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This book is a work of fiction, Any resemblance to actual names of people or places is merely coincidental and therefore regretted.

Dedication

To all serious minded youngsters,
for they are
the leaders of tomorrow.

And
to my parents,
Chief Mathias (Chinenyeze 1)
and
Lolo Cecilia (Nnediebube)
Odigbo
for their love of Education

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Forward

The issue of youth morality occupies a front burner in our society today. Cases of drug abuse, sexual immorality, blackmail, violence, and excessive materialism are rampant. These vices used to be prevalent in tertiary institutions. It is sad that today, young teenagers of secondary school age are now infected. Juveniles are becoming more delinquent as days go by.

This novel addresses the problem from an educational perspective. Negative peer influence, licentiousness, lack of focus, promiscuity and teenage pregnancy are highlighted and their consequences exposed.

The author as a long standing educationist of repute has sounded a note of warning. "Those who have ears, let them listen!"

I have great pleasure to recommend this book to our schools, parents and the society at large.

Prof. S.N. Agwu
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Ebonyi State University,
Abakaliki.

CHAPTER ONE

Ijeoma woke up startled. She jumped out of bed. What was the matter, she wondered. "It must have been a dream that jolted me", she thought. She couldn't place her hand on whatever it was immediately but her heart kept pounding with expectation as it used to do on the morning of a good day of sales. The time was still a quarter past four in the morning. The cocks could be heard displaying natural conjugal calls to eager, listening females. In Igbo land, and in some other parts of the world, the early crow of cocks had been a time watch. It indicated the arrival of a new day, a time to rise and get to one's daily duties. Ijeoma's heart was tingling with excitement but she could not explain where it came from. Then she remembered. Today is the day she would be going back to school with Nkechi, her best friend, and this time, it was going to be different because they would be going back as senior students, having come out successful in the last Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination. In addition, Ijeoma had reason to be particularly happy. She was going to be a boarder for the very first time. Some of her friends like Nkechi lived in the boarding house since their first years. Ijeoma used to visit some of them like Nkechi, Lillian, Stella and sometimes Ugochi in their small corners in the dormitory and had observed how enjoyable dormitory life could be. She had longed

for a time when she too could be a part of that life. This was her opportunity.

She looked around at the tiny single room she lived in with her parents. The walls were not painted. The room served as a combination of livingroom, dining, store and even kitchen. There was a cushion chair in one corner of the room which the father had bought at an auction sales. Above the bed was a long thick rope on which all clothing was hung. The cupboard at the left entrance had two rungs. The lower rung housed the black cooking pots while the upper rung was a store for food items. Above the cupboard were two boxes. The first, she was told, was the wooden box which was given to her mother at her traditional wedding. The second box used to be her father's tool box but since his death, the mother had converted it to her store of valuables. It was in it that she carefully stored the children's terminal school reports, their baptismal certificates, and other things she considered important for safe-keep. Beside the cupboard was an earthenware pot where they kept drinking water. Chikwado had nicknamed the pot 'fridge' because the water from it was as cool as water from a fridge. Under the bed was the archive. A wide range of things, some useful, some useless, were pushed underneath the bed. Shoes, sandals, bags, buckets, gallons, brooms, rags, and Tochukwu's football were some of the things that could easily be seen, carelessly lying under

the bed. At the right corner, under the bed, was the plate basket where the plates and cutleries were kept. Deep under the bed and close to the wall were old clothes and shoes scattered all over. It was here that rats and cockroaches lived. When a bucket was suddenly removed, a rat was sure to scamper out from behind it to somewhere deeper and more obscure. The rats were uncountable and ineradicable. They seemed immune to all rat poisons but appeared to be nourished by them instead because they would ingest the poisons and yet not die.

Life could not be said to be very easy for Ijeoma. Her father, a commercial bus driver, had died nearly four years ago in a motor accident, just when Ijeoma was getting ready for secondary school. That left their mother with five children to take care of single handedly. Ijeoma, being the second child, having come only after Obinna, had a lot of responsibilities. Following the death of their father, Obinna had dropped out of school and now apprenticed as a trader at Oritsha main market. Ijeoma, on the other hand, helped the mother with petty trading and hawking of 'bean cake' balls and 'pap' which she sold in the morning and evening hours. With this, they merely eked out a living. She hated the drudgery of having to get up before four o'clock every morning to mash beans and go to the 'mill' to queue up for grinding.

Her immediate younger sister, Ebere, worked on

the corn, mashing and sieving it to produce pap. Pap and bean cake balls made a quick breakfast which many average families savoured for breakfast in the rural and metropolitan areas. It therefore made quick sales in the mornings. Ebere stayed with their mother, helping out during the morning hours so that she could attend the afternoon session of the primary school. Chikwado and Tochukwu the youngest, did their own bit by peeling potatoes and helping to serve customers before they left for school.

Barely two weeks ago, Nkechi, Ijeoma's friend had come around to inform Ijeoma that the Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination result was out. She had met Ijeoma's younger brother, Tochukwu.

"Tochi, is I.J in?" Ijeoma's friends call her I.J for short. "Yes, she is inside the room" answered Tochi.

"Doing what?" Nkechi asked.

"I don't know" replied Tochi nonchalantly.

"Okay, let me see her" said Nkechi as she stepped across the open gutter into the corridor. She quickly knocked on the third door. She was already so familiar with the whole place that she could locate their room even with her eyes closed. "Yes, who is that?" Ijeoma asked from inside the room. "Make a guess" Nkechi tried to change her voice.

"N.K. baby, who else" Ijeoma rushed to open the door and let her friend into the room.

It was a small room, Nkechi observed afresh. The

room smelt of fetid, damp clothing. On the end immediately to the left of the door was the bed, rough with threadbare bedding and holes large enough to take full fists, holes probably made by rats because of the pinched, ragged outline of each hole. Clothes and old books were kept on the table beside the bed. There was a heavy rope in a corner, low with clothing draped like giant multi-coloured snakes reaching down to touch the floor. The black patch on the wall close to where the water pot and cooking utensils were kept along with the torn curtains on that side made the right extreme of the room look like a shrine of some demented god. A sharp contrast was the altar of worship arranged on a rack above the bed where statues of the Blessed Virgin and the Child Jesus stood with outstretched arms. The only chair in the room was a low, red, dusty cushion now black with stains of oil and dirt. Nkechi did not want to sit there. She'd rather sit on the bed. It seemed a better option.

"Good, I.J, I thought you were sleeping away your time. Now, is the time to go to school and find out our position because I heard the result is out," said Nkechi.

"Eh, na wa-a-o, eh. Did you hear anything at all? How did we fare?" Anxiety was written all over Ijeoma's face. "I don't know", Nkechi said simply and honestly. "What did you hear then?" asked Ijeoma impatiently. "Well, I met Oby Okafor as she was coming home from the market yesterday. She told me about the results and she said that up to fifty persons failed"

"Up to fifty?", Ijeoma shouted.

"Yes-o", she affirmed.

"God help us o. What about her? I mean Oby. Did she pass?", Ijeoma inquired.

"I think she passed because she had already started preparing for going back. So when are we going to the school to find out our own? NKechi finished up.

"Let's go tomorrow then" said Ijeoma.

"That's alright. What time?"

"Say 9.00 am. I'll be waiting for you" said Ijeoma.

"That's okay with me" said NKechi as they bade their goodbyes.

Once she was out of the room, she took a deep breath. "What a stuffy room" she thought to herself. The contrast of the room with the open air was too sharp. They had gone to the school the following day to check the results. It was a happy day because they were both successful. Ugochi, Lillian and Adaora were there too and were equally successful. They were all gorgeously dressed. It was rumoured that Chichi and Bibiana failed English and that meant that they were going to repeat the class. Ijeoma and NKechi were happy that they were successful and would be among those to enroll as senior students once the school reopened. Ijeoma's joy was double because not only was she going to be in the senior class, she would be in the boarding house and that meant among other things, freedom from the inconveniences of household chores and the drudgery of having to wake up in the early mornings.

"I am sorry for those who failed English or Maths" quipped NKechi.

"In fact, we are lucky to have passed" added Ijeoma. "Why shouldn't I pass? I worked hard" boasted NKechi.

"Don't say that. Exam is luck! What about Pep who used to be the best in Integrated Science. You know she failed it" put in Ugochi.

"True?" NKechi shouted. "She is just lucky it wasn't English or Maths. That would have spelt disaster."

"Look at Stella coming" Lillian pointed towards the road. Stella looked very simple in her black skirt and white blouse. She and Ijeoma were the only girls who did not plait their hair. Once, Stella's mother had asked her to plait her hair like other girls. She had answered in the negative, saying that first things should come first. She has to pass her exams first before behaving like a senior girl. Pride, they say goes before a fall.

"They said she made the best result", continued Lillian before Stella was within earshot.

"I am not surprised" said NKechi. "Stella is intelligent.

She is a good student." "She is just the best student", added Lillian

"She is good sha-a, but what about you? Is she better than you?" Ijeoma asked playfully.

"Well, you know" retorted NKechi.

"Frankly speaking, that girl is quite brilliant", said Ugochi matter of factly.

"And very simple too" added Lillian.

"Simple my foot! She is just an "Mgbeke" Anyway, I don't care who is more intelligent as long as I passed", Nkechi said, ending the line of discussion as Stella approached.

"Hello girls, I see you have all heard and have also seen it. How are the results? I hope they are fine? I hope no one failed", Stella tried to sound friendly.

"Yes-oi Congratulations!" replied Ijeoma and the other girls. But Nkechi was not impressed.

"Who is she asking all these questions? And who does she expect to answer them? Please girls, what are we still doing here? Let's be gone" Nkechi said haughtily. She started moving, pulling Ijeoma along. The others joined.

"Ah, I hope I am not the one chasing you people away" Stella asked.

Nkechi turned pointing Stella in the face. "Listen carefully, I don't know what is swelling your head. No matter what you may want to think, I am not on the same level with you. Better get it into your head ok?". She stormed out with her friends. Stella stood watching them, saying nothing. She stood until she could not see them again. She shrugged her shoulders. Stella knew she was not among the happening girls in the school, but nothing was wrong in saying hello to them. Or so she thought. "But why should Nkechi be rude to me? Maybe, because I am not one of those girls she twists around her fingers", Stella spoke to no one in particular. She shrugged her shoulders again.

"I'm only sorry for Ijeoma who she is misleading" It was while checking her results that she discovered what might have fired their envy. She made the best result in the school.

Stella smiled to herself. If that was what was biting Nkechi, then I have no apologies.

With the results collected, Ijeoma had gone on to prepare for the resumption. There were things that needed to be bought: new uniforms, new sandals, school bag. There were other boarding requirements that were to be provided: bed sheets, pillow slips, night gowns, day dresses, buckets, soap dish, towels, and a complete set of cutlery.

So when Ijeoma woke up this morning, she switched on the light to examine all the new items which had been bought for her by her mother. She was filled with joy. She lifted the box off the table and unto the bed and opened it. Everything was new; two pairs of school uniforms, well sewn skirt and blouse, the type senior students use, both neatly folded. Next were the day dresses and sports wear, all crisp. There were also bed clothes, panties, comb, toothbrush and other personal items. Most surprising was the bag of provisions sent in by Obinna. Who would have expected that from him, a mere apprentice. But Obinna had always loved her. Anyway, Ijeoma was thrilled. She was going to taste life for the first time. She closed the box and considered things to be done before the agreed time with Nkechi. She had to wash her jerry cans, wash and iron some clothes, plait her hair and do a number of other things to

enable her go to the hostel in style, just as she and Nkechi had planned. She wondered why Nkechi had her hair permed and styled. She was sure perming and styling one's hair was not allowed in the school. When asked, Nkechi had simply told her not to worry as it would be taken care of. She brushed this out of her mind and set about her tasks. She was determined to see and conquer the boarding house. Among the people who were so excited about her boarding was Nwadi, the lady living next door to theirs. She had told her that boarding house was the sweetest experience. Perhaps, sweeter than home! She had gone ahead to tell her of all the advantages of the boarding house, including freedom and exemption from daily household chores. The excitement was building up. She could not wait to see and experience the wonderful boarding house.

She turned around and realized she had been daydreaming. She looked at the old time beaten clock that had seen years. It was still past four. This was the third time she was waking up this single night. The excitement was simply too much for her to contain. She had to sleep till at least six. She laid back and tried to think of how the boarding school was going to be. She did not know when she fell asleep again.

When she got up, she set out for Ugomma's place where she would plait her hair. Although her hair-do was still presentable, she wanted a new braid. She has gathered that neatness was the hallmark

of a senior girl. She must have to do away with the old jungle life as quickly as a snake sheds off its old skin.

"Ijeoma! Ijeoma" shouted Uju she ran towards Ijeoma.

"What could it be?" Ijeoma wondered. Uju was known for flippancy.

"Uju babe, what's up?" Ijeoma hailed her, wondering what Uju could be doing around their house. Uju was notorious for her gossips. Picking up juicy information about people was her pastime. Ijeoma thoroughly disliked the idea of someone being so free as to engage in continuous gossiping.

"Hello, I.J, where are you going?" She asked, still panting from the run.

"Any problems? Just go ahead and talk without asking many questions" hushed Ijeoma.

"I was-made to understand that you'd be going to the boarding school. Na you biko! Uju exclaimed, Ijeoma feigned surprise. Ije just pretended to follow the praise. "Who made you to understand?"

"Ah, you didn't know? The gist is all over the town. Just tell me, is it true?"

Ijeoma disliked Uju. She was surprised that Uju kept coming closer despite her harshness to her. Couldn't she read the handwriting on the wall?

"Uju", put in Ijeoma sternly, "I'm in a hurry to somewhere and you must excuse me. We shall talk later okay?"

The expression on Uju's face turned sour. Ijeoma was already feeling she had upset the girl before

she looked up again. "Ijeoma, do you know that I am going to repeat JSS3?" said Uju sullenly.

Ijeoma felt touched by the girl's situation but the mere fact that she had been unserious with her academic work reduced Ijeoma's pity for her. In addition, Ijeoma's mother had earlier warned her against Uju's company, stressing that it held only evil in stock. Uju's mother was a renowned trouble-maker and her father, a good-for-nothing drunk. Ijeoma felt that she shouldn't even be seen standing and talking with Uju, let alone miss her appointment for Uju's sake. She wanted to end whatever conversation they were having as quickly as possible. She remembered when Nkechi taught her that she must adopt an aloof attitude if she was ever wanted to be seen as a big girl. Besides, she had to continue with her mission which is to find Ugomma to plait her hair.

"Uju, didn't you know that you were going to fail Junior WAEC and repeat it if you neither read nor attended classes? You instead preferred to go about gossiping. Now see where it has landed you. Anyway, I am sorry and it is a pity there is nothing that I can do to help", said Ijeoma.

"Is that all you can say?" shouted Uju.

"Ah, what do you want me to say? See Uju, I told you that I was rushing to somewhere and I've not cancelled the appointment. As I said I'm sorry but as you can see, I cannot help it. Bye Uju, please take care."

Uju stood looking at Ijeoma as she walked away,

swaying her hips. She could not help wondering what had suddenly come over Ijeoma. The Ijeoma she knew would never speak too harshly to anyone. Or was it because she would be entering boarding school? So what? "No", she thought again. "The fault may be traced to Nkechi and or Juliet or one of her new-found friends. "Pride goes before a fall" they say. Sometime ago, Stella, Ugo and Mma, all her classmates had treated her in like manner. Again, the same thing happened two days ago when she saw Nneka and her group of friends. They had even been out-rightly insolent, jeering and mocking her, laughing very wildly at each statement she made. "Well, I'll get back at all of them, especially Ijeoma", she said to herself. Just as Ijeoma was getting to the hair salon, Ugomma was preparing to leave.

"You are just coming? Is this the time we fixed?" asked Ugomma "Ugo o, I'm sorry. Somebody just delayed me. Please don't be annoyed. Please let's get down to it, you know that you are usually very fast and that it wouldn't take you much time to finish" Ijeoma pleaded. Ugomma had promised her a free plait because of her success in the last exam and as a send-off to the boarding house.

"Alright, sit down but if you keep me waiting when I am doing you a favour next time, I wouldn't have it. You understand?" Ugomma teased.

"Yes, your highness" Ijeoma answered and they both laughed. They settled down to start the braiding proper.

Soon the hair was done. It was a long spiral braid. It was her favourite "odinga" pattern and Ugomma had taken special care to make it flawless. Her expertise and Ijeoma's long hair resulted in a beautiful braid. When the work was completed, Ijeoma was so tired. Though she was, the mere thought that she would be going to the boarding school brought back energy and zeal.

Now, Ijeoma had only a few more things to attend to: wash the jerry cans for her water and iron the clothes her younger sister, Ebere, had washed for her. In fact, Ebere had been very handy in her preparations for school. Ebere helped her with every domestic errand that would facilitate things. She was usually in high spirits all through any errand and this had impressed Ijeoma a lot. Ijeoma had no doubt that Ebere loved doing things especially for her. Several times, Ebere challenged people who teased or derided Ijeoma, even in Ijeoma's absence. She was aggressive at any slight argument with anybody involving Ijeoma. Since their childhood, Ebere loved and respected Ijeoma. She had seen more than an elder sister worthy of respect in her. She saw Ijeoma as one who would teach her all that she needed to know about life so it was not surprising that they got along so well unlike direct siblings of their age in other homes who keep quarrelling or fighting. Ijeoma often spent time telling Ebere folktales at nights and usually asked her company when going out. It was easy to see that Ijeoma

liked her younger sister. How could she not be fond of Ijeoma in return? Anything she did for Ijeoma was deserved. Ebere didn't know how she could live without Ijeoma knowing how humble, loving and caring Ijeoma is. She had washed and ironed Ijeoma's clothes even though she was only asked to help with the washing. She was washing the jerry cans when Ijeoma came back to the house after plaiting her hair.

Ijeoma stood still, looked at her loving, dutiful, younger sister and tears filled her eyes. She knew well that she was going to miss Ebere. In fact, she had already started missing her. They both didn't know what to say to each other. They knew they thought alike and knew that it was going to be difficult staying without each other. They also knew they must have to try. They had arranged that they would be seeing on the school visiting days.

"Very soon you are going to join me in school", was all Ijeoma could find herself saying.

CHAPTER TWO

It was about four o'clock in the evening. They reached the turn that heralded the school gates. As usual, the gates were as majestic as ever, with the bold calligraphic writing in a semi-circle that said: Modern Girls Secondary School, with the motto "Only the Best is Good Enough." Between the entrance and the exit gates was a sculpture of the model students, two females, smartly dressed in blue and white, the official uniform of the school. They were both in the laboratory performing an experiment. From the rapt attention they paid to the work, the message of diligence as the watchword of the school was duly passed. From their glittering colours, Jjeoma immediately knew that the sculpture was recently painted. The flowers at the entrance to the school compound were dusty and dry, very different from the lush greenery that Jjeoma had left behind last June when she finished her junior secondary school certificate examinations for her home. The quiet that had then pervaded the school as she left that Saturday in June was today replaced with bustling activity. Students were trooping in tens and lining up at the check-point to have the contents of their bags inspected and approved. The noise of reunion of old friends, the joy of the successful at the entrance to a new class, the screaming of house mistresses, and the howl of the security men made the scenery look more like the students

thanksgiving and bazaar day. Earlier, Nkechi and Johnny had come around to pick Jjeoma's things up from her house. Ebere dutifully packed Jjeoma's GNG popularly known as "Ghana-must-go" bags into the car. She greeted Johnny and Nkechi and tried to ask a few questions. Just then, Jjeoma emerged in her spotless house wear and plaited hair. She embraced her mother and thanked her before proceeding to Ebere. Her valediction with Ebere was surprising and nostalgic. The previously agile Ebere became emotional. As soon as Jjeoma entered the back seat, Ebere started crying. She tried to explain to her that she would still come back and that she was not going permanently, but they all knew it was no use. Ebere knew that already. The tears flowed freely. They were for the loneliness and the insecurity the young girl would face in the absence of her friend and sister. Jjeoma knew they were such good friends outside being sisters. Jjeoma felt like crying too but knew better. She reached into her bag and gave Ebere her armpit roll-on, the same armpit roll-on that Obinna bought for her. It was something dear to Jjeoma at that point, perhaps because of its overwhelming perfume, a perfume that strangely reminded her of fountains. She knew Ebere would like it. In addition, she wanted to give something that Ebere would cherish so much so that she would feel the pinch. Ebere tried to refuse the roll-on but Jjeoma tucked it in-between her fingers, closing them tightly and asking her to keep it and use it as a

memorabilia. They embraced and hugged each other with tears flowing from Ebere's eyes while Jjeoma struggled to hide hers tears by wearing a wide hapless grin.

Their mother had to come and separate them and cautioned Ebere that Jjeoma would only be gone briefly and more importantly, she was going for good.

Nkechi and Johnny stood leaning on the car and watching the dramatic display of affection between the two sisters. Nkechi felt touched. It made her feel unloved, and unmissed. In her own house, her brothers and sisters were busy watching a wrestling match and just managed to say brisk goodbyes to her without removing their eyes from the screen. Perhaps, they were already used to her going off to the boarding school. Nkechi knew it was true but hated to admit it as an acceptable excuse. She wished silently at the back of her mind that her siblings would love her more and not always ignore her as though she did not exist, as though they were too used to her absence.

Johnny tried to be as detached as possible. He put the last of her things in the trunk of his car. They all got settled with Jjeoma at the rear, and Johnny drove off. He selected and tuned to a station that was blaring disco music. He put the stereo of his car to the loudest. He nodded to the music like a wizened, frenzied rasta, in total abandon. He was

so proud of his golf car. The lavish decorations were conspicuous: an aerial was jutting right from the roof of the car into the air. On the sides were warnings of 'don't bash my car'. He used silver-coated wheel covers. Johnny kept nodding to the music that was blaring out of his car. Johnny liked to have fun, enjoy himself and he believed that no one was better than he was. He was very loose with women. His small car did not reduce his pride because at every occasion, he would show it off. His slogan about the golf car was: 'If you have your own, bring it out' or 'What your camry can do, my golf can do better'.

On getting to the school gate, they were not surprised that the crowd at the gate was alarming. The students were trooping in, in droves. Just as they were about to get their bags out of the trunk of the car, some junior students ran to Nkechi and joyfully welcomed her. One told her that her parents had given her something for her. They greeted Jjeoma and Johnny briefly and continued floating around Nkechi, eager to tell her how their holidays was spent. It was not until Nkechi asked them to go and return later that they left. They still returned in less than ten minutes to say they were waiting to help them carry their bags to the hostels.

They were received at the gate by the house mistress on duty, Mrs. Theodore Obi. She was very warm in her greetings. "Good evening Ma", greeted Nkechi and Jjeoma, almost simultaneously.

"Good evening, my girls, how are you both?" she asked beaming with smiles.
"Fine ma", chorused the girls.

Mrs. Obi looked at them with one eye raised as though she found something wrong with the method of greeting used by the girls. She suspected the girls were too excited. All around the school, Mrs. Obi was the darling of the students. She would smile and laugh and even joke with the students although she could change completely when students are defaulting. Though she could at times get really mean with the students, she was still seen as the best because she would explain to you the reason if she was harsh on you while benignly refusing to pardon or forgive you. She remained the 'students' preference because her punishments were light like picking papers or running from here to there. Mrs. Obi is a very pleasant and affable lady. She looked quite charming and harmless but years of experience had taught her to be very careful with these girls. She ran her trained eyes over the girls to detect any flaws. The two girls were neatly dressed in their dormitory uniforms and sandals. Nkechi matted her hair and smartly tucked it away under her school beret. Mrs. Obi's eyes casually scrutinized Johnny who avoided her eyes and concentrated on nothing in particular. "What do you have in those boxes", she asked.
"Nothing Ma", Nkechi put in rather quickly.

"Well then, open them", she said casually, Nkechi had expected this. Mrs. Obi examined the contents of the boxes and bags and found nothing but a bottle of perfume which Nkechi had brought. "Nkechi, what about your friend?" she asked gesturing towards Ijeoma.
"This is Ijeoma. Ma. She is going to be a boarder", replied Nkechi.
"Okay, where are your papers, Ijeoma?"
Ijeoma handed the papers over to Mrs. Obi who stood scrutinizing them.
"Ijeoma", Mrs. Obi called, "Welcome to the boarding house"
Ijeoma observed closely the deep cut under her right eye. The students rumoured that she sustained the injury when in her usual comeliness she had tried to seduce the husband of another woman. The woman whose husband was nearly snatched, slashed her eyes using a nail file and threatened to use a real knife if she was ever seen again with her husband. The threat had gone down well as the story had it that Mrs. Obi never went close to the man again despite entreaties by the man. Ijeoma found it hard to believe that a woman as gentle and jovial as Mrs. Obi could do such a thing. To Ijeoma such was irreconcilable with her person. Ijeoma was yet to understand that official life is very much different from social life.
"The boarding house is a very nice place to be"
continued Mrs. Obi, jolting Ijeoma's attention. "And I do hope that you will enjoy it. But let me sound a note of warning". She cleared her throat.

"See that you keep out of trouble by keeping out of bad company. In as much as this place is a good place, it can be a hell for you if you have to be in trouble every time. Do you understand me? Good luck."

"Yes Auntie, thank you, Ma", Ijeoma replied.

"Do not hesitate to tell me if you have any problems""Yes Aunty. I am grateful"

"Right. You girls can go now. Remember, men are not allowed beyond the hall"

"Yes ma. Thank you Auntie."

As soon as they were inside the car and out of earshot, Nkechi burst out laughing "Don't mind her, busy body. She thinks she is very smart. What are these?" She pulled open the pigeon hole and held it. Ijeoma saw a nylon bag containing some clothes and other personal things not allowed in the school.

"I can always handle the school authority and take note, this woman, she is a gossip as you see her, forget all these motherly affectations. She may not be bad at heart, but she can be your worst nightmare in this school. Go close to her if you are a fool and she will never allow you any freedom." Nkechi tutored the new girl.

Ijeoma only nodded. She was busy looking around the school as if she was coming here for the first time and had not passed through three years of junior class already. Perhaps the look she

gave was that of conquest. She had conquered not just junior class but set to conquer the legendary boarding house. She is now a boarder, her dream since her first year.

Johnny soon reached the hall and parked. The girls got off their luggage with the help of some other girls who had returned earlier. Just then Lillian came running and shouting. "Hi, Nky baby, I J na you biko."

"Lily, so you are back already" queried Nkechi.

"Yes, less than an hour ago" answered Lillian.

"Who else is back?"

Many, like Ujunwa, Oby, Joan, Ugochi, and Vivian, Stella. They are not so many. I think Stella was the first to arrive. Look at Ngozi just coming.

"Stella the baby", shouted Ijeoma, as she spotted her helping some people with their bags.

"I. J. again? You mean business o!. So you are now a boarder?"

Oh! Why not, I told you I'd be here" replied Ijeoma.

"Na wa -o-o! Una welcome sha. Where are your things?"

As they gathered their things, Lillian started her usual narration, telling them about recent happenings, how the passenger sitting next to her in the mass transit bus from Onitsha to Enugu had attempted to toast her. He even paid her fare and she promised him an answer if he came again to see her on their visiting day with enough goodies. "You need to see this man, eh" She sighed. Ugly, flabby tommy, with floppy ears like the rabbit we

studied in our intergrated science class'. The girls kept laughing and hailing her. Already Johnny was feeling like a third wheel, though he liked the girls and their flippany gist. Nkechi will soon start teasing him that he could not see a girl and pass, let alone the beauty queens in Modern Girls' Secondary School. He had to leave since most of what they said did not even acknowledge his presence. Nkechi would call them "girls' gist." And that was what it was. Any gist that bordered on how girls should wisen-up when it came to boys, how boys always felt wise and bossy when it came to their relationships with girls and how boys deserved no love from girls, was truly a "girls' gist". It took every effort of his to listen to these girls without interrupting or interfering. He knew he had to go. Typical of Nkechi, because she has got what she wanted, she no longer cared what he thought or how he felt.

"So, see you, Nkechi. I'm about to go back home now. Bye." He turned to go but Nkechi quickly drew him back and apologized for not introducing him to her friends. "Girls, this is my big brother, Johnny" Johnny was a little bit taken aback. He felt bad that Nkechi could not even introduce him properly as her boyfriend or was he not good enough? Then the more realistic thought came to him. Nkechi was hiding so the girls would not tease her about her boyfriend or observe his features with particular interest.

"As you can see, he brought us to school and is now about to go back home." Gesturing to the

girls, he told Johnny, "and these are my friends. Lillian, Ngozi, Joan and Ijeoma" she added laughing because Johnny already knew Ijeoma very well.

She now turned to face him alone, backing the rest.

"When next will you come to see me?" she asked.

"Next visiting day?" he replied and they smiled and held hands for a while as she escorted him to the car.

She stood watching him until he got the car on and pulled away. Then, she rejoined the rest and chatting continued. Stella eyed her inquiringly. Nkechi pulled a face. She had purposely left Stella out in the introductions. She smiled at Ijeoma as they moved towards the hostel.

They took a detour to the hostel, chatting all the way. They passed the hall and some classrooms by cutting the path to the staff quarters. The dormitory was a huge sprawling bungalow housing four blocks with a quadrangle in the centre. Ijeoma stood watching the halls anew wondering.

'Am I dreaming or not?' She thought to herself.

They started cleaning the hostels of debris and rubbish left over when the students vacated for the long holidays. Ijeoma did not have any corner yet so she joined Nkechi in her corner, till the house captain later assigned her to a corner. Ijeoma watched as Nkechi brought out her clothes and hung them on hangers and placed them on ropes

suspended from the ceiling. She emptied the contents of her bag in her cupboard. Afterwards, Nkechi took over the arrangement of Ijeoma's things. Soon they were through. They joined the troupe of girls who mooded round the school, gallivanting and having fun. They hailed the new arrivals and occasionally gathered to munch a fast one, especially with those whose parents had brought food along in food flasks and needed to go back with them.

Ijeoma just packed her things and went over to Nkechi's corner where other girls had gathered. There, they ate the jollof rice, moi-moi, sausage rolls and other take-away foods they variously brought from home. They cracked jokes and exchanged pleasantries. Ijeoma had already adjusted and was now part of the whole arrangement. She was enjoying every bit of it: the jokes, the laughter, the food, the fellowship and the conviviality existing between them all. Generally, her own spirit of camaraderie started rising as she was warmly welcomed by other girls into the boarding house. With time, their discussions drifted to visits, holidays, parties, and pictures. All the girls gathered at Nkechi's corner were still talking and laughing when Vivian, a young girl of about fifteen, who was conspicuously bigger than her age mates came in and cut everybody short.

"Nkechi, a beg tell us, who was that guy that brought you back? Is that the latest boy friend or ..."

?" She cocked her eyebrows to one side, suggesting that she was sure the other girls would pick up. Surely, they did.

"Yes, please tell us", said Lililian and Uchenwa, simultaneously.

"Please, leave me alone, na my bro o"

"Bro what? Go and sit down. You think we don't know? The way you looked at each other and the way you people held hands and strolled to the car cannot be mistaken. Just tell us who he is. Surely we won't bite you"

"Ok.", Nkechi breathed out heavily. She knew the girls would not even let her be because she would be the one to lead the attack on any of them that had a male visitor till the person would be forced to say who it was. "Johnny is my boyfriend. We met during the hols" She smiled. "Does that satisfy all you curious cats?" she asked looking at Vivian in particular.

"I'm not through yet", Vivian continued.

Nkechi shot her an angry look, as if to say 'Are you not okay with the question you've already asked?'

"You see, I told you", retorted Vivian and Oby her friend who walked in with her.

"Na you, biko", retorted Oby.

"The boy is handsome, sha-a" added Vivian. "I hope he is not stingy?"

"Please stop it!" pleaded Nkechi, mockingly.

"Good defense. Now that brings me to my next question" said Vivian, looking around again for support from the attentive girls. This time she got none, probably because no one had an idea what

she was about to ask.

"Has he... or have you... eh m... Has he tried to... , you grab now, ... you know what I mean..? Just answer" Vivian said she observed that the girls were smiling and a few trying to suppress their smiles by looking straight ahead at Nkechi, silently pleading that she should not disappoint them.

Nkechi flushed through. She knew Vivian could be daring, but she did not expect that she would throw such a delicate question at her in the presence of so many girls. "That Vivian really has guts", thought Nkechi silently as she rummaged in her head for a smooth way of slipping out of the trap without losing confidence with the girls. Should she deny it, should she refuse to acknowledge the fact that Johnny had tried to make love to her? Should she tell the truth? She needed to make up her mind before the silence would be taken to mean consent. She decided not to tell the truth. She felt the information was too delicate to let loose to ordinary friends just gathered for a casual resumption chat. Besides, she needed to find an answer that would displease Vivian. She should rather place Vivian on the defensive rather than leaving herself to be at the mercy of Vivian's audacious questions.

"Vivian, I always tell you that you are so corrupt. Your mind always wanders so far that sometimes I wonder if we are truly your mates. You know too much already. How do you think that I could have allowed him to touch me. If men have been touching you, it is no reason to conclude that

Johnny or any other man for that matter, had been touching me. Stop thinking so fast and be your age" Nkechi snapped.

Immediately, the girls began to look at Vivian like she was taking them too far to places they should not go to yet. The confident Vivian found herself on the defense. She tried to explain that she did not mean it that way but the harm was already done. They asked her to stay mute. Others told her that they were listening to a beautiful narration from Nkoli, and that if she had tried to listen before forcing herself to be noticed, perhaps, things would have turned out better. "Sorry girls, I think Nkechi is not comfortable with the topic of her love life being made public. No qualms. Please, is he rich, as in, is he boxed up? she added, obviously undaunted.

"It is obvious", said Oby, "that that car he came to school in is his own"

"How are you so sure, did you know who he was before?" Nkoli asked.

"I said the car belongs to him, not borrowed, nor his father's. It's his own. His own car. Nkechi is really lucky", Nkoli continued.

"Nonsense, just tell him to come and take us to a party next month. My friend, Amaka Igwe is ...

"Who is Amaka Igwe?", asked Nkechi

"Don't you remember Amaka, my friend in City Girls? I once visited you in her company"

"Okay, is it that fair girl who represent her house for the sprint races." asked Nkechi.

"Yes. She is celebrating her fifteenth birthday and she has invited me and so we shall all go ... " said Vivian, standing up and yawning "Come on girls, look at the time. It's already 10.30 pm. "

"Lights out! Lights out! Come on everybody, put off your lights now!" Lillian said imitating their dwarfish house captain and they all burst into laughter. Ijeoma was excited beyond words. The jokes and the gist had all been heart-warming and relaxing but she looked at them and kept quiet, perhaps because she did not have any thing to say, perhaps because she was too inexperienced to contribute. She did not even know exactly what the lights out drama was about till later. It was then she realized that lights out time had to be the time after the day's activities, probably around 10.30 when the students were made to sleep. She had read that part of the hostel routine she was given. She chose to remain quiet and look serious and attentive, to learn as much as she could without looking lost. Ijeoma looked around the room. It was crowded with students who had come to hear Nkechi or Lillian or those who just wanted to join in the merry first-day noise-making. She said little and made no sound except laughter. Only one girl, Uju, observed her despite her quietness and commented on her pointed nose. It was then that the others noticed that she had a pointed nose, and even noticed that she had slanted eyelashes. She was not sure if it was in the custom of the girls to tease a new arrival, especially of her looks, or if they were being

matter-of-factly. She prayed they were not serious, or even if, that they should not let it get out of hand if they were joking.

She remembered home. She remembered Emma, the mechanic man whose workshop was opposite their stall, who kept telling her that he would marry her, that she was like a goddess, that she made him happy each time he set eyes on her. But each time she looked at the mirror however, she would not be able to see anything particularly remarkable. She had told herself that whoever commented on her beauty, especially those who came to buy akara, only did so to gain "jara", extra additions to their regular purchase.

One of the girls said boldly that Ijeoma was very beautiful indeed, probably because she had smooth, not parched, chocolate skin and bright radiant eyes; qualities she had inherited from her parents, qualities that continued exposure to bean cake fumes had done their bit to diminish, but had not Succeeded. She was used to people saying that she was a beautiful young girl, irresistible and charming. Recently, Nkechi had added to that by saying that her hips were enlarging boldly and that she was getting more attractive. She laughed inwardly when she remembered Nkechi's joke that she should not have to apply eye pencils as she already had naturally outlined eyes. Ijeoma was tall, slim and had long hair, the exact features Nkechi always wished she had. Ijeoma did not like it if Nkechi started her comparison partially because Ijeoma always saw Nkechi as being

more beautiful and adorable, more attractive with her smooth fair skin, aided by the body creams she used. At least Nkechi's skin was not exposed to incessant smoke from the akara kitchen.

Finally, Ijeoma went back to her corner, selected her night gown and put it on like the other girls before lying down. She had enjoyed every bit of the day and still had a lot more to learn. She thought of home. If she was still at home now, then she would be packing up after the day, or she could still be at the shop attending to some late shoppers. Else she would be mashing beans in preparation for the early morning grinding. She was grateful to the boarding house for excusing her from that tiresome work she had still not gotten used to after all these years.

Within a few minutes, she dozed off. In the middle of the night Ijeoma woke up. She opened her eyes and looked around. The open hall loomed dark in the dim light. Patches of darkness hung menacingly around her as she laid still in the quietness. She was trying to remember where she was. Human forms were stretched out on the beds and some people snored peacefully and others breathing hard. Then she realized she was in the dormitory, in the boarding house. She used a bed all alone unlike at home where she had to share the floor with her brothers and sisters except the last child who shared the bed with their mother. She laid back in bed and thought about her life. She couldn't believe her luck. Although she had

observed signs of expensive and extravagant life among the girls she felt there was no need to worry.

For the first time in her life, she felt a sense of peace. She had never felt this way before. She had always felt a sense of longing for home, for her mother, for her father, for her brothers and sisters. But now, in this boarding house, she felt a sense of belonging. She felt that she had found a place where she could call home. She felt that she had found a place where she could be herself. She felt that she had found a place where she could be happy. She felt that she had found a place where she could be free. She felt that she had found a place where she could be loved. She felt that she had found a place where she could be safe. She felt that she had found a place where she could be secure. She felt that she had found a place where she could be content. She felt that she had found a place where she could be at peace. She felt that she had found a place where she could be at home.

CHAPTER THREE

The first term of SS 1 quickly rushed by but it left its marks though. As senior students, they no longer wore the pinafore. That was for the junior ones. Senior students dressed in well tailored skirts and blouses and sandals all new. They plaited their hair. Altogether they looked taller, bigger and more mature. It was quite easy to see that puberty was setting in.

There were so many activities to keep them breathless. Apart from the usual class work, there were other things about dormitory life. Life in the dormitory was regimented like in a military camp. From rising bell early in the morning by 4.30 am, to lights out by 10.30 pm, the students were kept busy. Immediately after the rising bell, the students were asked to take their baths, and by five O'clock, they would gather for morning prayers in their respective denominational corners. That took no more than 15 minutes. They would then be ordered out to different morning functions and chores like sweeping and mopping rooms and corridors and toilets, arranging, dusting, sweeping the surroundings and packing away of refuse. By six thirty, the house captains would remind to change into their school uniforms and reappear for inspection. They would get

dressed and the house immediately and the captains would go round to the different duty posts to observe and inspect them. As soon as she is through, the students could then leave the hostels and for the classrooms or the refectory.

Breakfast was by seven. If by ten past seven a student was not at the refectory, then she would as well forget breakfast. The only way she could still get to eat the breakfast was if she has good friends. They would start the morning assembly by seven thirty, even though assemblies were held only on Mondays and Fridays. The official school hours start at eight am. Each lesson teacher takes about forty minutes except a double period. They would jog to some lessons especially those at the laboratories. Usually, before the break time at eleven o'clock, the students especially the unfortunate ones who did not eat in the morning, would be so famished and would be seeing plates and cups in hallucinations before them. Morning sessions end by 2pm. The girls would return to the hostels and get prepared for lunch. Lunch would be by 2:30 pm. Immediately after the lunch was the siesta break. All students are expected to have a quick nap of an hour, though barely any student did that. Four o'clock sees them to the afternoon preps. That would last till five thirty. The sports/games time would be by that 5:30 and would last an hour and fifteen minutes. Students who played games would instantly rush to take their baths and prepare for dinner by seven. Quickly after dinner is the night preps. Many