

Christmas ⁱⁿ London

By

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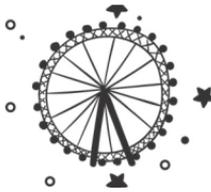
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CHAPTER 1



IT WAS THE second time I was travelling abroad; the first in which I would be able to take in my surroundings. During the first trip, when I was only three years old, my mum had literally clutched me to herself, even if I could walk. It was one event she always recounted, with the aid of the posts she proudly made of it on her Instagram

page. That was six years ago.

This time was different. "Careful. Watch your step," my mum sang, as she held two of my fingers, leading the way. We were climbing up the air staircase. "Welcome aboard, love," the air hostess said, nodding her head in my direction. I gave her a warm smile, my face looking down. Obeisance, perhaps. The air, mildly scented, was refreshingly different.

"Today is her birthday by the way," my mum announced, her tone establishing impeccable pride. "Oh my, happy birthday," the hostess replied with a grin wider than my mum's. Travelling on my birthday brought mixed emotions. It was likely the best gift I could have asked for, except that I knew my mum would keep telling whoever cared to hear about it. I thought many persons did the same, but on this occasion, my mind was swinging with the joy that it would be Christmas day by the time we landed. What I knew would happen

was that mum would ask if there was any need getting two gifts: one for my birthday and the other for Christmas.

On the plane, we walked down the aisle to locate our seats. I went ahead of my mum. We went passed the first and business classes and my heart literally thumped; what if the hostesses came up to us suddenly to ask us to turn in to those, I wished. But I moved on, keeping pace as my mum followed behind me. We were all going to land at the same time, after all, no matter who sat where. I always said to my mum that we would soon no longer fly economy class. We finally arrived at our seats. They were numbers 35A and 35B, on the left column of the plane. I squealed internally, desperately longing for a window seat.

I was already smiling by the time we moved into the row. Just as I had prayed and imagined, my seat was by the window. Behind us sat a woman with her baby in

hand. Across the aisle was a middle-aged man on the window seat with what seemed like his teenage daughters. They looked a few years older than I. While my mum slotted our hand luggage into the luggage compartment, one of the girls noticed she and I were looking at each other. She turned to pinch her sister to look at me as well.

The other girl turned, sweeping me with her eyes back and forth. They both giggled. I was not sure if it was my blue t-shirt with 'squad goals' printed on it with bright pink glitter, or my matching navy blue sweat pants with "squad" and "goals" printed on each leg that my mum made me wear. But it couldn't be my hair: black-to-pink ombré braids going all the way down to my waist. Instead of cowering away, I gave them a nasty eye back, before looking away. I couldn't be more satisfied. After my mum finally shut the cabin compartment, we were both ensconced in our seats and buckled up.

Some minutes later, the pilot's voice bellowed the pre-flight announcements:

"Hello esteemed passengers, we welcome you aboard this flight at a time like this. We hope you're looking forward to an experience to remember on your journey with us today. Both captain and crew are fully prepared for takeoff. You may ensure your seatbelts are fastened and your electronic devices are turned off or in airplane mode."

The plane soon started taxiing, increasing in speed. I could feel the winds massing over the aircraft's wings as it began to pick up pace. But slowly, the speed appeared to be fading as the plane started climbing into the airspace. It was not a smooth take-off because the weather wasn't particularly clement. I felt a little fuzzy in my head. My heart raced and thumped. It was so tensed that I had to hold my mum's hand. It felt like my face was melting into the chair as the plane

pulled itself, tilted first in front.

Afterwards, it regained balance and continued, suspended above the ground. The tilt was gone and I felt better on the inside of me and became settled. I then let go of mum's hands but a sick feeling came upon me still, as if to make me throw up. I rested my head down by the window and looked into the dark night. There was nothing to see, save the tiny particles of colourful lights several feet below. I plastered my face more tightly on the window, getting a wider and clearer view of the night sky. I thought to myself, we are flying through the night, while the world beneath us was asleep. While cruising at that height, it seemed we were sitting over the ocean. The aircraft seemed to be still in motion.

I continued looking through the window, but was interrupted by the air hostess. Her voice was calm and sweet. "Hello little princess, what would you like

to eat? Chicken or fish meal?"

"Can I have chicken, please." I responded almost immediately.

"And what would you like to drink?"

"Is it okay if I ordered two cans of drinks?"

"Sure, you can."

"Ok, I would like to have orange and pineapple juice"

My mum had been looking at me all the while. I thought she admired me handling things by myself but the end of my conversation with the hostess didn't seem like what she had been expecting. What else could I say? African mothers could be like that. Their gaze at you alone sometimes could call you to order. And I soon realized what was playing out.

"Err, please. I'd have orange alone instead," I changed my order, retracing my steps without thinking twice.

After my meal, the air hostess came back with a little nice bag filled with some

goodies as my birthday present. We had another exchange.

“Happy birthday, once again.”

“Oh wow, thanks a lot ma’am.” My mum and I echoed at the same time. Few minutes after I had finished eating and was winding down to sleep, I felt the tightest tug on my hair coming from behind me.

“Ow,” I said it almost loudly. I grabbed the hand and felt it was a soft little baby’s hand. I turned around, pulling it out harshly, only to see the baby I had previously seen. Before I could even regret dragging a baby’s hand that way, he was crying. His mother got up to see what was happening. She had probably dozed off. When she noticed what her son had done upon making eye contact with me, she apologized.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. She probably wanted to see what her baby was making a commotion about. Thinking the baby would actually calm down, it started crying even more again. What a headache it was to add

to my plane sickness.

I tried to tune her annoying voice down and sleep until the person in front of me, pushed their chair down to eat up some of my leg room. Speak of infuriation. I managed to get on my feet to see who that was. It was those girls. They had changed their seats because the seats in front of me were empty.

“Sorry could you move your seat forward, it’s uncomfortable for me this way,” I asked politely, acting like I hadn’t given them a nasty look earlier. My voice shook unintentionally as I spoke to them. They snickered a bit then ignored me. Great. I gave up, knowing full well I couldn’t convince them after our little feud. I tried another tactic. I asked my mum to tell their dad about it. It worked, plus, they got a little scolding that I could overhear.

CHAPTER 2



GOOD MORNING, RISE and shine,” my mum said, she was tapping me. She slid my window curtain to unleashed the sunlight on my face. I squinted, rubbing my eyes to see a food pack on my mum’s table. “This is for you,” she said, handing it to me while I unlocked my table.

“We have 30 minutes before we land,

so eat quickly," she said again. I opened the pack to see white scrambled eggs, bacon and croissants.

It didn't take long to devour the meal. I passed on the waste to the airhostess once she passed our aisle. I could then stand up to go to the bathroom but wobbled on my way there, due to turbulence that came upon the plane. I felt like I was on roller skates as I held onto people's seats, determined to find my way there. I finally got to the bathroom and tried to enter. It read 'occupied'. I held back my urine really hard as I paced around the corridor. When the door finally opened, I hissed. It's the same girl. I shove my way into the bathroom and slam the door shut. I felt victorious both for finally getting to urinate, and getting revenge on that girl.

Coming out of the toilet, the plane shook some more, causing me to fall. I trembled in fright, thinking we were about to crash. I got up slowly, pressing my palms

on the outside walls of the toilet. The hostess saw me from down the aisle and made haste to come and help me to my seat. It felt a bit embarrassing, but I was relieved, being helped back to my seat.

I saw on the plane screen that we had seven minutes left. I fixed myself into the seat then tried to relax more as the plane began its descent. Then the baby started crying again. And louder, this time. I closed my eyes and clenched my fists in frustration, trying to tune everything out and just survive the following seven minutes.

“Thank you for flying with us and Merry Christmas,” the pilot’s voice was still fresh with yuletide delight. It came through the microphone, without sounding diminished from the long hours we’d spent in the air. Everyone stood up, beginning to reach for the luggage compartment in order to take out their belongings. Unfortunately, the baby couldn’t read the room and lighten up a bit. Instead, it now harmonised its cry.

I could only imagine how strenuous it must have been for her mother to endure all that.

It was finally our turn to leave the aircraft. Outside. Fresh, cold, crisp air. Blowing on my face as I sighed in relief. "Finally, we're in London," I murmur to myself. We're finally outside the airport after the long line, check-ins and dragging our luggage for a long time. It's really cold. Extremely cold. As we stood at the car park, I was really looking forward to enter the prestigious London tradition royal cab. While I stood with super excitement, I was hit by the sweet aroma of coffee from Starbucks which was just right by the corner.

"Mum, please and please, pretty please... can I get a drink from Starbucks?" I asked her, stretching my luck. She caved.

"You have started with your buy buy. You know what that means. We would have to queue all over again." I was already pulling her there. I didn't mind. I just wanted to start my holiday experience from the

airport. We walked to the coffee shop and I quickly had to switch my accent to the British accent that I had been practising. I said to myself, it is time to put it in practice.

“Hello, how are you doing today, Mr. coffee maker.” I said it with so much confidence. My mum turned to look at me in utter confusion.

“Enhen, since when? Kilode?”

She chuckled but I kept a straight face because I had to stay in character. The young man looked at me smiling.

“Hello young lady, what would you like to order?”

“Caramel apple spice”

“Sure. Medium or large?”

“Large, please.”

My mum was looking at me. Then she voiced what she had been thinking.

“My dear, where did you learn all these from?”

“I have been watching and learning everything about British culture from TV

series.”

Soon my drink was ready and handed over to me. I was so excited that I wanted to taste it. The drink I had been watching on tv. While I was still trying to hand my mum my teddy bear back pack which I had in one hand, my drink spilled.

Fortunately for me, I still had some left in the cup.

“You are too hyperactive, this child,” my mum wasn’t happy.

“I am sorry, mum,” I was terrified.

“It wasn’t her fault ma’am. You don’t need to scold her, she’s just a child.” The coffee man lent his voice.

My mum looked at him like Oga, mind your business. I finished my drink and we quickly went to join the queue for taxi again, this time, the number of people waiting had reduced. We didn’t wait for more than two minutes before we got into our cab.

“Hello, where to, please?”

“North London,” I said with so much

excitement.

“Post code, please.”

I quickly turn to my mum to respond. She brought out her diary and gave him the codes. The cab man who happens to be a middle-aged British man was a bit unfriendly, I thought in my head. As we drove out of the underground parking, I was hit by the fresh winter breeze. It was a busy morning. People were rushing to work. Some were coming back from night duties. You could tell that the city of London is quite a busy place. I also couldn't help but notice all the Christmas decorations everywhere. Cars passing with Christmas tunes playing in them, the shops and buildings wearing the traditional green and red garlands, the huge sparkly wreaths and the multi-coloured fairy lights. It was all magical

I continued to admire the decorations as well as the way the people move around. Maybe because it's an airport road, but the sightings did not disappoint. The drive to

my uncle's house wasn't the closest, but definitely was relaxing as I slept off more than halfway through the drive.

"Pelumi! Pelu, Pelu." I heard a manly voice saying as the door swung open. I opened my eyes to see my short dark skin chubby uncle. "Birthday girl give me a big hug," he says with his arms spread wide open waiting for a hug. I think he expects me to run and hug him. How would my three-year-old self have done this? I had quite an imagination. I shyly go in for a side hug. "Your cousins are waiting for you upstairs; they can't wait to see you," he said with a jolly face as he took our luggage out of the car. Thank Goodness, it wasn't snowing today.

"Hello" a fair tall boy says, approaching me in a heavy British accent. He was wearing navy-blue jumper and black sweatpants. He gives me the most forced side hug imaginable.

"Hello aunty," he says, going over to

my mum.

“Hello Tise! Oh, my Lord, you are all so tall now,” she said looking up at him. He had become really, really, really tall. He didn’t look that much older than me though, probably by just a few years. He went on to help my mum with her luggage.

“Oluwatise I hope you have hugged your cousin saying hello?” My uncle says loudly as he comes into the house with the rest of the suitcases. “Yes daddy,” he says, kind of dragging his words. “Or should I tell her myself how much you’ve been waiting for her to come and all the questions you’ve asked about her?” He asked with a mischievous smile facing me. Now I knew he forced him but I couldn’t help but giggle at the thought of it.

I was really so grateful for their home being a bungalow. I really didn’t have the strength to climb all the way up a staircase any longer. Their house was warm and cosy, with a huge living room as soon as

you stepped in. You first notice the huge heavily decorated Christmas tree with other Christmas decorations and lights all over the cream walls. If not for the Christmas decorations, the wooden floor and the fireplace, their house looked like it came straight out of a black and white magazine. Literally, all the furniture was black and white.

“Let me take you to your room.” Tise said in a deeper voice than he used for my mum. Really? Didn’t he like me? I hadn’t even got a chance to talk to him as a cousin. He led me down the hallway which was also covered in thin fairy lights and garlands with tiny santas and reindeers on them. He opened the door to a small room. It was a warm room with a high bed and a dresser with a big mirror with lights around it. “It was my sister’s before she left for uni” he said, looking around the room. “You mean university?” I wondered if that’s what he meant. “Yes, if you prefer the long

word.” He squinted his eyes a bit like he was confused before leaving and shutting the door.

I took the room in again, enjoying the privacy. It’s the same colour as the rest of the house, but with differently coloured furniture and a carpet on the floor. This time, the dresser was all white but with pink details on its sides. The mirror was oval shaped and had round bulbs around it. It was like a princess’ dresser. I didn’t look more into the room and quickly went on the already made bed after taking off my shoes. My body relaxed quickly and my eyes shut immediately adapting to the comfort of the bed.

CHAPTER 3



I WOKE UP FEELING energetic and relaxed after what seemed like a few hours. Except for the fact that it was dark. There is no way I could have slept for this long. It's not possible. I jumped down from the bed and ran down the hallway wondering if I missed the whole of Christmas sleeping. To my surprise, my mother and my uncle were

in the kitchen talking and drinking with what seemed to be wine before looking at me.

“What time is it?” I was scared.

“Oh, it’s just three forty, you didn’t sleep for that long,” my uncle said.

“So, why is it already so dark?” I was so confused. They laughed at me. “That’s how it is during the winter in London. The days are very short and the nights are long,” my uncle replied.

“That’s strange. So, aren’t we meant to be in bed now?” I asked again looking through the windows to see darkness in the sky.

“In Lagos, this kind of darkness would be eight pm.” They laughed at me again.

“Don’t worry my dear Pelu, we haven’t even started the celebrations yet.” My uncle said.

“Tise!” he called firmly.

“Yes daddy”

“You and Pelumi should go down the

street and get the casserole from Miss Williams," my uncle ordered.

"Go on. Don't worry, it's not far, plus you need to stretch after that long sleep," he wrapped up all he meant to say, smiling. I don't think he had mentally registered that I was not a toddler anymore for him to be smiling at every statement he made at me. "Ah ah, I didn't even mention your hair, it's so gorgeous," he said. I genuinely smile at the compliment before Tise comes to us wearing his winter coat and beanie. "Where are yours?" he asked, pointing at his coat. I felt silly and awkward for leaving it in my room.

"Take care of her o," My uncle said avuncularly before I shut the front door. It's completely dark.

"It's just a turn over here and down the street," Tise appeared to be taking over from where his dad stopped.

"Miss Williams is our neighbour," he informed me as he walked closely ahead of

me like he was embarrassed, having me for company. I tried to catch up to him.

“How old are you?” I asked. “Fourteen.” His reply was so dry, I wondered why.

I remained silent as I overestimated this guy and now understood why he'd been given me a cold shoulder. We made a left turn into a street with a lot of stores. Not the kind of shopping stores but the normal thrift stores, drugstores, grocery stores and all. They were all empty.

It felt like I was in a graveyard, except there were no graves. There was no light in the stores, neither was there a single soul in or out. I was scared.

“Why is no one here?” I asked shyly

“Because it's Christmas.”

“So?”

“No one works on Christmas day. It's a rule.” He wasn't even looking up at me once. When I got fed up, I looked him in the face and asked, “Why are you so mean?” He then looked at me.

"What?" The question conveyed confusion. What followed was an exchange.

"You've been acting like I'm embarrassing. Like I'm a baby"

"That's because you are."

"No, I'm not, I'm ten years old"

"You're ten but you look like you just came out of a unicorn movie." He said that looking at my clothes.

I remained silent and thought I could only feel that way after being told off about my cloths a second time. We finally collected the casserole from Miss Williams before returning home. He broke the silence as we dusted our legs on the foot mat in front of the house. "I won't be that mean to you. I actually wasn't." I nodded before ringing the bell.

As the door swung open, the smell of hot seasoned chicken filled my nose. "Let's eat!" My uncle declared with a jolly smile while holding a wooden spoon with what looked like stew. I looked over at the dining

table and how quickly it transformed. It was filled with different types of food. Food, much more than what the four of us could eat. "Are more people coming?" I asked curiously. "Yes now, all your cousins are coming. Get ready." I looked at Tise with the same confused expression that I gave. "It's Christmas Pelumi, it's a family event." My mum said giving an indirect stern look.

"Get ready for a full house of people!" My uncle shouted happily, immediately after Nigerian music started playing in the background.

Several moments passed by as visitors continued to pour in. Some adults with their children waltzing through the door with either a bottle of wine tied in a red bow or a wrapped present that they'd place under the tree for my uncle. They came with their kids as well. Older, younger and even a newborn in one case. Of course, they had to be Tise's age and be as mean towards me as he had been. I'm not sure why a lot

of fourteen-year-olds do that. My other option with the younger ones, isn't even an option. Why on earth do they all have to be toddlers? Like, I can't even relate with anyone in the party. Of course, Tise had to act like he didn't know me.

I sat in the corner of the couch while everyone was out there dancing and talking to one and another. The food kept coming from my uncle who was busy in the kitchen; the music also kept playing; so, basically, it was like a house party, and I was the lame kid that sat in a corner. I couldn't help it.

My mum soon looked around and couldn't find me. She peered through the thronge and spotted my location, then bolted towards me. "Go and talk to other children. Socialise, jare." She said it with a glass of wine in her hand. I tried to get her to let go of my hand as she grabbed me towards the hallway to Tise's room where the party took place.

"Go in there and make friends," she

said. I didn't fight back knowing that I'd just wait for her to leave me alone and I'd never enter the room but she thought two steps ahead of me and made sure to take me there herself.

"Hello everyone, this is Pelumi. Tise's cousin. Some of you don't even know yet but she's also your cousin." She started speaking some five seconds after she pushed the door open slowly. There was immediate silence after she had ended her short introduction. They were sitting on the floor and the bed facing the tv where Tise and another dark-skinned boy held controllers.

The room was small, smaller than the one I slept in. It was covered in soccer player posters and pictures of him and a bunch of other people, possibly his classmates. The room was a bit stuffy, but in a cosy way, except for the fact that six or seven teenage boys were looking at me. There was only one girl, although she looked a bit

older than Tise. So, my chances of possibly talking to her were less than zero.

“You guys should be nice to her, she’s really great, Tise isn’t she?” my mum held my shoulder looking at Tise. “Yes, aunty.” he sounded forced. The rest of them stared at me like an object, then whispered to each other. Lord knows what they had to say about me, but it was probably my airport outfit, since it’s making everyone think less of me.

She gave me a little push forward, enabling me to take a few steps towards them before she closed the door and leaving. They went back to their phones as soon as she left to continue what they were doing. The room suddenly felt smaller and tighter. I didn’t know where exactly what to say or where to turn. I just knew I was the odd one out.

I slowly moved towards the bed and sat at the corner leaning on the headboard. They gradually started talking more and

more as loudly as they were before I had come in. They were slowly sounding it loud that I wasn't there. Although I wasn't the only person on the bed, it felt like I was not in the room. I felt so weird. Like, who were these people? Cousins? Really?

CHAPTER 4



SEVERAL MINUTES HAD passed. They were immersed in their world. They chattered away, playing video games and watching tik toks on high volume before one of them says something to break the cycle.

“Guys, what do you prefer? Rap or pop?”

"Music, right? rap obviously," Tise gave the answer in a voice I had never heard before. It was deep, yes, with a personality to it. I think that was who he really was, around his friends... well cousins.

"What do you mean? Britney Spears is the best thing that has happened to this world," the girl argues back. "Zina you're so funny," Tise said, before she threw a pillow at his face. Now I knew her name.

She turned to me all of a sudden "C'mon back me up. Don't you think pop is the best type?" she asked, looking at me and waiting for something to come out, as well as the rest of the boys. All the unfamiliar eyes staring at me simply made me feel uneasy. I quickly answered with "no".

"No?!" What do you mean? so you're agreeing with these uncultured lads that it's rap? shame on you" she said jokingly.

"No, I don't mean it's rap. Well, I think it's Afrobeat." I said it in a soft tone but

massive with confidence.

“What type of afrobeat? the one our dads play?” the boy asked the question, probably meaning a mockery.

“Well, a bit. But there’s a lot newer and nicer versions that are out,” I said back to him.

“Then show us,” Tise said, giving me his phone.

“Search for a song and it’ll play on the speaker. If it’s nice then you can play some more.” He said it calmly. This is the friendliest statement he ever made to me. Without questioning, I took his phone and played the first Wizkid song that came to my mind, Ojuelegba.

That was the song that broke the barrier. We now spent time talking about Nigerian songs as I introduced them to new genres. We talked, laughed and still criticised Zina for her music tastes. For the first time in so long since I arrived, they could look past what I wore to relate with

me as a fellow cousin. I hadn't picked my outfit myself; it made people think I was still a baby. Even Tise started warming up to me. There was no way I would have believed it, if I had told myself that we could in an hour switch from them ignoring me, to having funny conversations with me.

"O ya come for dinner," my mum came to interrupt our conversation. She had swung the door open with a plate of chicken and rice in her hand. Immediately, we got up and walked out of the room. I handed Tise back his phone but he gestured for me to hold on to it.

"You can continue playing from my phone in the living room," he said.

"Nobody is playing any of that stupid music you're always playing. Tise, please disconnect your phone from the speaker." His dad said it unmindfully. He made everyone laugh the way he said it.

"Oh well," Tise answered under his breath. But it was loud enough for me to

hear him as I was still laughing myself.

We sat at the table while the adults sat on the couch in the living room. Thankfully, his father's music did not disappoint. The food looked too good. Of course, there was the normal food I was used to eating like Jollof rice and white rice with stew. The other foods were unrealistic-looking. Apart from the casseroles and burger, there was a huge golden turkey in the centre. It looked and smelt too good to be true. There was a huge plate of red jelly, and Christmas themed pudding. It looked straight out of a candy store.

We were about to start the meal after my mum led us in prayer but there was an interruption.

"No, let us start with what each of us is grateful for this Christmas," one of the women said, making all the adults agree with the proposition.

"I'll start. I'm thankful for the presents I'm about to receive," Zina said with a smile

making everyone laugh. She continued, "and for meeting all of my cousins, especially you Pelumi." She gave me a little high five from two seats away. I blushed as everyone went "aww."

"O ya Tise, say something good." Tise's dad said to him.

He promptly obeyed, "okay um. First of all, I love you dad," he began his remarks timidly, making everyone chorus "aww" again. "I'm also grateful for everyone being able to make it, including you Pelumi. Even though you're a baby"

"I'm not" I snapped back jokingly. He continued, "anyways, you're lowkey cool and I like the music you listen to." He said it in a friendly way making everyone blush with me yet again.

At this moment, I felt so loved and seen. Who would've thought they would actually like me at the end of the day. "Ehn! Hope it's not these totally rubbish music that all these spoiled teenagers are listening to o?"

My mum intervened with her eyes wide open and wondering what he meant.

“No no, don’t worry.” Tise and I spoke the same time. We looked at each other, then laughed with everyone else at the table. Now it’s my turn to say something and I knew exactly what to say.