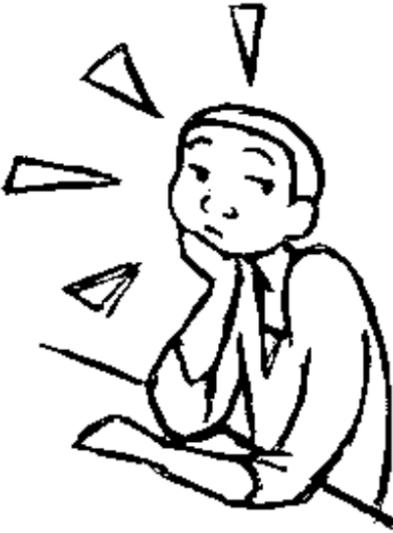


Nicholas' First NATIVITY

By

Agnes Kay-E



Nicholas Gharu gloomily watched the heavy rain slush the window. The next day, he watched other children dash out of their houses to play in the rain. The day after the next day, he hid his eyes behind tinted glasses and sat at the farthest corner

of his bed to avoid the glaring sun, which had turned its beam on everything in the room. The muslin curtain engaged with the sun by waving its too warm air into the room.

The next four days of yellow-hot, shimmering, smouldering, smelting heat had left him weary and irritable with an unceasing thirst for water. There were no pools, and a cold bath quickly turned warm. The hotness gave his armpit an awful smell; a smell much like the tree by the side of their house back in

Kent, which fly-tippers made their dump. Each time, he'd take a whiff of his armpit, hoping it was from his imagination and end up with the urge to barf. It could very well be an eyesore for his nose if it had eyes.

Hot, sweaty, bored, and defeated, he resigned to ping-pong-pong the tennis ball against the wall. He'd found it in the pantry and thought it was an odd place to stash it.

'I'll be home soon,' he recalled his father saying the last time he called.

He was not pleased with this change of environment. He moaned the fact that he couldn't confront his father, who was like a horse with blinders focused on his own race. He had all he wanted in Kent why his father couldn't see that baffled him. Nigeria seemed an impressive feat for a holiday trip, something that a father and son did perhaps. Not somewhere to haul someone to, like a bird in a cage swaying to its master's adventures.

His nanny seemed enthusiastic about his new school, almost ecstatic with prepping him. How can people be excited about moving to a new place, he wondered. It reminded him of the Japanese knotweed his nanny spied on

every other day, prodding, poking, tugging, and taking pictures. He had a faint belief that if she didn't agree to travel with them, his dad would have let him stay.

Although their new house was much bigger than the detached house back there, this was by all counts a museum.

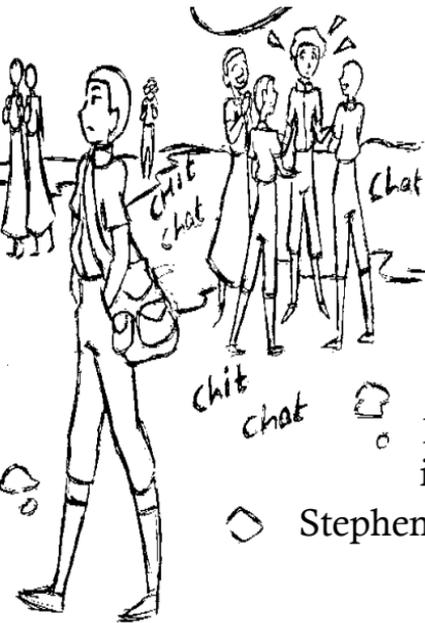
Nicholas grimaced at the dry leaves that stuck to the bottom of his shoes. It was supposed to be dry, right? He thought to himself. A new habit he'd resonated since he arrived in Port Harcourt.

It was his first time at Baptist Primary school. Everyone knew, but he, not because of his

knee-length white socks or his leather satchel. It was his black shoes. Black shoes. The error of it, and he dared walk into the school like it belonged to his father.

This rule-breaker piqued Stephen-the-Bull's interest. He was called

Stephen-the-Bull by his classmates



who didn't want him to discover what they really called him was Stephen-the-Bully. To Stephen, he was keeping them alert; the wordings on the wall were to remind them where they were. His stomach was always hungry and had to be fed. Besides, his classmates had too many sweets and cakes. He had to see a clear path, so one should stand in his narrow point of view, especially girls with long untamed hair, which flew restlessly like the cow's tail.

His father was a soldier and always told him: 'the path to duty required due diligence and alertness'. He still hadn't discovered what due diligence was, but he knew alertness was keeping your eyes wide open even when the sun was at its peak.

Stephen shoved a classmate with dark blue misshaped eyewear out of his way as he hurried to give this rule-departing boy a friendly new welcome and guided him to the back of the class.



The rule-un-observer looked around suspiciously. In his old school, the back seats

were meant for miscreants and trouble seekers but this gangly boy of the same height as himself, in an auspicious afro seemed to command respect therefore couldn't be a troubler. He never liked the front rows anyway; someone always threw things at his head - once it was an apple with a maggot in it. He shuddered at the memory and thanked the afro-carrying honour-commandeer.

The afro-carrying, respect-hijacking pupil stopped by a desk, pulled out a yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket.

"So, what is your name?" The afro-carrying boy asked.

"Nicholas," the error-exhibitor said with a grimace.

"Stephen," the afro-carrying young dude retorted striking his chest. "That bag looks fancy."

"It's a satchel," Nicholas retorted pointedly.

Stephen pulled out the yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped



his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket and nodded. "I'd like to have it."

Nicholas shrugged casually. "Tomorrow."

"That'll be nice," Stephen said with a nod then twisted his mouth, tapped the locker behind Nicholas and gestured.

Nicholas' brow furrowed briefly. He could have sworn that there'd been no vacant seat a few seconds ago. But there was one now. Stephen had made that clear by tapping on it. Just then there was an uproar of groaning desks as the students got up and their form teacher rushed in.

2.

“Good morning class.” The woman said as she swatted an insect.

“Good morning Teacher. We're happy to see you. God, bless you!”

That's new, Nicholas thought. He had been indeed brought to the backwaters of the world.



“I've just learned that we'd be having a new member. His name is Nicholas Gharu. Try to make him comfortable.” She lowered her head and muttered at the paper that was a few inches from her face. Sighing she raised her head, tilted it and frowned. “Where's Esin?”

Esin got up slowly, averting his eyes from Stephen.

“Why are you not at your desk?” The teacher grimly asked.

Esin slanted his head at Stephen, his eyes accusing.

“Go to your desk now?” Pointing at Nicholas, she asked. “Who are you?” Not waiting for his reply, she tilted her head to her

desk and picked two hand fans. Squinting, she took a fighting stance with arms stretched a little away from her and waited. A few seconds passed before she struck them together.

The class applauded. They knew that insects' waltzed into the room to their extinction.



The form teacher raised a brow at the odd person in her class. She looked down at his bright white socks and tried not to smile on seeing his black shoes.

“I’m Nicholas Gharu,” Nicholas retorted coyly.

“I see,” The Teacher crossed her arms, half-sat on her desk and asked, “did I give you permission to join my class?”

“But I?... I”

“Come here!” She ordered, twisting her mouth, the way you do when something is stuck on your teeth, and you want to rinse it off with your tongue.

Nicholas walked up to her just as Esin returned to his desk. Esin, who had deftly stepped over Stephen's foot proudly smiled to himself until he pureed a mango with his buttocks.

The boys at the back giggled.

“What was that?” The form teacher asked looking over Nicholas to the rest of the class.

Nicholas sighed and started. “Ma'am, if you don't mind?”

The entire class gasped in horror.

“Did you just speak without being spoken to?” the Teacher asked so quietly one would think she was frightened.

He chuckled in confusion.

The entire class leaned back in awe.

“Go and kneel down!” the Teacher snarled; her voice was shaky.

“What?” Nicholas sniggered, blinking in surprise.

The Teacher's eyes bulged and began to look like they were turning inwards. She stepped back in disbelief then recollected herself, took him by the ear to the corner of the class. “Ignorance is no excuse.” She muttered, pointing to the floor. “Stand there! Face the class!”

Suddenly exhausted, she returned to her desk and sat down, rubbing her forehead.

“Class!” she called.

“Yes, Teacher!” The class chorused as they got up.

“Sit down, sit down,” she said, still rubbing her forehead. “It's our turn to do a Christmas play... drama.”

The class fell silent, eagerly peering at her.

“We're in charge of the ‘Manger Roll Call’.”

The class became an upsy-turvy of babbling sounds. It was a known fact among the pupils that it was bad luck to do that drama. The class would be lucky to be made fun of for just a term. A few of them quickly shouted what they wanted to be in the play.

“Quiet!” She squeaked, squinting at them. When the noise died down, she continued. “Stephen, there's no wolf in the Christmas play.” She raised her forefinger before he could say anything else. “Gertrude, there'll be no snakes either or the like.”

Sighing, she got up after a salvage beneath her desk and laid a cardboard box on the desk. “You know what a ballot box is?”

“What politicians use to deceive us,” one of the pupils in the back mumbled.

“Emodi, get up and fix your shirt.”

The boy who had spoken reluctantly got up



to tuck his shirt in.

“Well done, you’re wrong,” She sighed then waited until Emodi sat down before asking. “Class, what *is* a ballot box?”

Esin was about to put his hand up, but hesitated.

“So, nobody in my class knows what a ballot box is. Very good. I see I’ve been wasting my time. On Monday, you’re going to hand in an essay. In that essay, you’ll tell me the history of the ballot box as well as its

advantages. Then you'll draw one for Mrs Ruth D.

Some members of the class groaned.

"Today is Friday," Stephen complained.

"Isn't that lovely?" The Teacher smiled sarcastically and clasped her hands in front of her.

"Ohooo, but tomorrow is Saturday. It's the day we clean, cook, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." Gertrude's lookalike said, flailing her fingers.

"Eheheh! Okay, don't bring your work on Monday, eh?" The Teacher retorted mockingly and slanted her head to the door. "New boy, come and take a paper from this box and go to your desk."

"Yes, Teacher," Nicholas sighed. He was willing to let this teacher's mean act slide because he didn't want to give his father an excuse for missing his birthday. It's wasn't likely he'd do anything but dislike her.

The Teacher picked a pen and began to scribble on a piece of paper she'd squashed earlier. "New boy," she called not lifting her head.

Nicholas picked folded slip of paper and slowly turned around.

“You've got a lot to learn,” the Teacher sighed dramatically and then asked. “What does your paper say?”

“Joseph,” Nicholas muttered, his brow raised, waiting. He frowned because she didn't notice – she was peering at the pile on her desk. He frowned, waiting. He heard moaning and turned to find the sound to see Stephen gesturing. He couldn't see what Stephen-the-Bull was fighting until Stephen tapped on the seat and mouthed ‘come’.

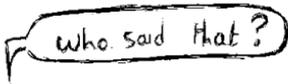


Soon after the first row of pupils hopeful pupils picked theirs, retorted their characters and returned to their desks crest fallen.

Esin raised his hand and murmured. “Excuse me, Ma!”

“Esin, come and get yours before you go.”

Esin unwillingly walked to the Teacher's desk, opened it and sighed with relief.



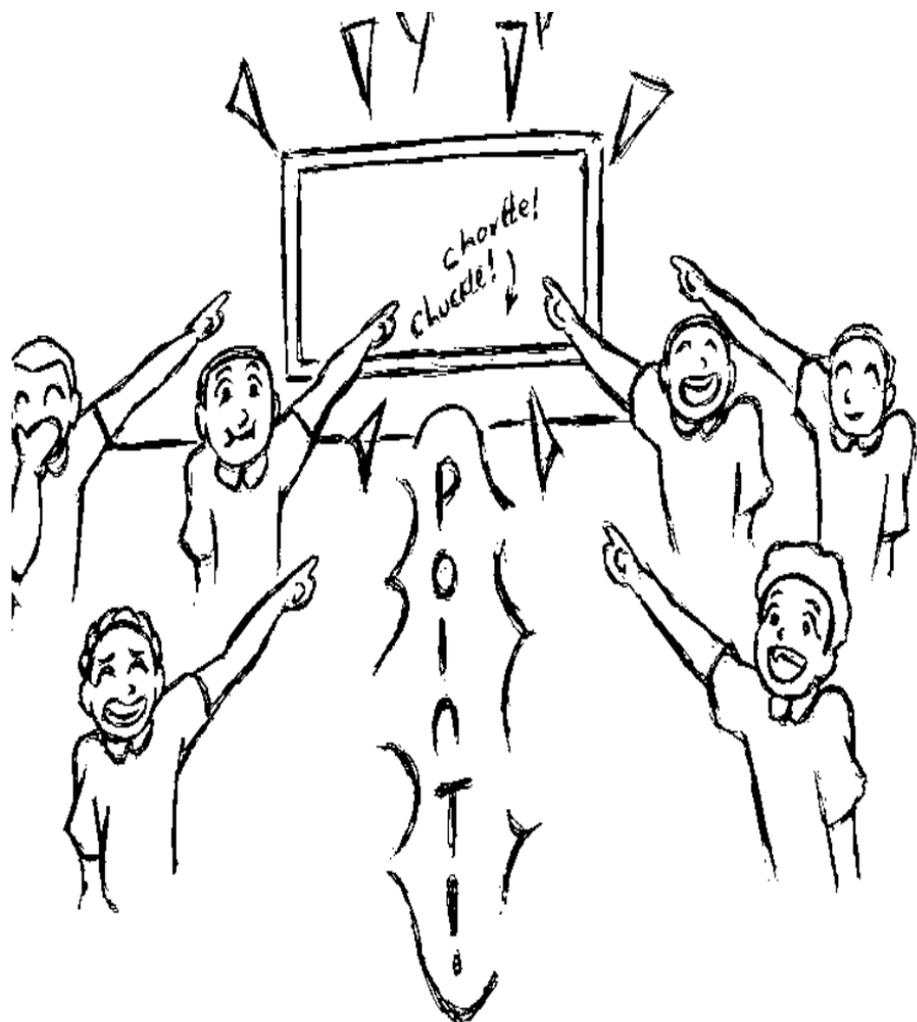
“What does it say?”



“Shepherd,” Esin replied, trying to contain his excitement.

“Who dash you?” Someone piped.

The Teacher looked around furtively. “Who said that?”



The whole class pointed to the window at the same time.



As the rest of the class came forward, the voice from outside the window continued to shout the same words. The Teacher picked her duster and held her hands behind her. She made the last pupil wait, then walked to the window.

“What does your paper say?” she asked the pupil.



“Shepherd,” the last pupil said excitedly and hurried to his desk while the others turned to the window.

The pupil raised his head and shouted, “Who dash y...!” but was interrupted by his collision with the Teacher’s duster.

The whole class burst into laughter - it was going to take a week to wash off.

“Some of you have not

returned your consent form. Make sure you come with it on Monday. New boy, come and take yours,” the Teacher bellowed over the slamming of lockers and loud voices.

Nicholas didn't hear his form teacher. He was captivated by the little brown insects that formed a line along the cracked wall. He could imagine the lone one barking orders at the rest. His fascination was broken by someone tapping him.

Distracted, he looked up. “Yes, Ma'am?”

“May I lock up the classroom now?” the Teacher asked, pouting and frowning and twirling a set of keys.

“Yes Ma'am, sorry Ma'am,” Nicholas murmured with a nod, slung his bag, and hurried out of the class to where Stephen was waiting for him.

“Why does she call me 'new boy'?” Nicholas asked when he caught up with Stephen.

“You're new, are you not?” Stephen asked, bemusedly.

Nicholas shrugged.

“But I told her, she saw my...” Nicholas scratched his head.

“Keep wearing those shoes, and you'll be a

popular boy around here,” Stephen retorted and made furtive glances at a group of pupils. “Esin is the best student in this school. I am ‘the class bully’ our form teacher said but I don't believe her. However, I agree with her that you're the new boy. What's the big deal anyway? No one has ever given you a name-tag?” Stephen asked and went to pull a girl's hair.

“Why do you do that?” Nicholas asked, his eyes disapproving.

“To keep them responsible,” Stephen said and pulled Emodi's trouser down.

Nicholas scoffed, wrinkled his nose, then shook his head.

“See, Emodi's not wearing a bel. He is supposed to. You're wearing black shoes when you're supposed to be wearing brown ones.

“So, why didn't you take my shoes off? Or do something of that sort.”

“What's the point of taking your shoes off? Besides,” Stephen paused and grimaced, then pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket. “I'm getting a bag, satchel. Bring it tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure,” Nicholas sighed and left Stephen to his antics, brooding.

4.

Nicholas didn't want any name tags. His father wouldn't be pleased, not that he cared that much. All his father cared about was the model he was dating - whatever that was, his business, his colleagues and nothing else. He hoped his father wouldn't miss his birthday as he had given his word. As his mind for a boy his age, and as his mind wandered, the gravels by his feet hit the gate.



Someone hissed and groaned.
"Quit doing that!"

It took a while for him to realise it was not from his thoughts. He turned to the sound and raised a questioning brow.

She gestured, at the stoned by the gate and at the cracked flowerpot.

"Sorry?"



She slunk back into her book, shaking her head.

Irritated, he followed her movement. "What did I do this time?"

Just then a strong voice called. "Nicholas."

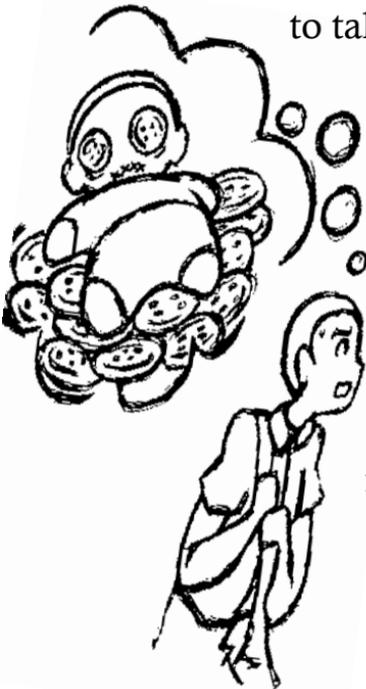


Nicholas turned to the voice. It came from a bony and squinty-eyed man who looked a lot like his mother. He had a pockmark that travelled from the side of his face down the length of his right arm. He also walked with a limp, at least it looked like a limp.



"I'm Tekena. Your father asked me to take you home."

A part of Nicholas was filled with excitement; the other part was hesitant because he'd been expressly warned to leave with no one else but



the driver. To ensure this, his nanny made him watch *Coraline* three times. Each time he said something to a stranger, he could see his eyes being replaced by buttons but not this time.

“I don't know you,” Nicholas said, twisting his mouth to the right side of his face. The man in front of him was a weird and interesting fellow. Because he had an odd resemblance to his mother, and also limp-walked.

“I don't know you either, but I'm here to do my job. You know what your father is like,” The Tekena-man said with an exaggerated shrug.

Nicholas was inclined to agree but turned to the rapid footsteps behind him. The Tekena-man sneakily looked around and made to grab him, but Nicholas had noticed and stepped back, only stopping when the back of his foot struck the already cracked flowerpot.

It crumbled noisily.

The Headmistress peered out of the window above them and shouted.

“Who did that?”

“Nicholas,” another voice



called.

Startled, that he'd been caught, he bent down in an attempt to pick the pieces.

“You're supposed to head to the gate, not in the opposite direction.” It was the teacher that had guided him to his new class. The teacher turned to the girl with a desolate frown. “Come, my dear.”

Nicholas looked back to the Tekena-man, but he was no longer there.

Nicholas wondered how the Tekena-man had gotten in, but not long after he knew how: the gateman was snoring. He eventually let himself out when his driver arrived. He



wanted to ask the driver who the Tekena-man was and decided to keep it to himself until his father returned. It was after all only a few days away.

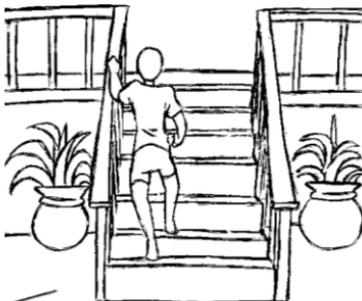


The day his father was supposed to return had come, Nicholas woke up early,



tidied his room, finished his homework then his father called to tell them that he'd arrived in Port Harcourt, but he'll be at the office for a few hours. Nicholas was so relieved that he let tears drop down

his cheek. He was so glad that they'd get to have dinner together that he cleaned his father's room.



Just before dinner, he remembered the consent form and ran



upstairs to get it. Up there, he saw blinking light and went to the window. There, he saw the new maid running towards a car with blinking light. She hugged a man who turned out to be the Tekena-man. Nicholas hid hoping the Tekena-man had not seen him.



"Nicholas, dinner is ready," his nanny called from the other side of his door.

Nicholas crawled away from the window and slid out of the room so swift he bumped into his nanny.

"What is it?" his nanny asked, in her very quiet voice.

"Is my daddy back?" Nicholas asked at the same time nodding to her question.

She shook her head.

He tried to put up a brave face by wrinkling his nose to keep the tears away, but she pulled him into the crook of



her arms, where he stayed to cry until he was calm.

“Would you like me to read you a bedtime story?”

“Wh-at?”

Nicholas stammered, retreated, and wiped his face quickly. “I’m ten.”



face

“So?”

“That’s baby stuff!” He snapped and quietly added.

“I’m going to the dining room.”



“Nicholas, wait!” His nanny called; her voice as gentle as a falling feather.

He stopped but didn’t turn around.

“Would you like to read one to me instead?”

Nicholas frowned, turned around and squinted his doubt at her.

She looks keen, he thought and asked a little too eagerly. “Which one?”

“Anyone will do.”

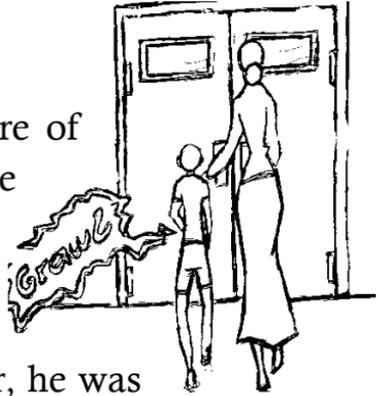
His stomach rumbled. He twisted his mouth and held his stomach. “After



dinner?"

"Of course."

Nicholas nodded, not sure of what she was up to, but he couldn't wait to listen to his favourite bedtime story even though he would be the one reading it. However, he was



ten he could at least show disinterest.



Seeing his father's place setting on the table, he decided to wait a little longer until his head bopped from drowsiness and he could no longer resist the urge to rest his head on the table. It was a

little after midnight that the nanny came downstairs to find his head resting on the table. She grimaced as she lifted him unto her shoulder and winced.

A few minutes later, she laid him on his bed and was about he sneezed his back to

to leave when and turned her.



“Bless you,” she murmured, lingered for a while and then turned the light off.

“I love you, Daddy,” he retorted.

