

BLOOD IN OUR DELTA

and other SHORT STORIES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My gratitude goes to God Almighty for his deposition of wisdom, knowledge and understanding in me, sufficient enough to put this literary piece together. You forever reign.

I also want to thank my family for their relentless love, kindness and prayers, for your prayers give me strength and faith.

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Lastly, I will like to extend my praise to the Nigerian society for inspiring me so deeply every day and challenging me to do better even as our society evolves. Thank you all.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this literary piece to God Almighty as the concept of this book can only be by his making. His conscience of humanity that he has deposited in me made me see the affliction of others and be moved by it.

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ANNA'S SHADE OF PURPLE

My name is Anna Sagbama; I am from Esan West, Edo state, Nigeria. I am the only child and daughter of Mrs. Adesuwa Ebon, an ardent member of the Christian Mothers Association (CMA) of the Saint Mathew's Catholic Church and the only widow of Mr. Ebon, a deceased chief of the village's cabinet.

Before long ago, I had just completed my West African Certificate Examination (WAEC). A generous donation was gifted to me by the Legion of Mary (a religious Catholic group) which I belong to. My mother and I were deprived by my father's brothers of any inheritance my father left behind, so the donation was all we had to live on at that time.

With high hopes and dreams, what is more, being only Eighteen years old, I ambitiously aspired to become a certified nurse; for it was all I dreamed of.

My joy knew no bounds when my mother informed me that my long-travelled auntie, my mother's kid sister who had left for Italy since she was twenty years old would be returning as the week ends. My mother had received a call from her a night before in which she apologized for her indifference towards my mother all the years past hence coming to Esan to make amends.

She was to arrive on a Saturday, by dusk to be exact. I was so excited and started imagining what she would look like, for my mother had told me of her beauty and class. I also hoped she would be able to help me achieve my dreams of becoming a certified nurse. I knew she had money, in my mind, anyone who had travelled overseas was a millionaire, I know right!

As Saturday approached, my mother asked me to wash the bedsheets in the visitor's room and clean every dust available on any surface in our house, for she would be coming to inspect. Before long, my mother came back from the market with every imaginable food stuff and ingredient and quickly went into the visitor's room to inspect it.

In her usual manner, she re-arranged the room and said I had not done enough. "Your auntie is now an Oyinbo woman (a Nigerian pidgin slang used to refer to Caucasians and light-skinned Nigerians) and there is no dust at all in the white man's land o!".

I assisted her in dressing the room to perfection, in our own humble way the room was fit for a Queen and so was every nook and corner of the house for I had been at work since morning and later assisted by Mama.

My mother dashed to the kitchen to prepare different soups, especially the Esan people's favourite black soup. She finally agreed to take her rest after the sun had set.

However, she had asked me yet again to sweep the entire yard. At this time, I had become so frustrated and tired and wished my auntie would stay back in Italy so my mother can regain her sanity. Dusk came and my auntie Caroline showed up.

My mother shouted and alerted the whole community, literally, when my auntie showed up in a taxi. As a result of her loud cheer, people who recognized my auntie also rushed to welcome her. My mother was overjoyed.

I had never seen my mother treat a relative so nice my entire life, for she was referred to as a holy witch, I mean to say, people saw her as highly religious but totally Godless. Aww, very funny story for another day. The celebration occurred, visitors were entertained and had all found their square root to their various homes.

My mother then took my Auntie to her room which only consisted of a bed, a wooden chair and two big windows. My auntie retired to her bed and so did we.

That night, I slept like a log of wood; I was so tired. The next day I was awakened by a hot slap from my mother. "Go to the parlour, your auntie is calling you," she said. I walked to the parlour with my hair scattered and my eyes puffy.

“Good morning my dear. Sorry to wake you up so early this morning.” Now fully awake, I replied. “No auntie, anything for you.” She smiled and asked me to sit down. “Do you like these clothes?” she asked. I stared at them; I had never seen any fabric that beautiful in Esan. “Yes auntie”, I replied. She replied further saying they were all mine.

I immediately knelt to thank her as my mother watched and smiled. She asked me a lot about myself and I told her of my plans to become a certified nurse. She was impressed that a young woman like me had a great vision.

I dropped to the ground in tears when she asked me if I would love to follow her back to Italy. Before I could utter a word, my joy was cut short when my mother responded “No, Caro”. I was hurt and disappointed that my mother did not want me to have a better life.

I tried to argue with her but she asked me out of the parlour. In disappointment, I packed my newly acquired clothing to my room and immediately dropped to the floor and wept. Oh, how I wept.

I heard my mother and my auntie converse and immediately went to hide behind the curtains of the corridor to hear exactly what they were talking about. It was like a judge and a victim exchanging words. My mother bombarded her with all sorts of questions.

From the conversation, I could faintly pick a few words; my auntie complained about not being able to bear a child and how the doctor found a cyst in her womb, how she had her womb evacuated and how she had finally given up on having children.

She also said she is married to an Italian man who didn’t care about having a baby and loved her like no other. She told my mother that she would love to make amends with her for abandoning her in Esan by taking me to Italy to have a better life.

Tired of snooping, I went to the church for it was time to go and clean it for tomorrow’s Mass and the Legion of Mary was in charge of sanitation for the week, which I was part of.

I cleaned the church like never before with one prayer in my heart that my mother would accept my auntie's offer of a better opportunity abroad for me. After so much cleaning, the church was sparkling and I finally left for home.

That day, every step I took was counted, for it was either going to be a countdown to my dreams coming through or a countdown to it being shattered by my mother. Immediately I got home, I noticed that the tension was gone and that my mother and auntie were busy giggling and laughing.

I summoned courage and greeted them. "You are welcome my dear girl", my auntie said. Now go and pack your luggage for we will be leaving for Italy on Monday", she added. I jumped on my mother's laps, hugging her and telling her how much I love her and that I would buy her a mansion when I got to Italy.

She became emotional and said, "When you get to Italy, be a good girl and don't bring disgrace to this family." "Okay Mama", I replied. I was so filled with joy. I prepared lunch and rushed to the stream to inform all my friends, I knew they would be there washing their clothing or fetching water.

I informed them and of course some of them were jealous, and some even said that my auntie wanted to take me with her for prostitution, for it was the trending situation in Edo state at the time.

I soon left the atmosphere of both jealous and genuine happy friends to go and begin my packing. By midnight, I was almost through. I decided to heed to nature as I fell flat on the remaining heap of clothes on my bed waiting to be folded.

The night never flew by so quickly. As usual I was awakened by a hot slap from my mother. She asked me to wake up, else, we would be late for mass.

I gave myself a rush bath and followed my mother and auntie to church. We were so late that we had to take a bike to the church which was a walkable distance. I never knew the power of gossip until the mass was over. Almost everyone came to me and started congratulating and asking me to promise never to forget them as I travelled.

The one which made me laugh was Lisa, the village headmaster's daughter who, before now, never spoke to me as she thought I was inferior. She came and hugged me tightly, telling me never to forget her as I travelled. Flabbergasted, I gave a shallow hug.

That Sunday was so busy for me. I spent time re-arranging the house for my mother, arranging my luggage and consoling my mother in between. My auntie, on the other hand, spent time explaining our travel itinerary to my mother.

When it was time to sleep, my mother came to my room to give me her motherly advice and pray for me. She also advised me to marry a white man who could love me unconditionally like my auntie and remove the family permanently from poverty.

What an advice, right?

That night, she went further to pass the night in my room as she held me tight crying almost all through. Time was so hard on her as morning came by so quickly.

I had my bath early enough and a taxi came to take us straight to the Benin airport from Esan. I watched my mother weep through the rear windshield as our vehicle pulled up. I was consoled by auntie as she promised me a better life and promised to also bring Mama to Italy soon.

I was scared of flights so I asked my mother to make me a hot plate of Okpa (an Eastern Nigerian delicacy) and Pap before we left so I could sleep all through the flight. Before afternoon, we were at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos. We boarded a taxi to a hotel on the Island owned by her husband's friend, an expatriate in Nigeria.

The next morning, my auntie and I went straight to the passport office and after two days I was given my passport. We left and came straight to the nation's capital Abuja, and I was granted a visa. Finally, after many protocols, it was legal for me to travel abroad.

The next Monday, we boarded the Air France plane straight to Rome. After some long hours and turbulence, we finally arrived Rome. We arrived to a cheering welcome from auntie Caro's husband. He gave her a warm hug as his driver helped us with our luggage.

"That's my elder sister's only child", she said pointing at me. "You are welcome" he said as he stretched and gave me a peck on my chin. I was shocked my auntie didn't mind so I didn't too, it was strange though because that wasn't our culture at all.

We entered his vehicle and drove home to a place called San Lorenzo's District. I felt like I was in a palace when the gates flung open on its own by just the press of a button. I even felt more special when we pulled over at the front of the house and the maids in uniform came and collected our luggage. The house was so beautiful and had an internal swimming pool by its corridor.

The marbles were beautiful and the chandelier in the sitting room looked fanciful. My auntie asked one of the maids to take me to my room. As I walked in, I could swear that the king of my village had never slept on such wealth. Its closet alone was as big as my sitting room back in the village.

The maid taught me how to use the shower and also showed me where to keep my things. I went immediately to have my bath for my auntie asked me to hurry so I could have dinner.

That night was such a beautiful night. I had my dinner and had the best sleep of my life. The next morning, I was awakened by the maid who knocked on my door quietly to tell me breakfast was ready and asked for my dirty clothing. That moment it felt so real Mama's slap wasn't there to wake me up any more.

That week was spent amazingly, my auntie's husband took his time to personally drive us round the beautiful and historic sites of Rome. We were one little cute family. On Sunday, for the first time, I saw the pope.

The mass we attended was officiated by His Holiness, Pope John Paul. A popular reverend father who belonged to that parish had passed away and so he came for the thanksgiving.

My first week in Italy was an experience to never forget. I had eaten all exquisite meals, drank all exquisite drinks, visited all exquisite places and purchased all exquisite items, all thanks to my auntie and her generous husband. Sometimes I felt homesick and asked after my mother. My auntie promised to call her for she missed her too.

The next Monday, my auntie drove me to Carlow University, Rome, to register as a nursing student. I had all my documents with me and this made the process very easy. I was happy and never felt more blessed. I missed my mother at times but I was relaxed because my auntie had already promised to give her a call. I felt Italy was too far from Nigeria and so the distance affected the speed of communication.

October finally came and I was taken on another shopping spree to get all I will be needing for my resumption. As I resumed, I was the only black girl in my class but no one could bully me for I always showed up looking really put together, some thought I was a princess from Africa.

My auntie also had one of the family drivers drop me off at school every day for she said she wouldn't want to miss me too much which would happen if I lived in the hostel.

I felt my auntie showed me so much love because she did not have a child of her own.

By the second semester of my second year, I had visited three countries in Europe for our departmental excursions, all paid for by my auntie's generous husband. My auntie was a housewife; she was not allowed to work by her husband.

Despite all these enjoyments, I was so worried for I hadn't heard from my mother. Each time I confronted my auntie, she would tell me that it was mama's decision not to speak to me so I wouldn't feel home sick. At a point I felt neglected by my own mother and decided to fall back on my auntie and her generous husband's love.

On the 9th of May, the year 2002, it was 3am; I had woken up after we had celebrated my auntie's husband's birthday. I felt so weak and experienced pain around my private part, the pain even got worse as I tried to stand up from my bed.

This wasn't my period for I had seen it two weeks ago, neither my ovulation for I had just finished a few days back. This pain was so excruciating and to make matters worse, I had blood stains all over my undergarment.

Immediately the sun came up I told my auntie and she gave me some pain reliever. I felt relieved but knew something was wrong, I felt something left me. Each time I complained to my auntie about my feelings, she would immediately term it that I was home-sick and therefore implored me to face my studies so I could make my mother and herself proud.

I was almost forgetting what had happened to me few weeks back until I woke up on the 16th of May, 2002, with the same pain. This time the pain was mild, but it was similar to the pain I had felt the first time.

Being a young adult, I didn't bother to report to my auntie, I just took the medications she gave me in the prior incident. Everything was put behind me, but something soon occurred, I had missed my period.

Reporting to my auntie, she said I should let things be, that maybe it was because of the pain and mood swings I had suffered at the beginning of the month. She also told me that it was a normal occurrence to every woman. That made me as calm as a dove. It wasn't unusual anyway, I said to myself.

Things went out of hand a few days later, I threw up on the dining table. Immediately, my auntie and her husband rushed me to the hospital and I was confirmed pregnant. My auntie was disappointed, she shouted “What have you done, Anna?”.

I was dumb-founded, I thought it was a joke, I couldn’t cry, I couldn’t laugh, all I did was watch the drama my auntie displayed at the hospital.

My auntie asked me series of questions but I couldn’t answer any. She gave me a slap, thinking that would wake me up, as if I was asleep. I screamed, “Auntie, I swear I’m not pregnant”.

The doctor advised that she take me home and allow me to have a good rest for I was now fragile. My auntie, disappointed, didn’t talk to me for two days. I felt like a failure, I felt I had thrown stone on the glass house which gave me shelter. She was sad, I was mad, her husband was indifferent.

After a while, my auntie walked up to me and told me that she would be there for me all through, that I needed not to say who the father of my child was if I didn’t feel like. Each time I tried to defend myself, she would say, “It’s alright, I understand”.

I tried to make her understand that she knew nothing about what I was passing through, but I was always told to keep quiet. Auntie Caro treated me like an egg that must not break, she had a driver and a maid follow me to school every day, she attended all my antenatal, I was given special treatment by all my lecturers due to my auntie’s influence.

She bought me pregnancy books and even gave me massages when due and would always come to my room every night to say a prayer. I won’t lie, in the midst of this entire trauma, I felt comforted.

Nine months flew by so fast, and I had added thirty-seven pounds due to the healthy and nutritious diet I was on. The day finally came and I gave birth to a bouncing baby boy, named Obaseki and Noah by my auntie and her husband respectively.

That day was a joyous one, I was unnecessarily pampered by my auntie. The reverse would have been the case if this happened in Esan. That wasn't the surprise anyway, the surprise was the fact that my baby's hair was blonde.

It was a mystery I needed to unravel for I had never slept with any man, talk less of a white man. My auntie took care of me and my child regardless and made sure I breastfed him regularly. The only time my auntie yelled at me was when I did something wrong concerning the baby.

Again, I felt her love was coming from the fact that she did not have a child.

On the 19th of January, 2003, something strange happened. I had closed from lectures unusually early so I used that opportunity to rush home for I was already missing my Obaseki. As I got home, I bumped into something very mysterious. Auntie Caro was breastfeeding my child.

She removed his mouth from her nipples as soon as she saw me. I immediately made the situation less awkward, by saying "Obaseki, you can't wait for mummy that you had to disturb grandma". She felt relaxed and laughed it off too. I was shocked in my heart, to tell you the truth.

This made me more curious, more alarmed of what was going on around me. I made it a point of duty to take Obaseki along with me to school anytime I had lectures, this was initially questioned by my auntie but she soon gave in.

The first time I took Obaseki to school, she called me every minute to know how he was doing and if I had breastfed him. Subsequent times, I caught the servant who accompanied us spying on my activities, this made me more alarmed.

The fact that auntie Caro suddenly demanded that Obaseki slept in her room made me really paranoid. I had to be quiet and not misbehave because auntie Caro was the only relative I had in Italy.

The 19th of March, 2003, was the day I got a hand on all that was happening to me. I had gone to get some hot water from the water dispenser in the kitchen, as I walked closer to the kitchen, I overheard my auntie's voice, and I decided to slow down. As I paid more attention, I realized that she was speaking with the husband.

I heard him say, "It's too early, she is still breastfeeding." "Let's wait a little longer, say three months", she replied her husband. "But honey, I will like us to have another baby," and quickly, she continued. "I have even gotten the sedatives to induce her to sleep, two is a fair share you know, and then I promise you by then she will be gone for good."

At the time, I was already on the floor with tears flowing down my eyes. I stopped sobbing in order to hear their entire conversation. "Honey I can't, this one child is enough, I hate sleeping with her, she is too young, and besides she smells funny too," said the husband. They both laughed, then she intensified, "Sweetheart, just one more and she will be gone for good, I promise."

Shocked and now very teary, I rushed into the kitchen and said: "Auntie, why? What have I done to deserve this? Is this why you have been so nice to me? Was this why you were so motherly to Obaseki?" She immediately played dumb and said, "What do you mean?" I replied her angrily, I made her understand that I had been listening all along, that I now know I was drugged and raped by her husband. I made her understand that my long curious question was finally answered.

"Auntie, so there has been a big joke all along and it has always been on me? Auntie, why? why? What have I done to deserve this from you? I took you as my mother." I said sobbing.

Now, my auntie who could do no wrong in my eyes, who always acted like a saint suddenly screamed. "That's enough my friend. Is there anything new underneath the sun?" I trembled.

Mr Carrizo, auntie's husband, lit a Cuban cigarette and began to smoke it. "Tell your mother to give me back my womb." My auntie said. Surprised, I stopped crying. "Tell her," she began to cry as she continued. She told me the story of how my mother forced her to have an abortion when she was pregnant as a teenager, and how the poorly done abortion affected her womb.

"With you, I have my sweet revenge." She said, laughing. "You have not seen anything yet." She said with a stern look. She then ran upstairs to grab my sleeping child and said, "Nobody will take my child away from me." I replied, "He's my child, I gave him life," I said boldly. She replied, "We shall see." I knew I was finished on hearing that statement, I did not just know how.

Days passed as I tried to escape from the house but all proved futile. The battle line was drawn; the red carpet was slowly dragged off from beneath my feet.

I practically stopped going to school for my auntie forbade her driver from taking me to school and the security from allowing me to leave the premises. The servants stopped serving me in every way and I was left to do my laundry, cook my food and clean my room. Obaseki was treated well so I was a little bit relieved.

13th of April, 2003, is a day I will never forget in my life. It was a bright morning. I had just finished cleaning Obaseki up when my auntie walked into my room with a troop of policemen and said, "Here she is." "Auntie, what is going on?" I asked. "Officers, arrest her, arrest her, this ungrateful girl has the guts to bring cocaine into my home, arrest her." She said angrily.

"Miss Anna, we have a search warrant, permit us to search your room, permit us now or face the music, the Police lead said with a stern look. I went on my knees to plead with the police and told them I was innocent.

I also implored them to search my room because I was innocent. After a light search, a sachet of 50g of cocaine was found in my box and I immediately knew I was framed but what could I do?

I was immediately bundled from the house. I saw Obaseki crying. Auntie Caro picked him up and gave a winning smile as the policemen took me out of the premises. I shouted and screamed, pleaded and begged my auntie to forgive me but all to no avail.

As I was forced into the police van, Auntie Caro, her husband and my son in her arms stood together as a family and watched as I was manhandled out of the premises.

As the van moved, I imagined what my son's future would be without me, I imagined my mother's face, I imagined what lies my auntie would tell my mother about me. I was sad and angry. I wanted to fight my way out but I was too weak, my heart was broken.

My mother's wickedness which I had always heard about finally caught up with me. What Ese, Efe and Efosa told me of my auntie beside the stream was true after all, but on a whole new wicked level. In my heart I said goodbye to my homeland Esan for I knew I would never see it again.

My mother's anticipation of one day coming to Italy was finally shattered and my dream of becoming a certified nurse was all in the blues. Before long, I was charged to court and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison without parole.

Estella, you have heard from several inmates why I was brought to this prison. Here is my own side of the story.

THE WISDOM OF IYA KOFO

My name is Kofo Olayitan, popularly known as "Iya kofo". I am a native of this land, Efon Alaaye of Ekiti State. I am the only widow of late Pa Kehinde Olayitan. As you can see, I am a food vendor famously known for my Iyan and Efo-riro. Yes o, me too I go school Mr Corper.

At least I sat for my secondary school final year examination, failed though, as my result was designed with three Fs, four Passes and two Credits, hahaha! but at least I am here today. My grandchildren are very brilliant and so they teach mama all she needs to know.

I know you have just been posted here for your one-year mandatory National Youth Service. My son in those days was also posted to Enugu, in the East. I know this town is little and it is nothing compared to the big city you have just come from but Efon is a beautiful town, a place surrounded by hills with a nice vegetation. Our climate encourages a luxuriant of forest growth.

Here, most of us are humble farmers trying to make a living. In abundance, we have yams, maize, cassava, palm oil, to mention a few. That is why we need people like you to come and educate our children. See this as your way of impacting the younger generation so cheer up, one year will soon be over. I said cheer up, okay?

My son, I promise you a plate of my famous Iyan and Efo-riro each time you come visiting and, my son you are welcome anytime. Be a man and stop sulking, okay? The people of Efon Alaaye are very loving, friendly and accommodating. Although our youths have been corrupted and now do the evil they see on our screens.

Our elders are comely and ready to listen to you when you have something to say. Don't you see me, I do not know you from Adam like Mr William my CRK (Christian Religious Knowledge) teacher in those days will say, you are not even a Yoruba man, but I am treating you like my son. So, my son you are safe in this land, there are rules guiding every land, just obey them and you will be safe.

To cheer you up, let me tell you a little about this land: Before I do so let me give you another plate of Iyan and Efo-riro.

Efon Alaaye as you can see is in Ekiti state, situated in south western Nigeria. As at the 1980s when a census was carried out, we were about 100,000 persons living in this land.

This land was officially founded in the 19th century when both Ilesha and Efon belonged to Ekiti-Parapo, a Yoruba confederation that fought against the town of Ibadan, 68 miles (109km) west-southwest, for control of trade routes to the coast. After a lot of restructuring my son, Efon Alaaye has turned out to be the town you see today, although still the original Efon our forefathers built.

You see, in the mid-fifties, Efon was a town where no thieves existed, you could literally keep your crops and belongings outside your house and no one will take them. Since inception of Efon kingdom, no one has ever reported that his or her belongings have been stolen before.

One cold morning, in my normal entrepreneurship spirit, I had just prepared my Efo-Riro with bush meat and pounded yam; I took it to the bukka to sell. Immediately I got to the bukka to set it up, four strange visitors came, I call them strangers because the people of Efon were so few back then that virtually everyone knew each other.

These visitors spoke with an Ado dialect and immediately I could tell that they were visitors. They told me to hurry for they were very famished. I had to immediately set up my wooden chairs and make the environment comfortable for them.

Not long afterwards, I served them my hot plate of Efo-riro and Iyan. After serving them, I left them in the bukka and went to the back to check if the firewood I had kept the previous day were affected by the morning dew in order to take necessary actions.

As I stooped low at the back of the bukka to check on the wood, I overheard a conversation that changed Efon forever and the way we think and act.

“These people seem to be blessed, they have lots of silver and gold, their crops yield a lot of harvest thus making them very rich, they have lots of ancient expensive bead jewellery, look at the jewellery on the neck of the owner of this bukka (local food joint)”.

This I heard one of them say. “They are very careless, very careless, look at how that rich chief carelessly left his bicycle outside as if it has no value to him, these people need to be taught a lesson,” another said.

Let us attack them already, we have been here for two weeks observing them, amongst all our operations Efon Alaaye seems to be taking us a lot of time, let us attack them on the night of ‘Oja Balu’ (the general market day in Efon which is usually on the sixth day of the week), by then the farmers would have sold a lot of their merchandise and made a lot of money.

At night, we attack and leave very early in the morning.” The man with the green Fila (the Yoruba name for cap) said.

On hearing this, I was shocked. Robbers in my shop, I said to myself, I had never come across such people, for Efon was such a peaceful town filled with people with high morals and integrity.

“Iya come and take our money” one of them called out loud. I tried not to tremble, I settled them with their balance and bade them good bye.

This encounter made me very worried, I did not know what to do, to be honest. I only had two choices, which was to save Efon from unwanted thieves or be quiet and protect my family.

Confused, I told my husband who happened to be a Baale (a chief) what I had encountered at the bukka, I also told him what I thought would be the best solution to this mishap waiting to happen.

He immediately told the Oba (the King) and the Council of Chiefs. Telling them what I thought would be the adequate solution, they were very delighted to implement it.

The Oja Balu market day was at hand and the Oba and his council finally agreed to implement the plan. The town crier went about the village passing an important message from the Oba and all the Baales (Chiefs).

“Good evening people of Efon, Oba Adeyeye is inviting all the first male child of every family belonging to this land to the village square for a brief meeting as the sun sets this evening. There will be a screening at the entrance of the village square by the three wise men of our land.

The criterion to be let into the square is to mention the first name of ten of your ancestors. These three wise men, having been embodied with wisdom from above will ascertain those that are lying and those that are not,” said the town crier as he walked round about Efon chanting over and over again this same message to ensure a good number of the people of the town were informed.

With my help, the chiefs made sure the thieves who were isolated close to the forest didn’t hear a word that the town crier said, for the town crier avoided where the thieves camped.

Evening came closer and all the first male child of every household in Efon dashed out to the village square with so much curiosity. As promised, the wise men conducted a proper screening. Now at the square, I was invited by the Oba, my husband and his fellow chiefs to explain my encounter with the four strangers from Ado.

I also told them what I thought we should do, I told them that the best plan would be to put all our priceless position in places that thieves would never think of.

Oja Balu being the next day, I advised all the men to tell their wives and their families to secretly put their priceless possessions in pots, clay coolers, inside a heap of dirty dried leaves and water clay coolers. I also asked them to bury their possession carefully under the soil and under their fire wood heaps.

I advised my people not to fight these robbers instead we should make a great fool of them. They were all excited and ready to make a fool of the robbers from Ado, although some were scared. Oba Adeyeye finally spoke some words of encouragement and advised that the men take the advice to their families at home and maintain silence.

This lightened the mood and we all dispatched. I followed the Oba to his court along with my husband and other chiefs. The Oba also assured us that he will continue to track the thieves with the help of the guards. As the people of Efon have been advised, they unequivocally did the needful.

'Oja Balu', finally came. The market was filled up, there had been a great harvest and people were very excited to sell their merchandise. That day, numerous trades took place, from trade by barter to commodity for cash. Visitors from other parts of Ekiti came to patronise us.

Our people being farmers made a great deal of money that day. As the market hours closed, we all went on ahead to add the remaining of our possessions to the ones which we had hidden already.

Night approached, the robbers went from house to house searching the entire house they visited, looked at the boxes, under the bed, searched every cranny, but couldn't lay their hands on any tangible possession, only petty items amounting to almost nothing.

Our Afonjas, (Warriors) waiting for them in one of the houses caught them. They were immediately taken to the dungeon.

By morning, everyone admitted to have seen these robbers, but no one complained of anything reasonable to have been missing. Excitedly, the town crier disseminated a message from the king asking everyone to come to the village square.

On getting to the village square, the villagers were all exposed to the four thieves who almost turned Efon to a nightmare. And of course, they were given the beating of their lives and embarrassed out of Efon by our Afonjas as ordered by the king. We stayed at the village square all day and celebrated our victory over loss.

From that day, it became forbidden for anyone to keep his or her possessions carelessly and that is why today, you see that everyone has at least a palm tree planted in the front of his or her house. This is to serve as a barricade for prospective thieves and a no-go area to strangers except if invited.

So, my son, feel free. Efon Alaaye is a land of peace, we are loving people. If you treat Efon well, Efon Alaaye will treat you even better. Once again, I say you are welcome to Efon and even more. Welcome to Iya Kofo's Bukka, welcome Mr. Corper (A funny name given to National Youth Service Corps members).

BABY AISHA (BLOOD IN DAMATURU)

I was in fact happy to hear that auntie Zainab was finally delivered of a child after thirteen good years of marriage. It took her a lot of prayers, insults, and spiritual cleansing to welcome her patter of tiny feet. The news of auntie Zainab's child naming spread across the extended family; it was her first child after six miscarriages.

I packed my luggage and took an excuse from my place of work; I couldn't miss this for anything in the world. The journey took me almost twenty-four hours. I got to Yobe state, Nigeria, early in the morning the next day and went straight to Damaturu.

A lot have changed, I said to myself as the taxi I boarded drove past streets and areas. Damaturu as usual was dry, cold and dusty. As I soliloquized, I saw a mini tornado in front. I got to the family house ultimately.

When the car got parked in front of the compound, a good number of my cousins and nephews came to welcome me. It was like a long-awaited family reunion that was long overdue.

I couldn't see auntie Zainab immediately; she was being bathed by my mother and hers. All I could hear was her screams, I just knew that her stomach was been pressed with a good measure of hot water.

This is a tradition usually carried out by Nigerian women when a baby is born to remove the excess blood from the mother's stomach. As I awaited my Auntie's entrance to the sitting room, I was taken to her room to see the new born baby. "What beautiful bundle of joy", I said to myself.

The baby girl was so beautiful, she had long lashes and beautiful brown eye balls, and she was the spitting image of auntie Zainab. I also saw my other nieces and nephews, all five together, with the youngest being seventeen, they were the children of my brothers and cousins.

Finally, auntie Zainab came to the sitting room. It was the third day of her child's birth; the parlour was full of close friends and relatives who had come to visit the family.

Auntie Zainab's story made rounds around the town. Everyone knew her as the woman without a child and so people had come to behold this miracle. Auntie Zainab was warmly greeted as her husband entertained the visitors with Kauri (a meal usually distributed to family and friends signaling the birth of a child).

That day was a stressful day. Night came and the guests took their leave. Later that night, auntie Zainab was bathed again and another round of thundering shouts was heard around the mansion. She screamed uncontrollably. My mother showed no mercy, she wanted her tummy to be as flat as that of a young maiden again.

The next day was packed up with almost the same routine. There were fewer guests. Later that evening, the fourth night of the child's birth, my aunt's husband had gone to the abattoir to purchase a ram that would be slaughtered for a sacrifice for the child's naming ceremony.

On the fifth day of the child's birth, the family harnessed the opportunity to have a family reunion since everyone was around. We decided to make use of the unusual opportunity to catch up on old times. Later that evening, more family members arrived and it was all celebration galore, everyone stayed together, the family house was big enough for us.

The family house was jointly built by the entire family. It consisted of four sitting rooms, seventeen bedrooms, and twenty bathrooms. We also had a big compound and an abandoned mud shed at the back of the house.

The shed was used to keep grandpa's tools and favourite equipment. Baba used that place to have a quiet time with Allah when he was alive. It was abandoned since he died. No one ever went there.

The next day, being the sixth day of the baby's birth, my cousins and I used this period to share out invitation cards, inviting the villagers to come and celebrate with us. Our family was very respected and popular, so numerous people were invited. We owned the only sugarcane exporting company in Damaturu.

Finally, the D-day was here. A day Auntie Zainab had waited for all her life. Her baby and self were adorned with beautiful ornaments and laili, (a local tattoo).

The celebration began. As the tradition states, the women stayed inside the house while the men stayed out, as they all waited for the Imam (a Muslim Priest) who would officiate the ceremony.

Imam Abubakar, a very popular cleric in Damaturu arrived; the ram was slaughtered for sacrifice and every one praised Mohammad. The child was blessed and gifts were offered to the Imam by Auntie Zainab's husband as tradition demanded. The baby's hair was also shaved off to finally welcome her to mother earth. She was named Aisha.

The celebration kicked off in full gear as jubilations encompassed the house. People trooped in in their numbers to witness the event that never seemed forthcoming. Night came and people were practically begged to leave the house for there was enough to eat and drink.

Baby Aisha and her mother were prepared to sleep by my mother and hers. Everyone retreated to their rooms.

“Waiyo, waiyo Allah, waiyo Allah” (Please God, Please God) was what I heard. I had just put on my night gown to sleep after a little gist with my cousins. My female cousins and I, out of fear, rushed down to the sitting room where the noise was coming from.

As we got to the parlour, we also realized that our brothers had also rushed too, to the parlour wearing almost nothing. It was Auntie Zainab's husband, “Mainaina?” (What is the matter?)

My mother and Auntie Zainab's mother rushed out of the room they shared. Then he finally spoke after much panting. “It's Alhaji Suleiman, he just called me.

He said a troop of armed men are going about the village chanting horrific words and killing people.” I asked him if they were up to six so we could call the local vigilante. He said the way Alhaji Suleiman heard their voices, they were more than a hundred, if not more, and they were all dressed alike. His uncle who called alerted him about that too.

“Uncle, it’s a lie,” my cousin responded. Everyone began to panic. Auntie Zainab was immediately awakened from her deep sleep owing to the stress she had undergone earlier.

“Alhaji, mainaina? She asked her husband who quickly explained to her the problem at hand. “Alhaji, let’s take the coaster bus and escape, my son Alhari is a fast driver and we will be able to hurry at least to Kano this night. We will all go to Baba Hassan’s house in Kano”, said Auntie Mariam.

“Walaiyi Hajiya Mariam, there is no fuel in the bus, we have used it up. Isa had used it to convey guests from Bade Local Government. He just came back from dropping them off earlier this evening and had complained to me that the fuel in the tank is almost on reserve.

We won’t be able to make it out of Damaturu this night. Alhaji Suleiman had just told me that they are already in his street and our street is just next”, said Auntie Zainab’s husband.

“Waiyo” Zainab’s mother screamed. “Why today, why today?”, auntie Zainab cried out in her tired state. My cousin Abdul shouted, “We have to act quickly, they are almost here.” Everyone began to panic.

Remembering coming across the shed earlier today as I strolled round the compound, I told everyone to follow me. “To where?” My mother asked. “Just follow me”, I replied.

Auntie Zainab said, “Let me go and carry Aisha, she is deeply asleep.” We all waited and after she had yanked the baby from her crib, we closed the doors to the house, and I led them all to the shed.

This was an amazing idea, for it was at the back of the mansion and almost made extinct by the banana trees at the back. It was constructed with just mud, for my grandfather had built it long before the mansion was constructed, when he was just a young man.

He instructed the family to leave it when we had enough money to build this mansion. It was Papa's favourite place when he was alive, he said it reminded him of his early days, growing up as a child in the village.

Immediately they saw the shed, everyone embraced the idea and rushed inside. The wooden door was immediately bolted with the nail. It was very dusty but we all managed.

Almost five minutes later, we heard a heavy bang on our gate; it looked as if someone used a cutlass to hit the gate violently. Then they started that similar chant “Muna ‘yan makashi” (We are killers and there shall be no peace in this land from henceforth) Everyone began to panic. I put on the torch on my phone and asked everyone to keep quiet by signaling with my finger on my lips.

As we stayed quiet, we heard loud noises, like they were scattering the house. It sounded like they were vigorously pushing down appliances in the house. We stayed quiet in the shed, hoping to come out of this mishap alive. Mama Zainab wept and wept quietly, anytime a sound comes out from her lips she would be asked to calm down. Everyone was scared, scared for our lives.

They stayed in the house searching and tearing the whole place down for about ten minutes. Then one of them shouted, “Babu wani daya a cikin gidan fa” (There's no one in this house). Then another shouted in Hausa “Bari mu duba kewaye” (Let us check the surroundings). Out of shock, Mama shouted “Waiyo Allah”. Baby Aisha who had been peacefully asleep woke up.

Immediately, her mother ripped her top and put her nipples in her mouth to keep her quiet. They walked around the compound, searching. Another person complained and said they should leave and go to another house before people escaped. No one in this town must be kept alive, another person said.

They started chanting again as they searched. Their noise irritated baby Aisha and she began to cry, everything done to keep the baby's mouth shut proved futile. We all knew we were dead. Out of fear I shouted 'waiyo', everyone was scared.

We heard someone's footstep coming close to our hideout and we just knew they were close. Baby Aisha wouldn't stop crying. I wept quietly. I was scared, so was everyone. That day, Baba Aisha made a drastic decision that saved everyone's lives.

Baba Aisha tried to yank the baby from her mother's hand. Auntie Zainab struggled with him. "Ina rokonka tare da Allah" (Please I beg you in the name of our God) he said as he dragged the baby off her hand. She began to sob; she knew what he was about to do. She released baby Aisha from her shivering arms.

We could hear them approach the banana tree and the end never seemed nearer. He covered baby Aisha's mouth with his hand and this choked her as we all watched and cried silently. I used my hands to cover Auntie Zainab's mouth as tears dripped from her wide-open eyes. Baby Aisha struggled with her breath until she finally gave up the ghost.

Then we heard one of the armed men shout "Walaiyi baa anybody. Zo Muje." (Honestly there is no one in this compound, let's all leave).

They all took their leave as they chanted. Now, it was already 3:30am, the early hours of the morning. Immediately we noticed the compound was quiet, we came out of the shed, we were all suffocating already. Twenty-five persons stayed in the shed that night.

Baby Aisha's corpse was carried by her mother; she sang hoping that she would wake up. Her husband tried to console her, she slapped his hands off her shoulder and shouted murderer! Baba Aisha began to cry and urged us all to plead with his wife.

Mama Zainab collapsed on the floor and we all rushed to come to her aid. Zainab was indifferent and continued to sing to her baby.

Abdul called our relatives in Kano to come and pick us up in Damaturu, we were all scared to leave the compound. He alerted us after he had placed the call and we all patiently waited inside the house quiet and staring at each other with sadness in our eyes until they arrived. Only the men of the family went into the rooms to pick up our belongings and we all waited in fear.

Morning came and a coaster bus from Kano arrived to pick us up. As we journeyed to Kano, everyone wept in the vehicle. We saw uncountable bodies of people on the floor as we passed from street to street and route to route, most of these bodies were lynched and dismembered.

Auntie Zainab was in a different world, she was indifferent about what was happening and wouldn't stop singing to the corpse of Aisha as her husband watched her in tears.

On getting to Kano, the baby was taken off her hands after much consolation and buried by Baba Aisha and the men of the family later that evening as the tradition demands.

It's five years already and on this day, I can't help but remember how baby Aisha, our long-awaited miracle saved our lives by giving us hers. Auntie Zainab had given birth to another baby girl who coincidentally turns two today, her name, ZAUNA! This means 'stay'.

We the people of Damaturu have never remained the same. We act differently and we think differently, and of course more than ever we understand the value of a peaceful community.

EFIK QUEEN

“Good morning my Queen.” This was the first thing I heard from my favourite maid Apa. “Where is my son Ekanem?” I asked out of curiosity for I was excited, my baby Ekanem Obong, is celebrating a decade on mother Earth.

“He is a Prince, the Prince of Efik land and I will like to tell him my story, how I became the queen of this great kingdom. So, Apa make sure you design the palace frontage with beautiful horticultural designs and prepare a banquet of sumptuous meals such as roasted grass cutter, bananas, coconut and sumptuous meals like Edika Ikong and pounded yam, I added. She then told me my son was in his chambers, being prayed for by his father, the king.

She left immediately to work hand in hand with the other palace maids. Noon came quite quickly and all of Ekanem’s friends were dropped off by their parents. He had made friends with most of his mates when he asked the palace guards to occasionally accompany him for a stroll round Ikpaene.

Ekanem was well-loved by his friends and so they showed up in their numbers. Their parents entrusted them in my care and I told them to not be bothered, knowing that their sons and daughters were in safe hands, coupled with the fact that we live in safe times.

The children were all ushered to the beautiful garden created for my son. The feast began, they had a lot to eat and drink. Most of the children had to visit the palace lavatory. They had never seen such banquet before.

The king, my husband, had invited magicians to entice the children with their tricks and praise-singers sang to the delight of my son, the Prince of the great Efik. It was a fun filled day as the entire children were catered to. It was now my turn to give him his gift he had been waiting for.

Ekanem, prior to his birthday celebration had bothered me on what his gift would be. For it was a tradition I imbibed to get him something special on his birthday each year.

As I walked to the front of the children with my hands at the back, I could see curiosity in my son's eyes. All the children bowed to welcome me to their midst. My husband was there with them.

"I have a precious gift for you and your friends, Ekanem,"
My son began to smile.

"You can share this gift with your entire friends here and I bet they would love it."

Now he was excited.

"Do you want to know what your gift is, Ekanem? He replied affirmatively.

My maids came to our midst with mats and calabashes, all dressed in the Efik women's traditional attire and adorned with wonderful ornaments. The calabashes were full of fruits. They laid the carpet made with palm leaves on the floor, arranged the fruits, gathered and sat around the mat.

This they did as the children watched in amazement. I broke the suspense by saying, "I am going to tell you a story." They all shouted in amazement and sat on down on their mats. Ekanem was excited.

"The name of my story is the 'EFIK QUEEN'."

"My queen you are the Efik Queen." Ekanem said.

"I know my son," I quickly responded with a smile.

"Here goes my story."

The entire palace was calm as I started my story.

"Once upon a time, there was a young maiden named Nkoyo, she was the only child of her parents and an orphan who was adopted by her father's elder sister who had three daughters.

Her aunt was popularly known as Mama Etuk, which was the name of her first child. Mama Etuk's children were really lazy, they were also about the same age as Nkoyo.

Nkoyo was a diligent young maiden. The whole chores in the house were left to Nkoyo, she never complained. Day by day, routine by routine, Nkoyo applied diligence in every chore. She would wake up every morning, sweep the entire surrounding, dash to the stream and fetch some water to fill twelve good calabashes.

She would also go to the woods to fetch some firewood, after which she would come back to put the food on fire for her aunt and her children, she only insisted on cooking her husband's meals because she didn't want her husband to be wowed and taken away by the meals of another woman. All these was Nkoyo's daily routine.

She was also in charge of washing everyone's clothes, including her three lazy cousins. She was only allowed to eat remnants, yet she flourished. She was the most beautiful girl in the family, being honey brown-skin and had a matching brown eye ball. Uncle Okon, her aunt's husband was not in support of the way she was maltreated.

He further warned that her aunt would only succeed in raising lazy women who couldn't maintain a home if she thought she was doing the right thing.

One morning in Ikpaene, it was very, very cold and windy. Nkoyo was enjoying her sleep as she tossed and turned on the mat in the small yard of the house, the place she was given to lay her head when her aunt came and poured on her a pot of cold water.

‘Useless girl, wake up.’

‘Good morning Mama,’ she replied.

‘I've told you this useless girl that I am not your mother, go and fill all the pots in the backyard with water.’

‘But mama it's about to rain.’

‘Don’t mama me, run now and make sure food is ready on time.’

Scared but willing, Nkoyo went in the rain and ran to the stream. By the time she got to the stream, she was wet and shivering for the rain had begun. She quickly fetched the water and hurried home; she would have to do this twelve times in order for all the pots to be full.

She did this as her cousins enjoyed their sleep as the breeze blew. It was the tenth trip and Nkoyo was already tired. Persuaded by a later rest, she hurried up and this time it was her twelfth trip. On her way, Nkoyo broke down in tears and wished her mother was alive.

Nkoyo’s mother had died when she was giving birth to her younger brother, her brother was stillborn. Her father couldn’t bear the death of both mother and child and died three weeks later as he hanged himself on a mango tree. As she wept by the river side, the environment became very breezy and something strange occurred. There was a tornado and an old woman appeared.

‘My daughter, your tears have awakened the heavens and they have been heard, take this and prepare yourself for shortly you shall be royalty.’

Astonished, she stood still. She tried to ask the old mother a question but before she could, the old woman vanished into thin air. Scared, she carried the pot of water and tidings and ran home. As she got home and descended the calabash from her head, she ran to her corner of the house out of curiosity to go through what she had been given.

They were good tidings indeed. They were all adornments consisting of coconut oil for a smoother skin, clay powder, and grounded local black powder to adorn the eyelids. It also had black soap and bamboo sponge. This she examined as she pondered on her encounter with the hefty grey-hair woman.

She immediately kept proper care of what she was given and carried on with her chores.

Nkoyo, very obedient I must say, carried on with the advice she was given and began to utilize the adornments and it paid off. Black never looked so beautiful.

She became a glowing diamond and so shiny as the stars. This left everyone perplexed for it was no news that she was been maltreated by her aunt and her cousins. For someone this maltreated it was rather too much beauty and grace, they must have thought.

This news found its way to her aunt's ears and out of jealousy Mama Etuk engaged in hitting her with hard objects such as fire woods, pots, and many more at the slightest provocation just to make her look ugly and bruised.

She was injured at these times but the wounds miraculously healed almost immediately. This made Mama Etuk very angry. She hated the fact that her niece was so beautiful.

One day the King of Ikpaene called his son Duke to his inner court worried. He was worried that his only heir Duke, who was ripe for marriage was yet to find a wife. Duke had been busy, managing the affairs of the land.

His father urged him to take a wife. His father asked him if he had any maiden in mind and he said no. The king then called his chief guards into his court, he asked them to go round the Ikpaene kingdom and randomly select fifty women for the prince. Indifferent and uninterested, Prince Duke walked out of the court.

As commanded, the chief guards, along with other palace guards, went round the village and randomly selected the maidens. The town crier had made a declaration that the Prince was in search of his bride and a maiden would soon be chosen.

The girls, unresistingly, followed the guards to the palace apart from Nkoyo, she was forcefully taken away from the farm when she went to fetch some firewood. She was devastated and clamoured on the fact that her auntie will have her killed if she doesn't return at the appointed time given to her. They paid no attention to her plea as they dragged her with them forcefully.

Amongst the girls, fifteen were carefully chosen and taken to the fattening room, after which the prince will meet with them for the very first time and choose his bride with the approval of the king and queen.

One of the thirty-five girls who were left after the first selection, being a friend to Nkoyo's cousins went to their compound and broke the news to Nkoyo's aunt who was expecting the firewood. Devastated, Mama Etuk and her daughters screamed in agony. Nkoyo's uncle on the other hand was happy for her and prayed that she would be chosen.

The maidens were taken to an isolated place. They were pampered with six meals a day and had a lady in waiting, to cater to all their needs. They were totally alienated from Ikpaene and had almost no visitors at all.

The only visitors allowed were there to give them lectures on how to be good wives and how to satisfy their husbands. Staying in the fattening room seemed strange for Nkoyo, for she had never been catered for in this manner all her life. It was later she remembered her encounter at the stream with the old woman.

They were well catered for. All day, they ate in large portions, rested, had local massagers to help station their newly acquired fat in the right places, and they also attended orientations where virtuous women came to pour out their motherly wisdom. It was fun-filled.

The lucky families of the children chosen were given a visit by the queen, who visited each mother with good gifts such as beautiful wrappers, jewelry, tubers of yams and cassava, baskets of snails and corn and some money.

When the queen got to Mama Etuk's compound with all these gifts, she couldn't help but burn in anger, all these the maidens later told me.

Nkoyo's uncle, on the other hand, was happy for her and happy to have received all these gifts from her majesty. Mama Etuk was frustrated. She single-handedly did all the chores in the compound for her children had no idea on how to clean and cater for the house. She was very frustrated.

Six months flew with the wind and the day for the revelation of the maidens was finally here. Everyone in Ikpaene kingdom was invited by the king to come witness such glorious occasion. The families of the maidens were given a special seat by the king for one of these families would soon be his in-laws. These families were the envy of everyone for they were well catered for.

The maidens were prepared by their ladies-in-waiting and the matron for that day. They were told that they had only five minutes to impress the prince.

They were asked to come out one after the other and say or do something fascinating that would capture the attention of prince Duke. Prince Duke was very tall, fair and handsome and was the man of the moment.

There was merriment in the air and the celebration began. The sycophants praised, food and drinks were served and the maidens entertained the prince and the entire crowd. The serious-looking prince was almost indifferent and would rarely smile while these maidens did their presentation such as singing, fashion parade and even oral cooking, yes oral cooking.

Most of the maidens narrated how to make Ikpaene's classics such as Epang Nkukwo, Edika Ikong, Afang soup with perishable solids such as garri and pounded yam.

The maiden who sang the traditional Ikpaene song caught the attention of the prince but prince Duke became even more fascinated when Nkoyo came on stage dressed and adorned with the Efik traditional dance costume adorned with vibrant colours, jewellery and ornament.

She caught his attention more when she danced accurately to every beat of the drummer shaking her chow berry hips and showcasing the beauty of an Efik woman, as she danced joyfully to the popular Ekonmbi traditional dance.

The prince was impressed, so was the king, the queen and the entire cabinet. The people cheered; some were jealous. But one thing was certain; the prince had found his princess. (children all smiling) Nkoyo's auntie was jealous and sad, but it was too late for her to hurt the young maiden again.

‘Today, I am the queen of this land, the only queen of King Duke, my beloved husband. That is the end of my story.’

‘Did you enjoy my story?’

They all responded yes! The feast was even merrier. Ekanem attested to the fact that it was the best birthday celebration he ever had. That was my own way of making my son happy on his birthday.

PAINS OF MEMUNAH (CHILD NOT BRIDE)

My name is Talatu Audu. I am twenty years old, a wife and a mother of four. I know, right? I was forced into marriage at the age of thirteen, all my children, all boys, were born without proper spacing. I was too weak to carry them full term due to the health issues and complications.

I work as a chef at the residence of the Local Government chairman of Bakura, Zamfara state, Nigeria. I have been working there since I was sixteen. My husband, Alhaji Dansuki, a poor local herbalist couldn't afford to take care of his four wives, the oldest being twenty-five and so we all have to look for jobs to sustain the family, as Alhaji is getting older and cannot run around like he used to.

Alhaji Dansuki was conferred with the prestigious title "Alhaji" when the Muslim Association of Bakura Local Government sponsored all the faithful Muslim fathers and husbands for Hajj. Last weekend he turned sixty-seven and he acts like a dead man already. That man irritates me.

My childhood friend, who is around the same age with me just got admission to study medicine at Bayero University but my parents have chosen to keep me with Alhaji because he was able to pay Baba's medical bill when he was afflicted with malaria which was about five thousand naira at the time.

My hand was given in marriage to Alhaji to say thank you for the kind gesture. Today, Baba is fine but I keep rotting here with this old man. My father is seven years younger than Alhaji. I regret marrying Alhaji, and now I am going to waste my life with this old man for the rest of my life until Allah says it's my time.

Watching my niece die this way is very painful. Today, apart from the day I was deflowered by Alhaji Dansuki, is the saddest day of my life. This could have been avoided. All Memunah wanted, was to go to school, in order to become a certified International nurse.

She was very enthusiastic about education and success until this greedy man, my employer's son, came and snatched her at her adolescence. I saw everything, how she was forced into marriage and how this marriage was miserable for her before death came and snatched her away.

Just as Memunah, Amina — Memunah's mother and I — were forced into marriage. Auntie Amina was very fortunate to have been married to Alhaji Rashad, a local farmer who exports ginger to Lagos and Kano.

Amina was loved by her kind husband who, at every given opportunity, apologizes to her for her forceful marriage to him. She gave birth to three children; Aminu, Mulitala and Memunah. Memunah, being the only girl child of her family, was loved by her father, and like her brothers, she was allowed to go to school.

Memunah counted herself very lucky to have a father who has great respect for women and the girl child, something very rare here, I must say. Memunah graduated as the brightest student from Binsalam Primary School.

Soon, she gained admission into the Saint Joseph's Missionary School in Gusua, a missionary all girls' college. While there, she was noticed to be the brightest student in Mathematics, English, Integrated Science and most importantly Agricultural Science.

It was no news that she was the best in Agricultural Science for her father always took Memunah to his farm as a little child to enlighten her on Crop science.

Memunah's father got an opportunity to export dried ginger to Saudi Arabia. He was excited. But he didn't have the money to plant the amount of ginger his business partners were asking for, and so, he went to meet his childhood friend who happened to be the only son of the Local Government chairman of Bakura.

His friend was excited for him and agreed to help him. Alhaji Yusuf had a very challenging condition to release such money to his friend Rashad. He said he would take Memunah as collateral (a wife) if Alhaji Rashad couldn't pay up in the next thirteen months.

Alhaji Rashad was skeptical because of his disappointment in such request but soon agreed because he knew he would pay up before time. He was given the money by Alhaji Yusuf.

Ten months passed and Alhaji Rashad realised that his crops had failed. This was because of the new fertilizers he had used. He bought this fertilizer in order to grow healthy crops and give his customers the best but his good intentions soon backfired on him.

Thirteen months flew by so quickly and Alhaji Yusuf came for his money as promised. Alhaji Rashad, now in a terrible state of health due to depression explained to his childhood friend what exactly had happened and begged for more time. Alhaji Yusuf refused and was excited to take a fourth wife from his enthusiasm; he had always had eyes on Memunah (ooo pervert).

Shortly, it was time for Memunah's mid-term. She came home excited to see her parents and siblings. After spending the short break with her parents, she became confused when her father asked her to wait a little while. Baba Memunah and my aunt Amina didn't know how to break such news to her.

Aisha my sister came and told me about what was happening. I was sad for I never expected such a thing to happen to my niece knowing that she had such a caring father who valued the girl child.

She also begged me to take good care of Memunah if Alhaji Yusuf proved persistent on taking Memunah away. Sad, I agreed. Soon, Memunah was let in on the problem at hand.

She was devastated for her dream of becoming the pride of Bakura by becoming a certified international nurse and the first woman to ever build a community centre in the local government was fast fading away before her very eyes.

Shortly after her knowledge on what was happening, Alhaji Yusuf came and forcefully took her away. He came with some guards. Two days later, he brought her bride price to prove that he had legally taken his bride away but it was refused by her grieving parents.

Two months after the ordeal, Alhaji Rashad died out of depression leaving my aunt Aisha very devastated. Memunah became the shadow of herself in that house. I tried all I could to cheer her up but all proved abortive. All she wanted was to go to school and become someone important in the society.

At the local government chairman's house, I slept there all week and only went home during weekends. This gave me the opportunity to look after Memunah. The only time Memunah spoke to me was when she asked about her mother and siblings. Memunah became a zombie, all she did was look all day and cry all night.

One night, I had stayed up late to do the dishes for Alhaji Yusuf and his father had visitors all the way from Kano much earlier in the afternoon. As I did the dishes, all I could hear was screams, from upstairs. I just knew it was Memunah again.

I ran upstairs to see what was going on. I was almost done using the stairs when I saw what gave me the shock of my life. Alhaji Yusuf's brothers, who were also married, were snooping into Alhaji Yusuf's room and laughing as I heard my Memunah scream 'Dan Allah yankuri' which means (I beg you in the name of God, stop).

I broke down in tears. I felt for her. This was a child I had watched grow from infancy to adolescence. Her screams brought sad memories to my heart and only reminded me of how I had been forcefully married off to Alhaji Dansuki. I wished for the next morning to come quickly. I could only imagine how emotionally exhausted she would be.

The next morning Alhaji Yusuf, his father and brothers travelled alongside with the business partners to Kano to inspect one of the milk industries they collectively owned. I harnessed that period to take care of Memunah.

As I knocked on the door to check if she was awake, she screamed 'Mainana'? (What is it?) I told her it was me. She opened door. She was only wearing her hijab and a towel tied around her breast. Unlike other days, she felt very sore and all I could see around her was Alhaji's fingernail marks. As I tried to touch her, she screamed. Then it occurred to me that she was in need of a hot water for a massage.

I rushed to the kitchen to boil some water. While the water was on the stove, I picked up their bed sheet to wash and I noticed it was soiled with blood again. After much interrogation, she revealed to me that that she had always bled this way since she was married off to Alhaji.

This made me sob. She was also in tears while revealing this to me. The water was fast boiling and I took a bucket and collected it from the fire. I made her drink some tea herbs just before I assisted her with a massage in the bathroom.

Bathing Memunah reminded me more about my ugly past. She had bruises all over her and as I put a hot towel on each place, she explained to me the mystery behind the pain. The worst was her underdeveloped breast.

As I put my towel on it, she screamed to the extent that the other wives got alerted, and when they came to the room and saw what had happened to Memunah, they laughed and walked away, saying it was the greed of her family that had caused her such pain.

Memunah's underdeveloped breast had bites on them and she explained to me that Alhaji Yusuf did this to her anytime she behaved unresponsive when he tried to have his way with her.

One of her breasts had a big sore on it and it had mucus coming out of it as I massaged it. What a wicked world! I immediately bathed her and gave her something to eat, only then did she have a good rest.

Days passed and Memunah's health got worse and she was forcefully made to undergo a pregnancy test by Alhaji Yusuf's mother. The test came out positive. Memunah, just thirteen, was already an expectant mother.

Alhaji Yusuf was informed. He rushed back home out of so much joy, he bought her a new car and got her a driver, took more gifts to Memunah's mother and siblings. He also increased my salary by 25% but we were all indifferent for Memunah was very unhappy.

Memunah's pregnancy made her feel worse and look worse for the sore on her left breast refused to heal and they became very swollen due to normal pregnancy signs. Memunah was in a lot of pain. The pain Memunah felt resulted into pregnancy complications.

Her whole body became very bloated and her feet even made her look like she had elephantiasis. The doctor brought to look after her told us that Memunah must be under close monitoring for she was in a lot of pain. Yet, Alhaji was indifferent and forcefully had his way with her almost every night.

One night, I heard yet another scream from their room upstairs. This time it was Alhaji that did the entire screaming. Alarmed, everyone rushed to their room. As we all made our way in, Alhaji and Memunah were almost naked. Alhaji cried shamelessly as Memunah lay lifeless on the bed.

It appeared like he had forcefully had his way again but this time with a very sad ending. Soon Memunah was rushed to the hospital and she was quickly resuscitated. Hours later, the doctor diagnosed her with Eclampsia, a disease nurse Amina said was caused by high blood pressure or large amounts of protein in the urine or other organ.

This makes her to convulse during pregnancy. I informed mama Memunah immediately. This even made her more traumatized.

As at the time Memunah was eight months and a week pregnant, she had suffered two seizures. This really made her very pale.

Finally, it was time for her to put to bed. Alhaji Yusuf had called a doctor to come and attend to her right at home. Memunah's screams made rounds around the compound as other wives of Yusuf sat down in the sitting room anticipating the birth of a new heir.

Alhaji Yusuf was almost indifferent about the situation. Memunah's mother and I, on the other hand, were very paranoid. We stayed with her all through as she laboured to have the baby.

She pushed and pushed in her own little way but the baby made no show. Very feverish, she suffered yet another seizure because she had made a major push that had let the baby's head out.

Their lives were at risk. She was unconscious and the baby's neck was hocked thus making the baby to choke. Memunah was also unconscious.

Soon, both mother and child were confirmed dead.

Mourning encompassed the house as everyone became sad. Memunah's mother immediately held on to the shirt of Alhaji Yusuf to practically choke him for ruining her family. Weak, she soon suffered a huge shock and collapsed.

The doctor called for an ambulance and that is why, nurse Ibukun, I have been here for the past two weeks, hoping that my aunt will be well again after such agony she has suffered, losing husband, child and grandchild all within the space of a year. Who will end this madness, who?

SURROUNDED BY DAUGHTERS (LOLO'S TRIUMPH)

I was told not to be suicidal, I was told the girl child was a precious gift from God, yet I wondered if my girls were all gifts from God, why then did Amadi forsake me? Why did he threaten to take a second wife? Why did he avoid my meals?

Why did he call me cursed? Why didn't he think of the time he professed his love for me? Why didn't he think of this when professing his love for me to my late father, the king?

My father trusted the throne in his hands, above all, he trusted me in his hands but Amadi had failed me after all, he took a second wife as he promised, seven days after giving birth to my fifth child Ndidi. My sorrow knew no bounds; I became a shadow of myself.

I was tired and exhausted. I just had my fifth child and I have had all of them within the space of six years because Amadi wanted a son quickly and now. I was unkempt and almost forgot that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

My girls and I were moved to the left wing of the palace. I, a whole Lolo of Nnewi kingdom was moved out of the main palace like an intruder. I just wanted to end it.

As time passed, I became determined to give my girls the best education in order for them to become great women in the society, being aware that we are now in the twentieth century and not the time of our forefathers where knowledge was reserved for only men.

Yet again, I was a little broken when Amadi's new wife gave birth to a male child. This made me feel worthless as a woman, all Amadi ever wanted was a male child. I soon braced myself and focused all my energy on raising my girls.

Slowly, we were fast forsaken by the king. Being the Obi of Nnewi, Amadi was invited to all sorts of events around the world and he took his new wife Lolo Amaka as his companion. This made me hate Amadi. I even hated myself for loving such a man.

I remember the first time I had met Amadi. I was strolling one evening with my ladies-in-waiting around Nnewi one windy evening. As I made my way round the town, a nail pierced through my slippers and I was terribly injured.

Then came Amadi, a man whom I thought was my light and shining armour, he took me to his humble shop where he sold latex and dressed my wound temporarily before I was taken to the hospital much later when the king was informed.

That was how we became friends before I fell deeply in love with him. I had forced my late father who loved me so much to break up my engagement with a man whom he had carefully chosen for me just to be married to Amadi, the person I thought was the man of my dreams and Amadi forgot all these as he travelled with his new bride all around the world, hmm.

Amaka, Amadi's second wife, played a huge role in making my daughters' lives miserable. Not quite long, they were withdrawn from their private schools and made to attend public schools while his only son was sent to the nation's capital to attend the most expensive boarding school in the country. All these Amadi did with my inheritance which I handed to him out of submission.

Neglected by my husband, my five daughters and I moved out of the palace out of shame for we were almost unnoticed. We moved to a two-bedroom flat in Oka where nobody knew us nor our background to start a new life. I had made a great deal of money from selling all the trinkets I inherited from my late mother.

I decided not to spend my newly acquired wealth carelessly for I left the palace with almost nothing. I kept every available penny I had in order for my children to have the best education.

In my new lifestyle away from royalty, I opened up a boutique where I sold used clothes from Belgium and Turkey. It was very lucrative at that time that I had to hire ten extra staff to assist me.

People from all over the city, mostly working-class ladies and University students came to patronize me each time I had new stocks. This generated a large income and I was more than happy to save for my girls' future.

My first daughter Ezinne soon completed high school. I had advised her not to take local entrance examinations into Nigerian colleges for I had saved more than enough for her to travel abroad for her education. My daughter having applied to study Medicine at Harvard University, got an eighty percent scholarship due to her excellent transcript.

I was more than joyous; she was even more excited. In this celebratory mood, Ezinne insisted that we go and tell her father about the good news. In all humility, I travelled with my daughter to Nnewi. On getting to the palace, we were turned away by the palace guards.

The same palace guards whom I watched my father the late king employ before my very eyes. The king screamed from the balcony, "You can go away with your bastard child from wherever you are coming from."

Ezinne broke down in tears and screamed, "Papa, I'm going to Harvard."

We both walked away with so much shame and disappointment. Amadi had stabbed me yet again. Ezinne never said a word to me as we drove back to Oka.

Few days later, all my daughters and I flew to Lagos to drop off Ezinne at the airport from where she would be flying out of the country to America.

It was a tearful and joyous moment to see her leave. A few years later, Ezinne was joined by her sister Elechi, who gained admission to study Pharmacy. This took a lot from me financially but I was determined to give my daughters the very best.

Four years down the line, the two girls were joined by their twin sisters, Ugochi and Ugonma who gained admission to study Law. And much later my last born Ndidi, joined them to study Creative Writing in the faculty of Arts. I was more than elated to see them go to school and prosper for they all impressed me with the outstanding results.

Although it was tough on me, I insisted they did no side jobs to avoid distractions that may result in academic failure. I was determined never to stop working hard for I had promising girls to take care of and a point to make.

Eight and a half years flew by so quickly as they all worked hard in fulfilling their dreams and created a name in America's corporate world. One day, while resting on the little balcony of my house, I received a call from my daughters who told me that they would be coming back to Oka.

My joy knew no bounds. They told me they would be coming in a week time and I was filled with so much joy.

I invited a few friends over on the day of their arrival. I had prepared all my girls' favourite meals, ranging from Oha to Ofe Nsala with pounded yam, all Igbo classics. I told my maid to clean up the entire compound and make sure the house was spotless.

I had also invited Reverend Father Osita who had been a huge pillar of support to my girls. That day, my joy was truly full.

For the first time in a while, I was moved to tears when I saw my girls coming out of the terminal. They looked so beautiful and all grown up. Do you know what it means to have five girls, all professionals, come from the same family?

My last baby Ndidi had won the Pens prize for fiction. The image at the airport will forever remain fresh in my memory. I gave them a warm embrace, one by one and joyfully drove them home to the feast that awaited them.

It was amazing, very amazing to have my girls all home. My few friends and well-wishers all gushed around them. I was lucky to have such successful girls.

Two days after their arrival, my first three girls told me that their suitors would be coming to see me. I felt on top of the world. Prior to that time, they had informed me about their suitor's intentions and as a mother all I did was put it in the hands of God.

One Saturday morning, my daughters told me they would like us to take a road trip to Nnewi. I was reluctant but they promised it was not about visiting their father and so I gave in. As we got to Nnewi, we lodged in a hotel.

I rested at the hotel while my girls enjoyed the scenery of their fatherland. I was excited to reunite with my old friends, it was a long time away indeed. Days later, my girls took me to a massive piece of land which they had collectively bought for me as a surprise. I was tearful.

The irony of this land was, it used to belong to my late father who gave it to someone as a gift. My children miraculously bought the same land from its new owner. I remember when my father would take me to this land.

One of my father's greatest accomplishments was that he owned a factory which exported corn syrup, making him the only corn syrup exporter in Nigeria. He later moved his factory to Oka, now owned by Amadi who is not doing too well with the business.

I heard from one of my friends that he handed it over to his new wife. This land would be the only possession I would have as something my parents owned.

My girls also promised to employ the best contractors to begin building me a mansion. Days later we left Nnewi, the girls never asked of their father. I could feel their pain.

Months later, my three daughters joyfully got wedded to their spouses. This was attended by some of Amadi's brothers who were not in support of his decision but never also supported me financially after the ordeal.

One fateful day, my daughters and I embarked on a trip to Nnewi. I had thought they wanted to show me the height in which the building had attained, but to my greatest surprise it was a tall white structure, a beautifully tendered garden, marble finishing and gold encrusted furniture, to mention a few, all gifted to me by my daughters.

They told me to forget about all my belongings in Oka for they had gotten me all I wanted and needed. That very day, I moved into my big mansion and I felt like royalty again. I learnt, that day, that you can never take away royalty from royalty.

My daughters had also invited some of my friends from Oka to come celebrate with me. Father Osita was also invited to bless my new home. I was overjoyed. My daughters gave me back the life I had once lived.

I adapted to my new house and my long-vacated scenery, I also decided to open an orphanage to take care of the needy, all thanks to my daughters who showed me their tireless support.

I was in my garden resting this windy evening when an old friend, Mrs Onu, a close friend of Amadi and I came visiting and told me that my estranged husband, Igwe Amadi was sick and bedridden in the palace and had been like that for a while. She also told me that he was seriously begging to see me for he had heard about my arrival to Nnewi.

Very skeptical at first, but I was soon persuaded and left for the palace against the wish of my daughters whom I had called to seek their advice.

Walking into the palace brought back both happy and sad memories. The guards couldn't look me in the eyes for they had felt bad on how they treated me the last time I was there.

It was amazing how they were quick to pull the red carpet from beneath my feet. I looked into the eyes of all the servants as they paid me hypocritical homage while I walked into the king's room.

It was sad to realize that the male child Amadi had craved for all his life, the male child which I almost died trying to have, undergoing Caesarean section four times within the span of six years, the male child for which I was driven from the home of my childhood where I had built happy memories, the male child for whom my children were neglected and abandoned for I alone to fend for, was the one who had put Amadi in this paralysis.

As I looked at Amadi stare at me almost lifeless, all I could say to him was that he missed out on raising champions.

Today, all my daughters are all Harvard graduates.

My first child, Ezinne, is a Medical Doctor in California, my second daughter, Ndidi, is one of the top Pharmaceutical consultants in the country and in the United States. The twins Ugochi and Ugonma are now practicing barristers at top firms in New York, and my baby Ndidi is a profound writer who just won an international prize for fiction.

Where is Obiora the golden child? He rots in jail for stabbing his own mother to death, sacrilege! It was such a shock for me to hear that, but all I can say is, what a pity!

I forgave Amadi and I prayed he recovered from his ailment. I also promised to make his daughters see reasons they should forgive their father.

After all the pain I had been through, I feel more than elated to be surrounded by daughters.

BLOOD IN OUR DELTA

I saw it all, from inception to the very end. It all started in my father's compound. They promised us roads, schools, industries, jobs for our youths and above all, they promised us wealth. We had all, but to tell you the truth, we needed more. The gods knew, the gods knew from the start what was on our land. They knew it was a blessing, they knew it was a potential best kept untapped.

Oloibiri was a land filled with milk and honey. We were seen as one of the best towns in Ogbia Local Government Area. Our men were hardworking farmers and fishermen. Our women were hardworking marketers. We were one big happy family that lived in peace and harmony.

We would have monumental festivals. The men of our land would make their wives cook fish and plantain for us all to merry. Oloibiri was everyone's dream land. Agriculture, our major source of income, was more than enough for us.

We would hear of the big cities and big towns and the problems they encountered. We, on the other hand, were more than satisfied to live as one and in peace.

Then came the white men. Papa was invited by the Federal Government two market days ago. He was told that a group of white men will be coming for soil exploration as they are trying to see if our soil has black gold (crude oil) underneath it.

We had heard of their kind, the people of Oloibiri except me wondered what they were doing in our land. Papa had briefed us all in the house and warned everyone in our house to keep our tongues within.

Before long, they came with their big machineries and we were indifferent for we didn't want to crack our brains on something too big for us to comprehend.

The gods knew this would change Oloibiri forever. This would change the once peaceful land into a land of strife and sadness. This would change our land from one flowing with milk and honey around its horizons to a land filled with malnourished elders, youths and children.

They knew this would make our hard-working men become lay-about and evil perpetrators, they knew this would make our glowing women to have tear bags beneath their eyes for they would be sick and tired of being sick and tired. The gods knew that sorrow would encompass the land.

I was not flabbergasted to see these men in my father's compound and so, I welcomed them and so did Mama who left the smoked fish and plantain she was preparing for her women's meeting which would hold later in the evening.

They responded so kindly, to tell you the truth. They asked of my father and my mother told them that he had gone for a meeting and would soon be back. While they waited, she entertained them with palm wine and smoked fish.

They were not interested in eating; they just wanted to see the village head. Soon, Papa came back and they were more than relieved to see him walk through the palm leaf barricade.

Papa welcomed them to his abode. Papa was very receptive. They told Papa what had happened. Mr. Macaulay said something strange had occurred on a piece of land today. Papa became more interested.

Mama and I left their presence but I was interested, very interested and so I stayed where I could eavesdrop on their conversation.

I wasn't prepared for what I was about to hear. They told Papa they had drilled some machineries inside the ground to find some natural resources from deep within. All these were re-explained to Papa because Papa was more likely interested in the white men discovering what will make our land rich and not exactly concerned on what oil was.

It felt so complex for Papa to comprehend and so, Papa always nodded with a smile as they spoke, to make them understand that he somewhat understood their intentions for our land.

They told Papa that they took the whole day to drill these machineries into the ground and by the next morning, mother earth had vomited them to the earth surface.

Papa has been the village head of Oloibiri for decades. As the last born of the family, I was born to see my father as the village head and I had seen him wisely resolve conflicts and proffered solutions to different problems but that day the confusion written on Papa's face knew no way out. Papa knew it was something beyond the ordinary.

It was evening, Papa asked the white men to come the following noon so they could all proffer a solution. The white men were excited and grateful and they gave Papa a great deal of cash and they took their leave. All through that evening, Papa was a shadow of himself. He told me and Mama what they had discussed.

In my head, I wondered why the gods would turn down the offer of Oloibiri becoming a better town, but the gods knew best.

The next day came and the white men were very enthusiastic as they came before time. Papa sent my elder brother Bibioye, the first born of the family to go and call the town elders. The elders arrived and off they all went to the village Priestess 'Ebitonye'.

As they got to the village Priestess' shrine, they narrated the strange ordeal to her. She, in turn, consulted the Oracle and after much consultation and incantation she prophesied that there would be no obstacle again.

The white men were excited and gave the village Priestess some cash as a gift to the gods. They also gave my father more gifts including wrist watches, modern day suits, whiskey and other fancy things. They indeed thought their problems were over.

More prepared, yet again they drilled their pipes and machines into the ground hoping to be successful this time. They got a huge slap on their faces when yet again mother earth vomited their equipment back.

This time around, they came to my father's compound and took him to the scene. This was a mystery, it gave Papa goose bumps, but it must be unraveled.

Papa thought of all things, he thought the people of Oloibiri had offended the gods without knowing. He wondered why a wealth waiting to be acquired would take such negative turn.

He arrived at a supposed reason. Papa asked if they asked the owners of the land before exploring and they said yes. The owners advised that they appease the gods yet again maybe the gods needed a special appeal because of the natural resources embedded in the land.

The white men, after an agreement were ordered to bring 8 alligator pepper, garden eggs, calabash full of kola-nuts, yam tubers, plantain and bottles of local dry gin respectively. The number 8 represented the 8 great spirits that formed OLOIBIRI.

After this sacrifice, they tried yet again but it still proved futile as the same strange ordeal occurred.

Then it became known to the people of Oloibiri that something strange was happening in the land. The white men by then had already seen their attempt to turn Oloibiri into a great oil commercial atmosphere as a failed project.

Papa urged, he urged them to try one more time. Papa in his pure heart was really interested in making Oloibiri a better land for our youths and generations yet unborn.

Papa called all the elders for a meeting, they agreed on going to meet with the village Priestess 'Ebitonye' one more time. As they got there, she consulted the Oracle yet again, the white men were advised to provide some items for a sacrifice.

Money was not their problem. The white men asked for what would be needed and the elders agreed upon it and asked that they provide 3 hot drinks, 4 live goats and other appeasers for the sacrifice. The white explorers were amazed by the littleness of what was demanded for and asked if that was all.

This time, the gods gave in, the sacrifice was accepted. They made one final attempt at the drilling and this time around everything went on smoothly. My father was amazed. The people of Oloibiri now aware of the implication of the success of the crude oil were even more excited.

The white men intensified their efforts at the creek connecting the area to the axis on the Atlantic fringe witnessing high traffic of passengers and cargo boats conveying men and equipment. Oloibiri soon became the centre of commerce in the Niger Delta.

All eyes were on our land. We suddenly sprung to the very top. Our land became a playing ground for rich foreigners and business men to try their luck on finding natural resources. We were at our prime.

The white men kept to their promise. They contributed immensely in programs that empowered our youths, schools were built for children and bore holes dug for the community.

They gave scholarships to extraordinary students but one thing was certain, these benefits favoured a fragment of the people, leaving out the remaining population from this influx of cash which was now flowing in Oloibiri.

Oloibiri, once known for peace soon became a place where people were enemies of each other and the land was divided.

Suddenly, out of poor management, there was an oil spill from the pipes and this caused problems in our land. People were dying of lung infections, mostly women and children. These spills found their way to our farms and our soil became contaminated.

There was famine in the land, for people's crops failed. Oloibiri, a land known to be flowing with varieties of crops such as oil palm, plantain, beans, garden eggs, yams, mangoes and vegetables soon became a land that now imported food stuffs from other neighbouring towns. This was disastrous.

Even worse, these spills also found ways to our rivers, streams and ponds, and also began to make fishes scarce in our Delta for the toxins also began to kill the fishes too. Then it became apparent that Oloibiri had formally entered into recession.

Our children became malnourished. Above all, lung diseases became the order of the day. Our local government soon became a spot for medical and non-governmental organisations to practice their charity for the oil spillage affected the health of our people. The death toll of women and children was fast rising.

Mr. Macaulay and his people had left our land for graduates in their field and indigenes who had studied abroad to manage. This is to explore oil in other parts of the country and this led to a great deal of mismanagement on the side of our people. It appeared as though they were not trained.

Soon, Papa was diagnosed of lung cancer which claimed his life. People refused to attend his burial for they accused him of bringing such a curse on our land by allowing the white men to dig out such poison, they said. They said his death was a way of the gods punishing him. In shame, Papa was buried.

With this despair in our land, some people enjoyed the influx of cash into their pockets while others suffered in penury. Majority suffered in penury.

Soon our women became idle for most of them used to sell fishes and plantain to both distant and nearby buyers alike. Our men and youths whose major occupation was farming and fishing soon became idle.

Our men became draft players at every palm wine joint corner while our youths turned thugs in order to survive. Oloibiri was its opposite as it became a land where misfits were found.

Years and decades passed by and Oloibiri remained the same. The rich in our land became richer and the poor became poorer. Greed encompassed our land; our youths became lazier and a huge number of our maidens became single mothers.

The great Oloibiri was fast disappearing. Everyone was unhappy and frustrated. The rich were indifferent. Greed truly encompassed our land.

Village heads had come and gone but the land remained the same. Then came this village head that was determined to make Oloibiri as peaceful as it once was.

His name Febrisma Ekiye. He was determined to make Oloibiri a better place. After much brainstorming on the restoration of our land, he finally called a meeting inviting all the elders. My immediate elder brother Preye, who was also a chief in the land said they agreed on seeking the face of the gods.

The chiefs and village heads collectively visited the new village Priestess for the aged Priestess 'Ebitonye' had passed away due to natural causes. They went visiting the new Priestess with appeasers such as kola, hot drinks, bunches of plantain, kegs of pressed palm oil and goats. The Priestess consulted the Oracle.

The ordeal was no news to her. She said that there was no solution because no one remembered to seek the face of the gods. She also said that this ordeal had occurred because the people of Oloibiri became greedy after pressuring the gods into blessing the land.

This greed caused the land to be divided and the gods were not happy with the land and its inhabitants. She also said, the people of Oloibiri do not know how to manage great wealth.

After further consultation she said the people of Oloibiri must collectively carry out a huge sacrifice involving all the virgins wearing white and dancing round the village while the village head, village chiefs and villagers dance behind them. This would cleanse the land and Oloibiri would become a better place for peace and tranquillity would return.

Immediately after their departure from the shrine, the village head summoned all the villagers to the village square. The village head explained the encounter he and his chiefs had with the village Priestess. He also proclaimed the day which the sacrifice would be carried out.

On the day of the sacrifice, the people of Oloibiri came out in their numbers. They assembled at the square and all the virgin maidens also assembled in their attires. While praising the gods, the people of Oloibiri danced round the village pouring their hot drinks on the floor as they asked for forgiveness of their sins from the gods.

They all finally assembled at the shrine after dancing round the village. The Priestess led a collective worship and appeasing which they did for hours. Afterwards, she urged everyone to go home that Oloibiri would be great again, so says the gods.

Later that night as everyone slept, there was a heavy downpour of rain which included thunder and lightning. That was in fact a huge sign that the gods had heard our prayers.

A week after the sacrifice was made, the workers at the creek sent by the state government for inspection lamented and said the oil in the well had dried up.

The people of Oloibiri celebrated and offered homage and appraisers to the gods of our land for taking away the curse from their land. The grass became green again, the rivers became clearer as healthy fishes could be seen again, our people became loving, and Oloibiri was great again.

Our land soon welcomed missionaries which exposed us to a closer relationship with the white man's 'GOD'. We have been hearing of the influx of these missionaries at Nembe and other towns around the Delta.

Our people got interested and curious too, most especially the youths and children of our land and before long the people of Oloibiri were all receptive to these missionaries who brought all the oil explorers promised and even more, at no cost. All these happened before my very eyes.

LIBERATED

One cold Tuesday morning, I had just finished my daily duties of sweeping the entire compound and fetching water into the unfilled drums in the compound. I was almost late for school that morning but I knew if I hastened my steps enough, I would be able to meet up with the daily general assembly.

I had a quick shower to fulfil all righteousness of daily hygiene and wore my uniform. Mama gave me some hot Okpa, a special kind of ‘steamed bambara nut puree’ which she had just made and she bade me goodbye.

As I trekked to school which was close by, I noticed a car driving really slow just behind me. I wondered why a car should be slower than the human feet, had I known they were up to something. As usual I thought it was just an old pervert behind the wheels trying to woo me.

I was indifferent anyway; I was only interested in making it to school on time for I woke up a little late. As I continued my stroll, the car increased its pace a little and now it was moving at my pace.

“Hello pretty.”

The middle-aged dark man asked. As I looked into the vehicle, I noticed there were two men in the vehicle. I ignored his call and continued my walk to the school, then, the other man sitting on the passenger’s corner said, “We have money, beauty we are capable.” I turned to him to give him a stern look, then I noticed someone lying down at the back seat. I immediately thought, “these must be rapists.”

I hastened my pace but they swerved me off the street into the bush with their vehicle. As I tried to avoid been hit by the vehicle, my leg got stuck in a muddy pothole.

Immediately, the man on the seat beside the driver and the man at the back seat came down and bundled me into the boot. It was easy for them to take me off for the short cut which I followed to school was often a lonely road. The road was a bad one, thus making a few people to take that route.

Suddenly, I was in a dark space, I tried to shout but that made no sense for I felt no one could even hear me. For a long while, I only tossed and turned as the vehicle passed through a rough route. Slowly losing my breath, I eventually fainted out of exhaustion and panic. It was dark when I was resuscitated back to life.

This happened when one huge looking man poured a bucket of cold water on me. Suddenly, I recognized the voice of the driver of the car who had connived in kidnapping me as he said, "Mama, na the girl be dis." (Here is the girl). I turned to him and my thought was right.

As he noticed me staring at him, he used his boot to kick my face and told the middle-aged woman to handle me with caution for I was very stubborn. While bleeding from the kick I had just received, I saw the madam dip her hand in her handbag and gave the group of men bundles of cash. They then thanked the woman and left.

Moments later, one young man came and bundled me. As he carried me, I tried resisting and I got countless slaps in return. Unable to bear the pain I gave up and watched him carry me. Again, I thought this must be ritual killers and felt really sober for my mother and the grief she would suffer. This made me break down in tears.

Finally, I was taken to a room, a room with a dim orange light. As I was put on the ground, I noticed that I was in a room filled with girls around the same age as me. I also noticed that in this big room, most of the girls were pregnant. I was confused.

I didn't know what to believe anymore. First, I thought I was about to be gang-raped. Secondly, I had prepared my mind to have my head chopped off and now this, I just didn't just know what to believe.

The two women with trays filled with plates of beans said, "Make una come chop oo." (Come and eat). Then these girls rushed towards them.

One of them shouted, “Wetin be this, make the people wey get belle come collect food for my hand, make the people wey no get belle go meet Auntie Boniface.” (The pregnant women should come and meet her for their food while the others who are not pregnant should meet the other woman for food).

I noticed the food given to the pregnant girls looked more nourished than the other meal for the other girls. We eventually had our dinner. While it was time to sleep, I noticed they kept the pregnant girls in a better room than the other girls.

The rooms for the pregnant girls were well ventilated and had mosquito nets on each bed, while other girls were stuffed together in a room and left to sleep on mats. In total, I counted and noticed we were fifty, with twenty of the girls pregnant. I finally laid on the mat which I shared with one other teenager named Oma.

As I lay down, I asked myself these rhetoric questions, “What am I doing here? What are girls my age doing here? Why are girls my age even pregnant?” For I was only sixteen, what exactly is going on here? As I wondered to myself, I eventually fell asleep in this mishap.

I was awakened with a hot slap from one of the ladies assigned to watch over us by The Madam. She said it was time for morning devotion. Shocked and asking myself if these evil people had any relationship with God. Out of curiosity I went to the big living room with the other ladies.

Their prayer point made me quiver. The matron who led the prayer asked us to pray for more victims, she asked us to pray for the safe delivery of the pregnant teenagers amongst us.

Then came the bomb, the phrase of revelation, the phrase that made me realize that I was doomed, the phrase that finally quenched my thirst and made me realize my mission here. I was bumped when the matron asked us to pray for quick pregnancy after we had been slept with.

Then I sat down on the floor and began to wail, the other girls seemed to be used to it, for they showed almost no reaction. After a few chores here and there, it was time to eat.

Again, we were cheated again, we were given bread and beverage that looked like coloured water, while the pregnant girls on the other hand were made to enjoy themselves.

As the days went on, I tried to get myself acquainted with Oma, my bed mate, she seemed nice and was the only one who seemed to care about my emotions when sad.

We wandered around the compound which was highly fenced and protected with broken bottles. She took me to the mango tree at the back so we could pluck some fruits. We plucked some, sat down and enjoyed these fruits while Oma enlightened me a little about herself.

Oma also opened my eyes to a lot of the crimes that occurred in the compound. She told me that that was her fifth day in the house; she also told me how devastated her mother would be, that is, if she was still alive.

This made her emotional and she began to sob. As I tried to console her, I saw two men wearing singlet and boxers, I knew they were one of the Madam's boys and so I ignored them.

As I did, they approached us and without saying a word to both of us, carried us and we began to scream. I tried to use my sharp nails to terrify the man carrying me, but I'm sure he was used to scratches after all. Robert was his name.

We were dumped on individual beds and before our eyes, we were raped. I screamed my eyes out, I was devastated, I tried to kick the smelly fool but he kept coming closer.

Oma kept shouting, "Please just kill me, kill me, it's better than this, please just kill me." This she said as she cried so bitterly, I was hurt and devastated by this too. We both were kicked out of the room by the macho men.

We staggered our way out for we could barely walk. That day, we said no word to each other all through. It became very clear that I had found a sister and a friend in that turmoil. That day, I was devastated.

Two months later, we were already used to this hell-hole; we ate two times a day and were fast emaciating. I looked very pale. I was worried about Mama, I knew Mama would be lonely, she was abandoned by Papa when she was unable to produce a male child and this made her cling to me so tightly for I was her only child.

I was so pale and encompassed with anxiety. Oma, on the other hand, was no longer my bed mate, she was confirmed pregnant after the rape and was moved to the other room.

One cold afternoon, I had just thrown up for the third time and was very dehydrated and pale. The Madam, sent for a nurse to have me checked on, and she in turn confirmed I was pregnant. I was devastated, I was only sixteen, my life was over in a flash, I was moved to the other room to join the pregnant girls. The other room was such an experience for me.

I was reunited with Oma, and she in turn introduced me to the pregnant girls who later turned out to be very nice and were a set of amazing girls with great character.

During the course of my pregnancy, I met with this lady named Amaka, also from Enugu state just like me and most of us, but what I couldn't tell was if we were in Enugu for I was in the boot all through my journey to this hell-hole.

She opened up about giving birth to 7 children already and how 'The Madam' as fondly called had a deal with most of the girls to release them if they could give her at least twenty babies. Amaka was twenty-three. This made me very devastated. Oma was even more traumatized.

We were just pregnant with our first child, that meant we had a long way to go. Oma regretted coming to Enugu from Lagos to spend the holidays with her grandmother.

Her parents who happened to be prominent people in the society sent her to Enugu to learn and imbibe the rich Igbo heritage after her grandparents complained bitterly of her inability to speak the Igbo language as a teenager. Her coming to Enugu turned sore when her grandmother sent her one evening to go and get some foodstuff from the nearby market.

As we were yet to recover from the shock, Ebube told us that she had given birth to 10 children already. The last time she was pregnant, she gave birth to twins. She said they would have been eleven children, but she once had a stillbirth.

The biggest shock came when we were told that all our children and pregnancies shared the same fathers. Those two beasts who raped Oma and I were the fathers of all our children. These discoveries were shocking, but out of this turmoil, came a great bond.

As we continued our lives as trapped teenagers, we had visitors coming from different parts of the world; they came for the sake of business. They came to buy the babies that we bore.

The male child was sold for six hundred thousand naira while the female child was sold for four hundred thousand or four hundred and fifty thousand Nigerian naira, multiple births ranged from one million and above.

In my heart I wondered what they used the babies for and I couldn't help but fear for my unborn child, even though I hated so terribly the circumstance of becoming pregnant. Like every other pregnant woman, I had my own fair share of morning sickness, such as nausea, vomiting in the morning and most crucial, swollen foot, it was so bad.

One morning, as Oma and I strolled round the compound after breakfast, we saw the madam and some group of men. Out of curiosity we forged ahead to know who those visitors were but this was done with caution.

We took refuge behind water tank close to where the madam was having a conversation with the men. From what we were able to gather, these men were body guards of a prominent politician in Enugu state.

They were sent by their boss to produce three fresh female baby heads and so they were directed to the Madam. The madam was telling them of a man who dismembered the human body for a living, in case they needed his services. What a profession! On gathering these facts, I began to weep, Oma whispered to me silently to gather courage. This I did, as I listened further.

The madam explained to them that there was no baby on board but about seven of her girls would be due for delivery next month. This made us gasp, I couldn't listen further, for I was wailing, Oma covered my mouth with her palms and we were able to quietly go under the mango tree where I poured out all the water available in me as tears.

The next morning, we summoned courage and explained our experiences to some of the girls in our room. That was when the full scope of this dungeon was unraveled. They told us different people came there to buy children for diverse purposes, the most patronage coming from the childless couples and ritual killers. This made us feel very unsafe.

Days passed, and I kept thinking of a possible solution to this mishap. And then there was a revelation one rainy evening.

Elope. Elope. That was what my heart kept telling me. Although it seemed impossible with the high fence and broken bottles, not to even speak of the two macho rapists, the fathers of all our children whom The Madam had put in charge of the gate.

I told my plans to Oma who encouraged me and even promised to join me. We eventually picked Saturday. Saturday seemed to be a good one for it was a day where they gave us an inch of freedom.

The only plan was to pass through the gate when no one was looking, for the fence was too high and the broken bottles at the top made us to forget totally about that option. Slowly but surely, Saturday finally approached.

That Saturday was an unusual day. I would just say God was determined to rescue us all from captivity. The nurse had come to examine the pregnant women, for there was diverse complaints about one problem or the other from some of the pregnant women and so the front of the compound was unusually crowded.

It was filled up with the pregnant girls and some others who came to just show support by watching us.

All these happened as Oma and I watched very closely. Not too long, the macho man in charge of watching the gate was distracted when he saw one of the girls.

This was Priscilla, full chested, tall and beautiful. We always teased her that she was lying about her age. As Oma and I watched very closely, he commanded her to come, we looked at each other with disgust in our eyes, as we watched them both.

He dragged her by the arm to the room he had taken Oma and I to. I asked Oma to quietly follow them to know what they were up to, I also noticed that the key was left on the padlock.

At that young age I understood the power of lust. Oma came back and told me that they would be there for a very long time for he was at it again. I alerted her about the gate, she was excited and we waited for a perfect distraction.

As we watched even more closely, we noticed that the nurse was backing the gate. The Madam and most of the body guards were not in the compound, the macho man put in charge of the gate had been overwhelmed by lust and while the other body guard was in the kitchen giggling with the chef on duty and the other women on duty.

This was a perfect opportunity. I started to sob; my tears were short-lived as Oma told me that it could bring unnecessary attention. Oma asked for what step to take next, I simply told her we would walk to the gate boldly, open it and run out.

That day, we were charged and filled with courage. We were more than determined to come out of that captivity, we wanted to be free. Oma first made the move and I followed.

As we approached the gate and began to unlock, other girls were alerted, and quietly came to the gate as the nurse was distracted, backing us and paying attention to a pregnant girl.

The pregnant girl who was just been checked saw us and almost blew it. I told her in sign language and with tears in my eyes that I would be back with the police.

We opened the gate. We felt so happy, so liberated, and outside the gate seemed like walking into the land of Canaan.

As the last girl with us tried to leave the gate, the padlock fell to the cemented ground, and this alerted the nurse who raised an alarm. We all turned to Olympians and ran for our lives; we ran.

Luckily enough, some motorcyclists were passing across and we shouted 'kidnappers'! We decided that the Eight of us who managed to escape would pair ourselves equally amongst these four motorcycles.

We jumped on it as Oma told the bike men to take us to the nearest police station; the bike men were so charitable not to charge us for their services.

As we raced, we noticed a red mini bus behind us, that was the macho man with the other body guard who was at the kitchen with the chef and the women on duty. I froze. I told the bike man to increase his speed, and we raced for our lives.

This race became violent when the body guards began to shoot at us, the cycle men raced very impressively as we dodged each bullet. We were finally able to get to Obollo Police station, Udenu Local Government Area.

The cyclist drove into the gate which was broadly open, and quite rare. Oma and I came down and ran into the police station. Before we could utter a word to the police at the reception who looked at us with confusion in their eyes, we heard another gunshot and this alerted the officers who immediately took their weapons with them as we all ran out.

Ngozi and the bike man who assisted her were shot, the second pregnant lady on the bike was so lucky to have fudged the bullet. They were the last persons to enter the gate.

The police immediately entered their van and gave the kidnappers a chase. This was done when the kidnappers sighted the officers and decided to use the closest way out.

Some police officers and I rushed Ngozi and the heroic bike man to the nearest hospital while Oma and the remaining girls narrated their ordeal to the officers on seat. Hours later, the bike man was confirmed dead, he was shot on the chest.

Ngozi, on the other hand, was able to survive the gunshot on her laps but this made her go into a premature labour and after some hours, she was delivered of a baby girl.

The state government was informed about this and that same day the dungeon was raided. The remaining girls were rescued at the dying minute. The Madam was at the verge of taking them to another location, they were on their way out already.

The madam was arrested with all her accomplices. The police were also able to arrest the kidnappers who chased us and caused the untimely death of the heroic bike man.

They were all charged to court and jailed. We all were taken to the state house where we were united with our parents and loved ones. Mama was overjoyed to be reunited with me. She was emancipated. This made national news and left many parents emotional. The state government sponsored us all to a notable rehabilitation centre, where most of us eventually gave birth.

I gave birth to a baby boy while Oma gave birth to a baby girl. We were all shortly freed to go home.

Months later, Oma invited my baby, myself and mama over to her family house in Lagos. Her parents promised Mama that they'll fully sponsor my education and take care of my child. Mama was elated.

A year later, Oma and I took the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) test, and we passed. Oma's parents, very financially buoyant, sponsored us both to a University in the United States of America, to study Literature for that was our choice of study.

“This is the reason why, I, Ndidi Okeke is in your midst today, telling this story with the permission of my sister and friend, Oma.”

“I pledge that if I win this competition of the non-fiction short story of the year and the cash prize, I will go back to my country after graduation and work hand in hand with the federal government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to put an end to the baby factory industry currently thriving in Nigeria.

Thank you!