

IDOGUN

*'Whatever the eyes of a dead man see
in the burial yard is caused by death'*

- Yoruba proverb

20th May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Why, why, why? I hate them all, I want to go home. I don't want to live with my Auntie. I don't want to live in Idogun. I want everything to go back to the way it was, with Daddy, Adebola and me living at number 4 Edgcombe House.

21st May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Daddy didn't take notice of my tears. I told him I didn't want to leave Lagos, that I wanted us to live like a family. I want us to be like when we left our foster parents in Kent to live with him in London. I sobbed and sobbed till I couldn't sob no more. I promised not to be naughty and to never, ever lose the front door key like Adebola and me used to do in London. I told him that I'd be responsible like he is always telling me to be. I promised so much yet he still wouldn't listen to me. He said I had to leave. I had to go and live with my Auntie, Iya Rotimi and my three cousins because he could no longer take care of me and Adebola. So today I've arrived in Idogun and I'm going to be here at my Auntie's home forever unless I'm rescued by a handsome prince.

22nd May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Today is Sunday and my Auntie, Iya Rotimi took us to church. I know she doesn't like me so I won't like her either. I don't like

the way she looks at me. She makes me feel as if I'm naughty all the time. Whenever she sees me, she rolls her eyes, kisses her lips and claps her hands while moving her head from side to side, and finishes with "You no go kill me o. I no go let you." I don't want to kill her. I just want to go back to Lagos and live with Daddy.

She turned up at our house out of the blue just like when Uncle Joseph came to take Adebola away. There were whispers behind closed doors – I tried to listen through the keyhole but I couldn't understand what was being said. After a while Daddy came out and said I had to pack.

"You're going to live with your Auntie in the village and no amount of sobbing and begging is going to change my mind," he said.

I can't wait to grow up and make my own decisions because when I asked him how long I had to stay in Idogun, he said it was till I finished school. That is a stupid decision. I've only just started Primary four – it will take another three years till I finish Primary six, and then I'll have to do five years of secondary school. Eight years of my life gone, just like that.

He never asked Adebola and me what we wanted. He just came home one day and said we were going back to Nigeria to live. We didn't want to come to Nigeria, but we came and now he's breaking our family up again. I'll be eighteen, an old woman, before I ever see Adebola again. He probably won't recognise me. How could Daddy do this? Doesn't he love me any more? Maybe he found out I broke all the glasses on top of the fridge. I didn't mean to, I was just throwing the ball against the kitchen wall because I didn't have anyone to play with.

Everything here is so confusing. I have too many relatives and I don't know how we're related. It seems like I'm related to the whole village. We came to visit once before and I didn't like it then. No-one could understand what I was saying, and they still can't. Now I'm going to have to spend the rest of my life here with no-one but you to speak to. I prayed and prayed because

Daddy said that God answers the prayers of little children, but I must have been really naughty because God didn't answer my prayer.

We travelled in a rickety old bus. You could see the dusty road through a huge hole in the floor. We bumped along on red dirt roads with gaping holes in them and every time the bus jolted over a hole I got a splinter in my backside. It was worse when we had to go through puddles because the muddy water kept splashing into the bus. Daddy had made me wear my white blouse and tartan skirt, with white socks, because he said it made me stand apart. By the time we got to Idogun my blouse and socks were browner than they were white.

We made several stops along the way so people could get off, stretch their legs, go into the bushes or buy food. We stopped at Ibadan, Ikare, Akure, Owoh and lots of other places that I can't remember. I only remember those four because Ibadan is near Lagos, Akure is the capital of Ondo state, Daddy went to school in Ikare, and Owoh is the nearest big town to Idogun. I wanted to buy some *akara* at one of the stops but I didn't have any money. Daddy had given Auntie some pocket money for me, but she wouldn't let me have it. I hate her very much for that. It is my money. She and her youngest son, who is about five, ate a whole loaf of bread by themselves and didn't offer me any. She's selfish, rude and ugly.

Before, it was just the three of us in London – we were like the *Three Musketeers* – and before that it was Adebola and me in Kent. There were no relatives in England, but now I have too many Aunties, uncles and cousins and it makes my head hurt trying to remember who is who.

When we arrived, everyone wanted to pat me on the head and pull my cheeks. I got scared so I bolted back the way the bus had come. I know I was being stupid, trying to run all the way back to Lagos and to Daddy, especially since the journey took all day on the bus. I didn't care, I just wanted Daddy. It doesn't matter that he canes us or makes us stoop down. He's our Dad and I

was determined to get back to Lagos, and no-one was going to catch me, not even Speedy Gonzales. I didn't get far though. The grinning driver with his crooked black pirate teeth caught up with me and said "Where you dey run go?" He made me get back onto the rickety bus and took me home. I suppose I have to get used to calling this place 'home.' But I have to say right now that my real home is in London. I was born in Paddington Hospital on March 18th 1968. Adebola was born in Wales. I used to tease him that he was swallowed like Jonah in the Bible and spat out in Wales. I, Omolola Olufunke Olufunmilayo Ogunwole, promise myself that one day I will get on a plane and go back to my friends. I don't know how, but I will. I'll run away as soon as I can. Cross my heart and hope to die.

23rd May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

I really hate it here. I want to go back to London. Even living in the two small rooms in Lagos is better than being here. We live in a mud hut, which has two rooms too, but one is for storage and the other is a bedroom. There isn't enough space for everyone, so Rotimi and his brothers sleep on the floor. Yinka and I share a bed and as she always takes up more space, I have to be content with the edge.

No-one understands a word I'm saying. There's no water, no electricity, no television and no friends to play with. To make matters worse, I wet the bed last night, so before they all went to school, Iya Rotimi put me in a chalk circle and made my cousins dance around me, clapping and singing. Sometimes I'm glad I can't understand what people are saying. Yinka, with her scarred face, enjoyed making fun of me, especially after we got into a fight on Sunday because I wouldn't let her wear my favourite dress to church. I called her a cry baby and said her scars made her look like she had tears on her face. Rotimi said the dancing and singing were going to cure me. But there is nothing wrong with me. I hadn't wet the bed in a long time.

Daddy cured me with the cane and stooping down.

I did nothing all day but sit and cry. I can't go to school because they teach in Yoruba and I can't read, write or even speak it properly yet. Please God, answer my prayer and let me go back to London. I'll be a good girl forever. I'll eat my greens and I'll be nice to Steve the fat kid. The light is almost gone. Rotimi said we have to get up early tomorrow, before the dawn because we're going to the bush to fetch water. I'm scared. What if a roaring lion or a wild elephant attacks us? That's what always happened to the natives in *Tarzan*.

24th May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Today I got up before the cock crowed, to fetch water with my cousins. I'm sure it was still night-time but I forgot to look at my watch. All I could hear were scary noises. We walked for ages before we came to a little stream in the bushes. I was frightened because it was dark. I couldn't see where I was going. Rotimi led the way with a kerosene lantern and I made sure I was in the middle, just in case a lion or tiger attacked from the back – better it get Yinka instead of me. I thought we'd be the only people going to fetch water but when we got to the stream, there was a long queue.

Rotimi said, "Na your fault we never leave for time." It's true. I hadn't wanted to wake up. Auntie had to pour a cup of water over me. I wish they had just left without me.

The stream wasn't really a stream. It was more like a hole in the ground and we had to use a bowl to scoop the water into our buckets and then wait for it to fill up again. It took ages and as we waited our turn, dawn came and the night went away. Rotimi made us wait till the hole filled up before we started scooping the water – that way we got clean instead of sandy, muddy water.

The journey home wasn't scary but it was very painful. Rotimi wound a piece of cloth into a circle, placed it on my head and

the full bucket went on top. I then had to walk home fighting tree branches and bushes with no hands. They could walk without touching the buckets but it was a balancing act I couldn't do. By the time I got home, the bucket was only half full and my neck felt like it had disappeared into my shoulders. It was decided that Mama (my grandmother) should get to drink the first cup. She grinned and Rotimi told me that she said it was sweet. At least I think that is what he said – most of the time I have to guess at what he means. Earlier, he came to get me from where I was playing hopscotch and told me it was time to come and chop. I thought he was going to make me cut up wood and I had visions of chopping off my foot or finger, since I'd never used an axe, but I didn't have to worry. 'Come and chop' means 'come and eat.'

Tomorrow, Auntie says we have to go and visit my grandfather who is blind and never leaves the house. He and Mama don't live together; he's got another wife living with him. Daddy told me that it is the custom for a man to marry more than one wife. I asked him if it was possible for a woman to have more than one husband but he told me not to be silly, which I think is unfair. When I grow up and get married, if my husband decides he wants another wife then I'll have to have another husband.

Daddy has other brothers and sisters apart from Iya Rotimi and I have more than forty cousins! Mama lives in a house with her brother Baba Ade and his wife Mama Ade, Daddy's brother Baba Dayo and his wife Iya Dayo and their six children. Yet there are only four rooms in the whole house. Mama sleeps in one, Baba Ade and Mama Ade in another, Baba and Iya Dayo and my cousins in the third, and the fourth one is a guest room for visitors. It's where we stayed the first time Daddy, Adebola and I came to Idogun for our first visit. It was several months after we first came back from London.

Iya Rotimi's real name is Bose I think, I've heard Baba Dayo call her that. But she's known as Iya Rotimi because Rotimi is

the name of her first child. Once a person has children, they're no longer called by their given name but by the name of the first child. If you have twins then you're called Iya or Baba Ibeji. Ibeji means twins. Daddy is Baba Adebola. When I have children, if the first is a girl, I'll be Iya Jennifer. If it's a boy, I'll be Iya Joseph.

Apart from my trip to the jungle to fetch water, I've been so bored today. There's nothing to do – all the other children go to school. Iya Rotimi went to the market and Baba Dayo to the farm. This left me with Mama, who doesn't understand anything I say. All my toys are in Lagos. If I had my bike I could have gone exploring, but on foot I was too scared to go further than Mama's house, which is just across the road from Iya Rotimi's. If I were in London right now, I'd be watching *The Wombles* or maybe even *The Banana Splits*. Maybe God will still answer my prayer and we'll all go back to Edgecombe House where the chimes of Big Ben woke me up every morning.

26th May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Went to the stream again and came back with even less water.

28th May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

I hate getting up so early in the morning to go to the stream. I've got horrible blisters on my feet and my neck hurts and I'm never going to grow tall.

29th May 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Iya Rotimi took me to see Baba, my grandfather. He's very old and blind. His house is on the way to the stream. His room smelled of mosquito coils and pee. Someone hadn't emptied the potty that was at the foot of his bed.

I remember Adebola and me visiting him with Daddy on our

first visit to the village. He touched our faces and had tears in his eyes. This time when he touched my face I could see the bones in his hands as they shook. Iya Rotimi helped him sit up. Then she got into an argument with Mama Tayo, Baba's other wife, who wanted him to stay in bed. Iya Rotimi accused her of wanting to kill Baba. I don't think she likes Mama Tayo.

20th June 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Today, Rotimi, who is much older than me, and I had to do an entrance exam to get into secondary school. I don't know why they made me do it because I'm really supposed to be in Primary four. All the questions had more than one answer and I had to choose the right one. The English exam was okay but the Maths exam was fractions. I haven't even done them so I guessed most of the answers. I shut my eyes and pointed my pencil up and down the answers five times and if I landed on an answer more than once then that was my choice. I was finished in no time. Everyone else was battling over the questions while the evil-eyed man with the droopy moustache and trousers that didn't reach his ankle, swished his cane to and fro. I put my pencil down and tried to catch Rotimi's eye but he was sitting too far away, plus he wasn't looking up. When Droopy saw me looking around, he hit my desk with his cane and asked whether I'd completed my exam. I nodded, afraid he was going to cane me because I finished before the time was up. But he just smiled and said, "This is what I like to see, people who can finish early. You may leave the class." I couldn't go back home because I'd come with Rotimi and he still hadn't finished, so I sat on the grass outside and made faces at the children who looked out of the window at me. Rotimi thinks he did really well in the exam. I don't care, I want to go home to London. I've been missing my friends. I sometimes wonder if they remember me. I wish I could write but there isn't a post office; well there is one, but it's never open.

21st June 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Why did Daddy do this? Why doesn't he want us any more? Maybe he's not really our father and that's why our mother left. She took one look at me and disappeared, so why would anyone else like me? Maybe that's why Daddy doesn't want me to live with him, because I remind him of her. I wonder if I have her eyes and nose, whether her hair is soft and black like mine, or brown like Adebola's. One day, when I'm much older I will go and find out for myself, instead of seeing her in every stranger who passes me on the streets of Lagos. I'd know if she were here in Idogun because everybody knows everyone else. When we were in London, we didn't say hello to people we didn't know, and you don't even in Lagos, but here in the village the chances are you're related – maybe your great grandfathers were brothers or something. That's family. Everyone is related to me, everyone wants to touch me; they say things I don't understand and then burst out laughing. Rotimi is still no good as an interpreter, but I'm learning to cope and I'm beginning to understand the Idogun language. 'Atiporo' is a 'stool', 'Ka wey ray?' means 'Where are you going?' I don't really think of London that much any more, only occasionally when things get tough, like when I think of having to spend the next 2,920 days in this village.

25th June 1977

Dear Jupiter,

School is out and everyone is on holiday. Today was my cousin Yinka's school play, which I didn't watch because she'd told me about her part, so I knew the story already. It's a bit like *Cinderella*, with Yinka as the daughter sold for some yams, gari, palm oil and clothes. Sometimes it feels like Yinka is my evil step-sister. She makes up stories about me to her mother, who then says to me, "Don't be bad, is no good." I can speak some Yoruba and a little Idogun now, but I've given up trying to

explain because she doesn't understand me and if she's speaking too quickly I don't understand her, so most of the time I don't even know what I've done wrong.

I wonder how Adebola is getting on with his new life? I hope he misses me as much as I miss him.

26th June 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Iya Rotimi says that I can't go to Lagos for the holidays and that I will have to stay in Idogun and go to the farm with my uncle, Baba Dayo. I'm not looking forward to it and I cried myself to sleep yesterday thinking about it. I don't like being sad. I don't like crying myself to sleep and wetting the bed. I don't like feeling alone. I just want to be with my dad but I don't want him to cane me for every mistake I make. I want a mother too, one who will plait my hair, kiss me goodnight and read me stories of princes and princesses. I also want my brother and maybe a sister as well, who I can boss around. I'd like a dog, not like the ones here that eat your poo, but like the ones back in Kent at Aunt Sue and Uncle Eddie's.

9th July 1977

Dear Jupiter,

My neck is sore from carrying a zillion yams, my back aches from pulling weeds and my hands hurt from making mounds. I've been to Baba Dayo's farm. We woke up very early because it was even further than the stream and Baba Dayo wanted to start work before the sun came out. I had to wear my platform shoes because I didn't have anything else big enough for my feet. Daddy bought them about two sizes too large because my feet were growing very fast. I used to stuff newspaper in them but now my toes reach the top and they are a bit tight. Mama, who is always around at our house, didn't want me to wear them but I had nothing else. I can't walk around barefoot like the savages in *Tarzan*.

As we walked deeper into the jungle I looked out for any suspicious rustling in the bushes. I wasn't taking any chances. I wasn't scared though, because Baba Dayo was leading the way and he had a really sharp cutlass. I walked close behind him. Iya Dayo was behind me and their daughter Aina was following her. The farm is big and Baba Dayo grows more than one crop – there are cocoa-yams, yams, corn, cocoa, kolanuts, cassava, guava and other things I don't yet know the names of. He showed me how to make giant mounds of dirt with the hoe, but my effort didn't match my cousin's. No matter how hard I tried, hers were always bigger. She was also faster when it came to pulling out weeds. Baba Dayo gave her six rows and I got four and she still finished before me. I think it was my shoes and it was so hot, so I kept on resting, plus I got bitten by an enormous soldier ant. It was very painful. I didn't know that ants bit people. There were lots of them marching in a column with the big ones hemming in and protecting the little ones who were carrying bits of food, I think. They were marching down my row and I didn't want them there so I used a stick to try and scatter them, but they just kept on making another line so I had to sit and wait until they had gone. That's when I got bitten. I hate ants.

12th July 1977

Dear Jupiter,

I had exactly the same day as I did yesterday, except today was longer, plus I saw Baba Dayo's thing at the stream and it was huge and had hair all around it, not like Adebola's. His is small and there is no hair. When he saw me staring, he hid it between his legs and he looked like a woman only he had all the hair, which I think is disgusting.

28th August 1977

Dear Jupiter,

The best news ever! I'm going to secondary school next month.

Imagine that! Baba Rotimi reckons that I'll be the youngest student there at nine and a half years old. Rotimi didn't get in so he'll have to repeat Primary six. I'm just so happy that I'll only be here for five years instead of eight.

It's a full moon tonight and I can see all the stars. Everyone is sitting outside. They've laid the mats underneath the giant iroko tree at the front of the house. It's too hot to sleep inside, so we might sleep underneath the stars as long as it doesn't rain. Mama is going to be telling stories soon so I guess I should stop here. I'm not looking forward to going to the farm tomorrow but I don't have a choice because during the day there's no-one left in the village, except the old people who can't walk very far. So there's nobody to play with, which is why I have to go. Soon I'll be in secondary school. I'm so excited.

19th September 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Today I started secondary school. I've skipped the last three years of primary school and here I am starting Form One. I was excited, but today I didn't want to go because I don't know anyone there and Mama had to drag me kicking and screaming all the way after I hid behind a sack of *gari* which Iya Rotimi was going to take to Lagos. When we got to school, all the other students were lined up for assembly. The girls were in white dresses while the boys wore white shorts and shirts and everyone looked so much older than me. All the girls have breasts and I stood out like a sore thumb because I was wearing my red trousers, a T-shirt and my platforms which are now not only too tight but also very dirty from wearing them to the farm. Everyone turned to watch Mama drag me to the front of the assembly. I just wanted to die. One of the teachers barked something and Mama explained that I'd just come from London so wasn't familiar with the school customs.

After the barking teacher dismissed the assembly and Mama returned home, he made me walk on gravel with my knees. "So

you think you can come to my assembly late?” he said. Then he turned to the departing students who were hurrying to class and said, “All of you should take notice – I do not tolerate any nonsense of any kind from any student. I will show you pepper or my name is not Olufemi Adegoke Adesanya.”

I was lucky that I was wearing trousers – otherwise I would have had some nasty cuts on my knees. However, it was still very painful. I hate school already. I didn’t understand anything. Mr Adesanya, the evil man who made me walk on gravel, is the Maths teacher and he kept on picking on me, saying things like, “Come and show us how this is done in the white man’s land,” or, “Just because you have been to the land of the white man does not mean you are better than anyone else.” I had never, ever thought that.

The only class I enjoyed was English Literature and the teacher, Mrs Ogunyomi, is very nice. She has a daughter, Remi in 1b. I’m in 1c. During lunch, Remi told me that her father has been to London for business. Everyone wanted to know what it was like living in London, so I told them life was different. They wanted to know what white people were like and I told them that they were just like people. Everyone laughed at this, so I offered to bring some of my treasured photographs of Aunt Sue and Uncle Eddie and the rest of the kids who were staying with them.

Even though I’ll only be here for five instead of eight years, it still seems like such a long time. I wrote to Daddy and he hasn’t replied yet. I asked him to send me my bike and some of my toys. Iya Rotimi comes back from Lagos tomorrow and I hope Daddy remembers to give her my things. At least with my bike I’ll be able to get to school on time after going to get the water in the morning.

11th November 1977

Dearest Jupiter,

Everything is so awful. Mr Adesanya has made me walk on

gravel three times already this week, once for not completing my Maths homework and the other times because I was late. It wasn't my fault. There were too many people at the stream and it took ages before it was my turn. I tried explaining this to him but he wouldn't listen. He said I should get up earlier and that the early worm catches the bird. We got up at 4 o'clock. I checked my watch. Yesterday we ran almost all the way so that we would be the first, but we met people on their way home as we neared the stream.

My knees are cut and sore and I wish Daddy had sent my bicycle. He didn't even send a letter with Iya Rotimi. He doesn't love me any more. He's forgotten about me already. We learnt a new idiom today in class – 'Out of sight, out of mind.' I think this applies to Daddy. I asked Remi today whether her Daddy would mind taking me with him on his next trip to London. I could go back and live with Uncle Eddie and Auntie Sue in Kent.

12th November 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Iya Rotimi told me that Daddy might be coming home to Idogun for Christmas! I wonder what presents I'll get? I hope he remembers to bring my bike. Maybe he'll bring Adebola with him too.

13th November 1977

Dear Jupiter,

Yesterday I went to the farm with Baba Dayo and my cousins to make palm oil. Baba Dayo had already cut clusters of palm kernels from the trees and covered them with banana leaves. Then he left them in the sun. He said this was to make it easier to pick them out of their clusters without pricking your fingers on the thorns protecting them. We sat beside the little hut made of palm branches and picked the kernels from the clusters till dusk fell. When we'd finished, Iya Dayo put them into two huge barrels and we built a fire underneath them and left them to

cook overnight. We had to get up early, so we slept on the farm.

In the little hut there were some sleeping mats, which we spread under the stars. I was anxious because that very day I'd been bitten by another soldier ant and their hill was next to where we were sleeping. Baba Dayo said, "Make you leave am alone, dey no go bite you if you come out for im path, na mosquito go bite you well well." I couldn't see beyond the circle of light cast by the lantern, so I stayed close to Aina. She wasn't afraid. She taught me some dance steps and we danced around the lantern and then Iya Dayo told stories about Ajapa the trickster and I forgot to be afraid.

Aina is my favourite cousin; I just wish she didn't snore so much. When she's concentrating on something, she likes to chew her tongue as if she's chewing gum. She laughs a lot and she's not mean like Yinka. I'm older than her but that doesn't bother her like it bothers Yinka. It's really strange that I like Baba Dayo's children but dislike Iya Rotimi's. Yinka walks around as if she's a princess and everyone is beneath her. Rotimi isn't much better, but he's not as mean as her. The younger ones just do what they see their brother or sister doing. Aina told me Yinka got her scarred face when she was a baby.

"She sick well well, so dem take am go Babalawo," Aina said, her eyes shining in the glow of the fire, "Na im cut am, so she no go die." I took that to mean that she fell ill and they took her to a witchdoctor and he cut her face open to keep her alive. I wasn't sure why they had to cut her but then she added the interesting bit. The spirits wanted to take Yinka back because she was so beautiful, so they had to make her ugly.

When morning came, the palm kernels were put into a big tub by the stream. It was made of mud and at the bottom of the tub were huge smooth stones. Once all the kernels were in the tub, Iya Dayo stepped in and started squishing them with her feet. After a while we all got in the tub and started squishing. We had to separate the outer layer of the fruit from the kernel. It was great fun. Aina started making up dance steps as we squished

away. When we'd finished, we filled the tub with water and an orange oily gunk rose to the surface, which we just had to scoop off. This had to be cooked until it turned into palm oil. The kernels are then dried over several months. Once they've been dried, they are cracked open and the seed inside is used to make skin oil (Mama uses it and it smells funny). We cooked yam in the boiling oil and ate it with eggs and chilli peppers that Dayo and I picked. The fresh oil was yummy. Nothing on a palm tree gets wasted. The branches are used to make huts, the leaves are used to make brooms, the kernel is used to make cooking oil and body oil and the dried shell of the kernel is used to build fires. If it is a good tree, you can even get palm wine, which is a nice drink after a long, hard day. I'm not allowed to drink much, though, because it could knock me out cold. I can only drink it if it's fresh, not more than three days old, as the longer it's kept, the stronger it gets.

I hated having to carry home the yams, cassava and corn, though. At this rate I'm never going to grow tall and if I'm not careful, I'll shrink to the size of *Tom Thumb*. I can't wait to grow up – at least then nobody can make me do things I don't want to, like live in Idogun. Five years is getting longer.

25th December 1977

Dear Jupiter,

As you know from the date, it's Christmas. Only it doesn't feel like Christmas. No Christmas tree, no fairy lights, no gift-wrapped presents, no cards. NOTHING. Just two new dresses from Daddy that are too big and an *iro* and *buba* from Baba Dayo. Iya Rotimi didn't give me anything, neither did Mama. And now, I have to go to church.