

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ The Boys Of The Band. Nkoranza (Name Changed). Interview With Akosua Asantewaah



She's called Akosua Asantewaah, a solid, good-humored woman of about forty years old. Some time ago her husband took his colleagues, all civil servants, as well as his own family by surprise by going to Accra for shopping and ... calling his wife the next morning from New York! Her husband Dominique has worked as an accounting assistant for over fifteen years. He is known and well liked in town. His wife kept silent but rumors were quickly spreading that he had indeed left Ghana. 'He went to New York, with the people from the band!' people whispered to each other and congratulated him on his luck.

Akosua Asantewaah, stout earthly and always where her business is, has three children and sells second hand clothes on the street. I ask her about the rumors and this is what she tells me: Oh yes, he left! How long ago? I don't know exactly, it will be a year or more ago already. It was no surprise to me, I knew that he was planning something with his friends, but of course he never told me in so many words. I felt it however and I was proud of him when he called me from New York that morning and when he said: 'I'm here, I'm in America!' I called my children together and told them: your father is a hero, he has made it to America! They danced! We made fufu that day which you know is the food we like the best and we had a party. The neighbors came. I won't forget that day!

He whispered over the phone as if somebody could still overhear him and send him back! Beforehand, yes, he told me that he wanted to go away to earn money for us, but no details. I didn't ask him. Then when he called from New York I knew he had made it. He sounded so happy. But I asked him 'Why did you not greet me before you left?' He laughed and I laughed too. Of course he had to seize the opportunity and go at once so there was no chance for saying good bye. He has a

very good friend, a musician. Often this friend gives concerts overseas. One time when things were really hot my husband did something very good for him and his friend said: 'One day I'll pay you back, I'll help you.' So I knew that he was waiting for help to get out of Ghana.

When this musician was invited to perform in New York he took Dominique with him as one of the band members. No problem with the visa at all. When they all left for the plane my husband joined and it all went smooth, he said. That's how he came to New York!

Now I am alone with my children but people always stop to greet me and it seems they are proud of us, so I am happy. We just pray every day that he may reach his goal and try not to worry too much. Or drink too much! We all pray that one day he comes back safely. And rich of course! I am more worried for him then for myself and my kids. He does not have it very easy. But he calls me as often as he can. Almost every week and when the children were sick he called every day.

He works at a hospital somewhere in New York. He lives in The Bronx if I remember well. It is a rough area but Dominique is not afraid for he too is black like all of them there. There are three Ghanaians together living in one room. Two work and the other one sleeps. They take turns. He already has a white friend who invited him over for Christmas, so he is not very lonely. They alternate working, cooking, sleeping. He has no papers and works under someone else's name. But now, or soon, he will have his own papers processed so things will go better. He may study and get a better job. In fact I think he got his papers now, because he is there over a year. It costs 2000 dollars to get them. He used to work with the name and picture of another Ghanaian but now with 2000 dollar he has received his own working papers.

I? I stay the same! I sell my clothes as I used to and pay chop-money and rent and clothes for the children, these things. My husband used to pay the school-fees and now too he has sent three times 300 dollars which covers the school-fees. So in fact not much has changed. But I think with the papers he can work under his own name and earn more.

The Ghanaians live together in a house and we look after each other in every way possible. He is not alone. He can even go worship in our own language in The Bronx!

There are blacks there like in Ghana here and we Africans do not look strange to them. It is easier to stay in New York then say in Germany or in Europe.

I think a lot of him. Every day I think a lot. Sometimes I wish I could see him, I long for him. I always pray that things go well. If I am faithful and don't think of anything but him then all will be well. The kids however ask every day: when is papa coming home!

Yes the kids miss him and I am thinking of him but I pray. The danger is to take a lover and I don't think he or I will do that. I care for him a lot and I know he does this for us and cares for us. Now with his papers he will come home and everybody will be happy and the children will all ask: 'papa what will you bring me, what did you buy for me'?

I have a good relationship with his mother, my mother in law, so when he returns there will be harmony. She wants money. All children have to look after their mother. I have a good relationship with her and anytime he sends money I tell her and give her what I can. So we will not quarrel.

I can advise other women in my position for I know how it is! Some take a lover, some only want money, some insult their husbands because they don't send enough money. It does not befit to insult your husband. Me, I pray every day for him. That is better. That is my advice. If you take another lover your husband never will help you again. If you are not free and easy with all the family then there is going to be quarrels too. Always.

Telephone conversation between author and Dominique:

'Upon arrival here I went to the house of a boy from Nkoranza and lived there and used his papers to work. However after 4 months he left and evicted me from the room and I had no more papers to use to work. Then I knew another Nkoranza boy and stayed with him till now. At the end of the month he too is leaving and wants his papers back. Then I don't know what to do. When I live with a guy I pay for the rent and pay for using the work-permit so there is not much left. I could not save anything. I hope at the end of the month to find another person that will take me in so I can continue to work. There used to be a general amnesty for us but they stopped that. Maybe there will come a time that they will start it again. I keep hoping. What people do is marry someone, not a real marriage but for the papers. You usually pay a thousand dollars and sometimes you get cheated. After

you pay the person may disappear. Anyway I have not decided to even try that yet.'□

Second call week later:

'Maame, yes, it is 8 here and we are preparing for church, a large Pentecostal church and all who worship there are Ghanaians, about 400 of us, not counting the children. Yes and the preacher is also Ghanaian and there are no black Americans or whites just us. The relationship with the American blacks is okay, it is cordial but we do not know what they are saying. Sometimes they are saying something like 'hey man', and we always lose track of what they want to say, but we are cordial. Of course they are also pretty rough! One night I came home from my shift and a black man was standing there and looking at me angrily and said 'Hey, what are you looking at me for, man, are you looking at me, you fucking son of a bitch, what are you glaring at me for!' He was going to chase me and I looked away and said I am not looking at you and reached my house in time. He laughed. Did you find another room? Not yet, but I'm leaving for church now!'

After almost six months I went to greet the wife and asked her how she, the children and her husband are faring. Apologized for the long delay!

'He is all right. Still the same. Same. I don't know what happens to him. But he still calls often and I still miss him a lot. Same address yes!'

She is short.

Three months later, I tried to call him but the telephone seems dead. Then two weeks later I call again.

'What the fuck are you calling me for! Fuck you man. Fucking shit why don't you leave me alone. I am trying to sleep, lady!'

I hang up. It wasn't him.

Now what?