

THE BIG CHAPTER

HOPE

A selected excerpt

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CHAPTER TWO

HOPE

Lilac and burgundy.

Those were the very first colours I associated with my mother. I don't remember the occasion or where we were; the image might have come from a photograph of my mother that no longer exists, but I remember those two colours and the dress as clear as day. My mother was a vision in a gorgeous dress, a combination of two colours that were rarely seen together, yet somehow declared just how fashionable she was. She wore her hair in well-oiled, jet-black jheri curls. She was beautiful, almost ethereal. She still is.

When we think about our parents, our thoughts are often clouded by the gratitude for the sacrifices they made to ensure that we got the best out of life, but when I think about my mother, I think about that beautiful woman, in a

beautiful dress. A woman who was just a girl. My mommy. Hope Ebele Chikodili.

My mother could not have been named more perfectly. Both her first and middle names are virtues. Ebele, her Igbo name, means mercy. Mercy and Hope: Nchekwube na Ebele. Even without knowing her, I imagine her name would have suggested the kind of woman she was.

I have vivid memories of people trooping in and out of our home when I was much younger. We did not have a lot, but for anyone who walked in, there was always a warm meal. Ebele would insist that we feed as many as found their way under our roof.

“Mommy, there is no food in the house,” was never an excuse.

If there was no food, there would be foodstuffs, and all you had to do was cook. And cook she always did. One of the many things I remember about my mother from when we were little was that she was always busy with something. There was always something that needed to be done around the house, at school, or in church, and somehow, she managed to do all of it without breaking a sweat. She didn’t need to go as far as she did, but she always went the extra mile for her family, for friends, and even for strangers. Where my mother was concerned, love was something we received freely and therefore had to give freely.

I did not quite understand my mother’s kindness and generosity as a child. It used to annoy me to no end because

the more people who trooped into our home, the more work I had to do, and I didn't like it at all. All I wanted to do was to lie on my stomach underneath our wooden dining table and bury my nose in books, and although my mother typically let me be, when kindness was required, reading was never an excuse not to offer it. I was her first child after all, and being a first child came with very serious responsibilities. The success of the training of my younger ones depended on her ability to whip me into the right shape.

I always thought that my mother was in the right profession. She had the right dose of kindness and discipline that is required to be a teacher. When kindness was required, reading was never an excuse not to offer it. Both as Mommy at home and Auntie Hope at school, Ebele Chikodili was a disciplined woman who had very high standards and exacted them, especially if you were privileged to be her child, as I am. It did not help that I was Auntie Hope's daughter at school. No one needed to invite my mother to school because she was already there. To my classmates, I was the "teacher's child," and to my teachers, I was the phenomenal Auntie Hope's daughter who operated on a totally different standard from everybody. If Auntie Hope was excellent, nothing short of excellence was expected from Chiamaka, and by extension, her siblings.

Note: Names of persons and companies have been altered, based on client confidentiality.