

# The Grown Child

By Quincy Washington

## PREFACE

By the mid-1950s, the vestiges of colonialism for most of sub-Saharan Africa had positively paled into the archives. No longer immured by the shackles of oppressive rule, nations were granted the free rein over the ordering of their governmental administrations and bestowed upon them the sovereignty long hungered for by their people. The state of Ghana achieved independence when the British relinquished their control over the Gold Coast, The Ashanti Region and the Northern protectorate on March 6, 1957.

The dawn of liberation would carry with it the opportunity for developing countries to emerge onto the ever-changing global arena, where democracy, liberty and justice were the trailblazing beacons to be pursued.

The passage from the 50s to the 60s was an example of a widespread shift in human thinking about how we ought to treat each other, and this newfound spirit trickled down to every household across the globe, and into the consciousness of those who had been deprived of their liberties for an age.

Mr Bannerman, a young and ambitious controller for the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, was a witness to this worldwide edification. He had long nurtured the belief that

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one day his deepest desire would be fulfilled, and that he would build a family, just like his parents. Owing to his late father's fight for Ghana's state sovereignty and equal education in the thick of a 2-year campaign in Northern Europe, Mr Bannerman kept protected the hope that his children might one day live a life free from torment and inequality and instead, live one brimming with a wealth of opportunities blind to discrimination.

Years into working at the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation as an overseas correspondent in London, Mr Stephen Bannerman would find favour aboard a ferry taking the Bay of Biscay, before trailing the seas of the mid-Atlantic, and then back onto the coast of West Africa. A young woman, just scraping five foot seven, had chosen to sport a navy-blue trilby hat that day. She wore a tweed suit with the ends of her sleeves pulling away an inch behind the wrist line. From across the promenade deck, through her lorgnettes, she would spot a young man stealing a quick glance back at her. Mr Bannerman, as he introduced himself to the young woman would marry her five years later, at a lavish ceremony near The Battersea Barge in London.

And, as is the destiny for most good people, Mr Bannerman would indeed enjoy the splendours of living with his four children years later - two boys and two girls.

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Mr and Mrs Bannerman, Stephen and Stella, loved all of their children in equal measure. But they delighted especially in their two youngest, their girls.

But, as is the destiny for all people, even the best of people, no condition can last forever – even life itself. Death is a disquieting certainty and nothing can escape it.

In the year 1981, Mr Bannerman had suddenly taken ill and after a valiant year-long battle, he passed away in his sleep on Sunday 11th April 1982. He left behind two young men, his two little girls and his grief-stricken sweetheart, his wife and soul-mate Stella Bannerman.

Sunday 25th April 1982

The crimson sun began to melt across the horizon. The days just passed had been long and hot, the likes of which you would only want to experience once a year. But on this night, as the moonlight flooded the sky awash with its glare, with it too came an eerie cold breeze descending on every house in the neighbourhood.

A little girl wearing an alice-blue poodle skirt skipped down an abandoned street, swinging her arms as she went. In her left hand, she protected a handful of pesewas, taken from her younger sister's piggy bank earlier that day. And in her right hand, she held a small straw basket, no bigger than

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her head, which carried two loaves of bread, a fine cut of lamb, a vine of large tropical tomatoes native only to West Africa, and a vial of iced water.

Any bystander would have known that the little girl had been on quite an adventure. The laterite soil perfectly decorated the fringes of her skirt, and the camel leather sandals she wore which were her sister's and one size too small, had left her little feet with searing blisters across the half-mile of African desert she had to walk through. Through it all, the little girl continued skipping. The joy of seeing her mother, her two older brothers, and most of all, her beloved younger sister, could carry her through even the most harrowing of journeys.

Two weeks prior, word had spread around the quaint village of North Okufi that a sudden death had taken an unsuspecting victim in the wake of the morning dawn. In the cloakroom of the little girl's small house, the morning that she left for school, her beloved father and protector, Mr Stephen Bannerman, lost his battle to an aggressive disease. His death shook the surrounding villages, as deeply as it did the family.

The Bannerman family was once a picture of perfection. Rudy and James, the two older boys, could often be heard from all corners of the street during their infamous tussles and horse play. The little girl and her younger sister, April, were all too often confused with one another. For one, they

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wore identical clothing, and on each Sunday before church, their mother would plait their hair in the same fashion, pig tails which was April's favourite but the bane of the little girl's life. Of all the many things they shared, it was only those pig tails that the two sisters could not agree on. But the little girl established a healthy alliance with her younger sister where April, if she asked nicely enough could borrow the little girl's favourite red plastic bleeping doll in exchange for her own beloved poodle skirt. From the eyes of the uninformed it was perfectly normal to believe that the only lingering presence in the Bannerman household was that of harmony and love.

And too it was but only before the unexpected departure of the head of the household. After the little girl's father passed away, almost all hope seemed pointless investing in. The village of North Okufi was still a poor one. On a still afternoon, where the lonesome streets would stretch far into the distance, you could hear an orchestra of stray mongrels each whimpering in the scorching African sunlight beating down on their emaciated backs. Pain and suffering, however, did not confer themselves on the mongrels alone. In fact, every family knew of a close relative, friend or colleague, who had at least once been left homeless, unloved and abandoned. And each family wallowed in the unspoken fear that they could just as easily be the next.

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The curtailment of the Bannerman's main source of income was self-evident in the usurping of their basic utilities, food and soon enough, their home. But what shook the family the most and in particular Mrs Bannerman, was the sheer despair, desolation and despondency which did not delay in taking over their lives. Mrs Bannerman, born Stella Obama, was a faithful protector and friend to her children, in addition to being a wonderful mother.

Indeed, it was love at first sight between the young couple on the Bay of Biscay which only came in its heaps and bounds, after the birth of each of their four children.

All was once harmonious but no family could have braced itself for such a horror. Despite their greatest efforts, the local authority was still nascent and little care was taken to conduct a thorough autopsy after Mr Bannerman's death. The little girl's widowed mother was left ailing and grieving. The father was the breadwinner and through his passing the family resided in the fact they had little means of supporting themselves and would soon dip into poverty without external help.

In the aftermath of her husband's passing, Stella earnestly pleaded with her late husband's three brothers for a modest helping of financial aid. Of the three brothers, only one relented and even so, his help was short-lived and later on tinged with bitterness and resentment, and a sudden ostracization from anything and everything concerning the Bannerman family.

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Two weeks since her husband's passing, Stella Bannerman, the little girl's mother, existed in a state of disorientation and heartache. She was incomplete, lost and lonely. Nothing was ever the same. Stella remained supportive of her four children by virtue of her bounding love for them but equally because she was plainly aware that they would not survive the harsh existence of living on the decrepit streets of North Okufi.

Nobody could have predicted or prepared for such an affliction. Such is the awkward relationship between life and its ill-timed partner, death. As a wife, mother and friend, anyone who had the pleasure of meeting Stella, spoke avidly of her infectious exuberance. She was Stella by name, and stellar by nature. But in these dark and lonely depths of despair, desolation and despondency, it was as though the mother that the little girl had grown to know and love was gone entirely.

The little girl, her two older brothers and her little sister had no other option but to fend for themselves and do their best to support their grieving mother while still grieving themselves. These children had no other option but to survive.

In truth, Rudy, James, the little girl and April had not known how strong they could be until they were tried and tested and until it became their only option.

Life has a knack of challenging our resilience when we least expect it and feel least equipped. Only through adversity

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can we assert our strength to persevere. How do we know how strong we are until being strong is our only choice? How do we know how much willpower we possess, unless it is first tested?

The little girl carried on skipping home.

The shocking death of her father had numbed the whole family and the shared grief pervaded the village of North Okufi leaving no family untouched. Two weeks since his departure, and the wounds remained fresh and sore.

Mr Bannerman was a man of few words but much action and conviction. He was a fervent proponent of further education and equal opportunities. His last lesson to the little girl was her mother's axiom that "in the dark and lonely depths of despair, desolation and despondency, it is faith and hope which are our closest allies."

Unlike her younger sister April, the little girl had a slightly smaller frame and her legs were thin and frail-looking like that of a flamingo. As she passed the local bakery shop, Adoodo, she was not only reminded of the fact that she was close to home. But these musings swept her mind back to the days when her father was still around and could be seen chuckling with his friends at the bakery while her mother prepared a fresh batch of hot wheat scones known as 'akpeti'. As she passed, the little girl mourned the days of seeing her parents together which could never be revived.

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Mrs Bannerman was a seasoned pastry maker at Adoodo and only a fool would dare challenge her to bake something tastier than her famed meat pies. Mrs Bannerman's pride and joy was watching her youngest daughter April, cook her favourite eggplant casserole with yam for the whole family. If only the little girl possessed the same interest as her younger sister to cook, how proud her mother would be. But the little girl found much more pleasure sitting cosily on the buttoned blue couch, in the corner of their sitting room, tucked away from all distractions, with the likes of Pierre Daninos' "Major Thompson lives in France" to take her on an odyssey.

But that day, the little girl had a change of heart, a realignment of priorities and a misplaced passion.

The joy of seeing Mr and Mrs Bannerman beaming from the counters of Adoodo on a Friday evening was a lovely but not unusual sight to behold. The little girl would never witness life's simple richness in the same way ever again.

On this day, a balmy Sunday, the little girl would perform the one wish that her mother desired the most; she would use the ingredients from the local market to surprise her mother, brothers and sister with a hot Sunday dinner.

After the passing of Mr Bannerman, the only hope for the little girl was for her future. After all, she still had her mother, her siblings, and her health, but above all, she still had hope.

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Unbeknownst to the little girl, drama was brewing back at home.

As the little girl strolled through her mother's row of her favourite flowers, bougainvillea, she reached the door, exhausted from her half-mile journey. A sweaty palm rested triumphantly on the cold handle for less than a minute as she gathered her breath. Standing outside her home, she was in heavenly oblivion, unaware of the sheer terror afoot behind the front door.

Oh, how excited she was to see familiar faces, to hear her little sister singing, and to serve as an audience to her older brothers' boisterousness.

The little girl opened her front door to see her siblings and a clamour of foreign-looking men, some of them her vaguely familiar uncles, and others complete strangers in long white overalls.

Her siblings were crouched down at the epicentre of the crowd. The little girl's younger sister, April, was in floods of tears, her forlorn eyes glinting in the low light, as she let out hopeless snivels. As the little girl hesitantly crept closer, she could see her second-oldest brother, Rudy, crouched down and holding a drooped body over his frail and trembling arms.

In what one could only describe as complete horror, the girl saw the woman she had grown to know and love her whole life looking bereft of any activity, her face pallid and her

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mouth pursed, as if distressed. The little girl witnessed her remaining hero, her beacon of integrity, hope and trust, lying limp and lifeless in her brother's arms.

In the time that the girl went to the market, her mother took her last breath.

Stella Bannerman suffered from a myocardial infarction, a heart attack. Rudy Bannerman held her in his arms, watching her life slowly ebb away. He desperately ordered for his older brother James, to call the ambulance, but it was too late. Meanwhile, the youngest of the siblings, April watched the chaos ensue from a gap in her bedroom door, clutching her doll, and completely helpless.

Stella Bannerman, the little girl's mother, died of heart break of a lost soul-mate, before she died of a heart attack.

Along with her three siblings, the little girl had plummeted from harmony to discord in no less than a fortnight. She was now an orphan.

On the night of the coroner's report, her older brother Rudy, grabbed a bottle of whisky to drown his sorrows at which point the little girl held his hand and dissuaded him from doing so, instead, encouraging him to hold onto faith and hope in what would be their greatest time of test. In her late father's words, just as her mother had told her:

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“In the dark and lonely depths of despair, desolation and despondency, it is faith and hope which are our closest allies.”

As hard as the little girl treasured this sentiment, her sage words had little effect on swaying her eldest brother, James. The trauma was too much for him to bear, so he left the Bannerman household, and would occasionally hang out with friends.

For the remaining three siblings, Rudy, the little girl and April, they invested in educating themselves.

No gift could exceed kind words and consolation. But even the most heartfelt gestures would never be enough to bring their parents back.

Most families in the village of North Okufi had safely resided in the fact that the Bannerman family, once an exemplary picture of union, was now a lost cause and not worth investing time or money in.

What was then akin to a welfare system in 1980s Ghana, avowed to cater for orphans, the impoverished and the uneducated, but in practice, this system was non-existent. The young, uneducated and impoverished were the dregs of society, and the abandoned majority. Education and opportunity was a luxury, not an absolute right. As long as life afforded every orphan the same harsh treatment, the little girl and her siblings would be no exception. They

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would each live a life of suffering, starvation and hunger in West Africa.

In spite of her parents' passing, and the unreserved disdain from their uncles and the people of North Okufi, the little girl reasoned that if other people would not invest in her future, then it made sense to invest in herself.

Through the whirlwind, she protected that which was of most imperishable value. She still loved to read and however accurately her tattered skirts and ragged shoes attested to her impoverished existence, her intelligence, her ideas and her ambition remained firmly intact and gave her something that even those more fortunate than her didn't have in as great a plenitude - her potential.

For the next two years, the little girl pleaded with a family friend to let her and her younger sister stay with them. Rudy would stay around the Bannerman household in North Okufi while pursuing employment. The little girl reasoned that, in order to continue her education, she would need a regular place to put her head, and regular aid to help her fund her schooling arrangements.

Over the next few years, the little girl became absorbed in her books. Her parents were long gone; such was the reality of her life. But she could only move forward.

Indeed, she was a farmer experiencing a drought, but the most resourceful farmers should not only be judged by how fruitful they are during harvest.

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By the fifth year after her parents' passing, the little girl was now a young woman, and was topping the exams at her school. Years later, she scored some of the most stellar results in the country and was granted admission to the best school in the western flank of Africa, the prestigious Amochito College, which is the alma mater of several African Heads of State. And after advancing to this school, she still remained one of the top students in her class.

Shirley Bannerman, the little girl, eventually studied at a top university in Northern Europe, where she met the man who would give her two wonderful children.

Yes, Shirley Bannerman, was no longer a little girl and she had to grow up incredibly fast.

The assumption of maturity and galvanised purpose which would ordinarily consume a whole chunk of another person's young adult life, she managed to condense into just a few years.

The little girl was a grown child – as we all are. No matter how many birthdays we will have the fortune of celebrating, we are all just grown children trying to meander through life's conflicts and obstacles in order to find our peace. This grown child has done it particularly well. And this grown child, Shirley, is my mother.

If I had to describe my mother in three words, I would say that she is thoughtful, incisive and optimistic. I never had the honour of meeting my maternal grandparents, but my

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mother speaks reverently of what she describes as the 'perfect' childhood, up until the time of their passing which makes it clear to me that my grandparents were great people.

My mother, my Aunt April and my two uncles struggled for years on their own. Feeding their frail bodies and finding shelter was a daily prayer and an ongoing ordeal.

An 'ordeal' is typically attributed to painful or horrific experience, especially one that is protracted. Retracing the etymology, however, the word 'ordeal' originates from the Old English 'ordel/ordal', literally meaning trial by physical test.

My mother's story illustrates that in our greatest times of trial, through ordeals, through heartbreak and through terror, we must hold steadfast onto the morals, values and goals which underpin what makes us who we are.

My late grandmother Stella, was correct when she told my mother that "in the dark and lonely depths of despair, desolation and despondency, it is faith and hope which are our closest allies". I hold onto that locket of truth and assurance throughout any ordeal I face.

My mother's ordeal was indeed a tragedy. But life brings with it both shocking misfortunes and hidden treasures.

What I know for sure is that, however fervently the tides of circumstance turn on us, whether favourable or otherwise, we must be resolute in moving only forward. Whatever the weather, it is only the farmers who manage to be

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consistently resourceful, whether in harvest or drought, who are the most prosperous.

It is true that we are what we repeatedly do and hence excellence is a habit. Fortunately for my mother, the moral values and ambitions that her parents instilled in her from early on laid a firm foundation which would forever withstand any hardship. Though her parents are greatly missed, their enduring legacy and teachings will be passed onto all of their grandchildren and to all who hear the story of their lives.