

AFRICANISM
T O D A Y



UBUHLE

From Scars to Stars

UBUJLE
FROM SCARS TO STARS

AFRICANISM TODAY BOOK
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FOREWORD

Can we go bigger and possibly do even better? This is the question we asked ourselves when we decided to produce our second book **Ubuhle**. A Zulu and Xhosa word that means 'beauty', the **Ubuhle** book is an authentic embodiment of African's resilience, strength, and power both inside and outside.

The previous book **Nguvu** took us on a journey that explored the minds and experiences of some of Africa's finest women. Together, we celebrated our ever popping melanin and we embraced our uniqueness in all its forms.

With **Ubuhle**, we decided to extend the horizons of what it truly means to be a citizen of the rainbow continent, Africa. Colour, gender, and creed were set aside in the compilation of this book.

Felicitously dubbed "From Scars to Stars", **Ubuhle** explores experiences from both men and women from across the continent that have been bruised by life's fury. These heroes and heroines did not give up until they saw to it that their scars had been turned into stars. It is our hope that their stars will also shine a ray of light and hope on those that might be going through similar situations.

We were honoured to receive a lot of entries from people willing to share their stories and inspire others. Unfortunately, due to strict moral and ethical policies that govern our publications and protect our readers interests, we could not include certain stories. Stories enshrined in propaganda or promoted divisiveness, violence, fanaticism, and hate speech were thus rejected.

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KOSISOCHUKWU OBUMNEKE-OKEKE

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KOSISOCHUKWU OBUMNEKE-OKEKE



KOSISOCHUKWU OBUMNEKE-OKEKE IS 28 YEARS OLD. HE IS FROM NIGERIA (ANAMBRA STATE). HE IS A GRADUATE OF PSYCHOLOGY FROM NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY AWKA ANAMBRA STATE NIGERIA. KOSISOCHUKWU ENJOYS SHARING HIS THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES ON HIS BLOG - KAYOBUM.BLOGSPOT.COM

The Fire Within

By Kosisochukwu Obumneke-Okeke



My story starts at the age of nine. It was an evening and I had just arrived home from school. Since the house was dark, I tried lighting a Kerosene lamp; unaware that the Kerosene was adulterated.

Before I knew it, my pyjamas had caught fire. My parents did everything possible to put out the fire but the damage was already done. I was in absolute pain from the burns. I was taken to Iyenu Hospital for treatment. I cannot remember everything that happened that night but I remember asking my dad if I was going to die and he said "no". In retrospect, I think he said it more for my benefit than anything else. He knew I needed to hear those words but his eyes could not mask his fear.

I was in a coma for weeks on end. My parents thought I was going to die. We all agree that my recovery was a gift from God, a miracle. When I finally came to, I remember shouting at the top of my voice that I needed water even if it meant someone dipping their finger into the water and letting it drop into my mouth. I felt like my insides were burning up. I was so hot inside I wanted nothing but to cool down the heat that was threatening to devour my insides into ashes. Unfortunately, getting water into my system proved to be a luxury I could not afford. The doctors advised against me taking water as it would be more lethal than the heat I was already consumed in. I was told that just a single drop of water on my tongue could kill me.

When I finally opened my eyes, my parents could not contain their excitement. They immediately called the eye doctor to examine my eyes so we could know right away if I had any complications with my vision. There was a silver lining. My eyes were perfectly all right! The months that followed saw me sitting down and eating liquids as my mouth could not yet handle solids.

During that period, I hated mornings. I dreaded the sound of the trolley along the hospital hallways and into the room as it announced the nurse with her daily dose of injections and torture. I was subjected to injections six times in a day. The cannula had to be sifted and my blood clogged. Let's not forget, the saline cleaning of my body, and the removal of bandages that hurt like hell. A repeat of these procedures every single day proved to be an ongoing nightmare I dreaded. To this day, I still remember the pain and shudder in fear.

After about a year of being in recovery at the hospital, I begged the doctor to let me be an Out Patient. I was haunted and scared by the many deaths happening at the hospital. That first night I was at home after such a long time felt like I had walked into paradise. Everything felt and looked new. But it was familiar too. I was finally home. I could finally see all my friends and playmates. Before the accident, I had been a very active lad that loved socializing and having fun. I wanted nothing but to be out there playing with everybody. But I was naïve to think that everything would

easily get back to normal. Nothing was the same. It was not just my appearance that had changed. Everything around me had changed. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. Yet again, my story was about to be rewritten.

The kids I thought were my friends ran away from me. Others avoided me completely. It was hard for them to believe that the scar-studded Kay they were looking at was the same one they had known all those years. I did everything I could to make them see that I was still that person but they would not give me the time of day. There were days when they would let me play with them, only to be told a few minutes later that they were tired and needed to get back home. I would happily say goodbye to them and go back upstairs. A few minutes later, I would watch them through the window return to the playing field once they were sure I was out of sight. Eventually, the constant rejection led me to develop a social phobia. I could not get myself to step outside the house. I could not bear any more rejections. I was just a child. I did not understand why all this was happening to me. Slowly, I found myself falling into depression without even realizing it.

As the healing process progressed, the itching started. I was told to take fowl wing to scratch myself. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. It only drove me nuts. The itching seemed to get worse by the day. It was bad that sometimes I would just cry from the irritation. The doctor later advised against staying in stuffy places. This led my father into buying a fan for me that was powered by the generator 24/7. But that was not the end of my troubles. I still had to continue going to the hospital every morning of every day. Later, my days were reduced to twice a week. It was some type of relief but I still had to take injections and lots of tablets. It can only be God that gave me the strength to deal with the kind of pain I went through because there are not enough words in the world to describe exactly how much I suffered.

I went back to school to continue my secondary education. Even here, I was faced with the same reactions from my classmates who could not believe how different I looked. The rejection later went beyond the school walls and into society. I was treated differently by most people I encountered. I could not pursue the same interests and goals as my peers because I was considered to be of a lesser class than them because of how I looked; I had to make older friends. One incident that stands out to me to this day is of me trying to board a bus to school. The school was situated very far from home so I had to travel a long distance to get there. I had to board a bus every morning. Every time I tried to wave down a bus, the drivers would zoom off because I had bandages on my arm that had blood dents. Seemingly merciful bus conductors would let me onto their buses but make me pay for two seats. Sometimes I would move with my younger sibling Chiso who would let me sit on his laps instead of paying for two seats. Fortunately, this constant rejection did not drown my zeal to go to school. I had a purpose in life and I wasn't about to let anything get in the way of that.

As time went by, I had to be booked for surgery. This surgery could not be done before due to my age. However, once I was old enough and my skin started shrinking from the healing process due to my physical development, it was finally time to go under the knife. I was booked for surgeries and I was operated on twice. What amazes me to this day about these surgeries is that my blood was and has always been enough for major or minor surgeries.

Throughout these ordeals and even now, God has time and time again proved to be on my side. I can't remember ever being scared or afraid to go into surgery. I never even suffered from any post-surgery traumas. My family has always been a pillar of strength to me, they have supported me all the way and given me the courage to face the pain with ease. My doctor too is a very professional and kind surgeon who took great care of me. ,

After secondary school, I enrolled into university as a Computer Science major. After two semesters I dropped out as I found the Statistics course a little too challenging for me. I went on to enroll at another institution where I pursued Estate Management for one semester but had to withdraw yet again as it too proved very challenging for me.

A family friend persuaded me to study psychology and I knew nothing about it except for society's association of it to mental health and rehabilitation. I was not impressed with the course and complained bitterly to my friend.

However, I surprisingly happened to excel in my studies. My course mates were students of ages 14 to 23, fresh out of high school whereas I was not. Feeling out of place, I became withdrawn. I would sit by myself during lectures and go back home alone. It was a very big institution with lots of good looking girls and boys. My scars announced my presence everywhere I went around campus. My social anxiety and insecurities about my looks made it hard for me to excel in my studies initially. The first semester was especially challenging because no one would let me into their study group. I did everything by myself.

When the second semester came, I took up the Class of Personality Formation. That course transformed my life tremendously as it helped me deal with some of the issues I had been privately struggling with. My real personality eventually shone through so much so that I was able to make more friends than the number of rejections I had suffered. In the process of gaining my social confidence, I was able to befriend a number of girls with whom I had no trouble taking pictures with. I was finally strong and confident despite being unable to date anyone for fear that they might be doing so out of pity. I graduated a year later than my peers as I had to do an extra year to meet the requirements for graduation. This I did without any trouble.

I had been struggling with depression in 2009. To deal with it, I wrote something about myself and sent it to a blogger. Unfortunately, my submission was rejected because the blogger found my content uninteresting. However, I did not let this change my mind about sharing my thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others. In 2011, I picked up my laptop and created a blog. On it, I shared stories about myself and more people read and shared my content. Sharing my experiences like this allowed people to become curious about me and take an interest in my life. One day during the Psychology week at school, I attended a pool party that saw me being the center of attention for a short while. I encountered people that had come across my blog and these asked me questions about the extent of my burns and other areas of interest. I ended up surprising myself and everyone else when I took off all my clothes except for my swimming shorts. Suffice to say, there was more to me than met the eye. There was more to me than the scars on my body.

Without knowing it, I had come to accept who I am. After this, I realized that fear of rejection and insecurity is what keeps us from fulfilling our full potential. It's very tempting to assume that people's perception of us is what keeps us from developing and achieving our dreams. In reality, it's how we perceive ourselves that will either give us the power to take on the world with brevity or deprive us of that very power by burying ourselves in guilt, shame, insecurity and a fear of rejection.

I would be a fool to assume that I achieved all of this by myself. See, whereas for a while I only saw rejection in the faces of people I encountered, I had, right before me and by my side people that had stuck through the mud with me; my family, the doctors, and the nurses. These people did not just happen by chance. They had been placed in these positions to help me deal with my pain and challenges. I was never alone. It was fear that made me feel alone. I survived all of this because God had been working to turn my scars into stars.

And indeed I am shining bright from the inside to the outside.



Kosisochukwu Obumneke-Okeke
before the fire

PASSANT MOHAMED

PASSANT MOHAMED

PASSANT MOHAMED



PASSANT MOHAMED IS A 19 YEARS OLD EGYPTIAN. SHE GRADUATED FROM AN INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL HAVING THE IGCSE CERTIFICATE AND CURRENTLY IN HER SECOND YEAR IN THE GERMAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO. SHE IS PURSUING STUDIES IN MEDIA ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY.

MIS EN SCENE: The Healing Words

By Passant Mohamed



I have always loved art, fashion, and modeling. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough to help me decide what I wanted to do with my life that could be useful and have a positive impact on others. I have always believed in the power of words. I believe that human beings are the main source of inspiration, motivation, and support for one another. A word, smile or even a simple action can make one's day better and help them take tremendous steps in their life that could either drastically destroy their life or make it better.

Hearing people blindly tell me to "follow your passion and don't waste your life away" has only left me feeling more confused. Others keep encouraging me to "seek a guaranteed well-paid career" as it offers more security.

I reached a point where I contemplated giving up on my passion in order to pursue a career path that would provide me with some type of job security and systematic life. That was how I ended up studying software engineering. But I was wrong. I still had within me this strong desire and craving for more, something significant and meaningful. Something that would transform the lives of those I encountered. But still, I had fears and reservations. I thought that using the Jihab was going to hinder my ambitions of becoming a model. I feared that I would not be accepted by others and that I did not have the standard qualifications to achieve that. Eventually, I gave up on this dream altogether.

However, in time, as I continued to learn more about myself, I discovered certain qualities about myself that gave me a new outlook on life. I discovered that I had the power, creativity, and persistence that was needed to achieve my long lost dream. I soon found myself on a journey that would help turn my self-induced scars to stars. I partnered with my best friend and together we set up a website dedicated to curating events, decorations and selling customized handmade gifts. We called it MISE EN SCENE. Our motto is "being the reason behind someone's smile." It is a true embodiment of my passion and everything I hoped to achieve in my dreams.

Our page started growing and we started earning a profit. It was surprising that we could make that much profit because we had very little confidence in managing a business. Hearing customer's feedbacks, taking orders and designing our own collection was a new overwhelming experience that helped me grow.

The progress that the business was making gave me the courage and confidence to create my Instagram page as a blogger. I finally had the courage to step into new territories that I believed would help me achieve my dream of becoming a model.

Thanks to the great support I received from my best friend, I was able to take that first step into the modeling world. She took numerous professional photoshoots of me and posted them online. It wasn't easy waiting for people's reactions and having the fear of failure but success proved to be more interesting and rewarding. Over time, I started getting recognition. Direct messages from known pages and brands who wanted to share my pictures started coming.

Perhaps these might appear simply as primitive steps towards my dreams but I have great hope for the future! "Believe in yourself so that others believe in you!" will always be my motto. Sometimes I can't help looking back at the times I hesitated and held myself back due to lack of confidence; the feeling that I could have achieved all of this sooner had I only had enough confidence and self-esteem. These regrets have awakened me to what one can achieve if only they have the will and determination to create a better version of themselves. There are such amazing things we can achieve if we give ourselves the chance to turn our scars into stars. My experience with my best friend made me realize just what a ripple effect a simple act of caring can have in people's lives. Perhaps I would not be where I am today had she not pushed and encouraged me towards my dreams. Indeed our words have power. They have the ability to help transform our lives and those around us when used cautiously and wisely. They can destroy too when used carelessly. Therefore, I would urge everyone to use their words to build up people, not tear them down.

ALBERTINA M NANDE

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ALBERTINA M NANDE IS A 21-YEAR-OLD NAMIBIAN CITIZEN AND 4TH-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT. SHE IS ALSO AN AUTHOR, BLOGGER AND A SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR AND ACTIVIST. IN EVERY WAY SHE CAN AND ON WHATEVER PLATFORM, SHE SEES TO BRING THE MESSAGE OF LOVE, HOPE, HEALING, AND SALVATION.

Piecing the Torn Pieces

By Albertina M Nande



Growing up, life kicked me around a lot. I was sexually violated both as a child and teenager. My sexual purity, my innocence, and my childhood were taken away without my permission before I could actually grow old enough to appreciate them. During my primary school years, I was taken advantage of by two of my cousins. Later, when I was in junior high school, I was uncomfortably touched from time to time by someone also close to me, who actually was one of the people that should have been protecting me. At the time when I was in lower primary school, my cousins took advantage of me to try out some of the things they wanted to do sexually. They never really forced themselves on me during these 'experiments.

They simply told me what to do and I followed instructions. And afterward, it wasn't like they told me to shut up and tell no one, I just somehow felt it had to be kept a secret. To me, it looked like we were just playing a game together. As I got older, the games we played stopped and the abuse stopped too. But their effects on me did not.

The fact that I never said no, reported or ran kept eating me up inside for years. I thought it was my fault. Like, who gets told to jump and with no argument simply jumps? I am a strong-willed girl, why couldn't I refuse then? Did I want it too? I was just a child, why would I possibly want sex then? It is not like I had hormones to fight and desires to control. Battling with such questions brought about so much shame and intense guilt within me. Unfortunately, the next incident didn't help things any further.

As a teenager, a person really close to me constantly touched me seductively on my butt, inner thighs, and breasts. Not only did he do that, he also seemed to find pleasure in using obscene language while he did it. He was an alcoholic, I was a woman. My perception at the time was that it was normal for women to be treated that way because we are women. I never really took it as abuse. Despite growing older, smarter and more aware of what was happening then, I was still disturbed by the fact that he looked at me the way he did. Whenever I was around him, I wondered about how he saw me. Was I that worthless? To the world, was I just a tool for pleasure?

I don't quite remember how long this went on for, but I eventually went to boarding school and it stopped. I was literally saved by the (school) bell! My life was a mess because I had no idea how a woman ought to be treated. We grew up being taught to suppress our emotions because telling an adult how you feel was a waste of their time or you were simply being a spoiled child. The fact that I grew up questioning my mother's love for me made me question my worth even further. I battled with feelings of not being worthy of love and care, of whether or not I mattered at all because despite my mother being alive, she was not around.

I often wondered why she had abandoned me. Maybe if she was around and we had a relationship, I would have found the courage to tell her what those boys were doing to me, or what this man was doing to me. I was an angry child and an even angrier teenager. There were times when I needed a mother's embrace so much but there was no mother figure in my life that I felt would understand me. My grandmother was awesome but I felt like she wouldn't understand a teenager's emotions.

Sexual abuse, I believe, is more psychological than it is physical. Because of my experiences with it, I knew no other life apart from one of strife and sorrow, alone and in pain. I felt I had no one to talk to; no one I felt could understand me. I lived in so much shame, denial, hatred, anger, bitterness, and guilt- until Jesus found me!

I gave my life to Christ in 2015 and that is how my healing journey began. At my shame-filled and painful lowest, God found my heart. He spoke to my heart about healing and one day, a memory back in time changed the entire trajectory of my life. This was my turning point. I think there comes defining moments of our lives where we have to face our demons-one way or another. The first step I felt I should take was getting out of denial and then speaking up about the abuse. I eventually found the courage to tell a trusted friend. Talking eventually led me to a group counseling for sexual abuse survivors in our church and this counseling was one of the best things that ever happened to me in my journey to healing. After the counseling, I felt God wanted me to turn my mess into a message, and allow Him to turn into good what the enemy meant for bad. And my scars turned into stars when I shared my story with the rest of the world in my book: *The Untold: Breaking Free from the Chains of Sexual Abuse*. I felt strongly led to write my story of how God moved me to the other side and I have been amazed by how the book has changed lives.

I have recently been encouraged to stop looking at my past with regret and rather be glad that life happened the way it did. It was ugly and bad, but my scars are beautiful and lives are changed as people behold my scars. Since I can't change it, I don't regret it either. I will embrace my scars and shame the enemy with them.

I seek opportunities to share my story because I believe each one of us has had to deal with past or present pain and everyone can use a dose of hope and encouragement. The future is also not guaranteed to be all rosy because we live in a fallen world so every chance we can get to encourage the world, to love people and bring them the message of hope, healing, love, and salvation, we should take it.

Wherever you are, whatever your story, be encouraged today to break free!

HOLLY RODRIGUES

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HOLLY RODRIGUES



HOLLY RODRIGUES AKA THE POETRESS IS AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN SPOKEN WORD ARTIST AND RADIO PERSONALITY ORIGINALLY FROM MIAMI, FLORIDA. THE RELEASE OF HER EP SANGRIA IS A MUSICAL SPOKEN WORD ALBUM BASED ON HER LIFE EXPERIENCES AND SPIRITUALITY. SHE USES POETRY AS A GIFT TO REACH PEOPLE IN A WAY THAT CAN HELP ELEVATE CONSCIOUSNESS AND GIVE PEOPLE A SENSE OF HOPE. MODELING IS ALSO A FORM OF ART SHE USES TO BRING TOGETHER AVANT-GRADE AND CLASSICAL BEAUTY. STORYTELLING THROUGH WORDS, MUSIC, AND PHOTOGRAPHY IS THE DYNAMIC THAT IS ART TO THE POETRESS.

Mashallah

By Holly Rodrigues aka The Poetress



The emotional scars I have been dealt with come from my childhood. After being abandoned by my mother at a tender age and being raised by a single father in his elderly stage of life, I faced many struggles that no child my age should ever have to face. There was a 20 year age gap between my father and mother. Naturally, this meant that my father had me late in life.

I was nine years old when my mother abandoned my father and me. With her out of the picture, I bid adieu to my childhood as I assumed the role of being my elderly father's caretaker. Taking on this role became a constant cause of resentment towards my mother. There was no connection between us so I didn't know exactly what to feel towards her.

The terrible relationship that existed between my parents always left me in an anxious and confused state. Unbeknownst to me, I had developed an emotional wound towards my mother. Something that would take a while to heal.

We all come into the world needing the tender presence of a mother's touch, nurture, care, and love. In fact, the mother's influence begins when we are in the womb. The mother wound is the pain of being a woman passed down through generations of women in patriarchal cultures. It can manifest as dysfunctional or self-destructive ways of dealing with pain.

My healing process began with self-care. After losing over 100 pounds and taking better control of my health, I felt better. In addition to taking charge of my health, meditation changed my whole life and led me to a beautiful spiritual journey of healing myself from all ancestral and inner traumas. I also contribute my faith through prayers and mantras to help me stay alighted and in tune with my true authenticity and a state of gratitude. Poetry and modeling is my outlet to tell these stories through words, music, and photography of self-love and healing.

Growing up, I saw how much deep-seated wounds and traumas can influence our journey towards achieving success in life. How can we progress and heal with such ugly brooding wounds? Recognizing these wounds awakened me to the beautiful power of forgiveness. Since then, I wear these scars not with shame, but as a reminder that forgiveness is mostly for my own sake, rather than for someone else.

-Mashallah-

A Poem by Holly Rodriguez

It was like I had 50 mothers that day
All who embraced me and smelled of milk and honey with a little cinnamon
It was like I had received the mother I was missing most my life
In 50 women
Who held me and said "MashAllah"
And told me I'll make a good Muslim woman
Allah knew the hole in my heart
And he exceeded that emptiness
My cup runneth over –mashallah

My sister said you ever become a Muslim
I'll shave your head
You cannot penetrate this veil, dear sister
Protected by the most high alhamdulillah
My coils are the spiritual antennas picking up interceptions from the divine
Universally aligned
5 prayers facing skyline
Allah is no entity separate from me
Allah is in you too, dear sister
So start with your own follicles
Cause I have 50 mothers ready to argue with you!

It started with Wudu
Where I rinsed each hand three times
Number 3 symbolizing the principle of increase
So everything I touch I come in peace
My mouth three times
To bless what I speak
My nose to bless what I breathe
You see it's a spiritual increase
Raising my vibration and release what no longer serves me
Only Allah can be a product of this masterpiece-mashallah
I even greet you in peace
Salam alakeim
Why have you mistaken me with your own reflection of hate
Tighten up sis
No time to be walking around in such distaste

When you are called you listen
I got tired of walking in division
Why do you assume that my life is destined to doom
Got tired of carrying that mother wound
I was only setting up myself a tomb
I healed my own womb
With 50 mothers
That day

ELIYA RENATH NKUBAH
ELIYA RENATH NKUBAH
ELIYA RENATH NKUBAH



ELIYA RENATH NKUBAH IS A 21 YEARS OLD TANZANIAN. HE WAS BORN IN A SMALL TOWN CALLED SONGEA, IN RUVUMA REGION, TANZANIA. HE IS CURRENTLY STUDYING ARCHITECTURAL, INTERIOR DESIGNING AND FURNITURE AT LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY (LPU) – INDIA. HE IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST WITH A FOCUS ON CHILDREN, AN INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER, FOUNDER OF EGA FOUNDATION AND GOD'S SERVANT.

The Route of Becoming

By Eliya Renath Nkubah



I come from a middle-class family, neither poor nor rich. My life has been laced with many difficulties, but I've always believed that my struggles make me stronger. That's how I've managed to overcome different challenges. Many people like my friends, neighbors, relatives did not expect me to be where I am today. My determination and the decision I made not to give up have helped me to reach at least fifty percent of my goals. At a point, studying for me became challenging because my parents who had been sponsoring my education all along retired and did not have the financial capacity to continue doing so. My relatives could also not provide financial support for the education of my brother and me. This phase of my life brought with it many challenges and disappointments.

Things became so bad that my classmates in primary school would refuse to associate themselves with me due to the hard life I was living.

I watched with a heavy heart as kids from well-to-do families visit places I could not afford. I faced constant rejection from girls I wished to be my friends because they thought I had terrible body odor. They would refuse to seat with me or be associated with me in any way. Others named me "MASKINI JEURI" a Swahili word for a poor person who disturbs. Even my neighbors who were studying at the same school with me didn't want to walk with me for fear of being associated with poverty.

The most hurtful experiences at school came from teachers that gave me bad names because my parents could not pay tuition fees on time. I always shared these experiences with my mother and to this day, I am still intrigued by her reactions to them. Smiling, she would tell me, "Son this is just a phase. You don't need to feel disappointed. God is preparing you for good and bigger things in FUTURE." Sometimes she would say, "My son! Learn to focus only on your future. Do not compare your life to that of others."

I remember selling many architectural planning ideas to professional architects when I was a child. I don't know why they believed in me but I knew all of that was by the grace of God and the talent I received from him. My mother encouraged me to become a professional architect. She taught me that in order to reach my goals, I needed to work hard, to never give up on my studies. From that day I started planning many architectural ideas and sold them. I sold them for a low price almost 10,000 Tanzanian shillings (7.69 USD at that time) because I needed some money for my school. There came a time when I built a good relationship with teachers when I was in primary because I drew an architectural planning idea for them. They appreciated what I did. They spent their time teaching me after school hours and honoring me with a gift as the best technical artist of the school during my graduating ceremony in 2010. It was around this time that I started to envision a bright future for myself.

The biggest problem came when I was in an advanced level (high school) in 2016.

I got an injury in my knee (meniscus tears) which prompted surgery that made me stay in the hospital and at home for a long time during my studies. Many people assumed that would be my end. However, I believed in getting better and being the best version of myself. Trusting in God helped me through these difficult times. If I wanted to get better, I needed to be persistent and resilient. I used my recuperating time to study and plan my future. I also started receiving mentorship from people already grounded in the industry. One such person was a man named Ally Juma whose words still echo in my ears; each champion was once a competitor that did not despair. I spent a lot of my mid-nights studying and praying in the hope that I will one day become the best.

Many people ask me how I managed to overcome the challenges I faced. It's surprising to some of them that a poor boy with a background like mine managed to somehow make something of his life. I always give them the same response; I invest in myself before anyone does, I believe in myself before anyone does, and I cheer for my successes first before anyone does. I will always be grateful to my parents because they modeled me into the person I am today. They demonstrated the value that can be found in relationships and human connections and I have used those lessons in my business ventures.

I approach my hurdles not as an impossible mission, but rather, as exams I simply need to pass. I'm God's servant. He allowed me to go through those physical and emotional scars so I can help people going through similar situations. In everything, you do remember those in need. It doesn't matter who you are, where are you coming from or where you are going. What matters is your commitment to yourself and others. I love God and appreciate Him for making me stronger.

ANISA EL-JONSAFI

ANISA EL-JONSAFI

ANISA EL-JONSAFI



ANISA EL-JONSAFI IS 25 YEARS OLD. SHE IS BRITISH, WITH TANZANIAN AND MOROCCAN ROOTS. SHE GRADUATED WITH FIRST CLASS HONOURS IN CRIMINOLOGY. EVEN THOUGH SHE CURRENTLY WORKS IN FINANCE, HER DREAM JOB IS TO WORK FOR AN NGO THAT HELPS DISPLACED REFUGEES OR HOMELESS PEOPLE RESETTLE INTO SOCIETY.

Dare to Escape

By Anisa El-Jonsafi



If you were to meet me as a child and speak to me about the experiences I have encountered along the way, I would not believe you. How can you prepare a child for pain, heartache, loss, and grief? Even though I have faced trials more than the average teenager out there, it is my experience as a survivor of domestic violence that I wish to share. I say, survivor, not because I was close to death (although there were moments that made me fear for my life). It is because I moved on from this painful experience and refused to let it shape the rest of my future.

I was 16 when I decided to go against my mother and move back to the UK from living with her in Tanzania (I was born in the UK).

Without consulting with her, I made an independent decision and moved. She did not take it lightly. Initially, I stayed with my step sister and then on the sofa at a friends' parent's house. This too was not for long as most parents thought I was a bad influence on their children. From there I lived in many hostels and met a lot of pleasant and unpleasant people. The experience and challenges I had during those times are enough to write my own book!

Anyways, I rekindled with an old boyfriend, a boy I had innocently dated prior to moving to Tanzania. I was 14 and he was 17. Perhaps it was one of the reasons my mother had us migrate to Tanzania. I was 16 when I returned to the UK. I had been placed in temporary accommodation and I had a whole flat to myself (apart from the weekly visit from the key worker as I was not a fully legal adult yet). Prior to moving to Tanzania, my boyfriend and I rarely argued. I believed I loved him and he loved me. I mean, he was the reason I had returned.

Somewhere during the time I was away, he had changed. Or maybe he was always like that and I was too young to notice. Perhaps, it was because I no longer had a family unit. Perhaps he felt empowered because he was older and wanted to assert his power over me. Whatever it was, there was a shift. We argued a lot. We fought almost every night. Offensive words and physical abuse came from both sides. I gave as good as I got. We were young, hot-tempered, and broken. Without being too graphic, I suffered cuts, bruises, and fractures. Once I received a blow to my head with an iron that engraved onto the skin of my eyebrow, leaving a scar. In fact, I am full of scars. Each scar a reminder of the physical wars I encountered and the battle scars left behind. I was only 16, an age when most teens are preparing for their A-levels, or baccalaureate if you are an international. I should have been sheltered by my family, but how was this possible when my family was in another continent? I felt responsible for everything that was happening to me. I was the one that had stubbornly left the safety of my mother's home and chose to be with someone that treated me like a punching bag. I made the bed. It was time to lie in it.

More than the physical abuse, it was the emotional and mental abuse that hurt the most. I was drowning in a web of mental discord; depression anorexia, insecurities, and low self-esteem.

It was the constant "Who would ever want someone like you...you are ugly, no one else is going to want to be with you..." that got to me and still lingers in my mind today and makes me self-conscious whenever I meet new people. I got so used to hearing these words every single day that eventually I started to believe them. Over the years, I managed to completely forget some of these hurtful things, if only for my sanity and peace of mind.

For a long time, I felt like I deserved everything that I was happening to me because I had put myself in this position. For this reason, I dared not seek help from anyone, not even the police. I was afraid of the judgment; who would want someone like me? It took a miracle and courage to finally leave him and take back control of my life. In the UK, if you are estranged from your parents or if you have young children you are offered social housing. So the closer I got to 18, the more I looked forward to the moment when I would be eligible to start bidding for a council flat and get ready for a fully independent life.

My relationship with my boyfriend was still a rollercoaster ride. We fought on most days but we also had some rare good days. Perhaps those were the moments that made me stay and believe that there was hope for us. We both looked forward to starting a brand new life in our own home. The day came when I received the first call for bidding. Just before leaving, we had a huge fight. Even though I cannot remember the cause of the fight, I still vividly remember the intensity of the blow to my face, the cut under my eye, and a bloody nose. I ran out of the house like a mad woman, got on the bus to the location of the viewing and cried the whole way there. I was just glad that I never shared the location of the viewing with him.

I ended up being thirty minutes late to the viewing appointment. A small one-bedroom apartment with an ensuite bedroom and a balcony. It was a blessing that the lady conducting the viewing agreed to wait for me. In retrospect, being late worked to my advantage because I would have hated getting there and finding lots of people given the state my face was in. There was concern written all over the lady's face when she saw my bruised face. I just burst out crying; "I need this flat to leave him. This is my only way out." She was sympathetic, but at the same time suspicious. I remember her saying, "That's what they always say. You will go back to him and bring him here." I remember standing in the kitchen and looking her straight in the eyes and said, "No I won't, I promise. I need this." I said it with such conviction I remember shocking myself.

Of course, I had to go back to the temporary flat I was sharing with my boyfriend. I lied about being unable to do the viewing because of the state of my face. He believed me. I spent the next few days quieter than usual, less argumentative, just praying and wishing I would be called and told the great news. A few days later, I got the expected call. I got the flat. I kept the excitement in, started calculating my move so I wouldn't arouse any suspicion. I decided I would only pack a handful of items, only the necessities and leave everything else behind. The day I was handed the keys, I took a taxi with my belongings and moved into my new flat and never looked back.

This December will mark eight years of me living in this flat. In these eight years, I have worked full time, studied at university and achieved first class honours, rekindled and reconnected with my family and friends, gained weight, enjoyed life and learned to love myself every day a little more. I have no regrets because it made me the resilient person I am today. I have achieved everything I am today because he said I wouldn't be able to. I not only proved him wrong, but I proved to myself that I can take control of my life and create my own future. A future I want to live and deserve to have.

To all the ladies who have been in a similar situation, dig deep down and find that tiny seed of self-worth., Nurture it, water it and let it grow. Once it grows, you will be able to overcome anything.

ALICE IRMA EBIKA OLUOHU

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ALICE IRMA EBIKA OLUOHU (SIMPLY ADDRESSED AS ALICE EBIKA) IS A NATIVE OF YALA L.G.A IN CROSS RIVER STATE, OF NIGERIA. SHE IS A GRADUATE OF FOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY. SHE IS CURRENTLY A CHINESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE STUDENT. SHE IS A MODEL, SICKLE CELL ADVOCATE, AND A PAGEANT GIRL. ALTHOUGH SHE IS 23 YEARS OLD, SHE REGARDS HERSELF AS AN OLD SOUL. SHE IS THE FIRST CHILD IN HER FAMILY AMIDST FOUR BRILLIANT BOYS WHO ARE HER SOLDIERS.

Lemons, Lemonade

By Alice Irma Ebika Oluohu



I enjoy learning because it makes me feel more alive. When I am on the runway or having a photo session, or when am advocating for my cause Sickle cell anemia, am able to face life a little more courageously.

I've been asked many times why I proudly advocate for sickle cell anemia. My response is always that I believe that all limitations can be overcome and I want to be a pillar of strength for anyone facing the same ordeals as I. Having experienced the stigma and ignorance associated with Sickle Cell Anemia as a child, I developed the desire to transform the society I live in and make it safe for others like me to live healthily and confidently. We live in a society that has very little knowledge about Sickle Cell.

The very little that most people know is based on myths or short topics covered in integrated science/biology in schools. Even in this day and age, there are still people that believe that sickle cell is a curse from adults.

Growing up, my petite stature and big head made it hard for anyone to take me seriously. I was overlooked in everything. I had to fight to find a voice in an environment where no one stood by me. Being in a boarding school made things extra hard for me. I found myself wishing to withdraw to a day school but I was too scared to make my wishes known. Life was more of a boring routine. I kept scaling through my classes until the end. Funny enough, this was the story of a 9-year-old girl who had successfully gained admission to a federal government college as one of the two brilliant students to make it that year from her region.

I still remember the pride on my father's face when we first visited the school. I saw the same look whenever he received my end of term average results. These made for the moments I could at least look forward to. Currently, I will not say I am at my best, but I am far from where my peers or society thought I would be. I have risen above my limitations. I have come to understand that everyone on earth will one day leave, one way or another. I have resolved to experience life to the fullest while I still have it. I am more than the conditions I suffer from and the crises I face. I refuse to be defined by the limitations and prejudices imposed on me by others that have chosen to walk the path of ignorance.

And so here I am right now, fully accepting the anemia but most importantly, not letting it define me. Living with sickle cell anemia is not the easiest of journeys. Not only is it an expensive lifestyle, it demands a lot of self-discipline. More than the constant rejections, survivors battle on the daily issues of self-care. I advise parents of young survivors to take their time to show love and care to their children. It is better to accept the condition and understand fully what it comes with. Only then will they be able to conquer everything together. I always advise parents and caregivers of survivors to do all they can to build the child up mentally, spiritually and physically.

Stop running from one quack to another and stop feeding them chemicals or weeds whose origins you know not. These might one day result into something far more dangerous than the sickle cell you are trying to beat. It is better to visit only certified medical professionals, pediatricians, and hematologist to be well educated and to get treatment when a sore or crisis occurs. Be aware of your Hbss type as it differs, get the right routine medication for your child or yourself and do not run from one medication to another because you heard some survivors use it. Before administering any drug be aware of the reason why it is being administered and its functions. To my fellow youths, especially those with sickle cell anemia out there let us all learn to stop abusing drugs. I understand the temptation to depend on painkillers to get through the day. However, most of these painkillers have a lot of side effects when used for prolonged periods of time or when overdosed. Cultivate in you a spirit of self-discipline. Be cautious of all your sexual encounters and remember to put your health and wellbeing first. Monitor your alcohol intake and do not get into it because your friends do. Bear in mind that we have a very fragile immunity that is prone to any kind of sexual infections. Get treated once the need arises. Get registered to an association or befriend survivors alike and always share ideas about your experiences in order to be educated about sickle cell anemia.

Personally, I have gotten over the temptation to wallow in self-pity. Just because you have Sickle cell anemia does not mean you have it rougher than anyone out there. Get involved in life and find what sets your heart on fire. Do not get distracted by the "naysayers" and the negative stories about your disease. If a lot of successful people living with sickle cell anemia can do it, you too can. The world awaits your greatness.

And finally, to the world at large, no child living with sickle cell anemia should ever be made to believe they're not worthy of living. Sickle cell anemia is not our identity. It is only a genotype status. Schools should learn to provide a hygienic environment for students living with chronic diseases. The world needs to be enlightened that sickle cell anemia is not a curse but a type of genotype that still eats us up due to lack of awareness. Learn to speak up for survivors and against prejudices associated with sickle cell anemia everywhere you find yourself.

NYIBOL KUEK
NYIBOL KUEK
NYIBOL KUEK



NYIBOL KUEK IS 21 YEARS OLD. SHE IS A SOUTH SUDANESE WHO RESIDES IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA. SHE IS A MARKETER AND A MODEL. A MODEL WHO HAS WORKED WITH VOGUE AND LANCOME

The Misfit Blackbird: Soaring Above the Differences

By Nyibol Kuek



I was born in Kakuma, a refugee camp in Kenya. My family fled from the civil war in Sudan and went to Kakuma. I migrated to Australia at the tender age of 5. My new home was quite hard to adjust to as not only did I have to learn a new language but also become accustomed to a new way of life.

Arriving in Australia in the early 2000s was very difficult as there weren't many people that looked like me, so I stood out like a sore thumb. My midnight dark skin was something that drew attention to me and most of the time it wasn't for the best. People would often point and stare at my family and me at malls. By age 7 I had learned English fluently and became more confident in talking with friends.

My conversational skills almost made me forget that I was different from my peers. I tried so hard to fit in. I thought I was fooling everybody until somebody would remind me of my black skin or African features.

In school, I was usually the only black person in the class. From age 6 I don't remember having high self-esteem or being praised regularly for my beauty. My younger years were more about making lots of friends and being liked. Growing up I was teased for my dark skin and most of the comments came from close friends of mine. I have been told "you'd be really pretty if you were white" to "you're the prettiest black person I've ever met" to "imagine if your black skin was dirt and it came off in the shower." These comments are real. I still remember them and they are comments that will forever leave scars on my heart.

During my childhood to adolescent years, I've always wanted to be somebody else because I had been programmed to think that there was something wrong with the way that I was just because I was different from everybody around me. This programming was evident in the media as well as in the classroom. It wasn't until year 11 that I began my journey to self-love and acceptance. I was doing really well academically and remained very driven and focused because I wanted to get into my dream university. Realizing that I was intelligent really boosted my confidence. I also began to play with makeup and fashion which were things that I've always wanted to do. I still didn't have the confidence to try modeling but by age 18 I started getting into modeling and this boosted my self-confidence immensely. In order to excel in modeling, you need to 'own your uniqueness' and accept yourself as you are.

I developed a love for creativity and expressed this through how I presented myself. Instagram is still my favorite social media network as it is a fusion of Pinterest and Facebook. I use Instagram as a way to showcase my modeling work, style and connect with different people from all over the world. A "selfie" that I posted went viral on the 11th of July. This photo caused some debate about "beauty" but most importantly it gave me a larger avenue to talk about self-love especially in the black community as our skin color is often subject to internalized self-hate.

Most of us carry heavy scars from the treatment we often receive from a world that doesn't celebrate us. I love that I now have a platform to speak about my journey to self-acceptance and help others to join or continue this journey.

My scars are a reminder that I can survive any circumstance and that there is beauty in my story. The things that I went through are not in vain but they are a constant reminder of the strength of the soul and that we don't have to suffer alone because there are millions of people with stories similar to ours. By using my influence I can empower others to speak out against racism and to look within themselves to find their beauty- because beauty comes within.

ANYUT (HANNO) RIAK

ANYUT (HANNO) RIAK

ANYUT (HANNO) RIAK



ANYUT (HANNO) RIAK IS A 24 YEAR OLD SOUTH SUDANESE. SHE IS CURRENTLY A HUMAN RESOURCE SPECIALIST, STUDENT, AND MODEL WHO HAS BEEN FEATURED IN DIFFERENT MAGAZINES, INCLUDING VOGUE.

Crazy, Not Crazy: The Untold about Mental Health

By Anyut (Hanno) Riak



Mental health has always been seen as an illness that you wear on your sleeve. It's like a badge letting everyone know that you are not okay. However, that's not the case. Mental health is a silent killer; it creeps in without warning and damages not only you but those around you too. It pushes you away from everything that's ever made you happy, to the point where you start questioning your own sanity. There are times where you feel like you're okay, then the slippery slope begins and you find yourself barely eating and in a sleep coma for weeks at a time. I speak from experience; I've struggled with anxiety and depression alone since the age of nine. Before we go into depth, I know what you are thinking, "How can you be depressed at that young of an age,

you had no responsibilities." Keep in mind that depression has no age, and we all are facing different circumstances. As a child, I was treated like an adult. There was no such thing as going out to play. I babysat four newborns, cooked and cleaned all the time. I had no one my age to talk to so I was always stuck in my head analyzing and calculating why people do what they do, and why am I sad all the time. I knew neither wrong nor right. I had no adult to guide me or to confide in. The only adult I had in my life at that time was my mom, but she was a very busy woman. There were times when I would not see her for days on end. My cries for help made me think of strategies to get in trouble just so I can have someone's full attention to tell them that I'm not okay. But nobody cared enough to see or listen. How do you talk about a feeling you can't understand with people who believe ignorance is bliss and if we don't talk about it, it's not considered a problem? In the African culture, mental health doesn't exist.

Being raised in the U.S doesn't make it any better. The youths here are quick to diagnose themselves with depression like it's a cool trend that allows you to have special privileges. When it comes to resources to address these issues, America provides a lot. For instance, counseling, parental involvement, vacations for periods at a time, psych wards, and it doesn't make it any better that we use pharmaceuticals to cure everything. Unfortunately, where I'm from we don't have these luxuries. We don't have outlets, let alone parents that are able to lend a listening ear. There are no resources that'll help relieve that. All we have is ourselves, and that is so scary. In the past three years I've lost numerous family members to suicide, and anytime they speak on it I hear negative comments like, "He/she was an alcoholic, that's why you need to not drink" or "He/she circled themselves around the wrong people." How disgusting is that! We're supposed to be the next generation, but anytime we try explaining the issues they compare their upbringing to ours.

I've heard numerous times that our parent's generation did not have issues like mental illnesses. They simply dealt with their issues and moved on. They weren't spiritually, emotionally, or mentally supported by their parents. And so they say we should do the same.

That we shouldn't complain. Where is the line drawn! How many more lives do we need to lose to realize that mental health is a serious issue?

If you're struggling with mental health, please know that there are resources outside of what you're doing now. I encourage you to exercise more or find hobbies outside of abusing substances. If you need to talk, contact a friend, or even get a therapy dog. I just advise you to not be the only one in your head, because, at the end of the day, we are our biggest critics.

BARBARA KAMBA-NYATHI

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BARBARA KAMBA-NYATHI IS A 39-YEAR-OLD ZIMBABWEAN. SHE IS AN AUTHOR, INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER, TEDX SPEAKER, PSYCHOLOGIST, FUTURE FEMALES CHAPTER AMBASSADOR FOR BULAWAYO AND MEMBER OF TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL. SHE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT INSPIRING GROWTH, CHANGE, TRANSFORMATION AND TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY AND LIFE CHALLENGES.

The Museum of Rainbow Coloured Blossoms

By Barbara Kamba-Nyathi



I have autoimmune arthritis which causes me severe joint pain and sometimes it makes it difficult to do 'easy' tasks such as using a fork or a knife. In 2009 I was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and this diagnosis helped save my life because when I was being operated on, a bigger and more life-threatening condition was discovered. That is when I was diagnosed with endometriosis which was spreading and growing at an alarming rate. This discovery led to the 13 surgical operations that have saved my life. These operations have led to changes in my body, challenges with day to day living.

One fine day in the year 2012, I woke up deaf in my left ear. An MRI scan was ordered by the specialist doctor to determine the cause of the sudden deafness.

Amazingly, the scan showed that there was nothing wrong with my ear which meant my hearing was going to be restored at some point later. It did and I can now hear clearly.

However, the scan revealed that my pituitary gland was swollen. It is the gland that regulates moods and hormonal balance.

The trauma to my body caused by all these procedures, diagnoses and the treatments has not been easy to deal with. I have learned to accept that I am different and a lot of people may never understand me and why I do what I do. Part of the reason why my marriage failed had to do with my health issues. The greatest lesson I learned was that if a medical practitioner, who is the ex, could not bear it anymore, what more just an ordinary person. I am now fine with people who do not 'get' me and I understand why they feel the need to judge me.

The combination of all these medical conditions has created a beautiful mosaic that is the strong, resilient, empathetic, and I want to believe the patient woman I am today. My story is about how I did not let all these health challenges break me or destroy me. Instead, they taught me life lessons on being gentle to my body and listening to it. I love to keep fit and that is the beauty born of my scars. Despite being operated on almost every year, I still find time to exercise and stay fit, I do allow my body to heal and get stronger. I run both trail and road when I'm feeling strong. I also do yoga mostly during recovery times from operations. I do a lot of strength and cardio workouts as well when I am stronger but not enough to run. Exercising has proved to be not only good for my physical wellbeing but also it has been very therapeutic on an emotional level.

One thing I need every day is a dosage of euphoria and catharsis and endorphins, which are supplied in abundance by the workouts; and also the joint pains are greatly reduced when I am active. This has truly been my testament to the effects of physical activity on healing, recovery and overall wellbeing.

TAYLOR JENKINS

TAYLOR JENKINS

TAYLOR JENKINS



TAYLOR JENKINS IS A 26-YEAR-OLD HUMANITARIAN FROM AMERICA. HIS MOTHER IS FROM PORT-OF-SPAIN, TRINIDAD AND HIS FATHER IS FROM BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, USA. GROWING UP, TAYLOR STRUGGLED TO BALANCE HIS PARENT'S DIVERSE CULTURES. HE CHOSE MUSIC AS AN ESCAPE AND WAY OF EXPRESSING HIMSELF.

Making Caribbean Soup

By Taylor Jenkins



Though I never received insults from the Trini side of my family about my American side, I always felt like I never belonged to either nationality completely. My response to that was to become introverted and creative. Somehow music found me and it's been an outlet for me ever since I was young. I picked up my first instrument at 9 and I started playing the guitar at 12. My friend and I just started to release music weekly on our Sound cloud page where we mix Soca (a musical style from Trinidad) with other styles of music under the name of Slyght Pepper. The name is a play on words making fun of my heritage, but also describing our "slight" style of soca. Slight pepper is also a common phrase that Trinis use when telling a cook how much "spice" to put on their food.

I was always living in my head and I find myself doing that now still. I think I could survive pretty well on an island by myself if I was forced too! However, as I've aged, I've noticed that I really love people. I love being the person that you wouldn't think would be open and caring and then treat those who are mistreated with kindness. Ever since I was young, especially hearing stories about the insults my family received as they integrated into the US, I wanted to make those who felt like they were "outsiders" to feel as if they were welcome somewhere. Even if it was just with me.

That has led me to my place of work at the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC is an international nonprofit that responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and gain control of their future. The IRC serves many populations, but I'm especially proud of knowing that the organization supports the Caribbean Diaspora by working with Haitian and Cuban parolees.

However, I noticed that music and my work life was not enough. I wanted to connect with my Caribbean roots in a very genuine way. On New Year's Day, I decided to create an online platform called Humans of the Caribbean Diaspora in order to create and bolster relationships between people within the Diaspora in order to strengthen the Caribbean as a whole.

I hope that all of my endeavors take off, but honestly, I am open to wherever life takes me. All I know is that I hope I'm happy in the end and that I can leave smiles on as many people's faces along the way.

WHITNEY SHAY

WHITNEY SHAY

WHITNEY SHAY



WHITNEY SHAY IS A 27 YEARS OLD AMERICAN. SHE IS A BURNS SURVIVOR, FIRE SAFETY ADVOCATE, MOTHER, AND HUMAN RESOURCE PERSONNEL.

Inferno: To Fight, to Lose, to Win!

By Whitney Shay



"You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from and still come out from it." - Maya Angelou.

I experienced many things, from an attempted kidnap to a bad car wreck. However, the most devastating of all happened on November 20th, 2015 at approximately 1:30 in the morning. My space heater exploded while my 5-week old daughter, my 2-year-old son and I were sleeping. Despite being plugged in, it had not been turned on. The smoke detector had failed but my 2-year-old son DJ woke us all up with his screams of "MOMMY!!!"

I woke up to find the entire house in flames.

I picked my newborn up, grabbed my sons hand and made a conscious decision to escape to the nearest store.

However, in order to open the door, I needed to let go of my two-year-old son's hand for a few seconds to turn the key. The moment I let go of his hand, my son ran back to his room. As couldn't see through the flames, I tried following his voice to get to him but I was unsuccessful. I left my apartment for a moment to hand my daughter to someone and went back inside to continue searching for my son. I still couldn't find him. I was forced to make the devastating decision to leave him behind and save Nyla, whose scalp was melting. I saved a total of 28 people but unfortunately, my son was not one of those people.

After that, my daughter and I were flown to a burn center with little to no chance of living. We were put on life support and then had skin grafts done to the burns on our body that couldn't heal on their own. Nyla has a graft on her head which is why she can't grow hair. They took skin from her back and put it where her scalp was burned.

My oldest son Braylen, who was at his grandmother's house had to find out his brother was now in heaven and that his mommy and sister were struggling to stay alive. If you think watching your child grow is hard, think about not being able to see them grow again. My son will always be two, the last time I had contact with him was in a fire.

I remember when the nurses took me off life support and I was able to open my eyes and they asked if I was ready to look in the mirror. I was. I was terrified and broke down in tears after I saw my reflection. I thought my children would see me as a monster and not recognize me. I was scared everyone would be scared of my scars. As the months went by, I had to change my mindset because of my daughter Nyla who looks up to me and bears the same scars as me. I had to acknowledge that inner beauty is more important than physical beauty.

Little kids usually act scared of Nyla like she is a monster but adults are the worst. My daughter has been called a baby Freddy Krueger and strangers online have told me I should have died in the fire and that it was my fault I didn't save my son.

I cry when I read through those comments but those people have never been in my shoes. There was absolutely nothing I could have done. I wanted to save my son. There's no greater pain than burying your child. I walked into the fire to save and would have stayed longer if I didn't have his siblings to think about.

Now, for my son who died, I try to make each day and time count. I don't dwell on negative thoughts. I have used his story and my mine to help reach out to other fire survivors. If you ever have a negative thought about yourself, tell it to go to hell where it came from. I survived because the fire inside of me is greater than the fire that engulfed us that morning.



Whitney Shay Before the fire, with her late son.

BAHAEDDINE TOUNEKTI

BAHAEDDINE TOUNEKTI

BAHAEDDINE TOUNEKTI



BAHAEDDINE TOUNEKTI WAS BORN AND RAISED IN TUNISIA. HE IS 26 YEARS OLD AND WORKS AS STEWARD.

Growing Pains: Finding Purpose in Changing Circumstances

By Bahaeddine Tounekti



I was born on the 3rd of August 1992 which happened to be my parent's one year anniversary. Growing up, I was a typical millennial: lazy, selfish. This was also fuelled by my hardworking parents who got me everything that I asked for. I even thought my little brother was born for my entertainment.

I was living the little perfect prince life, the happy ever after with my two heroes (my parents) ruling it until the day I turned 8. That was when life hit me. It's pretty early if you ask me. It might sound like it was easy because I'm still standing today but it was hard and bad and it could have cost me my whole life if I did hold on.

My mom, my favorite hero had to make her sacrifice.

She had to make a decision; to either stay and let us live for the unknown future or leave for a good and better job that promised a better future for us. So my own superhero sacrificed me back then to make sure that I live the life I have now, a wealthy and healthy life. She had to leave the house to go to a place that is more than 6 hours flight away just to make sure that we don't suffer and to support my father. My father believed in her decision because he loves her. He took on the responsibilities of 2 kids and a job by himself. He's a fighter too, not one to easily shake.

My only thought at that time was that my mother had abandoned me. My hero was gone. Who was going to make my lunch box? Who was to give me my morning hugs? Who was going to tell me bedtime stories, play with my hair, and give me a shower? Of course, I had my father, but my mother's absence left a deep void.

It was that void that started creating a sense of responsibility in me. I started to look out for my brother. If I had stayed true to character, I shouldn't have felt that way, but that was the moment when I got the first hit of life. From the fairytale to real life fights. I felt the responsibility to make his lunch box, do his homework with him, give him his morning hug, tell his bedtime story, and protect him from everyone else. I didn't want to see him sad or missing anything like I missed my mom. Whether it was healthy or not, I became an adult at 8.

The first year passed and my mom, my beautiful hero came back for summer vacation. We had the best time of our lives. We went to the beach and parks, played all summer long. I remember it was a hot summer day towards the end of the season when I woke up getting ready for another fun day when I got shocked by the news that she had to leave again. I had to be a mom to my brother again. This time around I took on even more responsibilities as my brother had just started going to a real school. However, I enjoyed the role immensely as he was a brilliant child who looked up to me.

My mother was gone for 5 years. I was in middle school and my little brother was in elementary school. He was still excelling in school, always first in his classes. That was when my mother decided to come back home for good. After 5 years. It felt like a lifetime to me. I was so happy to have my superhero back. With her coming, I had more time for myself and since I didn't want to go back to being the lazy, spoiled child I was, I used that time to learn a third language - English. I taught myself English from TV and songs I used to watch movies and pick up words or sentences, look it up in the dictionary and memorized it.

Few years passed, my little brother passed elementary school by getting to the best school for the elite kids! I was so happy for him and I got very excited more than him. To me, it meant I had done something right. I couldn't be celebrated although I was good at school, I was not that brilliant. A few months later my mom got pregnant for the last time. While my little brother was very excited, I wasn't excited as much as I thought I would have more responsibilities towards my family. I had my second brother at the age of 15. He was very cute and handsome. My mom said he looked like me when I was a little child. I watched him grow up and helped take care of him.

Years went by and I graduated from high school. I thought my parents will send me to study somewhere abroad, like all my friends. But my parents couldn't do that. It's true that our conditions were better but we were a bigger family now. I had to finish my education back home. I didn't even know what I was supposed to study. I was so busy taking care of my little brother and worrying about everyone else that I forgot myself. I chose civil engineering, something that I wouldn't be interested in, not even in million years. But I only chose it then because it sounded like I will make a lot of money later. I hated it so much. I hated every class and every second even though I was good at it. In my second year, I realized that I had to get involved in an organization or a club or anything that will help get me a professional experience while I was a student. And that's when I got introduced to AIESEC.

AIESEC taught me leadership, development and cultural exchange. That is exactly when I met the whole new me! I didn't know that I would be interested in leadership and team buildings, a social life, youth problems and collaborations with other organizations and conferences. I was just a kid trying not to ruin his life. The most surprising part was discovering that I had hidden talents. I didn't know that I was able to talk in public I didn't know that I was good with face to face conversations of personal development, crisis management or team management. I had finally found myself a happy place. I got to know so many incredible people and made friends of them, friends for life. It's been 7 years now and I am so lucky to call them my best friends with whom I've had my best moments in life.

I got so sucked into the social work with my new job in AIESEC. I loved it so much to the point that I started to feel it was the only right thing that I was doing. My parents didn't support it but they couldn't stop me. I quit school because I hated it so much. For the first time in my life that year, I failed. It was such an awful shock. I felt like I was falling into an endless pit. I felt lost. My devastated parents didn't know how to pick me up or motivate me again. They blamed it all on AIESEC, that it's a waste of time, money and energy. But I knew that was the only thing that will help me move on from my catastrophe.

I hated school more and more, but I continued my activities in AIESEC. It was my only source of information. I learned so much from my organization that I will never learn at home or in school or anywhere else. I became such a professional person, and also an action taker to change my life. I started looking for other options to study something else, something I would enjoy. It took me a while to find something but I did eventually. I found a scholarship with the department of states with the United States of America that allowed me to choose what I wanted to study. I was excited at the prospect of going to America. I was going to live what I have been watching on TV the whole time. I was going to live the American dream. I was so proud of myself. I felt like my life had just started. I literally forgot everything I had been through all my life and started over. All I thought about was how proud of me my parents were and how much more they would be on my return. However, I was in for a surprise.

What a culture shock! Alabama, a countryside in America, the heart of the south turned out to be a place where people still lived in the 60s, with no sense of fashion or modernity. They live in groups, white, black, Hispanics, Asians, and Latinos. For the very first time in my life, I was confronted with real-life racism. It was not something I experienced back home. It's true that we all have different colors but we never looked at each other as different. The lifestyle in Alabama was everything I was raised against and everything I was working against in AIESEC. It is everything I intend to stand against for the rest of my life. Where I come from, we abolished slavery in 1846 and that is how we stopped racism. We started living together as human beings. So as you can see, I found it difficult to integrate into my new society as I could not stand the ignorance of the people.

A few days later, school started and I looked forward to meeting like-minded people. The school was a place where people are expected to be open and accepting of other cultures. However, things proved to be going a different direction for me. Whenever it was time for introductions during all the first classes, my Tunisian background seemed to draw a lot of interest from my course mates. And not all of it was good-natured interest. I was asked questions like; where is it? Is it in the Caribbean? Close to Australia? What do you eat? What do you ride to school? If you are from Africa why are you not very black? How come you speak Arabic and French and English so well if you are from Africa? Why do I have a feeling that you are Brazilian?

What a mess! So I had to introduce myself in every class and give a little geography lesson with it. However, it was fun. I was basically the first Tunisian that they ever met. They didn't know what to expect from me like I didn't know what to expect from them. I got to make good friends that way. I started studying a course I love Business Management. It brought out my strengths and I got selected to host the 37th international annual festival of the Chamber of commerce. My time in Alabama passed fast. It was time to say goodbye to the place that I hated the most when I first moved, and yet the place that gave me the experience of my life. The place that gave me back my confidence after my academic setback. I was excited to meet my family again.

Landing in Tunisia felt like landing in heaven. My heart was beating fast. I experienced such overwhelming happiness seeing my little brother and dad waiting for me at the airport.

When I got home I found my beautiful angel, my lovely hero, my mother waiting for me with tears in her eyes. They were tears of happiness. She told me that I look different and better; my hair and body. My dad said that I sounded wiser which made me feel even better about myself. We had such an amazing family dinner that night like we never did before. I felt like I belong to that family more than I ever did before. I was like the king that just had his biggest victory. Why wouldn't I be feeling that way? I had just lived my life the best way possible at that moment and at that age.

I was enjoying and relishing the moment until the need to get a job settled in. I kept looking everywhere till one day my childhood best friend told me about the airline companies coming to recruit in Tunisia. I honestly didn't know what to expect from the interview. It wasn't like any other interview I've been through. The job requirements and expectations were different, and it was mostly physical. A week passed and I didn't stop looking for a job just because I did great on the previous interview.

I remember it was a Monday morning, regular summer day. I woke up late, had my breakfast and then I checked my emails like I did every other morning. And there it was. I was over the moon with excitement. My mother who happened to be next to me shed tears of joy when I shared the news with her. She said to me, "you can get whatever you want boy. Yeah, you are my son." Oh yes, I am most definitely my mother's son. She is and always will be my hero.

Upon receiving the official job offer, I fixed my visa and my medical checks. I was back on the road again but this time to a totally different country. It wasn't America this time around. It was the United Arab Emirates. That was totally different from everything I have been through before. A whole different society, people, environment, and lifestyle. I can't say I didn't know what to expect, because, after my first experience, I was prepared for anything. Moreover, I was going to be working with people from all over the world so I needed to be more understanding and tolerant.

I spent the first 2 months in the training academy learning everything about the job. I didn't know that aviation was so complicated and hard. I didn't know that cabin crew jobs are so stressful and exhausting. They always seemed like they were living the dream when they walk in the airport or on the plane. I didn't know that they had to study so much and go through exams. Or that they needed to get the basic medical of first aid. Oh my god, that was crazy. I had to do all of that in 2 months. My first layover was Melbourne in Australia. It was a 14 hours flight. We landed in a city whose existence I knew not of until that trip. I couldn't sleep after the flight due to the excitement. I took a walk around the city for more than 4 hours and then went to a restaurant for dinner. I even went to a club for a little fun.

I gained more knowledge about the places I visited and the people I encountered through my work. I started to understand the world and human relations a little better. Most people think that my job is just a fun job where you travel the whole time. However, I consider my job to be my biggest and wildest learning experience so far. I have learned from this job what I have never learned at home, school or anywhere else. I have learned the meaning of life and gained some understanding about the many different societies around the world.

I have learned about history, human connections, communication, and integration. These are not things one can learn from books or science only. They are learned best through experience.

Today I'm almost 26 years old. I have been doing this job for 3 years. I have enjoyed it as much as I have learned from it. I know that there is so much left for me to learn from life, work, friends, family, etc. I know that reading my story might make you feel like I have accomplished so much in my life. But that isn't the case. I am not where I wish to be yet but I am working my way there. This is only the beginning. I have heard it said that if your dreams don't scare you, then they aren't big enough. I'm grateful I didn't continue on my path of being a lazy spoiled child. I am grateful for all the challenges I have faced in my life, they have made me stronger. Through them, I became a star. You can't become one if you refuse to experience hardships or allow it cripple you. My advice to people is; do not just be a character in your story. Instead, be the story, the sermon, and make it epic!

NAOMI AWORETAN

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NAOMI AWORETAN IS A BLOGGER, FINE ARTIST, AND PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE FROM LAGOS, NIGERIA. SHE IS 21-YEARS-OLD.

Reflections of an Orchid

By Naomi Aworetan



It was 34°C in Surulere. There I was, sitting on the balcony in the blistering heat, obviously dressed very inappropriately for the Lagos weather. I watched people walk past from my vantage point. Everyone in Lagos looks vexed or mildly pissed but definitely in a hurry. That is, except the Mallams down the street, sitting on a wooden bench sharing jokes and eating something I'd rather not think about. Their cheerful laughter led me to something else I'd rather not think about. In fact, I haven't thought about it in almost a year and I feel like I deserve some accolades for that. It being the first time I ever got my heart broken, it is understandable that I would be hungover and thinking about it all the time. In fact, when it happened,

I went through a few stages of defense mechanisms. I hid, I lied, I projected my feelings, the works. It was still an odd feeling for me who until then had taken care of my heart well enough. Or at least well enough to not be heartbroken. So how did it happen you might ask? Well, it only makes sense that it wasn't a guy that broke my heart. And before you jump to conclusions and decide that I'm playing for my home team, let me make it clear that I'm not.

See, if there's something I take more serious than boy-girl relationships, it's friendship. I had the misfortune of growing up without a best friend. I had the occasional best friend at camp or summer lessons and all the various schools I attended but none of them lasted long. It could have been because I moved a lot. Or perhaps, simply, that I am a terrible person. But here's the thing, even some truly terrible people have best friends. It really became a problem when in secondary school the one person I considered my best friend told me in not so many words that he wasn't my best friend because he was best friends with someone else. "You can be my second best friend," I remember him saying. I'm pretty sure I stood there with my mouth agape staring at his retreating back as he walked away.

It was at that point I decided it was too late to have a best friend. "It's probably a relationship you grow when you are little," lamented the 16-year-old me. I decided that that wouldn't stop me from having actual friends. Thus, I looked forward to my university days with excitement and hope. I looked forward to making new friends at my new school even though it was not a school of my choice but my parent's. I tried blaming them for what happened to me but most times I blamed myself. It took a while for me to tell myself that I couldn't have done any better. I lived the best version of myself and that is all that matters.

University life proved very challenging for me. I first had to wrap my head around the new environment and new people who unlike me appeared to know their way around pretty well. I felt like someone lost in Oshodi (an old market in Lagos) staring at people getting their affairs done with confidence whereas I could not even identify things that were of interest to me. I missed out two weeks of classes because I didn't have the guts to ask anyone for help.

I eventually made some friends who looked past my resting bitch face and saw someone fun enough to talk to. We were inseparable, literally, except when we went for classes. We were always together and even went for each other's classes when we were free.

That was when I met her. I honestly didn't like her at first. No scratch that, I never really liked anyone at first (probably why I have so few friends.) Anyway, we didn't become friends immediately. I didn't even think we would be friends at all. As fate would have it, we got the same hostel allocation and started going to class together. I eventually got used to our friendship and would have done anything she asked, provided it wasn't life-threatening. We were inseparable. Our first year was amazing; new experiences, new crushes, likes, and dislikes. Everything was perfect. Or so I thought.

Without realizing it, I had started to rely on her for my happiness. I also got a boyfriend whom I came to rely on just as much. I handed over my right to be happy to people, so much so that I forgot that people also made mistakes. When the second year came, we started drifting apart. I wouldn't say it was for lack of trying on my part. But then again who would admit to that? My need for closure led me to ask myself questions about what might have caused the fall-out. Was it because of her relationship? Did she think I had something to do with it falling apart? Perhaps my mistake was playing mediator between the two of them as her boyfriend also happened to be a friend of mine. Eventually, in our third year, she outrightly changed her attitude towards me. Our friendship ended with me not getting the answers I needed. When asked by others what went wrong between us, I simply said we were both busy. And each time I died a little inside. The lack of closure made me lose concentration. I started to flunk my classes. My living situation only made things worse for me. I was squatting with her at that time because I had not been allocated my own accommodation. The worst part for me was that I could not imagine myself living with anyone else as she was someone I considered a very close companion. I would have used the term best friend but I don't think she ever thought of me as such. Our roommates kept wondering why she was treating me with such disdain when we were supposed to be best friends. Her constant hostility towards me eventually led me to conclude that our friendship was beyond redemption.

I like to think that now I know better. I am more mature. I acknowledge the fact that I am still growing. I still love her. Despite the way things turned out between us I can't take away all the great experiences we shared and the memories we made together. I can't blame her for all the things I go through. We all take different steps in life. I stopped guarding my heart. I've realized that sometimes heartbreaks are just a part of growing up. She probably has no idea I felt this way, and she probably has her own side of the story that I don't know about. I'm now best friends with her ex, ironic right? Life is too short to think about anything other than just living. We make mistakes every day and we move on. We just need not lose ourselves in the lives of others. Every now and then I catch myself thinking about this and instead of hissing like I used to, I simply smile. Maybe we'll hang out one day or maybe we won't.

As I looked back at the Mallams down the street, some of them getting on bikes to go about their daily lives, sharing jokes and Laughing, I only see beauty before me. That is how I see all my relationships these days. It is, after all, a wonderful life.

WEYA VIATORA
WEYA VIATORA
WEYA VIATORA



WEYA VIATORA IS 22 YEARS OLD, A RWANDAN AND A PROUD WOMAN. SHE IS A SINGER AND SONGWRITER AND SHE GETS HER INSPIRATION FROM EVERYTHING. HER MAIN INSPIRATION IS LIFE IN GENERAL, CHASING DREAMS AND GOD, FOR SHE IS A CHRISTIAN; LOVE, CULTURES, PEOPLE'S STORIES AND MANY MORE. SHE TRIES TO WRITE SONGS THAT WILL INSPIRE AND CHANGE PEOPLE.

What Dreams are made of

By Weya Viatora



We all have dreams, and all our lives, we try to make them come true. It truly hurts when yours get broken at an early age. Artists' dreams in my country are not as valued like in other countries. Mainly because singing in my country is not financially rewarding to many of us who are artists. It is also difficult that for most of us, we have to stick to a dream that even the most precious people in our lives do not support. You are being nurtured to live another dream, to be a doctor maybe, a pilot, a civil engineer; who knows? Friends also tell their friends who are artists how they over dream. They give a thousand examples of people who are more talented but did not make it at all. Therefore, as an upcoming artist,

you have few examples of people who came from far and indeed made it, so you rely only on your faith. At the end you are your own hero and have to make your dreams come true with no support. Because by the time you take the first step, trust me, many of those who did not support you will come to you this time.

Passion is not something you can change; no matter what you do to pay the bills, your real happiness is in that art. It is time that you make that passion pay your bills. Wise people from this world said that hard work pays, and I am here to emphasize on the fact that hard work in whatever industry does pay. Yes, at some point I felt like quitting because of the lack of concerts and festivals, people who want to pay you zero money for the performance, who really do not respect you because you are an artist or even people who change your reputation because you became an artist. I started writing less and I started accepting performing for free or very few money. I found other jobs that I was not really interested in just because I needed some money. After a few months, I talked to one of the talented artists in Rwanda and we were exchanging ideas. He told me of how he has been doing everything for his 10 years and more of experience. He told me how instead of waiting for gigs he creates them because after quitting his job he needed money and all he had left was his talent. After that conversation, I realized that it is the best way to gain money from the music industry in Rwanda. You have to sell your music by consistently creating small concerts and acoustic nights. I started realizing a thousand ways of making a life out of that art. It really showed me how I do not have to change my career for anything or to accept so I can pay my bills.

I have realized that it was never simple for anybody and that I have to break the walls, do what others think is impossible and make it happen. At the end, I do not get paid a lot but it is enough and the joy from doing what I love is priceless. The joy from making people smile dance or even get inspired by my music is heavenly. I no longer have to wait to get a job, I try to create it for myself and it turns it is working cause my whole heart is on it. One sentence kept me going and here I share with you: "Do not change your dreams for anything in this world; remember, you are not achieving them just for you, but for a million kids with the same dream".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We the committee members express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the overall publication of the book one way or another; our family, friends, loved ones and to God who made everything possible. It's always been a challenge working with different time zones but, we were all determined, patient and zealous. Working together has been a sacrifice, with a lot of processes involved, sharing our diverse thoughts but above all being able to carry everyone along with the decision making process. We appreciate all the events that led to the publication of this beautiful book "Ubhuhle" but Most of all we are extremely grateful to all the beautiful People who submitted their entries, trusting us to tell their story with the goal of exhilarating others. As you laugh, smile, or cry from reading these stories, it is our hope that you get inspired and encouraged just like we were.

Thank you very much.

For more on the book; the committee members and their profiles, publishing sites, other projects of Africanism Today.

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