

# One Season, Many Decades,

By Abubakar Adam Ibrahim

1.

## The Decade of sprouting memories

We were children playing in the sands, digging holes to plant seeds of memories and a love for a space we were yet to grasp the sheer enormity and complexities of. Seeds that would burrow deeper until their roots would curl around our hearts, squeezing them to give us the adrenalin rush, the pizzazz and passion it takes to live in this space. Yet, somehow, inexplicably, these roots smother us.

In those days, in Jos, that city nestled atop a plateau, feathered by knolls and boulders and often shrouded in the morning mist, we thought the world was still fresh, still grey from the unsettled dust of creation. On one or two occasions we banded together, the other children and I, to walk to the world's end, that place just beyond the horizon where the fiery sun sets.

As children, there were very little things to look forward to or to worry about: playing in the plot down the street or the one in front of Ngo's house, where sometimes, her belligerent grandmother, wispy and bent over, would chase us with insults and her walking stick. The festivities – the Eid when there would be rice and robust chunks of meat in tomato stew, when Ngo and her siblings, the Ndubuisi children, Kayode and his brother Ben would treat us with veneration because they longed for the feast our mothers were preparing. Like little lords in our starched kaftans, we would delight in taking bowls of Sallah food to their houses. At Christmas, the roles were reversed.

When we played in the sands then, no one was Yoruba or Igbo or Berom, Hausa or Egbura, and we only became Christians or Muslims when it was time to pray, or when Ngo's crazy grandma chased us, screaming, 'Bastards! Forehead bangers!' our laughter riling her up further. Most times, we were just children with hearts open to loving, to living, to laughing, to moulding dreams from the dust. We were just children of a city nestled on the hills in a country whose name was immaterial, whose fault lines we were blissfully unaware of.

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I became conscious of having been in love with stories and my country at the same time. It was an awareness because I didn't know when this falling in love happened, only that it had happened sometime earlier in my life.

I was about six or seven then. In the evenings, we would gather in the courtyard, sometimes sitting on the dakali or at the foot of Binta, an older girl who seemed as wise as the griots of old. Under the starry night or the solemn gaze of the moon, she would tell us stories of the cunning spider and the wily tortoise, of gullible birds and proud lions. We didn't know this at the time, but we were to be one of the last generations of children to be handed down these stories. Television, a rarity in those days, happened to those who came after us.

While our evenings were expended in storytelling and the revelries of moonlight plays, our days in school were garnished with flag-waving fervour and our teachers' promises that we were going to be the future leaders of a great country.

In those days, residues of the post-independence glow from two decades before still lingered, a glow that even a civil war and several military coups had not been able to eviscerate entirely. There were moments of national pride surges, such as the time the football team won the first-ever Under 17 World Cup in China, birthing a contagion of effusive nationalism.

‘Nigeria! The best in the whole world!’ my father said, cranking the knob of his National colour TV that went kat, kat, kat as he searched for a clearer image, a channel with better pictures. No one cared that most of the boys in the team were from Bendel in the far south, or what name they called God by or what language they spoke. They were just Nigerians.

It was the first time I recall thinking of myself as one. In the midst of those dancing adults and their excitement, I recall first catching the Nigerian bug.

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It wasn’t until much later that I would realise that even in those days in the mid –‘80s that despondency had already set in, and more people were investing their hopes, not in the promises of a ‘Giant of Africa’ but increasingly in the God bandied about by mercantile priests, clerics and new-age charlatans.

In the first Buhari years, this despondency had driven a good number of professionals to flee the country. The hit song in those years was Veno Marioghae’s ‘Nigeria go Survive,’ which had the standout line, ‘Andrew no check out o,’ delivered to a man about to flee the country. ‘Stay and build your country,’ Veno crooned.

Veno was a patriot who, like most others, believed whatever was happening in the country then was only a glitch in the matrix, that things would reset themselves if all Nigerians 'do their work' and the journey to greatness would resume.

But deep down, our parents and teachers felt this despondency. In the dark, it gnawed at their souls, hearts, and conscience. We were too young to understand it then or maybe they were just reluctant to admit it. Somehow, it felt wrong to acknowledge it. In a country of growing religiosity, it would feel like confessing to masturbating in an office. How could a dream of a country like this go so wrong?

**2.**

### **The Decade of Withering Stalks**

By the time I was in my teens and had started writing love poems for a girl I fancied in secondary school, I knew what my country was, is. She is a dream. A mirage. An idea. Something that is both alluring yet unattainable. When she is sober, she is celestial like a deity whose laughter and cadence enchants. A magical being (or realm) for whom adoration comes naturally. But for her, sobriety is rare. Something that comes flittingly, increasingly so as time progresses. God knows it is hard to love her. But it is harder even to unlove her, as I have discovered. As we all have.

One learns of such things, of the true nature of this place, as one would the infidelity of a lover: the silence of the neighbours as one walks by, the whispers that start off behind one, sometimes the secret histories of indiscretion scribbled on the walls, in the corners of the room, on the bed, tucked in secret private smiles. One learns of such things in the markets, from snippets of conversations gathered from others, from reading the newspapers and news magazines, from conversations with the other boys in school about how bad the military dictatorships were, how

abusive they were and have been to Nigerians. Sometimes, one learns such things from experiencing these abuses and social injustices, and how they have violated the country, leaving her bedraggled and reeling from trauma, one collects this knowledge.

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The birth of this contraption that is my country was a product of the business interest of the British. It was a colonial enterprise, one from which much was taken, repatriated to enrich a foreign country, one that was patched together and named Nigeria, one that was handed to 'our founding fathers' on October 1, 1960. It is telling that they failed to build a nation out of this enterprise, and the men who murdered them in a failed 'revolution', and those who murdered those who murdered them in retaliation, decided that maintaining her as an enterprise, not a nation, served their venal interest the best. Hence began the perpetuation of the colonial industrial complex by those who inherited the scraps of a country that could have been great.

And so you imagine that this place, this country, is like a sozzled goddess in a convoluted process of birthing a nation, an interminable labour made longer by those intent on delaying this birth even at the risk of smothering the children. Yet, in those sweet, naïve teenage years as we sat, our intentions clean like our white uniforms, legs swaddled in navy blue nylon pants swinging off the classroom desk, debating what was wrong with our country, it was easy to imagine that my generation would be the one to salvage that illusion. I imagined, rather naïvely I admit now, that my peers across the country were having similar conversations like the one my friends and I were having then. That we had all, through some telepathy, come to the

understanding that the task before my generation, I surmised, was not to lead a great country, but to create one for our children and the generations that would come after. I would realise not long after, that even that was yet another illusion.

### 3.

#### **The Decade of Dragons**

Illusions sometimes burn quickly, like tissue paper kissed by fire. And this decade, it seemed fire-breathing dragons, conjured by George RR Martin, had swept across the land, spewing fire, embers dripping off their wings, scorching cities, towns and villages. These dragons were not called Rhaegal, Viserion or Drogon. They were called Democracy, Politicians and Men of God.

As anxiety over the ‘Millennium Bug’ grew, the juntas, inspired by the sudden death of the last strong man, realised that they were going out of fashion across the world. General Abdulsalam Abubakar rushed the country through a transitions programme and handed it over to a former dictator who had swapped his smart khaki for flowing robes. New vistas opened, the democratization of shares in the Nigerian enterprise meant intense power brawls among the ruling class and to secure or advance their places, the new overlords reached into the depths of darkness and unleashed the monsters.

The first time this behemoth breathed in Jos, I was standing with my old school friends, as we had formed the habit of gathering every Friday to nurture the bonds formed in our teens, when someone arrived, panting. ‘They have started,’ he announced.

‘Started what?’ I asked.

‘Started fighting,’ he said.

‘Who and who?’

‘Muslims and Christians.’

News of such occurrences had filtered from elsewhere, from places like Kaduna, Lagos and Sagamu. Not once did I, or my friends, imagine that something like that could happen in Jos, this place where people of different tribes and religions were just Nigerians.

That demon roared through the streets of Jos, raining fire and death as neighbours turned on neighbours, hacking at each other, torching each other’s houses because they called God by different names. In the decade that this violence reoccurred with the frequency of seasonal rains, in this period when our politicians played the religious card and turned us against each other to advance their interests, the extent of our disillusion hit home. This truth, sad and bitter as it is, is that this country is the way it is, not only because of the failings of the people who should have made it a nation, but also because of the people who should have insisted it is made one. We are both her victims and her abusers.

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In the black steel trunk I had inherited from my uncle, I would discover, years later, my very first notebook when I started school. I was looking for some document and my search led me to the trunk when I chanced upon this book.

I flipped through the pages and discovered my very first class work. The memories of that day pour in, slowly, heavily, like honey from a jar. Our teacher had been called off to some meeting and to keep us busy, he had asked us to draw anything we fancied in our drawing books. Instead of drawing a bird or a lion or some exotic animal as the other children did, I drew a montage. A convoy of cars, siren blazing, driving down a street lined with flag-waving children.

All these years later, I could see the image coming alive in my mind. I could hear the children cheering these men who were speeding off to go whip our country into shape so that when we became old enough, we would become leaders of a great country – as had always been promised. That notebook, and all the content of that trunk, and all the possessions I had in my life would be lost years later in a fire some boys up the street, boys we had played Sunday morning football with, would light. By this time, the hate-spewing beasts of Politics and Men of God had embraced them. They had had become children of the dragon. The friendship we had growing up had become secondary because politics married religion and reminded them that people of different faiths must be enemies.

That day, all of those memories, all that juvenilia and the dreams of a great country went up in furious curls of smoke, ignited by furious children of a country too furious for her own good.

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The other day in the crowded Shasha flea market in Ibadan, a man was killed over a squashed tomato. Several people died because a man was killed over that squashed tomato.

A porter bearing a cargo of tomatoes had an accident and lost his load. The content spilt all over a woman's stall, making a proper mess of the space. He apologized and agreed to clean up, but without water, the task could not be completed satisfactorily. Sometimes such encounters end with a shrug. Other times with a conversation like this:

‘Goat! You no dey see road?’

‘Madam, sorry, nah. No vex.’



‘Sorry for yourself?’

‘Madam, e don do, please. See how you dey vex like my mama? And you come fine reach her sef.’

That may draw a smile, maybe even an exchange of jokes and both parties would go their way laughing, shaking their heads. At the very least, it would draw a long dramatic hiss before the woman or the man pushes through the crowd and goes about his or her business. On some days, it could turn nasty, like that Thursday in Shasha.

Because the woman and the porter both spoke different languages and were from different regions of the country, (the man was even said to be a foreigner) another man decided to intervene on the side of the woman. He slapped the porter. The porter slapped him back (Some accounts said he stabbed him). The interloper fell and died. That sad incident agitated underlying ethnic and regional tensions and led to the death of dozens of people. All because an anonymous Hausa-speaking porter accidentally spilt his cargo in front of an anonymous Yoruba woman’s stall in the middle of a crowded flea market.

This is the nature of this place now. This is how volatile this space can be. This place, beautiful and fatally fragile but mostly unpredictable.

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### **The Decade of Endless Grieving**

When Andrew, in Veno Marioghae’s music video, was convinced to stay back to ‘do his work,’ and help Nigeria survive, it was all a happy scene. Chubby Andrew shuffling at the end of the

music video became an instant pop culture reference that has endured over several decades and even today, those who are unfamiliar with the song are familiar with the references.

I wish every Nigerian story ended with the protagonist shuffling happily, like Andrew. But the reality is that those who have stayed back are doing so either because they can afford a bubble – constructed from all the things that make their lives comfortable (a source of power, water, food, walls swaddled in the love of their families, some level of security and the other constituents of their happiness – into which they could retreat every evening. In there, they escape the constant dose of frustration and despondence that this country forces on its citizens daily. The other half stay because they can't afford to contemplate leaving, or they are not stupid enough to sit on a cargo ship's rudder – like those four stowaways pictured in Lagos recently – to risk the Atlantic crossing that their forefathers, in chains, were forced to make centuries before. For those who can afford neither, hope is incredibly fragile but not even the vagaries of this country have managed to perish it. And it comes at absolutely no cost. That is what sustains people here. That is what keeps people trapped in this reality.

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My cousin's husband, Sa'ad, was driving into his house in Bauchi when some men jumped on him with the intent to abduct him for ransom, as has become the rage here. Through the window of her apartment, my cousin watched the shadowy figures, her husband and the assailants, tussling in the night, wrestling for the gun. There was a scream for help. There was a crack of a gunshot. There were men running in the dark and then there was her husband, slumped, drenched in his own blood, at first presumed dead.

He is only lucky to be alive. But as I write this, he is having a second surgery as doctors try to make sure he is not permanently damaged in some way from this incident.

Tales of encounters like these are a dime a dozen these days. Thousands of Nigerians have been kidnapped in this fashion from the safety of their homes, others waylaid on the highways and herded en masse into the bush where the kidnappers have their camps. Many never return from these forests.

In the last few months alone, nearly a thousand schoolboys and girls have been abducted from their hostels, sometimes 300 at a time. From Chibok, to Dapchi, from Kagara to Kankara and Jengebe. Each time these abductions happen, the country falls to its knees, grovels before these kidnappers and begs them to spare the children and save the government from the infamy. Not one person has been arrested or prosecuted for any of these kidnappings. Bizarrely, some of the bandits who claim to have repented are feted by the government. Their victims, some murdered, others forced to sell their valuables to regain their freedom, are abandoned to their financial ruination.

When Boko Haram raided a school in Buni Yadi in 2014, and slit the throats of 59 boys, there was no reaction from the government, no retaliatory strike, no arrest, no justice. Not even a monument to remind us that a terrible thing like that happened. Not one to remind us of all the massacres that have been inflicted on us, and the ones we have inflicted on ourselves through civil unrest, religious riots, farmers/herders violence, political riots, banditry and terrorism. Not even the civil war.

We are too inundated to even mourn the losses we suffer. We are afraid to learn the names of the children we lost. Nigeria doesn't really care and Nigerians don't have enough patience to

learn all these names because new ones would be added to them before one would even have moved his or her tongue to form the syllables that make up their names.

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The reality that has birthed all this creative verve to have come out of Nigeria is often stranger than the fiction we write and the overly dramatic movies we make and the laugh-out-loud comedy we create or the pop music videos we are famous for. It is darker, grimmer and far more bizarre.

So many things do not add up here, like how a country of such brilliant minds is always often led by middling men.

So when we retreat to the bubbles of comfort we create to escape this reality, we go all out. We party hard, the better to flee from our nightmares. It is no surprise that humour is one of the biggest industries in this country. We make fun of our misery and laugh at ourselves. Gently, with the greatest care in the world, we bury the bitter pills of our reality into the lush art we make so they are easier to swallow. With words, with art and music, we deconstruct our realities – the bizarre, the fantastical and magical, the tragic, the exhilarating and titillating – and cobble them back together in ways that would make it tolerable, beautiful even, sometimes even incandescent.

It takes courage to admit that loving this country is like being in love with an abusive partner, one who needs help but refuses to accept it, one who bites and punches, whom you wake up to find staring down at you with a look you can't comprehend but one that frightens you, one who when he or she reaches for you, you are never sure if they wanted to hug you or hit you.

Nothing hurts like loving what frightens you the most.