you who have used the symbol of your manhood to suppress my daughters, you shall be turned into a woman and experience the same pain and humiliation you've dished out to my daughters throughout the dawn of the deities." Madam Joy's voice rings with his doom. "Look around you, pathetic little man, and see with a clear vision. The ugly servant girls you so despise were once swaggering men like you, each boasting high connections and great wealth. Yet like you, each of them are soured trees, killing their fruits before they ripened and shedding them like worthless junk. Soon you'll join them in eternal servitude to me. Perhaps in your next incarnation, you will choose your city wisely and steer clear of female cities, my cities, cities that house my soul and my powers."*

*Madam Joy lets him go. The evil cackle returns to her lips as her black shadow swirls up, rising to engulf him. Sanusi begins to fall from the great height. He tumbles and screams . . . falling . . . drowning . . . falling . . .*

## VII

He awoke from his nightmare with a low moan. His head pounded, and his heart raced. He jumped off his bed as if it was infested with razor-toothed bugs. Images flashed in his head, memories of a terrifying dark entity, something about women, angry women, cackling women. He struggled to recall his nightmare, searched his mind for recollection. There was a wild urgency in him, a desperate need to remember. All he received were disjointed pictures and a disquieting sense of doom. He felt the sudden pressure in his groin, a

burning need to piss. He stumbled to the door toward the family bathroom by the landing. His hands trembled as he pressed the switch, flooding the white-tiled room with blinding light. His fingers pulled the buckle on his belt, zipped down his trousers, reached inside his underwear to yank out his penis.

Downstairs, Zainab heard the bone-curdling screams of her husband as she stooped to lift her son from the couch. She froze. Her limbs went weak. She let her son drop back onto the sofa. Heart pounding, she raced up the stairs toward the toilet from where the screams came, high-pitched female shrieks, screams that sounded uncannily like her own pain-filled cries when Sanusi subjected her to one of his brutal beatings. And from the open door of the empty bathroom, along the carpeted flooring of the landing, across the glossy painted walls, a thick black shadow flowed its steady black stream out of the house, taking with it an invisible passenger whose shrill screams followed the undulating course of the black shadow to a dark realm of eternal misery.





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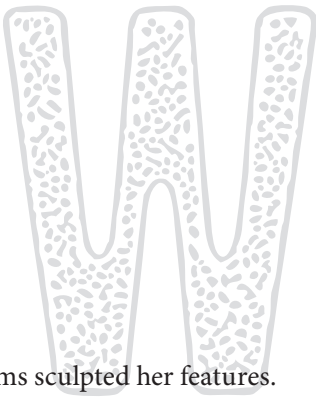
**Nuzo Onoh** is a British writer of African-Igbo heritage. Popularly known as “The Queen of African Horror,” Nuzo was born in Enugu, in the Eastern part of Nigeria (formerly, the Republic of Biafra). She experienced the Nigerian-Biafran war as a child refugee, an experience that has influenced some of her works. She first came to England as a teenager and attended the Mount School, York (a Quaker boarding school), and St Andrew’s Tutorial College, Cambridge, from where she obtained her A Levels. She holds a law degree and a master’s degree in writing, both from the University of Warwick, Warwickshire, England.

A keen musician, Nuzo plays both the piano and guitar and enjoys writing songs when not haunting church graveyards and the beautiful Coventry War Memorial Park. Her book, *The Reluctant Dead* (2014), introduced modern African horror into the mainstream horror genre. Her other books include *Unhallowed Graves* (2015), *The Sleepless* (2016), and *Dead Corpse* (2017). Nuzo has two daughters and her cat, Tinkerbelle. She lives in Coventry and is an active member of the Coventry Writers Group.





## MAURA MCHUGH



HY IS THE WORLD WRONG?" FIVE-YEAR-OLD Ygraine asked her mother for the first time.

Nerthus didn't respond for a moment. She was perched on the edge of the couch in the darkened den, an intent crease in her forehead as she watched a lurching black and white film on the telly. Old chiaroscuro

dreams sculpted her features.

She blinked, picked up the remote, and froze the image.

"What did you say?"

Ygraine flapped a free hand to indicate the entire shadowy space (her stuffed rabbit Zepher was clamped in the crook of her other arm). "Why is everything . . . *wrong*?"

Nerthus sat back and regarded the serious expression on her daughter's face. She drummed a slow beat with the pen in her hand across the notepad balanced on her knees. It seemed to Ygraine that this was the first time she had ever captured her mother's complete attention.

"What's wrong with everything?" Nerthus asked.

Frustration spiked Ygraine's belly like one of Mikael's ugly cacti in the conservatory. She didn't have words for the wrongness. It was a bone-deep knowledge that she was misplaced. Every morning she woke up expecting to

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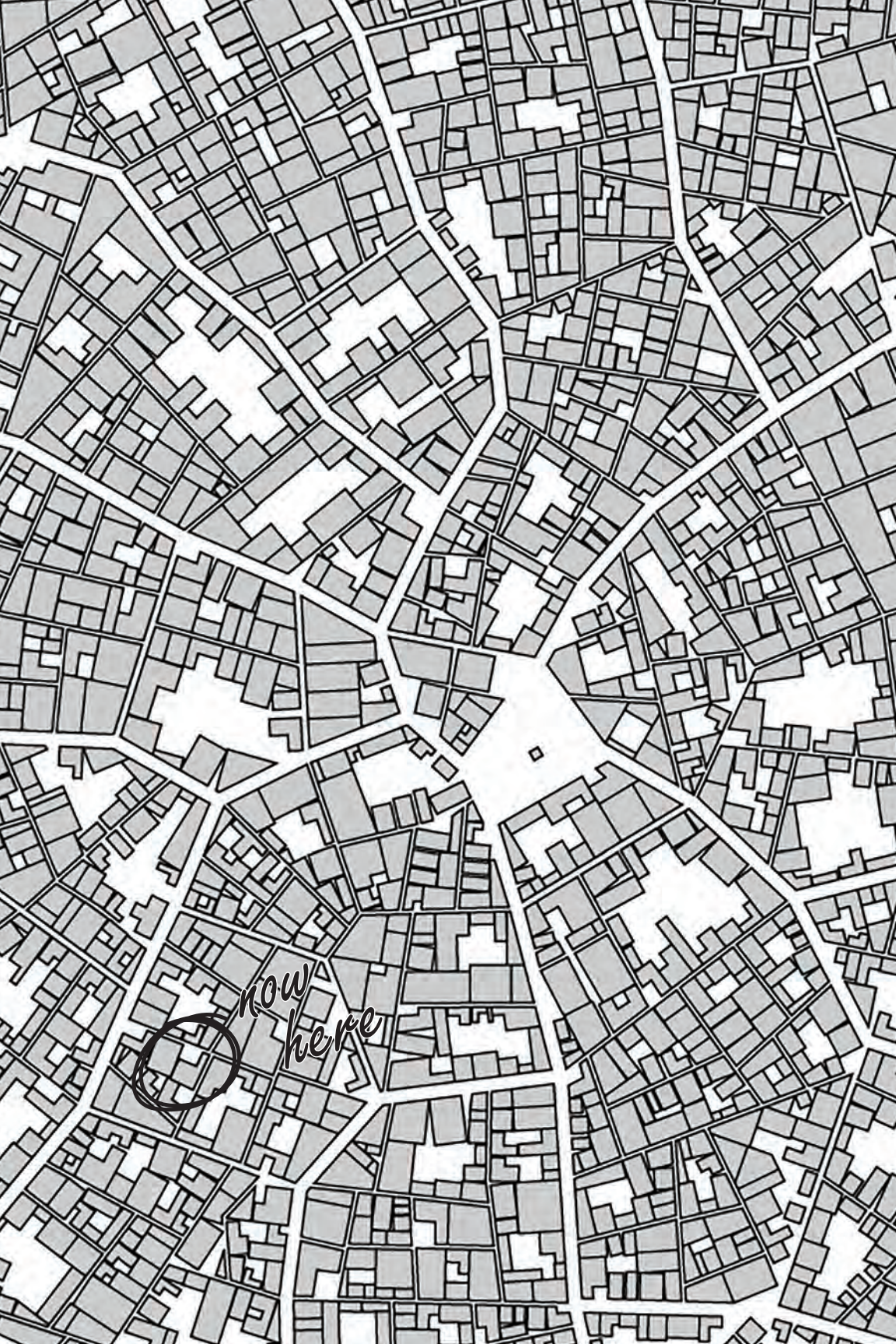
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