

Praise for Chasing A Mirage

“Chasing a Mirage seems like a fictional story but it is indeed a real life and personal experience of the author's 'journey to and return from hell' which should be read by all.”

Lekan Otufodunrin

Editor, Online and Special Publications, The Nation Newspapers

“Osita's experience as documented in this publication reveals the degree to which young Nigerians and indeed other youths from less developed economies can go to in their quest of “bettering their lives”.

Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi

Executive Director, Nigeria Network of NGOs

“Remarkable! A heartfelt tragic experience of many Nigerians! The Desert journey to overseas has led to nowhere and destroyed many. Osita survived to rescue both life and human resources.”

Gladys Johnson

Business World Newspaper

“Osita has brilliantly told a true life story of his experience as a victim of human trafficking. This book has shed a powerful light into the world of human trafficking. It is a good guide for potential victims, parents and organisations within and across Africa.”

Charles Oshingbeme

Management and Security Consultant

“...a well researched and insightful analysis into the dark world of irregular migration and human trafficking. A must read book for members of the civil society, travelers and the general public.”

Mr. Tony Luka Elumelu

Former Head of Protocols Nigerian Immigration Service and Present Head of Migration Desk Ecowas Commission

“We are encouraged by the personal experience documented here; as this book is released we are confident that it will catalyse more interventions in addressing

issues around illegal migration.”

Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi

Executive Director, Nigeria Network of NGOs

“it's a an interesting piece and very educative too.”

Mr Sunday Ani

Investigative journalist, Sun Newspaper

“An interesting narrative with good value for youths and governments on the African continent about how failure to provide opportunities drives adolescents to other lands in search of better life, leaving them exhausted and sometimes unfulfilled.

The book is an interpretation of the proverbial endless search for the much-sought jewel that is hidden right inside the pocket of a forager.

Osita Osemene's offering will bolster the campaign to harness Nigeria's vast human and natural resources.”

Bolaji D'Almeida

The Guardian

“As we learn from Osita's “chasing a mirage”, it is my belief that the dedication and determination of civil society organizations in Nigeria and across the world to address the growing menace of illegal migration will capture the hearts and minds of governments world over- ensuring that the dignity and rights of every citizen is assured.”

Oyebisi Babatunde Oluseyi

Executive Director, Nigeria Network of NGOs

Chasing a
Mirage
...my search for an oasis

COMRADE OSITA OSEMENE
WITH YVONNE AWOSANYA-ADEFAJO

Copyright © 2012

by COMRADE OSITA OSENEKE and YVONNE AWOSANYA-ADEFAJO

ISBN - 978-978-924-285-6

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review

This book is based on a true life story as narrated by Comrade Osita Osemene. Actual events took place. All characters are as described, but actual names have been changed

Published by:



Wimo Publications

15, Wendy Garuba Street, Arepo, Lagos-Ibadan Express way, Ogun state.

Email – wordsinmotionpublishers@gmail.com, www.wimopublishers.com,

+2348037045815, +2347031229975

Knowledge is power.
Information is liberating.
Education is the premise of progress,
in every society, in every family.

-Kofi Annan
(Former Secretary General, UN)

Contents

Foreword

Chapter 1: Great Expectations

Chapter 2:

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

The Story Continues

Study Questions

About the Authors

Appendix

Foreword written by Chief Olusola

Some of our most effective volunteers at the African Refugees Foundation include former refugees who have attempted to cross the desert through Libya into Europe.

The author of this book Comrade Osita Osemene returned to Nigeria following his uneasy trans-sahara crossing, chasing a mirage. Osita was lucky to be alive to tell his story and we at the African Refugees Foundation are happy to welcome him to join the growing number of peace ambassadors of the African Refugees Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Segun Olusola', written in a cursive style.

Chief Segun Olusola MNI, OFR

Founder / Patron

Foreword written by Prof. Eghafona

Trafficking in human beings is regarded by the world at large as a modern form of slavery, and closely related is human or migrant smuggling. Nigeria has been described as a centre of trafficking and migrant smuggling. Smuggling of Migrants is a crime involving the procurement for financial or other material benefit of illegal entry of a person into a State of which that person is not a national or resident. This book deals largely on a personal experience of being a victim of migrant smuggling. It is a great pleasure and honour to write the foreword to ***Chasing a Mirage...My Search For An Oasis by Comrade Osita Osemene with Yvonne Awosanya-Adefajo.***

According to Aldous Leonard Huxley (Texts and Pretexts, 1932), *Experience is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him. A Nigerian proverb also says ability to learn from the experiences of others is a great wisdom.* Osemene through this book has presented his experience as a lesson for those vulnerable to migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons. The book is a firsthand experience of the author on the lure to migrate. It serves as awareness for the many vulnerable in the Nigerian society, as it vividly highlights some of the dangers encountered on the long dangerous and tortuous journey to the purported Eldorado.

Being a victim of illegal migration and trafficking in persons has a lot of horrendous disadvantages, some of which are brought to light in this book. Some of the difficulties are: exploitation by ruthless entrepreneurs; not getting any job except in the sex industry; being *illegal* and in constant fear of deportation; human rights violations; access to economic and social rights as well as benefits of education and health systems may be denied by host countries; illegal migrants are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and end up doing the 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and degrading) that the nationals are unwilling to accept; being victims of xenophobia and racism; blamed first for increase in crime rate in the host country and are easy prey for organ harvesters, flesh traders, drug lords and traffickers.

The author has since established an NGO, *Patriotic Citizens Initiative*, actively involved in the fight against trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling. His true life experience should help reduce the temptation to many youths to fall in the hands of traffickers and smugglers. The book is not lengthy, but it is a detailed and factual experience. It is a particularly interesting document and a welcome addition to the materials on counter trafficking. It is highly recommended as literature for all, especially educational institutions and the youths. We all stand to gain tremendously from this interesting and educative life experience.

Professor (Mrs.) K.A. Eghafona

Head of Department,

Sociology and Anthropology,

University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.

Introduction

Human Trafficking, Child Labour and Irregular Migration are three interwoven criminal phenomena that in recent times have fast transmuted into massive globally co-ordinated crimes. Indeed, they have assumed epidemic proportions with attendant huge societal ills and dire security implications for the human race. This has painfully brought forward the urgent need for the world community to evolve strategic measures to effectively combat these rampaging scourges.

I once wrote in a seminar paper at an International Conference organised by the Model United Nations Club at Mac Donald Memorial International Institute in Port Harcourt on October 16th 2009, that these heinous crimes have more than ever before, threatened the survival of human race, the dignity of mankind and had completely eroded our old time collective moral etiquette and our established family and cultural value systems; as tragic diseases and preventable deaths have been associated with these menaces.

Recent statistics have revealed that in Nigeria, Africa and in a few East European polities, these heinous practices have become a source of immense concern as human elements involved have long begun to evolve dangerous and horrendously diverse strategies to transport themselves for the painful purposes of human trafficking, child labour and prostitution from our domestic domain of limited opportunities in Nigeria and Africa into Europe, the United States of America and other developed economies within the world community. Painfully, the quantum of deaths recorded by our apparently ill informed and gullible youths in their desperate efforts to pass through severely hot Sahara Desert, which are also infested with robbers, armed bandits, human ritualists and wild animals, are pervasively unimaginable and immense.

In order to stem the emerging societal doom arising from these heinous crimes, the Federal Government had made structural

efforts to eradicate it through some rigorous strategies by the Nigeria Immigration Service (**NIS**), the Nigeria Police (**NP**) and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and other related offences (**NAPTIP**). Collaborative efforts from these security agencies have drastically helped to reduce the dangerous tide of human trafficking, child labour and prostitution activities across Nigeria's extremely porous land border frontiers. Apart from the combative efforts of arrests of numerous victims and prosecution of the kingpins who perpetrate these crimes, these agencies have been very effective in the rehabilitation of rescued victims and admonition of numerous vulnerables who would have been further deceived to venture into these heinous crimes. These have been achieved through successful campaign strategies to would be victims (vulnerables) in the local communities by the Nigeria Immigration Service and **NAPTIP**. Indeed, through the prosecution of human trafficking kingpins as a method of strategic deterrence, these security agencies have drastically reduced this heinous scourge that have over the years, pitifully terminated the innocent lives of many Nigerians and African youths. These deaths have regularly occurred due to the senseless rush by irregular immigrants in search of greener pastures across the severely dangerous Sahara Desert and around the fringes and deep divides of the Mediterranean Sea; all in their stupid and desperate efforts to migrate into Western and Eastern Europe and the Americas.

Certainly, with these enormous dangers and collective societal calamity stirring on our faces, Comrade Osita Osemene's astute efforts to frankly, selflessly and patriotically change and reverse this looming societal catastrophe through his awesome handbook: **"Chasing a Mirage... My Search for an Oasis"**, must be immensely and earnestly commended.

Emmanuel Brasca Udo Ifeadi, Ph.D.

*Comptroller of Immigration Service,
Kano State Command.*

*Dedicated to every Nigerian Youth
that genuinely desires a better life,
in the midst of a challenging society.*



Map of Africa to Europe



1

Great Expectations

Today was the best day of my life. It was a brilliant morning, the sun was high, the sky was bright, and I was set to leave. I felt a thrill that was bigger than the excitement that coursed through my veins during my graduation, and a greater surge than I felt during Christmas as a boy. This was the beginning of the rest of my life, today was the day I travelled to *jand*!

Every Nigerian youth looked forward to going to *jand* or *Yankee*, the common expressions used to describe the United Kingdom and America. *Jand* was every Nigerian youth's proverbial paradise - a land where the sun rays had the cooling effect of an air-conditioner; where the government listened to its people, and fulfilled all their wishes; it was place where life was easy, and jobs were in abundance. It was not a land of frustration, but a land where dreams actually came true. I could hardly believe it. Finally, it was happening to me – I was *janding*!

My friends, Andy and Jimi, excitedly waited, and I could

hear their vibrant chatter coming from outside the house.

I grabbed my duffel bag, which was practically empty, but for a change of clothes, and a few odds and ends, copies of my credentials, keepsakes I could hardly part with and pictures of my family.

"Don't pack too many things," I had been advised. "When you get to the UK, you'll get rid of all these rags, and get the *real* clothes you need."

I had practiced my *fu-ne*, and I had rehearsed some new words which I had heard on television, and I was ready to speak through my nose, and sing-speak as the British were known to do. I heard the weather was cold, and sliding below ten degrees Celsius. I had never lived in weather that was cooler than 25 degrees, but I was more than prepared. After combing through the market, I had bought the thickest jacket I could find.

Thoughts flew into my head and all the things I would do once I touched base in *jand* had been clearly outlined; get a job immediately, work for a couple of months, enrol for my postgraduate diploma, get a better job, and within the next two years, look for a nice *oyinbo* lady to marry (at least that would secure my residency). By then, I would have acquired a little fortune, and would send as much money as I could to my parents in Nigeria.

All my life, all I had ever wanted to do was travel out of Nigeria, and live a better life. I was the third in a family of six. My father and mother were both retired teachers, and my father was also a clergyman. I had had a modest upbringing, my parents had given us the best that they could – an education, a sound upbringing, and I looked forward to a time when I could finally take care of them as

they grew older.

But I had gone out to the world with high hopes and aspirations, only to realise that the world was different. Nigeria was a hard country to survive in, and I had virtually hustled all the way. Two years fresh out of the university, and having served my country during Youth Service, I mused over how my country had refused to return the favour. I remembered the hundreds of miles I had to walk to distribute copies of my resumés, and all to no avail. Jobs in Nigeria were as scarce as water in a desert, and the very few jobs were given to people who were well connected, with *long legs* and friends in high places. Unfortunately, I had neither, and I had joined the teeming, desperately seeking unemployed youth.

My preparation for this journey had started months ago, after I realised I was not going to get the job I had always wanted.

The dream job would have been my ticket to a better life, a car, comfortable home, and easy cash to throw around. It never happened.

But I never gave up, and I decided to start a business. I started going across the Nigerian-Seme border to buy cars and sell. I had a stroke of ill-luck, and business started turning sour.

My clients, who I sold cars to, began to owe me, and some of the cars I was bringing into the country were destroyed in road accidents. Gradually, I started running into debt, till my entire business grinded to a halt, with little or no hope of revival.

My only other option had been to travel out of the country, and as I began to make my plans, my friends and

family were supportive, but many other people thought I was crazy. If I couldn't get a *good job*, the question was: how then could I attain all the necessary requirements needed to get a visa, or purchase a plane ticket?

Mr. & Mrs. Esosa had been the answer to a prayer, or so I thought. They were the owners of a visa processing office in Benin City, where I resided. They were learned professionals, both master degree holders, and they had seven graduates in their employ. They certainly looked like they knew what they were doing. I had a chat with them, and a longer telephone chat with Mr. Esosa during his follow-up calls. He sounded convincing, always eager to talk and share several of his success stories that attested to the abilities of his organisation. He assured me that he could secure a UK visa for me, and sort out all my travel arrangements.

The charge was highly subsidised, Mr. Esosa explained. The fee was only six hundred thousand naira. He explained that this would enable him to travel to Lagos, where all the necessary contacts would be made.

Six hundred thousand was a lot of money. My car sales business had folded up, and I had no other source of income. I emptied my bank account, borrowed from people, and scraped every kobo I could lay my hands upon, until I could raise the money.

I made payment, and I had asked how long it would take for the visa to be processed.

One month, I had been assured. And one month sounded fine.

I waited for a month patiently. Nothing. And then, two months, and it began to slide into three months. Still,

nothing, I knew something was wrong.

Mr. Esosa stopped receiving my calls, and would transfer them to his wife each time I called. It took me storming into their office one day, and carting away all their staff before I succeeded in getting my money back.

After my near-loss experience, I wasn't prepared to take any more chances. I was going to go to Lagos myself and sort this out. I had a friend in Lagos, Andy, who I had known since childhood, and I camped in his house while I began to pursue my dream of travelling out of the country. It was hard work - I took passport photographs, spent time in cyber cafes downloading and printing forms online, and hunted for people whose bank statements I could include in my application form.

After a few rejections from the embassy, I realised my chances were pretty slim, and I was in dire need of a miracle.

I had a friend who knew someone that knew someone that knew someone, and through this long social chain of friends, I found a professional agent who I paid handsomely to *organise* my visa for me. It had been so easy, much easier than all the hassles and humiliation of lining up at the embassy. I just paid a token sum, and I didn't even have to show up! I was virtually sitting with my legs crossed while my agent did all the running around. My agent was working very hard, and he regularly sent me updates on the progress he had made. Two weeks later, I received my passport, with a visa stamp across it. I could hardly contain my joy.

My dream was to arrive, by my 30th birthday, in a country of freedom, and I had decided I would get there. I

knew of course that the streets of London were not paved with gold, but I would work hard. I was a survivor, all through my life I always had a way of surviving, even when things were tough. This was not any different.

Nigerians travelled with nothing but the clothes on their back, and they returned with cars, money and a fortune. I had nothing to my name, no money, no job, but I had all I needed - my green ticket and a stamped entry - a chance to prove to the world that I had what it took.

If I put in half the work I had done in Nigeria into knocking on doors along the streets of London, I knew I'd make remarkable progress.

"You go late o! Time don go!" A voice jerked me back to reality. It was Andy.

I had been staring at the mirror, looking back at the reflection of a clean shaven athletic 5'9 built young man with a slightly round face, and a stubby nose. My dark brown round eyes twinkled with excitement. I was looking right into the face of a man who was about to travel abroad!

"I dey come, jare," I yelled back and I hurried out of my room.

* * *

As I sat in the cab with my friends, Andy and Jimi, heading to Murtala Mohammed Airport, I stared at the roads, in silence. The taxi pulled to a stop as traffic built up ahead. I was saying goodbye to the only life I had ever known, about to embrace a new one, but I had no regrets

whatsoever; I was not going to miss anything in this country.

What was there to miss? I stared at the beggarly-looking children with soulful gazes and faded, dirty clothing. They ran in traffic, and tried to get the attention of commuters; I looked at a young man who had balanced a plastic basket of fizzy drinks on his head, running in the streets, trying to sell his wares, and another man with a tie, who had been well beaten by the midday sun, and was trekking and profusely sweating. Even the traffic warden that conducted the traffic was looking lean, and hungry. I heard that in the UK, the police men dressed as well as bankers, and were better paid!

In the UK, everything worked, so I had been told. Nothing was amiss. There was never power failure, or corruption; it was an error-free society. Nigeria, on the other hand, was a complete opposite, an aberration of the norm, and a representation of everything that UK was not.

Being born a Nigerian, and in Nigeria was the greatest mishap known to befall anyone, so I thought. When there were countries like America, and Australia – why had my fate fallen on this side of the world? My potentials and my talents were being wasted in this country.

I suddenly felt dwarfed as a towering and oppressive jeep pulled up by the shrivelled taxi I was sitting in. The jeep was driven by a young man, no more than twenty nine, the evidence of his *chopping life* - full cheeks, a content, relaxed look on his face, a Rolex dangling on his wrist, and a beautiful damsel that looked she had walked right out of a Hollywood movie, seated next to him.

Kai! This guy na my mate o...

It was only in Nigeria where things like this happened – only a select few *enjoyed* and rode on the wings that money could buy, while the masses languished in poverty, seeking for solace from every possible angle.

I looked again at the young man in the jeep, and a satisfactory smile crept on my face. Soon, I would be like him. In a few more years, I would come back to Nigeria, and I would ride an even bigger jeep; and I too would *oppress*, the way I was being oppressed.

As we got to the airport, I jumped out of the taxi, clinging unto my bag, with my friends in tow, and I proceeded to check in.

I moved straight to the check-in point. There was a maddening juxtapose of people - crying babies, teenage girls hopping about in fancy clothing, and elderly men struggling with large suitcases.

. "If you are not travelling, please step backwards," an airport official spoke loudly and clearly.

More than half of the crowd moved away, just as I had expected – most of the people in the airport were friends and family, like Andy and Jimi, who had come to bid their loved ones farewell.

Andy and Jimi stared at me in envy, longing crept into their eyes. I could almost read their minds, and I knew they wished they could trade places with me.

I knew the feeling. I had been in their shoes countless number of times; I had escorted so many people to this very airport, waited for them to walk through the departure lounge, wave goodbye till my hands hurt, and

leave with the same disappointed feeling that I was still stuck in this country – a mini-version of hell. But today was my turn. I smiled, broadly.

My ticket was still in my hands. I got out my passport and I headed towards the airport official.

"My brother, abeg, please help me," I began. "I'm travelling to the UK, what do I need to do?"

A warm smile spread across his face. "Welcome sir," he greeted. "What flight are you going with?" He looked at my ticket, and nodded. "It's Virgin Nigeria. You're in the right place. Where is your luggage?"

"Here," I tapped the bag hanging across my shoulder.

"You travel light," he teased. "Let's weigh it to be sure."

I placed the bag on a scale.

"It's okay. 9 kilograms..."

"O boy, wetin dey happen?" Andy asked, across the barricade.

"The guy sey my load small," I replied.

"Space still dey your box o... Make I fold myself put inside?" Andy asked jokingly.

Pockets of laughter erupted after his joke. I heard the sound of a rich, content laugh, filled with authority and promise, and I was surprised that it had come from me. Everything about me was already changing, even though I hadn't stepped out of Nigeria, it surely felt like I was already living a new life.

The airport official showed me where to join the queue and wait for my turn. My travel documents were going to be checked. When it got to my turn, I stood at the counter,

and a petite lady with large eyeballs looked at me and smiled, and asked warmly. “Your passport and ticket?”

I handed my passport and ticket to her promptly.

There was a man with his wife and family of three children who were behind me, and I looked at the children, they were between the ages of eleven and seven.

Dis man de enjoy, o! I thought to myself. His life was settled, and his children would never have to suffer for life.

The lady behind the counter scanned through my documents. “Your first time?” She asked me.

Was it that obvious? I wondered. I nodded and smiled.

She looked through, and handed them back to me, her smile still in place. “Have a safe trip.”

Her words were like music to my ears. *Na me be dis?* I was on my way to the UK, but first I had to hand over my papers to a man behind the next counter.

He was tall and lean, and he did not smile at all. “Your passport please,” in a low voice, he made the request.

I handed him my passport, and he took it from me. I smiled politely. He did not respond. His eyes scanned my passport, and looked back at me. “When did you get this?”

“What? The passport?”

“Yes, your passport...,” he looked through the pages until his eyes rested on the UK visa stamped proudly on it. His eyes remained there, “...and your visa.”

“A few days ago,” I responded, and I noticed he reached for the telephone, punched in a number and was speaking

in a low voice. As much as I strained my ears, I couldn't quite make out a word of what he was saying.

When he had finished, I asked him, "Is there any problem?"

"There is no problem," his face remained placid, and expressionless. "Just a few things you'll have to resolve with the British High Commission. Just step aside."

"What about my passport?" I asked him.

"Don't worry, I'll attend to you soon. Just step aside, please."

I moved aside as the queue went on, and I stood for a while.

I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes afterwards, the queue was gradually thinning out, but I still hadn't been attended to. The plane was scheduled to leave in less than half an hour, and I was getting agitated.

The airport official who had helped me with my luggage walked over to me. "You're still here?" He asked.

"*I still dey here o,*" I chimed. "Your people said I should wait to see someone from the British High Commission."

"Who said that?" He asked me, lightly.

I tossed my head in the direction of the man behind the counter. He was busy, bent over, checking other passengers' documents. Suddenly, the airport official's smile vanished and a shadow glinted in his eyes. "That is serious. What happened?"

I was taken aback by the instant change in his demeanour. I had not realised there had been a problem. My confidence began to wane, gradually, and my lips

stammered the words, "I gave... ga...ave my passport to the man behind the counter, and he asked me to wait for a while."

"Where did you get your visa from?" The official asked.

It was a silly question, I thought to myself, but I replied, "From the UK embassy," Where else could I have gotten a visa?

His words were spoken in very low undertones, and I had to strain to hear them. "*Na arrest dem wan arrest you so...*"

Arrest me? What had I done? I stared in confusion. "But he's with my passport..."

"You are still arguing, *you wan go jail?*" were his final words. "You can't travel with your passport... it must be fake, or the visa must be fake."

I noticed the armed police that approached, and he walked away from me quickly, as if to avoid being implicated.

My head was swirling. I couldn't focus properly, but there was something I needed to do, and I needed to do it very quickly. Disappear immediately!

Not wanting to cause any distraction, I wove my way deftly through the crowd of travellers who were preoccupied with getting on the queue, and melted into the stream of people that were moving about in the airport. I made my way to the exit, too much in a hurry, and I didn't even wait to alert my friends, who were not in sight anymore.

I hurried out of the airport, a shadow of the man who

had walked in. This couldn't be happening to me! I was so close! Why was my luck so bad? How could I come so close, only to be told that I had been given a fake visa? I felt like weeping and getting hold of the man who had messed me up.

“*Osita, wetin happen?*” I heard Andy's voice calling after me.

I turned, and saw him following closely behind, bewilderment impressed on his face. I didn't respond. I needed to get as far away from this airport as quickly as possible.

My perfect illusion had been destroyed; my dream of a new world had just disintegrated into a million and one pieces.



2

An Unexpected Alternative

I stared at the white ceiling boards above me.

I was lying on a lump of foam, trying to do everything I could to stop myself from lapsing into a state of uncontrollable grief. My eyes moved around in slow circles, trailing the lazy rotation of the rusted ceiling fan blades. A tear threatened to fall, and I didn't hold it back as it rolled down my cheek.

It had been one week since my near big-break, and I was still yet to recover from the disappointment of having my hopes dashed.

“This is nonsense,” I kept repeating over and over. “*Wibich kin tin be dis? Why me? Why now?*”

The blow that had been dealt was massive. To think that I had pictured myself in the UK, and all that had stood between me and *jand* was getting on the flight. I couldn't believe I was still in Nigeria, stuck with the same old dysfunctional system, the dirt, the poverty; the sinking

feeling that I would fail if I remained, and that I will die unsung if I didn't get out when I could.

It was difficult to smile these past few days. I had lost my drive, my spirit, and zest for life, and it appeared my world was crashing all around me. I had to force myself to do anything – force myself to eat, will myself to get out of bed, and tell myself that I needed to forge ahead.

Barely a month ago, I had been an extreme optimist, and had put so much faith in my travel agent; the thought of not succeeding had not even crossed my mind. Now, I was back to Benin City, relegated to my home.

Two years ago, I had rented a two bedroom flat, and when my younger brother and sister gained admission into the university, they moved in with me, and stayed in one of the rooms. My house was situated in Osasogie, a relatively busy part of the ancient city of Benin, close to the university campus.

After I had announced my travel plans, my sister had began to make preparations to move into my room. I would never forget the expression in her eyes when I returned from Lagos with the news that I was still in town. She had moved into my room, and remodelled it to suit her needs, but sadly, she had to move out when I returned.

My room had become a prison of some sort. The only time I came out was when everyone else had left the house, and I would scout through the kitchen, and eat anything I could find, and return to the solitude of my room, before anyone arrived.

I couldn't show my face on the streets, or my regular hangouts. I had told everyone that had cared to listen that I was going to the UK, and I wasn't coming back home till I

had made it big. How could I ever face them? Everyone thought I was already in the UK. I hated Nigeria even more.

I rose to my feet. I couldn't let myself remain down like this, I had what it took to fight this – if anyone could succeed, it was me. If I had succeeded as a man-o-war coordinator, and managed to remain standing after all the tasks I had been involved in, then I could do this.

A telephone call from Lagos changed everything. It was Andy.

“Ol’ boy, how far now? You still wan cut out?” Andy was one of the few who knew the truth about what had really happened.

“Of course na,” I sighed in exasperation. *“After everything I’ve put in. There’s nothing left in this country. Nothing is working... business no gree work, job no gree come... and I must make it in life, true to God.”* I lowered my head. My temple pulsed with the same passion I felt on my inside.

“Sorry o,” Andy consoled. *“At least your own still better. I know one guy wey don enter plane finish. E don sidon for plane, before police arrest am.”*

“It was God that saved me from jail, o!” I remarked. *“Remain small, na jail I for dey now...”*

“I get one friend, sha...” Andy hesitated with his words. *“He wan travel go Spain...”*

“Another friend again?” I was tired of all the disappointments I had faced, and I was not ready to launch into uncertainty again.

“This one na authentic,” Andy told me. *“His senior brother dey Spain, sef...”*

“Spain...” I had never really thought of going to Spain. What was in Spain? “Spain – I don't know o.” My dreams had included *jand* or *Yankee*, but I unsure of what a country like Spain would have to offer.

“*Spain no too bad*,” he quipped. “*You fit cross over go America or London from there*. Nigeria is the big problem. Once you can cross our borders, you can cross over to anywhere you want to go... it's easy.”

I weighed the options mentally. Spain or anywhere else was certainly better than the frustration I faced day in, day out by remaining here in Nigeria.

“So...” impatience drifted from the earpiece.

I realised he was waiting for a response. “I'm interested,” I started. “At least, let me see the guy first.”

“*No wahala, you fit travel to Asaba?*” He asked me.

I laughed shortly. “*No shakings... I fit travel anywhere.*”

Two days later, I was in Asaba.

My parents also lived in Asaba, and I used the opportunity to see them. I got into Asaba at about eleven in the morning.

My mother and father were home as usual. My father was poring through the pages of his old well-read bible, and my mother sat, absorbed in the television, when I arrived.

My mother's eyes twinkled with warmth, and she greeted me with a warm embrace. “Osita, you are here.”

It had been a while since I had seen my parents.

“Where is Johnny?” I asked.

“You know your brother – he is playing football, as usual,” my mother quipped.

“Ah Mummy, Johnny's football will take him far o,” I teased.

The look on her face was not so convincing, “I pray so o...” her voice trailed. “Everything he does this days, it's football.... one day, maybe his football will take him to London!”

Her words brought back the pain of my recent experience. The last time I was in Asaba, I had come to bid my parents farewell. I had told them I was on my way to the UK. I had made promises of bringing them back wonderful presents, and doing them proud. As I thought about it, I suddenly remembered my misfortune. My crest fallen face was a dead giveaway of the emotions that racked through my head.

My mother had read my thoughts, and her eyes were soft as she spoke. “It's okay, Osita,” She consoled.

“Mama, I was this close,” I began. “I was very close...” I shook my head sadly.

“God works in mysterious ways,” my father reminded me. “Don't let it bother you. I know He has a plan.”

My father was an Anglican priest, and he had all his life ministered in the local church. Today, he was right on point, and his words provided a cushion my heart was in desperate need of.

“I'm going to see someone here in Asaba,” I told them. “I

want to see if I can try again.”

My parents looked at each other.

“Okay,” my mother began. “It sounds like a good idea.”

“Just be careful,” my father advised. “There are so many tricksters and fraudsters in this business.” His forehead twisted into a mass of creased lines. “God will go with you.”

I nodded. I could smell the *Nsala* soup wafting, and teasing my nostrils. My mother had been a home economics teacher for over twenty years, and she cooked so well, we often said that she could make food from anything.

“Mummy, you're cooking my favourite again,” I started, and my nose followed the aura trail to the kitchen. I could already imagine that to accompany the *Nsala* would be a hot bowl of *akpu*, and there would be strands of dry fish floating in the soup.

“Osita!” My father interrupted my thoughts. “Look at your cheeks, you should do and marry so that you will have someone to be cooking for you like this.”

“Don't mind your father,” my mother began. “Follow me my son, come and eat something.”

Two hours later, I had eaten a warm meal, rested, showered, and I set out to trace the address of the person who could become my ticket to another life.

I knew Asaba well, and it was easy to locate the address.

I had grown up in Asaba, and had lived here for a greater part of my life. I knew this town too well. The streets were not tarred, the homes were modest, old model cars drove past occasionally, and everything was pretty much simple.

The streets of Asaba were agog with life, as half clothed children danced with fascination in some corners, while others played a lively game of football.

As I walked past them, I couldn't take my eyes off them, or notice that many of them were barefoot, and had probably not had a descent meal all day. I shook my head sadly – despite the hardship, their parents had resorted to fate. But no, not me! I was much better than this, and I had too much on my inside to wallow in waste and decay in a country that didn't even know I existed.

I finally located the address of where I was going. There was no fence, but a small building, surrounded by a large enclosure of empty land, and a sturdy tree with large leaves. During the day, I imagined that this would be a perfect spot for children's hand games, and for wives to gossip while they bent over doing their chores; and at night, under the rustling leaves and the shadow of moonlight, it would become a lovers' secret rendezvous, or a spot for elderly men to sit and drink gin into the wee hours.

But as I approached, there was no one there, except a woman seated on a small stool with a wrapper tied over her huge body frame. Folds of fat hung from her under arm, and her face was haphazardly dotted with large pimples. She appeared angry, her head bent over, as she muttered into the sand upon which her bare feet were firmly planted. I approached her cautiously.

“Good afternoon ma,” I started.

. “*Yes, who you dey find?*” Her eyes widened, and I retreated.

“I am... looking for... Dada,” I stammered.

The woman hissed loudly, and she rose to her feet, shaking her head. As she looked at me, her expression softened. “*Bo*, my son, just wait...”

“Mama, is anything the matter?” I asked her.

“*I just tire for this country, jare*,” she groaned.

I watched her as she walked in slow, tired steps towards the house. At least we had something in common – we both wanted a change. But while I was taking steps to do something, she would probably remain here for the next fifty years, complaining about the same old thing.

I waited for a while, seated in the large space where a strong tree with large branches stood. I watched the energetic stream of chicks huddle around their mother hen, as she championed the search of their daily bread, scratching the red soil, looking under little rocks and foliage, in the hopes of finding seeds, only to be met with disappointment. In Africa, everyone had to hustle to survive, and the chickens were not left out. I had heard that in *jand*, everything was so great, and even the animals did not have to hustle. I heard there were animal rights too, and that people could actually be arrested, and jailed for infringing on the rights of chickens and goats, and the likes. *Na wa, o!* If the *oyinbo* men could treat me like they treated their chickens, my life would be much better, and more rewarding than it had been, so far.

Dada came out of the house, a young smiling man with a sway in his walk. He looked much younger than I had

expected. He was tall, skinny, with bulging eyes, and his head drowned in a baseball cap. He was dressed in faded jeans, and a t-shirt. His shoes were polished, he looked well put together. He looked like someone I could trust.

"Bros, how you dey?" He shook my hand. His eyes met and remained rooted on mine.

"How far?" I asked him. Dada was confident, and still smiling. Despite his age, he clearly knew what he was doing. I liked that about him.

"Welcome," Dada looked at me, smiling again. I realised his smile came second in nature to him. *"How was your journey? Hope sey stress no dey?"*

"No stress," I started. *"Asaba is my home land..."*

I heard the nagging of an angry woman coming from the house. The elderly woman came out, looking angry, and her emotions were directed at Dada.

"Dis woman don start her wahala," he began.

"You dis boy..." she lapsed into a whiff of Igbo, and she waved her fist angrily in the air.

"Abeg, make we move go another side," he led me away. *"That's why I need to get out of this country."*

He led me into the house, through a darkened corridor to a room. The room was a small murky jungle of books and clothes. The walls were darkened, and in the middle of the room was a rectangular lump of mattress. There was a kitchen stove at a far end, with a couple of plastic plates, a small pot, and a lantern.

He pulled up a stool for me to sit, and he dragged out a brochure from a rucksack and hurled it in my direction. *"Oya..."*

I caught the brochure, and unfolded it inquisitively. It had obviously once been a glossy magazine but it had been read and re-read, owing to the creases and brown-stain lines running across it. On its front cover, was a giant-sized cursive lettering - *Spain*.

"I'm leaving for Spain in three weeks," he started.

"Three weeks?" That was very close.

"And I heard you're interested in going too," he paused.

I took that as my cue to say something. "I'm interested, but I'm... just thinking of Spain... *which kin country be dat one?*" I asked him.

"*Ol' boy, any country better pass this hell, o*" he began. "There are jobs there, men..."

"*Na English dem dey speak for there?*" I asked him.

"*No, na Spanish, but the language is easy, e easy pass all these our languages,*" he started. "And there are good jobs. *You fit just work for a few months, then start your own business.*"

I nodded my head in satisfaction. This sounded like what I wanted to do. It made so much sense. "So, how do we get there?"

"It's easy. There is a travel company that is getting the visa for me." He enthused.

"I don't trust all those agents," I started, remembering the bitter experience I had just gone through with Mr & Mrs Osaro.

"Relax, it's not the same, besides, I'm also going too..."

"*You dey travel, too?*"

"*Before, nko? Who no like better thing?*"

That piece of news was reassuring. With Dada also going, I could guarantee that this was a legit deal, and there would be no surprises like I had received from the other agents. But there was something else I was also wondering about. “But I thought you're in your final year in the university?” I had assumed he was going to wait till he graduated the following year, before travelling out of the country.

“Abeg leave that one, school cert for jand better pass PhD for Naija,” he remarked. *“I fit fashi four years of university for opportunity for Spain.”*

“That's a sacrifice,” I stated. Unbelievable! He was trading his degree for his trip to Spain. I pondered over the consequences of his decision, and thought about my own life. He had a point. I had a university degree, a youth service certificate, and I had combed through the streets in search of a job, and what exactly had I achieved? Absolutely nothing; the years I had spent in the university trying to get a degree had been wasted. I was getting even more convinced. If this young man was ready to throw away four years in a university, then this was something to think twice about. I was already convinced – this was legitimate – this was the real thing.

“You'll just pay a small fee, and the agent will do everything for you – visa, passport, plane ticket, accommodation...”

“Ah-ah, this one is serious,” I shifted in my stool, interest grew in my eyes. “How much for all these things?”

“Two hundred and fifty,” he said.

“Thousand?” I asked, eyes widening.

“Yes o,” he looked puzzled at me. “Is it too much?”

“250k no be small money na, no be beans o,” I started.

“*That one cheap o...* calculate plane ticket alone, then visa and passport,” he started, “*and this one na authentic.*”

“*You sure?*” I asked him.

“*I sure?* They are already processing my own. I'm leaving in three weeks,” He looked at me. “This is a chance of a life time, and the agents will look for a range of jobs for you – and you will pick the one you like. At least, with your certificate you can get office work.”

“Like how much will I earn?”

“How much do you want to earn?” He asked me. “What a graduate is earning here – multiply it by ten.”

My eyes widened. I would be compensated for all the grief I had suffered; this was what I had been waiting for all my life.

“This is serious,” I was astonished at this incredible offer.

“You know, these Europeans, they don't have so many people wanting to go to their country, and their people are lazy,” Dada started. “There are jobs everywhere, they would even be begging you to work.”

“So, how many hours is the flight?” I asked him.

Dada paused. “It will take us a week to get there...”

“One week?” Confusion spread across my face, and traces of my excitement began to fade.

“Relax, it's a tourist journey,” he explained. “*You don go on tour before?*”

I shook my head.

He proceeded to clarify. "They will take us on a tour drive through Niger, and would lodge us in hotels as we are going on the journey," he started. "It's about seven days, we would be fresh when we get there."

"I don't need all that," I had no interest in a holiday ride. I wanted to make all the money I could first, afterwards I could go on all the holidays I wanted. "Let us just go straight to Spain..."

"*Ol' boy, e be like sey you like suffer head,*" he laughed. "This one is special, they will look for the job for you before you get there, and when you get there, they will settle us – accommodation... a good job, and if you're hardworking, we'll start earning hard currency."

"*These people good o,*" I clasped my hands together. This was a great deal.

"And then, from there, you can always cross over to *jand* or *yankee*," he started. "It's very easy."

It sounded so great. This was the best offer I had ever heard. No one even needed to know I had gone to Spain. And in a matter of weeks, I could move on to the UK.

"People are making money in that country o..." he chimed.

"But the language," I looked into his enthusiastic eyes, hope fading from mine. "How will I learn the language?"

"*No be language? How Chinese man dey manage for Nigeria?*" He asked jokingly.

He seemed to have answers to every question, and despite his young age, he was wise, and had obviously done his research.

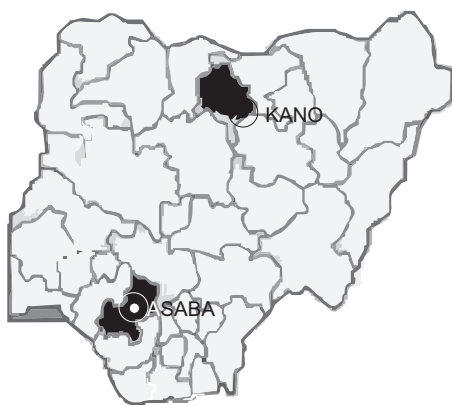
Two hundred and fifty thousand naira was all that

separated me from my dream out of Nigeria. I didn't know I had spoken aloud until Dada responded.

“The money is even small,” he said. “Some people are paying like five hundred thousand naira for this same deal. Many people are going... and they are coming back with plenty money.”

This was the best deal I had heard so far. I flipped through the pages of the crumpled brochure and stared at the pictures – the high rising buildings, the beautiful sandy beach, and I could picture myself standing in one of those offices, looking down at the beautiful town of Madrid or Barcelona, or running along the beach. This was it – my dreams were about to be realised.

I had received my second chance.



3

The Journey Begins

It was a chilly morning. My fingers were cold, and I breathed in the cool air of the early harmattan. It was barely 5am, the morning was yet to fully awake in sunshine, and the town of Asaba was asleep. For the second time, I said my silent goodbyes, but it won't be long, I resolved. I would be back soon, to bring to my family the succour they longed for. I would build a house for my parents, and ensure that they tasted the fruit of my hard work.

I couldn't believe it had only been two weeks ago, when I had told my parents about my plans, and although I was almost bursting with excitement over my new life in Spain, my parents had initially found it hard to understand.

“But Osita, I thought you wanted to go to UK?” My father had raised the first objection.

“Spain?” My mother had interjected. “Where is that one?”

“It's in Europe,” I had replied, explaining to them again about the opportunities that existed in Spain, and my plans

to travel to the UK from there.

I don't think they had really understood, but the animation in my eyes had been so bright and highly contagious, they had caught the *I-love-Spain* bug easily, and it had been concluded. They had given me their blessings.

Once I had decided to go to Spain, there was only one thing that separated me from my dreams. I had to come up with two hundred and fifty thousand naira.

With a two week deadline, it had not been easy to raise the money, and I had knocked on every door available. I had gone in search of the agent who had given me a fake passport and visa, and had managed to retrieve some of my money. My mother had been a blessing, and had raised as much money as she could in support of my trip. I couldn't wait to return and show my appreciation.

She deserved a nice warm house to show off to her nosy distant family members, and those neighbours of hers. I would do more for her, clothe her in the finest of fabrics, and make her the envy of every mother in Asaba.

With the money paid, my travel plans had been finalised, and now, I was set to leave.

For the second time in less than one month, I was bidding my parents goodbye, and this time, I silently prayed nothing would go wrong. I packed my bag once more, and carried it into the living room, where my parents awaited.

My father had a chewing stick stuck in his mouth, and he patted me in a fatherly embrace. My mother's face was bright with hope, and her eyes, watery with a mix of pride and reluctance.

She was happy that I was making the trip that would change all our destinies, but then again, she was a mother, and in her eyes, her baby boy was going out to a new world to face a new life, alone.

“Don't worry mum, I'll be in UK in less than one month.” I reassured her with an easy smile. “You know me now, *I'm a sharp boy...*”

My mother was pacified with my words, and her worried face curved into a happier stance, as her smile spread into her eyes.

I even planned to do better than that, I planned to be in the UK in less than one month, and make her proud, and make them all happy.

The final words between my parents and I had been a lengthy prayer, led by my father.

“My God, I commit my son into your hands,” his words were heavy. “As he is going out, lead him and take him to Spain, and let him find favour with all he meets...”

Dada was ready.

The plan was to travel to Kano, and from there, our journey would begin.

He was dressed in dark blue jeans, and a large shirt with his trade mark baseball cap. He was smiling as usual. He appeared to be relaxed, and I took a cue from him. This was the chance I had been waiting for, I should be happy.

We journeyed to Lagos, and when we got to Lagos, we

had to wait for a night bus to Kano.

It was a long ride, and although travelling was one of my hobbies, the journey to Kano was tiring. I had been sitting in the vehicle for over ten hours without a single stop. Most of the passenger in the fourteen-seater vehicle were sleeping, but my eyes were wide open. I could never fall asleep when someone else was driving, but the hours were telling on me, I ached for rest, and the muscles of my eyelids were working against my will.

I turned to Dada who was sleeping, and I nudged him, “These guys should have flown us to Kano,” I started. “Kano is far...”

Dada opened his eyes, looked around, and he responded: “When we get to Kano, we will take a flight.”

Dada seemed more eager to get back to sleep, than answer any more of my questions, and I let him be, and I settled into the seat of the bus and tried to relax with the easy bobbing of the vehicle. I stared out through the window, and all I could see was the pitch darkness that covered the land. I would have wanted to see the open fields and mountains that I had heard so much about. This was a tour I was certainly not enjoying, but I was sure it would get better. I struggled to keep my eyelids open, but it was a losing battle, which I eventually lost.

My eyes didn't open until the first rays of the sun broke through the rich clear clouds. I sat up, and looked around, and the sight of tall rising rocks and open fields, greeted me.

My limbs desired rest, my stomach grumbled, and my body felt sticky. I needed a bed, some food and a bath.

The bus slowed down, as it pulled into the park, and finally came to a halt. We had arrived into Kano.

As everyone disembarked from the bus, and made for their luggage, I got out my luggage and Dada's while he went to meet with our agent representative in Kano that had been awaiting our arrival.

Minutes later, I saw Dada walking towards me with a man in tow. The man was pudgy and had a rough beard. I had expected a more groomed official, as Dada had spoken highly of the organisation.

The man slapped my hand, and saluted me in a slurry accent, "*Sanu*, How are you doing?" And then, he pulled Dada aside.

He spoke with Dada for a minute or two, and afterwards, Dada came to meet me. "We need to buy provisions," he said.

"Provisions? What for?" I asked him.

"No, we need to pick up some other supplies, nothing big," Dada went on.

This was not what I had expected, but well, maybe I was being too hard and expecting too much. The trip had been highly subsidized, and I should give the tour organisers a break. I asked Dada if he had collected our flight tickets from the agent, but he told me we were going to take our flight from Morroco. We would ride in a luxury bus, he told me, and everything would be provided.

When we went shopping for supplies, to my amazement, Dada bought garri, milk, sugar, spaghetti, and geisha.

Something was not right here. I had a terrible feeling in my gut.

“Why are we buying garri?” I asked Dada. “What exactly is going on? I thought we were meant to be in a luxury bus and the organisation was paying for all our meals?”

“*Osita, chill out, now,*” Dada started.

“*Chill out, ke?*” I looked him in the eye. My face was contorted, and my voice pitch, raised. I walked up to the agent, and demanded quickly, “Where is the luxury bus that is meant to take us?”

“*You pay for luxury bus?*” He slurred, and looked away.

What did he mean by that? I was about to respond, when I felt a gentle nudge. It was Dada. “*Abeg, make we talk.*”

My eyes met with Dada's and he signalled with his eyes that we should move away from the agent. As he took a few steps aside, I reluctantly followed him.

My mind was agog, thoughts moving about in hurried frenzy. I had spent a lot of money, sacrifices had been made by my family, and I had been travelling for two days. My family probably thought I was half way to Spain, they did not have the faintest idea that I was still on Nigerian soil.

“What is it Dada? I don't like the stunt you're trying to pull... *I resemble small pikin?* What is he talking about Dada? Didn't I pay for the luxury bus?” As I barraged him with questions, Dada lost his easy smile.

“Okay, let me just tell you the truth – the money was actually one hundred thousand naira...”

“Then, where is the rest?” I asked him.

"My money no complete, so I joined your money to complete my own..." he confessed.

I started hotly at him, my hand twitched, as I resisted the urge to send it harshly across his face. "What nonsense is this, now?" I asked him. "What's the meaning of this?" I walked away from him. Why were things being so difficult? Now because of Dada's dishonesty, I was not getting the luxury bus ride.

I was confused. I didn't know what to do. Should I go home? Or just keep moving?

"We'll travel to Morocco by road through Niger Republic, and take a flight to Spain once we get to Morocco," he looked at me. "*Abeg, no vex. Sorry. No vex.*"

What was I going to say if I went back home? This would become my second failed attempt at travelling to the UK. My parents would certainly be embarrassed, and I would have lost everything – my money, and a chance to get into Spain. I had lost too much in my quest to travel out of the country. What was it with my ill luck?

"How long is the journey to Morocco, *sef?*" I asked nonchalantly.

"*Na straight journey,*" he started sincerely. "It's like from Lagos to Kano," he went on. "And there are so many people that are travelling that route."

I weighed my options, angrily. I had not planned to travel with so much inconvenience. "*Abeg, abeg,*" I tried to wave his explanation.

"See..." He pointed to the distance, "all those people you are seeing, they are all going..."

I stopped, and observed the different people that moved

around. They were not from Kano, they were a mix of people from different parts of the country - Yorubas, Igbos, Calabars, distinguished by their running marks across their face, the tones in their voices, and the sudden cacophony of languages.

"Biko, my brother," in an undisguisable Igbo accent, a young man had beckoned to a *mallam* selling oranges.

Two light skinned ladies rattled in the unmistakable chatter of Calabar language, characterised with heavy consonants that sounded like the dropping of bomb shells.

Pretty girls talked animatedly, with lingering laughter and wonderful smiles. There were young men like me, whose faces were filled with so much hope and promise; a man in this early thirties, dressed in a suit, was talking on the phone in a notable Itshekiri accent; there were elderly men, and women too, children, and families. These were regular people – from students to white and blue collared working class, to even the retired and elderly. There was only one question ringing through my head - if they could also make the journey, why couldn't I? Why wouldn't I? The question kept repeating, like a broken record, and I looked at Dada, resignedly.

"Are we all travelling together?"

"Yes now," Dada nodded, his eyes still uneasy as he studied me carefully.

I took a sigh. An elderly man was playing with his five year old son, a couple was huddled together, teasingly whispering into each other's ears. If these people could do it, then I also could. "Okay, I'll do it."

Dada heaved a sigh of relief. *"Thank God o..."* he tapped

my shoulder. "*Abeg no vex.*"

"It's okay," I started. I had come this far, and even if it wasn't what I had envisaged, I was confident that I would get to my destination. If all these people could do it, then I could.

In a few hours, the passengers were gathered together, and we huddled into the buses and the second phase of my journey was to begin. I had been journeying around familiar terrain of Nigeria, but now, we were taking the final plunge.

It was not as grand or as overwhelming as the clout that came with travelling in a plane, but we were still leaving Nigeria. I felt a quickening as the bus went past the Nigerian border. I looked back at the Nigerian soldiers we had passed, and content washed over me. I was finally out, I was finally free, and the next time I came back here, I was coming back here different! I was looking forward to a whole new life that lay spread ahead of me.

I settled into my seat, still reeling from the euphoria, and thinking of all the great things I would do before I returned to Nigeria. As the bus drove along the dusty road, I closed my eyes, and willed myself to sleep. It was the most peaceful, blissful dream I had ever had.

We travelled for a few hours before we finally arrived at our destination, a place called Zinder, the first state in the country of Niger. It was my first time *abroad*, but this was

hardly how I had envisioned it.

It was excruciatingly hot, and the sun blazed with more ferocity than I had ever experienced. I had almost exhausted the water I had carried with me. This was tough, and I wondered how long it was going to take us to get into Morocco.

As we got off our stop, I got out of the vehicle, stopping to introduce myself to the pretty girls with whom I had shared the bus ride.

“Hello,” I walked up to them. “My name is Osita,” I told them with an easy smile.

The elder one made the introductions. Her name was Ngozi. She was older, bolder and wise, and her chubby cheeks registered determination to succeed in everything she did. Ada, the younger of the two, had smooth velvety skin, and eyes that were wide with curiosity. Ada giggled at almost everything that happened, or everyone passed by.

We started talking, and I discovered that they were trained nurses and had recently resigned from their jobs in Nigerian government hospitals. Ngozi had three years experience as a nurse, and her cousin, Ada, was just fresh out of nursing school. Their travel agent had already found them nursing jobs in a private hospital in Belgium, and that's where they were headed. Once they arrived in Belgium, Ngozi informed me that they would start working immediately, and she showed me pictures of the hospital.

I looked at the smiling faces of the European nurses and doctors on the brochure, “that's great,” I told them. “I wish you guys the best.” I handed Ngozi the brochure, and she proceeded to tuck it into the folds of her bag.

“Thanks,” Ngozi smiled. She talked a lot about her passion, and her strongest role model, Mother Theresa. She wanted to reach out to the wounded and sick, and bring health to people who couldn't afford it. Ada didn't talk so much, she had a beautiful face, and smiled a lot, but beyond that, she wasn't as determined or passionate about nursing as her cousin.

I told them about my own plans. They weren't as grandiose as theirs, and I didn't have a clearly defined job waiting for me, but I told them about the different offers of jobs I had to choose from, and my plans of starting off a business once I had stabilised.

I enjoyed talking to them. They brought a glimmer to this long, rather mundane journey. I knew I had made some friends, too bad they were going to Belgium. I heard Spain wasn't too far away from Belgium – a few hours' drive apart – and we made plans to hang out together once we arrived at our final destination.

I looked around. There was empty open space, and lots of sand that stretched out endlessly. “When are we getting to Morocco?” I asked someone.

“Morocco?” He looked at me. “This is Zinder,” he paused and he made a mental calculation. “In another three weeks.”

This was a joke. “*Three weeks ke? Na joke, abi?*” I laughed forcefully, but I realised he wasn't laughing with me, and my face straightened.

“It's five days to our next stop, and from there, it is another three days...”

He broke the journey into bits, and explained it to me in details. We were going to hop from one city to another, and

go through the desert, until we arrived at Morocco. I stared at him. Then I went to look for Dada.

Once I found him, I exploded with anger, and shouted. “Dada, you are a bloody liar!”

“What is the matter?” Dada looked at me, with genuine surprise.

“How can you ask me that? This is a desert journey,” I accused him. “We are travelling through the desert. Do you think I'm crazy? Did I tell you I wanted to go to Europe through the desert?”

My fist met his face, and a crunch followed. Dada fell to the floor, his eyes grew dim and he rose slowly to his feet, and charged towards me. I was ready for him, I stood feet wide apart, and firmly placed. As he lunged towards me, I readied myself, about to do more damage, when someone pulled us apart.

“You are mad!” Dada shouted back, holding his cheek, where I had hit. *“You no study geography? You no know sey Morocco na inside desert e dey? Olodo!”*

“Leave me alone to finish him,” I jerked angrily, then I pointed at Dada, “You had better give me back my two hundred and fifty thousand naira!”

“Take it easy,” someone started.

“Which one are you asking for?” Dada asked me, “I've already paid the processing fee to our agent,” Dada told me.

“Which agent? You liar!” I screamed. “You cheated me, you didn't tell me this was how this journey would be,” I wanted to take out all my anger on him. I tried to get free, but the grip around me was tight, and I surrendered to it,

and remained still.

When I had cooled down, they left me alone. This was not how things were meant to be. How could I travel though the desert? This didn't make any sense.

"Why didn't you tell him the truth?" I heard someone asking.

I looked at Dada, the rage had subsided, but the reality of what I had actually gotten myself into dawned on me.

"Guy, you no try at all," I started. *"You no try at all..."* I paused, and walked around in meaningless circles. I dripped with sweat, the heat burned on my brow, this was real, it was not a dream, and I couldn't believe I had landed myself into this mess. I didn't even know what to do. The dream was over, none of my flowery plans were working the way I had imagined, and it was time to pack up, and go home. "I'm going back to Kano!"

A gasp went round, and whispers started. "Going back?"

"I thought you paid two hundred and fifty thousand?" Someone else asked. It was Ngozi, her eyes were fixed on me.

"So? I was wrongly informed," I started, "and this is not what I planned for... I can't just continue this journey when I don't know what lies ahead of me."

"Don't throw money away," someone else advised.

"And if all of us are going, we'll survive," I heard another person say. "It cannot be that bad, it can't be so terrible."

"Look, I'm here with my son, we're going to Spain, there are good schools there, and I can afford to take care of him," an elderly man started. His son clutched possessively to his father's hand. "This journey to Libya is not so bad,

just a few more days in the journey, and I hear that many of our fellow Nigerians have travelled like this, and they have gotten to their destination, and they are doing well. I know God will lead us safely.”

The man who had held me down spoke in soft tones, “I’m a pastor, I’m actually on a pilgrimage to Israel – when I get to Spain, I will take a connecting flight and continue my journey,” he informed. “I know it’s not easy, but we’ll get there. Nigerians are strong people.”

I thought about what they had all said. They were strangers, but we had suddenly become united in our journey, and I realised they had made some solid points. I nodded my head in agreement.

“Naija man be like snail, e dey survive any how, wherever,” the little boy spoke. His father rubbed his head. I marvelled at the wise words the little boy had spoken, and for the first time in a long time, I smiled.

Dada might have lied to me completely about my trip, but these were courageous people who believed they could succeed. Their words were soothing, and they made me believe that I could do so much more than I had realised. This was undoubtedly a dangerous journey, and I remembered the menacing-looking soldiers I had seen brandishing guns as we entered into Niger. This was a whole new world, very different from what I had prepared for, but they had made sense – there was no point in going back when I had come this far. Everyone believed I had travelled to Europe, and I couldn’t return with a second disappointment – I would shatter my mum’s heart, and adventure leapt within me – I wanted to see this journey to the end. This was like another drill in one of the man o

war boot camps I had been a part of for so many years, and I suddenly decided to see it that way. This was going to be a worthwhile experience.

The young boy extended his hand towards me, with an innocent beckoning smile.

“What's your name?” I asked him.

“My name is Temi, and I'm seven years old,” he rapped. “And my teacher's name is Miss Eniola.”

I took his hand, and smiled. Maybe this was not as bad as I had thought.



4

In Zinder

The town of Zinder was like nothing I had ever seen.

There was an endless stretch of sand, and rocks. It was a beautiful natural sight, but sadly, that was where the beauty ended. It was very hot, and there were ramshackle buildings made from wood and mud, scattered all around in little segments.

I was still holding Temi's hand in mine, we were walking behind his father, and heading to a connection house.

A connection house, I had been told, was a place where we would lodge and wait for the next vehicle to arrive. I had heard that there were several connection houses in Zinder. I imagined that the connection house was going to be like a hotel room, then I looked around at the state of the community, and I changed the thought. Maybe it would be more like a dormitory, nothing fancy or elaborate, just decent and manageable living conditions, with bunk beds, just like when I was in secondary school, and a place where we could rest and refresh ourselves for the next journey.

A black Arab led the way, and we followed him and tried to keep up with his long, quick paced steps. He moved nimbly, and effortlessly wove his way around other houses, like he knew this place like the palm of his hand. We had agreed to pay him some money, and he was leading us to a connection house where we would stay.

This had better be good. I needed to throw myself on a soft bed, and just fall asleep. Every nerve in my body ached, and I longed for some rest after the long journey.

We passed a series of make-shift houses built with wooden planks, and mud, but there was nothing that looked close to anything befitting.

The steps of the black Arab became slower, and we stopped, finally. We had arrived at our destination. I made my way to the front, and I saw the large wooden house no different from any of the rest we had seen on our way.

The connection house was literally a very large wooden box with a zinc roof, and this was where I was going to spend the next five days. My heart sunk.

The Arab turned the knob of the door and entered into the house, and other travellers followed him closely, but I stood for a while, still trying to get over my disappointment. My dreams of sleeping on a comfortable bed vaporised like smoky wisps from a burning ember, into the thin air.

I whistled softly under my breath, this was far from the comfort of a warm bed and clean sheets that I had expected, but I encouraged myself. I had seen worse days. All my man-o-war camp trainings had included tracking in the jungle, surviving the obstacles. I had been preparing for an event like this, even though I didn't know it. If

anyone could handle the madness this journey was beginning to unfold, I certainly could.

“I don't like this place,” Temi whimpered softly.

“Don't worry, it would be okay,” I told him, as we walked together through the doors.

As we trooped into the house, there was a sudden quiet that descended, but it only lasted for a few seconds, as the activity and bustle continued in full earnest.

The interior of the house was not so different, it was a long endless stretch away, and there was nothing in the house, except for a crowd of people. It was smoky, dark, and smelly.

There were no beds, nor chairs, nor cemented floors, just the sand beneath our feet, and people sitting, lying, and sleeping on mats, blankets. Someone was cooking right there within the house, without fear of burning the whole place down.

It was like an open dormitory with a mix of men and women. A few men that sat on the floor in a corner, turned from their game of cards, and cast their eyes upon me.

I felt my defences go up, my instincts blaring like a loud radio within me: *Danger! Danger!* I stared back, taking in the hard menacing looks that scarred their faces, and matching their looks with my unbroken stare. I looked around, distracted by the distinct smell of Indian hemp coming from another angle of the room. In the midst of a huddle of people who were doing various things from chatting loudly to singing and clapping their hands. I saw a young man, about my age, with eyes that were stone cold. He took in a deep breath of the wrapped Indian hemp between his shaky fingers.

Temi began to cough, and his father came towards him, and gathered the boy in his arms and left.

I looked around, taking in my surroundings – it was a mixture of all sorts of people – strangers, and friends; family and foreigners. It was like a mini-Nigeria, and though we were in Niger, it surely felt like I was back home in Nigeria. I could hear the different languages, spoken, the intonations, and everything else. I couldn't be certain, but I was sure that there could be nothing less than four thousand people living here.

Everyone settled in. We had to select a place to stay. I chose a portion close to the door, so I could run out first in case anything happened. I stared at my housing quarters for the next five days, a portion of sandy floor. I was surrounded on all sides by different people, and I looked around, feeling a thousand eyes were suddenly watching me. I lay my bag on a vacant spot, punching it till it became softer, in preparation of making it my temporary pillow.

I had survived in worse conditions, and I knew what it was like to struggle for basic amenities – food and water. But I hoped it wouldn't come to that as I looked around at the crowd of people – I looked stronger than most of them, but the desperation and dark hunger that lingered in their eyes made me realise that they would do anything to get what they wanted.

I looked around, to make sure no one was watching, and I pulled out a wad of notes and counted it carefully. I heard someone behind me, I turned around. It was the Pastor who had held me down during my fight with Dada.

“My friend,” he greeted. He was about six feet tall, dark skinned with a husky voice. I could imagine him preaching

on a Sunday morning, with a loud booming voice.

“Pastor,” I responded casually.

“Be careful with your money, don't just let people see it anyhow,” he advised. “These people are watching you, and from what I hear, we need to be very careful here.”

I looked at the men who were playing their game, and I realised they were looking at me with sideward glances. “Who are these people?” I asked him.

“Travellers like us...” he started.

I looked at them again, from the men playing cards to the ones hanging around, and laughing, and smoking. These people seemed to be at home. “They don't look like they are going anywhere.”

“That's because they are stranded,” Pastor began, and then he proceeded to explain. “They don't have any money to continue their journey. You need money at every step of the way, to cross the desert.”

“What do they need money for?” I asked him. “I thought we would pay one thorough fare.”

The Pastor shook his head. “I thought so too,” he started. “But the reality is that before you get to each town, at the soldier's check point, some money is paid before they let us in,” he told me.

“But I don't understand,” I thought about everything Dada had told me, and all his talk about our going on a tourist journey. He had just handed me a pack of lies like a bowl of my favourite *Nsala* soup, and I had gullibly swallowed everything.

“This is our present reality, and there's no use wasting

your energy on complaining,” Pastor read my down cast expression easily. “Like you, so many others have also been deceived, but I believe in looking ahead. The good book teaches that we should give thanks in all situations.”

The Pastor had a valid point. “About how much do we pay at each of these stops?” I asked him.

“It depends, the prices vary... but I hear it's about ten dollars, sometimes even more.”

I mentally calculated how much cash I had with me. I didn't think I would have any problem getting the money. “I have about that...”

“We have ten stops to make payment,” he went on. “I overheard people talking about the things that are done when you can't pay, but we have money, so we never have to worry about that happening.”

I heard a noise, and I looked up. An elderly man with large tribal marks on his face was staggering across the room. He had small facial features, a stern look on his face, and suddenly, he started giggling, and talking to himself. I watched him, wondering if he was also one of the stranded travellers.

“He's a mad man,” a soft whisper behind me caused me to jump in fright.

I turned and I saw Temi sitting behind me, on the sand. He was smiling at me. I tried to hide the fact that his sudden appearance had scared me, and I took his hand instead. I looked at the man once again. “Yes, I can see that.” It was evident now, as the man began to jump around.

“I heard my father saying it,” he started. “He is a Yoruba man, and he's dangerous.”

“Don't worry, I'll protect you,” I reassured him.

A man came around, speaking Igbo, he had a large frame, and he rubbed his hands. For the first time, I noticed they were swollen.

“What happened to that man's hands?” Temi asked loudly, and got the attention of some other people.

“Shh!” Pastor brought a finger to his lips. “Don't shout so much. He breaks blocks with his hands.”

I watched the man, and noticed other men had trooped in. They were looking very tired, and their hands were also swollen, and pulsating with pain. They went to their corners, and applied balm to their hands.

I wondered why these men had to subject themselves to this sort of torture, but I came to learn that they were trying to make a living. They had been recruited by soldiers to chip away at stones, and break bits of pieces from the rocks to create building blocks for their homes.

This connection house, I came to realise, was a city in its self, a way of life, where people interacted amongst themselves. For some of these people, this ramshackle had become their home for the past ten years, and within its wooden walls, they had found their spouses, given birth to their children, and it was still where they lived.

I couldn't understand how people could live like this, and still choose to remain here – living without privacy, leaving your life exposed, bared for the whole world to see.

“Osita!” I heard my name from a distance, and I sat up and looked around. I spotted Ada and Ngozi at an opposite end. They were waving at me. I smiled and wove back. It was good to know that we had ended up in the same connection house.

The door opened, and a tall slim girl walked in. She looked Nigerian, and my suspicions were confirmed when I heard the pidgin English that followed. *"Na so I see am o..."* Strong cheap perfume announced her arrival, and large bangles dangled from her wrist. Oval shaped eyes scanned the room, *"Abeg, I dey find my customer — e never pay me my money."* She looked over at the men, about. *"Wey Kofi?"*

At a corner, I heard some of the men bellow loudly, as their eyes trailed over her.

"This place resemble Ghanaian connection house?" Someone asked. *"You no see Nigerians everywhere?"*

"This girl has come again with her tricks," someone said.

"Alade, you dey find man, make I come?" one of the men asked, approaching her.

"You fit pay me?" She asked him.

"I resemble Kofi?" The man asked her, and he showed her a wad of notes.

A smile broke on her face, and she laughed. *"Oya, I dey come..."* she began to move out of the connection house, and noticed for the first time, that Ada was staring at her, with disgust.

Alade stopped, and she looked directly into Ada's eyes. *"Wetin you dey look? You never see ashawo before? No be ashawo work you com find for desert?"*

Ada looked away, difficult to hide the disgust in her eyes.

"You never jam anything, you go see something, your eyes go clear, well." She hissed loudly, and she turned back to her new customer, and latched her arm around him. *"Oya, make we dey go..."*

“Did you hear what she said?” Ada's eyes were wide with fear. *“She said I never see anything...”*

Ada was clearly shaken up, but Ngozi brushed her aside. “Ada, can you listen to yourself?” Ngozi asked her. “What do you two have in common? You are educated, you know what you are doing,” she continued. *“If you didn't join aristo in school,* is it here that you will come and start fooling around?” She asked her. “That girl is a prostitute. She doesn't have focus, or vision,” she concluded.

I had seen enough, and the stuffiness of the room was choking. I decided to take a walk, and I left the connection house, and walked around the settlement. There were many other connection houses like the one where we lived, and the rest were no better, some were even worse. I tried to approximate the number of Nigerians that were in Zinder, and my figure was running into thousands. There were thousands and thousands of Nigerians in Zinder, and there were many shops - restaurants, bars, and brothels that were run by Nigerians.

In the next five days, I met many other stranded Nigerian barbers, prostitutes, hair dressers, and labourers, who couldn't continue with their journey because they lacked funds. They were living in pitiable conditions, and couldn't go back to Nigeria because their family was expecting them to return with a fortune. They had to remain here, and do all they could to proceed in their journey.

I also met some other Nigerians who had long lost the interest to continue their journey, and had decided to remain in Zinder. Such a wasted effort, I thought, to come so far, and then settle for far less, and refuse to move forward.

I determined that nothing would make me terminate my journey, and no matter how difficult the situation got, I would keep fighting until I created a way out for myself.



5

The Agadez Encounter

After the fifth day in Zinder, we proceeded to Agadez, another state in Niger.

It was a long journey. The roads were straight, stretching into an endless blue sky and sandy desert distance.

We arrived in Agadez after a few hours. The vehicle stopped at the gates of the city, and the guards studied the team of passengers packed at the back of the truck. The soldiers had fierce looks on their faces, and their eyes were cast upon us.

Everyone had to pay a toll at this point, and the money was handed over to the soldiers. I heard a tap on the truck, the permission we needed to proceed.

I had great expectations for this city, and as the truck pulled in through the city gates. I looked around at the historical city, as it welcomed us.

I looked out, feeling bumpy from the entire journey, and I surveyed the land.

Agadez was a transit city, much larger and better organised than Zinder.

The city of Agadez was historical, and standing out was a tall thirty metre height slender clay tower with balconies, and wooden sticks jutting out. I found out it was called the Grande Mosque, and dated as far back to 16th century. It was unique in architecture, and the mosque was triangularly shaped with five stories, each divided by wooden date trunks externally. A string of staircases lined right up to the peak of the mosque. I looked at the building in fascination, trying to imagine how this building had been constructed. It was indeed a masterpiece, and had survived for over five hundred years and still stood, standing.

There were a group of Nigeriens who awaited our arrival. They were owners of connection houses, and they shouted out to us, luring us to stay in their connection houses.

Of all the Nigeriens, one stood out in particular. He was of average height and build, he was young, his facial features calm, and he looked like someone we could trust. We negotiated a price, and once we had agreed, he spoke with the driver of our truck, and he agreed to drive us to his connection house. The truck veered off into a more secluded part of the city. The Nigeriens directed us onward, and we drove further and towards a stack of wooden structures, and the truck stopped, and passengers began to disembark. I tried to imagine where we would stay this time, and I thought about the uncomfortable nights I had endured the past five days; it couldn't get any worse, could it?

The loud bleating of goats was the first thing I heard. It sounded like I was back in Nigeria, and we had landed in the middle of a farm.

“Have we gotten to Europe?” Temi asked. He had left his father's side, and had come over to sit near me, an occurrence which had become a habit. I didn't really mind. The boy was interesting, and chatting with him always brought a diversion from the reality of what I was facing. His eyes were wide with questions, and I patted his head softly.

“We haven't gotten to Eurpoe,” I answered his question. “We'll get there soon, but not yet.”

It appeared that we had arrived our destination, and the driver tapped the truck to signify this. I joined the other travellers got out of the truck, and lifted Temi out as well. The little boy squealed, as I lifted him higher, and by the time I was setting him down, and his feet were touching the ground, his eyes were shining with delight. He ran to meet his father, and I looked around our new surroundings.

It was a farm, as I had suspected, and as the truck driver reversed, I looked around for the connection house. There was none in sight.

The Nigerien walked to the wooden structure, which happened to be a goat pen, and spoke to a Chaldean who was managing the pen in a strange dialect which I later learnt was Arabic. Moments later, the pen was opened and the goats trotted out. He then looked at us, with a smile, and pointed to the pen.

I could hear the truck easing away slowly, into the distance.

I thought I had been mistaken at first, but I realised he was asking us to go into the goat house.

The other passengers walked towards it, chatting, as though everything was normal, but I proceeded with caution.

I cleared my voice, and spoke as loudly as I could. "You can't expect us to stay in there."

"Where do you want to stay?" Someone else asked me. "At least, we know this place is safe."

They called this place, safe? Did they even know what the word meant? Did they know what habitable meant? They were asking us to live with goats! "This was not our agreement," I was infuriated. How could these people subject us to this sort of treatment? I stared at the pen, but had to move in. My bones were aching, I was tired, and I couldn't believe this was where we had to lay our heads.

"Welcome to your accommodation," someone jeered, and a bout of laughter followed.

I didn't understand – was I the only one who was surprised? I looked at the Pastor, he didn't appear to be comfortable with this either, but unlike me, he had resigned to his fate. I moved to him. "We can't just let these people get away with this."

"What do we do?" He asked me. "Look around – nothing here is familiar, we are strangers, and we have to rely on these people, and if they say this is the best place, then this is the best."

"But they never mentioned all this," I stated, "it's annoying because I paid so much money for this trip. This is unfair, this is injustice."

The goat pen was a dilapidated mud house. It was dark, musty, and the ground beneath our feet was warm and mushy, and later I realised it was goat droppings mashed with their feed. The place smelled, badly.

“How can these people treat us less than their animals?” I wondered aloud.

I noticed that everyone else was making space to lay their heads. Temi's father had created a space, and he carried his little boy in his arms, and snuggled him close.

Some people were making jokes, Ngozi and Ada were chatting, and talking about how one Christmas in their village, they had to sleep outdoors, and they didn't really seem bothered about it. I realised why many people regarded Nigerians as people who were suffering and smiling, and it wasn't funny.

I was not happy about our sleeping arrangement, and Pastor saw the discontent in my face.

“We'll get to our destination soon, and that's what matters,” the Pastor said. “I have faith that God would see us through, one way or another.”

This time, I wasn't planning on waiting out with the Pastor, and I got my bag and headed out. I ignored the questioning eyes that followed me. There was no way I was sleeping in a goat house.

After walking around, and seeking directions, I found a hotel within Agadez. It was a wooden structure, and the roof had been made from the barks of trees. The room was tiny, with a threadbare mattress, a dimly lit bulb and an old ceiling fan. A thin frayed curtain demarcated the room from the bathroom. It was not fantastic, but it was a million and one times better than sleeping in a goat house.

This was the best thing I had seen since I began the journey, and pleased with myself, I made payment for the accommodation. I went looking for food when I ran into the driver that had brought us to Agadez.

He was surprised to see me at the hotel, and told me in confidence that most hotels in Agadez were hotspots for rebels, and that the hotel where I had chosen to stay was going to be raided by armed robbers that very night.

Laugh or cry – I wasn't sure which to do. Was this a joke? Was he just saying this to scare me off, and make me return to the goat house? Unbelievable! After all the trouble I had gone through to secure a place to stay, this couldn't be happening!

I didn't want to return to the goat house, but I was too scared to stay in the hotel, either, and didn't want to die trying to prove a point. I slept in the car park, instead, huddled at the back of a truck.

My plan was simple – if nothing happened, then I would know the driver's story had been a farce, and I would return to my hotel room the following day.

In the dead of the night, I was awakened by the ringing of sporadic gun shots, and true to the driver's words, a robbery attack was taking place. I was chilled to the bone, and remained as quiet as I possibly could amidst the screams of terror as the armed robbers carried out their deadly operation.

“Chineke!”

I could hear someone speaking Igbo loudly, and pleading with the gun men. A single gunshot was fired, and the voice was silenced forever.

After about two hours, I heard the pattering of feet, more gun shots, and from my hiding place, I peeped and saw the armed robbers, carrying AK47 guns, and shooting in the air. They jumped into a vehicle, the sound of screeching tires followed, and they were gone.

I waited a little while and then immediately, I crept back to the hotel, and managed to find my room despite the blood trail and mangled body of a tall man that lay across the corridor. The door to my room had been forced open, my bag ransacked, and its contents strewn all over the room. They had been looking for money, and I always had my money with me, at all times. I picked up my littered clothes and stuffed them into the bag. Only yesterday, this place had been a welcome sight, and today it had become a haven of death. If I had to choose between my life and a comfortable bed, I would forget the bed, and choose life. I would sleep in a goat house, ten times over, if that was the price of staying alive.

I managed to find my way to the goat pen, and I even had to pay extra money to be let in. I had never been so happy to see a smelly goat shed. The door opened with a creak and I walked in. Most people were sprawled on the floors, and were still asleep. I managed to squeeze myself into a small space I found. I was swinging between fear and tiredness, and once I lay my head on my bag, sleep came swiftly.

An hour later, and I opened my eyes, feeling the compulsion to breathe. I didn't need to look at my wrist watch to know that it was six o'clock. After years of consistent man o' war training, the routine had stuck to me, like a bad habit. I could never sleep after six, no matter how tired I was, and it didn't help that I had to constantly keep

watching over my shoulder all the time.

The goat house was dark, I could hardly see, and I tried to move. I couldn't. I realised someone's leg was across me. I pushed the leg aside, and by using my hands to feel my way, I managed to find my way to the door of the mud house.

I tried to turn the knob. It was locked. I pounded hard on the door, but there was no response.

It was extremely hot, the air was choking, and I smelt terribly. I needed to have a bath. But besides that, I needed to breathe!

I reached for my water bottle which was strapped across my shoulder at all times, and I took sips from it. It was running empty, and I would have to refill it.

I slammed the door even harder, thoughts were set loose, and ran crazy in my head. What if we had all been kidnapped? If anything happened to me right now, there was no way I could be tracked. Which embassy would my family go in search of me? I had told them I was going to Spain, they would never even think of the possibility of my being in Niger. I rested on the door, alongside other people who also needed to get out, for one reason or another.

The door was opened thirty minutes later, and I staggered out. My eyes burned with the intensity of the bright light and I shut them immediately. I inhaled deeply, and breathed in as much as I could.

After a few seconds, after my eyes had grown accustomed to the sun, I opened them, and looked around. I spotted a well and I walked towards it, and drew

some water from it to fill my water bottle.

I heard a voice behind me. “You're going to need more than that, because I hear the next trip is very long.”

I looked up, it was Dada. He was wearing his usual smile, but I didn't respond.

“Look, I've apologised to you, look man, this journey is a rough one,” he started, “and we need to be on the same side. This is a hard place man, we need to stick together.”

I looked at him. He was right, he had made a point – we needed to stick together, and we had to help each other.

“*No wahala*,” I spoke up. My gut still told me to stay away from Dada – he was bad news, and not to be trusted. He was not what I needed right now in my life, or in anyone else's, but he was right – we were treading on dangerous unfamiliar terrain, and it made sense to have an ally.

“So, let me know - why did you decide to torture my life like this?” I asked him.

“I didn't know it was going to be this bad,” he confided. “My brother travelled through this route a year ago, and told me it was okay.”

“Your brother lied,” I stated. “Now, we're stuck here.”

“But we will get there,” Dada stated confidently. “My brother is in Spain right now, true to God. We will make it, I believe that.”

And it made sense to focus on that singular fact. We would get there, in a matter of time. All we needed to do was stay low and stick together.

I went back to the goat shed, more people were awake. Ngozi was out, as usual, chatting and making jokes, and her

cousin Ada, was dusting over her clothes, and complaining. I laughed to myself, as I watched her exhibit her vanity.

“When we get to Spain,” Ada joked, “you will pay me back for all this torture you have put me through.”

“*No wahala*,” Ngozi stated. “*We suffer small, enjoy later.*”

“How long are we going to stay in this place?” Ada asked. “I couldn't sleep all night.”

Ngozi's persistence and positive spirit was emulative. I wondered how she got through every day. I admired her determination, and her drive.

“We're waiting for the next connection man,” Pastor Matthew said.

“Do you smell something?” Ada brought her hands to her nose, and she sniffed her sleeves.

“Goats...” Ngozi laughed. “Look, don't worry, when we get to Spain, we'll have our baths in the best hotels, and drink the finest wines.”

Ada laughed, and Ngozi had managed once more to brighten her spirits.

It took another three hours before we met our connection man. He was a rough looking man with protruding teeth, and wide tribal marks. He was Nigerien, no different from any of us, except from his darkened skin. His eyes were reddish, and he had a constant smile plastered on his face, much like Dada's, but even more annoying.

He was talking in hush terms with the soldier, then he came to us.

“We will move to Duruku in five days time,” he was

saying.

Five days? “Why do we have to wait that long?” I asked. Were we going to be subject to living in this slum for five whole nights? What were we meant to be doing to pass time? Everyone else felt as grieved as I did, and others began to raise objections.

“We have to wait for the truck that is coming to take us,” he started. “It passes once every week.”

His words silenced us, and we were faced with the reality of having to wait until the next vehicle arrived.

“What are we going to do for the next five days?” Ada asked loudly, this was no joyride, and no matter how many times her cousin Ngozi had tried to reassure her, she was beyond listening to anyone.

“Well, I know what I would be doing,” Pastor Matthew was in a corner, his bible open and he was reading through its pages.

“It's so hot, I wish I could remove my skin!” Ada shrieked.

This girl complained at every opportunity she had. She was almost driving everyone insane.

The next five days were spent getting to familiarise ourselves with the Agadez community. Agadez was a very busy city, and bustled with life and activity, and had people coming and going. The people were Tuaregs, not as dark skinned as the Black Africans were, and they were easily identified into tribes by the markings on their face.

The people seemed nice, but we hardly spoke to them. Agadez was a trans-sahara trade route, and there were herders pulling their cattle, and hawking their goods in the

market.

In the backdrop of the activity of Agadez, lurked shady characters, among which were drug dealers, and children who were being trafficked to other parts of Africa. The children were looking hungry, and sad, but they were under the watch of the men who kept them. There were prostitutes who beckoned to us in low voices, and made promises of deeper pleasures.

Most days, we were left locked in the goat house. There was pretty nothing to do, except to dream about our final destination. Most of the time was spent caught up in such illusionary worlds, and imaging what we would do once we arrived our various destinations.

On one of such days, I looked up, and saw a a truck heading out. It was old, and slow, and carried people who were seated at the back of the truck, and had been spread out in every way possible, and there were geri cans hanging from the truck. I tried to count the number of people on the truck. After I counted ninety and a sea of heads still remained uncounted, I gave up. There must have been nothing less than two hundred and fifty people huddled in that truck.

"Na wa o," Ada commented. "See how they just packed those people..."

"Speaking of sardines," Ngozi started.

I whistled. "This is serious... how can they expect people like that to survive in there?"

"That's how we're traveling," Pastor started.

"You're joking," but he didnt look like he was joking. "How are we going to travel like that?" I wondered. I was

to find out sooner than I thought.



6

Journey to Duruku

Five days moved quickly, and everyone, including Ada, had become accustomed to the smell of the goat shed. As appalling as it was, it was beginning to feel like home.

On the morning we were to travel, we were awakened early. I was up, and everyone was asked to come out of the shed. Our faces were far from tired, and the eagerness to leave was greater than anything we felt. The crowd of people that were going on the same trip was surprising.

The truck arrived, looking like the vehicle I had seen a few days ago, and we all had to get into the same vehicle.

Each passenger had a five litre jerry can strapped around himself as usual, and a twenty five litre jerry can which was tied to the truck. My jerry can hung proudly, bearing my name across it – Osita – carved with a hot knife. I was grateful for having a name that was not as popular or widespread. Poor Ngozi had to contend with four other women who were also called Ngozi, and as such, she had to use extra markings to identify her jerry can.

In the truck, not everyone could get a seat. The women and children were allowed to sit before the younger men, like me. I chose a seat that was comfortable.

Pastor Matthew said a quick prayer, asking God for protection, as we started the journey.

After five hours along the hot, dusty tarred road, the general mood was beginning to wane, and was not as joyful as it had been earlier. The smiles had diminished, and confusion and worry replaced the once jubilant gazes.

I grew tired of looking at my wrist watch, and I wondered when the journey would end.

“Look, that's a snake!” Temi's high pitched voice rang out, and we looked and noticed a large desert snake slithering away under the sun.

I had heard that animals normally wandered in the desert. I wondered how they managed to survive out in the wild, in this heat. On our journey, we had spotted a few desert lions, and some foxes.

“The worst thing that can happen to anyone,” someone started, “is getting stuck in the desert.”

The thought was crazy. What would happen if something happened? What if you had a flat tyre? The endless options tumbled through my imagination.

“These wild animals are very dangerous,” someone started, “someone said they eat humans live.”

“God forbid” Ngozi started.

“That will not be our portion,” Pastor Matthew said encouragingly. “That kind of fate will not befall any one of us.”

"Dis one na reality," someone added. "People die on this journey... anyhow."

"Well, we have survived so far, and we will continue to survive." Ada concluded.

"Let's stop talking about bad things, like dying, and being eaten by animals," Ngozi started.

"I think we should all save our energy," Baba Temi began. "Look at our water, it is almost half way, and we need to stop to replenish."

"Look! There's water!" Temi said in a high pitched voice.

"Where?" I asked him.

He pointed in a distance at a shimmering of water in the distance. I laughed, and shook my head.

"That's not water," I said.

Disappointed, Temi looked at the road again, and once again, his eyes lit up with hope. "It's water... I can see it!"

"That's a mirage," I began.

"What's a mirage?" Temi asked me.

"It's like an illusion," I tried to explain.

Confused eyes stared back at me. "What is an illusion?"

I wondered how I was going to explain this to a seven year old without confusing him the more.

"It's something that's not real," I told him "The hot sun heats up the tarred road, and creates an optical illusion... something that's not real."

"So, the water is not really there?" Temi asked me.

"No, it's not." I explained. "The closer you get to the water, the farther it goes away."

Temi watched the road, his eyes filled with disbelief. He looked like he had resolved to prove me wrong.

I laughed as I watched the little boy display his intelligence, his eyes set with determination, and so sure of himself, but not wanting to argue with me.

Suddenly, the truck stopped.

“Are we there yet?” Ada asked.

I didn't really think so. It was a bit too early to have arrived at our destination.

There were a few men who were standing before us. They looked around, and spoke to the driver.

“They are Chaldeans,” someone started. “They want to check us.”

“What are they checking us for?” I asked.

They came to the back of the truck, and looked at the heap of passengers. The men were Arabs, their skin tone danced between the dark African and the white Caucasians. They had black hair curled in plastic doll fashion. Their faces, on the other hand, were menacing and their eyes slanted and cold. “Everyone get down, now! And empty your pockets.”

“Why? We will not do that...”

I felt the butt of a gun on my cheek, and I was dragged out of the truck. I painfully shrieked as the men began to attack me with their sticks. Temi began to cry. His father pulled him aside, and away from the blows from the Arabs.

“Leave him alone!”

I didn't rise to see who my defender had been, but I recognised the voice. It was Dada's. He had stood up for

me, and one of the soldiers hit him with the butt of the AK47 rifle he carried. Dada fell to the floor, and soldiers intermittently took turns at kicking him in the midriff.

“Bring out all your money..!”

The harsh voice of the soldier caused me to turn back to him, and I watched him look over the female passengers in the truck, and his eyes favourably lingered on Ada. Ada's eyes mirrored hatred, and repulsion for this man, and she looked away. The soldier grabbed Ada's arms, and her hand flew across his cheek in a flash, resulting in a resounding slap.

He slapped her back, the force of his hit jolted everyone of us, and a large reddened palm print appeared on her cheek. He gave instructions to his other soldiers to pull Ada out of the truck.

Ada began to scream as the soldiers reached for her.

“No, no,” Ngozi started. “Please, please, she's sorry.”

But the soldier had no mercy and they reached into the truck, and pulled Ada out like a sack of garri. Ada fell to the floor, and they dragged her away, amidst her violent kicking and heart chilling screams. The soldiers began to loosen their belts, and slapped Ada even some more. I couldn't bear to watch, I forcefully tore my eyes away from the scene, but no matter how I tried, I could not cut out the sound of Ada's screams.

I watched in horror, as they attacked the rest of the travellers, taking away our money, our goods, and ravishing our women. There was mass destruction, torture, torment, all happening at the same time.

I looked around – everywhere was deserted – there was

no one in sight, nothing else in sight. We were left to our fate, in the hands of these merciless rebels.

“Dem no dey fell man, na man dey decide, and thou shall not loose guide,” the rebels repeated over and over again. “Since you decided to embark on this journey, you should bear the consequences.”

The raid took precisely six hours, and afterwards, the rebels spat on us, and left.

We looked around to gather what we could recover.

There was a litter of passengers lying across the desert sand, many of whom had been beaten, raped, or bruised.

Ngozi had gone to Ada, whose clothes were torn, and she was trying to pull them back together. Ada had been beaten, her lower lip was swollen and bloodied. They cried over each other.

I went over to where Dada was, I couldn't recognise the young lad, he held his stomach, where apparently, he had been shot, and he was bleeding profusely. I held him in my arms as he muttered, and struggled to save what was left of his life.

“Dada...” I started, trying to speak.

“I'm sorry men,” Dada was apologising, his teeth were chattering.

“It wasn't your fault,” I whispered. “Don't talk again... don't talk.”

“I'm very cold,” Dada told me. “I'm feeling... cold...”

The Pastor came to where I was, and he shook his head. He didn't look so hopeful.

I looked back at Dada, his eyes began to close. “Ngozi!” I

shouted with all the strength I had.

It was a loud shout that caused Ngozi to hurriedly leave Ada's side and rush to where I was. I was cradling Dada's head in my arms. His eyes had closed, he was suddenly still. I was sure he had fainted.

Ngozi had spoken so bravely about her ambitions to be a nurse, but I could see the fear and agitation that hovered in her eyes as she touched Dada's neck to feel his pulse. She might have had aspirations of bring help and healing to people like Mother Theresa had, but this had never been in her wildest dreams. Nursing school had not prepared her for any of the horrors she had faced in these few hours. She touched Dada once again, and looked back at me, sadly, tears welling in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Osita," was all she said, before pulling away to attend to her cousin.

I didn't need to ask her what she meant by her words. I couldn't believe Dada was gone, just like that. His eyes were shut, and for the first time since I knew him, he wasn't smiling.

This was so unfair. True, he had defrauded me, but he had died in my place. He had died trying to defend me.

There were men who had wounds to be tended, but we had a little time to put ourselves together. The driver insisted we had to leave immediately, as we had to move further before night fall.

We continued the journey for a few more hours before it became too dark to continue, and we stopped to rest for the night.

As passengers sat huddles in little groups around fires, there was a deathly still. Normally, there would be a large

feast, and chatting, but not tonight. Many had lost their appetites.

I couldn't believe everything I was witnessing – I couldn't believe the horror I had lived through was indeed a reality, it felt like I was trapped in a movie.

Ada had stopped crying, but her sunny smile was gone, her eyes were dark and filled with silent rage.

“I want to go home,” she sobbed quietly. “I want to go back to Nigeria.”

Ngozi had nothing to say. Her well of motivating and encouraging phrases had dried, and she was left with mouth-open, wordless expressions.

“Ngozi, this was not what I bargained for,” Ada sobbed louder. “Those filthy bastards touched me...”

Ngozi comforted her cousin, the two young girls had fear written across their faces. I turned away, unable to bear the pain I felt, but everywhere I turned, there was something to cause my heart to ache.

There were so many others – sobbing, lamenting, cursing – and regret filled the air. They cried over things that had been stolen, innocence that had been snatched, but the greatest grief was over the loss of our money.

The worst thing that could happen to anyone in the desert was to lose your money. If you had no money, it meant you couldn't continue your journey, and it meant you were stuck. A lot of people had lost their money to the attack, and would have to get some more to complete their journey. The travellers had devised all sorts of means of protecting their money from being stolen.

Half my money was gone, and I couldn't afford letting

thieves cart the rest away, and risk being stranded like so many other travellers I had seen in other towns. All the previous tactics I knew of hiding money – in your underwear, and in stockings, didn't work out here in the desert. I remembered how some of the passengers had been beaten and stripped by the rebel soldiers, in desperate search of money. There was a man who had sworn that he had no money, and after he had been stripped, a singular note was found stuffed in his underwear. He was rewarded generously for his dishonesty with a single bullet to the back of his head. He died instantly.

To prevent my money from being stolen, I had to put it in a place where no one, even me, could get it. The safest place to secure my money was to pump it into my stomach. It was the only way it could never be found.

I was only among the lucky ones who still had some money, but I didn't know how lucky I would be if we were attacked again. I had to act fast. I had some Vaseline, and I walked to a corner, and I removed my belt, and behind its fancy buckle head, I pulled out money from where I had hidden it. I folded the money and wrapped it in layers of cellophane, and I squatted and my Vaseline-smeared fingers quivered as I attempted to insert the money into my anus. I couldn't believe I was doing this; it was dehumanising! What would my father think if he could see me? This would break his heart. Tears threatened to fall down my eyes, and I was almost at the brink of insanity, but. I had to survive.

A journey that had started out as a joyride had transformed into a nightmare, and I realised I was walking on a thin line between life and death. I had to remain calm,

I had to relax, but I couldn't get out the images of all the horrors I had witnessed in so little time.

I shut my eyes, and willed myself to remain calm. I tried to insert the wrapped money once more. I tried to think of positive things- sitting in my parents' living room, chatting with my mother, having a laugh with my friend, Andy, loud *fuji* music playing, and just having a great time on campus. I tried once more, and I inserted the wrapped money all the way into my anus, ignoring the pain, and just thinking of happy thoughts. My hands were trembling. I had done it. I rose to my feet, and adjusted my clothes, and cleaned my hand on the sand.

For the next five days, we travelled during the day, and camped at night in the desert, cooking meals of spaghetti and geisha with our firewood and pots which we carried in our bags.

During this period, we saw different groups of rebel soldiers, but they did not approach us.

We arrived at our destination, Duruku, another state in Niger.

All the camps began to appear the same to me, with little or no difference except their names. It was all desert, dry land, and hard hitting sun.

The truck was stopped by a group of soldiers. They walked up to us, their eyes screening over us. They looked around, taking interest in the women.

These men were savages, animals in the sense of the word. They had no conscience, and they delighted in feeding on their torture and abuse of travellers. In these deserts, we were like prey, and no one was on our side, no one was coming to rescue us. It appeared we had woken up in the middle of a nightmare.

“Money... we want your money.”

“But we don't have any... we have given everything to the other soldiers,” someone shouted.

“You think we don't know what you do with your money?” They asked us. “Do you think we don't know?”

The soldiers randomly brought one of the men from the truck down.

“Where is your money?” They asked him.

The man shook his head furiously. “I don't have any money...”

They beat him, but still he insisted that he had no money.

“Drink this,” they placed the cup in front of him.

He looked at them, his eyes rooted on the metal cup, and back to him.

“Drink it my friend!”

The soldier hit him on his head, and his eyes met mine. His lip bled where he had been hit, and he looked up at the soldier again. He brought the cup to his mouth, took a sip and grimaced, as he moved his mouth away.

There was a hard slap on his head.

He raised the cup and drank everything from the cup. Two minutes later, his stomach started rumbling, he gave a

loud shout.

The soldiers knew that many of the passengers had stuffed their money into their stomachs, but they were experienced with dealing with cases like this. They had given him an extra dose of a strong purgative and minutes later, they laughed as they watched him run into a corner. Under their supervision, he purged the content of his stomach, including a wrapped cellophane of money. The soldiers went through his excreta, and lifted the smelly exhibit with a stick for the other soldiers to see.

They hit the man on his face.

“Silly man...” they shouted.

The man's stomach started to rumble again, and the soldiers laughed even harder. I later learnt that the purgative was so strong, half the people who took it ended up dying from dehydration. I never saw that man again.

“You have ten minutes,” they threatened. “Everyone go and bring your money out from wherever you have hidden it, or else.”

One by one, everyone started leaving, and they came back with money. I did the same.

Everyone who didn't give the soldiers money was given the white substance to drink.

This was our welcome to Duruku.



7

In Duruku

Duruku was a military camp that had been built with coconut thatches and palm fronds. There was very little, if any form of civilisation – no electricity, and all we had was a few square metres of space on which to lay our heads.

I was tired, exhausted from the past events that had unfolded rather rapidly and had burst the bubble of an interesting tourist journey.

This couldn't be happening to me. I felt like I was in a bad dream, and my plans were disintegrating rapidly. I wanted to wake up and find myself in Benin City, lying on my bed, and watching the fan rotate. I wanted to be anywhere else – walking the streets of Lagos in search of a job, anywhere else, but here in some way-out camp along the North African desert.

We were handed to another set of connection men in Duruku, and they had the responsibility of making arrangements for the next phase of our journey.

Duruku was littered with stranded and frustrated Nigerians who had run out of money, and were very desperate to make cash, anyhow they could. In a bid to make cash from other passengers, they would deceive them, and sometimes go as far as killing them.

In Duruku, I met one of the passengers that had come in another truck, a young Ghanaian man named Kwame. Kwame was always looking for the easy way out of situations, and rumours had it that before setting out on this journey, he had worked with a popular Ghanaian politician, and was always trying to get things to work to his favour. He always had a lot of money to throw around, and had paid the soldiers in Duruku handsomely to take care of him specially.

Kwame was occupying the space next to mine, and in little or no time, we became acquainted with one another.

One evening, while we were chatting, someone called out to him. "Hey, Kwame." It was a group of men, Nigerian travellers.

Kwame turned to talk to them. I never heard what they told him, but he straightened up, and he left me.

"What's happening?" I asked him.

"Nothing is happening," he told me, but I knew that he was lying. There was something he wasn't telling me, but I let it go.

The other men waited for him to leave, and they came to his belongings. He didn't have much left, except for his jerry can, and they took out Kwame's jerry can, and turned it upside down. They made a slit in the keg, and pulled out a wad of folded Euros. I shuddered. I didn't even know Kwame had hidden money there. "Hey, that's not yours," I

said.

I saw the silver glint of a knife, and fierce dark eyes mine. “Learn to mind your business.”

I kept quiet and they left with the money, celebrating their success.

Kwame returned thirty minutes later. Apparently, the men had deceived him, and told him that the camp was attacked by rebels, and one of the soldiers had asked him to come quickly. Kwame had left the camp, and waited in the sun for a long time. After he realised it had been a lie, he had returned to the connection house.

He picked up his keg, and discovered to his dismay that all the money he had ingeniously stashed there was gone.

“Who took my money?” He asked, his eyes blood shot. I couldn't say a word. I shrugged, and looked away. “Did you take my money?” He asked me.

I shook my head. “No, I didn't touch your money.”

Kwame went to meet the group of men, suddenly understanding what had really happened.

The man was sitting by a fire, carving a wooden stick with a glinting knife.

“Where is my money?” Kwame shouted angrily.

“Which money?” The man asked him. “Did you give me your money?”

“You deceived me,” Kwame began. “You deceived me, and you stole my money.”

“*You be first class mugu,*” the man went on. “You had better go and find the person who took your money.”

Kwame shouted, and the man pounced on Kwame and

jammed his elbow into his throat. Kwame spluttered, and struggled to breathe, then the man placed the edge of the knife on his neck.

"You wan die?" He asked Kwame.

Fear crept into Kwame's widened eyes, and he was stunned. His eyes pleaded with the man.

"I fit jus kill you for here, bury you for desert," the man went on. *"If you ask me any questions, I go stab you – true to God!"*

Then he let go of Kwame, the young man fell to the floor, and he began to sob.

It was a pathetic sight, I felt sorry for him, but like so many others, there was nothing anyone could do. Kwame was going to have to wait for the next vehicle to come. He was going to join the scores of people who had lost their money, and had been left stranded.

"From here, we're heading to Quatron..."

Temi's father shared the information over a crackling fire. The flames flickered in the shadow, and I watched Temi draw images in the sand. We had been in Duruku for four days, so far, waiting for our turn to leave the camp.

We had heard the news of the break out war in Algeria, and the trip to Morroco would be too dangerous, and we would have to travel through Libya to get to Europe.

I looked at him with intent eyes. "Only God knows what is in Quatron."

"Gatron is in Libya," he informed me. "We're crossing

over from Niger into Libya, and from then on, it's an easier route."

I wasn't sure if I should believe what he was saying. My hopes had been raised and without apologies, shattered, far too many times for me to believe his words. "That's what we keep hearing," I scoffed.

"It's true," he insisted, with an urgent expression. "The worst part of our journey is way past behind us, at least no more rebels, and I can't thank God enough that we're getting close to the end of this journey," he looked at his son, Temi who as usual, is up to some adventure on his own.

I was relieved to hear that, and it sounded like the most promising statement I had heard in days. So far, I had been travelling for two weeks, I had not been able to contact home, and I knew my entire family would be worried sick about me. This was not what I had bargained for, but if we arrived in Quatron soon, then I could proceed to Spain, and get to the UK.

This was my glimmer of hope, this was the most relieving thing I had felt. And if this was the most difficult part of the journey, then there was hope.

Temi came to meet me. I had developed a friendship with this young boy, and he reminded me of myself when I was much younger.

"We'll soon get to Spain," I told him.

"Are we going to see rebels again?" He asked me.

"Hopefully, we won't," I told him.

"What did they do to Ada?" He asked me.

"They did bad things to her," I told him. How was I to

explain to this seven year old about the horrors of life? He was too young to be exposed to the evil that raged within the heart of men.

“Will she be alright?” He asked me.

“She'll be fine,” I reassured him. “She'll be fine.”

Temi started to tell me about his teacher in school, and his friends, and then he looked at me. “I am tired, I want to go home, I don't want to go to Spain again.”

“We'll get to Spain soon, okay? Then you'll go to a special school, and you can call all your friends.”

He gleamed at the sound of this, and he looked at me. “Are we going to die?”

“Of course not,” I told him, then tried to feign a smile.

Temi left me and went to continue his game of drawing in the sand.

He was a poor innocent boy that didn't deserve to be here. He didn't deserve any of the horrors he had witnessed. I didn't say anything, and my eyes clashed with Temi's father's. The same thoughts that had sped past in his head were obviously the same in mine.

“Temi likes you,” he began with a stiff smile. “You seem to have an answer to all his many questions.”

I smiled. “He's a good child, and he reminds me of myself when I was growing up.”

Temi's father smiled faintly. “I want you to promise me something,” he said tersely.

I stared back at him, wondering what this was about.

“If anything happens to me,” he looked into my eyes, “I

want you to promise to look after Temi.” His eyes were suddenly filled with regret.

“Nothing will happen to you,” I tossed aside his fears. “Two of you have made it so far.”

“I am not so young anymore,” he told me. “And these roads are very dangerous – anything can happen, and I don't want Temi to be alone. Just promise me.”

I realised he was not going to drop the issue until I had done his bidding. “I promise.”

The creased lines on his face eased gradually, and he sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

I continued staring at the fire, unsure of what the next few days would hold for either of us.



8

Stuck In the Desert

Finally, after spending six days in Duruku, our transport finally arrived, and we left. As we clambered into the truck, I felt a bit of accomplishment, thinking that I had made it this far.

I had heard so much about the journey to Agadez- the journey of no return. It was the most tedious obstacle we were going to face, and one that if we survived, the end was certainly clear.

It was midday. I had stopped looking at my wrist watch because the days seemed to slide very slowly under the hot sun.

It was a long journey, our water was more than halfway gone. The truck moved through the sand, or sometimes through rocks, and it was a hectic journey too.

My hands ached, my eyes burned, and the heat was boiling. On this trip, no one spoke, and it was not just because we were busy looking out for rebels, but we also wanted to retain as much strength as we could.

There were no bearings, or road signs, and we had to rely on our guide, a Chaldean with large gawky eyes, to show us the way.

He directed the driver, and they apparently were following the directions of the moon, and the Chaldean had mastered the art so deftly, he had an uncanny ability of knowing which way to turn.

The journey of no return was the most difficult along our route and one where if you didn't die, get missing, kidnapped or arrive at your destination, half dead, you were truly a champion. My ears were filled with the stories I had heard, but as we continued along this route, I realised why it had been painted like that. The heat was excruciating, temperatures were hitting fifty degrees. Everywhere felt hot, my throat was dry. Eyes were staring about. This was certainly not a lot of fun.

As we drove past, I noticed the carcass of human bodies that lined the deserts – people who may have fallen off their vehicles from exhaustion. In a corner, Ada and Ngozi were seated closely.

Ada had not said a word since the attack on the route to Duruku, and Ngozi's bright smiles had vanished. I didn't blame either of the two – this journey had not exactly turned out to be the joy ride that we had all anticipated.

My heart was thudding rapidly, and I was hardly able to feel my body. The heat was extreme. I was looking forward to the next stop.

we eventually stopped to rest for the night and made a camp fire, we sat huddled together. Temi had not said anything throughout the journey.

“He's tired,” his father began. He was carrying the little

boy in his arms, and I noticed that Temi was even leaner than when we had started the journey. His eyes had sunk in, and his father's face was washed with an emotion that swung from sorrow, pain, to down right regret. I thought I had seen tears spring into the man's eyes. This was far from what he had bargained for, and Temi was not taking the pressure well.

I thought about Kwame who we had left behind, who would have to find his way, somehow.

I put my head down, it was important to get as much sleep as I could. We were half way through, and we still had a very long way ahead of us. Sleep came quickly, but when it did, it was far from restful, as I was reliving the nightmares all over again. In my dreams, I saw Dada's bleeding face, his hands reaching out to me, I heard Ada's screams, and beneath it all, I was running, trying to chase a shimmering light source in the distance. As I moved closer to it, it slithered away, mysteriously. Suddenly, I got close and I reached for it, and I could almost touch it... then I woke up.

Someone was nudging me.

“It's time to get up.”

My body felt like lead, my bones were aching and tired, but I had to be on my feet. My neck was long and lean, and I didn't need to look at the mirror to know I had also lost a lot of weight, and like so many of my fellow travellers, my eyes sagged, and my cheeks had flattened, and had sunk in.

Our journey began once more, and we had travelled for about three hours when the arguing from the front seat began.

Usually, the driver and his family sat in front with the

guide. The drivers always travelled with their entire family – wife, and children. Their lives seemed to dangle on a thin string, and just like the illegal travellers they carried, they had become accustomed to living on the edge. Anything could happen, and they were always ready for the worst.

The voices became louder. I couldn't understand what the driver or the Chaldean guide was saying, but the argument was getting more intense. Then the truck stopped abruptly.

The raised voices continued, and people began to wonder what was going on. It took a full ten minutes before we knew what was going on. The Chaldean had lost his way, and we had been going round in circles for the last three hours.

We stopped, looking around. The desert was like a big endless sea of sand without a beginning, or an end. The sands stretched out, and there was no possible way of knowing where we were.

Usually, no one knew where we were, except the Chaldean, and right now, he was in the most confused state I had ever seen him.

The Chaldeans had mastered the art of figuring their way around the desert, by following the directions and markings of the moon. Unfortunately, the moon had disappeared the previous night, the Chaldean had lost his bearing, and were left to hand-pointing in different directions, and calculated guesses.

The driver and the guide stopped arguing, and seemed to have reached an agreement, then they got back into the truck, and we headed out. I assumed everything had been figured out, but when we stopped again, and the Chaldean

scratched his head, wordlessly, I knew we were in for it.

As we stopped to camp at night, I looked at the darkened sky, void of the moon. 'Lord', I prayed. 'Please, wherever this moon is, let it show up!' I couldn't imagine what would happen to us if we got stuck in the desert. What would happen when our water supply ran out? And when the petrol for the vehicle finished? I pushed aside the negative thoughts, and forced myself to be optimistic. We would get to the next settlement soon. The moon would come out soon, it had to... there was no way else.

The next day, we continued our journey. We had been in the desert for two extra days, and it was not good at all. We were quickly running out of our food, provision, and firewood, but the most important of all was water – we had barely enough to withstand the heat and quench our thirst.

During a break, the truck had stopped, for everyone to stretch their legs for a while.

I took a sip from my jerry can of water. I still had a few more sips left, and if I could shake my jerry can, I could still manage to get a few out. Most people, like me had almost exhausted their water supply, and had begun to fight the burning overpowering thirst.

There was suddenly a loud strangulated shriek, as a small crowd gathered in its direction.

Someone else had fainted.

It was a thin, gangly woman who had looked deathly pale

all morning.

Panic swept through the crowd, but it had become second to nature, and many of the travellers didn't budge.

“What do we do?” a concerned voice asked.

“*Which one is what do we?*” A less concerned interjected. “Every man for himself here – this place is no man's land!”

A lot of people had fainted as a result of the unbearable heat. Usually when this happened, the victims were splashed with water until they were revived. No one had any water to spare, even if they did, I didn't think anyone was willing to use it to revive someone who might probably not survive very long, anyway.

A few travellers tried to revive her, but despite all their efforts, she remained still, her eyes closed. She had given into the heat, couldn't bear it anymore. She needed medical attention, as there was a possibility that she had slipped into a coma, but there was nothing anyone could do.

A few minutes later, the horn honked loudly. The driver was set to leave, and everyone had to get back into the truck, leaving the woman behind. For her, the journey had come to an uneventful end.

As the truck travelled, we noticed tattered clothes flying about in the desert. Initially, it looked like some travellers had stopped to rest, and had forgotten some of their things, but there was something about the smell that reeked from this place.

As we drove closer, I realised that there were people lying in the desert – dead, for probably two weeks or more. It was a mass open burial site. This was the spot where two hundred and fifty Nigerians, lost in the desert, had succumbed to the heat, and had died. It was a mass of bodies – carcasses that had dried up with the desert heat.

These had been people – just like us – a whole truck load of people with aspirations and desired destinations who had never made it out alive. Men, women, and even little children, and they were lying buried and forgotten in the desert, along with their dreams.

Their families were probably back home, awaiting their return, ignorant of the tragic fate that had befallen them.

The panic grew, the fear was intense, and people started to mutter at the same time. Most of them had been Nigerians – we could tell from their clothing. This was a place of death – the stillness was intense. The sight was morbid. This could have happened in only a few days short of when we had arrived.

“We are going to die in this place!”

“I shouldn't have come here!”

Open weeping, wailings, and shouting, but there was not enough strength to complain.

Temí was getting weaker, and his eyes were becoming pale. I held his small fingers in mine, willing the little boy to fight for life. His father dropped the last drop of water in his son's mouth and after the boy licked the water off his lips, he looked at his father. “I'm thirsty, daddy... my throat is dry.”

I stretched out my jerry can to his father, and nudged him

to take it. He gave the last drops of water to his son, but the colour didn't return to Temi's eyes. Temi's body was burning up. He had a temperature, and it was not getting any better.

I turned away, I couldn't look anymore. It seemed that at every corner, was a portrait of inconceivable suffering. We had stood our ground in our battle with the rebels, we had saved our money by inhumanely shoving it up our *asses*, but, we were in a losing battle against the forces of nature.

The truck pulled to another stop again. The driver and our Chaldean guide got out, and they began to look around, in confusion.

"I need to drink something, or I will die." A man jumped out of the truck, turned to corner, and he opened his zipper and he urinated into his jerry can. He brought his jerry can to his mouth and began to gulp hungrily. From the back of the truck, we watched his face, coveting the relief that flooded his eyes, and the peace and calm that seemed to pervade his being.

I looked away, this was repulsive... but I needed to drink something, anything, and I didn't care what it was. Many travellers jumped down from the truck, and began to follow his lead.

I urinated into my jerry can, it was barely much, but I closed my eyes, and drank it. It had no taste, there was no time to savour its taste, I was trying to survive.

After we discovered an alternative source to water, we

received some strength. We realised shortly however, that men didn't produce as much urine as women did, and the men had to appeal to the women to share.

I pleaded with Ada and Ngozi, and they shared some of their urine with me, which I passed on to Temi.

It was sickening, but if this was how we were going to survive, then it was a price we were going to have to pay.

During one of our breaks, some of the passengers took turns at lying under the truck, and enjoying the shade it provided.

We noticed a large unattended camel approaching. For us, a camel meant one thing for certain – water, and for some others, food. Camels could store as much as a hundred gallons of water in their hump, and to imagine a live water bag was walking around.

Immediately, all the travellers worked together, it was a lot of work, but we cornered the large animal, and after killing it, opened the stomach of the camel, and found the sac of water. I had always assumed water was stored in the hump of the camel, but apparently, I learnt that the camel stored its water in the lining of its stomach.

They opened the sac a little, and there it was, glittering, like rare gold-water!

I'd never been so glad to see water, even if it was lodged in the sac of an animal. It was time to share the water, and a fight broke out among the Benin guys and other passengers with majority of them who were members of the *Burgers* tribe threatening to stab members of the *Judith* tribe in our midst.

A free for all fight broke out, and the truck driver was

angry, and in his fury, he got into the truck, and started the ignition.

I would never forget the sound of the driver's wife loud scream that filled the entire place, or the loud crunching sound that followed as he moved the truck forward. His daughter had been sleeping under the shade of the truck, but it was too late.

The driver got out of the car, his eyes wide open, and he ran to the back of the truck. He almost threw up at the sight of the bloodied clothing and mess of his daughter's remains, the only proof that she had been there.

The fight stopped immediately, the driver went into a rave, and he began to run into the desert, almost going insane at the realisation of what he had just done. He had killed his own daughter.

Some of the passengers chased after him and held him down, and he fought for a while, then he stopped fighting, and gave a long agonising wail like a wounded wolf. We remained in the same spot for a few minutes as he mourned the loss of his daughter, with his wife. Both were visibly overcome with grief, to think that their little girl had just died in a most gruesome manner, and there were no questions asked. But we had to keep moving.

Someone else had to drive the truck, and one of the reserve drivers took over the rest of the trip. The driver and his wife had joined a caravan of Arabs travelling on camels, and they were going to take them to a nearby town.

There were a total of three drivers that usually rotated the shift. The journey was too tiring for one man to make singlehandedly.

Everyone had quietened, and the journey continued, once more. As the truck moved ahead, I stared at the remains of the little girl. We had covered it up with sand, as decently as we could.

The ride was in silence. There were loud sobs, wails. And there seemed to be an invisible timeline, no one knew who would drop dead next.

The truck engine began to splutter, and jerk, then it came to a gradual final stop.

This was terrible. We clambered out of the truck, and I joined the passengers, looking at our only means of transportation.

The driver opened the bonnet, and he put his head in, trying to figure out what was wrong.

It turned out it was a simple problem, with a simple solution.

“No petrol,” the driver explained.

Petrol had finished. The drivers had run out of all their reserves. If there was no petrol, how were we expected to get to Quatron?

“We will walk...”

The whispers broke in the midst of the company of travellers. It started out as a rumour, but as I watched the drivers and our Chaldean guide, I realised this was the reality.

“Walk?”

The journey was probably days, or even weeks ahead.

“Do you want us to die?” Others asked, looking at them spitefully.

“Don't worry, it can't be so hard...” I tried to look at the bright side of this. I had survived man o' war recruitment camp, and years ago, I had been the General Commandant in charge of training in the man o war section in University of Benin. I remember how I also supervised corpsers during boot orientation camp. I would see this walk like that. If I could do it then, I could do it now. I had not come this far to die in the desert, and somehow, we would survive.

The trek began.

The Chaldean and drivers appeared to be at ease, and moved in quick steps. We moved behind him, trying to keep up. Without them, we were completely lost.

To all sides, we were surrounded by dry desert land that stretched thousands and thousands of miles. It was a mad house. It was either we followed the Chaldeans, or we were left to die in the desert.

We had been walking for ten straight hours, my feet felt like dead wood, and I longed to rest, but there was no time to rest. We had to keep up the pace, or risk being left behind.

Temi could hardly keep up. His father tugged him along, and loving coaxed him, but Temi had lost his zest, his spark, and was gradually losing his life. The boy had disintegrated and all that was left of him was a faint shadow of the lively energetic child I had come to know.

He had fainted again and his father shook him, until his eyes opened. The little boy couldn't speak.

“Temi, let's go,” his father started in a tender voice.

“Daddy, I'm tired...” Temi's parched voice was hardly audible. His eyes were drawn in, his tongue was hanging out of his mouth, and he looked in a terrible state.

Tears dripped down his father's eyes freely, and he hoisted his son across his shoulders and continued to walk.

The sun was hard hitting. First of all, I threw my water bottle hanging around my neck because it felt heavy. Then, my bag was the next to go. I flung it over my shoulder, and I had nothing with me except a t-shirt, and trousers, and a pair of slippers. Everything else had become a burden. Everyone began to shed their weight, drop off their bags, and leave behind things.

Temi's father's steps grew slower. His body ached terribly, and the weight of his son, as little as it was, was becoming too heavy for him to carry.

Temi's father stopped.. He couldn't go on. He couldn't move, he couldn't continue. He lay Temi on the ground, his son's temperature was high, his heart was beating rapidly. His father wept over him, he grabbed his only son and held him to himself.

“Why? Temi? Why?” His father looked around for help amongst other travellers, but there was none. The same hunger, the same desperation to survive was in the eyes of everyone else, and they were trying to stay alive.

“Temi, let's go... they are leaving us behind.”

He helped Temi up, and they staggered onward, father and son, and then, Temi's fingers quivered and he fell to

the floor.

I waited for a minute, I had grown to love the little boy with all my heart, but the other travellers began to disappear, and once I lost sight of them, I could be lost forever.

“Temi, I'm sorry...” Tearfully, I tore my eyes away from him, and tried not to think about it. I let the boy go. My heart was heavy. There were so many terrible events, so many emotions, so many experiences I had had, but this far outweighed everything I had witnessed.

Temi's father began to cry. “Temi...”

That picture of a weeping man over his dying son was etched in my mind, because that was the last time I saw either of them. I kept walking ahead, hoping Temi's father would join me, and looking back, but he never left his son's side. I kept looking back until they faded into oblivion.

The Chaldean guides kept walking, their feet never tired – they had grown all their lives in the deserts, and they were accustomed to surviving in its harsh terrain, but many of the passengers struggled to keep up. Each step I took weighed me down, and brought me to a grinding halt.

“I can't...”

My feet were burning. My throat was burning. It had been a full day since I had begged for urine from someone, and it had only been a few drops. My body was dried out, I could feel my blood heating, I felt my heart beating rapidly. I fell to the floor.

My head hurt, and it felt like a hammer had been used on my body. This was my time. I closed my eyes, the vision of Europe lay ahead of me, and I knew I was never going to

see it. The vision faded, to be replaced with a younger version of me standing before an older man. I was dressed in my man o war attire. This was the day I joined man o war. I looked around, wondering where the desert had vanished to. What was I doing here?

The Commander was standing in front of me. I wondered if he was real, or if I was imaging everything.

“Are you sure you are ready for this?” The Commander asked me.

I nodded, my eyes rooted on him.

“Get down and give me twenty push ups...” His voice roared like thunder.

I went down on all fours, and began the push up routine. I counted out loud with determination. “One, two, three..... four....” I began to get tired.

The Commander shouted huskily, his voice intensified. “Don't give up on me! You can do this... come on... push harder... Osita, harder...”

The Commander nodded satisfactorily, and walked around me in circles.

I suddenly found myself standing before a troop of young men and women. It was three years after my recruitment. It was a man o' war training, and I was the one drilling the team.

“*Nzobu eyinba, eyin!*” the team of young men and women chanted as they jogged in a single file. They were dressed in brown khaki trousers and shirts with black boots. This was three years after my recruitment. Shaven hair, a stern look, I shouted loudly, “Atten...tion!” I paced about, circling them authoritatively. At the top of my voice, I bellowed, “I

want you to give me twenty push ups, now!”

They went down on all fours and began the push up routine.

“Osita, get up!”

The voices and images from my past faded and I heard another voice, it was Pastor's voice. And then, it became my father's voice.

“Osita, I have told you why you need to behave yourself,” he started. “The university is a strange place, so ensure you remain focused, and always remember the home you are coming from.”

My head went blank, and hurt when I tried to imagine what my father was doing here.

“Osita, get up,” it was Pastor's voice again.

. “I can't,” My mind began to play tricks on me. One minute, I was back on the man o war camp, and the next, I was having a chat with my father. “I can't...”

“Osita, you have to get up, fight this thing and keep moving...”

The hallucinations were very real, and it was difficult to figure out what the real world was. “I'm too tired,” I don't know if I spoke the words, because I was too weak. I didn't care. I couldn't move any further.

I felt the cool water on my lips. I stirred and opened my eyes. I was lying in the sand. I began to feel the crippling heat again. “I'm tired....”

“Get up, you need to move or you will die...”

His words were the strength I needed to rise. I felt hands pull me up and support me.

We had arrived at the next camp. I fell to the floor, in front of a well. And as water was poured on my head, I exhaled deeply.

I had survived. Against all odds, I had survived.

The settlement we had arrived was called Tijeri. We had been in the desert without food and water for a whole week, and we would require days to recover completely.

The chant and sound of drumming gradually faded, and I no longer heard it as loudly as I had heard it in the desert. I later learned that everything I had heard, and experienced had had been a pigment of my imagination. I had been having hallucinations, which was common when one suffered from an intense heat stroke. The heat from the desert had driven many people raving mad, and I had been very lucky to have survived, and still remain sane.

I had been so sure that I had heard Pastor's voice, and he had been the one who had carried me, but I didn't see him in the crowds, and I wondered if that too, had been part of my imagination.

I lay on the sand, by the foot of a well, too weak to rise. I was joined by many other travellers who had been lucky to have made it out alive.

For about four hours, we were gathered by a well, drawing from its depth, and we couldn't get enough of the water. We drank it, poured it over our heads, washed our feet, bathed in it – after the first splash of water on our faces, we couldn't stop ourselves. We had lost all our jerry cans in the long trek. I had lost everything I had come with, but I was long past caring. I had the one thing that mattered most, and that was all that I cared about – life. I had never felt so

glad to be alive.

I was still taking a drink of the cool spring of water when I felt a hot slap on my face. My feet wobbled as I tried to steady myself. Weakened by the tedious journey, I barely had any strength left in me. I fell to the floor, and was trying to pick myself up.

The other passengers were also being beaten, and were too weak to fight back or resist.

I didn't know what was happening, or why we were being beaten, but I later learned that the occupants of the settlement didn't want us around – we had invaded their wells, and at the rate at which we were going, we were set out to deplete their own supply, and they also needed to survive.

The beating was intense, but it didn't hurt as much as being stuck in the desert had hurt. As long as we had access to water, and a place we could hide from the scorching sun, we could bear any unjust treatment.

“Stop! We will give you money...” someone shouted, and then the beating stopped.

The Chaldeans eyes lit up, as the magic word was mentioned, and they murmured amongst themselves, argued, prodded and they finally arrived at a conclusion. They asked us to pay an exorbitant sum of money, and in exchange, they would provide a place for us to sleep, permit us stay in their land without any harassment, and arrange secure transportation to Quatron. We had to pull together all our resources to meet their demands. It was almost everything we had left, but it was certainly worth it.

We had no more money and couldn't afford to buy food,

and we were given a fruit called *Debino*. *Debino* was a sweet and gave strength, and we fed on this for a while because we couldn't afford anything else.

We were taken to our accommodation – a goat house that was smaller than the one we had stayed in Agadez. We went into the goat house with gratitude, and we were locked in all day, and late at night, we were released by the settlers so we could continue our journey to Quatron.

Police trucks awaited to convey us to our next stop, and as we clambered at the back of the trucks, there was an urgency, a desire to leave this place, and everything it represented, and forge ahead in our journey.

We travelled securely under the shade of the night, and rode behind police trucks to Quatron.



9

Arrival in Quatron

A few hours later, the police truck pulled into Quatron, breezed past the check points, and proceeded to the next connection house. A sigh of jubilation went around, hope leapt into the eyes of everyone in the truck as we climbed out of the truck, and stood before our final connection house.

We had finally arrived at the first state in Libya! We had crossed over, finally!

“Thank God!” Ngozi clasped her hands together. Her eyes were filled with boundless joy, and tears coursed a jagged path down her cheeks. “Ada, we’re in Quatron,” she jolted her cousin with a new found enthusiasm. “We’re in Libya!”

Ada didn’t seem to share Ngozi’s excitement, and remained mute. She had grown quieter all through the journey, her regret evident in her eyes.

Ngozi had told me that their link was waiting in Quatron, and would take them to Spain from there.

At last! After all the struggles we had been through, finally, our journey was beginning to make sense.

The connection house in Quatron was large, and a mix of many Africans – Nigerians, Ghanians, Togolese, and the likes. It was so clustered, you barely had enough space to move, but it was certainly better than being in the desert, anything was better than being in the desert.

Ngozi's link finally arrived. He was a short pudgy man of Spanish descent, and he had a cigar in his mouth. They spoke for a few minutes, Ngozi and her link, and I saw her smiling. I hadn't seen her smile like this in a very long time, and it felt good. The link man turned and spoke quickly to the owner of the connection house.

The owner of the connection house cleared his throat, and spoke loudly.

“All the women to this side...”

The women moved to another side. They were about two hundred women and girls. I looked for Ngozi in the crowd, and I found her with my eyes. A large smile was on her face, and she excitedly spoke to Ada.

“What's happening?” I went to her and asked.

Her eyes were bright with excitement. “We're going to Europe!”

“So soon?” I asked. Many thoughts whizzed through my head, I wanted to say so many things, but didn't know how to start. I had begun this journey with a full crowd – Pastor, Dada, Temi, his father, and they were all gone – all but Ngozi and Ada.

“Yes, we're going to Europe now,” Ngozi sighed. “We'll get our jobs immediately, and I'll be able to get Ada some

medical attention.”

I looked at Ada, her face was pale, her eyes, withdrawn. With no idea of where I would be, I knew I might never see any of them again.

“Take good care of her,” I said. “God will go with you both. Enjoy your trip to Belgium.”

I stood in the connection house, watching from a distance, along with several of the men that had been left behind, as Ngozi and Ada, along with all the women climbed onto the back of a truck that awaited. I watched as Ngozi helped Ada get on the truck, and she turned to me, and I caught a final glimpse, and a smile.

Someone shook his head sadly. “It's such a pity.”

“*Abi?*” I asked. “They are taking them first, and leaving us behind...”

He looked at me strangely, “You don't know?”

“Know what?” I asked him.

He turned in the direction of the short podgy Spanish African – Ngozi's link. “You see that man with the cigar?”

I nodded..

“He just paid the connection house owner three thousand dollars for each of these women.”

The owner of the connection house shook hands with the Spanish African, and he got in front of the truck, and it began to move. I didn't quite understand.

“The women are going to Spain alright, but they are going to become prostitutes,” he told me.

I was deathly still, as the implication of his words dawned on me. *Ada and Ngozi? Sold? Becoming prostitutes? What did*

this mean? No!

Impunged upon my heart was the image of intelligent Ngozi with giant sized dreams before her, who had endured a harrowing journey, and sacrificed everything for her family. I couldn't believe that after everything she had gone through, she was about to be forced into a life she was not prepared to handle. This would shatter her, destroy everything she had built. Ada – I didn't know how she would survive this.

I thought of all the stories Ngozi had been told – jobs as nurses in Europe – it had all be a lie.

The same way I had been lied to about this journey, Ngozi and Ada had been made to believe that there were nursing jobs awaiting them in Belgium, and everything had been a lie – the glossy magazine with nurses and doctors had been a scam to lure them. They had spent their life savings, travelled thousands of miles, almost died in the process, and all for what? They were going to be forced to become prostitutes to make nine thousand dollars to buy back their freedom. What would become of Ngozi? Or Ada? Or their beautiful dreams?

From the onset, there had never been any nursing jobs in Belgium, or in Spain for that matter – it had all been a string of lies.

With its roots springing from countries like Nigeria, this was a full-fledged illegal business created to make incredible mouth-offering job offers to lure young innocent people into the middle of nowhere, away from family, protection, and their government, and then sell them into the world of prostitution, and forced labour.

It suddenly unfolded before me, and the force that

compelled people to undertake this journey in their droves, became clear. At every point of our journey, there had been an underground market, where women and children were being exchanged, and I had just been too blind to notice it.

Along the Sahara desert route, contrary to the world view, the slave trade was alive, and well, and had morphed into another format. How did I ever get caught up in this mess, in the first place?

The unshed tears caught in my throat, and I was paralysed with the thought of the life my dear friends were about to be hurled into.

I had been wounded deeply, hurt beyond retribution, and I ached inwardly. My heart bled for the people I had met, known, interacted with, grown to love, and lost on the journey – Temi, Ngozi, Ada, Dada, Pastor... I thought about the people who I would never meet – the thousands of eager Nigerians who would troop with anticipation, and bright dreams, and begin the journey to Europe ignorant of the trappings and horrors that awaited them. No one ever told them, or prepared them for what lay ahead. If anyone had told me, I would never have started this journey.

The next days were the slowest days, ever; I sunk into a sad, depressed state, as I reflected on the journey so far. I had spent close to 40 days on a trip that should have ordinarily taken a few hours, and I had experienced unimaginable horrors. Within that time frame, I had not slept on a bed, and I could count the number of times I had taken a bath. I had to see this journey to its conclusion, if only to reward my efforts, and justify the risks that had

been placed on my life. I was determined to get to Spain, and prove to myself, and tell everyone that I could make it. My friends might not have made it, but I would make it on their behalf.

The settlement of Quatron was a hub of activity – people went about their daily activities, hustling, and doing everything they could to make ends meet.

I was down on my monetary resources, and I needed more to proceed to Tripoli, the last Libyan state in my journey.

Many Nigerians in Quatron were engaged in menial jobs to make a living, and I began to explore my options. I had no choice. If I was going to proceed on my journey, then I would need to make some money.

I had to work a series of jobs to raise money. Breaking blocks was very difficult, and I laboured under the hot sun, breaking blocks that were to be used to build.

I returned after a full day's work, and I had been paid peanuts. I sighed, regretfully as I counted the day's proceeds. At this rate, I would remain here in Quatron for the next year before I could save enough money. I sat in my corner of the connection house, exhausted, confused, and wondering what other job I could take on to provide the funds I would need.

“Hey, we have a proposition for you,” someone came to meet me. “Do you want to make some money?”

He was one of the regulars, very smooth, tall, honey skinned, with a rash mouth that burned with the bitterness

of bitter leaf – cursing, mercilessly teasing, and bullying. He had never spoken to me, but I had felt him watching me over the past few days.

I looked at him, disbelievingly. Of course, I wanted to make some money, but the connection houses were filled with men who were ever ready to take advantage of others. I looked at the man, studying him, carefully. His eyes were small, and darted about at intervals.

He showed me a wad of dollar notes, piquing my interest. I adjusted my stance. This was a language I clearly understood.

“Come with me,” he instructed.

I followed him to a secluded corner, where we were out of earshot.

“I want to make some money,” I told him. “What do I need to do?”

He paused, clicked his tongue, and looked at me, straight in the eye. “You are strong, you have the build, and the stamina,” he told me. “I’ve been watching you...”

“What do you need me to do?” I asked him.

“Someone needs to take out a soldier,” he told me in a hushed whisper. “It’s a clean job, and you’ll be handsomely paid.”

“Take out a soldier?” I wasn’t sure if I understood.

“Eliminate him, get rid of him.”

I shook my head. I was not up for this. The image of my family flashed before me – my father’s teachings, his calm voice, and all the values I had stood up for. They wanted me to kill someone, and that was the last thing I was going to do. I rose to my feet. “Sorry, I won’t do it.”

“Then, you will die breaking blocks,” he retorted angrily.

I returned back to breaking blocks, and I would have probably died breaking blocks if I didn't do something quickly. I decided to sell my passport. The proceeds were not sufficient to get me all the way to Libya, but it got me to Sabha, another state in Libya.

Sabha was a refreshing difference. It was the closest I had come to civilisation, and there were structures here that looked close to what I had left at home, in Nigeria.

It was a busy town, and I had a wider range of decent jobs where I could make quick cash. I carried load on my head, and broke blocks, and I was paid better than what I had been paid in Quatron

Sabha had a reduced crime rate, owing to the regular patrols of uniformed policemen.. But I couldn't risk being caught by any of them. I didn't have a passport, and one wrong move could mean I ended up in a prison cell, or be deported back to Nigeria. A deportation would be a most horrible and cruel way of returning home.

I was walking down the street, and as I approached a bend, I spotted a group of police men approaching. I was lucky, they had not seen me. I ducked behind, as they dragged away another young man, a Nigerian by the looks of it, who was not as lucky.

We were illegal immigrants, and Nigerians who were caught by the police are usually beaten and thrown in

prison so we had to do our best to keep away from them. I saw a phone booth, and I stopped to make a call.

I opened my wallet and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. It had my elder sister's number on it. I dialled quickly, my fingers were shaking.

The phone rang for a while, then I heard her voice. "Hello?"

"Sister!" It was difficult to hide my excitement.

I heard her pause on the other end, and then in a soft hopeful whisper, "Osita?"

"Sister, it's me... it's Osita!"

She shrieked on the other end of the phone. "Thank God! Where have you been? We have been so worried about you," she began. "Are you in UK now?"

Where was I going to start? Which of my near-death experiences was I to tell her about? "No, sister, I'm not in UK."

"Where are you?" She asked me.

I'd heard so many other people lie to their relations, and tell them that they were in a small city close to UK, but there was no point in being deceptive. "I'm in Libya."

She paused, her voice turning deathly grave. "Libya? What are you doing there?"

"Sister, it's a long story," I began. "These people deceived me, everything they told us were lies. I have been on a desert journey..."

"Desert? What are you saying?" The questions tumbled rapidly, one after another.

I tried to answer all her questions as best as I could,

within the one minute I had.

“Sister, this place is terrible,” I summed. “I’ll call you another time...”

“Listen to me Osita,” she interrupted my sign off fiercely. “You have a home, a family... if what you are facing is bigger than you, then come back home. You don't need to prove any point...”

Her words sunk in, and I paused. “I’ve been thinking of coming back home,” for the first time in a long time, I voiced my deepest desire. “But I would need some money.”

“I’ll send you the money you need,” she told me. “Just let me know how to get it to you...”

“I have to go now, sister,” I told her. “I’ll call you again...” I hung up. My money had run out, but I still cradled the handset on my cheek, reliving our conversation over and over again.

Hearing her voice had been so energizing. Her voice was rich with emotion, and satisfaction.

After I called my sister, I decided to check my emails. I couldn't remember the last time I had even seen a computer.

I walked into a cyber café. It was small room with computers set up, and it was owned by a Libyan, but there were three other Nigerians there, working on computers. I paid for a ticket, and I was assigned a computer to use. It was the computer behind the door. I quickly checked my email. My inbox was flooded with *where are you?* emails from my friends, and someone had even sent me a list of the things to buy from a shop in London. I kept my replies

simple, and short. I informed my friends that I was well, and was busy, and would send them a longer mail later.

The owner of the cyber cafe came in, and he looked around in detest at the Nigerians that were seated.

“These blacks are smelling like monkeys,” he began. He left and returned with an air freshener. He began to spray it around the place.

I quickly rounded up what I was doing, and logged out of the mail server.

I looked at him, offended. The Libyans were not Negro, they were a blend of Caucasian, and although Libyans were Africans, there was a lot of racism that existed within its borders. I had always thought Africans were black, but some Africans had proved to be an exception. Out of anger, he left the cyber café and few minute afterwards, I left.

I had barely gone round the corner when I noticed he had returned to the shop, but he had not come alone. On his heel, three policemen followed closely. The policemen went into the cafe, and rounded up all the Nigerians that were there.

Thankful that I had not been spotted, I turned at a bend, and took to my heels.



10

The Turning Point

Finally, I saved enough money, and from Sabha, I proceeded to Tripoli.

The town of Tripoli pulsed with life, and was buzzing with activity. Men and women hung around, there was life in the air, tourists laughed about, taking pictures, and happy children jostled about with fascination. But beneath the shadows, another set of people lurked – hiding from the police, and everyone else, trying their best not to be seen. That was the class to which I belonged.

I had stayed in Tripoli so far, for two days, and I couldn't wait to get out. I had been given directions to the port, where the ship would take off from.

This was it – I had survived thus far, and there was only one push between me and Europe. Finally, I was getting there. My heart began to thud once more.

I was on the final lap. All that was left between me and Spain was one ship ride, and I would be there, finally.

So many people had started the journey from Nigeria, but how many people had come this far? It was an expensive journey, for which some people had paid with their blood, and their very own lives.

The large ships stared back at me – I wondered which of these ships I would be travelling in.

There were a number of people waiting there with me, and moving in the shadow of the night.

Our guide was an average sized Libyan with a limp, assisted with a walking stick. “We wait here for the *lampalampa*,” he started.

Lampa-lampa? I stared at him. It was a funny name for a boat, but that would be our passage to Spain. After the ride on the *lampalampa*, I would finally get to Spain.

The crowd awaited the boat, and I was expecting a large boat, but as the boat neared the shore, I looked at it. This boat could take about 20 passengers, how were a hundred and fifty people going to get on it?

As the boat stopped, people scrambled to get on it, and I watched as the *lampalampa* danced upon the waters, unsteadily. This was a boat that had been built for twenty passengers, at most, and about a hundred had scrambled in, and there were fifty more of us, yet to get in.

Someone beckoned to me, smiles across his face. “O’ boy, enter now...” He was in the *lampalampa*, holding unto a pole, and he swayed with the boat. He extended his hand to me.

A loud horn distracted me, and I turned. A ship was coming in, and the Red Cross was offloading bodies of people who had drowned while trying to cross the Atlantic. They had also been travelling in a *lampalampa*,

and it had capsized, and everyone had drowned.

I had navigated on land, and almost died from a heat stroke. I wasn't going to risk bobbing about in a little boat, and getting lost in the middle of the sea.

In an instant, I saw my whole life flash before me— and I remembered my time as a man o' war commandant, and walking in search for a job, and hustling, looking for money to survive. I would give anything to return to the life I had in Nigeria, than risk dying here, in a strange land, in such a terrible manner.

"Ol' boy, come now..." the offer still stood.

I was torn between two worlds.

I had overcome a lot, seen the harsh weather, had to survive by drinking my own urine, endured the death of people I had come to know, and I was faced with the ocean. What exactly was chasing me? I thought of Nigeria, I thought of my home — my country- the land I had been so desperate to get away from. I would give anything to return to the peace and tranquillity, and the family that I had left behind.

Temi's face floated back, and I was transported back in time, and his question danced in my head.

"What is a mirage?"

I realised my entire journey had been I had been chasing a mirage, and each time I got closer, it moved even further away. I began to realise my illusion of creating a rose-petal world in Europe was only a mirage, it didn't exist; it was an illusion.

I had thought I was searching for an oasis in Europe, but I realised the oasis I desired, was back in my home country,

Nigeria.

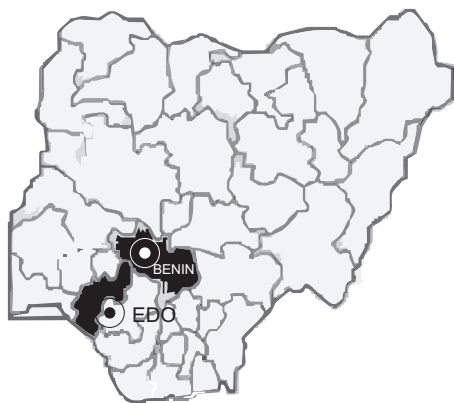
I stood on the banks of the river for a long time, my resolve was growing, this was the mid point, the final step between me and Spain. Then I remembered Temi, I remembered Ada, Ngozi, Pastor, and I knew their lives, the sacrifice they had made would be in vain if I got on that boat.

Somehow, within me, I knew I had to go back. I knew I had to tell people about the unforeseen dangers, the unimaginable horrors, and the web of deceit that they had been lurching into. Someone needed to tell their stories.

I shook my head. There was no way I was getting on that boat. I stared at the *lampalampa*, and wilfully, deliberately turned my back on my ticket to Europe, and I headed the opposite direction.

I had discovered where the oasis really was.

I was going home.



11

I Must Return

My heart beat with an excitement I couldn't contain, and I could barely conceal my joy.

I was going back home.

I told everyone that cared to listen. Some thought the desert sun had finally turned me raving mad, but it made perfect sense to me.

I had realised in a bitter way that there was no life in this journey. Some people had been on the route for ten, fifteen years, so many had died, and many people who had started out as promising young people had aged into hardened criminals who were killing others to survive.

It was ironical that it was the same country I had given up everything to leave, that I was struggling to return to.

I began to speak to as many people as I knew, telling them how we were not second class citizens in our country, how we had a place to call home, and how we didn't need to endure the pain. Of all the people I talked to, only four listened to me, and we started our journey back to Nigeria.

I had called my sister, and told her about my plans, and she had sent money to me. With the money she sent, I paid for the journey of five of us. I wished I could have saved my friends that I lost along the way.

I had to bear their travel expenses. The passion to rescue Nigerians from such a journey outweighed the financial stress it placed on me.

We began the journey home. It was a tedious one, but with the experience we had gained, it was easier for us.

I was excited, my spirits were high as we moved towards Nigeria. How I longed to see our roads, tattered as they might be. I wanted to be back amongst my family, people I knew, and my fellow Nigerians.

It took us three weeks, but we finally arrived at Sokoto.

I got out of the truck, dropped to my knees, ignored the stares and grabbed fistfuls of the Nigerian soil. Images flashed through my mind, Temi and his contagious laughter, Ngozi speaking of her dreams to come back and help her younger ones. Pastor who had left his young family, on his way on a pilgrimage... I would make their lives count. They would not have wasted their lives, their dreams, or spilled their blood just for nothing.

Tears trickled down my eyes.

One Year Later

I could hear the drumming, the wailing, weeping and the distant sweeping sound of sand as a desert storm began. I heard the piercing screams, it was starting all over again.

I woke up with a sweat, and my heart throbbing. I had been dreaming again, of everything – Dada, Temi, Ngozi – they had become a part of me. Somehow, my life would not remain the same.

I looked at my watch. It was six on the dot.

I fell off my bed and dropped to the floor, and did a few push ups. I counted aloud as I exercised, but my mind had wandered away.

I had been in Sokoto for a year, managing a joint called Daddy Smart Cuisine.

My sister knew where I was, but there was no way I could show up looking the way I looked. I was a shadow of myself, more than twenty kilogrammes smaller. I had lost my confidence, and my self esteem had been shattered. I had left Nigeria thinking I would return with enough money to throw around, but I had come back to Nigeria dirt poor - wearing a faded slacked t-shirt, a pair of trousers, and tattered slippers. My wallet was all I had in my pocket.

I looked like a criminal, and no one would want to have anything to do with me. I needed to clean my act up, pull my head together, and take care of myself.

I got a menial job in Sokoto, and started sleeping in an uncompleted building. I had a bath, and cleaned up as best as I could, and went in search of a job.

Job, after job, till I finally got this job managing the Daddy Smart cuisine. It was the best job I had worked in months. I was given my living quarters, and I was paid handsomely – about ten thousand naira a month.

But that had been a year ago. It seemed so far away, I

could hardly believe that it had been many months since I had returned from my desert journey.

I still had nightmares, almost every night. The nightmares continued for a long time, I knew I would spend years fighting them.

I thought of many things in my year in Sokoto, and I thought of the people I had rescued and brought back to Nigeria. If I could do that, it meant that with the help of the Government and corporate organizations, many more would be rescued. I had thought it through, and I knew what I must do.

My bag was packed in a corner – nothing much, except for a few things – two shirts and one extra trouser. I had written a resignation letter. I wasn't sure if the owner of the Cuisine would appreciate the efforts I had taken to write the letter, the man could barely read or write, but I wanted this to feel real for me.

I had the letter in my hand, and I looked around the room I had lived in for the past seven months, making sure I had not forgotten anything.

All was set, and I was finally ready to go home.

I walked to the bar, where tables and chairs were arranged. I opened my wallet. In its corners were grains of desert sand, and telephone numbers squeezed in odd corners. They were the phone numbers that a man at Madamada had given me. I opened the sheet, and I could almost hear the memories of horrified screams that it had

unlocked. I looked through the numbers that had been scrawled over it, and the names, and I could hear his shaky voice as he pleaded with me: “Please, when you get to Nigeria, call my family, and tell them that I am dead...”

I lifted the cradle of the handset, and I looked at the numbers again. I was about to dial, then I stopped. I couldn't make the call. I would not be the one to carry this terrible news to his family.

I folded it back, along with all its memories, and I replaced them. This was my only keepsake, a sick reminder of my journey.

I reached into my wallet and pulled out another slip of paper. It was another number that I had reserved calling, until now. I dialled the numbers, waited for the phone at the other end to ring, my heart began to thud, then I heard the familiar voice.

“Hello...”

I paused. The first thought that came to my mind was hot *Nsala* soup. Tears stung my eyes and I struggled to speak. “Hello Mama... it's me...”

“Osita?” She asked, then she shrieked at the other end. Her voice broke into a jubilant cry. “Osita, my son!”

I could hear my father's voice at the background.

“Mama, I'm coming home.”

THE END

The Story Continues...

It's been over eight years since I returned from my desert journey, but nothing much has changed. Thousands of Nigerian people – our men, women and children – are still blindly embarking on the same journey, with hopeful anticipation.

The journey through the desert is more pathetic experienced than written, and the sufferings of victims encountered are untold. In reality, the exodus of Nigerian youth is predicated on a myriad of problems like poverty, corruption, lack of employment. Put together, these factors destroy hope in the hearts of youth. A lot of Nigerians have lost hope in our nation, and our government, and in their desperate search of hope, they have become vulnerable, and easy preys of deceit.

This eyewitness experience of the suffering and death of Nigerians seeking for greener pasture elsewhere through any available means, and the need to institute a change in the Nigerian System spurred up a passion and burden within me which eventually gave birth to The Patriotic

Citizen Initiatives, a Non- Governmental Organisation that is geared at creating a massive awareness in all the local governments of Nigeria and Border States.

It is high time Nigerians began to add value to our citizenry and systems. The onus lies on us, Nigerians to build up our nation, and make it a better place. There is therefore a need for the mindset of Nigerians to be re-orientated. Human trafficking, Desert encroachment, corruption, Greed and its' like can be eradicated from the Nigerian system. The attitude of non-challancy towards the ills of Society has to stop!

If I could rescue four people, and bring them back home, then just imagine what would happen if every Nigerian joins hands to stop this illegal and inhumane act, and stop the blood of our people from running freely in the desert. Nigeria is our home, our responsibility, and I call on you to get onboard, and get involved. You too can make a difference! **www.chasingamirageng.com**

Thank you.

Osita Osemene

Study Questions

1. Do you think Osita had what it took to succeed here in Nigeria, without exposing himself to the hazards of the desert journey, and why?
2. Were Osita's parents in support of his going to Spain? Why?
3. How would you describe the personality of Dada?
4. Did Osita's prior experiences have any role to play in his quest?
5. Do you think it was good that Osita went on this journey?
6. Did anything in Nigeria change? And what is the hope of succeeding as before?
7. What are the traps that people fall into when they want to travel?
8. Do you think Osita made the right decision in coming back to Nigeria?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Comrade Osita Osemere

Comrade Osemene Osita is the Founder/National president of Patriotic Citizen Initiatives, a non-governmental organization. He is a humanitarian and a civil advocate, to the core.

His passion for humanity has been felt in his advocacy campaigns towards stranded Nigerians during the Libyan crisis, neglected Libyan returnees in Edo state, as well as his unending quest towards the welfare of Nigerians in Diaspora, especially those stranded in prisons and facing all kinds of dehumanizing acts across the world.

Comrade Osemene Osita is currently using his indebt experience in his 91-day journey through the Sahara desert to preach against youthful desperation, irregular migration and trafficking of all sorts, and the quest of getting quick wealth outside the shores of Nigeria.

He is a graduate of industrial mathematics from the University of Benin, married to Ego Osemene and they are both blessed with three children.



Yvonne Awosanya-Adefajo

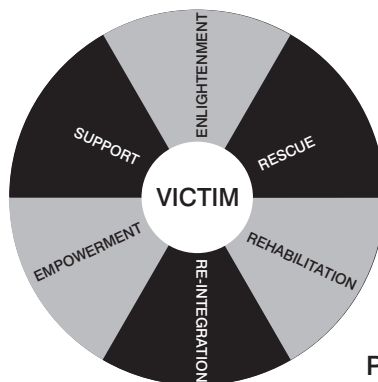
Yvonne Awosanya-Adefajo is a creative writer whose writing career started in 2001 when she won the third place award in Longman Publishers' Novel Writing Competition. She was also a participant of British Council's Telling Stories and Crossing Borders writers' workshops in 2004 and 2006. She has scripted several television shows, and is a producer for Inspire Africa's Moments with Mo and Naija Diamonds. www.aaachicng.com

■ APPENDIX ■

About Patriotic Citizens Initiative

PCI (Patriotic Citizens Initiatives) is an organization dedicated to the fight against the menace of irregular migration and human trafficking. The ability to correctly identify a particular problem associated with irregular migration/human trafficking and also proffer a solution is what distinguishes PCI from many others in the same field.

In 2011, PCI was involved in partnership with the Edo State Government, with the rehabilitation of the 1,750 returnees from Libya. PCI has developed a comprehensive strategy to address the twin challenges associated with irregular migration and give support for victims of human trafficking and returnees.



PCI'S STRATEGY

At PCI (Patriotic Citizens Initiatives), we have developed a strategic approach in a simple, direct but effective manner for maximum result known as ERRES.

E	-	Enlightenment
R	-	Rescue
R	-	Rehabilitation
R	-	Re-integration
E	-	Empowerment
S	-	Support

Get involved, and save a soul today!

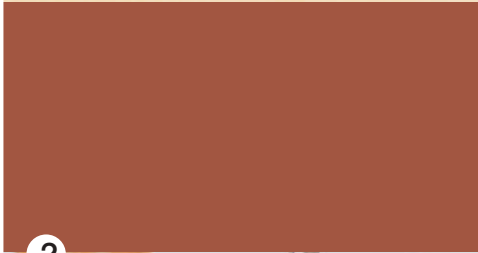
Please visit: www.pcinigeria.org



1) Osita addressing the press; 2) Campaign on Illegal Migration at Mile2 International Park, Lagos; 3) Osita with some EU delegates at a function; 4) Osita at an International Conference on Human Trafficking; 5) Osita at a workshop for students on Child Labour and Human Trafficking



1



2



3



4

5

1) Truck of travellers in the desert - Photo by kotkke.org 2) Illegal immigrants - Photo by francishunt.blogspot.com;
3) Osita's 'desert' wallet; 4) Journeying into Agadez - Photo by Reuters



1



2



3



4

1) Osita as a boy; 2) Osita with friends in Secondary school; 3) Osita dressed for a traditional dance performance; 4) Osita's Parents



1) Osita and Family

Nigerian Embassies Worldwide

Abidjan (COTE D'IVOIRE)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
35, Boulevard De La Republique,
O.I.B.P. 1906, Abidjan,
COTE D'IVOIRE
Tel: (225)211982/212328/223082

Accra (GHANA)
Nigerian High Commission
Joseph Broz Tito Avenue,
Behind Police Headquarters,
P.O. Box 154, Accra.
GHANA.
Tel: (233)776158-9

Addis-Ababa (ETHIOPIA)
Embassy of Nigeria
P.O. Box 1019, Addis-Ababa,
ETHIOPIA.
Tel: (251)550644, PBX 552308

Agdat Rabat (MOROCCO)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
70, Ave. Omar. Ibn El.Khattab
Agdat Rabat, MOROCCO.
Tel: (212)71856/71857

Algiers (ALGERIA)
Embassy of Nigeria
BP.629, Alger-Gare, Algiers 1600.
ALGERIA.
Tel: (213)693278, 693726

Baghdad (IRAQ)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Area 603, Lane 3, House 2,
Al-Mutanabi District, Mansour,
P.O. Box 5933, Baghdad, IRAQ.
Tel: (964)5421750

Bamako (MALI)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Badlabougou East,
P.O. Box 57, Bamako,
REPUBLIC OF MALI.
Tel: (223)225771, 227368
Bangui (CENTRAL AFRICAN
REPUBLIC)
Embassy of Nigeria
B.P.1010, Bangui
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC.
Tel: (236)610744, 611800.

Banjul (THE GAMBIA)
Nigerian High Commission
Garba Jahumpa Avenue,
New Town Road, Bukau,
P.O. Box 630, Banjul,
THE GAMBIA.
Tel: (220)95217, 95804.

Beijing (PEOPLES' REP. OF CHINA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
2, Tung wu Jie, San Li Tun, Beijing,
PEOPLES' REP. OF CHINA
Tel: (86)532363, 5322108.

Belgrade (YUGOSLAVIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
(YUGOSLAVIA,
-now Bosnia, Herzegovina,
Croatia and Slovenia)
Gersi CEVA 14A
P.O. Box 1021, 1100, Belgrade,
YUGOSLAVIA,
(now Bosnia, Herzegovina,
Croatia and Slovenia)
Tel: (38)413-329, 413-411.

Berlin (GERMANY)
Embassy of Nigeria, Berlin to NEUE
JAKOB STREET 4, 10179, BERLIN
TEL: + 4930-21230-0
Fax: + 4930-21230212.
Old Address:
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Plantanenstrasse 1100, Berlin, 98A.
REP. OF GERMANY
Tel: 4828322, 4772300-1

Bissau (GUINEA BISSAU)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
B.P. 199, Bissau,
GUINEA BISSAU.
Tel: 21 1876-7, 21 1022
Brasilia De (BRAZIL)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Sen-Avenida das Nacoes, Lote 5,
CEP: 70- 473,
Brasilia De. BRAZIL.
Tel: (55)226-5616, 226-1717, 226-
2572. '

Brazaville (REPUBLIC OF CONGO)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
11, Avenue Iyavcey.
B.P. 790, Brazaville.
REPUBLIC OF CONGO,
T e l :
(242)83.38.46, 83.13.16, 83.27.49

Brussels (BELGIUM)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Avenue De Tervuren 228,
1150 Brussels, BELGIUM.
Tel: (32)762 52 60, 7629831,
7629832, 7629847

Bucharest (ROMANIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Strada Orlando MR 9,
P.O. Box 37, Bucharest, ROMANIA
Tel: 50 41 80-8, 502465.

Buea (CAMEROON)
Consulate-General of Nigeria,
Bokwango, P.M.B. 30, Buea,
CAMEROON.
Tel: 32 25 28, 32 35 37
Buenos Aires (ARGENTINA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
11, De Septiembre 839,
1426 Buenos Aires, ARGENTINA.
Tel: 771-6541, 7729447.

Canberra (AUSTRALIA)
Nigerian High Commission
27, State Circle, Deakin, ACT 2600
P.O. Box 241
Civic Square, Canberra, AUSTRALIA
Tel: 062-2866426, 2861322,
861966, 861044
Fax: 2865332.

Cairo (EGYPT)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
13, Sharia Gabalaye Zamaiek, Cairo,
U.A.R.
EGYPT.
Tel: 3420389, 3417894
Caracas (VENEZUELA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Av Chivacoa, Qta Blanca Luz,
San Roman, Caracas,
VENEZUELA.
TEL: 2684936, 2634816

Conakry (GUINEA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
B.P. 54, Conakry,
REPUBLIC OF GUINEA.
Tel: 461314, 469400, 461409.

Cotonou (BENIN)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Avenue De France, Marina,
B.P. 2019, Cotonou,
REP. OF BENIN.
Tel: 301503, 301142, 304487

Dakar (SENEGAL)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Point FC, Rue 1 & F9.
B.P. 3129, Dakar, SENEGAL.
Tel: 24.69.22, 21.43.97

Dar-es-Salam (TANZANIA)
Nigerian High Commission
Liberation Office,
3, Bagamayo Road,
P.O. Box 9214, B.P. 1767,
Dar-es-Salam, TANZANIA.
Tel: 34493, 34440, 34923, 66600/1

Dublin (IRELAND)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
56, Leesen Park, Dublin 6,
IRELAND.
Tel: 682652, 604366, 604051,
604605.

Freetown (SIERRA LEONE)
Nigerian High Commission
37, Siaka Stevens Street,
P.M.B. 291, Freetown,
SIERRA LEONE.
Tel: 24202, 24219, 22474, 22074,
22234

Gaborone (BOTSWANA)
Nigerian High Commission
P.O. Box 274, Gaborone,
BOTSWANA
Tel; 313561, 313838
Geneva (SWITZERLAND)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria,
1, Rue Richard Wagner, 1211
Geneva 2, SWITZERLAND.
Tel: 022-7342140, 73421.49

Harare (ZIMBABWE)
Nigerian High Commission
36, Samora Machel Avenue,
Harare, ZIMBABWE.
Tel: 79 0761, 790763, 790765-9

Havana (CUBA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
5th Ave. No. 1401,
P.O. Box 6232, Havana,
CUBA.
Tel: 332091, 332898

Hawally (KUWAIT)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Area No. 1 St. 14, Plot 166, Surra.
P.O. Box 6432, 32039 Hawally,
KUWAIT.
Tel: 5320794, 5320795, 5320831.

Hong Kong (HONG KONG)
Commission of the Fed. Rep. of
Nigeria
25th Floor, Tung Wai Commercial
Building
109/111 Gloucester Rd., G.P.O. Box
5670,
HONG KONG.
Tel: 852-8278860, 852-8278813

Islamabad (PAKISTAN)
High Commission of Nigeria
House 6, St. 22 Sector F/6/2
P.O. Box 1075, Islamabad
PAKISTAN.
Tel: 822466, 212465-6

Jakarta (INDONESIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
34, Jalan Aipon Coro,
P.O. Box 3649, Jakarta
INDONESIA.
Tel: 62-21326686, 3404903

Jeddah (SAUDI ARABIA)
Consulate-General of Nigeria
19, Al-Oroubah Street,
46, Mushrefan District 6, /
P.O. Box 655, Jeddah,
SAUDI ARABIA
T e l : 9 6 6 2 -
6727662, 6716865, 6702886

Lisbon (PORTUGAL)
Embassy of the Fed.. Rep. of Nigeria
Rua Femao Mendes Pinto 50,
Restelo, 1400, Lisbon
PORTUGAL.
Tel: 3016191, 3016189, 3016439

Lome (TOGO)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
311, Boulevard Coreculaire,
B.P. 1189, Lome, TOGO.
Tel: 21 34 55, 21 60 25

London (UNITED KINGDOM)
Nigerian High Commission
9, Northumberland Avenue
London, W0N 5 8k,
UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 0171-839 1244, 839 2037, 839
6190

Luanda (ANGOLA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Houan Boumedienne, No. 120,
Caixa Postal 479, Luanda,
REPUBLIC OF ANGOLA
Tel: 345985, 340084-5

Lusaka (ZAMBIA)
Nigerian High Commission
17, Broads Road, Fairview,
P.O. Box 32598, Lusaka, ZAMBIA
Tel: 229860-2, 253177, Fax:
223791

Madrid (SPAIN)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Cale Seare 23, Madrid 28002,
SPAIN.
Tel: 5633144, 5630911, 5630971.

Malabo (EQUATORIAL GUINEA)
Embassy Of The Rep. of Nigeria
4, Passo De Los Cocoteros, Malabo,
EQUATORIAL GUINEA.
Tel: 2386 3520

Maputo (MOZAMBIdUE)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
22, Ave. Kenneth Kaunda,
P.O. Box 4693, Maputo,
MOZAMBIQUE
Tel: 490574, 492457.

Manila (PHILIPPINES)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
211, Paraico Street, Dasmarias
Village, MCC,
P.O. Box 2170, Makati,

Metro Manila, PHILIPPINES.
TEL: 8173851/2, 8173837

Mogadishu (SOMALIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Kilometre 5,
P.O. Box 980, Mogadishu,
SOMALIA.
Tel- 5fi7?, 13 fifiPWQ

Monrovia (LIBERIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Tubman Boulevard, Sinkor,
P.O. Box 366, Monrovia,
LIBERIA.
Tel: 261 148, 261020, 224478.

Moscow (RUSSIA)
Embassy of the Rep. of Nigeria
ULKachalova, 13, Moscow,
RUSSIA.
Tel: 290 37 85-7, 2001246.

Nairobi (KENYA)
Nigerian High Commission
Lenana Road,
P.O. Box 30516
Nairobi, KENYA. /
Tel: 565743, 564116/8.

N'Djamena (TCHAD)
Embassy of Nigeria(CHAD)
B.P. 752, Ave. Charles De Gaulle,
N'Djamena
TCHAD.
Tel: 512498, 512647

New Delhi (INDIA)
Nigerian High Commission
21, Olof Paima Marg.
Vasant Vihar New Delhi
INDIA.
Tel: 6876228, 6876558.

New York (UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA)
Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the
United
Nations,
828 Second Ave.,
New York, NY 10017,
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.
Tel: 212-9539130, 5577465

Niamey (NIGER)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Quarter Niamey Bas, B.P. 11-130,
Niamey,
NIGER REPUBLIC
Tel: 732207, 732410, 732795

Nouakchott (MAURITANIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
B.P. 367, Nouakchott,
MAURITANIA

Tel: 523-14,52304,52346

Ontario (CANADA)
Nigerian High Commission,
295, Met Caife Str, Ottawa
Ontario, K2P 1R9, CANADA.
Tel: 236 0521, 236 0522, 236 0523,
236 0527, 236 0529

Ouagadougou (BURKINA FASO)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
36, Hospital Rd. B.P. 132,
Ouagadougou,
BURKINA FASO
Tel: 30 66 67, 30 66 68, 315201

Paris (FRANCE)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
173, Ave. Victor Hugo, Paris 16E,
FRANCE.
Tel: 47046165, 47048497, 4704-
6865 (Ext.224)

Port of Spain (TRINIDAD & TOBAGO)
Nigerian High Commission
3, Maxwell-Philip Str., St. Clair,
P.M.B. 140,
Newtown, Port of Spain TRINIDAD &
TOBAGO.
Tel: 6282806, 6224002, 6226834

Prague (CZECH/SLOVAK STATES)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Pred Baturiemí 18,
16201 Prague 616,
CZECH/SLOVAK STATES.
Tel: 2 4 3 1 2 0 6 5, 2 4 3 1 2 1 0 4,
24312108

Pyongyang (NORTH KOREA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
P.O. Box 535, Pyongyang,
NORTH KOREA
Tel: 747748, 817286, 817558

Qatar (QATAR)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Doha, QATAR,
Tel: 732479

Riyadh (SAUDI ARABIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Riyadh 11893, Sulaimagiyah
District Riyadh,
SAUDI ARABIA.
Tel: 4823024, 4823982, 4655411

Rome (ITALY)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Via Orazio, 16/18
00193-Rome, ITALY.
Tel: 6878450, 6876720, 6897048

Stockholm (SWEDEN)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Tyrgatan 8,
P.O. Box 628, 11427, Stockholm,

SWEDEN.
Tel: 08-246390, 204575

Tehran (IRAN)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
31st Street,
9, Khaled IstAmbul Avenue,
P.O. Box 2736,
Tehran, IRAN.
Tel: 684935, 684936, 684921

The Hague (NETHERLANDS)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Wage Neaareg 5, The Hague,
NETHERLANDS.
Tel: 07-35017 03, 3548579

Tokyo (JAPAN)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
19-7, Vchora 2-Chome,
Shibuya-Ku, Tokyo,
JAPAN.
Tel: 468-5531-3

Tripoli (LIBYA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Sharra Basir El-Ibrahim Garden City,
P.O. Box 4417, Tripoli, LIBYA.
Tel: 0 0 2 1 0 - 2 1 . 4 3 0 3 3 , 8 0 -
43035, 43j36,
4443035-6, 4443038

Vienna (AUSTRIA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
Rennweg 25, 103 Vienna
P.O. Box 262, Vienna.
AUSTRIA.
Tpl- 7-IM9U 717fiRRV7

Warsaw (POLAND)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
ULChocimska 18,
00791 Warsaw.
POLAND.
T e l : 0 0 . 4 8 . 2 2 -
486944, 485308, 485309

Washington DC (UNITED STATES OF AMERICA)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
2201 M. Street, NW
Washington DC 20037,
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.
T e l : 2 0 2 - 8 2 2 2 -
1500, 8221513, 7751385/6

Windhoek (NAMIBIA)
Nigerian High Commission
P.O. Box 23547, Windhoek,
NAMIBIA
TEL: 232103/5

Yaounde (CAMEROON)
Embassy of the Fed. Rep. of Nigeria
(Opposite Renault Automobile),
P.O. Box 448, Yaounde.

CAMEROUN.
Tel: 22 34 55, 231904