AN AFRO-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO ME, GRACE PLEGNON

Me Next to Dad in Port Bouët, 2007

Me in NYC, 2013—next to Mom

My name is Grace Plegnon. I am the oldest child of Evariste Seguy Plegnon and Catherine Amon Yavo. I have led a very exciting life so far—thanks to my Dad, Evariste Seguy Plegnon, and his friend, Tom Neuhaus. Now I am a Freshman at Jefferson College in Watertown, New York, and I feel so lucky to live in a country where I can easily get a college education. But I'm still an Ivoirian at heart.

This book is about a friendship that changed my life and the lives of my sister Ines Elvira Plegnon and my brother, Thomas William Plegnon. If you've guessed it, yes, my brother is named after Tom Neuhaus. That's how close my father and Tom are.

The period of time described in this book extends from 2004 when they first met until 2008, when my Dad left his family and country and flew to New York, where he worked very hard to bring my Mom, my brothers, and me from Côte d'Ivoire. We arrived in New York in October, 2012. At that point, I was 12 years old.

I remember Dad bringing Tom to our house in 2004—after they got back from their trip to Daloa. It was really exciting. Here we were, living in a very modest part of Abidjan, Port Bouët, across from the ocean. Our house was made of concrete and our neighborhood was built on sand. We all got our water from a common well, and like any West African village, the homes were built around a common area where Moms could hang their laundry and chat with each other while children from all the houses engaged in all sorts of adventures. We all picked fruit from trees planted in the common area; for example, there was a banana tree right outside our house. Imagine not having to go to the supermarket for your snack but just reaching out and pulling!

Port Bouët is a mile or two from the airport, where thousands of white people land and take off every year. Most of the white people are missionaries or cocoa buyers, and they generally follow two tracks: either other whites meet them at the airport, and they are whisked away to European hotels or people from their missions deep in the countryside drive them directly to their destination. The likelihood of a white person entering our village of Port Bouët was very, very small.

So, when Tom and Evariste walked into our compound in August, 2004, it was like an explosion. The event of the year or maybe even the decade! My father and I were instant celebrities! A white man walks into Port Bouët! Will wonders ever cease?

I was 7 at the time and, though young, I was culturally aware and "knew" how to feel about this miracle. Like others in my society, I felt that white people were perfect, angels in fact, and I felt so privileged to know one. Of course, now, as a young adult I don't feel that way at all. A white skin means nothing in New York City or at Jefferson College.

My first year in the U.S. was my 10th grade year in high school. I don't really know how it happened, but I stopped being shy, I made friends, and I started to be open-minded and talkative. I even became vice president of my class! I think the reason for this was my background in Port Bouët, which like most West African villages, encouraged children to play together and to devise social strategies for getting along.

I also stopped hanging around with other French speakers and by 11th grade, I was ready for any challenge. So, within a year, I was doing an internship with State Senator Liz Krueger, whose office was on 96th street. And by the end of high school I graduated with a grade-point average of 93.5. I felt proud, as did my Dad. And all this success has made me an optimist!

I sometimes miss my country, Côte d'Ivoire. I miss the social aspects: visiting my neighbors and telling them about my day or gossiping or sharing food. I also miss the tropics and the African social mores, which are so different from what I experience now.

Eventually, I do want to re-integrate myself into Africa, but I feel like it's too soon to even speculate about the future. For now, I'm appreciating America and Americans. But I will go back in some capacity.

I have a dream of starting a school for poor children in Port Bouët; I want to pay back for all my good fortune. I want my Dad to feel that all his sacrifices are appreciated by his children. I want the people of Port Bouët to regain lost hope, to know that great things are possible, especially with a good education. So, staying in America is very important right now, because I must educate myself and become a person capable of really helping others.

I do miss my friends from Port Bouët. They don't have WIFI in the village. They have to take a taxi into the city of Abidjan, which is about 10 miles away and then they have to pay for a Cyber (pronounced see-bear) to send messages. I so miss my best friend Denise, who was my BFF from early childhood.

Our neighborhood in Port Bouët was separated from the ocean by a very busy road. We children would cross that road with our parents. My Dad would take us across the road to eat all sorts of food that we couldn't get in our neighborhood.

When we came to the U.S. in October, 2012, we left my grandmother, Dad's Mom, behind. So when I said goodbye, I never saw her again before she died; I imagine our leaving really broke her heart.

Tom gave her a freezer back in 2005, and I helped her make the beverages which we would hawk in our community. My grand-ma said, "Even if they don't want to buy the water or the bissap, make them! Tell them how healthy the water is and how they'll live a long life after drinking it!" So, thanks to her, I learned to be an effective salesperson. I miss her terribly.

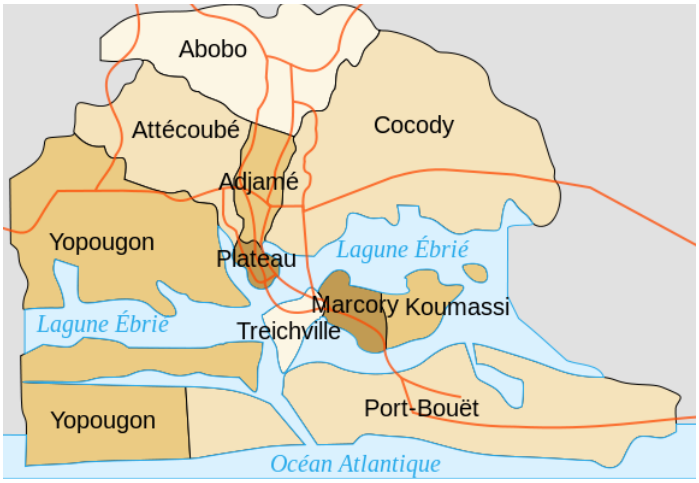
Now I'm a Freshman at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, New York. I'm majoring in Biology and I want to be a nurse.

I only talk about my country when people ask me where I'm from then I go into more details. People usually don't know where Côte d'Ivoire is and to be honest I'm not surprised because who cares about a small poor country when they are citizens of a powerful country and living the best life anyone could dream of?

INTRODUCTION TO PORT BOUET, MY HOME TOWN, AND TO ABIDJAN

I was born in a hospital in Port Bouët and lived there until we moved in October, 2012. The main feature of the town is the airport, which is quite important to the economy and the history of Côte d'Ivoire. Both airport and town were established in 1930.

In the 1960s, when President Houphouet-Boigny (HB) began his program to build the Ivoirian economy, focusing on agricultural development, Port Bouët and the airport grew rapidly. From 1960 to 1970 Côte d'Ivoire tripled its production of cacao. HB gave extremely favorable tax write-offs to the French (the colonial power that "owned" our country until HB established independence in 1960). The growth of exports and the influx of investment capital resulted in the "Ivoirian Miracle" and Abidjan came to be known as the "Paris of West Africa." To enable this development, HB allowed the influx of people from the North (called Dioula) and from Burkina Faso (called Burkinabe). Port Bouët became an important community of Dioula and Burkinabe and for this reason there are many mosques along the main road.



Port Bouët is separated from the rest of the Abidjan metropolitan area by a large lagoon, which is filled with brackish water and which is home to fish that are grilled and served à l'Abidjanaise in numerous restaurants—grilled, topped with shredded onions and tomatoes and served with attiéké (fermented shredded cassava) and soutrou (blazingly hot pepper sauce).

The second bridge that links Treichville with Plateau is called Pont Charles de Gaulle, named after the general and president who presided over the reconstruction of France after WWII and the re-unification of the Francea-frique, especially in conjunction with President Houphouët-Boigny. This friendship between the two presidents set the stage for "the Ivoirian Miracle", that lasted until the mid-80s, when cocoa and coffee prices plummeted, thereby ruining the miracle and setting the stage for the civil war that started in 2002.

Plateau is the New York City section. When you cross the de Gaulle bridge, the skyline really does look New Yorkish. The French embassy is located directly in the middle of this, representing the importance of French culture, language to the past, present, and future of Côte d'Ivoire.

As you drive along the east side of the Plateau, right up against the water and as you look a little off to the right, you see one of HB's treasures: the Hotel Ivoire. An attractive casino appears just a hundred feet above the water and just to the right is the tall, statuesque hotel, a prideful demonstration of what the Ivoirians were able to achieve under the presidency of Le Vieux or "the old guy", said in a respectful way.

Cocody is the section of Abidjan where the wealthiest live. This is also where most embassies are located as well as the prestigious university, Université de Cocody or more recently dubbed, Université Felix Houphouët-Boigny.

INTRODUCTION TO COTE D'IVOIRE, MY COUNTRY

If you are interested in African history, then you know the date 1884 and its significance. This is the year when German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck lured European leaders to meet in Berlin, Germany in order to formulate rules for how to divide up Africa among the European powers. The lure of course was the fabulous resources that would spell the enrichment of countless Europeans and the death and impoverishment of countless Africans. The minerals, coincidentally, would provide useful for both world wars. For example, rubber used in the tires of vehicles and in their engines, came from the DRC and Côte d'Ivoire. Uranium used in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki came from the DRC.

The decade that followed the Berlin Conference is known as The Scramble for Africa. Before that decade, there was no Côte d'Ivoire. Instead, there were many villages and a few kingdoms, none following the borders drawn by the European powers. Before this critical juncture, my country was a protectorate of France. After the conference, it became a French colony and supplied France with minerals, ivory, free or cheap labor, cacao, and so much more.

Today, Côte d'Ivoire (CI) is the number one producer of cacao—somewhere between 38 and 42% of the world's harvest. CI is also number 4 in coffee production and is also a significant producer of pineapples and palm oil. The colonial years involved the influx of many Christian and Muslim missionaries and a scramble for souls that has divided my country into two faiths: 1, Christian—Roman Catholic and Protestant and 2), Muslim). But as HB once said, "we may be half Christian and half Muslim but we are 100% African." By this, he meant that Ivoirians still retain many of their ancient beliefs as well.

HB was president of CI from 1960 to 1993 and during that time, he made my country what it is today: a place where people usually get along, do business together, and consider themselves Ivoirian first and Christian, Muslim, Bété, Bsoulé second. A phrase that has governed Ivoirians, "Ensemble, trouvons la paix" (Together we find peace) is similar to Abraham Lincoln's warning, "A house divided cannot stand."

Besides religion, CI is also divided into different cultural groups. My family is Bété and my father's uncle lived in the village of Depa, where Tom has done so much work. HB's family is Baoulé. While there are many ethnicities in the North, Southerners lump them together as Dioula. One also sees Dozos in the South; these are Northerners who wear leather, amulets called gris-gris that protect them from bullets, and who believe in talking to animal spirits while they hunt them.

Multinational corporations have had a big impact on my country. For example, Barry-Callebaut, one of the world's biggest chocolate companies, has plants in Abidjan. Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland (called Simca in CI) purchase a lot of the cacao in my country; Cargill and ADM sell many of their beans to Blommer, which grinds over 45% of imported cacao into chocolate liquor, used to make bittersweet and semisweet chocolate . One can say this without using qualifiers: when you purchase Hershey, Mars, or Nestle chocolates in the supermarket, you are purchasing beans grown in my country.

Many of the small businesses in CI are Lebanese-owned. In fact, there are over 40,000 Lebanese living in Abidjan alone. Much of the cacao business is controlled by the Lebanese. During the Lebanese civil war in the 1960s, the Shi'ites of Southern Lebanon sought greener pastures outside their country. Many moved to West Africa, and they in Côte d'Ivoire they control many of the transactions in cacao. For example, Saf-Cacao, which is the fourth largest exporter in San Pedro, the main cacao exporting port, is owned by a Shi'ite family. The next level down are the traitants, and one of the major traitants is a Lebanese family in Issia. The next level are the pisteurs, and they are usually Ivoirian but Muslim.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHOCOLATE/COCOA BUSINESS

Since people in my country speak French first and their local language second, they usually refer to the beans of Theobroma cacao as "cacao." In neighboring Ghana, they're called "cocoa." Since this book is written in English, the term used will be "cocoa."

At the time that the Scramble for Africa began in the 1880's Africa grew almost no cacao. The first areas to grow it were three small islands in the Gulf of Guinea owned by the Portuguese: Sao Tomé, Principe, and Fernando Po. Legend has it that a Ghanaian, Tetteh Quarshie, worked on Fernando Po for about six years, then bought his passage back, and planted live, unfermented cocoa on his parent's farm. From this initial planting emerged an industry that grew to supplying over 60% of the world's needs by the early 1930's.

Today, West African cocoa production dominates world production at approximately 75%, of which about 40% is Ivoirian and 20% Ghanaian. The Ivoirian and Ghanaian farmers really pushed the crop because it could earn important foreign exchange that would help build their local and national economies.

The two countries eventually followed economically distinct paths. At first, both had colonially founded institutions that controlled quality and price. But with independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah allowed the cocoa sector to deteriorate and Ghanaian production dwindled. Then, in 1979, President Jerry Rawlings spent government money to revitalize the board, and production of cocoa now stands at 21% of the world's total.

Côte d'Ivoire followed a similar but less controlling path. With independence in 1960, it founded the Bourse du Café et du Cacao. It controlled quality and prices as well.

Both systems were severely curtailed when the governments of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire were forced by the IMF and the World Bank to adopt more open and less bureaucratic systems. On the surface, this seemed like a positive development, but for my country especially, the curtailment of methods to keep prices viable for farmers caused extreme economic hardship and contributed to an impoverishment of the cocoa sector.

Today, in both countries, cocoa farmers suffer from economic unsustainability. Farmers are unable to afford the inputs needed to increase yields and so the farmers are in a commodity trap, forced to sell their beans at low prices.