

THE SURVIVOR



Florence Agbah

Introduction

Florence Agbah was born in Ghana. She now belongs to a readers' and writers' group which meets weekly in Chapeltown Community Centre and is part of the Adult Basic Education provision set up by Leeds City Council. This is the first book of Florence's autobiographical series, 'My Way'.

"I always wanted to write a book but I couldn't read and write. So I joined the group at Chapeltown Community Centre. I'd like to thank all those who helped me work on the book. Without them my story would never have been told."

Text, drawings and cover design by Florence Agbah, 1986.

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When I was little I used to watch my brothers and sisters go to school. I liked it very much and I always wanted to go with them. But they would not allow me to. They used to send me back home in tears. Sometimes I was almost half way there, then somebody had to bring me back home.

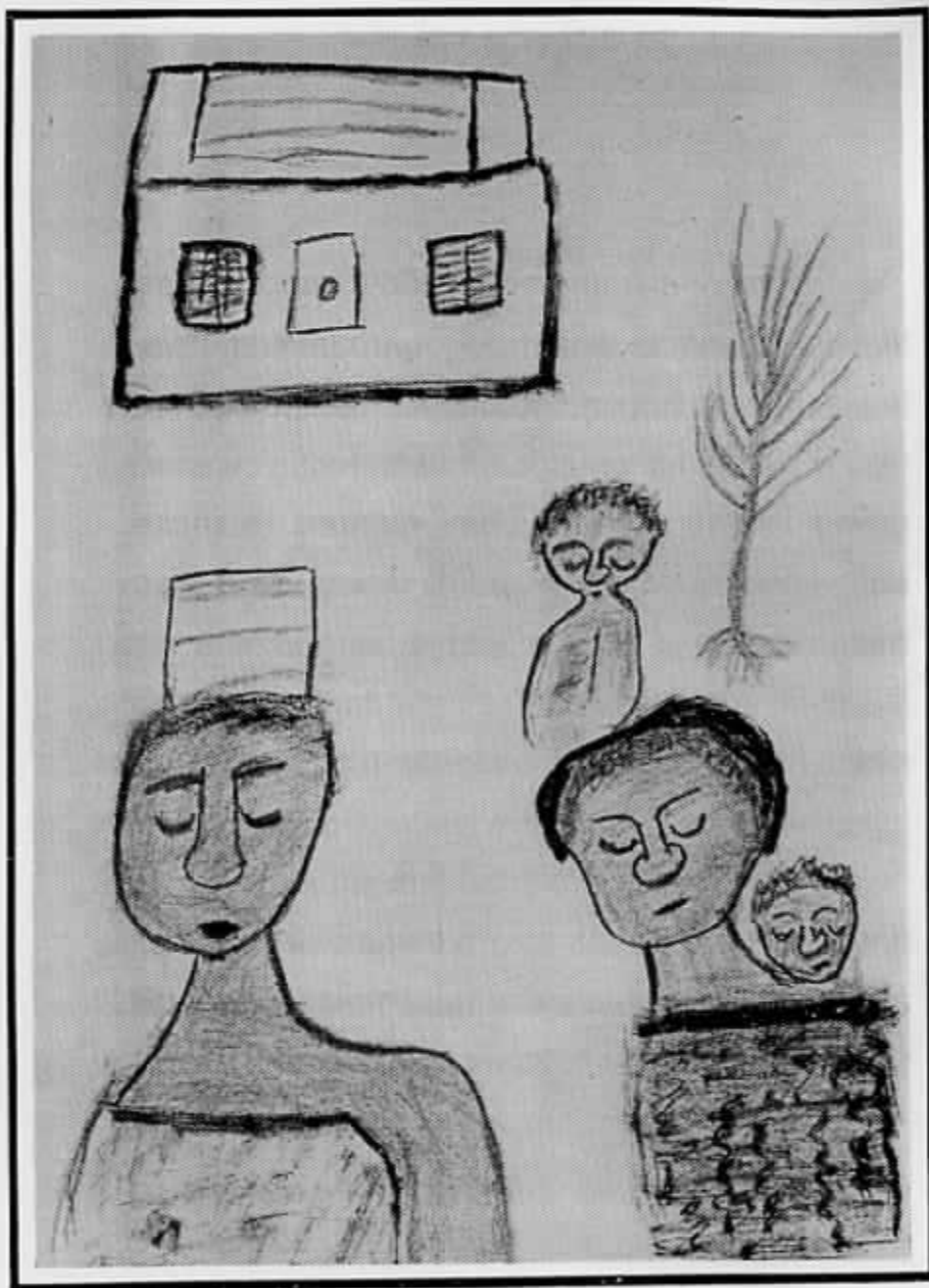
So one day I went to see one of my cousins. She was older than me. I asked her if she would like to go to school. She said yes, she would love to.

So I said, "OK. I'll call for you every morning. You just get ready everyday like everybody else does. As soon as the others go, we'll follow them".

So she agreed. So we started. Polly and I used to make sure that they'd gone. When nobody was looking, then we'd set off. When we got there, the teacher told us to get back home which, often, we did. And we carried on like that for about four or five months. Then after that, the teacher relaxed and he said "Oh, it's alright. If you want to join the class, you can do."

So we were all very pleased about that. We went home and told our parents. They were all very happy too because, at that time, you'd got to be almost adult before you start going to the school. They wanted to make sure you know what you're doing. And also because it was a little bit far from where we lived. So they wanted the child to be a little bit older first, you see.

So anyway we joined the other children and went to school, and we were very happy and you know, personally, I think I was a bit surprised that the teacher agreed for us to sit



with the other children and listen to him teaching. Sometimes he even asked us to join in. Anyway my mother bought me a lovely red dress. I was very pleased because she realised I really did want to go to school. And she was very happy for me. And my dad, he liked educated people. He liked having them around him. So he hoped one day we would all be educated.

So they were all very, very happy. Then about four months later the teacher started to teach us ABC which in our language is "ah buh duh" sounds funny, I know).

I was very happy. Oh, I forgot one thing. We had a half-brother and sister. Now our half-sister was older than me and my sister and my brother. So she, my half-sister that is, she knew quite a few things and we sort of listened to her because, in Africa, in those days, even if somebody was about 2 years

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The Ewe Alphabet

older than you, they were still older than you, so you had to listen to that person. So we listened to her because she was older than us. Now my older brothers, they were in a different school. They were in the Middle School so we didn't see them at all. We just listened to this half-sister of ours.

One day when I'd gone to school for about four or five months, it was home time and she said we should cross the road to get a drink of water. But we used to get water

from the neighbours, near by the school. So when she said this, we were all a little bit surprised, but then she was older than us, so we followed her and we were going to cross the road. She and my older sister were almost across to the middle of the road before my younger brother and I decided to cross the road.

So we crossed to the middle and by that time my half-sister and my older sister were on the other side of the road. Then we just

turned around and there was a timber truck coming towards us. My older sister ran from the other side of the road to where we were and by that time my younger brother was panicking whether to stay in the middle or to run back where I was and my older sister panicked too. She held him, dragged him, but it was too late. They both got killed. I must have been six or seven years old. I don't know. All I know is, I could never forget what happened that day.



So my older brother ran from the other side, to give the news to my parents. And I felt like I was dreaming. It felt like it didn't happen. It was like they were going to get up and walk. But then somebody told me, "Go drag all the youngsters from the roadside". I had to go home. And while we were going, a kiddie was bullying me. "Serves you right that your brother and sister was killed". But still I didn't know what he was talking about. I understood something had happened, but I didn't know I was never going to see them

again. This younger brother was my friend as well as everything else to me.

Anyway when that happened my mother and father ran to the roadside and they didn't know what to do either.

Well, somebody dragged me home. Then I don't know how many hours later, they came back home and then my father went straight to the forest area. And, according to my uncle, he was trying to hang himself. When my

uncle caught up with him he brought him back home. My mother, who at that time had a new baby, 5 days old, forgot all about the new baby. She didn't know what she was doing. She was just completely lost. And my older sister had to look after us - well, had to look after me and the new baby, because everybody else looked after themselves. Well I didn't need so much looking after. I washed and dressed myself, but I couldn't fetch water for the cooking and somebody had to cook for me.

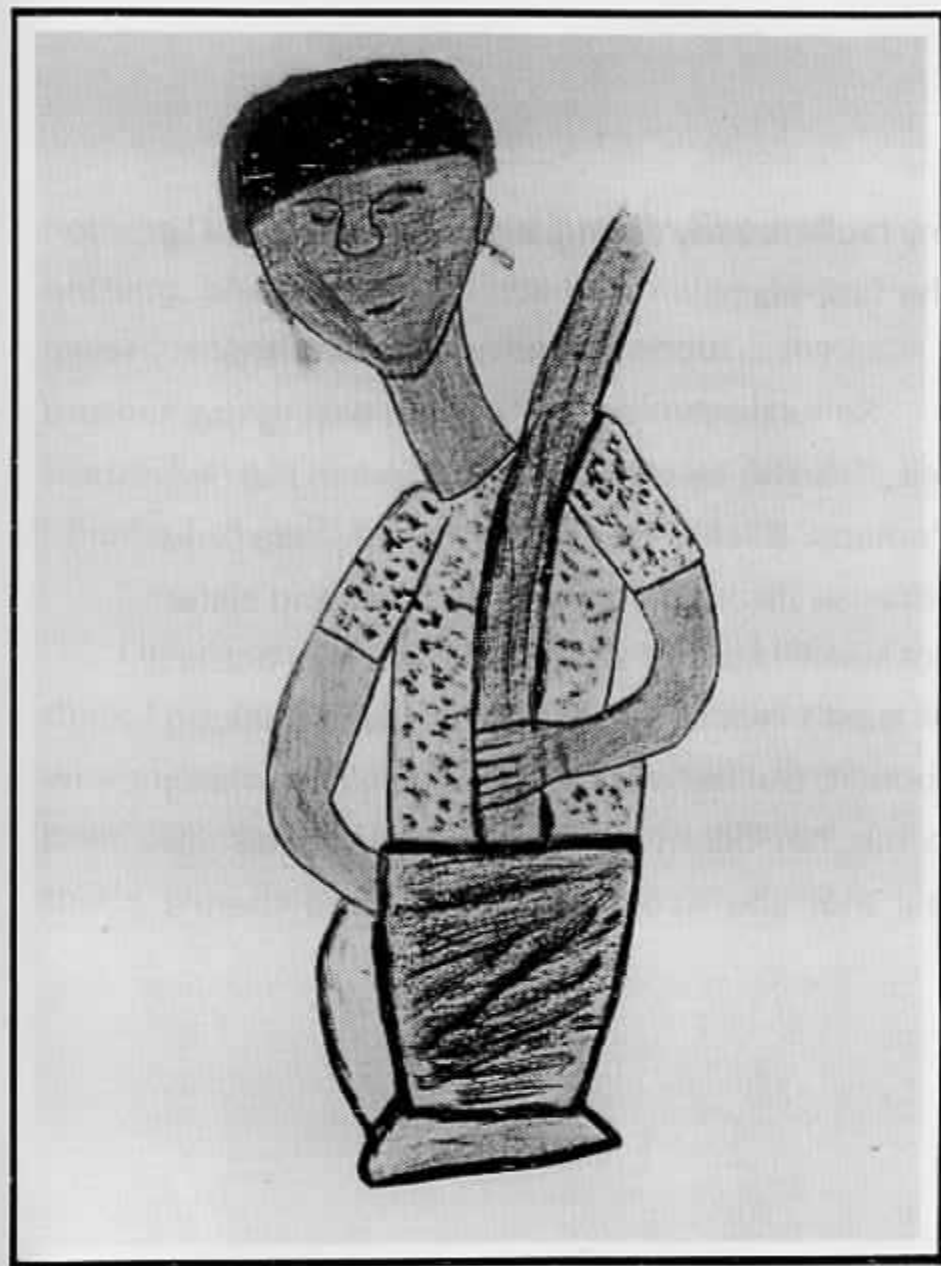
It was very sad. It was a terrible, terrible time for everybody in our village, because it never before happened that way - two children in one family to be killed like that. . . . So anyway, we got through it somehow, but deep down my mother, my father, myself and my older brothers and sisters, none of us ever forgot. We'll always remember that day. It was a terrible time and I personally got the worst. I felt that it was my fault that they got killed because if I was not determined to go to school, none of that would have



happened. My brother would have been alive. My sister would have been alive. So somehow since the accident, I have been feeling so guilty about the whole thing. Sometimes, if I'm not aware of it, it goes into the back of my mind. I also felt I've been punished because by going to school, I was being selfish, thinking about myself, nobody else. My older sister had been going to school for a long time and nothing had happened. If I hadn't involved my baby brother in the school, he

would have been alive today. That guilt was at the back of my mind.

Now a child can't go telling anybody these things, so I just kept it inside. And since that time, I've felt my mother somehow hated me, because I destroyed two of her children. Everything that she did, every movement she made, made me feel guilty. It was my fault. It was my fault that my brother and sister were killed. Although I was not the one who said we should go and get a drink of water, it was

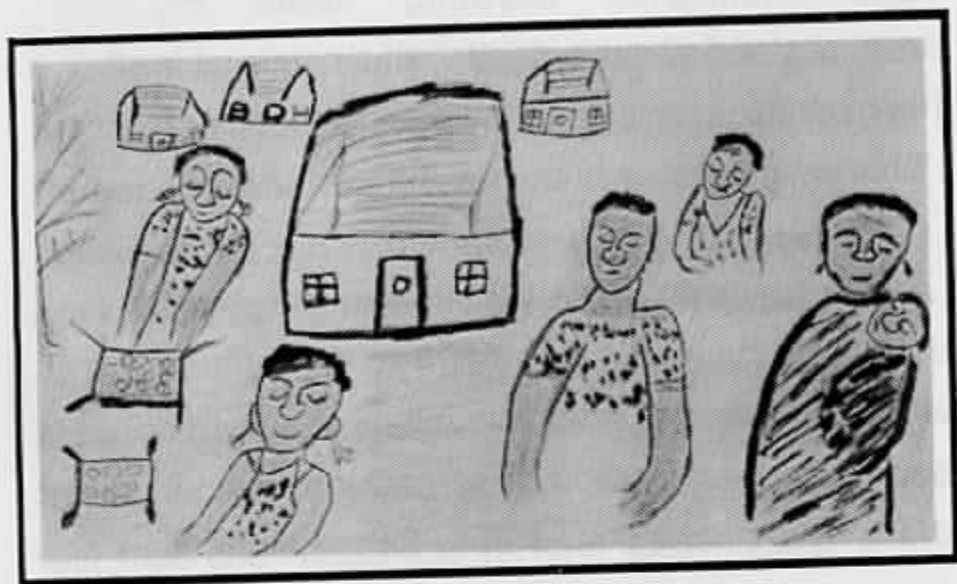


my fault that my younger brother was there in the first place.

So when my mother started hating me, I felt, "It's OK, because I am the one to blame". Perhaps if she had told me, "I hate you because through you your brother and sister got killed", I think I would have felt a lot better. At least I would know that she was thinking about it. But because she never said anything to me, her behaviour towards me made me feel that she hated me terribly and there's

nothing I can say or do about it really. She said nothing. She never mentioned my name. She never mentioned anything about my brother's and sister's death. All I know is, in the back of her mind, she blamed me for it and I blamed myself, which is a difficult thing.

Up till now, when I think about it, I still think I am the one to blame. And sometimes when I'm trying to read, I've felt, perhaps, I've been punished by God or something. Maybe that's why I can't read still. Because since



everything happened I haven't tried to read.

Ah, I've missed out something! When the accident happened we had to emigrate from our village to a different city. And the people had their own language, and their own way of doing things. And we carried on moving from place to place until we found the place we wanted to live. So at last we found the village school. By that time I was lots older. Too old, in fact. I asked my parents if I could join, and they said to me, "No, you're too old. The

teachers may take a fancy to you". And that was the end. I didn't go there after that. Because I still felt guilty that I caused my brother's and sister's death, I didn't push my luck.

But of course, now I am determined to read and write. I want to put everything that happened behind me because I've suffered enough. I deserved my punishment and I had it and I think I had enough. Now when my mother started hating me, my father began to

take an interest in me. He loved me very much. I never knew that before but a few years after the accident he showed me how much he cared. In fact if it hadn't been for the love he gave me, I don't think I would have been able to last this long. I would have felt the punishment more. So I am grateful that he showed his love. I'm also grateful that my mother taught me that kind of suffering because since I've grown up, I seem to have so many punishments. Some I don't even deserve, but because I know that I've been

through one punishment, I just go through any other without being destroyed. So, I am a survivor and I think I would like to call this story "The.....The Survivor". Yes! "The Survivor".





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