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Paul Danquah, author Nana-Ama Danquah's uncle, in the early 1980s in his World Bank office in the District.

ON THE COVER:
Illustration by Kelsey Dake

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NANA-AMA DANQUAH

A LIFE

AS WIDE AS THE WORLD

t wasn't until Uncle Paul's death that I understood the full measure of the man

STORY BY NANA-AMA DANQUAH

In early July of last year I received a call from Dr. Fouad, a man I didn't know, informing me that Paul Danquah, my uncle in Tangier, had been non-responsive for days, not speaking and not eating. Dr. Fouad, who'd been connected with me through the Ghana Embassy in Morocco, said he didn't think Uncle Paul, who was 90, would survive the night. His suggestion was to simply allow my uncle to pass away in his home. I insisted my uncle be taken to a hospital, then I booked a flight to Morocco.

Riding to the airport, I was flooded with memories of a childhood in Washington, D.C., that, courtesy of my mother's older brother, was imbued with wonder. He took great pride in revealing to me a world that existed as another pulse in the city known primarily as the center of politics: a parallel universe of paintings, poetry, movement and song.

As we drove, I took note of each jacaranda tree. They were barren, their season having passed, yet the sight of them brought me comfort. Each May when the jacarandas bloom and transform Los Angeles, where I now live, into a purple empyrean heaven, I always think of my uncle.

One of my earliest memories of Uncle Paul is of him standing by the garden at his home on Oakwood Terrace in Northwest Washington, talking to me about flowers. He was of average height for a man, about 5-foot-9, but the way he stood, elegant and straight-spined, the result of theatrical training, made him striking. His loose Afro sat atop his head like a cloud, lush billows of silver with dark, shadowy strands sifting through.

It was spring 1974. I had just emigrated from Ghana the year before to join my mother, who had been living with him for three years while attending university. I was 6, unmoved by whatever it was my uncle was telling me. What did I care about flowers? They served no purpose in my life besides background decoration.

"Darling, you miss the point entirely," he said.

A few days later, he and I embarked on an afternoon escapade, something we would do regularly over the years.

We went to the Jefferson Memorial and walked around the Tidal Basin, which was lined with cherry trees, their pink and

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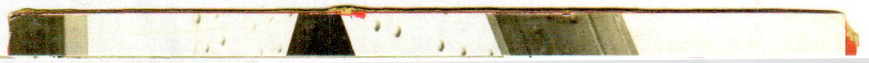


white flowers in full bloom. It was breathtaking.

"Is it always like this?" I wanted to know.

"Of course not," Uncle Paul laughed. He told me that the trees had been a gift from Japan and that the blossoms symbolize how beautiful yet fleeting life is.

Entering Tangier is like entering a painting, a piece of nouveau réalisme. It's intoxicating, a jumble of wide streets and narrow pathways, with Moorish and colonial architecture. The sidewalk cafes are filled with men sitting languidly, sipping coffee in the midday sun. The intersections are crowded with people, some in jeans and sneakers, some in djellabas and babouches — color, color everywhere.

I could see why my uncle retired here in a proverbial house on a hill with a view of the sea.

When I arrived Uncle Paul still hadn't spoken, but he was alive. He was in a public hospital, being fed intravenously. His face was sallow, the eyes vacant, his body almost skeletal. Dr. Fouad said it was actually an improvement.

I stared at the doctor as he spoke. He was handsome, a middle-aged Moroccan with a solid frame and a serious demeanor. I sensed a kindness about him. Grateful as I was for his help, I believed my uncle would fare better in a private facility.

In the 32 years Uncle Paul had been living in Tangier, I'd seen him only once. For many years, I was plagued with immigration issues that prevented me from traveling internationally. After he left Washington, we communicated by telephone and postal mail, especially during the first two decades.

The first time I'd set foot in Morocco had been in December, seven months before Dr. Fouad's call. The uncle I'd encountered was wrinkled and bent, his legendary diastemic smile now altered by missing teeth. Though there were moments of lucidity, he was altogether bewildered, stumbling through past episodes of his life as though they were the present. This was not the uncle I'd frozen in time.

This time when I went to his house it was in search of documents, such as health directives, life insurance or a will. My uncle kept everything, every menu, receipt, business card, announcement and correspondence. There were piles of papers, most of which looked to be junk: grocery receipts, to-do lists, old Christmas cards and dusty newspaper clippings. I didn't care; I took it all.

I breezed through the first pile, electricity bills from the 1990s and correspondence from a bank long closed.

The next pile was more revealing. I'd only ever seen my uncle's life through the purview of a child. Now with each piece of paper I touched, the full expanse of the life led by this man who'd cared for me as though I were his daughter began to unfold.

There was a 1963 letter from Amnesty International. As soon as I saw it, I removed my glasses and started to cry.

Though my uncle, Joseph Paul Walcott-Danquah, identified as a black man, a Ghanaian, he was born in London to a white English mother, Bertha May Walcott. His father was a black Ghanaian, Joseph Boakye "J.B" Danquah, who is widely considered the doyen of Ghana politics.

Uncle Paul was the first of his 18 children from two marriages and various relationships. My uncle and my mother, Josephine, were close. She named my sister, Paula, after him, and she chose him to be godfather to us both.

J.B. Danquah is one of the six men recognized as Ghana's founding fathers, known as "The Big Six." Political power often breeds paranoia. After the country gained independence, Kwame Nkrumah, another of the Big Six, was elected its first president. Eventually, he began detaining political opponents, real and perceived, including J.B. Danquah. Two years after the date of that Amnesty letter, my grandfather died in a condemned cell in political detention.

Sliding my glasses back on, I fell through time to fourth grade, to my first pair. Uncle Paul picked me up for our Sunday outing. "Boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," he'd said, paraphrasing Dorothy Parker.

We were off to dinner and an opera at the Kennedy Center. During the drive he told me about Miss Parker and the Algonquin Round Table, the "vicious circle." His stories about artists always made me wish I could have been of their era.

The next in the pile were love letters to Peter Pollock, his life partner. Peter, also born in London, was heir to a light-steel engineering company. He had the looks of a film star: blond hair, piercing eyes and a chiseled jawline.

The house on Holly Street NW, the last place they lived in the District, was a declaration of love and commitment. It was where family and friends gathered for holidays, with Peter cooking and Uncle Paul serving drinks and holding court.

Peter died in 2001. During a phone conversation shortly after, I asked Uncle Paul how long they'd been together. "Fifty-six years," he told me. I was awed. What courage and integrity it must have taken for my uncle to be proudly black and openly gay during times when the world considered both to be liabilities.

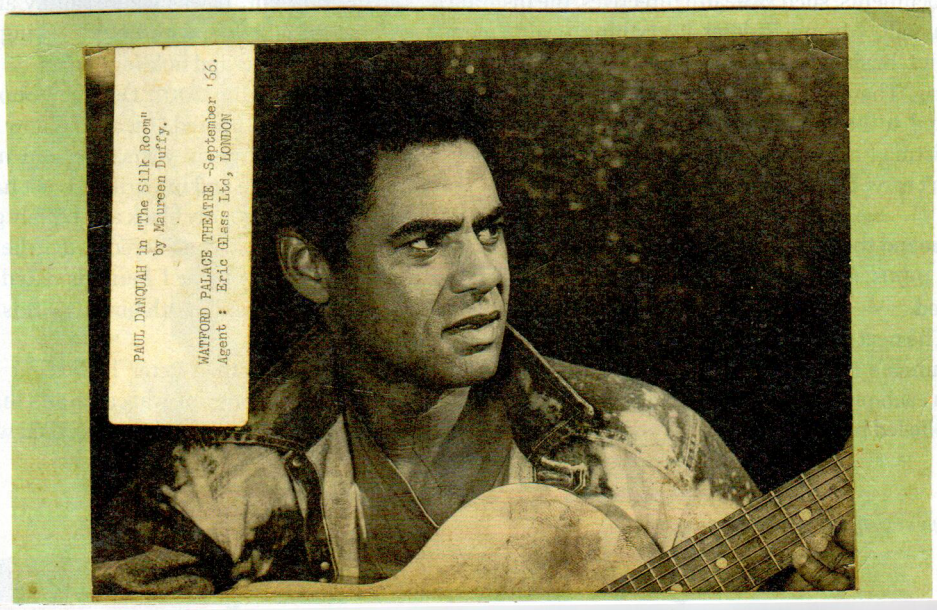
The oldest letter I found is dated June 1945, just after Uncle Paul's 20th birthday. It is addressed to Lt. Peter Pollock.

I learned that Peter had spent four years in a German prisoner-of-war camp and that prior to his life with Uncle Paul, he'd been involved with Guy Burgess

Page 24, from top: Paul Danquah in the mid-1960s; on the set of the film "A Taste of Honey" in 1960. **Opposite page, from top:** Danquah in costume for an audition for the film "Maroc 7" in the 1960s; greeting a chief in Ghana, circa 1950s.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NANA-AMA DANQUAH

I had barely made a dent in the piles of papers, but already I knew they belonged in the archives of an institution, not in plastic bags and torn, finger-smudged file folders.



of the Cambridge Five spy ring.

Both Peter and Uncle Paul were art enthusiasts, and they often hosted salons in their home. When they lived in London, their friend Francis Bacon, then a struggling painter, stayed with them rent-free for years at a time.

While studying law, Uncle Paul was cast in the 1961 film "A Taste of Honey," alongside Rita Tushingham, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship. He placed his studies on hold to pursue acting and was featured in more films and popular television shows such as "Danger Man" and "The Avengers." Eventually he resumed his studies and was called to the bar in the United Kingdom, as well as in Ghana and in Washington.

In the late 1960s Uncle Paul took a job at the World Bank, becoming its first sub-Saharan African employee. He and Peter moved to the District, where they continued to host their gatherings, invitations to which were quite coveted.

The last document I handled that day was a 1969 letter from the Times of London, written by the exiled South African journalist Dennis Kiley. He wanted Uncle Paul to put him in touch with Maya Angelou so he could commission her to write an article.

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Saudade is a Portuguese word that is similar to nostalgia, but more weighted with melancholy. It's exactly what I felt while in Tangier. I longed for the years of my youth spent with my uncle.

After I checked him into the best facility in Tangier, his condition improved almost overnight. "Chokran," he said that morning, thanking Dr. Fouad in Arabic. By the next day his personality had returned.

"Darling, open the window," he said to me. "I want to see the sun."

He had still not eaten, so I tried to feed him a spoonful of soup.

"No thank you, darling," he insisted. "I've had quite enough."

"But you haven't had any at all," I countered.

"My point exactly!"

It was classic Paul Danquah. He was polite, witty and delightfully cheeky, a perfect gentleman. Yes, this was the man I knew.

He used to take me to Old Ebbitt Grill and Tabard Inn for Sunday brunch. He was an epicure; of course he'd refuse to eat something that resembled gruel.

Saudade.

I longed, too, for the Washington of those days gone, the hub of black culture, innovation and creativity. In the 1970s the city was a mecca for some of the most influential artists and intellectual minds.

Melvin Deal was introducing the African Heritage Dancers and Drummers, one of the first African dance troupes in the nation. Robert Hooks had created the D.C. Black Repertory Company, which fostered the careers of many actors, including Kene Holliday and Lynn Whitfield. Bernice Johnson Reagon was the company's vocal director. While there, she formed the famous all-female a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Frederick "Wilkie" Wilkerson, a vocal coach who worked with Reagon, Angelou, Paul Robeson and numerous other performers, had a bustling studio on S Street NW. Wilkie convinced one of his opera students to give pop music a try. That student, Roberta Flack, used to be a regular performer at Mr. Henry's Restaurant on Capitol Hill.

Many of these people were Uncle Paul's friends. He introduced me to their work and, sometimes, to them. This was the soil from which I grew, nurtured with attention and love, not unlike the flowers in Peter and Uncle Paul's garden, so that when my season arrived I, too, would bloom.

Miraculously, Uncle Paul was soon well enough to be discharged. I returned home to tend to bills, deadlines and other obligations. It was my intention to return to Morocco within a month and stay for a long while.

Dr. Fouad sent me regular reports, photos and videos of Uncle Paul. After a week I noticed his health was rapidly declining. Eleven days after I'd left, Dr. Fouad called to tell me my uncle had died.

I traveled to Tangier once more, this time with my mother, to plan his funeral. We buried Uncle Paul near Peter, as he had requested. He'd written in one of his many notes I read that if there were such a thing as a next lifetime he wanted to spend it with Peter as well.

My uncle had an extraordinary life and lived to a ripe old age, but he is now gone from this world, and knowing that hurts.

He took hold of my hand, nurtured within me a love of the arts. It felt like a rite of passage, his guiding me through the cultural landscape that ultimately drew me to this literary life.

The heavens could not have granted me any greater privilege than the ability to have one last adventure with my uncle, Paul; to be there with him, holding his hand, expressing my love and gratitude in the weeks and days before he made his final passage. ■

Nana-Ama Danquah wrote the memoir "Willow Weep for Me" and is senior editor of African literature and culture at the Los Angeles Review of Books. To comment on this story, email wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.

Opposite page, from top: Danquah filming "A Taste of Honey" in 1960; signing autographs for fans during a press junket in 1961; performing in "The Silk Room" at the Watford Palace Theatre in the United Kingdom in 1966.