

Crazy Little Things out of the Blues

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I'm doing something crazy. There is in fact no exact English word to describe it. It is called *fait divers* which is a French phrase for very brief newspaper reportage of unusual happenings and dark occurrences, like accidents or crimes, that befall ordinary, insignificant people. There are a thousand and one loose English translations of the phrase such as "sundry events," "fillers," and "miscellaneous facts" or "news of the weird." I simply go for "news of the weird."

Most *fait divers* pieces are funny and shadowed by dark humor. They could be epigrammatic too. They could sound like a puzzle, a riddle, or a half-joke. The basic tools needed in constructing them are common speech devices: irony, pun, parody, allusion, ellipsis, surprise ending, and general wordplay. In short, when you find news stories as short, complete, and whole they are *fait divers*. You may remember headlines like: *No more hunger: Allen, who duped a company 12m worth of food, got himself 120 years of free prison food in Maiduguri*. They are very brief but closed circle stories, complete in themselves. One needs no additional information to get the whole gist.

For roughly ten months now, I've been doing this. I've been writing about random people and the random incidents that befall them from every city open to the news all over the country. These people are everyday people that do not count, and what happens to them are weird, brute ends of fate. Such happenings, such crazy little things out of the blue, are ordinary in a way that they are not. They could happen to anyone, but you don't see them coming until they happen to you.

Fait divers aren't making mockery. It is a means of finding a safe threshold in sadness. There is a bad story and it is broken as a joke, but a wise mind never misses its weight. There is grace, too. *Fait divers* lavish a great deal of it on you, lavish a great deal of graceful distance on you; you now can gaze at horror from afar with the consciousness that it didn't happen to you but can. And that is modest living.

For the folks I write about, *fait divers* offer something, too. A brand new resurrection is handed over to them; they get inducted into a sort of a hall of fame (of little tragedies, though) where they become stars forever. They exist as long as my writing of them exists. But if this is all I'm doing, then it is not a crazy task and neither is it a proud assignment. Journalists do exactly the same. They make unknown people little celebrities by writing about them, and our silent heroes and heroines live on in newspapers' archives.

I'm doing more actually. I do not particularly write about them. I sketch them in that I compress whatever has befallen them into usually two or three sentences and in maximum of three lines, the way you compress bread in a toaster. And I sketch them not in a newspaper section, but on Twitter and on Facebook. But *fait divers*, too, is journalism. There is a shared professional line between journalists and myself; I am a journalist, too, in some weird ways. And as if to seal this, I source for stories in newspapers, though I restrict myself to Punch alone, to the metro and crime section, due to the paper's reputation for genuine news and longstanding existence.

I started writing in September 2020 but began uploading on Twitter and Facebook by January and June 2021, respectively. On Facebook, I hashtag the posts with #newsoftheweird and/or #notw, but on Twitter, I shun captions. For this course, I personalize my Twitter. I don't retweet anymore and I rarely make other posts so that my profile page reads like a shelf of *fait divers*.

The project hasn't caught a sight. Once, poet Dami Ajayi retweeted a story with the quote, "Small fate-ish." Another time, a handful of users who hadn't caught up with the sarcasm infused into a story once dragged me. Fiction writer and *Zikoko* staff writer Kunle Ologunro commented under one of the *fait divers* that he needed a complete novel (book) containing these news briefs. Other than this, they had pulled no great engagement. I don't have an impressive online traffic. My Twitter is a small account where I follow about 170 people and about 250 follow me. My Facebook is not so cool either. Moreover, it seems my online audience does not understand what I'm doing. They are new to it. It is strange to them.

Historically, *fait divers* came to be in 1800s France and were already popularly widespread in the press by the 1850s. That was a period of technological and mechanical advancement which elicited various kinds of accident, domestic and otherwise. Telegraph was in vogue, too. And newspapers adopted it to transmit news items faster. *Le Matin: derniers télégrammes de la nuit* ("Le Matin: the latest night telegrams"), which declared itself the "newspaper of telegraphic information, universal and true," particularly took advantage of the new technology. It was a *Le Matin* journalist, Felix Fénéon, who stylized this form of news writing.

Felix elevated the language of *fait divers* from the flat, unadorned prose language to a language reeking of wit, dry humor, epigrammatic compression with a poetic and allegoric aura. Even when Felix's language was at its most plain, its compactness and acceleration elevate it so that it reads like a dark poetry, like a still photograph. (Although the brevity in part was compelled by Telegraph—the company charged per word.) All this he did while writing anonymously.

Generally, a typical Felix's *fait divers* are mostly recognizable as a major event, odd minor cause sort of stories. Details and explanations vanish, and we are left with a story that suggests a coincidence or fate. This is a sample of Felix's: *Scheid, of Dunkirk, fired three times at his wife. Since he missed every shot, he decided to aim at his mother-in-law, and connected.*

But Felix isn't my main source of inspiration. Teju Cole is. Cole was working on a non-fictional book about Lagos and noticed that the daily stories he came across needed another outlet, a more appropriate outlet. The appropriate outlet happened to be *fait divers*. He scavenged the metro and crime sections of a dozen of popular newspapers for dark stories to compose *fait divers* on

Twitter—if he was in the US, he accessed news on these newspapers' websites. And so from February, 2011 till February, 2013, Cole was tweeting these weird, brief news several times a day. Not everyday, though. As time went on, Cole reported weird news from other cities apart from Lagos and later wrote *fait divers* of early 20th century New York.

Because *fait divers* have no direct English translation, he translated them to *small fates*, which doesn't capture the meaning but reflects both the content and form of the writings. *Small* refers to the incidents being ordinary and minor. These small incidents occur by chance or fate; hence, *small fates*. He actually admired the playful rhyme of *fate* with *fait*. Cole adopted the style from Felix but with minor differences. For instance, he wrote *fait divers* that are usually more laconic and compressed than Felix's. And he goes for the irony rather than the laugh-out-loud funny "because many of these things are actually not funny at all." This is a sample of Cole's: *Not far from the Surulere workshop where spray-painter Alawiye worked, a police man fired into the air. Gravity did the rest.*

Italy-bound and from Edo, Douglas, 23, must have eaten heroin in his dream. He excreted 59 wraps at Abuja Airport.

Who's dreaming, who's not? In Benue, villagers claimed they were attacked by herdsman. Soldiers said it wasn't true. The police weren't aware.

Three members of the Fish Sellers' Association of Nigeria in Akure won't pay anymore. The dilapidated building they hid in collapsed.

Just like firefighters did 25-year-old Humaira in Kano. When things are dead, hand them over to the police.

Robbers who went to ensure the monies in some two banks in Ikire weren't counterfeit mistakenly killed seven people.

If time is money, then eleven Lagos internet fraud suspects just won themselves some cash from the Economic and Financial Crime Commission.

John was baptised with water, Christ with Holy Ghost, Nigeria Air Force with blood. Oguchi's brother, of Imo, who outlived him, can testify.

Won't people die of illnesses as Lagos shut down no fewer than 21 illegal pharmacies and drug stores?

Air force fight in the sky. But four officers who embezzled 41m will fight on their feet in small rooms for the next 21 years.

The police containing the anti-banditry protest in Kastina saved a protester from future bandit attacks by shooting him.

Osun. Ondo. Ekiti. Are Nigerians enemies of progress? Many can't take the upward progress of staple food prices anymore.

Protecting Port Harcourt residents against plausible sound pollution, Ben, a

sergeant, shot Daniel, an up-and-coming musician.

How fast we change! Mohamodu, 22, who abducted a 13-year-old in Osogbo has given 4 years of his life with hard labor to the prison.

2-year imprisonment in Delta: 3 specialists in church music instruments burglary can't support the music industry for now.

Lagos State: 21. Ondo state: 11 Sworn to keep the streets clean, police arrested protesters who littered the streets with their feet.

Baby learning to become a doctor in Lagos. Blessing, 27, owing some fee, has stayed in the hospital with her baby for 7 months.

After hours in the sun at a protest in Lagos, Adadu, a policeman, helped Kayode, a journalist, cleared his head with his baton.

After the deceased accused him of stealing his phone, ThankGod, 18, denied it by hitting his father, 40, to death in Benue.

Som Adedayor is a Nigerian writer. He currently runs for a degree in English Language at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state. In 2019, he was longlisted for Koffi Addo Prize For Creative Nonfiction. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lolwe*, *The Offing*, *Yaba Left Review*, *The Lagos Review*.