



WORDS *of the* WIND

"ESSAYS, SHORT STORIES & REFLECTIONS"

Elikem M. Aflakpui & Leslie Akplah

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Essays, Short Stories and Reflections

BY

ELIKEM M. AFLAKPUI & LESLIE A. AKPLAH

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Thank you for respecting the authors' hard work.

Also by Elikem M. Aflakpui & Leslie A. Akplah

GROWING UP: An Anthology of Everyday Experiences from Everyday People

About the Authors

Elikem M. Aflakpui and Leslie A. Akplah are young men who are passionate about writing and the development of literature in Ghana. Starting from a partnership which began on Facebook and saw them churning out interesting reads for their friends and followers, they have gone on to start their own website (www.2eweboys.com) and have also published their first book entitled GROWING UP. The website won them the prestigious award for Best New Blog in Ghana in the 2015 Ghana Blogging and Social Media Awards.

Elikem is a graduate of the University of Cape Coast with a degree in Social Sciences (Economics and Geography). After his national service, he worked with the Ghana Fellowship of Evangelical Students (GHAFES) as the Deputy National Programmes Coordinator. Currently, he is an Associate Data Analyst at PEG Africa in Accra. In addition to his usual write-up for www.2eweboys.com where he is the Team Leader, he also writes a weekly column titled Writing About Writing for the Business and Financial Times Newspaper. He also does freelance editing, proofreading and ghostwriting.

Leslie is a 5th year Doctor of Pharmacy student at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology. He won 3rd Prize in the 2015 360GH Writers Challenge for Tertiary Students and was also awarded the coveted Best Writer award for the 2015/2016 Academic Year in the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, KNUST.

Apart from writing and editing, Leslie is also a co-founder and COO at Isle, a marketing agency that offers innovative marketing solutions for small and medium size businesses. Leslie hopes to be an accomplished pharmacist, health

activist, and entrepreneur in future. He enjoys reading, writing, eating good food, spending time with loved ones and making people laugh.

Dedicated to all our friends, fans and readers who challenged us to do this

Acknowledgement

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Special thanks to our mentors in writing, Nana Awere Damoah and Kofi Akpabli, for holding our hands and being our guides on this road. It is by their teachings and trailblazing efforts that we improve every day. There is no better way of saying thank you to them than by following their footsteps and going farther than they have walked.

We cannot complete our acknowledgments without mentioning the people for whom this book was made – our readers. You have been amazing from day one and we know we cannot thank you enough. Continue to be consumers of our works and we shall not disappoint you.

Finally, we appreciate the support of our families who have been very encouraging on this journey. God bless you all.

How This Book Came About

Owing to the fact that both of us had become busy due to work and school schedules, we could not write as much as we would have wanted to. At the time of publishing this book, we had a nineteen-story series (19 Shades of Karma) stuck at the seventh story and many other projects lying down untouched. We knew it was unfair to treat our readers in that manner so we thought of a way to compensate them.

We challenged ourselves to come up with a book for them in one week. However, to make it interesting we went to these same readers to ask them what they wanted to read from us. They told us what they wanted in over seventy suggested titles. We narrowed the pool down to the final fifteen this book contains and got down to business – writing.

The collections you are about to read are our thoughts on each title suggested by our readers and we conveyed them through essays, short stories and reflections. We were excited about doing this because we were not limited in terms of which style or genre to write in. So, we call this a mashup of genres – our own categorization.

We are confident that we did justice to all the titles. It is a collection which will make you laugh, cry, get angry and be inspired all at the same time. We are sure that you will enjoy reading it. We look forward to your feedback.

Bless up!

Elikem M. Aflakpui & Leslie A. Akplah

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REFLECTIONS

CHAPTER ONE
A YEAR WITHOUT YOU

This chapter is dedicated to all those who have lost people close to them. We feel your pain and we know exactly how it feels.

Some things should never end. Like the fleeting life you had on this earth. Like the bond we shared when you were here. It was more than pulling a million rabbits out of a hat; more than making a thousand doves out of a white handkerchief – pure magic! Every second of it was out of this world and, sigh, I was silly not to have enjoyed it as I should. It's funny how we only miss the light when darkness befalls us.

I was a lonely heart riding on a floating card, surviving through one sleepless night after the other, and hoping that my time to love and to be loved would come. The time came. And you came along with it. You were a good thief. You stole my heart even before I knew it and you fixed all the not-so-pretty parts of my life. I was blessed – beyond measure.

But, you should have come bearing a note that read,

“EXPIRATION DATE: APRIL 9, 2016”

How would I have known that it you were not meant to last forever?

I have no regrets about the times we spent together. My tears are about those we did not get to enjoy - those times which are gone for good. The future we have lost.

It's been a year since you left, taking everything I cherished along with you. I remember your face as you were leaving. You had a smile on your lips, but in your face, your sorrow showed. I saw the pain in your eyes. I know you tried. You

fought so hard but when a place is meant to be your Waterloo, that is what it will be. *You came, you saw, but you were conquered.* I wish you had fought harder, but there was not a dint of fighting spirit left in you. Therefore, from a firm grip, air found space in between our hands until all I was left holding was the emptiness.

I know you are in a better place. And that also hurts me. Where does a dream begin and end? I hear you calling out my name, walking with me through the gates of time to eternity. I see us cross a bridge across the sky to a place where our souls only know peace. Then you leave again. And the emptiness in me flows all around yet there is no way out.

So, I tell myself I can wait. Though you are in a far place, my love will come to you like a bird on its way back home. I can wait forever if you say you will be back. I can wait forever if you will come back for me. It is worth it all to spend my life waiting for you.

It is hard to make the memories leave. Living without your love hurts. Living without your love is crazy. I'm hanging by a thread right now, hoping you would come and save me from falling into the depths without safety. Every day, I convince myself that your departure has not left me broken; that I'm only bent. I look at the wounds on my bleeding heart and hope that time would do its magic and heal me. I know that is a lie – just like I said I cannot live without you.

Well, the truth is, I can't. However, God and fate would have it otherwise. Instead of death, they dealt me the curse of sojourning in this life without you. In the beginning, I laughed it off because nothing could hurt me any more than your departure has. So, I called their bluff and played their game. How foolish of me

not to realize that there was absolutely no reason left for me to be here! I'd lost everything.

It has been a year without you, but the pain of not having you around is as fresh as a fresh flesh wound. I cannot get over it. I cannot get over you. It is with the faith of a saint that I traverse this earth every day, living in the hope that sooner, or later, whenever it pleases the Lord to relieve me from this curse, I will join you in paradise. There we shall be together forever – for real. Until then, my love, I will be fighting my battles here, navigating my way through this life, and enduring every pain that comes with living without you.

CHAPTER TWO

BETWEEN BOYS AND MEN

There is no better way to write about this topic than to share a personal story of how I had to grow from a boy into a man. I was aware of the transition but I never quite thought about what happened between the two until this topic came up. It is revealing, what I found out.

I loved a lady friend of mine, but there was a tiny little bit of problem: my best friend loved her too. Freaking love triangle! She already had something going with my best friend so I decided to respect her decision and let her be.

After a while, satisfied that things were not working out between the lady and my best friend, I decided to make my move. The first time I professed my affection for her was at an internet café. I was doing a school assignment and realized she was online. When we finished exchanging pleasantries, I dropped the bomb and logged out. Yeah, just like that.

A few days later, I called her and asked her, "What's up with my proposal?" Boy, did she blast me? I immediately retracted the proposal and told her it was a joke.

The next day, I called her again. I apologized for the day before, retracted my joke and reinstated my Facebook Messenger message as a proposal and asked her to consider it. Goodness! I was such a dumbass. And boy, did she give it to me again?

Chief among the things she told me over the phone that day was that I was childish.

Taking my "L" gracefully, I went into a seclusion and declared a fast for myself. When Jesus Christ went into the wilderness to fast for forty days and forty nights,

he came back equipped with scriptures to defeat the devil, the tempter. In my case, I returned from the wilderness with a poem to conquer the lady's heart.

BOY II MAN

It cost me to be a boy!
My love was too coy
Sense; absent to employ

I love you - I feared
He loved you - I dreaded
You loved who? - I wondered

You were a Helen of Troy
But a Trojan horse, I couldn't deploy
Cos there's a bond I can't destroy

Oh! Such folly
So much for being holy
Now, I'm almost lonely

Time best defines a man
Same qualifies a nun
I've joined the "Hood of Man"

From an ignoramus without a game plan
You turned me into a man
You own the patent to this Superman

So here's an application form
From a boy you did everything to transform
And a man who pleads that you conform

Great poem! But it amounted to nothing. Until recently, I would rather not remember anything from this experience. I lived like it never happened. But, too much happened within the few days of going through this and I cannot afford to leave it to the wind. Unexpected happenings like this make of us victims of growth and we live with the blessings of lessons they come with. Therefore, between my rough transition from a boy to a man, with the benefit of hindsight, here is what happened.

The first thing I struggled with while I tried to figure everything out was whose fault it was. I blamed myself. Good enough, but I also blamed everyone around me. I blamed the lady and I blamed my best friend. Talk about the height of pettiness.

I had enough reason to believe that she had a pint of affection for me. Why was she claiming I was being childish? Couldn't she also be mature and own up to her emotions and save me the trouble? If she ended up with me in a relationship, would we both not enjoy the benefits? Why then must I be the only person needing to grow up? (I cringe as I write these now.)

Thankfully, I came out a better man. I took responsibility for whatever was happening to me. That's what men do. I learned to focus internally on what I contributed and what I could do differently next time. I acknowledged that there were many different elements that contributed to the situation, but was also

consciously aware that blaming anyone else was not going to help matters. Before I came out with the poem, I was determined to be a better person, end my childishness and take the bull by the horn.

Of a truth, one of the reasons for my behavior was I felt inadequate. I was not quite right for her, I thought. I realized that I was, by my actions, justifying my inadequacies. Back then, if you gave me a paper and pen to explain why she was out of my league, I could write a million lines and explain them with scientific theories, principles and laws. But men, do not justify their inadequacies; they challenge them. That is what I should have done.

If a man feels like he's lacking or inadequate in any area of his life, he looks for ways to overcome his perceived inadequacy. I learned to look for tools and ideas I could use to become stronger and more confident, regardless of the justifications that made it okay for me to be inadequate in that area of my life.

In my place of solitude, I experienced the pain and frustration which came by allowing my inadequacies to exist. I decided to take full responsibility for that pain. It drove me to eliminate the pain from its source and I created a happier and more fulfilling life in the process.

Finally, I learned that men go after what they want in life. As a boy, I grumbled about the fact that the world is not fair. Why did I have to struggle to express affection? So many fuckboys were going about landing ladies here and there and I was yet to gather the courage to express my affection to one girl. Why did my case have to be so damn tough while everyone else was having theirs with ease?

The man I became found out that indeed the world is not fair. Fairness is an illusion and the world would continue to throw curve balls at me. The only way I could ever have what I want is to get out and create it. I did not need anyone's

permission – not even hers. I was looking forward to a polite smile or an encouraging gesture before I could make my move. As a man, I now know that even if I could get permission from everyone around me, I would still have to give myself permission to act on other people's permission so I may as well just give it to myself first.

I walked out from my hideout into the field, ready for action, pushing through my barriers, challenging my limiting beliefs, and proving I could take on this venture of love and succeed at it.

But no, the poem did nothing. I do not even remember sending it to her. If I did, then it was received and nothing was said about it. I have moved on and I can tell you that the lessons were helpful going forward. Even better, they are not only applied to pursuing a relationship, but to the totality of life.

In conclusion, I have not written this chapter as one who has arrived. Every day I strive to become a better version of the man I am today. Let me say here that there is no middle ground between being a man and being a boy. You can only be one of the two. Also, you cannot claim to be a man in a situation and a boy in another. Let your manliness be seen everywhere and in everything you do.

CHAPTER THREE

GROWING UP: FANTASY VERSUS REALITY

In my contribution to our first book titled "Growing Up", I wrote that my journey to becoming an adult began at age 15. Before this time, life as an adult was appealing. Now, I have experienced only a tiny part of it (there is so much more growing up to do) and I will admit there are a few great things about it. However, if I had the chance, I would choose childhood over adulthood any day! Childhood is special. Nothing beats it.

My fondest memories of my childhood are the times we "played house". This was a role-playing game in which the children assumed various roles of adults in the family and the community. Of course, those who know this game know that the most prestigious roles were those of Daddy and Mummy. It was, for me, a great game because we would spend hours lost in our interpretation of adulthood and our enactment of it. Sometimes we overstretched the role play and lived in a reality that was not meant for our age. If you ever played Daddy or Mummy in the game, you will understand my last sentence more. *Wink*

I remember all the other games we played, both under the sun and under the nicely lit moon. I think I belong to the last generation to enjoy stories told by the fireside. I am not talking about the ones we watched on television – this was real time. Adults assembled us and told us folktales. I remember playing tag with my friends at break time on the playground at our school. I remember the multiple field trips to various places of interest. The Accra Zoo and the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum are the places I remember the most. Then, I remember sitting in front of the television watching Saturday morning cartoons. "Baby Looney Tunes" was one of my favorite shows.

Those times felt like they would last forever – me feeling happy and safe around my friends and family. I did not know things like having struggles and problems. I did not have a care in the world. Now, I sit here and wonder where those times went. I feel like I blinked, and now, I am a grown-up person worrying about work and what else I am going to do with my life.

The ability to see the world through innocent eyes and have an endless imagination is something I will cherish all my life. Therefore, it hurts me to know that there are people who, by circumstances, were forced to grow up too quickly and they were deprived of the enchanting experience of being a child.

One thing that is common to every story about growing up is how we spend some of our childhood years wishing we were older. That is the downside of being a child. Despite all we had as children, we wanted more. We thought the grass was greener on the adult side and we could not wait to sink our teeth in grown-up experiences. Don't we regret that now?

The fun is over. Responsibilities have kicked in and it's time to stop acting mature and be mature. Adulthood is nothing like we imagined it to be. Life is not one big party like we once thought it was. Our lives now consist of keeping multiple planners and calendars, money, paying bills and rent and waking up early for our jobs.

They did not tell us that being an adult is an emotionally overwhelming thing. As we take strides into this new world, it gets scarier. Worse, we must face the monster by ourselves – each man for himself. We did not know it would be this difficult to soul-search to find where we truly belong in this world. It is not fun to make decisions for ourselves, especially when those decisions affect us in big ways. There is nobody to comfort us; no one to keep us safe from this cruel place.

We are beginning to learn that we do not stay friends with all the people who were our best friends when we were children. Sometimes, we look around and notice we have no friends at all. People drift apart, or life gets so hectic we forget to keep in touch. Are these what we were falling over ourselves to lay hold of?

We thought we would find our one true love and it would be a fairytale romance. We were stuck on Disney's portrayal of how love happens in a magical moment. Our true loves will walk into a room, everything will freeze, they would walk straight to us and we would ride off into the sunset. In real life, it is a lot harder to find the Cinderella who dropped her glass slippers in our dreams or the Prince Charming who would give us love's kiss to awaken us. Even if we do find them, the relationship is not always as magical as fairytales made it seem. There are fights, heartbreak, and sometimes breaking up and these were not things we considered when we envisioned our true loves as children.

We thought money was easy to make, it would not take any time at all, and we would always have money to spend on the things we wanted. As children, when we mentioned how rich we wanted to be, it was in "million million million trillion billion cedis dollars". The apogee of a lie. We dreamed it up and did not know we had to work a job and other "galamseys" to make ends meet. Even before the money comes, it is all spent up in our heads and, sometimes, we are already in debt. We are gradually waking up to the fact that those non-existing amounts of money we mentioned as children would remain exactly that – non-existing.

We thought we could be anything we wanted to be. Then we grew up to realize that we had to be realistic. All of us wanted to have the fanciful occupations – doctor, lawyer, architect, name them. As we grow older, only a few of us are realizing those aspirations. Many of us are having to settle with whatever pays the bills. Our childhood fantasies have had to take a back seat or they

disappeared altogether to make room for our new and more realistic career plans. We convince ourselves that we are doing them for a short period while we figure ourselves out. But, we know how difficult it is to come by a job so we endure throughout our working lives doing things we never imagined ourselves doing.

This last one irks me. We thought once we were grown up everyone would look at us as mature and treat us as such. But even that seems like it is too much to ask for. To many of the people who are older than us, once we were *youngies* to them, we would forever be *youngies*. Lately, I hate attending family gatherings for this reason. People still pat my head and hold my cheeks. Jeez! I'm no longer a little boy for crying out loud!

No matter how different and disappointing the growing up experience has been, it is a stage in life that meets us, whether we are aware of it or prepared for it or not. It is overwhelming and terrifying but we cannot run from it. We must embrace it, face it and master it. These are the things our first book was about – the stories of how twenty-one young people braved this storm of growing up. You must get a copy.

Growing up is a journey of a lifetime and the dramatic transition of a moment. Carl Boenish augments to this thought and says there's no future in growing up. Every day, we learn something new about ourselves and our worlds – and with that, we mature a little more.

SHORT STORIES

CHAPTER FOUR

AND YOU CALL THIS LOVE?

Dinner for two.

Everything was perfect. Location – the roof of the storey building he lived in, exposing them to the expanse of the skies. God would see them first if he looked down at the earth. For a man as religious as Kwasi Baffoe, that meant a lot. He looked up to the sky and admired how the stars adorned it. It looked to him as if they were arranged in the shape of love. Or, it was his imagination. He smiled and brushed the thought off.

The table was set. It was a small one. Simple and classic. A single petal of rose and a glass candle holder did the magic. He chose the plates from his mother's never-used-before china collections. All the cutleries came from the same chest. A bottle of the most expensive wine he could find in the supermarket, two wine glasses, fabric napkins and a big satisfying smile on his face and he was good to go.

There was soft music playing in the background. Kwasi asked his DJ friend hook him up with the most romantic songs and instrumentals. He could not take chances with this.

Kwasi dashed downstairs to the kitchen to check on the meal. It smelled like love. Again, maybe, it was his imagination. He took the lid off the saucepan and peeped into it as if he would die if he peered into for too long. Satisfied with the food's countenance, he went to the fridge to make sure the chocolate ice-cream he bought for dessert was in there. On days like this, strange things happen. Who knows, a dwarf could come for it without his notice. His imagination again. This time, he chuckled.

Next, he entered the washroom. It felt like the longest bath he had had until he came out to find that he was there for only six minutes. Then he heard a thunder rumble. "Christ!" he said under his breath and went on his knees. "God, please, hold the rain. At least, till this date is over. Please!" he prayed. "I will give a twenty percent tithe this month, I promise you. Please, just don't ruin my date tonight".

He went back to the rooftop and noticed that all the stars were gone. The breeze was intense. A tear fell from his eye. Or, was it a spit of rain from the sky? This time, it was not an imagination. Something either fell on him or fell from his eyes. He looked at the sky again and gave God a puppy face.

Kwasi was beginning to get agitated. He looked at his wrist watch and realized that Angela was late. He looked down from the roof for any sign of her on the streets but it was too dark to see anything. Had she changed her mind because of the weather? Was it raining at her end? Was she fine? Could anything be wrong with her? He ran his hands over his thighs but did not feel his phone.

"Damn me! I might have left it downstairs", he cursed.

He made a run downstairs, taking the stairs in twos or threes. On the last step, he twisted his ankle. That, however, did not stop him. He limped the rest of the distance to get his phone. Coincidentally, it was ringing when he got to the bedroom. It was Angela.

"Angie, you had me worried". That was his first statement.

"Oh come on! It's only been seven minutes", Angela snapped. "I'm at your door".

He held the phone in his right hand as he examined his twisted ankle with the left. It hurt. "Come in, it's open".

Angela was casually dressed. She was not wearing the dress Kwasi specially bought for the occasion. To think the dress cost him so much and he wore a tuxedo to match with hers, to say he was disappointed was an understatement.

Kwasi indicated that the dinner was up the stairs. Angela did not say a word and followed him.

The young man had a big grin on his face when they got to where he had set everything up. He gestured at his girlfriend invitingly and pulled her seat for her. The expression on her face was not what he expected. The more disappointing aspect of it was it was a stone-faced expression and he could not interpret it. But that would not kill his vim. He was on a mission and nothing would stop him.

His palms were sweating already. He could feel his feet wobble. And his mind was all over the place. He tried to make small talks. He asked her questions; silly questions; questions he had already asked her earlier in the day. Like, how was she, had she eaten, how was her night, how were her parents and you can figure the rest out. He dreaded a second of silence between them so he filled each of them with more chatter.

All the while, he was trying to open the glass of wine but because he was not in charge of his mind, he fidgeted with it. Finally, pooooop! He opened it. As he poured the drink into their respective glasses, starting with Angela's, he was visibly shaking. Angela saw it, and for the first time, she smiled. She placed her hand on her boyfriend's.

"Kwasi, it's okay. Sit down."

He smiled sheepishly and insisted he was fine. Angela tried to take the bottle from him but it was stuck in his palms. He turned to pour the drink into his glass

and accidentally knocked Angela's glass over, spilling the expensive wine on the lady.

"WHAT THE F**K IS WRONG WITH YOU?" Angela snapped, standing to her feet.

"I'm sorry". It was in the meekest tone.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? WHY ARE WE DOING THIS? WHAT ARE WE EVEN DOING HERE? WHAT IS ALL THIS?" Obviously, Angela was very angered.

For the first time, there was silence between the two of them. Predictably, it did not last. Kwasi broke it.

"Angela, I'm trying to..." Angela chuckled, making him swallow the rest of his words.

And there was silence. And Kwasi broke it. Again.

"Listen, I love you".

"YOU WHAT?" She laughed, took a step closer to him and sighed. "You call this love? This? This-this-this- I don't even know what to call it. You call this love?" She knocked a few things off the table. "Kwasi, take a good look at us and tell me you sincerely think what we have is love."

"But, I do...".

"NO, YOU DON'T. What you are is obsessed! I understand that you think I am out of your league and you cannot believe I gave in to your advances but, hell, you are trying too hard, Kwasi. You already have me but you are still pursuing me, trying to impress me. Today, it's an expensive dinner, tomorrow it's a nice dress, you even went all the way to pay my sister's school fees when you knew

we did not need your help. You are tripping yourself over. Stop it. Stop trying and just be you."

Kwasi let out yet another "but" just when the place went silent again.

"Shut up, Kwasi. In the name of God, shut up! You don't have to talk all the time. You don't have to be all in my business every day, checking up on me every second and worrying about the least thing. You overwhelm me. Everywhere I turn, you are there. That's not loving. It's an obsession. It freaks me out! I do not have a breathing space. You do not know where to stop or where to pause". She paused.

"Sadly... Sadly, Kwasi, in all these, you have not bothered for a second to ask yourself what I truly want. This-is-not-love, Kwasi. Don't dare call it so. Don't tell me you love me when all you are is fanatical about me." She was on the brink of crying at this point.

"I understand there are ladies out there who may want this sort of obsession or attention. But that's not me. That's not my love language. That's not what I call love".

Prolonged Silence

Kwasi opened his arms and the next second, Angela was in his embrace. "I love you, Kwasi". She could not control her tears. "I am with you. I have decided to be with you. And if God wills, I will spend the rest of my life with you. Don't stress yourself about impressing me. Let your love be a gift and I will cherish it. Let it be tender and slow, and it will grow. That's all I want from you. I want you to be my boo; don't try to woo me anymore".

And they were both in tears.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOVE AND HATE IN ONE STORY

In the beginning...

Not even the oceans could keep us away from each other. Though the distances were unreachable, he would swim to me; it was either he had my love or he would die trying. The stars and the infinite galaxies could not keep me from his love. It was the same old story; guy meets girl and they fall in love. Then what comes after happens. But he was not only a lover, he was a fighter. He would fight bulls with no sword to impress me, ride wild horses to be by my side. and swim with sharks for my love's sake. His was a fearless heart made with fiery stone. His love was deep, and he would stop at nothing to be by my side. This was a different story – one I believed was endless. I knew he would conquer kingdoms and kill dragons just to make me his. Till I agreed to be his, he was not going to stop.

Now...

He hates me.

I broke his heart, more than once. I hate myself for it but he feels the pain more. It is written all over him and he is punishing himself for it. He lives in imprisonment. He thinks it is better to be alone because he is afraid of what he might do to me. He has banished himself to that place and cursed himself with the problems of my sins.

Pain. Resentment. Imprisonment.

His thoughts torment him, locking all avenues for anyone to get through to him. He hates me for the fact that he is putting himself through that misery. He

did nothing wrong but he is trapped and broken. I am afraid he might never come out from there. It is unfair to him. All the happiness he used to bring to me has turned into a distant memory. It's been two months since his exile but it feels like a century. I did this to him and I do not blame him for hating me. I deserve it and I am very sorry for the things I did.

I hate him too.

I hate the moment I met him and the fact that I grew to love him. He lied to me, tricked my heart, took my innocence and left me to have no choice. He is nothing special. He has taken control of me and he is the only voice I listen to. It was love on my side and lies and pretense on his side. He was my priority, but I always came second to him.

Bound by the painful infliction of his words, I bleed. I never imagined that the person I committed myself to loving would be the one who hurt me, stabbing me continuously with his word. I still bleed. I yearn for a moment to be free from him, break the curse of the words that bind he and me together. I hate that I am a coward and a prisoner who will never move forward. I cannot bear the fact that all I do is just pray – that one day it will be over.

I curse the first day he laid his hands on me. I hate every tear I shed on that day because each drop was a count of how much I loved him. It's a shame that I could not fight back and I did not have the confidence to stand up to him. I hate myself for not being angry enough, for not walking away but still enduring it all. I hate that I am oblivious of my freedom and I have subsisted in pain and misery for all these years.

I wish he were a better person; that he had better opinions and was a little more considerate. I can't fathom how my mind goes blank and whispers his name when

I see him. My eyes blur and focus on his face. They push liquid memories down my cheeks and flush away the memory of all the evil he has done to me.

My heart sings softly of his touch. I hate my emotions for they betray me any time he comes close to me. What I feel for him has no reason. It is painful how he sees right through me - all my defenses and all my insecurities. I wish I could forget; forget he was here; forget he exists; and forget he is important.

I wish I could fix myself. Fix these thoughts with a figurative hammer and shatter the bloody-tear-stained glass string which attaches me to his back, and pulls me towards him. It is strange that I still feel a strong emotion of complete care and pure devotion for him. This affection far outweighs the hate, pain, fear, shame and tears that come with knowing him. It's silly I know. Our story is a story of love and hate. It's unfathomable.

Every morning, I wake up with his arms wrapping me and whenever he feels a movement on my side of the bed, he tightens up his hug as if he won't let me walk away. So, I stay. I am still drawn to him in a way that baffles me. He sees me for the cheat I am and I see him for the fraud he is. We both admit that we are horrible, but we cannot afford to be apart. No matter how cliché it is, we are a perfect example of *opposite sides attract*.

God knows why. Maybe God does not know anything about this. He has no hand in it. I don't know why and I doubt that he knows why too. But maybe this is what is beautiful about us. That we are fire and ice but when we stare into each other's eyes, we burn with passion and hatred. Maybe this is what love is. You hate someone so much that it makes you crazy and the only way to have your senses back is to get back at him in a way which gives him no option but to fall in love with you and you with him.

The only way to quench hatred is to kill it. However, it never truly dies so we are stuck with it. Every day, we would feel that burning sensation of being under each other's skin. Therefore, I know very well that no matter how much I hate him, I will always love him and he, me. If loving him is a sin, I will dance with the devil and impure deities. And if dying with him is my fate, then so be it that I die in his arms because my heart enjoys its cruelties.

CHAPTER SIX
SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE OR MARRIAGE BEFORE SEX?
(A Case of Testing the Engine)

Mr. Lutterodt watched Nii Lante come out of his room with yet another lady. He made sure to keep his gaze on them all through the hundred meters walk of shame across the compound to the gate. The older man shook his head as he saw them vanish into the dusk. He turned his radio's volume up to listen to sports commentary on BBC.

"Mr. Lutterodt, you too why? Why do you like embarrassing me in front of my guests? If you do not look at the ladies I bring here the way you do, will you die?" Nii barked from the entrance when he came back to the house.

The older man was waiting for that reaction. It had been like that since the young man rented his boys quarters two years ago. He chuckled and waited for Nii to get closer to him.

"I will stop shaming you and those disgraces of women you call guests when you stop this sinful lewd act of yours". As a Fante man, Mr. Lutterodt's English game was always at an all-time high. "This week alone, this is the fourth young girl you have brought here and exploited. And it's only Tuesday. By the end of last week, you brought a total of ten ladies. So far, your tally for this month is three short of the number of days in the month. Since the beginning of the year, you have bedded 96 of them. And your all-time count since the day you moved in here beats the number of wives and concubines King Solomon had".

Nii was shocked. "Ha-ha-have you been...", he stammered, still not recovered from the shock.

“What do you want from this life? Why are you engaging in sexual activities when you are not married yet?”

Nii chuckled at the question. He needed a seat to answer very well. While he pulled a chair, Mr. Lutterodt turned the volume of his radio set down. After all, he was not interested in the match anymore. His team, Manchester United, had been trashed three-nil already.

Nii sat on his chair and leaned forward such that his forehead almost touched the elderly man's.

“I am testing the engines, you see? In order that I can tell which car will run well, I need to test the engines to be sure”, Nii spoke in whispers. He had a smile on his face. His reading of the old man's face sort of meant that he had made a lot of sense.

“Do you think what you are doing is tantamount to testing engines? Which car dealer would allow you to try as many cars as you have and are still trying? Again, it is only a man who has not made up his mind about what car exactly he wants who tests these many cars”, He paused to let it sink in.

“Think about it this way”, he continued. “If every man goes to the dealership to test as many engines as you have tested the number of times you have tested them, what would become of the cars?”

Nii did not have a response to all the questions. Obviously, he had never thought of his lifestyle in that regard. He was also silent because he was looking for some serious logic to counter the old man's wisdom.

“Mr. Lutterodt, you don't understand me. As a young man, this is the time to explore. When I get married, I will not get the opportunity again. And, it's not like

I don't know what I want ooo. The lady I am planning to marry, right now, she's playing hard to get so I am just having fun with these ones until I am ready to settle down."

"Do you tell these ladies you bring her the same you have just told me?" Nii was silent and Mr. Lutterodt continued. "Listen, Nii Lante. First, sex is more than two people having fun together. It has several implications for both parties involved hence it should not be treated casually. It's funny how you have your heart set on someone whom you are not testing currently and messing around with other ladies. If someone else was testing that lady's engine, would she have been the woman of your dreams? Finally, if someone were testing your sister the way you also are testing others, would you have been okay with it?"

"So, you mean I should only test the person I have decided to settle down with?"

"Far from that. That's not what I mean".

Mr. Lutterodt allowed the young man to process the information he was receiving. Nii wore a very pensive look. This was a life he had led for six good years. He was used to it, he had his reasons for doing what he was doing. People had tried to get him to stop but none had succeeded – not even one could make him feel what he was feeling at that time.

"How do I know I am compatible with the lady I marry?" Nii asked with squeaks in his voice.

"Compatibility goes beyond sex. It..."

"I know all that. But I am talking about sexual compatibility. How do I know that my key is the exact one for her lock? Will it fit? How big is the lock? What if the lock cannot take the key? Things like this".

“Do you ever consider how compatible you are with these ladies before you bring them home?” Another question which thrown at Nii that he could not answer. “Why does the question of sexual compatible only come up when marriage comes into the discussion? You bring these ladies here not knowing anything about them, but you have whatever fun you want to have with them every night. In the same way, you can take a woman you have never touched before and bring her home for marriage without thinking about your sexual compatibility. You can make it work with her the same way you have figured your way out with these strangers”

“The difference, Mr. Lutterodt, is that I get to change the ladies I bring home if I do not find them good enough. When I am married, however, there will be no room for choosing another option”. This time, Nii found something to say. It was Mr. Lutterodt’s turn to think and come up with another convincing punch.

“What do you do when you bring a lady home and find that you two are not compatible?” Mr. Lutterodt paused for an answer but Nii did not respond because he thought the question was a rhetorical one. The old man prompted him to answer.

“Well, we finish the deed, I see her off and resolve never to make our paths cross again”

“You do the deed nonetheless, right? That’s exactly what you do with your wife. The difference here is that the next day you find more and better ways of making the deed better. That’s what marriage is about. No two people are fully compatible before they get married. When you agree to spend the rest of your life with someone, you are basically saying, I am willing to make it work with you, in everything including sexual relations. Do not forget that people change,

circumstances change. I have heard stories about how young people like you used to have sex and eventually got married. After the marriage, the excitement was nowhere to be found. They thought, by their experimentations, they were compatible. Whatever happened at the altar before they went under their sheets, no one knows."

"So you mean no testing engines at all?"

"Exactly so, son. The thing is that sex before marriage has nothing to do with testing the engine. Like you, most young people are having sex for the fun of it; to satisfy their lustful desires. Note that marriage is not only about sex so you people should not be overly concerned about testing sexual engines alone. If I were young like you, I would be testing virtues, not vaginas."

This one made them both laugh hard. After the laughter, Nii Lante sighed again. Mr. Lutterodt could sense the stress on his brain. It had been a long night. He too was tired.

"I should leave you to go and sleep. You have had enough for the night." As he rose from his seat, "Ah-ha! Let me add this last one", Mr. Lutterodt said again. "Testing the engine is a risky venture. You can never be too careful with it. Do not forget that to test the engine, you must deal with the whole car. The engine could be the neatest and sweetest one, but how sure you are you that the whole car is safe as well. The car comes with its baggage – seen and unseen ones. Once, you have access to the engine, you expose yourself to all the compartments of the car and the hell that waits for you in each of them. This is just too much risk and it is not worth it – not one bit!".

"Hmmm..." Another sigh from Nii Lante and it was followed by a long yawn. He stood up, gave the old man a firm handshake and thanked him for his wisdom. Both men entered their respective rooms.

CHAPTER SIX
THE RIVERS ARE THIRSTY
(The Sad Plight of Ghanaba)

There is despair in our village. We went to all our rivers this morning and there was no water in them. The whole village is in disarray. The women are running helter-skelter and wailing. It looks like a king's funeral. No, it does not look like it. It is a king's funeral. The rivers were our kings. We depended on them. They provided for us – water, food and jobs. They protected us. And some of us worshiped them. If they are dried and gone, it is indeed the funeral of our kings. The women are justified to be restless. What will they do now? How will they fend for their husbands and children?

The husbands, on the other hand, stand and sit in groups. Very little is being said among them. One big question sat on their minds – how did we get here? We have become like a lion sitting on a salvadora persica tree (a tree used to make chewing stick) but has rotten teeth. How did we go from being a village with an abundance of water to becoming a people who wash their hands with saliva? They could not fathom it.

The once fertile lands are all parched. Our farms are devoid of crops or livestock. The underbellies of the rivers are exposed, cracked bare – almost like they are enjoying the heat from the sun's rays. The last sight of water is visible only in small puddles, where some children, ignorant of the woes of the village, play in respite from the mid-morning sun.

“Let's hope that the skies will open up soon. If not...” one man suggested. “Let's bring the chief priest to come and pray to the gods on our behalf. Maybe, they will look down on us favorably”, he finished.

Not too far away, the local church prophet bellowed,

“Repent! The end is here. It’s all in the scriptures – Nahum 1:4, Isaiah 19:5, Psalm 107:33. I warned you. Turn from your old and sinful ways, return to the Lord. Bring your tithes to His house and see if he will not open the windows of heaven unto you and restore your rivers to their former glory...”

Not a soul gave him an ear.

I see a little girl, Ghanaba. Her skin is coppery, tortured by the sun due to continuous exposure. The stench of her sweat is apparent. Her messy hair and dirtied skin are evidence of the effect of the sad plight of our village. So soon?

The girl’s eyes are firm to the untrained eye, yet I see hunger and thirst in them as they become unfocused. They are eyes of experience; it has only been a few hours, but it is enough to see enough to make her this weary. There are too many unpleasant things happening around her. The village – human beings, animals and plants – is dying before her. Her hardened look and stone-cold gaze are inadvertent reactions to the conditions she has been plunged into.

She looks old and pale, more wrinkled than my ninety-year-old grandmother who passed away recently. You would not believe she is only six. Sickness is written all over her. Her bones weep as her skin clutches tightly to them. Her face – thinner than thin – clearly carves out her sharp features, leaving the attention not on her full, cracked lips; not on her hollowed-in cheeks, but on her tired eyes. In those eyes, I see a dying girl. Yes, it’s obvious Ghanaba will not survive this. All her dreams and aspirations will die with her too. A bad hand has been dealt to her - she and all the children of our village. She is indeed a slave. Slave not to a human, but to this life; poverty and hunger are her master, ones she did to deserve being under; even sadder, ones which she cannot escape.

Ghanaba is one of the hundreds in this village. It is sad that this is the life she has come to know. The result of callous men and women who lived before her but did not care about the rivers. Oh, they did. But only about the gains they could make out of it. They sold the water to other villages, built factories which discharged waste into the rivers, used chemicals to fish from them and made them their refuse dumps. They were warned. They knew the repercussions, but they cared too much about their pockets to consider that little girls like her would come and suffer for their greed and wickedness. Now, the rivers are thirsty. And our children suffer for it.

A few more girls join Ghanaba under the tree where she sits. The leaves on the tree can be counted but it provides some shelter from the sun which is showing no mercy at all. It is the luckiest of all the trees in the village as all the others have died from thirst too. The girls look like siblings. The plight of our village knows no discrimination and it brings the same wrath on every one and makes us all look alike.

Ghanaba and the girls sing a song – a dirge of praise. Perhaps, it is their last song because they sing it with the last strength in them. For after this, no one knows what their stories will be.

“Home again

This land of our

Birth

What shall we do

With thee

Home again

This land of our

Birth

What have we done

To thee

Home again

This land of our

Birth

I return

To thee

Again

Home again

This land of our

Death

Have I come

To stay?"¹

¹ The song is a poem by Nana Awere Damoah.

They sing and the whole village is in tears. Our tears are for our guilt and the pain we inflict on this generation and the ones after us. We mourn for there is no future for us and our village. Our negligence caused it. Our children's songs will haunt us forever, even in our graves. We wish our words are, "never again". But it is even too late to say that. The rivers are gone; so are we. There cannot be any story sadder than this. This is why we cry. Our thirsty rivers are dead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY TWO WOMEN CANNOT COOK IN ONE KITCHEN

Mabel and Joan became very good pals in their second year in the university when they discovered a tarty professor was trying to take advantage of them sexually. Initially, Mabel wanted them to report the foolish old man to the authorities but Joan led them to think through the issue well and they both realized they could end up regretting it. Firstly, it would be a matter of their word against his. Then was the fact that the man was the dean of the college and so could frustrate their very existence on this earth if he wanted to. Finally, was the question, "Does it worth it?" as a colleague of mine would say. So, they decided against it but that single discovery made them soul sisters.

Two years passed quickly, and the pretty ladies soon graduated from the university. As if by divine design, they were posted to the same secondary school in rural Ghana to teach. They were excited because for the first time, they were going to live together. Preparations began.

They made a list of items they would need. Then, they ticked off those they already had. Later, they bought what was left and then they set off to the place that was to be their workplace and home for the next twelve months.

When they landed in the town, a welcome party awaited them. Mabel and Joan were pleasantly surprised. "Were they that important?" they asked each other. They would soon understand why they were met with so much celebration.

The headmistress of the secondary school, Mrs. Nyuivor and the chief of the town were the biggest guests at the welcome party. Fufu with assorted bush meat was in abundance. Palm wine and *pito* flowed merrily like the biblical streams of living water. And a traditional dance ensemble displayed to their admiration. The two

young ladies felt like goddesses! When everyone had eaten, and drank to their fill, the headmistress addressed them.

“Our daughters, you are most welcome to our humble town. As you can see, we cannot hide our joy in seeing you. For a very long time now, our secondary school has been short of staff. The only course we offer is General Arts, not because that is our wish, but because that is the easiest we can run with our limited infrastructure and resources. Currently, only two teachers in addition to myself teach from Form 1 to Form 3 and the pressure on us is terrible. Every teacher posted here refuses to come because they claim this place is too rural. Your willingness to come here has overwhelmed us.”

It was then that the two young ladies realized they were in for a lot of work.

They were given an apartment next door to Mrs. Nyuivor’s, where she lived with her husband and their eight-year-old son.

The young ladies had their own bedroom, hall, washroom and balcony. But there was one little problem: there was no kitchen inside. There was, rather, an outhouse wooden enclosed kitchen which had been constructed for the headmistress by the townsfolk. She invited them to use the kitchen with her. So, they demarcated the kitchen into two parts with an invisible line and packed their equipment and utensils and everything else that belonged to the kitchen in there. Luckily, the space in there was more than enough to comfortably accommodate both parties.

By some unspoken accord, Mabel was solely in charge of food for both of them. She bought their foodstuff, cooked and did their dishes. Joan, on the other hand, took care of everything else about the housekeeping: cleaning, washing, etc.

Things moved very smoothly. In a matter of weeks, they settled into their new roles and integrated well into their new community. The students were also serious and cooperative. Life was good.

One fine Tuesday afternoon after school, Mabel prepared *okro* stew with banku. It was when she wanted to dish the stew into their favorite porcelain bowl that she realized she could not find it.

"Joaaaaan," she called out. "Yeeeeees," responded Joan. "Have you seen our porcelain bowl?" she deliberately stressed on the 'our' because she could hear Mrs. Nyuivor watching TV and she strongly suspected she was the one who had taken the bowl. And her plan worked. Moments later, the older woman walked into the kitchen with the bowl. And that was not the only time something like that happened.

On certain occasions, Mabel would wash every dirty utensil in the kitchen, including Mrs. Nyuivor's, but would come later to meet their utensils used and dirty whereas the headmistress' were clean and unused. Other times, she would cook half a tuber of yam and leave the other half for their latter consumption but by the time she realized, the yam would be gone. Gone, poof! Just like that. Whether it was her ancestors who kept coming for her food, she would never know. But the fact remained that, only two women used that kitchen, and the other woman was not complaining. Sometimes when Mabel was cooking, the older woman would come around, stand over her and impose her own cooking methods on the younger lady. It got her badly exasperated but she managed to keep a cool head.

The last straw that broke the camel's back was when the older women used a piece of meat that was in Mabel and Joan's freezer without informing them. Mabel fumed uncontrollably when she found out.

"Joan! Joan!!! You see what she has done now? She used the beef I kept from yesterday, the beef I said we'd use for the Jollof!"

"AH! But who does that?" Joan retorted rhetorically.

"Well, apparently, she does," Mabel answered the rhetorical question.

Here was a dilemma. How were they going to approach their boss-cum-neighbor over this issue?

Finally, they agreed they would go talk with her peacefully about the matter. Joan would do the talking. So, five minutes later, Mrs. Nyuivor heard three quick raps on her door. They went in when she asked them to come in.

Joan presented their petition as skillfully and peacefully as possible, and it was a simple one: if she wanted to use anything of theirs, could she please ask them first? God knows nobody saw what came afterward coming. The older woman blew up! Who did they think they were? Did they want to fight? What at all did they have that she didn't have? Did they know she was old enough to be their mother? – would they talk to their mothers that way? And that was how the visit ended.

Five years later, Mabel was going to the market with her mother when she remembered the incident. She recounted it to her mother. Her mother laughed and asked her, "But don't you know two women cannot use one kitchen?" Mabel asked why.

"Women are very competitive, especially among themselves. In the process of trying to outdo the other woman in terms of frequency of cooking and 'cooking better food', some animosity often arises which leads to bad blood between both women. Another thing too is that, if one of the two women is irresponsible, she would not mind using the other's stuff and leaving them dirty. Naturally, this would also breach the peace. Pilfering too could be an issue."

Mabel smiled; she could relate to every single point her mother had raised. Indeed, experience was the best teacher.

ESSAYS

CHAPTER NINE

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

The topic of death is one that has intrigued men for as long as humans have existed. Questions such as “Why do we die?” “What happens when we die?” and the ultimate: “IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?” have been on men’s minds for centuries. Are there any answers?

Many religions, if not all, believe in the afterlife, although the doctrines vary widely.

Muslims, for example, believe that there will be a day of resurrection (yawm al-Qiyamah) when Allah will destroy all the life on Earth and raise all humans from their graves. They believe that on this day, Allah will balance the good deeds a person has done in his lifetime against the bad deeds. If the good deeds outweigh the bad, the person will go to paradise (Jannah), a place of joy and bliss. If the bad deeds outweigh the good, however, then the person will be punished in hell (Jahannam). They also believe that, when Allah is making a judgment, even a person’s intentions are considered. Christians also believe in heaven (paradise) and hell but believe that for somebody to make it to heaven, he must believe and confess that Jesus Christ is the son of God and is the only way to God in heaven. The person must also have obeyed all the laws in the Bible. Buddhists, also believe in a cycle of death and rebirth called samsara. Through karma and ultimate enlightenment, they believe one can escape samsara and attain nirvana, an end to suffering.

Several other religions believe that the end of this life is not the end. They all seem to agree that the spirit and the soul which are the nonphysical components

of man live on long after the physical body is dead. These are what theists believe. What do *atheists* believe?

The only difference between atheists and the believers from the many religions listed just above is that atheists do not believe in the existence of god, God, deities or any form of a supernatural creator(s).

Most atheists believe that religion is plagued with anthropocentrism. To wit, men think they must live on simply because *they are men*, that the universe revolves around them. To this class of atheists, which form the majority, life ends after death. When asked whether he believed in life after death, one quipped smartly, "Oh yes, there is death after life." They ask, "When plants, animals, bacteria, fungi and other living things die, are they also judged and thrown into paradise or hell according to whether they did good or evil in this world?" Other classes of atheists exist, however, who believe that there is a form of an unending stream of consciousness after death. Some also believe in reincarnation, It seems, though, that the dominant belief in the atheist fraternity is that there is no life after death.

It is clear by now and understandably so that along the lines of religion, there are deeply divided schools of thought as to whether there is life after death. Generally, the theists believe in life after death, the atheists do not believe in it. Religion seems not to give us a straightforward answer. What does science say?

Science is widely regarded as that objective, incorruptible, rational body that does not guess. Scientists try to form theories that are based on observations and then proceed to test those theories. But how can men test a theory of a supernatural phenomenon in a natural world? How can men use the seen environment to make robust conclusions about the unseen environment? Especially when no man has been able to return from the dead.

There have been several stories about people who “returned from the dead” and recounted experiences they had of heaven and hell but these cannot be tended in in the courtroom of science. In science, death is a physical cessation of life. Death means permanent loss of brain function. The fact that these people returned to life means that there was still some degree of brain activity, albeit abnormal and too weak to measure, probably. But they were not dead. Any experience recounted by these people who ‘returned from the dead’, therefore, cannot be trusted.

In the largest-ever scientific study into near-death and out-of-body experiences, scientists at the University of Southampton who spent four years examining over 2,000 people who suffered cardiac arrests at 15 hospitals in the US, UK and Austria discovered that some awareness may continue in humans even after the brain has shut down completely.

This study, the closest that science has come to explaining this controversial subject, found that nearly 40 percent of survivors of the cardiac arrests described some form of awareness during the periods when they were medically declared as dead before their hearts were restarted. “One man even recalled leaving his body entirely and watching his resuscitation process from the corner of the room. Despite being unconscious and ‘dead’ for three minutes, the 57-year-old social worker from Southampton, recounted the actions of nursing staff in detail and described the sound of the machines,” The Telegraph reported.

It continues, “Of 2,060 cardiac arrest patients studied, 330 survived and of 140 surveyed, 39 percent said they had experienced some form of awareness while being resuscitated. Although many could not recall specific details, some themes emerged. One in five said they had felt an unusual sense of peacefulness while nearly one-third said time had slowed down or speeded up. Some recalled

seeing a bright light; a golden flash or the sun shining. Others recounted feelings of fear or drowning or being dragged through the deep water. 13 percent said they had felt separated from their bodies and the same number said their senses had been heightened.”

But these are not death experiences; they are near death and out-of-body experiences and although they provide some form of data for further work, they are hardly conclusive. What this means is that science is not sure either whether there is life after death or not.

And so, the mystery lives on, and the age-old question still mocks us. Now, dear reader, do you believe in life after death?

CHAPTER TEN

MENTAL HEALTH - DEMYSTIFYING THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

It was a long time ago. Counting the years backwards now, I must have been about ten years old then when my cousin Kwame, who must have been about 18 years old at the time, was brought in by my auntie to stay with us for a brief period. His arrival was strange for two reasons. First was the fact that, I knew he was working in Ho as a taxi driver. What was he doing in Praso then, especially when it was not a festive period so at least, one could say he was visiting? Secondly, it seemed the 'elders of the house' were not exactly willing to host him. I would soon know why.

Soon after Kwame settled in, he went out for a stroll. One 'elder of the house' quickly summoned us kids and announced to us in hushed tones that, Kwame had gone to meddle with marijuana and had been taken to *Ankafu* for treatment but had been discharged not too long ago. *Ankafu* was, in fact, the Ankafu Psychiatric Hospital which is one of the few psychiatric hospitals in the country. The elder then went on to warn us to be careful around Kwame. And we followed his advice.

Even though Kwame did not even look aggressive or sick, nobody wanted to be around him. None of us wanted to eat with him, watch TV with him, talk to him or have anything at all to do with him. I believe he soon figured out that we knew his story and he stopped trying to get close to any of us.

Years later, I found out that what had actually happened was that, Kwame had taken his taxi to some isolated bushes so he could use the stream there to wash his car. He stumbled across a group of marijuana smokers who were afraid he would go and report them to the authorities, so, they forced him to take a few

puffs of the illicit drug. Those few puffs made him lose sanity momentarily, and in a few minutes, he was out on the streets of the Volta regional capital, naked.

Luckily, someone who knew him saw him quickly enough and took him to the regional hospital where his condition was stabilized and he was referred to the Ankaful Psychiatric Hospital for further assessment and treatment. It was after his course of treatment was complete that he was discharged and advised to take some rest for a few days before returning to work. That was when he was brought to our end. What this meant was that Kwame was harmless but we stigmatized him because we feared the unknown.

This firsthand experience is not a special one; there is a general stigma associated with mental health issues in Ghana.

Early in 2017, there was an upsurge in the number of suicide cases reported by Ghanaian media. Two schools of thought emerged. One claimed that the apparent increase in suicide cases was only because the media had begun reporting them as they occurred. The other school of thought had it that, the rise was cause for alarm; that something must be done in terms of creation and revamping of mental health care systems in the country. What was more interesting was how the episode of suicides exposed how the majority of the population generally perceives mental health matters.

Most people seemed to be of the view that depression, and consequently suicide, was either a sign of weakness or was attention-seeking behavior. They did not realize that like malaria, cancer, hypertension and myopia, depression, schizophrenia, psychosis and other mental health conditions were also clinical conditions that occur not because their sufferers are weak or are attention seekers.

The Mental Health Authority was established in November 2013 to promote mental health in Ghana. Three years later in December 2016, it was revealed by Dr. Sammy Ohene, Head of Psychiatry at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital that ever since the authority was set up by the then Mahama government, not a single penny from the government had gone into its funding. Not even the office building of the Authority was provided for by the government, the doctor claimed. This clear disregard for and neglect of mental health by the government is merely a reflection of the generally poor attitude of Ghanaians to mental health. What could be the reason?

First and probably the most glaring reason is ignorance. People either fear what they do not know, or they devalue its importance. Mental health education efforts are on the low. As to whether the lack of education is what has caused the general ignorance or otherwise, is a question for the gods. But a lot of work needs to be done. Knowledge and enlightenment are the surest ways of demystifying mental health and in effect, the psychiatric hospital, which is merely the institution that houses clinical and professional mental health care activities.

With the 'suicide epidemic' scare early in 2017 came the setup of a number of online mental health care centers and nongovernmental organizations. The reactive rather than proactive response is not the best. Preventive care must be given more attention than curative treatment because it is easier to do and is less costly to the healthcare system and the individuals, their families and society in general.

The spiritualization of mental health diseases is also one thing that must be looked at. It all comes back to the issue of ignorance. Most women who suffer from Post-Partum Depression or Post-Partum Psychosis are referred to churches and shrines for deliverance when their relief lies in the hospital. Even cases of

drug addiction, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are given a demonic touch and treated as such. This is sad.

Another issue is the structural system of mental health care facilities in the country. The 1972 Mental Health decree, NRCD 30, strongly emphasized institutional care as opposed to primary health care for mental health. This decree guided mental health care policy in this country for 40 good years before the Mental Health Bill was passed in 2012 to replace it.

Under this law, psychiatric hospitals are the first and only points of call for all mental health cases, whether mild, moderate or severe. There are only 10 psychiatric hospitals in the country and so, only the most severe cases are admitted there. The hospitals have therefore come to gain the tag of “mad men’s house” over the years. This is very wrong.

I posit that, if the community-based model of care is adopted for the mental healthcare as is used in the general healthcare system and as is enshrined in the 2012 Mental Health Act, the bad notions surrounding the psychiatric hospitals will be reduced. Let us take as an example, how malaria is treated in the general healthcare system. When it is confirmed that one has contracted uncomplicated malaria, he can be treated in a community care facility – a pharmacy, district government hospital or a private facility. If the individual does not get treated, however, the uncomplicated malaria will progress to severe life-threatening malaria which would necessitate the transfer of the patient to a regional or teaching hospital. If there are no primary care facilities, the higher hospitals then become pools, as it were, for serious cases which could have been arrested earlier if proper structures were in place.

Relating the analogy above to the mental health service provision system, if mental healthcare is incorporated into the basic mandate of the primary healthcare system, the number of advanced and severe cases will decrease. Also, the populace would be seeing more mental health cases at the community level and will eventually get used to them. This will translate into an appreciable degree of demystification.

In conclusion, if we want to remove the mystery and stigma associated with mental health and the psychiatric hospital, we need to embark on education and implement the policy changes that will manifest the change we wish to see.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOCIAL MEDIA – A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

What is the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning? A study conducted in 2016, the Deloitte Global Mobile Consumer Survey, found out that 61% of the 53,000 respondents check their smartphones within 5 minutes of waking up. 88% of respondents said they take less than 30 minutes to check after waking up, whereas about 96% of the respondents take about less than an hour to do so upon waking up. 74 % respondents check their mobile phones about 15 minutes before going to sleep. The study also found out that social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and Instant Messaging apps such as WhatsApp were the two things consumers check first thing in the morning. This data reveals how indispensable social media has become in modern days.

The benefits of social media are numerous.

Most impressive, perhaps, is how easy they have made communication. Today, at the touch of a button, I can send a message to my friend Felix in faraway Japan, in real time. I can sit in the comfort of my room and receive important announcements from my social groups on WhatsApp. Yesterday when I misplaced the key to my room, it only took a text to my roommate on Facebook Messenger for me to regain access to my room. Most people have exploited this aspect of social media to network with people locally and globally. People have found love, jobs, accessed news, and many other things which otherwise would have been impossible if not for the power of social media.

Social media has also made it easy for people with similar interests to connect with themselves. Music fans, soccer fans, even professionals in various fields have

been able to get in touch with each other and collaborate for positive effects. Very interesting is the power that such connectivity gives its recipients.

Early in the year 2011, a revolution took place in Egypt which eventually resulted in the overthrow of then president, Hosni Mubarak. Speed which has become both a plus and a negative for the internet helped a group of people with similar political ideologies to effect a change that otherwise would have taken a lot of time, effort and resources.

In the field of business, the impact has been massive, to say the least. A whole new field of marketing, digital marketing, has emerged to properly utilize the power of social media to promote business and is fast overtaking traditional marketing outlets as the marketing channel of choice for most businesses. Traditional brands such as Unilever, General Electric, Nike and KLM have adopted ingenious social media marketing strategies that have increased their global reach and added to their revenue. Smaller companies and little one-man businesses have also benefited from social media in that they are better able to gain and maintain customers via direct advertisement and referrals.

But the users are not only the ones gaining. The social media sites gain more, arguably. Facebook makes more than \$1 billion in advertising revenue per quarter and is worth more than \$100 billion presently.

Social media has also increased the news and information cycle speed. Most major news outlets disseminate information about what is going on around the world via social media. From terrorist attacks to royal weddings to football match scores, anyone with access to a smartphone and internet connection can know in real-time, what is happening anywhere in the world.

The positive influence on health, government, education, etc. cannot be discounted either. But is it all bliss? No.

It has been observed that, paradoxically, social media is making us less social. It is argued that social media creates physical and emotional distance from those with which we communicate. The 'human touch' is gradually being lost. It is easier, for instance, to call someone a fool on Facebook, when you would not do so if you were talking to him face-to-face. People hide behind phone screens and exhibit all kinds of antisocial behavior. This is obviously not a good thing but sadly, cannot be stopped by anybody aside from the perpetrators.

Of great concern, also, is the fact that identity theft has been used in many fraudulent activities. Criminals pose as who they are not and use this false identity to defraud unsuspecting social media users. A common trick, for example, is to create a social media account of an individual using his picture and name and then message the people who know him to send money for an emergency. Online dating site fraud is another. Fake job recruitment drives which demand money before one is employed, are also another. The examples are numerous.

"The internet doesn't forget" is a cliché which implies that whatever happens on the net can be used against one in the future. There are several stories about people who made unsavory posts and later lost their jobs, lost potential jobs, lost their chance to go to heaven, and got banished from the Earth. Well, not literally but they definitely regretted making those posts and even joining social media, I believe. One story I read talked about a brilliant young graduate who once made an I-am-not-an-early-riser post on Facebook and members of the job interview panel used it to disqualify him since the job demanded early rising.

In conclusion, social media is both a blessing and a curse in modern society. The difference between it being a curse or a blessing lies on how responsible and careful the individual is in protecting himself from fraud, regrettable actions and other 'curses'.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SOCIETAL STANDARDS: WHO SETS THEM?

Be faithful to your partner... Do not steal your friend's money... Respect your neighbor... Do not kill... Be appropriately and decently dressed always... the common theme running through these is that they belong to a code of conduct to guide human behavior.

It is immediately obvious that some are 'documented' rules whereas the others are 'unspoken' rules. For example, killing another man is a crime everywhere on Earth. It is a documented standard of behavior. Being faithful to one's partner, though, is not a hard and fast rule and carries no criminal tag. Circumstances surrounding infidelity, however, such as neglect of the upkeep of one's children may irk the law court and attract some charges.

But what is the essence of these societal standards? And who sets them?

To answer the first question, imagine a society where there are no rules; a society where you can walk into any shop of your choice and pick any item of your choice, provided you are strong enough to fight for it; a society where anyone who is sufficiently armed can hold you up on the street and rob you of your car or other valuables and shoot you dead if you resist the attack; a society where you are assured of no protection whatsoever from anything at all... did you imagine a jungle of chaos? Yes, that is exactly what society would be if not for societal standards.

Humans are social beings and so tend to live in societies. Order rather than chaos is the natural state of these societies and social order is achieved through regulation of human behavior according to certain standards. Without these social norms, there would be no cohesion in society. Individuals would also lack

a sense of direction because there would be no generally accepted model of good behavior.

Sociology, the study and classification of human societies, is concerned with social values. These are cultural standards that reflect the general good deemed desirable for organized social life. These are assumptions of what is right and important for society. They are the ideals that every society aspires for. Examples of important social values are equality of opportunity, equality before the law and gender equity. These are values that almost every society desires.

This set of values is incorporated into the standards of society and regulate the behavior of members of that society. Groups are the products of interaction among individuals.

When a number of individuals interact, a set of standards develops that regulate their relationships and modes of behavior. That siblings should not have sexual relations (incest); students must not cheat during examinations and parents should be responsible for their children's upkeep are illustrations of some of these norms. So, to answer the question of who sets societal standards, the answer is: the members of that society.

This is reflected even better by careful observation of societies all over the world. America, for example, is a get-rich-or-die-trying society where entrepreneurship has been a strong value over the years. In contrast, Africa has not been exactly a hub of entrepreneurship. In fact, until recently when most African millennials began venturing into the startup space, that space was virtually nonexistent. It is clear from this that the value systems of both societies differ.

Societies change over time and standards change along with them but one thing that cannot be exaggerated is that society would be no society if there were no standards.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

No matter who you are, there will be a time in your life when you must speak or deliver a presentation in public. What is public speaking? It is simply the act of delivering an address to an audience. So, speaking to your friend on phone in public is not the same as public speaking. Hahaha.

Most people fear to speak publicly for several reasons. Below are a few:

- *"I will bore the audience."*
- *"I will look like a fool if I make a mistake."*
- *"I will be lost for words."*
- *"People will notice my nervousness."*
- *"What if they hate my presentation so much that they get up to leave?"*

There are proven ways of overcoming this fear that is so widespread that it has even earned its own name: glossophobia. To give your best presentation each time, consider the following ten points.

1. Take time to prepare for each presentation. When it comes to public presentations, there is one thing you will need lots of, and that is confidence. Preparation and practice are the surest ways of getting your confidence to peak levels.

Identify your personal weaknesses and work on them. Know your material inside-out. Rehearse, rehearse and rehearse!

2. Begin and end your presentation on time. Arriving late for your presentation is a non-starter. Aside from communicating disrespect to your

audience, you will most likely arrive there in a rush. This can increase your nervousness.

Also, end your presentation on time. The best way to make sure you complete your presentation in time is to practice with a stopwatch and fine-tune your delivery to be within the time you were given. During the actual presentation, use your stopwatch to guide the timing of your delivery.

3. Know your audience. It is very helpful to know who you are going to speak to. Are they male or female? Kids or adults or old people? What is their literacy level? What income bracket do they fall within? This will allow you to know what to say and what not to say and help you relate to your audience.
4. Dress appropriately for your audience. Present standards require a business suit for most public speaking engagements but discretion is advised. Dress according to the occasion and according to the kind of audience you are going to meet.

Make sure your clothes are clean and well-ironed, your shoes are polished and your hair is tidy. Remember: first impressions count.

5. Have a backup plan for visual aids. Visual aids such as PowerPoint slides are excellent tools for presentations. But what happens if you are unable to use the visual aids you planned to use? What if your laptop crashes? Or there is no projector? Or there is simply no time for the kind of presentation you planned? Cover all bases and make sure you have a recovery plan.
6. Do not overload your audience with information. It is your duty as a speaker to keep your audience engaged. If you load them with too much

information, they may get bored. If you offer too little information too, you will come across as being ill-prepared. Moderation is the keyword.

7. Don't use inappropriate humor. Humour can be either good or bad, depending on how you use it. Know your audience very well to know what kind of humor would be appropriate and what will be inappropriate.
8. Vary your speech tones. When you sound monotonous, you take away energy from your presentation. Let your passion and flair be seen in your presentation; your audience will love you for it.
9. Relate your topic back to your audience. One great error that most people commit is to center the presentation on themselves. One or two examples about you are fine, but remember your audience is there to know how you can help them. They are there for themselves, not for you!
10. Learn from your experiences. Assess each presentation objectively, not to regret what you did wrong, but to learn from your mistakes and to know what you did well. That way, you know what to do and what not to do next time. Experience is a very good teacher.

By taking note of these key points, you are assured that you can face any public engagement with confidence and throw glossophobia into the dungeons!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE RISING POPULARITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMEDY AND HUMOR

Humor, and for that matter comedy, has been with mankind from the first time the first man farted. Ancient Greek, Indian, Arabic, Chinese and African cultures had use for different forms of humor, ranging from private jesting to theatrical performances.

The earliest written record of humor was of the famous philosopher Plato who in his work, *Philebus*, made mention of ridiculing and an inability of weak people to retaliate when ridiculed. Then, Greek philosopher, Aristotle, recorded dramatic comedy in *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory. The field has evolved since then.

There is a subtle difference between humor and comedy.

Talented Ghanaian optometrist and standup comedian, OB Amponsah says of comedy:

It is the art of putting together through research and observation, a relatable piece of humor to a ready audience.

It is clear then that humor is a central component of comedy, even though other elements such as sarcasm and self-denigration feature regularly.

Humor and comedy are seen under several settings, ranging from the professional to the semi-formal setting, to the informal. There are pro comedians who have attained enviable degrees of success in the entertainment world. Names that immediately come to mind include Kevin Hart, Chris Rock, Bob Okala, Nkomode, Agya Koo and Liwin. These are men who have become great solely

because they made people laugh on stage and on screen. But a new trend is arising.

Social media is now a force to reckon with; more than 2 billion people are on at least two social networks, the most popular being Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat.

The advent and increasing popularity of social media has introduced an interesting global phenomenon where ordinary individuals with no prior intention to do comedy, have discovered that part of their personality and are now involved in comedy, whether for commercial purposes or not.

Well-known humorists such as @crazeclown, @KingBach, @krakstv, Yo Bro and several others started and blew up on social media. Yo Bro, in particular, which features witty memes of a bearded animated character, began a movement that attained cult following. From the success of Yo Bro came offshoots such as African Bro and Nigerian Bro that are largely based on the Yo Bro concept but are tailored for the African and Nigerian cultures respectively. These are all ventures that are profit-oriented and make some good money digitally.

There is a different class of humor, the source of which is rarely known or identified and these are the social media jokes and posts that get passed around so quickly and vanish just as quickly as they entered the system. Most of such comic posts are usually shared first on WhatsApp then distributed on Facebook, or vice-versa. Usually, the source is not acknowledged and so there is no means by which the creator can be rewarded.

Compared to the commercial informal class earlier discussed, this category of comedians is undermotivated and under-rewarded. It could be argued that the creators are not motivated by money, but intellectual property must be

acknowledged. This system of social media comedy could be grown better if there were a system in place where creators of original content could better protect their work from plagiarizing. Doing this would create niches of creativity which would translate to monetization if nurtured properly.

It is instructive to note, however, that traditional comedy – standup comedy and comedy shows – rake in more bucks than social media comedy. With time, when individuals learn to maximize the potential of social media, we may see a change in the analytics but for now social media comedy is popular but does not really pay. Let's see what the future holds.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHY PORNOGRAPHY IS ADDICTIVE

Damon Brown, a regular writer for popular American men's lifestyle and entertainment magazine, *Playboy*, said, "It seems so obvious that if we invent a machine, the first thing we are going to do – after making a profit – is used it to watch porn." Brown is not far from the truth.

Within the past century and a half, pornography has been widely disseminated around the world using new technology. From the now archaic photograph to the film projector, to the VHS, to the DVD, to the World Wide Web, to smartphones, accessibility to porn material has spiked and continues to rise by the day.

Paul Fishbein, the founder of Adult Video News, is right when he remarks, "Porn doesn't have a demography – it goes across all demographics." In 2005, the magazine *Christianity Today* published the results of a study called 'Christians and Sex' in their *Leadership Journal*. Of the 680 pastors surveyed, 57% said addiction to pornography was the most sexually damaging issue to their congregation. And this was over a decade ago when the proliferation of internet technology was nowhere near where it is now.

Data released by Google in 2012 detailing where the most sex-related search terms were originating from, showed that Pakistan, a Muslim country, was number one. Pakistan's assumption of the top spot was not a mere random happening. In fact, Muslim states occupied 6 of the top 8 positions for searchers intending to seek access to sex-related sites. The complete top 10 were:

1. Pakistan
2. Egypt

3. Vietnam
4. Iran
5. Morocco
6. India
7. Saudi Arabia
8. Turkey
9. Philippines
10. Poland

Indeed, pornography has no choice demographics. From the religious, to the agnostic, to the atheist, to the boy, to the girl, to the teenager, to the adult, to the geriatric, to the janitor, to the top business executive, anybody with access to the internet has access to pornography. Out of every 400 million online searches, one-eighth (12.5%) is for pornography. That's a lot of searches for porn!

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines pornography as any "printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement."

There is no denying the fact that sex is a powerful thing. Comparable to the legendary element, fire, sex is also a good slave but a bad master.

One of the greatest tasks of teenagers is to gain proper awareness of their sexuality and take control of it. Curiosity has led many a teen to 'search' for information about sex, whether from friends. The 'digital revolution' has fueled this drive in present times. Although this digital revolution has brought positive returns to society, pornographers have also capitalized on its power for their benefit.

There is much debate about whether or not porn is addictive. Even among experts in the field of psychology and psychiatry, there seems to be little agreement on the subject. The controversy peaked when the Fifth Edition of the Manual for Psychiatric Disorders (DSM-V), which captures other addictions such as drug addictions, failed to acknowledge sexual addiction as a clinical diagnosis. The exclusion of pornography (sexual) addiction stems from two basic reasons: inadequate research and a lack of an agreed upon list of symptomatic behaviors. The exclusion from the DSM-V, however, does not mean it does not exist. As an example, let us consider the story of smoking. For several years, smoking was socially acceptable because there was little information about it. As more research was done on it, the health risks it posed became a well-known matter and consequently, smoking fell out of favor with science. Comparing this story to the decision makers' decision not to acknowledge pornography (sexual) addiction, it can be said that with time and more research, things could change. Despite this, though, professional therapists are overwhelmed with men and women who have lost control over sexual behaviors. So, pornography addiction is real.

But why is pornography addictive?

Scientists have established that the part of the brain that is affected by drug addiction, the dopaminergic reward system, is the same part of the brain that is involved in pornography addiction.

There are five primary chemicals involved in sexual arousal and response. The one which is most likely to play the greatest role in porn addiction is dopamine. Exposure to pornographic material triggers mirror neurons that are designed to cause an arousal, leading to sexual tension and a need for an outlet. The outlet

here could be either sex or masturbation, and the release of the sexual tension leads to hormonal and neurological consequences which are designed to bind the individual to the object he is focusing on.

Dopamine plays a major role in the brain system that is responsible for reward-driven behavior. Every type of reward that has been studied for addictive behaviors (such as drug addiction, addiction to gambling, kleptomania) has been found to increase the levels and transmission of dopamine in the brain. In fact, stimulant addictive drugs including cocaine, amphetamine and methamphetamine act directly on the dopamine system.

Dopamine levels spike when an individual is exposed to novel stimuli. Because erotic stimulus is not a regular stimulus (especially for first-timers), it triggers more dopamine and teaches the brain to get dependent on the source of arousal. And this is how addiction occurs.

One way by which internet porn cements pornography addiction is what psychologists term the Coolidge effect. In this phenomenon, mammalian species exhibit renewed sexual interest when introduced to new receptive sexual partners, even after refusing sex from prior but still available sexual partners. The abundance of porn on the net means that at each point in time, there is new sexual content for the addict, which will ensure persistent interest in the act.

Another issue is the age at which most people begin watching pornography, the teen years. A teenager's brain is at its peak of dopamine production and neuroplasticity, making it extremely vulnerable to addiction and rewiring.

So yes, pornography is addictive and these are the reasons why. But like all other addictions, with the right therapy and mindset, it can be overcome. That, however, is a story for another day.

THANK YOU