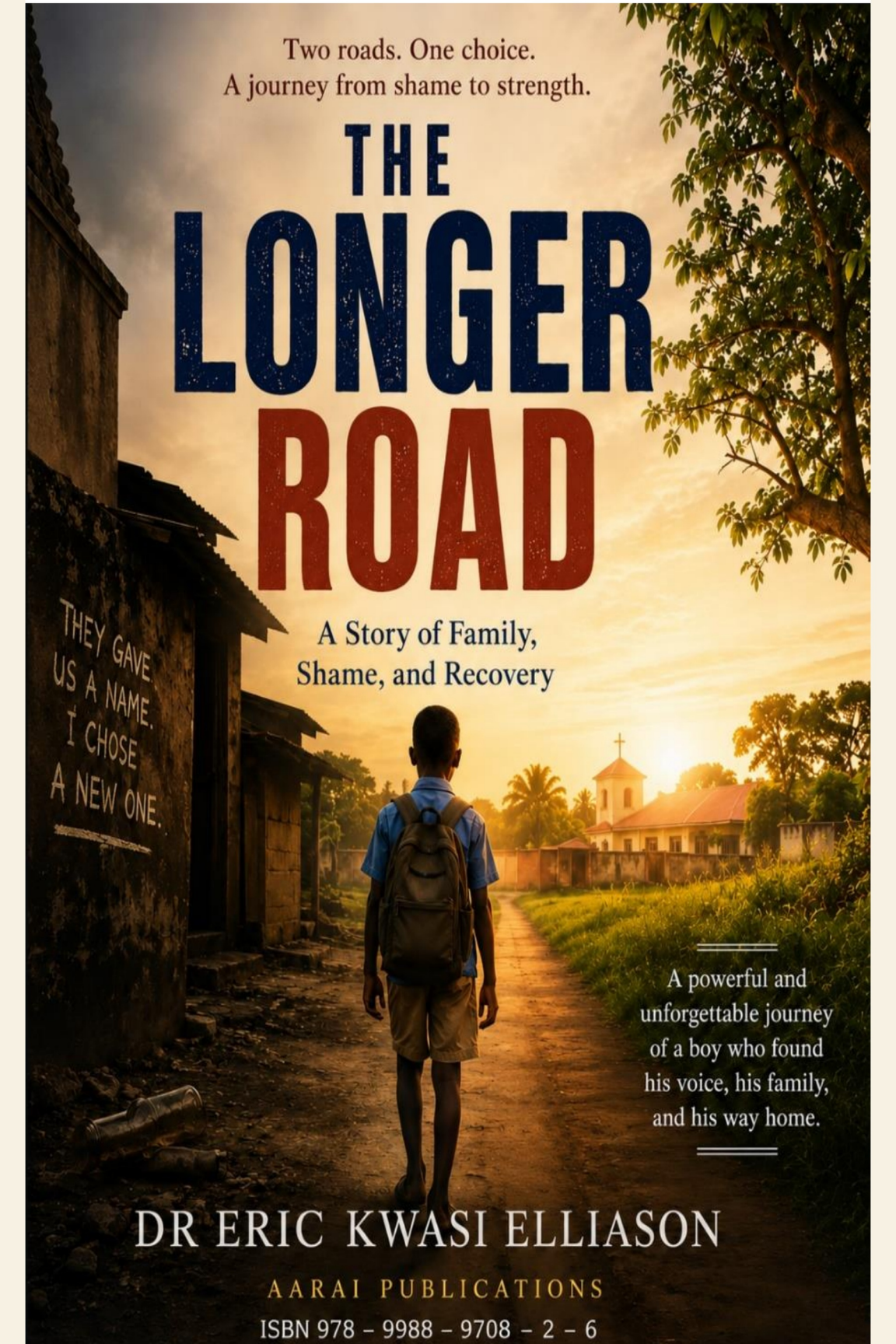


The background of the book cover is a photograph of a young boy with a backpack walking away from the viewer down a dirt road. The road leads towards a church with a cross on its roof, silhouetted against a bright sunset sky. To the left, there is a weathered building with graffiti on its wall. A large tree is on the right side of the frame.

Two roads. One choice.
A journey from shame to strength.

THE LONGER ROAD

A Story of Family,
Shame, and Recovery

THEY GAVE
US A NAME.
I CHOSE
A NEW ONE.

A powerful and
unforgettable journey
of a boy who found
his voice, his family,
and his way home.

DR ERIC KWASI ELLIASON

AARAI PUBLICATIONS

ISBN 978 – 9988 – 9708 – 2 – 6

The Longer Road

A Story of Family, Shame, and Recovery

Eric Kwasi Elliason



AARAI PUBLICATIONS ■ 2026

Copyright

The Longer Road: A Story of Family, Shame, and Recovery

Copyright © 2026 by Eric Kwasi Elliason

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. While the narrative is informed by the author's professional background and inspired by the struggles of families navigating recovery across Ghana, the character of Kojo and his specific journey are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual events or locales, or to persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First Edition

Published by AARAI Publications

Accra, Ghana

Publication Year: 2026

ISBN: 978 – 9988 – 9708 – 2 – 6

Dedication

For everyone who has carried shame they did not earn,
who has walked through rooms that felt too small,
who has learned to speak when silence was the only language—
you are still here.
That is not small.

For the healers who sit near pain without running,
who offer chairs near the door,
who know that a stumble is not a home—
thank you for showing us the way out.

And for the families still walking the longer road—
may you find your voice.
May you find your people.
May you find morning.

Acknowledgment

Writing this book has been a journey of reflection, compassion, and gratitude. A story about pain, family, and recovery cannot be created without recognizing the many people whose lives, experiences, and kindness shape the understanding behind it.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who has shared their stories, offered support, and shown patience to those walking through difficult seasons. The struggles faced by families dealing with shame, loss, and recovery are often carried quietly, but every act of courage and every step toward healing matters.

My appreciation goes to the people who believe in the power of listening. The teachers, counselors, caregivers, family members, and friends who stand beside others during their hardest moments remind us that healing rarely happens alone.

I am thankful for the opportunity to share this story. Although Kojo's journey is fictional, the emotions behind it reflect realities experienced by many families who face challenges and search for a way forward.

To every person who has carried a burden in silence, and to every family still searching for hope, this book is written with respect and compassion.

Thank you to everyone who helped make this work possible.

Table of Contents

Copyright..... 3

Dedication 4

Acknowledgment..... 5

Preface 8

Prologue 9

Chapter 1: The Day My World Changed..... 12

Chapter 2: Childhood Echoes 24

Chapter 3: Secrets Behind Closed Doors 34

Chapter 4: The First Escape..... 45

Chapter 5: When Pain Found a Name 57

Chapter 6: Family Ties, Family Tears..... 69

Chapter 7: Schoolyard Shadows 85

Chapter 8: The Mask I Wore..... 104

Chapter 9: Into the Spiral 119

Chapter 10: Friends or Foes 134

Chapter 11: The Name They Gave Us..... 148

Chapter 12: Losing Myself..... 162

Chapter 13: The Breaking Point 173

Chapter 14: A Cry for Help..... 184

Chapter 15: Meeting the Healers..... 189

Chapter 16: Stories Like Mine..... 197

Chapter 17: Facing My Past 203

Chapter 18: Learning to Trust Again..... 209

Chapter 19: Family Broken, Mending..... 216

Chapter 20: The Roadblocks	222
Chapter 21: Tiny Victories	228
Chapter 22: Relapse and Redemption	232
Chapter 23: Finding My Voice	237
Chapter 24: Giving Back	242
Chapter 25: Living in the Light	247
Epilogue: The Light We Carry	251
About the Author	255

Preface

Some journeys are not measured by distance. They are measured by the courage it takes to continue walking.

The Longer Road is a story about a family facing pain that slowly enters their home, changes their relationships, and tests their ability to hold on to one another. At its heart, this is a story about silence, struggle, and the difficult but necessary path toward healing.

Kojo's story begins in a home filled with ordinary moments, family bonds, and childhood dreams. But when hardship enters his family, he learns that silence can become a heavy burden. Through loss, fear, and uncertainty, he discovers that healing does not come from hiding pain. It begins when people find the strength to speak, seek help, and support each other.

This book is not about perfect people or perfect endings. It is about real emotions, difficult choices, and the small moments that can lead someone back toward hope. It explores how one person's struggle affects an entire family and how compassion can become the beginning of recovery.

The road to healing is rarely short. It requires honesty, patience, and the courage to take one step at a time. My hope is that this story reminds readers that a difficult past does not have to define the future.

For anyone who has felt lost, ashamed, or alone, may these pages serve as a reminder that there is always another step to take, another voice to hear, and another morning waiting ahead.

Prologue

Before I tell you my story, I want you to understand something.

I was not always the boy who learned to speak.

There was a time when silence was my first language. I learned it at the kitchen door, watching my mother's hands shake over empty pots. I learned it under the mango tree, listening to my father's footsteps slow and heavy. I learned it on the road to school, when children stepped away from me as if shame could pass through touch.

I learned it because I had to.

When you are a child in a house that is breaking, silence feels like protection. You think if you stay quiet enough, the trouble will not see you. You think if you do not name the pain, it will not grow teeth. You think if you do not speak, you cannot be blamed for what you did not stop.

But silence does not protect. It only hides. And what hides grows.

This is the story of how I learned that.

It is the story of my father, who lost his work and then lost himself. It is the story of my mother, who carried the whole house on her back until her hands cracked and her songs stopped. It is the story of my sister, Ama, who asked the truest questions and made me remember who I was when I had forgotten.

It is also the story of a bottle. A blue shirt. A paper bird with one big wing. A mango tree. A stool that moved from the doorway to the middle of the compound. A blue book where I wrote my real name until I believed it again.

But mostly, it is the story of a road.

There were two roads I could have taken.

One was short. It passed near the market, where boys laughed and bottles clinked and shame became a seat you could sit on. That road felt easy. It asked nothing of me. It promised I could disappear into the noise and forget the smell of my father's breath.

The other road was longer. It passed the church, the chapel, the narrow path with weeds on both sides. It was hotter and quieter. It took more time. It asked me to keep walking even when my legs ached and my pride screamed.

I almost took the short road many times.

I almost became the name people gave me.

But I did not.

Not because I was strong. I was not strong. I was tired, angry, and afraid. I did not know how to stop walking toward the things that were harming me.

I had help.

That is the part of this story that matters most.

I did not save myself. I was held. By a teacher who asked me to write one true sentence. By a friend who walked beside me even when I was difficult to love. By a sister who went into the dark to find me. By a counselor who said I could sit near the door. By a man who told me a stumble was not a home. By a mother who learned to rest. By a father who told the truth even when it cost him.

I was held by many hands.

And that is why I believe healing is not a solo journey.

A house does not stop leaking because one person patches the roof. A family does not mend because one person stops breaking. A child does not heal because one adult finally speaks.

We heal together. Or we do not heal at all.

This is not a story about a perfect ending. There is no perfect ending. My father still has hard days. I still have moments when the old road calls my name. The shadows still live in the corners of our house.

But we stopped calling the shadows home.

We learned to tell the truth while there was still time. We learned to ask for help before pain became a secret. We learned our real names again.

My name is Kojo.

I came from a place that nearly drowned in silence.

But I did not stay there.

And if you are reading this from your own dark room, I want you to know something.

The road may be long. You may not trust the light yet. Walk anyway. One honest step. Then another. Then another.

That is how we found morning.

That is how you will find yours too.

Chapter 1: The Day My World Changed

My name is Kojo.

I grew up in a town near Kumasi, where the roads turned red after rain and the market woke before the sun. Our house stood at the edge of a narrow lane. It had a tin roof, two small rooms, and a compound with a mango tree that gave shade in the afternoon.

To other people, our house may have looked ordinary. To me, it was the whole world.

In the morning, my mother cooked outside on a coal pot. Smoke rose from the fire and climbed into the air. Sometimes it smelled of roasted plantain. Sometimes it smelled of beans, pepper, and palm oil. On better days, it smelled of groundnut soup.

My mother's name was Abena. She was not a woman who wasted words. When she spoke, people listened. She could bargain at the market until a seller gave up with a laugh. She could carry a bucket of water on her head and still hold Ama's hand. She could scold me in the morning and sing to me at night as if nothing had happened.

My father's name was Kwaku. He worked at a factory outside town. I did not fully understand what he did there. I only knew that he left home in clean clothes and returned with dust on his shoes. He came home tired, but he never came home empty.

Sometimes he brought bread. Sometimes he brought smoked fish wrapped in paper. Sometimes he brought nothing but his laugh, and that was enough.

His laugh entered the house before he did.

"Abena," he would call from the gate. "Your husband has returned."

My mother would shake her head and pretend not to smile.

"You think you are a chief," she would say.

"I am chief of this house."

"Then go and wash before this chief touches my food."

Ama always ran to him first. She was seven, small and loud, with round cheeks and quick feet. She followed me everywhere, but when our father came home, she forgot me at once. He would lift her high until she screamed.

I was ten. I pretended I was too old for that kind of thing.

My father never believed me.

"Kojo," he would say. "My champion. Come here."

I would walk slowly, as if I was doing him a favor. Then he would pull me close and rub his hand over my head. His palm was rough, but I liked the weight of it.

In those days, I thought my father could fix anything.

If the roof leaked, he climbed up with old metal sheets. If Ama broke her doll, he tied the arm back with thread. If my sandals tore, he patched them with wire and told me they were stronger than before.

Once, when I came home crying because an older boy had pushed me near the school gate, my father sat me down beside him.

"Did you fall?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did you get up?"

"Yes."

"Then you already know what to do next time."

I did not understand him then. I only knew that his voice made me feel safe.

Our days had a rhythm.

My mother woke us before sunrise. She tapped my foot through the cloth and told me to get up. Ama always tried to hide under the blanket. My mother always found her.

"I can see your feet," she would say.

Ama would giggle and kick.

We washed our faces from a basin behind the house. The water was cold enough to make me gasp. Then we ate whatever was there. Koko with sugar if we were lucky. Bread if my father had brought some. Sometimes only roasted groundnuts and water.

I walked Ama to school. She held my hand even when I told her not to. The road passed the chop bar, the seamstress shop, the church, and the small kiosk where boys gathered to buy toffees. Women swept in front of their houses. Men called greetings from benches. Goats crossed the road as if they owned it.

At school, I liked English and reading. I liked stories where boys went far away and returned as important men. I liked Madam Efua because she did not shout unless she had to.

Most of all, I liked football after school.

We played on a rough field behind the classrooms. There were stones in the dirt, and one goalpost leaned to one side. Nobody cared. We played until our shirts stuck to our backs and our knees turned brown with dust.

I was not the best striker. I was not the fastest runner. But I was a good goalkeeper. I was not afraid to dive.

That was my life before the day my father came home early.

It was a Thursday.

I remember because Thursday was the day my mother usually bought fish if there was enough money. I had woken that morning to the sound of rain tapping on the roof. By the time we left for school, the rain had stopped, but the ground was soft. Ama stepped in every puddle she could find.

"Stop that," I told her.

"You are not my mother."

"I will tell her."

"You always say that."

She was right.

At school, the air smelled of wet earth. Madam Efua wrote sums on the board. My mind was on the field outside. Wet ground made the ball move badly, but it also made diving easier. I wanted the bell to ring.

When lessons ended, I ran out with the other boys. We played hard. Kwesi kicked the ball so high it landed near the headmaster's office, and we all scattered before anyone could ask who had done it.

I was laughing when I saw Uncle Kwabena standing by the school gate.

He was my father's cousin. He was tall and thin, with a cap he always held in his hand when something serious was happening. That day, the cap was in his hand.

He did not smile when he saw me.

"Kojo," he said.

I stopped running.

"Uncle."

"Take your sister and go home."

"Is something wrong?"

He looked past me toward the classrooms.

"Just go home. Your mother is waiting."

The way he said it made my stomach tighten.

I found Ama near her classroom. She was sitting with two girls, drawing lines in the dirt with a stick.

"We are going," I said.

"But I am playing."

"We are going now."

She looked at my face and stood up without another word.

On the way home, she asked many questions.

"Why did Uncle come?"

"I do not know."

"Is Mama sick?"

"I do not know."

"Did Papa send him?"

"I said I do not know."

She became quiet after that.

When we reached home, the compound felt wrong.

The coal pot was cold. My mother was not singing. A bowl of peeled cassava sat near the kitchen, untouched. Uncle Kwabena sat on a stool near the wall. My mother stood beside him, her wrapper tied tightly around her waist. Her face looked calm, but I knew that kind of calm. It was the kind that came before tears.

"Kojo," she said. "Take Ama inside."

"What happened?"

"Take your sister inside."

Her voice had no space for argument.

I led Ama into the room. She sat on the mat and held her doll against her chest.

"Kojo," she whispered. "Are we in trouble?"

"No."

"Then why is Mama like that?"

I did not answer.

I stood near the curtain and listened.

The adults were speaking softly outside. I heard only pieces.

Factory.

Closed.

Workers sent home.

No money today.

Maybe later.

Maybe never.

I did not understand all of it, but I understood enough.

Something had happened to my father's work.

That evening, we waited for him.

The sun dropped low. The sky turned orange, then purple. Smoke rose from nearby houses as women cooked supper. Children ran past our gate. A radio played highlife music from across the lane. Normally, my father would have called out to someone by then. Normally, I would have heard his laugh.

That evening, there was no laugh.

He came after dark.

I saw his shape first at the gate. He stood there for a moment before entering, as if he was not sure the house belonged to him. His shirt was untucked. His shoes were muddy. His lunch tin hung from his hand.

Ama ran toward him.

"Papa!"

He touched her head, but he did not lift her.

She stopped and looked up at him.

My mother came from the kitchen doorway.

"Kwaku," she said.

He walked to his stool and sat down. The stool creaked under him. He placed the lunch tin on the ground.

Nobody moved.

Finally, my father spoke.

"It is true."

My mother closed her eyes.

"All of it?" she asked.

He nodded.

"They closed the factory?"

"They said there is no money to continue."

"For how long?"

He gave a small laugh. It was not his real laugh.

"They did not say we should wait. They said we should go."

Ama moved closer to me. I felt her fingers touch mine.

My mother sat down slowly on the wooden bench.

"What about your pay?"

"They said we should come next week."

"Next week?"

"That is what they said."

"And if there is nothing next week?"

My father looked at her. His eyes were tired in a way I had never seen.

"I do not know."

Those four words changed the room.

My father had never sounded like that before. He was the man who fixed leaking roofs and broken sandals. He was the man who knew which road to take, which person to call, which shop sold things cheaper. He always had an answer. Now he had none.

My mother did not cry. Not in front of him. Not in front of us.

She stood up and went to the kitchen. I heard her lift the pot. I heard the spoon scrape the bottom. She served supper as if it was any other night.

We ate rice with thin stew.

My father ate only a little. Ama watched him more than she watched her plate. My mother kept her eyes on the food. I swallowed each mouthful slowly. The stew had little fish in it, but no one complained.

After supper, Ama asked if Papa would tell us a story.

My father looked at her. His mouth moved, but no words came.

"Not tonight," my mother said. "Your father is tired."

Ama nodded.

That night, I could not sleep.

Ama lay beside me, breathing softly. The room was dark except for a thin line of moonlight near the door. Outside, my parents spoke in low voices.

"What will we do?" my mother asked.

"I will look for work tomorrow."

"Where?"

"In town."

"You know there are many men looking already."

"I said I will look."

"I am not blaming you."

"I know."

The silence after that was worse than shouting.

I turned on my side and stared at the wall. I wanted to be older. I wanted to walk outside and tell my father that everything would be fine. I wanted to tell my mother not to worry. I wanted to promise Ama that our father would laugh again.

But I was ten.

All I could do was lie there and listen.

The next morning, my father dressed before sunrise.

He wore his good shirt. My mother had pressed it the night before, though I had not seen her do it. He washed his face, combed his hair, and put on his shoes. For a moment, he looked like himself again.

"Where are you going?" Ama asked.

"To find work," he said.

"Will you come with bread?"

My mother turned away.

My father bent and touched Ama's cheek.

"Yes," he said. "If I can."

He left without his lunch tin.

That was when I knew the world had shifted.

Days passed.

At first, my father left every morning. He went to workshops, stores, building sites, and other factories. He spoke to old friends. He waited outside offices. He came home tired and dusty.

Each evening, my mother asked the same question with her eyes. Each evening, his answer was on his face before he spoke. No. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow.

After one week, he stopped leaving so early. After two weeks, he stayed home until the sun was high. After three weeks, he no longer polished his shoes.

My mother began to work more. She fried plantain by the roadside. She washed clothes for neighbors. She sold groundnuts in small paper cones. At night, she counted coins on an old cloth. She counted them again, as if the second counting might change the number.

Food changed too. The soup became thinner. The fish became smaller. Bread came less often. My mother gave Ama the best pieces and told us she had already eaten. I knew she was lying. I began to hate the sound of my own hunger.

One evening, I saw her open a small tin box. Inside were her wedding beads. She held them for a long time. Then she wrapped them in cloth and placed them in her bag.

The next day, there was food in the house.

I did not ask where the beads had gone.

My father noticed everything. That made it worse.

He saw my mother working until her hands cracked. He saw me pretending not to be hungry. He saw Ama asking for things he could no longer give. Shame sat beside him like another person.

He became quieter. Then he became sharp.

A question could upset him. A small mistake could make him shout. If Ama spilled water, he rose from his stool too fast. If I asked about school fees, his face hardened. My mother began speaking to him carefully, choosing each word as if it might break.

One night, I heard her crying behind the curtain.

It was not loud. My mother did not cry loudly. That made it harder to bear.

Ama woke and touched my arm.

"Is Mama sick?"

"No," I said.

"Why is she crying?"

"She is tired."

Ama listened for a while.

"Will Papa get work?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Soon."

It was the second lie I told her. The first had been that we were not in trouble.

At school, I learned to hide things.

I hid my torn sandal under the desk. I hid my empty lunchbox in my bag. I hid my anger when boys talked about their fathers bringing home gifts from town. I hid my fear when Madam Efua asked why I looked tired.

"Kojo," she said one afternoon, standing beside my desk. "You are not yourself these days."

"I am fine, Madam."

She looked at me for a long moment.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Madam."

She did not believe me. I could see it. But she did not force me to speak.

After school, I no longer rushed to play football. I went home to help my mother. I fetched water. I watched Ama. I swept the compound. I learned where my mother kept the coins and how little each one could buy.

I still waited for my father's laugh.

Every evening, I listened for it. Some days, I heard his footsteps and hoped. Then he entered the gate with the same tired face, and the hope went quiet inside me.

The mango tree still stood in the compound. The market still woke before the sun. The church bell still rang on Sunday. People still greeted us on the road.

Outside, the world looked the same. Inside our house, everything had changed.

It did not happen in one moment. A family does not break like a pot dropped on stone. It cracks slowly. A missed meal. A quiet father. A mother selling what she loves. A child learning to lie so his sister can sleep.

The day my father lost his job was the first crack.

I did not know what would come after it.

I only knew that my father's stool had become too quiet, my mother's eyes had become too tired, and Ama had started holding my hand tighter on the road to school.

I was still a child.

But from that day, I began to feel responsible for things no child should carry.

Chapter 2: Childhood Echoes

After my father lost his job, our house did not change all at once.

That was what made it hard to understand.

The same mango tree stood in the compound. The same hens scratched near the wall. The same neighbors passed our gate and called greetings in the morning. My mother still woke before sunrise. Ama still asked too many questions. I still walked to school with my books pressed against my chest.

But the sound of the house had changed.

Before, mornings had a shape. My mother would hum while she lit the coal pot. My father would wash outside and clear his throat loudly, as if the whole town needed to know he was awake. Ama would complain that the water was too cold. I would laugh at her until my mother warned me to leave my sister alone.

Now, my father slept late.

At first, my mother tried to wake him. "Kwaku," she would say softly. "The sun is up." He would turn his face to the wall. After some days, she stopped trying.

He still went out to look for work, but not every day. Some mornings, he dressed and left with purpose. Other mornings, he sat on his stool in the compound and watched the road. His eyes followed people as they passed, but he did not greet them first.

That was not like him.

My father had always been a man of greetings. He knew how to call everyone by name. He knew which old woman had a bad knee, which man had planted maize late, which child had passed an exam. He spoke to people as if the town belonged to all of us.

Now, when people greeted him, he lifted his hand without smiling.

Some men stopped by to talk. They had worked with him at the factory. They sat under the mango tree and spoke in low voices. I was not supposed to listen, so I listened from behind the water barrel.

"They say the owner has gone to Accra."

"They say the machines were already failing."

"They say the pay may not come."

"They say we should be patient."

My father said little.

One man laughed bitterly. "Patient people still need food."

No one answered him.

My mother kept working.

She washed clothes for three women near the main road. She scrubbed until her fingers looked raw. Sometimes she came home with her back bent and her wrapper wet at the waist. She still cooked for us. She still checked Ama's hair before school. She still asked about my lessons.

But she had become quiet in a new way. Her quiet had weight.

At night, she counted money. She placed the coins in small groups on the floor. School fees. Food. Charcoal. Soap. Rent. She moved the coins from one group to another and then back again.

I sat nearby and pretended to read.

Once, she caught me watching.

"Kojo," she said, "go and sleep."

"I am not tired."

"You are a child. Children are always tired when they need to be."

I closed my book.

"Mama, are we poor now?"

Her hand stopped over the coins. For a moment, she looked at me as if I had slapped her. Then she gathered the coins into her palm.

"We are facing a hard time," she said.

"Is that the same thing?"

She looked away. "No." But her voice did not sound sure.

At school, I began to notice things I had never noticed before.

I noticed the boys with new sandals. I noticed lunch tins filled with rice and fish. I noticed who bought ice water at break and who drank from the school tap. I noticed which children paid their fees on time because the teacher did not call their names in front of the class.

One Friday, Madam Efua stood with a small notebook in her hand.

She began reading names. The children whose fees were unpaid had to stand.

I heard my name before I was ready.

"Kojo Mensah."

The room became too hot.

I stood slowly. Some children turned to look. Not all. Just enough.

Madam Efua did not shame us. She was not cruel. She only said we should remind our parents.

But children do not need much to wound each other.

At break, Kwesi came to me near the wall.

"Your father has not paid?"

I shrugged. "He will pay."

"When?"

"Soon."

Kwesi looked at my sandals. One strap had been tied with string.

"My mother says the factory men are all sitting at home now."

I looked at him. "Your mother talks too much."

His face changed. "I was only saying."

"Then stop saying."

He walked away.

I wanted to call him back. I wanted to tell him I was not angry with him. I was angry because he had said the truth where others could hear it. But I did not call him.

I sat under the almond tree and watched the boys play football without me.

That afternoon, Ama came to find me. She held a piece of sugarcane in her hand.

"Kojo, why are you sitting alone?"

"I am resting."

"You never rest."

"I am resting today."

She sat beside me and offered the sugarcane. I took it though I did not want it.

She leaned close and whispered, "My teacher called my name too."

"For fees?"

She nodded.

"Did anyone laugh?"

"One girl smiled."

"What did you do?"

"I stepped on her foot when we were leaving."

I looked at her. She looked back at me with a serious face. Then we both laughed.

It was the first real laugh I had felt in days. It came quickly and left quickly, but I held on to it.

On the walk home, Ama talked about the girl's foot, about her teacher's chalk, about a lizard that had entered the classroom. I let her talk. Her voice filled the road. It kept me from thinking about the notebook in Madam Efua's hand.

When we reached home, my mother was not there.

That was strange. She was usually back before us, even if only to leave food covered in a bowl. The compound was empty. The coal pot was cold. My father sat on his stool with one leg stretched out.

"Where is Mama?" I asked.

"At the roadside," he said.

"Selling?"

He nodded.

"Did she cook?"

He looked at me sharply. "Are you asking me or accusing me?"

My throat closed. "I was only asking."

He looked away. Ama moved behind me.

My father rubbed his face with both hands. "Check the pot," he said.

There was boiled cassava in the pot. No stew. No pepper. Just cassava with salt.

I served Ama first. Then I served myself. My father did not eat.

That evening, my mother came home after dark. She carried an empty tray on her head and a small bag under her arm. Her feet were dusty. Her face looked older than it had in the morning.

Ama ran to her.

"Mama, Kojo and I ate cassava."

"Good."

"Papa did not eat."

My mother glanced at my father. He remained on the stool.

She lowered the tray and went into the kitchen. I followed her.

"Mama, Madam Efua called my name for fees."

She paused. "I know."

"Ama's name too."

"I know."

"Will you pay?"

She placed the tray against the wall. "Yes."

"When?"

She turned to me. Her eyes were tired. "Kojo, not every question needs to be asked tonight."

I wanted to say that the teacher had asked in front of everyone. I wanted to say that Kwesi had spoken about the factory. I wanted to say that my sandals were hurting my feet.

Instead, I nodded.

That was how silence entered me. Not because I had nothing to say. Because I learned that words could add weight to someone already carrying too much.

That night, I heard my parents argue.

They tried to keep their voices low, but thin walls do not keep secrets.

"You cannot sit all day, Kwaku," my mother said.

"I went out yesterday."

"And today?"

"There is no work."

"There is always something."

He laughed in that new bitter way. "You think I am refusing work?"

"I did not say that."

"You think I enjoy watching you sell plantain by the road?"

"I did not say that either."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I am saying the children are watching."

There was silence. Then my father spoke, quieter now.

"I know they are watching."

I pulled the cloth over my head. Ama was awake beside me. I could feel it.

"Kojo," she whispered.

"Sleep."

"Are they fighting?"

"No."

"They sound like fighting."

"They are talking."

"Will Papa leave?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

I did not know. So I said nothing.

Nothing terrible happened on most days. That was the strange part. We woke up. We ate what we had. We went to school. My mother worked. My father searched or sat. Neighbors greeted us. Church bells rang. The market shouted. Life continued.

But inside me, something kept tightening.

I began to listen for my father's mood before speaking. If his feet dragged, I stayed quiet. If he sat with his head bowed, I took Ama outside. If he answered my mother with short words, I found a reason to sweep the compound or fetch water.

I learned the meaning of small signs. A cup placed too hard on the table. A long breath from my mother. My father rubbing his forehead. Ama looking from one adult to another. These signs told me what kind of evening we would have.

Sometimes, I missed the old days so badly that my chest hurt.

I missed my father calling me champion. He still said my name, but it sounded different now. Shorter. Heavier. As if my name itself had become work.

I missed my mother's songs. She still hummed sometimes, but the songs did not last. They broke off when she remembered something.

I missed the way Ama used to laugh without checking other faces first.

I missed myself too, though I did not know how to say that then.

One Sunday, we went to church.

My mother insisted. "We will not sit at home like people who have buried themselves," she said.

She washed Ama's dress the night before and pressed my shirt under a pot filled with hot charcoal. My father said he was not going. My mother did not argue. That frightened me more than if she had shouted.

At church, the drums beat hard. Pastor Mensah preached about storms and faith. I heard some of the words, but not all. My mind kept going to the empty space beside my mother.

Auntie Efua from the next lane leaned toward my mother after service.

"Abena, how is Kwaku?"

My mother smiled. "He is well."

"We have not seen him."

"He is resting."

Auntie Efua nodded slowly. Her eyes moved over me and Ama.

"May God provide."

"Amen," my mother said.

On the way home, she walked faster than usual.

Ama tried to keep up. "Mama, why did Auntie look at us like that?"

My mother did not answer.

I answered for her. "Walk."

At home, my father was under the mango tree. His eyes were closed. A small bottle lay near his foot.

I saw it first. My mother saw it next. Ama did not see it until later.

The bottle was clear. There was a little liquid left inside. It caught the sunlight.

My mother stopped walking.

My father opened his eyes.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then my mother said, "Kwaku, not here."

He looked at the bottle as if he had forgotten it was there. "It is nothing."

"Not in front of the children."

"I said it is nothing."

His voice was calm, but it had a hard edge.

Ama held my hand.

I looked at the bottle again. I knew the smell before I knew the name. I had smelled it on men near the market. It was sharp and bitter. It made men loud. It made some men laugh too much and others sleep in gutters.

My father picked up the bottle and placed it behind his stool.

As if hiding it changed anything.

That afternoon, the house was quiet.

My mother cooked without singing. My father remained outside. Ama sat with her doll and did not ask questions. I sat near the door and watched the place where the bottle had been.

Something had shifted again.

I did not understand addiction. I only knew my father had brought a strange thing into the house. I knew my mother was afraid of it. I knew I was afraid too.

That night, I dreamed of the factory.

I had never seen the inside of it, so my mind made it up. In the dream, the factory was huge and dark. Machines stood like sleeping animals. My father

walked between them, calling my name. I tried to answer, but no sound came out. The doors began to close one by one. I ran toward him, but the floor turned to mud and held my feet.

When I woke, my body was wet with sweat.

Ama was sleeping beside me. My mother was awake behind the curtain. I could hear her breathing. Outside, my father coughed.

I lay still and listened to the house. The walls. The insects. The far sound of a dog barking. The quiet between my parents.

That was when I began to understand that childhood does not always leave in one sudden moment. Sometimes it leaves slowly. It leaves when you stop asking for things because you know there is no money. It leaves when you learn which questions make adults sad. It leaves when you pretend not to hear your mother crying. It leaves when your father hides a bottle behind his stool and everyone acts as if nothing has happened.

I was still ten. I still went to school. I still walked Ama by the hand. I still liked football, mangoes, and stories.

But a part of me had begun to watch everything from a distance. A part of me had become careful.

And once a child becomes careful in his own home, he does not become careless again easily.

Chapter 3: Secrets Behind Closed

Doors

The bottle did not leave after that Sunday.

It stayed. Sometimes I saw it near my father's stool. Sometimes I saw it wrapped in an old cloth beside the water barrel. Sometimes I did not see it at all, but I smelled it on his breath when he came close.

Akpeteshie.

By then I knew the name. I heard men say it near the drinking spot by the market. I heard women complain about it when they washed clothes by the standpipe. It had sounded like something that belonged to other families. Now it was in ours.

My mother tried to keep the house looking normal. She swept the compound every morning. She washed our uniforms. She braided Ama's hair with neat lines. She cooked when there was food and covered the pot even when there was little inside.

She did not want people to see our trouble.

"Kojo," she told me one morning, "when you leave this house, walk well. Keep your shirt tucked in. Do not let people think we have lost ourselves."

I nodded.

She bent and wiped dust from my sandal with the edge of her wrapper.

"People are watching," she said.

I already knew. They watched when my father stopped greeting them loudly. They watched when my mother began selling plantain later into the evening. They watched when Ama and I wore the same uniforms for too many terms. They watched when my father missed church three Sundays in a row.

At first, they asked questions kindly. Then the questions changed. They became shorter. Their eyes stayed longer.

One afternoon, I went to buy salt from Auntie Mansa's kiosk. Two women were sitting there, fanning themselves with pieces of cardboard. They did not know I was close enough to hear.

"The factory has finished many men," one said.

"It is not the factory alone," the other replied. "Some men were waiting for an excuse."

"Hmm. Kwaku was such a proud man."

"Pride does not feed children."

I stood with the coin in my hand.

Auntie Mansa saw me and cleared her throat. The women turned. Their faces changed at once.

"Kojo," Auntie Mansa said. "Salt?"

I placed the coin on the counter. "Yes."

One woman smiled too widely. "How is your mother?"

"She is fine."

"And your father?"

I looked at the salt packet in Auntie Mansa's hand. "He is fine."

The lie came out easily. That frightened me.

When I returned home, my mother was washing clothes in a basin. Her hands moved fast through the soapy water.

"You stayed long," she said.

"There were people."

She looked at me. "What did they say?"

"Nothing."

She held my face for a moment, searching my eyes. Then she let go. "Go and watch Ama."

I found Ama behind the house, drawing circles in the dirt with a stick.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Making a house."

"That does not look like a house."

"It is a round house."

"Houses are not round."

"Mine is."

She drew a door.

"Who lives there?"

She pointed at the biggest circle. "Mama." Then another. "You." Then a small one. "Me."

I waited. "What about Papa?"

She pressed the stick into the dirt. Then she drew another circle far from the others.

"He is outside."

I did not know what to say.

That night, my father came home late.

We had already eaten. My mother had kept food for him in a covered bowl. He entered the compound with slow steps. His shirt was open at the neck. His eyes looked wet and tired.

My mother came to the doorway. "Your food is there," she said.

He waved his hand. "I am not hungry."

"You have not eaten since morning."

"I said I am not hungry."

Ama sat beside me on the mat. Her body became still.

My father moved toward his stool and sat down heavily. The smell came with him. Sharp. Sour. Familiar now.

My mother folded her arms. "Kwaku, the children are awake."

He looked at us as if he had only just remembered we existed. "Then let them sleep."

"No one can sleep when you come like this."

He raised his head. "Come like what?"

My mother did not answer.

"Say it," he said.

"No. Say it."

The room tightened. I pulled Ama closer.

My father stood too fast. The stool fell behind him. Ama flinched. My mother stepped back, but she did not run.

"You think I do not know?" he said. "You think I do not see your face when I enter this house?"

My mother's voice stayed low. "I see a man I love destroying himself."

He laughed. The laugh was ugly. "Love."

"Yes."

"Love does not pay school fees."

"No. But drink does not pay them either."

The words landed hard. My father stared at her. For a moment, I thought he would shout again. Instead, he bent, picked up the stool, and walked out of the room. He sat under the mango tree with his back to us.

My mother stood still for a long time. Then she turned to us. "Sleep."

Ama began to cry. Not loudly. Just small broken sounds.

My mother came to her and held her close. "It is all right," she said.

But it was not all right. We all knew it.

After that night, our house became careful.

My mother stopped challenging my father when he drank. She spoke to him in short sentences. Food is ready. Your shirt is washed. Someone came to see you. The rent man passed by.

My father answered in short sentences too. I heard. I know. Later. Leave it.

Ama stopped running to him when he came home. She still loved him. I could see it. But love had become cautious. She watched his face first. If his eyes were clear, she went near him. If his eyes were red, she stayed beside me.

I hated that. I hated him for making her afraid. Then I hated myself for hating him.

At school, I became good at hiding.

Madam Efua asked about my homework. "My book got wet," I said. It had not.

Kwesi asked why I no longer played after class. "I have chores," I said. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I only wanted to go home before my father returned.

Ama's teacher asked why she looked tired. "She slept late," I said. That was true, but not the whole truth. The whole truth was too large to carry into a classroom.

One day, during break, I heard two boys behind the latrine.

"Kojo's father drinks at the blue kiosk."

"Mine says he begs for credit."

"Maybe Kojo will become like him."

I stepped around the wall before I could stop myself.

"What did you say?"

The taller boy, Isaac, looked at me and smiled. "I said maybe you will become like your father."

My hands closed.

Kwesi was nearby. He saw my face and came quickly. "Leave it," he said.

Isaac laughed. "He is angry because it is true."

I pushed him. He pushed back. Then we were on the ground, dust in my mouth, his knee against my leg, my fist hitting whatever it could reach. Children shouted. Someone called Madam Efua.

She pulled us apart. My shirt was torn. Isaac's lip was bleeding. My chest rose and fell as if I had run from one town to another.

Madam Efua looked at me with disappointment. "Kojo."

I looked down.

She took us to the headmaster. Isaac said I started it. He was right. The headmaster asked why. I said nothing. He asked again. I still said nothing. He caned us both. Three strokes each. I did not cry.

That evening, Madam Efua walked with me part of the way home. She said nothing for a while. Then she stopped near the church wall.

"Kojo, anger is a heavy load for a child."

I looked at the road. "I am not angry."

"You fought like someone who has been angry for a long time."

I kicked a stone. She waited.

I wanted to tell her about the bottle. About my mother crying. About Ama drawing Papa outside the house. About the boys at school. About the way my father's eyes changed when he drank.

But I saw my mother's face in my mind. People are watching.

So I said, "Isaac insulted me."

Madam Efua nodded. "What he said hurt you?"

I said nothing.

She touched my shoulder gently. "You can speak to me if you need to."

I nodded, but I knew I would not.

When I reached home, my mother saw my torn shirt at once.

"What happened?"

"I fell."

She looked at me. "Do not lie to me."

I stared at the ground. "I fought."

"With who?"

"Isaac."

"Why?"

I did not answer.

Her face softened. "What did he say?"

I swallowed. "He said I will become like Papa."

My mother closed her eyes. For a moment, I thought she would shout. Instead, she sat down on the bench as if her legs had weakened.

I wished I had not told her. "I am sorry," I said.

She opened her eyes. "You should not fight."

"I know."

"But what he said was cruel."

I looked at her. She pulled me close. Her wrapper smelled of smoke and soap.

"You are Kojo," she said. "You are not your father's mistakes."

I wanted to believe her.

Behind us, my father stood near the doorway. I had not heard him enter. His face was unreadable.

My mother released me and stood. "Kwaku," she said.

He looked at my torn shirt, then at my face. "Who said it?"

"No one," I said quickly.

His eyes sharpened. "Who said it?"

I did not answer.

He walked out again.

That night, he did not drink at home. He did not eat either. He sat outside until late. I watched him through a gap in the curtain. His head was bent. His hands hung between his knees.

For the first time in many weeks, I felt sorry for him. Then I remembered Ama's tears. The pity turned hard inside me.

Our secrets kept growing.

There was the secret of the unpaid fees. The secret of my mother's beads. The secret of the bottle behind the stool. The secret of my father sleeping outside some nights. The secret of Ama waking from bad dreams. The secret of my fight at school. The secret of my anger.

Each secret had its own place in the house. Some lived behind the curtain. Some lived under the mango tree. Some lived inside my chest.

One evening, my mother sent me to fetch water. The standpipe was crowded. Women argued about whose bucket came first. Children ran between them. I stood with our yellow container and waited.

A boy from school saw me. "Kojo," he called. "Your father was near the drinking spot yesterday."

I tightened my grip on the container.

He came closer. "My uncle saw him."

I said nothing.

"Is it true he sleeps there sometimes?"

I lifted the container though it was not yet full. Water spilled on my feet.

"Move," I said.

He moved.

I carried the half filled container home. My arms ached, but I did not stop. When I reached the compound, my mother looked at the water level.

"Why is it half?"

"The line was long."

She looked at me and knew there was more. But she was too tired to ask.

The rains came early that year.

They beat hard on the tin roof and turned the road to red mud. On rainy nights, the house smelled of damp clothes and smoke. Ama liked rain before. She used to run to the doorway and stretch her hand into it. Now, when rain came at night, she moved closer to me.

Rain made voices louder inside the house. It trapped us together.

One night, my father came home during a storm.

He pushed the door open with too much force. Rain followed him inside. His shirt clung to his body. His eyes were red.

My mother stood. "Kwaku, you are soaked."

He brushed past her.

She touched his arm. "Let me get you a cloth."

He pulled away. "Leave me."

Ama sat up. I put my hand on her shoulder.

My mother's voice shook. "You cannot keep doing this."

My father turned. "Doing what?"

"This."

She pointed at him. Not at the bottle. Not at his wet clothes. At all of him.

He stared at her.

Thunder cracked above the house. For a moment, I thought he would break something. He did neither.

He sat on the floor. Then he began to cry.

I had never seen my father cry. Not when his mother died. Not when he cut his hand repairing the roof. Not when the factory closed.

But that night, with rain on his clothes and shame on his face, my father covered his eyes and cried like a man who had nowhere left to stand.

My mother went to him. I wanted her not to. I wanted her to leave him there. But she knelt beside him and placed a cloth around his shoulders.

He kept saying one sentence. "I have failed you."

My mother said, "Kwaku, stop."

"I have failed you."

"Stop."

"I have failed the children."

Ama's fingers dug into my arm. I did not move. I did not know what to feel.

Part of me wanted to run to him. Part of me wanted to shout at him. Part of me wanted to disappear.

That was the thing about our house then. Nothing was simple. Love and anger sat beside each other. Pity and fear shared the same mat. I missed my father and wished he would stay away. I wanted my mother to forgive him and wanted her to stop forgiving him.

A child should not have to hold so many feelings at once. But I did.

The next morning, my father was quiet.

He washed his clothes himself. He cleaned the mud from the doorway. He told Ama he was sorry for frightening her. She nodded but stayed close to me.

Then he went out. He returned at sunset with bread. One small loaf. He handed it to my mother without looking at her.

She took it. "Thank you," she said.

We ate it with tea. There was not enough for everyone to feel full, but it tasted like something from the old days.

That night, my father told Ama a short story about a hunter who got lost in the forest because he refused to ask for directions. Ama laughed at the ending. My mother smiled.

I watched my father and tried to decide if he was coming back to us.

The next day, the bottle returned.

That was when I learned that sorrow could apologize in the morning and still hurt you by night.

I began to keep my own record of good days and bad days.

Good days were days when my father washed early. Good days were days when my mother sang while cooking. Good days were days when Ama laughed without stopping herself.

Bad days were days when the bottle appeared before sunset. Bad days were days when my mother's mouth became tight. Bad days were days when I came home and felt the air before I saw anyone.

There were more bad days than good ones.

Still, I waited for the good ones. A child can survive a lot if he believes the next day may be different. But belief can become heavy too.

By the end of that term, I had changed.

I spoke less. I watched more. I knew which neighbors pitied us and which ones enjoyed our trouble. I knew how to hide school letters from Ama so she would not worry. I knew how to stand between her and our father without making it obvious.

I knew how to lie. I knew how to smile. I knew how to keep secrets.

One evening, after supper, Ama climbed beside me under the mango tree. The sky was dark blue. The first stars had come out. My father was not home yet. My mother was inside, folding clothes by the lantern.

Ama rested her head on my arm.

"Kojo?"

"Yes."

"Are we still a family?"

The question hurt because it was honest.

I looked at the house. I looked at my father's empty stool. I looked at the doorway where my mother's shadow moved across the wall.

"Yes," I said.

"But Papa is different."

"Yes."

"And Mama is sad."

"Yes."

"And you are angry."

I turned to her. She was not looking at me. She was looking at the stool.

"I am not angry with you," I said.

"I know."

We sat quietly. Then she said, "I do not like secrets."

I swallowed. "Me neither."

But I had already learned to live with them.

By then, secrets were no longer things we kept. They were things that kept us.

Chapter 4: The First Escape

The first time I ran from my own life, I did not go far.

I only went behind the market.

I had imagined escape as something big. A road leading out of town. A bus to Accra. A place where no one knew my father's name or my mother's tired face. A place where Ama did not ask questions I could not answer.

But my first escape was smaller than that.

It began on a Monday morning.

The day had already started badly. My father had come home late the night before. He had not shouted. He had not broken anything. He had simply

entered the house, smelling of akpeteshie, and sat on the floor near the door as if his legs could no longer carry him.

My mother helped him up.

I watched from the mat, pretending to sleep. Ama was awake beside me. Her eyes were open in the dark.

In the morning, my father was still asleep when we left for school. My mother moved around the house without speaking. Her face looked swollen, as if she had not slept. She packed nothing for our lunch. There was nothing to pack.

She gave me two coins.

"Buy something small for Ama at break," she said.

"What about me?"

She looked at me. I wished I had not asked.

"Share it," she said.

I closed my hand around the coins.

Ama stood beside me in her faded uniform. One button was missing from the front. My mother had tied the place with thread.

"Walk well," my mother said.

"Yes, Mama."

"And Kojo. Come straight home after school."

I nodded.

I do not know why that instruction stayed with me. Maybe because I already knew I would not obey it.

At school, I could not listen.

Madam Efua wrote sentences on the board. The chalk made small white clouds each time it touched the blackboard. The other children read aloud. Their voices rose and fell together.

I stared at the words, but they would not stay still in my mind. My stomach hurt from hunger. My back still felt stiff from lying awake. My head was full of my father on the floor, my mother lifting him, Ama watching in silence.

At break, I bought one ball of bofrot from the woman outside the gate. It was still warm. I broke it in two and gave the bigger piece to Ama.

She looked at the pieces. "This one is yours," she said.

"No. Eat."

"You are hungry too."

"I am not."

She did not believe me, but she ate. I put my smaller piece in my mouth and swallowed too fast. It was gone before I could taste it.

After break, Madam Efua collected our exercise books. I had not finished my work. I had tried the night before, but the numbers had blurred. Every time my parents moved outside, I stopped writing and listened.

When Madam Efua reached my desk, I kept my eyes down.

"Kojo," she said.

I said nothing.

She opened the book. Half the page was empty.

"This is not like you."

"I am sorry, Madam."

"You said that last week."

I felt the whole class listening.

"I will do it."

"When?"

I had no answer.

She closed the book and placed it on my desk. "Stay after class."

My chest tightened. If I stayed after class, Ama would wait. If Ama waited, she would ask questions. If we reached home late, my mother would ask questions too. I did not want any more questions.

When the final bell rang, the children rushed out. Ama came to my classroom door.

"Kojo, are we going?"

"Wait outside."

"Why?"

"Just wait."

Madam Efua was speaking to another teacher near the door. Her back was turned. My book was still on my desk.

I looked at the book. I looked at Ama. Then I walked out. Not fast. Not running. Just walking, as if I had permission.

Ama followed me.

"Kojo, Madam said you should stay."

"I know."

"So why are we going?"

"Because I said so."

She stopped asking.

We walked past the church, past the kiosk, past the women selling oranges. At the turn that led home, I stopped.

Ama looked up at me. "Home is that way."

"I know."

"Then why are you standing?"

I looked toward the market. The market was noisy even from far away. Traders shouted prices. Taxis honked. Someone was beating a metal pan to draw customers. The whole place sounded alive.

Our house sounded tired.

"Go home," I told Ama.

Her eyes widened. "Alone?"

"It is not far."

"Mama said we should come together."

"I have to do something."

"What thing?"

"Just go."

She held my hand. "I will come with you."

"No."

My voice came out harder than I meant. Ama let go.

For a moment, she looked very small.

"I will tell Mama," she said.

"Tell her."

I started walking before I could change my mind.

After a few steps, I looked back. Ama was still standing at the turn. Her doll was under one arm. Her schoolbag hung low on her shoulder. Then she turned toward home.

I kept walking.

The market swallowed me. Women sat behind bowls of tomatoes, garden eggs, onions, and smoked fish. Men pushed carts through the mud. Children carried trays on their heads. A man shouted about shoes from Kumasi Central Market, though they looked old.

No one looked at me for long. That was what I liked.

In the market, I was only one boy among many.

I walked without knowing where I wanted to go. I passed the fish sellers and covered my nose. I passed the cloth stalls where women touched fabric and argued over prices. I passed a barber shop with music playing too loudly from a speaker.

Behind the market, the ground became uneven. Wooden stalls leaned against each other. Empty crates were stacked near a wall. The smell changed there. Less food. More smoke. More sweat. More drink.

That was where the older boys gathered.

I had seen them before. They were not men, but they were no longer boys like me. Some had left school. Some worked carrying goods. Some did nothing that I could see. They wore slippers, torn shirts, and the kind of confidence that made younger boys move aside.

Kwesi's older cousin, Yaw, was among them.

He saw me first.

"Kojo," he called. "Why are you here? School has closed?"

"Yes."

He laughed. "School boys always lie badly."

The others looked at me. I felt heat rise in my face.

"I am not lying."

Yaw leaned against a crate. "Then where is your bag?"

I looked down. I had left it in class. The boys laughed.

I should have walked away. Instead, I stayed.

Yaw shifted and made space on the crate beside him. "Sit."

I sat.

No one asked about my father. No one asked about fees. No one asked why my shirt was faded or why I was not going home. They talked over me, around me, as if I had always been there.

For the first time that day, I breathed easily.

Someone passed roasted groundnuts in a paper cone. Yaw took some and gave the cone to me.

"Eat."

I hesitated.

"Eat. You think I poisoned it?"

I took a handful. The groundnuts were dry and salty. They tasted better than anything I had eaten that day.

A bottle sat near Yaw's foot. I saw it but tried not to look.

It was not hidden. That alone made it different from my father's bottle. These boys did not hide anything. They spoke loudly. They laughed loudly. They leaned into the world as if shame belonged to other people.

Yaw noticed my eyes. "You know this one?"

I looked away. "No."

He smiled. "Good. Stay like that."

Another boy laughed. "Why? Let him learn."

Yaw's face changed. "He is still a child."

"I am not a child," I said.

The words came out before I could stop them. All the boys looked at me.

Yaw laughed softly. "You hear him? He says he is not a child."

"I am ten."

"That is a child."

"I take care of my sister."

The laughter faded a little.

Yaw studied me. "Is that so?"

I said nothing.

He bent and picked up the bottle. For a second, I thought he would hand it to me. My stomach tightened. But he only moved it behind the crate.

"Then be wise," he said. "Taking care of someone does not mean copying foolish men."

I knew what he meant. I hated that he knew.

We sat there until the sun began to lower. I listened to their stories. Some were funny. Some were cruel. Some made no sense. But I did not want to leave.

Behind the market, no one expected me to be good. No one expected me to be strong. No one expected me to explain why my life felt like a room with no air.

That was the danger of it. Escape did not feel dangerous at first. It felt like rest.

When I finally stood, Yaw looked at the sky.

"Your mother will beat you."

"She will not."

He smiled. "Then she is better than mine."

I walked home slowly.

The closer I came to our lane, the heavier my legs felt. I imagined my mother standing at the gate. I imagined Ama telling her everything. I imagined Madam Efua sending word that I had left school without permission.

When I reached the compound, Ama was sitting under the mango tree.

She saw me and stood. "Mama is angry."

My mouth went dry. "Where is she?"

"Inside."

"Did you tell her?"

Ama looked hurt. "She asked me."

That was fair.

I went inside. My mother was folding clothes. She did not look up at once.

"Where were you?"

I stood near the door. "At school."

She lifted her eyes. "Do not start with a lie."

I said nothing.

"Madam Efua sent a boy here. She said you left your book and walked away."

My throat tightened. "I was tired."

"Tired?"

"Yes."

"So you left your sister to walk home alone?"

"She knows the way."

My mother stood. "She is seven."

I looked down.

"She came home crying."

I turned toward the doorway. Ama was not there.

"She cried?"

My mother's voice shook. "She thought something had happened to you."

The shame hit me harder than any slap.

"I only went to the market."

"To do what?"

I had no answer.

"To do what, Kojo?"

"To sit."

"With who?"

"No one."

She came closer. "Kojo."

I swallowed. "With some boys behind the market."

Her face tightened. "Which boys?"

"Yaw was there."

"Kwesi's cousin?"

"Yes."

"Those boys are not for you."

"They did nothing."

"That is how trouble begins. It does nothing first."

I wanted to argue, but I could not.

My mother sat down again. For the first time, she looked more sad than angry.

"I know things are hard," she said. "I know you are carrying too much. But do not run to places that will swallow you."

I stared at the floor. "I am not running."

She looked at me. "You left your sister. You left your books. You lied. What do you call that?"

The answer was in my mouth, but I did not say it. Escape.

My father came in before supper.

He was sober that evening. His eyes were clear. He greeted my mother quietly, then looked at me.

"What happened?"

My mother told him. Not everything. Only enough.

He listened without speaking. Then he turned to me. "Why did you go there?"

I felt anger rise in me. Because of you. The words burned in my throat. Because you sit outside with a bottle. Because Mama cries. Because Ama asks me questions. Because everyone knows. Because I am tired.

But I said none of it.

"I do not know," I answered.

My father watched me. His face changed. Not anger. Not shame. Something softer and worse.

"You know," he said. "You just do not want to say."

I looked at him then. For one dangerous moment, I wanted to say everything. Then I saw the tiredness in his eyes, and I hated myself for still caring.

My mother served supper. We ate in silence.

Afterward, Ama came and sat beside me outside. The sky was cloudy. The air smelled of rain.

"You left me," she said.

"I know."

"I was scared."

"I am sorry."

She picked at the edge of her dress. "Will you do it again?"

I wanted to tell her no. I wanted to be the kind of brother who could promise and keep it.

But behind the market, I had found a place where no one needed me. No one looked at me with worry. No one asked me to be strong. No one called me champion. No one called me poor. No one called me the son of a drunkard.

That place had felt wrong. It had also felt easy.

"I do not know," I said.

Ama leaned her head against my arm. "Please know."

I closed my eyes.

The next day, Madam Efua made me stand after class.

She did not shout. That made it worse.

"You left without permission," she said.

"Yes, Madam."

"You left your sister too."

I nodded.

"Kojo, when pain has nowhere to go, it looks for doors. Some doors lead to help. Some doors lead to more pain."

I looked at the floor.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, Madam."

I understood more than she knew. Behind the market had been a door. For a short time, I had stepped through it and felt free from my own house.

But when I came back, nothing had changed. My father was still struggling. My mother was still tired. Ama was still afraid. My fees were still unpaid. The bottle was still somewhere in our life, waiting.

That was the first thing I learned about escape. It gives you distance, but it does not give you freedom.

Still, after that day, whenever the house grew too heavy, I thought about the crates behind the market. I thought about Yaw and the boys laughing as if nothing could touch them. I thought about the way no one asked me to explain myself.

And a small part of me wanted to go back.

Chapter 5: When Pain Found a Name

After the day I went behind the market, I tried to behave.

I went straight home after school. I carried Ama's bag when she was tired. I helped my mother fetch water. I kept my exercise books where Madam Efua could see them. I answered when adults greeted me.

From the outside, I looked like a good boy again.

Inside, nothing was settled.

The thought of the market stayed with me. Not the noise or the smell or the boys. Those things were easy to forget. What stayed with me was the feeling I had when I sat on that crate.

For a little while, nobody needed anything from me. I was not Ama's guard. I was not my mother's helper. I was not my father's disappointed son. I was just Kojo, sitting in dust, eating groundnuts from another boy's hand.

That scared me. I knew I should not want to go back there. But I did.

At home, the days continued in their new way.

My father still searched for work, but less often. Some mornings, he left early and returned with dust on his shoes. Other mornings, he stayed under the mango tree, rubbing his thumb over the edge of his stool. When he drank, he spoke less at first. Then later, if the drink was too much, he spoke too loudly.

My mother watched everything. She watched the coins. She watched the food. She watched my father. She watched me.

I began to dislike being watched.

One evening, she found me sitting behind the house with my knees pulled to my chest.

"Kojo," she said.

I did not answer.

She came closer. "Did something happen at school?"

"No."

"Did someone trouble you?"

"No."

"Are you sick?"

"No."

She stood there for a moment. "Then why are you sitting here like an old man?"

I shrugged.

She waited. I could hear Ama singing to herself in the compound. I could hear a woman laughing from the next house. I could hear my father coughing under the mango tree.

My mother sat beside me on an upturned bucket. For a while, she said nothing. That made it harder.

If she had scolded me, I could have been angry. If she had told me to get up, I could have obeyed. But she sat beside me like she had time, though I knew she did not.

At last she said, "Sometimes when I look at you, I see too much in your face."

I stared at the ground. "What do you see?"

"A boy trying to become a man before his body is ready."

I did not like that. "I am fine."

"No, Kojo. You are not."

My throat tightened.

She touched my shoulder. "You do not have to carry this house."

I wanted to believe her. But who else would carry Ama when she was afraid? Who else would notice when there was no food left in the pot? Who else would stand near the door when my father's voice changed?

I said nothing.

My mother sighed and stood. "Come and eat."

There was rice that evening. Not much stew. Still, it was rice.

Ama talked while we ate. She told us her teacher had praised her handwriting. She showed us a page from her exercise book. Her letters leaned to one side, but she was proud of them.

My father looked at the page. "This is good," he said.

Ama smiled. Then she asked, "Papa, when will you come to school for parents day?"

The spoon stopped in my father's hand.

My mother looked at Ama. Ama did not understand what she had touched.

"Other fathers came last time," she said. "Kojo's teacher asked too."

My father placed the spoon down. "I will come when I can."

"When can you?"

"Ama," my mother said softly.

But Ama continued. "Will you wear your factory shirt?"

The room went quiet.

My father stood. "I am going outside."

He left his food.

Ama looked at me. "What did I say?"

"Nothing," I told her. But she had said everything.

That night, my chest hurt.

It was not like a cut or a bruise. It was not a pain I could point to. It sat under my ribs and pressed from the inside. I turned on the mat, but it stayed. I sat up, but it stayed. I drank water, but it stayed.

Ama was asleep. My mother was outside washing the plates. My father was under the mango tree.

I lay back down and pressed my hand against my chest. I wondered if something was wrong with my heart.

The next morning, the pain was still there.

At school, Madam Efua asked us to write a composition.

The title was written clearly on the board.

My Family.

The room filled with the sound of pencils. Children began writing quickly. One boy raised his hand and asked if he could write about his grandmother too. Madam Efua said yes.

I stared at the title. My Family.

I wrote my name first. Kojo Mensah. Then I wrote the date. After that, nothing came.

I looked at Kwesi's book. He had already written many lines. I saw the words my father and my mother. I looked away.

What was I supposed to write?

My father used to work at a factory. My father now sits under a mango tree. My mother sells plantain until her feet swell. My sister asks questions that make adults quiet. Our house has secrets.

I could not write those things.

So I wrote lies.

My family is happy. My father works hard. My mother cooks good food. My sister likes to play. We all love one another.

I stopped there. The words looked clean on the page. They also looked dead.

When Madam Efua collected the books, she paused at mine.

"This is all?"

"Yes, Madam."

She looked at the page. "Five lines?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Kojo, you write better than this."

I stared at my desk. She did not say more in front of the class.

At break, I did not go outside. I sat in the empty classroom and watched dust move in the sunlight. My stomach was quiet that day because hunger had become normal. The pain in my chest was not quiet. It had grown heavier.

Madam Efua came in with my exercise book in her hand.

I stood.

"Sit," she said. I sat.

She placed the book on the desk. "Read what you wrote."

I looked at the page. "My family is happy. My father works hard. My mother cooks good food. My sister likes to play. We all love one another."

My voice sounded small.

Madam Efua sat on the bench across from me. "Is that the whole truth?"

I did not answer.

She waited. I hated waiting adults. They left space for words, and words were dangerous.

"Kojo," she said, "I am not asking because I want to shame you."

Still, I said nothing.

She looked toward the door, then back at me. "Sometimes children write what adults want to hear."

My eyes burned. I blinked hard.

She lowered her voice. "Is your chest paining you?"

I looked up. "How did you know?"

"You keep holding it."

I pulled my hand away. "It is nothing."

"Does it pain when you run?"

"No."

"When you breathe?"

"No."

"When you think too much?"

I looked down. She understood before I spoke.

"That kind of pain can come from worry," she said.

I frowned. "Worry can pain your chest?"

"Yes."

I did not know that. I thought worry stayed in the head. I thought shame stayed in the face. I thought fear stayed in the stomach. I did not know they could enter the body and sit there like stones.

Madam Efua opened my book again. "You wrote that your family is happy."

I said nothing.

"Maybe some parts are happy. Maybe some parts are not."

My eyes filled before I could stop them. I hated myself for it.

She passed me a small cloth from her bag. "Crying is not a crime."

That made the tears fall harder. I turned my face away.

She did not touch me. She did not call anyone. She did not ask too quickly. She waited until I could breathe again.

Then she said, "Tell me one true sentence."

I wiped my face. "One?"

"One is enough."

I looked at the page. My pencil felt heavy.

I wrote slowly.

My father lost his job.

The room became very still.

Madam Efua read it. "Good," she said. "That is true."

The word good sounded strange beside that sentence.

She pointed to the next line. "Write another."

I swallowed.

My mother is tired.

She nodded. "Another."

Ama is afraid.

My hand started shaking.

"Another, Kojo."

I am angry.

The pencil stopped. I stared at the sentence. I had not meant to write that.

Madam Efua read it quietly. Then she said, "Anger often stands in front of sadness."

I looked at her. "What does that mean?"

"It means sometimes we look angry because sadness is too painful to show first."

I did not answer.

She pointed to the page. "Write one more."

I pressed the pencil hard.

I miss my father.

The words broke something open inside me. I put my head down on the desk and cried. Not loudly. But enough that I could not pretend anymore.

Madam Efua stayed with me until the bell rang. When children began returning from break, she told me to wash my face. She tore a clean page from another book and gave it to me.

"Keep this one," she said, touching the page with the true sentences. "Do not throw it away."

I folded it and placed it inside my shirt.

All afternoon, I felt the paper against my skin.

My father lost his job. My mother is tired. Ama is afraid. I am angry. I miss my father.

Five true sentences.

They were heavier than the lies, but they did not choke me the same way.

On the way home, Ama noticed my quiet.

"Did Madam beat you?"

"No."

"Did you fail?"

"No."

"Then why is your face like that?"

I almost smiled. "Like what?"

"Like you swallowed hot pepper."

I laughed a little. She smiled because she had made me laugh.

At home, my mother was pounding pepper in a small mortar. The smell rose sharp into the air. My father was not there.

I helped Ama remove her uniform. Then I went behind the house and opened the folded page again. I read the sentences until I knew them without looking.

That evening, my father came home before dark.

He was sober. He carried a small black plastic bag. Inside were two tomatoes, one onion, and a piece of smoked fish. My mother took them without speaking, but her face softened.

"Where did you get money?" she asked.

"I helped unload cement near the station."

She looked at his hands. The skin was scraped in two places.

"You should wash."

"I will."

Ama ran to him, then stopped halfway. She was still learning when it was safe to run.

My father saw it. His face changed. "Come," he said softly.

Ama went to him slowly. He placed his hand on her head.

"I will come to parents day," he said.

She looked up. "Truly?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When they call us again."

She smiled, but I did not. I wanted to believe him. I wanted it so badly that I became afraid of wanting it.

That night, after supper, I sat outside with the folded paper in my hand. My father sat on his stool. My mother was washing the plates. Ama was asleep.

My father looked at me. "What is that?"

"School work."

"Read it."

"No."

He leaned back. "You cannot read your school work to your father?"

I folded the paper tighter. "It is not that kind."

He watched me for a long time. Then he nodded. "Keep it well then."

I almost gave it to him. I almost let him see the sentence that said I missed him. But I was not ready.

Instead, I placed the paper inside my book.

For many days after that, I carried the true sentences with me.

When boys whispered at school, I touched the page. When my mother looked too tired to stand, I touched the page. When my father came home with the smell on his breath, I touched the page.

The sentences did not fix anything. They did not bring back the factory. They did not stop my father from drinking. They did not fill the empty parts of our pot.

But they gave shape to what had been moving inside me.

Before that day, my pain had been a heavy cloud. Now it had names.

Worry. Anger. Sadness. Fear. Missing someone who was still alive.

That last one was the hardest.

I had thought missing was for people who had traveled or died. I did not know you could miss a person sitting only a few steps away. I did not know you could miss your father while hearing him cough under the mango tree.

Once I had names for the pain, I began to see it everywhere.

I saw it in my mother's silence when she counted coins. I saw it in Ama's questions. I saw it in my father's hands when they shook before he reached for the bottle. I saw it in the boys behind the market, laughing too loudly. I saw it in myself when I wanted to run.

Pain was not always crying. Sometimes pain was a joke told too loudly. Sometimes it was a child fighting near the latrine. Sometimes it was a man saying he was not hungry. Sometimes it was a woman selling her beads and calling it nothing.

That week, Madam Efua gave me another composition.

This time, she did not write the title on the board for everyone. She wrote it only in my book.

What I Wish Adults Knew.

I stared at the words for a long time.

Then I wrote one sentence. Children hear more than adults think.

I stopped there.

The next day, I added another. Children get tired too.

After that, another. When adults hide pain, children still feel it.

I did not show the page to anyone. Not yet. But I kept writing. Small sentences. True sentences.

They became a place where my chest could empty itself a little.

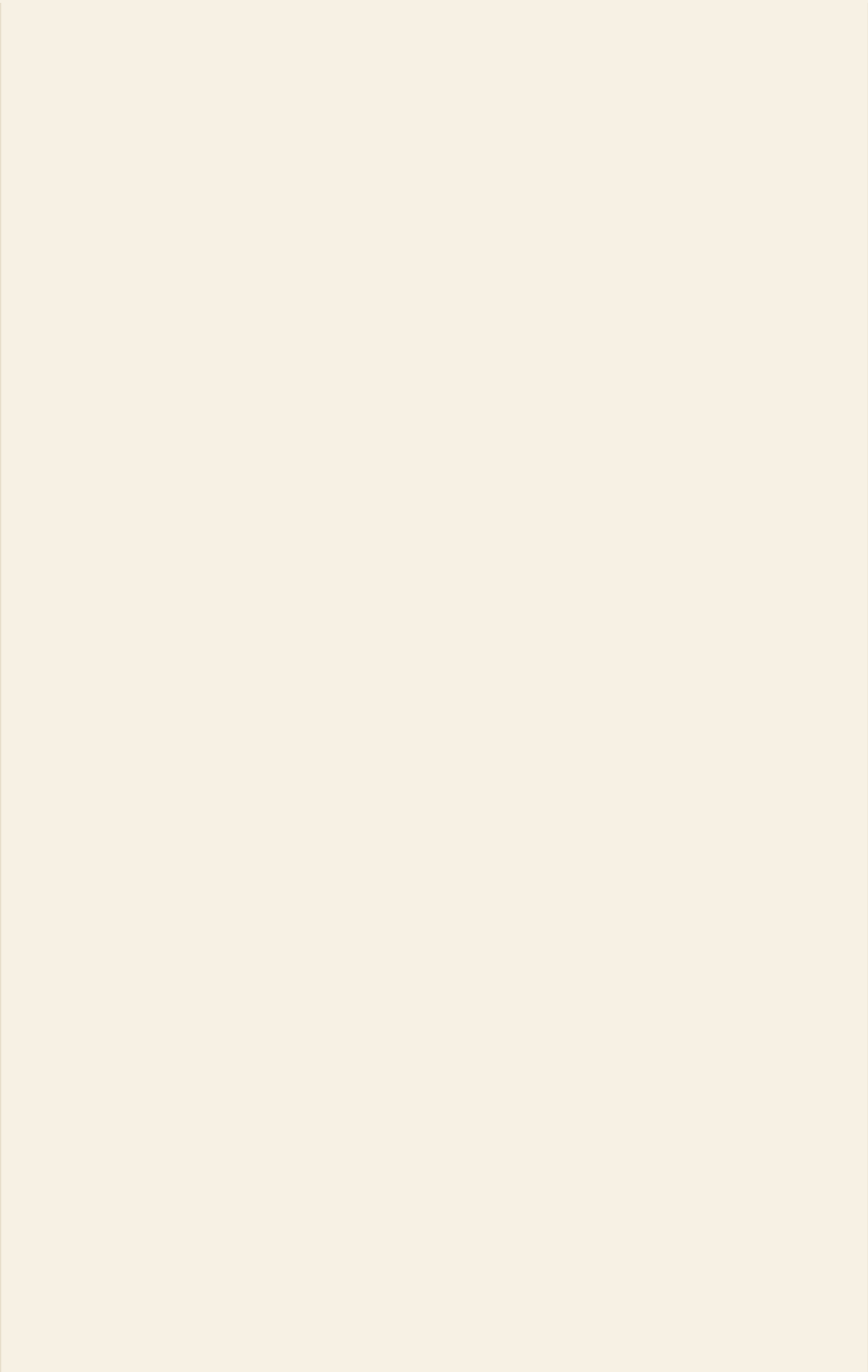
I still wanted to escape sometimes. I still thought about the boys behind the market. I still wondered what it would feel like to sit there again and be nobody's worry. I still felt angry when my father stumbled. I still lied when people asked questions.

But something had changed.

I knew now that what lived inside me was not madness. It was not badness. It was not weakness.

It was pain.

And pain, once named, could no longer hide in the same way.



Chapter 6: Family Ties, Family Tears

In our town, family did not end at the walls of your house. Family was everywhere. It was the auntie who corrected your shirt in church. It was the uncle who asked about your school marks before greeting your mother. It was the cousin who borrowed salt and returned gossip with it. It was the old grandmother who knew the name of every child on the lane.

When life was good, family felt like protection. When trouble came, family felt like a crowd.

After my father lost his job, relatives began to visit more often. Some came with food. Some came with advice. Some came only to look.

I learned the difference quickly.

The first to come was Auntie Adwoa, my mother's older sister. She lived across town with her husband, who sold spare parts near Kejetia. She arrived one Saturday morning with a sack of rice, smoked fish, and two bars of soap.

Ama ran to her. "Auntie!"

Auntie Adwoa lifted Ama and kissed her cheek. "You are growing thin," she said. Ama laughed because she thought it was a joke. It was not.

My mother came from the kitchen and took the sack from her. "Adwoa, you should not have troubled yourself."

Auntie Adwoa clicked her tongue. "If your sister cannot trouble herself for you, then who should?"

My mother smiled, but I saw her eyes fill.

They went inside to talk. I stayed near the doorway, pretending to clean my sandals.

Auntie Adwoa did not lower her voice enough.

"Abena, how long will this continue?"

My mother answered quietly. "He is trying."

"Trying is not food."

"He lost his work. It is not his fault."

"I know that. But the drinking?"

Silence. Then my mother said, "He is ashamed."

"Shame should make a man stand up. Not fall into a bottle."

I heard my mother move something on the table. "Do not speak like that in my house."

"I am speaking because I love you."

"Then love me with less noise."

I almost smiled. Even tired, my mother still had fire.

Auntie Adwoa sighed. "I am not your enemy."

"I know."

"Then listen. You have children. Kojo sees everything. Ama sees everything. You think you are hiding it, but children see through walls."

My mother did not answer.

"Come and stay with me for some time. Bring the children."

"No."

"Abena."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because this is my home."

"And if this home swallows you?"

My mother's voice changed. "He is my husband."

"He is also hurting you."

Another silence. I heard my mother begin to cry.

I stood up too quickly and knocked my sandal against the wall.

The room became quiet.

Auntie Adwoa came to the doorway. "Kojo."

I looked down.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"I was cleaning my sandal."

She looked at the sandal in my hand. It was not clean. She did not expose me.

"Come here."

I went to her. She placed a hand on my head.

"You are getting tall."

I said nothing.

"Are you eating?"

"Yes." It was not fully true.

She studied my face. "Do not lie to aunties. We are trained to catch lies."

I looked away. She smiled sadly.

Then she called Ama and gave us each a sweet from her bag. Ama sucked hers at once. I kept mine in my pocket for later.

When my father came home that afternoon, he saw the sack of rice near the kitchen.

"Who brought this?"

My mother was washing pepper in a bowl. "Adwoa."

His face closed. "Why?"

"She came to visit."

"With rice?"

"She is my sister."

"I did not ask her for food."

"No one said you did."

He looked toward the room where Auntie Adwoa was resting. "I do not want people feeding my children as if I am dead."

My mother's hand stopped in the water. "Then feed them."

The words came out before she could soften them. My father stared at her.

Auntie Adwoa came out of the room. "Kwaku," she said. "Do not quarrel with my sister because of rice."

He turned to her. "This is my house."

"And she is my sister."

"I did not invite you."

"No. Hunger invited me."

The air went still. My father's hand tightened at his side. My mother stepped between them.

"Enough."

Auntie Adwoa lifted her chin, but she said nothing more.

My father walked out of the compound. My mother covered her face with both hands. Ama began to cry.

I hated the rice then. I hated that we needed it.

That evening, my father did not return until late. When he came, the smell was on him. He did not speak to anyone. He lay outside on a mat under the mango tree.

Auntie Adwoa wanted my mother to lock the door. My mother refused.

"He will wake in the night," she said.

"Let him wake outside."

"Adwoa."

"No. You protect him too much."

My mother looked at us. "Not in front of the children."

Auntie Adwoa closed her mouth. But it was already in front of us. Everything was in front of us.

The next morning, Auntie Adwoa left early. Before she went, she called me aside near the gate.

"Kojo, look at me."

I looked at her.

"You are a child."

I said nothing.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"You are not the man of this house."

The words annoyed me. Someone had to be.

She must have seen that thought on my face. "I know what you are thinking. But listen to me. Helping your mother is good. Loving your sister is good. Carrying your father's shame is not your work."

I looked at the ground.

She placed something in my hand. Folded money.

"For school," she said.

I tried to give it back. "No."

"Take it."

"Mama will be angry."

"Your mother can be angry with me. Not with you."

I kept the money.

After she left, I gave it to my mother. She sat on the bench and stared at it.

"Adwoa gave you this?"

"Yes."

"For school?"

"Yes."

My mother pressed the money flat against her knee. "She should have given it to me."

"She said you would refuse."

My mother gave a tired laugh. "She knows me too well."

She used the money to pay part of our fees. The next week, Madam Efua did not call my name. I should have felt relief. Instead, I felt ashamed.

That was the thing about help. I wanted it, but I hated needing it.

Uncle Kwabena came a few days later.

He was from my father's side. He had been the one who came to school on the day the factory closed. He arrived in the evening with two other men. They sat with my father under the mango tree. My mother served them water.

I sat inside with Ama, but the window was open.

Uncle Kwabena spoke first. "Kwaku, we have been patient."

My father did not answer.

"You are not the only man who lost work."

Still no answer.

Another man said, "People are talking."

My father laughed. "People always talk."

"They are saying you drink too much."

"Are they lying?"

The men went quiet.

Uncle Kwabena sighed. "We came because we are your family."

My father's voice was low. "Family came to shame me?"

"No. To wake you."

"I am awake."

"Then stand."

The words were simple, but they struck hard. My father stood.

"You think I have not tried?"

Uncle Kwabena remained seated. "I know you have tried."

"No, you do not. You come here with clean shirts and heavy words. You think work is waiting for me behind every door. You think I enjoy sitting here?"

"No."

"You think I enjoy watching my wife work like a servant?"

"No."

"You think I enjoy seeing my son look at me like I am already buried?"

My body went cold. I stepped back from the window.

Ama looked at me. "What did Papa say?"

"Nothing."

But he had said it. He had seen my eyes. I did not know what was worse. That he had seen my disappointment, or that I had not known how to hide it.

Outside, Uncle Kwabena spoke more gently. "Kwaku, no one says you are not suffering. But if your suffering becomes poison in your house, then we must speak."

My father said nothing.

"We found a man near the station who needs help loading goods. It is not factory work. It is not steady. But it is work."

"I know that place."

"Will you go?"

A long pause. Then my father said, "Yes."

My mother stood by the doorway, holding the water jug. Her face did not change, but her shoulders lowered a little.

The next morning, my father left before sunrise.

He came back in the afternoon with cement dust on his trousers and small cuts on his palms. He looked exhausted. He also looked less empty.

My mother brought warm water in a basin. "Wash your hands."

He placed his hands in the water and flinched.

Ama came close. "Papa, did the cement bite you?"

For a second, no one spoke. Then my father laughed. A real laugh. Small, but real.

"The cement has teeth," he said.

Ama laughed too. My mother looked away, but I saw her smile.

That evening, we ate banku with pepper and a little fish. My father ate with us. He asked about school. He asked Ama to show him her handwriting. He asked me whether I had played football.

I wanted to answer warmly. Instead, I said, "No."

"Why?"

"I had chores."

He nodded. I could see he wanted to say more. I wanted him to say more too. But the space between us had become difficult to cross.

For three days, things were better.

My father went to the station each morning. He returned tired but sober. My mother sang while cooking. Ama ran to the gate when she heard his steps. I let myself hope, but only a little.

On the fourth day, it rained.

Work at the station stopped early. My father came home before noon. He sat under the mango tree, watching water drip from the leaves. My mother was not home. She had gone to buy charcoal.

I was inside reading. Ama was asleep.

After some time, I heard my father call my name.

"Kojo."

I went out. "Yes, Papa."

He pointed to the stool near him. "Sit."

I sat.

Rainwater fell from the roof in thin lines.

He looked at his hands. "You heard what I said the other day."

I knew what he meant. I said nothing.

He rubbed one cut on his palm. "I said you look at me like I am buried."

I stared at the mud.

"Do you?"

My throat tightened. "No."

"Do not lie."

I looked at him then. His face was tired, but his eyes were clear.

"I do not know how to look at you anymore," I said.

The words surprised both of us. He looked away first.

I wanted to take the words back. They sounded cruel. But they were true, and true words had become harder for me to bury since Madam Efua made me write them.

My father nodded slowly. "I do not know how to look at myself either."

I had no answer.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "When the factory closed, I thought I would find work quickly. I thought I would come home one day and tell your mother not to worry. I thought I would prove that I was still a man."

He laughed without joy. "But each day I came back with nothing, something inside me became smaller."

I listened. He had never spoken to me like this before.

"I started to hate the road home," he said. "Because at the end of it were all of you. Looking. Waiting. Needing."

His voice broke on the last word.

I felt anger rise. "We needed you."

"I know."

"Not only money."

He looked at me. I could feel my heart beating hard.

"We needed you to be here."

He closed his eyes. "I know."

I wanted to stop. I should have stopped. But once the words came, I could not hold them.

"Ama is afraid of you now."

His face twisted. "I know."

"Mama cries."

"I know."

"I do not want to be like you."

My father sat very still.

The moment the words left my mouth, I wished I could catch them.

He stood slowly. I thought he would shout. He did not. He walked into the rain and stood near the wall with his back to me.

I remained on the stool, shaking.

My mother returned and found him there. "Kwaku?"

He wiped his face, but I did not know if it was rain or tears. "I am going to wash," he said.

He passed me without looking.

That night, he did not eat much. He did not drink either. He lay down early.

I could not sleep. The sentence kept hitting me. I do not want to be like you. It was true. It was also wicked.

The next morning, my father left for work before I woke. I found his stool empty. On it was something wrapped in newspaper.

My name was written on the outside. Kojo.

I opened it. Inside was a pencil. Not new, but sharpened well. Beside it was a small exercise book with a blue cover. On the first page, my father had written in careful letters. For your true sentences.

I stood under the mango tree for a long time.

My mother came out and saw the book. "He left it for you?"

I nodded.

She looked at the writing, then at me. "Your father has not written anything in years."

I touched the page. I did not know what to feel.

At school, I wrote in the new book during break.

I wrote one sentence. My father heard me.

Then another. I hurt him.

Then another. He hurt me first.

I stared at the last sentence. It looked ugly. It looked childish. It looked honest.

That afternoon, I showed the book to Madam Efua. She read the three sentences and gave it back.

"Truth can be untidy," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you can love someone and be angry with him. Both can be true."

I thought of my father standing in the rain. "Is that allowed?"

She looked at me kindly. "It happens whether we allow it or not."

Family visits continued. Some relatives helped. Some judged. Some did both at the same time.

My father's mother, Nana Akua, came from the village two weeks later. She was small and strong, with white hair wrapped under a scarf. She walked with a stick, but no one dared move faster than her.

When she entered the compound, my father rose at once. "Maame."

She looked him up and down. "So you remember how to stand."

My mother quickly brought a chair.

Nana Akua sat and called Ama to her. She touched Ama's cheeks, then looked at me. "This one has old eyes," she said.

I did not know whether it was praise or insult.

She stayed for two days.

On the first night, she asked my mother to cook for everyone. She brought dried fish and palm oil from her bag. The food tasted rich in a way ours had not for months.

After supper, she called my father. "Kwaku, sit."

He sat.

She looked at him for a long time. "You are my son. So I will not speak as a stranger."

My father lowered his head.

"You are ashamed."

"Yes."

"You are drinking."

He did not answer.

"That is also yes."

My mother looked at the floor.

Nana Akua tapped her stick once. "You think shame belongs only to you? Look around." Her eyes moved to my mother, then to me, then to Ama. "You are sharing it with children."

My father covered his face.

Nana Akua did not soften. "When your father died, I carried cassava on my head until my neck burned. I did not drink my children's food. I did not frighten them. Pain is not permission to destroy your house."

The room was silent. Then Ama began to cry. Not because anyone had shouted. Because truth can be louder than shouting.

My mother lifted her into her lap.

Nana Akua looked at me. "And you, Kojo."

I froze.

"You are a child. Stop standing like a second husband in this house."

My mother almost smiled through her tears. I did not. Why did everyone keep saying that?

Nana Akua pointed her stick at me. "You think worry makes you strong. It will only make you old before your time."

I looked away. She was right, but I did not like her for it.

The next day, Nana Akua made my father walk with her to visit an old friend who knew someone hiring laborers near the lorry park. My father did not want to go. She made him go anyway.

When they returned, he looked annoyed, but he also looked alive.

That evening, Nana Akua sat with Ama and told her stories about my father as a boy.

"Your father once stole mangoes from a chief's tree," she said.

Ama gasped. "Papa stole?"

My father groaned from his stool. "Maame."

"Yes. He stole, and when the chief caught him, he tried to say the mangoes had fallen into his shirt by themselves."

Ama laughed until she fell against my mother. I laughed too. Even my father laughed.

For a few minutes, he was not the man with the bottle. He was a boy in his mother's story. A foolish boy. A funny boy. A boy who had once been loved before shame found him.

That mattered. I needed to know he had been more than what he had become.

When Nana Akua left, the house felt empty again. But not as empty as before. She left cassava, dried fish, and two hard truths behind her.

One for my father. Pain is not permission.

One for me. You are a child.

I carried both.

The weeks that followed were not clean or simple.

My father still struggled. Some days he worked. Some days he did not. Some nights he came home sober. Some nights the smell returned. My mother still counted coins. Ama still watched faces. I still wrote true sentences in my blue book.

But something had shifted.

The family had entered our trouble now. That did not fix it. Sometimes it made it worse. Relatives spoke too much. They judged without understanding. They gave advice they did not have to live with. They made my father feel small. They made my mother feel exposed.

But they also brought rice. They paid school fees. They forced my father to leave the stool. They told me I was a child when I had forgotten. They reminded Ama that more people loved her than the four of us inside that house.

One evening, after Nana Akua had gone, my mother sat under the mango tree with me. Ama was asleep. My father had gone to the station to ask about work for the next morning.

My mother held my blue book in her hand. I had let her read some pages. Not all. Some truths still belonged only to me.

She touched the cover gently. "You are writing many things."

"Yes."

"Does it help?"

"Sometimes."

She nodded. Then she said, "I am sorry."

I looked at her. "For what?"

"For letting you carry too much."

I did not know what to say.

She looked toward the road. "When trouble enters a house, everyone grabs what they can carry. Sometimes adults forget that children's hands are small."

My throat tightened. "I wanted to help."

"I know."

"Ama gets scared."

"I know."

"You get tired."

"I know."

"Papa..." I stopped.

She waited.

"Papa disappears even when he is here."

My mother closed her eyes. "Yes."

We sat quietly.

Then she reached for my hand. "But listen to me, Kojo. Helping is not the same as carrying everything. You can love us and still be a boy."

I stared at our joined hands. Her palm was rough from work. Mine was still small inside it.

For the first time in many months, I let myself feel that. I was still a child. A tired child. An angry child. A child who loved his family so much it hurt.

That night, my father came home with plantain in a black bag. He said a woman at the station had paid him partly with food because she had no coins.

My mother laughed. "So now you are paid like a farmer."

He smiled. "Food is also money."

She cooked the plantain with pepper. We ate outside because the night was warm. Ama talked about a song she had learned. My father told her she was singing it wrong. She told him he knew nothing about school songs. My mother laughed so hard she covered her mouth.

I watched them.

For once, I did not feel like I had to hold the house together. The house held itself. Only for that evening. Only for a short time. But it held.

Later, when everyone slept, I opened my blue book and wrote by the lantern.

Family can hurt you because they are close enough to touch the soft places.

I looked at the sentence. Then I wrote another.

Family can also find you when you are sinking.

I did not know which sentence was more true. So I kept both.

Chapter 7: Schoolyard Shadows

School used to feel like another country.

At home, I listened for moods. I watched my father's face. I watched my mother's hands. I watched Ama's eyes. Every small thing meant something.

At school, things had been simpler once. The bell rang. We lined up. We sang. We read from the board. We ran at break. We fought over football teams. We complained about homework. The world had rules there, and most of them made sense.

But after the trouble at home began, school changed too.

Or maybe I changed first.

I began to hear my name in places where no one had called it. I heard whispers behind classrooms. I heard laughter stop when I came near. I saw boys glance at my sandals, then at each other. I saw girls cover their mouths and speak low.

The schoolyard had shadows now. They were not real shadows from trees or buildings. They were the kind that followed you even in sunlight.

Some came from hunger. Some came from unpaid fees. Some came from the smell people said followed my father near the market. Some came from the fear that one day I would become the story everyone told.

Madam Efua noticed before anyone else.

One morning, she stood beside my desk while we copied a passage from the board. I was holding my pencil, but I had not written a word.

"Kojo," she said quietly.

I looked up. "Yes, Madam."

"Where are you?"

"In class."

A few children laughed. She turned and looked at them. The laughter stopped.

Then she looked back at me. "Your body is in class. Your mind is not."

I looked down at my empty page. "I am sorry."

She did not scold me. That was worse. A scolding would have given me something to push against. Kindness made my eyes burn.

"Write the first line," she said.

I picked up my pencil. The words on the board looked simple.

A good family supports one another.

I stared at them. The sentence felt like a stone placed on my chest. I wrote slowly. My letters came out crooked.

At break, I went to the almond tree instead of the field.

The boys were already choosing teams. Kwesi saw me and called my name.

"Kojo, come. We need goalkeeper."

I shook my head.

"Why?"

"I do not want to play."

He ran over. "You always want to play."

"Not today."

He looked at me for a moment. Then he looked toward the field. "Is it because of Isaac?"

"No."

Isaac was standing near the goalpost. He had not spoken to me since our fight, but he still smiled in a way that made my hands tighten.

Kwesi lowered his voice. "He is only talking because his mouth is bigger than his sense."

I almost laughed.

Kwesi waited. "Come and play. If you stay here, they will think you are afraid."

"I am not afraid."

"Then come."

I wanted to. My feet wanted to run. My body wanted to dive in the dirt and forget everything for a while. But I had not eaten that morning. My stomach felt hollow. My head felt light. I did not want the boys to see me fall.

"I said no."

Kwesi's face changed. "Fine."

He went back to the field.

I watched them play. The ball moved fast over the dry ground. Boys shouted. Dust rose around their feet. Someone scored and ran with both arms in the air. I sat under the tree and felt older than all of them.

That afternoon, Madam Efua made an announcement.

"Next Friday is Parents Day," she said.

The classroom became noisy. Children began whispering. Some smiled. Some groaned. Parents Day meant mothers and fathers would come to the school. They would meet teachers, look at exercise books, listen to speeches, and ask questions that made children nervous.

I froze.

Madam Efua wrote the date on the board. "Every child must bring at least one parent or guardian."

My chest tightened.

At home, father had promised Ama he would come when parents were called again. That promise had sat quietly in my mind since he made it. I had not touched it. I had not trusted it. But now the day had come.

Madam Efua handed out small notes. When she reached my desk, she paused.

"Give this to your mother or father," she said.

"Yes, Madam."

Her eyes stayed on my face. "Kojo."

"Yes, Madam."

"Do not lose it."

"I will not."

I folded the note and placed it inside my book.

On the walk home, Ama skipped beside me. She had received a note too.

"Papa said he will come," she said.

I did not answer.

"Do you think he remembers?"

"Yes."

"Should we remind him?"

"Yes."

"Will he wear his good shirt?"

"I do not know."

"I want him to wear the blue one."

The blue shirt was the one he used to wear to the factory on Fridays. My mother had washed it many times, but it still held its color. Ama loved that shirt because she said it made him look important.

At home, my father was sitting under the mango tree, repairing the handle of an old hoe. His hands moved slowly. He looked sober.

Ama ran to him with the note. "Papa, they called parents."

He took the paper. "When?"

"Friday."

He opened it and read. His lips moved a little as he followed the words.

My mother came from the kitchen. "What is it?"

"Parents Day," he said.

Ama bounced on her toes. "You said you will come."

My father looked at her. "I remember."

My mother watched him carefully.

He folded the paper. "I will come."

Ama clapped. "Wear the blue shirt."

He smiled. "Yes. The blue shirt."

I looked away. I hated myself for not feeling happy.

For the next few days, Ama spoke of nothing else. She told everyone our father was coming. She told me twice each morning. She checked the blue shirt where it hung near the wall. She asked my mother whether it needed ironing. She asked my father if he remembered until he told her he could not forget even if he tried.

My mother was quieter.

On Thursday night, she washed the blue shirt again and hung it inside to dry. My father sat outside. He had worked at the station that day, and his hands were sore. He looked tired, but clear.

After supper, my mother placed the shirt near the coal pot to dry faster.

"You must leave early tomorrow," she said.

My father nodded. "I know."

"Do not go to the station first."

"I said I know."

She did not answer.

He looked at her. "Abena, I will go."

"I hope so."

His face hardened. "You cannot even believe one thing?"

She stopped folding the shirt. "Kwaku, believing has become expensive."

He stood. For a moment, I thought the night would spoil. Then he sat back down.

"You are right," he said quietly.

My mother looked at him, surprised.

He rubbed his forehead. "I have made it expensive."

No one spoke. Ama was already asleep. I sat near the doorway with my book open, though I was not reading.

My father looked at me. "I will come," he said.

I nodded. He did not know that his promise frightened me more than his silence.

The next morning, I woke before my mother called us.

The blue shirt was folded on the bench. My father's shoes were near the door. They had been polished. Not perfectly, but enough.

For the first time in many months, I felt something like hope.

My father washed early. He shaved carefully with a small mirror held in one hand. My mother gave him warm water for bathing. Ama danced around him until my mother told her to stop disturbing the man.

He put on the blue shirt. It still fit, but not like before. His shoulders seemed narrower. His face looked thinner. Still, when Ama saw him dressed, she smiled so widely that I had to look away.

"Papa, you look like factory again," she said.

My father's smile faltered. Then he bent and touched her cheek. "Today I look like your father."

Ama hugged him.

We left together.

My mother could not come in the morning because she had plantain to sell. She said she would try to pass by later if the tray emptied early. My father walked with us to school. People greeted him on the road. Some looked surprised to see him dressed well. Some smiled. Some watched too long.

My father greeted everyone. Not loudly like before, but he greeted them.

At the school gate, Ama held his hand tightly. Children stared. I saw Kwesi near the classroom. His eyebrows rose when he saw my father. I pretended not to notice.

Madam Efua stood near the veranda with other teachers.

My father walked to her. "Good morning, Madam," he said.

"Good morning," she replied. "You must be Kojo's father."

"Yes. Kwaku Mensah."

She smiled. "I am pleased to meet you."

My father glanced at me. I looked down.

The morning began well.

Parents sat on benches under a canopy made from old cloth and wooden poles. The headmaster spoke about discipline, fees, homework, and respect. Some parents nodded. Some looked tired. Babies cried. Children fidgeted in the sun.

My father sat beside me. Ama sat on his other side, proud as a queen.

When the headmaster mentioned unpaid fees, my father's body stiffened. I felt it even though he did not move. Madam Efua's eyes passed over us but did not stop.

After the speech, parents went to classrooms to see books.

Madam Efua showed my father my exercise books. She showed him my reading work, my sums, and the composition page with the corrected title. My Family. She did not show him the true sentences. Those belonged to another page.

"Kojo is intelligent," she said.

My father looked at me. "He has always liked books."

"He is distracted these days," she added gently. "But he can do very well."

My father nodded. "I know."

"He needs support at home."

The word support sat between them.

My father looked at the books. "I will try."

Madam Efua did not smile quickly. She respected words too much for that.

"Trying matters," she said. "But children also need consistency."

My father looked at her then. For a moment, I felt afraid. Adults did not usually speak to him like that. Not directly. Not about us.

But he only nodded. "Yes, Madam."

Then Ama dragged him to her classroom.

I watched them go.

Madam Efua stood beside me. "He came," she said.

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

I did not know how to answer. So I said, "Fine."

She gave me the look she gave when she knew I was hiding.

Before she could speak, Kwesi came running. "Kojo, come and see something."

I followed him to the back of the classroom block.

"What?"

He grinned. "Your father looks smart."

I felt my face grow warm. "He only wore a shirt."

"So? It is a good shirt."

I did not answer.

Kwesi kicked at the dirt. "My father did not come. He said parents days are for women."

That surprised me. I looked at him. "Your mother came?"

He shook his head. "She is at the farm."

"Then who came?"

"No one."

He said it lightly, but his eyes were not light.

I realized then that I had been so busy feeling ashamed that I had forgotten other children carried their own empty spaces.

Before I could say anything, Isaac passed with two boys.

He looked at me. "So today your father remembered you."

Kwesi stepped forward. "Go away."

Isaac smiled. "I only said he remembered. Is that insult?"

My hands tightened.

He looked at my father, who was coming out of Ama's classroom with her beside him. "He looks good today. Maybe the teacher gave him tea."

The boys laughed.

I stepped toward him. Kwesi grabbed my arm. "Leave it."

Isaac leaned closer. "Or maybe he will drink it later."

Something hot moved through me. I pulled away from Kwesi.

But before I could reach Isaac, my father's voice came from behind me. "Kojo."

I stopped. I turned.

My father had heard enough. I could see it in his face. Isaac's smile faded.

My father came closer. "What is your name?" he asked.

Isaac looked at the ground. "Isaac."

"Isaac," my father said. "Do not use your mouth to wound people for things you do not understand."

Isaac said nothing.

My father looked at the other boys. "All of you. Go."

They went.

I stood there, breathing hard.

My father turned to me. "You wanted to fight."

I looked away. "He was talking."

"Yes."

"He always talks."

"Yes."

"So?"

My father's voice was calm. "So you give him your peace because his mouth is restless?"

I looked at him. He sounded like the old father for a moment. The one who told me that falling was not the problem if I got up.

I wanted to be angry. Instead, I felt something break open in my chest.

"You heard what he said," I whispered.

"I heard."

"Then why are you not angry?"

His eyes darkened. "I am angry."

"You do not look it."

"I am trying not to make my anger your burden."

I had no answer.

The bell rang for the closing prayer. Parents and children began gathering again.

My father placed his hand on my shoulder. It was the first time in a long while that his hand felt steady there.

For that one morning, I had my father back. Not fully. Not safely. But enough to feel it.

Then afternoon came.

My father said he needed to pass by the station to ask about work for the next day. My mother still had not arrived. Her tray had probably not emptied. Ama wanted him to walk us home, but he said he would meet us there.

"I will not be long," he told her.

"Promise?"

"Yes."

Ama looked at me, smiling.

We walked home without him.

At first, I did not worry. He had come to school. He had spoken to Madam Efua. He had stood up to Isaac without shouting. He had worn the blue shirt. He had tried. I wanted the day to remain good.

By sunset, he had not returned.

My mother came home with her empty tray and tired feet.

"Where is your father?"

"At the station," I said.

Her face changed slightly. "What time did he leave?"

"After Parents Day."

She said nothing. Ama sat under the mango tree in her school dress.

"He said he would not be long," she said.

My mother went into the kitchen. We waited.

The sky grew dark. The neighbors cooked. The church bell rang for evening prayers. A motorbike passed. Dogs barked near the lane. Still no father.

Ama fell asleep on my lap outside. My mother did not tell me to take her in. She kept looking at the gate.

When my father came, the moon was already high.

He entered quietly. Too quietly. The blue shirt was stained near the collar. His shoes were dusty. His eyes did not meet ours.

The smell came before his words.

Ama woke when he stepped into the compound. "Papa?"

He stopped.

My mother stood by the kitchen doorway. "Kwaku."

He lifted one hand weakly. "I am sorry."

The words were soft. Too soft.

Ama sat up. "You promised."

My father looked at her. "I know."

"You said you would come home."

"I know."

"You came to school."

His face twisted. "Yes."

"Then why did you spoil it?"

No one moved. Ama's voice was small, but the question struck harder than shouting.

My father opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Ama stood and ran inside. My mother followed her.

I remained under the mango tree.

My father looked at me. "Kojo."

I stood. I did not want to hear his explanation. I did not want to see shame in his eyes. I did not want to feel sorry for him again.

"You should have stayed gone," I said.

The words came out cold. His face changed. I walked past him into the house.

That night, Ama cried until she slept. My mother sat beside her and rubbed her back. My father stayed outside. I lay awake, staring at the roof.

The day had given me my father back. Then it had taken him again. That was worse than not having him at all.

The next morning, I did not wait for Ama.

She was still sleeping when I left. My mother called my name, but I pretended not to hear. I walked fast, my book pressed under my arm.

At school, children were still talking about Parents Day. Some spoke about what their parents had said to teachers. Some complained that they had been scolded at home. Some laughed about the headmaster's long speech.

Kwesi came to me near the veranda. "Kojo."

I kept walking.

"Kojo, wait."

"What?"

He looked at my face. "Did something happen?"

"No."

"You look angry."

"I am not."

He knew better than to argue.

During lessons, I made mistakes in sums I knew how to solve. Madam Efua called on me to read, and I lost my place. During break, I went to the field and stood near the goalpost.

Kwesi threw me the ball. "You are playing?"

"Yes."

The match began. I played badly. A weak shot passed under my arm. The boys groaned. Isaac laughed from the other side.

"Maybe he is tired from carrying his father home."

The field went quiet.

This time, I did not run at him. I picked up the ball and threw it as hard as I could toward the road. It bounced once, rolled into a gutter, and disappeared under dirty water.

Everyone shouted. Kwesi grabbed my shoulder. "What is wrong with you?"

I pushed him away. "Leave me."

"It was our only ball."

"I said leave me."

Madam Efua came from the classroom. "What happened?"

No one answered. Isaac pointed toward the road. "He threw the ball away."

Madam Efua looked at me. "Kojo?"

I stared at the ground.

"Go to the classroom," she said.

I went.

She found me there after break. I expected punishment. I almost wanted it. Punishment would have been simple. Instead, she sat across from me.

"Was it because of Isaac?"

I did not answer.

"Or because of your father?"

My eyes moved to hers before I could stop them. She knew. Of course she knew. Teachers knew more than children wanted them to know.

She lowered her voice. "Kojo, yesterday your father came. That mattered."

I laughed once. "He came and still spoiled it."

"That can also be true."

"I hate him."

The words came fast.

Madam Efua did not look shocked. "Do you?"

I clenched my jaw. "Yes."

"All of him?"

I looked away. That question was unfair.

She waited. I thought of the blue shirt. His hand on my shoulder. His voice telling Isaac not to wound people. Ama smiling beside him. Then I thought of him entering the compound with the smell on him.

My eyes burned. "No," I said.

Madam Efua nodded. "That is the hard part."

"What?"

"When people we love hurt us, the heart does not know where to put the love."

I looked at the floor. "I do not want to feel anything."

"I understand."

"No, you do not."

She accepted that. "Maybe I do not. But I know this. If you keep throwing your pain at other people, it will return to you heavier."

I said nothing.

She picked up my exercise book and opened to a blank page. "Write what happened yesterday."

"No."

"Then write what you wish had happened."

I stared at the page. That was easier and harder.

She gave me the pencil. I wrote slowly.

I wish my father had come home in the blue shirt.

Then I stopped. Madam Efua did not rush me.

I wrote another line. I wish Ama had slept happy.

Then another. I wish I did not wait for people who keep leaving.

My hand froze. That sentence scared me.

Madam Efua read it. Her face softened. "Keep writing," she said.

I shook my head. "I am finished."

She did not force me.

After school, I went to find the ball. Kwesi came with me. We found it stuck in the gutter near the road, covered in black water and leaves. He pulled it out with a stick.

"It smells bad," he said.

"It smelled bad before."

He looked at me. Then he laughed. I laughed too, but only a little.

We washed the ball near the standpipe. The water did not remove everything, but it made it usable.

"I am sorry," I said.

Kwesi shrugged. "You should be. You throw like a madman."

"I mean for pushing you."

"I know."

We walked in silence.

Then he said, "Isaac is stupid."

"Yes."

"But you cannot fight every stupid person."

I looked at him. "That sounds like something Madam Efua would say."

"My mother says it. She says stupid people are many, and your hands are only two."

This time I laughed properly.

For a few minutes, the schoolyard felt like before. Not clean. Not free. But not completely shadowed.

When I reached home, my father was waiting under the mango tree.

The blue shirt had been washed and hung on the line. It moved slowly in the evening breeze.

Ama sat near my mother, not near him.

My father looked worse than the night before. Not because he was drunk. Because he was sober and ashamed.

"Kojo," he said.

I wanted to pass him. My mother looked at me. So I stopped.

My father stood. "I failed yesterday."

No one corrected him.

He swallowed. "I came to school. I was proud. Then I went to the station. There was no work. Some men were there. They said one drink would help me forget the shame."

His voice broke. "I listened."

Ama stared at the ground. My mother's face was hard.

My father looked at me. "I am sorry."

I had heard those words before. They were beginning to feel thin.

"Do not tell me," I said.

He flinched. "Tell Ama."

He turned to her. "Ama."

She did not look up.

"I am sorry."

She hugged her knees. "You spoiled the blue shirt."

My father looked at the shirt on the line. "Yes."

"I liked that shirt."

"I know."

"You looked like Papa in it."

His face crumpled. My mother closed her eyes.

I could not stay. I went behind the house and opened my blue book.

My hands shook as I wrote.

School is not safe anymore.

Then I crossed it out. Not because it was false. Because it was not complete.

I wrote again.

School is safe until home follows me there.

That was the truth.

The next days were difficult.

At school, I avoided Isaac. I played football again, but not every day. I sat with Kwesi more often. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we only shared space. That was enough.

Madam Efua did not push me to speak in front of others. She gave me small tasks. Clean the board. Carry books. Read the first paragraph. Solve one sum. Small things that reminded me I could still do something right.

One afternoon, she asked me to help Ama's class carry mats after a reading lesson. I found Ama sitting with a book open on her lap. She was tracing the words with one finger.

"Are you reading now?" I asked.

She lifted her chin. "Yes."

"Read this one."

She frowned at the page. "Father."

The word sat between us. She looked at me quickly.

I smiled, though it hurt. "Good."

She smiled back.

That small moment stayed with me.

The schoolyard still had shadows. People still talked. Isaac still watched for chances to wound me. Fees were still a problem. Hunger still followed some mornings. My father still fought a battle I did not understand and did not forgive.

But school was not only shadow. It was also Madam Efua waiting with a blank page. It was Kwesi pulling a dirty ball from a gutter. It was Ama reading one hard word and looking to see if I was proud. It was a place where pain found me, yes. But it was also a place where I began to learn that pain did not have to have the last word.

Still, I did not trust that lesson fully. Not yet. I had seen how quickly a good morning could become a bad night.

So I kept my books close. I kept my anger closer. And each day, when the bell rang, I stepped into the schoolyard wondering which shadow would reach me first.

Chapter 8: The Mask I Wore

After Parents Day, I became careful with my face. That was the first thing I learned.

A face could betray you. If I looked angry, people asked questions. If I looked sad, they pitied me. If I looked tired, Madam Efua watched me too closely.

So I trained my face. I smiled when people greeted me. I nodded when adults asked if everything was well. I laughed when boys joked near the classroom. I looked calm when my father came home late. I looked strong when Ama looked afraid.

It was not strength. It was practice.

The morning after Parents Day, my father did not come out early. His blue shirt still hung on the line. My mother took it down and folded it without speaking. Ama watched her from the doorway.

"Will Papa wear it again?" Ama asked.

My mother pressed the shirt flat with her hand. "Yes."

"When?"

"When he is ready."

Ama looked at me. I gave her a small smile. That smile was my first mask of the day.

At breakfast, there was leftover boiled yam. My mother cut it into small pieces. My father was still inside. I could hear him moving behind the curtain.

Ama pushed one piece of yam around the plate. "Papa is not eating?"

"He will eat later," my mother said.

"Is he sick?"

"No."

"Is he ashamed?"

The question stopped both of us.

My mother looked at her. "Who taught you that word?"

Ama shrugged. "I heard Auntie Adwoa say it."

My mother sighed.

I spoke before she could. "Eat your yam."

Ama looked at me. "You are not Mama."

"No. But I am telling you."

Her mouth tightened. "You always tell me things now."

I did not answer. She ate, but slowly.

On the way to school, she did not hold my hand. That hurt more than I expected.

At school, people still talked about Parents Day. Kwesi came to me at my desk.

"Kojo. You are coming to play today?"

"Maybe."

"That means no."

"I said maybe."

He leaned against my desk. "My mother said your father looked smart yesterday."

I stiffened. "She saw him?"

"At the school gate. She was passing."

"Oh."

"She said he greeted her well."

I did not know what to do with that. So I smiled. "Yes. He came."

"That was good."

"Yes."

My face held the smile. Inside, I saw the same father entering the compound at night with his blue shirt stained and the smell of drink on him. Kwesi did not know what my smile was hiding. That was the point.

At break, Isaac passed my desk. He did not say anything. He only looked at me and smiled. I smiled back. His smile dropped. That gave me a small satisfaction.

I learned something that day. If people wanted to see me hurt, I could deny them the pleasure. I could make my face into a locked door.

At home, the mask had a different shape.

With my mother, I became useful. I fetched water before she asked. I swept the compound. I watched the fire when she went to buy salt. I helped Ama wash her uniform. I carried the tray when my mother prepared plantain for selling.

She noticed.

One evening, she stood at the kitchen doorway and watched me scrub a pot.

"Kojo."

"Yes, Mama."

"Leave it. I will finish."

"I can do it."

"I said leave it."

I stopped.

She came closer and took the pot from my hand. "You are doing too much."

"I am helping."

"You are hiding inside helping."

I looked at her. She had seen through me too quickly.

"I do not know what you mean."

"Yes, you do."

She placed the pot down. "Since yesterday, you have been moving like someone who is afraid to sit still."

"I am not afraid."

"Then sit."

I did not move. She pointed to the bench. I sat.

She sat beside me. For a moment, we listened to Ama singing softly behind the house.

My mother looked at my hands. "You do not have to prove anything to me."

"I know."

"You do not."

I kept my eyes on the ground.

She touched my chin and turned my face toward hers. "Kojo, look at me."

I looked. Her eyes were tired, but not hard.

"What happened yesterday hurt you."

I shrugged. "It is not a big thing."

"That is not true."

"It has happened before."

"That also does not make it small."

My throat tightened. I wanted to tell her that I hated hoping. I wanted to tell her that the good morning had made the bad night worse. I wanted to say that I was tired of watching everyone fall apart and then pretend at breakfast.

But my mother had enough pain. So I smiled. "I am fine, Mama."

She looked at my smile for a long time. Then she let go of my chin.

"Fine is a word people use when the truth is too heavy."

She stood and picked up the pot. "Go and call Ama."

That evening, Ama sat beside me under the mango tree. The sky was dark. My father had gone out. My mother was inside counting money.

Ama leaned against my arm. "Kojo."

"Yes."

"Do you think Papa loves us?"

The question landed gently. That made it worse.

"Yes."

"Then why does he do things that make us cry?"

I stared at the ground. A line of ants moved near my foot. They carried tiny crumbs from our supper. Each ant moved with purpose.

"I do not know," I said.

Ama was quiet. Then she asked, "Do you think he loves the bottle more?"

I closed my eyes. "No."

"How do you know?"

Because I needed it to be true. That was the real answer.

I gave her another one. "Because he came to school."

"He came. Then he went away."

"He is trying."

"Trying is not the same as staying."

I looked at her. She was seven, but pain had made her words older.

"No," I said. "It is not."

She pulled her knees up. "I wish he was like before."

I wanted to tell her I wished the same thing. Instead, I put on another voice. The big brother voice. The steady voice.

"Let me tell you a story."

"I do not want a story."

"This one is about a girl who caught the moon in a calabash."

She looked at me from the corner of her eye. "That is not possible."

"In stories, stubborn girls can do anything."

She tried not to smile. "What was her name?"

"Ama."

"That is my name."

"This Ama was even more stubborn than you."

"No one is more stubborn than me."

That made me laugh. Soon she was listening. I told her about a girl who scooped water into a calabash, but each time she ran, the moon broke into pieces. An old woman told her the moon was not meant to be carried. It was meant to be followed.

"What does that mean?" Ama asked.

"I do not know," I said. "You made the story."

"Stories can know things before the storyteller does."

She thought about that. Then she rested her head on my lap. "Tell it again."

So I did.

By the time my father came home, Ama was asleep. He entered quietly. I smelled the drink, but it was not strong that night. He saw Ama sleeping on my lap and stopped.

"Let me carry her," he said.

I wanted to say no. But he looked sober enough. I nodded.

He bent and lifted her carefully. Ama stirred but did not wake. Her hand touched his shirt. "Papa," she whispered in her sleep.

His face broke for a second. Then he carried her inside.

I stayed under the mango tree. My face was calm. My chest was not.

The mask became easier with practice.

At church that Sunday, I used it well.

My mother made us dress neatly. She oiled Ama's legs and tied her hair with blue ribbons. She made me wash my sandals twice. My father said he was not coming. My mother did not argue.

We walked without him.

Pastor Mensah greeted my mother near the entrance. "Sister Abena, good morning."

"Good morning, Pastor."

"How is Brother Kwaku?"

"He is well."

I watched her face. It did not move.

Pastor Mensah looked at me. "Kojo, you are growing tall."

"Yes, Pastor."

"And school?"

"Fine, Pastor."

There it was again. Fine. The small word that covered a large pit.

Inside the church, drums were already playing. During prayers, the pastor asked anyone carrying a heavy burden to raise a hand. My mother did not raise hers. I did not raise mine.

Ama looked around and whispered, "Should we raise?"

"No," I whispered back.

"Why?"

"Be quiet."

She lowered her head. I felt bad at once.

During the sermon, Pastor Mensah spoke about houses built on sand and houses built on rock. I tried not to listen too closely. Every sentence sounded like it was walking toward our compound.

After service, Auntie Mansa from the kiosk touched my mother's arm.

"Abena, we missed Kwaku today."

My mother smiled. "He had something to do."

"On Sunday?"

The question was soft, but it had teeth. I stepped forward before my mother could answer.

"He went to see about work."

Both women looked at me. It was not a complete lie. My father sometimes went to see about work. Just not that morning.

Auntie Mansa smiled. "That is good. A man must keep trying."

"Yes," I said.

My mother said nothing until we left the church yard. Then she looked at me.

"Do not lie for adults."

I felt my face grow hot. "I was helping."

"No. You were covering."

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes."

She kept walking.

At home, my father was sitting under the mango tree. No bottle was visible. That meant nothing.

Ama ran to change her dress. My mother went into the kitchen. I stood near the doorway.

My father looked at me. "How was church?"

"Fine."

He nodded. "Pastor asked of you."

My face tightened. "What did your mother say?"

"She said you were well."

He looked at the ground. "And you?"

"I said you went to see about work."

His head lifted. I expected him to thank me. He did not.

"Do not do that," he said.

I frowned. "Mama said the same thing."

"She is right."

Anger moved through me. "You want people to know everything?"

"No."

"Then what should we say?"

He looked at me, and his eyes were full of something I did not want to understand.

"Say nothing if you can. But do not become a liar for me."

I laughed. It came out sharp. "That is easy for you to say."

His face changed. I walked away before he could answer.

At school, my mask became useful. Madam Efua made me class monitor for one week. I had to collect books, clean the board, and write names of noisy pupils when she stepped out.

The other children complained. Isaac muttered, "Teacher's favorite."

I ignored him. Ignoring became another part of the mask.

When Isaac dropped his book loudly and said, "Some people act good in class and suffer at home," I wrote his name on the board. The class laughed. He glared at me. I smiled.

Madam Efua returned and saw his name. "Isaac, why is your name there?"

He looked at me. "Kojo hates me."

Madam Efua folded her arms. "Did you make noise?"

He said nothing.

"That is also an answer."

The class laughed again. For once, Isaac was the one with heat in his face.

I should have felt good. I did, a little.

But later, during break, he came close to me near the water pots. "You think you are better than me?"

"No."

"You write my name because teacher likes you?"

"I wrote your name because you talked."

He leaned closer. "At least my father comes home standing."

I felt the blow inside before my face moved. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to hit him so badly that my hands shook.

Instead, I smiled. "You had to use your father because you had nothing better to say."

His eyes widened. Kwesi, who had been watching from near the door, gave a low whistle.

Isaac stepped back. "You are mad."

"No," I said. "I am class monitor."

Then I walked away.

My legs shook after I turned the corner. I went behind the classroom and pressed both hands against the wall. My breath came fast. I had not fought. I had not cried. I had not shown him the wound. That should have felt like winning. It felt like swallowing a stone.

The mask protected me from Isaac. It also trapped everything inside.

At home, the cracks began to show.

One afternoon, I came back from school hungry and tired. My mother had gone to sell plantain. My father was not home. Ama was supposed to wash the bowls, but she had been drawing in the dirt instead. The bowls sat near the kitchen with flies around them.

"Ama," I called.

She looked up. "What?"

"Why did you not wash these?"

"I forgot."

"You always forget."

She stood slowly. "I was waiting for you."

"For me to do everything?"

Her face changed. "I did not say that."

"You do not have to say it."

She held her doll to her chest. "Why are you shouting?"

"I am not shouting."

"You are."

I picked up one bowl and placed it hard into the basin. "You are old enough to help."

"I help."

"No. You ask questions. You cry. You follow me around. You make everything harder."

The words came out fast. Too fast.

Ama stared at me. Her eyes filled.

I knew I had gone too far. But anger is proud. It does not like to turn back quickly.

"Go and fetch water," I said.

She did not move.

"Go."

She ran out of the compound.

The moment she left, the house became too quiet. I stood by the basin, breathing hard. Then I heard my own voice in my memory. You make everything harder. It sounded like something my father would say.

I sat down on the ground. My hands were shaking.

Ama returned with the small bucket half full. Water had spilled down her dress. Her eyes were red. She placed the bucket near me.

"I am sorry," she said.

That finished me. I stood and went to her. "No. Ama, I am sorry."

She looked away. "I will wash the bowls."

"No."

"I forgot."

"I should not have shouted."

She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "You sounded like Papa."

I closed my eyes. There it was. The thing I feared most, spoken by the person I loved most.

I knelt in front of her. "I know."

"Are you becoming like him?"

The question was not cruel. That made it worse.

"I do not want to."

"But are you?"

I had no answer.

She touched my shoulder. "Do not."

Then she went inside.

That evening, when my mother returned, Ama said nothing. I said nothing. We washed the bowls together. We cooked what we had. We behaved like a normal family until my father came home.

He came sober that night. He brought a small bag of gari and two oranges. Ama took one orange but did not run to him. I watched him notice.

He looked at me. I looked away.

Later, after everyone had eaten, I opened my blue book.

I wrote slowly. I wear a good face outside.

Then I wrote. Inside, I am becoming sharp.

Then. Today I hurt Ama with my mouth.

I stopped. My hand would not move for a while. Then I forced myself to write the last sentence.

I sounded like Papa.

The page blurred. I wiped my eyes quickly before anyone saw.

But my father saw. He was sitting outside near the doorway.

"Kojo," he said softly.

I closed the book. "What?"

He looked at me for a moment. "Come here."

I almost refused. But I went.

He made space on the bench. I sat at the far end. The night was warm. Crickets sang near the wall.

My father looked into the darkness. "When I was your age, my father used to shout. He was not a drunk. But he was hard. Everything in the house had to fear him."

I did not move.

"I used to tell myself I would never sound like him."

I looked at him then.

He nodded. "Then one day, I heard his voice come out of my mouth."

My chest tightened. "What did you do?"

"At first? I blamed everyone else."

That sounded honest.

"And later?"

"I tried to stop."

"Did you?"

He was quiet. "Not always."

I looked away.

He accepted it. "Kojo, anger travels. If no one stops it, it enters the next person."

I thought of Ama asking if I was becoming like him. "I shouted at Ama," I said.

"I heard."

My face burned. "You were here?"

"I came before she returned with water."

"Why did you not say anything?"

"Because I have shouted enough in this house."

I did not know what to say.

He leaned forward. "I cannot ask you not to be angry. You have reasons. But do not let my failures teach your mouth how to hurt your sister."

The words entered me slowly. I wanted to reject them because they came from him. But they were true.

"I said sorry," I said.

"Say it again tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because some words need more than one apology."

We sat together without speaking. It was not peace. Not exactly. But it was not war either.

The next morning, I apologized to Ama again. She listened with a serious face. "I forgive you," she said. Then she added, "But if you shout like that again, I will pour water on your foot."

I laughed. She smiled.

The mask did not disappear after that. I still wore it. At school, I smiled when Isaac watched me. At church, I answered fine. At home, I helped too much.

But now I knew something about the mask. It was not only hiding my pain from others. It was hiding me from myself.

I had believed that if I looked calm, I would become calm. If I acted strong, I would become strong. If I smiled, the hurt would leave. It did not leave. It waited. It grew teeth.

A few days later, I passed behind the market on my way home. I had not planned to go there. Not fully. But my feet slowed at the turn. I heard laughter from the crates. Boys talking. Someone clapping.

No one there knew about my blue book. No one there asked if I was fine. No one there expected my face to behave.

Yaw saw me from a distance. He lifted his chin.

I should have kept walking. Instead, I lifted mine back.

Chapter 9: Into the Spiral

Yaw saw me at the edge of the lane. He lifted his chin. I lifted mine back.

That was all. Still, it felt like a door had opened.

I stood there longer than I should have. The market was behind me, loud and full. The sun was dropping, and I knew my mother would soon look toward the gate. I should have gone home. Instead, I walked toward the crates.

The older boys were gathered in their usual place. Yaw sat on an upside-down bucket. A boy called Sly leaned against the wall. Another boy, Mensah, was throwing stones at an empty tin.

Yaw looked at me as I came closer.

"You again."

"I was passing."

"No one passes here by mistake."

The boys laughed. I wanted to turn back, but laughter can hold a person.

"I can go," I said.

Yaw looked at me. "Sit if you are sitting. Stand if you are standing. Do not hover like a mosquito."

I sat. The wood was rough under me. I tried not to look at the bottle near Sly's hand. Yaw noticed. He always noticed too much.

"You fought with your mother?"

"No."

"Your father?"

"No."

"Then why is your face like rain?"

"My face is normal."

Sly snorted. "School boys always say normal when they are dying inside."

The others laughed. I smiled because I did not want them to see the words had touched something true.

Yaw threw a groundnut shell at Sly. "Leave him."

Sly raised both hands. "Fine. The small father is protected."

The words made the others laugh again. Small father. Either meaning hurt. I stood.

Yaw looked up. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

Sly smiled. "You see? Small father is angry."

"I am not angry."

"Then sit."

It was a trap, and I knew it. Still, I sat.

That was how it began. Not with courage. Not even with desire. With pride.

The first few times I returned behind the market, nothing much happened. I did not drink. I did not smoke. I only sat. I listened to stories. Sometimes

someone gave me groundnuts. Sometimes I helped carry a crate and Yaw let me keep a coin.

It felt harmless. It was not. Harmless things do not need hiding.

I began to lie before I reached home. If my mother asked why I was late, I said Madam Efua kept me. If Ama asked why my shirt smelled of smoke, I said boys were burning rubbish. If Madam Efua asked why my homework was unfinished, I said the lantern went out.

Sometimes the lies were close to truth. That made them easier.

One afternoon, Kwesi followed me after school. I was almost at the fish stalls when he called my name.

"Kojo."

I stopped. He stood behind me with his schoolbag over one shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Home is not this way."

"I have to buy something."

"What?"

"Salt."

He looked at my empty hands. "With what money?"

I hated him in that moment. Not because he was wrong. Because he cared enough to ask.

"Why are you following me?" I said.

"I am not following. I saw you."

"Then unsee me."

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"There is that word again."

I turned away. He caught my arm.

"Are you going behind the market?"

I pulled free. "That is none of your business."

"It is if you are going to those boys."

"They do not trouble me."

"That is because they have not started yet."

"You sound like my mother."

"Good. Your mother has sense."

I pushed him. Not hard, but enough. He stepped back. For a moment, I thought he would push me too. Instead, he looked hurt.

"Fine," he said. "Go."

He walked away. I watched him until the crowd swallowed him.

Then I went behind the market.

The boys were there. Yaw saw my face. "You fought someone."

"No."

"You are a bad liar."

I sat on the crate.

Sly leaned forward. "School friend?"

I did not answer.

"Good boys do not like when you stop being good," he said. Yaw gave him a warning look. Sly ignored it. "They want you hungry, quiet, and polite. That way they can feel better than you."

I looked at him. The words were bitter, but they sounded close to truth.

I stayed longer that day.

When I reached home, the sun was almost gone. My mother was at the kitchen doorway.

"Kojo."

I stopped. "Yes, Mama."

"Where were you?"

"Madam Efua kept me."

"For what?"

"Reading."

She looked at me. I looked back. A good lie needs a steady face. My mother's eyes moved to my shirt, then to my hands.

"Where is Ama?"

My stomach dropped. "Ama?"

"She waited for you at school. A neighbor brought her home."

I had forgotten. I had remembered and pushed the thought away because I wanted to stay with the boys.

My mother stepped closer. "You forgot your sister?"

"No."

"Then what happened?"

I opened my mouth. No lie came. My mother's face hardened.

"Go and apologize to her."

I found Ama inside, sitting on the mat with her doll. She did not look at me.

"Ama."

She brushed dust from her doll's dress.

"I am sorry."

She said nothing.

"I thought you came home."

"No, you did not."

Her voice was flat. I sat near her.

"I made a mistake."

"You chose."

She still did not look at me. "Mama says mistakes happen by accident. Choosing is when your eyes are open."

I had no answer. She placed the doll down and looked at me.

"Were your eyes open?"

I stood. "Yes." Then I left the room.

That night, my father came home sober. He brought gari and a small tin of milk. Ama was still angry, so she sat near my mother.

My father noticed. "What happened?"

"No one should ask me anything," I said.

The room went quiet. My mother looked at me. "Kojo."

I stood. "I am not hungry." It was a lie.

I went outside and sat under the mango tree. After some time, my father came and sat on his stool.

For a while, neither of us spoke. Then he said, "Hunger does not become pride just because you call it so."

"I said I am not hungry."

"Then why are you here?"

He rubbed his hands together. "Because angry boys often think they are alone."

I laughed. "You would know."

The words came out before I could stop them. My father was silent. I waited for him to shout. He did not.

"Yes," he said at last. "I would."

That made it worse. I wanted him to be angry so I could hate him cleanly. Instead, he sat beside me with his tired hands and honest shame.

"I forgot Ama," I said.

"I know."

"Mama told you?"

"Ama told me."

My stomach turned. "What did she say?"

"That your eyes were open."

I closed mine. My father sighed.

"Your sister sees clearly."

"I know."

"Then do not teach her that people who love her will leave her waiting."

I opened my eyes and stared at him. He had no right to say that. He knew it too.

His face changed. "I have taught her that already. That is why you must not help me teach it again."

I stood. "I am going inside."

He did not stop me.

The next day, I did not go behind the market. I walked home with Ama. I held her bag. I bought her a small sweet with a coin Madam Efua had given me. Ama accepted it, but she did not smile quickly.

For two days, I behaved.

Then came Friday. Fee day.

The headmaster sent a boy with a list. Madam Efua read the names of those who still owed money. My name was there. Ama's name was there too. I stood with the others. I felt the eyes of the class on my back. Isaac only looked at me and rubbed his thumb against his fingers, the sign people made for money.

After school, Ama came out slowly. Her eyes were wet.

"What happened?" I asked.

"My teacher said I must bring money on Monday. Some girls laughed."

We walked in silence until we reached the turn near the market. I stopped.

Ama looked at me. "No."

"I need to do something."

"No."

"Go home."

"I will not. I will follow you."

"Then come home."

I looked toward the market. Behind the market, no one cared about fees. No one called names from a list. No one made poverty stand in front of a classroom.

"I am going," I said.

Ama grabbed my hand. "Please."

Almost. I almost stopped. I pulled my hand free. "Go home."

She stood there, crying silently. I walked away.

Behind the market, the boys were noisier than usual. Sly saw me first.

"Small father."

"Do not call me that."

He smiled. "Then what should we call you?"

"My name."

Yaw looked at me from his bucket. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

He studied me. "That word again."

I sat on the crate and stared at the ground. Mensah tossed me a roasted corn cob. I caught it and took a bite.

Sly sat beside me. "You look like someone who needs to stop thinking."

I did not answer. He picked up the bottle near his foot. Yaw's voice became sharp. "Sly."

"What?"

"Leave him."

"He is not a baby."

"He is ten."

"I was younger."

Yaw stood. "And look how wise you became."

The boys laughed. Sly's face changed. "I am only offering."

"I said leave him."

The bottle hung between them. I looked at it. Clear liquid. No label. The same thing that had made my father small. The same thing my mother feared.

I should have hated it. I did hate it. But that day, I also wanted to know why men kept returning to something that ruined them.

Sly saw my eyes. He held the bottle out. "Just smell it."

Yaw stepped closer. "Kojo, go home."

I did not like his tone. He sounded like everyone else. "Do not order me," I said.

Yaw's eyes narrowed. "I am telling you sense."

"I did not ask."

Sly smiled. "There. Let him choose."

Choose. Ama's word. I reached for the bottle. Yaw caught my wrist. "Do not."

The place went quiet. I looked at his hand on my wrist. "Leave me."

For a second, I thought he would refuse. Then he let go.

The bottle felt lighter than I expected. I raised it to my nose. The smell burned. My stomach turned. The boys watched.

I heard my father's voice. Do not become a liar for me. I heard Ama. Were your eyes open? I heard my mother. Some doors lead to more pain.

I still lifted the bottle. I took a small mouthful.

Fire entered my throat. I coughed at once. My eyes watered. The boys laughed, except Yaw. He looked angry. Quiet angry. Sly slapped my back. "Ei, small father has become a man."

I coughed again and wiped my mouth. It tasted worse than I had imagined. Bitter. Harsh. Like swallowing anger. For a moment, I thought I would vomit. Then warmth spread in my stomach. Not comfort. Just heat. But the boys were laughing, and I was no longer outside the circle. That feeling was stronger than the drink.

Sly took the bottle from me. "Enough for now."

Yaw turned away. I wanted him to look at me. He said nothing.

I sat there until my throat stopped burning. The world did not change. The market still shouted. The sun still lowered. But something in me had crossed over and could not uncross.

When I stood to leave, my legs felt strange. Loose. My head felt light. I told myself no one would notice. Everyone noticed.

Yaw walked beside me until the edge of the market. "Go straight home."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Why do you care?"

He stared at me. "Because I know boys who began by proving they were not children. They did not become men. They became hungry ghosts."

The words stayed with me, though I pretended not to hear.

I walked home slowly. The road seemed longer. At the gate, I paused. I breathed into my palm and smelled it. Akpeteshie. Fear rose fast.

I went behind the house and washed my mouth with water. I rubbed my tongue with my fingers. I chewed a leaf from the guava tree. The bitter taste changed, but it did not leave.

When I entered the room, my mother was cooking. She turned. "Kojo."

"Yes, Mama."

"You are late."

"Yes."

Ama sat near the doorway, her eyes swollen. My mother looked at me more closely. "Come here."

I stepped closer.

"What is that smell?"

"Smoke."

"Smoke?"

"Someone was burning rubbish."

Her eyes hardened. "Open your mouth."

I froze. "Why?"

"Open your mouth."

I did. She leaned closer.

Then my father entered the compound. My mother turned. I stepped back. My father came through the doorway. He looked from my mother to me.

"What happened?"

"Ask your son where he has been."

My father looked at me. "Kojo?"

"School."

My mother said, "He is lying."

My father came closer. Then he smelled it. His face changed so quickly it frightened me. Not anger first. Fear. Then anger. Then shame.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me outside. "What did you take?"

"Nothing."

His grip tightened. "What did you take?"

"Leave me."

My mother followed. "Kwaku."

He released my arm at once, as if he had burned himself. I rubbed the place where his fingers had pressed.

My father stared at me. "Did you drink?"

I said nothing. Ama began to cry inside. My mother covered her mouth.

My father stepped back. He looked as if I had struck him. "Kojo," he whispered.

That whisper hurt more than shouting. I wanted to say I was sorry. I wanted to say it was only once. I wanted to say I had done it because everything in my life felt like it belonged to other people.

Instead, I looked at him and said, "Now you know how it feels."

The words were ugly. They hit their mark. My father's face folded. My mother gasped. For one moment, I felt powerful. Then the feeling died, and only shame remained.

My mother sent Ama inside. Then she turned to me. "Go and wash. Then sit in the room."

Her voice was quiet. Too quiet. I obeyed.

No one beat me. No one shouted. That made it worse.

I sat on the mat while my parents spoke outside. Their voices were low. I heard my name. I heard market. I heard boys. I heard my father say, "This is my fault." I heard my mother say, "Do not make this only about you."

Ama sat across from me with her doll in her lap. She looked at me as if I had become someone she did not know.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

I stared at the floor. "I do not know."

"Yes, you do."

I hated that she kept saying true things.

"It was nothing."

She shook her head. "It was Papa's smell."

I could not answer.

"I do not like that smell."

"Me neither."

"Then why did you put it in your mouth?"

The question was simple. The answer was not. Because I was angry. Because I was ashamed. Because I wanted to hurt him. Because I wanted to stop feeling small. Because I wanted one moment where I chose the thing everyone feared. Because pain had been choosing me for too long.

I said none of that. "I made a mistake," I said.

Ama looked down. "Mama says some things are not mistakes. They are choices."

She nodded. The room became quiet.

That night, my father slept outside. My mother slept inside with us. Ama turned her back to me. I did not sleep.

The taste stayed in my throat. My stomach hurt. My head ached. Shame moved under my skin like ants. I thought about Yaw's words. Hungry ghosts. I thought about my father's face when he smelled the drink on me.

For years, I had looked at him with disappointment. That evening, he had looked at me with terror. I understood something then, but only a little. The bottle held a kind of mirror. My father had seen himself in me, and I had seen myself becoming something I hated.

In the morning, nobody spoke much. My mother gave us porridge. Ama ate quietly. My father washed outside and did not look at me.

Before school, my mother stopped me near the gate.

"You will come straight home today. You will walk with Ama. You will not go near those boys."

I nodded.

She held my face. "Look at me. This road you are touching is not play. You do not know that is why you touched it. If pain is eating you, say so. If anger is choking you, say so. But do not feed yourself poison and call it courage."

I nodded. She let go.

On the walk to school, Ama held my hand again. Not because she had forgiven me. Because she was afraid I might leave.

At school, Kwesi was waiting near the gate. He looked at my face and knew something had happened.

"You went there," he said.

I said nothing.

He stepped closer. "Did you drink?"

I looked away. His face fell.

"You are stupid."

The words stung because they were clean. Not cruel. Clean.

"I know," I said.

That surprised him. He looked at me for a moment, then kicked the dirt. "Do not go again."

I did not answer.

"Kojo."

"I heard you."

"That is not an answer."

I walked past him.

In class, Madam Efua asked us to open our books. I tried to write, but my hand felt heavy. The letters came out uneven.

During break, I opened my blue book. I wanted to write what happened. My pencil stayed still. Some truths are easy to name after they pass. Others sit in front of you with blood in their mouth and dare you to speak.

At last, I wrote one sentence. I wanted my father to feel what I feel.

Then another. I tasted his shame and it tasted like fire.

I closed the book.

For three days, I stayed away from the market. I walked Ama home. I did chores. I answered my mother. I avoided my father. He avoided me too, though sometimes I caught him watching me.

On the fourth day, Isaac passed near my desk and whispered, "Like father, like son."

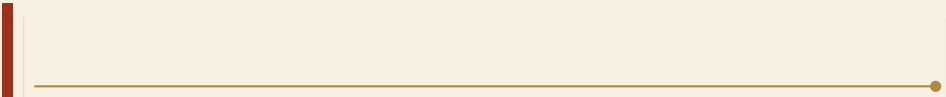
I did not fight. I did not shout. I smiled. That was the mask. But inside, something opened its eyes.

After school, I told Ama I had to help Madam Efua. I watched her walk home. I waited until she turned the corner. Then I went behind the market.

Yaw was not there. Sly was. He saw me and grinned. "Small father has returned."

I should have turned back. I did not. That was the beginning of the spiral. Not the first drink. The return. A mistake can happen once. A spiral begins when you go back to the thing that hurt you because it also made the pain quiet for a moment.

I sat on the crate. This time, no one had to invite me.

A thick dark red vertical bar is on the left. A thin gold horizontal line spans the width of the page, ending in a small gold circle on the right.

Chapter 10: Friends or Foes

When I returned behind the market, Yaw was not there. That should have been a warning.

Yaw could be rough, but there were lines he did not like people crossing around me. When he was there, Sly watched himself more.

That afternoon, only Sly, Mensah, and two boys I did not know were sitting near the crates.

Sly grinned when he saw me. "Small father has returned."

I hated the name. I also hated that some part of me liked being noticed.

"Do not call me that," I said.

He laughed. "Then stop walking like you carry a whole house on your head."

The others laughed too. I sat on the crate across from him.

The place felt different without Yaw. Looser. Like a goat with no rope around its neck. Anything could happen, and no one was there to stop it.

Sly had a bottle near his foot, but he did not offer it at first. He only talked. He talked about a man who owed him money. He talked about school as if it was a punishment.

"You sit in class all day," he said, "and for what? To write sums while your mother suffers?"

He smiled because he knew he had touched the right place.

"Madam Efua will not feed your house. Books do not cook soup."

I said nothing.

Sly leaned closer. "You know what boys like us need?"

"What?" I said.

"Sense. Street sense. You learn faster outside school."

I smiled, but it did not feel right. I liked school. I liked books. But lately, school had also become a place where fees were called aloud and boys like Isaac smiled at my shame. So I let Sly talk.

That was another kind of danger. When someone speaks to your wound, even foolish words can sound wise.

He picked up the bottle and opened it. The smell came out at once. My stomach tightened.

Sly saw my face. "Relax. Nobody is forcing you."

He took a drink and passed it to Mensah. The bottle moved from hand to hand. When it reached the boy beside me, he held it out.

I looked at it. My throat remembered the fire. I shook my head.

The boy shrugged and passed it on.

Sly watched me. "Today he is holy."

"I said no."

"I heard you." His smile stayed, but his eyes changed. "Maybe Yaw scared you."

"I am not scared of Yaw."

"Then why do you behave only when he is here?"

I stood. "I am going."

Sly laughed. "You see? Small father is still a baby."

I stopped. Baby was what boys said when they wanted you to prove something.

I turned back. "I am not a baby."

"Then sit."

I sat. Again. That was how Sly worked. He placed a word in front of you and waited for your pride to pick it up.

He did not offer the bottle again. Instead, he offered roasted corn. I took it. We sat until the sun turned soft. I told myself I would leave soon. Then soon became later. Later became almost dark.

When I reached home, my mother was not angry at first. That was worse. She looked tired beyond anger.

"Where were you?"

"School."

She looked at my empty hands. "Where is your bag?"

My stomach dropped. I had left it near the crate. My blue book was inside. My true sentences. My father's exercise book.

My mother saw my face change. "Kojo."

"I left it."

"Where?"

"At school."

The lie came quickly. She kept looking at me. "Go and bring it tomorrow."

Ama stood near the doorway. She knew. She did not say anything.

That night, I lay awake thinking about the bag. I imagined someone opening it. I imagined the pages torn, the pencil gone.

At dawn, I left before Ama woke. My mother called after me. "Kojo, why so early?"

"I have to clean the classroom."

I did not wait for her answer.

The market was not fully awake when I reached it. Behind the market, the ground was wet with old water. My bag was not where I had left it. My chest tightened. I searched around the crates. I looked under the broken table. Nothing.

A voice spoke behind me. "Looking for this?"

I turned. Yaw stood near the lane with my bag in his hand. Relief hit me so strongly that my knees weakened.

He threw it at me. I caught it against my chest.

"You left your schoolbag behind," he said. "Very wise."

I opened it quickly. My books were inside. The blue book was there.

"Thank you."

Yaw looked at me. "You came yesterday."

"Yes."

"When I was not here."

I did not answer.

"Sly gave you drink?"

"No."

"Did he ask?"

I looked away. Yaw swore under his breath.

"I said no."

"You think no once is enough?"

I frowned. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop coming here."

"You come here."

Yaw laughed without joy. "That is why I know what I am saying."

"You are not my father."

"No. I am not." His face hardened. "Then why do you care?"

He looked toward the market. For a while, he said nothing. Then he spoke quietly.

"My younger brother used to follow me like you are doing. He wanted to sit with older boys. He wanted to prove he was not small."

"What happened?"

Yaw's jaw moved. "He stopped going to school. Started carrying things for men who called him smart. Then they used him and left him when trouble came."

I held my bag tighter. "Where is he now?"

Yaw looked at me. "Not where a boy should be."

I did not ask more. His face told me not to.

"Go to school," he said.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulder. "Yaw. Why do you stay with them if you know?"

He smiled sadly. "Because knowing a trap does not always mean you know how to leave it."

That sentence followed me all the way to school.

By the time I arrived, assembly had ended. Madam Efua was standing at the classroom door.

"You are late."

"I know, Madam."

"Why?"

I could have lied. The lie was ready. My mouth opened. Then I saw the blue book in my bag. The page where I had written that hiding was lying without words.

"I went to get my bag," I said.

"From where?"

I looked down. "Behind the market."

Her face changed, but she did not shout. "Come inside."

At break, Madam Efua called me. We stood under the side veranda.

"You went back there."

"Yes, Madam."

"Why?"

I shrugged. She waited. I hated how adults waited when they wanted truth.

"They do not ask questions," I said.

"Who?"

"The boys."

"And that feels good?"

"Yes."

She nodded slowly. "Some places feel safe because they ask nothing from you. But they may also give nothing back. What do they give you, Kojo?"

I thought of groundnuts. Laughter. A place where I was not poor in front of classmates. "They make me feel less small."

Madam Efua's face softened. "That is a strong thing to want. But be careful who sells it to you."

I did not answer. She touched my bag. "Go back to class."

At closing, Ama waited for me at the gate. Her face was serious. "Mama said I should not walk alone with you if you go to the market."

That stung. "I am not going."

"Are you saying true?"

"Yes."

She looked at me longer than a seven-year-old should have to look at anyone. Then she nodded.

Near the church wall, Kwesi joined us. He did not greet me warmly.

"You are avoiding me," he said.

"No."

"You are."

Ama looked between us. "I will walk ahead," she said.

"No," I said quickly.

Kwesi looked at me. "You think I do not know where you go?"

"I do not care what you know."

"You should."

"Why?"

"Because those boys will ruin you."

I laughed. "You sound like a teacher."

"And you sound like a fool."

I stepped closer. "Say it again."

"Fool."

I pushed him. He pushed me back harder. My bag fell. Ama shouted my name. We stumbled against the church wall and fell into the dust. I hit his shoulder. He hit my arm. Neither of us knew how to fight properly.

Ama ran toward us crying. "Stop. Stop."

A woman from the church yard shouted. Kwesi let go first.

I pushed him away and stood, breathing hard. He wiped dust from his cheek.

"You want to become like them? Go. Go and sit with them. Go and drink with them. Go and forget your sister. But do not call me when they leave you in trouble."

I stared at him. He picked up my bag and threw it at my feet. "Everything is always nothing with you."

Then he walked away.

At home, Ama told my mother. Not because she wanted to betray me. Because she was tired of carrying things.

My mother listened without speaking. Then she sent Ama to wash her face. When we were alone, she said, "You fought Kwesi."

"He called me a fool."

"Were you behaving like one?"

I stared at her. She did not soften. "Answer me."

I looked away.

"You think love will always speak gently?" she asked. "Sometimes the person who tells you the truth will sound like your enemy."

"He does not understand."

"Maybe not. But he sees."

"I am tired of people seeing me."

My voice broke at the end. My mother's face changed. She came closer. "I know."

"No, you do not."

Her eyes sharpened. "Do not tell me what I know about tiredness."

I went silent. She sat down. "I am tired too, Kojo. Your father is tired. Ama is tired. But tired people still have to choose where they rest. Some places do not let you leave the same way you entered."

I thought of Yaw. Knowing a trap does not always mean you know how to leave it.

My mother continued. "Kwesi may be clumsy with his words, but he is not your enemy."

"What about Yaw?"

She looked at me carefully. "What about him?"

"He helped me find my bag."

"Behind the market?"

I nodded. She closed her eyes for a moment. "He may help you one day and fail you the next. That is what happens when a person is also sinking."

I did not like that answer because it was not simple. I wanted people to be one thing. Friend. Enemy. Good. Bad. Safe. Dangerous. But nobody in my life was staying in one place.

That night, I opened my blue book.

I wrote. Some people pull you down with a smile. Some people save you with ugly words. I do not know how to tell the difference fast enough.

I closed the book.

The next day, Kwesi did not speak to me. He sat with another boy during break. When teams were chosen for football, he picked a different goalkeeper. That hurt more than I wanted it to.

Isaac noticed. "Your friend has sense now," he said near the water pots. I ignored him.

"He left you before you spoiled him too."

I turned. "What do you want?"

Isaac smiled. "Nothing."

The word sounded wrong in his mouth. I walked away before my hands could answer.

After school, I waited near the classroom until most children had gone. When I finally left, Ama ran from her classroom.

"I thought you might go without me."

"I did not."

At the turn near the market, my feet slowed. Ama noticed at once. "No."

"I did not say anything."

"Your feet said it."

She took my hand. Like she was holding a goat by a rope. "We are going home."

For once, I let her lead me.

That evening, my father came home early. He had no money, but he was sober. He sat under the mango tree.

I sat on the ground nearby, pretending to fix my sandal.

After a while, he said, "You fought your friend."

"Kwesi called me a fool."

"Were you one?"

I dropped the sandal. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

My father smiled faintly. "Maybe because the question is useful."

He leaned back. "I had a friend when I was young. His name was Atta. He stopped me from doing many foolish things."

"What happened to him?"

"I stopped listening."

"Where is he now?"

"In Accra. We have not spoken in years."

"Why?"

My father rubbed his thumb across his palm. "Because when a friend tells you the truth and you hate the truth, it becomes easier to hate the friend."

I thought of Kwesi walking away. "Did you apologize?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Pride. Then time. Then shame. Those three can bury a friendship."

I looked away. "Kwesi pushed me too."

"I am sure he did."

"So why must I apologize?"

"Because you are asking the wrong question. What is the right one?"

"Do you want to lose him?"

I had no answer.

The next morning, I waited for Kwesi near the school gate. When he saw me, his face closed.

"What?"

I swallowed. "I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For pushing you. For acting like you were my enemy."

His face softened, but only a little. "I called you a fool."

"You did."

"You were one."

"I know."

He almost smiled. Then he became serious again. "Did you drink?"

I looked at the ground. "Yes."

He breathed out slowly. "Kojo."

"I know."

"No. I do not think you know. My uncle started like that. People laughed with him. They called him strong. Now he sleeps near the lorry park and his own children do not go near him."

I said nothing.

"I am not saying this to shame you."

"It feels like shame."

"Maybe shame is not always the enemy." He shrugged. "My mother says shame can warn you before disgrace takes a chair in your house."

I almost laughed, but his face stopped me.

"I do not know how to stop going there," I said. It was the first time I had said it aloud.

"Then do not pass that road."

"It is not that simple."

"Make it simple. If you pass a hole every day, one day your leg will enter."

The school bell rang. Kwesi picked up his bag. "Walk with me after school," he said.

That day, I did. After school, he walked with me and Ama. He talked too much on purpose. Ama laughed until she forgot to watch my feet at the market turn. We passed the turn. I did not stop.

For two days, Kwesi walked with us. On the third day, he had to stay after school. At the market turn, my feet slowed again. Ama grabbed my hand.

"Kojo."

"I know."

"Then walk."

I took one step. Then I heard Sly's voice. "Small father."

I stopped. Ama's fingers tightened around mine.

Sly came into view, smiling. "You are avoiding us now?"

"I am going home."

He looked at Ama. "This your sister?"

Ama moved behind me. "Leave her," I said.

He came closer. "Yaw was looking for you."

"Why?"

Sly shrugged. "Come and ask him."

Ama whispered, "Do not."

I knew I should not believe Sly. I knew this was how doors opened. Still, I wanted to know.

"Go home," I told Ama.

"No."

"Go."

She shook her head. Sly watched us with amusement. Something ugly rose in me. Not at Sly. At Ama. At the way her hand held me back.

I pulled my hand free. Ama stumbled. I did not mean for her to fall, but she did. Her knee hit the ground. She cried out.

I bent quickly. "Ama."

She pushed my hand away. "Do not touch me."

Blood showed on her knee. Not much, but enough. Sly stopped smiling.

I stared at the blood. Then I looked at him. "Go."

He backed away. Ama stood slowly. Dust stuck to her knee and tears ran down her cheeks. "I am going home," she said.

"Ama, wait."

She limped away. This time, I followed.

At home, my mother cleaned Ama's knee. Ama told her everything. Every word. The turn. My hand. The fall.

My mother did not shout. She looked at me with a face I could not bear. Not anger. Fear. The same fear I had seen on my father's face when he smelled drink on my breath.

"Kojo," she said, "you are beginning to hurt the people trying to hold you."

My father came home while my mother was still sitting with us. She told him what happened. He looked at me, then at Ama.

For once, he did not speak like a father giving advice. He spoke like a man who recognized a road.

"It starts like this," he said.

No one asked what he meant. We knew.

That night, I opened my blue book and wrote until my hand ached.

Sly smiles when I am weak. Yaw warns me but stays near danger. Kwesi wounds me with truth. Ama holds my hand like a rope. Mama sees too much. Papa knows the road because he is already on it.

Then I wrote one final sentence. I do not know who is my friend, but I am starting to become my own enemy.

I read it twice. Then I closed the book.

Outside, the market noise had faded. The house was quiet. Ama slept with her bandaged knee stretched carefully on the mat. I lay awake beside her.

The spiral had not pulled me far yet. But it had begun to touch the people closest to me. That was how I knew it was real.

Chapter 11: The Name They Gave Us

After Ama hurt her knee, I tried harder to stay home.

I walked with her after school. I carried her bag. I fetched water before my mother asked. I avoided the market turn when I could. For a few days, I behaved like a boy who had learned his lesson.

But lessons do not always enter deep the first time. Sometimes they only sit on the skin.

Ama's knee healed quickly. The skin closed. The swelling went down. She began to run again before my mother said she should.

But something between us had changed. She still walked with me, but she no longer trusted my hand the same way. Sometimes she held two fingers instead of my whole palm. Sometimes she walked a step ahead. Sometimes, when we reached the market turn, she looked at my feet before she looked at my face.

That hurt. I deserved it. Both things were true.

One afternoon, my mother sent us to buy kerosene. The lantern had been weak for three nights. That morning, the flame had died before Ama finished her reading work.

My mother counted coins into my hand. "Go to Auntie Mansa. Buy only kerosene. Come straight back."

She looked at Ama. "You will go with him."

Then she looked at me again. "Straight back."

"I heard."

"Hearing is not the same as doing."

I closed my hand around the coins. "I will come straight back."

She held my eyes for a moment. Then she gave me the small bottle.

At first, the walk was quiet. Ama moved carefully beside me, watching the ground more.

"Does your knee hurt?" I asked.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You are walking slowly."

She looked at me. "You ask too many questions now."

I almost laughed. "That is my line."

She did not smile.

We reached the kiosk near sunset. Auntie Mansa was sitting behind the counter. Two men sat on a bench beside the kiosk. One was chewing a stick.

Auntie Mansa saw us. "Kojo. Ama. What do you need?"

"Kerosene."

She took the bottle and bent to fill it.

While she worked, the man with the chewing stick looked at me. "You are Kwaku's boy."

I said nothing. Ama moved closer to me.

The man smiled. "You look like him."

The other man lowered his radio. "He looks more serious than Kwaku these days."

They both laughed. Auntie Mansa looked up. "Leave the children."

The man raised his hand. "I am only talking."

"Talk about the weather."

"There is no rain."

"Then be quiet."

Auntie Mansa finished filling the bottle. I reached for it. Before I could take it, the man spoke again. "Tell your father Blue Kiosk is waiting."

My hand froze. Auntie Mansa's face hardened. "Enough."

"He knows what I mean."

I took the bottle. "I do not know anything."

The man leaned forward. "Then hear it now. A man should pay what he owes before drinking more."

Ama looked up at me. My ears burned. I wanted to throw the bottle at his feet. I wanted to say my father was trying. Instead, I stood there.

Auntie Mansa came around the counter. "Go home," she said gently.

I nodded. Ama and I began walking. We had taken only a few steps when the man called after us. "Walk well, bottle children."

The other man laughed. Bottle children. The words followed us down the road.

Ama's hand found mine. This time she held my whole palm. I did not feel proud of that. I felt ashamed that fear had returned her to me.

We walked faster. Neither of us spoke until the kiosk was behind us.

Then Ama asked, "What does Blue Kiosk mean?"

"Nothing."

"Do not say nothing."

"It is where some men drink."

"Papa goes there?"

I said nothing. That was answer enough.

"Does he owe money?"

"I do not know."

"But the man said so."

"Men say many things."

She stopped walking. I turned. Her face was tight.

"Why do people talk about us like that?"

I looked away. "Because they are foolish."

"But why us?"

I had no answer.

She touched the bandage on her knee. "Bottle children," she whispered.

"Do not say it."

"But he said it."

"Do not repeat it."

She looked at me. "If I do not say it, does it go away?"

The question was too big for the road. I held the kerosene bottle tighter and started walking again.

At home, my mother was cutting onions. She looked up when we entered.

"You took long."

I placed the kerosene on the table. "There was a line."

My mother looked at Ama. Ama's face betrayed us both. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I said.

My mother looked at Ama. "Ama."

Ama's mouth trembled. "A man called us bottle children."

My mother closed her eyes. The knife stayed in her hand. For a moment, I thought she would drop it.

"Where?"

"Auntie Mansa's kiosk."

"Who?"

"I do not know his name," Ama said. I did. But I did not say so.

My mother placed the knife down slowly. "What else did he say?"

"He said Papa owes money where men drink."

The kitchen went quiet. My mother wiped her hands on her wrapper. I waited for her to tell Ama the man was lying. She did not.

Ama saw it too. "So it is true," she said.

My mother sat down. "Your father owes some people money."

"For drink?"

"Yes."

Ama stepped back. "But we do not have money for fees."

My mother's eyes filled. "No."

"And Papa has money for drink?"

I looked at the doorway. I wished my father would come home and answer for himself. I wished both things at the same time.

My mother reached for Ama. "Ama, come."

Ama moved away. "No."

"Ama."

"No. I do not want people to call me that."

My mother stood. "No one has the right to call you that."

"But they do."

The small sentence cut through the room. My mother had no answer.

That evening, my father came home before dark. He looked sober. He carried a small bag of oranges. Three inside. One for each of us. He had bought none for himself.

Before, that would have mattered. That evening, no one reached for the bag.

He noticed at once. "What happened?"

My mother looked at him. "Blue Kiosk is asking for money."

His face changed. He placed the oranges on the table. "Who said that?"

"A man at Mansa's kiosk told the children. He called them bottle children."

The words entered him like a blade. He looked at Ama. She looked away.

"Ama," he said. She moved behind my mother.

My father turned to me. I did not look away. For once, I wanted him to see my anger clearly. He lowered his eyes first.

"I will pay," he said.

My mother laughed once. Not a happy sound. "With what?"

He did not answer.

"With what, Kwaku?"

"I will find it."

"School fees are still waiting. Food is waiting. Rent is waiting. Now drink debt is also waiting."

He covered his face with one hand. My mother's voice broke. "They called your children bottle children."

He sat down as if his legs had gone weak. Ama began to cry. Not loudly. She simply folded into herself, small and quiet, and the tears came.

My father reached toward her. She stepped back. That was worse than shouting. He dropped his hand.

I hated him then. I hated him with a clean force that frightened me. But under the hate was something else. Fear. Because the name had not come from nowhere. Names stick when people believe them.

The next day, the name reached school. I do not know how. Names travel faster than feet.

During break, I was near the water pots when I heard two girls whispering. They were from Ama's class. I heard the words. Bottle children.

I turned so fast that water spilled from my cup. The girls saw my face and ran.

I found Ama under the neem tree. She was sitting alone. Her lunch tin was closed beside her.

"You did not eat?"

"I am not hungry."

I sat beside her. "Who said it?"

She did not answer.

"Tell me."

"No."

"Ama."

"No, Kojo. If I tell you, you will fight. Then Madam will call Mama. Then everyone will know again."

"What did they say?"

She opened her lunch tin and closed it again. "They said if they sit near me, they will smell like drink."

My hands closed into fists. She saw them. "Do not."

I forced my hands open. Ama wiped her face with her sleeve. "I washed this morning. My dress is clean. I do not smell."

I swallowed. "I know."

She looked at me then. Her eyes were wet, but her voice was steady. "Then why do I feel dirty?"

I had no answer.

Madam Efua found us there. She looked at Ama first. Then at me. "What happened?"

Ama looked down. I said, "Some girls are calling her names."

Madam Efua's face changed. "What names?"

Ama whispered, "Bottle child."

Madam Efua knelt in front of Ama. "What people call you is not the same as who you are."

Ama nodded, but I could see the words did not enter fully.

Madam Efua stood. "Which girls?"

Ama shook her head. "I do not want trouble."

Madam Efua looked at me. I said nothing. She understood. "I will speak to the class."

Ama looked frightened. "Please do not say my name."

"I will not."

That afternoon, Madam Efua came to Ama's classroom. She spoke to the children about names. She told them the mouth can wound. She did not say Ama's name. But children are clever in the cruelest ways. They knew.

After school, Ama came out with her face hard.

"Did it help?" I asked.

"No."

"What happened?"

"Now they know I told."

"You did not tell."

"You did."

I stared at her. "I was helping."

She shook her head. "You always help and make things bigger."

Then she walked ahead.

That evening, my father did not come home. The next morning, he still had not come. My mother did not say much. She made porridge. She washed Ama's face twice because Ama kept crying without sound. I wanted to ask where he was. I did not.

At school, the name waited. It came in small pieces. A boy covered his nose when I passed. Isaac waited until Madam Efua stepped out of class. Then he

tapped his pencil against his desk and began to sing softly. Bottle boy. Bottle boy.

The children near him laughed. I stood. Kwesi grabbed my wrist. "Sit."

Isaac sang louder. My body moved before my mind did. I pulled away and crossed the room. Isaac stood too, smiling. I did not hit him. I took his exercise book and tore the first page in half.

The class went silent. Isaac's smile disappeared. "That is my homework."

I dropped the torn page at his feet. "Now it is two homeworks."

A few children laughed. Isaac pushed me. I pushed back. Madam Efua entered before it became a fight.

"What is happening?"

She saw the torn page. Her eyes moved to me. "Kojo. Outside."

I went. She followed me to the veranda.

For a while, she said nothing. Then she asked, "What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Do not use that word with me."

"He called me bottle boy."

"And you tore his book."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to tear his mouth."

Madam Efua looked at me for a long time. I expected anger. Instead, she looked sad. "Come with me."

She took me to the headmaster. Isaac was called too. Kwesi came as witness. The headmaster listened. He made Isaac apologize. Then he turned to me.

"And you will copy his torn page again for him."

I looked up. "What?"

"You tore it. You will rewrite it."

"But he called me that."

"And now the school has handled that. Your pain does not give your hand permission to destroy."

I hated that sentence. I also knew I would remember it.

That afternoon, I copied Isaac's homework into a new page. Each word felt like swallowing sand. When I finished, Madam Efua sat across from me.

"Kojo, I know this is hard."

I stared at the desk. "No, Madam."

"No?"

"You know it is bad. You do not know it."

She accepted that. "You are right. I do not know what it feels like to be you. But shame grows when people feed it. Today Isaac fed it. Then you fed it too."

I looked away. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Tell me."

"I am tired of telling."

"Then write."

"I am tired of writing."

"Then sit until you can breathe."

I laughed bitterly. "Will breathing stop them?"

"No. The point is not to let their cruelty decide who you become."

She opened my blue book and pushed it toward me. "Write the name they gave you."

"No."

"Write it."

"I said no."

"Then it owns the whole room."

I picked up the pencil. My hand shook as I wrote. Bottle boy. The words looked smaller on the page than they felt in my chest.

Madam Efua pointed under it. "Now write your name."

I pressed the pencil hard. Kojo.

"Again." Kojo.

"Again." Kojo.

"Again." Kojo.

My eyes blurred. She said, "That is the name your mother gave you. That is the name your father calls when he remembers himself. That is the name Ama says when she is afraid. Do not let a foolish boy at school rename you."

When I went home, my father was there. He sat under the mango tree. He looked like he had not slept. My mother was inside. Ama sat near the doorway.

I stopped at the gate. My father looked up. For a moment, none of us moved. Then he stood.

"I paid Blue Kiosk. I borrowed from Kwabena."

My mother came out. "And you will repay Kwabena how?"

"I will work."

"You always say that."

"I went to the station this morning."

"And tomorrow?"

"I will go again."

Ama looked at him. "Will people stop calling us that?"

My father turned to her. His mouth opened. He had no answer. He sat back down slowly. "I do not know," he said.

Ama looked disappointed. But I felt relief. Because the truth, even ugly, did not insult us the way lies did.

My father lowered his head. "I cannot stop what people have already said. But I can stop giving them more reasons."

My mother looked at him. "Can you?"

He did not rush to answer. "I do not know if I can do it alone."

The house went quiet. Those words were different. Not a promise. Not an excuse. Something more frightening.

My mother sat on the bench. "Then do not do it alone."

He nodded.

"There is a man at the church," she said. "He helps men with drink."

My father's face tightened. "I do not need people discussing me."

My mother stood. "People are already discussing you. At least let the right people do it."

My father looked at the ground. "I will think about it."

"No. Think today. Answer tomorrow."

She went inside. Ama followed.

My father looked at me. "What happened at school?"

"Nothing."

He gave me a tired look. "Kojo."

I sat on the low wall. "They called me bottle boy."

"Who?"

"It does not matter. If it is not Isaac today, it will be someone else tomorrow."

He closed his eyes. "I am sorry."

I was tired of that sentence. "I am tired of sorry."

He nodded. "I know."

"Sorry does not stop them. Sorry does not make Ama clean in her own mind. Sorry does not pay fees. Sorry does not make you come home."

He looked away. "No."

The anger drained out of me. I sounded like my mother. I did not want to sound like that.

"Today Madam made me write the name."

"What name?"

"Bottle boy."

His hand closed over his knee.

"Then she made me write Kojo under it. Many times."

I pulled out the blue book and opened the page. He took it carefully. His eyes moved over the words. Bottle boy. Kojo. Kojo. Kojo. Kojo.

He touched the first Kojo with one finger. "I named you after my father. He was not a rich man. But he was steady. People trusted his word."

I said nothing.

"When you were born, I wanted you to carry a name people respected." He closed the book and handed it back. "Now my shame is standing in front of your name."

I held the book against my chest. For once, I did not comfort him. That was not my work.

He seemed to understand. "Kojo, when people call you that name, do not answer."

I laughed softly. "You think it is that easy?"

"No. But start there."

That night, I wrote in my blue book by lantern light. They gave us a name today. Bottle children. Bottle boy. I wrote my real name under it until my hand hurt. Kojo. Kojo. Kojo. Kojo. Then I wrote Ama. Ama. Ama. Ama. Then Mama. Abena. Then Papa. Kwaku.

I stared at his name for a long time. It still belonged to him. Not to the bottle. Not to Blue Kiosk. Not to the men at Auntie Mansa's bench. But names can be covered. A person could be given a name by family, then another by the town, then another by shame.

Before I slept, I opened the book again and wrote one more sentence. The name they gave us is not our name, but I can feel it trying to stick.

I closed the book. Ama slept beside me. My mother moved softly in the kitchen. My father sat outside under the mango tree. The house was quiet. But outside, somewhere in the town, the name was already walking.

Chapter 12: Losing Myself

After the name reached school, I stopped feeling safe inside my own skin.

Before, shame came from outside. From men at kiosks, boys in class, women who whispered. Now shame had entered me. It sat in my stomach when I woke. It walked with me to school. It followed me home. Even when no one said anything, I heard the words. Bottle boy.

I tried not to answer to it. Madam Efua had told me not to. My father had told me not to. But a name does not need your permission to enter your thoughts.

For a while, I wrote my real name every night. Kojo. Kojo. Kojo. I wrote it until the letters looked strange. I wrote Ama's name too. I wrote my mother's name. I even wrote my father's name, though sometimes I pressed the pencil so hard the page nearly tore.

But writing was no longer enough.

At school, I began to shrink. I did not raise my hand. If Madam Efua called on me, I stood and answered softly. If children laughed at something behind me, I assumed it was about me.

Madam Efua noticed. One morning, she asked the class to read. When my turn came, I stood. The passage was about a boy who helped his father plant maize. I began well. Then I reached the word father. My throat closed. I tried again. The word would not come.

Madam Efua said, "Sit down, Kojo."

Her voice was gentle. That made it worse. I sat. The boy behind me whispered, "He cannot read father." A few children laughed. I did not turn around. I only looked at the page until the letters blurred.

At break, Kwesi came to sit near me. He had not given up on me.

"You are not playing again?"

"No."

"You always say no now."

"Then stop asking."

He picked up a small stone and threw it at a tree root. "I will stop when you stop becoming boring."

I almost smiled. Almost.

He leaned closer. "You read badly today."

"I know."

"You read better than everyone."

"Not today."

"What happened?"

I looked toward the classroom. "Nothing."

Kwesi sighed. "That word again."

I walked past the water pots and went behind the latrine, where the wall was cracked and weeds grew near the drain. No one went there unless they wanted to be alone. I stood there and breathed. The air smelled bad, but at least no one was looking at me.

After some time, I heard footsteps. It was Ama. She stood at the corner with her slate pressed against her chest.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I saw you."

"You should be with your class."

"You should be with yours."

I looked away. She came closer.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then why are you hiding?"

"I am not hiding."

She looked around. "This is where people hide."

I wanted to snap at her. I did not.

"Go back," I said.

"Come with me."

"No."

She stood there. Her eyes searched my face. "You are different now."

I laughed, but it did not sound like laughter. "Everyone keeps saying that."

"Because it is true. You do not tell stories anymore. You do not laugh. You do not even shout properly."

"What does that mean?"

"When you shout now, it is quiet."

I did not understand at first. Then I did. My anger had gone inside.

Ama stepped closer. "Kojo, I do not like when you go far away while standing near me."

That sentence frightened me. Because it was true.

The bell rang. Ama turned. "Come." This time, I followed her.

The days after that became dull and sharp at the same time. Dull because everything repeated. School. Whispers. Hunger. Silence. Sharp because small things hurt too much. A boy laughing. A teacher pausing near my desk. The smell of akpeteshie near the road. Everything had edges.

My father had started meeting Pastor Mensah once in a while. Some days he came back quiet and sober. Some days he came back angry. Some days he did not go at all. My mother did not celebrate the good days aloud. She had learned not to feed hope.

But Ama still counted. "Papa went today," she would whisper.

"Yes."

"That is good."

"Yes."

"Will he stop drinking now?"

"I do not know."

She hated that answer. So did I.

One evening, my father came home from meeting Pastor Mensah. He had no smell on him. He looked tired, but his eyes were clear. He sat under the mango tree and called me.

"Kojo."

I was washing a cup. "Yes."

"Come."

I dried my hands slowly. I went and stood near him. "Sit," he said.

"I have work."

"Sit first."

I sat on the low wall. He held a small orange and rolled it between his palms.

"Pastor asked about you."

"Why?"

"He says children in a house like ours carry things people do not see. He said you can come with me one day if you want."

I laughed. It came out cold. "To talk about what?"

"Anything."

"I have nothing to say."

My father looked at me. "You used to write many things."

My body went still. "Did you read my book?"

"No."

"Then why are you talking about it?"

"Your mother told me you write."

I stood. "I said I have work."

He did not stop me. I went back to the cup and scrubbed it until my fingers hurt. I did not want another adult telling me my pain had names.

That night, I opened my blue book. The page stayed blank. I had too much inside me to write. That was when I began to stop writing. At first, I missed one night. Then two. Then a week passed, and the book stayed under my mat.

Without the book, the thoughts had nowhere to go. They turned into silence. They turned into lies. They turned into walking slowly near the market turn. They turned into anger at Ama when she asked where I had been. They turned into not washing my uniform. They turned into unfinished schoolwork.

One Thursday, Madam Efua returned our composition books. Mine had a red mark across the top. Incomplete. She placed it on my desk. "Stay after class."

When the final bell rang, I stood to leave. "Kojo," she said. I kept walking. She called my name again. I walked faster. Outside, Kwesi blocked my path. "Madam called you."

"Move."

"No."

"Move, Kwesi." He looked at my face and stepped aside.

I went behind the market. Sly was there. Yaw was there too.

Yaw saw me and frowned. "You are supposed to be in school?"

"School is closed."

"Then go home."

I ignored him and sat on a crate. Sly laughed. "Leave him. He is tired of good advice."

I looked at the bottle. I wanted the heat again. Not because I liked it. Because for a few minutes, after the fire passed, everything inside me became distant. I wanted distance.

Sly passed the bottle. This time, Yaw did not stop him. I took one mouthful. I coughed less than before. Sly clapped. "Ei. He is learning."

I hated him. I hated myself more. Yaw walked away. I stayed.

When I returned home, I washed my mouth behind the house. I kept my distance from my mother. I answered her from the doorway. I ate quickly and went to lie down. No one noticed. Or maybe they noticed and were too tired to fight.

The next time was easier. That is how losing yourself happens. By doing something once and feeling horror. Then doing it again and feeling less horror. Then doing it again and finding a place for the shame. After a while, the shame becomes part of the furniture inside you.

I did not drink every day. But I thought about it more than I wanted to admit. When Isaac whispered something, I thought about it. When the headmaster read names for fees, I thought about it. When Ama looked at me with careful eyes, I thought about it. When my father came home sober and tried to speak to me, I thought about it then too. That was the worst part. His trying made me angry.

One evening, my father brought home a small packet of sugar. A man at the station had paid him with it. Ama was happy. My mother smiled. She made weak tea for us. My father watched us drink. He did not take any.

"Why are you not drinking?" Ama asked.

"There is not much."

"You can take mine," she said.

He smiled. "No. Drink."

She smiled back. The room felt almost gentle. I could not bear it.

I stood. "Where are you going?" my mother asked.

"Outside."

"Sit. We are together."

"I do not want tea."

My father looked at me. "Kojo."

I turned on him. "What?"

He flinched. That small flinch fed something ugly in me. "You bring sugar today and think everything is fine?"

My mother said, "Kojo." I did not stop. "You sit here like we should clap for you because you did not drink today?"

My father lowered his eyes. My mother stood. "Enough."

"No. It is not enough. Everyone is tired, but we must smile because Papa brought sugar."

Ama began to cry. The sound should have stopped me. It did not.

My mother crossed the room and took my arm. She pulled me into the compound. "What is happening to you?" she asked.

I laughed. "Now you ask?"

Her face changed. "Do not speak to me like that."

"Then do not ask questions you do not want answered."

She stared at me. The anger in her eyes faded into fear. I hated that fear. I had seen it too often now. In her. In my father. In Ama. Because of me.

"Kojo," she said softly, "where have you been going?"

"School."

"Do not lie."

She stepped closer and smelled my breath. I had not drunk that day, but the habit of fear made my body tense. She noticed. Her eyes filled.

"How many times?"

I said nothing.

"How many times have you taken that thing?"

"Not like him."

The words came out like a slap. My mother stepped back. I saw at once that I had hurt her, not my father.

She turned her face away. When she looked back, her voice was cold. "Go inside. Apologize to your sister."

"What about Papa?"

"Your father is not the one you made cry just now."

I went in. Ama was sitting near the wall, wiping her face. My father was still on the bench. I stood near the doorway.

"Ama."

She did not look up.

"I am sorry."

She said nothing. My father looked at me. I looked back. There was no anger in his face. Only grief. That was harder to fight.

The next morning, my mother did not wake me gently. She pulled the cloth from my body. "Get up."

I sat. Ama was already dressed. She looked at me quickly, then away. My mother placed my uniform beside me.

"You will go to school. After school, you will come straight home. You will not go to the market. If you go, I will come there myself and disgrace you in front of those boys."

I believed her. "Yes, Mama."

She bent lower. "Your father's struggle is not a path for you to copy."

"I am not copying him."

"Then stop walking where his footprints are."

I said nothing. Her voice softened, but only a little. "I have one husband fighting drink. I will not watch my son become another battle in this house."

At school, I tried to behave. For three days, I did well. On the fourth day, Sly found me near the road. I was buying pepper for my mother. Ama was with me.

Sly leaned against a kiosk. "Small father."

I ignored him. Ama held my arm.

Sly laughed. "Your sister guards you now?"

I turned. "Leave us."

He smiled. "Yaw said you are weak. I told him you are not."

I knew he was lying. Still, the words touched pride. Ama whispered, "Kojo, let us go."

Sly looked at her. "You are the one who cries every day?"

I stepped toward him. "Do not talk to her."

He grinned. "There he is." I wanted to hit him. But Ama's hand tightened on my arm. I looked at Sly. "You are not my friend."

His smile faded. "Who told you I wanted to be?"

I walked away with Ama.

At home, Ama told my mother I had not followed Sly. My mother looked at me. "Is it true?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Good."

It should have been enough. It was not.

That evening, I felt restless. The house felt too small. My father sat outside, sober. My mother cooked. Ama practiced reading. Everything was calm. I could not stand it. Calm had begun to feel like waiting for the next bad thing.

I went behind the house and opened my blue book for the first time in many days. I wrote. I do not know how to live when nothing is happening. Quiet feels like a trap. I am afraid of becoming Papa. I am also afraid I already have.

I closed the book quickly.

A week later, Madam Efua called my mother to school. I had failed a spelling test. I had left two compositions unfinished. Madam Efua sent word. My mother came in the afternoon with her plantain tray still balanced on her

head. Oil stained her wrapper. Smoke clung to her clothes. When I saw her at the school gate, shame burned through me. Not because of how she looked. Because I knew I had brought her there.

Madam Efua met us in the classroom. "Kojo is falling behind," she said. "He used to do well. He is not present in class. He is tired. Angry. Distracted."

My mother's hands folded in her lap. "Has he been fighting?"

"Not recently."

Madam Efua continued. "I am worried about where he goes after school."

My mother closed her eyes. "I am also worried."

Then Madam Efua said, "Kojo is not a bad child. He is a hurting child."

The room went quiet. I hated those words. They made me sound weak. They also made me feel seen.

My mother's eyes filled. "What should I do?"

Madam Efua looked at me, then at her. "He needs someone to speak to. Not only when he is in trouble. Before trouble carries him."

My mother nodded slowly. "Pastor Mensah has spoken to my husband. Maybe Kojo should speak to someone too."

My body went cold. "No."

Both women looked at me. "I said no."

My mother's face became firm. "Kojo."

"I am not going to sit somewhere and talk about this family."

"I said no." My voice was too loud. A few children outside looked in. My mother saw them. "Lower your voice."

"I am not the problem."

The words left me before I knew they were coming. I looked at Madam Efua. "I am not the one who lost the job. I am not the one who drinks. I am not the one owing people money. I am not the one making people call us names. But everyone keeps looking at me like I am the one who must be fixed."

The classroom became silent. Then I saw my mother's face. Not angry. Broken.

She stood slowly. "Take your bag. We are going home."

The walk home was long. My mother carried the tray. I walked beside her. Neither of us spoke. At home, she placed the tray down and went inside. My father was under the mango tree. He looked from me to my mother's back. "What happened?"

I was too tired to lie. "I shouted at school."

He closed his eyes. "At who?"

"Everyone."

He nodded slowly. My anger returned. "Do not sit there nodding like you are wise."

"I was not."

"You started this."

He accepted them. "Yes."

That made me angrier. "Stop saying yes."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to fix it. I want you to go back to before. I want people to stop looking at us. I want Ama to stop crying. I want Mama to stop working until her hands look like old wood. I want to stop feeling like this."

My father stood. "I cannot go back to before."

"Then what good are you?"

The sentence hit him. I wanted it to. My mother came to the doorway. "Kojo." But I was already walking away.

I went to the market. Yaw was there. So was Sly. Yaw stood when he saw my face. "Go home."

"No."

"Kojo."

"I said no."

I looked at Sly. "Give me." Yaw stepped between us. "Do not."

"Move."

"You are angry."

"Yes."

"So, go home angry."

"I am tired of home."

Sly said from behind him, "Let him choose." I walked around Yaw and took the bottle from Sly's hand. I drank before anyone could stop me. It burned less. That frightened me more than the burning had.

Yaw looked at me as if he had lost something. I sat on the crate. The market noise moved far away. For a short time, I did not feel like a son, brother, student, warning, shame, or problem. I felt almost empty.

At that moment, empty felt better than full.

That was how I knew I was losing myself. Not because I no longer knew right from wrong. I knew exactly. I just wanted wrong to quiet the pain long enough for me to breathe.

Chapter 13: The Breaking Point

I did not remember leaving the market clearly. That frightened me later.

At first, I remembered pieces. Sly laughing. Yaw standing with his arms folded. The bottle moving from hand to hand. My own voice saying things I would not have said at home. Then the pieces became loose. I remembered the sky turning dark. I remembered Yaw telling me to stand. Then I remembered nothing for a while.

When my mind returned, I was near the church wall. I was sitting on the ground with my back against the stones. My schoolbag was beside me. One strap had torn. My shirt was dirty. My mouth tasted bitter. My head felt too heavy for my neck. The road was almost empty. Night had come.

For a moment, I did not know where I was. Then I heard someone call my name.

"Kojo."

I turned my head slowly. Kwesi stood a few steps away. He was holding a small lantern. His face looked strange in the light. Angry. Afraid. Tired.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

I tried to stand. My legs did not obey quickly. Kwesi came forward and caught my arm.

"Do not fall."

"I am not falling."

"You are sitting on the ground."

"I was resting."

He looked at me. "You smell like drink."

I pulled my arm away. "Leave me."

"No."

"I said leave me."

"You have said many stupid things. I am not obeying this one."

I tried to walk past him, but the road moved under my feet. He grabbed my bag and my wrist. "We are going home."

"I do not want to go home."

"That is not news."

I stopped and stared at him. The lantern shook in his hand. "How did you find me?"

"Ama came to our house."

My chest tightened. "What?"

"She was looking for you. She said you had not come home. Your mother thought maybe you were with me. She came first. Then Ama came later when no one was watching."

My stomach turned. "Where is she?"

Kwesi looked away. "She was crying near the road when my mother found her."

I stepped back. "She came out alone? In the dark?"

"Yes."

I saw Ama in my mind. Small Ama. Seven-year-old Ama. Walking near the road. Looking for me because I had once again chosen the market over her.

I bent forward, hands on my knees. For a second, I thought I would vomit. Kwesi placed the lantern on the ground. "Kojo. Is she home?"

"Yes. My mother took her home."

"Is she hurt?"

"No."

I closed my eyes. The relief did not wash me clean. It made the shame worse.

Kwesi picked up the lantern. "Come." This time, I followed.

We walked slowly. Kwesi did not speak at first. That night, even he had no easy words. Near the turn to my lane, he stopped.

"I should not have to drag you home like this."

I looked at the ground. "I know."

"No, you do not."

"I said I know."

He stepped closer. "Ama was shaking. She thought you had died."

My throat closed. "She said that?"

"Yes."

I pressed my hands to my face.

Kwesi lowered his voice. "Kojo, whatever pain is inside you, it is now walking outside and stepping on other people."

He picked up my bag and pushed it into my chest. "Go."

"You are not coming?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because this is your door. Enter it."

Then he turned and walked away with the lantern.

The compound was quiet when I reached it. Too quiet. No cooking sounds. No Ama singing. No mother moving pots. Only the sound of insects and my own breath.

The door was open. My mother sat on the bench inside. Ama was beside her with her head in my mother's lap. Her face was swollen from crying. My father stood near the doorway. When he saw me, he did not move. He did not shout. That made it worse.

My mother looked up. Her face was empty. Not angry. Not sad. Empty.

"Where were you?" she asked. The question had no life in it.

"I was near the market."

"With those boys?"

I said nothing.

"Did you drink?"

Again, nothing.

She looked at my father. He closed his eyes.

Ama stirred and opened hers. For a moment, she looked confused. Then she saw me. She sat up fast. "Kojo."

I took one step toward her. She moved back into my mother's arms.

My mother held her. "Ama, stay." Ama began to cry again. Small sounds. Tired sounds.

My father finally spoke. "Kojo, look at your sister."

I looked. Ama's lips trembled. Her hair had loosened from its plaits. Her dress was dusty at the hem.

My mother said, "She left this house to find you."

"I did not know."

"That is the problem. You no longer know what your choices are doing."

I stared at the floor. My father stepped closer. "You went back."

I laughed once. It came out wrong. "You know that road well."

He flinched. My mother stood. "Do not throw your father at me tonight." The room went still. Her voice rose, but it did not break. "I know what your father has done. I know the pain he has brought here. I know the shame. I know the hunger. I know the lies. I know all of it. But tonight, we are speaking about you."

She came closer. "You are not responsible for your father losing work. You are not responsible for his drinking. You are not responsible for my tiredness. But you are responsible for leaving your sister afraid. You are responsible for lying. You are responsible for choosing those boys when you knew where that road leads."

I felt small. Younger than ten.

"I am sorry," I said. The words sounded weak.

My mother closed her eyes. "I am tired of sorry in this house." She looked at my father. "Yes, Kwaku. Yours too." He accepted it.

Ama wiped her face. "I thought you were gone," she whispered.

"I am here."

She shook her head. "No." The word was soft. She looked at me with eyes too old for her face. "You are standing there. But you are not here."

No one spoke. That sentence did what shouting could not do. It reached the place I had been hiding from.

I stood in the middle of the room and felt something inside me give way. Not loudly. More like a rope snapping. I had thought the breaking point would be a great event. It was not. It was my little sister telling me I had already left while my body was still in the room.

My knees weakened. I sat on the floor. No one touched me.

I covered my face and cried. This cry came from a place deeper than pride. I cried because Ama had gone into the dark for me. I cried because my mother looked emptied out. I cried because my father's shame had entered me. I cried because I had wanted to hurt him and had hurt everyone else instead. I cried because I did not know how to stop.

After a while, my mother knelt in front of me. She placed one hand on my shoulder. "Kojo," she said.

I tried to breathe. "I do not know how to stop," I said. The words came out broken.

My mother closed her eyes. My father made a sound like pain. Ama cried harder.

"I do not know how to stop."

My mother's hand tightened on my shoulder. "Then we stop pretending we can handle this alone." She turned to my father. "All of us."

He nodded. No pride. No argument. Only fear.

That night, nobody slept early. My mother sent Ama to wash her face. My father remained outside for some time, then came in and sat near the doorway. I sat on the floor with my back against the wall. The room smelled of kerosene, dust, and shame.

My mother lit the lantern. She sat on the bench and looked at each of us. "Tomorrow we go to Pastor Mensah."

My father said, "I will go."

"No," she said. "We will go."

His face tightened. "The children too?"

"Yes."

I looked up. "I do not want to go."

"I know."

"People will talk."

"They are already talking."

"I do not want strangers knowing."

"Secrets are choking us."

She turned to my father. "You will speak to Pastor. I will speak too. Kojo will speak if he can. Ama will not be forced, but she will not be left outside the truth anymore."

Ama looked frightened. My mother touched her hair. "No one will make you talk if you do not want to."

My father rubbed his forehead. "Abena, I am ashamed."

My mother's face hardened. "Good."

He looked at her. "Good?"

"Yes. Let the shame do one useful thing and move your feet."

Later, when Ama slept, my mother asked me to sit with her outside. The air was cool. The mango tree was a dark shape above us. My father remained inside with Ama.

My mother sat beside me on the low wall. For a while, we listened to the night. Then she said, "When you were small, you used to run ahead of me on this road. You would run, then turn back to see if I was watching. You liked to be seen."

I looked at my hands. "I do not like it now."

"I know."

Then she said, "Today, when Ama was gone, I felt my body become cold. She went out because she loves you. Because she trusts that finding you is her work. That is not her work. It is not your work either, to carry your father. But you tried. And now Ama is trying to carry you."

My mother wiped her face. "I have made mistakes. I hid too much from you. I told myself I was protecting you and Ama. But children know when a house is burning. Covering their eyes does not remove the smoke."

She touched my hand. "I am still your mother. But I am not made of stone."

"Tomorrow, when we go, you do not have to say everything. But you must not lie."

"What if I cannot talk?"

"Then say that."

"What if I cry?"

"Then cry."

"What if Papa cries?"

She looked toward the room. "Then let him."

In the morning, my body felt weak. My head hurt. My mouth was dry. My shirt from the night before lay in a corner. I looked at it and felt disgust.

My mother gave me water first. "Drink." I did. Then she gave me porridge. I could not finish it.

My father came in from outside. He had bathed. He wore a plain shirt, not the blue one. His face looked older. He stood near the doorway.

"Kojo. I am sorry for last night." He came closer but left space between us. "When I saw you like that, I was afraid. Not because I was angry at you. Because I saw what my pain has taught you."

I swallowed. "I chose it."

"Yes. But I helped build the road. Today, we ask for help."

Ama woke late. Her eyes were swollen. My mother washed her face with warm water. Ama said she did not want to go to church because people would look at us.

My mother answered, "Then they will look."

Ama looked at her. "And if they ask?"

"I will answer."

"What will you say?"

My mother paused. "I will say our family needs help."

Ama stared at her. "That is allowed?"

My mother gave a tired smile. "It should be."

We walked to the church after breakfast. All four of us. My father walked beside my mother, not ahead of her. Ama walked between them for part of the road, then came back to hold my hand. Her grip was loose. Not like before. But she held it.

I looked down at our hands. "I am sorry," I whispered.

"You said already."

"I know."

"Say it again later."

I almost smiled. "I will."

Pastor Mensah was in his office behind the chapel. When he saw us, he stood. "Sister Abena. Brother Kwaku." He looked at all of us. "Come in."

My father spoke first. "I have brought trouble to my house. I lost work. I became ashamed. I drank. I lied. I frightened my family. Now my son has begun walking near the same fire."

My mother looked at Pastor. "We cannot continue like this."

Pastor Mensah folded his hands. "You did well to come."

My father closed his eyes. "I should have come earlier."

"Yes. But earlier is gone. Today is here."

Pastor looked at my mother. "Abena, what do you need?"

She looked down at her hands. "I need my children safe. I need my husband alive in this house, not only breathing in it. I need to stop pretending I am not tired."

Pastor nodded. Then he looked at me. "Kojo. You do not have to speak if you are not ready."

I said nothing. He waited. The room was quiet.

Then I heard myself speak. "I do not know how to stop being angry."

Pastor Mensah's voice stayed calm. "Angry at who?"

I looked at my father. Then at my mother. Then at myself. "Everyone."

Pastor nodded. "That is a heavy load."

I shook my head. "I am not a load."

"I did not say you are. I said anger can be."

"What happened last night?" he asked.

I looked at Ama. She was watching me. I wanted to lie. Instead, I said, "I drank behind the market. I left Ama. She came looking for me. She went into the road. Kwesi found me. I came home smelling like drink. I think I am becoming bad."

Pastor Mensah leaned forward. "Bad people do not fear the harm they cause. You are not bad, Kojo. But you are in danger. There is a difference. And danger must be taken seriously."

He told us about a counselor who came to the community center twice a week. Her name was Madam Akosua. She worked with families facing alcohol problems, grief, anger, and fear.

My first thought was no. Then I looked at Ama. She sat with both hands folded in her lap, trying to be brave inside a room she should never have needed to enter. I said nothing. But I did not refuse.

When we left Pastor Mensah's office, the sun was high. Nothing outside had changed. Women still swept. A child chased a chicken near the gate. But our family walked differently. Not healed. Not fixed. Not clean. Just no longer pretending that the house was not burning.

On the way home, Ama took my hand again. This time, I held it carefully. Like something fragile I had already damaged once and could not afford to drop again.

That evening, I opened my blue book. For the first time in many days, I wanted to write.

I wrote. Last night Ama went looking for me in the dark. I scared the people I love. I said I do not know how to stop. Today, they heard me.

I stared at the page for a long time. Then I wrote the last sentence. Maybe help begins when hiding becomes more painful than speaking.

I closed the book. Outside, my father sat under the mango tree. My mother was washing bowls. Ama was humming softly as she arranged her doll's dress. The house was still wounded. So was I. But something had broken open. And through that break, for the first time, help had a way to enter.

Chapter 14: A Cry for Help

The next morning, our house woke slowly. No one shouted. No one rushed. Even the hens seemed quieter than usual.

My mother lit the coal pot and warmed water for porridge. Ama sat on the bench with her doll. My father swept the compound without being asked. The sound of the broom was steady, but his face was not.

I sat near the doorway with my blue book beside me. I had not slept well. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Ama walking in the dark. I saw Kwesi holding the lantern. I saw my mother's empty face. I saw my father looking at me as if he had seen his own shadow.

My mother placed a cup of porridge in front of me. "Drink." I took it. It was thin, but warm.

Ama watched me. I wanted to say something to her, but my mouth felt heavy.

My father came and stood near us. "We will go to the community center today," he said.

My mother looked at him. "You are still willing?"

He nodded. "Yes."

The word was small, but it mattered.

Ama held her doll tighter. "Will they ask me questions?"

My mother sat beside her. "Not if you do not want to answer."

"Will they ask Kojo?"

My mother looked at me. "Maybe."

Ama turned to me. "Will you tell the truth?"

I swallowed. "I will try."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she nodded.

We walked to the community center after breakfast. It was near the church, in an old building with pale walls and a rusted roof. Children played football in the open space beside it. A woman sold oranges under a blue umbrella. Two men sat on a bench near the entrance.

I wanted to turn back. My feet slowed. My mother noticed. "Kojo."

"I am coming."

My father stopped beside me. "I am afraid too," he said. I looked at him. He did not hide his face. That made it harder for me to hide mine.

Inside, the room smelled of dust, soap, and old wood. Plastic chairs stood against the wall. Posters hung near the window. One showed a family sitting in a circle. Another said help is strength. I looked away from that one.

A woman came from the next room. She was not old, but her eyes carried age. She wore a simple dress and flat sandals. Her voice was calm when she greeted us.

"You must be Abena's family."

My mother nodded. "Yes."

"I am Akosua."

Madam Akosua. The counselor Pastor Mensah had mentioned.

She shook my mother's hand first. Then my father's. Then she looked at me and Ama. "You do not have to shake my hand if you do not want to," she said.

Ama moved closer to my mother. I stayed still. Madam Akosua did not force us. That made me trust her a little.

She led us into a small room. There were four chairs and one bench. A wooden table stood near the window with a box of tissues on it. The window was open. I could hear the football outside.

Madam Akosua sat down. "This is not a court. No one is here to be punished. We are here to understand what is happening and what help is needed."

My father lowered his head. My mother sat straight. Ama looked at the floor. I looked at the door.

Madam Akosua noticed. "Kojo, you can sit near the door if that feels better." No adult had ever said something like that to me. I moved to the chair closest to the door.

She began with my mother. "What made you come today?"

My mother breathed in slowly. "My family is breaking. My husband lost his job. He started drinking. I tried to keep things together. I thought if I worked harder and kept quiet, the children would be safe. But they were not safe. They were watching everything."

Madam Akosua nodded. "And you, Kwaku?"

My father rubbed his palms together. "I was ashamed. I still am. I thought I could drink and forget that I had failed. But I brought the shame home. I gave it to them. I did not mean to."

Madam Akosua said, "Harm does not need intention to become real."

My father closed his eyes.

Then Madam Akosua looked at me. "Kojo, do you want to speak?"

I shook my head.

"That is allowed."

She turned to Ama. "And you?" Ama shook her head too. "That is also allowed."

For a while, only the sound of football came through the window. Then Ama whispered, "People call us bottle children."

My mother covered her mouth. My father bent forward.

Madam Akosua turned gently toward Ama. "That name hurt you."

Ama nodded. "It made me feel dirty."

Madam Akosua's voice stayed soft. "You are not dirty."

Ama looked at her. "What if people think I am?"

"What people think is not always the truth."

Madam Akosua leaned forward. "When someone in a family struggles with alcohol, the whole family feels the pain. But the children are not the alcohol. The children are not the debt. The children are not the gossip. You are Ama. That is your name."

Ama wiped her face.

Then Madam Akosua looked at me again. I felt something rising in my throat. I tried to push it down. It came anyway.

"I drank too," I said.

The room became still. My mother looked at me, but she did not interrupt. My father kept his head down.

Madam Akosua said, "When?"

"Behind the market."

"How many times?"

I stared at the floor. "More than once."

Ama made a small sound. I could not look at her.

Madam Akosua did not shout. "What were you looking for there?"

I wanted to lie. Instead, I said, "Quiet." She waited. I forced the rest out. "I wanted my head to stop. I wanted people to stop needing me. I wanted to stop feeling ashamed. And I wanted to hurt my father."

My father covered his face.

I thought Madam Akosua would correct me. She did not. She said, "That is a painful truth. But it is better outside than hidden inside you."

I cried then. Not loudly. Just enough that I could no longer pretend. My mother reached toward me, then stopped. I nodded. She came and held me.

For the first time in many months, I let myself be held like a child. Not like the man of the house. Not like Ama's protector. Not like my father's judge. A child.

My father began to cry too. Ama climbed from her chair and leaned against my mother's side. Soon all of us were close together, awkward and ashamed and tired, but close.

Madam Akosua gave us time. She did not rush to make the moment beautiful. It was not beautiful. It was painful. But it was honest.

After a while, she spoke. "This will not be fixed today. There must be steps. Kwaku, you need support for the drinking. Not only promises. Abena, you need support too. You cannot carry this alone. Kojo, you need a safe place to speak before anger chooses for you. Ama, you need to know that none of this is your fault."

Ama nodded.

Madam Akosua gave us a plan. My father would attend a men's recovery meeting twice a week. My mother would join a family support group. I would meet Madam Akosua alone the next week, only if I agreed. Ama would come with my mother when she wanted.

Then Madam Akosua said one more thing. "No more secrets that put children in danger."

My mother nodded. My father nodded. I nodded too.

On the walk home, no one said much. The sun was hot. The road was busy. Life had not stopped because our family had finally spoken. People still sold tomatoes. Children still chased tyres. The world had continued without waiting for us.

But I felt different. Not healed. Not free. Only lighter in one small place.

Ama walked beside me. After some time, she slipped her hand into mine. "I am still angry," she said.

"I know."

"But I am less scared."

I looked at her. "That is good."

She nodded. "You have to say sorry again later."

"I know."

"And tomorrow."

"Yes."

"And maybe next week."

I almost smiled. "All right."

When we reached home, my father did not go to his stool first. He went to the water barrel, washed his face, and helped my mother carry the plantain tray inside. It was a small thing. But we all saw it.

That night, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Today I asked for help without saying the exact words. Maybe crying can be a kind of speaking.

I listened to the house. My mother was humming softly in the kitchen. Ama was breathing beside me. My father was outside, not drinking, only sitting.

The road ahead was still long. But for the first time, we had stopped walking it in the dark.

Chapter 15: Meeting the Healers

The first visit to the community center did not fix us.

The next morning, our house was still our house. The roof still leaked. The food was still not enough. My father still had no steady work. My mother still counted coins at night. Ama still watched faces before she trusted words.

But something had shifted. We had spoken. That made the silence different. It was no longer a wall. It was a room with a door.

Three days after our first visit, my father went back to the community center for the men's recovery meeting. My mother made him eat before he left. She placed food before him and said only one thing. "Do not be late."

He nodded. "I will go straight there."

My mother looked at him. "Go straight there and come straight home."

He lowered his eyes. "Yes."

Ama sat beside me, watching him. "Will you talk?" she asked.

My father looked at her. "I will try."

She frowned. "You always say try."

My mother turned from the fire. "Ama." But my father raised his hand gently. "She is right." Ama looked surprised. He bent and tied his sandal. "I will talk," he said. This time, Ama nodded.

When he left, the house held its breath. My mother worked as usual, but every sound from the road made her look toward the gate. Ama tried to read, but she kept losing her place. I swept the compound twice.

We were waiting for a man who had promised many times before. That was the hard thing about trust. It did not return just because someone walked in the right direction once.

The meeting ended near sunset. My father came home before dark. He was sober. He looked tired, but not empty.

Ama saw him first. "He came," she whispered. My mother did not smile, but her shoulders dropped.

My father entered the compound and stood near the mango tree. "I am home," he said. It sounded like a small announcement. No one clapped. No one praised him. But we all heard it.

At supper, he spoke more than usual. He told us there were six men at the meeting. Some had lost jobs. Some had lost families. One man had slept outside his own house for two months because his wife would not let him in.

Ama's eyes widened. "Did he come back?"

My father paused. "He is trying to."

"Does his child talk to him?"

"Not yet."

Ama looked down at her food. My father understood the question under the question. "Some wounds take time," he said.

My mother looked at him. "Yes," she said. "They do."

The next week, it was my turn to meet Madam Akosua alone. I did not want to go. I said so many times. My mother listened the first two times. The third time, she handed me my sandals and said, "You can complain while walking."

So I complained while walking.

The community center was busy that afternoon. Children played outside. A nurse sat under a tree weighing a baby. A man repaired a broken chair. Madam Akosua stood near the entrance with a notebook in her hand.

She saw me and smiled. "Kojo." I did not smile back. "My mother made me come."

"That is often how first meetings happen."

We entered the same small room as before. This time, there were only two chairs. I chose the one near the door. Madam Akosua sat across from me.

"We do not have to begin with the hard things," she said.

"What do we begin with?"

"You tell me."

"I do not know."

"That is fine."

Silence came. I waited for her to fill it. She did not.

I looked at her. "Are you not going to ask questions?"

"I will. But I do not want to chase you with them."

She opened her notebook. "Tell me one thing you liked before life became heavy."

"Football," I said.

"What position?"

"Goalkeeper."

"Why goalkeeper?"

I shrugged. She waited. "I liked stopping things."

The answer came before I understood it. She wrote something down. "What are you writing?"

"Your words."

"Why?"

"Sometimes people say important things before they know they are important."

She asked about school. She asked about Kwesi. Then she asked about the market. My body tightened. "I do not want to talk about that."

"All right."

"That is all?"

"For today, yes."

"You will not force me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because force may make you speak, but it will not make you safe."

She leaned back. "Kojo, you have been living like a goalkeeper at home. Watching every direction. Waiting for danger. Trying to stop everything from entering the net. But a child cannot guard a whole family alone."

My throat tightened. "Everyone keeps saying I am a child."

"Does it annoy you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because children cannot do anything."

Madam Akosua shook her head. "That is not true. Children can love. Children can notice. Children can speak. Children can ask for help. But children cannot become the walls of a house."

After the meeting, she took me to the main room. "This is Uncle Kofi," she said.

A man was stacking plastic chairs near the wall. He was tall and thin, with gray in his beard. His hands moved slowly. He turned and smiled. "So this is Kojo."

I did not like that he already knew my name. Madam Akosua saw my face. "He knows only your name. Not your story."

Uncle Kofi lifted one hand. "And I do not need your story before I respect you."

He pointed to a chair. "Help me carry these outside."

We carried six chairs under the neem tree. Uncle Kofi placed them in a circle.

"Why a circle?" I asked.

"So no one hides at the back."

"I like the back."

"I know. Most wounded people do."

When the chairs were set, he sat on one and wiped his forehead. "I used to drink," he said. He said it plainly. No drama. No shame in his voice.

I looked at him quickly. He smiled. "You thought only men like your father struggle?"

I looked away. "I did not say that."

"You did not need to."

I sat on the chair opposite him. "Did you stop?"

"For today, yes."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I do not boast about tomorrow. I choose today."

That sounded too small. He seemed to read my face. "Small choices save lives, Kojo. Big promises often make noise and then disappear."

He leaned forward. "Your father is not my enemy. Drink is not even the whole enemy. Pain is there. Shame is there. Pride is there. Hunger is there. Silence is there. If you fight only the bottle, the rest will wait for you."

He pointed toward the football field. "You still play?"

"Not much."

"Why?"

I shrugged. He laughed softly. "You and that shrug. One day your shoulders will get tired of speaking for your mouth."

Despite myself, I smiled. Only a little.

On the way home, I thought about the people at the center. They were not magic people. They were not saviors. They were people who had learned how to sit near pain without running from it.

At home, Ama waited near the gate. "How was it?" she asked.

"Fine." She gave me a look. I sighed. "It was not bad."

"What did she ask?"

"Football."

Ama frowned. "You went to talk about football?"

"Yes."

"That woman is strange."

"Yes." That made her smile.

My mother came out. "You are back."

"Yes." She searched my face. "Will you go again?" she asked. I wanted to say no. Instead, I said, "Maybe." Her face softened.

That evening, my father returned from the station with no money. Before, that would have sent him into silence or anger. This time, he washed his face and sat with us. "There was no work today," he said.

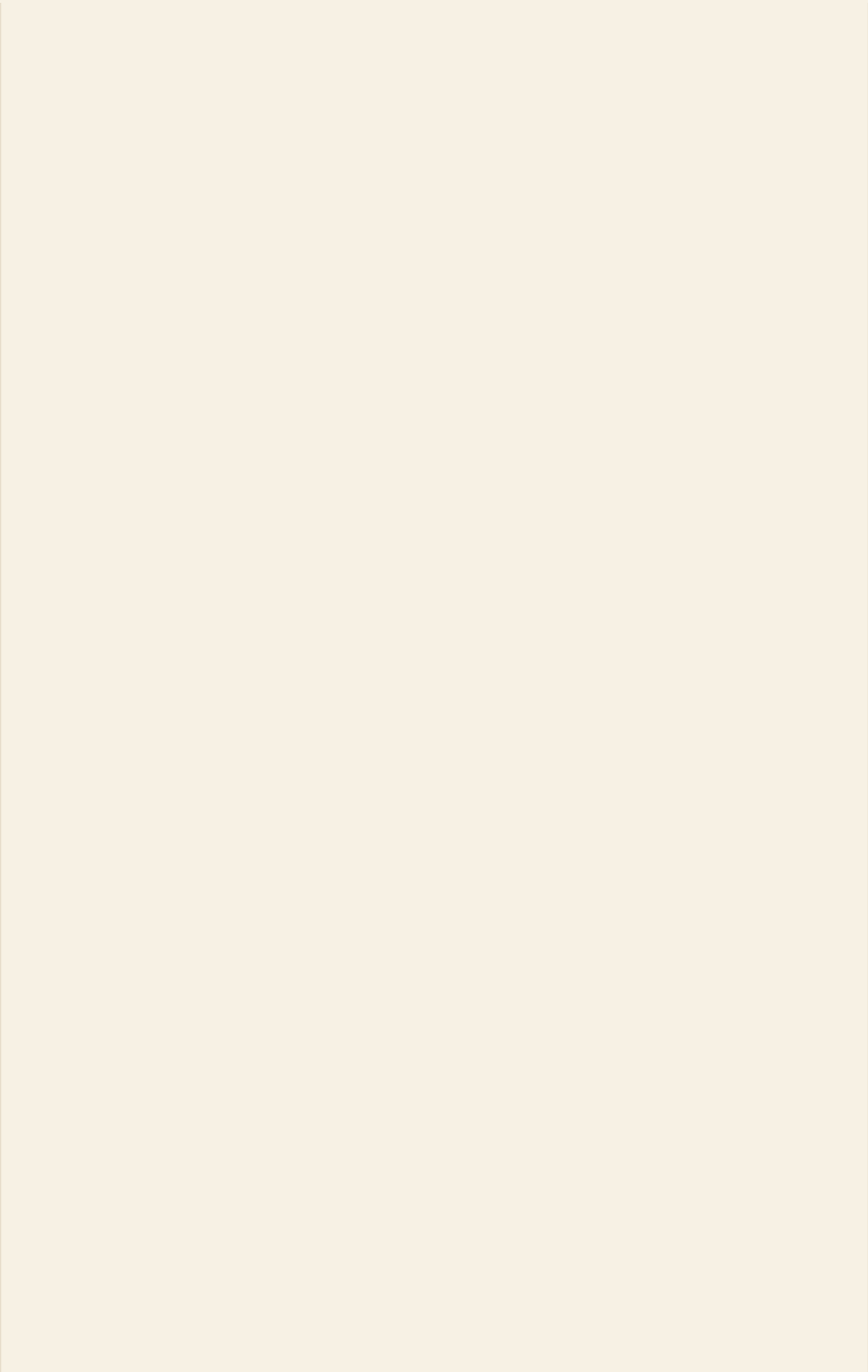
My mother looked at him. "Thank you for telling me." It was a small sentence. But it changed the room.

After supper, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Today I met people who did not try to fix me fast. Madam Akosua says I cannot guard the whole house. Uncle Kofi says small choices matter.

Outside, my father was helping my mother rinse the bowls. Ama was reading under the lantern. The house was not healed. But for once, no one was pretending it was.

I wrote one more sentence. Maybe healers are people who help you tell the truth without drowning in it.

I closed the book. For the first time in many days, I slept before the lantern died.



Chapter 16: Stories Like Mine

The first support group meeting felt like punishment. That was what I thought when my mother told me we were going.

"It is not punishment," she said.

"Then why must I go?"

"Because sitting alone with pain has not helped us."

I had no answer for that.

The meeting was held at the community center on a Wednesday evening. The sun was low when we arrived. The football field outside was empty. The chairs under the neem tree had been placed in a circle.

I saw Uncle Kofi arranging cups on a wooden table. Madam Akosua stood near the doorway, speaking to a woman with a baby tied to her back. Pastor Mensah was there too, but he did not lead the meeting. He only greeted people and helped carry chairs. That made me feel a little better. I did not want a sermon. I wanted to disappear.

Ama held my mother's hand. My father stood beside us with his shoulders tense. He looked ready to run.

Madam Akosua came to us. "You came," she said.

My mother nodded. "Yes."

Madam Akosua looked at me. "Kojo, you can sit wherever you feel comfortable."

I chose a chair near the edge of the circle. Ama sat beside me. "You chose the escape chair," she whispered.

"What?"

"The one near the path."

I almost smiled. "You talk too much."

"You think too much."

She was not wrong.

People began to sit. Some came alone. Some came with family. There was an old woman with tired eyes. A young man with a scar on his cheek. A mother with two children. A girl older than me who did not look at anyone.

I had expected broken people to look different. They did not. They looked like people from the market. People from church. People who could sit beside you in a taxi.

Madam Akosua opened the meeting. "We are here to listen. No one is forced to speak. No one is here to gossip. What is shared here must be treated with respect."

Then she asked everyone to say their name. Only their name. When my turn came, my throat tightened. "Kojo," I said. My voice was low. No one laughed. No one asked whose son I was. They only nodded.

My father said his name after me. "Kwaku." His voice shook a little. Ama whispered her name. "Ama." My mother said, "Abena." Our names entered the circle and stayed there. No one changed them.

Uncle Kofi spoke first. He remained seated with his hands on his knees.

"I drank for many years. At first, I said it was because life was hard. Later, I said it was because people judged me. Then I said it was because my wife did not understand. I had many reasons. Some of those reasons were true. But they were not the whole truth. The whole truth was that I was afraid to feel pain without something between me and it."

I looked at my father. He was staring at the ground.

Uncle Kofi continued. "I lost work. I lost trust. I lost days I cannot get back. One day my son stopped calling me Papa. He called me Kofi like everyone else. That hurt more than hunger."

No one spoke. I thought of Ama stepping away from our father. I thought of myself saying he should have stayed gone. My chest tightened.

Uncle Kofi looked at my father. "Some things return slowly. Some do not return at all. But today is still worth choosing."

A woman named Sister Esi spoke next. Her husband had struggled with drink for years. She had hidden it from her family. She sold cloth at the market and pretended everything was fine.

"When people asked, I said he was resting. When he sold my things, I said I misplaced them. When my children cried, I told them to pray and be quiet. I thought silence was protection. It was not. Silence made my children lonely."

My mother wiped her eyes.

A young man named Daniel spoke after her. He said he started drinking because older boys made him feel important. "They called me man. I liked it. At home, I was only a burden. With them, I felt seen." He looked at the ground. "But they only saw the part of me they could use. When I got into trouble, they vanished. If someone laughs while you destroy yourself, check that friendship."

The sentence entered me like a stone dropped in water. Ama leaned close. "Are you all right?" I nodded. It was not true, but she let it pass.

Then a girl older than me spoke. Her name was Afia. Her mother drank. At school, children called her names. She said she used to scrub her skin hard because she felt dirty after people mocked her.

Ama became very still beside me. Afia's voice stayed quiet. "One teacher told me I was not my mother's drinking. I did not believe her. But she kept saying it. One day I wanted to believe it. That was the beginning."

Ama reached for my hand. I held it gently.

Madam Akosua let the silence sit. Then she asked, "Would anyone else like to share one sentence? Only one is enough."

My father lifted his head. He spoke without standing. "My drinking has made my children carry names they did not earn. I do not know how to repair that yet. But I do not want to hide anymore."

My mother closed her eyes. Ama's hand tightened around mine.

People in the circle nodded. No one clapped. I was grateful for that. This was a man placing his shame on the ground where others could see it.

Madam Akosua looked at me. I looked away. She did not call my name. Still, my heart beat fast.

One sentence. Only one. The circle waited.

I heard my own voice before I fully decided. "I thought I was the only child angry at someone I still loved."

The words came out thin. But they came out. No one laughed. Afia looked at me and nodded once. Uncle Kofi said softly, "You are not the only one." That was all. It was enough.

After the meeting, people drank water and spoke quietly. No one rushed to us with advice. Sister Esi touched my mother's shoulder. Uncle Kofi spoke with my father under the neem tree. Ama stood near Afia, both of them shy at first. Then Afia showed her how to fold a paper bird from an old leaflet.

Madam Akosua came to stand beside me. "How was it?" she asked. I almost said fine. Then I stopped. "It was hard." She nodded. "Hard is honest."

"I did not like all of it."

"You do not have to."

I looked at the circle of chairs. "They sounded like us."

"Yes."

"I thought that would make me feel worse."

"Did it?"

I thought about it. "No."

"What did it make you feel?"

I watched Ama laugh softly as her paper bird fell to the ground. "Less strange," I said.

Madam Akosua smiled. "Less strange is a good beginning."

On the walk home, the sky was dark blue. The first stars had appeared. My father walked beside my mother. They were not touching, but they were not far apart.

Ama carried the paper bird in both hands. "Afia said I can make another one next week," she said.

"Next week?" I asked.

She looked at me. "Yes. We are going again."

My mother glanced back. "Are we?" Ama nodded as if she had already decided for all of us. My father gave a small laugh. It was tired, but real.

At home, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Tonight, I heard stories like mine. Pain sounds different in every mouth, but it has the same weight.

I paused. Then I wrote one more sentence. Maybe I am not dirty. Maybe I am wounded.

From the other side of the room, Ama whispered, "Kojo."

"Yes."

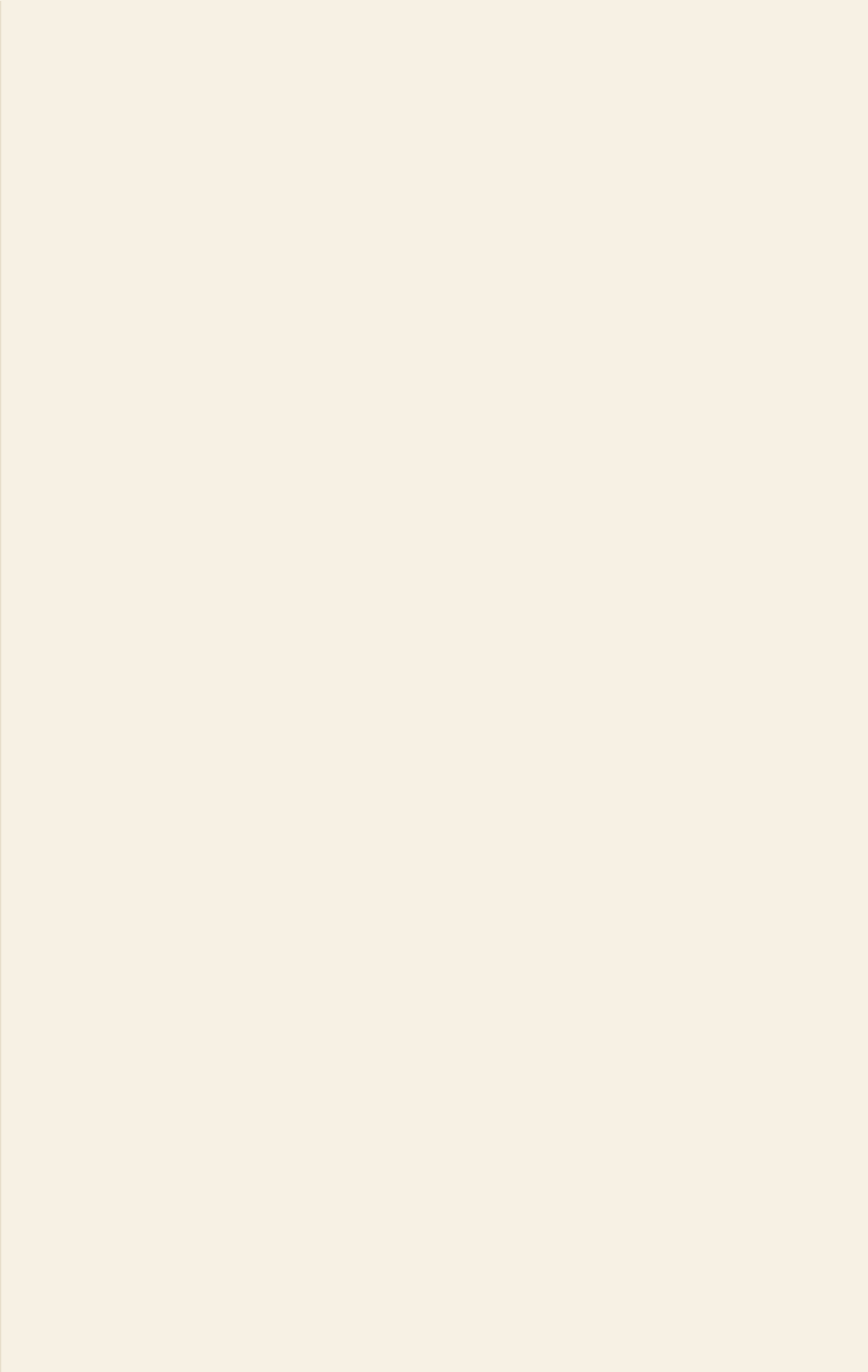
"Write my name in your book."

I turned the page. I wrote Ama.

Then she said, "Now write Afia." I wrote Afia. Then she smiled in the dark.

"Now write paper bird." I laughed softly and wrote it. Paper bird.

For the first time in many days, the book did not feel heavy. It felt like a place where something small could lift.



Chapter 17: Facing My Past

Madam Akosua asked me to bring my blue book. I did not want to. The book had become too full of things I did not want other people to see. It carried names, anger, shame, and sentences I had written when the house felt too small for breathing.

When my mother told me to take it, I held it against my chest. "Will she read it?"

"Only if you allow her," my mother said.

"What if I do not allow her?"

"Then you do not allow her."

I did not trust that answer. Adults often said choice when they meant obedience. Still, I took the book.

The community center was quiet that afternoon. No meeting. No football. Only a woman sweeping near the door and a baby sleeping on a cloth under the shade.

Madam Akosua was waiting in the small room. She smiled when she saw the book. "You brought it."

"My mother said I should."

"But you carried it."

I sat near the door. She did not ask to see the book. That made me suspicious.

She placed a blank sheet of paper on the table. "I want you to draw your house."

I looked at her. "Only small children draw houses."

"Many adults cannot draw the houses they live in honestly."

She gave me a pencil. I drew our house. Two rooms. The kitchen at the back. The mango tree. My father's stool. The water barrel.

Madam Akosua looked at it. "Where do you feel safest?"

I pointed to the mango tree. Then I changed my mind. "No. Not anymore."

"Where then?"

I stared at the drawing. I wanted to point somewhere. I could not.

She nodded slowly. "That is important."

I felt ashamed. "What is important?"

"That you had to think hard before finding one safe place."

She pointed to the stool. "Tell me about this."

"That is Papa's stool."

"What does it mean to you?"

I almost said nothing. Then I stopped. "It used to mean he was home."

"And now?"

I looked at the pencil in my hand. "Now it means we must check what kind of home he brought with him."

Madam Akosua let the sentence stay in the room. "That sounds tiring."

I laughed softly. "It is."

"When did you first start checking?"

I looked at the drawing until the lines blurred. "The day he came home late after the factory closed."

"What do you remember?"

"His shoes were dirty. He did not lift Ama. My mother asked if it was true. He said he did not know what we would do."

Madam Akosua's voice was soft. "And what did that do to you?"

I looked up. "He was my father. He was supposed to know." The words came out angry. She nodded. "Yes." Only yes. That made the anger loosen.

I looked back at the drawing. "After that, I started watching him. Watching Mama. Watching food. Watching coins. Watching Ama."

"Who watched you?"

The question entered quietly. I had no answer. I thought of Madam Efua. Kwesi. Ama sometimes. My mother when she had strength. My father when shame allowed him to see past himself. But most days, no one had watched me enough.

"No one," I said. Then I shook my head. "Not no one. But not enough."

She asked me to mark places on the drawing. A circle where I felt afraid. I circled the doorway. A square where I felt angry. I marked the stool. A line where I felt lonely. I drew it behind the house.

Then she asked me to mark where I kept my secrets. I drew a small mark inside my chest. On the little stick figure I had drawn to show myself.

Madam Akosua looked at it. "That is a crowded place to keep secrets."

I pressed my lips together. The tears came before I wanted them. I turned my face away. She pushed the tissue box closer. I took one. For a while, I cried quietly. Not because of one memory. Because all the memories had begun to stand up at once.

Madam Akosua waited until my breathing slowed. Then she said, "Kojo, children often blame themselves when adults fall apart."

"I know it is not my fault."

"Do you feel that?"

I wiped my face. "No."

"What do you feel?"

I looked at the drawing. "I feel like if I had been better, maybe Papa would have tried harder."

Madam Akosua leaned forward. "You were ten. You were a child. You could not save a grown man from his pain."

"But Ama needed me."

"Yes. And you loved her. But needing you should not have made you her second parent."

I stared at the paper. I thought of everyone who had said I was not the man of the house. I had not believed them. Maybe because letting go of that role felt like letting the house collapse.

Madam Akosua pointed to the mark inside the stick figure. "What is the biggest secret there?"

I held the blue book tighter. She noticed. "You do not have to show me. You can read it yourself if you want."

I opened the book slowly. I knew the page. I had written it after I shouted at Ama. I sounded like Papa. The sentence looked small and cruel. I read it aloud. My voice broke on Papa.

Madam Akosua said, "What does that sentence mean to you?"

"It means I am becoming him."

"Which part of him?"

I frowned. "Your father is not only one thing. Which part are you afraid of becoming?"

I looked at the page. "The part that hurts people because he is hurting."

Madam Akosua nodded. "That is a real fear. The fear matters because it shows you are noticing the pattern. But noticing is only the first step. The next step is choosing differently when the anger rises."

"I do not always know how."

"That is why you are here."

She asked me to write three columns on a fresh page. What happened. What I felt. What I did.

I wrote the first line. Ama asked if Papa loved the bottle more. I felt fear. I told her no, but I did not know.

Next line. Isaac called me bottle boy. I felt shame. I tore his book.

Next line. Sly offered drink. I felt small. I drank.

Madam Akosua read the page. Then she asked me to add a fourth column. What I needed.

For Ama's question, I wrote. Someone older to answer her. For Isaac, I wrote. Protection. For Sly, I wrote. To feel important without proving myself.

Madam Akosua tapped the last line. "This is important. Many dangerous people know how to offer importance to children who feel unseen."

I thought of Sly. He had not called me important. But he had made me feel chosen.

Madam Akosua closed the session with one task. "This week, when you feel anger, do not ask only what am I feeling. Ask what do I need."

When I left the room, my mother was waiting outside under the neem tree. Ama was with her, folding paper birds. She looked up when she saw me. "Did you cry?" she asked.

"Ama," my mother said.

"It is fine," I said. I sat beside her. "Yes. I cried."

She studied me. "Do you feel sick?"

"No."

"Then crying is not sickness?"

I shook my head. "No."

She thought about that. Then she handed me a paper bird. "This one is yours." One wing was bigger than the other.

"It is crooked," I said.

"So are we," she answered.

My mother laughed before she could stop herself. I laughed too. A small laugh. A real one.

On the walk home, I carried my blue book under my arm. It still felt heavy, but not in the same way. Before, it had been a hiding place. Now, maybe it could become a map.

That night, I drew our house again. This time, I added a small door near the back. It was not there in real life.

Ama saw it and frowned. "Our house does not have that door."

"I know."

"Then why did you draw it?"

I looked at the page. "In case I need another way out."

She leaned closer. "Does it lead to the market?"

"No."

"Good. Where should it lead?" She thought for a moment. "To the place with paper birds."

I smiled. Then I wrote under the drawing. Facing the past does not mean living there. It means finding the door you missed when you were afraid.

I closed the book and lay down beside Ama. Outside, my father coughed under the mango tree. My mother moved softly in the kitchen. The house was still the same house. But I had looked at it honestly. For one day, that was enough.

Chapter 18: Learning to Trust Again

Trust did not return because my father said sorry. Sorry had become too common in our house. It followed us to school, church, and the market. My father had said sorry many times. I had said sorry too. The word had grown thin.

Madam Akosua told me trust was not a word. "It is a pattern," she said. We were sitting in her small room. The window was open. Outside, children were arguing over a football.

"A pattern?"

"Yes. Something repeated until the heart begins to believe it."

"What if the heart refuses?"

"Then the pattern must continue without applause."

I did not like that answer. It meant my father could try and I still did not have to trust him quickly. It also meant I could not punish him forever.

That week, my father started coming home before dark. Not every day. But more days than before. At first, each early return made the house tense. Ama would look up. My mother would pause at the fire. I would pretend not to notice.

My father would enter and say the same thing. "I am home."

The first time, no one answered. The second time, my mother said, "Wash. Food is ready." The third time, Ama whispered, "Good evening, Papa." His face softened. "Good evening, Ama."

He did not reach for her. He waited. Before, he would have tried to force closeness. Now he waited. Some evenings, Ama went to him. Some evenings, she did not. He accepted both.

One Friday, he came home with a small packet of nails. My mother looked at it. "What is that for?"

"The back door is loose."

"It has been loose for months."

"I know."

He took a hammer and went to fix it. Ama followed him but stayed near the wall. He knelt and held the door steady. The hammer struck the nail again and again. Ama covered her ears. "It is loud."

My father stopped. "Too loud?" She nodded. He placed the hammer down. "I can do it later." She looked surprised. "No. Do it. I will stand far."

When he finished, he opened and closed the door twice. "It is better," he said.

Ama went close and touched the wood. "You fixed it."

"Yes."

"Will it break again?"

"Maybe. But I can fix it again."

She thought about that. "Some things break many times."

My father looked at her. "Yes."

"Can they still be fixed?"

"Some can. If people keep working on them."

Ama nodded as if she was storing the answer for later. I walked away before anyone saw my face.

That evening, I wrote in my blue book. Trust may be a door fixed one nail at a time. It sounded like something Madam Akosua would like. That annoyed me, so I closed the book.

At school, trust was harder. Kwesi and I were speaking again, but not like before. He still walked with me some days. But I could feel him watching me near the market road.

One afternoon, I stopped walking. "Say it," I told him.

He frowned. "Say what?"

"You think I will go back."

He looked at Ama, then at me. "Yes."

The answer hit me because it was honest. I wanted to be angry. Instead, I asked, "Why?"

"Because you have gone back before."

Kwesi did not soften his voice. "I am not saying you will always go back. I am saying I cannot pretend I am not watching."

I kicked a stone. "So you do not trust me."

"Not fully." The words hurt. But they were fair. He continued. "I still walk with you."

I looked at him. "That is trust too." I had not thought of it that way. Trust was not only believing someone could not fail. Sometimes it was staying near them while knowing they might.

That evening, I told Madam Akosua what Kwesi said. She smiled a little.

"Your friend has wisdom."

"He also has a big mouth."

"Both can be true."

Then she asked, "Do you trust yourself?" I did not answer quickly. That was the question I avoided most. I did not trust Sly. I did not trust the market. I did not fully trust my father. But the truth was worse. I did not fully trust myself.

"I do not know," I said.

"What would help?"

I thought for a while. "Not passing that road alone."

"Good."

"That sounds weak."

"It sounds honest."

"I should be able to pass a road."

"One day, maybe. For now, do not confuse danger with a test of pride."

So we made a plan. I would walk home with Ama and Kwesi when I could. If Kwesi was not there, I would take the church road. If Sly called me, I would not stop. If I felt angry enough to run, I would go to Madam Efua or write one true sentence.

The first test came two days later. Kwesi had stayed after school. Ama walked with a girl from her class. I was alone. The shortest road home passed near the market. I stood at the turn.

The market called with its old noise. I thought of the crates. I thought of Sly's smile. Then I heard my father's voice. Do not let my failures teach your mouth how to hurt your sister. I heard Kwesi. If you pass a hole every day, one day your leg will enter. I heard Madam Akosua. Do not confuse danger with a test of pride.

I hated all their voices. Then I took the longer road.

The church road was quiet. It took more time. My legs complained. My pride complained louder. But I reached home sober. I reached home angry. But sober.

My mother was washing bowls when I entered. "You are late."

"I took the church road."

She looked up. "Why?" I shrugged. Then I stopped myself. "Because I was alone." She nodded slowly. "Good." That was all. No praise. No tears. But I saw her turn away and wipe her face.

My father came home after sunset. He brought nothing that day. Only himself. Before, I would have judged the empty hands. That evening, I noticed the clear eyes.

After supper, Ama asked him to help with reading. He looked startled. "Me?" She nodded. "You know words." He sat beside her and pointed to each word. Ama corrected him once and laughed. He laughed too. My mother watched from the kitchen.

Trust did not feel warm. Not yet. It felt like standing near a dog that had bitten you before and seeing if it would stay calm.

Later that night, my father came outside where I sat. "Your mother said you took the church road. That was wise."

"It was longer."

"Wise roads often are."

He said, "I passed Blue Kiosk today. I did not enter." I looked at the dirt. "I wanted to enter. I heard men laughing. Someone called my name. My body wanted to turn." I understood that. "What did you do?" "I kept walking." "Was it hard?" "Yes." He looked at me. "Was the church road hard?" I nodded. "Then both of us walked past something today."

The next week, trust cracked again. My father came home late. The sun had gone. Supper was cold. When he entered, I stood at once. The smell came with him. Not strong. But there.

My father stopped near the gate. "I drank," he said. No lie. No excuse. Just the truth.

My anger rose fast. "Of course you did."

He nodded. "Yes."

My mother's voice was sharp. "Where?" "Blue Kiosk." "How much?" "One cup." "One cup is still one cup." "I know."

"So all your talking means nothing."

"It means I came home and told the truth."

My father sat on his stool. "I will go to Uncle Kofi tomorrow."

My mother folded her arms. "You will go tonight."

"It is late."

"You found Blue Kiosk in the dark. You can find Kofi."

He left again. This time, not to hide. To seek help.

My mother sat on the bench. I stood near the mango tree, breathing hard. "I knew he would fail," I said.

"He stumbled."

"That is failing."

"Yes. But he did not stay there."

I wanted to reject that. But I could not. The old father would have lied. He would have shouted. This father had told the truth and gone to Uncle Kofi. It did not erase the cup. It did not erase my anger. But it was not the same as before.

When my father returned, Uncle Kofi walked with him. He spoke briefly with my mother. Then he looked at me. "Kojo. A stumble is not a home. Do not build a house there."

I wrote it down. A stumble is not a home.

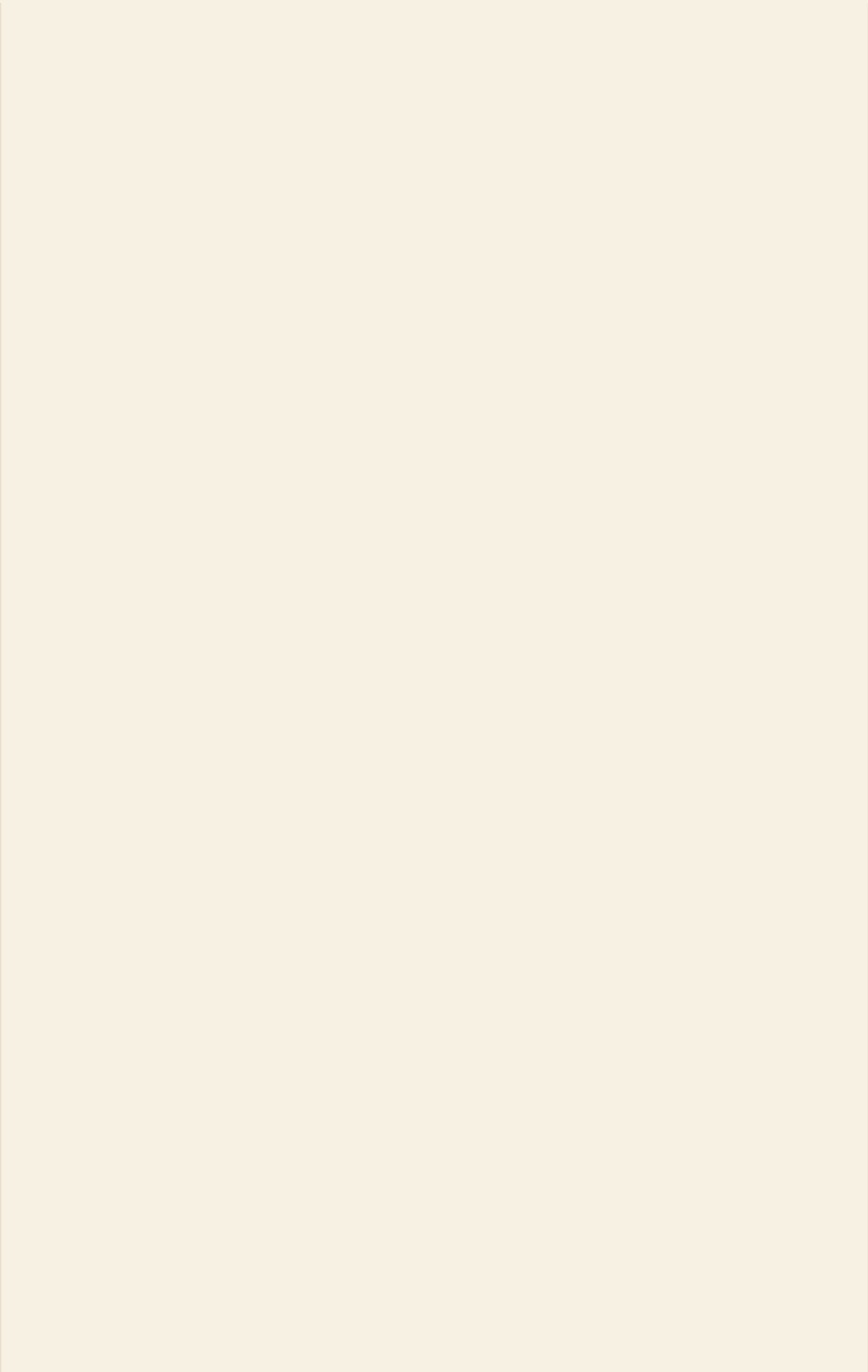
The next day, my father apologized to Ama. Only to her. She told me later. "He said he scared me again." "What did you say?" "I said yes." "What did he say?" "He said he will keep going to meetings." "And?" "I said I will keep watching."

I asked, "Do you trust him?" She thought for a long time. "I trust him for today."

At first, I thought that was too small. Then I remembered Uncle Kofi. For today, yes. Maybe that was how trust returned. Today. Then another today. Then another.

That evening, I opened my blue book and wrote. Trust is not forgetting. Trust is watching someone choose differently enough times that your body stops preparing to run. I am not there yet.

The last sentence mattered most. I did not fully trust my father. I did not fully trust myself. But I trusted one thing. Truth had begun to enter the room faster than lies. That was a beginning. A small one. But I had seen what small choices could do. They could lead a boy behind the market. They could also lead him home.



Chapter 19: Family Broken, Mending

Madam Akosua came to our house on a Saturday.

My mother had been cleaning since morning. She swept the compound twice. She washed the cups. She made Ama wipe the bench with a damp cloth. She even told me to move the old bucket behind the house.

I watched her work and said nothing. The house was still the same house. The roof still had rust. The back wall still had stains. My father's stool still sat under the mango tree. Cleaning could not hide everything. My mother knew that too. Still, she cleaned.

My father was quiet that morning. He washed early and put on a plain shirt. He did not sit on his stool. He stood near the water barrel and rubbed his hands together.

Ama sat beside me near the doorway. "Why is Madam Akosua coming here?" she whispered.

"To talk."

"She talks everywhere."

"That is her work."

Ama looked around the compound. "Will she see our broken door?"

"Yes."

"Will she see Papa's stool?"

"Yes."

"Will she know everything?"

I looked at her. "She already knows enough."

Ama thought about that. "I hope she does not ask me too many questions."

"You can say no."

She looked at me as if testing whether I believed it. Then she nodded.

Madam Akosua arrived just before noon. She wore a brown dress and carried a small cloth bag. She greeted my mother first, then my father, then me and Ama. She did not look around the house like someone searching for shame. She looked around like someone entering a place where people lived. That mattered.

My mother offered her water. "Thank you," Madam Akosua said. She sat on the bench. My father stood until she looked at him. "Kwaku, you may sit." He looked at his stool. Then he chose the low wall instead. I noticed. So did my mother.

Madam Akosua placed her bag beside her feet. "I came because a family does not recover only in an office. The house must learn new ways too."

Then she turned to all of us. "I want each person to say one thing this house needs less of, and one thing it needs more of."

My mother went first. "This house needs less silence. And it needs more truth before things become too big."

Madam Akosua nodded. "Kwaku?"

My father cleared his throat. "This house needs less fear of me. It needs more steady days."

Madam Akosua turned to me. "Kojo?"

I wanted to shrug. I did not. "This house needs less pretending. And more people remembering I am not grown."

My father closed his eyes.

Madam Akosua nodded. "Ama?"

Ama pressed her doll against her lap. "I do not want shouting. And I want people to come home when they say they will."

My father bent his head. "Yes," he said.

Madam Akosua said, "Good. Now we make house agreements."

Ama frowned. "Like school rules?"

"Yes. But for everyone."

My mother brought paper from my old exercise book. Madam Akosua asked me to write because my handwriting was clear.

I wrote at the top. Our House Agreements.

Madam Akosua looked at my father. "First agreement."

My father breathed in. "If I feel like drinking, I will not disappear. I will tell Abena or go to Uncle Kofi."

My mother said, "Tell me before you go. Not after." He nodded. "Before." I wrote it down.

Madam Akosua looked at my mother. "Second."

My mother folded her hands. "I will not hide every problem from the children. But I will speak in a way they can carry."

I wrote it down.

Then it was my turn. I stared at the page. "I will not go behind the market. If I feel like going, I will take the church road or find Kwesi."

Ama added quickly, "Or me." I looked at her. "You are seven." "I still have eyes." That made my mother laugh softly. Even my father smiled. I wrote it down.

Then Ama gave hers. "If I am scared, I will say I am scared. And nobody will tell me to be quiet when I ask true questions."

I felt my face warm. "I will try," I said. She narrowed her eyes. "You will do."

I wrote it down. The page was not beautiful. My lines were uneven. The paper had a tear near the corner. But the words were ours.

Madam Akosua asked where we would keep it. My mother said, "Inside." Ama said, "No. People hide things inside."

My father stood. He took the paper and walked to the mango tree. There was a nail already in the trunk where an old calendar had once hung. He placed the paper there carefully and used a small stone to press the nail through it. The paper moved in the wind.

Then my father lifted his stool. He carried it from its old place near the doorway and put it closer to the center of the compound.

Ama asked, "Why are you moving it?"

My father looked at the stool. "I have been sitting like a judge at the door. Maybe I should sit where I can hear people better."

The stool no longer guarded the entrance. It sat near the middle, under the tree, where anyone could sit near it.

My mother wiped her face with the edge of her wrapper. Madam Akosua said nothing. She did not need to.

After she left, the house felt strange. Not happy. Not fixed. Just exposed. Our words were hanging on the mango tree where wind, dust, and everyone in the family could touch them.

That afternoon, my father went to the station. Before he left, he stood by the doorway. "I am going to the station. If there is no work, I will come back by sunset."

My mother nodded. "Thank you for saying it."

Ama looked at the paper on the tree. "That is agreement one?" My father smiled. "Yes." He left.

The day moved slowly. My mother cooked beans. Ama folded paper birds. I washed my uniform. Every now and then, one of us looked toward the road.

Sunset came. Then the sky grew orange. Then purple. My father had not returned. I felt the old fear rise. My mother stirred the beans too hard. Ama stopped folding paper birds. I stood near the gate.

Then we saw him. He came from the road with dust on his trousers and a sack over one shoulder. He entered breathing hard.

"I am late," he said at once. "The man at the station paid me with cassava, and I had to carry it from his store." He placed the sack down. "I should have sent word."

My mother looked at him. "Yes. You should have." He nodded. "I will do better." No excuse. No anger. No smell.

Ama walked to the sack and touched it. "Cassava is better than sorry," she said. My mother laughed. This time, all of us laughed.

That evening, we ate beans with boiled cassava. My father sat on the moved stool. My mother sat on the bench. Ama sat on the ground beside me. The paper on the mango tree moved whenever the wind came.

After supper, my father washed his own plate. Ama stared at him. "Papa, you are washing?" He looked at the plate. "It appears so." "But you always leave it." "I am learning new tricks." "You are not a dog." He laughed. "No. But old goats can still learn where not to enter."

Later, when the lantern was lit, my mother called us together. "Before we sleep, each person should say one true thing about today."

Ama went first. "I liked the cassava."

My father said, "I was afraid to come home late because I knew you would all worry."

My mother said, "I was angry when you were late, but I was glad you explained."

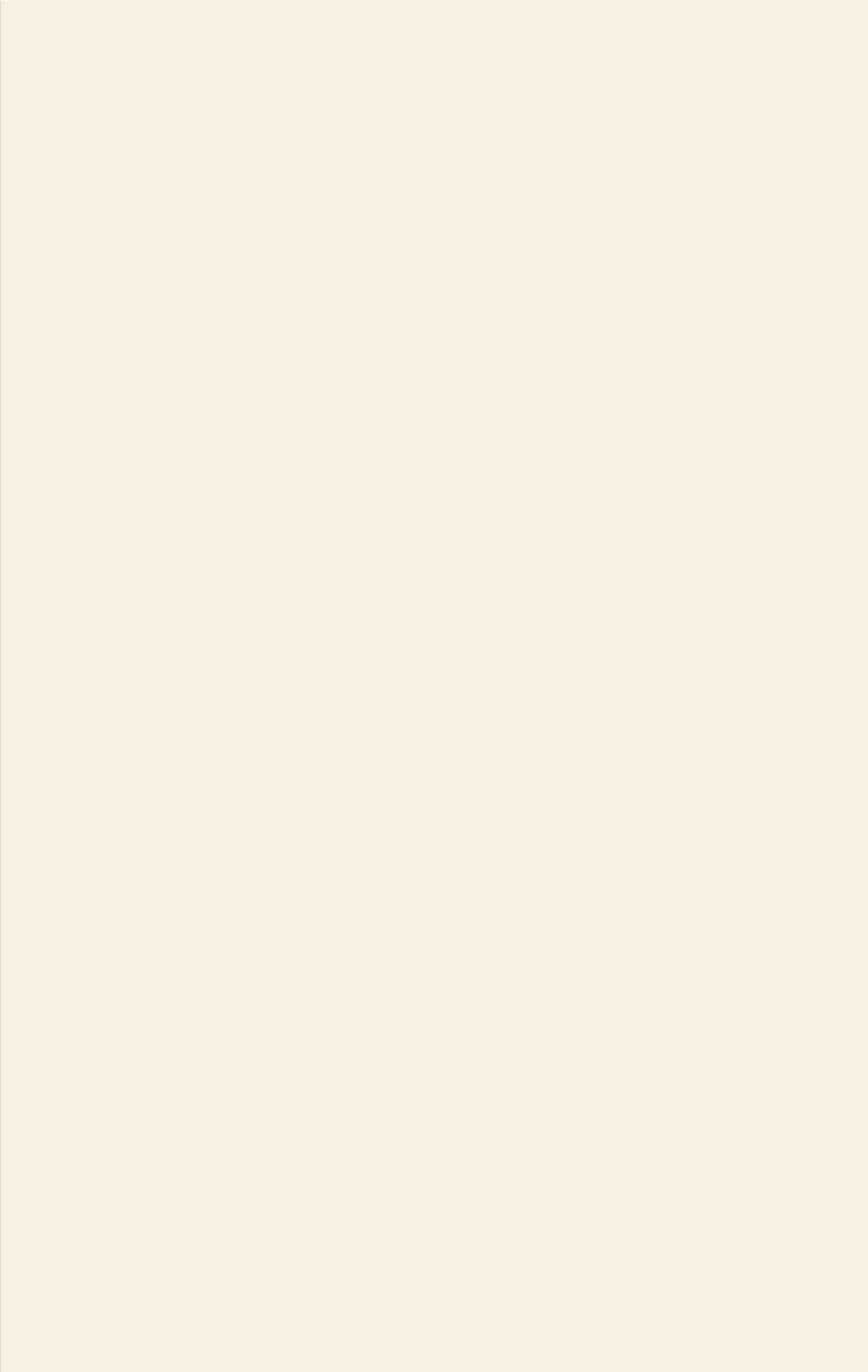
Then they looked at me. I stared at the lantern flame. "One true thing?" My mother nodded. I looked at the paper on the tree. "I wanted to think Papa had failed when he was late. But he came back with cassava."

Ama leaned against my shoulder. "That is two true things."

"Yes," I said. "Both are true."

That night, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Today we put our secrets on paper and nailed them to the tree. The house is still broken in places. But broken things can still hold people while they are being mended.

I closed the book. Outside, the mango leaves moved in the dark. The paper moved with them. For the first time, the house rules were not hidden in adults' mouths. They were where all of us could see them.



Chapter 20: The Roadblocks

For one week, the house agreements stayed on the mango tree.

Ama checked them every morning. If the wind folded the paper, she straightened it. If dust settled on it, she wiped it with her sleeve. She treated the paper like it could protect us by staying clean.

On the eighth day, rain came. It started in the afternoon while we were still at school. By the time Ama and I reached home, the yard was wet and water dripped from the mango leaves.

Ama ran to the tree. The paper was soaked. The ink had begun to spread.

"No," she cried. She tried to pull it down, but the wet corner tore in her hand.

My mother came from the kitchen. "Ama, leave it."

"It is spoiling."

"We will write another one."

Ama looked at her with angry eyes. "What if the new one also spoils?"

My mother did not answer quickly. My father stood near the doorway, watching the torn paper move in the rain.

I knew what Ama meant. She was not only talking about paper.

That evening, my father was supposed to go to his meeting. He did not go. He said the rain was heavy. He said the road was bad. He said he was tired. All of those things were true. Still, the room changed when he said he would stay home.

No one spoke much at supper. The rain continued. Water entered through the small leak near the back wall. My mother placed a bowl under it. Each

drop sounded louder than it should have. It felt like the house counting our fears.

The next morning, the rain had stopped, but trouble had not.

At school, the headmaster came to our class. He carried a brown notebook. "Children who still owe fees must bring payment by Friday. Those who do not pay will not sit for the test next week."

He read the list. Kojo Mensah. Ama Mensah. A few children turned. Isaac did not laugh. That almost made it worse. Quiet shame has sharp teeth.

After school, Ama walked beside me without speaking. Kwesi came with us, but even he had no jokes.

At the market turn, Sly was waiting. He leaned against a wooden post with a smile on his face. "Small father."

Kwesi moved closer to me. I kept walking.

Sly called again. "Your father was at Blue Kiosk yesterday."

I stopped. Kwesi grabbed my arm. "Walk."

Sly laughed. "You do not want to know?"

My heart began to beat hard. "Kojo," Kwesi said.

I looked at Sly. "You are lying."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Ama's voice shook. "Let us go home."

Sly looked at her. "Ask your father where he was."

I pulled free from Kwesi and stepped toward him. Kwesi blocked me. "Do not."

My hands curled into fists. Then I remembered the fourth column Madam Akosua had made me write. What I needed. Not what I felt. What I needed. I did not need to hit Sly. I needed truth.

I turned away. Sly called after me. "Run home and check."

I did not run. But I walked fast.

At home, my father was not there. My mother was washing clothes behind the house. She looked up when she saw my face.

"What happened?"

"Where is Papa?"

"At the station."

"Are you sure?"

She stood. "Why?"

"Sly said he was at Blue Kiosk."

My mother's face changed. Ama began to cry. My mother wiped her hands on her wrapper. "Go inside."

"No."

"Kojo."

"I need to know."

She looked at me for a long moment. "So do I."

We waited. Waiting can be a roadblock. It blocks your breath. It makes every sound from the road feel like judgment.

My father came near sunset. He carried nothing. His clothes were wet with sweat, not rain. His face was tired. Dust covered his legs.

My mother met him at the gate. "Where were you?"

He looked from her to us. "At the station."

"Did you go to Blue Kiosk?"

He froze. My mother's voice became cold. "Kwaku."

He rubbed his hands together. "I passed there. I did not enter."

Ama stepped behind me. My father saw it and looked pained.

"I wanted to enter," he said. "I heard them laughing. Someone called me. I stood there for some time. Then I remembered the paper on the tree. I

remembered Ama asking people to come home when they say they will." He looked at Ama. "So I left."

I searched for the smell. There was sweat. Dust. The station. But not drink. That did not make it easy. It only made it complicated.

My mother said, "You should have gone to Uncle Kofi."

"I know."

"You should have told me you missed the meeting before we asked."

"I know." My father's voice was low. "I am sorry."

My mother shook her head. "Sorry is not the plan."

"No. It is not." He turned and left the compound again.

Ama gasped. My mother said, "Kwaku." He stopped at the gate. "I am going to Uncle Kofi."

My mother looked at him. "Now?"

"Yes. Before pride tells me to sit down."

When he left, the yard felt empty. Kwesi cleared his throat. "I should go." Before he left, he looked at me. "You did not follow Sly."

"No."

"That is something."

It did not feel like much. But I nodded.

That night, my father returned with Uncle Kofi. They stood under the mango tree. Uncle Kofi did not enter the house. He spoke where all of us could hear.

"Missing one meeting is not the end. But hiding it is dangerous. Everyone here has work. Kwaku must tell the truth before fear finds it. Abena must not carry every alarm alone. Kojo must learn the difference between watching and protecting himself. Ama must be allowed to be a child."

Ama held her doll close. "I am trying," she said. Uncle Kofi's face softened. "I know."

The next morning, my mother took down the ruined paper. The words had bled into one another. Some lines could still be read. Others were gone. Ama watched like someone at a funeral.

My mother gave me a fresh sheet. "Write it again." I sat under the tree and copied the agreements. This time, I wrote slower.

My father stood beside me and added one new line. If I miss a meeting, I will tell the family the same day.

My mother added another. If fear rises, we will ask for truth before we accuse.

Ama added hers. Wet paper must be replaced quickly. We laughed at that. She did not. "I am serious," she said. So I wrote it.

Then I added mine. If Sly speaks, I will not stop walking. I stared at the sentence for a while. Then I underlined it.

At school that day, the fees still waited. Recovery had not paid them. Help had not filled our food bowl. Truth had not bought new shoes. Healing did not remove ordinary trouble. It only taught us not to let trouble become another secret.

On Friday morning, my father and mother went to the headmaster together. My father had found two days of work carrying sacks. My mother had sold extra plantain. They could not pay all the fees, but they paid part and promised the rest.

I stood outside the office with Ama. She held my hand. "Will they let us write the test?"

"I think so."

"You always think."

"I am trying to know."

She leaned against me. When my parents came out, my mother looked tired, but her face was clear. "You will sit for the test," she said. Ama smiled.

My father looked at me. "The rest must still be paid."

"I know." He nodded. No big promise. No proud speech. Only the truth.

That afternoon, I walked home by the church road, even though Kwesi was with me. He looked at me. "You know I am here."

"I know."

"Then why this road?"

I looked ahead. "Practice."

He grinned. "Good. I like walking longer for your growth." Ama laughed. I did too.

At home, the new paper hung from the mango tree. The ink was clear. The nail held firm. But I knew now that paper could tear. Rain could come. Meetings could be missed. Sly could wait at the turn. Fees could shame us again. Roadblocks did not mean the journey was false. They meant the road was real.

That night, I opened my blue book and wrote. This week the rain spoiled our paper, but not the words. Papa stood near the old door and walked away. I stood near Sly and walked away.

For once, I did not write about being fixed. I wrote about walking. One step. Then another. Then another. Sometimes that was all recovery gave you. Sometimes that had to be enough.

Chapter 21: Tiny Victories

Tiny victories do not announce themselves. They do not come with drums. They do not make neighbors stop and stare. Most of the time, they look like ordinary things. A boy walking past a road. A man coming home when he said he would. A mother sitting down before her body breaks. A little girl asking a question without fear.

That week, I began to notice them.

The first one came on Monday. Kwesi was sick, so I had to walk home without him. Ama had gone ahead with Afia. I stood at the school gate with my bag on

one shoulder. The short road waited. So did the market. I could almost hear it from where I stood. My feet knew that way. My anger knew it too.

Madam Efua came out of the classroom with a stack of books. "Kojo."

I turned. "Yes, Madam."

"Are you going home?"

"Yes."

She looked at the road, then back at me. "Which way?"

I hated that she asked. I also needed her to ask. "The church road," I said. She nodded. "Good."

I walked the church road. It was longer, hotter, and quieter. Nothing important happened. That was the victory. Nothing happened.

I reached home tired, dusty, and angry at how proud I felt. Ama was in the compound, folding paper birds. "You are late," she said. "I took the church road." She looked up. "Alone?" "Yes." She studied my face. "Did you stop anywhere?" "No." She nodded like a serious elder. "Good." Then she handed me a crooked paper bird. "For passing the road."

I laughed. "You made a prize?"

"Yes."

"It has one big wing."

"So it can fly in circles and still reach." I kept it in my blue book.

The second victory came that evening. My father was supposed to attend his meeting. Rain clouds gathered. The air became heavy. My mother looked at the sky, then at him. He had already bathed. His sandals were by the door.

He picked up his sandals. "I am going before the rain starts," he said.

Ama looked at him. "What if rain catches you?"

He smiled faintly. "Then I will become wet at the meeting." My mother gave him a cloth. He left.

The rain began not long after. I expected my mother to stand at the gate. She did not. She sat near the lantern and mended Ama's dress. Her hands moved slowly.

Ama whispered to me, "Mama is sitting." I looked. She was. Not cooking. Not counting coins. Not walking to the gate. Just sitting. That was another victory.

My father came home wet. He stood at the doorway with water dripping from his shirt. "I am home," he said. Ama brought him the old towel. She stopped halfway, then walked the rest. He took it gently. "Thank you." "You are wet," she said. "I noticed." She smiled.

My mother looked at him. "How was it?" "Hard," he said. "But I went."

The third victory came at school. The test was on Wednesday. I had feared it for days. That morning, Madam Efua placed the test papers on our desks. I looked at the first question. My chest tightened. I heard Isaac's voice. Bottle boy. Then I heard Madam Akosua's. What do you need? I closed my eyes. I needed breath. I breathed slowly. Once. Twice. Then I wrote my name. Kojo Mensah. Not bottle boy. Not small father. Kojo Mensah.

The questions were not easy, but they were not impossible. I answered the ones I knew first. When my hand shook, I pressed my feet flat on the floor. At the end, I was not sure I had done well. But I had finished.

After class, Isaac passed my desk. I waited for him to say something. He looked at my paper, then at me. His mouth opened. Then Kwesi came and stood beside me. Isaac closed his mouth and walked away. Kwesi grinned. "I did not even speak." "You were loud without talking," I said. "That is a gift." I laughed. It felt strange in my chest. Not painful. Just unused.

The fourth victory belonged to Ama. That evening, my father sat with her reading book. She sounded out each word slowly. He helped when she stumbled. Sometimes he stumbled too, and she corrected him with great importance.

Then she stopped reading and looked at him. "Papa. When you want to drink, does your mouth want it or your head?"

My father did not run from the question. "Sometimes my mouth remembers the taste. Sometimes my body feels restless. Sometimes my head wants to hide from shame."

Ama thought about that. "Do you tell Uncle Kofi?" "I am learning to." "Do you tell Mama?" He looked at my mother. "I am learning that too."

Ama nodded. "Good. Because if you hide it, we still feel it." The room went quiet. My father bowed his head. "You are right."

On Friday, Madam Efua returned the tests. I waited until she moved away, then turned mine over. I had passed. Not beautifully. But I had passed. Kwesi leaned over. "What did you get?" I covered the paper. "Mind your own." He grinned. "You passed." "How do you know?" "Your face is trying not to dance."

After school, I told Ama. She clapped once. "Good. Now you must help me with spelling." "Why?" "Because passed people must help other people pass."

At home, my mother listened quietly. She took the paper and looked at it for a long time. "You finished," she said. "Yes." She touched my shoulder. "That matters." My father asked to see it too. He held the paper carefully. "You did well," he said. "It is not my best." "No. But it is your way back."

That night, I placed the test inside my blue book beside Ama's crooked paper bird. Two small things. A passed test. A paper bird with one big wing. Both proof that crooked things could still move.

On Saturday morning, my mother did something none of us expected. She slept late. The sun had already entered the room when Ama sat up and gasped. "Mama is still sleeping." I woke quickly. For a moment, fear grabbed me. Then I heard her breathing. Steady. Deep. Tired.

My father came in from outside. "Let her sleep," he whispered. "But breakfast," Ama said. "I will make it." All three of us looked at him. "What?" "You can cook?" Ama asked. "I can boil water." "That is not cooking." "It is the beginning of cooking." I laughed before I could stop myself.

He made porridge too thick at first. Then too thin. Then smoky. When my mother woke, breakfast was late and not very good. She ate it anyway. "This porridge is suffering," she said. Ama burst out laughing. My father laughed too. Then my mother laughed. It did not erase the past. Nothing did. But it made a little space beside it.

That afternoon, I went to the field near the school. Kwesi saw me. "Kojo. Goalkeeper." I almost refused. Then I put my bag down. For the first time in a long time, I was guarding something that was mine to guard. A ball came fast

toward me. I moved without thinking. I caught it against my chest. Kwesi raised both arms. "Our keeper has returned."

For that one moment, I was not a warning, a shame, or a child with too much to carry. I was Kojo. Goalkeeper.

That evening, I wrote in my blue book. Tiny victories this week. I passed the market road. Papa went to meeting in the rain. Mama slept. Ama asked a true question. I finished the test. I played goalkeeper. We laughed over bad porridge.

None of it looked large. None of it would stop the town from talking. But the list was real. And for once, real did not only mean painful.

Before I slept, Ama leaned over my shoulder. "What are you writing?" "Victories." She looked at the page. "You forgot my paper bird." "It is not a victory." "It has one big wing and still flies." I wrote it. Ama's paper bird still flies.

Outside, my father coughed under the mango tree. My mother moved softly in the kitchen. The house agreement paper held firm. The road was still long. But that week, we had taken steps. Small steps. Crooked steps. Enough steps to prove we were still moving.

Chapter 22: Relapse and Redemption

The good week did not last. I wish I could say one passed test, one paper bird, one meeting in the rain, and one bowl of bad porridge changed everything. They changed something. Not everything.

The relapse came on a Thursday. My father had found work at the station that morning. He left early with a piece of cassava in his hand. My mother watched him go. "He will come by sunset," she said.

Sunset came. My father did not. My mother kept cooking. Ama kept reading the same line again and again. I sat near the doorway, pretending to repair my sandal. The food grew cold. The sky darkened. Still, he did not come.

At last, footsteps came near the gate. My father entered slowly. The smell entered before his voice did. Drink. Not strong enough to fill the yard. Strong enough to break it.

Ama stood at once. My mother closed her eyes. I felt the old anger rise so fast that my hands shook.

My father stopped near the mango tree. "I drank," he said. No lie. No story. No hiding. But the truth did not make the smell less painful.

My mother's voice was quiet. "How much?"

He looked down. "More than one."

Ama began to cry. I stood. "So this is it?"

My father looked at me. "Kojo."

"No. Do not say my name like that."

The yard felt too small. The air felt too thick. The paper on the tree moved in the night wind, as if it was mocking us. Our House Agreements. I wanted to tear it down.

My father stepped toward Ama. She moved back. He stopped.

My mother pointed to the low wall. "Sit there." He obeyed. She stood in front of him with her wrapper tied tight around her waist. "You will go to Uncle Kofi now."

My father rubbed his face. "It is late."

"You came home late from drinking. You can go late for help."

My father nodded slowly. "I will go." He tried to stand, then sat again.

My mother looked at me. "Go and call Kwabena."

I did not want to help. I wanted to leave my father there with his shame. But Ama was crying. My mother was standing too straight. So I went.

The road was dark. My anger walked faster than my feet. Halfway to Uncle Kwabena's house, I stopped. The market road was to my left. I could hear voices from that direction. Laughter. A bottle striking wood. My body remembered before my mind could refuse. I wanted to go there. Not to drink. That is what I told myself. Only to stand there. Only to let Sly see that I did not care.

Then I heard Ama's voice in my mind. You are standing there. But you are not here.

I turned away from the market. I ran to Uncle Kwabena's house.

He came quickly. No questions at first. Only sandals, lantern, and a hard face. When we reached home, my father was still on the low wall. My mother stood beside him. Ama sat on the bench with her doll pressed against her chest.

Uncle Kwabena looked at my father. "Kwaku." My father did not lift his head. "I am ashamed." "Good. Stand." My father stood. Uncle Kwabena turned to my mother. "I will take him to Kofi." My mother nodded. "Tomorrow, we will speak. Not tonight. Tonight you will get help."

My father's eyes filled. "I am sorry." My mother did not answer.

They left. The house became quiet. Too quiet.

Ama came and sat beside me. "Is Papa going back to before?" she asked.

I wanted to say no. I wanted to protect her. But we had made agreements. No dangerous secrets. "I do not know," I said.

She looked at the ground. "But he went with Uncle."

"Yes."

"And he said he drank."

"Yes."

"Before, he would lie."

"Yes."

She wiped her face. "So it is bad, but not the same bad."

"No," I said. "Not the same bad."

My mother sat down slowly. "I am angry," she said. Ama looked at her. "At Papa?" "Yes." "At us?" My mother reached for her. "No. Not at you."

My mother looked at me. "Kojo." "I nearly went to the market." My mother's face changed. "But you did not." "No." "What stopped you?" I looked at Ama. "Her."

That night, none of us slept well. My father returned near midnight with Uncle Kwabena and Uncle Kofi. He did not enter the room. He lay on a mat outside. Uncle Kofi spoke with my mother in low tones. I heard only pieces. Meeting tomorrow. No work alone this week. Tell the truth early.

In the morning, my father sat under the mango tree. His face was rough with shame. My mother gave Ama porridge. She gave me porridge. She placed a cup of water near my father but no food. Then she sat across from him. "Speak," she said.

My father held the cup with both hands. "I was paid yesterday. More than I expected." My mother's face tightened. "You did not bring it home." "No." He pulled folded notes from his shirt pocket and placed them on the bench. "The men at the station asked me to sit with them. I said no at first. Then one said I had become a woman under church people. I was foolish enough to answer with my pride."

He looked at Ama. "I chose badly." Ama did not speak. Then he looked at me. "I broke the agreement."

"Yes," I said. The word came out hard. He accepted it. "I also told the truth when I came home. That does not cancel what I did. But it is the part I must keep doing."

My mother looked at him for a long time. "What will change today?"

My father answered slowly. "I will not carry all my pay with me. When I am paid, I will come home first. I will walk with Kwabena to the meeting today. And I will tell Uncle Kofi before I go to the station tomorrow."

Ama finally spoke. "Will you drink tomorrow?" My father closed his eyes. "I do not want to." "That is not the same as no." He opened his eyes. "You are right. I will do what helps me not drink tomorrow." Ama seemed to accept that more than a big promise. So did I.

At school, I could not focus. Madam Efua called me to the veranda at break. "What happened?" "Papa drank." She nodded. "And you?" "I almost went to the market." "But?" "I went to call Uncle Kwabena." Madam Efua looked at me carefully. "That is a victory." "It does not feel like one." "Many victories do not feel good at first. Some only feel less bad than the old choice."

After school, Sly was near the market turn. "Small father," he called. Kwesi was with me. So was Ama. I kept walking. Sly laughed. "I heard your father returned to Blue Kiosk." My feet stopped. "Come. We can talk about it." For one second, I wanted to answer. Then Ama slipped her hand into mine. I turned my face away from Sly and kept walking.

That evening, my father went to the meeting. Uncle Kwabena walked with him. When my father came home, he was sober. He placed the remaining money in my mother's hand. Then he sat with Ama and listened while she read. She made him repeat a word three times. He did.

Redemption did not look like a man becoming new in one day. It looked like the same tired man returning to the same wounded house and choosing not to hide.

Later, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Papa relapsed. He came home and told the truth. I almost went to the market. I went for help instead. They did not make a beautiful story. They made an honest one.

Before I slept, Ama whispered, "Kojo. Are we back at the beginning?"

I looked at the dark roof. The leak stain was still there. The house was still poor. My father was still fighting. I was still angry. But the old beginning had been full of secrets. This was not.

"No. We are not at the beginning."

"Where are we?"

I thought about it. "On the road."

"Is it long?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "Then tomorrow we walk again." I smiled in the dark. "Yes. Tomorrow we walk again."

Chapter 23: Finding My Voice

Madam Efua gave us a new composition. The title was on the board when we entered class. A Person I Admire.

The room became noisy. Children began whispering names. My mother. My pastor. My uncle. A footballer.

Kwesi leaned toward me. "I will write about my mother. She can insult a goat and make it feel guilty." I smiled. "That is admiration?" "Yes. Power must be respected."

I looked back at the board. Before, I would have written about my father without thinking. His factory shirt. His strong hands. His laugh. Now the title felt like a trap.

Madam Efua walked between the desks. "Write truth. Not what you think I want to hear."

I opened my book. My pencil stayed still. I could write about my mother. She deserved more words than I had. I could write about Madam Akosua. I could write about Uncle Kofi. But my mind kept returning to my father. Not the father before. Not the father at Blue Kiosk. The father on the road now. The father who had failed and still gone back for help.

I hated that I still admired something in him. It felt like betrayal.

I looked at the page. Then I wrote. A Person I Admire. I admire my father, but not because he is perfect.

My hand stopped. The sentence frightened me. I almost crossed it out. Then I continued.

I used to think admiration was only for people who did not fall. Now I think it can also be for people who fall and do not stay on the ground. My father lost his work. He became ashamed. He made choices that hurt our family. I was angry at him. I am still angry sometimes. But he is learning to tell the truth. He is learning to ask for help. He is learning to come home. I admire that because it is hard.

I admire my mother too because she stayed strong for us, but now she is learning not to carry everything alone. I admire my sister because she asks true questions. I admire my friend Kwesi because he speaks even when I do not want to hear him.

Maybe a person to admire is not always a person who has no wounds. Maybe it is a person who faces the wound and tries not to pass it to someone else.

When I finished, my hand ached. Madam Efua collected the books. When she reached my desk, I held mine longer than I needed to. She looked at me. "Are you ready to let it go?" I swallowed. "Yes." She took it gently.

The next morning, she stood in front of the room. "Some compositions need to be heard." She opened a book. A girl had written about her grandmother. Then a boy had written about a nurse. Then Madam Efua opened another book. She looked at me. "Kojo, may I read yours?"

Everyone turned. My mouth went dry. I wanted to say no. But Madam Akosua had once asked me what I needed. I needed not to be ashamed of truth. So I nodded.

Madam Efua began. "I admire my father, but not because he is perfect."

The room became still. As she read, I looked at my desk. I heard my own words in her voice. When she read Kwesi's name, someone laughed softly. Kwesi sat up straight.

Then Madam Efua reached the last line. "Maybe it is a person who faces the wound and tries not to pass it to someone else."

She closed the book. No one spoke.

Madam Efua looked at the class. "What did Kojo teach us?" A girl raised her hand. "That people can change." A boy said, "That being hurt does not mean you must hurt others."

Then Isaac spoke. His voice was quieter than usual. "That fathers can make mistakes." Everyone turned to him. He looked uncomfortable. I wondered then what Isaac carried home after school. I had only seen his cruelty. Maybe cruelty had a house too. That did not excuse him. But it made him less simple.

After class, Kwesi followed me outside. "So," he said. "You admire me." I groaned. "Forget that part." "I cannot. It has entered history." He grinned.

Then his face became serious. "It was good." I looked away. "I did not know you thought like that." "I did not know either." He nodded and ran toward the field.

At home, Madam Efua's reading followed me. I had not planned to tell my family. But Ama saw my face and asked too many questions. By evening, everyone knew.

My mother asked to read it. She read slowly under the lantern. When she finished, she wiped her eyes. "You wrote my name," she said. "Yes." "You wrote that I am learning too." "Yes." She nodded. "That is true."

Then she handed the book to my father. He looked at it as if it was too heavy. "You do not have to read it," I said. "I want to." His voice was slow at first. Then it shook. When he reached the line about falling and not staying on the ground, he stopped. No one rushed him. He breathed in and continued.

When he finished, he held the book in both hands. "I do not deserve these words yet," he said. I looked at him. "I know." My mother gave me a sharp look. But my father nodded. "You are right." I swallowed. "But maybe you are walking toward them." He looked at me then. Not with shame only. With something like hope. "I am trying," he said. Ama lifted her head. "You must do." He smiled through wet eyes. "Yes, Ama. I must do."

That night, I sat outside under the mango tree. My father came and sat near me, not on his stool, but on the low wall. For a while, we listened to the insects. Then he said, "When I was young, I thought a man's voice was for giving orders."

I looked at him. "What do you think now?"

He rubbed his palms together. "I think a voice is also for telling the truth before silence harms someone."

I thought about that. "My voice used to come out as anger," I said. "I know." "I think it still does sometimes." "Mine too."

Then my father said, "Thank you for writing me as a man who is trying." I looked at the ground. "Do not make me regret it." He let out a soft breath. "I will do my best."

The next week, Madam Akosua asked about the composition. "How did it feel to let people hear your words?" "Terrible." She smiled. "And after?" "Less terrible." "That is progress."

"It felt like my shame became smaller when it left my mouth." She nodded. "Shame grows in hiding. Truth gives it air." I looked at my hands. "I thought speaking would make people laugh." "Some may laugh." "Isaac did not." "Maybe your truth touched a truth in him."

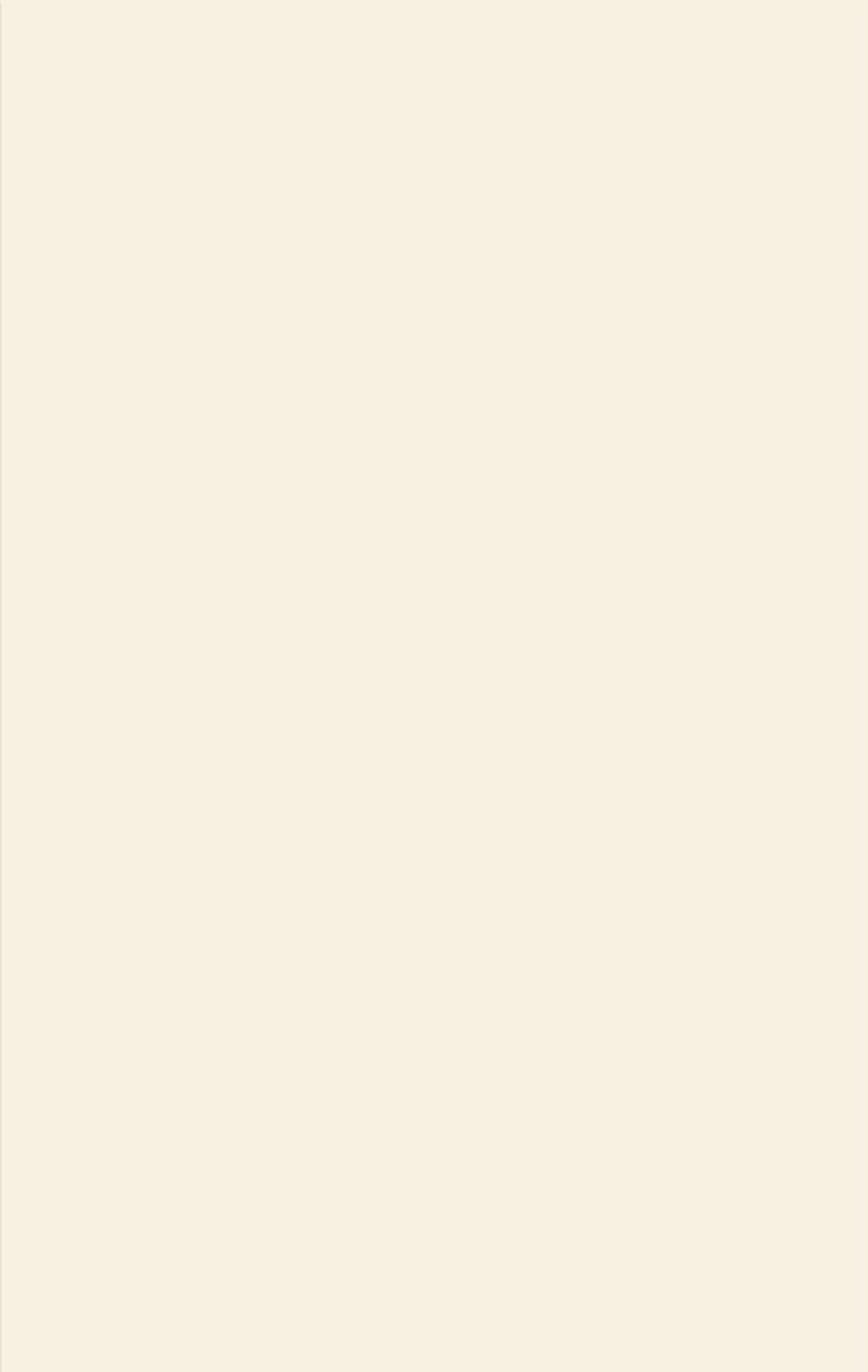
She leaned forward. "Finding your voice does not mean speaking all the time. It means knowing when silence is protecting you and when it is imprisoning you."

When I got home, Ama asked me to write something for her paper bird. "What should I write?" She thought carefully. "Write, I am Ama, not bottle child." I wrote it. She looked at the words for a long time. Then she asked me to write on the other wing. "She can still fly." I wrote it. She held the bird up and smiled.

That was when I understood. My voice was not only for me. It could help Ama find hers. It could tell my mother I saw her. It could tell my father the truth without becoming cruel. It could tell Sly no. It could tell Isaac enough. It could tell myself my real name when shame tried to rename me.

That night, I opened my blue book and wrote. Today I learned that my voice is not a weapon only. It can be a door. A rope. A lamp. A wing. I am Kojo, and I am learning to speak without disappearing.

I closed the book. Outside, the town was still full of mouths. Some would still gossip. Some would still call us names. But I had a mouth too. And for the first time, I was not afraid to use it for truth.



Chapter 24: Giving Back

Madam Akosua asked me to come early on Wednesday. "There is something I need help with," she said. I did not trust that sentence. Adults often called something help when they meant work.

"What kind of help?"

"Chairs," she said.

I looked at her. "That is all?"

"For now." For now sounded dangerous. Still, I went.

The community center was quiet when I arrived. The sun was still high. The football field was empty. A goat stood near the gate, chewing paper.

Uncle Kofi was carrying chairs from the storeroom. He saw me and pointed with his chin. "You are late."

"I am early."

"You are late for early."

I rolled my eyes and took two chairs. We placed them under the neem tree in a circle. I made sure one chair stayed near the path.

Uncle Kofi noticed. "Your old escape chair." I shrugged. "Somebody may need it." He smiled. "That is wisdom." I did not answer. Praise still made me uncomfortable.

Soon people began to arrive. Sister Esi came with her daughter. Daniel came alone. Afia came with her aunt. My mother came with Ama. My father arrived with Uncle Kwabena. He had come straight from the station. His shirt was dusty, but his eyes were clear.

Then I saw the new boy. He stood near the gate with a woman I did not know. He was about my age. His shirt was too big. His face was closed. He looked at the chairs as if they were traps. I knew that face. It had lived on me.

The woman spoke with Madam Akosua. The boy stayed behind, kicking dust with one foot.

Ama came beside me. "He looks angry," she whispered. "He is." "How do you know?" "I know."

Madam Akosua brought them closer. "This is Auntie Vida and her son, Ebo," she said to the group. Ebo did not greet anyone. His mother looked embarrassed. "Greet," she said softly. Ebo stared at the ground.

Madam Akosua did not force him. "Ebo, you can sit anywhere." He looked at the circle. Then he looked at the path. I knew which chair he would choose. The escape chair. He sat with his body turned half away from us.

The meeting began. People said their names. When it came to Ebo, he said nothing. His mother touched his arm. "Ebo." He pulled away. Madam Akosua said, "He can pass." The word pass made him look up. Maybe he had expected a fight. He did not get one.

The meeting continued. My father spoke one sentence. "I have learned that silence is where my old habits hide." My mother looked at him when he said it. Not with fear. With attention. That was another kind of trust.

When the meeting paused for water, Ebo stood and walked toward the edge of the yard. I watched him. Madam Akosua looked at me, but she did not speak. That was how she asked.

I sighed and followed him. Ebo stood near the broken wall, throwing small stones at a bottle cap. I stopped a few steps away. "That cap did not offend you." He did not smile. "Go away." "I can." But I did not.

"You are one of them?"

"One of who?"

"Center people."

"No."

"You look like you belong here." That almost made me laugh. "I used to sit in that same chair." He glanced at me. "The one near the path?" "Yes." "Why?" "So I could run." He looked back at the bottle cap. "Did you?" "No." "Why not?" I thought about it. "Because nobody chased me."

He was quiet. Then he said, "My mother forced me to come." "Mine too, the first time." "Did it help?" I did not answer quickly. "Not at first."

"My father drinks." I nodded. "Mine too." He looked at me then. Really looked. "Still?" "Sometimes he struggles." "That means yes." "It means sometimes." He frowned. "You talk like them." "I used to hate when people said that." "Then stop." "All right."

Then he said, "I hate him." I looked at the group under the tree. "I said that too," I told him. "Did you mean it?" "Yes." "Do you still?" "Some days I hate what he did. Some days I love him. Some days both sit in me and fight." Ebo looked away. "That is stupid." "Yes." He almost smiled.

"People at school know. They call me palm wine boy." His voice stayed hard, but his eyes changed. I felt the old anger rise in me. Not for myself this time. For him.

"What do you do?"

"I fight."

"Does it help?"

"No."

I nodded. "I tore a boy's homework once." He looked interested. "Good." "Not good. I had to copy it again." That made him laugh once. A short laugh. But real.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a folded paper bird. Ama had made me carry it. She said a person should not walk empty handed to a support meeting. I held it out to Ebo. He looked at it. "What is that?" "A bird." "I can see that." "Then why ask?" He stared at me, then took it. One wing was larger than the other. "It is crooked," he said. "It still flies." "That is what damaged people say." I looked at him. "Yes."

He turned the bird in his hands. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Keep it. Throw it. Tear it. I do not know."

"Then why give it to me?"

"Because someone gave one to me when I felt like I was only shame."

He stopped turning it. For a moment, his face opened. Then it closed again. "I am not shame." "I know. You are Ebo." His hand tightened around the bird. "You sound like Madam Akosua." "That is unfortunate." This time he smiled properly. Only for a second.

The meeting bell rang. Uncle Kofi struck a spoon against a cup. Ebo looked toward the circle. "I am not talking." "I did not ask you to." "Good." He walked back before me. He sat in the escape chair again. But this time, his body faced the circle. A little. Not fully. A little was enough.

After the meeting, Auntie Vida thanked my mother. My mother placed a hand on her arm and spoke softly. My father spoke with Ebo's mother too. He spoke with his head slightly bowed.

Ebo passed me near the gate. He still held the paper bird. He did not say thank you. He only lifted his chin. I lifted mine back. That was enough.

On the walk home, Ama skipped beside me. "You gave him my bird." "Yes." "It was for you." "He needed it." She thought about that. "Then you owe me another." "I owe you many." "Yes."

When we reached Auntie Mansa's kiosk, Sly was there. He leaned against the wall with two other boys. My body tensed. Sly saw me and smiled. "Small father." I kept walking. He laughed. "So now you are church people?" I stopped. Ama's hand reached for mine. I turned to Sly. "My name is Kojo." The boys beside him laughed. Sly's smile faded. "What?" "My name is Kojo." He pushed away from the wall. "You think you are better than us now?" "No." "Then why do you walk like that?" I looked at him. "Because I am going home." The words were simple. They felt strong.

Sly stared at me. For a moment, I saw something behind his face. Anger, yes. Pride too. But also a kind of loneliness. But I was not the one to save him. Some people could be invited toward help. They could not be carried there by a child.

I turned and walked away. Ama squeezed my hand. "You said your name." "Yes." "Good."

My father had stopped ahead of us. He did not praise me. He only waited until I reached him. Then he walked beside me. That was better.

At home, I helped Ama make more paper birds. She said the community center needed a basket of them for new people. My mother cut old leaflets into

squares. My father tried to fold one and made something that looked like a crushed bat. Ama stared at it. "Papa, what is this?" "A bird." "No." "A tired bird." "Very tired." We laughed. My father laughed too, then tried again. His second one was not much better. But he kept folding.

Later that night, I opened my blue book. I wrote. Today I gave Ebo a paper bird. I did not fix him. I sat near him.

That was what people had done for me. Madam Efua had sat near me with truth. Kwesi had walked near me with his ugly words and good heart. Ama had held my hand near dangerous roads. Madam Akosua had sat near my pain without chasing me. Uncle Kofi had sat near my father's shame. My mother had sat near all of us until she learned she did not have to sit alone.

Maybe giving back was not standing above people. Maybe it was remembering the chair you once needed and leaving it open for someone else. A crooked bird can still teach another crooked bird to lift.

I closed the book. Across the room, Ama was asleep with paper scraps around her. My mother had fallen asleep sitting up. My father gently took the cloth from her hands and folded it beside her. The house was quiet. Not empty quiet. Not secret quiet. A tired, living quiet.

But today, I had given someone a bird. And I had said my name without shaking. That was not everything. But it was light.

Chapter 25: Living in the Light

Light did not enter our house all at once. It came in small ways. It came when my father told my mother where he was going before she asked. It came when my mother sat down to eat while the food was still warm. It came when Ama asked hard questions and nobody told her to keep quiet. It came when I passed the market road and did not feel the need to prove anything to Sly.

It came slowly. Like morning. At first, you only see a thin line in the sky. Then the shapes around you begin to return. The tree. The roof. The road. The faces of the people near you. Nothing has disappeared. But now you can see where you are standing.

That was how our life became.

My father did not become a perfect man. I no longer trusted perfect stories. He still had hard days. Some mornings, he woke with his face closed. Some evenings, he came home quiet and went straight to wash before speaking to anyone. Sometimes he told my mother, "Today was difficult."

Before, difficult would have become silence. Then silence would have become hiding. Then hiding would have become drink. Now, difficult became a sentence. That was progress.

He kept going to meetings. Not because he always wanted to. Because he had learned that wanting was not enough. Uncle Kofi walked with him some days. On other days, my father went alone and came back with dust on his sandals and truth in his mouth.

My mother changed too. At first, I thought only my father needed changing. That was easy for me to believe because his mistakes were louder. But my mother had carried too much for too long. She had carried hunger, shame, anger, neighbors, school fees, my father's pride, Ama's fear, and my silence. She had carried them until carrying looked like love. Madam Akosua helped her see that love could also put a load down.

One afternoon, I came home and found my mother sitting under the mango tree. Not cooking. Not washing. Not counting coins. Just sitting.

I stopped near the gate. "Are you sick?" She looked at me and laughed. "So if I sit, I must be sick?" I felt foolish. "No." She patted the space beside her. "Come." I sat.

For a while, we watched Ama chase a chicken away from the cassava peels. My mother said, "I am learning to rest before my body forces me." "That is good." "You sound like Madam Akosua." "That is unfortunate." She laughed again.

Then she became quiet. "Kojo. I am sorry I let you carry adult things." I looked down. "You have said sorry." "I know. But some apologies must be lived, not only spoken." She touched my shoulder. "So when I ask you to fetch water, it is water. Not the whole house." I smiled a little. "Yes, Mama."

Ama began school again with more noise in her body. That was how I knew she was healing. She sang wrong words to songs. She argued with her doll. She asked my father if recovery meetings had homework. She told my mother that support group women laughed louder than church women.

At school, some children still whispered sometimes. Names do not die in one day. But Ama had changed. One day, a girl from her class told her, "My mother says your father goes to drink meetings." Ama looked at her and said, "Yes. That means he is getting help." The girl had no answer.

Ama told us that evening with great pride. My father listened quietly. Then he said, "Thank you." Ama shrugged. "I did not do it for you. I did it for my name." My mother looked away to hide her smile. I wrote that sentence in my blue book. I did it for my name. I needed it too.

At school, I was no longer the best boy in class. Not yet. My marks were better, but they had not returned to what they were before. Madam Efua said I was catching up. I hated that phrase at first. It made me feel behind. Then she said, "Catching up means you are moving." I held on to that.

Kwesi helped me study. He made a terrible teacher because he insulted every wrong answer. "No, Kojo. Even a sleepy goat can add better than this." I threw a pencil at him. He ducked and laughed. Still, he stayed. That was friendship. Not soft all the time. But steady.

One Friday, our school held another Parents Day. When the announcement came, my stomach tightened. The last Parents Day had given us the blue shirt

and then taken it away. This time, I did not tell Ama to hope. I did not tell myself either. I only gave the paper to my mother. She read it and placed it on the table. "We will see," she said.

My father came home that evening and saw the paper. He looked at Ama. "Do you want me to come?" Ama held her doll and thought about it. "Yes. But only if you come properly." My father nodded. "Properly." She added, "And go home properly." "Yes." Then she looked at me. "Kojo?" I did not want to answer. "I want you to come. But I do not want to spend the whole day afraid of evening." His face tightened. "I understand."

On Parents Day, my father wore the blue shirt. The old stain had not fully left. It sat near the lower side, faint but visible. When he stepped out, Ama stared at him. "You wore it." "Yes." "The stain is still there." "I know." "Why wear it then?" My father looked down at the shirt. "Because I cannot pretend it was never stained." Ama thought about that. Then she nodded. "It still looks like Papa."

At school, Madam Efua greeted my parents. She spoke to my father without pity and to my mother without making her explain the whole family. Ama read a short passage in her class. She stumbled once, then corrected herself. My father clapped softly. My mother clapped louder.

In my class, Madam Efua looked at me. "Kojo, will you read?" I stood with my book. My hands shook a little. Not from fear alone. From knowing what words can do. I read a short piece I had written the night before. It was called *The Longer Road*. I wrote about a road that looked easy but led to a place that took more from me than it gave. I wrote about another road that was longer and hotter but brought me home. I did not mention Sly. I did not mention drink. I did not mention Blue Kiosk. But my father knew. My mother knew. Ama knew. Kwesi knew.

When I finished, the class was quiet. Madam Efua said, "Thank you, Kojo." I sat down. My father did not clap. He only placed his hand over his mouth and looked away. That meant more.

After school, we walked home together. We passed the market road. Sly was there. He was older now in the face, though not much time had passed. He saw me. For a moment, I thought he would call the old name. He did not. He looked at my father's blue shirt. He looked at my mother. He looked at Ama

holding her paper bird. Then he looked at me. I nodded once. Not as greeting. Not as surrender. Only as proof that I saw him. He looked away first.

When we reached home, the mango tree was full of late afternoon light. The house agreement paper had been replaced again. The new one was cleaner, stronger, and tied with thread instead of only a nail. Ama said paper needed help staying up. She was right. Many things did.

My father sat on his stool, now in the middle of the compound. My mother sat on the bench. Ama sat on the ground and folded another paper bird. I sat near the doorway and opened my blue book. The pages were almost full.

I turned to the first page and read some of my old sentences. My father lost his job. My mother is tired. Ama is afraid. I am angry. I miss my father. The words still hurt. But they no longer swallowed me.

I looked at my family. My father was not only his drinking. My mother was not only her tiredness. Ama was not only her fear. I was not only my anger. We were still many things. Wounded. Trying. Afraid sometimes. Brave sometimes. Able to laugh over bad porridge. Able to speak when silence became dangerous. Able to walk the longer road.

That evening, Uncle Kofi came by. He and my father were going to a meeting. My father stood and told my mother before she asked. "I am going with Kofi. I will return after the meeting." My mother nodded. Ama looked up. "Come home properly." My father smiled. "Yes, Ama." He looked at me. I nodded. He nodded back. Then he left with Uncle Kofi.

No one held their breath the way we used to. Not fully. A little fear remained. Maybe it always would. But fear no longer ruled the room.

My mother lit the lantern after dark. Ama fell asleep with paper scraps around her feet. I sat beside the small flame and wrote the last page of my blue book.

I wrote. Living in the light does not mean shadows disappear. It means we stop calling the shadows home. It means we tell the truth while there is still time. It means we ask for help before pain becomes a secret. It means we learn our real names again.

My mother came to stand behind me. "Are you writing?" "Yes." "Good." She did not ask to read it. That was trust too.

I finished with one final line. My name is Kojo, and I am still walking toward the light.

I closed the book. The lantern flame moved in the air, small but steady. For a long time, I watched it. Then I lay down beside Ama and slept.

Epilogue: The Light We Carry

Years have passed since those days under the mango tree.

The house is no longer the same. The roof has been repaired. The back door closes well now. The mango tree still stands, though one heavy branch fell during a storm and left a scar on the trunk. The stool is still there too, not by the doorway like before, but near the middle of the compound.

Sometimes, when I visit, I sit on it. I never sit there without thinking of my father.

He is older now. His hair has more gray in it. His hands are still strong, but they shake a little when he is tired. He still goes to meetings. Not because life became easy. Because life did not. That is one truth recovery taught us. Healing is not a gate you pass through once. It is a road you keep choosing.

My father had more hard days after the ones I have told you about. Some days he walked well. Some days he needed Uncle Kofi. Some days he needed my mother's firm voice. Some days he sat alone under the mango tree until the urge passed. But he kept telling the truth. That saved us many times.

My mother learned to rest. At first, she did it like a person stealing from her own duty. She would sit for a few minutes, then jump up as if the bench had

accused her. Later, she learned that rest was not laziness. It was repair. She still works hard. That has not changed. But she no longer carries silence as if it were proof of strength.

Ama grew taller than all of us expected. She still asks questions that make people uncomfortable. She says this is a gift, not a fault. I agree with her now, though I did not always agree when we were children.

She kept making paper birds for many years. Some were for herself. Some were for children at the community center. Some were for people who came with faces closed, like Ebo once did. On one wing, she often wrote a name. On the other wing, she wrote a sentence.

You are not your father's shame.

You are not your mother's pain.

You are still here.

You can still fly.

I still have one of her crooked birds inside my old blue book.

The blue book is full now. Its cover is torn at the corners. Some pages are loose. Some words are pressed so hard into the paper that you can feel them with your fingers. There are stains from rain, sweat, and tears. There are sentences I once hated to read.

My father lost his job.

My mother is tired.

Ama is afraid.

I am angry.

I miss my father.

There are other sentences too.

I do not know how to stop.

Today, they heard me.

A stumble is not a home.

I am Kojo, and I am still walking toward the light.

For a long time, I thought the painful pages were the most important ones. Now I know they are only part of the book. A life is not one page. A family is not one mistake. A child is not one wound.

I have met many boys like the boy I was. Some sit at the edge of rooms. Some fight before they are touched. Some laugh too loudly. Some say nothing so often that silence becomes their language. I know those faces. I know the escape chair. I know the anger that hides fear. I know the shame that enters a child when adults break where the child can see.

When I meet them, I do not rush to fix them. Madam Akosua taught me that. I sit near them. Sometimes that is where help begins. Not with a sermon. Not with a threat. Not with a promise that everything will be fine. With someone sitting near the pain and refusing to run from it.

I have also met fathers like mine. Men who lost work and then lost themselves. Men who confused silence with strength. Men who carried shame until it became poison. Some return home. Some do not. Some ask for help early. Some wait until the house is already burning.

When they speak, I listen. Not because I excuse them. Because I know harm must be named before it can be changed.

I have met mothers like mine too. Women who hold families together with tired hands. Women who hide hunger from children and tears from neighbors. Women who think love means never saying they are tired. To them, I want to say what my mother had to learn slowly. You are allowed to put the load down before it breaks you.

And to the children, I say this. You are not the bottle. You are not the debt. You are not the gossip. You are not the name people throw at you when they do not know how to be kind. You are not responsible for saving every adult in your house. You are still a child. And being a child is not a weakness. It is something that should be protected.

Sometimes, I pass the old market road when I visit home. Blue Kiosk has changed owners. The paint is different. The bench is older. Some of the faces are gone. Some new ones have taken their place. The road looks smaller now.

But I do not laugh at the boy who once feared it. That road was large to him. It held his anger, pride, hunger, and shame. It offered him a false place to belong. He almost believed it.

Then people held him. Ama with her small hand. Kwesi with his hard truth. Madam Efua with her patient eyes. Madam Akosua with her quiet questions. Uncle Kofi with his today. My mother with her tired love. My father with his broken, honest trying.

I was not saved by one person. I was held by many. That is why I believe recovery must never be left to one wounded person alone. A house heals better when the whole house learns to speak. A child heals better when adults stop hiding the fire and start leading the way out. A family heals better when truth becomes less frightening than silence.

I still believe in light. Not the kind that pretends darkness never existed. Not the kind that shouts over pain. The kind that enters slowly. The kind that shows the crack in the wall, the stain on the shirt, the tear in the paper, the road that must be avoided, and the door that can still be opened.

That is the light I know. It does not erase the shadows. It teaches us where to stand.

My name is Kojo. I came from a house that nearly drowned in silence. I came from shame, anger, fear, and love that did not know how to speak. I came from a blue book, a mango tree, a torn agreement paper, and a crooked bird with one big wing. I came from shadows. But I did not stay there.

And if you are reading this from your own dark room, I hope you hear me clearly.

The road may be long. You may not trust the light yet. Walk anyway. One honest step. Then another. Then another.

That is how we found morning.

About the Author

Dr Eric Kwasi Elliason

Dr Eric Kwasi Elliason is a public health professional, researcher, educator, counsellor, and author whose work is devoted to understanding the human experience and supporting the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities.

With a multidisciplinary background spanning public health, psychology, counselling, education, and social development, Dr Elliason has dedicated his career to exploring the ways people respond to life's challenges, rebuild after difficult experiences, and find meaning through connection and support.

He holds a PhD in Public Health and a PhD in Guidance and Counselling Psychology, alongside a Professional Master's in Psycho-Oncology, an MSc in Public Health, and an Executive MBA in Hospital and Healthcare Administration. His professional journey has brought together research, teaching, counselling, psychosocial care, and community engagement across Africa and Asia.

As an educator and researcher, Dr Elliason has worked with students, professionals, researchers, and communities, focusing on areas such as human behaviour, mental and psychosocial wellbeing, counselling, relationships, research development, and the social influences that shape people's lives.

He is the Founder and President of the African Alliance for Research, Advocacy and Innovation (AARAI) and the Founder and President of the African Institute of Research and Professional Studies (AIRPS). Through these organisations, he continues to promote education, research, innovation, professional growth, and initiatives that strengthen human wellbeing.

Beyond academic achievements and professional titles, Dr Elliason describes himself as a listener, a learner, and a lifelong student of human stories. He believes that behind every struggle is a person with emotions, memories, hopes, and a desire to be understood. His work is guided by compassion and the belief that people should be seen not only through their difficulties, but also through their courage and capacity for change.

The Longer Road reflects his deep interest in the realities of family, shame, resilience, and recovery. Through the story of Kojo and his family, Dr Elliason

explores the quiet struggles that many people experience behind closed doors and the impact that silence, hardship, and unresolved pain can have on relationships.

While the story is fictional, its themes are drawn from the human experiences of loss, emotional suffering, family challenges, and the search for healing. Dr Elliason hopes this book encourages readers to approach difficult conversations with compassion, recognise the importance of support, and understand that recovery is not a sign of weakness but a journey of courage.

He believes that no person should be defined only by their hardest moments. With understanding, honesty, support, and hope, individuals and families can find a way forward, even when the road ahead appears long.