“Fiction is the truth
inside the lie”
-Stephen King

New Light

Chapter 1

“We’re in Ajegunle,” he said.

I could feel the outline of the rock behind us, tracing shapes and patterns onto my back. Each movement I made was a new canvas for the rocks, another chance to demonstrate its artistry. From where he and I sat, Ajegunle¹ was invisible. It was behind us, noise and unformed chaos. We only saw tranquility, the peace and order separate from our lives, which yet lent itself so easily to nature. Ten feet ahead of us, a chasm opened, hundreds of feet of stone and moss and strange-looking plants that clung to the walls of the hill— but mostly, hundreds of feet of nothingness, empty air that smelled of a different place from the world behind us. The chasm ended in a large pool of water. It was even larger and deeper early in the year, but the sun was ferocious and the rains rare around this time of year—near the end of March—and the pool was drying up. I could always tell how deep it was, easiest thing in the world. I often spent hours here by myself, picking stone after stone, and hurling each one all the way down. A few seconds of nothing, and then a plonk sound or a soft splash, and then I would know.

I hadn’t been here alone in weeks. I never wanted to be here alone ever again.

Evening drew closer. The light in the sky was bleeding out, and we could see the bloody swaths etched above us as the sun set. Already, the plea and prayers of crickets and grasshoppers filled the void around us. I couldn’t tell if they were always speaking, their tones frantic and inaudible words begging to

¹ One of Nigeria’s poorest towns, often known as Ghetto City
be heard, and if I only ever heard them when the light of day was gone. I suppose it might have been the case—with darkness, the mind sees more.

I turned to Michael. There was more than enough light to make out his face, haggard and scruffy. There were bags under his eyes and armpit stains woven into his shirt. His face was in my direction, but his eyes were closed. His face held that quiet peace he often exuded. I couldn’t quite describe it—it was something about the hint of a smile that curled the corner of his lips, something about the easy confidence his face and voice held even when he looked tired, and something about the magic in his fingers, magic that always traveled through me when those fingers met mine.

*I love you, Mike.* The words I could only let myself hear, the words that sat between us like a wall, even though he was the only one for whom I had thrown down walls. I could always tell him, but there was no point. Whatever we had, nameless and uncertain as it was, had a fast- looming deadline wrapped around it. Time had never felt so finite, the prospect of “next week” never so unwanted. He would soon leave Ajegunle, and so, those four words were pointless. If we had a year longer, a month even, maybe those words might mean something.

“I know we’re in Ajegunle,” I replied. “How can I not? It’s the only place I’ve known, the only life.”

His grip on my hand tightened. “Then you know what I already know—it’s not going to change. Look, Emeka, you have a brain. Like your cock, it’s probably five times the size of mine—”

For a moment, I was still, staring at Mike stunned. He opened his eyes, a glint in them mischievous and knowing. His lips widened into a grin and I punched his shoulder.

“Shut up,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief, but I was smiling, the way I often did when I was around him. “That’s not true.”

“Oh it is,” Mike replied, laughing. “O di ka ogologo ntari.” He reached for my crotch, but I grabbed his arm first, bit softly against his palm, which smelled nice, like soft perfume. Heat crawled all over my face and I felt my loins stir.
New Light

“Ogbanje!” said Mike, shoving my head backward with his free hand. The look of delight on his face vanished. “But I’m serious, Emeka. I understand why you had to turn down University of Illinois, but this is Princeton. Money won’t be a problem with them. They said they can pay for everything, everything. You can leave this town.”

“Maybe, but I’ll have to be accepted first—”

“Of course you will. They can’t reject you. It’s impossible. You’re Brainbox—”

I scoffed. No one called me that except Aunty Nneka’s kids—who often expected chocolate from me in return—and Mike. But the truth remained: I still hadn’t been accepted; every ounce of speculation between Mike and me could be for nothing.

“—and by tomorrow,” Mike went on, “your ticket out of this life will be in your hands. Look, hear it from me. South Africa is…it’s so unlike Nigeria, and so unlike Ajegunle. I can’t even begin to describe how different it is. And look, life is more than just what we’re doing, messing around, sneaking around. It’s about freedom and happiness and…you know, chill, being chill. I haven’t had four-month strikes in my university, I haven’t been afraid to meet anyone online—”

“I bet you do that all the time,” I said, looking away, because I didn’t want him to see my face then. Knowing anyway that he probably knew.

He laughed again. “Of course I do, Emeka. Because I’m free. And if Princeton says yes, and I’m sure they will, then just pack your bags and—”

I broke away from him, rose to my feet. My back cracked and whined, sore. “I can’t just pack my bags. Who’s going to look after Mama and Papa? You know Mama’s shack at the market was closed yesterday with all the other ones. She says she can always go back to sewing clothes, but that won’t feed chickens, talk more of a family. And Papa, when is he going to find a job? I don’t know, he doesn’t care. Mama’s always talking about God, about faith, but the truth is, I’m the only one she can depend on. I make more money working in Mallam Bukar’s shop than she will if she goes back to sewing clothes, and if…” I was breaking down; he was watching me break down. The lump in my throat hurt, the truth hurt, the tears forming in my eyes hurt, and the fear—of everything—was expanding out of me like a dark balloon.
“If I leave,” I went on, “they’ll be alone. She says...she says she supports me, but I don’t think they can make it without me, Mike.”

I stood there shaking, and Mike sat against the rock, watching me. There was concern in his eyes—real affection, like a small flame glowing in the cold of night—but it didn’t make me feel any less helpless. Then he rose and he walked toward me and he kissed me. His hands were vises on my shoulder, draping my body against his. His lips were strange and tender, instead of fierce and needy, and I tried to wrap my arms around him, and wrap myself around him, but I couldn’t. I cried. He kissed me and I cried and broke away, wiping my eyes, mumbling an apology.

“Fuck that,” he said. “Look, Emeka, I’ve been where you’ve been. I’m not an only child, but I’m the oldest, and my four siblings, they’re...they all have small jobs, Chi-Chi and Deborah at the market, Sam and Obiora at Mazi Ewedu’s farm, but it’s always never enough. The point is...the point is, Princeton, I don’t know much about it, except that it’s a big-name school. If it’s family that’s stopping you, you should know that in somewhere like that, the kind of money you’ll make, the kind of jobs you’ll get, your family will be set for life. And if you go there, there’ll be none of this...none of this sneaking around, none of this hiding and—”

“I can stay here,” I said. “And sneaking around, hiding, it won’t be a problem. After you leave, I’ll stop with the games. I’m not homosexual, it’s not me—”

A dark look crossed Mike’s face, and he stepped away from me. For a moment, my heart beat faster.

He said, “Just because you can deceive yourself around Chioma doesn’t change the truth. If you don’t want to admit it to yourself, no problem, but don’t let go of an opportunity like Princeton, just because...because you’re afraid.”

I was afraid. How couldn’t I be? I lived in Ajegunle, a small town in the heart of Lagos, the town people called “Ghetto City,” “Jungle Justice”. It was where I had been born, where I had spent all twenty-two years of my life. I had gone to Kiriwa Elementary School, and although I hadn’t been there in years, I still remembered the path there from my home, the gutters my friends and I crossed as shortcuts, through the thick mass of bramble and bushes we called ulo agwo—snake house. I remembered our headmistress, Sister Kate, who was still the headmistress even now, and the cane always leaning by her office door. That
cane had met my neck and hand and butt several times, for being late, for making too much noise, for looking at her with “Satan-eye,” as she called it. And I couldn’t forget my boarding secondary school, from which I had graduated two years ago, couldn’t forget the year we had been so overenrolled that some classes had taken place under the grove of mango trees outside, instead of within the uncompleted cement structures that formed the school.

Ajegunle was part of me, its twisted history, its people, each struggling to live the best way they knew how. The constant fights that broke out around Gungere, the local bar on Gafi District, and the naked children that played along the valley near Saint Michael’s church, the moments of justice, as Ajegunle called them, that seemed to happen every month, usually to thieves, who were beaten to a pulp until they could barely move, who could barely lift a finger to defend themselves as the car tire was shoved down their necks, as the fuel was poured over them, the match lit and dropped, the flames consuming them, the screams, stretching into the sky, leaving echoes that persisted forever. Ajegunle was that symbol of fire and justice and independence. There were often newspaper articles about it, “the bottomless pit of a struggling country,” the city of “touts and barbarians,” and everyone in town seemed to revel in this infamy, as if it were further proof of our resilience, our strength. Most discussions with my friends somehow found their way to the same thread, the same motto—we are all survivors, we have no room for the weak. But what kind of life was it when surviving was the pinnacle of existence, when you worked fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, for years and years? To what end? Simply living?

My growing distance from the town had started years ago, after I had witnessed the death of Pascal. He and I hadn’t been close friends, but we had often spoken whenever I dropped in at his dad’s stall in Eshiri Market to buy spices for dinner. He was often in the distance, cutting vegetables or peeling plantains, and while I waited for his dad and sister to wrap up my purchases, we would talk about the day and the weather. He always had the same answer to my question of “Pascal, how far?”—a common question in Ajegunle that meant “how are you?” His response: “Just fighting, bro.”
And then Mama Chika’s cousin had caught Pascal in the Chika family coop, trying to make away with two hens. He had chased after Pascal, screaming, raising alarm. Pascal hadn’t gotten very far, and when I woke up—it had been the middle of the night—and stumbled out with Mama to find out what was causing all the noise, I had only seen Pascal, sane and alive for four seconds, screaming and crying, “Please! Please!” before the match was lit. It didn’t matter that he was conscious while ablaze for twenty more seconds, didn’t matter because you really died when that match was lit, when the “area boys,” as the deliverers of justice were often called, chanted “Die! Die!” in fifty languages, while the kids watched blankly—it was, after all, just another day—and while every other observer either joined in the chant, the scream, or watched, because there was nothing to be done. But Pascal’s dad had been there too, and he had been screaming, and trying to make his way to his son, until one of the area boys had knocked him down. And by the time he’d gotten up, it was all over. And I had seen the precise moment things had ended, the precise moment life had vanished from that flailing, bloodied body.

The chasm between Ajegunle and I had only widened, because shortly afterward, I became best friends with a boy called Babani, and had then realized that maybe friendship wasn’t all there was. Some things about Babani stuck, his smile and his hug and the way he transformed into something beyond words each time he danced in the town square on the weekends. And I only let myself head toward these realizations in the dark of night—when even the ears of the walls couldn’t penetrate my roaring thoughts, when the images of want, wanting him, being with him, playing our stories of the day over and over again, were too stark, too bright. And I was afraid, because althoughAjegunle had never unleashed its justice on a homo— at least not to my eyes—there was always talk about it. Sometimes jokes, like “Emmanuel, e be like say you be homo, the way you dey eye that boy, me I dey suspect you o...” and more often, the livid undertones that followed each joke: “hemos are disgusting” in secondary school, “let Ajegunle catch just one faggot, we will beat the pussy-hater out of him” by the river bank.

2 “Pidgin English” as it’s called, might appear a few times in the story
The fear was a constant thing, and on the way to school or to the market or to the town square, each passing gaze that lasted too long was a terrifying *maybe. The way she’s looking at me, maybe she knows.* What if she tells her brother? It was ridiculous; I hadn’t done anything. More importantly, I wasn’t anything. My mom often had the same theory about why people did awful things. There had been the time Mazi Okonkwo had killed his wife—this must have been over ten years ago, and I couldn’t remember much except that it had been the second month without any power at home, and my mom and I had been sitting together outside, near the fire with which she had cooked some *garri.*

“They think it was because she was pregnant with another man’s child,” she said. “But is that a reason to kill somebody? It’s the work of the devil, Satan, always planting these evil seeds in people’s heads.”

It was the thought that often came to mind—I was *fine...* the word *homo* sounded as it felt, alien, disgusting, and each time my thoughts wandered too far, it was because of the devil, tempting me, planting these seeds in my head. I spent several nights and several weeks praying, *begging,* the words muffled in my throat, thick with fear, of damnation, of being discovered.

But discovering what? Discovering what?

**Chapter 2**

I wanted to be angry at Mike. I wanted to scream at him: of course I was afraid, I couldn’t afford to leave town in the way that he had been able to, after receiving a scholarship two years ago to begin an engineering program in South Africa. I couldn’t afford to close the door—the ton-heavy, triple-iron-bolted door that separated me from my people, my family, the entirety of my life, for something as *empty* as telling myself, “Yes, I’m gay.” What did that bit of self-discovery mean when it would ruin everything twenty-two years of living had created? Why could I be so selfish as to afford myself that bit of self-discovery when everything else was still so chaotic and riddled with questions—where the next meal would come from, how we would pay the unending bills, how my parents and I would make it—when each day was just a day of inching along, small ants on a narrow track, when each day was deciding who would have some meat
for dinner and when we could afford to have lunch and how we could pay the electricity bills when power was less predictable than rain and didn’t do much except illuminate a dusty old bulb in the room I shared with my parents. Life was hard the way it was already, couldn’t he see, and if making Chioma my girlfriend and deciding that I wasn’t something I had no reason to be, something that couldn’t help us survive, if those things made life just a little easier for my family and me, then I would take it over any bit of self-philosophizing that could only end in pain.

But I couldn’t be angry at Mike, because I feared he was right. I couldn’t be angry at him, because I had come to love him. It was weird to think that the love had been born of a lie, but the path that had sent me to him had really started when, for my last birthday, Chioma had bought me a phone. Not one of those small ones either, not the Nokia brand that only let you call people and play Snake Xenzia, but a big one that had things like internet and colors and a camera. She said a rich cousin from obodo onyingbo had flown into the country bearing multiple gifts. I had wanted to deny the gift; I knew it was more expensive than everything else I might have received that year combined, but I was too powerless and too grateful and too enamored to the alien device to do so. I told my mom I could sell it later that night, and she grew fierce and angry and told me no.

“Emeka mu, no! You don’t have nice things, we don’t give you enough nice things, so you’re going to thank God for the blessing that is Chioma, and you’re going to keep it. Meanwhile, invite her over to dinner tomorrow. I want to thank her in person.”

After registering a free sim card at GSM Village, near the outskirts of Ajegunle, I was told by the man helping me that the phone came with two weeks’ worth of free internet. He wanted to show me how to navigate the phone, but I declined his help. I stayed up all night playing around with the phone. More than half the people in Ajegunle likely had no clue what Google was, but I did. I had won a contest organized by the US Embassy, which provided funds necessary for me to take a bunch of exams and apply to any two American universities of my choice. So I had carried out most of the research months ago at the local cyber café, whose internet service we called Tortoise, and by the time I had Chioma’s gift, I was familiar with a few things. Then, while playing around on a website, I had seen the strange ad linking to some app called
Badoo, and two days before my internet had finally expired, Mike and I had chatted, small cautious words paddled back and forth. That had been over a month ago.

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I only used the app a short while after midnight, when the darkness folding around me became a refuge. I always felt like a thief, burdened with a heavy conscience, startled by the smallest noises. Once, I felt something graze my leg, and nearly screamed, nearly jumped up from the paper-thin mattress and shrieked into the night, but it had been nothing but a bored, passing lizard.

It didn’t make my heart thud any less frantically, but even as my ears pressed hard against taut silence, listening for my parents, for the sound of Mama Sochi and her kids, my eyes were fixed with intensity on the app, on the maze of mostly blank squares, with blurred faces and half-revealed torsos thrown into the mix. I got one or two messages from those squares. I read the profiles of those squares, mostly vague statements about friend-seekers and “checking this out”. And even though I had breathed in enough courage to even use this app, its filter set to only males, I didn’t quite have enough to actually talk to anyone. Until Mike messaged me.

This was on the second night. His profile was a little more expansive than most—age, height, an about me section that explained he was visiting from abroad to tend to personal family matters, and a profile picture that showed the lower half of his face—from the bridge of his nose and lower—and the sculpted, dark-caramel glow of his chest. There was something different about his profile, his half-revealed picture, something braver, something more confident. His message itself was a simple one-liner—“Hey”—and I found myself typing the same word back, my heart beating even harder.

How are you doing, he asked, and so it began.

The chat stretched into crawling minutes. I felt my mouth go sour with fear. My stomach crawled and folded with unpleasant sensations. Outside, the small patters of rain began to sound, patters which bloomed into steady beating, and I felt the room grow colder. I was tired and afraid, but I was…in a way, excited. Maybe that isn’t quite the word. I just knew things were different, so different, the simple act of talking back to a stranger miles away, a stranger of whom I had a suspicion that was taboo in Ajegunle. I couldn’t tear myself away from the moment.
I felt like we both knew something about our chat, something charged and elevated. It showed in the questions he asked and in the way I replied, a continuous back-and-forth dance that skirted the edge of something large and incredibly obvious-feeling. But it was a dance we indulged in—he talked about visiting from South Africa and secondary school in Nigeria, and I talked about Kiriwa and Bukar’s kids at the shop. We talked about the rain and a little about his family. Then he asked for my number. I stared at the screen for a long time, maybe five minutes. I stared, sensed him waiting on the other end. And then I said okay, and sent him the digits.

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A month had passed since then.

It was funny how much of your life could change in a month. I showed him what I liked to think of as my special place, my retreat for when Ajegunle became too much and I needed something to which I could hold on and disappear. A dirt path from my house led to the base of a teetering slope, this base caked with piling heaps of accumulated garbage, rotting bags and years-old food remains and carcasses of small rats. We had to walk through the sludge and the slime to climb the slope—there was no way around it—but when we got to the top, it was all worth it. At the top, we could see most of Ajegunle from one side, the clutter of buildings and human life. We could see the people like ants, an army of ants with voices a thousand times louder. The vehicles looked like flashing glints of metal in the daytime, a sea of metal pressed together and screaming, the pollution of black smoke and overpopulation rising from them and the people in them to cuddle the sky. But I barely ever took this view. I went around a large rock that blotted out Ajegunle and faced something else, trees and bushes whose wilted yellow and faded green hues were somehow more comforting, maybe because of the silence, the peaceful stillness in those masses of vegetation. People rarely ventured this far. First off, my family lived in the furthest part of Igbo District—a segment of Ajegunle—from the town’s center, and this place looked like the sort of distant, foreboding place you gawked at from miles beneath, but never imagined getting to.

It was where Mike and I often sat together and it was where I listened to his stories about South Africa and the boys of South Africa and how good sex could be when you weren’t afraid. It was where I had my first kiss—my first real kiss, not the one I often shared with Chioma, but one I actually felt, my face lost to his face, my lips dancing to the power of his tongue, all the senses in my body alight and attuned
New Light

to the motion of his fingers on my skin. It was where we had shared a dozen kisses more, and where he had
given me my first quake-filled handjob.

But I knew this was only a moment, a small page. There was life after now, and in it, Mike was gone.
In less than a week—a few days before I’d find out Princeton’s admission decision—he’d leave for South
Africa. I hadn’t brought myself to handle the full extent of what his going away would mean, the void it
would leave.

I sometimes told myself that next week would never come.

Chapter 3

Night was finally upon us when Michael said that it was getting late and that he had to get back home. He
lived in Ijaw District in Ajegunle, and if we could get an okada from one of the main streets near my home,
it would be a half-hour ride for him back to his district. It was harder to make out his face in the darkness,
but I could tell that he was more tired than before, and even slightly pissed at me.

“Let’s just stay,” I said, almost imploring. “Just for a few more minutes. I don’t…know when next
I’ll see you.”

He scoffed. “At least you’ll have Chioma.”

I looked away. The silence persisted between us, neither of us willing to break it. Then he took my
hand. “I’ll stay—thirty minutes more, if you want me to.”

I had cried too much today, for reasons I still wasn’t sure of, and I couldn’t bring myself to cry
anymore. But I felt the edge, the fine line over which we lose control of our emotions. It was in Mike’s
touch. I simply nodded, and we went back to the large rock, which demarcated the chaos of my world from
the empty peace of nothingness. We sat side-by-side. He drew my face to his, and our lips met.

I placed my head on his chest, and his fingers brushed my cheek, tracing heat-paths on it. For a
moment, it became too much, the feel of his hand, my sheer terror at this moment, this fading, fleeting
moment. I wanted it to last forever. I could hold on forever.

“I wish I could take you with me,” he murmured, as if talking to himself. “To South Africa.”

The motion of his fingers on my cheek suddenly stopped, and I felt my stomach shudder. In the
distance, behind us, we could hear small voices. We could hear the growing footsteps of people approaching.
Two voices, none of which I recognized. Their syllables had the emphatic curtness mostly unique to Northerners, so they were probably from Ajegunle’s Hausa District. What were they doing out here?

It didn’t matter. Mike and I had disentangled from each other as fast as we could. My heart screamed in my ears, and I saw my fear mirrored in his face. But we were both shielded from view of the approaching intruders by the rock behind us, and it sounded like we had another ten seconds before they would be able to see us.

I opened my mouth, but Mike put a warning finger to his lips, signaling a command I understood well. I shut my mouth. And then he charged me, and screamed before I could.

“I say, where my money dey?” he shrieked. He had pulled me close toward him, my rumpled shirt caught in his fists.

“Mike—” I mumbled.

“Cooperate, cooperate,” he whispered fervently, and then in a voice that all of Ajegunle must have heard: “Bro, I talk say, WHERE MY MONEY DEY!”

I sensed the men approach from behind even before Mike left me. I turned around and saw them—two slim men, dressed identically in stained-white t-shirts and thin shorts. They looked no older than thirty, but their faces were thin and looked folded by lines of a harsh life. One of them held a thick, thorny stick. The other snarled, “Wetin dey happen here?”

“This mumu no wan give me my money!” Mike snarled, pointing at me. “Six thousand naira wey he owe me, never pay me for the last three weeks. He talk say him dey hide him money here, but nothing dey here, except yeye grass. Man dey chop grass? I go follow him go him house; he go give me my money.”

I watched the faces of the other man, certain they could hear the roar of my heart, the shriek of my thoughts. But their faces held a certain cruel amusement, and I could tell they believed the tale of my plight. Slow relief sunk into me and somehow I found myself saying in a shaky voice, “This man too get wahala—I promise say I go pay am.”

Mike pushed me forward roughly. “Move joor—make dey go your house. You go pay me money today.” The men parted to let me pass, and I heard one of them laugh as Mike and I headed away. The further we got from them, the more I expected the whole charade to fall apart. I expected them to suddenly scream and chase after us. This place was filled with stones, and they could easily grab several and fling
them at us, screaming “Homo! Homo!” In Ajegunle, that would be a death sentence—the beginning of the end.

But I didn’t hear them approach. Mike continued to push me, until we faced the evening throng of Ajegunle from atop the hill—the cars and keke napeps that would at this point have started heading home or to night jobs. Then we began to descend the slope toward my home, and Mike stopped pushing. We didn’t stop until we were at the foot of the slope, crossing the familiar collision of ages-old detritus that littered the road ahead, and we didn’t talk until we had trudged through the muck and were along the lone path that cut through Ogbete Market and led to my home. There was no one in sight but a few children in the far distance, half-naked, laughing and chasing each other in circles of dust.

“Jesus,” said Mike. We stopped walking and he stared at me. “The kind of shit we just—”

“I know,” I whispered. “My legs are still shaking. If they had caught us, God, if they had seen us, our lives…our lives would have finished. Mike, I think we almost died.”

“We’re alive,” he mumbled. An arm stretched out to hold mine, almost reflexively, but he stopped mid-air and pulled back. “I thought you said people hardly came up there—what were they doing?”

“I don’t know…Hausa District has been losing land lately…they looked a little like most Ajegunle herd…maybe they were scoping out places? I don’t know, Mike, but we almost died.”

He looked up, in the direction of the slope. We could see a side of it from where we stood, a shapeless mass that teetered from the ground, half-buried in the lengthening shadows of a thick evening. We couldn’t see the two men. We wouldn’t have been able to.

“I don’t know—maybe nothing would have happened. Even if they caught us, even if they tried to get us to the town square, your parents would never let—”

My eyes dilated in surprise and I had to suppress a laugh that would have probably tasted bitter in my throat. “Are you serious? Mike, Ajegunle is Ajegunle. Mama may have tried to save us, but they would only beat her down. Nobody can stop the area boys. Nobody can stop their justice. Mike, this is what I’m talking about. I can’t do this. I can’t…I can’t be a homo. My parents need me and besides, I have Chioma and—”

He snapped, unexpectedly. “Chioma is a lie you tell yourself! She’s not real, and you can’t change anything! It’s who you are. Are you an idiot? Are you a goddamn idiot?”
New Light

I almost struck him. Perhaps not, but the thought crossed my mind in a flare of anger, terrifyingly vivid. I suppressed the urge to scream back, because Mike seemed to lack the power to understand. He had the blood of Ajegunle in his veins, but maybe something about obodo onyingbo, about South Africa, had diluted it. In this town, there were simply things that couldn’t be, and I could feel the lies we had told ourselves over the past weeks vanishing. By the time he left next week, there would be no trace of the illusion.

So I didn’t hit him, and I didn’t scream back. I began walking home. He hurried after me.

“You have to get an okada,” I said.

“I will,” he replied. “After I walk you home.”

I glared at him, looking for signs of a joke. “What? Mama is home now, and Papa is probably just asleep in bed, but he’s going to be home too.”

“Okay, if you don’t want me to, then I won’t. But Emeka, my mom and I are going to the city tomorrow. She’ll be in the hospital for a few days; I’ll be with her for some time and then…then I’ll have to go back. Today is our last day together…for who knows how long. But if you want me to just leave you now, and go to the okada-park, I will.”

The resentment in his voice shattered me. I wanted to hold him so badly, to throw my arms around his neck, to pull him close to me until all I could breathe was the sweat and perfume cloud around him, to kiss him.

“Okay,” I said, the tears not in my eyes but in my voice. “Walk me home.”

Chapter 5

Mama was outside, on the side of our house that faced Aje River. I could smell the okra she was blending into soup. Our home was a small cement bungalow, with wooden doors you could force open with one kick. Spray-painted on the walls of the bungalow were three large red X signs, along with a date that had passed six months ago: the government had marked our home and most of the houses along our winding street as “against housing regulations” and “set for demolition”, but time had come and gone, and they hadn’t shown up, which everyone had predicted.
New Light

This part of Ajegunle was abuzz. Night had fully settled. Electricity had been out for the past several days, and a few people walked around with candles, whose flames danced in the small wind. I saw Tobias and his mother closing up the small biscuit shop they toiled over for most of the day. Tobias waved at me, but his wave faltered and stopped when he saw Mike. I don’t think he suspected anything, not just yet. But in these parts of Ajegunle, strangers were a rare sight.

Mike and I waved back uncertainly. My heart was thudding again. This felt somehow worse than those men that had nearly come upon us entangled on the rock, those faceless folk I doubted I would see again. Everyone knew me here, and already, I could hear the stories they would whisper and spread behind my back. Did you see that tall person Emeka brought here? Have you seen him before?

It would probably be a fleeting thing, lost in a sea of other small-town gossip, but sometimes, little flames kindled and became infernos.

I didn’t want my mom to see Mike. She was cooking in the backyard and we were up front.

“Heh heh,” I told him, as we faced each other. The street that stretched in either direction from us was a crooked sand path, winding its way down cramped, half-finished homes, whose residents were the life-blood of Igbo District, people you knew well enough to call family, in a distantly intimate way. I knew some of them would be watching; from the corners of their eyes, they would be. “The neighbors here have big eyes, as you can probably see.”

He chuckled. “Like everywhere in Ajegunle. Okay, Emeka, I’ll be going now. I don’t know when next we’ll meet, but I have your phone number and we’ll keep in touch, okay? It won’t be the last time, I promise.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“And one more thing; there’s one more thing I need you to promise me.”

“I’m listening.”

“Princeton is going to admit you. When they do, I don’t want you to look back. Not for the next four years. I want you to leave this town, and run far, far away. Outside Ajegunle, the world is so different. You need to see it.” His eyes blazed with helpless desperation; I could tell this promise meant everything to him. It wasn’t one I could keep, but it was one I could make.

“Okay Mike. I understand.”
Then I heard footsteps, and before I could move away from him, Mama appeared in the narrow doorway. Her white, undersized apron was stained with soup, and she held a dripping ladle in one hand. I watched her face carefully. She looked at Mike and me for a moment, and then two, and then a little longer. But her expression did not change.

“*Emeka mu*, welcome back. Who is your friend?”

“Just an old classmate that left town ma,” Mike replied promptly, before I had the chance to speak.

“I wanted to see him before leaving town.”

I couldn’t tell if she bought it. Her expression revealed nothing.

“If you want, you can join us for dinner.”

He bowed a little. “Thanks ma, but I have to start going back. I live in Ijaw district, and it’s getting late, but thank you so much. Goodnight, Emeka.” He reached out to me, and I almost screamed, terrified, but his fingers didn’t find my neck or cheek or lips, but my shoulder. He squeezed it tightly, for just one moment.

“Goodnight Emeka,” he said. His voice cracked the slightest bit. “We’ll talk.”

He began to walk away. This was it. He was leaving. He was leaving, and it might be the last time I saw him, and I was just standing here, watching him go. I couldn’t. I couldn’t.

“Emeka, come inside,” said Mama. “It’s getting cold, and I need your help with the soup before your father wakes up. He hasn’t improved at all.” She headed back into the house, talking about Doctor Omezia and how Omezia wouldn’t see us anymore until we paid the bills, but my eyes stayed on Mike; my eyes burned. I watched until Mike disappeared, and feeling quite like a zombie from one of those foreign horror movies—“the Satan ones,” my mom called them—I walked into the house.

**

In the backyard, the smell of sizzling okra was everywhere, overpowering. Mama handed me one of the big, stirring spoons.

“You stayed out all day,” she said, as she peered into the pot. She wasn’t looking at me, and that terrified me. “I know Mallam Bukar traveled, so his shop isn’t open, and you told me you would be back before it got dark.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I got carried away…”
“That your friend, your classmate, did he go to Kiriwa or GSS with you?”

“Kiriwa.” I was surprised at the ease with which the lie tumbled out of my mouth.

Mama still wasn’t looking at me. She was focused on the okra, tracing absent-minded lines into it with the ladle. “Chioma came today…she didn’t see you all day. She also didn’t see you yesterday.”

I said nothing. Silence felt easier. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but it felt like something was, something different. Mama stared at the pot and I stared at the ground. A millipede inched along a path five inches from my feet.

“Come and help me with the soup,” she went on, and I finally exhaled, not realizing that I had been holding my breath. “I want to go and pick up Papa’s clothes, and yours, before it starts to rain. Agadi nwoke, grown man like you, still having your mother fetch your clothes.”

She placed the ladle on a nearby stool and approached me. I looked up at her. Our eyes met. I froze.

She was crying.

“Mama…” My voice was a choked sound, lost in the murmur of the wind.

“I’m fine,” she said, and held my face for a moment. “Just tired. Finish with the soup. I’ll go bring the clothes in. Tomorrow’s Sunday. We have a six o’clock mass.”

I nodded. “I know.”

She nodded absently. She left.

**Chapter 6**

The night Mike left never felt real. There was something off-balance and skewed about everything, from the men on the rock to those eyes watching Mike and me on the street to Mama in the backyard. I spent most of that night awake. I heard the scuttle of lizards in the walls, heard when Papa awoke and shook Mama up to ask for his dinner. I heard when Mama Sochi burst into coughing splutters in the next building, and heard the stampede of her daughters and their voices when they asked if she was all right, if she wanted water. And when I closed my eyes, I saw Mike walk farther and farther away, until he was a speck in the darkness, and then, nothing. No trace. No phantom sensations of his hand on mine, almost as if he had never existed. But he had; I could smell the perfume on me, his perfume, *him*; the scent had pressed onto my clothes, and at the
crack of dawn, when the roosters began their morning cry, I realized in one giddy moment, that Mama would have smelled the perfume too.

Chapter 7

But in the next few days, it felt like nothing had changed, like time had struck a big reset button, and the world had spun back into mundane familiarity. Mass came and went. Mama’s eyes looked the same as they always had, and she talked about the same things. She wanted to meet Papa Tochi for the sewing supplies she would soon need, and I had to make sure Papa took his medicine and ate some of the food from last night. I went to the nearby stream with the two plastic red buckets, one of which had developed a leak, and saw Mazi Ewedu and his two daughters there. He and my dad had been fighting this strange non-verbal war for the better part of the last decade, and he made sure to let me know it with an unending stream of stink-eyes, as I fetched water from the rushing stream.

When I got back home, Papa was awake, reclined on his wooden chair and fiddling with a chewing stick. I told him I saw Papa Ewedu at the stream. His brows furrowed as I expected.

“That stupid goat,” he said. “That stupid, old, useless imbecile hasn’t died yet?”

“No papa.”

“The gods are taking their time, but they will surely strike him down.”

Papa stunk like the Ajegunle gutters and I asked him if he wanted to bathe. He was fine, he said. He wasn’t a woman, and I had to stop harassing him like Mama did. Where was Mama by the way?

“She went to meet Papa Tochi.”

Papa’s brows furrowed again. “Papa Tochi. That stupid goat.”

I fed him his medicine, and tried to have him eat, but halfway through, he began to vomit, spewing yellow slime all over my hands and bare feet. I washed up in a corner of the backyard, and mopped the floor clean, and he retreated to his mattress to sleep again. I cooked yam porridge while waiting for Mama to return. Adanma and Sochi came over because they had nothing better to do. They told me stories about their mother and the new boy Sochi liked, who Adanma swore was a devil-worshipper. Sochi reminded Adanma that liars burned in hell forever.
New Light

Chioma came by early in the evening, and accused me of running away from her. I smiled a smile that was heavy on my face, and let myself move into her arms, and let her lips press onto mine. We sat outside, and spoke. She mostly did, about everything. The scores from her JAMB exam weren’t so good, and she might have to spend yet another year without a university admission. But mine was coming up, and she said she was excited.

I said I was too, and it didn’t feel like I was entirely lying.

Most of me knew I was an Ajegunle boy, that this town was where my destiny began and ended, but a small part of me—the part of me that had been adventurous to fill out a US Embassy Application Sponsorship form on a whim—began to wonder if life beyond Ajegunle was more than fable. Beyond the same stories and the smell of my dad’s vomit and Mama’s near-constant expression of sadness. If I could be unburdened enough by family and Ajegunle, if I could be selfish enough to dream about the wonders of *obodo onyingbo* and live in the wonders of *obodo onyingbo*, a place where I could look at boys, without being afraid of area boys catching my glances and screaming, “*Homo, catch that homo.*”

But it was a very small part.

Most of me realized where I belonged, and for the next several days, the routines of that familiar, established world played to completion. I checked my phone several times each day, but Mike never called or texted. I don’t know why. All I knew was that I couldn’t call or text him either.

I had no money.

Chapter 8

And then the day came.

Mama woke me up before the roosters did. She stood over me, submerged in the surreal glow of a flickering candle.

“Mama, what is it?” I asked.

She was smiling. “It’s your big day. Let us pray.”

We did. Papa slept, while we sang gospel songs, and she prayed. She thanked God for my life, for our health, our continued safety, the meals we ate, the friends we had. So much to be grateful for, she said in spirited exuberance, her eyes shut tight, her hands raised to the heavens. So much to love God for. Then she
prayed. For forgiveness of sins. For safety. For the blessed day that was today, when Princeton would tell me whether or not I had gotten in.

“Father God,” she said, “your blessed son Emeka has tried his best and worked his hardest. We pray that you unlock for us the land of opportunities, the land you promised the Israelites, flowing with milk and honey. May it be our portion in Jesus’s name. Amen.”

When it was over, she and I sat on the stools outside, staring at the candle.

“I’m afraid,” I told her. “I don’t know why.”

“I do,” she replied. Her fingers found mine. “Emeka mu, don’t be afraid. Today is your day. They will say yes.”

“But that means I’ll leave you and Papa…who will watch over you?”

“God will take care of me and Papa, and I will take care of you and Papa, like I always have. It’s your time. People that go out there, they come back big men. You will come back a big man, and all of Ajegunle will know your name. Chioma will escort you to the cyber café, okwia?”

“Yes.” I smiled a little. “She wants to escort me everywhere.”

“Chioma…she’s a good girl. Her parents are good people.”

“I know.”

Nearby, the first shriek of the morning roosters filled the sky.

“And she cares about you.”

“I know.”

“And you care about her.”

“Yes.”

“But…you don’t like her.”

My stomach grew taut. I felt everything inside it compressed against flesh. The heat from the candle became icicles on my flesh. There was nothing in Mama’s voice…like when she had been asking about Mike.

That your friend, your classmate, did he go to Kiriwa or GSS with you?

“Yes.” It was a word barely spoken, one I knew she perfectly heard.

Her fingers left mine. “Okay.”

The flame in the candle danced. Another rooster shrieked.
New Light

I waited, certain she wouldn’t say anything. Not for a while.

She didn’t.

In the sky above, velvet strips vanished for shades of light blue.

“Do you remember your friend, Moses?” she finally asked.

I was a little surprised.

“Yes,” I said. “He was here all the time. Before he left for university in Maiduguri.”

“Yes, I always called him devil-boy, playfully of course. His mouth was like a running tap. Or like those gossip-women at Ogbete Market. Never stopped. Always breast-this, breast-that, girl-this, girl-that. And you were always a good boy. You laughed and made small sounds. But each time I came out, with rice for him, or to say that it was late, that he should start going home, it was always the same nonsense he was talking about. And I saw your face, you just looked…you were a good boy. Things like that weren’t your concern. With Chioma, I allowed it, because she was God-fearing; her father was one of the Saint Michael choirmasters, and her mother, you know Anita. If she’s not organizing Zone 6 Women’s Fellowship, she’s at work at the motherless babies’ home. But still. It was a crazy year. Girls not old enough to vote for our next President were carrying children in their big bellies. Remember Susanna? Pregnant with triplets at her age. People said amadioha had cursed her. Anyway, I wasn’t worried, because if Chioma’s parents could trust her with herself, then why not me, with you, when I knew? I knew how much I raised you.”

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“Mama—”

“And I remember how it was the day Moses left. Do you remember? That was when Papa, your yeye father, hit my beans pot and scattered a day’s worth of beans everywhere. And I cleaned it alone, because Moses was going, and you were inside, and it was only one mess of beans, and you had cleaned who knew how many? Every time Papa needed you, every time I needed you, you were always there. And on that day, I saw you and I thought it was funny, because Moses was just going to get a degree and you looked like you were at his funeral. I said, okay, Moses Babani was your best friend, who else will harass you with stupid stories about girls when he’s gone? I said you just missed him because you were friends, and maybe I was thinking that—”
There was a sudden sound from inside the house. We could hear Papa stretching, rising from the mattress. Mama and I glanced back, as if we were trying to see him. In that single motion, our gazes found each other. Her eyes were wet. I think mine were too.

“Papa is up—” I began.

She chuckled, wiping at her eyes. “Yes, at this early hour. It’s a miracle.” She rose. “Let’s prepare for the day.”

“Mama Emeka!” Papa called hoarsely. “Are you there?”

She patted my shoulder and whispered to me, “Today is your day, Emeka mu.” Then she turned around, and hurried into the house to meet Papa.

**

Cynthia followed me to the cyber café. She waited by the door. I paid Kingsley Okonkwo for thirty minutes of internet and sat near a desktop in the corner of the room. I liked the corner desktop. There was something about the walls around it, something cozy. I checked the e-mail I had made the day I had begun applications. Found the old one with a link to the Princeton admissions website.

There was a slow drip of time. The website came onto the screen, pixel by pixel. I glanced at the door, from which Chioma watched me, beaming in usual encouragement. I logged in with unsteady fingers, typing my password twice to get it right. When I hit enter, I felt a slight convulsion travel through my legs. I took my phone out of my pocket. Nothing from Mike. I slid it back in.

The website loaded slowly. First, the stark orange of a bright logo. Then words creeping line by line. The page only half-loaded, but I had read enough:

Dear Emeka Abasi,

The Princeton Admissions Committee has carefully reviewed your application, and we regret to inform you that we are currently unable to offer you admission into the Princeton University Class of 2018.

I stared at the words for a long moment. Forever it seemed. Then slowly, I closed the website and rose.
Chapter 9

Outside the door of the café, Chioma and I spoke for a few minutes. Less than two minutes I think. I wasn’t sure. Things felt a bit disconnected, and I think I was only half-certain of where I was. Then I asked her if I could walk back home on my own. She looked a little hurt, but I didn’t care.

On the walk back, I passed by a familiar muddle of dirt and muck. Flies buzzed and circled rot. Beyond the rot lay what once used to be freedom, a massive chunk of it that sliced the sky. I thought of climbing there. I didn’t think I would run into those two Hausa men. I didn’t think I would run into anyone. I could face away from Ajegunle for one more moment. I could maybe get to vanish for one more moment.

I headed in the other direction instead, without hesitating, down the path that cut through the market. Fish and meat and blood and spices, sliced-up vegetables and cans of sardines and blown fuses and belt buckles. The chant and draw of familiar faces. I passed them all until I was home. I almost got out my phone, but I knew what to expect at this point.

There was no sign of Papa, but Mama was in the backyard, washing his underwear.

“Where’s Papa?” I asked her.

“Mazi Chuka invited him to drink palm-wine at the square,” she explained, looking up from a bucket of soapy water. “Your father is a fool so he said yes. I told him he was crazy, I tried to stop him, but you know how fools behave. They never—” Then she really saw my face. I thought I felt fine, maybe a little tired. I definitely just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep a little, but I don’t know what she saw. It turned her expression into something like dismay at once. She rose straight, wiped her soapy hands on her waist-draped wrapper, and hurried up to me. “Fools,” she said. “Everyone at Princeton—all fools. God will open a door bigger than them; do you hear me? God will—”

There was honest, painful conviction in her voice, and I couldn’t reconcile it with how hollow and empty I suddenly felt. I just wanted to close my eyes and sleep, for a long time, maybe forever. I just wanted— I just wanted…

And I was shuddering, shaking from head to foot, and I was crying, heaving sobs that made my chest tremble and blurred my vision with burning liquid. I was pulled into Mama, into the musty smell of old clothes and the antiseptic tang of bleached detergent. I was pulled into arms whose touch promised something
everything else had failed to deliver. I was pulled into the one thing I *did* have and love, the only thing I knew for sure, perhaps the only thing I would ever know for sure.

“Emeka.” Her voice was a breath on the side of my cheek. “I’m here for you, *Emeka mu*. I’m here for you. I’m always here for you.”

I tried to say something back—anything—but I couldn’t. I could only hold on.

**