

Living in Peace

Fond memories of my childhood

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with all men, says the Bible, in *Romans*

12:18. And that is exactly what we were doing, living in peace, with the only person in the whole, wild, world - bushes everywhere, no electricity, no sights, except for the two of us - he, his wife and five children, and dad, mum, me, and my three siblings. We were good neighbours, I schooled with two of his kids, and dad often gave him a ride when he was going out of town, something mama wasn't so pleased with, since she did not trust him. She was right. That was the day he could no longer hold back, what he actually felt towards us... At the time, we had electricity, and on that night, it rained, and like it happens whenever it rains, the lights went off. However, that was an act of God – the power cut, the rain, and the thunder that struck, seconds before the shot was fired.

1987, September 5, was the day she arrived, the day she walked into the house and joined the fold. It was exactly nine months since she had been gone, stuck somewhere. That was me, and that day I joined the others, my three siblings at the time, two boys and a girl. The eldest, Emmanuel, and the youngest Nathaniel, Florence was the second and she bore mama's name. It was a Saturday when I arrived, so you could call me Ama, according to the Ghanaian, native, naming system. It must have been in the morning, afternoon, evening, night, or dawn, I don't know, since no one told me about it. I don't recall much about Kumasi, my birth place. Indeed, I know nothing about the place. I don't

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remember being a little child playing with any little white boy, stories my older siblings told me, about a little white boy I used to hang around, a neighbour's child. I don't remember the lightning that used to appear within the house in the form of small, blue balls of light, floating in the air through the rooms. According to my older sister, it sometimes came into the bathroom while she was washing down, and she would rush out of there with the soap all over her. I heard there was a tree that stood outside our house, a tree that the eldest born, Emma, sometimes visited at night. He was a child by then, just about 8 years old or less. Yet, he was brave enough to venture outside and hang around that supposed, witches tree. I heard lots of stories about his brave spirit, during his childhood. Once he wore a slipper, and a slither got under it, right under the sole of his left or right foot. Yet, he didn't panic, he didn't scream, he just shook it off, he only shook his leg and the serpent just rushed out in fear. It was God, but he was brave, nonetheless. Kumasi was beautiful, according to those who could remember. I knew nothing about the chickens and the thriving backyard farm we owned. We had lots of chickens and enough cassavas and yam in the farm, and that saved us during one of the driest seasons in the history of the land, the 1983 famine that flooded the entire country except for one place, Kumasi. Well, it wasn't completely exempted, because according to mama, you had to visit the market at dawn in order to be able to get something to buy. People queued for everything. Once she needed

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some sugar but there wasn't any left to buy, so we had to take our breakfast or whatever we were taking that day, without sugar. Not much of a big deal, if it was solely sugar we needed from the shops. Mama sold some fish during those days in Kumasi. But I don't know if she continued to do so when the famine came. Dad said the chickens we survived on were barely old enough to savour, he used to say they were young, and thus, without much meat. However, mama always rebuffed that, amidst laughter. Maybe, they weren't as plump as she claimed they were. Nonetheless, those chickens, along with the cassava, is what kept the family alive during one of the worst seasons in the history of Ghana, the 1983 drought. Kumasi had lots of stories, and I plan to share as many as I recall, from what I was told. My older siblings, especially the first two, Florence and Emmanuel began their education here. I learnt that nearly all the time, they took some food to school, *Jollof*, precisely. That was Florence's favourite, according to her. For the days mama couldn't get her that *Jollof* for school, she would simply give away her feeding fee, because there was nothing worth buying with it. Awesome! Now I learnt something else, there was this teacher of theirs, their class teacher, who was always happy to inquire of what they brought to school for lunch. She would ask them, grinning, "So what did you bring today?" And then open their bowls right in front of them and get the answer herself. Feeding on the kids' meal, that was her specialty. But they weren't that dumb, not to notice, that their food was always short of

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quenching their hunger. They must have told mama about this, since the tables turned on her, one day.

On that glorious school day, Miss Feeding on the Kids' Meal, was full of smiles, asking about their lunch for the day. They said nothing, as they always did, when she asked. I guess she wasn't directly asking them, it must have been a sort of rhetorical question. She gently seized their lunch box, once again, breathed in, quietly, preparing herself for yet another pleasant surprise, some *Jollof*, yam and egg stew, rice with tomato stew and some chicken, just anything that she felt was too much for these toddlers, to down alone. Tada! What was it this time? Could you guess, anyone? Well, I could never have, if I were given all the options in this world. Oh, did I mention that we had several pawpaw trees? I was told years later, when I could speak like a grown-up. Those pawpaw trees also played a role in shutting down the hunger, during the famine period. Mama used to make some stew out of them, both green and yellow pawpaw fruits, ripened and unripened. That was what that teacher saw that morning when she opened up their lunch box – a nice, colourful serving of pawpaw stew with some yam, or rice, whatever it was that sat quietly beside it. “Is this what you brought today?” That was what she said, and perhaps, that was the last time she ever left them starving. Yes, I believe it was, since I just recalled what mama said, when Florence brought up the matter sometime ago. She made them eat at home, to their fill, and then gave them some snacks for lunch at school. Oh, what a world! A primary

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school teacher, nursery school teacher, kindergarten teacher, crèche! Eating food that would keep alive these poor, little souls, until they went back home for more, or whatever their poor mothers could afford to give them before bedtime. This is evil, and she should have been hanged for this, but I suppose no one else knew about it except mama. How were they going to report this? To whom? The head teacher? Obviously, we both know that was not possible, since they were just kids. To all those teachers and caretakers who abuse children in this way, may God deal with them in his own special, way, Amen. So, that was some drama for you. Now, let's talk some more about Ama, that little girl who arrived, in 1987. As I said before, I don't recall anything, except perhaps, three years after my birth, in 1990. But before that, let's stay in Kumasi. One day I felt ill, very ill. It was something serious, though I don't know what I was suffering from. It took the prayers of a well-known, God-spirited man to set me free from whatever was slowly, killing me. It must have been a spiritual attack, highly likely, if it could only take prayers to cast it out. As Christians, with years of experiencing God's power and salvation, mum and dad knew where to go to, when drugs couldn't heal. They prayed, they fasted, and they sought God's face. They were mature Christians, not new converts. They were the first to pray for me, before visiting the pastor. I recovered shortly after that prayer session, thanks to God. However, the devil wasn't done yet. I learnt of something from mama, that one

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night, as she was in the room with me, a young girl, appearing in the form of a house help, humbly-attired, entered the room out of the blue, holding a broom in hand. She had come to sweep the place, she said, when asked by mama. What? Who are you? Who the hell are you to come in here, out of the blue, a complete stranger, in my room, to sweep! Did I summon you here? Mama did say all of that, in her own words to that obvious witch who simply left without a word. Hmm, strange, funny, but I didn't make that up. It actually happened. That was Kumasi, however, such is life. The arrows that fly by the day, the pestilence at noon day, none of that would come close to you if you make the Most High your dwelling place, *Psalms 91, verse 9 to 10*, taken from the Bible. I thank God for my life and that of my family, for all these years on earth. Indeed, no one can live and walk alone in this life, if it isn't God who is keeping you alive, then who would bother? Think of all those illnesses you have survived, the car crashes that should have whisked you out of here, asap, those critical examinations you passed at school, the grade point you made at the university, the interview where you were the only woman, or the only person who didn't stand a chance of being selected, yet you made it, all thanks to Jehovah. From 1987, till this day, I have not starved, I have not gone without eating for a day, except if I wasn't feeling good. I have not witnessed any war, any national disaster, or any personal disaster that could make me wish for death, and that is because God cares for me. Therefore, I believe

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He exists, not solely because of the Bible studies dad often takes us through within the weekend, or the family prayers we share on a daily basis. My faith in God is based on my own knowledge of Him through my interactions with his Word, and my experiences so far in this life. I'm going to tell you all about it; what I have seen, what I have learnt, and what I know, in all these years of living in peace.

Accra, around 1990, this marks the start of my young life in the capital city. We lived near a farm, a large-scale farm that had everything from crops to animals. It was the University farm, that is how we called it, the University farm because it belonged to the premier university of the land, the University of Ghana. It was a research facility and had many nice faces to it, the animals' section especially, was my main interest, because of the fowls that came from there to our house. It was our regular supplier of chicken for big occasions such as Christmas, and at normal times when mama thought that we needed some more protein in our meals, in addition to the usual fish we had been taking. Talking about fish, there was a river near the farm, a popular one that some of the kids of the house often visited. At least, Emmanuel, the first born, and dad's namesake, made regular visits to the place. He would leave in the morning, sometimes as early as 6 or 7, and return by late afternoon with some mud fish, a good

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number of them, which mama would fry for us all. I had never been to the river, but I don't recall having the appetite to see it. About a mile away from the farm, there stood a government bungalow. It was a large stretch of a building, painted white on the walls, and green on the windows. I think I once joked that it looked like a chicken coop, a large chicken coop. This was our new home, but to me it was my first home. It was alienated, tucked away in some bushes. The path leading to the place was a rough road that got very difficult to travel on when it rained. No matter how good a driver you were, you would have to get stuck in the mud, every now and then before tirelessly making it out. Many times we got stuck in it, when travelling in our white car, a lovely Nissan saloon car that dad bought from America during his days as a student there. He had saved every penny for that, spending less at all times because he knew what mattered the most, bringing something valuable home to his family. He told us how some of his fellows with whom he studied there, were all about going to Disney, shopping, and just having fun. It was no wonder therefore, that most of them returned home with nothing, except an ironing board, in one instance. He brought home a car, our first family car. I don't know how much it cost, but it was brand new, so perhaps, \$300 to \$500 won't too bad a guess. In addition to the not-so-friendly road leading to our new residence, we were totally surrounded by bushes, lots of wild grass that bordered both sides of the narrow path that led to the house. It was thick and scary,

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especially if you were walking alone, and at evening time. All you could hear was the sound of birds chirping, cicadas singing, or simply dead silence. Imagine living a mile away from civilization. There were no telephone lines at the time, so if anything was happening, no one but God will know.

Nonetheless, we had no option but to enjoy this place. We were alone, but for one human being who lived beside us in the boys' quarters. He was the guard of the bungalow, an elderly man of about 50 years old. He was Muslim, and had a family, a wife, and five children, two of whom I schooled with, Baba and Aisha. They were older than me, many years older, perhaps in their early teens. However, that nursery school was the only school nearby at the time, so despite their age, they were welcome to attend. He seemed normal, like your regular neighbour. He was of medium height, dark, and with white beard. He was home most of the time, and you would know if he was, because of the music that constantly streamed from his house. It was a kind of prayer song, perhaps. But it was always on, blaring from his radio or whatever device he was using. It could play throughout the day, from morning to night. And of course, mama and dad, used to complain about it. I think dad sometimes went over to his place to tell him to turn it down a little, and sometimes he did. Yet, sometimes after he did turn it down, he would turn it back on again, at blaring point. We just had to endure it, because the parents understood what it all meant, it was a fight, a spiritual confrontation. Beside this attitude of his,

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I don't recall him doing anything else. We were friendly neighbours, dad often gave him a ride when he was going out of the vicinity. He would let him sit in his office car and drop him off on the Tema motor way, which was the main highway that connected us to the main land. Mama didn't really like this Christian way of doing things, since that man wasn't someone you could consider a friend. He didn't appear unruly in anyway, but if your only neighbour could deafen you with loud music, day and night, every single time, possibly throughout the year, I wonder how that person could be your friend. On the night he shot his gun, aiming for us, he had reached the climax of pretending to be a friend.

Now, I loved this place, our new residence, especially when it rained. The air felt clean, wholesome, very refreshing. There it rained cats and dogs, when it rained. There were lots of thunder and lightning, and after each downpour, our backyard garden got greener. We began to set it up one evening or so. It was dad and mum I think, who began it. Obviously, I doubt any of the older siblings would have thought of starting a garden. With a background in Agriculture, dad was the one who probably began it, after discussing it with mum. I remember seeing them making the beds, and saying that they had to be ready soon for the raining season. The first crop we planted was maize, or corn, as spoken in American English. Maize is one of the easiest, if not the easiest thing to plant. You only have to dig the ground with a cutlass and drop it in and fill it up with some water. Then after some time you will see it

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sprouting up. Thus, we planted a lot of maize in our first gardening effort. But we had some vegetables too; tomatoes, pepper, and even some cassava, which isn't a vegetable by the way. Yes, I remember the groundnuts, we had groundnuts too. They tasted so good, even in their raw state. Sometimes after harvesting them, we'll rinse some up and eat it like that. I remember taking it in this way. Emmanuel, the first child was the one who usually harvested and roasted the groundnuts. He was always good at getting food, from catching the fish from the river at the farm, to roasting some maize and groundnut during harvest time. That was his specialty. Mama was in charge of cooking, and the kids had to clean up the house. Until I turned older, maybe, around 6 years old, I don't remember doing anything at home. At the time of our moving into the bungalow, I must have been around 4 years old. But I was very much aware of everything happening around me. I began nursery school around that time and nearly every day I left for school with some home-baked pastries, thanks to mama. Tarts, that was what I usually took to school. It was two or three at most, and it tasted really good because mama is no novice when it comes to cooking. I had a full breakfast every morning before leaving for school in the white car that dad bought from America. Mama drove me to school, but she didn't pick me up later. It was my brothers who did, Emmanuel and Nathaniel. I remember the two carrying me up on their backs like the baby I was. Emmanuel would take me on his back for about 30 minutes of the walk back

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home, and Nathaniel would do the same afterward. However, I did some walking first. They only took me on their backs like a camel, when I got tired. That was how it was every day from school. It was a long route home, about an hour and a bit, but there wasn't any option than to walk. There were cars for sure, private cars mostly, and some official vehicles from the University farm that plied the road. Nonetheless, we couldn't wait for them before heading home. Since we lived in isolation, the only time we had access to public transport was when we went out into town, like the fishing harbour, or when it was time for school. The older siblings, Florence and Emmanuel, were the ones attending school at the time. They had to awake early, and trekked to the farm in order to catch the only, functioning bus that carried students, workers, and traders into the main land. If you were to miss that bus, then no school for you, it was our only salvation, beside the white car. Our white car took us to church on Sundays, and it also took me to school during the weekdays. Moreover, when mama needed to get some groceries that couldn't be found on the farm, she drove to town in it. That made her popular. Everyone knew about the woman who drove the white car, because it was amazing that she could drive. Later on in time, when I grew a bit older, though still a child, she would pick us up, me, Nathaniel, and a later sibling, Deborah, from school in that white car. So, back to my nursery school days; I mentioned earlier on that I schooled with two of the children of the security guard, our only neighbour and

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prospective assailant. Baba and Aisha were those two, and they were older than me who was around 4 years at the time. They didn't ride with me to school, no, not in mama's car, but we met at the school grounds on all the days they chose to show up. They were friendly kids whom I often played with at home. Sometimes, I would sneak out of the house, especially looking out for mama, and then go play with them. We used empty tomato cans to cook some food over fire which we made with pieces of wood. It was so exciting for me, the cooking in the cans, it felt real, as real as mama's act of cooking at the kitchen. Our main ingredients were spoilt tomatoes and some tiny amount of rice which I usually brought from home. I would sit around the tin can on the fire, watching the not-to-be-eaten food boil, with glee. It was one of the most exciting activities that I engaged in as a child. Besides cooking with the guard's children, we used to run around the compound. But I remember Baba, Aisha's brother, usually walked or ran about without anything covering the soles of his feet. Nonetheless, I don't recall him coming to school barefooted. Those were the good times we shared. We were friends, up until their father tried to kill ours, on that raining night.

My school days were just as interesting as my play time with Aisha and Baba. I had other friends, of course, and a big sister, my teacher, Lucy. She was young, around mid 20s, tall, dark-skinned, and friendly, well she was more than friendly. She fed me every morning before school began. Nearly

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every morning, I was at her place taking some breakfast, though I always had some at home. Why was that so? Mama dropped me off at her place, so she could take me to school when it was time. She didn't take me straight there, since it was too early. I was shy, very shy at the time. Yet was that strange? I was only a toddler, 4 years old. I couldn't speak- speak as in saying yes or no. I nodded and shook the head when I had to respond to a question. At the time, the most frequently asked question was from teacher Lucy and it was, "Are you hungry?" She often said this, nearly every time mama took me to her house so she could take me to school later. No, I wasn't hungry, how could I be after all I had eaten at home? I had porridge, white porridge which was simply a mixture of corn dough and water, cooked over fire until it turned semi-watery. It was our usual meal in the mornings, which we took with some bread and if there was any, groundnuts, roasted groundnuts. It was delicious, especially if you added the groundnuts to the porridge and added some milk as well, not forgetting sugar. However, since I was going to be away for a while, and would only have lunch at midday, mama sometimes fed me something else for breakfast. I ate rice, yam, or *banku* sometimes. The latter being another meal born of maize, corn dough to be precise. Unlike the porridge you only needed to mix the corn dough with little water, so it didn't turn watery. It had to be semi-solid, not watery, else that would make it porridge. Moreover, you had to continuously stir it up, else knots were going to form in it.

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Finally, you had to add some salt, just a little salt to the mixture before putting it on fire. *Banku* is a heavy meal, so taking that in the morning was going to leave me full until midday when I had lunch. So, how could I be hungry after taking something like this? But I couldn't say no, or even shake my head to indicate it. Because I was shy. Yet I had the courage to say yes by nodding my head. Why did I do that? Why couldn't I just shake my head to say no? I think it was all because of my timidity. Being timid is something. It's a strange disease that only God could cure. Many years later, when I had grown up, was in elementary school, around grade seven, I sat in the car of an older woman who knew my father since they worked at the same government agency. We were chatting about myself, and my affiliation to the man she knew. Suddenly, I saw something. There was a mid-length metal pole, standing in the middle of the road, right ahead of us. I saw it as clear as day, and of course, it was day time, but I kept quiet about it because I was too timid to say, "Look out!" Or "Please there's a pole before us." I couldn't talk, I couldn't say such words because I was too shy to speak to the stranger beside me. She was a stranger, since she wasn't family, the regular people I speak to all the time, people I couldn't be shy of. Hmm, this is serious. Was I really ready to die because I was shy? Though I couldn't alert her to the danger ahead, I was praying in my head that God should let her see it. I was, since I was sane enough to recognize death. And she did see it, thanks to God. In a flash she saw it and

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turned the steering to swerve it. *Ha...* how relieved I was. I thanked God in my head and remained quiet, quietly sitting beside her. She glanced at me, after a while, not a while, rather after some minutes of relieving herself of the frightening situation we were heading for. She glanced again, and again, trying to see if there was a problem somewhere. Perhaps, I had a problem with my sight. I didn't, I was just abnormally shy. Later, I thought it must have been an evil spirit that made me that way. Maybe it wasn't a matter of being possessed by a spirit, rather being encouraged by the spirit to remain timid. Hmm, I could cite several instances of my timidity, like how I used to sit in the bus and kept mute when the conductor asked if anyone was getting down. I didn't talk, because I was shy, so the car just by passed my stop point and I disembarked with everyone else at the last stop, several meters away from my intended stop. It was tiring to walk all the way back, but I couldn't help it because I was too timid to speak. Hmm, strange huh? Yes, I was, luckily not anymore. Teacher Lucy fed me whenever I said I was hungry. Yet, it wasn't so convenient for her, since she was only a single, young woman renting a room and working for peanuts to make a living. And I was always reducing her food stock simply because I couldn't say no, no I'm not hungry. Once she remarked, "As for you, everything you'll eat," spoken in the local dialect, *Twí*. "Oh, too bad, you didn't do well," mama once said years later, when I told her about the double breakfast I used to have in those early years of my childhood.

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You may know a bit about my personality now, being timid, but that's not all that defined me. I possessed a maternal side, *laughter*, yes, at just about 4 years old, I had the motherly instinct towards a much younger child at school. She was about 2 years old and was really cute. I think her hair was plaited. I don't remember her talking, but she wasn't mute or dumb. She sat down with all of us, as we learnt the alphabets, the numerals, the rhymes and everything else. I admired her so much that I would play with her, whenever I could. I even told mama about her, that there was a girl at school who was really cute, but I didn't know whose child she was. Teacher Lucy used to carry her and pace up and down with her when she felt like sleeping. One day, the teacher announced that no one should attempt carrying up cutie, since she could easily fall asleep on you, and you won't be able to put her down. I heard it loud and clear, but I didn't understand it like a grown-up would. One day, in the teacher's absence, I carried her and paced the room with her. She wasn't sleeping at the time. I just couldn't resist picking her up. She was beautiful, a cute little girl, like some little sister to me. I dearly loved her, so I carried her and we roamed the classroom and then after some minutes, she began to fall asleep. I placed her over my shoulder and paced up and down the room for several minutes. I was tired, I wanted to put her down, but I couldn't, or didn't know how to. Fortunately, after about 10 to 20 minutes of holding her, teacher Lucy came in to save me. *Ha!* I was exhausted, *laughter*. Those were

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some of my adventures at school. School was nice, and so was church on Sundays, held in the same place I schooled. One of my fond memories of going to church on Sundays was when I got to wear pearl necklace to church. We all had some, me, mama, and my elder sister, Florence. Dad bought it from Australia, where he had gone to study. It was the reason why I never missed a Sunday service. I couldn't wait to put it on on Sundays, I couldn't wait for the week to end quickly so I could go to church just for it. At times when we didn't go to church because the road was bad, due to rain, dad will hold a Bible study session at home. However, it wasn't only for us. We had friends on the other side, people who lived on the farm and around it. I remember the Borketeys, Mr Borketey and his family, though I don't recall meeting his wife or any other family member beside him. He was a nice man, friendly, a Christian, and an aide for when we needed his services. There were others whose names I don't recall, but those were our real neighbours, our true friends, not the man who lived beside us, the guard who tried to kill dad one day. We'll get to it, soon. Now you know we weren't alone, we had people who cared about us, some of whom were exceptionally nice, perhaps, because we shared the same spirit with them. Whatever the reason, God will appoint someone for you if you serve him well, if you don't, he'll still get you someone, to torment you. However, it says in *Proverbs 16:7*, that when a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. That's why God

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prevented that man from harming dad, because He was pleased with his ways. Our family was a peaceful home. Dad would wake up every morning and greet everyone in a lively tone. He usually awoke early, around, 7 or maybe 8, that is, during the weekends. And when he did, he'll go round disturbing all the sleepy heads. As you're stretching out to sleep some more, you'll hear, "Good morning, family, time for prayer, time for prayer, wake up." Ah, that was unpleasant, a real damage to our sleep. It's Saturday for God's sake, let us rest a bit! I used to say, but obviously, not only me. Sometimes mama would intervene. She'll say, "Daddy, it's too early, it's the weekend, let them rest a while." "Okay," he'll say. But at times it wasn't okay. He'll give us a deadline, up to 10 o'clock for instance, to rouse ourselves from sleep, to gird up our loins like the soldiers we ought to be, soldiers of the Cross, ready for the Word at all times, irrespective of what day it was. We all had Bibles, except for me, since I wasn't old enough to read it. So I listened. I think I enjoyed the Bible studies more because of where it was held – at the car shed, right on the compound. It was quite airy, breezy, I loved it. It felt like some adventure, whenever we gathered there. Then right after the sermon was over, we had breakfast, rice porridge, that's rice cooked with more water than the usual way, so it could be drank like water. Here in Ghana, we call it rice water. It was the alternative to the white porridge I mentioned earlier, *koko*, as we call it here. Rice water really went well with groundnuts and milk. If we had

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groundnuts, good, if we had milk, better. Our bread was always fresh, soft, and warm since we heated it in the stove every time before eating it. This made our breakfast very special, simply because the bread was always warm, and soft. It made such a difference to our meal. Getting that bread was no simple thing though, as you now know, we were isolated from everyone. So Emmanuel, the eldest usually rode the bicycle all the way to the University farm to purchase the bread. It would take him about an hour to return, 45 minutes to an hour, at most. However, mama sometimes bought it when she visited the farm or when she took me to school. We were a happy family. There weren't much arguments, I don't remember any noise emanating from the house because of that. It was mostly quiet, with the exception of a few times when the parents had their issues. Now, to what you've all been waiting for, the incident I kept talking about, the attempted murder of our father by the guard.

It was a normal day, the day it happened. We woke up and went about our daily routines. I think it was a weekend, Saturday or Sunday. The sun was out, the birds were singing, and perhaps, his radio was blaring as usual, with the prayer song I spoke of earlier on. It was normal, until the evening when it rained. I remember we were all together at the living room, but I don't recall what we had gathered