

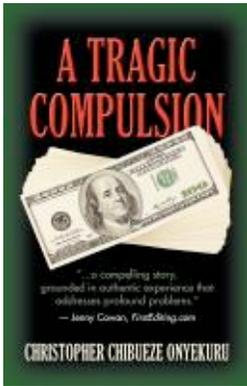
# A TRAGIC COMPULSION



"...a compelling story,  
grounded in authentic experience that  
addresses profound problems."

— Jenny Cowan, *FirstEditing.com*

**CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU**



*A chilling story of a young Nigerian in Spain, of poor family background, who wants to keep within the law while struggling to accommodate the financial pressures from home. But when he sees himself compelled into a gruesome murder plot, it's now a battle to save his own life and to free himself from the shackles of the law. Bad leadership has turned the psyche of young Nigerians into the quest for fast wealth acquisition.*

# **A Tragic Compulsion**

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# 1

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He lay in a pool of his own blood.

“The money, the money, the money,” the masked gunman sang out slowly. “Where is it?” He was squatted beside the dying man, tapping the muzzle of the pistol he held on his left palm.

The African lay face down, shivering on the floor of his family house, covered with thick blood oozing out from the back of his head. The gunman looked at the opening in the African's skull as blood gushed out of the hole he had created with the butt of his gun. But he didn't care. Breathing in the smell of human blood turned him on during an operation of this nature.

The gunman stopped tapping the pistol, lowered it once more and pointed it at the African's left ear, threatening further. “I must have all that money or you will be dead in the next few minutes!” He was shouting now.

Not yet satisfied, the gunman turned the butt of the gun and struck the African twice on the same bloody spot, widening the wound and creating more gushing of the red body fluid.

The African cried out and violently recoiled on the floor as more waves of pain swept through his body.

The broad-shouldered gunman stood like a looming creature with a vicious temper burning inside. It was better for the man lying on the floor that this gunman was in a mask, because his face represented that of a monster, born out of bottle and knife injuries he sustained over a multitude of fights in public places

and during the robbery incidents the gunman had been carrying out since he was fourteen.

The African lay writhing in pain, dying. But a little part of his mind still stirred him back to life. His mind raced in thought: why couldn't he fight this gunman? Yes, despite the African's own tallness, the man towered over him. And the man also possessed a more intimidating chiseled physique than the African could have imagined. But the man on the floor knew he possessed some skills that could help him to fight back. Somehow he couldn't find them and make use of them. Where had his little skills gone?

The African heard his own groaning voice, "Please... please don't kill me. I...I have given you all the money that I came back home with. Please...please search this whole room. If you discover that I have lied to you, then kill me—"

"Shut up, you stinking fool!" his assailant roared, angrier now because of what the man on the floor just said. "I am working on information." He bent down and went to the African's ear, making sure the man on the floor heard the next important statement correctly.

"Listen, you fool, if you ever thought I undertook the long journey to this lifeless village to waste my time with you, then you're a loser. You hear me? A big loser! I was properly informed that you're loaded with ten fucking thousand Euros, and that's what I came here for."

The gunman stood up, pulled out a packet of Benson and Hedges from his trouser pocket. With ease, he selected a cigarette and lit it with a match.

"Now let me ask you, if you didn't have money, why did you come back for Christmas, big fool? Why did you?"

Not waiting for any response, as he wasn't ready for one, the gunman began kicking the African with his legs. This time he kicked and jabbed the man on the floor many times in the rib

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cage with the strong military boots he wore. The impact broke one of the African's ribs.

“Did you forget you were going to pay your tax as soon as you landed home? Did you forget that you had certain people to pay homage to?”

“What is two thousand Euros, fool?” the gunman continued to rage. “What were you doing abroad? Washing dishes, I guess.”

The African wriggled in pain at his cracked ribs. A trickle of blood dripped from his mouth. He no longer heard the gunman's words. He had lost a lot of blood and was beginning to fade away. Yet as he went fainter, he wondered what might have happened to all the people sleeping under the same roof as him this night, including his parents. Had this lone gunman killed everybody and then turned on him? he asked himself as he waited for the moment when a bullet would cut through the back of his head and end his dejected life. Why couldn't the whole lot of them fight back together and subdue this lone gunman?

And why did he even come back from Spain? Why? He remembered.

His parents!

He was here to see his parents: his bed-ridden father and his aging mother whom he had missed so much, after a long period away from home. He had saved all the money he could to be sure he came home to spend the Christmas with his beloved parents and other family members and extended relatives. But it didn't happen the way he had wished. Now, instead of being happily asleep, with all the relatives who came out here to welcome him, he lay in his own blood, death knocking at his door. And nobody could save him.

Outside the house, an owl hooted from one of the numerous tall trees surrounding the small village. The African heard the

sound distantly. But he understood its significance: Death was around the corner.

*Where on earth are the police? Oh God, this is not happening to me. I am dying. God, I am dying.*

He heard the harsh, icy voice again. "I am going to search your boxes now, fool," the gunman said. "If I take the pains and discover where you hid the money, I will hack your breath away."

The African didn't respond. He had no strength. But he never knew though, strength or no strength, the gunman never left any traces after his operations. He was a condemned man.

The gunman crossed over through the African's head to where his legs rested on the floor, moving towards the wardrobe. But things changed all of a sudden. Somehow, the gunman slipped on the African's blood and skidded. He stumbled, lost balance and crashed down on the floor.

Abruptly, something in the African energized him and within a split second, he was up. He broke away from the gunman, turned and began running with his last strength. He must be away from the gunman as much as he could before the man recovered from the fall. The African ran, cupping his throbbing opened skull with his left hand to prevent the increasing oozing of blood from his head; holding his broken ribs with the right hand so as to prevent it from disintegrating.

The African drew nearer to the main exit of his family house and forced himself to shout out to the neighbors inside the compound. His mouth formed the words, "Help, please... help me!" But no sound would come.

Still he ran. He knew that even if he shouted and they heard him, nobody would come to his rescue. Everybody was scared of being hit by a bullet. He had some strength to run, he thought. Thank God, at least.

But some force was drawing his legs backwards.

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The gunman was back on his feet. The African glanced over his shoulder a trifle, in time to see the man raise the pistol, aiming it at him. But there was nothing he could do other than to keep running. He ran.

He dashed out of the building into a blinding darkness, in confusion. Then he remembered that there had been a power outage, and that the gunman was using a beam of light from his own touch. In the blindness, the African's drive hauled him to an obstacle, which he felt with his hands and understood quickly. It was the high, aging block fencing guarding their house. He clamped both hands on the fence, struggling with last effort, his body throbbing. He hopped up and was almost on the outside of their house.

The gunman was out too, and closer. He targeted and fired. He didn't miss his aim. The bullet hit the African at the back of his right shoulder and shattered the scapula into fragments.

His breathing almost halted now, the African scaled over the fencing with the gushing blood and dropped outside the family compound. He gritted his teeth and ran without direction.

He was still running when he felt the vibration of his mobile phone that he always kept under the right side of his pillow before going to bed.

## 2

The African woke up with a start, his mouth open, panting and breathing from the exercise. Confused at first, he clamped his right hand on his chest, but then understood where he was and went for the light switch. He stopped midway, deciding against switching on the light.

*My God, it was a dream. I went home to my country.*

He tried to fight off the superstition that immediately bombarded him.

*I am not going to like the message this phone call will convey.*

The whole blood in his body surged toward his brain, and the bad dream generated an instant headache.

*The hunger of the masses has created insecurity – a big threat to our nation. What do we do about this?*

The phone's vibration continued. The African fumbled for the device, dragged it out, his eyes still shut to the illumination of the phone's light. He opened his eyes a little to view the identity of the caller, not allowing himself to be fully awakened in case he didn't want to take the call: It was unusual for anybody to be calling him at as early as five o'clock in the morning.

“Whoever you are, damn you!” he cursed, “calling me at this time of the day with a private identity.” He tossed the phone back to its position.

The vibration continued a little more and stopped. Two minutes later, the call came again.

The African sat up, now unable to avoid being woken up. He thought about the dream, about the long hooting sound of an

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owl, and worried. He remembered that at home he had two aged parents whose health conditions always got him worried.

*I hope nothing has gone wrong.*

He picked up the phone, touched the answer button and connected the line. He listened for a voice. None came. Then he said, "Hello?"

"Rhino!"

The African frowned. Out of the darkness that surrounded the room, anger smoldered in his half-closed eyes. "Who's this?" To his greatest astonishment, the male voice which hammered into his ear from thousands of kilometers away sounded excited. Or were there voices? A voice seemed to be saying something in the background. And then, a clatter of glasses.

"Rhino," the voice called again.

The African immediately knew who the voice belonged to. The caller's tone was different from that of any other of the secondary school mates he had back home.

Rhino breathed in relief.

*Thank God this isn't any emergency about my parents, or my family.*

If it were, the call would have come from one of his family members.

"Nichy, what a surprise that you're calling me," Rhino said in their native African language, maintaining a friendly attitude, while addressing the other man by his own nickname, "and at this time of the morning!"

"Why do you sound this way?"

"This is an odd hour, you know."

"I don't care what hour it is. Why are you surprised that I am calling?"

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“Why not? I call you from time to time. And you have my phone number, but refused to call, not even for a minute, just to say hi.”

“My man, know this: phone calls are only meant to be thrown from overseas, not the reverse.”

“I see,” Rhino paused a little. “Now that you've broken the rule, I hope all is well.”

“Man, Merry Christmas. I called you because I wanted to be the first person to break the good news to you.”

Rhino's heart sank into his stomach in anticipation of what news this could be. From the background noise and the jangling of glasses, he guessed Nichy was with a woman. They were drinking, and were perhaps in some small hotel room.

*So Nichy still lives his hotel lifestyle?*

Rhino's mind wandered about in the split second of pausing over the phone. But he couldn't guess what the news could be. Though Nichy seemed excited, Rhino didn't like receiving news from someone drunk or someone battling with a hangover. Such news may be as bad as otherwise expected.

“What news, Nichy? I am listening.”

*Now, say what you want to say, please, and stop wrecking my nerves.*

Rhino waited for a reply. It took a long time.

Finally, Nichy spoke. “But first I want to ask you a question which has lingered within me for some time now.”

“Please do. I would like to go back to sleep a little.”

“My dear friend, are you really the man we sent to Europe two long years ago? Or should we give your place to another man?”

The question hit Rhino by surprise, though it angered him even more. In an involuntary gesture, he withdrew the phone from his ear and stared at it. He placed it back to his ear.

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“You've still not changed from your drunken and ill-mannered way of talking to people,” Rhino said.

“Look, who says I am drunk? We were doing it together down here, and I know you've not stopped, because you can't stop it.”

*How a day could begin!*

“If you called me all the way from Nigeria to lash insults at me, then thanks. But I have to go back to bed, because I'll have to wake up in the next hour and prepare for work.”

“Aha! Yes, your chicken dirty work. Sappy has told me all about it. You even do the dirty job on a day like the twenty-sixth of December, Boxing Day?”

Rhino stirred in his bed, restive now. “Sappy told you what?”

“About the stupid and dirty poor man's job you do, of course! How much did Sappy say they pay Rhino?” Nichy had dropped the phone and was throwing his question at someone with him over there. Rhino heard a voice in the background call out eight hundred Euros per month – the voice of the female he suspected was with his friend. Rhino wondered why he should be listening to someone drunk like this. But the mention of the name Sappy kept him stuck to the phone.

Nichy's husky voice came back again. “They say you earn eight stupid hundred Euros over there. It's unbelievable.”

“I see you have no news to deliver. In that case, goodbye,” Rhino snapped the phone out of his ear and began to press the cut-off button. But he stopped on the way as, out of the surrounding quietness, Nichy's voice came from the distance.

“The good news, mate, is that Sappy is back.”

Rhino clamped the phone back to his ear. “What did you say?”

“I said Sappy is back for Christmas!”

There was a long hostile pause as Rhino's lips went dry, his mouth parting in disbelief over what Nichy just said.

*My God, he has been tormenting me, trying to let his news sink into me very slowly.*

“Sappy is back for Christmas,” Rhino repeated. “How? With what residence permit? In this deep global economic recession? That is impossible!”

“Look, who says it’s impossible? Oh, well, yes it is, for a poor, dirty working class boy like you. Sappy told me all about it, man. The economy will remain static for you because you don't want to put your eyes to the ground and follow what others are doing there. Rather you choose to do useless, dirty jobs. Well, you've chosen poverty.”

Rhino didn't respond. He had nothing to say, and could only listen and absorb the insults being thrown at him.

“He is not just back for Christmas,” Nichy went on. “He came back as a made man. Sappy has made it, man! Sappy has just become one of the biggest boys in town. He came back loaded with plenty c-a-s-h, a lot of goods and a clean Jaguar X type 2-0-0-7 model.”

No response.

“Sappy is a rich man now. So what does he have to do with the European residence permit? He throws in his passport at any of the embassies tomorrow and the soon-to-be-titled-chief is granted a one-year visa. What are you doing, man? You’re no more the sharp Rhinoceros we used to know in those old secondary school days. What came over you, mate? You must wake up and follow others in what is going on...”

A deep fear struck Rhino to a halting position, sending his pulse racing. He couldn't believe what he was being told. He suddenly plunged into thinking, not concentrating as his old school mate continued to rant on the other end of the line.

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*Sappy is back for Christmas? How possible could this be?  
And he has become very rich!*

Sappy went to Switzerland six months ago, from Rhino's house. He had refused to call Rhino ever since he left. Rhino could not recall anything wrong he had done to the chap. He never treated him badly during the short time Sappy stayed in his house. Their plan had been to travel to Europe together, but Rhino's arrangement went through before Sappy's; and one year passed before Sappy succeeded with his own plan.

"Right now," Nichy was saying, "his family is enjoying Christmas because there is money flowing around. But your own family...I don't know, still in penury while they have someone like you out there. This is just hard to believe..."

Rhino's mind came back to the phone still gripped to his ear. He heard Nichy's voice saying, "Guy, you need to wake up! Remember, this is your second year abroad – in Spain for that matter, where all sorts of things are happening. You were one smart boy here at home. Let yourself do something, my guy. Get rich, come back here and give us the good time."

There was a pause, the man on the other end allowing his message to be absorbed.

"We are all inside the city, and have been staying in a five-star hotel since the past week, and Sappy is footing the entire bill. Guy, we wait for you to come back and do the same for your friends and kinsmen here. And we wait for you to help us financially too, in order to join you there. Please quit that naughty job right away and turn into being a bad boy and look for the c-a-s-h."

Nichy went on ranting at him, but Rhino had heard enough. He touched the end button of the phone, though not before he heard the suspected female voice say, "Come home rich, honey. We are waiting for your fun. Or we find a way of deporting you to this our God forsaken country and replacing you with a faster

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guy.” This was followed by a roaring laughter from both the woman and Nichy his old school mate.

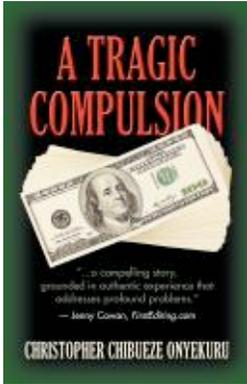
Rhino dropped the phone back to its position and immediately drifted into deep thought about his situation.

\*

Two hours later, Rhino rose from bed. Not that he had slept again since then. It was time to prepare and go to work. But he needed to say thank you to God for His mercies over his life and his family's.

Rhino knelt down by the bedside and began. Words wouldn't come. He tried again. It remained the same. In lieu of that, his mind strayed back to his village. What would Sappy be doing now? Especially, what would he be telling the people against *him* and his inability to commit crime?

Unable to continue with the prayer, Rhino stood up and began preparing for work.



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