

## **Chapter 2**

### **Return Home**

Ude was on the road for most of the day as the lorry made its way, wending through bad roads that traversed in and out of villages and small towns. Whenever, the roadway opened into a major town, it was slowed by traffic. The journey had begun at 6am in the morning, but Ude did not arrive in his village until 8 o'clock at night when the lorry pulled up on the asphalted roadway besides a large tree. Weary, he disembarked, picked his belongings then hit a worn bush path, perpendicular to the asphalted roadway, towards his family compound, located about a half a mile away.

Ude's mother was home when her son walked into the large hut she lived in unannounced. Ude did not send any word of his impending return. His mother was thus surprised to see him. She was elated though, for she had not seen her son since he left the village 15 years back in the company of a wealthy merchant who was a friend of the family. Chief Nwankwo was a used clothes dealer based in Lagos who also had branches of his business in several major towns across the

country. Every now and then, he took promising young men under his tutelage as apprentices and taught them the used clothing business. They lived with him for 5 years serving him in various capacities—as assistants in his stores, itinerant retailers on the road selling his used clothes, and as helpers around the house where he lived with his 2 wives and several children.

Ude had finished elementary school in 1951 but his father lacked the wherewithal to send him further to secondary school. For a brief period, about 6 months, Ude took after his father's multiple occupations and tapped wine from palm trees, farmed, and trapped game (bush meat) in the bushes on the outskirts of the village.

Mazi Simeon Ude, Ude's dad, was a proud and industrious man. Ebony skinned, lanky and thin faced, he often wore a countenance of contentment. He did not make much from his toil, but he managed to pay Ude's way through elementary school. He could not afford his son's further education in secondary school, but he was determined to open an alternative door for him to work towards a better life, and that door was a trading apprenticeship with Chief Nwankwo. There was no payment involved in this, considering Ude

would provide 5 years of free labor to the Chief while learning the used clothes business. All that Simeon Ude gave to Chief Nwankwo as gifts in appreciation of Nwankwo's acceptance to take his son under his wing were several gallons of palm wine, tobacco snuff and 20 large yam tubers. All of this occurred 15 years to the day Ude returned home.

"My son, welcome home. What happened? You did not write us, and you did not ask about us, why?" Ude's mother, Agnes, was a charming woman. In her middle age now, she still radiated a lot of the beauty of her youth. She was very light skinned, of average height, and was further endowed with a high cheek boned face. Ude resembled his mother in skin complexion and facial attributes, but took after his father in being a very tall man. His mother's question was difficult to answer, for he really had no reason for his being incommunicado all this while. After a brief silence that seemed to last forever, he spoke up.

"I am truly sorry about that. The life in Lagos was overwhelming..."

Agnes interrupted before Ude could finish his thought.

“That’s okay,” she said. “ I am glad you are back home now. How long do you plan to stay before going back?”

“Ah! Mama, I don’t think I will be going back any time soon.”

“What happened?”

“There is crisis in the land. Our people are coming back to the east from all parts of Nigeria due to this crisis.”

“Oh, that must be why I’ve been seeing some people recently in this village that I haven’t seen in a long time!” Agnes wondered.

“The other day, I saw Nwakanma, Okafor and Albert at the market, and I don’t believe they’ve been around in a long while.”

“They are probably back home because of the crisis,” said Ude.

“But what is this crisis you are talking about? “ Agnes asked. “We don’t get much news in the village, and your father’s radio has batteries that have been dead for about a year now.”

Just as Ude was about to start his story, His father walked in. He was as surprised as Agnes was to see his son. Simeon Ude was returning from a night village meeting. They exchanged pleasantries after which Simeon pulled up a stool and sat on it.

“Ah, John, don’t tell me the problems we have heard about in the north have reached Lagos!”

“Papa, it is not quite there yet, but it is fast approaching. Nobody is being killed now, but we don’t know about the future.”

“I saw Silas at the market just yesterday. He came back from Kano, where he said dozens of Igbo people were killed by mobs. What exactly is the true situation of things right now in the country?”

It was clear that Mazi Simeon and his wife, dwellers of the Igboland countryside, were cut off from communication and thus unaware of the grave events unfolding in their country. Ude sat on a stool across from Simeon. Eager to tell them what was going on, he was barely 5 minutes into it when Okwuchi, his unmarried sister and the last child of the family, stepped into the hut. She shrieked at the sight of her brother. There was excitement, hugs and familial banter after which Okwuchi went back out to an open

area used as a kitchen. She lit up a fire and was soon making supper for her brother.

Ude continued on with the story.

“...The problem actually started in January when the Prime Minister and others were killed. The northerners were very angry at the loss of their top political and military leadership...The Igbo resident in their midst...”

Cutting in before Ude finished his sentence, Simeon wanted to establish one fact. “Who killed the Prime Minister?”

“The people who were executing the coup.”

“And who were these people?”

“There were many of them, but they were led by 5 Igbo majors...”

And so Ude kept his parents riveted in his story until the wee hours of the morning.

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Everybody woke up later than usual the following morning. Simeon owned two huts inside of a mud

walled compound. Ude's mother lived in one with Okwuchi. Simeon lived in the other hut, which was the bigger of the two. There were actually 2 rooms in Simeon's hut—a parlor and a bedroom. In the parlor were 2 long benches, a rectangular table and a bed made of bamboo poles laid neatly side by side and tied up with twine for stability. Simeon's guests who spent the night because it had gotten too late to leave for home often slept on the bed. There was no visitor stranded by the night when Ude came home, so the bed was available to him. He slept on it and continued to do so for several months.

Agnes and Okwuchi ate a hurriedly made breakfast of sliced cassava and coconut and headed out to their cassava farm, but before heading out the door, Okwuchi served her father and brother their breakfast meals. Soon Simeon grabbed his tree climbing belt. With the apparatus, he climbed palm trees several meters tall to tap the trees for their sweet wine. There were several trees he had to hit before midday. He bade Ude goodbye then walked up to the gate, bent his tall frame and stepped outside.

Ude felt awkward at being alone in the compound. It was about 9 in the morning. In Lagos, he would be at the market by that time, his clothes spread out on

wooden racks nailed to the wooden frame of his kiosk. He would be sitting in a chair inside the kiosk, reading the daily newspaper and attending to customers every now and then. He couldn't recall the last time he had been idle on the morning of a regular weekday in the last 15 years. But here he was, in his village, a returnee from the political crisis, with nothing to do. There was no way he could exist like that. He would go insane, he thought. As from the next day, he resolved, he would go out with father to the palm trees and to the bushes to set traps like the days of yore as a teenager before he left for Lagos.

For the next 4 months, Ude kept up the regimen he resolved to do to keep busy. He cleared weeds in father's yam farms and assisted with carrying gallons of palm wine on his Raleigh bicycle to the market for sale. He climbed palm trees to punch holes into the trees at the crown from where the wine seeped out. His climbing was clumsy, for he had not done that for 15 years. Father discouraged him, fearing a fatal fall from any of the trees which can grow up to 16 meters in height, but Ude insisted on climbing the trees.

By January 1967, Ude had had enough of village life. It was a laid back place, he had plenty to eat, he was happy to help father out, and there was no other place



in the country safer than right there in the village. But he was a 28 year old man now. He had left home at 13 years old to become an apprentice. He wasn't doing bad at all, and in fact were it not for the political crisis, he planned on getting married in the second half of 1967. He had planned to start saving up on the bride price, exorbitant in his part of Igbo land, from the second half of 1966, but fate decreed otherwise. His business was shut down and he had to relocate back to his village as a result of circumstances having to do with external forces beyond his control.

He had stayed in the village now for 4 months and the national conflagration he feared was about to be unleashed had not happened. Using some of the cash he had left, he replaced the dead batteries in father's radio so he could tune in to the latest on the political front. Nightly on the radio, he learned about the increasing bad blood between Gowon and Ojukwu. He also heard about the Aburi meetings on the news. At least the leaders were talking, he mused. Having come to the conclusion that he overreacted in shutting down his business and checking out of Lagos, Ude decided to move to Port Harcourt to resume his trading career and put back on track his plans to save

up on a bride price and get married no later than the second half of 1968.