Innocence

Afternoons in Ghana for me were like no other. I was free. From the moment I would wake up all I wanted to do was go outside and play in the garden. My brothers, cousins and I would run around my uncles garden for hours without having a single care or worry. In the garden our imagination would run wild, there were no limits on who we were, where we would go. This was every child’s dream and here we were living it.

We spent countless afternoons engaging in our favorite activity, bothering the family of chickens. It was quite simple actually, get a small pebble and toss it at a hen. Well maybe there is a little more to it than that. We wouldn’t just get any pebble, we would take our time and find the perfect pebble. Not too small, not too large just the ideal size to get the reaction we desired from the hen. There were never any winners, we usually play until the family of chickens were out of sight, so I’m not sure why it is that we enjoyed this game so much. Maybe it was the way the hen crooned whenever we got too close or the way her feathers would stand up that kept us constantly entertained. But something was different about this afternoon in July, something I wish I could go back and change.

Heavy gray clouds from the night before are long gone. The sun was out and shining, casting a golden tint over the garden unstopped by the few shadow less wisps of white lingering
in the sea of blue. The garden was shining as was everything in it. It must have rained the previous night. Leaves from the plantain trees were scattered on the ground still shiny and wet.

“Folake I see them”, my brother called out to me a not too far from where I was standing. I ran to him, gravel crunching beneath me, knowing we were about to play our favorite game. Ready… Set… Toss! As usual I missed but my brother hit the hen causing it to squawk at us and ruffle its feathers. “c’mon you cheated I wanna try again” I whined. This time I was determined to reach the bright white hen and I found the perfect pebble to do so. Ready…. Set…. Toss! Nothing. No squawk or croon just silence. The hen turned and slowly walked back towards her chicks as my brother and I watched in silence. For those few seconds everything seemed to be still not even a breeze to disrupt the stillness of the moment. Our gazes met, her eye beady and black but behind it was a burning sadness, pain and anger. As long as this moment of stillness seemed to take it was over and the hen began to lead her chicks to the shiny bushes still wet from rain. Of course my brother and I went to investigate right away.

My worst fear had been confirmed, I had accidently killed one of her chicks. Suddenly it didn’t feel so warm outside, I could feel my hairs beginning to stand up starting from my arms spreading quickly as goosebumps cloaked my body. My stomach felt tight and turned with nausea and disgust from my actions and my view of the lifeless chick before me. I was distraught. I was furious with myself for playing the stupid pointless game. I wanted to be anyone else but me. I couldn’t keep calm, I was panicked and crying and my uncle just didn’t
I couldn’t see how serious this was. What did he find so amusing about my horrible act? Well according to him we were all going to eat the chicken eventually. And I suppose this was an attempt to make me feel better which failed horribly. I still felt terrible, my cousin told me to pray which helped a little but still didn’t give me the closure I desired. I wanted nothing more than to apologize to the hen and all the chicks for being so foolish.

As much as I loved my uncle’s garden I found it difficult to go back without feeling down. It no longer felt the same to me, it felt cloaked in death and regret. I no longer felt exhilarating freedom in the garden but instead trapped and stuck.

Till this day I wish I could go back and stop myself from throwing those rocks. I have also thought back and realized there was some truth to my uncle’s words. And I suppose I felt guilty for not expressing the same emotions when an adult chicken is killed for my consumption. And although it would be easy to blame my lack of feelings on the fact that the life lost was young and innocent but it would be wrong to justify my lack of emotions that way.

“Hindsight is 20/20” is definitely a quote that I have been able to resonate with more over the years. I think back to how I beat myself up for days over the loss of the chick and how I should have been able to avoid the situation altogether. But sometimes I tend to forget that I was young and innocent too and I just didn’t know any better. It took me a long time but it’s okay to
not know any better when you’re young. I was just an impulsive fun-loving child that failed to think the possible outcomes of my actions all the way through. At the end of the day there was no need to be upset with myself as long as I was. This goes for everyone that makes innocent mistakes. They are exactly what they’re called, innocent, and therefore there is no need to beat yourself up over minor innocent mistakes because life will carry on.

I’ve realized that innocence isn’t just one way and set in stone. The innocence of the chick was infantile and unknowing while my innocence was curious and thoughtless. Two halves of a whole, and when the two halves interact innocence can be lost through innocent acts.