Mum stopped working and searched for another carer. The first one she found, willing to foster me full time, lived in Norfolk, so off I went. A few weeks later, my parents received an unexpected visit from a health visitor querying my whereabouts. The Norfolk health services had contacted their London counterparts when my foster mother had tried to organise my next vaccination. While sympathetic to my parents' plight, the health visitor frowned on the arrangement because the distance reduced the opportunities for visits, especially in the winter. She advised Mum and Dad to find an alternative placement.

So, aged one, I came to live with Nan. Mum's best friend had introduced her to Nan. Nan had fostered children before, the last one being a Nigerian girl, whose parents had spirited her away in the dead of night, breaking Nan's heart in the process. As such, Nan agreed to offer day-care services, but not full-time fostering. My parents and Nan both lived in London, but the distance between them made a daily commute impractical. Somehow, they convinced Nan to meet me before deciding. I had just started walking, and at our first meeting I toddled into Nan's arms and she fell in love.

*

If the eyes are the window to the soul, Nan's spoke of kindness. Her crow's feet and the dimples embedded in her square jaw were a testament to her sunny disposition. Hugs were her speciality: tight ones, cuddly ones, pick you off the ground and swirl you around ones. Nan kept her ash brown, curly hair trimmed, a fortunate thing, because her fingers never strayed from it, especially when she engaged in a good old natter. Nan spoke the Queen's English mixed with a smattering of cockney, her favourite cockney word being 'ain't'.

'May I have some sweets, Nan?' I'd ask.

'No, you may not,' she'd say. 'It ain't time.' Sweets were for after dinner, not before.

Nan's short and cuddly frame belied the speed at which she whizzed about like a tornado, duster in hand, apron tied around her waist. In the living room, she would lift the vase with its beautiful arrangement of fresh flowers and dust underneath. Next it was the turn of the snow globe, filled with tiny fake magnolias. Finally, she would dust the garland of dried flowers surrounding the fireplace mantle, before settling down to a cuppa in her dainty, floral, fine china, teacup and saucer. Yes, Nan loved all things flowered, dresses and aprons included. She also loved playing bingo and never missed her weekly outing to the local club. Nan had no artifice. Quick to the point, she ruled our happy household.

I called Nan's husband Pop. I never did find out his name, and no one called him anything else. The two couldn't have been more different, Pop's tall and thin frame a direct contrast to Nan's more rotund figure. Pop never said much unless arguing about football. In

the summer, he loved nothing better than sleeping in his favourite deckchair in the garden. He often perched his eyeglasses over his forehead and covered his head with a newspaper to block the sun's glare from his balding patch. Sometimes, he'd have a tobacco pipe resting on a stool right next to his deckchair, and every so often, he'd take a puff. In the winter, you could find him pottering in his tool shed at the back of the garden. I never knew what he did in there because it was out of bounds.

Nan and Pop had grown-up children, Phil, Julie and Tom. I remember little about Phil. He didn't live with us, and we rarely saw him. Julie lived with us for a while, then she got married, leaving Tom, the youngest of Nan and Pop's three children and Dee, my younger playmate. Like the rest of the family, Dee's pale White skin, wispy blond hair and blue eyes set us apart. He was another one of Nan's foster kids. I believe many had come and gone before us. Dee visited his parents almost weekly, which meant that I was often by myself, but when he was around, he was fun.

Every few weeks, Tom would take me and Dee out for a special treat. We'd skip behind his extra-long legs, down the road to the fish and chips shop at the corner of Priory Road and Middle Lane. We'd watch as the shop owner lowered a basket of battered cod into the sizzling oil.

'And what comes next?' Tom would ask, peering at us through rimmed glasses that made him appear much older than his twenty-seven years.

'Snap, Crackle and Pop!' we'd both chorus, before bursting into uncontrollable giggles. The sound of the sizzling oil reminded us of eating Kellogg's Rice Krispies at breakfast. Wide-eyed, we'd ogle the shop owner as he emptied the hot food into large sheets of newspaper.

'Can we have some extra salt and vinegar?' I'd ask.

'Of course, you can,' the shopkeeper would say, before sprinkling the food with a liberal dusting of the two condiments. To this day, I'm still partial to salt and vinegar.

*

We lived at 144a Middle Lane, a Victorian structure on a typical North London street. The house was four storeys tall with both a basement and an attic. From the street, a steep flight of steps led to the first floor, which housed the living room and kitchen. More stairs led to bedrooms on the middle floor and to the attic where old Mrs Smith, a lodger, lived. An external flight of stairs behind the kitchen led down to the back garden. I have no recollection of who lived in the basement.

The house made a perfect backdrop to our favourite game, Batman. Dee and I spent hours in dress-up costumes, racing each other around the old, rambling house, up one flight of stairs, down a corridor, up another flight. I was Batman, and he was my faithful Robin. Now and then, Pop or Tom would yell 'Oi, slow down!' as we whisked past on our mission to save yet another imaginary victim.

When Dee and I weren't playing Batman, Nan could find us in the garden on our tricycles. The garden was generous, with a rectangular lawn and a riot of perennials and annuals dotted along the fence separating us from the neighbours. The heady scent of sweet peas, lavender and peonies made it an attractive place to be in the spring and summer. A paved area, our racing track, separated the flowerbeds from the lawn. Pop loved his backyard and hated us racing in it; his major fear was that we would run the wheels of our trikes over his favourite plants and ruin them. Often, he'd pop up from beneath his newspaper shade and check that we were behaving ourselves, before going back to sleep.

Most afternoons, it was my job to take old Mrs Smith's tea up to her. Nan would pack it into a small picnic basket. On tiptoe, I would clutch the banister as I crept up the stairs, pulse racing, all the while casting furtive glances over my shoulder. I wasn't sure what I was expecting to jump out at me, but climbing the dark stairwell alone was nerve-racking. This was despite Mrs Smith rewarding the effort with a handful of sweets. I had a sweet tooth, and it almost made the fear and trepidation worth it. But Nan always made me share the sweets with Dee and that just didn't seem right.

In the mornings, I would wake to the tantalising wafts of bacon signalling breakfast was cooking. I would skip into the kitchen where Nan would greet me with a 'Good morning, Ann, how are we today?' before placing a cup of milk in front of me. Then she would pause as she waited for my reply, twinkles at the ready. She would follow my 'I am fine, Nan. Thank you' with a quick peck on the forehead. Then she'd scoop whatever we were having for breakfast onto my plate before settling down to eat hers.

Bedtimes were special. Nan would bathe each child in succession and watch us brush our teeth before helping us into our pyjamas. Then she would settle Dee into bed before coming into my room. First, we would read a chapter out of my favourite story of the hour, before saying my prayers. Next came the game of 'Which hug is it?' as I tried to guess what kind of hug I was about to receive. Would it be tight and squishy or warm and fuzzy? Or would it be the bear hug? With eyes closed, I'd wait for arms to envelop me and I revelled in the comfort they gave. After another peck to the forehead, I would settle down to sleep. Nan would tiptoe out of my room, leaving the door wide open.

Darkness, in any form, gave me the chills, and I never slept with the door closed. Nan kept a single light on in the corridor. With the door open, it beamed through into my room. Although paltry, I found its orange glow soothing as I lulled myself to dreamland. One evening, I struggled to sleep despite the hot mug of cocoa Nan gave me. Deciding that I needed a distraction, Nan gave me a handkerchief. She showed me how to fold a corner into a tongue and tickle my left hand with it until I fell asleep. From then on, I went to bed with my handkerchief as my faithful companion.

Chapter Two
It Does Matter If You're White or Black

Just before my fourth birthday, Dad picked me up from Nan's so I could celebrate it with him and Mum. We got off the bus close to home, and I held Dad's hand, skipping alongside his wide strides. Dad turned and his eyes crinkled as he slowed his pace to match mine. 'I have a B-I-G surprise for you at home,' he said.

My eyes lit up. 'Oh, goody! Will I have cake with my candy?'

Dad shook his head, 'Maybe, but that's not the surprise.'

'Did you buy me a birthday present? A doll?'

'No, it's bigger than that.'

'I can't guess it, Daddy, please tell me.'

'Just wait. It's a lovely surprise, I promise.'

As our house came into view, I scrunched my nose, wondering what could be bigger than a doll.

Dad and Mum lived in a one-bedroom, first-floor flat on Seven Sisters Road in Haringey, London. It was so much smaller than Nan's house, but the rooms were spacious with high ceilings. The living room's focal point, the striking bay window and its comfy window seat, overlooked the street below. It was my favourite place to perch and gaze at the world going by. The room was sparsely furnished with a black, leather, three-seater sofa which doubled up as my bed whenever I visited. Mum often covered it in pastel-coloured cushions which softened the black and brought some life to the otherwise plain, cream walls. A coffee table and Dad's radiogram, a contraption that combined a radio with a record player, completed the furniture.

As soon as we entered the flat, Dad led me to the living area where I found a smiling Mum sitting on the sofa with two bundles in her arms. I paused, but Dad tugged me closer. I peered at the sleeping bundles, then looked up at Dad in wonder.

'You've got a new brother and sister,' he said. I looked closer, and he continued.

'The one dressed in pink is a girl. Her name is Taiwo. The other one, dressed in blue, is a boy and his name is Kehinde.'

Mum's welcoming face held an amused grin. Intrigued, I peered at the girl. She had hair like mine. 'You can touch her but be gentle,' Mum said.

I reached out and touched the girl's cheek with the tip of my finger. She squirmed and yawned. I snatched my hand back. 'How did they get here?'

Mum and Dad shared a smile. 'The storks brought them,' Dad said.

Dad led me to one of the walls, now decorated with two round plates. I studied the plates, noticing that they each had a gold-rimmed, scalloped edge. Just inside the edge of each plate was a patterned circular band, blue on one plate, pink on the other. The white centre of each plate depicted an enormous bird with legs that looked like stilts. Each bird had a baby wrapped in a bundle dangling from its extra-long beak. A curious thought entered my head.

'Did a stork bring me too?'

Dad nodded in response before leading me to a third pink plate mounted on the other side of the room. For now, the explanation satisfied my curiosity and Dad let out the breath he had been holding. I skipped back to Mum.

'Can I play with the babies, Mummy?'

'No, sweetheart. They are still too little. Wait until they get bigger.'

After supper, Dad brought out my birthday cake, and my parents both sang Happy Birthday before letting me blow out the candles. Satiated and happy, I settled on the sofa-bed ready to sleep. Then I remembered my special hankie, the one I soothed myself with. Mum was busy with the twins, so I asked Dad.

'Dad, can I have my hankie please.'

'What hankie?'

'The one I tickle my hand with before I go to sleep. Nan packed it in my bag.'

'Okay, let's have a look.'

Dad crossed the room to the bag cosseted in a corner. After a few minutes of rummaging, he lifted his head. 'I can't find it, are you sure it's here?'

'Nan promised she'd pack it.'

Dad turned the bag upside down and emptied the entire contents. Out tumbled knickers, socks and dresses, but no handkerchief.

'Nan must have forgotten to pack it,' Dad said.

Tears welled. 'I need it to sleep. Please, can I have another one, Daddy?'

Dad took in the down-turned corners of my mouth and the glistening pools in my eyes.

'Okay, let me talk to your mummy.'

Dad padded off to the bedroom and returned moments later. 'Sorry, Funmi, Mummy doesn't have any clean hankies right now.'

'But I can't sleep without it!'

Dad lifted a finger to his lip. 'Shh! You don't want to wake the babies. They take ages to fall asleep.'

The tears fell, and I hiccupped into my pillow. Dad knelt beside the sofa, put a calming hand on my back and rubbed it in circles. When I stopped heaving, he kissed my forehead, pulled a blanket over my shoulders and said good night. To my relief, he left the bedroom door open, so a faint light wafted into the darkness.

When I returned to Nan's, I told her all about the babies and my missing handkerchief. Nan had a clever solution. She showed me how to twist the edge of my pyjama top and shape it like a tongue. If I ever found myself without a handkerchief when I needed one, I now knew what to do.

*

Nan and Pop started planning Julie's wedding. It would be a grand affair and Nan said I could be a bridesmaid. On the wedding day, the house teemed with people. All the bridesmaids were getting dressed at Nan's and travelling to the church together in a fancy car. After breakfast, the excitement moved to a bedroom. The girls squealed as an adult handed out the dresses. Soon silence reigned as we concentrated on slipping into our outfits.

A few minutes later, I realised something wasn't right. The three girls around me busy pulling the tulles of fabric over their heads had one thing in common. Their pink, satin dresses reached down to their ankles, but my dress was white and only came down to my knees. With their fluffy white hair bands and cute pink slippers, the other girls resembled little princesses while I looked like a ballerina. *Why the difference when I was supposed to be a bridesmaid too?* When I asked the adults helping us get dressed, they just smiled and told me how beautiful I looked. The other bridesmaids, not so kind, whispered and giggled. I couldn't help it; my lips pouted and wobbled.

I went in search of Nan and found her in her bedroom. Eyes glistening, I held the skirt up. ‘My dress is all wrong!’

As always, she pulled me into a hug before leading me to her full-length swivel mirror. ‘See how beautiful you are!’ she said. I gazed silently at my reflection. Okay, my outfit was different from the other girls’. Still, it was the most beautiful dress I had ever worn. I didn’t have the headband, but it probably wouldn’t have worked with my woolly pigtails. I had the same slippers though, albeit in white, to match my dress.

‘You’ve always wanted to have a ballerina outfit. Now you do and…’ Nan leaned in to whisper her secret, ‘you are the only ballerina in the room.’

I cocked my head and watched myself in the mirror. I twirled and the skirt of my dress ballooned and swirled with me. A slow grin spread across my face and I twirled once more. Nan handed me over to Tom so she could finish getting ready.

I had the most wonderful time dancing the night away with Tom and Pop as my ever-constant companions. After the wedding, we took a long-deserved holiday to Blackpool. I struck a pose on the sandy beach in my blue bikini and straw hat and Pop took my picture. It was to last for posterity. There were no other girls like me around, but it didn’t matter because I ran and built proper sandcastles to my heart’s content. In my little world, all was well, and I was happy, just the way a child should be.

*

Whenever Dee visited his parents and I had no one to play with, Tom let me tag along on his walks in Priory Park. He would also sneak me a sweet or two when Nan wasn’t looking, which made him my favourite of Nan’s children. One Sunday afternoon, with Dee away and Tom unavailable, Nan allowed me to go up the hill to meet some friends from Sunday school.

We always met at Susan’s house. Her mum was a member of the church Nan attended sporadically. It had been a normal afternoon of board games followed by skipping in the garden. Tired from the physical exertion, we took a break when Susan’s mum offered us chilled drinks and cookies, before retiring to another part of the house. Waving her hands, Susan started talking. ‘I have a brand-new doll! She’s got beautiful eyes and eyelashes that move. When I press her belly, she cries, and tears fall from her eyes.’ The girls gasped, pressing in to hear more. ‘Wait here, I’ll get her,’ Susan said, before dashing upstairs to retrieve the doll.

In Susan’s absence, the girls chattered. The doll sounded marvellous and none of them had seen one that could cry. In record time, Susan reappeared, doll in tow. My eyes lit

up when I saw it, my sneaky suspicion confirmed. Nan had given me the exact doll as a Christmas present, and it was the closest thing to an actual baby that I had ever seen.

Susan settled the doll into the crook of her arm. 'Look,' she said, 'she's got her own water bottle and I can feed her!' She stuck the miniature bottle between the doll's heart-shaped lips. She lifted the doll's knitted dress and pointed to one of the two buttons on its belly. 'Afterwards, you press this, button and she pees!'

The girls crowded round, jostling for a better glimpse. 'It's just like the one Nan bought me for Christmas,' I said from the back. A hushed silence descended as all the heads in the room swivelled a full ninety degrees before six pairs of eyes settled on me.

Susan glowered. 'What do you mean, it's just like yours?'

The heads all swivelled in the opposite direction. I opened my mouth to explain further, then snapped my lips shut. With her arms crossed over her chest and the two frown lines marring her pretty face, Susan wasn't expecting me to answer that question. In fact, I could tell that she would much rather I recanted. Susan was the kingpin in our group, and she hated the thought of others owning things she did.

'I have the same doll,' I said, feeling the need to stand my ground.

Susan's neck grew pink. The other girls, sensing the coming onslaught, edged back a little.

'No, you don't. You are just a copycat.'

My nostrils flared. 'Yes, I do. And why would I copy you?'

My reply only seemed to enrage her more. Her face turned crimson. Planting her feet wide apart, she pointed. 'You are not my friend anymore, get out of my house!'

My skin flushed with heat. I knew what that meant. If I wasn't Susan's friend anymore, then none of the others could be my friend. I eyeballed the girls. A few held my gaze, and I read the pity in their eyes. Others squirmed, refusing to look at me altogether. While sympathetic, they didn't have the guts to stand up to Susan. With jerky movements, I turned around and flounced through the house, heading for the front door. As I bounded down the stairs leading to the pavement, I realised too late that I had left my jacket behind. Still, I wasn't about to ruin my dramatic exit, so I kept walking.

Moments later, Susan came running after me. 'Don't forget your stupid jacket, you black monkey!' She flung the offending clothing at me. I stiffened as I felt my blood boil. Unable to contain my outrage, I swivelled back around, body rigid and eyed my ex-friend. Ruddy-faced, eyes glaring, she was in full fight mode. I took in a deep breath and bellowed, 'I am not a monkey!'

'Yes, you are. Why is your skin so dark if you're not?'

Before I could respond, 'Hoo, hoo, hoo…' she chanted, stamping each foot from side to side, her fists beating her chest in synchronised rhythm. I presumed she was mimicking a monkey. I looked up towards the house. Susan's mum was nowhere to be seen. The other children had gathered at the front door to watch the fight. They picked up the chant.

'Hoo, hoo, hoo…'

Mortified and shaken, I felt my hands clench and unclench. It was one against six. Picking up my jacket, I turned around and stormed home. I couldn't believe Susan had called me a monkey. I vowed I would never go back to her house.

*

I was pensive that evening, unable to get Susan's words out of my head. I wasn't a monkey. That much I knew. They didn't talk or walk like people, and they lived in trees. Still, Susan had a point. Why was my skin so dark? At bedtime, Nan tucked Dee, back from his day trip, into bed before coming into my room. We went through the usual routine, but my heart wasn't in it. As if she could sense something troubled me, she gave me an extra-long hug, before turning the lights out. Just as she was about to step through the doorway, I whispered, 'Nan?'

She paused, 'Uh-huh.'

'Why am I not White like everybody else?'

Nan came and sat on the edge of my bed. 'What do you mean?' A tender finger brushed against my cheek.

'Well, everyone in this house, at school and even Sunday school is White. Why am I Black?'

Nan enveloped me in her arms and rocked us both back and forth in silence. Finally, she coughed. 'Ann,' she began, 'God made different people, coloured and White. You are coloured, I am White. That's just the way God likes it. The world has loads of coloured people like your mum and dad, and they have coloured babies.'

I pondered her response for a moment. 'Nan, if I scrub very hard, can I wash the Black skin off?'

I felt the warm arms wrapped around me go rigid. With a finger under my chin, she lifted my tear-stained face.

'You will do no such thing.' Her voice, firm and sure, continued. 'Like you, another boy once thought the same. He scrubbed hard, hoping to get his skin off. He made himself

bleed so much that his parents had to take him to hospital. We wouldn't want that, would we?'

I pictured the bloody scene in my mind with revulsion. I nodded, confirming we definitely didn't want that. Nan wiped my tears with the corner of her apron. With another tight squeeze and a kiss to my forehead, she headed out for the last time. I settled down to sleep with the questions still pounding in my head. *Why was I here, a Black girl in a world full of White people? Where were all the Black folk Nan was talking about, and why wasn't I living among them?*

*

That year, I became more aware of the differences between living at Nan's and my parents' place. Mum and Dad shared their garden with other tenants, and they never allowed me in it alone. I therefore spent a lot of my time indoors. With the birth of the twins, the flat felt more cramped. With the double pram parked in the hallway, the highchairs and day cot in the living room, you couldn't move around without bumping into something or someone.

I also noticed major differences in the food I ate. Mum always cooked Nigerian meals, especially *eba* and stew. You moulded the *eba*, a thick, glutinous substance, into little balls with your fingers before dipping it into the stew. I wasn't keen on *eba*. It tasted like sawdust, and when you chewed, it smeared your teeth. However, I loved the stew, made of chillies, tomato and okra – sometimes called lady's fingers. The way Mum cooked okra, it had a gloopy, slimy consistency, I suspect to help the balls of *eba* glide smoothly down your throat. I started swallowing the balls rather than chewing them. It made a colossal difference. I could savour the stew without tasting the *eba*.

Like spaghetti, you could tell when I'd had *eba* and okra. It always left me looking as if a slug had crawled all over my front leaving behind an orange maze. I soon learned the trick of eating it without covering my hands and arms in a slimy trail. First, you dipped the *eba* in the okra stew. Next, you cupped your hand to keep the contents from falling out, before gently swirling it around, until the trail of okra broke. Then you lobbed it all into your mouth in one swift motion. The skill required some practice, but Mum cooked it so often, I soon got the hang of it.

The dish became a firm favourite, and I wanted Nan to make me some when I returned, the only problem being I couldn't remember its name. 'Nan,' I said one afternoon, 'can I have some of that stuff Mum makes for dinner?'

'What stuff?'

‘The stuff that goes like this…’ I stopped speaking, cupped my right hand, swirled it around twice, before lobbing the imaginary food into my mouth.

Nan stared, perplexed. She called Pop over. ‘Come on Ann, show Pop.’

I repeated my actions. They looked at each other, then simultaneously burst into laughter.

‘What’s funny?’ I asked. That only made them laugh louder. Soon, their laughter triggered my own, and we all laughed together. When Nan’s mirth subsided, she asked me the name of the food. I shrugged my response. ‘I don’t know.’ That set off more hysterics. Nan promised to find out the next time Dad visited. For now, I had to settle for English beef stew, and although I liked it well enough, it was nowhere near as nice as okra stew.

I started school when I turned five, but for some unfathomable reason, I have very little recollection of it. I have flashbacks of being locked in the girls’ toilets with other girls and screaming our heads off, but in excitement rather than fear, and that’s pretty much it.

On their next visit, Mum and Dad talked about leaving England and going home to Nigeria, where I would meet lots of new cousins, uncles, aunts and my grandparents. I hadn’t a clue where Nigeria was, but it sounded exciting until I saw the sadness on Nan’s face. After my parents left, I overheard Nan and Pop discussing the war going on in Nigeria. According to them, it wasn’t safe. I didn’t know what ‘war’ meant, but given Nan’s expression, it wasn’t anything good. Nan’s unhappiness distressed me, and I didn’t want to leave her if it made her so sad.

The next time I visited Mum and Dad, I heard them talking again about the trip back to Nigeria. ‘When are we going?’ I asked.

‘Soon,’ Mum said.

‘Nan said there’s a war there. It’s not safe. I don’t want to go.’

In the deafening silence that followed, my parents exchanged a look I didn’t understand. They kept conversations about Nigeria out of earshot from then on. My visit ended, and I headed back to Nan’s.

Chapter Three
The Separation

I visited my parents often after the birth of the twins, yet when the stork brought another baby two years later, it still caught me by surprise. My new sister was named Idowu, and a fourth plaque joined the three on the wall. With four children in it, the one-bedroom flat felt confined. The twins didn't enjoy vying with the baby for Mum's attention, and they wept incessantly when she carried the newborn. Dad was out working all day long. Mum did her best, but even with the little help I provided fetching things for her, it all seemed too much. For once in my life, I longed for quiet and couldn't wait to get back to Nan's.

A week later, I hadn't returned to Nan's, and I started asking questions. But on every occasion, Mum or Dad gave me a funny look followed by silence. Eventually, one evening, they both sat with me. My gaze flipped from one to the other. *Uh-oh, I'm in trouble. What did I do?* I bit my lip, waiting for them to speak.

'Olu.' Mum's use of my Nigerian pet name made me pay attention. It usually signalled she was happy, except this time, the emotions on her face contradicted this. 'You are not going back to your nanny,' she said.

I squished my eyebrows together and searched their faces. They were not making any sense. 'But why?'

'We are going to Nigeria soon.'

'But I don't want to go to Nigeria, I want to go back to Nan's!'

Dad put a heavy hand on my head and turned my face to his. 'We are a family. We love you and can't leave you behind.' His voice was resolute in its stillness.

'Can't I stay with Nan until we leave?' My voice trembled as my eyes filled with tears.

'We need to get used to being together as a family, us, you and your brother and sisters.'

My voice hitched, 'But I didn't say goodbye!'

'We're sorry about that, but you will get to see Nan again someday.'

Hope renewed, my heart fluttered. 'When? Can I see her next week?'

Dad shook his head, his eyes soulful. Not one to give up, I pushed, fists clenched, tears falling fast. 'What about all my clothes and toys? What about school?'

'We'll pick your things up soon. You will go to a new school until we travel.'

My shoulders drooped in defeat. I couldn't imagine never seeing Nan again, and although Dad promised I would, I didn't trust him, because he wouldn't tell me when. I turned and shuffled to the sofa. Arms hugging my middle, I sobbed. My parents let me cry for a while, then tried to cajole me out of my misery with dinner. But I wasn't hungry, and I just pushed the food around on my plate. At bedtime, I cried myself to sleep while tickling my hand with the hem of my pyjamas. Remembering Nan had shown me how to do this made me weep even more.

I moped around for days. Mum tried to cheer me up with stories of Nigeria. At every opportunity, I tried to coax Dad into letting me visit Nan. He wouldn't let me but repeated his promise that I would see her again someday. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't just let me stay at Nan's until the move. Then one evening, I overhead them talking when they both thought I was fast asleep. 'My dear, do you think we are being too hard on her?' Mum said.

'Possibly, but we can't take the risk of a court battle with her nan. The last time that happened, the courts awarded custody to the foster parents. As you know, she's already suggested keeping her until the civil war is over. If we leave her behind, there's a good chance, we'll never get her back.'

There was a lengthy silence before Mum spoke again. 'Have you thought about what going back will mean? Despite our best efforts, we haven't saved much. Until we both have jobs in Lagos, maintaining the family might be harder than we think.'

'That's true, but what other option is there? We can't stay here and be treated like dogs for the rest of our lives. Even with my diploma in sales and marketing, I'm still filling empty shelves in a supermarket. I'm not living like that when I know I can do far better back at home.'

I didn't hear Mum's reply as I drifted off to sleep, but I sensed my parents struggled with their decision as much as I did.

*

With Mum at home with the babies, Dad worked all hours, so he could buy all the household goods we would need in Nigeria. One evening, Mum put the baby and toddlers to bed before sitting beside me on the sofa. 'You are starting school on Monday.' She wrapped an arm around my shoulder and gave me a sideways hug. *Yippee! It would be nice to get out of the flat.* 'How will I get there?'

'Dad will take you to a childminder on his way to work. She will take you to school and pick you up. Dad or I will bring you home later in the day. You'll like Mrs Brown. She is Black like us and she has two children who are a little older than you.'

My ears perked at the news that they were Black. It would be awesome having Black friends for a change.

Mrs Brown was from the West Indies. She was a stout woman with a booming voice and a cackle that made me wince from the sheer loudness of it. Her twins, Benton, a boy, and Briana, a girl, both attended my new school. I thought our flat was small, but Mrs Brown's entire apartment comprised one multi-functional bedroom, living room, kitchen rolled into one, and a tiny bathroom. Dad dropped me off so early he often woke up the household. Mrs Brown hated Dad seeing her cluttered living space and bemoaned the fact daily, although never in his presence.

My hopes of becoming friends with Benton and Briana vanished before they could even germinate. The Brown twins, or the Nasties as I called them, took an instant dislike to me, and the feeling became mutual. On the way to school, Mrs Brown always walked ahead holding my hand, while the twins brought up the rear. Every few minutes, one of them pulled my hair or poked my back. When I turned round, they pulled faces, stuck out their tongue, or sniggered. If Mrs Brown noticed anything, she didn't say. At school, they got their friends to join in their cruel games and, together, made my life a misery. African monkey, fuzzy and golliwog became my new nicknames. I did my best to avoid them. Sometimes I was lucky, and I succeeded. However, I still had to go home with them. Soon, the bullying became intolerable, and I was desperate to find a solution to it.

One Saturday morning, Mum and I walked to the shops, and she took a route we had never taken before. 'That's my school, Mum,' I squealed, as we walked past the school gates.

'That it is,' she replied.

Just then, an idea bloomed in my head. I hoped Mum would take the same route home and my chest drummed when she did. As soon as we got to the school gates, I paid extra attention to the rest of the way home.

At school on Monday, I worked hard at dodging the twins. After lunch, I slipped back into class and went up to Miss Simpson, my teacher. 'Miss, can I be teacher's little helper today?' I flashed her a megawatt smile when she said yes. It meant I would avoid the playground misery. At home time, I hid in the toilets and waited until the hubbub of children's voices died. Hoping the twins were long gone, I made my way out of the toilet cubicle. Determined to get home by myself, I walked out of the school gates and turned left. A few yards up the road I heard a voice that sounded suspiciously like Briana's. I paused and ducked behind a lamppost. It was definitely the twins explaining to their mother how they'd searched for me. Slowly, their footsteps faded away.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked to the traffic lights and as Nan taught me, waited for the little green man before crossing. I turned right and continued up the busy road. While I found the thought of going home alone daunting, the Nasties terrified me more. I was certain of the way. I just had to keep going on this road until I saw our door, the only one with a dark, olive green colour. Sure enough, a few minutes later I saw our house just up the road. Proud of my accomplishment, I strolled up to the doorstep and pressed the flat's doorbell. No one answered. I tried again. Still no answer. *Mum and the babies must be out.* Tired, I plonked myself down on the doorstep to wait.

Mum came home soon after and found me fast asleep outside. Later that evening, she and I had a long chat about my first big adventure. I explained why I ran away from the Browns. I don't know if she had a word with Mrs Brown after that, but for the next few weeks the Nasties were less nasty.

*

A week after I ran away from the Browns, Mum started taking me to school and picking me up herself. It was quite a task for her to get all four children ready in the morning for the trek, but I was thankful that I no longer had to deal with the Nasties. Weeks had gone by and despite my pleas, Dad still wouldn't let me see Nan. He had collected all my stuff from her and to show how much she cared, Nan sent me two beautiful, knitted hats, one white and one red. I loved my hats and although it wasn't winter yet, I wanted to wear them every day because they made me feel close to Nan. Fortunately, Mum let me.

One day, Mum was late in picking me up after school, so Miss Simpson told me to wait outside the headteacher's office. On my way, I ran into two much older boys and before I knew what was happening, one of them snatched my hat off my head and ran away. Mimicking Tom and Pop, 'Oi, give it back,' I yelled, running after him as fast as my little legs would go, while his friend jeered behind us. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not catch up with the hat snatcher. He weaved and bobbed, ducking all my attempts to clutch his coat.

After five minutes of fruitless chasing, I gave up, breathless. With slumped shoulders, I shuffled back to the head's office, fat, twin rivulets leaking from my eyes. I arrived just in time to see Mum and the headteacher walk out.

'We were just about to… Why are you crying? What happened?' Mum bent to wipe the tears off my face, but that made me want to cry harder.

I opened my mouth and heaved out the words. 'My hat. A boy took it!' I broke into a fresh bout. The headteacher looked at Mum, a worried look plastered across his face.

‘It’s a special hat, a present from someone close,’ Mum said.

‘Oh dear,’ he said, understanding dawning in his eyes.

Just then a girl strolled up. ‘Are you talking about a hat? I saw a white one floating in a toilet bowl in the girls’ toilets.’

As the import of the revelation hit me, I dissolved into an incoherent flood.

‘Come on, let’s go home, we’ll get a new hat,’ Mum said.

‘No! I don’t want to go home, not without my hat.’

Now that I had started, I couldn’t stop myself. I heaved out great hacking sobs, one after the other, only stopping in between to gulp a breath. The twins, who had hitherto been silent, whimpered. Afraid they would wake the baby and she’d end up with four squalling kids, Mum raised helpless eyes to the headteacher. The headteacher took my hand and drew me into his office, leaving Mum to pacify the toddlers. He spoke to me gently, telling me how sorry he was about what happened. Slowly, my sobs transformed into quiet hiccups, until they disappeared into a sigh.

Mum popped her head into the office and exchanged a grateful look with the headteacher. She turned to me. ‘Come now. Let’s get going before the baby gets hungry. We can buy a new hat, and remember, Nan gave you two. You still have the red one at home, but I don’t think you should wear it to school anymore, just in case.’

I had cried so hard that now my head hurt. I rubbed my eyes furiously and sniffled. Bone tired, I was more than ready to go home and sleep off the trauma. I nodded and limped after my mother.

Soon after the hat saga, Mum and Dad began packing for the return to Nigeria. Then one day, a huge van appeared outside the front door and two men spent the entire day hoisting trunks containing everything we owned into it. That evening, I had a final surprise. I was playing with my doll when the doorbell rang. Over the previous days, my parents had seen lots of visitors, friends who came to bid farewell, so I thought nothing of it until I heard a familiar voice. I could not contain my joy as I flew into Nan’s arms. Dad had graciously allowed her to come by and say goodbye. We spent a lot of time kissing and hugging. She brought a gift. I unravelled the wrapping paper, and two beautiful dresses fell into my lap. After more cuddles, Dad made that promise once more, this time to both of us. One day in the distant future, he would let me come back to visit Nan.

Chapter Four

New Beginnings

Three days after Nan's visit, we boarded a plane from Heathrow Airport and flew to Liverpool. From there, we embarked on a huge ship and sailed to Nigeria. I only have vague memories of scuttling around long and narrow corridors as I amused myself with the other children on board. Two weeks later, in the last week of October 1968, the ship docked at our destination, Apapa in Lagos. Carrying the baby, Mum led us out, with me sandwiched in the middle and Dad bringing up the rear, a twin in each hand. As we stepped onto the ship's gangway to disembark, a blast of heat struck me as if I'd fallen headlong into a furnace. I turned to Dad behind me. 'It's boiling!'

His grin split his face in half. 'Welcome to Africa!'

I fanned the air, trying to cool myself to minor effect. Even dressed as I was in short sleeves, the heat was stifling, and I could feel the sweat beading on my collarbone.

We emerged from the immigration desks into the arrivals lounge in the Port Authority building. My steps faltered at the welcome from dozens of clamouring voices. I gaped at the sea of Black faces, with not a single White one in sight, and remembered Nan's story about how God made people of different colours. *This must be where all the Black people lived, where I belonged.* I sniffed and scrunched my nose. The smells were strange, a suffocating mixture of humid air, earth and sweat.

A host of relatives welcomed the family home from England. They spoke in a language I could not comprehend. Even their clothing was different, with the ladies draped in technicoloured fabrics, skirts that bunched at the waist and roomy tops whose sleeves could have happily accommodated several more arms. The men wore long flowing gowns with baggy trousers underneath. Some older women had huge scars carved into each cheek. I wondered if they'd all been in the same accident.

The women surrounded Mum and enveloped us in a group hug. '*Eku abo!*' they trilled. Overwhelmed, I clung to Mum like a limpet. Then the ladies transferred their attention to us kids. One lady relieved Mum of the baby. Another one detached me from Mum's skirt, looked me over, patted my cheeks and said, '*Oyinbo*,' before passing me to the next relative. I wondered what she meant. One by one, they manhandled me and my siblings, repeating the mantra *Oyinbo*, until the twins burst into tears and Dad came to their rescue.

The welcoming party led us to the cars waiting to take us home. 'Beep-beep, beep-beep.' The incessant sound of horns filled the air as if the drivers were deliberately

composing discordant music. I turned, wondering what the emergency was, but the adults kept on moving, oblivious to the racket. *Was this normal?* Soon, we reached the fleet of cars belonging to our entourage. Dad climbed into the passenger front seat with Kehinde on his lap. Another relative holding Taiwo clambered into the back. Mum urged me into the middle before climbing in with the baby. Exhausted from the day's events I settled in between the grown-ups and, lulled by the car's motion, drifted off to sleep.

*

Mum jostled me awake. We had arrived at our new home. I climbed out of the car, arched my back and stifled a yawn as I stretched my achy muscles. It was dark, and I couldn't see much, as a relative led us up a flight of stairs and knocked on a door. Someone opened it, squealed and pulled us into the room with a joyous hug. Inside, more relatives congregated. Once more, they handed me like a parcel from relative to relative as they patted my head, shoulders, or any part they could reach, all the time singing '*Oyinbo!*' I tolerated the attention for a while until I needed the bathroom.

Deftly disengaging from a would-be admirer, I crossed the room to Dad. 'Here's your grandmother, my mum,' he said. I hung back shyly but looked at her. She smiled, and I noticed she had scars on her cheeks too. *Golly! How many people were injured in this accident?*

'Dad,' I tapped his side and tiptoed, trying to reach his ear. He bent down, and I whispered, 'I need the toilet.'

His eyes grew wide. 'Ooh! Let's get your mum.' He led me to another room where Mum sat on a bed, feeding the baby. 'She needs the toilet,' Dad said, as Mum looked up.

'Oh dear,' Mum replied, 'get one of the relatives.'

I frowned at both of them. *What was the problem?* Dad disappeared, and two minutes later a lady's head popped round the door. She and Mum had a brief conversation in the foreign language, then she signalled that I should follow her. I glanced at Mum, who gave a nod of approval. As I swung round, Mum said, 'Stop, do you need toilet paper?' I nodded. She rummaged through her bag before stuffing a wad of tissue in my hands. I took the lady's hand and followed her out.

Just as we re-entered the living room, it went dark and everyone groaned, 'NEPA!' I grasped the hand holding mine tightly, uncomfortable being in the dark amid a bunch of strangers. Within a few seconds, a candlelight flickered in the corner, and my relative moved towards it. There we found my grandmother. After a brief exchange between them, my grandmother reached behind the sofa and pulled out a potty. The relative took it and led me

out of another door onto a balcony. She put the potty on the floor and signalled that I should use it.

I shrank back in surprise. *Me, use a potty in the open air with a stranger looking on?* But by now I was squeezing my legs together and couldn't hold it for much longer. I darted a quick look around. It was pitch black apart from the light from our candle, which was threatening to die any minute. I suppressed a sigh, pulled my knickers down and squatted over the potty. The deed done, I stood up and looked at my relative. With no qualms she bent down, picked up the potty and led me indoors.

We walked through the much quieter living room, many of the guests having left while I attended to my toileting needs. The candles remained the only light source. The bedroom, where I found my parents, glowed from an amber flame flickering behind a glass-shaded lamp. I yawned at the sight of the twins fast asleep atop the bed, envy blazing in my eyes. As if reading my thoughts, Mum signalled, and I scrambled up into a nook next to my siblings and closed my eyes. My life in Nigeria was about to begin, and life as I had known it was relegated to the annals of history.

*

I stirred out of my slumber the following morning with a pervading ache all over. I had dreamed about using a potty on a balcony. My eyes snapped open. *Wait! That wasn't a dream, it really happened.* I squirmed a little. *Why was I so uncomfortable?* Slowly, I looked around. I was lying on the floor in the living room. Well, not quite, but on a mat on the floor, surrounded by the twins, two other children, my grandmother and the lady who helped me use the potty, all fast asleep. I eased myself up and ran a palm over the criss-crossed imprint of the mat on my tingling cheek. I pressed my fingers against my face, gently easing out the lines.

Eyes wide open, I looked around our new abode. The sizable living room where I just woke led to the inter-connecting bedroom where I fell asleep the night before. I could see no bathroom or kitchen. *That explained the previous night's saga on the balcony.* I wondered how we would manage without both. The answer came later that morning once the household awoke. Mum rolled a towel and toiletries inside some newspaper and gave it to me to hold. Then she picked up a small wooden stool, a plastic basin and a bucket before leading me out of the door. 'Where is the bathroom, Mum?' I asked, as she opened another door which brought us on to an outdoor landing with an iron staircase. She led me down the stairs, into the enormous courtyard. She pointed to the bathrooms. 'Over there.' My eyes widened.

As we approached, I eyed the two tiny huts, made of corrugated iron, standing side by side at the back of the courtyard. Three sheets formed walls and the fourth a make-shift roof, leaving a gaping opening in front. Mum took the toiletries from me and set them down on the newspaper on the floor, adding a small plastic bowl from the bucket. With the larger basin and the bucket, which had a rope tied around its handle, she walked to a cylindrical concrete wall nearby. I watched, fascinated, as she lowered the bucket into the cylinder, swished the rope around like she was lassoing a horse, then pulled it up. I gasped as the bucket reappeared, heaving and splashing water. Seeing my surprise, she said, 'This is a well where all our water comes from.' I moved forward to inspect it, but she stopped me. 'No, don't come any closer, it's dangerous. You must never go near it.' She stopped and made sure she had eye contact. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mum.'

Mum poured the water into the basin, picked it up, moved a few paces and placed it on the bathroom floor. 'Right, take off your clothes and fold them on the newspapers,' she said. I looked around the courtyard. It wasn't busy, but there were women and children in another outbuilding. The adults concentrated on their cooking, but the children gawked at us.

I pointed to the open bathroom. 'Um, Mum, there are people here and no door.'

'It doesn't matter, hurry, I have yet to wash your brother and sisters.'

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I lifted the hem of my nightgown and pulled it off. I cast a glance at the children. Yes, they were still gawking. Ignoring them, I stepped up to the flat concrete slab which made the bathroom's floor. Mum dipped the small plastic bowl into the water, scooped some and poured it over my shoulders. 'Arghh!' I hopped from one foot to the other. The water was frigid. My body stiffened and tiny goosebumps flooded the surface of my skin. Mum ignored the faint protest, picked up the soap and sponge and started to scrub my back. The second splash of water didn't feel so bad, and I relaxed into the wash.

While Mum washed me, I looked around. The bathroom's raised floor allowed water to run off into the bushes behind the huts. Where the door should have been, a thin pole hung, secured at both ends with a nail. The three-storey structure housing our dwelling appeared massive, the iron staircase running all the way to the top floor. Our rooms were on the first floor. Sandwiched between the outdoor kitchen and the bathrooms, but set further back, sat two additional huts with doors.

As Mum finished my ablutions, another woman exited the building with a bucket and bowl and headed to the well, just as Mum had. I towelled myself dry and picked up my nightgown, pulling it over my head just in time to see the woman move into the other

bathroom. I watched avidly, curious to know if she would take a bath in full view of everyone. Instead, she pulled out a wide sheet and draped it over the pole hanging across the doorway. *So that's what it's for!*

*

Life in Nigeria couldn't have been more different from my former existence. Our new home in Mushin, the same size as our London one, felt crowded sheltering nine people. My paternal grandmother, whom everyone called Mama, had come to stay along with her niece, Sola, and another child, Wasiu. Both children were younger than me. Mum, Dad and the baby slept in the bedroom while the rest of us, including Mama, slept on mats on the living room floor. I didn't like it one bit. The floor was hard, there were no pillows, and every morning I woke up with the mat's herringbone weave etched temporarily into my cheeks. I missed Nan, and I missed my old, comfortable bed.

With only two bathrooms servicing the building, people going to work rose early to queue for them. Younger children didn't and instead bathed naked, out in the open next to the huts. I soon overcame my initial unwillingness to bathe publicly and in no time was bathing myself under Mama's watchful eye. It wasn't long before the foam sponge Mum brought from London disintegrated. Mum replaced it with the local sponge made of pounded raffia. The problem was, it made me itch, leaving huge welts where I'd scratched. 'Don't worry about it,' Mum said, as she coated my skin in Vaseline. 'You will soon get used to it.'

For toilets, the children used the potty day or night. Then the adults removed and emptied them. Curious about the adults, I asked Dad.

'Haha,' he said, 'the two huts between the kitchen and the bathrooms are pit latrines.'

'How are they different from toilets?' I asked.

'On the inside of each latrine there's a wooden platform with a hole in the middle. People squat over the hole to do their business, and a large metal bucket underneath the platform collects the waste.'

My eyes rounded. 'What happens when it fills up?'

'At midnight, men with faces masked with bandannas come and empty the waste into giant trucks and take it away.'

'What's a bandanna?'

Dad chuckled. 'It's a triangular scarf which they tie around their nose and mouth, so nobody recognises them.'

I chewed on that for a moment. *I suppose I wouldn't want anyone recognising me if I was carrying poo.*

'Can I use the latrine too?' The potty made me feel like a baby.

'No, not yet, I'm afraid. Perhaps when you are bigger.'

*

Besides the large, outdoor communal kitchen, the building had kitchenettes on each floor, in an outer lobby, just before the stairwell. Here, some tenants kept their own cooking stoves. Fed up with being cooped indoors all day, I stood at the entrance to the kitchenette and watched Mum prepare supper. Four kerosene stoves, all the same identical forest-green colour, sat on a waist-high wooden bench placed along the left side of the rectangular room.

'How do you know which one is yours,' I asked.

'Come over here.'

I shuffled closer and Mum pointed out her initials etched into the base of her stove. Mum struck a match and dropped it into the central aperture in the stove. Within seconds, a bright yellow flame sprung out, and I watched, transfixed, as the uneven flames licked the bottom of the pot Mum lowered over it. In places, the flame was sky-blue, in others, orange-black. The orange-black flames left a trail of soot all around the outside of the pot, but the blue ones didn't.

While Mum cut green vegetables and put them into the pot, I studied the rest of the kitchenette. A square opening with steel rods, in the wall opposite the door, served as a window and provided the only ventilation. It made the room resemble a prison cell. The blackened wall behind the bench created a contrast with the other dirty cream walls. Pondering the difference, I ran a finger along the black side. It left a trail behind. I looked at my finger, now coated in soot and realised it wasn't black paint at all.

As Mum continued cooking, the room darkened into a smoky haze. The piquant aroma of the tomato and pepper stew mingled with the acrid smell from the cooker's flames. I blinked rapidly, covered my nose and whined. 'Mum, my eyes and nose sting.'

'That's the fumes from the kerosene,' she said. 'Let me turn the wick down. See if that helps.' The fire tongues became smaller, and the odour dissipated somewhat. 'The food will take longer to cook with a lower flame, she said.' *No wonder I was almost always starving by the time family meals were ready*.

I helped Mum take the prepared meal inside, and as we settled down to eat, the lights went off. The collective groan 'NEPA!' resounded through the entire neighbourhood. NEPA was the acronym for the National Electricity Power Authority, although locals translated it to 'Never Expect Power Again'. I was getting used to the frequent blackouts. We rarely had electricity for long, and most evenings, candles or kerosene lamps provided light. We had

only eaten a few morsels when the electricity returned. A resounding, welcoming cheer thundered through the building. 'What was that noise for?' I asked Mum.

'People are just so thankful the electricity came back so quickly.'

'Why do they keep taking it away?'

'I don't really know. They say there isn't enough to go round, so we all get a little now and then.'

None of it made sense. People in England had electricity all the time. Why was it so different here?

*

Life was settling into a rhythm, but all my toys, including my beautiful life-sized doll, stayed in the trunks. 'Why can't I play with my toys?' I asked for the nth time. Mum's response remained the same. 'You would have to share them with Wasiu and Sola. They would destroy them in minutes, and I can't afford to replace them.' I didn't understand Mum's logic. *What was the point of a toy you couldn't play with?*

My one remaining red hat and the matching pair of shoes that Mum bought before we left England also stayed in the trunk. And no, Mum hadn't replaced the hat that ended up in the loo. I understood why I couldn't use the hat. It was far too warm for the balmy Lagos weather, but my shoes! When Mum eventually brought them out at Christmas, they were way too small for my feet.

Although Nan had called me Ann, my parents called me *Funmi* and Mama called me Keji. 'Why does each person I know call me by a different name?' I asked Dad.

'Actually, Ann's not your name at all.'

That baffled me. 'It's not? How come Nan called me that?'

Dad paused, as if deciding whether to speak. 'Well, before Nan had you, she looked after another girl. Her name was Ann.'

I mulled over this piece of information. 'So, Nan called me Ann to remember the other girl?'

'Maybe, or maybe she just liked the name Ann.'

An awkward silence followed, then Dad brightened up. 'The name Mum and I gave you is special. It means God gave us you to cherish.'

A smile broke across my face. I liked the sound of that. 'What does Keji mean?'

'I am Mama's only child. Keji means second. You, my little one, are Mama's second child.'

'So, I have three names?'

Dad tittered. I peered at him. *What was so amusing?*

‘You have thirteen names.’

‘Thirteen!’

‘Yes. When a couple has their first child, family elders get overexcited and they each give the baby a name. That’s why you have so many.’

‘Do you know what they all are?’

‘Some, and your mum can tell you the rest.’

‘Is *Oyinbo* one of them?’

Dad couldn't contain himself. He roared with laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’

He coughed and spluttered, merriment still dancing in his eyes. ‘No, *Oyinbo* is not one of your names.’

‘What does it mean? The day we arrived, everybody called me that. I remember.’

‘That’s true, but it’s not your name. It means “White person”.’

My brows furrowed. ‘But I’m not White.’

‘I know. Let me tell you some of your other names. Your other grandmother named you Tokunbo. That means you came from overseas. Your grandfather named you…’

As Dad reeled off unpronounceable names, my mind slipped back to what he said earlier. *Why did my relatives call me a White person when I was as Black as they were?*