

### INTRODUCTION

There is the noise of children everywhere: children laughing, playing, screaming. Washing hangs out of the windows to dry; some windows are smashed. I walk into the three-bedroom flat, shared by three families. There is a sweet smell of egusu (melon seed) being fried in palm oil, the TV is on mute, and music is playing from a CD player. I am offered a malt (non-alcoholic beer) to drink, and welcomed in Igbo: 'Nnoo, Ndeewo nwunye anyi!' ('Welcome, our wife!').

### CRAMPED IN LONDON

Hope and Nkemji have a 1-year-old son, Tobechei.\* They are looking after Chisara, a 3-year-old girl, whose mother has gone back to Nigeria to get married. Because Chisara 'doesn't have papers' (passport/visa), her mother has left her with Hope and Nkemji. They are all living in one small room. Joy sleeps in the bed with the two children; Nkemji sleeps on the sofa. The baby's things are in one corner — nappies, wipes, and so on — and their clothes are packed in suitcases. Chisara's things are in a carrier bag that her mother brought: a few clothes, some Weetabix, juice, and a teddy bear.

This is where Hope and Nkemji live. This is not Lagos; this is Streatham.

I ask Nkemji if I can write about his experiences of London: 'Will they pay me?' he jokingly asks. I have known him since 2002. We first met when I was working for VSO in Togo. He was a businessman, trading between Togo and Nigeria. He had two sons and was happy. We met again in 2005. I had moved to Tooting to study medicine, and he was living with his cousin in Peckham.

### 'IS THIS NOT BEGGING?'

When he first came to England, he paid an agency who sent him to a nightclub to work in. Not as a bouncer or a barman, but as a 'kpeke'. The job was to sit in the men's toilets of the nightclub, and offer those using the toilet a spray of



Emily.

aftershave, a towel to dry their hands on, or some breath freshener, in the hope that they would 'dash' him something in return. After each shift, he had to give a percentage of what he had earned to the agency: 'It was OK, I would chat to the people, most were good guys, but I would ask myself: "Look at me, look at what I am doing, is this not begging?"' He then looks at me and winks: 'And do you know, 70% of those people were not even circumcised?!' When Tobechei was born, Hope took £100 from me to circumcise him. I told her: "They don't even bother about that thing here, save the £100", but she said he has to do it.'

### WORKING IN SOCIAL CARE

Nkemji has also worked as a support worker, for a man with learning difficulties: 'That one was so easy', he tells me. 'I would just sit there, talk to the guy, make his lunch, even sleep at the guy's house and get paid for it!'

The British manager of the care company where Nkemji was working became aware that Nkemji did not have his papers (work visa) and was using someone else's National Insurance number. The manager gave Nkemji as many shifts as he liked, in return for a relationship with her: 'You know that woman was very difficult.' Nkemji explains: 'She had this thing they call bipolar: one minute she would be so happy and telling me she loved me and wanted to marry me and the next minute

she would be saying she hates me, and that she wants to kill herself! Ha! That lady was troublesome!'

Hope is now 2 months pregnant with their second child. Nkemji was angry at first: 'When she told me, she said: "Nkem, I am pregnant again." [Nkem is a term of affection in Igbo, meaning 'my own one, my dear.']] 'I said: "Who is your Nkem? Don't ever call me that! I have two sons in Nigeria that I am training and now you tell me you are pregnant again?!"'

Nkemji has since calmed down. But he says he doesn't know what to do, and feels like drinking alcohol: 'My head is too heavy with all this stress, I need GP to check my blood pressure, this country just wants to kill me, make I no die for dis place.'

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\*all names have been anonymised to protect people's identities.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X706781>

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