

## **PART 1—I LOOKED UP AT THE SKY, AND THE ANGELS WERE NO MORE**

High school in Nigeria is six years long, and runs from grades 7 to 12. For several Nigerian students, it represents the first sense of being somewhat unhinged from home, of taking the first step to the tricky concept that is freedom. Because I jumped into high school right after grade five, rather than grade six, my parents often heralded the blush-inducing statement that I was “more mature than my age”. An incredibly fast growth spurt and the appearance of a little beard after I’d only struck twelve certainly suggested this, but as far as mental maturity went, I wasn’t so sure.

I attended a boarding high school, fairly large and a few hundred miles away from home. The memory of my first night there is still clear. I stayed up in bed, a little kid in need of his mom. I thought of her clutching my hand hours earlier, just before vanishing from the other side of a fenced gate, telling me that I’d be fine, that I could be on my own. I couldn’t imagine it though—being away from the safe tethers of home, from my lovable and generally destructive siblings, from an era of what felt like an ending timeline.

Now, for the obligatory context-stamping background. My siblings and I grew up governed by fairly strict religious and parental laws. For as long as memory can capture, prayer was our existential fodder, said before meals and before sleep, on every dawn and dusk. We’d pray to God to watch over us, to bless roads we traversed and meals we ate. Beyond prayers, we learned of the social norms that bore no room for bargain or moderation—respect for teachers and parents, unwavering chastity before marriage, unquestioned obedience to our elders and regular reviews of the Bible. It was a well-structured world; it kept us in line, kept us safe. These were the laws so tightly drilled into our minds that after a while, they were like breathing, fundamental and unconscious.

Then came boarding school, and then came that first night truly alone, that first night away from family. It was a deviation from pattern, from structure, and as it turned out, it was only the beginning. We've all heard some saying or other about the immortality of old habits, and so it was with me. Nigeria is deeply religious, and every classmate I knew had firm religious beliefs rooted in Christianity or Islam. However I didn't always see them kneel to pray before dawn or before meals, and although it felt vaguely out-of-place, it didn't stop me from going on with those habits that were part of me. *All the time*, I prayed and read my Bible and thought of home. As I built myself into my new world, a new schedule, a new life, "all the time" became "sometimes" and by the end of the second year, "a few times". I'm still not sure what happened to break it, but in any case, this steadfast pattern of constant prayer vanished, except when I was home for the holidays. Then I would pray with my family, full of guilt at what I considered my gravely vanishing piety. Yet afterward, a new trimester would begin, and prayer would again vanish from the forefront of my mind.

This was not to say I found prayer a somewhat thoughtless concept (I've never deemed it thoughtless). In fact, this was not really to say *anything* about prayer. This was to say that I broke away from a past regularity only after I got the chance, the mental freedom, to do so. For whatever reason, in the absence of parents and siblings to watch me, I stopped seeing angels each time I glanced at the sky.

## **PART 2—THE MEN ARE CIRCLING; CAN YOU SEE THEM? THEY'RE SMILING AND DRAWING OH SO NEAR.**

Probably halfway through my second year in high school, some new students transferred in. Transfers weren't common, but when they came, they were well appreciated. After all, there were

only so many variations of mean jokes we could paddle at people we were used to. So there they were, six or seven new students, and one of them got assigned to my room. His name was Joseph; he was tall, thick-muscled, and it was easy to imagine that he always scowled. However, he was actually quite friendly and made outrageous jokes all the time. Joseph and I were fast friends.

On a dull weekend evening, my roommates came up with this ingenious idea that we all imitate wrestlers from WWE, a wrestling show. Needless to say, this idea ended badly. A window was shattered and we were all punished. But moments before this, something happened. At the peak of the game, Joseph pinned me to the ground, a taunting smile of victory etched on his face, hovering close. He rose before he realized what had happened. I don't think it was my first erection, but it was certainly the most significant.

Some ideas are born never to die, and so it was with mine. I didn't understand what the erection meant, and I didn't understand what my thoughts meant. I lost control of them; they morphed and shook and imagined a thousand different scenes—all of them around Joseph. With more fervor than ever, I wanted to be around him. I remember spending several nights trying to provoke him into new rounds of play-wrestling, just so he would pull me close and send me spinning to the ground, just so he would crush his weight against mine, but with a gentleness that turned my mind to star-struck stew. He never really obliged, and this only fed a growing obsession that waned out after a while.

In the third year of high school, life shifted on its hinges—I formed a new circle of friends and became rather close to one of them, “Ikenna”, (a Nigerian name that translates to ‘strength of the father’). Ikenna and I were often together, seatmates in the morning, roommates in the evening. Unabashedly, I told him several times that he was the ‘bestest’ friend I’d ever had. He always

smiled at that. The next trimester, Life decided to see how well it could push my buttons—Ikenna was transferred to a different boarding school in a different state.

The emptiness that followed was immense, but people often only see skin, blind to the layers beneath, thus no one else was aware of my distress.

It did take a while longer for me to realize what was happening. I think it was by my fourth year in high school that I finally understood that I was possibly gay, perhaps because I came to understand what the word meant just a little before then. But it was merely a consideration, one that broke through my mind like a root tendril through the ground, one I immediately rejected.

A recent event in the country had spawned discussions of homosexuality, and the mere mention of the word filled others with outrage and me with shame. I often wondered why—I wasn't gay...I was just...*very* sensitive. Yes, sensitive.

Yet fear constricted my throat and terror filled my heart each time I heard some of these discussions. My classmates as I knew them were likely some of the most argument-prone people in the world. Some of them would take to arguing against their own names just for the sake of it. On the issue of homosexuality however, there was *never* a division of ideas, at least not to my own ears. They always denounced it, in small groups washing clothes in the school backyard or in large groups huddled around dining hall tables. Their words were never soft either, never mere phrases of disapproval. They were openly scathing, hateful, as if talking about some slimy, dangerous lesser species.

So began this inner battle within me. Why their words hurt. Why I was afraid. I knew the truth of course. On some level, I had to. I thought of Joseph and the wrestling antics, of Ikenna and his smile, of my empty longing after he left. Each memory was clear as water gleaming in brooks on a sunny day, and I called the implication of each memory a lie.

This battle went on right until my final year of high school. For at least three years, I battled the idea that I was gay. It seemed that the closer I got to graduation, the more repulsive the idea felt, and yet the more obvious it seemed. The topic had become a significant part of Nigerian politics, and everywhere I looked, I saw a lack of support. I attended church sermons in which priests called it “a Western abomination” and “the ugly rebirth of Sodom and Gomorrah.” My friends tagged it disgusting. The enormity of their views crashed upon me. They *had* to be right, didn’t they?

One evening, likely over the summer, I was at home with my parents, when it appeared, an unwelcome guest on the news. A famous Nigerian priest and some other man had been found bare, entwined, in a hotel room. They had been paraded naked by their finders across streets. We saw censored shots of the men, their hands and feet bound, their faces bloody from beatings they had received. Evidently, the police had arrived *hours* after they had been paraded, and had taken the naked men away. Unspoken was the idea of justice, was the glaring inhumanity of the situation. My parents didn’t say anything on the matter, and I had to fight the urge to ask them to.

### **PART 3—BLUE SONGS AND LOVELORN HEARTS SELDOM A MAN MAKE**

I had often wondered what my life would look like written as a novel, where the gut-stunning climax would emerge. Right now, I might currently be etched on the oft-sentimental pages of an epilogue, which would put the climax behind me, at my sixth (and final) year of high school. It was certainly one of the grimmest years of my life.

Cynical philosophers might dismiss love as nothing but trouble. I don’t know how close to love infatuation gets, but it’s certainly full of its own hell. While still struggling to come to terms with who I might be, in a country that utterly rejected the possibility I was also trying to reject, I

became attached to a new classmate called Ahmed. He was short, skinny, and gifted with a wit that stung like a sword. Because of a class system which assigned two seats to a desk, he was my seatmate.

Have you ever been in love? Or felt anything close to it? Have you ever brushed hands with someone, a meaningless contact to the one, a flush of feverish heat to you? There I was, beside Ahmed, and every bit of interaction was magnified a thousand fold. A good side of his right arm was coarse and scaly, darkened from a fire accident he never really talked about. As we took notes in class, his arm often brushed mine, infusing warmth that stole my concentration and inspired daydreams. He liked to draw beside me, and I often stared at the beauty his small, delicate hands carved on paper. And then there were his jokes, pushing me to the floor so that I roared with laughter while my sides hurt. One of my better memories from that year came from Ahmed's best joke ever, one that had me laughing so hard I fell and tried to crawl out of the room to quiet myself. In my mind, I could see every detail of his face, every tic, every nod. Even now, I can recall the way his smile seemed pushed to one side, giving him a rather mischievous expression that fit his rather mischievous nature.

But then came Life again, bringing out Ahmed's warm side to inspire the worst in me. He became obsessed with a girl, and his diagrams of teachers and classrooms and cartoons became shades and lines and circles of her. He spoke about her in class and out of it, murmuring her name in a small voice full of longing, often turning to me to remind him of how beautiful she was. And of course I did so, smiling outside and saying, "She's amazing!", dying inside as petty jealousy dug up buried thoughts.

Thus far, I'd been glued to Ahmed without trying to consider the implications. In the presence of pain and jealousy, there was no turning away from the fact that I was hurt, and that the red

emotion was a clear statement on my sexuality. For no good reason, I spent time fixed dully to my window or buried in my pillow, my face hidden. Grief cascaded over me, and it wasn't just the pain of longing and unwitting rejection and unrequited affection; it was the pain of who I was, running counter to my country and my friends and my family and my religion. It was my sexual identity, wrapping itself around my neck, clashing with a self-denial that was hollow at this point, barely believable. It was the grief of a million things that came to life in Ahmed's emotions for this girl.

And then came the discussion that rings with sadness even now, Ahmed talking—for the first time in my hearing—about gay-bashing. In all such homophobic discussions, I often sit rigid and motionless, afraid that a syllable or a finger would betray my fear. That day, I was most frightened, but there was also this undertone of pained disappointment and possibly defiance. For once, I almost spoke up. But I didn't. I left the room quietly.

It's really hard to say that I "came out" to myself at some specific turning point, but by graduation, I was convinced I was gay, and my fears had evolved. I wasn't afraid of myself anymore; I was afraid of others. I was afraid of the hate that sometimes rippled around me, was lost as to why I felt like the only one in my living group who thought differently on the matter.

I listened to a lot of calming songs, watched videos that assured me things would get better, even with my laptop turned away from the door in case someone walked in. I was suddenly two people. There I was, this smiling energetic math-loving guy. I spoke with everyone and laughed at everything. I loved my family and my friends and my life. And then there I was, the shadow of reality but perhaps more real than the first, cautious and wary and lonely, still in love with my friends and family, but brutally aware of the fact that they didn't really know me, and possibly never would. Neither was a lie; they were both realities. The very nature of my country hinged on

this cultural, religious mindset that I—as a whole—couldn't fit into. Therefore, I split at the seams, at the confluence of the acceptable and the utterly detested. A boy and his clone.

#### **PART 4—IN FARAWAY LANDS ONLY DREAMED OF SING THE ELVES ON OAK TREES, DANCE UNICORNS UNTIL THE STARS FLOAT WITH MERE MORTALS**

Graduation was a loud, clamorous event, full of confetti and tears and clicking, flashing cameras. In the last five minutes of the ceremony, I looked around and realized with deep sadness that I might be looking at some of my classmates for the last time. After graduation came the question of college, the next phase of life awaiting me.

For a while, the only considerations were Nigerian universities. The mere idea of an education abroad seemed like wishful thinking, not merely because I understood that more accepting cultures existed out there and I didn't think I was fated for such good luck, but also because it seemed like one of those generally unlikely things that people dreamily talk about, like running for president or winning the lottery. However, after a very suggestive e-mail that came on the heels of my SAT result, I finally entertained the idea that studying in the US was an *actual* possibility.

In my Nigerian living groups—in my circle of family, friends and classmates—the US represented this image of glamor and order. In several instances, when people sagely ranted about the blunders of the Nigerian government, it was often followed by a generic statement on how things ran smoothly and differently in other countries, “like the US”. Not everyone necessarily believed this, but there was no doubt that the mere mention of the country came with a mystic



intrigue. For me, that mystic intrigue came on so many layers, one of which said, “If you can go there, if you can get there, things will be different.”

Months later, MIT accepted me. The shock overtook my mouth. I screamed and ran around the house and finally collapsed on my bed, unable to take in the reality. I remember spending days and weeks afterward, trying to assimilate every bit of MIT I could, from admissions blog posts to the online newspaper to updates on LGBT life at the Rainbow Lounge. My fixation wasn't merely on MIT's extremely gay-friendly culture; it was on this unbearably beautiful idea that MIT *really* did exist, that it represented the possibility of a new world for me. At that point, my sexual identity was a more pronounced part of my overall identity than it had ever been before, and the more I filled my head with MIT, the more a part of me seemed to shrink away from Nigeria, seemed to distance itself from the world I had known all my life.

On the first night of the Campus Preview Weekend, I went to the Rainbow Lounge as quickly as I could. I was a prefrosh, and every building gleamed with strangeness and newness, so I got lost pretty quickly. I finally stopped a girl to ask her where the Rainbow Lounge was... except that I didn't.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I'm trying to find a room.”

“Sure!” she replied, grinning. “Which one?”

*The Rainbow Lounge*, I thought, but the words died at the top of my throat. The same fear that had crippled my movements and words in Nigeria overtook me. It just seemed too unreal. I was sure that I'd say what I was looking for and her eyes would change. They would regard me with disdain and she would walk away. Of course it was silly, but despite the evidence that sexual inhibitions wouldn't be a problem here, the part of me that had hidden itself away from family and

friends still cling to the impossibility of being accepted. So I told her “never mind” and set off on my own. A few minutes later, I did find the Rainbow Lounge.

I saw the rainbow flag plastered to the door, a large welcome message for the Class of 2017. Inside the lounge, people sat in a tight circle. They looked up at me...and they all smiled. They spoke to me; I said something brief about my name and relapsed into silence. They were discussing some scenes from an LGBT movie, and the sheer idea that they could openly do this was too much to take. As time passed, more members of the class of 2017 filtered into the lounge, and they came with their stories, of living openly and in secret, of confiding to no one and taking part in pride parades.

For the first time in my life, I pulled an all-nighter. My shell dropped; my spirit soared. I opened up. They nodded and smiled and one of them offered me a hug; I nearly collapsed from gratitude. When I got back to my room, it was 8A.M. I sat on the edge of my host’s bed and cried. It was a cry of relief, of disbelief.

It’s been a long time since then, but I still remember the excitement of that night—scavenger hunts in the Infinite Corridor for rainbow stickers, card games, new and supportive friends. I’m somewhat open now. My roommate and most people in my fraternity know I’m gay. I dated a fellow freshman for several weeks but the MIT workload caught up with the relationship and severed it. I’ve spent the past few months living a life that once existed only in dreams. And it feels like full bloom; I’m not two sides of reality.

I’m just one person.

One very grateful person.

## **PART 5—SO WHO AM I? WHAT DO I SEE WHEN I STARE AT THE MIRROR?**

One question I was naturally often asked during Orientation: “What was it like in Nigeria?” And my usual automated response: “It was great! Full of adventures.” Months after I’d settled into the drum of the Institute, the tunes changed: “How are you finding the US?” Another automated response: “Absolutely wonderful; the food is kinda weird though.”

But really, those are straightforward hollow responses that serve nothing more than to move a conversation along. What do I think of the US? I obviously find the Boston atmosphere more welcoming; living can be its own task without the burden of constantly thinking of how to live, of how to present myself, an exterior that belies the interior. With my near-total freedom here, I no longer have to slink into the shadows or glance over my shoulders to see who’s watching me. Interestingly enough, this has resulted in some kind of evolution. While my sexual identity was always at the forefront of my mind in Nigeria’s homo-repressive atmosphere, it somewhat slunk out here. The mere ability to live my life as I wanted meant that being gay wasn’t a constant thought-inducing affair. It meant that I could walk around in total confidence, without having to think of who knew and who didn’t. It was simply a part of me.

This raises what I consider a significant question—what does feeling so completely at home in the US mean? Does it somehow deemphasize the life I had in Nigeria, or at least stand superior to it? What are the things that tie me to my home country? Trivial answers come to mind—nearly two decades of life experiences, friends and, very importantly, family. But what if my family moved to the US? Assuming by some random chance, the people I knew in Nigeria were suddenly here for good, would I have any lingering ties to my home country, apart from the empty-feeling fact that I was born there? There does appear to be a bleakness in this situation. I would still be two sides of an unsteady coin, with even less motivation to handle the mental weariness.

On the flip side, how do I identify with the US? The culture is more welcoming, and I've already built a steady network of friends, people I deeply care about. As usual, the idea of family holds me back, but if they could live with me here, would I be fine with that? What would I be missing in Nigeria? This calls to mind why I can call myself Nigerian beyond what dark words on a passport declare. The meals I love, the unique mannerisms I compose myself with, the languages I know. A good part of my life has been shaped by being a Nigerian, most notably my love of writing. Sometime in high school, I realized the words I said had no powers. They wouldn't change the hostile climate or make my friends any more accepting. It was easier to turn to some other medium, and therefore I wrote frequently. I began to love the way words shaped themselves on paper, the way simply moving my fingers could express so much, could bring up all these thoughts and ideas—from lingering stories to intimate secrets. These floating mental blurbs grew into a universe of reality I could physically hold. Without the need to write, I don't know that I would have found so much freedom in words. I would possibly be very different.

This doesn't quite solve the conundrum of misplaced identity and self-belonging yet. Earlier, I considered the implications of moving to the US. What if I could, but was restricted to a state where significant pockets of homophobia thrived? It likely wouldn't mirror the degree of fear and distress I often faced in Nigeria, but it seems reasonable that I'd rather live in an entirely different and more accepting country than within the United States, in a state that still somewhat limited the scope of my thoughts and actions. This brings us to the driving point behind these clashing tensions. The places clearly matter, but *very* little compared to the skeleton of my identity, to the pieces that represent my values, my beliefs. A *place* of belonging seems less important in this context. If I moved to a city similar to Boston, I'd likely thrive there, and of course I define

“similar” in light of the things that are important to me—sexual climate, artistic and technical culture, the manner of people that live there.

The question of “where we belong” is one that transcends passports and licenses. “Nigeria”, “The US”, or even “partly both countries” are responses that are too limiting. I could belong anywhere depending on the circumstances, but I’d identify more with those places that mirrored my values, values on which my picture of an ideal world hinges. But these are as complex as we humans are; these values evolve, and our ideal world evolves in tandem with them. The *set* of places we can call home evolves as well.

## **PART 6—I’M HAPPY AND MAYBE THAT’S ENOUGH**

I understand more clearly who I see when I stare at the mirror. I understand what I want and understand that the concept of my holistic desires melds with how and where I want to see myself, and is often times unable to be answered by mere locations. Regardless of where I am, I’ll always harbor a wish to be able to tell my parents that I’m gay, to see them smile and accept me. But this isn’t likely to happen. They also have their values and desires. They want a strong religious foundation for their kids, one upon which a heterosexual family, mirroring those same ideals, can stand. And objectively speaking, that should be fine. The lack of wish-fulfillments shouldn’t put an end to wishes.

Nigeria isn’t the place that will fit in with my dreams and values. Neither is the US, not as long as I’m tied to several important elements of my home country. And clearly, citizens of every country live along the lines of different cultures, lines that often never intersect. Just because a certain culture runs counter to our beliefs doesn’t mean that the very place in which the culture is integrated can never be a home.

And ultimately, trying to decide where the ideal home is isn't the big question. Life serves its cards in usual random fashion. Once upon a time, I found myself in Nigeria, and I split at the seams to accommodate the gap between my cultural mindset and the country's overall mindset. Now, I'm in the US and I'm happy to be here. But things could have been different. MIT could have rejected me. I could have ended up studying in Nigeria or Russia or Venezuela. Regardless of where you are, you should remember the worth of your values, and while you can't bend your immediate world to fit those values as much as you want to, it isn't enough to stop living.

If I'm back in Nigeria in the next couple of years, I'll keep on living this double-life, because it works for me. If there's a wind of change—and there sometimes is—I'll try to be swept into it, but if there isn't, I can still live. Not just as a shell, but as a real person. People are luckily more complicated than a bland sum of beliefs and ideas. We can love; we can live with people regardless of differences, if only we make an effort to.

Right now, I'm in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a p-set-churning college in the United States and I feel happy here. I'm often smiling, and that's enough for me.

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