

Chapter 1: A Supposed End

Motionless, teary eyed, with a weak pulse, Mercy lay alone in the darkness of her room at midnight. She was filled with regret, as she swallowed a bottle of pills, life draining out of her. Her heart was bleeding, mind in agony, desperately crying for help with unmoved lips. All she knew was that she had made a mistake and was no longer ready to leave this world behind. In her pain, her mind was at war. The battleground was intense, vision clouded with no hope to cling to but she fought. Mercy was not ready, she no longer wanted this. Her bleeding heart cried to God, as that was the only hope she had left, the only one she knew could save her from this dark hole she was in.

Chapter 2: The Beginning

The cloudy skies, exhaust fumes from passing vehicles, and the smell of fried yam and akara filled the bustling streets of Lagos, Nigeria on an early Saturday morning. Amidst the chaos, chatter and banter from market sellers, and the praise and worship going on at the Seventh Day Adventist Church, in a quiet street corner away from the facade of Lagos life was the home of Mercy.

Mercy was a young 18 year old girl full of life with a vivacious character and compassionate heart, gifted with a myriad of talents. She grew up in an average Christian family, who loved her and tried their best to make sure she had what she needed to succeed in life. She grew up in an environment that emphasized the need for excellent grades, following societal protocol and maintaining an acceptable lifestyle for a teenager. With the expectations placed on her, Mercy struggled to always be at the top. Her struggles were accompanied by anxiety, fear of failure and

a constant need to be validated from outsiders. Mercy carried a burden only she felt, she felt lost and was at war with herself. She silently cried for help, but no one saw her, and bringing up issues of mental health was a space she dared not venture considering the negative connotations it had in her home, and in the Nigerian society at large. She had tried once in her earlier years but she was met with the popular statement “you are not depressed in Jesus name.”

In most Nigerian homes, depression and other mental health issues are usually just rejected or prayed away. No one ever really wants to even hear the reasons why a person feels that way, it is against cultural norms and beliefs.

Chapter 3: New Territory

Life was looking up for Mercy based on societal standards, she had just gained admission to study at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States of America. Her family was so proud and happy for her. Mercy was so elated, but the voices in her head began to speak before she could even properly celebrate her big win, saying how she was not good enough, how she was not going to fit in, she even began to think about how her parents would raise the funds to cover her travel expenses as well as her fees. She had gotten a scholarship, but the amount left to pay was still a lot for them, her parents did not have to say this but she knew the financial situation at home.

Her parents managed to raise the funds to pay her first year school fees and also her flight ticket. She didn't know how, but Mercy remained grateful to her parents. Mercy started a new life in a new country on her own, she was still battling her inner demons and the constant thoughts of failure especially now that she was the first in her family to get an education outside the country.

The expectations placed on her were more than ever. After a few months of getting acquainted with the system of foreign life, and making a few friends, Mercy realized she was feeling even worse with each passing day. Mercy's friends were the party going type whose everyday lives involved drinking and using drugs. They were the friends our parents warned us against. Their lifestyle soon began to rub off on Mercy and she was at every party hosted both in and out of school, she was constantly drunk even though she was underaged, and she became introduced to pills and marijuana. Mercy was drawn to this life because it afforded her temporary solutions, it gave her the peace her soul desperately longed for a few hours. Mercy started to withdraw from her family, she hid her lifestyle from them at all costs because she knew it would break their hearts, but she did it anyway. This was her fix, she would tell herself every time she had to do something she knew would disappoint her parents. Even though Mercy found her temporary solution, there was still this void she felt. She was still depressed and sad, but she tried to deny this.

Although Mercy kept up with this lifestyle, she was still excelling at school, her grades were remarkable so her parents felt she was doing good where she was. When they called to check up on her weekly, their conversations mainly surrounded school, anytime something else wanted to come up she lied that she had projects to finish up. Mercy felt devastated that she couldn't talk to her parents about so many things. She just needed someone to talk to, that wasn't going to condemn her— that would help her, and offer her a solution to all her problems. Mercy wanted happiness, she wanted to feel content in her spirit.

Chapter 4: Rude Awakening

“We have booked your ticket and sent your itinerary, you are coming back home in the next three days,” those were the last words Mercy’s parents said before the call disconnected. Mercy began to weep as she heard those words. It began to dawn on her that she would no longer have the freedom she had in school back at home, how was she going to transition she thought to herself, everything was a lot to take in. Mercy had told her friends that they would have a party the day before she was to leave to celebrate their last day with her before she came back for the next school session. Unknowing to her, this was the last time she was going to see them. Mercy’s parents were completely broke and had borrowed some money they were trying to pay off, so they couldn’t afford to send her to school for the next session. They were going to break the news to her once she got home.

The day before leaving for Nigeria, Mercy’s friends threw her the wildest party. She indulged in all that she could and took as many substances as her body could handle, she knew that once she got home, none of this was going to be possible again. The following day, Mercy woke up in her vomit before she realized she had just ten minutes to head to the airport if not she was going to miss her flight. She scrambled around her room, got ready and called an Uber to take her to the airport. She had only packed one suitcase because she thought she was coming back and did not feel the need to carry her winter clothes as well as her party outfits, since she was not going to use them in Nigeria anyway.

Mercy landed in Nigeria and was immediately welcomed home by the smell of the airport. She wished she was back in school. She spotted her parents, ran and embraced them. Her parents had complained about how she had lost so much weight thinking it was because she did not enjoy the

readily available junk food they served at school. Mercy had lost weight because she was not herself. She was always consumed by her thoughts, and her frequent use of drugs did not help matters. The next day following Mercy's arrival, her parents broke the devastating news to her, she stood up and walked into her room locking the door behind her. She was in a state of confusion, Mercy couldn't be angry because she knew that her parents must have sacrificed so much just to even pay her first year fees, but she was also disheartened and broken. She felt like she was being pushed to the edge, nothing seemed to be working for her.

Chapter 5: Shattered Hopes

Mercy couldn't grieve this news as she had wanted. It felt like a thousand pieces of shattered glass had pierced her heart, but she had to portray an understanding demeanor so she didn't seem ungrateful. Her parents encouraged her and told her she was still going to attend school, not just in the United States of America. They felt she was withdrawn because of this news alone, but Mercy had been struggling even before she left Nigeria. Although her depression escalated now that this had happened. She wanted to tell them all that was going on with her, finally speaking up to escape the depths of hell within her, but she just couldn't. One time, Mercy tried speaking up about the issue but was immediately dismissed by her mother who was too consumed in her work. She felt her mum was being insensitive and after that day she decided to keep all her opinions and thoughts in regards to all that was troubling her to herself.

Mercy became a shadow of herself. She could not talk to her siblings because they were both much younger than she was, they would not understand anything she was going through.

Mercy had a journal that she kept. Each page echoed her silent cries, her sinking moments, the current storm. Writing was an outlet for Mercy to be as expressive and free as she wanted to be. Although the white pages of her journal stained with the black ink of her pen did not offer her solutions, her journal listened. It took in every word she wrote and soaked in every tear she shed. It made her feel safe and seen.

Despite her internal battles, Mercy acted strong in front of her family. She could barely function, but she had to fake it. During family dinners she felt choked and consumed by sadness, here she was seated around the people she loved most and she couldn't even bare her mind. Mercy missed when she was still a little girl crying in the laps of her mother's ankara wrapper and how her mother caressed her, making her feel like the most cared for in the world and all her problems seemed to disappear. She longed to experience that again. Yes she was now grown, but she was still her mother's baby— her pride and joy.

Chapter 6: Desolation

Mercy's parents had planned a family trip to their village for the Christmas celebrations in December. Mercy had opted out from going because she was not feeling too well and her parents had agreed. Her mum wanted to stay back with her, but Mercy refused and encouraged her to go especially since she hadn't been for some time. Mercy was happy she got to be alone for a few days, and just sit with her thoughts without anyone having any expectations of her. Her mother had packed food for each day for her and stocked up the kitchen for anything Mercy needed.

The first day after her family had left, Mercy was okay. The following days, that story completely changed— she had sleepless nights, very destructive and demeaning thoughts, she had lost her appetite, and all she could think about was death. Mercy didn't know how she was going to die, but she sure knew she could not keep living like this. She was suffocating, the pain and sadness were taking over her fully. There was no longer any form of escape for her. Mercy began to search on how she could kill herself without feeling pain and of course she found answers. Fear wasn't even a stumbling block, Mercy had made up her mind about the way she was going to exit the world. She thought about her family's feelings, and all they would think and say for a brief moment, but she knew they would eventually move on after some years. She was determined for the first time in a while to pull through with this. She was miserable, and she felt the time was right.

Chapter 7: Moments Leading Up

Mercy had prepared for this moment the previous day. She had found the bottle of pills that would be instrumental in all this, she contemplated leaving a note for her family, but felt there was no use and it was the cliché thing to do. Mercy went into her room and laid on the bed, it hit her that she was going through with this. She stared blankly at the roof, and thought about everything she had been through. She began to second guess her decision but all she wanted was to silence the voices in her head, to put an end to her pain. It was unbearable, and she didn't know how to deal with it. Mercy decided to swallow the whole bottle of pills at midnight. It was time. She felt nothing when she initially swallowed it so she lay patiently, waiting, ten minutes later she began to hallucinate. Mercy felt and saw every image in her imagination. She became aware of what she had done and regret began to sink in. Mercy did not want to go anymore, tears

began to roll from her eyes. She couldn't speak. Mercy was numb, she begged God in her heart and knew this wasn't her time.

Chapter 8: Raw Wounds

Her mother saw her first on her bed, she rushed in to meet Mercy who was nearly unconscious. She let out a huge cry, her father and siblings rushed in after. They couldn't believe their eyes. They saw a nearly dead girl right before their eyes. Her father picked her up and dashed outside into their car rushing to the hospital. Mercy was attended to immediately when they got there. Her family was filled with fear and instant regret, where did they go wrong? What signs did they miss? All they could do was pray that Mercy survived this and they would have their daughter and sister back again.

Chapter 9: New Found Hope

This incident led to bare and open heart conversations. Mercy's family even though they still couldn't quite understand the events that had transpired, but they were open to listening and caring for her. This marked a new era in their family and her family sought the help of a therapist to unpack and understand the issues of mental health, and how they can best cater for the needs of their children especially Mercy, as well as heal the open raw wounds that were formed. Her journey of survival broke the silences around mental health conversations in her home. Her family had gotten a new found hope.