

ep-1-the-beginning

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00:00 Enid Otun: Hello, and welcome to the first podcast episode of If Women were meant to fly, the sky would be pink. The Beginning. I'm Enid Otun. This episode I'll be introducing you to the start of my aviation career as a woman in the '80s and '90s, how it all started, why it all started and how it shaped me as a future commercial pilot.

[music]

00:50 EO: My heritage is fairly unusual to start off with, I was born to a Cumbrian mother and a Nigerian father in the early '60s. By the time I was born, my father had long since returned to his native Lagos, Nigeria, leaving my mom to take care of me as a single parent to a mixed race baby in a time when mixed race babies weren't the don thing. Luckily, my mom was a feisty Cumbrian lass who weathered the prejudice and rejection with a mixture of impenetrable defiance and humour. She told me that she had taken me to three churches in Liverpool before she could find one where they would agree to christen me.

01:27 EO: But, I was duly christened and my mom looked on proudly as the photos were taken. My mom wasn't perfect by any means, who is? But she didn't give a monkey's what anyone else thought, and I'm thankful to have inherited that quality from her. When I was a toddler my father sent for us, and we sailed to Lagos on the Aureol ocean liner, and that took three weeks. I can't imagine how my mother managed to keep a 2-year-old entertained on a boat for that long, but we both survived somehow. My father met us, and took us to what would be our home for the next 15 to 20 years. Unbeknownst to my mother, he already had a wife who lived in the flat downstairs.

02:09 EO: He gained significant kudos for being the only Nigerian man in Lagos with not just one, but two English wives. Overnight, I gained two half-brothers and a half sister, and my mother begrudgingly had to put up with a fellow wife in the flat below. Suffice to say that although some aspects of Lagos life were very interesting and exciting, and that's after independence from the UK in the 1960s, our home life wasn't a happy one. Unfortunately, the charming charismatic image that my dad portrayed as he courted my mother and the rest of the world, belied a violent abusive side, which quickly became obvious behind closed doors.

02:53 EO: He was a powerful, highly thought of professional who socialized in the most prestigious circles. I used to have play dates with the head of state's children. He made it very clear to us both that he could do as he pleased, and treat us as badly as he wished, and nobody would believe us or come to our aid. And we believed him, it was true. My childhood and the entirety of my mother's married life was marred by my father's abuse. So, although it was traumatic when he died in a car accident when I was 12, it was nothing compared to the trauma of living with him.

[music]

03:39 EO: After my father's death I felt both devastated and liberated, I was sent to boarding school in Kent in England, and my mother flew over with me from Lagos, and she hired a posh Jaguar with a chauffeur so that we could arrive at the school in style, something I wasn't used to. She left me

with a tuck box bursting with treats and my new trunks, and my new posh uniform, and I cried for days after she left. The homesickness was hellish, but, even then I was beginning to get a feeling that I was finally free. Not many people have experienced childhood trauma, paradoxically, I didn't really know what to do with my new found freedom, I didn't really know who I was, let alone who I wanted to be.

04:22 EO: Boarding school proved to be an important time for me to experiment though. My fellow pupils and I all bumbling through adolescence in the way that people did in the '70s, by moaning and groaning our way through lessons and homework and living for the midnight feasts, Saturday lunch times in the Wimpy, you remember those? Showing our age a bit, loitering around the Pick 'n' Mix in Woolworths during our trips into town. All the proud moments come to mind, smuggling a bottle of Mateus Rosé on the flight back from a summer break and then drinking the whole bottle and rolling around drunk on the lawn in front of the headmistress's office. Such fun, or not, after I was caught.

05:00 EO: Planes were already a big part of my life, I flew back and forth from Lagos to Heathrow at the end of every term. I was complete with a big red tag hanging around my neck, singling me out as an unaccompanied minor. I always flew British Caledonian sitting at the back to try to get away from the smokers up front. What a time to be alive! It never occurred to me to be a pilot though, despite all the air miles I was accruing as a child, and then a teenager. At school I was drawn to the arts and classics, but even within those subjects, I didn't see myself as an academic.

05:36 EO: I'd had all my confidence literally knocked out of me during my childhood, along with being repeatedly told that I was stupid and good for nothing. So, I certainly didn't imagine myself doing anything exciting in the future. I hope the next part of my story brings hope and confidence to anyone listening, who may have had a less than perfect start to life. I realised once my father died that my mom and I were basically on our own. I didn't have a lot in terms of family or support, but I had agency. I was free of his judgement and threats as well as the oppressive expectations of my African family, and little did I know that a day trip to a local air show was gonna set me on a path to a thrilling future.

06:19 EO: When I was 15, my mom visited me at boarding school. She took me to a local air show in Headcorn in Kent. And while we wandering around, I noticed a sign advertising 30-minute pleasure flights, and I signed up, completely unaware that this was gonna be 30 minutes that would shape my career and character for the rest of my life, pointing me in an entirely different direction. The pilot on the flight quite by chance was a British Caledonian co-pilot who often flew the Boeing 707s on the Lagos route, so I excitedly sat up front with him and enjoyed chatting and watching what he was doing. And then suddenly, he asked me if I wanted to take the controls to see how it felt. And before I realised what I was doing, I agreed, and it turned out to be the greatest feeling ever, thrilling and terrifying to be in charge of this plane, but also, just to be in the sky, above the clouds with such beautiful views, and such an amazing perspective.

07:21 EO: So once we'd landed, I wandered back to my mom to tell her all the news, but I was surprised when the pilot approached me, and to my delight, he told me that I had really good handling skills for someone of my age and experience, and that I should consider getting lessons. He then gave me his details and told me I should let him know up front if I was on board one of his

fighter. I was over the moon, it was a huge moment for me, not just because the flight had been so exciting, but because it was the first time anyone had ever told me I was good at something, and that I showed promise. So from that moment on, I began nagging my mom for lessons. Now, initially, she thought it was a phase, but I was unrelenting in my whinging, so she eventually agreed. And in a way, I think she was relieved I finally had some idea of what I wanted to do.

08:11 EO: So at 17, I had a few lessons in England, and then throughout the summer holidays, I took lessons at the Lagos Flying Club. My 18th birthday, and the end of my school years were rapidly approaching. I used to buy the monthly magazine, Flight, and when I wasn't learning to fly, I wrote to every major airline they featured, asking them to take me on and with some sort of sponsorship: Air UK, Dan-Air, Britannia, British Air Ferries, BEA, GB Airways, and many more received my eager but naive letters. Obviously, I didn't tell any of these prospective employers that I had yet to conquer my air sickness, and that none of the science or maths qualifications they required, I had. But neither did I mention I actually spent quite a lot of time wondering if I could be better suited being an air traffic controller.

09:06 EO: So as the rejections came in and other letters remained unanswered, I persevered with my lessons, and on my 18th birthday, I completed my private pilot's license in a little over the 40-hour minimum. Celebrating a newly qualified private pilot was an age old tradition at the Flying Club. It consisted of sitting in the old ejector seat of a now scrapped Nigerian Air Force MiG-21 which had been positioned outside the club house, the ejector seat, not the aircraft. You were soaked with a freezing cold bucket of water whilst your fellow students looked on and laughed; mark you, they were also clapping as well, "Welcome to the fraternity." I was finally a pilot.

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