DID

I

LIVE

AT ALL?

OHIEKU-AJANAKU UCHECHI ONIMISI

CHAPTER 1

Dark skies, dark days these were the thoughts that crossed the minds of many in the small village of Okpo, which was located in the eastern part of Nigeria, the strong wind blew at the rag looking clothes which hung from the clothing line, mother had just told Aja to go bring in the clothes, she was picking beans in preparation for the meal, so she couldn’t go get them herself.

Aja, leaving his house chores ran outside to get the clothes, as he was about to get the clothes he stopped and touched his cheek were a water droplet had just fallen, he looked up and saw the grey sad looking sky, he watched as the clouds did a dance of misery, the wind howled disturbingly and everything looked sour, the gods were indeed showing their warning signs.

As quickly as the clouds turned grey, the sun came up and cleared the sky.

“Aja quickly run to the stream and fetch some water…go do it quickly before the rain starts …..AND DON’T FORGET TO CHECK THE CLAY POT FOR CRACKS BEFORE FETCHING O! ~~ịnụla~~?” (Have you heard?)

“Yes mama I have heard you” Aja replied as he scurried off with a clay pot that was in the worst condition ever.

At the stream Aja had realized that the clay pot wasn’t holding any water at all, he just laughed at himself, he was always in a hurry to leave the house that he hardly heard anything mama was saying. He was so lost in his thoughts he didn’t notice the slender looking boy sneak up behind him.

“**AJAAAAA** boy”, Aja jumped up startled. “The A boy, the mainest boy, the biggest boy…. What are you thinking? What is in your head this afternoon?” The malnourished fellow asked, “OOOOOOhhh Chinedu why did you scare me like that ehn?”

Aja and Chinedu practically grew up together, their parents were friends and their houses were not that far apart either, but not everyone in the village had a comfortable lifestyle, for instance Aja could eat three times a day were as Chinedu could barely have one meal a day. This was disheartening to Aja as he could see his friend suffering, but there was only so much help one could give to the drunk that was Chinedu’s father and his sick dying mother.

“Aja, how have you been? How is the family?”

“I’m supposed to be asking you that question Chinedu? How are things? And how is your new job at the farm coming along?”

“We have seen better times but we are managing ourselves, emm the job is hectic but I’ll survive, anyway it’s good to see you…I have to get going now can’t be late for work I’ll see you later, ~~Ka ọ dị~~”. Chinedu walks off while whistling a tune, Aja thinks about how hard working his friend is and reminisces on the good old days when it was just “all play and no work”.

He sits at the edge of the stream and dips his feet into the water he begins to whistle the same tune as Chinedu as he moves his head from side to side.

“SNIFF SNIFF….GRRRR” he is startled and turns to see what could be making such a sound, behold the cutest puppy he had ever seen making the meanest face ever, he pet her a few times and she succumbed she started wagging her tail and barking and she jumped into his lap. He got up and left the stream and the puppy followed him all the way home.

“Ma ma, look what I found….It’s a dog mama”. Aja exclaimed to his mother. “Oh my…. WHERE did you get that from????”

“I found her by the stream while I was fetching water; she ran up to me and jumped in my lap”. Aja said grinning ear from ear. “Just don’t let her in the house…. Okay?” “Yesssss mamaaaa”. Aja screamed as he skipped away with his new dog. “Hmmm,this boy of mine”. Mrs Nwafor thought to herself. She had imagined that by the age of 17, Aja would have outgrown his childish antics, well at least she had become used to it.

Growing up as an only child Aja had to find new ways to keep him occupied, as mother was always busy with preparing food or washing the clothes, with her it was always one thing or the other, but at least she was there. Father also known as Mr. Nwafor didn’t have any time to spend with Aja as he was constantly at the farm and when it was time, to go home he would always stop by Chioma’s house, a single lady of questionable character. No one really knows what he does there he stays for hours and comes home very exhausted.

Okpo, our own little village was a place to be; clean streams, good soil (our fruits were never under grown), beautiful weather name it. It’s the year 1800 and everything seems good, Aja is turning 18 this year and Mr. Nwafor’s harvest coming in. We all have good things in store for us this year or we think we do. Only the gods can determine our fate, in a land this serene nothing bad is bound to happen.

CHAPTER 2

The sun was about setting, the orange and purple colors of the sun set had enveloped the whole village in its beauty. Aja had just come back from his weekly visit to Chidubem’s (his supposed wife to be) house, Aja was coming of age and he was to be married to Chidubem, his visits were part of the courting process. He admired the sky for a while as that was his favorite thing to do.

The aroma coming from the house had him running in, as mother was preparing her famous Oha soup with goat meat and pounded yam, this was his favorite meal. Aja made his way into the kitchen and went over to the pot of soup, he was about to raise the lid up, “CAN YOU IMAGINE? He didn’t even greet me, no mama good evening abi? Is that how I raised you? ~~m ga-akụ gị ihu~~”.

“Ma ma I’m sorry”.

“Sorry for yourself”.

“Mama good evening, how was your day mama?”

“That’s better, don’t try that nonsense again o, oya come and eat my dear”.

“Okay mama let me just quickly pour water on my body”.

“Okay but be FAST O so your food won’t get cold, ~~ịnụla~~?”

“Yes mama”.

Aja quickly goes in to pour some water on his body, as he needs to freshen up he has been out for some while. He then returns to the kitchen to get his meal, as he grabs his food a bit of the Oha soup spills on his hand, he jumps up and yells in pain. Mother rushes into the kitchen, a look of shock on her face and her eyes wide open.

“AJA WHAT HAPPENED? WHY DID YOU SCREAM?”

“Mama I spilled hot soup on myself by accident”.

“Is that why you are screaming like something serious happened…this boy please don’t give me heart pains”.

Aja whispers an “I’m sorry” to Mama and she nods in approval and tells him to do to the parlor to eat his food. As Aja walks into the parlor, he notices that Papa’s seat is empty as Papa hasn’t returned home yet, he wonders were papa could be at 8:00pm but he just shrugs the thought off. Aja seats down and begins his meal; he takes his time to savor the flavors, as he licks the soup bowl for any remaining fragment of soup. As soon as he is through with his meal, Papa walks in the front door and makes his way across the parlor, he is about to enter his chambers when,

“~~Ebee ka ị nọbu~~? EBUKA NWAFOR? EH WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” Mama shouts at him.

He just stands there as if he is in shock and doesn’t say a word.

“ANSWER ME!!!! I SAID WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? AND WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?”

“SO ITTTT ISSS MEEE YOUU ARE TALKING TO LIKE THAT?? **WOMAN!!!!!** HAVE YOU LOST YOUR SENSES??”

“I HAVE NOT LOST MY SENSES EBUKA; IT IS YOU THAT HAS LOST YOURS…. SO I AM NO LONGER ENOUGH FOR YOU, THAT YOU ARE NOW SLEEPING AROUND WITH THAT CHEAP GIRL…”

“COME ON, WILL YOU SHUT UP? YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE SAYING, HAVE YOU NOW BEGUN TO SEE THINGS THAT ARE NOT THEREEEE…IF YOU HAVE, YOU HAD BETTER GO JOIN THE VILLAGE MAD MAN AND STAY WITH HIM, SINCE YOU ARE NOW RUNNING **MADDDDDD!!!!**”

“MY MOTHER IS NOT MAD!!!” Aja interrupts.

“And WHOOOO was the person that added you into this conversation ehhhh, MY FRIEND WILL YOU **GET OUT OF THIS PLACE?**”

Aja not being able to stand up to his father runs out of the house wanting to get away from the commotion that was going on, as he edges further away he hears the faint voice of his mother telling him to come back and then the father telling him to sleep outside, he gets so angry that he keeps running now at full speed heading in a direction unknown to him, he had never gone towards that part of the village that pointed towards the West. He continued, blindly running into a tall solid figure which came crashing down to ground along with him.

“OWWWWW….WHOTTTTT IN THA BLOOHHDYYY HELL WAS THAT???” The smooth feminine voice screamed.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there” Aja replied, it was dark and he couldn’t make out her features to tell who it was, but one thing was for sure he had never heard such a sweet sounding voice like this before, that is if sounding like you have hot yam in your mouth is sweet? So, that means she couldn’t have been from the village. He realizes that he is still on top of her, so he gets up and pulls her up with him, she is carrying a small lantern with her she lights it and raises it up to his face.

“oooohhhhh you’re a native”. She says, as soon as he notices her face he takes a step back “you look like someone poured ~~milk~~ on your body, is that how you look normally?” Aja asks frantically, she just giggles and moves her head to the side.

“I’m just not from around here”. She says innocently.

“Okay that’s understandable, by the way I’m Aja and I’m from around here, what’s your name?”

“I’m Sarah; it’s nice to meet you”. She said blushing as she noticed the grin on his face.

CHAPTER 3

“I’ve never heard that name before”. Aja said whilst starring at her, he had just seen that she was wearing a pair of mini khaki shorts with a transparent skin tight camisole which left nothing to the imagination, along with a pair of brown boots he couldn’t quite make out if she was wearing socks or not they were almost the same color as her skin “**MILK**”, he laughs to himself as he wandered how could someone look this pale. Sarah hardly acknowledged the laugh as she too was engrossed in how he looked. He had a smooth looking face that looked rough at the same time, his lips were full and his jaw was chiseled, he looked like he had never been in a fight in his life his brown skin looked silky smooth. He had a singlet on, one that had faded its original white color to something less bright; she looked at his arms and the muscles bulging from them, arms which looked like they’ve been sculpted by the gods, she thought to herself how wonderful of a specimen he was, and he was quite tall too nothing less than six foot two (6’2), wow what a man she thought. The sound of an old man calling her name brought her back to reality.

“I have to go, my father’s probably wondering where I went off to. It was really nice meeting you”.

She didn’t give him a chance to reply as she ran into the dark patch of road. Aja finally coming to his senses had realized that it was time to head back home. He walked down to his house, all the while thinking about his encounter with the stranger Sarah. He got to his house and proceeded to his room.

“THIS BOY, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? DO YOU WANT TO GIVE ME HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?” Mama screamed at the top of her lungs. Papa who had already fallen asleep on the floor was startled awake when he heard her scream.

“Adanma, why are you screaming at this time of the night?” Papa asked in panic.

“Is it not your son? He wants to kill me, I was so worried….Aja where were you?”

“Mama, Papa, I only went out for a bit to clear my head that’s all”.

“Let’s all go to bed, it is already 10:30pm and we don’t want to wake the neighbors up with all our noise ~~ịnụla~~?”

“Yes papa”.

Aja goes into his room and lies on his mat woven from bamboo sticks; yes it’s a bit uncomfortable but there were no comfy fluffy mattresses back in the day, the house which was actually a “hut” wasn’t that cozy either, all the houses in Okpo were molded the same way they were all made with clay and their roofs, thatched palm fronds. Oh well he didn’t really mind all he wanted was to see his beautiful Sarah again, hopefully he would encounter her in his dream.

Morning came fast the next day the cock’s crow woke Aja up as early as 6:00am, he got up put on a pair of shorts and his worn out slippers picked up a broom and began sweeping the compound, he wanted to finish his house chores in a hurry so he could go to Chinedu’s house, he couldn’t wait to tell his best friend all about the girl that made his heart skip a beat. As soon as he had finished up his chores he dashed to Chinedu’s house not even bothering to have his breakfast first.

“KNOCK KNOCK” “KNOCK KNOCK”, this was the sound that woke Chinedu up.

“OOOOHHHHH who could that be at this time?” Chinedu cried out.

“Chinny boy, it’s me Aja open up, open up”. Chinedu opens the back door to let Aja in he walks in and sits on the floor at the far corner of Chinedu’s room.

“OYA tell me what brings you to my house at 6:30am this morning”. Chinedu asks Aja standing over him Aja scrunches up his nose as the odor from Chinedu’s mouth hits his nostrils.

“OOOOHH GUY go use chewing stick a bit abeg, your breath is not pretty”. Aja says in an annoying tone.

“Na you bring yourself come my house o, but never mind let me freshen up”.

Chinedu goes out to the back yard to get a fresh chewing stick, he chews for a few minutes, gargles some water in his mouth he spits out the water and walks into the house.

“OKAY A boy what do you want?”

“Chinedu you won’t believe what happened to me last night”.

“I really don’t have time to guess just tell me what happened”.

“You’re no fun…okay I’ll tell you. So last night mama and papa were fighting….”

“AGAIN??”

“Yes again they’ve been at it for quite some time now…..wait that’s not the point”

“Then what’s the point?”

“I’m getting there… just stop interrupting me…okay so I got tired of hearing them fight so I left the house, I actually ran away far away as I was running I bumped into the most beautiful looking girl I have ever, she had the strangest skin color she looked like milk and she spoke like she had hot yam in her mouth. Chinedu I have never felt the way I felt with her before”.

“Hmmmm Aja you have done it again, don’t tell you have forgotten about Chidubem, the girl that you are supposed to MARRY don’t go falling in love with some other person, you will only get yourself into trouble”.

“You don’t understand Chinedu, she isn’t like other girls and Chidubem is nothing compared to her”.

“If she isn’t like other girls shouldn’t you be concerned that she is not from here, come did you ask her what she was doing here in Okpo?”

That had hardly crossed Aja’s mind, during their introduction he was so enchanted by her that he didn’t bother to ask what she was doing in their village, perhaps she was lost.

“Chinedu it is not that serious, abeg you’re over thinking this thing”

“If you say so, just be careful don’t let your heart lead you into trouble”.

“Okay I’ll be careful; I have to get back to the house before mama starts to look for me, Chinedu I’ll see you later”. He stands to hug Chinedu before he departs, Chinedu waves him goodbye. Aja walks quietly back home trying not to wake up mama with the sound of his slippers slapping the ground.

“AJAAA where did you go? This early in the morning you have already begun to wander about”.

“Mama I was at Chinedu’s house, I just went to check on him”.

“Check on him for what? Did he tell you that he was looking for you?”

“Mama I just wanted to see how he was doing, there is no harm in that…is there?”

“Aja please just stop leaving the house without telling me, I worry for you and I just want you to be safe”.

“I know mama, but I’m a grown man and I can make my own choices, you don’t need to worry so much….okay?”

“Okay my child, hmmm this one you’re now talking like a man, please do quick and marry Chidubem so I can have grandkids…okay?”

Mama reaches out to hug him, she squeezes him tight and pinches his cheeks, at this point Aja wasn’t sure he still wanted to marry Chidubem, she had become but a distant memory. He didn’t want to answer her question so he changed the topic.

“So mama where is papa?”

“He went to attend the elders meeting at the village square, he should be back soon”.

“Okay, mama what’s for breakfast?”

“Your favorite, ~~akara~~ and pap with plenty honey”. She said giggling, she knew her son well and his love for sweet things never passed her by. They both sat down on the mat neatly laid out on the floor, they put the akara in a flat plate and the pap in a gigantic bowl and they ate till they were on the floor breathing heavily.

“Mama, ~~Daluu~~ the meal was delicious”.

“You are welcome my son”.

He stood and took the plates to the back yard to get them washed he had somewhere else to be, so he had to be fast.

He would try to see Sarah again.

CHAPTER 4

Walking down the dirt road hoping that he could bump into her once again, he stops when he sees a group of “MILK” skinned people all dressed alike holding long solid objects that have never been seen before, he is a bit confused as he didn’t expect to see this many strangers in his village, he quickly hides behind one of the trees thinking that he has been spotted.

“What am I even doing here? I don’t know any of these people, they all look so strange, and I don’t want to get into trouble let me just leave”.

He checks to see if anyone is watching, no one is looking in his direction so he proceeds to run back home. He runs all the way back not even bothering to check if he is being followed, he stops when he gets into his house and locks the door.

Confused, he doesn’t understand what the arrival of this many “MILK” skinned strangers means, what could they possibly want in a small village like Okpo…

“WHO ARE YOUUUUU? WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE??” These were the frantic screams that were coming from the neighbors… “NOOOO WHERE ARE YOU TAKING US? LEAVE MY MOTHER ALONE SHE IS NOT WELL, SHE IS VERY SICK”.

Aja comes running out of his house on hearing Chinedu’s voice, he is shocked at sight he sees, people being whipped and chains being put around their necks, wrists and ankles with the “MILK” skinned people pulling at the chains trying to arrange them. Aja could still hear Chinedu shouting from a distance, struggling to get a hold of his mother.

“**BANGGGGGGG**” That was the sound that shook the whole village, followed by the loud scream of Chinedu’s mother as she fell to the ground weeping with all the strength she had left. Aja was still confused not able to comprehend what had just happened, that is not until he saw the pool of blooding around the body of his best friend, he ran towards the body screaming and calling for help but it was too late as Chinedu had taken his last breath, Aja fell to the floor feeling defeated he cried out to the gods to have mercy on his friend, but nothing changed Chinedu was still dead. Aja was rudely interrupted from his mourning when a “MILK” skinned man pulled him from the ground and put him in chains.

He was then dragged to the courtyard as they were all taken there, what had they done to deserve this? They thought to themselves most importantly who were these people? They had brought death, suffering and misfortune to their peaceful little village.

The strangers separated us from our parents and loved ones, they took only those that were young and able bodied, the rest were either killed for resisting authority like Chinedu was or they were just left alone, the grief of never seeing their children again was enough to kill them off.

They assembled us in an orderly manner so that we the villagers were facing them (strangers, “milk” colored people or whatever….it didn’t matter again). A slender looking man emerged from the front line of the strangers; he spoke some sort of way that was inaudible as we couldn’t understand him. All I could make out of his speech were the words “**SHIP**”, “**AMERICA”** and “**EUROPE**”, with that being said we were to start our journey to the place of no return. I looked around just to have one more glimpse of my village which I would never see again, I froze as I laid my eyes on the beautiful Sarah she was more visible in the sunlight, her skin sparkled under the sun, her hair as brown as tree bark and lips as red as the ripest tomato in the farm. She was beyond beautiful that words couldn’t describe it; he would just have to keep the picture of her he had just seen in his mind FOREVER.

He would surely never see her again, his life was about to change forever.