

TIME
WILL
TELL





TIME WILL TELL

A TRUE STORY OF
ABDUCTION, SURVIVAL
AND RECONCILIATION

YEMI ELEGUNDE



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*In Loving Memory of my dad Lekan Elegunde.
God be with you till we meet again.*





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I started the project of writing the manuscript in June 2005 which eventually became the published book “Time Will Tell”, never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would attract so many readers, I never thought that I would talk to the media, appear at seminars and even pick up an award for the book.

It started out as a project for me, I knew that I had a lot of thoughts that I couldn’t let go of, and some that I wanted to make sure I never forgot. In the beginning I kept my thoughts to myself but later I found that I was more willing to open up to some people and talk about the events that eventually became the story. I took my time writing, in fact, it took six years. There was no deadline; there were no targets and I had no real intentions of it becoming a published book. In fact I didn’t even realise at the time, the depth of the ongoing issue that is *International Parental Child Abduction*.

Before the book I didn’t know anyone else who had been through experiences similar to mine, so it never crossed my mind that this was a global issue and one that needed more publicity. According to research released by the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO**) in 2011, every other day a British child is abducted by a parent to a “non-signatory” country (one which has not signed the Hague Convention on international child abduction). In practice, this figure is likely to be even higher as many cases are simply not reported. Figures from the United States are even higher. New figures reveal that the number of parental child abduction cases dealt with by the Foreign Office has risen by 88% in under a decade. It is now a worldwide issue with the Foreign

Office and Reunite International working on cases that relate to 84 different countries.

Understanding the effects that parental child abduction has on the families involved financially, mentally and emotionally as well as the long term scars left on the children involved is low. The long term objectives and results of parental child abduction vary vastly and ultimately unless the complex situation is resolved amicably and quickly, no one wins. Not the abductor, the left behind parent or the child or children caught up in it.

“Time Will Tell” helped me in many ways: the writing was somewhat therapeutic for me, and somehow it made me feel a little more at ease with things that had really bothered me and played on my mind for close to thirty years. The book also opened many doors for me, it helped me start something that I had always wanted to do, which is to support other kids, and parents who find themselves thrown into similar situations.

I have met and worked with Reunite International, Abducted Angels and various other charity organisations that specialise in International Parental Abduction issues, I have worked with experts on case studies focused on the psychological effect parental abduction and alienation can have on a child, I have also met many parents of various ages, from all over the world. These people had one thing in common: their child or children had either been abducted to a foreign country or they feared that their child could be abducted by the other parent at some point.

In this revision, I have attempted to answer most of the questions that readers of the original book asked, including the biggest question of all, in my father’s own words, why he took us away without our mum’s knowledge or consent. I have also tried to fill in some of the missing gaps that people wanted to read about including how I actually spent my early years rediscovering myself in England. I have also attempted to bring the book up to date. In the original version I focused loyally on the events through my own eyes as were relevant to the whole story, hence leaving out some

peripheral stories, here I have tried to bring the audience up to date beyond the initial reconciliations between me and my parents, but also to the continuous reconciliations with myself, getting to know my parents better and becoming a father.

I wrote “Time Will Tell” from my early vivid memories, it would seem a lot of things are stored almost permanently in our minds. Occasionally, while chatting with friends, colleagues or even strangers the topic of my sister and me having been smuggled away to Nigeria while we were kids would crop up. I would have to elaborate on this topic a little more and my audience would always be intrigued. Time after time the same suggestion would come up “You should write about this” they would say and I would say “Yeah, maybe one day”.

Gradually I began to realise that I did, in fact, have a lot of memories and thoughts about the years I spent in Nigeria, so when Jo Larsen, the wife of a colleague, urged me for the umpteenth time to put my memories to paper, I realised that perhaps I should take her advice more seriously. So In June 2005 I began to type and re-type, only to delete and start all over again. Slowly but surely the pages started piling up.

A lot of people have helped me along the way, some just by telling me to write about my experiences and by saying how much they would love to read my story. Others kindly read my manuscripts, some, more than once. Some really pushed me to keep feeding them with more pages; collectively they pushed me all the way to the end of this book.

I would like to thank the following people in no particular order for their insight, feedback, time and encouragement. Kristina Savytskaya ; Yulia Kharchenko; Isolde Fischer; David Sanford; Stephanie Ferrero; Frank & Jigs Awuah; Darren Awuah; Lorraine Reid; Clare & Aaron Tebbutt; Brian Emmanuel; Lanre Elegunde & family, Angie Ruiz Martin; Lisa Holding, Lindsey whitehead, Louise Springall, Ima Scotney and Lisa Davidian.

My thanks also go to Sean Felton and the staff of Abducted

Angels, Alison Shalaby and the staff of Reunite International, My Child Abduction Meet up group members Jonathan Banjo, Jean-Christian Cattin, Sabeena Sumrust, and the many other left behind parents I have met along the way, My step-Dad Owen Powell, My Uncle & Aunt Charles & Erika King, my cousin Oliver King, my step-brother Bola Ogunkoya and My beautiful sister Bisi Ogunkoya (with whom I shared most of these experiences and who kindly read it all to authenticate and remind me of some important events and dates).

I would also like to thank my parents Florence Powell & Lekan Elegunde who both read the original book and willingly helped me with a lot of facts in this revised version. The message from my father is that sometimes it becomes impossible for parents to live together, but to take a child away from the other parent without the knowledge or consent of the other parent or to restrict the other parent from seeing their child can leave long term scars for all.

Shaya my daughter, you are loved, thank you for coming into my life and making me a complete man. Finally, my gratitude also goes to Lucy Mellersh my editor on this revised project, who in spite of the first-hand experience she had gone through as a result of parental abduction, still read my book and manuscripts numerous times and kindly carried out the editing.

This book is dedicated to the memories of Tunde Adeaga and my brother Damian “Chisel” Powell. I would also like to dedicate it to my mother who I now see as my true hero, for all the things she has gone through in her life.

Yemi Elegunde
February 2013

PROLOGUE

When I returned from Jamaica late in November 2004, I was returning from probably the worst time of my life, but when I got back home to Luton, UK and sat down to reminisce, one small irony hit me. Although I did not see them in the same country let alone at the same time, this was only the second time that I had physically seen both of my parents in the same year since I was seven years old, back in September 1973.

I had seen Dad in April of that year in Nigeria it was kind of a home coming trip, then, in November, tragedy brought me to Mum in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica.

The significance of seeing both my parents in the same year, albeit seven months apart, could be easily missed, especially under these circumstances, it dawned on me that my sister hadn't even managed that, and it made me realise that this was something that may never happen again.

My parents live at least 9,203KM apart on different continents, Mum lives in Jamaica in the West Indies while Dad lives in Nigeria, West Africa, they have neither seen nor spoken to each for well over 30 years.

For me, this was the year that I had finally closed the door on 31 years of soul searching, pain, and a host of emotions. 2004 was when I decided to stop fruitlessly searching for the answers to my questions. To be honest, the answers probably wouldn't make me feel any better now.

I decided it was time to move on with my life, I had to give my daughter a better beginning than I had. It was time to let go of the

lost years that I could never get back and appreciate the roller-coaster years that I experienced instead. I have been both lucky and unlucky to experience life the way that I have, I fought a lot of battles with my emotions as well as with other people. I made a lot of friends along the way. As a result of my experiences, and what I have seen and done, some people say it made me a better or a stronger person. I disagree: better or stronger than what?

Who really knows how I would have turned out had the events of 1973 never happened? What I do know is that I am a strong person, most people will say that I smile through almost any circumstance and I truly appreciate what I have and the life that I have been given.

If I had a choice, I wouldn't have chosen to be where I ended up in September of 1973 nor would I have chosen to go to Jamaica in November, 2004 but this is all part of my destiny.

I have always been a firm believer that everything in life happens for a reason, we all end up in the right place at the right time, and sometimes we are just not lucky enough or perceptive enough to know it.

Destiny plays a role, as do our individual choices. No matter how bad life seems to be, you only have to listen to the news, look across the street and so on, and there is always someone, somewhere, having a day or a year that makes yours look like a blessing.

Still, we all have a story to tell, some of us have lived very sheltered lives others have bigger wilder experiences. Here's my story...

CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME TO NIGERIA

Bisi and I held hands tightly as we walked along the muddy, bumpy clay road. We were trying to keep up with Dad who was a few steps ahead of us, hauling a couple of large suitcases. It was a warm night in September 1973, there was a light drizzle falling and it was mostly dark along the road.

We both looked up to Dad for reassurance; we knew something unusual was going on, but no one had taken the time to explain anything to us. Dad just looked at us and smiled.

It was past 9pm, there was very little light about, a few of the small houses we could see had candles flickering in the wind, some had kerosene lanterns and occasionally we would walk past a house with electricity.

Bisi and I had never been to this place before. We continued to walk along the muddy path, as the light drizzle now turned into slightly heavier rain, none of us had a raincoat or an umbrella, so we had to walk faster; I wiped away a bead of rain from over my eyebrows as I glanced over to my right where two boys were playing ping-pong in the rain with just a dull fluorescent light hanging above the table.

I could see little chicks scurrying across in front of us chasing after their mother hen, there was a pig burying its nose into the smelly damp soil and I also noticed little kids running around barefoot with nothing but a pair of pants on. What I still didn't know was where we were.

“We’re nearly there now” Dad said. We both nodded, as we had done countless times over the last few hours. It had already been a very long day and now it was getting weirder. What had started as a nice surprise earlier that September morning, was now looking very strange. Of course, I didn’t know it then, but this was going to be the turning point in my life, the point that would define the rest of my life. That fact wasn’t even in my wildest dreams that night. I was only 7 and Bisi 5.

As we approached the little house, one of the few painted ones that I had seen so far, Dad’s excitement grew. Then suddenly a young lady came running out of the little house, she was ecstatic as she ran screaming and beaming at Dad. She gave him a massive bear hug as some more people came rushing out of the house. She was now talking, almost yelling to him speaking in that dialect Dad usually uses only with a handful of uncles at home. “Hello, hello” she shouted towards Bisi and me, as more people came out of the house, some taking Dads bags off him and carrying them through into the house.

We walked in; I didn’t recognise anyone in the room. I felt rather tired and nervous as I am sure Bisi did too. We sat down still holding each other’s hands tight; you would have needed a chisel to pry us apart. Dad had gone into another room, Bisi and I looked at each other quizzically. The windows were all wide open now and there was dozens of kids all staring in and talking excitedly in the same language that neither of us understood. We just sat there without a clue as to what was happening.

Suddenly, a jolly woman, larger than life, with a huge smile on her shiny face came into the room and handed us a bottle of Coca-Cola and a pack of zoo crackers each.

She was really excited and was trying her best to communicate with us. But we just sat and stared at her as the commotion carried on all around us. “Eate nice” I heard her say; as she tried to encourage us to try the biscuits. I kept wondering where Dad was. It was getting more confusing by the minute; we just sat there,

silent and bewildered. “Eat...e...sweet...e...nice” but we just held hands, the kids at the windows were still loud and there was at least 15 people in the little room.

After what seemed forever, Dad came back to the little living room. “You alright?” he asked, we nodded, I think we were too confused at this point to find the right words.

Soon we were both too exhausted from the whole weird day that we crashed out right there, where we were sitting, in spite of all the noise around us.

The next day, I woke up in a small room, it took a few seconds to understand my bearings; it must have been very early in the morning because everyone else was still asleep. I glanced up at the grey ceiling, in one corner of the room I could see a wall gecko, on my left side I could see someone else was asleep right beside me and on my right I could see Bisi who was still deep in sleep. I sat up and counted at least eight other children all asleep some on the bed with Bisi and me but most of them on an old shabby straw mat on the floor.

I got up, and manoeuvred around the legs and arms sprawled all over the mat, I walked out of the room into a dark narrow corridor, it was all quiet, I turned to the right but all the doors were locked so I turned back, there was a row of rooms on both sides and I could see people asleep in some of them. I made it back to the living room where we had sat the previous night; Dad was in there sitting at a desk, at the other side of the room. He was busy writing, I went over to him, “Good morning Dad, what are you doing?” “Writing a letter” he responded. “But where’s Mum” I asked. It had now been close to 24 hours since we had last seen her. Dad replied “I am writing to her right now, do you want to tell her that you are OK?” “Why?” I inquired, “why not just go back home instead?” then the words that will live with me forever were uttered. “She’s still in England; we are in Nigeria so we won’t be seeing her for a very long time”.

I was only 7 years old, up until this point, the only thing I knew about Nigeria was that it was my dad’s country, I had never even seen any photos of the country. At that moment though, the only

thing I could hear in my mind were Dad's words. In my heart, I understood what Dad had just told me but I didn't understand how this could be happening. I was looking for a reassuring sign that Dad was just joking but there was no such sign.

The chilling reality was there for me to see. The previous day we had unwittingly boarded a plane from England, we stopped briefly in Ghana, then caught a connecting flight to Nigeria later that night.

I continued to press Dad, I wanted to know exactly when he thought we would see Mum again "you will see her again one day soon, you may not understand right now but when you are older, you will understand". Bisi was awake now and had found us in the living room; she could see the tears in my eyes and the flabbergasted look on my face.

Dad invited Bisi to join him in writing his letter to Mum; eventually I conceded and joined them too. I asked that he tell Mum that we were fine and well and I asked her to send me my wristwatch. It was my first real watch, a present from my birthday back in February of that year. I had always been obsessed with watches so it was the perfect present and one that I did not now want to be without. I wore it whenever I was going out with Mum or Dad and had I known that I was never going to see it again I would have tried to go back home to get it before we left.

As it turned out Bisi and I left England in exactly what we had worn to Mrs Brown's in the morning, Dad didn't pack a suitcase or any of our belongings whatsoever as he didn't want to arouse any suspicion. On the day we left, not only had he pretended to go off to work, he must have waited around till he knew Mum had left the house and then gone back in and packed everything he needed, including two passports that he had secretly applied for and acquired for Bisi and me. The passports and the clothes we wore that day were the only possessions that Bisi and I took from England to Nigeria.

We finished the letter, the only content of which I remember

was my little paragraph about being OK and the request for my wristwatch, as for the rest, I was not interested and could not care less.

It seemed everyone in the house was awake now and wanted to come into the living room for a chat. We still had the language barrier of course, and now I was beginning to feel that I wanted to be left alone with my thoughts, it was a feeling I was going to get again and again in the coming years.

It was amazing to see how many new cousins I had in just one house. Uncle Joe was the oldest of Dad's nine brothers and sisters. It was his house in Agege that we had arrived at, and were now living in. He had a big family of his own, his wife the jolly lady who had offered us the crackers the previous night I only ever knew as "Maami", which roughly translated meant "my mother" but not only did all her children address her by that name so did most of the children in the neighbourhood and eventually so did Bisi and I.

Between them they had six children; the oldest Dipo was only a few years younger than Dad so he would have been in his late 20's when we first met him, next was his sister Bolaji, then a brother Lanre followed by three girls Bolanle, Yetunde (the young girl who had rushed out to greet Dad as we approached their home the previous night) and the youngest one Abake. Abake was only a year younger than me so eventually she was the one that I was closest to and the few words of Yoruba that I learned in those early days were courtesy of her especially as she spoke no English at all.

I remember Dipo used to be a goalkeeper for his local team and would take me to a few of his matches. Lanre spoke the most English whilst Yetunde and Abake hardly spoke any at all.

They all lived in one of the biggest houses on their street in Agege. It was a bungalow. The living room was the first room you came to as you walked in through the main door. It was sparsely furnished; there was an old piano in one corner, two old armchairs and a three-seater surrounding a centre table, above which was an old dusty ceiling fan.

The living room had two doors, the main entrance and the other door which led to a long hallway. Five doors on each side of this hallway led to bedrooms which some of the older ones like Dipo and Lanre used as bedsits. The first bedroom on the left was the largest and this was Uncle Joe and Maami's.

The hallway led on to the kitchen which was at the other end of the house, it was a big room and the walls had been plastered but not painted so the room looked dull and dark. The kitchen also served as a kind of storage room for kegs of cooking and drinking water and sacks of rice, beans & gari a traditional staple meal made from cassava. The kitchen had two twin kerosene stoves and was the busiest room in the house always full of women cooking, cleaning black eyed beans or rice from a tray or pounding yam or cooking one of their various delicious-smelling pepper soups whilst chatting in loud and excited voices.

There was a door from the kitchen which led outside to an unkempt garden and a shack built from aluminium which, to my horror, was the toilet. I had never seen or heard of a pit latrine in my life. Even more horrifying for me was his explanation of how to clean myself after squatting over the hole in the ground, there was no toilet roll, instead there was a lime scale filled old plastic kettle, I had to remember to fill it with water before using the toilet. While I still stared at him with my jaw dropped, he reminded me to thoroughly wash my hands afterwards. "You mean I run this water over my bum and wash my dudu off with my actual hands?" I asked. "Yes, with your left hand" was the reply.

I left the commotion of the living room and went outside where I sat on a step in front of the house, I watched some ants busy carrying pieces of food in a well organised queue, past my feet and into a crack near the step I was sitting on.

I was still very upset I tried to wipe away my tears, but they just kept welling up in my eyes and streaking down my cheeks, I remember Yetunde trying to comfort me, but I wasn't about to be friendly, instead I was getting angry and more confused.

Bisi came out and sat down beside me on the step, she was only five years old. She had recently joined my school, St James Norland School in Shepherds Bush West London. I had been looking forward to being a big brother at school for so long. As it turned out, she only got the one day at school and now we were never going back. I am sure she understood even less what was going on and just needed to know that someone was there for her.

I sat there thinking, It was already getting hard for me to take, difficult for me to see how what had started as a normal day had managed to turn into a nightmare scenario so quickly and without Mum or us having any idea what was coming.

So how did we get here? How did two children unwittingly end up leaving Holland Park in London that September morning and arrive in a small suburban town called Agege in Lagos State, the then capital city of Nigeria, that night without our mum, or indeed anyone, suspecting a thing? How did Dad convince us to leave home and board a plane from Heathrow? Even now, I don't have all the answers but here is what I do recall.

There were two little clues in it for me, just two minuscule but unusual things happened that morning, one of which was enough to make me raise a question but nothing more.

We lived on the 15th floor of a 22 storey building in Holland Park West London, called Norland House, the building still stands tall and proud today. It wasn't our first family house but it was where I had lived for the most part of my life. Our regular nanny Mrs Cross was a very fat white lady we called her Aunt Mary, she had a son of her own, Peter, who was a couple of years older than me. Her husband Sam who we called Uncle Sam was always great fun to be around. Peter and I spent a lot of our time watching TV. We were both Batman & Robin fans, although my favourite TV character at that time was actually 'Joe 90'.

If the Cross's couldn't have us for any reason or if Mum and Dad didn't need us to go all the way over to the Cross's, then Mrs Brown was the alternative. She was good friends with Mum and

they also lived in Norland House, just above us on the 16th floor.

Mrs Brown's daughter Beverly was about my age and we were pretty much best friends. We loved playing 'doctors & nurses'. Once I was in from school, I couldn't wait to see Beverly.

On this September morning, I don't recall Beverly being at home, I think she was at school, but we weren't, for some reason, instead we were with Mrs Brown while both Mum & Dad were at work.

The first clue that this wasn't a normal day was when Dad came back home rather early from work to everyone's surprise, no one was expecting him back just about a couple of hours after he had left to go to work! But here he was.

The second clue was that he wanted to take both Bisi and me to the barber's! That was strange to me because Bisi had never been invited to the barber's with us before. It had always been a boy's night out, never a family afternoon outing, besides, I didn't even need a haircut, both points of which I was quick to raise, but Dad was even quicker with his counter, explaining that we couldn't leave Bisi by herself and how another cut would be just right for school, oh, "and don't forget Kentucky Fried Chicken as usual". That sold it to me and to Mrs Brown, so we said our byes and left. We went straight to the lift and down to the ground floor; there was no stopping at home to get our coats or anything else.

Another strange thing was that Dad didn't have his car! "Stupid thing broke down on my way to work". He said. Years later, I would find out that he had in fact sold the car to a friend of his that morning and had only gone out earlier that day to deliver the car and pick up his money.

It was no major surprise to see Uncle Taiwo waiting downstairs, he had been round to see Dad quite often recently. I don't think Mum liked or trusted him much, especially since whenever he visited Dad at the flat, they always spoke in a language that none of us understood. We all got into Uncle Taiwo's car and headed off, past every barber shop I knew, past every KFC we knew, and on we went.