

CHASING CLOSURE

A Life Balanced on The Edge of Belonging

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THE EDGE OF BELONGING

My education in Ghana and the United Kingdom is an intriguing allure of adventures, a melting point of curiosity and cultures. Yet, amidst the cacophonies of accents and dialects, I remain an outlier. In England and Wales, I felt like that faint line lost in the grand circle of belonging. Not only did I become visibly an illegal immigrant, not by choice, but by the system itself which set the tune that made me become a ghost -yet contributing to the growth of its economy.

Even within Nigeria, I may have succeeded in wearing a regalia of professional, a social intellect and a fluency in the language of the workforce, yet my tongue stumbles over as I attempt to speak with an accent considered by my fellow Nigerians as not belonging with them, and thereby making me a Ghanaian. The Ghanaians, on the other hand, have already made it known that I do not belong to them. I am fully aware that I do have some Ghanaian blood from my maternal grandfather. But except for that bloodline sticking within my veins, I hang on the edge without proof of belonging.

Each place that I have been from birth, each community I have dwelled in becomes a set-in limbo – a life in half a circle, balancing on the edge of belonging. Many times, I wonder where exactly I fit. Even time seems to play against me just as my names.

From my middle name, I am Igbo; without my middle name, my "*Igboness*" is placed in doubt, exchanged for and comfortably given classification among the Hausa Fulani, yet I speak none of those dialects.

My life is in constant attempt to connect with each of its edges for a full belonging. Chasing closure in a circle that continuously seems elusive, complete and doubtfully whole. Yet with each chase, the circle seems to be building more semi-circles, excluding me from the full circle and thus morphing new impossibilities to find a balance on the edge of belonging.

This book is an invitation to follow my journey in life. It provides a map of the in-betweens, the testament of the bittersweet of not belonging to, and a seeming, yet elusive promise of the possibilities whole – yet found not in any full single circle of belonging.

BORN IN THE SHADDOW OF DEATH

She brought me into this world at such a young age, yet I never referred to her as "mother". I even rejected her when I was just five years old.

I am really emotional as I write this. My mother was only eighteen when she gives birth to me. My arrival must be a mixed feeling. Lying there, later, holding me in her hands as she pushes the nipple of her breast towards me. I imagine, she must have all sorts of feelings. I imagine my teenage mother's pale face lifting up weakly, with a faint smile and stretching her hand towards my grandmother who is now holding and cradling me gently between arms and hands. I am the result of a teenage pregnancy.

It is quite common for babies to cry when they are born, but I came with a rather unusual experience. Unlike most infants, I did not cry upon entering this world. My mother and grandmother worried that I might not survive, despite the fact that I was still breathing. I was like that observer, calmly taking in my new surroundings like a cool and collected individual observing between two worlds. This was not cool for my parents, they were far from being impressed, as they were consumed by the circle of fear all around them.

At least I know that with my mother, was my maternal grandmother; the day she gave birth to me.

My grandmother tells me that nature and I fought for survival and they joined in the fight by beating my feet with merciless gentleness. They wanted me to feel pain and cry out. After a few struggles, they prevailed over me. I had no choice but to fully accept being alive, I ushered a cry to everyone's relief and welcomed myself into the full balance of life's circle.

I do not have the exact coordinates of my birthplace- I'm talking about the exact spot on the map, with all those fancy latitude and longitude coordinates. I can only use respective imagination to paint a picture of what might have taken place then and there.

My mother gave birth to me in the midst of a fractured heart. I was born into a circle of chaos, amidst troubles, selfish divides and hope all mingled together like a wild dance party. To add a touch of irony, I was born right in the heart of unity, where Sénoufou, Dioulla, and vibrant immigrants from Niger, Mali, and other parts of Africa and Cote d'Ivoire came together in a magnificent blend of cultures. In the heart of the expansive Tchologo region lots of towns and villages evolves, each with its own captivating story woven into the fabric of time.

Amidst this expansive region, stands an enigmatic town called Ferkessédougou. This is sometimes shortened a Ferkessé, which is also the name of its charismatic founder, a Niarafola leader who founded the town in the 19th century.

In Ferkessé, Thursdays are usually market days and August is usually the last month of the raining season. The weather could be temperate and enjoyable due to the amount of rainfall or very hot as the weather bends under the expectations of the rain in evaporation. In August, the average heat index in Ferké could be very hot and it is common to hear of heat exhaustion and heat strokes as I observed seven years later after my birth when I went to visit my mother.

My grandmother also told me that after I was ushered into the world on that fateful Thursday of August, there was considerable doubt whether I would survive to bear a name at all. Nevertheless, lo and behold, I let out a hearty cry and earned not just one, not two, but THREE names to call my own.

How long it took before I ushered that loud cry? I cannot reasonably tell. As I give my first proof of the action of my lungs and expelling of anionic fluid and mucus and all hopes now regained my grandmother closes the scene of my birth. So again, I would use respective imagination to reconstruct the immediate events after I gave up my first cry.

My mother is pushing the nipple of her breast towards me, she is now connecting with her first labour experience, four year earlier. Four years earlier to my birth, she was only fourteen then. My elderly brother was born. He was not born in a hospital. Is it not strange that I have better knowledge of where my big brother was born than where I was born? He was born attended by local women in riverine village of Ebom, in the now Cross River State, Nigeria. Two years later, the child, my big brother Peko, died. After the dead of the child, my mother left the marriage. She was married to a man old enough to be her father. Life sure has a way of throwing some curveballs!

Lying in that bed in northern Cote d'Ivoire, my mother must have been finding herself being hunted by the of the pains of that past marriage, maybe harbouring some anger at her mother -my grandmother, who I guess did not know better than to give her in marriage and subject her to such pained fate. Despite such memories of pain, she turns her head and plants a kiss on my tended forehead. It is over now -she is out of a teenage marriage, spared out of the danger of labour pain and fear for having a still child. Her face now brightens with a smile as she sweetly holds me, oozing with warmth and joy. She not only has me but has also found love with a man of her choosing, breaking free from the shackles of an imposed, old marriage.

In the midst of this newfound happiness. As she sweetly holds me and oozes with warmth and joy, nature, which few minutes earlier was fighting with me, seemed to be in agreement with our serenity. The sun which has been elusive just moments ago, suddenly bath us as it provides a bright sun. If life is compared to a weather, then nature is not a predictable trusted friend. For no sooner, this brief respite is interrupted by the ominous presence of death once again entering into the room. As the cloud sailed beneath the sun, my mother is now gripped with sad memories of a dead son, and fears that I may also die premature. She is holding me tightly, hoping that I will live enough to sail through the storms of life and make her name proud.

Speaking of mothers and their complex relationships with their offspring. You may have heard about the intriguing accounts of mothers who despised their offspring simply because they were the product of a love affair gone wrong? It's quite fascinating, really. My own mother, for example, despite being broken on the fact that her relationship with my father did not culminate in a marriage outside of their cultural group. I was nevertheless a welcomed and cherished blessing. She and grandmother considered me a blessing sent from above. My mother hailed from the part of the world where being a single parent had no label of shame and disgrace. I was therefore pampered with love and showered with all the affections available at my privilege. In a way, it will be reasonable to think that she still longed to make it back to my father and I was perhaps the confident bridge of hope to that reunion.

Fast forward to 1975, I am two years old toddler. Something tragic happened, a devastating event will set in, shattering that hope of that reunion. My mother and grandmother, once again find themselves thrown into very awful and hearty race for survival. Once again, I am pulled into the circle of the shadow of the death. I cannot really provide full details except that this sudden affliction was a visiting cycle and the gravity of the situation is clear. Four years ago, I informed the reader earlier, that my elder brother Peko died at the age of two, in 1971. I am unable to provide descriptive narrative of the cause that led to his untimely demise. I am also unable to provide details on how long the battle for my recovery took that is how long I hanged in limbo, edging between the half circles of life and death. Whilst I cannot provide the details, I can state the fact that it was a very life-threatening situation and the most perilous experiences my parents ever faced.

From the narrative my maternal grandmother provided, it seems that eventually, I suffered from a condition that also included a reduction of sense of touch. All form of medicines both Traditional and orthodox failed. All hopes were gone –almost. Eventually an answered prayer came and a reference was tried as part of the resort. Someone advised my parents of a traditional medicine man who had a history of healing such ailment.

There was a problem. The reference lived in a remote location that would require travelling in a public transport on bumpy road for about two hours if not more. This was also a risky road, because I looked dead already, my skin was pale, I was insensitive to stimulus and fully shrunken. The very lines of my full skeletal frames where popping through the thin skin that I now bore. I was as half as already dead.

The incision into my body would make any normal adult cry. How much more a two years old child. I cannot fully use respective imagination to describe the emotions that were going through my grandmother’s mind. I cannot even describe what string of hope she had that made her take that trip. She was my life support. She mustered courage and took the next available bus from Ferkessédougou to Niellé in the prayerful hope that I would survive. As she watched the incisions being made into my chest and back, she narrated her fears as I did not show any sign of pain. I was all numbed. Even she could feel the pain as the blood gushed out of my tiny body. They made sixteen incisions in

my body and added some concoctions' whose mixtures were only known by the traditional practitioner. My mother could not come with us on this journey. She did not want to see me dying in her arm. My grandmother was my heroic life support. She was my super-mother.

Niellé was a whole different setting from Ferké. It will begin the big shift for my maternal grandmother. She had travelled to Niellé as a stranger. She had to stay for a while until it was medically safe for us to leave. Instead of leaving back to Ferké my grandmother settled in Niellé as it provided more opportunities to her advantage.

I survived the shadow of death and bounced back into the full circle of life with strings attached. Nevertheless, as think over the childhood experience, I cannot but sing the verse from the hymnody:

Because GOD lives, I can face tomorrow

.... Now I know GOD hold my future

My life is worth a living because GOD lives.

NNE AFO: When Tradition Clashes with Love

From the moment I was born into this world, I became a victim of a cultural course of division. Love and cultural expectations lock horns in a never-ending battle, threatening to overshadow my very existence as tradition clashes with love. My very existence is the accidental fruit of a forbidden love affair between an Igbo man and a Cross River woman.

The union was a scandalous affront that shook the foundation and sent shockwaves through the hearts of my rigid relatives. My paternal relatives were quite stern traditionalist, holding on to their customs with an iron grip. They disapproved without missing a beat, especially when it came to my mixed-tribal background – thereby setting my innocent life on the cultural edge.

Children are considered by most tribes in Nigeria as trophies. Parents pride and brag themselves for being able to conceive and give birth to children. The sense of joy and pride sometimes pumps that effulges when a child is born is often indescribably vain.

Relatives, especially the maternal relatives, normally parade the announcement with an outpour of white powder and majestic dancing steps, joined by other women who sing and dance. The men, on the other hand, praise and congratulate the fellow man for being man enough to impregnate a woman. The swell of pride and selfish acknowledgement often takes GOD out of the process of childbirth from the men who have become so lauded with praises as if it is their sole efforts to form and sustain a seed in the womb of the woman.

In a situation where both grandmothers of the new born baby are alive, there is a competition to show care for the baby and mother. Both the grandma from the father's side and the grandma from the mother's side want to be the one to look after the child.

So long as this competition exists between grannies, the fate of some children will innocently be exposed to an early version of the degradation of human pride. Thankfully, my only grandmother who is present at my birth is my maternal grandmother.

Although I am not inclined to claim that being born with only one grandmother present is the most fortunate and enviable circumstance a woman who has just given birth could possibly experience, I do mean to say that in this particular instance, it was the best thing for my parents.

My father found himself caught between the depths of love and the weight of familial obligations—a man trapped amidst the turbulence of conflicting forces. While he held a deep affection for my mother, the subtle echoes of cultural norms whispered by relatives, intertwined with age-old notions of Igbo supremacy, gnawed at him like relentless termites

I am not sure how many persons acted as guardians of cultural conformity, trying to persuade my father as they embody the oppressive burden of familial expectations. They unrelentingly coerce him to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of upholding the family's honour. This clash between love and traditional duty creates the backdrop for a truly heart-wrenching family dramas, where every heartbeat echoes with the agonizing discord of decisions made in the name of tradition – and unfortunately involves an innocent infant -me.

The prevailing belief among the Igbo concerning Calabar people is that they are inherently evil and promiscuous. However, being raised within both cultures, I believe this notion is merely a myth perpetuated by a strong negative stereotype.

The claims made by the Igbo people regarding the immoral behaviour of the Calabar people are primarily based on the numerous anecdotes shared by men about their encounters with Calabar women. Consequently, this led to an increasing number of Igbo men seeking out relationships with Calabar women, which in turn created a strong fear factor for Igbo women and parents who fear losing their partners or the sanctity of their marriages to women of Calabar descent.

Here is the truth, traditionally, as part of their readiness for building a home, Calabar women are trained, and have been known for their ability to care for, treat, and support their men by prioritizing love, respect, and submission. Consequently, when men recount their experiences with these women, they tend to portray these qualities in a rather promiscuous light instead of doing so as virtues of caring from these women.

Having lived on both sides, Igbo women are as sexually active as women from Cross River, except that you are likely to find more submission from Cross River women than Igbo women. The rest is assumption based either on prejudice or stereotype.

Of course, the assumption may not have even worked in the days of my father with regards to considering my mother. Let me play the devil's advocate and put myself in his shoes. Suppose you have a relative who actually had some real-life encounters with people from Calabar, and they present their perspective of the people as a primary source. You are likely to have your argument paralyzed, especially if it comes from someone you respect or owe to respect.

I am unable to precisely discern the extent of influence my father's relatives had on him. However, what I can ascertain is that numerous women and innocent children have suffered heartbreak as a result of parental or sibling influence interfering with their relationship and love choice. This influence has effectively paralysed counter arguments, utilizing parental authority and emotional blackmailing as means to coerce cultural compliance. The consequences of resisting societal pressures in this regard are often marked by a flood of incessant nagging, expressions of disappointment, and emotionally draining references that take a toll on one's well-being.

The point also here is that it was considerable difficult for Biafra to be united within itself.

My father, my mother and both grandmothers were all Biafrans – at least so they were referred to in Cote d'Ivoire in those days. Whereas to the Ivoirians all the factions of Nigerians that stood and had a cause with Ojukwu Odumegwu were Biafrans. Within us we were not.

The Biafra struggle historically included Cross River State, where my mother hailed from. But to most Igbos, these Cross Riverian did not fit the purpose of matrimonial

affiliation. To us the Igbos, all of us that came from Cross River were referred to as Nde-Calabar -meaning the Calabar people. When Colonel Ojukwu disappeared to Cote d'Ivoire for refuge, history has it that the struggle was being sustained by his second Obong Philip Effiong – he was not Igbo but a Biafran to the core – who stood on the front line.

Today's Biafra identity is a visible reflection of an inner mindset. There are visibly no shared ideological frames. The Biafra unity in the early 1970s was a tattered reality, fraying at the edges where tribes met. While the war against Nigeria had stitched us together with a shared unifying factor, the deep-rooted threads of prejudice stubbornly remain. Among Igbo parents and women, individuals like my mother were not merely seen as "Odumegwu" but were regarded as dangerous infiltrators slithering into the Igbo nest, threatening its purity. Today, more than fifty-year latter, that unity has further been marred, to the point that as Igbo people, we struggle to even find common ground based on our shared ethno-lingual heritage. Instead, we are further dividing the line based on administrative structures such as state and political parties – recently in Imo state, the Catholic Church went to war with itself over the appointment of Peter Ebere Okpaleke because he was not from the Mbaise in Imo State.

My mother was a woman with a broken relationship in search of love who stuck and gave herself to a man who declared and shows her the love she longs and misses. My father was a man who had reached the age of adulthood and had the means, yet still single, and succumbed to the to the demands of culture and society to settle and get married, and have children in order to provide his father or mother with a pride grandchild or catalogue of grandchildren.

However compatible these two were in love and felt about their love connection, the culture of people played a strong force in designing to them about their connection, thereby, overruling the heart of love.

It must have been a tough game for my father, especially considering that he was the “*Opara*”. As the first born maybe he was on the constant balance not to disappoint

societal expectation by marrying a non-Igbo, especially one that is nde-calabar. This is a no-go area!

Contrary to popular belief, my mother was not from Calabar. Sadly, most part of Nigeria classify anyone from Cross River as being from Calabar. She is from a different locality, but not from Calabar, we speak different languages in Cross River and Calabar people speak Efik. Besides, Igbo people forget that people of Cross River were also considered as Biafrans.

My mother thought that she has found love and was not aware of all these cultural divides and opinion about her. I am not able to provide a descriptive detail of the issues that happened. What I do know is that within the same year of my birth, my father would marry a blooded Igbo woman. My inability to provide further details stems from the fact that I have never been provided with full details of this this bit of my life.

On the other side, I am also tempted to think that my mother was going through her own emotional stage with societal advisors. Perhaps she is now being cautioned about the "*Oziza*" people, a term used by my maternal community to refer to the Igbo tribe. She must now be internalizing prevailing prejudice about Igbo people as well.

Growing up, I was exposed to various narratives about the Igbo community, often painting them in a negative light. Stories of their alleged cunningness, untrustworthiness, and involvement in dubious practices were whispered among my mother's social circle. It is possible that she internalized these prejudices and saw herself as a protector, shielding me from the perceived dangers associated with the Igbo people based on the heartbreak and rejection we both went through at my birth.

I was tainted by my mother's heritage, deemed unworthy of acceptance because of the mistaken origin of her state and the blood that flowed through my veins. However, upon reflection, I have come to understand that these narratives are often rooted in ignorance and perpetuated by a lack of understanding and empathy towards different cultures and communities.

My very existence at infancy, was a testament to the fault lines dividing Biafra, a constant reminder of the price paid for love defied. For a long time, I felt trapped within two circles – neither here nor there. My identity has been limbo of a circle within circles – balancing on the edges of cultural belonging.

FRACTURED CHILDHOOD

When my mother felt betrayed of love and heartbroken, she decided to send me away from Ferkessédougou where she lived in the same town with my father.

From infancy, it seems that I have been the fancy of messy situations. My world was surrounded with fear in the midst of love and care. My mother loved me dearly as did my grandmother. Yet there had been full of nightmares of losing me. At birth I was still for a while, then the fear of being death again at age two. After my full recovery I was returned to my mother in Ferké.

At this stage my mother was in deep struggles and had to send me back to my grandmother. Her lifestyle could not allow her to have full time attending to me, coupled with the fact that she did not want to lose me to a family that was not willing to accept her. Her messy situations of love and youthful lifestyle would send me back to grandmother in 1976 when I was three years old.

Two years later, in 1978, I would also disown my mother. I did not know anything about my mother. I was too young to remember her. How many biological mothers have lost out on the best part of their child's life is only for heaven to reveal and the devastating effects can never be reckoned with the right expressions in an attempt to translate the emotional language.

In September 1979, I am six years old. I am walking behind my maternal grandmother on a dusty road in Niellé. We have been walking for more than half an hour. We are walking to l'Ecole Primaire Public Niellé 2. I am excited because I am going to start school. This was the only Primary School in all of Niellé in 1979. The short name for the school is EPP Niellé 2.

The locals in Niellé refer to my grandmother as “Madame”. She was very conversant with the efficacy of plant-based medicines – she was an herbalist in her own right. The locals would come to her for consultations and she would freely offer medication based on plant knowledge. She was accepted as one of theirs and known by many persons by virtue of her trade.

My mother is among the unfortunate women who had been denied the privilege of their heart crave, being called by what they deserved to be called. I wish I knew that, and I would have given her the joy of hearing me call her by the name “mother”. Now the weight of this makes my heart feeling the fracture of the missed opportunities as write this. However, I cannot undo history for death came too early and my understanding came too late to mend that fractured part of my childhood with my mother. At this stage of my life, the only person that I know as my mother is my grandmother. Her real name is Bessie Ibe. But I call her “Mma” –meaning mother. Now being a parent, I am aware of a privilege that my mother missed. For throughout her lifetime, I called and responded to her calling on me with the appellation of “Aunty”.

As we enter the office of Mr. le directeur (the headmaster), my excitement could be heard through my heart beat at the prospect of imagining myself in khaki uniform. we are waiting, people are coming in and out of the office. Of these people, many are sharing courteous greetings.

We waited with my grandmother for almost what looked like an eternity. Finally, Mr. le directeur calls us in, it is our turn. They are many people –parents and teachers- that are waiting for the attention of Mr. le directeur.

“How old is he?” Mr. le directeur asks in French, after few formalities.

“He is six years old.”

“What is his name?” He asks further

“Emmanuel” Mma replied.

In the meantime, I am lost in profound thoughts of blissful daydreams. My mind is meandering about my journey of schooling from Primary to secondary, graduating from wearing kaki short to trousers.

“I am sorry he can’t start school this year.” I hear Mr. le directeur say to my grandmother.

I am disappointed. Now the reality is dawning on me. I am noticing things I did not notice since we entered the office as I seek for a place to hide myself. It is an average size, square room, with two wooden windows opposing each other. A messy wooden desk sat close to the wall about four steps after the windows. On the left side of the

office were cabinets, some of which had openly displayed contents ranging from artifacts, to books, files, text books. The office also serves as a store.

“Why can’t he attend school?” I hear my Mma ask.

“He is not grown enough to start school. His hand is almost there. Maybe next year he would have grown taller.”

Suddenly, all my daydream of hopeful transition of khaki uniform from wearing shorts to trousers disappear. In Cote d’Ivoire, just as most African Francophone Countries children in primary and Secondary school wear as uniform a brown khaki material as uniform. In Cote d’Ivoire the boys in primary school were restricted to wearing pair of short culottes or panta-culotes. The graduation to secondary school changes that. In Secondary School all boys wear trousers.

I could not believe that my hope was being deferred right in from of me. My friend and playmate Abdoulaye was already in school and the thought of staying back was in itself as sick as the feeling of hunting and staying home alone.

My Mma looks at me and sees the disappointment on my face. Mr. le directeur’s face looks very resolute. Besides he has many other parents waiting and being the only school, there was only a limited number he could take. But my Mma is a great combatant and would not take the word “no” on face value. I am not able to recall the full details of her line of reasoning. At the end I am allowed to start Primary education.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the process for school enrolment in rural areas was not done by age but by the stretch of one’s hand over to reach the opposing ear. I was six and at age six my right hand should normally be able to touch my left ear. When Mr. le directeur called me forward and he asked that I raise my right and cross over my head to touch my left ear. I was wanting in my ability to do that. I was smaller than the regular age six child in height. Therefore, I had to be sent home. It was a disappointing feeling. My grandmother pleaded and reasoned with the head of school. Finally, I am allowed to start the first year of the cours primaire elementaire (elementary primary course one), known as CPE1.

My grandmother impacted my life in so many ways. I grew up thinking that she had no fear. I recall this incident when she came to my defence. I was squatting and emptying my bowels when I saw a mother hen. I tried chasing hen and chicks when all of a sudden,

the hen was pouncing at me. As soon as I called out Mma rushed out with a log of firewood and scared the hen away. I always felt safe with her. The incident of the chasing hen, would however leave a scar on me for a long time.

Like many other houses in Niellé, we did not have a toilet attached to our house, in order for one to ease themselves a nearby bush would be used. Since I was still a child, it was adequate for me to use the immediate open space and grandma would later dispose of it in a nearby bush.

Now that I am grown up, I am putting together the pieces that led my staying with grandmother. At this time, I am called Enoh Augustin Emmanuel.

A bit more about my maternal grandmother. My grandmother had two girls. My mother was the eldest and she had another daughter called Maria. Both children were born in Ghana. I am not able to tell where in Ghana. Except that I recall hearing them usually talking about Yendi being the place of their early childhood. My mother had a Ghanaian name as Esi and her sister was Amma. In Ghanaian culture most people are named according to the day of the week that they are born. Esi is for girls born on Sunday and Ama for Saturday born. I have never heard them talk about my grandfather, who gave birth to my mother and sister. I do know however for sure that they were born of a Ghanaian father, if not different Ghanaian fathers.

I would assume that my grandmother never had luck as well with men and this apparently transcended to her daughters. My maternal aunt, my mother's sister, Maria, would return to Nigeria. As far I remember, she had been in the house of more than two men in marriage as at the last time I saw her, she had been married thrice. My mother has been disappointed and as result had to hide me to secure the child of her womb and nine enduring months of pregnancy.

Back to the instance of denying my mother; I heard from some of the locals that, when I was five years of age, I once made my mother cry in the public square. The truth is, I am unable to remember that story at all. I guess I was too young to have any recollection. The story has it that when my mother travelled from Ferkessédougou to come and visit

my grandmother and me. She sighted me, but I ran away from her. There was a stream of uncontrollable tears. The fact is that I did not know who she was.

I can imagine the embarrassment and pain to see that her own child, the son of her womb is denying her. This must have brought her to face the sad reality of the consequence of distant and absentee motherhood.

Talk about absentee parenthood. It is a difficult and often overlooked issue that can have profound effects on both the parent and the child. In this case, my mother's absence led to a heart-breaking moment where her own child did not recognize her. This could be very painful and leading to confusion of immeasurable impact.

In 1981, during the grand vacation we made up for the missing. I was put on a vehicle by myself – it was a locally reconstructed 22-seater Toyota Dyna shuttle. I had sustained a big injury on my right foot. While we were hoeing the field as part of the school labour, one the pupil on my right accidentally headed his hoe into my feet, what I remember is that I saw a white thing popping out. The wound was still fresh by some days, I forgot all of these in the excitement of the journey.

When I was a child, I used to think that the trees and the other plants in the savannah region were somehow following us on our journey. After about two hours of travel, the driver hands me over to my mother. Back in those days, there was a strong sense of community and trust, so it felt perfectly fine to travel with a completely unfamiliar driver for two hours. That's how our reunion began.

During the time I spent with my mother, I had the opportunity to learn a few new things. One of the most memorable experiences was getting to watch television for the very first time. I find myself perched on the chair, eyes glue to the flickering square box, each flash of black and white colour creating a portal to a new kind of world. This wonder of a TV is like wonderland.

The wonder and excitement I felt when witnessing the power of electricity was truly incredible. I was completely captivated by the sight of a refrigerator powered by electricity especially since in Nielle, where I lived, fridges were mostly powered by

kerosene and not electricity. I must admit that I had a couple of unpleasant encounters due to my curiosity and experimentation with electricity. While I found these shocks to be somewhat exhilarating, my mother, understandably, did not share my enthusiasm for such experiences.

I also picked up the skill of showering myself while I was with my mother. She only showered me for the first day and encouraged me to do so. Up till then grandmother would take care of my bathing needs. At age eight I had my first personalized shower by myself. Interestingly, I found myself frequently focusing on washing my stomach, although I couldn't really pinpoint the reason behind it.

The wound that I sustain from the gardening was increasing. Mother took care of that and within three days I noticed a great halting difference. Her method was simple, she would use warm water to disinfect the wound and surroundings then would apply some antibiotic powder -I suspect it is tetracycline due to its yellow and red colour.

This visit to Ferké was not our first meeting. It was our second visit. Beside the visit of denial, she came again to visit, when I was in Primary two (CPE2), in 1982. Then we connected and I was happy to see and welcomed her.

In between my mothers visit , I had repeated Primary one, My grandmother was surprised that I repeated primary one. I told my her that the teacher did not like me. This was just based on a single instance when we went to buy food. I bought fried sweet potato and the teacher, Madame Constance refused me to eat it during class, yet another pupil ate his. Now that I have grown, I realized that she did not hate me and did not also see the other pupils while he was eating.

My dear old grandmother could not read. She wanted to encourage me to study and would employ a clever ploy to motivate me to hit the books. She would ask me to read my books to her as a way of encouraging me to study. Instead of actually reading the right thing, I would just look at the mesmerizing pictures in the textbooks and forged reading by conjuring up fantastical tales in my mind. As a result, many of my books often ended up being transformed into magnificent paper aircrafts, majestic boats, and soaring kites that whisked my imagination away to distant realms.

In all this, I had strong desire to really make my grandmother proud and as time went on, I gradually became one of the best pupils in the school, I recall how in Cours Elementaire 1 (CE1), that is in Primary three our teachers Monsieur had become so fond of me. I also became his interpreter, at one occasion He even took me to forests, in search of guidance from a marabout, and I would assist in interpreting their conversation.

In that hushed forest, I witnessed a dance of knowledge, a secret exchange between men of different eras and backgrounds. With each word I interpreted, I felt nurtured something within me, the desire to make my grandmother proud morphing into a yearning to bridge gaps, to connect, to understand the relationship between worlds. I wanted to become powerful. I sought to acquire a power that would shield both myself and my grandmother from the harsh realities that fractured our lives. In my naivety, I believed that the esoteric realm held the key to this protective strength. Yet, despite this resolute pursuit, an inexplicable fear would seize me when I closed my eyes and contemplated the unfolding events. This mysterious fear would promptly halt my fanciful imaginings, leaving me with lingering doubts and unanswered questions.

AN ATTRACTION TO ADVENTURE

Niellé! Not like a claustrophobic village where everyone was in everyone else's business, is a place that weaves with the threads of my childish reckless and impulsive will, creating a narrative of fiery and daring mistakes and untamed curiosity that colours my sojourning in village where families are so interconnected that it becomes impossible to distinguish where one ends and another begins. I would tell you about a spark that ignited not just the only market square but set me on a ride of self-discovery, where mischievous flames danced alongside the shadows of an adventurous spirit

In Niellé, the Harmattan season is a dreaded period between November and March. The region becomes a desolate wasteland, with most herbs and trees dying out due to the parched air. Leaves fall off, leaving behind a skeletal frame, waiting for the rains to revive them. The Harmattan season brings with it a paradoxical impact, causing extreme cold at night and scorching heat during the day. The weather is unforgiving, causing the human skin to bear the brunt of its dehydrating nature. Our skins would require an extra dose of industrial jelly or locally produced shea butter to stay hydrated, or else it will crack and flake at the slightest touch.

Everyone's favourite time during the Harmattan season is the fireside. Fireside fellowship is very common during the Harmattan season. At night, under the moon, children—and sometimes elders—gather; playing and recounting tales and telling stories. In the early part of the morning, we prepare to stave off the cold from the night before. We light an open fire and warm ourselves. This is a beautiful circle. The stories weave in with the flickering flames, drawing us in with a sense of belonging.

There exists a sinister side, hidden in the depths of its fiery embrace. Sometimes, for reasons unbeknownst to us, the flames conspire with the mischievous Harmattan wind, wreaking havoc upon our beloved farmlands. It is a sight both dreadful and tragic, painting a vivid picture of destruction.

I was seven years old when I had my first grand experience with the love circle of fire and the harmattan wind. I was playing with some other boys. I was holding a match box that we had used to light the fire for one of our catches of game. The sun was setting –it was about five o'clock in the evening; we were in the market. I pulled out of one of the sticks from the roof of a particular stall. I had this strange, sudden desire to play with the match. So, I ignited it. My hand craned upward so the small flame could kiss the raffia.

What happened next was beyond our young imaginations. The mesmerizing orange waves of fire became entangled with the powerful gusts of the Harmattan wind. It was as if the air itself had become magnetized, causing the flames to spread from one stall to another in a matter of seconds. The thatched roofs proved to be a formidable opponent for us boys, and we were helpless to stop the rapid escalation. Fortunately, the entire village quickly gathered to combat the roaring inferno. Despite our best efforts, only a handful of stalls were saved from the merciless flames. The once vibrant market was reduced to ashes, leaving a sense of loss and devastation in its wake. The village market was gone, fortunately homes near the market remained untouched. Thankfully, no one was hurt.

Adventures can be dangerous in the most enticing way. It has a way of turning even the most mild-mannered child into a daredevil. As a child, I was fascinated by this story and quickly became obsessed with the idea of trying it out. There was this tale going around that some animal or insect parts had mystical abilities. One of the tales most important of noting, was the one of the wasp nests. There was this common belief that if one were to diligently rub the wasp nest on their palm and slap someone else, that the slap would send pangs of stinging pain through the affected person. Most children did not believe this tale, but there was always that one child who was a little bit more daring than the rest – I was one of such. I was attracted to the danger and mystery that it entails.

I became obsessed with the idea to the point of trying it out. I remember going to great lengths to find a wasp nest.

We were on mid-week school break when I saw a wasp nest. I collected a wasp nest from under the roof of granary and started rubbing it on my palm. I must say, I was a bit

apprehensive about the whole thing, but my adventuring childishness was insistent that it would work. After a few minutes of rubbing, I took aim at me to slap my left arm and check its potency. It is in this moment, that I saw someone passing by. He was in CM2 and I was in CP2; he was three classes ahead of me, perhaps three to four years older. I did not want the moment going to waste.

Quickly, I began rubbing it on my palm harder. I was ready to sting someone. I swiftly went towards him, ready to test the theory out on this unsuspecting fellow, and without warning gave him a hard slap. I didn't wait to see his reaction; I ran off. Maybe he would forget about it? He did not forget about it. He caught me in school the next day. When I was confronted with the evidence of my childish antics, I could not deny it and instead played coy. I was as silent as a lamb; my eyes did all the pleading for me; nonetheless there was this look in those same pleading eyes that said to everyone that I knew I had done something wrong, yet I loved every minute of it. He must have heard the plea from my eyes loud and clear, because he decided to take pity on me, and released me.

We were told that Niellé shared a boundary with Mali. Well, I was up for a geography lesson and feeling as adventurous as ever. I decided to take a walk to Mali one evening. I walked until the houses were few and far between, and the night-time had caught up. I had not realized how off course I had gone up until then. I was ready to panic. And then I heard humming in the distance. The humming of a motorbike. It got louder and louder until it abruptly came to an end and the rider stopped next to me.

After interrogating me, he decided I was trustworthy enough for a ride. He took me to his house. It seemed to be the last house in Niellé. He had been transferred at here. The rider just so happened to be the father of Bernard, the young boy that I had slapped with my wasped palm. We played for a while, then Bernard's father returned me to my grandmother for the night. Once again, our community had come through for one another once again. Those were the days when we were really close to our neighbours. We knew everyone in the neighbourhood and we looked out for each other. There was a real sense of community. Everyone helped each other out and looked out for each other's child.

Today, we are not as close to our neighbours as we once were. Most of the present generation has technology in their hands at all times, whether it be phone or computer. We are used to being connected to the internet and looking things up at the touch of a button. But it wasn't always like this. We were our own social network, without the internet connection. No television, no computers, no phones.

There was always something to do, whether it was a game of tag or hide and seek. And if there wasn't anything organized, we would just make up our own games. We were always moving, always playing. We made our toys from tins, bicycle spokes, boxes—anything that our hands came across. And we played until dusk. Most of our parents were not wealthy, but that never really crossed our minds.

Technology has taken over and we are all too busy looking at our screens to bother interacting with the people around us. It's a shame, because those were some of the best times of our life.

We lived in a world where the common placed mode of getting around where by walking on foot and using bicycles or moto-bicyclettes. Seeing an airplane was in the books, if it was not in the books, then it was like finding a shooting star. Once, we walked and bicycled 30 kilometres just to see a utility aircraft. That first experience of seeing a plane has stayed forever with most us.

Niellé had a rich number of local artisans making local clothing using the weaving system. It also had a port for harvesting cottons that would serve for importation and making cotton fabrics. After I had recovered from one of my ailments, Grandma needed to get some clothes made for me quickly, as we had come into Niellé in an emergency state. Baba Vali was one of the main tailors and he lived almost closed to where my grandmother lived, about 5 minutes' walk through a path boulevard of grass. Vali had children, some younger than me and some older. Before long, Abdoulaye and I were bonded. The Vali's family was a place I was blessed to have made my own. Baba Vali was a father and kind hearted man. He sat there with his hand made clothes for people. There was something about the clothes he made. Maybe this was particular to me, as I never sampled any opinion, neither had it occurred to me to do so until now. The clothes he made had a particular feel on my body as if they were specifically made from the heart. I think it must be the result of passionate input in his tailoring craft. Baba Vali's

wrinkles on his forehead, were often threatened by his kind gestures and smile. At the same time, he was a tough disciplinarian.

Baba Vali's eldest son, seems to have taken his disciplinarian attitude. With Abdoulaye, we did a lot of things together. Abdoulaye used to convince me to go get some money from my grandmother. Grandmother used to sell tobacco for snuffing. I usually fell to his demands and we will use the money to buy child-driven snacks. It was not stealing. I was my grandmother's spoilt and she will usually give me what I ask for. On this occasion, Baba Vali's eldest son, got to know and he gave Abdoulaye the beating of his lifetime

Abdoulaye was about two years older than me. We would go out and practice aiming for game all the time. Birds and lizards were our favourite. I was not the best marksman. Abdoulaye, obviously the most skilled of us both, never let me live it down. At 9 years old, he was already proving to be a very good hunter. I had only aimed and killed game once. It was a red head agama lizard.

The Savanah region has a group of hunters known as "Dozos." The Dozos are traditional hunters and belonged to a confraternity of initiated hunters. There was a belief that they used supernatural aid to protect themselves. Up to this day, they are said to be very close to the animal spirits, which teach them rituals. They always dressed in strange clothing reflective of their connection with the animals.

I was Abdoulaye's favourite joke to tell. He often brags himself as becoming a Dozo one of these days, and my poor marksman skills would never land me a spot in their shadow. The other boys liked to join in too, sometimes. At the end, all of the laughs would simmer down in our throats as our teeth gnawed at our savoury catches. I almost always cooked the game. We would pick up a tin used for tomatoes from the street. That was our cooking pot. I would gather cooking palm oil and salt. The cooking fire was kicked up above stones, little sticks acting as fuel. There was laughter. All the shaming and teasing melted away into a feast of fellowship and camaraderie.

It was not only our hunt that we ate together. Vali was a kind man, and his family was a family to me. During mealtime, food was served to accommodate everyone— even those who had come to sew cloth. It was a great fun. Our water came from wells. There was no tap water. Cups and plates were shared and passed around amongst one another. We ate with our hands from the same dish.

In those days communal fellowship was a high value. Everyone knew everyone, and treated each other with respect and equality. There was a sense of community that is difficult to find today. Everyone helped out when someone needed it and looked out for one another. It was a time when people were more connected to each other and cared about others than they do now.

Even religious difference was no force to break the bond that existed in this community. There were three major religious practices in Niellé – Islam, Animism and Christianity. Children of all religions played together without any thought of difference. We were just children enjoying the company of other children. Even as we kept growing and were faced with the reality of living in a divided world, they continued in forging a lifestyle that related the importance of religious tolerance. I remember that the only Catholic mission once took in two persons living with disabilities – one of which I remember clearly was a Yaya and was a practicing Muslim. During the Christmas and New year period, the church will organize a feast of love when everyone was expected to cook and bring and people will attend despite their religious subscription. The taste of assorted meals and varied drinks, and games was a heavenly combination that always makes us feel happy and satisfied. But there's something even better about this: it's sharing this experience with people who are united in a close-knit community circle.

The community circle in Niellé was close-knit and always looked out for one another. No child was without a family, which helped me feel connected and explore many different areas of adventure. I was never bored living in Niellé because there was always something new to discover and new zones of adventures to explore.

As I grow older, I understand that not all adventures are as simple as they seem. The wasp nest story and the fire play are a good example of this. Looking back on it now, I can see how foolish and reckless I was in my attraction to adventure.

MEETING MY FATHER

September 1981, I am eight years old and this is the first time, I ever am seeing and using a telephone in my life. At this moment my mother is now twenty-six years old. This is also the first time that I hear about my father and have any vivid recollection talking to my father.

As I dig into the depths of my memories, I am struck by the intricate events that was my mother's life. Her pursuit of love, like a compass guiding her through the wavy sea of emotions, is both captivating and disconcerting. It was as if she breezed through life, her heartstrings held with the delicate threads of desire and longing. Yet, as I ponder upon the twists and turns of her journey, I am reminded of the profound complexities that shaped her character.

She possessed a remarkable resilience, likened to a sturdy acacia weathering the storms of time. Each disappointment seemed to fuel her determination, propelling her forward with an unwavering belief in the power of love. And so, it is with a sense of both admiration and caution that I reflect on my mother's pursuit. Though her path may have been fraught with challenges, I cannot help but marvel at her unwavering spirit. I will share the reasons for my evolving perception of her shortly. However, let me make it clear that my intention is not to disparage the woman who carried me in her womb and brought me into this world.

Even though my mother entered into other relationships, her heart still held a place for my father. It seems my mother has still not overcome her love for my father, following the break off, due to the unfortunate cultural belonging complex, despite that she has been in other circles of relationships. I must admit that as I write this bit of my life, I am ashamed to talk much about the chronicle of my mother in pursuit of love.

The reader will agree with me that it is difficult for people who write or tell their autobiography to escape the fact of those seeming less likely aspects of their lives. I wish I could restrict myself only to those happy and great aspects of my life that are worth making public display or excite myself in presenting only the saintly attributes of the

circles that make up my background. The truth nevertheless remains, every one of us have some dark patches and are not born of angels.

Even in the Bible saints have their vulnerable human aspects still mentioned in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. It will therefore be a mere drive towards vanity and dishonest dispensations if I bury the skeletons in the family line that bore the flesh of my existence. I am not a saint, my father was not a saint, neither was my mother. Satan has some part of every human except the Messiah.

My mother's quest for a love for enduring -happily live after- transformed her into something I could not recognize. While in Ferké, she had found a man working with "La Régie des chemins de fer Abidjan-Niger (RAN)". The Abidjan-Niger Railway is a 1,260-kilometre rail track in West Africa francophone region that links Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso through Niamey in Niger Republic. I cannot recall his name, he had children, one of which was Edith. I am not sure what happened to their mother, except that she was not around. At this stage I suspect she must have passed away to death as they easily accepted my mother.

I had known some other individuals who shamelessly took advantage of my mother's relentless drive to find love. It was disheartening to witness how they manipulated her emotions and used her vulnerability for their own selfish gains. While my mother never explicitly explained her motivations to me, I can't help but believe that she was determined to break the cycle of failed relationships that had plagued her bloodline for generations.

Her mother, my grandmother had failed to settle with a man she would call her own. Witnessing her hardships, my mother made it her mission to create a different reality for herself. She longed for a place she could truly call her own, a home where she could find solace and build a foundation of love and stability. It is within this context that I suspect my parents' conversation took place.

My father, once again single, represented a glimmer of hope for my mother. Perhaps she believed that their love story could be reignited, with a new chapter written full of happiness and fulfilment. The prospect of finding love and creating a home together must have been a tempting proposition, fuelled by the desire to break free from the chains of past disappointments.

As to whether I was excited or not at the prospect of meeting with my father, I cannot recall what my emotions were on that day.

What I do remember is the 1983 feeling of excitement. We are now two years after and it is another beginning of the *Grande vacances*, that is the end of academic year holiday. It is towards the end of July 1983. I am excited because, I am going to meet the man I spoke to some years ago on a landline, My father. The journey was by night. The journey from Niellé, in the Savanah region to Abidjan, in the South took us about ten hours to complete. We began the previous evening and arrived Abidjan the next morning. This is the first time I travelled in the night. I stayed awake almost through the journey in the long coach car, I think we are almost fifty persons in the vehicle on that night journey.

As the first rays of daylight pierced through the windows, we finally arrived in Abidjan. The city welcomed us with its vibrant energy, a stark contrast to the quietness of Niellé. Amidst the bustling crowds and unfamiliar surroundings, I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment and anticipation for the moments that awaited me with my long-lost father. The night journey had come to an end, but a new chapter was about to begin.

I eventually had the long-awaited opportunity to meet with my father, a moment that held great significance in my life as a mere ten years old at the time. I am now wondering if there was any anticipation or nervousness welling up inside me as I followed my mother to meet him. It had been two years since I had established a true connection with my mother, and now the moment had finally arrived to meet the other half of my biological belonging.

As I stood before him, I couldn't help but notice the feeling of protection that I never knew I that I had missed. He had a smile that hinted at a mischievous spirit. Yet, there was an undeniable air of unfamiliarity that hung between us. It seemed as though time had created an invisible barrier, distorting the clarity of my memories of our first encounter. While the details of that moment have become somewhat blurred over the years, the emotions that swirled within me remain vividly etched in my mind. Despite the initial uncertainties, I couldn't deny the surge of curiosity and longing to know my father better.

As we exchanged awkward pleasantries, I found myself yearning to bridge the gap that had been created by our physical separation. It was a mixture of excitement and apprehension as we embarked on this journey of getting to know one another, like two puzzle pieces slowly coming together to form a cohesive picture. Little did I know then, that this meeting with my father would shape the course of my life, unravelling layers of identity, connection, and self-discovery that I had yet to explore.

THE REUNION

In Abidjan, on a very heart-rending day that a child of my age should not have been exposed to, my mother became aware that she would be engaged in a struggle to keep me in one-sided allegiance to her. A realization which she was willing to come out as winner at all cost. She would rather have custody of me – her only child and hope than lose me.

In 1984 I am living with my father. My mother was not staying with us. She would only come to visit from time to time or I travel to go and spend some weekend at my mother's place. Both mother and father are living in Abidjan. By this time, Abidjan has been replaced by Yamoussoukro as the political capital of Cote d'Ivoire. Despite the transfer of government functions from Abidjan to Yamoussoukro in a year earlier, in 1983. Abidjan still remained the *facto* capital and maintaining all its administrative and diplomatic prowess. My father lived in Abobo SOGEFIHA while my mother lived about thirty minutes' drive apart in Adjame.

The living conditions between both parents were different in their way. My mother lived in the shared communal compounds with about 13 households. The households had three toilets and bathrooms that was shared by all the occupants. Living at my father, on the side I had a liberty of a room to myself, we had privacy and one family bathroom and toilet. I was the only child surrounded by adults two distant relatives from our kinsmen, a housemaid and my father. Living at my father's was strict while living at my mother allowed me to unleash my childhood.

I was also constrained most of the time with regards other things that pertains my father. During the week, I will spend that after lunch break at my uncle's place, not precisely my uncle but also a kinsman. Nda Namdi, was a strict man. His real name is Nnamdi. The word "Nda" or "Dede" is an adjective in Igbo vernacular to describe respect and seniority. The only spots for unleashing my childhood were school and my mother's place and of course, when I was on midweek break. During the midweek break I would be left at home to play all manner outside the stern gaze of my father. Adwoa. The house help was a *laissez-fairian* adult who allowed me the freedom to play as much as I liked. I recall an incident when my teacher in school would not permit me to unleash my childhood flow. I had to be detained by the teacher during break.

While my classmates were busy playing, jumping and screaming during a forty to forty-five minutes break, I was incarcerated to the black board. By my teacher. Until date I recall the beating that I have received on that faithful day. I was beaten with a fan belt. My ordeal started way before the break. I guess it will be fitting to say that I had endured up to an hour of disciplined tutoring. What was the issue? I had difficulties in comprehending the division operation operations. My primary four teacher was bent in letting me understand the operations. This is 1984. In 1984 it was normal to be given corporal discipline. At the end of the day, despite the beatings I still could not understand how the operations work. Here was however the strange thing. The next day, I was effortlessly able to fully understand the operations of division and it became one of my best. Then I thought my teacher was unkind, but now I live to appreciate him.

I lived happily in both worlds I like a whole circle – at least so it was in my childhood mind. I really had no idea on the relationship gap between my father and my mother. Until one day another adult joined in. My freedom lines were further cut off. There was a big crisis of misunderstanding. A new wife has just been brought from Nigeria for my father. What she understood and could speak was English and Igbo. What I understood and could speak was French. I recall this particular day, when I had to go light the gas stove to make eba for myself. I was eleven years of age and that was my first time to light a gas. I served myself from the already cooked sauce that she had cooked. While I was at it, my father's new wife came and was speaking to me. I knew she was not happy over something but really could not tell what exactly it was. It was latter in the evening, when my cousin, Cletus came back from work that he interpreted her reactions to me. She was not happy with the fact that I had to light the gas to cook and serve myself, as I could have caused a fire accident. She did also mention that she had asked me if I wanted to eat and I responded in the negative. I recalled I was asked something and indeed responded in the negative. That is, I said no. I did not know that she was asking if I was ready to eat. I thought she was saying something else. Language was a barrier. I understood French, she did couldn't speak French; she spoke in English, I was English dumb.

The language barrier and probably other related issues that really have nothing to do with me will eventually create a big divide. There was the stacking of problems connected with living with a step mother. Maybe she was trying to protect her domain of marriage and would have no need of any external issues. Anything that was not fitting within the circle of her domain marital settlement was an unwelcome intrusion. By this

time, the maid has been asked to leave. I am not sure how, but now I know why. We will eventually have a half -sister through her – the maid.

On 1984 A big quarrel ensued, unlike the quiet and gentle mother that I think I knew, I would hear and see my mother raising her voice and shouting. My step mum was also shouting. The women were having a fighting match of war and gesticulations. Aunty Vicky, uncle Pascal and my father were there, I heard them talking also but not as loud as my mother's (step and biological. The place was in array. We the children, me and the other children of aunty Vicky and uncle Pascal were playing, I think it was also the birthday of one of them. The impact of the discussion was never disclosed to me. In many ways, I am grateful to this inability to comprehend English language at that stage of my life. It was a blessing for the tender part of my life and age. For, I am not sure how I would have borne the collateral damage of those verbal arsenals that were unleashed as they fought for whatever territory.

I am not sure which of these two women left with the inner satisfaction of having used a comparative verbal armoury. One thing was however sure, my mother fought on already lost ground. She did not belong to the desired ethnic circle and it was time to stop day dreaming. For the other woman had a well secure territory and legal right as she had a bride price paid for. My mother was a victim of a hope of love built on day dreaming castles. My father was also a victim of cultural and family ties too strong for him to break. They were both tied to distinct destiny circles with narrative they could not re-write. Unfortunately, I was caught in both halves of those circles.

I was such a disappointment to my mother – so she did make me realize latter in the evening. I cannot recall fully how the way home was. But I do recall that I had all my belonging with me packed in a suitcase. I was called out from my playmates and told that I would be going to stay with my mother and return to my father when it was time for me to go to Secondary School. All things being equal they were talking of a two years gap, from the year nineteen eighty-four to the year nineteen eighty-six. I do however recall, how I felt disappointed. Before given me a verdict of the decision to go and live with my mother, I was actually being asked, as if given a choice, which of my parents that I would love to go with it. I opted to stay with my father without even giving it a blink thought. I was excited. Excitement made fun at me when I was not in mood for

mockery and fun. These adults would not heed to my desire, they only asked for the sake of asking for they had already decided my fate in the matter. They were only being nice. My mother felt disappointed that I would choose my father instead of her.

Why was she disappointed? Earlier, before they started the meeting that ended in verbal tantrum, my mother called me in confidence to buy my commitment. She told me that if I am asked who I will go with I should chose her. That point of call to ask my choice of parent came. I chose my father. That was a pain to my mother. For another time in her life, her only son was rejecting her. For another repeated time I had denied my mother – so she must have felt. I had a sense of independent thinking and would cling to what I felt. Beside I was still childish enough to understand the weight of my action. Beside I was at that age in my life when boys tend more to their fathers than mothers. Boys grow in three stages. I was in the second stage, a age twelve. This stage includes a period when I started wanting to learn to be a man and was looking more and more to a male figure and my father’s house provided me with the possibility for that look-out. I had my father and Cletus.

My mother, I did mention earlier, lived in a two-room house. During the day the house will serve as an eatery. people will come in buy food and drink. One of my best groups of clients was the people from the famous football club known as the Stade d’Abidjan. That was when I first met the legendary Nigerian footballer, Stephen Keshi in 1985. I felt attached to him because he was a Nigerian and I recalled how he was struggling to communicate in French then probably also for the reason that he seemed to be the only male in that pack with a closeness to my pro-genetic circle -the only Nigeria in the team. I was proud of him. I would receive casual uncle like strokes and jokes whenever he happens to be around. The rest was imaginary affections – nothing really more.

There were two problems living with my mother. I had no male presence to support me in this stage of my life. Beside this She was a busy woman with a lifestyle that would really not make a full care for me. As a single mother the responsibility of providing was huge on her shoulder. She did a lot in order to make sure that I was at ease and happy. Nevertheless, Somehow, I felt part of me was becoming restricted to some of my emotional gates. Mother love is very important during the growth stage of children,

especially boys. I loved my mother and my mother loved me. As a single mother trying all within her power to provide the essentials of life. I was still a stranger to her. She had also come to term that her hope of marrying my father were built on unfounded fantasies. This led to a resolution of moving on. She sent for her mother, my grandmother to come and stay with us. Grand mother came and it was good to see my Mma again.

By the time grandmother came, I was a different person. I have been refined (maybe the right word is redefined) by the city life. At this point I was no longer the child that I used to be. My country training in Niellé mixed with my drive for exploring the city life had turned me into something that my mother as well as maternal grandmother could not understand. I was extreme in my plays. My extremities led me into some life-threatening situations that I have never told either of my parents. Thinking over the situations, I have only GOD to thank for.

In one case I wanted to impress the other children that I had a fall that I thought almost died. It was a rainy day; we love playing under the rain. I wanted to impress the other children and decided to do a skiing move on the macadam floor of the compound. I did a wrong move and landed with such heavy precipitation. The weight of the fall was so heavy on my young waist and the skull on my back head. I felt such excruciating pain and almost did not know what I was into. In the second case, I jumped from the third floor of a building because I wanted to reflect some scenes I have watched on TV. I landed and could feel that my legs had retraced inward, though still maintaining their normal physical appearance. Grandmother noticed that I was walking differently. She chided me. I never told her what I did. Instead, I faked my walk as it was depictive of some members of a popular street gang in the mid-1980s in Abidjan, 'les mapleciens'. Les Mapleciens was a group of notorious gang famous for their hairstyle copies from Mr T, who was very popular for a TV series in the 1980s. The next day I went to the dispensary under the school allowance and was followed by consecutive visits that eventually led to my recovery.

In the years 1984 to 1987 when I attended l'Ecole Primaire Prive Saint Michel, in Adjame it was a single sex school for boys. We had the girl section, known as Notre Dame des Apotres. Which was solely for girls. It was necessary that I change school, following the obvious break between my father and my mother. Despite the fact that it

was a strictly unisex school. This does not mean that we did not have any interaction with girls. We had a monthly mass. Both schools were under the same leadership and there would be a monthly catholic mass organized when us the boy pupils from Saint Michel and the girls' pupils from Notre Dames des Apotres would converge together in the same church and vicinity, some of the boys would use the opportunity to try and impress some of the girls. I was really never involved in the impression game with our counterpart school. My macho brag actually occurred during the vacation of 1984.

During the long school vacation that occurs from mid-July to September, most schools would provide supplementary vacation classes. Saint Michel, Adjame was famous for its excellent teaching standards and would open its doors from anyone to register and attend the four to six weeks teaching. I was part of a click of boys – we were three of us who were naturally classmates in the same school during normal schooling. Staying with my father had impressed me with the Anglophone culture, consequently I devised that we come up with nick names with Anglophone origins – John, Johnson and James. We were all excited about that. Our group formation was inspired by the cartoon of the three musqueteers. We committed to all stand for one another. There was a group of particular girls from a different school, these came from école primaire Jean Delafosse, Adjame. They also had a click. I can't recall the name of all the girls in that click except one with a first name as Romaine.

In the year 1985 death struck and we lost one of our class mates. We were both in the Cours Moyen 1 (CM1), the fifth class in Primary School. He was a different child in the school. Louis Chima were his first two names. He was the only in the school that did not wear khaki short like all of us in Primary school. He wore khaki trousers instead of short. There was a rumour about him that he was he sickly. That was all most of us the pupil knew. None of us dared to ask him. I guess the teachers knew the real reason, hence the special accommodation was granted to him to wear trousers instead shorts to school.

We shared some similarity with Chima or Louis. We were in the same class. Our parents were both Nigerians and like my father, his father was Igbo. His father and my father worked with the same organization, the African Development bank. As at then, I did not think much about his Igbo identity. I was more excited about the national identity and the Anglophonic tie we shared. Thinking about it, I think it was my spiritual response to

a fact that he was some layers to completing my identity circle while I was in Primary School. I did not know of any other Nigerian that attended EPV Saint Michel as at then. I know some that attended Notre Dame des Apotres, the girls section not the girl section that I attended. I did not know that Chima has been having a fate that I fought in the earlier days of my life from birth and after birth. He has been having a struggle of the will to live. He was a young and vibrant child. Eventually he lost his life to death at the tender age of twelve. His death would be a re-connecting point with my father. It is strange how every bit of life does connect to the full picture of our lives; however distracted and remote it may seem.

My mother was very bent in winning the custody game and ensured that father never succeed in his attempt to reconnect with me. She, in time past, presented my father to me with such reverend pictures. In my brief stay with my father, I saw those goodly traits that mother did talk about. Here, now in space of months and a year, she has changed her representation of who my father was to labels with qualifying adjectives designed for the sole purpose of defying him. It is such an interesting thing to observe the morphing power of words as the soul weathers through opposing equilibrium of fading hopes. My mother is confronted with reality of a flawed love relations and this shift left me confused as to who my father really was – I knew a different man than the new version my mother is desperately attempted to frame on me.

The funeral service for Chima took place in the Roman Catholic Church that links its structure and name to our Primary School. We, all the pupils of EPV Saint Michel, were in attendance. On the other side, from where I was sited, I could see my father sit with his new wife. Something within me was excited to see my father. I was at the same time trying to avoid us meeting eyes. My heart longed to speak to him but I was restricted. My father had come to support his grieving workplace and ethnic colleague who had lost his son. As soon as the funeral services ended, I quickly left so as not to meet with my father and his wife.

My soul felt very limited and I have very lunging gap. I am only a child of 12 years old. Unfortunately, I am caught in a world that that is bigger than me. My mother hoped to keep me within her circle. Her strategies were to vilify my father in order to frame my perception of my father. I was in that circle, bound by a partial partisan belief in my mother and fear of not disappointing her. Something within me was restless and incomplete. Yet I laid bound in that systematic emotional incarceration until that one

glimpse at my father in that funeral service. The circle I was bound in was not strong enough. I needed a man in my life. Without ever telling my mother I would sometime skip afternoon school and go meet my father at his office. Our school days were in two sessions. There was the morning session that would start from eight in the morning and closes at twelve noon. Then we would return after the midday break at two o'clock in the afternoon till five o'clock in the afternoon. I would sometimes miss out in the evening session and travel by public bus from Adjamé to business district of Plateau in Abidjan, where my father's office was located. As a pupil, it was easy for me to commute via the SOTRA bus without paying a fare. SOTRA is simply an acronym for the public transport company of Abidjan, literally standing for Société de Transport d' Abidjan. My father worked in the legal department with the African Development Bank and we enjoyed free medical care. I would usually use the pretext of going for medical check-up; the truth nevertheless is that I wanted to just be with him.

My mother, I think from the incident of event of the disappointment, on marital choice of father instead of her must have realize my independence of thought as well as attachment towards my father was very strong.

Let the reader be reminded that I am not making an ungrateful attempt to vilify my mother or father. I love both parents fondly and still brood over the childhood I never had with both parents. I am the posterity of event that involved my life in circle of love. My situation is not the only one in this world; neither will be the last one. I am writing this with hope that parents understand what the potential consequence of their innocent actions could have on their child and instead work together in creating an environment that will provide emotional protection for the filial issue between them. This has been my inspiration and the reason why I chose, under GOD, to commit to one wife and family.

Challenge raising me.

Advise to single parents raising boys

FRAMED BY A NIGHTMARE

I was adopted to a sister who woke me up into a nightmare. she unwittingly became the conductor of the nightmare that unfolded before me. In that moment, I chastised Nancy, almost resentfully, for being the one to rouse me from my peaceful slumber. It will take about half a decade for me to sleep back from the reality that will be played in the ensuing chapters of my life. I so wished that I wasn't woken up that day that I had to tell her to give me my sleep back.

It was is scorching afternoon, in August 1987; I had forcefully retired to sleep to seek refuge in the realm of dream. This particular nap was not really due a necessity of habit or natural response to a feeling tiredness. Maybe it was actually due to habit; habits that were displayed by a rather deliberate escape from the incessant parade of the villagers' antics. Their insensitivity had worn me down, leaving me craving solace in the arm of slumber in the land of sleep.

We arrived in Ebom on a magnificent engine boat from Afikpo, making quite the entrance. As we disembarked, we were met with a sea of curious onlookers, engaged in all sorts of activities along the riverbank. This was my first encounter with a river of this magnitude, as I had only ever seen streams, wells, and the occasional lagoon. But this, this was something entirely different. The river stretched out before me, wide and powerful, a grand expanse of water that seemed to go on forever. It was a thrilling experience, floating on its surface, the boat gliding through its hidden currents.

Cross River state derives its name from this river. Its bank is a central point of convergence in the socio-economic life of the people of Ebom. The river originates from various branches in the elevated lands of western Cameroun, carrying with it the stories and histories of the peoples along its flow. We saw men and women doing laundry, having a swim, fishing with hooks and nets, selling their fish and transporting passengers on canoes and engine boats. The onlookers greeted. We received serial relays of welcoming words from the point disembarking to the house.

The house was where one of my maternal grand uncles lived. The brother to my grandmother. The house was made of clay mortar with a corrugated roof as cover. The sun was gliding towards its zenith with an early heat that was beginning to scorch. When we reached that mid-morning, it was almost an empty compound. Before long, people were tramping in to see my grandmother and her daughter- my mother who had been away for decades. Much more I was the centre of admiration and enquiries. At first, I was fascinated but eventually had a diminishing return of spotlighted fascination the second day.

People would make fun of me when I spoke with broken version of the Bahumono language, children of my age who had now come to gain acquaintance with me would act in a way that made me feel as one lacking emotional and social intelligence that is required of a native as I fail to match with their rural hustling skills and wisdom. I may have been from a civilization that is used to the benefit's western lifestyle and wisdom, my civilisation was not fitting well here, except to satisfy their curiosity, mockery. I considered these responses as being insensitive. I started feeling disoriented and belonging out this village circle. My way out was to avoid people, since that was impossible, a forced sleep would do. I slept most of the time to protect my sense of identity. Some thought I was lazy but it kept me at my ease - in my semi-circle edge of belonging.

It was during one of those secluded escapades that I was woken into a nightmare by Nancy who just appeared. Nancy was a sister I never knew existed. Not a single clue of her existence has been given to me all these 14 years of my life. She was like an apparition in my life. My mother only told me that she was my sister. From what I gathered; she was adopted. I would rather say that she was formally purchased. Let me explain.

There was a practice in of exchange between the Bahumono communities and the Igbos of Ebonyi state living across the other side of this river. A person could travel over-river and acquire a child whom they will adopt as theirs. That child would be known in the community and accepted as thus. Beside Nancy, I know two more persons who lived in that status.

I am angry, I am also sad and I feel so betrayed. Unknown to me my mother I made arrangement for me to go live with a stranger. I was woken from sleep because that stranger had just arrived and we were introduced to each other. I am not sure how long he was around. All I know is that the discussion was very brief, maybe he came while I was having my nap. I was introduced to and told that I would be going to live with him.

There was no word to transcribe how I felt. The toll of my mother's decision was emotionally painful that I immediately felt literary sick, my body temperature went on an instant rise. I blamed Nancy for waking me up. This stranger that I had to go live with was actually not a stranger by relation. He was a relation to my mother. Francis Enyi was the son of one of my grandmother's brothers. It was my mother's cousin and my maternal uncle.

I was told that we were just travelling to Nigeria for the holiday and for me to acquaint myself with my maternal roots and would be going back to live with my father. I was under the notion that I would be returning to go to Secondary school under government bursary, for I had obtained the required pass mark for government bursary and had even started looking out for who to exchange school location with. I was not aware that my mother was arming herself on a plan to leave me in Nigeria. I was not aware that this was her way grand plan for beating the plan and deal with my father.

Everything was in confusion in my mind even the next day, all through the journey. To discover that the very mother that I trusted has carried out a hidden plan to ship me out of the comfort zones that I have lived to know was painful to my young heart of fourteen years. It is was in August 1987 when I arrived Ogoja in Cross River State with my uncle. The journey from Ebom to Ogoja lasted about five hours. It could have been shorter, but for the rough road and the interchange in commuting. The first part of the journey from Ebom to Ugep was bumpy, curvy and the car, a 404 Peugeot rocked in a way that I was not enjoying. Yet somehow, I was excited, it seemed the bushes were following us, as the car moved. The scenery was different and somehow, I could not help but put my imagination at work.

Now that I am writing this in 2022, I cannot but help to wonder what means my mother had used to communicate with my uncle as the whole process seemed to be that fast. In 1987 we didn't have cell phones. My uncle travelled to us the very week of our arrival in Nigeria.

We were greeted and welcomed by my uncle's wife; I think she was in her late twenties as then. She must be about one hundred and fifty-centimetre-tall and rounding about size twelve using British measurement standard. Her completion was natural toning light. My uncle on the other side must be about one hundred and sixty-centimetre-tall with a collar size of about 16 and a 32-inch waistline. They seem to be a perfect couple for each other. She provided her husband, my uncle with a perfect welcome and was welcoming to me as well. They lived by themselves, they have been married for, my guess, more than five years and yet to had a child. Their love story was a village secondary school love story come true. In a way I was relieved that I had found a way of escaping from the villagers.

The next day, at about six o'clock in the morning I am woken from sleep. The birds are still doing their dawn chirping; the zooming sound of cars can be heard. We live by the road side. This road leads to a major intersect connecting states and is a major commuting point into Ogoja. The effect of that is that I slept late, as I was yet to be accustomed to the noise of cars that ramped into town even at late hours.

In addition, my sleeping situation is not something I am used to. It feels like I am sleeping on bare floor. The sofa chairs, has sitting cushions that can be pulled out. These were the ones that are used for sleeping. I used three of them. Each is about forty centimetres in length on each side. Keeping them in queue each to another, thus I had a one hundred and twenty centimetres long and forty centimetres wide sleeping place. I woke up may times during the night to find myself on the floor either because I had rolled over to the floor or the cushion had shifted under me.

I am awakened into a new dawn of realities. All the routines that I had known for the past years of my life are about to place in a bin.

“Ime” I hear my name from sleep.

I opened my eyes, as I feel the gentle hand tapping me back into the new dawn and mentioning my name.

“Wake up” she says gently.

I stretch, look and fold myself in like an embryo in its mother’s womb cozing for warmth. I should not have done that. It is a wrong move. For before I could realize I heard a sharper voice commanding me to rise up with an accompanying slap on between my knee and ankle that I could feel on my tibia.

“Ime!” – a louder calling with an almost militaristic tone calls.

“Brother” I answer

When I said that they seemed to be a perfect couple, I was not wrong. For as soon as my uncle heard the louder version of his wife’s voice in commanding me to wake up from my sleep, I heard a concerting imperative call from him. The message was clear. I stood up and quickly arranged the seat cushion into place.

Without wasting time, I receive command to follow the neighbour’s children to the river to fetch water. It will take about fifteen minutes’ walk to the river. Fetching and carrying water on a bucket on one’s head is a skill that I don’t have and need to acquire. I have never carried water on my head my whole life. The first day, a quarter of the water poured, as I was yet to master the art of balancing the water on my head, so I had to carry the bucket in my hand all through the fifteen minutes track back home, I went about three times. The road to the stream on that very first day is still memorable. I am only following the children. I have no knowledge of what they talk about. I can neither speak nor hear English language. Thankfully there was Osim, who hailed from the same maternal village and would sporadically remember to speak to me in Bahumono language.

When we returned and I finally finished fetching the water, my uncle's wife would introduce me to an induction talk. She is not the type that mixes word. She instructs me among many things that henceforth my response whenever my uncle calls should be "sir" and not "brother" as she heard me respond earlier in the morning. I may not have much understanding of English language, but I know the difference between the words brother and sir. I could not help; I immediately found a sudden disconnect with my uncle and his wife. My uncle's wife turned out to be the opposite of what I had thought her to be. I am now having a renewed bout angry mood at my mother for betraying me into such position.

Few days later, after about a week of induction from my uncle's wife; the following week I am taken to school. The Government Primary School, Ogboja in Ogoja, Cross River State, is just about five minutes' walk away across from where we lived. This would be my fourth primary school in seven years of primary school education. It is the rounding of the last term for the academic year. I am enrolled back into Primary five. Again, I am the admiration and curiosity of the class and school. I can neither speak nor write English. I am not happy for this set back in life. I was meant to start secondary school, but here I am going back to Primary five. This is not my ideal stage in life, yet I preferred being in school than being in Ebom or at home with my uncle's wife. For the few days I am not wearing any formal uniform. The school is lenient about that for the whole remaining part of the school term.

All the kempt I had when I first came into the school in the previous terms have disappeared. I am looking a far different version of myself. Some concerned teachers asked me what had happened to me. I keep my answer to them short and simple in pidgin English "*I no sabi*". Meaning I don't know what happened.

By the time that we came back into this new term I have become very emaciated with patches around my body and some fresh sights of furuncles. One of the main causes for the boils is the fact that I did not know how to wash my body with my hand and also was used to either using a shower that flowed or cupped container to pour the water on myself. There was also the additional factor that I was using water that directly comes from the river, which is foreign to my body. The reaction will lead to having an outburst

of boils that lasted over time. Eventually, I am provided a make shift sponge made from polypropylene bags. That did help.

During the holiday my uncle's wife had started engaging in selling groundnut and bread and sometimes banana. To be more precise, I am the one selling the roasted groundnuts. I would walk about thirty minutes daily to hawk groundnut to a busy junction that was on the Katsina Ala and Calabar road. This hawking circle extends from school time. As soon I come back from school, I would have a snappy meal, when there is no ready meal, I would be giving garri (cassava grit) to drink. Sometimes it will be provided with sugar, sometimes salt. Despite the fact that I am the one hawking the groundnut and have also come to frying it. I am not allowed to have some of the groundnut, except on some few special opportunities, when it is not yet wrapped.

At one time, I became so hungry that I ate some of my hawking wares. I ate a combination of a loaf of bread and groundnuts. I knew that I was going to be killed for that, as at then I was hungry and do noy care. When I reach home that evening I have to come up with a story. I told my uncle and his wife that I had sold them on credit and would be collecting the money the next day.

The next day, my hawking merchandises are neatly placed on a large tray which I carry on my head. The familiar weight of the tray, piled high with my wares, presses against my scalp. I can practically feel the hair there thinning, a constant reminder of the burden. I am not sure on where I could get the money from.

About twenty minutes of walking under an unforgiving sun to my market place, I am praying each step of the way and pleading with GOD for help with a promise to commit my life to His cause. Then not long after, coincidentally, on a spot, not too far from where my uncle had rented a piece of land for farming, a beacon of hope appears amidst the dust, I spot a one hundred Naira note nestling by the unclear path. My prayer has been answered. I now have enough to eat pay off and even eat more groundnut.

I ate less, slept less and worked more. Though my mother must have returned back to Cote d'Ivoire, I still carried the burden of a betrayed feeling and eventually had an emotional recoil.

We eventually move house and my guardian changed trades. We are living still about the same distance to the school eastward and he is now engaging in foodstuff business. My uncle would go to Abakpa Market and buy cassava. I was expected to use my break time to go help transport the cassava, weighing between ten to fifteen kilograms on my head and drop home. At least two times. The carrying was done in a basin, neatly packed and arranged. At some point, I had a classmate, called Onyekachi, who would willingly help. These were the days were children were genuine and not afraid to help and mix with others. Often, we will miss the immediate class that comes after the short break time. It was about ten minutes' walk from our new house to the market and seven minutes from the school to the house. The break time was usually forty minutes.

After school hours, which takes place at two o'clock in the afternoon, I would either go to conclude my carriage or move the next levels of the cassava production. This required sitting in front of the heap of cassava, sometimes high enough that it is impossible to see the next person behind. There was no downtime, all energies were required to focus on the work. My uncle, his wife and I are racing against the next market day. The Okuku market serves as port for Garri trading and would have traders coming from Calabar and Akwa Ibom to purchase.

The emotional recoil makes me less verbal. I speak less, I am still not happy. My mother I am still feeling has disappeared on me. Often, we will finish peeling the cassava late in the night. I have to go looking for ambulant cassava grinders and bring them to the house. They were often easy to locate, as the sound of their engines could be heard, sometimes it was not easy to locate so I had to walk further to find them in the night. By late in the night, I am referring to ten o'clock in the night to one o'clock in the morning.

Once the grating is done, we would proceed to the process that will discharge the starch from the cassava as well as dry it to powdering stage. Usually, this period would require three days to have a quality garri, but we would rush the process and start the production within twenty-four hours.

Whenever I am in the house, in the presence of my uncle or wife, I will act in fear. I would operate in zombie mode. I would be wishing for the next few hours in school where I would be alive - relieving my real me, among my peers and a school that had come to provide me with stardom.

While at home with my uncle or wife, I will recluse to quietude. I have no one to talk to, no one to share my heart and my disappointment. This has not only bared my true personality identity from manifesting; I also feel literally robbed from my paternal identity that I started enjoying.

When my mother, in the hope that things were going to work out, eventually got me to my father, I was given back the name that my father had for me. My father had named me Anselm and I had an Igbo name Uchechukwu. In the process of changing some error occurred and I was given a birthday that fell on the same day of the week and year that I was born. But on a different month. My uncle changed my name from Anselm and I was re-named Emmanuel. Not only did my first name change, also every other name to the surname I would now become known as Emmanuel Irem Obei.

My uncle has successfully cemented my mother's hope, to separate me from my paternal root. This change occurred right at a point when we were about to sit for the Primary School Leaving Certificate.

While my identity has been changed and my natural bright is now being dimmed. Something is happening behind the scene. I have one companion –a reading habit. I would read whenever I have the opportunity to read. Okuku market days are my reading days. On such days my uncle would go to sell the produce we made. That would give me time to play around or sneak out. I have also developed the art of writing my thoughts to myself in philosophical tone.

I had undergone a spiritual rebirth before I was shipped, against my will, to Nigeria. On August 26, 1986 I embraced a new Christian Identity as a Born-Again believer. This

builds my character to pray and learn to forgive. Sometimes I would have some bouts of anger, but as I would sit to pour out my thoughts and pain in pen, I would find some filtration that would rather make me philosophy of the whole process of life. It was a nightmare of reality, but my faith made me awake enough to deal with the situation in the light of the scriptures of life.

Growth is admirable, but growth can reveal the weak incline of person who lack maturity enough to master that weakling of their being. In the course of time, two more children came to live with us. This time we moved into a more space place, by the river side in Abakpa, Ogoja. My uncle's wife' sister, a baby of about two years old came to live with us. Then there was George, whose mother was also related to my uncle's wife. I was the eldest and the only one that related to my uncle. On this faithful day, I was seated on the veranda facing the road reading a book, when I heard my uncle wife tell George to "go and tell that Hausa goat that food is ready". It was said in the Bahumono dialect, it was also said in a way that she did not think that I heard her. George was diplomatic enough not to repeat the exact word she had said. But he came still to call me to eat. I felt so insulted that my identity could be made akin to that of a goat. I am not really sure what goats in Hausa land have different from goats in other places, but for me, I refused to be identified with a goat over food. I may be under their watch, I may be hungry, but I had dignity and honour enough not to stoop low to the level of a goat. I told George to go and tell her that I was not eating. I did not eat that maize.

My responses pained her. The next day I got summoned by more than two persons. They wanted to know what she did. They told me how she confessed that I have never shown any remorse and had been fully compliant until the day I did not eat. I told them nothing. As I thought about, I learnt a vital lesson, there is power that comes through position and privilege and there is power that comes through the strength of recognizing one's identity. The latter is more powerful than the former. I defeated her ego because I recognized my identity and would not stoop low for a digestible food. This was made possible because of my spiritual positioning in the balancing circle of GOD'S love. The circle of GOD'S love has been the place where I always lived in full circle – not on the edge of belonging.

If only my mother was alive, she would not have dared call me a goat. This was in 1992. My mother had died a year earlier in April 1991 following a brief illness and a brief visit to the school. My mother had given them some moneys to look after me. When I first moved in with them, Uncle Francis had just been made redundant. He was a manager at Obudu Cattle Ranch. So the money from mother came in handy to mortgage them back up. Whenever, my uncle would go to visit me in school, he would account even the transport he paid as a reimbursable expenditure. When she passed away, the visits stopped. I was on holiday when the name calling happen. I considered that if she could make a comparison between me and the other children and make them identify me as a goat, then I wasn't belonging to that circle. That incident woke me up from the nightmare and pushed me further.

Looking back in retrospect, I may have gone through harsh conditions, exposed to name callings and endured almost four years of child labour. I am will forever remain grateful to YAHWEH for this uncle of mine. He is my uncle for life for I learnt the vital skills for hustling and survival in life under his roof .

These difficult circumstances have shaped me into the strong and resilient individual I am today. While the road may have been treacherous, I now realize that it was a blessing in disguise. Being exposed to harsh conditions has taught me the value of perseverance. Every challenge I faced served as a stepping stone towards personal growth and development.

It was during these times of struggle that I discovered my untapped potential and inner strength. I learned to push beyond my limits, to never give up, and to always strive for greatness. Through enduring name callings and harsh treatment, I developed an unwavering sense of self-worth under GOD. I learned that my value as a person does not diminish because of the opinions or actions of others. Instead, it taught me the importance of belief in GOD, self-belief and the power of resilience and develop writing skills. I now understand that my worth is defined by my own character, integrity, and actions under GOD. Perhaps the most significant blessing of being exposed to such harsh conditions is the empathy and compassion it has instilled within me as well .

Having experienced adversity firsthand, I can empathize with the struggles of others and offer a helping hand. These experiences have shaped me into a beacon of hope, inspiring others to overcome their own challenges and reminding them that they are not alone. Life's harshest conditions have bestowed upon me an invaluable appreciation for the simplest joys and blessings. Every small victory is magnified, and every moment of peace is cherished. I have learned to find beauty in the most unlikely places and to be wheter it is balancing on the edge of belonging or fitting in the full circle.

LIFE BEGINS AT SEVENTEEN

I have my share of street life. In some way I am conversant with the hustling situation with those who are homeless. My walk into the hustle of the street begins in 1990, at the age of seventeen.

I was supposed be in the third year of secondary school life. The third year of Junior Secondary School is an examination class. My mother has died. My uncle's wife had made me feel very less human and compared me to a goat. I had too much pride and esteem to be a goatie. Because of this unpleasant zoonic name calling occurrence, one that happened to my hearing only once - I felt she had attempted to steal something from GOD – my human identity – and that was over food. I was not ready to exchange my destiny or identity at their mercy for the sake of food that would just be digested and flushed out. This to me was a spiritual matter. I was no longer capable to maintain the docile behaviour I had maintained for the past three years. The nightmare was over. Besides, my uncle had also started showing less commitment to me, now that my mother – the connecting tie of the circle – has gone. I must admit, that I was raised by my mother and grandmother with an independence that came with its stubbornness. My stubborn inclined were lulled to sleep by the actions of staying with my uncle and the disappointed feeling of my mother's betrayal. In a great way, these turned me more into someone who shared his pain with pens and papers than people.

This action of my uncle's wife had a very decisive effect on me. It abruptly woke that stubborn nature and sense of independence that I had. For the remaining days of the holidays, I would be less seen at home. Sometimes, I would take the walk to the river and spend half the day swimming. It was not that I was a good swimmer. It is just that water had a way of keeping hunger under control. It helped me deal and disperse the thousand thoughts that were going through my mind. When I was not in river swimming, I would go to visit a particular acquaintance, Christopher, who hailed from my maternal village. He was my age; I would help them peel cassava and sometimes fry garri. The reward was of course food. Somehow, I also acted this way, when I realized that my uncle's wife felt pained that her food was rejected. In a way, that was my way of retaliating for the name calling that she labelled me with. The coincidence is that my uncle had travelled to Katsina, in Northern Nigeria to buy Onions. This worked well to my advantage. Until I left, he had not returned. At this point, he was now dealing in Onion trade. I was excited when I left back to school, I never returned. Interestingly, neither my uncle nor his wife ever looked out for me.

In April of 1990, as I carry, I have my suitcase loaded ready to go to boarding. My uncle's wife despite the ordeal and childish revenge behaviours that I had displayed still gave me some food stuff and provided for my transport. As I jumped into the public commuter, I am excited because I am now free and awake from the nightmare. Little did I know that this excitement was just the beginning of a new reality. I was about to be ushered into a circle of a life of hustling. My education pursuit was about to be shaken to where I could not afford to go back to the boarding school; neither could I even afford to go back to school.

My only quick way out was to go back to my uncle. I had an excess of reality check, transformed dignity – you may say it is pride- that had returned me into some sort of determined resolute planner. It was like when I was younger, as we go out with our catapult, we dare not return without a catch – even if it was a reptile, an agama lizard to be précised. In other word, it was not part of our game to return without result. I did not want to return to my uncle, So I had to work out a plan for survival. My brain went through recalibration of thoughts. The reality was in front me. My education was about to end. I did not for any reason want to go back to that house. I felt within me that I did not belong to that circle in the house of my uncle's wife.

I was seriously worried and unsettled. The only thing I had as monies were the transport fare that my uncle's wife gave me and the food stuff, which was just a m measure of garri flour. Despite the worries and concerns I still went into the boarding house. Usually, we would have about a three week's grace period. Mary Knoll College, Okuku in Ogoja, at that time was headed by one of its old boys and stern disciplinarian, Reverend Father Patrick Iduku. Having been through the system and being an old boy, himself came with the advantage of an extra mile consideration for those who will default payment for at least a month – but the chase for tuition and related fees would begin in the third week after resumption into a new school term. For two weeks, I wore our pride blue and blue day uniform.

The school uniform was white shirt and white shorts while the after-school day uniform for those at the boarding house was light blue shirt and dark blue shorts. The students in Senior Secondary school wore pairs of trousers instead of short. Mary knoll college comprised of students from the Junior Secondary School, Senior Secondary School and advanced (A levels) students. The school is normally for boys. An all-boys catholic school. There was an exemption for students in the A level. These were people who either are doing remedial classes. Women were allowed to attend if they were in such categories. These were in a different preferential class. They were free from the bullying, refectory rules, etc. I had one of them as my person. I had school families. People would say that they had school pets. That is the names that senior students would give to the younger students under their cares. It was a tradition for senior students to have either one student or more under their cares either as protégées or slaves. In my case, throughout the three years in boarding institution, none of them enslaved me to fetch water for them, none took advantage of my provision and food stuff. As a matter of fact, I feel so favoured because I gained more from them than they to me. In memory of gratitude permit me to mention names, in the hope that someday this book will lead into reconnection.

There was John Madu whose father had a ware shop in Abakpa, Ogoja. He was like a big brother I never had. Even after he left Mary Knoll College, we would still keep in touch. The next year was Egon Ajuk Alaka and Dickson. I was part of a little group. We called ourselves the “the Hardcase”. It was not a cult. In Mary Knoll parlance, they called us “illegals”. An illegal student is one who will not participate in activities. I was an illegal to the core. I had mastered all the hide outs, games and tricks to survive the boarding house. One was befriending the big boys. Egon Ajuk was in the final year of

the secondary school and a prefect and Dickson was post-secondary school student. Dickson class status provided him with a privilege place of study. Egon and Dickson being friends from hometown we will be going there. I did not have to worry going to the refectory as the portion of food for both Egon and Dickson were family size due to the privilege of being a prefect. Hamilton was also one of the persons enjoying the privileged immunity due to fact that he also ails from Edor Where Egon and Dickson lived. Hamilton Uдах will become prefect also the next year, it was easy for me to play escape under pretext that I was sent by him to do so and so errand. I also had the additional advantage of becoming the treasurer to one of the prefects, Alex. Alex hailed from Ediba; we spoke the same maternal dialect. He would give me his money to keep and I would keep it. That was to my advantage.

Time moves; likewise, people line their events around the movement of time. Fast forward, Egon, Dickson, Hamilton and Alex would graduate and move on from the system. I am now without the human shields that provided with immunity privileges.

The senior Prefect was told that I was an occultist, many of them believed that I was an occultist and that worked well to my advantage. There was a rumour that I used to disappear and re-appear using metaphysical abilities. When people are lazy in brain and hard to comprehend simple fact by searching out for puzzles and simple logic, sadly this is common in many African societies. That is because I had so mastered the art of escaping, without being caught that some people believe that I was not ordinary, the prefects and other seniors so believed that I was using metaphysical mean. I capitalized on that and one occasion; upon waking up from the scheduled and mandatory siesta I saw a praying mantis in the corner of my bed. I needed to build some further protection, I told the Dormitory Prefect that I would be expecting some visitors and that he should not drive them. It was time for us to engage in free time activities – washing, etc. I was really hoping that the praying mantis would still be there by the time I come back. I got a call that I had visitor. I walked back to where I was and there, I was pleasantly surprised to see Egon Ajuk Alaka. He had come to visit me and brought in provision and money. That was blessing. GOD worked out some provision for me. We talked for a while and Egon left. I quickly rushed to my bed side. The praying Mantis was still there. So, I went to inform the dormitory prefect that the visitor I was expecting had come and showed him the praying mantis as the spiritual visitor. It was a bluff, a survival joke and it worked. The Senior Prefect was told about it. Amos Kajang Amos was the senior prefect. He approached me. I had to explain the situation that I was only building on their fear

and that was just that. Before he became a prefect, we had made acquaintance. I had a classmate that lived off campus and I would sometime go there. The classmate was a next neighbour with Amos. We had also met in Church on some few occasions as I attended Assemblies of God Church.

When the school fees chase started, I came up with an idea to raise fund. I reached out to my fellow Hardcases members. Two others were in the same tuition situation. There was Osim Nzan and Kenneth Uche. Joining us were two other persons. We went looking for accommodation outside campus. We found one that was already furnished. It belonged to a footballer, who nicknamed himself as Swallow. The money from Egon was really timely. We escaped embarrassment. One hurdle was crossed. We had food for now. Even though I was out now with an accommodation in the name of school, I didn't have the tuition and examination fees. The temptation was strong on me to go and meet my uncle. For a repeated time, I refused to head to that advice in my mind. Osim was very instrumental in providing food stuff, which was helping. We also had a young Igbo trader who lived in the same compound. Sometimes, I would follow him to the market to sell second hands clothes and would sometime give me some money. That money would only be spent on food. Sometimes, he would travel to Abba to buy replenished stuff. At one time were all broke, we had to plug some vegetable that looked like fluted pumpkin leaves to cook in palm oil, water and salt. When the concoction was ready to be eaten with accompanied swallow of eba, we noticed that it was not fluted pumpkin leave as we thought. It was wild vegetable. Anyway, we were hungry and had come to far to stop eating. Whatever that was, I still don't have an idea. We all survived and no one was ill from eating either the concoction or the green vegetation.

The last time I saw my mother in April 1990, she was about to settle down in marriage with a man I met. When she came to visit me, she was accompanied by her brother in-law to-be. I have later been in touch with him after my mother passed away. I gathered some money and travelled to Ntara 2, in Ogoja. I took a weekend trip there. It was very easy locating the place. I was very welcomed and participated in the community life. We went to farm. Ntara is an agricultural community known for its rice and yam cultivation. That was my first introduction to rice farming. Instead of staying over the weekend, I spend the whole week and had some heavy load of foodstuff ranging from yam, to garri and paddy rice and money. Mr Joseph Majuk was the brother-in-law to-be of my mother. He was very supportive and this support led to paying my tuition and exams fees. GOD

specializes in making ways where they seem to be no way. He showed up and sorted that leg of the journey. HALLELUYAH!

At the end of the Junior Secondary School examination, we had to part ways. While my classmates were parking and looking forward in great anticipation to go home, I spent most of my exam's days worrying about where I would be living and how I will survive. Then salvation came. Osim suggested that I go with him. This was so much of a relief an answered prayers come true. GOD always shows up in my mountain and valleys. I recall another incident, when I had to money to go back home. This happened at the end of the previous school term, the one that connected to my uncle's wife labelling as a goat. We closed for the term. I did not have anything on me for transport. I stood at the bus stop for what I think was up to three hours looking for a lift. None came and no one was willing. The sun was setting down, it was getting night. Three men walked to me, called out my name written on my suitcase and asked where I was going to. I told him that I was going to Abakpa. He gave me the required fare for commuting from Okuku to Abkpa. My eyes are in really in cloud of tears at the grateful thoughts of divine interventions in my life. I still think that man and his other men were angels in human form.

There were some limitations staying with Osim in Okukunela. I needed to make money for the next school year for the senior Secondary School. At Osim, we were living to carefree boys' life. We ate whatever comes our way, slept wherever the night met us. We shared clothes and even tooth brush. Today we will sleep at Osim's house, tomorrow at Agaba's house. There was no plan. In that process, I met Uwem Etukapan. Money was a key factor that I needed. Osim didn't have that worry because his father would provide. I needed money.

We were in at the stream having our bath. At age 18, I was greatly concerned about making money to care for my fees. As the other boys were busy talking about girls and other things, one thing was on my mind. I have never worried about money as at this time of my life. The sound of the water could be heard as it streams through carrying leave and sliding gently on rock. Some little fish could be seen enjoying themselves carefree from finding some provision. As the other boys were laughing, jesting I was immensely dealing with a problem in my mind. I did not know how to make money for myself. I sold groundnut and bread for my uncle's wife. Despite the fact I had traded hawking groundnut on dangerous highways, risking my life by swerving between cars

and trucks and running for competition in order make revenue for my uncle and wife, it has never crossed my mind that I could actually use my market skills for myself. There was yet another problem, in order to run a business, I needed an investing capital, good or services station. I didn't have any of those. By now I have mastered the heart of keeping emotions, from time to time when my friends made a reference to me, I will respond with the liveliness that made it difficult to perceive what was going through in my mind. Solomon wisdom is true, when it penned in the pages of the Bible that "Even in the midst of laughter the heart knows its sorrows". We were in the same space but living in different circles of realities. I was sad, confused, in total mental chaos and at the same time my mind was running for ideas. Then a light bulb hit. I could go to Hamilton. Without even given it a thought to sleep, I told Osim and Uwem that I would be leaving to Hamilton's at Edo.

Hamilton was dealing in black market petroleum retail at the same time he was a middle man cocoa agent. While he would mostly be engaged buying cocoa from farmers, I would be in charge of selling the petroleum products, namely fuel and engine oil. I made some profit by adding a little amount on what Hamilton would sell. Not all customers would usually for the price add, but most did. There was however some special time when my additions to the price margin would not be argued. Whenever there was fuel scarcity. People had no choice; we on the supply side were at will to do what we desire. I am bit sure Hamilton knew of my marginal increments or maybe he knew but never really cared. I was provided free accommodation and feeding as well. That was how I made some money.

I am now in the first year of Senior Secondary school (SS1). I made it on time. At the age 18, I am able to fend for my tuition. In 1991 my tuition was ___ and the boarding fees was making a total of _____. I did not go to the boarding house. I cannot exactly recall why I did not go to the boarding house, wheter it was for want of freedom from the rules of boarding house or it was the result of economic planning. Whatever reason it was, this would cost me with. In the middle of the school term, I was among those chased out of class for non-payment of tuition fees.

Money is exciting to behold. I was excited that I was able to work out my tuition. I failed however to discipline my expenditures. I spent the money on renting a room just adjacent to school the chapel of our school purchasing household and food stuff. Before I could

realized, I had less left and decided to keep that for my feeding. My introduction to financial planning and budget started at age 18.

I had a roof and I had food. These were important, yet came at the expense of my education. I made a budgetary mistake. I could have gone straight to boarding house I had managed to secure the fund for both tuition and boarding. My teenage version however had no one to advise me. Now I am faced with the consequence of the decision that I had made with the money. As I write this, I am making a parallel attribution to life. GOD uses our skills and experience to provide for us. Like in the parable of the talented servants, the choice is ours to design what we do with the resources – whether to put them to purposeful use or spend them in dissipated pursuits.

The school was in session, I was indoor at my house the whole day. I could not go out during the day for shame that any one will see me. I did not want my neighbours, who lived next door and also a student to know about my tuition challenge. It was a one roomed mud house. Two days later, on Friday afternoon, I went into the school premises. I was going to get a loan from one of my classmates in order to travel for the purpose of obtaining tuition fees. Little did I know that I was taking myself into the den of an ordeal.

I walked in the school with my favourite black jacket in a sunny October sun. I went through a backtrack. I was halfway in between the football pitch and the house where PaMoses the cook lived when a commanding voice called out to me from a classroom nearby. John Ijomah, the senior Prefect called out with a voice that was unmistakably indicated that there was trouble for me. I had no intention of meeting John Ijomah. After a hurdle of interrogations John ordered me to follow him. He was walking on the cemented veranda of a block of classroom and followed behind. He noticed I was ordered to walk down on the sand and grass path, under the sun. I obliged. In those days being a senior prefect was like being a military ruler under non-democratic dispensation, it was the ground for many to unleash their inhuman nature.

John took me to spot that use to serve as the assembly spot for the end of classes – where we would sing the school anthem or where we would gather when it is labour day. Upon reaching there he asked me to kneel down. I refused to kneel down. The consequence was a very sharp slap that was meant to enforce his authority as a prefect. I didn't kneel. I knew that his power over me was limited as this was a weekend and I was not a

boarding student, so I could just decide to walk away and face the consequence on Monday – during normal school hour. It was a battle of egos. There was also the advantage that we had visitors in the school premises and one of them may come in to arbitrate – that was my hope. The school premise was filled with both boarding students of Mary Knoll College and teachers doing their distant learning classes. The school served also as an approved centre for distant learning program during the weekend. More slaps followed. At a point John ordered that I remove my jacket and mocked me for my sense of dressing, wearing a jacket in a hot weather. I refused to oblige. I must admit that I had received a bath of slap on that day than any other day. But you see I was a core “illegal” student – like Spartan boys we don’t show weakness, we stay resilient in the face of beatings. To enforce our resilience, we usually wear double shorts. I had camouflage that was part of my daily wear – even those were not available we had this habit of always faking our pains from the cane. There were only two times when I succumbed with fake cries.

I came into the school to get a loan to travel for the purpose of tuition. I expected a quick collection. Here I am instead, tugging ego with a prefect. At some point, one of the distant learning participants intervened. I can’t remember all John said, except for this very statement:

“He thinks that he can undermine my regime”

When John first came from a different school, he was a novice. I recall an instance when I had to save us from beating when I took him and others to one of my hiding spots in the night. I saved us that night. He had the advantage of being in senior class and consequently will become senior prefect. I cannot tell the source that made him think that I am undermining his regime. I can only assume that he was probably trying to subject me to submission or make me a scape goat by breaking my resilience and creating a record for himself for cracking down a hardcore “illegal”. Maybe it was also due to the rumour that I was involved in the use of esoteric advantage. He was perhaps bent to use his experience of our save-out action and knowledge that I was only using common sense hide-out mapping. I was a scape goat that came with a unique selling advantage to establish himself as de-facto prefect that can crack rebellion into submission and daring enough to deal with spiritual forces. I left feeling satisfied that I did not reach breaking point – of course bearing the pains and fire of the slaps.

I got the money from my school mate. I could not travel that same day. My face was on fire and swollen from the hot slaps hammered into them by John. Interesting enough I am unable to remember who I got the money from, all that I can vividly remember is every minute of my ordeal in John's den. Life is so inconsistent; people's privilege status can change at any given time. When that happen sometimes that which once seemed a full circle will shrink its circular value as another circle interlinks. John, by virtue of his new role had a created for himself a circle that will perceive him as being powerful. What he did know is that I had problems that I was dealing with and that I was only in that premise to sort a way out to be back to school. He did not know that I was not as privilege as him to have my tuition cash out at the voice of asking a human parent who has already done seeking the cash for their children. I needed to seek for the tuition after asking the heavenly. His interventions were stumbling blocks to my progress in life. I thought I had forgiven John, but as I am typing the story, I am having feelings that are re-enacting that day. I have asked GOD to forgive him and I have also forgiven him. The day, I travelled to Ntara and came back with the tuition after one week.

THE PATERNITY FRAUD

In 1992, I was in the second year of Senior Secondary School. When I embarked on this journey of personal freedom, I did not have much thought of the challenges of providing for needs – one's own need. I had always had things provided on demand. As a matter of fact, the first time I ever knew what it was to feel hungry was at the age of 12, when food took a little unusual before getting cooked. To be a provider is not easy. I could not keep up with the tuition demands of Mary Knoll College –that is to say I could not afford to provide my own tuition. In one of my visits to Osim in Okukunlea, he suggested that I join his school. Osim had moved to a new school. Therefore, I obliged to go and enrol at Trinity Secondary School, Bashua.

There was a problem, I still owed tuition fees at Mary Knoll College and as such would not be able to move to the next class without evidence of paperwork from the previous school to validate my academic progress. At some point, I had become concerned about my image and had reduced my visits to Ntara (to indirectly secure some funds) and Edor (to black sell petroleum products). We travelled together from Ikom and stopped over at Bendehge Ekiem. Uwem lived with his brother Lawson Etukapan at Bendeghe. After some time, we headed to Bashua. It was the season of the first flush of harvesting of cocoa beans. Lawson was a middle man dealing in cocoa business. Uwem was also supporting in the cocoa beans trade. After about three weeks we left for Bashua. and Lawson made some financial support from the proceed of the cocoa. The issue of the paperwork from my previous school came up, it was not with much emphasis, I was told to make sure I provide then in due time. In mid-November 2022, I would start a new journey of schooling in a rural community. I felt happy that I could move on to the next stage

Have you ever felt happiness and some unsettling? A new chapter had opened for me. My prayers seemed to have been answered. Bashua actually presented the perfect fit for my budgeting. It was a rural community in Boki Local Government Area. The village was somehow removed from the influence of competitive civilization except for the express way that serves as communing point for international, inter-state and local travellers – and of course us, the non-indigene who have also decided to adopt the community school as ours. We were accustomed to seeing and hearing vrooming sounds

coming from the roads that served as link for travellers from Cameroon the main source of livelihood was petty trading and largely farming. The smell of Cocoa beans, bush mangoes, locally known as Ogbono was a major attraction for middlemen from distant towns. The part that benefitted me much was the rich supply of banana and wild spinach, known by most locals as Okazi. Banana farming was also a popularity in the area, we ate banana in all its forms here, cooked when unripe and as fruit when ripe. Foodstuff purchase was very cheap and, on many occasions, the locals would, out of a sense of generosity provide for us. Some of my friends and classmates would also supply. I had a classmate who considered me a brother, Scholastica. Her friendship was immense in curbing out my needs for supply. GOD, in his mysterious ways did provide for food. We rented a room by the roadside linking Danare and Bashua with Osim, GOD has provided for shelter as well. I felt so at home in Bashua. No one exactly knew where I came from and no one strangely asked me about my tribe. I was happy.

By March 1994, my sense of happiness would become unsettled. I needed to register for the West African Examination Council Examination. The thought of starting trading as a middleman buying either Cocoa beans or any of the commodities in Bashua was not an option as that would take away my study time -which is already facing some struggles.

Two months later, after we were expected to finalise the payment for the registration of the SSCE exams and now running into penalty timeline. The only option I had at this moment in my head is to head to my aunt – my mother’s sister – Maria to seek for help. I tossed with the thought for some days and a weekend later I obliged and went – keeping off all the useless swell of ego and sense of independence.

The weekend is over, after spending all my moneys on transport, I am still in the village with no tuition fees. The last Naira I had was given to drivers and the change from my transport fare was also given to some ambulant traders in exchange for some snacks which they were hawking in the busy motor station. I felt really vulnerable, lonely and in need parental comfort. I greatly missed my mother. For that day, I spent some time looking at her pictures and I eventually shed load of tears that I held back in part for all the years. I did shed some rapid tears in secret during the fresh days of her dead in April 1990– but needed to be strong because of grandmother. However, on this particular day, four years, I was alone grandmother was not there anymore, my tear flowed from its fountains, letting all the bottled-up emotion gush out in torrents.

I am looking at my mother's picture, salty tears still reviving their flow over the dried ones. I hear some laughter outside. These were children playing. Thousand memories jog through my mind, I recall my past when I was much younger than them with no cares and concerns. Within this strip of mental recall of my past I was also having a vision of endless series of moments when I needed help but would have none- life was a lonely jungle.

After a while I went to my aunty Maria to inform her of my plan to travel back the next day and try to make some work to earn for my SSC Examination registration. Her husband was around – he did not have the money. He however came up with a suggestion. We were to go to my mother's first husband – besides, thanks to my uncle Francis, I was bearing his name. The thought of it was not one I wished for but as it was, I had no choice but to accept. I eventually played into the identity lost game and now was guilty of paternity theft.

Thankfully it was market day and Mr Irem Obei William was around in the village. He would usually stay in the farm for any other days except on weekend and market days which falls every four days in the week. My aunt's husband met with some other persons and we went to Mr Irem's house. He agreed to settle the fees. That was the first time that I ever set foot in his house and met his other children, whom I would eventually adopt as my brothers and sisters. I, eventually with my own action and desire sealed all the attempts of my mother and uncle to become identified as a member of the Okpata clan in Ebom.

On my way back to school, I am sitting behind the driver, sandwiched between some other passengers and tightly holding unto my treasured registration fees. In those days of 1994, we operated more of a cash-based society in Nigeria. My mind is recalling all the discussion that transpired. One particular statement from Mr Irem Obei, was a bald truth reminder of my association in committing an identity fraud. He did say that he had the right to deny me. He chessed his reason on the fact that my mother never presented me to him and did not also even acknowledge him after she returned from the Ivory Coast until her death. At twenty-one years of age, I understood clearly what that meant – that I was an acceptable liability.

This was not the plan for my life, this was not the identity that I charted for myself. I am sitting in the car, the sun is taking a majestic bright glide into the sky and the trees and

shaping clouds seems to be following us as the car moves past them. My mind however cannot move past the incident of the meeting and I spend more time in philosophical meanderings of the possible implication of semantics from that meeting. I feel nothing close to responding to the bright rays of the suns majestic glide. Rather my sessional philosophical meandering instead made me feel moodier. I was not supposed to be this alone in this world, with no specific circle of belonging.

I don't have a family, I don't have money, I don't have a birthday, even the name I was bearing was not mine – it was imposed on me and I have played into it. I am unhappy. Thinking in retrospect I should be thankful. I had allies in providence in the like of Osim, Hamilton, Egon, Mr Joseph Majuk, my aunt's husband and of recent Mr. Irem Obei. Yes, Mr Irem Obei has been one of the great investors in my life. He was used by divine providence to invest into my Secondary School Examination. His words, also were very inciting in awakening my sense of identity and a longing to be in the right place –the circle that I naturally belong –in my father's house.

In 1994, we don't have access to emails, no computers and no telephone. I was missing family life as well as standing the chance of missing on this year's examination. In order to make a call I would need to travel more about 40 kilometres To Ikom from Bashua. My best available option was the post office. There was one at Bashua. That night, when I arrived Bashua, I wrote a letter to my father. The next day, I rushed to the post office and posted it.

TRANSFORMING IDENTITY

I do not care how imperfect my mother was. It is true that when I was five years old, I disowned my mother at that age. Although I am now in 1992, and 14 years older and wiser since that incident, I still experience feelings of betrayal towards her. Nevertheless, despite these emotions, my affection and respect for her endure unwaveringly. My life has been devoted to fulfilling her aspirations for me – even when she has died already.

When I was eleven years of age my dear mother once said something - that she desired for me to become a medical doctor. I vowed to myself to make her dream come true and become what she wished and dove headfirst into the world of science - became a science student to honour the dream of the blood that flowed within my vein. I was buzzing with excitement and anticipation that I was able to obtain the money for the registration and hopeful that someday, I will become one of the finest doctors to grace the planet. Oh, the possibilities were endless!

On this fateful day, As I strolled for around 30 minutes, I finally reached the school gates. My heart sank as I realized it was assembly time and I was dreadfully tardy. As per the norm, one of the teachers rounded up all the stragglers to dole out a suitable punishment for our lack of punctuality. I ended up on the receiving end of some corporal punishment - a few lashes of the cane for my transgression. The sharp whistle of the cane and its flagrant sound against my white trousers brought back memories of my younger years in Junior Secondary School days. It's been ages since I've been beaten like this. However, what really got under my skin was not the physical pain that left a lasting impression on me, but rather the teacher's words to me as the switching sounds of the words made their interval expressions. He expressed concern that I looked like a criminal and that he feared for me. Yet, added that he had studied me enough to know that I was a well-behaved student. What a confusing conundrum! And to top it off, I didn't even have a cool nickname or any other attributes that could suggest otherwise.

I am in class, it is one of my core sciences subjects, physics. It is also one of the subjects that I am struggling with. As a matter of fact, I am struggling with Physics,

Chemistry and Mathematics. As the teacher tries to explain, I am at lost. I have been out of school for more than a week chasing after registration fees and now there is no compass to keep me back on the same track of understanding as my classmates. Every nugget of teaching that was presented to us by the teacher landed from one of my ears to another into confused oblivion. Science was exciting, but I had to do double efforts I was trapped in doing a course of study in a bid to live within the identity circle of my mother's hope and career desire for me.

I am angry within myself. I am angry because I felt that I was failing my mother's hope. I remembered how she stood for me and drenched in the rain to replace a book that one of our neighbour's sons had purchased. Back in my youth, I was totally hooked on the King of Pop, Michael Jackson! Let me give you a picture of my relationship with Michael Jackson. I was frequently seen in my younger days rocking a totally rad Michael Jackson tee-shirt, attempting to replicate his iconic hair flip, and I voraciously searched watching for all things Michael Jackson. He was close to my everything that was worth the identity. I even remember this one time I went rascal and tried to perm my hair with my mother's stash of hair products, just to look MJ. It didn't end well for my stubborn afronoid hair – my hair got burnt. That's what Michael Jackson did to me. Even at his death, I printed and sold Tee-shirts in London and wrote a poem about him.

Back to the book incidence; to summarise I misplaced the book in school and my mother had to go and look for the book, drenching the weather and rain. My mother had an unwavering dedication of going above and beyond to uplift me and hide my imperfections. Now, as I sit in class wondering if Science was really a thing for me, the weight of my inadequacy to match my mother's boundless devotion towards me is crushing. I am feeling guilty that I am not able to match her commitment to me. The mental strain is becoming unbearable – I am losing my mind.

Talk of competitive madness! I think I have had my share of it. It's a feeling I know all too well. The Senior Secondary Examination (SSCE) was the ultimate test for me - a make or break moment that could determine my entire future. I was up against the odds, fighting tooth and nail to pass science and prove my intelligence and competence in the subject. It was a battle against my own brain, a test of its ability to absorb and

retain the tricky topics of science subjects. And of course, there was the added pressure of the ticking clock, reminding me of the tuition yet to be paid. But despite all my efforts and resources, something seemed to hold me back. Looking back on it now, I can only guess that it must have been the divine intervention – GOD.

I wanted to speak to a teacher and ask for guidance. The next day I am back to school. But I did not see any teacher, instead of talking to a teacher I decided to stay in the art classes in lieu of the sciences classes. As the lecture was going on, I am mentally on a journey and as my journey progressed, a remarkable event unfolded, which forever changed the course of my life. I gained a profound realization that my mother's unconditional love would always want me to live a fulfilled and joyful life, free from the shackles of her own professional aspirations. The memory of her braving the downpour to help me find a lost book resonated deeply within me, and I knew that she would want me to embrace my own identity with open arms. She would want me to strive for excellence and to always be true to myself. This epiphany filled me with hope and strength, and I vowed to honour her by living up to my full potential and becoming the best version of myself.

At the age of twenty-one, it is natural to start building personal responsibility. I realized that all the art subjects in exception of Economics were like natural friends. With excitement, I eventually registered last minutes for art subjects – with the exception of the mandatory science subjects, mathematics, agriculture and Biology.

To say that I am excited at my new move will be under-rating my feeling. I was super excited. There was however one problem. I may not be able to pass the exam, I had missed out two years of Senior secondary school curriculum and had about four months to the examination. But I refused to let this setback defeat me. Instead, I turned to the only solution available to me. So, as soon as Saturday came, I made the decision to invest in my own education. I travelled to Ikom and purchased the WAEC syllabus and all the required textbooks. With determination in my heart and money in my pocket, I embarked on a journey of self-tuition in order to pass.

Literature and English, English Language and Christian religious studies were my naturals. I requested to register for French Language as well. This was no possible. The school did explain that it would be difficult due to various factors, primarily there is no

evidence of the school competence for teaching that subject since there was no French language teacher. So, I let it pass.

Curiously enough, throughout my entire journey in secondary school, I never officially adopted a nickname for myself – I never found one that matched my vibe. In Mary Knoll College, there was a tried-and-true formula for nicknames - particularly for those who lacked one. The trick was to fuse the first and second syllables of your name together, or else the final and initial ones. And so it was that my classmates started calling me MaRem, a combination of Emmanuel and Irem. I never adopted that. The identity history behind the name was not something I was happy about – there was a rather unpleasant history behind it and that left me feeling dissatisfied. Up to the last day in Mary Knoll, I never managed to come up with an alternative nickname to call my own.

As I began immersing in the Art class and I showed so much enthusiasm for literature. Now being a science student turned art student I decided to take a form of identity that matched with my vibe and called myself a literary Scientist. I was very confident with my new sense of study identity and moved on further to give myself another spectacular nick name. The second nick name became a catch fire and my school mate would hail me as: “Domingo Cheche Malowi”. And I would reply with a thumbs up and resounding: “Yeah Yeah Yeah!”. A new chapter had begun, and I was ready to rock it!"

I went through a journey of self-discovery, traversing through various stages of identity status. But it was the final stage that led me to the realization of my true potential as a unique individual. Many individuals lose themselves in the desires and dreams of others, or in the shackles of their past. I too found myself in such a state of diffusion, where I simply accepted life as it was. And then came the identity foreclosure, where I surrendered my aspirations to fulfil my mother's expectations. But it was the identity crisis that sparked a flame within me, pushing me to explore different values and career goals. It was a daunting process, as I struggled for two days to make a difficult decision between following or betraying my mother's hopes and pursuing my academic field that align with my own talent. I eventually emerged as it is written of me in the volume of the celestial book, embracing my true identity and choosing the path of my passion, bravely stepping out of my comfort zone and into the world of Art, and I have never looked back since. I am glad I did.

With gratitude to GOD, I would like to say that I did grace the exam hall with literally penmanship and emerged victorious with a single sitting attempt. Glory to GOD.

A CONFLICT OF FAITH

If I tell you that I was once an assistant to a medium, what would you say? It is true. Is it something I should be ashamed of? I will let you be the judge.

It is August 1994.

I am twenty-one years of age and have just completed my Senior Secondary School Examination. I moved from Bashua to Ikom. Bashua was located in the underbelly of Cross River State in Nigeria, it was a village with a growing population of students coming from various part of Cross River and was sprouting a midst of lush, untamed forestry, teeming with the wilderness of the untouched landscape. Despite its natural richness and social diversity, the same could not be said for the lives of those living there. Life was a simple struggle, filled with lack of purpose, and I soon found myself constantly aspiring for more. After moving to Ikom, things were in a bit of positive slide, yet not what I wanted – it seems that I was just living. I wanted to change my status and revolt against my destiny to leave the life I had and seek out the one I deserved. After almost a month of rest spent staying with my friend Vincent in Ikom, I headed out for a long journey to Calabar to live with my aunt. I was living in an unpleasant world, however, that reserved no room for fairy tales, and I was certain that life was not going to be any easier.

Somehow, I felt an inkling of excitement, mainly because I was truly about to experience Calabar to the fullest. Feeling a tingling sensation build within me, I rejoiced. Up till now I had only had two brief introductions to Calabar lasting not more than two days each. Both journeys were at different dates in 1989, when I represented the Ogoja Local Government for some interschool competitions.

I am not really sure as to why I wanted going to Calabar on this particular occasion, but the impulse was so strong that I had to oblige in almost mindless and zombie-like move.

I had no idea where my aunt lived. All I knew was that she lived in Calabar; I cannot even recall if I had any clue of which area of Calabar it was that she was living in. I took the bus to Calabar despite not really knowing where exactly my aunt lived, simply hoping that I would find her once I arrived. As we got closer to the town, I started to wonder if I had really done the right thing by setting off to Calabar, and leaving the only place that had provided me with some sort of comfort – something that I might never be able to experience there. What if it was all a mirage, and the life and ambiguous purposes that I sought out to achieve in Calabar did not really exist? Was it possible that I had just left the circle that was my everything behind me for nothing? All these thoughts circled in a chaos in my mind as the beginnings of my new life seemingly started to unfold before me.

It would be beneficial to repeat the fact that in 1994, there were no mobile phones. I had no sense of direction as well. After about five-hour road trip, we got into Calabar. As soon as we arrived at Calabar, the people who knew their way around had already begun to drop themselves off at the respective bus stops closest to their residences. I didn't know where to stop, I had no map, nor had I informed my aunt that I was coming. However, upon reaching a particular stop, this strange impulse began to alight within me. I was hesitant – but I sure I had alighted. As I am writing this, I am unable to remember the exact location. It was at about six o'clock in the evening. As I alighted, I ultimately decided to chase after my impulse, and I soon found myself cautiously walking through a dingy street. It was bare, completely untarred. My feet began to ache tenderly as I found myself wandering down the same path long into the dark. Still unsure of where I was, or where I was headed, I began looking for the sign of a church – an Assemblies of GOD church to be precise.

I attended Assemblies of GOD church and was a devout member. Those days, it was easier for committed members of the church to identify themselves with another branch of the same church in a different location. Assemblies of God was a big family. Knowing this, it was no surprise that my first instinct was to locate a welcoming place where I could spend the night in case, I was not able to find my aunt's residence. I knew that even if I was not able to find a member of the church who was willing to accommodate me, I would simply be allowed to spend the night on the church premises. I could stay there, pray and take my rest for the night and hopefully, by then, I would have figured out how to get to my aunt's house. I cannot recall how long I had spent trekking through

the unevenly paved, untarred and dirty road, when I began to hear some people speaking the Bahumono language next to a lot of batchas.

I did not know them.

However, I approached them optimistically and greeted them as such. I informed them of who it was I was looking for, and it was soon proved that I was wrong to have trusted that spontaneous impulse; they told me that I had gotten off at the wrong stop. Thankfully, they knew my aunt, and even though they hailed from a different village, they knew of where she lived. Having given me specific, lengthy descriptions to help me locate my aunt's place, they waved goodnight and took their leave. Interestingly enough, I did not ask for their names. Eventually, after another long, begrudging hour of trudging through dishevelled roads, I finally reached my destination. Indeed, looking back now, it was fairly easy to locate; my aunt was a popular figure in the area. Once again, my feelings and hunches were beginning to prove rightly so.

I did not remember anything remarkable about my aunt. All that I could recall was that her father and my grandmother were brother and sister. All my life, I had never seen her, except on one occasion, solely knowing her from the accounts of my maternal uncle, her brother, Nkanu, who spoke of her often; I had lived with Nkanu as well, at some point in time. Thanks to the locals, I had managed to reach her house. She was very surprised to see me after all these years. Those were the days when people would just show up to one's house without warning, and the African, communal sentiment within us would implore us to welcome them with open arms – even if they were strangers.

The next morning, I was woken up at four in by an unwavering quake of beckons and shakes that tremored across my body, from another young boy: Bassey. We were made to quickly wake up in order to make bean cakes. Our daily routine from Sunday to Saturday would consist of rising every day at that very same hour, if not earlier, to fry akara and make pap, in order to hawk them on the hot streets of Calabar.

There is this remarkable thing about my aunt that swiftly caught my attention: it is my aunt's odd behaviour. Occasionally, she would fall into a trance; sometimes, she would say some very obscure things, and other occasions, she would just pass out. During all

this, her husband would simply seem unruffled. It was then that it hit me: my aunt was nothing but a medium.

It came as a shock for me because this stood against all my beliefs and convictions; especially seeing as I had zero tolerance for anything that was un- belonging to a biblical Christian perspective. I did not want my aunt's occupation to be a reason for a clash of opinions between us; her home was a safe haven for me. Should I learn how to tolerate other beliefs, like being a medium? I knew that she was a good and kind human being inside, and if I could only figure out how to persuade her, I might have been able to lead her to find the right path, one of peace and forgiveness, which was the path of salvation in the right Christian faith.

Upon observing my aunt delve into her trances and communicate with the spirits of the other world, I soon developed the burning feeling that I was in a foreign circle. Everything was so different there; I was like a new-born that had just opened his eyes to a different circle of life. My aunt's lifestyle and stories only seemed to get weirder. She tried however to normalise her path of practice. She told me that she helped people solve their infertility problems solely by using various local remedies that she prepared herself in return for money. Sometimes, she was paid an additional sum of chickens or cats. To be completely truthful, it seemed as though she had made a comfortable, somewhat glamorous living out of that lifestyle for herself.

At one point, I had even attended one of her sessions with a regular customer of hers – a woman in her late thirties, I think. It shook me from inside as I had never thought that this could ever happen to me; my beliefs were against all that I was living. Although I found myself often disagreeing with the choices and activities of my aunt, I soon became evermore engaged in them myself, surprisingly out of personal choice. However, on some occasions there would be none – like meal of cat.

I had never liked eating cat meat, but there came a time that I had to do so. That night, the family meal had been cooked and prepared using cat meat. That cat was one of the items provided as requirement from one of her clients. At first, I would not eat it because of my distaste for cat meat as well as the cruel method utilize in killing the cat – For

those who may not know the trauma a cat goes through before having its meat on their dinner table, I will spare you the gory ordeal of it. The room we, the boys, slept in was the same that kept the saucepans and remaining dishes. As the night went on, I grew hungry. The warm scent of the dish gently wafted across the room, filling the atmosphere with an air of decadence. Its flavourful smell tickled my nose, tempting and teasing me, goading my swelling appetite. With nothing else to eat, I finally decided to try a little bit of the sauce (doing my best to avoid the meat) in order to satisfy and calm my aching belly. Eventually, I began to eat the meat as well, since it was part of the sauce. That was the very first, and the very last time I ate cat meat.

One day, I attempted to share the truth with my aunt and warned her against idolatry. In response, she informed me that the founder of Christianity himself had even worshipped an idol whilst kneeling in the garden – this was blasphemy, I was weakened into silence at that response.

At twenty-one years old I was still practicing abstinence – not because I wasn't attractive or because I had not been presented with any opportunities to sleep with women. It was actually the opposite. I was strictly guided by a Christian belief that discouraged pre-marital relationships, and I was truly convinced and happy with that notion and vehemently preached that.

Then out of nowhere, there was a young girl that came in to stay with one of the neighbours. I instantly noticed her when she came in. From what I could gather, she also seemed to have just shown up at her aunt's. For some strange reason, I was drawn to her in a similar fashion as to how moths were drawn to light. I was not supposed to be drawn towards her.

I was slowly fading away, losing sight of my principles as I clearly remember sneakily stealing a couple of glances at her. Biting my lip in sheer apprehension, I silently berated myself for acting so shamelessly as I continued to gawk at her surreptitiously. I was heavily rebuking the thought of talking to her – I was decidedly avoiding her. But it was not for long; about three or so days after her arrival, we started talking. She had initiated

the conversation; it was then that I first gathered that she had just lost her job. It was from then on that I would fall into a lengthy, internal struggle.

I must admit that my human nature was all out, I was fully amazed by this outstanding woman, who so effortlessly existed right before my very eyes; yet there was something pulling me to her as well driving me from her in equal measures.

This young lady was quite possibly one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen in the neighbourhood. I couldn't help it.

She wore thick locks of rich, golden hair that melded beautifully into a tressage of brilliant, dark hair that gave her a unique appearance, alike a dainty gazelle running gracefully in the wild savannah. I watched intently as her long, luscious tresses shimmered and, under the evening light, the accessories in the hair caught the light elegantly as it moved, gently swaying about as she moved. My heart pounded heavily as I gazed at her; my faith and notions had already begun to weaken. It felt almost as though I was having an attack to my heart and faith; I could not seem to think properly, and my lips began to quiver for seemingly no reason. It was clear: her stunning beauty was pleading for attention, and so, my attention was drawn to her statuesque bone structure that formed her delightfully tender high cheekbones. She possessed the appearance of someone who might have been royalty.

As we got to talking, it became clear, she told me that she liked me. I did not expect that and was further divided. I had always been an adherent of the Biblical admonition from to Timothy to treat younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. Within me there was a war going on; I was bent on enjoying the time I spent conversing with her whilst simultaneously restricting myself from taking things any further. Besides, she was the only one with a good intellectual capacity worth also a good conversation. Nevertheless, my aunt, who had also seen how much the girl had grown to like me, advised me to give in to her lustful desires. I wouldn't, although I had been offered such strong temptations. I must confess that at some point, I nearly caved in; however, by some chance of divine intervention, she moved. I soon learned that she had found work as a housekeeper and had left to another part of Calabar after someone had come looking for her. We never said goodbye.

Thank God for miracles – I got saved.

Although I was undoubtedly relieved that Rajuno, that was her name, was no longer there to tempt and test me, a piece of me was still saddened by this news. I had gotten used to her presence and the intellectual discussion, and soon all the time I had spent speaking with her left a void could only be replaced by unavoidable housework. I realized my humanity and fact that divine strength is what graces us to stand in faith and character

My aunt's traditional and commercial practices required me to perform menial tasks such as slaughtering the chicken, making the concoctions from plants, and soaking the beans later in the evening. I was unhappy; I had become more of a houseboy who got up at four in the morning simply to make akara and akamu for sale during most part of the morning to mid-morning, and have to come back home only to be made to wash the clothes, and do a variety of household chores. Even my Christian religious commitment was neglected as I grew to lack any semblance of free time – I was not even praying for myself as I ought to.

I was so devoid of hope and faith in life that one day I compared myself to a lone chicken.

One early morning, as the day divides between sunrise and dawn I was outside, casually tending to my daily chores when I happened to catch a glimpse of bright yellow tuft out of the corner of my eye. Upon closer inspection, I came to discover that the ball of flaxen was, in fact, a baby chick. All alone, a feeling of pity stirred within me. As I completed my household work, I kept a watchful eye out for the little bird, hoping that its mother would turn up eventually. By the time I had finished, it was still alone; devoured by pity, I took it in, and fed it, raising it as my own.

Now, I was feeling a similar sentiment of lonely emptiness while I continued to live in that circle of my aunt's home.

I was eagerly looking to meet my siblings. It was such strong of a desire that it began consuming every fibre of my being. Day by day, this compulsion only burned stronger, much alike a wildfire ravaging a plain of dry grasslands; in the pit of my stomach, I could feel something begin to brew and boil. Unfortunately, I was held, constricted by my financial resources, or a lack thereof. Then, a miracle happened, my aunt's husband informed me that someone had been looking for me, and that they had a message for me.

Soon, I set out and travelled to a place not far from our vicinity in Calabar. It was a letter from my father. Recall a while back, I had sent a letter to him and it looked as though he had finally responded. The response had come through someone who hailed from the same area as my mother. Apparently, the person who had brought the letter had travelled back to Cote d'Ivoire.

I now understood why I had gone to Calabar, that it was not pure fate that had led me down a path where I would tirelessly endure a conflict of faith. That compulsion had been a divine compass.

Every impulse is an unknown direction from GOD. We can no more trust our own judgment than we can a broken compass. The only safety lies in submitting our choices to the One who knows the way. His perfect will is always good, always right, and always best. We need not fear where He leads, for He is faithful and will never leave us or forsake us. (Deuteronomy 31:6)

The letter was dated July, 1994; I did not receive the letter until almost three months later in September. I can vividly recall how my hands were trembling profusely with excitement as I opened the letter, how my lips quivered uncontrollably in a nervous stupor, how my rapid breathing came to an abrupt halt as I tensely held my breath. I can still feel the rush of emotions as I write this now; I can still feel tightness in my chest as I gritted my teeth with all my might whilst I hurriedly tore open the envelope and slipped out the crisp sheet of paper that sat within it. I couldn't believe what was inside. I'd dreamed of that letter many times. Included in the sealed envelope were 20,000 Francs CFA. Although I was assuredly excited by the money, I was most excited by the content of the letter, where my father had made reference to the expectancy for me to "return to where I naturally belonged". Those words echoed endlessly within me as they melted my heart, which beat uncontrollably and in turn, vivaciously pumped the hot blood through my veins.

This marked the beginning of a two-thousand kilometres long journey back to where I naturally belonged.

THE JOURNEY BACKWARD

We are in October 1994 and to be completely truthful I had no clue why I am still here in Ikom full of despair.

On this faithful day, I recall as I sat amidst the boisterous chitter chatter, my mind blurring from the animation of people in the shop, the faint scent of hair products, and the slight burn on hair as the lighter kissed the clipper as the barber disinfected them. I sat in, staring indifferently at Osim and others barbers as they cut the people's hair, barbering them casually. Their hands moved rhythmically, almost as their hands methodically danced across the surface of the clients' heads. For particular reason, my mind somehow, seemed to be back to sensory realization with my environment, with this particular customer that was receiving cleanly snipping and shaving away of the growing, undesired ends. As the stray clumps of hair flushed through, gently floating downwards and settling on the barbershop floor, he hissed in pain. I began to wonder – not at the cause of his pain, but at the pain of my despair.

His pain which was due to sharp brush of the clipper on his cleanly shaving beard strip was nothing compared to mine as I pondered.

In a matter of days, what had I done with the 20,000 CFA?

Now, there hadn't seemed to be any right answer to that question, at least, for the time being.

A journey of a thousand miles is always delayed by that one step. And for me, it was no different. As soon as I had received the letter and the 20,000 CFA that had been so carefully attached with it, I excitedly began to plan my cross-country trip from Nigeria to Cote d'Ivoire. The road trip from Calabar to Abidjan would have required three days to complete. Somehow, I knew from the beginning that it would be a tough, unruly journey, yet, the reward would be bountiful.

It eventually took me more than 60 harrowing days to arrive, completing the circle to where I naturally belonged from Calabar, Nigeria to in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

As soon I got the money, I headed back for Ikom. There was simply no time to waste. The road trip from Ikom requires passing through Ugep, which provided an intersect to Ebom. By the time I had reached Ugep, I decided to alight and branch out – heading straight to Ebom to settle some affairs with my aunt’s before continuing onwards. I should have rather headed straight for Lagos from Calabar instead of even going to Ikom, but I had wanted to say goodbye to my friends in Ikom.

When I told my friend, Osim, that I was going to Cote d’Ivoire, I became uncontrollably excited, and in turn, he could not help but become excited too. As I spoke casually of my plans, I could sense his own enthusiasm as the grin on his face began to grow wider and wider, his yellowish-white teeth gleaming, his brow afronoid skin. Until date I have not ceased to ponder on the reasons behind his unexpectedly joyous expression. For me, it was a big deal, because I going to meet my siblings, family – where I naturally belonged.

Despite my growing excitement, I soon, somehow, developed an equal sense of awry hesitation. I was not sure if my father’s wife would still be willing to accept me as I recalled the picture that played out between her and my mother ten years ago. The memory of that volcanic exchange of emotional tones and words were still haunting me as they began to replay in my mind –as if it just happened 10 minutes ago. It started first as a blurred, cloudy shape of concern then stretched and shifted into a pristine picture of hurt and fear. I was hit with a sudden thought; will the raging fire of those old memories be enough to put out warmth of the desire for family reunion?

Recalling that very moment, I gulped in discrete anticipation, like water on beetle, the fear of the unknown seemed to have dis-propelled all my initial excitement to travel. On the other side, I seemed to be hearing a voice in my head saying: “Go for it! Don’t let this opportunity pass you by! Instead, I did not take the chance in the direction of that voice. I needed a clearer signal in my spirit as to whether to go or not to go. The signal finally came, however, by the time that signal came, I had already spent almost all of the money.

We expose ourselves to untold loss when we delay in taken action. The longer I waited, the more time and energy were squandered. Here is lesson, we miss out on opportunities that could have been seized had we acted sooner, as they may no longer be available when we finally decide to take action. Furthermore, procrastination can also lead to

financial losses; if we wait too long to purchase goods or services at a lower price than later on, then our budget will suffer unnecessarily. Finally, indecision can have an adverse effect on our mental health.

One could only imagine the absolute shock that washed over me as I realise this. It was almost as if it had all disappeared all at once. Without money, I was lost. This then became another building block to the tower in my mind suggesting to me that this was just another confirmation that I should not travel.

My desires and fears were at a ferocious conflict. I wanted to go, yet afraid of not fitting in and finding acceptance.

At Ikom, my numbered days were divided; just as my heart was. Most of the time, I was at Vincent's. I would pass most of my time at Block Fotos in Four Corners, Ikom, silently deliberating my problematic predicament. Some days, I could be found at the Ikom motor park, seeing my friend, Osim Nzan. On most occasions I would be lamenting my inner struggles, and Osim would listen quietly, frequently offering sincere words of support and advice. Although the brunt of it all were words of affirmation, I felt somewhat relieved of my own pressures – as though a heavy weight had been gingerly lifted off my chest for a few, much needed minutes.

One day, unbeknownst to myself, Osim told Simon about my situation.

Amongst the Igbos, there is a philosophy of empowerment known as “onye nana nwanne ya!” – meaning: “no one should leave his brother behind!”. Under this systemic philosophy, it became the norm for both boys and men to live with a businessman for a period of three years or more in order to learn a trade. At the end of this period, the apprentice would be settled by his mentor. The mentee in turn will train others. There is a BBC report that has is that prominent men, such as Innoson Chukwuma of Innoson Motors and Cosmas Maduka of Cosharis Group, are amongst the successful products of such a system.

Vincent and Simon were both respectively undergoing mentorship training. Vincent was being trained by his elder brother, Emmanuel, to become a professional photographer while Simon was working under his master to understand the secrets of running a retail drinking outlet.

While I was with Vincent, I grew to learn a little bit more about photography. Before then, I had given some little thoughts to the craft by taking pictures in secondary school using a borrowed Kodak 110 film Camera. It seemed simple enough; you pushed a button, it clicked, you go to lab and there you had it – a photo. I did not know that there was really much to photography until the days of my escapades with Vincent. Those were the days of the dark room. I really did not show much interest in learning that particular aspect of photography, as well as much of the other technical details, but all in all, I had a good time. I started to pick up things that I would never in my life have had the chance to otherwise.

Vincent was a brother, indeed. We attended the same church and I had introduced him to foreign gospel music, thanks to the Scripture Union shop that was just next door to us. Even then, there was not much of a future for me here in Ikom; I was not able to learn much. Not that I didn't want to – it was more so that I did not have the facilities to do so. In order to learn the main content (that being the ever-important bulk of information), I was required to get myself into a concrete contractual arrangement. I couldn't, however, maybe because I had the mind to travel and was simply not ready to fully settle in there.

It was good to be back in the midst of a fellowship of my brethren in Ikom from the the controlled atmosphere of my aunt in Calabar. I was as free as I wanted. Here, I was the hero.

At Calabar my faith went into conflict. Here in Ikom my faith had picked up in rhyme and zest, yet, I was faced with a new kind of temptation. As mentioned previously, without my knowledge, Osim had told Simon about me. When he heard about my situation, he seemed to have become overwhelmingly touched, and approached me with a plan. In his mind, it was all very simple: he promised to give me a sum of money daily at the end of his business day so as to be able to support me in travelling back to meet my family. I cannot recall how much it was, but what I do know is that it reached the mark of 20,000 Naira.

When I first heard of his planned generosity, I was astounded. At first, I was stunned by shock. It was a fairly large sum of money that, when plagued by my financial woes, seemed too good to be true. After overcoming the initial sensation of shock, I grew increasingly eager to accept his proposal. Indeed, there was a minor sense of misgiving

growing in the pit of my heart, yet, it was an opportunity I knew I could not pass up. Soon after, I left for Cote d'Ivoire by going through Calabar, to Lagos, and Accra, Ghana.

Part of what Osim had told him, that I had gathered, was that my father was a diplomat – which I had not mentioned otherwise. I had just let it be. That was an evident flaw of character, and I was too morally weak to correct that farce of that impression.

The irony of it all was that neither Vincent Odo or Simon Obasi had any idea that I had Igbo blood running within me. They did not even bother to ask where I had come from. They just accepted me for my person, and in particular, Vincent, for the fellowship, and Simon, for the humane concern of my story – my heart melts as I am writing this. It was a bond forged in the crucible of shared experiences, laughter, and tears. I can only imagine what would have become of me without their genuine generosity and friendship. I would eventually tell Vincent about my tribal identities. His acceptance of me built moments of beauty and acceptance that I will forever cherish.

Those were the days when love was not mandated by your tribe but by your humanity. People would accept you and receive strangers without question.

Sadly, it does appear that the majority of people today judge by external features instead of internal traits. People are often judged based on their religion, gender, ethnicity and other factors that should be less important than qualities like kindness and compassion. While this isolationism reduces opportunities for meaningful connections between groups with diverse characteristics; if we work together to strengthen acceptance across differences our global community can still reinvigorate its core values of love and understanding on a spiritual level.

On that fateful day in the crisp October of 1994, with a heart brimming with anticipation and a bag laden with dreams, I embarked on a journey.

As I reached Accra, I was, once again, out of cash. This is attributed to the fact that I had undermined the transportation, and majorly because I was also painfully extorted at the border between Nigeria and Benin, in Seme, by touts and men who hold law enforcement positions at the border post, with their hands out at every turn. An individual can be stopped here and there and asked to produce some kind of fee or bribe before they are allowed passage by the touting officials. This extortion has become a major source of

corruption along this route. Aside from money, travellers may also be forced to pay bribes with items. The presence of these rogue officials creates an environment where it can be extremely difficult for people to travel freely, causing delays that cost time and money for both Nigeria citizens and those travelling from other neighbouring countries through the borders.

Again, that malicious thought that I was making a huge mistake began to build and accumulate viciously in my mind. My fears and the conviction of my desires were at each other's necks.

I arrived Accra in the wee hour of Sunday. On Sunday morning, I went to the Assemblies of God church in North Kaneshie and presented the membership letter as I desperately explained to them that I was practically stranded. My mind was running astray with thoughts of the worst. After sweating literal bullets, anxiously biting my bottom lip raw, and rocking uncontrollably on the balls of my feet, I was, thankfully, put at ease. They had sincerely supported me, and I was finally able to travel after church the service to Cote d'Ivoire. It was then that I finally arrived.

When I arrived, my father's wife had change she welcomed me without any visible signed of bitterness. I felt home.

Maybe if I had still taken that step immediately, I would have shortened the timeline.

The most important part of every journey is deciding that you get started even we meet some delays, we should still focus and we will make it.

WHERE I NATURALLY BELONG

As I unfold the letter, an ominous feeling washes over me, the weight of those words bearing down on my soul. The words within were laden with an unspoken weight that seemed to crush my spirit. I wished I could un-read those lines, but it is too late. The indivisible wounds inflicted by the revelation is bleeding within, leaving me with an overwhelming sense of loneliness within a family circle that perceives me as a stranger capable of committing the unimaginable.

I chance upon this letter as I am gathering my sister's belongings in order to take them back to her. It unveils that everyone in my family was very happy and rejoiced when eventually she left my care. She stayed with me for some time, while I worked diligently seeking to secure a place for her in a private hostel, using my network within the Scripture Union Circle. The letter exposes their concerns about her staying with me, driving home the painful reality that, even in my attempts to care for my own sister, I remain an outsider in their eyes -to say I belong to the half of the family circle.

The weight of being a half-sibling is like wandering through a territory filled with hidden battles. It's a never-ending series of sad emotions that creep up on us, revealing the unspoken trials that accompany these one-of-a-kind family dynamics. The enduring sense of isolation within a family circle leaves an indelible mark that lingers long after childhood.

There were strange kinds of whispers and rumours stories about me as a possible malevolent figure. I overheard speculations about my being insensitive to my newfound family circle or even hinted at darker suspicions, like being a wizard or a possible character who could commit the unthinkable. Except for Chantal, who wrote the letter, I did not tell anyone that I was aware of some of those thoughts about me, I also did not tell anyone how I felt when I read the general feeling about me as potentially harmful to commit violation with my sister. It was a really painful.

My father and others (some few that I was aware of) never really knew what the issue was with me. My father thought that I was not accustomed to living in a family circle and advised me to adjust to new reality of where I naturally belong – with my siblings.

When I was in Nigeria, I was robbed at constant flashpoints of thoughts of the bliss and joy of belonging to my family circle. My thoughts often meandered towards the joys of being part of a family with numerous brothers and sisters. I nurtured a deep sense of longing, a nostalgia for blood connections that I could not share with anyone but to confide to my diary. I wrote,

“Here I am bringing smile and happiness to others’ sisters when mine in far distant reachable places are unreachable.”

I was eagerly looking to meet my siblings. The anticipation of reuniting with my siblings had built to a crescendo. It so strong a desire that was consuming every fibre of my being. When I arrived home in the evening wearing my tartare looking Kitto flipflop I was eagerly welcomed by my step mother, my aunty Olumma, other brothers and sisters joined in. Oscar was the only elderly male sibling at home and he was very welcoming. He ushered me into our room. We still lived in the same neighbourhood at Abobo SOGEFIHA in Abidjan. I was excited, I was happy to be back to circle where I naturally belonged – the circle that I had naturally missed.

Everything was in rhyme and sync – at least for the very few days, I was happy. Then something started happening, the balance began to tip. One morning I had switched on the cassette stereo to play a negro spiritual gospel, then the television set went on and a video game was on out-loading the atmosphere overpowering my attention to listen to music. I never understood why. I felt that it was disrespectful. Without any word, I switched the stereo and walked away.

Sometimes, I was visibly finding myself conflicted over simple matters such as change of music that should be played on the stereo or the type of show that should be watched on the television, or whether the sound should be from the television set, the radio or video game.

I was trying all within the conscious frame of my ability to avoid any conflict or sibling rivalry. I had not travelled on third of the Economic Community of West African States

to set the war gong of sibling rivalry. I came because I was in need of a circle of loving relationship with my siblings; however, a cloud of bitterness was gathering.

I could not believe that this was the same Oscar that welcomed me. I came to realize over time that neither Oscar, nor I had a thing to do with it. Our elderly relatives had unconsciously been promoting the sibling divide between me and Oscar. Unknown to me, few days before my arrival, within the same time space of my cross-border journey, Oscar had a mother-and-child misunderstanding with our step mum. In anger, she pronounced that he will soon be replaced from his position of first born. I suspect that the welcoming attention I was receiving must have re-echoed that pronouncement and hence the sudden change of behaviour.

I heard my father said nothing about it as well as much as some of the event happened disguisedly under his watch; and most were overtly under the watch of other elderly figures such as our big aunty Olumma. One who spoke up at time was our cousin Joyce. I took all the steps to avoid trouble and never even reported or mentioned anything. I still was blamed. That was when my father mentioned his thought that I was not accustomed to living in a family circle and advised me to adjust to new reality of where I naturally belong – with my siblings.

Left to my own devices, I struggle to comprehend my place within the family. While I was still trying to deal with the frustration of being misunderstood, I received a message that one of elders, who hailed from the same village as our paternal grandmother, was requesting to see me. We lived apart at about five-kilometres walking distance. When I arrived, Mpa Cele (meaning Papa Celestine), sat me down and brought a Bible. I was blasted with Bible scriptures that openly seemed accused that I was not loving my siblings.

I remember specifically that he quoted from the book of 1 John 4 and asked me to read. He was not direct on the issue but was clear to tell me that I need to love my brother, if I must claim to love GOD. That moment, I felt alienated and emotionally wounded. Nevertheless, I kept quiet until the end. At the end, I thanked him, out of respect, for the time and left. Until date, I do know who took that report to Mpa Cele or who asked him to talk to me.

Months have passed since I came from Nigeria to Cote d'Ivoire, and I remained mostly secluded, battling a profound sense of loneliness and questioning my place in the family.

Most people who came to the house really never knew that I was around, because I was mostly indoor. I must confess I felt lonely and never really knew if it was a problem with me or my inability to speak Igbo.

I resigned myself mostly to finding solace in the Bible, prayers and losing myself reading books. That was what make sense to me. Sometimes, I would feel so moody and depressed. Sometimes to escape that anxiety and lonely feelings I would also engage in outing activities like going to the market or engaging in some other visits as well as activities around the city. These activities proved to be therapeutic for me, providing a temporary respite from the depths of my loneliness.

Oscar continued to be a paradox, whenever we go out. he would be very opposite, he never disdained me in public in front of strangers. As a matter of fact, he gave me the utmost respect. Even when we were outside the house by ourselves, it will seem as if we never had a difference. Those would be the moment, when I would recognize Oscar for what I thought of him. I recall in one of those days when we had gone to go wash our father's car. The car used to be parked about a five-minutes' walk from our house for security reason, it was safer to keep the cars there under watch of a paid guard. As we were coming back, Oscar suggested that he was going to teach me to drive. That was my first time on a wheel on that eventful day of 1995. I could not keep the wheels straight and almost caused an accident. That was the beginning of a mendable relationship with Oscar. The truth is, you can't hate your brother because that is blood and blood stick thick – whether it is half-brother or not.

Amidst this turbulence, Joanna, one of my sisters, and I found solace in each other. We forged a strong bond of friendship and kinship. She was in the second year of secondary school when I first arrived. She was a natural talker and a great sense of curiosity about people. Before long we became good friends. We would go through her school homework together as it was easy for me to relate with school assignments in French. I think one of the reasons we flowed was the fact that I was not judgmental of her teenage frenzies, she found it easy to talk and ask questions and would receive a counsellor-like response with clinical touch.

My homework's support functions also extended to supporting five other younger ones – Onyinyechi, Obidike, Ike, Rose and Obi. To them, I was a star, shining brightly in our family circle. They brought joy and a sense of unity to my life. They were also the

unwitting sources of information about what others said about me, sharing these tidbits in their innocent childlike manner.

The Igbo culture does operate a form of cast system. This is not just in term of the discriminated practice between the “Osu” and the free people, the royals and the commons. Even within family circles, there is a stratification characterized by hierarchy of birth – even gender. By virtue of my birth, I was a go to person and middle-person relying the needs of the younger ones on school related issues between our father and them. I soon gained my father’s trust on financial economy, when I cut down the expenditure for purchasing books at the start of the academic year. I was aware that I had just replaced someone’s role and was readily falling into a conceit of being giving a trusted responsibility to handle financial related trust. It is really strange that vanity always manages to finds it place in our mind. While I was, I was going the downward path of vain delusion, I got pulled out – by Oscar.

When I said that Oscar was a paradox, he is indeed a paradox. I had expected him to respond in his usual. Instead, he came to me, without a show of pride and humbly made a request with regards the purchase. Which I was at will to oblige or not –and in line with better judgment I did the expected. The subject of his request is irrelevant to public consumption. Hitherto I learnt a very important lesson in life: that one should not let a new opportunity led to conceit.

After a while I started meeting other siblings of mine, Patrice, Chantal, Clarence and Chima. We were a very large family. These four were as at the time of my arrival schooling in Ghana Chantal was another paradox. We stroke a chord of friendship immediately with Chantal. I think of her as a compound blend of curiosity and very kindness. We were in constant argument and constant laughter. I think she was constantly trying to find out how much my temper could stretch; she even asked me once what really could make me flare my emotions. This is my estimation is due to the fact that she had observed.

As a stepbrother, my journey has been marked by numerous challenges and a consistent sense of sadness. One of the most disheartening aspects of my situation is the differential treatment I received from one of my sisters in comparison to her biological brother. It was evident that she favored him over me, leading me to feel like an outsider and deeply

saddened by the fact that I was the only one without a direct biological sibling of my own.

One manifestation of this favoritism was the denial of even basic necessities, such as food. It was a painful experience to observe her intentionally withholding food from me, solely to ensure that her biological brother had enough. To add to the distress, the food would suddenly vanish, only to be permanently disposed of in the kitchen bin. The sense of loneliness was emotionally draining, serving as a constant reminder of how little value I held in this family dynamic – So I felt.

Despite all this my family is a big heart. We love ourselves and will stand for each other's. Even those who may be indifferent to our success. A lot of persons have experience empowerment through my father. Permit not to mention names here in order to protect the sanctity of their identity – these were part of the family.

The weight of being a half-brother does not disappear overnight. It is a burden that one cannot simply shake off it transform. Instead it does transform. It is an integral part of who I am, offering me a distinct perspective on the intricate dynamics of belonging to a circle within a circle of family belonging. I have learned to navigate the unspoken whispers and concealed tensions, bridging the gaps with empathy and patience. This has been very instrumental in my professional life as well as I relate with different sub teams within a team. True belonging may have remained somewhat elusive, but I discovered acceptance on the edge of belonging – not in spite of my differences, but because of them.

This was not just a narrative of overcoming challenges; it is about embracing the messy, yet beautiful reality of family – a patchwork weaved with love, pain, and acceptance. It is about finding my place with the circle of belonging, not by erasing the boundaries, but by drawing my own unique lines, fortifying the edges and enhancing the entirety the circle. It is a narrative that continues to unfold, each line guiding me closer to appreciating the complexities of my own intricate life and belonging.

THE CONTINUING CIRCLE

On this very day of July 1996 I am in Takoradi. and I am walking in circle, somehow unable to really locate my direction in way that I have used many times.

I had just left my host's house, auntie Christy – not my biological aunt, in the Ghana Port Authority (GhaPoA) quarters and was headed to go to go to the Takoradi Polytechnic to seek admission. I was excited that my years of home-stay were going be over and that I was going to finally continue tertiary education. I didn't know that I was about to experience some moment of aimless walk.

My excitement was caught short when I reached the market square and by some strange reasons, I found myself walking round and round in circle, round and back around the Takoradi Circle market. I cannot tell how long this continued but I do know that I have been walking around that circle for more than five rounds of circle walking. I walked down the busy street with my mind in the fog of confusion. I couldn't conclude where I was supposed to go. I looked around, hoping for a clue, but the circle market seemed to swirl around me in a blur. After all of this, I decided to seek help from a local trader I located a trader who was seated on a wayside openly and sheltered by a large umbrella.

The sun in that mid-morning of July was scorching hot and the humidity was at its peak and conditioned to the process of evaporation – it could be raining anytime soon, which will in turn ruin my day. The sun beat down mercilessly on the parched earth, casting everything in a hazy yellow light. Sweat dripped down my face as I trudged down the paths in circles, my skin was hot and sticky to the touch. It was the kind of heat that made me feel like I was being baked alive and I couldn't think aright. It was as if the heavens had been holding back their tears, waiting for the right moment to release them – in the meantime my body, our bodies forcefully bore the salty profusion of sweat.

An old and well used Bible which has become fatter than its original state laid by the desk of the man of the local trader. I approached and asked for his Bible. After a brief prayer under my breath asking for GOD to guide my hands and eyes to the right page. opened randomly to find a word of direction, so it was I got one. I cannot recall where exactly it fell but I do remember it was somewhere in the book of Psalms.

Whatever it was, it connected with a conviction for me to look further beyond Takoradi. Armed with this new conviction, I braced through the heat and went to the station to board a vehicle to Accra. The Takoradi Circle Market is a big one and the third largest market in Ghana. After about five hundred meters walk in a sunny mid-morning and profuse sweating, I reached the station that headed to Accra. In a moment my anticipation was cut short again for upon arrival at the station, the vehicle loading to Accra was already full and about to move out heading to Accra. I stood outside the vehicle, my heart racing with impatience as I watched the last of the passengers' clamber inside. Every seat was filled with people and their luggage. I wanted to make it on time for Accra and even any delay would lead me to stay a night over. So, I boarded the one heading to Cape Coast, hoping to chancely meet a vehicle there to relay me to Accra on time.

About two-hour latter we arrived Cape Coast. I was quick to notice the University of Cape Coast by the roadside. So, I called out to the driver that I was dropping off and he stopped me over by the University. I was excited and at the same time nervous.

I stepped out of the car and walked up the path towards the university, my eyes scanning the names of the halls that served as student lodge and other buildings and sparsely manicured lawns. But it was the view of the sea that truly took my breath away. It had a mesmerizing sea view outside, situated right at the opposite side of the university. I stood there for a moment, taking in the beauty of the scene of the sea, before I decided to explore further.

As I walked onto the sprawling campus of the university, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. Everywhere I looked, I saw gleaming memories of the University of Calabar where I was supposed to go and study political science but never did because of an indefinite strike by the Academic of Staff Union of University (ASUU) which lasted more than eight months.

I made my way through the campus, I saw students laughing and chatting with each other, engaged in activities that catered to every interest. I felt a sense of belonging and camaraderie, knowing that I would be part of a vibrant community of students from all

over Ghana. I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation for the future. I felt that University of Cape Coast was the perfect place for me to pursue higher education, and that the opportunities it offered were endless in building a dream to become a professional to the glory of GOD. I couldn't wait to begin my academic journey here, surrounded by the infrastructure, faculty, and resources available.

Nonetheless my self-assurance, there I was presented with certain conditions for admissions that were demanding. I was provided with a list of formalities, which required me to go through a process of registering for a university entrance examination, having my Senior Secondary School results verified, certified and translated by the Ghana office of the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and I was also told that I would be paying my tuition fees in US Dollars as an international student. I did not understand why despite being a member of the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) I would be paying tuition in US Dollars. Lastly and unfortunately, the forms were not available at that time for admission, I was informed to wait until the forms are accessible for the next academic year – that is 1997-98 instead of 1996-97 academic session.

In mere disappointment, I enquired if there was another tertiary education facility in Cape Coast and was directed to Cape Coast Polytechnic. It was a dusty road. The dusty road stretched out in front of me as far as my eyes could see. I noticed that the road was dotted with small rocks and pebbles, even the air was thick with dust. When I reached the destination, there was nothing fascinating about the place. There was only one building that served for both, classrooms and administrative centre. Compared to the University of Cape Coast, I seemed to have entered another world apart.

When I reached there, I eventually met one lady by name Magdalene. She attended to me, listened to me and requested that I also bring my result from Nigeria. That was another disappointing request. However, after purchasing the form, I headed straight to the Cape Coast vehicle station and headed to Nigeria instead of going back to the Cote d'Ivoire. It was a risky and stressful journey, as I was almost running out of cash. I was obliged to submit the form before heading back to Cote d'Ivoire.

The journey was eventful because it gave me an exciting opportunity to connect with the extended members of my circle. I met my eldest paternal aunt and her family – the eldest sister of my father. Nda Ada welcomed me with open hands and we all immediately started connecting with other siblings – her children. My aunt’s husband, Mr Ucheoma, was very instrumental in helping me speed-up the process of obtaining the result from the WAEC office. He had a distant relative who occupied some important post at the WAEC headquarters in Lagos and he was able to help me eliminate out all the bureaucracy of public service and provided me with an official statement of results in matter of few hours which otherwise would have taken days

My heart was fully overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness to GOD. Now I had received the document that held great importance in my next move of life – education. I also had the opportunity to embrace members of my circle. To be very honest, I felt more in a welcomed circle of belonging at the Ucheoma’s than I felt in my nuclear circle.

Fortified with joy and with some time on my side, I decided to take another step further in acquainting myself with the circle of my connection. The next day, I travelled eastward from Lagos to Owerri and found my way to Akabo, where my paternal village was located. For the first time in my conscious state ever, I met my paternal grandmother –Mma Anna, my uncle –Maurice, and other siblings as well.

As soon as I had reached home, my grandmother, Mma Anna did not fail to proclaim my arrival to the entire vicinity from Umuembem and beyond, as she held me in her embrace, sang and danced and hugged me and running her hands over my head, face, ears, accompanied by blessings uttered sometimes in poetic fashion, sometimes in musical tense – these acts where happening in repeat intervals. It was kind of embarrassingly amusing to be showered with such treatment that made me feel less than a teenager instead of the twenty-three old adult that I am.

It even became more embarrassing when other elderly women who heard of my arrival tripped in around and shower me with equal display of embraces, pressings, and asking questions in Igbo language – to my shame. I was literally very limited in communicating with them using only the most shortened responses. Some would ease my lingual

shortcoming in the circle of my village by speaking instead in English. Those two days in the village were very momentous and broadened my understanding of the cultural practices of Igboland

The embarrassment aside, I couldn't fail to appreciate the similarities between the two half circles where I exist. The Igbo people were similar to the Bahumono people, where my mother hailed, for such welcome attribution had greeted me nine or so years ago when I first arrived in Ebom with my mother and grandmother. Both circles share a cousin heritage, as both have a culture of praise-singers, singers, and public rejoicing. Overtime, I have grown to notice more similarities in culture and to be honest, if not for the language difference, other cultural practices of Igboland can also be found in Bahumono land.

Over time, I have grown to notice more similarity in culture and to be honest, if not for the language difference other cultural practice of Igbo lands are also proudly found in Bahumono land. I have also grown to appreciate the uniqueness of both cultures, and to accept that despite being from different backgrounds, we share a whole lot. The Bahumono people are known for their hospitality and generosity while the Igbo people are renowned for their business acumen. They may differ in terms of language, but their similarities can be found in other aspects—from food to music and dance. They come together so often that can now blend their distinct styles into one beautiful cultural production: A celebration of what it means to belong to two separate ethnicities yet still feel connected by virtue of shared identities. Whether through shared history or common customs, there is something special about coming together as one community regardless of differences. That is why I am proud to be part of this amazing union between Igbo and Bahumono –The union of the two halves of my circle is one that I will rather see as celebrating diversity instead of trying to erase it!

In two days, I had the opportunity to learn more about the loops of circles that knotted my paternal family together, I had opportunities to learn a great deal of the links and divides within the families that made our kinship circles that included the Ojjieme's and the clans that contributed to making Umuembem and its firm place in Akabo. More so, I had more joy within myself due to the fact the soles of my feet have eventually touched my fatherland. It was an amazing experience that has left me with plenty of questions and even more answers. I connected some of the dots between the past, present and

future generations of my family in Akabo and as I left, I remembered looking forward to visiting again soon.

I knew as we walked through the paths and passed houses to Ori-Akabo to board a vehicle that I would be leaving a part of myself behind. I also knew that I would carry the warmth, the love, and the happiness of this trip with me wherever I would go. I very well knew that I would come back to my fatherland, again and again, to soak in its beauty, its culture, and its love. Through it all, I am grateful for the familial ties and diversity of cultural identities in my circle that being here has brought me.

Circles help you take a step back and look at the big picture and the journeys round the circle market in Takoradi and connecting with the circles of my blood hood would forever change my perception on the unity of diversity.

THE JOURNEY OF ALTERING NAMES

The weight of my name, a torn legacy born from the unwanted passion between my father and mother, is a cross that I am bearing, an emotional conflict that haunts my every step.

Little did I know, the skeletons of my progenitors were on the verge of resurfacing in my life once more, even though at the beginning of it all, I was unaware of what was about to happen.

Upon arriving in Ghana, a sense of confidence filled my chest as I immediately made my way through the streets of Cape Coast to the polytechnic. I was about to meet with Mrs. Abaka Magdalene, who was in charge of reviewing all of my paperwork for the upcoming Higher National Diploma Course I was about to enrol in, for the start of a new chapter in my academic journey, upcoming in September 1996.

I was sitting there, after filling all of the required papers, and bringing all the documentation necessary, I was waiting for her to let me know everything was right, and I couldn't contain the excitement of what this new chapter on my academic journey would mean for me, all the opportunities and experiences I was about to have been beyond my imagination.

As I sit across from Mrs. Magdalene, I couldn't help but notice the sudden change in her facial expression. It was as if something had caught her attention, causing her to furrow her brow in a display of concern. Despite her best efforts to conceal it, the concern etched across her features became more pronounced with each passing moment.

“These are not the same,” she mentioned, pointing at the names used in my forms and on my secondary school academic credentials. I swiftly clarified the situation by explaining that my parents had experienced a dissolution of their relationship, which led to a change in my name from my father's. I went on to explain that I have since returned to my father's name.

However, she could not help me, there was nothing she could do to complete the admission process and only suggested I get an affidavit. I felt a hole in the middle of my chest, deeper and deeper with every passing second, I was disappointed and frustrated, I almost hated my past and my family background as well.

In disappointment, I headed to Takoradi, for I had no place to sleep in Cape Coast. Therefore, going to Takoradi was the ideal. Reaching Takoradi, I am walking down the streets dragging my feet that seemed to hold an invisible weight that didn't allow me to keep going, it was the disappointment that followed me. I was about to lose hope at that moment, I felt helpless and as if there was nothing else, I could do to fulfil my dream.

I am still recalling vividly, how I let out a frustrated sigh and lifted my head upward toward heaven, pleading for some kind of relief, trying to be a bit more positive about the future. It was then, somewhere in the midst of Takoradi, that I saw a sign post that read: Magistrate Court Sekondi-Takoradi. My entire face lit up and without hesitation, I sprinted and sought my way out to Sekondi.

Upon reaching the magistrate court of Sekondi-Takoradi I found two ladies, both of them with a warm smile. I explained my situation to them. One of them, after listening to me, inserted a paper in the typewriter that was a table away and started typing. After that she provided me with an affidavit and asked me to confirmed if I was okay.

“Yes...” I told her, trying not to stutter by the surprise of her actions, but that was not the end of it. The lady, after I affirmed that it was a true reflection of my story, went to another room and came back some minutes later, presenting me with an official stamped document the judge had signed. I expected her to charge me anything for it, and was pleasantly surprised that she did not. She just wanted to help me. I wish I had remembered her name. Whereas, I regret not remembering any of their names, their generosity will nevertheless stay with me. Those women and their posterity deserve my continuous prayers for heaven's continued blessings. Their actions have inspired me to pay it forward and spread positivity wherever I go. To be honest, before meeting them, I was sinking into disappointment. Unknown to me divine providence has already set the pace ahead.

The next day, after spending the night at Aunty Christy's house in Takoradi, As the sun rose on a new day, I am setting out on my journey back to Cape Coast with renewed

faith and optimism and the necessary paperwork in hand – the affidavit. She accepted the documents and I was hopeful and grateful.

As I was walking back through the long and dusty road, I couldn't help but think about the wonderful goddess of GOD, for directing my steps and guiding me down the right paths without me even knowing it. I was grateful for the presence of such powerful guidance and for the angels in human disguise I had found along the way - as the two women at the court in Sekondi and Mrs. Abaka herself at C-Poly.

Not too long on my walk I was caught by another person, who had also just submitted his form at the same polytechnic. As we conversed, he told me that he has submitted his application but was not too confident of the success because in order to gain admission one is required to know someone and it is almost impossible to get accepted without some kind of connection. This notion piqued my curiosity and left me pondering the unfairness of a system that seemingly places greater value on connections within the polytechnic circle rather than one's qualifications. We parted ways shortly after with him wishing me luck in my application and I wished him the same.

After that we parted ways, wishing each other good luck and I continued, the impact of his word had affected my hopes. My hopes weren't so high as they were before the encounter, my mind was at war, I didn't want to let the situation get the best of me and bring me down, I wanted to trust that GOD was the only connection I needed in order to get in the program, but the war with my mind and my spirit was a difficult one. I tried to keep my trust.

The doubt and impatience consumed me for all throughout my walk to the vehicle station. But I had to let go. About a month's latter, in September 1996, When I returned to Mrs Abaka's office school had started a new session and my name was not on the list. I couldn't help but attribute it to the unfortunate family circumstances that my had. Mrs Abaka was not in on that day. So, I left back to Abidjan that day in disappointment.

In July 1997 when I returned to purchase the admission applications form the 1997/1998 academic year, I met Mrs Abaka again and was explained that names had already been submitted by the various Head of department and my submission could not make it in on time. I was also told that I should keep checking in case anyone in the list fails to

show up for admission, then I could be substituted. I thought that was just to make me feel better, but it didn't work, she also told me I could opt for a Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) for the same program instead of the Higher National Diploma (HND). The DBS was lower. I was not ready to wait – either for the lottery of admission probability into HND or to go back and wait at home. I opted for the Diploma in Business Studies and was offered. It was disappointing, it was nevertheless the option to take.

Little did I know that I had set a course on blessing by taking the seemingly disappointing option...

The Diploma in Business Studies turned out to be a great blessing for me. I had never expected to learn so much about business, especially the practical parts of it, as I did during my tenure of study for this program. In one short year, I was able to develop an understanding and appreciation for management practice. It was through these courses that I got introduced to areas like communication skills, Secretarial English, Business Law, Principles of management, which later on helped me built the basis for seeking admission into a management level course, and eventually stumbled in Management of Strategic Human Resources five years later at the University of Glamorgan, Now University of South Wales.

However, I didn't feel totally fulfilled by being a DBS student. We were considered as being non-tertiary, despite the fact that we were all part of the same polytechnic with those doing the Higher National Diploma (HND), they did not consider us as part of the tertiary circle. I found that description diminutive of a DBS student and unfair, to be honest, we all studied at the same place and put the same effort in our courses.

Nonetheless there was another circle within the polytechnic that accepted me, despite the non-tertiary status and accepted me against the rules of conventions. The Christian Fellowship.

Despite not being a tertiary student, I was fortunate enough to find acceptance and belonging within the confines of another circle against the rules of its established convention -the Christian Fellowship circle at the polytechnic.

Nonetheless there was another circle within the polytechnic that accepted me. This group provided an inclusive and supportive environment where I felt comfortable sharing my beliefs and ideas. Their kindness and generosity helped me to thrive in my academic pursuits and personal growth. I am grateful for the connections I made through this fellowship and the positive impact it had on my life. As a professional, I value the importance of inclusivity and the benefits of diverse communities. Despite not being a tertiary student, I was fortunate enough to find acceptance and belonging within the confines of another circle against the rules of its established convention -the Christian Fellowship circle at the polytechnic.

After the December break of 1997, that is in January 1998, I was surprised by the approach of Natt Miller, II – who was then the secretary for an opportunity to serve as the Publicity Secretary of the Cape Coast Polytechnic Christian Fellowship. I was the only member of the executive committee who was non-tertiary. I felt humbled under GOD and at the same time could not often fail to see the swell of ego that would from time to time try to pop up.

The Fellowship saw the potential in me, defied convention and accepted me without hesitation. The inclusive spirit and unwavering support of the Christian Fellowship inspired me to believe in myself and pursue my dreams, regardless of any limitations or obstacles I may face. The faith of the Executive Committee in me ignited a spark within my soul, and I will forever be grateful for their unwavering kindness and encouragement.

At the same time, some discussions at the executive meetings will from time to time remind me how limited my circle was in the Cape Coast Polytechnic Circle. Despite the acceptance in the Christian Fellowship Circle and the opportunity to interact with all tertiary students, I was not satisfied with being a non-tertiary student. I think there always had been some sort of ‘fire’ that GOD put inside of me, it’s a force that pushed me to get greater and bigger things, and I believe that GOD wouldn’t have put those feelings inside of me if I wasn’t capable of achieving those goals.

I wanted to operate within the full circle of the institution's community, not just the half circle in the fellowship. I could not wait to complete two long years in this state of restless enthusiasm. So, I applied for a Higher National Diploma in Marketing.

Thanks to GOD I got admitted, and dumped the DBS. I cannot fail to appreciate one particular lecturer, Mr. Agyeman who was the head of the department then. As we interacted during lectures, he was able to appreciate, under GOD, my level of intellectual competence and orchestrated my entry into the Higher National Diploma in Marketing. I believe he was an angel in disguise as well, guided by GOD to help me along my path.

The ending of a story is not any better with or without stress. The joy and the grief will always be there, they are sometimes necessary to form our characters, to experience the storm before the calm of it all. But what we must remember during these trying times is that GOD is always with us guiding, protecting, helping us to get to where He wants us to be.

So, in November 1998, Here I am in C-poly, starting the enjoyment of the full circle of campus life (Christian Fellowship and Academic pursuit). I am finally where I was supposed to be, even though I wouldn't change any of the missteps and obstacles I encountered along the way, because I know it was GOD's intention, and he was always there by my side, I know all the things that happened let to this moment and made me person that I am today, for all that I am and will always be grateful.

FINDING COMMUNITY AND STRENGTH/sailings winds

As the winds of harmattan playfully dance around, introducing a new chapter in its weather cycle and leaving traces of dust on everything in sight with shy gentility in the atmosphere of Cape Coast in November of 1998, I proudly joined the full circle of tertiary students of Cape Coast Polytechnic. My sights are set on achieving the coveted Higher National Diploma in Marketing, and I am ready for the challenge that lay ahead. And so, with great anticipation, I prepare myself to take part in the grand matriculation ceremony, a time-honoured tradition that marked the beginning of my academic journey. The winds of change may blow, but I am steadfast in my determination to succeed.

Little did I know that my journey as a tertiary student in this foreign land would be a true test of my resilience and determination. From navigating the bustling streets of Accra and Takoradi in order to cover for financial need, to adjusting to a new academic circle, and dealing with identity and faith conflicts, every step of the way presented a new challenge. But I refused to let these obstacles deter me from my mission.

In 1998, during the Christmas break, I travelled home to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire and was unable to return to school until close to the end of the semester.

When I finally arrived back at school in February 1999, I was filled with frustration and anxiety. I had missed out on so much during my absence, including critical tests and mid semester quizzes that would determine my final grade. Those tests and quizzes built towards 30% of our results. The thought of having to play catch-up was overwhelming, and I couldn't help but feel like I was already set up for failure. As I sat in my first class back, I couldn't help but feel like I was out of place. Everyone around me seemed to be up to speed on all the material, while I was struggling to comprehend even the most basic concepts. It was a frustrating experience, and I couldn't help but think that my absence

had set me back irreparably. Despite my best efforts to catch up, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was already behind the curve and would never be able to catch up to my peers.

I was fortunate to have a reliable companion in my dear friend, Kwesi Koomson. Kwesi's friendship extended beyond just being a friend; he was a brother to me, and we shared a common faith in our Christian beliefs. As a reliable follower of our Christian faith, he has been an incredible source of support for me during my toughest times. His unwavering encouragement and guidance have helped me overcome this academic dilemma.

One of Kwesi's greatest gifts to me has been his expertise in math-related subjects like Statistics and Economics. His side-tuition has been a game-saver in my academic journey, and I am so grateful for his unwavering support. Kwesi embodies true friendship and brotherhood, and I am blessed to have him in my life.

The same experience happened when I went back for the semester break. During the same period of time, I had other siblings schooling in Ghana as well at primary and secondary school level> they all went back and I was unable to return. I can imagine the load of responsibility that my father had to bear with five children having to be sent across boundaries at the same time for schooling purpose in addition to six more at home in Cote d'Ivoire.

Ghana is renowned for its friendly and welcoming atmosphere and that is not far from being the fact. However, during my time as a student there, I faced some challenges with certain classmates who did not take kindly to me. The primary reason for their dislike was my Nigerian background, and some were uncomfortable with my bold approach to expressing my Christian faith. I would openly lead prayers and shunning what I considered as being incoherent with Biblical stand point of view.

I recall a particular day, as I sauntered toward the lecture hall under a blazing sun that was beating anything thing under its rays. The place was packed to the beams with all the marketing students, just like myself -spilling out into the corridor of the first floor. We were all eagerly anticipating the arrival of our lecturer. Lo and behold, an unoccupied seat caught my eyes in the room! Without wasting the time, I deftly meandered my way through the crowd, taking in the pungent aroma of perspirations and unique scents from each individual along my passage, until I finally reached my desired destination.

As I was settling into the embrace of the wooden seat, I suddenly heard a classmate's voice informing me that the seat was reserved for someone else and that the notebook on it belonged to the intended occupant. I inquired about the whereabouts of this individual and was told that he was still on his way and that the seat had been saved for him. I couldn't fathom the idea of relinquishing the comfortable spot to someone who couldn't even make it to class on time. So, I chose to ignore the argument and remain seated. Suddenly, a voice boomed across the room, "Slap him, oye Allatta Nii!" What that mean was: "Slap him, he is a Nigerian". Shocked and appalled, I realized that this was blatant xenophobic and discriminationary.

Nigeria and Ghana are two West African countries that share a lot of similarities. Both countries have a long history of cultural, economic and political relations. However, over the time, there have been some clashes between the two countries, which have threatened to affect their relationship. These clashes have been fuelled by a number of factors, including economic competition and historical grievances.

Usually, some of the students in my class come to lecture already high on substance. Which means that my Nigerian roots could have added fuel to the already raging fire, as the polytechnic was, within the same time frame, going through a clash of relevance between one infamous Mr. Atepor, a Ghanaian, and Mr. Madueke, a Nigerian. Luckily, the situation didn't escalate further. Let's just say there were more sober persons in the class than substance high-ones on that day.

Little did my classmates know that I carry within the circle of my blood a Ghanaian heritage as well. My maternal grandfather hailed from Ghana, and my grandmother often speaks of her time spent in Yendi, a charming town nestled in the northern region of Ghana. Perhaps, we even share a familial connection, but who knows? It's a pity how we often overlook the fact that our world is a small one and we could unknowingly find ourselves in conflict with our own kin just because we are quick to categorize people by their known nationality, tribe, or race. For example, I have a colleague that is Hausa and from Kano in Northern Nigeria, I was pleasantly surprised when she divulged to me that that her mother hailed from Imo State, South East Nigeria. Who knew that our paths would cross and reveal such a fascinating connection between our respective roots? It's moments like these that remind us of the powerful bond that unites us as human, regardless of our differences. Oh, that we will learn to take a step back and remember that we are all connected, regardless of our differences.

Except for some isolated cases of bold affront on my nationality, I was fortunate to have been spared for the most part on this front. One main area where I was usually attacked the most, was on the basis of my Christian identity and moral stands on issues. I was some sort of irks and it was painfully apparent that those who held a disdain for my religious convictions were quick to seize any opportunity to ridicule me. It was not hard to see overt attack either when I would stand to call for prayers and share some Bible related thoughts before start of class or whenever the opportunity presented for haters of my Christian identity to poke fun at me. I remained steadfast in my convictions. Unknown to these fun scoffers, such challenges had been catalyst to further strengthen my faith and become a better version of myself. I was also having the support of other Bible believing Christians, such as Adu Gyamfi (alias Pastor Rasta), Kwesi Koomson, Prince Hanson, Prince Blankson and Mercy Brew. We continued to stand firm in our beliefs and use each moment of adversity as a chance to grow and inspire each other. I became popular known among my classmates by a moniker of “Somebody”.

I understood too soon, sadly, that most of my tertiary colleagues were by some strange vesture draped in a peculiar cloak of self-importance, unlike those from the non-tertiary world. Even some of my peers who had shared the DBS journey with me had

metamorphosed into braggadocios beings. Together, we had once fostered a sense of camaraderie and unity at the DBS stage. Now some of them have suddenly realized otherwise. It seems that a state of lack can easily shackle us with a false sense of humility until we obtain our heart's desires. But I refused to let their arrogance infect me. Instead, I decided to take a different approach, one that focused on unity and collaboration.

The vibrant tapestry of campus life is a fascinating amalgamation of diverse cultures and creeds. Everywhere you look, there are lines of divisions, separating people into their respective academic departments, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnicities. Even within religious groups, there are subgroups aplenty; the Muslims, for instance, had their own internal divisions between Ahmadiyya and mainstream Muslims, while the Christians were a veritable rainbow of different subgroups. Nonetheless for me, Christian unity and collaboration were the watchwords of my identity. In line with that I made a deliberate choice to align myself with the main Christian group – The Ghana Fellowship of Evangelical Students (GHAFES) and the Polytechnic Christian Fellowship, the ones that brings together all the different Christian sub-circle into one glorious whole circle. Because when we work together, we're stronger than any sub-circle could ever make us.

I poured my heart and soul into best efforts to bring Christian students together and foster unity on campus. Our noble cause faced unexpected resistance, almost as if the idea of unity in the name of our Messiah was an alien concept to some. I couldn't understand why there would be pushback against such a noble cause

The road to progress was bumpy in this matter. I personally prayed and fasted for it. There were times when it seemed like every step forward was followed by two steps back, as disagreements and competing priorities from individuals created roadblocks to progress. What made the situation even more frustrating was that I knew Christian unity was possible. The more we prayed, the more it was disheartening to see some individuals were more invested in their own personal agendas than in coming together as a community to worship and learn about God in unity. Some saw their opportunities to be recognized in some sort of leadership positions if they stayed more committed in the sub groups.

Besides personal agendas, there was partisan commitments to their home churches. For example, when I thought we were winning and making progress, one of our executives of the Christian Fellowship had to go form another Sub group and even invited me to be part of the executives. I declined.

I had seen and read about it as part of the Master's desire when he prayed in agony for us to be united. I knew the power of faith to bring people together. But here, on this campus, it felt like we were constantly fighting against each other rather than working towards a common goal.

Despite the setbacks I refused to give up and held onto hope that one day we would be able to put aside our differences and come together in faith, but the journey towards that goal was filled with frustration and disappointment.

As I reflect on my journey, I must confess that my initial feelings were that of disheartenment and discouragement. However, as we delved into the matter at hand, it became more evident that the resistance we faced was not a dead end, but rather a challenge. A challenge that required us to dig deeper, to fight against the divisive forces that threatened to tear us apart, and to unite as a community of true believers. Armed with a new sense of purpose, we set out to shatter the barriers that had long separated the various Christian groups on our campus. I worked alongside three remarkable presidents of the Christian Fellowship, from the illustrious Natt Edwin Miller II to the dynamic George Assama William. Together, we defied the odds with additional prayer sessions and forged a path that led us to a place of unity and strength from the sessions in the prayer rooms.

I canvassed for us to organize events that brought in speakers, and created opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Slowly but surely, we chiselled away at the walls of division and watched in awe and satisfaction as members of different groups began to mingle and build relationships, united by their shared love for Christ. As we welcomed more and more separatist Christian Sub-circles, including the Deeper Life Campus Fellowship, our weekly attendance skyrocketed. The journey was not easy, but it was worth it.

The unity that we started building was not just a surface-level agreement, but a deep and meaningful bond. I knew that we had truly achieved something special.

EDUCATION IN THE BALANCE

I must say, the event that kept me out of classes for a solid three months in 1998-1999 was quite intriguing. But it wasn't just a one-off thing, oh no. It was more like a sign of what was to come - a string of similar situations that seemed to be following in its mysterious footsteps.

In April 1999 I am back home, in Abidjan, for the Easter break. It is a great moment when the whole family is gathering in full force to celebrate the Easter break. The air thick with the sweet scent of cooking and the chatter of my kin filled every nook and cranny. Nonetheless all things under the sun must come to an end place, and soon enough, my kin departed one by one, leaving me at home. Everyone has returned back to school, except me. Four returned to Ghana and the other six were also returned to the daily school routine in Cote d'Ivoire. I was the only left at home.

As a first-born, it seemed that I was fated to shoulder the burden of sacrifice. While my siblings are ushered forward and provided with timely tuition, I left to languish in the shadows, content to watch and wait. It was a heavy price to pay, but one that I bore with enduring resolve. I knew that our father had his hands full with a list of sprawling offsprings, not to mention the endless demands of our extended families and other commitments that we are not aware of. And yet, even in the midst of my own this situation-imposed exile, I couldn't help but wonder: how long I would have to stay before returning back to school? My education seemed to be in the Balance.

Thankfully, I returned back to school in Ghana at the mid of June 1999. Though we were already a month well into the semester by then but at least I didn't have to endure the same old boring stay experience as the 1998-99 experience. After about 10 hours of travelling, I am glad to be back. The endless hours of travelling have taken their toll on me, but I can now breathe a sigh of relief and let the peacefulness of being back to school wash over me.

As I stepped back into Cape Coast that night, the cool tropical air enveloped me like a welcoming hug. It had been long six weeks away from Ghana, and I was filled with a sense of excitement and anticipation for what the remaining part of the semester would bring. The familiar sights and sounds my footsteps greeted the vicinity as I made my

way to accommodations. As the days passed, I am fully immersing in my studies. The lectures, discussions, and assignments challenged me in new and exciting ways. Each day was filled with adventure and possibility, and I felt truly happy to part.

As the semester progressed, the dreaded demands for money began to pop up like weeds in a garden. First came the textbooks, with their exorbitant prices from lecturers who are using for business opportunities. Most of those so-called text books were actually photocopy lecture notes, with no covers that would promise knowledge but delivered only financial hardship. Then came the other surprise fees were leaving students scratching their heads and emptying their wallets. But the demands didn't stop there. Oh no. Suddenly, there were club dues to pay, class trips to fund, and even a mandatory donation to some pop-up causes (yes, you read that right). It was as if the Polytechnic had morphed into a bottomless pit, constantly sucking money out of students' pockets with no end in sight. And yet, despite the financial strain, there was a sense of camaraderie among us. We may have been broke, but at least we were broke together and we made the round and had enjoyable fellowship and fun eating around.

What made the difference between my broke and the broke of my Ghanaian contemporaries is that almost all of them were recipient of Government bursary. Most of them had received government bursaries, while I had to pay my own tuition.

As the semester approached its three-quarter mark, I was broke, my financial status was on life support. However, the thought of heading back home to Abidjan and returning late to school made me feel uneasy as that would further place education GPA on the balance and tilt my performance towards the abyss. That's when a brilliant idea struck me - why not start some extra income generating ventures? With this newfound sense of drive, I set out to brainstorm on something would provide me with a source of income.

There is a dilemma, I know that I need to do business but I am lost, staring into the abyss of uncertainty. I have no idea what business to pursue. It feels like I am standing at a crossroads with no signs pointing me in the right direction. I know I am making the right decision about generating income soon, but my mind is blank.

Finally, after about a week of contemplation, by divine intervention, inspiration strikes me from an unexpected angle. Lurking in the shadows of my bedroom is a bed lamp so beautiful, it drew the awe and envy of some of my schoolmates who set foot in my room. Its origin traced back to a certain shop eighty-two kilometres away. The illumination

that is dawning on me at that discovery is akin to a lightbulb moment, and I am determine to take the leap towards my newfound thought.

I have in my room a bedside lamp that is rechargeable which I bought from Takoradi. I remember the day I stumbled upon the rechargeable bedside lamp at Melcom stores. It was like love at first sight. The sleek design and the fact that I didn't have to worry about constantly replacing batteries had me sold. I brought it home and it quickly became my go-to light for reading night. It was then that a light bulb went off in my head (pun intended). What if I can share this amazing product with others? What if I can turn my love for this rechargeable lamp into a profitable business? And thus, my entrepreneurial journey began. In 1999, we are experiencing frequent power outage in Cape Coast. This is an opportunity.

Thanks to a loan from Miller, I started small, buying a few lamps and selling them to my school mates. The response is overwhelmingly positive. People are loving the convenience and practicality of the rechargeable lamp.

Before you know, I start a journey of expansion in my mind. I am imagining how soon I would expand my reach by setting up a small booth. I am so excited by the success of the venture- it is a boom. I sold out everything. The demand is increasing. I can, however, not take things to the next level - alas, I hit a wall. My progress is hindered by an obstacle I could have overcome. I sold most of the goods on credits and trust of repayments at promised dates. Some never paid me back at all, and others took their sweet time, leaving me unable to reap the rewards of my labour gainfully. This experience taught me a valuable and practical lesson the hard way about the buying and selling aspect of the principal and Practice of Marketing.

I am beyond frustrated right now. I cannot believe this happened to me! I was so close to achieving my financial goals, and now everything has fallen off the crack. My day dream for expansion is now facing the reality of vulnerability to trust. Why does it always have to be so hard in life? I put in so much investment and risk, only to be stopped by this a solitary obstacle that I could have controlled and avoided. It felt so frustrating. I thought I had everything planned out perfectly, but life just had to throw a curveball my way.

And it's not just my financial goals that have been impacted as I am now more indebted to Miller, II. Even my education is at risk because of the unfair practices of most of our lecturers. It's infuriating to think that my grades could be affected simply because I didn't purchase their lecture notes. This practice was so common that no one dares to speak up against it, leaving the education of countless students hanging in the balance. It is hard not to feel hopeless and defeated in the face of such financial frustration and systemic injustice that puts the futures of so many students in peril.

I spoke to some lecturers and requested for additional time to pay for the lecture notes. I was favoured to have their acceptance, except for one who was then a teaching assistant. This teaching assistant had promised us a failure (grade F) if we do not pay for his lecture note, lo and behold, I was slapped with an F in Economics, which coincidentally was also a subject with modules that I dislike.

The issue of unfair practices by lecturers is a serious concern for many students and can be frustrating to deal with. It is unacceptable that grades could potentially be influenced by a student's ability or willingness to purchase lecture notes. It is important to note that, despite all lecturers commercialising their lecture notes, not all of them in the Cape Coast Polytechnic engaged in this behaviour of failing people for not paying for their lecture notes, and it is encouraging to see lecturers like Mr Ansah and Mr Nkyekyer who displayed strong ethical and God-fearing compass and genuine care for their students. Their compassion cushioned the effect of my grade which were already facing challenges due to the unusual absence from school whenever I travel home for either the semester break or to obtain financial re-fill.

However, I have no other choice at this stage but to go back to Cote d'Ivoire. As soon as we finished the exams, I hit home

Looking back on those three years, I feel like I've been through a wild, rollercoaster ride. Three years of blood, sweat, and tears (okay, maybe not actual blood, but you get the point). I faced challenges left and right, obstacles that would make even the most seasoned student quiver in their boots. But I didn't give up. No, not me. I pushed through the late nights and early mornings, missing prolonged lectures missed and present time on campus, the endless essays and exams, the financial lacks and potentials for failures,

and the occasional mental breakdown. And you know what? I graduated to the grace and Glory of GOD.

Sure, it wasn't the smoothest journey. There were times when I wanted to throw in the towel. But I persevered, pushed through the tough times, and made it to the finish line. And you know what? It feels amazing. To everyone facing your own mountains to climb, I say this: keep going. Don't let the challenges defeat you. Because if I can graduate from this challenge, so can we in every other situation.

A DECISION TO VOLUNTEER

With my narrow graduation from Cape Coast Polytechnic behind me, I stood on the precipice of a daring and noble adventure. Months of contemplation had led to this pivotal moment, where I was about to embark on a journey to make a real difference. The thrill of the unknown was electrifying, but so was the weight of the responsibility I was about to shoulder.

As a devout Christian, I knew that I had a higher calling. That's why I decided to volunteer and put my academic knowledge to the altar of practical test. I wanted to turn my project work into a tangible, real-world application that could make a significant impact. It's time to give back in a big way!

Let's delve into the past for a moment. What happened that really called for me to put my academic knowledge to the altar of practical test? As part of the partial fulfilment of the Higher National Diploma (HND), we were required to submit a project proposal. I was eager to see where my passion would take me. With a glimmer of hope in my eyes, I presented my meticulously crafted project proposal, which aimed to revolutionize the way non-profit organizations operate and sustain themselves in a fiercely competitive world. I poured my heart and soul into that proposal, envisioning a future where charities could thrive and make a lasting impact on society. However, to my dismay, my supervisor's reaction was not what I had anticipated. With a furrowed brow and a gentle shake of his head, he informed me that the topic I had proposed was dwelling into areas that had not been taught as part of the curriculum of our business school and therefore was not practical with the curriculum.

My dreams were abruptly shattered, like a fragile glass sculpture crashing onto the cold, unforgiving ground. I felt my confidence wane, and a wave of disappointment washed over me, threatening to engulf my passion for creating change. But little did I know that this rejection would be the catalyst for a serendipitous journey of self-discovery and resilience.

As soon as I received the news about the rejection of my project proposal, I felt a wave of disappointment wash over me. However, I quickly realized that setbacks are a natural part of the academic journey and that I should use this experience as a learning opportunity. With that spark of determination ignited in me, I refused to let this setback define my academic journey. Instead, I decided to channel my energy into exploring ways of presenting the viability of my proposed topic in a way that will create interest and desire to approve and let me delve into project in the lens of principles aligning with the modules taught in our business school curriculum.

In the end, my efforts paid off, and I emerged with a case for my proposal that surpassed the resistance of my initial vision in every way. The topic I wrote about was a unique one: “The Relevance of Marketing to Religious Organisation. Achieving success is never a walk in the park, yet it's the obstacles that shape us into the strong, resourceful individuals we strive to become. With each setback, we grow wiser and more determined, transforming into lifelong learners who are unstoppable in the pursuit of our dreams.

I was determined to work in a sector that would provide a practical reality to my research. So, when Nana-Yaw presented me with an incredible chance to volunteer with the esteemed Scripture Union. Without a second thought, I leaped at the opportunity to be a part of this exclusive evangelical circle of Christian ministry that is given to use the Bible to inspire children, young people and adults to know GOD. I was eager to witness first-hand the practical applications of my academic theories. I knew this was a perfect opportunity for me, especially considering that I did a comparative study that included the Scripture Union as well.

After several months of volunteering from August to November, I was thrilled to receive an official letter of engagement from the organization on December 1, 2001. This letter marked a significant turning point in my journey with the Scripture Union, as it recognized my commitment and dedication to the organization. As Regional Finance

and Administrative Officer, I was responsible for managing the financial and administrative needs of the organization in the Central Region.

I quickly realized that this would not be an easy task, as the Scripture Union had scarce resources at its disposal, and the demand for its services was exceedingly high. While I found the administrative aspect of the job to be straightforward enough, the financial side of things left me feeling somewhat inadequate. In all honesty, I had never been particularly fond of accounting during my academic studies.

For a span of three years, I harboured a trepidation towards the study of accounting. The mere mention of such a course would send shivers down my spine, for it seemed to be a daunting task to undertake. However, I was determined to succeed and worked tirelessly to ensure that the organization's operations ran smoothly. It was time to face the fear of accounting that I had carried for three years in tertiary institution. Thankfully we were in an era of mobile phone with one swift dial, I was able to reach out the faithful brother Mark Essandoh to come to my aid. He didn't hesitate for a second, packing his bags and journeying from Accra all the way to Cape Coast. His expertise and guidance were invaluable, and with his help, I was able to overcome my fear of accounting and truly excel in the accounting practice.

This role allowed me to deepen my involvement with the organization and make a meaningful impact in the lives of young people in the central region and beyond. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve with the Scripture Union and continue to support their mission to this day in whatever way I can.

During my three-year engagement with the Scripture Union, I had the pleasure of experiencing a truly fulfilling and memorable time. The organization provided me with countless opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals who shared like passion for making a difference in the world. Whether it was through volunteering, attending events, or simply spending time with friends, I always felt a sense of community and purpose. One such individual is Samuel Halm, a compassionate and driven individual who has dedicated countless hours to helping those in need. Our shared passion for service becomes the foundation of a strong bond, as we navigate the challenges and triumphs of our volunteer work together. Our conversations are filled with heartfelt discussions about our experiences, sharing stories of the lives we have touched and the

impact we have made. In addition to Samuel, I also find a kindred spirit in Jemima, a warm-hearted and empathetic secretary. Together, we forge a friendship built on our shared desire to bring

As I reflect on my time with the Scripture Union, a single memory stands out like a glimmering jewel in a treasure trove. It was an experience that left an indelible mark on my heart and forever altered the course of my journey. Picture this: I found myself nestled in the heart of Cape Coast, living under the same roof as the esteemed Nana Yaw Offei Awuku, who not only held the position of travelling Secretary but also became a cherished confidante and guiding light. Our connection was rooted in a shared passion for spreading the good news of the gospel, and we whiled away countless evenings, delving deep into meaningful conversations and lifting up each other's prayer concerns.

Nana Yaw was more than just an employer; he was a beacon of hope, a wellspring of wisdom, and a rock of support. He helped me navigate the choppy waters of life and imbued me with the courage to pursue my calling with unwavering faith. Looking back, I am grateful for the time I spent with Nana Yaw and the close relationship we developed, which continues to this day. As Beth, Nana's beloved spouse graced the scene, the family circle expanded with the ebbs and flows of unconditional affection and occasional disagreements. The Offei Awuku clan was a wholesome unit, seamlessly bound together.

The circle grew even wider with the entrances of Derek Emmanuel Koomson,. As my time in Cape Coast was drawing to a close and I was busy making preparations to depart for the UK, therefore I specifically requested George to support the Scripture Union in my capacity during this transitional period, George Assamah William arrived on the scene. adding a fresh burst of energy to an already vibrant family.

Overall, my engagement with the Scripture Union was a truly transformative experience that has left a lasting impact on my life. On Looking back, I am proud of the impact that I was able to make in the lives of young people in the central region through the opportunity engage with the Scripture Union. While it was not always easy, the experience taught me the value of hard work, dedication and prayer and has stayed with me to this day.

After three transformative years with the Scripture Union, I find myself at another moment of separation in this circle of my life. An incredible opportunity presents itself in the form of going to study in the United Kingdom, I have earlier deferred the admission last year. While elated at the prospect of furthering my education and embracing new experiences, a bittersweet feeling tugs at my heartstrings. Saying goodbye to my friends and the tight-knit community I have grown to love and appreciate as my own in Ghana. As I prepare for my departure, memories of laughter-filled evenings spent sharing stories, engaging in deep conversations about faith, and supporting one another during challenging times flood my mind. The special world that I have become a part of, where bonds were formed and nurtured, is now on the verge of being left behind. The experiences while volunteering and living with Beth and Nana have shaped me greatly into the person I am today, and leaving them behind is no easy task. However, futuring my educational career provides an opportunity for personal growth and a chance to broaden my horizons beyond what I ever thought possible.

The 13 of October, 2003 marked the day I set off from Cape Coast, en route to Accra, with a one-way ticket to the United Kingdom. Two of my dearest confidants, who had promised to see me off with all the pomp and friendly ceremony befitting my grand adventure were there. Their presence was a worth, and the bond we shared was a testament to the strength of true friendship. As we parted ways at the airport, I knew that their love and support would be with me every step of the way.

LONELY SHADES OF BRITAIN

Almost a month after I arrived in the UK, a devastating piece of news reached me from a non-relative, a fellow interpreter in the Church way back in Abidjan. That news will forever alter the course of my life. It was with a heavy heart that I learned of my father's untimely passing. It was a shock that reverberated through every fibre of my being, leaving me numb and overwhelmed. In the midst of adjusting to a new country and embarking on a fresh chapter of my life, I was suddenly confronted with the harsh reality of my father's absence.

At first, I could sense that my own family members were hesitant to disclose the heart-breaking news. I called severally and no one was ready to let me know. The pain sliced through me, for I believed that as the first-born, I deserved to be kept in the loop. Yet, I chose to suppress my anger, understanding that perhaps they thought shielding me from the truth would ease my burden. Deep inside, though, I yearned for closure, clinging to the hope that a family member would inform me with a contrary news. Finally, it was my cousin's husband who delivered the news and it was a shattering blow. It crashed upon me like an avalanche, overwhelming grief and loss washing over me, threatening to engulf my very being. In that moment, it felt as if a vital part of myself had been violently torn away, leaving behind an all-consuming void that seemed impossible to escape.

As I pour my heart out onto these lines, the memories of my beloved father come rushing back, enveloping me in a whirlwind of emotions. Each memory stirs up a bittersweet concoction of longing and gratitude for the love he showered upon me during our very limited time together. The weight of regret settles upon my shoulders, as I reflect on those final moments, I was unable to share with him. There are moments when I still find myself wishing that my parents had been granted the gift of witnessing the person I have grown into today, so they could see the fruits of their labour and the impact they had on shaping my path.

When I first arrived in the UK to pursue my studies, I was filled with excitement and anticipation. However, little did I know that finding a job would prove to be a much more challenging task than I had anticipated. As an international student, I was not

familiar with the job market or the cultural norms surrounding employment in this new country.

I faced numerous obstacles and hurdles along the way, and at times, it felt like I was on the verge of becoming stranded – I actually did become stranded. Most employers were looking for candidates with a certain level of familiarity with the local job market, which I simply did not possess. Additionally, the competition for part-time jobs was fierce, as many students were also seeking employment to support their studies. I sent out countless applications, and even sought guidance from career advisors at the job centre, but all my efforts seemed futile. Every week, I received letters from various employers, and the contents were always the same. They would express their deepest regrets and inform me that I had not been successful in my applications. It felt like a knife being twisted in my heart every time I received such letters, and it was hard to keep my spirits up. As the days turned into weeks, and then months, I began to feel a sense of desperation. Financial strain started to take its toll, and I couldn't help but wonder if deciding to study abroad was a mistake.

At one time my moral and spiritual compass was shaken, I keep finding myself in a series of dilemma and on Monday, 27 October 2003, I poured my heart into the pages of my diary about the endless possibilities of succumbing to vices and completely abandoning my moral and spiritual compasses while stranded in a foreign land with no money and no decent job opportunities in sight. The only options that seemed readily available to me were working in casinos or becoming a member of a bar or pub crew – serving alcohol and exposing my senses to licentious vices. It was beyond frustrating. I even came up with all sorts of twisted arguments to justify why I should give in to these temptations and take such jobs. To be honest with you, I probably would have given in if it weren't for the constant restraints of the HOLY SPIRIT.

In the midst of this challenging moment, I moved into a remarkable opportunity for introspection: to embrace a more compassionate perspective and cease hastily passing judgment on others' choices. Before now, I had an air of going Bible-gangster and

shooting scriptural bullets of criticism on some people members of our Christian Fellowship, from my alma matter in Ghana, who graduated with a job in the brewery. As I delved deeper into this introspective journey, I realized that every individual carries their own burdens and faces unique challenges. What may appear as a questionable decision to one person might be the only viable option for another. It is through empathy and compassion that we can truly grasp the complexity of human experiences and foster a more inclusive and understanding society. This realization has compelled me to approach interactions with a newfound patience, allowing me to see beyond the surface and truly appreciate the diverse tapestry of humanity, speaking the truth in love. Of course, that being said, I remain a conservative Christian and will stand boldly for views that I strongly feel do not align with Biblical correctness.

I found myself in a constant struggle with my finances, drowning in an overwhelming amount of debt. With each passing day, I felt more and more trapped in my current situation. The final straw came when a letter arrived demanding payment for my university housing. I couldn't help but feel resentful that this had become my reality.

I prayed and searched fervently for a job opportunity to come my way, but as time went on, my hope began to falter. Despite successfully avoiding working in an alcohol-infested environment, I was faced with yet another difficult decision. On November 6th, 2003, I reluctantly accepted a one-night shift job at Peacock's warehouse using someone else's name, fully aware of the ethical implications of my choice.

Throughout my shift, the weight of anxiety sat heavily on my chest, as if I would be discovered at any moment. At the end of the day, I documented my difficult decision in my journal, feeling the emotional turmoil settle in deep within my soul.

No other job came after that. At last, on a faithful day, I got a letter in the mail. It was a hopeful letter. I was practically bouncing with optimism, only to discover that it will actually be the bearer of a sad reality. The letter invited me for an interview, so I made

my way, all dressed up, on the train from Trefforest to Cardiff Central. When I arrived and introduced myself, I could feel the unease in the air. I was asked to wait and less than two minutes later, they apologised and explained that there had been a mix up - the role I had applied for had not yet been interviewed. I never received a call back. From the commotion that happened on that day, I had a very gut-wrenching feeling of being discriminated against solely because of the colour of my skin. They must have assumed, based on my name, Anselm Ezemson, that I wasn't of African descent. But, to their surprise, my appearance bore the distinct hallmarks of an African skin tone. Quite a shocker for them!

Unfortunately, stories like mine are not uncommon for international students studying in the UK. Despite the UK being known for its diversity and multiculturalism, racism is still a prevalent issue that many international students face. Discrimination can occur in many forms, from subtle remarks and exclusion to outright hostility and violence.

It's ridiculous how even in a supposed diverse society like the UK, racism still manages to make us feel isolated and disconnected. The highest number of international students residing in the UK, often find ourselves feeling disconnected from the community around us. Despite our physical presence in the country, we still felt like we were on the outskirts of society, living in a separate half circle, unable to fully integrate and engage within the full circle. It's a difficult and disheartening experience to endure, one that leaves a lasting impression on those who have faced it

It is essential to raise awareness of this issue and create a supportive environment that promotes equality and respect for all. Universities and institutions need to take an active role in combating racism by implementing policies and procedures to address it as well. The media need to stop playing double standard and instead, hold those accountable who perpetuate discriminatory behaviour based on racial profiling. This includes providing training and resources for the public on cultural sensitivity and anti-racism.

Oh, what a sad experience it was to be racially discriminated against! So much so that I decided to take proactive measures to reduce the chances of it happening again. After all, I wouldn't want all that time and money I invested on transport to go to waste. I started using my African middle name when applying for jobs to weed out all those racist employers. I mean, why bother wasting our time and money on transport just to have some racist judge me based on my melanin composition? With this plan, any equal opportunity employer who's not just paying lip service with their diversity and equality form would willingly invite me, and we can all have a good a working relationship.

Socially, I was called by peer as “Uche” and all applications following that would bear either the full version of the name Uchechukwu or Uche. Honestly, I think it came with a price to the extent that I was on the brink of throwing in the towel and giving up. Just as I was on the brink of giving up on ever finding a job after months of fruitless search, a stroke of grace came my way. On a chilly Saturday morning of December 6, 2003, my phone rang with a call from a potential employer. They had found my application from the University’s job centre and wanted to invite me for an interview. I felt anxiety and renewed sense of hope flooding my heart. When I stepped into the interview room, I was greeted warmly, creating a welcoming atmosphere. However, my emotions were a mix of scepticism and chope. In the back of my mind, I remained watchful for any lurking signs of bias, at the same time, I couldn't help feeling a glimmer of hope. It was a delicate balance, and I fervently prayerful for an optimistic outcome.

After returning from Cwmbram to Treforest, I couldn't help but keep feeling that mix of hope and anxiety. This job opportunity could potentially be the breakthrough I've been longing for. I waited anxiously. A phone call finally came through a few hours later. It was ASDA Cwmbram, informing me that I had been selected to join their team. I was ecstatic. The next night, on Sunday 7th, December 2003, I buttoned up my coat, shielded myself against the harsh biting winter cold and embarked on my journey. The journey from Treforest to Cwmbram was long and arduous that required three interchanges of train and bus rides lasting up to one hour and thirty minutes. I was ready for whatever the road ahead may bring. I relished every moment of it. After all, what's an adventure

without a little challenge, right? I wanted this job so badly. Finally, I arrived at the gates of the ASDA store ready to embark on this new chapter in my life.

To my surprise, my supervisor and my colleagues on the shop floor were incredibly welcoming. I didn't experience even a hint of discrimination, even though I was the only African working there, in an all-Welsh community. It was a wonderful experience. I remain grateful for the warm reception. It was also there that I came to the stark realization of the deep-seated hatred between the British, specifically the Welsh and the English. It was as if a fiery dragon had been unleashed within them, breathing dim flames of contempt and resentment towards each other. I couldn't help but marvel at the intensity of their rivalry, almost as if it was a game of thrones. I would also later understand that the same rivalry extended beyond English and Welsh. There is long-standing feud between the English and the Scottish, as well as the English and the Irish. And yet, I was completely unaware of the animosity brewing within the borders of Great Britain.

Balancing my seven-nights a week night job and full-time studies during the day was a challenge. Adding to the pressure was the fact that I was breaking immigration rules by working more than the permitted 20 hours as an international student. The fear of being caught and deported loomed over me as I worked 56 hours a week. Thankfully, my clandestine work regime was short-lived as Christmas break was around the corner, giving me the freedom to work as much as I wanted, without fear of being caught.

After an intense twenty-four days of streak of non-stop back-to-back ritual of travelling and night shifts, my temporary contract came to an end. The financial burden that had been weighing heavily on my mind was finally lifted, I now had moneys to meet some pending demands that were weighing heavily on my mind. Working as a Grocery Colleague at ASDA had proven to be a true lifesaver in many ways. Majorly, I was able to take care of some long overdue payments, including my hall fees and some books that I needed for my studies. For one, it allowed me to finally pay off a significant portion of my food expenses, which had been a major concern for me as an international student living away from home. Welsh cuisine was bland, I had to rely on my cooking skills to

whip up. I could now afford to buy groceries that were not only nutritious but also delicious to my African taste bud. Soon enough, our hall's kitchen will transform into a hub for bringing together my Nigerian and African peers to indulge in dishes that evoke memories of our homelands.

IN THE SHADOW OF LONDON

I am about to embark on a 120-kilometer journey with Charity, a heavily pregnant woman in her last trimester. The journey was part of the ordeal most of the international student go through in a bid to seal our immigration status in the UK. As I hopped into her car, a bizarre idea danced through my mind – what if her baby decided to make a surprise appearance during our ride? With that outrageous notion lingering in the air, I set off on a voyage that perfectly mirrored life's unpredictability.

Both Charity and I were bidding a fond farewell to the tranquil landscapes of Wales, and her car was our vessel, ready to carry us from the serene Welsh countryside to the bustling streets of England. My emotions were in turmoil, a whirlwind of anticipation, excitement, and just a hint of anxiety that seemed to reverberate within my chest.

As we hit the road on that fateful day, January 24, 2005, the world outside the car window passed by in hues of green and grey, a living canvas painted by the winter season. I was hopeful that in London I could find a cheaper education centre that could afford me an opportunity to renew my visa. Little did I know that this journey into the unknown would be filled with unexpected twists, testing the boundaries of hope, courage, and the bonds that connect us all – as international students hoping to secure a residency in the UK.

In a wide sense of things, I was hopeful that England would be better than Wales. Little did I know that beyond the horizon of this journey, a labyrinth of challenges and triumphs awaits me. The rhythmic hum of the wheels against the road seemed to murmur secrets of the path I was about to tread. What mysteries would unfold as I crossed into London, a metropolis filled with both promise and uncertainty? The anticipation tingled in my veins, a curious mix of curiosity and trepidation, as if the ride itself carried the weight of my unspoken questions.

As Charity manoeuvres her hands and feet between the gears, clutches and wheels speeding onward, I couldn't help but reflect on the exorbitant immigration fees that had become an unwelcome companion on this journey. Each fee was a reminder of the financial mountain I had to climb. It felt like a constant battle for survival, an endless loop of applications to different educational institutions, desperately seeking

opportunities to keep moving forward in the UK. The fees were an ever-present cloud, casting a shadow over my dreams and aspirations – like those of many immigrants.

The weight of these fees wasn't the only burden. The need to pay for visas loomed like a spectre, a haunting reminder that our status in this foreign land was fragile. Every penny earned was earmarked for survival, for staying afloat in a sea of uncertainty. The thought of deportation was an icy touch on my spine, pushing me to work harder and fend off the ever-encroaching darkness – while at the same time afraid to be caught working for more than the required hours per week.

Balancing the demands of work and study was a tightrope walk on the edge of exhaustion. The 20-hour work week limit for international students felt like a cruel joke in the face of mounting expenses. The struggle to find employment that would fit within the constraints, yet provide enough to meet the towering fees and living costs, was a relentless juggle. At times, it seemed like an impossible equation, a puzzle with missing pieces that refused to be solved.

Then came the day that the walls seemed to close in. I had managed to secure a PhD program with a private institution and used that to apply for visa in order to secure a visa that will make me prolong my stay in the United Kingdom. I waited for a longer time and would receive a denied visa. The news of the denied visa shattered the fragile stability I had managed to build. I was given the option to appeal. Frustration swelled within me as I prepared my case, pouring my heart onto the pages of my appeal. The summons to court brought a mix of fear and determination. On that eventful day, I was in court. Standing before the legal representative of her Majesty the queen, my voice trembled as I laid out my argument, my future hanging in the balance. And yet, despite my heartfelt plea, the outcome was a crushing denial, leaving me adrift in a sea of despair.

As the job at ASDA, once my sanctuary, turned into a treacherous zone, I found myself navigating the murky waters of existence as an undocumented immigrant. I found myself having to live in the shadow. The label of an illegal immigrant became my mantle as I worked hidden away, my footsteps echoing with fear in every alleyway. The whispers of deportation were a constant symphony in my mind, a relentless reminder that my every move was fraught with danger. The weight of secrecy pressed down on me, the

emotional toll of living on the fringes eating away at my spirit. At least, I still had my job as a Colleague at Asda to keep body and soul together.

I can still vividly recall this pivotal night. It is the 21st of May in 2009, a date forever etched into my memory like a scar. Anxiety twists my gut as I receive an unexpected summons that night. The call summons me upstairs to the People Manager's office, a place that holds both an air of authority and an ominous aura shrouded in friendly manner.

My heart pounds in my chest as I step into that room, a heavy cloud of unspoken tension hanging in the air. The request seems deceptively simple but carries enormous consequences – I was being requested to provide proof of my right to work in the UK. That very request dangled in the room like a guillotine blade, ready to fall and sever the fragile threads of my existence.

The harsh reality hits me like a tidal wave, and I am utterly unprepared for its merciless force. The brutal truth is that I could be summarily sent to the Immigration Removal Centre, a nightmarish abyss from which few ever return. It's as if my worst fears have come to life, a grim reminder of my precarious status in the shadow of London.

That very night, I had no choice but to step away from the familiar shop floor that has been my battleground for survival in the UK for five years in a stretch. I am suspended without pay, left to grapple with the abyss of uncertainty that looms before me. My three weeks of gruelling labour and hard-earned wages vanish into thin air, swallowed by the relentless gears of immigration enforcement.

Leaving this chapter behind, marked by the desperate struggle for survival, I feel like I'm leaving a piece of my soul behind – indeed, it is a piece of my soul as my hard-earned three weeks' pay in exchange for my sweat and blood is taken away. The job that has once been my lifeline has transformed into a treacherous trap from which I have to free myself as quickly as possible. It's a bitter pill to swallow, a stark reminder of the injustices faced by those living on the fringes of England, their dreams overshadowed by the looming spectre of deportation.

The process of starting from the unknown is gruelling. The emotional toll of being denied a visa when you really depend on it is hard to describe. It feels like a deep betrayal of the so-called Commonwealth creed, the same creed Britain often invokes to maintain its influence over its former colonies. My world has been upended, and I stand on the precipice of an uncertain future, my every step forward a testament to the strength that adversity can unexpectedly bestow upon us.

The bustling city of London, with its towering skyscrapers and bustling streets, once symbolized hope and opportunity for me, daring me leave the tranquil city of Cardiff. Now, with the denied visa, it has become an unforgiving labyrinth, where every step I take feels like navigating a minefield.

Faced with the harsh reality of being an illegal immigrant, I have no choice but to plunge into the shadows of London's underbelly. I know that the consequences of being discovered are dire – deportation back to Nigeria, a place I'm really not too accustomed to. For all my stay in Nigeria was just seven years spent in primary and secondary school and a bit after that when my mother took me there against my like.

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As my wallet begins to drain and the weight of high house rent presses down on me, I find myself in a desperate struggle to survive. The world around me has become an unpredictable maze, and I need to navigate it somehow.

After wrestling with a moral dilemma that gnaws at my conscience, I make a difficult decision. I turn to the shadows, taking up clandestine jobs that will help me stay afloat. It's a path I hadn't foreseen, but necessity has driven me to it.

It's during this tumultuous time that a fellow Nigerian colleague, Paul, as we called him, someone who understands the hardships I'm facing, comes to my aid. He introduces me to Emmanuel, a Nigerian who is on the verge of traveling back to Nigeria for some personal program. In a twist of fate, I assume the identity of Emmanuel and take on a temporary job as a security guard at Wickes in Erith.

For two wild weeks, I basically became Emmanuel, the security guard, without anyone at Wickes knowing it -keeping my true identity concealed in the shadows. It's a surreal experience, a double life, which, trust me, I never saw coming. This whole experience has been seriously surreal and full of guilt. It's a stark reminder of how far people can go when life throws them curveballs.

As I write this now, I am realizing that I did become the main character in a poem I wrote once called 'The Lost Ones.' It's all about how people lose themselves in the struggle to make a living, especially dealing with immigration issues. So, yes, I have been deep in that journey, walking in their shoes for two weeks, and it's been eye-opening, to say the least.

My fear of being discovered constantly was hanging over me like a dark cloud, casting a heavy rain of anxiety over every move I make. I recall one day someone mentioning that all the security people coming have the same name as Emmanuel.

At that remark, the weight of secrecy pressed heavily upon me, a constant burden that wears on with my spirit and Biblical conviction. It's a life of perpetual anxiety, always looking over my shoulder, always aware that at any moment, my precarious existence could crumble like a house of cards. The simple act of finding a place to live or accessing essential services in UK becomes a labyrinthine ordeal, fraught with challenges.

The city of London, once a shining symbol of hope, has turned into one relentless, confusing maze with obstacles at every corner. I am now transformed into a sort of ghost within my own life, keeping my true self locked away, my dreams put on hold, and my very sense of who I am slowly fading under the constant dread of being found out by immigration authorities. It is like I'm living life on a tightrope, caught somewhere between being in London and being in the shadows of it – living life in half a circle.

Amid the shadows and uncertainty, I did find a sense of kinship with others who share my plight. In the hidden pockets of London's immigrant communities, I encounter fellow

dreamers turned survivors, all seeking a chance at a better life, all bound by the common thread of invisibility.

Together, we form a tight-knit community, supporting one another emotionally and sharing tips on navigating the treacherous terrain of life as undocumented immigrants. Our stories, each filled with resilience and determination, are a testament to the human spirit's ability to endure even in the harshest of circumstances.

Two weeks later, as soon as I get my first pay, I leave Wickes and am provided another security opportunity. No paperwork or contract is signed – only a verbal agreement of how much I will be paid. My days blur into nights as I toil relentlessly, working long hours under the cover, paid in cash, with no official records to trace my existence as the being employed to work for the agency.

As the days turn into weeks, and weeks turn into months, my existence settles into a rhythm of perpetual uncertainty. I have become adept at slipping through the city's shadows, a master of evasion, and a guardian of the secrets that bind our community of illegal immigrants together. Yet, beneath the surface, a yearning remains—a longing for recognition, for a chance to emerge from the shadows and live openly as a contributing member of society. I know that the road ahead is fraught with challenges, but I refuse to let my dreams be extinguished by the darkness that surrounds me.

I hold an unshakeable determination to discover an escape route from the intricate web of uncertainty that ensnares me. I long to rekindle the once-blazing hope within me, the beacon that had illuminated even the darkest corners of my life. There is, however, a problem; my passport has now expired, and there is no way to renew it in the UK as long as I do not have the right of residency.

Little did I foresee that a thrilling and hopeful turning point was about to unfold on a particular Sunday, the 21st of June in 2009. It was a day when I engaged in business conversation with Mr. Ndubueze, a discussion that would set ablaze an already existing passion within me -the prospect of made my heart brimmed with super excitement. I've always held a deep love for photography and all its intricacies, and suddenly, everything seems to be falling into place. The camera has always held a path where my natural enthusiasm and aspirations converges, setting me on a thrilling journey filled with boundless hope again.

As we were still in the midst of setting up the studio, the shocking news of Michael Jackson's passing on June 29, 2009, sent ripples through the world. It was a moment that stirred something deep within me. You see, I had been an ardent fan of the King of Pop since my childhood. His music had been one of the soundtracks to some of the chapters of my life, and his loss felt somehow personal. it struck a chord deep within me, evoking a profound sense of nostalgia that transported me back to the innocence of my youth in Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa.

The idea struck me like a bolt of lightning – there was a potential opportunity here to make some much-needed money. I couldn't help but think of how I could pay off my overdue rent and ease my financial struggles.

I sat down with Mr. Ndubueze and we brainstormed a plan. We decided to design and print t-shirts paying homage to the legendary Michael Jackson -truth is to pay our business need.

On July 2, 2009, I embarked on a bold venture, driven by economic necessity and the weight of my rent, which was already two days overdue. I entered the wild game of street hawking in the heart of London's Westminster. It was a daring move, and the stakes were high.

Street hawking in London, as I realised, turned out to be quite a challenge, contrary to what I initially thought. Despite my excitement and best efforts, I could not manage to sell a single one of those thirty-plus Michael Jackson tribute t-shirts.

I did not know that selling on London streets required a street trading license, not to mention the risk of getting arrested and deported if anything went wrong.

So, there I was, standing on the bustling Westminster Bridge, with the majestic Big Ben in view, feeling like a complete failure. I couldn't help but question my choices at that moment. London, once full of promise, had now become a web of obstacles. The weight of it all bearing down on me, and I longed for a change of scenery as my dreams of making it big in London started getting clouded by the harsh realities of life as an immigrant. The desire to return to Africa started burning within me. I found myself at a crossroads, grappling with decisions that would shape my future. However, returning home to Nigeria wasn't even an option, partly because I didn't want to go back empty-handed, partly because I really did not understand Nigeria, and the last part I was in a relationship and looking forward to getting married.

Five days later, on July 7th, 2009, we witnessed the birth of Zuri International Photo Studio, a dream that had finally been brought to life. Though I was now immersed in a business that brought me immense joy, a nagging concern about immigration matters continued to weigh on my mind. It was as if the very soil of the United Kingdom didn't resonate with the deepest corners of my heart anymore. I yearned for something more, a return to my roots - to Africa.

As my mind is making up, GOD is also working behind the scene, unknown to me, orchestrating my destiny in ways I cannot fathom. A miraculous opportunity presents itself. I learn of a job opening in Human Resources located in Nigeria.

The bearer of this life-changing news is none other than Dr. Kola Oduwaiye, or Uncle Kola as we fondly refer to him. He is a Nigerian based in the UK, and his family has also become like home for me. He comes across the opportunity during his visit to Nigeria. He informs me that a fast-growing IT firm in Abuja is actively seeking an HR officer to manage its human resources functions.

Without a hint of hesitation, I seize the moment, my heart ablaze with anticipation and submit my CV on a memorable Wednesday, August 19th, 2009. The real turning point is engraved in time on October 5th, the day I embarked on my inaugural series of interviews. The arduous journey through interviews and evaluations culminates in an

earth-whelming moment, when on Wednesday, October 14th, 2009, an offer is extended that will change my life's trajectory forever – HalleuYAH!

My heart is swelled with both excitement and anxiety as I am being sent off by my fiancée to London City Airport on that Monday morning, November 16th, 2009. I am on the verge of boarding a Lufthansa flight bound for Abuja, poised to commence a new chapter in the story of my life.

However, the way out of London comes with one more twist. An overzealous airport staffer of Asian descent, his features reminiscent of an Indian background, halts my journey and reports me to the immigration authorities due to my expired passport. In the ensuing interrogation, I explain that I have gotten tired of struggles and have reached the decision—that the United Kingdom no longer holds allure for me, and I am returning home indefinitely. In response, I am handed a resounding verdict: a five-year ban from entering the UK, and that was also the first time I heard the term "self-deportation."

Later that very same day, I set foot in Abuja, a symbol of my departure from the relentless shadows of immigration concerns. It marked the dawn of a new era, brimming with promise and abundant opportunities, as I begin my journey with Quanteq Technology Services.

As my mind shapes its course, God quietly orchestrates my destiny, unbeknownst to me. A remarkable opportunity emerges: news of a Human Resources job opening in Nigeria. Dr. Kola Oduwaiye, affectionately known as Uncle Kola, a Nigerian residing in the UK and a cherished figure in my life, stumbles upon this chance during his visit to Nigeria. He conveys that a rapidly growing IT firm in Abuja seeks an HR officer to oversee its human resources functions.

Without hesitation, I seize the moment, my heart ablaze with anticipation. On a memorable Wednesday, August 19th, 2009, I submit my CV. The true turning point arrives on October 5th, when I embark on my inaugural series of interviews. The arduous

journey through evaluations culminates in a life-altering moment on Wednesday, October 14th, 2009, when an offer arrives, set to redefine my life's path – Hallelujah!

My heart swells with a mix of excitement and anxiety as I bid farewell to my fiancée at London City Airport on that chilly Monday morning, November 16th, 2009. I stand on the brink of boarding a Lufthansa flight bound for Abuja, ready to commence a new chapter in my life.

However, my departure from London introduces one final twist. An overzealous airport staffer of Asian descent, bearing features reminiscent of an Indian background, halts my journey and reports me to immigration authorities due to my expired passport. During the ensuing interrogation, I explain my exhaustion with the struggles and my resolute decision that the United Kingdom no longer holds allure for me. I declare my intent to return home indefinitely. In response, I am handed a resounding verdict: a five-year ban from entering the UK, marking my introduction to the term "self-deportation."

That very same day, I set foot in Abuja, symbolizing my departure from the relentless shadows of immigration concerns. It heralds the dawn of a new era, brimming with promise and abundant opportunities, as I embark on my journey with Quanteq Technology Services.

RECONNECTING WITH NIGERIA

The sun is hanging low in Abuja's sky, casting a fiery glow across the horizon as the Lufthansa plane is gliding down to its graceful landing at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport on this evening of Monday, 16 November 2009.

After six long years of weathering the relentless storms of life in the United Kingdom, every fibre of my being is quivering with anticipation as I am finally setting foot on African soil to start a new chapter.

Yet, it's not just the sweet embrace of home that's awaiting me; it's the very air itself, thick with a dry and slightly dusty heat, an unmistakable announcement that the enigmatic harmattan season has opened up its dusty wings once more. In an instant, it's spiriting me back to nostalgic memories, where the past and present of my life are waltzing in the timeless embrace of nostalgia.

I can't help but smile as I hear the boisterous chatter of passengers and the rhythmic variations of Nigerian pidgin English, mixed with various degrees of complaints and arguments, most of them in very imperative tones in the background as we're waiting for our luggage. The airport is buzzing with life.

I collect my luggage and moving through customs, feeling a sense of relief and anticipation washing over me. The immigration officer, adorned in well-starched and crisply ironed khaki uniforms, greets me with warm smiles and cheerful banter as he stamps my passport without even mentioning that it has expired. I'm back home, reconnecting with my native land.

Outside the airport, the chaos of Abuja is greeting me with open arms. I'm seeing people sitting outside the airport while I'm waiting for Justice to come pick me up. I'm shocked to see people involved in many sorts of business right at the airport – money changing, begging, kilichi sellers - those I could remember. The display of summer colours in the clothing of passers-by is adding to its re-filling of a sense of nostalgia. I have returned to a place where I truly belong.

I am making my way to the car with Dr. Justice Adaji, whom his sister, Mrs. Tina Oduwaiye, has arranged to pick me up. I cannot help but reflect on the beauty of Africa, a beauty many of us are taking for granted in our quest for a better life abroad. I watch

as the trees and grass are swaying gently in the breeze. The vibrant orange hue of the setting sun is painting the sky, creating a breath-taking backdrop to my homecoming. I was emotionally grateful to GOD as took in all the sensory emotions.

The warmth of the Nigerian people is also striking me deeply. Passers-by are exchanging friendly greetings, and even the infamous traffic jams are seeming to take on a life of their own, with drivers often seen engaged in animated emotional verbal exchanges that, to an outsider, might appear on the brink of a serious physical confrontation. Yet, to my amazement, despite the furious action by the drivers, the atmosphere inside the cars is filled with light-hearted laughter, as if they share a secret joke only known to those within the inner circle. In this moment, I can't help but reflect on the incredible resilience and warmth of my beloved Nigerian people. Despite the many challenges the country faces, it's this unwavering spirit and ability to find joy in the midst of chaos that make Nigeria truly special -at that I felt a profound emotional connection to my fellow countrymen.

With the first rays of morning light, I'm eagerly yearning to escape the confines of that dismal hotel room. Surprisingly, despite the poor service and shoddy facilities, I had managed to find some solace in sleep. My heart danced with enduring joy because I was finally home, However, amidst my elation, a tinge of melancholy brushed over me, knowing that there were challenges awaiting me on the horizon.

As I await the arrival of Justice, I decide to take a little walk beyond the confines of the hotel and acclimatize myself with that part of Abuja. To my delight, I am immediately greeted by the tantalizing scent of spicy, succulent roasted chicken wafting from a nearby roadside suya seller. It has been far too long since I indulged in the natural flavours of real chicken. I simply must indulge in the delectable flavour and savour the taste of truly fresh chicken. Without hesitation, I purchase half of the delectable bird and find solace right there, under the cool shade of a tree, to relish in its savoury goodness and savour each and every bite, while at the same time taking in more aroma from the smoky version of the roast still on fire. It is as though I am reuniting with an old friend - the taste of natural chicken becomes music to my taste buds.

Justice arrives a little later that morning, and I check out of the hotel. Together, we embark on a search for accommodation. As we drive through Abuja from the trendy Wuse to the prestigious Central Business District and ending in the chic Gwarimpa, it

was quite an emotional moment, marking the start of a new chapter, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of hope and excitement.

Settling into my new apartment in Gwarimpa, I cannot shake off the mix of excitement and nervousness that is engulfing me as I am preparing to embark on this new adventure that will start tomorrow.

Wednesday, November 18, 2009, is marking the beginning of a new phase in my life, a day I have eagerly awaited. I adorn my Next blue checked shirt and budget friendly Primark trousers and suit making my way to Quanteq Technology Services in the Central Business District. The building, with its bustling office floors, is filling me with a profound sense of purpose. My colleagues are welcoming me with open arms, eager to share their knowledge and expertise. I am settling into my new role; a growing sense of joy and fulfilment is enveloping me.

I must admit that I am pleasantly surprised to notice that Nigeria has evolved, contrary to the notion that I had. The IT industry in Nigeria is thriving, and I am thrilled to be a part of its burgeoning growth as an HR Business Partner in a tech company.

Despite that, I find myself grappling with overwhelming impostor syndrome. The nagging feeling of inadequacy is looming large. This is my very first time doing Human Resource Management in practice, outside the classroom teaching. I am, nevertheless, determined to prove my worth and make a meaningful contribution to the industry. The emotional struggle to prove my worth was intense, and the shadow of self-doubt was ever-present.

Little do I know that overcoming impostor syndrome will be an ongoing battle. It's as if a shadow is lurking at the edges of my confidence, ready to pounce at any moment.

As I grapple with the imposter syndrome, I come to a point of finding myself like a lost soul in my own country of Nigeria. Despite my Nigerian roots, I am often at odds with the culture and customs of my country people. My accent doesn't help matters - frequently mistaken for a Ghanaian, I feel like an outsider in my own land. To add to this, I struggle to match the exuberant and gregarious nature of my fellow Nigerians, with their overly forceful personalities, many of whom were vulgar and noisy. I am even shock to realise that the version of Christianity, I had known before I left Nigeria thirteen years ago is now a dilute – this was disheartening.

At work, the Nigerian tech industry was also making waves, and our company played a significant role in several ground-breaking initiatives. We were part of the pioneering team working on the National Identity Management Commission's project, which was a massive undertaking with far-reaching implications.

It did not take long for me to come to the sober realization that despite being structured as a limited liability company, our company is essentially controlled by one individual. This person, the Managing Partner and founder, wields hyper substantial influence over the company's decisions and operations.

One of the challenges that rises from this structure, that I am faced with is the difficulty in addressing certain personnel matters. I distinctly recall an instance when a request was made to dismiss an employee outright. This posed a significant ethical challenge as there was no documented history of previous misconduct or performance issues on the employee's record. From human resource point of view, there is no objectivity and fairness in dismissing an employee just because the manager says so without evidence and investigation. Navigating such situations highlights the need for more structured and transparent HR practices within workplaces.

While the tech industry in Nigeria is flourishing, it is essential to implement sound HR policies and procedures to ensure fairness and consistency in dealing with people related matters.

Despite occasionally experiencing impostor syndrome and facing the unique challenges of the Nigerian job market, I am committed to persevering. I am learning to accept and appreciate both my vulnerabilities and strengths, as they are essential components of my personal growth. By overcoming these obstacles, my sense of fulfilment and purpose are growing stronger with each passing day.

In the beginning, I was admittedly quite naive when it came to office politics and diplomacy. My enthusiasm and dedication to my work sometimes overshadowed my awareness of the subtle dynamics at play within the organization. It was a little later that the thought did occur to me that the unfair dismissal attempt was probably an attempt to reduce salary liability as we are planning to start extending operations in Douala, Cameroun. This realization came late. I have, by now, entered into enemy line with management. Even if the realization did come earlier, I doubt if that would have made a difference, maybe I would have been more diplomatic.

Not long after that, as I am settling into my role, my relationship with the Managing Partner takes an unexpected and unfortunate turn for the worse. I was entrusted with designing an HR Information System (HRIS) in collaboration with the Software Development Team. Excited by the prospect of contributing to a crucial project, I poured my heart and soul into the task.

To my disappointment, my efforts are met with indifference and harsh criticism. It seems that my attempts to improve our HR processes are not well received. I feel undervalued and misunderstood, taking a toll on me emotionally. It is then that someone from the audit team approaches me privately, revealing that the issue is actually beyond the technical aspects of my work. I have become a perceptual unnecessary overhead. I am faced with a tough decision: either I resign or I will be let go under the guise of a different reason. The emotional impact of this revelation is overwhelming. Alternatively, perhaps the problem lies in my own failure to understand what is expected of me.

Whatever the case, I am at a loss. It is then that someone in the audit team reaches out to me in confidence. From the discussion, I realize that the issue is extending beyond the technical aspects of my work – I don't fit into a usable tool and have become a perceptual unnecessary overhead.

As I sit alone in the office, when he leaves, the weight of impending doom presses upon me. The walls that have once been my sanctuary now feel like they're closing in. The realization that I might be on the brink of losing my job, my livelihood, is a heavy burden to bear.

In simple words, I either resign or I will be dismissed with pretext.

It's a stark ultimatum. The choice before me is anything but simple. Resigning would mean walking away on my terms. It feels like surrendering in the face of adversity. On the other hand, being dismissed, even with a pretext, would shroud me in the cloak of failure. I have to make a decision, but not before understanding the complexities of the situation.

My next action is to pray. As I pray, I make a conscious effort to navigate the intricate web of office politics and interpersonal dynamics.

As the days pass, I delve deep into the intricate world of office politics. Trying to grasp every water cooler conversation, every whispered corridor discussion reveals a layer of intrigue and strategy that I have been blissfully unaware of. The workplace is not just about tasks and deadlines; it's a chessboard of egos, alliances, and unspoken power plays.

My initial innocence sluggishly starts giving way to a deeper understanding of the importance of relationship-building and diplomacy within the workplace.

As I gain a more profound insight into the inner workings of the office, I realize that my technical skills, while vital, are not enough. Nurturing relationships and practicing diplomacy are equally important, if not more so. I also discover that nurturing relationships and practicing diplomacy should also be conducted under Biblical light; otherwise, one would delve into dirty office politics.

The initial shock and despair begin to transform into a steely resolve to adapt and survive. It is a valuable lesson, albeit learned the hard way, that will shape my approach to professional interactions moving forward.

As I am battling through the trials and tribulations of my work, I find myself grappling with a significant personal milestone. Preparing for my upcoming wedding is proving to be an emotional and logistical challenge that is taking its toll on me. Juggling the intricacies of my job, the complexities of office politics, and the excitement of my impending nuptials is no small feat.

Throughout this deeply emotional and introspective rollercoaster of a journey, I learn the true meaning of homecoming. Homecoming is not just about returning to a physical location; it is a profound process of rediscovering oneself, confronting our inner demons,

and forging new paths. The conflicts and emotional struggles I face are an indispensable part of this transformative journey, shaping me into the person I am meant to be.

FINDING LOVE

I had a long walk in Single Street. Sometimes I heard people wondering If I ever would have the vein to ever approach a woman and strike up a conversation. Honestly, I also had my own doubts about my ability to talk to women. In all honesty, I did give it a shot a couple of times - two or three attempts, although it was much later in life, around the age of 30.

I am glad it turned out so, because I am of the few people in life who have never known what it means to be an “ex” to someone. Every attempt never got a “yes” thus sparing me the opportunity to either become their ex or them being my ex-relationship.

I guess this explained why I was never able to easily find X in mathematics (pun intended for a smile)

Eventually I did find my right connection.

It is a warm July evening, and I have been contemplating the words I am about to say to her for quite some time. I often fondly call her, "Apostlette". By now I am convinced she is the one and I feel ready to take the next step. “Ninah”, as I am approaching her, it feels strange to use her first name, as I rarely did so. It is a bit unusual for me, and I can tell she is also a bit puzzled by it.

I sense the tension building in her as I pause, not quite finding the words to express what is in my heart. My palms are feeling sweaty, and I can feel the butterflies in my stomach as I gather the courage to speak.

Finally, I break the silence, my voice trembling slightly, "Have you ever thought of marrying a Nigerian?" The words eventually leave my lips, and I know she understands the significance of what I am about to say. I watch her closely, observing her reaction as she absorbs my question.

I can see the reactions in her eyes. The heat of the moment intensifies as I continue, sharing my feelings for her, and it feels like the room is getting warmer by the second.

Overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, she is asking for some water, and I hurry to fetch it.

With her taking a few sips to cool down, I know she is in a mixed state of anticipation and anxiety. The next words would determine our future, and I want to handle the situation with care. I long to share my feelings with her, but now that the moment has arrived, I also want to give her the time to process and pray about it.

I chose my words carefully, ensuring that she understands I that am not making a proposal per say but a "prayerful awareness of my thought". I want her to be aware of my feelings and give it a prayerful thought herself.

We decide to fast and pray together, and the weeks passed as we sought divine guidance and clarity

Then, on a significant day, September 6th, 2008, I muster the courage I have left, walked up to her, gazing deeply into her eyes, and make a declaration that I know is unlike any I had ever made before.

I speak my heart, first while standing, and then, I could not help but get down on one knee, as tradition and the depth of my feelings compels me. I cannot recall the exact words I said, but I know they came straight from my heart. What I do remember is the moment I declared my love for her, and her "YES" that followed, which filled my heart with joy.

As she says "YES," I stand back on my feet, and right there, we bow our heads in prayer, asking for divine guidance on this new journey. Thanking GOD for bringing us together, we pray for our relationship to flourish.

At this junction allow me to take you on a journey of our love story. I approached relationships with a patience that is built on the belief that the right one would come at the right time under guidance from GOD. I still subscribe to the school of thought that GOD is still interested in directing people to their marriageable pairs.

It all starts sometimes in late 2006. We both attend the same church, Kingsway International Christian Centre in London.

Truthfully, nothing particularly remarkable marked our first encounter. It was an ordinary Tuesday, and after the "Morning Glory" prayer session, we found ourselves

waiting for the church van to transport us from Hackney to Stratford, where I could catch my connecting commuters. On that day, our first conversation took place.

It happens, we were both heading to Woolwich. We sat across from each other, on the Jubilee line train. I am nestled into my seat, tuned in my headphones, and dived into reading my book.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"Zipporah," I responded nonchalantly, attempting to raise her curiosity of the book's title.

"So, you can you hear me?" she queried, noticing my earphones and the faint music from my mp3 player.

I nodded in affirmation, acknowledging her question. The rest of the journey passed in silence.

At North Greenwich, while waiting for the bus to Woolwich Arsenal, her curiosity finally bubbled over. "Which department are you in?" she asks.

"Aaron and Hur," I reply.

I am sensing anticipation in the air, yet she remains silent – for a little while. After a little while she pushes further to enquiry about what department that was.

Over time, we continue to meet at church and at the bus stop. Our glaring differences became increasingly evident We were totally opposite of each other. It was not long before she confessed how I sometimes seemed to test her patience with my habit of not providing straightforward answers to simple questions. She cited the example of my response to her question about my department, where instead of a direct answer like 'prayer department,' I cryptically offered 'Aaron and Hur.' Similarly, when people asked me how I was doing, I will answer with responses like 'C cube' or '3G.'

For those inquisitive minds, 'Aaron and Hur' alludes to the support provided to Moses when he needed assistance holding his hands on high during Joshua's battle against the

enemy. I found it an apt metaphor for the prayer department. As for '3G' and 'C Cube,' they were abbreviations I used for 'Godly Grandiose and Great' and 'Cool, Calm, and Collected,' respectively.

As the days went on, we talk more during those waiting periods at the bus stop whenever we chance to meet. These were regular encounters, which unknown to both of us were subtly weaving a bond of friendship.

I was an early regular at church. As part of our requirement, the prayer department was required to be in church earlier. My early dedication to the church soon found me in a role I hadn't quite anticipated. It wasn't long before Ninah began asking me to save her a seat in church close to the first rows. Before I knew it, I was happily reserving a spot for her every Sunday morning. Even at that our relationship remained at this cordial level. Then, in a turn of events, Ninah and I ended up joining the same Caring House Fellowship. Still, nothing particularly significant happened between us.

Initially, my preference is to prayerfully consider marrying only someone from Nigeria. I am also open to the idea of finding a suitable partner from any other part of West Africa if that doesn't work out. Ninah's East African background, therefore, makes an unlikely match in my mind, and I never give it a thought.

Interestingly, Ninah has quite a number of admirers, and most of them happen to be from Nigeria. However, she makes it clear that she has no interest in marrying someone from Nigeria. In order to avoid any unwanted attention from Nigerian suitors, she decides to leave Kingsway International Christian Centre, where there is a larger population of Nigerians. Eventually, she also leaves the Caring Heart Fellowship for the same reason.

It is clear that both of us have rigid mindsets when it comes to our preferences for marriage.

Later, in April 2008, we become neighbours. About two months later, in June, a clue to consider Ninah for marriage emerges. I have a dream that provides insight into her character, and I decide to watch and pray. As we spend more time together, I am

discovering that Ninah is not only kind-hearted and compassionate but also has a deep sense of spirituality and a practical business mindset, which confirms my dream.

In retrospect, our rigid mindset that initially bound us to seek potential marriage partners exclusively within our cultural comfort zone, where only God's way preserves us until we meet the right one. Love and compatibility know no boundaries. True marital happiness can be found in unexpected places beyond cultures when guided by the wisdom within scriptures.

In August 2010, I take leave from work to travel across opposite cardinal points to go and say “Yes, I do” and exchange the unbroken circular rings in holy exogamous matrimonial affiliation. Yes, I travel across Africa to find love.

I have a brother who resides in the United States, and we share some bond. He, along with our late sister, Chantal, is the only one who knows about my plan to return to Nigeria. I confide in him about many things, including my intentions to return to Nigeria and my pursuit of love. We even make an agreement that he will be my best man at my wedding.

As the wedding day draws near, I am taken aback when my brother shares a dream he had. “I have a dream and I am telling you that I will not be going for the wedding.” Therefore, I will not attend. While I personally find his dream unfounded, I respect his decision and accept that he won't be there with me on this journey.

The Bible mentions that there's a friend who sticks closer than a brother, and in my life, Natt Edwin Miller, II embodies that Scripture. From the very beginning, he has committed to stand by my side on my wedding day. In anticipation of the big day, I travel to Ghana, and the following day, he and I embark on a journey from Kotoka International Airport to Kampala, via Entebbe, all at his own expense.

Dorothy Eshiwanni, a dear friend of ours, embarks on an overnight bus journey, covering over thirteen hours, from Nairobi to Kampala, fulfilling her promise to be there despite the long and tiring travel. James Kiwolu, my course mate and former housemate from our days in Pontypridd, generously hosts me and Miller for the week. These incredible friends stand as a family for me during that time. It's a poignant reminder that friends can be even more supportive than family when circumstances require it.

On a truly special day, Saturday, September 4, 2010, I don a white Kanzu paired with a black jacket for our traditional runyankole Kwanjula ceremony. The Kwanjula is a sacred celebration where a groom seeks the blessings of his bride's family. It's a ceremony brimming with rich cultural significance. The following day, a beautiful Sunday morning on September 5, 2010, Ninah and I stand before our friends and family in Kampala, Uganda. Our hearts are full, and our love is undeniable.

Two days later we are on the Ethiopian airline plane heading from Uganda to Nigeria with my wife. We say goodbye to Miller in Lagos and parted ways – him to Accra and we to Abuja. As we settle in the evening after an eventful journey, I can't help but feel grateful for that warm evening in July when I find the courage to speak my heart and the love that blossomed from it. I follow my heart, overcome the obstacles, and let go of any doubts or work-related stress that once threatened to hinder our path. I will no longer live in a half a circle as I set to create a new full circle with my wife – a family, my own family under.

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

I am back at work from a very short-lived post-nuptial getaway. As I sit at my desk, staring at the computer screen, I find myself grappling with the elusive stability of employment.

The relationship with my managing partner has become like a rollercoaster of doom, spiralling into the depths of gloom. What was once a promising alliance has now devolved into a never-ending cycle of unmet expectations and constant criticism.

Each day at work is feeling like stepping onto a rickety rollercoaster, unsure of what twists and turns lie ahead. There is no psychological safety. It seems that no matter how hard I work or how much effort I put into my tasks, it is never enough. My confidence is waning as the managing partner's words of disapproval echo in my mind. It has reached a point where I have to make the difficult decision to hand in my resignation effective 14th February 2011.

The decision to resign was not made lightly. It is an act of self-preservation, a declaration that my mental and emotional well-being mattered more than any job. But as the days passed, I couldn't help but wonder what lies beyond that fateful 14th of February.

What new challenges and opportunities would greet me once I stepped off this rollercoaster of psychological threat? On the other hand, I am confident that it is time to regain control of my life and steer it in a different direction. Yet I was confident that my HR experience and UK education would land me a job in no time.

I must confess, I did not discuss with my wife about my decision to resign. I waited until the very day I bid farewell to my workplace before breaking the news. It was not a decision taken lightly. Little did we know, my beloved wife was carrying our first baby at the time. The news of her pregnancy brought both immeasurable joy and overwhelming fear. Suddenly, the consequences of my resignation became magnified, looming over us like an unyielding storm. Now, I find myself wrestling with the harsh realities of everyday life, faced with excruciating choices just to make ends meet - and regrettably dragging my wife along for the wild ride.

One scorching afternoon, with empty pockets and a gas-less stove, I found myself wrestling with a difficult decision. One of our neighbours, Tina was at work, and I hesitated before stepping into her room, seeking to borrow some gas to prepare a humble meal for my pregnant wife.

The months dragged on without a job offer in sight, our situation grew increasingly dire. The days blended together as I trudged through the scorching streets of Kubwa, my humility forcing me to approach strangers with a plea for even the tiniest sum of money. It was disheartening to see the indifference in their eyes as I asked for just N100, a seemingly insignificant amount to them but a lifeline for us. I sold my clothes, which I brought from London with me.

Every day became a battle for survival, where our meagre earnings were carefully rationed to ensure we could put food on our modest table. There were moments that etched themselves into my memory, moments that revealed the depths of our desperation. I remember the day I found myself picking out a discarded bread from the bin in our shared Kitchen with a neighbour. With unease, I took it out and carefully warmed it on our gas stove, transforming it into our meagre meal for the day. The taste was still okay, in that moment, it was sustenance, and me and my wife savoured every bite. There were also times when even the most basic necessities eluded us, such as bathing soap. In those moments, I would resort to using shampoo for my showers.

In the face of such adversity, our lives became a delicate balancing act. We learned to make do with what little we had, stretching every resource to its limit. Wale, our neighbour's supplies became communal, and we carefully measured out each item, ensuring nothing went to waste. It was in these moments that our resilience shone through. We discovered an inner strength, a determination to overcome the hardships that life had thrown our way. Never before had we appreciated the value of even the smallest crumb, for in our world, every morsel mattered. Though our circumstances were far from ideal, we clung to hope and tenacity. We knew that one day, our situation would change, and we would emerge from this period of adversity stronger than ever under GOD.

Prayers and hope came through, I received some solar torches from Mr Okey, in London. With a mix sense of hope and trepidation, I embarked on the journey of selling the

torches, desperately hoping to turn our situation around and order for more. However, little did I know that this venture would be far from the success story I had envisioned. As days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, the reality of my situation began to sink in. The torches were met with lukewarm reception, and I found myself slashing prices to compete with the fierce market coldness to what I thought was a required novelty in a country with erratic electricity supply. The once cherished gifts, intended to bring joy and light, were now being sold at a significant loss. Each transaction became a bittersweet reminder of the sacrifices we had to make in order to make ends meet. A cloud of guilt and remorse loomed over me as I witnessed the tangible effects of my desperation-driven decisions.

I eventually found myself in a rather unpleasant situation where I had incurred a debt to Mr. Okey, and to my dismay, his sister Uche took it upon herself to relentlessly pursue me for repayment. She expressed her frustrations with me, accusing me of intentionally refusing to pay back the debt. Uche didn't hold back her emotions, vehemently expressing her disappointment and even resorting to name-calling. Needless to say, it was a humbling experience that left me feeling quite unsettled.

Our journey exposed us to the complexities of trust. Money that we borrowed seemed to disappear without a trace, and requests for financial help from friends only added to our already complicated situation. However, amidst these intricate dynamics, neighbours like Wale, remained by our side, offering their support whenever possible.

After carefully considering my options, I made the decision to embark on a new business venture. We agreed with my wife to venture into manufacturing. In June 22, 2011, I reached out to one of my brothers in the United States, seeking a loan to kickstart my business. I made a sincere promise to repay the loan within six months, with a 33% interest rate. Despite my efforts, I received no response or feedback from my brother after two follow-ups in August 2011 and February 2012. As disappointing as it was, I chose to stop pursuing the matter and accepted the radio silence from him.

There was also the constant pressure from our landlord. The constant pressure from our landlord, urging us to vacate our home, only fuelled my determination. I refused to yield, as my unwavering commitment to provide for our family persevered despite the relentless challenges.

Our home became a sanctuary of resilience and creativity, as we found ways to stretch our limited resources. At times, we even resorted to using candles to heat a saucepan of water for a simple meal, finding solace in the simplicity of our actions. My days were consumed by the relentless pursuit of stable employment. I traversed an uncharted terrain, exploring unconventional avenues in the quest to secure a steady income. The weight of financial responsibility pressed heavily upon my shoulders, urging me to push beyond my comfort zone. I became a seeker of opportunities, knocking on doors and making countless phone calls, determined to find a job that would provide security for my family. With each rejection, a sense of desperation threatened to engulf me, but I refused to succumb to despair. Instead, I borrowed meagre money from various sources, swallowing my pride in the face of necessity. The financial burden weighed heavily on my mind, but I persevered, driven by the love and responsibility I felt towards my family.

In the depths of my sixth month of unemployment, I made a conscious decision to breathe new life into my job search strategy. No longer satisfied with simply submitting resumes and waiting for a stroke of luck, I delved into the world of business and job-hunting literature. With each turn of the page, I sought the flicker of inspiration that would ignite the fire within me, propelling me towards success. Armed with newfound knowledge and a burning desire to excel, I embarked on a journey of self-improvement. I dedicated myself to honing my skills and expanding my horizons. Through the power of the written word, I began to craft compelling cover letters and polished resumes that would captivate potential employers. I immersed myself in sporadic training sessions, researching online sources to acquire new skills and stay abreast of industry trends. Step by step, I was transforming myself into a formidable candidate, ready to seize any opportunity that came my way. With unwavering determination and a thirst for growth, I was resolute in my pursuit of the career of my dreams.

I started receiving a few interview opportunities, which gave me a glimmer of hope. Guess what? Not a single one resulted in a job offer. It is like a cruel joke - endless rounds of pointless interviews, with no end in sight. My hopeful optimism started to wane. The sad truth is, while I focused on perfecting my resume, I neglected to invest in preparing for the interview process. I was determined to turn things around, I focused

on improving my interview skills. Finally, after enduring 14 months of unemployment, I received a job offer that brought an end to my long journey in May 2012.

Our journey proved to be a bumpy ride, filled with its fair share of conflicts and misunderstandings. The early stages of our marriage were particularly challenging, as we grappled with the inevitable adjustments and compromises that come with merging two separate lives into one. There were moments when we questioned if we were truly meant to be together, as our differences seemed insurmountable. Yet, amidst the chaos, something remarkable began to unfold. It was during this trying period that the seeds of a profound friendship were sown. As we sailed the rough terrain of disagreements and misunderstandings, we found solace in each other's company. We learned to listen, to truly hear one another's perspectives, and to find common ground. It was through this process that our bond grew stronger, and a deep sense of trust and understanding began to take root in our relationship. We realized that our love was not just built on passion and romance, but on a solid foundation of friendship and empathy.

My wife and I faced insurmountable hardships with grace, determination, and an enduring love that illuminated even the darkest corners of our existence. Our story serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the unyielding strength of love, silently prevailing against the odds

I DON'T HAVE A BIRTHDAY

Ever met someone whose birthday is more of a mystery than a celebration? Well, that's me—a part of the handful on this planet who never quite get the candles-and-cake treatment. Now, here's the twist: it's not just me caught in this whirlpool of confusion; my two sisters are in on it too. But while they managed to break free and party on their true birth dates, mine is different story and I'm left wrestling with the riddle of my own life story.

I never really had an issue with the discrepancy on my birthday until 1997. That's when things took a wild turn. I am standing in a court in Takoradi, Ghana, facing a mess that traces back to my birth. A mess that decided to mess with my life, specifically my academic life. I had my eyes set on Cape Coast Polytechnic in Ghana, a dream I'd been nursing for a while.

I had just purchased an application form for entry into Cape Coast Polytechnic in Ghana. I have waited for almost three years after secondary school, at home. Now my hopes and waiting were about to be crashed for a fault that is totally not mine. There was an identity clash between some of my documents. In one document I was referred to Anselm Uchechukwu Ezemson and in another I was referred to as Emmanuel Irem Obei. I needed both results to make my application.

I didn't choose these names; they are like old threads woven into my life story by hands and choices of my parents. Yet, the burden of making sense of this jigsaw puzzle fell on my shoulders. My mother is gone, my father, is moving on with his life. I may not be having been responsible for the choices that are now preventing my progress with challenges, the responsibility however laid on my shoulder to forge and work out the salvaging of narrative of a mess that I did not create – a narrative of inherited parental decision.

No one is responsible for writing or rewriting the narrative of our lives. The divine script is for everyone to have a life of hope and future. Jeremiah 29:11 is a universal statement endorsed by heaven's pen to all who trust GOD to push themselves into the very place that GOD has destined for us. Chaos, disappointments, setbacks are parts of the building blocks that will define how far we are ready to align with the divine pen in writing a narrative of hope and a future. I had a choice, to either stay as Emmanuel Irem Obei or revert like most of my brothers and sisters to my Ezemson status. The thing is, if I went with the former, it would be a betrayal to my roots, my true self. It was a pivotal decision, one that came with a price—to travel to Nigeria and obtain confidential statement of results from the West African examination Council.

Life, from the very beginning, has been like a battleground for those who desire a life of hope and destiny. Only those who dare to rise above the chaos end up shining. There are others, though, with talents and skills, who might never glow. Not because they lack potential, but because the path to rise is uncomfortable. Sometimes, they'd rather cling to their comfort zone than go through the challenging process of transformation.

How did I come by the name Emmanuel Irem Obei? Many of my classmates in Ogboja Primary School may have also wondered the same. Yet none dared to ask; for when I first joined, I was known and called in 1987 and most part of 1888 as Anselm Ezemson only to be seen in Secondary School as a different name.

My mother's first husband in Ebom, the father of her first son, was called Irem Obei. I cannot tell how old she was when she married him. I do recall however the fact that she was 14 years when she gave birth for him. Unfortunately, the child did not live for more than two years. My uncle took me to the Local Government Area and changed my name when as were in the process of registering for the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination. I don't have any of the documents and I am unable to state which date of birth I was given.

But wait, there's more. Primary School was like a revolving door of names for me. This was not the first time that my name had been changed. From 1979 to 1983, I was

Emmanuel Augustin Enoh. My mother's name was Mary Enoh Bassey. I have no knowledge of the background of the Bassey part of her name, who he was or where he came from. What I do know is that the Enoh in my surname was my mother's middle name. Enoh is unisex name popular among the people of Ibibio and Efik lineage. My mother's people, the Bahumono people have had good trade relationship with the Efik and have borrowed much of Efik cultural heritage. The name Enoh was one of such. The gender duality of the name made it fitting for my mother to cover up the paternity gap by calling me with her name. it was like this cultural hand-me-down. She called me with her name, a way to tie me back to her roots.

And that's where I stand—amid this swirl of names and stories, trying to figure out where my journey is leading. The weight of history, the tug of heritage, and the promise of a brighter destiny all weave together in the variety of my life. It's like looking at a map with shadows pointing the way, guiding me towards a future that is distinctly mine, a narrative of triumph that I am determined to shape, no matter the hurdles or detours.

From September 1983 to 1987 I will vividly be by the name Anselm Uchechukwu Ezemson. That was the name that my father called me at birth. What I am able to explain is why the discrepancy That is the name my father gave me when I made my grand entrance into this world. Now, here is where things get intriguing- There is this mix-up with my actual birth date. The same goes for my two of sisters, too! It's like a tantalizing puzzle that we just cannot seem to solve. Oh, the mysteries of life!

In the year of 1988, my uncle changed my name to Emmanuel Irem Obei. For the next eight years, I went by this name, until found myself in the Sekondi Takoradi Magistrate Court in the month of July 1996. From that point forward, I have reverted back to my original name. However, I must confess, there is a lingering sense of intrigue and curiosity within me, for my birthday remains unchanged to 9 August. It feels rather extraordinary to celebrate 27 December -a day that does not truly belong to me.

BUILDING MY CIRCLE (LIVING IN LIMBO)

Back in August 2003, two years after I completed my tertiary education and preparing to go to the United Kingdom for my post graduate studies; it was thanks to GOD a moment of introspection, retrospection and forward thinking. I had a clear out path for myself and a map for my family (my wife and children), but this was shoved aside in day as I had my parting word with my father. In addition to being given half of my tuition and told to fend the other for myself, I was also told that my going to the overseas would be for the benefits of other siblings. I obliged off my pre-mapped plans in honour and respect for my father's ideal – to bear the burden of the family (a kind of messianic existence).

I am the first born of my father, and my father was himself an “Opara”-that is first male born. As a first born, I have just been tied to the stake to live a messianic existence that charted my identity as I boarded the Swiss Air plane to Heathrow.

While my mates, colleagues were enjoying their fun and investing themselves overseas in the UK, I spent much of the time there investing in tirade of worrisome care about siblings, distant relatives. A sense of responsibility that has metamorphosed into a gargantuan phase as my father sadly died prematurely about three months after I had arrived South Wales.

My father was the official bread winner for a wife, more than ten of children, his mother, an extension of siblings and extended family links as well unknown list of beneficiaries of his benevolent hands. This compounding of inherited obligations even affected my views and thoughts about marriage – it took me very long time before I could give love a chance into matrimonial affiliation.

At the end of every pay period, I count my earning in terms of exchange of life, blood and sweat. Since 2004 my earnings have, at the risk of sounding inconsiderate or maybe boastful, provided more for other persons than myself. Normally, I would go through the pay period writing down who needs to be settled out of my sweat and blood. I have become like my father, the typical African who lives yet not alive for himself.

Now that I am transitioning through a role that is facing redundancy, my income and budget have been immensely subjected to a review as well. But the people who are earning from income have not diminished, neither has the skyrocketing wave of rise in prices of commodities decreased. It is strange really how people would out rightly feel entitled to enjoying their personalized portion of the reward of your life blood and sweat exchanged into income. Some have even insulted me and called me labels when they felt that I have given them less than their own perceived expectation of my income. These relatives, families and friends may not really know how much pain we endure for them to gain access to our income, that I have denied myself and family some joy and necessities in order for them to gain what they got and sadly display such crass sense of ingratitude. I am the victim of stereotyping, they assume me by whatever criteria they assume as marking success – maybe job title, or social media presence. Unaware to these I actually struggle to find support when I am in need.

Just recently in May 2022, my loving wife had to go through a major surgery. The bureaucracy and organizational process for approving the procedure between the health facility and AXXA Mansard, our health management office (HMO) was unbearably unprofessional and inefficiently sluggish with serials lacks of response to calls and messages as well worrisome deafening silence from a service provider that should be as responsive as they deal with matters life and death. Naturally, I would have avoided that process and respond with an outright payment of the medical procedure. I couldn't however, I was stuck, I am suddenly feeling self-conscious and angry with myself as I am heading down the drug store to purchase some prescribed anti-biotics. I had just released all that was in my bank account to redeem an extended family situation and adding to more than 24% debit on my next salary.

AS I counting the remaining days of my employ with the Voluntary Service Overseas as People and Resourcing Manager, I am forced to conduct a comparative audit of my father's life and mine. I knew how much he earned by-weekly and what he could have achieved with that. My father talked about securing our future, but ended wasting his resources to extended requests for help. Consequently, sometimes I have to miss out on assessments in School until funding was made available. Nineteen years after he has died, some beneficiaries of his extended benevolence are still expressing ungrateful complaints and listing of where he fell short of their expectation.

My father had a growing impact on me and I lived his ideal as well as stereotype ideal of a first born. Sometimes we need to take some time for a comparative audit. The beam of my focus is now turn to a life of charity that meets everyone needs and sacrifice the future of the wife and children that have been placed in my custody.

I am worried about the future of my family; I grieve that I have not invested my salary rightly by purchasing a future beyond me or active years of service. I am staring at myself, wondering what happened to me. I had a clearly laid down plan and map for myself and family. Thanks to redundancy and the personal audit. I have started a commitment by engaging in insurance policy.

I thought to share this with the hope to also provoke others to wholesome thinking and challenge us to re-think of a future beyond us and our active years on earth.

FINDING CLOSURE

I have been pouring my heart and soul into this book for a solid three years. In 2022, after years of dreaming and wishing, I finally took the plunge into the wild world of writing. Little did I know that this journey would take me on an exciting ride of self-discovery, reaching heights I never thought possible. Each paragraph I penned brings me closer to uncovering the essence of who I am and the bigger pictures of events and gratitude that connects with my identity. Sometimes, I would spend weeks and months navigating the stretches between chapters, nevertheless it was all worth it.

Now, in this particular chapter, I find myself landing from an extraordinary journey of finding closure. I have come to the realization that true closure and a sense of belonging can only be achieved by fully embracing the intricacies that make me, me. It is a journey of introspection and growth, where I delve into the profound impact of practices like prayer, meditative Bible reading, and heartfelt conversations with my wife and children and self and repenting as well forgiving.

These experiences have also shown me that closure is not some far-off destination, but rather a state of being. It is about finding solace in the very essence of who I am under YAHWEH and finding peace in the knowledge that who I am in HIM is enough.

I started this quest feeling overwhelmed by a swirling sea of emotions - loneliness, some level of doubt and some sprinkle of insecurity. I long to unravel the intricate layers of my past that have held me back from fully embracing my authentic self. I have read from the Bible that I have a Spirit of sound mind. Therefore, with a daring spirit, introspection and a push of self-exploration, I dive into my fears, insecurities, and godless limiting beliefs.

With each layer I peeled away, I feel a surge of enlightenment, a profound understanding of the barriers that had skulking encased my sense of belonging. Driving deeper into the labyrinth of my existence, I cannot help but marvel at the peculiar circumstances and divine orchestration of my birth and life. Oh, how I appreciate the wondrous hand of YAHWEH, crafting a unique network of experiences that have shaped me into the beautifully flawed individual that I am today.

The fluidity of my Ghanaian ancestry, the love filled struggles of my dear mother, the surprising rejection I face at birth, the frustrating inability to speak my parents' language, the ongoing struggle for acceptance among my siblings, the heart-wrenching betrayal from my own mother, the name that was forced upon me, the arduous quest to authenticate my Nigerian identity to a specific tribe, and the absence of a traditional birthday celebration. These are the vibrant brushstrokes that profile my beautifully flawed existence.

In the past, I always saw these aspects of myself as shortcomings. Now, I understand that embracing my flaws is a crucial step towards self-acceptance and closure. I've learned that it is in our imperfections that our true uniqueness and relatability lie. By wholeheartedly embracing my flaws, I have unlocked a newfound sense of deliverance and self-compassion. It is through owning and celebrating these imperfections that I am able to forge genuine connections with others and find my rightful place in this world.

I had foolishly made a conscious decision to distance myself from anyone who didn't know me by my true name, Anselm. However, it has come to my realization how foolish this is and that those who have truly supported and uplifted me throughout my journey to growth are the ones who knew me as Emmanuel. Now, I am determined to seek out these incredible beings and forge a deep connection with them. I am reclaiming my power and stepping into a life of authenticity and fulfillment.

Cultivating Self-Love:

I have come to the realization that in order to find closure and truly belong to myself, it is essential for me to prioritize my own well-being. With this understanding, I am embarking on a journey of self-care and self-love.

It was not until my late forties that I became aware of the false burden of responsibility that I have been carrying. This burden had taken a toll on my own well-being, as I had felt obligated to attend to the needs of my extended family and other individuals at the expense of myself, my wife, and our children.

Thanks to some serial disruptive behaviours and straightforward statements from my brothers that I had a moment of clarity. I realized that by prioritizing others to such an extent, I was denying myself the care and attention I deserved. This realization prompted me to seek closure with this pattern of behaviour and make a conscious effort to redefine my priorities.

Healing Past Wounds:

Growing in a large family where you are the only step with no other directly sibling and sometimes visibly seeing that all other members had their camps, I sometime faced the harsh reality of co-sibling favouritism. Like denying me the opportunity to eat a particular left-over meal with the pretext of keeping it for their uterine sibling only to latter see it trashed because that uterine-sibling did not eat it and it got spoil. It pains. Or vividly seeing and hearing the name callings behind your back, it hurts. In this part of my journey, I have confronted the wounds of my past, it was interesting to realise that while I thought I had forgiven, some of the experience still affected my behaviour and response. Now I have sought healing by completely asking GOD to forgive each for their action as also ask for me to me forgiving to some of my reactions. I have bravely delved into my emotional baggage. I acknowledge the pain and emotions that I have carried with me. By addressing these wounds head-on, I have gone through the process of healing and forgiveness. I understand that holding onto past pain only hinders my growth and ability to find closure.

For a long time, I witnessed the raw wounds of an exogamous society turn apart. The scars of divisive traditions that have left indelible marks on my very soul. My journey being a metaphor of those navigating the rough waters of multiple cultural identities lays bare the harsh reality of a society at odd with its own essence. I have finally reached a place of finding closure regarding my early childhood rejection at infancy on the balancing edge of tradition.

As the living bloodline of my mother, I stand in the gap asking that the tears she had shed as a result of being taken advantage of be forgiven and that the consequence in the lives of the families and generations of those men be withdrawn. For those of you men or women who take advantage of people 's vulnerability, there is no single tear that does not have a consequence. I

Also through prayers, I connected to sins and baggage of my bloodline to release old pain and make space for personal growth ..

Closure: The Power of Self-Acceptance," has been a transformative chapter in my journey towards closure and belonging. By unravelling the layers of self-doubt, embracing my flaws, cultivating self-love, healing past wounds, and honing my strengths, I have gained a deeper understanding of who I am in YAHWEH.