

*The Beginning:*

Nzingha.

That's my name, The name of a great Seventeenth Century African Warrior Queen. My family is from Uganda but I was born in Kenya. My Grandad was living with us to help my newly wedded parents learn how to raise a family, they were supposed to just be off to Kenya for their honeymoon but they decided to stay a while.

The first memories I have is speaking Swahili, one of the native languages in Kenya. My Grandfather's European friend came to visit sometimes and he taught me English here and there..

"My name is Nzingha" He would say slowly, and point to me.

"My name is Nzingha" I'd repeat and point to myself.

He would bring me cookies and take pictures for us to keep, which was very rare for us to have at the time so the neighborhood kids saw us as "privileged", it wasn't regular for kids to have pictures, especially not in our area.

Kicking around our soccer balls made out of plastic bags in my torn Sapatus (Sapatus meaning shoes in Swahili) running around playing with tires that weren't used any more. Then when the sun began to set .

"Klds it's time to go home, eat then study" my mother would always tell me and the kids I'd play with. In my house education was top priority, my Grandad always made sure my

Mother was focused on education, that's why she makes sure I'm focused on it as well. Also, being that my Father was a Math teacher and now a principal at the local school I had to be focused. I studied and studied no matter the circumstances.

*Turning Point:*

But then one day my family decided they wanted to send me to Uganda for a better education. Truthfully I didn't want to leave. All of my friends from primary school to secondary, I had to leave. I was hoping to come back during the holiday to come see them but that's a lot of going back and forth so I doubted it.

"Goodbye" I whimpered quickly to my family and friends, it felt as if I had swallowed a marble trying to hold back my tears.

*On the bright side...Grandpa is here on the plane ride with me, he knows Uganda and could teach me some things, and I will meet more family members.* I tried comforting myself. I cried the whole plane ride, partially from being scared on a plane for the first time but also from thinking about how I'm being ripped away from the only place and people I've known from the past 15 years.

Arriving in Uganda I see a crowded city. It's amusing and confusing, quite hectic, but an amazing view. When we get home there's a celebration, I think it's mainly for my Grandpa coming home but they say it's for me too. Aunties and Uncles I had no idea existed telling me a series of things like, "You remember me? I used to change your

diapers... I knew your Mother. I went to Secondary with her... your Dad and I have been best buds since we were little.” Nice to hear but I wanted to go to sleep.

A couple days passed by of me sleeping, waking up, cleaning the house, studying, cooking, studying, then going back to sleep. The same cycle over and over again. It was our break from school so there was not much to do, I knew no one. I had really appreciated everything my Mother used to do around the house, now I had to do it by myself because Grandad was older and he couldn't do stuff on his own. Plus the men in Africa aren't supposed to lift a finger. But, I couldn't complain because he didn't ask me to do it.

I started watching TV with my Grandpa, it was such a foreign thing to me because we never had a TV in Kenya, I saw lots of these luxurious things for the first time. Big houses, nice cars and families.

“Wow! Where is that?” I asked my Grandpa.

“America,” He told me. I gazed into this box seeing such foreign things, I wanted to go there badly.

“You have to study to get there.” My Grandpa told me as if he was reading my mind. I turned to him and smiled. From that day, I knew I was going to study to get to America.

Then after break comes time for school... I'm quite nervous, I don't know any of these kids my age and haven't grown up around them. My Grandfather firmly tells me.

“Go to school, don’t be distracted by anyone there. They’re there for a short period of time but your education is life long.” He should know there won’t be an issue with distractions because I don’t have any friends around here. What’s the use? I might just pick up and move again.

Grandad makes me walk with Kabera, my cousin I barely know, to school because traffic is too intense in Uganda for him to drive and get me there on time. Kabera and I don’t speak the whole way, she only speaks Luganda and I know none of it! I only speak English and Swahili so that was no help.

We get to our classroom and I scan the perimeter, everyone is staring as I walk in with Kabera, she does a curtsy as if the teacher was the Queen and says something in Luganda then goes to sit with her friends, and I don’t know where to sit, I wanted to sit in the back corner, a comfortable spot for being new but the whole back row was taken up by the kids that are “cool” I’m assuming. So I rush to the furthest back spot I can get. “You’re not going to greet me?” Ms.Mbare asks in a tone of offense taken.

“I’m sorry m’aam he-” she stops me

“uh- no you come up here and greet me”.

The class giggles as I go up with my head down, my head starts to pound from both anger and embarrassment.

“Hello ma’am, I’m sorry, that was rude of me not to greet you. I was just nervous, it’s my first day, first day learning in this country since I came from Kenya ”. As I turn my back

to walk away she grabs my hand firmly, spins me around and hits me on the hand with a ruler.

“You didn’t curtsy ” she says firmly with her lips tucked.

In shock I stood there with my mouth open, I’d never been hit by a teacher before, but I curtsy, then returned to my seat. I could feel all eyes on me, I felt alien to everything. I sat at lunch alone, it was a terrible first day experience, then we went back to learning, but I did learn some Luganda.

On the way home, once again not talking to Kabera, I told my Grandad what happened and he chuckled. I didn’t know what was funny, but he told me,

“That’s just how it is here.” I didn’t want to get used to it, I wanted to go home, and desperately.

Days had gone by then finally a pat on my shoulder during lunch,

“Here” a girl says as she hands me one of her packs of cookies. “My name is Pam, what’s yours?” she asks as she sits on the curb next to me.

“Nzin-” I clear my throat. “Nzingha”. We go on chatting about her experiences in Uganda and mine in Kenya and comparing and contrasting our countries we grew up in.

I realized she was one of the kids who sat in the back, so she was cool. I wonder why she was talking to me though.

“I’m having a party for my birthday on Saturday, you want to come?” she asked me.

“Yes! Thanks for the invite” I say with a smile from ear to ear. I had finally made a friend.

I get home and tell Grandpa the good news. He's happy for me but then tells me, "Will there be someone to take you, I'm not feeling so well so can you ask her parents to please come pick you?" It wasn't unusual for Grandpa to feel unwell.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I have to leave you home while you're not feeling well."

He then laughs, "Don't be! This is your first friend here and I want you to make more in the time that your here. So go and have fun, don't worry about me."

It comes Saturday and Pam and her parents come to pick me up.

"By Grandpa, hope you feel better." I give him a hug as he's laying on the couch.

"Have fun!" he says. "I will!" I yell dashing out the door.

I get to the party and the whole back row of the class is there and a bunch of older kids. It's like I get a whole new type of respect walking in with Pam. They all want to be my friend chatting it up. We danced and had fun the whole night. *This is such a great night. I'm going to have all of these new friends going back to school Monday.* I think to myself.

Come Monday I got to school and all of the people that giggled at me wanted to chat with me because I was friends with Pam now.

"Hey, you're Nzingha right?... such an exotic name... so cool." I heard all around.

The power I felt was great with all these people swarming me like a celebrity, and this was all from one party so what about the next few. I was once again invited to go out with Pam so ofcourse I couldn't say no.

We went out but this time it was to someone else's party. Some part of me felt guilty for not telling Grandpa but he wanted me to go out, make friends and have fun since I hadn't been for the past months in Uganda.

Every time I went out I felt free, I used to always feel abandoned by my family from Kenya because they never tried to come and visit, but with partying I felt free.

Week and weeks went by of me enjoying and partying with my new friends, and I kept making more friends. Everything had flipped around from hating being in this country to enjoying myself so much I forgot about all the sadness. But there was multiple nights I spent nights arguing with my Grandpa and him saying that same old stupid line of "Go to school, don't be distracted by anyone there. They're there for a short period of time but your education is life long." Is he not the same one that told me to have fun?

I then get home late one night after partying... per usual, knowing I'm about to get in trouble, I tip-toe off to bed and Grandpa didn't make a fuss about it so the relief I felt was great. Then the next morning I wake up to someone repeatedly ringing the doorbell and banging on the door. I rush to look at the door from around the corner and it's police.

"Hello? Is there a problem?" I say, trembling and confused

"Is this the residence of Mark Ngonze?"

"Yes, what happened?"

“I’m sorry to inform you that Mr. Ngonze was found dead outside on the curb of the Pharmacy last night as the owners were trying to close up shop.” The rest of the words were a blur, nothing else mattered, I heard what I needed to. They held my hand and led me to their car and took me down to the police station.

I was in a state of shock. My whole body felt cold. I was filled with guilt. My heart sank into the ground, an emptiness in my chest, something I’ve never felt before. This man was this man who had taught me so many things, he was my Best Friend before I had gone off partying and not focusing.

My Aunt Thereasa, had come to pick me up from the police station. I heard muffles in the background but my thoughts were too loud to hear them. The one thing I did hear was, “We arranged for his funeral to be in a week”. Do these people even care that he’s gone? I don’t know.

For days I stayed in bed and didn’t speak to anyone, Aunt Thereasa didn’t really care. One of the people who had supposedly changed my diapers didn’t care about how I felt and just left me to be in that room sad. I saw my Grandpa in my dreams for many nights.

I finally came out of my room one of the days,

“I want to go to school”.

She then turns to me hesitantly and says, "You will but today's the day of your Grandfather's funeral, so go get dressed" On the drive there it was total silence, "You know I was worried you were going to stay in that room today and not come." Aunt Theresa says. Why does she even care? She just wants his inheritance. I never saw her come around anyway.

I feel nothing, part of me thinks he's still alive, probably just ran away because I didn't even see him.

The next day I asked Aunt Theresa again,

"Can I go to school now?" She stops and looks at me for a good couple of seconds up and down.

"No. Sorry I can't pay that tuition... you're not smart enough anyways."

I storm off to my room with frustration and slam the door shut.

She chases after me, swings the door open and yells,

"DON'T YOU EVER SLAM MY DOOR AGAIN." She was now my enemy. "Now pick up that rag and mop my floors, now!" She raises her hand to slap me, and I flinch. I ran to go pick up everything and mop her whole house. All three floors weeping and crying.

The next few days went by of her yelling at me to clean and I didn't listen sometimes, I wasn't able to go to school anyway so it didn't matter. So she got rid of me. Passed me onto the next house. This time it was Aunty Josephine and Uncle Sam's house, they treated me better but didn't have enough room, Aunty Josephine already cleaned the

house herself so she didn't need help. Then I was passed to the next house cleaning. Then onto the next, next, next, next... This was what I did, cleaning to keep a roof over my head, it felt like I was a foster child, well I basically was. I was abandoned by my family back in Kenya as well.

But in these houses I would find a way to study. I was only on the level of education I was because when going out to shop for the families I was living with, I would save up little change to buy books for each academic level and hide the books. Call it stealing if you want but it sure was worth it!

But there was something different about this last family. They actually cared. I would of course still help around the house but it wasn't as much, their children would also help me, most of them were my age, just one of them was a toddler.

"Good evening sir" I did a curtsy and told Uncle Donavan.

"You're family so stop doing that curtsy stuff, but what do you need?"

I smiled as I got up, "Um, I really hope you don't think-".

He rolls his eyes, "Get to the point already!"

"I want to go to school," I say , twisting and lacing my fingers.

"You are your Grandfather's Granddaughter" He smiles, "You know he used to always say...'Go to school, don't be distracted by anyone there.'"

Then we continued together, "They're there for a short period of time but your education is life long." We laughed.

He then goes on to tell me, "I will send you to boarding school, but under one circumstance, you have to remember his quote."

"I will!" I shriek as I hug him.

*Hope:*

couple of months ago that I was going off to boarding school and I definitely would've objected to you even implying that. But now that Grandpa is gone I'm getting my education for him.

Packing for days with extreme excitement and dreaming of getting to America after school. This was a boarding school for high school kids so it would be nice to be around kids my age.

"I'm going to miss you" The eldest daughter Elizabeth runs to hug me.

"I'll miss you too but we could right each other letters, I'll tell you all about school out there"

Then I'm off... waving goodbye to the best family I had. Tears rolling down, finally... happy tears. The exhale of faith and hope of moving on to something better. For a family I had barely been with this was the best family I had met in Uganda.

*Starting back up:*

I arrive at Father Arthur's boarding school and it's run by a man from Britain whose name is, you guessed it, Father Arthur. He's an elderly man who's been Principal here since 1964. My Uncle Donovan came to this school along with his siblings.

I went on to make friends and of course study hard. Every Saturday we had the dance and we danced with our friends. In the girls' dorms they'd chat about the boys. I wasn't really interested though.

For the next four years I involved myself in everything to do with studying and I finished with my High School Education. My Uncle Donovan, Aunt and cousins were the only ones that showed up to my Graduation but that was just enough, those were the only people I needed.

But now what to do, I had to get into College but with what money, I had already asked for enough from my Uncle.

"Thank you," My Uncle tells me.

"For what? I should be the one thanking you!"

"For following what I asked... Really what your Granfather asked of you."

"You know, he was right, but I used to just brush it off, now I understand."

"I know you want to go to America, your Grandfather used to tell us about that, but you have to work for that now you can't afford it"

"Yes I know, and I will work"

Thinking about my dreams made me want to work hard. I went for interview after interview and they'd always ask me the same questions.

"Why do you want to work for us?"

What I really wanted to say was one word... America. But I couldn't so I had to come up with some bogus story. Or another question was

"Why do you think you would be good for the job?" I didn't know this would be my first job.

Finally I settled upon working as a bank teller. It was paying me good enough and I enjoyed it, it was calm. So I saved until I finally was able to afford a plane ticket.

*America:*

Once again I'm on a plane, landing where I've been working toward. It doesn't feel real, it's like a dream. From being a little girl seeing it on TV for the first time.

I stayed in a nice hotel. Ladies would knock on the door "Room Service" in a sweet tiny voice and clean my room. What a luxury. I would've never dreamed of this.

"Hello, what would you like today?" The chef asks me downstairs in the kitchen.

I was in awe, there was an all you can eat buffet AND the chef was asking me what I wanted.

I slept like a baby... but it had been two days and I needed to find a job and get a house. So I looked on the internet and found something I'd be interested in. I wanted to work for the Federal Government. Go big or go home am I right?

I took a train up to my interview and I didn't do my research. Here I am thinking I'll go in and ace this interview.

"Sorry we don't take people that aren't citizens of the United States."

I was shut down. It was like a big red buzzer. I don't know why I felt like I wasn't going to be able to get a job.

So I decided to go with something I was more used to and got to be a bank teller again. Nothing to complain about. I got the job which means money which means College and house.

I then found the College I wanted to go to, Howard University and studied to become an Environmental Scientist, that's what my Grandpa was before he retired. Then I was accepted.

I only had 4 more days left in this hotel. But there was a solution. A motel! The internet says that's similar enough too. That week I slept like a baby, I had a job and I knew I was going to get a house after being in the motel for a little while.

I walk to the front desk of the motel.

"Hi, I'd like to make a reservation." Keep in mind this was my first time making a reservation because Uncle Donovan had done the last one in the hotel for me.

The grumpy lady with glasses that had connected around the back of her head and bangles clanking as she did paperwork turned to me as if she was irritated by my existence and tiredly said.

“For what?”

“Sorry, what do you mean for what, It’s my first time in America and-”

“Yeah, yeah I don’t want the sob story, you pay per night and let me know when you’re getting out you can’t stay too long.”

“Oh- okay but I don’t know where to stay after this”

“Homeless shelter.”

I stood back in shock and thought *Do I really have to stay in a homeless shelter?* Then I paid for the rest of the week and went up to my room. This was no luxury room as the internet said, it was dirty and had a funny smell. It’s not so similar to the hotel from before but I have somewhere to sleep. I went on my phone and search up “Can you get a home with a green-card?” I scrolled through page after page as if I was going to get a different answer but everything said NOPE... in short. I’m here in America but this is not my American Dream... First I couldn’t get the job I wanted. I can’t get a house. Now I’m staying in a not so clean motel... and I will wind up in a homeless shelter.

After nights of working and saving in the motel I moved to the Women’s Homeless Shelter but I couldn’t stay as many nights as I wanted. It was first come first serve. We had a curfew. For the next couple months I hopped through homeless shelters while saving and going to classes.

Then fast forward 5 years I have a degree in Environmental Science, a job, a citizenship and a house. Nzingha. That's my name, The name of a great Seventeenth Century African Warrior Queen. I fought to get my American Dream to come true. Even when people told me I wouldn't be able to get my education I did. But this time it wasn't only for myself alone, it was for Grandpa too.