

[Snap Judgment intro]

Glynn: This story does contain a common curse word, sensitive listeners, be advised.

The holidays are fun, right? Lights, presents, food. But what if after all the eggnog and the champagne, what you're left with isn't a hangover, but the biggest decision of your life? And this, dear listener, is where our story begins. It's from an eight-part series called S***hole Country. Yeah, we went there. It comes from anonymous producer, and our friends over at Radiotopia Presents, we're going to share the first three episodes with you today. Four years ago, Afia, 30 something Ghana-American living right here in the Oakland area, she went back to Ghana for the holidays. When she returned to the bay, she flies directly into a media firestorm.

Afia: My name is Afia, and I don't know what to do. Let's start at the end. I'm 30, the youngest of three and the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants, born in New York, currently living in California. If you were to read my Tinder profile, instead of just swiping right on the bikini pic, which, hey, that's what it's there for. You'd know I stay loyal to Biggie over to Tupac, and Sailor Moon over Biggie. It's January 17th 2018. Last week, I returned to San Francisco after a month in Ghana. I just spent the holidays at my parents and older brothers, all of us celebrating together for the first time in five years. The very next day, I awoke to some disturbing breaking news out of Washington.

Reporter 1: Mr. President, will you give an apology for the statement yesterday?

Reporter 2: Mr. President, did you refer to African nations, did you use the word "shithole--" [crosstalk]

[overlapping conversations]

Reporter 1: Mr. President, are you a racist?

[overlapping conversations]

Reporter 1: Mr. President, will you respond to these serious questions-- [crosstalk]

[overlapping conversations]

Reporter 1: Mr. President, are you a racist?

[overlapping conversations]

Dick Durbin: When we started to describe the immigration from Africa, that's when he used these vile and vulgar comments, calling the nations they come from "shitholes." I cannot believe that in the history of the White House in that Oval Office, any President has ever spoken the words that I personally heard our President speak yesterday.

Afia: That's Dick Durbin, a Democrat and senator from Illinois. And for our purposes, an earwitness to the presidential scandal du jour. Reportedly, Trump went on to helpfully suggest that the US bring in more folks from places like Norway, instead of Africa. I know. I know.

[intense music]

Afia: Don't feed the troll, even if said troll is the leader of the free world. And yeah, I usually do keep it moving. When a CNN alert lights up my phone with a weekly reminder that our President has zero respect for large swaths of our nation, I just pray for a quick death and the nuclear holocaust he will likely trigger and go about my day. But this time, I paused, again and again. As I eat breakfast and waited for the bus and walk to one of my jobs. Shithole, what an ugly word. An ugly interesting word.

I started thinking of all the other words I've heard used for African countries. Primitive, poor, developing, third world. They're more polite and they point to the same thing, Africa as a backwards monolith. Home of the hollow-eyed villagers crowding those depressing Sally Struthers commercials from the 90s. There are so many people who think of us that way. Even here in the Bay Area. Shoutout to my liberal coastal elites.

[trumpets]

Some of them too, consume only one African export, the deeply entrenched struggle narrative. I've seen a lot of them post pictures with brown school kids and call them beautiful, which we all know is code for, "These people need some help."

Remember that awful holiday song from back in the day? The one with the starving Ethiopian children on the album cover where Boy George and Bono and Sting. Ah, God, why did you do it, Sting? They all say about Africa, these are the actual lyrics. The Christmas bells that ring there are the cling chimes of the doom. [Jingle Bells music playing] Nothing ever grows, no rain or rivers flow. Do they know it's Christmas time at all?

[Jingle Bells music fades off]

Maybe Sting was kidnapped and forced to participate. I'm not really coming for Sting though, or the liberal elites. I'm not even coming for Trump. Mostly, I'm looking at myself. Yes, me. Dripping in so-called first world privilege, carefully ignoring faint stirrings of frustration, of contempt. When I'm in Accra, and the electricity shuts off three times before noon, primitive, developing, third world. But let's be clear, if my family and I are from one shithole country, then we're actually from two.

[somber music]

In one, trash is strewn in gaping gutters lining the streets. The craters in the pavement will swallow your car, and you'll never be heard from again. In the other, you're smeared by words, looks, an entire system expertly designed to chip away at your dignity. You can't quite put your finger on the mess. But if

you live there long enough, you'll pull a Lady Macbeth on your soul, trying like mad to scrub spots where it's touched you.

[somber music]

I have an important decision to make. Strange as it is to say, this shithole controversy might help me make it. What it illuminates gets to the heart of the question I asked myself every day during my month in Ghana. The question that permeated my conversations with my family. The question I'll pick apart over the course of this podcast. What does true development look like? Before we go any further, you should know that all of the names you'll hear, including mine are pseudonyms. That's how it has to be if we're going to be honest with each other. Okay. If all that sounds good by you, let's rewind.

[I Kno by Vincent Augustus]

Glynn: You're listening to S***hole Country, from Radiotopia Presents. Don't go anywhere Snapnation, because we're just getting started. Afia has got a big decision to make. When we return, she's going to tell us how it all began one month earlier. Get your passport ready. We're going to Ghana. Snap Judgment. Stay tuned.

[I Kno by Vincent Augustus]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to S***hole Country, the newest series from Radiotopia Presents. When last we left, our narrator, Afia, she revealed that she was dealing with something big. Now, we're going to go to Ghana, one month earlier in time and space and find out exactly what it is.

Afia: She tricked me. She totally played me. I stare at my mom, Agnes. The dusty Harmattan winds straight from the Sahara don't do anything to cool the room. Sweat rolls down my neck and the huge peacock tattoo curling around my mom's left shoulder glistens. She sighs and says it again, "This apartment is yours. Your daddy and I want you to move in." Mom directs her gaze past the swanky marble floors and recessed lighting to the tropical greenery outside. She sweeps long braids away from her face and reclines in her white plastic chair, the kind that has the ubiquitous Gye Nyame God symbol twisted into it. God is everywhere in Ghana. He literally has your back, especially if you're my mom.

"What is there for you in America, [Fante language], hmm?" She laughs. Her silver earrings and bracelets jangle merrily. Scratch that. Menacingly. I should have known.

When I first graduated from college and moved out to Philly for a job, my parents happily offered to drive, and as they headed back, they happily handed me the receipts for their gas and tolls. She's just so good at this. A minute ago, we were celebrating the shiny new apartment complex we're standing in is hers. She had the plans. She wrangled the builders. She made all of this happen. My mom, the former seamstress, the Burger King coupon hoarder, the person making me an offer I'm not sure I can refuse.

[upbeat music]

Afia: You can call me Afia. This is the story of my family and our lives in a “shithole country.”

[upbeat music]

Afia: December 11th 2017, Kotoka International Airport. I don't know why there's a live jazz band in customs, but I like it. After approximately a week on a plane, I've arrived in Ghana for only the fourth time my 30 years of life. Burkina Faso to the north, Cote d'Ivoire to the west, Togo to the east, the Atlantic Ocean just a few miles away. Welcomed by the dulcet tones of-- Yeah, that's the Backstreet Boys. You would never see this in JFK. I feel a surge of pride and the slow exhalation of a breath I didn't realize I've been holding, kind of like the first time I watched Ghana beat the US in World Cup soccer back in 2006. The soundtrack to their win was an American announcers' slightly incredulous reminders of Ghana's GDP.

As I shuffle through the final set of airport doors, I'm hit by a wall steamy nighttime air and jostling crowds. I'm back. [unintelligible [00:13:08] and fried plantain on my lips, diesel exhaust in my nose, shades of my family in every face I see. And the voices, ah, this is the greatest accent in the world. I'm four years old and dad is introducing me to the *Berenstain Bears*. I'm 12 and buried in mom's Estée Lauder scented chest and she says, [Fante language] I'm 25, mom gazing at me and my brothers with murder in her eyes, muttering [Fante language]. And I even miss that. Being back feels like walking into my bedroom after a long day at work. I shimmy out of my too tight button down slacks, and fall into my bed, into relief.

[indistinct chatters]

Afia: Hi. Yay.

Agnes: We don't even know the flight you've taken.

Afia: Hey. Say hi.

Agnes: Hi. [excitedly]

Afia: Oh, don't say hi that loud.

Agnes: Welcome to Ghana.

[chuckles]

Agnes: Oh, my goodness.

Afia: I thought I sent you flight details.

Agnes: No.

Afia: Oh, I'm sorry.

[conversation continues in background]

Afia: Mom and dad. Agnes and Kwabna.

Agnes: Huh?

Afia: I need to take a shower.

Agnes: It doesn't matter.

Afia: It's been a very long time.

Agnes: It doesn't matter.

Afia: It matters.

Agnes: [kisses Afia]

Dad: Hi.

[car honks]

Agnes: See, he just cut off and [imitates speeding car].

Dad: We're getting out from the airport.

Agnes: Right now, we are at the airport going west.

Afia: Despite the holiday traffic, it only takes a half hour to drive to my parents' house. I clock chop bars, blasting Afro beats and billboards for New Year's Eve prayer marathons through my window, as mom and dad paint their own picture present day Ghana inside the car. There's lots of gesticulating and the occasional [onomatopoeia].

Reunions like this one have become a little more complicated since my parents sold their New York house in 2014. They moved back to Accra soon after, settling for good in a modest peach and periwinkle three bedroom with the standard live-in housekeeper. My older brothers and I are still scattered across the US. Victor in Houston, Sammy in New York, me in the Bay Area. Since I'm not

making bank, working for Google, I was going to spend another December alone. Until my mom called with an uncharacteristically generous offer. "Come to Ghana. Let's spend the holidays together for the first time in five years, because that's what Christmas is about. Fellowship, family, love."

Afia's Cousin: Affections are obscene and we keep those things indoors and hidden.

Afia: That's one of my cousins. He's reminding me of why it's so foolish to project sentimentality onto my very practical Ghanaian family.

Afia's Cousin: My father, the first time he said to me I love you was when he dropped me off to college. So, I'd call my brother up and be like, "Yeah, I think daddy's dying." He's like, "What? Uh? Huh? Why?" I was like, "Oh, because he said I love you." There was a dead silence on the phone for about 30 seconds, and then I heard click. I was like, "Well, I guess someone doesn't care about our father. He's going to be out of the will."

Afia: My cousin, of course, is right. Parents here don't have time for feelings. They've got goals. Mom reveals her grand design the next morning, right after she addresses a pressing matter.

Agnes: With your haircut, your this, your dress and the dress you're wearing when I'm walking with you, they think you're my maid.

Dad: [unintelligible [00:16:55]].

Afia: Really?

Agnes: Yeah.

Afia: So, this very nice purple vintage dress that I bought in Oakland is not--

Agnes: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Because you know what? All the affluent shop in America, when the clothes they don't buy, they bring it here. They call it "false."

Afia: But that's not--[crosstalk]

Agnes: Nice. When we go, you see how the people are dressed. Nicer than us. They laugh at us all the time. You know what they call them? Johnny Just Came.

Dad: Yeah.

Afia: [chuckles] Johnny just came from America?

Agnes: Yeah. Johnny Just Came.

Dad: Yeah. Oh, maybe from Europe or somewhere. Anyways.

Agnes: Johnny Just Came. That's how it is.

Afia: Okay, okay, okay. I'm changing. I'm changing.

Agnes: Yeah.

Afia: 10 minutes and far too much jewelry later, we're on our way. Mom will finally show me the construction project that's consumed her life for the past four years, her apartment and retail complex, two stories and 20 units that she'll officially start renting on January 1st. This is why I bought a recorder and a microphone, to document my mom's transformation to a badass entrepreneur. But when we arrive at the site, it doesn't take long for things to go sideways. She and one of her new tenants, who is almost definitely on her payroll, make it clear.

Person: Why don't we stay in our country?

Agnes: We have to travel to make life better.

Person: Better.

Agnes: And this is a beautiful place. Why can't you? Why wouldn't you come and live here? Why?

Person: Your mom went.

Agnes: Your mother is here, your father is here. Why wouldn't you come live here?

Afia: [crosstalk] -this turned. This took a turn. This is not about me. This is not about me.

Person: This is not about you but why? Why would you not come here then?

Agnes: Yeah. Because you don't like--[crosstalk]

Afia: Because I have a life in California.

Person: What? You can have a life here too.

Afia: Okay, point, counterpoint. I've got great friends in the bay. Half the year, I wake up to perfect weather. Avocados are delicious. Even though it kind of killed me a little bit too admit it at first, so is the vegan food. And I'm definitely single. Juggling freelance copywriting jobs, living paycheck to paycheck in a city where rents is a more predictable tragedy than an episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*. But in Ghana, I feel like an imposter. Here's a preview of a conversation I'll have in 10 minutes with one of the plumbers.

Person: So, you can't speak Twi?

Afia: No.

Person: Why?

Afia: Mom and dad didn't teach me.

[crosstalk]

Afia: My parents wanted us to assimilate. Outside of the necessary curse words, I'd never really learned Twi or Fante. Here's another attempt a conversation I'll make two weeks from now.

Person: What is the feminine of [Fante language]?

Afia: [Fante language]

Person: Good, good, good.

Afia: [Fante language] I keep messing it up.

Is it low key kind of nice to be celebrated for operating at a zero-grade reading level? Of course, brings me back to a better time when there are juice boxes and hugs on demand, and Peter Jennings anchoring the evening news. But that's not real life. Real life is getting laid off from my copywriting job. Real life is running out of unemployment money in a month. Real life is obsessing over these facts and not noticing that I passed my mom her ringing phone with my culturally unacceptable left hand, which she promptly smacks into oblivion.

My mom takes the call outside the apartment we've been standing in, and I watch her pace through the window. She did this. Did something even bigger. Moved from Accra to New York in her 20s knowing almost no one, I think, but something like that. And then, she uprooted her life again 40 years later. How did she do it?

[somber music]

Glynn: You're listening to S***hole Country from Radiotopia Presents. When we return, will Afia give up everything she's known in America to move to Ghana? Stay tuned.

[somber music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington and you're listening to S***hole Country. An eight-part audio memoir from Radiotopia Presents. Now in this next segment, it

does mention sex and drug use, and references of animal cruelty. Please take care while listening, because when last we left, it was December 2017. Afia was visiting her parents in Ghana. They just made her a huge offer, "Leave America, move to Ghana. You'll have help taking care of everything." Afia isn't sure what to do, but she does know where she might find some answers.

Afia: I'm going to, standing in the apartment my parents want to give me. And I feel white. Like Blair Waldorf in *Gossip Girl* levels of white. Don't get me wrong, some of my cousins are living large. I just never really thought generational wealth was in the cards for our twig of the family tree. But apparently, the second my risk-averse father finally retired, my mom, Agnes, sat him down, gave him some real talk on one of her favorite subjects, money. As in, "You know how you drove a taxi and I sold wedding dresses for crazy brides, and we scrimped to buy land in New York and Accra in the 90s? Guess which real estate market is burning up, and which investment will sink us before we can force Afia to give us grandkids?" Now, here we are, five years later, melting in the dusty heat on the outskirts of Ghana's capital on a dirt road lined with bustling shops made from shipping containers, where diesel trucks and stray goats do their best to navigate the deep divots.

I walk out to the street to get a better look at the purple 20-unit apartment and retail complex. The worn carpeting and cracked tiles of our small suburban home, born again into the entrepreneurial highlife. Traded in for skylights and stately ceiling fans and wainscotting. Damn. Mom gets results.

Cousin 1: She's different. She's not like a typical Ghanaian. She's different, and I like that. Yeah. She lives her life.

Cousin 2: She lives her life.

Afia: My cousins speak truth. My mom, Agnes, is a peculiar sort of Ghanaian woman. Endlessly stylish, makeup perfectly applied to her heart-shaped face. Doesn't take shit from anyone. But that description could apply to 80% of the aunties in Ghana. What my mom sets herself apart is in the lengths she will go to in order to be seen.

Exhibit A. That time I got my first tattoo. My mom decided to follow suit, badgering me for months to set up an appointment for her. "[unintelligible 00:24:40] Afia, let them do a picture of my face on my arm. I want to always remember when I was young and beautiful." My brothers and I threatened to never again acknowledge her in public if she went that route. She eventually decided on a kaleidoscopic peacock splashed on her left shoulder, and we thanked God.

Exhibit B. Recently, my mom got into it with her next-door neighbor. It was over a rooster that shrieked outside her window for hours in the middle of the night.

Agnes: I wringed his neck.

Afia: You broke its neck?

Agnes: Yeah. Twisted the neck, but he didn't die. He got up. He was okay. But then, the owner saw that, so that was the end. We don't see any more roosters there.

Afia: So, you were trying to send a message?

Agnes: Yeah, that's what I did, and it worked.

[upbeat music]

Afia: I was embarrassed of my mother growing up. I'd shrink into myself during her regular all too public showdowns with Costco cashiers over receiving she allegedly been denied. Why was-- is everything she does so extra?

Clearly, I have trouble taking my mom seriously. But there's no point in me weighing the pros and cons of a transatlantic move if I don't trust her. I need to understand what her angle is. Why did she build these apartments in the first place?

So that evening, after a healthy serving of goat meat fufu and Season 5 of *90 Day Fiancé*, I ask her. I don't know a lot about mom's life before dad. She likes to roll her eyes and wave away those kinds of questions. Not because she wants to keep secrets, really feels more like she doesn't think anyone would care about the answers. I once stumbled across an answer. I was 12, digging through the fireproof box of my mom's closet. I needed my birth certificate for a school project. When mom came home from work that night, I cornered her in the kitchen, steeling myself for the task ahead by channeling the spirit of my favorite show, *Dawson's Creek*. They always handled secret revelations with such style.

"Mommy, I know about Mensa. I saw the divorce papers. You were married before daddy?" Mom looked at me blankly. I swallowed my heartbeat, once, twice. Father God, I know now I've made a terrible mistake and pray for you to deliver me from this imminent ass whooping. I promise to never again follow Dawson Leery or any other false American teen idols who disrespect their parents, and I will never--

"Yes," she said. It was as if I'd asked the most obvious question in the world. I stared at her. She turned back to a pot of the yams on the stove. They weren't going to cook themselves.

Reporter: Citizens of the new state of Ghana gathered for the celebration, marking their day of freedom from colonialism. What was once the Gold Coast of British [audio cut] now becomes an Independent Commonwealth. Vice President and Mrs. Nixon represent the United States at the three-day festivities. Native dances and games mark an event of historic importance, since Ghana becomes the first Negro colony in Africa to gain its freedom. Premier Kwame Nkrumah, with Representative Adam Clayton Powell of the US, as Ghana's new army passes in review before the American-educated Premier, and Deputy Secretary Ralph Bunche of the United Nations. Another feature of the occasion is a beauty contest. [audio fades]

Agnes: I was the last born of 10 children. The second, third, fourth, and fifth, they all passed away. So, that's why I became me. If they didn't pass away, I wouldn't even have been born. So, I was grateful for them bringing me to this Earth. I was very privileged. My father opened a lot of stores selling flour, certain[?] rice, big bags, my father was doing import and shipping. I had a maid. I went to good school, proprietary school. And in my household, you don't speak-- we call it vernacular. Vernacular means your native language. You speak English. Most of the parents that was posed to the white man felt like, "Hey, if you understand the white man's language, you'll be favored."

When Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown, that's where everything went back. I think it was 1966. My father had money, and the government took everything. Everything, everything. We pack our things and we all went to the village. And he was never the same. From the city, straight to village, when you go there, it was so dramatic because nobody understands you.

Afia: You didn't speak Fante?

Agnes: No. Parents, they're so happy that their children are speaking in English. So, when you come home, they're speaking with you in English. Even my mother was speaking to me in English, and she wasn't educated. She never went to school. Everybody is calling you [Fante word]. They all surrounding you, listening to you.

Afia: Mom tells me that's how it was for most primary and secondary school. Until she met a young man.

Agnes: When he was very quiet and wouldn't even look at me, something told me to explore it, that's who I am. The resistance attracted me. That was my first love. I really, really did love him. We will go to concert with no money and jump the wall. So many stupid things here. When I look back, that wasn't good for him, because he took it to the extreme. He even stole people's money so we can go out with, which is not fun. He wanted a baby. I didn't want a baby. Got dropped out from college, and they took me to learn how to sew. So, I finished my sewing, I have my kiosk out--

Person: You had your what?

Agnes: Kiosk.

Person: Your kiosk.

Agnes: Yeah. I have apprentice. Things were going fine for me. Why should I have a child? But then, he felt insecure, and my parents didn't want to see him.

Person: Your parents didn't approve and you had to listen?

Agnes: Yes, I have to listen. I have to listen

Afia: As my mom says the words, she visibly deflates, her eyes not meeting mine. It doesn't square at all with the woman who raised me, who always makes people listen to her. It's like I've accidentally walked in on her changing, and I want to cover her up until she's decent again. Those fights she'd have with Costco cashiers, all the dramatics, I was embarrassed but I'd be lying if I said a small part of me didn't deeply appreciate it, how she stuck up for us. I'm invested in my mom being this ultra-fierce protector, my protector. But she's more than that. She's more than my mom. So, Agnes collects herself, and continues her story.

Agnes: When I had the baby, he was never there. After I finished having the baby, I left it with my mother and I came back to Accra.

Afia: That little boy, my oldest brother, Sammy.

Agnes: When I came back, he did something very bad to me. I had a big chest that I put people's clothes in there. He took all the clothes away and burned them. I called the police, he went to jail.

Afia: Thanks to Joseph, Agnes, who had a brand-new baby to take care of, was now \$400 in debt. Big money in the 70s and even bigger in Ghana, where at the time, the price of the cocoa crop was cratering and the economy was falling apart. What choice did she have other than to start all over?

Agnes: I was in my kiosk sewing, and this guy had a Thunderbird, American car.

Afia: A Thunderbird?

Agnes: Yeah.

Afia: Oh, okay.

Agnes: White, and everybody looking at this car. This guy was looking at me. I was very tall, skinny, nice shape. And that evening, he sent somebody to come and pick me up, so we can go to the club. I said, "No. I have a little baby. What can I do?" He said, "No, no, I get somebody to babysit." So, he was here for two weeks, only two weeks. And that's where it started.

Afia: Mensa aka the dude when divorce papers? Yeah, this is him.

Agnes: Right away, he wanted to marry me. It was so fast. I was in a relationship that was going sour. And here comes somebody want to marry me and take me to America. Why would I say no? He wasn't my ideal person, but he was an okay man, and he had the money.

Afia: Were you attracted to him?

Agnes: No. He came back a year's time to marry me and start filing the papers for me.

Afia: Agnes was going to New York, leaving Ghana and her unstable ex-boyfriend behind. But what about the baby who is barely two years old? She'd leave him too?

Agnes: I didn't feel guilty at all. For what? Not even one guilt. No. I have a new life. I'm going to make life for me and my child. It's a new adventure. What did I have here? Nothing. And I didn't know what he will come to do to me. This is a mad man walking around. I don't know what he would do to me and my child.

Afia: So, you saw it as a way to provide--

Agnes: For my family. For my relatives, everybody. Going to America those days, sure, it's like a pot of honey dripping into your mouth. It's beautiful. You have to focus.

Afia: She did. In 1978, Agnes packed her bags and left her kid with her sister. Boarded her first ever plane, destination JFK. And settled in with Mensa's sisters in the Bronx, waiting for a man she barely knew to return from an international business trip. She waited for months, scraping together money to send to her family in Ghana, from a job taking care of elderly white woman. But she would never see Mensa again.

He called one day to tell her that he'd gotten caught up in some shady business that somehow led to his denaturalization and deportation. Luckily, Agnes had just gotten her green card. But without Mensa's money, her place in America felt a lot less secure. Until she went to a party and met someone new.

Agnes: I wanted somebody to build a life with. This guy had a good job. So, I said, "Okay." It wasn't love at first sight. No, no, no, because he was skinny like this. I feel sorry for him.

Person: Skinny like what?

Dad: She always says skinny. I wasn't all that skinny.

Afia: My dad, Kwabna. By that point, he'd been living in New York for a decade, and loved the disco scene.

Agnes: He was a womanizer.

Dad: No, not womanizer.

Agnes: He was a womanizer.

Dad: It wasn't exactly [unintelligible [00:37:52]]. I would see one or two friends, but those years were, like we said, party time.

Agnes: Daddy threw us party all the time, and daddy will give them what they want. [crosstalk]

Dad: No, no, no.

Agnes: Drugs. When he's having a party, that place is filled up.

Afia: Daddy, drugs? How did you get the drugs?

Dad: Those days, it's not like--[crosstalk]

Agnes: Those days, it wasn't harmful.

Afia: [laughs] What are you talking about? It's not like in the 70s, and then cocaine doesn't kill you. What are you talking about?

Agnes: Yeah, in the late 70s.

Dad: Yeah, late 70s.

Agnes: It was okay. It wasn't in the house. I didn't care for it.

Dad: I saw people were doing. There were lot of disco, people were allowed there to have fun.

Afia: It wasn't often for Kwabna though. He was always working in a bottling factory, as a data clerk at a bank. He was on his hustle and tried to keep his head down because as Agnes would soon learn, he was stuck in the US. His immigration status had been dicey for years, and he had a hard time opening up to new people. Even a good friend might rat you out to the authorities if you piss them off enough.

Dad: You lose everything. Your mind is shattered, all your dreams, you have to start over. But where are you going to start from?

Afia: Distrust emanated from his eyes as he leaned against the wall in a dim, crowded apartment, tapping a foot to Donna Summer and sizing up Agnes.

Agnes: And then, he starts questioning me. Oh, my goodness. Questioning me like I was in court.

Afia: Because papers, who had them, who didn't were all that mattered.

Agnes: I think I had three Jamaicans, they were fighting over me because they knew I had papers.

Dad: If you had papers, number one.

Afia: But then you must have felt so used.

Agnes: No, you know what it is? You are grateful. I was grateful that I had papers before I came here, because I didn't know how much it worth.

Dad: Yeah, unless you're dead.

Agnes: Because you know people are suffering. He was in America for how long? He hasn't seen his father, his mother. I mean you can't travel.

Person: It's like 10 years by that point.

Agnes: Yeah.

Dad: Yeah.

Agnes: I felt sorry for all of them. If I could have done it for all of them, I would have done it. I felt sorry, because I didn't know what I had was that powerful.

Afia: Agnes decided to help him get a green card. It was only after they actually started getting to know each other, that their relationship evolved from a business arrangement into something more.

Agnes: He was not serious at all. Let me tell you the song that I knew that he was serious. That time, [singing] *Make that move right now, baby*. He was signing it all the time. He even brought me the record. I said, "What is it?" That means he wants to make the move right now.

Dad: Oh. You liked that song?

Agnes: He used to sing it all the time, *Make that move right now*.

Dad: I [unintelligible [00:41:21] all the time.

Agnes: Yeah.

Afia: Things were on the up and up for Agnes. A good man, a nice apartment. She started filling the paperwork for her little boy to join her in New York. And then, she snagged the job she'd have for the next 30 years.

Agnes: Grand Hyatt Hotel was reopened by Donald Trump and his wife, July 1980. And I was one of the first people to start working there.

Afia: So, Trump gave you a job?

Agnes: Yeah, unfortunately. [chuckles] It was on 42nd Street in Lexington Avenue. Everything was high and with blue glasses all over. There was no concrete. Everyday, reporters come to the hotel. It was very dramatic. I remember being in the room with Ivana, his wife. When he comes there, he goes to the management side. But the wife is the one who oversees the rooms. So, believe me, we were sitting there, talking and everything she was telling. Yeah, I was proud to be a New Yorker. I was proud to be a Grand Hyatt employee. And I was proud to be an immigrant that has made it.

Afia: But the feeling of security didn't last long.

ICE would come to your work?

Dad: Yeah.

Agnes: Yes.

Afia: Not ICE, but the immigration--?

Agnes: Immigration, yeah.

Afia: Do you remember one time? What happened?

Agnes: One time. This is a big hotel here. Where I used to work, the locker room was there. Three Ghanian girls were coming down. I said, "Oh, can I talk to you?" "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. You don't know what is going on." They got dressed and run away. People were coming down in droves picking their things and going. Security don't know what is going on. Human resources don't know what is going on.

[background noise]

Agnes: Immigration came to concierge.

Afia: To the concierge.

Agnes: Yes. One of the concierge ladies sent somebody to go tell all the housekeepers. And if you see the dishwashers, the waitresses, people were going through the front door, hitting themselves.

Afia: Agnes had made it as an immigrant in America, which in that moment, meant that our past, present, and future boiled down to a tiny box, and her ability to check it. The all-important box would change over the years. Single or married, renter or homeowner. Agnes worked hard to check them off and access the life she knew she deserved. But at some point, she began to tire of the boxes that were presented to her. She needed something bigger because, as she tells me the next morning at the apartments, nobody wants to dream small.

Agnes: It's hard. It's hard. Doing this wasn't easy. But if I have to do it all over again, I'll do it again, because it makes you feel a part of society. I was in America working, but I could never do this in America. Where would I get the land? And this will cost me a fortune, I don't have the money. So, I'm in some way that even people see me as a rich person, in America, who the hell am I? I'm nobody. Nobody even cares. And it's like they say in Shakespeare, "We are all on the stage. Everybody wants to perform." Everybody wants to get an Oscar. I can't get it there, but I'm getting it here, and I'm smiling because I perform.

You know that we're retired, we are here. Unfortunately, I don't have anybody here. All my children are all in America. So, what is it having all this and I don't have anybody whom I can rely to take care of it if in case I'm gone today? I have a big store downstairs. I was thinking you can use it any way you want it to build an empire business store. You can have a school there to educate people about journalism. Anything your heart desire.

Afia: A chance for me to be a player on the stage, to be somebody, to be seen? Who wouldn't want that? And what would a stage for me in Ghana look like?

[upbeat music]

Afia: S***hole Country is written, narrated, and sound designed by me, Afia. These episodes were produced by me and Mark Pagán. Julie Shapiro and Audrey Mardavich are our executive producers. Special thanks to Tania Ketenjian. Cover art by Sindiso Nyoni. Music in these episodes includes, *I Kno* by Vincent Augustus, and our theme song, *Home*, by Ria Boss. For additional credits and context, especially for all of you history buffs out there, please check out the show notes on radiotopiapresents.fm. You'll also find the other five episodes in this eight-part series. The next one up is number four, and it's titled LVMH. Big thank you to my endlessly patient family, supportive friends, and brilliant professional mentors. You know who you are.

[upbeat music]

Glynn: This series gets wild, weird, and real. You can find out what happens next by heading over to your favorite podcast directory or radiotopiapresents.fm to devour the rest of S***hole Country. You can find more about this show on our website, snapjudgment.org.

Well, now you know this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you're going to have your place of birth disparaged by the leader of the free world, and you would still, even then, not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.