

PROMISES UNVEILED

by Adaobi Okonkwo

The promise of a brighter future took Nnena away from her homeland, leaving behind a life in Nigeria with her mother for the sprawling campuses of college in the United States.

"The United States," Nnena murmured to herself while staring out of the plane's window as it descended toward an unfamiliar airport. She clutched a worn photograph in her hand, an image of her and her mother, Adanna, standing outside their modest home in Lagos.

"Education will be your ticket to a better life, Nnena," she remembered her secondary school teacher, Mrs. Ofili, saying. Little did Nnena know that life's script would take a cruel turn just one year into her journey.

Nnena's unwavering love for books and her dreams of making a difference through education were well known. "I'll become a professor one day, Mom," Nnena had told her mother with a determined smile. Adanna's eyes welled up with pride as she replied, "I believe in you, Nnena. You can achieve anything." These early experiences shaped Nnena into the person she had grown to be, instilling in her a profound love for education and a determination to create a better life for herself and her mother.

Back in Nigeria, Adanna grappled with a sudden and unexpected illness-related injury, a bolt of lightning that had attempted to turn her world upside down. With a deep breath, Adanna dialed Nnena's number, her heart heavy with a mix of fear and guilt. The phone rang, and Nnena's voice, warm and comforting, came through the line.

"Hello, Mom," Nnena greeted, unaware of the turmoil in her mother's voice.

Tears welled up in Adanna's eyes as she stared at her injured foot and tried to find the right words to convey the gravity of her condition. She couldn't afford to be incapacitated by this injury, not when she was the sole provider for Nnena. The weight of responsibility pressed upon her, the worry about Nnena's future becoming an ever-present companion.

"Mom, you need to see a doctor," Nnena had urged her repeatedly, worried about the severity of her mother's condition.

But Adanna's desperation and vulnerability drew her into the clutches of exploitative pastors promising miraculous healings and divine intervention.

"Nnena, I trust in the Lord. He will heal me," the very same words that one of the religious charlatans, Pastor Joshua, had comforted Adanna with.

Adanna sat in a dimly lit room, surrounded by fervent followers who clung to every word Pastor Joshua spoke. His voice resonated with conviction, and his promises seemed like a lifeline for Adanna in her darkest hour. She had heard miraculous stories of healing within his congregation, and she yearned to be one of them. The deep-rooted faith that had been a source of hope for Adanna in times of adversity now blinded her to the skeptical whispers of reason.

Weeks turned into months, and Adanna's visits to Pastor Joshua's congregation became a ritual. The money she had saved for Nnenas' college education, meant to be their beacon of hope, began to vanish into the collection plates of this self-proclaimed pastor. The college fund she had diligently nurtured for years now dwindled at an alarming rate, unnoticed by her daughter who was miles away in the United States.

Adanna's faith in divine intervention, born from her own challenging upbringing, was her guiding light. It was a faith that had once pulled her family through the darkest of times. But now, as her unwavering belief in divine intervention led her down a treacherous path, it became apparent how her upbringing and reliance on miracles shaped her choices.

Under the counsel of her perfidious brother, Ben, who always had a silver tongue, capable of convincing even the most skeptical minds, Adanna continued to pour her dwindling finances into the pockets of deceitful pastors. "You're on the right path, Adanna," Ben reassured her in a hushed tone during one of their secretive meetings. His motives were often shrouded in secrecy, hidden behind a facade of brotherly concern. Yet, deep down, Ben harbored selfish ambitions and opportunism.

Thousands of miles away in college, Nnena noticed a steady decline of financial support from her mother, the dwindling ability to pay her tuition fees, and the increasing struggle to make ends meet. Her dreams of securing a higher education began to slip through her fingers as Adanna's savings depleted, flowing into the pastors' coffers. The safety net that was meant to catch Nnena was torn apart, leaving her to plummet into the harsh reality of financial strain.

"Nnena, I'm sending you everything I can," Adanna would say in their frequent phone calls, her voice tinged with sadness.

Heavily burdened with these unforeseen challenges as well as the challenges of navigating college life alone in a foreign land, Nnena felt increasingly isolated and abandoned. The promise of furthering her education, the very thing that had brought her to the United States, was now a distant mirage.

Nnena's struggles reached a breaking point, a culmination of the adversity she faced and the burden of her mother's choices. "I don't know how much longer I can do this," Nnena admitted to her friend Sarah, her voice trembling. Depression was nigh and in-waiting to lead her to the brink of despair.

The revelation that her mother had used her college fund and all their major family savings to pay for the promises of these fraudulent pastors hit Nnena like a tidal wave. She felt betrayed; her trust shattered into a million pieces.

Depression, like a heavy fog, finally settled over Nnena. She felt lost and hopeless, unable to see a way forward. It wasn't just about the money; it was about the breach of trust, the feeling of abandonment, and the crushing weight of responsibility for her own future. In her darkest moments, she saw no way out.

One fateful night, Nnena sat alone in her college dorm room, the weight of her mother's choices pressing upon her. The isolation and sense of betrayal became too much to bear. In a moment of hopelessness, Nnena attempted to end her life, a cry for help that echoed in the silent corridors of her college dorm, a heartbreaking consequence of the actions set in motion by Adanna's desperation and misplaced faith. Sarah – who was visiting – found Nnena in minutes, her eyes filled with tears as she dialed 911.

"Stay with me, Nnena," Sarah pleaded, clutching her friend's hand.

Dr. Williams, Nnena's kind-hearted professor, entered Nnena's life, sensing her distress. "Nnena, you don't have to face this alone," Dr. Williams assured her. Dr. Williams' own journey of overcoming adversity made her not just an educator but also a mentor to those who needed it most.

As Nnena's life hung in the balance, Dr. Williams' intervention became a turning point not only for Nnena but also for Adanna in Nigeria, who was confronted with the consequences of her choices. The realization that she had nearly lost Nnena drove her to her senses, but it was a realization that came almost too late.

Adanna's heart weighed heavy with regret as she recognized the extent of the harm her choices had inflicted on Nnena. In the quiet of her room, she gazed at a photo of Nnena on her bedside table and whispered words of apology in contrition, vowing to make amends.

Amidst these tumultuous events, Nnena's college campus slowly became a haven of hope. Strangers became friends, united by a common desire to lift Nnena out of her struggles. They organized fundraisers, offered tutoring assistance, and even just lent a listening ear.

"It's going to be okay, Nnena," her friend Michael reassured her one evening as they sat in the campus library. "We're here for you."

Meanwhile In Nigeria, Adanna faced the harsh reality of her involvement with the fraudulent pastors and her brother's complicity. In a glimmer of hope, she reached out to a local NGO dedicated to combating spiritual exploitation, which swiftly responded with compassion. They provided Adanna with medical attention and introduced her to a support network of survivors who offered emotional solace and revealed the scale of the exploitation.

Guided by legal experts from the NGO, Adanna courageously confronted the fraudulent pastors who had preyed on her vulnerability. With their collective support, she exposed their schemes, garnering significant media attention and international concern. The NGO's comprehensive approach included counseling and emotional support for Adanna and her daughter Nnena, aiming to address both the legal aspects and the emotional scars of their harrowing experience.

Adanna's journey from victim to redemption, with the invaluable help of the NGO, became a symbol of hope for others trapped in similar situations. Her actions not only exposed the predators but also inspired a wave of change, making it increasingly difficult for spiritual charlatans to exploit the vulnerable.

Standing before the court and armed with the truth, Adanna embodied resilience and exemplified how collective action could combat exploitation.

"It's time to put an end to this," Adanna declared, facing down the pastors who had taken advantage of her vulnerability. These charlatans, once shrouded in an aura of invincibility, found themselves exposed, isolated, and defeated.

Adanna's efforts gained momentum, causing her brother's sinister alliance to crumble. Ben's manipulation tactics had unraveled, and he was finally confronted by Adanna. "You've brought shame to this family," Adanna said to Ben, her voice filled with a mix of anger, sadness, and disappointment. Adanna's confrontation was a painful reckoning but a raw and necessary one that revealed the extent of Ben's betrayal.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Adanna became a fierce advocate against fraudulent pastors who preyed on the vulnerable. Through legal action and consistent media exposure, she continued to work alongside numerous organizations to dismantle the web of deception that ensnared the lives of countless other Nigerians who shared similar experiences in the hands of religious charlatans.

"Adanna, you're a hero," a journalist told her as they discussed her fight for justice—which ignited a nationwide conversation about the dangers of blind faith and the importance of critical thinking.

Nnena's recovery was not a swift process; it was a journey filled with setbacks and small victories, but she learned to navigate the labyrinth of her emotions and confront the trauma that had led her to the brink. Dr. Williams remained a steadfast pillar of support, guiding Nnena through therapy sessions and helping her forge connections with support groups that understood her pain.

Gradually healing from both physical and emotional wounds, Nnena reached a pivotal decision to go on a leave of absence and return to Nigeria. However, her return was not merely to confront her trauma; it was a transformative journey towards healing and reconciliation. Nnena

had endured immense pain and betrayal, but she soon realized that her mother, Adanna, had also suffered in her own way.

Upon her return, Nnenas' first step was to reestablish contact with her mother. She was nervous, unsure of how to broach the topic that had driven a wedge between them. Adanna, who had been consumed by guilt and remorse since learning about Nnena's suicide attempt, welcomed her daughter with open arms, tears of relief and love in her eyes.

Their initial conversations were tentative, filled with unspoken emotions. Adanna knew that she had to take full responsibility for her actions and seek Nnena's forgiveness. She began by acknowledging the pain she had caused her daughter, apologizing with sincerity and without reservation.

"I'm so sorry, Nnena, please find it in your heart to forgive me" Adanna whispered through tears.

Nnena, while still guarded, saw the genuine remorse in her mother's eyes. Over time, Adanna didn't just speak words of remorse; she took tangible steps to make amends. She started by sharing her own journey of healing and redemption, explaining how she had been ensnared by the fraudulent pastors, her brother Ben, and her own vulnerability.

Adanna's story mirrored Nnena's in many ways — the vulnerability, the manipulation, and the desire for a better life. Nnena began to see her mother as a fellow survivor rather than the antagonist in her story. Adanna's commitment to righting her wrongs was evident in her active work with organizations dedicated to exposing spiritual exploitation.

Nnena felt her heart soften as she watched her mother's sincere attempts to make amends and observed her commitment to helping others. The process of forgiveness was not immediate; it took time and reflection. Nnena grappled with the pain and betrayal she had felt, but she also recognized that Adanna had taken every possible step to seek redemption.

One day, as they sat together in the quiet of their home, Nnena looked at her mother, and her heart was filled with a profound sense of compassion. She realized that forgiveness wasn't just for her mother; it was a gift to herself, a way to release the burden of anger and resentment that had weighed her down for so long.

With tears in her eyes, Nnena reached out and held her mother's hand. "I forgive you, Mom," she said softly. "I see how hard you've worked to make things right, and I can't carry this anger anymore. Let's move forward together."

Adanna's face lit up with gratitude and relief. It was a moment of reconciliation that brought tears of joy to them both. They had not only mended their fractured relationship but had also found a shared purpose in helping others heal from the scars of exploitation.

"Together, we can help change lives," Nnena told her mother as they sat in their family home, their hands tightly clasped.

Adanna looked at Nnena with a sense of pride and fulfillment. "It's not just about us anymore, Nnena," she said, her voice filled with conviction.

Nnena and Adanna embarked on a mission of empowerment together by establishing a foundation that provided resources for education, mental health support, and awareness campaigns, aiming to break the cycle of blind faith and manipulation. They united their stories of redemption and resilience, using them as a powerful tool to advocate for change and support others who had suffered similar hardships.

And in an instant, their worlds unraveled.

Nnena awoke suddenly in her modest bedroom in Lagos, the warmth of the African sun casting a golden glow through her window, her heart pounding, her breath shallow as she recalled the dream she had. Confusion swept over her as she frantically looked around.

With a sense of trepidation, Nnena rushed to her mother's room. Adanna was there, just as she should be, unharmed and deeply engrossed in prayer.

"Mom," Nnena stammered, her voice quivering. "I had the most vivid dream. We went through so much pain, so much hardship. But now, it's as if none of it ever happened."

Adanna looked at her daughter with a knowing smile. "Nnena, sometimes dreams are more than just dreams. They can be premonitions, warnings from the future."

Nnena's heart sank, realization dawning that the tumultuous events she and her mother had endured in her dream were only a vision of the treacherous path they might take. Tears welled up in her eyes as she conceived the magnitude of the revelation.

The dream had offered them a glimpse into a potential future, a cautionary tale—a stark warning of the snarls that await them should they make the wrong choices.

Adanna hugged her daughter tightly, grateful for the gift of foresight that had spared them from potential horrors. "We've been given a chance to forge our paths, to ensure that we never have to live through what you witnessed in your dream." Adanna whispered.

Nnena and her mother's mission of empowerment and healing was no longer a dream but a tangible reality. They would use the knowledge from Nnena's premonition to navigate the challenges ahead, safeguard themselves from the perils that had haunted her sleep, and inspire others facing adversity to discover honorable paths to healing and hope, even in the darkest of times.