

I

In the beginning

Chapter 1

September 1963

One could begin with the dust, the heat and the purple bougainvillea. One might even begin with the smell of rotting mangos tossed by the side of the road where flies hummed and green-bellied lizards bobbed their orange heads while loitering in the sun. But why start there when Tayo walked in silence, oblivious to his surroundings. With a smile on his face he thought of the night before when he had dared to run a hand beneath the folds of Modupe's wrapper. Miraculously, without him even asking, Modupe had loosened the cloth around her waist. Of course they had kissed many times before, usually in the Lebanese cinema when all was dark, but that was nothing compared to Friday night. And while Tayo was lost in his thoughts, his father, who walked alongside, noticed his son's smile and read it as excitement for the forthcoming trip.

They had set off early that morning to visit relatives, as was the tradition when someone was about to embark on a long journey. They began with Uncle Bola in the hope of finding him sober because by midday he would almost certainly be drinking *ogogoro* and this was not a day to meet Uncle Bola under the influence.

"An old man should be contemplating his mortality rather than dreaming of women," Tayo's father said, alluding to

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his brother's raunchy tales, which Tayo knew his father secretly enjoyed.

And although his father made it sound as though Uncle Bola was old, Uncle B. liked to joke about his age and boast that he was young enough to still make babies and thank the Lord God Almighty. And he did make babies – dozens of them. As for thanking God, well, that was simply a manner of speaking. Uncle Bola believed only in beautiful women – not Allah, Christ, or Ogun. In turn, women loved him, in spite of what he lacked by way of height, teeth and schooling. Tayo had long since concluded that Uncle Bola held the secret to a woman's heart, which was why he looked forward to this visit. But on this particular morning Uncle Bola did not seem himself. Upon seeing them, he became quite weepy, so weepy in fact that he forgot about his atheism and offered prayers to Allah, Ogun and Jesus on behalf of his favourite nephew. With tears still in his eyes, Uncle Bola gave Tayo his best *aso ebi* as a going-away present, and then insisted that they stay longer to take *amala* and stew with him.

“Here is some money for the ladies when you arrive,” Uncle Bola whispered, stuffing the newly minted Naira notes into Tayo's shirt pocket before waving a final goodbye.

Tayo had hoped to stay even longer, enjoying the company of his sentimental uncle, but there were many more relatives to be visited and several more lunches to eat. Everyone insisted on feeding them and then, just when Tayo thought it was all over, they returned home to find more relatives gathered to wish him well. Several of Father's friends were sprawled across the courtyard drinking beer and palm wine while the children chased each other in the dirt path by the side of the house. The women sat in one corner, roasting corn on an open fire, with sleeping babies on their backs.

“Tayo! Tayo!” the older children chanted as he made his way through the throng, stopping to pick up the youngest. Tayo

expected his father to usher people away, but after the day's copious consumption of palm wine, he had apparently forgotten time, preferring instead to continue boasting about his eldest son.

"*Na special scholarship dey don make for de boy?*" somebody asked.

"Oh yes," Tayo's father beamed.

In actual fact, the scholarship was not created just for Tayo, but because he was the first Nigerian to win this scholarship (such things being reserved, in the past, for whites), Tayo's father decided that he might as well claim it just for his son. Tayo closed his eyes while his father boasted, and thought ahead to Sunday, imagining how he would move swiftly through the crowds at Lagos Port to the ship and over the seas to England. "And then to Balliol College, Oxford," Tayo whispered, thinking how grand it sounded.

At dawn the following day, the entire Ajayi family said prayers before gathering around Father's silver Morris Minor, washed and polished by brothers Remi and Tunde so that it glistened like a fresh river fish. Everybody was dressed in his or her Sunday best, ready for the photographs and only when the cameraman ran out of film did they clamber into the car. Father parped the horn and all the doors slammed shut. The key turned and turned again, but the motor wouldn't start, so everyone stumbled out again to push. Even Father pushed, with one foot pumping the pedals and the other pressed firmly against the ground. They rolled it down the path, out of the compound and onto the road, until the engine lurched into action and hurriedly they all piled back in. The children followed the car down the dirt road, running and waving, not caring about the dust being blown into their faces, but jogging along until they couldn't keep up. Sister Bisi ran the fastest, thumping decisively on the car boot before they sped away, out of Ibadan and onto the high road that would take them to Uncle Kayode's place in Lagos. There

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were five of them in the car: Mama and Baba seated in front, and Tayo and his two aunts in the back. Father forbade talking in the car, claiming that it distracted him, and for once Tayo was happy with this edict knowing that his aunts would be eager to lecture him on how to behave in England. It didn't matter that his aunts had never travelled outside of Nigeria; it was their right and duty to instruct. Tayo closed his eyes and thought again about his sweetheart and their final goodbye. He remembered the poem he had composed for the occasion and the lines that did not quite rhyme, but thankfully in the end there had been no need for sonnets.

By the time they arrived at Uncle Kayode's house, the car was caked in dust and its weary passengers covered in sweat and grime, but all would soon be forgotten in the luxury of Uncle's home. Uncle Kayode was a big man in Lagos, recently returned from abroad as a senior army officer. Maids cooked for him, and large fans hung from the ceilings, whirling at high speed to keep the house cool. Tayo had never seen anything like it before.

"When you arrive in England, my son," Uncle Kayode was saying, "you must make sure to contact the British Council and don't forget to write to cousin Tunde and cousin Jumoke."

Tayo listened carefully, hoping not to forget any valuable advice, but by the time he went to bed he couldn't remember half of what he had been told. Annoyed with himself, he tossed restlessly on his mattress. For weeks he had been looking forward to travelling away from home – to having his freedom – but now he thought only of what he would miss and how frightening it would be to travel alone. He took Modupe's photograph from his bag, quietly, so as not to wake his uncle, and kissed it. Reassured by her smile and remembering the events of Friday night, he rolled over and eventually fell asleep.

The next day, Tayo stood at the ports, holding tightly to his bag. He dared not ask his uncle another question (he had asked so many already), but he still wasn't clear about what to do

when he disembarked. What if the arrival halls in England were just as chaotic as the confusion he was seeing now with everyone shouting and gesticulating, willing people to move forward? Nobody bothered to queue. Exasperated by the late-afternoon heat, men took off their cloth caps and flicked away beads of perspiration. Then, as the folds of their agbadas kept slipping off their shoulders, they hitched them back, raising their arms like swimmers. Meanwhile, women herded children, straightening little dresses, trousers, and shirts, while hastily tightening their own wrappers and head ties, continually unravelled by heat and bustle. Tayo, like everyone else, had been standing in this crowd for hours. He smiled, but not as broadly as the day before. His parents, uncle, aunties, and several Lagos-based relatives were with him as well as Headmaster Faircliff and some teachers from school: Mrs Burton (Latin), Mr Clark (Maths), and Mr Blackburn (British Empire History), but none of his brothers or sisters had come and he missed them, especially his sister, Bisi.

Tayo shook his head wistfully, staring at the *Aureol*, which towered high above them like a vast steel giant with hundreds of porthole eyes. You will be missed, he told himself, recalling the rumour started by friends that a particular Lagos girls' school – the one that occasionally visited their school – was supposedly in mourning over his departure. He glanced around for these girls, but all he saw were family, easy to recognise in the matching clothes worn specially for his send-off. The men's agbadas were the same eggplant purple as the women's short-sleeve bubas and ankle-length wrappers. Tayo's mother had chosen the material, fine Dutch waxed cotton, embroidered in gold thread at the neck and sleeves. Tayo had wanted to wear his agbada like the rest of the family, but Father insisted on Western attire, claiming it more appropriate for an Oxford-bound man. So instead of loose flowing robes, Tayo wore grey flannel trousers, white shirt, school tie, and a bottle green blazer that

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stuck to his skin like boiled okra. His agbada was neatly packed away in the trunk with extra clothes, the Koran, the Bible, half-a-dozen records, and several large tins of cooked meat with dried okra, egusi seed and elubo.

“Jeun daada o, omo mi. F’aju si iwe re o, de ma jeki awon obinrin ko si e lori.” Eat well, my son. Pay attention to your studies, and don’t be distracted by women, Mama whispered, tugging at his shirtsleeve.

“Yes, Ma,” he nodded, turning to face her as she adjusted his collar, which needed no tweaking but that was her way. He hugged her tightly so that her head tie brushed against his chin, and the weight of stone and coral necklaces clinked against his blazer buttons. It took him back to his childhood days when he feared thunder and lightning and would rush to his mother’s arms to bury himself in the reassuring scent of her rose perfume tinged with the smell of firewood and starched cotton. He squeezed her again before his father called him away.

“So long, my son,” Baba spoke in English, which was his custom when in the presence of expatriates.

Tayo held out his hand and was surprised when his father pulled him into the voluminous folds of his agbada and held him there for some time. Baba then started sniffing and fiddling with his handkerchief behind Tayo’s neck, which compelled Tayo to cough and break Father’s hold so that they stood for some moments, disentangled but silent, each searching for something to say.

“Now, Tayo,” Headmaster Faircliff interrupted. “You’re off to be a Balliol man.”

“Yes sir,” Tayo nodded.

“You ought to be jolly proud of yourself, Tayo, and soon you’ll return to lead your country and make our school proud.” He grasped Tayo’s hand and threw a friendly slap across his shoulder.

Tayo nodded again, feeling strangely irritated by the man

whom he normally admired and felt indebted to for the scholarship.

“Right then, off you go,” Mr Faircliff ordered, releasing Tayo, and pointing to the gangway.

Tayo turned to leave, holding tightly to the large canvas bag that hung from his shoulder. Mama had assured him that in it was all that he needed for the voyage – a few changes of clothes, a bar of Palmolive soap, a tin of kola nuts, some dried meats, a map of England, chewing sticks, and Uncle Kayode’s old winter coat.

“Write to me as soon as you arrive,” Father called.

“Yes sir.” Tayo glanced back at his father before making his way slowly up the steps. He waited for his father to shout one last instruction, but it never came.

Chapter 2

Dear Baba,

Greetings from England and dry land! And what a journey it was, Baba, with that mighty sea constantly slapping against the ship and spraying the deck with salty water. There were many days when we saw no land at all and no other ships, just dolphins and flying fish, and once a group of sharks attacked our dolphin friends, turning the water red. Occasionally we passed another ship and our captain would blare his horn loudly, saluting the vessel while we waved, but usually it was just us and that endless, frightening sea. The waters were particularly rough when we entered the Gulf of Guinea, and the notorious Guinea current. They were also rough in the run up to the Bay of Biscay, but the worst was entering the Mersey Estuary from the Irish Sea. From a distance, the Irish Sea was cloaked in fog so that we could not see the rough, heaping waves that are legendary among mariners. Mind you, this was the only time when I succumbed to seasickness (and everyone suffered from motion sickness that day!).

On board the ship, I made friends with two students – Mr Lekan Olajide from Ogbomosho and Mr Ibrahim Mohammed from Kaduna. The three of us were well received by the Captain, and even invited to the first-class cabin where the British Broadcasting Corporation was making a film about Nigeria. Perhaps we are already famous! Sadly, Mr Olajide and Mr Mohammed were not Oxford-bound, but we have exchanged

addresses, and in this way we remain in touch. The boat made several stops along the way at Takoradi, Monrovia, Freetown, and the lovely Las Palmas. Once in Liverpool, they tugged us into harbour and I travelled to London, and then up to Oxford where I am now in my college rooms.

My first two weeks at Oxford have been busy and filled with invitations of all sorts. Yesterday I had tea with my moral tutor and sherry with the Master. Today it was a new members' drinks party at the West African Society, and chapel was followed by sherry in the Old Senior Common Room. I have also been introduced to a British Army Colonel, a Brigadier, and a Lord who dined in college. King Olav's son (from Norway) is a student here at Balliol too. As you can see, there are many important persons at Oxford, which is part of what makes it such an impressive institution.

In other ways though, Oxford is not as I had expected. The sun sets by 5pm and I am told that it sets even earlier in months to come. This, and the fact that darkness descends so slowly, are so strange for me. The people can be a little strange too and on the whole not terribly friendly. I have come to the conclusion that because the English are a minority in Nigeria, they are obliged to be cordial in our country whereas their true temperament is somewhat cold – much like their weather. You will also be surprised to discover that in this country, people do not greet each other in passing, not even Balliol men. In fact many Balliol men do not look very distinguished at all. Some sport long hair, and bathing is not a daily occurrence on account of the cold. The tutors look more distinguished, but many are surprisingly ignorant about Africa. I am grateful to Headmaster Faircliff for his letter of introduction to Professor Edward Barker and his wife, Isabella, who have invited me to lunch next week.

I am also excited to report that I have met three other Nigerians at the university. Mr Ike Nwandi, who is reading History, Mr Bolaji Oladipo reading Law at Magdalen, and

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Christine Arinze who reads Modern Languages at St. Hilda's. We live and study in the colleges and each has its own library and tutors. I am also friendly with Percy, my scout. He is the man who cleans my room every day, and has been most helpful in explaining the origin and meaning of certain English customs. Can you believe that he addresses me as 'Sir'? Life is different here, but a great adventure. I intend to join the college football and table tennis teams, and also the West African Students Society. I will, however, devote most of my hours to reading, starting with Kant and de Tocqueville, as well as many other notable scholars for my tutorials.

I wait anxiously for news from home, and for some letters. My greetings to everyone, and please tell Mama that her food has served me well (I have made several friends by sharing it with chaps on my staircase). English food, with the exception of custard (like ogi) is not too appetising. Please greet Auntie Amina, Uncle Tunde, Auntie Titiola, Auntie Mary, Uncle Kayode, Uncle Joseph, brother Remi, brother Tope, sister Bisi, sister Kemi, sister Fatima, and all the family.

*Yours truly,
Omotayo.*

PS – As my colleagues find it difficult to pronounce my name, I am now known as 'Ty' for short.

Sarah Ladipo Manyika

Dear Son,

We received your letter dated 27th October; two weeks hence. We are delighted to know that you arrived safely and in good health. Praise God! It was most interesting to hear of your experiences in Oxford and I have informed colleagues at work about your meeting with King Olav, the Lords, and the army generals. They are duly impressed. In your next letter, you will please apprise me of the precise names of these gentlemen so that I can provide complete statistics to colleagues and Uncle Kayode.

We are all well here. Thanks be to God. Bisi received highest honours for Geography, and Biyi made school prefect. So you see, the Ajayi family continues to excel in their studies. Marvellous. We are looking to you now to make us even more proud. Meanwhile, things in Nigeria are running splendidly. The independence celebrations (three years of independence now!) were quite fantastic. In short, there were many fireworks, dancing, eating, and general gaiety. We were proud and now the government is working for increased Nigerian leadership. Indigenous responsibility is what we call it. Rumour has it that a Nigerian will soon replace our Chief of Police, and we hope so. God willing. And yet some white men here are still thinking they own our land, not acknowledging that it is a new Nigeria. In short, to keep you informed I send you forthwith these articles from The New Nigerian and The Daily Times newspapers. I have underlined, for your benefit, the important points.

Your mother is preparing her trip to Mecca. She informs me that she will offer special prayers for you when she arrives, and that upon her return, she will dispatch hence-with to you some additional provisions. In short, she would like to know how much to send your esteemed colleagues. It is most encouraging to hear your news. Write again immediately upon receipt of this letter. Read your books, and always remember that you are an Ajayi

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man. Don't forget the Ajayi motto – In all things moderation, with exception of study.

God bless you.

Your father

Inspector (Mr) Adeniyi Ajayi

Chapter 3

All that Tayo knew about Mr and Mrs Barker, prior to their first meeting, was that Mr Barker and Headmaster Faircliff had attended Oxford together in the 1940s and that Mr Barker was a History don at St. Johns. Tayo presumed on this basis that the two men would be similar – that Mr Barker, like Faircliff, would be highly intelligent, pompous and patronising. Tayo was surprised therefore to discover that the man was not at all as he expected, and even more surprised to hear Mr Barker freely joking about his old friend as an old colonial ‘type’ and a remnant of a dying era. Mr Barker was nothing like Faircliff; he was soft-spoken and married to a much younger (and very attractive) Italian woman who preferred to be called Isabella rather than Mrs Barker. The Barkers had no children of their own, but seemed to have adopted a number of foreign students at Oxford. Isabella cooked wonderful meals in a way that reminded Tayo of his own mother while Mr Barker talked politics like his father. Mr Barker had visited Nigeria on several occasions, which was what made Tayo feel so at home from the beginning.

Today the Barkers were having a drinks party for foreign students at their house on St. Giles. Isabella welcomed Tayo with the usual hug and kiss before whisking him through the kitchen and into the garden where everyone else was gathered. Tayo felt disappointed that they had to mingle outside rather than inside where it was warmer, but it seemed to Tayo that this was the British way. People spent all day talking about the weather,

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complaining about how cold, damp and miserable it was until the sun poked its head around the clouds and then everyone cheered up and started talking about lovely weather. But ‘lovely’ to Tayo could only be warm weather not this cold, pale orange sun sitting high up there in the sky. Tayo was thinking of an excuse to return indoors when he spotted his friend, Bolaji, and the woman standing next to him. He had only ever heard of one Nigerian woman at Oxford so he guessed it must be her – the famously beautiful third year, Christine.

They were talking literature when Tayo joined Bolaji’s small circle of friends who stood by the back door, which was at least warmer than standing under the apple trees where everyone else had congregated. Bolaji was in the process of arguing that Shakespeare was the greatest author of all time while others argued for Tolstoy and Homer. As Tayo listened, it became obvious that the group knew much more about literature than he did. Even Bolaji was able to reference an impressive number of literary theorists in support of his position.

“What does Christine think?” Tayo asked, curious to hear her thoughts for he knew that she read Modern Languages.

“Poets are the greatest writers,” she answered.

“And why?” he asked, knowing that the safest way to avoid being questioned himself was to do the asking.

He noticed, as Christine talked, that she appeared quite serious, never smiling despite the fact that the conversation had taken a jocular tone. Tayo had heard men say that Christine was arrogant on account of her beauty. Others thought it was the result of having lived in England for such a long time. It was rumoured that both her parents had schooled in England and she had been sent to boarding schools as a child. Whatever the reason for Christine’s apparent seriousness, Tayo was determined to make a good impression on this beautiful woman. She spoke eloquently like an actress, poised and confident so

that Tayo quickly lost track of what everyone else was saying until he heard someone call his name.

“What do you think, Tayo?”

“Me?” he replied, stalling for time. “I think if I had to choose it would also be Shakespeare – his sonnets,” he said, with the sinking feeling that someone would now ask him to say more, to explain or, God forbid, name a favourite sonnet. To avoid further questions, he mentioned in passing that one of his old teachers had been a poet.

“Christopher Okigbo was your teacher!” Christine exclaimed.

Later that evening Bolaji marvelled at Tayo’s good luck.

“Did you see how she lit up when you spoke of Okigbo? She even smiled!”

Tayo laughed, pretending not to have noticed, but of course he had; everybody had noticed.

Tayo did not see Christine again for several days until they bumped into each other the following Monday as she was dashing out of the Covered Market, heading toward Schools Examination. He invited her to have coffee with him at the Cadena the next day, which to his surprise she accepted, and it was all he could do to stop himself from grinning while saying goodbye.

The next day he was struck by how made up Christine looked. She was the sort of woman who would always look beautiful, but it seemed to Tayo that she had put extra effort into styling her hair and adding rouge to her cheeks. He didn’t care for the rouge, finding it artificial, but the fact that she had gone out of her way to look good for him was all that mattered. Perhaps she really did like him, he thought while she talked again about Okigbo and some of the other new Nigerian authors. He asked her why she was so interested in these writers. Wouldn’t it be more interesting to talk about other writers that she must know from all over the world? No, she replied, insisting that her knowledge

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of Nigeria and Nigerian writers was not good enough. It seemed to matter a great deal to her what other Nigerians thought of her. If only she knew how in awe they all were of her! Tayo was beginning to think that she was sharing things with him that she might not have shared with others, when she changed the subject and asked him how many girlfriends he had.

“So far I’ve counted five,” she said, referring to the number of women who had passed by their table to say hello to him.

Tayo tried to laugh it off, but Christine wasn’t laughing.

It took some days to convince Christine that he wasn’t the playboy she took him to be. She kept commenting on the number of women that liked him, but at the same time she was seeing him more often so that he grew bold again and asked if she would like to come to his rooms for coffee. On Friday night she came, and this time, when she made yet another dig about his so-called girlfriends, Tayo decided to play along with her story. Rather than be defensive, he told her all about his teenage fantasies for Indian women and how he used to go to the Lebanese theatre in Ibadan to watch Indian films which was the only cinema available. Unable to understand Hindi, what else was he supposed to do but look at the ladies? Christine laughed a lot this time, which gave him the courage to turn serious and tell her how beautiful she was. He still half-expected to be pushed away or for her to say something about how silly and young he was, but she didn’t, so he grew bolder and took her hand. And then, because she didn’t resist, he drew her close for a kiss.

For the rest of the term they spent as much time as they could together. Often they took walks by the river and now it wasn’t only him telling her about his background but she also shared hers with him, telling him more about her family. There were moments when Tayo felt guilty about Modupe, but he reasoned

with himself that he and Modupe had been too young to make promises to each other. Three years was a long time to be apart at their age and now, when he re-read Modupe's letters, they struck him as childish. Modupe was just a girl next to Christine and with Christine he had gained confidence, so much so that he no longer felt the need to talk about long-term commitments as he had done with Modupe. He was, after all, only nineteen, and now that he had won the chase with Christine he still hoped to meet other women and further expand his horizons.