



VISIONAIRES

A True Tale of Religion and Mystery

PETER M. OGWARA

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For Ikegwuonu Anthony

May his soul rest in peace.

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Peter M. Ogwara

Religion is the impotence of the human mind to deal with occurrences it cannot comprehend.

Karl Marx

People only see what they are prepared to see.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision.

Helen Keller

FRIDAY,

June 11th 2010

2:30pm

The day it all started had begun like any other day. It was Friday, and to us students at St. George's Catholic Secondary School, that meant laundry, a long afternoon of free time, and an equally long free night. There would be no prep time for studying today, and no labour. No sports were allowed too, but that was okay –there were many other things to do to pass the time if you had already done your laundry, like I had.

Being June, the school was currently in the third term of the school's academic session. I was in S.S.2, the fifth level out of six, and was quite popular among both the staff and the students –I was a leader in multiple student religious groups, had acted as the school's infirmarian – the health prefect – for almost two years before being officially appointed, had served as the assistant senior prefect for a term, and then had been made the Labour prefect of the current term. Not that this meant much to me really, but it was a boarding school, and hierarchy was everything.

That Friday, as usual, I'd started my free afternoon later than everyone else. Lunch had ended at 2:10pm, and I'd spent the next 20 minutes assisting the current infirmarian in administering drugs and tending to injuries according to the school nurse's instructions and my limited experience, so when the infirmary was finally clear of patients and we cleared up, the rest of the school had already changed out of the uniform into more casual wears and had mostly begun their various activities. On my way back to my dormitory, I walked past students fetching water from the well-like reservoir and taps and students already washing on the school's quite small open laundry ground, some still just organising buckets to use. I knew each face by name and class. St. George's had a student population numbering just over 200. We all know each other.

My dormitory was located on the lower floor of the second dormitory block. Unsurprisingly, I was one of sixteen selected out of my classmates to be dormitory prefects. Dorms were usually made up of persons from all the classes, except our seniors in S.S.3. Mine was one of the biggest in the school, and therefore had the highest population, which meant even more responsibility. But I wasn't thinking

of all these. I had been the dorm prefect for a while –all these were normal. My mind was, at this point, on the current novel I was reading and the fact that the meagre Friday lunch of semovita and *egusi* soup had done nothing to appease my appetite.

I got the first indication that something was going on when I reached the dorm. As I entered, I noticed a small group gathered between two of the bunks, spilling out into the dorm's centre walkway. I knew the space. It was the 'angle' of one of my dorm members: Shola, a tinyboy in J.S.1 who the entire school called *Sho-sho*. He currently held the reputation for being the dirtiest boy in the school and the J.S.1 boy most likely to get into any sort of trouble. I did a quick assessment of the situation –there was no indication of violence or bullying, or that Sho-sho was being persecuted for committing another crime. In fact, the group was made up of his fellow J.S.1 boys, including many from other dormitories and one other –a J.S.3 boy called Augustine who I was quite fond of for his interest and active participation in all things religious. They were engrossed in whatever was going on, and I slipped unnoticed into my angle, which I shared with my bunkmate Franklin, a student in S.S.1, and waited for them to disperse.

They didn't.

I changed into my casual wears and they were still there. Made myself a meal of biscuits and milk, and they hadn't budged. Finished my meal, washed the bowl and organised the inside of my locker, and they still hadn't moved, murmuring excitedly amongst themselves. I glanced at my watch. It was already some minutes past 3pm, and from experience, I knew most of the J.S.1 boys in the group wouldn't have even thought of organise buckets to use for their laundry, to talk less of actually doing it. And, as a prefect, making sure the students were clean was partly *my* responsibility. It was time to take action.

"Hey!" I called sharply. The entire group looked up and fell quiet, startled –they hadn't realised I was there. "Whatever is going on there, it's enough. All of you get out. Go and wash. Now!"

That was when I received the biggest shock so far. Instead of leaving, they all began to come towards my angle, led by Augustine, who had Sho-sho in tow. I stared at them in surprise. Had I misjudged the situation? Had Sho-sho done something again?

But the faces that crowded around my angle (they stayed outside –it was totally unpardonable to enter a senior’s angle without permission) were definitely not angry. They did all have the same look in their eyes, though. It took me a moment to recognise it –it was wonder, mixed with awe and excitement. What on earth was going on?

Augustine’s face shone the most. “Okpara,” he said. That was me, of course. “Sorry for disobeying you, but trust me, you want to hear this.”

3:15pm

“Something wonderful is happening,” Augustine said.

Something wonderful, huh? I tried not to let my face betray any emotion –being calm in the midst of extreme emotional displays was one of the qualities I believed a leader should have, and I did it extremely well. The boys in front of me would need a kind of verdict on whatever had got them quivering with excitement, and I knew I wouldn’t have to say a word to give it. My very expression would tell them all they needed to know. Being as high on the credibility chain as I was, I had to be extremely careful, or I could lead my very susceptible wards astray.

Looking back at that time now though, it’s all very funny. I was just a month to my sixteenth birthday, and I thought I was some kind of don. Or maybe ‘Bishop’ would be a more accurate description.

“Okay,” I said to them. “You’ve got me. What’s happening?”

“Augustine, tell him!” One of the J.S.1 boys said.

“Yes, tell him what you saw!” Another piqued in.

I watched them with interest, well-masked, of course. What could he have seen? Were the priests that oversaw the school planning something that he had managed to get wind of? Or had he stumbled upon one of the seniors, either in my class or S.S.1 doing something that he shouldn’t? As was usual with St. George’s, all the S.S.3 boys were not in school, having left immediately after they sat for their WASSCE. I decided to add a little discretion, just in case. I told Augustine to come in and sit on my bunkmate’s bed –Franklin had the lower bunk –and sat down beside him, hoping I wasn’t about to become complicit in something likely to result in trouble. And it was very easy to get into trouble in St. George’s.

Augustine nodded and sat down. The rest stayed outside the angle. He closed his eyes. His face had lost all the awe and wonder that had been in them a minute ago. Now it was squeezed in concentration. As he spoke, a string of expressions

flitted across it. I understood he was reliving whatever he had experienced and, though I was immediately full of questions, didn't interrupt.

"It was terrible, and wonderful", he began. Everyone else too was quiet and listening intently, although they had already heard it. "At first I was just looking at the picture. But then she was there, and she called my name. We were in a garden, I think. I can't really describe it. And she was beautiful –she was so beautiful. But she was sad."

I was flummoxed. This wasn't what I was expecting at all. Still, I didn't understand, not then.

He continued. "She told me she wanted to show me something, and told me to walk with her. And we walked for a long time, along a very long road. After a while, we got to another path in the road. In the distance, I could hear screams. People shouting and crying. I became scared. But she took me and led me into that other path. And everything changed."

I could literally see the fear on his face. I realised my breathing was getting shorter, and worked to steady it. I still didn't want to give an unconscious verdict on his story. But what was he saying?

"Everywhere became dark and hot. I saw a great pit, full of fire, and there were people inside, human beings! They were burning, but not being burned. Every single one of them was in agony, crying for help. I was terrified. I too, began crying. Then she spoke again, and told me where I was. This was Purgatory, and it was real. But because people did not believe, they kept on being wicked and sinful, and ending up there. She told me Hell was real too, and worse than this, because the people there had no hope at all and would suffer forever.

"But she told me Heaven was real too, and that if people only knew what awaited them there, they would not want to spend another minute on Earth. Then she took me by the hand and led me away. And suddenly we were at this huge gate. It was big and golden, and it was shining so much it almost hurt my eyes. And she took me and led me past it, and –and," he shook his head, and his expression became more intense. "This place was beautiful. Okpara, this place was beautiful!" I was a bit surprised when he called my name. I'd begun to think he was in a trance, or something. "She led me down these streets. Everything was

bright and white, and it was so peaceful and full of happiness. I didn't see anyone, but she led me to this other place, it was like a hall or something. There was the sweetest singing coming out of it and when we entered I saw a mass of people, all in intense white clothing. Up in front, there were angels. Different types of angels, and there were all singing. And in front of everyone there was a throne, surrounded by a light so bright I couldn't look at it. She led me there, then left me and joined those on the throne. I couldn't say or do anything, I just knelt down and shivered, I could feel the majesty and holiness and power, and I was crying again.

"Then she looked at me one last time, straight into my eyes." He finished. "She looked at me and said, I must tell everyone and let them all know the truth, that it was my duty. And then, I woke up."

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

I said nothing for a minute. I now understood what had got them so excited. Augustine had had a vision. Or he thought he had –I was still reserving judgement. They were just kids. Actually, we were all kids, but I knew how the Church handled cases like this, to some extent. Nothing was verified until verified. It could've just been a dream or a hallucination for all I knew. I have to admit though; I was a bit excited now. I just hid it well.

Finally, I spoke. "This is interesting," I said. "This happened to you? When did it happen?"

"This morning, after morning chapel but before classes." He said. I nodded, thinking. That alone was enough to be newsworthy, but then he added an unexpected twist. "But it didn't happen just to me," he said. "There are others, too."

3:32pm

A chill ran up my spine. "Others?" I asked. "What do you mean others?"

Augustine threw a glance up at the boys still gathered around my angle and turned back to smile at me, a little smug. "I wasn't the only one who has seen," he replied quietly. "Some others have had the vision too."

"Really?"

He nodded happily, and threw another glance at the crowd. I followed his gaze this time. He's glancing at Sho-sho.

Suddenly, something clicked. "Shola," I addressed the boy in the crowd. "You saw, too?"

Sho-sho nodded shyly.

So that was why they had been in his angle, and why Augustine had pulled him along when they came to mine. One of their class boys had seen a vision –of course they wanted to hear about it themselves.

The significance of this was not lost on me. If more than one person had seen, I could no longer call it a dream. But visions! I was a firm believer and knew such things were possible. But in my school? And during my time? Was I about to be a witness to something miraculous, something that could go down in the history of the church? My attention sharpened at once –this could be much more important than I thought.

"Come!" I called.

Sho-sho stepped forward shyly and entered my angle, stopping directly in the centre. I couldn't blame him. I was not only astronomically higher than him on the school's totem pole, I had also punished him several times based on his uncleanliness both in and out of the dormitory. In fact, even now his white shirt was much, much dirtier than all the others, with oil stains from the afternoon's lunch and several other days' worth. He looked generally unkempt too. The shirt was only partially tucked in, his hair was a mess, and I believe the word for how his face looked was 'grubby'.

I ignored all these. “You saw what Augustine saw?” I asked. The others outside watched with interest.

He nodded.

“Where you guys together?” I inquired.

He shook his head ‘no’.

“We did not exactly see the same thing,” Augustine piped in. “Tell him, Sho-sho!”

I raised an eyebrow and glanced from Sho-sho to Augustine and back again in surprise. “What you saw weren’t the same?”

Sho-sho shook his head again.

“You didn’t see the lady?” I inquired further.

Sho-sho spoke for the first time. “I did,” he said. He had a high pitched voice, higher than that typical of boys his age. He didn’t speak with much confidence, but I expected that. “But she didn’t take me anywhere,” he continued. “I was just looking at the picture, and then she started talking to me. I don’t know where we were, but I was with her and we were talking. Everywhere seemed red, but she was wearing this white cloth. No, not white. It was like cream.”

He finished and fell silent. They all turned their gaze to me, including Augustine sitting by my side. I didn’t say anything yet, just placed my elbow on my knees and my chin on my hands in a ‘thinking’ position. This was what I was afraid of –they wanted me to give a verdict, and I still wasn’t willing to give one. I needed to make sure I got all the details right first, and then I would think of what to do.

As I contemplated, something both Augustine and Sho-sho said suddenly registered.

“Hold on,” I looked up at both of them. “What picture were you looking at?” St George’s was a catholic school, so there were many religious images around, especially in our chapel.

Augustine replied. “It’s a picture of Mary,” he said. “Okpara, this picture is miraculous! You have no idea how many persons *I have seen* while looking at it.”

A picture which transports people into visions? “Where is this picture?” I asked.

“It’s with Igwe Stephen,” Augustine told me. “He owns it.”

Igwe. Another very religious person I was fond of. Unlike Augustine though, he had some problems keeping up academically. He was in Augustine’s class now, but they hadn’t gained admission into the school the same time –Igwe had repeated a class, which meant while his real classmates had gone on to S.S.1, he had remained in J.S.3. He was much more religious than Augustine, to the point where some thought he was quite fanatical. Of course, as would be expected, he didn’t care about what others thought or said.

I would need to see him.

I nodded and made a decision. For the first time that afternoon, I turned to Augustine and gave him a small smile. “Do you know where Igwe is?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

I nodded again and glanced down at watch. “Okay,” I said, standing. Augustine stood with me. “Have you guys washed?” I asked the boys. The sheepish look they gave themselves answered my question. “Alright, go and wash. Sho-sho, make sure you wash. No stories.”

They scattered excitedly. I turned to Augustine and put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll talk about this later, okay?”

He nodded and grinned. Then he too hurried away.

It was 4pm.

4:00pm

I picked my novel and headed towards the senior classroom block. I had wanted to talk to Igwe Stephen, but my thoughts were still swirling around what Augustine and Sho-sho had told me. Honestly, at this point, I wasn't 100% sure I believed them yet. In fact, as I thought about it more and more, the more incredible it seemed. If this had really happened, the effects were going to be massive. Unimaginable.

The class was empty, as I knew it would be. I dumped my book on my wooden desk, but instead of sitting, went to stand by the windows. St George's stood on one of the hills of ancient Ibadan, and the windows of the senior classroom block had a sweet view of that part of the city. It was mostly brown roofs and busy roads and sky, but it was peaceful nonetheless.

Visions! How? Why?

I mentally began to go over the apparitions and visions in the history of the Church. Almost immediately, the apparitions of Fatima came to mind. In 1917, three children in the Spanish village of Fatima had claimed to see an apparition of a beautiful lady while tending their flock in the countryside. It was one of the most popular apparitions of the Blessed Virgin, one whose similarities to the visions of Augustine and Sho-sho weren't lost on me. Especially the fact that multiple persons had seen it, and the 'lady' was involved.

I went to my seat, also wooden, and sat. If there was a vision being seen by various persons, there must be a special reason, or message to be passed –visions weren't things that happened at random.

Just then, I realised it might not be as random as I thought. Today was the first of two pretty important days in the church –the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and memorial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, June 11th and 12th every year. And not just that, the church had celebrated *Corpus Christi*, the exaltation of the Holy Eucharist –the actual body of Christ –only five days ago, on the Sunday of that very week. Coincidence or the workings of a divine hand?

And there was still the last alternative –the visions might be supernatural alright, just not from the *good*supernatural? What if it was a trick from the devil? But how could I tell? What if I dismissed the whole thing and it turned out to be an actual divine message?

I shook my head. No, it wouldn't matter. If it was a real message, it would come out into the light one way or the other, regardless of what I or anyone else did. It was too early to speculate and come to a conclusion. I knew how the church worked –thousands and thousands of hours were spent analysing each claim of a vision or apparition, or any miracle whatsoever before a verdict was given. If this got as far, it wouldn't be any different. It wasn't my place to decide. Whatever would be, would be.

6:15pm

I didn't talk to Igwe that day. I spent the rest of the afternoon in the class, reading my novel and working on some articles for the press club, until it was time to wash up and go for dinner. Dinner was beans porridge. I usually took mine with Garri *after* the school's official Friday night activity, together with my classmate and former bunk-mate, Kingsley, so we compiled ours into a bowl and stored it up in Kingsley's locker. The only other activity for the night was chapel and night prayers, which were usually shortest on Friday nights.

While we went about all these, I couldn't help but notice how normal everything was. Most of the school had not yet heard of the event, although I saw Sho-sho and some others huddling up.

I spent my free night doing various things; so many that I can no longer recall what they were. There were no more mentions of the visions by anyone, and one of my last thoughts before I went to sleep was that the whole event was probably already fading away like many others in the school.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

SATURDAY,

June 12th 2010

5:30am

Rising Bell.

The first sound of the morning.

I opened my eyes grudgingly as the dormitory lights came on. Outside, the heavy bell was still tolling, as it would for the next minute to ensure everyone woke up. Up and down the dormitory, as in the whole school, boys were jumping down from their bunks and grabbing buckets. We had 45 minutes to take our baths and prepare for the first daily activity of St. George's –the celebration of the Holy Mass. And lateness to activities, especially the Mass, was not tolerated at all. Soon, we are all trudging up to the Chapel.

The New Chapel, where we celebrate Mass, is located at the peak of St. George's hill. The school itself isn't very big. A single tarred road runs up from the gate at a low point of the school to the hilltop where it stops in a large expanse, bordered by three buildings –the New Chapel, the father's house where the priests live, and our multipurpose hall, which stands at the very peak and overlooks all the other buildings. Most of the remaining space in the school is taken up by our sports arenas. Two fields, one larger than the other, two basketball courts, a lawn tennis court, and a sandy volleyball court separating the two dormitory blocks. The other major buildings are interspersed between and around these –the senior and junior classroom blocks, the refectory and kitchen, and the small house where priests-in-training from the catholic major seminaries stay, to assist the priests in running the school. No two buildings are on the same level.

By the time we are in the chapel and prayers have begun, the day is already bright. Light pours in from the high windows, joining with the numerous bulbs to illuminate the room. The chapel is structured as a diamond, with the altar at one corner, and the only entrance to the building in the corner across from it. There are four columns of pews, two in the centre and two at the sides, all facing the altar. The entire thing is very symmetric.

The altar itself is simple. A huge crucifix hangs above it, affixed to the corner. There is only one pulpit, a wooden one from which the readings of the day are

taken. Beside the pulpit and facing the congregation are three chairs, meant for the priests officiating over the Mass. Behind these is one simple bench for Mass servers. All these sit at the right of the altar table, raised one stair above them. The only thing at its left is another simple bench, to accommodate more Mass servers if necessary.

I sat on the right centre column, at the very edge of the row second to the last – my regular seat. This means I sat directly in front of one of the current Senior Prefects, Michael ‘Miko’ Chimdindu, my classmate and very good friend. Along his pew, and that on the other side of the central aisle, were the rest of my classmates. My own pew was occupied by J.S. 3 students, including Samuel, who I was fonder of than any other junior student, directly beside me.

Morning prayers were concluded. The priests began to arrive. The officiating priest of the week, our bursar, Fr. Patrick walks in first and heads to the sacristy behind the altar. The other priests follow swiftly –the rector Fr. Francis, the vice-rector Fr. Simon, and our spiritual director Fr. Julius. I had all but forgotten about the business with the visions. But then the Mass begins, and Fr. Clement announces the Memorial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and it all rushes back to me. If the visions had anything to do with yesterday’s feast, then it might not be over yet. I glanced around the chapel, almost expecting something to happen suddenly, but the Mass ended uneventfully. Everything was normal. Perhaps it was really over.

Then Samuel turned to me. “Joshua,” he’s one of the very few who talk to me on a first name basis. “Did you hear about Igwe Stephen and the visions?”

I froze for a second, then frowned and turned to him. “Visions? Igwe saw visions?”

He shook his head. “No, but he was helping people see. He did it for some J.S1 boys yesterday, and some of my class boys.”

“Augustine told me something about that,” I replied. Then I pause again and peer intently at him. “Wait –did *you* see?”

“Me? No o... I didn’t do, *abeg*,” Samuel said. “Some of them were crying, others were really afraid –who wants to go through all that? With everything I’ve done?”

My frown deepened. Samuel was actually afraid of seeing something supernatural. And it seemed those seeing the visions were more than I thought. And Igwe was the only conduit? That was strange to say the least. Yes, the boy could be overwhelmingly saintly, but was that really how God worked? I still couldn't decide what I thought, so I decided something else. It was time I talked to someone else about this. And I knew just the one.

7:15am

I stood at the door and calmly gazed at the boys inside St. Patrick's dormitory, twirling my heavy, iron chain key holder around my finger as I always did. They saw me and hurried out, except for the boy whose duty I knew was to sweep and clean the room. I nodded at my classmate in his angle then moved to the next dormitory and repeated the same thing.

It was time for morning duty, and as the school's current labour prefect, this was mine –ensuring that everyone got out of their dorms and to their assigned places of work, and then making sure that the work was actually done. I got to the last dormitory on my block –St. Paul's, which was the on the other end of the block from mine, and on the upper floor, and waited until the dormitory quickly emptied out again. I glanced across the volleyball court to the other block and saw my partner, Benedict doing his job chasing the students out in his own unique way –Bene, though shorter and stockier than I was, was usually more vocal and full of angry energy. I nodded, satisfied, and walked into St. Paul's.

St. Paul has a very unique position among the dormitories. It stands at the very corner of the students' living environs. From it, the entirety of the other dormitory block can be seen, as well as the kitchen and part of the refectory. The school's reservoir, main water taps and small laundry space were almost directly in front of it. The school's old toilets werespread out bythe side, a little distance downhill, and the bathrooms behind. It was an almost perfect vantage point for watching the student populace, and because of this, was always the assigned dorm of the head Senior Prefect. Always, except for this term. The person I wanted to see had been a senior prefect, but no longer had a post and was currently free of responsibility, which was actually kind of enviable. He and I had served as assistant senior prefects just the previous term.

The thing about Theodore was, he was *cool*. One of the more spiritual persons in my class, he wasn't the goody-two-shoes, bible-toting, everyone-must-be-perfect type. He was always very laid back and relaxed, but at the same time, very strict. He commanded an extremely strong air of respectability from the entire school – juniors laughed with him but didn't dare cross him, the priests and other

members of staff respected his input and assigned him important, high responsibility tasks. Even we, his classmates, saw him as one of the more mature, wiser ones. With us, it was different though –we had grown with him through all the awkward moments from way back when. But there was nothing awkward about him now. He actually had a set of custom dumbbells he worked out with at least thrice a week.

I strolled towards his angle. He, of course, had no morning duty. None of my classmates did.

“Theo!” I greeted.

“Okus,” he responded, calling me by my nickname. “How’s it going?”

“Cool, *jare*.” I entered his angle and checked the bathrooms through his window to see if any boys were stealing a quick moment to take their baths. I saw no one. Unfortunately, that also meant those working there weren’t on site either. I sighed.

“How far –is there labour today?” He asked, changing out of his uniforms into casual clothing.

“Yes,” I replied. “But I saw Fr. Francis talking to Miko after Mass, there might be a free day afterwards.” On Saturdays, the students usually did more intense cleaning after breakfast, and then had a couple of hours to themselves to do anything but engage in sports before afternoon prayers, lunch and siesta. However on a free day, all those activities were waived. Students could participate in sports or whatever from whenever it started till the day ended by 6:15pm.

I plopped down on Theo’s bed. He glanced down at me in mild surprise. Not that I didn’t usually come to his angle, I just didn’t do during morning duty unless there was something important.

“What’s up?” He asked.

I scanned through the dorm to make sure no one was listening. The sweeper wasn’t in. I turned back to him. “Have you heard what happened yesterday, with Igwe Stephen and some others?”

“Oh,” he replied. “You mean the Visionaires?”

I frowned, surprised. It was the first time I heard them referred to by that term.

The Visionaires.

I nodded. Apparently, Theo had heard about it. I realised that I should have expected that –even without a prefectship position, he always had his finger on the pulse of things.

“Augustine came to me yesterday,” I said. “At first I didn’t even know what he was going on about. What do you think?”

Theo paused and leaned his tall, wiry frame on his locker. He fixed me with a shrewd, thoughtful look. “Honestly, I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t thought much of it. But strange things do happen, it wouldn’t be the first time, and no one can say how God works. But nothing is confirmed until it’s confirmed, and these are not things that should be trifled with. That’s my main issue –these children are going to start trying to take advantage of it. They’ll start playing, joking and lying about the whole thing. Igwe should not have done it, or at least continued without the priests’ knowledge. He should have met Fr. Julius immediately. Instead, they’ve gone around spreading stories, basking in fame. That’s never what visions, or apparitions, were about.” He shrugged. “Well, let’s see how it goes.”

“I was wondering if I should take it to Fr. Julius myself,” I mused.

“You don’t have to,” he replied. “Sooner or later, it’ll get to them.” He reached outside his window and grabbed the towel hanging there. “Me, I’m just going to play my games today. All day sports! *Oshey!*”

9:30am

It was labour time. That, of course, meant more work for me and my partner while the rest of our classmates lounged around. Not that we were complaining – that's just how the system worked. Everyone had his own responsibility to shoulder. Labour was my special responsibility, usually assisted by the senior prefects. There were gutters to wash, grasses to cut, halls to mop, grasses to cut, classrooms to clean thoroughly, and more grasses to cut. Immediately after breakfast, we had set about assigning the rest of the students a special task. Once that was done and Benedict confirmed there weren't any dirty area we were missing, we resumed patrol, as we had done during the period for morning duty.

As I walked about, calling out instructions and making sure no one was slacking, I kept thinking about the Visionaires. I wished I could be as blasé as Theo about the whole thing, but I couldn't. I was a firm believer in purpose, always had been, and I felt I had a duty to perform with the information I had been given. I'd never been one to sit and watch as things played out, not when I could have something to contribute to it. And with these visions, I was in a precarious situation. I knew that sooner or later, Igwe would come to me. We had had too much discussion on spiritual matters for him not to. And frankly, I couldn't put off talking to him about this any longer. I'd said I needed more information. As it was, there was only one source I hadn't tapped yet. Igwe himself.

I waited until the two hours allotted for labour was almost over, when most persons were already done with their tasks, and were just waiting for the bell to ring. I knew where Igwe was working, of course. I had assigned him to it. He was one of five cutting down the grass of the Fathers' orchard, which was directly in front of the Fathers' house.

I let my patrol take me there. They were done, as I knew they would be. The truth was that day's labour wasn't very serious. If it was, only two persons would have been assigned there. I stopped and inspected the orchard. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

At that point, the bell began to toll. There were sounds of celebration throughout the school's premises as boys left their places of labour and hurried to the

dormitories to drop their equipment and pick up their sporting gear. As I had predicted, Miko had announced a free day during breakfast. It would be sports till 6:15pm.

My work wasn't done –I still had to patrol once more to ensure all jobs were done to satisfaction, but I fell into step beside Igwe as he headed down the road.

"Going to dorm?" I asked him.

"No," he replied. "I need to get something in class, and then I might be heading to Chapel."

I nodded. It was exactly the kind of response I expected him to give. Not that he was a bookworm, but since he had been asked to repeat his current class, he had been spending more and more time in his books. And of course, he was still as spiritual as ever. The junior classroom block was only separated from the Fathers' Orchard by the lawn tennis court. Soon we were climbing the Y-shaped staircase in front of it to the J.S.3 class on the upper floor.

"So," I began, choosing my words carefully but speaking casually. "I heard about the visions."

"Hmm," he replied. "*That*. Please don't ask me how... I'm as shocked as everyone else."

He didn't look shocked, though. He didn't look any different from how he did when we discussed anything else, like having people see visions around you was something that happened everyday. None of Augustine's excitement was here. There was no awe, no smug look of superiority. As I studied his face, I realised it was the look of someone who had long accepted he would see such things in his life—someone with tremendous faith. Or maybe he was just hiding his thoughts very well.

"I can imagine," I said, musing. And I could. Persons who experienced these things never knew why they did, or how.

"It just shows how God works," he told me. "Those who thought they would see didn't see anything. The people He chooses are those who others think are trash, people like Sho-sho. Can you believe it? The boy who everyone calls the dirtiest

was the first to see. *The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*"

I almost smiled. It was typical Igwe—quoting bible verses. Then something he said registered. "So not everyone could see?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, and I don't know why either. But you know how these things are—it's not for everyone. Some even thought the boy was faking it at first. It was when others started seeing they began to believe. I don't blame them anyway. When it started, I was shocked too. I saw the boy crying and was trying to console him, so I showed him the picture, told him to look at it and imagine she was here with him and was speaking to him, and that he could tell her everything that was bothering him. I never believed it would work, to talk less of him actually seeing her. It was incredible."

Right. The miraculous picture everyone was talking about.

"So it was all because of the picture?" I ask. "Can I see it?"

"Sure," he replied. And he reached into the back pocket of his trousers and brought it out.

11:45am

I gazed at the simple piece of paper in his hand in surprise. The miraculous picture. The bringer of visions. That which had caused so much excitement among the students of the school.

It was just an ordinary portrayal of Mary, the mother of Christ.

In fact, I knew this particular image very well. We'd had the exact copy stuck in the corner of a picture frame in the house in which I'd grown up. I remembered how, sometimes, if I thought my mother was in some kind of danger, I would take it down and clutch it tight, because they shared part of a name. She was Rose. The portrait was that of Mary under the title *Rosa Mystica*. Mystical Rose.

It showed the head and torso of a statue of Mary in profile, covered in a cream veil with gold lining. The veil flowed down to a robe of the same colour which covered the shoulders completely, both ends meeting under the neck beneath a bright red rose. Her hands were clasped together in prayer, with a red rosary hanging from the right wrist.

"Our Lady Mystical Rose," I whispered.

Igwe nodded. "I've had it for a long time. It's just one of my sacramentals."

I took it from him and eyed it speculatively. "So, if I look into it, I might see a vision?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He replied. "You might or might not. But the truth is you don't need actually need the picture to see."

I looked up, surprised. "What do you mean?"

He leaned on the balustrade of the classroom balcony and glanced down. "You can use any sacred picture of Jesus or Mary," he said. "Any at all."

I hid my shock. I'd been assuming that he was the one making it happen, that it was through him the visions, whether divine or not, were getting to those seeing—the Visionaires, as Theo had called them. But if he didn't have to be with them, it seemed my suspicion about the day was right. The feast of the Sacred Heart of

Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary must be causing manifestations of some kind. I felt a tingle in my spine.

He looked back up at me. His countenance was still as calm as ever. He even looked bored. "All you need to do," he told me, "is look into it and try to imagine yourself there with him or her. Find a quiet place. Blank your mind. And concentrate. Really concentrate. Not everyone will see, and everyone has a different message. If there's a message for you, then you will get it. If not..."

We fell silent for a moment. The sounds of sports going on in the smaller football field and lawn tennis court drifted up to us, along with the noise of free students in the dormitory. I glanced at my watch –it was a quarter past noon already. I realised that Bene must be looking for me to go over the assigned works.

"There are still some who don't believe though," Igwe said at last. "But that's to be expected, right? Even till date, some dispute the apparitions at Fatima. They will make fun of it, but those who are chosen are chosen. May God open the eyes of the rest."

12:30pm

I left Igwe and went about my remaining duties quickly. Most of the students were playing on the fields and courts, but I wasn't in the mood for sports so I headed to the class to get my novel. I didn't have much else to do that day except read and rest. I'd decided to do both –sports could wait till evening.

The senior classroom block is a three storey building, with the bottom floor holding the physics and biology labs, and the top floor housing the school library. The three classrooms themselves, one for each senior class, were in the middle floor, one after the other. My own class, S.S.2, was in the centre of the three. S.S.3's class was currently abandoned, of course, since they weren't in school, and was in the control of my classmates, mainly because our juniors couldn't walk past our class without a good reason. Not without fear of punishment from any of us who happened to see them.

Due to the topography of the school, there were three ways to access the classrooms floor. A staircase, built into the block, ran up one end of the building from the bottom to each floor. However, this was only mostly used to get to the library from the classrooms. Someone approaching from the students' orchard, which was level with the floor, could get to the classrooms over a concrete walkway connecting the block to the orchard. This walkway was connected to a staircase that led from the lowland in front of the block, past it, and up to the expanse in front of the chapel. The third way to the classrooms was a paved slope down from that same expanse that passed behind the walkway, rising above it from the waist-high wall that separated them, and joining with it at the very end, where they connected with the classroom floor. The other side of the walkway had a railing which protected from falling the short distance to the slope at the bottom of its staircase.

I had just started up this staircase when Miko appeared at the top, coming down from the direction of the chapel. I was surprised –unlike me, Miko was one of those who was *always* in the mood for sports. Unless he had senior prefect duties, I couldn't imagine what had taken him to the top of the hill when he could

be down in the field kicking at a ball. He had a strange look on his face, and when he saw me, he broke into a wide smile.

“Okus!” He called.

“Miko,” I replied. “What’s up?” We met in the centre of the staircase, where it joined with the walkway. I was even more surprised at the smile on his face –it wasn’t Miko’s usual impish, mischievous grin. It was one that radiated real joy, marred only by the strange look that remained in his eyes. It seemed... contemplative. Which was quite strange in itself –Miko wasn’t the kind of person you found walking around deep in thought on a free day.

The thing was, Miko was our Senior Prefect, but he was also one of the worst rule-breakers in our class. Like any good rule-breaker, though, he was rarely caught, and was notorious among us for attempting highly risky ‘tasks’, earning him the nickname ‘Confidence’. His forearms were big, but the rest of him wasn’t. In fact, we were almost exactly the same height. The last time I had seen him look like this was way back in our J.S.2, three years ago, when we had been bunkmates and best of friends. The actual account would be too long to include here and would need a book of its own, but something had happened and he had had a somewhat ‘spiritual’ experience.

Suddenly, I knew.

“Miko, what happened?” I asked.

Miko merely shook his head. “Okus,” he said again, but added nothing else.

I raised an eyebrow at him. He blew out a single breath of laughter, caving in. He took my forearm and led me to the railing on the walkway, then let me go and leaned against it. I leaned too, waiting.

He hesitated for a moment, like he was thinking of exactly how to put what he wanted to say. Then he blew out another breath. “I think it’s good I met you,” he said. “I would have come to see you anyway, sooner or later.” He paused again, then turned to me and looked directly into my eyes. “Joshua, He spoke to me,” he said. “Jesus Christ spoke to me.”

12:40pm

My breathing was even. My face perfectly composed. It was as I feared –Miko had joined the Visionaires. He had seen a vision, too. And Miko had always come to me on spiritual matters, ever since our days in J.S.2—way before others. That was why he had said he would've come to me anyway.

It was Augustine and Sho-sho all over again. I was being called to duty once more, to do my job as a spiritual leader among the students and give a verdict on the happenings. Except this time, it was one of my own classmates –someone who had grown alongside me for 5 good teenage years. It wouldn't be as easy keeping my thoughts from Miko as it had been with the others so far.

Jesus Christ had spoken to him? Jesus Christ?

What was I supposed to make of that? Things had been serious enough when the visions were of Mary –there were reports of those around the world daily. But Jesus Himself? The Christ, the son of God? What in heaven and on earth was going on in my school?

"When did this happen?" I asked him quietly.

"Just now, in the chapel," he replied.

I nodded. That explained why he was up here. But I had to confirm something else. "It was Igwe, right?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, nodding. "Joshua, it's real. What just happened to me...! But, man, I really need prayers."

"What did you see? Where did He take you?"

"It... it wasn't like that," Miko replied. "I didn't go anywhere. I was where I was, sitting in the chapel, talking to Him." He shook his head. "It's so hard to describe."

Of course it would be. No such experiences were simple or straightforward.

"Tell me," I said. "Start from the beginning. You used a picture, right?"

“Not really,” he begins. “I talked to Igwe and he told me to just relax and think of heavenly things and all that, and to really concentrate and meditate. So I went to the chapel and sat in the front row, and began meditating. I don’t even know when it started. It was so strange.”

I could see that he was really shaken. A chill ran up my spine, to join with all the other chills I had had since this business began. But this was Miko. Miko was not easily spooked. If he was now, something really otherworldly had happened to him. And that wasn’t all. Miko hadn’t used a picture, but yet he had had a vision. Every time I thought I’d understood one aspect of this, it seemed something would happen to change it. First, Igwe tells me his presence was not needed, and now a picture isn’t either?

“I was sitting there in the front row, directly in front of the pulpit, meditating,” Miko continued. “I didn’t realise exactly when it started –didn’t even think about that until it was done, but Jesus began to talk to me! It’s hard to describe, but it seemed he was talking to me from three places at the same time. You know the picture on the pulpit? He spoke to me from there. And from the crucifix above the altar, too.”

I knew the picture he was referring to. It was a quite recent addition to the chapel, hung on the front of our simple wooden pulpit. It was a full image of Christ in a white robe, with his right hand raised to bless and his left touching his heart. From the point of contact two rays shone down, one red and the other blue, representing the blood and water that had gushed out of his side when he had been pierced on the cross by a roman centurion, and symbolising the cleansing and forgiveness of the sins of mankind. Underneath ran the words: ‘Jesus, I trust in you’. It was a common image in the Catholic Church –the image of Divine Mercy.

“But I could also see Him,” Miko went on, “not in the Chapel or in a picture, but on a golden throne with this intense bright light all around it.” He was really into the story now, gesticulating with his arms as he spoke. His eyes had taken on a faraway look. “I didn’t see where we were, only the throne, but there was power there. He told me *everything*, Joshua. All the bad things I had done, that I’m still doing. Even those I’d only *thought* of. He listed them out, and they were so much I almost cried. And he told me I must begin to make amends at once or something

terrible would happen. I need to meet everyone I've wronged deliberately and ask forgiveness, and then really change for good. He said I must stop all the rule-breaking and become prayerful again."

I listened in silence as he went on, pouring out everything he had been told in his vision, including specific people he had been cruel to, even from several years ago, and some particularly nasty bits of rule-breaking he had engaged in. Unlike Augustine and Sho-sho, his message was very personal. I felt slightly uncomfortable—I wasn't a priest and didn't plan on becoming one, and the things Miko was telling me bordered on confession. I didn't think I was qualified to hear them.

But I didn't interrupt him. I understood. They say confession is good for the soul, and this wasn't something he could ever share with the priests of the school. He needed someone to tell. He needed to unburden himself. He needed to share.

1:15pm

I left Miko and headed up to the chapel. I had very carefully offered no advice or verdict on his vision and the message he had received, just nodded along to his suggestions. He needed to pray? Sure, why not. He needed to make amends for the wrongs he had done to others? Not a bad idea either. He needed to be a better person and stop breaking rules blatantly? Might even help him become better at his duties as the senior prefect. But as he went down to the dormitories to begin to implement these and join in the free day sporting activities, I veered off my mission to get my novel from the classroom and went to the chapel instead. There, I sat on my usual seat two rows from the back.

My mind was buzzing. The intensity of the visions, it seemed, was increasing rapidly, and more and more credible persons were getting involved. I myself, in all honesty, had no idea what I believed at this point. Unless this was an elaborate prank spanning across the student hierarchy, I couldn't not believe the Visionaires had seen something. But why? And what was I supposed to do about the whole affair? Everything I had read and studied told me visions and apparitions didn't just happen – weren't just given – for the sake of 'seeing' alone. There was usually some bigger purpose to them. Also, I had never heard of a case of so many unconnected visions being seen by different persons at the same place and time. What possible purpose could they serve?

Perhaps if I had a vision myself, I would be told. There would be no harm in trying, would there?

Would there?

I looked up at the crucifix above the altar and began to meditate, concentrating hard on it and trying to block out everything else. It was a wooden crucifix, though the sculpture of Christ hanging on it had been recently painted white. Not white as in fair in complexion, but white as in the colour of snow, with glistening trails of bright red blood flowing from his palms, feet, and side. I could remember the afternoon those trails were added and we saw them for the first time – the entire school had stopped in shock at the chapel entrance. In our defense, the

blood did look real. Nonetheless, it had been quite funny hearing the gasps and seeing the fear from the juniors and seniors alike. It still was.

I shook my head. My thoughts were drifting. I needed to concentrate on the crucifix and image of Christ and think on my questions.

The problem was, unlike Miko and the rest, meditation wasn't the least bit new to me. I did it almost everyday, and it had never had anything to do with clearing my thoughts. On the contrary, during meditation, I *dwelled* on them. I would think on things happening to and around me and try to analyse them rationally and religiously. I would pray and ask for guidance, yes, but I never expected to actually see Jesus, Mary or the Holy Spirit coming down to speak to me. I couldn't do it now.

So I sat there in the chapel, trying to clear my thoughts and utterly failing for 15 minutes before I finally gave up on the attempt. If some divine power had chosen to show me something, I would have seen it already. Perhaps it just wasn't for me. Igwe had said it too – not everyone would see.

Still, I couldn't accept that my role in all this was merely to observe. This might have been a tad arrogant –there were over 200 students in the school, why should I be special? –but I didn't think of it that way. I believed firmly that the divine being called God had a reason for every event that occurred in every person's life, and in this particular event, I was in a unique position, being at the same time very high in the student hierarchy and very respected as knowledgeable in spiritual matters – a sort of spiritual leader. The encounter with Miko proved just how willing people were to open to me. All that wasn't for nothing, was it?

I got up and left, still contemplating deeply. I had no answers and it seemed none were forthcoming. It would be wiser to return to my usual activities and leave everything else for the divine. *Quéseráserá*. Whateverwill be, will be. Whatever had to happen, would happen.

I went to the classroom, got my novel from my desk, and returned to the dormitory. My plan was to read a few chapters, take a little nap, then get up and play some sports, so once I got there I lay down and relaxed. The novel was an old C.S. Lewis I had gotten out of the library earlier, and though the writing style was

far from modern, I was enjoying it very much. I had already read his entire Narnia series, and I really admired the way with which he told such interesting tales woven through with religious and moral meanings. I was an aspiring writer myself, though both my style and genre were very different from Lewis'. Still, I hoped they would have some real, positive impact someday.

Suddenly, it clicked.

My breath caught in my throat and I sat up sharply. My eyes were wide with excitement.

Of course! That was it! This was my purpose – to put into writing all that was happening now, and ensure the records saw the light of day. It was a task only I could accomplish. Only I had enough influence to get the accounts from those involved – people like Igwe and Miko – and the writing skills required. It didn't matter if the visions were real or fake, divine or not. I would write the account of everything I had seen and heard, and everything that would occur before it came to an end. If they turned out to be true, history would need an accurate record. If not, it would make a great story, with many lessons and topics up for debate.

I was ecstatic at my epiphany. Trembling with excitement, I quickly opened my locker and got out one of my fresh notebooks. I couldn't find a pen so I settled for a pencil, flipped to the first page and, in large stylish letters, wrote: 'Visionaires, a true tale of Religion and Mystery', and designed some flowers by the side.

I looked down at the work and beamed. I had begun.

I had flipped to the next page, ready to start the story when two of my dormitory boys suddenly entered, chatting excitedly. I caught a snippet of their conversation and jerked up from my bunk.

"Hey!" I called. They turned around at once, startled – they hadn't known I was in. Their eyes were shining. "What did you just say?" I demanded.

They glanced at themselves before replying. "It's Igwe Stephen," they said. "He's with some people, helping them see visions."

"Right now?" I asked.

They nodded fervently.

“Where are they?” I inquired.

They glanced at themselves again, and then replied hesitantly, “In the S.S.3 class. Some S.S.1 boys were with him.”

They were afraid I would get angry, but punishing those in the class was the farthest thing from my mind. I knew what this was –an opportunity to witness a 'vision-seeing' for myself. It seemed providential that this was coming just a few minutes after I'd had my epiphany. It was a call to action. My duty – to witness and record. I would not waste this chance.

I grabbed the notebook and pencil, and hurried out.

2:30 pm

At this time of the session, S.S.3 classroom is usually forlorn –scattered through with broken desks and chairs and various forms of litter. All desks with locks that actually worked had long been taken away by students in other classes, along with most chairs that could still stand. Because it was almost always deserted, it was one of my favourite places in the school.

That day, however, it was far from deserted. I arrived at the door, breathing slightly hard from hurrying all the way from the dorms. There were up to ten persons in the class, all juniors, except from Igwe Stephen and Amadi Vincent. Amadi was in S.S.1, and though we weren't close then, I knew him as one of the more responsible ones; someone who, unlike most teenagers, took life seriously enough. He wasn't a natural genius, but he studied regularly and very hard to be one of the top of his class. He was sitting near the center of the class, holding a picture of Mary I did not recognise. Igwe stood at his shoulder. A little distance from them, a junior boy sat on another chair, sweating and smiling, apparently just coming out of a vision himself. The others stood in small clusters around the two chairs.

They all looked up at me. I paused. The sight was somewhat expected, but surprising nonetheless.

Igwe beamed. "Okpara," he said. "It's good you are here! Come, join us."

I stepped in tentatively. I was nervous. What was I about to witness? The very air crackled with some strange energy. The eyes of everyone in the class shone with excitement and awe, except Igwe who somehow, was still as calm as ever, and Amadi who alone had not looked up when I arrived and who, I now saw, had his eyes tightly shut.

A thrill went through me as I realised what this meant. Amadi was in the middle of a vision.

Igwe had turned back to him. "Where are you now?" He asked. "What do you see?"

"I... I'm still climbing the stairs," Amadi said, squeezing his eyes tighter. His voice was strained, like someone in distress or someone thinking extremely hard. I could see veins popping in his temples. A light sheen of sweat covered his forehead and the back of his neck. His breathing was shallow.

Another thrill went through me. This was not an act. The boy in front of me was definitely seeing something the rest of us weren't.

I quickly produced my pencil and flipped the Visionaires notebook a couple of pages past the cover I had designed I needed to get this down at once – I could worry about the parts that had already happened later. I caught Igwe's eyes and gestured to the book in my hand using the pencil. He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Can I write?" I asked aloud, but in a hushed voice.

"Sure," he replied with a smile. He didn't bother reducing his voice. "Why not?"

I began to scribble furiously at once.

"Wait—" Amadi said suddenly. "I'm... I think I'm near the top. Wow... there's a big golden gate here! I can't even see the top. Everyone coming up is going to stand somewhere in front of it. I can see St. Joshua... he's separating the people! Some are going through the gate. Others are going somewhere else – I can't see it."

"What about you? Have you reached them?" Igwe prodded.

"I'm not with them," Amadi replied. "I'm in front of the gate. Oh – it's opening! I'm going in."

A low murmur of excitement went through the juniors standing around. My pencil flew across the page, trying to get every word and reaction down. I wasn't thinking about what he was saying. I was just writing.

"Go on," Igwe told him. "Tell me –how is it? What do you see?"

The light sheen of sweat on Amadi's forehead had turned into droplets, but his expression was no longer furrowed in concentration alone, but also in awe.

"It's beautiful!" He cried. "Everywhere is so white. The ground is gold. There are people about... everyone is in white. And everyone looks so happy! It's so

peaceful.” He paused. His frown tightened. “Wait– I can hear singing. It’s coming from down the street.”

I was suddenly reminded of Augustine’s face when he had told me his vision of Heaven. Amadi’s face was full of the same intense wonder and awe.

“Follow the sound,” Igwe urged. “Go on, find them!”

“I’m going. There’s a big door... it’s closed... I’m opening it... Oh!” He exclaimed.

“What? What is it?” Igwe asked, leaning forward. I was surprised to realise my heart was beating rather rapidly as I wrote.

“It’s a very large hall, and it’s full of people! There are chairs at the front... I think it’s Jesus and his apostles. The singing is coming from a choir in front –I don’t know the song, but their voices are so beautiful.”

“Look around. Do you see anyone you know?”

“No... Yes! Yes! That’s my father! Oh, God... he’s coming. He’s coming to me!”

Amadi was positively trembling now. His face was covered in sweat, the collar of his shirt drenched. I was breathing fast now also, but I focused on my writing. This was incredible.

“He’s talking to me,” Amadi added.

“What is he saying?” Igwe asked.

“That I should be a good boy that he loves me very much,” he replied in a choked voice. I thought I saw a tear seep out of the corner of his closed eyelids.

“He’s gone now,” he continued. “But look! See who’s leading the choir. It’s Egbuonu Anthony!”

This time, I froze completely. My pencil stopped moving. I gaped at Amadi, eyes wide. Up until five months ago, Egbuonu; *a* member of my class, and a very dear friend of mine.

Egbuonu was dead.

2:42pm

I stared at Amadi in shock, heart racing. What was he saying? Egbuonu was there? He could see him?

When the news had come that Egbuonu had passed away, I'd cried almost non-stop for a week. It was the most painful event that had ever happened to me at that time –the passing away of one of my best friends. And it had been even more saddening than it would have been if it had been another person who had passed, for one fact. Egbuonu was *good*. Of all my classmates, he alone had remained largely uncorrupted by the rebellious nature of most teenagers against rules and regulations. He had been kind, generous, patient and forgiving, never once responding to the many, many mocking his behaviour attracted from the entire school. Until he'd gone, we hadn't appreciated him. *I* hadn't appreciated him, though we had been close. I missed him terribly.

And now, Amadi was saying he could see him in Heaven. Despite myself, I realised I was extremely relieved. If he was there, then he wasn't in the *other* place.

"He's coming towards me," Amadi said now. His eyes were still closed. I leaned forward eagerly, no longer writing, and moved into a crouch beside the chair. I wanted to hear what Egbuonu would tell him.

"How does he look?" Igwe prompted. "What is he wearing?"

"He looks so happy," Amadi reported. "He's in a suit and tie. He's here now –he's asking about the school and the students, and his classmates."

I held my breath.

Igwe's eyes flickered up to mine for a second. "Tell him they are fine," he said. "Tell him Okpara is here."

Amadi nodded. Or rather, he jerkily moved his head up and down. "Yes, yes. He says to tell you that he is okay and he is happy, and you should not feel sad for him anymore. He says you guys should keep going, and you should try very hard... because Heaven is real, but Hell is too. He loves you all, and you should never stop praying – especially you, Okpara."

I let out something between a laugh, a gasp and a sob, and nodded. I glanced up and glanced up and realised Igwe and the juniors had shifted their gazes to me. I had almost forgotten they were there.

Igwe turned back to Amadi. "What's happening now?"

"He's going back to the choir," Amadi replied. "I'm leaving the hall – I'm going back – I can see the gate again – I'm going through..."

He trailed off and fell silent. The only sounds in the room were the juniors' excited breaths.

"Amadi?" Igwe called, softly but strongly. "Amadi?"

Amadi opened his eyes and looked around, disoriented. His breathing was ragged and laboured. His face was covered in sweat.

"It's okay," Igwe told him, putting his hands on his shoulder. "It's okay. You're back."

Slowly, Amadi focused on him, and then glanced up at the rest of us."

"How was it?" Igwe asked.

Amadi turned back to him. "It's real. It's actually *real*," he said. Shock, incredulity and disbelief were etched on his face. "I've – I've never experienced anything like this before. I didn't think it was really true!" He stood his head and wiped off the sweat from his forehead. "Please, no one should talk to me just right now. I need to bathe, sleep, and clear my head."

As he stood up to leave, I picked up my book and pencil, and caught Igwe's eyes. I nodded. I had seen enough.

6:15pm

The bell began to toll, reverberating through the school grounds and jarring me from my thoughts. I looked down at the book in front of me. After the experience in the classroom, I had returned to my dormitory and got to work on putting everything down at once. It was now three hours later, and I hadn't even finished writing Augustine's account and how I got to know of the visions yet – the very first part of the story. Still, I felt I was making good progress. If I continued like this, I would be caught up in no time. And I still had no idea how and when all this would end.

I dropped my pencil, stood up and stretched, and joined the rest of the school going down for their evening baths. Free day was over – it was back to usual activities now. For a Saturday evening, this meant a dinner of rice and stew, followed by evening prayers and singing practice, and a free night until lights out by 10:30pm.

Throughout dinner and chapel, the Visionaires were all I could think of. My mind swirled around Augustine's and Sho-sho's stories, Miko's message, and what I had witnessed with Amadi. Yet I still didn't say anything to anyone, not even Samuel sitting beside me in the chapel. I had no idea where this was going, and something told me it would be smarter to just observe and record. I knew myself – I was a slow and deep thinker. It would take me a while to really analyse everything I'd seen and heard so far. I still didn't know why this was happening or what it was supposed to achieve. If the visions were really divinely inspired, they would definitely have a purpose, right? Right?

Immediately evening prayers ended, I and the rest of my classmates left the chapel, except the choir and chapel prefects who stayed behind to conduct the singing practice for the rest of the school. Unless a new song was being taught, our presence was not needed. After almost five full years in the school, there wasn't a song we didn't know. I quickly went about preparing my Sunday wear – they needed pressing – and hurried back to the dormitory to continue my writing before the next event would occur. I was still there when the singing practice

ended 30 minutes later. Within a minute, the dorms were full of chattering students.

Samuel came in, strolled into my angle and plopped down on my bed. Of course he could do this – he had special privileges when it came to everything I owned.

“Joshua, I’m hungry,” he whined, taking a cursory glance at what I was doing.

I took my heavy, chain-laden keys and threw them to him. He opened my provisions locker at once and pulled out a box of cereal, a tin of powdered milk and a bowl. I noticed one of the other boys in my dormitory, a J.S.2 student, looking at him with a mix of jealousy and longing, but I knew they were all used to my treatment of Samuel. Anyway, if they needed something, all they had to do was ask. My sack of *garri* was legendary –I had no problem sharing.

Samuel quickly prepared the cereal, grabbed two spoons and came to sit beside me. When he offered me one, I shook my head.

“I’m not eating,” I said.

“Why?” He asked indignantly. He always felt I didn’t eat enough and was way too generous with my stuff.

I chuckled. He could act like an over-caring wife sometimes. “I’m not hungry now,” I told him. His eyes narrowed in scepticism –there was no way the school’s dinner could have filled me. “I might eat later,” I added for his benefit.

“Let me take your place!” The boy that had been looking at us called pleadingly. “Okpara, please!”

I chuckled again. “Ask *him*,” I said, gesturing to Samuel and returning to my work. I really wanted to be done with the page I was working on before retiring.

Samuel leaned in for a closer look. “What are you writing, anyway?” He asked. The other boy had come into the angle. Samuel’s permission was as good as mine.

“A story,” I replied simply. I flipped to the cover I’d designed and showed him.

He took one look and snorted in amusement. “You’re writing about this thing with Igwe, aren’t you?”

I shrugged, smiling slightly. “I think it should be written.”

“Hmm – hmm!” The other boy gestured wildly, his mouth full of cereal. I glanced at him. He swallowed hastily. “Is it the visions people say they are seeing?” He tried again. “Are they true?”

It was the first time and only time anyone asked me that outright. I shrugged and didn’t respond.

At that point, my bunkmate, Franklin, came into the angle, laughing at something someone outside had said. Franklin was slight, only just beginning to grow out of the effeminate frame he’d had in his younger days. He was very jovial, one of the friendliest in S.S.1.

Samuel was speaking on the other boy’s question. “People are seeing something,” he told him. “I don’t know where it’s coming from, but they are really seeing something.”

Franklin paused in unbuttoning his uniform and glanced down at us. “Are you talking about the Visionaires?” He asked. Then he snorted loudly in obvious mirth. “Please! Don’t tell me you guys believe that nonsense?”

“It’s true!” Samuel fired up in defence. “Even your own dorm-boy–”

“Who? Sho-sho?” Franklin interrupted. Apparently he had heard all about it. “The boy is fooling all of you *joor*! He’s lying! Where is he, anyway? I wanted to hear it from him.”

The other boy piped up. “I saw him and some of his class boys going to the hall after chapel.”

“To see more visions, no doubt,” Franklin said, laughing in derisive amusement. “Everyone is now seeing visions. Let me see too!”

I closed my book quietly. There was no way I would be able to concentrate with their loud argument.

“Just because you haven’t seen doesn’t mean it’s not real,” Samuel retorted. “People of little faith.”

“*Please*! I don’t want to see. Instead of doing something reasonable with their time, people are everywhere trying to see visions. Okpara, you’ll see it tomorrow –the way J.S.1 and 2 boys will be dirty because they didn’t wash and iron...”

But something else he'd said had caught my attention. I perked up. "Hold on," I interrupted. "What do you mean, *people are everywhere*?"

"Oh, you didn't know?" Franklin responded, laughing.

The other boy piped up again. "Yes!" He said eagerly. "If you go to classes now, you'll see them. Some are in the hall, others in chapel too. I think there are even some at the cemetery. They've been doing it since afternoon, and they all claim to see. Even those who didn't see before and those who have already seen are having new visions."

I raised an eyebrow. St. George's had a small cemetery where the founding fathers were buried. Understandably, juniors were usually frightened of being there at night. But what was this? It was past 9pm and juniors were at the cemetery? Everyone was seeing? It didn't sound right. What was going on now? Some of them must obviously be lying. Visions, like everything divine, were not forced.

The three were still arguing animatedly. It was quite interesting watching them – a boy in J.S.2, one in J.S.3 and another in S.S.1 arguing without thought of class in an S.S.2 boy's angle. But I took my book and pencil, dropped them into my locker and stood. I needed to think, and I couldn't do it here.

9:00pm

The air outside the dormitory was cool and humid, usual for nights in June. Students milled around enjoying their free time, though less noisily than they did the afternoon's – St George's frowned on any kinds of noise after evening prayers. Still, it seemed to me the students were more excited than usual. Or maybe I only felt that way because of the lively argument I'd just walked away from.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and began walking. I didn't know exactly where I wanted to go, so I just let my legs lead the way. I found myself mounting the stairs to the upper floor of my dormitory block. Of course – there was only one place I went when I needed to clear my head of overly serious thoughts and relax a little. Stanislaus' dorm.

Stanislaus Odoburu was my closest friend. As these things went, we were nothing alike on the surface – he was fat, fair and big while I was lean, dark and lanky, and the only thing onlookers could see we had in common was a deep love for literary works. The truth was I had the ability to touch and bring out his serious side, and he was able to knock me down a notch whenever I got too serious. Together, however, we could be incredibly goofy and deceptively mischievous. In times like that, the special kind of secret craziness we shared would show its true form. We were a perfectly balanced pair.

I found him in his angle, chatting and laughing with one of his junior friends. Immediately I arrived, he drew me into their meaningless banter. I enjoyed myself immensely, and made no mention of the Visionaires – it was nice to let it off my mind for a bit. After a while though, he brought it up himself. He knew about the happenings, but he only joked about it, not caring if it was real or not. He compared the whole affair to movies we had watched and books we had read and came up with possible scenarios of what could happen afterwards. They were all very dramatic, of course.

I left him after a few minutes, feeling considerably lighter but still deeply contemplative, and continued my walk. Another of my close friends stayed in the next dormitory, the one directly above mine. I went to his window and peered in.

There were a few persons serving punishment near his angle while he supervised. This was normal – Leslie was the Director of Programs, which meant it was mostly his duty to deter late-coming to activities. There was a lot of activity and noise in his dorm, which was precisely the way he liked it.

As I watched, he screamed at one of the boys being punished: “You think you’re now a ‘visionary’ and can come late as you please, right?”

Many of those in the room snickered in response.

I withdrew my head from the window and continued the walk along the dormitory block. So the news *had* spread, and what I had heard during Samuel’s and Franklin’s argument was true. Every student now knew about the visions, and those who were ‘seeing’ were rampant.

I shook my head. This didn’t sound right. This didn’t sound right at all.

The whole thing reminded me of one of the books Stanislaus and I had read from the library, one of those he had mentioned earlier. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, a highly dramatized play about the infamous Salem witch hunts. In the book, the whole mess had begun when some children’s’ tomfoolery, led by a slightly older girl, had been misunderstood, and the entire town became convinced the girl in question had put a spell on the other children and she was carted off as a witch. Then, after being coaxed, threatened and even manipulated, she begins to randomly mention other witches in the town to satisfy her own bitterness towards some of the townspeople. Each person called was immediately taken to a trial where she would be asked to confess or die. To make matters worse, other girls involved also begin to mention names and the whole thing snowballed. Soon, the town was in terror –so many had been accused and imprisoned, and there was no way to know for sure who was or was not a witch if there were any at all, leading to hundreds of innocents being hanged.

Was that what was happening here? Had the story of one vision snowballed until everyone thought they were having divine revelations? What if Franklin was right and Sho-sho had just been lying in the first place? Was there anyway to know for certain?

In every dormitory I walked past, there was at least one discussion going on about the Visionaires. Every gathering was talking about it. It was being discussed in all

tones – hopeful, believing, sceptical, cynical. Some thought it was downright humorous. Others were true believers.

I recalled what Igwe had said to me just that afternoon, about how some would never believe and would make fun of the visions. Was that what was happening?

The whole thing *had* been made a tomfoolery of, I realised. And from what I understood, divine revelations never stated off that way. What kind of message could be successfully delivered in such a state as this? Would anyone listen? Still, it shouldn't be my place to say what could or could not be divinely inspired. I couldn't presume to know or understand the workings of God – that would just be arrogant. And hadn't I myself seen one of the Visionaires during his trance just that afternoon?

I let my mind go back a few hours, to the classroom with Amadi, hearing him describe all he was seeing and hearing, sweating profusely as Igwe guided him through. It had seemed very real, so much that just thinking of it gave me goosebumps.

In retrospect, however, some things had been quite off about the scenario. Igwe, for one. He had stopped guiding Amadi to welcome me into the class when I'd arrived. Should someone in such an intensely spiritual engagement be able to do that? In fact, should Amadi himself have been able to talk to us during the trance, or even hear us? I thought of all he'd described of heaven –streets of gold, persons in white, throne room and singing choir. Honestly, it seemed much too *human*. I wouldn't expect a human being to be able to describe the spiritual realm so simply or even at all –it should be beyond our imagination. But do I know? I thought about Egbuonu Anthony. It seemed really strange that he should be the only one in a black suit in a place where everyone wore white. Suddenly I remembered the picture we had used at the Mass celebrated in his honour. In it, he had been in a suit and tie. Was that what Amadi had remembered? As for the other parts, it wouldn't be too hard to put him in front of a choir – Egbuonu had been the best singer in the entire school and our choir prefect.

And there was the message, the one he had passed to me and my classmates through Amadi. Analysing it now, it was pretty generic. In fact, *all* the messages were generic. Augustine's message of hell, Sho-sho's vision, even Miko's of personal repentance. Also, Augustine's description of Heaven had been really

different from Amadi's. He'd mentioned a long road; Amadi had mentioned a staircase, both versions featured in innumerable movies and cartoons they would have seen. And Miko's description of Christ's throne had been different from them both.

I suddenly realised with a slight shock that I was in front of Miko's dormitory, on the upper floor of the second dormitory block. He was inside with a group of our classmates who were mocking and laughing the Visionaires. He was smiling and nodding along with them, but his eyes were reserved and he was saying nothing. He didn't notice me at the door.

I withdrew and began heading back to my dormitory, wondering what the next day would bring. With the scope the event had gained, it was impossible for the priests not to have heard of it by now. Knowing them, however, they might not do or say anything about it just yet, but wait a little while to see where it went. But something had to be done. As it was, I was beginning to have the vestiges of a headache just thinking about it.

I arrived at the dorm. Samuel and the rest were gone. The room was silent.

I fished for my keys under my pillow where I knew Samuel would have dropped them and opened my locker. The Visionaires book was there, but I didn't touch it. Instead, I pulled out the bowl and the box of cereal. It was time I took Samuel's advice – anything else could wait till morning. And I was certain that one way or another, everything would end on Sunday. I just didn't know how.

Sunday,

June 13th 2010

8:00am

Sunday morning. I'd woken with a hot twinge of anticipation in my stomach.

Sundays at St. George's were different from other days for a multitude reasons. For one, there was absolutely no labour allowed, and this alone was enough to change the outlook for the day. Secondly, it was the only day we didn't have Mass first thing in the morning, which meant we got to sleep in for a few more minutes. There would be the usual morning prayers almost like a Saturday, but immediately afterwards, we would go down for morning duty, a period longer on Sundays than on any other day. Breakfast on Sundays was bread, tea and either tomato stew or fried eggs, and the loaves were always more succulent than those of the other two days we had bread. Eggs were a Sundays-only delicacy. Then would we go for Holy Mass, after breakfast by 8am.

The main difference though, was the uniform. On Sundays, everyone looked immaculate in white long-sleeved button-down shirts and matching trousers, along with black corporate shoes. There were a few loafers, but nothing more daring than that. And of course, there were those who weren't immaculate at all, but when we were all together, the bulk of sparkling-clean students covered them up. It was quite a sight seeing us all trooping to the chapel looking like saints.

The twinge of anticipation did not lessen as we went about our activities. If anything, it increased steadily. By the time we were seated in the chapel for Mass, it had reached a searing peak.

Surprisingly though, and quite unusual for St. George's, talk of the Visionaires had been at the barest minimum all through the morning. The school seemed to have lost most of the excitement of the previous night. That which remained was the usual post-free-day feeling. There were no general punishments and no impending tests or examinations. What was there not to be excited about?

The priests and altar servers of the day began to emerge from the sacristy behind the altar in a procession while we in the congregation stood and sang. The Mass had begun. I tried to take my mind off the Visionaires and concentrate on the service, but I couldn't. I was puzzled. Last night, I'd have bet anything that the

happenings would become a thing of legend at the school – something that would be talked about for centuries to come. Now, I was no longer sure. No one seemed to want to acknowledge it any more. Not even the Visionaires themselves. Was it just me? Was I being foolishly superstitious to think about it so much? Did the rest of the school know something I didn't? Or was it much too early in the day to speculate?

It was much too early.

It was the eleventh Sunday in ordinary time, according to the Church's liturgical calendar. The chief celebrant of the Mass – the priest in charge – was our rector, Fr. Francis. I always enjoyed Fr. Francis' homilies. They were highly intellectual and always educative.

After the reading of the gospel, he stepped away from the pulpit and began to deliver his homily in his usual way, walking freely from one end of the altar to the other, making eye contact with the students in the congregation, and connecting the readings and psalms of the day with intricate lessons and teaching of the Church. He preached very seriously and made very few jokes, but that too was normal. He could deliver a humorous homily whenever he wanted to but it was usually one or the other, depending on his mood and the intended lesson. The humorous ones weren't frequent, and it was very rarely a blend.

Which was why, when he suddenly broke into a wide smile after about half an hour of preaching, I knew immediately that something was up. His homily, however, continued seamlessly, without the slightest pause or hesitation.

"You need to understand," he said in his strong, carrying baritone. He didn't use a microphone. "That not everything that happens around you, not everything that happens to you is a sign or signal from God. Not every dream you have is a message... or a vision."

I froze in my seat. He knew. Of course he knew – I'd expected him to have heard about it. What I hadn't expected was a statement about it, not so soon, and definitely not during a Sunday homily. The other priests sitting at their places on the altar had identical grins.

"The human mind is an incredibly powerful thing," he continued still smiling. "It can make up almost anything if you tell it to. You sit here and tell someone to

imagine something, and to concentrate on it, and it *will*. You can close your eyes and see or hear anything you tell it to *imagine* –it is *not* a vision from God. Such things are usually easier to perform on young, active minds like yours, and when there is a visual image to trigger it, like a holy picture. Many have been deceived by these and, uh, I'll advice you not to fall victim."

And with that, he ended the sermon and returned to his seat, looking like he was trying very hard not to dissolve into laughter. The other priests had similar looks. They were obviously in agreement.

I stared in surprise. He was dismissing it! He was dismissing the entire thing as mere imagination and laughing about it! Just like that! The students in the congregation had caught his mood and were also grinning, murmuring and laughing under their breaths. The mandatory one-minute of silence after the homily was broken with soft snorts and giggling. There were even some loud chuckles. Beside me, Samuel did not laugh, but he had a look of resignation and acceptance. I glanced at the other faces in the chapel. They were all highly amused.

I was shocked. My mind was buzzing. Weren't these the very same people who, just last night, had been true believers, and now they were accepting Fr. Francis' explanation without wholeheartedly and without reservation? These teenagers who I knew rebelled against even the most sensible rules the priests set up? No – it didn't feel right. Was this how the case of the Visionaires was going to end?

Yes, I totally agreed with Fr. Francis about the human brain. I knew he was right. Frankly, everything had become quite ridiculous, and without a solid message or purpose to go on, there was not much argument for the divine. Yet I'd expected more than this, perhaps a little more investigation. A lot of people had claimed to see visions –wasn't that a little too much for the whole imagination-it's-all-in-your-head argument?

Worse still, he had made Igwe out like some criminal fraudster. But I'd talked to the boy twice. He had really believed, even more than any of the others. I wondered how he would be feeling now –most like betrayed and angry, and definitely very embarrassed. I would need to see him, I decided as the Mass resumed. Ensure he was alright.

In any case, one thing was certain now – this was the end of the Visionaires.

11:30am

I came down from the hall just as the bell rang, signalling the end of the one-hour study time had after Mass every Sunday. I hadn't participated – I'd been in the hall, presiding over a meeting of one of the spirituality-oriented societies I ran. Now I strode down the road towards the junior classroom block, keeping my eyes on the flock of students emerging from the classes and heading to the dorms. He wasn't with them. I knew he wouldn't be. I got to the building, climbed the Y-shaped staircase, and went up to the J.S.3 classroom.

Igwe was on the balcony, leaning in the concrete balustrade at the exact same spot we'd stood and discussed just 24 hours ago. When he saw me coming, he sighed sadly and looked away. Igwe Stephen had gone through the entire event calm beyond comprehension, had endured almost four years of ridicules without flinching. Now, all that was gone. He looked utterly devastated. Totally and completely defeated.

This was not the Igwe Stephen I knew.

I leaned on the balustrade beside him and looked out at the dormitories, but didn't utter a word. We remained like that for several seconds, in absolute silence.

Finally, Igwe spoke.

"How could I have been so stupid?" He said.

I looked up at him. He was shaking his head from side to side, but he didn't turn to look at me.

"It never occurred to me –not once! – that I was telling them to *imagine*," he continued, his voice dripping with harsh contempt. "I didn't think about what I was saying, didn't even question anything. I'm a fool."

So, he had accepted Fr. Francis' words too, and now he was blaming himself for everything. The last soldier, the general of the Visionaires himself, had fallen. The king had been taken. Checkmate. It *was* the end.

I gave him a small reassuring smile. "Don't be too hard on yourself," I told him. "It wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" He replied. "If I'd had just a tiny bit of sense, I'd have taken the first case to the priests immediately and everything would have ended there. No, I had to act like I was Fr. Mbaka, going round giving visions."

Fr. Mbaka was a priest in the eastern part of Nigeria who was famous for his miracles. I laughed once, and then patted his shoulder lightly.

"We learn from everything," I said. "And everything happens for a reason, even if we don't know it at the time. Don't throw everything away just yet."

He sighed again, but his expression cleared up a little. We stood in silence for another while. A cool, refreshing breeze blew the trees, ruffling their leaves. It was very peaceful.

This time, it was I who broke the silence.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"What can I do?" He shrugged. "I'll go down and people will laugh at me, mock me and call me names. More of the usual, really. At least, if it counts for anything, I know I thought I was doing what was right." His expression cleared up some more. "What has happened has happened."

I nodded, squeezed his shoulder and gave him a smile, and then left him to recover himself as best he could. 'More of the usual,' he had said, but I knew he would never be the same, not after this. It had been in his voice.

It wasn't until much later did I realise what had bothered me about the priests' verdict. I had read a lot of books and watched a lot of movies, and from what I understood, it should take a very strong and skilled hypnotist to induce the state I had witnessed Amadi in. If Augustine's and Sho-sho's stories were true, and if Miko and some others had indeed entered that same state, then we should be thinking not just of an ordinary hypnotist, but one with incredible talent and training. And Igwe Stephen was just 14 years old. If he could do this at that age *without* even thinking about it...

I shuddered. That was some terrifying potential. Either that or there had really been something supernatural at play and we just hadn't seen it.

And now, we might never know.

I got to my dormitory and opened my locker, and my eyes fell on the notebook and pencil with which I had been recording the happenings. I picked the book up and flipped it open. The cover page I'd designed jumped out at me, hand-drawn flowers trailing one side and the word 'Visionaires' written boldly in a large, cursive font. I shook my head. Everyone was letting it go, but I determined there and then that I wouldn't.

I took one last long look at the cover and then dropped the book back into the locker. I would get back to it someday. It might take me months, even years, but I would write the story of the Visionaires. I would finish the work I had started, and no matter the verdict that had been given already, no matter how long it took, I would tell the story to the world.

This is the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Marie Ogwara was born in Lagos, Nigeria, but has long since visited almost every other part of the country. He currently lives in Port Harcourt, where he spends his time seeking the next story to tell.

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When something strange begins to happen amongst the students of a secondary school in Nigeria, answers must be found.

This is a true account of events, events which the narrator witnessed and was a part of, and which have never been resolved till date. Names have been changed, but the tale is true, and told as he remembers it.



VISIONAIRES

A True Tale of Religion and Mystery