The World I See Through

An anthology of short stories



Written by Find Your Path Fellows 2026

OurStoriesFromHome



The World I See Through Africa

An anthology

Written by
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OURSTORIESFROMHOME
2026

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Written by Find Your Path Fellows 2026.

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Contents

Copyright 3

Introduction 5

About Find Your Path 6

About the founder 7

Founder’s note 8

Sponsors and acknowledgements 9

A note on the stories 10

INNOCENCE IS EXPENSIVE
Eniola Ajetunmobi 11

The Cost of a Dream
Esther Lawal 17

Things I Have Always Wanted to Say
Onyebuchi Precious Mmesoma 32

A KINGDOM BUILT ON CHAINS
Mustapha Alimot Abike 52

The Path to Nothing
Oluwadarasimi Oluwatamilore Esan 71

WHERE LOVE TRULY LIES
A’asiyah Omolola Sodiq 76

Beyond The Runway
Oluwaji Oluwamisimi Grace 95

The Price of Blood
Sophia Zinachi Sholadoye 117

Contributors 126

Stay connected 127

Introduction

The World I See Through Africa brings together stories by the Find Your Path Fellows 2026. Across homes, classrooms, city streets and imagined histories, their characters confront questions of ambition, belonging, family, love, injustice and responsibility.

Some pursue a dream that others struggle to understand. Some discover the cost of trust, silence or acceptance. Others face the legacies of power and the difficult work of choosing a different future. The settings and voices vary, but each story offers a particular way of seeing.

The World I See Through Africa invites readers to encounter the world through the experiences and imaginations of young African writers. This collection makes room for those perspectives in the writers’ own words.

About Find Your Path

Find Your Path is an impact programme by OurStoriesFromHome that bridges the gap between formal education and the skills teenagers and young people need for the future. Through training, mentorship and community, it helps them recognise their strengths, develop practical skills and turn their ideas into work they can share.

The vision is to complement classroom learning with opportunities to think critically, solve problems, collaborate and build confidence. It prepares young people to explore further education, work, entrepreneurship and the creative economy, while building their ability to adapt as the world changes.

The Find Your Path Fellowship is one expression of this wider vision. Its first edition was a fully sponsored, one-week creative-writing programme for ten teenage writers, supporting them to develop their voices, strengthen their storytelling and explore responsible uses of technology in creative work.

This anthology brings together writing developed by the fellows. Each contribution reflects its writer’s interests, imagination and perspective.

To learn more about Find Your Path or explore a partnership, email ourstoriesfromhome@gmail.com.

About the founder

Oluwaseye Adesina is the founder of OurStoriesFromHome and Find Your Path. Her work spans content strategy, storytelling, community and creative development.

She is Head of Media and Content Strategy at CareerBuddy. Through Find Your Path, she is building opportunities for teenagers and young people to develop practical skills, explore their strengths and prepare for life beyond the classroom through training, mentorship and community.

Founder’s note

I started Find Your Path with a desire to support young people as they begin to discover their strengths. My first focus was emerging creative talent, but the bigger question was how to connect what young people learn in school with the possibilities beyond it.

My first idea was an extracurricular club across schools: a space for teenagers to explore their interests and develop practical skills. I began with a summer fellowship for ten creative writers. That fellowship was the first step towards a much wider vision.

Find Your Path bridges the gap between formal education and the skills young people need for the future. Through training, mentorship and community, I want us to help them think critically, build confidence, adapt to change and put their abilities to use in work, enterprise and everyday life.

Getting to know the fellows has been a beautiful part of this journey. This anthology gives their stories a place to live and a chance to reach readers beyond the programme.

As Find Your Path grows, the aim is to work with schools, parents and partners to reach young people across different interests and skills. Writing is where we began. Our purpose is to help them build pathways for themselves.

Thank you to our sponsors, to my writing partner, Maranatha of The Writer’s Writer, and to the fellows for sharing their stories with us.

Seye Adesina

Founder, OurStoriesFromHome and Find Your Path

Sponsors and acknowledgements

Our thanks to the sponsors and supporters of the Find Your Path Fellowship 2026. Your support helped make this first summer fellowship possible and gave ten young creative writers a space to explore their voices.

We acknowledge Tonya Baynes Coaching, The Changeover Foundation, Reels by Fakson Visualz, Trivia by Gospel Games, Alpha Mercy Foundation and CalledOut Estates Limited for supporting the fellowship.

Special thanks to Maranatha, author, writing coach and the founder of The Writer's Writer, for her support as Seye's writing partner on the fellowship.

To our fellows, thank you for the imagination and effort you brought to this experience, and for trusting us with your stories.



A note on the stories

The stories in this anthology were developed during the Find Your Path Fellowship 2026 and received developmental guidance and light editing.

We chose not to over-edit the work. Our intention was to support each writer in developing a story while preserving their voice, imagination and stage of writing development. The collection offers readers an encounter with their emerging craft, with room for the individuality of each writer to remain visible.

INNOCENCE IS EXPENSIVE

By Eniola Ajetunmobi



Age 14

Eniola writes stories, journals and songs. Eniola hopes readers will connect emotionally with the characters, enjoy the story and find something to reflect on.

INNOCENCE IS EXPENSIVE

Rain.

It fell hard on Kirikiri Maximum Prison.

Moses decided that he would either die or be free.

The siren came first, followed by gunshots. Moses was already running.

Khaki shirt, number 217 stuck to his back.

Bare feet slipping in the mud. He thought about his family and Desola, the woman he loved.

He was willing to escape and risk his life for them, because they were the only people who trusted and cared about him.

The bush behind the prison was full of thorns.

There were broken bottles. His chest was on fire, not from running, but from two years ago.

Two years since that plate of poisoned food, when they pointed at him and said he did it.

No evidence. No lawyer. Just life imprisonment.

The judge didn't even look at him when he sentenced him.

"*Stop!*" he heard, followed by a gunshot. This wasn't the first time he had tried to run. In 1994, he tried to climb the wall during harmattan and was caught.

Twenty lashes, three days in a dark hole.

No food, no water.

Moses did not stop. He planned with another cellmate to escape together. He and his cellmate found a broken part in

the ground, started digging and found a tunnel. By the time they were out of the tunnel, they had landed in the office of the DPO (Divisional Police Officer). This time the consequences were more severe: more lashes, no food, and he was not allowed to see anyone for a month.

He decided to try to escape alone one last time. The fence was ahead, with barbed wire at the top. He didn't think; he ran at it and jumped. The wire caught his shirt and tore it. He was bleeding, and the pain was sharp. Then he hit the ground on the other side and ran.

1970.

Nigeria was still learning how to breathe after the end of the Biafran War when Moses was born. There was scarcity and poverty.

He lived in Lagos, in a room-and-parlour apartment: zinc roof, no fridge, no running water.

Five people lived in that room: his father, his mother, his sister Amarachi and his grandmother.

His father was a driver.

His mother sold akara and pap by the roadside. She would wake up at 4 a.m. to soak beans and grind them on a stone. She was kind, patient and smiled a lot.

The house was not fancy; they had no advanced technology, just mats, chairs, a stove for cooking and a paraffin lamp that made the walls yellow.

Rice was for Sunday; chicken was only for Christmas. Every other day was garri and beans or eba and soup.

Mrs Obinna was the perfect mum for Moses, although she scolded him sometimes.

Grandma lived with them. She was 65 and didn't talk much.

She always told them stories, mostly of the Biafran War, and always advised them.

Some days, she played with them, and she often gave them gifts when they obeyed her.

At age 7, Moses was already in the kitchen doing basic things such as cutting onions, blending pepper and other things he could do without difficulty.

At age 12, he could already make crunchy akara from scratch, and he could make it quickly and easily without the help and supervision of his mum.

His younger sister Amarachi had just finished primary school. School fees became a problem. He dropped out of school at exactly 16.

His dad died, and he had to help out with the family.

He spent more time in the kitchen. He learned how to cook a variety of Nigerian dishes from Mama Femi's buka.

That’s where he met Desola.

A Yoruba girl with tribal marks. 18 years old and of average height. She had finished secondary school and planned to go to university once she was 20. She liked adding a lot of pepper to the food she made, and it mostly ended in disaster.

1990.

Moses had been working for Mr Kayode, the politician, for a year and had easily won his family’s heart with his delicious dishes. He didn't need time to adjust, and he only cooked what he was told to cook. He made sure all was well with the food because the politician had a bad heart condition and sometimes spent days in the hospital when he had an attack.

He was also seeing Desola. She was serious. "*No touching until marriage,*" she said.

1993.

Then one day, Mr Kayode had an attack and was taken to the hospital. The doctors advised one month of bed rest.

One day, while Moses was in the kitchen, Mr Kayode’s wife came to him saying there was a snake in her room. He ran toward her room with a stick and a kitchen knife. When they entered the room, she shut the door and said there was no snake in the room.

Moses was confused and was about to leave when she started undressing in front of him. He refused at first, but when he saw her crying and begging, he decided to do it, mainly because she begged and because Desola never allowed him to touch her, so he saw this as an opportunity to satisfy his urge to sleep with Desola.

The relationship continued for six months behind Mr Kayode's back. He was never suspicious and still treated Moses like his son.

Moses also didn’t let Desola go. He still loved her. He knew what was happening between him and his boss' wife was a plaything that would surely end.

Mr Kayode found out through the camera he had installed in the kitchen. He felt betrayed and angry. He decided to do something that would finish Moses forever. He had a plan in mind and shared it with Janet, a colleague of Moses at the restaurant.

The day of manifestation was set: the 5th of October, Mr Kayode’s 40th birthday party.

Moses was the only one allowed to cook. The other chefs just helped him prepare the ingredients, including Janet, who had been employed just two months earlier.

While no one was looking, Janet took a strange green flower, went straight to the kitchen and placed the flower in a bowl

of water. She squeezed the green liquid into the ingredients for the pancakes.

After Moses had made the food, guests came one after the other to serve themselves. Then Bolaji, the son of another politician, picked up a pancake, sat down and started eating.

He suddenly collapsed on the floor. There was panic, and he was immediately rushed to the hospital.

Bolaji was announced dead.

Moses was arrested.

The politician, Mr Danjuma, was a bitter rival. He made sure Moses went to court.

Desola cried, but her family said, "*Leave that criminal.*" Only Mama Femi and his family believed him.

1995.

Moses escaped from Tafawa Square. He alighted from the truck and jumped the fence. He ran and hid inside an abandoned house. The police searched for him but couldn't find him.

Moses went to his family's house, and they all cried together. He explained to them that he could not have done what he was accused of.

The Cost of a Dream

By Esther Lawal



Age 18

Esther enjoys writing stories and journalling. Esther wants readers to remember that there is always room for growth and dreams.

The Cost of a Dream

“Who hasn’t answered yet?” the teacher asks as she looks around the class.

“Anna!” she calls in a loud voice.

I look around as the sound of her voice calling my name jolts me back to reality from my imagination.

She is asking everyone what their plans are after graduation. I have thought about mine over and over again, and they remain the same. It’s what I’ve always wanted: to become a famous actress by twenty.

“Anna? We’re waiting! What are your plans for post-grad?” she asks again with a smile.

“To become an actress living in New York City,” I say with confidence. Everyone bursts out laughing, and I instantly feel sick to my stomach.

I had never said it out loud before, and seeing their reactions now makes me feel like I should have just kept my mouth shut and said that I was still thinking about it.

“I didn’t say, 'What do you want to be in the future?' I asked for your plans after graduation. Won’t you write JAMB or try to get admission into a university? Or maybe even learn a skill first?” the teacher asks, a bit confused.

I can’t blame her. Truly, most people are already preparing for JAMB, and some have already signed up to learn a skill, and here I am saying that I want to become an actress.

“Umm… I was just joking.” I fake a smile.

“I’m writing JAMB next year and will be attending summer lessons after graduation,” I finally say, and the teacher asks everyone to clap as I sit down, trying to avoid everyone’s

eyes so they won't notice the tears that have built up in mine.

———-

Years later, the echoes of their mocking laughter are still in my head as I adjust my desk so I can rest my head on it.

The sound of the email being sent and the echo of my classmates' laughter collide in my head, and I shut my eyes tightly to pray again.

One step closer to my dream, I say in my head.

Seeing this scholarship article last week was the highlight of this whole year.

My classmates' laughter at my ambitious plans always felt more valid than the dreams I had actually nurtured since I was a child. Ever since I graduated from secondary school, I haven't found any means to get to New York or even become an actress here in Nigeria.

I'm now in my second year studying Law like my dad wanted, but my acting career is not going as planned. I received another rejection email yesterday from an audition that I went to last month.

I look at the sticky note on my mirror that has *"Keep going"* written on it. I sigh and straighten my back. I wrote that note for times exactly like these.

"Are you ready now?" I ask Sayo, my best friend.

We have another audition today that we've been preparing for since last week.

I never thought I would meet someone like Sayo. We're coursemates, and we met at our first lecture as freshmen. She had the same dream as me, and we share everything. I even stopped telling my mum anything about my acting.

“Let’s go,” Sayo says as she walks in front of me in the hostel hallway.

We arrive at the audition venue and queue with the others. They call us in batches, and we wait in a lounge area before finally going into the interview rooms. Sayo and I go in separately, but we squeeze each other’s hands for warmth before separating.

“That was impressive. Have you submitted your profile?” the director asks me, and I nod yes.

“We’ll keep in touch,” he says curtly, and I immediately get up to leave.

I stay in the lounge to wait for Sayo to come out so we can leave together. I am ready to smile and jump with her because I’ve never actually gotten a *“We’ll keep in touch”* before.

It’s usually *“Thanks for coming”* or *“Thank you, next person, please.”*

But Sayo comes out looking gloomy and sad.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as she gets closer to me.

“Nothing,” she says, still staring at the ground. Suddenly, she screams, *“I got the role!”*

“Wow, I’m so happy for you!” I say as I give her a big hug. That’s when I notice that the others are already being sent home.

We’ve been auditioning since last year, and this is the first time either of us has received a *“yes”* from anyone.

“I won’t be going back with you, though. I was told that I need to stay back for some extra information,” she says with excitement.

“No problem. Just call me when you get to the hostel so we can celebrate this properly.”

I am genuinely happy for Sayo. I wave goodbye to her and leave.

“Ah! I’m so tired,” Sayo says as she collapses onto the bed. She has been coming back late and exhausted for the past two weeks, and I’m really worried about her.

“Are you okay? You’ve been looking tired lately. Can’t you take a break?” I ask, but she interjects sharply.

“Break? Where? When I just started my career? I have to give this everything in me. Even my life!”

“Ah-ahn, it’s not that deep now. Which one is your life?” I ask jokingly.

“You really don’t know what this path is like. You can’t afford to fall behind for a single second, or you’re out permanently. Anna, it is much more difficult than all the practice we do here in the room o,” she says. It really hits me that I shouldn’t be questioning her about something I haven’t experienced yet.

We have classes the next day, and the lecturer decides to give an impromptu test. Sayo skips the class, and I think about taking the test on her behalf. But just as I’m about to, a student is caught and pulled out for doing the same thing. It’s funny how God saves us sometimes.

“You think this test is a joke because it’s impromptu, right?” the lecturer asks the boy, who isn't even fazed by being caught.

“This test is worth 50 marks, and anyone who is not in this class right now will not write my exam,” the man finally says before passing an attendance sheet to the front row.

Everyone starts murmuring about the announcement. Some are happy, but I am worried about Sayo. The course is three units, and missing this will do real damage to her CGPA.

When she gets back that day, I inform her about what happened, but she doesn't care.

"I'll soon leave this school for you people anyway," she says when I express how worried I am that she might not be allowed to take the exam.

"There might be a make-up test," I say, remaining hopeful for her. She replies with a smile and adjusts her pillow to sleep.

———

Church is the only place where I get to see my family again. I don't like going home because my parents just want to control my life. Both of my older siblings left the country four years ago. My sister is in California working as a stylist, and my brother works at the Google office in New York as an AI engineer.

Both of them give me the strength to pursue my dreams, but my parents just don't want me to leave.

"We can't have all our children scattered across different continents," my mum once said, trying to support my dad when he refused to sign some documents I needed for my scholarship.

"Brother Ayo and I will literally be in the same city. How is that being scattered across different continents?" I asked her in anger.

"Just stay in Nigeria with us. We will be retiring soon; who will we call if not you?" she added. I lost my appetite and left the dining table, which is the one thing my dad hates most.

“Anna,” I hear someone call. It’s Seun, the leader of our drama unit in church.

“You didn’t come to church last week, did you?” she asks, and I shake my head no.

“Because I didn’t see you, and I had something important to tell you,” she says, looking worried. It starts to scare me.

“You know that Mr Phillips is my uncle, right?” she asks. I wonder what she is about to say.

“He said he tried to reach you, but he couldn’t. He loved your acting and looked everywhere, but he couldn’t find your profile. Someone told him that you and Sayo were friends, so he asked her if he could get your contact information. She told him that you weren’t interested in the role anymore. He was really disappointed and told me about it yesterday. I know that can’t be right. You begged me to talk to him for you. What happened?” she asks, but I am in a daze.

Why would Sayo say that? I ask myself. She knows how much this role meant to me and how hard I worked for it. She even said she wasn’t confident enough, so she only applied for the role of an extra.

“Anna, what happened?” she asks again, placing her hand on my shoulder.

“Sayo lied. I was still interested in the role, and I don’t know why she would say that to him. She submits both of our profiles whenever we audition, so I just assumed that she submitted mine as well,” I reply with tears in my eyes.

She pulls me into an embrace and says, *“Confront her about it. As far as I know, this might all just be a misunderstanding. But if it’s not, she needs to face the consequences.”*

I just nod and wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt.

On my way home, I keep wondering why Sayo would do that to me. I've never trusted anyone as much as I trusted Sayo. I told her things that I never even told my siblings or parents.

"Why did you say that?" I ask when she gets back that night. She just hisses and continues wiping off her makeup.

"Sayo, I asked you a question. Why did you tell Mr Phillips that I was no longer interested in the role when you knew that I was?" I ask again, anger burning in my chest.

"You told me that if we didn't both get roles, you wouldn't take yours. I knew they weren't going to give me a big role, so I just helped you turn it down," she says, twisting her lips as she cleans under her eyes.

"But you should've asked me first!" I say, but she walks away.

We don't talk for three days after that, and I am still so angry at her. She is living the dream that we both shared, while I am realising she never had my best interests at heart.

——-

Our classes run late today, and I stay back to chat with some of my classmates.

"We haven't been seeing you and Sayo together. Hope nothing is wrong?" Eniola asks.

"She got a role, and she's been really busy," I say with a forced smile.

"Is that why she unfollowed you on Instagram?" a girl named Toke asks.

Everyone in my department knows about our Instagram page. We worked so hard to build it in our first year because we thought having more followers would get us roles faster.

“Wait o! Is Sayo actually your friend? Because I’ve been hearing the things she says about you, and they’re not good,” Temi adds.

Temi also acts part-time. She gets roles easily because she featured in ads and short movies as a child.

“Remember the audition for A Life With Love?” she asks, and I nod.

“I heard that the director liked you. He kept saying, ‘I want that Anna girl for the role,’ but they couldn’t find your profile and assumed you weren’t interested anymore.”

I stare blankly at her. This was really happening.

She has to shake my arm to bring me back to reality.

“What happened? I heard she told your parents that you weren’t able to focus in school because of your auditions, too. My mum told me that. What kind of friend says that?” Temi adds, but I am too spellbound to speak.

I leave the three girls and head toward my hostel. I find Sayo’s laptop on her bed, so I know she is already back. I am not going to confront her this time; I just need to know how long she has been doing this. I want to know how many opportunities I have lost because of her.

I notice that she has changed her laptop password. I check her phone instead; luckily, it’s unlocked. As I scroll through it, I keep asking myself, *Was our friendship even real? Did she secretly hate me?*

I find a chat between her and the director she’s currently working with. I discover that she has completed the movie, and that she told him I wasn’t interested in a role.

He wanted to cast me in season two of their series since he couldn’t get my information before shooting for season one started.

I realise that she doesn’t even have my profile saved and never submitted it anywhere.

I only received rejection emails from places I applied to online myself. I could have accomplished so much if I hadn't trusted her blindly.

I leave the room in anger, deciding to go home. As I walk down the hallway, my phone beeps with a notification. It’s an email from Esper Studio, the acting school in New York where I applied for an international student scholarship.

I feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead, and my hands start to tremble. I open the full message:

“Dear Anna,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted as one of the five international students selected for the Esper Studio Scholarship.

As our goal is to pick one student from each continent, please note that you will be representing Africa.

We would love to have you on board as you start this new chapter of your life.”

I look back at my room door, crouch down, and cover my face as I cry.

I don’t even know where to start my thanksgiving. I worked so hard on the tape I submitted, but I never imagined they would pick me since I had no major acting history.

I had only ever been a background extra or played the friend in a commercial.

I grab my bag and go home. My mum has just returned from an event when I arrive, and she is excited to see me.

“Ah-ahn! When did you come back? I thought you didn’t miss us,” she says jokingly, but stops when she notices I’ve been crying.

“What happened? Why is your face like that?” she asks, and I tell her about the scholarship.

She immediately starts dancing and holding my hands.

“I don’t understand you o! Why are you so sad when this is what you’ve always wanted?”

“Sayo betrayed me. She has been sabotaging me this whole time,” I finally say, explaining everything I discovered.

“So that girl is like that? I noticed she was always trying to get your dad and me to discourage you from acting. But why? What did she think she would gain from all of this?” my mum asks, looking confused.

She wants us to celebrate, but I tell her I am not ready to tell Dad yet.

“Who will pay the enrollment fee? It’s a scholarship, but there are still bills to pay o,” she says, and I agree.

When my dad returns, my mum talks me into telling him, and we share the news with him together, but he isn’t pleased.

“So you want to leave your university where you’re studying a reputable course just to go and act abroad?!” he asks in a sour tone.

“It’s what I’ve always wanted, Daddy,” I say, tears welling in my eyes.

“Let’s have this discussion later. I’m tired now,” he says and walks away.

———

Days pass, and he still hasn't given me an answer. My mum shared the testimony in church on Sunday, and congratulations keep pouring in. If only they knew I might not end up going because of my dad.

I call my siblings and explain the situation to them. They are happy for me, and my brother even offers to pay my enrollment fee, but only if Dad agrees.

Sayo and I haven’t spoken since I got the news, but I know she must have heard about it from someone.

She also applied for the scholarship because I sent her the link. I keep wondering what she must be thinking.

I decide I’m going to talk to her. We might not remain friends, but I want to hear her reason for everything she did.

I call her, but her number is unavailable. I go back to the hostel, and she is in the room. To my surprise, she apologises for everything, admits that it was jealousy, and says she hopes we still get to be in the same movies one day. That makes no sense, but I still give her the benefit of the doubt. She suggests that we have a girls' night like we used to, and I get excited.

“This is my way of making it up to you. I’m really sorry, Anna,” she says.

“I’m not going to that low-budget restaurant, sha. You know how terrible their food is,” I say with a small frown that turns into laughter.

She smiles and says, *“That wasn’t the plan o. We’re going to The Sky Restaurant!”* She sounds excited, and I scream.

“No way!” I say with a doubtful expression.

“I’m serious. The director of the movie I just finished made a reservation for us to celebrate wrapping up, but we couldn’t

go. I'll call him and tell him I'm going with a friend instead," she says, trying to convince me.

"But I don't even know what to wear. You know that place is for high-class people," I say.

"Are you not a big person already? A whole New Yorker!" she says and laughs.

"I'm not even a citizen o," I reply, laughing along.

She books a ride to take us there, and we leave for the restaurant.

The rest is a blur. The next time I open my eyes, I am in a dark room with my hands and legs tied up.

"Sayo, help me!" I scream, but I get no response. I can't figure out where I am, but I keep screaming for help. I've never experienced anything like this before, and I am terrified.

I am still trying to force the ropes loose when I hear voices, and I start screaming for help again.

My entire body is drenched in sweat, and my vision starts to go dim.

The door opens, and Sayo walks in with three strange men.

"What's going on? Sayo, help me, please! I beg you in the name of God!" I plead with tears in my eyes.

She scoffs and says, *"You think I'd let you leave the country after you ruined my family?"*

I am shocked. I've barely even met her family. I only know that her sister went to jail and that her parents don't like interacting with people.

"I didn't do anything to you! I never have! Sayo, please release me!"

She laughs maniacally and slaps me across the face with fury.

"Sayo, please let me go! I beg you!" I scream.

She squats in front of me and explains why she is doing this.

Apparently, her sister, Lola, was in her final year of school when she met a friend who invited her to a party as a decoy.

She was used.

"Let me keep some stuff in your bag, Lola," the girl had said to her.

The girl had hidden drugs in Lola's bag, and when they got to the party, she took them out. Toward the end of the party, the police suddenly rushed in. The place had been reported as a drug trafficking ring, but Lola had no idea. Some people fled, but she and a few others were caught, including the girl who put the drugs in her bag.

The police questioned them, but the group had already planned to pin the blame on Lola and play dumb. She was told to get a lawyer, as were the rest of them. The case was investigated, and my dad was the lawyer defending the people who lied against her.

She was sent to prison, and her family always blamed my dad. They spent a lot of money trying to get Lola out of prison and are still paying off the loans.

Sayo had promised to get revenge because my dad had supported criminals for money.

I remain her captive for almost two weeks—I can't even keep count of the days properly. She gives me barely anything to eat or drink.

I am eventually rescued by the police. They are able to track my phone and see that its last location.

———

Sayo is arrested, but I still feel bad for her and her parents. Now both of their children are in jail.

I ask my dad about what Sayo said, and he swears he wasn't aware of the setup. He says, *“I was just defending my clients. That was my job.”*

A few days later, my siblings call my dad and ask him to support my trip to New York, and he finally agrees.

My brother pays my enrollment fee, and my dad pays for my visa and tickets.

I have one week left before travelling, and I go to visit Sayo.

“I’m really sorry all of this happened to you,” I say, but she hisses so loudly that everyone around us stares.

“You’re not sorry, Anna. If you were, I wouldn't be here.”

I apologise as much as I can and leave.

My parents pray for me, and I pack my bags. It still feels like a dream, but I know it is real when I arrive at the airport.

I have to give up studying law, but I am so excited for this new chapter. My dad has promised not to support me if anything goes wrong, but I know it is all a bluff.

Things I Have Always Wanted to Say

By Onyebuchi Precious Mmesoma



Age 16

Precious writes stories with the hope of encouraging readers and inspiring lives.

Things I Have Always Wanted to Say

Ada had a habit of drifting into her own world.

Most times, her mother would catch her staring into space and wonder what could possibly be going on inside that little head of hers.

"*Ada! Where have you travelled to again?*" her mother would ask.

Ada would blink, smile sheepishly and laugh it off.

At sixteen, Ada was in SS3 at Hybrid College on Falaye Street. While everyone else was busy copying notes in class, Ada's mind was usually somewhere else. Her classmates often joked that she could travel to another country without leaving her seat.

They were not entirely wrong.

Ada believed in love. Maybe a little more than she should. She noticed the little things people often ignored. The sound of rain falling on the roof, children playing outside after school, the cool evening breeze after a hot afternoon, or a simple smile from a stranger. To Ada, every little moment had a story hidden inside it.

Life at home was different.

Her family was not rich. They managed with what they had and thanked God for every meal they shared. Ada admired beautiful things, but she had also learned to be content with the little life gave her.

One Saturday afternoon, her mother called from the kitchen.

"*Ada, please go and buy akara and pap before the woman finishes selling.*"

Ada smiled immediately.

Akara and pap were among her favourite meals.

As she walked down the street, the smell of freshly fried akara filled the air. From another compound came the rich aroma of jollof rice and chicken.

Ada stopped for a moment and took a deep breath.

"*One day,*" she whispered with a grin, "*I will eat whatever my nose is smelling.*"

She laughed quietly at herself and continued walking.

The akara seller wrapped the hot bean cakes in brown paper and handed them to her. Ada carefully collected them, enjoying the warmth against her palms.

Just as she turned to head home, someone walked towards her.

Michael.

Her heart skipped.

She had liked him since JSS2, and somehow those feelings had refused to disappear.

She quickly adjusted her dress and stood a little straighter.

"*Maybe today he will finally notice me,*" she thought.

Michael walked past without even looking in her direction.

Not even a glance.

Ada watched him disappear down the road before letting out a small sigh.

"*Maybe tomorrow,*" she whispered, holding the warm akara close to her chest as she continued her walk home.

By the time Ada got home, the smell of hot pap escaping from the kitchen welcomed her before her mother did. A few stubborn flies hovered around the warm akara. She waved them away with the back of her hand before stepping inside.

"*Adaaaa! Jesus, what took you so long?*" her mother called from the kitchen.

"*I met a little traffic on the road, Mummy,*" Ada replied, placing the akara on the tray.

She poured herself a cup of water and emptied it in one long gulp.

"*It is well, my child,*" her mother said, pouring the steaming pap into two chipped enamel bowls that had faithfully served the family for years.

Mother and daughter ate together, talking about little things until the evening slowly gave way to night.

That night, sleep refused to come.

Ada turned from one side of the bed to the other before finally sitting up. She walked quietly to the small mirror hanging on the wall and stared at her reflection.

"*You're beautiful,*" she whispered to herself. "*One day... he'll notice you.*"

A small smile found its way to her face before she lay back on the bed.

The next morning, the familiar shout of "*Up NEPA!*" echoed through the compound.

"*We have light!*" someone shouted excitedly.

"*Ada! Bia o,*" her mother called. "*Go and plug in that torchlight with the cracked handle before they take the light again.*"

Ada laughed softly and hurried to do it.

Not long after, someone called from the gate.

"*Ada! Nwa mara mma!*"

She smiled immediately.

Only one person called her that.

"*Delight!*" she shouted, hurrying outside.

"*There she is... Mrs Michael,*" Delight teased.

Ada covered her face.

"*You know I don't like it when you call me that.*"

"*Really?*" Delight laughed. "*Then why are you blushing?*"

The two friends burst into laughter.

Then Delight remembered why she had come.

"*I came to invite you to a picnic this evening at the beach near Victoria Island. Almost everyone from school will be there.*"

She paused, then smiled mischievously.

"*...Including Michael.*"

Ada tried to hide her excitement, but her heart had already begun beating faster.

"*Lover girl!*" Delight called after her. "*Come quick o! Let's meet at my house. We'll board a bus together.*"

"*Okay!*" Ada answered almost immediately.

She hurried back into the house.

"*Mummy!*" she called, her voice louder than usual.

"*Yes? This one you're calling me while I'm in the bathroom; hope all is well?*" her mother replied.

Ada smiled to herself.

"*I want to tell you something.*"

"*Can't it wait until I come out?*"

By the time her mother stepped out, little bubbles of soap still rested on her hair and shoulders.

"*What is making you this excited?*" she asked, wiping her hands with the end of her wrapper.

"*Mummy... I'm going for a picnic by the seashore tonight. It's like a class hangout. A lot of my classmates will be there.*"

She hesitated for a moment before adding softly,

"*Please don't say no.*"

Her mother looked at her for a while before smiling.

"*If your father were here, you know he wouldn't allow you to step out at night.*"

Ada lowered her head.

"*I know, Mummy.*"

"*But since Delight will be with you, you can go.*"

Before her mother could finish talking, Ada threw her arms around her.

"*Thank you, Mummy!*"

The rest of the day, Ada worked around the house with unusual energy. She swept the compound until the dusty ground looked neat, washed the plates until they shone under the afternoon sun, fetched water and even helped her mother prepare dinner without being asked.

Her mother folded her arms and laughed.

"*This picnic must be very important.*"

Ada only smiled.

If only she knew.

As the evening grew older and the sky slowly wrapped itself in darkness, Ada got dressed and made her way to Delight's house.

Before she could knock on the gate, a fluffy brown dog came running towards her, its tail wagging so hard that its whole body seemed to dance.

"*Easy... easy,*" Ada laughed, bending down to rub its soft fur.

The barking brought Delight outside.

"*Awn! Look who is here,*" she teased. "*Mrs Michael herself.*"

Ada covered her face.

"*You know I don't like it when you call me that.*"

"*I'll stop the day Michael finally notices you.*"

She grabbed Ada's hand and pulled her inside.

"*Come and sit down. Let me put a little powder on your face.*"

"*Delight, you know I don't like makeup.*"

"*My dear, there'll be plenty of fine girls there tonight. At least let them know you're beautiful too.*"

Ada sighed dramatically.

"*Fine... but don't make me look like a masquerade.*"

The two girls burst into laughter.

Just then, Delight's father walked into the sitting room.

"*Delight, who is the beautiful young lady outside?*"

"*My friend, Ada.*"

"*Oh... so you're Ada. You're welcome.*"

"*Thank you, sir,*" Ada replied with a smile.

A few minutes later, the girls boarded a bus heading for Victoria Island.

Streetlights flashed across the window as the bus rolled through the busy roads of Lagos.

Ada barely noticed any of it.

Every few minutes, Delight nudged her shoulder.

"*See this one,*" she laughed. "*You've been smiling since we left the house. We haven't even reached the beach.*"

Ada turned to the window so Delight wouldn't see her blushing.

Deep inside, she whispered,

"*Please... let tonight be different.*"

The road leading to the beach was busier than Ada had imagined.

Cars sped past one after another, their headlights cutting through the darkness like long ribbons of light. The sound of horns, laughter and music from nearby cars filled the night air.

"*Come on, Ada,*" Delight said, gently pulling her hand. "*We'll be late.*"

Ada was about to follow when something caught her attention.

An elderly man stood by the roadside, his walking stick trembling in his hand. He stretched one foot forward, only to pull it back again each time another vehicle sped past.

He looked lost.

"*Delight, wait.*"

"*What is it?*"

"*That old man... he can't cross alone.*"

Before Delight could respond, Ada was already walking towards him.

"*Good evening, sir,*" she said with a warm smile. "*Can I help you cross?*"

The old man slowly lifted his face.

His eyes searched for where Ada's voice was coming from before a faint smile settled on his wrinkled face.

"*God bless you, my daughter.*"

Ada gently held his hand.

"*Take your time, sir. There's no rush.*"

Step by step, they began crossing the road.

The old man's grip tightened around Ada's fingers as they reached the middle of the road.

Then...

A bright white light flooded the road.

It came so suddenly that Ada had to shut her eyes for a second.

The sound of an engine roared towards them.

"*Ada!*" Delight screamed.

Everything happened at once.

Tyres cried against the road.

The old man froze.

Ada's heart slammed against her chest.

The white SUV stopped barely an arm's length away from them.

For a few seconds, the entire road seemed to hold its breath.

Even the music from the beach suddenly felt far away.

Slowly…

The driver's door opened.

A polished black shoe touched the ground.

Then another.

A tall figure stepped out.

He adjusted the sleeve of his shirt before raising his head.

It was Michael.

For a second, Ada forgot how to breathe.

He didn't even look at Ada at first.

His eyes went straight to the old man.

"*Sir, are you alright?*" he asked, hurrying over.

"*I'm fine, my son,*" the old man replied with a smile. "*This young lady helped me across.*"

Only then did Michael turn.

His eyes met Ada's for the first time.

She suddenly forgot how to breathe.

"*So… you're the one who helped him?*"

Ada nodded softly.

"*Yes.*"

Michael looked at the old man again before turning back to her.

"*Thank you.*"

Ada blinked.

She had imagined Michael talking to her a thousand different ways. In none of those daydreams was the first thing he said: "*thank you.*"

"*It was nothing,*" she replied quietly.

"*It wasn't nothing,*" the old man interrupted. "*Many people passed me by, but she stopped.*"

Michael looked at Ada again. This time, he wasn't just looking at another student.

He was looking at a girl whose kindness spoke before her mouth ever did.

He pointed towards the white SUV parked by the roadside.

"*Are you both heading to the beach?*"

"*Yes,*" Delight answered.

"*I'm going there too. Hop in. I'll drop you.*"

Ada looked at Delight.

Delight forced a smile before nodding.

"*It's okay. Let's go.*"

As they settled into the car, Ada sat quietly, her fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of her dress.

Everything felt unreal.

The soft music playing inside the car, the cool air from the air conditioner, the faint scent of Michael's perfume... it all felt like one of those dreams she usually woke up from.

Outside, Lagos refused to sleep. Cars rushed by, streetlights stretched across the road, and the city glittered like someone had scattered tiny stars on the ground.

No one spoke for a while.

Then Michael broke the silence.

"*What's your name?*"

Ada almost laughed.

She had liked this boy for years, yet he didn't even know her name.

"*Ada.*"

He nodded slowly.

"*I'm Michael.*"

Delight nearly smiled.

"*As if she doesn't know,*" she muttered under her breath.

Ada bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing.

The rest of the journey passed quietly, but something had changed.

For the first time, Michael knew her name.

And somehow…

That was enough to make Ada's heart believe that maybe, just maybe, tonight was different.

When they arrived at the beach, music welcomed them before their feet touched the sand.

The place was alive.

Students gathered around, laughing, taking pictures, playing games and enjoying the cool breeze from the sea.

Ada stepped down from the car and looked around.

She had never been anywhere like this before.

Delight smiled.

"*Don't tell me you are already lost in your little world again.*"

Ada laughed.

"*Maybe a little.*"

They joined the others, and for once, Ada wasn't thinking about whether Michael would notice her.

She was simply enjoying the night.

Later, everyone gathered for games and dancing.

"*Everybody should pick someone to dance with!*" someone shouted.

Ada stood beside Delight, already expecting to watch from the side.

Then a hand stretched towards her.

She looked up.

Michael stood there.

"*Would you dance with me?*"

Ada looked around, wondering if he was really talking to her.

"*Me?*"

Michael smiled.

"*Yes, you.*"

Slowly, she placed her hand in his.

The music started.

And they danced.

From the corner of the crowd, Delight watched quietly.

A few minutes earlier, she had been the one laughing the loudest.

Now, her hands rested by her side.

"*Delight, are you not joining us?*" one of their classmates asked.

She looked up quickly.

"*Of course. I'm coming.*"

She smiled, but her eyes returned to Ada and Michael for a second longer before she walked away.

Ada and Michael kept dancing until the music slowed and the crowd began to scatter.

The laughter around them slowly faded as students started packing their things and preparing to leave. The picnic that Ada had imagined for days was coming to an end.

As everyone walked towards the bus stop, Ada looked around for Delight.

But she was nowhere to be found.

She soon noticed Delight was already far ahead, walking quickly without waiting or calling her name.

Ada frowned.

That was unlike her.

"*Delight?*" she called softly.

But her friend didn't turn.

Ada hurried a little, trying to catch up, but before she could reach the bus stop, someone held her hand gently.

She turned.

It was Michael.

"*Don't tell me you want to run after Delight,*" he said with a small smile. "*She has already gone ahead.*"

Ada looked towards the road.

"*I should go with her.*"

"*I can drop you off,*" Michael replied.

"*No, it's okay. I will follow her.*"

But Michael shook his head.

"*It's late, Ada. Let me take you home.*"

After a moment of hesitation, Ada agreed.

The drive was quieter than the first one.

Both of them sat in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was the kind of silence where both people were thinking about things they didn't know how to say.

After some minutes, Michael noticed an ice cream shop by the roadside.

"*Can we stop for a minute?*"

Ada looked confused.

"*Why?*"

"*Just trust me.*"

They stepped down from the car, and Michael bought two cups of ice cream.

Ada smiled.

"*You really like surprising people.*"

Michael laughed.

"*Maybe.*"

They stood by the roadside, enjoying the cool night breeze.

"*I've been noticing you,*" Michael finally said.

Ada looked at him.

"*Me?*"

"*Yes. Especially after tonight. The way you helped that old man... you didn't even think about yourself first.*"

Ada smiled softly.

"*I don't know. I just felt like he needed help.*"

Michael nodded.

"*That's what surprised me. Most people only do good things when someone is watching.*"

Ada looked down at her ice cream.

"*I just like little things. A person's smile. A beautiful morning. Helping someone when you can. I think those things matter.*"

Michael smiled.

"*That's what I like about you.*"

Ada became quiet.

On their way back, Michael asked,

"*Why do you always seem so far away? Even in school, you are always in your own world.*"

Ada laughed gently.

"*I think I just enjoy noticing things people ignore.*"

Michael nodded.

"*Maybe that's why I noticed you.*"

When they finally reached Ada's house, she realised they had gone straight home instead of stopping at the bus stop.

The white SUV parked in front of their house caught her mother's attention.

Ada stepped out with a smile.

"*Thank you, Michael.*"

"*You are welcome.*"

Michael greeted her mother politely before driving away.

Ada watched the car disappear before entering the house.

For the first time in a long while, she went to bed smiling.

But not everyone slept with the same happiness.

The next morning was Monday.

Ada entered the classroom and saw Delight already seated.

"*Good morning,*" Ada said.

Delight only nodded.

Ada paused.

"*Delight... are you okay?*"

"*I'm fine.*"

But her voice didn't sound like the Delight Ada knew.

During break time, Ada finally asked.

"*Why did you leave me yesterday? You didn't even wait for me.*"

Delight looked at her.

"*Did you even notice I was gone?*"

Ada became quiet.

"*What does that mean?*"

"*Nothing.*"

But it wasn't nothing.

As days passed, Delight became different.

The girl who once laughed with Ada became the girl who watched her quietly.

Then the whispers started.

People began saying things about Ada.

That she was only getting close to Michael because of his family's wealth.

That she had always wanted to be around him.

That she was pretending to be innocent.

Ada couldn't understand where the words came from.

She had never wanted Michael because of his money.

She liked him because of the little things she saw in him.

One afternoon, Ada heard Delight talking with some classmates.

"*Everyone thinks Ada is just a sweet girl,*" Delight said. "*But people don't know what she is really doing.*"

Ada stood there silently.

The words hurt more because they came from the person she trusted.

Later, she confronted Delight.

"*Why are you doing this?*"

Delight looked away.

"*I don't know.*"

But deep down, she knew.

She had allowed jealousy to become louder than friendship.

Things changed.

Delight started making choices she was not proud of.

She tried to make Ada look bad in school.

She distracted her during assignments.

She spread stories that were not true.

But Ada remained quiet.

She focused on herself.

She studied harder.

She stopped trying to prove her heart to everyone.

And slowly, people began seeing the truth.

They saw that Ada was still the same girl who helped strangers, shared what little she had and cared even when nobody was watching.

During the final exam period, Michael walked towards Ada after their last paper.

"*Ada.*"

She turned.

"*I have been trying to find the right time to say this.*"

He took a breath.

"*I can't hide it anymore. I like you. I want you to be part of my life.*"

Ada looked at him.

A part of her had waited for this moment for years.

But another part of her understood something important.

Love was not something to rush into because of excitement.

"*Michael,*" she said gently, "*I like you too. But love is not something we should jump into without understanding each other.*"

Michael smiled.

"*I respect that.*"

And for the first time, Ada knew she was choosing with her heart, not just her dreams.

Delight watched from a distance.

The jealousy she had carried only left her empty.

She later realised that Ada was never trying to take anything from her.

Ada was simply being Ada.

Kind.

Honest.

And true.

With time, Delight apologised.

It wasn't easy, but Ada accepted her apology.

They both learned that friendship needed honesty, not competition.

Life moved forward.

Michael and Ada slowly built something beautiful based on respect.

Delight also found her own happiness when someone who truly appreciated her came into her life.

Years later, they all looked back and remembered one important lesson.

Sometimes, the things we are afraid of losing were never ours to begin with.

And sometimes, the people we envy are only showing us the parts of ourselves we need to discover.

Because the things we have always wanted to say are not always meant to be spoken.

Sometimes, they are meant to be lived.

A KINGDOM BUILT ON CHAINS

By Mustapha Alimot Abike



Age 17

Halimat enjoys writing stories and journalling. She hopes to motivate readers and leave them looking forward to the next story.

A KINGDOM BUILT ON CHAINS

Diana's POV

A rapid knocking sound seeps through my subconscious as I roll in my bed.

"Dear heavens! I'm awake," I yell out to whoever is disturbing my beauty sleep.

I'm guessing there is an important announcement for me to be woken up this early. Last I checked, my father couldn't care less if I slept the whole day without moving. In his world, my siblings are the prized jewels of the century.

The old wooden stairs creak as I approach the living area.

"Good morning, Daddy." I curtsy to my father.

"Don't bother with the fake courtesy; I don't want you here any less than you want to be," he replies, sipping his early morning tea, or in this case, late-morning tea.

"I want you to follow Hannah to the seamstress shop and find yourself a nice-fitting dress. The royal family is hosting a ball, and the queen has personally requested our family," he says, still fixated on today's papers.

I breathe in deeply, preparing to counter his request—he knows I hate balls, so why bother inviting me to one?

"Oh, and before you make a silly excuse for why you can't come, it is not a request but a strict order," he reiterates, leaving the large sitting room.

I crumple on the sofa, already feeling devastated even though the day has just started.

“Are you going back to sleep already? We have a lot to do,” Hannah, my very intrusive sister, says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Don’t patronise *me, Hannah; I’m already pissed off as it is,”* I retort, getting up to prepare for the torture of a day I’m about to have.

THE SEAMSTRESS SHOP

My sister is currently catching up on old times with Mariah, the seamstress. We finished our shopping what seemed like ages ago, but Hannah is just too much of everyone’s favourite.

Sometimes, I get jealous of Hannah; everyone loves her, adores her, praises her, even worships her.

I am the odd one, the one who doesn’t fit in, the outcast—I fit every pariah-like description.

People even dare to ask me if I am truly my father’s child, and sometimes I question it myself.

“Diana!” my sister yells, shaking me out of my reverie.

“What are you thinking? You seem to be in your head a lot these days. Are you okay?” she asks with genuine worry.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine; I just need to rest,” I say with a yawn to sell my story.

“You just woke up, for Pete’s sake, and we are leaving soon,” my sister replies, eyeing me suspiciously.

We are supposed to head straight back home, per our father’s orders, but my perfect sister decides to stop by her betrothed’s home: Kingsley. He is a menace, but like Hannah, everyone’s favourite. He is the eldest of the family, and they are expected to get married, *blah blah blah*.

Hannah is acting like a swan, swooning over every word he says; I feel like throwing up over the fine Victorian decor. I might consider buying some when I finally escape the hell I call home.

"Diana! What is wrong with you?" my sister yells, scanning my face.

"What, what, what!" I reply with a yell of my own. I am frustrated, tired and exhausted, but there she is, being Princess Charming with her prince.

"Kingsley here was kind enough to ask if you would go to the ball with Leon; he also has no one to go with," she says after a long moment of silence between us.

"I really appreciate being called a loner, but no, I'll pass," I retort, leaving the room feeling very angry. I know my sister very well, and I know that she feels bad that I don't have a companion to take me to the ball, so she has asked that two-faced street pole about his brother. I can make my decisions mysel—

"Ouch, are you blind…" I am getting ready to pour my anger onto the poor stranger I bumped into, but I look up to see Egan, my colleague at archery class.

"What's got your hoots in a toot? You weren't even looking where you were going." He looks at me, lifting my chin.

Egan is what you would call a friend, but I hate calling him that; it irks my soul.

I feel the thump of his finger on my forehead.

"Why'd you do that?" I pout, rubbing the spot he'd thumped.

"You seem to be a little bit too in your head. What's going on in there?" he asks, acting like my sister.

I groan in return, walking past him. *"Hey, wait up,"* he shouts, running after me.

We end up at the park, and I lose track of time; he always has this way of making you forget. He is truly a f-f-friend.

I take a deep breath before going into the house because I know I am about to get scolded.

I know I am in deeper trouble when I see my sister crying while my brothers look more than furious.

"Where have you been?" my father shouts.

I'm a little surprised he's the first to ask; he'd usually go: *"You got injuries, cuts or bruises?"* Then I would simply reply, *"No casualties,"* and that would be that.

Did my sister cook up a sob story?

"Whatever she said is a lie," I quickly say, before this goes exactly where I know it is surely going.

"We were going to wait until the night of the ball to say this, but you are to follow your brothers' troop to migrate to Africa."

"Think of it like an adventure. And it is not a request but an order; they leave the night after the ball," my father finishes.

Out of everything he says, the only thing I pick up is that we—meaning everybody but me—discussed my life, moving players like on a chessboard without my knowledge, as usual.

"H-how can you do this to me? I know I'm not Nathan or Hannah, but that doesn't mean you should ship me off to some unknown region."

I feel my chest burning hot within me. For a second, I cannot breathe and start to gasp for air, but nobody makes a move, not even my own mother.

I give in to the darkness that surrounds me; I don't fight the pain, I welcome it.

—

I sit up on my bed, holding my head, trying to remember what happened. As the memories of the previous night return, I swoon into a doze and wake up sweaty.

I change my attire and head downstairs for breakfast. I don't bother with pleasantries or greetings because, honestly, at this point, none of them deserves it.

"How is your head?" my mother finally remembers to ask. I continue to serve myself, pretending I didn't hear a flea talk.

"I understand that you might have felt a bit queasy, but your sister ran a hot temperature through the night, and I needed to be with her. You understand, right?"

Her silly excuse almost makes me burst out laughing; maybe Father's invitation doesn't seem so bad any more, because I would take anything over this right now.

"I will be finishing my breakfast in my chambers, and I would be more than happy to follow my sweet brothers to Africa."

Saying that aloud, I pick up my plate and head back to my place of ease; no maid cares to ask if I need help—after all, who ever cares for the outcast?

It is past noon now, and garment fitters, hair stylists, and jewel keepers fill the house.

My sister looks like one of the stars in the sky; my brothers look more ravishing than ever, while I look, as usual, like a little outcast trying to belong.

Soon enough, Kingsley comes to pick Hannah up, and my brothers' dates arrive shortly after.

"Poor thing doesn't have anyone to take her to the ball," one of my brothers' dates whispers to no one in particular, but I

really am not in the mood for dumb dramas, so I stand by the fireplace peacefully until my sister approaches me.

"Listen, sis…" I raise my hand, dismissing her and whatever manipulative stunt she is about to pull, but she doesn't seem to get the message—typical Hannah.

I turn to face her; maybe she'll leave me alone if I give her attention.

"What, Hannah? What could you possibly want?"

"I know you hate me right now, but I do want you to know that I don't want you to go to Africa. I love you, sister; I hope you know that."

With that, she hugs me and leaves.

THE BALL

Everyone is smiling and laughing, trying to fit in and be somebody.

I stand on the second floor watching everyone over the barricade; my sister is currently the centre of attention, followed by my brothers, who are the eye-catchers of every maiden in the room.

Even the paper boy seems to be having fun.

All I can think of is Father's proposition.

It is time for the Queen's boring speech, and everyone gathers.

"My good people of England, we are gathered today to honour our great youths who are going to Africa; they need help and someone to lead them, and we are going to be exactly those people."

Everyone in the room bursts into applause—I am just appalled. She says a few words and gets a standing ovation?

Such hypocrisy.

On the way home, my father praises my brothers for the huge impression they made.

Huge impression? They practically flashed their arrogant smiles, pranced around the ladies, and dropped compliments.

"Did you meet anyone new at the ball, Diana?" my sister asks as we make to alight from the carriage, drawing everyone's attention to me.

"Please refrain from dragging me into your conversation; I have no interest," I reply, as I walk away.

I have a whole new life to prepare for.

THE NEXT MORNING

I wake up brighter than usual; it must be the happiness of starting a new life far from all of this.

I packed my baggage as soon as I returned home yesterday; I can't wait to leave this sorry excuse of a household.

"I'm going to miss my babies so much," my mother whines at the ship's dock.

"We aren't going forever, Mother; we will be back," my brother Edward says.

"Marie," my mother calls me by my maiden name.

I am at the back, watching them like the sick, happy family that they are.

"Yes, Mother," I say with a forced smile.

"I know I haven't been the best mother in the world, but I love you, sweetheart, and I don't want you going about causing trouble. Please be safe, dear."

She hugs me, and for the first time in a long while I feel the warmth of a mother once again, but now it is time for me to go and start afresh, at least until we come back.

“Goodbye. Speak well of me to Hannah, and make sure to greet Egan for me. I’ll be sure to send my letters now and then.”

With that, I trail behind my brothers to my new life.

THE COLONY OF LAGOS

Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined the place they call ‘AFRICA’.

We are received by British junior officers who lead us to our carriage. The air is warm and heavy; the trees seem to stretch endlessly, and their houses are elegant, adorned with wrought-iron balconies and brightly painted shutters.

But as the carriage moves along the bumpy road, I do not see a single human in sight.

“Where are the inhabitants of this vicinity?” I ask my brother.

“Nowhere you would care to know.”

We arrive at a state colonial bungalow; it is white, with its tall windows thrown open to admit the warm afternoon air.

After we settle in, my brothers leave for some meeting, but of course, I cannot follow, so I explore—which turns out to be a bad idea.

I sneak through the back gates and come into what seems like the woods.

I start to enjoy my stroll and the chill air descending from the trees when I hear the cry of what seems like someone in pure agony.

I run in the direction of the cry.

I stop at the sight of a black girl in chains and shackles, screaming in a different language, while a Briton whips her.

"Stop it, can't you see she's in pain?" I scream, snatching the whip from his hands.

"Please return to your chamber; I am merely treating this slave as she should be treated," the official says, looking at me like I am supposed to enjoy him whipping a poor girl.

"You must be part of the new shippers; I'll go get the governors," and with that, he leaves.

I look at the poor girl in horror.

"What is your name?" I ask her, trying to create an understanding.

"Aisha," she replies, avoiding my gaze.

I bend down to try to touch her, but she shrinks away from me.

I don't know what else to do, so I try demonstrating.

"With due respect, I'm well educated and speak English, ma'am," she says rather angrily.

"Oh, I am so sorry. I thought..."

"Why *are you helping me?"* she asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

"He was whipping you; what was I supposed to do?"

"You do not know, do you?" she says, rubbing her wrists.

She continues after a stretch, *"I don't know why I am telling you this, but you need to try and stop your people. They are taking our lands and enslaving my people."*

She looks at me like I'm the last thread of hope she has, but I burst out laughing.

She must be ill or sick, I think, but the look on her face lets me know she's dead serious.

I don't want to believe that my brothers came here for this; it isn't possible, or is it?

I run back the way I came.

So much for a fresh start.

I sit back down on the sofa, holding my head in my hands. My brothers couldn't possibly be part of all this; they are very likely trying to talk some sense into the other governors, right?

After racking my brain for the possibilities, I decide to wait.

Suddenly, the doors of the bungalow burst open.

"What is wrong with you, Diana?" Nathaniel screams at me; he must have heard from that official what I did, but I have a fury of my own burning in me too.

"What is the true reason we are here?" I ask in a rather calm voice.

Silence.

"Why are we here?" I repeat with dread in my voice.

"D-did you speak to one of those savages? They must have spoken nonsense into your head," says Edward.

I have my answer. Edward never stutters unless he's nervous or just flat-out lying.

"We share the same blood with them; how can you be this cruel!" I yell, imagining it were my people in this situation instead, my sister being flogged like that.

"Don't poke your head where it doesn't belong," Nathaniel finally responds, breaking the tension between us.

"If I don't?" I boldly ask.

“I will have her beheaded,” Edward replies, leaving me standing like a fool.

A NEW DAY

I spring up from bed, hoping to go in search of the girl I met yesterday.

If this is a sign for me to make a change, then I’m willing to take it.

I dash for the door immediately after I get dressed, only to be stopped by my amazing brother Edward.

“Where are you going?” Edward asks me.

“I don’t want to be in this house all day; it reeks of corruption and enslavement,” I reply casually, heading for the door, and luckily, this time I am not stopped.

I retrace my steps to where I found Aisha yesterday, hoping to see her and understand more about what is happening.

As I walk deeper into the forest, I hear voices, so I stand nearby as a familiar voice and another converse in a foreign language: *“O maa ran wa lowo, mo daju”* [she will help us, I’m sure of it], says a figure who looks like Aisha.

“Aisha, it’s me,” I say, coming out of my hiding spot.

“Welcome back, ore mi, my friend. Did you reflect on what I told you yesterday?” she asks me worriedly.

“Yes, I did, and I would be more than happy to help, but who’s the friend?” I gesture toward the other young black lady standing beside her.

Their hair is fascinating; it is full, curly and neatly packed up.

“This is Mariam,” she says, leading me to where she called the base camp of the survivors.

“Some of us sought refuge in our trees, but there was a limit to the number we could accommodate and keep safe,” she explains as we arrive at the camp.

Pieces of their cloth are used as tents, while they boil water using some kind of iron pan.

“We just met, but I want you to know that we are waging a war against them. We won’t give up our lands without a fight; if we succeed, we will take shelter under the Oyo Empire,” she maps out to me on a stained cloth.

“Where is the Oyo place you speak of, and when are you waging your war?” I ask, worried for my brothers.

Though they are behaving like rascals, I can’t let them get hurt in the war.

“Sadly, you haven’t gained my trust enough for me to share that with you,” she says, smiling at me. I spend the whole day learning about Aisha and their different cultures, which is probably a bad idea.

Aisha informs me that they are launching the attack in two nights. Before I leave, I learn a little bit of their Yoruba language.

“Where have you been, Diana? We have had officials searching for you,” Nathaniel screams while searching my body for injuries.

“Don’t poke your head where it doesn’t belong.” I give them a taste of their own medicine; they should know what it feels like to be shut out.

“If this is about the slave girl you met, stay away from them; they tend to be quite dangerous,” he says.

Aisha told me to beware of this; she knew my brothers would try to brainwash me into turning against them.

“Okay, brother, I’ll stay away from her.”

I have absolutely no intention of staying away from her; I would just have to be sneakier. My brothers know I am never the type to give up easily or let go of things. I give them a reassuring smile, then go off to my chambers.

—

The birds seem to chirp brighter than usual. I am really starting to love this place; it feels warm and accommodating.

But while I am here, feeling at home, some of the people here are losing their homes.

I have a chance to do something about that.

"Good morning, brothers, what are we having for breakfast?" I ask, remembering I promised Chima, a young girl I met at Aisha's camp, that I would bring her a taste of British food.

"We are having eggs; come and sit," Edward offers, pulling out a chair for me.

"No, thank you, I would rather have it packed up," I reply, trying to stop myself from retorting rudely. I hate my brothers for what they are doing.

After minutes of interrogation, they finally let me go.

I arrive at the camp in a short while and join them in their preparations for war.

"Chima, I brought your breakfast," I call out, looking for the bouncy little girl.

She comes out from behind a tree, giggling and laughing. I look at her, wondering how it feels to have your home taken away from you, watching your people suffer right before your eyes.

I will do everything in my power to keep them safe.

After I give Chima her breakfast, I go in search of Aisha and Mariam.

I suddenly hear screams and people shouting for help. I see troops of British officials scattering and destroying the camp while chaining people and dragging them like hogs.

"What are you doing? Let them be!"

I scream when I see Aisha dripping in blood, being dragged by various guards.

"Don't touch me, alatan ni e!" [You are a traitor!] she screams, glaring at me in hatred.

I see my brothers standing behind her, smiling with quiet satisfaction; I march over to them, wishing them dead at that very moment.

"I hope you realise your mistake before it is too late."

"These people will be taught proper discipline, and we will not have a traitor in our home," Edward says through gritted teeth.

Proper discipline? Traitor?

"These people are accommodating; these people tried to understand me and were obliging. They made me feel at home; I haven't felt at home in a long while," I scream at him.

"Diana." Nathaniel holds back my screaming form.

They must be sick in the head if they think I will give up easily.

—

It has been a week since Aisha's camp was raided, and it is my fault; I unwittingly led my brothers straight to the camp. Now I am drowning in guilt.

I get up from the couch and step outside to get some fresh air.

I should have just stayed inside, because the sight I am met with is horrific. There is a line of young, innocent men marching to God knows where, groaning and whining in agony; I don't even realise tears are falling from my eyes until I see a boy no older than nine.

My resolve returns in that moment. I am not going to back down; I am going to find where Aisha is kept and try to help, even if it is the last thing I do.

"Where are you taking these savages?" I call out to the British official leading them. It burns my tongue to call them savages, but I have to make them believe I am with them.

"The enclosed courtyards," he replies.

"Take me with you," I tell him, knowing he can't refuse.

"Yes, ma'am." He goes to fetch a carriage while I use the opportunity to talk to the slaves.

"Where is Aisha?" I ask no one in particular. One slave looks up and spits at my feet.

"Alatan! Ki olorun da e lejo" [Traitor, may God judge you], he says, glaring at me in hatred.

From the little Yoruba I learnt from Aisha, the only word I can pick out is traitor.

He knows what happened. Everyone knows.

"She is in Governor Edward's care," says the small boy in front.

"Tah, ki nidi ti o fi so fun un?" [Why did you tell her?] says the man who glared at me earlier.

"Alright, ma'am, shall we move?" asks the guard.

“Take me to my brother’s home, Governor Edward,” I tell him instead; surely the boy couldn’t be talking about my brother.

The guard drops me off at my brother’s home; I am not surprised my brother has a secret home without my knowledge.

I suddenly remember that I haven’t sent a letter home yet, but there are more important matters at hand.

I push open the wooden doors of the balcony and find my brothers chatting while Aisha is on her knees holding a tray of spirits; she is shivering and battered in blood.

“You animals!” I shout, making them notice my presence.

“Wh-how did you find this place?” asks Edward, approaching me, but I am blinded by anger, so I raise my hand and slap him.

We are both surprised that I have just slapped a governor, but right now he is my elder brother with a heart of stone.

“I will accept that because you are angry,” he says, rubbing his cheek.

I glance at Aisha, but it seems her hatred has only intensified since the last time I saw her.

“*I will come back for you,”* I mouth to her, eyeing my brother, then leave the bungalow with a heavy heart.

—

It is two o’clock in the morning; I have to go and rescue Aisha.

I successfully sneak out of the house without my brother’s knowledge, but here is the main dilemma: I have to get into my brother’s bungalow without the patrol guards spotting

me. So I climb the ladder resting against the walls of the house.

I nearly fall but grasp the window for stability. From the little I have gathered, the slaves are kept in the housemaids' quarters, and if I know my brother as well as I think I do, Aisha will be on the same floor as him.

Voilà! I open the third door from the window, and there lies Aisha.

"Wake up, wake up," I whisper, gently tapping her.

"Y-yes, master… D-Diana, what? How are you here?" she asks, rubbing her eyes to be sure she isn't hallucinating.

"Yes, yes, we need to move now. You have people to save, lives relying on you."

I have been secretly gathering people, and the final step of my plan is to find Aisha's location.

"Okay, let us go." I lead her to the place I came through, but the ladder I used has fallen, alerting the British guards. We both run to where the troops are gathered.

It is time for war.

"Awon Eniyan mi, akoko ti de ki a gba ile wa ati ile wa pada. A o ja fun emi wa. Jagunjagun ni wa, a o si ja titi de igbeyin wa!" she shouts to the troops, and soon enough, a bunch of British troops burst through the forests and surround us.

The fight is bloody and gruesome.

Aisha and some of the fighters are caught, and soon, it is time for their judgement.

My brothers make me choose: either I die with them, or I kill them with my own two hands.

I make my choice.

I hope that what we did will make a statement one day, and that history will speak our names as fighters and warriors.

But I truly know this is the start of a Kingdom with a great past.

The Path to Nothing

By Oluwadarasimi Oluwatamilore Esan



Age 12

Oluwadarasimi writes stories, poetry and spoken word. Oluwadarasimi hopes to inspire action through imagination and real-life issues, including protecting the planet and overcoming challenges.

The Path to Nothing

He walked down the streets of Lagos with his scattered hair, old slippers, dusty face and stained clothes.

He came across a man selling groundnuts, bread and stew, boiled eggs, and Fanta with water.

His stomach rumbled.

Just as he was about to make a plea, he lowered his head and quickly walked away as his ears started itching and his hands jittered in his empty pockets.

He remembered everything that had happened in the blink of an eye, from the moment one of his classmates first offered him the drug up until this very moment.

If I had walked away that afternoon, my life would have been completely different.

Welcome to Kayode's story—a journey filled with unexpected twists and a rich potpourri of intriguing events that teaches a big lesson to young people.

Every Saturday, Kayode followed his aunt to the hospital. He would watch families, singles, and married couples step across the metal frames by pushing the handles into the reception.

While adults sat quietly on the metal or cushion chairs, he would wander among the children, cracking jokes to ease their tension. He was as gentle as a sheep and as silly as a goose to them.

His aunt always said, *"Soon you will be the one doing checkups, prescribing medicines and doing surgeries on the heart, lungs, kidneys, and brain."* A smile would brighten his face, and he would answer,

“One of my main goals will be to always make my patients laugh.”

But Kayode had an Achilles’ heel, a weakness—he always secretly wanted to be part of the “COOL GUYS” in his set.

He liked their popularity; everyone wanted to be their friend, and all the girls liked them.

One afternoon, they invited him to come and join them. At first, they talked, joked and laughed, which made Kayode feel like he was one of them.

After a while, the leader secretly asked him to come over to an empty classroom after school and showed him a container with a white substance.

He said, *“If you want to really be a part of us, you have to prove yourself to be a man.”*

Kayode hesitated.

“*Come on, everybody has tried it. Don’t be a mama’s boy.”*

“We have all taken it several times; nothing has happened to us, and we still act normal.”

He knew it was wrong to take drugs, but if he said no, they would call him a coward. Beyond that, they would tell everyone else, and the little social credit he had would disappear faster than clouds after rain.

Kayode looked at the drug in Mohammed’s hand; his legs were spaghetti, his heart was being punched in the centre, his face turned pale, and his eyes went stiff.

Right there, at that moment, he remembered his father’s words: *“A real leader doesn’t follow the crowd; be with the people who walk on the Narrow Lane of life.”*

He turned away, preparing his lips to form the word '*no*', when they all started laughing at him, calling him different expletives that pointed to one—"LOSER!"

Kayode's face went red; his eyes flashed like car headlights, hot air came from his nose and ears, and he squeezed his fists together till he felt nothing but sweat.

He snatched the drug and took the bottle of beer from one of the boys. They all cheered. He forced a smile, but deep inside, he knew he had crossed a line. He knew he had disobeyed his father, mother, older siblings and aunt, but most importantly, his Heavenly Father, God Almighty.

At first, nothing happened, so the cool guys now added him to the group. They continued to laugh, talk, joke and play while Kayode's heart broke in his chest.

He consoled himself, vowing it would never happen again.

But once became twice a week, and then every weekend. His grades began to drop; he stopped going to football practice and started acting, walking, talking and doing everything like the "COOL GUYS."

He spent most of his time with the "COOL GUYS" because he was an official new member of the group. His parents and friends noticed he was secretive and withdrawn; whenever they asked what was wrong, he insisted everything was fine.

Eventually, he became stubborn with his teachers, parents and friends alike. By the end of the school term, Kayode had let go of his good grades. He lost his family's trust, his teachers' respect, and the confidence to chase his dream of becoming a doctor.

He went into a continuous downward spiral.

Years later, he was walking the streets of Lagos when he ran into an old classmate who had also wanted to be a doctor. The memories came crashing down like a ton of bricks.

It reminded him of the education, future and values he had traded for a moment of fame, acceptance and coolness.

As he watched it disappear into the clouds with a quiet, ghost-hissing sound, his shoes were rock, his socks were sandpaper, his clothes were nylon and dust, his eyes were filled with water, his ears became sore, his hands were sweat, his throat turned to a wet sponge, and his hair was cactus and poison ivy.

He whispered to himself, *“Some choices take only a second to make, but a lifetime to regret.”*

WHERE LOVE TRULY LIES

By A’asiyah Omolola Sodiq



Age 17

A’asiyah is a Find Your Path Fellow 2026 and the author of Where Love Truly Lies.

WHERE LOVE TRULY LIES

The Windy Morning

The early morning wind swept gently through the streets, carrying with it the scent of fresh rain and blooming flowers. Dark clouds drifted across the sky, allowing a little ray of sunlight to peek through. It was the kind of morning people love to see.

Inside a modest but elegant house, however, peace was nowhere to be found.

“Maisarah!”

Her mother’s voice echoed through the hallway. Maisarah sighed softly as she closed the novel she had been reading. She already knew what the conversation would be about. It had become a daily routine over the past few months.

“I’m coming, Mama,” she answered, placing a bookmark between the pages before walking into the sitting room.

Her parents were already seated, waiting for her. Her father looked at her with concern while her mother wore a serious expression.

“Sit down, my daughter,” her father said gently. Maisarah obeyed. Her mother wasted no time.

“Maisarah, you’re twenty-five years old now. Every week someone comes asking for your hand in marriage, yet you keep refusing them. Tell us, what exactly are you waiting for?”

Maisarah lowered her eyes and said she hadn’t met the right person yet.

Her mother frowned. *"How will you meet the right man if you reject all of them before giving them a chance?"*

"I don't want to marry because people expect me to," Maisarah replied calmly.

"I want to marry someone who fears Allah, respects women, and will be my companion, not just my husband."

Her father smiled faintly. *"There is nothing wrong with wanting that, my daughter."*

But her mother still would not accept that she was not ready to get married. Maisarah loved her parents deeply, and she understood that they only wanted the best for her, but sometimes she wished they would trust her judgment.

A few minutes later, Maisarah decided to excuse herself.

An hour later, Maisarah was walking quietly down the street, the wind swinging the edge of her navy-blue hijab as she hugged her cardigan closer.

She passed children laughing outside a bakery, elderly men discussing football beneath a tree, and street vendors arranging fresh fruits on colourful wooden stalls. She didn't mind the people around her because her mind was occupied.

She was not afraid of marriage but afraid of making the wrong choice. She had seen women who smiled brightly during their weddings only to be seen crying months later.

Lost in thought, she arrived at a quiet café away from the noise of the world. She ordered a cup of cappuccino, chose her favourite seat near the window, and took out the novel she had been reading at home. She had only managed to read a few pages when the wind made the book slip from her hand.

Before she could pick it up, someone else bent down for it. *"Here you go."* Maisarah looked up. Standing before her was

a young man dressed in a neat cream-colored kaftan. He looked to be around her age. His beard was well kept, and his gentle smile instantly made him seem approachable.

"Thank you," she said politely. *"You're welcome."* For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The young man hesitated before asking, *"I hope I'm not disturbing you."*

Maisarah shook her head. *"Not at all."*

"I noticed you've been sitting here alone for quite some time. You looked… worried."

She smiled politely. *"I'm fine."*

"I'm glad to hear that." He was about to leave when he stopped. *"My name is Aman."*

"Maisarah," she said.

"It's a beautiful name."

"Thank you," she said. His honesty caught her by surprise. Maisarah was pleased with Aman. They talked for several minutes about ordinary things, about the weather, books and other things.

Their eyes met for a brief second before both quickly looked away. She felt comfortable talking with him; there was no awkwardness or pretence.

Eventually, Maisarah checked the time and said it was time for her to head back home. Aman stood as well. As she was about to leave, Aman asked for her number.

At first she hesitated, but she later gave it to him. As they went their separate ways, she didn't look back, but Aman did.

That evening, after returning home, Maisarah changed into comfortable clothes, prayed *Asr*, and settled onto her bed

with another book. Just as she got into the story, her phone vibrated. She picked it up; it was an unknown number.

It read, *"Assalamu Alaikum. I hope you got home safely. Thank you for making a stranger's morning brighter. — Aman."* She read it with a smile on her face.

.....

Over the following days, Maisarah's visits to the café passed peacefully. Although she had chosen not to reply to the message Aman had sent her, she found herself thinking about him from time to time. His kindness, gentle smile, and respectful manner had left an impression on her, but she convinced herself that it had simply been a pleasant encounter with a stranger.

A few days later, Maisarah and her closest friend, Yasmine, went to the market to buy a few household items.

After finishing their shopping, they decided to walk home together instead of taking a taxi.

As they chatted and laughed along the busy street, someone called Maisarah's name from behind.

She stopped walking immediately and turned around, wondering who could know her there.

To her surprise, she saw Aman walking towards them with a cheerful smile on his face. He greeted both ladies politely before looking at Maisarah with a playful expression.

He jokingly complained that she had ignored the message he had sent after their first meeting. Feeling slightly embarrassed, Maisarah explained that she had not recognised the number and had thought it belonged to someone else.

Aman accepted her explanation without any resentment, and the misunderstanding quickly turned into laughter.

After introducing himself properly to Yasmine, the three of them walked together for a short while. Yasmine soon excused herself, claiming she had another place to visit, though Maisarah knew her friend was simply trying to give them some privacy.

As they continued walking, Maisarah discovered that talking to Aman felt surprisingly easy; their conversation flowed from one topic to another. They spoke about their favorite books, their childhood memories, their ambitions, and the importance of choosing a life partner based on good character rather than wealth or appearance.

The more they talked, the more Maisarah realised that Aman possessed the qualities she admired most in a person. He was respectful, humble, patient, and carried himself with quiet confidence.

By the time they reached the gate of her house, neither of them had realised how quickly time had passed.

Before leaving, Aman politely asked if he could continue talking to her through phone calls and messages.

This time, Maisarah agreed without hesitation. From that day onward, communication between them became a regular part of their days. They exchanged messages every morning and wished each other a peaceful night before going to bed.

Whenever Maisarah faced a difficult day, Aman would encourage her with kind words. Their friendship grew stronger, and both of them found comfort in each other’s presence.

Weeks gradually turned into months. They occasionally met at the same café where they had first encountered one another, sometimes discussing books they had recently read and other times simply enjoying each other’s company over a cup of coffee.

Aman admired Maisarah's intelligence, kindness, and modesty, while Maisarah appreciated his sincerity, maturity, and unwavering respect for her. Yasmine was the first to notice the change in her friend: whenever Aman's name appeared on Maisarah's phone, a smile would unconsciously spread across her face.

Although Maisarah repeatedly denied having any special feelings for him, deep inside she knew her heart was slowly changing. Aman was no longer just the kind stranger she had met on a windy morning; he had become someone whose presence brought peace to her heart.

Unknown to Maisarah, Aman had begun to experience the very same feelings. With each passing day, he became sure that the friendship they shared had grown into something much deeper, and he quietly began praying for the courage to tell her how much she truly meant to him.

.....

One evening, after much thought and prayer, Aman decided it was time to tell Maisarah how he truly felt. He called her and asked if they could meet at the café where they had first met. Curious about the reason for the meeting, Maisarah agreed.

The next afternoon, they met at the café. At first, they talked as they normally did, but Maisarah noticed that Aman seemed unusually nervous. He paused several times before speaking, as though he was searching for the right words.

Finally, he gathered his courage and confessed his feelings. He told Maisarah that their friendship had changed his life and that he had come to admire her character, kindness, and faith. He admitted that he loved her and wished to make her his wife.

She was surprised by his confession; she hadn't expected him to express his feelings so soon. She thanked him for being honest but explained that marriage was an important decision and that she needed time to think and pray before giving him an answer.

Aman respected her decision and assured her that he would patiently wait for whatever answer she gave. That evening, Maisarah visited her friend Yasmine and told her everything that had happened. Yasmine smiled warmly and encouraged her not to rush. She reminded Maisarah to think carefully about Aman's character rather than focusing only on her emotions. For a few days, Maisarah reflected on their friendship. She remembered Aman's kindness, honesty, patience, and the respect he had always shown her. After praying and seeking Allah's guidance, she felt a sense of peace in her heart.

She called Aman and asked him to meet her once again at the café. When Aman arrived, he was nervous, fearing she might reject him. However, the moment he saw the smile on Maisarah's face, he felt hopeful. Looking into his eyes, Maisarah told him that she had made her decision, and she had decided to marry him. Aman's face lit up with joy; he thanked Allah repeatedly, unable to hide his happiness. They agreed that the next step was to introduce each other to their families and seek their blessings, believing that their love story had only just begun.

.....

A few days after Maisarah accepted Aman's proposal, both of them agreed that the next step was to seek the blessings of their families. Aman first visited Maisarah's parents with his family. He was respectful and humble throughout the visit, answering every question honestly. Maisarah's parents were pleased with his good manners and were convinced

that he would make a responsible husband. They gladly accepted him and prayed for a successful marriage between the two.

Not long after, Maisarah visited Aman's family. While his father welcomed her warmly and treated her with kindness, his mother was not as pleased. She had always imagined choosing a wife for her only son and was disappointed that Aman had made the decision himself. Although she hid her true feelings behind a polite smile, she remained cold towards Maisarah. The young woman noticed the difference in her attitude but chose not to complain. She believed that with time, love and respect would soften her future mother-in-law's heart.

Preparations for the wedding soon began. Both families worked together to make the occasion memorable. Friends and relatives gathered to celebrate the union, filling the atmosphere with joy and prayers.

On the day of the wedding, Maisarah looked elegant in her modest bridal attire, while Aman could not hide the happiness on his face. As they exchanged their marriage vows, they silently prayed that Allah would bless their marriage with love, peace, and understanding. The first few months of marriage were everything Maisarah had hoped for. Aman proved to be a caring and loving husband. He treated her with respect, helped her with household chores whenever he had the chance, and always made sure she was comfortable.

They often spent their evenings talking about their dreams, reading together, or taking quiet walks after dinner. Their home was filled with laughter and affection, and every day strengthened the bond between them.

However, not everyone shared their happiness. Aman's mother watched from a distance as her son devoted more

time and attention to his wife. Instead of feeling proud, she felt jealousy slowly growing in her heart.

She convinced herself that Maisarah had taken her son away from her. Although she never openly confronted Maisarah, her attitude became colder with each visit. She criticised the way Maisarah cooked, cleaned, and even arranged the house.

No matter how hard Maisarah tried to please her, nothing seemed good enough. Aman noticed his mother's strange behaviour and told his wife not to take her words to heart. He believed that with patience, his mother would eventually accept her.

Maisarah chose to remain respectful despite the hurt she felt. She continued treating her mother-in-law with kindness, hoping that one day her efforts would be appreciated. Little did she know that this was only the beginning of what awaited her, and that the greatest test of her marriage was yet to come.

.....

A year after their wedding, Aman and Maisarah received the news they had been praying for. Maisarah was pregnant. The moment she shared the news with Aman, his face lit up with joy. He embraced her and thanked Allah for blessing their home. From that day on, he became even more caring. He made sure she attended every antenatal appointment, reminded her to take her medication, and never allowed her to carry anything heavy.

Whenever he returned from work, he would ask about her health before doing anything else. As the months passed, Maisarah's pregnancy progressed smoothly. Their families were delighted, especially Maisarah's parents, who

constantly visited to make sure their daughter was comfortable.

Aman's father was equally excited, but his mother could hardly hide her desire for one thing—a grandson. Whenever she visited, she would place her hand on Maisarah's stomach and pray aloud that the baby would be a boy.

Maisarah only smiled politely, believing that whether a child was a boy or a girl, every child was a blessing from Allah. Nine months later, Maisarah went into labour in the early hours of the morning. Aman rushed her to the hospital, his heart filled with both fear and excitement.

After several hours of labour, the cry of the new baby echoed through the delivery room. The doctor came out with a smile and congratulated Aman on the birth of a healthy baby girl. Overwhelmed with happiness, Aman thanked Allah repeatedly before carrying his tiny daughter in his arms for the first time.

To him, she was the most beautiful child he had ever seen. When Aman's mother arrived at the hospital and learned that the baby was a girl, the joy on her face disappeared. Instead of congratulating the new parents, she frowned at Maisarah. *"So after all these months, this is what you gave my son?"* she said bitterly. *"You couldn't even give him a boy."* Exhausted, Maisarah felt tears fill her eyes. She could not believe that instead of comforting her, her mother-in-law had chosen to insult her. After her mother-in-law finally left the room, Maisarah broke down in tears. She began wondering if she had somehow disappointed everyone.

A few minutes later, an elderly nurse who had witnessed the incident gently approached her bedside. She smiled kindly and comforted Maisarah, explaining that the gender of a baby is determined by the father's chromosomes, not the mother's.

She reminded her that a mother can only pass on an X chromosome, while the father can pass on either an X or a Y chromosome. If the father's sperm carries an X chromosome, a girl is born, and if it carries a Y chromosome, a boy is born. Therefore, blaming a woman for giving birth to a daughter was both unfair and scientifically incorrect.

Hearing those words brought relief to Maisarah's heart. She realized she had done nothing wrong. Her daughter was a precious gift, and she refused to let anyone discourage her. When Aman returned to the room, he found Maisarah quietly holding their baby. He noticed that she had been crying and immediately comforted her. He assured her that he loved both her and their daughter with all his heart and that no one's opinion would ever change that. His words eased her pain, but deep inside, she knew that her mother-in-law's hatred had only grown stronger.

Unknown to Maisarah and Aman, Aman's mother had already made up her mind. She believed her son deserved another wife—someone she hoped would give him the grandson she desperately wanted. That decision would soon change the course of all their lives.

.....

After the birth of Maisarah's daughter, Aman's mother still believed that her son needed another wife. She thought Maisarah would never give Aman a son and decided to find a young woman who could replace her in his heart.

Not long after, she met Fatimah, a beautiful twenty-year-old from a poor family. When she told Fatimah about Aman, describing him as wealthy, kind, and responsible, Fatimah agreed to become his second wife.

Although she appeared quiet and respectful, her real interest was the comfortable life Aman could provide, and she wanted only his wealth.

One afternoon, Aman's mother arrived at his house with Fatimah. Maisarah was surprised to see another young woman standing beside her mother-in-law, but she welcomed them politely into the house.

When Aman entered the sitting room, his mother immediately announced that Fatimah was to become his second wife. Aman was shocked. He explained that he loved Maisarah and had no intention of marrying another woman.

However, his mother continued to pressure him, insisting that she only wanted what was best for the family.

After days of persuasion and emotional pressure, Aman reluctantly accepted, hoping to keep peace within the family. Fatimah moved into the house a few days later. Despite the pain in her heart, Maisarah treated her with kindness and showed her nothing but respect. Fatimah thanked her warmly and behaved like an innocent, humble young woman.

However, behind her smile was a heart full of jealousy. She admired the love Aman had for Maisarah and secretly wished it belonged to her. She soon made up her mind that she would do whatever it took to become Aman's favourite wife, even if it meant destroying Maisarah's happiness. That night, as she lay in her new room, Fatimah smiled to herself. She had already begun planning how to separate Aman from the woman he truly loved.

.....

At first, Fatimah behaved like the perfect second wife. She woke up early, greeted everyone with respect, helped with the housework, and spoke gently to Maisarah.

Even Aman began to believe that his mother had made the right choice by bringing her into the family.

Maisarah also tried her best to live peacefully with Fatimah. She shared the kitchen with her, helped her settle into the house, and treated her like a younger sister.

However, Fatimah had no intention of returning the kindness she received. Deep inside, she envied the love and attention Aman gave to Maisarah.

As weeks passed, Fatimah slowly began to put her plan into action. Whenever Aman was away, she deliberately created small misunderstandings. She would move Maisarah's belongings and pretend not to know where they were. She secretly broke a few household items and blamed the servants, making it seem as though Maisarah could not manage the home properly.

Soon, she became more dangerous. She began telling Aman's mother that Maisarah often spoke disrespectfully about the family, even though it was completely untrue.

His mother believed every word and constantly complained to Aman, encouraging him to pay more attention to Fatimah instead.

One afternoon, Fatimah prepared a special meal for Aman. Unknown to everyone, she secretly mixed a charm into his food, hoping it would make him love her more.

After eating the meal, Aman gradually began to change. He spent more time with Fatimah and became unusually distant from Maisarah. He no longer noticed the sadness in his wife's eyes or the effort she made to keep their home peaceful.

Maisarah was confused by the sudden change. She could not understand why the loving husband she once knew had

become so cold toward her. Whenever she tried to speak to him, he simply told her she was overthinking things.

Fatimah smiled quietly each time she saw the distance growing between them. Her plan was working exactly as she had hoped, and she knew this was only the beginning.

.....

Fatimah's jealousy grew stronger with each passing day. Seeing Aman become more attached to her because of the charm gave her more confidence to continue her wicked acts. She wanted Maisarah out of the house completely, and she was willing to do anything to make that happen.

One morning, while Maisarah was washing clothes, Fatimah intentionally removed them from the washing machine and threw them onto the floor.

When Maisarah returned and saw what had happened, she calmly asked Fatimah why she had done such a thing. Instead of answering, Fatimah mocked her and began insulting her. Unable to bear the constant provocation, Maisarah warned Fatimah to stop causing trouble.

Realising she had found the perfect opportunity, Fatimah suddenly screamed for help and falsely accused Maisarah of slapping her.

Hearing the commotion, Aman rushed into the room. Before Maisarah could explain herself, Fatimah burst into tears and claimed that Maisarah had attacked her out of jealousy.

Aman, whose mind had already been poisoned against his first wife, believed Fatimah without asking for Maisarah's side of the story. Maisarah was heartbroken. She pleaded with Aman to listen to her, but he refused. He warned her not to trouble Fatimah again and walked away with the younger woman, leaving Maisarah in tears.

Fatimah was pleased, but she was not satisfied. She continued to tell lies about Maisarah every chance she got, making Aman believe that his first wife was becoming disrespectful and difficult to live with. Day after day, Aman grew colder toward Maisarah until the love they once shared seemed to disappear. Finally, Fatimah accused Maisarah of bewitching her, claiming it was the reason she had been pregnant for more than nine months.

Without investigating the matter properly, Aman blindly decided to divorce Maisarah. Left with no choice, she packed her things with tears streaming down her face and carried her daughter in her arms. Before leaving the house, she looked around the place where she had once lived happily with her husband. Her dreams had been shattered by lies and deception. Without saying another word, she walked away, leaving behind the home she had built with love, while Fatimah stood quietly at the doorway, hiding a victorious smile.

.....

Life was not easy for Maisarah after her divorce. She returned to her parents' house with her little daughter, carrying nothing but a few belongings and a broken heart.

Although her parents welcomed her with love, Maisarah often cried herself to sleep, wondering how the happy marriage she once enjoyed had ended so painfully.

Instead of allowing sadness to take over her, she devoted herself to raising her daughter and gradually rebuilt her life. A few months later, Maisarah began working at a small bookshop not far from her home. Surrounded by books, she slowly found peace again.

One afternoon, a gentleman walked into the shop looking for a novel to buy as a gift for his young niece. Since he could

not decide which one to choose, Maisarah patiently recommended a few books and helped him make a choice.

Before leaving, the man thanked her for her kindness and introduced himself as Idris. Over the following weeks, Idris became a regular customer. Sometimes he came to buy books, while other times he simply stopped by to greet Maisarah and her daughter. He treated the little girl with kindness, bringing her storybooks and chocolates whenever he visited.

Unlike others, Idris never judged Maisarah because she was divorced. Instead, he admired her strength, patience, and the love she showed her daughter. As their friendship grew, Maisarah gradually shared the painful story of her failed marriage. Idris listened quietly without interrupting or speaking badly about Aman. He encouraged her to let go of her past and reminded her that with every hardship comes ease for those who are patient.

Several months later, Idris asked for her mother's number so he could tell her parents of his intention to marry her. He also promised to love and care for her little girl as though she were his own child. After discussing the matter with her parents and seeking Allah's guidance through prayer, Maisarah accepted his proposal. For the first time in many months, she felt hopeful about the future.

Meanwhile, Aman's life was falling apart like sun-dried bricks in the rain. Fatimah had finally shown her true colours. She cared only about his wealth and constantly demanded expensive gifts and money. One day, Aman was suddenly released from the charm and discovered that she had secretly been taking money from him and lying about many things, including the accusations she had made against Maisarah. The servants also admitted that Fatimah had been responsible for the misunderstandings that had destroyed his marriage.

The truth hit Aman like a heavy burden. He realised he had wronged the woman who had loved him sincerely. Filled with regret, he drove Fatimah out of the house and blamed his mother for ignoring the truth about Maisarah. His mother, now ashamed of her actions, admitted that her hatred for Maisarah had caused the family to fall apart.

When Aman later heard that Maisarah was getting engaged to Idris, his heart sank.

Determined not to lose her forever, he pondered whether to go to the engagement ceremony, hoping she would give him one last chance.

.....

Maisarah and Idris's wedding was simple but beautiful. Surrounded by their families and a few close friends, they began a new chapter of their lives with prayers and hope for a peaceful future.

Unlike her first marriage, Maisarah stepped into this one with a heart that had been tested by pain and disappointment. Although she smiled throughout the ceremony, a small part of her still carried the scars of her past. Idris proved to be the kind of husband he had promised to be. He never made Maisarah feel ashamed of her past, nor did he treat her daughter as someone else's child. Instead, he loved the little girl as though she were his own, spending time reading stories to her, taking her on evening walks, and celebrating every little achievement she made. This filled her heart with gratitude.

As the weeks turned into months, peace slowly returned to her life. She no longer lived in fear of being judged or being accused wrongly; her home became the place of comfort, respect and understanding she had always wanted. Idris often reminded her that her difficult experiences had made

her a strong woman. His patience and kindness helped heal the wounds that seemed impossible to mend.

Not long afterwards, Maisarah discovered that she was expecting another child. The news brought mixed emotions. She was happy, yet she feared that what had happened before might happen again. Idris noticed her worries and gently assured her that whether Allah blessed them with a son or a daughter, the child would be welcomed with love and gratitude. Months later, Maisarah gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Idris held both the baby and her daughter close, thanking Allah for the blessings He had bestowed upon their family. Maisarah watched them with tears of joy in her eyes. For the first time in many years, she felt truly valued, respected, and loved.

Elsewhere, Aman often reflected on the choices that had cost him his family. He understood that trusting lies instead of listening to the woman who had always stood by him was a mistake he could never undo. His regret became a lesson he would carry for the rest of his life.

As for Maisarah, she chose not to dwell on the past. She forgave those who had hurt her, not because they deserved it, but because she wanted to move forward without bitterness. Standing beside Idris and watching her children grow, she realised that hope can return even when little seems left. Life had given her another chance—not a perfect life, but one built on trust, faith, and the courage to begin again.

Beyond The Runway

By Oluwaji Oluwamisimi Grace



Age 16

Oluwamisimi writes poetry and hopes to leave readers feeling motivated, connected and reminded of their own strength and emotions.

Beyond The Runway

It is a muggy afternoon in Lagos, where traffic moves so slowly that even the pedestrians overtake the cars. Hawkers tap on windows, selling everything from plantain chips to *wara*. Horns and frustrated voices rise above the air.

I am too lost in thought to pay attention to what is happening around me.

I can't stop thinking about the audition and the opportunities waiting for me. If today goes well, it could be the first step toward attending the modelling school I have always dreamed of.

"Madam, wetin you dey reason? We don reach o," the conductor shouts, pulling me back to reality.

I reach into my handbag, take out a 1,000 naira note, give it to the conductor and get down from the bus.

After walking a short distance from the bus stop, I arrive at the modelling school. Symi Fashion and Modelling School is displayed across the front of the building.

I pause for a moment, staring at the building. I take a deep breath and let out a sigh. *"Finally, I'm here."*

I adjust the strap of my handbag. A wave of nerves washes over me. The security guard greets me as I enter the building.

I walk over to the receptionist's desk.

The receptionist barely looks at me. *"Yes? How may I help you?"*

"Good afternoon. My name is Grace. I am here for the audition."

The receptionist lets out a sigh before pointing towards a row of chairs.

“Go and wait over there with the others.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly and walk towards the waiting area. My confidence slowly fades as I see other applicants, each looking like they already belong there.

One by one, the applicants are called in for their audition. I sit quietly, my hands clasped together, hoping and praying it goes well for me.

Soon, only one applicant and I remain.

“I am so nervous,” she whispers.

I let out a quiet laugh. *“Me too.”*

Before either of us can say anything else, a voice calls her name.

“Good luck,” I say.

“You too,” she replies before entering the room.

A few minutes later, my name is called.

“Miss Temilade Grace.”

My heart skips a beat as I hear my name. I stand up, adjust my outfit and walk toward the audition room.

“Good afternoon,” I say.

Four people are seated behind a long table, their eyes fixed on me. I take a deep breath, then swallow hard before greeting them.

“Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon. Please, you may have a seat,” one of the judges replies.

They ask me a few questions about myself, why I want to join the school, and what modelling means to me. Once they are satisfied with my answers, one of the male judges smiles.

He flips through my file before looking up at me.

“According to the file, you are five foot eleven. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

Another judge leans forward.

“One more thing, Grace. Before you leave, we’d like you to do one more thing. Please stand and walk to the end of the room, turn, and walk back.”

I nod and rise to my feet.

Taking a deep breath, I walk to the end of the room, careful to keep my posture straight. At the end, I turn and walk back towards the judges.

“Thank you,” one of the judges says.

I stand quietly, waiting for their response as they exchange a few words among themselves.

After what feels like forever, they finally stop whispering among themselves and turn to face me.

“You can go now,” one of the judges says. *“We’ll review your audition and contact you with our decision.”*

“Thank you,” I reply with a smile before leaving the room. I have no idea if they are impressed or if I’ve completely embarrassed myself.

———

Three days have passed since my audition, and I am still waiting for a call from the modelling school.

I connect my phone to my Bluetooth speaker and play some music as I go about my morning, but for the first time in a while, I barely pay any attention to it. I am still thinking about the audition.

"Gracee!" my mum calls.

"Ma," I answer.

"Food is ready."

"I'm coming!" I reply, turning the volume down before making my way to the kitchen.

Mum places my breakfast on the table before looking at me.

"Have they called yet?"

I shake my head. *"Not yet."*

She gives me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. Good things take time."

I nod, though I'm not completely convinced.

"I hope you're right," I say, forcing a smile before taking another bite of my food.

After breakfast, Mum leaves for a site inspection in Ogun State. I walk her to the gate and watch as she drives away before heading back inside. After clearing the dishes, I return to my room, turn on some music, and tidy up while singing along. Just as I'm about to put my phone away, the screen lights up. My heart skips a beat, but it's only an Instagram notification. Disappointed, I sigh and toss my phone onto the bed.

Hoping to distract myself, I reach for my sketchbook and pencil. Flipping through the pages, I smile at some of my old designs before adding a few new sketches of beauty products and clothing ideas.

I don’t realise how tired I am until I drift off with my sketchbook still resting on my lap.

“Grace.”

A familiar voice pulls me from my sleep.

I slowly open my eyes to find Mum standing by my bed. Judging by the darkness outside my window, she has just got back from work.

“I got home a few minutes ago and found you asleep,” she says with a smile.

“Come and eat. I bought food.”

I rub my eyes and stretch.

“Okay, Ma.”

A few minutes later, we are seated at the dining table, eating.

Halfway through my meal, my phone buzzes on the table.

I pick it up absentmindedly, expecting another random notification.

My eyes land on the sender.

Symi Fashion and Modelling School.

My breath catches in my throat.

I quickly open the email.

“Congratulations...”

I almost choke on my food.

“Mum!” I exclaim, coughing slightly as I reach for my glass of water. *“I’ve been accepted!”*

———

The loud sound of my alarm pulls me from sleep.

I groan, reaching over to silence it before rubbing the sleep from my eyes. A glance at the clock shows it's 6:20 AM. Today is my first day at the modelling school.

A smile spreads across my face as I throw off my blanket and climb out of bed. Excitement bubbles inside me, pushing away the little bit of sleep left.

After a quick shower, I get dressed and stand in front of the mirror, smoothing the wrinkles from my outfit.

"First impressions matter," I whisper to myself.

Satisfied with my appearance, I grab my bag and head downstairs.

Mum is already waiting for me.

"*Good morning. How was your night?"* she teases.

"Good morning, ma. My night was fine oh," I reply with a laugh.

After breakfast, we leave the house early to avoid the usual Lagos traffic.

We get to the school at exactly 8:45 AM.

"Thank you for bringing me, ma," I say before hugging her.

"Byeee."

I step down from the car. Just as I am about to enter the building, I see a familiar face.

The same girl from the audition.

She spots me too and smiles.

As I walk towards her, I notice how tall she is. Her light skin glows beneath the morning sun, and her neatly styled braids frame her face perfectly. She carries herself with a confidence that makes her hard to ignore.

"Grace, right?" she asks.

I look at her, slightly confused.

“Yep, but how do you know my name?”

She laughs softly.

“I heard the receptionist call your name before your interview that day.”

“Oh.”

She smiles and extends her hand.

“I’m Elizabeth.”

I shake it.

“Nice to meet you properly.”

We both make our way through the school building.

The receptionist looks up as we approach. It is a different receptionist, and she looks more receptive than the previous one.

“Good morning. New students?”

We nod.

“Welcome to Symi. Please head to the orientation room on the second floor. The session will begin shortly.”

“Thank you**,”** we say in unison.

Elizabeth lets out a nervous laugh as we climb the stairs.

“I can’t believe we’re actually here.”

I smile. *“Me neither.”*

When we get to the room, a few students are already seated. Some are chatting excitedly, while others scroll through their phones in silence.

Elizabeth and I exchange a glance before taking two empty seats beside each other.

I quietly scan the room. Everyone looks so confident. Some are dressed effortlessly, while others carry themselves like they've been modelling for years.

A familiar knot forms in my stomach.

Do I really belong here?

Before I can dwell on the thought, the door opens.

A tall man walks in, dressed elegantly in a fitted black suit and pants.

The room falls silent.

His face is sharp and commanding, with high cheekbones and a firm jawline. He carries himself with the kind of confidence that makes everyone sit up straighter.

"Good morning, everyone," he says with a warm smile. *"Welcome to Symi Fashion and Modelling School. My name is Mr Alim, and I'll be one of your instructors."*

Mr Alim spends the next hour introducing us to the school. He explains the rules we are expected to follow, our class schedules, and the different courses we will be taking. He reminds us that punctuality, discipline, and professionalism are just as important as talent. He also warns us that modelling isn't just about looking good; it requires confidence, hard work, and consistency.

He introduces a few of the instructors, points out where the studios, changing rooms, and photography rooms are located, and encourages us to make the most of every opportunity the school has to offer.

By the time the orientation comes to an end, my head is filled with excitement and a little nervousness.

"So," Elizabeth says, slinging her bag over her shoulder, *"want to look around?"*

I smile. *“Sure.”*

We step out of the orientation hall and begin exploring the school together.

“This place is bigger than I expected,” Elizabeth beams.

I nod in agreement as we wander through the hallway, trying to remember where everything is.

“Excuse me,” a voice says behind us.

We both turn.

A tall young man, probably in his early twenties, stands there wearing the school’s training outfit. He has an ID card hanging around his neck.

“You two are new, aren’t you?” he asks with a smile.

“Is it that obvious?” I reply.

He laughs.

“Trust me, I was exactly like you on my first day.”

He introduces himself.

“I’m Christian. I’m in my second year.”

The rest of the day flies by as Christian shows Elizabeth and me around the school. He points out the photography studio, the runway training hall, the changing rooms, the cafeteria, and the student lounge, making sure we know where everything is.

By the end of the tour, the school doesn’t feel as intimidating as it did when I first arrived.

Before we leave, the three of us exchange phone numbers.

“See you tomorrow,” Christian says with a smile.

“Bye!” Elizabeth and I reply.

We walk toward the school gate together, talking about everything we've learned that day. By the time we reach the parking lot, exhaustion finally catches up with us.

"I'm going straight to bed when I get home," Elizabeth says with a tired laugh.

I chuckle. *"Me too oh!"*

We hug briefly before going our separate ways.

———

It's Tuesday morning. My phone alarm buzzes at exactly 6:20 AM, pulling me from sleep.

Unlike yesterday, I don't groan or reach for the snooze button. I am already looking forward to the day ahead.

After getting ready and having breakfast, Mum drops me off at the school.

As soon as I step through the gate, I spot Elizabeth waiting near the entrance.

"Good morning!" she calls, waving enthusiastically.

"Good morning!" I reply with a smile.

Together, we make our way to the training hall, where the rest of our classmates are already gathering.

A few minutes later, our instructor walks in.

"Good morning, everyone,**"** she greets.

"Good morning, ma'am," we reply in unison.

"Today, we'll be starting with the basics of runway walking."

She walks to the centre of the room and looks at each of us before speaking again.

"Many people think modelling is simply putting one foot in front of the other, but it's much more than that. Your

posture, confidence, facial expression, and the way you carry yourself all matter."

She pauses, allowing her words to sink in.

"By the end of this course, each of you should be able to walk a runway with confidence and professionalism."

She demonstrates the correct stance.

"Stand tall. Keep your shoulders back, your chin up, and your eyes focused straight ahead. Let your arms swing naturally, and don't rush your steps."

We all watch carefully as she glides across the runway with effortless confidence.

"Now," she says, turning back to us with a small smile, "who wants to go first?"

A boy around six feet one goes first, then the others. Finally, it is my turn.

I take a deep breath and step onto the runway. Remembering everything the instructor has just demonstrated, I straighten my shoulders, lift my chin, and fix my gaze ahead. I place one foot in front of the other, taking slow, steady steps.

"Good," the instructor commends. *"Your posture is nice, but relax your shoulders a little. A runway walk should look effortless, not forced."*

I nod and try again.

"Much better," she says with a smile.

The rest of the lesson is spent practising our runway walks, correcting our posture, and learning how to move with confidence. Whenever one of us makes a mistake, the instructors patiently correct us until we get it right. By the

time the session ends, my feet are sore, but I can already see an improvement.

Elizabeth stretches her arms and sighs dramatically.

"I never knew walking could be this exhausting."

I laugh. *"Tell me about it."*

We pick up our bags and head outside, where Christian is waiting for us.
As we walk toward the gate, Christian smiles.

"Get some rest," he says. *"Tomorrow won't be any easier."*

Elizabeth groans.

"You're kidding, right?"

Christian laughs.

"You'll find out tomorrow."

I exchange a glance with Elizabeth before we both laugh.

If today is anything to go by, I know this journey is only just beginning.

———

The steady line of cars stretches as far as I can see.

Mum lets out a quiet sigh as she taps the steering wheel.

"Lagos traffic will humble anybody," she mutters.

I glance at the dashboard clock before looking out the window.

"Do you think we'll be late?" I ask.

Mum shakes her head.

"We'll make it. That's why we left early."

As if on cue, the traffic begins to ease, and the cars crawl forward once again.

I lean back in my seat, scrolling through my phone until a message from Elizabeth pops up.

“Where are you now?”

“Still stuck in traffic. I’ll be there soon.”

“*Same here.”*

I laugh softly.

Somehow, knowing I am not the only one running behind makes me feel a little better.

By the time Mum pulls into the school’s parking lot, a few students are already making their way inside.

“Have a great day,” Mum says.

“Thanks, Mum.”

I grab my bag and hurry toward the entrance.

“Today, we’ll be starting with the fundamentals of modelling,” the instructor announces, clasping her hands behind her back.

She walks slowly across the room, her gaze sweeping over each of us.

“Many people think modelling is simply about being beautiful, but that’s far from the truth. A good model knows how to carry herself with confidence, maintain excellent posture, connect with the camera, and command attention the moment she steps onto a runway.”

She demonstrates the correct posture before inviting us to try it ourselves.

When my turn comes, I take a deep breath, square my shoulders, lift my chin, and walk forward, remembering everything she’s just taught us.

“Very good,” she says with a nod. *“Just relax your shoulders a little. Don’t look stiff. Let your confidence do the talking.”*

I adjust my posture and try again.

“Better.”

The rest of the lesson is spent practising our runway walks, improving our posture, learning basic poses, and working on our facial expressions in front of the camera. The instructors move from one student to another, correcting every little mistake and encouraging us to keep improving.

By the time class ends, I am completely exhausted, but I can’t stop smiling. I know every lesson I learn here is bringing me one step closer to the future I have always imagined for myself.

———

Two months have passed since I first walked through the doors of Symi**.**

In that time, the school has become my second home. The long training sessions no longer feel impossible, and the instructors’ constant corrections have shaped me into a much more confident model.

Elizabeth and I have grown inseparable, and somewhere along the way, Christian has become an important part of our little circle. Whether we’re laughing over lunch, practising after class, or walking to the gate together, the three of us are almost always together.

Life at Symi has settled into a comfortable routine.

Until one Monday morning.

“Everyone, gather around,” Mr Alim calls.

The room falls silent as we gather around him.

A smile spreads across his face.

“In three days, you’ll be participating in your very first runway showcase.”

Excited murmurs fill the room.

My heart skips a beat.

My first runway.

The weeks after the announcement are filled with nonstop practice.

Elizabeth and I have learned so much in such a short time. From perfecting our posture and mastering the runway walk to striking confident poses and maintaining eye contact with the audience, we spend every spare moment practising together.

Christian is always there to help whenever we get stuck. He never misses a chance to correct our posture or offer a few words of encouragement, and somehow, his advice always makes things easier.

With each passing day, my confidence grows. The nerves that consumed me at the beginning slowly fade, replaced by excitement.

Before I know it, the showcase is in less than 24 hours.

As much as I try to stay calm, my heart refuses to listen. I have dreamed about this moment ever since I joined Symi, and now it is finally here.

Backstage is filled with excitement. Models adjust their outfits, stylists make last-minute changes, and everyone tries to calm their nerves.

Elizabeth nudges me gently.

“You’ve got this.”

I smile nervously. *“I hope so.”*

Christian walks over, his usual confident smile on his face.

“Remember what I told you,” he says.

“Walk like you belong there.”

I nod, taking a deep breath.

“Grace!”

My name is called.

It is my turn.

I step onto the runway, keeping my shoulders relaxed and my chin high. The bright lights make it impossible to see the audience clearly, but I remember every lesson I’ve learned over the past two months.

Step by step, my confidence grows. When I reach the end of the runway, I strike my pose, turn gracefully, and walk back with a smile.

As soon as I step backstage, Elizabeth wraps me in a quick hug.

“You were amazing!”

“I didn’t trip,” I laugh.

Christian chuckles.

“I told you you’d do fine.”

Once everyone has taken their final walk, the judges gather at the front of the hall.

“First of all,” one of them begins, *“we’re proud of the progress you’ve all made over the past few months.”*

Smiles spread across the room.

“We’ve also been contacted by a fashion brand looking for a few fresh faces for an upcoming campaign. After reviewing

today's showcase, we've selected the students we believe are ready for the opportunity."

The room falls silent. My heart pounds against my chest.

The judge unfolds a sheet of paper. *"Elizabeth."*

Elizabeth gasps, covering her mouth.

"Grace."

I freeze for a second before Elizabeth grabs my hand excitedly.

"We made it!" she whispers.

I can't stop smiling. Two more names are called before the judge continues.

"Congratulations to all of you. You'll receive the details of the job tomorrow. We expect professionalism and commitment from each of you."

Applause fills the hall as we congratulate one another.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Elizabeth says as we walk out of the hall.

"Neither can I," I admit. Christian smiles proudly at both of us.

"I told you all those extra practice sessions would pay off."

Elizabeth laughs. *"Looks like we owe you a thank you."*

Christian shrugs with a grin.

"Just don't forget me when you're both famous."

"Don't worry," I tease. *"We won't."*

I laugh, still trying to process everything that has just happened.

The three of us walk toward the school gate, talking excitedly about the opportunity. None of us can stop smiling. It still feels unreal.

As Mum drives us home, I stare out of the window, replaying the day's events over and over again. For the first time, I feel like all my hard work is finally paying off.

A week later, the selected students gather at the fashion brand's studio for the campaign. It isn't as glamorous as I had imagined, but it is exciting. The photographers guide us through different poses while the stylists adjust our outfits and makeup.

After several hours of shooting, the campaign finally comes to an end.

"Well done, everyone," one of the coordinators says with a smile. *"You've all done an amazing job."*

Before we leave, each of us receives an envelope. Curious, I open mine. Inside is my very first modelling paycheck.

It isn't a huge amount, but it means everything to me. Elizabeth smiles as she looks at hers.

"We actually got paid!" I laugh.

"I know."

On my way home, I keep looking at the envelope in my hands.

Most people would probably spend their first paycheck on clothes or something nice. But I already know what I want to do with mine.

That evening, Mum notices the smile on my face.

"What happened?" she asks.

I hand her the envelope.

"I got paid."

She looks at me proudly.

“I’m so proud of you, Grace.”

I smile. *“Thanks, Mum.”*

Instead of spending the money, I carefully place it inside a small box in my room.

Then I reach for my sketchbook.

I flip through pages filled with fashion sketches before turning to a blank page. This time, instead of drawing clothes, I begin sketching lip gloss tubes, body butter containers, perfume bottles, and simple logo ideas.

One day I will start my own beauty brand. Not just any brand. One people will love and trust.

I smile to myself. *“This is only the beginning.”*

Over the next few weeks, things continue to improve. I attend more castings and auditions, hoping to land another modelling job.

When I finally get the chance, I am confident.

A few days later, the results are released. For the first time since joining Symi, I am not selected. My heart sinks, and disappointment washes over me.

“Maybe I’m not good enough,” I mutter.

Elizabeth shakes her head.

“Grace, one rejection doesn’t define you.”

Christian nods.

“Every successful model has been rejected before. Don’t let one audition stop you.”

That evening, Mum sits beside me.

"If you give up now," she says softly, *"you'll never know how far you could have gone."*

Her words stay with me.

The next morning, I get up, pick up my heels, and head back to training.

I am not giving up.

———

Months pass.

I continue modelling whenever opportunities come, saving almost every naira I earn.

Little by little, my savings grow.

After months of planning, researching products, and designing my logo, I finally place my first order.

When the boxes arrive at my house, I can barely contain my excitement.

"This is real," I whisper.

I arrange everything neatly, take pictures, and create social media pages for my brand.

Hours pass.

Nothing.

Later…

My phone vibrates.

New Order Received**.**

I stare at the screen in disbelief.

Someone has actually bought my product.

I scream.

Mum rushes into my room.

“What happened?”

I show her my phone.

She smiles proudly.

“I told you your hard work would pay off.”

A few moments later, my phone buzzes again.

It is Christian.

Christian**:** *Congratulations, CEO.*

I laugh before replying.

Me**:** *Not yet, but I’m getting there.*

A Year Later

My beauty brand has grown beyond anything I imagined. It isn’t the biggest brand in the country, but it is growing steadily, and every order reminds me why I started.

I still model occasionally, but it is no longer my destination. It has simply been the road that led me here. Elizabeth remains my closest friend, and Christian has never stopped cheering me on.

One afternoon, the three of us stand outside the gates of Symi.

“So,” Christian asks with a smile, *“if you could go back and tell your old self one thing, what would it be?”*

I look at the building that has changed my life and smile.

“I’d tell her never to give up on her dreams, and that modelling isn’t easy, but she will survive.” We all laugh.

I might not be globally known yet. My brand isn’t on billboards across the globe yet, but as I package another order, I can’t help but smile. Every dream begins somewhere, and mine has finally begun.

The Price of Blood

By Sophia Zinachi Sholadoye



Age 13

Sophia enjoys writing stories and fan fiction. Sophia hopes to keep readers interested in the worlds and characters on the page.

The Price of Blood

Prologue

“Another pose. Yes, good. Now, Femi, hold her by the waist and look into her eyes,” the photographer instructed.

Teni’s phone rang. *“Sorry, I need to take this,”* she said. *“Ki lo de? A oni gbogbo ojo!”* the photographer angrily exclaimed.

“E ma binu, sir. I'm very sorry.” she apologised.

“Hello?” she said gently into the phone. *“Hello, Teni, you need to come home now. It's an emergency. Come home now!”* Eniola said hastily and hung up.

Teni panicked; she hadn’t expected that call.

“I need to go. I'm sorry, sir, we must do this another day,” she told the photographer, and kissed Femi, her fiancé, goodbye. *“I have to go, babe.”*

And she left.

She drove at speed to their luxurious mansion in Ikoyi, Lagos Island.

She rushed to the front door and hastily typed in the PIN to the door lock.

When she got in, she went to the living room where her siblings and her mother sat with cold expressions as if they had just seen a ghost.

“What’s going on? Why are you all looking so shocked? Where is Daddy? Someone answer me, what's going on?” she panted.

There was a minute of silence. *“Daddy is... Daddy is... Daddy is dead, Teni,”* Eniola stammered, hot tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Daddy... wait, our Daddy? As in Chief Gabriel Adebayo?” Teni asked, unable to believe it.

“Yes, our Daddy, Teni. He had a heart attack,” Daniel sobbed.

“Wait... wait, he’s had one of those before. He’s going to be okay, right? Have you taken him to the hospital for treatment?” she asked, hoping there was still a chance.

“We called the private doctor, Teni. He came almost immediately, but nothing worked and... and he stopped breathing.” Darasimi, her younger brother, answered. Teni paused; she could not process the information she had just received. She dropped to her knees.

Teni just didn't believe it. To her, this was all a bad dream, and she was about to wake up in a cold sweat, right? So why wasn't she waking up? She asked herself.

Wake up, wake up, wake up, she thought as she shut her eyes tight, as if she were actually asleep and trying to wake up.

“No... no,” she muttered to herself.

She just froze there, trying to process everything, but she couldn't. She didn't want to live in that reality after all; she was Daddy’s pet and could not imagine life without talking to her dad every day or every week.

How was she now living in a reality where her dad was dead? She just couldn't fathom why the universe would drop this on her, and just a few weeks before her wedding? She had no words; it was all too much to take in.

She fainted.

“Teni, please wake up. We lost Daddy; I don't want to lose you too,” Eniola sobbed.

Teni woke up with a gasp, panting in a cold sweat. Her body shook as if she had just taken an extremely cold shower. She looked left and right, frantically searching for her dad.

When she didn't see him, her eyes welled up, and tears started rolling down her face. The more she cried, the more her head ached. Eniola just stood there, hiding her own share of tears.

Now real grieving had begun. Before, she had been in denial; now, she had shed her first few tears.

It hurt her deeply. She was so hurt she forgot about everything else in her life for a second.

She forgot about her career, her fiancé, her wedding; anything else that had been important in her life wasn't, not anymore...

Then, a knock came on the door. It was Timilehin, their oldest son and immediate younger brother..

“Mummy is calling you guys for a family meeting to sort out Daddy’s burial.”

He informed them and left.

Teni went to wash off her ruined mascara, then they both headed downstairs. Teni was still in her silk dinner gown from her pre-wedding photoshoot.

She and Eni sat down in the living room.

Then their mother began planning the burial. *“As you all know, your father was a very important man, and so this burial must be as lavish as possible but still simple, not too overboard.”*

They all nodded. *“Good. I will ask our event planner to contact food vendors, find an event hall for us and get everything else necessary, but other things, like finding a casket or consulting a pastor, will be our responsibility,”* she said, as if they were a business team pitching an idea.

And the family began to plan and suggest.

Then Teni called Femi and informed him of her father’s death and of her decision to postpone their wedding. He told her he supported whatever decision she made, and then she started prepping for the burial.

Two days later, Chief Gabriel Adebayo’s obituary was announced. Teni also announced the postponement of her wedding to give herself space to mourn properly.

Before long, everyone was talking about his death. Headlines were saying *“CHIEF GABRIEL ADEBAYO HAS PASSED.”* or *“HONOURABLE CHIEF ADEBAYO REPORTED LATE.”*

Three weeks later, they held his burial, as lavish as Gabriel had been. The children’s eyes were red and filled with tears, especially Teni. The full burial was streamed on the news and on some websites.

Five days after the burial, the family lawyer, Emeka Okoro, came to read out the will and handle Gabriel’s estate.

“Last will of Gabriel Adebayo…” the lawyer stated.

“My first testament is this: if I pass before any of my kids are 18, may my wife, Abimbola Aderonke Adebayo, be their legal guardian.

To my wife, Abimbola Aderonke Adebayo, I leave one of my mansions in Banana Island, land worth 200 million naira in Lagos Island, Lekki and Sango Tedo, and an additional $1,000.

To my first child and first daughter, Teni Ademide Adebayo, I leave 100 million naira, my terrace house at Eko Atlantic, some of my jewellery, and an additional $500."

...

"And last but not least, to Daniel Adebayo, my youngest son,

I leave a house in Ikeja, Lagos mainland, and full responsibility over my entire empire (businesses, investments, bank accounts), and that will be all..." The lawyer paused. Everyone looked at him in shock.

"Sorry, sir, but are you sure you read that right? The youngest son?" Mrs Adebayo asked in shock. The lawyer read on, ignoring Mrs Adebayo's question.

"Signed by me,

Chief Gabriel Adebayo.

1st Witness - Kelechi Mbanefo

2nd Witness – Pamilerin Popoola."

The lawyer exhaled heavily.

"Did you hear what I said?" Mrs Adebayo asked, still confused.

"Yes, ma'am, that is what he wrote. His youngest will lead and oversee all that has to do with the Adebayo empire."

They all sat in silence, shocked by the news they had just received.

"Now, I will be on my way. Any other piece of information will be sent by email or WhatsApp."

Daniel stared at the lawyer in disbelief as he left the house.

"I can't accept this," he said quietly.

The room fell silent.

His mother rose to her feet. *“You have no choice. Your father built this empire for you, and you will oversee it.”*

Daniel shook his head. *“He built it on fear, corruption, and innocent people's suffering. It ends with me.”*

His words echoed through the room. His siblings exchanged uneasy glances, but no one spoke.

The next day, everyone was still feeling uneasy. When Daniel came down for breakfast and the chef set his plate down on the dining table, his mother took the plate away. *“Since you refuse to accept the empire that fed you and sent you to school for a whole 20 good years, you will not eat from it,”* his mother exclaimed angrily.

“Daniel, I think it's best to just accept this opportunity. Don't you know that this is a blessing? Do you even know what it means to lead the Adebayo empire? Just apologise to Mummy and accept it,” Eniola gently advised him, so he could keep the empire and possibly bring more wealth and power and be on his mother’s good side.

“Accept what? I am going to end the cycle of bloodshed in our family; then I will accept it.” He stood up and left to buy food outside.

Teni sighed. She knew that at this rate their mother was going to disown Daniel, and he knew it too, but he didn't care, and it didn't change his mind.

Six months after the burial, Teni went ahead with her wedding and married Femi Adetunji. After a month-long honeymoon, they relocated to the UK. Over the next few months, Daniel uncovered files, hidden bank accounts, and records of illegal business deals his father had buried for years. Every document revealed another secret, another victim, another lie.

When the investigation was complete, Daniel handed every piece of evidence to the authorities.

The news spread across the country.

“ADEBAYO BUSINESS EMPIRE UNDER INVESTIGATION.”

“SON EXPOSES HIS OWN FAMILY'S CORRUPTION.”

The businesses were seized, along with the lands, money and secret bank accounts: basically everything they owned and had inherited. They even took the house. They were forced to move into a slum dwelling in Makoko. The family's fortune disappeared almost overnight, and the Adebayo name became a symbol of disgrace instead of power.

His mother could not forgive him, and as Teni predicted, she had disowned him. Some of his siblings believed he had destroyed everything their father had worked for.

Teni, who was already in the UK with her husband, heard of the unfortunate events plaguing her family and sent as much money, help and support as they needed.

Her other siblings felt she had escaped the misfortune through her marriage, and they believed Daniel had spoilt the empire their father had built.

But Daniel knew the truth. They were paying the price of bloodshed and corruption.

He had not destroyed his father's legacy.

He had ended it. Stigma and shame were still there, but at least he had delivered justice and fairness.

Months later, he opened a small company built on honesty, fairness, and hard work. It earned far less than the empire had ever made, but for the first time, every naira was clean.

As Daniel placed the framed certificate of his new company on the office wall, he looked out the window and whispered,

“I will be the last Adebayo to build wealth on innocent people's blood.”

Outside, the morning sun rose over Lagos.

For the first time in generations, the Adebayo name had a chance to mean something different.

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Oluwadarasimi Oluwatamilore Esan

The Path to Nothing

A’asiyah Omolola Sodiq

WHERE LOVE TRULY LIES

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The Price of Blood

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