



# THE TEARS OF OTHER MEN

ESSAYS AND REFLECTIONS FROM A NIGERIAN  
STUDYING IN THE UNITED STATES

WRITTEN BY

**MARVELLOUS OGUDORO**

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*Dedicated to Lagos, Nigeria;  
The soil on which I matured.  
I miss you very much.*

***THE TEARS OF OTHER MEN***  
***Essays and Reflections from a Nigerian Studying in the United States***

***By Marvellous Ogudoro***

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## *Chapter 1:*

### *Introduction: A Space To Be*

At the beginning of many books, some authors start by describing the correct way to work through their writing. In this way, I am no different from the others as I think much is gained when this book is read from cover to cover.

Where I contrast with many of the authors that I grew up reading, is that I am an individual at cross sections, who carries within him voices that have historically been hushed. As a child of Yoruba and Igbo parents and a product of post-colonial Nigeria, I carry within me a rich history of musing, writing and storytelling. Like my paternal grandmother, who was one of the first women in her village to become literate, I have developed a deep appreciation for the written word. And, like my mother, I have combined that appreciation with cavernous love and extensive effort in order to bring forth this collection of essays.

Hence, this book which has been carefully revised and thought through, is in essence, an attempt to create more space at this intersection that I find myself. As a Nigerian studying in the United States of America, my main goal with this book is to expand the palette of ideas that underrepresented individuals are “allowed” to engage with. I want the stories we tell *to* the world and *of* our world to cease being restricted to certain themes. Consequently, you will find that in this book, most chapters are loosely connected to each other, but are rather held together by one thing, my artistic voice and the experiences that have shaped that voice.

In this way, I hope you think of this collection of essays as a mosaic where focusing on individual colors and shapes prevents the full picture from being appreciated. To offer a different metaphor, I encourage you to think of this book as a cocktail party where dissimilar Hors d'oeuvres are served even though they are prepared by the same chef. Hence, in that spirit, go forth, try out some of this finger food and take in the space that I am trying to create.

## **Chapter 2:**

### ***Dad, Mom and Godswill, This is For You***

In my opinion, one of the best ways to express love for someone is to create. It is to bring into being something that is inspired by another and to immortalize that individual's temporary presence in our world. To say that "*because of you, I create*" is to announce that, "*because of you, I **commit** to some form of permanence*". This idea of commitment is, thus, one that I plan to explore in this chapter which will contain stories of three people who inspire me everyday to bring things into being. It shall be a chapter of love, written on pages of commitment and if I am lucky, it will be something of permanence.



#### ***I. Dad***

A deeply personal story comes to mind when I think of my father. It is a story he relayed to me about his growing up and it is set in a smaller town of Eastern Nigeria. As the tale goes, my dad is walking past a very charismatic bookseller who is probably ringing a bell in an attempt to draw attention to his work and improve his sales. The bookseller is offering up a free book

to anyone who can out loud, read and explain a paragraph or two of a pretty difficult text that the seller has picked out. The salesman is confident that the reading and comprehension level of the paragraphs are several times above most of the people walking past his shop. Therefore, when a young 7th grade looking boy steps up to the challenge, the bookseller is particularly self-assured that he has nothing to worry about.

What this bookseller and everyone else watching my dad pick up the book, however, failed to understand is that Ibeawuchi wasn't your regular village boy. When the rest of his village walked up to the boundaries set in place by the Nigerian civil war, poverty and internal displacement, Ibeawuchi looked beyond the walls and saw something that most people do not see when they

are trapped by the limited resources of their upbringing. He saw a dream; his dream and it is one of self empowerment which *is* ultimately directed towards the mass-empowerment of Nigerians.

Needless to say, my dad wrapped up that day with a new book in his hands. Those crisp pages were, however, not the only thing he left that marketplace with. Following that challenge and his ability to overcome it, my father walked away with a sense of confidence and determination that nothing since has ever been able to rid him of. Not the challenges of being a first-generation college student, or the hardships of traveling thousands of miles for an education in a foreign country. Not the weight of supporting a family of four on one person's income or the nights spent homeless and hungry during his PhD program. Not even family members and friends who once again, couldn't see beyond the boundaries of limited resources would be able to stop Ibeawuchi as he burned the midnight oil. Again, they failed to understand that he is working for a dream; his dream and it is always worth waiting for.



## ***II. Mum***

If you were to ever meet my mother in person, you would instantly be surprised by her warmth. Though I doubt she would ever be described as the life of the party, it would be hard to have her at any social gathering without catching

a glimpse of her smile before she would come over to chat and offer you a hug. My mother is the kind of person whose instincts lean towards care and this explains why I picked up this question from her: “*Are you doing okay?*”.

From the stories she has relayed to my brother and me about her upbringing, Omolola has always had a lot on her shoulders. Whether it's taking care of her three younger siblings, supporting her parents financially with her banking career or grinding her way through her education, there has never been a shortage of responsibility. In fact, one of her stories that I have found most impactful, embodies this very idea of the weights we carry for ourselves and others.

After my younger brother, Godswill, was born, my mom got pregnant with another baby and after nine months of a rather smooth pregnancy, I had another little brother. The first couple of days were uniquely beautiful as there is quite no moment like welcoming a new individual into the world. We were blessed to have family members like my grandmother closeby and I have very strong memories of being amazed by how soft my newly born brother's hair was. These blissful moments of welcoming the child who would have been named Miracle, are however, punctured by his unfortunate and sudden death five days after he was born.

Now you see, *death is an interesting thing not just because of what it takes from individuals, but also because of what it leaves with them.* For my mother, death had taken away a child; *her child.* And in its wake, death had left my mother with a strong sense that she may have been carrying the weight of the wrong things. A sense that her ideas of responsibility might have been off balance.

Following the newborn's death, my mother quit her progressing but extremely draining banking career. It was a job she had enjoyed or at least, that's what she wanted to believe on the bus rides before sunrise. It's what she tried to believe when the stress induced headaches surfaced or when she couldn't be a part of her children and husband's lives.

She wanted to believe that she enjoyed this career because, in a developing country that is enmeshed in all sorts of economic challenges, it isn't too hard to find reasons to justify financial flourishing even when the emotional costs are high. But the truth is, in my mother's grieving heart, such financial reasons couldn't possibly outweigh the responsibility she felt towards her health, her family and most importantly, herself.

And so, she quit. She quit to give my brother and I the wide smiles we looked forward to after school. She quit to read the books, write the stories and work on the projects that mattered to her. And above all, my mother quit because she needed to carry some burdens that were of her own choosing. Not the ones that were dictated by her birth order or financial circumstances, but the *responsibilities that even though sometimes painful and draining, belonged to the things that she loved.*



### ***III. Godswill***

For most of my life, my brother and I annoyingly shared a bed. Knowing this, you can probably understand why I hated how often Godswill tossed while asleep. You might, also, have an appreciation for how powerful his kicks could be when he was dreaming about Lord knows what. Despite all this though, I do remember how much I missed him on the

nights when he was not beside me. In fact, I still today find myself missing those hot Lagos nights when we would sleep shoulder to shoulder. I miss him most especially, when nothing seems to put my mind to sleep. He would always be there; even if *quietly*.

In this way, Godswill has typically been the introverted sibling. Whereas I am not too worried about being out in the midst of people, my brother has always preferred to have his space. During family gatherings where there is loud music and numerous baby cousins running around, Godswill would rather spend some time sketching out his next drawing or learning about the latest science discovery.

For a long time, I did not understand this. Here was the supposed sidekick to my main character, who would not engage in the kinds of dialogues that I wanted. In the moments when I was lucky to get anything out of him, there would be one word answers. “Emmm, Sure” “Yes?” “No”. It didn’t make sense. At least, not until the moments leading up to my departure for the United States.

Those weeks, be they filled with so much uncertainty about the future, were some of my greatest moments of appreciation for my brother. More often than I had in the past, I really just wanted to be engulfed in the silence that formed a large part of Godswill’s world. I began to understand that in such a busy, turbulent and uncertain world, one of the things that you probably shouldn’t take for granted is an opportunity to be quiet comfortably.

Hence, thousands of miles away from my one and only brother, I excuse myself to sit in the moments of silence that I know he is enjoying halfway across the world. I go on walks whilst paying attention to the color of the sky and buildings around me. Maybe more importantly though, I remember what it feels like to be so comfortable with someone, that not every moment has to be filled with dialogue. And for this, I am forever grateful.

### **Chapter 3:**

## **A Thing Without Shape: Nigeria's Foreign Policy Challenge**



One of the best and worst things about being Nigerian is that, no matter where I go, there is always another Nigerian nearby. I could be waiting for the subway in New York City, cashing a check in Saudi Arabia or practicing my Spanish in Argentina but our familiar accent would travel to meet my ears. And yet, the government from which we hail has refused to acknowledge the untapped talents of its people—especially its diaspora. Our homeland has refused to cultivate its fruits; who are individuals scattered around the world who always find a way to climb to great heights. In doing so, the Nigerian government has allowed its diaspora to remain shapeless and it benefits no one for this lack of direction for our foreign policy to continue. Let's explore three ideas that might be able to help.

### ***I. Who Are My People?***

The world we live in today demands data in a way that the Nigerian government has not been able to produce. The information systems in Nigeria can hardly identify who is within the country. Hence, the idea that they know who our diaspora is composed of, is far from reality.

Understandably, my country loses significantly because of this lack of information. Nigeria is, for example, not able to properly account for and manage the billions of dollars that make its way into the economy via foreign remittances. Another challenge comes from the fact that Nigeria's diaspora is left vulnerable during times of crisis and we can see an example with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Hundreds of Nigerian citizens were left stranded as bombs rained across Eastern Europe. All because our government had done two things.

First, it had forgotten the obligation to protect its citizens, whether within its borders or not. Second, upon remembering the obligation to protect Nigeria's citizens, the policy makers in Abuja were not able to identify who those citizens were. This is because Aso Rock Presidential Villa, and the institutions of political power that surround it, are not focused on the upliftment of Nigerians. Instead, these institutions and the individuals within them, are deeply flawed because of the foundations of exploitation that they are built on.

Adapted from the British days of colonization, these political establishments never stopped taking advantage of the everyday Nigerian. Rather, the elites who found themselves in positions of power after the British departed, continued to pillage the pockets of Africa's giant, Nigeria. These elites did so without giving thought to the ideas of development that they professed during the Independence movement.

In such a situation, how might Nigeria begin its march towards development? Well, the country must start to know who its people are. No modern country can survive in the international playing field without being able to identify its citizens. More importantly, no modern country can excel in said playing field without being able to protect its citizens, irrespective of whether said citizens are within its borders or make up a diaspora community. The world we live in demands information. Hence, it is time Nigeria starts to take its place as a major world player.

## ***II. "Identification Please?"***

The Nigerian passport is among the weakest in the world. Ranking 98th on the 2021 Henley Passport Index, Nigeria's passport only allows visa free travel to about 45 countries and territories. In contrast, passport holders of the United States and Japan enjoy visa free travel to 185 and 192 countries/territories respectively.

Considering the highly interconnected nature of our world, such a gap is unacceptable. Nigeria's diplomats have failed to open the doors of international trade, tourism and communication. These diplomats have observed the hurdles that Nigerian citizens have to overcome to travel and have turned a blind eye. This must no longer go on.

In a country with over 200 million people, how can we expect to develop if we are significantly disconnected from the world? It is time Nigeria's embassies and consulates begin to do the hard work of diplomacy. These ambassadors and their teams need to engage with their respective host countries and negotiate deals of mutual interest. There is no assurance that the negotiation of these diplomatic travel arrangements will be easy but it is high time Nigeria stops being the passive participant in international affairs. For too many years, Africa's giant, Nigeria, has allowed the policies of the world to dictate its economic and political state. This must stop on the international stage and it begins with the development of reciprocal travel arrangements for Nigerian Passport holders.

### ***III. 28 Weeks***

One of the most difficult things you can do as a Nigerian is to get a new passport. When I started the process, I was constantly amazed by how many loopholes I had to jump through to get a document that I am entitled to as a Nigerian Citizen. In all, it took about 28 weeks to receive a document that consular officers had promised me would come in eight weeks. This too is unacceptable.

A passport is an absolute necessity for any individual that plans to engage with the world beyond one's borders. Thus, if we are to encourage Nigerian citizens to become more active participants on the international stage and if we are to honor the identities of the Nigerian diaspora, we have to get our passport processing right. It can no longer take half a year for individuals to get their documents because we know the kind of identification limbo it creates. We can no longer tell the world that we do not have enough passport booklets when we ought to have the data that allows us to predict how many booklets the Nigerian government and embassies should order. Additionally, we can no longer afford to have our embassies riddled with bribes. These and countless other inefficiencies in our passport procurement process must be eliminated.

### ***III. Moving Forward***

When my father would return home from a busy day of work, it would only take a couple of footsteps for my brother and I to figure out that he was the one at the door. Conscious of the depreciating security situation in Nigeria, my dad had a special rhythm to the way he would dust his shoes. Once completed, my brother or I would know he was the one and proceed to let him in.

In a similar way, many Nigerians know the rhythm to which our country dusts its shoes. We know that our country often forgets the diaspora it ought to remember and we sense that Africa's giant has no sense of direction for its foreign policy. Hence, upon hearing footsteps approaching our doors, many Nigerians abroad refuse to open up. This is, however, unsustainable.

Nigeria must begin to appreciate foreign policy development. Our country must recognize the untapped knowledge and resources that exist outside of its border and it must treat these individuals and their resources with respect. Our embassies, which are the primary way Nigeria's diaspora maintains its roots, must understand why they exist. These consulates exist not to rent expensive New York City buildings or to serve as posting grounds for favored political appointees. Rather, the walls of Nigeria's embassies exist to serve Nigerians in ways that reflect dignity and effort.

Because, maybe by doing this. By having data on who our people are and coming to their aid. By helping Nigerians travel more freely. By cutting down document processing times. Maybe by

doing these things, Nigerians abroad will no longer run from the door. Maybe our diaspora will skip towards the rhythm of our country's footsteps. Maybe, they will smile like two young boys who are happy to see their father. Maybe our fatherland's footsteps will no longer scare us.

*Chapter 4:  
Death Is Both Quiet and Loud*



*I.*

For as long as I can remember, my mother's health has always been a thing of personal worry. I've come to wonder if maybe this worry stems from the sense of generalized anxiety I've always harbored. Or maybe it is my father's extremely disciplined fitness lifestyle that has somehow eclipsed my mother's health habits and made her health seem deficient in comparison. Whatever the case may be though, worry always seems present when I reflect on my mother's health.

In fact, some of my most prominent memories of my mother are of her rushing to the bathroom in the middle of the night. In these moments, I see my father holding my mother's anemic body steady in order to prevent the loud thump that we might hear if she passes out again. These memories allow me to hear the sound of my mother's dry heaving that travels

through the quiet night in such a way that my half-asleep neighbors might be awoken. Additionally, with the sound of vomit, comes my dad's stress-filled screams as he frantically calls for my brother and me to wake up.

For my brother and me- the sons of Ibe and Lola-, this nightly episode with my mother has begun to take on a clockwork existence. We are now familiar with our roles when summoned at 3am. First, one of the brothers must grab some water from the kitchen for my vomiting mother and this is because my half-asleep dad is already being stretched too thin to worry about hydration. Next, both brothers must get on their knees and begin to pray. In this moment, we must commit my mother's life into the hands of the Lord and rebuke any evil attacks that the Devil might be trying to undertake.

Personally though, these moments of prayer have come to represent so much more. For when my knees touch the ground, what runs through my mind is not just the raging spiritual battles that my parents often depict. Rather, it is the process of bargaining with death's kiss that my consciousness is also fixed on. And truly, this process of leveling with death, or at least attempting to, is one that I have continued to engage in.

## ***II.***

In my experiences with the concept of death, I have come to realize two important things. First, I do not yet have a close experience with death even if my anxiety tells me one is bound to happen any moment now. And second, I am bound to death and by death. This bond, relationship or whatever you may choose to call it is, however, not exclusive to me. In fact, all of us, from the moment we are born, must begin a delicate conversation with death. For some individuals, this conversation will be one stricken with anxiety while for others, the final stop to our long journey of life is something that will be embraced.

For me, death has always been somewhat of a dilemma. On the one hand, it is the price we often assign to our most horrible criminals. And yet, somehow, maybe even ironically, it is the gift that the cycle of life grants to a new generation. From this second perspective, it seems that death is a way of creating space. It ensures that the new are not hopelessly devoted to the old, while also prompting individuals and institutions to search for what death often graciously leaves in its wake: a chance for renewal.

In fact, it is this opportunity to start from scratch- *to build from the ground up before having our enterprises die*- that our lives might be ultimately reduced to. For as Albert Camus reminds us in the particularly relevant *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "What is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying".

## ***III.***

This reason for living that for Camus, also serves as a good reason for dying is one that I do not think I have found yet. I do, however, know that I want my reason to ultimately be tied up with people; individuals with whom I do not necessarily share a common background, but who I can aspire to help. I also know that I want my reason to be bound up with death's gift for renewal, but in a double-edged manner.

First, I want this gift of renewal to be offered to the world *through* me and the career that I end up choosing. Second, I want this gift of renewal to manifest *in* me. I want the continuous creation of space that allows for growth to be a part of *my* story. In other words, I want the death of certain parts of me, but in a way that allows the more intricate worthwhile parts to be born. Specifically, I want the silence that closely follows the passing of the past-*my past*- because I know that this quiet will be followed by the blaring microphone of our hearts crying for joy.

**Chapter 5:**  
**Birthday Prayers**



Congratulations Nigeria; you're 62! A lot of us didn't think you would make it but here you are waxing strong. A country severely bruised, deeply poor but alive nonetheless. In your 62 years of life, I wonder how many crises you have had. I know of at least three.

When you were born, the different parts you are made from didn't elect to be joined together. In this way, you are like Frankenstein's monster.

However, rather than for the pure joy of science, you are a project in exploitation. This is your birth crisis.

What is your teenage crisis, Nigeria? Well, like a lot of teenagers, you have struggled with certain parts of yourself. There are things about your being that don't quite slide into place but why would they? You're Frankenstein's monster. You, though, have fought, starved and bled to keep yourself holistic. What was the cost? *Just* a million dead parts of your body; the body you claimed to love. You went to war with your own being and you "won".

Your adult crisis was built from the remnants of your teenage struggles. Unresolved issues don't just go away. They come back, sometimes more nuanced, but most times angrier. In your case, Nigeria, your problems returned angrier. As a nation, you are broke, insecure and unsafe. You are also an abusive partner and have, therefore, chased away anyone that wants to help you.

We, however, must not worry about all of that because today, you are 62! Three years short of the typical retirement age, you dance the night away in your patched up body. Music and dance have always been special to you so tonight's party is easy. You hit every beat perfectly and you are the envy of your African colleagues because as other patched up projects born out of exploitation, they wonder how you managed to find this niche. Apparently, your party jollof rice is also unbeatable. One would think that a project like you, made from disconnected parts, would lack rhythm and taste. But you surprise us; you're Nigeria.

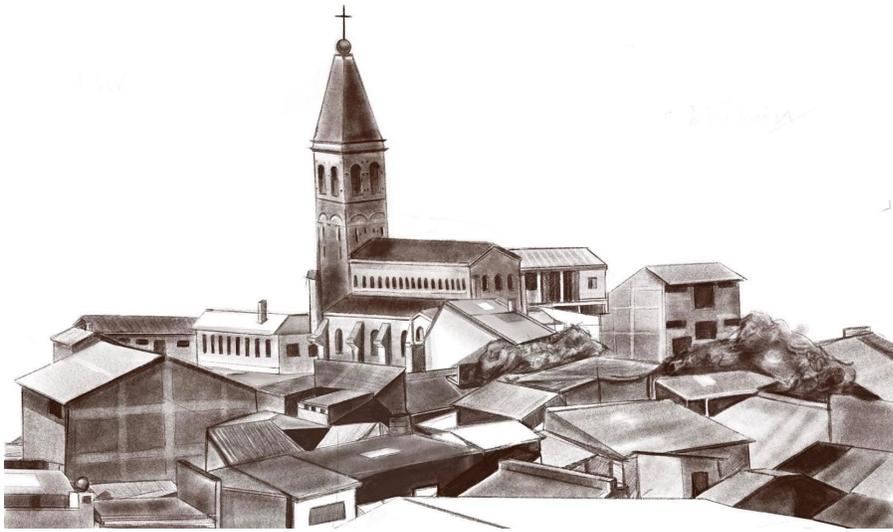
In some ways, you even inspire us.

You are as resilient as you are broken and you are as talented as you are poor. You do not let your challenges define you because you know that your issues are not entirely of your own making. You, Nigeria, will walk into any room with their shoulders high and your name proudly worn on your sleeve. You speak your mind and make sure people listen. And on those good days that are becoming more and more frequent, you blow the competition out of the water.

My birthday prayer for you then, Nigeria, is to have more of these good days. I pray that you start leaning into people who actually care and want to walk with you. That you remember the young parts of yourself and think about what the future can be for them. That you acknowledge your painful beginning but do not let it define you. I pray on this your 62nd birthday, that your remaining years are good. That you become more economically productive, more safe and more reliant on institutions. Finally, I ask God that you make the right decision in this upcoming inflection point. That you realize that 62 years is simultaneously so many years but also so little time in the grand scheme of things. This could be a new beginning.

Happy birthday, Nigeria. I am praying for you.

**Chapter 6:**  
***Portraits of Distance***



***I.***

When you're an international student six thousand miles away from home, you will find yourself always looking for new ways to remember the vastness of the world. Sometimes, you'll stare at the moon and recall that it was that same moon you looked at when you were on a different continent. At other times, your eyes

will be drawn particularly to world maps, because they help you know that your homesickness is valid.

My favorite way of recalling the vastness of our world though is by going on walks, especially walks with other people. These walks are literally grounding. They help my feet cover some distance while simultaneously reminding me of the *distance between where I currently am and where I am from*. And it is this very idea of distance and separation that we'll be contemplating in this essay and though I can easily reflect on the separation challenges that I have faced as an international student; I will be devoting this chapter to the story of another individual that is equally worth telling. Let us begin.

***II.***

The first time the subject of our portrait let out tears, she was already reminded that they wouldn't be her last. See the thing is when you are born in Cuenca, Ecuador shortly after the 1972 coup d'état, you will be surrounded by both the joyful screams of your relatives and the political turmoil of your country. You will flower into adolescence as your country haphazardly experiments with democracy and after enough violent riots happen outside of your home, you'll make a decision that no one ever wants to make. You'll stare at the angry mob outside your window, the hunger and economic pain that has become all too familiar and you'll decide that you don't want the child growing in your womb to experience this. You'll lay your hand on your baby and you'll ask God for one thing. That even though your daughter's first tears will be shed

in starvation and poverty, you'll ask that maybe the rest of her tears will serve to water more prosperous ground.

By the time the subject of our portrait arrives in the United States, she will have taken on a new identity; one that she is not in any way familiar with. She will be a stranger in a land where the main language spoken is one she is not great at, and she will have to figure out this country entirely on her own. Our subject will reside in Chicago, Illinois with two beautiful daughters and she will look upon their glowing eyes every morning; eyes that are yet to understand the complexity of the situation they are in.

Interestingly enough, when our subject's daughters grow older, they will do the same thing to their mother. They will stare at her often and wonder if she really understands the complexities of being an undocumented immigrant. Her daughters might conclude that their mother hadn't assessed all the risks and struggles associated with her flee from political strife. And in some ways they will be right, but it is that very fact that makes our subject's life more interesting. The uncertainty that was on the other side terrified her, but it also drew her closer because she believed that even the greatest struggles and slimmest of chances were worth undertaking for the ones she loves.

### ***III.***

It is important to the portrait we are painting, that we take time here to reflect on two parts of our subject's story. Both these parts are central to the story we are telling, and they are also unfortunately central to the stories of millions of people in the United States.

This first part has to do with the nature of undocumented experience in America; the void that you live in without any sign of light at the end of the tunnel. Many of us take for granted the important place that things like government approved identification have in our lives. When you're navigating healthcare, education, and employment institutions, things like social security numbers, driver's licenses and insurance are quite literally to die for. When the subject of our portrait was diagnosed with cancer, so many healthcare resources were out of her reach. Our subject's case was further complicated when her husband was also diagnosed with cancer, effectively immobilizing both working adults who had young daughters to care for.

When the glowing eyes of our subject's daughters were set on college education, no amount of hard work and good grades could secure them a conventional path. These girls would quite literally have to battle against all odds and one of them would only obtain her certificate several years after her scheduled graduation. Another example of the undocumented immigrant's struggle can be seen when our subject's family set their eyes on homeownership as a path towards developing generational wealth. This would also be an uphill battle. After nearly 40 years of working diligently and saving, our subject and her family would only finally be able to

make the move from renters to homeowners due to an unlikely combination of courage, commitment, and just pure luck.

The second part of our subject's story, which also plays a large part in the lives of other undocumented immigrants, has to do with our human tendency to forget that portraits are representations of actual people. It's quite understandable that we reduce huge segments of the population down to sample sizes, points on a graph and easy figures that we can memorize. We must, however, remember that for every public and social policy perspective that we move forward with as a nation, there are real people whose portraits we affect with our brushstrokes. We must remember that the story of *our world* is not the story of data points and easily digestible information. It is, rather, *a story of individual portraits*, each with their own complexity that builds into a larger and more beautiful mosaic. It is a story about *subjects*.

#### ***IV.***

Like many circumstances in our world, there is a pluralistic nature to our subject's experience. With over ten million undocumented immigrants in the United States, it is in this way that our subject's portrait is similar to the portraits of many others. Like her, these millions of people sit on buses, pray at churches and shop at grocery markets. These individuals volunteer during times of national crisis, become our neighbors and invite us to cookouts. They look forward to warm summer days, toss coins into wishing wells and have hopes for their children. They are similar to the rest of us in the beautifully intricate way we humans are all similar and they resemble our subject's portrait because of the shared experience of undocumented immigration.

And yet, our subject's portrait will be ever so slightly different. It is painted with the memories that most of us will never know and decorated with the joyful smiles of her children. Her portrait is described briefly in the minds of the immigration officials, judges, and attorneys that she has met, but it is hung up beautifully in the hearts of the community that she has raised. Her portrait is her in all the ways that it can be small, depth-filled, vibrant. And yet, it is still a portrait; bound up by the pieces of wood that simultaneously provide the canvas on which this story is told, while *also* limiting the medium on which this story is told.

Maybe most importantly though, *her portrait is hers* and this will be the saddest yet most beautiful part of these paint strokes that have produced her life. The final image we the observers will see, will fully never communicate the layers of pain, sacrifice and grace that have gone into her life. Those brush strokes are hers alone to remember.

#### ***V. Postscript***

I would like to take some space and time here to reflect on the legality question that might be brewing in the minds of some of our readers. There are several questions that relate to this but I'll zero in on a major source of contention and discord. Our question can be framed as such: "If

overstaying a visa or crossing a border without due process is a violation of specific rules that have been set in place, why should I care about those individuals who violate this rule?”. It is a great question, and it is one that I’ve found myself struggling to answer many times. As I’ve wrestled with peeling back the layers of this question, I have also found myself circling back to two things. First, *what constitutes a fair system* and second, *how might the value of fairness be exercised in an unfair and unideal world?* Both of these questions are extremely important, and I will be inviting you, the reader, to keep wrestling with them long after this chapter is over, *for the simple reason that they are my questions as much as they ought to be your questions.*

## ***Chapter 7:***

### **The Tears of Other Men**

I have always been the child of my parents who mourned the challenges of others. On several occasions, I would rush home from school eager to discuss with my family the struggles of my classmates. We would talk about how Bolu's family wasn't very understanding of his passions and how Chinwe had become deeply saddened by her parents' recent separation. In these conversations, I would be unable to divorce myself from the unending troubles around me. In addition to the heavy school bag I dragged each morning, I carried around the even heavier weight of the world. Why?

I am not entirely sure. But, what I do know is that by the time I walked on stage to accept the position of Head Boy and Student Body Chairman at my private Christian high school, my parents had tried to have several interventions. The one that I remember the most would occur around JSS2 (8th grade). The conversation centered around my eating habits or more accurately, lack thereof. I had let a stomach ulcer grow within me because I would rather fix/hear every problem than eat. I was literally letting the problems of the world eat me up as my stomach acid eroded the lining of my digestive tract.

Hence, when I found myself carrying around the front page from the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, I was unsurprised. For months, I was unable to remove the newspaper from my school bag. I wanted to be reminded that while I roamed the halls of Capitol Hill for my internship, fairly confident in my safety, there were people whose homes, loved ones and sense of safety had been stripped away. What was I going to do to make sure this pain would not continue? How was I going to use the opportunities that I had been given to stop not all, but at least some of the suffering that rings through our world. In this way, it is the tears of other men that propels me in my career journey. I want to make sure that less people suffer today than yesterday and I want to be a part of a team that does this with grace and commitment to human dignity.

As an individual in his early 20s, I am still very unsure about what exactly this looks like. I cannot say with precision that this is the type of job that will help me do the best work and I do not know where such work will be located. What I do know, however, is that there is enough work to be done. From my 17 years on the African continent, to my college education in the United States of America. From the halls of Capitol Hill to the ideas of the corporate world, my experience has revealed to me that there is much good work to be done. Hence, what is important is that we remain in touch with two things. First, we ought to remember the tears that we ourselves have shed over the things that have caused us pain and suffering. But second and maybe more importantly, we must remain in touch with the tears of other men for how else are we ought to live this thing called life.

## Chapter 8:

### Lagos to Washington DC and Back.



*I.*

There's maybe no better time to reflect than when you are ten thousand feet in the air. Heading to New York City on my three year anniversary of being in the United States, my brain cannot help but think about home. No, not the home that my college in Holland, Michigan has become during my undergraduate education. Rather, home for me is Lagos, Nigeria.

Africa's largest city of 25 million people felt incredibly small when I lived there. My parents had gone to great lengths to ensure that my brother and I would not know the traffic horrors that are a daily affair for many Lagosians. On their middle class income, Ibe and Lola had chosen a more expensive neighborhood so that our family would be close to the different things we needed. Primary school was a quick five minute drive and the commute to secondary school maybe doubled that. My mother's weekly market trips needed just one bus ride and so did my father's shuttle to work. In all, we were *lucky* to have such accessibility, or at least that's what I believed until I lived in Washington, D.C.

The northeast region of the US is a beautiful place to be. As a born and bred Lagos boy, I love the constellations of cities that turn this part of the United States into a mega region. Boston, New York City and Washington, D.C. to name a few, are all located in the northeast, which is a region that boasts of close to 25% of the US total GDP. In that vein, it was the region of the United States that I wanted to spend time in because of its bubbling opportunities and deep history as the founding corner of the country. Hence, when the opportunity came to move to the nation's capital for a semester, I immediately hopped on it.

Living in Washington, D.C. allowed for many learning moments. But in the context of this essay, the US' capital allowed me to reflect on three ways in which my home, Lagos, could be better planned as a city.

## *II.*

My first suggestion for Lagos to become a better city, is for the individual residents of the city to resist the “accessibility as a privilege” mindset that I had adopted in my teenage years. Inhabitants of Africa's largest city should realize that we deserve more efficient ways to commute and reside.

It should not be a matter of luck when one doesn't spend countless hours in traffic. It should not be a matter of luck to find affordable housing. And it definitely shouldn't be a matter of luck when one isn't a victim of a crime. Lagosians in particular and Nigerians in general, therefore, need to offer less grace to the political leaders who have for decades, mishandled our resources. Such mismanagement has gone on for far too long.

## *III.*

Lagos will be on its journey to becoming a better city if the city planning authorities acknowledge the delicate balance it takes to cultivate a good city. Like a well manicured plant, city planners ought to carefully monitor and curate the natural branches that best serve Lagos residents.

Questions like, what are the intuitive ways in which the city is changing, need to be asked. How are real estate developers responding to the housing needs of local communities? How are entrepreneurs planting their businesses in order to attract more customers? How are private/public schools being instituted to respond to highly residential areas and the needs of the city's children? Without asking questions like these and using the answers obtained to inform city planning, government officials risk wasting community resources, misplacing amenities and building bridges to nowhere.

## *IV.*

Finally, Lagos very urgently needs to fix its transportation and electricity infrastructure. It is very unrealistic for any city that aspires to compete globally, to do so without these two infrastructure requirements. Unlocking the benefits of constant electricity will for example, allow more Nigerian students to study later into the night, thereby increasing the intellectual capital available to the city. It will also allow more Nigerian entrepreneurs to not be weighed down by the high cost of fuel. Building better transportation infrastructure will, on the other hand, save productive hours for over 20 million individuals. This will create the space for more high-yielding work days while also incentivizing foreign investments.

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In closing, Nigerians in general and Lagosians in particular, display so much hard work and have so much unharnessed potential. These qualities will, however, remain underdeveloped without proper institutions and infrastructure.

The value of grit that my city, Lagos, imbibes in its inhabitants, needs a system that allows said grit to flourish. Without such a system, my brothers and sisters from the city I love will continue to struggle unnecessarily. Yes, some individuals will be lucky enough to shine even though they are surrounded by this struggle. But if my time in Washington, D.C. taught me anything, it is that to rely on the power of mere luck for economic growth and progress when measured steps can be taken, is to neglect the duty of policymakers. It is unacceptable in Washington, D.C. and it must be unacceptable in Lagos, Nigeria.

**Chapter 9:**  
***What Will This Brokenness Reflect?***

***I.***

Of the few things I vividly recall from my teenage years, I remember a prayer that I would say every morning as my bus headed for school. Maybe something about being half awake as our school bus waded through the dense Lagos traffic would incline me to reflect but I like to imagine that this urge to pray comes from something much more sublime than angry drivers rushing to get to work as soon as possible. Either way, my prayer was a simple one.

Over the course of about a minute, I'd try to be thankful, but then proceed towards asking. This, however, wouldn't be the typical ask that you might expect your slightly overwhelmed high schooler to make. It wouldn't be about grades, lunch breaks or even about relationships. Rather, I'd ask for the grace to make good decisions and for the guidance to do the right thing.

In my younger self's opinion, it was simple prayer; short enough that it could be said on the quick bus ride and good natured enough that it could be answered. Nevertheless, this prayer and the idea of making good decisions upon which it rests, invites our careful reflection and it is this pondering that this essay is devoted to.

***II.***

Good decisions are hard to make, if at all they are ever made. Personally though, my awareness of the previous sentence has always been difficult to live into. In other words, good decisions have been necessary to my idea of self for as long as I can remember. They have been necessary to uphold the idea of a boy who has always pressed the right buttons and made the right choices. And almost hilariously, they have been necessary for a boy whose name already sets a bar that's exceedingly hard to reach.

Now, I do know that my name is not to blame for the sense of anxiety that I feel when the idea of falling short overwhelms me. I am sure of this because through conversations with friends, family, and strangers, it has become obvious that we all feel this way from time to time. I know that I am not alone in the struggle to be perfect, and I know that I will not be alone when I fail in that regard either. And yet, it still appears that way.

It seems that society has placed before us an unattainable yet alluring idea of perfection and that though many of us acknowledge that this idea is simply not needed, it is still so painful to resist the pull to perfectionism. Our hearts and minds have had decades of precisionist ideals so aggressively etched into them that to embrace a different narrative is painful.

I sometimes like to imagine how this etching of our minds would look visually. On some occasions, I think of our frolic with perfectionism as two individuals who are engaged in an intricate dance of projecting and reflecting ideals that both parties recognize as faulty. Other times, I imagine these two individuals as partially broken mirrors sitting directly across from each other. Each mirror looks at the other and is completely okay with the imperfection that the other mirror has. Yet, if one mirror was to see *its own* broken pieces reflected through the brokenness of the second mirror, the image it sees is one it can't stand. It's rather confusing, isn't it?

### ***III.***

Now, let us shift our attention back to my bus ride to school. We begin again with high school Marvellous and his prayer but this time, let us draw our attention to what happens after the prayer is over. I get up, take a deep breath and dash into each new day of learning. Personally, the last two steps of this sequence – *the deep breath and the dash into school*-have come to represent significantly more than they represented when my most pressing life crisis was taking standardized tests. First, we have the deep breath which has morphed into a double-sided process. If my inhale represents an honest acknowledgement of the constant desire to make all the right decisions, then my exhale represents even the tiniest of daily pushes away from this unhealthy mindset. In other words, the deep breath has come to serve as the foundation upon which my self-improvement is hopefully built on. It starts out how a lot of positive changes typically do; First, with a frank acceptance of where one is and then, it transforms into the small daily steps that slowly break down perfectionist ideals.

The second part of this sequence- *the dash into each new day*- I believe, speaks for itself. For, when our process of healing our heart's wrongfully etched messages starts, it should not hinder us from embracing the present and future. Rather, healing should allow us to take small breaths but never in a way that distances us from our task of living in the current moment. If anything, healing should let us live more freely in each moment, because we now have the space to charge into the day after diligently asking ourselves, “what will this brokenness reflect?”.

**Chapter 10:**  
***Becoming Black***

As Ahmaud Arbery faced off his attackers in February 2020, I was seated in an Expository English class at my predominantly White institution. The dynamics of race and its implications in America, that would violently end the life of the 25-year-old jogger, were also confronting me and several other people of color in the United States.

But my experience would not make it to television or social media, and fortunately so. No, these experiences were to be held in my mind and to be stored away in the folder of stories you tell your kids as you teach them about the world. Sometimes though, some tales of how race manifests in daily life, would be shared with a few friends of color and even smaller white allies. And if we were really lucky, while trading stories we would share a laugh about how absurd all of it was. Chorus together in giggles that attempted to hide the pain that tugged at our hearts as we spoke about our lives.

Personally, this act of sharing stories and speaking about race has become easier as I have watched my time in the United States elongate from one week to four years. Each passing day provides new experiences, new context and maybe most importantly, new language.

I know that while I am not African-American, I am a Black man. I have learned that the skin which was referred to as “fair”(light) in Nigeria, is across the Atlantic, considered dark. I have picked up on the ways that my height, in combination with my Black body, is often perceived as threatening. I understand that my recently acquired midwestern American accent encourages individuals to think me smarter than if I wore the accent of my youth and that my 4C hair gives rise to piercing stares. Most frustratingly though, I have heard and sensed from mostly White counterparts, the sentiment that because I am an African in America and not an African-American, I am somehow “better”. That I am an individual who has not fallen prey to “Black or African American culture”.

One of the things that this unconstructive and terribly ludicrous idea misses is that a discriminative reaction to Blackness is indifferent to how long ago an individual took on the Black identity. The bias against a Black body is unconcerned about whether said body arrived in the United States several generations ago or just finished going through Customs and Border Patrol. This is because most of the perception of racial identity that exists does not take up enough time for the development of nuance. The store owners who have been extra curious about my hands while I was in their stores don't care that I'm Nigerian. When police officers are looking for a suspect that fits a description, what part does being an African in America play?

A different but connected part of the conversation, is that even if such a distinction mattered, why are we okay with that? In what world should we allow such a trivial variance to continue to cause pain that has lasted for generations? Whether recently immigrated or American born, being a Black person in particular and being a minority in general, shouldn't have as many negative consequences as it has today. Asian women, Native American teenagers, Latinx men, Black individuals and anyone in between these racial minority identities, should not have to carry the deadweight of bias and prejudice. Such a burden is hurtful to everyone in American society; even White individuals.

The question then is, how do we move forward? With all the complexities of race, how do we create a more just society? And for this, I would like to end with a short story. A story that alludes to an incomplete answer that I have spent the most time with. As a six year old child growing up in "racially" homogenous Nigeria, I vaguely remember the election of Barack Obama. Compared to the stories that I have now heard from my American friends and classmates, I recall being more amazed by the fact that he was president and not that he was a Black president. As a child raised in the Nigerian culture of achievement and who was oblivious to the racial implications of Obama's election, I reflect back now with a bag of mixed feelings. To the dismay of my six year old self, I am now more like Barack Obama but not because I have presidential power. Rather, like the son of a Kenyan father and American mother, I am a Black man in the United States with my own experiences and stories of how race has bumped against me in my daily life. But unlike the president, I can thankfully *reflect more intimately* about these issues through my *writings and in the stories* friends and I trade about this country we love.

*Chapter 11:*  
*Acknowledgements*

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