

A TRIBUTE FOR SHONA AT 30

# TRY NOT TO CRY

Letters, memories and reflections, from family, friends and colleagues



**For  
Shona Olalere  
Oluwatola**

Compiled with love  
April 2026

**Thirty Essays On Shona at Thirty**

# Table of Content

## **Foreword**

A Note from the Editor by Tobi Oluwatola 5

## **From the Olalere Family**

My Over-Darling by Mummy Pauline Olalere 8

A Discipline from Heaven: My Daughter, Tosin by Daddy Segun Olalere 10

My Sister, My Best Friend by Bayo Olalere 12

I'll Always Be There for You by Elsie Olalere 14

A Pillar of Love by Kayode Olalere 16

## **From the Oluwatola Family**

God Heard Every Word by Deaconess Comfort Titilayo Oluwatola 18

The Amiable, Affable Lady by Dr. Olatunde J. Oluwatola 21

## **From Pastors and Mentors**

A Daughter in Whom I Am Well Pleased by Kenneth Habuh-Rajan 23

Seeds in the Ground by Wole Soetan 25

The Outlier by Steven W. Popper 27

A Scholar and a Force for Good by Cynthia Cook 29

## **From Colleagues and Professional Mentors**

The World Is Finally Catching Up by Dr. Alex Tamunomiegbam 31

A Rare Combination: A Tribute to Shona by Remi Ogunkayo 33

A Heart That Goes First by Dotun Eyinade 35

She Leaves Everything Better by Olayinka Iyinolakan 37

She Truly Sees You by Jean Kyula 39

Madam Talk-and-Do by Zara Abdurahaman 41

## **From Friends and Sisters**

She Makes Life Make Sense by Zee Baruwa 43

More Than I Imagined by Tomi Balogun 45

She Made Room for Me by Blessing Idowu 47

A Heart of Gold by Timi and Anjola Sotubo 49

She Becomes the Help by Ngozi Harris 51

She Is the Kind of Person Who Stays by Rose Oketola	53
It Felt Like Home by Francisca Ovie	56
Your Love for Others Is Unmatched by Raina Fabo	58
On Purpose, with Grace by Jeni Anya	60
The Gift That Keeps On Giving by Grace Idowu	62
She Renewed My Faith in People by Obi Jemedafe	64
The Big Sister I Didn't Know I Needed by Faith Banje	66
A Rare Gem by Eniola Adeyemi	68
 <b>A Special Extra</b>	
Resume Virtues and Eulogy Virtues by Dr. Tobi Oluwatola	70
My Auntie Is So Caring and Loving by Bunmi Olalere	72

# A Note from the Editor

This book began, as many good things do, with a simple idea: ask thirty (30) people who know Shona best to write down what they see as she turns 30. Thirty-two (32) people said yes by the deadline. What you hold in your hands is the result.

Reading every contribution — some sent as polished essays, others as messages dashed off from a phone at odd hours, others as long voice notes — I was struck most by what I had not anticipated: the consistency. People who had never met each other, writing independently across four continents, and reviewing different seasons and aspects of her life from childhood to professional, all described the same person. This is worth pausing on. In a world where character often shifts depending on audience, the Shona in Ilorin is recognisably the same Shona in Los Angeles, in Abeokuta, in Yaoundé, in Cyprus, in Santa Monica, in boardrooms as well as in the kitchen. That coherence is the first and most significant finding of this collection. Several themes recur with enough frequency across the essays to be worth naming.

The first is service as default behaviour. Contributor after contributor — her mother, her colleagues, her friends, women who met her only twice before she cared for them through a hospital discharge — describe a person who moves toward need without being asked. Ngozi Harris writes that Shona does not merely offer help; she becomes the help. Rose Oketola notes that she showed up to midnight prayer meetings not because she was obligated to, but because she simply does not do things halfway. Zara Abdurahaman describes a move she was too ill to finish; Shona took over. These are not isolated acts of generosity. They are a pattern so consistent that it constitutes character.

The second theme is the quality of her attention. What Jean Kyula calls “seeing people,” what Grace Idowu describes as listening for patterns and what is left unsaid, what Blessing Idowu experienced as a boss who created safe space rather than pressure — these are different words for the same thing. Shona pays close attention to people. She remembers names, birthdays, sizes, preferences. She anticipates needs. I tell the story of how on her first trip to Nigeria, she had compiled a list of every person I had ever mentioned and arrived with a gift for each of them. This is not a social skill. It is a form of love made operational.

The third is the relationship between her faith and her conduct. Contributors from very different contexts — pastors, RAND faculty, business colleagues, childhood friends — all observe that her faith is not a separate compartment of her life but the architecture of it. Pastor Kenneth, who knew her as a university student, notes that she came to church not to be seen but to be formed. Steven Popper, writing from a secular academic context, describes a person who binds the world together — without naming faith, he is describing the same quality. Zee, who lived with her, recalls that even the workout videos were set to Christian songs. The integration is total and apparently effortless.

The fourth theme, observed by those who have worked alongside her, is what I call a bias for action. Yinka Iyinolakan writes that Shona not only means what she says but executes on it. Zara writes about a dinner conversation in Santa Monica about hosting a training in Nigeria became, within weeks, a funded reality. Remi Ogunkayo describes an employee who showed up with purpose before she had been given any direction.

Cynthia Cook describes her as animated by deep purpose, carrying her academic formation directly into meaningful action. Dr. Alex Tamunomiegbam observes that her courage is steady rather than loud — the kind expressed in continuing to build when outcomes are uncertain. These observations, taken together, describe a person who reduces the distance between intention and action faster than most.

I want to say something about the people who wrote these pages. Thirty-two contributors sat down to do something that takes more effort than it looks: articulate, honestly and specifically, what another person means to them. The quality of the writing in this collection is remarkable. Several essays are simply beautiful pieces of prose. All of them are honest. I am grateful to every person who contributed, and I have tried to edit each essay with a light hand, preserving voice and preserving the details that make these tributes irreplaceable. Thank you to Mummy and Daddy Olalere, Kay, Elsie, and Sway for writing from deep inside a shared history. Thank you to my parents Daddy and Deaconess Oluwatola for warmly describing your acquaintance with my darling wife. Thank you to Pastors Ken and Wole, to Steven and Cynthia, to Remi, Jean and Yinka, for the perspective of those who helped shape her spiritually and professionally. And thank you to Alex, Dotun, Zara, Zee, Tomi, Blessing, Timi, Anjola, Ngozi, Rose, Francisca, Raina, Jeni, Grace, Obi, Faith, and Eniola — for writing with such care and such specificity. You made this book.

A note on structure: the book opens with Shona's immediate family — the Olaleres — and then the Oluwatolas. Pastors, mentors, and professional colleagues follow, and then the wider circle of friends, especially drawn from Shona's PrayHer Circle. In this edition, my own tribute appears near the close, just before Bunmi's final essay. Special thanks to Raina and Elsie for helping to coordinate responses from the ladies of the PrayHer Circle and her childhood friends.

The final essay, placed last by design, belongs to Bunmi Olalere, Shona's niece, who is ten years old. It is the shortest essay in the book, and in some ways the most clarifying. She lists the things her auntie does when she visits: the pancakes, the bowling, the books, the 3-in-1 water bottle. No abstraction. Just love, made concrete. It felt like the right place to end.

Shona: thirty people looked at your life and saw the same thing. That is not luck. That is the result of thirty years of consistent, deliberate choices about how to show up for the people around you. This book is a record of that. I hope you enjoy it and try not to cry.

**Tobi Oluwatola**

April 2026



**Mummy Pauline Olalere**

# My Over-Darling

**By Mummy Pauline Olalere**

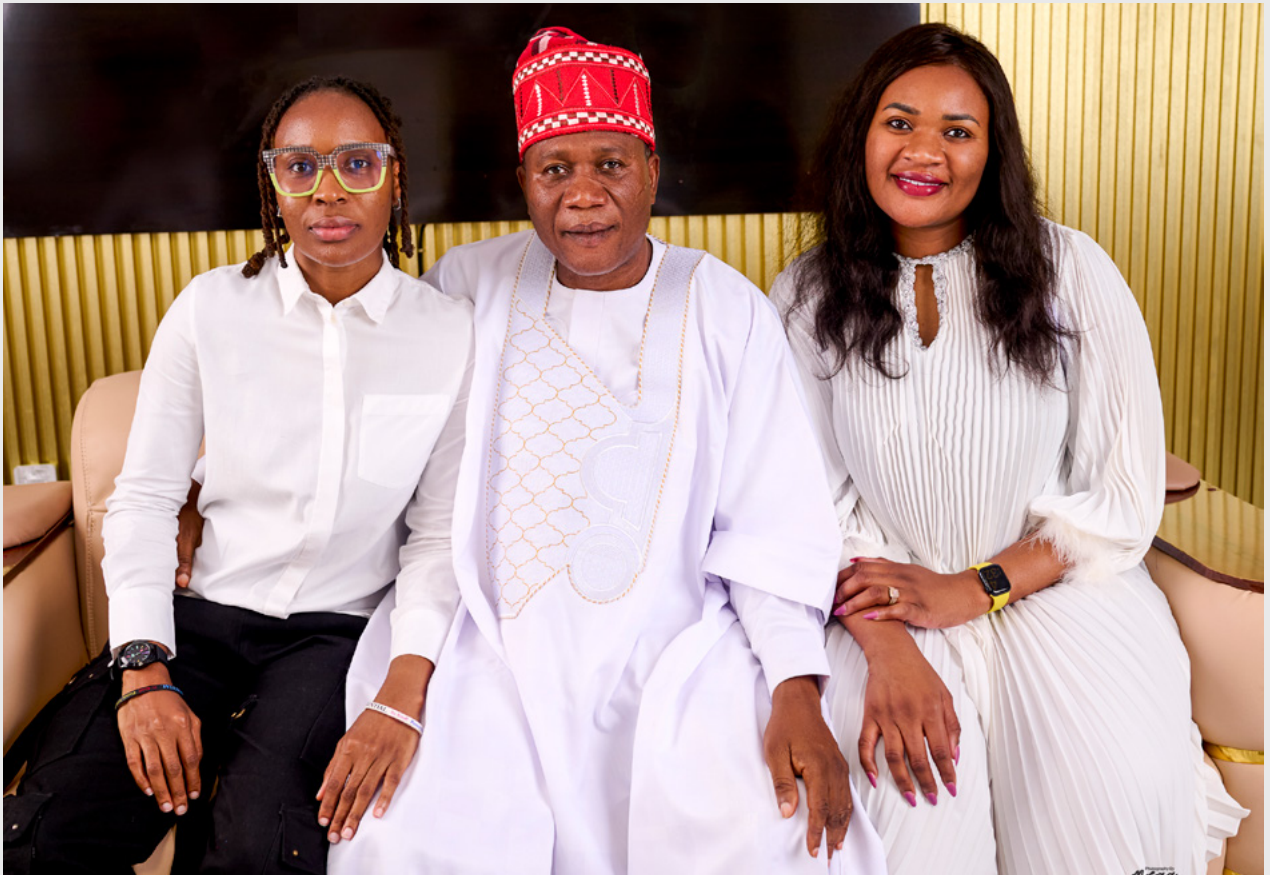
Thirty years ago, our family received a beautiful gift, and watching Shona grow into the remarkable woman she is today has been one of the greatest joys of my life. To know Shona is to know a heart that beats entirely for others. She has always been a deeply emotional and profoundly caring soul — the kind of person who consistently places the needs of everyone else far above her own.

If all my children were like Shona, I would sleep perfectly every night with both eyes closed. She is entirely selfless; there is nothing she would not give to someone in need. Her hardworking spirit is boundless. I have watched her endlessly cook for a house full of people, serve every single plate, and then quietly gather and wash the dishes afterwards. Even when she is completely exhausted, you will never hear her complain or admit she is tired. As her mother, I have learned to read her face and her body language. I see the sweat on her brow, and it is usually me who has to step in and gently force her to finally go and rest.

Long before she became the incredible wife and woman she is today, she was my little "Mommy's girl." She followed me everywhere. I still laugh when I think back to her days in secondary school and her daily, quirky routine. Every morning, before leaving for school, she would sneak into the pantry to mix Milo and milk into a thick, chocolatey paste and hide it in the freezer. The moment she returned home — before even taking off her school uniform or dropping her heavy bag — she would make a beeline for the freezer. She would sit there, happily scraping away at her frozen "ice cream" block with a spoon until it was entirely gone. Only then would she go upstairs to change and wash up.

Shona was always a peaceful child. She was never one to cry for no reason, and she was always so well-behaved that she never needed to be disciplined. She simply wasn't built for trouble. She also wasn't built for the "big girl" lifestyle. She has never been interested in clubbing or wild parties. In fact, she is only just now trying to learn how to dance beyond her usual, joyful "church dance." She has always had her funny little quirks, too — like the fact that no matter how hard I tried to teach her, she simply cannot tie a wrapper the traditional way to the left; she will always stubbornly tie it to the right!

Her spirit has always been incredibly industrious and wonderfully ambitious. When her father bought her a speaker and microphone, she eagerly started practising her singing, only hanging up her microphone when her sibling gently teased her about her vocal talents. Undeterred, she poured that creative energy into other passions — learning fashion design and dreaming up entrepreneurial plans, from running a shop in Lagos to starting a tomatoes business. She has always been full of vibrant ideas and the drive to make things happen. Shona is, simply put, a good person. She is my darling daughter — my over-darling — and I love her more than words can express. As she steps into this beautiful new decade, my deepest prayer is that she and Tobi reap the incredible rewards of her kind heart. I pray that her own children inherit her beautiful character. If they are anything like their mother, she will never have a single regret. Happy 30th Birthday, my beautiful Shona. You are, and always will be, a perfect gift to us all.



**Daddy Segun Olalere**

# A Discipline from Heaven: *My Daughter, Tosin*

## *Daddy Segun Olalere*

I could speak for an entire day about my daughter, Tosin, and never feel the weight of weariness. To our family, she is more than just a child; she is a profound blessing who has radiated joy from the very moment of her birth. Throughout her life, she has been defined by a temperament so calm and a discipline so complete that I can only describe it as "discipline from heaven".

In all her years, I have never known Tosin to engage in conflict. Whether within the walls of our home or out in the world, she has never fought with anyone nor raised her voice in abuse. Among all my children, she stands apart as one who never gave me a single moment of headache or distress in her entire life. Her honesty is immutable, and her respect for others is reflected even in the smallest gestures, such as her habit of asking, "Daddy, if it is convenient for you," before making any request. She has always possessed a truly listening ear.

Tosin's character was perhaps most clearly tested during her time studying in Cyprus. After she finished school, she began sending me photos of herself in conferences with various colleagues. When I asked who they were, she explained that she was working where her school had retained her. However, when I reached out and reminded her that our original agreement was for her to go there to study, not to work, and that I wanted her to return to Nigeria, she did not hesitate. While other children might have argued to stay for the sake of a foreign career, Tosin simply replied, "Daddy, it is true," and returned home out of pure obedience.

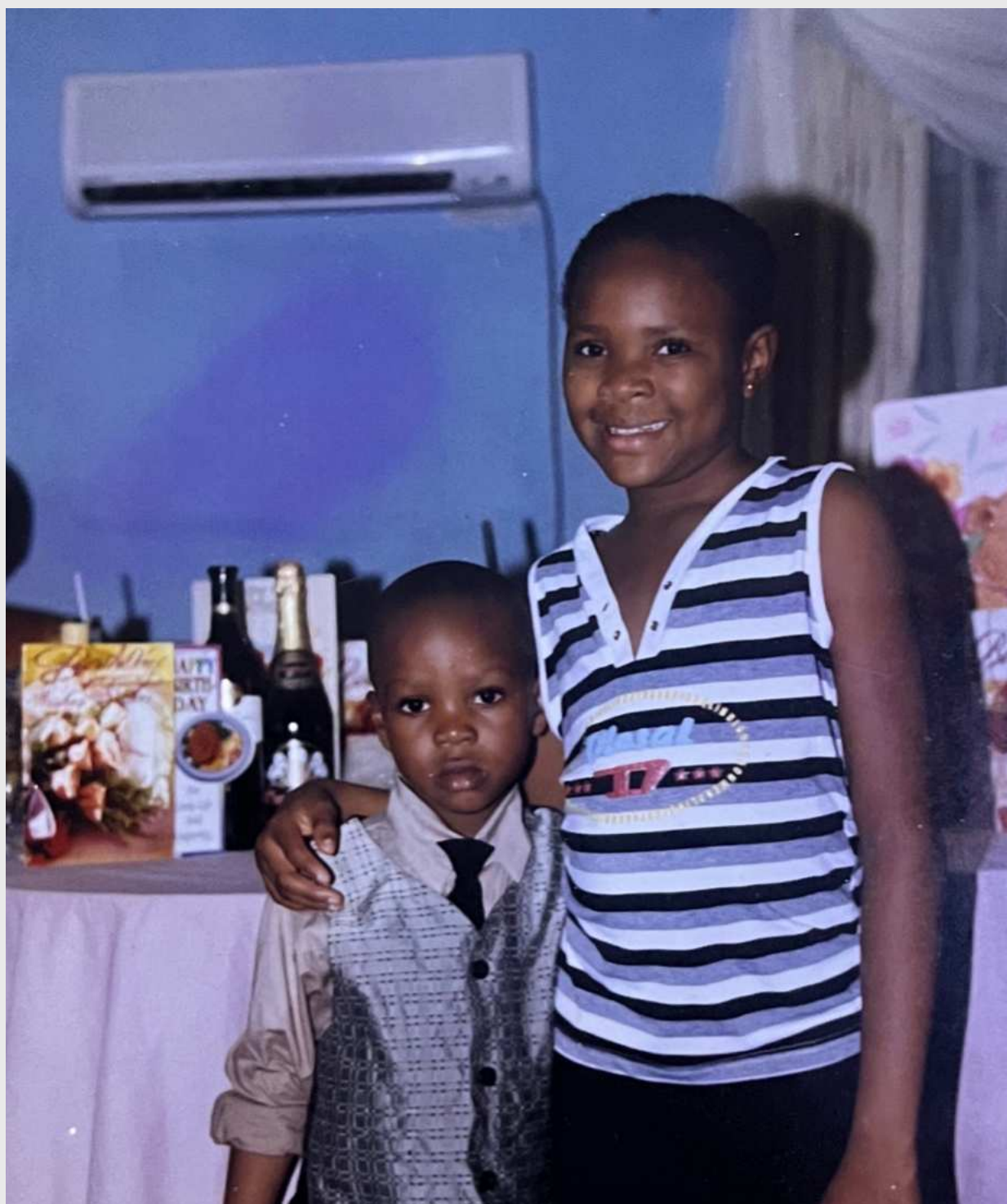
That same lack of pride followed her back to Nigeria. Her diligence was especially evident during her service at the State CID in Ilorin. She served with such distinction and heart that her impact remains a topic of discussion there to this day. I remember being deeply honored at a retirement party for the PRO, where he called me out in front of the entire club to praise my daughter. He spoke of how she renovated his office and how her thoughtful preparations—even providing a variety of fruits in the car for the IG's visit—helped him earn a promotion. The IG was so impressed, asking how they knew exactly what he liked. She brought honor to our name through her work there.

When she applied for a job and was offered a salary of 70,000, she initially worried the amount was too small. I told her, "You are not the only one that applied. You have the opportunity, they picked you, that means you are good". I advised her to accept it and simply explain that, based on her education, the compensation was modest. Not only did she listen, but even when told she only needed to come in three times a week due to the economy, she chose to go to work every single day. She even approached me about starting a small business selling foodstuff like tomatoes and onions because she saw people in her area struggling to find them. Seeing a woman who had studied abroad bring herself to that level of humble service showed me a heart entirely devoid of arrogance.

Tosin has always been a God-fearing person, deeply committed to the church and her gospel music. At one time, she wanted to be a musician, and I invested heavily in her, buying sound systems and keyboards from Dubai. She sings so well, though she was once discouraged by someone saying her voice wasn't clear—but she never let that stop her commitment to God's work.

I once wanted to say at her wedding that if there is a heaven, I am certain of two people who will enter, and she is one of them. Her behavior, her honesty, and her spirit have brought nothing but honor to our family. To

her husband, Tobi, I say: you are very lucky to have such a wife. Just as she has been a blessing to us, I know she will continue to be a light in your home.



**Bayo Olalere**

# My Sister, My Best Friend

**By Bayo Olalere**

Today, I want to talk about an amazing person who I am forever thankful to God for — one of the two best sisters in the whole world. Shona is not just a sister; she is also my best friend, my second mum, and one of my biggest supporters. She always pushes me to be the best at anything I set my mind to.

Some people go through life quietly, while others leave a lasting impression on everyone they meet — and Shona is definitely in the latter category. Her selflessness is one virtue I will always admire, because she loves making everyone around her happy and comfortable, even when it is not convenient for her. Turning 30 is not only a celebration of years lived, but also a celebration of lives touched.

One memory that will forever stick in my head is from when we were younger. We were in the kitchen, Mummy had just finished cooking and was serving food, but Shona hadn't brushed her teeth yet, so Mummy told her to go and brush first. She left the kitchen looking very moody, and since Mummy couldn't see her face, I chimed in: "Mummy, Sister Shona is frowning!" Shona didn't even let me finish. She turned around and fired back with, "Shut up, you fool!" We all burst out laughing because we knew she was fuming.

Beyond the laughs, Shona has always been someone who shows up for others when most people would be too focused on their own lives and challenges. Growing up, she would wake up early, take care of her own responsibilities, and still find time to check on me — even when she had every reason not to. She still does that to this day, and I can personally attest to it. It is simply who she was, who she is, and who she will always be. It was never something she announced or made a show of — it is just how God made her.

One of the greatest examples of courage I have ever witnessed is her quiet strength and her capacity to give even when she had little to give. She supports without hesitation and listens without rushing to judge. With Shona, compassion is not just a feeling — it is action. Watching her taught me that one of the most powerful things we can do in this world is simply show up for others.

To a truly remarkable woman — happy 30th birthday, my dearest sister. I will forever be grateful to God for blessing me with an amazing soul like yours.

May you see yourself not just as a person, but as a pillar, a light, a role model, and a source of strength — because that is exactly how the rest of us see you as you step into this new decade.



**Elsie Olalere**

# I'll Always Be There for You

## ***Elsie Olalere***

Wow! Big 30! I almost started by saying I remember when you were born — lol. I do not remember the exact hour, to be honest, but I do remember no longer being the only female child, and the latest addition being “yellow pawpaw” in Kano State.

From Seat of Wisdom School, where there was that one time you did not want to go to school, to Eduland where you had a double promotion, then Legacy, Bowen, and Cyprus where you graduated with two degrees — and now completing your PhD. What a journey!

Yours has been a journey of resilience and consistency, even in seasons you did not fully understand. It is so beautiful to see how God works things in your favour, because you truly deserve it.

You put everyone first and tend to burn out, but you hardly let it show. Most times, people cannot even tell. I want to say rest more — even though I do not take my own advice on this — but I will say it anyway. Enter a season of rest.

You are the one who wakes up and cooks up a storm for others, only to eventually have no appetite to eat. Madam Firebrand for Christ! From joining Girls Auxiliary, to that dance group, to going to camp at such a young age — you have always been deeply committed. You are the kind of person who would go to church even if no one else did.

So it was no surprise when you poured your heart into service in both COZA and ZCGC. You live the Word, and it is inspiring.

One of the scariest moments of my life was when you had an asthma attack. Foluke and I came to Bowen and witnessed it. It was so severe that you were almost lifeless, and you had to be transported by road. During that trip, I held on to Jesus's garment so tightly, praying for Him to breathe life into you. He did, and I am eternally grateful to God for your life.

There is so much more to say — I mean, it has been 30 whole years — but I am limited by word count, lol.

My prayer for you is to always be surrounded by people who genuinely love you. Cheers to making more memories, and wishing you many wonderful years ahead in perfect health. Amen.

I'll always be there for you.

Elsie Olalere



**Kayode Olalere**

# A Pillar of Love

## *Kayode Olalere*

Thirty years is a milestone that naturally invites us to pause and look back. As I reflect on our journey together, Shona, I am struck by how quickly the years have slipped through our fingers — how it feels like only yesterday we were kids running through the halls of our family home, yet here you are: thirty years old, standing at the threshold of a beautiful new chapter.

Growing up with you was a gift of constant joy and movement. I still find myself wishing we could go back, even for a moment, to those days when our biggest concerns were the games we played and the dances we shared. I can still picture the excitement when Daddy would come home with jerseys so we could take on the court at school — everyone “walking it up,” ready for anything. And then there was the parlour: our stage. We would sit everyone down, including Mummy, turn up the music, and lose ourselves in the pure rhythm of being young and together.

Even back then, your true character was already shining through. You were always the “mommy of the house” — the one who moved quietly through every room, making sure everyone was okay, well-kept, and cared for. You looked out for all of us with a grace that surpassed your years. Today, as a woman who has found her footing and built a home of her own, that nurturing spirit remains your greatest strength. It is bittersweet to watch you step fully into this new life, but I am so deeply happy for the peace you have found.

You are, quite simply, the pillar of our house. From the very beginning, you have been the one who holds us together. Whether it's coming home and immediately whipping up pancakes, pulling off a family dinner, or insisting on those group pictures that become pieces of our history — you are the one who creates the moments we would otherwise let slip by. Your presence is something we always feel, and it is something we always miss the moment you are gone.

On behalf of the entire family — Mommy, Daddy, Elsie, Sway, and Bunmi — I want you to know how much we love and cherish you. No matter where life takes you, you will always have a place in our hearts.

Happy 30th Birthday, Shona. May God continue to bless and provide for your home, and may your life overflow with long days, prosperity, and the same good health and joy you have always poured out for others. We love you so much.



## Deaconess Comfort Titilayo Oluwatola

# God Heard **Every Word**

## ***Deaconess Comfort Titilayo Oluwatola***

Shona Oluwatosin Oluwatola @ 30

A Testament by Deaconess Comfort Titilayo Oluwatola, Mother-in-Love

### **PREAMBLE**

I prayed for many years for another daughter for the family — godly, loving, and humble — to be a wife for Tobi. I held on to God, and though the desire tarried, our faithful God answered by bringing Shona!

### **FIRST MEETING**

At our home in Abeokuta on Sunday, 7th January 2024.

### **HER GODLINESS & HUMILITY DISPLAYED**

On arrival, Shona was reported to be fasting and about to break her fast — just as I was! I immediately praised God for answered prayers and for the godly daughter-in-law I had long desired.

She humbly greeted everyone and related respectfully to all, young and old. Though tall, she even tried to bend low while taking photographs with people.

Her food choices were simple: pepper soup, moin moin, dodo, fish, and vegetables — no solid food, not even rice, despite all the elaborate dishes we had prepared.

She received us without reservation as her parents and fitted perfectly into the family. She was deeply appreciative — she called her mum, Mrs. Pauline Olalere in Ilorin, to express how warmly we had received her. Her mum also expressed her joy and praised God for answering her heart's desire for in-laws who would accept her daughter with love and open arms.

We also had a tour of notable places in Abeokuta, and not once did Shona compare or contrast it with Ilorin, where she had lived. She simply showed appreciation, humility, culture, and class.

### **VISIT TO THE OLALERES**

In mid-January 2024, we paid the traditional first visit to the bride's family in Ilorin, where we met Mr. Segun and Mrs. Pauline Olalere — Shona's parents — in action at their hotel. They were working and relating with their staff in such a humble manner that one could hardly identify the CEOs among the paid workers. It was then that I understood where Shona gets her humility from.

The family accepted us heartily and without reservation, just as Shona had. They lavished us with hospitality and made us feel at home throughout our stay.

### **HER GENEROSITY**

Shona has a large, loving, and generous heart. Whenever she visits family members, she arrives with bundles of gifts fit for everyone. She takes our granddaughters on what she calls "Girls' Outings," treating them to fun places and showering them with food, drinks, and assorted gifts. I do wonder when it will be our grandsons' turn!

### **HER ACADEMIC PASSION**

Shona holds an MPhil in Policy Analysis from the RAND School of Public Policy, where she is currently completing her PhD in Policy Analysis. She also holds an MSc in Policy Analysis and Global Governance from the University of the West of Scotland, an MA in International Relations from Cyprus International University, and a BA in History and International Studies from Bowen University, Nigeria. She is also the author of a book titled *No Kush No Coffee: Demystifying the Notion that Success is External*.

What is particularly fascinating about her academic journey is how she painstakingly completed two Master's degrees from two different universities in a single academic year — all while working to support her parents' efforts in funding her education. This speaks to how hardworking, determined, resilient, and resolute she was as a scholar, and how deeply considerate she is as a child.

### **HER PASSION FOR A HAPPY HOME**

Shona O. Olalere married Dr. Oluwatobi Oluwatola on 4th April 2024. Since then, she has been diligently nurturing her family — fasting and praying, loving her husband and his people, forgiving offences with a large heart, and seeking wise counsel from faithful Christian counsellors when needed. Shona is, without question, a virtuous and loving wife, daughter, and daughter-in-love.

### **HAPPY PEARL BIRTHDAY, MY DARLING DAUGHTER, SHONA OLUWATOSIN OLUWATOLA!!!**

Congratulations on your Pearl Birthday, dear! Yours has been a deeply impactful life in just three decades. May God grant you more grace, longevity, and anointing to do greater exploits in life, ministry, and the fulfilment of your destiny, in Jesus' name.



**Dr. Olatunde J. Oluwatola**

# The Amiable, **Affable** Lady

**By Dr. Olatunde J. Oluwatola**

I consider it a deep honour and privilege to be asked to pen a few words about my acquaintance with my highly cherished daughter and daughter-in-love, Mrs. Shona Oluwatosin Oluwatola, née Olalere, in commemoration of her Pearl Birthday coming up in May.

Our acquaintance began in December 2023, when our son — now Shona's blessed husband — stopped by the house in Abeokuta shortly before travelling to Taiwan, essentially to embrace his mum on her birthday, but also, and more importantly, to share with us the most delightful, long-awaited, and prayer-answered news: that he had found her — the woman God had chosen for him as his wife. That very adorable lady was Shona, a graduate student at the Pardee RAND Graduate School in Los Angeles, USA, where Dr. Tobi Oluwatola had also completed his doctorate a few years prior. We were informed that she would be briefly in Nigeria the following month, giving us the opportunity to meet her.

Our joy knew no bounds. We thanked God for His faithfulness in helping Tobi find a wife. We opened a line of communication, seizing the occasion of Christmas, and the exchanges were deeply gratifying. Here is a glimpse:

"Merry Christmas, our dear and precious daughter, Shona. May the joy, peace, and love brought through Christmas fill our lives and all of our situations, now and always, in Jesus' name. A seyi samodun ooo. With lots of love and prayers, from Tobi's parents, Abeokuta, Nigeria."

"Good morning, Daddy. Merry Christmas to you and the family, sir. Thank you, Dad, for the message and your heartfelt prayers — I feel so loved and honoured. I pray you also have a lovely Christmas Day filled with God's goodness. I look forward to seeing you in January, Dad."

The exchanges spanning just one month of acquaintance are a testament to the remarkable personality I found in Shona. She graciously included me among the members of her PhD Dissertation Advisory Council at the RAND School of Public Policy in Los Angeles — a gesture that speaks to her openness and deep respect for academic community. She is a woman of peace, deeply loving and profoundly respectful. She is a true world citizen, with meaningful developmental impact across many nations — notably in India, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria — as an Artificial Intelligence expert working at the intersection of technology, health, education systems, and governance.

Finally, I wholeheartedly congratulate Mrs. Shona Oluwatosin Olalere Oluwatola on the great life and character she has built. I congratulate her for her wholehearted choice to walk in godliness and in the fear of the Lord. I congratulate her for her diligent ambition and her deep commitment to making the world a better place. May she receive full reward for all the virtues she so generously embodies, and may she continue to grow in the strength of the Lord Jesus.

**HAPPY, HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SHONA! And many happy returns.**

Dr. Olatunde J. Oluwatola — Shona's Father-in-Love



**Pastor Kenneth Habuh-Rajan**

# A Daughter in Whom I Am Well Pleased

## ***Pastor Kenneth Habuh-Rajan***

There are relationships that time cannot dilute and distance cannot diminish. My relationship with Shona is one of those rare and precious gifts.

I first encountered Shona as a university student — bright-eyed, hungry for the things of God, and utterly unashamed about it. What struck me immediately was not merely her intelligence, though that was evident, but the quality of her spiritual appetite. She did not come to church to be seen. She came to be formed. Her desire to be discipled, to sit under spiritual authority, and to translate the principles of God's Word into academic and personal excellence set her apart from the very beginning. She was, in every sense, a daughter of the house — selfless, devoted, and deeply committed to the advancement of God's kingdom.

One moment I carry close to my heart took place at the Millennium Nice Peak Hotel in Ilorin, Kwara State. Shona had arranged for me to meet her father — a gesture that, on the surface, seemed simple, but carried the weight of everything she valued. Her father's gratitude was overwhelming. He expressed, with visible emotion, how profoundly his daughter's life — and by extension, his entire family — had been touched through her relationship with our ministry. Sitting across from that man, I understood afresh the far-reaching consequence of pouring into a single life. Shona had taken what she received and carried it home, and it had blessed a whole household.

Then there was a season when I had been transferred from Ilorin, but my family had not yet joined me at my new post. Shona came to town and, without any prompting, asked to take our children out. What followed was an outing they still speak of with great joy — she spared nothing, she held nothing back. The photographs told the story of a woman whose generosity was not performed but instinctive. That is character. That is who Shona is when no one is watching.

Out of sight was never out of mind. As recently as February 2026, she and her husband visited me at my hotel during my last trip to Nigeria. We fellowshiped, we laughed, we remembered — and I left that room deeply grateful that God had allowed our paths to cross and remain intertwined.

Shona, you are thirty. But you have already lived with the weight and wisdom of purpose. The world has only just begun to see what God has always known about you. Keep going, beloved daughter. Your best days are gloriously ahead.



**Wole Soetan**

# Seeds in the Ground

***By Wole Soetan***

It is a profound privilege to write these words for Shona as she marks this beautiful 30-year milestone. As a father and a pastor, I have watched many young people grow, but Shona occupies a special place in the heart of our family.

When I think of Shona, the first thing that comes to mind is her prayer fire. It isn't just that she prays; it's that she carries a specific, burning atmosphere of intercession wherever she goes. For Shona, prayer isn't a chore or a ritual; it is her native language.

Perhaps her greatest legacy in our home is the seeds she has planted within my children. Shona didn't just teach them; she poured herself into them.

I watched her sit with my children for hours, patiently working through their schoolwork, ensuring they didn't just pass, but that they truly understood. She didn't have to do it, but she did it because she cares about their future. But here is the most beautiful part: Shona wasn't just working for our sake. Every hour she spent tutoring, every prayer she breathed in our home, and every way she served God was a seed in the ground for her own children. She is building a harvest that her children will walk into. She is creating a legacy of diligence and devotion that will make their path smoother and their faith stronger.

To see my children walking in the truths she helped instil is one of my greatest joys. She didn't just give them information; she gave them an example of what it looks like to be a young woman who is unreservedly there to serve God.

There is a unique humility in the way Shona cares. She has a way of anticipating needs before they are even spoken, making sure people are taken care of with a quiet diligence that seeks no spotlight. Whether she is leading a prayer meeting or handling the smallest practical detail, her posture remains the same: a servant-leader who understands that the greatest in the Kingdom is the one who serves.

Shona, as you enter your 30s, my prayer for you is taken from the very life you've lived. May the seeds you have sown in the lives of my children and so many others return to you as a harvest of unimaginable joy. May the fire in your spirit burn even brighter, and may you continue to walk in the deep satisfaction of knowing you are exactly where God wants you to be.

Happy 30th Birthday, our beloved Shona. We love you deeply.

With love and blessings, Soetan Oyewole, Executive Pastor, Commonwealth of Zion Assembly



**Steven W. Popper**

# The Outlier

**By Steven W. Popper**

I have a theory (perhaps better to call it a recurring impression): one actually meets fewer different people during a lifetime than might be supposed. To be sure, the globe is peopled with nine billion souls, and I have travelled widely, seen much, and met many. Yet it seems to me quite often that one person will remind me of another. I have been involved in many group endeavours in different settings that permitted long observation of the people involved. Often I will find in those settings a group of individuals at first new to me, yet upon extended acquaintance they appear to take on the character and role of others I have met in different yet similar contexts.

Baseball is like this. Every team has their version of the steady skipper, the young phenom, the wary veteran, the journeyman, the clubhouse comic, the uncannily disturbing relief pitcher, and so on. On each team they have different names, but they are the same cast — in essence, the same recurring archetypes. This is the foundation of the 17th century's Italian commedia dell'arte and its stock characters, who so effectively capture the gamut of human essence and continue to do so four centuries on.

There are people who possess great intelligence and those with a creative spark. There are those who are great and decisive doers in this world, and those who possess and share with others their great heart. They most often have their characteristic foibles that go along with that which makes them distinctive — but which also place them in a class that is recognisable and distinct.

And then there are the outliers. Those who actually combine opposites: rare possessors of virtues that form a complete whole. Do such people also fall into a type? They appear distinct; they seem unique.

It did not require long acquaintance for me to think that Shona is not a stock type. She seems that rare instance of a blend so distinctive as to be memorable across the years — without echo of previously met predecessors, nor future successors.

Or is she? How to explain the quiet tears from the eyes of a self-possessed, poised young woman at the apparent departure from her world of a newly found counsellor — a parting representing a possible sundering of bonds that had included her in a trajectory of community linking present with past? (To me, this was the most striking and affecting image from my official RAND farewell party.)

It now becomes clear: Shona is, after all, of a type — albeit an exceedingly rare one, to be cherished when revealed. She is one of those scarce individuals who make it their business to bind the world together, who make the pieces fit, who ensure that meaning is secured and made tangible and manifest. And whose capacity for doing so appears to flow so naturally as to almost escape notice. Almost, but not quite.

Shona, accept the homage of one who will look forward over the years to see how you continue from strength to strength, leaving community and meaning in the wake of your passage. Be well, and with all our best wishes, continue to bind up those portions of our wounded world through which you stride.

Steven W. Popper



**Cynthia Cook**

# A Scholar and a Force for Good

**By Cynthia Cook**

Shona was a student in a Pardee RAND Graduate School class that I co-taught with two other professors. We divided the class into three groups for advising and grading, and Shona was placed into my group, so I got to know her work in depth.

From the beginning, Shona stood out from among her peers through the quality of analysis she brought to every discussion and to her written work. She was not simply a high performer in the conventional sense — she thought carefully, wrote precisely, and consistently pushed her arguments beyond the surface of a problem. What impressed me most was not only her intellectual rigour but her genuine generosity toward her fellow students. She made an effort to uplift her peers through kind and constructive feedback on their work, elevating the quality of the classroom community as a whole. Of course, she received top grades.

During the class, I was struck by Shona's vision for making positive change in the world. Her research interests were not abstract — they were animated by a clear sense of purpose and a deep commitment to real-world impact. It was evident that she intended to carry her academic formation directly into meaningful action.

After moving from RAND to a senior fellowship at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, I saw new opportunities that I believed would suit Shona well. CSIS executive education offered avenues for continued professional growth at the intersection of policy, strategy, and global affairs — precisely the space where Shona's work was headed. Shona was accepted into the Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy (AILA's) competitive International Fellowship program, a testament to the strength of her profile and the clarity of her vision.

Shona stayed in my guest room while attending the week-long training, and it was a genuine pleasure to reconnect with her in person. Seeing her engage with peers and practitioners from across the world only confirmed what I had observed in the classroom: she brings the same warmth, curiosity, and thoughtfulness to every setting she enters.

I believe that Shona's intellectual capacity, work ethic, creative thinking, and genuine kindness will enable her to make change and help create a better future. She is exactly the kind of person the world needs more of — rigorous in thought, generous in spirit, and unwavering in purpose. I have no doubt that the best of her contributions are still ahead.



**Dr. Alex Tamunomiegb**

# The World Is **Finally** Catching Up

**By Dr. Alex Tamunomiegb**

Turning 30 is often described as stepping into a fuller version of oneself, but with Shona, it feels more like the world is finally catching up to who she has always been.

What I admire most about Shona is not just what she does, but how she does it. There is a quiet intentionality about her and the way she shows up — for people, for her work, and for life — that speaks volumes. It is easy to be present when things are convenient, but Shona has a way of showing up even when it costs her something. That, to me, is character.

One of my most cherished memories with Shona is a season where we committed to praying together consistently and intentionally, every single day. Life was demanding, uncertain in many ways, yet she never wavered. Those moments were not just about prayer; they were about discipline, faith, and showing up for God and for each other. In those quiet, sacred spaces, I saw her strength, her depth, and her unwavering belief — not just in outcomes, but in process. That kind of consistency is rare, and it shaped more than that season; it shaped me.

Shona has also been a bridge in my journey in ways she may not even fully realise. Whether it was introducing me to spaces like the Nigerian Economic Summit Group, constantly supporting Christmas on the Streets, or being part of conversations that refined my thinking — even down to something as personal and defining as my thesis topic — she has consistently expanded my world. She has a way of opening doors, not just physically, but intellectually, emotionally, financially, and spiritually.

There is also a courage in her that is easy to miss if you are only looking for loud expressions of bravery. Shona's courage is steady. It is in her willingness to keep going, to keep believing, to keep building even when outcomes are uncertain. It is in her ability to choose growth over comfort, and truth over ease. She doesn't just endure challenges; she transforms through them.

What makes Shona truly remarkable, however, is the balance she holds between strength and softness. She is driven, yet deeply humane. Focused, yet relational. She understands that impact is not just about results, but about people — and that distinction shapes everything she touches.

"The Lord will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." — Isaiah 58:11

At 30, Shona, you are not just entering a new season; you are walking into deeper purpose, greater impact, and sustained grace. You are seen, you are valued, and you are deeply appreciated. The world is better because you are in it.

Happy 30th birthday, my Love. Lots of love, Dr. Alex Tamunomiegbam



**Remi Ogunkayo**

# A Rare Combination: A Tribute to Shona

***By Remi Ogunkayo***

One of the qualities I have always admired most about Shona is her principles. When she joined RED, she was unlike anyone else the company had hired — a six-foot-plus woman arriving from a very different background than most of her colleagues. Some wondered about the steep learning curve ahead of her, stepping into a field entirely new to her.

But Shona won us all over. Her intelligence, her curiosity, and her ability to adapt to the pressures of a demanding environment made an immediate impression on me. Shona is firm yet uncompromising, committed to excellence and consistent in her service to others. These qualities became an asset I came to trust deeply — I could always depend on her to deliver for our clients, without exception.

Beyond her work ethic, I came to appreciate Shona's unique sense of humour, her warmth, and her drive. She combined our gruelling work schedules with a degree she was pursuing at the time, alongside her commitments to her church. That kind of pressure would have broken most people. Somehow, Shona balanced all of it and excelled at every turn — meeting each new challenge with a quiet confidence that nothing is too difficult to overcome. I not only came to trust her instincts; I came to value her ideas and insights.

Even after we stopped working together, I have continued to be inspired by the choices Shona has made and the path she has carved for herself. She is someone I trust, and very few people have earned that privilege.

It has been an honour to work with Shona, to mentor her as she has grown both as an individual and as a stellar professional, and to play a part in her journey into the self-assured woman she is today. I wish her many more successes — and a very happy birthday.



**Dotun Eyinade**

# A Heart That Goes First

***By Dotun Eyinade***

I am incredibly blessed to call Shona a friend. There aren't too many genuinely thoughtful people in this world, and so when you encounter a member of that rarefied clan, you consider yourself lucky. Shona deeply cares about others and goes out of her way to put smiles on their faces.

In the years since I have known Shona, she has always had thoughtful gifts for everyone. Her ability to make other people happy stems from a heart filled with love and selfless concern. I once listened to my friend, her husband, talk about her sacrificial, almost saintly, care for others: how Shona woke up early in the morning to take care of family, despite an exacting schedule writing a PhD dissertation. You don't see such selflessness in an age where the prevailing creed is ME (Self).

Tobi couldn't have asked for a better spouse, as he is also one of the most thoughtful people I know, and I was praying that he would meet and marry an equally kind soul.

Shona brings an uncanny passion to her work, and I witnessed this during her field visit to Nigeria while researching for her PhD dissertation. She carefully selected participants for the focus group discussion and ensured the session was worthwhile for everyone. Need I add that she was respectful of everyone's time and their contributions?

Shona's life trajectory is an inspiring one. I worked with her on publishing the Nigerian edition of her book, *No Kush No Coffee*. She was motivated by the need to inspire young people to overcome hurdles and realise their potential. In the book, she drew from her personal story and made a strong case for how everyone can surmount the seemingly difficult hurdles of life. I am confident that there will be many more books, and I am excited by the prospect of the indelible impression that her story, life and work will make.

Shona is a true friend of my family, and we all adore her. I am excited for the many decades ahead for Shona and the impact that will ensue. I remain confident that the decades to come will be filled with laughter, joy, the loving companionship of Tobi, beautiful and thoughtful children, and a life of service to others and impact that builds a better society.

Shona, here is wishing you many more years filled with the happiness that you have brought into the lives of everyone whose paths have crossed yours.



**Olayinka Iyinolakan**

# She Leaves Everything Better

**By Olayinka Iyinolakan**

Shona is one of the most genuinely good people I know.

I still think about how we met — a wedding, of all places, in what was honestly one of the most hilarious situations I have ever found myself in. One couldn't have scripted it. And yet, out of that wonderfully random moment came four years of building Indigenius together, and a friendship I wouldn't trade for anything. Life is funny like that. The best things usually arrive sideways.

What strikes me most about Shona is how deeply she sees people. Not just the co-founder, not just the researcher with the impressive academic journey — but the person in front of her. She cares about people genuinely and deeply, sometimes to a fault. She extends patience to everyone around her, even when they don't make it easy. She leads with kindness, every single time, and holds space quietly for people to grow and do better. That is rare. Rarer than she probably realises.

Her passion for real societal change is what drew me to her from the beginning. It was not just a good pitch or a sharp mind — it was that she meant it. She meant every word. And five years in, she still does. That kind of integrity is what makes working alongside her feel like more than just work. It feels like purpose.

Shona has a gift for showing up when it matters most. There were moments in building Indigenius that were not easy — stretches that tested everything — and she never wavered. She believed in what we were building, and she believed in the people around her when they needed it most. That kind of steadfast loyalty is not something one forgets.

The life she has built reflects exactly who she is. Her husband, her family, the warmth and richness of everything around her — it all speaks to a person who pours herself fully into the things and people that matter, and leaves everything better than she found it.

What makes Shona truly remarkable is not any single achievement — not the academic titles, not the co-founder credentials, not the research portfolio — but the whole person. The one who walks into a room and makes people feel seen. The one who cares deeply and apologises for it, when really the world needs far more people like that.

Here is to Shona on her 30th birthday. The future ahead of her is bright, and she has earned every single bit of it.

With so much love, pride, and gratitude, Olayinka Iyinolakan



**Jean Kyula**

# She Truly Sees You

***By Jean Kyula***

Shona is one of the most intelligent people I have ever worked with. I have been working with her for about five years, more closely in the last three. We had worked together long before we ever met in person, and I finally met her on her wedding day — and she was every bit as beautiful as I had imagined!

My children even know her by name and always whisper, "Mama, Shona is so beautiful!" whenever they see me on calls with her. Shona is kind, thoughtful, and she goes above and beyond. Honestly, I do not know many people who work like her — her diligence, work ethic, and dedication are unparalleled!

On our team, she is the encourager. She will always give people their flowers and never starts or ends a session without a heartfelt "Well done with all the work!" It is a simple sentence, but it is the thing about Shona that makes her so special. She truly sees people.

I will never forget one of my first trips to Nigeria. She asked me for my shoe size, and I did not really think much of it — she was in the US at the time. So there I was, busy in the office, when the caretaker told me I had a delivery. Lo and behold, Shona, before we had ever met in person, had sent me the most beautiful pairs of shoes I own to this day! I was so blown away by her thoughtfulness and generosity. How she had thought to do something like that for me still touches me to this very day. This is what I mean — Shona sees you!

Everyone who works with Shona will tell you what an asset she truly is — invaluable, irreplaceable. Her love for Jesus is so evident, and the way she encourages us and prays for us is something truly beautiful.

We started out as colleagues, but Shona has truly become my friend and sister. I will forever be grateful to God that He allowed me to meet and work with her. Though I am so much older — let's not dwell here! — I have learned so much from Shona. Her calm spirit in the face of difficult times is deeply admirable. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter where life takes us, she will forever be my sis.

Thank you for being my friend, for being so kind, and for being the hands and feet of Jesus in the most real way. I am so thankful I got a front-row seat to watch you bloom and witness your brilliance. I already call you Dr. Shona. This world is a better place because you are in it.

Your sis, Jean



**Zara Abdurahaman**

# Madam Talk-and-Do

***By Zara Abdurahaman***

My hair-making partner in crime, Madam Talk-and-Do, hospitality champion, multifaceted queen, and so much more — these are just some of the words that describe Shona. I am extremely grateful our paths crossed at RAND, and for the friendship we have built since then. We have done a lot together and been through a lot together — fun times like shopping, planning a surprise party, and touring Mexico, and serious ones like planning the first DMDU Summer School in Africa.

So many stories come to mind, but one of my earliest memories of Shona going above and beyond was when I was moving to a new apartment in Koreatown. Of course, Shona volunteered to help. Halfway through the move, I got sick and extremely weak. I was struggling but trying to push through. Shona made me lie down and took over, moving the rest of the items with the help of my other friend. They then arranged everything so the place looked organised and livable. She even helped me return the truck to U-Haul. And through it all, she kept checking on me, asking how I was feeling and if I needed anything. I was truly amazed and touched by her generosity of heart, time, and effort. That is the kind of person Shona is — someone of service who will always go the extra mile for the people around her. And the best part is the consistency; she hasn't changed one bit since then.

Another amazing side of Shona shines through when she goes into corporate mode. We don't get to work together often, but when we do, it is impressive to see her in the zone. She is always on top of things and takes practical steps to make things happen. The idea of hosting the DMDU Summer School in Nigeria started as a wishful dinner conversation, and before you knew it, Shona had reached out to partners and helped secure funding. She may not know it, but I was genuinely impressed and inspired by that. That is Shona — she doesn't just dream; she executes.

Shona, you have so much impact through your work and your interactions with people, and you are only just getting started. On a personal level, you have helped me through some of my toughest times and offered wise and thoughtful counsel. As you step into the next decade of your life, may you continue to grow from strength to strength. May you never lack what you have so freely given. May the Lord bless you, keep you, and grant you all your heart's desires according to His will.



Its Been Great  
Having You Around..  
Love You So Much  
Thank You For  
Being You **Tito!**  
Shona!!

**Zee Baruwa**

# She Makes Life **Make Sense**

**By Zee Baruwa**

Happy birthday, my sisto!

Everyone has that one person who makes life make sense. For me, that person is Shona. I met her through my ex-boyfriend — her brother — and since then she has been one of the most important people in my life. Shona is kind-hearted, patient, goal-driven, compassionate, and God-fearing, always willing to help others, which is why she is so deeply loved by everyone around her. She doesn't just care about people in theory — she shows up for them in the most practical, consistent, and sometimes hilariously determined ways.

When we lived together, I got a front-row seat to just how intentional she is. Shona made sure we ate healthy — she would always cook nutritious meals (yes, including healthy shawarma, which I did not know was possible). She made sure we exercised at least once a day, pulling up all kinds of workout videos on YouTube: aerobics, dance routines, you name it. And in true Shona fashion, even the dance exercise videos were set to Christian songs. Body and soul, all at once.

She also made sure we stayed close to God. She would wake me up every morning for the Hallelujah Challenge without fail. "Tito, focus!" she would scream whenever I started dozing off mid-prayer. Beyond the mornings, she was always encouraging us to dress well, look our best, and carry ourselves with confidence. We were constantly helping each other show up as the best versions of ourselves.

Shona was also our unofficial financial advisor. She was always sharing advice on how to invest wisely and spend even more wisely. One time, she dragged me to Yaba market to invest in gold — and I went, because honestly, you just trust her. During COVID, she came up with the idea of doing transcription work, and we started transcribing adverts in different languages. That small idea snowballed into something real: that was how we got into research and transcription, and how @officialihad came about. She has a way of seeing opportunity where others see downtime.

She has always encouraged me to be the best version of myself, and her belief in me has had a lasting impact. Today, I have completed my postgraduate diploma and just finished my master's degree — and a big part of that is because Shona pushed me to further my education when I might not have pushed myself.

Having Shona as a friend and sister is one of the greatest blessings of my life. I am truly grateful for her friendship over the years. I love her so much.



**Tomi Balogun**

# More Than I Imagined

***By Tomi Balogun***

When I first met Shona, I never imagined she would one day be family. I met her through her sister, and she did not have to try to be memorable; she simply was. I could not have known then that life would weave our stories together so deeply.

From the very beginning, our connection went beyond friendship. We bonded over shared visions, deep conversations, ideas, and scriptures we both discovered. From that point on, what began as chance encounters blossomed into something steady, intentional, and deeply rooted. We didn't just stay connected; we merged beautifully as sisters.

One of the things that has always stood out to me about Shona is her deep sense of dedication. She is one of the most committed and reliable people I have ever met. She never treats love, friendship, or sisterhood as something casual. With Shona, you feel cared for in action, not just in words — random check-ins, thoughtful gestures, surprises with kindness on a quiet Wednesday morning.

Shona is not just a friend or sister; she is a presence that stays with you. A steady light. A reminder of what it means to love deeply and live intentionally.

And even as I write this, her check-in messages are still dropping in — small reminders of her consistency, her care, and the way she shows up without needing occasion or prompt. That, in many ways, is who she is.

As she turns 30, I celebrate not just the milestone, but the woman she has continually become: strong, thoughtful, grounded, and full of grace. I am grateful for every chapter we have shared and excited for all the ones still ahead.

Happy birthday, my Shona. You are deeply loved, endlessly valued, and beautifully unforgettable. I love you!



**Blessing Idowu**

# She Made Room for Me

## *By Blessing Idowu*

I met Shona through my elder sister Grace, just after my NYSC. I was searching for a job and things weren't really working out. I had complained to my sister about how frustrated I was, and she had promised to talk to her boss Shona on my behalf.

Lo and behold, I got a role working at OluwatolaDynasty around May last year as an executive assistant.

From the very beginning, I understood that Shona was not the typical Nigerian boss. She showed me genuine love and was committed to my growth. She is warm, kind, caring, and understanding.

Not long after I started working with her, she came to Nigeria and wanted to meet me for the first time. She asked my sister and me to come meet her in Ilorin. She paid for our transport to and fro, hosted us in her dad's hotel, and made sure we were very comfortable and well-fed. We went bowling, she paid for our pedicure sessions, and still got us gifts. I honestly was wowed.

That was the first time I met her, and I could already tell that she is such a cool, sweet, and kind person. Shona has been very supportive — she assisted my sister and me in starting up a business, and she was the first person to patronise us.

At some point, I began struggling on the job because it was overwhelming for me, and it wasn't really aligned with what I wanted career-wise. I wasn't performing my best, and she noticed. Instead of reacting harshly, she gave me a safe space to be free and tell her how I felt. I opened up to her, she listened without judging me, she prayed with me, and told me to think about what I wanted to do next. When I told her I wanted to pursue something else, she didn't take it badly. She supported me and even gave me the grace to resign peacefully. And what really melted my heart was that she supported me financially as I moved on to my next phase.

Shona is someone who will help you grow spiritually and draw closer to God. She encouraged me to be part of a community she created, which soon became a safe space where we could all share our problems, pray for each other, and find support as sisters.

Beyond work, she is intentional about people. When she came to Nigeria again, she organised a hangout for the group and made sure everyone was well cared for — the accommodation, transportation, the food and drinks, everything!! Shona is such a sweet soul.

There was also a time I had issues with my sister, and I reached out to Shona. She called us together, prayed with us, and helped us reconcile. She made us realise the importance of love and peace as sisters.

Shona is loving, sweet, and deeply selfless. She is someone I can pour my heart to, because she listens, she genuinely cares, and she pushes you in the right direction.

I am truly grateful to God Almighty for her life and her impact on mine, and I am sure so many other people will testify to the same.

I wish her nothing but happiness, peace, and blessings. And I pray that she is surrounded by genuine love and kindness, as she has shown to me and to others.

Happy Birthday once again, Shona! You deserve the very best.



**Timi and Anjola Sotubo**

# A Heart of Gold

## ***By Timi and Anjola Sotubo***

### **From Timi**

One thing I have heard many people say about Shona is that she has a heart of gold. This has certainly been true in my experience with her. I remember when I had to move back to LA in the fall of 2023 and needed to find an apartment. In my first week back, before I moved in anywhere, Shona made sure I was well fed. Thanksgiving that year was also something different for all of us. Thank you, Shona.

Shona is also remarkably industrious. She handles life and work across time zones with an ease that is hard to fathom. As a graduate school student working part-time, she found a way to incorporate regular meetings with colleagues in Nigeria and consistently show up for her church community there — all without missing a beat. And it bears mentioning: Shona truly loves God. It shows in everything she does.

### **From Anjola**

Thank you, Shona, for being one of God's gifts to us during our time living in Los Angeles. I still remember the gifts you gave us — especially the "yellow" gift. I also remember those faith-boosting resources you sent me when we were expecting our first child. That meant so much to me.

I pray that this new season brings you even more clarity, favour, ease, and a deeper intimacy with God like never before. None of the things He has entrusted to your care will die. I pray that you continue to live for an audience of One, trusting that you will remain His good and faithful servant.

I thank God for how far He has brought you, and for all He has accomplished in you and through you. Your life is a testament to what is possible, and you challenge me to be a better version of myself. I truly believe this is just the beginning — you have not yet seen your best days or your greatest victories. And as Christ said, "greater works shall you do."

Happy birthday, Shona! This is 30!!!

With so much love always, Tim, Jola, and Daniel Sotubo



**Ngozi Harris**

# She Becomes the Help

***By Ngozi Harris***

I met Shona at a church sisters gathering, a space filled with warmth, shared stories, prayers, and food. From that very first meeting, there was something deeply genuine about her spirit. I did not know then that our lives would soon become so meaningfully connected.

Not long after, I found myself in a very vulnerable season. I was preparing for an unplanned wedding while pregnant, and I felt incredibly alone. My family was far away, and despite my efforts, I could not get my sister to come from Nigeria to support me. In that moment of uncertainty, I prayed, and then I called Shona.

What she did next still humbles me. Shona stepped in with a level of care and commitment that felt nothing short of divine. She took charge as though she had been assigned the role. She brought thoughtful gifts, coordinated logistics, picked up a friend she had never met, transported food, and served tirelessly throughout the wedding. She even arranged accommodation for friends who came from out of state. She gave her time, her energy, and her heart — freely and joyfully.

Then came the birth of my daughter, now her goddaughter. Once again, Shona showed up in ways I could never have imagined. She stayed with me in the hospital, caring for both me and my baby until we were discharged. She followed me home, cooked, supported me through sleepless nights, and stayed for three weeks — this, from someone I had only met twice before my daughter was born.

Shona is the embodiment of compassion, selflessness, and genuine love. She does not just offer help; she becomes the help. She continues to be a pillar of support to me and my family. We pray together, and she has stood by us in difficult times, including visiting my husband in the hospital.

My dear Shona, I thank God for your life. You are a blessing to this generation. The seeds of kindness and love you have sown will surely return to you in abundance. May you never lack, and may your light continue to shine.

We love you deeply and celebrate you wholeheartedly.



# Rose Oketola

# She Is the Kind of **Person Who Stays**

***By Rose Oketola***

Shona and I met through One LA Church in Los Angeles in 2023 while serving on the prayer team. I still remember the day she walked up to me after service and said, "Hey sis, how can I join the prayer team?" That moment stayed with me because it captured something essential about her. Shona doesn't stand on the outside of things that matter to her. She is the type who leans in and serves. Not long after, she joined, and we began serving together.

In those early days, I quickly noticed how naturally she carried excellence. Shona has a quiet confidence that doesn't demand attention but commands respect. She can walk into a room, assess what's needed, and begin moving with purpose. She is organised, thoughtful, and effective, even with little direction. What made it even more remarkable was her consistency. She was always on time, despite taking the bus from across town. That level of commitment said so much about her character before she ever spoke a word.

But beyond her strength and capability, it was her heart that drew me in. I remember inviting her out to celebrate what I call my "second birthday" — the anniversary of my Christian baptism. We spent time talking, laughing, and simply being present with one another. In those moments, I saw how deeply she values people. Shona has a way of making you feel seen and heard with little effort. She listens with intention, responds with kindness, and carries a sweetness that feels both genuine and rare.

Her generosity is another thing that has always stood out to me. When we travelled together to Texas for a conference, I witnessed firsthand how she quietly stepped in to cover a friend financially without hesitation. It wasn't something she made a big deal about; it was simply who she is. Shona is always willing to help, always ready to give, and does so with a sincere heart that reflects her love for people.

One of the most defining things I've experienced with her is her faithfulness. I once led a monthly intercessory chaplain's prayer group that met from midnight to 3 a.m. — a time when most people would choose rest. Though she was not a chaplain, Shona accepted the invitation and showed up consistently. Not halfway, not occasionally — but fully present, praying through the entire time. In those quiet, late-night hours, I saw her endurance, her devotion to God, and her loyalty to the people she stood in the gap for. She is the kind of person who stays.

I also remember a season when she was trusting God deeply in her personal life. During one prayer call, I could sense her surrender and her heart fully turned toward God, even in uncertainty. Not long after, I felt led to share a word with her about preparing for the blessings ahead — like the five wise virgins — because the opportunity would come suddenly. On Christmas Eve, while sitting at my dining table eating lunch before we barbecued turkeys for the holidays, she shared that she had met someone named Tobi and was planning a trip to meet his family in Nigeria. In that moment, I told her she was not going just to meet his parents — she was going for a traditional introduction, and that she would be married before the end of summer. She laughed and insisted that the trip was only to meet his parents. I ignored her and playfully sang, "Shona is getting married." Then I gifted her with an outfit for the event. Three weeks later, she sent a joy-filled text saying she was engaged. It was a moment I cherished because I witnessed her step into a season of joy, peace, and answered prayer. I also saw another side of her — in her commitment to her fiancé.

As our friendship grew, I was both nervous and honoured when she asked me to be her chief bridesmaid and best lady. Walking closely with her during that season, I learned even more about who she is. Shona is beautifully simple when it comes to fashion, hair, and makeup — not flashy, business casual, and always graceful. She approached her wedding with intention, setting a budget and remaining disciplined enough to keep it. I remember us spending six hours running around to different boutiques on the second day of dress shopping. Just when we could have been exhausted, we walked into one last store — and there it was: the perfect dress. It was within her budget and brought out such a royal essence in her. In that moment, it was clear that God's hand and grace were on this union. I also learned that Shona is the type of person who likes to quickly locate what she needs when shopping.

What amazed me even more was how everything came together. In what felt like such a short period of time, every detail was provided by God's grace. Though the timeline was tight, nothing felt rushed or out of order. Through Shona's diligence, organisation, and clear communication, everything was completed beautifully from beginning to end.

Meeting Shona's influential friends and family during the bridal dinner and wedding celebration confirmed something I had only imagined. Although many of us encountered her at different points in her life, the consistency of her character has remained the same for all of us to experience.

That is Shona — faithful in the unseen, prepared in spirit, and open to God's leading. She loves deeply, serves wholeheartedly, and walks with both strength and gentleness. Shona is truly an exceptional person, and I count it a deep honour to not only know her, but to have walked alongside her in such meaningful seasons of her life.

This tribute for her 30th birthday cannot fully capture the depth of the memories we all share. The true gift has been her character, displayed time and time again to so many people over the years. Cheers to 30 years of becoming an exceptional person. May God continue to shape you into the best version of who He has called you to be



**Francisca Ovie**

# It Felt Like Home

**By Francisca Ovie**

There are some people you meet, and it feels as though heaven carefully orchestrated the encounter long before the moment ever arrived. Shona is that person for me.

Before I ever met her, I had heard so many beautiful things about her kindness, her brilliance, her depth. But nothing prepared me for the experience of knowing her personally. When we finally connected, it was during a season in my life when I needed light, clarity, and genuine companionship. And Shona was all that and more. From our very first conversation, there was an ease I could not explain. No pressure, no pretence — just a natural, soul-level connection. It felt safe. It felt real. It felt like home.

One of the most memorable moments we shared was when I visited her in Los Angeles. Shona didn't just host me — she embraced me. She created a space where I felt seen, valued, and completely at ease. In a world where people often give from a place of convenience, Shona gives from a place of intention and love. That experience revealed her heart in a way words can hardly capture.

Another defining moment was when we travelled together for a faith-centred gathering. To witness her passion for God, her commitment to growth, and her alignment with purpose was deeply inspiring. Shona doesn't just speak about faith — she lives it. She embodies a quiet strength and a genuine devotion that draws others closer to God without pressure or performance.

What stands out most about Shona is her consistency in love and generosity. She is a giver — not just in what she does, but in who she is. And it is even more beautiful to see how that love extends into the life she is building with her husband: a partnership that reflects grace, support, and shared purpose.

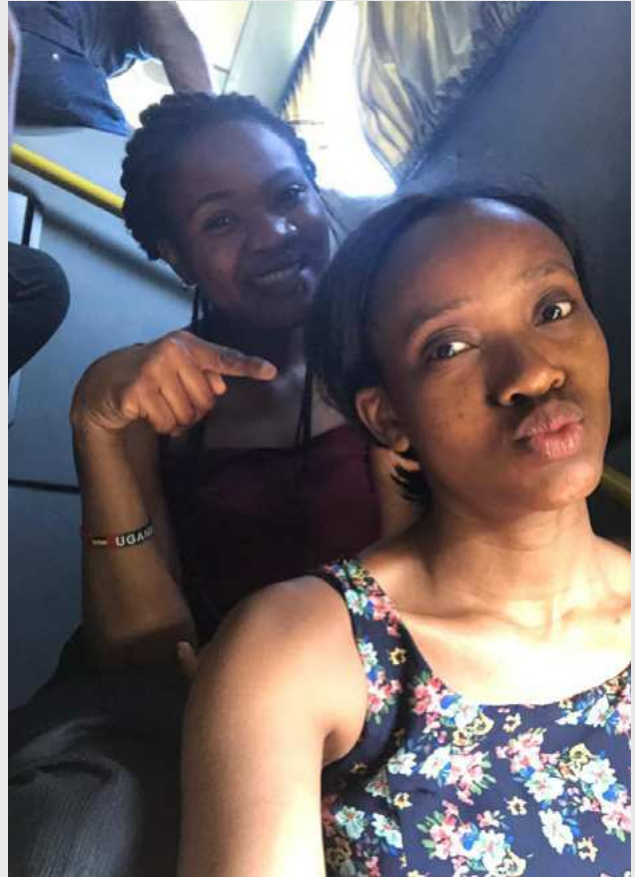
For someone like me, who has often poured into others without experiencing the same in return, meeting Shona was a reminder that mutual, life-giving relationships still exist.

At 30, Shona is not just growing older — she is growing deeper, stronger, and more impactful. Her life is a testament to grace, intentionality, and quiet influence.

Shona, you are a gift. To know you is to experience kindness in its purest form. And I am grateful that our paths crossed in this lifetime.

Happy 30th birthday, my sister love. The world is better because you are in it.

With Love,  
Francisca Ovie



**Raina Fabo**

# Your Love for Others **Is Unmatched**

***By Raina Fabo***

I remember very clearly the day I met you. I was on a random date when you arrived, and almost instantly, everything shifted. What had started as an ordinary outing became something entirely different, as your presence and warmth stood out so naturally. Your golden heart was already evident that night, and almost ten years later, you have not lost any of it.

Looking back, I often wonder how I would have completed my master's thesis without you. I was overwhelmed, trying to balance work and studies. We used to meet almost every morning on the bus, often calling each other beforehand to make sure we wouldn't miss it. It was during that time that you suggested we go on a retreat to focus on drafting our theses.

That season became one of the most defining moments of our friendship. We spent our days fasting, praying, worshipping, and sharing the Word, all while working on our theses. It was both productive and deeply spiritual, and I truly believe our bond was grounded forever during that time.

Over the years, we have shared unforgettable experiences. I remember our trip to Douala, when a major accident blocked the road just outside Yaoundé. We stayed there for hours, and at some point, we stepped out of the bus and began walking along the road. Rather than feeling discouraged, we felt led to pray — not just for the situation, but for Cameroon. It was your first time in the country, yet you remained calm and focused, sensitive to the moment and to God's prompting.

The journey back to Yaoundé was just as intense. At the bus station, we were taking pictures with Guinella and Ulrich (my sisters), unaware of what lay ahead. Once on the bus, the heat became unbearable — no air conditioning, no open windows. The only way we could manage was by sitting on the stairs near the open door. Dangerous as it sounds now, your presence made it easier. You kept smiling, and as always, you found God even in the smallest details.

We have cried together, but God has ensured that our laughter has always been greater. I have been blessed not only to learn from you, but especially to learn how to love people genuinely. Your love for others is unmatched.

I pray that the God we serve continues to be kind to you and bless you beyond what you can imagine. I love you deeply.



**Jeni Anya**

# On Purpose, *with Grace*

***By Jeni Anya***

I've tried to trace my memory back to the first time we met, but I genuinely can't place it. What I do remember clearly is how I spent more time in your room in UPE 3 than anywhere else in Bowen, talking about things that felt unusual at the time — and somewhere in those moments, I knew I had found my person. Your room was downstairs, mine was upstairs, but somehow I was always drifting in "just for a moment" and ending up staying far longer than I planned.

You were one of the first people I saw truly embody foresight in a way I admired. You didn't dwell on problems; you looked for solutions. And when something couldn't be changed, you carried it with grace and never complained. We grew apart for a while, but reconnected when I reached out about Cyprus. Seeing you were living there, you opened your home to me so effortlessly while I found my footing. I still remember arriving in that black Mercedes and seeing you outside, waiting to welcome me.

Your bed was barely wider than an outstretched arm, yet you made space for me without hesitation. During that time, I watched you move with so much grace, engaging people across cultures with ease and kindness. In your usual fashion, your time was split between school, some organisation you were working at, and church — leaving no time for idleness, which taught me a lot about discipline and the value of time.

Reliving these memories while writing this fills me with so much gratitude for having you in my life. You extend yourself to those around you — like when you went to university and made it a point to check in on my brother. And even now, you continue to pour into others, always seeking to see God revealed in everyone around you. In the first quarter of last year, I remember asking God to help strengthen my prayer life — and later in the year, He responded by giving me you through "PrayHer." It was a confirmation that our relationship reaches further than I even know.

Till we are grey and old — happy birthday, my darling.



**Grace Idowu**

# The Gift That Keeps On Giving

**By Grace Idowu**

I purposefully met Shona Oluwatola in 2022 at a time marked by uncertainty. I was approaching the end of my studies in History and International Studies, anxious about what direction my future would take, and the only thing that came to mind was to find an internship that would give me clarity and practical skills. What began as an introduction by my cousin quickly became a defining relationship — one that has and continues to reshape not only my career path, but my faith and relationships.

Shona employed me as an intern at CDIAL AI, now Indigenius AI, and introduced me to the world of AI technology and policy, helping me understand how influence, when grounded in intention, can serve humanity. That redirection was not accidental — it reflects her character. She is deeply committed not only to her work, but to the people she encounters and the impact that work can create. Her dedication is not performative — trust me, it is consistent, structured, and rooted in excellence. She approaches every task with a discipline that ensures not just completion, but quality, helping me fully grasp something my late mother always said: "... whatever is worth doing, is worth doing well."

Yet, beyond her structured work ethic lies a defining compassion. Shona listens in a way that goes beyond words. She listens for patterns, for what is left unsaid, for the truth beneath every emotion, and she always asks questions to the degree of your comfort.

During a difficult period in my life involving a conflict with my younger sister, I had just taken the matter to God asking for His direction — and then Shona reached out. Every time Shona checks on me, it is always divine timing, which reflects how in sync she is with her Father in Heaven and the people she loves.

She stepped in not as an observer, but as a peacemaker. She hosted us, guided us through honest conversation, and created a space where healing could begin. Her actions were deliberate and generous — she gave her time, her resources, and her care without hesitation. That moment revealed her quiet courage: the willingness to step into tension and patiently guide others toward resolution.

In professional spaces, this same humanity is evident. She resists hierarchical distance, insisting instead on shared growth. During a work meeting with a stakeholder, she asked for my input as we were wrapping up. While I spoke, I referred to her by saying, "...as my boss has said..." After the meeting, she called me on WhatsApp immediately and said — and I quote — "Madam, who is your boss...lol," and we laughed about it. She gently corrected me, not to diminish her role, but to emphasise collaboration and mutual learning.

At her core, Shona is guided by her faith. Her love for God informs her actions, her decisions, and her relationships. It is not abstract — it is lived, expressed through intentional communities that I am privileged to be a part of, acts of service, and a desire to help others encounter God personally.

To know Shona is to experience consistency between belief and action. She is thoughtful, disciplined, compassionate, and deeply human.

Happy Birthday, Shona of the Most High God. I deeply love and truly celebrate you.  
With Love, Lady Gee



**Obi Jemedafe**

# She Renewed My Faith in People

***By Obi Jemedafe***

I met Shona at a friend's dinner, and the first thing that struck me about her was her humility and her kindness. Despite being a guest herself, she was checking on everyone, making sure we were all comfortable and catered to. After the event, she and I were the only ones who stayed behind to help clean up, and I was deeply impressed by her selflessness. When we got talking, she encouraged me and spoke with such confidence, kindness, and humility that I really wanted to be her friend — though I wasn't sure how she felt, as most people aren't open to new friendships.

Long story short: we are sisters and besties now. I have learnt so much from her in such a short time, and she has renewed my faith in people. Shona always sees the best in everyone, and now I try to do the same. She looks beyond actions to find and understand people's motives, and she approaches everyone with compassion. She is a true Christian — not in words, but in deeds. The proof of a true Christian is seen in how they love, and her heart and life are filled with so much love that you cannot help but be inspired by her.

Shona is someone who is true to her word. You can always count on her. She has always shown up for me and stood with me through the most difficult season of my life. I could not imagine the last year without her support and friendship, and I will never be able to thank her enough.

When I think of the person you are becoming, I am excited, because I know that God has only just begun with you. Your path is like a shining light that grows brighter and brighter. May God reward your kindness and expand your greatness. May your vision always be clear, your impact continue to grow, and your greatness exceed all expectations.

I celebrate you today with deep respect and admiration. Your life, your discipline, and the way you carry yourself continue to inspire me in more ways than I can fully express. You are a true example of excellence, and I am grateful to witness your journey.

I wish you all the best in the coming years, and I hope we stay close — because I cannot imagine my life without you in it.

Have a wonderful birthday, my love!



**Faith Banje**

# The Big Sister I Didn't Know I Needed

***By Faith Banje***

Shona has never simply been a person in my life; she has been a steady presence, a guiding light, and, in many ways, the big sister I didn't know I needed until I met her in Cyprus.

I still remember those early days — how naturally she welcomed me into her world. There was something deeply comforting about being around her. Whether it was going for sleepovers or visiting her at work, every moment carried a sense of belonging. She has this rare ability to make people feel seen and valued, not through grand gestures, but through quiet consistency and genuine care. Those ordinary moments we shared have now become some of my most treasured memories.

One thing that has always stood out about Shona is her strength. Not the loud, attention-seeking kind, but the quiet, resilient strength that shows up every single day. I've watched her carry responsibilities with grace, support others without hesitation, and stand firm even when life demanded more than it seemed fair to ask. She is truly a backbone — not just to me, but to so many people around her.

Her compassion is just as powerful. Shona doesn't just listen; she understands. She doesn't just help; she uplifts. There were times when I didn't even have to explain what I was going through — she just knew. And somehow, through her words or even her presence alone, things felt lighter. That kind of empathy cannot be taught; it is simply who she is.

What inspires me most is how she lives her life as a blessing to others. She gives without expecting anything in return, and she loves without limits. It is no wonder that so many people look up to her — she leads by example in the most authentic way.

As you step into this beautiful milestone of 30, I pray that you continue to hold fast to the Lord, just as Joshua 23:8 reminds us: "But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now." May your path be filled with even greater purpose, joy, and favour. May your strength be renewed daily, your kindness multiplied, and your impact continue to reach far beyond what you can see.

Shona, I am so proud of you. Thank you for being my sister, my inspiration, and such a blessing in my life. The world is better because you are in it. Happy birthday, Sis!



**Eniola Adeyemi**

# A Rare Gem

***By Eniola Adeyemi***

Today, we gather with full hearts and joyful spirits to celebrate an extraordinary woman — Shona — as she marks three incredible decades of life. Thirty years of love, growth, resilience, laughter, and unforgettable moments. This is not just a birthday; it is a celebration of a journey that has touched so many lives in the most beautiful ways.

Shona, in these three decades, you have shown us what it truly means to be a wonderful person. You have a heart that gives so freely, a spirit that uplifts effortlessly, and a presence that brings comfort to everyone around you. Being around you feels like home — safe, warm, and full of genuine care. You have this rare gift of making people feel seen, heard, and appreciated, and that alone is something truly special.

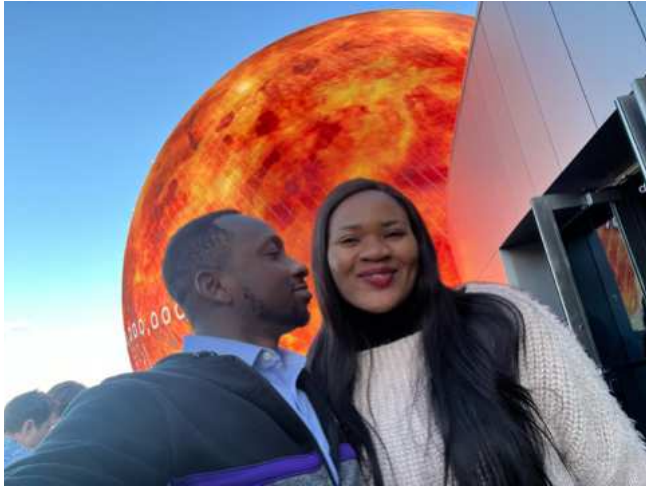
Your kindness is not something you turn on and off — it is who you are. In moments when others might walk away, you stay. When people need a listening ear, you are there. When someone is struggling, you are the hand that reaches out. Over these thirty years, you have built not just friendships, but deep and meaningful connections that stand the test of time.

What makes you even more admirable is your strength. Life has its ups and downs, but you carry yourself with grace through it all. You rise above challenges with courage and continue to shine, never letting difficulties take away your beautiful nature. Instead, you use your experiences to grow and to inspire others to keep going. Your laughter lights up rooms, your smile brightens even the darkest days, and your energy brings people together. You are a source of joy, a pillar of support, and a constant reminder that good people still exist in this world. Everyone who knows you can confidently say that their life is better because you are in it.

As we celebrate these three decades of your life, we also look forward to all that is yet to come. The future holds even more blessings, achievements, and beautiful memories for you. If the past thirty years are anything to go by, then we know your journey ahead will be even more impactful and inspiring.

So today, we raise our glasses to you, Shona — a truly wonderful person, a rare gem, and a blessing to everyone around you. May your days be filled with happiness, your heart with peace, and your life with continued love and success.

Cheers to three amazing decades, and to many more ahead.





# Resume Virtues and Eulogy Virtues

**By Tobi Oluwatola**

David Brooks, in his book *The Road to Character*, distinguishes between two different sets of life priorities. The first he calls Resume Virtues — the skills and accomplishments you bring to the marketplace, such as job titles, academic degrees, awards, and career success. They focus on self-promotion, external achievement, and “making a mark.” The second set, which he argues are more important, he calls Eulogy Virtues: the things spoken about at your funeral — kindness, honesty, faithfulness, bravery. They focus on character, relationships, and “inner light.” Most people excel in one category or the other. Shona excels effortlessly in both. In this essay, I focus on three of her virtues to illustrate this point: her bias for action, her energy, and her compassion.

Many people say they will do things. Shona just does them — both at home and at work. She started AccessGov on a whim late last year, following a conversation about the frustration she encountered while interviewing local governments for her thesis — none of them had systems for tracking activities, let alone data on their service to their communities. She felt we could close this gap. Immediately after that conversation, she drafted a concept note, and the next day prompted us to build the website. On our December trip to Canada, she discussed her frustrations with Folu, and shortly after, a product agreement was in hand. By February, Shona was in Nigeria, having secured meetings with all Ogun State local government chairmen and the Nasarawa State Investment Promotion Commission — all from just two introductions. In less than a month, she had

entered into agreements with five local governments in Ogun State, developed proposals for five ministries in Nasarawa State, hired an intern in each state, visited six local governments and several ministries, and pitched AccessGov to them all using mockups of the product. She returned to the US armed with valuable feedback to build out what is now being tested. No funding raised, no large team — just one passionate woman with a bias for action.

When I first moved in with Shona, the first thing that struck me was her energy. I could not understand how one person could fit a PhD, two jobs, a startup, active church leadership, writing books, and a constant presence in the lives of friends and family into the same 24 hours we are all limited to — and still find time to worry about what I would eat. Shona would wake at 5am, do her devotion, ask me what I wanted for breakfast and get on with it, then move from call to call interrupted only by stretches of deep work, then prepare lunch for two, then back to it, then meet with friends to pray, then back to meetings with Nigeria running until 1am — only to sleep three hours and be back at it by 5am. Never complaining, never faltering, just consistent, seemingly boundless energy. Two years later, tempered with more maturity and a healthier rhythm of rest, she is still the same. Her calendar is packed not just with work, but with the birthdays of everyone in our lives and reminders to check in on people constantly.

Finally, her compassion. Shona rarely meets a person without a thoughtful gift. I recall her first trip to Nigeria — she had made a list of every person whose name I had ever mentioned and arrived with something thoughtful for each of them. I like to joke that she bribes people, but I know it comes from a genuine depth of care. Shona feels deeply. She cries when she is happy and when she is sad, especially for the people she loves. Just like Steven, her tears on the day I left after our first extended visit in DC left such an impression on me that I knew I had to marry her. But like a rose, she can also show tough love. She is deeply committed to the people around her growing into the best versions of themselves — never afraid of a hard conversation, direct and thoughtful in her feedback, whether with her colleagues or with me. And on the occasions she has had to part ways with people after several chances and corrections, she has found a way to do it with genuine humility, grace, and compassion.

Shona is a rare gift. We are all lucky to have her in our lives, and I am grateful she chose me.

Dr. Tobi Oluwatola  
Shona's Husband

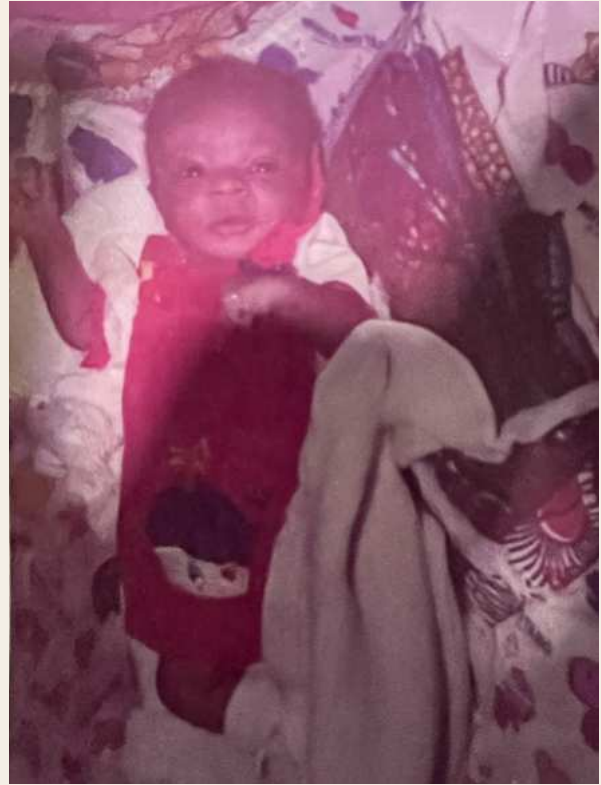
# My Auntie Is So Caring and Loving

***By Bunmi Olalere***

I just wanted to wish my auntie a happy birthday in advance. She's such a kind and caring auntie that every time she comes, she always makes a special meal for the family. This time that she came, she did pancakes for everybody in the family.

And also, she bought me books, she even bought me a 3-in-1 water bottle. Every time she comes, she takes me out to go and have fun and explore new things. She buys me shoes, books, even Bibles. My auntie is so caring and loving.

I pray that I make her proud and her children make her even more proud, in Jesus' name. Long life and prosperity to her. Amen.



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# Try Not to Cry

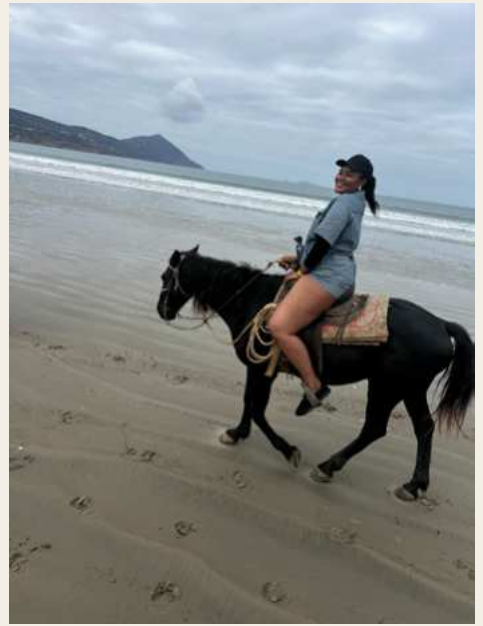
for Shona

A keepsake of faith, friendship, family and love

Thirty people looked at your life  
and saw the same thing.

Compiled with love, April 2026

Happy 30th birthday, Shona



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## **A life remembered in many pictures and many voices**

“My auntie is so caring and loving.  
Every time she comes, she takes me out  
to have fun and explore new things.”

— from Bunmi Olalere’s tribute

Try Not to Cry · A Tribute Book for Shona at 30

family · friendship · faith · love