

HEART OF A LION

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Foreword

Even at a young age, early in my career, I sometimes thought about publishing a book. Not only about football though; quite the opposite. My life so far has been quite full-on, especially my childhood... and that's still true even today. Nobody outside my small circle of trusted friends knows my life story. Now it's time for me to share it with the outside world, as openly and honestly as I can. However, it is not with the intention of putting myself in the spotlight, or patting myself on the back.

I'd really like to inspire people with my stories – young people in particular. I hope that talking about what I've been through will show that there's always light at the end of the tunnel. It doesn't matter how difficult your childhood circumstances are, there's always a way to get through the tough times. I know that from my own experience. I've made mistakes in my life, I've taken plenty of punches (and given them), and fallen on my face countless times. But I kept getting up again and again, with another life lesson under my belt every time.

I followed my own path to where I am today. That's another point I want to emphasise in this book: have the courage to be yourself. Make your own choices. Have the guts to stand out. To develop your God-given talents and chase your dreams. Have faith in your own ability and drive, without letting other people's

opinions and expectations hold you back. That's the way I've always done it, despite the problems it's often caused me. And I'll keep on doing it that way, because there's nothing more important than being true to yourself.

Some people will say that it's too early for this book. They have every right to think so. As I see it, it has nothing to do with how old I am or the stage I've reached in my football career. Sometimes I feel like I've lived an entire lifetime already. This book explains why. Each chapter starts with a tattoo that's relevant to that period of my life. This book could not have been written without the co-operation of my mother and my best friends. They helped me through the darkest periods of my life, and they are still my inner circle today. I want to give them my heartfelt thanks for that.

This book tells my story. This is who I am.

Memphis



The only thing he left
was his blood.
First I wanted more than that,
but while growing up,
everything a father should have taught
I learned myself.
First I was a small boy in a big world
but now I'm a big boy in a small world.

1. Genesis in Ghana

It's in Elmina Castle that the tears come. Inside this former slave fort, Memphis Depay sinks to his knees, stares out through the bars, and starts sobbing softly. It's the only noise in this gloomy dungeon. This is the room from which, for centuries on end, African captives were forced through the 'door of no return'. Forced onto slave ships for the months-long journey to the plantations of the United States, the Caribbean islands and Suriname. Memphis is not the only one who is overcome with emotion. Music producer Rass King, who has made the journey along with Memphis, asks in a wavering voice if it's ok for him to sing. And he does, Bob Marley's *Redemption Song*, a song about release from slavery through the power of the mind. When Rass's voice has died away, Memphis and his friends remain on the stone floor of the basement for another half an hour. Silent, almost numb.

The only sound that penetrates the dismal cellar is the excited chatter of a swelling crowd outside the fort. News of Memphis's presence has spread through Cape Coast like wildfire and more and more residents of the Ghanaian coastal town are gathering at the entrance gates. But they'll have to be patient, because Elmina Castle is not the place for a flying visit, certainly not when you're in search of your roots, like Memphis, here in his father's country for the first time. Shoulders slumped, he follows the guide to the rooms into which thousands of

slaves were crammed together for weeks on end, bound in chains, in their own excrement. To the death cell, where insurgents were left to die of starvation, via the church and the slave market to the women's quarters, where the Dutch governors picked out their sex slaves each day. The fort was in Dutch hands from 1637 to 1872, after the West India Company and John Maurice of Nassau-Siegen's fleet captured it from the Portuguese. They initially wanted it for the trade in gold and ivory, but before long the slave trade became the top priority. Placards on the walls in Dutch are a reminder of that time.

The tour ends on the roof. There amongst the battlements, Memphis suggests a group prayer. The friends stand in a circle, hand in hand, with eyes closed and heads bowed.

Outside the fort again, the tension is quickly broken. Memphis has barely stepped off the bridge that leads to the fort, before he is surrounded by a screaming throng of people. In Ghana his surname is pronounced differently to how people say it in the Netherlands and *Dee-PAY!* rings out over and over, with the second syllable drawn out. Before long Memphis is at risk of being swallowed up by the jostling crowd. Everyone wants to touch him; a selfie with him is the greatest trophy of all. It is utter chaos, the mass of screaming people seeming to take on a life of its own. It's like an ant heap, moving painfully slowly to no one knows where. Then the police rush in, and they don't mess around. They form a cordon around Memphis, and anyone who comes too close gets a whack, or a shock from an electroshock weapon. "That's taking it pretty far," Memphis mumbles, and he comes up with a plan to calm things down. He asks for a football. Where there are African children a ball is never far away, and within seconds a football flies out of the crowd in his direction. He whips the ball into the air and begins to juggle it with his feet, shoulders and head. Cheers rise from the crowd, reverberating round the walls of Elmina Castle. Memphis laughs for the

first time since setting foot in the slave fort. The ball becomes a lifebuoy and a source of joy. That's what it was for him countless times throughout his difficult childhood, and so it is again on this highly-charged day in Ghana.

One day earlier, Memphis's friends had started arriving at the Schiphol VIP Centre. In this private area of the airport, the trip to Ghana could begin in peace and quiet. This is how Memphis travels. For short flights between Rotterdam Airport and his home in Lyon, he travels by private jet. Longer flights start and end with the VIP service at Schiphol. "I can afford it, and it saves a lot of hassle," Memphis explains, sinking into a roomy armchair and ordering a fruit salad.

He has christened this trip to Ghana: *The Genesis*. He chose the name deliberately. "In the Bible, Genesis stands for the beginning. These are my first steps into the realm of good causes, the beginning of a new phase in my life. This is the first time I've done something like this with my friends. The religious factor plays an important role too. We want to show blind and deaf children that God loves them and we're going to pray for them and sing and dance with them. Genesis also represents the fact that this isn't a one-off. We're not just dropping in, handing some money over and wishing them luck. It's the first in a series of projects, and I want to see them progress. And so, this is *The Genesis*."

Memphis chose his travelling companions carefully. This trip promises to be an emotional one, so he wants to be surrounded by close friends – guys that he can be himself around, and with whom he can share his experiences. Another trip is planned for the day after they return from Ghana, when Memphis will be taking the same group of friends on vacation. The destination is a secret. "I expect that the trip to Ghana is going to be quite moving for all of us," he explains. "I think it will be great for us to process our experiences together. That's why I've planned the surprise trip for immediately afterwards. To help us to make the transition back to normal life... and to have fun, of course."

Of course his two childhood friends Gigi Vitale and Tufan Özbozkurt are going on the trip. Memphis and Gigi have known each other since they were five, when they both played in the youngest division for Moordrecht football club. Memphis met Tufan at psv Eindhoven at the age of twelve. The three of them refer to each other as brothers; they have their own lingo, their own way of relating and a strong bond of trust.

Rotterdam rapper Winston Bergwijn will also be making the trip, along with his producer, Rass King. Memphis hasn't known them for long, but they connected the moment they met and since then, he and Winne, as Bergwijn is known, have been in touch every day. They've already laid down a track together, with this journey in mind, and they plan to make a video clip for it in Ghana.

An English friend, Gbolahan Adarabioyo, will join the group in Accra. He is the older brother of Manchester City defender, Tosin Adarabioyo. Mental coach and friend Joost Leenders has had to drop out as he has too much to do in the Netherlands. But the group is still far from complete. Sherman, a Dutch security guard, will be joining them, as will Leonie Hallers, who was responsible for organising the trip on behalf of her company International Sports Alliance. There's also an entire delegation to make a visual record of the trip, including an English film crew creating a short documentary, an English photographer for Memphis's social media and a Dutch crew to tape the video clip. In Africa the group will be joined by a local guide, a Ghanaian security guard and six drivers.

But Memphis's inner circle will be Gigi, Tufan, Winne, Rass, Gbolahan, Sherman and the co-writer of his book. They will be travelling in a separate bus in Ghana, with the others following behind and the group will be divided along the same lines at mealtimes. "Memphis will always have the final say, on when the cameras are allowed in," is how Leonie concludes her briefing at the VIP Centre. The travel plans have been discussed, and the house rules too. Now *The Genesis*

can begin. “Leonie asked me beforehand what I wanted to achieve with this trip,” says Memphis on the plane. “The short answer is that I want to change children’s lives. That’s the crux of it. In this case, children who are deaf or blind, and there are 24,000 of them in Ghana. I want them to realise that, despite their challenges, they have their own unique talents. I want to encourage them to develop those talents and make the most of them. Until now, deaf and blind people have been written off, charities have paid them little attention – in Africa charities are more likely to back projects that fight famine or particular illnesses. Obviously these are fabulous causes and very important, but such issues are already getting a lot of attention. I want to help a forgotten group and God has put me on the track of helping deaf and blind children. I view it as a mission that I must fulfil.”

Memphis has been to Ghana once before, although he doesn’t remember it – he was just a baby when his parents took him along to pick up his half-brother and half-sister from his father’s previous marriage. Things are very different now. “My father doesn’t even know I’m going to Ghana,” Memphis says. He doesn’t give the impression that that will be changing any time soon. “I don’t know exactly where he was born. I don’t know if he has any brothers or sisters. No man, I know nothing at all about my father. I was three years old when my parents’ marriage broke down. During a fight with my mother, he smashed our aquarium with his bare fist. That’s why I’ve got the words, tattooed inside a map of Ghana: *the only thing he left was his blood*. I have hardly had any contact with my father for a long time, but I want to know where a part of me comes from. So, for me personally, this is also a journey of discovery, back to my African origins. Maybe I’ll talk to my father about it one day. Or maybe I won’t.”

When they arrive at Accra airport, Ghanaian security guards guide the group smoothly to the waiting buses. On the tarmac, Memphis takes a moment to soak up his first impressions. By now it is evening and standing there in the twilight, he

takes a deep breath of the sultry air, silently inhaling the scents of West Africa, as he takes in his surroundings. Then the door of the bus slides open and Memphis settles into his regular spot, the one he always takes when travelling by bus with his clubs and with the Dutch national team: the back left.

The bus will play an important role in the days to come, and not just logistically. This is the place to which, several times a day, Memphis and his friends will retreat from the commotion and process all their impressions of Ghana. They will usually follow the same ritual after boarding: Tufan starts up the Wi-Fi, security guard Sherman makes sure everyone has a drink and Memphis is in charge of the music – mostly American hip hop. The atmosphere on the bus depends on the excursion they've just made. Some outings have everyone staring out of the window in silence afterwards, while others get them laughing and singing. And there's a code of honour: what's said on the bus, stays on the bus. This is their safe zone.

Following a short night at the Kempinski Hotel, it's time for their first trip. Under police escort, their convoy of six buses and cars heads for Cape Coast, 150 kilometres west of Accra. There, in the Chief's Palace, an official reception with the local chief awaits. They must receive his blessing before being officially permitted to travel through the area. It sounds much more formal than it really is. The local chief turns out to be a relaxed man who's very happy to welcome Memphis. "One of Ghana's famous sons has come home," he says in his opening address. His advisers, dressed in traditional robes, nod their agreement. "We are overwhelmed by your arrival, as well as your concern for Ghana's disabled children."

The chief promises that, on his next visit, Memphis will be baptised according to local custom, and then a ceremony is held to summon the spirits of his forefathers. In turn Memphis gives a few words of thanks, before shaking his hips with a local dance group.

An hour later, Memphis is running along a sand flat, chasing a tinkling ball. He has been given special blinding glasses to wear, so he can experience what it's like to play football with only a bell to orient himself. We have arrived at Cape Deaf, the beating heart of Memphis's journey. This is the place where seven hundred deaf and blind children are educated, given sports lessons and healthy food. *Disability not Inability*, the foundation's motto, is written on the facade of the main building. Because to be disabled means to be differently abled, in this place children learn to think in terms of possibilities, rather than impossibilities.

The complex is extensive, but there are shortages nonetheless. Shortages of teaching materials, building materials, specialised teaching staff, money... of everything actually. That's why Memphis has come to make a donation. He donates a Braille machine. There are only three of these in circulation in Ghana, well, four from this point on. In his speech to the students and staff of Cape Deaf, assisted by sign language interpreters, Memphis emphasises the reason why he's here. "I'm here to show the Netherlands and the rest of the world how talented you are. That you deserve opportunities and support. We have the same blood and I'll be there for you."

Once back in the Cape Coast hotel, at the end of the day, after the haunting visit to Elmina Castle, Memphis goes to the beach and takes a seat on a low wall. The sea is rough on this side of Africa and he stares out at the wild waves. "I don't have the words to describe how I feel right now," he murmurs, almost unintelligibly. "I can see all of what happened today like a film in my head. All I can do is be thankful, thankful that I can be here, to do something for my father's country."

The first evening in Cape Coast comes to an end with singing and dancing on the beach. After dinner, Memphis turns on his illuminated speaker and finds music by Ghanaian singer Bisa Kdei. Bare-chested and facing out towards the breakers, a glass of cognac in one hand and the speaker in the other, he dances

to the sounds of *Azonto Ghost*. He seems to be in a trance. Normally his friends dance along with him, but this is not a normal evening. They leave him in peace.

The next morning, Memphis opens the first national conference on a sport's policy for deaf and blind children in Ghana. The venue is the University of Cape Coast and the conference is attended by representatives of the Ghana Deaf Sports Federation, the Ghana Blind Sports Association, the National Paralympic Committee and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The congress was initiated by Memphis as part of his trip and there are teachers and children from Cape Deaf attending as well. His speech this morning is about the importance of sharing, and Memphis references his time at Manchester United. "Despite having all the money in the world, it was an unhappy time for me. I only found happiness when God showed me which way to go. A lot of people measure their success by the size of their bank account and the things that they own, but that's got nothing to do with happiness. My money is God's money, therefore your money too. I'm here to share it. To share it with the people in the country where my roots are, the people who need it the most."

A blind girl says a few words of thanks. Her last words, in particular, leave a lasting impression: "Your visit is a blessing, Memphis. You give us hope."

After that, a new day awaits at Cape Deaf, where a sports tournament has been organised, with Memphis and his friends as active participants. They will be playing a game of *goalball* in the school gym, with blind children sitting on the floor and trying to throw a ball into the opposing team's goal. The ball has a small bell attached, so the children know where it is. Memphis is once again given blinding glasses to wear, and to the great amusement of his friends the game ends with a ball hitting him hard in the groin. "I don't think blind sport is very good for my fertility," Memphis jokes, wincing in pain as he empties a bottle of water into his shorts.

After a football tournament outside in the shimmering heat, it's time to have lunch with the children before enjoying a musical performance. Emotions run high for Memphis and his friends when a children's choir performs. What starts out as a Ghanaian song suddenly changes to Dutch halfway through. Winne is the first to notice. Is he hearing things? Could it really be true that here, in the middle of Africa, a group of children are singing the lyrics that he and Memphis wrote together? From a track that hasn't even been released yet? How? The pair exchange surprised looks, and the tears start to flow down their cheeks as they hear the Ghanaian children sing: "*Laat het eind een nieuw begin zijn, intentie puur, die van een kind zijn.*"¹

It takes a little while for Memphis and Winne to recover from the performance's unexpected turn. Later they discover that Leonie, their tour operator, had emailed the lyrics to the Cape Deaf school management team a few weeks earlier, thinking that it could perhaps be integrated into a performance by the children. Even so, Memphis and Winne are astonished that Ghanaian children who had never spoken a word of Dutch were able to master the text, purely on sound, read aloud for them by their teachers. "Blind children's other senses are heightened," a teacher explains, "in order to compensate for their blindness. They mastered the text pretty quickly."

Memphis uses this information in his closing speech by once again drawing the children's attention to their talents. He then signs the cheque sealing his financial support for Cape Deaf. He returns the principal's thanks immediately, saying, "You don't have to thank me for anything; let's thank God. And I want to thank all the children and staff here, for being who you are."

As they travel to their next destination, Kakum National Park, silence reigns

¹ "Let the end be a new beginning, intention pure, like a child."

in the bus. No music from the speakers for now, nobody chatting. Peace and quiet. The children and their uninhibited merriment, the tour of the weathered classrooms, the heartfelt discussions with the teachers, the backdrop of music and singing, has left quite an impression. Even Gigi, normally the clown of the group, is wrapped up in his own thoughts. “What a beautiful silence,” Memphis says, after half an hour. No one responds.

Only when they reach Kakum National Park does the group come back to life. This last remaining part of tropical forest in South Ghana features canopy walkways stretched high amongst the treetops, and these awaken the child in them all. The view of the opulent greenery below is enchanting, but the group is focused on making each other’s lives miserable on the wobbly bridges. In particular Rass (scared of heights) and Gigi (scared of swinging) are finding it heavy going, a source of malicious pleasure to the rest. At Elmina Castle it was the ball that lightened the mood, now it’s pure, unadulterated childish fun that provides a diversion.

When they are back and night has fallen on Coconut Grove Beach Resort, Memphis asks one of the hotel staff if he could light a bonfire for them on the beach. The speakers come out again and exhilarated, Memphis dances around the fire with Gigi, Tufan and Rass. Winne grins from his seat on a nearby wall. He has to shake his head as he recalls the moment, earlier in the day, when he suddenly heard their own words from the mouths of Ghanaian children. He laughs as he says, “That did really happen, right? I still can’t quite believe it.” Back at the end of 2017, the Dutch-Surinamese rapper received a message out of the blue. As a child, Memphis had known all Winne’s lyrics off by heart, and now he was approaching his childhood idol to ask whether he’d agree to the idea of recording a track together. “I didn’t know Winne personally, but obviously I knew him as a rapper. The best in the Netherlands, in my opinion. He’s not

afraid to stand out from other rappers. I think Winne's an amazing guy, with a heart of gold. He speaks wise words that get me thinking, and he has a positive attitude to everything he does. To carry out this plan properly, I had to have him."

"I wasn't immediately enthusiastic," says Winne. "I never make music with people I don't know. So first I wanted to know whether we clicked – I like to feel the energy that someone brings to a project. Memphis came to my studio in Rotterdam and we sat there for a while talking about music, about what he wanted to do, and about life in general. We clicked pretty much right away."

The message that Memphis wants to convey in his song was inspired by Jay-Z's *Hard Knock Life*, a song that tells the story of the road to the top, from the New York gutter to the A-list of the music scene. Memphis: "My original idea was to record a track and clip with Winne in Rotterdam. Then when I told him about my plans for Ghana, he said why not base it on that? That thought had been at the back of my mind for a while too, but first I wanted to find out whether Winne was even interested in working with me. When he started talking about linking it to the Ghana project, it all came together. Ghana as a starting point, with a message of positivity to inspire young people all over the world: high-quality music and a great video clip showing what we did in Ghana. Every aspect of this track has to show the point I'm at in my life, right now."

The more Memphis thought about his trip to Ghana, the more threads he tried to tie together. "My sponsorship contract with Under Armour provides for creative input from my side. That makes it a very special partnership for me. I told them about my plans in Ghana and they were enthusiastic immediately. We started work on designing a football boot with the colours of the Ghanaian flag. The idea was that I would wear the boots when I played on the Dutch team in the international friendlies against Slovakia and Italy, because I was leaving for Ghana just after the match in Italy. In the end, we weren't able to get the

boots finished in time and afterwards I realised that was a good thing. Those eye-catching football boots would have generated plenty of attention, and I don't want any fuss here with the media. It just distracts from the real reason that I'm here. I know how it works: journalists say that they want to talk to me about the project, then after just one question, they start asking about my career or my private life. But this isn't about me; it's about Ghana and about deaf and blind children. We're going to draw attention to that later with my own crew, and in the video clip with Winne. We'll release our track on a label and distribute it via all channels. The proceeds will go straight back to Ghana, to the projects here, so it will come full circle."

When he wakes up the next morning, Memphis looks out from his hotel room and sees a boy standing on the beach outside. It turns out that the little guy left home at 6am, walking 7 kilometres just to catch a glimpse of the footballer. As the morning goes on, more and more curious Ghanaians arrive on the beach. It seems that people have found out where Memphis is staying on the Gold Coast. The hotel's security guards are not comfortable with the situation and they call in reinforcements. By that time Memphis is already on his way to the next project: swimming lessons for the deaf and blind youngsters of Cape Coast, followed by a football clinic. The latter event goes into serious overtime, because in the final game it seems that no one can manage to score. The match is fought hard on the bumpy surface, and the fiercely competitive lads don't spare Memphis in the duels. "No goals no glory!" Memphis shouts at the speaker as it announces the end of play. Ultimately, he brings an end to his stay in Cape Coast by kicking the ball straight into goal. The bus is ready to head to Accra for the final leg of *The Genesis*.

Most of the final day in the capital is devoted to taping the music video with Winne. During a break, Memphis pays a visit to the local market, which is more

complicated than it sounds. The longer Memphis is in Ghana the more chaotic the scenes, anywhere he makes an appearance. For this reason, increased security is in place for his trip to the market. His usual security guards are joined by two members of the military, each carrying a machine gun that could easily bring down a herd of elephants. Fortunately, they don't need to raise them, but there are certainly hectic scenes when Memphis arrives. People come running from every direction, forming an ever-growing pack in the jumble of narrow alleys that make up the market. After an hour, Memphis escapes from the scrum. He has spotted children playing football away in the distance and he joins them for a kickabout. His last public feat in Ghana is a powerful shot straight into the top corner of a rickety goal.

Before leaving for the airport, Memphis calls everyone together in the hotel gardens. There are presents for the Ghanaian guides, security guards and drivers, and Rass performs a rap that was written during the bus rides. A fragment:

*Walk by faith not by sight
Share the love, be the light
Get the strength, lose the fight
Fight again, make it right
Pray together, stay together
Hoping we will find our way together.*

A cheer rises up from the gardens. It's time to go. On the way to the airport, Memphis shows the others a message he has received from his mother. In response to the short videos he sent her, she has written, "Remember we talked about this when you were little? You said that when you grew up, you wanted to help people in Africa. God answers our prayers."

Then there's laughter from the front of the bus. The motorcycle policeman who has escorted the group throughout the trip is pulling a stunt: driving along, he stands up straight and put his fingers in his ears. Memphis's victory pose, as imitated by so many children over the past few days, everywhere Memphis went. Memphis roars with laughter, returns to his usual spot at the back of the bus and says, "A lot of things have come together for me here. I've felt so much joy and gratitude. That's the main vibe now. But on the other hand, the fact that my father comes from Ghana, and that he's hardly been there for me at all, throughout my life, was another aspect of this trip. That was sometimes hard – harder than I'd expected. It brought up a lot of pain from my childhood. As far as my father's concerned, after this trip I've got more questions than answers. That's ok though, all in good time, but I'm really happy that I didn't have to make this trip alone. When things were difficult, I was able to share my feelings with my best friends, and then focus on something else. If they hadn't been here, I probably would have spent every night crying in my hotel room. Instead it was a good mix of helping people, strong emotions, de-stressing and enjoying myself. I still need to process it all. We'll come back to it later."

Then he starts to rap a few lines from his track with Winne:

Ik moest back naar mijn roots

Dit voelt zo goed

Kijk papa wat je zoon doet

Dit is walking in faith.²

² I had to go back to my roots

This feels so good

Look Dad what your son's doing

This is walking in faith.