

# LEAVING HOME

The interesting experience of a Nigerian Youth



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**Dedication:** My profound gratitude to God for all He is to me. Special thanks to my family and friends who have invested so much in me. This is my first try, I promise to work harder and be better.

*“If you want to be a good writer, start writing”* \_ Rev. Chris Oyakhilome (D.Sc., D.D)

## Contents

Reminiscing .....	4
The Start of Something New.....	6
The Event that changed Everything.....	9
The D-day .....	12
The Park Experience.....	13
The First time around.....	16
The Departure.....	17
Welcome to Abuja .....	21
The Mountains and Plains of the North.....	25

## **Reminiscing**

Brandon can finally heave a sigh of relief as the year is gradually coming to an end. It has been a thoroughly eventful one for him. One filled with mixed experiences. He feels a little nostalgic on this beautiful Tuesday morning.

He is at home, and his mother and siblings have all gone out to work and school respectively. As he sits on his comfy blue-sheet covered bed, all he could think about is the different things he could have done this year. “But the year held a lot of unfulfilled plans” he thought to himself.

At the beginning of the year he made several resolutions and plans as most of the people in the world do every New Year. Over the past few years ‘resolution making’ has become his custom. Three years back he told himself “I will become a millionaire this year”, this thought was inspired by an advert he saw on a roadside billboard.

However, he has not been able to save up to one hundred thousand naira till this moment. Anytime he thinks of that resolution, he feels depressed. But he has resolved to not let it get to him again. “I will make it in the right” is one of the words he uses to encourage himself.

In his secondary school days, he has been a somewhat shy boy and relied mostly on his friend Donald for social tips. But all that is history now. He is a new person right now. He is someone who had gone through a lot of experiences. At age 25, he can beat his chest and say “I have been there and I have done that” to a whole lot of things. This year more than any other, he had had to make many tough decisions.

It started when he had to choose which state to do his national youth service. He was left with only two options to choose from and he got his choice. He was going to a city about 700km away from his home city of Port Harcourt. It was scary and exciting at the same time. Scary because it was a strange land, he had no family or friends in that place. And exciting because he liked adventures and it will give him the much needed break from the demands of his family. For him, it was freedom at least for a full year.

His family and loved ones were worried because the place he is going to his notoriously known for bombings and kidnappings. Each time they try to discourage him from going there, he would counter them with the question “are there not people still living there?”

## **The Start of Something New**

After printing his call up letter for the national youth service, he had just three more days left to make the needed preparation for the journey to the campsite. He had quite a handful of things to do. He needed to go to the market to buy camping items like white shirts, shorts, shoes and backpack among other things.

“But mom this money will not be enough to buy all the stuffs I want for this journey” Brandon protested as his mom handed him Forty Thousand Naira. “Brandon, you know that things are hard in the country nowadays and we have a lot of bills to pay” his mother explained. Brandon’s mom has been the breadwinner of the family after his dad passed away eight years ago. She has managed to feed, clothe, shelter and train Brandon and his other two siblings through school. Brandon’s brother is now an accountant at one of the new generation banks. He helps with the expenditures at home as much as he could.

Brandon’s sister on the other hand is yet to get a ‘real job’ after youth service some two years back. She helps out with keeping their mom’s shop. Brandon’s mom has a shop, where she sells wholesale goods but recently business hasn’t been coming by frequently.

Brandon nodded in agreement when his mom told him to manage the money she gave him. His mother is a liberal spirit, “if she had money she would have given me more”, he thought to himself. He quickly tucked the money into his pocket to avoid being seen by his friend Jones, who had followed him to his mom’s shop to get the money. He knew he would have to give a reasonable sum to him, however since he did not see the amount he would just give him five hundred for all the hassle.

At 12:30pm, the sun is high on this particularly beautiful Monday in October as Brandon and Jones boarded a bus from Niger Street in the township area of Port Harcourt. They went to the ever busy mile one market. With Forty Thousand Naira in his pocket, Brandon was extra cautious with movements around him. He had his pocket picked once in the market, and it wasn’t a funny experience.

He had just received a payment for one of the graphic designs he did for a client and decided to spoil himself with a change of wardrobe. On that faithful day, a little overwhelmed by his 'big pay', he took no notice of the crook sitting close to him in the bus. He had put the money at the back pocket of his denim trouser and didn't realize his money has been stolen until the bus conductor asked for his fare. The crook had gone down from the bus a few bus stops back. Brandon wasn't going to allow a repeat of that incidence. "Once beating twice shy" he thought to himself.

The mile one market was packed with sweaty sellers and buyers alike, it would be a hectic task for Brandon and Jones to navigate through the crowd to their customer Emeka whose shop is situated close to the railway.

*"Abeg make una comot for road make we pass na"* shouted an apparently agitated boy. Brandon and his friend scarily made way for him to pass. Brandon is feeling dazed already and he is yet to buy anything, "be strong, you are a man" he comforted himself.

They finally arrived at Emeka's shop. Brandon chooses to buy from Emeka each time he comes to the market because his products are of good quality and relatively cheaper than other traders who sell the same items.

*"Enya, how far na, long time no see"* the smiling Emeka said shaking Brandon's hand. Returning the gesture Brandon replied *"my man, I dey o, how market na?"* *"Market dey fine my brother"* said Emeka in his *ibo* accent.

After all the pleasantries, Brandon and Jones went on to browse for the items they needed to purchase. Emeka has most of the items in stock and after trying them out, Brandon enquired the price of each item. The total price of the items was calculated to be Eighteen Thousand Naira and Brandon handed the money over to Emeka without allowing his friend to see the rest of the money in his bag.

From Emeka's shop the duo moved to another shop to complete their shopping. At about 2:30pm they succeeded in purchasing the last item on their shopping list. Brandon liked shopping and although he has been made jest of by his mates at school that shopping is a

“girlie activity”, he remains unperturbed. During shopping is one of the few times he could express himself lavishly. And because he has a passion for fashion, it was only natural for him to like shopping; he is yet to see any celebrity *fashionista* who doesn't like shopping anyways.

Tired and famished Brandon decided they should get into a nearby eatery for food and rest before they head back home. Jones gladly accepted the invitation, and so the duo made their way into a newly built middle class eatery, adjacent to the market. There they ordered food and took time to regain strength for the trip back home.

When they have finished eating and rested for a while, Brandon reminded Jones that it was getting late and that they should start going home. Brandon was really feeling comfy in this cozy air conditioned eatery, which had a large flat screen television hung on the wall with the channel tuned to African Magic. “We should come here more often” he said to Jones who smiled in agreement. However, as they paid their bills and left the eatery, Brandon knew within himself that this would be his last visit to this eatery for many months.

Back home, Brandon's mom is getting slightly worried that Brandon might lavish the money she gave him on some useless items and come back to ask for more money. While she was still going about this thought she heard Brandon coming into the house. She quickly snatched the bags from him and perused to make certain that he had at least bought the things he primarily needs for the journey. She was very pleased with what she found in the bags. Her little boy is gradually becoming a very responsible man. She knew that her late husband, Mr. Duke would be proud of how Brandon has turned out.

## The Event that changed Everything

Mr. Duke had died from a tragic motor accident on his way back from work. The 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2013 was considered a *black Friday* in the Duke family. It was the day their loving and disciplinary father and husband left the world, and left them to cater for themselves.

The day had started out like every other day; they did their normal routines as a family, their morning devotion, Brandon and his brother cleaned the house while his mom and sister prepared breakfast. Afterward they all had breakfast together and Mr. Duke left for work.

On that particular day, Brandon and indeed the whole family noticed an unusual excitement about their dad, he seemed happier today. Brandon and his siblings came to the conclusion that it might be due to the fact that that day was his last day of work for the year; actually his company was having an end of year party which he was appointed to organize.

“The last time we saw dad this happy was when he was promoted to the position of assistant manager in his company” Brandon’s brother had said at the breakfast table and the whole family erupted in hearty laughter. Unfortunately, that would be the last time Brandon saw his father alive.

Brandon’s father played a prominent role in his life. Brandon adored him. Hence, when the news about his father’s accident was brought to them by one of his father’s friend and colleague, he was devastated.

The man reported that after the party at the office, the now tipsy Mr. Duke went into his car and drove off. “We had agreed earlier that I was going to drive him home, since he was not in the right condition to drive” the man explained. This bit of information didn’t come as a surprise to anyone in the family because Mr. Duke had a somewhat controlling nature.

It was said that Brandon’s father, Mr. Duke had a head-on collision with a truck, and died at the hospital due to excessive bleeding. The Duke family and other close relatives went to the mortuary where the corpse was deposited. And when they confirmed the corpse to be Mr. Duke, they all broke loose, shouting and crying profusely so much so that none of them could comfort the other.

When they got back home, they were received by their neighbors who had heard the news of the accident over the television, and had come to sympathize with the family. News (especially bad ones) travels fast in this area of town as was seen by the number of people who trooped into their compound hours later.

An interment service was held for Mr. Duke three weeks after his death. His wife, Brandon's mother was left to single handedly bankroll the whole event. When Mr. Duke was still alive, his relatives pretended to love him, but now his family realized that all that was a charade.

The burial incurred a lot of cost on Brandon's mother and it consequently affected his spending as he wasn't given the usual amount of pocket money anymore. But it has been three years gone by now, a lot of water has passed under the bridge ever since, and things were beginning to look up, until the new administration came on board.

The Duke family without their patriarch continued with the family tradition of eating breakfast and dinner together every time they are all available. Tonight they are going to have rice, stew and *dodo* for dinner. Brandon always felt extra elated each time they ate this because it's his favorite food, and his mom has a distinct way of preparing it that he never manages to get satiated quickly. Brandon loves his sister's cooking but not as much as he does his mom's.

After dinner, Brandon thanked his mom and headed for the room to rest, he *Facebooked* a little and strategized on his journey to this unfamiliar destination. He tried to enquire from some of his friends about this place but apparently just like him, they knew very little about this place. He tried google, and saw some interesting and beneficial facts about the place. Some of them were quite terrifying facts but Brandon has an optimistic view to things. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" is one his favorite mantras.

At around 10pm he heard a knock on his door, it was his mom checking on him to ensure he was having enough rest considering the tasks that awaits him in the next few days. "Young man, leave Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and the rest" his mother snapped at him. "Mom, I am only using google to check out my destination" he protested. "Whatever, I am

just checking to ensure that you are having good rest, I'm off to bed now, make sure to pray before you sleep" she instructed. "Okay mom" Brandon replied.

## **The D-day**

The next day went by very swiftly and Wednesday finally arrived, the day Brandon will embark on the excitingly adventurous journey away from home to his youth service camp site. The journey was estimated to be up to 700km far and would last more than 16hours on the road. This is the farthest he would travel and be from his mom and family since he was born. It was really emotional for him, for a moment he became double minded; 'to go or not to go' was his version of the Shakespearian question.

His luggage was already packed the previous night, so all he needed to do was get a taxi to take him to the nearest park. Once again he went through all his documents as instructed by his mom to ensure he didn't leave anything behind. Earlier that morning his mom woke him up and they did their routine family devotion and obviously he was the bane of the prayers that day as it has been for the last one week or so. The family prayed for journey mercies for him. They also prayed against Brandon being badly influenced in camp.

Horrendous stories have been told of hitherto innocent boys and girls getting corrupted while in camp. Brandon has been a good boy all his life so it sounded weird when that prayer point was raised by his older sister. Nonetheless the whole family including Brandon heartily prayed.

After that they did have breakfast and a few instructions were dished out to Brandon. It's now 6:30am and he has to move quickly less he'd miss the bus to Jos. Quickly, Brandon tumbled his backpack into the trunk of the car, kissed his mother, brother and sister good-bye and off he was on this remarkable journey of his lifetime. His family waved at him as the taxi moved out of their compound. Letting go of his mother's embrace that has been one of the most difficult things he has done all his life.

## The Park Experience

When Brandon got to the bus terminal, he found out from the receptionist that the bus he was supposed to board has departed. Brandon was gutted by this revelation, he tried to contemplate what he was going to do, he thought long and hard. It took him so much effort to get to know this bus service company and to get their bus ticket but now those efforts are all coming to nothing. Worse still, if he doesn't embark on the journey immediately, he was in for a long night journey which will mean that he will arrive at his destination late.

Suddenly, it came to him that there should be another way to get to his destination apart from the route he planned. So he searched for a different route using the *google earth* app on his android phone. He called it his "electronic guardian angel" because it has come to his rescue on many occasions.

One of those occasions was when he got kidnapped by some petty kidnappers who mistook him for the son of a notable politician in the state. However, when his kidnappers found out that they got the wrong person, they beat him up and then carried him to an unknown location and dumped him there. Brandon was able to navigate his way home with the help of this app on his phone.

Once again this app is going to prove useful as it will help him get alternative route to his expected destination. Brandon was able to find an alternative route. But with the time spent so far, he'd need to go to Abuja first and then board another bus for an onward journey to his campsite. That journey will mean more money, energy and time spent on the road than initially anticipated; however, Brandon has to do all he can to get out of town today.

And so he went back into his chartered taxi and asked the driver to take him to a different bus terminal. The driver has been very patient with Brandon all these time and Brandon has been appreciative of it, telling the driver "I am sorry" and "thank you" every now and then.

While they were on their way to the other bus terminal, Brandon and the driver got into a conversation. Brandon told him all about his journey and the middle age driver told him some

interesting things too. The driver, Mr. Ejiro is from Koko in Delta state, and is a father of two grown-up children about the same age as Brandon.

“I look at you and I see my son. Now I am beginning to understand what my son went through during his service year, *e no easy at all*” said the driver to Brandon. He went further to tell Brandon some of the things his son told him about his youth service experience. Brandon was so engrossed in the stories that he didn’t realize when they drove into the bus terminal.

Brandon wished he could go further with this man, he actually wished this man could drive him all the way to Jos. He likes the man; who has a humorous way of telling stories and would be a great company for long distance as the one Brandon is about to embark on. Within the short time they have journeyed together, Mr. Ejiro has successfully made Brandon laugh and made him a little more at ease.

The driver took the corner into the bus terminal and Brandon alighted and took his baggage along with him as he paid the driver his fare. Brandon paid the driver a little more than they had originally bargained as a way of appreciation for all his kindness.

Brandon walked to the reception area of the bus terminal to enquire on the available buses. He was told that all the buses for the day have departed and only an eight seater car was still available. Brandon was delighted by this latter part of the information even though it meant he’d have to pay more than those who travelled in the bus earlier. He quickly bought a ticket. As he got to the car, he found only two passengers there. He and these two passengers as it happened were going to wait for another two hours before the car finally departed.

In the meantime, as they sat waiting for more passengers, Brandon brought out his phone and started reading a few of his *Facebook* posts and *WhatsApp* messages. He saw some really interesting stuffs online that kept him preoccupied during the wait. His friend Pascal was online and was asking him if he had already reached his destination. Pascal is one of Brandon’s not so intelligent friends. He did badly in geography during their secondary school days, he couldn’t even answer correctly when asked where is the capital of his state Enugu.

Hence, it was understandable for Brandon that Pascal would think that a distance of 700km could be traveled in five hours by road. So Brandon just told him everything about the journey so far.

As they continued to wait for more passengers Brandon started to feel hungry. Left in his stomach was the light breakfast he ate earlier that morning. Now he has to look for where he can eat, but the problem is there were no restaurants within sight. He had to make do with a bottle of *coke* and two packs of *gala* which he bought from a nearby *aboki* shop.

He continued chatting as he munched on his food. He looked at the time on his phone, it is 11 o'clock now and only two more passengers have joined the initial two Brandon met earlier. They have to wait for at least two more to make the car complete. Brandon is beginning to feel really concerned about the time.

This is only the second time he would be going to Abuja and although he has a handful of friends in that place not many of them lived in Abuja city where the termination point of the car he has boarded is. With the way things are going he will almost certainly arrive in Abuja at midnight. If he had so much difficulty finding his way around during the day at his last visit, how much more difficult would it be for him at midnight, he thought.

## **The First time around**

The first time Brandon went to Abuja was two years ago when he and his course mates went for a science conference. The Association of Physicist in his university had selected him and five others to represent it at the conference. Brandon is one of the brightest students in his department, therefore it did not come as a surprise to anyone when his name was included in the list of delegates to the conference.

The trip to Abuja was a very exciting prospect for Brandon; it was going to be his first time to visit the beautiful capital city of Nigeria. He had heard many interesting tales of that city. On social media, some of his friends boasted of how they had visited Abuja and just how magnificent it was. This made Brandon long for the day he will go to Abuja. His visit to Abuja came on a platter of gold because he and the other delegates have all their expenses for the trip catered for by the Physicist Association.

Brandon had the time of his life on that trip. He went to a few prominent places like the International Conference Centre (ICC), National Ecumenical Center and Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). However, there won't be enough time for him to repeat that experience this time around because his stop at Abuja will be very brief.

## **The Departure**

At about 3pm, the last passenger paid for her travel ticket and the car was set for departure right after the driver settled some guys at the park and reconciled the manifest. There were seven passengers in total, out of which only two were females. The car departed its Aba road terminal in Port Harcourt at about 3:30pm. It came as a great relief for Brandon who for a moment thought that he will get disappointed and not get to travel that day, which will ultimately translate to cancellation of his national youth service that year.

But before they sped off into a never ending length of roads, they made a brief stop at the petrol station to fill the car tank. The prices of things have really skyrocketed since the last time Brandon went on a long distance journey as this. Petrol prices have soared from around the region of 95naira/liter to about 170naira/liter. This has affected the prices of everything from food to transportation.

The driver bought ten-thousand-naira worth of petrol and Brandon began to make some calculations in his mind how the driver would make profit from this kind of journey after spending that much on petrol alone. The transport industry is one that interests Brandon as he had plans of starting his very own transport company when he is done with service and has saved enough money.

In the meantime, he watched as the pump attendant typed in the amount in the pumping machine. Some petrol marketing companies have been known to tactfully sell lesser quantity of petrol than the amount paid for. They do this by adjusting the pump calibration. Brandon quietly watched and observed that this could be one of those companies that were being talked about by the dissatisfactory expression on the driver's face. However, the driver didn't mutter a word; he simply opened the door of the car, went inside and drove off.

They encountered a few traffic jams within the city but they soon got on a freeway outside the city. The sun will soon set and there is still a lot of ground to cover if they want to make it to Abuja before midnight. Scary tales have been told about how dangerous night travels could be on Nigerian roads.

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