

Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

THE EIGHAN SERIES

1. KIDNAPPED

Kyle woke up at 6am to discover the absence of his mom: apparently, she had to go to work earlier than usual because of some presentation. His half-sister, Jill was a sycophant: she only pretended to care about him when mummy was around. In mummy's absence, he basically did everything by himself.

Unfortunately for him, this 'presentation' had kept mummy away, and he was left with the onerous task of preparing for school all by himself! Yikes! At least Jill showed him where his toothbrush was, after toying with him till he welled up in tears. "It's under the chair, no it's in the oven, or did I leave it in the toilet?" That witch! Kyle also got to use Mummy's left-over milk for his cereal, but for which he would have had to go to the grocery store across the road all by himself to buy. Oh! he hated Jill so much. She had managed to manipulate mummy into believing that he was one to exaggerate stuff, so mummy wouldn't even believe it if he told on Jill. Plus the way she gave him all the attention in the world when mummy was around, it was just implausible in mummy's view that Jill would mistreat him in her absence.

It was time for school. "I'm ready Jill". Kyle screamed. "And so what?" Jill retorted. "If you won't go to school, come and sleep!" Kyle was so heartbroken upon the realization that he was forsaken to go to school by himself. This was going to be a first time for him. He cried so hard until the tears would no longer flow, then took his bag with the gallantry of the six-year old kid that he was, and left for school amidst sobs. On he walked along the dusty footpath in the burgeoning neighbourhood, intermittently sobbing and sniffing and feeling abandoned and unloved in this cruel cruel world; with sleek exotic buildings, some uncompleted, greeting him from left to right. Even though the school was less than 500 meters from his home, he had never walked to school alone and it felt weird. Little did he know that it was about to get weirder. More than half way through the journey, a tall scraggy-looking man with thick lips and

long dreadlocks emerged from a junction. He was clad in that kind of singlet that looked like fishing net with a certain plant boldly designed on it, and had on a pair of baggy shorts which exposed his underwear. "Cute boy, why are you crying?" He asked in a calming voice. *'At least someone in the world sympathized with me'*, Kyle's little mind thought. He therefore did not hesitate to relay his troubles to the stranger, who comforted him and got him a big fat lollipop from the nearest candy shop, before walking him the rest of the way to school. At the school gate they met Reverend Wright. He was the school's spiritual director; very fond of kids, very calm and well, very spiritual. "Is this your son?" He asked in his usual gentle tone, with a hint of suspicion of foul play due to the stranger's appearance. "No sir, I'm just dropping him off", the scraggy man (his nickname was 'Alito') replied. "I'll take him from here", Rev. Wright uttered protectively. So, Alito waved goodbye and left Kyle with the reverend, who gave Kyle more candy and watched the Rastafarian till he was out of sight.

It was around 2:30 pm when Kyle's mom, Mrs. Caroline Eigan, passed by the school from work to pick him up. But his class teacher hadn't seen him in school that day. Mrs. Eigan figured he was not comfortable going to school without her and decided to stay at home, so she called Jill to confirm her theory. To her utter bewilderment he wasn't at home either! Apparently, he was supposed to be in school because 'Jill herself brought him to school in the morning', a lie which would soon unravel. With panic, frenzy and uncontrollable apprehension, Mrs. Eigan kept demanding her six-year-old son, even threatening to sue the school in her rage. Fortunately, a spark of hope came to her from the Matron in the form of a tiny piece of information: she had seen Kyle with a scraggy-looking man, who she could tell was from the neighbourhood, whilst driving to the school in the morning. She, as well as the school's security man Listowell (Listo for short) was prepared to go with Mrs. Eigan to look for this 'scoundrel' who was suspected to have kidnapped Kyle, probably for ransom. In the school's 7-year history, two kids had been kidnapped for ransom with one never being retrieved since the ransom wasn't paid in time. So, they knew they had to act fast. They scoured through the neighbourhood, asking around for this scraggy-looking, thick-lipped 'rastafarian' who they were sure had kidnapped a sweet innocent little boy – Kyle. The frantic search finally paid off

when they were directed to an unpainted 'ghetto' overlooking a lotto kiosk in a surrounding which was in dire need of a clean-up exercise. Alito emerged from the 'ghetto' just as the search party - it consisted of Mrs. Eigan, the matron and Listo - arrived. Mrs. Eigan, emboldened by the pain of losing a son, rushed to Alito fiercely demanding her son. A confused Alito considered running, but knew he's been without blemish for a while now. Yet, before he could understand what was going on, he had taken a few slaps from each of the women. It took Listo's intervention to calm the situation and ask reasonably, where the poor woman's son had been taken. Alito's vehement denial of knowledge of the little boy's whereabouts was met with joint skepticism. "I saw the boy walking alone to school whilst crying, so I walked him to school. I even bought him toffee. I swear I'm not a bad man! I won't hurt your son." Alito defended himself. "You are a liar, it was my daughter who sent my son to school this morning", Mrs. Jill retorted. Alito repeated his protest even more vehemently, constantly swearing that he wasn't a bad man. As the altercation ensued, Mrs. Eigan had a call and pleaded for silence as she put the call on speaker. "Is this Mrs. Eigan?" the caller asked. "Yes", came her reply. "We have your son, bring GH¢ 100,000 cash to SNNIT Flat block C by 9pm else you won't see him again! No police, come alone!" She barely had time to ask about his well-being when the line went dead. Placing the call on loud speaker however, proved to be her saving grace to some extent; for the voice at the other end sounded familiar to Alito and after pondering over it for a while, he kind of figured out who it was. "I think I know the voice but I'm not 100% sure". Alito revealed. "Why don't you go ahead to the police station while I follow this lead?" He suggested to Mrs. Eigan who was in deep sobs at this point. They all tried hard to console her until she calmed eventually. Then in pairs, the women headed for the police station in Mrs. Eigan's Ford Explorer, whilst the men, in the matron's Corolla, headed for Salunko, a few kilometres off the SNNIT Flats.

Salunko was more or less the slums of an otherwise beautiful Sakumono town; the 'Klottey' of Osu. There was a big gutter that physically and economically separated the slum from the town of Sakumono. It was in this Salunko slum that Alito grew up with Yared, Abass, Olu and some other 'area' boys, and they practically hustled together in attempt to secure better lives, engaging in a myriad of unsavory activities which earned them bad reputations in the neighbourhood and beyond: armed robbery, fraud, kidnapping, just to name a

few. Alito always disapproved of their actions, constantly pleading with them not to do what they did. But of course, majority always carried the vote, and he had no choice than to follow their actions because of the food brought the table most of the time. It was one of such escapades seven years ago that called a halt to the nefarious deeds; for Alito at least. The memories came flooding back as he dozed off in the rush-hour traffic on the way to his old neighbourhood...

It was in the very early hours of a cold Wednesday morning. The group had met in an uncompleted building to go over the plan for the heist of block C apartment 1 of the SNNIT Flats. The errand boy of that house – Elias – had done a great job with a decipherable drawing of the plan of the apartment. Having shared the roles – Abass and Olu to do the raid whilst Alito scanned the area for imminent danger – they moved surreptitiously into the compound, all clad in black to adjust to the night. The two then broke into the building whilst Alito, feeling sorry for the innocents who were about to be robbed and hoping they co-operated so that no one got hurt, hid behind the hedges to be inconspicuous. About seven minutes later, what Alito saw both scared and confused him at the same time; his friend Olu sprang out of the building as though escaping for his dear life. But before Alito could approach him to find out what was going on, ‘pfew’ came a gunshot from the building, right into Olu’s back. It was most likely from a silencer since it wasn’t so loud. Alito froze on the spot; now his fear was of being found and shot too. Had they been led into a trap by Elias the errand boy? What will happen to Abass? Heck what will happen to him if he was apprehended too? He decided to run away but saw movement at the doorway. Two men came out, first Elias, then a middle-aged man who seemed like the owner of the house. The middle-aged man was not so tall, had a slightly protruded belly with thick arms, and an almost square head. *They would notice my presence if I ran now*, Alito thought. So he stayed quietly and watched as Elias dragged Olu’s body inside, by the instruction of the middle-aged man. After the body was dragged in, the middle-aged man looked around to make sure no one was in sight. Then as if on cue, he looked straight at the hedges where Alito was, and kept his gaze there *No! Had he been seen?!* *Maybe they had been apprised of a third culprit*, Alito pondered as his heart kept thumping louder than a military band. The middle-aged man - only his silhouette was visible at this point - took a step towards the hedges, then another... then, to Alito’s huge relief, Elias the errand boy came back to lodge

a complaint, which sent the middle-aged man back into the house. “Phew”, sighed a relieved Alito who waited a few moments before exiting the vicinity, straight home to pack his bags to leave Salunko, intending to return no more, until this day when his suspicion of hearing his old friend Abass’ voice was sending him back.

Meanwhile, Jill was lying comfortably on the couch, legs crossed, watching a telenovela with, an empty bowl of ice-cream on the table. Being a JHS graduate awaiting her results, this had been her routine for some time now. Then a call came. It was her step mother, Caroline Eigan. *Had the little brat been found?* Jill thought. A part of her really did want him to be found. Even though she hated him to bits because she felt it was because of him she wasn’t getting all the attention she deserved, she also felt bad for not taking him to school that morning, and then lying about it later. Mrs. Eigan went on a 15-minute tirade over the phone, of how wicked Jill was and how she only pretended to care about Kyle when she was around, interspersing her tirade with “what have I done to deserve this” and “Haven’t I treated you as my daughter even though you’re not?”. Jill listened without uttering a word, for there was no falsehood in what her step-mother was saying; and yet, she felt no remorse. *Why had her dad divorced her beautiful mom for this one? Why was she no longer allowed to see her mom? Why had her dad travelled for so long and left her in the hands of this stranger, and her little ‘devil’? Good riddance by the way.* In many ways her impersonality was a passive-aggressive reaction to her own ‘unappealing’ life.

The duo of Alito and Listo got to Salunko at sunset, and went straight to Abass’ house. Several of the buildings were more dilapidated than before, but not much had changed even after seven years. They met Yared, Abass’s younger brother, who was delighted to see Alito, his former role-model. For Alito had been more of an elder brother to him than Abass all those years ago. He explained his brother’s infrequent visits with lots of cash for him and for their mom who also lived in the area, and expressed fears that Abass was still into illegal dealings. “So where can we find him?” Alito finally asked the pressing question. “Why? Has he done something wrong again?” Came the reply. Naturally, Yared was still protective of his elder brother even though the latter had gone rogue. Alito explained about the kidnapped child and the threatening voice over the phone and thankfully, that garnered some sympathy from Yared, who then divulged Abass’ sporadic mention, of some operation at the SNNIT

flat. "My guess is he lives there now", Yared concluded. Just as Alito got up to leave, Yared beckoned him to wait. He went into the inner room and returned with a Colt series taser. "You might need this", he said as he handed it to Alito. "Your brother gave it to you right?" Alito asked. "Apparently for self-protection", Yared scoffed, "he doesn't realize that he is the real danger to us". Alito thanked his old friend profusely and promised to use it wisely as he left with the security man for the SNNIT flats, dreading the encounter they were likely to have. They then called Mrs. Eigan, apprised her of latest developments, and asked her to bring back-up. She was already on her way to the SNNIT flats, having scrambled to withdraw the money before the bank's closing.

When Kyle woke up, he found himself in a very strange dark basement. The only light that flickered through was from two tiny rectangular holes at the top corner of the basement. He felt weak from long hours of sleep and was terrified, because he had no idea where he was. He couldn't even find the voice to scream as he groaned "Hello" several times, with no response. After several minutes, the door to the basement opened briskly. A man entered and moved leisurely down the stairs, as though counting the thuds of his own footsteps. Kyle immediately raised his head and started speaking to the approaching silhouette. "Hello, where am I? Please I want to go home, I want to see my mom". The response was rather solemn and soothing. "You will go home soon dear boy; mummy will come for you soon". There was a smirk to the tone which Kyle didn't catch of course. "Are you hungry?" The voice asked. "Yes please." "I brought you pizza. Anything for my cash calf". The voice teased as Kyle was handed a slice. "What does that mean?" "Nothing! Just eat". So Kyle took the slice, raised it to his mouth then paused, as if remembering something. "Reverend, is that you?" The man slowly drew his face closer and lowered his voice to a sinister tone... "EAT!"

'Ding-Dong!' rang the doorbell to the dreaded Apartment 1 of block C. It was Listo, the security man of Kyle's school, present ostensibly to negotiate the deal to get Kyle back. "Mrs. Eigan sent me to pick her son", he said boldly when the voice in the room asked about who was at the door. "We don't know what you're talking about", came another voice from the room. It was very similar to the one on the phone. Listo figured that they were playing hardball for security reason. So he prodded, "Madam is at a meeting. She didn't want to cancel it

because it might raise alarm, that's why she sent me." He paused for effect, then concluded, "I have the money". It took the men inside a while to respond, they were probably pondering over what they'd heard. Elias finally came out, together with a remarkably tall man with thick, dark beard, who was very unfriendly looking. "Where is the money?" "Where is the boy?" "You will get the boy after we see the money." Listo started to protest but saw a gun in the unfriendly man's holster, and thought better of it. He sighed, "it's in the boot", he pointed at the car parked close by. "Open it" they ordered. Listo opened the driver's side and pulled a lever which gave a click to indicate that the boot was open. The gateman approached the boot with aplomb. Upon opening it, he was thoroughly tased by Alito who was in the car boot all along. The unfriendly man got confused when the gateman fell to a heap. He started to remove his gun but received a hefty blow from Listo, who took advantage of the temporary daze to snatch the unfriendly man's gun. "Don't move!" He commanded while pointing the gun at him.

Alito jumped out of the boot and immediately doubled back upon seeing the unfriendly man. His beard was long but his hair was surprisingly kempt, and his white long-sleeved shirt folded at the wrist, was tucked into a well ironed black trouser and shoe, giving him a formal look. There was no doubting who it was, but still it felt like Alito had seen a ghost, maybe because of the formal look, and the fact that his old friend had gained more flesh and looked more muscular and well taken care of. They stared at each other for several seconds until Alito finally murmured in disbelief "Abass". "You coward", replied Abass. "You are seven years late." "I'm sorry I left you here but... they shot Olu, and you know I had no weapon." "So you left me to die?" "I... I'm sorry..." Listo rolled his eyes before he cut in, "erm, sorry to interrupt your reunion but we have an innocent six-year old boy to rescue." Abass looked at Alito again in disgust, but said nothing. "Please, where is he?" Alito asked. No response. "Is it the same man who kidnapped you and shot Olu?" Silence. "I know you are mad at me but please let's not take it out on an innocent kid". Still no response. Then Listo came in, "Sir, please the police are on their way, if you help us find the boy you can still save yourself." "I will help you, but not this traitor!" Abass replied pointing his chin acrimoniously at Alito. Then gave a huge sigh before unravelling the mystery. "It was all a setup from the start. He already knew about us – what we did. So he sent his errand boy to come and bring us as he needed rogues to join his gang." Their attention shifted to Elias who was lying

on the floor; he had started to stir. Abass quickly tased him once again into oblivion. "Please continue". "On that day when this traitor left us to our fate, he offered us a huge paycheck to join his gang. Olu declined so he was ordered to get out... then as he was running away, he shot him. Yes! he did the shooting himself." They all cringed. "So under compulsion, I accepted. But this guy is a whole other type of devil"! "Who is he?" Lito asked the burning question. "And where can we find him?" followed Alito. Abass took another huge sigh before responding. He looked worried.

"They call him 'Reverend'. He poses as a pastor to the public, but he is a very dangerous man." The mention of 'reverend' kicked into motion several gears in Alito's head. Come to think of it, the reverend who he delivered Kyle to at the school, had the same stature as the silhouette he saw that faithful night: not so tall, slightly protruded belly, thick arms and an almost square head. "Wait! What's your reverend's name?" Alito asked Lito. "Reverend Wright? Nah, it can't be him. He's been our spiritual director for almost ten years." "Is that him?" Alito asked Abass. "I don't know his name", Abass confessed. "Square-like head, thick arms, slightly protruded belly--" "Yes yes, that's him. You've met him?" "I delivered the boy into his arms at the school." "A traitor and an idiot, tough." Alito made to respond to Abass's affront but Lito drew their attention to a device tucked beneath the fascia board of the building. "Guys, look", he said, pointing at the round device. It was a carefully hidden camera. "Has this always been there?" Asked Lito. "I have no idea." Abass responded. "He's probably watching us right now. We need to find him as soon as possible! Where could he be?" Alito probed with a sense of urgency. Thankfully, Abass had surreptitiously followed 'Reverend' to one of his covert hideouts; a self-contained house about twenty kilometers from the SNNIT Flats. At that exact moment, they heard sirens blazing from the distance, and vacated the premises as hurriedly as they could in the corolla, not without giving Elias a final tase on the ground.

Elias finally regained consciousness and woke-up, only to see himself surrounded by the cavalry, along with a beautiful 30 something year old lady who was obviously the little boy's mom. He calmly denied knowledge of all questions thrown at him and was prepared to receive physical abuse from the calvary when Mrs Eigan received a call redirecting her to another building where her son could possibly be.

Meanwhile, the reverend had seen the altercation in front of his house and had come to the conclusion that Abass had sold him out. "Well loyalty can't be bought, I guess", he muttered. He knew it was only a matter of time before they found him and the boy, and contemplated fleeing with the boy. But the apprehension of his loyal errand boy meant that he had to do something to at least set him free, and live to fight another day. He was a calculating man, diabolical but very patient in executing his plans. Like a viper stalking its prey, he waits for the opportune time to strike. He quickly devised a plan to bring this whole mess to an end; at least for the time being.

Alito, Abass and the security man could not believe what they saw when they arrived at the house that was supposed to be holding the reverend and the boy. It was blazing with fire! They knew they had to enter the raging fire to search for the boy in case the maniac was savage enough to leave him in there. "My job here is done." Abass blurted out. "I don't want to be here when the police arrive." Alito moved to convince him to help but Listo held him back. "Let him go." So Abass took off as a free man, oblivious of the fact that his dead body would be found three days later in a drain near Salunko...

The duo searched frantically in the blazing fire for several minutes, amidst profuse sweating and frequent scalding by the fire. But the boy was nowhere to be found. The police came to join in the search, fire service came to diminish the fire, but still, there was no sign of the little boy. Mrs. Eigan, who had to be physically restrained to prevent her from joining the search party in the fire, wailed uncontrollably as the search proved futile by the hour. Then, just when she could take it no more, she heard her phone ring. Apparently, it had been ringing for some time now but she couldn't have heard it over the pandemonium. She barely found the voice to mumble "hello" but the voice at the other end instantly brought her some confused excitement. It was Kyle, calling to inform his mom that he was home, safe and sound.