

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 Peer Applause

You learned right away that applause sounds like love.

~ Ava Dellaira



Amigwu is a small village in the town of Alayi located in the south eastern region of Nigeria now known as Abia state. The main occupation was farming so everybody farmed in one way or the other—mainly for subsistence. Alayi seemed quiet. Serene, undisturbed, and at a distance from the hustle and bustle of the city—a place where people respected the elderly and went about their business. Villages were organized in compounds; row houses of various shapes and ample sandy space which allowed children to play in front of their houses when the central playground—the square is occupied.

Each compound was named after its founder—man or woman. The name of my village; Ufundierimma means the home of the descendants of the founding mother—mama Erimma. That’s where I was born and I was proud of it.

My dad was very proud of mama Erimma even though he never knew her. For lack of interest, I never bothered to ask dad why he idolized the woman he never met. I can visualize the look on his face if I had asked. The playground in my compound was sandy and soft so my cousin Egbichi and I loved to play there more often than at the square even when other kids were playing there.

Egbichi and I had been born on the same day and at the same time of the day—few minutes apart. Our parents were best friends; we had learned to crawl and walk together.

“You and Egbichi spoke your first words just about the same time,” my mom had told us.

“I don’t believe it,” I had argued.

“It’s true—both of you said ‘Maa’ at the same time. Ask Mama Anya,” she said.

Egbichi and I loved to play in that rich sandy playground, and we took turns playing different roles. One Sunday afternoon, when we were three going to four, she lay on the sand and spread her legs.

“Draw me,” she said.

I traced her body. And then I lay next to her figure and spread my legs.

“Draw me too,” I said.

We inspected both figures to see if there was any difference between them. We drew eyes and mouth on both figures. Then We looked at the figures again, laughed and fell over each other. When we stopped playing, mom came out and screamed at us, “You’re not coming in my house covered with sand like you’ve got no sense.”

We dusted the sand off each other.

“Let’s go to the stream so you can take a bath,” mom said.

We were riding on each other’s back when Uncles Okereke Chima, Azik Ukachukwu, and a huge tall man walked into dad’s house.

As I was dusting off the sand, dad called out, “Ogbuleke, come in here.”

I told Egbichi to go home because I did not want her to cry if she saw me being spanked. I knew I’d be

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spanked if dad didn't like the way we were playing.

"Come over when you finish," she said.

I went inside the house looking dusty with sand all over my body. The tall huge man stood up.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Ogbuleke," I answered.

"My name is Mr. Okpee," he said.

My uncle stood up and took my right hand and put it over my head. He asked me to touch my left ear. I tried, and I wasn't close.

The huge man and my uncle tried to make my right hand reach my left ear; they bent my head until I began to feel pain in my neck. Suddenly, they said together, "Yes, he touched it."

"Why do you want this child to touch his ear? You almost broke his neck," dad said.

"The Methodist church wants to start a new school at the church, and we don't have enough children to make up the required number," my uncle said "so we would like Ogbuleke to attend the school to help us make up the required number." "We know that a child is ready for school if he or she can touch the left ear with the right hand," the tall huge man said.

"He's not ready for school yet," dad said, as he brought out a jar of palm wine, which he had tapped himself. Mom served them yams and vegetables. When they finished eating, I ran to Egbichi's house. I was excited by the prospect going to school.

"Uncle Okereke wants me to start school in his church," I said.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

"Yes, mom said it was OK," I replied.

Egbichi grabbed her mom, sobbing.

"Maa, Ogbuleke is starting school. I want to go with him," she said.

"Is your uncle still in your dad's house?" Mama Anya asked.

"Yes, he is still there," I answered.

Mama Anya went to dad's house and came back with a smile on her face. "Both of you will be going to school together."

Egbichi and I hugged each other, screaming and jumping up and down until we fell on the ground. Then we got up and went back inside the house. We ran around and told our friends, even the ones we did not like to play with.

Mom's stomach had gotten big; she kept telling me there was a baby in her stomach. A few days later, I woke up in the morning, and women were singing and dancing in my compound. "Your mom had a baby this morning. Go and see the baby in the bedroom—his name is Anyele," dad said. At first I was bewildered; I wondered how that baby came out of her stomach. But when I saw her carrying the baby smiling, I was happy, and my bewildered mind calmed down. I sat next to her shaking the baby's tiny, soft hand. Women came in groups and congratulated mom. Mama Anya stayed over for four days and cooked for us.

Egbichi's dad had died when she was one year old, so dad was her surrogate dad. Before school opened, dad bought slates, chalk, and had our uniforms sewn by the tailor. Mine was a white shirt and brown shorts and Egbichi's was a white blouse and brown skirt. We were ready for school and talked about nothing else but starting school.

Every Sunday we wanted to know when school would start.

"Mama Nwaka, is tomorrow a school day?" Egbichi asked often.

"No, it's not tomorrow," she said.

The thought of going to school made us feel grown, so we began to learn how to feed my baby brother and to hold him on our laps. Carrying the baby was as much fun as playing in the sand as long as he did not

poop or burp. When the baby did, I simply vanished, but Egbichi had no problem helping mom clean the baby up.

One Sunday after Christmas, Egbichi and I were playing at the square and enjoying roasted beans and coconut. Suddenly, Egbichi pinched me. “Those people are going to Papa Ikebie’s house,” she said.

Uncle Okereke, Azik, and Mr. Okpee strolled across the square to dad’s house.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

When we got home, we sat by dad’s side, hoping to hear that school would open the next day. Dad brought out undiluted palm wine, and Egbichi and I gave out cups. When they finished drinking the wine, we helped mom prepare the Sunday meal. Mom was in an unusually friendly mood, my baby brother was sleeping in the bed, and we were anxious to hear from the visitors.

We were helping her clean up after the meal when she broke the news and said, “You are starting school tomorrow.”

Egbichi and I dropped what we were doing and ran straight to Mama Anya and told her.

I stayed awake all night, anxious to put on my school uniform. “I am a big boy now,” I said to myself.

On Monday I woke up early before everybody, including mom.

“Maa, wake up,” I said and shook her.

“Ogbu, what are you doing waking up so early? Go back to sleep,” she yelled.

“I want to go to the stream and take my bath; it’s time to go to school,” I replied.

“No, it’s too early. I will wake you up in the morning,” she said.

I went back to bed grudgingly. I simply stared at the underside of the thatched roof waiting for mom to call my name. Suddenly, mom tapped me on the shoulder. “Ogbu, wake up,” she said.

I jumped up ready to walk to the stream, but she had my baby brother in her arms, which meant she was not going anywhere.

“Go and wake Egbichi up. I have a bucket of warm water for you two to take your bath,” she said.

When I got to her house, she was sleeping, and her mom was cooking.

“Mom wants both of us to take a bath at my house,” I told her mom.

“OK, come back and eat before you go to school,” she said.

We ran to my house. Mom was preparing food for us too.

“Mama Anya wants us to eat at her house,” I told mom.

“OK, I will wrap this up for you to take to school for lunch,” she said.

We went back to Mama Anya’s house and ate the breakfast she had prepared specially to make us happy. It was our favorite breakfast: *akara* (fried balls of dough of black eyed peas) and *akamu* (creamy blend of corn flour). We put our uniforms on, feeling proud and excited. Mom escorted us to the village square. We stood there wondering why she wouldn’t let us go. We waited and waited until we got restless.

“Stop jumping around,” mom said.

“Why are we standing here?” I asked.

“We are waiting for Jeni.”

Suddenly, a tall woman approached us. “Mama Nwaka,” she called out.

“How are you?” mom greeted.

“Mr. Okpee instructed me to pick these two kids up. I will walk with them to school and back every day,” she told mom.

“Yes, I know; that’s why we are waiting for you. I will have food waiting for you on your way back from school; come to the house,” mom said.

We walked to school with the tall woman behind us; sometimes she held our hands. When we got to the church house, there were kids all over the green grass. It was intimidating to play with those kids, who were

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much bigger than us.

“Put your bags down and join your mates,” the tall woman told us.

We played for a while, and then Mr. Okpee blew his whistle and asked us to form two lines. We marched back and forth while he yelled, “Left, right, left, right.” Finally, he directed us into the church house.

“My name is Mr. Nnaji Okpee—you can call me Mr. Okpee—and this is Miss Jeni Okorie. You can call her Miss Okorie,” Mr. Okpee told us.

Miss Okorie spent some time teaching us a song for our morning assembly, and Mr. Okpee said the prayer. We got divided into two classes. I was in Mr. Okpee’s class, and Egbichi was in Miss Okorie’s class. We were disappointed for not being in the same class.

Miss Okorie marched her class to the far end of the church, while Mr. Okpee’s class took the front end of the church. It wasn’t so bad. Egbichi and I could see each other from our respective seats. On the first day, we sat on the floor, and the teachers sat on their chairs. I sat in the front row and was happy to have a front seat so I could see Egbichi in her class.

“This is your permanent seat,” Mr. Okpee announced.

“This is how we will sit every day,” Miss Okorie announced to her kids.

We took turns telling our favorite folk stories. Some stories were very familiar, and others were totally new. As the kids came up to tell their stories, I began to like a few of them just from the kind of stories they told and how they told the story. Some kids really made the class laugh.

Suddenly, Mr. Okpee called my name. “Ikebie, it is your turn,” he said.

I told a story about O’motar and the tail people; it was a popular story, so most of the kids knew the story. When I got to the part that involved singing, the whole class joined me in singing the song; I could see Egbichi looking in my direction.

I wished she were in my class because she liked the story too.

When the bell went off again, we took a short break. During the break kids gathered around me and told me that they liked my story. When we returned to the class, the two classes joined together.

“You must bring a stool, slate, and chalk to school every day,” Mr. Okpee said.

We sang the song Miss Okorie taught us, and finally school was over. When we got home, mom was cooking yams and vegetable sauce.

“How did they do?” mom inquired.

“They did well,” Miss Okorie replied.

“Did they fall asleep?” mom asked.

“No, they had lots of energy.”

Mom served us the food. “Get water for your teacher,” she said.

“I’d like to get it; she’s my teacher,” Egbichi said

“OK, you can get it,” mom replied.

After eating, Miss Okorie held my baby brother for a while, and then we escorted her down to Igwu with Egbichi and me holding hands and hopping along on both sides of the road. When dad came home, I told him that Egbichi and I needed stools to sit in the class.

“That’s what Mr. Okpee said.”

He walked into one of the rooms and came out with two little chairs. “Here are the stools,” he said.

I went to Egbichi’s and gave her one of the chairs.

“Keep it in your house. I don’t want mom to break it,” she replied.

“Why did you say that? I asked. “She doesn’t need a small chair like that.”

“She sits on mine when she is cooking, and she breaks it all the time,” she said.

“You are right; she sits on one when she is making *akara*,” I said, thinking about the golden, fried dough

of black-eyed peas she served for breakfast.

The next morning we waited for Miss Okorie to meet us at the square.

“Here she comes,” mom said.

We looked around, and she was walking up the hill. Before we left for school, Miss Okorie held my brother for a few minutes.

“You must be ready for hygiene first thing every morning,” Mr. Okpee announced. Dirty kids were given a note for their parents and sent home.

On Tuesday, Miss Okorie came on time, so when we got to school, we had ample time to play with other kids. Now that we were getting used to the other students, Egbichi and I began to make friends. Instead of playing with me, she ran straight to a group of girls who were holding hands and moving in a circle. I joined some boys who were kicking a soccer ball around.

One day in December, Mr. Okpee announced that there would be a final examination. He posted the date on the wall.

From that day on, there was no storytelling or dancing. We practiced and practiced everything we had learned in the school year. On Friday Mr. Okpee informed us that the examination would start on Monday.

On the last day of school, we gathered in the church. After the opening prayer, Mr. Okpee called the names of the kids who were being promoted to elementary two.

“Those who did not hear their names will repeat elementary one,” he said.

Egbichi’s name and mine were not called, so we thought we had failed the examination. Then Mr. Okpee continued. “The first in my class is Ogbuleke Ikebie, and the first in Miss Okorie’s class is Egbichi Ejere.” He picked us up and let us stand on top of his table.

“Clap for them,” he said.

The school clapped, and we were dismissed for Christmas holidays. Only three kids had failed the examination.

On our way home, Miss Okorie held our hands while we bounced up and down. We got home earlier than usual, and mom hadn’t cooked yet. Dad was home too. It was *Eke*—native’s market day and nobody goes to the farm on that market day. Miss Okorie stopped briefly, played with my brother, told mom and dad how I did in the final examination and left.

On Sunday dad sold out his diluted palm wine in the morning, but he saved one jar. So I knew he was expecting some visitors in the afternoon. Soon after dad finished with his wine sales, I saw mom plucking *oha* leaves—just enough to cook with. When she finished with that, she began to grind *ukpo’h* nuts. Then she brought out a big dried fish and put it in the water. It was obvious that important people were coming to visit.

“Maa, who is coming to visit?” I asked.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I saw dad save his special jar of undiluted wine,” I answered.

“Uncle Okereke, Azik, Uncle Jeremiah, and Headmaster Okpee are visiting after church service,” she explained.

I stayed home to help her watch my brother. Later on Egbichi came over. When she finished cooking she said to us:

“Come on, you two, let’s go to the stream so you can take your bath and look decent when your headmaster comes to visit.”

“Mama, who is that?” Egbichi asked.

“Mr. Okpee,” I answered.

“Oh,” she mumbled.

When we came back from the stream, churchgoers were just coming back from church.

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“Go and put some clothes on before the visitors come,” mom said.

I put on a polo shirt and black shorts, and Egbichi wore a white blouse and a black skirt. We looked like we were going to church. We did not wait for long before Uncle Okereke, Uncle Jeremiah, Azik, and Mr. Okpee arrived.

“Ogbu, come and greet your headmaster,” dad said.

Egbichi and I walked gingerly to dad’s house, not knowing what to say. As we walked inside the house, Uncle Okereke beckoned us to come to him, and he embraced us.

“I heard how you two did in your examination—well done,” he said.

“They are going to elementary two when school resumes,” Mr. Okpee said.

“Didn’t you say that they were too young to be registered?” dad asked.

“Well, the headquarters in Ovim did not oppose their promotion,” Mr. Okpee said.

We shook everybody’s hand and ran out quickly. Dad called us back to pass *nzu* (a slab of chalk) around, according to the custom. Dad told me once that the offer of *nzu* signifies peace—a welcoming symbol. It is the first thing a visitor is offered. After *nzu*, we passed out cups that dad filled with palm wine. At the end of the evening, we escorted our visitors to the village square and shook their hands.



One day before the beginning of the new school year, mom’s friend Ogbonne came over and told mom that Egbichi had left early that morning to live with her brother Mba leaving me to wonder about how I could go to school without her. However, mom did not waste any time; she pulled out her tender-loving-care magic and calmed my bewildered mind down.

When we started class the next day, Miss Okorie inspected our hands, ears, hair, teeth, and clothes. One girl, Ejije Aka, was dirty, so she was sent home with a note for her parents.

“We have gone through the vowels enough. Now we are going to start on other alphabet letters,” Miss Okorie announced. We did and classes continued. On Easter Sunday, Miss Okorie came over and took me to church. After church all the teachers went to Uncle Okereke’s house. I stayed with his wife, Mama Ugo, while the teachers and Uncle Okereke ate and drank wine. They chatted and laughed loudly, and I wondered why they were so happy. Later dad came and joined them. He was still there when Miss Okorie and I left.

One afternoon on our way home from school, Miss Okorie and I stopped at my village square to play soccer. It was awkward because boys did not like to be seen playing soccer with a woman. Nevertheless, I went ahead and played with her. Surprisingly she knew how to play soccer. SO we chased and dribbled the ball around each other till I got tired.

“I am tired; let’s go home,” I pleaded.

“Just one more time,” she replied.

Finally, she picked up her books, and we went home sweating.

“Why are you two sweating?” mom asked.

“We’ve been playing soccer at the square,” Miss Okorie replied.

We sat down and cooled off before mom served food. After eating, mom and Miss Okorie chatted for a while, and then she left. On the last day of school, we scrubbed the classroom and the blackboards and piled our chairs on top of the desks. When Mr. Okpee rang the closing bell, we marched into the church then Mr. Oji, Mr. Ume, and Miss Okorie led us in singing as loudly as we could, clapping and dancing. After the opening prayer, Mr. Okpee called out the names of kids in elementary two who’d be transferring to Methodist Central School to start standard one; I was one of them. Then he called out the names of kids in elementary one who would be promoted to elementary two. “If you did not hear your name, you failed the

Chuks I. Ndukwe

examination, and you will repeat your class next year. Merry Christmas. School is dismissed,” he said.

Chapter 5

Fear Of failure

Our greatest fear should not be of failure but of succeeding at things in life that don't really matter.

~ Francis Chan



On every last day of each school year, my head was overloaded with anguish, agony, and a crushing headache. I discovered that the suspense, uncertainty, and unavoidable result of the final examination—compounded by the venue and method by which teachers announced it—could force a child to suspend play and enjoyment of life and to yield to the fear and agony of failure.

I learned that expectation and reality often diverge even when their convergence is all but assured. Going home on that day presented its own unique challenges. The overly excited and jubilant kids who were rewarded for their exceptional performance found themselves in an awkward situation. The balancing act of encouraging the less jubilant kids and consoling the sobbing kids made going home together on that day the most dreadful of all things a child can go through.

Last year I had not been happy about coming third in the class; this year I took the first place I had always wanted, still I could not express my joy. I was unable to reconcile the agonizing and conflicting emotions. So I ran into the bush, pretending to be depositing body waste until the crowd was far ahead. Then I came out and walked slowly behind them. When I got home, mom was not there; she had gone to fetch drinking water. Our drinking water flowed out of a rocky hill.

She came home carrying a pot of water on her head and a basket of mpataka—thin slices of fresh cassava—in one hand. I loved mpataka with coconut. When I saw her, I rushed forward and took the basket from her.

“Where is Anyele?” I asked.

“He is with Mama Anya,” she replied.

When we got home, she put the pot and the basket away; then we went to Mama Anya’s house and came right back with Anyele. She cracked a coconut and gave us some with mpataka. Anyele liked mpataka too. I did not go out to play that day. Instead, I stayed home and played with Anyele.

On Saturday, Oyidiya came by. She stayed for a while and played with Anyele, pinching and tickling him like I used to do.

“Ogbuleke, I am going to the school to bring Miss Kanu’s belongings home. Would you like to go with me?” she asked.

“Let’s ask mom,” said I.

“You can go,” mom replied.

In the afternoon, we went to the school and brought Miss Kanu’s belongings home.

On Sunday Azik, Uncle Okereke, and Mr. Okpee visited after church. Dad had reserved a specially diluted palm wine for the occasion. I was the bartender, and they drank and chatted while I refilled their glasses. I loved to bartend so I could hear what they talked about—and they talked a lot.

That afternoon they talked about the examination and about the day, they had twisted my right hand to get me to touch my left ear over my head.

The next morning, I could not get out of bed. I felt weak and tired.

“Are you ready for breakfast?” mom asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

A little while later, breakfast was ready. The golden rolls of akara were still in the frying pot, and she was stirring the milky-looking akamu. I set the plates quickly.

“Here, it’s for you and your brother,” she said, filling the plate with the akamu.

“I don’t want to eat with Anyele? He is too greedy,” I snapped.

“OK, let me put his in a separate plate; keep eyes on him,” mom said.

In a minute, Anyele’s mouth was full of akara, and akamu was dripping on his body and on the floor—off his spoon.

“Maa, come here fast,” I called out.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Come look at Anyele.”

Without waiting, I dragged him over to her, and went back to my seat.

“I don’t want to eat with him anymore; he doesn’t know how to act,” I repeated.

I went back to enjoying my food alone while he went to the backyard to clean himself up.

In the evening, dad came home late, so we waited for him until bedtime. He walked in singing and staggering.

“I stopped by my nephew’s house to discuss some issues, and he wants Ogbuleke to come over and spend two weeks with them,” he said unapologetically.

On Sunday, I went to church with Uncle Okereke and Mama Ugo, and sat with the choir. That was the most fun part of my time with them. To me, singing in the choir meant you are a true worshiper of God. I was a child, and every child’s decision should not be subject to questioning, so I decided to join the choir as soon as I was big enough to do so. On Christmas Day, I went to church with Miss Kanu and Oyidiya. Ugoji did not come with us; he’d gotten hurt playing soccer. Christmas carols made me happy and joyful, so after church I kept singing all the way home. Mom had invited Miss Kanu to Christmas dinner. So when we got home, mom had a bowl of rice, and fowl stew waiting for us.

“Come and sit down. I have been waiting for you,” she said.

We sat down, and enjoyed the traditional Christmas meal: rice and fowl stew. Then after the meal, I followed Miss Kanu and Oyidiya home, and ate again in their house. That was the tradition on Christmas Day: you ate rice wherever you went.

That year the farming area was very close to the village. It was so close you could see people working in the farms, and vice versa. Men had just begun to clear the bushes. They either carried food with them or they came home for break. Every afternoon, mom went to the farm with Anyele and me to eat lunch with dad. Some days we stayed with him until closing time; then we took a bath in the stream and came home together. It was fun; Anyele and I ran around in the bush chasing each other and most kids were doing the same.

Mom and dad had a family tradition: on Wednesdays, they worked on mom’s vegetable patches. There was no way to know which plot belonged to one or the other; the only way to tell was which plot they worked on Wednesdays.

One Wednesday we woke up very early, brushed our teeth, and went to the farm. Dad cleared some space in the bush and built a small tent for Anyele and me, and mom built a fireplace for cooking. I picked Anyele up and said to him;

“OK, big boy, they are serious; we are going to live here forever.”

While I was preparing a space in the tent for Anyele to sleep, mom had already gone to Ogba to fetch drinking water.

“Here, this pot is drinking water, and that pot is for cooking and washing our hands,” she explained.

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She joined dad, who had already cleared a large portion of the plot. I watched both of them hitting the plants and the tree branches with vengeance.

“Maa, I want to help,” making my way to where she was.

“Watch your brother,” she yelled.

I did not understand why she was yelling; I was only trying to help. They had cleared half of the plot when people began to pass by.

That was the first time the whole family went to work together. Mom was in good mood—judging from the way she was cutting everything down with her sharp knife.

“Ogbuleke, get me water,” dad said.

“No, I will get it,” she said.

She rushed to the tent, filled the cup with water, and gave it to dad.

“Maa, I am hungry,” I yelled out.

She looked at me, abandoned what she was doing immediately, and prepared food for us. Farmers ate when they felt hungry. Mom roasted yellow yams and served them with hot palm oil. After the meal, they rested for a while before they resumed work.

Dad returned to work first, then mom followed. They attacked the bush, cutting plants and trees down until the sun took a dive into the west, and plants began to cast their shadows all over the farm. We packed up and took our bath before other farmers arrived to join us at the stream. When we got home, I was exhausted even though I did not do any work at the farm. I managed to stay awake for dinner, and then I went to bed. I woke up the next morning, to itchy hands and legs, and furious scratching.

“Why are you scratching?” mom asked as she inspected my body.

“I don’t know why I am itching,” I replied.

She looked at my hands and my back.

“Give me your hands; mosquitoes bit you yesterday,” she said.

She rubbed oil all over me, including areas that were not itching. When Anyele woke up, she examined him and did not find a single mosquito bite.

“Thank God I did not see any mosquito bites on your brother,” she said.

“Nna Dick, what do you want for breakfast?” she asked.

“Nothing, I am about to leave the house right now,” dad said.

“You work too hard; you must eat before you leave the house,” she said.

She peeled yams, ground pepper, and prepared pepper soup. Dad ate before he went to work. It was amazing how mom overruled dad’s decision every single time. She did not have a loud and strong voice like dad, but her sweet, mild voice had a much farther-reaching impact than his. I did not ask her how she managed to control dad like that, knowing that she would smile and perform her head-rubbing routine. That was her way of saying, “Son, you are too young to know.” When dad left for work, I escorted him to the edge of the square and came back. We swept the compound together, and then I played with Anyele until we fell asleep. When I woke up, the village was as quiet as a ghost town; all the kids had gone to the farm with their parents, as I did the previous day.

On Monday, the first day of school, we defied the cold weather and took a bath in the stream. When we got to school, I was assigned to Standard Four A, and the new teacher was Mr. Nwabeze. I had hoped to be in his class for long, so my wish came true. Mr. Nwabeze was handsome, light skinned, and tall; everybody liked him for his friendly smile.

When he got to the classroom, he was smiling.

“My name is Amechi Nwabeze, and I will be your teacher for this school year,” he said. “Your task is to pay attention to me while you are in this classroom and to listen to everything I say, and my duty is to teach

you and help you to understand what I am teaching. Is that clear?"

We sat down quietly while he compiled the list of all the books and materials we needed for the year. When he finished, he went around the classroom and handed the lists to each student.

"I'd like to know each one of you, so come up and introduce yourself and tell us what part of Alayi you come from," he said.

I started, as I did in every class.

"My name is Ogbuleke Ikebie, and I am from Amaigwu Amankalu Alayi."

"Clap for him," he said.

The introductions went on until we got to the last student in the class. Elendu Iheke was still standing in front of the class, introducing himself, when the bell rang for lunch break. A few kids ran out, but Mr. Nwabeze called them back.

"Nobody leaves the classroom while I am sitting here unless I say so; is that clear?" he asked in a serious tone that made him seem mean.

During lunch, a few kids expressed surprise about his meanness before the break; it was good to know that other kids felt the same way I did. After lunch, he called the roll, and every now and then, he bent over and looked at a student from the top of his eyeglasses. It was hard to tell whether he did that to see the student more clearly or to frighten him or her.

For whatever reason, the image of him looking like that stuck in my mind. After the roll call, he stood up.

"I want to go over a few rules you may not be accustomed to," he said, "I run a tight ship, so I like to impart discipline to my crew, I will not keep you in the classroom any longer than it is necessary, so when the bell goes off for leaving the classroom for any reason, you must remain seated until I ask you to leave. Did I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," we answered.

"For the rest of the afternoon, I want you to come up and tell the class all about the last Christmas holidays. Don't be shy. When you finish, I will tell you all about mine. Let's start with Ikebie," Mr. Nwabeze said.

"During the holidays, aku fell; we ate lots of it. On Christmas Day, I went to church with Miss Kanu and Oyidiya and Ugoji; then we ate rice. I spent two weeks with my uncle Okereke Chima, and sang in the choir with Mama Ugo," I said.

"Clap for him," he said

"Did you do anything else?" he asked.

"Yes, I went to the farm with mom and dad and Anyele too."

"Next," he said.

Each student then told the class how they had enjoyed the holidays. When the last student finished with his story, the closing bell rang, but Mr. Nwabeze had yet to tell his story. Therefore, we sat and waited for him to tell his story.

"Well done, everybody. Time has run out; we will continue tomorrow," he said.

The following day, Mr. Nwabeze came into the class beaming.

"Yes, I promised to tell my story about the last Christmas, so here I go," he said. "A day after school closed, I traveled to Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region to spend the holidays with my brother. Enugu is an beautiful city with the house of assembly sitting on top of the hill and the secretariat scattered around it. I went to work with my brother every day and strolled around the capital. Vendors set up tables all over the place to sell everything. I visited the governor's mansion, and worshiped at the Anglican Cathedral on Christmas Day. Finally, I watched the soccer match between the Nigerian Eagles and the Gold Coast All

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Stars. It was magical; the game ended with a one-to-one draw. Finally, when I returned home to Ovim, I went to the farm a few times with my mother before coming back.”

We clapped and clapped for him. We were proud that our teacher’s brother worked at the Eastern Regional capital. He must be one of those people they called “honorable,” we concluded.

After Mr. Nwabeze’s story, the bell rang for physical education.

“Let’s go to the junior field and stretch ourselves,” he said.

We marched to the junior field and competed in different kinds of races. For size or strength, I was no match for the other kids; I always lost by a few yards. When the bell went off, I went to lunch with my friend, Innocent.

“Let’s go to the courtyard,” Innocent said.

“Why?” I asked.

“My mother sells food there,” he replied.

We ran to the courtyard. His mother had a large basin full of slices of cooked yam and a pot of steaming stew. She gave us some.

“I come here every day for lunch,” Innocent said.

“Do you eat yam every day?” I asked.

“No, she cooks different things,” he replied.

We played around the courthouse until the end-of-break bell rang; then we ran back to the school compound as the other students had fallen in line and were about to march to their classes. We managed to sneak into the line and marched along with them to the classroom.

On the way home, a fight broke out between two girls. This was the first time I witnessed two girls fighting on the way home from school: Ngozi and Chioma fought over Ugoji. All the girls knew what the issue was, but they would not tell us. We separated them and maintained peace until we got home.

When we went out to play at the square in the evening, I chatted with Ugoji.

“Why were Chioma and Ngozi fighting on our way home from school?”

“I borrowed Chioma’s book in class, and Ngozi didn’t like it,” he explained.

“I am confused. Why did Ngozi get offended?” I asked.

“Ogbuleke, please let us play; I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

On Saturday, when we gathered at the square for soccer practice, all eyes were on Chioma and Ngozi. Without any sign of anger or animosity, they laughed, giggled, and jumped rope together.

“Girls are strange. How could two people fight one day and become friends again the next day?” I thought.

“You should never get yourself involved with any girl,” Ugoji said.

“Why are you involved with Chioma?”

“That’s enough; let’s play,” he said.

On Monday morning, we were crossing the famous Igwu Bridge when Chioma whispered in Ngozi’s ears, and both of them broke out laughing. Ugoji looked at me as if to remind me what he had told me at the square about girls. When we got to school, I went to clean Miss Kanu’s backyard, and Chioma was there talking to Oyidiya. Both of them were laughing hysterically. I believed they were talking about Ugoji.

“What are you laughing about?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you; it’s something girls like to talk about,” she said.

After the morning assembly, class started with arithmetic, followed by English language. During lunch break, Innocent and I went to the courtyard, and his mother gave us akara. Then we returned to the school compound before the end of break, lined up and marched to the classroom.

On Saturday mom and dad woke up before everybody else. They chatted for a while before mom went to

the kitchen. It was about the strategy for the day's farm work. Mom had some ideas about what to do before the sun started to pump heat waves down to Earth and who should be doing what.

Mom's preferred plan was that both of them would till the ground, side by side, until they had covered the whole lot. Then they would plant the yams, side by side, until the end of the day or until both of them got tired. However, dad wanted to till the ground while mom planted the yams after him.

"If we tilled the whole lot, any one of us could come back and finish planting the yams, with or without the other," she said. "But if I trail behind planting yams after you, then both of us have to come back together to continue in that manner. Tilling and planting by one person does not look too good either."

"OK, you're right. Let's get ready. I think we can finish everything today," dad responded, patting mom on the shoulder.

Mom prepared pepper soup with ginger and some other herbs; then we left the house before anybody else was up. When we got to the farm, dad made a shed for Anyele and me, mom prepared a fireplace for cooking, and then both of them attacked the land. They tilled the ground forward and sideways until they had covered the plot.

"Get some rest while I cook some food," mom advised.

"I want to walk down to the stream and take a quick bath," dad replied.

"Nooo, it will make you lazy," she said.

"OK, give me water," he said.

"Here, give it to your dad and get some firewood," she said.

Mom cooked yams and served them with vegetable sauce she had made at home. After lunch, she gave Anyele a bath before they went back to work.

At the end of the day, as the sun was receding into the west over the colorful horizon, we packed up and then took a long bath in the river.

One Monday morning, Mr. Nwabeze mounted a notice board beside the blackboard.

"This board is the class merit board," he announced. "We will have tests and quizzes every Friday. On Monday morning three names will appear on this board; those three names will represent the students who came first, second, and third. I look forward to seeing your name on this board."

We'd had a merit board before, so it wasn't a surprise or a big deal, for that matter. I turned around to see Elendu Iheke and Elechi Uche's facial expressions; they were looking at me too, so I turned away quickly. With the battle joined, and the old rivalry renewed the competition began. During the Easter break, Mr. Nwabeze took me home to spend the break with his family. On our way, I saw a big, long thing moving along in the bush with smoke coming out of it; then it blew a loud horn. I was struggling to ask what it was when Mr. Nwabeze began to explain what it was.

"That is called 'train,'" he said.

"Why is smoke coming out of it?"

"It's burning coal; they use it to make steam to drive the train," he explained.

That was too complicated for me, so I did not ask any more questions, but the whole place had a strange smell.

When we got to his house, he introduced me to his family members. His sister, Elizabeth—who was about twelve years old—led me to a room at the backyard, and wanted me to call her Liz.

"What is the meaning of Liz?" I asked.

"It is the short form of Elizabeth," she explained.

"OK, what is the meaning of Elizabeth?"

"She is the queen of England."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

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She walked out leaving me alone until her mother came and got me.

“Take your bath and join us for dinner,” she said.

I took bath and joined them for dinner. Liz and I did not make eye contact. I thought she hated me for asking all those questions, but I knew she was wrong. My name means “a warrior who killed his enemy on Eke market day,” Why shouldn’t I know the meaning of hers too? Maybe in Ovim, names do not have meaning. For two days, she avoided me and I followed her mother around—helping her in the kitchen and with garden work.

“You are so helpful,” she said.

“I help mom too,” said I.

Surprisingly, she did mom’s head-rubbing routine and smiled. I don’t know why people liked to rub my head.

“Take Ogbuleke to the train station and show him around,” she said to Liz.

On our way to the station, she seemed uncomfortable; she tried to look at me, and then she looked away.

“When we get to the station, don’t ask me questions,” she said. “Let me just show you around and tell you about the whole station, OK?”

“Yes,” I promised.

When we got to the station, she showed me the platform, the waiting room, and the ticket window. People were buying tickets, and then we heard the horn and saw smoke rising far away.

“Look over there. The train is coming; stand by me,” she said, grabbing my hand.

The huge, long train with a black engine rolled into the station with a loud noise and stopped. Many people came down from the train, and many people got in the train.

“These people are coming home, and those who got into the train are going away,” she explained.

It was exciting. Mr. Nwabeze’s town was far better than mine. Liz and I became friends again.

The following day, Mr. Nwabeze took me to the Methodist bookstore.

“This is where all the Methodist schools get their textbooks from,” he said.

He bought pencils, a ruler, and a notebook for me. After that, we stopped at a small market, where he bought some biscuits for me. I ate some and saved some for Liz.

We attended church on Sunday, and we returned home in the evening. The visit turned out to be a bittersweet experience because when kids in my class heard about it, I became the most disliked kid in the class. Whenever I got close to any one of my classmates, he or she would simply walk away as if I had committed a crime.

I decided to spend lunch break at Miss Kanu’s residence with Oyidiya. One day, as I was walking to the teachers’ quarters, Innocent called out “Ogbuleke stop,” he ran and met me halfway to the teachers’ quarters.

“Why are you avoiding me?” he asked. “I didn’t do anything to you.” He said.

“Everybody hates me. I thought you are one of them.” I replied.

“No, I am not,” he said. “I don’t care if they hate me too,” he said. “We’re friends, and you did not do anything wrong. Let’s go over to the courtyard.”

We ran over to the courtyard, and his mother served us rice and goat meat.

A few weeks later, we began to prepare for the midyear examination. Innocent and I studied together whenever we had the chance. When the results of the examination came out, Innocent and I had passed.

My anger for the treatment by my classmates without justifiable reason deepened. I studied every day with Innocent whenever possible, and week after week, I dominated the performance board with resolute determination to outperform in the final exam.

In November, as the weather started to change, cool air blew over the town, bringing fog with it and hazy sunshine, reminding everybody the end of the year was around the corner.

Chuks I. Ndukwe

One morning the headmaster announced, “The final examination will start in two weeks. Behave yourselves, and make this school proud.”

Two weeks later, Mr. Nwabeze, Mr. Eleke, and Miss Kanu were gone, and three teachers from different schools took their places. The exam lasted for a week. The headmaster and his wife walked around every classroom observing, supervising, and taking notes while other teachers conducted the examination. On the last day of school, the bell rang, and without lining up or marching, we gathered in the assembly hall. After the prayer, every teacher announced the results for his or her class.

Innocent was squeezing my hand when Mr. Nwabeze read the results for our class. When he heard his name, he took off running, and then he came back. I came first, Innocent came second, and Elechi came third. At the end of the assembly, the headmaster stepped forward again and congratulated everybody who had passed the exam.

“Alayi Methodist Central School outperformed every school in our division. You made the teaching staff proud. Enjoy your holidays,” he concluded.

Innocent and I hugged, and then he took off again running to give his mother the good news. Mr. Nwabeze walked up to me and shook my hand.

“My mother would love to know you did well on the final,” he said.

Ugoji, Oyidiya, and I went to Miss Kanu’s residence. We celebrated with orange Fanta and biscuits. We helped Miss Kanu pack while Oyidiya prepared rice and stew. When we finished packing, we ate; then Miss Kanu locked her residence, then we went home.

When I got home, Ejere Igwe—my best friend—was waiting for me at the square.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

“I went to Miss Kanu’s house,” I replied.

We spent some time with mom before we went over to his house. We spent the afternoon together—shooting down mangoes.

Mom’s stomach had become big again; she would place my hand on her belly to feel the baby’s movement. One day, on my way from school, I heard a gunshot. (Fathers celebrate their children’s delivery with gunshot.) When I got home, women were dancing in the compound, and men were celebrating with palm wine. “Your mother has given birth to a baby girl,” dad said. “Her name is Nwakaego—meaning more precious than money. Go and see her in the bedroom.” When I saw mom smiling—she looked so happy and beautiful—it made me happy too.

Chapter 8

A Moment Of Inspiration

What you are looking for is already in you...You already are everything you are seeking.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh.



One Monday morning, we started school with marching, morning devotion, and prayer before walking to our classrooms. The headmaster walked in and conducted his roll call. “We will have a special visitor this afternoon. He is a scientist from America;” he said. “His team of engineers is here to conduct exploration. They will perform a demonstration for us here in this classroom, so come back before the afternoon roll call.”

When you’re a child, one of the most wonderful things about notification is the restless embrace of immediacy pitching currency against patience. In this case immediacy and currency won so all through the lunch break we waited restlessly to see the scientist; an American whose name we’ve only seen in the test book. In our young minds, scientists are not real people let alone visit our school. There we were, lost in a zone of elevated anticipation, anxious to see and hear what the scientist from America had to say.

Suddenly, a car entered the school compound and went straight to the headmaster’s residence. Two people got out of the car: a big, tall black man walked toward our classroom followed by a white man of average height carrying a box.

As soon as he crossed the classroom entrance, the headmaster shouted. “All stand, Salute.”

“Good afternoon, sir,” we greeted.

“Good afternoon, class,” he greeted back.

“Be seated,” the headmaster ordered.

“We have very special visitors this afternoon. They are a group of scientists who will be spending a few weeks with us,” the headmaster said. “They are conducting explorations to determine if we have any deposits of rare minerals in this division. I will let the scientist introduce himself and explain the demonstration he intends to perform this afternoon for us.”

“My name is David Marshal,” the black scientist said. “My companion, Henry Anderson, and I are electrical engineers. You must have seen the light that comes on every evening around the rest house at the end of the soccer field. It is called ‘electric light. I’ve arranged for a wire to be run around the field, so one day before we depart, you will play a game under the electric light. Meanwhile, I will demonstrate how the light is generated. Watch carefully so you can ask questions afterward.”

The white man opened the box and took out wires, screwdrivers, bulbs and switches, and a big battery. He put the battery on top of the table and connected the wires to the sockets and the switch. Then he connected the wire to the battery and inserted the bulbs into the sockets.

“I would like one of you to volunteer and come up; don’t be afraid,” he said.

Without giving the scientist time to finish the sentence, I was by his side already. I must confess jumping out of the seat and running to the front of the class at the request of my teacher without thinking about the reason was a common behavior on my part. However, at that time my curiosity was in overdrive

“Thank you,” he said. “This is what I want you to do. This is a switch, and that is a toggle. You can move it up or down; this direction is up, and the opposite direction is down. I want you to hold the toggle, and we will close all the windows and the door. When the classroom gets dark, I want you to move the toggle

up.”

Afraid of what might happen, I moved the toggle slowly upward, and light came on and illuminated the classroom. It was a phenomenal sight and amazing. I stared in disbelief. Then I screamed; “I want to become electrical engineer when I grow up.”

“You can go back to your seat. The light comes from the electric current stored in the battery,” he said. “Behind the rest house, a generator provides the current for the light you see around the rest house.”

Does anybody have any question for the scientist?” the headmaster asked.

“Yes, sir, I have three questions.”

“Go ahead, Ikebie,” the headmaster said.

“Can every electrical engineer make light come on like you did?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Does anybody else have a question?” the headmaster asked.

He waited for hands to go up, but none went up.

“OK, Ikebie, ask another question.”

“Is every electrical engineer a scientist?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Ikebie, ask your last question,” the headmaster said.

“What should I do to become an electrical engineer?”

“If you study math, advanced math, physics, English language, plus any other two subjects, and if you maintain a high enough grade, you can become an electrical engineer,” he explained.

I jumped up again like a little possessed cat. “When I grow up, I want to become an electrical engineer!”

“Open the door and the windows,” the headmaster said.

We opened the door and the windows.

“You can come up and take a look, one person at a time,” the scientist said.

I ran up again touching every piece of the setup thinking one day, I would be the engineer hooking up all those wires. Everybody in the class went up and looked at the setup closely. At the end of the demonstration, we stood up and gave the engineers loud applause. I remember the scientists leaving the classroom, and the class descending into deep silence; everybody seemed to be speechless or lost in amazement.

“Ikebie, why are you so excited about the experiment?” the headmaster asked.

“Sir, I want to become an electrical engineer.”

“Who else wants to become an electrical engineer?” he asked.

I raised my hand up again unable to contain myself.

“Not you, Ikebie. I mean other students.”

I wrote down a few things the scientist had said, notably that I could become an electrical engineer if I was good at math, advanced math, physics, English language, and two other subjects. I also wrote down that every electrical engineer is a scientist.

“Can I see your notebook?” the headmaster requested.

I surrendered my notebook. He went over the notes I had made, and he handed my notebook back to me. Every time the headmaster asked the class to write a composition on what we wanted to be when we grew up, I’d write pages describing the first time I saw electric light and how exhilarated I felt watching Mr. David Marshal conduct his demonstration in my classroom. In addition, I would end the composition with forward-looking expectations of how proud I would feel to light up a dark room with electric light.

The desire gradually stuck in my mind to the point thinking about it made me happy. Sometimes I felt like my imagination was running wild, messing up my mind; other times I felt like I was secure in God’s

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sacred place every innocent child's aspiration and hope is secure and destined for fulfillment. The reality was that I had no chance of becoming an electrical engineer, and there was not any road map for reaching that goal. Yet, I refused to accept the perversity of the divergence between a child's desire and its reality.

One Friday afternoon the school began the weekly cleaning and Mrs. Helen Okocha sent for me.

"Ikebie, could you go over to the headmaster's residence and see Lydia?" she asked.

I dropped my broom and ran over to the headmaster's house and Mathew was standing in front of the house.

"I am here to see Lydia," I told him.

"She is in the backyard," he said.

I walked straight through the living room to the backyard as a privileged guest or maybe adopted family member.

"Ikebie, I want you to go to the stream with Mathew and fetch me drinking water; we are running low," she ordered.

"OK, let me get permission from the headmaster."

"Go ahead, but you don't have to," she said.

I ran back to the classroom and found the headmaster his head buried in a newspaper, reading without looking up.

"Excuse me, sir; Lydia wants me to go to the stream with Mathew to fetch drinking water. Can I go?" I asked.

"Yes, Ikebie, you can go," he said, smiling and shaking his head.

I turned around to walk out of the classroom, then he called me back and gave me some money; I had no idea how much it was.

"Tell Mathew to buy some snacks for both of you," he said.

"Oh, thank you, sir," I said and sprinted out of the classroom.

Before we went to the stream, Mathew bought salted groundnut roasted in ash which we munched on all the way to the stream.

On our way back, Mathew asked, "Ikebie, what is a scientist?"

"He is electrical engineer," I answered.

"How do you know?"

"He came to my class."

"OK, why do you want to be an electrical engineer?" he asked again.

"I want to make electrical light."

"The headmaster thinks that you are years ahead of your age."

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend him. I say things without thinking. What should I do?" I asked and silently blamed myself for displaying such a distasteful act of precocity.

"No, it's not bad. He says that you are brilliant," Mathew said.

Talking as we did, I did not feel the weight of the pail of water I was carrying, nor did the distance from the stream to the school seem any longer than the distance between our school and the soccer field. We got back on time, just before the final bell went off.

"Ikebie, would you like to go to Umuahia with us?" Lydia asked.

"Why?" I asked.

"To travel with us and visit Mama Rose."

"Who is Mama Rose?"

"She is Mr. Okocha's mother."

“She doesn’t know me; I’d be shy to see her.”

“Don’t be silly. Mr. Okocha talks about you all the time, and his mother wants you to come and spend Easter break with her.”

“I’ve to go now,” I said and left.

When I got to the classroom, the headmaster was still there sitting on his desk reading the newspaper.

“Sir, we are back.”

“That’s very good. See you on Monday,” he said.

I picked up my lunch bag, my math textbook, and my notebook and joined my group, and went home. I did not tell mom and dad about what Lydia had told me, as I did not give credence to it. Two weeks before the Easter break, Mrs. Okocha gave me a letter for my parents. I rushed home and read the letter to mom and dad.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Ndukwe,

My mother-in-law, Mrs. Rose Okocha, has asked us to invite your son Ogbuleke to visit her family in the town of Umuahia during the Easter holidays. Would you please do us the honor of allowing your son to travel to Umuahia with us on the last Friday before the beginning of Easter holidays? We are looking forward to a favorable reply.

Sincerely,
Helen M. Okocha

After hearing the letter, mom and dad sat in total silence. I handed the letter to dad, and as I was about to run out of the house, he said, “Get your pen and paper.”

“They are in school. I don’t bring them home,” I told dad.

“Bring them home on Monday. We want to reply to that letter soon,” he said.

On Monday, I brought my pen and ink bottle home, and I wrote the letter for my parents. dad dictated, and I put his words in writing. I had my blotter in my left hand, and my ink bottle positioned just right to prevent it from tipping over. I cleaned the nib of my pen so my writing would be clean and clear.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Okocha,

We are happy to receive your letter, and we will be glad to let Ogbuleke travel to Umuahia with you. However, he is a young boy, and he has never traveled abroad before, so we are worried about how he is going to behave in the presence of your mother and her family. Please let her know that he is growing up in the village, and he has never lived with people as enlightened and educated as you. Tell her also we are happy she picked him to visit her and her family.

Have a safe journey.

Sincerely,
Mr. and Mrs. Ikebie Ndukwe

On Tuesday morning after the morning assembly, I got permission from the headmaster, went next door, and handed the letter to Mrs. Okocha. Then I returned to my seat. Uncle Okereke heard the news, sent for me, and gave me a little box to travel with. On the last Friday before the Easter holidays, I did not go to school with other kids. Instead, I went much later dressed in my Christmas clothes feeling proud and went straight to

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the headmaster's residence with my box containing English textbook, notebook, pencil and two pairs of shorts and two shirts.

Luggage were everywhere on the floor. School closed around noon, and within a few minutes, Mr. and Mrs. Okocha came home.

"Is everybody ready?" he asked.

"No, I will be ready in a few minutes," his wife replied.

"Mathew, put our luggage in the trunk and check oil and petrol. Lydia, sit on the left; Ikebie, get in the middle; and Mathew, sit on the right side," he ordered.

Mr. Okocha sat on the passenger's side, and Mrs. Okocha drove all the way to Umuahia. When we arrived at Mrs. Rose Okocha's compound, the car drove up to the front of a beautiful house almost like the rest house beside my school's soccer field. An elderly woman of average stature came out smiling, spread her arms, and hugged me.

"You must be Ikebie," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, my name is Ogbuleke Ikebie."

"Come inside the house." She took my hand and led the way to the house and at that moment, I had to pee so badly.

"Ma'am, I want to urinate," I said.

She pointed at the urinal. I managed to close the door before urine pressed hard and almost rushed out. She practically took me away from everybody else.

"My son cannot stop talking about you, so I wanted to see whom he has been talking about," she said.

She took me to the kitchen where she was cooking dinner. Her kitchen was so nice with pans and pots hanging everywhere, shining like silver. When she began to slice a small yellow-looking fruit, my eyes began to burn and tear up.

"Ma'am, what's that thing?" I asked. "It's making my eyes burn."

"It's called onion. Go back to the parlor. I will come and get you when I finish cutting it," she said apologetically.

I joined Lydia in the parlor as she had just finished unpacking and was getting ready to take her bath.

Mama Rose came in the parlor and beckoned to me to return to the kitchen. I helped her whenever she needed help.

"I wish I could keep you here with me forever," she said.

I did not see much of Mr. and Mrs. Okocha until dinnertime, as they were in a separate section of the building. I helped put the plates, spoons, and forks on the table. Then I gave everybody their napkins before I sat down.

Somehow, I forgot I was a visitor, and kept helping Mama Rose. She was a kind and sweet woman like mom.

"Ikebie, say the grace," the headmaster said.

"Close your eyes. God is good. God is gracious. God we thank you for getting us here safely. We thank you for the food we are about to eat. Bless it for us, and I thank you for Mama Rose. Amen." I opened my eyes.

"I can see why you keep talking about Ikebie. This boy is a sweet little thing. Can I keep him?" Mama Rose asked Mrs. Okocha.

"The time he spent Easter break with us back at the school, the only thing he did not do was cooking, and he felt happy doing it," Lydia said.

"His mother is a lucky woman," Mama Rose said

“Are you saying that I wasn’t a sweet child when I was young?” the headmaster asked humorously.

“My dear, you were sweet,” she replied.

After dinner, I cleared the table, and Lydia and I washed the dishes. Mathew did not say a lot. I had the feeling he was not thrilled with me being there and acting the way I was acting, but I did not know any better. Shortly, he went back to his room, and I sat with the family while they talked about this and that uncle who they said came around constantly asking for money.

“Lydia, when are you taking Ikebie to the township?” Mama Rose asked.

“Helen and I are attending meeting at the Uzuakoli Methodist College tomorrow,” the headmaster said. “When we return, Mathew will take them around the township and the government secondary school.”

While they were gone, I helped Mama Rose plant some seeds in the garden. I went to the pump with Lydia to fetch water. Their water ran out of pipes, unlike ours, which ran out of the rocky hill by the waterside. They did not have a stream where we could go and play in the water. I guess you don’t need a stream when you have a pipe carrying water straight to your compound. We made two trips to the pump.

“What happened to Mathew?” I asked.

“He went to Uzuakoli with Mr. and Mrs. Okocha. He is their driver,” she said.

Mr. and Mrs. Okocha returned very late in the evening after we had eaten dinner. Chatting and laughing as they walked in the house. Lydia took Mrs. Okocha’s pocketbook, and I Mr. Okocha’s briefcase. Lydia and I served them dinner before we went to bed.

The following day, Mathew took Lydia and me to the township. The township was smoky, smelling like coal, and trains were coming and going nonstop as people crowded the platform waiting for trains. We visited the government secondary school before going back to the village. For the most part, I played soccer with kids in the village. On Friday, we returned home.

When we were leaving, Mama Rose hugged me, and I kept looking back at her from inside the car until she abruptly went out of sight. One unforgettable thing about the trip was how everything—houses, trees, and people—kept running backward as the car drove past them.

We arrived at the headmaster’s residence early in the afternoon and then I went home right away eager to tell mom about Mama Rose. When I got home, mom was sleeping with Nwakego while Anyele sat all alone. We went outside to avoid waking mom; she did not sleep in the afternoon that often. I gave him a biscuit and then we went to the square and stayed there until dinnertime. At dinner, I told mom she and Mama Rose were alike.

“Maa, she called me a sweet little thing, and she wanted to keep me,” I said.

“She was joking,” mom said.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” dad asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you behave well?” he asked again.

“Yes, I think so,” said I.

On Monday morning, school resumed. Having slept in the same house and having served the headmaster, I had mixed feelings about how to act in the classroom. I stopped jumping out of my seat to solve problems on the blackboard.

In June, we had a very unusual midyear examination. The question and answer sheets were different. Time, and items allowed in the classroom, was very different. When the results came out, the result sheet had one of two comments on it: “ready” and “not ready.” The students who scored “ready” went on advanced lessons, while the others continued as usual. I was one of the ready students. All the ready students, except for me, filled out secondary-school entrance-examination application forms. Shortly in August, they traveled to different places to take entrance exams for their secondary school of choice. I was not among them

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because I had nobody to pay for my secondary-school education. I was just happy to be where I was with the prospect of going to live with my brother in Aba, of all places.



Nwakaego had been sick for a few months. It started like fever and we did not have hospitals, so Uncle Okereke gave her pills, and a dibia treated her with herbs, but she did not get better. I would carry her and try to get her to eat something, but she could not get anything down—not even light soup. She emaciated and got weaker, but I continued to believe she would recover. Mom began to wither away like a plant on polluted soil. Two weeks later, Nwakaego passed at midnight while I was sleeping, and dad woke me up.

“Ogbu, Nwakaego has passed. Meet me at the backyard,” he said.

For the first time, I had a strange feeling—emptiness and fear. I wanted to see mom, but many people were surrounding her.

I met dad at the backyard, where he was digging up a grave to bury her. I helped him, as tears rolled down my eyes, until we reached the right depth. Mom was screaming and rolling around on the ground.

“Why did you allow this? Why didn’t you take me? She is a young soul; she does not deserve to die so young. Good God, where are you? What did I do wrong?” she kept screaming.

After preparing the grave, all the elders offered their native ritual, dad chewed odo—a yellow substance derived from a plant; nzu—a slab of chalk; and osoji—a spicy nut. Natives believe the combination has a protective power against the devil. Then he spat it all over the grave. The elders lit oil lamps and placed them at the four sides of the grave.

“Ogbu, I want you to give your sister her last bath, as you used to do when she was alive. I know she would want you to do that,” dad said.

Her body was flabby and flexible. I struggled, picked her up, and carried her to the grave. I gave her a bath and wrapped her in a white cloth and the elders lowered her into the grave. We walked down to the stream and bathed. When we returned home, the oldest dibia in the village sprinkled some liquid on us with his oxtail, and then we went back to bed.

From that day, mom—who had been flourishing and blossoming—began to fade and wither like a flower in the winter. She cried every day and every night, forcing me to cry too.

“I want another daughter; I need a girl,” she kept saying.

She began to travel everywhere to see dibia (native doctors) so they could help her to conceive another girl. She agonized inconsolably until she lost the will to smile, her cheekbones began to protrude, and tears began to run down my eyes. One day we were sitting in the kitchen, then I put my hands around her neck and looked into her blurry eyes and said:

“Maa, if you stop looking for another daughter, I will do everything girls do for their mother,” I said. “Stop sleeping with dad; I don’t want you to die.”

She hugged me and held me tight for a while, and then she looked into my face as tears ran down her face and mine.

“OK, let’s cook,” she said.

I visited Egbichi and told her what I said to mom. Then she told her mother and other girls. Every day after school, I went to the stream with the girls and filled our drinking-water pot with water, and ground condiments for mom to cook with when she got home from the farm. I went with the girls to fetch firewood for cooking, and I cracked palm kernels for mom. A few days later, she called me to the kitchen.

“I want you to know that you are a very special young man,” she said. “I will do what you said. I have

thought about it, and I realized that I am lucky to have you and your brothers as my children. I told your father, don't worry about me anymore."

A few weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon, the Christ Apostolic Church held open prayer meeting at the square. They sang and danced, and their pastor preached to the crowd. After the meeting, their visiting missionary from America pointed at mom and invited her to worship with them on Sunday. She went to church on Sunday, and from that day, she was never the same woman I used to know.

She attended Bible studies, prayer meetings, and church services. Surprisingly, she did not ask me to go to church with her. It did not take long before her spirituality began to show. One day after church, mom told dad to take the lock off her door.

"Why do you want to do that?" dad asked.

"So that people can come in and eat when they are hungry," she said.

"Are you sure you are not losing your mind?" he asked.

"No, I am not losing my mind. I feel good about it; don't worry," she said.

Dad took the lock off her door, and every day, girls from my village—who had heard I was doing things for mom that girls do for their mother—came to our house and filled our pots with water and got all the ingredients ready for mom to cook with in the evening. Some days they cooked for her, and when she got home, she served the food. Gradually, she began to regain her happy demeanor. She let those girls come around when she was home, and she entertained them.



Early in November, many students who had taken the secondary-school entrance examination began to receive letters of admission. Elechi Uche got admission to Uzuakoli Methodist Secondary School, Eke Okai was already a second-year student there, and others were going to other secondary schools. Their future road maps seemed clear; at least it looked that way.

One Friday morning in November, the headmaster announced that the final exam would start on the first Monday of December. "A few members of the teaching staff, including me, will be away to conduct the exam at different schools," he said. "Be on your best behavior and good luck."

The exam started on the first Monday of December, as announced, and lasted for one week. Immediately after the exam, most of the seniors left for various reasons. My best friend, Ejere Igwe, was one of them—admitted to Methodist Teacher Training College in Ovim. I was happy for him, but could not help feeling devastated at the thought of our eventual separation. However, going to live with my brother in Aba was good enough for me.

On the final day of school, the morning devotion started early. After the prayer, each teacher read out the first ten names in the class with the highest scores, not necessarily in the order of merit, followed by the names of those who had failed the exam. "If you didn't hear your name, you passed the exam, and you will be promoted when school resumes next year. Have a merry Christmas," the headmaster said.

Chapter 10

Encouragement And Aspiration

Just as courage has no meaning without fear, faith has no meaning without doubt. They're the yin and yang of all aspiration.

~ Dennis Palumbo



On Friday morning, a Peugeot 404 station wagon drove up in front of our house, and Uncle Anyele Aka rushed out of the car and into the house.

“Where is Ogbuleke?” he asked.

“I am right here.”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes Uncle, I am ready.”

“OK, get in the car,” Uncle Anyele said.

Waving and smiling at everybody, I got in the car and had a beautiful ride home with only one stop at Umuahia Motor Park to fill up the tank with petrol. At about noon, I was home with mom and Anyele.

“Take off those clothes and take a bath. I will prepare food for you,” she said.

She fried plantain and served it with rice and stew. I told her what Uncle Emeke Chima had said about going to Ozuitem for an interview.

“I know about it. Nobody wants you to go into trading,” she said.

“What do they want me to do? I don’t have any chance of going to secondary school like the kids with rich relatives.”

I told her what Uncle Udensi said—that he would not pay for my education—but I did not say anything about the nasty slap my brother had given me or anything about Uncle Udensi’s wife.

“He should never have said that,” mom said. “Anyway, that statement is a challenge to God. You shouldn’t worry about it.”

Then I told her about Mr. Madubike Okocha’s letter.

“He came here looking for you. You can go and see him on Monday,” she said.

On Monday, I went to Mr. Okocha’s residence and knocked on the door. He opened the door with his eyeglasses hanging on his nose. He looked at me from the top of the glasses, bending his head slightly down—a typical image of him I would never forget.

“Come in, Ikebie. Do sit down,” he said.

Mrs. Okocha came out, and I stood up quickly and greeted her.

“When did you come home?” she asked.

“Ikebie, I filled out an application form for the entrance examination for Government Trade Center Enugu on your behalf,” he said. “There is only one of its kind in the whole region, and I believe you have the best chance of getting into that school. They admit only the brightest students.”

“I don’t know anybody in Enugu, and I don’t know if dad can afford to pay for me to go to Enugu,” I said, crying.

“Why are you crying?” he asked as Mrs. Okocha looked on.

“I know you want me to become somebody and successful,” I said. “But I’m afraid I can’t make you proud of me, I am sorry.”

“If you are invited for the exam, which consists of a written and oral questions, I will pay for your trip to

and from Enugu,” he said. “I will also give you pocket money. The school will provide you with accommodations, so don’t cry.”

I jumped up and covered my face. I was in a state of disbelief.

“I don’t know what to say, sir—ma’am. Please help me. I do not know what to do. Thank you, sir. I am so happy,” I rattled.

“You don’t need any help. You are amazing, child,” Mrs. Okocha said. “Are you hungry? We have food left over from lunch.”

“No, ma’am, I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t leave home; I will send for you when I get the invitation,” he advised.

“All right, sir. Thank you,” I said and left.

I cannot remember exactly how I got home. My best guess is that I ran all the way, and judging from my past behavior under similar euphoric state of mind, I was probably hopping and jumping from one side of the road to the other and perhaps kicking a few plants that dared stick their branches out. I could not believe Mrs. Okocha had said I was an amazing child. Those words stuck in my mind and stayed there as indelible as words carved in stone.

Later in the afternoon, mom came home with Anyele running behind her.

“Let me cook food for you and your brother. Then you can tell me why Okocha wanted to see you,” she said.

Mom believed in discussing certain matters while eating, a theory I’ve never been able to substantiate. While Anyele and I munched on beans and plantain, she sat directly opposite me, and I would stop eating and look back at her.

“Now, why did that man ask you to come home?” she asked.

I told her exactly what had happened when I got to the headmaster’s residence.

“First of all, I want to thank God for that man,” she said. “Do you remember Miss Okorie, Mr. Okpee, and all of your teachers? Every one of them visited this house, and each one of them took you home to meet their family. Ogbu, I have nothing to say. Sure, I gave birth to you, but you are everybody’s son.”

When dad came home, mom relayed the story to him. At dinner, he looked at me and said a few words: “Ogbu, did everything go well between you and Headmaster Okocha?”

“Yes, he told me to stay home.”

However, I did not stay home; I thought it was a good idea to see if I could qualify to work as a teacher.

On the day of my interview for the teaching position, I traveled with a group of other young people to Bende Divisional Education Office in Ozuitem. Some of the candidates had finished standard six a few years before me. We walked a very long distance—about fifteen miles—traversing farmlands and crossing deep and wide streams (or rivers, as the natives called them). You could paddle a boat on some of them.

I was twelve, and younger than most candidates, but, after the interview, I was selected to attend the teacher-training course. The educational system was a free, universal system, and we were the first group of teachers in the system. The training started on Monday and lasted for four weeks, ending with material preparation and a teaching demonstration. On the last day of training, the divisional education officer, Mr. C. U. Okereke addressed trainees before we dispersed and returned home to wait for teaching assignments. For reasons unknown, I cannot remember how much I was paid nor what I did with the money I earned.

The Sunday after I returned home, Mr. Okocha attended church at Amankalu Methodist Church. After the service, he stopped by my house with Uncle Okereke Chima and Azik Ukachukwu and dad treated them to his special palm wine and mom’s Sunday delight. After the meal, we walked to the square and before Mr. Okocha entered his car, he gave me a letter: an invitation for the GTC entrance exam.

“I want you to come to my residence on Friday before the exam day with your traveling box,” he said.

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“Mathew will take you to the Ovim train station, where you will board the train to Enugu. I will tell you all about your trip when you come on that Friday.”

On the Friday before the exam, I reported at Mr. Okocha’s residence. After dinner, he called Mathew and me together.

“Tomorrow morning, Mathew will take you to Ovim train station,” he said. “He will purchase a ticket for you. Keep it secure because the conductor will ask for it inside the train on your way to Enugu. When you arrive at Enugu train station, take a taxi to GTC and report to the security office at the principal’s office. After the exam on Wednesday, you will go to Enugu train station and buy a ticket for Ovim. Be at the station early, and check the train’s scheduled arrival time at Enugu so you don’t miss your train. Mathew will be at Ovim train station to bring you home.” He gave me an envelope with money inside.

On Saturday morning, Mathew took me to Ovim train station, he bought the ticket, handed it to me, and I put it in my pocket. I watched him very carefully so I would not have any difficulty buying a ticket on my way back. We checked the train’s arrival time and then waited until we heard a loud sound and saw smoke rising from a distance—I had seen that once before.

“Get your box; that’s your train coming,” Mathew said.

The train rolled into the station and came to a stop. I boarded the train and waved at Mathew as the train began to roll away from the station.

The journey was simply amazing. Many government officials were in that train and it stopped at many stations to drop off and pick up passengers on the way.

When I arrived at Enugu train station late in the evening, I hailed a taxi.

“Can you take me to GTC?” I asked the driver.

“What is going on in that college?” he asked. “I’ve taken so many young people there this evening.”

“The college is hosting us for their entrance examination,” I said.

He drove to the school campus, and the gatekeeper opened the gate after asking the driver a few questions.

I reported to the security office for processing. After verifying the information on my invitation letter, a man escorted me to a dormitory holding fifteen candidates, bringing the total number of candidates in the dormitory to sixteen. There were dormitories everywhere on the campus, and sixteen candidates occupied each one. The auditorium held more candidates than the dormitories. Candidates were boys who had come from all cities and towns in the Eastern Region of Nigeria—all vying for two hundred positions for the final interview. One of the candidates, who had been occupying the dormitory before my arrival, showed me around.

I changed my clothes, took my bath, and joined other candidates who had arrived by train in the dining hall, where the school treated us to a delicious meal.

On Monday, the day of the examination, the campus maintenance people converted the dining hall to a huge classroom after breakfast. At about nine o’clock, the principal and ten other white men guided the candidates to their seats and gave instructions about the rules as well as the structure of the examination. The examination comprised of written, oral, and practical tests. Shortly after going over the instructions, they passed out the question papers, and we had one hour to complete the answers followed by oral questions and answers. Some of the questions were about current events, and some were to tell a story about a celebration or other events.

On Tuesday, the process continued with practical tests with ten stations where they had pieces of wood and other materials and pictures of finished, or assembled, objects on the table. We had one minute to replicate an object from those pieces of wood and other materials. Out of the five objects we were required to

reproduce, I can't remember if I finished any one of them completely before time ran out, and I heard a mean-looking man say in a very cold and calculated voice, "Time is up; you can go. Next."

I left the room with tears running down my face; it was obvious I had not done well at all.

Surprisingly, when I joined the other candidates who had gone through the exercise, everybody was sobbing and wiping away their tears.

"I'm in good company," I thought.

"How many did you complete?" a few kids asked me.

"I don't think I completed any of them right," I answered.

"Yeah, me too," other people echoed.

We stayed separated until the last candidate came out of the room. The principal came out and stood emotionless in front of the sobbing candidates.

"This is the end of the day's exercise. You will be informed in a letter if you have been chosen to come back for the final examination," he announced. "Good luck and safe journey."

We returned to our respective dormitories.

"I don't think anybody did well in that practical test," one person said.

"Let's go and play soccer in the field," another person said.

Nobody was in the mood for any kind of fun, so nobody obliged. Within one hour, workers restored the dining hall to its original formation. The campus manager rang the bell in front of the dining hall, and we went in the hall and ate our dinner. I worried about what I would tell Mr. and Mrs. Okocha when I returned home.

On Wednesday morning, I followed other candidates and bought my ticket at the train station.

Inside the train, I was pretty much detached from and oblivious to what was going on inside and outside the train. The ride did not feel as cool as it had on my way to Enugu. The train arrived at Ovim train station at 2:30 p.m., and Mathew was on the platform waiting for me. I disembarked the train subdued and immobile.

"Ikebie, what is wrong?" he asked.

"Everything is wrong. I wish I did not go for that exam."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I failed the exam."

"You don't know that. You always feel pitiful after exams," he said.

"Yes, but this is different."

We walked to the parking lot and got into the car; he started the engine. Then we sat there for a few minutes before we took off.

"Make sure you don't look like that when we get home," he said.

"Don't worry. I will be dead by the time we get home," I replied.

He stopped at Isukwuato Motor Park. "Come on, they have hot and steaming maimai in this park. Get some," he said.

"I don't want any," I said.

"You're right; you will be dead by the time we get home. Lydia is not home to offer you any food, so get some of this," he insisted.

"I said no! Leave me alone," I snapped.

Now we arrived at the headmaster's residence, and he was on the verandah, reading a newspaper.

"Good afternoon, sir," I greeted him.

"Ikebie, how did it go?" he asked.

"Terrible, I am not sure I did well," I said.

Then Mrs. Okocha joined us on the verandah and took her seat by her husband.

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“What made it terrible?” he asked.

“I don’t think I did well.”

“Tell us about the whole process,” Mrs. Okocha demanded.

“We did written and oral examination on Monday,” I said.

“Did you answer all the questions on the written part?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said

“Did you have enough time to go over your answers?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am I did.”

“In the oral part, how many questions did they ask you?”

“They asked us about ten questions.”

“Did you answer all the questions?”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Give me one example of the questions they asked.”

“The interviewer wanted to know my two most favorite subjects.”

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I told him Mathematics and physics are my favorites.”

“What other questions did he ask?” She asked.

“He asked me what I thought would happen if I kicked a ball at the wall and why.”

“And?” the headmaster asked.

“I told him that the ball will bounce back with the equivalent force I kicked it because for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

“Go on to the practical tests,” she said.

“On Tuesday we did practical tests. They gave me pieces of wood and other materials to construct an object in a picture. I had only one minute to replicate each of the five objects on the picture.”

“Like a blueprint,” Mr. Okocha said, looking at his wife.

“How many did you finish?”

“I don’t think I finished any of them,” I said.

“How about the other candidates?” she asked.

“Everybody sobbed after the tests.”

“Don’t worry anymore,” she said.

“I think you did well,” Mr. Okocha added. “Go home and get some rest.”

A few weeks later, Uncle Okereke Chima went to court; he was the secretary of the local council, so he helped the court clerk to decide cases. On his way home, Mr. Okocha had given him an official envelope to give me and asked him to tell me to see him right away. The envelope was not sealed and I knew what it was all about.

“Congratulations, you have been selected to attend the final examination on the date specified. I look forward to seeing you again,” the letter read.

On the following day, I went straight to Mr. Okocha’s residence. The front door was open, and Mathew was standing in the backyard. I raised the letter and waved it at him. “Where is the headmaster?” I asked

“He will be right back. He and Mrs. Okocha take a walk to the courtyard and back every day after school,” he said.

“I know that,” I said, just to remind him I wasn’t a stranger in the house. We kicked a ball back and forth in the backyard until Mr. and Mrs. Okocha came back through the gate at the backyard.

“Ikebie, you got my message,” the headmaster said.

“Yes, I did, sir,” I replied.

“Congratulations,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“Come here on the Friday before the final exam; we will repeat what we did the first time.”

“I will, sir,” I said and left.

On the Friday before the exam, I went to Mr. Okocha’s residence and spent the night. On Saturday, he gave me enough money for the round trip, and Mathew took me to the train station, where I boarded the train to Enugu.

On Monday, there were much fewer candidates than before, and we had a written exam in English language, mathematics, and physics.

The exam lasted for four hours with a few minutes break in between. I spent a day at the school campus. The school had a lovely soccer field, so we played soccer on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday, I boarded the train, and Mathew was waiting for me at Ovim train station. I did not feel as bad as I had felt after the first exam when I disembarked the train.

“You look happy,” Mathew commented.

“I don’t feel bad,” I said.

When we arrived home, Mr. and Mrs. Okocha were walking back from the courthouse. So we stopped and picked them up.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” I said.

“Ikebie, how did you do?” Mrs. Okocha asked.

“I don’t think I did badly this time.”

“Did you answer all the questions for each paper?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, and I reviewed my answers three times on each occasion.”

“You know that if we get a letter from the school, you are in,” Mr. Okocha said.

“I am aware of that, sir.”



Nigeria had just gained independence, and the federal government established a free, universal education system. (Primary education was not free until then, hence divisional education authorities were recruiting candidates with a minimum qualification of standard six to teach in the new system). I had received my assignment to teach at Okpufu Universal Primary School—under Mr. Okorie Gbaningo.

When school started, we registered 144 pupils—boys and girls. All free, universal primary schools in the nation started from elementary one, therefore, every teacher taught elementary one.

I waited for a long time without getting any mail from GTC. I consoled myself with the thought that I was a teacher and could start making plans for the future—like going to the teacher-training college...or secondary high school, for that matter, if I saved enough money. All sorts of thoughts came to mind, and one thing was clear: I was not going to be a jewelry trader like my brother. I enjoyed teaching; I remembered my first year in elementary school and how Miss Okorie took care of me so I treated my pupils the same.

One Friday evening, I was returning from Ozuitem Divisional Education Office—teachers went there to get their pay every month and I had stopped by Uncle Okereke’s house with the intention of spending the night but Mama Ugo told me that Uncle Okereke had gone to our house to give me a letter from Mr. Okocha.

I jumped up. “Maa, I will see you tomorrow at the church,” I said and took off running.

I was flying like a bird; the pain I had been feeling in my legs dissipated immediately. I met Uncle

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Okereke on his way back home.

“I stopped by your house to spend the night, and Mama Ugo told me that you went to give me a letter from Mr. Okocha,” I said.

“That is correct. The letter is from the Ministry of Education in Enugu,” he said.

“Thank you. I will see you at the church tomorrow,” I said and took off running again.

I got home and dad gave me the envelope. I ripped it open immediately.

“Congratulations,” the letter said. “You have been selected to attend this historic institution beginning on the above date. The school is free, and provides students pocket money on a weekly basis. Plan to arrive at the school campus no later than two days before the beginning of the school term.”

Tears of joy rolled down my eyes; nobody from my town had ever gained admission to GTC before. When my excitement subsided, I told mom and dad. “I want you to go to the central school and see your headmaster; let’s make sure the letter is real,” dad said. Probably he had a good reason to be skeptical.

On Sunday after church service, I went to see Mr. and Mrs. Okocha.

They were relaxing and listening to the radio when I knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Mrs. Okocha said.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“You got the good news,” Mr. Okocha said.

“Yes, sir, I did. I don’t know how to thank you and Mrs. Okocha,” I said.

“Ikebie, sit down,” he said. “Do you remember the day we had a visitor from America, and he performed a demonstration in the classroom, and you jumped up excited? And every time I asked the class to write, an essay on what you wanted to be when you grew up—every single time—you wrote about being an electrical engineer? I am proud to be your teacher, and Mrs. Okocha is even prouder. You can thank us by being the kind of student at GTC that you were here in your primary school and going on to become an electrical engineer.

“Lydia cooked some rice; go to the kitchen and get some. I hope to see you before you leave for GTC. Congratulations again,” he concluded.

I began to cry; I could not hold it in as tears flowed down my cheeks like water.

When I got home, mom was finishing dinner, so I went in the kitchen to help her.

“Go—you are a teacher now; you don’t have to set up the plates anymore,” she said.

Mom and I cried when I told her and dad what Mr. Okocha had said.

“How can such a good deed make you cry like that?” dad asked. “You should be happy and thankful to God.”

From that day until the end of the school year, I was relaxed. I went to school every day, happy and hopeful. I did my best to encourage the kids to enjoy coming to school and to learn with enthusiasm. At the end of the school year, I resigned my teaching position. Before I left home for GTC, I spent a week with Uncle Okereke and Mama Ugo, and two days at Mr. and Mrs. Okocha’s residence with their family.