

Coming To America

By Andersen Ogwumike

I remember vividly, though with nostalgia, the first time I visited the United States of America. In 1980, I had just excelled in the entrance examination to get into high school. This was a big deal considering that you will have to pass the entrance examination to go to high school and with good score of 300 and above, you have a shot at attending a federal high school which are considered elite high schools in Nigeria.

During the 1960s, stories had it that well to do families who were interested in politics in Nigeria sent their delinquent kids to America to study so as not to ruin their chances on political appointments as Nigeria was celebrating their independence from Britain. Not to call my brother delinquent but, that was the case with my eldest brother who fulfilled his promise to let me holiday in the United States if I passed the "common entrance examination' as it is called in Nigeria.

It was mid-summer in 1980 when I arrived in the United States through J.F.K. International Airport. I wasn't blown away because I had seen the airport in pictures my brother sent home, but I was just happy to be here. We spent that night at my aunt's house in Queens and the following day we left for my brother's house in Houston Texas. After two weeks of memorable experiences in America I had to go back to Nigeria. Now, I must confess that the two weeks I spent in America felt like a whole year. I missed my family and friends at home. It was different here. I had no friends to play with me, only when my brother was off duty, he would take me to one of his Nigerian friend's home down the street to hang out for a while, or to the movies. So I got bored real quick and was ready to go back home.

At this time in Nigeria, things weren't too bad, the economy was shaping up, there were jobs if you look for them, even school kids were not charged bus fare if they had their school uniforms on. More over, I was very eager to get home and show off to my friends, my brother had bought everything I requested from him, coupled with the fact that I was going to be attending a Federal high school when school resumes, life was good.

Nigeria turned for the worst ten years later, since 1990, it had been a man made depression over there. The politicians are all corrupt; they get into office just to embezzle the government coffers, they siphoned the economy to foreign countries where they all maintain fat bank accounts. While that is going on, the military will stage a coup de ta to unseat the civilian government, sometimes put all the politicians in jail. The Juntas' get more corrupt than the politicians and will not hand over power for as long as they desire. All these affected the economic and political disability of the country. What foreign corporation would want to invest in a country where the military takes over power at random and overthrow a democratically elected government?, Ten times in sixty years of independence, the military has unseated civilian government and has been in power more years than democratically elected government. Military officials became thugs; you can pay them to go harm your enemy or retrieve a debt. As all these were going on, the country was engulfed in scams, corruption, advance fee fraud, incessant communal clashes, religions riots between the Christians in the South and the Northern Muslims, government offices became market places, you have to "grease" someone's palm to get what is due to you (bribery).

That was the state of Nigeria I grew up to know, no opportunities for anything, the rich was getting richer and the poor kept getting worse, nobody cares for the poor and helpless- education means nothing because you cant get a job when you graduate from college, for example, my younger sister graduated in 2002 from one of the best universities in Nigeria (University of Lagos). She has a masters degree in business management banking and finance, even as I write this essay, she still doesn't have a job.

When I got fed up in 1998, I packed my suitcase, went to my bank and closed my account so I could buy my ticket, I went to the embassy and was asked to return the next week and I was given a visa for three months visitation.

Air Swiss was putting out a brand new Boeing 747 air craft on the American route, so was one of the lucky passengers on the very first flight. It was a very special flight I will never forget because of the special treatment that was given to the passengers.

That faithful cold February evening, we taxied down the run way of J.F.K. International and my cousins were waiting at the arrival. It was a long drive from New York to Springfield, when we arrived at my cousin's house it was still cold and I was wondering in my mind if this part of America was different from the other parts, you know, the Houston part that was warm when I visited the United States the first time. I kept my rhetoric question to myself thinking the cold will go away, alas, its winter as will I will find out a couple of days later.

A couple of months passed by and my honeymoon period was over. First, if I wanted to stay in the United States, I have to normalize my papers, my visa expires in a month, I will need an extension or apply for a green card, I did both. In a couple of weeks

I received my work permit after a comprehensive fingerprinting and the whole nine yards of immigration processes.

I got my first job at Wal-Mart on Boston Road in Springfield as an overnight shift shelf Stocker, and later from 2001 - 2005, I worked at the post office the Bulk Mail Center (BMC) as a mail handler until my green card request was granted and made it possible for me to enroll in college. Here I am in STCC pursuing a degree in criminal justice. And that's my story.