Meeting Mrs. Usanga

It is past noon and sweltering outside. The yellow blossoms hang limp and bored as my cousin Godwin and I sit on the porch watching the driveway bleach white under the midday sun. We are cut off from the minor bustle in the estate, sealed in by a high gate near which the door to the security quarters hangs open, the guard lying asleep on the concrete floor.

I check the time every few minutes, growing more and more agitated as a half-hour passes by. Ever since my uncle warned me against behaving too "Americanized" here—slipping out early, jetting around town, and returning home after nightfall—I have tried to involve Aunty Gloria more closely in my plans. Earlier this morning, when she assured me that her driver would take me into town, I sent my regular cabbie away. Now late, I cannot help but regret telling her about my visit to Cornelia Connelly College today. It is a strange paralysis, this waiting, especially in the heat.

"I can't believe he's not here yet. Do you know what time school gets out?"

My question nudges Godwin out of his silent reverie, his fists clasped so tightly that the creases in his starched shirt strain at the shoulders. He thinks for a moment, his eyes focusing on some invisible point in the air before his face.

"They should close by one o'clock," he says, finally. I check the clock on my phone—it's nearing 12:30.

"Is CCC far away?"

"No, it's not far. Just twenty, maybe thirty minutes." Godwin glances at me, his expression sobering. "You spoke to Emem? He said he's coming?"

I shake my head no.

"I talked to Aunty Gloria. I don't have Emem's number."

"Let me see if I have it." Godwin makes an odd music, punching buttons on his phone as I watch, spellbound. If I had had any inkling that he might have had Emem's number, I certainly would have asked him to call sooner. At times like these, especially, I suspect that his affinity for waiting has seriously robbed him of his agency.

Like so many other Nigerians, though he has a degree, Godwin doesn't have a job. He has been without work for over a year since his last job ended in scandal, his boss absconding with hundreds of thousands of dollars earmarked for a corporate contract.

Since he picked me up from the airport in Uyo a month ago, he has been going with me to the grocery store, making sure the house help sweep my floor, even changing my bedsheets himself when I need it. Though I don't really like being doted on, he has taken it upon himself to be my personal helper while I'm here. Most days he can be found alone indoors, checking his e-mail for job offers or staring at the ceiling, sweating in the barless prison of his air conditioning-less bedroom.

"I found it," he says, ceasing the endless scrolling through his cell phone. "Do you have credit?" Having no job means having no money to buy phone credit.

"Just give me the number," I say, exasperated. As Godwin recites it, I dial and listen as the line rings several times. Emem doesn't pick up.

"No answer," I say, ditching the last bit of hope that we'll get to CCC before the end of the day. I stare at the front gate like a crystal ball, willing it to reveal Emem's whereabouts. Within minutes, I hear the engine on his motorbike growl to a stop outside. He strolls in through the gate door, his trousers slung lazily from his slender waist.

"Good afternoon, Aunty. Are you ready?"

Emem peers at me, squinting against the sun as he shifts his weight testily from one foot to the other. I am flummoxed by how easily he manages to make it seem as though it is *I* who has kept *him* waiting. The flurry of angry words I've been steadily arming myself with the past hour escape me.

"I've been waiting all morning! Where have you been?"

To my ears, my voice comes out sounding like a high-pitched whine. My eyes pinch into a glare, boring a hole into Emem's. Emem glances away sheepishly, running a palm over his head.

"I was busy when Momsie called."

His voice trails off, and he shifts his weight again, no trace of sympathy on his boyish face. Five years ago, Emem started out working as my aunt's driver. He has since risen in the ranks to manage her construction site while attending night classes at the university. His lateness is a tacit acknowledgement that he is becoming somebody and cares little about where his boss's niece needs to go. At times like these, I think of reminding him that it is my mother's compound he is standing in, and that, as her daughter, I deserve a level of respect. But I would not dare say this out loud. I try a different approach: sympathy.

"CCC closes at one. I don't think we can still make it."

“What time is it?” he asks, concerned. I look at my clock phone again; it’s quarter till the hour.

“We can still make it, Aunty,” he says, striding past us down a row of defunct cars to a blue 15-passenger bus emblazoned with a bright decal: AKIWOL. With all of the other cars spoilt, we must take the bus my aunt uses on official business for the Akwa Ibom Women’s League—which she founded to mobilize women in government. We wait for several more minutes while Emem checks the fuel and opens the bus windows to air out the heat. Climbing into the front seat, he waves us over.

Godwin slides into the bench behind Emem, and I choose a seat a couple of rows back on the other side of the bus. As we head into town, the traffic congeals like a plug of glue in the road. I glance between my watch and the window, praying it thins out, sensing Emem’s scowl through the back of his skull. Each time I come home to Uyo, there are more and more people. And over time, the roads have clogged with a growing number of cars, motorbikes and pedestrians. It is a spiritual quagmire of sorts that, no matter who we are—rich, poor, old, young—we must all pass through the same road to get where we’re going.

At this point, I have all but given up on reaching CCC today. For the past eight years since my mother died, my sisters and I have been trying to set up a memorial scholarship at her alma mater. We hope to cover the final two years’ worth of school fees for a handful of students, just as my mother did when she was alive. Though my father and sisters promised to send scholarship materials for me to deliver to the Principal—with whom I have never met nor scheduled an appointment—I will arrive empty-handed, since they did not send anything. I look at the clock again: past 1:00 p.m. If we miss them, I will have to try again tomorrow, but I have a strange feeling that I must get there now—that the will I have mustered today may disappear.

Emem deciphers a maze of police checkpoints, roadside squabbles and hawkers sweating in the afternoon sun. When traffic is at last moving, I can relax enough to lean back in my seat as he flies the rest of the way. We turn down Ikpa Road headed to Iruan, passing a fresh meat market and the green archway at the University of Uyo, where girls saunter by in sequined tops with red, shiny lips. At the edge of town, past a winding row of unfinished houses, the road dead-ends at a wrought iron gate inscribed with the words: CORNELIA CONNELLY COLLEGE, AFAHA OKU.

Many of the women who shaped Nigeria's history attended school right here in Ibibioland. As we approach the gate, I imagine my mother standing just beyond it with her hand outstretched. She will take my hand, and the sadness I've been carrying all these years will finally leave me.

Driving through the main gate is like crossing a portal into the colonial past. Godwin tells the security guard, a wrinkled man with a sleepy gaze, that I am here to meet the principal on official business. The man waves us down a dirt road that winds past a string of colonial-era dorms with crumbling facades that form a crescent around the campus. Our wheels stir up dust on the path, forming a loose cloud that traces our route through campus. We drive past a rusty sign dwarfed by tall weeds that bears the school's crest and motto: ACTIONS NOT WORDS. Where the soil has eroded, the gnarled roots of a pink-blossomed frangipani tree protrude from the ground.

If Nigeria has developed at all in the fifty years since her independence, the good news has not yet reached the grounds of CCC. I feel the ghosts of girls gone by peeking out of darkened windows, begging to be freed. We pass Saint Dominic dormitory, on whose porch a cluster of suitcases and wooden storage lockers huddle beneath the roof's eaves. Someone has arranged the lockers in rows with the luggage and threadbare mattresses, bound with rope, stacked neatly on top.

I tell Emem to stop the car and get out while I snap a few pictures from a distance. The images are overexposed in the sun, bright spots of light blighting the view. I step closer, shift the exposure, and take a few more photos. Before long, I am kneeling on the crumbling footpath, snapping away as I hear car tires crunch over the gravel behind me. They slow to a halt as an engine sputters off.

"Excuse me, what organization are you from?"

A voice calls out from a distance. I look in the direction it's coming from and see a woman in a beat-up sedan. She wears a look of concern and confusion, her face framed by stringy curls. I stop taking pictures and walk slowly in her direction. Only when I am a comfortable distance away do I speak.

"Good afternoon," I say.

She echoes my greeting and asks again which organization I am from. I'm not sure if photography is allowed on campus, so the question worries me. By now the woman is standing outside the car, clutching a pile of papers to her chest.

"My mother used to go to school here," I begin. "I just wanted to visit the campus and see what her experience must have been like. We're trying to set up a scholarship."

"Okay, I thought you were from one of the organizations helping us. So many of them visit unannounced." The woman's face relaxes.

"No, no. I was just passing by the dorms and wondering why all of the luggage was out here."

She sweeps her hand through the air, taking in the porch, the sagging dorms, everything.

"We used to have a box room where we stored all the luggage, but now we have students sleeping in the box room, so we keep the luggage outside. We are so overcrowded that some students sleep on mattresses on the floor." She grimaces, dismayed.

"Yes, I noticed the mattresses, too," I say, nodding.

The reason for the overcrowding, she explains, is the rising importance of girls' education.

"Back in those days, many of us married and had families before we ever went to school. Now you have very small girls coming to school, and, with free and compulsory education, we can hardly house them all."

Her name is Arit Ekpo, and she teaches physics and mathematics. She tells me she used to live in Baltimore for a time, and her children are scattered across the United States with one still in university in Nigeria. She is glad I have come to see my mother's old school, to get a feel for the place. Optimistic to a fault, she adds that the only difference between education here, in Nigeria, and the U.S. is geography.

"I'm here to see the principal," I tell her, eager to resume the purpose of my visit.

"She is not in today, but I can take you to the Vice Principal's office," she replies.

I follow Mrs. Ekpo across the grass and proceed down a long, crumbling footpath that, from all appearances, used to be tarred. I will later find out that this path has a name, the Appian, where students in my mother's day used to parade in their finest attire. It was on the Appian that Cornelians walked tall and proud, according to the school's reputation.

At the end of the path, we take a right toward the quad, another left and around the corner to where several other visitors sit in plastic chairs outside the Vice Principal's door. Inside, her desk overflows with papers, class registers, writing tablets, a transistor radio

playing the news. There is barely enough room to walk, let alone sit inside. And when she finally joins us, we have been waiting almost thirty minutes.

Vice Principal Anastasia Affiah takes her time removing a stack of papers from a plastic chair inside her office that she pulls out onto the walkway. As she sits, pleasing mounds of flesh spill out both sides of her chair. Mrs. Ekpo makes a quick introduction. I explain why it is that I have come, speaking briefly about my mother. Mrs. Affiah points in the direction of the car park.

"You came in the bus? You are from AKIWOL?" She peers at me through her glasses, though for the sun's blinding reflection I cannot see anything but a sheen of sweat on either side of her pleasant face. I shake my head no.

"My aunt is Gloria Okon—"

"Lady Gloria Okon?!" Mrs. Affiah interrupts. "She was my teacher!" Her face breaks into a smile, and I feel blessed for the coincidence.

"What year did your mother graduate?" Mrs. Affiah asks, her eyes piquing with interest.

My head bows as my mind starts running back over the years. It was 1971 when my mother came to the U.S. and in 1969, I think, she taught at Loreto. She must have graduated from CCC then, but I can't be sure. I don't know very much about her life in Nigeria—she didn't talk so much about growing up, except to mention my grandfather, who died suddenly when she was ten.

"Sorry, I don't know," I reply, quietly. Mrs. Affiah relaxes in her chair with an encouraging smile. Her left eye drifts a bit off toward the periphery as she looks at me. Oddly, it puts me at ease.

"I was just wondering because I am an old girl, so I thought maybe I knew her. The principal is an old girl too, so maybe she'll know her, but she is not here today. We will ask her."

I make plans to come back and visit again to discuss the scholarship. As Godwin and I leave, the grip on my hand tightens: my mother is pulling me in.

* * *

I return later in the week for a meeting to discuss the scholarship with Mrs. Affiah, who has agreed to take me on a tour of campus today. We sit in chairs outside of her corner office, overlooking a majestic frangipani tree. The students are in lectures, huddled near the windows for light.

I have written out the scholarship requirements: girls with a high GPA and extracurricular activities, namely dance, since my mother was a wonderful dancer. I ask about the student clubs, and Mrs. Affiah lists the chorale group, debate club, drama club, and dance troupe—of which my mother was a part. As we talk, a trio of girls makes their way by slowly over a crumbled staircase.

The two girls on the outside support the arms of the girl in the middle, who is barely able to walk. She grimaces with each step, her body nearly doubling over. I ask if she is sick, and the VP says she was in a fight, beat up by two other girls who stand quietly nearby, awaiting their fate. They look so innocent that I can hardly imagine them beating this girl into such a state.

"Mmekut enye? Mmekut enye?" she asks, that is, *Do you see this girl?* "Sorry for you o. To the principal's office—straight. She will deal with you." She throws her hand in the air, sending the girls off to punishment.

I ask why they were fighting and she replies that the seniors like to beat up on the juniors to make themselves feel superior. Unfortunately, they beat this girl so bad that she stopped breathing and had to be rushed to the hospital. Now her parents are coming to pick her up. She speaks casually, as though this kind of thing is commonplace. I have more questions, but will save them for another time.

We finish discussing the scholarship, and Mrs. Affiah takes me on a campus tour, picking up a thin, three-foot-long stick that she plies as a cane, though, given her corpulence, it's much too thin and brittle for the task.

"What's the stick for?" I ask, curious.

"We flog here," she replies.

"For what?"

She rattles off a list of petty offenses—talking during Catechism, sneaking out to be with boys. When we pass a girl, Mrs. Affiah confiscates her beaded bracelet. The students are not allowed to wear jewelry here. The rules are tough, far stricter than I could manage, though I'm not particularly rebellious. As we pick our way over a crumbled path, I stumble and twist my ankle—not badly, but enough to cry out in pain.

"Sorry, dear. We just have to manage. I have been writing the government for money to renovate the structures and walkways here. They promised to—but nothing yet. In our days, there was no fence, but you wouldn't dare walk close to that gate. There was that

kind of discipline back then. But now, anything we are doing, just use your conscience. Government has no time.”

By 2:00 p.m., the girls pour out of their classrooms in clumps and pairs headed for lunch. Running, skipping, walking, they form a ragamuffin army in thin blue tops and brown pleated skirts, hair cropped closely to their skulls. I watch them with a mixture of envy and longing for their youth and camaraderie. They watch me equally, noting my nose ring, dreadlocks, and high-bronzed skin. They can hear the otherness in my accent, smell it on my skin and clothes. America is difficult to hide here.

We make our way over to a quiet corner of the quad, entering the music room that sits behind the assembly hall where students hold plays and meetings. The building's foundation stands half a foot above the ground where the soil has eroded.

"Watch your step," Mrs. Affiah says, pointing to a giant crack in the cement that has caved in near the doorway. I hop over it and step inside the room, where a tired-looking woman in a head-tie and native dress sits at a table with three other teachers, in heated conversation. They greet us as we walk in.

While Mrs. Affiah banters with the women, I take in the room. There aren’t any books or instruments to speak of and a series of chord progressions etched in chalk on the wall comprise the day’s lesson. The women quiet down when Mrs. Affiah introduces me as the daughter of a late old girl of CCC.

"The face is very familiar," says the woman in the headtie. "What was the mother’s name?" she asks, her eyes fixed on me.

"Her mother was a sister to Lady Gloria Okon," Mrs. Affiah replies. At this news, the woman screams and jumps to her feet.

"Elizabeth! She was my school mother. We stayed in Saint Joseph’s dormitory together."

She strides over, pulling me to the doorway by my wrists. As she tilts her head backwards, inspecting my cheekbones and eyes in the sunlight, I catch sight of a girl swinging from a branch outside. On the ground below her, a tree stump juts out from a rubbish heap around which her friends stand watching, laughing as she takes a jump. In her weightlessness, my heart soars, hoping that this tiny woman with a vise-like grip will bring me closer to my mother. She releases me as the girl falls in a heap, her friends hooting and clapping.

"Same face," the woman says, her eyebrows knit deep in thought. Returning to her chair, she sits with a sharp exhale that deflates her shoulders and chest.

I never imagined meeting one of my mother's classmates today; it is the kind of miracle that renders me speechless. I watch her quietly, mesmerized, until she speaks.

"My name is Felicia Usanga. Your mother was my school mother. There was nothing that she wouldn't do for me. She wrote me letters even after she crossed to that side—" She raises an arm overhead, pointing across the room, like a compass, to America. "Until 1975, when she said she was getting married. She said she would send a letter with the new address, but we missed each other. I never got the letter," she pauses, thinking. "When I heard about her death—"

She stops mid-sentence, her voice choked with tears. I feel sorry that she must feel this pain again, to look upon the face of her long-lost school mother—gone forever, without so much as a goodbye—in my cheekbones and smile. But in another way, I am glad for her pain. We share something, motherless daughters, an ache that will never wane. Her sadness tells me that I am not alone, that my mother was loved.

I wish to sit for a moment and talk to her, but am distracted by another teacher, tall, pushy, who grabs my arm.

"Your mother's alma mater is very poor. How will you help us?" she asks, insistently. She tells me that she conducts the cultural dance group that is in dire need of a sponsor. She points to a ragged pile of clothes in a corner. "These are the only costumes we can use to perform. They are five years old." She eyes a toppling stack of instruments, among them an *obodom*, or talking drum, and cowbell.

"In the whole school, there are no musical instruments from the western world to show to the students. So you teach them theory. They don't know what a piano looks like, except the ones they see in the church. One day when the Bishop of Catholic Church came, we sang a song for him and I pleaded with him, please give us a keyboard, even if it is two octaves, to show to the students from time to time. And it's getting to two years now, and he hasn't given it to us. That is why they don't want to hear music: *because they don't understand it*."

Her torrent of words renders me silent. I do not know what to make of this. Yes, I have come to offer money for a scholarship, but the needs here are much greater than I imagined. I want to turn away as I often do when a beggar asks for change—out of

embarrassment, at the state in which we find ourselves; or shame, that there is little I can do about it. It dawns on me that even our memorial scholarship will do little good if the girls do not have light to study by, or books. I listen patiently to her plea and excuse myself, promising to talk with my family about what we can do to help.

When I'm free, I find Mrs. Usanga sitting quietly in a back corner, lost in time, her face dewy and open. We exchange numbers, and she tells me I must come back and visit to see photos of my mother from back then. We make tentative plans for next week, and the other teacher, who has ceased pleading with me, snaps a picture of us with my camera. After the flash, Mrs. Usanga gives me a warm hug.

"I am happy for this day. God has brought us together again. I could have left early after classes, but God asked me to wait and see. I didn't know that God asked me to wait and see good things."

* * *

When I return to spend more time with Mrs. Usanga, I find her in the same room, at a table with several other teachers. When I enter, she gives me a hug and regales the story of our meeting to her colleagues.

"God does everything," she begins. "In fact, I didn't used to stay in school for so long after school, but that particular day I was entering discourse, and I waited here till after school was over, and I was still sitting here writing when the VP brought in a very fine lady. She came and introduced us to her here, and then, when she mentioned the mother was here in school, the mother was a sister to Mrs. Gloria Okon, I started shouting—oh! Elizabeth! That is her face!" She laughs, hugging me.

That I have my mother's cheekbones and smile is a small blessing in itself—evidence that I am hers. I am relieved to have finally met a childhood friend of hers, and I want these other women to leave so that we may talk. Mrs. Usanga pulls out a stack of yellowed photos and spreads them out on a desk. I pull up a chair to sit down, but stay standing, dragging my eyes over the photos, some my mother sent from abroad after she left for the United States.

There is a picture of the assembly hall, taken over forty years ago, looking new and modern. Back then there was a large tree in the front grass and the flowering plants flanking the entryway. There is no such tree here anymore, and the hall has fallen into disrepair. On the back of the picture is signed: *CCSS, Cuba Varsity, Milky Way.*

“What is ‘Milky Way’?” I ask.

“In those days we had so many names—C-Cubed, Cuba Varsity, Milky Way—because it was here that the milk was flowing like honey!” Mrs. Usanga laughs a rich sound that bubbles out and takes me back to her youth. “We were very proud and pompous of this school, especially this principal, Sister Margaret Rogers.” She points to a nun with glasses in a full habit.

“The school was run by nuns?” I ask.

“Yes it was, a mission, at that time. It was later in the seventies that the government took over the school. That is why you see it in this dilapidated state.” She shakes her head in dismay.

I later learn that, in 1949, Cornelia Connelly College was founded by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an order of Roman Catholic sisters. They first arrived in Calabar, in Southeastern Nigeria, in the 1930s, founding a series of “bush schools” to spread the Catechism. What began as a small mission soon grew, and CCC, named after their founding mother, became one of the best girls’ schools in the country.

In 1970, after the civil war, the government took over hundreds of schools and kicked out all of the missionaries, rolling out a new nationalist, anti-Western education policy. Since then, mismanagement and corruption have yielded a steady decline in infrastructure and educational standards, with many schools ultimately handed back to the missionaries after decades of neglect—though CCC remains under governmental control.

The Cornelia Connelly of my mother’s stories, and Mrs. Usanga’s memory, was a lush environment fertile enough to nurture the bodies and minds of the brightest Nigerian girls. These women went on to become titans of business, elected officials, and even Supreme Court justices. The CCC I have found, forty years later, is a mausoleum of crumbling staircases, decaying dorms, and dark classrooms in which students sit clustered near the windows reading by sunlight.

A new dormitory stands half built with no roof or doors. A new library sits unused, awaiting government funds for books and a generator. Mrs. Usanga speaks reverently of the past, but is saddened over the daily challenges she faces teaching here. No light, no running water, no books, not enough rooms for the students, their luggage standing outside. Absent the girls’ can-do spirit, there would be no teaching them.

"I was so happy to be posted to my alma mater last year," she says, "only to find erosion and disappointment everywhere I looked here. Back in those days, a Cornelian was highly respected, and I promised to help the students feel what I felt when I went here. The way she carries herself, dresses, speaks, somebody should easily detect that she goes to CCC. But now, the buildings are falling apart, and the students are out of control because there are too many of them."

Despite the bleakness she describes, Mrs. Usanga smiles.

"Even then, if the girls go outside to do any competition, *they still win*." Her laugh bubbles out again, her eyes twinkle. She picks up a picture. "You see your mother there in the dance troupe—" She points to a slender girl in profile wearing a heavy headdress.

I had always known that my mother could dance, but I did not know she was in the drama group and had acted in *Julius Caesar*. Somehow it makes my own life make a lot more sense.

I ask what this relationship—school mother—means.

"We were so close, as a daughter and a mother," she laughs. "Not like the school mothers today. She would help with my work, wash my clothes. She confirmed me in the Catholic church before she left."

They continued to write letters to each other, even after my mother crossed to the United States.

"She sent me a letter in 1975, saying that she had married and changed her name and would send wedding pictures, but I never got them. We must have missed each other through the postal service."

She mutters a phrase under her breath, *Abasisosong,* that is, "Thank God."

"And now I have met the carbon picture of my school mother—how I wish you would come and see my house. I have so many more pictures there."

I agree to return the pictures to Mrs. Usanga at home in her village just off Calabar-Itu road. Before I leave, she takes me on a short trek to the dorm across campus where Mommy used to sleep, in a smallish room with threadbare mattresses laid out over thin bed frames. Graffiti covers the walls. I pick out a phrase scrawled in a child's hand that reads:

HILARIOUS PRINCESS RULED HER WORLD WITH WISDOM.

I can feel my mother's handprints on the walls and wonder what words, if any, she left behind here. Mrs. Usanga points to the spot where her bed was—in its place now stand three ancient wooden lockers, likely older than she is—and I stare silently, willing my mother to materialize before me. It comes as no surprise when she doesn't, though a part of me is stunned, jarred by the realization that she is not here. *Even if she did write something on the wall*, I think, *it's probably faded by now*. It is a sobering thought and, though there's nothing to see besides a cement floor and brick walls, I pull out my camera to fend off an existential futility. *Click. Click. Click.* With each snap of the shutter, I record the graffiti, the mattresses, and the tiny bit of sunlight streaming in the crack in the door. Just like this room, it is a shrine of sorts that I am making to the girl who lodged here. Photo by photo, word by word, I am building it.

I cannot fathom the number of miracles necessary to bring me to Mrs. Usanga. To have been my mother's school daughter and then a teacher, posted here at CCC, so I could meet her here today. A wave of peace sweeps over me, the same feeling I get when my mother is around—like when my sisters and I slept huddled in her bed the day after she died. We talked and laughed and cried for hours until sleep greeted us, though I kept my eyes open, not wanting to be frightened by my mother's ghost. When she finally came, as I knew she would, her warmth held me like a hug. I was relieved, thinking myself silly for having been afraid of my mother.

She is here now. I can feel her taking my hand and pulling me in. I don't know where she's taking me, but I will follow.