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# THE MOUTH

Critical Studies on Language, Culture and Society

A photograph of a dirt path in a rural African setting. The path is reddish-brown and leads through a cluster of simple buildings. On the left, there is a light-colored building with a corrugated metal roof. On the right, there is a darker building with a corrugated metal roof and a doorway covered with a dark cloth. In the background, several tall palm trees are visible against a pale sky. The overall scene is a typical rural African village.

**African Journey – A Memoir**

**Festus Badaseraye**

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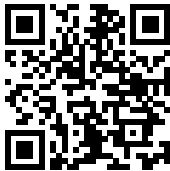
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## **Acknowledgment**

I will always carry in my heart those who have helped me make this book a reality. These include the editors of *The Mouth* and, most of all my wife, Eva Munar Mayans, the love of my life, who has made my life in Mallorca be simpler and easier to handle. With her I feel happy.

All funds raised shall be totally designated for building a school in Ekakpamre, Ughelli South, Delta State, Nigeria.

Festus

# Preface

“What is a stranger? Strangers are from ‘there’, not ‘here’. [...] Above all, they make us uncomfortable by reminding us that there is a ‘there’, and that ‘here’ is *only* here, not everywhere. They hold values that are in conflict with ours; in fact, they have values that seek to undermine ours. They are the vanguard of invasion, spies, the singular point of not here, not us.”  
(Ruf 2007, *Bewildered Travel*, p. 108, original emphasis)

**E**urope has become a desired destination (a ‘there’) for many Nigerians who are looking for a new life and for opportunities to support their families. As bewildering as migration to a foreign continent may seem and as frightening encounters within a foreign society may appear, so surely bewildering are the feelings of the immigrant in question, namely the undesired ‘stranger’. In his biography, Nigerian author Festus Badaseraye describes these personal experiences of migrating from Nigeria to Spain, turning uncertainty (a blurry ‘there’) into security and stability (his ‘here’, a new future). However, all along the journey he is caught between ‘here’ and ‘there’; between traditional values in Nigeria and his complicated role as a newly-arrived immigrant to Spain.

The reader follows him on this path from one station to the next, so experiencing his numerous struggles. These are external, namely his encounters with political instabilities and administrative obstacles such as visa and residence permits; as well as internal ones, when he realizes that he does not live according to his parents' or family's vision of a son, husband or father, by not fulfilling their expectations. Arriving in Europe, he is first confronted with language barriers and the fear of being the ultimate foreigner, someone who is not integrated, or someone who seems too different to pursue his 'European dream'. Yet despite all of these hardships, he becomes someone who represents hope, not only for his African family left behind as well as for his new European family, but also for all of the other African migrants he meets along the way. Countless people from Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana etc. have ever since been inspired by Festus, whose repetitive statement "All I do is for Africa" speaks through each line of his biography. Narrated in his unique style, his voice represents an indefatigable character that never gives up on pursuing his goals and who manages to struggle along despite all obstacles met. His personal determination, his great sense of humanity and his gratitude have helped him to find love and success after all.

We got to know Festus in Palma de Mallorca after having found out about the earlier Spanish version of this monograph, and then decided to integrate him into our Mallorca-based research project on migration, language and interaction in the tourist hotspot of El Arenal (see *The Mouth* 1 and 2). Ever since, Festus Badaseraye has invited us to his home in Palma, has introduced us to his family and has been a generous host throughout – also in terms of his narratives, his advice, and his cooperation. Once the decision was made to work on a modified

and revised English version of his biography, he agreed to have it translated by Marina Ilari (for LUND Languages, Cologne, Germany), to whom we are greatly indebted. While the overall topic of the book, i.e. the migration from Africa to Europe, could not be more pressing and up-to-date, considering current socio-political discourses, the personal angle, based on the agentive voice of a Nigerian immigrant, taxi driver and businessman, could at the same time not be a more fitting way of addressing critical matters of language, culture and migration. We are therefore honored to be able to publish Festus' monograph as a special issue of *The Mouth*.

At the moment, Festus Badaseraye is building a school for girls in his native village of Ekakpamre, into which he puts all his efforts, while he is already working on an upcoming book project, potentially taking readers on a second *African Journey*; maybe this time into the reverse direction, from Spain back to Nigeria. We wish him strength and the best of luck for all of his projects.

Janine Traber & Nico Nassenstein

# Chapter 1

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## A Nigerian Childhood

I was born in Africa on February 8, 1965 in Benin City, Nigeria. It was where I took my first steps. My parents were Johnson Eyeta Badaseraye, son of Okori and Koko, and Alice Badaseraye, my mother, daughter of Ubido and Olorume. They both came from the same village: Ekakpamre, in Ughelli South, a Delta State local government area. In lieu of my parents, my eldest sister, who I truly admire, took care of us. Being from Africa is the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I cannot imagine it any other way. And all of the core values that were instilled in me at home, in my childhood, are still latent in my life today.

Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1999, there was a fire outbreak that affected several communities in Ughelli. Their forests, boats, nets and even the river were destroyed. Investigations carried out revealed that the fire emanated from a ruptured ancient pipeline belonging to Shell, which spewed oil into the communities. Those affected find it quite hard to survive. They



are mostly fishermen. The fire destroyed their canoes, outboard engines, boats and fishing nets. At present, they survive facing many challenges.

In Ekakpamre, my father's family signed a lease agreement for land with Shell Oil Company. Therefore, the company undertook to pay my family a specific amount of money every ten years. Nonetheless, reality has been far different. Up until four years ago, they still had not paid anything. I come from a poor family. To be able to marry my mother, my father had to overcome some obstacles. His brother, in lieu of his father, who had passed away – when a father passes away, the eldest brother replaces him – was in charge of the family and did not want to give his consent. The reason was because my father was poorer than my mother's family. However, thanks to both of my grandmothers intervening, they were able to get married.

My mother's family was very large. They were 31 siblings in all, boys and girls from four women. I did not get the chance to meet all of my uncles and aunts. Even young suiters were advised to ask girls for their surname so as to not mistakenly be coupled with their cousins.

During those times, women – like my mother – did not study. They had to do household chores, help around the house and prepare to serve their future husband. Only the boys went to school. Soon after the wedding, my eldest brother was born. The economic situation was getting worse as the days went by, so my parents decided to emigrate to Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, where their other ten children were born. I was the fourth. My father worked with his uncle who bought and sold coconuts. My mother sold peanuts and fried corn on the streets. My eldest brother lived with my uncle in Ughelli, Delta State.

As my parents worked outside, I learned to make my own paper toys with my friends on the street: cars using tomato cans or milk cartons. One day, my father called us over and taught us how to make rockets out of paper. That was a truly special day for me, being able to fly the rocket that I had made with my bare hands.

My father always worked outside the village and, whenever he came back, he would ask my mother how we had behaved. And, if one of us had behaved badly, we would get punished. We would not be allowed outside the house during the holidays.

Older siblings had full rights over the younger ones. When it was time to eat, food was served based on age: from old to young. Birthdays were not celebrated, nor were gifts given on the day of your saint. But for Christmas, we were given new clothes and shoes. We wanted our uncles to come and visit us because they would always give us a coin. The eldest brother always got the best part.

After saving up some money, my parents were able to buy a large pot, rice, tomatoes, fried tomato, oil, onions, palm oil, beans and plantains. My mother cooked all of these ingredients to be able to sell them to people on their way to work in the morning. After selling, she had to take care of us, a family that grew little by little, until reaching eleven children.

At the age of three, I started *gari* ('school'), which was similar to daycare, and at that age I was already fetching water with a bucket on my head. I had to walk for about one kilometer, back and forth each.

When I was born, my family lived in a "room and a bedroom," which is a living room and bedroom. My parents slept in the bedroom and all of the children in the living room, on a bed of palm leaves. Before going to bed, the bed would unfold and, in the

morning, it would be folded and stored. And, as the family grew year by year, we had to sleep ever so cramped.

In those days, most houses were one-story, and they were all beside a tree that would protect us from the scorching sun with its shade. As children, we would play in front of our houses. We liked football and would make the ball out of paper and plastic bags. Whichever had the most amount of paper and plastic was the best ball that we used to play. Another game consisted of seeing who kicked the ball nearest to a button we had placed on the wall. Rain was excitement for us and we would all go outside, get wet and splash around in the puddles. My first toy was a paper plane that my brother Denis taught me how to make.

At nightfall, the entire family would sit in front of the house and the children around it. The parents would use that moment to advise us, tell folktales or share their own or their grandparents' life story. My father would always tell us that we had to be strong, that life was very tough and, above, all, that we had to learn to accept whatever we had to go through. "Never live your friend's life," he would say.

I remember many other of his sentences: "If we have bread today, that is what we have. We must not think about what we are lacking." He would also tell us we must not speak during meals: "First you must pray and then eat in silence." When it was time to eat, the parents would sit around the table and we would sit on the floor. His way of thinking regarding children was accurate: "A man has to be very strong – physically and economically – to be able to protect a family." That is possibly why my father was so tough on us. He would say "men are in charge." On my land, we have great affection for our ancestors and, during those nightly meetings, we would talk about them. He would say "you must

love the elderly because they are authentic libraries and can advise us with their experience.”

With respect to respecting adults, I remember that, when they called me “Festus!”, my response was “Sir” and I would wait for them to send me for something. We were to never answer back to adults. Another of his sayings was: “If you see someone walking and eating, you must not look as it is considered bad manners; you just have to eat what your parents give you”, he added.

I have bitter memories of the civil war during my early years, which destroyed our village and went on from July 6, 1967 until January 13, 1970. The Igbos, the most extended ethnicity in Nigeria, which constitutes 17% of the population, desiring independence, rose in rebellion against the military regime that we had back then. The war had begun. Soon enough, the military regime gave the orders to go house by house in search of Igbos, with war helicopters and planes that flew over us and fired shots. We were so utterly afraid that, at night, we would hide under our parents’ bed.

My parents were very religious. Religion in Nigeria varies depending on families. In my case, I learned and practiced two religions, as my parents taught me. During my childhood, we were Catholic and, later on, animistic. We would all go to church on Sundays. We would change into the best clothes – the best according to us although we were poor – we had and attend mass in order. My parents would be in front and all children behind. When my father worked, my mother and eldest sister would be the ones to take us to church. When we got there, we would take off our Sunday shoes and silently walk in. The entire world was quietly listening to the word of God. My parents always and in all important daily acts invoked the word “God”. And they did this when educating us, when eating, when going out onto the street,

when going to bed and, also, when getting up in the morning. They would tell us that God was everywhere and added: "If you have God in your life, your life will be much easier."

The basis of our food has always been rice and we drank *yane* with that, which is a spicy soup; starch, which is made from cassava starch (rich in carbohydrates and sugar). Another favorite dish was the *gari*, which is also cooked with cassava starch. Usually, those who cooked were the mothers, assisted by the eldest sister, as in lieu of the mother, she acts as such and we all had to obey her as if she were our mother.

We would drink tea for breakfast. We each had a plastic cup that my mother would pour into with hot water, with two tea bags and four or five sugar cubes. The rest was hidden for the next day. Back then, we did not have a refrigerator in our home and, many times, a tea boat lasted several days. Doctors advised my mother that we should also drink milk, at least three or four times a week. However, store-bought milk soon became sour because of the burning hot weather.

In the morning, my mother would also give us a toothbrush that was extracted from very stiff tree root. We had to chew that root until it became soft. Only then would you start to brush your teeth. We would clean our teeth and shower every day. If we failed to do so, we would not be allowed outside the house. Hygiene was something that was very important for all of us as, according to my mother, "uncleanliness causes diseases".

At the age of five, I was taught to do my laundry in a medium-sized bucket. My eldest sister, Dora, would give me homemade soap and, as such, I began to scrub my clothes. She would keep an eye on me to see if I was doing it right. Then, she would rinse the clothes with clean water to later hang them on a rope that was tied onto two trees.

Every two years, my mother had a baby. I remember that my sister Victoria was born in our own home. As we had a shortage of money, we were not able to go to a healthcare center. In this case, a very old woman – who was the village midwife – came and she cut the umbilical cord with the same razor blade that my father uses to shave. Whenever a boy or girl was born, family members and friends were invited to the house to drink a local liquor that is called *kakai*, which has a very powerful smell; if there was money lying around in the house, the drink would be *dry gin*. The reason for said celebration originated from the social conviction that each child that was born into a family increased its social security. It was like one more insurance so that the family could survive. Two years later, I had another sister. This time, at a protestant church, where the pastor's wife was the midwife.

The more siblings, the smaller the house was becoming. My father worked at Ekakpamre; he came to Benin City to live on a street called Lagos Street, no. 16. My mother later moved there. At that new house, the number of siblings started increasing. But my father, who still wanted to have more children, decided that we would move to a house on Iwehen Street, which was two streets further. We were so many siblings that my sister Dora, who was the one who took care of us, could not handle it. That is why my mother stopped selling food on the street and set up a traditional Nigerian clothing store with Hindu fabrics that my mother bought in Lagos.

My sister had so much on her plate with household chores that my father sent my cousin from a village where he worked to lend my sister a helping hand.

My mother does not know how to read or write, because back then, women only prepared to serve men, according to the saying and custom of the region: "If you do not know how to cook or scrub, you will not marry".

I would ask my mother: "Why do you not know how to read or write?" "Back in my day," my mother replied, "schools for women were in their own home, where we learned to cook, serve men and care for the children." "Mom, when I learn how to read and write, I will teach you." I said.

From that day onward – I was 7 years old – I liked going to school more because I thought that if I learned, I could teach others.

At the age of three, the time came for me to enroll in a public school. Downtown was closer, around three kilometers from my house. But there was one problem. The school was public and Catholic. And the most important requirement to get in was knowing the priest or someone at the church. Luckily, my father's boss, his cousin, helped us and was very involved in the church's activities. The only thing missing was submitting the application letter to the school. The first day was impossible as there was a line that went on for kilometers. The following day was the same as the first day. At last, on the third day, we were able to submit the application and, thanks to my father's cousin speaking with the headmaster, I got accepted. The first thing my parents did was go out and buy me all school material: a pencil, ruler, sharpener, books to read and write and everything needed to go to class. My parents had to make a huge effort as we were very poor.

The first day of school arrived and, according to my mother, I did not want to go into the classroom because there were soldiers everywhere. Those were the days after the end of the civil war in Nigeria and, for several months, soldiers would go house to house or to schools searching for Biafrans. I was so afraid of staying at school that my mother had no other choice but to take me back home again. I remember that, the whole way back, I did not let go of my mother's hand,

because of how scared I was thinking about the soldiers. The next day, my mother did not accompany me. My eldest sister and a classmate from my village did. That is how I started elementary school.

My first years at school were tough as, according to my mother, I just wanted to be at home. My father was out working and my brothers could not help me and, many times, I was punished for not having completed my homework.

As I grew up, games with friends were different than they were when I was younger, but we would always play in front of our house. Football matches lasted hours on end and we played eight against eight. We formed a team that actually played in my country's first division. We also played hide-and-seek at night. That was when I started to have contact with girls. During full moons, after telling stories, parents would give you time to play with your friends and the boys would usually hide with the girls. The next day, we would tell our friends about what happened the night before.

We always had problems with electricity. We usually used traditional light or made the most of the full moon. The traditional way was candles, or palm oil that was placed in a boat with a cloth inside. It smelled like burnt oil and gave off little light. But we never complained. It was what he had and we did not know otherwise.

As our house was near the wall, on the weekends and during holidays, we would go play in a large hole, as a pond that was right next to the wall itself. In summer, it was dry with no water, and during the rainy season, it would fill up with water. One day, my friend came back from vacation and brought a ball. The first one we had actually seen in real life. Until then, we only knew those made from paper. Then, everyone wanted to befriend him



to play with that ball. When it was my turn, I kicked it so hard that it bounced off of a friend of mine and went directly into the wall moat that was full of water. Everyone looked at me and I was afraid I was not able to get it back. I did not know how to swim. I grabbed a bamboo stick that was hanging and cut it. And using that as a board, rowing, I was able to reach and get the ball back. When I was back, my friends hugged me and I gave the ball to my brother Denis. Then, when arriving home, my eldest sister was so angry at me as I was soaked in very dirty water. Some even say that, at one point, they had found a body in the pond. I quickly went to shower and later on, when my sister told my father, he punished me.

In my neighborhood, there was only one television, which was in a neighbor's house and, to be able to watch it, we befriended the owner's son. Adults would also go there because, on Sundays, they would put on a comedy called "Hotel Jordan," which was quite entertaining. People would line up to see it. Without exaggerating, we were over thirty children sitting on the floor. Adults would bring chairs from their homes. There were also wrestling programs that would really entertain us. One Sunday, the owner was tired of so many people and said he did not want to see anyone at his door. We insisted on sitting on the floor, until one Sunday, he chose to throw a bucket of water on us. Denis and I went home drenched. When we arrived, my father was sitting in the living room.

"Why are you drenched?"

"We just came from watching television at our friend's house and the owner does not want us to go there anyone."

"You have to learn to not go where you are not wanted."

Two days later, my father bought a television. We were so ecstatic and my father gave us another one of his lessons: "While the television is on, the whole world can come and watch it."

When completing elementary school, my parents had to search for another school where I could go to continue my education. My father's brother, Jacob, was a professor at Ughelli, and was in charge of deciding where we had to go to study. They decided to send me to a school that was 10 kilometers from my parents' hometown, Ekakpamre, and around 140 kilometers from where we lived. As we were far from downtown, my parents decided that I would go to boarding school and prepared everything required to start this new stage.

The day came to bid me farewell. I remember it was one of the worst days of my life. My parents had hired a van for my transfer. The driver arrived at 9 a.m. I said farewell to my siblings and that was when I realized that my life was incomplete without my brother Denis; he meant everything to me. We hugged each other crying, and I asked my father for Denis to come along with me. My father picked me up and put me in the car. My mother was crying and my father said: "Festus, it is for your own good." My father and brother Denis came with me. The trip was 150 kilometers. As we were moving forward, it was like I was going into another world. I fell asleep because I was tired. Shortly before arriving, my father woke me up and gave me the following advice: "The only way to live without trouble is respecting the rules and knowing how to interpret what an order is and what a suggestion is."

When we were near the new school, I saw a green gate and two soldiers with a rifle protecting the entrance. Great fear took hold of me by watching that scene, but I had to be brave. My father told us that the soldiers were not mean, but instead were there to protect us. The school was called "Sant Ambros Secondary School".

We went to the reception desk and a man, after welcoming us, informed us of some institutional regulations: we were allowed visits from our parents every month; I was allowed to go home one weekend every two months; and I was allowed to leave the school with the principal's permission.

The class and cafeteria schedule were posted on the lodging facility's entrance. It also said that everyone had to take a nap from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Three days a week, there would be sports and on Saturdays, we would practice football and sports. On Sundays, at 8 a.m., we would all go to the church that was about 18 kilometers away. Then, we could visit the village and buy something. I liked returning to the lodging facility more, as there were other students.

It was the school's tradition to welcome a classmate in a peculiar way. There were two buckets: one filled with water and another one empty. The *novice* had to fill up the empty bucket by transferring water from the filled bucket using a spoon. If the water fell on the floor, the bucket would not fill up and the *novice* would lose. I would win if I was able to fill it up without spilling water on the floor.

The first couple of months were quite hard for me having to adjust to a new schedule and type of food. My parents left me something to eat: condensed milk, cookies, cereal bread and a can of sardines. That is how I was able to get through the first few days. I then started to get hungry, so I decided to send a letter to my parents explaining my problem, but they never received the letter.

Three months later, the holidays arrived and it was time to go back home. At the school's entrance, I bumped into my uncle, who picked me up and asked me many questions about what I liked studying.

Before going back home, I went to my uncle's house. "What do you want to study in the future?", he asked me. "Economics."

"Why Economics, if you are not doing well in Math? Why not study History or Law that has no Math involved?"

At that point, I stopped replying as there was still much time ahead of me to think about the future. The next day, my uncle took me to a taxi stop and, one hour and a half later, I arrived home. When I arrived, my brother Denis, overjoyed to see me, would shout at the top of his lungs that Festus had come back, until my whole family came outside except for my father who was working.

With much joy, they told me the big news: that my parents had bought a plot of land where they were building a very large house with one room for each child. The land was in a village called Oko Village, approximately 10 kilometers from the house where we lived. There was so much happiness that we were singing altogether "Jesus Christ is the greatest", until my mother arrived. She hugged me and made me give some turns to see if I was well. It was one of my parents' customs. And, I remember telling my mother all of the punishments I had endured because of my bad behavior. She told me the story of an animal that escaped a trap and, from that day onward, when the animal would see something similar to a trap, it would run away. "You have to learn from that animal and will see that they will not punish you ever again."

Already on vacation, my brother Denis told me how the girls in his class were and that he had already had sexual relations with them. He told me this in my mother's absence. According to our customs, your mother is the one who has to choose the woman that you have to marry and, also, the eldest brother has to marry before the others.

My brother was attending a mixed-gender school and I was in an all-boys school. My brother was 15 years old and I would turn 13 in February, which is why I thought that, by being in an all-boys school, I would not get the chance to meet girls. This worried me a lot and I had to find a solution for what I thought was a big problem.

One day, I told my father that I did not like being in an all-boys boarding school. My father told me that it would benefit me in the long run. I felt as if I was receiving a different education than my brothers were. Even regarding topics such as relationships and social behavior. I remember I even had to teach my siblings how to use forks during meals or how to behave in public. It was time to return to school and everything was becoming more normal. The soldiers no longer frightened me. But I still continued to miss my family, especially my brother Denis.

In my African homeland, there is a custom that families who do not have money to pay for their children's education, receive aid from friends and neighbors. There are even neighbors who become the guardians of another neighbor's child when they go to work. And they are also entitled to the same rights as the parents when the children behave badly, being allowed to punish them. The poverty in certain African regions is alleviated by the aid of others without expecting anything in exchange. It is the solidarity that comes from the hearts of some people who have the bare minimum to live.

My second year of school was bitter sweet. A lot of routine despite my education improving in comparison with the previous year. Nevertheless, I kept thinking about my brother being surrounded by girls whilst I was in an all-boys school. At last, I met a boy from my father's village who was called Akpo and we were in fifth grade together. He told me that the only way to bear

the absence of family was to focus on a sport. So, the next day, I signed up to a football and track and field team. My integration was complete. I even participated in a school championship.

I focused so much on football that my education was declining as the days went by. I suspended the first quarter exams. As my mother did not know how to read, when I showed her my grades, she asked my sister Dora to read them out and she told her they were not good. My excuse was that, out of all my brothers, I was the only one who had a fairly long distance away to study.

I waited for my brother to arrive. The love I had for my brother was something unexplainable. My brother told me: "You have to speak to dad and tell him that you do not want to go back to boarding school and that you want to stay in Benin City." When my father came, I told him what my brother had told me. My father just looked at me and, without uttering a single word, left.

Whenever an important decision had to be made, it was customary for my parents to meet alone in a room. And so, they did. Then, my father called me and suggested that I complete the course and that we would talk later. I insisted that I did not want to go back to school. My father grabbed me by the hand and said: "My dear son, I do not want you to live like I did going from one coconut plantation to another, from one palm oil plantation to another, searching for parmesan. I am fighting for your future", and stood up. When he reached the door, he told me: "Festus, please, cooperate so that everything is easier", and left. In the end, and much to my dismay, I decided to return to school.

I went back to the daily school grind. I did not like it at all. I did not want to continue studying. But there I was.

One day, just for arriving five minutes late to class, my professor sent me to the soldiers, who were in charge of school discipline. The sergeant asked me if at my age – I was 15 years old

at the time – I knew how to drive a motorcycle. I replied that I did not. “I am here to teach you”, he said. The sergeant made me act as if I were sitting on a motorcycle and repeat that ten times, until I fell to the floor. He threw a glass of cold water on me and told me: “You have stained my office floor; now you have to clean it.” Then, he spilled gravel on the floor and made me kneel on top of the gravel and gave me a cloth to clean and dry his office floor. When finishing, he said: “Respect is the basis of life.” To this day, respect towards people and love have been the basis of my life.

When I got to class, my friends – who had gone through the same thing – tried to cheer me up. I was sad – very sad – for several days. I felt acute pain all over my body and I had emotionally lost the will to study. I started feeling sick of my school. Everything was going badly and I wanted to go back home.

One day, when I got to school, all of my food supplies had disappeared. I asked the boys but nobody knew anything. That same day, I said: “Enough is enough!” I asked for the weekend permission to visit my family and was allowed. Without thinking about whether or not I had any money, I went to the taxi stop to Benin City. I just had 10 Nairas on me and getting to my village would cost 50 Nairas. I left the stop and started walking. When I got to Ekakpamre, I went to my father’s eldest brother’s house and asked him if he could help me. He had no food or money to give me. I continued walking until I reached Efrum. There, I stopped a taxi and told the taxi driver that, when arriving at the destination, my mother would pay him. Throughout the journey, I fell asleep and, when I got to my town, the taxi driver asked me for the street name.

As it was the weekend, I thought my father would be there. We got home. My mother was the one at the door. The taxi driver got out of the car with me. My mother was really scared when seeing me with a stranger. The taxi driver told her that he had found me

crying at the Efrum stop without any money. My mother started to cry, gave the driver his money and thanked him for what he had done. Shortly after, the taxi driver returned and asked for my father. My mother told him he was working. The driver left a message for my father: "Sometimes you have to listen to your children; parents are not always right. For not listening to my son, I lost him forever", and began crying. My mother got on her knees while crying, started to pray for the son that good man – who did listen to me – had lost.

Dinner time was here and the silence at my house made it seem as if it were a cemetery. We had dinner and all went to bed without saying a word.

The following day, my mother woke me up very early telling me that I had to go back to school and "when you father comes home, we will make a decision." With great sorrow, I went back to school and waited until the end, which was merely one month and a half away.

When I finished the course, I returned home. My father was not there and took quite long in coming home. During that time, my mother and siblings looked out for me a lot. One Sunday, Denis and I went to play football. When we got back, my father was at home. Denis and I got on our knees to greet my father. He responded to us with a smile and said: "I found out that you have been having trouble at school, son. You have to fix problems, not run from them. If you have to study in Benin City, you do the searching." I got down on my knees to thank him for everything they were doing for me. I soon found a school, "Adolorgramer", although it was an all-boys school. There, I enrolled in a course. I wanted a mixed school and finally found it at a nearby village. It was called "Agbo Grammar School". To avoid transportation problems, my father



gave the motorcycle they had bought me a few years back as a gift to Denis, to stop me from going to school on a motorcycle.

Shortly afterwards, Denis introduced me to my first girlfriend, Helen, who put up with all of my mischief from my wild sixteen years of age. I switched schools again. This time, to "Asoro Grammar School" where I completed my high school education with very good grades.

# Chapter 2

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## A Revolt

**F**inishing off high school is when I can say the craziness of my youth began, equal to going against the whole culture and tradition that, up until then, my parents had taught me. They were always slaves to tradition, culture and religion, which I did not quite understand.

I did not understand, for example, why my sister had to marry after undergoing female genital mutilation (the cutting or removal of tissue of any part of the female genitalia for cultural, religious or any other non-medical reasons); much less why they held a ceremony for her to celebrate being a virgin before marrying. The ceremony started with her being basically naked, only covering her private parts. That ceremony accepted my father into the society of men whose daughters had also practiced said ritual. For me, that ancient practice had no feet or head.

After mutilation, my parents assigned the person who my sister Dora was to marry. My sister married a man she did not

know, and barely his name. The ceremony held at my parents' house ended and my mother packed my sister's bags. A little later, the man who she was to marry arrived. He was about ten or twelve years older than her. His family members and friends accompanied him while singing and dancing. Once they got to our house, they were given what is called a *Kola nut*, which is a seed used to consult God and express the best wishes for the new marriage.

I recall telling my mother: "Mom, maybe my sister does not want to marry that man." And she replied: "They will love each other with time as, during the marriage ritual, we and all ancestors will ask them to love each other their whole lives."

Proceeding with the ritual, the Kola nut is used to try to speak with ancestors. For that, a reasonable – yet symbolic – amount of money is placed on a white plate. Then, husband and wife get on their knees and the husband's family's spokesperson addresses guests and introduces all relatives, starting with the elderly. He explains that they have come to the house to take the girl home with the husband. They speak for quite a while and pray before the Kola nut.

Having finished praying, those present are served some liquor that, in this case, cannot be homemade *kaikai*, but instead a more refined liquor such as the original *Dry Gin*. Everyone present, dressed in their best clothes, drinks liquor in a crystal glass. The person responsible for the ceremony – who is usually sitting at the house entrance – grabs the *Dry Gin* glass and one of the Kola nut parts and offers it to the groom – who is still on his knees praying. The man drinks first and stands up. The woman remains on her knees and drinks the rest of the seed. The person in charge of the ceremony, usually a senior man, makes a hand gesture to the woman to stand up. From then on, they are husband and wife.

When the ceremony ends, the girl goes to her mother's room and, along with her closest friends, they dress her in the best clothes, and put on the best shoes and necklaces, based on the family's economic status, while the rest of the guests dance and eat.

On my land, when a woman marries, she loses her father's surname as the husband, as of that moment, will be the head of the family.

My older brother – who was already 24 years old – still had no woman. My mother insisted on finding him one, but none of the ones she introduced him to were to his liking. So, I started inviting my girlfriends over. One Sunday, I asked my mother for permission and said: "my girlfriend is coming today." My mother replied that I could not do so as it was disrespectful towards my older brother. She also said that "saints who protect the house do not allow practicing sex during the day." I responded that I could not wait for my older brother to marry so I could then have a girlfriend, and that I did not understand that custom that prohibited sexual relations with a girl. I had never seen my mother so furious. She even threatened me, telling me to follow that rule or I would have to leave home.

From what I could see, I was a problem for my parents as I did not accept religious, traditional and cultural standards. I tried talking to my mother so she could understand my point of view, but she always supported my father's opinion. I did not feel the same way they did. My thoughts were very different regarding some topics, especially the relationships I wanted to have with girls. I told my mother that I really liked a girl and that I did not want to hide from my family to keep that relationship. In the end, my father allowed me to be alone with that girl and, from then on, I felt free.

At home, they gave me space alone and thanks to that, every Sunday, my girl would come over until she became my usual girlfriend. Despite that, I still had chores at home. We set up a farm with around one thousand hens. My brother and I were in charge of feeding them. Three to four months later, the hens started laying eggs. And, at six in the morning, my brother and I would have to wake up to feed them. It was a job we did with pleasure as, that way, we could help the whole family.

I was in the last year of school when my usual girlfriend got pregnant. My parents knew that I was with her but hers did not. We started to fear how her parents would react to this. One Sunday, when I was in the farm with my brother, I saw my girlfriend Helen arrive. My mother, who was leaning on the entrance door of our house, sensed she was pregnant just by looking at her. After looking at each other, the question was inevitable. We both said yes.

Somewhat excited, my mother said everything that came to mind. That I was irresponsible and that it was very difficult to raise and support a child, all the more without being married. She then asked me what we intended to do. My girlfriend was crying and I, when watching her, also started to cry. That was when I realized the severity of the situation.

My siblings came over and tried to comfort us. My eldest sister arrived later on and, by the scene, she grew very thoughtful and, as the woman she was, she soon sensed the drama with my mother, siblings and girlfriend Helen.

I adore my eldest sister, who I love and admire so much for all of the lavish affection towards her siblings. I cannot say the same for my older brother, David.

In Nigeria, there is a custom of investing a lot in whatever the eldest son does. One day, a man came home to claim 800 Nairas

for a deal he had made with my brother. Neither my brother, parents nor the rest of the siblings had that kind of money available. My mother, who did not know how to read or write, gave all the money to David so that he could put it in the bank, which in this case was the New Nigeria Bank. When my mother needed it to pay off my brother's debts, she was faced with the fact that there was not a single Naira. My mother then had to sell all of the lands she had purchased. My sister Dora also put in to pay off the debt. Otherwise, my brother might have ended up in jail.

My sister Dora and I resumed conversation about the topic of my girlfriend Helen being pregnant. Maybe, in light of this situation, the solution was to get married and, thus, save both families the village's critique. My mother even told me once that Helen's parents "will never want their daughter to marry a rascal." And she threatened to report me to Welfare Home, an institution where they take children who do not obey their parents.

Helen, who was home, cried and my siblings would comfort her. When my father arrived, he asked Helen what her parents were like and how many siblings she had. But Helen did nothing more but cry without answering any of my father's questions.

Nigerian culture is very tough on women. Men can have all of the women they want, but women cannot. They are quite limited. They cannot drink, smoke or leave the house, unless accompanied by their parents or brothers. This is why many girls escaped their homes. Helen and I had our own secret ways to see each other on the quiet. She told me she was afraid that her parents, when finding out she was pregnant, would kick her out of the house.

The surname is the most sacred thing that families and girls have, and they must marry following tradition; otherwise, they are kicked out of the house. Families do not care about other people's feelings. The only thing that worries them is the tradition, religion

and culture. My mother, understanding with everything and everyone, told Helen: "Do not worry; if your parents kick you out, you will not be left out on the street."

Helen's mother did not know her daughter was pregnant as, according to her, she used a belt to hide her pregnancy. After this huge ordeal, in which I suffered a great deal, my mother gave Helen money to take a taxi, go home and tell her mother. When Helen left, my father told me he had found out that Helen's family was more traditional than ours. "To avoid conflict, we will have to follow tradition" – said my father – "As of this day, you will never go alone, but always in the company of Denis and someone else, until Helen comes and we know her parents' response."

He told me I should not walk alone on the street as some parents become very aggressive when they find out their daughters have gotten pregnant without getting married. There were even families who would pay a certain amount of money to abort the child. That is what had happened to one of my mother's cousins. When I found out about all these things, fear took hold of my body, and I then understood my parents' concern.

A few days went by but nothing happened. It was as if everything had gone back to normal. I wanted to know how Helen was, but my brother was scared to ask for permission to leave. Until one day, Denis and I planned that he would ask for permission to leave the house with a friend of his. And was allowed. When he got to his friend's house, he told him Helen's parents were very angry as her mother had found out she was pregnant, and because Helen did not want to say who was responsible for her pregnancy. Her father had given her five days to tell the truth; otherwise, she would be kicked out of the house. My brother told me and I was so shocked that I almost fell ill. I was

so nervous for what could happen to Helen and also to myself. I saw no exit to this situation that both of us had created.

When Denis asked me what I intended to do, I quickly replied: "I want to get lost with Helen and have nobody find us." He then told me that my father had told my mother that if Helen did not come back, he would then go speak with the elder in my girlfriend's village.

It was usual custom in villages for the elder, the most respected, be the judge and solve – or try to solve – the problems that would occasionally arise in each village. When the elder could not solve it, he would then call the police.

When seeing my discouragement, my father told me that if Helen did not return in two days, we would go speak with *odionwara*, the village elder. And added: "In any case, we will care for Helen and the pregnancy, while you continue studying. You have not done anything wrong; you are just bringing a child into this world. We would have liked it to be different, but things are not always how you want them to be. You think unlike the rest of the family but that is no reason to abandon you. I hope you do not try to fix this matter on your own."

After my father's wise intervention, I felt more at ease. When it was time to eat, we were all more at ease. My sister Victoria even said: "If it is a girl, I would like her to take my name, but if it is a boy we will have to think about it."

After eating, Denis and I went to feed the hens. Upon returning, I saw Helen at the door speaking with my mother. She would not stop crying. She had bags beside her. This meant that her parents had kicked her out of the house. My siblings helped take her bags to my room. I could not intervene as it was customary for younger members not to interrupt when adults were talking. When they finished speaking, she walked towards me and



we went to the room. There, she asked me for water as she was exhausted. She had walked for several kilometers. She then told me everything she had gone through over the past few days. As her family was only interested in the father of the child, she had no other choice but to tell them. Her father promised that he only wanted to know the name. But her uncles and nephews told her that when he saw me, I would find out. Nobody knew what to say or do. I was guilty for the harm that had emerged between both families. Helen asked me what I thought. I just cared about being with her. In Nigeria, family tradition and customs are worth more than a human life.

It was dinner time and my mother called me over to come down with Helen. She walked downstairs afraid. My mother, before starting to eat, told her that the next day, my parents would go meet hers. My life had changed from one day to the other. At the age of 19, I already had a responsibility that I did not know and customs that I did not understand. I had to be the head of the family and act as such. I had to take in many things. My girlfriend and I had never been alone together, much less more than one hour, except when we were studying in the same school.

Later on, I went with Helen to shower as she did not know the place. Our bathroom was made from a zinc plate and just covers the body, while the head and feet are exposed. The door is covered with the same towel you will use to dry off.

My father saw me waiting for Helen to get out of the bathroom and gave me another lesson: "A man must never wait for a woman outside the bathroom. She has to wait for you outside with the towel, cream and whatever else you need. You are the head of the family and have to learn to be a man and she, a woman. Son, I know that, whenever I speak to you about tradition and customs, you lose track but this is all the guide to life, which teaches you what

to do and what not to do. It is the beginning for you to be a good person; also, religion teaches you to love, respect and not to steal." I do not know why but I do not think like my parents about tradition. I think I follow everything they have taught me such as respect and love towards my family, friends and neighbors, but I do not understand that deep-rooted respect to the tradition and culture of our country. I do not understand why women are inferior to men. My sister Dora got married without knowing the man she was going to marry. I did not understand that and also think my father did not either.

"I do not know where you have learned such values, so different to ours", said my father. Before going to bed, my mother gave Helen – a girl who had decided to live with a boy – the first lesson, saying: "As of today, you have to serve Festus on your knees. In the morning, you must prepare hot water for him to bathe, do laundry and sweep the room. And when he is with his friends, you cannot walk into where they are without his permission.

"Mom, Helen and I are not going to live like that", I said. My mother stood up and left.

We went to sleep. We did not say a single word. We were both really nervous. I did not sleep a wink. I was thinking about the meeting my mother was going to have with Helen's mother the next day. It was very hot in the room. I tried fanning myself with a piece of cardboard, until the natural alarm clock went off (rooster and birds), and people who were on their way to work. Helen, when seeing me wake up, said "good morning" to me. And I said it back. She continued: "Festus, I know you do not like everything your mother has told me and what I must do with you, but I will do it so they do not get angry at me in your house and there is peace in the family."

“You are not my slave; you are my girlfriend. The household chores will be shared among my sisters, but serving and greeting according to family tradition is out of the question.”

All the meanwhile, Denis walked in and wanted to know how we had spent the night. My brother was looking out for me and, just like me, was very worried. After greeting each other, we went to feed the hens. While we were at work, I saw my mother talking to Helen. Two weeks had gone by without my mother going to the clothing store she had. Every day, her employee would come to give my mother accounts of what she had sold at the store. It seemed I had caused quite the scene for my mother to abandon her job because of me, trying to solve the issue. I have to thank her my entire life.

My mother was ready to meet with Helen’s mother. They both said goodbye to me and went to Helen’s village. I was very nervous thinking about what could happen. Hours later, my mother and Helen walked in through our house gate much more at ease. She called me over and told me how it had taken place. She told me there would be no problems with Helen’s elders. Her older brother also wanted to meet me. But not the uncles and cousins who wanted me to go begging for forgiveness on my knees. I would never do that.

I was not willing to kneel in front of Helen’s cousins. My father tried to convince me. I told him I would go when I thought was a good time. At one point, my father started talking about weddings and that I had to marry Helen. I said I would not. And that starting a new family was not in my plans as I was very young and still studying.

One week after Helen had come to our house, my mother went with her to see a doctor for the first checkup. The doctor said that everything was going well.

Having to share my room with Helen was quite a strange situation. Throughout the pregnancy, I think I was good to her. But I continued overthinking about my family and hers. I think I have been extremely good to my parents and siblings. The only thing we had clashes of opinion on was anything regarding these three words: religion, tradition and culture. These three words are what is causing more problems in Africa. For me, religion is a subject that must be taught in schools because it teaches to love, respect and live in harmony. What I do not agree with is how people practice it. How to educate children in Africa is something I admire, because it includes the name of God in everything and this helps you stay on the right path. Saying has it that if you do things right, God will praise you and, if you do things wrong, he will punish you. I do not know whether or not this is true, but it helps a lot of people. I also have nothing against tradition and culture. What I do not understand is why I have to live like my great-grandparents or marry four women because my ancestors have done so. I want to live off of my thoughts and analyze them. There are things from my ancestors that I do not like. I respect them, yet I do not share their thoughts. Throughout the pregnancy, I went to school a bit ashamed as I did not know how my friends were going to react when seeing my friend Helen's belly grow every day. This concerned me. Helen's parents were very patient with me as I barely went to see them. However, they – especially her mother – frequently came over to our house to be with her. And they would always say the same thing: that their relatives wanted to meet me.

One day, I decided to visit my girlfriend's family. When I told my mother, she was so happy that she started to thank God because of my change in attitude. In the celebration held every year, called the "celebration of the saints", which many people

attend and where everyone eats, sings, prays and dances, my mother even called me over to brainwash and clean all of the evil there was inside of me and against the others. I said nothing and agreed to that. At the end, I realized I kept on thinking the same as before the brainwashing. This time, the celebration went on for two weeks.

One day, while on the terrace of my house with my parents and siblings, I saw a 40-year-old-looking man come in and, after greeting my parents traditionally, they got up and left the living room. They were talking for quite a while. When my brother Denis left, he made a hand gesture of disagreement with said visit. Days later, the same man returned to our house. This time, with other companions. I thought that these men came to court my sister Victoria. I left the house, saw some bicycles, left the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and poked all of the wheels.

“One of your sons has poked the wheels”, they told my father. “Festus, was it you?”

“Dad, these men cannot come for a 16-year-old girl.” One of the men lifted his hand and was willing to hit me. My father stepped between us both. He apologized, called me and said: “If you continue like this, we will have to kick you out of our home.” Helen also put in a word, rightfully, and told me that, if I continued to be like that, she would go back to her parents’ home. I grabbed her hand and tried explaining why I did that. But she remained on my parents’ side. “You are the one who has to change”, she said, “not your parents”, and left crying.

I apologized to my parents and proposed for them to set a date to go meet Helen’s parents. The day that I so dearly dreaded came. Helen’s parents were very courteous to me. Her father is a very good man. He said they just wanted to meet me as it was our families’ custom. “So our ancestors are happy wherever they are

and transmit peace, happiness, strength, money and everything we need in life." I stared at him and noticed that his face had the same expression as my father when he would speak to me about his ancestors. When he finished giving me advice, they moved us into a very large room. Helen and her family were already waiting for me and received us, following tradition, with Kola nut, the welcoming seed.

When returning home, my father told me: "How lucky you are, son. In recent years, many young boys have lost their lives for getting a girl pregnant and you, however, have been very welcomed by Helen's family. They even allow you to visit her whenever you like." Helen stayed at her house as, according to tradition, she could not come with me until the next day.

For a couple of months, I went on with my life as usual. Until one day, my mother was waiting for me beside the gate to our house. She told me that Helen was in labor and we had to leave immediately. Seeing that I did not want my child to be born at home, I agreed and we quickly went to a private hospital by car, which is located at "Off Sapela Road". In Nigeria, there is no social security, which is why my mother had to pay one hundred Nairas for admission.

I was waiting with my mother while Helen gave birth. Although I was just as happy as my mother, she would not stop tormenting me about whether I knew how to take care of the child and if I could educate him. I did not even have one Naira to give my child. Then, my sister Dora arrived in a taxi. While I was greeting her, my mother shouted: "Young father, your son wants to meet you." I had mixed feelings of embarrassment and fear and told my mother to go see the child herself. The nurses told me not to be so embarrassed. And together, everyone pushed me into the labor room. I saw Helen happy and smiling with the baby in her

arms and she said: "Festus, hold your child; he is very handsome." I was still very embarrassed.

As tradition says you have to give some kind of tip to the medical team, my sister Dora gave me an envelope to deliver, which said on it: "Dad, this is for you." We were in the clinic for six hours until they called us to pay for the birth and the stay. My mother took care of that, while sending my sister to Helen's parents' house to give them the good news.

We got home and, in minutes, the whole neighborhood came, including Helen's family, and we just kept eating and drinking for a long time.

After the birth, when arriving home, the baby must be showered with a bit of water mixed with the soil on which the parents live. My parents do not come from Benin City, which is why Helen's mother told my mother she was not entitled to perform that ritual with soil from Benin City. Helen's mother had brought soil from her home and wanted to carry out this ceremony. Both families argued a lot. In the end, the "area elder" was called to decide this matter for both families. The elder ruled in favor of my mother for three reasons: because my mother was the child's father's mother, because it was my parents' house and because a woman could not claim anything in her partner's house. Helen's mother, asked for forgiveness and the celebration went on. My mother bathed the child, as customary, with soil from Benin City. It was time to give the child a name and so he was given two. Another custom from my country is to circumcise boys. This is where differences between my parents and Helen's arose once more, but this time about the date.

We had many problems when it came down to caring for the boy, despite our sisters helping us, as he frequently had health issues. My country's customs when someone in the house has

health issues is going to church – if it is Protestant – before seeing a specialist, or going to a quack doctor. So, my mother and Helen’s mother met and decided to go to a different quack doctor. When they both returned, they called me and told me that I was responsible for the child always becoming ill, “as our ancestors are furious with you because you do not want to marry. As punishment, the ancestors, at night, scare the child and this is the reason for the illness. And, if we do not celebrate the wedding in two weeks time, something bad will happen to the child.”

Before knowing what I thought about the wedding, both families had already agreed on the date and had even sent out the invitations. I, father of the child and future husband, did not mean a thing. First comes tradition and culture. My feelings and opinions were not important.

The night before the wedding, I was about to pick up the child and escape. But, unfortunately, I did not have enough money. The day of the wedding, my parents had to drag me over to Helen’s house. The welcoming was traditional at my future wife’s house. Then, the family spokesperson stood up to explain why the family had come to Helen’s house. As many languages are spoken in Nigeria and Helen’s parents only understood theirs and “street English”, my parents had to find a spokesperson who spoke both languages: theirs and ours.

At Helen’s parents’ house, the family spokesperson explained why my family was there. He explained that we wanted to take Helen to our house, and that it has not been possible because I studied and because I did not believe in my ancestors’ tradition. They thanked us for coming and accepted my request. My family took out the money and handed it to her parents. They then called Helen. They made us kneel down and my future wife’s father began to pray. When he finished praying, he opened the seed we



had brought, and served us the *Dry Gin* in a glass. From then on, we were husband and wife.

Two weeks after the wedding, the child was not getting any better. My mother decided to return to the quack doctor. The diagnosis was that the “chief title” ceremony was missing. Seeing how things were going, I saw myself at another ceremony. According to my mother, the acceptance of the “chief title” would also help me with my education. I had no other choice but to accept it. My father had to ask for permission at work to be absent for a few days, as the title belongs to the ancestors. He had to be with us and came to witness the commencement of the title.

When arriving at the palace, the king seemed to be sitting at the entrance on a very large chair with a crown on his head. He had cowrie shells and red coral on his hands and feet. A palace representative asked us why we had come. My mother replied: “We are from Ekakpamre, my family of Milolo, father of Chakaro, Chakaro father of Kakada, Kakada father of Badaseraye, Badaseraye father of Eyata, Eyata father of Festus.” The palace representative then said: “Festus Erakpoweri Badaseraye, welcome.” And he showed me the palace door. Then, I sat down on the novice’s chair, which means that the crowning process has still not started. The palace spokesperson stood up and asked me why I had gone to the palace. He said: “We know your father’s origins and would like to know your mother’s.” My mother stood up and said: “Mamaro is the father of Efemanjan, Efemanjan is the father of Ubido, Ubido is the father of Ikpera, my native name.” The spokesperson asked us for the Kola nut, the seed to consult God, and the money.

Then, the king’s representative started the ritual telling me what I had to do every day: call the gods three times to address them and ask them what I wanted after making a line of white

powder with the pinky finger, then using the thumb to throw the powder in the air.

I thanked him and we left. On the way, my father told me that I could be the king of five clans, who governed them. Before the British arrived, Africa had been governed by the kings, one for each state. I told my father that I was useless for those things.

When we got home, the boy was sleeping. Helen served me dinner and we went to sleep. One year later, Helen got pregnant again but the child died at birth. It was the beginning of 1986. Two pregnancies followed after that, along with two more births: Sheila who was born in August 1987 and Lizzy in February 1989.

My family was growing but I continued depending on my parents and this was a problem for me. My father was the member of an Ekakpamre people's association that lived in Benin City. They met every Sunday. After every meeting, my father would update us on the program that there was in his homeland and that there was a lot of work and he would like to return. My mother did not want to hear him go on about that topic as my parents already had a very large house and good lands in Benin City. My mother tried to convince my father to work those lands. He tried doing so for a while, but seeing that my mother earned more than him displeased him.

My father's friends, who were married to more than two women, would laugh at him for only having one. As my mother saw him so sad, she decided to find a woman for him that would not cause my family any trouble, and introduced him to her best friend. My father refused. What was wrong with him was that he was tired of living in Benin City. He just wanted to go back to Ekakpamre, where there was work and he earned more money. He asked his children if anyone wanted to go along with him. Nobody agreed, so he went to his village alone and would come to see us every so often.

One day, I decided to go see my father and stayed with him for three days. He encouraged me to stay in Ekakpamre as the Nigerian National Petroleum Company had built a school there to study "oil" and this could be the solution to work I was searching for.

Nigeria was getting worse by the minute. Letters would not arrive, telegrams neither, and phones could only be used in companies. I had to find a job.

I had a friend and neighbor of ours who studied and worked to pay for her education. During the weekends, she would extract fluid from gum trees and then sell it to companies who manufactured rubber and plastic and, she would go to the field to collect African seashells, which were quite rare, and then sell them to women on the street.

One day, I went with her to teach me how to extract fluid from gum trees. We would leave at five in the morning. At the farm, which was quite far away from our homes, my friend taught me to extract liquid. You have to see if it has marked lines on it and clean around the tree where you have to make a cut with a well-sharpened knife. She showed me several times and then let me try. I had no problem and extracted the fluid from the tree. She left and I was there alone at the farm, very happy because I had already found something to do and make money off for my family.

Shortly afterwards, I heard someone call me. It was Denis, my brother's voice. He called me with a loud and shaky voice: "Festus, Festus, Festus." I started to run towards him; "Festus, Mom calls you. Father's cousin has come from Ekakpamre and wants all of his male children to be present before speaking."

When arriving, my mother's house was crammed with people. Shouting, I asked my father's cousin what had happened. He hugged me and looked into my eyes. "Festus, I am sorry, a man killed your father yesterday."

# Chapter 3

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## New Beginnings

**W**hen I heard the word *killed*, I felt as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been thrown on me and was speechless. Everyone was crying. When my sister Dora – who arrived later – found out, she jumped up and hit her head against the floor and was left unconscious. We tried to wake her up with buckets of water and cries. Nobody understood what was happening. My father, who was incapable of harming anyone, had been murdered.

The relative who had come to give us the sad news insisted on going straight to my father's house, as his family members were waiting for us. My mother, devastated, called David, the eldest son, and we rented a van. Before leaving the house, my mother told us: "Children, you know what has happened. Your father's family is waiting for you for the burial. You will choose a spokesperson to speak on behalf of everyone. In this case, David will be

the one who speaks. You, Festus, I beg you to keep quiet, because any word that is said that goes against tradition carries a fine. They can even abandon us with your father's body and not allow the burial. And your father does not deserve this."

Once the van was prepared, we left on our way to my father's village. During the trip, not a single word was uttered. There were only looks and long faces. I, personally, did not understand a thing. I had been with my father not long before and saw him very well. He was a very thin yet strong man. At the age of 62, he still had an athlete's physique. I remember that sometimes, he would arm-wrestle me or my brother Denis and we could never beat him. He would also teach us how to wrestle and how to do leg locks so as to not be taken down. He would always say: "The enemy always has to be facing you." It was one of the main rules of wrestling. I never saw my father argue with my mother and, the strength of his voice was enough to make us obey. His saying was proverbial: "You are not a man just because you have testicles."

We arrived at my father's house in Ekakpamre. The family members were waiting for us. According to tradition, only adults can attend the meeting and funeral. After welcoming us, my father's family spokesperson lamented what had happened, reminding us about our obligation to look ahead. As my father had eleven children and was married, he was entitled to seven days of mourning. My eldest brother, who had been assigned as our family's spokesperson, raised his hand and was given permission to speak. The first thing he asked for was an explanation of what had happened and if anyone knew who had done it. They said this was not the right time for that and it was best to take my father's body out of where it was already placed. It was very costly having it in an official freezer as there was in the village for these types of cases. "The longer he remains there, the more his soul

suffers," said my father's spokesperson. "We will have time to speak after the funeral."

We were about one hundred meters away from my father's house. I stood up and went to his house. The door was closed. I went around the house. My father's clothes were hanging on a tree, soaked in blood. When I saw the clothes, I was shocked; I was just able to yell out to my siblings, saying: "Come, come, our father's clothes are here, drenched in blood." All my siblings came. As my mother was a woman, she was not allowed to participate.

The family members called us so that one family member could go with them to identify the body, as the following day, before twelve in the afternoon, the body had to be prepared for the burial. My eldest brother went with them. My mother, who was from the same city, went to her father's house. We stayed at my father's house. After several hours, my brother David arrived and told us: "Tomorrow will be the last time we see Dad as they will return to the hospital to take out the body from the morgue at seven in the morning." Once more, we all started to cry. We went to bed without having dinner. The next day, at 5:30 a.m., they knocked on the door and called my brother David to go to the morgue. We were all silent. Only my mother would say something to us from time to time.

Before long, we saw a van come in. Inside was David, one of my father's family members and his body. They took him out of the vehicle, placed his body inside the home and left him on a bed for the family to see. It was quite a shocking moment that I will never forget. My youngest brother, Prosper, said; "Look, Dad is sleeping." I told him, "Prosper, they will soon place him in a hole they will make in the ground because he is dead and we will no longer see him."

Two hours later, four men walked into the house with a shovel and axe. Then, they started to dig up the hole. We were beside my father. At two o'clock, we were forced to eat to regain strength as we had not eaten or drank since the day before. We ate with barely any strength to do so.

Four men came in with ropes to place my father's body inside the hole. This time, hearing everyone's cries was overwhelming. My sister wanted to go with him. I felt such an exasperating helplessness. I wanted to go get lost in Nigeria. I wanted to know everything that happened to my father and know how the murder had taken place. But I came across tradition and culture once again... My mother just repeated: "My children, be strong."

Before placing the coffin in the ground, a woman came with food and water as, according to tradition, you have to place food and water in the grave so that his soul has something to eat and drink during the trip and not make it half way. They covered the box and, following tradition, each son grabbed a handful of soil and threw it on top of the coffin, expressing one wish while saying: "If there is life beyond, let this death not repeat itself."

They covered the grave and seeing that, according to tradition, the soul of the deceased travels through night, the family prepared a celebration, eating and drinking, while his soul traveled. At six in the morning, all of his children were called to put our feet on the grave to wish him a good trip and ask him to look out for his children. There was a different ritual every day. On the third day, as my eldest sister Dora was married, she had one day to herself. Her husband had to come to pay my father tribute. My sister Felicia – who was also married – was not allowed her husband's tribute because my father had not introduced the husband to the family. What I truly cared about was what had happened to my father. After several investigations, I was informed that the killer had

been a man who had lost his mind and chopped his ribs with a machete and was now locked up in his house. I told them to report him to the police but my mother abruptly said: "Festus, you are not going to change anything; this is how we live here and we are going home. In villages, people kill each other and nothing happens..." I replied: "In these villages, a chicken is worth more than a human being."

Once the ceremonies – that I did not understand, yet put up with to not disrespect my mother – ended, we headed to Benin City. It was nighttime when we arrived. I had decided: "I am leaving Nigeria." I sat beside Helen and told her I was going to get money and that we would leave with the three children. She was not here because of the work. She did not want to leave. Nigeria was her country. What I saw as a problem – tradition, customs, religion – was none for her. I stood up and went to speak with my mother. I repeatedly urged for money to leave Nigeria. My mother tried to calm me down with a series of reflections. That I had to complete my education and support my family. That life was not as easy as one thinks it is. That running away from what you dislike to go somewhere unknown is reckless.

That night, I went to speak with my friend Frank and told him what my mother had said. He also insisted that I had to complete my education, that he was quite hurt for what had happened to my father but that it would go away as time goes by. I then spoke with my friend Rita who told me: "Festus, you decide your future; and if you want money, I have taught you how to extract fluid from the gum tree. Work on that and you will have money for whatever you want." In the end, I turned to my mother and told her I did not want to study anymore and that I was going to work to earn some money and, thus, be able to leave the country. In light of this approach, my mother said everything that came to mind.



That I was out of my mind. That I was irresponsible for wanting to leave the country, leaving a woman and three children behind.

The next day, I went to work at the farm, extracting fluid from a gum tree. I would go alone and take food with me to stay there working the entire day. The following week, Helen –seeing that I was serious about this – came with me and dropped off the children at my mother’s. Over time, I rented a machine to extract fluid from the tree. We paid rent to the farm owner. I gave back the money Helen and my brother Denis had lent me and with the remaining money, I started to process my passport.

While I was applying for my passport, I would look at the world map and see the countries that were not in Africa. As Nigeria’s official language is English, my first choice was to go to the United States, Canada, England or Australia.

One month later, I had earned the money I needed and left to Lagos, Nigeria’s capital. On the bus, I found a series of boys who I befriended and who were also applying for a visa. The first few days, we stayed at a pension that we – between everyone – paid for with very little money. The four of us were there for more than one month, going to the United States embassy, until we were given a number to obtain the visa. When it was my turn, they told me I did not qualify to go to the United States. I tried with other countries, and always received the same response. We returned to the United States embassy and, this time, they told us that, in order to travel there, we needed 10,000 U.S. dollars.

Seeing that I was not successful, I decided to go back home, because I was not able to get the money they were asking for, not even by selling all of our properties.

During those days, the students planned a strike. The reason was the coup that a so-called Ogboro had attempted, but failed. All soldiers involved in this coup were executed following the

president's orders. Only the Ogboro leader survived, by escaping on a private jet. Ogboro had promised to improve the country and all students had put in their word, so we went out to protest.

The president called all parents to action to take their children out of school and off the streets and, thus, banned more than two children together on the street. That day, student leaders called to action for nobody to leave their homes. I will never be able to understand how a country that is in the top seven countries in the world who produce crude oil can have such a high percentage of poverty. That is why, despite the prohibition, we went out to protest. It was the bloodiest in Nigeria. Everything was so organized that we knocked down all prison doors and released the most radical prisoners, while burning many state vehicles.

Everyone was in favor of the students and proved it by walking through the streets holding a green leaf. The president in power, a soldier called Babangida, gave soldiers the order to go out onto the street and shoot anyone who was protesting. Many young people died, even those who were not protesting or were on the balconies of their own home. The order lasted five days.

For a long time, soldiers went from house to house investigating people who had participated in the strike. When I returned home, I told my mother I could not take it anymore and I wanted to leave the country. When my mother saw that the country was getting worse by the minute, she gave me permission to leave the country. She even gave me some money, around 7,000 Nairas, for my dream to happen, clarifying that the donation "is your life inheritance."

After our conversation, my mother left crying. I also fell to the ground crying, just thinking about how sad my mother was feeling. I tried to take back my decision of going to Europe, but something inside of me kept saying: "Boy, keep going; never let fear take hold of you."

I stood up and went to my mother's bedroom. She was sitting on the bed. "Mom", I said, "I am here to tell you I want to go to Europe." I sat beside her. She took out a paper bag, gave it to me and told me to count the money inside. "Tell me if that is enough," she added. I answered that, unfortunately, it was not enough and that I would need around four thousand U.S. dollars. She then started saying out the names of family members who could lend us money. I wrote them down on a piece of paper. When I finished, I went to bed. I spent the whole night tossing and turning, thinking about what my mother had said. In the end, she reached the conclusion that I was not a bad son; I simply could not handle her way of living, her culture, her tradition, or her religion.

In the morning, my mother called me saying that it was the perfect time to find people in their homes. We started to visit the family members I had written down the night before. At the first house we visited, the man offered us breakfast that we did not accept. My mother told him the reason for the visit. In response, he said that he would not give a single Naira to my mother or any child who wanted to leave for Europe. My mother thanked him for the visit and we left. This went on for several more visits. When it was time to eat, we had succeeded in getting five hundred Nairas.

After eating, my mother, who was waiting for me at the gate, told me that, in order to get money, we had to sell the car, by taking it to a car dealership. We tried several times, until one man said he would buy it but he could not give us the money until the following day.

Upon our return home, I felt like the car was sinking. I soon realized that there was something inside the car. I got out, tried pushing it but was unsuccessful in doing so. My mother got out and I saw that she was up to her knees in water. We both started pushing and took the car out of the hole where it had fallen in. However we could, we emptied the water from inside the car.

When we were ready and about to get going again, two men appeared, pointing their guns at us. One of them, while threatening us, approached us saying: "Stop and get out of the car." We were on a private path. As I could, I explained that we had taken the wrong path. Suspicious, they inspected the car and registered both of us. As they saw we were carrying no weapons or dangerous objects, they told us: "Behave like a Nigerian", which meant: bribe. My mother gave them money and they let us leave. It was an area reserved only for the rich. She then said: "Festus, you will be successful in your trip to Europe because for them not to have killed us here is a sign that your trip will go well."

The following day, my mother asked me for the car documents and we left to sell it. I can never thank my mother enough for what she has done for me. Once we sold the car, she said:

"Parents always want the best for their children. Children are people who want to achieve something. Festus, you have not been a bad child. You have never disrespected us; you just want to live what your mind tells you. Son, I will always be by your side. I want to know when you will be returning to Nigeria." "In two or three years."

"The money from the car is yours. Whenever you want, you can go to Lagos to apply for the visa. Thank God; he is the greatest of all. Go son. Fulfill yourself and may everything go as you want. Never forget about your family." I got on my knees and thanked her over and over again. Although I told my mother I would return in two or three years, inside I thought that my dream was to live in Europe, where there was democracy. In Nigeria, I felt overwhelmed by all of the rules you had to follow and also by tradition. I thought about a freedom I did not have at the time. I called Helen to tell her that the next day I would be leaving to Lagos for my visa and that it would take a few days. I

grabbed my children and tried explaining them the situation. My six-year-old was perhaps able to understand something; but not my four-year-old, let alone my one-year-old. Everyone cried, but there was no going back. I spent the entire day playing with my children. I was having a rough time on the inside because I had to leave my children and wife behind. I had to be strong and follow the path that I started with the help of my mother.

The next day, at five in the morning, I saw a Peugeot 504 approach that came to pick me up. My mother – who had planned my trip to Lagos – told me: “This man will accompany you to Lagos until you have your visa and the ticket for your trip.”

The trip lasted six hours. My mother knew the driver. During the ride, he told me: “With the money this trip to Europe is going to cost your mother, you can buy a house with ten rooms. With that money, you can also buy some lands, rent them out and live a good life off of rent.” I replied that my wellbeing was worth much more than a house and some lands. He also had the following to say: “Europeans do not like black men; that is what everyone who has been there says.”

That said, we got to the “to gate Lagos” line, which is a security gate to get into Nigeria’s capital. We went through security paying a certain amount of money. Then, I told the driver to take me to the Polish embassy because there was a cook I knew there. The guard called the cook and, shortly afterwards, he came. He asked me for my parents’ authorization, the money and the passport and told me to come back in three hours.

Meanwhile, we were seeing other embassies. Almost all of them were on the same street of Lagos. Most of them had an endless line. At the end of the road, I noticed a red, yellow and red flag I had never seen before. I did not know what country it belonged to. At the entrance, I read the name “Spanish embassy”.

It had fewer lines than the rest. I got out of the car and saw that there were not any soldiers either. I asked one of the security guards the requirements to apply for the visa to that country that I was unaware about. He said that with a return ticket, I could obtain the tourist visa.

The embassy was closed until the following day. I went to the car and the driver was sleeping. It was four o'clock and, since we left Benin City, we had not drunk or eaten anything. We sat down on a wooden bench on that street and asked a street vendor for rice, beans and banana, including water and a soft-drink.

We returned to the Polish embassy. When we got there, the guard gave us the passport and wished me safe travels and good luck. I opened the passport and saw the visa was stamped. That was when I felt shivers down my spine and was scared. I ran to the car and told the driver. I told him we had to sleep in Lagos because I wanted to go to the Spanish embassy the next day.

We bought bottled water to shower and slept in the car. The next day, we returned to the Spanish embassy. There were two well-dressed men at the entrance. They were Nigerian. They asked me the reason for my visit and I told them it was to apply for a visa. They informed me that they worked for a visa agency and that a return ticket, 500 U.S. dollar, my passport and 50 euro were enough for the agency. If I fulfilled those requirements, they would give me my passport stamped with the visa at twelve o'clock, that same day. I did not trust that offer and made a deal to always be by their side.

I needed four photos and the return ticket. We went to a travel agency and I asked about the cheapest fare. I did not care about the city. I wanted to leave Nigeria and did not care about the number of stops; I just wanted to be able to reach Europe. The trip with Ghana Airways cost me 4,000 Nairas. The ticket was from Lagos to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The airline made a stop in eight

African cities until arriving at Las Palmas. I did not know where Spain or Las Palmas was situated.

We returned to the Spanish embassy with all documents in order and I filled out the application for a ninety-day stay. The boys – with whom I had made a deal by paying them 50 U.S. dollar – handed me the passport with the visa inside and I paid them what we agreed on. These boys are usually scammers because then they ask you for more. This time, I was lucky and just gave them what we agreed on. Once all paperwork was completed, we returned to Benin City. I was so eager to tell my mother everything I had lived through in Lagos. During my return, the driver started pointing out the pros and cons of emigration. That there were families abandoned with the promise of an uncertain return. That children were given an education through mail or over the phone. That there were family members who had sold everything thinking that Europe was the solution, but that many of them had returned without anything and were in Nigeria living on the streets without any money. He even advised me not to risk anything for a dream that was like taking your chances on the lottery. However, while he was giving his speech, my mind continued to meticulously prepare for the trip.

My mother was sitting on the terrace and, the second she saw us, she came down running to welcome us. Helen and my three children also came down. Before getting out of the car, I told them I had all of the documents and the ticket with Ghana Airways. When getting out of the car, they asked me what day I was leaving and I told them March 4. So, my mother then hired the driver to come pick me up on the 3rd at 12 p.m. My mother and Helen gave me an emotional hug. “What a relentless son I have”, said my mother. “Until you meet your goal, you will not stop. I will miss you. I will not have anyone to argue with. On the other hand, I will not see you every day like the rest of my children.” Helen would

not stop crying. I tried to comfort her by telling her that I was going to another country for our own good and our children's. I was quite exhausted, ate dinner and, as soon as I could, went to bed.

The next day, I bid my mother farewell in the traditional sense. My mother made me get on my knees to pray, grabbed my head, blew out air from her mouth and said that, whichever place I come across, I must always look for the good. For which she blew out air three times, as a family blessing. When I finished praying, I went to see my friends. I started with Frank. When I told him I was leaving to Spain, he started laughing as, according to him, Spain is not well-known in Europe and every Nigerian who aspires to leave his country, emigrates to the United States, Canada, Australia, England, France, Germany or Holland.

"How are you going to send cars from Spain?", asked Frank. "I am not leaving Nigeria to send cars. I am going in search of a better life, without being a slave to culture, tradition or religion. I also want to live calmly and fulfill my ambitions as a person."

Other friends also came to see me and nobody understood why I was leaving Nigeria as, according to them, those who emigrate aspire to a life where car and home acquisition prevail. They did not understand me.

When I got home, my mother already had her rituals prepared. To not argue, I listened to her and did everything she told me to do. During my last days in Nigeria, my mother would not stop throwing herbs all over my body to protect me from the evils of life. Until I left Nigeria, my mother had to practice one of her rituals on me every day.

The day came to bid me farewell. I gathered with my siblings and asked them to watch over my children and my wife. The driver arrived at eleven in the morning and took me, along with my mother, my wife and a family friend to Lagos. After over six



hours of driving, we got to Lagos. As we had no money to pay for a hotel, we bought food at the airport parking lot and slept there. My flight departed at six in the morning. So, my mother woke me up at four. The time had come for me to say goodbye to my mother and my wife. Until then, I felt very strong and powerful, but at the time of my farewell, I felt alone and empty. I would not stop crying. Even on the plane itself, a man came up to me and asked why I was crying so much. I told him it was the first time I was leaving home and going to Spain. The man cheered me up and told me that every beginning is tough but I would soon grow accustomed to it.

The flight lasted around twelve hours. We stopped over in five African countries until arriving at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The man who had comforted me asked me how much money I was carrying and I told him I had 200 U.S. dollars. He told me that the right amount to go through customs was five hundred U.S. dollars and that I could be deported if I did not have that amount of money on me. He told me to get in front of him and that, if the police asked me for more money, he would lend me it. When it was my turn, the national police asked me for my passport and the international certificate of vaccination. I handed it over. They then asked me if it was my first time visiting Spain. I said it was. They then asked me about the hotel where I was staying at and if I had any family in Las Palmas. I told them I did not.

When leaving, another two police officers stopped me, registered me, placed me in a room, and looked at my bags, in which I was only carrying two shirts, two pants and one pair of sandals. When they saw I had nothing they were looking for, they showed me the exit. I then looked for a phone booth to call my mother. I thought that I could be able to call my house with Nigerian coins. I tried asking for change on the street with one hundred U.S. dollars in hand and nobody replied. Everyone just kept walking

past me. I then realized that nobody spoke English in Las Palmas, but instead a language I had never heard. I finally found a taxi driver who understood a bit of English and he took me to a neighborhood where many emigrants live. I found a phone booth there, where they exchanged my U.S. dollars. When I got to that neighborhood, near the port of Las Palmas, I saw many black people on the streets, as well as many drunks.

I was walking into a phone booth saying that I wanted to get through to Nigeria. They showed me to a line where there were more than thirty people waiting to use the phones. When it was my turn, I dialed the phone number my mother had given me (the only one there was from a man in my neighborhood). After several tries, I was finally able to speak with my mother. I thanked her for everything she had done for me and I told her that, the next day, I was going to search for a shipping company to send her money so she could get back the money from the return to Nigeria.

My arrival in Spain entailed a complete change. I had never seen two Europeans together except for at the cinema. The thing that most shocked me when exiting the airport was being surrounded by white people; I felt so strange. Although I did not understand their language, I was not scared about people rejecting me either. Everything was new for me. It was the first time I had seen a taxi with a taximeter or streets with lights and me alone in the taxi. That was quite odd as, in my country, taxis pick up and drop off people along the way. I saw well-dressed police officers with clean cars.

When we were on our way to the booth, two police officers stopped us at a security check. I thought it was to try to bribe us, like they would do in my country, but that was not the case; they let us through. The streets were paved and clean. When we went by the pier, where – for the first time – I was able to gaze at a very large ship that greatly caught my attention.

At the phone booth where I had spoken to my mother, they recommended cheap accommodation. When I arrived, I started to bang on the door, just like in my country, until a man came downstairs and told me there was a doorbell and I had to call by pressing the button. The boarding house owner – who barely spoke English – told me the pension would cost me 800 Pesetas. He took me to my room and showed me the bathroom and how to use it. I was shocked. When I was at school, we visited the Sheraton hotel and everything I saw surprised me, but I never thought I would use the same systems that were at the hotel we visited. I had never seen anything like it: running water to shower, a washbasin, and also a toilet with water to then relieve oneself. Once the boarding house owner finished explaining, he left and I stayed a good while looking over and over again at how water came out of the toilet. I flushed several times and could not stop surprising myself. I returned to my room, lay down on the bed without having dinner and fell asleep.

At six in the morning the following day, I showered, had breakfast and went to the pier to look around. I saw two lines of African and Asian people mixed around. I asked a group from Ghana why they were forming lines and they said it was to find a job, as a businessman would come here in half an hour to hire workers. The jobs they offered were to clean ships, stores or relocation, at a price depending on the strength of work and time hired. I lined up and told the group from Ghana that I had arrived the day before and that I had gone to the port to see the ships as I had never seen them in my life. They told me that every day was going to be a surprise with things I had never seen in my life. They told me a phrase a recall quite well: “Europe is the light for Africans.” Shortly after, a couple of well-dressed men came, repeating out loud: “Ships, stores, ships, stores...”

# Chapter 4

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## Spain

It seemed like a dream. Several days of my life had gone by with a great deal of events that I could barely understand. I was alone in order to find work in Spain. Far from Nigeria and to make my dream come true. So far, things had been going well for me. Maybe I would find my first job and maybe I could earn many Pesetas, or now Euros, which is the currency in Europe.

The line was becoming shorter insofar as those men handed out work. We were mostly young people from all over the world. I had never seen so many different people. A man came and asked for six men to clean a ship's fuel storage bunker. I followed my friends. I had never been on a ship but wanted to work.

On my way to the ship, a man I bumped into from Ghana told me that he was in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria for two years now and that he lived with others on an abandoned ship where most Africans lived. That way, nobody had to pay for electricity or water. He asked me if I wanted to live with him. He would find an area just for me. I would save money from the pension like this.

We got to the ship. We went down a ramp and I realized that it was wobbly and I was going to get dizzy. I tried to get off but the Ghanaian grabbed me by the hand and told me: "Do not be afraid; the ship is on water, so it is normal for it to move because the sea is not always steady."

"I am feeling dizzy."

"What is your name?", he asked.

"Festus", I responded.

"Well, if you want to work, come with me; if not, I will call someone else. You have been very lucky as you have been in Las Palmas for less than one day and already have work. There are men here who have been searching for a job for months. Come on, do not be a wuss", he said.

My friend Michel opened the fuel storage bunker and went inside. He gave me a torch to shed light. He then got out and told me we had to change clothes. He gave me a pair of jeans and a shirt and tied the torch to my head to be able to see within the storage bunker. The smell was so strong that I threw up. Michel started laughing. The dizziness started to go away bit by bit and I was able to hang on until it was time to eat. All of the men who worked, took their food out, but I had none. I had not gone prepared for that. The boss asked me why I was not eating. I replied that it was my first day in Las Palmas. He replied that, without eating, I could not work. He left and, before long, he came back with a milk carton and a pack of cookies. I ate it and drank everything. It was the first time in my life that I had drank so much milk in one day.

I wanted to finish the job so I could call my mother to tell her about my first experience. At the end, they paid me 4,000 Pesetas. I went to a phone booth to talk to my mother. This time, there were not many people.

When I picked up the phone, my mother told me: "Son, thank goodness you have left Nigeria. The federal government

has posted an order, forcing everyone who participated in the student strike to present themselves at the police station; whoever failed to appear would be declared wanted and captured." At that moment, my entire happiness had turned into sadness. I was out of harm's way but my siblings were not. Before hanging up, my mother begged me to come back. I immediately said "no", let alone in these circumstances.

When work was over, I quickly went to pick up my belongings at the boarding house where I lived. I paid what I owed and went to the abandoned ship. When I arrived, I saw Michel cooking. When he saw me, he said he already had an area for me, and pointed at it. I put down the only bag I was carrying. I was thoughtful for a long time because of what my mother had said. I told my friend Michel who told me it was best to ask the Spanish government for asylum. I decided to go to the police the next day.

As soon as day broke, I grabbed all of the documents I had on me and asked Michel where the police was. He said he did not know as nobody went to the police because they would deport you as of immediately. But I had a serious issue and trusted that they might see me because of that.

On the street, I asked people where the police was. People would move away. Tired of walking without achieving anything, I went back to the ship. As soon as my friends saw me, they asked me what the police had said. I told them that nobody answered me on the street as I spoke English and people did not understand me.

So they advised me that, if I went to the police, to take the documents, and leave the passport. That way, they would not be able to deport me, as the Las Palmas police were tough on African men. One of them told me that, one night, they grabbed him and gave him a beating. As he had no citizenship, he was not allowed

to go to the hospital and his friends healed his wounds. They told me that they cannot beat you officially, but in secret they can.

I thought that when I got to Spain, I would be free from all the danger that went on in my country, but my mother's news that I was wanted worried me greatly. Everything was so dark and quite difficult to solve. That day, Michel prepared a typical Ghanaian dish (*fufu* and soup), which was a type of mashed potato with spinach sauce. As he saw me so uneasy, he told me not to worry and to try again.

I realized that we lived on an abandoned ship, much worse than when we were in Nigeria. For a moment, I looked back. In Africa, the whole world talked about Europe as the dream for any African. The situation, however, was quite different. Here, nobody understood me and neither did I understand their language. Despite that, at no point did I consider returning to Nigeria.

Once again, I spent the entire morning looking for the police without success. I returned to the ship. There were many people. Some were pessimists, and talked about returning to their country. Others said they had been in Las Palmas for four years and still not found a job. Nonetheless, I thought about me coming to Europe and was determining to not return to my country.

I discussed that with Michel for a while and he told me that many men who had lived on the ship before had gone out for a walk and never returned. He said that some of them – after a while – had been sent a letter from their countries telling them that the police had deported them. Maybe that is why Michel advised me not to ask the police for asylum, to live with them and let time go by.

It was clear that if someone tried deporting me to my country, it would have to be over my dead body. I was so worried that I went to a corner of the ship and fell asleep just wondering.

The following morning, I continued searching for the police. I would stop at all traffic lights with my repetitive question. "Police station," I would say, but everything was useless; nobody understood me. Then, I saw a car parked on the widest street in Las Palmas. I approached it and asked the man if he spoke English. He replied that he did not, but using hand gestures, told me to wait a bit more for someone who did speak that language. A lady came and asked me in English: "Can I help you?" I was speechless when I heard a white person speak English so well and so clearly. The lady repeated the same question. Seeing that I did not react, she grabbed me by the hand and then, I took that time to tell her about my problems: that I was wanted in Nigeria, that I wanted to go to the police, but that nobody understood me, that I wanted to submit my documents... Without a second thought, the lady asked me to get into the car. Already inside, she introduced me to her husband, her son and her mother and we had a quick conversation in English.

When we got to the police station, the lady got out of the car with me and showed me where I had to go, wishing me luck. When we said goodbye, I asked her: "Are you leaving me alone?" "I cannot help you here", she replied. I went upstairs, staring at the lady the entire time. I went in search of the immigration department. An immigrant there pointed at the office. I knocked on the door and a man named Cortés greeted me. In English, he asked me what I wanted.

"I am a Nigerian student and I have a serious problem in my country for participating in a student strike. My country's government has issued a search and arrest warrant for all students who participated in said protest."

"Why have you come to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria?"

The man stood up and, in front of a map, asked me again why I had traveled to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and why not



any other African country. I told him that all countries are the same in Africa. Then, without looking straight at me, he told me I had two weeks to leave Spain; otherwise, I would be deported to Nigeria. I tried explaining the reasons for my trip once more, but he replied that he did not understand English. I started to cry and left his office.

When leaving the office and going downstairs, one hour and a half later, the first and only person I saw was Argelia, the woman who so kindly had accompanied and was waiting for me. She reminded me about my mother's patience and companionship through Nigerian lands. Maybe that is why I referred to her as my white mother, that and many more acts of kindness from her.

When I saw her, I thought I was dreaming, but I was not; it was her indeed. She called me: "Festus! Festus!" She went upstairs, grabbed me by the hand and calmed me down because I was crying. She was interested about what had happened. I told her everything. Then, she asked me to take her to the police officer. She walked in without being called and was talking to the police officer for quite a while in Spanish, which I did not understand. At the end, the immigration manager started to write up documents. When he was done, my Spanish mother signed the documents without telling me what she was signing. I also signed. She told me I had to go sign every day, Monday through Friday, at nine in the morning at the same office. She then gave me a permit to circulate within the island, telling me that, if I decided to leave one day, I had to ask for permission. Argelia grabbed me by the hand and we left the office. On the street, walking towards the car where her family was waiting, she told me: "Festus, I have signed as your interpreter and guardian. Now I will go with you to the Red Cross where they will appoint a lawyer to handle your case, because you will need it."

On the way, her mother and son gave me some coins. I do not remember the amount but I do the beautiful gesture. They also gave me their home phone number saying that, whichever problem I had, to call them.

Argelia walked into the Red Cross with me. A very pretty girl called Juana greeted us. During my two years in Las Palmas, she was my social worker. My Spanish mother explained my problem to her and how she found me on the street, lost, without understanding any Spanish, and without a roof over my head. Juana, the social worker, said that she understood English quite well. Argelia told me all of this before leaving, telling me that I was in good hands.

My white mother told me that she would like me to go to the beach with her husband and son as it was her husband's day off. She stood up and gave me two kisses. She then said: "Do not worry; they will take care of you." I thanked her for everything and apologized for making her lose time assisting me. "I am a mother", she said, "and I do not know where my son will be tomorrow; if he were to be in your place, I would like someone to help." We looked at each other and, at the same time, our eyes drew tears, and she left.

The social worker, Juana, kept listening to me without uttering a single word. She then asked me to take a seat and hand her the documents they had given me at the police station. She left and, in no time, came back with a man who asked me a couple of questions in English. I filled out some documents and, when the man left and I was alone with the social worker. She told me that the man was a doctor and wanted to do a checkup before I left. The Spanish state wanted to know if I had any health issues, especially HIV. Never in my entire life had I undergone a checkup or analysis. I remember one time I had a motorcycle accident in

Nigeria. They took me to my house and my mother spent two days placing a washcloth soaked in warm water on the area to make the swelling go down. When things were not improving, she took me to a pharmacy where I was administered an injection.

Consequently, I could not believe everything that was happening to me. Much less, while searching for a police station, a woman would spend her entire morning on me, instead of taking her son to the beach with her family. It seemed like a dream. Then, the social worker and doctor who gave me a checkup happened. I thought I was dreaming. The social worker gave me many documents for the analysis and told me that the following day, after signing at the police station, I had to come by the Red Cross. She told me that they would search for somebody to give me Spanish lessons, as well as a psychologist to help me. I told her I did not need a psychologist because I knew exactly what my problems were, and settled for the Spanish state granting me asylum.

At that time, the doctor walked in and asked me:

“When was your last meal?”

“Yesterday at night”, I replied.

“At what time did you eat?”, insisted the social worker.

“Yesterday at night”, I repeated.

They could not believe I went so long without eating. Then, the doctor drew blood from me. It was the first time in my life. He examined my heart, the pulse and several more things. I continued to be surprised.

I remember that my grandfather died when I was in high school and he had never gone to the doctor’s office in his entire life. When it was over, they brought me cookies and fruit juice until I recovered. Then, Juana called a lawyer responsible for

refugees in legal matters and they guided me to a social house called "Abandoned Jesus."

Upon my return to the ship, I bumped into Michel. He was interested about what had happened. I told him everything. I told him about the woman who had helped me, and that I had obtained a permit from the police to be able to circulate freely within Las Palmas.

I showed Michel the document that the police had given me. Distrustful, he warned me that many Africans had fallen into a trap. "While they give you this document", he said, "they prepare to deport you." We, Africans, are easy to deceive as we are in Europe and, for all we know and how we have been educated, we do not understand what goes on around here."

With respect to the woman who had helped me, he said: "She must be a saint, not a mortal. Maybe she is a spirit that God has sent to help you. But never fail to see that there are devils in between."

I told Michel that I was going to the ship to pick up my belongings and that the following day I had to go see a lawyer.

"A lawyer? You have no idea how much a lawyer costs in Europe. Who is going to pay for this lawyer?"

"The Red Cross", I said.

"Festus, I wish you the best luck in the world. I like you, but you never listen to anybody."

"When I follow my heart and head, things have gone well for me."

When bidding Michel farewell, he hugged me and whispered: "Another African victim."

With the little that I had on the ship, I left the pier of Las Palmas, searching for the house that, according to my social worker, was called "Abandoned Jesus." I finally found it. When I arrived, I knocked on the door and a man with a white beard who spoke little

English came out with what I thought he wanted to tell me. I handed him the document that Juana had given me and he told me to wait. Ten minutes later, he was back. I filled out some documents and he gave me a room. I asked the man if I could shower. Despite him being reluctant at first, upon my insistence, he allowed me to shower. When I got to the room, I was with another Saharawi man who just spoke French. I had to share the room with him. I was with that man for two months. I was not able to have dinner that night as the serving time had elapsed and I had to settle for the fruit juice I was given at the Red Cross.

The “Abandoned Jesus” house was governed by a series of co-habitation rules. At 9 a.m., we all had to leave the house until 1:30 p.m., when food was served at the door. At 8 p.m., we all had to be at the house; otherwise, we would be left out all night. The regulation says that, if you break the rules three times, you will be kicked out. The use of showers was communal and we were only allowed to shower three times a week. I did not like this as I liked showering every day, but I had to abide by the rules.

As I had to go to the police station to sign on a daily basis, every morning, I would ask if they could give me a bit of breakfast. They said “no,” that it was not the time, and I went to the police station without having breakfast. I had gone almost 24 hours without eating.

After signing at the police station, I went to the Red Cross. They gave me the results of the analysis. Everything was ok, but they warned me that I had to eat every day and that the following day, a lawyer would come. They also informed me that UNICEF had a certain amount of money destined for refugees. And they encouraged me to submit an application to the police. If it was approved, they would be the ones to inform me the result when appropriate.

I left the Red Cross happy about everything that had happened, especially about the news that they would give me financial aid for six months, as without documents, I could not work. Thinking about all of this, I arrived at Santa Catalina square – I think that is the name – which was full of bars. As nobody understood me, I used my finger to point to what I wanted to eat. I chose bread with sardines, a menu that I repeated for two weeks after going to the police station to sign every day.

A few weeks after being at the “Abandoned Jesus” house, I called Argelia. I thought she had forgotten about me. Nevertheless, the second she picked up the phone, she recognized my voice. She asked me how I was doing and told me that she wanted to see me one day to tell her about my current situation. I gave her the “Abandoned Jesus” house phone number so she could call me.

One good day, I was first in line to eat. The priest – the man with the white beard who had greeted me – called me over to tell me I had a call. It was Argelia. I felt like screaming, laughing, and crying all at once by seeing someone worry about me in a country where I had no family. I thanked her a thousand times. She told me I did not need to thank her and that she had called to tell me I was not alone, that her husband, mother, son and herself were my family and that, whatever happens, they will always be with me. I started crying. She tried to calm me down over the phone. I kept her words of encouragement in my heart. We agreed on meeting the following day. I hung up the phone. When I got to the dining room, everyone was eating. The priest had reserved a table for me and asked why I was crying so much. I told him a friend had called and I felt protected by having a family here. “How lucky you are!”, he said. I finished eating and went to bed. And so the days went by. In the morning, I would go sign at the police station and then, I would usually stop by the Red Cross. Juan, my social

worker, told me there would soon be a girl who would give me basic Spanish lessons to be able to interact with people and that the police had stopped by the center to request information about my behavior.

While at the Red Cross, they introduced the lawyer Ignacio Diez to me. He was a very educated and respectful man. He asked for all my documents. He asked me if the police were wasting my time by making me go to the police station to sign every day and if I needed a psychologist. I told him I was fine, that I felt protected and that I did not need a psychologist. He gave me a phone number in case I needed anything, as he was in charge of processing all documents for refugees in the Canary Islands. He also gave me an appointment to go to his office. At the end, I thanked him and the social worker.

When the visit was over, I went on my way. As everything was new for me, I could not stop walking through Las Palmas and looking at the buildings that seemed huge and properly-built highways. Everything seemed so new and very pretty if I compared it with what I had left in my African hometown.

As agreed on over the phone, I went to meet with Argelia. When I arrived, I gave her my hand, as customary in my country, and she greeted me with two kisses. I looked at her eyes and felt affection towards me; the love of a mother to her child, as she would not stop asking me if I was well and if I needed anything. She told me she had no money to give me but I was going to have plenty of affection and never be alone. During this visit with Argelia, I felt like I was on top of the world.

When the visit was over, I went over to the bar to buy my usual snack: bread with sardines. Then, I would go to the beach, not to tan as I was already black, but instead to gaze at the waves and see how people swam, as I did not know how to swim. I was

passionate about seeing how people dove into the sea and swam freely. I felt safer as the days went by and, I would say to myself: "I believe in time."

And so on, one day after the next. At the police station, I was always given a document that justified I had signed. One day, they gave me a blue card that I was unsure about. I went to the Red Cross to ask what it was. When I showed Juana, she stood up to congratulate me and explained that Madrid had accepted my application and that, therefore, I was entitled to UNICEF financial aid. For that, I needed an account number at a bank. I did not know what that was. I had never had one. But they advised me to go to the nearest bank and ask for someone who spoke English.



# Chapter 5

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## Struggle

**W**hen leaving the Red Cross, on my way to Bankinter, the bank nearest to where I was, I stopped to think about everything that was happening to me. I was going to walk into a bank and there were no soldiers, police officers or security guards around. How different the world – Nigeria – where I came from was. It was like night and day.

I walked into the bank and, when it was my turn, I told the cashier lady that I wanted to open an account. She asked me for my ID. I gave her the blue card I was given at the police station. She went to the next office for a moment and, when she walked out, she told me I was able to open a passbook. In just a few seconds, she gave it to me. It was as if I were a boy with new shoes. I would not stop opening and closing the passbook. I went to the Red Cross and gave the passbook to the social worker. She told me that UNICEF would pay me 25,000 Pesetas per month for one

year, which they soon reduced to six months. I could not believe it. She ended up telling me that, by the end of the following month, the money would already be posted to my account. I left happy and content, and began my usual path to the beach.

Along the way, I saw a phone booth and called Argelia. I told her everything that had happened to me and thanked her once again for everything she had done for me. If, when I left Nigeria, I would have known I would find a woman like Argelia and how she treated me, I would not have believed it. I later called my mother in Benin City. After several tries, I was able to get through. I told her everything: from what had happened with Argelia, to getting a blood analysis, and having a passbook at a bank, including my current situation. I asked her about my children and my wife. She replied that everyone was fine. I sent her mementos for my siblings and friends. My mother told me: "My dear son, you do not believe in saints, tradition or any of that; however, you have been sent an angel. You think it is a person of flesh and blood but it is an angel."

Once more, when it was lunchtime, I went to the bar and, as always, ordered bread and sardines. At sunset, I went back to "Abandoned Jesus" to eat dinner.

The following day, I resumed the familiar routine. When I was sitting on a bench reading a book by James Hardly Chase, a Hindu man approached me. He kindly greeted me in English and asked me if I was Nigerian. He immediately explained to me that he had started his life in Lagos working as a cook at a hotel and that he easily recognized Nigerians by their face and accent. He told me he had been living in Las Palmas for over thirty years. He told me several anecdotes from his country and asked me if I had a work and residence permit. I showed him my blue card. He pointed out to me that I could not legally work with that blue card, but that – if

I wanted to – he could give me a job at his warehouse. I replied that – if he wanted to – I could start working right there and then. He told me he would think about it. I went with him and he showed me the warehouse. The next day, I started work at 10 a.m., after signing at the police station.

I called Argelia to tell her what had happened. She warned me that, without the corresponding documents, I was not allowed to work. She also said that the people who had hired me could exploit me, working many hours for little pay. I told her I did not care if I was paid little, because the only thing I wanted was to send my family money, see my children play, give them a bicycle and whatever they need for their life in Nigeria. She insisted not to work until having all documents in order; but I – stubborn-minded and determined – wanting to earn some money for my family, decided to work the following day. I was so happy that I called my mother to tell her I had found a job and that every penny earned would go to my children. My mother's reaction was the same as always. "Son, God is with you."

I could not sleep that night because of how happy I was. When seeing the light of day and not looking at the time, I got up. As it was a day to shower, I was the first to shower and also the first to sign at the police station. Then, I went to the Red Cross like I did every day. I told Juana that, as of that day, I would not come in every day because I had found a job. "You're taking a risk", Juana said, "because if the police find out, they will request that your financial aid be taken away." I replied that I had to help my family and needed to work. She insisted that I would not do that, especially when I told her a Hindu man had hired me to work at his warehouse.

She liked the work idea even less as I could sustain a work injury and, only then, would encounter serious problems. But

she saw me in such good spirits that we said goodbye and she told me to give her a phone number in case she had something urgent to tell me.

I was the first person at work; I even arrived before the company owner. After greeting me, he told me to wait. Shortly after, he walked out with a very muscular native boy. His name was Gregorio. The owner told me I had to work with him. He took me to a very large warehouse where there were many boxes. He told me that every week, a container with household appliances and canned food would arrive.

Before starting work, everyone ate breakfast. I did not take anything to eat. The boss told me I had to eat before starting to work as it was very heavy work and he did not want to see a dead black man at the warehouse. He had extra food on him and gave me a portion. He told me that his wife worked there and would prepare food for me. He also clarified that the Hindu man paid his employees poorly. However, I told him I did not care as long as I earned some money. I think they thought they could fool me.

They closed the warehouse and we went to a store by car. When arriving, the Hindu man told me I had to work from ten in the morning to ten at night, Monday through Saturday, and that I would be given 10,000 Pesetas every week. I said "thank you" without a second thought.

Me and Gregorio went to the warehouse once again and, along the way, he told me he had been working with this man for more than fifteen years and that many Africans had worked with him but only for a short while, because it was a lot of work and little money. He also told me that, in many cases, the police would go get them at the warehouse because when they left work, they would go sell drugs to survive.

I worked a lot on my first day, until nine in the evening. I was tired. When I arrived at “Abandoned Jesus,” the door was already closed. I rang the doorbell and, after several calls, the priest, furious, appeared, telling me that the door was closed and would not open until the following day. He warned me that the rules were there for a purpose. I – saddened and apologetic – apologized. I kept looking at the window until he disappeared. I sat down at the entrance. A while later, he came back and opened the door.

I went to my room. My roommate, the Saharawi man, was already sleeping. When he saw me, he got up as he grew worried when he did not see me at dinner. I told him what had happened to me. He took out a box from under his bed. Inside was a steak fillet and bread, the only food he was able to grab for me. I thanked him.

When I went to work the next day, I told the Hindu man that I had to get off work before 8 p.m. I even told him that, when I had some money saved up, I would rent a house and not have to worry about trouble with my residency. That day, I got off at 7:30 p.m. Gregorio and I had been handing out packages to several stores.

When I walked in, the priest told me that if I had any money or valuable belongings at the house, I had to give them to him as they were not liable for lost or stolen objects. I still had 100 U.S. dollars that I brought from my country. I took them out from under the mattress and, when I got to work, I asked my boss to exchange that money for Pesetas.

Work that day consisted of handing out bags with food. I was given some tips in Pesetas, which I calculated in Nairas. Come nighttime, I went back to “Abandoned Jesus” with 500 Pesetas and gave half to the priest to save them for me. And so, I started to hand him money for several days.

The weekend was here and the businessman gave me 10,000 Pesetas. I called Argelia to tell her. She told me that, with the same number of work hours, people from Spain earned much more and that they could go back home and rest in the afternoon. I told her that I had come to help my family and that it was all the same to me.

Sunday was here, the day that Argelia would come to pick me up to go on a field trip. Her husband, mother and son arrived with another car behind them. They all got out to greet me. We started the journey to a camping area. When arriving, I told Argelia that we were going into the woods and it was strange that we were not carrying any machetes or weapons. What if a dangerous animal attacked us? She told me that the only dangerous animal there was me. I did not want to go into the woods until she grabbed me by the hand and told me not to be afraid. I told her that in Nigeria, when walking into the woods, we always took weapons in case a snake or ferocious animal attacked us. That was why I was scared of going into the woods without anything for self-defense. They would not stop laughing. They told me that Europe is quite different than Africa and to be calm.

They prepared the barbecue and started to grill steak with potatoes wrapped in aluminum foil. After several days, it was the first time I had eaten a hot meal in good conditions and as a family, which was what I liked the most. Nacho, Argelia's niece's boyfriend, was with me the whole time playing football. We took some photos. We had a good time and laughed a lot. It was an unforgettable day. In the evening, after a great day, they dropped me off at "Abandoned Jesus."

The next week, I called the Red Cross and the social worker told me to go to the bank to see if the money had been posted. She also told me that Madrid had opened my file and that there

was a small issue: they needed some sort of document or passport from my country and, until they had it, they could not give me the brown card.

I destroyed my passport and, out of fear, had reported to the police that I had come on a stowaway vessel. But they wanted to have some kind of document from my country of origin. I told them I would ask my mother. The only thing they wanted to do was certify I was Nigerian.

I went to the bank with my passbook, which I always had on me. They asked me for my ID and then, they updated the passbook, which did have money on it. My legs and hands began to shake. I could not believe what was happening to me. I thought, how could it be that in Africa you can live with no help at all, yet, on a Spanish island, you have everything. Even me, who had arrived from another country, had a bed, warm meals, a doctor, lawyer, and even financial aid. I was confused and overjoyed at the same time.

I went to work content. I decided that I would not use the money UNICEF gave me, as I could live off of the salary I earned from the Hindu man and my own savings. I was happy. I even walked through the streets singing Bob Marley songs, my favorite. For me, his songs are messages of support, both for when you are feeling happy or sad, as they always cheer you up.

Those days, I went around looking for an apartment to live in and, consequently, without a schedule, be able to fulfill with the work schedule. My boss introduced me to a woman who said she had an apartment for rent in the Pelayo building. I asked for the price and she said 25,000 Pesetas. I bargained and she left it at 20,000 per month, plus electricity and water. I went to see the apartment. It was to my liking, so the following day, I paid the amount we had agreed on. She handed over the keys.

I called Argelia to tell her and she told me that the area where I had rented the apartment was not very advisable. I also informed Juana about my new apartment and she said the same thing Argelia did. However, I clarified that I had rented the apartment just to sleep, nothing else.

I went to bid my farewell to the priest at “Abandoned Jesus” and pick up what little I had left there. I asked him to give me the money he had saved for me and he told me that the money was deducted from the number of days I had stayed there. I tried explaining that he had not told me that and, should I have known, I would not have given him the 30,000 Pesetas. He replied that the place was for people who had nothing. I called Argelia to tell her. She called the priest herself and explained my situation to him. The priest answered that the Red Cross had sent me there as I had no money to live and I could not go anywhere with just 30,000 Pesetas. I spent the entire night tossing and turning, just thinking about how a person who said to be a man of God could just deceive me like that. We had a strong argument. I never went back to “Abandoned Jesus” since then.

On my way to work, I bumped into a man from Ghana, called Nicolás, who told me he was searching for a job. I told him to come with me, maybe my boss would hire him. And so he did. He started working that day. At the end of the day, Nicolás asked me where I was going. I told him I had rented a studio apartment and asked if we could share. I said “yes”, and we could split the bills. He left the boarding house where he lived, picked up his things and came with me to share the studio.

Already settled into the studio, I decided to go grocery shopping to a supermarket with the help of a Spanish-English dictionary I had bought the day before. I made a list of what I needed for my new home. I went to a market in Las Palmas and



my first surprise was seeing that all products were tagged with a price. In Africa, it is customary to buy something and bargain for it.

I bought rice, tomatoes, chicken, milk, bread, onion, Cola Cao, sugar and beans. When I approached the meat section, I had to get in line. When it was my turn, I made a complete fool of myself because, instead of asking for 2 kilograms of “chicken”, I asked for 2 kilograms of “cock”. Everyone started to laugh.

From that day onward, I started my work schedule as they had said, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Saturday. I even had to go in to work on a Sunday if any containers had arrived to unload the boxes.

They soon put me in charge of the orders to serve around ten stores. They belonged to three brothers who were in different areas of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Also, when I finished unloading the boxes at the warehouse, I would go help out at any of those stores. So I was quite busy the entire day.

One day, Argelia came to visit me at work. I was not allowed to speak with her because my boss was watching me. When I finished work, I saw Argelia at the gate with her husband. After grabbing my hand, she said: “Festus, I understand you want to help your family. We know your plan is to bring your wife and children but with this harsh job you are doing, you will fall ill.” I told her I had to work as the only goal in my mind was to save for me and my family.

They then took me home. They wanted to meet the man I lived with. On the way, they asked what means of transportation I took to commute from my house to work. I told them I went by foot, as the bus was too expensive. They were amazed and told me once again that I could not lead that life for very much longer. We got home and I introduced them to Nicolás, my roommate.

He had been struggling for 5 continuous months. The news I received from Nigeria seemed disastrous for my family. The first Sunday that I was able to have time off, I got up with the intention of playing some sports, cleaning the house and calling my mother. On the way, I stopped by a phone booth to call the only house that had a phone in my mother's neighborhood. and tell them I would call back in two or three hours so that my mother could be there when I called. Whenever I called, she had to give the children in the house a tip for notifying her about my call. Also, that day, I wanted to speak with my wife and children as I had not been able to speak with since I left Nigeria. I just used to speak with my mother.

When the time came, I returned to the phone booth knowing that my mother would be on the other side of the line. And so she was. I asked about my wife and children. She told me they were not able to come because they were sick and that Helen's dreams had been very negative about me since I had left Nigeria. She also told me she had to visit several oracles to find out the cause and why my children had fallen ill since my trip to Europe. She told me she had practiced all rituals with her saints, but the children were not getting any better. I cut her off immediately and told her: "Mom, stop telling me about your dreams and oracles. I came to Europe to be able to help my family and feed them. I work fourteen hours every day for you. I want to hear Helen's and my children's voices. Now, go home and tell Helen to come with my children."

I hung up the phone. She was sad and angry at the same time because of everything she had told me. I called her back thirty minutes later and my mother answered again. I told her I wanted to speak to my wife.

I finally heard my wife's voice saying: "Good day, Sir." I asked her about our children and she said they were very ill. My

wife's voice seemed quite spiritless. Maybe that is why – hurt and touched – I begged her to put my mother back on. This time, she said everyone at home felt awful about the reason behind the children's illness. Lastly, I told my mother I would send her money to take my children to a hospital and hung up. If I would have had the residence permit that day, I would have immediately returned to Nigeria to see my wife and children in person. But I could not and was sad and alone.

# Chapter 6

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## Help and Hope

**W**hen I got home, my roommate tried comforting me. I kept crying non-stop. I did not know what to do. My wife and ill children were far away; my mother was busy. "Festus", my roommate said, "I am ten years older than you; I have never seen a young man with so much strength as you; I want you to know that your famous phrase – I believe in time – will help you endure everything with time." That day, I sent my mother money to take my children to the hospital and start to process my wife's passport.

Then, I resumed the same routine as always. At the police station, they told me that the Spanish state had accepted me as a refugee. "As of today", the policeman said, "you will come in to sign every Friday, instead of every day, and you can travel throughout Spanish territory." I was given a brown card that I had to renew every six months. That was great. I left very happy and

even allowed myself to sing through the street that song that goes: "Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight!"

Until I arrived in Spain, I did not know about the importance of a residence permit. After the police station, I went to the post office to send an urgent package to Nigeria. They told me it would at least take one week to reach its destination. I was also informed that, if I wanted the package to arrive earlier, I should send it through DHL. Without a second thought, I took a taxi – which I had never done – to take me to DHL. The man assisting me told me I had to make an express shipment. He assured me that it would be in Nigeria in three days.

When I got to work, Mr. Godwani asked me why I was late. I told him the story, my family's and the card I was given and I went to work handing out packages. Luckily, I was given many tips that day. It seemed like everything was going well as if it made up for all of the bad I had gone through the previous days.

I truly felt privileged. I had a permit to travel throughout the whole country. I had sent my family money and had a mother in the Canary Islands who looked out for me, would bring me clothes, and would call me at work if she had not seen me in one week. Sometimes, I called her and, if she couldn't pick up the phone, her husband would say: "Hello, my son." I felt so happy, like a boy with new shoes. I had found a family who did not care about the color of my skin.

Another time, when leaving work, I bumped into a man from Togo. He told me he lived in one of the abandoned ships and that he did not have any documents either. I offered him my house and, as we just had two beds, he slept on a mattress on the floor. He lived with us for quite a while.

A couple of days later, I called my mother to see if she had received the package. She said she had received a videotape but

there was no money inside – I had hidden it inside so nobody would steal it. That was the worst news. I thought about killing myself. I cried a lot. My children were sick and could not go to a hospital because they lacked money. It was my huge problem and my obsession.

Since then, I sent money through another channel and changed how I sent it. As clothes were very cheap on Saturdays, I would buy some for my children and nephews and send them to Nigeria, placing the money in the middle. It was the only way they would not steal it. I also bought a radio cassette and a TV, and would place the money inside. There had to be a way for the money to reach my house.

I called the Nigerian embassy in Madrid to discuss my passport. They said that if I wanted it, I had to return to Nigeria. So, I visited a lawyer. I told him about my problem and my intentions of bringing my wife and my children to Spain. He invited me to visit him again one week later.

Over the phone, I told my mother to start processing my wife's and children's passport so I could take them to a hospital, here in the Canary Islands. My wife told me that my children were doing much better and that the eldest would not stop asking about me.

And so the days went by. At my house, co-habitation started to worsen. One of my roommates started waking up at four in the morning and praying, yelling he was possessed by the spirit of God. The neighbors would even come knocking on our door, threatening us that they were going to call the police. In light of this situation, I told Nicolás to find somewhere else to live where he could yell as he pleased. He left and I stayed in the company of the man from Togo.

One day, when I came home, I saw two young men at the entrance hall exchanging ballots. I was quite scared. The police had

warned me that, if they found drugs on me, I would be deported to Nigeria. I called Argelia and told her. She calmed me down and told me not to work during the weekends and go with her family camping.

With my obsession of bringing my family over and sending them money – which I frequently did – I made a decision to save up more money. So, I would buy the cheapest thing on the market. I mixed milk with water and just ate rice, beans, tomato sauce and made a sort of mashed potato with corn flour and wheat flour. The only place where I would eat meat was at Argelia's house. After one year in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, a law was passed saying that anyone who was processing their refugee status could waive applying to residence and work permits, with the sole requirements of having a six-month job offer and were given three months to regulate the situation.

I asked my boss for this work permit and he refused. I called my lawyer to ask him about this topic. He told me that, if my boss did not give me that permit, I would have to go looking for it elsewhere. As my boss saw I was serious and that if he did not give me that permit I would leave, he gave me the six-month employment agreement, with the sole condition of me working for him only. When I told my lawyer, he told me to give him the document to request hours and apply for the work and residence permit.

The sought-after day to submit the documents was finally here. It was July 30, 1991. Along with them, I also renounced to political asylum. All documents were stamped and I handed them to my lawyer. As I was used to informing the Red Cross and my social worker when something new happened in my life, she told me to seek professional help. I told her I did not need anybody's help. The only thing I wanted was to bring my entire family to Spain as, according to the latest information, Nigeria was getting worse by the second.

My routine was the same as always: police station, Red Cross, lawyer... and during my Sundays off, Argelia would come and pick me up and I would spend the day with her family.

One good day, my boss asked me how my paperwork was going. I told him I was just waiting for my residence and work permit to live calmly and not be attentive to whether or not I was going to be deported. I want to bring my family here and I will, I told him. My boss said that, in his opinion, it was best to maintain political asylum than apply for the residence permit, as I could be given citizenship in five years. "With asylum", he added, "you can go to an English-speaking country and further your education, but with a residence permit, you will need a visa to leave Spain." I told him I just thought about my family and was not interested in the rest, for the time being. He invited me to have a glass of vodka to help me forget about my problems. I told him that drinking just makes problems disappear for a while, but then they return, "I do not want to live one second without thinking about my family, my children and my wife." "So young and you already have a wife and children?"

"Yes, because I come from a world where we live off of culture and tradition and nothing else."

"How lucky then. With your spirits, I think you will do just fine." I went back to work.

I remember one day that we did not work because my boss had the Hindu celebration. I made the most of that time and went to the beach, not to swim as I do not know how to, but to see how children dove into the sea and bathed. I was so jealous of seeing them and could not stop to think if only I could have my children here with me. Day after day, I would receive news about Nigeria which was ever worsening. I decided to call my mother and for Helen and my children to be present.



My mother told me that Helen was not able to come, but that my children were there. I affectionately greeted them. My mother told me that many of my friends were interested in knowing about me and how I was doing in Europe. She told me that Frank – the son of the owner of the house with the only phone in the village – went to check up on my children every day. I became infuriated because my wife was not there, just for going to visit her parents.

“Mom, I will never understand anything. I am here fighting for everyone’s well-being. But you just think about your things and your culture, without thinking about what I could go through. If I call, it is to speak to you, my wife and my children. Mom I just want you to know that I have applied for the residence and work permit and, if I am granted it, I will do everything in my power so that my wife and children come with me. And, the next time I send money, it is to prepare the documents. Please, Mom, whenever I call, make sure Helen is also there.”

Then, I said goodbye to my eldest son and asked him if he liked everything I sent him. As he is quite shy, he barely spoke. Then, I spoke with my two daughters. Sheila told me she wanted to see me and that, as I left on a plane, whenever she sees one, she waves goodbye to me. The smallest one – merely two years old – was happy about babbling: “Daddy, daddy.”

I said goodbye to my mother. She reminded me everything she had sold for me to get to Europe and that she commended me to her saints and oracles every day. When she finished speaking, I told her: “Here is a very simple example: if you dream that water has covered the world, does that mean that the world will flood? Ever since I was born, I have been hearing you say that the world will flood and, do you not see, we are all still alive.”

Mom, the residence permit is a document that allows me to enter and exit Spain without any trouble.”

“You told me you would come back in two or three years. But, the way I see it, those two years will be forever. You lied to me.”  
“I do not know, Mom, but life here is very different than life in Nigeria and I think it would be best for my whole family. Give Helen a kiss for me and tell her I love her.”

I came home very sad.

Just like my social worker had advised, I went to see an association linked to the Red Cross, whose CEO was called Amando Quintana. I told him all of my concerns and that it was urgent to bring my family. He asked me to give him a photocopy of the receipt of the residence permit, the names of my children and my wife, including passport-sized photos to start preparing the family reunification. He undertook to go to the police to continue with my application paperwork.

I also informed my lawyer how I had waived asylum as the police told me there was no need for it. He told me that the first applications will be resolved in two or three weeks. At that time, there were many immigrants who applied for the same thing I did. The lawyer told me there would be no problem as I had never been involved in a fight, drug trafficking, or theft, which is why the respective immigration associations would submit good reports about me. When saying goodbye, he cheered me up and wished me good luck.

One Sunday, after having spent the day with Argelia’s family, I felt very alone and took a walk along the seaside. There were not many people. An elderly woman walked up to me and we got to talking. She told me she was Jewish from Israel, that she had been in the concentration camps and she showed me the mark on her arm that identified her. She asked me how I felt in Spain. I told her “good”. She told me she had seen me crying many times, especially when leaving the phone booth. I told her my life story

and the relationships I had with my mother and my family. I also told her I had found a family in the Canary Islands. Rafaela – her name – asked me if I could prepare an African meal for her one day. I was delighted and we agreed to that.

One Monday, when I came back from work, I was told that two police officers had been asking around for me. The work receptionist signed the letter receipt and gave it to my roommate, according to him. Musa handed me the letter saying that my roommate from Togo had hidden it out of jealousy. I opened the letter and my roommate read it out loud to me. It was the work and residence permit that was approved on August 28, 1991. I had turned into the envy of my immigrant comrades who some told me had been applying for this permit for ten years and had still not been awarded. Some had even married a Spanish woman to get it.

I felt very happy with the permit I had been granted. I told Argelia and all of my friends, including at work. Many were in disbelief. They even made me doubt the letter that my friend had read out to me. That is why I picked up the Spanish-English dictionary and asked my boss permission to be absent to be able to translate the letter step by step. I went running to my house and translated the letter word by word and, indeed, it was the permit I so desired.

I wanted to celebrate. I went down to the bar for a beer. It took effect and I fell asleep on the bed, as I was not used to drinking alcohol. I slept until the next day. I wanted to call my mother but did not because she would spoil my happiness that day. I have never judged my mother. I have gotten angry at her but I have always respected and loved her.

I showed my lawyer and he – after congratulating me – told me I was missing my passport. We had been contacting the Nigerian Embassy for it, but had no luck. I called my mother to

go to the office in Benin City to apply for it. She told me that she would ask my eldest brother as she did not know how to read or write. I told her "no", because I did not want to have anything to do with my eldest brother. He had ruined my whole family. David spent the inheritance for all eleven siblings and had invested it in a business without funds. Whatever my parents had he wanted to himself. I begged my mother not to speak with my eldest brother. The following day, I sent money for my passport.

The whole time I was in the Canary Islands, I never thought about women as I only had one thing in mind: bringing my wife and family to Spain. Maybe that is why I was so surprised when a very young and pretty girl invited me out for a drink. We agreed on meeting the next weekend. She came to my house and had a conversation with my roommate, turning to personal matters.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No. I have a wife and children in Nigeria and my wife will come with me."

"Do you think she wants to come?"

"Yes, she will come."

"And what if she does not? What will you do?"

"Surely she will. I have never doubted it."

"Do not abruptly shut the door on one plan only; you always have to have a plan B."

"My only plan is to bring my family to Spain."

When she left, my roommate told me that the girl wanted to be my girlfriend and I had turned her down. She did not understand my stance. I told her it was all clear to me. That I worked for my family so that they could one day come and live with me. We discussed the situation in my country and the poverty there comparing it with the situation in Spain. "Even blind people sell

ONCE coupons”, I said, “and earn money. I would also like blind people from my country to live like they do here.

What I truly cared about was my mother getting me my passport. When I called her, she told me that the department chief had told her it would be ready in less than three months. It was too long a wait. The embassy advised my lawyer to go to Nigeria in person to pick it up. But we refused because that option was not in the letter the Spanish Government had. We had no other choice but to wait.

A few weeks later, Rafaela – the lady I had met at the beach – came to visit me. I prepared an African meal for her: melon soup, which is a sauce made from African melon seeds, with onion, tomato, and meat with corn flour and wheat flour. She liked it but said that the meal was too much for her. She left but we met up a couple of times after that.

Meanwhile, I would not stop calling my mother for news about the passport. During one of those calls, I was able to speak with Helen. It seemed like a monologue. She barely spoke, which is why I told her I felt her acting strange towards me and, as long as I was her husband, she had to listen to me and not my mother and she does not have to be a problem for us. I was the head of the house, not my mother. I told her I was fighting for them, but she only replied “nothing”, a word I hate. I ended up getting angry: “The day you want to speak, come; otherwise, I no longer care if you come.” She started to cry and my mother told me that, since I had left, Helen was very sad.

By the end of December, I received the passport that my mother had sent me. It was huge news. When I received the package with the passport, I was at work. I asked my boss for permission to be absent and go to the police station. When it was

my turn, the police officer told me I had to see a lawyer, as three months had gone by, so my permit was on standby.

A bit sad, I went to my lawyer. There was a new obstacle in my life. The lawyer, Ignacio Diez, sat down with me and told me not to worry, that he was aware and everything would soon be fixed.

Come Christmas, Argelia invited me to her house. We celebrated with the entire family. It was a very pretty day. Once the Christmas holidays were over, I continued with my job, transporting boxes from the warehouse to the store. A Spanish man – who was the Hindu man’s client and who went to the store to buy species – stopped me saying he would like to speak with me and a work colleague as he had a restaurant in Soller port and was trying to set up another one in the Canary Islands. He wanted to know our day off to speak with us in person.

On our first day off, we met up with him at a bar. He told us about the job and said he would sign a six-month agreement with us and that the salary would be one hundred thousand Pesetas. He told us that, before March 4 – if we were interested – we had to be in Mallorca to start working. My eyes went wide open as I looked at my colleague, both shocked by the offer. I did not want to sign anything before my lawyer knew about it. So, he gave us the documents and we agreed to meet the following week.

# Chapter 7

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## Mallorca

**M**y lawyer asked me to show him the job offer as soon as possible. I called Argelia to share the news. She told me they would miss me if I left Las Palmas, but they wanted to see me happy anywhere in Spain.

Throughout the whole week, my colleague and I discussed the job offer, what a new job meant: more money and less hours, with all of the rights to which a worker in Spain was entitled. Also, the man who had hired us, told us that working overtime was well-paid and weekly. It seemed as if we were living in another world.

The lawyer – after reviewing the contract documents with the man from Mallorca – told me that everything was in check, that we could sign without fear and to then give him a copy with all of the documents signed.

The day of the appointment, the man who offered us work came with a woman and introduced her as his wife. She was very

serious throughout the conversation and just asked us if we were trustworthy as the trip from the Canaries to Mallorca was quite costly. Her husband took out all of the documents and asked us if the lawyer agreed. I told him that, according to my lawyer, everything was in order and that only the overtime topic was missing. He said there would be no problem with that.

The trip from the Canaries to Mallorca was scheduled for March 4. We signed the papers and they gave us each a copy. I gave it immediately to my lawyer.

The only doubt I had was about that woman. I did not like her look or way of acting. I was drinking beer the entire time and the only thing she asked us was if we were trustworthy and when someone does not trust another it is because that person is not trustworthy.

When I told Argelia that we had signed my new employment agreement, she asked me if I knew I was going from one island to the other. I told her that I did not and she asked me to buy a map of Spain and to see where the Canaries and where Mallorca were.

Two weeks after signing, I called my mother – despite not wanting to – as whatever news she gave me – except for my passport – was bad. This time, I was going to give her the best news for me and my family: “Mom, I have a new job and I am going to move cities.” She remained quiet, until she said that everyone was fine and that my eldest son was there. I spoke with him. It gave me great joy. I sensed he was very eager. He even asked me for a bicycle. I asked about his sisters and he told me they were all healthy. When I asked about his mother, he gave the phone to her. I feared the worst. My mother blurted out: “Helen is no longer your wife.” I insisted that I wanted to speak with her. My mother continued saying that she was a woman who did not suit me as her family was not completely clean. I was speechless. I was



lifeless in the cabin until the phone fell out of my hands. I felt like dying. It felt like I was being hit with a sledgehammer.

When the booth owner saw me so poorly, he begged me to sit on a chair for a minute before leaving. I stared straight at the ground and the first word out of my mouth was against the tradition and culture of my village that had destroyed my life, and I promised never to return to Nigeria.

When the anger in me had subsided, I called my mother again who had still not left the house where she was speaking to me from. I told her I wanted to speak with Helen and that she be the one to tell me everything she had to say. My mother insisted that I not speak with her. "You will get over it", she said. I replied that I had met many girls but none of them were like Helen. I hung up the phone and felt alone, lost, full of angst and hopeless. That was when I regretted leaving Nigeria.

I was left without spirits and powerless. I was absent from work for two days. A colleague notified the boss that I was not doing well. I told Argelia. She advised me not to be angry with my mother, as she had not experienced anything else in the world. She also told me that, if Helen was truly my wife, I would get her back. I said goodbye a bit livelier.

I went to work just like Argelia had asked me to do. When arriving, my boss asked me about my problem and, in light of the situation, he told me to sit down and not work until I was better, and to tell him my problem.

Gregorio and his wife came to ask me why I had not showed up to work. I told him: "My wife has left me." They all told me that, if Helen was truly my wife, I would get her back. I swore I would never live by tradition and that my culture would consist in loving, respecting and letting people live; I also swore that I would educate my children based on my judgment and my way of

seeing things, not according to my ancestors. The only thing I ask my children is to study, because education is the basis of mankind. When you read more, you know more; it is like going to the gym every day. The more you train, the more muscles you develop.

My life went on with sorrow. My village's culture and tradition had tried to do away with all of the happiness I had found in Spain. But, as I learned to get up and not fall down again, I will always try to move forward.

A few days later, I was given the ticket to go to Mallorca. We agreed to meet up at the airport on the 4th. I started saying goodbye to my friends. I also said goodbye to Okakpo, who had been in the Canary Islands for over twenty years, holding the same job. He was double my age and I told him he had to have more enthusiasm and fight to work less and earn more, which is normal in Spain, and not work so much and earn so little.

I told my boss that I would stop working on March 3. "Festus", he said, "here is some advice: you now aspire to go beyond, to Europe. Here, Canary Islanders are very open and welcoming. We are close to Africa and are used to seeing black men, which does not happen elsewhere in Europe. You are also dragging the other man with you and, if something happens, you will be to blame." I told him that, if my friend came along, it is because he wants to. I had already asked him if he preferred staying and he told me he was like me; that he also had children and wanted to do whatever possible to make his family happy.

One day before the trip, Alejandro came to see if we were prepared to travel to Mallorca. We told him we were and that, if he met his end of the deal, we would meet ours.

The day of the trip came. As I only had a small television, I prepared a package with clothes Argelia had given me, along with a radio cassette and sent it to my mother.

We went to the airport three hours earlier. Shortly after, Alejandro arrived, shook hands with us and wished us good luck. He invited us for a soft drink. His wife was serious, as always. I slept through the whole plane ride, until Alejandro told me we had arrived at Mallorca. We got off the plane and he told us we were going to a village on the Island called Port de Soller, but that the restaurant was in Soller and that he had paid for the first two days at a boarding house for us.

We went to Soller on one of Alejandro's vans. When going up Coll de Soller, I felt horribly ill from so many curves. We arrived at Soller and stayed at the Margarita boarding house. The room was so cold it seemed like a freezer. Alejandro left without caring about whether or not we were going to have dinner. We had to go to bed without having a single bite to eat. It was a horrible night. We had not eaten and were freezing cold.

The following day, without having had breakfast, we started to clean the restaurant. His wife came to open the door and stayed there drinking a beer until Alejandro arrived and asked us if we wanted to eat. We told him we had not eaten anything since the day before. He apologized. Then, he walked into the kitchen and prepared food for us. We ate in the kitchen and they, in the restaurant.

Soller is a very different village than what we were accustomed to see in Las Palmas. I called Argelia and told her that the trip had gone well. She asked me for my address in Soller. She always wanted to look out for me.

We kept walking around Soller until we got to a restaurant where we could eat dinner and celebrate that we were already in Mallorca, willing to work while earning a significant salary. We had never eaten at a restaurant. We asked for the bill and, when we saw it, we promised never to eat at a restaurant again because I would never be able to bring my children. We went to sleep.

# Chapter 8

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## Soller

In the end, after having long desired it, I started to work with my friend at a restaurant in Soller, Mallorca. I was working in the kitchen while my friend was the waiter. My boss was with me the first three days and kept an eye on everything I did. According to the agreement, I appeared as the kitchen helper. Everything was going quite well.

After one week, we rented a studio apartment in Port de Soller, on Torrens Street. We rented it from a lady who had a bakery and a supermarket.

Everything they had promised us to work at the restaurant was a lie. We cleaned the restaurant, washed the dishes, peeled potatoes, cleaned the mussels... everything was on us. The owner's wife would open the restaurant in the morning and did the accounting from the day before. Meanwhile, her husband would go grocery shopping to then cook food.

The first discussion took place when my friend asked the wife about overtime. The wife answered offended: "You must work; do not start to ask for money. We have already paid for your tickets from the Canary Islands to Mallorca, including the first couple of nights for accommodation." My friend was very upset until I took him outside the restaurant for him to calm down. When her husband came, the wife had made up things that we had never even said. She even said that my friend had threatened her to death. The man went to my friend and, before anything happened, I got in between them and said: "I know it is logical to believe your wife, but she lied; there were no insults or threats." His wife sent me to the kitchen and my friend wanted to stop working saying: "Festus, you only think about your family; before you even realize, it will be too late and your children will never know how hard it is to work here and bear humiliation." Before I finished talking with him, Alejandro came to the kitchen and asked me if I was also going to leave. I continued working without saying a word. He then said: "Before going to file a report to get you both deported to Africa, I want to know your opinion." I continued working quietly. That day, I had to do the work of two people. When I finished working, I went to speak with my lawyer and told him what had happened. The lawyer told me that if I wanted to keep working, to do so; otherwise, I should find another job. He also told me not to worry as nobody was going to deport me and, if I had any other problem again, I report him. They would help me.

At night, I had an argument with my friend given that he also expected me to quit the job we had started together. I told him I wanted to keep on working for my children and he told me that my children will not know how to work when they come here because they have the African mentality.

I lied down in bed thinking about what I should do. When I returned to work, I told my boss that I wanted to speak to him, warning him that I did not like what was happening at all, as he was not fulfilling any of the promises he had made. I did not want to work without pay and, if that was the case, I would leave. He told me that he had not given us money so we did not spend it and that his intention was to pay us, jointly with the severance payment, at the end of the season. I told him that the money was mine and I could spend it as I wished. My family is back home and I have to feed them. I will not tell them to wait a couple of months, until I collect the severance payment. He promised me that he would try to fix the matter.

At the end of the month, he gave me an envelope with a paper I had to sign. It was my pay slip. I signed, counted the money and the entire pay slip was there. It was the first time I collected 100,000 Pesetas. When I got home, I counted it more than twenty times. I felt extremely happy with so much money.

Just like every day, I would go to the nearest bakery to buy bread to have a snack. That day, the bakery owner was there. He was a very pleasant man who was always joking around and told me that he needed a strong man like me to work. I asked him about the work schedule and he told me it started at 4 a.m. and ended at 10 a.m.

That day, I went to work at the restaurant. I did everything, working both in the kitchen and as a waiter. At the end of the day, I went home to sleep and at 4 a.m., I started working at the bakery. For one month, I worked two jobs: the bakery and the restaurant. It was not until one day, I asked the restaurant boss that I wanted to be paid overtime. His wife heard us and contemptuously intervened: "What do black slaves know about money? Go work and stop with the nonsense." Offended, I thought about answering back but, I bit my tongue, and decided to leave.

While at the cable car stop that goes from Soller to the port, a local police officer approached me and told me that the restaurant owner had filed a report against me. I started crying. They tried to comfort me and make me understand that I just had to render my testimony. Along the way, they asked me what I had been through, and I told them how we had been deceived in Las Palmas, how we had been promised money and it was quite different as a result. They claimed 300,000 Pesetas for damages caused for abandoning the restaurant, as I would have to claim it to the court.

Two weeks later, I received a letter with my residence and work permit from Las Palmas. So I went to speak with the bakery owner and he drew up an employment agreement for six months.

A couple of months later, I was summoned to court for the restaurant trial. I had a rough time. I had never been in that place. I told the judge I had come to Spain in search of a job and a better life, not to be locked up as I had done nothing wrong. The judge told me I had not committed any crime. The judge ruled and forced my former boss to pay me everything he owed me in less than 24 hours.

I was so happy that I called my mother who I had not called in the past three months. I took that time to tell her the whole story: that I was no longer in Las Palmas, that I was in Mallorca and that I had had a trial I won. I asked her about my children and siblings and that I wanted to speak with the mother of my children, Helen. My mother told me over and over again to forget about her.

The following day, I went to the restaurant and, just by looking at me, the boss handed me a check. I went to the bank on Soller square to cash it and they told me funds were insufficient. I went back to the restaurant and the boss told me that they had lied to me at the bank, that I should go back again. I went back but no luck; there was no money in the account. I told them that if

they failed to pay me, I could call the judge on the number he gave me when the trial ended and I was, in fact, going to call. The bank manager then called the restaurant owner and he issued me a new check, which was when I cashed it.

I loved working at the bakery. I began to meet many people and they were all so kind to me. One good day, while walking through a soccer field, I bumped into Guillem, who invited me to play with them and offered me equipment to train. A couple of days later, the trainer asked me if I wanted to sign up for the team. So I signed up. The first game, I scored a goal and gave the pass for the second goal. Without knowing it, I turned into some kind of hero. All of this was published in the Port de Soller newspaper, saying that they had signed up a black Nigerian man who knew a lot about soccer. At the end of the season, I was the team's second-top scorer, which is why they awarded me a trophy. My teammates got along with me. Many of them would even invite me over to their homes. And then, I started doing what – until now – I had never done in Spain. Going out with my friends (Juanito, Galindo, Coca, Ribas...).

Everything was going smoothly at the bakery. They even invited me to the owner's house for the first Christmas in Mallorca. But, having no part in it, something out of the blue came to put an end to my good luck. The owner's son completed his military service and, as he was the only child and had no job, they had to fire me.

Consequently, going back to Las Palmas – or even Nigeria – crossed my mind. I had met two businessmen here in Mallorca who had promised me the world and none of them had fulfilled their promises. I was even upset and disappointed to such an extent that, after collecting my severance payment from the



bakery, I went to look at flight tickets to return to Nigeria. I was tired of struggling so much.

I went to the soccer field to bid my teammates farewell. I told them I was leaving because I did not have a job. My teammate's girlfriend told me that her father was actually looking for a worker. She went to ask her father and, when she came back, she told me it was true, and that I could start working with him as a construction helper. And so I did. It was a new job that I knew nothing about, but I wanted to learn little by little. I was even told that everyone knew each other in Soller and, if I worked well, I would always have a job. I was working at the farm for six months. Both the farm owner and his daughter were very pleased with me.

I met another construction businessman who also gave me a job. I worked for two weeks and was so lucky that, when one construction project was over, another was starting and I was involved. I was doing quite well with that company. They would pay me in a timely manner and overtime every week.

During my everyday activities, I met very pleasant people. One of them was Guillem Verd, the master builder. A friendly and nice guy. When he saw me eat rice with tomato sauce every day, he said: "Festus, if you want to be a construction worker, you have to eat well. Come and eat with me. My wife and mother cook me excellent meals each day." That day, I ate lentils for the very first time in my life. They were amazing. Guillem looked out for me a lot. He brought me fruits and also took me to the port in his car.

Another Christmas was here and my soccer friends told me they would celebrate and asked me if I was going and that I should eat with them. To not spend Christmas alone, I decided to go with the Guillem Sec group.

During dinner, behind me was a man who was married to the daughter of a renowned man in Soller, who would not stop mocking me, as he had never seen a black man eat with cutlery. He went on the entire night until my friends stopped him and told him not to mess with me. His wife even begged him to apologize to me. I told him that I knew how to eat with cutlery as I did without, and that I had been educated to not laugh at people and went home.

I tried speaking with my children's mother many times, until one day, she was on the phone. "What happened?", I asked. She would not answer. I tried cheering her up but received no response. Until I told her: "Look, I am here alone, in a land I do not know, struggling to be able to earn money for you. But I need your support. Since I got to Spain, I have not forgotten about you or our children. I just have one thing in mind and that is to bring you soon. You are the woman of my dreams. Since I arrived in Spain, I have had the chance to be with other women but I have not done so because of you. Tell me what is going on with you!" A while went by and she did not say anything. I had no other choice but to hang up the phone.

That day, I changed my mind and decided to bring my children to Spain. I did not want anything to do with my wife as she did not understand love. I remember when my mother insisted that I needed a wife to care for me, keep the house tidy, the shower ready and clothes ironed, to which I replied: "Mom, I do not want anything to do with women, so long as they listen to you. The world takes you on different paths. I have changed. My customs and relationships with women are not what you think."

Two months after my last conversation with Helen, my mother told me my brother Denis had passed away. I dropped the phone from the shock. I could not believe it. I bitterly cried. At that

point, I began to recall my childhood with my brother who was also my best friend, my adventure buddy, my accomplice with girls... and I thought: those you love most are the first to leave.

I remember my brother saying: "Festus, you have to be spotless when you leave the house. Everything must be ironed: pants, socks, even Nairas." There were days when he showered more than three times. He was very clean. He taught me how to drive. My brother was a bit unhealthy but I never thought he would die at such a young age. I will always keep my brother at heart.

With soccer and work, I started going out with friends and I vividly remember when I met my first girl at Port de Sollèr. At night, she would come to my studio apartment in secret as I was scared her family would find out she was dating a black man. That relationship lasted less than two months.

Then, I met another girl, a couple years younger than me. She introduced me to her family who treated me quite well, but the girl smoked a lot. I tried making her stop. Her mother thanked me for it. But my future plan did not fit her and we stopped seeing each other. I suffered a lot after the breakup.

Another time, a soccer teammate introduced me to a girl and she immediately said: "Just what I need, introducing a black man to my family." At that time, I realized there were people who cared more about someone's skin color than the person himself.

Something similar happened with an elder and his grandson who I waved to while we trained on the soccer field. The grandfather did not want the boy speaking to me. He even said that black men neither knew how to read nor write. He banned him from speaking to me. That was until one day, I spoke with his grandfather and I think I convinced him that we – black people – are just like the rest; the only difference is our skin color. But there are

good black men and, unfortunately, there are others who are not. A few days later, his grandfather apologized.

My arrival in Mallorca was very important for my integration, although I had a rough start with my employment, as I previously mentioned. I was interviewed quite a few times for the Sa Veü de Sóller newspaper. The soccer articles always highlighted my moves. In winter, as I was not used to the cold, I would train with gloves, a scarf and a hat on, and my teammates would laugh at me.

Because of this welcoming environment, I felt better here than in my home country. But the will to form a family in Spain allowed me meet people who I would have otherwise not met in my life. A man I had met from Deià told me I was too naive to live in Europe and I did not know how to read what people said in between the lines. He told me I had to hold back a bit as I was too transparent and Mallorcans did not give all their trust until they knew you well. But I have always trusted people and this, in the long run, has caused me some trouble.

Women would also tell me: “Festus, be careful! You are too nice and trusting. Just be careful.”

I met another girl, to such an extent that we started living together. I furnished the house all by myself. At that time, I went to the police station to find out what I had to do to bring my children to Mallorca. They told me I first needed a house in good conditions and to go to the notary’s office to draft the invitation letter. So, I prepared to get my children the following year, in 1994. Work was going great. I had overtime, and everything was going just perfect.

When I had merely three months left to go to Nigeria, my worksite and master builder were changed. I lived the darkest time of my entire construction work at that site. We were four

workmen and three officers. In other sites, work was equally divided; but at this site, I was always given the toughest work. While I worked, they had a good time. I argued with the owner and all of my coworkers went against me. I then asked for the severance payment as I did not want to continue working with that group. The owner said “no”. When Guillem Verd – who was working at another site – found out, he came to see me. I told him I was leaving the site and that I did not want to continue working like that. He asked the officer what had happened and he told him the opposite. My friend tried to calm me down.

The next day, as I wanted to find another job, I stayed home. In the afternoon, I heard Guillem knocking on my door. When I opened it, I told him I no longer wanted to work at that company and that I had decided to find work at another site. He grabbed me by the arm and told me: “You are coming with me to work, and my site was changed.” I worked with Guillem since that day onward.

As time went by, work increased, especially because I spoke English and so I focused on doing gardening for English-speaking residents.

The day I had to go to Nigeria to bring my son to Mallorca was here. I exchanged all Pesetas I had to Nairas. I purchased a ticket with British Airways. I had several stopovers, from Palma to Madrid; from Madrid to London; and from that airport to Lagos. I spent the night there, so the next day I could get a taxi and return to my house in Nigeria.

When I got home, nothing had changed. The gate was closed. My nephew – who did not know me – came to open the gate. My mother was sitting on the terrace beside my eldest sister, Dora. They stood up. My sister, full of joy, slipped. I threw myself on her and kissed her all over. I did the same with my mother. Then, the three of us sat down on the floor. My mother did not take long

to ask me how I was and if I had come back to stay. I called my daughters, Sheila and Lizzy. They came and just stared at me without getting close. Over four years had gone by since I left the house. They went from shy to hugging me: first my children and then my nephews. My house was a celebration. I started handing out all of the gifts I had prepared for them. They were all so happy.

When I told them I did not come to stay, but instead to see my family, they told me that everyone who left just thought about coming back; but I – as always – did the opposite as the rest of the world.

The next day, I went to my mother's room and told her to get dressed. We went to the Benin City's most important trade street and walked into a car dealership. My mother refused to walk in, saying she could not afford a single thing there, not even a wheel. We were interested in one of the cars they say costed a couple thousand U.S. dollars. I had that money on me. I went to the office to exchange that for Nairas. My mother was quiet the entire time. We paid for the car, they handed me the documents and we went directly to Benin City to change the ownership and put the car in my mother's name.

When we got home with the car, my mother took me to her room and said: "Son, can you tell me where you got the money to buy this car from? You have been in Spain for five years and, according to my neighbors, there is lack of work in Spain right now and, here you are, buying me a car."

"Mom", I said, "I have not stopped working since the day I arrived in Spain. I even work more than twelve hours on a daily basis. I have worked a lot and the car is my promise to you when I left Nigeria as we had to sell the one you had because of me. I also have money to take my eldest son with me to Spain, but first I want to speak with Helen. I will then go to Lagos to apply for the visa."

The entire family, children, siblings, and neighbors gazed at the car. I sent my sister Josephine to buy drinks for everyone. I asked my mother for permission to go see Helen. When I walked in, only Helen's youngest sisters were there. I greeted them and asked for her. They told me she was not home. I asked them to tell her to come see me as soon as she got back.

I went back to my mother's house. My eldest son continued distant from me. I asked him if he would like to come to Spain with me. He said "yes". It was his birthday, so we held a huge celebration for him. It was the first time I paid entirely for one of my children's party's. My mother would not stop kissing me.

The following day, very early in the morning, my mother called me to go outside. Outside was Helen and a friend I did not know. I greeted them. I asked my wife how she was and she replied: "How do you want me to be when your mother kicked me out of the house." I replied that I had not come here to argue but to speak alone. Before speaking, her friend told me they had not come to argue but to ask for money. I told her friend that I did not know her and that she had no right to ask me for money. I also warned Helen that her duty was to care for our children and if there was anything to discuss, it would be between me and her, nobody else. Helen told me that without her friend's presence, she had nothing to say to me. So I told her that if she was not capable of speaking with me, we had nothing in common, which is why I said: "Take your time and think about it; I will be in Nigeria until the end of the month and, when you know what you want, come back and we will speak alone." I also told her that I was going to Lagos with my eldest son to do the paperwork as I wanted to take him to Spain, "and I see you are not in my plans. If you want your children and want to form a family, you still have time." She stayed quiet, as usual, letting her relative speak.

I went for a walk alone to think. When I got home, I told my mother that, whenever Helen came home to see the children, nobody got in her way as she was the children's mother.

The next day, I went to Lagos with my son to do the paperwork. I showed the officials my residence permit and told them I wanted to take my son to Spain. I also showed them my employment agreement, lease agreement, invitation letter executed by the notary and the child's passport. They completed the paperwork as soon as they could and I thanked them.

At home, when they found out my eldest son was coming with me to Spain, I promised my daughters, Sheila and Lizzy that they would come with me next time, as I did not have enough money at present, but I would send them many gifts.

A few days later, Helen came back to my house accompanied by her damned relative. She told me I had to give her money to start a business.

"Why do you talk so much about money and not your children?", I asked her.

"The children are with your mother."

"The money I have is to travel to Spain with our son. I will send you money when I can."

The following days, I could not stop thinking about the mother of my children. I do not blame her for anything. Maybe I should have explained that marriage was a two-way street and that problems should be resolved between the two of us. But there was no way to get her mind around it.

When I went to buy my son's ticket, the lady asked me how I was going to pay for the ticket. I told her with Nairas, and she told me that the child could not travel with me if I paid the ticket with Nigerian currency because of the strong devaluation the Naira had suffered in recent months. The only way was paying in



U.S. dollars. I did not understand anything that was happening. It occurred to me to ask if they accepted credit cards. She told me they did but she had to ask her boss. When she came back, she told me that her boss did not even want to hear speech about credit cards or Nairas as they could be fake. Once again, I was in the middle of a good mess. I had exchanged U.S. dollars to Nairas when I bought my mother's car and had no more U.S. dollars.

I tried speaking with all of my friends in Spain to lend me a hand but was not able to contact anyone. Those days, speaking over the phone from Nigeria was quite complicated. Tired of so many attempts to contact Spain, I told my mother I was leaving but would return in five days.

When in Soller, I went to a well-known travel agency and asked for two return tickets. The money was not enough, which is why I decided to speak with my boss from Deia, who I begged to pay me in advance, and I would pay him back in terms of overtime. My boss was very understanding and granted me every facility to buy the tickets. He also allowed me to take all of the time I needed and return when I was able to.

It did not take me a day to return from Nigeria. As soon as I arrived, I told my mother that I was going back to Spain with my son as I had the flight tickets.

As I had a pending conversation with Helen, I went to look for her and found her with a group of friends. I told her I wanted to speak with her alone. She said "no", that it always had to be in the presence of one of her family members. All of my explanations were useless. I told her that she would live much better in Spain and as a family, and she told me she did not want to listen to me, seeing that my thoughts were not in line with hers. She had still not finished speaking when I said to myself: "I will never get back with this woman."

Two days later, I left Lagos with my son to Spain. During the flight, my son was not used to the food they served him so he had a bad time. I suffered a lot seeing him so dull.

When we arrived in Mallorca, a friend of mine came to pick us up at the airport. When we got home and I showed my son his room, he surprisingly asked me if it was for him alone. I told him it was.

# Chapter 9

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## Between Two Homes

**T**he day after my son's arrival in Mallorca, I explained to him that life in Europe was very tough and that the only way for us both to be able to live calmly was to protect each other as we had no money to take out of any funds, or to pay for any lawyers. We also had to help our family who lived in Nigeria, and that we should never forget where we came from and where we are headed. When I told him these things, he just looked at me and nodded. At the end, I helped him shower. He had never seen a shower.

I introduced him to the guys who were playing on the soccer field. They welcomed him well. They already knew he was my son as I always talked about him and they also knew I had gone to get him. My son had a very good time playing soccer with the guys, to the extent that, come night, he did not want to leave.

I had already spoken with the Puig Soller school principal. A few days later, he started school and adapted very quickly. As I

worked at a farm in Deià, I told him to go to the neighbor's house to eat, but he told me to teach him how to heat food in the microwave so he could eat at home.

One year after bringing my son to Spain, I signed my first mortgage, which I had never dreamed or thought was possible. In Nigeria, banks only lend money to the rich. However, in Spain, being poor and a construction worker, a bank had lent me money to buy a terraced house in Port de Soller. I could not believe it.

The only negative thing about buying the house was that I shared it with someone who turned out not to be compatible with my way of being or living. She even thought I was bringing my family to Port de Soller and I would take it away from her. And, for a couple of years, I lived with someone who is not even worth mentioning, and who was the mother of my first Spanish son called Kevin. She made my life impossible, and I even abandoned Port de Soller, which I fondly profess.

Going back to Nigeria made me realize the value of my life in Spain. I told my friends how important it is to live in a democratic country. I told them how the State protects you and human rights are respected. My friends looked at me surprised and one of them asked me:

"But how many women can you have there?"

"One and it is enough."

"That is not life. Let me start calling my women and you will see they all love me very much."

"But these women mean nothing to you; they are like material, they serve you like slaves. But do you want them or do you want what they give you and how they serve you?"

"Here, I am the man of the house and I am in charge. You do not exist in that paradise you speak of, because the children you have there are not yours; they are the government's children. They even make

you carry the mother's surname. Festus, come back home. You were born in Nigerian, live like a Nigerian. Our culture is the best where the man is the god of the house; in Europe, you are nobody." "You, with your mentality, cannot live elsewhere. You enjoy having more and more children who you will not be able to feed, let alone educate. In Europe, families have one, two, or even three children perhaps, but everyone eats and has a better life than any child in Africa."

When coming back from Nigeria, I could not stop thinking about everything I experienced there; it even made me sick. My mind kept on repeating scenes from my country: extremely thin children, many men sitting around without doing anything, or waiting for someone from Europe to feed them. I had to be admitted to the Son Dureta Hospital and was diagnosed with anxiety. I was able to get out of said depression with the help of the doctors and I decided to work more to bring my children to Spain so they could live better.

I started searching for more jobs. I would even collect carob beans and olives on the weekends. The more I worked, the more jobs I had.

I fulfilled my first objective, which was bringing my son to Spain. I decided to study, thinking that there would be a course in English at Universidad de Palma de Mallorca. I was hugely disappointed when I was informed that courses were only available in Spanish or Catalan. The receptionist – when showing her my grades in English – gave me the address of the Delegation of the Ministry of Education and Culture, where I was received and treated with much respect and affection. After presenting documents and more documents, I was granted the second course of secondary level education two years later. I then promised myself to continue studying.

Nico – who worked at a hotel in Deià – significantly helped me and taught me how to do gardening. Thus, I was also able to work on the weekends and to save up to bring several family members to Spain: my brothers, Sunday and Prosper; my sister Vivian; and my dear nephew Wilson. And, when I did not have enough money to buy their flight tickets, Nico lent me some. He also gave us all a job. We obviously returned all of the money he had lent us.

The thought of bringing so many family members was to help my Nigerian family altogether, as it was very large and I, alone, could not keep up. My country of origin has no social security and I had more than thirty nephews who were all depending on me. Today, it makes me very happy to have helped them.

At that time, I simultaneously had more than four jobs. Luckily, since the day I got to Spain, I have always had a job.

One of them I did thanks to a German man called Lothar who lived in Deià. He challenged me saying that I would not know how to take care of his garden. He told me Africans were very inconsistent. That his wish was to go to the United States and, that is why, when you least expect it, they stand you up. By means of my former boss, Jaime gave me a job. He told me he would always pay me when coming back from Germany. One month later, he returned and, when he saw the work I had done, he asked me if I wanted to work for him forever, as I was only working on the weekends until then. I warned him that I had a permanent agreement with my construction company. The German told me he would speak to my boss.

My boss, Jaime, told me he had spoken with Lothar and that – if I wanted to – he would have no problem by me working for him. He even implied that I could go back to working at the construction company if I did not like the job.

The next day, Lothar came to pick me up at my house, surprised that I had a terraced house. He congratulated me. I told him the house was not mine, but the bank's. He told me that, in his country, most Africans live crowded, around ten or more on one floor, and they are only eager to send their family money but do not want their family to come to Europe. That is why he praised my attitude of bringing my family to Spain. That day, he invited me to dinner.

One day in 1996, when I got back from work, I saw a letter from the Ministry of the Interior in my mailbox and, when I opened it, I literally read: "By the ruling of this general directorate, by the delegation of the Minister of Justice, Festus Erakpoweri Badaseraye has been awarded Spanish nationality by residence..." I immediately, overjoyed, started to shout: "I am Spanish! I am Spanish!" Already in my living room, I told my eldest son in English: "We are Spanish!" He did not know what being Spanish meant to an immigrant. But I valued it. I called my Spanish mother, Argelia, and told her. She congratulated me. I also called my biological mother. She asked me what this meant and I thoroughly explained it to her. I told her that I would have many opportunities for being Spanish and be able to enjoy more rights. My mother told me:

"Are you no longer Nigerian?"

"Mom, I was born in Nigeria but I feel more Spanish. I am Nigerian by origin but this country, Spain, has given me many opportunities to feel good."

I was given more work bit my bit. Everything was going very well. One neighbor from the farm where I worked as a gardener became jealous and started to speak ill of me. He also said that, if he bumped into me along the way, he would beat me up. One day – already tired of this situation – I punched him. I later felt sorry

and wanted to quit my job at Lothar's farm. However, my former boss, Jaime, agreed with me but insisted that I should never hit anyone. Moved by the tense situation developed, I decided to search for another job.

One good day, I went to Palma and stopped at a car school to ask about the requirements for becoming a taxi driver. They told me the necessary permits. That same day, when I got home, I started studying to become a taxi driver and not to depend on anyone.

Each day, when ending my job as a construction worker in Deià, I would go down to Palma to attend car school classes. I had never studied so much. I went to class and studied for six months. I found it very hard, as my Spanish knowledge was not enough to show up to an exam.

I decided to show up to the first BTP exam and I suspended it. The third time was the charm. I had told a man I wanted to be a taxi driver. He told me the BTP permit was not enough. I also needed to take an exam from the city council where I was going to work, which – in my case – was Palma.

So I went to the city council in Palma to know the requirements to become a taxi driver in this city. Consequently, I also had to study the taxi regulation, transit rules of Palma and the map of Mallorca. At the same car school, I met a man whose entire family was dedicated to taxis. He helped me prepare for the exam with street itineraries. As I lived in Soller and had no clue whatsoever about the streets of Palma, I recorded all questions and possible answers on a cassette tape that I listened to day and night. I studied all streets, hotels and the most important restaurants. There were many nights – even weekends – that I went to Palma to walk around from the Spanish Square, writing down all streets and paths I went past on a piece of paper.



It was the day of the exam at the local police office and we were called by application order. I was the last one. When they called out my name, everyone in the room turned around and a woman asked me if I understood Spanish. I told her I urged to defend myself. I had to show up two times to the exam to pass it.

Once having obtained my permit, I decided to search for a taxi-related job, as a driver at first. No bank wanted to lend me money to buy a taxi license. Despite the influence of some friends, banks refused. Until the director of one bank whispered in Mallorcan: "This black man thinks that a bank will give him that much money."

So, I decided to ask my friends to borrow me money. I remember that a well-known man told me: "Festus, you will have to sleep in a taxi. Have you ever thought about the number of years you will have to work to pay it off?" He added: "Festus, continue with your gardening and you will be successful." In the end, as always, the more difficult the situation seemed, I found someone who came to my rescue. One family from Port de Soller approved part of the money at the bank, with the sole condition that, if I owed six consecutive installments, they would keep the taxi license. I signed without hesitation. Another two families from Deià lent me the remaining money. Thanks to them, I was able to accomplish my dream. I am so grateful for everything they have done in my life.

We went to the notary's office and I signed. I felt like the happiest man in the world. Having solved the taxi matter, I decided to bring my daughters from Nigeria. My mother said everything that came to mind for buying the taxi license and spending so much money knowing that I would live better in Nigeria with much less. After a long conversation, I told her I had also decided to bring my daughters with me. She told me that was

not possible for the time being as the clitoris mutilation ceremony was going to take place in two months. To refrain from saying an atrocity and my thoughts about the ceremony, I kept quiet for a while. Then, with the strongest voice I had, I warned her: "If you practice mutilation on my daughters, I will report you."

Because of this, before starting to work with the taxi, I decided to speed up my daughters' arrival in Spain and, in less than one month, I was able to have all documents I needed to bring them in order. I arrived in Lagos – where my daughters were – to settle some pending details to complete at the embassy. When I finished, I visited my mother in Benin City. After greeting me, she expressed her disagreement with me taking my daughters to Spain without the mutilation ceremony. She continued insisting on fulfilling her traditions. I did not listen to her and came to Spain with my daughters, aged 10 and 12. Their arrival was quite complicated as they were not able to adapt. I tried speaking with them through every means possible to help them feel accepted. However, some girls calling them "black bitches" did not exactly contribute to their adaptation. I signed them up for basketball to be entertained, but the youngest – who is very shy – did not want to go. They saw themselves in an unfavorable, hostile and dismissive environment. The girls would tease them because of their skin color. And this was very impacting for the girls. To such an extent, I worried more than once for regretting having brought them.

With full enthusiasm, I started working with the taxi. On my first day, the last thing I could imagine was that my skin color could cause some trouble with both police and customers. As I still lived in Port de Soller, I got in the taxi and took it upon myself to go to Palma, going through the Soller tunnel. When paying the toll fee, the lady in the cabin said: "Festus, I think that the civil

guards in front of you are going to pull you over, because they just said: 'What is a black man doing driving a taxi?' " And so they did. On the first roundabout, the civil guard traffic agents pulled me over.

I was baffled, as I had been in Spain for 12 years – two in Las Palmas and ten in Mallorca – and never had a police officer pull me over to ask me for documents. Nonetheless, they did for driving a taxi. When I worked in construction with the forklift, nobody would pull me over.

They kindly greeted me and one of the officers told me: "You know that when you buy a car that has been used as a taxi, you have to remove the partition, city council stickers, license number..." Then, when he saw the taximeter, he said: "Step out of the car right now." I was shocked; I did not know how to explain it to him. I finally told him: "Sir, it is a taxi. I do not have to remove anything. I have bought the license and have not yet made a trip." Surprised, he asked me: "Do you know how much a taxi license costs?" I told him I knew exactly, that I had already paid for it. In disbelief, he replied: "Show me all of the documents on you and, seeing that you are lying to me, I am calling the tow truck." I got in the car, opened the glove compartment and gave him all of my documents. They went to their car and, for a long while, they started to call I-do-not-know-who and, after a good amount of time passed, they let me leave, not before warning me that "the first nonsense you do with the taxi, we will take your license away." I told them: "Do not worry. I have paid it and I know what I have to do."

When arriving in Palma, another surprise was awaiting me. My taxi colleagues would not believe I was a legal taxi driver. And many customers, in sight of a black man driving, apologized and said they were mistaken.

One Saturday in the evening, when there was a game at the Son Moix stadium, they called two taxi drivers from Hotel Bellver. When I arrived, I told my colleague that I would go behind him seeing that I was inexperienced and did not know how to get there. He did not reply, but when his taxi was loaded, he quickly headed to the stadium. I told the journalists that I did not know the stadium as it was new in the square. They encouraged me and told me not to worry because they knew it quite well and started telling me where to go. They even reminded me that all beginnings in any profession are hard, to not worry and move forward. Those journalists were good people.

Bit by bit I started to unfold throughout Palma. I started making stops and was very happy with the money I earned every day. On the third day, I made a stop at Es Fortí. A taxi driver – whose name I prefer to skip – approached me. He first greeted me and said: “473, I come to apologize to you. Remember the day taxi drivers surrounded you? I was the one who called the issuer saying that a black man had stolen a taxi.” He insisted that he came to apologize because of that. I accepted his apology.

All beginnings are rough, but I never thought this much. Between the police, my colleagues, customers and others who went so far to say that I sold drugs, the first few months were quite painful.

A taxi driver called Gabriel and another colleague, Kevin, who I knew before starting this profession, put me up-to-date with all of the rumors about me. Some were saying that black men were very lazy and that I was barely going to last two months. But, little by little, I started gaining the trust of many.

I vividly remember that there were days when the police would pull me over more than three times. One day, when leaving the airport, a civil guard patrol car followed me. When reaching a

gas station, I took off my seatbelt seeing that it is not mandatory for taxi drivers within the city. They pulled me over and fined me for not having my seatbelt on. I discussed this with Mr. Gabriel, the *Pimem* president, who promised me that he would carry out the corresponding procedures to speak with the Civil Guard traffic chief, who they went to, along with the *Pimem* lawyer. To my utter surprise, the traffic chief said it was normal to have pulled me over as my people usually drive without a driver's license or insurance. And they did not lift the fine.

During this initial period, I have to thank the help from the issuer's employees: Ana, Nandi, Sandra, M<sup>a</sup> Ángeles and Manoli. Whenever I was even given a service, they would ask me if I knew where I was. I could also count on the support of Jaime, Ana's husband, who always encouraged me to move forward without being discouraged.

Over time, I started to meet cooler youngsters from the area, such as Pedrito (the small great man who was always on a diet and who I never saw lose weight), Sebas (the big-headed jokester) and the four brothers from s'Aranjassa (who always messed and continue to mess with me): Pedro, Gory, Miguel and Xisco.

After a couple of months working with the taxi, at Paseo Mallorca de Palma, a local police officer pulled me over asking me about my identity and the taxi documents. I handed him the license slip and he told me I could not work as I needed my driver's license and residence permit. I told him that there was no need for the residence permit if I had the ID.

"Are you going to tell me how to do my job?", he asked. "No, I show you what I have, because my residence and work permit were taken from me when I obtained Spanish citizenship." The police officer called the tow truck and I called the *Pimem* secretary, Juan Serra, explaining what was happening. He came

immediately and told the police officer that I was new in the taxi business but I had everything in order. Seeing that the police officer did not care for the *Pimem* spokesman's reasons, he chose to call the taxi sector chief. A patrol car immediately came. But before his superior arrived, I had already been fined six hundred Euros for incorrect parking. I had not parked incorrectly. I was driving and he made me stop there. I was also fined for defying the authority when he asked me for my residence permit. I did not understand a thing. And that man continued to laugh at me. Everything he was accusing me of was a lie. Juan Serra calmed me down and told me that he and Mr. Gabriel, the *Pimem* president, would go see the mayor of the Municipality of Palma, as this situation was unacceptable. Not a single day went by when I left to work that I was not stopped.

The deputy Mayor kindly greeted us. I apologized and, recognizing that I had all my right, he suggested that I report the events if I wanted to. I told him I just wanted to work, not report anyone. He gave me his personal card telling me that, whenever a Palma police officer pulled me over, to show them this card or call him personally.

# Chapter 10

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## Lucky

Consequently, I thought about transferring my taxi license, as I was the only black taxi driver and working did not pay off when I had to spend the entire day giving explanations to the authorities, customers and even my taxi colleagues. Thanks to the Mallorcan mass media who interviewed me several times, both over the radio and on television, I was able to introduce myself and make clear that I was a black man driving a taxi in Palma and did not steal.

I know that all beginnings are tough, but mine was especially tough. I had to struggle to get a glass of water. But with all of the bad and the good that was happening to me, there was something that gave me strength to continue and keep fighting. It was thinking that I was born in Nigeria, a country where my future was darker than my skin. And, although I fought in my home country, I would have never gotten past the misery, as bribes were always involved, even to get into an institute, school and/or university,

despite having passed all exams. However, here, I saw light at the end of the tunnel and my struggle always had its reward.

I remember one night working with the taxi, when I was at Titos club stop, two girls got in. When they heard I was listening to Bob Marley and that I was humming, they started to sing along with me. Suddenly, I realized that the local police were following me. One of the police officers got in front of me signaling to pull over, and the other stayed behind. They made me get out of the car and asked me for the documents again, shining a flashlight on my face comparing it to my ID. The two girls – upset by the wait and with the police – stepped out of the taxi to ask them for an explanation. The police officers replied that they were just doing their job. However – somewhat annoyed – they asked them how many taxi drivers they had pulled over besides mine in the entire Paseo Marítimo, which is a very busy street, full of people, vehicles and, thus, taxis. When I saw the discussion start to get heated, I remembered that the deputy mayor had given me a card. I decided to take it out and show it to the police officers. The young girls asked them who was going to pay for the fare. I intervened and told them not to worry as I was used to this and would deduct the time we had been pulled over. But one of them was so angry that she demanded that I go to the police station with them to file a report against the authority, as they were witnesses of what happened, ensuring that I had been pulled over without having broken any traffic law. I tried calming them down, telling them not to worry about me as I had also worked at a construction company with a forklift and carrying bags of cement on my head and not once had the police stopped me to ask me for my documents. But it became a ritual since I started working with the taxi. I told them I would not go file a report and waste more time as I would have had to do that every day and, some days, many times. In the end, I



convinced them and dropped them off at their home. When it was time to pay, I told them there was no need and they started crying, telling me that they had to pay what the taximeter said. I insisted that there was no need as we had wasted a lot of time with the police. However, they left me money, got out of the taxi and told me there was no right for these things to happen to me. And I went on my way working...

My life had been a constant struggle. I had to work hard on the street to pay all of the debts and, when I got home, all I had was arguments. My house was not exactly a home as I did not have peace to rest, regain strength and continue working the following day with a new drive.

I decided to bring my mother to see the difference between Europe and Africa. My siblings and I gathered the money required for flight tickets, insurance, and necessary visa paperwork. In the end, we got it.

When my mother finally came home, what I thought was going to be happiness, such as having my mother by my side for three months, led to serious problems, not by me or my mother, but by the person with whom I lived. She completely distrusted my family and me and ended up destroying the family and home we had formed, along with my three children from Nigeria and my fourth son, Kevin from Soller.

Suddenly, one day, I came home and saw my mother crying outside the gate. I quickly found out what happened. The person I lived with had kicked her out of the house. Kicking a son's mother out of his home is something that never happens in Africa. I swore that, as soon as my mother left, I would break up with her, as my life had always been governed by respect and love. One of the strangest things I heard when I started to understand Spanish was negative jokes towards mother-

in-laws. For me, it is like the “opposite world” as in Africa, the mother-in-law is a mother who must be respected. However, in general, it is quite the other way around here. Therefore, when my mother went back to Nigeria, I decided to abandon my house and rebuild my life far from the person who had caused so many problems and who I am not going to mention to not bore the readers and that, without a doubt, would be enough to write another long book.

As in all things, there were also colleagues in favor of and against the award I had been given. One who had problems with the city council said: “You have no money to defend me but you do to spend on a gold pin for a black man!” Shortly after, he left the taxi trade union. But since then, most of my colleagues accepted me and everything went smoothly.

My struggle continued. One time I had worked the entire night, as it was a good season for taxis with a lot of work, all taxi drivers would usually have breakfast at a bar that was near the Bosque stop. When I got to the stop, I saw a taxi colleague lying on the ground and a man who had punched him. When some colleagues saw the fight, they left the stop. Three women taxi drivers stayed and tried to deter the attacker. When seeing what was happening, I immediately went to distance the attacker. At first, I thought they were two taxi drivers who were fighting but one of the women warned me: “Festus, be careful! These men are very dangerous. He is not a taxi driver. He is a drunk who nobody wants to take because of his state of intoxication and he is furious.” I tried speaking with the man to make him stop punching my colleague. He told me to leave as he had always wanted to kill a taxi driver and today was his day. I had no other choice but to hold him down while my colleagues called the police. When the police officers arrived, they took care of the matter and took the attacker

under arrest. My colleague was admitted to the hospital holding on to his life for a long time.

From that day onward, most of my colleagues who never greeted me, started coming up to me and thanking me. A couple of months later, I was invited to a meeting from the former *Pimem* (taxi trade union). Much to my surprise, I was honored with a gold medal for having defended a colleague who was about to lose his life.

Not knowing why, I returned to the worst moments of my life. I felt alone and did not want to bother my Spanish mother. Depression took hold of me. I would spend the day crying. I even thought that was the end for me at the stops. Leaving Spain crossed through my mind. I saw no way out of what was happening to me. Everything was so huge I did not know how to get out.

One good day, working, mid-February 2003, around six in the morning, four girls in front of Pachá, Paseo Marítimo, stopped me and asked me to take them to Titos. It was a very short distance they said, but they could not walk any longer. I told them that all distances are equally the same. On the way, one of the girls changed her mind and said: "You, black man, take me home." I started to laugh thinking it was a joke. When we got to Titos, I stopped the taximeter and she said: "What are you doing? I told you to take me home!" I told her I thought it was a joke as we were laughing the whole ride. She insisted: "Take me home!" Her friends tried to convince her to get out of the taxi. She insisted that the "black man" take her home. I turned on the taximeter again and we went on.

During the ride, we talked and laughed until we reached her destination. She told me: "If I give you my phone number, will you call me?" I told her I would indeed call her. And she added: "The number is not to add for the agency, but to call me and, if not,

I will not give it to you." I promised to call her. I wanted to call this girl the second I dropped her off, seeing that I felt something very special the short time I had been talking with her. But she warned me not to call her before three in the afternoon. I could not stop thinking about her the whole morning.

I could not help it and called her. Seeing that she did not answer the phone, I tried again and so on, ten more times. I even left voice messages on her mobile, until she finally picked up and I said: "Hi! I am the black taxi driver." She told me she already knew, and she had told me not to call her until three, asking why I called her so many times. I told her I called to hear her voice and to say I would like to invite her to have drink. She told me she could not at the time, but she could later and hung up.

The time that went by since the call until we saw each other was eternal. It seemed like the time to see that girl in the daytime, be able to sit by her side and hear her again would never come. As four girls had gotten in my taxi, I thought they were somewhat drunk as I saw them so joyful. I could not stop thinking about what type of girl was this happy, as throughout my days in Spain, I had never seen a girl like that.

The moment waited for was finally here. I arrived earlier, which was very rare for me. That day, I was driving absent-mindedly. I just went from stop to stop instead of going around as I usually did. I could just think about seeing that girl again. When arriving at the place we agreed to meet at, in front of the El Molinar gas station, I thought she was not going to show up. And exactly at the time we had agreed on, a car stopped in front of mine. I looked and it was her. I felt great joy inside of me and a huge relief that I still have to this day. She made me get out of my car and get into hers and we went to a renowned bar off the coast called "El Penón." I had to control myself the entire time we were talking because I

just wanted to hug her and hold her hand. I felt something I had never felt in my life. I do not know whether it was because of my age or because I felt very lonely. I saw in her something I had never seen. I looked her in her eyes. I listened to how she spoke and her joy made me complete. I was so happy with her that I was about to ask her out. But, guided by the common opinion that the first day is not the most appropriate to ask someone out, I lost my chance. We said goodbye after coffee. The farewell, however, was only physical, because this girl was still in my head mentally and was everywhere. I then had no energy to continue working, so I went home.

When I got home, I went to see my mother directly who was still with me at that time. My mother asked me why I had come back from work so early. I told her: "Mom, today I am very tired and feel like going to bed early." I went for a walk. I could just think about Eva and, on the way, I could not believe what I had seen. I called her again to hear her voice. We spoke for a while and I remembered we had agreed to meet two days later. I came back home, showered, prepared dinner for my children and went to bed.

The next day, as always, I woke up at three in the morning and went to work, although I could not wait for the day for us to meet. When it was finally the day to see Eva again, I could not resist any longer. I got close to her and leaned in to kiss her on the lips. She stopped me with her hand on my chest and said: "What are you doing? I barely know you! You are going too fast!" Honestly, being so direct was something I had never done, but my feelings made me lose control and my manners, so I apologized and we went for a walk.

I would not stop asking her to go out with me the whole time and she said she had not thought about it and did not want to take

things fast. She first wanted to get to know me and then decide; I agreed. To not pressure her so much, I asked her if we could continue seeing each other and she agreed, but told me that she was going to Barcelona with a friend in the coming days. I asked her if I could take her to the airport. She told me I could so I picked her up from her house the following Thursday at seven in the morning. She was there with her friend Teresa.

That day and time, I was at Eva's house. Suddenly, a girl got in my taxi and greeted me: "Hi, Festus." She did not know me because of Eva but because she worked at a bank branch I went to. Eva later came down. They greeted each other, she gave me two kisses and I took them to the airport. I got their baggage out of the trunk and we bid each other farewell. Before the plane departed, I called her again to wish her a good trip. I did not get with her on the plane, although I would have if I could. I did not stop calling her every day of her trip. Every outing with her friend, I was there on the phone. She probably thought I was the most annoying person in the world because I would not stop calling her at any time of day and, as I worked until twelve at night and woke up at three in the morning, I would send her text messages. I had the strongest feelings of my life.

When Eva came back, I asked her if we could see each other. When we met up, I no longer asked her to go out with me, but to marry me and she replied: "You are crazy! You barely know me."

At the beginning of March 2003, my mother had to go back to Nigeria, after spending three months in Mallorca. I invited Eva to come with my mother and me to Frankfurt as it was the last stopover to go to Nigeria. She gladly accepted. I just wanted to be with Eva, although a huge obstacle was in my way: breaking up with my former life. She, with her help, support, love and happiness, made me overcome all of the suffering. What hurt me the

most about everything I went through was not being able to enjoy my son, Kevin, because of my former breakup, something I have always tried to explain although I doubt he has understood to this day. I separated from his mother, not from him.

The day to accompany my mother was here. I told Eva I did not want to displease my mother as I was breaking up with my son Kevin's mother, which is why we traveled separately on the plane. I did not take my eye off her the entire trip. I was eager to reach Germany, say goodbye to my mother and be able to hug her and thank her for having accepted the invitation.

We reached our destination, Frankfurt. Seeing that we arrived a bit late, my mother immediately got on her next flight to Nigeria. She had barely boarded when I went running to Eva to hug her and apologize for the situation. She understood as our relationship was not stable, although for me it was like a honeymoon. It was the happiest trip of my life. Before, I always traveled alone or out of necessity. I finally fulfilled my dream of going on a pleasure trip with the person I loved the most.

Love smiled back at me again. We visited several sites in Frankfurt. We held hands and laughed the entire time... She taught me that life was not purely work, but you also had to enjoy it. It was the first time I started going out to eat at restaurants as I had never done so on my own. I have no words to express how I felt during the whole trip, as every feeling was wonderful.

One day, we were eating paella at El Molinar and after having a friendly and thoughtful conversation, I asked Eva to marry me. She looked at me and said:

"You are crazy! You barely even know me. Plus, I do not know how to do anything around the house, not even cook, do laundry, or iron clothes. I still live with my parents and feel comfortable, as I have everything prepared."

“Eva, this comes from my heart, I am in love with you. I do not need you to do anything for me. I already have a mother. I know how to cook and iron. I know how to do everything around the house. The only thing I want is for you to love me and believe in me.”

“Yes, yes, like all men do. Now you say you do not care about me not knowing how to do anything because you are in love but then you will want more.”

“I am not like all men. If you give me a chance, I will prove it to you.”

We left the restaurant to go for a walk and that day, I found out that Eva was a lawyer. My mouth fell wide open.

“You are a lawyer, work and still live with your parents at the age of 32?”

“Yes, and I am very proud to still be living with them.”

We left things there. Not a day went past that I did not call Eva: in the morning, afternoon and evening. We started a more formal relationship and ate together almost every day.

There are three very important things in my life: Coming to Spain (meeting Argelia and bringing my children), the taxi license (stop working for others and be self-employed), and meeting and marrying Eva.

Sometimes I wonder if Eva married me because she was tired of hearing the same phrase every day: “Eva, please, marry me.” One day, she bought a house where she lived alone for a while. She wanted to live alone for a while before living with someone to know what it was like.

I decided to meet her family. She told me that her mother invited me to a paella one Sunday. By then, I had already met her cousins, Antonio and Miguel. Antonio, who painted Eva’s house, told me: “The day you meet our family, let me know so I call two



ambulances to be ready outside for our grandmothers.” I also met her brother Pedro who, since the first day, turned out to be like a brother to me. It was the day of the paella. I arrived at Eva’s parents’ house very frightened. Much to my surprise, everything turned out more normal than I would have expected. I met Eva’s parents and her two grandmothers, two women who were more than eighty years old who welcomed me with arms wide open, especially the grandmother called Maria. As soon as we met, she invited me to eat at a restaurant with Eva. She said that if I was the person who was with her granddaughter for love, she wanted to get to know me better.

I left the house so upbeat that I asked Eva to marry me again. It all went by so quickly that, two years after having met, we were preparing our wedding. I invited my mothers: the one from Nigeria, Alice, and the Spanish one, Argelia. As I saw that her family was very traditional, I decided to get married at the church. We chose the San Fernando parish, a white church located in front of the Beach of Wonders in Palma. We met César, the priest who would marry us and who helped us process the paperwork. As I had not been baptized in Spain, we went to the diocese of Mallorca, where they eased all church paperwork.

The day I asked for Eva’s hand in marriage was here and my whole family and I went to Eva’s parents’ house. It was the sweetest appetizer for the wedding that I had ever experienced with the support of my entire family, with all of my siblings and nephews on that island, and the rest of my Nigerian family awaiting the event through their mobile phones. We were all so nervous that we got locked inside the elevator. Because of the nerves, I think we were more than five people in the elevator that had a limit of four people. We were luckily able to get out and decided to walk up seven flights of stairs.

The engagement ceremony was great. I introduced all of the family accompanying me: My brother Sunday, my brother Prosper, my sister Vivian, my children, including Kevin, and my daughter Lizzy. Sheila was not able to attend as she was away on a trip. And I cannot forget about my nephew, Wilson, who is well-known for his jokes and humor. I remember I told Eva: "I have never seen my uncle so happy with a woman; I hope you are the last; and, please, Eva, take care of my uncle. He is the best I have and our family's guidance both here and in Nigeria."

That day, I met Eva's entire family, both her father's side, her godfather Jordi with his wife Cati and her cousin María, as well as her mother's sisters, Eva's godmother, Marita, and her husband Antonio, including her cousins, although I already knew most of them, Antonio, Miguel, M<sup>a</sup> del Mar, Marta, Rosa and her mother's brother, Uncle Pau and his wife Ana María, and her cousins Silvia and Sonia.

We had a great time through the whole meal. We laughed a lot thanks to her uncle Pau, who is the life of the party, along with her cousin Miguel. Whenever we got together or celebrated a family event, I wanted them both to come. They guaranteed laughter.

That day, I was able to appreciate how helpful my mother-in-law is. She is always attentive with everyone. Before you finish your meal, she would already offer you more. I – a person who does not know how to disguise my feelings – did not cry because of everything that was happening. Despite being a black man who has gone through two separations with several children from my two previous wives, which is a heavy burden in society, Eva's family did not think about it and terrifically took me in. I felt a special acknowledgment towards my future wife for not treating me while thinking about the burdens I was carrying.

When saying goodbye, Pedro, my father-in-law, approached me and told me: "Your family is here and count on us with anything." I did not cry then because I remembered the day I came across Argelia, my Spanish mother. It was the second time that somebody offered me their home and full support. From here, I want to express my total acknowledgment to all of Eva's family, especially her grandmothers, Rosa and María, who are unfortunately no longer with us. I will never forget them.

After this point, life smiled back at me and everything began to change. I started experiencing things I had never experienced: vacations, a social life... I had never gone out for a walk happily and calmly through the street holding Eva's hand, smiling as always, with kisses and cuddles. At the beginning, I was a bit shy as I had never done so, and she said: "Do not be silly; nothing will happen." Whenever we kissed, people would stare at us and Eva would say: "Let them look. It is their problem or do black men have no right to live their love and show it?"

Eva and I traveled many times: London, New York... I remember that, at JFK International Airport, we had just landed, gone through customs, and they made me step aside and took me to a room to interrogate me. I saw Eva getting nervous, asking: "Where are you taking him?" I said: "Eva, do not worry. This is the U.S. Nothing will happen to me." They took me to a room where they asked me why I had a Spanish passport if I was originally from Nigeria. They asked me the same question in Spanish and English, and I answered in both languages. When they finished interrogating me, they said: "Welcome to the United States of America." I lived my dream: visiting the United States and accompanied by my future wife.

It was the day of the wedding. I invited my biological mother and my Spanish mother. They were both my godmothers. I

walked in with both of them, one on each arm and, today, I can say that it has been the greatest day in my forty eight years of life. I remember the smile on all the guests' faces when I arrived at the church. My mother-in-law, Rosa, and her brother, Pau, came to open the car door for me. Caring as always, they hugged me and said: "Come on, Festus, you are very handsome."

The time I waited for the bride to arrive was very hard for me. I was waiting for my princess for over half an hour. Nervously, I asked my mother-in-law: "Is she not coming?" For a second, I thought she changed her mind and would not come. When the nerves had kicked in, I saw the wedding car arriving. The people on the street and guests started to applaud. I felt like fainting from all of the emotions I was feeling. Before stopping the car, I went directly to open the door saying how awful the wait was. Almost whispering, I said: "It looks like you come from Africa. I even thought you were not coming." Then, I knew it was the expected waiting time but the excitement exceeded me. When I saw her, I soon forgot about the wait and told her: "How beautiful you are, I love you so much." I hugged her and placed a flower on her dress, just like the one I had on my suit.

It was not a usual ceremony. The priest contributed to us having a great time. With his amusing comments, he made our guests laugh like never before at our ceremony. There were several moments of intense emotions, such as when I had to dedicate a few words to my future wife and put the ring on her. Because of the nerves, my hands were shaking and I could not put it on her. Or, when I had to give her the wedding coins, they fell on the floor, or when my Spanish mother read out a letter she had dedicated to us, all guests started to weep emotionally. It was a touching moment among family and friends. When it was time to sign, I signed quickly. However, when I gave Eva the pen and noticed

that she was a bit nervous, I told her: "Here, here, Eva, sign." And she replied: "What if I do not?" But, in the end, she did sign.

We ended the celebration with a dinner at the Mon Port hotel in Port Andratx. It was a fantasy dinner I could have never imagined. The planning was extraordinary. Whenever I looked both of my mothers in the eyes, my biological mother smiled and held my hand, and my Canary Islander mother hugged me whenever she could and said: "Festus, I want you to be yourself and enjoy everything at your reach. I have never seen you so happy, Festus."

More than four different meals were served, which was unthinkable in Nigeria, one and that was it. I remember that, after dinner, when we waited for the wedding cake, my biological mother told me: "Festus, so much food and no dancing?" I told her: "Mother, do not worry. We will dance after the cake." "But I want to dance already", she replied. I tried calming her down and, once they served the cake, we started to dance. My wife started dancing the waltz with her father, as tradition goes. Then, I went in with my mother and, when the waltz was over, I had asked for my favorite song by Bob Marley: "Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight". I started to dance with my black mother, then with my wife, and then with my white mother, wishing for that moment never to end. I was so happy that I did not stop dancing the whole night. I remember that all of the guests danced and we had a great time.

We spent our wedding night at the same hotel. Many family members and friends stayed over. The next day, we got together to have breakfast and all comments were: "The funnest wedding", "We had a great time" and "You and your wife make a stupendous couple". I remember that grandmother María would not stop kissing her granddaughter Eva. And we said goodbye.

We left on our honeymoon to China for ten days, six of which we spent in Beijing and four, in Shanghai. We had a Spanish-Chinese interpreter and a driver for us two, who took us everywhere we wanted and showed us the oriental culture that was so different to ours. We had a great time. Eva and I had traveled a lot, but China was quite different and special at the same time.

When we came back from our honeymoon, I felt so happy that, despite having had children with other women, I asked my wife for one child. She refused saying: "You already have children and I have not even thought about having any..." It took me over one year to convince my wife. In the end, I convinced her and, shortly after, she became pregnant with our first son, Peter.

I experienced what I had never experienced. I accompanied my wife to all gynecological visits and ultrasounds throughout the entire pregnancy. It is a priceless experience. I just wanted to see the test results. Our gynecologist, Montse Caso, is a great professional, very human, and always with a smile on her face. The day of the delivery, the magnificent midwife, Macu, also intervened, who we had met during delivery preparatory classes. They assisted my wife. When my son finally started coming out – born on May 5, 2008 – and they told me to help him out with my bare hands, I cannot explain the feeling. I do not know if it was because of love, age, or not having had the chance to experience all of this but, despite having older children, to whom I apologize, I experienced this moment as if it were my first son. They even gave me scissors to cut the umbilical cord. And Peter turned out quite handsome, with light brown skin, and I am not just saying that because he is my son. I could not stop kissing him. While I placed him on my wife's chest, I told her: "What a handsome son." Then, I asked the medical team for permission to leave with my son and introduce him to Eva's family who were

waiting outside impatiently. I remember that, when I showed him to my mother-in-law, she saw he had spots all over his body and asked me: "Festus, what have you done to the boy?", and she went straight to the nurse who had accompanied me to ask her to explain. They told her the spots were normal for a mixed-race child but they would soon disappear. My mother-in-law was not satisfied with the explanation as she had never seen a mixed-race child. I told her: "Grandmother, do not worry. Everything is fine and it is nothing." I went back to the delivery room, they cleaned the baby, got my wife ready and, shortly after, took us down to the room. Everyone wanted to see him. All family members and friends started to show up. The baby went from arm to arm. He was our great joy.

My wife had already warned me that, if she had a child, it was not going to be the only one for her. So, less than five months later, after Peter's birth, she was pregnant again with our second child and we repeated the process with the gynecological visits, ultrasounds... all with the same excitement as if it was our first child. And, one year and two months after Peter, specifically on July 30, 2009, and with the same medical team, it was the day of delivery. This time, my wife was calmer, as she had already gone through the experience, she enjoyed the birth much more. I was even able to follow everything through a mirror they placed so I could see the moment our second child, Denis, was born, and I gave him to her, while the midwife took photos. As the first one was so handsome, I knew that the second one would also be. And, at present, in October 2013, we were expecting our third child, which I do not know if it will be my wife's last one as she seems more African than European. And she said she did not want any children...

I cannot help but point out that, in the beginning with the taxi, many colleagues turned their back on me, although, little by

little and as I have already mentioned, I began making friends, until the Palma Radio Taxi president, Carlos Ruiz, called me and asked me to be a member of the board. I thought he was joking, thinking that, as usual, it was a joke from one of my colleagues. I told him: "Come on, Carlos, you made me come for this? You could have told me over the phone and I would not have come all the way here." He started to laugh and said: "Festus, this is not a joke; I have already asked the rest of the board members and we want you to become part of the board of directors. You just have to accept and then have people vote for you at the next general meeting held next month." It was something I have not been able to take in to this day as I never even dreamed of becoming a board member.

I must confess that, during spring 2013, one night, watching the Jorge Javier Vázquez show called "*Hay una cosa que te quiero decir*", I was moved and thought that I should thank Argelia for her affection and unconditional support through that show. And so I did. I wrote to the show, telling my story with my white mother and they called me right away to invite me to Telecinco. On July 10, the show aired, thrilling all family members, friends, familiar and unfamiliar people. People would stop me on the street when they recognized me.

It is also worth mentioning that another fulfilled dream is to be able to continue studying. In May 2013, I was accepted into University for people above the age of forty-five and, in September, I started law school. Because of all of this I say that 2013 is my lucky year. This is the story of a black man who came from Africa, my African journey, a memoir.







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