

Nkonim

By D. Boczek, M. Darnell, T. Edwards

SCENE 1

Far left downstage, a beam of light is showing on the narrator as s/he speaks.

Narrator: The world as we know it today, whether we choose to believe it or not, is full of miracles. What you may think is not possible can be possible in someone else's eyes. Even here in Ghana, many people-- even people who live ordinary lives-- have great, miraculous stories to be told. This story is about just such a person. His name is Adofo. He is 24 years of age and has started working as a software engineer at Vodafone. He recently completed his Masters degree in Computer Science at the University of Ghana, and although the work is challenging for many new employees, Adofo finds it easy. But what *isn't always* easy is that Adofo is sometimes misunderstood by his new colleagues...

Light fades out on the narrator and the scene begins with Adofo beginning his day at work. Adofo has a routine that he keeps every single day. He is very focused on each task in front of him, which we see in his deliberate and practiced motions.

Adofo walks to his desk and puts his things in order. First he folds his light jacket neatly and places it on a shelf near his desk. He then unpacks his lunch, which has a container, silverware and a napkin, which he folds precisely as he puts each item "just so" on the shelf. After that he puts his phone squarely next to his computer and puts his headphones on and sits down to work. He begins typing diligently and is deeply engrossed in his work.

A minute later two co workers walk up to Adofo's desk, casually talking to one another.

Employee 1: Adofo...Adofo!

Adofo has headphones on and is so engrossed in his work, he does not notice his coworker speaking to him.

Employee 2 (reaches over and pulls one headphone off of Adofo's ear): Adofo! Welcome to planet Earth! We are talking to you!

Adofo is greatly distressed to be pulled so harshly out of his focus AND to have been touched. He pulls his headphones off and begins to “stim” by gently rocking and moving his fingers. He continues stimming throughout the interaction.

Adofo: What?! Please don't do that! Please don't do that.

The two coworkers give each other a look to suggest they think Adofo is overreacting and acting very strange.

Employee 1: Ooo-kay... Sorry man. We just wanted to tell you that all the new hires are going to the bar after our shift. Do you want to come?

Adofo (still rocking): No. No thank you.

Adofo starts to put his headphones back on and get back to work. His colleague interjects.

Employee 2: Eh, Ado come on now, I know we have a lot of work for the new system, but one evening away from the desk won't kill you.

Adofo: I said no thank you. No thank you.

Employees 1 and 2 give Adofo a strange look and then look at each other as if confirming that they think Adofo is very strange. They walk a few feet away as Adofo turns to his computer to get back to work. As he starts to put his headphones back on, he hears what his coworkers are saying and stops to listen.

Employee 1: There's something wrong with that guy, he reminds me of my neighbor, the cursed child. You know the one who lives by the new cafe.

Employee 2: Yes, I never saw the boy myself, but I hear him when I walk by... I never hear him speak any words but he yells and screams when something doesn't go his way. He sounds like the devil's own son.

Employee 1: Yes! Well I *have* seen that boy. He gets mad when even his own mother tries to embrace him. He yells, but he also rocks back and forth and does that strange thing with his hands (*he nods towards Adofo, pointing out the stimming behavior*). He has surely been possessed. A witch cast a bad spell on that family and left the son to rot. He has no friends, no love for his family.

Employee 2 (*Looking uneasily at Adofo*): We better leave this guy alone. He might have a touch of the devil in him, too.

Adofo (*Standing to face his coworkers and flapping his fingers*): You are wrong. That boy that you are talking about is not cursed-- and neither am I!

Both coworkers are stunned and look a bit afraid. They take a half step back.

Employee 1: You don't even know what you are talking about! Why would we take your word?

Adofo: Because I haven't been cursed-- I have been blessed.

The employees laugh uneasily

Employee 2: Only God can truly bless someone. You are clearly touched by something that is NOT the hand of God (*nods again at Adofo's hand flapping*).

Employee 1 (*chuckling*): Let's just go.

The coworkers turn to go, but Adofo stops them

Adofo (*sternly and a little louder than before, still stimming with either a slight rocking or hand flapping*): That boy, the boy you say is possessed? I think he IS like me. But he hasn't been cursed. He probably has autism. And so do I!

The coworkers look stunned as Adofo's open admission

Employee 2: You lie, Adofo! How could you possibly work here if that were true?!

Adofo: Have you not noticed that I pick up new computer languages faster than anyone here? That I can focus for longer periods of time than anyone else? That I catch mistakes in the system quickly while others still search?

Employee 1: Yes, but-

Adofo (*Talking over Employee 1*): It is all part of my gift. My autism has made a few things in life harder for me, but it has made some things much easier. Like Programming.

Employee 2: But you can speak! And you went to college, didn't you?!

Adofo: Yes. Autism looks different in different people. But whether one can speak or not, we all have gifts. I told you I was blessed! I was blessed with a family and a community who saw my gifts and supported me. I was blessed with a mother and father who insisted I get to go to school like other children--even though our chief told them it was no use. I was blessed that my neighbor heard about a school in Accra that helped differently abled people--people like ME, find ways of succeeding in the word.

Employee 1 (*still stunned*): I thought that was impossible...

Adofo: Well, it isn't and I am proof of that! My ability to focus, make sense of patterns and sequences and complete tasks to perfection were able to grow because I had people who made an effort to understand me. In fact, I was hired *because* I have these gifts. Our boss specifically asked my professor to recommend people on the autism spectrum *because* we are so good at this work.

Employee 2 (*sheepishly*): Adofo, I am sorry, I did not know.

Employee 1: We didn't understand. I am still not sure I do. But I'm sorry.

Adofo: I know. Just do me a favor please. Stop saying people with autism-- or any other thing-- are cursed. It is not true and it keeps us from getting support, which prevents the world from getting our unique talents. You underestimate the power that God has given us.

The employees nod and mutter in agreement.

Employee 2: Okay. But, hey, Adofo? I know you don't want to go out tonight, but would you want to some other time? I think we have a lot we could talk about.

Employee 1: Yeah man. The offer is open.

Adofo (*gets more relaxed in his body*): Honestly, bars are too loud and too crowded for me. But yeah, I think getting together for a coffee would be good.

Adofo turns back to his desk, while the other employees thoughtfully walk back to their own work stations. Adofo sits down and takes a moment to regroup. He smiles to himself before putting his headphones on and returning to work.

SCENE 2

A beam of light comes up on the narrator as s/he speaks.

Narrator: The world has its views of people with disabilities, and treats them accordingly. In Adofo's case, much of his disability is not visible and can take people by surprise. But what about people who have disabilities we *can* see clearly? Furthermore, what about disabilities that leave people without any eyesight at all? Nyameama is a 24 year old blind student who is studying for her PhD in psychology. She knows there are many negative and untrue beliefs about mental illness--just as there are about her blindness-- and she wants to help change that. She wants to be part of the solution to solve some of the suffering she knows can be helped with the right support. Luckily, as she works in the clinic as part of her schooling, her gift of keen listening helps not only her patients, but her colleagues as well.

The light fades off the narrator and onto Nyameama, who is sitting down in the break room eating lunch. She hears footsteps coming closer, and hears it's her coworker Afi on the phone, who sounds a bit down.

Afi: I know, Fatou. I will just have to figure it out. It is just so hard though. Anyway, I have to go now. Okay, bye-bye (*hangs up phone*). Hi Nyame, how are you?

Nyameama: Hi Adi, I'm well, but I couldn't help but hear you on the phone just now. You sound a bit defeated, is everything okay?

Afi (*sighing*): Yeah, I am okay. It's just that I have had this patient for three months now, and I'm getting nowhere with him. I really felt like I was getting good at this, but now I just don't know.

Nyameama: Hey, don't let trouble with just one patient take your confidence away.

Afi: I know, I know. It's just that we are so close to graduating and it makes me worry that I won't be any good at this out in the real world.

Nyameama (*laughing*): Afi, of course you will! I have gone through the exact program you have, and we have been prepared well. I have even heard others in our group talk about how good you are. There will always be difficult patients and not everything will turn as quickly as we'd like it to, but you will be fine!

Afi: I know you are right, I think I am just getting scared about leaving the security of this program and going out on my own. Do you ever get scared about it?

Nyameama: Oh yes, sometimes. But then I remember I have already overcome the worst of my obstacles and know the value of what I have to offer. Did I ever tell you about how I was almost stopped from doing this program at all?

Afi: What?! No, you never told me that! What happened?

Nyameama (chuckling): Oh yes! When I told my undergraduate advisor that I wanted to go on to become a clinician he scolded me, saying (*Nyameama wags her finger in the air and takes on a funny, mocking deep man voice*), “Child, it is one thing to read your braille textbooks and to type up papers. But how do you expect people to take you seriously when they meet you in person?! No, you can do psychology, but you are better behind the scenes, maybe doing research or writing.”

Afi (laughing at the impersonation, but also a little shocked at the lack of support): He said that?! Ah these old people with their old fashioned thinking...

Nyameama: Yes! But many people DO still think that way. Oh I was so embarrassed at the time. I thought, ‘he must be right, what was I thinking?’ But then, on the very next Sunday in Church, my Auntie Hola, who is always clipping coupons and articles from the paper, handed me a folded up magazine article.

Afi: What was it about?

Nyameama: It was an article about a psychologist in the United States who is also blind. He told the story of his journey, which funny enough also began with a college counsellor telling him he would never be able to do it. Watson I think was his name.

Afi: You are kidding!

Nyameama: No! Truly. He also talked about how a few people had not taken him seriously, but mostly he has done well. (*Laughing*) He even said that one of his patients was *happy* he was blind! This man did not want to be recognized on the street after sharing such personal information with someone!

Afi (laughing): I can imagine!

Nyameama: But that article was the only sign I needed from On High that this was my path. And I think about it anytime someone doubts me.

Afi: That is just amazing! Nyameama, I have always felt you listen more deeply than most anyone I know. You don't just hear the words people say, you hear what is underneath them. You can sense what people are feeling when they have barely spoken! I believe this really is your true path.

Nyameama: Ah thank you, Afi! What a lovely thing to say. Truly, I am just happy if I can help people. All people go through such similar things, yet we think just because one is blind, or one suffers from anxiety, that it makes us all so different. But all of us want love and connection and opportunity. Wouldn't you say that's true?

Afi (*reaching out and taking Nyameama's hand*): Indeed it is. And you know, you have helped motivate *me* today to do *my* best to make a difference for someone. Thank you for sharing all that with me. I will miss you dearly when we move on from here.

Light fades out.

SCENE 3

Light comes up on the narrator

Narrator: Strong support and access to resources for people with different abilities has helped Nyameama and Adofo find their place in the world. But it wouldn't mean as much as it does without friendship and community. For these two, being able to connect to other people who have experienced discrimination and judgement has been an important part of the journey.

Light fades off the narrator and onto Nyameama entering a cafe. She is happy and buoyant. She makes her way with her cane to a booth made of velvet and sits down. She runs her fingers over the velvet, enjoying the sensation and takes a nice slow inhale to smell the coffee and vanilla in the air. She smiles with satisfaction.

Adofo enters and goes to where she is sitting.

Adofo (*reaching out, giving Nyameama's shoulder an affectionate squeeze*): Hello Nyame! It has been too long! How are you, friend?

Nyaemema: Oh Ado! It hasn't even been that long, but it is so good to hear your voice I could just cry!

Adofo (*sitting down at the table*): I know, I have missed you. We have both been so busy working and studying and, well, doing what some people said we would never do (*smiling and shrugging*).

Nyaemema (*chuckles*): Yes, when I graduate, I can think of a few people that will be in disbelief.

Adofo (*clicking his tongue*): What you had to put up with... What did that one professor say to you? 'You can't help someone emotionally, without seeing them physically! Body language is everything!' That was a load of lies. I mean just personally, you've helped me without even trying! It is almost like second nature to you, you were meant to help heal things deeper than what meets the eye.

Nyaemema: Awe, you always know what to say! As much as I like the idea of proving someone wrong, support and encouragement have always played a bigger role in my successes. And that includes from you! Thank you for always being there for me.

Adofo: I agree completely. Who would have thought all those years ago when we met at that school for kids with disabilities, we would find ourselves here? Not only doing work we want to do, but still friends after all these years!

Nyaemema: I think your mission *is* to make me cry today!

Adofo: I don't mean to, but I do feel very proud of you.

Nyaemema (*reaching out to find Adofo's hand*): I'm proud of you too. And who knows what wonderful things are in store for us ahead. But enough about all that! How are you doing?! How's work?!

Adofo: Ah, it is going well...

The two keep talking animatedly as the light fades halfway out on the scene. We can see them, but can no longer hear what they are saying. The light comes up on the narrator.

Narrator: Whether one has a disability or not, we are all human and deserving of a good life. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, abilities and shortcomings. Sometimes the biggest obstacle disabled people face is not the disability itself, but the preconceived notions and judgements which prevent them from having opportunities. And without opportunities, one can never thrive. Every story is different and everyone has something to offer. We are all children of God, we are all miracles deserving of support and love.

Light fades out

The End

"SUNY COIL GLOBAL COMMONS" by <a>Timika Edwards, Darla Boczek, Mary Darnell, <a>NRCCD is licensed under CC BY 4.0

<http://www.openwa.org/attrib-builder/>