



TALES OF TWO

LONDONS

STORIES FROM A FRACTURED CITY

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I LIKE TO CLOSE MY EYES WHEN I'M TAKING SERIOUS THINGS

The Akwaaba Writing Group

Akwaaba is a social centre for migrants in Dalston

Juliana: The environment has made me to be strong and stand firm. You may ask me how.

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Hadik: I was sleeping. As usual in my niece's room. I still remember the room. Literally, I remember all the corners of the house. I was sleeping in a pink bed, in this wooden house, and I was thinking about the 14 years I spent in my home town.

I was thinking about the last days I spent with my auntie. I remembered the last Ramadan and celebrating Eid. I was remembering all this and listening to Photograph, that song by Ed Sheeran.

So ya, my niece wakes me up. I wake up in this wooden room and see the shines of the sun coming into the window. I wash

my face. It's my last breakfast with her for I don't know how long. This is my great day. The worst and the best day.

We eat breakfast. When we've finished I say to myself, Ya Hadil, no tears, you have to be strong, you'll see her again. Inshallah.

I was wearing grey jeans, a white dress with the Big Ben on it, a black jacket and a white scarf. I remember my trainers because they were my nephew's trainers. They didn't fit him anymore so he gave them to me.

I came downstairs and everyone was getting ready, helping to put my luggage in the car. I was taking selfies with my nephews. The sun was shining and we were taking selfies outside in the garden.

We got in the car. Looking out the window of the car. It was like Tunisia was saying goodbye to me, saying hopefully we will see you soon, Hadil

I was listening to everything carefully. I said to myself, Hadil, this is your time to prove you are able to take responsibility, to be strong, to be a good person. Yeah, Hadil, this is your chance.

No one can feel the pain of staying away from your mom, only those who try it.

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Remie: One of my mother's friends in the village took me in and started looking after me. She didn't have much either but

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she really tried. Her friend, a posh woman from Kampala came to visit her. She saw me almost dying and she brought me to Kampala.

That was the beginning of my success.

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Warda: When they got the visa and called me, I was out of my mind. I was shouting and shouting and jumping. I fainted with happiness. I had never imagined this happiness. When my children were born, when my daughter got her university degree, those were all happy moments. But this moment cannot be explained. All my body went white, and numb. I could not breathe and I fainted.

The girls who lived with me could not understand and kept asking me: are you ok? They had never seen me overacting as I am always calm. I was by myself then, I had nobody with me, so I was always quiet. That day I was like a monkey: nobody knew what was going on. I felt like a newborn.

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Hadil: I went inside the airport and put our luggage in and stayed with my sister and her daughter. It was still too early to go inside into the waiting area, through this door when I pass through, lots of things are gonna change.

I looked around to my niece playing around me, speaking with my sister, I do remember that she told me: I want you to

support our mummy and never forget where you belong and don't forget that we love you.

How I'll never forget that, that will stay in my mind. Especially that my family loves me, that's something you cannot forget.

Now is the moment to say goodbye to my sister. Our tears just fell without our permission.

Now I'm in the plane. Sitting in the last place in the airplane, my brother on my right hand side. Sitting in a red and grey chair. The plane moves but it is still on the ground. But now not anymore: I'm in the sky like a bird, watching from the window how much my country is beautiful.

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Warda: That day, I wore bright white colours. I wore my headscarf pink so that everybody could see it. I never wear pink. I remember the bright rose edge of the scarf falling on my beige dress. After that day, people that see me tell me that there is a new brightness about me.

I was at the airport from twelve o'clock, although they were only arriving at five. I was standing in front of the metal barriers at the gate, to get first position. Inside me, I did not believe it. I thought - they might stop them at customs. I was shaking with fear. And then....it was like in the movies. I saw all the passengers from Tunis Air. I even met somebody I knew. I asked them if everybody had landed. Can you imagine?

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After an hour everybody had arrived and they were not there yet! I thought the Home Office must have denied them entry because of my visa situation.

When I saw them, I was just mad. I crawled under the fence to meet them. I wish somebody had been there with a camera, because ... their faces and my face ... it is like I had them for the first time. It was like giving birth for the first time.

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Remmie: My flight landed at 6am.

The escalator surprised me. I had never seen one before and I did not know how to get on. It took me an hour of admiring the white people jumping on it without fear. Today I am happy that the escalator is no longer a problem for me.

Furthermore, what has made me successful is having learnt how to eat English and European food. When I first came to the UK I grew very skinny. I did not know how to eat pizza or use a spoon and fork.

One of my friends took me to an Italian restaurant. They bought me a pizza but I could not eat it. I thought it was a plastic plate.

I always envied admired cats and dogs. They have a place to stay. They are well cared for and they hold British passports. Today I am so happy that I do not need to admire envy them anymore.

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Olu: The happiest moment has fear attached to it. When the council gave me the house, I was homeless. I was happy. And when they gave me money I was happy. But there was fear attached to it. The fear attached to it was this. Is there a limited time? Are they going to evict me. Because the first council evicted me. So I was scared. I said to myself, Oh, they gave me a house, they gave the children money. But it is for a limited time. Maybe one month, like the other council did. Will they come again and say, You will have to leave? They gave me cash because there was a problem with the accounting sector.

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Kenny: They gave me a phone number and an address. That same day I went there. The agent called me and he told me, I'm outside Iceland. You see me?

He was a young guy with a black scarf on his head done like a turban but flat. He had glasses and a moustache. He looks trendy, this cool guy. He explained about the heating. Then he handed me the keys.

After he left I went around and looked again. The walls smelled of new paint. The washing machine—new. The fridge—new. It's on the ground floor and quiet, part of a house. There's a garden! I went in the garden. I thought: Hn, this is a nice place for children to play.

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There's this big tree and at the back of the garden is a canal. Sometimes you see the swan.

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Olu: The lady I was staying with—she ordered some food for her own child. Cerelac. It's Nestle who make that food. When the food arrived it was for the wrong age. It was food for a six-month-old baby. But she'd ordered 6 kilos of it.

The lady was so upset. She was going to send it back. I didn't say anything, I was silent. But I was praying my heart to God.

Then she said, You can have the food then! I told her that when I have the money I'd pay her back, but she said it was OK. If you could see inside me! Inside me I was like, Oh! I still remember that thing.

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Ola: The animal is a cat. The name of the cat is Whiskey. The owner of Whiskey is Carol Harris, my friend. Whiskey was white in colour. Whiskey grew up in Carol's house. Whiskey ate Carol's leftover food. She liked to hang around Carol's visitors. I am petrified of, and allergic to, cats and dogs. So Carol always locked Whiskey away whenever I visited. Carol always looked after me whenever I visited. Unfortunately Whiskey passed away three years before Carol. May her soul rest in perfect peace. Amen.

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Olu: I can't say we slept well. We were four, sometimes five in the bed. We slept head to toe.

Me and my two children, my girl, and my baby boy. Her and her baby. Five of us in one bed! And her baby moved all over the bed. That's why Jude, until now when he sleeps, he sleeps in one place, he never moves. My youngest son, he manoeuvres everywhere. My daughter too. But when Jude is sleeping he is absolutely still. If you want to enjoy your sleep, let Jude sleep with you.

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Anthony: The office was a bit hard to find. I was thinking of a big nice office but it was rather a small office on a quiet road.

I pressed the doorbell and heard a click. I pushed the door. Two office desks in the room and a man behind one of the desks. He was wearing this expensive suit. Most black Africans when they know they are in a higher level than you, they want to show off, so you have to give them that respect. They ask you straight questions and they expect you to answer in a straight way. They do not want you to joke around.

I told myself: OK. And I told him my story. I relaxed a bit, and he gave me the different options.

He said I can marry somebody from the EU.

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I can just get somebody pregnant.

Or maybe just go back home and reapply with somebody who got a British passport.

Going back home was out of the question. And I was not having a girlfriend at the moment, so the option to get somebody pregnant on the street was out.

The option left was to do a fake marriage. He asked if I had anybody in mind. I said no, so he said he would try and help me. Because that's what they do.

So he gave me a form to fill and he told me that I have to pay a hundred pounds, which means I am a registered member. In other words it means he is now my lawyer.

I left the office a bit happy, but still I was thinking: is this the right thing?

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Olu: I went straight to the shop. I bought food. I bought fruit. The children, they didn't have underwear, so I bought underwear. I bought winter hats, scarves. I nearly finished the money that same day. Because I had to buy a lot of things, because there were some things I had had to throw away when we were homeless. Toys. We kept some things. But most we had to get rid of. When we were living in different places I had one bag for the whole family. So I had to get all these things back.

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Lola: When I first moved in, the flat was empty. I slept on the floor with my children. At night it was very cold, my daughter was feverish with the cold. I had to take her in my arms and sit with my back at the wall until daybreak.

A few days later, a black woman, fat (a little bit), light in complexion with short gold hair, and a cool voice knocked on the door. I thought, Who is this?

She wanted to know if I was the person who had been there before. I said I just moved in.

We started from there. I call her Big Mommy because she's older than me, fifty-something. Any time she needs help I'm there, any time I need help, she's there. She eats out of my pot, I eat out of her pot.

Big Mommy loves Jollof Rice. She teaches me how to cook it. It's got rice, pepper, curry, thyme, butter, Maggi cube or Maggi chicken. She makes it tender, so it smells like lily flower, bright orange!

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Kenny: We sang the birthday song to David. Usually, he goes HIP HIP and we go HOORAY! But this time we did it the other way. We go HIP, HIP and he goes HOORAY!

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Olu: So that morning I said to my children, Do you believe we won't be moving around and around again. They said they believed. I told them we were going somewhere nice. They said, Yes mummy. I said, Do you believe we are not going to move around any more. They said, Well, we believe mummy. The boys said it like, Yes we believe, we believe. But my daughter, she's older, and she said, Mmmm, I believe, I believe.

I asked them what they wanted to eat. One wanted pizza, the others wanted chicken and chips. So I bought both pizza and chicken and chips to take away.

I put the food on the table. It was a new table. The agency had put it there. We took the plates. The pizza was cut into four pieces, and we are four.

We put a slice of pizza on each plate. We shared the chicken and chips. We put out the condiments, ketchup, mayonnaise, barbecue sauce.

We also had drinks. Robinsons juice. We slept well that night.

Oh my god. The kids slept in their own room.

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Lola: I had my daughter premature. She was 26 weeks and four days when I had her. She was 900 grams – small like a lizard in your palm.

Three weeks after, I had a lot of pain. Before I left in the morning, I put out red bream for dinner. Then I went to the hospital. I told them I had pain in my stomach.

The midwife said: Don't worry, you'll be fine. You just had a baby, it's normal to have pain. You'll be OK.

So I came home. I was going to cook the red bream and rice. I went to the toilet and Oh My God. Instead of the pee the blood was just coming out. It was rushing! Rushing! Rushing out! Oh My God.

I get a blanket to cover myself. I open the door outside to shout for help. I saw a man on a bicycle –don't ask me what he looked like, I was at the point of death! –I just need him to go upstairs and call Big Mommy.

He saw me, he was shocked, he thought maybe I stabbed myself. He run up stairs – and Big Mommy with her gold hair come downstairs with no clothes on her! Just a wrap, no shoes, nothing.

When Big Mommy call the ambulance, they say: where's the blood? How much blood? When did the blood come? What colour is the blood?

Big Mommy say, She is dying! If she die, I'm going to SUE YOU!

When the ambulance arrived, Big Mommy stayed with my children. She cleaned my house. She cleaned the toilet with the

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blood on the floor. She took my children to her flat. She locked the door.

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Juliana: The day I cried a lot was the second day when the stitches were trying to heal. I moved my leg and the pain was so much. The nurse told me I need to walk around. I tried. I picked up courage and moved. I moved three steps. Then the pain came! And I shouted for my mother. MAMA, OH, and I cried.

Then I thought, no one's going to help me but I can do it. I have to move on to do what I have to do. Then I continued walking, walking.

When I went home and I needed to wake up in the night to give the child breast, I needed to do it even with the pain. Later, as the child was growing, no one helped me as well. I'd change the child, bathe the child. All alone.

I'm not complaining but I have to do everything on my own. This is the life here. I have no one helping me. I do everything on my own. I'm always smiling – if you like me, you can smile back and we'll chat. That's my life, that's my story and the life continues.