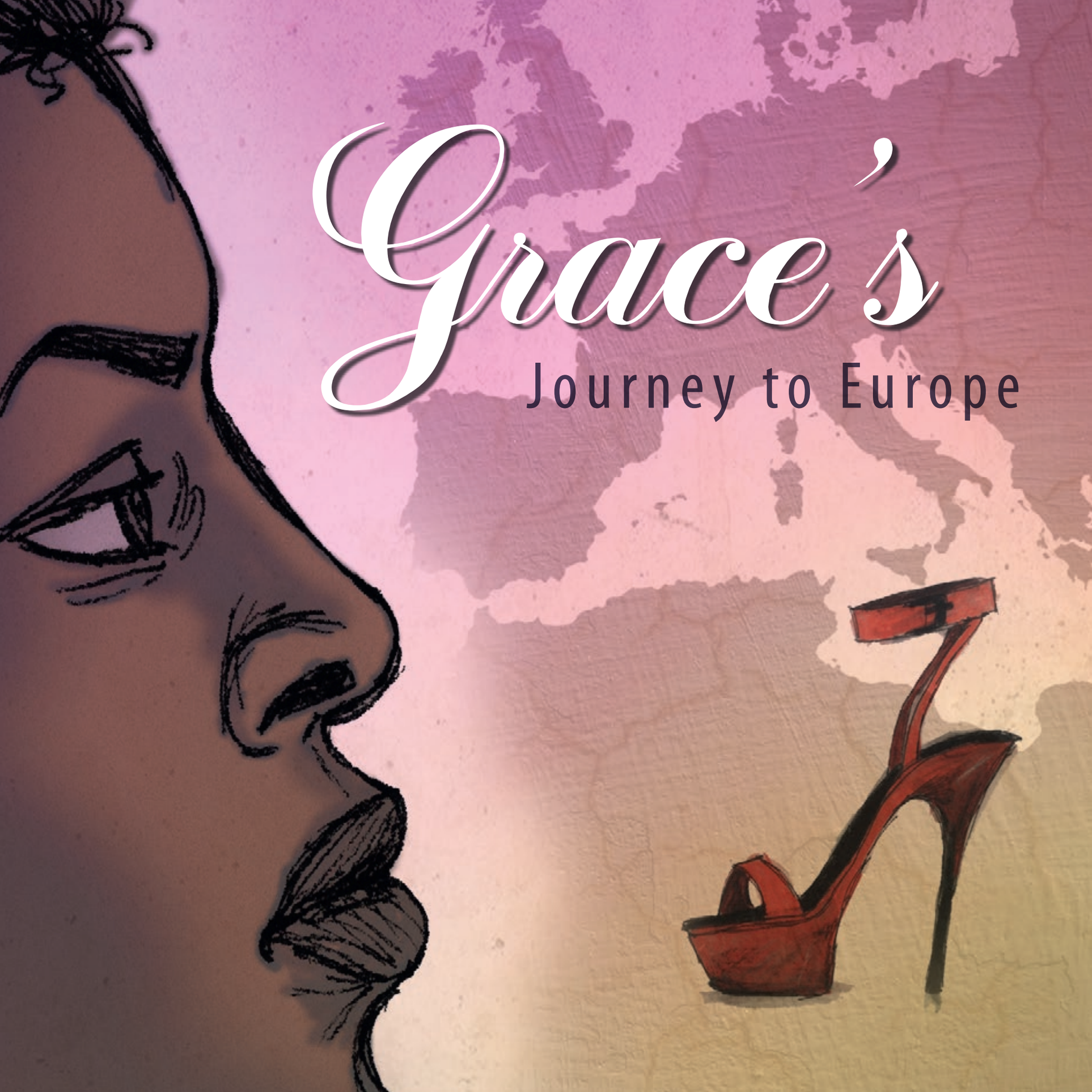
Grace's

Journey to Europe



Grace's
Journey to Europe

Grace was the third girl in a family of 7 children and lived in Benin City in Nigeria. She was beautiful, had even teeth, a straight nose and a warm smile. She loved books and enjoyed school. From early childhood on she had to help her mum with the younger children. She dressed them, carried them around, rocked them to sleep when they were crying and invented games for them. She carried water, learned how to cook and helped keep the house clean. Her daddy was a respected man. He was an officer in the army and often gone for a long time.

One day a military delegation knocked at the door of Grace's family and informed the mother that there had been an ambush of renegades, and dad was killed by a bomb blast. They all were devastated and years of suffering followed. Grace's sister had to move to the city and work for a lady there. A brother was

sent to an uncle to help him in his mechanic shop. There was no money for school fees and Grace had to stay home and look after the family, while her mum worked as a hairdresser. They barely survived and Grace longed for the old days.

One day a former neighbor who lived in Italy returned to the city. She wore clothes made of rich material, wore expensive jewelry and nice shoes. Everybody admired her. She organized a party in her backyard with chicken and rice, fish, lots of sweets, tea and many other delicacies. The music was blaring and girls started dancing; it was a big celebration. Grace was there as well with wide eyes and enjoyed it all. While she ate, drank, danced and chatted with her friends, her mum and some other mothers huddled around the newcomer from Italy. They whispered together and money changed hands. Two days later Grace was told that she was selected to go to Europe to earn money to help support the family. The nice lady had several job vacancies in her business and as Grace was a good cook she could work in a restaurant.

From then on everything went very fast. The lady insisted that they went to the Juju priest to sign the contracts and get his “blessing”. Grace hated the rituals. She was scared and started wondering if this was a good idea. She loved

her brothers and sisters and would miss them a lot. But a deal was a deal, and who was she to say that she did not want to go.

So the traumatic journey started. Men took the girls to the border in cars. At night they had to cross a river. They ran for their lives from the border guards and hid behind rocks. They were beaten, pushed and shoved, and one by one brutally raped by the boss of those who led the way. They barely got enough food. Some of them became weak and sick. One girl got bitten by a snake and died. Grace stumbled on, thinking of her siblings she could help with the money she would be making as a cook in a European restaurant. Then came the scariest bit of the journey: a ride in a small, overfull, unsafe boat across the sea. She lay on the bottom of the boat and cried out to God for mercy. They made it to the shores of Italy where they ran again, to escape the Italian police and reached the bus that was waiting for them in a hidden alley. Finally she was safe, she thought.

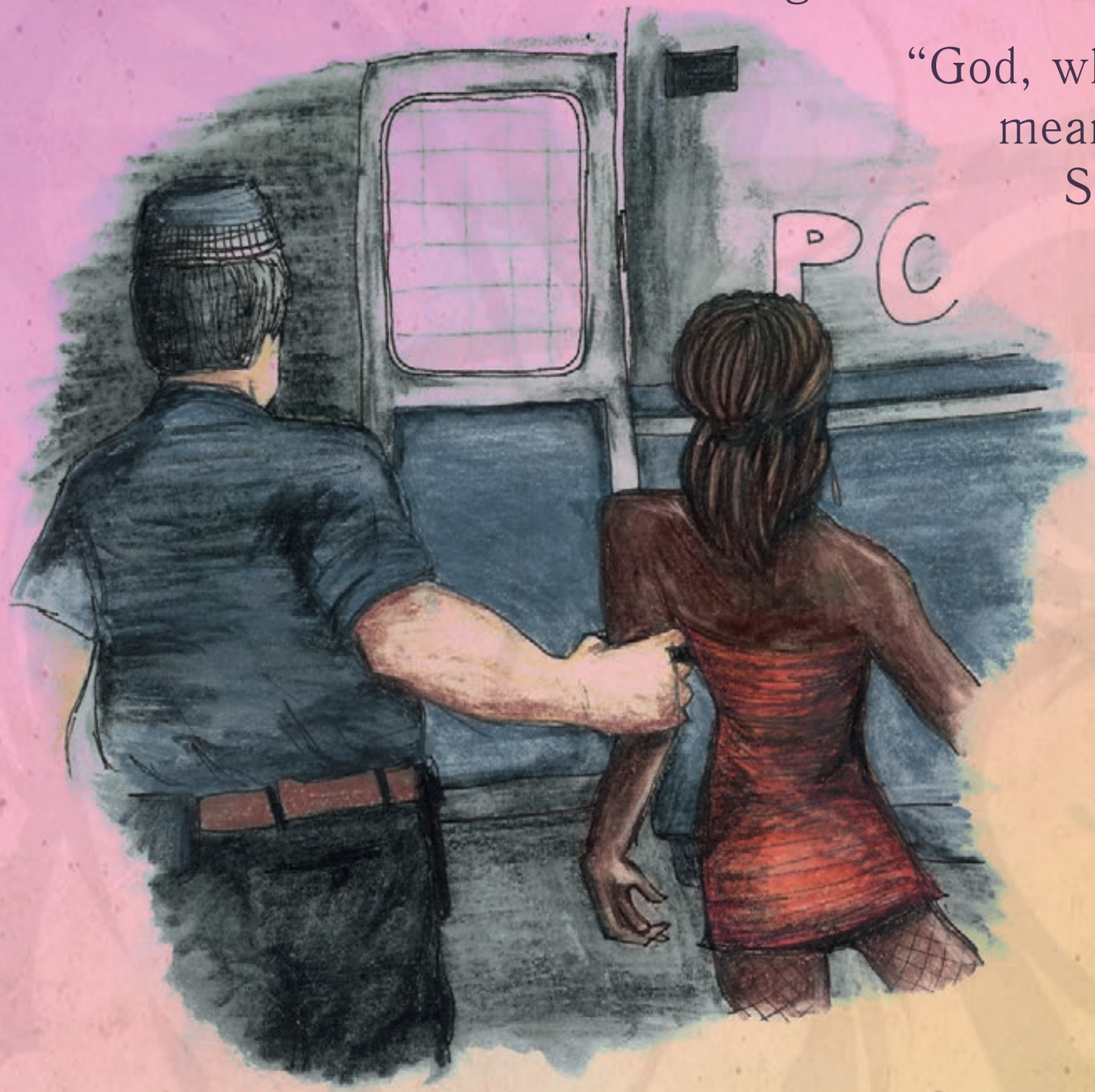
But the nightmare was not over. Instead of a kitchen she was brought to a wooded area in a park, and given high heeled shoes and skimpy clothes and told that she should do the same thing as the others. Another Nigerian lady called Peggy was to become her teacher: “Stand here at the side of the road smiling and flag the cars down.” On and on she lectured her on the ways she was to behave and what she had to do and how. Grace started crying, and promptly Peggy slapped her and threatened to inform the “Madam”, who had guys who beat up girls so badly that they could not walk for two weeks. “By the way, they know where your family lives and will hurt your little sister. She will be next.” Grace thought of Tracy back home with her sweet face and gentle, lovely dark eyes and dimples in her cheeks. “They got me, but they shall never touch her.” So she started sadly to sell her body to the clients who drove by, praying all the time for herself and her family while she served the customers.

When she got to the flat where she was staying with others, she showered, crashed into bed and cried herself to sleep

asking God to forgive her sins. She buried the dream to one day become a cook and have a little restaurant deeply in her heart. How could that happen in this godforsaken place where she was just a commodity to satisfy men's lusts and sexual appetites?

Through a friend, she was invited to an African church. She treasured the meetings and told nobody there what she did every night. Deep inside a seed of hope slow-

ly started growing. Her favorite song was: “God will make a way, where there seems to be no way”. A group of Christians started visiting the ladies at night. They brought drinks and Bibles and books. Grace started reading the New Testament and the small seed of faith in her grew.



“God, what does this mean for me? Standing here and satisfy-

ing customers, doing horrible things is not part of your righteousness, Lord. Please help me out of this mess."

One day the Christian group brought little papers. It had a phone number and address in Nigeria on it: "If ever you are picked up by the police, here is a place in your country where you can find help," the kind lady said to her and poured her a cup of tea. "Keep it safely on you, these people are our friends." Grace, who called herself Cathie on the street, heeded this advice.

It was not too long after that, that there was a raid by the police. Grace had to show her papers and found out that they were fake, and that she had lost her asylum. She was put into jail with many others. There she waited day after day without knowing what was going to happen. She had some money, and there was also the address she had gotten from the group who visited them on the street. She was desperate, but at least there were three meals a day and she did not have to worry where the money would come from, to pay

the rent and buy food. The "Madam" or those who worked for her could not touch her here. After many days, the cell door opened and she was pushed into an office. The official was grumpy and unfriendly and told her: "You will be sent back to Nigeria today. Gather up your things and come." She trembled thinking of the shame it was to go back to Nigeria empty handed. She had failed her family. There would be no more money for school. She knew she would not be welcomed home. Then she remembered the address and the little bit of money she had been given. Would it be enough to go to this place in Nigeria? She had to try. She could not face Mum's disappointed, worn-out face and disapproving eyes.

It was time to leave. She was brought with others to the airport. They were treated like criminals; the policemen were unfriendly and rough. "Bye, bye Europe! Bye, bye shattered dreams! I won't miss the work, but I will be longing for the comfort and the luxuries of the West with running water, electricity all the time and supermarkets full of food. What will the future hold?"

“God will make a way, where there seems to be no way” and “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you”, suddenly came to her mind.

“God, please make this verse come true and go ahead of me. Humanly speaking I have no hope now. Please provide for my needs and lead me in the way you have for me, in Jesus name, Amen!”

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all things will be added unto you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Matthew 6:33–34

When they landed she knew where she was going. She was looking for a bus to the town in the address on the paper. She was relieved to see that she had enough money on her to change into Naira. The ride was long, she was sweaty and tired, but somehow she felt a deep peace in her heart and a sense of God's presence with her.

Finally the bus arrived in the strange city where she had never been. A taxi driver brought her to the address she showed

him. Should she dare to ring the bell? What other choice did she have? With shaking hands she pressed the button and waited. “O Lord, I can’t handle more stress. Please let this be a safe place. I can’t get over one more disappointment.”

The door was opened and the gardener let her in and brought her to the beautiful house Western missionaries had built for girls like her. She was warmly welcomed, given food, a bed and shown a place to shower. She cleaned herself up and dropped off to sleep. In the morning she met the lady of the house. Grace told her story and why she came and why she could not go back home.

Grace’s prayer was answered. She could work in the kitchen and help to cook. She learned a lot of new dishes and loved the smells and tastes. Above all, she enjoyed the freedom to work with her hands and the fellowship with others who had similar stories. Through the teaching and love of the family that ran the house, her heart slowly mended and the trip to Europe seemed like a terrible nightmare.

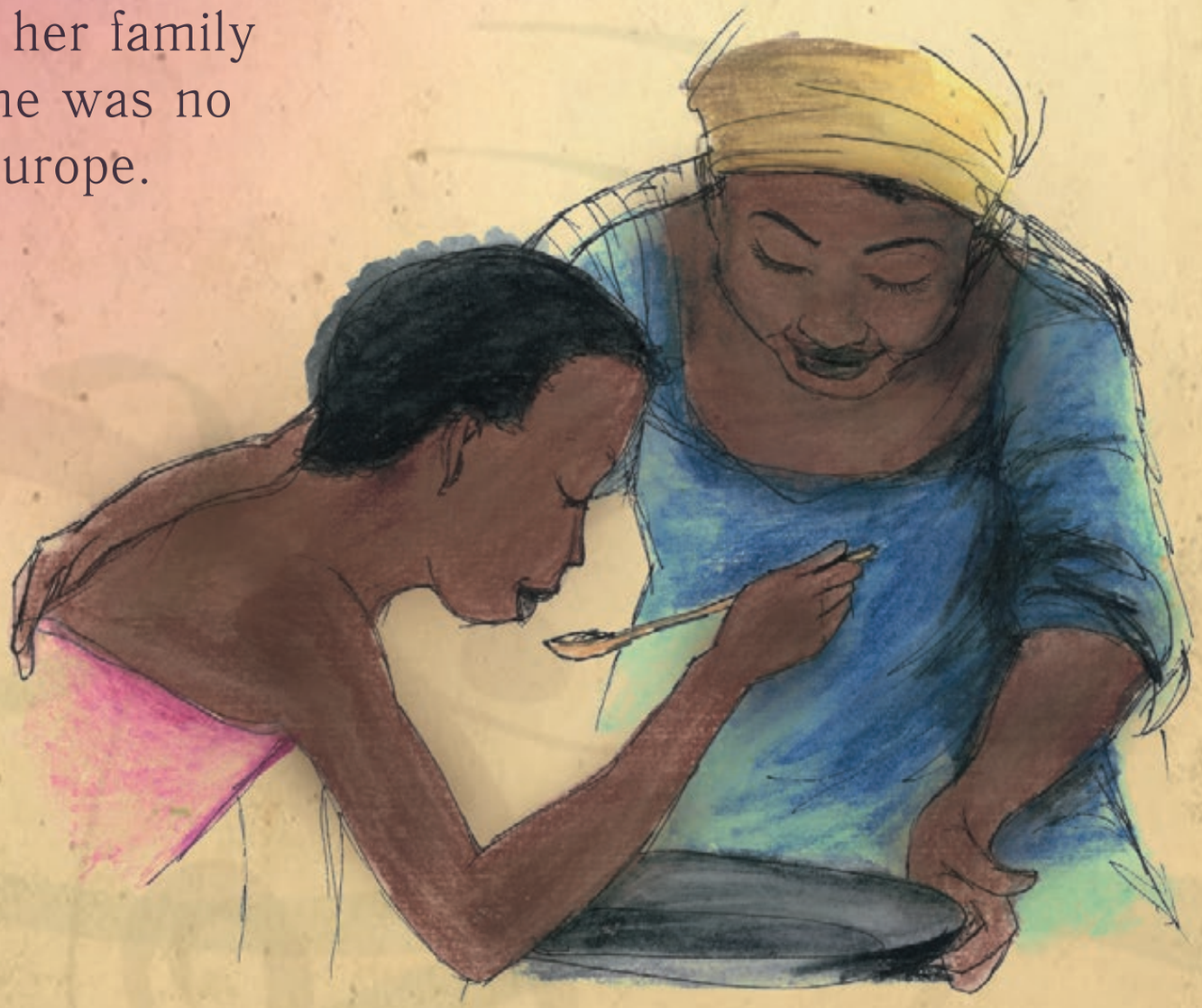
She never forgot her sister Tracy. “How is she? I don’t want her to end up in the same predicament that I did,” she thought over and over. Then she had an idea. What if I open a little restaurant? I can cook. I know how to prepare all these lovely dishes now.

She talked it over with the lady who ran the shelter. “This is a good idea!” she exclaimed. “We will give you a small loan and you can buy some pots and pans, a stove, a couple of tables, plates and glasses, cutlery, rent a room for three months and food from the market. You can pay us back little by little as you earn money.”

What a chance, what excitement, what a scary feeling! Grace gave it a try, and low and behold, the customers loved her cooking. Soon the two tables were too small, she had to buy two more, and little by little she paid back the loan. When she was sure that she would succeed in running this small business, she went back to her family, hugged her Mum and dear, dear Tracy whom she loved so much. She told her

mum her story and asked for Tracy to join her in running her restaurant, and to help her finish school. Mum agreed. A year later her brother Sam came too, to do the shopping and bring meals to customers who did not or could not come to the restaurant.

So Grace still was a big blessing to her family although she was no longer in Europe.



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