
Denison Bank

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Abstract

Denison Bank illustrates the complex challenges Black immigrants from Africa face as they seek freedom in the Western world. Chinedu, a young immigrant from Nigeria, arrives in Toronto with aspirations of becoming a teacher, only to have his hopes and dreams thwarted by the harsh realities of anti-Black racism and xenophobia. Struggling to make ends meet, he finds employment selling accidental death insurance at Denison Bank after encountering microaggressions and prejudices during the hiring process. *Denison Bank* chronicles Chinedu's journey toward achieving his dreams, highlighting his critical personal growth, experiences with migration and racism, as well as the enriching relationships he forms and maintains with people in his homeland and abroad.

Keywords

African diaspora, Canadian citizenship, Nigerian immigration, migration narratives

"You have what it takes to do well here. You're real, and that's what this job requires. Plus, they really need people like *you* here, that's the new thing now," Marlene said to Chinedu before she sipped prudently from the bitter coffee that she earned for being salesperson of the month. Chinedu marveled at how people could take such victories seriously. Marlene smelled of cigarette smoke and simplicity, a blended scent he did not want to get accustomed to. It was moments like these that made Chinedu envision giving up on his dream, packing up his few belongings, and retreating to Nigeria, flying weightlessly.

It was not that he had anticipated his new life in Canada to be seamless; it was that he had grown tired of working for less than he deserved. He had become diminished by his otherness and the social worlds he faced. Work at the call centre had become drearier and more plasticky than usual. Chinedu was faced with the superficiality of Toronto, wrapped in its pretension, causing him to reach his breaking point.

Marlene continued, "Bud, I was a millionaire before I decided to come work here and be a telemarketer, and I wouldn't change a thing! And remember, when you're selling accidental death insurance, make sure that you really believe – Oh hello? Hi ma'am, I'm calling on behalf of Denison Bank of Canada. How are you today?" As Marlene began her sales pitch, the other telemarketers continued their own calls behind the sound of her boisterous voice. *A choir of underachievers* thought Chinedu.

Marlene set the coffee down beside her computer monitor and pasted on a seemingly concerned expression after running her fingers through her grey hair that had a bluish highlight within it. Her butter-colored teeth flashed as she smiled, and the skin around her eyes appeared more wrinkled when she did. The conversation dragged on, her once bubbly voice flattening back to normal, then dragging as though being pulled over rocks. "Yeah, like I said, love," Marlene was becoming slightly irritated, "take the accidental death insurance for now, if you don't like it—though I'm sure you will, love—by any means just call in and cancel it. I'm not yanking your

chain, but like, you never know. You gotta protect everyone around you, all of yous! So, I'll sign you up? Super duper! You have a fabulous day! And thank you for being a valued customer of Denison Bank of Canada. Bye for now, love!

Chinedu rolled his eyes before Marlene could catch him and hastily rubbed his fingertips against his stubble. He was unsure which irritated him more. Was it the duplicity of her carbonated voice that fizzled every time she spoke to a customer? Or was it that he had recently graduated with a master's degree, and instead of successfully landing a job in education, he was preparing for a career as a telemarketer?

The Toronto sun infiltrated the small building, reminding Chinedu that he would rather be anywhere else than indoors on this office floor, where every worker sat crammed together in cubicles. He had not felt this claustrophobic since his first arrival in the city, riding the subway for the very first time. He found it so odd to be so close to strangers that their warm, sticky breath could warm the small hairs on the back of his neck, causing him to recoil. So close that their elbows could thrust into his sides, inducing a dry giggle. Once, when he went to hold onto a trolley pole, he placed his hand on top of a young woman's hand. The owner of the hand smiled at him as he apologized profusely, his head bowed to avoid her beautiful, almond-shaped eyes.

He would tell his younger brother, Debare, in Nigeria, about how people even took their dogs on the subway and spoke lovingly to them, just as they would their spouses. To this, Debare would reply, "Brother, buy a car, you're in Canada now! You should not be traveling with mad people. By the way, I'm still suffering here o, brother, what about my school fees?" It was after their last conversation about the subway that Chinedu decided he would no longer tell Debare about any difficulties he was experiencing in Toronto. He would fold up his disdainful stories and tuck them away like he did his master's degree.

Debare always failed to empathize with Chinedu. Every story Chinedu shared about his harrowing experiences as an immigrant, Debare would counter with an expectation for Chinedu to

send more money home to him, their mother, and their father. Chinedu sent home a portion of the money he earned as a telemarketer on probation at Denison. He sent funds to help his father pay for legal fees, his mother's business expenses, and Debare's school fees. The money that remained after such payments felt as insignificant as the English biscuit wrappers and crumbs found at the bottom of his carry-on bag when he first arrived in Canada. Yet to Debare, Chinedu was a newly rich Canadian who could afford to contribute more. Debare and the rest of the family did not know that Chinedu was making only minimum wage and was behind on his rent, nor would they comprehend how dire his situation truly was. His favorite shirt, now tight, his uncut bushy hair, frayed jeans, and worn sneakers could attest to this. There was no dress code at the Denison Bank of Canada call centre, no requirement whatsoever to appear like the quintessential professional or like his best self. He was not polishing his pedagogy or influencing the next generation of politicians, doctors, or great thinkers—he was trying to sell accidental death insurance and failing wretchedly at it.

"Hello, my name is Chinedu, you can call me Michaels. I'm calling from Denison Bank of Canada. How are you today, sir?" Chinedu said with his headset digging into his ebony hair and squeezing his pierced ears. The adoption of the name *Michaels* last year had not helped his employment situation. At the job interview for Denison Bank in Calgary, the interviewer struggled. "Shy-knee-dough, shy-knee-dough? Sounds like a Chinese dessert!" the interviewer said with an arrogant smirk as he glanced over Chinedu's resume.

Chinedu kept calm. "Yes, my name is sweet!" His high cheekbones raised as he wearily joked. "But it's pronounced Chee-Nay-Do. It means God leads, and he's led me to you, sir." Peals of laughter bounced about the interviewer's office, but the real sigh of relief came when Chinedu was offered the job in Toronto instead of Calgary, a city that he was trying out for job prospects.

Chinedu saw the customer alert screen pop up on his desktop. "I'm great, the wife and I are

getting ready to go over to the cottage." The voice of the customer sounded sturdy and confident. It was entitled and weighty, but Chinedu decided that its waves would not drown him. Instead, he would ride them.

"Is this a good time?"

Chinedu stood his ground.

"Yes, it is. We just came back from Shop-Mart. How can I help you, Chinedu?" Mr. Giles, the customer, had said his name correctly. Chinedu swallowed and pushed the wrinkled brown fast-food bag on his desk behind his computer monitor as if doing so would prepare him for what seemed to be imminent combat. He had started to become accustomed to Western food now, swapping jollof rice for greasy low-cost cheeseburgers.

"Well, sir, I am calling to let you know about a deal that I can offer you for accidental death insurance." There was an empty pause before the customer began to speak again.

"Nope, sorry, that's already handled through my employer and the wife's, so—"

"Yes, but Mr. Giles—"

"It's Harry."

"Sir?" Chinedu was confused and felt himself losing the battle.

"My name is Harry," the customer said with an empathetic laugh. "We don't need any formalities. Are you from Nigeria?"

"Yes, sir. How can you tell?" Chinedu asked while attempting to conceal his accent, his mouth suffocating those words.

Harry laughed again; this time, the laugh was more endearing. "No, the reason I am asking is because of your first name. The wife and I know a new couple who recently joined our friend's church from that place. My guess is that they left because of the heat." Chinedu was speechless, so Harry laughed again to signify that it was a meaningless and poorly delivered joke. "Comedy was never my strong suit," he continued.

"Harry, if you do not like the accidental death insurance, you can always cancel it. So, let me go ahead and add it. You have thirty days, death comes unexpectedly—"

"Wow! What don't you understand? I'm not

interested! You're becoming really rude and pushy. How do I know you're even calling from Denison Bank and not *Africa*?" Chinedu could feel the customer's energy – it was belligerent, antagonistic, and standoffish, giving him a lamentably familiar experience. The way Harry said Africa made Chinedu shudder and block out any other words that followed. He was acutely aware of himself, his difference, once he heard Harry say *Africa*.

Chinedu's demeanor became hard and solemn. "You can visit www.denisonbankofcanada.com. You can also give us a call if you ever need any assistance with anything banking-related. Our phone number and website are on the back of your personal and business debit cards." Chinedu's eyes swelled up while his voice began to break, and he could feel the penetrating stares of his neighbouring coworkers as he struggled through the closing of his catastrophic sales pitch. He felt overpowered and demoralized. Not only had he not made any sales at Denison, but he had just been insulted and stereotyped.

Flashbacks of failed interviews and short-lived jobs after graduation seemed to choke him, gripping his neck with vulgar force while subduing him to an agonizing reality. The memories of being told that he was too accented and of when an interviewer tore his resume now intrusively settled at the bottom of his chest.

Marlene was now standing by his cubicle. Her brown sweatshirt with holes failed to match her emerald-coloured eyes. "Just hang up! Plenty of other fish in the sea! You got the bait, kid, but hang up now!" Her voice was husky and encouraging while her coffee breath was sour. She had so many voices, like clothes in the closet that she could pull down at her convenience.

Chinedu looked at Marlene, then looked back at the computer screen that illuminated his pancake-shaped face. "And sir," Chinedu said sharply, "should you require any other assistance, I suggest that you and your wife both go to hell!" The awkward pause that had once visited the conversation between Chinedu and Harry reappeared.

"Excuse me? I have been a customer for

twenty-seven years. I—" Harry attempted to shoot back, but Chinedu hung up.

"Dude, what did you do?" Marlene's lips parted in a shudder. She placed her thick hands on her cheeks as if to squeeze her face together to add to the absurdity of the call.

"I took your advice! I hung up. Thanks for that, Marlene!" Chinedu said with a smug smile on his face. He rose to his feet and felt the feelings of pain and insecurity leave his body as he exhaled. He logged out of his computer and swiftly removed the headset from his curls before tossing the fast-food bag into the trash bin in front of his seat. He picked up his navy-blue backpack that was stationed by his cubicle. "Goodbye, I guess I'm not one of *those* people you thought I was," he said, specifically to Marlene.

Chinedu was headed for the door when he was stopped by Lara. The two had always talked about how much they loved Nollywood and Bollywood films during lunch in the staff room. She had been introduced to both types of films by her fiancé, an engineer from Mumbai, Chinedu had discovered. They would chuckle at how the women in each movie industry seemed so dramatic, and they teased the Nollywood actors who tried to replicate American accents. He loved how he could speak to his supervisor with such comfort and security, something that he was unable to do back home in Nigeria. Lara would tear off pieces of her homemade sandwich slowly every time Chinedu spoke, as if eating her lunch with care was a demonstration of respect for a new immigrant who seemed *lost in foreignness*. In recent days, Lara had stopped speaking with Chinedu, and she would look at the peeling paint as she walked through the halls so that her eyes would not meet his as he walked in the opposite direction.

"So, you're just leaving, like that? That's it? Are you feeling well?" Lara's tone made her sound worried about an old friend.

"I have never felt better. Lara, I've had enough! Today, I have had enough," Chinedu said in his *musical* accent.

"I'm a teacher, I don't belong here."

"Oh, that's right, you have your fancy-pants

master's degree," Marlene said sarcastically and bitterly. She was now behind him, engaged in conversation near the building door.

"Goodbye, you two, and thank you!" A weight lifted off Chinedu that both Marlene and Lara could feel as he walked down the building steps, retrieving his cell phone from his backpack to schedule an Uber ride.

Days passed since Chinedu's dramatic exit from Denison, but the heat from the sun continued to fry the busy Toronto sidewalks and cook pedestrians in the same way it did that day. From his downtown apartment, which he shared with four other roommates, he could often hear the acts of parading and celebrating, and he thought about how removed he was from summer life. After all, he seldom left his apartment and was living off the generosity of his roommates. He wondered if he was experiencing depression, the *sickness of the spirit* that his ex-girlfriend Sanaa had often talked about. When they talked about this subject, Chinedu would say that men could not have depression, and Sanaa would say that statements like that *made* her depressed.

Months passed, and autumn blatantly replaced summer's tranquility. Frustrated by the mechanical procedure of sending resumes and cover letters into an abyss, Chinedu often scoured the internet for free Nollywood movies to watch. He had already applied to many school boards across the country but never received so much as a rejection letter. Beer bottles, wilted fries, and grocery bags decked the floor of the apartment.

One Monday morning, in his short blue house shorts and white tank top, he picked up his phone and logged onto Instagram. He saw his cousin Austin's post about his new job as an engineer. He had posted a photo wearing a purple blazer and a yellow construction hat, accompanied by a caption that thanked his new wife for her diligent support. Chinedu felt estranged from Nigeria in that moment, angry at himself for having left and disappointed in himself for not being successfully employed. "That's it! I'm booking my ticket home," he yelled out to himself. "I should never have come to this country!"

The room was quiet after his outburst as if the

walls of his apartment had been silenced. Defeatedly, Chinedu refreshed his email once more before deciding to turn off his laptop. The email title and sender's name in bold made his heart beat a little quicker out of surprise; it was Marlene Ray from Denison Bank. It was not a potential employer who would validate his credentials and give him something to brag about to his family back home. It was not the notification of an interview that he would later be able to throw in Debare's face. It was only Marlene, and somehow that was enough for Chinedu--enough to make him smile, pause in the moment, and *be* in the moment. He read the email, his eyes dancing across the lines with unexpected delight.

Hey, stranger! It's been forever and a day! I don't mean to ruin your dramatic exit, but Lara found an elementary curriculum handbook when she was doing some cleaning, and I figured it must be yours. You need it? Plus, you still owe me for buying the card for Brian's retirement—that was your job! Speaking of which, any luck with the teaching thingy?

When he had first started at Denison Bank, Marlene had invited him and a few others to go out with her to throw darts and have a few beers. He was appalled at her, at the time, that she could flirt with him and call him her African prince even though she was older than his mother and in her third marriage. What business, he had wondered at the time, did a middle-aged woman have going to a bar, drinking, and throwing darts without her husband's permission? It was Sanaa who had forced Chinedu to let go of what she called his patriarchal ideas, and slowly, with each *Sociology of Gender* lecture she had dragged him to, as well as the passionate debates they would have about misogyny and gender roles, he did let them go.

The email continued.

The hiring freeze is crazy, eh? Listen bud! Nothing good comes easy, but I wish you all the very best from my oxygen-deprived heart (damn cigarettes). There's something out there with your name on it, bud, trust me. Oh, and I would still like to catch a Jay's or Leaf's game with you, beers on me, cause I'm assuming that your

paychecks are all gone with the wind. Boy, you blew up on the customer on your last day, eh? So unlike you, but hey, you never really enjoyed this line of work, and it was a matter of time before you erupted. I always pegged you as a pool boy anyway, even with your fancy-pants master's degree.

Chinedu giggled to himself and thought about his reply to Marlene. He thought about telling her to leave telemarketing for a career in stand-up comedy.

He would make it in Canada after all, he said to himself, just as Marlene had told him he would. Coming to the West and living the *Canadian Dream* was the hope of every little boy in Chinedu's village, including himself, and he certainly could never give up on teaching, his one true passion. Hearing from someone, seemingly genuine, who understood his plight eased Chinedu's frustration, though he detested that so many others mistook his confidence for arrogance. Going back home could wait, he thought, as he readied himself to reply to Marlene. He did not know when or how he would become employed as a teacher. In this moment, all he knew was that a beer with a brazen older woman, over a game that he did not understand, did not seem so bad.

It seemed like the Canadian thing to do.

Acknowledgments

To my good friend Mack, for all the wisdom, laughter, and fellowship.

Author Biography

Kevin Ufoegbune is a psychotherapist, social worker, and entertainer, and is currently completing his PhD. His Master of Social Work (MSW) practice-based research paper at York University focused on intergenerational trauma and psychotherapy within the Nigerian diaspora, utilizing a critical autoethnographic approach. As a therapist, he works with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community members, couples, families, and organizations (including the NBA), as well as fellow Christians, addressing issues such as spirituality, addictions, trauma, depression, anxiety, and other challenges. He enjoys singing, hiking, exercising, and cooking. As a television producer, he co-created *Flavours of Africa* on Rogers Television in 2016 with his mother, Mrs. Doris Ufoegbune. The series highlights African and international cuisine, culture, and narratives.