

The untold story behind my fast rise in Nollywood!

JULIANA OLAYODE



REBIRTH

from **GRASS** to **GRACE**

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to YOU.

If you are hurting, may you find healing.
If you are confused, may you find direction.
If you are tired, may you find strength.
If you are sad, may you find joy.
If you are afraid, may you find courage.

In the places you have been despised, may you be honoured.
In the places you have failed, may you yet succeed.
In the places you have been rejected, may you be accepted.
In the places you have suffered shame, may you enjoy glory.
In the places you have toiled, may you harvest plentiful.

As I rose from nothing to something, may you rise above all your
barriers.
May your story be sweeter than mine!

Cheers!!!

Juliana Olayode.

DISCLAIMER

The events in this book are real, the places are real and the people are real. However, some people did me wrong. I have forgiven them, but still need to mention details so that you understand my journey. To prevent them from suffering shame for their past mistakes, I would be using letters to represent them; the first letter of their names. Only those who know about these events would know the exact identity of the people.

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GOODBYE MUM

Growing up, for me, was fun until my dad and mum separated. It was on a Saturday morning. We woke up to an argument between them and it was the first time my siblings and I would ever hear them raise their voices that way; we were confused. Before long, my dad started throwing my mum's things out of the house. She tried to stop him, but he was stronger than her.

At that time, we lived in a two-room apartment and we had neighbours. The neighbours were fascinated at the rancour they saw because they knew my dad to be a jovial and playful man. My dad had the ability to chatter away with absolute strangers. My mum was also in the good books of neighbours because she was generous, especially with the bachelors and spinsters in the compound; she would almost always prepare a lot of food, having the neighbours in mind. So, this development was a surprise to many.

When the neighbours arrived the scene, they inquired of my mum what the problem was but she was already sobbing and could barely speak. My siblings and I could not explain either as we were just as shocked. Some well-meaning men among them took my dad to a secluded area and spoke with him. I do not know what they talked about, but I heard my dad say, sternly, "she must go!". He was shouting.

I had lived with my dad long enough to know that when he made up his mind on something, no one and nothing could make him change his mind. The question that then lingered in my mind was, 'what did my mum do to deserve such shame?' I really wondered why he wanted her out of the house all of a sudden.

The day before, I still saw them eating and laughing together. He told his usual jokes; we all laughed and went to bed in peace. I was baffled at the sharp contrast and wondered what could have gone wrong between the time they retired to bed and the time we awoke to the drama.

My siblings and I watched as my mum struggled to get her things back into the house, tears streaming down her face. My dad had warned us, his children, not to come close to him or plead for our mum but we could not obey that. The six of us went to him on our knees and we latched onto his legs, begging him. He was definitely angry, as he

turned deaf eyes to our pleas and blind eyes to our tears. He was a jovial man on a good day, but also a disciplinarian. The moment he ordered us out of his sight, we knew better than to stay.

I saw the pain in my mum's eyes. She did not want to leave. What woman would want to leave her six children and the husband of her youth? She put her things together at the foot of the door. She signalled me to come. At this time, my dad had gone inside. She told me she would be back. She wanted to go see some people that were close to my dad; people she hoped he would listen to. After she left, I relayed the message to my sisters and we all started crying again.

My dad locked himself in his room. I went to his door, in the evening, and tried it. It bulged. So, I figured it was either he later unlocked it or we just assumed all along that it was locked. I went in and saw my dad sitting on the bed, shaking his legs. He only did that when extremely upset. I did not care that he was angry, I went over to him and rested against him, my head on his chest. His heart was beating really fast. He did not say a word to me.

My dad always had a soft spot for me; we were close. In those days, when he wanted to submit a quotation for a job, he would tell my mum to pray over it. After my mum had prayed, he would bring it to me to do same. He believed in my prayers. I would say I was my dad's second wife.

Whenever he wanted to visit his friends, then, he would take me along. He did that not only because he enjoyed my company, but also because he took pleasure in hearing the comments his friends passed, praising him for having a beautiful daughter. I am the only fair-complexioned child of my parents and people called me Oyinbo. I was not only fair but had long black hair.

On different occasions, my dad would have my mum wear a ready-made flowery dress for me and any of my elder sisters available would pack my hair into two with ribbons my dad bought. On our many trips, people would stop us and say nice things. Whilst I was blushing, my dad would usually say, "na my pikin o".

The next question, usually, was “why she con yellow like this and you con black?” and my dad would say, “na God o”. He took delight in explaining that to any and everyone who stopped us on our way to his friends’ houses. Some of the admirers gave me money, some bought things for me, and for the female admirers, they took turns touching my hair.

There were many occasions too when I stayed up late with my mum, waiting for him to return home from work. He would ask why I was awake and I would tell him I wanted to see him before going to bed. A big smile would brighten his face, he would carry me and say “oyinbo mi”. I loved the sound of that and I would chuckle when he called me that. And sometimes, I was privileged to eat with him, whenever mum allowed.

I slept off on my dad’s chest countless times after playing with his hairy chest and pot belly. I remember times when I put my ear to his belly, saying I wanted to hear how his food got digested. The moment his stomach rumbled, I would laugh so hard and tease him. My dad and I were that close.

As I put my head on his chest that evening, I did not know what to say. I did not know if it was in my place to ask what happened. I remained silent for a while until I summoned enough courage to speak, hoping he would not get upset and send me out. I asked him if he would let my mum stay and stop being upset with her. His response was positive. Maybe he did that to stop me from crying because things were different the next day.

When my mum returned the next day, with some of my dad’s friends and some church members, they pleaded with him but he would not listen. I got angry at him for deceiving me. I went to him and reminded him of what he told me the night before. He told me to leave him alone. I was really upset. I trusted him and believed his words; he had been convincing.

My mum left and came back with her friends. They all knelt before him. So did my siblings and I. That did not change anything. My mum went to his elder brothers’ houses and they came home with her to beg, but he insisted she must leave.

The saddest thing was we did not know why he was insisting and my mum was not saying why either. Whenever people came to beg, they would ask the children to excuse them at the point of discussion. They only called us back at the point when they wanted to beg again. So, we were left in the dark as to the cause of the whole problem.

The day I saw my grandmother show up at the house, with her sister, to beg my dad, I was so sure it was over and he would not be able to say no. I got the shock of my life when I heard that did not work too. My mum then called us and made us see she was doing her best not to leave us. I could tell she was bottling up a lot inside. She did not want to leave her husband and she definitely did not want to leave us. She was in a state of despair as she sobbed bitterly. It was over.

She promised to check on us from time to time. We asked her where she would go and she said she did not know. She said she could not go back to her mother's house as tradition did not permit that. More so, she was the first child of her mother and her younger siblings were doing well in their own marriages. She could not stomach the shame of going back.

My mum blessed us, hugged us one after the other, and left. It was a very sober evening. The reality just dawn on us that mummy would no longer live with us. My parents were separated.

The atmosphere at home changed when mum left. Dad remained in the room whenever he returned from work. No laughter. No smiles. The house became lifeless. Everyone wore a straight face, minding their own business. We were all upset with my dad. I even overheard one of my sisters telling a friend who had come visiting that she would never forgive my dad.

Dad became a chef. He started cooking for us. His food was definitely not as tasty as mum's. My dad never cut down on ingredients, so there were always many things to chew on. He did not do that for too long. My elder sister, Adetutu, took over. She and my immediate elder sister, Bose, took turns cooking.

My two immediate elder sisters took mum's position. They would wake my younger

brother and I very early in the morning, prepare breakfast and make sure we were dressed for school before 7am every day. If not that I would go to school and cry about my mum, it was not obvious otherwise that my mum was not around. My mum raised my sisters well.

Let me mention here that the first two children, my eldest sisters, rebelled against my dad and he sent them out of the house to live with grandma, reason for just four children with my dad at the time.

My mum showed up in the house one afternoon and we were so happy. She wanted to know how well we were doing. She went through our school books, inspected our nails and checked our clothes. She asked if my dad had said anything about her and we answered her in the negative.

She stayed a while. My younger brother and I were on her laps all through her visit. She prayed for us and gave my sisters instructions on what to do. She gave us a curfew of 6pm and insisted dinner should be eaten by 7pm. She told them to make sure dad's food was well preserved.

She simply performed her motherly duties and as she did this, her eyes filled up. She tried to stop the tears, but she had obviously reached her breaking point. She broke down in tears and we all joined her.

In tears, she told us, speaking in our Yoruba dialect, not to act like children who do not have a mother. She said God would watch over us until she returned. She said emphatically that we should always pray. She promised to still check on us from time to time. She gave some money to Adetutu to keep for emergency spendings. Soon after, she left.

My brother and I could not stop crying. Adetutu reminded us that mummy said she would come back and that comforted us. My mum did not stop coming until someone told my dad that she usually came. He beat my elder sisters for not mentioning it to him all the while and told us to tell her never to come again.

The next time she came, we told her what daddy said and my sisters showed her the

marks on their bodies. She said she would not come again. She had a friend who was a hair stylist. Her friend's shop was not too far from the house, so she arranged a way for us to meet her at her friend's shop without incurring our dad's wrath.

After that day, however, we did not hear from mummy in months. We started getting used to life without her. Every day, we hoped someone would come from her friend's shop to call us but no one came. Days, weeks, and months passed.

It got more disturbing when we could not reach her via phone. My sisters would go to the business centre to call her but her phone was always switched off. We went to her friend's shop to inquire and were told she had not come by. We were dead worried, with all sorts of thoughts playing on our minds.

As a young girl, I could think of little else. I kept remembering the last time I saw her, what she wore, where she sat, what her face looked like, how she hugged me and how she prayed for us. Was that the last we would see of her? Had she died? Had she decided never to see us again? Was she sick? Was she arrested? Did she have an accident? The questions were endless. The more I tried to get the bad thoughts off my head, the stronger they came.

I went to my sisters crying and asked if my mum was dead. They assured me she was not. I do not know why I believed them, but I did. Maybe it was because we prayed for her afterwards and I felt peace in my heart that God was with her.

Then one day, something happened.

My mum was trying to cross the expressway, when suddenly a motorcycle, passing 'one way', hit her. The rider escaped. People gathered at the scene. My mum was still breathing but she was badly injured, bleeding all over, and in bad shape. Nobody helped her. They were just analysing the situation, cursing the rider and lamenting on recent accidents while my mum was helpless on the ground, struggling to breathe.

A nice fellow came some minutes after and checked her pulse. He discovered she was no longer breathing. He yelled at the people who were at the scene at the beginning, asking why they did not help. They excused themselves saying they did not want to get

into trouble with the police. The man used his fingers to close my mum's eyes.

I screamed out of my sleep. It was a dream, but it felt so real. I was terrified. I woke my sisters. My dreams were special and usually came to pass. Before then, I had dreamt that my dad and mum had a fight, but I didn't see the separation in the dream. When I told my sisters, knowing my gift of dreams, they became scared. We prayed against it, but that did not stop my tears. I kept seeing my mum's face everywhere. I was restless and began to scream.

My dad woke up. In tears, I told him what I saw. He said it would never happen, that my mum was alive and well wherever she was. He said it was likely a figment of my imagination. In spite of what he said, I could not sleep until daybreak. I begged God that my dream should not materialize. My hope that she was alive dwindled by the day, but I did not stop praying.

After incessant attempts, three weeks after, my sisters tried calling her again, and this time, it rang. My mum picked. She said she had been terribly ill. My sisters told her about my dream and how worried we had been. She assured them she would visit soon, but asked that they bring me and my younger brother to speak with her next time they came to call at the business centre. When my sisters returned and disclosed the news that they had spoken with mummy, I could not hide my delight. I began jumping from chair to chair and thanking God for nullifying my dream.

One afternoon, soon after, we heard a knock on the door. When Adetutu opened, we saw one of the apprentices from my mum's friend's shop. We did not wait for her to finish delivering her message before we dashed out of the house, my sister forgetting to lock the door until Bose reminded her.

When we got to the shop, panting, we saw mummy. We hugged her. I sat on a stool beside her and did not let go of her hand until we left. I wanted to be sure it was not another dream. My mum had lost so much weight. I could see her cheekbones, eye sockets and collar bones. She was looking pale. It was obvious she was just recovering and only God could have pulled her through that experience.

We took turns explaining our fears to her, explaining how we felt when we could not reach her. She broke down in tears again and in Yoruba, said “I will not die. I will live for you”. She prayed a while. And after my sisters explained my dream again to her and how we prayed, she caressed my hair. And after such a long time, she called me one of my names, Aduragbemi meaning Prayer Saved Me!

The last time she called me Aduragbemi was when she told me how I was born. She was in labour for three days! She kept seeing a black cat and every time she saw it, she lost her strength. The strange thing was she was the only one seeing the cat. The midwives did not see it. They were beginning to think she had a problem.

On the third day, she asked to be taken to church. The head of the prayer team prayed over a cup of water and gave her to drink. At that moment, my mum’s strength was renewed and she stopped seeing the cat. That’s how I came into this beautiful world at C.A.C. (Christ Apostolic Church), Oke-Iyanu, Ogba, Lagos. That was the reason behind my name, Aduragbemi.

As her surprise visit came to a close, my mum gave us money, but she did not have much to give this time around. She gave my sister One thousand Naira and left. We cried our eyes out again, wondering when next we would see her and very concerned about how she looked, hoping she would be fine.

Somehow, the news got to my dad that mum came around. He mentioned it at devotion; we usually had family devotions on Saturdays. He did not beat my sisters this time and he did not raise his voice at us either. I guess he mentioned it just to let us know he knew.

After my mum was fully recovered, she came around again. She told us she had gotten a job and that she would save to rent an apartment. She promised when that happened, we would be able to visit her and spend more time with her. At this time, my dad had bought a phone for Adetutu, so my mum was able to take her number. She prayed for us, gave us money and left again.

We did not see her often anymore, but we kept in touch over the phone. She also

sent people to us regularly with foodstuff, money and clothes. My sisters kept the foodstuff with a neighbour. We hid the clothes too, and wore them only during holidays, when away at our cousins' place. We did not want daddy getting upset. It was a tiring and difficult experience.

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THE TOUCH

My younger brother, Samson, and I returned from school one afternoon and did not find the key to the house where it should have been. My brother and I attended Temitope Nursery and Primary School, Ogba, Lagos. I was in Primary One at the time and brother was in Nursery One. We were sweating profusely when we got home because it was a hot afternoon. We were also tired, hungry and sleepy.

I told my brother to take off his uniform and I did the same. We were in our underwear. We then sat at the door, waiting for our sisters to return. Next to our house was a beer parlour that doubled as a restaurant. It was owned by one of our neighbours, Mama Unoma. We had waited almost an hour, so I decided to tell Mama Unoma about our plight and how hungry we were.

She was kind to us. She gave us a plate of *Garri* with *Egusi* soup and two big pieces of meat. We thanked her and returned to the door where my brother and I devoured the meal. After I returned the plate with thanks, I warned my brother never to speak a word of what happened because we had been trained not to ask neighbours for food.

We cleaned our mouths, getting rid of any proof of what we had just done, and then began to do our assignments. At that time, *Uncle I* stepped out of his room and headed for the kitchen. He noticed Samson and I sitting outside. He came to us, asked why we were outside and I explained to him. He then told us to come into his room and stay there until our siblings arrived. *Uncle I* was our neighbour, a Benin man, living with his brother. On this day, however, his brother was not around.

Not too long after we got to his room, my brother slept off. His room was very cold, not because he had any air conditioner, but because his fan was blowing at its peak. He asked me how school was and I told him. Soon after, he asked me to sit on his laps. I did. He asked if I knew the multiplication table and I responded in the positive. He told me to recite it and I did excitedly. I started from two, but by the time I was on four, I felt something against my bum.

I did not pay attention to it until he grabbed my flat chest with his hands and started squeezing. It was painful, so I stopped the recital. He asked why I stopped and I told him.

He said he was sorry. Still wondering how to react to him, I heard my name. It sounded like Adetutu's voice and I was about responding to her call when he covered my mouth, lifted me off his laps and told me never to tell anyone. He said people, including my sisters, would beat me if I ever told them what happened. I nodded in fear. He stood, faced the wall to adjust his trouser, carried my brother, and opened the door.

When my sisters saw us, they thanked him for hosting us and took us home. I did not get over the incidence for a long time. The most confusing part to me was how he acted in front of my sisters. I did not know how to tell them what happened, so I kept it to myself, hoping that would be the last of it but I was wrong.

On a particular weekend, I was playing with other kids in the compound when I heard my name. It was *Uncle I*. I frowned. He told me to follow him, but I did not. He went straight to my house and demanded to speak with my sisters. He told them I had been rude to him lately, saying he wanted to send me on an errand and I refused. My sisters called me in and asked me why I was being rude to him. I was so confused. I could not say anything.

I was ordered to follow him and run whatever errands he sent me. I followed him against my will. When I got to his room, he closed the door and just stared at me. I wondered what he was staring at. I broke the silence and asked him what he needed me to get for him. He smiled at me and said "nothing". He teasingly told me to stop being a stubborn girl. He told me to take off my dress. I refused. He pulled me closer and did it himself. I just stood there confused. I wondered what about my body got him excited. My chest was still as flat as ever.

He started touching me again all over. When he started squeezing me again, I cried in pain. He said he was sorry again, but he obviously was not done. He asked me to remove my pant but just as he did, there was a knock on the door.

He told me to wear my dress, and kneel down. I did. He faced the wall and adjusted his trousers before opening the door. It was his girlfriend. I greeted her and she in turn asked why I was kneeling. *Uncle I* did not allow me reply as he said he was punishing me

for being rude to him. She begged him to let me go and he did. I wondered at how fast he cooked up his lies and stories.

I left his room and sat in a corner under the stairs. I could not go back to the other children. I did not understand why this was happening to me. I did not like it, yet I could not tell my sisters. I started crying, remembering my mum and how much she protected us. I wished she was still home. She would not have allowed us to play outside the house. And even if she did, she would have kept a close watch on us. One of the reasons she did not allow us play too hard, was she tried to prevent Samson and I wetting the bed at night. We did that if we played too much during the day. I promised myself I would report him to my mum when next she came.

Sadly, it continued like that for a long time. *Uncle I* got bolder by the day. Sometimes, he would meet me in the toilet or bathroom, on those days when my sisters asked me to bathe myself. Because of that, I stopped going to the bathroom. I started bathing in front of the house. He would come out of his room at such times and watch me as I had a bath.

I thought it was only *Uncle I* who liked small girls. I did not know his friend was like him. He called me into his room again someday. When I entered and saw his friend, I was relieved, confident he would not try it. I believed he really wanted to send me on an errand for real this time.

As I waited, he said something to his friend in their dialect and they both laughed. He then put me on his laps, in the presence of his friend, and started touching me. He stepped out briefly and while he was away, his friend took over. *Uncle I* took over again when he was back. That day was a nightmare; my body was abused and my little brain hurt.

Before they could do more damage to me, my brother called out for me. He was my saving grace. He brought me lolly pop and biscuit. The moment I was allowed to go to my brother, I went under the stairs and cried again. That corner had become my shelter every time I was abused.

As I cried there, my little mind reflected on what our Sunday School teacher had taught us. She taught about heaven and hell and the example she gave could not have been a coincidence. She gave the example of a boy and girl who went to the toilet, took off their clothes and started touching each other, doing what 'mummy and daddy' do. She said such children would go to hell and she gave the description of hell. As I sat under that staircase, I cried the more, afraid I would go to hell.

I thought of telling my dad, but I was afraid he would beat me. I doubted my sisters would believe me either. At that point, I remembered the good news part of what my Sunday School teacher said. She had said that if we did not want to go to hell, we should ask God for forgiveness. So, I did.

I prayed, though not sure if He was listening. I told God to forgive me, and not let me go to hell. I also asked Him to make *Uncle I* stop touching me.

After my prayer, *Uncle I* fell sick. It was so bad that he was taken to the hospital, thereafter to his village. When he returned, he never touched me again. And after a while, we did not see him anymore. Some people said he travelled out of the country. Some said he relocated. I did not care which it was, I was glad he was gone for good.

God answered my prayer!



OUR WIFE

My dad allowed us spend time with family when we were on vacation. It was something we looked forward to. We chose who we wanted to visit, and most times, we visited Big Daddy, my dad's eldest brother in Ikota, or Aunty Bunmi. Both places were always fun for us.

In Big Daddy's house, we were as free as birds. I enjoyed following Big Mummy to the market, as I got compliments from people. I also enjoyed staying with her in the kitchen while she cooked. As she cooked, she usually gave me what she was cooking to taste and you can imagine how exciting that was for me.

Big Mummy would bath for Samson and I on such visits and serve us large portions of food. It was with her I got to like yellow *Ghana buns* and *Kunu*. It was always fun at Ikota. I would make sand castles and just play all over the place. My cousins, Aunty Toyin, Uncle Yomi and Aunty Bukola were very nice and easy to relate with. And for the first time, I saw another fair person in my dad's family; Aunty Toyin. We got very close and she usually spoiled me with a lot of gifts.

Whenever we got home, after a visit to Ikota, we had little else to talk about than our time there. My sisters would call Unoma, Chika and other friends in the neighbourhood to tell tales, especially tales of boys they met at Big Daddy's place.

Aunty Bunmi's house was also fun. She is Big Daddy's first born and was already married as at then. Her house was almost always full. If we did not go to Ikota during holidays, then we were at her house. Her children were young like I was then. Tosin, her first child, is about my age, Dami, is Samson's age, then the last two; Tobi and Ope.

The most interesting part of our visit with Aunty Bunmi was the TV part. We did not have DSTV in our house, but they did. We watched a lot of cartoons there. I think my favourite at that time was *Power Puff Girls* and my brother's was *Power Rangers*. My sisters watched a lot of movies when they came into the living room. It was my first time knowing I could watch several movies without buying CDs.

It was at her house I watched the movie, *Sound of Music*, for the first time. It was a very emotional experience for us; we all screamed that day at the end when Captain

married Maria. I remember teaching the high school movie songs, and cartoon songs to my friends in the compound when I got back home. I always felt more intelligent and better exposed than my neighbourhood friends whenever I returned from such visits.

We had just returned from one of our trips to Aunty Bunmi's house, when we entered the house and saw a pot of soup. It was very unusual as dad never cooked while we were away. If at all he did, nothing much like what we saw in the pot.

His clothes were washed. There was just something different about the house we met. We wondered if he hired someone to do the chores for him, but we doubted so. We knew our dad's routine. He worked on the Island so he left home as early as five every morning, returned not earlier than 10:30pm, complaining of traffic, and exhausted. Many times, he slept off while eating. It was only on Sundays he stayed home and he slept for long hours on Sundays. We were sure the transformation in the house was not his doing.

While we were still in shock, Unoma and Chika came in and started telling my sisters all that happened while we were away, as usual. According to them, a dark-skinned woman had been coming to the house and sometimes had stayed overnight. My sisters and I refused to believe what we heard.

What strengthened my faith was it had been a while since my dad and mum separated, since I was in Nursery 2. And since then, my dad's friends, when visiting, had told him to remarry, but he kept saying he would not, that he had five wives already, referring to his five daughters. He said he did not want any woman who would maltreat his children in his absence. He said this over and again to his friends. I knew this because like I said earlier, I was daddy's girl. I was with him during these conversations.

I hated his friends and wished they would stop visiting. I told my sisters someday about their ill advice to dad, but discovered it was no news to them; they had been eavesdropping. We further disliked them because they always made my dad spend. Whenever they came, he would ask us to get them drinks and tell my sisters to cook for them. While the food was being prepared, he would ask us to buy fried turkey from

Mama Unoma's restaurant. We hated the sight of them.

There was a day dad was very tired and had not had enough sleep. He told us to tell anyone who came looking for him that he was not home. Coincidentally, his friends came that day. With joy in our hearts, my sisters and I chorused, "he is not around!" That day, we felt triumphant. But we never told dad they came or he would have been upset. He liked his friends being with him.

So, knowing how much his friends meant to him, and seeing he had defied their suggestions time and again, we were certain what Chika and Unoma told us could not be. We pushed it aside and told them stories of our visit with Aunty Bunmi.

One night after, however, my dad woke us up. That was the first time he would be waking us up at night. He told us how he had stayed five years without a wife and now he had found a good woman who would not maltreat us, who would treat us like her own. He said she already had a son and that in a few days, she would be coming to live with us.

I still remember the upset on my sisters' faces. He promised we will like the woman. We cried and pleaded with him, telling him we were fine without her, but he had already decided. Some days after, he returned home early, took a shower and stepped out almost immediately. Without a word to anyone, he came back some hours after with the dark-skinned woman the neighbours had told us about. She came in all smiles and met all frowns.

I was upset. My brother just stared. We were all quiet as she made her way in. My dad wondered why we did not greet her, so he demanded that we do. We did. Shortly after, he did the introductions; introducing her as his new wife and our step mother. He told us to respect her as we would our mother.

My dad told us he had not been accepting contracts outside Lagos because of us, but that with this new development, his heart was at rest and he would begin travelling again. He informed us that his new wife had a shop where she sold food stuff and we would be expected to help out at her shop every now and then. He asked us to treat her son, Peter, like a brother. His speech that day was very long.

I am not sure Adetutu and Bose slept that night as I kept hearing their voices, even in my sleep. I could not hear all they said; they were not so audible. I was not happy that my dad now had a new wife, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it. Dad had made up his mind. The experience with my mum leaving had taught me that. It was now confirmed beyond doubt that my mum was not coming back.

I was afraid though. I had read a lot of stories about step-mums and the stories were not pleasant at all. About that time, I had a best friend, Toyosi Oyesile, so I decided I would tell her all about it in church the next day.

So, during Sunday School the next day, I started whispering to her, but she could not hear me clearly. While trying to be louder, our Sunday School teacher noticed us and separated us. That same day, we had a newcomer in church, someone who would become a major part of my life in later years. She was fair and pretty. She was told to introduce herself and she did. She said her name was Sarah David. I was confused when I heard her say that as I expected her surname to be an indigenous name. She was the first person I was getting to know with both names non-indigenous.

After the service that day, I walked up to the new girl, Sarah, and introduced myself. She was shy. We didn't talk much before I left her and went to speak with Toyosi. When I disclosed the news to my best friend, she was shocked and did not believe me at first.

I had to convince her I was not kidding. Because of our closeness, she had become close to my dad too. She wanted to come home with me to ask him. I would have allowed her, but I was not sure what my dad's reaction would be. She did not have any advice for me, but it was good letting it out to a friend. She asked if I had told Mummy Amanda. Mummy Amanda was a mother to many of us in church. She was there for my siblings and I when my mum was away.

Mummy Amanda gave us money and gifts at different times; lightening our burdens. Her husband worked in Cadbury then, so at the end of every month we enjoyed a lot of Cadbury products. So, yielding to Toyosi's suggestion, my sisters and I went ahead to tell Mummy Amanda.

She did not believe us as she was one of those praising my dad for not remarrying and also hoping for my mum's return. When she finally did believe, she counselled us. She told us to make the process easy on our dad and his wife and asked us to pray for them.

Back at home, my sisters did not like our step-mum and they did not hide it. I did not like her coming to take my mum's place, but I guess my little child's heart did not take it as personal as my elder sisters.

The news must have gotten to my mother. I was seated with Samson in front of the house one afternoon, doing my assignments, Adetutu was in the kitchen and Bose was tidying up the house when we heard people screaming our mum's name outside the gate.

Samson and I ran out. When we got outside, we saw mummy in Mama Unoma's embrace, kids from the neighbourhood flocking around her. I jumped on my mum and she whispered to me, "you're already getting old". I smile now as I remember that.

After the drama outside was over, we led her into the house. We had missed her as it had been a while we saw her. We gave her updates as usual and broke the news to her. She said she knew. She said she had been hoping our step-mum would be home when she came; my mum wanted to meet her. Her eyes teared up as she spoke words I would never forget. "So, Kola moved on without me!"

She said if anyone had told her that her husband would remarry or that they would be separated, she would have dismissed the words confidently. My siblings and I joined her as we all wept. When she had gathered her emotions, she comforted us and told us God would watch over us and she prayed God's provision for daddy to keep providing for us.

My mum is a natural peacemaker. She never wants to be in strife with anyone, so she told us to be at peace with our step mother and promised to check up on us from time to time. She gave us money and provisions. She then prayed for us, as usual, and reminded us to call her if ever there was an urgent need.

Things were not the same any more. I could not sleep in the room with my dad. I

could not sleep on the same bed with him. I could not eat with him any more. No more cuddling. My dad spent more time with his new wife. This made me jealous and angry. But eventually, I got used to the development.

Samson and Peter, my step-brother, started getting along well. They played, talked together and even slept side by side. My dad could not hide his joy at how the two boys were getting along. If my dad was happy, then I was somewhat comforted.

4

MY FLAT CHEST

Sarah David and I started getting close. One day after church, Toyosi, my best friend, and I, stopped by at Sarah's house. Sarah had a very cute elder brother, Daniel, that Toyosi and I started crushing on from the very first time we saw him. It was a pleasure knowing Sarah's family. Her elder sister was very beautiful and most surprising was their mum. She looked way younger than her age.

Sarah's mum served us rice and stew that afternoon. I honestly did not recover from that tasty meal in a while. I kept asking Sarah when next her mum would cook rice and stew again. We would laugh about it.

Sarah was like me, in that her parents too were separated. But unlike me, she lived with her mum. And for the first time, I found someone who could relate with me and understand how I felt. She lived with her dad and stepmother before her mum came for her and her siblings, so she understood the feeling of having a strange woman on your parents' matrimonial bed. Toyosi was an amazing friend, but she could not feel my pain as nobody can feel your pain like someone who has been in the exact same shoes.

On another day, Toyosi and I visited Sarah again because we did not see her in church. On getting to her house, we discovered she was sick. She had cramps and was throwing up. That was news to me. I did not know what that was but Toyosi did. It was then it dawn on me that I was different from my two friends.

Toyosi and Sarah were already developing breasts, but my chest was still flat. They were already menstruating, I was not. It got me really worried and I wondered what was wrong with me. Month after month, I was expecting blood, but nothing came. I kept looking at my chest and kept seeing the same thing; nothing was growing out. It was a depressing time for me.

I remember trying on my sisters' bras at different times. I would look at myself in the mirror to see how my clothes would fit or what I would look like with breasts. I heard that there was an ant that came out at night, the myth had it that if you put it on your chest and it bites you, your breasts would start growing. Silly me! I did it several times and was bitten by the ant on those occasions. No change!

I was so worried I started feeling less of a girl. It became a prayer point for me, such that when we were told to ask God for one thing, it was either I was asking to start menstruating or I was asking for a change in my 'chest status'. Toyosi and Sarah teased me on many occasions. They were wearing bras, but I was wearing singlets.

In the course of time, Sarah's brother started liking Toyosi and I was not happy about it. I cried my eyes out. I thought it was because I was the flat-chested one with nothing at the back either. I was shapeless, compared to them. I started picking up unnecessary quarrels with them. My self esteem was crumbling, but it was not obvious to them as I put up a strong façade in public.

Toyosi and Sarah played important roles in my childhood. We share many memories that the pages of this book cannot accommodate. We cooked, fetched water, went to church, and did other things together. We sometimes chose dress codes for Sundays, did same hair styles and even wore each other's clothes.

With time, thankfully, I took my mind off my flat chest. Then one day, as I was with my friends, Toyosi pointed at my chest and asked me a question. I looked. Lo and behold, they were there! I am giggling now.

Toyosi Oyesile gave me my first bra; she gave me from the ones her mum bought for her but were too small for her. And that was how Juliana Olayode was inducted into adolescence!

5

THE MOVE

Peter's father, that is my step mum's ex-husband, came to get him. So, it was just her in the picture now. And about that time, she got pregnant for my dad. She fell sick sometimes and was either sleeping or throwing up. My sisters were the first to suspect she had taken in but I disregarded their opinion because I did not want my mind to accept that my dad was having sex with her.

I convinced myself that she was sick and would soon recover. However, I had to face reality soon enough when her tummy started growing bigger. She was getting fatter and her legs were swelling up. The next thing my sisters and I worried about was the gender of the baby in her womb. We did not stop praying that the child would be a girl, because we wanted our brother to remain our dad's only son. We did not want any competition for him. On the other hand, I overheard my step mum, on different occasions, telling her friends she wanted a son.

Watching her made me assume pregnancy made women lazy, until I saw some very hard-working pregnant women later on in life. She stopped going to her shop, so my dad assigned Samson and I the duty of manning the shop, saying we needed to make sure the shop still made sales.

Whenever she recovered and was at the shop, we were with her every weekend and joined her after school on weekdays. Initially, it was something dad forced on us and we hated it, but eventually, we enjoyed doing it, especially on those days we made a lot of sales and she was happy. On such days, she gave us some of the money to keep and dad was always glad seeing our reaction.

On many occasions, Toyosi and Sarah came visiting at the shop and we would talk non-stop. Adetutu and Bose, our ever-loving big sisters usually brought us lunch. On a few occasions, we had to take care of lunch ourselves by buying food.

Months passed and our step-mum finally put to bed. And it was a girl! You should have seen how my sisters and I celebrated. Our prayers had been answered. The baby was named Esther, very adorable baby she was. I became fond of Esther and enjoyed carrying her. Same for my siblings, especially Adetutu. Esther became attached to her

and they went everywhere together.

However, something happened shortly after that altered our lives again. After devotion, one weekend, my dad told us we were relocating to Ijoko, Sango Otta, in Ogun State, Nigeria. We doubted he was serious and hoped against hope that it was a joke. He was serious. We were upset. Worse for us was it was still going to be a rented apartment, so we wondered why in the world we had to go that far to rent another house.

I was devastated. It was bad enough that he had remarried, I could not add losing my friends and being away from the environment I was used to. I was not happy and did not look forward to the relocation one bit. I felt it was both a rash and selfish decision; one that favoured him and his wife.

Some months after, my dad told us it was time; he asked us to start packing. Adetutu and Bose expressed their displeasure and dad was upset with them. It was at that point Bose left to Aunty Bunmi's house and started living with her family. Adetutu had become a mother figure in the house so my dad did not want her to go.

However, some days before the day dad had fixed for moving, Adetutu told Samson and I that she would not be moving with us. She said she was moving in with a friend and that she would save money to rent her own apartment. She took a piece of paper and scribbled her telephone number and that of our mum on it. She gave us some money and left.

Samson and I cried our eyes out. It was just the two of us; that was very depressing. We had no one to run to, to protect us or comfort us like before. When my dad and his new wife returned home and knew about Adetutu leaving, it did not change anything. I was hoping her leaving would somehow change daddy's mind, but I was wrong again.

Two days after, a truck pulled over and we moved our things into it. I cried profusely. My dad tried to pet me but I was not having it. Samson cried until he slept off. I literally cried all the way to Ogun State.

Things immediately went sour. When we got there, strangely, I could not find the paper where my mum and sister's numbers were. I was really bitter. I beat myself over

and again for such a costly mistake. I could not forgive myself. I was scared and felt hopeless. Nobody knew where we were. What if something happened to us? Would we ever see mummy again? The thoughts did not stop!

I eventually got over my fears, but things did not go as planned for my dad at work. Many times, I heard him asking my step-mum to give him small loans. My dad could not afford to get her a shop in the new location so she started selling from the house.

My dad got a breakthrough with time and he got her a shop, but it was barely open for six months before it was closed down because the family was living on the proceeds of the shop; she was not able to restock.

There were days we had nothing to eat and there were days we lived solely on *Garri*; we ate a lot of *Garri (Eba)* and *Ewedu* in those days. I have never liked *Ewedu*, I still do not. So, whenever the family was eating *Eba* and *Ewedu*, I soaked *Garri* instead.

Thankfully, we did not have to buy the *Ewedu* that became our regular soup. There was a farm next to our compound and the owners were friends of my dad and his wife. When we newly relocated, my dad was nice to them. The families were friends, so in our time of need, they never stopped my brother and I from picking *Ewedu* on their farm. They also cultivated *cocoyam*, so we got some tubers whenever they harvested.

Things really got worse for my dad and I started to worry for him. I barely saw him smile or laugh any more. Many times, he would sit at the backyard alone, sighing and shaking his legs. I was not close to him any more, so I found it difficult to ask him if he was okay, and be there for him.

Then one day, there was an argument between my dad and my step-mum. I do not know what caused the quarrel. She was raising her voice at him and I could barely hear what my dad was saying as his voice was low. She was upset about the financial state of the home and his inability to pay back what she loaned him. She reminded him that his children had not resumed school since our relocation. My dad walked out while she spoke.

It was an unpleasant experience. I called Samson into the living room and we prayed

together. After about an hour, dad had not returned. I decided to go look for him. I knew he had just two friends in the neighbourhood; I was certain I would find him in either of their houses. My brother wanted to go with me, but I insisted he stayed as it was getting dark already.

I did not see my dad and I was getting very worried. On getting back home, I wanted to pee, so I made my way to the backyard and there he was! My dad was sitting on a stool, hands on his head and head bowed in between his knees.

He did not notice my presence. I waited. I watched him. After some minutes, he raised his head and I saw a tear make its way out of his eye and down his cheek. I was beyond shocked because I had never seen my dad cry before. It broke my heart to see him that way. I wanted to pretend like I did not see him and return inside to save his ego but I could not move. I could not help crying too. The tears made their way out.

“Daddy”, I called out. When he heard my voice, he told me not to come. He asked me to go back inside. It was obvious he did not know I had been watching him. He stood up, faced the wall, and cleaned his face with his hand.

“Go inside”, he said again, but I was not going to leave him. I hugged him from behind. “Oluwatobiloba, have you been praying for me?”, he asked.

I told him I had and he was quiet. I told him God would answer our prayers. After a while, he faced me. He made me sit on the stool and he squatted in front of me.

“Oyinbo, you have lost your complexion. This place is not good for you”, he said. He said that because I was having skin allergies; black spots dotted my body. I saw the pain in his eyes. My dad switched to speaking Yoruba, apologising that my brother and I had not resumed school after a year of relocating. He apologised about our lack of good nutrition, and in his words, “I have made you suffer”.

He told me the people he now worked with were owing him and had refused to pay him. He explained how distraught he was that his wife, my step-mum, no longer ran her business and that he was owing her so much.

“I am not a lazy man”, he said. And I knew that first hand. If hard work was the

guarantee of wealth, my dad would have been one of the wealthiest men in the world. He was a hard-worker. I was sometimes afraid for his health. When we moved to Ijoko, he would leave the house at 4am in the morning with one of his friends who owned a bus and worked at Agege. And many nights, he never returned until midnight or past midnight. At some point, he started working on Sundays too.

I had the privilege of following him to work on some occasions. He went from place to place fixing electrical problems, went from person to person, asking if his money was ready and went from company to company, asking if they had electrical issues to fix. The first time I went with him was hectic; it was a tiring experience. It was the love I had for him that kept me going with him.

After my dad talked with me that evening, he asked me to pray for him and I did. He then hugged me and I stayed in his embrace for a while. It was precious for me at that time because it had been very long my dad hugged me.



OUT ON THE
STREETS

Our neighbourhood became more populated as people started relocating there. My step-mum now had more friends. She was discussing with her friends one afternoon and I overheard them. Her friends were telling her that they make their children hawk to make money. They then advised her to make use of her grown up children, referring to Samson and I, to make money via hawking.

That was how it started. My brother and I started by selling water to people on a construction site. My step-mum knew someone that connected her, so we were allowed in. The site was a big one, so there were many customers. We were making money. We were happy; at times, we were able to sell as many as thirty bags of water in a day.

About that time, dad's work was picking up too. So, we were eating better at home. He told my step-mum to go to Sango High School and find out what was required for my brother and I to resume there. My step-sister was enrolled in a primary school in the vicinity. Things were looking up. Samson and I, however, had to wait until the first term to resume with them and we needed a transfer letter. With those factors in place, we continued selling water.

Competition arrived on the site; our sales began to drop. So, we started selling puff-puff with the water. Patronage continued and we were happy. Soon after, the competition increased and people started selling other pastries and small chops. Sales began to drop again.

About that time, I made a friend on the site, Mr. Aminu. Someday, he asked why my brother and I were not in school. After I explained, he offered to bring me books to read. I did not like the idea of reading non-academic books, but he told me I needed to keep my brain active by reading. He started bringing books for me to read. I read and returned them to him when done.

There were times Mr. Aminu gave us money, and other times, he bought us food. Someday, he told me that the Chinese people were complaining; too many sellers on the site, people just eating and not working. He said they would soon stop us from entering the site; we would have to stay outside the gate.

That was bad news for me. I wondered how we would survive and doubted the workers would want to come out to buy from us. I told my step-mum what Mr. Aminu said. She told me that if that happened, Samson and I would start hawking on the street. That did not go down well with us. I told Samson and his reply was, "God forbid". We laughed about it and moved on.

A few days after, Mr. Aminu's prediction materialised. We were not allowed into the site any more; we were literally locked out. Not too many people came out to buy. We had lots of leftovers. That day, we did not sell more than Two hundred Naira worth of puff-puff. When we got home, we ate the rest and gave some to neighbours.

The very next day, we were on the street, hawking. She told my brother and I not to go in the same direction as she feared we would play and laugh all the way without making sales. My brother had become my best friend in those days. We talked about everything, we laughed together, and we were there for each other. So as to avoid distracting each other, we indulged her and went separate ways.

On my first day hawking, I sold everything but my legs felt the brunt of it. Same happened with my brother. At night, we talked about our experience. Samson told me how some people wanted him to sell to them on credit. I could not help laughing; I simply concluded that human beings are just what they are.

The puff-puff patronage was growing, such that we sometimes did three rounds in a day. My step-mum bought a bigger plastic container for us to match up with the demand. We were making so much money that she started buying the ingredients in bulk.

Daddy was also doing well, so he hired a lesson teacher for us. The teacher came in the evenings so our selling rounds reduced, but as expected, that did not go down well with my step-mum. She proposed we have our lessons later in the evening, but the lesson teacher was already booked then.

Our lesson teacher was funny, but also strict; he was quick to use the cane. There were days when my brother and I would be tired and doze off during class, after a long day of hawking. He would punish us at such times and report us to our step-mum.

Having classes at home gave us the feeling of being in a school again; it lifted our spirits somewhat.

Someday, while hawking, I saw the child of one of my step-mum's friends hawking puff-puff. I was very upset. Why were they copying us? The news made it to my step-mum. She and her friend quarrelled over it; my step-mum saw it as betrayal of some sort. And just like that, many other puff-puff sellers surfaced. We figured many of them set out earlier than we did as our customers had already bought before we got to them; some even sold at a cheaper rate to our customers. Sales went down again.

About that time, our lesson teacher fell ill and did not show up for about a month. When he came back, he did not last too long as my dad could not afford to pay him again.

Sadly, because of our new competition, my step-mum would wake us up very early in the morning to do chores, and by 7am, we were expected to be out of the house. And most times, that was without breakfast. When we returned for the second round, we would then take *Koko and Groundnut*. We had a woman who sold that to us. It was fast food for us then.

There were times we woke up late and had to leave the house without a bath. If something was undone when the puff-puff was ready, it had to stay undone as my step-mum wanted us to sell it hot.

Samson could bear with not bathing, but the hunger was a no-go area. When we were about parting ways on some occasions, he would complain of stomach pain, threatening to eat out of the puff-puff. I would tell him not to do so, knowing my step-mum counted the puff-puff and would know if one or more were unaccounted for.

My brother did not listen to me, and soon my step-mum was calling him a thief. The first day she said it, I was shocked. My brother was gloomy all day and kept mumbling, "she called me a thief". Another time after, my brother took from the money to buy food and he told her when he remitted the money at night that he was hungry and needed to eat. She called him a thief again and this time, Samson raised his voice at her.

I was surprised at my brother. He told her to her face, without fear, never to call him

that again. He told her to ensure we had breakfast before going out if she did not want him to eat out of the puff-puff or touch the money. She was mad at him and wanted to beat him for standing up to her but he ran out.

I was so sure she would report Samson to my dad that night but she did not. That got me wondering because that was her style. It was then it occurred to me that she probably could not report to my dad because she would have to explain why his children had been going hungry.

My step-mum became pregnant again. She gave birth to another baby girl. I was again delighted that my brother had no rival. I now had more responsibility. When she gave birth the first time, Adetutu did most of the work. Now, it was my turn. There was so much to do around the house. A part of me was delighted that I was becoming a woman and learning to multi-task, but another part of me felt the work was rather too much.

I eventually broke down. I became sick; I had Chicken Pox. I could not speak well and my body was always itchy, yet I was not relieved of my responsibilities. My brother was upset and threatened to confront daddy, but I told him not to, that if my dad saw all these and did not stop it, then he had his reasons. My brother's reply to me was, "you want to die silently?"

About that time, while hawking, I stepped on a plank without noticing the nail on it. People were able to help remove the nail but I was bleeding. My brother somehow appeared on the scene and asked me to go home but I refused, not wanting to upset my step-mum and wondering how my portion would be sold.

People around asked if I did not have a mother when they saw my body covered in Chicken Pox. The observers started insulting my mother and my brother got upset. He explained to them our mum did not live with us. Samson helped me up and we left the scene to an uncompleted building. He was almost done selling his portion of puff-puff, so he poured mine into his, gave me the money he had made and told me to go home.

Tears poured out of my eyes and I could not stop them. My brother started crying

too. He wanted to hug me, but I refused; I did not want him contracting the Pox. He then said, “you don’t want me to hug you because of the Chicken Pox?”. That got me crying more and before I knew it, my kid brother was already hugging me. I thanked him and went back home.

My step-mum was surprised to see me back home. I told her what happened, but she did not care. She took the money and went inside. I boiled water and started treating the wound myself. As I nursed my wounds, I remembered the words of the onlookers about my mum. “Mummy, where are you?” I cried.

I remembered at that moment how protective my mum was. She hated seeing scars, marks or sears on our bodies. She ensured we did not play too hard. Someday, back then, I was running and I fell, bruising my knee. It was a light scratch, but mummy ran to me, carried me and treated me immediately. She did not allow me out of the house to play in days; that was my punishment. But at this point, I was alone and that hurt. I felt my step-mum was heartless.

When Samson returned and I told him what happened, he exclaimed, “she’s wicked!” I managed to sleep that night with my leg hurting. Soon, the leg began to swell and pus was coming out of it. People who saw me told me to treat it that I stood a chance of having my leg amputated. There was nothing I could do. I kept hawking with Chicken Pox and a swollen leg.

On one of my rounds, I stumbled on Mr. Aminu who took me to a pharmacy. I was treated and given drugs. I was told to go home and rest. I was happy, having an excuse to rest my leg. When I got home, my step-mum accused me again of taking money from customers that were owing us to treat my leg. I was upset, but I did not say anything.

My leg started healing, but the Chicken Pox was still there to contend with and I was beginning to have a temperature. I still went out to sell as usual and on this day, a woman poured water on me. She said I was wicked to have Chicken Pox and be selling edibles. She said I wanted to spread it to people. I felt like a plague, like an outcast.

I cried on the spot. I did not even know what to say to the woman. She could have

easily said she was not buying. Why did she have to be so mean? Somehow, my brother met me again a few minutes after and asked why I was wet and crying. I told him what happened. He was boiling with anger and wanted me to describe the woman's shop, but I did not, and thankfully I was not close enough to the shop for him to figure it out by himself.

Samson, though my younger brother, always fought for me. I wondered what he would do to the woman and I dreaded it. I got home and told my step-mum. She said nothing. The next day, for the first time, I stood up to her and told her I was not going to sell that day. She was upset and said all sorts, but I did not bulge. She did not give me breakfast and I stayed that way until evening.

In the evening, she said she would never send me to sell for her again, but asked me to go collect all the money that people owed us. I met Samson on the way, and he decided to follow me. We got some money back, thankfully. However, the money was not complete and I did not want her to nag me when I got home. I told my brother to go home; I would stay on the road and beg.

Samson refused to leave me. He was going to stay with me and beg. And that was how our begging career started, though it did not last more than that day. We started going from adult to adult, begging. Some people eyed us, some asked me not to come close because of the Pox. A particular woman waved the money around her son's hand and then gave me. Samson told me not to collect it; that act was too fetish-looking. But she was giving me Five hundred Naira; I could not refuse it. I said the blood of Jesus three times and collected it. I had been taught that the blood of Jesus could nullify all evil and I believed.

That day, before we left the bus-stop, we made Two thousand, Five hundred Naira. When we returned home, I gave my step-mum the money we had retrieved, plus Two thousand Naira more, from our begging. I gave Samson Five hundred Naira to keep.

At this point, let me pause on my story to ask you not to judge people too quickly. You never know the reason behind people's actions until they tell you. Many of us judge

beggars, especially those with complete bodies and no deformity. I am not encouraging laziness, but my point is, you do not know their story. Even if you will not give to them, please do not judge or insult them. That girl might just be another Juliana Olayode.





7

MUM APPEARS
AGAIN

The next day after our begging experience, my sickness got worse. I could not talk; it was as if there was a boil in my throat. My temperature was also high. They had to call a nurse to check me. When she came, she said I had Chicken Pox in my mouth and that it was very dangerous.

I looked up to see the Calendar. It was June 4, three days to my birthday. I said a silent prayer in my heart. "God, please bring my mum to me." It was an impossible prayer but I prayed it anyway. As at that time, I had not seen my mum in years and had not heard her voice either. I had little or no faith in the prayer I offered, but I said it anyway. The nurse injected me and gave me drugs; in no time, I was fast asleep.

A day to my birthday, I did a *cross-over*. I prayed into my birthday. I told God that if my mum did not show up on my birthday, I would kill myself; I was threatening God. My birthday came and there was no one to wish me a happy birthday. By the time I woke, Samson was already out. On the table was *Koko and Groundnut*.

It took me a lot of strength to get up, but I did. I went to sit at the passage facing the gate, waiting to see my mum. I sat for hours, not moving from that spot. I slept off there and later woke up to continue my watch. The sun began to set. Then, my mind went to Samson and I wondered why he was not back home.

A voice interrupted my thoughts. I heard, "Juli". I looked up and there in front of me was the shock of my life. My mum had come, Samson with her.

"Jesu! Ye Jesu! Ewo awon omo mi" translated, "Jesus! Jesus! Look at my children!". She lamented and began to cry. I sat there, unable to move and unable to find my voice. I was speechless; it was indeed a miracle. I was convinced that day beyond any doubt that God did answer prayers. When out of shock, I wanted to jump and hug her, but I was too weak to do so. I just kept mouthing, "thank You Jesus" as we all cried.

She asked of my step-mum and I said she stepped out. I was glad my mum did not meet her, I did not want a scene. She called my dad but he did not pick up. She then told us we were leaving with her. That was enough to infuse strength into my feeble

body. My mum helped me up.

As we were about leaving, our Landlady came and asked who she was. My brother and I both chorused that she was our mother. The Landlady said she could not allow our mother take us like that without proper consent. My mum kept quiet and listened. The Landlord joined us and said the same thing. They appealed to my mother to be patient and asked Samson to call my dad's friend.

When my dad's friend arrived, he also persuaded my mum to do it the right way, asking her to come back at a time my dad was around. My mum agreed but gave conditions that we must not sell again and that if when she returned on Sunday my dad was not around, she would have no option than to take us without his consent. She wrote her number for us, gave us some money and left.

As if planned, the moment my mum left, my step-mum arrived. After the Landlady told her all that happened, she went into her room without saying a word to us.

Later on, I asked my brother how he saw my mum. He said he was at Ijoko, selling puff-puff. He was selling to a passenger in a bus that was held up in traffic. As he was about collecting his money, the bus started moving and he was chasing after the bus. When he caught up and was about taking the money from the passenger, he heard someone call his name. The voice was our mum's. She screamed. "That's my son!" The bus parked and she got down.

Samson said people in the bus were clearly confused. The bus drove off and my mum took the puff-puff container from his head. The first thing she asked him was if he had had a bath and he said he had not. She asked why and he explained. It was while he explained that she figured he also had not eaten.

She took him to the nearest restaurant and as she watched him eat, she cried. Afterwards, she bought water for him to wash his legs and face and they started coming home.

"We are leaving this place on Sunday, let us start packing our things", Samson

said with great joy, beaming from ear to ear.

When my dad returned from work, my step-mum relayed what had happened earlier in the day to him. Samson told him the original story and my dad went all quiet and morose. He did not go to work the following day as if afraid that she would come and take us. He went to see his friend who witnessed what happened to get his opinion.

Samson and I were so excited on the eve of our departure. We managed to sleep about 2am but still woke up early. Thankfully, mummy came early, but she did not come to the house. According to her, she did not want to lose her temper at seeing our step-mum.

The meeting held in my dad's friend's house. The Landlord followed us to the place. It was a very emotional meeting. My dad explained to my mum why we were not in school and hawking. He then begged my mum not to take my brother, saying she should give him the honour of raising his only son, but Samson ran to my mum and held on tightly to her, crying.

My dad really begged for Samson to stay. His eyes teared up and his voice got shaky. The two men took him out to calm down while my dad's friend's wife pleaded with my mum to allow Samson stay, promising my dad would make amends. My dad came back in, squatted in front of my mum and pleaded again for Samson.

My mum could not watch him in that state for too long; she told him to get up. And unlike my dad years ago, she forgave him. They came to an agreement that she could come visit Samson and he was allowed to visit her too. They also stated that Samson would follow my dad to work until he resumed school. When school resumed, my mum demanded that Samson be put in a boarding house. My dad agreed to all the terms.

I ignored my Chicken Pox again and hugged my brother. I knew how much he wanted out like I did. We had made plans and now he was to be left behind. Samson was literally shaking and saying no. I felt terrible that we were leaving him. I

wondered why my mum bulged at my dad's pleas. Didn't she remember when she begged him and brought several people to beg him and he did not care?

My mum took Samson to a corner of the compound. I watched from a distance. I could not read her lips but I saw my brother nodding from time to time. She hugged him and gave him some money which he quickly put in his pocket. My mum prayed for Samson, and we left.



LIVING WITH THE gODS

This chapter contains some graphic ‘spiritual’ details that might not be okay with all readers. You could skip to the next chapter if you sense you would be uncomfortable. Thank you!

We arrived mum's place that evening. I saw a man tying a white wrapper, sitting on the bench outside the house. My mum greeted him. I did the same and entered the house. Who was he? Did my mum re-marry too? Thoughts raged within me. My mum asked if I wanted to have a bath before eating, but I was too hungry for that. She served me, I ate, and I slept off almost immediately.

I woke up to the reality of my environment the next morning. It was a beautiful morning; the sky was blue and the sun shone brightly, but the things I saw around me were not beautiful at all. I saw some red things tied all around the living room, a calabash was on the wall, a calendar full of masquerade pictures hung on the wall, a leaf that had turned brown hung somewhere and there was a splash of blood on the door post.

What is this place? And what are these things? I stood up and went to the room. The room was not any different; a white cloth with cowries beaded into it was tied to the wall with white bowls around it. There was a black stone on a black plate, with stains of palm oil. I saw a big calabash that was covered. I did not know when I exclaimed, "Jesus!" and ran outside the house.

Outside the house was a banana tree, a cage that was made of iron and covered with planks and roofing sheet. I leaned in and looked inside through a part of the cage that was open. There, inside, was a black image with a cock's head on it. It looked fresh. I started to feel like I was surrounded by gods.

I thought the things I was seeing only existed in movies. I was hoping I was sleeping and having a nightmare until I heard my mum's voice. I turned and saw her carrying water on her head. She poured it into the black drum in front of the cage. Next to it was the bathroom, made of roofing sheets and plywood. The wood covering the bathroom did not cover much.

I sat on the bench outside. My mum went in and came out with a stove. Should I tell her what I saw? Did I see well? Was I imagining the things I saw? Or is this real? Did my mum marry an herbalist? Was she hypnotised? Does she know what she is doing? Is my mum now a witch? The thoughts were unimaginable.

“Juli o!”, it was my mum calling. She said she had called me a couple of times already and I did not respond. She asked what I was thinking about. I could not tell her. She told me to go to the room and get palm oil, she described how I would find it. She was grinding pepper on the stone, so I assumed she wanted to make stew.

I did not want to go back into that room so I told her my leg was paining me. I explained the nail incident to her. I was not sure that was enough of an excuse, but she went in and got it herself. She said she would make herbs for me to dry up the Chicken Pox. My mum had always been a lover of herbs right from when we were still a complete family.

I remained quiet and kept thinking. Should I call my dad and tell him I want to come back? I could not do that and shame my mum before my dad and step-mum. However, I needed someone to talk to, badly. I did not know if to ask her how she got here. I noticed also that she did not have friends. Even the next door neighbours hardly passed the front of the house, and when they did, they ran or walked fast.

Why did my mum settle for this? When I greeted neighbours, they never responded. I hated my new home already. My step-dad worked as a security man for Negris. He usually left home early in the morning and returned in the evening. He sold alcohol; the herbal ones. He sold at work because he had a small place outside the company's compound, for himself. He sold to his customers there, but some came home in the evening to buy.

My mum, on the other hand, sold fish and *pomo*. So, there was always a lot of noise in the evenings. The men were always talking sports, women, Nigeria, sex, work or whatever else they found to discuss. Most of them left drunk, leaving some of their things behind. It was my duty to keep the things safe until the next time the owners appeared. That was my new life.

The next Sunday came and I told my mum I wanted to visit the church we attended before the relocation. My step-dad's house was not too far from where we lived before. She agreed. I went to the bathroom and returned to the house to see my mum dressed in

a white gown, a white cap on her head and a blue belt around her waist.

I was destabilized. I was still trying to take in the fact that I live in a shrine with people coming to drink and smoke every night. I was still getting used to neighbours looking at me funny and staying away from me. And now, this? My mum was now in a white garment church! I wanted to faint. I wanted to rip the dress off her body. I was so upset and unsettled in my spirit. I decided to let it be and talk to someone in church about everything.

At church, people were pleasantly surprised to see me. I was delighted to see Sarah David and my other friends again. There were many new faces; there was a new pastor and a new Sunday School teacher. A lot had changed. Thankfully, Mummy Amanda was still in the church. I was treated special, got plenty hugs and smiles. I told them I was back in Lagos with my mum, but I did not disclose the location of my house.

Toyosi Oyesile was not in church. I was told her mum had been transferred to another church. That was not good news for me, but I was comforted knowing I could always visit her.

After church, Sarah wanted to come with me to the house, but I declined. We had a lot to catch up on. She teased me again about my breasts, reminding me of how worried I was years back. She then asked me if I had started menstruating and I answered in the negative, embarrassed. She told me not to worry, that when it finally started, I would get tired of it. We had a lot to talk and laugh about.

When I told her of my ordeals at Ijoko; not going to school, hawking and all, she could hardly believe her ears. She is a very emotional person. She cried with me and felt my pain. I wondered if to tell her my mum now attended a white garment church and my step-dad was a native doctor. I feared it would destroy our friendship. We talked some more and we parted ways. I did not go to Toyosi's house to avoid getting home late.

When I got home, there were already many people there, drinking and making noise. I greeted them; my step-dad was with them. One of the men drinking said he would marry me. I immediately exclaimed, "God forbid!". I had thought I was saying it in

my heart until I heard my own voice. They laughed at me and I went inside.

I discovered my mum was not back yet, so I used the time to process my thoughts. I knew how to pray. I did not have a cordial, friendly and mushy relationship with God then, like I do now, but I knew Him to be a deliverer and a warrior. I was ready to engage Him in a fight against all these gods I saw around me. I could not hear God at that time, but He spoke to me in dreams. I was ready to fight.

I read several psalms before sleeping every night, especially Psalm 91. Thankfully, my step-dad never stopped me from praying, only asked me to pray silently. That was fine with me. My voice did not have to be loud before God heard me. I was not praying in tongues then, but I ensured to pray every morning and every night.

I had a dream one night. I was walking when a man stopped me and said, “let your light shine in darkness; put God to work!” I woke up the next day pondering over it. I thought it was time to get closer to God so I never missed Sunday services, mid-week services and vigils.

Soon after, my mum said it was time for me to go back to school. It was quite easy for me to get back to school. Before the relocation, I was in JSS2 in Ojodu Junior High School, Ojodu-Berger, Lagos. I was a very popular student in my school and my teachers loved me. Mrs. Adepoju was the principal then and I was Acting Head Girl before we left. I was already the Acting Head Girl in JSS2 because our seniors in JSS3 were already writing their JSSCE.

When I entered the school premises with my mum that day, teachers were pleased to see me and asked why I left. My class teacher, Mrs. Olabunmi was delighted to see me. When we got to the principal's office, we explained things to her. The principal said when they did not see me, they had sent one of my friends, Jennifer Osaro, to check on me and had been told we relocated.

I resumed back to school and I was made the Assembly prefect. Sarah soon joined me in school as a transfer student, but we were not in the same class.

Sarah and I went to school together. I could not hide things from her again. I told

her about my mum and step-dad; I was pleased that it did not affect our friendship. She would come to my house and we would go to school together. She never mentioned it to anyone, even her mother. Sarah was an amazing friend. She lived in a much better house; a comfortable flat. Her mum also had a good job. I was initially surprised when she came to my school, a public school. I still do not know why that happened.

Sarah David became more than a friend; she became my sister and best friend. Sarah would leave her comfortable bed and come stay the night with me on my bug-infested bed and bath in our thatched bathroom.

We did not have a toilet, so we relieved ourselves in nylons. Sarah, though having a comfortable toilet to use at home, would stay with me and ease herself the way I did. Even with the knowledge of who my step-dad was, she did not shrink back but became closer to me. I grew to love her more in those days. We attended to the customers at home together in the evenings, after school, we fetched water together, washed together, and more. She was there for me.

I dreamt a second time and saw the same thing as I did the first time. I knew it was time for action. I fasted and prayed. I then began to remove the things hung around the living room one after the other. I honestly do not know where the boldness came from but I was confident in the name of Jesus. I had read my Bible over the years and I had watched movies in church that told me Jesus was powerful, so I simply believed.

My mum was away to the market when I did this. I burnt all the charms and anointed the house with oil. I invited Jesus into the house. I used a sponge and water to wash off the blood on the door post and put anointing oil instead. I cleared everything in the living room. The living room doubled as my bedroom.

I did not know there was more to what I did. I slept that night and I saw a masquerade chasing me. I saw different things in the dream. The experiences in the dream were interwoven, but not too clear. But one message was clear; I had looked for trouble. My hand was numb the next day, but I did not tell my mum. I was actually surprised she did not notice the things that were missing. Surprisingly, my step-dad did

not notice too. God was at work!

I went to school with the numbness in my hand, without telling anyone. Fortunately, there was service in church that day. After the service, I went to the altar, placed my hand there and prayed. The numbness left and my hand was okay.

I dreamt again and this time, the man I saw told me not to be afraid, quoting the scripture, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world." That was the reassurance I needed that I was not alone in the fight.

The battle was tough though. I started seeing images appearing and disappearing on the wall. I started hearing voices and having nightmares. Night time was not a time I looked forward to those days. When I could not handle it alone anymore, I decided to confide in one of our uncles in church who I knew was spiritually mature, Lekan Aremo.

He was shocked when I told him what had been happening to me. I told him I woke up on different occasions and saw marks on my body. Whenever I was chased in my dream, I woke up with pain in my legs. He came to my house that day with Ajoke Fadiya and Maurice Ikeh and they started praying.

I only heard God through dreams, but they heard God audibly. So, they gave me instructions on what to do. As we prayed, I started seeing angry faces and scary images. I told them what I was seeing and confessed to them that I was afraid and felt too young for this battle I got myself into.

Lekan Aremo said, "that's why they keep coming. The enemy knows when you are afraid. Build your faith. Tell them not to come again and they will not!"

Let me pause my story here again to tell you that if you ever doubt that there is a God, challenge Him to reveal Himself to you, and He will. I am a Christian today, not because I grew up going to church, but because I have had several encounters with God. I have experienced His power. I have seen Him work for me and He has proven Himself to be God on countless occasions. He has never failed me.

Back to the battle! When I consciously chose faith over fear and handed over to God, things changed. Even in my dreams, I became fearless. When 'they' came, I did not

run. I found myself quoting scriptures and calling the name Jesus.

Then in real life, when awake, I got even bolder. I went further to anoint the shrine outside. My step-dad called his god, *Ogun*. I took the cover off the shrine and prayed over it, and then anointed it. It was war! A tall, dark man kept appearing in my dream, asking who sent me.

Thankfully, about that time, I got baptised in the Holy Ghost. It had been on a Sunday. During Sunday School, we were taught about the Upper Room experience. Our teacher asked those of us that wanted the gift to stay behind after Sunday School. I did and I caught fire. Praying in tongues, I believe, is a gift every Christian should covet. I got so fierce and bold that fear seemed to leave me alone. I began to pray more in the Holy Ghost than I did in understanding.

That did not stop the attacks though. After a night I prayed, my feet started feeling wet as if I was stepping on water. That made me assume the water in the white bowl in the room was a link to the marine world.

I started seeing mermaids in my dream. They sometimes asked me questions and at other times, spoke in languages I did not understand. Though I could not understand them, from their facial and body expressions, they were upset with me.

I was tired of it and did not want to see them again, so I prayed. They came again, but this time, they could not touch me. There seemed to be a transparent wall that separated us; and thankfully, that was the end of such dreams. I stopped having those leg-in-water sensations too. Prayer indeed works.

Interestingly, after that victory, chickens began to enter my step-dad's cage outside. Some started laying eggs there. Rats began to mess up the place and my step-dad was left wondering what happened. He tried to appease his god and tried to stop the animals from desecrating his shrine but it did not work. I knew God had disarmed whatever power hitherto ruled in that cage.

My courage grew. The next ground to conquer was the compound. I wanted to stop people from coming to the house to drink. I wondered how my mum would make money

if that happened, but I trusted God would make a way. So, I prayed again. Gradually, people began to reduce, until there was not a single person that came to the house to drink in the evenings any more.

I became convinced beyond all doubts that there was, and still is, incredible power in the name of Jesus. These experiences also made me realise there is nothing too big or too small to talk to God about. He hears all prayers. So, if He decides not to grant a request, He knows better and will work something better out.

One night, I felt somebody tapping me. When I woke up, I heard in my spirit, “pray without ceasing”. So, I began to pray. I prayed until I slept off. The next day, it rained heavily over the night. I woke up to see the banana tree in front of our house uprooted; I saw the roots.

It was my mum who then gave me the details. She said the rain was very heavy and thunder struck. She heard a noise and went outside. My mum was a light sleeper and hardly afraid of anything. She said she had wanted to find out what happened. She opened the door and found the tree on the floor.

I laughed when she told me. She wondered what was funny about a tree falling, but the secret was between God and I. My God made sure He uprooted every trace of darkness in that house to make sure His light shone bright.

Not long after, on a Saturday morning, my step-dad was sitting outside the house, on a bench. My mum was cooking. I was indoors at that time. All of a sudden, my step-dad started convulsing; shaking violently, until he passed out.

My mum began to scream for help, but like I said earlier, we were outcasts because of his line of work so no neighbour responded. Then she began screaming, “Jesus”. By that time, I had come out and was beside him. His body was already getting cold. My mum started dialling his children’s numbers, but she could not reach them.

I began to pray in the Holy Ghost as words failed me. A voice whispered in my ear that God won’t answer me because he was not a Christian. I refuted that thought because I know Jesus healed, and still heals, those who have not come to accept Him yet.

I had some anointing oil in the house; I always endeavoured to have some. I felt a nudging to put some in his mouth. My mum and I struggled to open his mouth with a spoon and I poured some oil in and continued to the pray in the spirit. His temperature began to normalise and shortly after, he opened his eyes.

“What happened to me?” he asked. I told him. He then said he saw himself walking fast on a road and a man in white stopped him and said “Pada”, meaning, “Go back!” I told him it was Jesus he saw and asked him to surrender to the One who brought him back to life. He smiled, but did not say anything. My mother made signs at me to stop speaking about Jesus, but I did not stop.

I told him the shrine outside where his *Ogun* lived had become a labour room for chickens and a spot for rats. I told him rats lick whatever it is he pours on the other one in the room. I told him his idols could not save him. I was ready at the moment to lead him in the Salvation Prayer but he excused himself, saying he was tired.

I went into the house and thanked God for His deliverance and asked Him to please ensure my mum left that house, without my step-dad dying in her arms. Afterwards, my mum and I had a long conversation. She told me she knew of the things I removed from the house. She said she was silently praying for me. It was then I remembered that at different times, she had asked me, out of the blues, if I was okay. Other times, she had laid hands on me to pray for me.

She then explained to me how she had started attending a white garment church. When my dad sent her away, she had nowhere to go; her mum refused to let her stay. She saw a church having a vigil and she joined them for the night. After the vigil, she had asked if she could sleep over at the church for some nights. They obliged her and were good to her; that was how she joined the church.

She then told me how she met my step-dad, how she then moved into his house and started living with him. She said my step-dad had no problem with her going to church because, according to him, he was a white herbalist, “Awo”. He said they do not do evil charms. He told my mum that he inherited it from his father.

After the explanation, I got to understand my mum better. That again confirmed to me not to be quick to judge people; we never know why people do what they do until we hear their stories or step into their shoes.



BEFRIENDING
MUM

On the 5th of April, 2010, I got home, took off my uniform and saw a blood stain. At this time, I was in Senior Secondary School, at Babs Fafunwa Millennium, Ojodu, Lagos. I did not remember having any injury and mum was not home.

When I discovered where the blood was coming from, I started crying. How would I explain this to my mum? I kept cleaning, but it kept flowing. I hurried to Toyosi Oyesile's place. She asked what was wrong and I explained to her, perplexed at bleeding non stop, without an injury. She laughed at me; she laughed so hard, she nearly choked on her laughter. I was irritated at her insensitivity. I wanted to walk out when she pulled me back, locked the door and said, "Congratulations. You're now a woman". She hugged me very tight.

It was then it clicked that I had started menstruating. What I had been waiting for all these years had finally come and I did not even recognise it for what it was. We began to laugh. I then asked my friend how to stop it from staining me. Toyosi brought me a sanitary towel and a new underwear. She showed me how to take care of myself when menstruating. She gave me a dress to wear as the one I came in with was stained. She asked if I had told Sarah David and I told her it was when Sarah and I parted ways that I got home to discover the stain.

When I got home, my mum was back. I told her what happened to me and she laughed also. Then, quite abruptly, she went quiet. I asked her what was wrong and she said, "Kola", my dad's name.

I asked her why the mention of my dad and she said for all my elder sisters, on their first day of menstruation, my dad had told her to buy a live chicken and prepare it to celebrate their womanhood. She was unhappy she couldn't continue the tradition with me. So, she bought me an egg. She said a whole egg was equivalent to a whole chicken. I saw the heart with which she did it and I was content, but it made me wish my family was together.

My mum then lectured me. She told me not to let anyone touch me. She said a touch from a man could get me pregnant. That was all she told me, she did not explain the

details to me. No sex education. And that set me up for embarrassment.

One of my school friends, Onimole Ayomide, was quizzing me some days after. She wondered why I had been acting funny with the guys in schools, avoiding all forms of contact. I told her my mum said I would get pregnant. She immediately ran to the corridor, laughing and ran back, staring at me in disbelief. “It is sex your mum was talking about!”. I felt so silly and naive. She did not stop laughing.

I went home upset that day and I decided I was not going to talk to my mum. My mum pestered me and I gave in. I told her how she made me look like a fool. I had told my friend what she told me with so much confidence. My mum apologised. She was obviously shy talking about sex with me. It was a struggle for her and took her a long time before she even mentioned the word sex to me.

Her inability to talk to me about personal issues made me realise my mum and I were not friends. Soon after, thanks to MINE Teenage Ministry, we became friends.

Sarah invited me for the Bible studies MINE organized every weekday. I was not interested until she told me they served jollof rice every Friday. I told her I would attend on Fridays so I could eat. She laughed at me and assured me that after one experience, I would want to be there everyday. I thought she was blabbering until I went with her the first time.

It was a beautiful experience, to say it moderately. I was awed at how young people like myself were worshipping God. I started seeing the Bible in a new light. I was given a book, “The Ideal Student”. After reading it, I realised being a Christian student was nothing difficult if I truly submitted to God. I never stopped attending, as Sarah had predicted, and I took Toyosi and Jennifer with me. In retrospect, it is funny how the names of my friends, years ago, have become names that the world associates with me today.

In one of the Bible studies, the coordinator, Timi Adigun, told us to write letters to our parents. He said God wanted us to honour our parents, no matter how good or seemingly bad they may be.

I wrote a letter to my dad, but I did not give him until a year after. Writing it, though, helped me to forgive him and love him again. In my letter to my mum, I was able to tell her how terrified I had been living in my step-dad's house. I thanked her for telling me the details of what happened to her after dad asked her to leave. I told her I was proud of her and that I would make her proud.

I gave it to her and she kept it in her bag. Later on, I asked her if she had read it and she reminded me she could not read. I wondered how I forgot that. My dad was the one who could read, not my mum.

So, your guess is as good as mine. I had to read it to her! I was so shy. I read it to her and had to explain some parts in Yoruba. Long before I was done, she was already crying. I said "I love you" to my mum and it sounded so strange to my ears. I forced the words out of my mouth and then hugged her. My mum laughed and said I was behaving like 'Oyinbo', like an American.

That day was special as my mum went ahead to tell me how she and my dad started dating, how she chose him out of several suitors and how they got married. The tales were full of love. I discovered she still liked my dad and I made it a duty to tease her. I made her call my dad at different times. It was my joy seeing the smile on her face when she spoke with him.

My mum and I became really close. We started doing things together around the house. Whenever it rained, we would fetch rain water together and scoop water out of the house together because we had a leaking roof. When it rained, we also disposed of dirt on the overflowing ditch beside the house, carrying the dirt wherever it would. We knew it was wrong, but we were dead poor. We would both wake up very early to dispose of dirt at the bus stop, whenever the rains stopped.

I always prayed we would never be caught but we were on a fateful day. I was so scared; I thought my mum would go to jail. We pleaded with the man and he eventually let us go. We then started burning our dirt or waiting on LAWMA to help.

Then shortly after, we heard of a Government decree that every house had to have

a toilet. Government officials were going from house to house, but we were sure they would never get to our little corner. We could not imagine the threat of our house being locked down and our faces shown as public examples on TV.

I was going to fetch water someday when I saw them. I turned back and hurried to tell my mum. My step-dad had gone to work. What would we tell them? That we defecate in nylons? I was afraid, but my mum was calm like she had a plan. We stayed inside, locked up and prayed they would not come to our house. They did.

We heard a knock. My heart was in my mouth. I just kept praying. My mum answered the door and asked me not to come out, but I did not listen; I followed her. My mum was pleasant and confident in her conversation; I honestly wondered at her. The man asked of our toilet. As my mum opened her mouth to respond, the man was called by his colleague. He excused himself, promising to be back, but he never returned.

I jumped on my mum and we rejoiced as though we had won a lottery. We went back into the house and thanked God for saving us from shame. With events like this, my mum and I got closer.

I was resting one afternoon when I heard my mum sobbing. I asked her what the matter was and she told me she had gone to fetch water to cook when she was insulted. I had told her before then to stop fetching water, but she said she did not want to wake me. She said as she walked past a neighbour's house, someone called her a witch. I was so vexed. I did not like trouble, but I could not stick someone calling my mum names.

I dressed up and went to the house she told me about. My mum tried dissuading me, but I was not having it. I knocked on their door. They were surprised to see me and they came out, ready for war. I greeted them and said I did not know which of them called my mum a witch but it should never repeat itself. I told them I would not be calm the next time it happened. I asked them to respect us as we respected them.

I was so bold. I did not raise my voice, but I was stern. They did not say a word, and I left. After that day, they never called my mum names again. I not only became my mum's friend, I became her cheerleader and defender too.



UNDERGRADUATE
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF
IBADAN

I graduated from Babs Fafunwa Millenium Senior Grammar School, Ojodu-Berger, Lagos. I was the Head Girl in my final year at school, loved by the principal, Mrs. Adebayo, other teachers and students.

My Valedictory Ceremony in school was a very emotional one. I was missing everyone and everything already, coupled with the fact that I was afraid of facing life outside the four walls of my school.

Before I graduated, I took the JAMB exam and I passed. I was already an undergraduate at the University of Ibadan as I had been given admission to study the course I applied for, Mass Communication. Mrs. Adebayo was all smiles when I made the information public. She announced it to the school with so much pride. People applauded and my teachers congratulated me.

Little did I know I was going to lose the admission. My mum tried so hard to raise my acceptance fee, tuition and other necessary payments, but she did not make headway. I told her not to worry; I assured her our finances would be better the next year. She still tried to raise it, but we missed the deadline. She was bitter for days and wondered why they would not extend the deadline.

That was how I missed my admission to the University of Ibadan. My principal and my English teacher, Mrs. Obabolujo called me to follow up. When I disclosed the bad news, they were upset with me and told me I should have kept them abreast with how things were going.



IN LOVE
WITH MY
MUSIC TEACHER

I joined a music training class in church. Sarah and I joined after we were talked into it. Our initial reaction was a big no because it was a training meant for the adults in church. According to our music teacher, *Mr. F*, he was fulfilling our late pastor's wish. He said the pastor had a burden to revamp the choir before he died. It was his final honour to the memory of the pastor.

The music teacher was really good at what he did; it was easy to understand and remember. There were no dull moments in his classes. He was eloquent, friendly and committed. He was always in church before any of us. He was already married with two children, but his family was in London.

I always looked forward to the time of the week when we had music classes. I found myself talking about him all the time; telling my mum how intelligent he was, and always chatting away with Sarah about his teachings. I always did his assignments. I did not want to ever be in his bad books.

As we rounded off the music classes, he promised to give a gift to the best student. I wanted to be that best student, not because of the gift but because I just wanted him to be happy with me. I spent endless hours reading the manual he gave us, going through my notes and researching online. I was intent on being the best.

The exams came and I passed. I did my best, but I was still unsure. The following week, we were all seated as he called our names, giving us our result sheets. I looked into mine and I had 95%. I was not celebrating yet because I did not know what others had. I had a competition in the class, Ajoke Fadiya. I was sure she had 100%.

When everyone had gotten their result sheets, he asked us all to mention our scores. At the end of that episode, I discovered I had the highest score. I was so excited. I screamed and thankfully, others congratulated me. My teacher congratulated me and patted me on the back. After doing his farewell to the class, he announced that he would be taking his best student out. I was more than delighted.

As close as I had become with my mum, I still needed someone to put in a word for me whenever I had to go out. I told him to call my mum and explain to her. He not only

called, he came to our house. He met my mum and explained everything to her. My mum agreed. I was elated.

My music teacher took me to lunch at a beautiful restaurant and the food was delicious. I had as much plantain as I wanted; no restrictions. I had two packs of juice. I honestly did not recover from the experience for a while; it was a first for me.

He asked to know more about me and I did not hold back. I kept talking. He listened attentively to me, giggled at some points and laughed when I said something funny. He passed pleasant comments at different times, like “you are smart”, “you are more mature than your age”, “you have a beautiful smile”, and “you are beautiful”. My tender heart was swept away.

When he dropped me off, he gave me money and I was happy. I could not stop thanking him. I hurried home and told my mum about my outing. I gave her the money. She was glad, and she blessed the money. That was the beginning of my several outings with him.

I would go with him to train other choirs, go with him for ministrations; I was always with him for his outings. I was getting attached to him. He would come visiting, bringing foodstuff for my family. He would still give me money after giving my family foodstuff, saying God led him to be a blessing to us.

One day, my mum told him how worried she was about my schooling, so he brought up the topic of schooling in the US. He talked about me doing a visa lottery. He told us of the different people he had done it for and it worked. He said it was probably God’s will for me to school overseas. He further said he would foot the bills and take me to the place where the processing would be done.

That day, my mum blessed him. I started daydreaming schooling in the US. We did not have a TV in our house at that time, but I had watched high school movies in Sarah’s house. All we had in our house was a radio and my mum always listened to Radio Lagos. But with my exposure at Sarah’s, I started fantasizing schooling in the US, working in a coffee shop and saving for tuition.

The hope of travelling abroad made my mum open up to my music teacher and they got closer; he was very welcome to our home. I became close to him. I trusted him. I talked to him about everything. We prayed together. He gave me scriptures to read, psalms especially.

I did not know I could act at that time; music was everything to me then. He gave me music assignments, taught me to train my voice, and gave me books to read. I was hoping I would learn to play some musical instruments because he knew how to play them all, but I never got to learn.

He paid for all the expenses like he promised. The result of the visa lottery came out and I did not win. I thought God was cruel, after all my prayers and daydreaming. My mum and music teacher consoled me and told me things would still work out. He promised to try again, but my mum told him not to worry, saying I would focus on JAMB. At that, he said, we could work on both JAMB and the visa lottery.

Shortly after that, his friend from the USA, Glenda, came to Nigeria on a visit. I went with him to see her in the hotel where she was lodged. Glenda liked me. She gave me her pictures to look at, she asked me to sing for her and told me to tell her about myself. We had a nice time together as we talked about a lot of things. When I was leaving her room that day, she gave me chocolates, cookies and a hand sanitizer.

Again, I went back home to tell my mum about my new friend and she was clearly excited at the news. Some days after, Glenda and my music teacher paid us a surprise visit at home. “She asked to see you”, my teacher said. I was embarrassed at her visit; I was not proud of the shack I lived in one bit.

Neighbours gathered and just kept staring at her. She took pictures of the environment and asked if I would like to go back with her when returning to America. I told her I would be delighted to. She promised to talk about the details with my music teacher. It seemed to me that God really wanted me out of this country and was making a way for me.

Throughout Glenda’s stay in Nigeria, I went out with her. I spent some nights with

her in the hotel; we got along quite well. When she was leaving, we exchanged pictures. She gave me her contact details. Most emotional for me was her necklace; she took it off and gave it to me. I treasured that necklace and hardly took it off.

She called me when she got to the States. We had some very long conversations and my papers were being processed. My mum and I were delighted that I would soon be travelling to the USA to live with Glenda.

Not long after, some issues came up between her and my music teacher, money related, and that was how my hopes were dashed. She stopped calling me and when I tried, I only reached her voice mail. I was hurt, really hurt that I had lost yet another opportunity to school abroad. My music teacher said we would keep trying the visa lottery and JAMB; I was consoled somewhat.

Then one day, he told me he liked me. I liked him too, but not in the way he was saying. I asked after his wife and kids. He told me he was divorced. He told me he had told his sister, who was my late pastor's wife, that he liked me. He told me a couple of other people he had told. I was speechless.

He gave me some time to think about it. He said he could make his intentions known to my mum, but I begged him not to. While I was still thinking his proposal through, he told me more about his marriage. He said his wife was unfaithful to him. He just kept comparing me to his wife and made me feel I was much better. My teenage mind felt good; I thought he was leaving his wife for me.

About that time, his wife came to Nigeria with their second child and they had an argument in my presence. He took me that day to where his family was lodged; I assumed he was so proud of me he wanted to flaunt me in his face of his wife. He left the place angry that day.

When in the car, driving me back home, I tried to calm him down. His voice changed and he apologized for being upset in my presence. About that time too, I would visit him in his sister's house and she would greet me well. That made me feel very accepted. If my late pastor's wife, his sister, accepted me, then I was in good stead if I

agreed to marry her brother.

At different times, his sister would ask after my mum and after a few minutes, excuse herself to leave us to be together alone. I even spoke with his mum over the phone who begged me to follow her son to Ekiti, saying she really wanted to see me.

To top the list, my music teacher told me he could stand before Pastor Adeboye, knowing how well I respected and still respect that man of God, and tell him how much he loved me. He said he could shout it from the mountain top. He said he knew people would call him mad and wicked for trying to take advantage of me, but he did not care; he could not deny his feelings.

He gave me the history of people who married young girls and it worked for them. He assured me we would live happily ever after. At that time, he was forty years old and I was seventeen. He would cook for me and bring to me though my mum did not know about that. Because of the church she was attending, there were times she would be away from home for many days. In those days, he was always there for me. He talked to me like I was older than my age, seeking my opinion on issues.

I knew how much money he had per time. I knew his debit card pin, I knew the passwords to his phone and laptop; he was absolutely open with me. He promised to send me to school and promised not to get married to me until I was done with school.

I told him about my fear of saying yes to somebody's husband and he reminded me that they were divorced; using scriptures to justify his words. With all the words he spoke, plus how much he had done for me and his commitment to my family, adding to the fact that he was telling family and friends about me, I agreed to marry him.

I let down all my guards, since I had agreed to be his bride. I started writing him letters almost everyday. He bought me many cards. We talked endlessly on the phone. He said he wanted to make it official; he wanted to tell my mum. Again, I was afraid of that, but since he was asking a second time and I had already agreed to marry him, I told him he could tell her.

The day he came to tell her, I was not myself. I knew she would either agree or kill

me, but my mind settled for the latter. I stayed outside; I could not dare to listen. I prayed that she would agree. I was really terrified. When I summoned courage to go in, she told me she had just received a call from her church and had to leave immediately. She told me what to cook for my step-dad and reminded me not to sleep off with the candle on.

I was still confused. Had he told her? When she left, he told me he had not told her. He said she had received a call when he was about telling her. However, his willingness and courage to tell my mum put my heart at ease and made me love him the more. That day, we cooked together and watched movies on his laptop till very late at night when he left.

We then started getting intimate. The first time he attempted touching me, I shrugged him off and refused, but eventually, I gave in. I told him he could touch me, but we were not going to have sex, and he agreed.

He never forced himself on me but he talked a lot about sex. He talked about it so much that I wanted to experience it. I told him to his face that with all he had described to me, I looked forward to doing it with him.

We were together for a year and we did not have sex. There were times I told him not to touch me and he honoured my wish. Times when I went to church and was reminded about the sanctity of sex, I would get repentant and ask that he stop even the touching. But a time came my conscience was dead in that touching regard and I allowed him to touch me indiscriminately; I did not care or even take it to be anything again. It became normal.

Then one day, he told me he was sick. He said his scrotum ached. I had never heard what he told me in my life. He said because he had not had a release in a long time, and his sperm had accumulated, he was experiencing severe pain there. I had never heard him sound so low, I was scared for him.

I went to visit him. He could not walk. He was crawling on the floor. I was literally terrified. I asked him what the solution to his intense pain and discomfort was. He said the solution was sex. He told me he would use a pain reliever and go see his doctor friend.

I went back home, so afraid for him. I prayed all night until I slept off. Honestly, when I saw him, he had looked like he was about to die. I could not go with him to the doctor because I did not know how to tell my mum or what excuse to give for going out. I spoke with him over the phone and he said he was bringing the test result.

He came and explained that his doctor friend said the case was critical, that if he did not release some sperm, he would die. I needed to do something. I did not want him to die. I told him I would have sex with him. His birthday was around the corner, so I promised him I would give him as a birthday gift. I was that naive and gullible at seventeen. Reminds me of a quote by my mentor, Timi Adigun, "There are some things age will not teach you if you do not deliberately learn them!" We would always remain ignorant on some important issues if we do not seek out knowledge concerning them.

So, I promised him my virginity as his birthday gift. It did not happen, however, on the day I promised because I was afraid. He was upset with me. He then threatened that if I, the woman he loved could not help him, he would go pay someone to do it for him. At that point, I was upset with myself. I reminded myself he was my husband-to-be and convinced myself it made no difference.

We reconciled and I gave him another date. I promised him that this time, I would not disappoint him. Our conversation changed from that day and all we talked about was sex. He loaded my brain with all sorts of things.

The day finally came. He wanted to move the date because he was expecting some money that he wanted to use to pay for a good hotel, but moving it would mean my mum back from church. So, he settled for a cheap hotel. I still remember the smell of cigarette that filled the room. I hated the smell of alcohol and cigarette; I still do. We had to wait at the reception for the room to be cleaned and aired.

So, we went back into the room, and it happened. It was a painful experience for me. I cried at different points and he kept apologising, begging me to keep my voice down lest they think he was raping me. He told me to relax and bear the pain. In his words, "do not be a weak woman". That got at me because I hated feeling or being treated as weak.

I asked for a break. He tutored me some more and tried again until he finally got through. It was not anything like he had told me it would be. I saw no clouds, I made no sounds, I felt nothing special. It was painful all the way, but it was obvious he was satisfied.

When he was done, I checked the bed for blood. I screamed! There was no blood! He told me that not all virgins saw blood. I was so confused, but chose to believe him anyway. Soon after, he slept, and I was there crying. Why didn't I see blood? Even if not all virgins see blood, why should I be on that list? How would I tell the story of losing my virginity without blood? Who would believe me that I was actually a virgin?

It was traumatising for me and for some weird reason, I started thinking someone must have had sex with me before, probably in my sleep. I could not get the haunting thoughts out of my mind.

The next day at home, when I woke, I could not get up from bed. My body ached. My laps, my knees, my back, my waist; I was a mass of pain. My mum noticed, but I excused it away as regular body pain. She asked me to have a bath, saying she would get me a pain reliever.

As I made to stand up and walk, I could not put my legs together. I had to pretend to be limping to avoid my mum noticing. In the bathroom, when water touched my private part, it hurt terribly. I figured I had tears. I was so upset with myself. I was shy to talk with him over the phone. He eventually came visiting. I told him about the tears and pain and he told me I would be fine.

I started avoiding my mum. I avoided being naked before her. I could not afford my mum knowing because shortly before I gave in to him, my mum had started getting wary about him. She reduced my time with him and warned me sternly to be careful about him. She said she could not explain why, but she was beginning to have ill feelings about him. She told me she had a dream that he raped me. She saw these signs before I slept with him; I could not have her discovering what I had done.

I started acting strange in the house, so my mum reported me to Mummy Amanda;

the woman I was close to in church. Mummy Amanda told me to come to her house. I felt easier going to see Mummy Amanda than suffering the ill feeling of guilt, seeing my mum and remembering that she warned me.

When I got to Mummy Amanda's house, I was at ease. She was a person I could tell personal things to when shoved to the wall. She told me my mum was worried about me and sensed something was happening between my music teacher and I. Sadly, I denied everything, telling her my mum was just being unnecessarily suspicious. She believed me and I stayed a few more days with her.

My music teacher stayed in touch, sending text messages every now and then. I felt guilty that I could not defend my love for him. How was I going to cope then when I got married to him? I thought I should just confess to her so she could help me explain to my mum, then the marriage plans could kick off in full gear.

When my brief stay with her was wrapping up, I told her I had something to tell her. I told her about everything between my music teacher and I, but I left the sex part out. She got so mad and raised her voice so loud her husband had to come out. She told him what happened. He was alarmed.

"The man has brain washed you!", he said. He said we would go see the music teacher the next day with my mum. I felt bad that they did not believe I loved him and that they thought I was brainwashed. So, not being able to tell them in person, I wrote a letter to Daddy and Mummy Amanda, telling them I had sex with my music teacher. I explained my reasons, thinking it would make them understand me better. I made them know I loved him and could do anything for him, if it meant his health and life.

Mummy Amanda screamed when she read it. I can never forget that night. I still remember the look on her face. She asked if I was not afraid of Karma, asking how I dared sleep with a married man. She said I would reap all I sowed. She said a lot in anger and I sincerely wondered if she had read my letter; why didn't anyone, just anyone, think it was not my fault. She called my mum and told her. It was on speaker. My mum was crying over the phone.

I was confused. I felt I had lost my mind. Mummy Amanda told me to call my music teacher and ask where he was. I did. He was at his sister's place. After the phone call, I was told we would go there first thing in the morning. I was told we would pick my mum up on the way.

I did not sleep until daybreak. As we headed for his house, I wanted to text him to leave the house; I wanted him to know I had confessed. But I decided against it. He loved me and had boasted he could tell the world. I was certain he would defend me and defend the love we shared.

When we got there, *Mrs. J*, that is my late pastor's wife, was home with her children. She told the children to excuse us. Mummy Amanda then recounted the ordeal to her. *Mrs. J* asked me to kneel in the middle. She began to call me names. She said I had a seductive spirit; a marine spirit. I was shocked. She was there when we used to do our lovey-dovey. I could not believe my ears.

My mum asked of my music teacher, *Mr. F*, and he came. When he came in, I could not look up at him. Now was the time for my love to speak up for me. But to my utmost shock, he denied everything to my face.

"I do not know what you are talking about", he said. I looked into his eyes and he did not wince. I wanted to die. He walked out of the room and nobody stopped him. I began to wail. My mum beat me mercilessly that day. *Mrs. J* said all sorts of unprintable words.

My mum kept crying as the women said what they would say. My mum took the blame and chastised herself for opening her arms that wide to him. As we were returning to Mummy Amanda's place, my mum said she felt like a failure; asking me to pack my things and return to my dad. She said she would call him and tell him what I did, saying I was better off with him than her. I knew she was pained.

Mummy Amanda intervened and asked me to stay at their place for a while; seeing how upset my mum was. That day was the worst day of my life. I am sure it would have been worse if Mummy Amanda did not make things better. I called my music teacher but

he did not pick. I sent him a text and thanked him for deceiving me because I was told the truth about his scrotum lie.

He replied me and told me I was cheap. We had many back and forth angry words at each other. That night, I cursed the day I met him, the day I loved him, and the day he slept with me. I cursed myself for hurting those who loved me.

Sarah came to visit at Mummy Amanda's place, but I could not explain anything to her. I remembered the last time we spoke about being virgins, my other friend, Jennifer Osaro had been there also. We had promised ourselves we would stay chaste and honour God with our bodies. Jennifer said it to my face on that day that I was the only reason she was still a virgin. They looked up to me.

I was too ashamed of what I had done to mention it to any of them. I was good at bottling up my emotions. So in spite of looking pale when Sarah saw me, I refused to say the reason why I was so. In those days, I smiled and acted a lot in the presence of others but went home to cry. There were times I broke down in tears at church and people assumed it was the worship getting at me.

So, to those who have asked me if I ever had a boyfriend, my answer has always been a no because he was not a boyfriend, but a man-friend; the man who made me a woman.

12

THE FALSE
PROPHET

Life at home with my mum was never the same again. She did not trust me anymore. I could not blame her; I had betrayed her trust. She questioned me on every move, and kept reminding me of my mistake. My mum would not let me pray with her any more; she doubted even my prayers.

With God, I had lost my confidence. I felt wretched before Him. I kept pleading for His forgiveness. Now, I know better and know what I should have done, but I did not know any of that back then.

I kept remembering the words that were spoken over me at that time, “your own daughter would do same to you”, “you have a seductive spirit”, “you are from the marine world”, “you are cheap” and more. Those words became my constant companions and destroyed my self esteem.

I still went to church and acted normally. I played and laughed with my friends, but I was wounded inside. I cried a lot when I was alone. I eventually got to the point of deceiving my own self when I told myself to stop crying. I believed strong women did not cry. I fought my tears with laughter. I hit my chest so hard at different times to take back the tears until I started feeling a hard knot in my chest.

The moon became my friend. I would wait for it to appear in the sky every night and pour out my heart when it did. The moon had a strange way of giving me hope when I saw it. I wrote countless apology letters to God. I would burn the letters and watch the smoke go up. I could not talk to God, so I deceived myself into thinking the smoke would convey my words. The devil played with my mind at that time. I had several funny dreams. I was depressed.

For some reason, they delayed in bringing us a new pastor after the demise of the initial one. The church eventually did and this new pastor we got was more into deliverance ministry. We were always having vigils and church programs. My mum would only allow if my big sister in church, Ajoke came home to promise she would take me and bring me back.

About that time too, I felt I should help clean up the place where we bought water; it

was usually dirty and slippery. Even though we lived in a ghetto, I ensured our house was always clean. When I told my mum about my desire to help the Baba, that sold water, clean the place, she refused. She did not want people to accuse me or her of wanting evil for the man. She was called a witch already; she wanted to stay in her place.

When she reluctantly agreed, I told the Baba my intentions. He was surprised yet pleased. He gave me the things I needed to clean up the place. I did and he blessed me. For some strange reason, the blessings of that old man lifted my burdens and made me feel lighter. From that day onwards, it was my duty to clean the place whenever I noticed it was getting dirty or slippery.

In time, I got close to the old man. He asked about my schooling and I explained to him. He started giving me books to read and told me tonnes of stories. Baba became my friend; helping him and spending time listening to his stories did me a lot of good in my healing process. My relationship with him became closer and I started helping him arrange his house on weekends. I helped with cooking his food; I was left wondering why such an old man was left to cook his own food.

Baba became my responsibility. Sometimes, I took the food stuff he asked me to buy to my house, cooked the food there and then took the prepared food to him. As expected, people in the neighbourhood began to gossip that there was something going on between me and the old man. I did not bother about the rumours. I was serving the man and that was all that mattered to me.

Baba played a guitar and sang many folklores. In those times, I cried when he sang. It was Baba that told me that women were emotional beings. He told me not to hold back my tears whenever I needed to cry; he encouraged me to let the hurt out. Oh! Did I mention Baba being a Christian? He told me I was precious to God; that was refreshing, like spring water poured over my soul. God used Baba to start my healing process. I started to regain my confidence.

Months passed and I had a dream. I had a dream that someone poured dirty water on my body. I woke up depressed that Sunday morning. I went to church with my head

bowed. After the service, the new pastor called me into his office and told me I needed sanctification. He said he saw me crying to him, telling him someone poured water on me.

I was shocked. How did he know? He asked me to fast for three days and asked me to come to church in those three days to see him for prayers. I told my mum and she encouraged me to oblige.

On the first day of the fast, Jennifer was with me. She saw me praying at intervals and asked if I was fasting. When I told her I was, she said she would accompany me to the church, that she needed prayers as well. I was wearing trousers that day, but changed into a skirt in the evening because my pastor preached against it. Jennifer and I then headed to the church.

On our way, she spotted her mum from afar and remembered there was something her mum had asked her to do she had not done yet. She ran back home and asked me to help write down the prayer points.

I got to church and it was just the pastor there. I assumed he was the one who picked his children from school that day as they were still in their school uniforms and they were with him in church. He told me to come into his office and asked his children to go into the car.

In his office, he asked me if I read the scriptures he gave me and if I observed my prayer time. I told him I did. So he then claimed God told him I needed a spiritual bath and that I had to take my clothes off. He claimed his office had been supernaturally made a spiritual bathroom. He wanted to wash away the dirty water that was poured on me in my dream.

As he spoke those words, I began to cry. Was my case that critical? Why would God want me to have a bath in the pastor's office? Couldn't God wash me without me taking off my clothes? Why all these complications?

The pastor told me to stop crying and that I should follow God's instructions through him. He said he would excuse me so God could do the sanctification. He left his

office. I shut the door, made sure the windows were locked and put the curtains down. I was naked in his office. He had told me how to pray and I prayed. I cried as I did.

I saw the door handle moving so I quickly got up, and got dressed. I opened the door and he came in with oil. He claimed again that God asked him to anoint my body from head to toe. So, the anointing session started. He anointed my head, my eyes, and was moving down. When he got to my chest, he did the sign of the cross and wanted to proceed to touch me. I stopped him and told him to put the oil in my hand. I would anoint myself.

He told me to lie down, that he wanted to anoint me down there. It was at the point when he wanted to anoint me, I remembered I had forgotten to wear my pant when I hurriedly dressed up. At that time, I also remembered the dirty things *Mr. F* used to talk about. It was then my eyes were opened and I knew what this man was trying to do to me. I got upset, took my bag and left immediately.

I shamelessly cried on my way home. I started agreeing with the words I had been labelled with, maybe I indeed had a seductive spirit. Why did every man in my life want to have sexual relations with me? I cleaned my face before getting home. My mum asked how it went and I lied. I did not want another episode.

I was angry at God. How did the man know about my dream? Did God really ask him to anoint me? Would anything bad happen to me because I refused him anointing me? I was confused and angry at the same time. I did not stop fasting and praying, however; I completed the three days.

He finally sent me a text on the fourth day, apologizing to me for what he did. It was then I was able to get rid of the fear and guilt that gnawed at me. I realized at that point that the man was attracted to me and wanted to have a feel of my body. But I stopped going to that church. I could not continue going there.

It was a difficult decision because I had been going there since I was a child. I did not know the answer to give people when they asked me. I was angry at God and blamed Him for everything. Every evil thing that had happened in my life was traceable to the

church; at least, so I thought.

A while after, I decided to visit Baba again. I had been avoiding him since the incidence with my pastor. I still ran errands for him, but did not wait to spend time with him. He noticed and called my attention to it, but I always gave excuses and ran. However, when I could not take it anymore, and needed some fatherly touch, I went to see him.

The first thing he said to me was, “you have not been going to church. Man is not God”. When he said that, I fought my tears. When I could not hold them back any more, I went to the tap and let them out as I washed my face. I did not want him to see me cry. When I returned, he said, “I have told you it is okay to cry”.

He sang for me as he played his guitar and I allowed the tears flow. When I was about leaving, he told me to go to the table and pick the envelope that was there. I read it when I got home and there were three lines in the sheet of paper. “You can face it. You are strong. You are beautiful”. Those words were refreshing.

Again, I remembered his words, “man is not God”. It was then I put things in perspective. God did not offend me; man did. Why was I blaming God? Why was I making God responsible for the mistakes and weaknesses of mortals? Men would always be men no matter their titles and will fail over and again.

I remembered the scripture in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that God would not put more on me than I could handle. I meditated on that scripture and then apologised to God for my own failures too.

In spite of acknowledging the frailty of my pastor, I had to change my church so I went church seeking for a few weeks. I eventually found one and it had everything I needed except that I felt intimidated there. Everyone dressed as if they deliberately went shopping for church.

I possibly felt that way because it was my first time away from the church I was used to. However, knowing the number of clothes I had, I felt terribly intimidated. I decided to stay there though, because apart from the flashy clothes, shoes, bags and body

accessories, the worship and the word were on point.

When I returned home, my mum was already back which was strange. I was not long at home when we heard a knock. It was people from the church I had just left. I assumed they had missed me in the past weeks of my absence and came to check on me.

They asked why I had been away from church. Strangely, I could not answer; I was just there smiling sheepishly. The look of shock on my mum's face further aggravated my uneasiness. I silently prayed that my mum would not say anything. She did not. She simply stepped out.

When she left, they asked me again and I assured them there was no problem, promising to be back in church the next week. They prayed with me and left. The moment they left, my mum came in, locked the door and asked me to cough out the truth.

I started crying. She was upset. She complained that I had changed since after being deflowered. She said I had lost my relationship with God. She said she noticed I hardly prayed any more and that I had just compounded it with the latest news of not going to church. She kept talking; she was very upset.

I wept bitterly, sobbing all over as she spoke. When she was done. I told her the truth. I thought my mum would console me, but she reached for a turning stick and beat me. As I screamed and cried, she reached for other objects and kept beating me. The interesting thing was she was also crying as she beat me. She did not stop until she was tired. I had scars and some parts of my body were swollen. I was confused and asked God to kill me. I did not understand why she was so mad at me. I later figured that possibly because she had not beaten me for the episode with my music teacher, she was venting everything at once.

She called Mummy Amanda and told her she was tired of me. Fortunately for me, God came through for me through Mummy Amanda again. She said the pastor had been caught doing same with other members. She only wondered why I had not spoken up; it had been four weeks after the incidence.

I told Mummy Amanda I was afraid. Even if they believed me, I did not want the church to be closed down or the pastor suspended on my account. I dreaded my name going down in history that way. My mum got more upset, however, and said I would go to the church and say what happened. I prayed God would change her mind and He did. My mum then said I should either change my church or follow her to hers. Going to her church was not an option for me so I told her about the new church and she was okay with it.

I enjoyed the services at my new church, but I still did not feel I belonged there; they were far above my social status. I did not dress well; I did not even smell good. I could not even afford a deodorant. Many times, by Wednesday, I had already started worrying about what to wear on Sunday. I would empty my wardrobe and think hard of ways to combine my clothes in a way that they would not know I had worn the dress before. I had only one pair of shoes. It was a mental experience getting ready for church at that time.

Eventually, I found a solution; I joined the choir. I was glad they took me in. The choir wore uniforms; that way, I could blend in with what they were wearing. Soon, I started making friends. Shortly after, I joined the drama department and church started getting more interesting. And soon after, Sarah David joined me in my new church. I was happy.

13

THE TURNING
POINT

I started attending MINE Teenage Ministry's Bible study. I discovered it was a ministry for teenagers but not of teenagers; there were many people above the teen-age there, some even married. MINE TM changed my life. Until my last breath, I would forever be thankful to God, He ordered my steps to this ministry. I honestly wonder how my life would have turned out otherwise. You would understand better in the following chapters.

Thanks to Sarah, I started attending the Bible study sessions Mondays through Fridays. Sometimes, we saved money for transport and at other times we trekked. It held at Yeshua High School, a private Christian school at Ojodu. I lived behind County Hospital, at Aguda, Ogba so the distance was bearable. I was amazed at how several young adults made their way there every weekday.

In MINE, I noticed there was no discrimination. It did not matter whether you were rich or poor, nicely dressed or not, with a good accent or not; everybody was accepted and felt at home. The coordinator, Timi Adigun, made meeting of friends compulsory, after worship and before he shared the word. We all had to love each other compulsorily.

It was there I got to discover the Bible was actually an interesting book to read. We fasted every Friday and ate together when breaking our fast; food provided by the ministry. I was used to seeing teenagers throng in for concerts and shows; but this was a first. To study the Bible!

There were times the coordinator delegated sessions, either worship or word sessions to teenagers. I was wowed at the love for God and depth of scriptures of young people like me. I wanted to grow. I was tired of being a baby Christian. My mates were challenging me. I wanted to know God intimately like they did because many of them could hear God. At the worship sessions, we sometimes experienced people getting healed.

We were taught about grace and my love for God starting growing. My knowledge and perception of God started changing. Before, I thought God was one mean judge just waiting for me to offend and punish me but that changed. I started seeing Him as a friend

who desired a relationship with me. I got to know that even though holy, He wanted me to be totally open and honest with Him. I was not to run away when I messed up, rather He wanted to be the One to clean me up and make me whole. That was new, yet exciting, to me.

I never missed Bible study if I could avoid it. When my friends, Toyosi Oyseile and Jennifer Osaro were home from school, I brought them along.

The Ideal Student, one of the several books authored by Timi Adigun, the coordinator, was another life changer for me. The book spelt out ten qualities of an ideal Christian student and they have become tenets I still live by.

Like I mentioned earlier in this book, it was during one of his teachings from the book that he told us to honour our parents by writing them letters. That helped me in forgiving my parents, especially my dad. He taught us to buy our parents gifts and ask them to bless us; I still do that today. I do not joke with my parents' blessings.

One of my earlier days in the ministry, Timi Adigun announced that World Virginity Day would be coming up soon. I was shocked at the roar. People were screaming and hooting. I could not join in the excitement. I felt bad, thinking since I was no more a virgin, I would not be able to attend. I had already joined the ministry's workforce; I was both a member of MINE Levites (the choir) and MINE Expressions (the drama team). I was already wondering what excuse I would give to be absent because as at then, my friends did not know I had been deflowered.

While I was still thinking, it was then explained that the day was not a celebration of virgins. It was a day to advocate sexual purity, encouraging young people to keep sex for marriage; telling virgins they were not alone and should not feel pressured, and asking those, like me, who had made mistakes not to continue in it. #nosum; no sex until marriage, was the catchword. However, it was explained that it was called Virginity Day not Sexual Purity Day for the sake of the next generation; such that unborn children and little kids would get to see virginity as precious, not a stigma.

I was relieved; glad I could participate. There had been editions before that, but my

first World Virginity Day experience was very emotional. I cried a lot that day asking God if I could have my virginity restored; people around thought it was the worship getting me so though. I committed to sexual purity on that day. World Virginity Day has since become a very special day in my life, almost as important as my birthday. Coincidentally, it holds every second Saturday in June, a few days after my birthday, June 7.

MINE TM publishes free magazines for teenagers, distributed worldwide. I was still new in the ministry at this time, but I was chosen as one of the models to be used to publicise the purity movement in the magazine. I initially felt miserable because at that time, everybody in the ministry assumed I was virgin. Keeping secrets could be very disturbing. With my face on the publicity fliers, and everyone assuming, I just played along and started living a lie; not correcting their assumptions.

Soon after, the coordinator visited my house. I had no clue he was coming. According to him, he was on his visitation tour, checking on members of the ministry. He said Sarah gave him the description to my house.

The night before he visited, it rained heavily and our house was always flooded whenever it rained. Thankfully, we were done packing out the water before he came but our only chair was wet. I opened the door to throw out some dirt when I saw him. Timi Adigun in my house! I was so surprised; I was speechless. When I found my voice, I ushered him in.

My mum was home. She put her wrapper on the chair for him to sit on. He asked to see my pictures. I did not have many and they were under the bed right there; we had a bed in the living room. I told him the pictures were far but my mum said they were under the bed. Embarrassed, I lifted the bed and brought out my album, and my mum's.

I initially did not want to give him my mum's album because it was full of pictures of her in her church. I am proud of my mum but I did not want anybody seeing her in a negative light as they usually did those who attend her church; I had suffered from that enough. My mum was not what people had labelled her.

He looked through all the pictures with my mum. My mum smiled all the way,

explaining picture after picture and he listened to her. As he was about leaving, he handed me an envelope. If not for the weight of the envelope, I would have assumed he wrote me a letter. I handed the envelope to my mum. He prayed for us and left the house.

I walked him to the bus stop and then returned home. When I got home, I saw my mum rejoicing. She had opened the envelope. The ministry had given us Fifty thousand Naira. I could not stop thanking him. For about a week, his visit was the topic of discussion in my house.

A short while after, Timi Adigun called me. He told me he and his wife were offering me a home, to live with them. I was excited. It was good news, but I wondered how I would disclose the news to my mum. I rehearsed my lines over and over and said a short prayer, "God, if you really want me to go, please do not let my mum say no".

Thankfully, they had also given the same offer to Sarah David. Sarah's mum had agreed, so I told my mum that. She said she would pray about it, but asked what would happen to my schooling. I told her they promised to sponsor my education. My mum prayed and afterwards gave me her blessing to go.

I literally jumped on her. I did not believe she would agree. I thanked her profusely over and over again. At that time, Sarah was already living with them. I called TiTiMi Adigun, that's what we call Timi and Titi Adigun, and told them my mum had agreed. I thanked them again for the offer.

It has been said that you just need to meet one person, and your life changes forever. I am proof of that. My life changed for good when I met TiTiMi Adigun and MINE TM.

14

ANGELS ON
EARTH

The day I left my mum's place for TiTiMi's house was a very emotional day for me. My mum prepared plantain and fried eggs, my favourite. I know the sacrifice it was for her to make that meal; she would rather buy *Garri* and *Shawa*. She usually told me *plantain and eggs* was a rich man's food and a waste of money.

My mum cooked for me and served me that day. She helped with arranging my books and clothes. I could not leave the house until evening because I did not want people to see me. Moreover, I had no box or bag. I packed my things into a black disposable bag, the one I got from cleaning the church. I had to double it so it would not tear.

When I finished eating, my mum asked me to kneel in front of her. She gave me a very long speech, telling me how to behave myself there. At some point, I had to make a gesture to remind her I was on my knees.

Then she began to pray for me, for like an hour. I was still on my knees. My dress was drenched in my own tears and my hair was soaked with my mum's tears. There is one prayer she prayed that I would never forget and I quote, "I am sending you forth to greatness".

As she prayed, she reminded God of one of my dreams I had told her. In the dream, I saw a man who told me to stop dressing shabbily, asking me to get good clothes because I would be celebrated. After I told her that dream, because she believed in my dreams, she had cheerfully collected her thrift money and gotten me some fairly used clothes. She had also changed my underwear collection. I had worn some so long I had stitched them in different places.

So, she reminded God of that dream as she blessed me. She also blessed the TiTiMi family, praying they would not regret their decision. After the prayer, she gave me a very firm hug. I carried my things and she walked me to the bus stop.

Sarah was delighted to see me. TiTiMi Adigun welcomed me graciously into their home, then at Obawole, Lagos.

Living with the Adiguns was heavenly. We had devotion every morning and every

night. In the mornings, after devotion, we would discuss our plans for the day and at night after devotion, we would talk about how the day went. Night talk was more fun as Sarah and I would gist endlessly about how the day went, experiences with motorists, traders and more. We laughed a lot. I consciously took note of the events of the day so I would have plenty to say at night.

Doing that helped us to bond because I was practically a stranger to them, and so was Sarah. They were just getting to know us. To help us grow spiritually, Dee, which is the name I gave Timi Adigun much later, short for dad, would give us scriptures to read and insist we wrote the exposition in our jotters. Maama, which is the name we all call Titi Adigun as our mum, would encourage us to read as many books as possible from her bookshelf.

Maama is soft spoken and polite. It was fun getting to know her. I desired to hear her speak, but she is a woman of few words. Her actions were enough though. She allowed us to eat whatever we wanted; we had a choice. That was luxury for me.

I had access to the fridge and all the goodies in the kitchen. She never restricted us. She even told us to write a timetable of what we wanted to eat daily.

For leisure, we had access to the TV but were restricted to gospel and educative channels; we were not allowed to watch every channel on DSTV.

Living with them shaped my life. God gave me a family in them. I opened up gradually to them. It was my first time seeing two people happily married. I never knew when or if they had disagreements. They never raised their voices at each other. They ate together. It was just new to me. The air in the house was beautiful and peaceful. They made me desire to get married.

They were both virgins when they married. Time and again, I looked at their photo album and wondered how they did it. The devil came again and lied to me that their marriage was beautiful because they married as virgins. I nursed this bitterness and fear and cried on several occasions. They never caught me crying. Whenever I wanted to cry, I would either go to the bathroom and put on the tap as I cried or wait until midnight when

everybody was asleep. Thankfully, I know better now. True love, the love that comes from God, helps us have beautiful marriages.

Instead of staying idle at home, TiTiMi gave me money to start making beads. I had acquired the skill after secondary school. They asked how much I needed for materials and they gave me the exact amount I asked for.

I made beads, but made no money because I did not know how to charge people; some took my beads on credit. My friends took some. I eventually reported myself to TiTiMi and explained to them that I was not a business person and apologised for wasting their money.

They kept to their word. They registered Sarah and I for JAMB the next year. They told us to search for a good tutorial center and we found one, Citadel Academy, at Ojodu. The fees were expensive coupled with the fact that transportation from Obawole to Ojodu daily was going to be a sizeable amount.

When we reverted to them, they paid and gave us money to buy Past Questions. At night, Dee would wake us up to read and make sure we did not sleep until we completed three hours of reading. He made sure we were reading. Maama would remind us to read hard so we could get admitted on merit. She would say, "JAMB is once a year. Give it your best so you could play and sleep as much as you like after."

The day came to write our exams. At devotion, they laid hands on us and prayed for us. We went to our exam centers very confident. We indeed came out successful. I had 274 and Sarah did well too. Dee and Maama celebrated us. Dee made his delicious buns for us and Maama made spaghetti and chicken. I cannot forget the details; it was a celebration.

At devotion, we teased Dee and jested that the days of his disturbing our sleep to read were over. We did our post UTME exams and we both did well. I had 74. I waited for all the lists and my name did not come out. Paying or bribing people for admission was not an option so we waited patiently.

It was a hard time for us, but having people to stand by us and encourage us at that

time was such a blessing. Some state universities gave the opportunity to change institution. TiTiMi gave us money to take forms for different universities and polytechnics. We were desperate to get into school and they gave us all the support we needed to achieve it. I would need to note here that they were helping other members of the ministry at this same time. I only know the details that pertained to me though.

We wrote several exams and waited expectantly. When it was all over, Sarah got admitted into Ekiti State University and I got no admission. I was so happy for my friend that I momentarily forgot I was seeking admission too. It was when she left for school that the reality dawned on me.

I began to feel like a failure and different thoughts ran through my mind non stop. I assumed I had a spiritual problem, probably an ancestral hold. I later thought I lost my only opportunity at schooling when I lost the very first one which I could not pay for. I kept these thoughts to myself though.

About this time, TiTiMi had relocated to a bigger apartment; a duplex in Ajuwon, outskirts of Lagos. They opened up their house to more people, male and female alike. It became a mini live-in camp for teenagers and young adults. We were about six regular people living with them, others came for designated time periods and left. I honestly wondered how TiTiMi accommodated all of us without ever complaining. They were simply committed to blessing lives.

The next JAMB exam period came again and they paid for the six of us. They paid for our tutorials again. They paid for a month, but we did not like the style of teaching at that center so we asked to read at home. There was a big reading room in the house. Dee however, made a deal with us; he said we would stop going to the tutorial if we promised to read from 8am to 2pm plus two hours of study at night. We agreed to the deal. At night, if we were not up, Dee or Maama would come wake us up.

One day, however, I could not bottle up my fears and worries any more. It had gotten overwhelming. I felt I was going to explode because even though I had been studying, I feared I would not get into school again. I was in the reading room that day

with others but there was a battle in my mind. I could not read the letters in the text book. The more I tried, the fainter the letters got. Tears blurred my vision.

I dropped the book and ran upstairs. Thankfully, Dee was in the living room at that time. I fell at his feet and wept. “What is the matter? Are you okay?” He asked questions, concerned for me. Maama was at work; if she was home, he would have called her to join him. Maama, a Pharmacist, at that time worked as a Manager at Health Plus, GRA, Ikeja.

For over fifteen minutes, I just sobbed at his feet, shaking, with tears running down my face and mucus dripping out of my nose. I could not speak.

“Take it easy on yourself, Juliana”, he said, and asked again what was wrong. I still could not look up or speak. “I speak peace to you, Juliana. What is wrong? Speak now”, he said, and immediately, I found my voice and the war in my mind stopped.

I told him how afraid I was. I confessed how much I missed Sarah and how I felt like a failure when she left for school. I told him how terrible I felt reading for JAMB with people younger than me; I was the oldest female among them. I asked if God was punishing me for something. I said a lot that day. He consoled me and said words that have stuck to my heart since that day, “For we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose”.

I wrote JAMB again and passed. I had 254 but same thing happened; no admission. Then Maama told me and the others about when she failed in the university and had to stay an extra year. She told us how depressing it had been for her. It had been her first time failing, but in retrospect, she was thankful for it, stating that she might not have met her husband otherwise and explaining some other things.

It was encouraging to hear her story. I decided to take a break from my attempts to get into the university. I had seemingly wasted four years of my life focusing on getting into school. I told Dee I wanted to focus on other things and he said it was okay. I had been sceptical about telling him. His approval meant the world to me.

I went to see my mum who had been worried about my academics; fasting and praying about it. I told her about focusing on other things; probably working then trying

again. She was not happy initially but she eventually gave in and blessed me.

And indeed, God worked it for my good. If I had gotten into the university, you would probably not know I exist today or be inspired by my story. I believe formal education is important, but we all have different routes to success. Do not put a pause on your life just because your pre-conceived plans did not come through.

Someday, maybe someday, you would see a PhD behind my name. Someday!

15

LIGHT...
CAMERA...
ACTION!

Let me take you to the beginning of my professional acting career. This was shortly before I went to live with the Adiguns. I was on my way to choir rehearsals one afternoon when I got a call from my friend, Jennifer Osaro. She asked me to come for an audition in Longe Estate, behind Big Treat, Omole, Lagos. I asked how many people were there to audition and she said they were few. I still did not want to go, but after plenty convincing, I went.

When I got there, I was scared. The crowd was huge. I wondered why Jennifer lied to me. I felt so little; I hated crowds. Worse was, they were dressed like people going for a pageant, hoping to be awarded for wearing the best dress and there I was, casually dressed. I was wearing faded black jeans, a round neck top and slippers. I had to remove my scarf and pack my hair up.

I was mad at Jennifer for lying to me. She told me she knew I would not come if I knew the truth. I told her I wanted to leave; the folks there were staring at me funny. She took me to the restroom instead. I looked in the mirror and frowned.

“You be fine girl jo”, Jennifer said in pidgin. She explained how she got a slot for me. When I finally agreed to do it, we stepped out of the restroom and got ushered to the waiting area. The man that helped Jennifer get me in gave us a script to read. While Jennifer was reading, I was distracted by a fine girl I saw. She was so pretty, I could not help staring. I called Jennifer’s attention and my friend agreed the girl was pretty.

I told Jennifer to help me. I wanted to compliment the girl. So, Jennifer led the way. When we got to her, I said, “I have been looking at you, you are so pretty”. “Thank you”, she said.

Almost immediately, the director came out and picked me and the girl. I got scared all over again when I saw the judges and those auditioning. The man told me to read with this pretty girl; imagine my tension. I asked her name with a shaky voice and she replied, “Dior Adiele”.

I had never heard such a name before. I immediately assumed she was born overseas. She was so confident. When we were before the judges, my palms got sweaty

and I squinted to read my lines.

“Do you use glasses?”, the woman who had introduced herself as Mrs. Olowu, asked me. I said yes, lying, before I even knew I had said it. “Go get it”, she said. That’s the insanity of lies; they never stop. I lied that I did not come with them.

I finally read well after messing up twice. I honestly wonder why they did not throw me out after the first time. I had to apologize to Dior for messing up. She smiled and told me it was okay. I could not wait for Jennifer to be done with hers. I left for rehearsals. I could not stop beating myself for mispronouncing some easy words, for stammering, and squinting; for messing up in general.

Fortunately, however, a month after, I got a call that I was chosen for the role and I was told when to resume set. I did not understand what I did right, but it was good news I was grateful for. My mum and Jennifer rejoiced with me. It was a TV series, *Me, Myself and My Diary*.

I was on set with Mrs. Tina Mba, Mr. Yemi Solade, Mrs. May Owen, and the beautiful Dior Adiele. It was my first experience on set and it was pleasantly memorable. I got to see first hand the amount of work involved in film making. I discovered it was a lot of hard work.

When we wrapped the set, I was given an envelope. It was quite heavy. The producer commended me for doing well and apologized that what they were giving me was small but promised it would get better.

When I got home, I opened the envelope, counted the money and screamed. Why did he apologize to me? The money was no small money to me. I was jumping excitedly. I immediately put aside my tithe and offering. I was tired of being ashamed of my offering; squeezing it. Now, I was glad I could give something befitting to God’s work.

After setting aside what I was going to honour God with, it still remained a lot. I gave some to my friends, bought myself some clothes and handed the rest to my mum. My mum and I prayed for the producer and the production. I sent the producer a text much later to thank him.

My next experience was the movie, *Where does beauty go?*. I played the younger version of Mrs. Clarion Chukwura.

I got to meet Mrs. Abiola Segun Williams on that set and I totally fell in love with her. She is a Christian, she speaks well, eats healthy and is decent. I remember the day, on set, when an upcoming actress was confused on how to handle kissing roles. She told the story of how she started acting and stated that she had never kissed in a movie. She was not talking to me, but I was glad I was in the costume room with them when she said that.

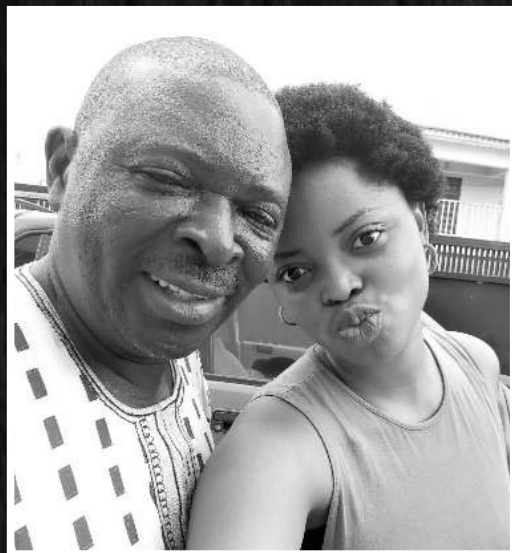
I was inspired. I was encouraged through her words to stand out. She said that day, “acting for me is like a ministry. I am not in it for fame or money, but because God instructed me to be”. I held on to those words that day and promised to make a difference in the industry. She was just speaking from her heart that day. She did not know the profound effect her words would have on my career. I have been Mrs. Abiola Segun Williams’ secret admirer since.

In order to make some more money on that set, I stayed back to assist the costumier, Ojuolape Kosoko, whose assistant had left for some reason. That was how I learnt about costuming. I had fun learning under her.

I did some other movies after that like *Rivers Between* and *Couple of Days*. *Couple of Days* was written, directed and produced by Mr. Tolu Awobiyi, also known as Lord Tanner. I learnt a lot working with him. I did a short film, *Click Now*, and a stage play, *Magic Time*, with Lord Tanner. I joined Pastor Gbenga Kuponiyi, of blessed memories, for his stage play, *Interwoven*. Just to mention some of the acting projects I have been involved in.

It was not all auditions I went for that I was given a role. I got some and did not get some. So, refusing to stay idle, I took some ushering jobs at that time, wrote some scripts that I was paid for and went with Ms. Ojuolape for costuming jobs.

Then, it happened...





16

TOYO BABY

One fateful day, I got a broadcast message from my friend, Temitope Dada, fondly called Dabest. It was a long message. I opened it but did not read it. Dabest called me much later and asked if I would be going for the auditions. I did not understand what he was saying, so he asked if I had read the message. I said I had not. He insisted I did, saying the message was from a reliable source.

I read it. It was an audition call from the Jenifa's Diary TV Series. I told him they already had their cast. So, instead of hearing a "no" or "we will get back to you" which they never do, I would rather stay in my house. Besides, it was on a Saturday and I had to go clean the church and attend choir rehearsals.

My mum, however, told me to give it a trial and Dee gave me his blessing too. I called the choir coordinator and excused myself. The audition was to start at 10am. I arrived the venue by 8am, thinking I was early, but I was seemingly late. It was the most crowded audition I had ever been at. I wanted to go back immediately. I had come early to get auditioned before the crowd, but I met a crowd.

My friends that went for the audition with me told me to stay. I called Dee to give him the progress report and he also asked me to stay. When I went to the table to register, I got the number 527. I wondered if the others slept there overnight.

I called my mum after seeing my number and she insisted I stayed. I went to the rest room at different times and locked myself up there, ignoring the several knocks. I just wanted to be away from the crowd. It was a tiring experience. I finally got auditioned by 8pm.

It was my first time seeing Mrs. Funke Akindele Bello. I was star struck. I tried not to allow it affect my performance. When I was done, I got the usual, "we would get back to you". I picked my things and left.

Some days after, I got a text for another audition, the next stage. I was both surprised and delighted. I scaled through that and was called for yet another; I scaled the first three hurdles. I was then called for the final audition; the script reading.

The place was crowded as usual. We were called in one after another to read for

different characters. We were then grouped. I was in a group of over twenty people, reading for *Toyosi*. In between, we were asked if we could drive and swim. I could not do either, so I had automatically disqualified myself. They then put those of us who could not drive or swim in a separate place and we were ignored for a long time.

Others were asked to go, but I was told to wait. At about 7pm, I was called in to read for *Toyosi*. After that, I was told to wait outside again. After a long time, I was called in. Mrs. Funke Akindele Bello read for *Jenifa*, Lota Chukwu read for *Kiki*, Beverly Osu read for *Mercy* and I read for *Toyosi*. We were told to do away with the script and act. We did.

Afterwards, Mrs. Bello congratulated me and told me I got the role. I was in tears. She hugged me. I never ever thought I would get the role. She told me to restate my details as she checked. I guessed she wanted to confirm my real age.

“How old are you?”, she asked. I told her I was nineteen. She did not believe me so she asked again. “I am nineteen ma”, I said again. “You are such a baby”, she said, smiling at me. I then became afraid again that my age would disqualify me, but it did not. “You have the role”, she said again after other judges commented that I did not look my age, saying I acted well and mature.

As I exited that room, I rushed to the restroom and said a prayer, thanking Jesus for making it happen. I called Dee next; he had been following up all the while, encouraging and praying for me. I then called my mum. She screamed over the phone, saying, “thank You Jesus”, in Yoruba. I also called Dabest on my way home in the bus.

I could not stop the tears that flowed that night. My mum was waiting for me outside our house when I got home. She ran to hug me and she congratulated me. She immediately said we would fast and pray to seal it. I agreed to it. She asked if I had called Dee and Dabest. I told her I had. That night, I spoke late into the night with my mum, giving her all the details.

Judging from what I was paid by previous producers who were not as popular as Mrs. Bello, my mum and I began to plan for the money we had not seen. We planned on giving to the church, getting a good apartment, shopping and saving for school. We were

planning, real big.

I was nineteen when I started acting in the Jenifa's Diary TV Series. I was the youngest on set. I had to snap out of my age and get into character.

Working with Mrs. Bello taught me a lot. I got to know the real her. She is very hard-working. I cannot overemphasize that; she is very diligent. She is very versatile; she can do almost everything. She knows something about everything everyone is doing on set, so she is able to help out when needed. When we had lots of people on set, she would assist the hair stylist, make-up artist, costumier, light guy, and even caterers. There is nothing she cannot do on set.

I really admired, and still do, her strength and work etiquette. She hardly sleeps and she rarely gets tired. Just when she complains of being tired, she is up to doing something else. The thought of her makes me smile as I write this. She is a workaholic.

On set, she never tolerated laziness and pride. Learning from her, I started helping around on location. If I was not on set, that is acting, I helped in whatever way I could. I got close to her siblings in the process. I call them Uncle Papa and Aunty Mama.

I enjoyed my time spent with Aunty Mama. She was my confidant and advocate. She treated me like a sister. We got so close I usually looked forward to having her around. She was protective over me. She would buy me things to eat and drink. Uncle Papa was also a big brother. He was good at bullying people, but we all enjoyed his company; he kept us laughing. He had the habit of acting like he did not care, but he did care. He was always looking out for me and others that were close to him on set.

Uncle Papa was the one that helped me open an Instagram account. Prior to that, I knew nothing about Instagram. That day, we were in the house. Aunty Mama and Lota Chukwu were in the house. It was during those breaks we had. Uncle Papa came in and talked about Instagram. I said I did not know what it was about. After laughing hard at me, he helped me open an account. Aunty Mama made zobo that night to celebrate the opening of my account.

Jenifa's Diary set was another home for me. There was a day I went out with Aunty

Mama, Uncle Papa and their friend. They were going shopping and I followed. During the shopping, Auntie Mama told me to pick a dress and told me to disturb her brother to pay. I picked a dress that she liked and with her prowess in convincing her brother, he paid for it. It was a beautiful dress. As I write this, I am laughing as I remember how we all teased, went back and forth before he eventually paid. Amazing people they are.

Lota Chukwu is another sweetheart. She would pamper me on set; it felt so good to be the youngest on that set as almost everyone was looking out for me. Sis, as I fondly called her, helped me with my lines; we studied our scripts together before going on set. We sometimes were up really late, getting our lines.

When explaining things to me, she usually asked, “do you get?” and never ceased to tell me, “I am here any time you need me, baby”. I totally loved the family I had on set.

Then, there was Sister Ayo, Mrs. Bello’s elder sister. We called her Sister. She hardly came around, but when she did, Lota and I were always delighted. She was always the encourager. She was our big mummy. She knew how to make me laugh. There was a song she composed for me and would dance as she sang it for me. It always cracked me up. She has a beautiful heart.

Our director, Mr. Tunde Olaoye, is a brainy. He is very schooled; knows so much and reads a lot. He was almost always with books on set; I wondered how someone could do that. He is a very disciplined and responsible man. He is very cheerful and it is very hard to catch him frowning. He is a bundle of energy; hardly tired or exhausted. Most importantly, he is very good at his job.

Mr. Blessing, our DOP, is very good at what he does, soft spoken and easy going. Mr. Fatai, the sound man never ceased to make us laugh on set.

In summary, Jenifa’s Dairy set for me was a great experience. Everyone, from cast to crew, delivered their duties professionally.

Back to my boss, Mrs. Bello. She is a lover of people and children. She always likes to have people around her. Her arms are open to take people in and she has a passion for young people.

She was my mum on set. She called me up at night at different times and counselled me. She told me the *dos and donts* of the industry. She told me about her different experiences in the industry. She gave practical examples and warned me never to lose myself. She told me to remain in God.

We prayed and fasted together. There were nights when we woke up to pray together. She took me very close. She trusted me. She told me how much she believed in me many times before I went to bed.

There was a particular day she told me about how God lifted her and I ended up in tears. Her story gave me hope. I enjoyed serving her. She was so kind to me. I did not know how to repay her, so as I had been taught by Dee, Timi Adigun, I served her, before, during and after set. And she never ceased to bless me for it.

The very first show I was invited for in May 2016 was in Ilorin. She gave me one of her dresses, a new dress. She gave me her shoe, clutch and wig. She gave me nails to fix; it was my first time ever fixing nails. They were the exact same nails she usually fixed. I was more than happy.

She warned me sternly to do light make up. She said I should be conscious of what I allow make-up artistes do on my face. She told me I was a fine girl and did not need too much make-up. She told me she would check the pictures, to show how serious she was about her instructions.

Mrs. Bello was always looking out for me and protective over me. There was a day someone saw us and said we looked alike. I was delighted at the compliment. “Oh! Toyosi is my daughter”, she said, and that was all I needed to hear. It was the icing on my cake.

My mum had fibroid and she had to do a surgery urgently. Mrs. Bello came through for me and paid for the surgery. I am not too good at expressing myself in person. I wrote her letters at different points and sent her text messages to thank her for being so kind to me.

She started teasing me, calling me, “Toyosi, oni letter”, meaning “Toyosi, the letter writer”. I treasured my relationship with her. I promised her I would always pray for her

and I still do.



17

TOYO BABY,
THE USHER

The plans my mum and I had were exaggerated. I was paid for the series, but the money I received could not do all my mum and I had fantasized about. In retrospect, I laugh at the things my mum had planned to do with the pay; we had big dreams.

I honestly did not know how big my role in Jenifa's Diary would be when I got the role. I thought I would be done after the first season. I was surprised when I was called back season after season. I got so busy. Jenifa's Diary practically became my life; I was almost always on set.

Even though I was already acting in the Jenifa's Diary TV series, whenever I got a call for ushering jobs, I took them. I needed the extra pay. I did decent ushering jobs. I had values I could not compromise. No club, bar or night ushering jobs. No jobs with indecent outfits. I did the regular wedding, and concert jobs. The pay for decent ushering jobs was as low as Five thousand Naira per job but for me it was worth it.

My mum was concerned for me, wondering why I would be on TV and still be going for such cheap jobs. I told her I had to do so. I could not sit at home when not on set doing nothing and I definitely was not going to sleep around. Dee did not like the idea either, but he understood my position.

There were times I went for ushering jobs and people recognised me. I smiled at them. At times, fellow ushers jeered at me, wondering what Toyo Baby was doing serving as an usher with them. I always found a way of laughing my way out of the teasing.

I was living with the Adiguns at this time. TiTiMi always gave us monthly stipends. Even if I asked for more before the next was due, I was sure they would give me, but I wanted to make more money myself.

But eventually, the ushering job started getting very embarrassing. There was a day I went all the way to Shagamu for an ushering job and after a long day, working, we were paid One thousand Naira. The Madame said she had not been paid and asked us to write down our account details. Except she plans to pay tomorrow, I got no alert.

At that point, I cried to God. I felt cheated. It was getting too humiliating. I cried to God and He made me know I should stop the ushering jobs. It was only God that could

stop me in spite of the embarrassment. I was asking Him to make sure the woman paid me, but He said I should stop ushering. I was initially upset with God, but before I left the place of prayer, He had comforted me.

After I had settled with God, I told Dee about my latest experience and he said he would never allow me go for another ushering job. That was the last of ushering for me.

As I pondered on what else to do when not on set, I got a call from Ms. Ojuolape to come help with costuming on a set. I went on that set as her assistant. The day we arrived the hotel we were lodged, I saw them watching Jenifa's Diary at the reception. It was too late to hide my face. The receptionist was so happy to see me. "Toyo Baby", she called out. She assumed I was one of the actors for the movie.

The crew folks were also surprised to see me. I refused to focus on what they could be thinking. I faced my work and did it without shame; carrying boxes, collecting costumes from actors, ironing the costumes and more. It was a lot of work.

My mum had told me that a real woman should not see work and ignore it; she should always give her best. Maama also said something similar. There was a day I was with Maama in the kitchen and it was obvious she was tired. I asked her how she was and she said she was fine. "Real women do not get tired", she said lightly. Maama explained to me, that day, that a woman had to be strong and diligent. Taking care of the home, nursing the children and attending to domestic issues generally required commitment. I was surrounded by hard-working women; I could not live lower than the standard they had set for me.

On that set, the person they had casted for a particular role did not show up, so the producer spoke with my boss, Ms. Ojuolape to let me take the role. She was kind enough to allow me take the role. So, I got that acting role without an audition and without signing a contract.

After acting for them, in about six scenes, the producer said she was not going to pay me. She said I had no contract with them and said she assumed I did it out of good will. I was upset and so was my boss. This woman then told me to bring my acting

certificate. She asked where I learnt acting from. She said she would pay me if I produced documents and certifications.

I felt used again. She had promised to pay before I agreed to act for her. I immediately went to a corner and reported her to my Father, God. He told me to hold my peace and see how the movie would turn out. I wiped my tears and did not talk about the money any more.

I thought what God meant was that the shoot would not continue, but it did continue. I had to go home before the shoot ended because I had to be back on Jenifa's Diary set. I heard later on that they concluded the movie shooting. I wondered if I heard God right. It was a cinema movie and she even used my face to publicise the movie even though she had insulted me, saying I was not a good actress.

I heard later on from a reliable source that the movie never sold out and it did not last in the cinemas. Much later, this same woman called me. I have no clue where she got my number from. She apologized to me, giving reasons for her mean behaviour and asked that I forgive her.

The truth is I had forgiven her all along. I only needed God to vindicate me and He did. So, that was the end of my costuming career as well.

When I got home and relayed my experiences to Dee and Maama, it did not go down well with them. Ms. Ojuolape could not also pay me fully because the producer did not pay her fully as well. The next thing Dee did surprised me. He paid me the balance I was owed. I was speechless.

I was in tears when he gave me the money. That was the end to petite jobs for me.

18

MY FRIENDS
AND I

I have been blessed with amazing friends in my life. When things were very tough for me, they were there for me. I dedicate this chapter to some of them; to honour their love and sacrifice.

Ernest Orunwese is such a sweetheart. He understands friendship. He came into my life, asking me to date him. I declined but he insisted we remain friends, and we have been ever since. He is a photographer. Back in the days when I lived with my mum, he would visit everyday, not caring how my house looked and the work my step-dad did.

He was a distant neighbour. Neighbours closer to us told him to stay away from my family, but he did not listen to them. I knew almost everything about him, even his salary. I was his banker; he saved a percentage of his salary with me and asked me never to give him no matter the pressure he mounted on me. At that time, he was saving to buy a camera.

Ernest normally passed through my house on his way to work and visited on his way back home. He ate meals in my house and on some occasions, we worshipped and prayed together.

He had an accident because of me. It was raining someday and I was not home. I asked him to please check on my mum. In the process of his journeying to my house, he had a terrible fall and had to be rushed to the hospital. People told him I was the cause of his accident. My mum told him to stop coming to the house as the gist went viral.

Ernest would not bulge. The moment he was up and moving, he was back to visiting us. I have seen very few friends as generous as Ernest. Here is toasting to your great heart, Ernest Orunwese.

Jennifer Osaro is another good friend of mine. She too was warned about being close to me as she lived not too far from my house, but she defied the suggestions of people. When I was learning how to make beads, she was working in the same compound. We got very close in those days.

I remember vividly how Sarah, Jennifer and I would talk endlessly in my house. One million Naira seemed like the world to us then. We prayed and fantasized about having

One million Naira. She was a major part of my teenage years until she left for school.

Innocent Abaleke was another good friend I had. We became friends in church. I never wanted him to know my house, but he cajoled a little girl from my former church to bring him. I thought that was going to be the end of our friendship, but it was not. He was quite older than I was. In fact, most of my friends, except high school friends were older than me. They usually said I talked, acted and dressed way older than I looked.

My friends became Innocent's friends. Many times he came to visit, he met Ernest at my house and we would have endless arguments on different issues; relevant and irrelevant. So, Ernest, Innocent, Jennifer, Sarah and Toyosi were my closest friends in my earlier years. Whenever they were not around, even my step-dad and mum missed them.

The good thing, for me then, about having Ernest and Innocent as friends was they were able to help their younger friends out financially. Whenever they got their salaries, they bought things for my girlfriends and I. They also bought things for my mum and step-dad. We, the younger friends, usually looked forward to the end of the month.

Innocent had a car, so we all went out on different occasions. It got to a time, Ernest and Innocent started giving my mum money for food. So, my mum cooked for everybody everyday; at times, even without them dropping money and we would keep their food in coolers until they were back from work. We were a big family.

As expected, when I joined MINE TM, I inducted them too, and they started joining me for Bible study. On some occasions, we all rode in Innocent's car to and fro, so we did not have to trek or spend on transportation.

God used them for me in those days. Without them, I wonder how lonely and sad my life would have been. They defied the odds of my financial status and chose to be my friends. We spent and were spent for each other.

At some point, Innocent started having feelings for me. He asked me out and I declined. He was very persistent, however. I never said yes to him, but we reached a point where the feelings were mutual.

There was still a fear in my heart, however. I was not going to do trial and error. I

believed, and still do, that if I was saying yes to a guy, I should have marriage in view. I could not play with my emotions or his either. The funny part was I could not put my fear into words when he asked me what I was afraid of.

My parents had failed in marriage. I did not want same to happen to me. I did not want to settle with someone that I had even if it was one single doubt about. Though I did not say yes to him, I was unofficially his girlfriend. People in church and in MINE TM assumed we were dating. Even our families, on both sides, assumed same.

A point came, however, when I had to define the relationship clearly. My doubts and fears were too strong to ignore. After praying, I made it official that I was not interested. When my mum heard of my decision, she was mad at me for leading him on. I was mad at myself too.

So, for a young person reading this, never be afraid to leave someone you do not totally love and do not make the mistake I made by dragging it so long. Do not be afraid that if you let him or her go, you would never get a better person. God loves you too much to give you anything less than the best; so do not settle for such. And please remember, it is your life here. Do not be tied to someone because you fear what people would say. When the chips are down, you would bear the joy or pain alone.

However, Innocent was a great friend. A great friend is not automatically your husband though. He had a good heart. He was there for my family through the years. When I was on set, he kept tab on my mum for me. He knew my brothers and sisters and was there for them too. He is happily in a relationship with someone else today and there are no hard feelings.

So, this chapter was a feeble attempt to appreciate my friends, though I know the words here do not do justice to how my heart feels towards them. Can you guess what they usually called my house in those days? I will tell you because that is what it was. We always laughed when they teased me with that name.

The rat estate!

19

FAME
HAS A
REAL FACE

Fame could make you lose yourself; make you forget who you are and make you live a lie. Fame makes you the book everyone wants to read and the person many want to associate with. All eyes are fixed on you and your life gets so much attention.

Bloggers and journalists monitor your moves and quote your words. With fame, you lose your right to being private. Fame, if not well managed, can make you a very lonely person. Fame attracts parasites to you; people who only want to milk you and use you.

Fame fades; where are the big stars of yesteryears? Fame is not fulfilling. Whatever feeling fame gives is only temporary. With fame, people see you as extra-ordinary and expect you to be perfect. And that is unrealistic, unfair and frustrating. You might not agree with me, but those who have tasted fame would not dispute my words.

Fame was the last thing on my mind when I started acting in the Jenifa's Diary TV Series. But I guess the package is intertwined; popularity comes with success.

It gets very depressing when people have expectations of you, just because you are a celebrity, that you cannot meet. Before, I could walk on my street and wear comfortable flip flops and nobody would notice. I could move from place to place and nobody would know I just passed. I could go to the market and the traders who treat me normal and not increase their prices.

Fame changed that. I never saw it coming. I will be forever grateful that Jesus found me before fame did. I wonder how I would have turned out otherwise.

I am also thankful for TiTiMi Adigun in my life. People misunderstand the relationship I have with them, thinking I have substituted my parents. I still have my biological parents that I love so much. However, Dee and Maama have come to be my second parents. They have been pillars for me in the world of fame where you need people to put your head in check.

Let me note here that being famous does not mean you are rich. I have had several people asking me for money, when at that particular time, I was sure they had more money than I did.

Up until months back, when I still used to jump buses, several people would stop me on the road, or in buses to take selfies with them. Sometimes, I had to beg them to wait until we were out of the bus to take the selfie. Conductors in buses expected me to leave my change with them the moment passengers started chanting “Toyo Baby!”

Some passengers expected me to pay their bus fares. Some called family members and asked me speak with them, saying, “I am in the same bus with Toyo Baby! Speak with her”. Some even dared to challenge me, saying, “Aunty Toyo, with all the money you’re making, why are you not in your own car?”.

Bike men that knew me sometimes charged me more. I lost my bargaining power with market women because they assumed I had a lot to spend. It got so frustrating at a time, because I had no car and had to walk sometimes. I had to wear dark glasses and a face cap everywhere I went. But even with that, they still recognised me. I hated leaving the house. I honestly cannot remember any place I have been to in Nigeria that no one recognised me.

There was a day I took a bike home and as we rode, the bike man said, “you are Toyosi”. I replied and said I was not; I was Juliana. It was not a lie, but it was not the truth either. The next time he picked me, he accused me of lying. I had to explain to him that my real name was Juliana. He laughed at me and insisted I was Toyosi.

There was a scary day too. I went to the market and touts blocked me. They started hailing me in Yoruba, “Eyan ti Funke Akindele, gbogbo Glo, gbogbo Jenifa Diary, e fun wa ni nkan”. They were asking me for money, associating me with Mrs. Bello and Glo, an organization she is an ambassador for. I was afraid and my heart was in my mouth.

It was at the butcher’s place. I was buying meat and I could smell alcohol oozing from their mouths. Some were smoking. They were serious; saying they would not let me go. I told them I had no money, but they did not believe me. One of them was puffing whatever he was smoking right in my face.

I wanted to call Dee at that time but I feared they would ask for my phone as a substitute. They were already creating a scene. At that point, a scripture dropped into my

mind. I heard, “I am with you always, even to the end of the world”.

Then, I started praying in tongues under my breathe. Almost immediately, one of them came to me and asked if I truly did not have money and I told him I did not. He then asked if they could take pictures with me and I obliged. That was how I took selfies with all of them, one after another. One of them even demanded that I smile with my teeth showing, so it would be obvious it was Toyo Baby.

That was how they let me go. There is immense power in prayer. There would be times no human would be able to help you. Why wait until then? Cultivate a lifestyle of prayer; it is so potent.

When I got home and told Dee, his words were, “I am proud of you”. I explained my fears to him and told him I did not want to go to the market again. What if they kidnap me? What if they hurt me? His reply both baffled and encouraged me.

He said, “you are an asset to the Kingdom of God. Angels are always with you. Jesus is looking after you”. He told me a time was coming soon that I would never need to step foot on the streets or in the market anymore, but until then, I should learn to relate well with traders, make an impact in my short conversations with them and make them know I am as human as they are. He asked me to enjoy that phase of my life while it lasted. He told me to “sow seeds” into the lives of the everyday people of Nigeria while I still had direct contact with them.

I went to my room, a little upset. That was the last thing I wanted to hear at that time. Sow seeds? On my bed, however, I turned it over and remembered where God picked me up from. It was something I could do.

So, from that day, I became friends with the tomato seller, frozen foods attendant, food stuff seller, vegetable ingredients seller and more. We started gisting when I went to the market and we took pictures together at different times.

With that, we became cordial and they started asking me questions from Jenifa’s Diary and I took my time to answer them, plenty laughing in between. Times when I went on other movie sets and came back home, the welcome I usually got from my

market friends was always encouraging. It felt good to know they missed me.

There was another time something happened that broke my heart. My mum called me and she was crying. She said people around her said emphatically that she could not be my mother. They could not believe that Toyo Baby's mum lived in such a humble abode. They laughed at her.

I was disheartened. I hate hearing my mum cry. I told her to cheer up. She would soon live in a large house. But I asked her to stop telling people she was my mum. I told her people had a false expectation of those they saw on TV. I encouraged her and made sure she smiled before we ended the call.

The same had happened with my dad at different times. People doubted he was dad. He had to call me and give the phone to his friends before they believed. On a particular day, I had to go visit him at work with my friend who has become my baby sister and doubles as my Personal Assistant, Funmilayo Adewusi. He was delighted to see me. We were under the sun and people kept stopping to take pictures with me.

At a point, he told me to go hide somewhere away from the sun. I told him I would not. I was proud of him, and if he worked under the sun, that was exactly where I was going to be. I was not going to allow fame make me disown or abandon my family.

Back to that day when my mum called. After the call, I started to cry. I poured my heart to God. Why would He make me famous and my parents cannot boast of me? I reminded God of how wealthy I would be if I was exposing my body or sleeping around; I had gotten offers already from influential people to sleep with them as at that time. Some called me from the blues and I wondered how they got my number. Even though I knew I was not a virgin anymore, I had committed to living sexually pure, to honour God.

I had a long spree complaining to God that day. I quoted scriptures and asked Him questions. I reminded Him of my commitment to Him and His work. I was just ranting. When the words failed, I prayed in the spirit. When I was done, I heard these words down deep in my spirit, "I will take care of you".

Times like that when I am down, God comforts me through His word. Other times, He uses Dee and Maama for me. At other times, He uses their children to brighten me up. They are very sensitive children. When they sense I am not okay, they consciously, and at times subconsciously, do things to make me laugh.

I remember what happened the day my phone was stolen. I got home and Esther asked to take pictures with my phone. I told her it had been stolen. Funmi, my PA, took both of them, David and Esther to the room and explained what happened to them. They prayed that my phone would be found.

I would not have known about the prayers if they had not asked me the next day after devotion if I had found my phone. I told them I had not found it. They then told me how with Funmi they told Jesus to help me get my phone.

I did not get the phone back, but Dee and Maama helped buy another one; the same brand and model I lost. When I explained that to the kids, they said “Thank You Jesus!”. I am all smiles as I write this. I love the three of them, that includes baby Samuel. God has used them for me countless times. Please make sure you have a community of people that have your back. You would need them as you go through life.

Back again to fame. Hope you don't mind my digressions though. When you get famous, human beings that seemingly forgot you existed would suddenly resurface in your life, most asking for money. Someone I knew years back just resurfaced and asked me for money to sponsor the opening of her fashion house. I explained in details how I did not have such money, but she did not believe; she asked instead that I loan her the money. She sent me a text afterwards insulting me and accusing me of being selfish.

There were times I wanted to ask if anyone wanted my fame and they would give me their money in return. The pressure on me was unbearable. Now I understand why some celebrities do some shameful things they are not proud of just to have money or possessions; the pressure to live up to the expectations of people is better explained than experienced. It is awful.

I remember attending a conference earlier this year, 2017. It was Lofty Heights

Conference, convened by Wale Tejumade. Frank Edwards was one of the main speakers. He talked about this same contrast between fame and wealth.

Frank talked about years back when his songs were already viral, yet he was walking the streets and jumping bikes. I laughed when he said there were times, he walked past cars and the drivers wound down, waving at himself excitedly, telling him they were currently listening to his songs. I could totally relate. I was encouraged to know mine too was a process that would soon end.

Someday last year, I met Mercy Aigbe through one of my friends that works with her, Tosin Odusanya. She was very pleasant and kind. She answered many of my questions and gave me some serious words of advice. I could tell she was talking from experience.

At that time, I had just been written out of the Jenifa's Diary TV series. I told her about my desire to change my social media account name from Toyo Baby to another name I wanted to push. I explained my fears and struggles.

After listening to me, she encouraged me on my stand as a Christian, asked me to stay out of scandals and told me to maintain good relationships in the industry. In response to my change of name, she told me sternly, "Do not confuse your fans. You worked hard for that name. You gave life to the Toyo Baby character. Ride on it!"

It was after my conversation with her, that I got more comfortable with people calling me Toyo Baby everywhere and I watched God open doors for me. That meeting with Mercy Aigbe was a great blessing to me.

20

MONEY,
MONEY,
AND MORE
MONEY!

My breakthrough eventually came after a long prayer session I had with my covenant sisters. Most of them have lived with TiTiMi Adigun at one time or the other; we are very close. We started as housemates, then became friends, then sisters, then covenant sisters who pray together. They are Funmilayo Adewusi, Amaka Eze-Nwosu, Tobi Olaniyi, Courageous Ugbe, Simi Aremo, Tosin Odusanya and Anthonia Amazige.

I am older than all of them except Tosin. I love and respect all of them deeply. They have a very intimate and deep relationship with God.

After service on a particular Sunday, we were talking as usual. At some point, I told them about a dream I had and that I sensed a need to pray. We were the only ones left in church that day; service had ended a long time ago. They agreed to pray with me.

We prayed for several hours non-stop. The interesting thing is that we started by interceding for our church, The Ark. Then we moved to our pastors, Pastor Timi Adigun, Pastor Titi Adigun and Pastor Yomi Rufus. We then prayed for MINE TM to which we all belonged.

Afterwards, we began to pray for each other, one after the other. We enjoyed spiritual gifts as we prayed. I kept writing down the words of knowledge that were coming. Many words came for me and I wrote them down; I wrote over two pages. And that was when my breakthrough began.

People began to invite me for shows, concerts and events within and outside Lagos. I made more money than I made acting. I was able to send some money to my parents. I was thankful to God for the provision.

Dee then called me and asked if I wanted to make more money. He challenged me to commit to giving more to God's work. And just when I did, more and bigger doors opened to me. My network increased; I started meeting people that mattered in Nigeria; those in the acting industry, in the business world, and in the church.

I got nominated for several awards and won many. There were some I had to decline because I was too busy to go to the awards ceremony. I started speaking on the same platforms with people I only saw on TV prior. Celebrities started calling me a celebrity.

People I was starstruck meeting were also starstruck meeting me. It was a miracle.

My fan base on Instagram picked momentum and I just stared in amazement at how fast it grew. The growth of my followers could only have been divine; no logical analysis could explain it. I started getting several emails, fans telling me how much of an inspiration I was. Mothers telling me I am a role model to their children. It just got sweeter by the day.

Shortly after again, I got an endorsement in millions. It was enough to buy me a car and help me sort out some bills. However, I had promised God that when I earned my first millions, I would give it out. I gave out the endorsement money as I had promised without telling family and friends; I did not want anyone talking me out of it.

God yet showed up. I got other movie contract deals where I was paid more than I ever had been before.

Right now, I have more acting offers than I can accept. I have so many speaking invites; I cannot honour even a tenth of them. I consciously give myself breaks so I can read books, pray and spend time with those that matter to me. I am now in the place where I determine what acting job to take, what speaking engagement to honour and even which endorsement to give a consideration. If that is not amazing, I do not know what is! God is faithful.

Now, you will never see me in a bus or on a bike. Those things are in my past; God has raised me up. I am not where I want to be yet, but I am no longer where I used to be. I still take strolls to the market though; I do not ever want to lose the feel of touching humanity in a close and personal way.

If you are in a place in your life where everything seems rough or slow or even backward, please do not lose hope. As far as you have God and you're doing what is right dutifully, your day of breakthrough will definitely come. Please do not give up just yet.

A friend of mine, Ifeanyi Orji, popularly known as Henrisoul, once told me that God does not take people up, He grows people up so that when they get up they would have learnt enough to handle the promotion well.

When he said that, I noted it. So, I hope you are noting the things you're reading in this book. Please surround yourself with good people; people who will encourage you and pray with you as you go through the processes of your life.

And guess what? Your money is on its way. Money, money and more money!

21

STOP TALKING
LIKE YOU
KNOW ME

Like I said in the previous chapter, I look at my followership on social media and all I see is the hand of God. I have had colleagues in the industry asking if I bought followers on Instagram. I have even had well meaning friends asking me to reduce how much I talk about God on social media, saying it would reduce my followers and/or make producers and directors ignore me. But in retrospect, I think it did the opposite.

I just could not imagine posting a picture without a message. Social media is “social” and “funky” enough; I was not going to blend with the norm. I decided to brand my page and make it a place people could find inspiration. I did not mind losing jobs or followers because I was talking about Jesus or inspiring people.

When I told Dee about people’s comments, he reminded me that it was my page. Other celebrities use their pages to promote values and things important to them. He said I should do same. I should define my page and know what I want to do with it. He reminded me of how some public figures post nude or almost nude pictures on their pages; flaunting their time in clubs and parties. He told me I had a choice to make.

I promised myself to stick with representing God and everything good and decent on my page. The moment I decided to go all out to inspire and bless people with my page, the numbers on my page started soaring. I would wake up every day to see that over two thousand people had followed me in the past twenty-four hours.

July 1st, 2017, I hit one million followers on Instagram. Please note that as of May 2016, about the time when I was written off Jenifa’s Diary TV series, I did not have up to ten thousand followers.

I remember a day I went for an interview and a man met me in the studio. He said his wife was a big fan. He asked to take a selfie with me. After I agreed to a picture, he asked if it was not asking too much for me to speak with his wife. I said it was okay.

His wife was so excited speaking with me. She asked why I had not posted anything on Instagram in the past two days. I was shocked. She said she had been checking my page for my next post and had not seen anything in two days. She actually told me the caption of my last post. Up until my conversation with her, I did not know how much of

an audience I had.

She is the first of many people that have made similar comments. It has made me realise the damage those with negative messages are wrecking in people's lives. I hence proposed to take my posting more seriously.

However, I saw the other side of social media when I posted about World Virginity Day. I posted a picture and a video wishing people a happy Virginity Day, telling them sexual purity was the new cool.

I never mentioned I was a virgin in either posts. I only talked about virginity and sexual purity. The picture and video went viral instantly. That was in June 2016, when I barely had over ten thousand followers. Different bloggers reposted it. Hah! I read comments. I was bitter. I was broken. I cried so much that I had a terrible headache. I could not sleep.

Dee kept praying for me. My folks in church, and in the ministry at large, prayed for me. People in the ministry, MINE TM, called to encourage me. Chimenem Anayo, especially, took it up personally to defend me and raise supporters for me on Nairaland, where my name was being ripped apart.

I was afraid. I could not go online for days. I could not even go out. Dee kept telling me to find strength in God, telling me to hide myself in God. "These people do not know you", he kept telling me.

The reason why it hurt so much and broke my heart was because a lot of people kept saying, "stop throwing your virginity in our faces". I never said I was virgin, so I was being persecuted for what I was not. And my people in church too were consoling me for what I was not.

As at that time, Dee, Maama, my biological sisters, covenant sisters and members of the ministry did not know about my past, because I had not told them yet. So, both the words that attacked me and the words that defended me pierced at my heart. I cried myself to sleep on those days. I had not learnt to ignore comments at that time; I went back to read the comments over and again, and they broke me even more.

Eventually, for the attack part, God comforted me with His word in Matthew 5:11-12. God's word is life. It transcends the letters. It spoke life into me and I felt energised again. I needed that encouragement because I was already asking myself why I put myself in such a tight spot.

Can I tell you why I am so committed to the sexual purity message?

Years ago, at one of our Bible studies in MINE TM, while Wunmi Sodimu was leading worship, the Holy Spirit gave a word of knowledge. "I would open a door for you in the entertainment industry. When you get there, do not forget to talk about Me and sexual purity."

When that word came, I tried to ignore it, but deep within me, I knew God was talking to me. At that time, I was not fully into acting; I was more into singing. I felt unworthy of such a call because I knew where I had been and what I had done.

I cried about it. In the process, I remembered people like Joyce Meyer; people who God gave a message out of their mess. I finally received the word by faith and promised God that if He indeed did what He promised, I would fulfil my part.

So, when I became famous on the Jenifa's Diary series, I knew I had a commitment to fulfil. That is why I have been advocating the cause and I will not stop.

Back to June 2016, I eventually healed from the hurts and got back online. My first post on Instagram after I got back was quite lengthy. It started something like this:

"So, World VirginitY Day 2016 was awesome. It was a beautiful experience in God's presence. I so look forward to World VirginitY Day 2017..." It was really lengthy, but I was calm and poised and explained again that we meant to victimise or intimidate no one. The emphasis was on the upcoming generation.

As expected, some folks started attacking me again. Some people just do not read before commenting; so sad! What I did this time when I read the comments was to go to the profiles of those who were attacking me. I liked some of their pictures; that was my way of offering them forgiveness. Do you know what followed? Many of them then sent me direct messages, thanking me for liking their pictures and apologised for their nasty

comments.

Some screen-grabbed their notification page that showed I liked their pictures and posted it for their friends to see. Some others did not respond at all. But most precious to me were two people who after I liked their pictures sent me direct messages and confided in me about their past. It made me know they were only lashing at me out of their pain.

One of these two precious souls was a lady in an abusive relationship. Her boyfriend was abusing her sexually, verbally and physically. With God's help and wisdom, I was able to walk her through the break up.

The other one was a more critical case. She had been raped at ten. She was into drugs and she slept around indiscriminately. God used me for her, but her healing and transformation took a longer time.

I have learnt and I am still learning how to handle social media better. It has its pros and cons. I am committed to blessing lives through my accounts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and I pray for more grace to handle the critical and bitter people who hide behind their keyboards and just malign and insult people, saying things they know absolutely nothing about.

You know something I discovered on Instagram? The people who say nasty things either have no or few posts or have negligible followers. Many times, they even have private accounts. I have come to discover they are lonely people, seeking attention.

Most liberating for me was the knowledge that these people do not know me. They would leave my page after posting their nasty comments and go post nasty things on another person's account. I decided I would not take their comments to heart anymore. I would not allow them pour of their sour hearts into mine.

I have come to find my ultimate acceptance in God. And thankfully, I have some true and loyal fans who have come to know, accept, and love the real Juliana Olayode. Are you one of them? I would be more than delighted that you are!

22

CONFESSION
TIME

There comes a time in our lives when and where we are just tired of bottling things up. There is a time to let go or we stand a chance of exploding. Secrets make us sick.

For years, I hid my past from Dee and Maama and from my very close friends. It could be very disheartening when people close to you think they know you and speak so highly of you everywhere without actually knowing the true you.

I watched Dee, who is also my pastor and mentor, use me as case study several times when preaching. He would tell the adolescents or undergraduates he was talking to that Toyo Baby, their celebrity crush, was a virgin and keeping herself sexually pure until marriage. Yes, I was committed to sexual purity, but I was no virgin.

He would look at me, with the pride of a dad and mentor as he mentioned my name. The congregation he was addressing would applaud. I was miserable. I tried several times to tell him, but I just could not. The times I attempted to, I would say, "I have something to tell you". When he asked what it was, I would say something else.

This was someone who God had used for me in more ways than I could ever recount. I hated the fact that I was not totally honest with him and his family. I was scared of his reaction. Would he stop being proud of me? Would he stop me from following him for ministrations? Would he ask his children to stay away from me? Would he ask me to confess before the church? I was tormented by fear.

Many times, we are afraid to confess things to people we love, afraid to hurt them but in actual fact, it is our withholding the truth that hurts more.

I wrote Dee a letter, confessing everything to him, but I never gave him. I ended up tearing it. I would type long confessions on Whatsapp and end up deleting them. I would record voice notes and delete afterwards. I even rehearsed my confession speech several times in front of the mirror, but the moment I stepped out of my room, my courage failed me.

I had told him bits of the truth earlier about being in love with my music teacher when I was younger but I left out the important details. I had thought before then that the only person I owed the truth was my husband but this was different. I lost my peace. I

assumed it was because he had become a father to me; a father who bragged about his daughter but his bragging was based on falsehood. I felt like I had betrayed his trust. I could not even imagine how Maama would feel; I decided not to think much about that.

One day, long after, when I was on a long stay with my elder sister, Adetutu, away from my home with TiTiMi, I decided to face my fears. I could not sleep that night. I was ready to face whatever the consequences were.

I typed a very lengthy message to Dee, explaining everything. As I typed, I wept profusely. I concluded I had lost my relationship with him and his family. I was sure he would never trust me again, he would never forgive me and would always take me as a liar.

He called me immediately after reading my epistle, but I did not pick. I could not pick. I dreaded waking up the next morning. I put my phone in flight mode and cried through the night. When my sister came in to check me, I pretended to be praying.

The next day was a Sunday. I did not go to church. Nothing ever stopped me from going to church, but this time, shame did. I felt like the proverbial prodigal son; I could not face my adopted dad.

I managed to sleep that night, but I had a bad dream. In the dream, people at a gathering were yelling at me. I woke up crying. My brother, Samson, was around. He knew something was wrong, but I did not tell anybody what the problem was. He chose to stay home with me that Sunday. I kept crying, sighing and shivering. Samson at some point started crying and praying silently for me.

Sometime about noon, we heard a knock and Samson went to get the door. It was Dee. Pastor Timi Adigun had come to my sister's house; he came with my PA, Funmi Adewusi and my friend, Sarah David.

When I heard his voice, my fear doubled. What would he say? Why did he come? Why did he come with my friends? I saw both fear and concern in the eyes of my friends when they came into the room and saw the state I was in. They asked me questions, but all I could do was cry. Samson explained all my drama through the night to them. They tried to get me to talk, but I could not.

Funmi stepped out at some point and came back to tell me Dee wanted to see me. I wrapped my arms around myself and cried the more, begging them not to make me go out to see him. Just then, he called out to me from the sitting room. At that, I knew I needed to go out; I could not disobey him.

When I found my way out of the room, I managed to greet him. He asked why I was not in church and I said I was sorry. He reminded me of a rehearsal I was to be at; I was preparing for a stage play at that time. He insisted I must attend. The rehearsal was later that day. He also reminded me of the get-together he was having with his proteges at Lekki that afternoon. He prayed with me and left.

I was amazed he spoke with me as if he had not read my message. I really wanted to be at the get-together. I knew Maama must have planned something special. They were always blessing people. I felt the other proteges were the faithful ones; I did not deserve to be a part of the fun. I made up my mind I would go for the rehearsal to honour his instruction, but I would not go for the proteges' time out.

I went for the rehearsal and did my best. As a professional actress, I have learnt to put my personal issues aside, get into character and do my job excellently. When I was done, I went back to my sister's place. I knew Dee was going to call to ask how the rehearsal was. He did.

We had a very long conversation on the phone. It was an emotional conversation. He had told Maama about my message already. Maama felt his pain; she usually called me her husband's first born. On the phone that day, he offered me grace and told me to come home. I was afraid to go home, but I did.

When I got home, the first person I went to was Maama. I knelt before her and wept on her laps. She kept patting my back and telling me to stop crying. My Maama, Pastor Titi Adigun, is an angel. She is so full of grace and love. I am blessed to have been adopted by her.

Dee was watching on. When I was done with Maama, still on my knees, they both prayed for me. Afterwards, they hugged me and welcomed me back home. Neither of

them ever mentioned my confession to anybody. My secrets were safe with them. Nothing changed in my relationship with them. I was amazed at that. But more importantly, I was finally light and free.

However, the fact that I had confessed to TiTiMi Adigun did not mean the world now knew. People had assumed I was a virgin. I had never said I was but I had never corrected their assumptions either. So, I was still in that fix.

Shortly after my confession, *Ebony Life TV* called me for an interview. I went and for the first time in my several interviews, I was asked point blank if I was a virgin. I tried to evade the question, but my interviewer was not having it. She demanded for a yes or no. I did not see the question coming and I lied. I said, "Yes, I am a virgin".

Immediately the interview was over, I hurried to the bathroom in the studio and cried. I felt terrible for lying and told God I was sorry. I called Dee on my way home and confessed my wrong. I explained further when I got home.

The next thing he said shocked me. He said, "Call her and confess the truth. Ask for a rescheduling of the interview; do it again and undo your mistake."

I was not going to do that. I felt it was my secret and the whole world need not know about it. I was upset with myself, however, for answering her. I could have insisted I could not tell. So, I proposed never to answer such again. Easier said than done, right?

Shortly after, I was on another TV interview, *Crux Of The Matter*, with Elsie. I was invited to talk for sexual purity while the other guest spoke against. In the process of the discussion, around the time when it was heated, I was asked out of the blues again if I was a virgin. And before I knew it, I heard myself lying again. I was mad at myself.

I was on another TV interview that trended for a while. It was *On The Couch*, with Lady Ariyike. I talked about sexual purity, but thankfully I was not asked if I was virgin. After that one, I decided to stop interviews altogether. I was tired of lying or having to dread lying if I was asked straight up.

23

REBIRTH

The breakthrough I needed to be free from my fears finally came. Dee was speaking with me and my PA about my career. He told me to write my autobiography. It sounded like a good idea, but I knew I was not going to do it. I put up a face like I would. I could not imagine telling the world about my life; the good, bad and ugly. Months passed after he told me and I did nothing. He did not force me.

Eventually, God broke through to me during communion time in church and told me to write this book; the book you are reading right now. While I was warming towards starting, I had an encounter. I was reading a book and I dozed off. Someone tapped me and I heard, “they are waiting for your book”.

I have discovered that many of us delay in our obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God. Sometimes we know it is the right thing to do, but we do not want to do it. We want what we want, not what God wants, but we often forget that God knows better than we do.

I finished writing the first draft of this book some days to my birthday this year. I clocked twenty-two (22) on Wednesday, the 7th of June, 2017. So, you can easily deduce that I was born Wednesday, the 7th of June, 1995. Now, I would assume this is the most shocking piece of information in this book. I have found out that the top question people are asking Google about Juliana Olayode, is her age. Now, you know.

The past twenty-two years of my life have been a journey. I have taken you through the summary of the journey. While writing this book, I cried, I smiled, I laughed and I forgave.

I sincerely hope reading this book met you at some point or the other in your life. You do not have control over the things that happen to you in life, but it is your choice how you respond to them. God allows you to go through some things which you get to understand much later.

Please stop seeing your challenges as the end of life; seek opportunities in them. Never allow your background or financial status, presently, define your future. Remember, Juliana hawked, begged and starved in the earlier days of her life but here she

is today.

Do not allow your educational qualifications or pedigree hamper you; Juliana has not been to a tertiary institution yet. Do not even let your age stop you. I am as young as it gets. Rise up and take life by storm. And you do not have to sleep around or lose your soul to become great.

You cannot have what you do not see however. What picture of greatness do you have in your mind's eye. Think big. Dare to dream! Choose to walk on water! Dare the impossible. You will never know where you will succeed if you never try.

It is okay to be afraid, but like Joyce Meyer would say, "Do it afraid!" Take the risk when you have to no matter what people think. When you need a protective shield, you don't have to look too far. God is right there with you. Hide in Him.

As I conclude this adventure, I feel so much peace within me. Only the truth can set you free. Lies or deception will forever keep you bound. You would always need to remember your lies or tell more lies to cover up the first.

Please tell the truth to that person you know you owe it to. Do so today. The truth may hurt that person for a while, but if the person truly loves you, healing will follow. The truth cannot be hid forever; the earlier it is said, the better.

My last words to you would be, "Believe in Jesus. Life is worth living with Him by your side."

This has been my story of hope, of change and of transformation; my rebirth! Thank you for reading.

Rebirth is a story of thriving in the midst of hardship. It is rightly subtitled, from Grass to Grace. Juliana Olayode tells of the many hurdles she had to scale and the obstacles she had to surmount in becoming one of the most sought after actresses in Nollywood.

From hawking on the streets to contending with sexually abusive neighbours to dropping out of school to failing at several auditions, she fought for relevance.

This book is one that resonates with everyone that seeks to be more; dissatisfied with being ordinary. Juliana did not hold back in sharing her failures, struggles, fears and accomplishments in this riveting telling of her life's journey.

It is a book that not only gives hope, but also fuels the hope it gives. Reading this book would definitely be the beginning of your own rebirth.

Your greatness beckons on you!

Juliana Olayode is a multiple-award winning Nigerian Actress. She rose to stardom via her exquisite delivery of the character Toyo Baby on the Jenifa's Diary TV Series. She has won the hearts of millions across the world and has become an inspiration to just as many.

Juliana is a highly sought after inspirational speaker, brand endorser and comper. She is also a prolific writer and blogger.

Juliana Olayode is passionate about the rebuilding of her homeland, Nigeria and channels that passion into reaching the younger generation, especially teenage girls. Juliana is a Christian and is committed to making Jesus known. She resides in Lagos, Nigeria.

