

Nicholas' First NATIVITY

By

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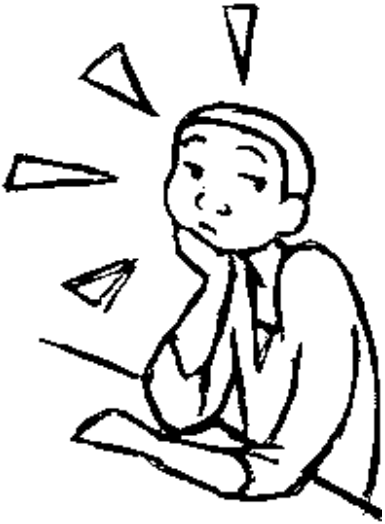
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*To my priceless treasures, Ben and Ella.
My admirable sister, Louisa
My irresistible Mentor, my mother, Louisa*



Nicholas Gharu gloomily watched the heavy rain slush the window. The next day, he watched other children dash out of their houses to play in the rain. The day after the next day, he hid his eyes behind tinted glasses and sat at the farthest corner of his bed to avoid the glaring sun, which had turned its beam on everything in the room. The muslin curtain engaged with the sun by waving its too warm air into the room.

The next four days of yellow-hot, shimmering, smouldering, smelting heat had left him weary and irritable with an unceasing thirst for water. There were no pools, and a cold bath quickly turned warm. The hotness gave his armpit an awful smell; a smell much like the tree by the side of their house back in Kent, which fly-tippers made their dump.

Each time, he'd take a whiff of his armpit, hoping it was from his imagination and end up with the urge to barf. It could very well be an eyesore for his nose if it had eyes.

Hot, sweaty, bored, and defeated, he resigned to ping-pong-pong the tennis ball against the wall. He'd found it in the pantry and thought it was an odd place to stash it.

'I'll be home soon,' he recalled his father saying the last time he called.

He was not pleased with this change of environment. He moaned the fact that he couldn't confront his father, who was like a horse with blinders focused on his own race. He had all he wanted in Kent why his father couldn't see that baffled him. Nigeria seemed an impressive feat for a holiday trip, something that a father and son did perhaps. Not somewhere to haul someone to, like a bird in a cage swaying to its master's adventures.

His nanny seemed enthusiastic about his new school, almost ecstatic with prepping him. How can people be excited about moving to a new place, he wondered. It reminded him of the Japanese knotweed his nanny spied on every other day, prodding, poking, tugging,

and taking pictures. He had a faint belief that if she didn't agree to travel with them, his dad would have let him stay.

Although their new house was much bigger than the detached house back there, this was by all counts a museum.

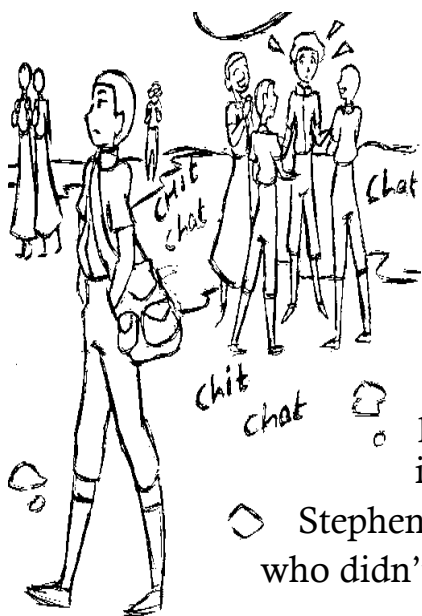
Nicholas grimaced at the dry leaves that stuck to the bottom of his shoes. It was supposed to be dry, right? He thought to himself. A new habit he'd resonated since he arrived in Port Harcourt.

It was his first time at Baptist Primary school. Everyone knew, but he, not because of his

knee-length white socks or his leather satchel. It was his black shoes. Black shoes. The error of it, and he dared walk into the school like it belonged to his father.

This rule-breaker piqued Stephen-the-Bull's interest. He was called

Stephen-the-Bull by his classmates who didn't want him to discover



what they really called him was Stephen-the-Bully. To Stephen, he was keeping them alert; the wordings on the wall were to remind them where they were. His stomach was always hungry and had to be fed. Besides, his classmates had too many sweets and cakes. He had to see a clear path, so one should stand in his narrow point of view, especially girls with long untamed hair, which flew restlessly like the cow's tail.

His father was a soldier and always told him: 'the path to duty required due diligence and alertness'. He still hadn't discovered what due diligence was, but he knew alertness was keeping your eyes wide open even when the sun was at its peak.

Stephen shoved a classmate with dark blue misshaped eyewear out of his way as he hurried to give this rule-departing boy a friendly new welcome and guided him to the back of the class.



The rule-un-observer looked around suspiciously. In his old school, the back seats were meant for miscreants and trouble seekers

but this gangly boy of the same height as himself, in an auspicious afro seemed to command respect therefore couldn't be a troublers. He never liked the front rows anyway; someone always threw things at his head - once it was an apple with a maggot in it. He shuddered at the memory and thanked the afro-carrying honour-commandeer.

The afro-carrying, respect-hijacking pupil stopped by a desk, pulled out a yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket.

"So, what is your name?" The afro-carrying boy asked.

"Nicholas," the error-exhibitor said with a grimace.

"Stephen," the afro-carrying young dude retorted striking his chest. "That bag looks fancy."

"It's a satchel," Nicholas retorted pointedly.

Stephen pulled out the yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and



tucked it back in his pocket and nodded. "I'd like to have it."

Nicholas shrugged casually. "Tomorrow."

"That'll be nice," Stephen said with a nod then twisted his mouth, tapped the locker behind Nicholas and gestured.

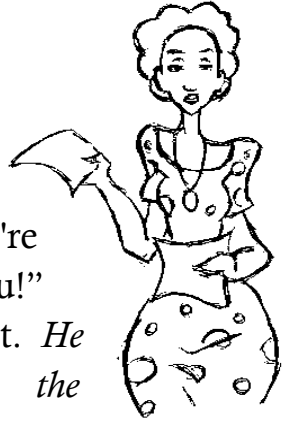
Nicholas' brow furrowed briefly. He could have sworn that there'd been no vacant seat a few seconds ago. But there was one now. Stephen had made that clear by tapping on it. Just then there was an uproar of groaning desks as the students got up and their form teacher rushed in.

2.

“Good morning class.” The woman said as she swatted an insect.

“Good morning Teacher. We're happy to see you. God, bless you!”

That's new, Nicholas thought. He had been indeed brought to the backwaters of the world.



“I've just learned that we'd be having a new member. His name is Nicholas Gharu. Try to make him comfortable.” She lowered her head and muttered at the paper that was a few inches from her face. Sighing she raised her head, tilted it and frowned. “Where's Esin?”

Esin got up slowly, averting his eyes from Stephen.

“Why are you not at your desk?” The teacher grimly asked.

Esin slanted his head at Stephen, his eyes accusing.

“Go to your desk now?” Pointing at Nicholas, she asked. “Who are you?” Not waiting for his reply, she tilted her head to her

desk and picked two hand fans. Squinting, she took a fighting stance with arms stretched a little away from her and waited. A few seconds passed before she struck them together.

The class applauded. They knew that insects' waltzed into the room to their extinction.



The form teacher raised a brow at the odd person in her class. She looked down at his bright white socks and tried not to smile on seeing his black shoes.

“I’m Nicholas Gharu,” Nicholas retorted coyly.

“I see,” The Teacher crossed her arms, half-sat on her desk and asked, “did I give you permission to join my class?”

“But I?... I”

“Come here!” She ordered, twisting her mouth, the way you do when something is stuck on your teeth, and you want to rinse it off with your tongue.

Nicholas walked up to her just as Esin returned to his desk. Esin, who had deftly stepped over Stephen's foot proudly smiled to himself until he pured a mango with his buttocks.

The boys at the back giggled.

“What was that?” The form teacher asked looking over Nicholas to the rest of the class.

Nicholas sighed and started. “Ma'am, if you don't mind?”

The entire class gasped in horror.

“Did you just speak without being spoken to?” the Teacher asked so quietly one would think she was frightened.

He chuckled in confusion.

The entire class leaned back in awe.

“Go and kneel down!” the Teacher snarled; her voice was shaky.

“What?” Nicholas sniggered, blinking in surprise.

The Teacher's eyes bulged and began to look like they were turning inwards. She stepped back in disbelief then recollected herself, took him by the ear to the corner of the class. “Ignorance is no excuse.” She muttered, pointing to the floor. “Stand there! Face the class!”

Suddenly exhausted, she returned to her desk and sat down, rubbing her forehead.

“Class!” she called.

“Yes, Teacher!” The class chorused as they got up.

“Sit down, sit down,” she said, still rubbing her forehead. “It’s our turn to do a Christmas play... drama.”

The class fell silent, eagerly peering at her.

“We’re in charge of the ‘Manger Roll Call’.”

The class became an upsy-turvy of babbling sounds. It was a known fact among the pupils that it was bad luck to do that drama. The class would be lucky to be made fun of for just a term. A few of them quickly shouted what they wanted to be in the play.

“Quiet!” She squeaked, squinting at them. When the noise died down, she continued. “Stephen, there’s no wolf in the Christmas play.” She raised her forefinger before he could say anything else. “Gertrude, there’ll be no snakes either or the like.”

Sighing, she got up after a salvage beneath her desk and laid a cardboard box on the desk. “You know what a ballot box is?”

“What politicians use to deceive us,” one of the pupils in the back mumbled.

“Emodi, get up and fix your shirt.”

The boy who had spoken reluctantly got up



to tuck his shirt in.

“Well done, you’re wrong,” She sighed then waited until Emodi sat down before asking. “Class, what *is* a ballot box?”

Esin was about to put his hand up, but hesitated.

“So, nobody in my class knows what a ballot box is. Very good. I see I’ve been wasting my time. On Monday, you’re going to hand in an essay. In that essay, you’ll tell me the history of the ballot box as well as its

advantages. Then you'll draw one for Mrs Ruth D.

Some members of the class groaned.

"Today is Friday," Stephen complained.

"Isn't that lovely?" The Teacher smiled sarcastically and clasped her hands in front of her.

"Ohooo, but tomorrow is Saturday. It's the day we clean, cook, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." Gertrude's lookalike said, flailing her fingers.

"Eheheh! Okay, don't bring your work on Monday, eh?" The Teacher retorted mockingly and slanted her head to the door. "New boy, come and take a paper from this box and go to your desk."

"Yes, Teacher," Nicholas sighed. He was willing to let this teacher's mean act slide because he didn't want to give his father an excuse for missing his birthday. It's wasn't likely he'd do anything but dislike her.

The Teacher picked a pen and began to scribble on a piece of paper she'd squashed earlier. "New boy," she called not lifting her head.

Nicholas picked folded slip of paper and slowly turned around.

“You've got a lot to learn,” the Teacher sighed dramatically and then asked. “What does your paper say?”

“Joseph,” Nicholas muttered, his brow raised, waiting. He frowned because she didn't notice – she was peering at the pile on her desk. He frowned, waiting. He heard moaning and turned to find the sound to see Stephen gesturing. He couldn't see what Stephen-the-Bull was fighting until Stephen tapped on the seat and mouthed ‘come’.

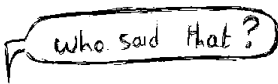


Soon after the first row of pupils hopeful pupils picked theirs, retorted their characters and returned to their desks crest fallen.

Esin raised his hand and murmured. “Excuse me, Ma!”

“Esin, come and get yours before you go.”

Esin unwillingly walked to the Teacher's desk, opened it and sighed with relief.



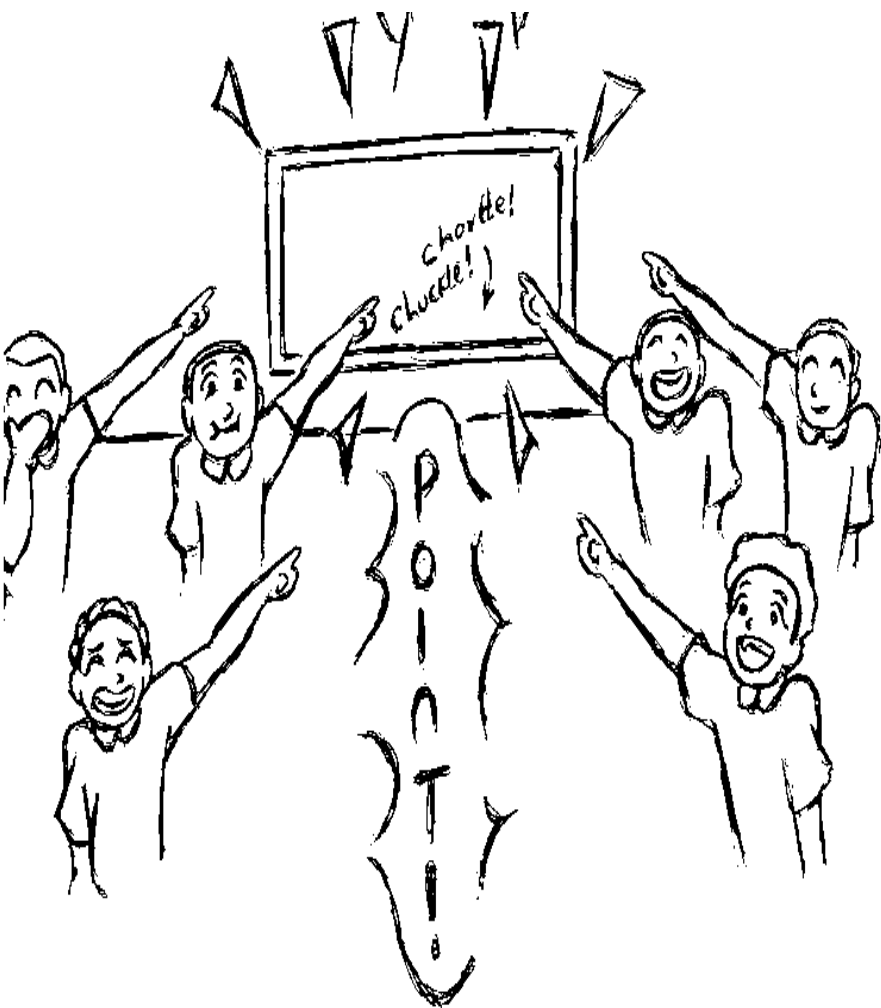
“What does it say?”



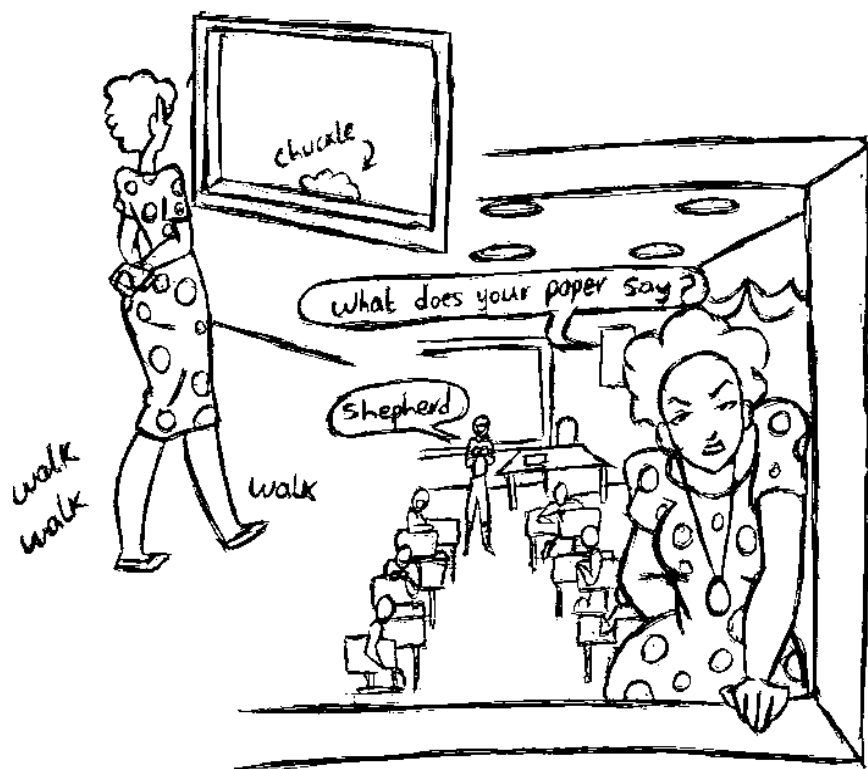
“Shepherd,” Esin replied, trying to contain his excitement.

“Who dash you?” Someone piped.

The Teacher looked around furtively. “Who said that?”



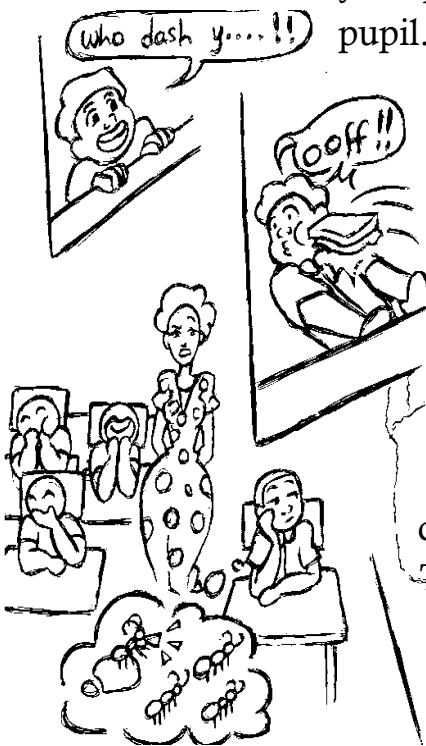
The whole class pointed to the window at the same time.



3.

As the rest of the class came forward, the voice from outside the window continued to shout the same words. The Teacher picked her duster and held her hands behind her. She made the last pupil wait, then walked to the window.

“What does your paper say?” she asked the pupil.



“Shepherd,” the last pupil said excitedly and hurried to his desk while the others turned to the window.

The pupil raised his head and shouted, “Who dash y...!” but was interrupted by his collision with the Teacher’s duster.

The whole class burst into laughter - it was going to take a week to

wash off.

“Some of you have not returned your consent form. Make sure you come with it on Monday. New boy, come and take yours,” the Teacher bellowed over the slamming of lockers and loud voices.

Nicholas didn't hear his form teacher. He was captivated by the little brown insects the formed a line along the cracked wall. He could imagine the lone one barking orders at the rest. His fascination was broken by someone tapping him.

Distracted, he looked up. “Yes, Ma'am?”

“May I lock up the classroom now?” the Teacher asked, pouting and frowning and twirling a set of keys.

“Yes Ma'am, sorry Ma'am,” Nicholas murmured with a nod, slung his bag, and hurried out of the class to where Stephen was waiting for him.

“Why does she call me ‘new boy’?” Nicholas asked when he caught up with Stephen.

“You're new, are you not?” Stephen asked, bemusedly.

Nicholas shrugged.

“But I told her, she saw my...” Nicholas

scratched his head.

“Keep wearing those shoes, and you’ll be a popular boy around here,” Stephen retorted and made furtive glances at a group of pupils. “Esin is the best student in this school. I am ‘the class bully’ our form teacher said but I don’t believe her. However, I agree with her that you’re the new boy. What’s the big deal anyway? No one has ever given you a name-tag?” Stephen asked and went to pull a girl’s hair.

“Why do you do that?” Nicholas asked, his eyes disapproving.

“To keep them responsible,” Stephen said and pulled Emodi’s trouser down.

Nicholas scoffed, wrinkled his nose, then shook his head.

“See, Emodi’s not wearing a bel. He is supposed to. You’re wearing black shoes when you’re supposed to be wearing brown ones.

“So, why didn’t you take my shoes off? Or do something of that sort.”

“What’s the point of taking your shoes off? Besides,” Stephen paused and grimaced, then pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded

and tucked it back in his pocket. “I’m getting a bag, satchel. Bring it tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure,” Nicholas sighed and left Stephen to his antics, brooding.

4.

Nicholas didn't want any name tags. His father wouldn't be pleased, not that he cared that much. All his father cared about was the model he was dating - whatever that was, his business, his colleagues and nothing else. He hoped his father wouldn't miss his birthday as he had given his word. As his mind for a boy his age, and as his mind wandered, the gravels by his feet hit the gate.

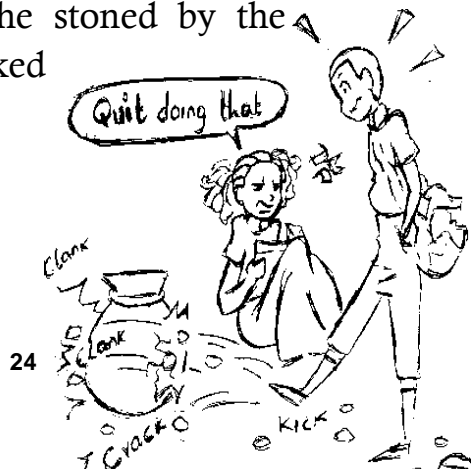


Someone hissed and groaned.
"Quit doing that!"

It took a while for him to realise it was not from his thoughts. He turned to the sound and raised a questioning brow.

She gestured, at the stoned by the gate and at the cracked flowerpot.

"Sorry?"



She slunk back into her book, shaking her head.

Irritated, he followed her movement. "What did I do this time?"

Just then a strong voice called. "Nicholas."

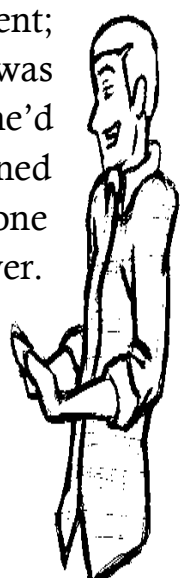


Nicholas turned to the voice. It came from a bony and squinty-eyed man who looked a lot like his mother. He had a pockmark that travelled from the side of his face down the length of his right arm. He also walked with a limp, at least it looked like a limp.



"I'm Tekena. Your father asked me to take you home."

A part of Nicholas was filled with excitement; the other part was hesitant because he'd been expressly warned to leave with no one else but the driver. To ensure this, his nanny made



him watch *Coraline* three times. Each time he said something to a stranger, he could see his eyes being replaced by buttons but not this time.

"I don't know you," Nicholas said, twisting his mouth to the right side of his face. The man in front of him was a weird and interesting fellow. Because he had an odd resemblance to his mother, and also limp-walked.

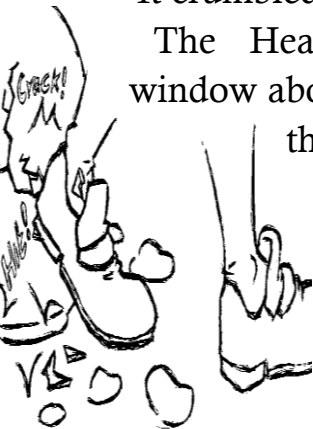
"I don't know you either, but I'm here to do my job. You know what your father is like," The Tekena-man said with an exaggerated shrug.

Nicholas was inclined to agree but turned to the rapid footsteps behind him. The Tekena-man sneakily looked around and made to grab him, but Nicholas had noticed and stepped back, only stopping when the back of his foot struck the already cracked flowerpot.

It crumbled noisily.

The Headmistress peered out of the window above them and shouted. "Who did that?"

"Nicholas," another voice called.



Startled, that he'd been caught, he bent down in an attempt to pick the pieces.

“You're supposed to head to the gate, not in the opposite direction.” It was the teacher that had guided him to his new class. The teacher turned to the girl with a desolate frown. “Come, my dear.”

Nicholas looked back to the Tekena-man, but he was no longer there.

Nicholas wondered how the Tekena-man had gotten in, but not long after he knew how: the gateman was snoring. He eventually let himself out when his driver arrived. He



wanted to ask the driver who the Tekena-man was and decided to keep it to himself until his father returned. It was after all only a few days away.



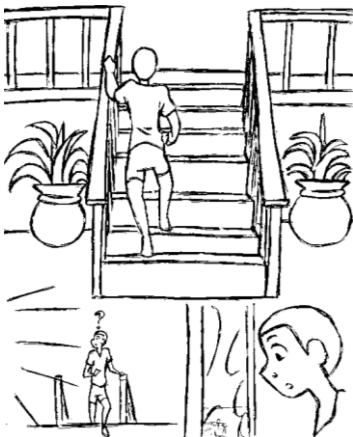
The day his father was supposed to return had come, Nicholas woke up early,

tidied his room, finished his homework then his father called to tell them that he'd arrived in Port Harcourt, but he'll be at the office for a few hours. Nicholas was so relieved that he let tears drop down



his cheek. He was so glad that they'd get to have dinner together that he cleaned his father's room.

Just before dinner, he remembered the consent form and ran



upstairs to get it. Up there, he saw blinking light and went to the window. There, he saw the new maid running towards a car with blinking light. She hugged a man who turned out to be the Tekena-man. Nicholas hid hoping the Tekena-man had not seen him.



"Nicholas, dinner is ready," his nanny called from the other side of his door.

Nicholas crawled away from the window and slid out of the room so swift he bumped into his nanny.

"What is it?" his nanny asked, in her very quiet voice.

"Is my daddy back?" Nicholas asked at the same time nodding to her question.

She shook her head.

He tried to put up a brave face by wrinkling his nose to keep the tears away, but she pulled him into the crook of



her arms, where he stayed to cry until he was calm.

“Would you like me to read you a bedtime story?”

“Wh-at?”

Nicholas stammered, retreated, and wiped his quickly. “I’m ten.”



face

“So?”

“That’s baby stuff!” He snapped and quietly added.

“I’m going to the dining room.”



“Nicholas, wait!” His nanny called; her voice as gentle as a falling feather.

He stopped but didn’t turn around.

“Would you like to read one to me instead?”

Nicholas frowned, turned around and squinted his doubt at her.

She looks keen, he thought and asked a little too eagerly. “Which one?”

“Anyone will do.”

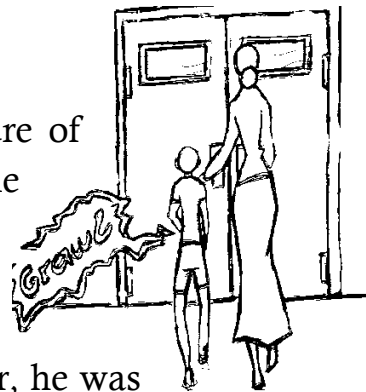
His stomach rumbled. He twisted his mouth and held his stomach. “After



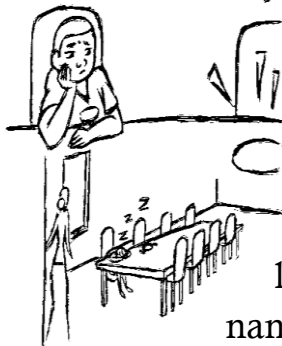
dinner?”

“Of course.”

Nicholas nodded, not sure of what she was up to, but he couldn't wait to listen to his favourite bedtime story even though he would be the one reading it. However, he was



ten he could at least show disinterest.



Seeing his father's place setting on the table, he decided to wait a little longer until his head bopped from drowsiness and he could no longer resist the urge to rest his head on the table. It was a

little after midnight that the nanny came downstairs to find his head resting on the table. She grimaced as she lifted him unto her shoulder and winced.

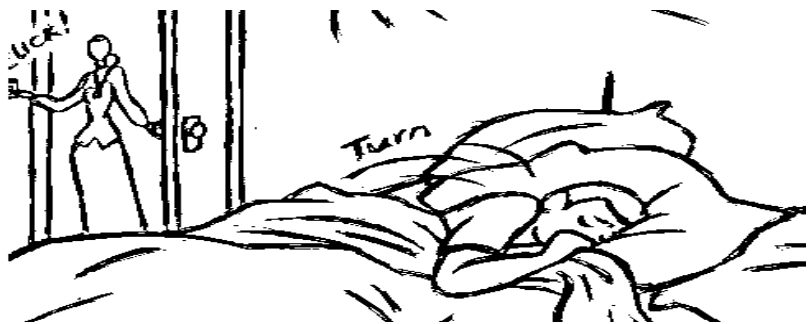
A few minutes later, she laid him on his bed and was about he sneezed his back to

to leave when and turned her.



“Bless you,” she murmured, lingered for a while and then turned the light off.

“I love you, Daddy,” he retorted.



5.

Sorry, that he'd slept off before his father's return, he hurried to his father's room to find the door locked.

The new maid saw and watched him for a while then said, "Your father's not back."

"Oh," Nicholas mumbled and eyed her suspiciously. "Good morning."

The new maid gestured and said. "Breakfast is ready."

"Okay," he retorted, wondering why she lingered. He had become suspicious of her ever since he saw her with the Tekena-man last night. He dillydallied by the door of his father's room. A while later, she hurried down the stairs just as the nanny was climbing up.

"You're not assigned to this wing, child." The nanny whispered to the new maid, a little irritated.

The new maid curtsied. "I'm sorry Ma!"

“Stop being sorry Ify and do your duty.” The nanny moaned. She looked tired as she heaved herself up the stairs and found Nicholas loitering. “There you are. I’ve been calling you,” she sighed in a hoarse voice. Sighing she leaned on the wall and exhaled slowly. “Your father called early this morning.”

Nicholas knew what she was about to say: your father couldn’t make it. Now in a sombre mood, he trudged behind his nanny as they made their way down the stairs resigned to the fact that it was going to be another long weekend.

At school, they milled around the same boring routine daily except when the police turned up to teach them about safety.

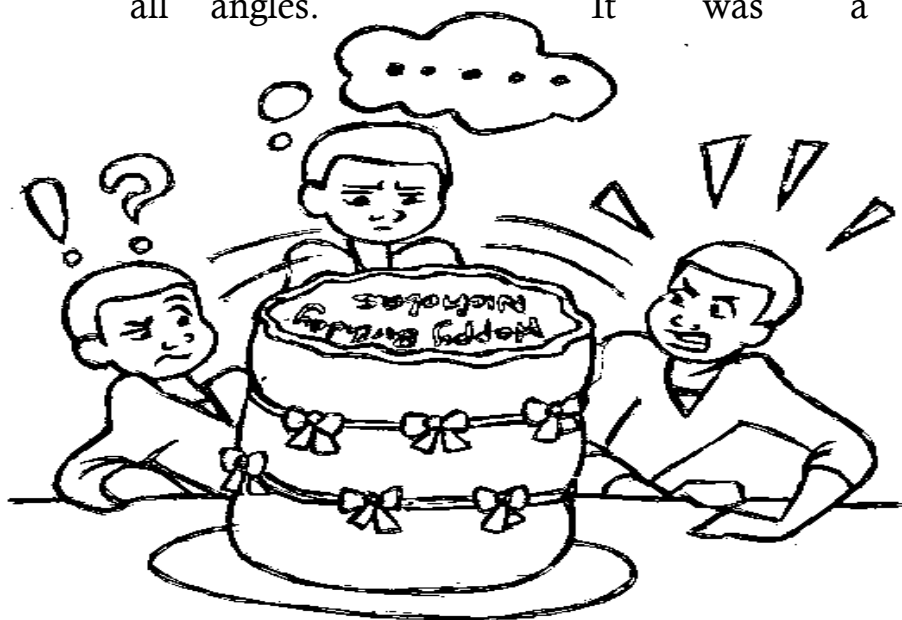
Nicholas had shown no interest and therefore didn’t listen. It didn’t help that he’d joined the school in the second half of the third term. He wished the holidays a speedy approach.

6.

Nicholas watched the sun break through the cloud and sighed. He'd been up since midnight. Sunday had come and his first birthday without his mother was going to be boring. He'd hoped his father would be present especially because he had promised. He made his way down the stairs wondering why he bothered to get out of bed.

His father had not made it to the house and therefore didn't make it to his birthday.

Nicholas morosely glared at the cake from all angles. It was a



monstrosity so far as he was concerned.

‘Why make a cake so big when it would be just two people at the table? Well, one, as it was just him.’

“You could have given me the choice of choosing my cake,” Nicholas murmured as he mused. A simple cake, like the buttermilk one mummy used to make before she fell ill all those years ago.

He grimaced, still eyeing the cake which reminded him of the tower of Ibiza. Why that tower was slanted, he’ll never understand. If it was human, it was sure to have bought itself a cane.



He heard the cling of the doorbell. Well, the

cuckoo sound that announced that someone was at the door.

He barely pushed off his chair when Ify came wheezing past to get the door. Ify’s speed left his nanny so astounded that her eyes, which were always hidden

in the slit of her eyelids, showed up.

“You’ve got a guest, Master



I'm not alone ooooo!

Nicholas,” Ify chirped cheerfully.

Nicholas and his nanny stared at each other for a while and then the nanny frowned. Ify waited expectantly.

His nanny slow nodded and Ify rushed to the door.

“Hello!” Stephen squeaked through the crack of the door, startling three of them.

“Hey, Stephen,” Nicholas chuckled.

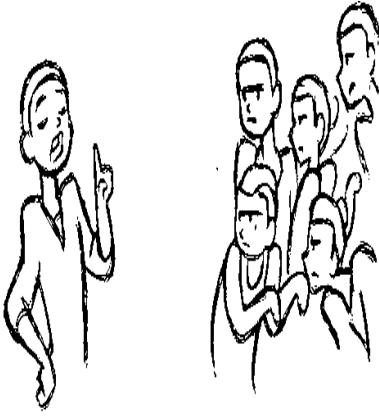
“I didn't come alone o!” Stephen said with a gurgle.



“Happy birthday!” chorused several voices behind Stephen. They weren't particularly dressed for a party: their clothes were soiled and raggedy. To Nicholas' amusement, they were all smaller and clearly younger than he and Stephen.

His guests twiddled into the dining room. Their eyes bulged as they eased themselves closer to Nicholas's *monstrosity*. They rubbed their hands together and licked their lips concurrently.

“Wash your hands,” The nanny dinned when the children stretched their hands to the large bowl of sweets.



Nicholas could tell that his nanny was going to have a fit – she was doing her calm-herself breathing and it’s-all-good-whistled sounds, followed by her touching

her forehead and stomach at the same time.

Feeling sorry for her, Nicholas shouted over the din. The other children’s hopeful gaze turned sinister with disapproving glares distorting their faces.

He sniggered. Looking at them one would think he was spoiling *their* party. It was *his* party.

“Wash your hands, first!” Nicholas emphasized, then pulled Stephen aside and asked. “Who are these people?”



“My friends.”

“How did you know my birthday?”

“You mentioned it,” Stephen said quickly and tried to walk around his friend.

“No, I did not.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn't,” Nicholas said firmly.



Stephen faked a yawn, rubbed his stomach, pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket. Then with an exaggerated sigh, he asked. “Why are we arguing? It's your birthday o!”

Nicholas crossed his arms, still waiting for an explanation.

Stephen shrugged offering none.

With a determined gaze, Nicholas said. “No one will have a piece of cake if you don't tell me now.”

“Your uncle,” Stephen said with a wave of his hand.

“Uncle?” Nicholas stammered.

“He said his name is Tekena. He had a parcel for you but forgot it at home. He'll bring it himself. I decided to bring my friends to make it lively.”

Nicholas frowned. *Who is this Tekena-man? What did they talk about? How did he meet Stephen? If he is a relative, why hadn't he heard of him?*



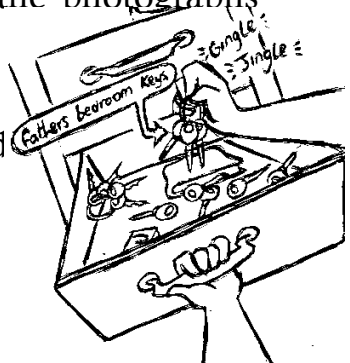
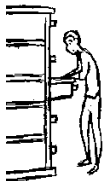
They turned their attention to the uproar in the dining room. Stephen hurried to join them while Nicholas scrambled to the larger sitting room and threw the double doors open.

Dad didn't make it, I may as well have a party, he thought and turned the music up.

The other children, Stephen's friends hastened to the large sitting room their hands, pockets stuffed. Nicholas ran upstairs to get his tablet to take pictures. But when he returned, Stephen's friends were littered all over the sitting room and spread through to the dining room munching over their plates of jollof rice. Angry and confused, he stared at his tablet. He shrugged recognising that they weren't properly dressed for the photographs he wanted to show off to his Kent.



After a while, he got an id
rawer which had all the



retrieved the one to his father's bedroom. There, he found his father's bank cards. Inspired, he took the bank cards. He didn't need to go in search of the driver; the driver was already in the living room stuffing food into his mouth and gulping a bottle of malt drink.

"Everyone!" Nicholas called out.

When no one answered, he turned the music off.

That got their attention.

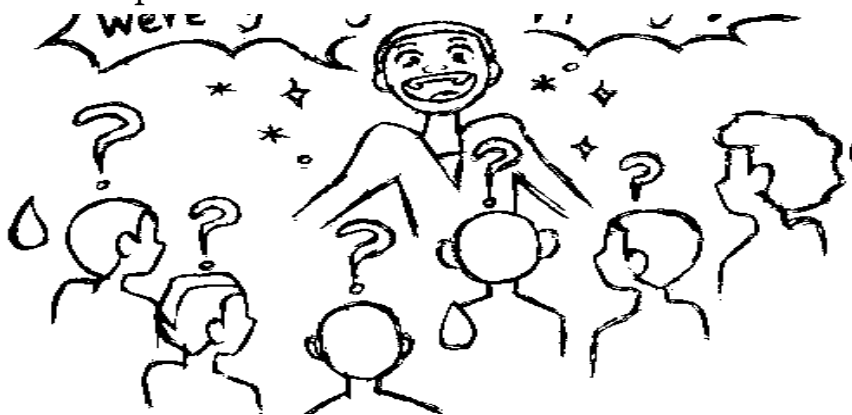
"We're going shopping?" He piped excitedly.

Their confused glances left him puzzled.

"We're going to buy clothes?" Stephen asked eyeing his new friend.

"Yes. Do you know a place?"

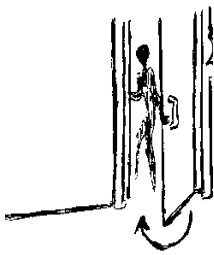
Stephen beamed.



“We’re going out?” Nicholas said to the driver.

The driver nodded but didn't raise his head. Stephen beckoned his friends and they left.





7.



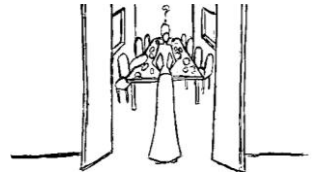
A few hours later, the nanny came downstairs and discovered that neither Stephen, his friends nor Nicholas were in the house. After a quiet search, she returned to the living room.

“Where's Nick?” She asked in a low voice.

The driver looked grimly at her. “Who be Nick?”

“Oga pikin,” Ify offered cheerily like she'd solved a complicated puzzle.

“Na im name be dat?” He asked wearily.



Ify nodded eagerly, but the nanny just glared at him, her eyes hidden behind the slits of her eyelids as she let out a nervous chuckle.

“Where's Nick?”

“Im comot,” the driver said and shook his head



exasperatedly. He shook his head again, scoffed and muttered in a very low voice, "I don't understand women; they ask a question and expect a speech. It's quite noticeable that Nick isn't with me." He shook his head again and returned to the palate-wetting feast sitting on the palm of his hand. When she didn't leave, he looked to Ify for an explanation.

"E dey like say Oga pikin don loss," Ify responded with a serious look on her face.

The driver reluctantly set his plate of food down, grumbling as he groped around for the key that was hanging out of his pocket, only stopping when he stepped on it.

"Where's Nick?" The nanny

howled.

Everyone else in the house hurried to the sound and Ify



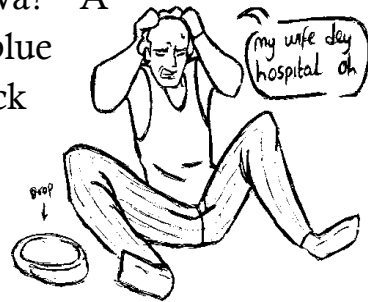
explained.

The driver looked beaten as fear took its toll on his brows. He didn't know his boss well, but he'd heard a lot about him and none of it good. He held his head and lamented.

"No be you?" A tall woman wearing a toque retorted. "Dem take food swear for you?"

The gateman tossed his beret and sat on the floor and cried; "Which kind wahala be this nah? My wife dey hospital o!"

"For dis 'mber month kwa?" A young man dressed in a blue gingham shirt and faded black trouser sighed.



"Will you all shut up?" The nanny exclaimed, holding her head. "I think my head is about to fall."

Stephen came to a halt when he discovered that grownups had replaced them in the larger living room. Most of the children crashed into him as they weren't watching.



"Aww Stephen!" a little boy cried.

They were hungry and thirsty, but the adults seemed upset, so they impatiently waited. By the door, they dumped their shopping bags on top of each other's own.



Cross, the nanny asked. "Where have you been?"

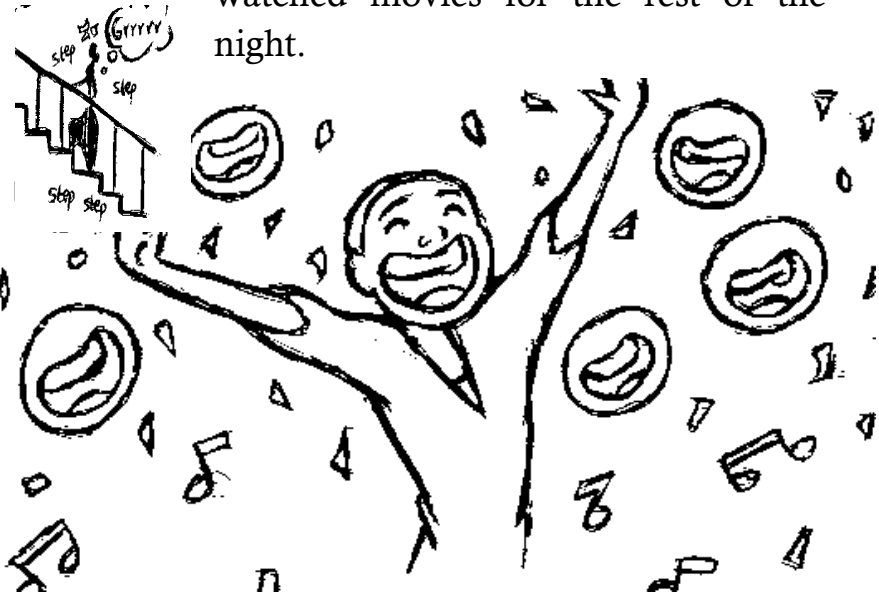
Nicholas raised a surprised brow. "Out?"

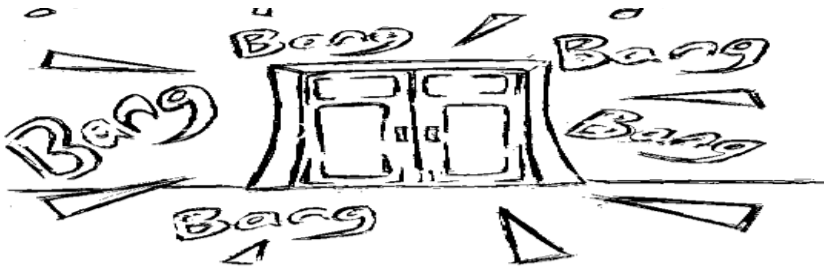
The nanny slunk back, blinked. She eyed him, groaned and dawdled for a little while before heading upstairs.



The party started right after.

Nicholas relished in their energy. They knew the lyrics to most of the songs and danced and ate. Bloated, they watched movies for the rest of the night.





8.

A loud bang on the door, followed by several others woke Nicholas. He yawned, opening his eyes just as someone farted in staccato filling him with the urge to puke. The banging he thought was in his head was outside, so he scrambled for the door. He coughed to hide his surprise. It was his father.

“Hello son, I’m sorry about yesterday. I’ve got to take off again. This merger is taking longer than I planned. I’ll definitely make it up to you.” His father said as he hurried up the stairs.

Nicholas shut the door and silently scoffed.

His father looked down from the landing. “Turn that music down, will you?”

“Yes Dad,” Nicholas said recollecting himself. He hurried back to the larger sitting room, closed the double doors and



closed the dining room doors because his new friends had spilled into it, then ran after his father.



Nicholas stiffened when he found his father was searching the drawers.

"I can't seem to find any of my bankcards. I've maxed out the one I left with."

"Maxed out," Nicholas repeated the only part of the statement that made sense to his scrambled thoughts.

He tucked his hands in his pocket and winced.

"It's expired. I meant to say."

"Oh!" Nicholas mumbled as he looked for an explainable place to put the cards that were in his pocket.

"Have you by any chance seen my bank cards? I could have sworn I left them here. I can't even find your mother's."

Nicholas blinked. He didn't know his mother had bankcards nor did he expect any to be obtainable since she'd passed.

“I’ll check downstairs,” Nicholas offered.

“Don’t worry son. I think I left them at the office.”

Nicholas moved near his father’s keepsakes that he’d gone through earlier and slipped the cards in. It was only then that he realised he’d also taken his mother’s card. He stealthily stepped away from the box and went back to leaning on the doorpost and watching his father scavenge for his bank cards.

His father paused and turned around to see his keepsake box open. He walked to it. Seeing the cards, he scratched his head. “I don’t remember leaving that there. I must be more jumbled up than I thought. Tell your nanny that I’m off to Togo for a week or two, then I’ll stop by Abuja before coming home? Be good son.” his father said and scratched his son’s head fondly. “You’re due for a haircut.”

Nicholas was only too relieved that he had not been caught, to be worried about missing



his father. There was something invigorating about hurting his father and pleasing his new friend, and there was something empowering in showing off to his friends, something his father would never understand.

By the time he got downstairs, his father had left.

Funny enough, he didn't feel perturbed by

his father's forgetfulness in wishing him a happy birthday which made him desire to find out more about this Tekena-man.

If only to find out if he was indeed a relative. But the question was how he would be able to tell if the man was a relative? He'd not seen anything in his



father's keepsakes to suggest it.

Perhaps, his mother's keepsakes could give him the answer he sought. However, her keepsakes were no more, even her picture, the one that rested on his dresser had grown wings.

Nicholas suspected that the person who stole the one on his dresser was the same person who took the rest of her things.

Was that Tekena-man involved? Or the new maid?

He moaned and slapped his forehead; he'd forgotten to give his father the consent form.

“New boy!” Stephen called.

Nicholas sniggered. He'd forgotten about that name tag. I guess I can get used to it, he thought. It's not like it is a negative word or anything.

He twirled to face Stephen.

Stephen yawned and rubbed his stomach then he pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead,



folded and tucked it back in his pocket. “Well, the party was smashing. But we have to go. Today is Sunday. It's showing day.”

Nicholas frowned. “Showing day?”

“Yes.”

“What is that?”

“For a boy, you ask too many questions,” Stephen said as he stretched his limbs.

“Well?”

“It's the day we present ourselves to families and hope to be taken in. I gave up a long time ago. But they...” Stephen paused looking at the children picking up their shopping bags and shrugged.

“Nick?” His nanny called.

Stephen assumed she was angry about the party that he quickly and quietly began to wake his friends. They stealthily carried their shopping bags, held their shoes in their hands and scurried out of the house on their tippy toes.

Meanwhile, Nicholas was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. He didn't see his new friends make a run for it.



At school the following day, the pupils Nicholas walked past nodded at him. He was sure something was off about his clothing that he ran to the lavatory. The totally horrid sight of it caused him to puke his breakfast, smearing the shirt of his uniform. He moaned. If they weren't talking about his clothes, now he'd given them something to talk about. He hurried back to his class averting his eyes. Not watching, he bumped into one of the teachers.

“Nicholas, watch where you are going.”

Nicholas staggered. “Yes, Sir. Good morning Sir.”

With brows arched with concern, the teacher asked. “Are you okay?”

Nicholas nodded with a small smile.



The teacher nodded still eyeing him suspiciously.

The teacher's brows looked much like

Scrooge's except his were black and wispy against his fair skin. Besides, he was intent on hiding away from the rest of his classmates.

"So, Joseph, I heard you had a swell party on Saturday," Gretchen said with a nod blocking his path.

Nicholas looked over at Stephen who shrugged. He meandered through a labyrinth of pupils to get to close to Stephen and asked in a loud whisper. "How could you have told her?"

"It just came out," Stephen defended and awkwardly pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it in his pocket.

Geez, he talks like a girl. Now it would look like I didn't invite the rest of the class on purpose. It's not like I know any of them, Nicholas thought and snapped. "Well done."



Stephen shrugged again and continued unruffled. "So, the rest of the group are wondering when you'll visit them. It's your turn you know since they came to make you happy."

“What!?” Nicholas squeaked and blinked. “I didn’t invite them...” He wanted to say more, but the Class Monitor tapped her desk to announce the presence of the Headmistress, Mrs Habib. The class got up just as the Headmistress walked in.

He now knew the Class Monitor; it was the girl who'd reprimanded him about the flowerpot. When she looked at him, he assumed she had reported him.

How kind of them to want to punish me at the start of the day? He mused.

“Good morning Ma, we're happy to see you. God...”

“Good morning Class,” she cut in. “Mrs Obazi your form teacher is unwell. A teacher will be assigned to your class for the duration of



her absence. Today, Mr Obesu will teach you, so be of your best behaviour. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"As you don't have a teacher today, at least until Mr Obesu comes, we'll be celebrating Master Nicholas Gharu's birthday. That'll be during your break period. His family brought us a cake." The Headmistress gestured at the first pupils by her right on the first row. "In the meantime, tell me the part you're playing in the Manger Roll Call."

When it got to Nicholas' turn, he did what everyone else did - get up, shout their names and the part they were playing.

"Interesting," the Headmistress paused thoughtfully. "Why was Joseph important?"

"Was he? I thought it was Mary?" A girl blurted out and covered her mouth as if she'd said something she wasn't supposed to.

"She was the most important. But -"

"Was she?" half of the class abruptly asked.

"Yes."

"Why?" Stephen curiously asked.

"She agreed to be used as a vessel."

"A vessel?" Gretchen asked trying to hide a chuckle in her hand.

“Vessel kwa,” one of the boys that sat at the back of the class said in a jerky voice. “Kpocharam my container biko.”

The Headmistress gave Uchenna warning gaze and said. “Uchenna, one more word from you that has nothing to do with this topic and you’ll clean the lavatory.”

Uchenna lowered his head and sat down.

“Much like a container, yes,” the Headmistress replied, nodding. “If she had said no, we’ll not have Jesus today so we wouldn’t be celebrating Christmas.”

The class looked warily at her. They were mostly inclined to disagree, but with a Headmistress?

“Let me explain,” The Headmistress said as she pulled out their Teacher’s chair. “If your mother was told that when you finish primary school, secondary school, and earned a degree, you won’t get married. You’ll simply go from town to town preaching to people who will beat you up, steal from you, curse your father and your mother and after three years you would die for those same people. Will you or your mother agree?”

“No way!” Uchenna vehemently exclaimed then held his lips between his fingers and sat

down as quietly as possible in the hope that the Headmistress wouldn't notice him - he was the tallest person in the class and had a raspy voice.

"One time, when I was small," a girl started.

"You're still small," Gretchen muttered, bobbing at the girl.

"Well, my mother," the girl continued and paused dramatically. "Beat someone for calling my brother imbecile."

"Is he not?" Gretchen asked, her eyes daring the girl to correct her.

"No! He is just mentally challenged." the girl corrected defiantly.

"Fancy name for *'imbe'*." Gretchen hissed.

"Gretchen, that's a horrible thing to say!" The Headmistress admonished.

"It's people like you that make me look good," Stephen stated, chuckling. "As you know, I don't judge."

The Class Monitor rolled her eyes just as the others started a low tone debate between themselves.

Esin sniggered.

“Enough! Now, focus!” The Headmistress said in a raised voice. “Class, why do you think Joseph was an exceptional person?”

“Exceptional?” Someone from the back of the class said. He didn't belong to the class, his head was still white from its impact with the duster.

“Special and not common,” Esin murmured proudly.

“Bookworm,” Gretchen's twin mumbled distastefully.

Gretchen responded with an applaud.

Esin smiled broadly until he felt something wet on the back of his shirt and closed his eyes afraid to find out what it was.

“Because God spoke to him?” A boy who'd joined the class a week before Nicholas asked in a small voice.



“I see, you need to learn more,” she murmured to herself and looked up. “Well, Mr Obesu is here. Make sure you pay

better attention in all your Bible Knowledge classes.”

The class stood up abruptly and greeted Mr Obesu. Mr Obesu was a gaunt man, his tan chinos trouser was pleated around his waist with his belt. His shirt equally looked like he could easily hide in it.



If I hear PHIM

“Good morning Ma, good morning class.” Mr Obesu muttered rapidly.



As soon as the Headmistress left Mr Obesu turned to face the class. “Listen! I’m in the middle of preparing my class for the Christmas party. So, if I hear *phim*, I’ll destroy each

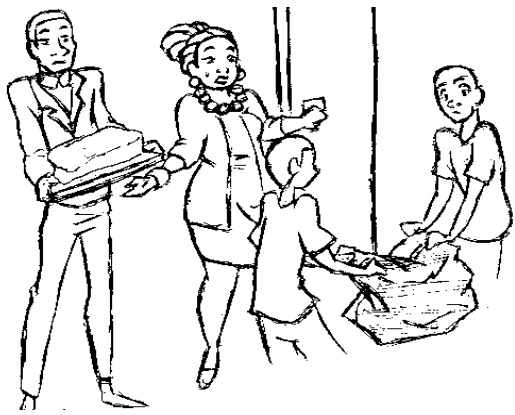
and every one of you.” He pointed at each of them. “Class Monitor, you know what to do.”

She barely got up to answer him when he left the class.

Two hours passed and no teacher came to teach them. Nicholas wished he had brought himself something to read. It was still an hour thirty minutes before break time. Sighing, he turned to speak with Stephen, but Stephen was

already at the corner of the class jeering and
playing cards with the pupils who sat at the
back of the class.

10.

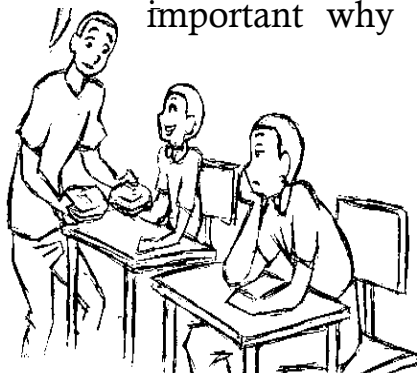


As soon as it was break time, the Headmistress returned with Mr Obesu and two other teachers. She supervised the carrying of the large bag holding packaged fried rice. Mr Obesu carried the cake, his face grim.

For some reason he couldn't understand, Nicholas was relieved that the cake was not as large as the one in the house. The birthday jingles, cake and applaud were a brief distraction for Nicholas.

He was more concerned with discovering what Joseph's job was. In his last school, Joseph was regarded as a wimp who hid behind an excuse of a vision. When he told his mother at the time, she said, 'if he wasn't

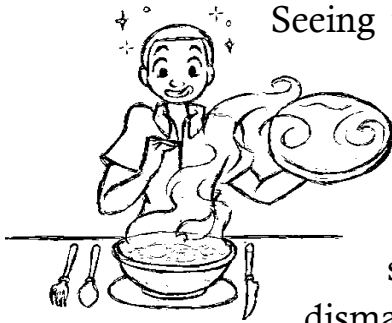
important why was he mentioned. You don't see it doesn't mean it's not there'. It didn't bother him then, but now he desired to know



the reason why this Joseph was important.

The Headmistress had ignited a desire in him which was further reinforced by what his mother had said all those years ago.

As soon as he entered the house, he dumped his backpack on the dining table.



Seeing the *ekpang-nkukwo* the cook had prepared made his mouth water. He'd been so distracted that he'd eaten nothing at school. He slushed his food to the dismay of his chest. He had to slam it with his fist a couple of times to get relief.

His nanny came in and sat down for a while, peering at him the way a dentist peered at a teeth.

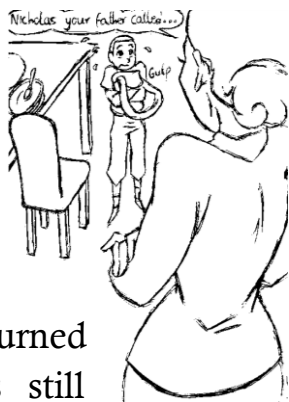
He had not noticed his nanny come to join him.

His nanny let out a long sigh and said in a solemn voice, "a lot about you has changed these past days. I do hope it's for the better." She thinned her lips and frowned at his plate. "Do you want more?"

Nicholas strongly shook his



head. Seeing her gaze stuck on him with her arms crossed in front of her, he quickly cleaned his mouth and cleared the table. He returned and noticed that she was still watching him. He promptly dislodged backpack from the table but she still looked at him. He glanced around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Nothing was out of place. Defeated and afraid to ask, he hugged his bag and waited.



“Your father called,” his nanny said.

Nicholas stiffened. He slowly turned around bracing himself with his backpack.

“He expects you to be by the phone at 7 p.m. prompt.”

Nicholas nodded and began to walk away.

“I’m not done with you. As from today, you’ll have no phone or tablet.” Nicholas opened his mouth to protest, but she raised a hand to stop



him. “If you need to read a book then the library is just a few streets away. Do you know that what you did could have cost everyone in your father’s employ their jobs? Not that you care but they’ve got families, you know.”

Nicholas wrinkled his nose. *She always has something to say*, he thought and scoffed under his breath.

“Throwing a party is fine if you asked for permission. What if hooligans had joined the party? You’ve got to be careful because actions do have consequences, good and bad.” She sighed holding her stomach and her forehead. “There’ll be no desserts, sweets or the like. And yes, it includes your favourite juice. Anything you want to say for yourself?”

Nicholas blurted the first thing that came to his mind. “Why was Joseph an exceptional man?”

His nanny blinked in surprise and shrugged. “Because he was wise beyond his years.”

“You mean age?”

The nanny nodded with furrowed brows.

“Okay.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Nothing. I’m supposed to be playing the part of Joseph.”

“A Christmas play.”

“So it would seem.” Nicholas retorted with a shrug.

“So it would seem?”

“The teacher didn’t come in today,” Nicholas muttered and returned to the dining table still hugging his knapsack. “It’s just that apart from Mary, Joseph, and the baby... Jesus. The rest are animals. Well at least until the shepherds appear. I get to play Joseph.”

His nanny snorted. “You as Joseph?”

Nicholas didn’t like her reaction to his playing Joseph. But he couldn’t possibly take the role of Jesus or the shepherd. He wouldn’t have minded playing the part of one of the Magi, but they had no part in the play. The part of Herod would suffice if it were in the play.



He absentmindedly walked into the kitchen. It was his first time in it. It was foggy and stuffy. “What’s her problem?” Nicholas mumbled to himself as he set his dishes by the sink.

“Whose problem?” Ify asked startling him.

“What’s wrong with playing the part of Joseph?”

“Oh, the dreamer, nothing.” Ify nudged him out of her path to the sink.

“The dreamer?” Nicholas asked, looking confused.

Ify scratched her head and gestured. “Of course, he was arrogant and had to learn humility as a slave and a prisoner.”

“So, I’m arrogant? You’re calling me arrogant!” Nicholas mumbled and started to cry.



Ify turned around in a bid to muffle him but hesitated and quietly exclaimed. “No o! God forbid!” She eyes him and reluctantly wiped his face. “You sef, somebody cannot play with you?”

“Why can’t I play Joseph, Mary’s husband. Please tell me!”

“Honestly?”

Nicholas nodded.

“Well, Joseph,” she started and paused to push a large bowl into his hand then moved to a basket of melon seed. “You see, hold the bowl properly.”

Nicholas stared at her for



a while then unwillingly held the bowl up. “Joseph protected Jesus, pikin wen no be im own o! I meant that he took the child as his own flesh and blood. He loved God and was kind.”

“How did he protect Jesus?”

“Na wa o! He ran away to Egypt with the baby nawh.”

In other words, he was a coward.

She sighed and shook her head as she took the large bowl now filled with melon seed from



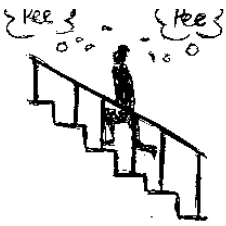
him. “How does your teacher get to teach you, when your mouth no fit stay one place. He taught Jesus how to care and plenty things like that.”

“How can he teach God to care?”

“Abeg, abeg, abeg. I resemble pastor? I answer A, you jump to B. Na who send me sef?” She climbed a stool to retrieve something from the cabinet but remembering how he cried a minute ago, she stopped. “I’ve got work to do.” She said quickly, turned to face the sink and added. “Ask your nanny.”

Nicholas could tell that he was being dismissed. He was left more confused than he'd been. The adults in his life were less than fascinating, he concluded.

Also, he had a feeling that there was something he'd forgotten.



11.

The following day, their form teacher didn't turn up. Not the next day, or the day after the next day, or the day after the day after the next day. On Friday he went to school with a book to read.

As soon as he set his backpack down – he ran up the stairs to ease himself. There was a parcel on his bureau. It was a small one, so he took it with him and moaned after seeing its content: a thumb drive.

Curious and fascinated, he took it downstairs, waited until his nanny had gone out for grocery-shopping and snuck into his father's study - his nanny had taken all his gizmos as punishment for the party.

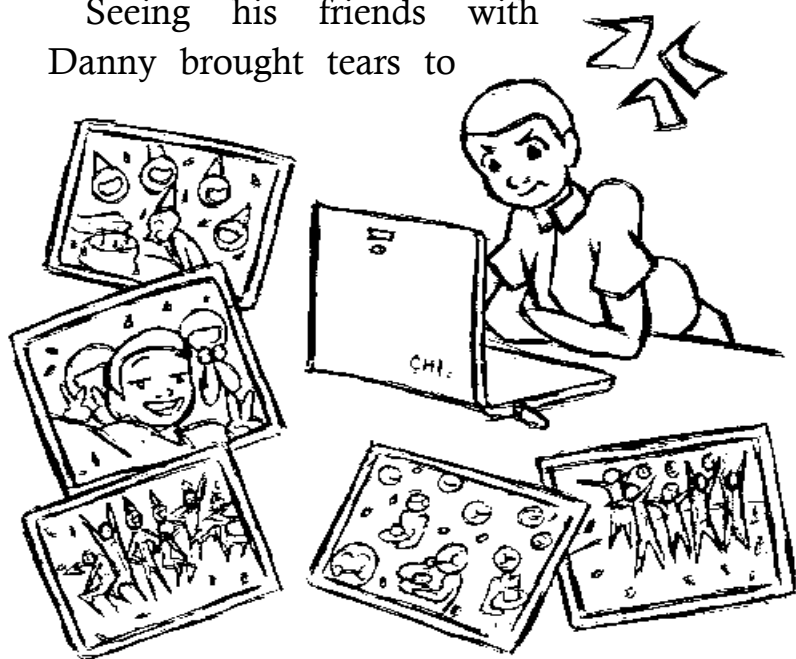


Seeing the pictures in the thumb drive made

him wish he hadn't opened the file. It had snapshots from Danny's birthday.

Danny had been a rival of his since playgroup. Even when they became friends, there was a silent competition between them. To worsen it, they shared birthdays. How cruel could fate be?

Seeing his friends with Danny brought tears to



his eyes but he fought it. He missed the friends he'd been forced to share with Danny because they were in the same class in the same school. He now especially hated the fact that Danny had to be the one entitled to have the

company of all his friends at his birthday party. He'd planned to get them into better outfits so he could take pictures that'll show off the number of new friends he'd garnered in such a short space of time even though they were younger than him.

If only the girls hadn't been so fussy about the frills, ruffles and laces and the fact that everything had to be pink or have pink. To him, the colour only made sense in ice cream where it told the world that it was strawberry. It didn't make sense that they'd fight over it, but they did. What happened to purple or green or any other colour?

That night, Nicholas didn't know which bothered him more: not remembering what his mother had really said about Joseph; losing his friends to Danny; or not fulfilling his goal due to the infinitely endless pink. Nicholas tossed and turned all night until he fell into a hazy slumber.

The weekend was so long that Nicholas felt like a twig that had fallen into stale water, floating and going nowhere.

It took him a while to realise that he wasn't dizzy but that his nanny was rousing him.

While he took his bath, an idea crept into his thoughts. A great idea, but he didn't know how to go about it. One that would make Danny's fancy birthday party crumble like building blocks. This idea would have his stamp written all over it. There was now an elephant's calf in the room: getting his classmates involved.

He impatiently made his journey to school.

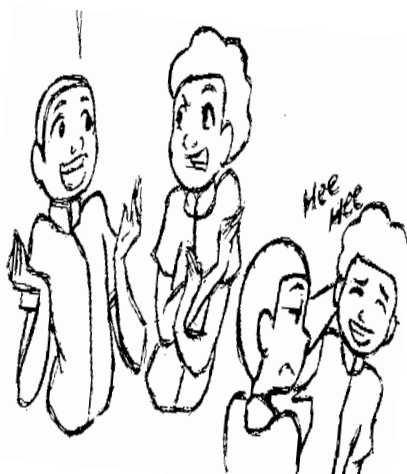
Soon after he sat down, Stephen walked over to him.

"It's going to be another free day." Stephen whispered cheerfully. He half-sat on the desk, pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket.

"She's not back?" Nicholas casually asked.

"No o! Something about an operation."

Nicholas eyed Stephen suspiciously. Stephen raised his hands and made an innocent face. "I overheard. I wasn't even eavesdropping. Well, *they* said she'll not be back before the end of term which is why most



of them,” he nodded to his fellow backbenchers. “are celebrating. The play will now be kaput.”

Nicholas’ eyes bulged. He couldn't believe his luck. “I’ve got an idea.”

Stephen sucked his tongue and twisted his mouth uninterested.

“Why don't we use this opportunity to practice the play?” Nicholas eagerly asked.

Stephen snickered, puzzled then shook his head. With a sigh, he said, “No one wants to play an animal.”

“We can change it up.”

“How?” he asked, still uninterested

Nicholas shrugged. He hadn't thought of the nitty-gritty of the Christmas play.

12.

They looked at the rest of their classmates for a while, Stephen sat on Esin's desk and rested his feet on the seat while Nicholas leaned on the desk beside it. By their left side, a group of girls clapped their hands and tapped their feet to the rhythm of the girl in the middle. By their right side, Esin was competing with two other pupils in building origamis, some watched in awe and tried to mimic the trio woefully. Stephen's clique – the backbenchers - booed Gretchen; Gretchen hissed at them, one of the boys retaliated with a meow sound.

Nicholas and Stephen pondered for a while and suddenly looked at each other, laughing.

"I have an idea." Nicholas and Stephen chorused.

"You first," Nicholas urged

"You first." Stephen gestured.

"Stop acting like girls," one of the backbenchers snapped.

Stephen glared at the boy who reclined into

his seat with a shrug.

“We can change the animal sounds into songs,”

Nicholas mumbled as he nodded to the rhythm of the singing and clapping girls.



Stephen grimaced.

“What?” Nicholas asked, still wide open at his friend in excitement.

“I was thinking, you could promise to bring jollof rice on the day.”

“Show day!” Nicholas exclaimed and shook his friend then corrected himself. “Showing day.”

He frowned, his excitement deflating when he saw annoyance on Stephen’s face.

“What are you two up to?” Gretchen asked, arms folded.

Stephen looked at his friend with a disapproving frown, but his friend wasn’t watching.



"We want to change the play,"
Nicholas offered.

"To include
snakes?" she asked
rubbing her hands
readily.

"No!" both boys
shrieked and
grimaced

uncomfortably.

"We know, we don't like animal sounds.
You and your friends can come up with a
song that will make the tune work."



Gretchen
shrugged and
slanted her head.
"If I OK, we'll need a
lyric for the play or
three lyrics." The

girl that sang looked around confused. "Hold
on!" Gretchen sighed then turned to the boys
and whispered. "Only if snakes are allowed."

Nicholas shrugged.

"Only if it fits with the song." Stephen
reiterated.

Gretchen snorted. "Not a problem." She
started walking away and turned back to

them. "So, what is show or showing day?"

"None of your business," Stephen replied through clenched teeth.

"Now, it's my business." Gretchen murmured and replaced Nicholas on the desk.

"Class," Nicholas called. "We've got an idea, Well, mainly Stephen's idea. We're changing the animal sounds into a song."

No one playing the part showed an interest.

"There might be food on that day," Stephen quickly added as he made his way to Nicholas



in front of the class.

"Food!" the class chanted.

"Enough!" Gretchen quickly joined them. We'll have to practice our lines. Nicholas will direct us until our teacher is back."



The class monitor, the girl who'd reprimanded him over a flowerpot sniggered.

"Oya Divine, speak your mind." Gretchen's twin urged the sniggering girl.

"I can do a better job," Divine said coyly.

"Much as we'd like to see you try," Gretchen wrinkled her face and continued, "...you better stick to your duty as Class Monitor *o nne*."

"Well, you're all making noise," Divine countered.

"You included," Esin said, frowning.

Stephen chuckled, surprised and nodded his approval of Esin's outburst.

"Tomorrow, we'll go through the play. Just know your lines," Nicholas started then raised a brow at his new comrades for support, and they gestured to him to continue.

"How many of you don't have a costume?"

More than half of the class raised their hands,

“I don't...”

Stephen feigned a cough and shook his head at Nicholas.

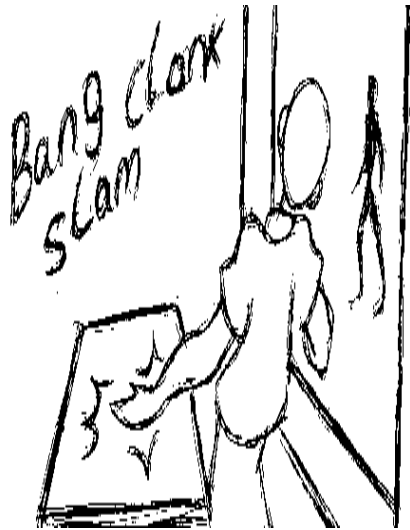
Nicholas wanted to continue, but for him to succeed and pull Stephen’s supporters to his goal they had to have a united front, so hesitantly he said.

“We’ll come back to that.” Then he leaned into Stephen and whispered. “I don't know the play.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes, shook her head and went to the form teacher's desk and returned with a copy of the play.

“We’ll be the best that we can be,” Gretchen said eagerly smiling at him as she handed it to him.

One of the boys at the back smacked the lid of his locker in an unusual pattern. Everyone scrambled to their seat. Nicholas would have remained where he was if Stephen hadn't



nudged him forward saying,
“Mr Obesu’s coming!”





In a blink of an eye, all the desks had books displayed on them with their owners bent over, reading. The classroom had become so quiet that they could hear Mr Obesu's shoes swish through the wet grass.

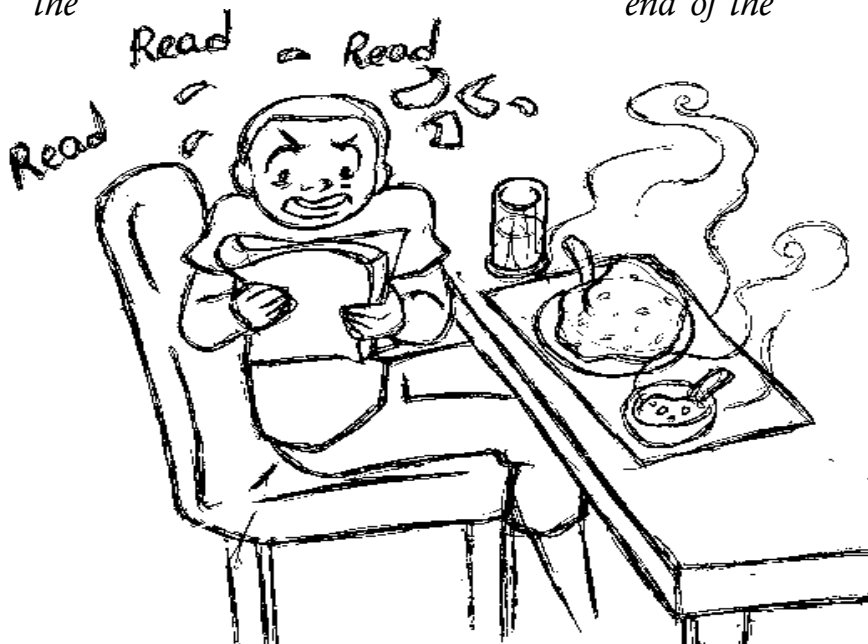
Nicholas smiled, unable to contain his excitement. *Let's see how Danny will beat that?*

He searchingly glared at it and snickered at the name: Manger Roll Call. *What matters is not the name, he told himself. It's what I do with it.*

The bell announcing the end of the school day rang just as he started to open it, so he

tucked it in his bag.

*I'm going to study the play like nothing else. By
the end of the*



*school term I'll not only be most popular boy in
school but Danny would wish he were me.*

“Take that Danny!” he muttered.

Upon entering the house, Nicholas quickly ran up the stairs to get changed. He returned and went straight to dining room, practically bouncing with the play close to his chest.

His food was piping hot, and his nanny was not in sight, so he decided to take a glimpse at the play while he ate.



14.

Nicholas began to sob.

This play is a mess! No wonder, there was no interest in it. This was supposed to be my one opportunity to put Danny in his place, forever.

Danny had taken too much from him. There was no way he was going to let this one slide. He just had to come up with a strategy that would put him on a high level than his frenemy, Danny.

Defeated, he moaned, still staring at the booklet. Even if he succeeded in producing the best play ever, there was no way of sending it to Danny as he had no multimedia gadget. Thanks to his father, he became friends with the most annoying person on earth. And thanks to his father, that boy would have another opportunity to exceed him. The quiet competition between them was as frustrating as it was satisfying. Worthwhile didn't fit in.

Nicholas was in his worst state. He'd never felt this harassed. More so, with a script that

would end his miserable little life.

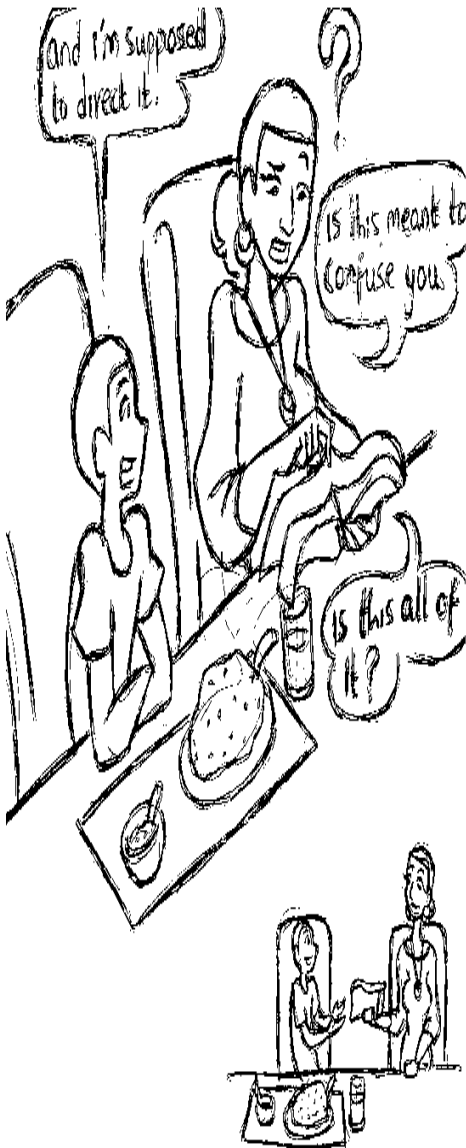
His nanny walked in and was about to reprimand him but stopped when she saw him fiddling with a booklet as well as toy with his food. Thinking it was a problematic homework and equally wondering why it was

in a book she stretched a hand.

“May I?” The nanny asked. She smiled when she noticed that it was a play. “Is this the play you talked about?”

Nicholas nodded.

She read it, frowning as she turned each page. “Is this meant to confuse you? It’s hard to tell which part belongs to whom. Is this all of it?”



Nicholas made a sound between a snicker and a chuckle. "And I'm supposed to direct it."

"Are you allowed to make changes to it?"

Nicholas twisted his mouth. "I don't know."

"Who's your teacher?"

"I don't know her name."

His nanny looked at him blankly and shook her head.

"Do you have friends in your school?"

"Yes. A few," he frowned. "Why?"

"To get it right, you'll need all the help you can get."

"How can I ask for help when I'm the person supposed to be directing it?"

"Asking for help shows you can trust their opinion."

Nicholas raised confused brows. "That does not make sense."

"You can only ask for help from people you believe in or people you think you can trust. Can you trust me to help you with the script?"

Nicholas nodded eagerly then sighed ruefully. "I don't think we're allowed to alter it."

"Why?"

“Because previous classes have played it as it is?”

“Let’s do this. We’ll take clips from them and produce ours. If you show your teacher and she does not like it then you can ditch it.”

Nicholas pondered. *Anything is better than what we have.*

“Would you like that?”

Totally. “When do we start?”

“As soon as you finish your food.”

That day would be one of the best days of his life; not only did they piece together a new play, but his nanny had also forgotten her rule of no desserts, sweets or the like. She told him stories that made him laugh until his stomach ached, and she said it with a straight face. She also forgot that he was supposed to be in bed early for his football lessons in the morning - a sport he absolutely hated.

Finally finished, they decided to practice the line but were interrupted by Ify.

“Ify, don’t startle me like that ever!” His nanny screeched then let out a low whistle as her hands flew to her head and stomach.

“It’s 4 a.m., Ma,” Ify gripped, wrinkling her face.

“Is it?” His nanny raised surprised brows.

“Nicholas, go to bed. You've got football practice?”

Nicholas was about to object, but she raised her hand as usual.

His nanny clasped her hands and gestured with her head. “We'll continue from where we stopped when you get back.”

Nicholas reluctantly did as he was told. He'd never seen this part of his nanny. He liked it. He thought of doing something for her. Remembering something she asked of him, he ran back to the dining room.

“Bedtime story, tonight. I promise,” Nicholas said and crossed his heart.

She smiled, shook her head and sighed.

15.

The weekend had come and gone too quickly for Nicholas, but he was glad. Armed with a new script, hope and a wish he jumped out of the car and ran all the way to his class and waited for the school devotion to begin. He barely dropped his backpack when...

“Hey!” Gretchen squealed.

Nicholas turned around slowly with a question on his face, his jaw clenched.

“So, how do we proceed?” Gretchen squealed.

“Proceed?” Nicholas asked wishing she was an ant that he could crush right then.

“On the play,” Gretchen retorted, sniffed and sneezed.

Nicholas stepped away from her afraid that one of her snakes may have infected her like their classmates had rumoured. “Oh, the play. Has your friend finished her part?” He asked sulkily.

“Of course,” Gretchen replied, then sniffed and sneezed again.

“That quickly?” Nicholas stammered. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the fear of her becoming a leech until the grand finale of the play. A part of him wished her answer would be ‘no’.

“Of course, she's quick on her feet,” Gretchen chirped proudly.

“And your bullying her had nothing to do with it,” Nicholas grumbled.

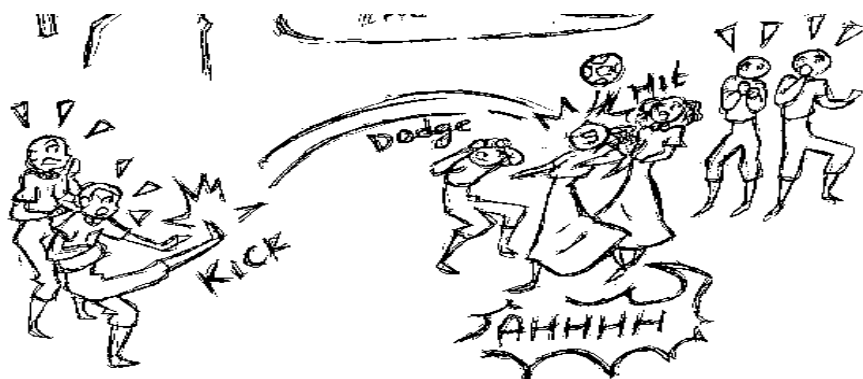


Gretchen, who was heading out of the class, stopped midstride and asked, “What did you say?”

Nicholas shook his head. She is getting more irritating by the second, he thought.

“New boy!” Someone cried.

Thinking it was his Teacher. Nicholas quickly got up and was ready to greet her and



scoffed when he realised it was just the class monitor, Divine.

“Just me, new boy. How is it going with the play?” Divine asked.

In his thoughts, he turned her to a piece of paper and tore her to shreds. Feeling he wasn’t inclined to answer, he shrugged.

Uchenna and another boy ran into the class.

Nicholas frowned at them.

Uchenna stopped near the form teacher’s desk, tossed a ball and let it land on his fingertip and whirl then continued to the back of the class. Another two boys playfully jostling each other came in. While Uchenna and his partner went to the back of the class, the jostling two remained in front and called for the ball.

Nicholas saw the path of the ball and ducked. Rushing back into class, Gretchen wasn't so lucky and instantly started bleeding. A few other students walked in at the same time and froze.

No one motioned or talked until Esin walked in and screamed.



Esin's panic turned the class into a flurry until Stephen who was always late

walked in and took Gretchen to the staffroom steering her away from him, so her back was set to him. Minutes later, Uchenna and his partner were called to the staffroom.



Their teacher had not returned as predicted. His classmates were bored. Seeing the opportunity to get back at Danny, Nicholas decided to broach the idea of the new script with his classmates.

He'd even printed off several copies when he was supposed to be having breakfast. His appetite had not been enough to distract him from his goal and now his stomach rumbled. More so, as he stood in front of the class, he was no longer confident.

He thought of the flaws in his plan: no recording equipment; three weeks to make it a success; half of the class, no costume.

He sighed. Frowning suddenly, he thought of his nanny's questions.

For moral support, he looked towards Gretchen, but she hadn't returned from the staffroom. Remembering the snapshots of Danny's birthday didn't help. He turned his attention to Stephen and seeing Stephen's eagerness made him want to try.

16.

Since his nanny asked him his Teacher's name, Nicholas had made a sincere effort to know people's names.

He didn't know his teacher's names in his previous schools.

Apart from Danny Oswald, Bethesda and Jacoba - the two girls whom he'd known from playgroup and his neighbours, and who turned out to be Danny's spies - he didn't know any other names.

His other friends he knew by their nicknames. Acknowledging it now was sad. If Stephen hadn't introduced himself, he was sure he wouldn't have known his name. He'd heard the class monitor's several times, yet he didn't remember it. Gretchen was like a wasp, it would have been difficult not to know her name.

"What is our form teacher's name?"

"Mrs Obazi!" some of his classmates chorused thinking it was a game.

“Well, Mrs Obazi,” he started slowly trying to think of what to say and snickered, paced a little and began to mutter.

“Well, Mrs Obazi has not returned and the teachers who were supposed to help out haven't. We don't know what to learn and can't teach ourselves what we don't know. We can use this time to do the play and turn this boring-in-school holiday into something exciting. Ask me only questions that will make this work. Actually, I think it will be best to ask Stephen.”

Nicholas looked briefly at Stephen who shrugged.

“Also, Gretchen whenever she returns and the songs we'll use on the day.” Nicholas paused and gestured because he had forgotten the lyricist's name.

He continued pacing and then remembered the stapled papers in his hands and quickly distributed it.

“I've altered the play so that the animals would be less mute as they'll be singing. Can we just study our lines and add the music later?” Nicholas paused to catch his breath.

That didn't seem to get them as interested as he wanted.

“Cram it,” Stephens said and made his way towards the front of the classroom. As he spoke, he seemed to command their interest because they listened to every word he said with piqued interest. “The songs will be practiced from next Wednesday. If *they* come to disturb us and make us feel bad -”

“We’ll show them,” Uchenna exclaimed from the back of the class startling some of them. The boy beside him clasped his hand while the rest of the class hammered their desks in agreement Stephen looked on, and after a few seconds, he pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket.

“We’ll have invisible hooves, and we’ll need to learn the rhythm for it.” Ifiok squeaked in a low voice.

Some laughed, some snickered, others looked at her confused.

“What is funny in what she said?” Gretchen asked.

The classroom turned into hicks of laughter of various kinds, sniffing kind, the coughing kind, the snorting kind, the giggles kind and even fart-sounding kind. This was all because

of the funny shape of the gauze on Gretchen's face: the bandage was misshaped.

Nicholas was sure the school nurse left the slit where her mouth was supposed to be to keep her quiet. But he couldn't think of an



explanation for the little opening where her eyes were supposed to be.

"Keep laughing. I'll put a snake in all your beds. I know where most of you live and the rest wouldn't be hard to find." Gretchen mumbled as she walked in.

If it was to keep her quiet, it has failed, Nicholas thought. He quickly banished the thought to prevent giving his plans a bad omen.

Stephen laughed the loudest. "I wonder

why your mouth wasn't covered."

The following day, Mr Obesu gave them the same warning and abandoned them to their pursuits. Gretchen turned out to be more helpful than Stephen, and the foot-tapping went without a hitch. The entire class enjoyed it and were so carried away that they almost landed in hot waters with Mr Obesu.

Luckily, Mr Obesu was waylaid by a youth corper.

Wednesday came,

Gretchen feeling confident that they were ready, decided to add the music. The who class became disjointed spokes of a cartwheel. Their laughter helped ease Nicholas' concern about their clumsy ostrich dance.

At the end of the day, they agreed to meet in school for full rehearsals. The venue had been independently changed and agreed upon without Nicholas. Stephen had stealthily added a choir of angels to the acts so he could bring his friends. He hoped the school would like the idea and if they didn't, would be

unable to prevent it on the day. Unsure of Gretchen, he decided to blackmail her: if she disagreed, the business of bedwetting would be an enticing topic for the class.

Nicholas had not had the time to practice his lines. Playing Joseph wasn't supposed to be hard, but he'd been given a few speaking parts. Moreover, he was practicing how to sing and tap-dance at the same time, something he wasn't used to.

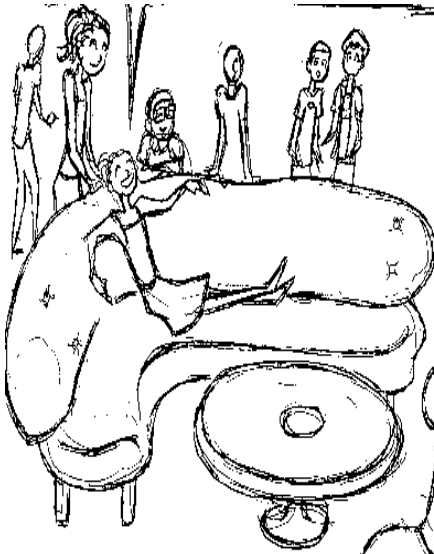
He was desperate for two reasons: he was directing the play and he had two left feet. He waited for his nanny to check on him before sneaking out of his room, then tiptoed until he got to the study. He almost passed out in fright when he saw Ify. She sat in the dark laughing at something she'd seen on the telly.

Relieved that he had not been caught, he continued on his tippy toes to the study and shut the door behind him.



A rowdy rhythmic sound above Nicholas' head woke him up. Stretching his eyelids, he stumbled out of the study to inspect the source of the sound. He went to check and saw his classmates and Stephen's friends. He sighed with brief relief when he saw that they hadn't soiled anything - he hadn't lived down Stephen and his friends' last visit with his nanny.

More so, he didn't want to tarnish his nanny's pleasant mood. He had an earnest wish that she would be friendly enough to let



him have one device for filming the play, most preferably the tablet.

Stephen saw him and quickly



walked to him and dragged him to a corner of the living room. With an exaggerated expression, he began to explain. "The school refused to let us in without our parents' consent..."

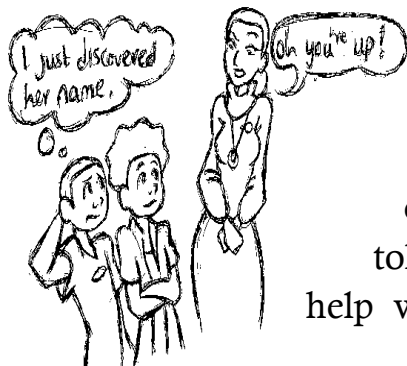
"Mrs Ogbozo will help us while we practice here. Our parents know her,"

Gretchen finished as she plopped on the sofa close to them.

Nicholas squinted briefly at her and turned to Stephen. "Mrs Ogbozo?"

"Yes?" Nicholas'

nanny walked in. "Who called? Oh, you're up! I told your classmates that I'll help while you get ready. You



don't mind, do you?"

Nicholas blinked. He had just discovered her name, and that



she knew most of their parents? He wondered if he should be concerned about how much he didn't know about her or anyone else. He looked up wondering why the nanny was looking at him. He looked down to see that he was still in his pyjama and ran out of the living room.

They had been practicing so well that he was beginning to daydream Danny's stunned face and the awe of his friends back in Kent.

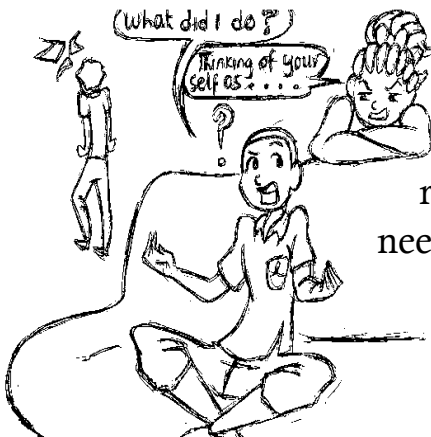
"New boy!" Gretchen and Divine exclaimed.

He hadn't realized that the room was quiet until he saw black dot in white from his classmates peering at him. He replied with a 'what is it' look.

Stephen yawned. "It's your turn."

"What?" Nicholas sniggered.

They gestured, but he didn't understand. The look on his nanny's face had not dissolved. It made him apologize. He hated that look, but he wanted the play to run smoothly. No. He needed it to run smoothly.





“It’s like walking back and forth on a croaked path,” his nanny, Mrs Ogbozo suggested to him when he stumbled a third time. She had decided to grill them ensuring them that

they’d know it like ‘the back of their hands’

As he acted out his character, it dawned on him what Stephen was trying to tell him on his birthday. How Stephen had been able to meet Tekena-man was still a mystery, Stephen was talking about show day and the other children that attended his birthday know about or discussed show day, but no one else in their school knew of show days. As soon as he finished his scene and the choir of angels played their part, he inched closer to Stephen and whispered.

“What is show day?”

“Not now!” Stephen warned.

“I want to know what it is.” Nicholas’ patience had worn thin. He had to be sure, he needed to be sure. He didn’t know why he knew he wanted to. He couldn’t concentrate any more at his mind reeled He had been

complaining about the tablet, the phone, and the measly iPod that he hadn't realised why Stephen's friends looked so raggedy at his party. He couldn't believe people were that poor.

"What is show day?" Nicholas blurted out.

The whole class fell silent. Fearing what Stephen would do, they stealthily snuck to Mrs Ogbozo's side. Gretchen was the only one who showed interest.

Stephen shook his head disapprovingly and walked out and so did most of the backbenchers in school and Stephen's friend from the party. It was the first time Stephen didn't bring out the yellow handkerchief from his pocket.

Baffled, Nicholas asked. "What did I do?"

"Thinking of yourself as usual," Divine murmured and clucked her tongue. "You want to know, abi? Show day is the day that desperate parents choose desperate children to soothe their status, soul and pride. And it's not Show Day, its Showing Day. Satisfied?"

"Divine!" Esin cried and gestured to the crying children who were huddled to the corner of the next room sobbing.

"You're no different from New Boy." A girl

playing the part of the giraffe said gingerly and left the large sitting room.

Nicholas bulked. He averted his gaze because of the judging eyes which included the nanny.

But all I did was ask a question?

He suddenly felt small and guilty. Guilt he bore from the way they stared at him. It was quite an uncomfortable feeling.

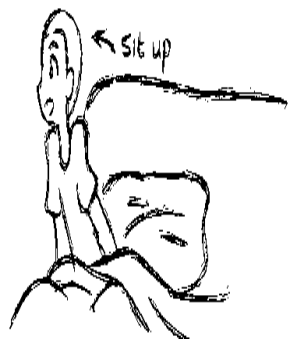
“Everyone, its time for lunch.” The nanny said in a gentle voice and got up.

Hungry and eager for the change of setting, they followed Nicholas’ nanny to the dining room.

Nicholas watched them leave. The nanny was last.

He was made to feel guilty, and he didn’t know what for. After they’d had lunch, no one looked at his face. If he got near any of them, they’d move away.

They returned to their practice only stopping to have their dinner. His classmates promised to come the following day, but none of them turned up much to Nicholas’s relief.



18.

Nicholas gleamed at the ceiling for the first time, not bored but curious and excited.

All that remained now was something to record the event with and the costumes. He'd forgotten about that not-so-minor detail. Most of his classmates didn't have costumes. He snickered mockingly, neither did he. He'd have to ask Stephen about the changes he'd made as soon as their path crossed.

Stephen reminded him a lot about Danny except Stephen cared. Like Danny, Stephen did and said what he wanted even to the teachers.

Thinking of it made him wonder if he was the best person to play the part of Joseph's character especially after his nanny, Mrs Ogbozo had spared no time in pointing out Joseph's characteristics. The admiration in her voice as she described the Joseph character made him wonder what she really thought of him. Ify had implied that he was arrogant and even sniggered when she learned the role he was playing.

The problem with the people in his life was that they'd snigger, scowl, scoff, snort and frown, roll their eyes and even turn everything into an irony, but like his father, they'd say nothing if it wasn't sarcastic.

Perhaps, he was with the wrong set of people. He shuddered violently. He wasn't going to let his nanny, Ify, the driver, Gretchen, or Divine get under his skin.

He blinked several times to chase the tears away. He could speak to only one person, his mother, but the person was no more.

She'd always kept her promise.

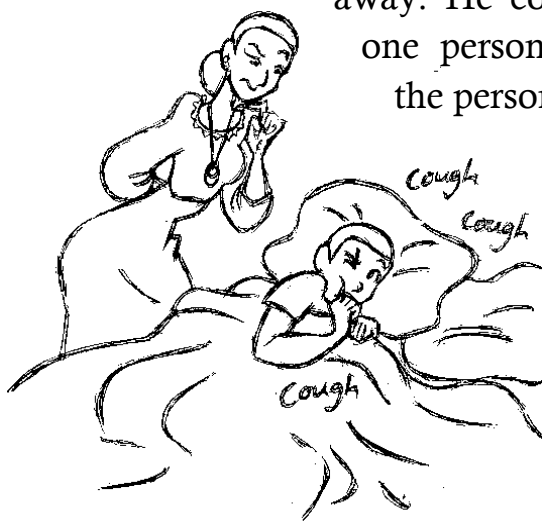
He never did.

Nicholas

frowned. That would make him more like his

father. If there was one

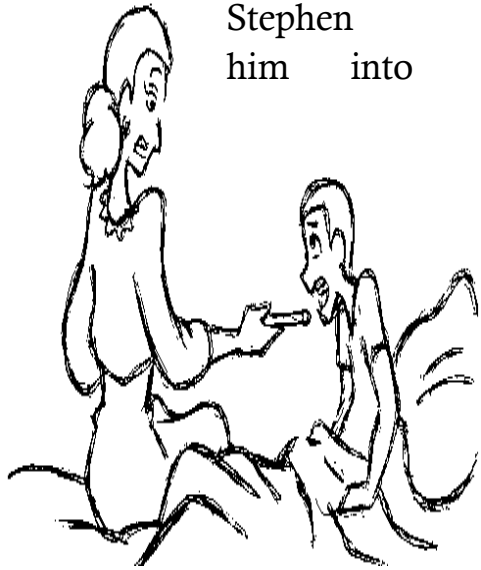
thing he didn't want, it would be to turn out like his father. He decided there and then to keep his promises.



He'd forgotten to read the bedtime story to his nanny, even though he had promised. He'd been longing for his mother so much. Perhaps, it was best not to keep that particular promise. The nanny was a paid help and therefore didn't love him. His father treated him like a burden, and now wanted to turn

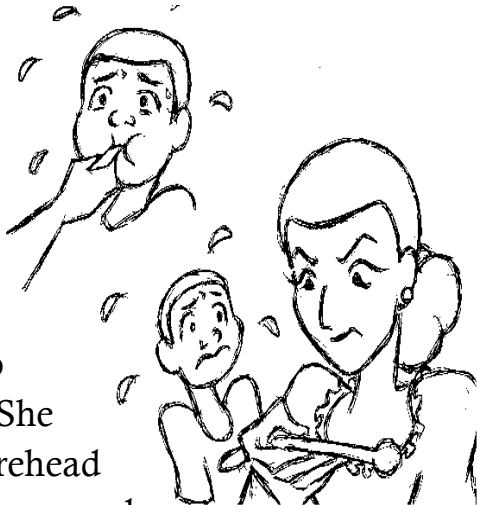
Stephen
him into

Nicholas sighed, moaned and gasped and frowned. He needed to stop the new habit of sighing. It was beginning to irritate him.



As he leaned over the window of his bedroom that Sunday evening, he remembered falling off the window ledge and straightened himself. His father had been there to rescue him from peril. Remembering left him dejected. He turned his thoughts towards the play which was going to be held on Friday.

After a restless sleep, he feigned illness when the nanny came to wake him up. She touched his forehead which he'd massaged thoroughly.



Suspiciously eyeing him, she hurried out of the room and returned a few minutes later with a thermometer.

“Open your mouth and lift your tongue.”

He did as he was told.

She slid the glass-stick under his tongue.

Wrinkling her nose, she said, “Close your mouth.” A few seconds later, she said, “Open your mouth.” She adjusted her glasses and stared at the stick for a few seconds and sighed with relief. “You’ll be fine, get ready for school.”



As this plan had failed, the fear of facing his classmates tripled. He took in the Monday sun with trepidation as he waited for the driver to

reverse the car. He looked back at the house, but Mrs Ogbozo seemed to have sensed his desire to escape and waited on the steps.

As he got close to his school, he began to itch uncontrollably. He was even more worried when he got to school and didn't find Stephen. Everyone was going to think it was his fault that Stephen was not in school. Perhaps it was.

He could accept no one talking to him if it didn't affect the play. But that day, they didn't practice the play. He stared at the book he'd brought to the school to read but the words mocked him by refusing to stay on the page.

The following day was even more unbearable.

He no longer cared about the play. He just wanted his friend back. He didn't even know where to find him. The 'backbenchers' refused to speak to him on Uchenna's insistence.





19.

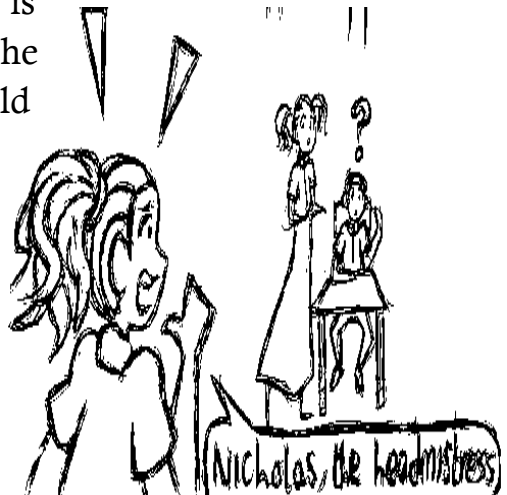
The following day, during break period, the Class Monitor bounced into the class and whispered. "Your father came with the police."

Nicholas gave her a wry smile suspecting she was up to no good.

She shrugged. "Something to do with bank cards. The Headmistress told him..."

She barely finished speaking when Gretchen rushed in and said. "Nicholas, the Headmistress is calling you o! She said you should come now, now, now."

Nicholas was already jittery with the Class



Monitor's comment and now this. He knew he should have confessed to his father that morning.

Stephen had warned him when he found out the cards weren't his. He forgot because his father came and left abruptly. He knew that was an excuse. He'd dodged the 7p.m. phone call for fear that his father had found out what he'd done.

This is bad, he thought. I can't go to jail. I'm too young for jail. I'm going to go to prison before I've had a chance to finish the play. The little image I'm about to save will be lost forever if I don't perform in the play.

20.



Nicholas did his walk of shame until he got into the car with *The Undertaker's* theme song playing in his head. When he got home, he suspected his father wasn't in because he saw the silhouette of a burly man in the sitting room. The relief was drained out of him when he heard his father's voice from the half-open door that led to the study.

Moving closer to the sitting room to get to the stairs so he could lock himself in his room to escape his father's wrath if only briefly. He swallowed and staggered to a halt.

The burly man was a police officer. He was much taller and intimidating now. Nicholas could feel the hair on his skin stand. He started to itch all over his body again but was afraid to scratch. The



sides of his mouth began to twitch on its own - it took all he had in him not to cry.

I wish I'd spoken to my father as Stephen had advised. Perhaps, it wouldn't have risen to my being led away in handcuffs.

He felt the draught before he noticed the front door shut. Glad his father was going out he turned to the stairs.



“You may want to tell your father what you’ve done.” The burly man muttered. His voice sounded like crushing footsteps.

The burly man crushed a monkey nut and Nicholas was overcome

with the need to visit the toilet. Startled by the slamming of the front door, he turned. It was his father.

“Mrs Ogbozo,” His father called out.

Nicholas had never heard his father raise his voice before. His nanny hurried down the stairs. Ify saw and heard Nicholas’ father and scurried back to the kitchen.

“What is this I hear about my son missing?”

“I beg your pardon, Sir?” Mrs Ogbozo asked in a surprised



voice. She was a few steps away from Nicholas' father and still catching her breath from the little sprint.

"Mrs Ogbozo, it's not a fine print." Nicholas' father said, with a deep-set frown he exhaled heavily. "I'll explain for clarity. The driver just mentioned that he'd gone missing for four hours."

Nicholas' nanny's eyes turned to slits; she would have been eyeless but for her mammoth lashes. "You misunderstand, Sir."

"Enlighten me," Nicholas's father exasperatedly urged.

"He went shopping with his friends, and they returned to have a party." Mrs Ogbozo slanted her head and pursed her lips.

"Shopping, party?" Nicholas' father asked in staccato.

The nanny gestured and sighed. "I've got no control over your son." She gave Nicholas her signature 'I warned you' look and left the sitting room.

He'd been so surprised about his father's unawareness of the party that he began to exit the room.

"Nick?" His father called sternly.

Nicholas turned around shaking like a leaf

being battered in the wind and raised a brow.

“You went to the ATM?”

Nicholas nodded, making sure to keep some distance between them.

“You stood in the queue?”

Nicholas nodded.

“And waited until it was your turn?”

Nicholas nodded.

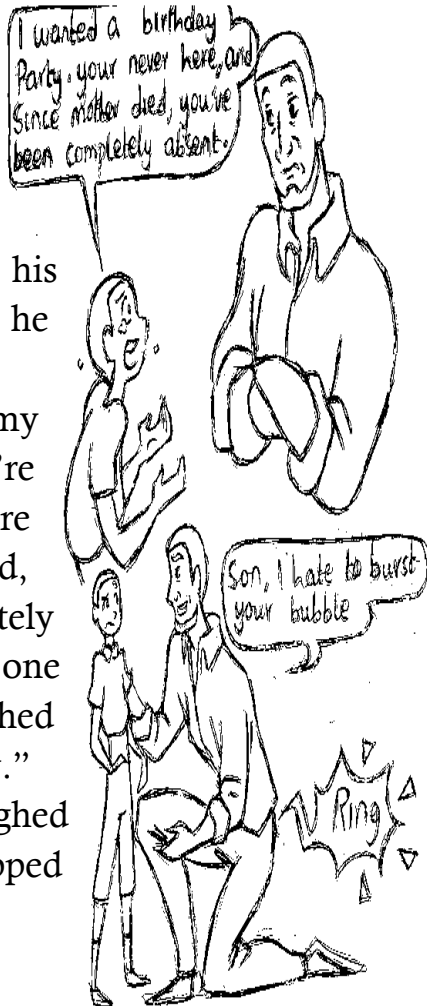
Surprised, his father asked. “Why?”

Nicholas didn't understand the question.

His father twisted his mouth to the side as he waited.

“I wanted you at my birthday party. You're hardly ever here. More so, since mum died, you've been completely absent.” He said in one breath and sighed regretfully. “I was angry.”

Nicholas' father laughed even harder and flopped



onto the sofa and laughed some more. His father looked at his palm and played with his ring and then sighed. "Son, I hate to burst your bubble, but that day is not your birthday."

It was Nicholas' turn to laugh but not of humour. He was horrified that his father didn't even know his birthday.

"I'm serious son! Your mother hated baking. We decided to celebrate our birthdays on hers because hers was the last. We didn't change it after you were born so it kind of stuck."

Nicholas laughed long and hard, paused for a few seconds then asked with a frown. "When is my birthday then?"

"Twenty-fifth of December," his father said, smiling dreamily.

"Wh-at!?" Nicholas blinked several times and gasped sarcastically. "On Christmas day?"

"Yes, on Christmas Day." Nicholas's father answered with a nod.

Nicholas scratched his head which was feeling sweaty. He stretched his shirt away from his skin as it had begun to itch. He chuckled nervously and muttered to himself.

"There's always a first time. You don't

think there'll be no consequence to your action, did you?" His father asked but was interrupted by a call.

Nicholas shook his head, pacing morosely. He turned to his father and said. "No birthday can top Christmas Day. But, I've... I've."

His father had already moved back to his study.

Nicholas moved and froze when the policeman shifted in his chair with a raised brow. He turned away from the intimidating figure and hugged himself as he deliberated.

The play's in two days. Would my father be willing to let the play end before handing me over to this policeman? What is the children's prison like? What is hard labour like in prison?

"You may want to tell your father what you've done." The policeman repeated.

Nicholas jumped at the voice behind him. The man seemed to be growing, and his voice echoed repeatedly in Nicholas' ears. He slowly turned to face the man and had to look up to see the man's face.

"The cashier may have ripped you off, but you took something that wasn't yours."

Ify laughed as she walked and stopped abruptly before excusing herself.

“I swear, I didn’t mean to. I was angry. I was... I was... I don’t know. But I returned the cards. I promise.”

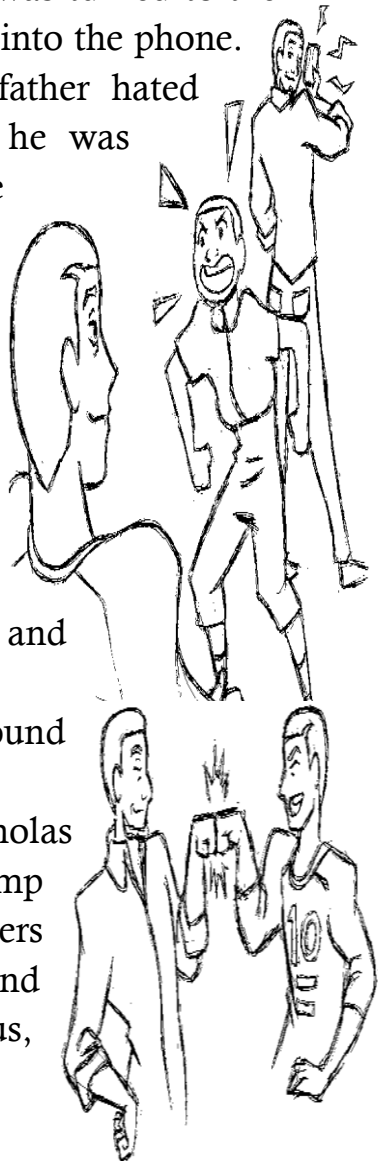
Nicholas saw the Tekena-man walk into the house. His father’s back was turned to the Tekena-man, still talking into the phone. Remembering how his father hated being interrupted when he was speaking to the phone and afraid that the Tekena-man was going to hurt his father, Nicholas intercepted him.

“Don’t touch my father!”

The Tekena-man raised an amused brow and crossed his arms.

His father walked around him.

A confused Nicholas watched his father pump fists and bump shoulders with the Tekena-man and frowned. Still suspicious,



he stayed away from them.

“It’s okay son,” His father said grinning and beckoned him. “This is your uncle Tekena. He is your mother’s brother.”

“Your mother and I fought a lot. So, I went away. Now I’m back,” the Tekena-man explained

Stephen walked in a few seconds after that. Nicholas ran to him.

“I’m sorry about putting you on the spot that day.”

Stephen shrugged.

The policeman scoffed.

“I’m in trouble,” Nicholas whispered and slanted a look at the policeman.

“Yes, you are.” His father spoke. “I’ve been waiting for you to come clean.”

Nicholas exhaled noisily. “You knew?”

Nicholas’s father nodded and added. “Following your uncle’s advice, I’ll give you a job as repayment for the money you spent.”

Nicholas stepped back, his eyes searching his father’s face. His father’s tone made him



suspect it was going to be a difficult job.

“Your uncle has something that belongs to you,” his father ushered him to his uncle.

Nicholas cautiously walked towards the Tekena-man and took the parcel. He opened it amidst furtive glances at the Tekena-man and gasped. It was the picture that had been on his mantel piece. He brushed the tears that brimmed around his eyes. He’d given up his search for it a while ago.

“How?”

“Ify accidentally broke the glass and was looking for where to fix it. She met Stephen’s father near the orphanage. He is a glass cutter.”

Nicholas nodded absentmindedly as he smoothed his hand over the surface of the picture.

Nicholas’ father looked curiously at the Tekena-man.

“Ify is my fiancée and Stephen’s cousin.”

“I thought he was an orphan?” Nicholas’ father asked.



Stephen laughed hysterically and cleared his throat.

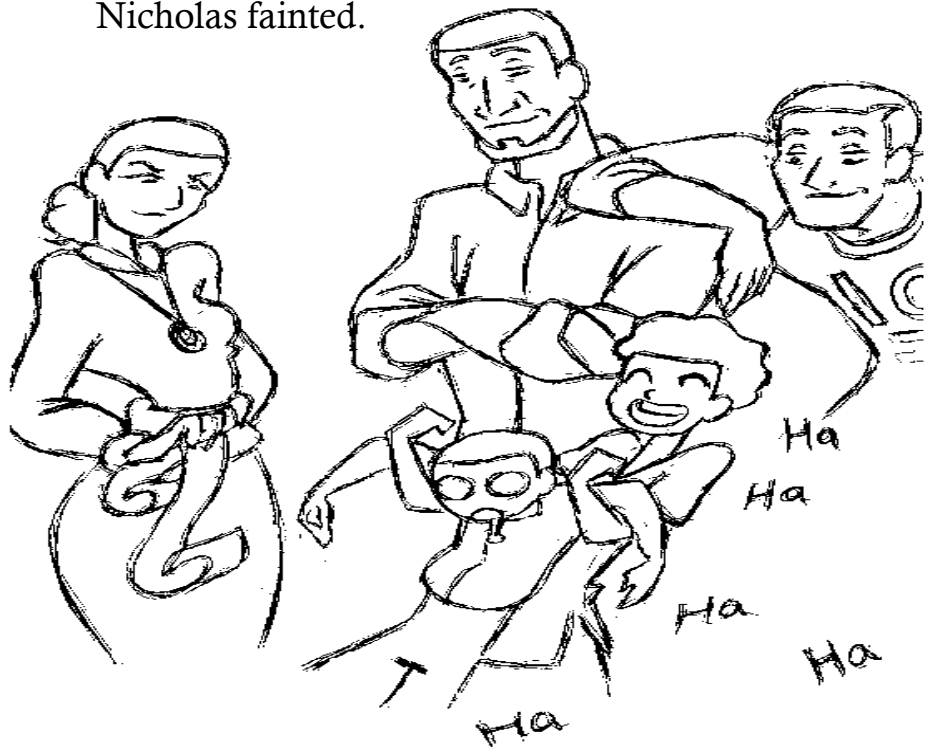
“No!” The Tekena-man shook his head vehemently. “He just helps the owner of the orphanage from time to time.”

Nicholas’ father thinned his lips and averted his eyes, a little embarrassed.

“Sir,” Mrs Ogbozo said as she walked in, her arms outstretched, holding a piece of paper to his father. “The list.”

His father gestured and nodded. “Make sure you get a copy. It’s your job description.”

Seeing the amount of work to be done, Nicholas fainted.



21.

Friday. The day of the play had finally arrived. It was a showing day indeed. Not for orphans. It was a showing day for Nicholas to prove for the first time that he could do without being a peacock.

It was a good thing that Mrs Ogbozo, his nanny and Mrs Weruche, his Teacher were friends as well as cousins. It meant that they could still stick to their adapted play.

He hadn't been allowed to attend classes since the list was made. His job required that he'd been up as early as 5a.m. His hands were sore; sore from helping his nanny make the costumes and from caring for little children. His throat was also sore from singing nursery rhymes. Glad that he could participate in the play, he didn't mind. Even though, he only had until the following year to finish his job.

Discovering that his birthday was on Christmas Day made him seem so small that he was semi-relieved that he didn't have to compete with Danny anymore.

A problem had arisen just as the play was about to start; they'd forgotten an important character – the baby. Luckily, their Teacher had come with her best friend's newborn baby and was willing to surrender it for the part, as long as none of them carried it.

“Do you still want something to film the play with?” Stephen whispered.

Nicholas stared blankly at his friend and shrugged. He turned his attention to the itch on his nape as he asked. “About the choir of angels, can we still add it?”

Stephen stared at him. “Are you sure?”

“Let's make it a real show day, showing day.” He looked hopefully at Stephen who was now wearing a large frown. “Please?”

Stephen grimaced and then pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back into his pocket.

Nicholas looked at his friend, pleading.

“Why?” Stephen finally asked.

Nicholas shrugged.

“You have to have a reason.”

Nicholas sighed thoughtfully. “Because the play is not complete without them?”

Stephen didn’t look convinced.

“They made my birthday memorable even though it wasn’t really my birthday?”

Stephen still wasn’t convinced.

“Well, I think it’s only fair that they are part of it. They practiced. They loved it. I know they want to be part of it. I guess I think it wouldn’t be complete without them.”

Stephen pulled out his yellow handkerchief, shook off imaginary dust, wiped his forehead, folded and tucked it back in his pocket.

“Friendship is sharing, and sharing is caring?” Nicholas quickly added as Stephen appeared to have lost interest.

Stephen grimaced thoughtfully and shrugged. “They are here.”

“What?”

“Like I needed your permission,” Stephen scoffed, got up and walked towards the other shepherd.

As the Head Mistress introduced them to the audience. Nicholas saw his father, his uncle, Tekena and the rest of his household and giggled nervously.

22.

The play had gone on without a hitch and then Gretchen had an idea. She always had something up her sleeves, and no one saw this coming except Stephen of course. He'd *overheard* someone saying something that someone else had noted because Stephen *never eavesdrops*.

As she moved forward, her foot got caught in Stephen's shepherd's crook – Nicholas had made a last-minute switcheroo with Stephen. She stumbled into the manger but luckily the girl in the horse costume leaned forward suddenly and not meaning to, shielded the baby.

Gretchen glared at Stephen through tear-rimmed eyes and blinked and was surprised when Stephen mouthed; 'I'm sorry'.

Nicholas and Stephen nodded their encouragement which propelled her forward. Though her halo was now lopsided she wasn't fazed.

Apprehensive, they stared at her and waited.

Gretchen began to sing.

“This little babe,
Born today.
To rescue the faint hearted;
To rescue the frail, innocent and old.

This little babe,
Born today.
For every special someone;
To some day say that I’m one with God.”

The song went with their tap dance, and so they participated.

As the other pupils rhythmically clapped for them, they knew no one was going to laugh at them the following term.

As they left the stage and the people applauded Nicholas watched Stephen praise Erin and Gretchen. Ify pulled him into a hug while his nanny looked on. He ran to her and smiled. She patted his head and he wrapped his arms around her.

In the past months he'd learned to share,
listen and learn.

He had also managed to know the name of
all his classmates.

Feeling pride well in him, he looked at his
father and uncle and smiled – they were
filming him.

Acknowledgements

I want to specially thank you Benjamin Ezinwo, Mary-Immanuella Ezinwo & Chimele Louisa Ezinwo for being the inspiration for this book.

Friendship is sharing.

Sharing is caring

I'll always hold these words dear.

**Thank you for reading my book.
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book at your favourite retailer.**

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