I am Not Yvonne Nelson

Chapter 3: FOREWORD

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FOREWORD

The legendary Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, once said, “If you don’t like someone’s story, write your own.” Writing one’s own story helps to cure the misrepresentation and inaccuracies that are likely to occur if one’s story is told by others. However, writing one’s story does not come easy. Anyone who decides to write his or her own story is often confronted with the dilemma of how far to go, how much to reveal, and how clean the writer should look in the story.

In most cases, such stories come out with exaggerated virtues of the writer. The rough edges are often trimmed, and all the creases about their lives are neatly ironed out, leaving an almost perfect account of an obviously imperfect person.

In this book, however, Yvonne Nelson has decided to be different. With a special kind of boldness, she has opened the door into her life without first cleaning up the messy aspects of it. It’s like waking up and posing for the camera without any makeup on. Considering the society in which the author operates and is familiar with, it is a rare act of bravery to write the things contained in this book.

This book is not an ordinary autobiography. It is a search for an answer to a question that has nagged the author since her childhood. It chronicles a journey that starts unassumingly but auspiciously in Dansoman, gets gloomy and bleak after Aggrey Memorial AME Zion Secondary School in Cape Coast, and sets the stage for the author’s struggles; a struggle against failure and the desertion that comes with it, a struggle which later becomes the fight against the pitfalls of fame and success.

In essence, this book recounts an endless struggle by the author to discover herself and her place in the world. She faces a fair dose of ups and downs. As with all human stories, there are surprises and dramatic ironies that are known, perhaps, only to Providence. For instance, Aggrey Memorial, which she despises so much turns out to be the right place that prepares her for the success that would define her life.

In the midst of the struggle for success and against the battles that come with it is the bigger and overriding theme of the story. It begins on the first page and ends on the last—the mystery about the author's father. This story has almost all the elements of fiction. However, the major conflict of the story remains unresolved as the reader closes the pages and wonders what is next.

Those whose perception of celebrities is defined by glittery photographs on glossy magazine covers with stories that contain glossier portrayals of the celebrities' lives will find this book revealing, if not shocking. It lays bare the struggles and failures and fears of the men and women who, at some point or the other, own the screens of our television sets. This book also gives an insider's perspective of female celebrities and settles the debate about whether sex-for-roles in the movie industry is a perception or reality, at least in Nigeria and Ghana.

Above all, it also subtly reveals the power celebrities wield. The success story of the author's protest against Ghana's power crisis in 2015 and the visit by President Akufo-Addo's close associate to convince her to contest a parliamentary seat on the ticket of the NPP in 2020 attest to the power celebrities wield beyond the entertainment circles.

This is a book that is bound to ruffle feathers and ignite wild debates, but those who read it objectively and without the judgmental binoculars will see the story of a young woman—fallible like all other mortals— who is determined to leave a mark despite the internal and external forces that have erected high hurdles in her way.

Manasseh Azure Awuni

(Ghanaian Journalist and Author)

April 2023

Life, they say, begins at 40. This saying is rooted in the belief that, by a person's fourth decade on earth, he or she should have laid the foundations necessary for a smooth and more rewarding take-off into the next half of his or her existence on earth. If this saying is anything to go by, then my life is yet to begin. I will be 38 in November; and per the constitution of Ghana, no person below 40 years is eligible to be elected president of the country, even if he or she is able to carry the entire nation to the moon and back.

So why am I in a hurry to write my memoir before I turn 40? Do I think I have achieved so much that this stage of my life deserves a book? Have I reached the pinnacle of my goals and ambitions?

I have covered quite a distance, but what I envisage before me is more ambitious than what is behind me. So, I am not writing this because I think I have peaked. It is said that a person's speed in the battle of life is determined by the speed of his or her pursuer. That which is determining the speed of my run started its vicious and supersonic pursuit before I was born. I have been running in silence, apart from a few hints I have dropped here and there in some major media interviews.

Some people, mainly bloggers and reporters in the entertainment industry, have tried to take the disjointed bits and pieces and weave their own stories about my life. They have tried to convince their audience that their version of my story is the one and only definitive account. Some of those strange stories sound like works of fiction grounded in real-life scenarios, at least with a real character. I have engaged in some firefighting in the past, trying without much success, to extinguish some flames of untruths, half-truths and outright misinformation.

Correcting other people's accounts of me is, however, not the reason I am telling my own story at this stage. I am not here to seek sympathy or validation. I am not here to challenge anyone's version or correct anyone's narrative.

I am writing because I have a story to tell. I am here to be real. I am here to open up, especially to a generation of young women that needs the truth to make decisions. I am here to find the most important answer to the most nagging question about my life.

I was barely out of my teen years when fate thrust me in a career that makes the limelight inevitable. Being in that limelight comes with its own etiquettes. You are required to conform to the etiquettes and swim along the tide. You are expected to move with the flow, even if it runs counter to your reality.

Being called a celebrity is a bestowment of a package on you. It sometimes comes with unrealistic demands and expectations. You have to live for the people. You have to learn the celebratory cues and act on them as if your very existence depended on them. Your reality does not matter if it does not align with the make-believe reality of show business. The industry requires one to act out one's real life in much the same way a script containing someone's imagination should be acted out. You have to always smile to the lenses of the prying crowd. You have to conceal your weaknesses. You have to hide your tears and fears.

But there comes a time one finds truer meaning to life, a calling and a cause more fulfilling than the real and imaginary applauses in the market square of stardom. There comes a time one has to be real with oneself. There comes a time when one feels compelled to let the world into one's life and show them the other side, the real side. This, I feel, is my time.

In so doing, I intend to help future generations of young women that are hungry for fame and would do anything to make a name. I do not intend to decide for them or dissuade them from following their dreams. I intend to show them the whole picture. I intend to give them the ingredients to prepare their own meals of life.

I intend to show them the human side of celebrity life. I intend to show them that celebrities are nowhere near the status of superhuman species. Behind the expensive make-up, glittering edited photos and enhanced videos are human beings who have blemishes—physical and emotional— just like everyone else. They have their weaknesses, their fears and disappointments, just like everyone else. It is true that a female celebrity will likely have teeming men, known and unknown men, dying to get her attention. But it is also true that she, too, struggles to get the attention of the man she loves, who may not love her back.

I intend to show young women entering the movie or showbiz industry that they have hard choices to make. They have to choose between growing organically with dignity or leapfrogging into overnight stardom with unspeakable compromises. I intend to show them that they will suffer for their stubborn refusal to earn a place on the big stage with their body.

In telling my story, I have made the hard decision not to sanitise it. I have told it in its raw form. Knowing my society and the high "moral" standard by which its women are measured, it is like taking an uninsurable risk in an already perilous endeavour. However, I want whoever looks up to me to see the whole package. I have had my low and my high moments. I have done things that I'm proud of and things

I could never talk openly about until I decided to write this book. I have run and completed some races. In others, I have faltered and crashed. All of that has shaped me and made me the woman I am. I intend to show those who look up to me the scars of my falls, with the hope that they may avoid the landmines that nearly ended my life.

Above all, the main reason I decided to write this book precedes my birth. I have searched in all the possible places for answers but failed. So, I am telling this story with the hope that I will find answers that will stop the tears that only my pillow can adequately bear witness to.

I am telling my story to discover myself.

Yvonne Nelson

April 2023

I am Not Yvonne Nelson

Chapter 5: CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

A Teacher's Question

What turned out later to be a frantic search and a lifelong fight for my true identity began rather nonchalantly. The trigger was a simple question from a teacher who wanted to cure his casual curiosity. It was a question whose answer I thought I knew without having to scratch my young head, but I ended up racking my adult brain for years, employing scientific methods, and conducting my own investigations but without the corresponding reward for the effort. Every now and then, different variations of that question return to haunt me like a horrifying ghost.

I grew up with a void in my life, but it really didn't mean much to me until that fateful afternoon when my Primary Five class teacher, Mr. B.B. Grant, summoned me to his desk, in front of the classroom. As I approached his desk, another boy in my class also scampered toward us. The teacher had called him too.

I did not have the faintest hint about why the two of us were Mr. Grant's subjects of interest and summons, but it would not take forever to find out.

Eugene Nelson was one of the neatest and most handsome boys in the class. As young as he was, he had an aura of respectability around him. Apart from his attitude when provoked, which those in his circles had endured a few times in the past, I could not say anything negative about him. We were not friends. We had our different cliques because our personalities—which were polar opposites—could not contain us in the same group. From afar, I liked Eugene, and that was just it. Even if I had any crush on him, I kept it to myself. To be called to our class teacher's table together, therefore, set me on edge until Mr. Grant spoke.

"Are the two of you related?" he asked.

It was a question that confused me, but Eugene and I did not have any difficulty answering it. We were not related. We bore the same surname, but it wasn't strange to have two or three children in the same class and from different hometowns bearing the same surname. Eugene was short and I was tall. His nose, eyes, head and every other feature of his was different from mine. The only feature we shared was a fair complexion. That, too, was not a novelty, for we were not the only fair children in that class. But the teacher, peering into our personal records on his desk, appeared to know more than we did. To us, we were not related in any way, but he thought there might be something we did not know.

"When you go home, ask your parents," he said and dismissed us.

The teacher's question set me on a lifelong inquest into what has turned out to be the most elusive assignment of my life. The more I discovered, the more I wished the search hadn't started in the first place. But the more answers I got, the more desperate I became about finding the true answer to the most important question of my life—who am I? That I am Yvonne Nelson is a well-established fact to outsiders, but to my family and a handful of friends, I am not Yvonne Nelson. After almost four decades of my existence, I am still as desperate as when that seed of confusion was planted in my head by a teacher who, perhaps, did not appreciate the full import of what he was doing. The search for answers was bound to begin at a certain point in my life, but his question brought some urgency and intensity to the entire enterprise.

The assignment he gave us that day meant different things to Eugene and me. To Eugene, it meant exactly what the teacher said—he should ask his parents. In my case, I had no parents. I had only a parent. Eugene had a father and a mother to ask, but I had only a mother. I would later discover that Eugene, like me, had actually only one parent who was in the position to know the answer.

Assignments from teachers, or what we often called “homework”, were supposed to be done at home. If we had a favourite programme on television or an important outing and didn’t want the assignment to interfere with our programme, we squeezed some time and did it in school so our day and night would be cleared for our personal stuff. The teacher’s assignment on whether Eugene and I were related was not a conventional assignment, and I did not have anything special to attend to at home, but I could not resist the urge to start it right from school.

I started to scan the features of Eugene critically in order to pick hints of our biological relationship, but there was nothing useful from that exercise. When we closed that day, I continued my investigation by standing at a respectable distance to see the man who picked him up from school. The man came, and he was Mr. Nelson. As I had done in the case of Eugene, I tried to pick out features that would lend credence to a possible relationship between Mr. Nelson and me, but there was none. So, I carried the unresolved puzzle home, with a strong resolve to find an answer.

On my way home that day, the teacher’s question weighed heavily on me. What I had not paid attention to started to take centre stage in my life. I was still young, but I was old enough to notice some anomalies in my family. I was awake to the stark and uncomfortable reality that I was the odd child at home. Of the four-member nuclear family in my house, there appeared to be a stronger bond among the first three occupants of that house. I felt like a stranger.

When curiosity had driven me to ask my mother why the name of her popular business was Manovia, she said it represented her name and those of my two siblings. She had coined the name from the beginning, middle and ending of their respective names in order of age—Margaret, Enoch and Sylvia. My mother’s name is Margaret, and Enoch and Sylvia are her first and second children. I came last. She responded to my next query with the explanation that I had not been born at the time she established the business. I felt left out, but that was not the only or most obvious difference between my two siblings and me.

At primary six, I was about 12 years old and conscious of a number of things. I was conscious of the fact that my two siblings, Enoch and Sylvia, had a surname that was different from mine. Theirs was Davies. And mine was Nelson. I didn’t take the time to know much about Davies, but in those days, I did not need to be told that he was an important somebody in the country. Lt. Col. Joseph Kabu Davies was not only a senior military officer but also someone who appeared influential. I had seen photographs of him with President Ft. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings, and that was enough to tell me his pedigree.

Children of my generation grew up seeing Rawlings as an enigma. He had transitioned from a military ruler to a civilian president, but much of what we heard about him were his exploits as a soldier. He was

a symbol of bravery, justice and fearlessness. His looks endeared him to many, and his antics and showmanship made him a delight to watch anytime he was on television. As far as some of us were concerned, he was among the most powerful men on earth, and whoever was close to him had to be really important. So, I rated Lt. Col. Davies, the father of my siblings, highly.

When my siblings had once mentioned that my mother was pampering me, I remember her telling them that it was because my father was not there. With that background, the teacher's question ignited in me a fierce determination to know who my father was. I also wanted to know whether the Nelson whose name I carried was the same Nelson who fathered my classmate, Eugene.

My mother is not the type who is used to giving straightforward answers. She prefers to give an explanation before she responds to even close-ended questions. In the case of Mr. Nelson, however, I do not clearly recall the order in which she answered my questions. What I recall was the order in which I processed and stored that information.

I recall her affirmative response to what I considered the most important question of my life. Eugene and I were, indeed, related. The teacher was right. Eugene was my brother. Before I had time to process the revelation and ask further questions, my mother went on to tell me a string of negative tales about Mr. Nelson. These negative stories were part of the reason I never felt emotionally attached to the man whose name I bear. Even if I had any emotional attachment to him, what Mr. Nelson did to me on my first visit to his house was enough to erase it all. That rejection was more painful than being jilted by the most romantic and caring lover.

CHAPTER TWO

A Failed Abortion

I was one of the most popular pupils in one of the most prestigious private basic schools in Ghana at the time, St. Martin de Porres School in Dansoman in Accra. Before a number of more prestigious private schools sprouted everywhere in Ghana, charging fees in American dollars and offering British curricula, St. Martin de Porres School was one of the most exalted schools in the country in the 1990s. That was when private schools were still a preserve of society's privileged, and not the necessity of every parent in today's extremely deteriorated public basic school system.

It was the second private school I attended after a brief spell at a kindergarten that was named after the most popular Catholic figure of my generation—Pope John Paul II, known in private life as Karol Wojtyla. The Pope John Paul Preparatory School collapsed long before Pope John Paul II died in 2005. (That school was situated where the Dansoman Children's Park is today). I cannot say much about its prestige in its heydays, but private schools were not as common then as they are today, and only a few parents could afford to take their children there. So, I assume I started at a good school.

From Pope John Paul Preparatory School, my mother enrolled me in St. Martin de Porres School. The school started in 1973, a dozen years before I was born. With 17 pupils at the beginning, the school now has over 1,200 students and is still regarded as one of the top private schools in Ghana's capital. According to the official history of the school, its founder, Mrs. Florence Laast, named the school after her "favourite saint, Martin de Porres, one of the few black saints in the Catholic faith. He was known for his hard work, humility, and, most of all, his compassion towards his fellowmen."

As I would grow to learn, St. Martin de Porres and what he stood for, perhaps, was more significant to me than it was to the founder of my school. According to Catholic.com, Martin de Porres is a patron saint of Mixed Race, Barbers, Public Health Workers, and Innkeepers. He was beatified in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI and canonized in 1962 by Pope John XXIII.

According to his official biography, "St. Martin de Porres was born in Lima, Peru on December 9, 1579. Martin was the illegitimate son of a Spanish gentleman and a freed slave from Panama, of African or possibly Native American descent. At a young age, Martin's father abandoned him, his mother and his younger sister, leaving Martin to grow up in deep poverty."

I grew up to learn that I am of a mixed race. I grew up to realise that I was an illegitimate daughter. And until proven otherwise, everything points to the fact that my father abandoned me. Like St. Martin de Porres, I have had my share of ridicule about my parentage. Unlike him, however, I did not grow up in poverty. The fact that I attended St. Martin de Porres School was enough testament to that. It was in this school that I spent at least nine of my formative years, acquiring all that primary and junior high school

education had to offer. It was and still is a good school, and I give credit to my mother for giving me a good start in life.

I am still unable to say whether my mother was a rich woman, for my idea of wealth was informed by the affluent families in my neighbourhood, those who lived in bigger houses and drove better cars and went on vacations abroad and did all the things I fantasised about as a child. Looking back, however, I think my mother was not doing badly at all.

We lived in a two-bedroom semi-detached house that had its own spacious compound. It was part of the properly planned and developed Dansoman Estates, which, at one time, boasted of being the largest urban-planned residential area in West Africa. We had two bathrooms with WCs and a kitchen. My mother's business was flourishing, or so I thought, and we did not run out of cash.

My mother's shop, Manovia, was the most popular landmark in that part of Dansoman called Sahara. Commuter vehicles used Manovia junction as a bus stop and the nature of the business was such that all manner of persons patronised it. It was a pub and a convenience store. My mother was a distributor of both alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks. I recall going to the Accra Brewery Limited with my mother, sitting in the car and seeing her supervise the loading of her consignment into delivery vans. I recall seeing her at night counting money with the little bedside lamp she kept by the mirror. She drove her own car and travelled often on business trips. Her busyness with her flourishing business meant that she could not be there for us as she should be. To make up for this, she hired a house-help who took care of us and handled the chores that were above the strength of our feeble hands.

In school, I was popular for a reason most parents at the time would not want their children, especially girls, to be known for—entertainment. I was one of four students who were inspired and influenced by the American hip-hop group, Fugees. Formed in the early 1990s, the group was said to have derived its name from the word "refugees." It is unclear why refugees were of interest to a singing group, but the group's founder, Lauryn Hill, later ventured into a non-profit aimed at helping refugees.

The original Fugees trio had Wyclef Jean, Pras Michel and Lauryn Hill, while the St. Martin de Porres version had Enoch Nana Yaw Oduro- Agyei, Nii Tettey, one Aziz, and me. Being the only female, I was obviously the Lauryn Hill of the group. Nii Tettey had returned from the United States to join us in junior secondary school as it was then called. With his American accent, he was the closest we came to mimicking Fugees. We memorized and sang their songs at school functions. There were times we composed our own songs and performed them at school functions.

As a group, our favourite was Fugees, but my personal favourite was the Ghanaian rapper Obrafour. There was something about his music that blew my mind—the unparalleled depth and the dexterity with

which he owned the Twi language in his raps. Obrafour's music was so rich that members of the older generation who were not accustomed to hiplife and rap music got drafted into the genre because of his irresistible appeal. I did not have his photos in my room, but he was permanently engraved in my heart. I was influenced by foreign musicians, but Obrafour has been my all-time greatest singer. I remember how I saved money from my feeding allowance to buy his "Pae Mu Ka" album and learnt every line of each song in that album. He used to come to a studio in Dansoman SSNIT flats—I think it's called DKB Studio or so—and that was the closest I got to seeing him in person. Whenever I spotted him in his short dreadlocks at the time, I would shout his name from my school compound. Many years later, while helping him promote his 20th-anniversary concert, I told Obrafour how I used to shout his name. I didn't know whether he believed it, but he remains my finest artist of all time.

Besides Fugees, my group performed Obrafour's songs in school. He was big in the day and still commands enormous respect in the industry. We dreamt about growing up and sticking together to do great things as a musical group. Life, however, had different plans for us. Our ultimate goal started to dissipate even before we completed basic school. Our circumstances separated us even before we had time to plan how to stick together and pursue that dream.

Aziz is now married with children. Nii Tettey returned to the United States after junior high school and not much is heard about him now. Enoch Yaw Oduro-Agyei is, perhaps, the direct beneficiary of our childhood attempt at music. He is a Ghanaian singer and composer under the stage name Trigmatic. I also ended up in the entertainment industry outside of music, but the influence of American music almost defined my life even before I figured out the course of my young and not-so-ambitious trajectory.

I used to have photos of Fugees in my room, and my family thought I was useless. The whole American music culture influenced me a great deal. I dressed like a boy, and I still have traces of that tomboyish lifestyle in me to date. The influence was huge, and I loved it. But what appeared like a craze for music and the arts was a good escape for me, an escape from loneliness, especially as I began to discover that I didn't fully belong in my family. Music was, therefore, a welcome escape from a possible depression that could have come with that childhood loneliness.

My other therapeutic moments were the times I spent with my best friend, Miranda Mould. Miranda had her own share of the weight which life had placed on our young and fragile shoulders. She lived about three blocks from my house and we spent a lot of quality time together.

We often sat near the Ghana Telecom telephone booth that was close to my mother's shop, and whenever it malfunctioned, we served as the prompters to those coming to patronise it. We would tell them it was not functioning and continue with our discussion as they turned away. Sometimes we just sat there, with nothing to talk about but enjoying each other's company while thinking about what preoccupied us at the time. And I had a lot to occupy my mind.

My teacher's question had led me to discover a lot more about myself, most of which were not pleasant. The immediate discovery was about a father who didn't like me, a father who behaved like I did not exist. The story from my mother was not something that could make up for the absence of a father. It was the unflattering story of my birth, which came up a number of times in situations of anger.

When my mother was angry with me and really wanted to hurt me, she would tell me she had given birth to me by mistake. Whenever she said it, she knew how I felt. She knew she was driving a sharp nail into my heart. I could feel she really wanted to hurt me. Maybe, she was just being truthful. By so doing, however, she wounded my spirit, and that unhealable wound served as a constant reminder that all was not well with me. She made me feel terrible about my existence. I cannot imagine ever getting angry with my daughter and telling her that. And I do not think any child, for whatever reason, deserves such psychological torture. But those words and the story that gave credence to their power constantly reminded me that I was neither wanted nor appreciated.

My mother told me that when she got pregnant, she did not want to have me so she went to see a medical doctor to terminate the pregnancy. (My mother has told me that the doctor who saved my life is still alive, but she has not told me who he is or which hospital he worked in.) She took that decision in her sixth month. The doctor agreed, and on the said day, she paid the fees and all was set for the abortion. She lay on the surgical bed, raised her legs, but just when the doctor was about to begin the procedure, he shook his head.

"I can't do this," the doctor told her. "If you really want to do it, go somewhere else. I'm sorry I can't do it."

Gripped by fear and the shock of the doctor's sudden change of mind, she abandoned the idea. But she did not forget how I survived. And she made sure to remind me whenever she felt the need to. It is true that she conceived me by mistake. The details of that story are still too sketchy to be woven into something meaningful. But what is obvious is the fact that I could have ended up as a piece of medical waste if she had made up her mind early enough on whether she wanted to keep me or get rid of me.

I was born on Tuesday, November 12, 1985, at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra. From what I later learnt, there was no complication. I was born via spontaneous vaginal delivery (SUD).

Interestingly, Eugene was also born in November, but he is a year older than I. When I was old enough to understand the human reproductive system, I assumed that when Eugene was three months old, his dad—our dad—met my mum and they conceived me. If I was born in November, then I was probably

conceived in February, so I wondered what kind of man would leave a baby and its mother at home and go to father another child within the same period. From the dossier of negative information I gathered from my mother and the other deductions I made on my own, my perception of Mr. Nelson worsened. My worst recollection of his behaviour was his absence from my naming ceremony.

When I asked my mother why she named me Yvonne, she didn't have any reason. Names have meanings, and parents often choose names to reflect the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child or names that speak to what they expect of their children. Some believe that names have a way of influencing the lives of their bearers so care is often taken to choose names that would not portend doom for the holder. In my case, however, my mother had no reason. I thought Yvonne was an outdated name or what we called "colo" (a Ghanaian colloquialism for "colonial", often used to refer to things that are old-fashioned). But my mother said it was a name that was in vogue in those days.

My own search later revealed that Yvonne has a French origin and is derived from French names such as Yvon, Yves, and Ivo. Yvonne means "yew", a tall and enchanting tree species well-known for its resilience and long life. An entry on thebump.com says the following about that name: "Decorated by delicate green leaves and blood-red wildflowers, yews are one-of-a-kind in every shape and form. With the name Yvonne, a baby can be inspired by nature's beauty each and every day."

Just as I was conceived, my mother may not have been deliberate about my name, but I believe it was the right name for me. I am a yew. I say so not only because I am tall. I believe I still have an awful long way to go, but what has brought me far in life is resilience. It is resilience that kept me in one whole piece after I learnt that I was born by mistake, that I was a product of an aborted plan to abort a pregnancy. It is the resilience of a yew that kept me going when I failed and felt useless to my family and to some friends who did not hide their disdain for the failure I had become.

I believe I am as unique as the yew. And as someone who paints for pleasure, I am often inspired by nature's beauty.

CHAPTER THREE

Meeting Mr. Nelson

When I learnt that Eugene's father also was my father, I began to pay closer attention to him, and a pang of envy started to take a strong hold on me. If we were children of the same father, then I deserved to have what Eugene had—the love and the care and the material possessions. His appearance showed that he was better taken care of than I was. He changed school uniforms more regularly than I did. He had better shoes. Everything of his appeared new all the time. He was dropped off and picked up from school by the man who was also my father, while I had to walk home from school.

My school was about two kilometres from home, and the amount of time needed to cover that distance depended on whether I was going home alone or with my friends. Even with friends, it depended on our number and what occupied our attention after school. Walking was not much of a big deal, but being picked up from school in your father's car came with some prestige, love and care, for which every child yearned.

On a few occasions, my mother drove me to school. Her business kept her occupied most of the time, and considering the distance, I didn't hold any grudge against her for not doing what my father did with Eugene. As a single mother, she had a lot on her plate of hustle, but when she was available and when it was raining, she drove me to school. On some occasions, the father of my friend, Marian Myres, dropped me off in his Volvo before continuing home with his daughter. He was such a nice man, a gesture that made me miss my own father and envy Eugene the more.

What helped me cope with this envy was what my mother told me about Mr. Nelson. When she told me Eugene and I shared the same father, I asked why she hadn't told me all along. Her response was that it was not necessary and would not have changed anything because my father did not really take care of me. He had abandoned me since birth, she said. She gave me a number of scenarios that corroborated her negative portrayal of my father.

Mr. Nelson, she told me, had boycotted my naming ceremony. It was, and still is, a big deal. There must have been something unforgivably grave to cause a man to boycott the naming of his daughter. Whatever the reason was, she did not tell me. And nobody did. But my elder brother thought he had witnessed a fierce fight between my mother and my father shortly after I was born.

Enoch was young and could not remember the exact details of the fight, but he said it had something to do with my birth and was so serious that it nearly resulted in fisticuffs. It was on the corridor in our house, he later told me, and they screamed at each other until my father stormed out of the house in anger. That must have been shortly before my naming ceremony. It was not the last of the fights as I later heard from my mother.

My mother told me another story of her visit to my father's shop in Lartebiokoshie when I was still a baby. She had gone there for either provisions or money for my upkeep. When a misunderstanding ensued, she asked my father to take us home if he was not prepared to provide what she requested. My father jumped into his car and drove angrily and carelessly. We almost crashed on our way home, my mother told me.

My mother said when she complained about the dangerous driving, especially when a baby was on board, my father continued to drive like someone on a suicide mission. She then told him to allow us to alight if he wasn't going to drive with care. To her surprise, my father screeched to a halt and ordered us out of his car. She had to find a taxi to take us home.

Hearing these stories did not endear Mr. Nelson to me. I saw him as a total stranger, someone I had no connection with. He must have been the reason my mother wanted to abort me. He would not have abandoned me if he didn't hate me, I told myself. If he loved me, he would have lavished me with gifts and love as he did to Eugene. Beyond the early flood of bad testimonies, what he did when I tried to get close to him confirmed what my mother told me.

On one of our school vacations, I told my mother that I wanted to visit my father and she allowed me to go. Mr. Nelson Okoe was a popular man around Lartebiokoshie in Accra. He was a businessman who loved to have fun. He was the type who threw parties at will and was seen in the company of those who did not subscribe to sacrificing the pleasures of this world for the afterworld. He was successful, and the means to fund that lifestyle was the least of his worries.

That lifestyle came with intended and unintended consequences that transcended his personal behaviour. And it showed when I got to his house. He lived in a big family house, one of the biggest in the area at the time. It was a large family house with two one-storey buildings on the compound. (I remember his twin sister lived in one of the storey buildings.) A number of his children had visited him for the holidays and I was one of them. We were children from different mothers.

I felt different from the rest of the children. They resembled one another and some of them resembled Mr. Nelson. But I looked different. I was tall and the rest were short. The only child taller than me was Eugene's elder brother, Nii Aruna. Nothing showed that the other children and I were of the same father.

I did not feel any bond between Mr. Nelson and me. Nothing drew me to him. There was no fondness. Nothing. If I were to live with this man as my father, then I had to create that bond. I had to psyche myself up and accept that he was my father, despite the things my mother had told me about him. It was going to be difficult, but it was worth a try. Your father, they say, is your father. You can't trade him for someone else's father even if you don't like his looks or character.

I, however, abandoned every effort I was making to create that bond when he clearly told me, without saying it, that I did not belong to his household. It happened in the course of my visit. I was in the living room with the other children when he called all of them to his bedroom. Their laughter and giggling filtered into the living room, where loneliness and neglect were my only companions. I wondered why he did not call me. Eugene was there. He had also been called into my father's room.

When I went home that day, I told my mother that that was my last visit to my father's house. And I kept my word until decades later when circumstances compelled me to go back there. I remember one day, my father was driving past our house and stopped when he saw me sitting at the spot Miranda and I used to sit at. He rolled down and called me, but I refused to go. I remained seated and refused to utter a word, and, after some time, he drove off.

I had asked him for a pair of shoes, and he had promised to buy me three. And that was it. It remained a promise, unfulfilled to date. I was more emotionally attached to shoes than I was to the man I called my father. People close to me know that I am infatuated with footwear. I have about a hundred pairs of them. That love for shoes began very early, perhaps, as part of the American hip-hop influence. For my father to deny me shoes meant more to me than he probably could imagine. It meant he didn't love me. It meant everything my mother said about him was true.

What hurt me, even more, was the fact that I saw Eugene changing shoes often. He wore some of the best shoes. It was many years later that I realised Eugene's wardrobe was supported by his mother, who, like my mother, was a single mother.

Like me, Eugene was not living with Mr. Nelson. His mother was different from the mothers of the other children of Mr. Nelson. At the time, I didn't know this. When I got to know that Eugene, like I, lived apart from Mr. Nelson, I still wondered why he loved Eugene but cared less about me. If we were both born out of wedlock, why would he love one and hate the other? To the best of my knowledge, I had not

offended him. Even if my mother had offended him, why would he visit her sins on me? And what was the nature of the offence that made him despise me so much?

It is difficult to miss what you have not tasted, but imagining what I could have had if there was a father figure in my life gave me a sense of loss. I was a child starved of parental love. My father was completely out of the picture, and even though my mother provided for me, I cannot pretend I had a strong bond with the woman who missed no opportunity to remind me that she had me by accident. I don't remember ever doing any homework with my mother. Perhaps, my mother was too busy and my father would have had time for me if I lived under the same roof with him. The worst part of the absence of a father was the improvised father figure at home. My brother Enoch played that role.

It was a role assigned to him by my mother, and I was often at the receiving end of his disciplinarian duties. My elder brother was the man of the house. When I offended my mother and she had to beat me, she sometimes delegated that responsibility to him. It was an assignment he executed with passion, making me wonder whether he beat me so hard just to please my mother or he really wanted to instill discipline in me. He would lock me up in the room and hit me ruthlessly. I remember on one occasion, he beat me and stopped only when I told him I was menstruating. I couldn't tell exactly what he sought to gain, but if it was to make me submissive or subservient to their dictates, then he failed miserably. I was not a pushover. I was strong-willed and didn't let them cheat me at home. I made my position heard and did not allow my background or the rod of discipline and intimidation to force me to accept anything that ran counter to my beliefs, especially when I knew I was right.

All of that made me wonder whether my father would not have treated me differently and whether he would have allowed that to happen to me if he was in the house. Looking at his behaviour at the time, however, I was convinced it could have been worse. We could barely stand each other even though we hardly met. Whatever caused him to invite every one of his children into his room and leave me alone in the hall might have been strong enough to elicit severer beatings from him than what I got from my elder brother. And as I grew, I was determined to find the answer, even if those who had it were unwilling to give it to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Failed, Dejected and Rejected

My first encounter with what looked like failure was in 2000 when I sat the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), a compulsory transitioning examination administered by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC). It was the examination that determined who was good enough to enter secondary school. A candidate's performance in that exam also determined whether one was good enough to be admitted into Ghana's "Ivy League" secondary schools. Those who did not excel with distinction were destined for the second class, third class and other unclassifiable secondary schools. Until recently, when the government's policy on protocol admissions and corruption adulterated and still threaten to further undermine the excellence and prestige associated with the elite secondary schools, the dream of every BECE candidate was to make it to the very best secondary schools available. And one way of doing that was to pass extremely well in the BECE.

Candidates were graded using their best six scores in the nine or ten examinable subjects in junior secondary school (Some schools studied and wrote French while others did not so the number of BECE subjects at the time varied from school to school). The scores in a subject were graded from 1 to 9, 1 being the best score or "Excellent", while 9 meant failure in that subject. A candidate's overall score or result was calculated by summing his or her best six scores obtained in the exam. If you were asked what you obtained in the BECE, you said you got an Aggregate 6 or 8, 9 or 10, depending on the total score from your best six subjects.

Those who obtained Aggregate 6 were those who scored 1 in their best six subjects. The exceptional pupils who scored 1 in all the subjects often said, "I got an Aggregate 6 with ten 1's."

The public school system at the basic level has, for a long time, been neglected, so those who go to the public basic schools hardly score Aggregate Six, whether they attend rural or urban public schools. In my days—and that is still the case today—the competition was among those who attended top private basic schools such as St. Martin de Porres School. In such schools, many candidates score "Aggregate Six" so the distinction or comparison is often focused on the number of ones a candidate scores.

This was, perhaps, the reason I felt so distraught when I went for my results and it was a double figure. I obtained Aggregate 12, which meant that I was not among the best. In some public basic schools across the country, that could have been the best score for the exceptionally brilliant children. It could be the best result in some districts, but that was not a good result in St. Martin de Porres. It was the reason I considered myself a failure, especially when that had implications for the secondary school I had to attend.

The outcome of the BECE didn't come to me as a surprise. I was more of an entertainment girl than an academic child. My claim to fame was in music and dance, and I struggled with Mathematics. Social Studies, Religious and Moral Education, and Vocational Skills were the subjects I was good at. English Language was my best. With Integrated Science, I loved only the biology aspect of it. Everything pointed to the fact that I hated figures and calculations. It was the reason I chose General Arts as a course of study in secondary school.

However, it was not always about what I wanted to do. It was what others thought was good for me that prevailed. It is a situation many children face, and mine was no exception. Mine, however, proved costly. I was compelled to study a course I hated in a secondary school I hated even more.

Before we sat our BECE, we were often made to choose the secondary schools we wanted to attend. I don't recall all the three schools I selected for my first, second and third choices, but I remember I wanted to go to Mfantsiman Girls' Secondary School in the Central Region. I don't remember how it was ranked at the time, but that school is currently ranked a Category "A" secondary school in Ghana. Despite my choice, however, I was compelled to attend Aggrey Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Secondary School. I am yet to see a school with a longer name, but what made me hate the school had nothing to do with the length of its name.

Central Region is a citadel of the best secondary schools in Ghana. Being the first capital of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), a number of European missionaries established their schools there and spread to other parts of the country. The Methodist Church established the allboys Mfantsipim School in 1876. It was the first secondary school in the Gold Coast. Mfantsipim School remains one of the best secondary schools in the country. In terms of the all-girls secondary schools, another educational footprint of the Methodist Church in Cape Coast is the Wesley Girls High School, arguably the most prestigious secondary school in Ghana. The Catholic Church did not want to be outdone so it established St. Agustine's College and Holy Child School, all-boys and all-girls schools respectively. The Anglican Church established the Adisadel College, an all-boys secondary school, and it has also become one of the secondary schools of choice in the country. All of these are category "A" schools in Cape Coast.

The Presbyterian Church and other faiths also made strong marks elsewhere across the country with the establishment of world-class secondary schools, but Cape Coast still remains the town with the largest concentration of the best secondary schools in Ghana. To say you're going to secondary school in Cape Coast came with some prestige. That was, however, not the case with my school.

Aggrey Memorial A.M.E. Zion Secondary School, as we attempted to shorten it, was founded in 1940 by the late Rev. Dr. A. W. E. Appiah. He named the school Aggrey Memorial College after his late uncle, Dr.

James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey. Dr. Aggrey was a pan-African intellectual, missionary and educationist who was noted for his advocacy for girl-child education even at a time when the importance of a woman was confined to cooking and childbearing. It was Dr. Aggrey who said, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation.”

The secondary school established in his honour, however, started with only boys. According to the official history of the school, “In 1947, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Zion Church took over the realm of affairs of the school as a result of an agreement between the “Aggrey Society” and the A.M.E. Zion Mission. The name of the school was then changed from Aggrey Memorial College to Aggrey Memorial A.M.E. Zion Secondary School, and the first two boarders were also admitted.”

It is unclear why the A.M.E. Zion Mission expressed interest in the school, but it may have something to do with the man in whose memory the school was established. In 1898, it was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church that gave Kwegyir Aggrey the opportunity to study at Livingstone College, North Carolina, U.S.A., and at the associated Hood Theological Seminary, where he later became a professor.

With student numbers gravitating between 3000 and 4000, Aggrey Memorial—as we further shortened the long name—has been the biggest secondary school in Ghana in terms of population. A school with such numbers and without the corresponding infrastructure and teachers is bound to face challenges. Its victims are those who go there to determine their future.

Things may have improved now, but when I enrolled there in 2000, Aggrey Memorial had no proper supervision and discipline. If you did not pay serious attention to your books, the numbers provided you some form of cover and you enjoyed anonymity from the eyes of the teachers and school authorities whose duty it was to counsel you and put you on the right track. When I realised I was straying too far away from academic excellence, I did not get the needed help and support. Part of the blame ought to be borne by my parents and the school authorities.

In the first place, I did not choose Aggrey. My stepfather, Lt. Col. Davies, had a strong influence in the school. He had been a chairman of either the parent-teacher association or the school’s board at some point, so his word carried weight in the school. My two half-siblings had both attended Aggrey Memorial, so when I completed junior secondary school and was made to go there, it was a continuation of a family tradition.

Unlike my siblings, however, I was forced to study a programme against my will. I wanted to study General Arts, but the school said that course was fully subscribed. The only way I could keep my admission was to accept Business Accounting. I hated figures and calculations with passion but I was compelled to pursue that course. In class, all the noise about double entry principles of bookkeeping,

balance sheet and the rest of it entered in one ear and went out through the other. I was there to make up the numbers.

My best moments in Aggrey Memorial were on Saturday nights, when we had entertainment. During the week when academic work preoccupied the students, what kept me going was the expectation of Saturday night, when I would mount the stage and perform. I competed in the Miss Aggrey beauty pageant and won, a feat that attracted enmity among the senior girls. A junior girl who won a beauty pageant provided strong competition to the senior girls who aimed to catch the attention of the best boys on offer. There was the assumption that I would be disrespectful because of the crown and attention from senior boys. And it didn't help that I wasn't the quiet and submissive type. I was assertive, which, to the senior girls, was synonymous with arrogance. That was, however, not the main problem I had to contend with in that school.

Aggrey was an experience I didn't prepare for, but it turned out to be a kind of endurance test that prepared me for the future. My mother made sure that my boarding school wooden box (chop box) was always filled with the provisions one needed in a boarding school. She didn't have to buy many of them because she stocked them in her shop and was generous when stocking my box for school. My chop box was what saved me when the dining hall failed me. And it failed me often.

To say that the food was terrible is the mildest way to put the situation in Aggrey Memorial, which defies description. I remember the soup we nicknamed "moftoto". It was either groundnut or palm nut soup. It was so light that if you looked into it, you could see your image. When left untouched for a few minutes, it settled in layers so that the water was on top and the other particles beneath. It was a kind of scientific experiment whose results we didn't make use of. I still grimace at some memories in the dining hall. A friend once saw a toenail in the kenkey he was eating and another student saw the wing of a cockroach in her food. The stories of boarding school food aren't pleasant in many schools, but Aggrey was on a different level.

When our digestive system distilled the nutrients which our teenage bodies needed and we had to discard the rest, it came with another adventure. The toilet and bath facilities were oversubscribed, making it almost impossible to have them in sane and sanitary conditions. Sometimes we bathed outside. And the only way to avoid smelling as if you had swum in the toilet was to resort to what we called "take away".

The girls' dormitory was up the hill. Down beyond it were farms of indigenes of Brafo Yaw, the suburb of Cape Coast where the school is located. "Take away" was simply emptying your bowels in polythene, wrapping it and throwing it as hard as your hands could into the bush. Wherever it settled or how the content spilled was not your business.

If your friend said to you, “I dey go do takeaway,” you got the memo.

Not many could stand the harsh conditions of the school. My best friend at the time, Fianko Bossman, told his parents he could not cope and needed a way out. They found a way and he left for Pope John Secondary and Minor Seminary in Koforidua before the second year. Another good friend, Laurina Mensah, left before we got to the third and final year. Her mother came for her to Italy, and that was the last I heard of her.

Those of us without an option had to make two choices, either give up or make the best of the situation. I chose the former. I wasn’t an “A” or “B” student. I was just hanging in there, knowing very well that my soul, mind and heart had left the school, but I had to be physically present to tick a box for those who sent me there. Music was what kept me going. It was what helped me to endure, and I couldn’t wait to leave the school.

When it was time to leave, the headmaster gave me my worst memory of Aggrey Memorial. The day before my departure from school, he slapped me in a way I would never forget. My offence was that my hair was bushy. We were not allowed to wear our natural hair beyond a certain length. However, the final year girls couldn’t wait to have our hair permed or extended, so, in the final term, we preserved it. That was the offence which attracted my worst nightmare in the school.

I left Aggrey resigned to fate. Before WAEC released the results of the 2003 Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE), I knew I could not proceed to the next step on the academic ladder. In that final exam, I did not write Accounting and Costing, two of my four elective subjects. It was a decision I took because it was better to be marked absent than to fail. I didn’t know what I was going to write. I could not make meaning of whatever was taught in those subjects.

The dashes I recorded on the SSSCE results sheet did not make any difference from the “Fail” that would have been there had I written the two papers. Either way, I could not go to the university or any tertiary institution without passing at least one of the two subjects I refused to write, especially Accounting. I needed at least three passes in my electives. I barely passed the other two, and my passes in the core subjects were weak.

The future stared at me grimly, blank and bleak. I felt I had wasted my secondary school years. The burden of failure was too heavy to bear. At that point in my life, I had really not figured out what I wanted to do with my life. Education often provided a safe vehicle to escape indecision until much later in life when one decided whether to make a living off one’s certificates or confront the world in a

different arena of life's many options. If someone wanted to branch into business but did not have the capital, capacity or audacity to abandon school and pursue their dream, they stayed in school. They passed their BECE and SSSCE and went to the university or the polytechnic. They got a degree or diploma or certificate. That was their passport to the next phase of their lives, a licence to work and earn money of their own and live independently until they felt it was time to venture into their true passion.

In my case, the way was not clear. I did not want to do my mother's business or venture into my own. If I had to progress in life, I had to go back to school. I had to face my fears and conquer the two mountains I had avoided at Aggrey. It was either I went back to secondary school and studied a totally different programme that didn't have Accounting and Costing as subjects or I had to resit the two subjects.

Fortunately, WAEC had a private exam mainly for students like me. We called it Nov-Dec because, in those days, it was written in November and December. Here, one was not required to register all the subjects one studied in secondary school. It was an opportunity to resit the subjects one had failed. If a candidate felt the need to improve his or her passes in the other subjects, he or she was free to register for all the subjects. I didn't have the willpower to rewrite all the subjects. I decided to attend private classes and rewrite the two subjects I had avoided.

That experience taught me one of the first most important lessons in life, that difficult situations are better confronted head-on. If you can't negotiate yourself out of it, it is better to fight the haunting giants than postpone the fight, for dodging an inevitable problem or challenge simply means postponing it. If I had averted my mind to this reality early enough, I could have made some modest grades in Aggrey. It would have saved my face. It would have saved me from the dejection and rejection that came with my failure.

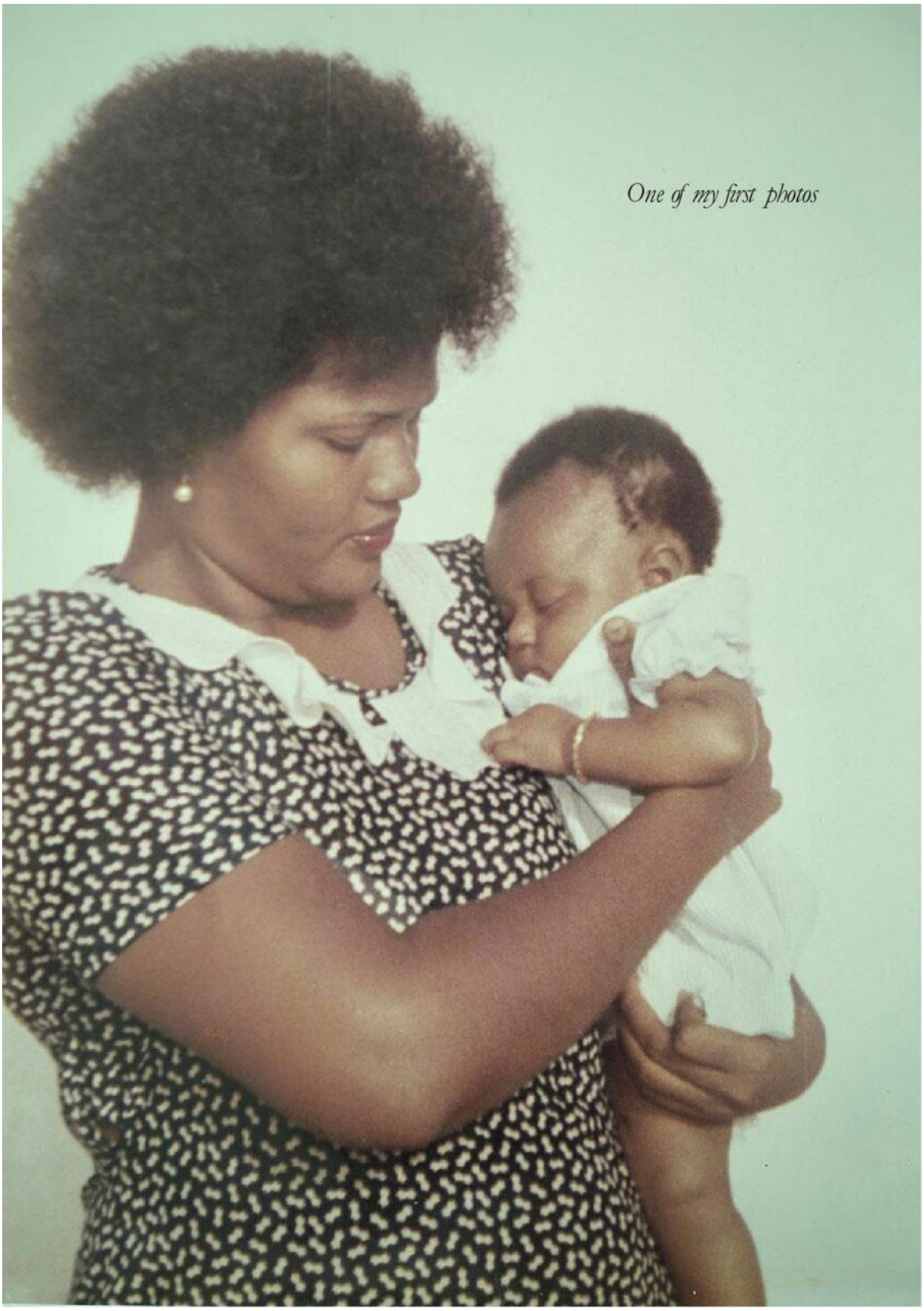
I felt rejection at home and from some friends. There was absolutely no respect for me at home. I was a constant irritant, and when I shut the door, it was almost always said to be too loud. I was seen as useless. The fact that my room was full of hip-hop stars was enough confirmation that I was not serious and wouldn't turn out well. I felt like my mother had given up on me at that point. Some friends also distanced themselves from me. Failure is not just an orphan. It can sometimes be an infectious disease, which is avoided by even one's closest associates.

I had a friend called Lerease. She was my closest friend whenever we came back home on secondary school vacation. She was in Wesley Girls and I was in Aggrey, different grades of secondary schools in Cape Coast. But our schools didn't matter when we were back in Dansoman. We partied together and sneaked out to nightclubs together. High school parties, from Adisco to Achimota, did not escape our attention and attendance.

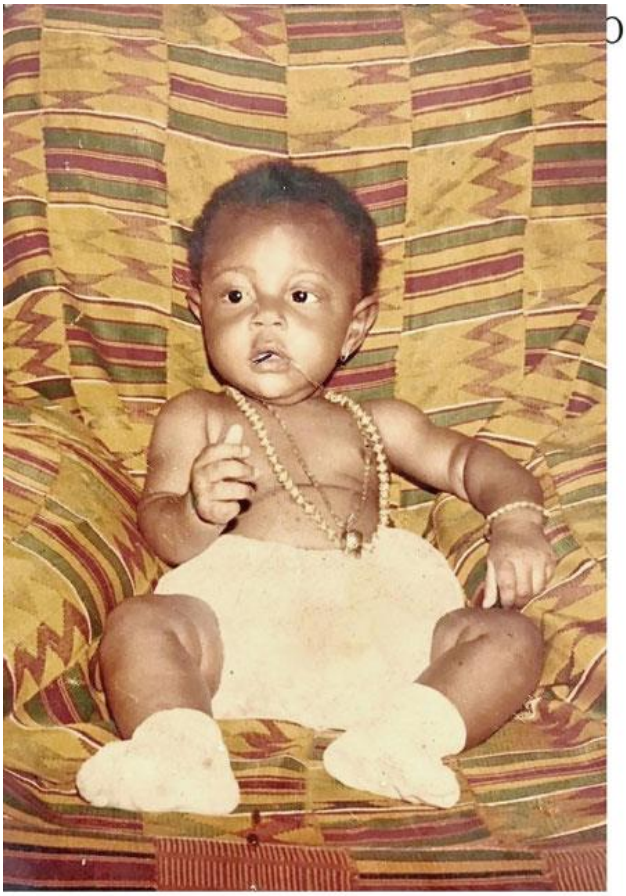
After school, however, the difference in our performance was more distinct than day from night. She gained admission to the University of Ghana and I could not apply to any tertiary institution. I, however, still clung to our friendship. I remember I even went to buy some of her stuff for school from the market. The end of our friendship started with the beginning of her university education. She kept a distance while in school and when she came home on vacation, I noticed a more magnified distance.

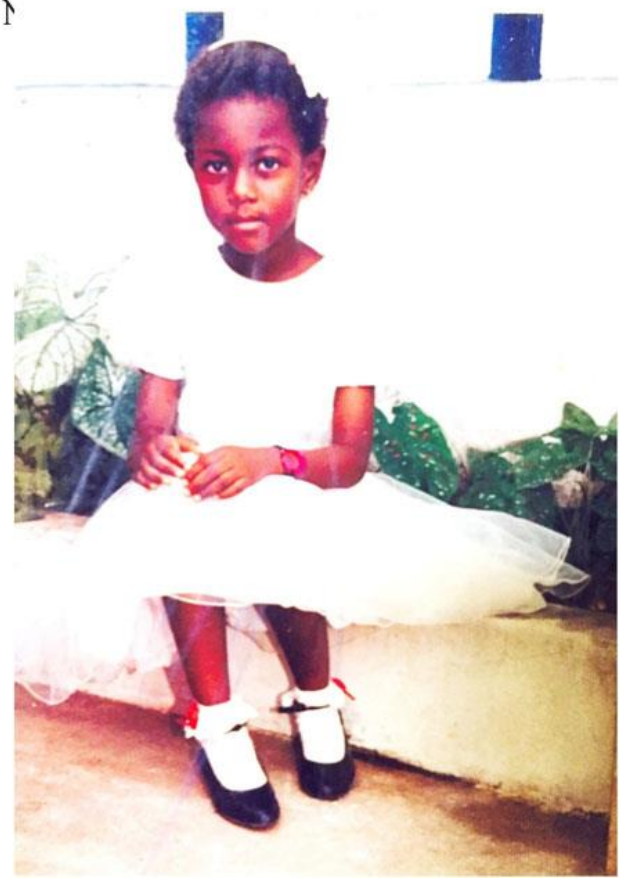
Lonely, rejected and almost depressed, I had no option but to give my second attempt at passing my SSSCE all the effort and seriousness I could muster. When the results came, I passed Costing and failed Accounting. If I had to go to school, I needed to pass Accounting. So, in 2005, I had to resit the Accounting paper. It was my "Third World War" and I had already endured enough to know that I could not give up regardless of the outcome of that resit. It was the only way to salvage my self-worth, prove my relevance to my family and prove to friends who shunned my company that I was not a lost cause.

Before I could prove that to them through academic excellence, however, there came an opportunity to be in the limelight. And what I thought had been wasted years in Aggrey Memorial proved to be the most useful experience that would not only prove crucial to me at that point but also define who I would eventually become. It also earned me a place among the "notable alumni" of Aggrey Memorial on the school's Wikipedia page.

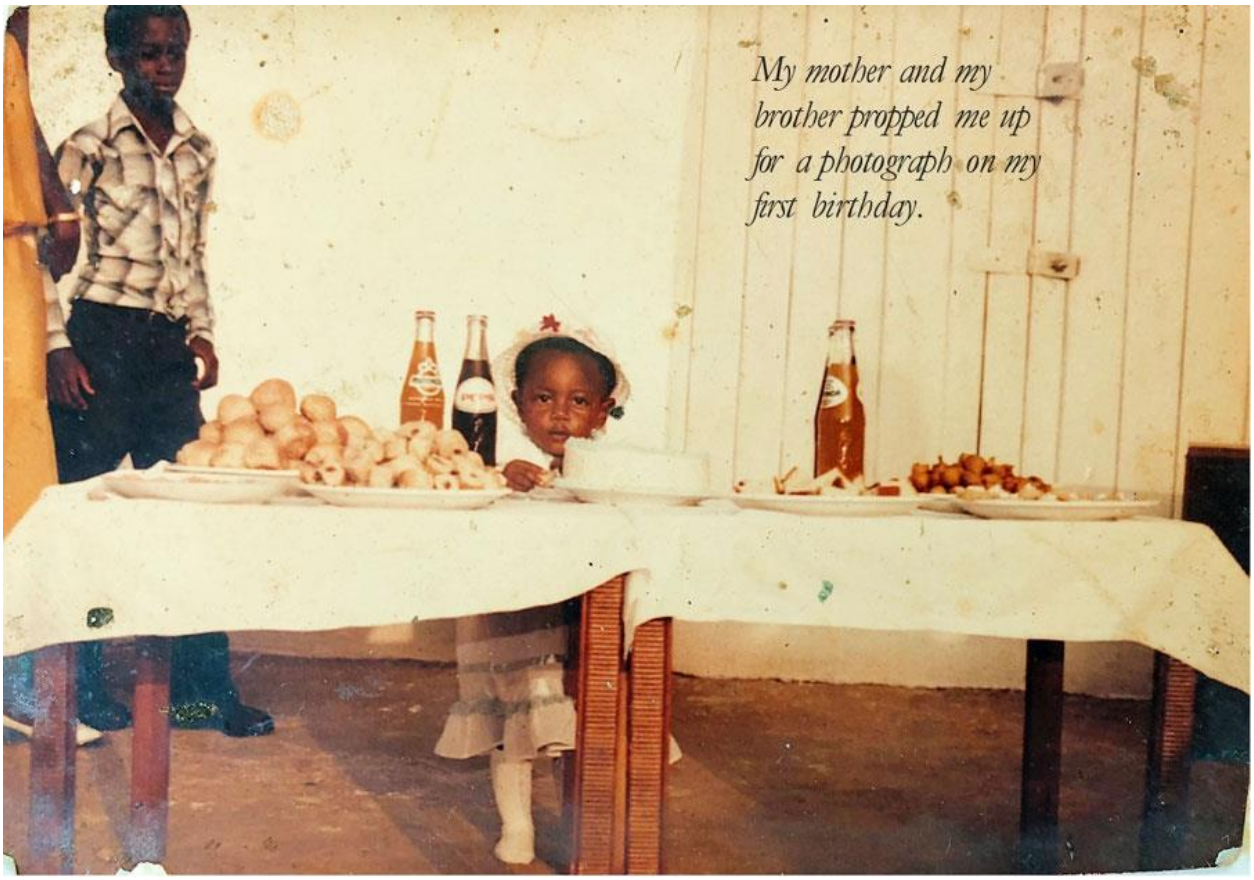


One of my first photos





Apart from these photographs, I don't remember what happened in these early years of my life



My mother and my brother propped me up for a photograph on my first birthday.

At manovia with my mum

We took this photo at my mum's shop (manovia)

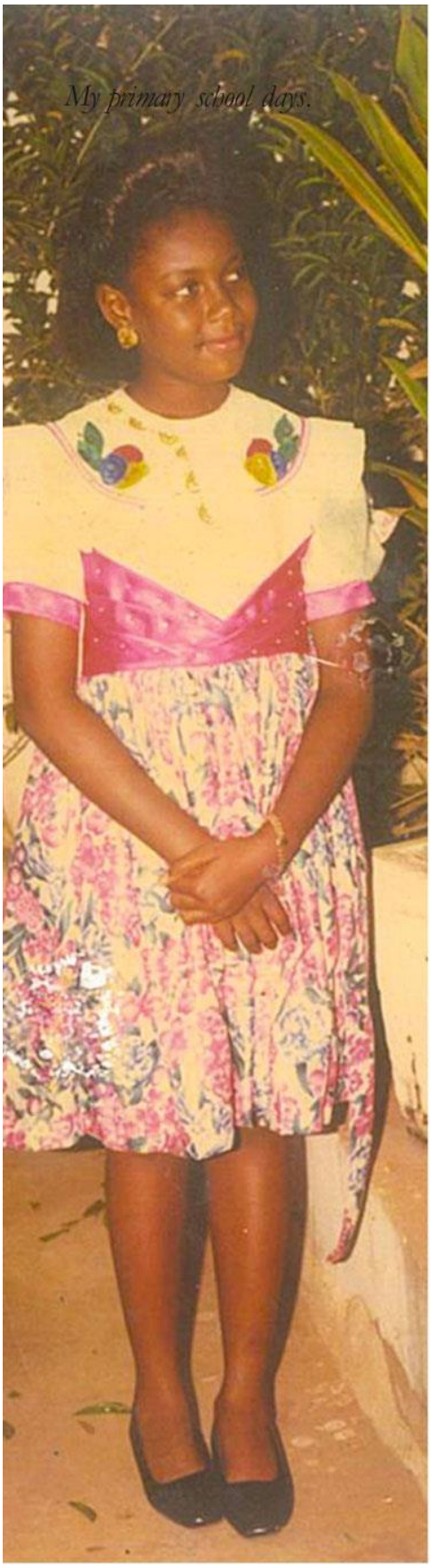
Spending time at home in our living room in dansoman

I was probably two or three when this photograph was taken.

My mother, sister and I (being carried) in Dansoman

With my siblings, grandmother and a relative.From left to right: My brother, my sister and I.

Mr. B.B. Grant, the teacher whose question ignited the search for my father, poses for a photo with me (the tall girl in the middle) and some of my classmates in Class 5A at St. Martin de Porres School.



My primary school days.

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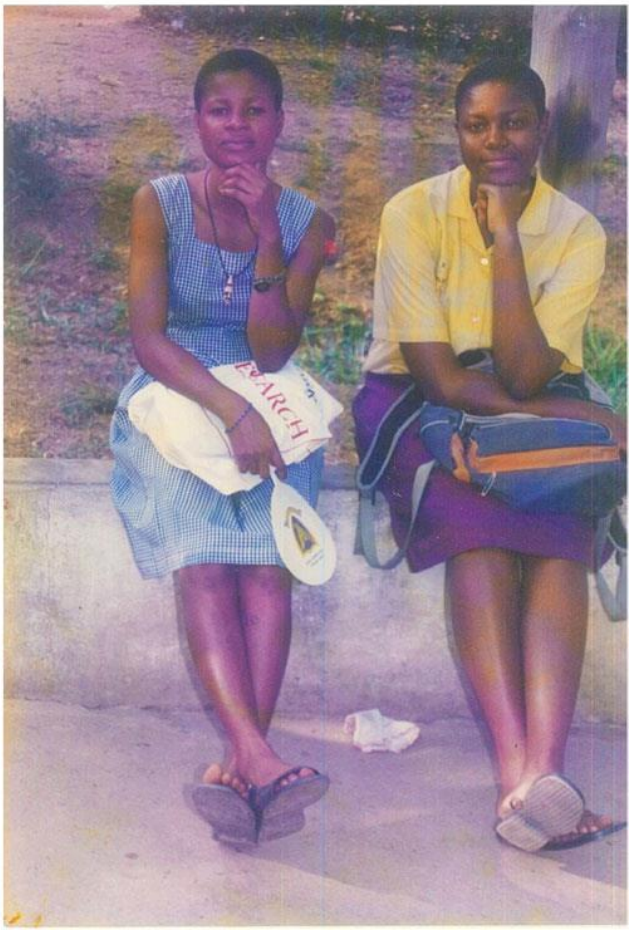
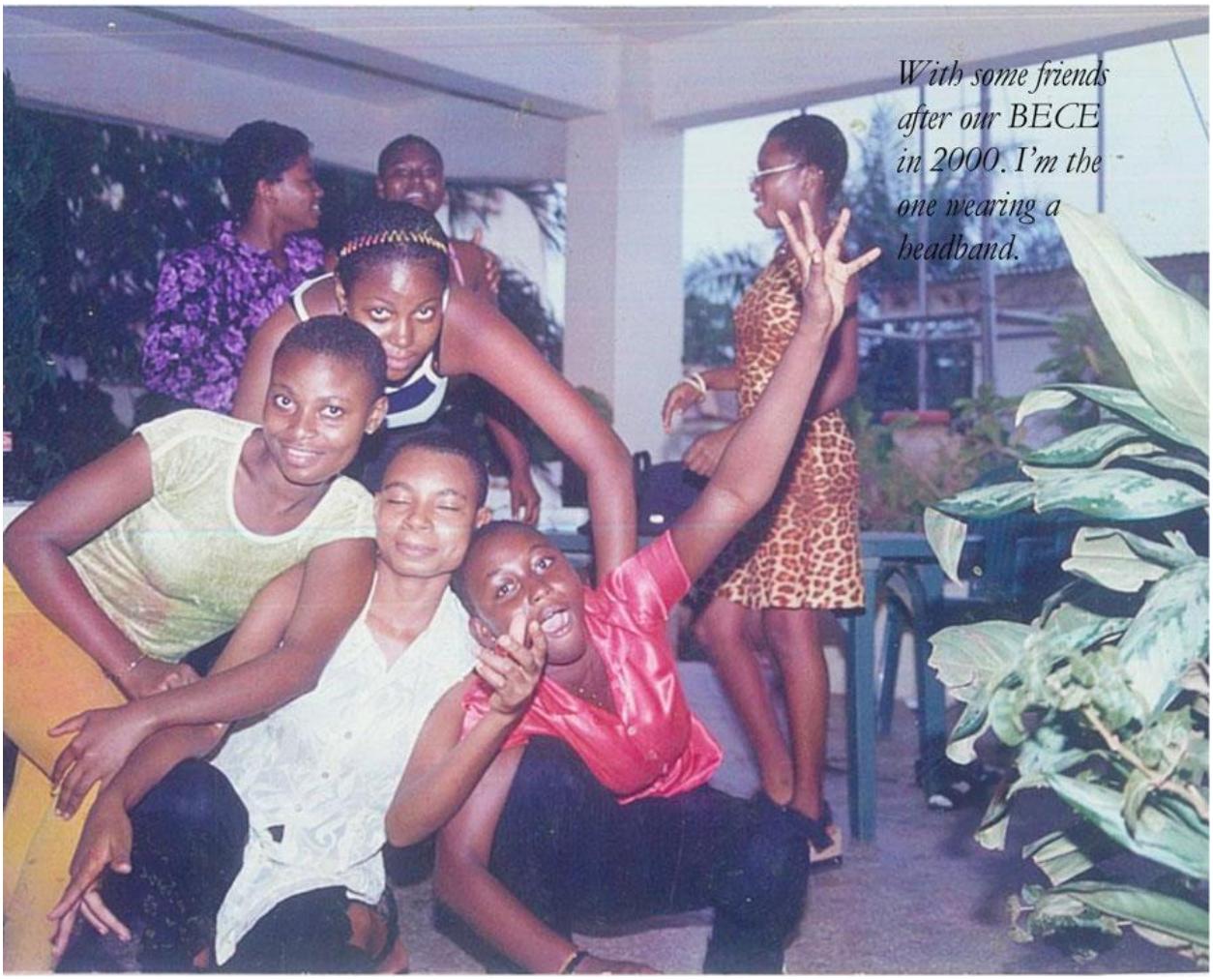
Top: My first year at Aggrey Memorial.

Bottom: My final year at Aggrey Memorial

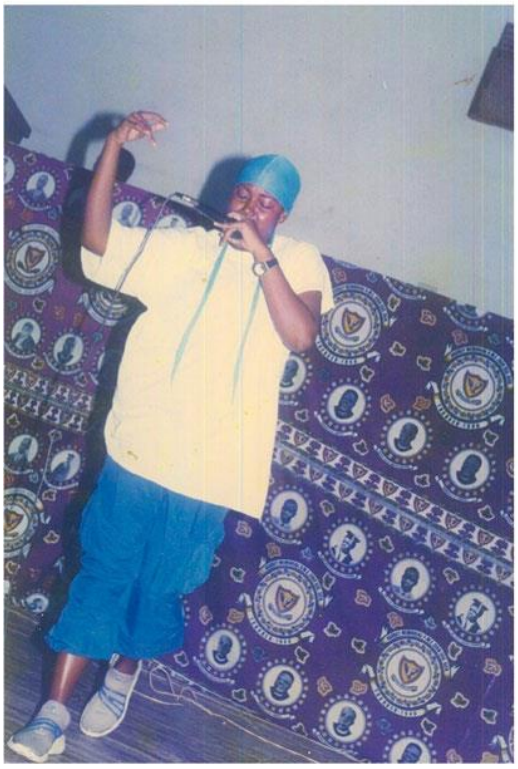


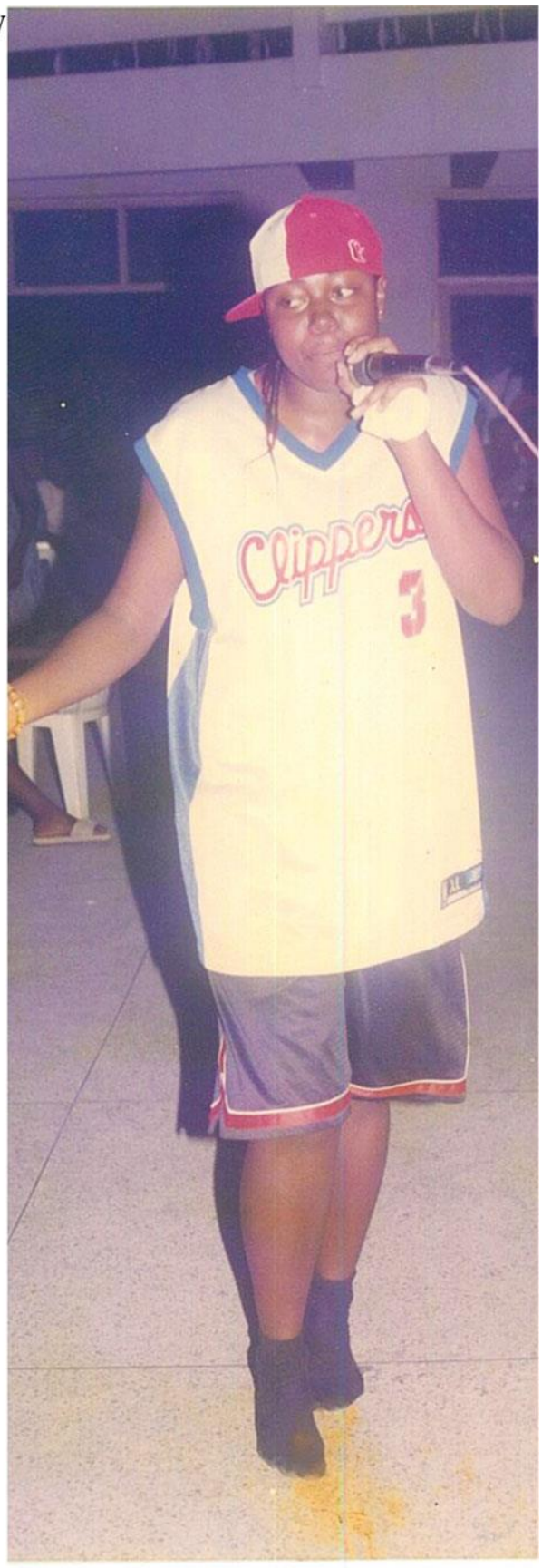
I [Second from left] was taking it easy with my friends on Aggrey Memorial campus.



With some friends after our BECE in 2000. I'm the one wearing a headband.

At Aggrey Memorial, I always looked forward to Saturday to mount the stage.

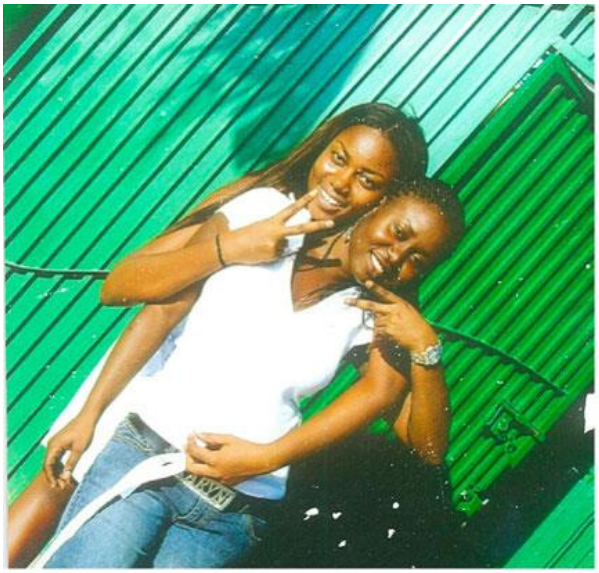




One of my visits to Miranda Mould [in black] in her house

From left to right: Lerease (carrying the child), I and Karen.

With some friends at Central University. Fianko Bossman [second from right] has been one of the most he lpful friends in my life.



Karen was that friend through whom some of the best things happened to me.

I am Not Yvonne Nelson

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CHAPTER FIVE

Abanoma the Miss Ghana Contestant

My mother had remarried by the time I completed secondary school. It was her second attempt at the sacred institution that is said to have been ordained by God. After her divorce from the father of my two siblings, and after having me with Mr. Nelson, she was alone for a long time before she gave marriage another shot. This time, it was with one Mr. Benky, who also lived in Dansoman. When she moved to Mr. Benky's house, she went with me, her youngest child. It was yet another chapter of my life that came with humiliation.

The family of Mr. Benky did not make any attempt to hide their dislike and disdain for my mother and me. It was as if they had sworn to torment us until we were fed up enough to leave the house. When they wanted to whine or say something disparaging about me, something they ordinarily would say out of earshot, they said it in a way that would make me hear it. They would say it in a way that would hurt me.

For instance, they knew my name, but among themselves, they called me "Abanoma." So, instead of "Where is Yvonne?" they would shout,

"Where is the Abanoma?"

"What is the meaning of abanoma?" I asked my mother one day.

"It means a stepchild," she explained.

That I was a step-child to Mr. Benky was a fact of life. But did they have to rub it in my face whenever they wanted to say something unpleasant? Well, I could not correct them or stop them from using that name in a way that connoted more illegitimacy than just a way of identifying the person being described. I was used to hearing worse things about me. As harsh as "abanoma" sounded, it was still milder than my own mother reminding me that I was born out of a mistake. As hurtful as it was, it was better than knowing that I was a symbol of regret for the woman who brought me here. It was, however, not the harshest condition I faced in that house.

My room in Mr. Benky's house was truly befitting of an "abanoma". When I first got to the house, the room I was given happened to belong to a daughter of Mr. Benky. She was at the time outside the country. When the real daughter returned, the stepdaughter had to vacate the room.

I was given an adjoining bedroom that shared the same bathroom and toilet with the bedroom of my mother and my stepfather. In order to safeguard their privacy, the opening between the two bedrooms

was blocked. Part of the wall of my room on the opposite side was broken to create an outlet to and from my room. That came with its own issues.

To access my room, I had to go through the guest toilet. Part of the wall that was broken to create the new outlet was not plastered. But that was the least of my worries. When Mr. Benky's children decided to watch television in the living room for hours, water from the leaking air conditioner dripped into my room so I had to keep an eye on the container that was used to collect the water from the air conditioner. On occasions that I went out and the air conditioner functioned the whole day, I returned to a room flooded with water. Apart from this ordeal, I didn't have a bathroom of my own, after being blocked out of the shared bathroom and toilet meant for the room I occupied. I used the guest toilet, but when I had to bathe, I did it behind my room, near the dogs' kennel.

This meant I didn't have the freedom to bathe at any time of the day. I did so under the cover of darkness and I had to first ensure that there wasn't anybody peeping into the compound before I undressed and took my bath. I was hitting 20 and my feminine features were ripe and in their prime. It was the time I was most sensitive to my body and valued my privacy the most, but being in a hostile terrain, I had to cope with what I had and forget about what I needed or deserved. My female friends who visited and had to bathe also went through this adventure.

When I could no longer bear it, I asked my mother to let me go back to our house. She agreed, but I wasn't going back to the comfort I had vacated. My mother had rented the main building out, and my sister, who had married, lived in the boys' quarters with her family. My brother lived in the extension upstairs and the only space left at the time was a tiny room in the middle, which did not have a toilet or bath. I remember Irene Logan, the Ghana-based Liberian singer who won the 2006 Stars of the Future reality show, once visited me and when I told her my room had no toilet and bath, she was surprised. Having to go outside the room into the compound to access a toilet and a bath was uncomfortable, especially late in the night or when it rained, but it was normal to me. The only abnormality was that I was no longer a normal girl struggling to pass her exam and enter the university. I was on my way to stardom. It began with a beauty pageant.

Some of the best things that have happened to me came through an angel with whom God blessed me as a friend. Karen Okata Boateng is one of those friends who stick tighter and love deeper than family. We both attended secondary school in Cape Coast, but that was not the reason we were friends. I was closer to Lerease than Karen because Lerease and I lived a few blocks apart. However, in my moment of failure, Karen did not make me feel inadequate. She is the type of friend who believes in you more than you believe in yourself.

It was Karen who first mooted the idea of me contesting the Miss Ghana beauty pageant. It was in 2005, and I was yet to go to the university. Those were the days when the pageant carried a lot of prestige and

was highly coveted and I didn't see myself anywhere near the crown. "You're tall, intelligent and beautiful. Why don't you go for Miss Ghana?" I remember Karen telling me.

It sounded good to be told this, but my immediate response was selfdoubt. The contestants were often university graduates or students of tertiary institutions, but I was neither a graduate nor a student in any tertiary institution. Karen was relentless. She said she knew someone who could guide and advise me if I agreed to take part. That person was Stacy Amoateng of TV3's Music Music fame. The audition had started, and when we eventually approached the organisers, they said we had to go through the process.

Their main concern was my weight, but I promised to work on it. It wasn't just a promise I made to persuade them. I was determined to do that. With the help of Karen, we went to Dansoman Roundabout and bought four-inch high-heeled shoes. While I was dieting and exercising to shed some weight, I was also learning to walk like a model. It wasn't an easy task for a girl who was a tomboy, but there was the will. And, with the help of Karen, I found a way.

In 2005, Shirley Frimpong Manso's Sparrow Productions was the franchise holder of the Miss Ghana pageant. Our base was the office of Sparrow Productions. The competition was keen. When you have 10 young women fighting for a crown, fighting to catch the attention and win the favour of organisers, fighting to impress the judges of the competition and the voting Ghanaian public; the good, the bad, and the ugly side of the competition could not be exaggerated. The organisers seemed to have their favourites, and I believed I wasn't anybody's favourite. However, I won the favour of the audience.

On the Saturday before the grand finale, I was featured on the front page of *The* one of the top weekend publications at the time. Many in the competition thought I was influential enough to get it done for me or that I paid for it. If anybody paid money on my behalf, I did not know. I had no such influence or cash to sponsor a front-page publication. I felt I was just lucky and had favour where it mattered. It was also, perhaps, because I was tipped to win the contest and those who wanted to sell their papers obviously wanted to associate with the best, the potential winner.

A Ghana News Agency report on the grand finale of the 2005 Miss Ghana competition, which is still online, said the following of the expected outcome of the contest that night: "The contest was a straight fight between Lamisi Mbilla and Yvonne Nelson, who also won the most talented and photogenic lady and took home 2 million [today's 200] cedis."

It is true that I won two individual awards on the night and was tipped to be crowned Miss Ghana. Before the final announcement, however, I knew my fate. I knew I would not wear the crown. The miracle I hoped would happen did not. So, I was not surprised I missed out. I had fumbled when it was

my turn to answer the question that was asked the final five contestants from whom the first three winners would be picked.

I remember, backstage, Shirley Frimpong Manso came to hold me tenderly and asked, “Yvonne, why?”

She and I didn’t have a close relationship, but I imagined she was rooting for me to win. That slip obviously took me out of the frontrunners at that point of the race. It was the wish of many that I would emerge with the crown, but it did not happen. I didn’t make the headlines.

Lamisi Mbillah of the University of Ghana made headlines as Miss Ghana 2005. The first runner-up was also a University of Ghana student, Ursula Naa Dei Neequaye, while Maame Afua Anne Darko of the University of Cape Coast was adjudged the second runner-up.

I entered the competition because I wanted to win. To lose the crown, especially in the manner in which it happened, was painful. Seeing that the first three winners were all university students and I was a secondary school leaver who had not qualified to enter the university increased the intensity of my desire to excel academically, even if my version of excellence, in my wildest imagination, was just the opportunity to gain admission into a university.

Looking back, however, I do not regret not winning the beauty pageant. The odds that I would not have been here if I had won that contest are very high. I would have spent eternity basking in the glory and opportunities that came with the crown. My life would have been defined by the rules governing the competition. I don’t know whether I would have survived the trappings of the fame that came with being Miss Ghana. I know I would have ceased to be an ordinary girl. The restricting power of living according to other people’s expectations of Miss Ghana may have prevented me from being who I wanted to be. It could have stopped me from doing what I wanted to do.

The Miss Ghana pageant, however, gave me some exposure that would later serve as a launchpad to something greater. At the time I lost the crown, I had no bragging rights to anything I was proud of. The benefit I had derived from my education until that stage of my life was entertainment. The singing, dancing and mounting of the stage at St. Martin de Porres and Aggrey Memorial came in handy during the Miss Ghana contest. I was adjudged the most talented contestant because I had spent much of my life singing and dancing. I wrote the rap songs I performed in that competition.

My fumbling at the intellectual test was what cost me a crown, and I vowed not to let anything come between me and my education should I pass the Nov-Dec. While I was pushing and fighting for my own

way, Providence seemed to have the final say. A golden opportunity, out of nowhere, jolted me pleasantly.

Princess Tyra

It is said that the big game often appears when the hunter has given up the hunt for the day. I cannot say I had completely given up on life's hunting, but it was a thought that creeped in and out of my mind as I confronted my world. My life at that moment was dogged by what I thought were crushing failures and disappointments. Crashing out of Miss Ghana when the crown was in sight and well within my reach was the defeating icing on my cake of struggle and self-doubt. If I couldn't do well in school, and my only attempt at a competition in the entertainment industry did not work, where else could I make it?

I would later learn that it was only a matter of time. When that time was ripe, I didn't have to struggle or fight for the tight window of opportunity that allowed the glowing rays of hope into my life once again. It happened as though I was cast in a movie whose perfect script was written and directed by Providence, and I was merely a favoured cast. In reality, that's how I entered the movie industry—effortlessly.

It was in 2006, and I was with Karen Okata, the bearer of my luck charm. Even when she didn't have to play an active role, Karen was always connected in some way to the monumental epochs of my life. It so happened that she was with me when I bumped into what would turn out to be the golden door that opened priceless opportunities for me.

We had gone to Afrikiko, a middle-class eatery and recreational centre in Accra, to buy fried rice. A friend I had met in my Miss Ghana days and I were in the car while Karen went into the restaurant to get us the food, which we intended to take away. When Karen kept too long, my hunger pangs nudged me to follow up to see what was holding her up. It was on my way to the restaurant that I bumped into Abdul Salam Mumuni, a renowned movie producer in Ghana. When he mentioned his name, I instantly recognised him, for he was a household name in the entertainment industry and I had watched a number of movies from his Venus Productions. I am not sure whether he also made me out, but, having taken part in Miss Ghana and come close to winning, he probably knew who I was.

"Are you coming for the audition?" he asked me after the introduction.

I had no idea he was auditioning for his next movie, and I told him just that. I was there for food and nothing was going to distract me. Even when he invited me to join in the audition, I didn't have any difficulty choosing food over a potential movie role that day. That was how the brief encounter ended—without any interest or commitment from my side. In the entertainment industry, music was my first

love. I had acted in school, but at the time I met Abdul Salam, as he's popularly known, I wasn't excited about the prospects of being on the screen, especially when my first two attempts had ended in smoke.

After Miss Ghana, I had been cast in a television series titled *Babe* It was a series produced by actress and producer Luckie Lawson, and the entire episode was shot in a barber's shop. It never made it onto television.

Before *Babe* Ivan Quashigah, the producer of *Things We Do for* featured me in another television series titled *Fortune* In that series, I played a detective. I was going to crime scenes, examining dead bodies and all that. I don't remember much about the storyline now. At the time I met Abdul Salam, that series too had not yet made it to any screen, so jumping at an impromptu invitation to audition for a movie role was not a particularly exciting prospect. It was part of the reason I didn't regret choosing food over an audition, but I did leave my contact details.

That destiny-shaping encounter did not, however, end with my rejection of the invitation to audition. Abdul Salam called later and offered me a role in the movie. I had just started my first year at Central University College (CUC). I had managed to pass my Accounting and Costing after two attempts and applied to CUC to study Human Resource Management. If you asked me why I chose that programme of study, I would struggle for a reason. What I studied at the time was inconsequential to me. What mattered was that I was in the university. I had bought the form and applied quietly. My mother and siblings only got to know about my plans when I was offered admission. It was my moment of pride and the pleasant surprise was acknowledged by my family.

Having suffered rejection and humiliation from some of my friends because of my inability to go to the university after secondary school, I had vowed that nothing would stand between me and the degree I desperately needed. I had learned from my basic and secondary education that I was good enough to pass examinations, but my main obstacles were self-imposed obstructions. If I would graduate with a degree after four years, then it all depended on me. CUC is a private university and is more expensive than a public university. At the time, the fees at CUC were about four times what my mates paid at public universities in Ghana. I could not afford to waste my mother's colossal investment and leave after four years with nothing to show.

This was what made it difficult to accept Abdul Salam's offer of a movie role. After some persuasion, however, I gave it a try, but with a grim determination not to let that derail my academic journey.

The first movie I featured in was Beyonce. It had Nadia Buari as the lead actor and I played a role that my Nigerian colleagues in the movie industry call a *decorated walker* I was merely decorated to walk past, without anything notable in my appearance. I was the lead actor's friend and I played only one scene

that had lines. Various reviews of the movie online do not have my name as part of the cast, and that is perfectly understandable. I was almost anonymous.

My breakthrough didn't take long to come. It came with an urgent call, again, from Abdul Salam. I was in the lecture hall and stepped out to answer the call. He needed me for a movie role. The crew and cast were already on location and I had to come straight away, he said on the phone.

When I got there, my costumes were ready. I was dressed like a princess and asked to go on set. The conventional processes of being given a script, mastering it and attending script conferences or rehearsals were all side-stepped. It appeared someone had been given that role but had to be replaced. An improvised cast was expected to take her place, so the lots fell on me. With verbal instruction on who I was and what I was expected to do, I was thrust onto the set, like a fat goat being thrown into a den of ravenous hyenas. That was how I felt when the unmasked disapproval of my inclusion was communicated in the most unvarnished of languages. I fumbled on set. I felt uncomfortable in the costume. I had no time to psychologically prepare myself for the role. But here I was acting in a movie that had my character as the title. The movie was *Princes*

And I was Princess Tyra.

In that movie, Kofi Adjorlolo was my father, the king. He got so frustrated with my acting that he walked off the set in protest and told Abdul Salam to replace me. (A few years later, I cast Kofi Adjorlolo in a movie I produced). The director, Frank Raja Arase, did not have any hope in me either. I felt terrible, lost confidence and became anxious.

Princess Tyra had a number of maids. I confided in one of them that that day was going to be the last time they would see me. I had endured enough embarrassment and was not going to show up again. What I said got into the ears of Abdul Salam Mumuni, and he spent a considerable amount of time convincing me not to abandon the project. It appeared he was the only one in the production team who had confidence in my ability to act. Rooting for me sparked wild rumours that he had something to do with me, the only possible reason he wanted me around despite my abysmal performance.

I later learnt that the line between that perception and the reality in the movie industry was imperceptible. It is true that most movie producers in the industry take advantage of women who need opportunities. It is almost a norm that you cannot break through with just your talent. If you are a woman, you have to give something to get something. If a male producer was resisting all pressures to dismiss a young woman, the only possible reason among those present, therefore, was that the two were involved in something beyond the movie.

The movie industry is one of the most hostile environments for young and budding talents. There isn't much encouragement from senior colleagues, especially among women. A new entrant is often seen as a competitor who is there to take someone's shine or snatch a role meant for them. The default position of the old guns is hostility and a silent prayer for the novice to fail. There are, however, a few with exceptionally kind hearts. One such person is Jackie Appiah.

Jackie Appiah was one of my maids in *Princess* She was the maid Van Vicker, my lover prince from another kingdom, fell in love with. Jackie had made quite a name for herself in the industry even before I entered, but she didn't at any point make me feel less of myself. She treated me well and gave me all the encouragement. Apart from the convincing Abdul Salam did when he learned of my intention to abandon the production, Jackie made my stay less of a burden. Of hostilities on set, I must say I also felt very comfortable whenever I was on set with Majid Michel.

I had a change of mind after the encouragement from the producer so I decided to give *Princess Tyra* my level best. I summoned courage, gathered confidence and faced my fears. If people think you're not good enough, the most appropriate response is to show, rather than tell them what you can do. Instead of abandoning the movie, I stayed and fought on. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The opening of *Princess Tyra* lists the stars as Van Vicker, Jackie Appiah, Kofi Adjorlolo, Kalsoume Sinare, Rama Brew, Gavivina Tamakloe and:

"Introducing Yvonne Nelson."

Princess Tyra was well-received, and it is still one of my biggest movies of all time. It was big in the fame and opportunities it gave me. I earned 1.5 million cedis from that movie. Today (in November 2022) that is 150 cedis or $11. At the time, however, it was worth about $100.

That was half of the amount I earned for participating in Miss Ghana. I had saved the entire amount I earned from Miss Ghana. I also saved the entire money I earned for playing the lead role in *Princess* Looking back, the financial reward was peanuts, but the exposure that the movie gave me was priceless.

I became a household name. My mother could not hide her pride when a church member at Mount Olivet Methodist Church in Dansoman approached her after church one Sunday and all she had to tell my mother was how well I acted in that "popular movie". Prior to that, I had been a nuisance that was

barely tolerated whenever I returned from set late and woke them up to open the gate for me. I remember my mother once remarked that I always said I was acting, but there was nothing to show for it.

The release of *Princess Tyra* changed everything. My status at home changed. My brother and sister now saw me as a celebrity sister. The posters of celebrities that littered the walls of my room were still there, but the disdain that had accompanied them vanished overnight. There was respect for my name at home and my sister even added “please” to the words she spoke to me.

The recognition went beyond my family. I attracted more movie roles from other producers and I started starring in movies that had me as the main character or the only big-name character driving the movie. The movies I featured in
after *Princess Tyra* are *Passion and Soul, The Prince’s Bride, Material Girl, Playboy, Heart of Men, The Ga me,* and *4play* among others.

I did not, however, have a smooth sail. The fame and its trappings, the opportunities and the rewards and my journey to the top were rudely interrupted. It came from the least expected source, where my breakthrough began.

Banned by Movie Producers

The way to the top is not always a leisurely and pleasurable walk in the park. It is not a tarred road bedecked with roses. It is a rough and thorny path. It can sometimes be slippery too. The journey through this path requires perseverance and endurance if one is to see brightness beyond the dark and gloomy clouds of natural and man-made obstacles. I learned this the first day I went on set to shoot *Princess* But what appeared later made my experience at the beginning of the *Princess Tyra* movie pale into insignificance. The obstacles came in different forms—physical and spiritual.

The first notable spiritual attack happened when I was shooting *Material* A lady who worked with Abdul Salam reminded me that it was the first movie I was leading, without any other big-name or established actors. She said if the movie didn’t go well, the producer would not cast me again. I don’t know why she said that, but I took it as a cautionary piece of advice that should spur me on to put in my level best. I was determined to do that, but the obstacles were beyond my control.

When we started shooting, I had a problem with my eye. It reddened and was painful. When I visited the hospital, the doctor said it was a bacterial infection or something to that effect. I was given medication, but it only got worse. Part of the reason I wore sunglasses in that movie was to conceal the reddened eye. I could mask the pain with smiles and act as though everything was normal, but the cameras could not do anything about a defective eye of the lead actor.

When it worsened and we could not continue to shoot, especially with some indoor scenes, we had to put the production on hold until I healed. If there was any change in my condition as we waited, it was only getting worse. It both frustrated and scared me. I could feel the tension around me when I was offered that challenge at a very young age in my acting career. It made me feel there could be something more to my condition than just a physical irritation of that part of my body.

I locked myself up in the room for a whole day, stripped naked, lay on the floor and prayed and cried to God. I wasn't someone who could be described as very spiritual, but I had seen the hand of God in my life many times and knew He could intervene in this crucial stage of life He had placed me. It was a crazy act of faith, but it worked. The following day, my eye cleared. And two days later, I was on set. *Material Girl* was a huge success, and it did not erase my favour in the eyes of Abdul Salam and other producers as the woman had warned. It opened more opportunities that came with their own hostilities.

The most hostile obstacle I faced at the time was not spiritual. Even if it was, it manifested in a physical form with known human causal agents. It happened in 2010 when the Film Producers Association of Ghana, a bunch of men whose behaviour I found to be disgraceful, decided to ban me from acting for one year.

It all started with my altercation with Abdul Salam Mumuni, the man who gave me my breakthrough. The misunderstanding between us did not warrant a ban. I saw it more as someone who felt entitled to me and wanted to show me where power lay. It was no doubt that he gave me the opportunity to shine when no one else believed in me. I was, and still am, eternally grateful to Abdul Salam. But what I could not do was lose my voice to fight for my right because he had helped me. I had always stood up for myself and others in situations of injustice and didn't think I should not complain about unfair treatment just because he had helped me.

My fight with Abdul Salam—if I can call it a fight—happened when we were acting *[4]Play* I was in my final year at Central University when Abul Salam called me to join the cast. He was well aware of my commitment to academic responsibilities and that I didn't have much time to spare. I was not ready to defer my programme, and leaving CUC without a degree would leave me in despair. But he still acted in a way that was totally unfair.

I had sacrificed a quiz and answered an urgent call to go on set for the shoot when he called me. I left campus and went to sit the whole day, but there was no show. One of the lead characters did not show up. The following day, I again abandoned class and went for the shoot, but nothing happened. One of the lead actors, we were told, was a judge in the Miss Malaika beauty pageant. Those responsibilities had kept her away and kept me at bay from academic work.

When I was leaving that day, I told Abdul Salam that I had already missed two days of class and a quiz, so I wasn't coming the following day. What I said was as if I had struck a match stick and dropped it in fuel. He flared up and started a condescending attack on me. I have never seen him angrier. Roger Quartey, one of the crew members, kept fueling his ego and stoking the fire that raged until I left that day.

I didn't receive any call to go back on set for the shoot. The next time I heard from or about him was a week later when I heard in the media that FIPAG had banned me from acting for a year. It was the top story on every entertainment show. Social media and newspapers used it as the cud they ruminated on from time to time. When I had an opportunity, I told my side of the story, but the popular narrative was that I was a young "disrespectful and ungrateful actress fighting those who had made her who she is".

I must admit it was a tough year. I was in my final year at the university. I was banned from acting. I was pregnant and definitely was not prepared to host another human being.

I also felt betrayed by my colleagues in the movie industry, especially the older female actors. I thought I was being bullied and needed their support to confront the all-male producers. If what they did to me was to send a message to those they employed to act for them; if that message was to say that nobody was indispensable and that they could choose to teach anyone they pleased a lesson; then I expected a collective voice of disapproval from the actors. That did not happen. I was alone. And I faced it squarely.

Here again, one exception was Majid Michel, who stood by me in the thick of it all. He defended me and even tried to mediate with Abdul Salam, but it did not work. He was one of three people with whom I travelled to Akosombo to see the film producers, who had said they wanted to meet me. The others were Fred Nuamah and Frank Raja.

In Akosombo, I saw Augustine Abbey, popularly known as Idikoko, among the film producers. This was a man I grew up watching on television and hoped he would encourage and inspire the young ones to grow. Instead, he was siding with a group of men who thought they controlled the bread and the whip and had the power to deny a bite to whoever refused to be whipped in their incongruous line. In the meeting, they were extremely rude.

I still do not understand why they wanted to meet me, for nothing concrete came out of that meeting. Perhaps, they thought I would go and kneel and beg them to lift my ban. I didn't do that. Frank Raja, Majid and I left Akosombo without any sign from them that they would do something about the ban. It continued.

Within that year, however, there were cracks in the ranks of the producers. David Owusu of Media Five Productions defied the ban and cast me in a movie, but he was not allowed to release it until the ban was over.

Abdul Salam, who had instigated the ban came to me to patch things up. He said we should leave the past behind us and work together. With him, I shot two movies. This was without the knowledge of the other producers because the ban was still in place. Socrates Sarfo, a producer who asked me out for dinner, told me how he was disappointed in the actions of Abdul Salam.

I don't know why they all suddenly disembarked from their high horses and tried to court my affection. If I'm to hazard a guess, however, I'll pin it down to the failure of the intended effect of their ban. They had thought I was going to be crushed by the ban, but they soon realised that their action had rather lifted my profile.

My name was on the lips of many. Those who hadn't paid attention to me were beginning to find out more about me. While I launched my glaucoma foundation and tried to give back to society in my own small way, a floodgate of opportunities opened in Nigeria for me and I featured in a number of Nollywood movies. Their intended lull in my career turned out not to be the dull moment they had anticipated. Acting in Nigeria was more lucrative than in Ghana. There were times I shot multiple movies on a single Nigerian trip before I returned to Ghana. If Ghana gave me a professional breakthrough in acting, my financial breakthrough came from acting in Nigeria. This is a fact many Ghanaian actors who have featured in Nigerian movies will not dare contest. Nigeria has a bigger market and an even bigger budget for movies.

So, before I became active again in Ghana, I had also become very popular with some of the top producers in Nigeria. If the Ghanaian producers thought they were putting an unbearable weight on my head to break me, they ended up strengthening my neck and preparing me

for heavier and more rewarding burdens of life.

was 2010. And I was 25. I was about to graduate with a degree. My acting career had taken off extremely well, but it was hit with a ban in Ghana. I found a welcome distraction in my charity, the Yvonne Nelson Glaucoma Foundation. I recorded a single that featured some of the top stars in the entertainment and sports industries in Ghana. Musicians such as Sarkodie, Efya, Sherifa Gunu and Edem were featured. Michel Majid, boxer Joshua Clottey, Nana Aba Anamoah, Prince David Osei and John Dumelo also featured in the video.

The solace I sought in my humanitarian venture and opportunities in Nigeria was interrupted by a turmoil that started mildly in my abdomen and climbed wildly to my head and gave me sleepless nights.

In my head was not physical pain. It was mental torture.

I had gone for a pregnancy test to confirm what becomes the most obvious conclusion for a sexually active young woman who misses her monthly flow. I was in the company of Karen. And when the test result was ready, I wasn't strong enough to open it. She did and declared the verdict.

"Charlie, it dey there!" she exclaimed.

On an ordinary day, I would have laughed out loud and that would trigger a string of jolly conversations and jokes. But this was no laughing matter. It was a grim piece of information that was capable of turning my world upside down. I wasn't the only one responsible for the situation, so I called the man whose potent seed had germinated in me. His name is Michael Owusu Addo, a renowned Ghanaian musician who is better known as Sarkodie.

Sarkodie was a budding musician with the potential to become one of the biggest artists in Ghana and beyond. At the time, however, the future looked uncertain, and his way through the maze of life still appeared too foggy to predict. Success was not guaranteed. He was still living with his mother and was not ready to carry a burden while he was being carried by his mother.

I wouldn't call what had developed between us a serious relationship. I gravitated toward people in the music industry. For the longest time in my life, music was my getaway from all the unpleasant things life threw at me. So, I liked his talent. We started talking and got close. Closer.

And extremely close. Then the unexpected happened.

I was 25, and he was 22. I won't say I was too young to know how to protect myself, but I think I was naïve. I was still that tomboy transitioning to womanhood and knew very little about the most important things about women. I knew nothing about safe periods and ovulation and the complexities of the monthly. I grew up with my mother but "vagina" and "penis" were like taboo words in our house. The closest she had come to giving me sex education was when she once forcibly opened my legs to inspect my hymen. After that, she warned me that if I broke my virginity, she would grind pepper and ginger and insert it down there.

That was in my teen years. I was now much older and more independent, but I still knew next to nothing about my reproductive system and its cycle. I knew, at that age, that I could get pregnant. I tried to abstain as much as possible, and when it had to happen, I protected myself. But I lost my guard with Sarkodie and had to pay dearly.

I called him on the phone and said we needed to talk. He still lived with his mother and this was not the kind of news to break in the house. I called him out of the house when I got to Tema, and we sat in my Toyota Rav4. (He drove a Toyota Matrix at the time if my memory serves me right).

I sensed the intensity of his emotions when I broke the news to him. I could hear his heart pounding, and when he finally found his voice, he faltered. His message was, however, unambiguous. He didn't want the pregnancy. That would damage him and his career. The only option was to get rid of it.

Whether or not his career and the uncertainty of life were the real reasons he could not afford to let me keep the pregnancy, I cannot tell. I later discovered that he had a girlfriend who was attending a university outside the country. It was in her absence that he got involved with me and things got dangerously complicated. Whatever it was, his stance was clear. And I was left to evaluate my own options.

The first thing that hit me when he said no to keeping the pregnancy was my own life. I had grown up without a father in my life. I had often been reminded of how I had been borne by mistake. I was still wondering if the man whose name I bore was my father. How was I going to bring another human being into this world to live like me, someone whose father would reject him or her as Mr. Nelson had rejected me? If there was a way to spare someone else the trauma I was contending with, why would I reject that option, especially when I was not psychologically and emotionally prepared to be a mother?

In my circles, only two of my friends knew about my pregnancy. If someone else knew apart from the three of us, I don't know who told that person. I later discovered that Sarkodie's team also knew about it.

As I wondered what to do next, a friend of mine said she knew of a certain pill that I could take and get rid of the foetus before it festered.

She was in a hostel and had a room to herself. That made her hostel the ideal place to do it. If I tried it at home, my mother would know about it. And hell would come crashing down on an already troubled earth.

So, one weekend, I visited her and took the pills. I swallowed one and inserted the other into my vagina. The few days that followed were some of the most excruciatingly painful moments of my life. It was only after I gave birth that I was able to get a condition to liken the pain I felt to. The pain came with severe bleeding that lasted so long that I became weak. I could see life slipping out of my frail body. When I sat on the WC, clots of blood fell into the toilet bowl like constipated poop. When the bleeding and pains finally stopped, I went to do another pregnancy test to ascertain the efficacy of the selfadministered procedure.

The pregnancy was still there, intact.

Keeping the pregnancy was not an option. Undertaking another selfmedication was also not an option. I agreed with Sarkodie that, this time, we had to do it in a hospital or health facility. Again, that friend of mine had a recommendation. It was a facility in Mamprobi, and, on the appointed day, Sarkodie drove me there with his manager and they left.

Having endured the life-threatening but failed attempt, the question I asked myself while entering the facility was, *Is this where my life will end?* The dilapidation of the building that housed the doctor's operation did not inspire any hope in me that it would be safe. I was given an injection that was supposed to numb the pain, but I could still feel it. I could feel the screwing inside me. I even thought my entire womb was being removed. Whatever it was, my only prayer was for a successful outcome.

From the health facility, I went back to my friend's hostel. As had happened with my Nov-Dec exams after school, I hoped and prayed that I would be lucky with this second attempt. The pain, again, was intense and I bled profusely. I felt worse because Sarkodie left me to my fate in the most difficult period. He did not call to check up on me or find out how the procedure had gone.

Having an abortion is one of the most regrettable mistakes in my life. If the clock of life could be rewound to my younger self, I would keep it. But the benefit of hindsight is sometimes not useful because the lessons learned cannot be applied retrospectively.

I don't know how others who have been through it feel, but my abortion haunted me for years. For instance, whenever I visited the gynaecologist and had to fill out a form, there was a place on the form that asked whether I had had an abortion before. Knowing that it was important to be truthful in my disclosure to health professionals, I had to tick the abortion box. It was not just a tick, but the disclosure of my moment of shame in a judgmental society, sharing a dreaded piece of secret with people whose perception of me might never be the same.

I have encountered many young women who have gone through this with varied stories of pain and degrees of regret. I have also heard stories about others whose situations and reasons for going the painful and dangerous route were not different from mine. Some have not been as lucky as I have. They either lost their lives or their ability to have children again. Like me, they are often pushed by the financial burden of mothering a child alone, the emotional and psychological unpreparedness or the unwillingness of our society to accept children born out of wedlock. Apart from everything else, my mother, a prominent member of the Methodist Church, would have ostracised me had she known about my pregnancy at the time. Looking back, however, I still believe I acted foolishly. I could have lost my life. My body could have been imperiled with an irreversible condition that would have left me damaged forever.

The fear of the unknown can be paralysing, but in an attempt to mitigate it, it is sometimes difficult to notice the seriousness of the situations we sometimes put ourselves into. If I had taken the risk of delivering, I might have pulled through despite the difficulties. It is almost always impossible to change a situation that becomes clearer many years later. In some cases, however, the lessons learned from the past become useful blueprints for present and future decisions. Some do not get second chances, but I was lucky I did. When I became pregnant the second time, I didn't think twice about keeping it.

This time, I was mature enough to know that what mattered most was how my child and I fared. My preoccupation was the kind of future I would help the child build and thrive in. What others thought and what society said about my unconventional way of procreation became secondary. The tongues that wagged about the inappropriateness of having a baby without first having a husband did not move me this time. I was mature enough not to pay heed to those whose next question after learning of Yvonne Nelson's pregnancy would be, "Who is her husband?"

I was financially stable enough to fend for a child and give it a bright start to life. With that in mind, I was a hundred percent sure about the decision I took to keep my second pregnancy.

And I did not need to consult anybody about it. I did not need any validation of that decision from any man or woman, young or old.

First Car, First House and Independence

I started to appreciate and yearn for space after I returned from my sojourn in Mr. Benky's house. Before my mother's marriage to Mr. Benky fell on the rocks, I had had enough of the humiliation there so I left before my mother followed. My first taste of an independent adult life began when I returned to my mother's house. That was when I took part in the Miss Ghana contest, started acting and was in the university. At that stage of my life, I was responsible for myself, pushing through my fledgling acting career while studying to acquire a degree.

One of my first tangible assets was a rice cooker I bought during that period. That piece of life-saving equipment ensured that I had enough to eat and didn't have to go out on an empty stomach. It also helped me to save because it cut down my budget for food considerably. I have grown to have an emotional attachment to rice cookers because of the first one I bought. If a rice cooker was the first tangible asset I acquired, the first and most expensive property I acquired was a car.

My first car was a used Toyota Corolla. In Ghana, that is the template almost everyone follows. Very few people are able to buy brand-new cars as beginners. But the joy in owning a used car—if that is your first—is indescribable. In my case, it did not matter that it was a used car. I bought it from De-Georgia Motors in Tesano, Accra. It was the biggest status symbol that magnified my name at home and put some modicum of respect on my brand at the time. My elder brother drove an old VW Jetta while my mother drove a Nissan Sentra. At the time my Toyota Corolla arrived, it was the nicest car in our house, and I worshipped it. I washed it myself.

I don't remember how much it cost, but it wasn't very expensive. I could, however, not pay in full so I paid half and the rest was spread over six months. Abdul Salam had promised me roles in a couple of movies in the period so I worked hard so that I did not have to default in paying for my most valuable asset. It solved a number of problems. This was in 2007 or thereabouts when there were no cab-hailing applications. What this meant was that whenever I needed a taxi, I had to walk to the roadside or a vantage point where I could get one. The inconvenience, especially at night or on rainy days, made owning a car a necessity, not a luxury.

My life at the time was a personification of hustling and the car was an integral part of that important chapter of my drive to succeed. I used to carry my costumes to school and would dash to shoot movies after lectures. That vehicle served a dual purpose as a means of transport and a private office that housed my clothes, shoes, make-up kits and everything else I needed at work.

Two years later, I bought my second car, a golden-brown Toyota Rav4. It was also a used vehicle but it was in better shape than the Corolla, which had started to break down and give me problems. I had got a car dealer to take the Corolla and I paid a top-up to acquire the Rav4.

After three years, the RAV4 also began to give me problems. Besides the mechanical issues I had to grapple with, my brand was growing, and in the showbiz industry, an actress who had courted enormous media and national attention for the right and wrong reasons didn't have to show up at functions in a rickety vehicle. So, for the first time, I bought a brand-new vehicle or what they call here "tear rubber".

It was a VW Touareg, which I ordered in 2010 and was delivered in 2011. It made a lot of waves in my circles and I was immensely proud of myself. In 2019, I bought a BMW saloon car, which I still use together with the 2011 Touareg. With time, I outgrew the glitzy lifestyle of the industry. If changing a vehicle every other year is part of the show business, then I prefer something worthier and more impactful to show than a fleet of vehicles. At the time, however, investing in the optics was more worthwhile than in the substance.

The showbiz industry comes with demands and expectations, some of which are impossible to meet. I was fortunate to have been shaped by the circumstances surrounding my birth. The early taste of failure and its concomitant rejection taught me to set my priorities right when luck smiled on me or when success came my way.

The year I bought the first of my two new cars, I was paying for my first house. I paid in three installments and, by 2012, I was done. It was a two-bedroom detached house at Devtraco Courts in Tema

Community 25. I had got to the stage in my life where I felt I had to be on my own. Being on my own and living a life according to my own terms meant that I had to be under my own roof. With that goal in mind, I exerted pressure on myself and worked tirelessly. The movie roles I got from Nigeria paid off and I invested almost all the earnings in that house.

The excitement of owning my own house clouded out sound judgment in the selection of a location for the house. Tema Community 25 is far removed from the centre of the city, but in my desperation to leave Dansoman, I didn't consider this. If I had concerns, those concerns were overwritten by the encouragement from my elder brother, who was also acquiring a property there. I later learnt that he was dating a lady in Tema, so moving there was in line with his plans. The irrational choice of location for my house dawned on me when I moved into the house. Whenever I finished shooting and it was too late in the night, going back was a problem. It was not secure to use the motorway at very odd hours and make the solitary journey off the motorway to my new and secluded neighbourhood. That extended residential area of the industrial city of Tema was not as developed as it is today. I sometimes went back to Dansoman to sleep and continue work the following day. At other times, I spent the nights at a friend's place in East Legon. I soon realised that the problem I intended to solve was still there. After two years, I started to look for a place closer to the centre of Accra, where I plied my trade.

I saved and acquired a three-bedroom house at Redrow Estates at East Legon Hills. This house had a bigger hall and was more secure than my previous place. I was the second to move into this gated estate when it was completed. The first was a French couple. I was so desperate to move that I didn't wait to furnish it before moving in. The surrounding was still a mess, and when it rained, I walked in mud to my house the first few months I moved in. For the sake of convenience, however, I couldn't wait to move in. The estate developer completed my part when I was shooting a movie, so I didn't have the time to pack or transfer the furniture from Tema Community 25. In the beginning, I didn't even have curtains. All I had was a mattress on the floor, and that was good enough for me to move in.

One day, one of the contractors at Devtraco hinted me of a piece of land that was up for sale at East Legon Hills. It took me a year to decide the suitability of the land for the house I intended to build for myself. The indecisiveness also bought me enough time until the Nigerian telecom giant, Glo, signed me as a brand ambassador. I acquired the land and started to build at my own pace and specification to suit my taste. In 2018, it was habitable enough to move in. That is where I have lived up to date.

Iyanya and My Love Life

My first encounter with love was in the second year of junior secondary school. I fell for Aziz, a boy who joined St. Martin de Porres School from Achimota Basic School. Academically, Aziz was the unserious type. I later gathered that he had been sacked from Achimota Basic School for poor academic performance. That information didn't dent my love for him. What he lacked in books was made up for in entertainment. He was a member of the Fugees and we mounted the stage to perform together.

Aziz was that student who was often punished for the wrong reasons. I was in his circles and it was common to see us punished together for eating in class without cleaning or getting whipped at the assembly for one misbehaviour or the other. He was eventually sacked from St. Martin de Porres School for poor performance. I wept when I got home and the reality dawned on me that I wasn't going to see Aziz again. When asked, I couldn't say the real reason I cried.

Aziz's disregard for books rubbed off on me a great deal, but I managed to pull through with weak grades that were strong enough to grant me admission to Aggrey Memorial, where I met Fianko Bossman, my high school lover. As fate would have it, Fianko was transferred from Aggrey Memorial, but that didn't end our relationship. We continued our teenage love briefly after secondary school and became very good friends afterward. He has been one of the most helpful people I have met in life. In fact, I think everybody needs a Fianko Bossman in their lives. He has such a good heart.

The type of men I have fallen for tells a lot about me. I tend to gravitate towards people's needs, talents, intelligence and realness. Looks or six packs are secondary in my choice of men. I have a strong aversion for older men, what they call sugar daddies. I always feel these are people who have almost finished having fun as far as relationships are concerned and want you as a plaything.

My most significant experiment with love happened with the Nigerian Afropop singer, Iyanya Onoyom Mbuk. It was not strange that from my near-death experience after a brief spell with a musician, I fell in love with another musician. I have already professed my love for music and how gravitating towards musicians came to me as second nature. Part of my acting career was in Nigeria, so it was also natural that our paths crossed.

We had a decent relationship—breakfast in bed and all the niceties of a dream relationship one could think of. I had the assurance that he was someone I could be with forever. He tattooed my initials, YN, on his wrist, and I thought that was a big deal. If he wasn't serious about me, he wouldn't do that. In his hit song, "Ur Waist", he mentioned how he lusted over me. One can therefore imagine my shock when I returned to Ghana after one of my visits to Nigeria and someone called me from his house.

The caller said anytime I left Iyanya's place, another actress came over to him and sometimes slept over. The person felt strongly that there was something going on between them and thought I should know.

That actress turned out to be Tonto Dikeh of Nigeria, one of the female celebrities Iyanya named in his "Ur Waist" song. When I was convinced about the authenticity of the information I received, I was heartbroken. I took to Twitter to rant and vent. Tonto Dikeh responded on Twitter, saying people changed and so did feelings, so I should move on.

I later heard more stories about what Iyanya did with some of his female crew members. It convinced me that what happened between him and Tonto Dikeh wasn't an isolated incident. It was a pattern, his way of life. I knew I eventually would have left even if Tonto Dikeh hadn't come into the picture. I did not see the need to keep fighting her for a man I had lost, especially when I knew her fate was not going to be different from mine.

However, it is one thing knowing that there is a good reason to leave and it is another world of hell to accept the decision psychologically and emotionally. It is often easy to convince the mind, but the heart lacks understanding. The heart would often want to be left alone to do things its own way. That was my ordeal during the break up with Iyanya. For two months, I cried inconsolably. A friend of mine got irritated at a point. She didn't understand why a "whole" me would brood so long over a man who had betrayed my love.

My efforts to forget about the issue were undermined by the insane interest the media in Nigeria and Ghana developed in our break-up. They dragged it from our perspective and their own perspective. Those with advanced degrees in relationship management offered their unsolicited opinions, while those who were clothed with the power to administer the morality code of the universe had their say. The storm raged on for a long time and, from time to time, some media outlets still looked back to regurgitate the headlines and find a way of linking the past with unrelated present events.

When I eventually moved on, my next biggest test of love came from another continent. Ghana had not worked. And Nigeria had failed me painfully. I was certain the United Kingdom would work out because everything about Jamie Roberts had the markings of a perfect partner and doting father.

Jamie and I began casually online. He had known me through his Nigerian wife. The woman was not only my fan. People said we looked alike. She was tall, like a model, so I guess she may have started following me because she was told about her striking resemblance with a Ghanaian actress. That's how her husband also got to know me. He reached out through social media and introduced himself as a British photographer whose wife was my fan. After the casual chat, we went silent for a long time.

About a year later, when we got in touch and I asked about his wife, he said things hadn't gone as expected. Their marriage had hit a destructive iceberg and gone cold in broken pieces. He opened up to me and told me a lot about the woman. From how he went on and on about his ex-wife anytime we

spoke, I got the impression he hadn't got over her. Months passed and we spoke casually. We got closer as friends, regularly messaging and calling each other.

I told him I would visit anytime I was in London, but he made it easier by proposing to travel to Ghana to see me. He came over. I realised he was very nice. He quickly settled into the Ghanaian environment as if he had lived here all his life. He ate waakye as if he had transitioned from his mother's breast milk with it and had eaten it ever since.

Jamie is a black man in a white man's body. He loves African food, music and, of course, its women. He likes them black and tall. His first wife, with whom he had two children before marrying the Nigerian, was a black South African. I would have been his third African wife had things not ended so quickly and painfully.

Love is difficult to withhold even in the exercise of utmost caution. In other words, if you have suffered a painful heartbreak and you make a mental note never to love with all your heart, that promise only holds until you find someone you truly love. What I had gone through in the past did not dim what I had for Jamie. I gave that relationship my all and he in turn made me feel I was worth the whole world. We got into a serious relationship, and he would turn out to be the father of my daughter, Ryn.

Ryn was supposed to cement our relationship and make things complete. We were supposed to naturally transition from what we had built to a more formal and binding one. He was a man in whom I saw a husband. Having monitored how he related with and treated his two older children, I considered him the ideal father for my kids. But while we planned, his ex-wife had a more elaborate plan. It was her plan that worked to perfection, not ours.

One day, I received an explosive email from Jamie's Nigerian ex-wife. I knew her intention was to destroy him to me, to keep us apart. The email was written in a way that left very little or no room for failure on her part. She knew the effect she wanted to achieve with the email and she got just that.

The email was detailed and explosively explicit. She took her time to reveal all the dirt about her ex-husband, details that would shake any woman no matter how deep her love for a man is. My love for Jamie was deep. It was the reason the email tore us apart. It may sound ironic, but if I hadn't loved him so deeply, our relationship would have continued even after the email. When you love someone with all your heart, they're able to hurt you deeply. And to say I was hurt after reading the email is an understatement. I was broken.

After the email, there were always doubts. There were always questions. The trust was completely gone. I made a decision to opt out of the relationship despite being pregnant for him. It was tough for both of us.

Jamie is still very much present in the life of our daughter. He is one of the most caring fathers I know. Having lived without a father, the last thing I would do is prevent my daughter from enjoying fatherly love. When Jamie visits to see Ryn, I give him the guest room. Sometimes, after a week, he would tell me he is going back.

After Jamie, I lost the essence of falling in love and believing in a man. My worldview about marriage also changed afterwards, and I prefer a partnership to marriage. I believe in partnership, having someone you want and not having to sign a contract. As a woman, I'm trying to work hard and be independent. If marriage is to solve the insecurity of what happens when a man leaves, that doesn't really apply to me now. If you're in love with someone, why do you sign a contract? Signing that contract is like an acknowledgment that it won't work and the marital contract cannot save it. You can sign a contract to be responsible for the kids and for other commitments, but you cannot sign a contract to love someone.

Considering what has become the norm with many marriages, it doesn't make sense to sign a contract. It does not change anything.

#DumsorMustStop, Akufo-Addo's

Call & the Offer to Contest on NPP Ticket

In 2015, a message I considered to be a usual rant on Twitter turned out to be the rallying point for one of the biggest non-partisan protests ever held in Ghana. It was one of the proudest moments of my life, a moment that made my voice heard on the mismanagement of my country and the messy state of affairs in which an otherwise rich nation had found itself. The frustration had been building up in me for many years. When the time was due, it came out naturally and created the needed effect and impact.

My dissatisfaction with my society, country and the black race as a whole started in my childhood. Long before America's culture and lifestyle conscripted me through entertainment, I had begun to compare and question the things that were made in Ghana and those made in Europe, America or Asia. If I bought a pencil here in Ghana and saw another pencil from a classmate whose parent or other relative had returned from the United States or Europe with it as a gift, I compared mine with theirs. Most of the time, the difference was clear. There was always something about the foreign-made product that made

the local ones look inferior. There are some who argue that such difference is rooted in the inferiority mindset of the black, but that is not true. The finishing or packaging of the foreign ones stood out. The crude and haphazardly assembled products made here appeared as though the manufacturers here did not care about competition or aesthetics.

As I grew older, I began to see beyond the look and feel of foreign-made products. It began to dawn on me that Ghana, Africa and the black race in general, were helpless and had to look outside for solutions to the most basic problems plaguing them. Attempts to instill empty words and vague slogans of patriotism in the youth did not help change this mentality in me because the reality on the ground was in stark contrast to what my teachers and books said about being black and proud of one's heritage. That reality drowned the hopes of the founding fathers and what, in their days, were considered inspirational rallying calls for the advancement of Africa and the black race.

No child in my days went through basic school without learning about the story of Ghana's independence. And no textbook told that story without the role of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the man who led Ghana to independence. Nkrumah is remembered for the profundity of his proclamations, the strength of his convictions and his faith in the black race. I'm unsure whether he carried this optimism to the grave or whether the circumstances surrounding his overthrow and exile taught him that he trusted too much in a people who had no trust in themselves. Known as one of the greatest pan-Africanists to ever live, Nkrumah was fiercely optimistic about Africa's ability to take charge of its destiny and prove a point to the rest of the world.

On the eve of Ghana's independence, he declared that "the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with total liberation of the African continent." His quest for a united Africa, which took a life of its own in the Nkrumah era, was personified in these words.

For his faith in the black race, Dr. Nkrumah declared on that night: "But also, as I pointed out, that also entails hard work. That new Africa is ready to fight her own battles and show that, after all, the black man is capable of managing his own affairs."

As a child growing up and learning these words, I soon came to the realisation that they were empty slogans, especially because the first part that talked about hard work is often left out in both Nkrumah's quote and the endeavours of the black continent. I was born two decades after Nkrumah left the political scene in Ghana. However, I have learned a few of the things he did to practicalise the words he so eloquently declared on the night the Union Jack was lowered. In its place, the Red, Yellow, and Green with the Black Star was hoisted proudly and it fluttered audaciously with the promise of a new nation.

After Nkrumah and his generation, however, there has not been much evidence to prove that the black man—whether in Africa or the diaspora— is capable of managing his own affairs. Sometimes, I genuinely hope that I am wrong. I hope that I am too pessimistic. The reality, however, often defeats any attempt I make at optimism.

For instance, Ghana is among the world's leading producers of cocoa and gold and is home to a host of other natural minerals and fertile soil. However, we have no say in the value chain of the raw materials we produce. We still export raw cocoa beans and get next to nothing from the multi-billion-dollar chocolate industry. Our gold is mostly mined by foreign companies and refined abroad. When we struck oil in commercial quantities, we lacked the economic and technical capacities to exploit it, so we looked up to the West, and, as usual, our percentage in it is negligible when compared to the countries whose companies are mining the oil. When politicians talk about adding value to our farm produce and moving beyond an agrarian economy to an industrial one, they are almost always in opposition. In government, they are too occupied with amassing wealth for themselves and their descendants to think about the lofty ideas they espoused when they were hungry for power.

Dictated by their insatiable greed and consumed by their selfish interests, our leaders sign some of the worst contracts when they have the opportunity to negotiate on our behalf. The little revenue we derive from our resources are often misused, leaving too little with which to provide critical social needs and infrastructure.

In an era when our Asian counterparts who were like us at independence are miles ahead of us, we do not seem to have any concrete plans to make us competitive on the global stage. We have no sense of urgency. Our education is still a relic of our colonial past. Our lawyers and judges still wear *white* wigs and are compelled to be fully robed in the blistering heat when very few of the courtrooms outside the national capital have air-conditioners or proper ventilation.

Despite our enormous human resources, we seem to contribute nothing to the world of science and invention. The black men and women who have stood out have done so on the fertile grounds of innovation created for them in America or Europe. Back home, we tend to hold fast to cultural practices that add nothing to our humanity and progress. I have always expressed these frustrations to friends and we would rant and conclude that the solution is not rocket science.

The greed that made us willingly sell our own race to others in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is still the creed in most African countries. It is in our DNA. So, I sometimes ask myself: if I were that *white* what would I make of blacks and their nations that are beggars? What respect would I have for a continent that is endowed with resources, but is so hopelessly helpless that when disaster strikes, its default position is to look to others for salvation? If we flipped the coin, would we genuinely think that we

deserve the same amount of respect that should be accorded people of other races and continents, those who continue to make advances while we kill one another in greed-induced civil wars?

Most of the time, the voices that speak up against our failure and bad governance are those of academics, political activists and civil society groups. The discourse in Ghana, however, got into unconventional circles and the frustration got to every lip between 2013 and 2015, when erratic power supply disrupted every sphere of life and threatened to further undermine the little progress we had made. A nation of nearly 30 million people was still relying mainly on the hydropower systems constructed by the Kwame Nkrumah administration when the population of the nation was less than 8 million. When the power crises persisted, the pinch became so severe that even the most passive observers became active participants in our discourse.

The politics of "dumsor" dominated media discussions. The name of the recurring phenomenon of unstable power supply, dumsor, is derived from two Twi words—"dum," meaning "switch off", and meaning "switch on". Dumsor wasn't new, but the one recorded in that period is the worst in living memory.

I am not an expert on energy, governance or economics, so my frustration with the power crises was mostly with friends and people in my circles. But one night, I was compelled to take my ranting to Twitter when I was tired of buying diesel to power my generator set. Besides the heat I had to endure in the absence of electricity, my health was also at risk.

I use Xalacom eyedrop, which needs refrigeration. I have a family history of glaucoma, and that medication, according to information available online, is meant to reduce "intraocular pressure (IOP) in patients with open-angle glaucoma and ocular hypertension". I had to refrigerate the medication and since the national grid was almost always off, I had to keep the generator on. The cost of fuel was draining me financially. My most pressing need for an uninterrupted supply of power was to store medication. There were others whose very livelihoods depended on electricity.

It was for this reason that when I tweeted my frustration and ended with #DumsorMustStop, I woke up the following morning to find that the hashtag had caught fire on Twitter and was trending for days on end.

In the midst of the trend, the Citizen Ghana Movement pressure group reached out to me. They wanted to discuss how we could capitalise on the mood generated by my hashtag to pile greater pressure on the government to fix the problem. I met with leaders of the pressure group, lawyers Kofi Bentil and Nana Kwasi Awuah. The two had broken away from the OccupyGhana pressure group, which was the outcome

of a non-partisan protest in 2014. I bought into their idea and they set to work on the legal requirements ahead of what became the #DumsorMustStop protest.

On my part, I reached out to all the celebrities I knew and sold the idea of the protest to them. It was an opportunity for those of us in the arts and entertainment industry to make our voices count, but not many of them responded. I was, however, happy that the few who came on board did so wholeheartedly. They included Efya Nocturnal, Van Vicker, D-Black, Prince David Osei, DKB, Kweku Elliot and Sarkodie. Sarkodie could not make it to the protest, but he recorded a hit song about the power crises.

It was normal that a problem of that magnitude would give a political advantage to the opposition political parties, so while the government did not take kindly to our protest, the opposition parties were solidly behind us even though we had made it clear that our agenda was nonpartisan. In the days leading up to the protest, I received a call from someone who said I should hold on for the presidential candidate of the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP), Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo. In that brief call, he expressed his support for my cause and encouraged me. He said I was a true daughter of the land and that what I was doing was a good thing. He said I should push on and not be discouraged, for the whole of Ghana was behind me.

I also received calls from the office of President John Dramani Mahama. The callers said the president wanted to meet me, but I told them I would only meet with the president on condition that my fellow organisers of the protest would be part of that meeting. The officials at the presidency insisted that the president wanted to meet me alone. I stood my ground, stating that if the president was not prepared to meet me with my colleagues, then the meeting was not going to happen.

And it did not happen.

A few days before the protest, there was pressure from my family members, who tried to talk me out of it. I remember my father, Mr. Nelson, called me one morning and, without even greeting me, asked me to drop the protest. He said the Nelson name had become embroiled in a national controversy because of my intended action.

“Yvonne, the name. The name! The name!” he said and went ahead to tell me how his friends were calling him to talk to me.

It was interesting that the man who didn’t make me feel part of him suddenly became so concerned about me when I was embarking on a national cause. I still wonder how the people who were influential

enough to want to stop the protest were able to link me to Mr. Nelson and put him under such intense pressure that he called me. Our relationship as father and daughter was not out there in the public. I had thought it was as anonymous as how we related with each other until Mr. Nelson called. I declined to recline and watch the nation suffer when I had the unique opportunity to make my voice heard.

That evening, my mother also called with the same plea. It was either Mr. Nelson had told her to add her voice to dissuade me from leading the protest or she was genuinely concerned for my security and the implications of leading a crowd in the politically charged environment. Whatever her motivation was, I politely told her that it was too late to reconsider my decision to lead the protest.

The week leading to the protest was my busiest. While putting finishing touches to the arrangement and fending off attempts to stop it, I was also engaged in countless media interviews. I remember brushing my teeth in the car one morning while on my way to an early in-studio radio interview at Peace FM. It was as if I was running a political campaign.

May 16, 2015, finally arrived as a very tense day. My team and I had done a lot of preparation, but we could not be sure that Ghanaians would turn out in their numbers to make the protest a success. The government and the governing party were doing everything possible to undermine the protest. It was supposed to be a vigil, and participants were asked to bring their lanterns and candles to march from the University of Ghana to the Tetteh Quarshie Interchange. The Minister of Power, Dr. Kwabena Donkor, later told me that his outfit fixed the dysfunctional streetlights on that stretch just to douse the effect we wanted to create with the thousands of lanterns and other lights we used for the protest. Keyboard gangs of the governing party were also ready to undertake their coordinated trolling should the numbers fall short of their expectation. The stakes were high. They knew it. And we knew it.

When the moment came, I was overwhelmed and moved by the numbers that turned out. Tens of thousands of protestors from different walks of life turned out. Some people travelled in buses from Kumasi to Accra to take part in the protest. The Ghanaian media gave it live coverage, while the international media featured it prominently in their news. Social media was awash with our messages and pictures and live streams of the event. We made a strong statement. It became the most significant and defining moment for the fight to end the power crises in Ghana.

As with all actions against the government, the protest came at a cost to my comfort and security. I received anonymous death threats from people who felt I was making the government unpopular. Two weeks after the protest, I didn't sleep in my house. While away, a neighbour once called me and said some Toyota SUVs had parked outside my home and their occupants were peering into my compound. But for the high wall, I guess they might have entered. The gated residential community where I lived at the time came under intense scrutiny. The estate developer was accused of not having electricity metres in some of the apartments and was arrested and detained. I had a metre so no matter how hard they

looked, they couldn't find anything to implicate or incriminate me. After some time, they left me alone, and I returned home.

A year later, the opposition NPP and its candidate won the 2016 election. The power crisis and its effects were a major sin of the incumbent National Democratic Congress (NDC). Dumsor had resulted in job losses and dealt a deadly blow to the small-scale enterprises that depended on electricity but could not afford alternative sources of power. Even though the NDC administration resolved the crises at a huge cost and through shady procurement deals, the victims of dumsor, corruption and mismanagement could not forgive the party at the presidential and parliamentary polls. The NPP, led by Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, won massively in both the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Some friends and I went to congratulate the president-elect, Nana Akufo-Addo, with whom we took a photograph. It is a photograph I regret taking. Akufo-Addo came to the presidency with enormous goodwill. He had been projected as a no-nonsense disciplinarian who would not hesitate to crack the whip on errant appointees. He was said to be incorruptible, and Ghanaians thought he was going to be the antidote to mass stealing at the highest level, which is euphemised as corruption. Unfortunately for Ghana and those who trusted in him, he has turned out to be a monumental disappointment whose government's unbridled borrowing, corruption and reckless spending plunged the nation into an economic dumsor.

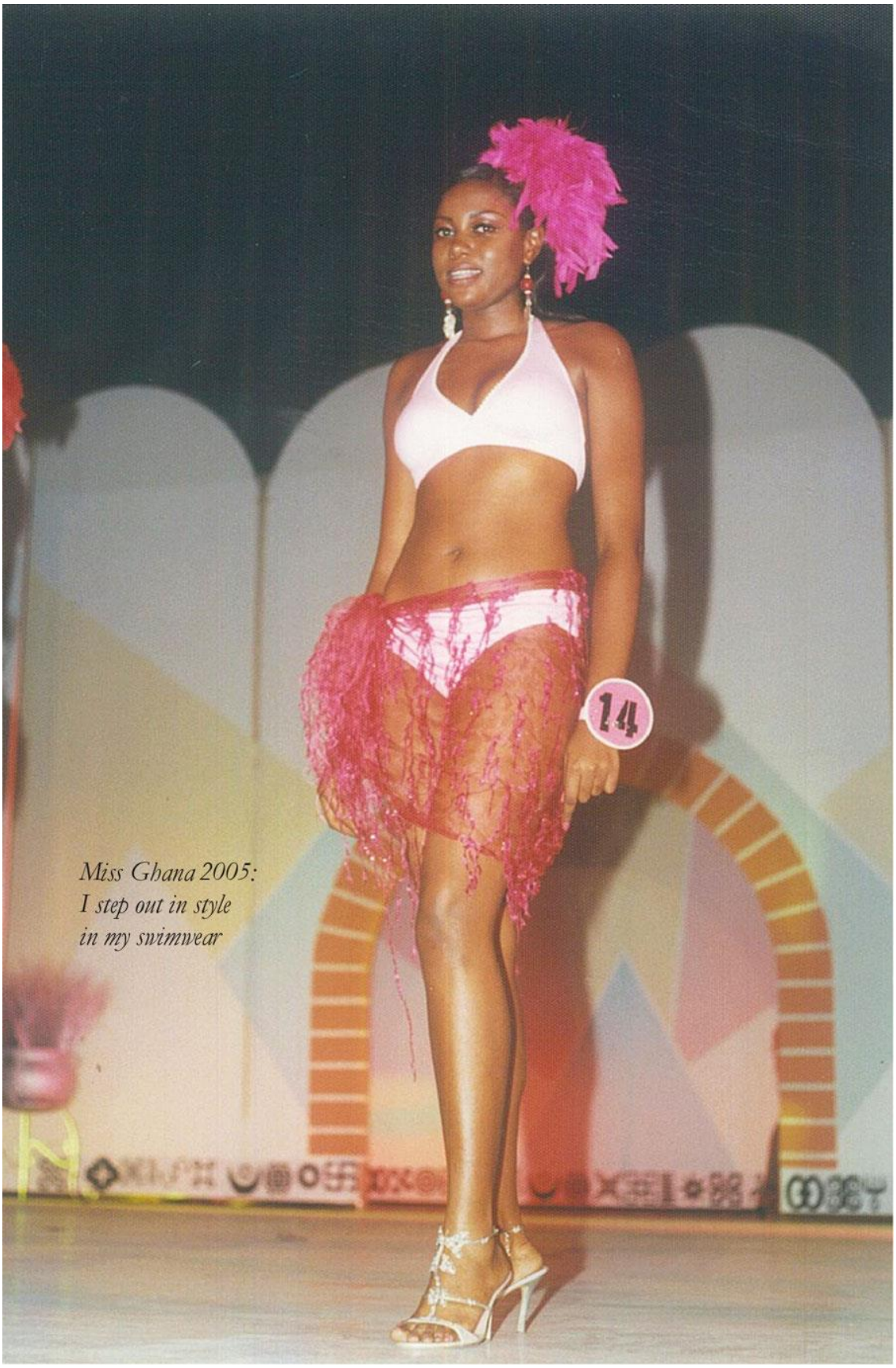
By the end of the first term of Akufo-Addo's presidency, many Ghanaians had begun to lose hope, not only in him but also in the country and its politics. It was not strange that his party nearly lost the parliamentary majority it commanded in the first term. There was a tie in the parliamentary polls. The NPP only got the majority when its member who had been expelled from the party from contesting the election as an independent candidate, won his seat and joined the NPP side in parliament. Even with that, the governing party lost the election of the Speaker of Parliament for the first time in Ghana's Fourth Republic. I certainly do not wish to associate with a politician who is projected as one thing but becomes the polar opposite of that when elected into office. Strangely, however, some close associates of the president thought I was a candidate to be drafted into their party and pushed to contest a parliamentary seat with their tacit endorsement and support.

Prior to the 2020 polls, an influential man in the Akufo-Addo circles came to see me and proposed to sponsor me to contest the Ayawaso West Wuogon parliamentary seat on the ticket of the NPP. The NPP had lost its MP for the area and one of the "wives" of the late MP won the byelection in 2019. The byelection was characterised by violence and resulted in the formation of a commission of enquiry to investigate it. She was lacing her boots to contest the seat in 2020. When I drew the attention of the emissary to the fact that the party already had a candidate, he said the fact that he was contacting me meant that they had concluded their plans and would do everything within their power to pave the way for me to contest if only I was interested.

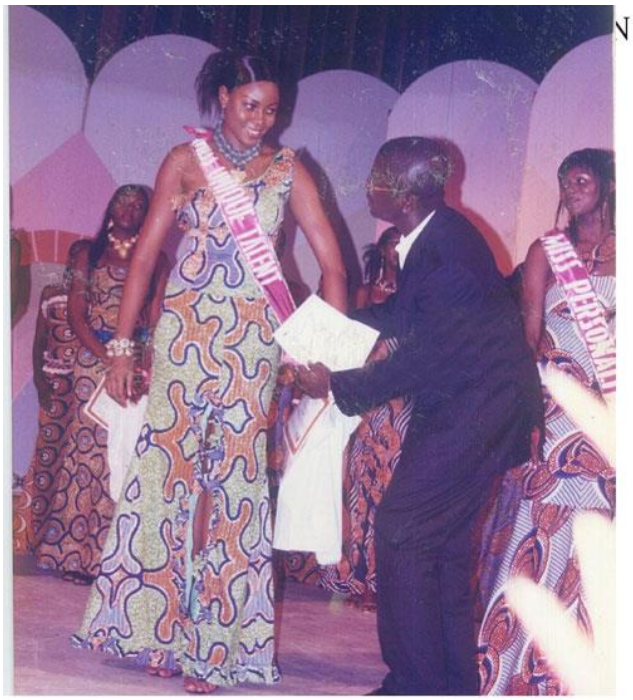
I asked him to give me a couple of days to think about it, but I had made up my mind the moment he broached the subject. I was not interested in the offer. Even if I was interested in going to parliament, who told him I wanted to do that on the ticket of the NPP? What if I wanted to go as an independent candidate? And was I going to allow myself to be someone's political puppet? Once you accept to be sponsored by them, you lose your independence and they expect unalloyed loyalty from you. This was something I wouldn't do even if I was interested. This person was the president's family member. And from the modus operandi of the Akufo-Addo "family and friends" government, I wasn't going to be their conduit, even if I was interested in going to parliament.

Apart from the fact that they probably saw a formidable political personality in me as a result of the #DumsorMustStop protest, the other reason the NPP's gods wanted me to contest was not difficult to discern. My colleague actor and friend, John Dumelo, was contesting that constituency on the ticket of the opposition NDC and they feared he could unseat the NPP candidate with his celebrity status. Already, John Dumelo's political affiliation had strained our friendship. We had had open exchanges on Twitter in the past and I wasn't going to make things worse by openly contesting him. I wouldn't betray our friendship to satisfy some people's political calculations. If I accepted the offer, I was going to do that because of the convenience of political power.

That constituency is a stronghold of the NPP, the main reason John Dumelo lost despite his popularity and stardom. If I had contested, my chances of winning would have been high, but I do not regret rejecting the offer. Had I accepted that offer, I wouldn't be different from the politicians and their politics of convenience, which I so much detested.

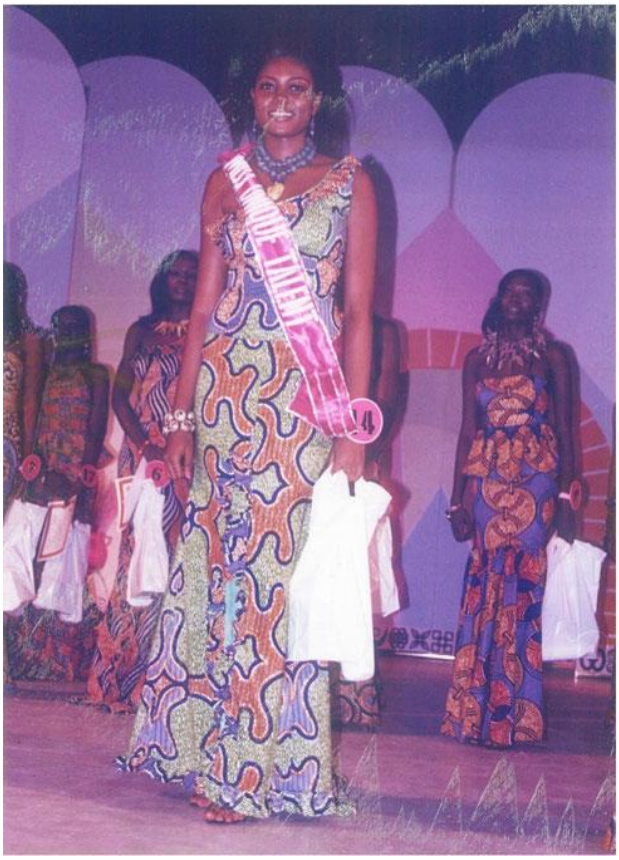


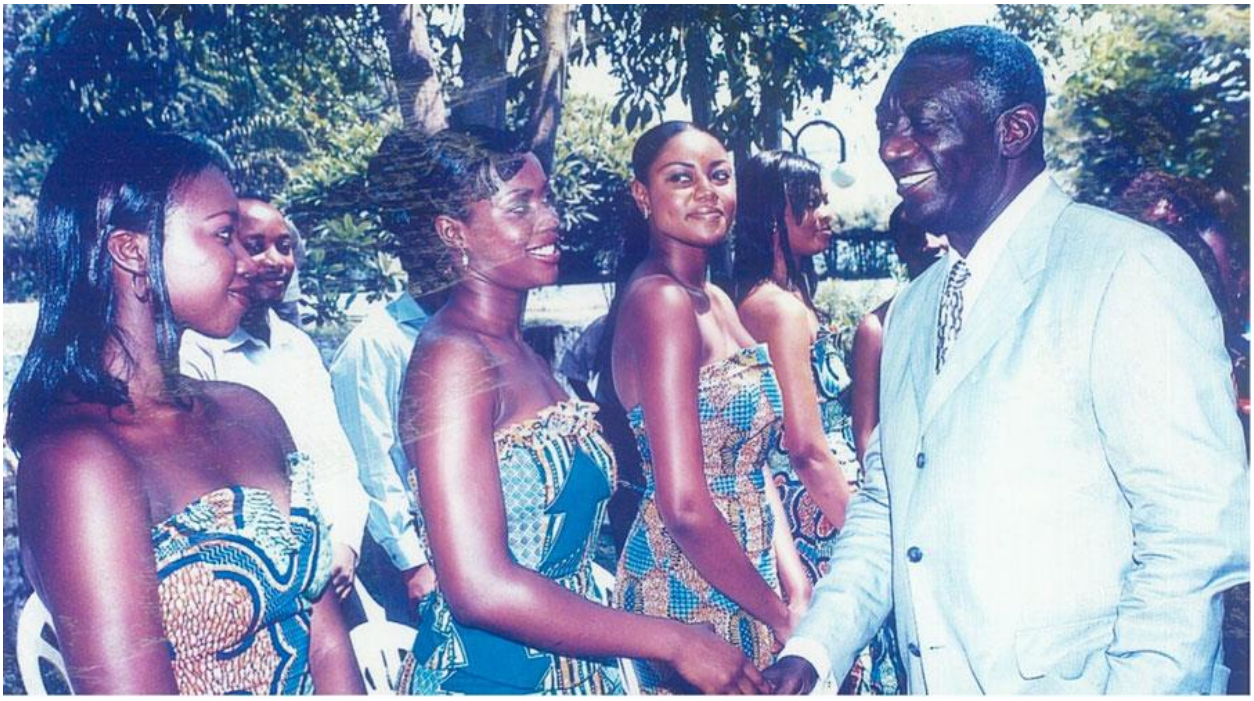
Miss Ghana 2005:
I step out in style
in my swimwear



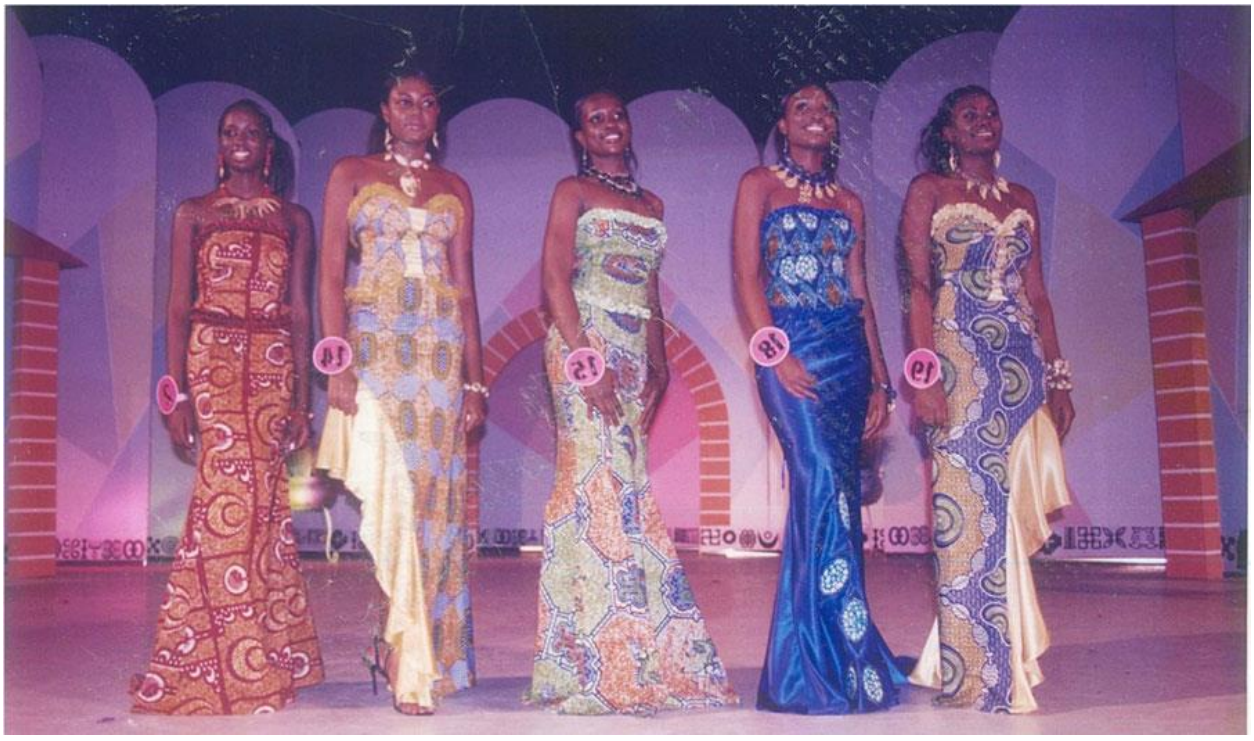
Receiving the best talent award from Prince Kofi Amoabeng

During one of the speech segments at Miss Ghana





The contestants meet President J.A. Kufuor at the Osu Castle, the then seat of government. I am third fro m the left

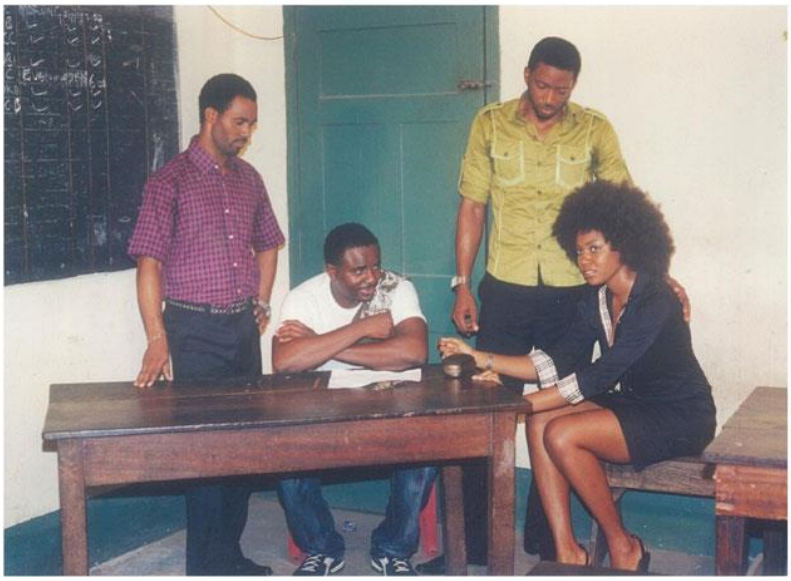


The perfect five from which the final three winners were selected

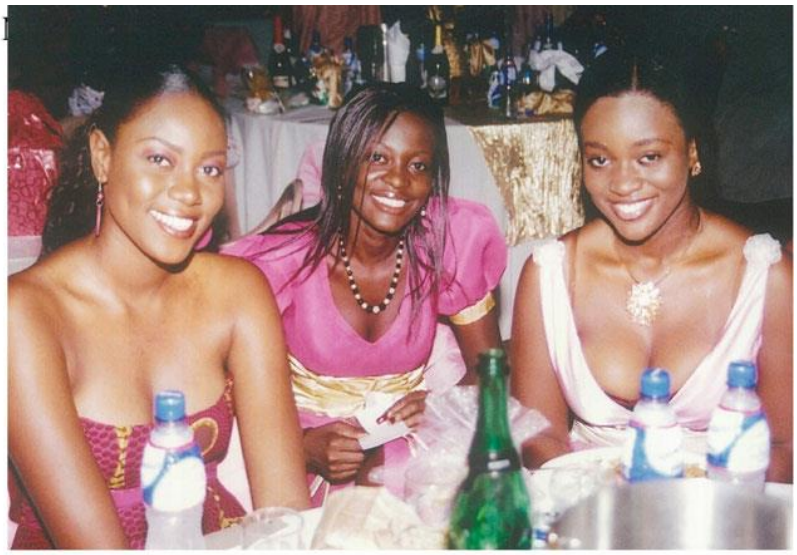
ON

On the set of Play Boy, from left to right: Jackie Appiah, Ingrid Alabi, Henry, myself and Beverly Afaglo

On the set of Fantasia with Rita Dominic, Director Anuka, I and Van Vicker



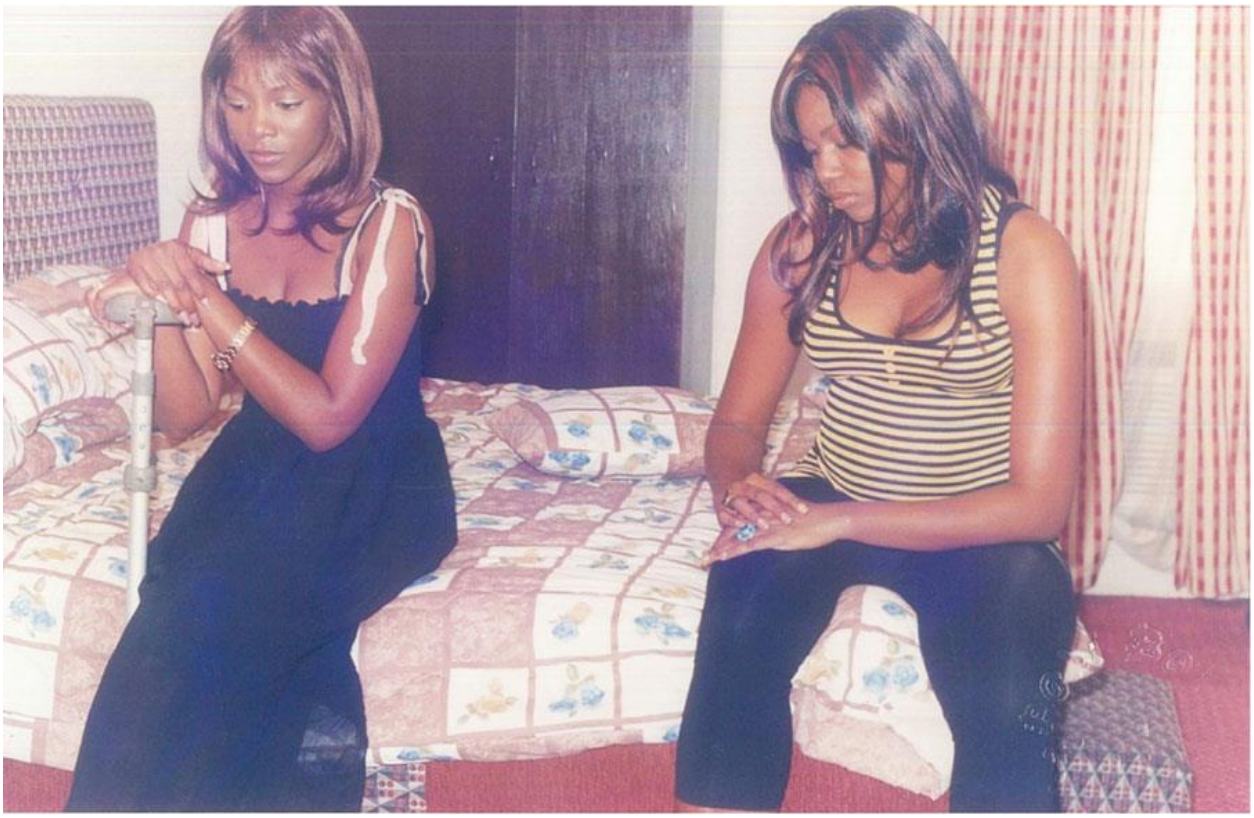
Emeka Ike and I [seated] on a set in Lagos



I, Asantewaa [in the middle] and Jackie Appiah at an event in Accra

Majid, Frank Raja [middle] and I on set

In Lagos filming with Eucharia Anunobi

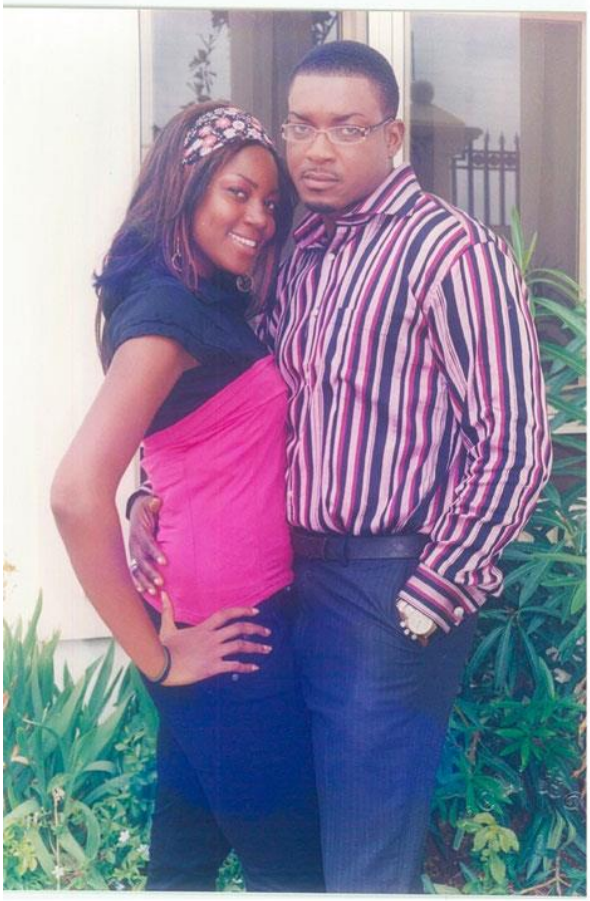


With Genevieve Nnaji on set in Lagos

“I attracted more movie roles from other producers and I started starring in movies that had me as the m ain character or the only big-
name character driving the movie. The movies I featured in after Princess Tyra are Passion and Soul...”

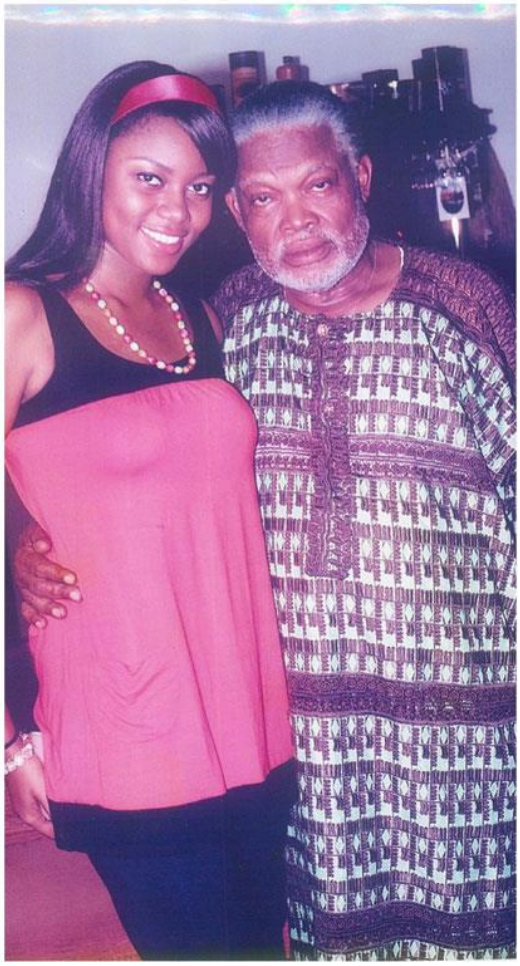
In this photo , I was on set filming Passion and Soul

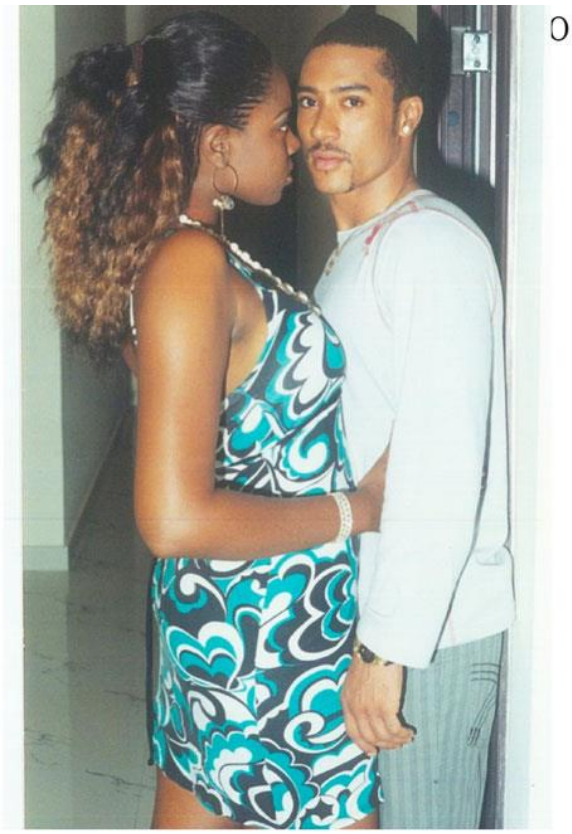
"Of hostilities on set, I must say I also felt very comfortable whenever I was on set with Majid Michel..."



In Lagos filming Chidi Mokeme

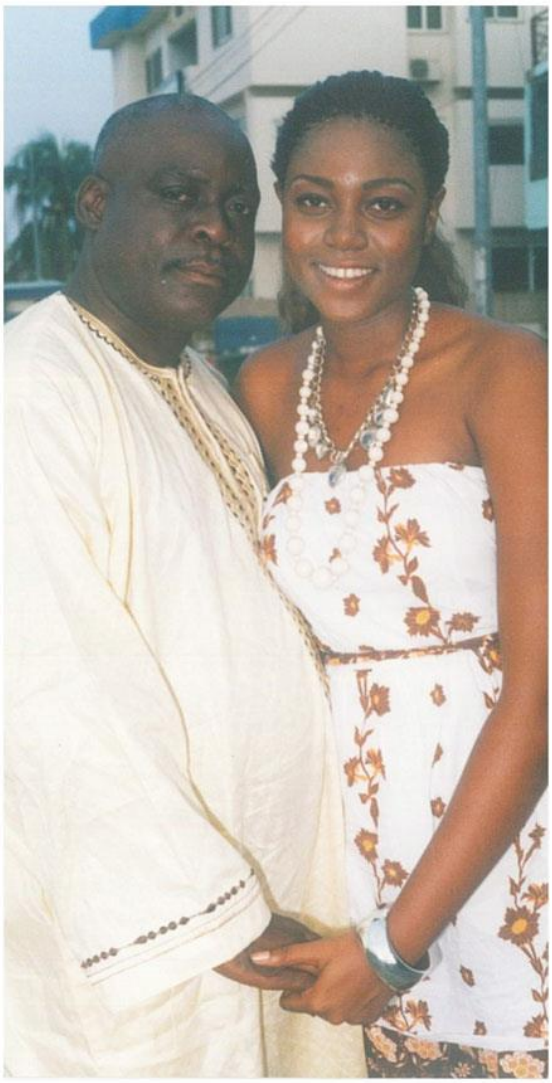
With Enebeli Elebuwa on the set of Fantasia, a Ghanaian movie.



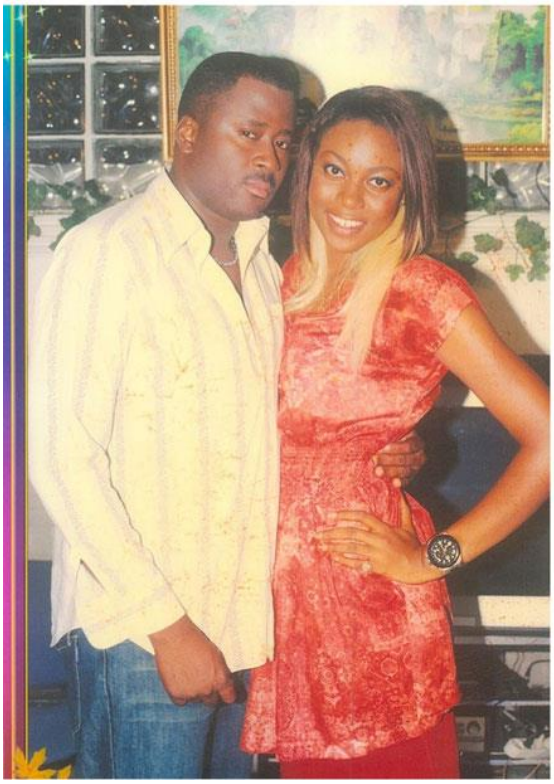


With Majid

Kofi Adjorlolo walked out of the set of Princess Tyra as a protest against what he termed as my terrible acting. We later became friends and I even cast him in a movie I produced.



With Desmond Elliot in Ghana



I AM NC

“The release of Princess Tyra changed everything. My status at home changed. My brother and sister now saw me as a celebrity sister. The posters of celebrities that littered the walls of my room were still there, but the disdain that had accompanied them vanished overnight.”

With Akon

NNE NELSON

With Viva Bianca, an American actress in Santa Barbara in Los Angeles in the filming of Road to Redemption

My third time as a movie director

With John Dumelo on the set of Jungle Justice

I found directing so interesting that I wish I had started earlier

Shooting a commercial for Brussels Airlines in 2022

With lawyers Nana Kwasi Awuah (left) and Kofi Bentil after we got clearance from the police to proceed with the protest.

The #DumsorMustStop protest was a huge success. It shook the government to the core.

This was one of the interviews in which I said Mr. Nelson was not in my life

A Man's World

In 2009, when I was on set shooting *The Prince's* I received a visitor. He was not my visitor, for he had come there to see someone else. By the end of his visit, however, I turned out to matter more to him than the person he had come to see. This august visitor, if I should call him so because of the retinue of security guards he moved with, derived his influence from the surname he carried. His name is Joel Duncan-Williams, the son of the founder and leader of the Action Faith Chapel International, Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams. Until that day, I hadn't known or heard about him, but I could not fail to notice his imposing presence when he showed up.

Before he left where we were shooting the movie, he said he had fallen in love with me. The days and weeks that followed proved he was not joking. He would buy me lunch and visit me on set. I was amused by his security and the mini-convoy that followed him. I began to wonder what threats he encountered that warranted the kind of escort he moved with. While I was still unsure of what to tell him, his plans were far advanced for marriage. But something ended our friendship abruptly before it had the slimmest probability of developing beyond that.

He paid me a visit one evening with the usual princely entourage that I had only seen in movies of non-state officials. When the howling of his motorcade's siren had adequately announced to the neighbourhood that my household had received an important somebody, he came in and announced his plans. He said, before the marriage would proceed, I had to go to his father to be prayed for. The purpose of that prayer was to ensure that whatever demons or evil spirits were present in me or my family line would be cast out. In my head, I asked whether he didn't think my mother also needed to pray to cast out any potential bad spirits in him. Being the son of Archbishop Duncan-Williams didn't necessarily mean he was inhabited by the Holy Spirit and guarded by angels. And who told him that being an actress meant that I was a harbinger of malevolent spirits?

At least, those who lived in our area would testify that the Manovia household used to be one of the most religious households around. My mother's sense of spirituality heightened after a motor accident she was involved in, and it was rare to miss morning devotion in our house. Those were the times, in my teen years, I used to interrupt prayer sessions with revelations from God. When I started my acting career, I made it a point to always pray before I started any movie role I was given. I am not one of those who wear their religion on their sleeves, but I believe in God and believe in prayers. I have seen the hand of God in my affairs many times and I have no doubt He comes through for me when I call on Him. I don't believe in just big pastors or men of God, some of whom are nothing short of entrepreneurs. I, therefore, found it funny that someone who was interested in marrying me and hadn't secured my consent thought I needed to be spiritually cleansed even before he proceeded. He didn't see the need for that cleansing to be mutual.

Outside the realm of spirituality, that thinking betrays a certain mindset that I have come to see in a lot of men, especially in Ghana and Nigeria—terrains I'm familiar with. It is a mindset that reinforces the unfortunate reality that this is a man's world. It is an entitlement mindset that a woman must be subservient to a man and be subject to his wishes and dictates. It is an unwritten rule that expects a woman to be complementary to a man and that her own priorities and feelings must be subsumed by the overriding ambitions of the man. In the case of Joel Duncan-Williams, it was evident that he was thinking about one side, his side and his interests. Others have a cruder way of manifesting this mindset. It is the forceful entitlement to women's bodies. I knew it existed, but the movie industry opened my eyes to its pervasiveness and seriousness

When a popular movie director in Ghana threatened not to cast me in a movie again unless I gave in to his sexual demands, I initially didn't take it seriously. I thought it was just an empty threat that was meant to put pressure on a fame-hungry young woman. But he meant it, and, for a year, he did not look my way in the movies that came from his stable. He had made the advances for a long time, and when it became clear to him that I would not yield, he wielded the ultimate trump card. He tossed a sack of juicy hay in front of a young woman foraging for the foliage of success and fame and all the trappings that came with it. I didn't accept the poisonous bait, so he carried out his threat. After a year, he was convinced that he had failed and because he needed my service, he came back to make peace with me. But I had to give something else to placate him. I ended up acting in a number of movies for him for free. In all, I have done about fifteen movies without charging a fee. I needed to stay visible, relevant and be in the trends. The more movies one shot, the more one stayed in the minds of people and had the potential of landing juicier offers. Producers know this, and women who are now looking for the opportunity to enter the industry are often required to exchange sex for roles.

Was I shocked that this director went this far to punish me for something I had the right to refuse anyone I had no feelings for?

Not at all.

If what he did had any effect on me, it only confirmed that I was born into a man's world. I had to live with it and endure the consequences if I could not change it. That world influenced me a great deal even before I became conscious of it. As I've already stated elsewhere in this book, the male-dominated hip-hop culture shaped my early life. It's the reason I grew up as a tomboy. I loved it. I also grew up naturally drifting more towards men than women. I felt more comfortable around men than women and that meant I learnt the ways of men very early in life. The more I knew, the more hopeless I became of the reality of women in a world they dominate only in numbers. I have always been around men, but I couldn't think like men or behave like them. I am a woman. And they are men. I feel if we got into the same trouble, society would judge them more leniently than me.

Men get away with a lot of things, or so I think. They control a lot of things in the world and dictate the pace and sometimes the phases of women's lives. They vastly outnumber their female counterparts in every industry. In entertainment, a woman needs more than just talent to succeed. A woman needs to be mentally tough, principled and ever ready to suffer for not yielding to the demands of every Tom, *Dick* and Harry.

Nature itself has placed uncomfortable and—sometimes disconcerting—restrictions on women. Think about menstruation. Think about menopause. (As if to remind us about men's dominance, those words begin with men.) Some women's periods are so painful that it is a dreaded monthly burden. At 60, a man can still have children. After 30, a woman who wants to have children begins to be restless and pressured because as she inches towards 50, her chances of conceiving begin to dim. Pregnancy comes with its complications. Sometimes, it is a life-or-death affair, which is borne by the woman. Nature's burden weighs disproportionately against women.

Aside from the minority that are able to hire paid house helps and an even slimmer minority whose men help them at home, household chores still remain the burden of women. A man can go to work a day after the birth of his child, but a woman must first heal. She must breastfeed and act as the primary caretaker of the baby. In some instances, as in my case, the career of the woman must be put on hold when she's pregnant. She must watch helplessly and painfully as opportunities slip by or are taken away from her.

This dominance finds a disturbing expression in marriage as well. A woman is often in the shadows of a man. It is becoming normal for men to cheat, but sacrilegious for women to do so, and I wonder the essence of marriage when the two parties are not held to the same standards of the so-called hallowed institution of God. Sometimes, I'm tempted to think men are wired differently. Being around men, I have realised that a man can be with 20 women in a given year, and that's absolutely fine with him. Many women who enter into relationships or marriages with their hearts often end up disappointed; and when they have to leave, a majority of them do not get a share of the property that is proportionate to their sweat.

In all of this, my main frustration has been the sense of entitlement some men wield over women who are neither their children nor wives. As I grew in the industry, I discovered that despite the talent of a woman, the average producer or movie director would want to take advantage of her sexually before she is allowed to flourish. That is a disturbing reality, and not many women are able to turn their backs on the offers. I was fortunate that I entered the movie industry after the Miss Ghana contest, which had given me some clout before I starred in my first movie.

I know, as women, we have our own issues, but if we had women in the majority as producers and directors, I don't think they would be making these demands of men. I can't imagine refusing to cast a