

THE MIGRANT'S LENS

A N I G E R I A N
I N
A M E R I C A

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ADOWRI

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Osabuohien Ehi Don Adonri was born in Benin City, Nigeria where he had his primary, secondary and tertiary education. He holds a Bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. He migrated to the United States in 1989 and attended the New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, New York where he bagged a Master's degree in Instructional Technology. He taught high school history, government and computer technology for five years in Brooklyn, New York. He also worked for fourteen years with the New York City Administration for Children's Services and Human Resources Administration, from where he resigned as a Director of Social Services - Research and Evaluation in 2009, and returned to Nigeria. He is a private entrepreneur.

SYNOPSIS

This historical fiction is inspired by the author's own migration story. The fictional character: Osaze Freedom Idahosa was born on October 1st 1960, the day of Nigeria's independence, his middle name - Freedom was given to him as a result, and the name stuck. Freedom migrated to the United States in 1987 because he was denied his dream job of becoming a central banker in Nigeria. He believes this is because of the Nigerian quota system and the resultant nepotism that has come to characterise the hiring process for government jobs. He tried getting just any job but nothing was forthcoming, there were just no jobs in the country. He became despondent and did what a lot of young people in his situation did at the time - find his way out of Nigeria.

Barely a year after arriving in the United States, Freedom encounters a near-death experience in a Brooklyn, New York white neighbourhood. A mob of racist white youths attacked him in Bensonhurst where he went to deliver furniture. Merely hours afterwards, a mob of white youths will also attack a couple of black youths and fatally shoot one of them. The protests that followed and the racial tensions before and after the murder of the black youth will shape Freedom's views of America and change the way he now sees the challenges of his homeland.

CHAPTER 1

Freedom got called for a delivery job. He is to pick up furniture from a downtown Brooklyn store and deliver to an address in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. He was familiar with the area from his days working as a security guard not too far from that neighbourhood. This is an opportunity to make quick money without having to drive to Manhattan first to pick up. His pickups are usually in Manhattan, and deliveries could be within Manhattan, the five boroughs or anywhere in the Tri-state area. He can quickly get this Brooklyn job out of the way and still meet up with his usual delivery routine at his base in Manhattan. He pulled up to the furniture shop in his 1985 Ford T-150 commercial pickup truck, loaded his van and called the owner of the furniture, told him he was on his way. It is a short drive and he estimated it'll not be more than a 45-minute drive. He headed towards Cadman Plaza through Hillary street, merged unto I-278 W, and came off 18th Avenue between 60th Street and Shore Parkway. The Parkway is lined with predominantly small, Italian family-owned businesses. He took the first turn on the right and arrived the address in 33 minutes, it is a single-family home. The street is lined with clusters of single-family homes and a few apartment buildings. He parked his van in front of the house and came down to press the bell at the front door. He waited a short

while; and when no one came to answer the door, he went back to his van to sit and wait. "The man he spoke with earlier may be in the bathroom," he thought. He'll wait a few minutes and if no one comes out, he'll call on the pay phone at the corner. Freedom had hardly finished that thought when someone yanked his driver's side door open and violently dragged him out of the van. Suddenly, he was encircled by a gang of about 20 white boys, many of them holding baseball bats, others had knives, and Freedom thought he saw one of them with a gun! "What you doing here nigga?" one of them asked. Freedom blurted what he thought was an answer but he wasn't even audible to himself. Just as one of them hit him on his right knee with a baseball bat and he buckled, he heard a voice yell "stop!" The boys quickly dispersed and left him on the ground wriggling in pain. A middle-aged white man stood over him. "Are you okay?" the man asked. "Umm, yes sir" Freedom responded. The man gave him a hand and Freedom got up, wobbled a bit, and then told the man: "I'm in the neighbourhood for a furniture delivery". "I know, sorry about that, these knuckleheads are a bunch of idiots. My name is John, John Cabrasi," the man said. He asked Freedom if he should call the police and an ambulance. Freedom said no, and assured him he was okay. Freedom managed to back-up the van into the driveway of the house, and John assisted him with bringing the furniture into the house. When they

were done, he rode with Freedom in his van until he was about to join the I-278 E back to downtown Brooklyn. John came down from the van, and Freedom continued his journey. Freedom went straight back home. His wife Camille was surprised to see him back so early, she noticed Freedom was walking with a limp and asked what happened. Freedom narrated his horrid experience in Bensonhurst that morning. Camille was livid. She wanted to call the police but Freedom pleaded with her not to. She went to the safe and came out with her service pistol. She told Freedom that they need to go back to the neighbourhood in search of the youths. Freedom told her that was definitely a bad idea, he again pleaded with her, and assured her he was okay. He didn't want to get entangled in any police case just a few months after finally filling his immigration papers and getting his immigration status in order. Camille went to the refrigerator, got some ice, made an ice compress, and placed on Freedom's knee to help decrease the swelling and stop the bleeding.

They would later find out that evening that a gang of around 30 white youths shot a young black youth called Yusef Hawkins in the chest with a .32-caliber revolver in the same Bensonhurst neighbourhood. Two bullets cut through his heart, he slumped to the ground and died. Yusef was only 16 years old when he was murdered. He went to Bensonhurst, a

predominantly Italian-American neighbourhood in Brooklyn to meet the owner of a used car he wanted to purchase. According to what Freedom read in the newspapers in the days and weeks following Yusef's death, Bensonhurst is a closed world of some narrow-minded people who would do anything to prevent others (whose ideas, colour, ways of life or culture differ from theirs) from "encroaching" their neighbourhood. As a result, they were very hostile to any perceived threats that would "soil" their community.

On that same day while Freedom was making his delivery in Bensonhurst, there were rumours throughout the neighbourhood that a white girl in the neighbourhood was dating a black teenager, that she was inviting black and Latino boys to the neighbourhood for her 18th birthday party that night, that a group of black teenagers were coming to beat up white kids in Bensonhurst. They concluded that the neighbourhood girl needed someone to protect her, and they needed to protect their neighbourhood against the intrusion of "niggers".

Meanwhile, Yusef had seen an advert in a magazine-listing about a used car that is for sale in Bensonhurst, and decided he was going to check it out and possibly purchase it, if he was satisfied with the condition and price of the car; he went in company of some friends. As Yusef and his friends searched for the address from the used car listing, a

mob of 30 or so angry white youths approached them and just as one of them asked Freedom that morning, one of them asked “What you niggers doing here?” The white youths surrounded Yusef and his friends. As they did in the morning, some carried baseball bats, some had knives and at least one person had a gun among them. The white boys began to beat Yusef and his friends up. Pop! Pop! Gunshots!!

And Yusef Hawkins was shot dead!!!

The white youths scattered. However, eight of them were eventually caught, charged, and sentenced for the murder. The boy who pulled the trigger was identified.

The Yusef Hawkins murder and his own near-death experience at the hand of probably the same set of boys, in the same Brooklyn neighbourhood will define the prism through which Freedom viewed New York City, and by extension, the United States in the years to come. He became interested in everything concerning race relations. He followed how the Reverend Al Sharpton became the controversial voice for the disenfranchised, and how he led demonstrations throughout New York City demanding justice. Following Yusef Hawkins’s death, hundreds of black demonstrators marched through the streets of Bensonhurst led by Reverend Al Sharpton. The neighbourhood residents cursed

and spat on the protesters, throwing watermelons and other different food items at them. Freedom was puzzled as to what was particular about watermelons and black people that it was frequently used by whites on blacks at protests, this was not the first he heard or had seen this happen on TV. He would later find out that farming their own watermelons were a symbol of liberation and self-reliance for black people after they became free from slavery; white people's resentment against African Americans freedom from slavery led to using watermelons to belittle African Americans as sloppy, childish, and lazy. The white people in Bensonhurst also taunted and shouted "niggers go home" and "Central Park, Central Park" at the black protesters.

Ah yes, the Central Park rape case. Freedom had followed the news on TV and in the newspapers earlier-on in the year. However, it was only after the Yusef Hawkins murder and his own Bensonhurst near-death experience that he became keenly aware of the debates that surrounded the rape charges. In April of that year, a white female was assaulted and raped during a night-time jog through Central Park. Five black and Latino youths from Harlem between the ages of 14 and 16 years old were arrested, charged, and convicted of the crime.

The young white lady was dragged off her jogging route, she was then raped, and severely beaten. Her attackers fractured her skull and she almost died

from blood loss. She woke up in a coma some days later but she had lost her memory.

The central park jogger's attack that year in 1989 was as evil as could be!

The attack brought increased fear and racial tensions between white and black people in the city of New York. Freedom had been very aware of the racial tensions in the city since he arrived two years earlier but after the central park rape case, he couldn't help but notice the increase in tensions in almost all aspects of New York City life - on the trains, on the streets, in malls, just everywhere. The court trials that resulted from the rape incident were followed closely by all because New Yorkers, especially white people were afraid to go to the parks and afraid to take the trains. They put all the blame on the young boys they now tagged the "Central Park Five." Freedom remembers having strong feelings about the rape case especially when black boys were identified as having taken part in it - a feeling of shame that people of his race were identified as having taken part in this extremely evil and dastardly act. He also remembers thinking, if the woman who was raped lost her memory and could not recall the event or even other events before the rape, and there were no other witnesses, how come the perpetrators were apprehended so quickly and the court decisions were also very quick according to the reports he read. Freedom now saw the connection

between the central park rape and his near-death experience, and the eventual murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst.

Ten years after the conviction of the so-called "central park 5", a different person confessed to the assault, and DNA evidence confirmed his involvement. The convictions against the so-called "central park 5" were dismissed.

CHAPTER 2

W if your masquerade is not dancing today, it doesn't mean he will not dance tomorrow"; this was his mother's favourite African proverb reserved for Osaze whenever he came home disappointed about his inability to achieve a set goal. Osaze Freedom Idahosa had just arrived home from Lagos, where he went for a Visa interview at the United States of America embassy. He was denied the Visa. Freedom - his middle name was given to him by his father. The name is of great significance because he was born on October 1st 1960, the day of Nigeria's independence from the British. It was a day of double joy for the Idahosas; they'd just had their first child, and the country, Nigerian had just gained her independence! It was a day of great hope not just for them but for the country at large. Everyone was celebrating! And Osaze's middle name - Freedom stuck. Everyone called him Freedom except his father.

However, 26 years on, Freedom's frustration was visibly written all over his face. To his mum, he seemed to have lost a few pounds though he had only been gone for five days. She made him his favourite meal of Eba and ogbolo soup. He ate and felt a little better. There is something about his mother's soup that calms him. He went straight to his room without saying a word to his mum, his dad or any of his siblings. Life is not fare. His friend and

classmate at the university - Sam, had only visited the embassy once and he was given the Visa to the United States, that was two years ago. Why is his case different? Why is his case so difficult?

At the third try, Freedom eventually got his Visa and migrated to the United States in 1987. Young people were leaving Nigeria in droves. Those who could obtain a Visa to travel to any country in Europe or to the United States; did so. Others paid agents who took them through the arduous and deadly land journey to Europe by way of Libya through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Many died in the desert. Many more died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe on derelict boats arranged for them by immigration traffickers. This exodus was due to the general economic hardship in the country at the time, caused by the economic austerity measures put in place by the various governments in power.

Freedom had graduated four years earlier from the University. He served the mandatory one year of National Youth Service Corp (NYSC). Three years after NYSC however, he was still unemployed. He had always been very clear on what he wanted to do after graduating from the university; work at the central bank and maybe one day become the Governor of the Nigerian Central Bank. When the entry test to get into the bank came out, he took it and was one of the top performers. However, he

didn't get the job because of the quota system. Others who scored lower than him got the job because of the tribe they came from and the country's attempt to address inequity and provide opportunities for those from the tribes lacking representation in government jobs. But what he has come to realise is that nepotism and tribalism has derailed the foundational intent of the quota system, those in charge now use it as an opportunity to give jobs to their own relatives, tribes men/women, and their friends. Freedom was despondent; he tried getting just any job but nothing was forthcoming. He became very frustrated, and started doing what a lot of young people in his situation did at the time; find their way out of the country in search of greener pastures. There were just too many push factors pushing Nigerian youths out of the country. The austerity measures made life hard for the citizens and jobs were difficult to come by. When you got a job, the salary was hardly enough to get by. Many young people were still living under their parents' roof in their late 30s, some even in their 40s. So, young men, and to a lesser extent young ladies, found ways out of the country. There were just too many push factors in Nigeria and too many pull factors pulling young Nigerians toward Europe and America. Aside the stories told by Hollywood movies and the promotion of the American lifestyle by the American media, Nigerians who went to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s also came home with tales of

how sweet and easy life in the United States was for them. However, most of them returned home to Nigeria after their studies. Nigeria was a nice place to live in the 1970s for university graduates in general but particularly for those with foreign degrees. Young men and women who came back home in the 1970s after their studies abroad, came home to posh jobs in government and in the various industries in the private sector. They were instant car owners, usually with a chauffeur if they desired. Getting free accommodation with a job was not uncommon. Life was good. However, all of this began to change very earlier on in the 1980s with the fall in crude oil prices, lack of the ability to plan for raining days by those in government, corruption, misuse and misspending of government resources. All these led the government to put tough measures in place to try and revive the economy.

When Freedom was admitted to the University of in 1979, the school fees was highly subsidised, and his parents were easily able to afford the fee. Every academic year, students even received bursary (monetary award/grant) from the government. School meals were subsidised, a meal ticket of N1.50 gave you three healthy meals a day. He still reminisces about the Sunday afternoon special meal served at the university cafeteria - Jolof rice, fried ripe plantain and chicken! He could literally smell the mouth-watering aroma of the spices in the steaming

hot jolof rice and fried chicken! All for 50 kobo!! The faucets at the cafeteria dispensed clean and healthy hot and cold water. Unfortunately, all these are gone now. He heard the cafeteria has been closed down and students have to make private arrangements to feed themselves. The infrastructures at the university are running down and not maintained. "My God! What happened to Nigeria!!" he thought.

CHAPTER 3

Freedom arrived the John F Kennedy airport, New York on a cold Friday morning in March of 1987. He had finally touched the American soil! The first shock he had was how cold the weather was. "Oh my God, no one warned me about the extent of this cold" he thought as he shivered under the second-hand overcoat he purchased at Marina Lagos, a London fog. He was certainly told it will be cold in New York but he didn't expect it'll be this cold. His second shock was even more harrowing. He has been looking for Sam, his friend and classmate who promised to wait for him at the airport. Sammy as he calls him, had migrated two years earlier and assured him he'll pick him up and accommodate him until he finds his feet. Now, Sammy is nowhere to be found. He saw people using the phone booth to make calls but wasn't sure what to do. This turn of events was not on his menu of things to do on arrival. He must have looked lost because an airport wheelchair assistant, one of those airport workers who assist airline passengers in wheelchairs, walked up to Freedom and asked: " How're you doing? You need help?" Freedom was startled by her question and didn't quite understand what she had said. She asked him again if he needed help. Renee is an African American female; an average American may describe as being on the plump side but to Freedom she was of a perfect weight. She looked to be

between 35 and 40 years of age. She had a well contoured face, and the complexion of her beautiful black skin was very familiar to Freedom because it looked exactly like his mother's. She stood at about 5ft 6', and Freedom couldn't help but notice how pretty was. He quickly recovered from his thoughts and answered: " yes please madam".

"Don't call me madam, my name is Renee".

Renee speaks with a southern drawl, she migrated to New York City from Alabama twelve years earlier. "Oh, okay" Freedom blurted. " I need to call my friend, he was supposed to pick me up but I can't find him anywhere around". Renee walked with Freedom to the phone booth, slotted a coin and dialled the phone number he gave her. The phone rang for a while and went to voicemail, she handed the phone to Freedom and he left a message. It was already 1pm and his flight arrived New York City since 8am. Renee found him a seat at a corner of the arrival area and they both hoped Sam will eventually show up to get his friend. But Sam never came. Renee took Freedom to the bus station after her shift was over, put him on a bus to 42nd street and gave him directions to a place called "Doors" - an intake facility for emergency shelter. This is not how Freedom imagined his American odyssey but this was his reality at the moment. Renee also scribbled her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it

over to Freedom. She fantasised about inviting him home.

Freedom is a very handsome, ebony black African man, though a little on the lean side for Renee's taste. He stood at about 6ft 2', maybe 6ft 3' tall, and walked with an easy gait of a prize horse. Her imagination went wild with the thought of likening his walk to a horse. She could not see his body muscles because of the long coat he had on, but she imagined they were well contoured just as his face was. His eyes were sad, maybe from the disappointment of the day. He had two faint scars on both sides of his cheeks, they were not noticeable from afar but you could clearly see them when you got close to him. Were they scars? No. They looked more like marks because you could tell they were deliberately inscribed but you couldn't say they were tattoos either. She had seen some African male and female passengers with them before but she never really took any particular interest in it. There was something about the scars on Freedom's face that made him look courageous, brave, fearless and resolute. Freedom spoke English with an unfamiliar but a clear diction that enunciated certain words in ways she had never heard before. Like when he exclaimed: "My God" when it became obvious his friend wouldn't be coming to pick him up at the airport. The seeming properness of his pronunciation as opposed to the way a typical American will

pronounce “God” as “Gad”. What a sexy accent. His clarity of language surprised her too because it contradicted the stereotype of the African brother she had in her head. She had seen many since she started working at the airport but Freedom was the first she has had such close contact and interaction with. She can't lie, taking him home crossed her mind but it was out of the question, her upbringing wouldn't let her take a total stranger home on the first day she met him. Not that she hadn't done it in the past but that was before life taught her that her mother's lessons back when she was a young girl growing up in Alabama are still valid life lessons. Aside that, she is a single mum of two girls: Danielle is 10 years old, and Malika is 8. She couldn't risk bringing a stranger home in her current situation. If she had an extra room, perhaps she would have considered it, though unlikely. She lives in a basement studio at a Bedford Stuyvesant colonial house in Brooklyn, so it wasn't even possible. She was sad to see Freedom go that night, she hoped he would call and she would see him again.

At the emergency homeless intake centre, the lady at the front desk took Freedom's information, gave him a pack of food comprising bologna sandwich and a soda or mineral as it is called in Nigeria. She asked him to sit while she worked on finding an appropriate placement for him. Freedom gazed at the security post through which he just came in, and observed

that the guards were changing shifts, he looked at the clock at the far end of the hall, it was 11pm. He was tired, jet lagged and confused. He didn't realise he had nodded off. He was startled by a gentle touch on his shoulder, a male uniformed guard stood in front of him. "My broda, how you dey" the guard said in Nigerian pidgin English. He couldn't believe his ears, and he thought perhaps he is in a dream but he managed to say " I dey fine sir". "Oh boy, no call me sir, my name na Omo" the guard said. Omo and Freedom properly introduced themselves, and Omo informed Freedom that he had seen his name on the list of clients to be transported to placement, and realised he had a brother here, he is an Edo boy himself, an Esan from Uromi. Freedom's heart jumped for joy, and he remembered his mother's frequent and favourite counselling, and her favourite African proverb: "if your masquerade is not dancing today, it doesn't mean he will not dance tomorrow". His masquerade certainly just danced. Omo told him not to worry about being transported to a shelter, he can stay at his place and they'll both figure out a way for him to get life started in the United States. Omo pointed at the other two guards chatting at the entrance security post: "the one sitting down is Kola, and the one standing is Uche, they are both my senior bros here. Kola teaches Science at a high school in the Bronx but his side job is here as a security guard at night. Kola brings in his usually well ironed white or blue shirt, neck tie, and trousers or

pants as they call it here in the U.S, in his bag. He cleans up in the staff bathroom in the morning and heads straight to take the number 2 train to his teaching job at a high school on Pelham parkway in the Bronx. Uche also has a main job as a social worker with New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Both men have lived in the United for a long time, Kola for 15 years and Uche for 20 years."

Freedom and Omo gisted most of the night and got acquainted with one another. After Omo's shift was over, they took the train to Omo's apartment in Brownsville, East New York. Omo got Freedom settled, showed him how to operate the TV, the stove and microwave. He took a quick shower, wore another security guard uniform and headed for his day job as a guard at a construction site in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. It is about 30 miles between Grand central station where Omo's night job is located and his home in Brownsville, and another 20 miles between his home in East New York and the second job in Sheepshead Bay. However, the subway makes these journeys look shorter. Omo quickly dished out these facts and other gists in-between getting ready to "jet" to his second job.

Omo has only been in the U.S. for 2 years and was still really trying to find his feet. His girlfriend Edith had agreed to marry him just 6 months earlier and he filed his immigration papers and got his work permit.

However, Omo and Edith decided to live separately because Edith has a 15-year old son who didn't take kindly to his mother getting married to a man who is not his father. Omo has been on this off-the-book day job for about 18 months. He had not had his work authorization papers when the job was arranged for him by another Nigerian who helped him out when he first came to the United States. He has to work the two jobs to support Edith financially and also keep his life going. Both jobs pay minimum wage and he can hardly make ends meet at the moment. He is also taking part-time classes at Brooklyn college so he can eventually get a 4-year degree and apply for a good paying job. He had an Ordinary National Diploma (OND) in electrical engineering from Nigeria. His OND was accepted as equivalent to an Associate Degree in the US by his current university and most of his credits from Nigeria were accepted towards a bachelor's degree, he was very happy about that.

Omo did not come home on that first day. He called to inform Freedom that he has a class at school, and will be heading straight to his job at the "Door" from there. "No worries, I am enjoying these fast-moving programs and adverts on TV " Freedom responded. The frequency of advertisements on American television was mind boggling, it seems an advert is interjected every few minutes. This was in contrast with the way programs are run on Nigerian TV. There

were so many stations here too, it was difficult for him to concentrate. Freedom's TV only had two stations back in Nigeria - the Federal government owned Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), and state owned Bendel Television (BTV). The programs run by these two Nigerian stations seem to be at tortoise pace compared with the fast-moving programs he was watching now. He must have dozed off because he was startled by the TV noise. He looked at his watch and it was 3am in Nigeria, meaning it's 9pm here. He turned down the volume of the TV, went to the fridge to get a sandwich, he ate and continued watching the news that was now playing on one of the stations. "Americans talk too fast" he thought. Then he heard something that sounded like a pop - a light explosive sound. It was not from the TV. He turned down the television so he can be sure. He heard it again. This time it was louder. It sounded like the occasional fireworks during Christmas in Nigeria. Then a double pop -po! po! He was absolutely sure now that what he heard were gunshots! Fear gripped him. He wasn't sure what to do. Hope he hadn't come this far and all this way to get killed. He started praying.

Brownsville, East New York in the late 1980s was a war zone of sort. It was the height of the crack cocaine and heroin epidemic. The various street corners were enclaves and mini territories inhabited and jealously guarded by the different gangs of drug

dealers. Not that drug dealings didn't happen in the day time but most drug dealers were nocturnal, so the night time was their time. The pops Freedom heard were gunshots - the gangs were trading their wares and sorting out their issues on the streets of Brownsville, East New York. Freedom's heart raced throughout the night and the pops seemed to have started trailing off only as the sign of initial daylight started peering through the windows. He jumped up from what seemed like a nightmare when he heard the squeaking noise of the turning doorknob. "Thank God!" he said exasperatedly as Omo walked in. "Wetin happen" Omo asked. Freedom narrated his overnight experience and Omo smiled; he assured him that he has nothing to worry about so long as he "maintains his lane" as they say in Nigerian parlance. So long as he doesn't interfere or get entangled in other people's business, he'll be okay.

Later that evening, Freedom dialed the phone number Renee gave him, a thick male voice answered: "hello" He quickly cut off the call and hung up. Hmm, he thought to himself, she didn't sound like she was married during their conversation but then again, they didn't talk about her marital status. If she is married or had a live-in boyfriend, why did she give him her phone number and asked him to call?

CHAPTER 4

Omno arranged an off-the-book security job for Freedom in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. He was employed as a temp guard and on-call basis. When a guard calls off for any reason, he would be called in as a replacement. His first assignment came in a couple of days later, it was a Sephardic Jewish Community Centre in Sheepshead Bay. Some Jewish youths between the ages of 16 and 21 were having a party and his assignment was just to be at the gate entrance with his uniform on, and occasionally walk around on patrol. He wasn't to ask for invitation or anything, all they needed was the presence of someone in uniform, so as to give the venue a sense of security. The supervisor sent him there because he was very impressed with Freedom during the interview and training sessions, he could tell Freedom's education was far beyond what's required for the job and that Freedom could easily handle the job. Aside that, he didn't really have anyone else to send. One of the problems with running a security company that pays minimum wage is the inability to employ and keep committed employees. Most of them need second jobs to make ends meet, and many are students who take the job as a stepping stone to getting a better job. So, many quit the job without the mandatory 2 weeks' notice. These companies are constantly employing and

keeping people on standby so as to fulfil their contractual obligations.

When Freedom arrived Sheepshead Bay, he had a sense that he had just arrived an "overseas" country as many older generation folks refer to western countries in Nigeria. The nice, clean private homes clustered together, and the clean apartment buildings with well-manicured lawns and clean streets. These contrasted the streets of Brownsville where he was coming from. He also noticed on his bus ride here from Brownsville that the racial demographics seem to have been changing as the journey progressed, until all the black people in the bus got off the bus and they were gradually replaced by white people. He was now the only black person left in the bus. "Are these white people staring at me? Or was it just my imagination?" He felt like he was being watched. To distract his thoughts, he stared out the bus window at the bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and parks along the route. Then he saw the Sephardic centre and his bus stop just a few metres ahead. He came down from the bus and reported for duty. A non-uniformed white supervisor of the security company he met at training was there to familiarize him with the environment and re-emphasise what he was expected to do. The supervisor left soon as they were both satisfied Freedom knew what to do. He stood at the gate as the kids went in and out of the hall. They were

apparently having a party, music was playing in the background and he could occasionally hear the MC speaking, then cheers and sometimes jeers that followed. The kids were all white. Everyone in his immediate vicinity were white. He observed some of the men that went into the adjoining building to the hall, he thought they looked "interesting". They all wore very long beards, black long suits and big black hat with hair that had side curls sticking down both sides of their head in front of each ear. They had a walk and expression about them that gave them priestly look. "This must be some kind of religious sect" he thought. They were Sephardic Jewish men. The Hollywood movies Freedom watched back in Nigeria and the novels he read did not prepare him for what he was witnessing. He also didn't know that blacks and whites live this separately in America. "Unn" he responded as a young boy asked him a question he didn't quite understand. "Where is the vending machine?" the kid asked again. Freedom was confused. He didn't respond. "What's a vending machine?" he thought. Freedom didn't know what a vending machine was. So, he pretended as if he didn't understand what the kid said. The kid got impatient and walked away. Freedom thought about going after him but decided staying at his duty post was a wiser decision. Then he saw the kid slot in money into what looked like a large refrigerator with a glass door. The machine dispensed some sort of candyfloss which the kid picked up and left. "Oh,

that's a vending machine" he had seen them at the airport and at a few other storefronts but never really gave it any thought. The party ended at about 7pm and Freedom was relieved to see the security company supervisor patrol vehicle pull up at the venue.

The second assignment Freedom had was two days later at a construction site in the Canarsie neighbourhood of Brooklyn. Canarsie shares a boarder with Brownsville, it was populated by mostly white people at the time, and was just about a 15-minute ride by bus from the house. The site became a permanent assignment of some sort for Freedom. The construction site was not active but had a lot of equipment in it. He shared a 24-hour shift with a white guy who came in at 7pm and worked the night shift until 7am when Freedom resumed. At first, they didn't say much to one another, but as time went on, the guy - Tony became more relaxed. They would have small talks in between handing over duty and the activities log book. Each guard writes in the activities log book at the site every hour. The log book was full of mostly "No activity" for the twelve hours logged by each guard daily because nothing really happens at the site. Tony had small talks with him, at least he has told him that he liked Nigerians because they were hard working, and he had worked previously with other Nigerians. Freedom reciprocated by telling him a little about himself.

There was something about Tony that he couldn't quite figure out, and his face looked somewhat familiar, like he had seen him before, maybe in an American movie. Aside that, he has been warned by Omo to be cautious about revealing too much information about himself because he does not yet have his work permit and his current job was off-the-book.

Shabba Ranks "Telephone Love" blared out the loudspeakers and the dance floor went wild. Young ladies in their sexy baggy jeans and tops were on the dance floor duking it out, the guys will not to be outdone. It is Saturday night at "The Ceiling" - a nightclub on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. This part of East Flatbush is populated by immigrants mostly from the Caribbean - Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Guyana, Grenada, Barbados, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Saint Kitts and Nevis. It had a rich potpourri of African diaspora cultures. It is the go-to place for Caribbean and soul food. You had a great time if you also love reggae and other genres of west Indian music.

Omo and Freedom came out tonight to unwind and have a good time. Omo came with his wife, and was on the dance floor dancing with her. Freedom stood at the bar sipping a bottle of stout and watching the dance floor. Someone tapped him on the shoulder: "do you mind?". She didn't wait for a response but

held his hand and led him to the dance floor. Just as they started dancing, the music changed to "Night Nurse" by Gregory Isaacs. She turned around and drew seductively close to him, he tried to pull back but she dragged him in. Weird thoughts and sensations rushed up his head and ignited something in his head that took him back to his bad boy days at the university in Nigeria. He was as bad as they come, a party animal and the ultimate womaniser but an extremely brilliant student of economics. He would have graduated with a first-class honours degree if it wasn't for his partying and womanising. He still managed a second-class upper division honour. He held her tightly but softly enough that she let out a moan of excitement. The DJ changed to a more upbeat song and they danced some more. After the dance, she led him back to the bar and ordered a mixed drink of Planter's Punch for herself, and a stout for Freedom, then introduced herself, "I am Camille".

"Freedom" Freedom said in response. " Interesting name" Camille said.

"Packed with meaning" Freedom fired back.

"Hmm. Tall, handsome and witty. Touché" Camille said. The drinks came and they started sipping. Freedom reached into his pocket and asked the bar tender for the bill. But Camille cuts in and says: "the drink is on me; I ordered the drinks." They argued for

a while and Freedom eventually gave in. “Interesting” he thought, “a country where women pay for their own drinks and yours”. This was strange to him because in Nigeria, the men always paid; as far as he knows, that's just the way it is. He remembers the time in the university when he didn't have any money and his girlfriend wanted them to go out; she had some money on her. She actually handed the money over to him for them to go out on that date. They went out and he paid the bills. When he asked her why she couldn't just keep her money and pay for them both, her response was: “what do I look like? A man chaser?”

They left the club at about 3:30am, Freedom escorted Camille out the club and she told him she would wait outside for her friends. While outside, they really had time to talk without the loud music in the clubhouse. Camille is a beautiful curvy woman with a very pretty face. Her shape suits her and she carries herself with a certain confidence and sexiness that Freedom couldn't quite figure out; at least not yet, but he was sure he would with time. As they were talking, a white Ford sedan pulled up next to them and a young man came down, exchanged pleasantries with Camille, kissed her on the cheek and says "hi" to Freedom. The guy had on a correctional officer uniform. Camille introduced John as her co-worker and the two men shook hands. “So, Camille is a correctional officer” Freedom thought.

Right on cue, three other guys came out the club and joined them. "The friends Camille came to the club with were all men?" She read his thoughts and got close to his ear: "they're all co-workers, John is our designated driver for this outing, we take turns being the designated driver whenever we plan hanging out together".

Camille is a 30-year old West Indian American of Trinidadian descent. Truth be told, Freedom was confused by all the different designations of American race and ethnic demographics. Camille migrated with her parents to the United States years back when she was about 12 years old. Though she's been in the U.S for 18 years and did her high school and university education here, you could still hear a pinch of accent in the way she speaks - perhaps that distinguishing Trinidadian accent. She oscillated between the rhythmic Trinidadian accent and the American one effortlessly, depending on who she was talking to. Freedom found her enthralling. And she is single! And no kid!! They exchanged phone numbers. Omo and his wife had just come out of the club and were heading towards Edith's car.

CHAPTER 5

Camille is self-assured, independent, a self-driven and strong woman. Some may say she is an alpha female. She intimidated many men, especially with her cerebrality, sexuality and self-confidence or maybe arrogance. Why not? Despite a rough start when she first moved to the U.S with her parents as an only child at the age of twelve, she overcame being bullied in high school for her Trinidadian accent and her weight, to become the valedictorian of her high school graduating class. She then went on to the university to study psychology and graduated magna cum laude. Her parents relocated back to Trinidad a couple of years back, they were already middle aged when they migrated to the United States with her. They had her late, her mum was 40 and her dad was 50 years old when Camille was born. She had always loved the way uniformed officers looked, and the authority they carried. However, she didn't want to be a police woman for philosophical reasons. The history of American policing in relation to the treatment of black people in America irked her. So, she chose to be a corrections officer.

Freedom and Camille sauntered through the euphoric six to seven months stage of a romantic relationship. There was strong physical chemistry between them, and they exploited every bit of each other during this period. Freedom, when he is not

working, spent a lot of time at Camille's. At some point, she gave him a spare key. While Freedom enjoyed every bit of his physical relationship with Camille, he wasn't so crazy about Camille's outspokenness. He loved that she is smart, confident, and self-assured. But there is something about her self-confidence and dominance in some situations that sparked the fly in him and challenges his masculinity in ways he is not at all comfortable with. However, most of their arguments ended up in bed. Whenever she brings up the topic of marriage, which was often after the 6-month mark in their relationship, Freedom would find a way to change the topic. She would also always let him know that he had just changed the subject. Prior to meeting Camille, Freedom vowed he was not just going to get married due to the pressures of getting his immigration status in order. He is keenly aware that many who have done so, have found themselves in serious problems.

About one year into their relationship however, Freedom popped the question and Camille said "yes". They both didn't want anything elaborate, just a few friends at the Brooklyn City Hall and lunch at Juniors Restaurant in downtown Brooklyn.

Soon as Freedom's immigration papers were in order, he took the test for entry into the New York City civil service. While he waited for the results, he still worked at the security guard company, and also

bought a van he used for logistics and delivery services. A few months into his marriage with Camille, he told her how he had never seen any signs of construction work at the site where he worked as a guard. Camille had a funny feeling about the site and decided she would drop him off at the site the next morning. When she got there, she took one look at Tony, and John Gotti popped up in her head. John Gotti was one of the most powerful, dangerous and notorious Italian American mafia bosses in the U.S in the 1980s and 90s. The "Dapper Don", as he was fondly called because of his expensive clothes and flamboyant personality, won many court cases against the government. The construction site at which Freedom worked fit right into the mode of operations of the "Gambino family" schemes, Camille thought. Gambino was the name of Gotti's mafia organisation. One look at Tony, she knew he was probably a mafia, it was the gut feeling of an officer. She has seen his kind before at Rikers island prison where she works. Tony kind of figured she knew also because she had on her correctional officer uniform, and look she gave him. Freedom resigned from the job and focused on his delivery business despite his harrowing experience in Benson Hurst.

Eighteen months into his marriage with Camille, Freedom got a job as an analyst with the New York City Department of Housing. With the money he

saved up from operating the delivery van and income from the security job, he was able to come up with half the down payment for them to purchase a house in Jamaica Queens. Camille had been talking about purchasing a house since they got married. This was his surprise for her. Camille was surprised because Freedom had always come up with his portion of the house bills without fail. How did he manage to put such an amount together? On the other hand, she really wasn't too surprised because she had come to admire his prudence when it comes to money management. So, they went about house hunting and found a colonial house with three bedrooms and a finished basement in Queens, NY. They chose Queens because it is easier for Camille to drive to her job when she chose, and it is an easy commute by bus or train. It is also an easy commute for Freedom to his job in Manhattan as well.

What appealed to Camille about Freedom was the confidence he exuded as he stood, sipping his stout beer that night at the club in Brooklyn. Her gut feeling was right because she cannot remember ever having a conversation with any other guy who could match or surpass her wit the way Freedom did. Their initial attraction was spellbinding. They couldn't get enough of each other. Freedom is a strong-willed man who stands his ground and equals her tenacity, she loved that about him. Freedom on the other hand loves Camille's aura and high self-esteem, though she isn't

always easy to handle, especially when they are with his friends, or even her friends or strangers for that matter. Frankly, he was sometimes irritated by her personality and frankness. Maybe his irritation comes the cultural idiosyncrasy of his upbringing; one is not bound to speak one's mind in every and all situations. Male or female, there is a place for silence in certain situations. Camille can come off as arrogant sometimes. He didn't mind when it's just the two of them. However, he thinks she should be more nuanced with her outspokenness when they are in company of others. The other day, they attended a Nigerian party at the Kolawoles – a couple who are both medical doctors, and whose third and last child - a female, had just graduated as a medical doctor. The Kolas' other two kids had graduated as medical doctors as well. So, the Kolas were gisting with some guests on the side about the rigours they had to put their kids through to achieve their objectives. "It shouldn't have been about your objectives but the kids' objective and what they want for themselves " Camille interjected. The Kolas politely ignored her, and continued their conversation. Freedom couldn't help but hear the comment by another Nigerian lady who whispered to her friend in Nigerian pidgin: "wetin this one way no get pikin sabi?" In other words, what does this childless woman know about kids.

There's been a lot of tension in their marriage lately and quite a bit of verbal altercations. Their inability to

conceive was a major sour point. It has been five years since they got married. They had gone to see different doctors, the reports have been consistent: Freedom's sperm count is okay, Camille has stomach fibroid and this may have impacted her fertility and chances of getting pregnant, the doctors said. They've gone for second and third and fourth opinions; all the doctors have advised Camille to consider having surgery to remove the non-cancerous growths in her uterus. This procedure they say may increase her chances of getting pregnant. Camille has read about the condition herself; she is of the opinion that surgery is not necessary as many women with fibroid have been known to get pregnant. That aside, she loathes the idea of going under the knife. Freedom on the other sees surgery as a worthwhile sacrifice to make for procreation and the blessing of having children in a marriage. "That is easy for you to say, you are not the one going under the knife" Camille would always counter whenever they had this argument.

Aside the belief that procreation is at the core of a marriage relationship, Freedom was also facing a lot of pressure from his parents back home in Nigeria. It looks to Freedom that companionship is the primary reason for Camille in their marital relationship. He has come across a few married couples who do not have children and seem not to be bothered by it. As a matter of fact, his co-worker Luke told him that his

wife and himself agreed that they were not going to have children even before they got married. As far as Freedom knows, this is unheard of, not just in the Bini culture but every culture in Nigeria. You marry because you are old enough to have children. Yes, you marry for companionship but procreation is the ultimate goal. The last time he received a letter from his father, it was clear that his parents thought he should have had at least two kids by now. They asked if he and his wife were having problems conceiving or was this a personal choice not to have children even though they have been married for five years. His father said he too has heard of western couples who got married but decided they were not going to have children. He hoped his son has not been so westernized that he has imbibed their culture in this aspect. If the problem is physiological, he advised Freedom in his letter to visit home so he can give him some native medicine.

Not having a child after five years of marriage and Camille's attitude towards the matter created a lot of tension in their marriage. Freedom became more vociferous and critical about Camille's outspokenness. He became suspicious of Camille's relationship with her male co-workers, he picked on everything. Camille began to find faults with everything Freedom did as well. They started sleeping in separate bedrooms. Soon, Freedom moved all his clothes from their common wardrobe to

the visitor's room and they both started spending a lot of time outside their home without each other.

One Saturday night, Camille hung out with his colleagues as usual and came back home at about 4am Sunday morning. Freedom was in the living room waiting. He asked her where she had been and she told him: "you have no rights to ask me - you loser". From the look in her eyes and the way she was swaying, it was obvious Camille has had a bit too much to drink. She can usually hold her own when it comes to alcohol but it didn't seem so tonight. Freedom had been drinking himself while he waited. He called her " a barren whore" in return. Camille drew closer to Freedom and gave him a hot slap across his left cheek. Freedom instinctively wanted to retaliate but restrained himself. He shoved her. They shoved one another back and forth for a second, then Camille reached for the telephone and called the police. Four cops - three males and one female responded. The female cop pulled Camille to the side, while the males talked to Freedom. Camille of course introduced herself as a correctional officer and told the officers that things had calmed down before their arrival. She didn't want Freedom arrested; she didn't want Freedom asked to leave the house. The officers disagreed and asked Freedom to follow them to the station. At the station, they took his statement, released him but told him not go back to his home that morning, he was instructed to stay

away for at least twenty-four hours before returning home. It was a traumatic experience for both Camille and Freedom. Camille suggested therapy but Freedom didn't see the need for it. Freedom started to keep late nights. Sometimes, he didn't come home at all for days. They both barely spoke. Freedom stopped wearing his wedding ring the day Camille called the police into their home.

CHAPTER 6

On his job, Freedom was doing very well. He was an excellent student of statistics and accounting back at the university in Nigeria, so when he was assigned to the accounting department of his job, it was right up his alley. He had 60 credits in accounting from his bachelor's degree. He took another 60 credits from the City University of New York on a part-time basis to qualify him to take his Certified Public Accountant (CPA) exam. He got his 60 credits, took the CPA exam and passed. In just six years at the department of housing, he was promoted from a staff analyst to an administrative staff analyst and was now a management staff. Though Freedom reported to three levels of supervision before the Deputy Director, he was promoted to Manager next to the Deputy Director, who recognised Freedom's talent soon as he started working at the department. Freedom re-organized their accounting system and did a lot of the heavy lifting at the department. Everyone knew how talented and hardworking Freedom was. When the Manager's position became vacant, at which time Freedom had already passed his CPA, and was already accepted to New York University (NYU) for his Master's degree in Business Administration, he was recommended for the position and got it. The two supervisors above him weren't interested in the position anyway, they didn't want a management

position because according to them, once they accepted the Manager's position, they would no longer be protected by the civil service union laws. Freedom would never really understand some of his African American brothers and sisters. They complain that the management cadre of the civil service in New York City is dominated by whites, yet here is an opportunity to move up and they are turning it down? Well, their loss is his gain. So, Freedom became a manager within six years of employment with the city. It was unheard of. What Freedom did not understand at this stage of his stay in America, are the nuances of the American work place relationship between African Americans and whites in America; specifically in the New York City Civil Service. While the management cadre of most of New York City Departments were populated by whites, the non-management cadre were usually populated by Blacks and other races. White people seem to be able to apply directly for management positions and are accepted. Blacks and other races on the other hand, mostly came in through entry level positions, then work their way up. Though openings for management positions are publicly advertised, the positions always seem to go white people. Those in the upper echelon of the city's civil service usually already have someone penciled down for these positions. The department of housing where Freedom works, occupies an 18-storey building in Manhattan; the 16th, 17th and 18th floors are the

management floors; ninety percent of the employees on these three upper floors are white. The other 15 floors are occupied by non-management staff, and ninety percent of the staff are black with other races and a handful of whites making up the rest.

There is a deep-rooted institutional racism that seems to play out in the way civil servants are employed in New York City Civil Service. The mistrust of the system by African Americans is an inevitable consequence of this institutional racism. The two African American supervisors ahead of Freedom had their reasons for choosing not to apply for the management position. Freedom would come to understand this later in his career and stay in the United States.

Freedom met Nicole the day he came for his job interview six years back at the lobby of the department of housing building. She had already been working there for about three years as a housing specialist supervisor. He asked one of the security guards for directions just as Nicole was standing by the guard station and equally speaking to another guard, she volunteered to direct him to the office he was going to. She rode with him on the elevator to the 18th floor where his interview was scheduled, and they had small talks on their way up. Nicole pointed him to the conference room once they got to the 18th floor, and rode the elevator back to her office cubicle on the 8th floor. When Freedom

resumed at the office, they struck a friendship and would occasionally go to lunch. Nicole is a forty-eight-year-old medium size African American woman with a deep mahogany skin. It's obvious she took great care of her skin because it shown like a morning sunrise. She is a beautiful woman by any standard. She graduated from Clark Atlanta University - a historically black university in Atlanta Georgia, where she read sociology. She worked mostly in the non-for-profit space after graduating from the university but decided to take a job with the City of New York a few years back because of the job security and the eventual good pension. She just never was able to keep an employment for more than two years at a time in the private/non-for-profit sector. She didn't think this was a smart trajectory to stay on as she got older. Nicole had never been married and have no children. As a matter of fact, she has given up on the idea of marriage and child bearing a long time ago. Not that she didn't want to get married or have children, men, especially black men just didn't seem to be attracted to her. At first, she tried very hard to understand what was so unattractive about her that men shun her. When she looked in the mirror, all she saw was a beautiful black curvaceous woman with a round symmetrical face, an aesthetically pleasing full lips and almond eyes. She has battled hard to try to understand why she couldn't find a man, or put more appropriately, why men don't seem to find her or approach her

romantically. She thought maybe it's because she is intimidating. She has been told many times by black and even white male friends that she can be intimidating at times. So, she tried her best to be friendlier and less intimidating. It didn't make any difference. She has also been advised to lower her standards but she has never been one to settle. She didn't think she was asking too much. All she wants is a man with a university education like herself, gainfully employed and decent-looking. Okay, she is willing to drop the decent-looking part, and maybe just maybe, the university education requirement. But she will never settle for an unemployed or unemployable man. Over her dead body. A man ought to be able to pay for the first date at the very least. She smiled at herself at the thought of her requirement that a man pay for the first date because she knows it's not a true requirement of hers. She has always paid her own bills on the few first dates she's been. It's been a long time now since she went on one, with a man.

Nicole is a sociologist and her own theory on the real reason behind her dating dilemma. She thinks it is as a result of "colourism" in America - prejudice based on the tone of your skin. She knows based on studies that the percentage of light skinned black women that were married are more than twice that of dark-skinned black women. So, the problem was most likely her deep black mahogany skin. Historically,

American dark skinned black women are not as valued as their lighter-skinned counterparts when seeking romantic partners. As it is with many other forms of racism in America, "colourism" was a by-product of slavery. As slave masters raped enslaved black women, the lighter-skinned black children that resulted from these relationships were given preferential treatment over their darker counterparts. These light skinned people would later be assigned by the slave masters to work inside the slave masters' house as opposed to working in fields or farms. This the origin of the designation you sometimes here in American lexicon: "house negro" and field negro" or the more derogatory - "house nigga" and "field nigga". This stratification has now become ingrained and internalized by many black people, and has become a thriving part of America's systematic racism.

So, Nicole has resigned to her fate. She wasn't one to feel sorry for herself. Life is what it is. Life is a card game. And life, the universe deals the card. We play the cards we are dealt. She stopped trying hard to find a man and focused on herself. She bought herself nice and expensive clothes, dressed to kill, and travelled on vacation any chance she gets. Many at the job even gossiped that she might even be a lesbian because she was friends with Simone - the openly lesbian potter at the office.

When Nicole saw Freedom that first day at the job, something about him struck her interest. Perhaps it was the brown checkered Ralph Lauren blazer, blue oxford button down shirt, khaki-coloured trousers and brown shoes. The man has good fashion taste. When she conversed with him in the elevator, she didn't have to ask if he was Nigerian, she knew. Nigerian men love fashion and she was familiar with his accent and the "properness" of his English language. He was tall. "Sexy" flashed through her mind but she suppressed it as she has learned to do these days. She checked his fingers and he had on a wedding ring. "He looked too young for me anyway" she muttered to herself. She had stopped entertaining the feeling she thought she might be having now a long time ago, so she shoved the feeling aside. In any case, they struck a friendship when he started working at the office. On their first lunch out together, Freedom found out she is 48 years old, 15 years older than himself. "She didn't look it" Freedom thought. Though Freedom is not as blunt as his wife Camille, Freedom was a pretty blunt person himself. So, he asked her: "are you married?". When she said "no", he asked "are you divorced?" She told him she had never been married and she has chosen not to date or have a romantic relationship. "Are you a lesbian?" Freedom asked. Nicole smiled, there was something about the way he asked the question that showed concern, it was clear to her that there was no malicious intent.

Perhaps she wasn't offended because she liked him, or maybe because she is not homophobic. She has always argued that non homophobic people shouldn't be offended when asked if they are gay. Those who ask have a right to know. "No, I am not a lesbian, I just chose not to date" Nicole replied. Later on in their friendship, Nicole would explain "colourism" to Freedom. Freedom was a good listener and Nicole loved this about him. "Makes sense" Freedom responded on the topic of "colourism" as part of the overall institutional racism in America. He told Nicole that based on her explanation, it is clear to him that "colourism" is also alive and thriving in Nigeria but in a different form. Though he hasn't come across any formal studies, how else can one explain the very high prevalence of skin bleaching by Nigerian women, and to a lesser extent, Nigerian men. He told Nicole how children of mixed race called "half caste" in Nigeria are perceived to be privileged by many. How if you have a white person or even an Indian, Chinese or any other non-black race as a partner in your business or as an employee, the chances of your business succeeding increases. These revelation surprised Nicole, she's always had this idealistic vision of the home continent and she hoped to visit one day. Then Freedom comes along and gives all these stories about post-colonial Nigeria and how African leaders have exploited their own people and impoverished

their Nations. And now colourism and a self-imposed type of racism.

Freedom and Nicole became very close and would occasionally go on lunch breaks together. However, Nicole was transferred to a field office in the Bronx a few months after Freedom resumed at the head office in Manhattan. She was visiting the head office about a year later and she called Freedom to ask if he was free for lunch. They had not seen for many months now and their telephone communication had become less and less with time. Freedom said he was free. They walked from their office on Williams Street to their favourite Italian restaurant on South Street Seaport. The first thing Nicole noticed was that Freedom was not wearing his wedding ring. She couldn't tell why that was the first thing she noticed. Perhaps she has had this suppressed wish that he'd be single one day. Their friendship had blossomed over the years. It was more than mere friendship at this point, maybe one could even say it was a platonic relationship. Even when they don't speak for a long time, whenever they eventually spoke, it is as if they've been talking every day. Sometimes, Nicole had these maternal protective feelings towards Freedom, perhaps because of the age difference or perhaps because of the pains he was going through in his marriage. Freedom has come to accept Nicole as a confidant and he tells her all the troubles in his marriage; how he really loved his wife initially and

she loved him back. But now it seems they are mortal enemies living under the same roof. Nicole could see the sadness in his eyes. He told Nicole they've decided to file for divorce and he has moved out of their home. Nicole didn't know what to say, she just listened. There was an awkward silence between them for a few minutes as they picked on their meals. Nicole broke the silence: "I have been transferred back to the head office" she said. "Oh fantastic" Freedom responded.

CHAPTER 7

Freedom and Nicole started spending more time together again. Nicole loved musical concerts, Broadway shows, nice restaurants and jazz. She invited Freedom to an Aretha Franklin concert at the Radio City Music Hall on Sixth Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets, on the west side of midtown Manhattan, New York City. Freedom has passed by that location severally but the thought of attending an event there never crossed his mind. Attending concerts at expensive New York City music halls just wasn't part of the lifestyle of the average Nigerian immigrant. Spending \$70 and sometimes hundreds of dollars just to watch a music concert? God forbid. Freedom accepted the invitation out of politeness and respect for his friendship with Nicole. He gave Nicole money for his ticket so she can purchase tickets for both of them with her credit card, and they were set.

On the day of the concert, a Saturday evening in June, as the excitement of summer was beginning to settle into the psyche of New Yorkers, Freedom went to Nicole's apartment on 97th street between central park west and St Nicholas. Though he works with the City Department of Housing, Freedom was still very confused by the complex designations of neighbourhoods in New York City - the village, Soho, downtown, midtown, uptown, etc. Oftentimes, it is difficult to know precisely where one ends and the

other starts. Though you could tell that the rich affluence of Manhattan was beginning to wither around 96th street and central park west, it was still difficult to tell where Harlem really starts around here. One could however begin to see the end of white populated apartment buildings along the Avenues, and the beginning of black populated apartment buildings. Ninety sixth and ninety seventh streets are kind of the confluence - a coming, flowing, meeting together of the black and white races before they totally separate at around 98th or perhaps 99th street. His mind flashed back to the bus ride to his first job assignment from Brownsville to Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. The dynamics of race relations in New York never ceases to amaze him. He walked the full length of 97th street to Nicole's apartment. He went in the building and met a concierge - a concierge? He identified himself and was told Ms. Spooner was expecting him - room 18c. Nicole's last name is Spooner. He went in the elevator where a white lady was already pressing the button to her floor. He entered and pressed the 18th floor. When he rang Nicole's door bell, she opened the door almost immediately. Whoa! she looked stunning! She ushered him in and asked him to sit down. "Would you like a drink?" she asked. "No thanks" Freedom responded. "I'll be just a minute, I'm almost ready" said Nicole as she dashed back into her bedroom. Freedom took in the living room - very neatly and tastefully decorated with a tan Italian love

seat, a single white chesterfield chair and a brown chair-and-a-half. An oriental style rug covered the centre portion of the hardwood floor. He was still taking the room in when she walked out. She had on a charming and very sexy black dress. She looked exceptionally beautiful. He walked her downstairs to a waiting taxi and opened the door for her on the left side of the backseat before walking over to the right to seat next to her. The cab took them to Radio City Hall. The hall was already packed and the show was just about to begin. The atmosphere was electric, lots of love song and everyone sang along. Aretha and her band were top notched, the acoustic in the hall was out of this world. The musical instruments travelled naturally and surrounded the hall as if one was embedded in the band itself. Aretha Franklin's voice was angelic. She serenaded the crowd with all their favourite songs: "Ain't No Way", "Chain of Fools", "I Say a Little Prayer". When she sang "Respect", all the women and some of the men went wild, everyone was standing now, and swaying to the music. Then she went into singing "Natural Woman". Everyone in the hall seemed now in a trance, they were hypnotised by the queen of soul, by her musical genius and exceptional gifts. Nicole glanced at Freedom; she was surprised he was singing along. "So, he knows Aretha Franklin's songs?" She thought. He never ceases to amaze her.

The musical concert was over at about midnight. It was too short! "Queen of soul! Queen of soul" many of the attendees screamed when it was all over.

In New York City on a Saturday night out, the night was still very young. They hailed a yellow taxi but the taxi didn't stop. They hailed a second one, and it also didn't stop. They looked at each other but decided not to speak about what both of them knew might be going on. They didn't want to ruin their perfect romantic night. Romantic? They weren't involved in that sense, at least not yet. It is not something they've discussed. Subtle racism by taxi drivers and especially yellow taxi cab drivers in New York City was something black people in New York City are well aware of. A taxi will refuse to stop for a black person but goes ahead to stop for a white person. Nicole and Freedom didn't want to discuss racism tonight; they came out here for a good time. The third taxi eventually stopped and Natalie told the driver the address - a restaurant at Union Square. A Spanish restaurant - Casa Casa. Natalie had already made reservations before living home. She knew the concert was starting early and would probably end at about midnight. The concert lasted 3 hours 30 minutes. It was well worth it.

Her initial plan was for them to go to an African American soul food restaurant in Harlem. She changed her plans because she was pretty sure no yellow taxi cab was going to take them there at late

hours. They'll need to take a yellow cab to around her place on 97th street, then come down and take one of the unmarked taxi cabs that runs all the way to Harlem. The other alternative would be to take the subway to Harlem. She was too nicely dressed for the trains; so, she settled for the Spanish restaurant. They ordered their meals, ate, had a lot of drinks in between talking about the concert, soul music, jazz and other sundry topics. She was always amazed at Freedom's knowledge of American pop culture. Freedom told her his knowledge came from being a mail subscriber to "Right On!" - an American teen magazine that covered everything and everyone in the African-American entertainment business. While in secondary boarding school in the 1970s, Freedom's friend - Frank sneaked the magazine into the hostel and shared with him. Freedom himself also became a subscriber later at the university. Aside this, "Soul Train" - an American musical variety television show was a favourite show of many young people of certain background in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s. Freedom's description of his upbringing and the things he was exposed to as a child growing up in Nigeria was contrary to the picture of an African kid Nicole had in her head. The picture she had was primarily painted by the American media, and it is that of Africa as an abyss of negative void, laden with poverty and malnourished children.

They had great conversations, a good meal and a fabulous time. They took a taxi and headed for Nicole's place at 97th street. On arrival, Freedom walked Nicole upstairs to her apartment, kissed on her on the cheek and was about to turn around to leave when she held his hand and drew him in. They embraced and their lips locked. They staggered towards the short corridor leading from the living room to the bedroom, Nicole rested her back on the wall at the end and Freedom closed in. They woke up later that Sunday morning in each other's arms. Nothing seemed to matter. They were meant for each other.

Freedom went home late that Sunday. He contemplated staying but there is work tomorrow. At lunch the next day, they spoke about the weekend and how they would handle this new turn in their relationship. They didn't work on the same floor, so that was not an issue. They decided that they would reduce doing lunch to twice a week. Not that they haven't seen people who are openly romantically involved at the job, but Freedom was still officially married.

CHAPTER 8

Nicole had started going through the initial symptoms of menopause a couple of years earlier - hot flashes, trouble sleeping, moodiness, irritability, and maybe even depression. She wasn't sure what was happening to her, she went to see her doctor. The doctor informed her she was going through menopause. She opted not take any medication and chose alternative therapy instead. She was really out of it for almost a year; then she started feeling better physically, mentally and emotionally. She started taking walks for about 40 minutes to an hour in the morning before getting ready for work. Her energy picked up and her general health improved. When she recently started getting very tired in the morning again, she thought she had the flu. Though it is summer time in New York and the flu is rare, it is not unheard of. She took some over-the-counter medication but the morning weakness continued. When she started vomiting, she went to see her doctor. They ran all sorts of test but found nothing. Based on the information on her medical records, Nicole hadn't had a romantic or sexual relationship for years. The doctor was also aware that Nicole had been treated for Menopausal Syndrome through alternative therapy and without medication. Her symptoms however seemed consistent with that of a pregnant patient. Nicole was shocked when the doctor suggested a pregnancy

test, then she became amused by the thought of it. Is this possible? Truly, she's been having the best sex of her life lately but she didn't think about using protection because she had not menstruated for as long as she can remember. The test was done and it came back positive. Nicole Spooner is pregnant.

Freedom had mixed feelings when Nicole told him about the pregnancy. He was elated at the prospect of having his own child. He has also proven to himself that he is capable of impregnating a woman, not that he really doubted the doctor's report that indicated he was okay. He was happy Nicole said abortion was out of the question and that she didn't believe in abortion. On the legal question of abortion in America, Nicole is pro-life for herself but pro-choice for others. She believes others should have the right to make a choice about themselves based on their peculiar circumstances. But she couldn't see herself choosing to abort a child under any circumstance, she didn't believe the conceived child should have to bear the consequences of whatever decisions made by adult living beings. In the rare cases where the issue is to choose between saving the life of mother or the child, then the best medical decision should be made by the doctors in consultation with the family. Whenever she had this debate with her friends in the university, many had said her stance are contradictory. She didn't think so. All her friends were die-hard pro-choice. They

believe you are either pro-life or pro-choice, there is no middle ground.

While Freedom was elated about the news of Nicole's pregnancy, he was also very confused about what the next steps would be for their relationship. Though they've been friends for many years, their romantic relationship was barely a year old. He had promised himself that he would take his time and stay away from romantic relationships for some time after his divorce from Camille became final. Now this. Is he going to ask Nicole to move in with him? Is he moving in with her? She certainly has a better living arrangement at the moment but he couldn't see himself moving in with a woman. Would they purchase a house together then? Were they getting married? There is absolutely no doubt in his mind about his love for Nicole and her love for him. But he couldn't see himself getting married to a woman fifteen years his senior, and then again, he didn't want to have a child out of wedlock. There were just so many questions.

When Nicole told her mother (Laila) about her pregnancy, she was ecstatic. Ms Spooner as everyone calls her mother is 74 years old, she lives on 116th street in Harlem. She has four children, two males who are both jazz musicians and live in New Orleans and Los Angeles respectively; and two females. Nicole is the third of the four children, with Grace, a 35-year-old dentist in Harlem being the

youngest. Ms. Spooner moved to Harlem from South Carolina in 1920 with her parents during what is now known as the Great Migration of African Americans from the American South to the North. Some refer to it as the Black Migration. In the early years of the 20th century, millions of black people migrated out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. Black people moved because of the poor economic conditions for them, and the extremity of racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern states. The South had the Jim Crow laws - a law that enforced racial segregation. Lynching of black people was the order of the day. Black people moved to the Northern parts of the United States to escape Jim Crow and in search of jobs. Harlem, New York was one of the most popular destinations for black people at the time.

Black people started building new places and new lives for themselves in their new location. They started to actively fight racial prejudice as well as confront the economic, political and social challenges that created the Urban Black Culture of today's America.

When World War 1 started in Europe in 1914, it affected the movement and flow of European migrants to the United States. These European migrants were the ones filling the labourers' positions of the industrialized urban cities in states like New York, Illinois and California. WW1 therefore led to a

shortage of labourers in these states. With the high demand for ammunition and other war equipment, these industries were forced to entice Black Americans to the North from the predominantly agricultural South. Upon arrival, black people found jobs in factories, slaughterhouses and foundries. They worked under very precarious and dangerous conditions; it was however better than being in the south without jobs and facing Jim Crow. The women had a tougher time finding work because they did mostly domestic work, and because there were limited positions relative to the number of workers available, it led to heated competition for domestic labour positions. There was also competition for housing as the cities became overcrowded. While segregation was not legal in New York, racism and prejudice were still very widespread. The whites made sure rent in certain areas were well above what even a well to do black person can afford. White neighbourhoods made local laws to not to sell homes to black people who could afford them. This was in spite of the United States Supreme Court law banning racially based housing. There was a lot of interracial tensions and riots at that time in U.S. history. As a result, black people started creating their own cities within big cities, starting the growth of a new, urban, Black culture; and the most famous of such black urban cities is Harlem in New York City. The unique black American culture thrived once black people were able to form their own

neighbourhoods. The Harlem Renaissance and a new black political activism was born, and this activism will later morph into the Civil Rights Movements. Ms Spooner's parents migrated with her as an only child to New York around this era. She was barely three months old. Blacks still faced a lot of discrimination in New York but things were relatively better. Ms Spooner met her husband Jake Spooner at a popular restaurant in Harlem where she worked as a waitress. Jake was a saxophonist for one of the various music bands in Harlem at the time. He was also a member NAACP (National Advancement of Coloured People), a civil rights organization that aims to eliminate racial discrimination. The Spooners made sure their kids had good education by enrolling them in private schools, and all four kids eventually had university education.

When Nicole talks to him about her family migration history to New York, Freedom instantly draws the analogy between his migration story and the migration story of others in America today with the Black Migration to North America, the push factors that push people from their homes, and the pull factors that pull them to new locations. Both his migration and the Spooners' were voluntary movements in search of a better life. This is unlike the slave trade where the migrants had no say in the matter but were captured, sold, and bought by

others, then transported to their new destination as properties of their new owners.

As the pregnancy progressed, Ms. Spooner started spending more time at Nicole's apartment. Freedom's divorce from Camille had been finalised long before Nicole got pregnant. However, neither Freedom nor Nicole spoke about marriage. Nicole wasn't really worried about it because she had settled in her head that she was never going to get married even before she met Freedom. She had also settled in her head that she wasn't going to have children because she hated the idea of single parenthood by choice. But here she is. This child is a blessing from God. She wasn't particularly religious but she professes the Christian faith and was raised as a Christian. She believes in God but attends church only on occasions. She actually doesn't belong to any particular church. Her spiritual struggles and journeys are stories for another day. She believes this child is a gift from the Almighty. She has even started fantasizing about having a girl and how she would dress her up in cute pink and purple outfits. She has delayed finding out the sex of the baby until the seventh month. Her sister Grace also comes to help her out every now and then. Grace was already planning a baby shower and penning down the guest list.

Freedom spent a lot of time at Nicole's these days and has even left some clothes there for the days he

sleeps over. He's been very loving and caring, and has attended all her prenatal appointments with her. They've gone out on dates and continued enjoying each other's company. As a matter of fact, you could even say their friendship and love for one another has waxed stronger. Ms. Spooner, Nicole's mother has taken a liking to Freedom. She likes the way he treats her daughter. She has also not mentioned the issue of marriage with Nicole. Nicole tells her mum everything, maybe not everything but a lot. Ms Spooner is well aware of what the issues are and she is not one to pressure her children. When Grace, her other daughter started having issues in her marriage lately and moved in with her, she said nothing about Grace's issues with her husband, she simply listened. Grace knew she and her daughter can stay with her mum for as long as they needed and mummy will take care of them. Ms Spooner is a great cook and there is always home cooked food at her place, ready at moment's notice. It is clear she spent her life working in restaurants, first as a waitress and later as a chef. She started coming over to cook for Nicole and sometimes she would bring in food already made from her home. When she is cooking at Nicole's and Freedom is there, he hangs around her in the kitchen and volunteers to help. She would always tell him: " go sit down my African prince, the food will be ready sooner than you think" he insists on standing around anyway and would help her with little things, and listen to her stories. She reminded

him of his own mother. Sometimes when he thinks about his mother, Freedom wells up. What is the whole essence of this migration thing anyway, he has not seen his mother now for almost a decade, neither has he seen his father or siblings. What has he really achieved all these years living in America? Granted, he is now a CPA, an MBA degree holder, and has a good job with the city. He is also doing private accounting consulting on the side and eventually plans to set up a private accounting firm. But couldn't he have achieved same or more in Nigeria? It is difficult to tell. Nigeria still hasn't improved economically or politically since he left. The military conducted an election but took power back from the winner. It is hard to gauge how much he would have achieved had he been living in Nigeria. A few of his classmates are doing really well, you could even say they are doing better than himself. But the overwhelming majority are doing very poorly he heard. Some are still unemployed ten plus years after graduating from the university. His thoughts were disrupted by Ms Spooner's announcement that dinner is ready. Nicole's sister was around with her 4-year-old daughter, Laila who is named after Nicole's mother. It was a Sunday and Ms Spooner has made her Sunday dinner special of homemade macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, cornbread, seasoned greens, mashed potatoes and gravy. Umm. Nicole jumped up with excitement. She craves

all sorts of food these days and it seems at least three of her cravings have been served.

CHAPTER 9

Freedom had not seen Omo for quite a while. As a matter of fact, they've not seen for over a year. With work life, school, family and all the other hustle and bustle of American life, visiting people in their homes was not part of the ways the American lifestyle operated, at least not for immigrant Nigerians like Freedom and Omo. However, they do speak on the phone at least once a month. They were somewhat abreast with happenings in each other's life. They were quite happy to meet at Freedom's apartment on DeKalb Avenue in Fort Green, Brooklyn.

After Freedom moved out of the Brownsville apartment, Omo had gone on to complete his degree in electrical engineering from Brooklyn college at the top of his class. He was recruited directly from the university by a computer technology company at their New York City office. His relationship with Edith had begun to have some serious problems even back when Freedom was still staying with him. Edith's ex-boyfriend, the father of her son had been released from prison after serving five years for selling illicit drugs. He sold crack cocaine - a highly addictive drug that is produced by the conversion of cocaine into a smokable form that were sold in smaller portions and distributed to more people. The name crack came from the crackling noise that is

made when users smoke the drugs. It was relatively cheap with potent and devastating effects.

When Omo arrived the United States and eventually resided in Brownsville in the 1980s, he was totally ignorant of the problem of the crack cocaine epidemic and its devastating effects in America's inner-city neighbourhoods and particularly within the African American communities in New York City. Perhaps if he was aware, he would not have lived in Brownsville. The epidemic of this relatively cheap illicit drug was at its peak and Brownsville was one of its epicentres when Omo lived there. The new drug led to increase of addictions, deaths, and drug-related crimes in black neighbourhoods. On his very first night at Omo's house, Freedom experienced the sounds of the drug wars. His experience that first night and the Yusef Hawkins murder in Bensonhurst would shape the way Freedom viewed America, and led him to developing a keen interest in understanding the life of African Americans in America and the issues of America's race relations in general.

Shortly after Freedom moved out of Omo's apartment, Edith's ex-boyfriend started coming to see her again, first under the pretense of coming to see his son. Edith protested, telling him that his son was old enough to go see him or they can arrange to meet wherever and whenever they chose. However, one thing led to another and her son's father began

to threaten Edith. At that point, Omo moved out of Brownsville to Queens. He stopped seeing Edith, then he stopped calling when an unfamiliar male voice picked her phone when he called her. What he didn't know was that Edith had relapsed. He didn't even know Edith previously abused illicit drugs in the first place. It wasn't a topic they discussed. The stress from the situation with her son's father and the fact that her son had now followed in the father's footsteps selling drugs, got the best of Edith. She became hooked on drugs again, later fell sick and was admitted in the hospital. When Omo went to see her at the hospital, she had lost a lot of weight but was happy to see him. Omo apologised for not calling her for so long but she said "no I totally understand why you took the decision to stop calling" She thanked him for continuing to send her money despite the circumstances. Then she narrated all she had been through. She had started using crack cocaine again with her son's father. Her son's father didn't use crack before he went to prison, she was the one who used drugs but had successfully completed rehabilitation with the help of her parents and some close family members. She was drug free for many years before she met Omo. But when Leroy (the son's father) came back from prison, his gang of friends were no longer in charge of the streets, some of them were incarcerated and others were either dead or had moved from the neighbourhood. He couldn't really get back in the game, not with the

younger players that now ruled the streets. He did little hustling here and there but just couldn't get going. Then he started using, and once she had that stuff around, she started using too. They started having a lot of arguments, mostly over money. The dispute escalated to more aggressive language, then physical and sexual abuse while under the influence. Fights erupted when there was no money to buy drugs or other daily needs because all the money Omo sent her and the little Leroy brought in had already been expended on drugs. She hadn't seen her son for a long time now. Somehow, she feels she has let him down by starting to use drugs again. Her action may have contributed to him going into selling drugs. Since she was admitted in the hospital, neither her son nor his father has come to see her. She gave the hospital Omo's name and phone number as her next of kin, and that's how Omo came to know she was admitted because the hospital called him. She looked very frail and there was a lot of sadness in her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks as she spoke. Omo was tearing up himself. Edith is a good woman but life happened. At the end of the hospital visiting hour, Omo left the hospital and promised to be back to see her the next day. When he came back the next day, he was informed that Edith died a couple of hours after he left the hospital the day before.

Though they never actually lived together, Edith's death had a profound effect on Omo. First, he was angry that such a nice person would die without having tasted anything good out of life. Then he was mad at black people in America. How can some people have so much opportunities and choose to do drugs and ruin their lives. Then he remembered where he was coming from and became mad at the black race as a whole "why e be say na black people dey always suffer everywhere" he muttered to himself in Nigerian pidgin English. Why must black people be the one to bear the brunt of all sufferings in the world? He was depressed for some time, then decided he would visit his parents and siblings in Nigeria. His annual leave was coming up. It's been almost a decade now since he came to the United States and he hasn't set eyes on his parents. Life is too short. He called the airline ticket agent and bought a ticket to Nigeria.

CHAPTER 10

Omo boarded a plane and headed home to Nigeria for a visit. He was visiting Nigeria for the first time since he left. He was excited but also apprehensive, and really didn't know what to expect. When the plane touched down at Muritala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos, his first impression was how unkept the fields and the landing tracks looked. He took a direct flight from New York to Lagos, and arrived Lagos in the morning. His plan was to join a connecting local flight that will take him to Benin City. Omo's parents and siblings live in the Edo state capital, Benin City. "It is now called Edo State" he thought, it was Bendel State when he left, and Nigeria had 19 states but now, there are thirty-six states. Two states have been carved out of the old Bendel State - Edo and Delta states. He was born and raised in Benin City but he remembers fondly the visits by his family to his ancestral home town of Uromi at least twice a year, to see his grandparents and the extended family. The pampering of his grandparents who are now late and the warm welcome of the extended family. He also remembers the occasional warning looks from their mum when he or his siblings got too close to certain family members, she didn't want them to be closed to, the "evil" family members.

As the plane taxied towards the terminal building, the airport looked semi empty and desolate but for a few

planes that were parked at the terminal, and the broken-down planes and vehicles in the bushes. He was getting dispirited. He tried to rationalise in his head that perhaps things looked this way because he was coming from one of the busiest airports in perhaps one of the busiest cities in the world, New York City. He needed to focus on thoughts that will keep his spirits up.

When he arrived the baggage claim area, the conveyer belt looked terrible, battered, broken and galloping along like the #2 train on Broadway East New York elevated tracks in Brooklyn. Some airport staff were holding luggage carts that seemed they ought to have been retired by now. He asked one of them for a cart and the cart guy demanded money. His friend Uche who travels to Nigeria often had given him some Naira notes. Omo asked Uche why he needed the Naira notes when he can exchange his money once he gets out of the airport; Uche told Omo he'll find out when he gets to Nigeria. "It seems you have forgotten where you came from" Uche told him.

Omo dipped his hand in his pocket and gave the cart guy some Naira notes. The cart guy smiled and offered to help Omo with his luggage, Omo said "no, thank you" and the guy handed the cart over to Omo. The heat at the baggage claim area was stifling. The air conditioning system wasn't working or if it was, you couldn't feel it. Omo was sweating profusely.

There were so many checkout points and every official demanded “something”. Cash exchanged hands in the open. “Welcome back to Nigeria”, Omo muttered to himself. Finally, he got through all the arrival formalities and met his younger brother Itua. Itua has really grown since he left. He is six years younger than Omo. Itua is the youngest of the three children of his parents, and Omo was the eldest. Itua is now a medical doctor and planning to leave the country soon for the United Kingdom. Things aren't going well in the country.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same” Omo thought. It was 1994 and the General Sani Abacha years as the military head of State in Nigeria. The government was cracking down ruthlessly on political dissidents accused of several bombings across the country. Moshood Abiola, the winner of the presidential election held in 1993 was jailed for treason, he subsequently died in prison custody. Perceived enemies of the government in power were jailed and others were hanged for treason. Omo's parents advised him to stay in a hotel they had already arranged for him; for security reasons they counselled. “I travelled all this way back home but have to stay in the hotel for security reasons?” Omo thought.

Despite all that was happening in Nigeria at the time, Omo enjoyed his 2-week stay in Nigeria. He was happy to see his parents and siblings, and a couple

of his classmates. Quite a number of his school mates have travelled abroad to Europe or to the United States. Some have moved to other states in Nigeria, most are in Lagos.

Omo's parents were very concerned that Omo was still unmarried. "You should find a wife before returning, you are not getting any younger" his mother told him. Both parents even proposed arranging a nice girl from a nice home for him before he leaves. Omo smiled at their proposition and told them he is actively searching but his time in Nigeria was too short to achieve their expectations.

On his first weekend in Benin City however, Itua invited Omo to a colleague's wedding. Omo met Roli, a final year student of biochemistry at the university of Benin. Roli was a pretty young lady, highly intelligent and was fun to converse with. He wooed her; "for the fun of it" he told himself. He felt she was a little too young for him. However, they spent the majority of the time he had left together, and she came daily to see him until he left back for the U.S. He kept in contact with her by phone and by mail. She made weekly trips to the Post and Telecommuting Department (P&T) on Ring Road Benin City to use the payphones there to call Omo on the weekends. Roli called Omo weekly and also began to spend a lot of time with his parent at their home. Though they didn't see physically for about a year, Freedom became very fond of her and looked

forward to her calls and their conversations. Eventually, he invited her over to the U.S on a fiancé Visa and they cliqued as a couple during this visit. Roli travelled back to Nigeria and Freedom's parents didn't waste any time in going to perform the necessary traditional family introductions between their family and Roli's. A month later, they went ahead with Omo's blessing to perform the traditional wedding ceremonies and paid Roli's bride price. Though Omo couldn't attend the wedding ceremonies in person due to his work schedule; in Edo custom, brides are married to the family; handed to the groom's father if he was still living, and if he is not, the bride is handed over to the eldest male in the groom's family. The groom's family then hands over the bride to their son. It is believed that the bride is married into the groom's family and becomes part of that family once her bride price is paid. So, this ceremony can be performed in the absence of the groom, if he is unavoidably absent. Roli's dad is Edo and her mum Itshekiri. Roli left for the United States soon after the traditional wedding. One month after Roli's arrival in the U.S, Omo wedded her at the downtown Brooklyn courthouse, Freedom was the witness. Barely a year later they had a daughter.

"How madam and baby" Freedom asked soon as they settled down to their bottle of beer. "My brother dem dey fine, we thank God" Omo said, then asked "How your own big bele madam ?". "Dem they push

am small small my bro" Freedom responded; he then told Omo that Nicole's sister Grace was planning a baby shower and she had asked Freedom to be around during the shower, essentially to help with bringing the gifts home. The shower of course was going to be an all-female affair. Freedom dreaded the idea of being the only male at the event, so one of the reasons he asked Omo to come see him was to ask that he accompany him to the baby shower. He couldn't imagine being the only man in the midst of all the women. He could have asked over the phone but he also wanted to see his friend face to face, and get a first-hand gist on his visit to Nigeria. In any case, they've not spent time together for a while. The whole baby shower thing did not make sense to him. Though he is a Christian, he couldn't help the thought of his African beliefs and superstitions associated with celebrating a child before its birth. Many Christians in Nigeria are still in that space where their traditional cultural beliefs are at crossroads with their Christian beliefs. Traditionally, many believe that the gods or ancestors may be angered if a child is celebrated before its birth, and the baby or the mother, or both might be cursed with bad luck, illness or even worse - death. He however wiped this thought from his head by saying to himself "African customs don't apply in the west". In any case, he knows that many people in Nigeria now have baby showers and nothing has happened to them or their babies.

Nicole was now over seven months pregnant. The gender of the baby is now known. It's a girl! Nicole is beside herself with joy; and Grace, her younger sister has kicked the baby shower planning into full gear. Nicole's favourite aunt, auntie Sheila has been informed. Nicole was also informed of the baby shower even though certain etiquette says the celebrant shouldn't be informed or involved. Grace didn't really want her involved either but she needed her input with the guest list. Nicole didn't want any of her co-workers invited, so they decided on close family members and friends, and came up with twenty guests in total after much pruning.

Grace started working out other details herself once the guest list was settled; then the date and location. Identifying the right venue was an issue. They only had 20 guests on the list, so Nicole's apartment would have been able to accommodate them as she has a nice size terrace and they wouldn't have to worry about transporting the gifts. However, if it is held there, Grace and maybe two or three others would have to stay behind to help with the clean-up. Knowing Nicole, she would want to get involved or at least supervise. Cleaning up after a party during the third trimester was definitely a bad idea. So, Grace decided on renting a small hall in Harlem and inviting Freedom to help transport the gifts home. On the games to be played at the shower, she had many ideas. Her best friend Charlotte was a master of

games, and she came up with a ton of ideas. Games such as "Guess How Big Mom's Belly is", "Guess the Baby Food", and many more were on the list. For the Gifts, Nicole had already created a gift registry at Macy's department store. But guests can choose to bring their own presents. Baby clothes, toys, and diapers were on the gift list for the baby. Masks, scented candles and makeup for mommy. The theme for the baby shower was southern tea time. For food, it's going to be a buffet to which only close family members were to contribute. The menu included the usual southern suspects - fried chicken and waffles, fried catfish and grits, baked mac and cheese, fresh salads, etc. Then drinks; lemonade and different teas, sodas and juice. And of course, a baby shower cake! Small bags with candies, cookies will go to the guests as favours to thank them for coming.

A lot went into planning a baby shower and Grace was a meticulous and detail-oriented person. She checked her notes several times and was satisfied that her sister was going to have a great time on D Day.

CHAPTER 11

Freedom, Nicole and their 3-year-old daughter Emotan were on a 1,220 kilometres vacation trip on highway I-95 south from New York City to Charleston, South Carolina. They left New York City as early as 6 am, planning to make a stop at Myrtle Beach, spend three days there, then proceed to Charleston to see auntie Sheila. It is a trip both Nicole and Freedom have been looking forward to for some time now; at least since auntie Sheila made them both promise at the baby shower that they would visit her in Charleston soon as the baby was old enough to travel. Freedom loves to drive, especially on American highways. He rented a car and purchased a map. Ordinarily, the drive to Myrtle Beach from New York City would probably take about 11 hours if one were to drive there directly. But they made many short detours along the way - Philadelphia, Atlantic City, Hershey, Baltimore, Washington DC, Arlington, Richmond, and Williamsburg. At Williamsburg, Nicole suggested they spend night as it was late; this way, Emotan can get a proper rest and they can have a fresh start the next day. Freedom who had been driving for about 15 hours at that point agreed as he could also use the rest himself. They spent the night at a hotel in Williamsburg and left for Myrtle Beach the next day.

Arriving Myrtle Beach, they got settled in their hotel room and headed for the Myrtle Beach Boardwalk and Promenade. It is Nicole's favourite place to hang out when visiting Myrtle Beach, and she has visited many times. The boardwalk seems to be over a mile, maybe a mile and half or a little less. It's a long sandy oceanfront with immaculately clean beach edges with many shops and restaurants. The first thing that struck Freedom was that almost everyone greets and says "hi y'all" in that accent he first encountered on his first day in the U.S when he met Renee, the lady who helped him at the airport. There were other expressions of greetings and other accents but it was difficult not to notice the prevalence of the southern drawl. People would look at Emotan and say something pleasing. At first Freedom was startled by the salutations from total strangers who were merely walking by. He didn't know how much he had imbibed the New York City culture of Minding Your Own Business (MYOB), keeping to yourself, and keeping your nose out of other people's business, until now. So, this greeting business became a sort of culture shock for Freedom. Not that this manner of behaviour was strange to him. As a matter of fact, this is how people behaved where he came from in Nigeria and he would even dare to say in all ethnic cultures that constitutes Nigeria, except of course Lagos because of its cosmopolitan, overpopulated, congested and fast paced lifestyle. Even at that, you will still get an occasional Yoruba courtesy in pockets

of places in Lagos. Not in New York, it seems everyone has learned to mind their business there. So, at first, Freedom didn't even notice that they were the ones people were greeting until he noticed Nicole returning their greetings and slowing down to instruct Emotan to greet back. "Say hello" she would say to Emotan.

Nicole would usually bring along a book or two, and spend her first couple of days at the very serene section of the Boardwalk and Promenade with its natural environment. Not this time, they only walked through that section, then headed for the fun section with beachfront restaurants, shops and a lot of fun things to do. They visited the aquarium, playgrounds, Trampoline Park and a lot of family fun places. Though Emotan is probably too young to remember this Myrtle Beach vacation in the future, she seemed to have had a lot of fun. They set out two days later for the two and a half hours drive to auntie Sheila's in Charleston.

They got off Interstate 26 East and took an isolated road that went through a wooded area. It reminded Freedom of his family trips with his parents and siblings to their village near the Nigerian Institute for Oil-Palm Research (NIFOR) in the suburbs of Benin City, Nigeria. Auntie Sheila lives in a Single-family home on a large unfenced plot of land. The next house seems to be at least half a kilometre away, she had a sizeable vegetable garden in the backyard

with many fruit trees scattered around. Auntie Sheila and her husband Pete came out to meet them. "Look at ma African princess" she exclaimed as she picked Emotan from Nicole. Two other middle-aged women came out to help with taking their luggage in. As auntie Sheila and Nicole talked and headed straight for the kitchen where auntie Sheila was putting finishing touches to dinner, some other family members arrived and Freedom was introduced to a bunch of them with whom he shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. The dinner table reminded Freedom so much of his home back in Nigeria. The food had every and all things southern: macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, red beans and rice, cornbread, seasoned greens, mashed potatoes and gravy, and of course chitterlings. Freedom ate all except chitterlings. Chitterlings are the small intestines of domestic animals, usually made from pig intestines. Not that Freedom hadn't had small intestines from domestic animals before. As a matter of fact, goat and cow intestines are some of his favourite back Nigeria. Pig or pork is not the type of meat he would choose but he didn't forbid it. But there was something about the aroma of chitterlings that Freedom just couldn't stomach. Thirteen family members sat at the dinner table that night. Well not exactly at the table, auntie Sheila's dinner table could only take six people, the rest were sitting in the living room chairs and stools. It reminded Freedom of

home as he watched everyone eating, drinking and talking.

"Emotan, that's such a beautiful name" auntie Sheila said. "What's the meaning" she asked. Nicole glanced at Freedom giving him a sort of "ok" nod. After the baby shower, Nicole had asked Freedom for some Bini baby girl names to choose from. At first, she had said she wanted African names but Freedom reminded her that Africa is a continent. Then she said Nigerian names, and Freedom reminded her that Nigeria is a country with many ethnic Nationalities. Then she finally got the drift and said Bini names. He came up with many but the moment he mentioned Emotan, Nicole fell in love with the name, she asked him the meaning, and he said "Lazy bones". She busted into a laughter so severe that Freedom had to help her to the bed to get some rest and regain her composure. Afterwards, Freedom asked her what was so funny about lazy bones that warranted such drama. "Lazy bones" was my mother's nickname for me as a child because I hated doing house chores but things turned around and I became a very hard worker after my teenage years. Then Freedom told her the story behind the name Emotan. In the history of the great Benin Empire during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great, the king of Benin Kingdom from 1440 AD to 1473 AD, Emotan was the second wife of a prominent Benin chief named Azama. Azama's first

wife took care of all the domestic work in the home and also gave birth to all the children. Emotan whose real name is Uwaraye was barren and couldn't cook, she also hated house chores, hence her husband nicknamed her "Emotan" - lazy bones. She was however good at taking care of the domestic animals, making seasonings and spinning threads which she sold at the central market in Benin City at the time. Upon the death of her husband, she became homeless. Traditionally, she would have returned to her parents' home but her parents had long been dead. She then set up a hut by her shop in the market to live in. She used her hut as a free daycare centre for children of her fellow market women. They would leave their children at her place to go take care of their business and come back to pick their kids up after they are done. Though many of these market women offered to pay Emotan for her services, she refused any payment. The parents also observed how well she took care of children and how fond of her the children were. In this way Emotan became the first person to open a daycare/childcare centre in Benin Kingdom in the early 1400s and it was Not-for-profit, and operated as a charitable gesture to her fellow citizens. Also, when Ewuare the Great, king of Benin Empire was still a prince, he went to war with his brother who had stolen his kingship. Emotan used her hut as a hiding place for the prince and helped Ewuare in his quest to take back his stolen kingship. When Emotan died, the king decreed that

she be buried at her hut and a tree planted there in her memory. The king also decreed that everyone having a celebration in the kingdom must have a procession and pay homage to Emotan at her hut. The tree planted at the graveside stood there for centuries. About five hundred years later, a sculpture of her image was erected where the tree was planted and the sculpture is still there till this day. Amazingly, the Binis still pay homage to Emotan till this day. "Whoa" exclaimed Nicole. " Emotan, it is then" So their daughter was named Emotan. Auntie Sheila couldn't stop smiling all through the story. Of course, she knows whose nickname was "lazy bones" and she thought Emotan was the perfect name for Nicole's daughter.

Freedom woke up to a medley of food aromas. Nicole had warned him to get ready for the mother of all breakfasts as it is tradition for African Americans to eat a lot of food for breakfast. When they got to the breakfast table, it had chicken - "chicken for breakfast?" Freedom muttered. We are not talking chicken tenders but the real stuff; deep-fried chicken. The breakfast table also had scrambled eggs, waffles, grits, ham, corn fritters, bacon, fried apples – "fried apples?" and pork sausage. Freedom loves to eat but he felt dizzy just looking at the food. They ate as much they could and headed for a tour of Charleston. They only had two days. " We need to

make it back here to Charleston when we have more time" Freedom told Nicole as they drove off to town.

Charleston is a charming beautiful southern city. Nicole had already told Freedom about the long and storied history of the city that is deeply rooted in the pre-American civil war era, and the American history of slavery. About 40 percent of African slaves were said to have been brought through the Charleston Harbour. Nicole had written down a few places for them to visit on this short visit. They went to McLeod Plantation Historic Site - this is a huge heritage site covering tens of acres. The plantation left a serious impression on Freedom, the brief lesson on the transatlantic slave trade he was taught in high school back in Nigeria and all the extensive readings he has done on his own about slavery did not prepare him for what he was witnessing in person. The place has really been well preserved as one is easily transported back in time to see or at least imagine the relationships between those who lived and worked on the plantation. They toured the houses built for enslaved families, viewed antiques owned by former slave owners. They also went to Charleston City market. The set up of the market reminded Freedom of Agbado market back in Benin City – Agbado is the second most popular market in Benin City. The manner in which the traders displayed their wares, the street market style mimicked the open markets back in Nigeria. Everything took Freedom

back home. Freedom saw many familiar products - artwork, food, clothing, and artisans that make traditional sweet grass baskets, baskets just like the ones back in Nigeria. He purchased the basket; he just couldn't resist. It became very apparent to Freedom that in spite of all the Africans that were forcibly and savagely brought to America went through, they still managed to retain very deep connection with the heritage of their homeland.

They spent the next day visiting some family members around Charleston and driving around to see some more tourist sites. Suddenly it was time to start packing for their journey back to New York.

CHAPTER 12

Four years into their romantic relationship and with a child together, Freedom and Nicole were not married. Freedom virtually lives at Nicole's apartment; he spends eighty percent of his time there. However, he still keeps his apartment in Brooklyn and goes there occasionally. He still had reservations about moving in with her. Something in him just didn't agree with it, though it made absolutely no sense at this point that he continues to pay rent where he doesn't really stay. He thought about marriage to Nicole a lot but just couldn't bring himself to accepting that she was the right person for him. They click on so many levels but he couldn't get over the barrier that their age difference created in his head. He feels it is not fair to Nicole that she has accepted him wholeheartedly but he hasn't reciprocated. Not that she complains, it seems Nicole has truly made peace with the fact that she wasn't going to ever get married. She has never brought up the topic and sometimes this makes Freedom nervous. He believes she does think about it, just that she suppresses that thought. Life can sometimes be a droll. Here is a woman who loves him and he loves her back but she had to be fifteen years older. Why couldn't she be younger than him or at least same age, or if she's going to be older, with no more than a couple of years. But fifteen years? Freedom just couldn't see what the future will

look like. Perhaps he doesn't love her as much as he thinks. If he did, why would her age be a barrier? Nicole didn't look her age. As a matter of fact, people often complemented them on how good they look together. "Do you know we are domestic partners?" Nicole said to him jokingly the other day. He didn't say anything in return. He has heard the term before but never really paid attention to its meaning. So, he looked it up, and found out that domestic partnership is a relationship between couples who live together and share a common domestic life but are not married to each other or to anyone else. He found out that people in domestic partnerships receive legal benefits that guarantee right of survivorship, hospital visitation, and other rights. Freedom's knowledge of domestic partnership kind of gave him some perspective on the kind of relationship he had with Nicole. He then made peace with himself, at least for now.

When he went to his apartment in Brooklyn to check his emails and telephone voicemail, he found out that Omo had called him to ask if he was back from South Carolina. Omo asked to be called back as soon as possible. There was a sense of urgency in his voice and he wondered why Omo didn't call him at Nicole's. He immediately picked up the phone and called Omo back at the phone number he left. "Hello" an unfamiliar voice answered. "Hello, may I speak with

Omo please" Freedom responded. Omo came on the line: "oh boy, how you dey, you don come back?".

"Wetin happen?" Freedom asked "Long story, if you fit wait for me, I dey come your house. I'll give you the gist when I get there" Omo said. Omo came about an hour later. He looked bad, haggard and a lot leaner than the last time Freedom saw him. What could have happened Freedom thought. He asked Omo if he had eaten and he said no. He told him to settle down while he dashed to the Chinese restaurant a block away to get some food. When he came back, they settled down to eat while Omo narrated his ordeal. He's been having a lot of disagreements with his wife; she called the police a couple of days ago and he has been put out of his home. Omo's marriage started having cracks soon after his wife got a job. He had noticed before then that whenever they had arguments which is mostly over money and budgeting issues, she would always say: "wait till I get a job and have my own money". Omo didn't take these threats seriously. Soon after they had their second child, she started pressuring him about them getting a home in the New York suburb of Long Island. She would always say to him: " people that are not up to your level and do not have the kind of prestigious job you have or earn half what you earn, live in their own homes in the suburbs; and here we are squeezing in a one-bedroom apartment in this glorified project called Lera apartments in

Queens". Omo wasn't ready to buy a home but he caved-in to her suggestion. To him, it was becoming a blackmail. He bought a home in Long Island. With the new home came mortgage payments, home maintenance, higher utility bills, new taxes; county tax, school tax, etc. Transportation cost to and from Omo's job also increased. Now, he needed to drive to the Long Island railroad train station in his town, pay to park his car at the train station, then take the Long Island rail road to Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, then pay another fare on the New York City subway to his job in Manhattan. For food shopping and running their home, Omo still gave his wife the same amount he was giving her before they moved to their new home. They also had to purchase a second car as the locally run public transportation system was infrequent and driving to and from shopping malls was just the norm in their new town. Soon, his wife started complaining that she needed an increase in the money for running their home, her expenses had increased also. Omo obliged with a ten percent increase but it wasn't enough from the wife's perspective. The pressures started getting to Omo and his wife. They started getting snappy with one another. A lot of verbal altercations followed and then occasional shoving. They would have shouting matches in front of the children. To avoid the arguments, Freedom started staying late at work and would often come home when everyone was already asleep. He would leave in the morning before his wife

and kids woke up. Then his wife got a job and enrolled the kids in daycare. Freedom didn't think the new arrangements was in their collective interest. She didn't really consult with him before making the decision. On her part, the wife told Omo that she had told him time without number that she's tired of staying home 24/7, 365 days. She needed to make her own money. She got a job as a nursing aid at a geriatric home in the next town, a 10-hour shift that ran from 8am to 6pm for 5 days a week. Once she started, the kids could only see their mum a few hours daily before going to bed, and they hardly ever see Omo. Aside that, the income his wife earned wasn't nearly enough to pay for the children's daycare. Not that she paid for the daycare, Freedom did. Freedom and the wife were arguing over the issue of daycare and her getting a job for umpteenth time when the argument went out of hand a couple of days ago. She vehemently refused to give up her job, she needed to make her own money she insisted. Name calling and a shoving match followed, she called the police and now there is a restraining order against him to stay away from his wife and the kids. A court date has been set for him and his wife to appear at the family court.

Freedom gave Omo the spare keys to his apartment. He didn't have to say it, Omo knew he could stay for as long as he needed. Freedom also called Omo's wife and listened to her version of the story. She

regrets that they both let things deteriorate to this point. Freedom told her: “everything would be okay” On the court date, Freedom accompanied Omo to the court. After hearing the case, the judge recommended that Omo and his wife see a court appointment mediator. Though Omo's wife assured the mediator that Omo did not pose any danger to her and the kids, the mediator still did not recommend vacating the order of protection outrightly, instead he recommended that they attend domestic violence counselling and family therapy. A visiting schedule for Omo to see his kids was worked out. The visits will be supervised by a social worker pending the outcome of the therapy and counselling sessions. Neither Omo nor his wife expected that the outcome at the court will be this serious. In any case, Omo spent the next four months at Freedom's apartment and went to see his wife and kids for three hours on Saturdays. The order of protection was eventually vacated after the completion of family therapy and Omo moved back with his family.

CHAPTER 13

Freedom was visiting Nigeria fourteen years after he migrated to the United States. He wished it was under a different circumstance but it wasn't. His dad died a month earlier. He spoke with his dad just a week before his death and his dad sounded as if he was in good spirits. They talked about all the usual – the state of things in Nigeria, his mum, all his siblings. Freedom has five siblings, four males and a female. All four males have now migrated to Europe, one in Belgium, one in Germany and two in the UK. The female is the last born of the family and had just graduated from a private university in Nigeria. They talked about how every able-body young Nigerian who have the means to leave the country have left. Those who are left behind are desperately trying to leave by any means necessary. There are thirty houses on their street in Benin City, and there is no single house from which someone has not migrated out of the country to a country in Europe, to the United States, Canada, Japan, South Africa, Libya and other African countries. His dad was lamenting how low the country has been relegated due to bad leadership from both the political and military ruling class. Can you imagine Nigerians migrating to South Africa in search of a better life? Freedom remembers all the South African teens that went to secondary boarding school with him on Nigeria's government

scholarships. Nigeria was one of the strongest supporters of the anti-apartheid movement. Now, Nigerians are migrating to South Africa, Libya and Ghana, in search of a better life? He was in the final year at the university when the Nigerian government ordered the deportation of illegal immigrants from Nigeria, and about two million fellow Africans were said to have been deported. Of the two million deported, one million were said to be Ghanaians and this led to a new phrase in Nigerian lexicon: "Ghana Must Go". He remembers taking part in the protest by Nigerian University students against the government policy. The students thought the policy was unfair to fellow Africans. Freedom and his dad spoke about the Nigerian economy, inflation, high cost of living, increase in the pump price of petrol; and the complete breakdown in the public school's system. The universities are endlessly on strike and it takes six to seven years to now complete a four-year degree. Parents now enrol their kids in private primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Freedom had a lively conversation with his father as usual. Just a week later, he was gone. Freedom was crushed. He had been planning to visit Nigeria for the past seven or more years but just didn't quite get to it. Aside his financial obligations to himself and Emotan, he also sends home - a monthly stipend to his parents, facilitated the migration of his four brothers financially and was responsible for his sister's school fees until she graduated from the

University recently. However, his not visiting Nigeria until now was not only due to financial constraints, it was also all the constant negative news that comes out of Nigeria. When the country returned to civilian government a couple of years back, he thought that was the greatest news he's heard about the country in a long. Freedom and his dad spoke about all these things.

Freedom's dad had been a politician in the 1960s. He won elections into the National Assembly in the 1964 Nigerian National elections. It was a contentious election marked by ethnic and regional conflicts between the North and the South. In the south, the conflict was between the East and west. There were conflicts within the regions also. There were widespread violence and repression. When his dad told him the story of the 1964 elections, it seems to Freedom that the more things change, the more they remain the same. His dad lost a lot as a result of that elections, he sold everything he had to ensure he won. Literally everything. He ran a transportation business with six lorries, he sold them all. He owned acres of rubber and palm tree farms; he sold them all. He sold everything except for the house they lived in. Then in January 1966, the first coup d'état happened, then counter coups followed, and eventually the civil war that lasted until 1970. Freedom's dad lost everything and vowed never to get involved in politics.

Freedom witnessed Nigeria's return to civilian government in 1979 as a 19-year-old undergraduate. From the story his father told him and what he read in history books, nothing really changed; even now that his dad has passed on, and the country is on its fourth leg of democratic government, things seem to be getting worse. The basic amenities of a functional society are still lacking - no constant electricity, no public water supply system, no good roads; you can't travel by road to certain parts of the country because of insecurity. Freedom couldn't see any end to migration of the young and it pained him greatly. He was very worried about his mother; she has aged a lot and he felt guilty that he had not come earlier to see her. She's still as sweet as ever, letting him know that she understands why he hadn't visited earlier. Thanking him instead for taking care of all his brothers and sister, and for being a good son to his father and herself.

Freedom's family home in Benin City was bustling with a lot of activities. Many of Freedom's extended family members from the paternal lineage were there, many had actually been staying in the house since the day Freedom's dad died. The mood of a Bini funeral or any Nigerian funeral for that matter will depend on who the deceased is, how they died, and the type of life they lived. If the deceased had many children and lived a long life, it is usually a celebration. In many ways the deceased become

more important in death than he or she was alive. In Nigeria, Christian, Muslim, and traditional African beliefs come together at funerals. The dead may be more important in death than when they were alive. Though Nigerians are believed to be split almost equally between the two Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam, and many Nigerians go to church and the mosque; majority still introduce traditional African religious rituals into their daily life, burials and other ceremonies. In many Nigerian cultures, and certainly in the Bini culture, it is believed that the deceased, especially the elderly, becomes an ancestor when they die. Traditional Nigerians believe in reincarnation. This is despite the contradiction of this system of beliefs with Abrahamic religious beliefs that when you die, God will judge your soul and you will be released to heaven. Nigeria and indeed Africa is at crossroads when it comes to assimilating the tenets of the two Abrahamic religions into their customs and traditions. They've been unable to do away with their customs and traditions altogether and embrace fully their new faith. Many a time, this becomes a source of conflict between the children of the deceased and the extended family during a funeral. In the Bini tradition, this conflict must be properly resolved and a proper burial arrangement reached before the ceremonies commences. If all burial customs aren't followed, family members fear that their loved one won't be an

ancestor and they will come back to the earth as spirits to haunt the living instead.

In Bini, the extended family under the supervision of the eldest male extended family member known as the "Okaegbe" or his representative, has the primary responsibility for the funeral. The children of the deceased led by the eldest son performs the funeral as permissible by the "Okaegbe"

Freedom's two younger brothers who are now residents in the United Kingdom were able to make it home for the funeral. The other two in Belgium and Germany were unable to make it. It was Freedom's primary responsibility under the Bini custom to lead his brothers and sister in performing the funeral for the family. He met formally with the extended family and negotiated a "Christian" burial. This means all the things needed for the traditional animal sacrifices and other rituals will be presented to the extended family by the children of the deceased. The extended family members will perform all the necessary traditional rituals in-house, while all outward appearance will take the form of a Christian burial. Traditionally, the burial ceremonies would have been seven days but with this agreement, it will only be for three days. Posters were printed to announce the death. Three separate set of same patterned uniform clothing to be worn by the nuclear family, extended family, friends and well-wishers were chosen. These clothing are now generally called the Yoruba name -

"aso ebi" in Nigeria's everyday nomenclature. Musicians and performers were hired for entertainment.

Freedom and his siblings were ready for a lavish ceremony. Each of his 4 brothers bought a cow, including the two he bought, they had a total of 6 cows for a 3-day ceremony. This is not counting the goats and chickens. Though a lot of in-house funeral ceremonies have been going on since Freedom arrived Benin City, the funeral proper kicked off the next Thursday after his arrival.

Pallbearers were hired to officially escort the casket bearing Freedom's father body during the procession from the hospital mortuary to the house where he is laid in state in his living room for family and friends to pay their respects. A Christian service of songs followed at the canopy tents that have been set up in front of Freedom's family home and extended to block the street. As a matter fact, the street has been blocked from vehicular traffic until the completion of the funeral ceremonies. The church pastor, the choir, members of the church, family and friends were all in attendance. The choir sang hymns and other gospel songs. The pastor gave an encouraging sermon afterwards and Freedom's dad was eulogised by the church. When it ended, food and drinks were served.

A wake keeping was continued by the family and friends after the service of song. An elaborate vigil

and traditional memorial service commenced after the service of songs; it was attended majorly by members of the extended family singing traditional songs throughout the night.

The body was moved to the church the next day for another Christian ceremony, after which the corpse was then moved back to the family residence and taken straight to the vault that had been elaborately prepared for the interment. The body was lowered and a prayer said by the pastor. Freedom was the first to hand-pick the red sand of Bini soil and pour on the father's chest in the grave, followed by his mother and his siblings and other family members. Pouring sand on one's parent chest at internment is an important and vital part of the Bini culture. It is every parent's prayer that they die before their children so they can experience the privilege of their children pouring sand on their chest. Before this final interment, various animal sacrifices had been done the night before by designated members of the extended family, the blood of animals is poured into the earth for the deceased, and traditional prayers said to lay the spirit of deceased to rest, and so the deceased can transit smoothly into becoming an ancestral spirit. Such are the mix of traditional African religious beliefs and Christian beliefs in modern African societies.

Three days after the formal funeral ceremonies began was the grand finale. It was the social dance

and celebration. When Freedom was a young child in the 1960s and 1970s, this event used to be an all-night event. But sometime in the early 1980s, this all changed. Just as the economy of the country worsened, armed robberies and insecurity increased in Benin City and the rest of the country. It became too unsafe to have this elaborate event in the night time as robbers started robbing attendees on their way home, some robbers even boldly robbed at the events themselves. Customs and traditions had to make adjustments to societal realities, and the social wake became a day time affair. The social wake afternoon was more like a big party and carnival. Three live music bands played -a lot of music, singing, and dancing. It was a celebration of life and the more music and dancing; the better chance the deceased's soul has at a successful afterlife. Time was also made for a Bini Cultural group that entertained the guests with traditional Bini songs and dance. Each of the children of the deceased were called in order of seniority to take their turn on the dance floor with their friends. A lot of money was "sprayed" on the children by guests. A lot food and drinks went around and the guests and family had a feast. The next Sunday, Freedom, his mother, siblings, close friends and family went to church for a Thanksgiving Service, marking the end of the funeral.

CHAPTER 14

Freedom has been taking stock of his life lately, especially since he got back to the United States from the burial ceremony of his father in Nigeria. He's been in the U.S now for fifteen years and he'll be forty-two years old on October 1st. What has he really achieved since coming the U.S and where is heading? He is not married, his relationship with Nicole is cordial but their physical attraction towards one another seems to have waned over time; the bond between them however remained strong. He never proposed marriage and she never brought the issue up. She seems very content having their daughter Emotan, and she has channelled all her energy towards raising her. He has played his role as a father and still spends a reasonable amount of time at Nicole's. Emotan has grown to accept their family arrangements. Well, she doesn't know any different; she has always spent ninety percent of her time at her mother's with her father being around most of the time and then the rest of the time with her father at his place in Brooklyn. Whenever Nicole needs time alone for whatever reason, Freedom would always take care of their kid, either at her place or at his place in Brooklyn. Of course, Nicole also had the option of taking the child to her mother's but that was always a second option and only happens if Freedom is not available. Freedom has been a great father to Emotan, she must admit.

Emotan loves her father to death and very attached to him. Maybe because he lets her get away with a lot whereas Nicole is the disciplinarian. Nicole thinks it is more than just that, she thinks there is a special bond between them that can't really be explained in words, she knows because she had such a bond with her father. While Nicole is content with having their one child, Freedom on the other hand felt he is missing out on life, this is not exactly how he planned his life. Or did he even have a plan in the first place? While he had never really sat down to think through what his future family life, it is reasonable to assume that he should have been married with children - at least three kids by now. It seems boys don't really think through their future family life in the way girls do, Freedom thought. It isn't unusual to hear a young girl as early as ten years old talking about at what age she wishes to get married, what kind of man she wants to be married to and how many children she wishes to have. Emotan as young as she is have started talking about her future. Boys on the other hand generally don't think about their future family life in the same way as girls do, at least Freedom didn't. Now that he is in his forties, it seems he just now started thinking about his life in a very specific way, and it seems a lot has passed him by. Since he migrated to the United States, he has just sort of gone with flow, and taken advantage of opportunities as they came. Just as there was no intentional and specific planning about his future family life, it seems

he had no specific plans either about his migration. Like everyone else that was leaving the Nigeria in the 1980s or even today, he just wanted to leave Nigeria and the difficulties behind. He assumed life would be different and better in the United States based on the information he had. In the 1960s and 1970s when Nigerians travelled or migrated to western European countries and the United States, it was mainly for the specific reason of acquiring western education and returning home to use the knowledge and education to contribute to nation building. These folks usually returned back to Nigeria after four to six years depending on how long it took for them to finish their studies. Nigerian youths who migrated in the next decades of the 1980s, 1990s and thereafter seem not to be so specific in what they intended to achieve at their intended destination. As a matter of fact, many tried multiple destinations in the west, and which ever came through is the country they migrated to. Their primary purpose was just to leave the Nigeria and her problems behind. Many therefore arrived their destination with the wrong visas, usually a visiting Visa. Coming into a country with the wrong visa is the first albatross that prevents Nigerian migrants from leading a normal life. It becomes a problem that makes it difficult or impossible for many to achieve stability in their new environment. They would love to enrol school but cannot do so, they would love to work but cannot do so legally; all because the visas they came with does not allow

them engage in these activities legally. This issue however is not peculiar to Nigerians alone but to many other migrants from Asia, South America, and other parts of the world. President Reagan and the United States Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act 1986 into law to address this and other issues of illegal immigration. The act legalized most undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the United States prior to January 1, 1982. While this act came as a reprieve for many Nigerians who arrived the U.S prior to January 1, 1981, those who came after still found themselves in the quagmire of finding a way to become legal in their new country of residence. Some applied for Visa sponsorship through work if they qualify, others go into relationships leading to marriages and their spouses eventually file for them to get legal status. All these take time, as long as a decade or more in some cases. If the marriage relationship was one that was entered out of desperation to legalise oneself, it doesn't usually end well. Such is the dilemma of being pushed out unnaturally from one's natural environment. It's almost like another version of slavery, except this time, the migrants made the choice themselves. They chose to migrate to a place where they would lose their right to live freely, at least temporarily for the years that they are "illegal" and even when they become legal, they find that they are second, third or fourth class citizens. Many migrants however do think this is a worthwhile sacrifice for the

opportunity to live in a western democratic country, considering all the perks and advantages that comes with eventual citizenship of their new home.

While in Nigeria for his father's funeral, Freedom met some of his old school mates who have done very well for themselves. As a matter of fact, one of them was now the governor of a state. Some have become ministers at the Federal government, commissioners at the state government, and others are captains of industries. Some had families and children who are already in the university. However, there were an overwhelming majority who still haven't been able to get jobs decades after graduating from the university; the level of poverty for this category was hard for him to stomach. He wondered on which side the pendulum would have swung for him. He is not doing too badly himself, he is now a Deputy Director with the City of New York, and doing quite well for himself. Just that the conscious and unconscious bias from his predominantly white work environment at the management level is difficult for him to deal with sometimes. Very often now, he is the only black person with a seat at the management table. As he moved up the civil service ladder, he began to notice there were fewer black employees, until there were just a handful of black people at that level. Actually, only three of them in an office that houses over one thousand employees. The three of them are in

different departments, so they are hardly in the same meeting.

The pervasiveness of the systemic racism within the New York City civil service was now clear to Freedom in ways that it wasn't before. He now sees clearly how the management cadre of the city civil service is systematically made predominantly white and male. Oftentimes, he finds himself in a position where he is seated at the table but unable to contribute to the decision-making process. Not that he is outrightly or openly excluded from contributing, rather it is the subtle alienation resulting from the group culture and his struggle to correct certain assumptions that white people in the room make about him and others like him. He fears that if he corrects them, he will be further perceived as someone who has failed to assimilate the management culture or management way of thinking. They often tout the inability of the lower cadre to think from a management perspective as the major reason for their failure to make it to management positions. Freedom's thinking is that; if the American society in general and specifically New York City civil service sincerely wants diversity and inclusivity, then on the basis of merit, proportionate number of men and women, and people of all races should be at the table. This way, we can have diverse and inclusive views. It is not enough to just have that one black person in the room. If you are the only one

at the table, it becomes difficult to correct the assumptions of the majority at the table as you may find yourself having difficulty speaking for yourself without the expectation that you are speaking out for your race.

Everyone at the office is aware of Freedom's high intellect and high work ethics. His effectiveness in his role has never been in question. However, he was recently bypassed for promotion to the Director's position. A white male whose résumé pales compared to his, got the job. Rumours from the grapevine is that Freedom did not get the position because he is too serious and doesn't really connect with his peers at the management level.

When Freedom discussed these issues with Nicole, it is clear to Nicole that Freedom now has an experiential understanding of race relations in America. Reading about race relations in books is one thing, actually experiencing it, is a whole nother. Freedom has often made the argument that racism in America affects the African Americans differently from the way it affects recent "voluntary" African migrants to the United States. Basically, the methods and reasons for migration of both groups are different. While one was involuntary, the other is voluntary. This has had a great effect on how both groups react and relate to the racial dynamics of the American lifestyle. Many of Freedom's Nigerian friends in their private discussions cannot

understand why black Americans relate to white people the way they do. Why so many black American men were in jail, in the homeless shelters scattered around New York City, traded in drugs and killed one another in drive by shootings. To them, they see America as the land of opportunity and it seems to them that black Americans, especially black American men didn't seem to be taking advantage or want to take advantage of the opportunities. Yes, black Americans were captured and brought to American soil in the most inhuman manner imaginable and exploited and degraded. But slavery has been abolished over a century ago and the civil rights movement has achieved racial equality legislation decades earlier. So, many in the African migrant community would often argue that it's time for the black race to move forward.

However, Freedom's position now that he is armed with experiential understanding is different. He believes the damage done by slavery for about one hundred and fifty years cannot be easily undone. Freedom and others who holds this position buttress their position by pointing out how the African Americans worked for centuries free of charge, and how the American government has refused to pay the reparations it promised black people. Black Americans are the only group of people that had not received reparations for state sanctioned racial discrimination. The Jews received reparations for the

holocaust. Native Americans have received some reparations for being forcibly exiled from their native land by the Europeans that now dominate the United States. The average white family has ten times the wealth of the average black family. A white university graduate has seven times the wealth of a black graduate. The playing field is very unequal and the race that has the economic power isn't willing to share or give away that power. After the abolition of slavery came Jim Crow, anti-Black housing, etc. The effects of all these and more is what we see playing out in the African American life in the United States.

Freedom understands what the other school of thought is saying, he understands the need of Black America to pull its self-up by the bootstraps. Based on his personal experience however, he now sees that bootstrapping will not erase the racial wealth divide in America. Neither is it going to erase the wealth divide between Western Nations and the Nations on the African continent. For those Nigerians and by extension other Africans who believe that African Americans are being "lazy" for not taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the modern American society, Freedom's question for them is "what are you doing migrating from the most natural resource-abundant continent to the ones with less resources?" Freedom has been pondering all these questions about the black race and his life in the United States, the life of the black people in the

U.S, in Africa and in the world in general. He was pondering his purpose and the purpose of life in general.

CHAPTER 15

He is running late for work this Tuesday morning. He had a rough night; he didn't sleep well. He couldn't quite remember his dream but he knows he had a nightmare. Freedom rarely dreams, when he does, he usually remembers but not last night's, he just remembers struggling to get out of a hole of some sort. "Am I not too old to be having nightmares?" he thought; well maybe one is never really too old for one. He has a project he was working on at work, and the deadline for submission is this morning. He knows that wasn't source of his anxiety. It was certainly Nicole's ailment. He hasn't been sleeping well for a while now because he had a lot of troubling thoughts on his mind. Emotan spent the weekend at her grandmother's and has been staying there for the past couple of weeks because Nicole was admitted in the hospital. She has ovarian cancer. The cancer was not detected on time, the symptoms were not apparent in the early stages. Nicole had always had stomach and digestive issues. As a matter of fact, Nicole always kept a bottle of antacid in her hand bag because of frequent heartburn, acid reflux and indigestion; which she attributed to her love of fried food, especially African American southern cuisines. She ate a lot of fried foods, though she had cut down as she got older. However, the frequent heartburn was still there. So, the cancer was mistaken for a minor ailment which is

why ovarian cancer is often referred to as the "Silent Killer" The doctor says this was probably the case with Nicole, her cancer was already stage three before she was diagnosed last year. Stage four came quickly; the cancer has spread to her lungs. Freedom went to see her last night despite closing late from work. The doctors allowed him to stay with her for as long as he wanted and she seemed to be asleep all through with a rhythmic laboured breathing. He stayed until 10pm and came home.

Just as he was about stepping out the door this Tuesday morning, the phone rang, he picked it up and the voice on the other side told him to come to the hospital immediately. His heart skipped a beat, he felt his heart palpating, beating rapidly. He knew. He said "thank you", and told the caller he will be there as soon as possible. He sat back down for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. Should he call Nicole's sister or her mum? No. He decided he needed to go to the hospital first and get confirmation. He went downstairs, walked to St Nicholas Avenue and flagged down a taxi cab. The hospital was on St Nicholas Avenue towards downtown, and only about twenty minutes away. At the hospital, he was taken into Nicole's hospital room. She had already been totally covered with a white sheet. He asked the doctor if he could see her face, he said yes and removed the sheets from Nicole's face momentarily and covered it back.

Freedom sat down and wept. Barely a year after he lost his father, he has now lost the love of his life. The hospital called Freedom as soon as Nicole died. The time of her death was put at 8:01am that Tuesday morning. Freedom called Nicole's sister, Grace. She said she would join him at the hospital as soon as possible. Freedom was the next of kin and was given some paperwork by the hospital to be signed. It didn't take long for Grace to arrive at the hospital, she had already informed Nicole's mother. The body had already been taken to the mortuary. Grace and Freedom went to the mortuary so Grace could see her sister; they left soon after for Ms Spooner's. Many people had gathered there already when they arrived; neighbours, friends and family members who lived close by. The TV was playing in the background and someone mentioned that there was a fire incident further uptown in Harlem. Emotan had already been picked up from school by her aunt and dropped off at her grandmother's before she came to the hospital. Freedom thought about going home to Nicole's apartment but decided staying at granny's was best for now. All of the visitors left a little after, so it was just him, granny, Emotan, Grace and her kids. Everyone was glued to the TV - the big, thick, black cloud coming from the now collapsed and burning building, sirens and people running away from the scene of the fire. Everyone focused on the TV as a momentary distraction, the grief they were feeling was incomprehensible to them at that

moment. The days that followed were sad and confusing but they had a funeral to plan. Most of the planning was left to Grace. She contacted a funeral director in Harlem who arranged to collect Nicole's body from the hospital to the funeral home.

The first thing Freedom noticed during the planning is that funeral is being called homegoing. In the African American funeral tradition, the soul of the deceased is thought to return home to its heavenly origins. At first Freedom thought this may have been a continuation of the African culture of believe in the afterlife but later found out that the "homegoing" is more tailored along Christian beliefs of the deceased soul's ascension to heaven

Much planning goes into the African American funerals, and they often involve spirited processions, gospel hymns, and fervent prayers to honour the life of the deceased and their ascension to heaven. A lot and elaborate planning went into planning the funeral just as it is in Nigeria. It is a celebration of the deceased's return to eternal life with Jesus Christ in heaven.

The chapel was elaborately decorated. The colour theme was purple - Nicole's favourite colour, the colour of royalty. The casket was white. There were banquet of flowers everywhere. Nicole loved flowers and tulips were her favourite. The casket was surrounded with tulips - purple and white and pink,

all delicately and attractively laid. The whole chapel was surrounded with tulips, roses, carnations, hydrangeas. The chapel looked heavenly.

Nicole's body was well-groomed and made-up, and she laid there in that majestic casket; looking peaceful and beautiful, as if she was just asleep. On this first day of viewing, people came - family and friends. They tenderly approached the corpse for a few minutes of peace and reflection, some said silent prayers. The funeral took place two days later on a Saturday. It was a joyous and highly spirited celebration of life. The chapel could hold two hundred and fifty people, it is huge chapel but was unable to hold the number of people that showed up. Grace had anticipated this and asked the funeral director to create seating space in tents outside the chapel. Nicole was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, a university social club, an organization for women. Her sorority sisters showed up for her. There were absolutely no inhibitions during the service. The music was mostly upbeat Christian praise and worship songs. The pastor preached a very uplifting message. People were invited to speak. Friends, family, Nicole's classmates and her sorority sisters offered glowing tributes to her, and above all, tributes to God Almighty.

The funeral started early at 10 am and lasted ninety minutes. A car procession led by a black limousine hearse then took the corpse through Adam Clayton

Powel Jr Boulevard, turned into 125th street, another turn to Robert F Kennedy bridge ramp to the tri-borough bridge on their way to Cypress Hills National Cemetery, a veteran cemetery where Nicole's father who was an army veteran was buried. Nicole was also a member of the National Guard reserve. It is a beautiful cemetery located in Cypress Hills, on Jamaica Avenue in Brooklyn.

Freedom has seen many cemeteries since arriving the United States but he had not paid any particular attention to them until now. As they approached the cemetery from Queens via the Jackie Robinson Parkway, he couldn't help but notice how neatly and well laid out this many acres of hallowed ground were. The greenery. Once they got into the cemetery, the beautiful memorial features and monuments paying tributes to those buried there. The carved statues and intricate memorial art. It was a peaceful and reflective atmosphere. It was sacred ground. The deplorable conditions of the cemeteries in Benin City and many other places in Nigeria he has visited flashed through Freedom's mind; but he pushed that thought aside for the moment. He was happy Nicole is being buried here. Though happy cannot in any way describe his feelings seeing Nicole's body lowered to the grave. He felt empty, like a part of him was gone forever.

When the funeral was all over, it became clear to Freedom that African Americans passionately

celebrated their own in death just as Nigerians do. At Nicole's funeral, no expense was spared. Even as an accountant, he couldn't put a cost to it, he just knew that the personal cost was high despite death insurance coverage.

CHAPTER 16

Freedom became a single parent of a six-year-old girl. Nicole's mother and her sister had offered to keep Emotan so as to minimize the changes to her life caused by her mother's death. Freedom politely turned their proposition down; he wanted to take on the responsibility of single parenthood right away. He however agreed to let Emotan stay at her grandmother's and continue at the school she currently attends until the end of the term. He picks Emotan up on Fridays and brings her back to her grandmother's on Sundays. Whenever he can during the week, he'll stop by and see her in the evenings. While Freedom was going through his own grief, he was more concerned about Emotan's reaction to her mother's death. She became withdrawn and would sometimes cry. She occasionally complained about headaches and stomach aches. These complaints bordered Freedom a lot. When she spent the weekend him, he would check on her in her bedroom and find out she was awake at midnight and early hours of the morning. Freedom would sit and talk with her until she goes back to sleep. He contemplated therapy but was advised by a Nigerian friend who is psychiatrist to give it some time, as the symptoms Emotan were exhibiting are consistent with how many children react to the death of a parent. As she grows and develop, she'll understand the loss in new ways –

reactions to this event are lifelong. He also advised Freedom that if there is anything extraordinary beyond what he had observed, then he can bring Emotan into his clinic for evaluation.

Freedom poured his energy into his job, he resigned from New York City Housing department. The Director had retired, and once again he was not considered for the position, instead, a young white male with less qualifications and experience was hired for the position. That was the last straw for Freedom. His pension with the city was already vested, he has earned enough credit to qualify for pension once he meets the minimum age requirements in the future. He resigned and applied for a job in the private sector; he got one with a top accounting firm. It was a rigorous interview process to get into the firm but Freedom was determined. He prepared well for the interview, he researched the firm, practiced his communication skills, and reviewed his accounting and auditing knowledge. He has really come to love and enjoy the flexible work schedule and corporate work culture. Busy season lasts only for four months starting from December until March, as it's the year-end, which is when his company and other big accounting firms get involved heavily into Audit & Tax services for their clients. Most importantly he earned triple the salary he was paid working for the city. Plus, he is doing real accounting practice.

Not that he has not been experiencing race issues with his current job as he did with the last one. As a matter of fact, he has even learned new race relations terminologies - macro and microaggression. According to the definitions he read up on the subject: Microaggressions are individual biases and goes from one individual to another, while Macroaggressions are systemic and affect whole classes of groups of populations. Freedom soon found out that going into the business world meant working in a world that is even more predominantly white than when he worked for the City of New York. It was challenging for him to relate at least at the initial stages. Just like with his previous employment, he couldn't really open up. He just focused on getting his job done and moving on. On the positive side, he has been identified as a high performer and he likes the trajectory his career is heading. It is however clear to Freedom that he is not assigned projects of equal importance as his white colleagues. Just like with his city employment, he still has that feeling of an outsider, there were still the occasional insensitive questions from his white colleagues, and opportunities didn't seem to be always equal. Some clients have even taken him for granted and seem to think he is not smart enough to do their job. They would always go to the White colleagues to ask questions, treating them as if they were his superior. On one occasion, he went to an auditing job with three new hires (all white) who were

paired with him for mentoring, the white client went to one of them to ask questions. The embarrassed young man had to ask him to direct the question to Freedom as he was the head of the team.

Freedom purchased a condominium 98th street on St Nicholas Avenue very close to Nicole's old apartment, in fact just one block away. He wanted to purchase Nicole's apartment but the management of the building said it wasn't available for sale. He bought the apartment 98th Street primarily because of Emotan, so she can continue attending the same school and so she can stay close to her grandmother and aunt. He also didn't have to worry about babysitting for the times he has to travel for work. This decision has really been good for Emotan because she seem to be adjusting relatively well to her mother's death.

Freedom met a white lady who was also an accountant for another big accounting firm at a conference in Connecticut. She resides in New York just like himself; they struck a friendship and started going out on dates. Freedom was being very cautious about dating. He didn't want to rush into any relationship after Nicole's death. He is keenly aware of rebound relationships, he didn't want to rush into a new relationship before he has fully processed Nicole's death, though it's almost two years since she passed. He is also now a single parent and didn't want to bring just anyone around his daughter.

Nicole's mother has become like a mother to him and sometimes when they are having that mother-son conversation, she would encourage him to start dating again, she reminds him that life for a Christian is a never-ending process, and he must continue with his life.

He started to open up to Heather as she seems very nice. As a matter of fact, he was surprised at himself because he has never thought of himself being romantically involved with a white woman. Sincerely, it was something he fantasised about before coming to the United States but his initial experience with race relations in America seem to have wiped out that fantasy from his head. He didn't think of himself as racist, rather his response to racism was a result of the already prevailing conditions of the society in which he finds himself. He has had conversations about race with Heather and she was very comfortable discussing it; she seemed adept with the issues. He started to let his guard down and when she insisted they go over to his place after a night out, he agreed. The sex was good, she seemed to have been orgasming every other second. When it was over, she asked Freedom: "how can I make you happy". "I'm good" Freedom responded. The next time they went out on a date however, Freedom was surprised to hear her say that she wasn't really ready for sex when she went home with him. "As you could see, I didn't have my coochie shaved" she said to

Freedom, then she chuckled. Freedom wasn't sure if this was a joke or she was serious. She was also carrying on about how nice Freedom's condominium was. She made comments that seem to allude to the fact that his successes are merely the result of reverse discrimination. As if the only reason he is successful is because he is black, a beneficiary of some of some sort of affirmative action. A lot flashed through Freedom's mind that evening. "If this lady is saying she wasn't ready for sex that night, that could be interpreted as me having sex with her without her consent". Jail time flashed through his head. "And then for her to think that I have achieved all I have professionally and financially because of affirmative action?" Freedom thought. The term micro-aggression flashed through his head again. What happened that evening was definitely a classic case of micro-aggression: an indirect, subtle, and probably unintentional discrimination against him because he belongs to a marginalised group - the black race in America. He thought it was unintentional and or unconscious bias because she carried on throughout the evening as if nothing happened and he played along. He thought about calling her out during their conversation on her clearly racist conclusions about him, but then he thought it was safer to just let it go. To add insult to injury, she proposed following him home again this particular evening! He politely declined, telling her that he was going to pick his daughter up as soon

their date was over. Freedom eased out of the relationship. Whenever they spoke on the phone, he came up with all sorts of excuses not to see her again. She finally got the hint and stopped calling.

CHAPTER 17

Nicole's sister, Grace reconciled with her husband and moved back to New Jersey. Ms. Leila Spooner, Nicole's mother died soon after. Transitioning into single fatherhood for Freedom was made easier by the fact that both these women were available to help him with the process. It helped Emotan with her grieving process as both her grandmother and aunt showered her with a lot of love after Nicole passed on. Though he didn't appear publicly worried or express to anyone how scary single fatherhood was to him, he questioned privately his own preparation to raise a child on his own, as he did not have any experience or examples to rely on. He couldn't remember knowing and even hearing of anyone who was a single father while he was growing up in Nigeria. He felt overwhelmed at the pressure of being solely responsible for a young female child. Initially, he questioned how he would be able to approach all the various situations presented by this new challenge. The tasks of single fatherhood have been daunting to say the least, especially being a single father to a female child. He has done his best to create a healthy environment for his daughter and help her grow in the right manner. It has not been easy trying to juggle work with childcare and other issues involved in running a household. Nicole's mum and her sister were his pillars. Now that Nicole's mum has passed on, and Grace was no

longer available, Freedom has really had no one to fall back on. However, he is grateful they were there to help until Emotan got to an age where she could be left at home alone. He really misses Nicole's mum. Single parenthood is still sometimes a logistical nightmare as he would love to be in two places at the same time but that's humanly impossible.

The first major decision he made when Nicole died was to give up his apartment in Brooklyn and buy an apartment in Manhattan. Now that Emotan's grandmother has passed on, and her aunt lives far away, it must be tough for Emotan. However, she seemed to have adjusted very well, at least outwardly. She's turning out to be a very brilliant and respectful young lady, she maintains straight A's in her academic work and she is the president of her class. Despite all the difficulties presented by being a single parent, Freedom is very happy with the strong bond he has formed with his daughter and seeing her grow up into a healthy and well-adjusted young lady is very fulfilling. He has struggled with dating and entering into new relationships. His daughter comes first. Sometimes he wonders if he would ever be in any serious romantic relationship again or ever get married again. He recently met a Nigerian lady, a physiotherapist he met at central park a couple of months back. She had been in the park with a client, a young white kid of about six

years old with cast on his right arm and right leg. She was helping him walk with the support of a foldable walker. Freedom was at the park with Emotan for an evening walk. Emotan walked up to the boy and struck up a conversation with him and his physiotherapist. Emotan approaches people like that, and she seem to know who to approach in public and how to approach them; it is just a skill she has naturally. She is an outgoing, friendly and socially confident young lady with very high emotional maturity. After a while, she walked both the physiotherapist and the young boy over to where he was sitting, reading a newspaper, and introduced them. " Hey dad, meet Ethan and Ota, Ethan is six years old and Ota is a Nigerian!" she said in her usual bubbly style of talking. They all got talking and the boy narrated how he was involved in a bus accident on his way to camp last summer; he broke both his right arm and right leg, and lost feelings on the right side of his body. He expressed how grateful he is for the work Ota has done with him so far, and how much he liked her. Freedom exchanged phone numbers with Ota afterwards. Freedom never really looked at Ota that first day, he just had a polite general conversation with her and her client, the kind of conversation where you have eye contact with the person you are talking to but you don't really see them. Emotan walked with them through a path that leads to the east side of the park and returned a few minutes later.

Freedom have been thinking about visiting Nigeria again lately. Firstly, he didn't want the next time he visits Nigeria to be for the purpose of burying his mother, he needs to go see her and spend some time with her while she is still alive. He has been feeling this way since Ms Spooner, Nicole's mother passed. Moreover, Emotan has been on his case about visiting Nigeria and seeing her paternal grandmother. He has also been toying with the idea of relocating to Nigeria and setting up a business. He has been warned by many about the near impossible hurdles he'll need to scale to succeed in the murky water of the Nigerian business environment. He knows these hurdles himself but he just feels that he'll never be his fullest self in America. There are hurdles here in the United States as well, just that they are of a different kind. As a black person and first-generation migrant, how does he ever scale the hurdle of becoming truly American? It seems he'll always be less American than his European American migrant counterparts. Deep down his mind, he didn't like that feeling. His American identity will always be questioned. In Nigeria, it is tribe. In America, it is race, it is the colour of your skin. Like many, if not all the Nigerians he knows in the United States, he is very reluctant to talk in-depth about race and racial barriers with other Nigerians or anyone else for that matter, except with Nicole when she was alive and a few very close friends. In actual fact, many first-generation Nigerian immigrants like

himself do not see anything uniquely peculiar about race in America that is not also present in tribalism in Nigeria. Many of his friends and acquaintances talk less about racial bias but would rather talk about the opportunities that exist in America because of the presence of structures and strong institutions of government. This is in contrast with Nigeria, where there is lack of structure and the institutions of government are extremely weak. So, where others see turmoil in the United States, many Nigerians see opportunities. Despite all the racism, he does not feel any less than white people in America or any other race of people for that matter. He doubts he knows any Nigerian that does. This does not however change the reality of America's institutional racism and its effect on his psyche as a black person.

The relationship between Emotan and Ota blossomed over time. Freedom allowed free communications between them, and occasionally, they all met at the park. The last time they met, Ota invited both Emotan and Freedom to her church's Sunday service. Apparently, Emotan and Ota had been talking about religion and their faith. Emotan expressed how she misses going to church with her grandmother on Sundays, and Ota thought it was a good idea to invite her to the church she attends. It's a non-denominational Pentecostal church in Brooklyn. She thought Emotan will enjoy their Sunday morning service.

Freedom grew up in the church. Both his parents were ordained deacon and deaconess, and later elders in their church. Freedom and his siblings attended church with their parents every Sunday as youngsters and even midweek programs when it was not in conflict with their school work. So, Freedom grew up within a structured Christian environment and was raised with high Christian values. Things began to change when he was sent to the boarding secondary school at the age of twelve. Middle- and upper-class parents at that time usually sent their children to boarding secondary schools in Nigeria, it was prestigious for them to do so, it was expected and a thing of class. Many parents who belonged to neither the upper nor the middle class also did all in their power to send their children to boarding schools as well. Freedom's dad went a step further than just sending him to a boarding school, he sent him to one outside their state of residence, he sent him to Lagos. His mother protested initially but his father thought it was best for the child. Beyond the benefits of boarding school, Freedom's father wanted him to experience other environments and other cultures.

At the secondary boarding school, Freedom was no longer under the direct supervision of his parents. Sunday services were still mandatory because though the secondary was owned by the government, it was established by Baptist missionaries and still retained many of the Baptist

tenets. Students attended church services at the assembly hall every Sunday but Christians who are Catholics were allowed to attend Sunday services at a nearby catholic church under the supervision of a school prefect; while the Muslims went to the close-by mosque on Fridays and were exempted from the church on Sunday. The daily early morning assembly was compulsory for all and was conducted as a Christian assembly with Christian hymns and prayers.

It was earlier on in his secondary school life that Freedom began to question his faith. He learned about the transatlantic slave trade in his history class, how Christians who claimed to have the love of God and humanity at the centre of their religion were the ones involved in the capture and sales of other human beings to create wealth for themselves and their countries. Then he went on a school tour to Badagry where he visited the slave museum – saw and touched relics of slavery that highlighted the horrors and injustices of slavery. The tour also took them to “The Point of No Return” at Gberefu Island in Badagry; this was the point at which slaves were shipped to unknown destinations. This tour had a profound impact on Freedom, and was first reason he began to question his faith.

Then he read "Things Fall Apart" a novel by Chinue Achebe as his literature textbook in class two (the eighth grade). What he got from the novel was how

white people brought religion as a guise to colonizing the people and erasing their culture. He empathised with Okonkwo, the novel's central character whose lone struggle to fight back the white man ultimately led to his untimely and shameful death.

When Freedom came home on holidays from school that year, he gave his parents all sorts of excuses to avoid going to church. Freedom did not completely not believe in God. The fear of hell fire with which he was raised was still there. In case hell fire is real in the afterlife, he attended church occasionally. Soon as he was old enough to make his own decision, Freedom stopped going to church altogether. He claimed to be Christian in all his official documents and would say he is a Christian whenever he was asked what religion he belonged. Since arriving the United States, Freedom had only been to church once and it was for a wedding ceremony. However, he appropriated the structure he was given by being raised in the church. When Emotan started going to church with her grandmother, he thought it was good for her to do so. Americans are not as religious as Nigerians, and he can see how this has impacted the way young people relate to their parents and older people in general. In his opinion, there is a level of disrespect of adult and societal authority in general by the young in America that will be abominable in Nigeria. This is regardless of whether or not one was practising Nigerian indigenous religions, Christianity

or Islamic religion. So, Freedom was happy Emotan attended church with her grandmother. He also didn't mind going to church when Ota extended the invitation; at least for Emotan's sake, he was willing to attend.

The church is a non-denominational megachurch in Brooklyn. They met Ota at the entrance. The members were all well dressed and the atmosphere looked more like people going to a concert. Hundreds of cars were parked in the church's large parking lot and many more parked on the adjoining streets. They were ushered into the church by very professionally looking ushers who gave them the church's program, envelopes and some forms. They were directed to their seats. The church auditorium was huge! Had three levels!! Freedom estimated that it could seat three thousand people and it was at least eighty percent full when they came in. Somehow, they were still able to be sited on the front row of the second floor. The choir was huge, looked more like a large concert band, and they were belting out a song. Great acoustic! As a matter of fact, perfect acoustic. Freedom glanced at Emotan and she seemed engrossed, completely absorbed in what she was seeing and hearing. Freedom then took a look at the program he was given at the entrance. It was time for praise and worship, everyone was now standing with many singing along and moving to the music. After three upbeat songs,

the choir went into slower songs to which many closed their eyes and sang along in worship mode. Announcements followed, then offerings. Freedom put some cash in the envelope he was given at the entrance, and Emotan did same. The envelope had a portion on back for your name, contact address and phone number. Freedom did not fill in his name, Emotan did. Velvet offerings bags were passed around. More announcements made. The choir ushered in the pastor to the pulpit with a worship song. The atmosphere was charged, the pastor's voice now leading the song, many now speaking in tongues. All this is not completely new to Freedom. While his parents attended the Anglican church, he has attended many Pentecostal churches while living in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, what he was witnessing is not at all different from what happens in many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, especially the Church of God Mission in his home town of Benin City. The Church services held by the Scripture Union at the university he attended in Nigeria had similar pattern of service though in smaller group setting.

The pastor started his message which was about the "Seasons of Our Lives": "the spring is a time to plant and sow; summer is the time to build and protect; fall is a time to stop blaming and take responsibility; and winter is a time of trial. Blame is a self-imposed limitation. God's love is unconditional but His

promises are conditional. It is not easy to maintain a positive attitude in a world full of negativity. The bible tells us that God is love but love is not God. Not all who love are of God. Love is the desire to give to another at the expense of self and God may not be part of that equation". Freedom took notes, he likes taking notes in church, it lets him concentrate and not fall asleep. The pastor then segues into the soul of man, and faculties of the soul; conscience, imagination, memory, reasoning, affections, feelings, emotions and desires.

Freedom was impressed, it wasn't the style of preaching he was used to hearing but he loved it. When the pastor made the alter call, he thought about going but he had a double mind, and was undecided. He didn't go. However, he was sure he would come back here again. He liked what he heard. So, despite the distance between his apartment in Manhattan and the church in Brooklyn, Freedom started attending church every Sunday except when he had work assignment outside the city. Ota started visiting his apartment as stronger bond developed between her and Emotan. She would take Emotan to church with her on Sundays even when Freedom was not available. Freedom cannot exactly tell when it started but a relationship that he couldn't really define in his head started between him and Ota. She was really nice and would take care of a lot of the domestic needs in his place

- cook, clean and do the laundry; stay in the house with Emotan when he is out of town for work. Emotan has also learned a lot just by assisting with the chores. Freedom really started looking at Ota for the first about six months after that first day he went to church with her. She is actually a very pretty woman, perhaps not the type he would have been attracted to at first glance; she wore clothes that were too loose fitting, or you could even say a little oversized. She hides her curvy figure, large breast and hips. On this particular day, she wore a blue Jean bum shot and a white crop top while doing some work around the house. He glanced at her when she walked by him, she turned sideways to look at him and their eyes locked for a moment, she looked away but they both knew something had happened in that moment. So, there was no formal wooing from either side but when Freedom thought about, she had been giving him all the signals since the first day they met, just that his mind wasn't working in that direction. They got talking and Freedom asked her if she could stay the night and she agreed. She had work the next morning but she had her uniform in her bag. Freedom would later find out she also had her sleepwear. They talked that night seemingly for the first time though it's been over nine months since that first encounter at central park. He told her his age and asked if she didn't mind telling him hers. She's thirty-nine years old and had migrated to the United States ten years earlier. She graduated with a

degree in business administration in Nigeria and got a marketing position at a bank. Her older brother who was already in the United States at the time asked her to resign from the job because of the bad reputation associated with female bank marketers in Nigeria at the time. Many banks were reputed for employing beautiful women as marketers. While there was nothing particularly wrong about this because people in general are likely to be more comfortable with a female marketer than males on money matters but some banks and financial institutions started using these female marketers as a source for deposits. Some banks would engage female employees and set for them very high targets on deposit mobilization and other asset creation ventures, thereby putting them under undue pressure to do whatever they can to get what their employers wanted. Ota's brother thought the pressure was too much and unreasonable. He then facilitated bringing her to the United States. She stayed with him for two years while she pursued a degree in physiotherapy. She moved to her own apartment once she got her associate degree and was able to get a good paying job. She went on to get a bachelor's degree. Her brother has since moved to Atlanta with his family but she remained in New York

Migration of Nigerian women to the United States has no doubt empowered them by giving them

autonomy and greater control over their lives. This has also led to greater gender equality for them in America. The problem however is that too many have been left single and have not been able to find male suitors to fulfil their desire for companionship. Many Nigerian men are not attracted to the "empowered" westernized Nigerian women because they do not basically meet their idea of the type of women they would want to settle down with. Such women in the opinion of some have become "masculine" women as they now have traits similar to the Nigerian male migrants, traits such as being extremely opinionated, outspoken, strategic, persuasive, ambitious, and effective. These are traits that make them powerful but intimidating to Nigerian men who were raised in an environment where women are more laid back and subservient. From the perspective of some Nigerian men in America, while these same traits are also present in American women, there is a major difference when it comes to dating. The American woman will naturally share the bills with you, while the Nigerian migrant woman will still expect you to be "the man" and pay the bills while she keeps her newly acquired powers and money. This is a source of conflict in many migrant Nigerian homes. On a more serious note, this change in the economic power dynamics has led to an epidemic of divorce in the Nigerian American community. And even worse, it has led to an epidemic of Nigerian husbands murdering their Nigerian wives. Ten

Nigerian women were murdered by their Nigerian husbands within a 2-year span in the United States! So, a lot of Nigerian male migrants would keep their female counterparts in the "friends' zone", they relate to them as friends, and if sexual benefit comes along with the friendship, that's fine, if it doesn't, that's fine too. When some Nigerian migrant men are ready to go into a serious romantic relationship, they opt for non-Nigerians, American women or go back home to Nigeria to bring spouses. Going to bring spouses have also proven fatal because a good number of the murder cases resulted from such relationships because the same issues arises once the wife brought from home acquires the powers available to her in her new environment. For the Nigerian woman in America, it's not like African American men are available either. As a matter of fact, there is a serious shortage of dateable and marriageable African American men in the United States for many reasons.

Freedom's opinion on Nigerian women and their newly acquired powers in America differ from that of some of his friends. He likes that Nigerian women are empowered in their new country of residence. Perhaps his relationship with Camille and Nicole has shaped his different take on this issue. He is also a single father of a girl child, and cannot imagine raising his daughter to be a docile and subservient woman, he just couldn't. However, he thinks there

are different roles for males and females in relationships and in a marriage. While he believes in co-captainship, he still believes a ship must have one head captain – the ship's master. He believes the ship's master in a marriage relationship should be the man. However, if the man is incapable of steering the ship, he doesn't see why the woman shouldn't then take charge. In the Nigerian environment where men had the economic power in old agrarian system and still dominates employments in government and most of the upward mobile businesses even in the modern economic system, the patriarchal system is an inevitable consequence of the economic relationship between men and women. For the most part, women are dependent on the men for their survival. Though the United States is also patriarchal, a lot of progress has been made towards gender equality for over a hundred years now. The tension created in the Nigerian migrant community when it comes to romantic relationships/marriages seem to be as a result of these strides. So, both the male and female Nigerian migrants need to understand that romantic and marriage relationship is at crossroads in the U.S, as well as in Nigeria. As women become more empowered economically, they must then learn to use their powers in such a way as not to alienate the menfolk. Perhaps there is something to be learned from the strategic soft power of the old school mums. The men on the other hand need to understand that today's economically

empowered woman cannot be like the mums who raised them.

Freedom started getting serious with Ota. That she was also a good influence on Emotan was certainly an added incentive. It wasn't long before Freedom popped the question and Ota agreed. They had the wedding at the city hall, just the five of them - Freedom, Ota, Emotan, Ota's brother and Omo.

CHAPTER 18

That summer, Freedom, Ota and Emotan went to Nigeria. Arrangements had already been made for a Bini traditional wedding between Freedom and Ota. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls you're welcome to Muritala Mohammed international airport in Lagos" came the pilot's voice. Emotan was so excited she started to cry. They landed at about 9pm on a Monday night. She could see the Lagos skyline from her window seat as they were landing. "Are we in Lagos dad?" She asked. "Yes" Freedom answered. She got emotional. Ota, who was sitting next to her in the middle seat comforted her and wondered what was going through her mind. However, she decided it wasn't a good idea to ask but to let her go through her moment.

On the luggage pickup area, Freedom gave Ota that look; the look of "welcome to Nigeria". Nothing has changed from the last time he was at the airport; it was still an organized chaos. They went through the usual bottlenecks associated with checking out of Nigerian international airports - immigration, customs and many other agencies whose designation or purpose he couldn't quite make out. They finally met Freedom's friend who came to pick them up. He drove them to a five-star hotel in Ikeja Lagos. It was only about a 10-minute drive from the airport, and Freedom booked the hotel for its proximity to the

airport, he didn't want anything to do with the crazy Lagos traffic. They would spend three nights here and leave for Benin City on a local flight on Thursday. The hotel is one of the largest hotels in Nigeria and like every typical five-star hotel around the world, it had multi-storey buildings comprising over two hundred and fifty guest rooms and suites, a spa, shopping mall and night club. It had multiple restaurants and bars within the hotel complex. Every international cuisine imaginable were available at the restaurant. It had a huge outdoor Olympic size pool and a poolside restaurant and bar. A complimentary breakfast buffet is served daily from 06:00 am to 10:00 am. Emotan had a time of her life the two mornings they had breakfast there. She is usually a picky eater but couldn't resist all the eye-catching foods that were available, many foods she was familiar with and many more that were new to her, including many Nigerian cuisines. She tried them all. She spent most of her day by the pool side with Ota, while Freedom attended to the many guests that came to see him. Freedom was using this opportunity network on the business he is planning to start in Nigeria, it is also an opportunity see old friends who are resident in Lagos.

Though Freedom has tried his best to paint a picture of Nigeria in Emotan's head by telling her stories about his own childhood in Nigeria, and showing her pictures from his childhood, teenage and young adult

life in Nigeria, Emotan still couldn't quite erase the image of Africa she has imbibed from her own childhood experiences growing up in the United States. It is an image of Africa where she expected to see elephants, Lions, gorillas, giraffes and many other animals; and hunters with spears hunting animals. Despite Freedom's best efforts, Emotan still did not believe that Africa is not a country, she believes Africa is still "uncivilized" and couldn't really imagine an urbanized African city in reality. Emotan was surprised a few years back when her dad told her that he and majority of the people he knows back in Nigeria have never seen large wildlife except at the zoo. The images of Africa in American news, popular media and school textbooks often highlights African people living in abject poverty. The very rare time they show the other realities of wealth, power and good health (which also exist in the continent) is so minute that it does nothing to balance the view of an average American child or adult for that matter. Typically, African children are depicted as sick and hungry. There are many missionary and non-profit advertisements on American television helping to drive this narrative, asking for donations to help poor and malnourished African children. While it is true that there is an unacceptable number of poor people, especially children in the continent; there are also millions of African children who are well nurtured and nourished, and sent to school by their parents daily to learn. However, this balance is never really struck

by the American media. It isn't just the media but the books and movies that black and white American kids are exposed to very earlier on in life. Inaccurate impressions of Africa start early, as children are exposed to stereotypical storylines - "The Lion King," "Madagascar", "George of the Jungle," etc.

Having spent the last couple of days in the hotel in Lagos, Emotan felt she had been lied to by what she had been taught in America. She spoke about these things with Ota who also tried to provide a balance by the letting her know that there is another side to Nigeria that she is yet to see, a side fraught with poverty, hunger, insecurity, roads full of potholes, etc. Emotan's response was: "but there is poverty, homelessness and school shootings in the United States too". Ota agreed.

Freedom's mum was happy beyond words to see her son, her granddaughter and her daughter-in-law. She already considered Ota her daughter-in-law even though the traditional wedding rites were yet to be done. She is well aware of the fact that Freedom and Ota were already married at the court registry in New York. She had already done background inquiry on Ota's family and was satisfied that her son is marrying from a good family. She has informed her own late husband's family, especially the eldest person in the family who will now stand-in as Freedom's father.

Bini traditional marriage rites are very elaborate ceremonies and are held in very high esteem in the culture. Though Freedom and Ota had already been living together, they still had to go through all the necessary protocols. Freedom as the prospective groom made the first move by going to the home of his prospective bride to introduce himself and seek acceptability by Ota's immediate family - her parents and siblings. Freedom went with four of his friends who were already in town for the wedding. He took some drinks, fruits and kolanuts as gifts for his prospective in-laws. They were welcomed and Freedom was given a seat next to Ota's father. The old man had small talks with him. Though the conversation was very friendly, Freedom could not help but feel like the man was sizing him up, as if to assess if he was suitable to marry his daughter. The visit went very well none-the-less. Ota's father agreed that since Freedom and Ota's time Nigeria is short, the next step of the marriage process which is the introduction will be combined with the marriage.

The wedding started that Saturday morning with introductory rites, Freedom's immediate family and about 10 members of the extended family arrived the bride's family house two hours earlier than other guests and were ushered into Ota's family living room. The living room was arranged in such a way that Ota's family sat on one side while Freedom's family sat on the opposite. The mission of Freedom's

family was to formally announce their son's intention to marry their hosts' daughter. Kolanuts and drinks were presented by the family of the bride. "You are welcome to our home, please accept these drinks and kolanuts as our welcoming gifts" Ota's family spokesman said. "Urhuṣe, thank you" everyone on Freedom's family side of the room chorused. Ota's family spokesman then asked their visitors the purpose of their visit. The spokesman for Freedom's family responded: "we saw a beautiful flower here in your garden and have come to ask your indulgence if we can pluck it. Specifically, our son, Freedom has informed us that he found that beautiful flower here in your household garden, that he would like to beg you and your family to be given the flower as a gift to love and cherish for the rest of his life".

"We don't have flowers here in my garden" Ota's father responded jokingly. Everyone in the room laughed. Freedom's family then formally accepted the drinks given to them by their host and in turn presented their own kolanuts, drinks and other gifts. The spokesman for Ota's family introduced everyone seated on their side; and the spokesman for Freedom's family did same for their side. The introduction having been completed; everyone was eagerly waiting for one of the main business of the day which was the identification of the bride by the groom.

In response to the earlier claim by the visitors that they had come to pluck a very beautiful flower from the bride's father's garden, the spokesman of Ota's family now responded to their visitors by saying: "there are so many beautiful flowers in our garden, if the flower you are looking for comes out, will you be able to recognise it?" Freedom's family chorused "yes, yes, yes".

The bride's family started ushering into the living room veiled maidens who are Ota's relatives, sisters and cousins one after the other for the groom's family to identify the flower they came for.' Two maidens at a time were ushered in. The groom rejected all of them after unveiling, saying they were not the reason for their visit. Ota was then ushered in, dressed in Bini traditional attire and a traditional hairdo with a veil over her face. She was elegantly dressed and stood out from all the previously unveiled maidens. She was led into the living room by a married female member of her family. Other relatives and close friends, including the previous spinsters, came from behind her amid singing and clapping as the bride is being led in. Imaginary barricades and barriers were set on her path. These barriers had to be cleared by the family of the groom before she completes the 'journey' to the family room. At every stoppage where the imaginary barrier is mounted, the visitors were called upon to clear the road by presenting some money. This happened three times before she finally

entered the family room to clapping and cheers. She stood by her father and Freedom was asked to unveil her. He unveils her, and in joy, admits that this is the 'flower' he had come to pluck. Everyone cheers and claps. Ota was then asked by her father to identify her suitor, she identified Freedom as her suitor. Another round of cheering and clapping. The bowl of kola was then taken to the eldest male of Ota's family to perform the prayers. The "Okaegbe" as the eldest family male is called, picked one of the kolanuts and offered the prayers, then broke it. Other kola nuts in the bowl were broken and shared among those present in the room.

The drinks (gin) were poured into small gin cups. The Okaegbe was given the first cup with which he offered prayers and poured libation to the ancestors on the floor. Thereafter, he handed the cup of drink over to the visiting Okaegbe who gulped it. Others were served using the same cup. This way, the visitors were properly welcomed by their hosts. Ota was summoned and asked, once again, if she accepts the proposal, so that the gifts presented by the visitors could be accepted. She answered "YES!". She was then asked if she accepts the marriage proposal. And she gave a resounding "YES." Her family then asked if she was pregnant? She said "no". In the tradition of the Bini people, if the bride is discovered to be pregnant, the marriage rites will have to wait till she is delivered of her baby as it

is not permitted by tradition to receive dowry on an expectant woman. In recent times, this tradition is being waived by the families so long as bride's family agrees.

The main event of the day was the payment of dowry and other family rituals to be done indoors before the bride and groom is presented to the larger family group and the general public. The list of items and requirements for the dowry for marriage had been handed over to Freedom's family the first time Freedom visited his in-laws' home. The items were brought in and presented to Ota's family. The items included yards of cloth for the parents of the bride, salt, sugar, honey, palm oil, palm wine, yam tubers, hot drinks and the sum of twenty-five Naira. Dowry may vary by the bride's family.

However, before proceeding with the dowry payment, two other important rites had to be performed - the youths' (Ibiegua) rites and mother of the bride (Iyomo) rites. A delegation of Freedom's family was led into one of the rooms in the house where Ota's younger siblings and relatives were paid some amount of money. This is merely symbolic, the sum of N3,000 was paid and shared among Ota's younger siblings. The money is meant for the youths to keep protecting the bride until the moment she is given out in marriage. Another delegation of women from Freedom's family was also sent to meet the mother of the bride (Iyomo) to settle them; to give

money to the women of the bride's household. Only a symbolic amount of N3,000 was also given and shared among the women of the bride's family led by the mother of the bride for all the care they've given the bride till date. At the end of these two rites, the mother of the bride and the youths came to the living room to report all proceedings done behind closed doors to the larger house. The spokesperson for each group reported that they were satisfied with what transpired and the marriage can proceed.

The eldest male in Ota's family accepted the bride price in consonance with Ota's father. Ota's father then asked that his daughter be brought back to the living room. He whispered advise to his daughter's ear and also called Ota's mother to speak with her as well. They both prayed for her and Ota's father took her to the eldest member of his family who then took Ota to the eldest member of Freedom's family, and sat her on his lap. By this ritual Ota was given away in marriage to Freedom's family. The room erupted with jubilant cheers. Freedom's uncle then took Ota to Freedom and sat her on his lap. A louder roar of jubilation went up in the room. A song was raised by the spokesman for Freedom's family and everyone danced in the rather small space for the number of people in the living room.

This time-consuming ceremony in bride's family living room and all the rites that were performed are considered crucial to the sacredness of the marriage

union. While this three-hour ceremony was going on inside the house, a lot of guests comprising extended family members, friends and well-wishers were patiently waiting outside the house in six different tents that had been set up to receive guests. Light refreshments had been served and the guests were all there waiting to receive the newly married couple.

The newly wedded couple came out to a lot of pump, pageantry and cheers. Ota looked like a true African queen in her beaded attire. She looked rich and regal. She had her hair made into a unique hairstyle known as "Eto-Okuku" in Bini local parlance. Coral beads were sewn into the hair to form of a crown. Her wrapper was made from red velvet fabrics. The wrapper was tied at the chest, she then had on a beaded cape. Her neck was adorned with coral beads known as "Ivie-uru" and she wore hand beads on both hands known "Ivie-obo". The regal traditional wedding look was rounded off with beaded earrings known as "Emi-ehorivie" and a handbag made out of coral beads as well. Emotan was dressed up exactly like Ota, she was playing the role of the "little bride's maid" - a modern addition to the ceremony. Freedom looked everything like an African king in his white flowing Bini kilt that flows all the way to the ankle, a white untucked short sleeve shirt, a red neck beads, and hand beads on both hands.

The couple danced to music provided by a live band. Family, friends and other guests "sprayed" them

money, and friends celebrated with them. A lot of eating and drinking. Souvenirs were given to all guests.

Freedom and Ota's traditional marriage ceremony, like other Bini native law and custom weddings was a fun-filled event that showcased the rich custom and tradition of the Bini people.

The next day was the church wedding, popularly called the "white" wedding in Nigeria. Freedom had not wanted this next wedding ceremony but Ota insisted. There is no way she could have told her father who is an ordained elder at their family church that there wouldn't be a church wedding. Freedom eventually agreed. The invitation card and program had already been printed and given out before Freedom and Ota's arrival in Nigeria. The cover of the wedding invitation and program was very attractive with "Our Wedding Program" boldly written at the top of the program with images of a pair of platinum wedding rings in the middle on a white and gold background, which was also the colour theme of the wedding. The bride's name, followed by the groom's name were boldly written under the picture of the rings, followed by the date of the wedding. The backside had the church name, the address, date of the wedding and time.

Ota had on a very luxurious and romantic white wedding dress. The fabric was delicate with lace

work around the neck and arms. She looked like a princess. Emotan was also dressed in an intricately designed white gown almost mimicking Ota's dress and she walked in as the second person on the bridal train beside the chief bridesmaid. All the bridesmaids had on gold themed dresses. Freedom, his best man and the groomsmen were all decked up in black tuxedos, and were already seated at the church. The service started with the processional hymn, introduction, and then declarations were made. At the beginning of the next hymn, Freedom and his best man walked up to the altar, and Ota was walked to the alter by her father. The priest conducted the marriage, and the groom was asked to kiss his new bride. The church celebrated with cheers and clapping. A family member read a psalm, after which the priest prayed for the bride and groom. Another hymn ushered Freedom and Ota back to their new seat in the church front row as husband and wife.

Freedom's younger brother who came in from the United Kingdom did the bible reading. The priest preached the sermon for about twenty-five minutes after which he said a concluding prayer for the bride and groom, and the congregation in general. A concluding hymn ushered everyone out of the church. Taking of photos with the bride and groom continued outside the church while most of the guests drove straight to the wedding reception venue.

Though guests had been seated for over an hour at the elegantly decorated wedding reception hall, the wedding reception proper didn't start until the master of ceremony announced the most anticipated moment of the day's event - the arrival of the bride and groom: "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, let's all stand and welcome the latest couple in the universe, Mr and Mrs Idahosa!" The DJ cranked up a specially requested popular dance music to which the bride and the groom, the bridal train and groom's men danced as they made their way down the aisle and eventually to the dance floor. Freedom and Ota eventually took their place at the head table located in the front of the hall. The bridal party were seated at the tables next them. The MC entertained the guests with jokes, then went into introducing the various events at the reception. A lot of food and drinks went round. The couple had their first dance to a lot of "uhhs" and "ahhs" and lots of money was sprayed on the them by the time they came on the floor for their second dance. Then followed speeches from family and friends. More food and drinks and music and dancing. Lots of photos and video recordings. Cutting of cake. The bouquet toss. It was a reception party for the memories.

CHAPTER 19

They left Benin City two days after the church wedding, spent a night at the same hotel they previously lodged on arrival in Lagos, then left for New York the next morning. Emotan suggested that his dad and step mum proceed on honeymoon. "Honeymoon will have to wait; we both have to get back to work" Freedom responded. Emotan believed she had the most fun on their Nigerian trip; the attention of her paternal grandmother, her aunts, uncles and cousins; then, the wedding, especially the native law and custom. She didn't like that it rained a lot in Benin City though, it was summer time in New York but raining season in Nigeria; the bad roads riddled potholes, and earth roads, cars were literally swimming on some of the roads. These were frowners. It rained almost every day except for the weekend of the wedding ceremonies. Ota's family had engaged the services of a "rain catcher" known as "omuamen" in Bini - a traditional "juju" man whose trade is to stop the rain from falling or redirect the rain to another part of town. She actually saw the man at the backyard of Ota's family home with a fire set with firewood and a bag from which he occasionally brought out things to chew and spit out in the winds. On the floor was a bottle of gin from which he occasionally sipped, gagged and spat in the direction to which he wanted the rain to go. It worked! At first there was a heavy cloud over the sky, like it

was going to pour any moment now, then the clouds began to move westward and it didn't rain. Though the weather was downcast and sky partially covered with clouds, the colourful beauty of the ceremonies overshadowed the downcast weather.

Overall, Emotan felt very much at home in Nigeria and wouldn't mind living there one day. Plus, she is no longer deceived by the very wrong portrayal of Africa and Africans by American media. As a matter of fact, she couldn't wait to tell her friends her experience once school resumes in a couple of weeks.

Ota couldn't really explain what she was feeling on her return to New York. She had already moved in with Freedom before they left for Nigeria. Having had her traditional wedding and walked down the aisle at the church wedding, she's had all she's always wanted in a relationship but why is she feeling this deep sadness after the wedding? Perhaps it's because she is not getting enough attention from Freedom. He had a backlog of work he was trying to catch up with and was very busy. But Freedom has always been busy and to tell the truth, he is not any busier now than he was previously, that aside, she isn't the attention seeking type. Even Freedom has observed how sad she looked; it must have been written all over her face. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You look very unhappy, is something wrong?" he added. "No, I am fine" Ota responded. Perhaps it is

post-wedding depression; the anti-climactic feeling that sometimes happens to some people after a wedding event or any other celebratory activity. She seems to be having difficulty adjusting to this new change in her life. Is she feeling a sense of loss for the life she had before? It is strange because the life she had before is not the life she ever wanted, at least that is what she thought. It was a life of aloneness and she knew without a doubt that she suffered from depression as a result of that lifestyle. So, how come she's still depressed after finding a loving husband and very loving stepdaughter in Emotan. Freedom is a nice guy. He is very unlike many other Nigerian men she has had the opportunity of meeting. He is not a womaniser, at least not to her knowledge. He is not a drinker albeit socially and sparingly. The alcohol he has in the house has been there for months, perhaps even years. Maybe Ota's sadness is a recurrence of post-migration depression. While she may outwardly look as if she had adjusted to the culture and environment of the United States after about a decade of living here, she really hasn't. Though she felt fortunate to have been one of the few that were able to escape the economic hardship in Nigeria, she has always felt lonely here. This was her first visit back home to Nigeria, and it seems going home reminded her of all the strong social connections she had there. Returning to the U.S is showing her how weak her social networks are here. As a matter fact, she

doesn't have any social network here. She has a few Nigerian female acquaintances, and she could even call a couple of them friends and they talked on the phone every now and then. However, it's nothing compared to the network of friends back home in Nigeria – her childhood friends, primary and secondary school mates, her cousins and other family members. Here in the U.S, she really has no friends in the true sense of the word. Though she's forged very close relationships with some co-workers over the years, the friendships soon faded as their assignments took them in different directions. She has very low to no participation in social activities, she can count how many times she's been to the movies on her fingers. She rarely attended Nigerian parties because she was unmarried and had no children. The parties were usually celebrating marriages, anniversaries and children's birthdays it seems. She didn't want to be the subject of gossip. In the U.S, it seems work was all her life was about. At least now, she has a family. She has no reason to be sad but she is.

She acquired a parcel of land in a choice area of Benin City while she was back in Nigeria. This is something she had been working on before she met Freedom. She felt a need to have something she can point to having achieved for all the years she's been working. She thought about telling Freedom but felt

she didn't need to, at least not at the moment. Maybe later in their marriage.

Freedom poured himself into his job and focused on putting the finances together for the business he is planning to start in Nigeria. He registered his company while in Nigeria with Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC). He needed at least two persons to register a Limited liability Company, so he added his younger brother as a partner. He awarded ten percent of the share capital to his brother and kept ninety percent. He added his brother just for the sole purpose of fulfilling the legal requirement of having at least two directors in a Nigerian Limited liability Company, there is no intention for his brother to participate in the business. He planned to go into real estate development in Lagos and Benin City but didn't think he should start immediately. He wanted to get into exporting a product from Nigeria to the United States. He did his research on the type of export business he could get into. Nigeria's only major export is crude oil, it accounted for about eighty percent of her total exports. He felt Nigeria needed to expand her export potentials to be able to meet up economically with other upwardly mobile developing and developed Nations of the world. He wanted to contribute his quota to the nation's economic development. Nigeria is full of so many other natural resources with export potentials. He narrowed his findings down to exporting shrimps

from Nigeria to the United States - specifically to New York where there is a very big market for seafood. This was a low hanging fruit for him. He has identified a business partner in Nigeria who will facilitate the Nigerian end of things. He has spoken to a couple of seafood wholesalers at the south street seaport seafood market in lower Manhattan, NY and they've promised to buy from him so long as his product met all food safety and regulatory requirements of the United States Food and drugs administration (FDA). While in Nigeria, he started the process of obtaining a license from the Nigerian Export Promotion Council. Once that went through, he registered with the United States Food and Drug Administration. He also hired a lawyer in Nigeria who helped in obtaining a Certificate of Free Sale from the Nigerian Ministry of Health that will show that the products are safe for human consumption and free of any contaminants. He got a certificate from the Nigerian National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). After obtaining these documents, Freedom then registered with the United States Food and Drugs Administration.

Freedom hired an assistant named Ovie while in Nigeria. Ovie is a twenty-six-year-old graduate of economics from the University of Benin. He is a second-class upper graduate like himself and Freedom was impressed by his IQ during his interview. Despite all the challenges faced by

universities and other tertiary institutions in Nigeria, they are still churning out some very brilliant students. Ovie is from Delta state, a state in the Niger delta coastal region of Nigeria. Shrimps and Prawns are majorly harvested in coastal regions of Nigeria, and Ovie is very familiar the terrain, and with the town of Ogharefe in Delta state where Freedom plans to get his products from. Ovie hails from the village of Jesse which is just a few kilometres from Ogharefe. Since graduating from the university three years earlier, he has been living in Lagos and "squatting" with friends, looking for work. But in the meantime, Ovie is hustling to make money by doing freelance brokerage work at the Apapa seaport and the Muritala Mohammed International airport in Lagos. He was introduced to Freedom by a friend and Freedom liked him the first time he saw him. He is a vibrant young man who seemed to have his head in the right direction. The friend who introduced him knew his parents, so Freedom felt he could trust him.

CHAPTER 20

Freedom travelled back to Lagos five months after his previous visit. Ovie met him at the airport and they took a taxi to the hotel. Though he has been warned about how dangerous it is to travel on intercity roads in Nigeria, he travelled the next day by road with Ovie on a commercial charter vehicle to Ogharefe. He wanted to meet directly with the owners of the farm that would be raising the Frozen shrimps and prawns on his behalf. If he is going to do business in Nigeria, then he has to overcome this fear of Nigerian highways that almost everyone is warning him about. He is aware that the highways are rife with crime, police greed, corruption, and pothole-riddled in many areas. But he also knows that if you keep a low profile and use commercial vehicles, one can navigate all the challenges a bit easier. If something random happens, then something random happens. Random can happen anywhere. Travelling by air has its own challenges. In Nigerian airports, flights that are scheduled to leave at 9am end up leaving at 3pm after being postponed multiple times while you sit at the airport waiting and helpless. Sometimes, the flight is cancelled altogether. He often wonders how people survive doing business in Nigeria. For Freedom, travelling by road is a risky but necessary option. He left Lagos at 7am that morning and was at

the farm in Ogharefe by 12 noon of the same day. Not bad for a journey of approximately 450 km.

Freedom scrapped the idea of partnership. He couldn't agree on anything with the partner he identified in Nigeria; they were too wide apart on business ethics. He concluded that his best option at this initial stage is to go it alone; have direct access to the farmers, get the best possible products and the best possible price. It is clear to him that going through the partner would waste time, cost more money, and reduce the profit margins. He needs to learn and navigate the ropes himself at this initial stage, partners can come in later as the business expands.

The farm is located in an undeveloped and sparsely populated section of this sleepy small coastal town. There were other businesses scattered along the main thoroughfare - a logging company, a couple of sawmills and many old commercial buildings that has since closed down; businesses that looked a shadow of their old selves. The Manager of the shrimp farm met them at the parking lot. "How do you do? I'm Mr John Obadia, general manager of the farm" he said. "Hello, I am Freedom, Freedom Idahosa" Both men shook hands, and the Manager proceeded to walk Freedom through the farm. He explained that the farm had just undergone renovation so as to increase the capacity, quality and durability of the farm. The ponds are on five acres of land running into the

creeks. He showed Freedom the hatchery. He discussed some of the challenges facing the farm which includes: sporadic electrical power supply and problems with logistics. Most of their logistical needs are done by boat. There is also the issue of lack of local feed mills, which means they have to source feed from abroad, from such countries as Denmark and Vietnam. The electrical power supply problem has been mitigated by purchasing two heavy duty diesel generators but this drives the cost of production up. Because there are very few shrimp producers in Nigeria, there is also a lack of skilled shrimp farming experts. The farm had to employ experts from the Philippines. The Manager took Freedom through the processing, packaging and refrigeration section of the farm. Freedom was impressed. The Manager gave him samples to take back to the U.S; all he needed to do is to make sure they are refrigerated soon as he gets home, then packaged in a cooler with dry ice, and checked-in as an item for personal consumption on his flight back to the U.S. The Manager also gave Freedom a price list of all the different sizes and types of shrimps. On his way back to Lagos, Freedom stopped by in Benin City to see his mother for a couple of days.

Freedom wrote down a business structure that will make his business internationally reputable. He rented an office in Victoria Island – one of the most reputable highbrow neighbourhoods of Lagos,

created a company profile and a corporate email. He had discussions with Ovie on how he wants the operations run; they would start off with air shipping at the initial stages, then progressively move to sea shipping as the market increases. With recommendations from some of his friends and Ovie's input, he identified the shipping company he will be using.

Freedom came back to New York with the shrimp samples and proceeded to show them to his buyers. He then officially put in his resignation from his job. Freedom successfully made his first shipment of shrimps from Nigeria to the United States that fall. He felt very strongly that his path to returning back to Nigeria was set. On the home front, Ota got pregnant and gave birth to a twin - a boy and a girl, and Freedom took some time off to stay home with Ota and the babies. He set aside his plans of travelling to Nigeria for the meantime. He'll travel back in a couple of months to touch base with his supply chain and network on other business issues. He had been shown a piece of landed property in Lagos that he needed to go take a proper look at and negotiate with the seller. But first things first, he gave himself a break from work and stayed home with his new bundle of joy. Emotan was over the moon about the new arrivals and she really relished her big sister role. She helped with everything. Again, the only person that didn't seem too happy was Ota. She

seemed visibly sad at times, and it seems it was a return to when they came back from their wedding ceremonies in Nigeria. She had mood swings, crying spells, anxiety and difficulty sleeping. Freedom read up on the possible causes of this; he was confused and becoming worried. Is he married to a depressed personality? He didn't think so, Ota was too positive on many other fronts, she couldn't be tagged as someone with a depressed personality disorder. He concluded based on his findings that Ota probably had postpartum depression. He hoped according to what he read; it will go away after a while. In any case, he focused on helping out as much as he could in the house and did any official work that needed done from home. After about six weeks, he noticed Ota was beginning to feel better, her smile came back and she was more relaxed with the babies and everyone else. They both agreed she would stay off work until the babies were old enough to enrol in crèche. Emotan has volunteered not to go to summer camp so she can help with the babies.

Freedom set up an accounting company of his own in the U.S. and hired an accounting assistant at his newly set up New York office. The assistant doubles as a marketing manager to deal with the shrimp business and other matters that may come up at the office. He then travelled back to Nigeria that summer. This time he is going for a longer stay so he can begin to lay the groundwork for him and his family

return back to Nigeria. He purchased an SUV which he shipped ahead of his travel. He also asked that a rental apartment be identified for him to look at when he arrives. His flight arrived Lagos at about 8am, Ovie picked him up and drove him to the hotel. Soon as he got settled, they went to see three different apartments in the island, two in Lekki phase one, and a third further east at Aja. He liked the one at Aja, it is a privately owned gated estate off the Lekki Expressway. It is actually a secluded community onto itself, occupying about 100 hectares of residential, commercial and public service area. It has good road network, round the clock security, a large recreational park, and other facilities such as banks and rental apartment a shopping centre. The estate has some very eye-catching mansions, modern private houses and apartment buildings. Freedom chose one of the duplexes from a unit of four separate three-bedroom duplexes, each with its own gated entrance and enough space for two cars to be parked within the compound. It also had its own security gatehouse and a generator house. “Ah yes, an electrical generator house, pathetically indispensable must-have in 21st century Nigeria” Freedom thought. You are lucky if you get 4 hours of electricity in a 24-hour day from the electricity supply company. The 4 hours you get is determined by the supplier, and it’s never available at a set time. Pure madness! But there is more!! Each individual home is also its own Public Works Department, responsible

for supplying its own pipe borne water and setting up its own sewage system. Though he had wanted an apartment so he would have less of these headaches to deal with, Freedom was sold on the privacy that a house would provide, plus it will conveniently accommodate his family when they visit and eventually when they come over. The annual rent was something he could afford because of the relative high exchange rate of the dollar to the Naira. But he is not deceived by the relative low cost (in dollar terms) of the annual rent because he realises, he is his own Public Works Department, and would have to add-on all that other cost plus the estate charges for security and other common amenities. Freedom paid for two years and went ahead to furnish the part of the house he needed for now, then moved in a week later.

Freedom bought a landed property located about 15 km from his new place, eastward towards Epe, along the Lekki Aja road. It is two hectares of swamp and forested wetlands and marshes. This area of Lagos is between the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Lagos lagoon on the other. The land still had some trees and bushes. He invested in the land with the idea of reclaiming it to sell part of it and develop other parts for residential properties. He did his due diligence with the help of his lawyer. The land had registered survey plan, deed of assignment and original family receipt, according their findings.

Freedom proceeded to pay for the land and employed the services of a swamp buggy to clear a small portion, then sand filled about thirty square meters a portion of which he erected a security gatehouse. He then employed the services of a guard who lived in the gatehouse and watched over the land. He then started the process of putting a Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) in place with his lawyer. The problems around the rigorous processes, long duration and the high cost of obtaining land and property documentations in Nigeria is well known. The bureaucracy and corruption in the government ministry responsible for issuing the C of O is an open secret; workers won't move your file except they are "paid" or given "something". This all-important document (Certificate of Occupancy) is the document issued by State governments in Nigeria to landowners and property buyers as legitimate proof of ownership. Aside this, it can also be used as collateral for bank loans and make it easy for property owners to re-sell. It took Freedom five years and millions of Naira in bribe money before he could obtain the C of O.

Within the five years it took him to get the C of O, he had to deal with the very dreadful affliction of land grabbers popularly known as "Omonile" in Lagos. They are part of the land owners who he bought the land from in the first place. They sold the same piece of land to more than at least two other buyers in the

last five years. They've come at every stage of the land development so far, and Freedom had to pay "Omonile" signing fee for them to have the Deed of Assignment signed. The Omoniles are an alternate government unto themselves when it comes to land matters in Lagos state, they've established an alternative Land taxation system, and do everything possible to grab as much as they want financially from a prospective buyer. The new land owners have to pay various absurd mandatory fees. This system is nothing short of day light robbery to frustrate a buyer for their own selfish means. These fees end up in the pockets of village heads and influential members of the community for their own selfish gain. When Freedom went to the police to report, he was advised by the police to find an amicable way of settling them. These thugs can generally make life very uncomfortable for landowners in their community. They can also become violent until one pays them the money they demand. They would also forcefully take over your land till you pay up. They've gone as far as placing "juju" on the land until Freedom and others who bought land in the community paid up. At every stage of work at the site, he had to pay.

He cleared the land, had it fully reclaimed and sand-filled, then fenced. At this point he was exasperated, he had spent hundreds of millions of Naira, and that's the amounts he could document. In Nigeria, you are

just going to spend a lot of undocumented money because everything is so convoluted, there is just no straight forward way of doing anything.

In the last five years while he was growing his business, Freedom spent over 60% percent of his time in Nigeria. Despite all the challenges, he liked it here. His daily routine usually consists going to the land site in the morning whenever work is going on there, then heading to his office in Victoria Island around 10am when the traffic towards the city centre has subsided. The period around 10am is fondly referred to as “CEO travel time” because the bumper-to-bumper slow moving Lagos traffic towards Victoria Island, Ikoyi and Marina would have subsided as all Lagos Island bound workers would have gotten to their destination. In the evenings, he also waits in the Island at one of the various swank bars in VI or go to one of the private clubs in VI or Ikoyi with his friends who are members. The clubs are exclusive membership clubs where Lagos' crème de la cream and elites mingle. He has made quite a few friends and have met some of his old university schoolmates who are now captains of industries in finance, real estate and other businesses. He has also met a few political office holders, top civil servants and military officers. He loved the bantering at these clubs and plans to join one or two of them once he gets his feet fully planted in Nigeria. Aside the bantering, it seems near impossible to break into

the cliques formed by these Lagosians. One would think that business networking would naturally emanate from these casual activities but that doesn't seem to be the case. Perhaps this is because he was still an outsider. Perhaps when he becomes a member, things would change.

Just as Freedom concluded the overall fencing of his land, he got a call from his lawyer that he has been sued - someone else is laying claim to the land! The claimant is saying he has government issued legal papers for the same land from twenty years earlier. As his lawyer will explain to him later, the land was part of a large portion of land - about thirty hectares in all that was previously donated to state government by the community for the purpose of setting up an industry in the 1970s. When the government didn't set up the industry as proposed after three decades, the community sued the government to court and the courts ordered the land returned back to the community. The state governments release land to indigenous peoples or settlers this way following a legal process known as "excision". What the law suit is saying however is that the state government had apportioned two hectares to this company and had given them a C of O. The company set up an industry on one portion of the land but left Freedom's portion of the land for later development. "Why did the company wait until I have spent all this money to now sue" Freedom asked his

lawyer." Was the community not aware of this before selling the land?". Freedom had so many questions. The lawyer assured him that they will win the case in court. However, land cases in Nigerian courts can take forever to conclude.

The shrimp business has not been doing very well lately, not because he didn't have enough market in the United States, rather, the demand from the U.S end had increased and supplies from Nigeria has been inconsistent and unable to meet up. His major supplier has been having all sorts of business challenges; majorly lack of consistent electricity, the high cost of importing feeds and logistics. These were the same challenges the manager had pointed out to him when he first visited the shrimp farm a few years ago. It seems they were unable to surmount the problems despite their best efforts.

Freedom contacted another shrimp production company in Rivers state - a trawler company which lands high tonnage of shrimp off the coast of West Africa. He visited the farm and ordered two-container load of shrimps that is expected to land Lagos any day now. All shipping arrangements by sea has been made and he will be travelling to New York to await the consignment and do all the paper work on that end himself. He is sticking his neck out on this one financially and he didn't want anything to go wrong.

However, everything did go wrong with the huge shipment of shrimps Freedom made. The Food and Drug Administration certified the consignment unfit for consumption. Not because the shrimps had spoiled or was contaminated but due to mislabelling of the packaging. The package labelled for pink shrimps contained brown shrimps - these are different varieties. The sizes of shrimps on the labels and on the packs did not also match the products on the inside. There was nothing Freedom could do. He lost hundreds of thousands of dollars just like that. He consulted with lawyers and other stakeholders in the FDA to see if there was a way to salvage the situation. There wasn't any.

CHAPTER 21

Emotan is his father's pride and joy; together with the twins, they gave Freedom the desire to keep keeping on. Emotan graduated her high school with the highest cumulative grade point average. Like her mother, she attended a historically black university in Atlanta - the medical school at Morehouse university. Although Morehouse is a historically black all-male institution, the School of Medicine is coeducational. As a matter of fact, there are more female medical students than males. Emotan graduated with an M.D degree.

While Freedom was dealing with his loss from the shrimp business, he had a heart attack, a partial stroke and was on admission at the hospital in New York for two weeks. Emotan's graduation ceremony got him off that hospital bed quickly. The heart attack happened three weeks prior to Emotan's graduation. Freedom got off the hospital bed on time to attend the ceremony. After the ceremony, Freedom started planning his next trip back to Nigeria.

"Are you serious? You are going back to Nigeria after all that happened to you?" Ota asked "Yes I am" Freedom responded. "But why?" Ota asked again. Freedom did not respond. They have been arguing lately about his Nigerian trips and the whole plan of moving back to Nigeria. Ota feels moving back to Nigeria was no longer feasible for them at this point.

More so, Freedom has been trying to plant his feet on ground there for too many years now without success. Truth be told, Ota can no longer picture herself living in Nigeria, especially living there with her children. With all the problems in that country? Inconsistent electricity, bad roads, insecurity and many more. She can't see herself giving up all the perks of living in the West. Freedom on the other hand has had his mind made up. Despite his misfortune with the shrimp business and the challenges he is facing with his real estate investment, he returned to Nigeria.

Freedom and his lawyers were able to work out an out-of-court settlement on the land case. The company that took him to court bought him out of 1 hectare of the land. Freedom was happy with the deal because it enhanced his cash flow; he started developing the other one-hectare portion that was left. It wasn't exactly what he wanted but he can at least move on.

One month later, Freedom's lawyer called him from New York to inform Freedom that his wife had filed for divorce.

CHAPTER 22

An African proverb says: “do not look where you feel, look where you slipped.” Freedom loves proverbs, especially African proverbs. Growing up, both his parents and all the elders in his family and his general environment punctuated every discussion with proverbs. As Chinua Achebe said, “proverb is the salt with which words are eaten” This is a true custom of every African culture. In these very trying times in his life, Freedom turned to the wisdom language of his upbringing, the content of inspirational books and stories he had read, and ultimately his faith. He needed inspiration to carry on. As Zig Ziglar said: “everyone needs a little inspiration and motivation now and then”. However, some argue that motivation doesn’t last; that might be true but neither does bathing – that’s why it is recommended daily.

Freedom tried to identify where he slipped on the shrimp consignment that was certified unfit for consumption by the FDA. He let his guard down. With his old supplier, he had a worker there at the factory who ensured everything was packaged according to specification. Ovie supervised the worker and travelled to Ogharefe from Lagos on a weekly basis during production and preparations for shipping. He did not put the same protocol in place with his new supplier, he let their impressive profile deceive him into trusting them. But can we continue

this way? Must every process and every business be micro-managed? Isn't trust foundational to a business transaction? If I pay for a product, shouldn't I get the product I paid for? Can Nigeria join upwardly mobile nations of the world economically if we can't build a trust system that respects a contract between two? Can we make progress with a political system with self-serving politicians who clearly exploit the system for their own benefit? Can we make progress without a reliable arbiter of justice – an impartial system of justice? He thought about suing the shrimp farm but was advised not to. He may end up not getting his compensation paid after spending millions of Naira on the lawsuit. Freedom licked his wounds and turned to reading, as he always did whenever life threw him a curve ball.

Where did he slip on his journey of life?

Where did he slip on his marriage?

Where did his country of birth - Nigeria slip?

Where did his continent - Africa slip?

Where did the black race slip?

So many questions?

In journeying back to Nigeria, Freedom was following his belief deep in his heart that this is where he belongs, being birthed in Nigeria and growing up here is not an accident. Will Freedom be ever free? He has tasted and seen what is possible in Nigeria as a young man growing up. He has lived in the West and he has lived here, there is no doubt in his mind

where he belongs, where he wants to be. He has moved according to his conscience. He believes he needs to take advantage of the opportunities presented in the country of his birth and act on the opportunities around him. And he has done so and will continue to do so.

Freedom read again "Acres of Diamonds" - a well-known speech by Robert Conwell, the founder of Temple University. It is a true story about an African farmer named Ali Hafed who heard stories of fortune from other farmers. He heard that these other farmers discovered diamonds on their land and became rich beyond their wildest imagination. Ali Hafed became fed up with his own life and eagerly wanted the same fortune. He decided to sell his farm and left his family to begin a search for land in foreign places that would lead him to his diamonds. He searched through many lands far and wide but found nothing. Ali searched until he lost hope and became a despondent, depressed old man. Ali eventually committed suicide!

The farmer who bought Ali's original farm from him was strolling along a creek that ran through the farm one day when he noticed a blue flash from the creek bed, he knelt and sifted it through the water until he pulled a crystal object from the mud of the creek. He wiped it off, took it home and left it on the shelf above his fireplace, and forgot about it.

Sometime later, a visitor stopped by his farmhouse and noticing the crystal on the shelf, picked it up. Instantly he became excited, he was holding a diamond in his hand! The farmer of course thought it was a lie but the visitor reassured him that it was indeed a diamond. That farm eventually became one of the largest diamond mines in the world.

If Ali Hafed had simply known how to identify and look for diamonds in its dirty and rough stage, he would have had the fortune he so desperately wanted right there in his own backyard.

Nigerians and by extension Africans are sitting on their acres of diamond. "What is needed are the skills and ability to recognize what a diamond looks like in its rough state." We are all sitting on our acres of diamonds. We can only find it as individuals and as people when we recognise that it takes intense heat and pressure for diamonds to be born.