

THE FIRE OF SUCCESS BY IKEMEGWALU  
STELLAMARIS.

PROLOGUE

Ihuoma has been married into the family of the Chizue's in the village of Nkwocha. Being the only daughter of her family and late mother, the ceremony was designed at its peak and to wish her well. Nduka her husband then took her to the city with him where he lives. Within the first couple years of their marriage, Ihuoma put to bed a healthy baby girl. They named her Chidalu by tradition and baptized her with Mary as they were Christians.

One day Ihuoma's father went to sleep at night and journeyed to eternity. He was given a befitting burial by his three sons and daughter. As time went on, Mary was enrolled for child education. At such tender age, she was brilliant in character, and showed great academic excellence. But there was a dawning hindrance to her future; Nduka's business was going down very fast. He was been owed money by lots of people, and also his trusted acquaintances made use of his illiteracy in education and vanished with his fortune before he understood what was going on. He didn't find the thieves with his fortune and suing his debtors who were in higher offices and positions to court was a lost course. Also he had no certificate to take up an official job. Sadly, he took his family back to his native town, Nkwocha. In frustration, he married another wife Uzoma, because Ihuoma could neither bear him a son nor a second child.

Life became very miserable for both mother and daughter. Fortunately, Mary has taken the entrance examination into secondary school before coming home and was qualified to register into one of the good schools in town. But this did not go down well with her paternal relatives who preferred she should stay at home and get a husband who would lend a hand to the family situation. Ihuoma knew she had to fight tooth and

nail all by herself if her daughter should go to school, and it was a sacrifice she was willing to make, she who knew the values of education and what it had done to her husband and her family was fearlessly ready with a gentle ardor to lit a bright light through her daughter into the family.

## CHAPTER ONE

Mary was registered into Notre Dame College. Her first day in school was not exciting as she imagined. There were students everywhere but no one she could talk or relate to. She felt so lonely and missed her dear mother. As she was taking a walk through the school, she spotted a fruit tree, and went to seek shelter under it. There she was for quite not long, a girl of about her age and physique came and gently sat beside her.

“Why do you look so sad?” she asked Mary.

Mary was silent, she didn't know who the girl was, and was in a loss for words.

“It's alright, I felt the same way on my first day, but you will soon get used to the school, the feeling is only but a while” she said.

Still Mary was quite.

“My name is Flora” she said cheerfully.

Finally something Mary can reply to, she thought to herself.

“I am Mary Chizue” she said with a smile.

“What house are you in?” Flora asked.

“Pink house”

“Oh, we are in the same dormitory” Flora said with excitement.

They spent some time together under the tree, then came the sound of the bell and they went their separate classes. After lesson, Flora showed Mary the school refectory and advised her never to be late for a meal, the chapel and also the library. From that day onwards, Mary

and Flora were like sisters. After they had supper, Flora told Mary that they were going for a general call in the school hall. The Rev Mother was there to give them a short orientation on the ground norms of the school and how to observe them. While this was going on, some of the Rev Sisters went round the dormitories to ensure that everyone was present at the gathering. On their way back, they heard some light footsteps by the yellow house dorm, instantly they made haste towards yellow house to discover two girls breaking into a fellow student's cupboard. The sisters caught them red handed and took them to the school Mother as the principal was not around at the time of the incident. She had their names taken down and sent to her office. Then without much ado, she dismissed the students back to their dorms and bunks. On their way back, the students talked about the incident. Mary was bewildered, she had never heard of a girl stealing. She asked Flora why they tried to steal. Flora told her either they want to punish whoever they were stealing from or were not satisfied with what they had. Mary was alarmed "But why punish a fellow student in that way?" Mary asked. Flora told her to forget about that, that as for the girls their punishment would be due by the morning, their cup was just a tip full that night.

"And that would be just one in many things you would be seeing around here".

Their bunks were next to each others, so they both went to bed at the lights out. The house captains and mistresses went round to make sure that every student was on her bed and asleep. Mary never forgot to pray morning and night, so she thanked God and was fast asleep.

In the early morning around 4:30am, the school bell rang, signifying everyone to get out of bed. Mary woke up and prayed. The captains, as usual, went round to make sure nobody is missing or still asleep. Some overslept and had to be woken up by a slap tap from the captain or the mighty cane of the mistress. Once awake, you go about

your assigned morning duties, then rush up to brush and teeth, take your bathe and freshen up for school. By 6:00am they went for prayers, after which they have their breakfast by 6:30am. From there to the school assembly ground and off to classes. The first lesson they had was English, which was Mary's favorite subject. She was active during the lesson and answered many questions. The teacher was taken to her intelligence. She was appointed the class prefect. Some of her classmates were not happy with the excellence of her character and her appointment, and tried to rebuke her and Flora at every little chance. They tried to know what they were doing and saying in order to report if any mischief was noticed. But Mary and Flora knew what they were up to and kept themselves away from any anti-behavior. One day Mary told her classmate Nneka who it was her turn to tidy the chalkboard for an upcoming art class, but she refused abruptly. So Mary had to report her. Their form mistress, questioned Nneka on why she disobeyed the class order, Nneka could not explain herself, and was reprimanded to clean the chalk board till the coming week. For that Nneka disliked Mary, but Mary didn't mind and loved them all anyway. The assignments and class works were coming at an increasing rate from all the subjects; there wasn't much time for games.

## CHAPTER TWO

The exams were fast approaching, and while the students are busy trying to leave no stone unturned, some are busy trying to leave no chat on ground. This peer group includes a girl named Lizzy. Her parents were rich, and gave her everything she wanted as an only child. She and her group were very popular in school as the haughty girls. No teacher dares to touch or flog her because of her father's first exhibition of power in the school. Once a teacher had slapped her, for jumping into the class through the window. Her father landed in school the following day and took the teacher to the police station. It was the pleading of the principal that lead to her release. She is well known for sneaking out at night and attending parties with her friends. She was always less concerned in her academic matters. And whether she took the exams or not, she was going to the next class anyway.

After the exams, the principal of the school assembled the students together. She waited for them to maintain absolute serenity, before she began to speak;

“I want to inform you girls that starting from the coming term there will no longer be any outing days in the school, because some of you take it as an advantage to go about irrelevant matters and sorts instead of going home to your parents and guardians”

E-e-e-e-ee-e-ehhh!! The students exclaimed.

“Oh yes” continued the principal. “And you can scream from now till tomorrow and it still won't change a thing. You are to be better and not worse. As for your exams, today is the judgment day, heaven or hell, pass or fail. The names of the best performers will be called out, if you don't hear yours, work harder next term. From the JSS 1. The best performer so far is Chizue Mary Chidalu”

“E-e-e-e-eh!!!” shouted the students mostly with joy.

“She should come up her and collect her prize” said the principal.

“Thank you Ma” Mary said.

“You are most welcome” she replied. And then turned to the students as Mary walked down, “She did it with 98% average. The next is Obika Flora”

As she calls their names, the other students clapped their hands for the victor.

“So that’s the end of it. If you want to be celebrated in this way, then try and work hard next term. Remember to help your parents at home, be obedient and cheerful. Goodbye and happy holidays. Close and lock every hostel. Take all take aways to your homes, then leave the others in a closed cupboard. See you girls next term in good health” she concluded.

As soon as the assembly was rounded up, the students vamoosed in many directions. Flora’s parents came to pick her up. She introduced Mary to them. Her parents liked Mary and gave her some money for her transport fare, which she refused at first, but the look on Flora’s face nudged her to it. She thanked them for being so kind and left for her hometown. Mary found a bus going to Nkwocha. As they left the park, thoughts about home flashed through her mind. He mother, step-mother, father step brothers and sisters. They would be so big now, she thought. She tried to imagine what it would be like to see them all again, after been gone for so long.

## CHAPTER THREE

Immediately the white bus arrived at Nkwocha, it pulled down the hill slowly and stopped. Mary jumped out and walked down to the village, everything seemed changed; development was coming to their town. The market place was filled with buyers and sellers. She greeted those whom she recognized. On getting closer to the house, she sighted the little kids playing, and as she moved closer, they all ran to her hugging her legs and tugging at her hands. Once inside the compound she noticed her step-mother by her doorpost and went over to greet her.

“Good afternoon Ma” she said to her.

“Afternoon, how are you?”

“I am fine Ma. I hope you’ve been well?”

“Yes, I was just thinking who the children ran to meet. Didn’t know it was you”

Mary smiled.

“Welcome” Uzoma said finally.

At that point Mary turned and went over to her mother’s hut, but she wasn’t there. As she came outside to ask about her, there she was coming back from the market with a load on her head. She shouted with joy as she saw her daughter. They hugged each other. Meanwhile, the other wife was there looking at them. She wasn’t happy Chidalu was going to school, and though she has confronted their husband over the issue, he reprimanded her with caution, since he played no part in sending Mary to school. Then came the neighbors to meet her and ask about school and the city. Excited children jumped up and down.

Since her father was not home when she came back, she didn’t get to see him until after super. She went over to main hut, and there he was with his pipe and bottle of schnapps beside him.

“I see your feeling better than all and doing most than none” was her opening gambit.



Nduka was delighted to see his daughter. She always had a way of poking fun at him, and always the one to put a smile on his face in his lowest.

“If you’re going to be rude with your grammar this night, please stay at that end of the hut” he replied with a smirk on his face.

She came close regardless and gave her daddy a big hug. They had chit chats about life and school. When it was time for Mary to leave, she thought it better to remind her father about her fees in his jolly mood. He was battled and asked her;

“Did I send you to school?”

“No father, but you have to...”

She barely finished when her father said he no money, and had his second wife and children to carter for. Though Nduka never meant to hurt Ihuoma and his daughter, but he had taken two wives and didn’t know how to please both. The first one gave him a home, peace of mind and one child, the second brought boys and girls and trouble with her. He wanted a son, but sometimes when he looked at Mary, she was worth ten sons, and he won’t see the need of the growing rabble in his household. He placed his pipe hanging loosely in his mouth, Mary knew the talk was over; she gently rose and returned to her mother’s abode.

Due to Uzoma’s belligerent nature, with her eight army of boys and girls, she ran the Chizue household like it was a coup. She didn’t like the fact that Ihuoma and Mary were doing well on their own. What annoys her the most, is their total ignorance of her attitude. At times it seems she didn’t exist in Ihuoma’s eyes. She took the title of oriaku usually meant for the first wives, claiming their husband’s favorite. She depended on Nduka for everything, and when there’s no money, she curses him out, until he goes borrowing. And when Ihuoma tries to lend a hand or feed her children, Uzoma would scream and tell anyone who cares to listen how Ihuoma wants to wipe all her kids because she (Ihuoma) had only one child.

While at home, Mary tried as much as she could to support her mother. She went out to the shop, ran errands and taught her younger siblings,

when Uzoma's head was not seeking who wanted it dead. Her mother is a kind woman and lends a hand to others even in her lowest. She wanted Mary to be educated and told her that she is her only hope and future. She tells her to be kind and to avoid bad company at school. Mary told her stories of some characters which of the students display at school, and her mother became deeply concerned about her daughter. Mary seeing the effect of those stories, slowed down on how much she told her mother so as not to cause her any worries.

On one eventful night, Uzoma went into their husband's hut to request some money from him. and when Nduka said he had none at the time being, she rose and ruined abuses on him at the top of her voice. The neighbors reached out to calm her down but she was blunt and told them that Nduka was fond of giving Ihuoma money without her acknowledgement, and that is why Ihuoma never seemed to lack and had the capacity of sending her daughter to school. But she Uzoma that gave him male and female children eight in number and all to his name, he would leave half past dead with hunger. As she kept talking, Nduka came out of his hut burning with rage to defend his own self, he told the neighbors that Uzoma is a callous woman with a sharp tongue. When he had money and gave her, she would sing his praises in front of him, but when he goes broke as tonight, what they see is what he gets. Some of the neighbors gathered was not really because they cared; they were merely there to watch a good family drama and to have a talk about it later.

Meanwhile, Mary was already preparing to be back at school. Her mother once more advised her to avoid bad company and bad behavior. Mary felt so sad for her mother and wished she could stay with her all through, but she had to go to school. She said goodbye to her father who gave her nothing, her step mother who was glad it was only her against Ihuoma again, her step siblings were not so glad to see her leave, as they all waved goodbye to her as she left the compound.

## CHAPTER FOUR

When Mary got back to school, the whole place was still dry, only a few students was seen here and there. She went to her dormitory, unpacked and cleared her cupboard, her bed and everything else. She lay down on her bed and try to keep herself busy with her book.

Later on, she got too distracted by an ongoing conversation of some student's closely.

"You know what, I told my aunt needed some money for my textbooks, she promptly gave them to me, which I gave to my boyfriend" said NJ(Nneji).

"What!" exclaimed Maureen, "I cannot do that one o! if you do that, then what is he doing at all?"

"You guys forget am older than he is" Nneji replied.

"owwwwkay, we forgot you are a sugar mama"

They said in between laughs.

"Anyway" continued Maureen, "I went over to my uncle's place in Lagos, he's hardly at home, and the boys around the hood all thought I was pretty, if you know what I mean" she said in a knowing manner.

"eeeeeeeeeh, bad girl, wetin come happen na" the others nudged her to go on.

"Well I liked one, who like good tidings and had enough cash, took me to all sorts of places, and bought me things I never thought I could have, clothes, shoes, bracelets, infact name them, and ....."

"Mau de mau", the others hailed her to a stop, most times she spoke without a break for another, and they knew when they have heard the main gist and the miscellaneous, which she was going into. Lizzy spoke next:

"For me, you all know I don't need a lie to go where I want to. I visit my sugar pops and boyfriends when I want to. Hit it big the last time, I got

to visit this one man in Calabar, from there we went to Dubai, spent a week there and came back with a stash of money”.

“So where’s it?” Rose asked.

“Where’s what?”

“The money nau?”

“Sorry, I don’t share”

“Stingy gal”

“Anyway, I spent it all on clothes and shoes”

“But your father is rich and provides enough of those for you”

“A girl can never have enough clothes” Lizzy replied.

“But...” Rose tried to speak again but Lizzy interrupted her.

“Mind your own business, Rose” Lizzy said getting upset, “kettle calling pot black”.

At that point they heard some footsteps coming towards their dormitory.

“It’s the mistress” said Maureen.

They all dispersed to their bunks, and pretended to be either reading or sleeping. The mistress entered and went round to ensure everything was in order, she asked if they needed anything or complaints of any kind, to which they replied no, after that she left. The naughty students burst out laughing.

“Ye ye woman” said Lizzy.

“Why can’t these old ones let us be?” Abigail asked rhetorically.

“Her retirements never reach?” said Rose who pretended to be sleeping.

They all laughed and went outside to continue their discussion.

Mary was dumbfounded. She did nothing else during the holidays but helping her family in ways she could, and was occupied with her Church obligations. She thought what a fun life it is but empty without family and a future, too bad she thought. While she was in her thoughts, someone covered her eyes with the palm from behind; she took her time for a little while, and knew it was none other than Flora with the tiny fingers. They both hugged excitedly, and Flora asked her;

“How did you know it was me?”

“You have the tinniest fingers I know” she teased her.

Flora laughed and said, “It’s good to see you, my friend”

“You too, how was home?”

“Trouble like always, yours?”

“I can’t call it paradise either, but that’s the idea of family”

They both laughed.

“You looked lost when I saw you” Flora said.

“My dear, those girls blew my mind with their holiday escapades.

In fact I was lost in their midst”

“You mean Lizzy and friends?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Saw them on my way in, do help me and unpack”

“Of course”

Classes began in earnest the next day. But Mary was restless during classes and couldn’t sleep at night. So, one day while she was in class, she saw a familiar face walk in, and called the teacher aside. After a brief talk, the teacher told Mary to follow the man with the gloomy face. She went with him to the principal’s office where she was told that her father has kicked the bucket. Mary wept on hearing the news. When she was fit enough the principal gave her the permission to go back to the village with the elder.

It was a big loss to the Chizue’s in Nkwocha. Nduka died of food poisoning. Uzoma his second wife had a big quarrel with Ihuoma and was more furious when Nduka tried to intervene, which seemed to her that he took Ihuoma’s side. After that, in anger she went to a native doctor to ask him what to do for their husband to love her more than the other wife. He gave her a concoction and told her to add a little of it to her husband’s food. She went home happily.

That day it was Ihuoma’s turn to cook for Nduka, and knowing that he preferred her food more, Uzoma thought it wise to use Ihuoma’s food as a medium. Once Ihuoma had served their husband’s meal in his hut and went to take her bathe, Uzoma sneaked into his hut, opened the plate of soup and poured the whole substance in,

instead of a little as the man told her. She thought if a little of it could make him love her, than the whole of it, would be marvelous, but how wrong she was. She stirred the soup with a finger and cleaned it against her wrapper, but as she tried to close the lid, it fell from her hands to the floor. Ihuoma shouted asking who it was. Uzoma picked it up instantly and as she dashed out of the hut, Ihuoma came out of the bathroom. She(Uzoma) pretended and said she heard a noise from the kitchen and ran to check only to find out it was a cock. When Ihuoma asked where the cock was, she replied that she had chased it out. Ihuoma went inside her hut and closed the door. Uzoma smiled within herself, gave a slight hiss and then left. Not knowing Ihuoma was watching behind her curtain. So when Nduka was back, Ihuoma served him the meal, not knowing the contents as it was.

During the night, Nduka coughed up blood, when he knew he won't last long, he called Ihuoma and asked her for forgiveness, blessed her and Mary and gave up the ghost. When she realized what she had done, Uzoma wept and wept, she blamed the native man as she wailed and confessed, but then the deed was already done.

Mary cried all day, she couldn't do or eat anything. She had to wait until the funeral was over before going back to school.

Meanwhile, Uzoma was asked to return to her father's house with all her kids, as Nduka's kinsmen told her that there would be no need to raise murderous breeds in their lineage.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Mary went back to school only to notice that the students were far ahead of her. So she buckled up in order to meet up. Flora was always there to help her out. Some of the students and teachers came to console her, her strength was renewed and she was grateful to them. Mary knew she had to let go of what had happened and look forward to the future and also her promotion exam was coming up, there was no time for self pity.

One day, one it was time for the students to go eat at the refectory, Mary got there, only to discover that someone had taken her food and left the plate for her. Mary was sad, but Flora comforted her and gave her some tea from her provisions. Because the act was becoming a prevalent one in the school, the event was reported to the school mistress who knew Mary as a good student. During their prep time at night, the principal paid them an unusual visit in the school hall and addressed them thus;

‘Why are you some of you extremely cold blooded?’ she questioned without expecting any reply.

‘Some of you decided not just to be a bully, but starve your fellow students at the same time. Now if you’re among such a group, I would like to let you know that your cups are filled. An investigation has been carried out before now, so if you know you took part in the lunch mischief step forward’.

Everywhere was quite as a graveyard. No one moved.

‘You girls do not want to move with my second motive right now’ the principal warned.

Still everywhere was motionless.

‘Okay then, bring up Miss Nkiru’

Two of the Rev Sisters escorted a young girl to the platform.

The principal continued

‘Some of you may or may not know, but Miss Nkiru is a staff here who works at the school refectory. It’s her job to ensure that every plate is full before the bell goes. Now you all know what that means’.

Turning to Miss Nkiru she said;

‘Tap every single face you saw emptying more than one plate at the ref today’.

The students were seized with consternation, as each one breathes a sigh of relief when Nkiru walks pass them while looking at their faces. And then she stopped, and tapped someone, they students went murmuring. ‘It’s not me’ the girl said moving reluctantly.

“Quiet!” said the principal. ‘and sep forward before I use some drastic measures to bring you out’. She stepped out moving with a stubborn reluctance. At that point Miss Nkiru touched another, who stepped in front with a stubborn boldness. ‘Is that all of them?’ the principal asked her.

‘I am sure of this ones’ she replied.

‘Thank you’ said the principal to Miss Nkiru as she returned to her chambers. And then to all the students she said;

‘This will serve as a warning to all of you up to one misbehavior or the other, soon you will be no different from these two, who would serve as an example to all of you’

Then to the two girls, she said;

‘You both look like hardened criminals with no sign of remorse for what you have done, wait till am done with you, all the evil spirits in you shall flee’

Nneka Mary’s classmate was one of the girls in question; she was asked to name the other ones, at first she was reluctant, but when the mighty cane of the mistress rained down on her, she was quick to mention her accomplice. All three of them were sent on indefinite suspension, with a fine to pay the school for the extra meal they ate and with a letter of apology read aloud to the entire school in the presence of their own parents and the parents of the victims.



When they came back with due pleadings from their parents, the exams were almost at hand, and just in a week to go. And with the exposure of their attitudes and punishment given to them, the girls were humbled to the ground. They knew they needed help, and sort no other than Mary and Flora who were more willing to help them out.

During the literature in English exam, a girl shouted with cry; when the supervisor went over to know what happened only to discover that the girl could no longer spell 'is'. The teacher encouraged her to calm down knowingly that the girl might be nervous which happens to some students during exam. Apart from that, the exam went on peacefully. Some girls who tried exam malpractice were very unlucky. Not only were they caught but did not take the rest of the exam. Mary was sorry for them especially her classmate Ifeoma Uno. Who went in with a textbook.

After it was all over, every student was expected to pack everything home, or locked up in a cupboard. On the last day of the term, the principal called the students together as usual, she addressed them thus;

'As you know' she began, 'this is the last day of the term and also the last session of the academic year, for those who have made it through. You have to be careful not to end up like these chaffs am about to mention now. You remember your friends Lizzy, Maurice, Rose, Abigail and the rest of their gang.

'Yes ma' the students replied with much interest.

'Now I am going to tell you how they ended up. You know none of them took the examination. Lizzy upon all her father's wealth, went on to become the fourth wife of a business tycoon. Her first year was good enough but after sometime her husband left her like the others he's had and married a fifth wife. She's been made to return home to her parents with her kid. Maurice had an accident after attending a night party with her boyfriend who was driving the car dead drunk. Now both of her legs have been cut off, her facial skin had to be stitched up. The boy knowing the severity of what he's done and what awaited him,

abandoned her and fled from the hospital the moment he regained consciousness, he is now a wanted man. Her mother went comatose on seeing her daughter. Rose got pregnant for a man old enough to be her father; much to her dismay the man simply denied responsibility. And being a man of power her poor parents could do nothing about it; she now hawks in the streets with her baby behind to make ends meet. Abigail got infected with the AIDS virus through her boyfriend. Her parents have since disowned her. The boy disappeared like dust and was never seen again. She is also pregnant and keeps beckoning on death to come. So the story goes on and on, and you get what you put into life, as you make your bed so you'll lie on it. If you do not want to end up like they did, change your ways now you still have the time. Some have been threading in their footsteps up till now, and seeing for yourself where this kind of life leads, and you still won't change, your own predicament might just be worse than theirs. You have been warned. This goes out especially the outgoing students. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Now go back to your homes and be good wherever you find yourselves'

'Yes ma' the students chorused.

'Don't forget to pick all you can from your dormitories and lock up the rest, God bless and guide you all'. She ended and climbed down the platform.

'Amen and Amen' everyone replied.

The school was over, everyone including the staff were all on last minute routines, clearing up and goodbyes. Mary and Flora packed up and left for the bus stop together, where Flora's parents were already waiting.

'How are you Mary?' asked Mrs Obika.

'Am very well Ma, thank you, how's the family?'

'They are all well' turning to her daughter she asked her,

'What's your position?'

'I took second; Mary won't step out of the first position'

They all laughed.

'That's wonderful you two, keep it up. And take this for your needs  
Mary, send your mother my regards' she said as she handed her an  
envelope.

Mary was very thankful to her, and waved to as their car drove off. She  
went to the park and boarded a bus home, once more she thought of  
what it would be like without her father and step-mother.

## CHAPTER SIX

During the holidays, Flora visited Mary's hometown. Mary was pleasantly surprised to see her because they only discussed their hometowns and sometimes the routes but Flora never said she was coming. She spent a week with the Chizues. She was pleased with its natural allure, the pleasant air and atmosphere, the village stream, screams of delighted children playing in the moonlight at night, the village cultures and dances, everywhere and everyone seemed happy at each point in time.

'Yours is such a lovely town' she told Mary one day.

They went to the market together; washed clothes at the stream, fetched firewood, and on some occasions went for the moonlight plays. Flora was very glad.

And that was why she was sad when it was time for her to leave. Mary's mother gathered a lot of gifts such as stock and crayfish, dry meat, tubers of yam, corn, and fruits like avocado pear, garden egg and kola, and lots more. When her parents came to pick her up the next Sunday morning, they were amazed at what plentiful gift Ihuoma had given them, and their daughter was in good health too. They had a brief pleasant chat, and gave Ihuoma an envelope too. When they were about to go, Flora was sad again. Mary consoled her amicably for she too was going to miss her friend. With that they left. Outside some of the neighbors were already out whispering about the car parked in front of the Chizues house. So they peeped till Flora and her parents were gone, and came around with pleasantries while in truth seeking for some link to start a petty talk. Ihuoma being the nice woman that she is was ever kind to them and sometimes find their motions funny too.

On one of the days while the holidays were almost to an end, Mary and her mother were sitting outside the hut, when they saw some people coming inside the compound. On a closer look, they discovered it was no other person than Uzoma and some elders. They came with them two large cocks, and two keys of palm wines. They were welcomed and offered seats to make them comfortable. When they were all

settled, the eldest among them spoke on behalf of others for her to forgive Uzoma as to regards to what she had done. Ihuoma thanked them for coming and told them that it was not her place to accept Uzoma back into the family since she was not the one that brought her into the family, and so therefore she sent her daughter Mary to call her father's kinsmen. When they had arrived, Uzoma went on her knees to plead their forgiveness. After much talk within they told her to go, in that, they would send their reply to her on whether she should come back or not. So she left with the cocks which meant they received the two palm wines from them as guests and did not take the cocks for that would mean that they had given in too soon.

When they had left, the Chizue kinsmen speculated with Ihuoma on whether she would be able to live with Uzoma once again even in the absence of their husband. She replied;

'I have thought about this before this moment, and realized that it is not just enough to forgive my once co-wife, there is still need to give her another chance to be a better woman and a good mother, after all whenever Mary goes back to school I just wallow in this whole compound all by myself'

The elders were glad to hear her speak as she had done. The eldest told her;

'Adannia, we have heard your words and they are as kind as we know you are. Since you have made this decision we will gladly grant your wishes and bring Uzoma back home to you. We do hope she does make good use of this opportunity one more time. And do not hesitate in any way or any day to call on us when you need us as you have done today. You did well to have regarded us in this matter that is the idea of a wise woman. We will leave now, and make arrangements as to when she should return, and send the message to you. May the day break,  
Adannia'

With that they all left. Mary was very glad at the thought of having a full house again with her step siblings.

Uzoma and her kids did return after two market weeks of their visit. The kids were happy to see Mary again. They had all grown bigger than the last time she saw them. Their neighbors also came around to welcome Uzoma and the kids. It was like the return of a prodigal wife only that Ndudi was not present. It wasn't long before they all adjusted to their normal life.

One day after supper, Mary was sitting outside the hut discussing with her mother as they do. The moon was shining very bright in its fullness, and the sky was filled with stars that sparkled. The children can be heard playing in the moonlight. Mary, who had been looking for a way to remind her mother of her resumption day which was the coming week, now thought it was a good moment to do so. Her mother smiled and told her that she knew she's had it in mind all the while. And told her not to worry, for they have both worked hard through the holidays and that it was not all in vain. Mary was glad to hear that, and more so, when she goes back to school, she was entering a senior class, and that made her even more glad.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The first day of the new session was quiet as expected. With only a few students there and about, it was dull, but the Rev Sisters were at work to organize and maintain things as it should be. Mary was moved into the senior dormitory, as was done to everyone who made it through their previous class. Two days later, Flora arrived during the English class. They smiled at each other so as not to disturb the class. Soon the school bell rang for recreation, making time for everyone to catch up with each other holiday's experiences.

One Thursday morning, the students were meant to have moral instructions. It was decided that the students stay in their class whereby each class was assigned to a Rev Sister or teacher. It was a teacher that was assigned to instruct Mary's class, and facilitated them on the theme, 'Money is not everything'. She told them thus;

'Money can buy learning but not knowledge,  
Money can buy leadership but not wisdom  
Money can buy drugs but not health  
Money can build a house but not a home  
It can buy friendship but not love  
And, it can buy clothes but not true beauty'

She asked them to further name instances where money is applicable but could not solve a problem. They mentioned in terms of education but not intellect, one said food ingredients but not good taste, another mentioned that it can buy art but not creativity and amongst others. Mary jotted these down in her book. The teacher continued once more;

'Some of you may regard being a millionaire to be the greatest achievement, a life with everything you want in it. But true success my dear students is not measured in terms of wealth. The most remarkable people we regard in this world such as the Saints, those we are sure have made heaven, Einstein, the great philosopher, Isaac Newton, the physicist, Chinua Achebe, the writer we all know, amongst others did not just bend on making money, they were bent on making a way to better the life of

humanity in many ways they can. The man with an honest intention, an objective and a vision is on his way to success. The fulfillment to such vision or dreams advocates true success. So then my beloved let us all be careful in making choices that may defect our future tomorrow. The truth is that our tomorrow, our future, our destiny and our career starts now. Do not waste this opportunity of making better your lives and the lives of your family and community. With God all things are possible.'

At that juncture, the bell rang indicating the period is over, and a change to the next lesson. As for Mary she has learned a great deal from the lesson, and made a firm promise to herself to always trust in God.

'Contentment is the finest gold' the teacher said, 'but if gold should rust what will iron do?' she asked concludingly without expecting an answer.



## CHAPTER 8

Mary was on her last year in secondary school, and was preparing to write her SSCE exam. She fought hard in all her studies. She felt inspired at the thought of making her mother proud and called Nne Doctor. And also her mother was not growing any younger. Mary had no doubt in her mind that she would make it. She and Flora went to the library as often as they can and stayed apart from each other if need be so as to focus. When they both got their JAMB forms they both applied to the same university with the hope that it does work.

On the examination day, the students gathered together and prayed, they wished each other well, and went into the examination hall. Mary endeavored to pray before and after each exam till they were all over. When their set was dismissed and told to go home and await their results. Mary went home to her family. When she got back, she was well received as always. Uzoma was now kinder than ever. She had also started a petty trade just in front of their compound; this minimized the number of word combats and fights that she was involved in. On one of the days Flora came to their hometown in hope of going back with Mary to the city, but Mary was quick to decline because of the fear of living her mother except when she was in school or visiting her grandparents from her paternal side. But she did promise Flora she will come to town soon for a visit since she has her address and had been there on one of their weekends in school.

After a month had gone, Mary told her family she was going to check her result in school and as well use the opportunity to visit Flora's family.

When she arrived the school, the students were on a midterm break. She went straight to the principal's office, who was glad to see her. She told Mary that she had done the school proud and gave her the statement of her result. She got eight A's and a B. When she inquired about Flora's result as to deliver to her, since she was going to her home. She was told no one was allowed access to another person's result except under special circumstances. She thanked the principal and

some of the staff and Rev Sisters she could find and went on her way to Flora's place. They were pleased as they can be to see her. The next day she and Flora went to receive Flora's result, and she did well too seven A's and two B's. When they got home, the family had merriment to celebrate them for doing so well. Mary spent one more day, went shopping, later to the zoo wild life and had access to visit a medical research facility because Flora's father was a prominent man in medics. After two days with them, she left for her hometown for she could not longer wait to bring the good news to her family. Everyone was overjoyed. They waited till the coming Sunday to go for thanksgiving in Church, and then had a day of fun and ease. The news spread to the neighbors who came to congratulate Mary for doing well. In fact, she was their shining star. At night before bed, Ihuoma called her daughter to advise her. She told her thus;

'Mary you are my daughter and I have never deceived you. You have only gone a step higher to the real life. This stage is where and when everything happens. But don't forget my words, daughter, the fire of true success is ambition. Do not live a life of worldly desires and goals. For you and I have labored all through our lives, you are my reward on earth, and I want us both to be rewarded in heaven. You have learned what it is to be contented in life through the kind of life you have been surrounded with. Whatever we do not give you, is either harmful to you or we do not have it. Be mindful of where you come, never forget your roots. Most of all continue to love the Lord your God in whom we hope to save our souls. Have you heard all I have I said?'

'Yes mama' she replied.

'Okay, you can now go to bed, have a good night rest, today was hectic'  
she told her smiling.

'Good night ma'

And they both left for the comfort of their beds.

## EPILOGUE

Mary later finished her university education and graduated with a first class which was same with Floras. They were not posted to the same corp. service location. But they kept their friendship alive with visits. They have grown to be sisters than just friends. After their service they were both employed at prominent firms. Mary worked as a doctor before joining a research medic while she built a hospital in her hometown, and two more at different locations in the country, to which she became the director. It wasn't long before she got married to a humble medic researcher. That was the happiest day of her mother's life. She now had reply for those who told her that training a woman is a waste of time. Indeed, she has proved them wrong, for they all now benefit from the hospital in their town, she (Mary) has brought a light to them all. Uzoma regretted all the time she wasted talking and bragging about male and female children instead sending them to school and giving them what they deserve. She came to understand that each has the capacity of being a light to their homes and society.

Flora practiced her career as a pharmacist and was married to a business tycoon. They lived in the country side away from the city. She also gave birth to a pair of twins, a boy and a girl. Mary had two children, Teresa and Philips, but not twins.

As they both came together for Flora's twin dedication, the talked at length and reflected on how far they have come, and how those who quit and who were in a haste to make it either dropped or were dropped by life itself. They held hands and prayed, all is well that ends well. She had a name to be thankful to God for Chidalu, indeed God be praised.