

29,
Single
& Nigerian

NAIJASINGLEGIRL

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DEDICATION



For my mom and dad

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PROLOGUE



I was seated at Casabella, a highbrow restaurant in Calabar, with Nkechi, Amanda and Bibi. The trio had imposed a birthday dinner on me. It was my 27th birthday.

'I'm sorry I could not get you the cake I promised,' Bibi said to me. I had a sour expression on my face as I drank from the second glass of red wine I was having that evening. Earlier in the day, when Bibi came to drag me out of my house, I told her birthdays were pointless. Birthdays in an uneventful life only got a person closer to their death and death was certainly nothing to celebrate, cake or not. She told me to assume it was our usual all girls outing we usually had at the end of every semester.

'I like this place,' Nkechi said as she stared around.

'Right! But someone needs to tell the couple seated beside us to take it easy with the excessive public display of affection, it is getting irritating,' I said.

'I thought I was the only one that noticed,' Amanda chipped in and laughed. 'But Edikan I know you are just jealous of them.'

'I am not,' I said defensively.

'Let me get my phone so we can take photos,' Bibi said. 'It's quite unfortunate we won't have the time to sit like this in next eleven months. No thanks to NYSC.'

She stood up and walked confidently to the left wing of the restaurant where her phone was charging. There was a distinctive appeal in her gait despite the shaky red high heels she wore. With each step, her butt cheeks seemed to toggle to the tune of Tuface's *Ibe Neme* blaring from the in-house stereo. Her tight yellow dress made her womanliness more pronounced and a few heads belonging to potbellied owners ogled lust-

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fully. Little wonder her nickname in class was Kim K. I couldn't help admiring my best friend. We had a lot in common except in physical appearance. She was the epitome of feminine African-ness in its pristine definition. She was of average height, had a large bust, narrow waist and wide hips. Exactly what my mother wished for me, not minding if mine came with a thick waistline. In my hometown at Ikot Ansa, being called fat is a compliment. To my mother, 'fat' is a synonym for words like 'healthy' and 'robust'. It was her primary determinant of whose kids lived better among her friends.

I was quiet as I waited for Bibi's return. Sometimes, I felt fidgety in the company of Nkechi and Amanda. They were Bibi's friends and the relationship I had with them was 'friendship by association'.

Bibi returned ten minutes later with one of the waitresses. She handed her phone to her and asked that she take us a group photo.

'The picture looks nice but could have been better if there was a guy,' Bibi said to no one in particular as soon as the waitress left. 'What is missing on this special day is the boyfriend Edikan has never had.'

CHAPTER 1



The vehicle came to an abrupt halt, snapping me out of my reverie. The bus driver alighted and, walking round to the back of the bus lifted a sack of maize out of the luggage compartment. Then he asked us to excuse him for ten minutes.

‘Sorry to disturb you. Where exactly are we?’ the passenger seated beside me asked me. He would later introduce himself as Etim. He spoke with a foreign accent that was neither British nor American. We were three hours into the journey to Umunya and I had not noticed him until now. He was dressed in an African fabric shirt and jeans, complemented by a hippy face cap, and the bulky headset which hung around his neck completed the look. His shoulders towered above my neck and I estimated he would be at least six feet tall.

‘You should direct your question at some other passenger. This is my first time in Anambra,’ I said as I wiped my tired eyes.

His face lit up. ‘Don’t tell me you are heading to camp too!’ he said eagerly. I flashed an affirmative smile and nodded my head slightly.

‘It’s good to know I have a travelling companion and maybe a camp companion,’ he added.

‘Your luck.’

My reply was short, squeezed out through my knotted nerves. The feeling was not mutual. I preferred my own company whenever I travelled but since I didn’t want to come across as discourteous, I encouraged the conversation, a move I would later regret.

‘Are you also a graduate of UNICAL?’ I asked.

‘No. I like different. No offence, but universities in Nigeria are trash. I did my bachelor’s at Manchester in the UK, where I studied law.’

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I detected arrogance in his voice. Lawyers were widely known for their egoistical personalities but there was something extra haughty about this one that irritated me. Not knowing how to respond, I murmured a bland, 'Okay.'

'So tell me, what did you study in school?' he asked.

'Risk financing.'

'That's strange.'

'Apparently, you are not the only one who likes different.' My tone was accusatory and I secretly hoped he got the message.

'I thought such courses were foreign to Universities in Nigeria. I was in UNICAL last week and considering the deplorable state of the school, I doubt it has the facilities to run a course like risk financing. If it were a private university like AUN at Yola, I'd pass.'

How annoying can a human get, I mused. There was an awkward silence between us.

'Hello? Anybody there?' he asked, waving his fingers across my eyes.

'I'm here.' I said flatly. Then collecting myself, I pulled my hair, a mass of tiny Kanekalon braids, into a ponytail and said, 'I'm all ears.' *Go on and fill me with the details of how much better than me you are.*

'I have never been to the East before. My favourite cities in Nigeria are Abuja and Calabar. I actually wanted to work my service to Abuja but me being me, I was like, fuck it! Anyway, Anambra camp better be worth me or my dad would have to make one powerful phone call,' he said and giggled at his own bon mot.

Oh! Are we going to talk about your senator dad? What is wrong with this guy?

The passengers had begun to complain of the driver's prolonged absence.

'If this happened outside the shores of this country, I would have personally sued the bastard of a driver,' Etim swore, his voice, rising and hardening. 'No regard whatsoever! I wonder why Anambra State does not have an airport so I could have flown in from Calabar and saved myself this shit! He said ten minutes and he's been gone for twenty-seven

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to God knows where. Fucking customer service!

‘Customer service from Chukwu Bu Chukwu Motors ke?’ a man in the next row questioned to general laughter. I produced an obligatory chuckle to mask my embarrassment. Apparently, I was not the only one entertained by Etim.

‘I’m sure he’ll be back soon,’ I assured him. ‘The transport company probably tasked him with the responsibility of delivering the cargo of maize.’

Transport company? Cargo of maize? I repeated those words in my thoughts, surprising myself, because those words were not mine. Ordinarily, I would have said, ‘His bus people must have sent him to drop the corn sack for somebody.’ I hated how he made me choose my words carefully. He obviously intimidated me and I had unconsciously tried to impress him. I decided there and then that it was okay to hate him; God would understand.

The driver returned in thirty minutes, apologising profusely. The rest of the journey was going to be a two-hour drive. Two more hours with a human radio seated beside me. I cringed at the thought.

‘Have you flown before?’ Etim asked.

I nodded. Of course it was a lie. In fact, I had never seen an airplane at close range, but I was afraid if I told him the truth, he would go on to give me a broad history of airplanes in Nigeria. I visualised him saying, ‘Virgin Nigeria as the number one air carrier in Nigeria was born in the early 90’s to the virgin family of Richard Branson under the regime of General Babangida, the then Military Head of State who was...’ The thought of that amused me and I laughed out loud unknowingly.

‘What’s funny?’

‘Nothing,’ I said, regaining my composure.

‘So which is your preferred airline? Aero or Arik?’

‘Neither! I don’t even like history as a subject.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I partied last night and I have less than two hours to make up for

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my lack of sleep.’

‘Oh . . . okay.’ He pulled out an MP3 player from his pocket and slowly placed the headphones on his head.

I shut my eyelids in relief and pretended to sleep. The rest of the journey was smooth.

* * *

‘Any *Ajumaya* in this bus? Come down for here oh. Next stop is Onitsha,’ The driver said, parking by a statue of a man in an NYSC uniform. I faked a yawn and alighted with Etim. There were three more prospective corps members in our vehicle, bringing the total number of passengers that alighted at Umunya to five.

‘Finally!’ Etim exclaimed, stretching his arms. I saw a signpost of the address on my call-up letter but no building in sight. Fortunately, a vehicle heading directly to the camp gave five of us a lift. When we arrived at the gate, Etim pulled me aside and whispered, ‘You should get my number. My name is Etim by the way.’

‘Edikan,’ I said, holding my phone out to him nonchalantly. He dialled his number and handed the phone to me. I saved his number as Etim Manchester. *What stopped you from getting mine, you proud thing*, I cursed silently as we parted ways. A group of soldiers barricaded the black rusty gate that signalled the entrance to the school. Another phase of my life was right in front of me.

* * *

A gaping gully sporting a clay-red toothless grin welcomed me to Union Secondary School, Umunya. The soil was sticky- red to reddish brown, loamy sand often referred to as red earth or acid sand due to its low fertility. Umunya smelt of rain, and although I liked the smell of rain, I hated the mess the muddy ground made of my lemon coloured

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suitcase. My grey sneakers had suffered a similar fate, and pulling my large suitcase with the extra two inches the clay had added to my heels was an uphill task. At least I was lucky to have the option of pulling my suitcase. Others were ordered by the no-nonsense camp commandant to carry their muddy suitcases on their head, a punishment for late arrival to camp. My excuse had been acute migraine.

‘Ajebo, is it not common headache you are calling migraine?’ one of the soldiers had asked me. He looked me in the eye and said he never forgot a face. I took his words as a threat. Nigerian men in military uniform scared me and I was not ready to get in any soldier’s bad books for the next twenty days.

The camp was already buzzing with people scrambling left, right and centre to complete their registration. Queues were formed in different areas of the camp. Some corps members were already dressed in their all white attire, and a small group had already commenced marching practice in the field. I glanced at my wristwatch. It was only twenty minutes past two. I wondered if some of them had arrived camp in the night to have completed their registration so quickly. A slight pang of envy hit me.

‘Join the registration queue for ladies on the left. You will all be allotted a hostel soon,’ one of the NYSC officials instructed as she handed me a number tag with 998 written boldly.

The men had a separate queue at the far end. I could recognise Etim from the outline of his cap. No one else seemed familiar. I was secretly hoping to bump into one or two of my school mates. It took two hours of waiting on the queue before an official screamed, ‘Number 998!’

‘Right here,’ I answered at the top of my voice as I stepped forward to a table which was littered with sheets of paper.

‘Quick tip if you want to stay out of trouble,’ the female official said to me, ‘This is a highly regimented zone. For the time being, ignore the secondary school structure and see it as a military base. The sole purpose of your twenty-one days here is to discipline you to become a better

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citizen of this nation. You don't respond with 'right here' when you are called. That is a tad insulting. 'Present sir' or 'present ma' is the appropriate response. I hope you take your corrections.'

'I'm sorry ma,' I apologised.

She handed me a form and instructed me to fill in my bio data quickly. The process took me five minutes. When I gave it back, the official glanced through and stared at me suspiciously.

'Any problem ma?' I asked in a squeaky voice.

'Do you have a voter's card?'

'I didn't come with it.'

'International passport?'

'I don't have one.'

'What of your WAEC certificate?'

'I was told I won't be needing it here.' My heart had already begun to beat wildly. *What could be wrong?*

'Would it affect my registration?' I asked. A depressed uncertainty hung in my voice.

'What's your date of birth?' she asked, completely ignoring my question.

'July 3, 1985,' I said. 'I filled it in the age column.'

She sized me up for a few seconds before saying, 'I just wanted to be sure.' *You just wanted to be sure? Why would I lie?*

She pointed left. 'Go over here and ask for platoon eight, your platoon officer would hand over your kit to you. Your hostel mistress should be there too.' I thanked her and picked up my suitcase shyly. I could feel her eyes on me as I self-consciously walked away from the table. I was beginning to wish I had worn better clothes rather than the leggings and t-shirt. Suddenly, it hit me. The official was particular about seeing a form of identification that contained my date of birth. She wanted to be certain I was not an imposter or she probably asked out of curiosity. This was not the first time it was happening. At 27, I was more or less one of the oldest graduating students in my class. My physique belied my

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twenty-seven years. I stood a little less than five feet, with a petite figure. My only feature that made my twenty-seven years believable to a total stranger was my C-cup sized breasts.

There was another endless queue waiting to get kits. *Good Lord*, I sighed. I was famished. My eyes were heavy with sleep and my heart shuddered at the realisation that it may not get any better for the next three weeks. When I overheard someone say, 'None of the boreholes are flowing!' I exhaled resignedly and collapsed on the grass.

I wondered if Amanda and Bibi were going through a similar phase in their camps. Both were posted to Benue and Lagos State respectively. Nkechi secured an extra semester for failing a departmental course so she had to wait for next year's batch. I fished my phone from my hand-bag and dialled Amanda's number. It was switched off. I dialled Bibi's and got a network error tone. Nkechi picked at the first ring.

'You don't sound too good. Are you okay?' she asked.

'My dear, this NYSC thing is distressing, nerve-racking, exasperating, tiresome. . .'

'Calm down Madam. It can't be that bad.'

'It's worse! You won't understand because you are not here.'

'I don't care Edikan. You don't know how it feels to watch all your friends leave you behind. I will give anything to switch places.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound insensitive,' I said. 'You know I have been moving around with a hangover from last night so the whole thing is taking a toll on me.'

'It's okay,' she sighed. 'Have you heard from Bibi and Amanda?'

'I haven't. That is one of the reasons I am calling.'

'I spoke with Bibi an hour ago. She was all excited and chatty. If I get through to her again, I will definitely let you know.'

'I don't think that will be necessary. My battery is almost flat and I'm going to turn off my phone after this call. Can you believe I haven't caught sight of a bulb here? Talk more of a socket to charge my phone?'

'You'll be fine. Sorry,' Nkechi said and the line went dead. I hissed

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loudly and threw my phone on the grass.

‘Camp is not what you expected, right?’ a voice laden with bonhomie asked. Apparently he had been listening to my conversation unbeknownst to me. I turned to stare at him.

‘I’m Nathan,’ he said, extending his hand. He was sitting on the grass too, inches away from where I placed my suitcase. Beside him was his neatly arranged NYSC kit. I assumed he was one of those that came in the night before.

‘How were you able to get this so fast?’ I asked, my fingers pointing at his kit.

‘Street wise,’ he answered, chuckling softly. ‘I came in about three hours ago. My number was 618 but 450 was not around to answer to his number when he was called so I took his place without the officials knowing.’

‘Lucky you,’ I said, amused at his luck.

He was staring at me, an open unabashed stare. My friends had warned me not to return from camp single. Could this be my Mr Right?

He took out a number tag from his pocket and handed it over to me. ‘Looks like I won’t be having any need for this. They are attending to 614. You should be called in less than ten minutes,’ he said. I thanked him excitedly.

‘Why are you not in your white and white?’ I asked.

‘Because I am not in the mood to join the parade. The longer I delay the better for me. If I have my way, I would keep on wearing plain clothes for the next three days.’ We both laughed.

I was enjoying his company. I had already registered his name in my heart as my first official friend in camp. The announcer called out 618.

‘That’s you madam,’ Nathan beckoned at me. ‘You can buy me a drink when you’re back.’ I flashed a smile as I got up and made my way to the front of the queue.

I was back in a short while, gleaming with smiles and clinging onto a transparent polythene bag that contained my kit.

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‘Corper Shun!’ Nathan hailed me.

I sank into the grass and began pulling out each item one after the other shyly. My face hardened when I saw my oversized uniform.

‘Everything okay?’ he asked.

‘No! NYSC camp is far from what I expected. You know what? Take a look at this.’ I scowled, sliding my oversized uniform and oversized shoes to him. ‘If I had my way, I would sue MTN.’

‘Why? What does MTN have to do with us?’ I liked the way he used ‘us’ rather than ‘you’.

‘Well, the current MTN advertisement on TV makes it look like NYSC is the coolest thing after sliced bread,’ I said, gesturing with my perfectly manicured fingers. People often said my slender fingers were my best features and I always felt the need to flaunt them. ‘One hunky guy who looks like a popular Nollywood actor and his model girlfriend get posted to different states, their bus journeys depict an exciting adventure, they travel past River Benue and River Niger, once each arrives their different community which is a picturesque version of a typical rural community in Nigeria, a group of villagers arrive to celebrate and dance with them. I don’t even want to get started on their well fitted khaki. Not this mama dash me nonsense and Okon big shoes my platoon officer gave me. Talk about expectations and reality.’

‘You are funny oh,’ he said, laughing. ‘So which is your problem? Nobody danced for you when you arrived Onitsha or am I not handsome enough?’

I lowered my eyelids shyly. Was he trying to get me to admit how his macho shoulders, his near perfect smile and those burning dark eyes fascinated me? I felt charmed just sitting with him. *He is taken. Stop admiring!* a tiny voice in my head sneered at me.

‘I think you shouldn’t be so judgmental. We still have twenty more days and I am positive when the last day comes, you wouldn’t want to leave,’ he said.

‘False! You will be disappointed.’

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‘I got an offer with one of the big accounting firms in Abuja so I tried influencing my service to Abuja but it didn’t work out. You can imagine my shock when I found out I was posted to the east. Anyway, I am done mourning my ill luck. I have already decided to make my stay here one of the best eleven months of my life and so please be my guest,’ he said.

Be my guest? Did he mean be my girlfriend? I looked down abashedly again.

I realised we shared a similar experience. In my own case, Lagos State was where I wanted to serve. My father’s friend who worked at NYSC headquarters had told me to pick my preferred location. Initially, I opted for Port Harcourt considering most people that influenced their service to Lagos during the last batch ended up in Osogbo, Ibadan and its environs and I was not ready for that sort of unwelcome surprise. I had never been to Lagos but it was the city of my dreams. Bibi, who made frequent trips to Lagos, convinced me it was a city for hustlers and ultimately, where we could kick-start a successful career considering our field of study. My father’s half-brother, the only relative I had in Lagos, had long relocated to the village, making accommodation my biggest challenge. I was certain I was going to be posted to a secondary school but I could not rely on them for my accommodation. Statistics revealed only fifteen percent of schools had lodges and I was reluctant to press my luck but Bibi had urged me on. Bibi had her family house in Lagos. Her father and mother had been separated for ten years and she was the only reminder of their union. Her father lived in Lagos while her mother was based in Calabar. She told me her room in her father’s house was large enough to accommodate both of us so I shoved my fears aside and gave my father’s friend the go-ahead to influence my NYSC posting.

Life after school suddenly seemed promising. A lifetime of adventure was waiting for me. I was relocating to the city of my dreams. I was going to camp with my best friend. Accommodation after camp had been settled. We were going to gate crash job interviews together. We would probably work in the same company, become flat mates in a new

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apartment when we started earning money, meet interesting guys, go on vacations and buy expensive cars. It seemed like the world was there for my taking, waiting for me to live, to explore, and to own it. The thought was orgasmic. Just like Nathan, reality set in when I picked up my call-up letter two days before my birthday and found the letters AN inscribed. *AN better be the name of a province in Lagos*, I said, cursing under my breath. I was furious and filled with rage when the director of student affairs interpreted it as ANAMBRA. A furnace lit itself deep inside me. By afternoon that day, despair had overwhelmed my rage. By evening, depression had replaced despair.

Head bowed, eyes uninterested, I fidgeted with my dinner at the compact dining area in my family's living room. The entire house was quiet except for the sound the rusty blades of the ceiling fan made. My father sat a few metres away in the single couch in the living room, a Punch newspaper spread across his thighs. His eyes were focused on the centre page with rapt attention. It appeared he was completely oblivious to the presence of mother and daughter in the dining area. After what seemed like eternity, my mother said, 'Edikan, do you want to go to camp ill that you've refused to eat? Anambra is not bad at all. What if you were posted to some place like Borno?'

The word Borno struck a chord in me. I raised my head slightly.

'By the way, what did your friend say?'

'Which of my friends?' My voice was almost a whisper.

'Bibi. Was she able to get Lagos?'

Get Lagos? She made Lagos sound like some sort of trophy doled out to only students with the best behaviour. Maybe she was right, I did lose my trophy. The thought brought a wry frown to my face.

'She did. If only Daddy allowed the person that worked hers work mine. She also said there is a way out.'

'Out of what? What are you talking about?'

'She said I can use a fake medical report to apply for redeployment. All I have to do is plead asthmatic. I'm looking for a doctor to write a

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fake asthma report for me.' The concern on my mother face instantly faded.

My father stormed into the dining room in anger. 'Edikan, you are very stupid. You are an idiot for even considering that!' My father was a disciplinarian and he scared me whenever he was angry. I once overheard a neighbour say the only things he was an expert at using were his cane and chewing stick.

'You go to church every Sunday yet you underestimate the power of the tongue. Do you know the millions of naira many people would give to rid their body of a disease like asthma?' His voice hardened as he spoke. 'And here you are, ready to sentence yourself to a life of anguish because you want to go to Lagos for your own selfish reasons.'

'But Daddy, I can never have asthma!' I snapped. 'Corpers fake medical reports all the time.'

'How dare you talk when I'm talking? Because the whole world is doing it does not mean you should throw away your morals. Are you one of them? How are you any better than criminals who fake their own death?'

I kept mute. I knew questions like that would be followed by a resounding slap if I dared answer. I was hours from clocking 27 yet my parents still treated me like a kid. Tears had begun to well up in my eyes. I was determined not to let them flow, not with my kid brother eavesdropping by the window blinds. My father made it clear I was not going to redeploy. None of us in my family had ever been bold enough to contest his authority.

CHAPTER 2



There was nothing blue about Blue Hostel, save for the ambience which reminded me of a blue Christmas. It was the last of the seven female hostels in Umunya and the hostel mistress had allocated the lower bunk of one of the double-decker beds to me. The atmosphere smelt of medicine and mud. The faded white paint of the walls which it shared with the camp clinic was in need of refurbishment. Previous corps members had written their names and state code numbers with ink to mark their presence. I visualised my name on the wall.

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The windows of my hostel were permanently sealed and the only source of ventilation was the tiny door. The hostel was cramped with thirty bunk beds with a narrow passage in-between each bunk for navigation. The rumours were true. None of the taps were flowing. To worsen matters, my hostel lacked a bulb so I had to improvise with the flashlight of my phone. My second major concern was where to power up my phone. The thought of going twenty-four hours without my Blackberry device frightened me. While I was with Nathan, the camp whistle had gone off and corps members were instructed to assemble for a briefing. Most of us had made light of the announcement until one of the soldiers appeared with a whip and chased us to the assembly ground. I managed to sneak to my hostel to drop my suitcase before returning to the assembly ground.

All ten platoon officers addressed us before the state coordinator

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took over. His speech was the longest. He was a lean, soft-spoken man in his early fifties who had formerly served as a coordinator in three different states. He said the technicians were currently working on the water taps and promised that the issue of electricity would be rectified within three days. He made mention of vendors waiting to assist corps members in recharging their phones at the camp market but added that we patronised them at our own risk. He concluded his speech by urging corps members to be well behaved, exercise caution in all things and uphold the camp rules. The session ended by 9 p.m. with corps members reciting the National Anthem and the NYSC Anthem.

I strolled casually to the hostel after the briefing. I fished out my phone and muttered some swear words when I noticed my battery was down to its last bar. The rainy season had caused the grass to grow at a fast pace and as a result, tiny insects stung my legs. Water had never felt so priceless. I would have given anything to get a litre to shower. By the entrance to my hostel, a teenage boy stood with a tray of bananas. He saw me coming and gawked, silently inviting me to patronise him. An idea occurred to me.

‘How much is this one?’ I picked up a small bunch and handed it over to him.

‘One hundred naira.’

‘I will give you two hundred and fifty naira but you will help me do something.’

‘Wetin?’ he asked excitedly like a child who was about to be handed his first toys. I pulled out a one thousand naira note from my pocket. ‘Help me buy one bag of sachet water at Mammy Market. A hundred naira bag oh, the one that contains twenty sachets.’

For some irrational reason, I felt I had to explain more to the boy. ‘*I wan make it plenty so I go use am baf.* You know there’s no water in this camp.’ My command of pidgin was embarrassingly poor but I assumed the hawker was conversant with only Igbo and pidgin. ‘Then you will buy me one small bucket. Don’t pay more than three hundred naira for the

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bucket. Oya how much of my change will remain?’

‘Six hundred naira.’

‘If you take your two hundred and fifty naira for your banana, how much will be left?’

He used his fingers to make calculations.

‘Three-fifty naira,’ I said, without giving him a chance to reply. Time was a luxury I didn’t have. He took one swift look at his tray and another at my money as though he was trying to gauge who would lose in the event that he disappeared with my money. I told him to hurry while I kept watch.

He returned in a few minutes. As soon as he handed me my change and the bag of water, I heard someone scream in excitement at the adjacent hostel. What followed next was a group of corps members scampering with buckets to the water taps. I sighed at the hawkker. It was his luck.

The bathroom was dark and the only girl from my room that was bold enough to get in retreated to the hostel with horror stories of stench and dirt. I had to join other girls to shower on the bushy field behind our hostel. The bath outside was cold, coupled with the tell-tale signs of impending rain. All done, I threw on my pyjamas and I was grateful my hostel had no wall mirror. I couldn’t bear to see how distressed I must have looked. My mattress was light and my bunkmate who was thrice my size expressed her dissatisfaction at sleeping on the top bunk by getting down every now and then, shaking the creaky bed vigorously to frustrate me. When I complained, she swore it wasn’t deliberate. Earlier in the evening, she had approached me to switch places with her but I refused. This was her way of punishing me but I was prepared not to budge. When she eventually slept off, she continued the torture with her incessant snoring. I could feel my bed vibrate every time she exhaled. There was no way I was going to sleep. I had a strong urge to update my diary with details of my first day in camp but it was too dark to write. So much I needed to write about; Etim, Nathan, the soldiers, my bunk mate, my

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roommates and camp generally.

The rain had begun to fall. It fell heavily, with no meaning or intention but the fulfilment of its own course, which was to fall without care. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. With every drop came memories, memories of my first day at Ikot Ekpene. It was on a rainy night like this I first arrived Obotidim in Ikot Ekpene.

* * *

I once told my friends I was born with a wooden spoon but that was a lie. In fact, I was born with no spoon at all. I had no memories of my parents returning from work even though rumours from my extended family had it they were wealthy before they gave birth to me. Sometimes, I felt my birth brought ill luck to them. My father used to be a successful cocoa farmer. He had a large cocoa plantation that spread across one hundred acres of land. He held only a first school leaving certificate but he could carry on an intelligent conversation with professors. He owed his vast knowledge to travel, interacting with people from different parts of the world during the frequent foreign trips he made in the course of exporting cocoa. On the other hand, my equally intelligent mother was a trained typist. Her career became obsolete when typewriters were replaced with computers. When she became pregnant with me, my father had insisted she quit work and become a full time housewife so she could take care of my sister and me properly. Four months after, he lost his cocoa plantation to a commercial bank when he was unable to offset a huge loan. I was born into abject poverty three months later.

I returned home from my public primary school one afternoon to find my mother alone in my room, sorting my sister's belongings into a large Ghana-Must-Go bag. It was the last day of the term for me. The tiny room my sister and I shared was pregnant with awkwardness when I stepped in. I began narrating the day's events in an attempt to dilute it but mother wouldn't pay attention to me. Her expressionless face made

me uneasy.

‘But Mummy what is wrong?’ I asked repeatedly.

‘Go outside,’ she said dismissively. ‘Go outside and play with Eno’s dolls. I will send for you when your sister returns from school.’

Play with Eno’s dolls? At 9, I didn’t behave like the average kid. The idea of playing with my neighbour’s toys was still foreign to me, a factor I attributed to the extreme living conditions I grew up in. My father used to say the only toys I knew were my mother’s breasts and my right thumb.

Later that night, my mother came inside the tiny room.

‘Are you girls asleep?’ she asked. I turned and faced her. My sister was wide awake too.

‘I want us to talk,’ she said, her tone brisk as she sunk into the thin mattress that had no bedspread. My breathing was shallow and I stared at her with longing. ‘Aunty Agnes is coming to pick you to her house tomorrow. You will be living with her from now on.’

‘Which of us?’ I asked. She winced, glancing at my sister.

‘Why me? What of my last examination tomorrow? What am I going there for?’ Umoh asked frantically.

‘Your school kept no records of you last term. Same thing may happen this term.’

‘Is it because of the fee drive?’ I asked.

My mother nodded sadly. She turned to my sister, ‘Your father and I have talked this over. There is no money but Aunty Agnes has agreed to train you in her school and give us money for Edikan’s fees if you live with her. Junior has not started school because of money. As the oldest, it is a sacrifice you should be eager to make for your siblings. We don’t want any of you to end up as a dropout,’ she said gently. ‘You will return to us every holiday. Aunty Agnes will take very good care of you. She just needs someone to help with the chores.’

Technically, my mother was about give up one of her daughters to her younger sister. My sister was going to be a house help. A house help

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that schooled. *It's not house help, its house girl*, a tiny voice in my head reminded me. Umoh was sobbing uncontrollably into her pillow. I wanted to hug her and say everything would be fine but those words were hollow, a cliché of empty promises I didn't believe in.

'When is aunty coming?' I asked.

'Tomorrow evening,' my mother said.

'What if I go in Umoh's place?'

I didn't know where that came out from but much to my relief, Umoh's tears miraculously subsided. I was inclined to make it more permanent. My mother looked me in the eyes, a long shrewd look as though she was trying to register if I was serious.

'You're still too young. I doubt if you would be as efficient as your sister there. Besides, your aunty specifically mentioned Umoh, not you,' she said. My sister's facial muscles were beginning to constrict again.

'But it is better if I go in her place. I am already due for common entrance examinations and I could start secondary school in a new place unlike Umoh who would have to abandon her friends and start a new secondary school.'

'You should sleep. We will talk about this with Daddy in the morning,' my mother said. She stood up and flicked the light switch off on her way out.

The room was wrapped up in silence again. My sister had stopped crying and her eyes were closed. I laid face up on the right side of the bed, unable to sleep at 11 p.m. When I turned to face her, she was snoring lightly. Sleep was her antidote out of any emotional situation especially when she cried. She was three years older than I was but way too fragile for her age. Going to live at Ikot Ekpene with Aunty Agnes would wreck her. I considered myself the stronger one, confident that I would easily adapt anywhere.

* * *

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Aunty Agnes was no Jezebel but the one time we spent a two-week holiday in my mother's village with her as our guardian turned out to be the worst two weeks of our lives. She was the most feared and respected female teacher at Umana Community Secondary School, Obotidim, and we were made scapegoats and guinea pigs of a few of her many disciplinary methods during our stay. Aunty Agnes was the only staff member who lived outside the school premises, a decision fostered by her love for farming. Aside the small plot of land in the school farm every teacher was entitled to, she used most of her savings to buy small farm-lands at Obotidim. There she planted cassava, maize, oil palm and vegetables. She hardly bought foodstuff and she had converted one of the bedrooms in her house to a storehouse where she kept the excess. Most of them were stored under her bed as a precautionary measure against household thieves even though she lived with her only son, Ofon. She took the key to the storehouse everywhere she went and her bedroom was out of bounds for everyone with the exception of Ofon whom she doted on. Aunty Agnes originally lived in another village in Ikot Ekpene but relocated to Obotidim after the birth of her son.

Her four-year-old son was the product of a relationship she had with Ikenna, a married man. By the time she found out his marital status, she was already five months gone and the doctor had warned her of the risk of a damaged womb if she attempted an abortion. When Aunty Agnes first confronted Ikenna, he had vehemently denied he was married until she produced the scruffy looking wedding photo one of her friends had given to her as proof. Ikenna was furious. He said she had no right to investigate him since he was responsible for paying her bills. Then he told her to go look for the father of her 'bastard'.

During one of Aunty Agnes' weekly trips to the market, Ikenna's wife had trailed her, shouting, 'Husband snatcher! Witch! Prostitute! Calabar dog! I have heard stories about you people. So after sleeping with a dog, you brought the pregnancy to tie on my innocent husband? A man that knows nothing about you. My God has put my enemies to shame!

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He has put my enemies to shame! My husband doesn't do cheap prostitutes like you. Lose loser losest! Lose loser losest! Lose loser losest!' A small crowd had gathered and joined Ikenna's wife to boo Auntie Agnes.

The day after, Auntie Agnes sent a lengthy letter narrating the entire incident to my mother. My mother wrote back insisting she relocate immediately. She took up residence with us in Calabar after the birth of Ofon to help her get over the betrayal of her runaway lover and of course, the scorn from people who believed Ikenna's wife. She treated her son with disdain. My mother always had to beg her to breastfeed and change Ofon's nappy. Whenever he cried for too long, she stood by his cot telling him all the horrible things his father did to her.

My father once asked my mother, 'Does that innocent baby understand a word of what your psychotic sister is saying?' and both of them erupted into a fit of giggles. One Friday afternoon, Auntie Agnes came home different. She was singing melodiously in the compound.

'Agnes, nsido?' My mother asked. We were all puzzled at her countenance. She went straight to the cot and grabbed her sleeping baby, splattering kisses all over his cherry face. Ofon started crying, uncomfortable with the sudden display of affection from his mother. He was accustomed to having his mother lift him by an arm. Umoh and I stood by the door, bemused; our auntie was hardly ever in a good mood.

'See how frightened your baby is. Even my daughters are curious. Did you run into Ikenna? Has he finally accepted the paternity of his child?' My mother asked with a quizzical expression on her face. Auntie Agnes frowned at the mention of Ikenna.

'Sister, mbok don't mention Ikenna's name here. How I feel now is the Lord's doing.'

'I don't understand.' My mother said.

Justina took me for Friday Revival Hour. It's a programme in her church, Faith and Truth Holiness Ministries. I was so touched by the sermon. I gave my life to Christ when an altar call was made and all I feel now is peace. I forgive my son and every other person that hurt me.' She lifted her right hand and waved in the air.

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‘You forgive your son when he did nothing wrong? How?’ My mother asked.

‘Sister, you won’t understand.’

The following Sunday, Auntie Agnes took her five-month-old son to Faith and Truth Holiness Ministries. The Sunday after, she was sitting in the living room couch, all set for church when I walked past to drop a tumbler.

‘Go and put on your best church clothes, I am taking you to my church today,’ she said to me. Earlier in the week, she told Umoh to accompany her to church but Umoh had feigned illness.

‘Agnes, none of my daughters will follow you to a church we know nothing about. A church that bears a confused name,’ my father said authoritatively from the lobby where he was ironing. ‘Why should faith, love, holiness and truth be in one name? Can’t the church stick to one name?’

‘In-law, there is no love in the name. It is faith, truth and holiness,’ she said.

‘You see, that’s the point. Why should my daughter go to a church that has no love?’ he asked with a trace of humour in his voice.

She got up and stormed out of the living room angrily. From then on, she attended all their weekly programmes without trying to convert any of us.

When she returned to her base, she became one of the founding members of Faith and Truth Holiness Ministries, Obotidim Branch. I was rooting for her salvation but when the much anticipated two weeks holiday in the village presented itself two years after, the hysterical woman my sister and I met was a shadow of her repentant self.

* * *

3 p.m. the following day, a rickety 504 drove in carrying Auntie Agnes. She looked like she had aged twenty years. Her collarbone protruded

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and her hair was completely wrapped in a turban. She had an austere look that feigned holiness. The back seat of the vehicle was stocked with yams, maize, plantain and palm fruits.

‘Carry them carefully into the house,’ she instructed Umoh. She was holding a half empty bottle of Coca-Cola when she alighted from the vehicle. I opted to help with her handbag but she said, ‘No, no, no, no. Not this one. I can carry it myself.’ She gave me the half empty bottle of Coca-Cola. ‘Keep this safe for me. I will ask for it in the evening.’

‘Aunty is very stingy. What is she keeping that small coke for? You should drink it,’ Umoh said to me as I walked past the lobby.

‘Do you want her to kill me?’ I asked, giggling.

‘Come!’ she pulled me to a corner. ‘I think she came with plenty money that’s why she wouldn’t let you touch her bag.’

‘That means she is always with lots of money because no one has ever touched her bag.’

‘Should we check when she’s asleep?’

‘But she holds her bag even when she’s asleep.’

‘Wicked woman,’ Umoh hissed.

Later that evening, Mummy, Daddy and Aunty Agnes sat at the backyard, talking. Umoh and I stood by the kitchen window to eavesdrop but we couldn’t hear a word.

‘What if Aunty still insists I follow her tomorrow?’ she whispered.

‘Shhhhhh,’ I placed my palm on her mouth.

Both of us dashed back to our bedroom when our mother stood up abruptly. She burst into our bedroom and unceremoniously flicked the light switch on.

‘Mummy...’ Umoh drawled and faked a yawn. I was not in the mood for pretence.

‘Edikan, are you sure you can cope in Aunty Agnes’s house?’ she asked with her right hand placed on my shoulder. I nodded in affirmation.

‘You should sleep then. You have a long day ahead,’ she said. As

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soon as she was out of the room, Umoh squeezed my hands. ‘Thank you. I won’t forget this,’ she said.

I nodded with my eyes closed.

The following evening, I was seated at the back seat of the rickety 504 Auntie Agnes hired. Most of my belongings were cramped into my mother’s old suitcase beside me. I had requested for a Ghana-Must-Go bag but my mother did not trust its durability. My mother, sister and brother stood by the car window gazing remorsefully as though they were selling me off into uncertainty and slavery. My father had already bid me goodbye earlier. Umoh’s face was downcast and I knew she was fighting back tears. My little brother was crying uncontrollably while I watched him wrestle from my mother’s grip.

‘She will be back tomorrow,’ my mother pacified him. It was difficult to suppress a tear. As soon as the 504 engine started, Auntie Agnes turned towards me, ‘What is that nonsense on your face? Am I kidnapping you?’ she asked. I hurriedly wiped the salty liquid off my cheek with the hem of my dress.

* * *

The ride to Obotidim was long and debilitating. A fallen tipper had obstructed the flow of traffic along the Calabar-Itu highway. A journey that was supposed to last not more than two hours took five hours. Auntie Agnes said she was going to give me Panadol tablets for my headache once we arrived. We eventually arrived Obotidim at ten in the evening.

It was pitch dark and Auntie Agnes mentioned to her driver they were on their ‘off month’. *Off month? What does that even mean?* As though she read my thoughts, she said,

‘Edikan, we won’t be having electricity until next month.’

‘But why?’ I asked.

‘In rural areas like this, it is rationed to communities on a monthly

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basis.’

Knowing Aunt Agnes did not have a power generating set, I wished our off months would fall only when I was on holidays in Calabar.

As soon as the driver turned into Aunt Agnes’ compound, the landlady’s dog ran towards our vehicle, barking. The compound was fenced with flowers and vegetables, housing Aunt Agnes’ apartment and three others. The dog was still barking when we got out of the car. The landlady emerged from the tiny passage with a gigantic lantern. She was youthful and too agile for a grandmother, which I would later learn she was. There was no trace of croakiness in her voice and her hair was shiny black. If Obotidim were an urban area, there would have been side talks of how she had a secret elixir.

‘So you don’t know how to greet?’ Aunt Agnes interrupted my thoughts.

‘Aunt good evening,’ I said to the landlady. I was brought up to address everyone five years older than me as aunt or uncle.

‘Welcome my daughter.’ She turned to Aunt Agnes. ‘Eka Ofon, is this the house girl you told me about?’ I swallowed hard. *Just before you get too comfortable, you are now a house girl*, a voice in my head reminded me.

‘No, I am a nanny,’ I voiced out my thoughts inadvertently.

‘You are what?’ Aunt Agnes gasped.

‘Nothing Aunt, please I wasn’t talking to you,’ I said in a small voice. She grabbed her hand luggage and walked past me to the balcony. I was struggling clumsily to lift my suitcase when the driver came to my aid. ‘Thank you Uncle,’ I said to him. Aunt Agnes had been regarding me intently from where she stood.

‘My friend, if you can’t lift a box as light as that I don’t know what you are looking for in my house! You should have let your sister come!’ she said sternly.

Aunt Agnes’ apartment consisted of four rooms. The apartments in the compound were adjoined to each other, and the compound had one pit toilet and a bathroom that was publicly shared. There were two

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doors leading in and out of her apartment. The first was that of the living room reserved for non-existent visitors. The one behind was an exit way from the kitchen and was used frequently. Midway laid her room, followed by the store house. Whenever Aunt Agnes was out, she locked the door of the storehouse, thereby secluding the house from the kitchen which was always open but devoid of foodstuff. The kitchen served as a reception area and guest room to not-so-important guests. There was a wall hanger by the left corner. On one side, she kept her kitchen equipment. There was a rusty looking fridge behind the door which was always locked. Ofon was fast asleep on a mat when we got in.

‘I had to force him to sleep. He was crying because you didn’t return early,’ Sister Kokomma, the lady she asked to babysit him said.

A candle was lit and Sister Kokomma helped me tuck my suitcase beneath the wall hanger in the kitchen before she left for her house across the street.

‘Edikan, this is where you would be sleeping so you better take care of my kitchen the way you take care of your bedroom at home,’ Aunt Agnes said.

She picked up her son and carried him to her room. ‘I hope you won’t need this candle because I don’t have an extra candle for my room. Go to bed!’

You mean go to mat? I was unsure of what she was referring to, as there was nothing in the kitchen that fit the description of a bed. I took off my shoes and lay on the mat. It was raining heavily outside, a thunderous rain that made the sheets of the ramshackle roof clatter and clang. I retrieved my old wristwatch from my pocket. The time was 11:25 p.m. Sleep was the last thing I wanted to do.

CHAPTER 3



‘98! 998 are you there?’ a voice whispered. It had stopped raining, and the hostel would have been as quiet as a graveyard but for the sound of my bunkmate snoring.

It took me seconds to process the fact that the girl on the adjacent bunk was calling out to me.

‘Are you talking to me?’ My voice was low too. *998? So I have been reduced to a number?* During our briefing, the camp commandant had instructed us to wear our reflective number tags at all times so it would be easy to apprehend corps members caught contravening the camp rules. I felt like a convict hanging mine across my neck but that was the safest place I knew, knowing I could be careless at times.

‘Sorry I called you by your tag number. My name is Funmi. What’s yours?’

‘Edikan.’

‘Is that a Benin name?’

‘Calabar.’

‘I am from Ijebu Ode but I was born and bred in Lagos,’ she said. ‘Have you noticed everyone is asleep except us? I wonder what will be our fate tomorrow.’

I sighed inwardly. *Our fate?* She was indirectly asking that we be friends. That was a good sign. I still had plans of redeploying to Lagos despite my parents’ warning. Part of my strategy in accomplishing that was to associate myself with people based in Lagos. Funmi seemed like a likely candidate with the right connections.

‘Why are you still awake?’ I asked.

‘I find it difficult to fall asleep when I am in a new environment.’