

CHAPTER 3: Journey to America

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or the children of Sierra Leone and much of Africa, the United States, and the rest of the Western world, seem almost like mirages— an abstract utopia seen only through media, and the stories of chance visitors from the West. Many Africans dream of escaping the stagnation or chaos that often plagues countries on this continent, thought--like dreams--visions of moving to America are mostly false, and based on myths.

I was no exception. I had always dreamed of leaving Sierra Leone for the opportunities and prosperity of the West, but I accepted it would never happen.

Like many of the kids I grew up with in Africa, my perception of America was defined by a sort of MTV-consciousness. When I thought of the American way of life—particularly for African Americans—I thought of rappers and celebrities living luxuriously: flashy jewelry,

expensive cars, gold grills, and handfuls of bundled banknotes.

Obviously, these were images of success and wealth. However, it wasn't even the wild opulence that attracted me to these images; instead, it was the certainty with which the people on the screen lived their lives. They were not anxious about anything—let alone war and want. They seemed like they believed they could do anything, and nothing could touch them.

While my understanding of America was vague and misled, my desire to leave everything behind and go there was compelling. Then, as I turned twelve or thirteen, I began to see my father preparing. He was going to try to make a way for us to move, perhaps even to America.

My father's education and hard work through these years of conflict and disorder created a life of relative comfort for my family once the war had finally boiled over; we were no longer starving. However, my father knew that he wanted more for us; more than a war-torn Sierra Leone could provide. For years, he applied to program after program that promised work and life abroad—but, one by one, they all fell through.

Finally, a few years after the final ceasefire, he was discouraged and dejected; but he retained one more hope. Several years before, his coworker had won the Diversity Lottery and gained passage to the

United States. My father felt that something within him told him: this is the only way out.

Established in 1990, the Diversity Immigrant Visa program is intended to welcome people from populations who scarcely immigrate to the US. From an applicant pool of approximately 20 million, only 50,000 Permanent Resident Cards (green cards) are awarded. Recipients are selected by random lottery; the only stipulation is that applicants must have a high school diploma, or two-years of occupational experience. Once selected, applicants only need to pass the basic immigration requirements, and just like that, they and their family are allowed to live and work in the U.S. The prospect of winning was thrilling, but the odds were stacked against us. My father applied, almost reluctantly, waited until he was very close to the cutoff date in 2003; he had very little hope in our slim chances. Months passed. He received no news, and was ready to give up on the idea.

One day, a stranger visited him in his office, excited, his shirt soaked in dark sweat.

“I have good news! So good, you must buy me lunch for delivering it!” the man said, laughing. He was waving a manila envelope.

Suffice to say, the messenger ate very well that day—my father’s name had been drawn for the Diversity Lottery! Awestruck, he sunk into

his chair, grateful to God for answering his prayers. But why had it taken so long? my father wondered as the two men ate lunch.

Apparently, the envelope fell behind a metal cabinet, where it sat for months. Then, this man was cleaning the office, sliding furniture back and forth, when he found the envelope. Leaving his cleaning halfway finished, he figured out where my father worked, and ran out into the hot Freetown streets to deliver the envelope.

Inside was a slip with some instructions. Now, my father needed only to redeem his invitation letter, and go through an interview process at a U.S. embassy.

Now the process began to get very complicated--so much, that my father began to doubt whether finding the envelope after all this time was the luckiest thing that had ever happened to him, or the cruelest twist of fate possible.

The first obstacle was the expiration date: my father had exactly one week to get to the U.S. Embassy. And not just him; the acceptance letter meant that any of his immediate family members could also get visas, but anyone who did not get to an embassy for an interview within just those seven days would be ineligible. Then, of course, there was the problem of getting there.

During the Civil War, the U.S. Embassy was relocated to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. To travel to Abidjan meant that my father would have to purchase airfare for the entire family, plus numerous days in a hotel

room. The interviews themselves each cost 300\$, or about 1,200,000 Leones per person—imagine how stressful the process must have been as my father supported a five-person family!

My father had to empty nearly his entire savings to cover this process, knowing it was worth it to create a new life for us. Still, the money was not nearly enough. My father asked many family members, cobbling funds from every corner of his network. He bought the tickets--and the last of his financial resources were expended. However, he booked the flights and the hotel on short notice. We would barely beat the deadline, just for the opportunity to be interviewed, and to have a chance--still hoping we would be accepted.

After ten-days of nerve-wracking medical evaluations, interviews, and waiting endlessly in Côte d'Ivoire, we were awarded our visas in late April 2004. To my sisters and I, the possibility of living in America began to feel tangible. Now we had momentum, we thought!

One more deadline remained: to get our green cards in the United States, we had six months. The United States Government offered the visa, but nothing more; All of the logistics were left up to my dad, who didn't even have the money to fly one person, let alone all of us. The deadline approached, day after day.

My dad adjusted the plan. Now, he would try to borrow the money to fly himself to the United States. Once there, he would get a job on an American wages, save some money, and start a chain: first, he

would bring over my mother. Then the two of them would work to bring us. Of course, he had only six months to do this; he put in his one month's notice at work, and committed to the plan.

When my father could not even find the funds to buy a plane ticket, and four weeks remained before all of our visas expired, he accepted a job. He planned to remain in Sierra Leone as an accountant for an American who was trying to build an international African business: Kib Pearson.

Kib Pearson was an intelligent businessman, and he was also interested to learn more about my dad. Gradually, Kib began to understand our predicament, and generously offered to help.

“You have a golden ticket,” he said, “but you can't use it,” and he generously offered to help:

“Come work for me in the United States. I could use an accountant there; please come be our business manager, and I will buy flights for you and your family,” Kib said. My dad couldn't believe Kib's generosity; he took the job immediately. I remember his excitement as he told us: he felt as if some force were pushing him forward, to keep taking the steps to get to America, no matter how risky--things would work out.

This offer was extremely generous, and a little risky. Kib knew my dad, but not well. He did need to hire some help--but hiring someone already in the United States would be much simpler and cheaper.

Ultimately he genuinely wanted to help us, and didn't want our opportunity to immigrate to be wasted. The dream remained alive.

Before speaking with Kib, my dad planned to move us to an area where we would have distant family for support, but now we would follow the job.

“Besides,” Kib told my dad, “San Clemente will be a great area for your family, and for your kids.” He was certain that we would have better opportunities if we could grow up in a wealthy area:

“Many doctors or engineers go to America; people with high degrees, and lots of skill that count in their own countries. But not in America,” he said. “They go, and they sweep floors for the rest of their working lives. And they do it for their kids; they do it so their kids grow up with opportunities. They would have plenty of opportunities in San Clemente.”

My dad nodded; this was exactly why he was leading us to America. “I'll do it,” he said.

One day, Kib also took our measurements, using a thin white piece of measuring tape. He would ensure we received more clothes when we got there, he said--he would send his wife our measurements. Then, he bought the tickets on our behalf, and sealed the deal. It was real: the dream was coming to life.

Now fourteen years old, I felt that the final two months of waiting in the blazing Freetown sun felt like eternity. I could imagine

myself in new, American clothes. My dad told us Kib said there were beaches. Other than that, I had almost no idea what to expect of our new life over the horizon. The liminal period dragged on and on, and my parents gradually sold the last of our things. We were finally ready to move.

Leaving the place we had spent our entire lives would certainly be painful. But, after all we had fought through to survive the war—and after all we had sacrificed to make our emigration to the United States possible—the only thing that stood between us and our liberation was a stretch of ocean water. Everything felt so certain to me—we were finally leaving!

Leading up to the last day, we encountered another critical problem: we had no choice but to spend a night-long layover in The United Kingdom, and could not get visas. We wanted to stay the night in Heathrow airport, but it closes. We had no choice but to go through customs. UK immigration control was concerned we would try to enter the country illegally during our layover. Kib was indignant: “Why would you try to immigrate illegally to the UK when you already have a visa to get into the US?” We had only a few days left, and my father seemed to spend nearly all his time trying to get us all UK visas. “It’ll work out because it has to,” he said, but he didn’t seem convinced.

And, in addition to the trouble with the visas, we had to make it to the airport—and, as I've said before, nothing is certain in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone had a single international airport: Lungi International. It is separated from the capital of Freetown by nearly 8 km of ocean. Smaller, more expensive transportation methods are sometimes available, but the vast majority of those hoping to travel between Freetown and Lungi must ride the single ferry that crosses the inlet. There is no other quick way to cross than to pack yourself into the mass of people, and trundle your way across the water in what looks essentially like a massive bathtub.

On June 28th, 2004, my family and I got up at dawn. The sun rose orange on the other side of the bay from Freetown, and the water between us in the town, and the airport in Lungi, glistened. Our plane was not even scheduled to depart until 11:00 pm that night, but the sheer excitement of the coming journey woke us up with the sun. Besides—we had family to see before we left, and still no visas for our layover. The day would be busy.

Our goodbyes were long and difficult, and the saddest for me was separating from my grandma; my earliest memories were of her; she gave me my first understanding of love. That day, she wore her traditional dress, its beautiful red and yellow tie-die pattern swaying as she walked. In the years after the war, she had aged, and her wrists were

thin. She held my face in her hands, pressed our foreheads together--and spoke a few words. She held my hands for a long time, squeezing between soft hands with thin skin.

Then, it was time to go to the dock. father had sold everything: our home, and all of our larger belongings. Everything we had, we would carry on our backs, or in our arms. My father's pockets were empty, and the plane tickets were not refundable. He would not be able to replace what Kib bought; the only way was forward. This was a major gamble. If, for some reason, the flight did not work out, we would not even have a hotel room to return to. Our ferry would depart at 6:00 PM—and we were determined be on board no matter the obstacles.

With every step, everything behind us in Sierra Leone seemed to disappear forever, as if it vanished the second we took the next step, and the next. Departing my home country still felt like a dream, like each step I took was unreal--and We made our way down the gently sloping streets, until we were in sight of the large ferry. A crowd gathered at the boat, people and cars ambling their way onboard. Meanwhile, the crowd was growing.

Kib was there, waiting for my father, both of them dressed in suit jackets to go finish negotiating the visas. Kib had a small car waiting; my father told us to get on board the ferry. The process of loading everyone would take over an hour: "I'll be back before the boat leaves," my father said, and he and jogged away in their leather business shoes.

We were shoved onto the vessel, a big, white, tub-shaped boat streaked with yellow and brown. Its rusty hull was filled beyond maximum capacity: countless, standing bodies of people mixed with scattered cars and trucks. Nothing moves too quickly in Sierra Leone--we would have to wait for a while in the open air--but we anxiously watched for every sign the crew was ready to leave.

My mother became more and more anxious. Where was our father? What if the ferry left without him, and without our visas? The disaster seemed too big to contemplate. I think I had to remember to breathe. Workers were beginning to unmoor the ferry, shouting to each other. I climbed up the side of the boat to watch for him, and there he was, his jacket open and flapping like a cape, and an extra shirt button undone. He was holding our bundled visas like a football player running for the goal line.

He had the visas; Kib helped secure them. As he elbowed his way through the crowd of passengers to join my family, the boat shuddered, engines churning to life. He stumbled a little when the deck trembled, and he was completely breathless--but he was successful. What could stop us?

The sun was on the other side of us now. It shone through the city's haze so that it looked almost fuzzy, but its reflection in the water was bright and stinging. Passengers were chattering all around us, bumping into strangers without much care. The sea wind stirred, and the

wind coming back over the docked boat felt full and wet. It was a little after six o'clock: the ferry was about to leave late, but nothing to worry too much about. I wanted to shout as the engines started to life, and the barge prepared to trundle out into the waves.

My eager emotion, however, was shattered by a new announcement: the engineers discovered the anchor was lodged immovably. The ferry would not even be able to leave the dock. Over the crackling intercom, the captain assured everyone that the crew would find a way to get the boat moving again. From our place in the ferry, we could see the crew running from place to place, but they seemed to be growing more panicked. Someone went to a nearby steel factory to get its owner to sever the chain and free the boat. The sun continued to go down so that it was at the horizon, and we shielded our eyes with our hands.

By eight o'clock, the bay sat in darkness, and still help had not arrived. Eleven o'clock felt far too close. People were beginning to leave the ferry, and walk back into town to find hotels. Others were sitting on the docks, crying or trying to make the best of things. Others were returning with food, holding out hope that the boat would get moving again. Our excitement was completely overshadowed now. We were silent, looking anxiously from the crew, to the time, to the rising crescent moon, to the other shore with its flickering lights, and, somewhere in the dark—a plane with empty seats with our numbers.

My dad jumped into the scramble on the dock, where food sellers had come to try to make a little money from the situation, and people were haggling. He disappeared into the chaos, trying to find another way across. Now I was anxious the boat might start, and leave him on the shore. He returned, suddenly. "Come, come, come," he said, beckoning and barely waiting before hurrying back through the crowd. My mother got my two sisters and me on our feet, and we stepped back onto land to follow him.

He had commissioned the owner of a motorboat to take us across, a small man who leapt ahead of us into the wooden hull, and scrambled to move old blankets and cartons so that we had space to sit. The vessel was shaped like a wooden trough, and had green stripes. The finish was worn away in places so that the wood looked almost white in the light of the light bulbs that swung over the dock. It had a single engine in the back that took three or four hard tries before it finally coughed to life. We couldn't care less, however; we would have taken a raft if it had gotten us to the other side. The owner pushed the little boat away from the dock with a kick, and we were moving again, closer and closer to our goal. "I'll have you there in less than forty-five minutes," the boatman said.

Now, we bounced over the edged waves toward the opposite shore. This was at least faster than the crawling pace the ferry would have taken. My mother held my sisters' hands in the front, near the pilot.

About midway in our journey, the engine suddenly sputtered, and its loud, clunky roar was silent. Our own wake splashed past us in one swell, and then ceased. Now we were drifting. We each sat up straight, looking from eye to eye, and the only sound was the waves under us, licking at the edges of the boat.

The boatmen tinkered with the engine, his fingers quick. He was completely silent; I think he did not want to acknowledge what had happened for fear that the news would cause us alarm. However, the silence said enough; we were stranded. Our fear and dejection was inexpressible, and we were each close to sobbing. We bobbed in the black water, isolated from the lights ahead and behind. A few boats passed, going in either direction, their speed making us yearn to be moving again, but the last blow to our spirits was seeing the ferry we had abandoned—now moving steadily towards the far shore. It churned by so slowly that its passage took several minutes; we shouted, over and over again, but the ferry was just far enough that the crew could not hear our cries for help.

We had nothing left but to pray to God for safe passage. And, if we were not destined to reach America, we begged him to at least allow us to return to Freetown with our lives. We would learn from this terrible experience, nurse our wounds, and somehow start again. However—all ears were out of our reach, and our sore throats grew hoarse from begging the boats to come.

We knew no help was coming. I began to imagine things happening to the boat: a leak, a hole. Anything of that sort would have been the end for us. We knew how isolated we were, and how helpless. Whenever a larger wave hit us, and rocked the boat, my sisters and I would startle and cling to any part of the boat we could. After everything we survived—sickness, the rebels, the bombs dropped on our neighborhood during the siege, the jungle—we only wanted not to die in an old speedboat by the airport.

Then—the engine suddenly sputtered back to life. We held our breath as the boat lurched forward and gained the first bit of momentum; we were on our way toward the Lungi shoreline once more. Over and over, the boatman apologized, embarrassed and probably afraid, himself. We knew the problem was out of his control, and we felt blessed to be moving again; we could not be angry. We were soon stepping onto the docks that, minutes before, had seemed impossible to reach.

Now, we had to travel forty-five miles from the ferry terminal to the airport. Our plane was scheduled to depart in thirty minutes—clearly, we were not going to make it on time. However, we had come so far—it seemed unthinkable to stop now. We were determined to see this journey through to the very end, even if the airplane left without us. We crammed into a 1970's model taxi, the only one at the dock, with two other passengers. My dad sat up front.

The driver was young and didn't seem very experienced: he drove wildly, recklessly, sending the car to the outside of each turn. Our bodies mashed against each other, pushed by the rapid turns, and the aluminum panels and doors clanked groaned like a soda can being crushed. We sprinted along for twenty miles or so, sometimes only three tires on the ground as we crossed broken asphalt in ridges.

Then, the cab was thrown to its left side, and it slumped off the road. We saw something small drift and bounce away from the cab's front and disappear: it was the front left tire. The driver lost control completely and began to swerve; insanely, he seemed to be trying to continue driving! My father pushed him out of the way and took control of the vehicle, decisively bringing it to a halt. No one was hurt, thankfully.

Eleven o'clock had come and gone, and we were close to giving up hope that we could get on the plane. The lights of Lungi were hazily visible in the distance. We started to walk, shuffling our stiff legs toward the airport, when we were intercepted by a couple of commercial motorcycle drivers, their round lamps bouncing in the rough road. We climbed aboard, our arms still full of our things, and our knees gripping the bikes.

We screeched to a halt at the gate; my father quickly paid the drivers. He stopped counting out the change and just passed the best he

could do. We began to scramble. We could see the plane ahead of us, which made us relieved—but we were also close enough that our effort would make a difference. We sprinted through the doors and greeted the weary-eyed attendants at the desk. We were so late that they had to restart the conveyors to get us checked in—we later found they heard the ferry was delayed, and held the plane for any passengers who might have been on board.

Airport employees hustled us on board with the few others, also impeded by the anchor problem. The cabin of the plane was dimly lit, and below half-capacity: row after row of blue chairs under the yellow light. Climbing on a mostly-empty plane had an ominous feel, but finally we could spread out our limbs and rest. We did not sit long before the engines ignited again, and with them I regained my shattered sense of joy and excitement.

The plane lifted off—there was a certain melancholy in seeing the lights of the city fade, the city where I had spent so much of my first fourteen years. I watched them fade into obscurity until my neck was sore on one side from craning to look past my sister and out over the eastern shores of the Atlantic. I knew we had made the right decision, and how fortunate we were to have even the ability to make that choice.

The rhythmic roar of the jet engines, and the hum of the plane's climate control replaced all the noise and confusion of the day. I continually thought of New York City, where we would land—the abstract metropolis, idealized in film reel images of taxis and skyscrapers, style and wealth. My sisters and I barely slept, thinking about what we might see there.

My parents, meanwhile, were still recovering from the trials of the day. My mom cried through the night, and my father's attempts to sleep were interrupted by nightmares that met him whenever he managed to doze off. I was fatigued, both in body and mind—but I couldn't suppress the nervous excitement that bubbled in my stomach, keeping my mind awake and my eyes glued to the frosty window where silver night clouds seemed to race by, concealing the dark unknown beyond them.