

## THE PEOPLE GOD GAVE US



The last time I was in Nigeria, a woman who lost her twenty-five year old son in an accident told me that her son still lives in her dreams. He comes to her at nights and he fills her in on what progress he is making. I have gotten a scholarship. I have gotten a visa to the US. Mom, I am getting married. I want to make you proud, he once said to her, looking into her eyes as if in search of her missing joy. Although he died, he has refused to be dead, his mother said. It was on that day, in that sitting room in Ibadan that had the musky smell of rain, that I decided – three years ago – that I would organize a reunion for my used-to-be Block Rosary kids/members.

And so eleven years after our little Block Rosary centre somewhere in Ijebu-ode in Nigeria disappeared into the blur of unwritten history, we meet again. We meet as adults, and our faces are the score sheets of all that has happened to us. I didn't know I would see this day again, one of them says. Stella says the God of her childhood has changed because she lost her father and Ebuka her brother within the last few years. The week Ebuka died, Stella tells us, a priest came to give him communion. Ebuka whose body was changing fast and had given up because hospitals gave up on him, managed to ask the priest to give him two more hosts.

"But it's still the same," the priest said. Tears come to my eyes as Stella narrates in detail.

"I used to think that nothing evil could happen to me and my brother because we were children of God. I didn't believe God could let it. It's as if God has changed. I now have serious questions," Stella adds, then swallows a sob and stops. I notice the unease in the group. Augustine's face buckles and Emeka bows and looks hard at the cement floor and Chidera stops smiling. But this isn't the first time our group has been seized by such sadness.

Shortly before our group photo was taken, I remember, Peter died, which is why he is not in the picture. It was just after he began secondary school at Adeola Odutola College. He used to hawk plantain and potato chips for his mother on the streets after returning from school. Sometimes, when I noticed his tray empty from the side mirror while driving home in the evening, I would pull over onto the shoulder of the road, put his empty tray into the boot and drive him home, knowing he had walked at least twelve streets that day. He would put on his seat belt and thank me from the beginning to the end of the journey and I couldn't tell whether it was because I took him home, or because it was in a Mercedes Benz.

He had ashen lips and thin legs, with the shy smile of a mushroom. His mother's eldest son after losing five children.

He would have been in university by now. He would have said, if he were still alive: "I am now in my final year in university, Bro. Anthony," and I would have said: "look at you who used to be slim as a birthday card. You now have a body." And he would have laughed his full-blown laugh, like the men on the cover of old cabin biscuit cartons that were popular across West Africa in the late 90s. I am describing him like this because his family told me after he died of a fever that they had no photo of him, and because they told me the cemetery in which he was buried but wouldn't tell me which spot. An unmarked grave. Sometimes I drive past Eruwon cemetery where grave stones jut out like many white teeth and I can't tell which grave is his. I watch for a while with the car windows wound down, casting my eyes across the cemetery and knowing that Peter's body is right here, somewhere here, and a knot forms in my throat when I remember that there's not even anybody I could possibly ask. And that is when tears come to my eyes.

But I have HD memories of him, I console myself and drive away. I turn into another street and I imagine him on the passenger's seat in the car asking me why it is no longer a Mercedes, why is it now a jeep? Peter loved to ask questions, because he loved answers, and yet nobody has an answer as to why he died at age 14. Why his parents had not taken him to the hospital when he began to show symptoms of fever on that black-dressed afternoon of January 1, 2010, when the skies in Ijebu-Ode seemed bereft of silver linings.

But we are happy, eleven years after our prayer centre vanished, two years after Ebuka died mysteriously. We are happy because we have one another. Sister Happiness is still a beautifully mischievous, fun-loving rascal. She now organizes events across the country. She used to have a signature hairstyle of tightly-plaited cornrows. But today she wears a wig the shape of broccoli. Black broccoli.

Stella still carries herself like somebody's first lady, her shoulders held high in an I-have-mastered-every-situation sort of way. The three Okoye girls are now big on Tik-Tok and instagram and they make me think of the Pussycat dolls.

Paul Egbulei came with his wife, heavy with unborn child. That one decided to get married before me. Izuchukwu still talks like a solar-powered robot, calls me bwo-Anthony and is obsessed about frequenting the gym. Immaculate, fondly called Mama during her childhood days, is now a huge shock: a feminist who wonders why women cannot be catholic priests.

Mr. Dim Augustine who used to genuflect before hot meat pie, is now a gymnast who tells people to avoid junks. Handsome Chidera promised me many years ago he'll become a priest and now he looks at me and says: "how are you doing it *sef?*" But thank God we have Kingsley who entered seminary in his place. Salesians of Don Bosco. He must know how I am *doing it*. Then there is Samuel, the kind of man I can use for my P.A. Seeing him spend a few nights in my house, I feel like placing all my files and unfinished manuscripts into the hands of this reliable man who has a skin the colour of fine coffee. I remind him, whenever he goes errands for me with his usual nose-first smile, that we are now adults together. He answers me "yes *sah*."

Joy is now studying to be a nurse and she very much looks like it. Brother Henry who founded the centre with me, is now Father Henry, a priest of Ijebu Catholic Diocese. Amaka arrives and I uncross my legs and nearly leave my seat for her. Grown into a Madam! She keeps pushing her long hair away from her juicy face as she speaks. *Hiahn!* Harrison's body still doesn't appreciate food. He can still fit his way into a door opened ajar.

It's what a reunion is like: an opening. An opportunity. A place where divergent stories gather at one crossroad where God sits active and compassionate. But that door is still closing. It's open now but it's closing slowly. No one knows tomorrow. Gather memories now that you can. Hold them, keep them safe. Good memories remind us of the people God gave us. And a reunion is an act of thanking God for having given us these people.

