

“DIARY OF AN AMERICAN WOMAN”
FIRST OF A THREE-PART STORY CALLED
THIS AFRICA IN MY DREAM

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ABSTRACT

The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) was adopted in Nigeria after unsustainable foreign indebtedness caused grave economic crisis, which spun off political and social turmoil. Its adoption in 1986 by the Babangida military regime, was pushed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), as the only viable solution to Nigeria's problems. Rather than provide relief, the adoption of SAP imposed extreme neoliberal austerity policies that pushed many middle class families into poverty, causing some to migrate both within the country and abroad. “Diary of an American Woman” is the story of three characters, Ola, Love, and Fakar. The story presents an account of three migrations: internal migration within Nigeria, external migration to America, and patrilocal movement from parental to marital abodes. Ola keeps a journal about her immigrant experience in America, which unfortunately is lost with her luggage in Nigeria. Fakar discovers the journal in his workplace and begins to read it. Ola's immigrant experience in America as recalled in her diary reveals the underbelly of life of a Nigerian in America to the hotel janitor.

Immigration is the movement of a person or people across territorial boundaries, including internal migration from one part of a country to another, and external movement across national boundaries. In reality, multiple migrations occur and sometimes interlock to shape the lives of individual migrants, as will be shown in this story. The emigrations in “Diary of an American Woman” are initiated by another form of migration that is unseen but extremely powerful; the movement of international money and financial power created the push factor for the internal and external migrations of the main characters (Gopalkrishna and Oloruntoba 2002).

The customary change in a woman’s abode from her parents to her husband’s or in-law’s home after marriage is included as a kind of migration, because it has all the elements of migration from change of locale through adaptation cum assimilation problems and nostalgia for the original home, to the struggle to succeed in the new setting. Such is the example of a young woman called Love who happily moved from her original home in Uzuakoli with familiar villages, forests and savannah to reside with her husband, Fakar Imade, in his one-room cabin in the city of Umuahia in Abia State of Nigeria. Their marriage is a case of double migration because her husband, Fakar Imade, is an economic migrant from Benin-City located in a State where Edo language and culture are standard. The sole reason for his relocation to the Igbo city of Umuahia, whose culture he criticizes, is economic. This couple’s life is impacted by the husband’s discovery of a diary that narrates another emigration experience by a Nigerian student, revealing the realities of immigrant life in the American haven of Nigerian folk imagination.

The catalyst for both internal and external migration by the characters was the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) (Ogbonna 2002). Under the imprimatur of the World Bank and the Babangida military regime, the SAP enforced neoliberal austerity policies that included not only

the devaluation of currency, withdrawal or decrease of government spending on public services such as health, education and transport, as well as reduction of State employment (Anyawu 1992; Okome 1998), it also increased economic deprivation that influenced the lives of all Nigerians, and led many to migrate to different parts of the country and abroad, in search of ways to improve their life chances (Adejumobi 2005; Shiva 2000).

The principal characters - Fakar, Love and Ola - are directly and indirectly affected by the economic depression initiated by the program. Ola's father loses his job and succumbs to a heart attack. Ola decides to immigrate to America for more education, which would give her leverage in the Nigerian job market. Fakar's father loses his job causing Fakar to leave school and eventually find a job as a migrant worker on the lowest economic ladder. Without employment, many parents can no longer afford to support their children in school. Idle and without purpose, many young people revert to deviant behavior and this is a major cause of friction for Love and Fakar because their son, Fakar Junior, dropped out of school and joined a gang. In her own case, Love's internal migration from her parents to her husband's location proved problematic for her marriage because she finds it difficult to adapt to her marital abode.

Love's problem of migration is mitigated by her proximity to her original home, which serves as an emotional escape in times of stress, intensified by her husband's recourse to domestic violence. Fakar's discovery of the diary of an American immigrant opens his eyes to another migrant experience that will eventually impact his family. In the following story, the narrator uses a limited omniscient viewpoint and stream of consciousness technique to explore the migrant situation of the main character, Fakar, who reads from the personal journal of Ola Udodi, the Nigerian American student.

It is quiet at Big-Time Motel in the upscale World Bank area of Umuahia, the capital of Abia State, Nigeria. The only noise is that of vehicles in the nearby Express-way where hawkers plied their trade. Birds could be heard chirping in adjoining bushes at the edges of the compound. The steward, Fakar Imade, is happy that he has succeeded in convincing his wife, Love, to keep the peace. This was a promise he made to the manager so he could keep his job. He has just hung the kitchen towels outside to dry when he notices that the door of the little store is not properly closed. He goes to close it and discovers a big leather suitcase with a label, “American Tourister,” with a journal sticking out of the top pocket. Instantly, he panics, knowing the suitcase belongs to an American tourist and has been stolen by his son, Junior and his gang. If the police get to know, he may lose his job. He wants to push the journal into the pocket of the luggage and hide the luggage while he thinks of the best way to report the situation in a way that will not implicate his family. The wrinkles on his chin deepen in anger as he recalls the numerous times he had warned Fakar Junior that his gang would land him in big trouble one day.

Venting his anger on his new setting and its people’s love of money, Fakar forgets that it was his pursuit of money that brought him to the place. “The problem is this Igbo society that we live in. They are aggressive and they like money. My son is a victim of this society. He adores money and has no respect for me as his father. When I try to discipline him, his mother gets in the way. In the Edo land of my forefathers, we do what our fathers tell us to do.” He is so angry that instead of pushing the journal inside the bag, he seizes it. Curiosity overtakes him and he opens the journal to get some information about the owner. “Ola Udodi” is boldly written on the front cover. Still angry, Fakar flips through the journal without seeing anything as he rants about his son.

“At his age of fourteen, my son thinks that he knows more than I do. But he only knows the wrong things that are leading him astray. He knows the names of all the big cars, yet I don’t have any moving machine except these ‘foot-run’¹ that God gave me.” He stamps his sturdy feet on the floor to indicate their strength.

“I’ll deal with him whenever I see him, no matter where his colluding mother is hiding him!” He has barely closed the door when there is a knock on the back of his head. Kpom! It is loud and his head hurts.

“Where is my son?” Love says, hitting him again with a frying pan. Kpom!

Fakar holds his wife’s hand with the frying pan still in her grip.

“Open that store! Did you lock Junior in there?” She is very loud. Fakar drags her towards their residence still holding Ola’s journal with one hand.

“Leave me!” She screams; exactly what Fakar does not want. He remembers his promise to the manager the day his wife stormed into the motel’s kitchen to complain that he did not leave enough shopping-money for her.

That day, she stomped into the main kitchen of the motel and shouted at Fakar. “Look at me! She yelled. “I can no longer buy new clothes since I married you. I’m not asking you for money to spend on myself to look fine like other women. I just want to buy books for our daughter since you won’t let me get a job and have my own money.”

“Go back to the house. I’m coming,” he whispered.

“I’m not leaving here without the money.’ She stomped her feet impatiently. The manager came to find out why there was a lot of noise from the kitchen. Fakar knelt down to beg the manager, who promised not to dismiss him. Since that day, he always tried to settle

problems with his wife inside their residence. He even threatened her with the prospect of moving to his parents' house in Benin-City if he lost his job. She promised to keep the peace.

Fakar has now succeeded in dragging her into their residence. He locks the door. He is still holding the journal. He storms out, but Love is not quiet. Her voice could be heard from any part of the big compound. Fakar hurries back to the store and throws a piece of tarpaulin on the suitcase to hide it. Love stops wailing. There is sound of things breaking.

“That woman! I’ll kill her.” Fakar runs back to the house to prevent his wife from destroying things. He unlocks the door but Love is no longer there. She has jumped out through the window. He looks at the black and white television that the manager gave him when they renovated the guest house. It is completely smashed; just pieces. The white “agbada”² that he wears for every big occasion is on the floor; cut into pieces. He notices that the scissors is not there, but it does not occur to him that Love is keeping it as a weapon.

He is devastated. People are losing their jobs all over the country and this has affected the motel. The Manager has reduced the number of employees because the motel lost the patronage of customers who lost their jobs and other sources of income. He feels threatened and no longer assumes that because he works hard, his job is secure. Recently, he expanded his duties to include cleaning the compound and doing the gardening every weekend with his wife and children because the manager had dismissed the gardener and did not hire another one. His expanded duties on his old salary should make him feel secure, but he still feels vulnerable. He needs his family to cooperate with him in doing his job. A son who would steal things from guests or a wife who would shout and disturb the peace could jeopardize his job. He feels that he must control his family. So far, it has not worked with his son. And now, his wife is creating further complications and increasing his anxiety.

Fakar Junior hated his father's job and poverty. He wanted to be rich and drive big cars like some of the customers at the motel. His attitude created conflict with his father and he ran away from home although he comes to see his mother when his father is at work. Fakar blames everything on his wife,

"My wife does not cooperate with me. She spoils the boy. She is also spoilt. She always runs away to her parents' house when we have problems. I blame myself for living in the same state with her parents." He knows that he is not being truthful to himself so he sighs and admits his weakness. "Those eyes of hers; once I see them, my body squashes like ripe pawpaw. I can only deal with her when I'm not looking at her." He kicks the garment on the floor, scattering its shredded pieces all over the room. He looks at the broken window. The absence of the pair of scissors becomes significant as he connects the damage in the room with the anger that caused the destruction. It now crosses his mind that Love might have taken the pair of scissors as a weapon. "No, she's not like that. She won't use something that dangerous to fight me, her loving husband."

Love is on her way to Uzuakoli with the scissors in her hand. She knows the streets, markets and people of the town where she was raised and where her parents still live. The people also know her. They expected a lot from her because she showed unusual intelligence in school, but Love got married before she finished high school. Her circumstances are different from those of the owner of the suitcase, the "American Tourister," in the store of the motel. The owner, Ola Udodi, is a Nigerian student in America, who returned to Nigeria and was travelling to her destination when her bus was robbed on the Expressway.

At thirty, Ola is the same age as Love. Graduating from Abia State University at the age of twenty, she wanted a good job before getting married to her boyfriend, Paul Ibe. This could

not happen because SAP changed everything; shrank the civil service, massively retrenched workers without creating more jobs and therefore escalated unemployment.

Ola's father lost his job as principal because his school was merged with another one as part of the SAP's goal to cut the education budget. Many teachers were laid off, leaving a few to manage larger classes. The situation was depressing for dedicated teachers like Mr. Udiodi. In his fifties, Ola's father was too old for a new job and there were many people looking for jobs. It was whispered that he gave in to despair because of the change in his lifestyle caused by his jobless situation, but the truth was that since the government no longer provided free health service for all, and he could not afford to see a doctor when he started having heart problems. He died of a heart attack. Ola was devastated, but she had to be strong and focused on her final examination. She did not want to be frustrated like millions of unemployed college graduates. This was why she decided to do graduate work in America. A degree from America would be helpful in securing a job in one of the oil companies. With support from her sister who was married to an oil company worker, and her mother who sold her father's old car, she travelled to America where she faced immigration problems.

Unlike Ola whose migration was motivated by the need for economic independence, Love thinks of her problem in terms of emigrating from her buoyant village to live in marital poverty. She does not recognize that she has become part of the bigger picture initiated by the migration of foreign investment money to Nigeria. The big feature of her new home in the motel compound is that it is the hideout of rich people who have profited from foreign money invested in new economic sectors, especially the servicing of oil exploitation. The small percentage of local contractors and servicers of the new economic sectors are happy that they are not part of the majority of the middle class that have become impoverished. Some of these lucky few like to

show off their wealth by wearing flamboyant traditional attire, driving expensive cars, and patronizing exclusive clubs. Big-Time Motel is one of their favorite hubs. Some of them live in far-off cities like Port Harcourt and Enugu, yet they drive the distance to Umuahia in order to keep clandestine appointments because of the privacy and seclusion offered by the motel.

Love wanted a job in the motel but Fakar who knew a lot about the goings-on in the motel prevented her from realizing that ambition. This has been a constant source of tension in their marriage and Love has become bitter about having a husband who cannot provide all her needs and yet will not allow her to work. Sometimes she hawks fruits at her daughter's school but the profit is not enough for her needs. Love thinks about these things and her resentment for Fakar increases. "Next time he touches me, I'll do to him what I did to his favorite attire! Stupid man!" She secures the scissors in the folds of her wrapper.³ She spends some time at the bus station looking at vehicles and thinking about her life.

A bright yellow and red bus attracts her attention. She reads the inscription on the bus; "Udo-ka-mma".

"Peace is not better!" She contradicts the message of the inscription.

"Peace is good when the two people work for it, but if my husband beats me and I don't fight back, how can there be peace? If I don't fight back, Fakar will beat me to death. I have to defend myself!" She thinks and moves to the area where there are lots of cars. She does not notice the vendors or the touts, neither does she pay attention to other people wanting to select a vehicle like she is doing. Her mind is on her present quarrel with Fakar. Suddenly, she smiles because she has seen the bus inside which something special happened to her several years ago; the bus where she met an elderly woman who changed her life by giving her some marriage-survival tips.

The bus is called “No condition is permanent.” It now looks really old and weathered. Love hops on the bus with a smile on her face as she recalls her meeting with the elderly woman. It was the first time that Fakar hit her. She knew that some men beat their wives, but she never imagined that it would ever happen to her. When it did happen, her reaction was to run. She did not even know to where she was running. She spent a long time crying in the bush. She regretted leaving school and the comfort of her parental home in order to marry Fakar. Finally deciding that “he is not worth it” she went back to the house, collected some of her things and left for Ozuakoli to be with her parents. She entered this same bus now, but it was new then and very comfortable. In the bus she sat near a woman who just reminded her of her mother by her age and the way she smiled.

“Good afternoon.” People greeted her back but she noticed a gorgeously dressed woman in the seat behind the driver.

“Good afternoon, my daughter,” The woman shifted on her seat, inviting Love to sit next to her. She was traveling to the village to see her people just like Love. Love narrated how she sacrificed her studies and good life for a marriage that had become intolerable because of her husband’s poverty and aggression.

“You can still go back to school.”

“I have two children.”

“That shouldn’t prevent you from living your own life. All my six children graduated from college before I went to school and now I have my own sub-contracting business.”

“What business?” Love smiled for the first time, showing her interest.

“I am in the garment business. I learnt how to make clothes and dye wrappers from my mother who sewed clothes for women in my village. I used to sew clothes for my children; couldn’t afford ready-made ones.”

“Madam, how did you begin a business?” Love says thinking about her infrequent effort at buying oranges from village markets and selling them to students when she goes to pick up her daughter from school.

The woman smiled because Love was showing interest in learning. “College opened my eyes. We learnt about the Structural Adjustment Program. We had to learn to create our own jobs. College gave me connections with school mates. I teamed up with two of them.”

“They sew the clothes with you?”

“I sew and supervise other tailors while one partner manages the business and another does the marketing. Traditional outfit is in high demand and our garments have the stamp of the traditional tie-dye. I learnt from my mother. Think about going back to school sometime. It will help you to nurture your talent.”

Love did not respond to the woman because she believed the idea of going back to school was far-fetched.

“How long have you been married?” The woman said.

“Seven years.”

“Do you still want to be married to him?” This question by the woman took Love unawares. She hesitated, looked around the bus to see whether she recognized anybody who might talk about her private life. Although she did not see any familiar face, she whispered her reply.

“I want to leave him, but I am ashamed of going back home as a divorcee.”

“So you want to keep an abusive marriage?”

Again Love hesitated before speaking. “If he will not hit me again, I will stay and take care of my children.”

The woman smiled at what she considered Love’s naiveté. In college, she learnt that nobody willingly gives up power unless you force that person to do so. She wanted to explain to this woman that she needed to improve on herself, make her own money, and not rely on her husband for every expense.

“My dear, it is your own marital problem. Your parents have their own life. Go and deal with yours. You are no longer a child.”

“What will I do? My husband is more than six feet tall and heavy. Look at me. I am a little woman at barely five feet with little weight except for my breasts. He picks me up with one hand. I used to like it when he did it with love. Sometimes he would carry me on his back. But now, he complains about the way I spend money. I have not changed. I spend now just the way that I used to spend when we first met. He himself has not changed much. No.... yes, he has.”

“You are confused. One thing that I’ll tell you is this: Don’t let his weight intimidate you. Use what you have; frying pan, shoes, or whatever possible. Never use your hand directly. You will hurt those dainty little hands of yours. And don’t hit a vital part of him.” The elderly woman said.

Love looked at her long fingers. She remembered how Fakar liked to kiss her hands. She continued to look at her hands as she spoke.

“My hands are now rough from cooking and washing clothes,” she said.

“They are still your loving hands, so protect them and use a pan or something to fight him.”

“But if he takes the pan from me?”

“Use your teeth. If he hurts you, hurt him back in any way that you can. Deprive him. He is a bully. Stand up to him and he will leave you alone.” The woman nodded.

“Hurt him back in any way I can.” Love also nodded.

Sitting on the same seat in the same bus, seven years after getting this wisdom from the business woman, Love thinks that fighting her husband with weapons has not solved the problem but it has helped a little. At least, her husband knows that she is a force to be reckoned with. Yet, he still beats her. She is confused about why he continues to use a method that does not help him. He has not cowed her with his aggressiveness. She also has not solved the problem by hitting him back. She has only become more aggressive. And more unhappy.

Alone in their room, Fakar bends down to pick the pieces of the television. He changes his mind. He wants a witness. He thinks about the only member of his family that does not give him problems. His daughter, Efosa, gives him peace. He decides to go and get her from school. He walks the five miles from Olokoru to Abia Government Day School in the city of Umuahia with the journal still in his hand.

It is almost eleven in the morning but the sun is already hot and burning. Fakar is a large man weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds. He sweats profusely but makes no attempt to wipe off the sweat soaking the singlet⁴ that he wears underneath his shirt and his shirt. By the time he gets to the school in two hours he is completely drenched. The large compound of the school appears desolate but he can hear the sound of pupils inside. He goes to the far right of the school shaded by lots of fruit trees. He sits on the exposed root of a mango tree. He uses his shirt to wipe his face. The breeze blowing from the orchard cools his body. He has no interest in

reading, but to keep himself busy, he opens the journal. He admires the beautiful hand written style that slants to the right. He begins to read:

Friday: June 15, 2007

I can't believe that I have lived in America for eight years without setting my feet in my country, Nigeria, or seeing my mother and all my loved ones. It will happen tomorrow. That is why I can't sleep and that is why I am writing. My room mate, Joan, said that she had to leave our room because the presents were on her bed, but I don't think that it's her real reason.

"I have to go back to David's place for the night. Your things are everywhere," she said.

I removed the presents from her bed. I hurried. But she still left.

"Take your time. I'll be back in the morning to take you to the airport," Joan said.

"I'm not sure that it will happen. Sleeping with a man can be distracting. I know. I used to do that with P."

Fakar cannot see the name of the person that Ola used to sleep with because it is scratched off as if the writer does not want the name to be in her journal. Fakar flips through the pages backwards to see whether he can find out the name that was scratched off.

Thursday. June 14, 2007

It was very nice of Joan to have helped me out with wrapping the presents that I will take home to my loved ones. Joan Lasey is a good friend. I have roomed with her for three years. I

have shared things that I locked in my heart with her. But today, I almost regretted telling her about Paul because she brought him up at a time that I was very happy.

I was playing one of my favorite pop music, "I will survive," by Gloria Gaynor. It was the hottest music when I arrived here in June 1998. I wasn't so much into the lyrics then because all was well with me and Paul. When things changed with Paul, I fell in love with the lyrics of Gaynor's music. It encouraged my spirit of survival.

Today I was singing, "I've survived" instead of "I'll survive." I was really dancing and having a great time as Joan and I wrapped the presents. She was sitting on the bed near the table and I was kind of gyrating around the place, shaking my behind and really getting so cool. She said something that made me think that she wanted to spoil my fun or maybe she was still angry about the fight with David. Her business with David is not my concern; it's her cup of sweet problem. What I don't like is when someone digs up a secret that I shared with her. That was what Joan did. That I shared it didn't mean that she should talk about it even to me.

The first thing she said was, "I've always wondered why you have not picked any of the guys you date as a boyfriend."

"Keep wondering about it," I said and continued to dance.

"I don't know why lots of guys like you anyways. You have big butt and you're short and-."

I looked at her, real hard. Joan dared to say that to me. Political correctness was not one of her virtues. Incidentally, that was one of the things I liked about her when I first met her and she bluntly said that her parents were racist but she liked people of all races. Her bluntness has become ridiculous, since she can now judge me with her standard of beauty. I wanted to fix her and say: "Even though you are almost six feet tall, you look like a scallywag because there is no life in your anorexic face. That's why David cheats on you." But I did not say it. Not today.

Joan has been a good friend. I just said, "So you don't know that that's part of my natural beauty. Read the right magazines and not the ones that tell you how to change your body." Diary, do you know what? She said nothing. This is very much unlike her.

The first time I met her she didn't frown at me or tell me that I had an accent. She didn't ask me where I was from or say that I did not belong. She accepted me as a fellow human being. That was three years ago and we have continued to room together. It's just that she is too much into pop culture. She likes to do everything that the fashion magazines say about attracting men. She buys designer clothes, starves herself, takes diet pills, and freely dispenses sex, yet that stupid David barely tolerates her. She spends her money on him and calls it liberation. I go out with guys on my own terms. And my terms don't include lavishing money on them!

Mmh! Diary. You know how I have been saving money for my school fees. I work hard too, you know. Three jobs! No joke.

Fakar's back hurts. He gets up from sitting on the root of the tree. He sits close to the trunk and rests his back on the trunk. He is still keen on knowing more about Paul, so he scans through the pages till he sees Paul's name.

It's not fair of Joan to have referred to Paul just because I shared my secret with her. I told her more about Paul than I wrote in this diary. She knows that I am sensitive to his name, so why bring it up? Why bring up a memory that I buried several years ago?

"There's no present for Paul," Joan said to me.

"I don't care." I continued to sing but I was hurt.

"Whatever."

Joan's cup was full. I waited for her to open her mouth one more time about Paul before I gave it to her. After all, I knew where it would hurt her too. That stupid David! Like she knew, she decided to leave for his place. I think that I would have quarreled with her. She didn't have to spoil my fun.

Now that Joan has raised the issue of Paul, I can't keep my mind off it. This means that there is still some resentment that ought to be expelled. It is tied to my beginnings in this country. I came to this country in June 1998, full of enthusiasm. Paul was anxious about my leaving him for someone new when I get to America. I had to promise him that I would be faithful to him. I assured him that I would return to Nigeria as soon as I finished my course. I did not know that America would not accept my credits from Nigeria. Look at me. Back home in Nigeria, my school mates called me Alfa; that was because I was very good. The professors gave me excellent recommendations. All were rejected in America. It was like I had never been to school before. No diploma, no friends; just nothing.

Diary, do you remember the very first entry I made when I landed in America? Inside the airplane at Dulles Airport, other passengers were leaving but I stayed back to write down my feeling of happiness. I remember that entry that I made on the 10th of June, 1998. I still remember it like I wrote it only yesterday and I quote it here:

"Hurray! The plane has touched down. People are clapping. Hurray for America! I am very happy. But I'm also sad. I miss Paul. I miss my mother. God bless my mother for giving me the Toyota Crown that my late father left for her. We sold it to make up the money for my upkeep here in America. Right here inside this plane, I vow to make good with the proceeds from my late father's car. I promise not to disappoint my late father who was my greatest teacher. I promise to go back to Nigeria and show my mother that I have made her proud. God

bless my sister, Oyibo, and her husband for buying my plane ticket. They all supported my plan to come to America for further studies. Only Paul. He said that he did not want to lose me. I will get into college, get one more degree and go back to Nigeria with American experience that is important for getting a good job in Nigeria. This is my promise to you, Paul, even though you are not physically here with me. God, please help me!"

But I could not get into any university. I could not begin to pursue my American dream of getting an education. I panicked. My money was running out. I wrote to Paul. He said that I should return immediately because I didn't have family and friends to help me out. He also said that I was too young to be on my own in a strange land. That sucked. I was twenty two years old at the time, for God's sake! And Paul is only two years older than me.

I wrote my experiences down every day and shared them with Paul. He also wrote constantly. His letters helped to keep me alive because I was dealing with a lot. On the social level, I was a mess. I could not accept the burden of being black in America. I had learnt in an American literature class that I took at my university in Nigeria that race was tied to benefits and disadvantages in America but I guess I didn't really know the extent of its impact on everyday life. I didn't understand why people referred to me as "that black woman." There was this incident at the University of Maryland where I had gone to submit my application at the Graduate School. I sat in the lounge waiting to see the Students' Advisor. Another woman also came in and sat down. The secretary spoke to the Advisor on the phone.

"There is a woman waiting to see you," she said. I thought that I was the one and so I got up. She added, "And there's also a black woman."

"Why did you call me a black woman?"

"Because you're black."

“Why didn’t you call her....?” Before I could finish the sentence, the secretary looked me in the face and said, “Because she’s not black.”

I was actually confused. I even apologized to her.

“I didn’t mean any harm. Just new in the country and want to know why I’m always referred to by color and other people are not.”

She turned to her computer.

*Dear diary, why am I defined by color and other people are normal? This is shocking. All of a sudden, I am labelled as a black woman. My country and ethnicity are no longer important. And I am not even black in color. Nobody is. When I was new here, I sometimes felt like screaming at people to look at me properly and see that my skin color was not the color of my black boots. I wanted to tell them that nobody was white like the color of my paper. I thought that people were only color blind and put labels on people **just** to put them down or raise them up. The color they put on you was supposed to define you. Society has already decided the behavior of the racial colors. People already knew what black meant in the society. They believed that black was not intelligent and not pretty at all. How could I, an Igbo woman, accept that?*

I came from a great country, Nigeria, but many people I met did not even know my country. They knew Africa but in their view, it was just a place; a village with a lot of disasters and where people go half-naked. I was in shock. I fought. I cried. I lost. I cried some more. If my pillow could tell stories, its stories would reveal the things that I said as I wept myself to sleep many nights.

I thought about taking Paul’s advice to go back to my country, but I did not want to go back and join the millions of unemployed graduates. My father lost his life because he lost his

job and could not afford to see a doctor. He deserved better. I'd make it up to him by succeeding. He'd be proud of me wherever he is. I knew that my mother would not want me to go through the kind of suffering that I was experiencing in America. Like Paul, she would want her baby to just come home. But I did not want to go home. I did not want to feel like I had failed in America. I would rather continue in America and accomplish what I came here for. While nursing my wounded ego, the University of Maryland Students' Advisor opened the door and motioned me to enter. When I entered his office, he stood up, looked me in the face, gave me a firm hand shake and introduced himself as Jo Timble. He treated me like a human being. Even though he gave me bad news, he also gave me very good advice.

"My grandparents were immigrants from Ireland so I have some idea about what new immigrants go through in terms of situating themselves. My position as Students' Advisor also keeps me in touch with the reality of new students and those from foreign countries."

As he spoke to me, I felt that he understood a little bit of what I was going through. Tears came to my eyes, but I held them back because my mother taught me to never cry in public. Tears should be saved for those who love me, and for my dear pillow. I looked at him like he was a brother to me.

"America does not easily accept credits from other countries," he said, still looking at me like a human being and not an alien with unmentionable diseases.

"Meaning that they do in some cases," I said hoping that mine would be one such case.

"If you like, you can send your diploma for verification. However, most universities would be reluctant to accept credits from Africa at this time."

"Why?" I shot my eyes at him for not saying Nigeria instead of Africa.

“For God’s sake, Africa is not a country!” I felt like screaming but I did not scream. I had learnt to stifle my irritations because if I reacted at every act of disrespect, they would put more labels on me.

He explained that every report on Africa indicated that education was going downhill. I felt mortified because this was true of Nigeria, especially the public schools. That was why Papa gave me private lessons that helped to give me a good grounding in my studies. If only a college here would give me a chance, I would prove myself.

“There is something that you must know,” he said.

“Some immigrants you see here doing all kinds of jobs in restaurants and convenience stores have degrees, some even have PhDs. They start over; and do those jobs with a purpose. When you see them working you know that they have a purpose. They don’t drink or smoke and get into trouble. They just focus on getting an American degree and they do it in good time because....”

“They already have degrees,” I said.

“You got it. And they are focused.”

God bless Jo Timble. I decided to start over. Another problem arose. I was not qualified to apply for student loan or scholarship because they were for citizens only. I needed a job. I had never had the need to hold a job as a student in Nigeria. Of course, I worked during the long vacations to get experience. My parents always paid school fees and gave me allowances that took care of other needs. In America, I not only had to provide for myself, I also had to pay school fees and rent. I had two options for a job. One was the type where I would do the conventional forty hours a week and get paid like I worked for twenty hours. The reason was because I had no work permit and the employer was at risk of running afoul of immigration laws

for giving me a job. The other kind was to register as a student and work in the college, but that was kind of harder for me because I did not have the money to register in any school. Foreign students' school fees were just exorbitant. I had no option but to choose to work full-time and earn half salary. I wanted to save money for college.

Once I began to hang out with immigrants, it was easy to get information on how to survive and succeed in America. My first job was in a gas station at Veirs Mill Road. It turned out that the other young woman who was waiting to see Jo Timble at the University of Maryland was not American. This I found out when both of us were waiting at the bus stop.

"You speak English very well," she said.

"You have an accent," I said and laughed at my audacity to tell another person what people usually told me.

"Do people tell that to you a lot?" She laughed like she knew why I laughed.

"Always," I said.

"Me too. And they tell it to me like I am stupid or something," she said.

"I learnt English in Armenia. Many people here can't even speak a word of Armenian but they look down on me for not knowing enough English," she said.

Dolores' family knew the owner of the convenience store at Veirs Mill Road. So I got the job. In Nigeria people would look down on me for getting a job through a connection rather than through a competitive interview. They have a derogatory name for it – Ima-mmadu – that just refers to 'knowing people' rather than depending on merit. Here in America, it is called networking and it is not offensive.

I registered for my first class in October 1998. It was a six weeks' Basic English course at the University of Maryland, a prerequisite for foreign students. The professor made us keep

journals. He even graded our daily entries, so I had to write in the journal every day. I no longer had enough time for writing letters. I worked at McDonalds in the morning. From there I would go to classes late in the afternoon. The night was for the convenience store at the Gas Station at Veirs Mill Road. I barely had time to keep up with the demands of journal writing, let alone the luxury of writing letters to Paul.

I was alone, lonely, and tired. I looked forward to hearing from Paul because that was a big connection to who I was. I was struggling to define a new me in America according to what America laid down before I came. I wanted to surmount the obstacles in my way as a foreigner, as a woman who had become black. I stopped fighting the label of being black. I accepted that I was black. I began to navigate the system through that route. I would fill forms and check the box that categorized me as black. Sometimes, the box would be for African Americans and I would still check it because that was what the system understood. I always felt funny because I was not an American yet the system classified me as one.

Fakar stops reading the journal. His own problems have receded in his mind as he read the journal. He thinks about what he has just read. He looks straight at the road from where he came. A woman is passing by. She wipes her face.

“So life can be tough like this in America.” He drops the journal. It makes a noise.

The woman looks at him suspiciously.

“Shoo!” He claps his hand as if beating off imaginary dirt. He cannot understand why Ola stayed back in America.

The woman turns to look at him closely; a man who claps his hands and talks to himself.

“Why not go back?” Fakar says still reacting to what he regards as Ola’s stubbornness. He is loud. The woman on the road thinks that his words are directed at her.

“How dare you tell me to go back? Does this school belong to you?” She says going towards him.

“Not you Madam,” he apologizes. The woman looks at his face. She notes that he’s sweating, even though he is sitting under the shade of a tree. His eyes are red and his clothes are wet like he just came from a dip in the river. His face looks calm except for the bloodshot eyes. The woman decides that he must be a crazy man to be “talking to himself like that.” She turns back. She hurries.

From the road, she can hear him continuing with “his madness of talking to himself.”

“I cannot understand why a small girl like that will go to a foreign land and suffer like a person who is not a human being. Just for the sake of getting another degree. Look at me, I have only ‘attempted secondary school’ but I am happy. I started work in the motel as a kitchen cleaner and became a steward. Even though I am in the servants’ class, nobody thinks that I am not a human being. They may look down on me for being poor, but nobody thinks that I am a black something. I am an Edo man. Imagine being called a black man with accent like it is a bad thing to have intonation! In this country, we have different peoples who speak in different ways. Yoruba people talk as if trains move inside their throats. Igbo people hack language like firewood. Hausa people fan language like breeze. As for my people in Edoland, we hit am like iron.”

“All be English. No one better pass the other,” he concludes in Nigerian Pidgin. He is clearly agitated by what he read. He gets up and stamps a foot on the journal. He stretches. School is not yet over. He picks up the journal, wipes dust from it, and continues to read.

My letters to Paul became infrequent. I was suffering; didn't even have time for myself. Thinking about it now, I believe that Paul might have interpreted it as loss of interest. But that was no reason to accuse me of being unfaithful. I still remember the hateful lines like I read them just yesterday: "I know that the glamour of God's Own Country has opened you to new possibilities for romance. You probably have another boyfriend by now, but I tell you something my dear: all that glitters is not gold. Agaracha must come back."

That word, "agaracha," stabbed me in the heart. This is not a name that you call someone you love. I stared at the word in the letter until tears from my eyes made them unreadable. Agaracha was a synonym for flirt and prostitute. I have never been unfaithful to him. I remember that day very well. It was on the 24th of December 1999. The snow was seven inches high and people were happy about white Christmas. The joy of Christmas was not mine. I had no family here so I was not planning to travel like other people. I did not have a visa that would enable me to go home to Nigeria. Even if I had, I would not have had the money for the trip. Anyway, I turned my loneliness into an opportunity to cover three jobs. I did not have the time to sit down and cry out my heart over Paul's letter, but the message of the letter shot pains in my heart from time to time. I tried to suppress the pain by hardening my resolve and creating more work for myself at the convenience store where I worked as a retail clerk. When I was not attending to a customer, I would concentrate on sorting out the shelved items just to occupy my mind.

It was on Christmas night that it finally got me. Waiting for bus 26 that would take me from Veirs Mill Road to Takoma Park, I had nothing to occupy me besides watching out for the bus and for any marauder that might show up. Snow flakes, the size of a quarter, cascaded down

sporadically. Anybody would have taken pleasure in their beauty and I guess that many would have done so from the comfort of their homes. I did not enjoy their beauty. They irritated me because they made a mess on the road and made it hard to walk on. They melted and seeped into my hair. I was very cold. The bus was late in coming. What would have been just ten minutes turned to thirty and forty? Within that time, I was almost frozen.

I stood there and thought about Paul's letter. Tears from my eyes washed off the snow that brushed my face. I shivered from cold, loneliness, and anger. Still the bus did not come. It was at that bus stop that I vowed never to acknowledge Paul with a thought or mention. But now, after all these years, just because Joan mentioned him, I'm breaking my vow. I'm happy that Joan brought him up. It's good to clear my mind of any bitterness before this journey home.

Fakar closes the book. "This girl is a big fool. She had a man who loved her and begged her not to leave him. She said a very big No just for the sake of a degree. What degree is better than hooking her man and marrying him? She would have been a wife and maybe a mother of children. Look at my wife, Love. Her father wanted her to finish school, but she refused because she did not want to lose me. No matter what happens, she is fulfilled as a woman. She has a husband who loves her and God has blessed us with children. What more does a woman want?" His voice sounds hollow and the wrinkles on his chin deepen.

Meanwhile, Love gets off the bus in her home town. She is delighted that the outdoor market is full of life. She decides to visit some of her favorite wrapper stalls not because she has money to buy anything, but just to enliven her mood before going to her parents' house. Many of the sellers are excited about a visitor from America who stopped at the market to take

photographs. Some youths gathered around him and he spent some time talking with them. The youths narrated what they heard from the visitor. Each narrator embellished the information and very soon the picture of America as a place of richness without poor people was created. Love hears the stories through the sellers, some wanting to go and live in America while others say they do not want to leave their families, but they want things to return to the way they were before the government's SAP and its austerity measures.

Fakar is still holding the journal but he is no longer reading it. He is just thinking about his circumstances and comparing aspects of his life with Ola's experience. Like her, he had the ambition of going to college and getting a degree. He remembers his days of living with other students in the residence hall at Warri High School. That was when they said that Nigeria was going to borrow money and introduce Structural Adjustment Program. There was a public debate. The government said that the program would make Nigeria a better place. Many people opposed the loan because it would reduce people to the kind of poverty that Nigerians had never seen. On the television in the common room of their school, they would listen to views of the government and the opposition.

Fakar did not understand the whole thing then. He did not know that it would affect him. He had the ambition to go to a university and study accountancy. His mother always praised him for being very good at counting her money and keeping record of her sales because she did not know how to write. This was why he became interested in accounting as a subject of study. He did not suspect that there would be any problem with his ambition. His father was a manager at Bendel Line, one of the biggest public transport services in the country. His family got free tickets from the service to travel once a year and everything was fine until Nigeria took the loan.

Fakar remembers how he used to wake up very early in the morning to stand at Urelu Junction with his father and other people who lost their jobs. "I used to stand there with my father; right there in the sun hoping that somebody would come by and hire us to do some work. We did any work." They did garden work, construction work, kitchen work; just anything for any money that it would bring. The money they made was not always enough for rent. But his mother was a market woman who sold palm oil. She would use her profit to buy food for the family's only meal at night. Fakar was not happy that he left school, and his father explained that nobody liked what was happening, but that they needed to survive and wait for life to become normal again. He enjoined his son to work hard always in whatever situation Osalobua, the Almighty, placed him. One of their regular clients, Mr. Okoro Madu, liked the way Fakar used to wash his clothes and iron them. He hired him as his servant and Fakar served him well. When Madu got married, he got Fakar the motel job in Umuahia. That was why Fakar moved from Benin to Umuahia as an employee of Big-Time Motel. He started as a cleaner and was later promoted to work in the kitchen.

He washes plates and eats there also. Sometimes, he brings left-over food to his family. Fakar believes he has not done badly by moving up from a domestic worker in a private house to a kitchen-boy in a corporate motel.

"But my son? I am afraid for that boy. Children of nowadays want everything to be easy. They see people in big cars. They want the cars by any means. I need my wife on my side for us to deal with him together," he frowns as his thoughts return to the stolen suitcase.

A group of children run out of the school with their bags and boxes. He goes to find his daughter, but he is informed that the senior class will be released in a short while. Again he goes back to the mango tree and resumes his reading.

Saturday, June 16, 2007

I am so anxious about this trip that I want to cry and shed the emotions that I have bottled up for such a long time. I have been so afraid that my mother would die like my father and I won't have the opportunity to show her what I have made of myself. It was because of my mother that I got my first cell phone. It is very expensive to phone Nigeria, but I still would phone her as often as I could, just to hear her voice and laughter. Now my dream is coming true. I am going home and I will see my mother again! I don't want anything to prevent this trip.

I have heard and read about the new travel rules on the internet. The airlines introduced many new rules to strengthen security since the 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center. I made a lot of notes from my research on the new rules so that I won't forget them. Things have changed so much since I travelled by air from Nigeria to America. Now you have to remove your shoes and be patted down. When I told Joan that September 11 had changed the world, she said something that I have not forgotten.

She said, "And the world helps it to destroy the world."

"That is the title of the project that my group is working on," she said. Joan and I major in Communication but we are in different groups. We began to discuss the project. She talked about how thousands of people die in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq because of the people killed at the World Trade Center.

"As we go after those that are connected with the bombing of the World Trade Center, we also hurt other people even though we did not intend to," she said.

"We also hurt our own people. Those who get killed and their families," I said.

“Those who lost their lives on nine-eleven can never come back even if we kill all the people in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are just creating casualties who turn round to lash out,” she said.

“The cycle of hurting and hurting back goes on,” I said.

God, please break the cycle.

I have just remembered something that I did not pack. I will need to freshen up in London during the nine hours waiting period before the transfer for the second leg of my journey. I think that I will pack my brown cotton suit in my backpack. I bought presents for everybody. My two brothers, Ben and Tom, and my sister, Oyibo. I also bought things for my uncles and aunts and other people. I missed so many Christmases so I want to give them presents to make up.

Another group of children rush out of the school. They are bigger than the former group. Fakar feels that Efosa must be in the group. He goes to find her.

“Papa!” Efosa hugs her father.

“How was school?” he says. She puts her small metal box down and brings out her exercise book. She holds it up to her father. He smiles.

“My daughter who makes me happy.” He touches the word “excellent” beside the ‘A’ written by her teacher.

“Why are you here, Papa? Is Mummy Okay?”

“Your mother is fine. I closed early from work. I decided to take a walk, so I came here.”

“You walked all the way from our house?”

Fakar nods.

“My strong Papa. You are my hero!” Efosa takes his hand and they walk across the big yard.

“Efosa!” Some people call out to her from a bus.

“Papa, are we walking home?”

“Of course not.”

“Those are my friends in that bus. Let’s go to their bus.” She swings her father’s hand.

From the bus stop near the motel, Efosa and her father walk towards their house. It is a two-room house that is known as ‘boys’ quarters.’ This was a British name for the abode of their African servants during the colonial era. Even though Nigeria is now ruled by indigenes and Nigerian men are no longer called “boys,” the residences of domestic workers are still called “boys’ quarters.” Love has planted flowers in the front yard of the house where they sit in the evening to tell folk tales to the children.

Fakah thinks about how to handle his domestic situation. He knows that his wife has run to her parents’ house as usual. “That’s what she does whenever she wreaks havoc. She comes back when she thinks that my temper has cooled down. This time, I will not cool down.”

The fragrance of the frangipani wafts to Efosa’s nose. She smiles. The sight of the guest house always makes her happy. She can see the yellow and pink flowers of the frangipani above the hibiscus hedge. Her greatest joy is the flame tree.

“Papa, it really lights up like flames!”

“What?”

“The tree.” Efosa points at the flame tree that hovers like a huge red umbrella above their house.

“That’s why they call it flame-of-the-forest. It gives color to the forest.” His voice is gentle. It does not indicate the rage that he is fighting.

“I will beat that woman until she dies death! Idiot!” He clenches his jaw to prevent his mouth from speaking his thoughts.

“Papa. Where is my mother?” Efosa cries when she sees the mess in the house.

“She did all this to our house! Look at the television. She knows that you learn from the educational programs.”

“What did you do to my Mummy?”

He is angry at her reaction to what her mother did.

“I did not do anything to her. Look at what she did. Look at the window; smashed up!” He raises his voice.

She throws down her school box and makes to run out. Fakar holds her hand.

“I won’t let you run away too!”

“My mother ran away? Where is she?”

“Let’s go and get her.”

Love is still in the market when her mother comes to find her. Mama Love has heard from some of the youths that she was in the market. She knows her daughter’s favorite stall. She is about to cross the road beside the market when a taxi stops. Her grand-daughter is the first to see her.

“Mama-Nnukwu!” Efosa runs to her grandmother.

“Good evening Ma,” Fakar says.

“Is something wrong?” Mama Love says.

“Nothing is wrong Ma.”

“We are looking for my mother. She ran away,” said Efosa.

Mama looks sternly at her son-in-law before turning to Efosa. “I know where to find her,” she says. As she expects, Love is in a wrapper stall helping the owner to pack the wrappers.

Fakar does not want to go to his in-law’s house and face Love’s father and the probing questions he might ask. On her own part, Love wants to take her daughter home because she needs to do her homework and go to bed. Seeing that both of them want to go back to Umuahia, Mama Love tells them to hurry so that they would get back to Umuahia before dark. Before they enter the taxi, Mama pulls Fakar aside. “If you ever beat my daughter again, I will kill you. Do you hear me?”

“I don’t beat her Mama.”

“Do you hear me?”

“Yes Ma.”

Everybody is quiet in the taxi. Efosa is reading a book. Her mother, Love, places her head by the window. She is not thinking about her present problem, but about all that she heard about America in the market.

“God’s own country. Everything is perfect there. Money is like sand,” she recalls the stories trying to decide whether she would like to go there or not. She glances at her daughter and smiles but the smile is quickly followed by a sigh of anxiety as she remembers her son. She wonders why the government can’t do something about gangs that recruit the youths of this country.

She remembers Fakar’s suggestion that they will move to Benin and live with his parents if he loses his job. She will not move to another place. There are bad things in Umuahia, like

her son joining a gang. She also hates to see students wearing school uniforms that remind her of her high school days. She does not want to leave Umuahia because she hopes that things will be return to normal. Her son will come back to his senses when he sees how well his sister is doing, and she will also go back to school one day like the elderly woman she met in the bus. Life will be good. She likes the hills, the paved streets, and the people of Umuahia. She likes the bus travel from Umuahia to Uzuakoli. Her family is not perfect but she belongs with them. She would like to visit America and see a country that has nothing bad in it. She would like to see it but she would not like to live there because she also loves Umuahia.

Love looks through the window at the green forests. She stretches her eyes to look at the folds of the mountains. She knows that a river runs through the valleys. There are cassava plantations on the low-lands where her mother has a farm. Maybe she should try her hands at cultivating cassava like her mother. She glances at her daughter again. She also glances at her husband. This is the life that she had wanted but she did not know that it could be so tough. She looks at Fakar again and sighs. She cannot believe that he is the same man that she married fourteen years ago. Her father wanted her to finish high school but she refused. She wanted to be a wife and mother like her own mother. She met him in her school when he came with his manager to deliver refreshments. School Inspectors had come from all parts of the state to hold a meeting in her school. He was there to serve the visiting School Inspectors. Love was also one of the girls that the Principal selected to help serve them. Love still remembers her first sight of him in a sparkling white chef suit and matching white chef hat. He was tall and majestic. She smiled at him. Since that day, she never lacked special chocolates, cookies and chewing gums. He supplied her with these goodies each time they met and this was often.

“He was so good.” She sighs. Fakar snores.

Fakar and Love are on the same bed but they face different directions. They both know that they have a big fight that is yet to be settled. In addition to their fight, Fakar knows that he has to face the issue of the suitcase with the Manager. and it may not augur well for his job.

Love is not asleep. She is thinking about her marriage.

“Love, what is wrong with us?” He holds her.

“Remove your hands from me!” She pulls back. He releases her because he is afraid of what she could do to the little property left in the house.

“I have kept quiet about what you did in the morning. Please I don’t want any trouble with you. Let’s make up,” he says.

“You don’t want to quarrel with me? Do you think that I have forgotten what you did to me in the morning?”

“I did not hit you.”

“The way you dragged me like a small girl....”

“You knocked me with a frying pan. You wounded me. Do you think that I am a piece of wood? You always hit me with a pan or spoon.”

“You are lucky that I haven’t hit you with my kitchen knife,” Love says.

“Don’t crack this kind of joke.” He puts his hand on her waist.

“Who is joking with you?” She does not remove his hand.

“We need to be together. That was why we got married.”

“So you know?” Love says.

“We have to be together. Our love and togetherness are the most important things in our life. With all that is happening, we need to hold tight.” He shifts closer to her.

“Where is this new wisdom coming from?”

“I’ll show you something that you will read and see that life is not good even for those who travel to America. They think that they are getting something, but they lose themselves.”

“My husband, this is deep.” Love gets up wanting to know how her husband got a view of America that is different from what she heard in the market.

END

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ENDNOTES

¹ Foot-run is a play on Citroen, by Nigerians. The phrase indicates a person's car-less situation.

² Agbada is a flowing gown, part of a three-piece ensemble worn by men.

³ A long piece of cloth that can be wrapped around the waist to form a skirt-like garb; around the chest to form an attire that looks like a shoulder-less long gown; and may, when desired, be wrapped around the head like a huge headscarf or stylish hat.

⁴ undershirt