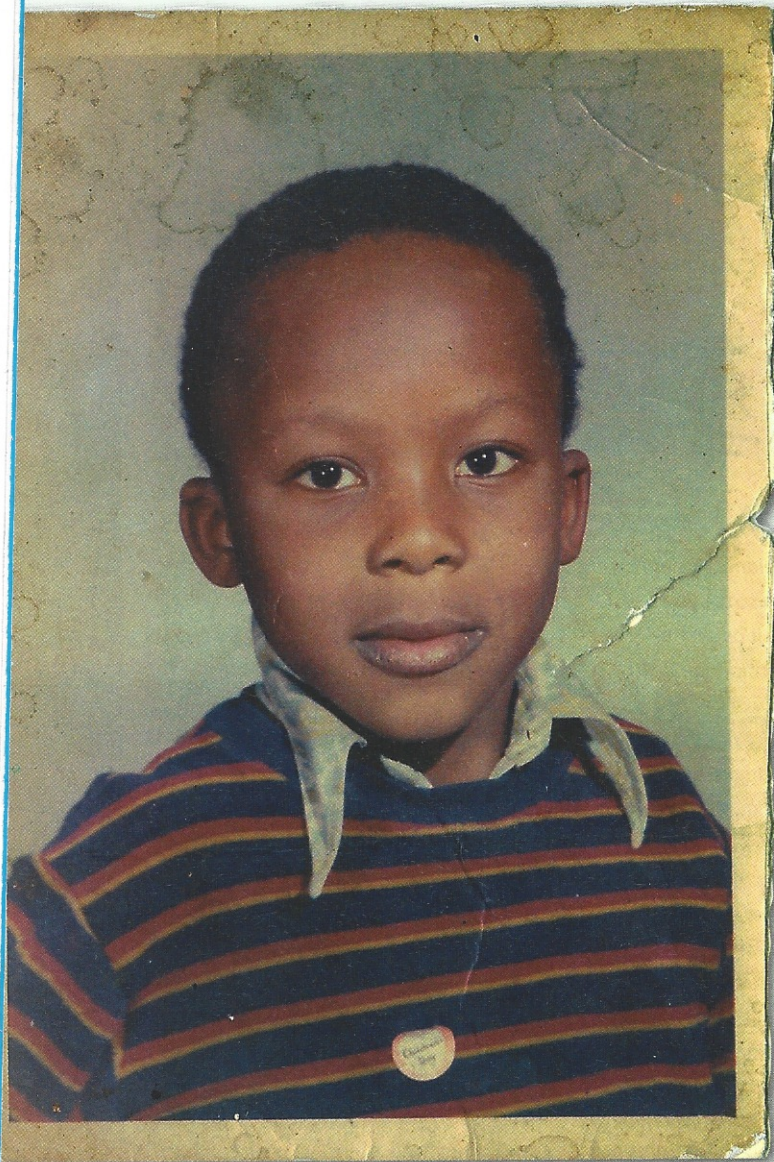


# Time *Will* TELL

## Healing After Parental Child Abduction

**Jennifer May** chats with Yemi Elegunde, who was just 7 when he was abducted from his mother in London, by his father, and taken 3,000 miles away to Nigeria, alongside his 5 year old sister.



*'Bisi and I held hands tightly as we walked along the muddy, bumpy clay road. We were trying to keep up with dad who was a few steps ahead of us, hauling a couple of large suitcases. It was a warm night... there was a light drizzle falling and it was mostly dark along the road. There was very little light. A few of the small houses we could see had candles flickering in the wind... I could see little chicks scurrying across in front of us chasing after their mother hen; there was a pig burying its nose into the smelly damp soil... what I still didn't know was where we were.'*

In September 1973, when Yemi Elegunde was 7 years old, he and his sister Bisi (5) were taken from their home in Holland Park, London and brought to Nigeria by their father. This was not a holiday; Yemi and his sister were victims of parental abduction and would not see their mother - or England - again for many years. In his beautifully written and heartfelt memoir, *'Time Will Tell'*, Yemi captures the confusion, heartbreak and loneliness of those wilderness years.

Separated from their mother in a country and culture that was alien to them, this book is his attempt to make sense of what drove his father to take such a drastic step, and to understand what it was like for the parent left behind. It also shows how children who are victims of parental abduction suffer, and the long-term effects such actions have on their future development and relationships.

Yemi writes beautifully, capturing the nuances of Nigerian life in all its colour as well as the voice of the confused and angry child; you can sense these children's confusion as they come face-to-face with a myriad of lively relatives for the first time, not to mention a landscape so very different from their London home. There was Uncle Joe, his wife and six children, with whom they lived on first arrival; there was the different food, latrine facilities, the outdoor well to be mastered, as well as a new language, Yoruba. There was also the vastly different terrain: *'I continued to wipe away my tears and look around me, at the muddy, derelict clay roads full of massive cracks... pot holes everywhere... little brick houses, some missing*



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windows, others missing roofs...the pigs, goats, hens and ducks wandering everywhere. The smelly gutters, half built hospital... the old women bent over sweeping the dirt off the clay path and the kids barefoot, I wondered how this could be home...'

Yemi's father never explained why they had been taken to Nigeria or why their mother was left so far behind. While he was encouraged to write to her, it didn't lessen his sense of loss. 'One of the acute things about parental abduction is the child is not allowed to contact the other parent, and often they don't even know how to,' he explains. 'I knew my address inside out and no one could take that away from me. I was able to write to my mum.'

The children were placed in a succession of boarding schools, where the regime was tough; corporal punishment an acceptable part of everyday life. They rarely saw their father. They adjusted (as children do) with remarkable fortitude; however it was far from easy. 'We were trying to acclimatise to a new country – new language, different food, people – it was difficult to focus on how much I missed my mum, but at boarding school I had more time and stability,' says Yemi. 'I was able to write to her. In those early years I missed her a lot. I used to go into a corner and cry on my own and wish I was home.'

Yemi wasn't told why his father took this drastic step until 2012, and he keeps the reader equally uninformed until the end of the book, helping us empathise with his frustration and hurt. 'My father came to England to study, and when he met my mum it was agreed they would eventually go to Nigeria. He went back before I was born

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A TRUE STORY OF  
ABDUCTION, SURVIVAL  
AND RECONCILIATION

YEMI ELEGUNDE

and took their savings with him. But he discovered it wasn't the country he left and he lost it all,' says Yemi. 'A couple of years later the same thing happened again. At that point my mum (who was Jamaican) decided she was no longer going and made that categorically clear.'

His father was determined to go back. 'He was under a lot of pressure from family,' he explains. 'They said that even if he came home without a degree but with his children, they would respect him as a man. I also believe he couldn't bear to go without his children. He knew my mum would never agree, so planned the abduction.'

Did his father understand the impact his decision had on his children? 'No. He hadn't a clue,' says Yemi. 'This happened in 1973 and we only spoke about it in 2012, but in all those years he knew I was angry with him but he never understood why.'

Talking to his mother also helped Yemi understand what she went through. She had been devastated by her children's abduction, but got no help from any government agency or organization. 'My mother broke down completely when she realised we were gone,' says





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Yemi. *'It was as if she had found her two children dead in the house. She was so distraught.'*

She was offered no help. *'She knocked on doors, the foreign office, but no one would help her,'* says Yemi. *'The police didn't know what to do either. All they said was that if she went to Nigeria herself, and got us back and then made her way to an Embassy they would help repatriate us.'*

He admits that his experiences affected his personal relationships. *'For years I thought this had only happened to us and I didn't mix with people that much,'* he says. *'Thirty years later when I started writing about it, I realised having grown up as a very independent person I wouldn't let people near me; into my inner self. It was only on reading (my) book myself that I realised I was pushing people away. I wasn't close to my father in Nigeria, so in essence I grew up without a mother or father and I wouldn't let anyone else in.'*

The birth of his own daughter was the driving force behind Yemi mending his fractured parental relationships and coming to terms with his childhood. *'It was important for me when I had my daughter that whatever I did in my life I never wanted her to feel she couldn't talk to me,'* he says. *'And therefore I had the urge to lead by example.'* The love and respect he feels for both parents shines through, albeit tinged with regret that his childhood in Britain – a place he always considered home – was taken from him. But hearing his parents' side of the story has enabled him both to forgive and heal.

Have things improved for children at risk since those days when there was no support available for the parent left behind? *'I've done*

*quite a bit of work with Reunite International, and the statistics are that a child is taken every other day from this country,'* says Yemi. *'In America it's double that. But the reality is worse because a lot of people don't report straight away. What we do have now is the Hague Convention, which has been signed by various countries, but that doesn't necessarily mean a child will be rescued. A lot of countries haven't signed up to it in the first place. We do have a bit more awareness now and a bit more help than in my time, but it's still a big issue. Part of my idea in writing this book was to try and show what that separation does to children and help other people.'*

What would he say to people who may be considering taking a child? *'That is the perfect question really. My explanation is, don't think that the child is too young. I was 7 and 40 years on I can still tell you everything – I could write this whole book again from memory. The scars can be long term. Some people have said it would drive them crazy. Everyone understands that sometimes two people cannot live together, but they should try and solve it amicably. It's no good for the parent left behind. It's no good for the child.'*

• *'Time Will Tell'* Yemi Elegunde's award winning book is published by Matador and available in bookshops and online.

• **Reunite International:** [www.reunite.org](http://www.reunite.org)

• **Irish Centre for Parentally Abducted Children (ICPAC)** is a registered charity offering advice on International child abduction. Tel: 01 6620667