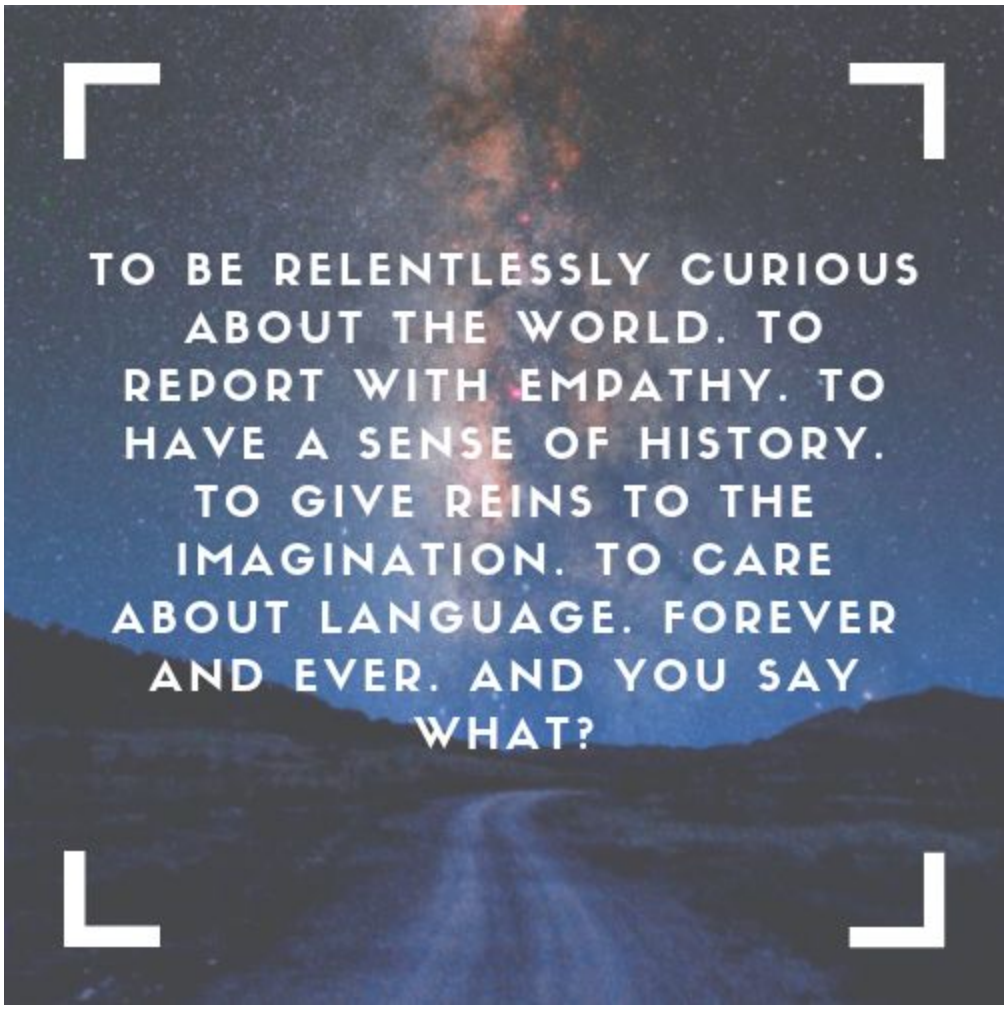
THE QUESTION MARKER

ISSUE 8

THE QUESTION MARKER



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Last month we made a public call for submissions. Some were great, others not so much. But it filled our hearts with gratitude that people were willing to trust us with their work.

Although the authors published in this issue are not newcomers, there is one exciting exception: Chisom Okwara. I met Chisom earlier this month at a writer's event. We were introduced by the very generous Caleb Okereke. We barely had time to talk at the event, but I did a google search and was blown away by what I found. Her talent is rare and I have no doubt her star will continue to expand.

Another writer in this issue I'll like to talk about is Adeosun Adams: this is his second appearance in the magazine and it's vintage Adeosun, always stretching to illuminate where others might have overlooked. To read him is to be filled with joy. The essay, as a whole, rambles, and I strained, during the editing, to keep it in that shape because its subject defies order.

Unfortunately, I'll have less time to learn from and work with these extraordinary writers for the next couple of seasons as I am taking a break from the magazine to take up a paid job. I'll be replaced by the enigmatic Olisa Eloka who probably loves the magazine more than me. Never to worry, your favorite magazine ain't going away. I haven't consulted with the rest of the team, but my guess is that the website will stay up with fresh content while the magazine itself is rested. Whatever happens, we'll keep you informed.

So, I'll let you enjoy this month's stories. I hope you enjoy reading them, as much as I did.

Solomon Elusoji
Co-editor
August, 2019

Born To Rule

Eke Jude *profiles President Muhammadu Buhari*

Muhammadu Buhari

In the early hours of Saturday, December 31, 1983, Brigadier Sani Abacha, then a one-star General in the Nigerian Army, accompanied by armed soldiers, stormed the studios of the FRCN, Ikoyi, Lagos. A few minutes later, martial music erupted from the radio station. “You are all living witness to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty, which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years,” Abacha said in his coup announcement. “Our economy has been hopelessly mismanaged. We have become a debtor and a beggar nation.”

Abacha’s vituperation of the Sheu Shagari-led civilian administration wasn’t unique. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria had witnessed several coup operations, some successful, others not so much. And the reasons for the action - national revolution and a return to a fabled El-dorado - was always almost the same.

After Abacha's announcement, the nation was yanked through hours of uncertainty. Who was behind the coup? And who was going to take over? The announcement had come from Lagos, but it was still unclear if the coup had been successful in other states. Yet, there was silence. The Shagari administration wasn't fighting back and it appeared the soldiers were working in unison. As the hours dragged on, the verdict became clearer: the Second Republic had become history.

Some 20 hours after Abacha's voice had travelled through the airwaves, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, the GOC of the Third Infantry Division of the Nigerian Army, grabbed the microphone and assumed office as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces. He said the military "dutifully intervened to save the nation from imminent collapse" and laid out the four sins of the toppled civilian administration: mismanagement of the economy, election malpractice, corruption and indiscipline. "This generation of Nigerians, and indeed, future generations, have no other country than Nigeria," Buhari said. "We shall remain here and salvage it together."

Four days after he became Head of State, Buhari, together with his deputy, Tunde Idiagbon, showed up at a World Press Conference in Lagos. The pair wore the black beret, a piece of clothing popularised by the late Chinese leader, Mao Tse-Tung and Cuban autocrat, Fidel Castro. While they fielded questions from reporters, the pair took copious notes. "There was something radical and yet friendly about them," journalist, Dan Agbese, wrote.

At the press conference, Buhari read a 16-minute statement, in which he reiterated his earlier charges of economic mismanagement and corruption against the civilians. Then he anchored his leadership on three premises: there would be no timetable for a return to democracy; government would devote huge resources to the pursuit and recovery of stolen public funds; and all those suspected of corrupt enrichment by the government would be declared guilty and detained, until their innocence could be proven. There is "no guarantee that if you release someone with a case to answer, he will not run away," Buhari said.

The public loved the Buhari coup. Nigerians, perhaps with the exception of the elites, regarded him as a sanitiser, the one who had come to fumigate and vacuum the stench of the nation's public life and character.

Buhari's main tool was violent intimidation. Through the National Security Organisation (NSO), he scanned the nook and cranny of the country and detained hundreds of Nigerians and foreigners. Most of them never found out what their offences were. In six months, the regime issued 22 decrees, including the infamous decree 4, which essentially broke the beak of the local eagle press. He also executed convicted hard drug peddlers.

However, whenever he got the chance, he was always quick to note that his approach was the quickest way to get the nation back on its feet. He had no faith in

the judiciary ("the richer you are the more likely you are to get justice") or the press, which he accused of sloppiness. "Nigeria is being used by highly influential people, rich people in the society who are prepared to destroy both their society and other people's society to make money," Buhari told the Voice of America in May 1985. "We definitely felt . . . we must not allow Nigeria to be used for destroying others and for that we decided to permanently keep those involved out of the society and we have no regret for it."

But had he been moving too fast? Buhari lasted only 20 months as Head of State, before he, too, was replaced by another coup. Nevertheless, the masses, especially in northern Nigeria, never forgot him; they had identified a lone-ranger who was willing to go head-to-head with the country's entrenched systems and shake things up.

*

After years of military rule, Nigeria eventually turned to democracy in 1999. The soldiers, however, were unable to resist the allure of power; many swapped khakis for agbadas, including the fourth republic's first President, Olusegun Obasanjo. Buhari too. After he was overthrown by Babangida, Buhari had been placed on house arrest for three years. He later returned to Daura, his hometown, as a civilian and became a farmer. But he never lost sight of political leadership. In 2003, he contested for the Presidency and lost. He tried again in 2007 and 2011. No luck. But in 2015, he formed an alliance with unlikely political rivals to defeat the almighty PDP. His time had come, again.

In the lead-up to the 2015 elections, Buhari branded himself as a "converted democrat" in a speech he gave at Chatham House. He said he was ready to submit himself to the "rigours of democracy". But was Buhari simply playing to the gallery? It was difficult to say at the time, but many Nigerians believed him. At the polls, he defeated an incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, and became fourth time lucky.

As a fresh civilian President, Buhari was hesitant. It was a stark contrast to the speed with which he had operated as a military ruler. He took six months to form a cabinet while the country roiled in an economic recession; he depended on 'body language' rather than tangible policy to govern the nation; he quickly earned the tag 'Baba Go Slow'. But Buhari was unperturbed. He blamed the constraints of democracy for his sluggishness. In interviews, he liked to, nostalgically, whip up the efficiency of military rule, how fast it was possible to get things done. And when he returned to the past, it would seem like he was bored with democracy, like he didn't really believe in it. During his first four years as President, he exhibited flashes of military impudence. He insisted on keeping Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and Namadi Sambo in detention, despite court orders directing their release. In 2018, at

the Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Bar Association in Abuja, Buhari said that the rule of law must be subject to the supremacy of the nation's security and national interest, an argument routinely used by dictators across the world.

But if his politics were conservative, his economics were radical, a clean break from liberal laissez faire. He set out to defend the naira, banned the use of government foreign exchange for certain imports and rolled out a plan - The Economy Recovery and Growth Plan - that emphasised increasing agriculture yield, investing in infrastructure and nurturing local manufacturing. The ERGP bears some resemblance to strategies utilised by East Asian countries - Japan, Taiwan, South Korea - to create some of the most audacious economic miracles in the history of humankind. But the Buhari administration continued to be dogged with corruption and insecurity, two of the question marks which he had promised to resolve during his campaign trail.

Then there was ill health. He spent huge chunks of his first term as President away from the country, barely clinging to life. Many claimed, at 76, he was too old and sick to lead; others said he had died and been replaced by a double. But, by the time it was time for re-election, he had bounced back. He campaigned across the country with a promise to continue the 'good work' his administration had started. There were ongoing infrastructure projects - rail, roads, bridges - to point to; there were social programmes - trader money, school feeding - to stab a finger at; and there was the promise of tomorrow, a still mythical "Next Level", upon which he campaigned, his charismatic deputy, Yemi Osinbajo, by his side.

At the 2019 polls, which wasn't the freest and fairest in the history of elections, Buhari did enough to push aside his main opponent, the corruption-plagued, business-oriented Atiku Abubakar. At least at the time, it appeared most Nigerians were happy to stick with the Buhari mythology, the idea that one man, rampaging and crusading, can change the course of a nation's troubled trajectory, for good.

*

Muhammadu Buhari was born in Daura, Katsina state. His father, Hardo Adamo, was a Fulani chief. The 23rd child of his father, Buhari was raised by his mother. (his father died when he was about four years old)

He enrolled into the Nigerian Military at age 19, studying at the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) in Kaduna, before proceeding to the Mons Officers Cadet School in Aldershot, UK. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in January 1963 and appointed Platoon Commander of the Second Infantry Battalion in Abeokuta, all at age 20.

For most of his military career, Buhari was in the thick of action. He participated in the counter coup of 1966, which sought to avenge northern blood. He fought in the civil war and subsequently collaborated to overthrow Gowon in 1975 and enthrone Murtala Muhammed.

In interviews, Buhari touts himself as a man who has been a public servant all his life, someone dedicated to the general welfare of all Nigerians. He has worked as a military governor and headed national energy corporations. If public service was the yardstick for being good, Buhari would be a saint. But is the willingness to serve equal to the ability to do so? Of course not. In the end, he will be judged, not by the purity of his intentions, but the manifestations of his decisions. ✚

Eke Jude is a Staff Writer at The Question Marker

Stay With Me

Chisom Okwara *reviews Ayobami Adebayo's award-winning novel, Stay With Me*

Ayobami Adebayo. Photo Credit: Eniola Alakija

***Stay With Me* is a delicate sandwich**, a four-part bun that is a sure filler. It doesn't drip. It is neither hot nor spicy. It is hearty, slow-cooked to near perfection, firm to the finish. It leaves you questioning the endless possibilities of marriage. Spanning the years 1981 to 2008, all the way from Ilesha to Jos, it tells the story of a couple that endures and eventually caves into the ruins of a turbulent love. The plot weaves through sweet university love, traverses marriage, transcends the accusation of barrenness, and climaxes at the despicable undertones of the birth of children who die too young to not be missed. The denouement – an unmasking of

extreme aiding and abetting, revelation of a wet lie, and an unassuming reunion – is abrupt and revealing in the way expertly riddled plots are.

As a reader, I was angry at myself for not connecting the dots and adding up the signs all along. But, the poignancy of the final scenes put my emotions at bay and then set them ablaze. When a mother who thought the last fruit of her womb - before she numbed ties to motherhood and marriage - was dead like the ones who came before, only to discover, after fifteen years, that this child had stayed alive, conquered illness, ridden the wave of single parenting, and grown into a wide-eyed precocious youngin, she couldn't help but surrender (finally) to all the emotions that both herself and readers like myself had bottled up throughout the book. This book – with winding, interlocked themes of deceit, detachment, gender biases, and twisted family onuses – made me one with that mother: Yejide.

I read *Stay With Me* in early June, when the intensity of "6-months to-2020" chants were yet to sizzle. I was approaching my graduation and I was, failingly, trying to soak up the last few days of collegiate excitement and fun, planning dinners (which never happened) with my friends, and avoiding a looming desire to simply retreat into myself. This book marked my transition from an over pushed bubbliness to an intentional thoughtfulness. It nudged my inevitable introspection under the weight of a looming estrangement from friends and juvenile stability at college.

At different points in the plot, images from my past and present coloured the cream pages of its red paperback, the most resonant of all being the scene when Yejide visited the Mountain of jaw-dropping miracles to meet a prophet to cure her *alleged* barrenness. She got strapped to a goat and was asked to breastfeed its bundled contraption. The despicability of this scene threw me back to the fall of 2017 in whose early days I shuffled hospitals without assurance of what actual disease was trying to take my life away from me.

My parents had been convinced by our close relatives to seek the face of God; after all, I must have been poisoned by someone for my belly to hurt so hard. Our age-old family prophet came visiting soon after. With a premise as convincing as prophet Josiah's assertion of Yejide's pregnancy, my own prophet said that my star is bright and my 'village people' know this, so they – specifically two of them, a husband and a wife – were trying to dim my light. After questioning me to shreds, he got me kneeling in the centre of our living room, surrounded by my family and his prayers, bursting with spittle.

At the end of this deliverance session, he gave me an anti-poison liquid to drink and a jar of some sweet-smelling ointment to pour into my water before showering. I was further instructed to say a prayer to the trinity 30 minutes before every subsequent bath. In a sense, my instructions were quite spotty and actionable – stretching into weeks till the ointment, which I did love the smell of,

finished. Yejide's prophetic commitment, on the other hand, ended differently as she caught her prophet having sex with Mrs. Adeola, the customer who introduced her to him, on the mountain where her prophetic revelations were held. She never went back. Neither did I did return to my own prophet when I ran out of ointment.

Although *Stay with me* is an epistolary narrative told by both husband and wife – Akin and Yejide – Yejide's voice is the only one with a lasting ring to it. I ended up reading the entire book in her voice, from the start when a second wife disrupts her four-year old marriage and all goes sour, to the midline when her marriage starts to stink. *Stay with me* is Yejide's story. Akin, just as his silence in the face of Yejide's suffering for reasons well within his testes, is almost dead to me. His narration, though nostalgic and sensitive, is undeniably subdued by Yejide's unfiltered hyper emotionalism. It is easy, therefore to see how this book reminds me of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come,* in the manner of transcendence of love, marriage and pseudo-childlessness in Nigeria from the perspective of the girl turned wife turned mother. It is also telling, the auratic parallelisms between Yejide's newfound defiance towards the near end of the story, and the unspoken rebellion in Ramatoulaye's letters, in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Also central to *Stay With Me* are the intricate references to self-sacrificial motherhood, in lines that cut into the skin like those from Buchi Emecheta's oeuvre. One went, "A good mother's life is hard. A woman can be a bad wife but she must not be a bad mother. Moomi told me that before asking God to give me a child, I must ask for the grace to be able to suffer for that child."

Detachment and nostalgia are aftertastes in *Stay With Me*. They augment the stonewashed narrative of childlessness, polygamy, culpability, conspiracy and convoluted family dynamics, forming a garden-fresh echo which causes a reader to look beyond the pages of the book to the circle of their own life. One plays witness to their own realities, expressed in less austere terms, bouncing off the pages and screaming to be engaged with. Yejide's estrangement from her fourth child isn't a narrative that has been plastered in the sands of Nigerian fiction. But I can take a bet that anyone who is at a stage of life where a bulky memory from their past still lingers in their mind's eye – either a past of love or pain or belonging or attachment; one which dissipated as clocks ticked and seasons changed – is guaranteed to find those feelings tumbling down as they encounter *Stay With Me.*

I personally know what it is like to hold back love, to avoid heartbreak. I know how many steps to take to the back when commitment dares approach me. I know why a mother – Yejide – can decide to keep her distance from her own child. I do not know these in the context of a marriage plagued by pressure from relatives and ruined by the intrusion of a second wife, a planned child-breeding intercourse with an unfortunate brother-in-law or its eventual damage to a family bond, but I do know that I have left many applications unattended to because I was sick and tired

of rejections. I also know that I have shied away from love because a certain singer warned me that when a heart breaks, it don't break even. I have lost a friend to sickle cell, and even though I didn't mother this friend at birth, mothering her close to death left me feeling all kinds of pain in parts of me I never knew existed.

So, I know Yejide. And in the three days that I lay on the twin mattress in my dorm room reading *Stay With Me*, I was Yejide. The only stool I hadn't pushed back was that by the table of Yejide's direct experiences of motherhood – as a child whose mother had died at birth and as a wife who made love with two brothers to become a mother. Not only do I not physically relate to those, but their happening solely ties to marriage and childbirth, both of which I have no interest in. Nevertheless, I couldn't dare to judge Yejide. I would have been hitting a knife at my shadow if I dared.

In all, Ayobami garnished *Stay With Me* with all the twists that made it as unrestrainedly depictive of Nigeria as possible. This book could easily fit into a Nollywood movie owing to the theatrics of the early stages of Yejide's love and marriage to Akin, the dramatic occupation of her childless era, and of course, the brotherly conspiracy that fanned the flames of dramatic novelty into the story. Not only does the novel find its roots in the narrative of barrenness, pressure from in-laws, hyper religiosity and the Adichie-familiar intersperse of conflict-rigged Nigerian political history, but it also reads like a well-crafted "African Literature" assignment.

Stay with Me is a calculated book, a move by a chess player who weaved the strikingly resounding elements of most Afro-feminist bestsellers. Because it is well done, it has stood – and still will stand – tall as an emblem of African/ Afro-feminist literature. ✚

Chisom Okwara studied at the African Leadership University in Mauritius, where she was an Editor at a campus publication. Chisom aspires to live a life that epitomises the French sentence, "On est bien la."

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The Underdog

Naira Marley knows how to ride the wave of pop culture, writes **Adeosun Adams**

Azeez Fashola, aka, Naira Marley

In Burna Boy's continent and Rema's year, Naira Marley continues to swerve left. His post-jail song, 'Soapy', plus its video, which crossed the hard one million YouTube views milestone barely a week after its release, is a statement of the artiste's zeitgeist. Naira Marley's Soapy pushes the boundary of acceptable content further along, entering the taboo topic of masturbation into the narrow catalogue of musical subject matters. But while it is the title, also the crux of the chorus, which has earned him outrage, the song is also a short -- if convoluted -- expository on prison life. He represents prison as a collection of people with as much individual diversity as a salad -- "Inside life, l'oó ti rí Five Alive / Inside life, l'oó ti rí Deeper Life".

The idea for Soapy may be rooted in Naira Marley's experience of detention, the language leads back to social media. Which is why one might be forced to wonder why the backlash is loudest from that corner. The soap metaphor has stuck around the internet for a while. In quarters where the fine art of self-satisfaction is the discourse, the slinky material is sooner than later summoned to serve two polar purposes: convey meaning to the initiate and alienate the outsider. If the recent

reaction to Naira Marley's musicalization of the phenomenon reveals anything, it is that there are more initiates than outsiders.

Naira Marley does not come across as a sexual singer. His handling of lewd materials is brash; he doesn't care for the subtlety which gives songs about sex and desire their allure. It is in fact a little hard if you are not already used to the soap metaphor, to understand what Soapy preaches without encountering the dance. But the fusion of music, dance and the body is the ultimate medium of sexual expression. You can figure out a lot about a person's sexuality if you pay attention to how they use their body relative to the music on a dance floor. Naira Marley knows this. He intimated his fans with the Soapy dance by posting short clips on social media even before the official audiovisual arrived. And when it did, it was garbed in prison colors. Naira Marley's contribution to the Nigerian prison narrative is important. Until the artiste weighed in on it -- "Kiríkirì ń jó soapy ... Ìkòyí prison ń jó soapy ... Nínú cell EFCC wón ń jó soapy" -- the sex lives of Nigerian prisoners was hardly on the mind of the outside world. This may be the kind of thing Naira Marley dines out on, it would have earned many of the other artistes at work today a ‘cancel’.

The Soapy dance borrows from the male body's most private moment, imitating the rituals of self-pleasure: a hand curled in front of the groin, sliding up and down furiously, legs shuffling around. The appeal, one suspects, is the freakiness. In a society like ours, where pretentious morality is ranked way over individual quirkiness, a dance that breaks us into a collective disorder is indeed tempting. But the Soapy dance lacks the elegance of the Zanku which it is being taunted to replace. It would vanish in a moment, pushed out the window like the memory of masturbation, and we'll return to hopping on dance floors.

The music video starts out with mugshots, spends its entire runtime in confinement (as opposed to Naira Marley's favoured set, the streets) and -- here's the most intriguing detail -- reenacts the exact image that blew up the internet after his arrest by the EFCC: of his friends and himself, five men in all, posing together for the authorities' camera. A reclaiming of his moment of ridicule, perhaps; or a mockery of the authorities and the legion of Nigerians who celebrated his arrest. More so if you consider that the event has gone on to become a focal point in his career. Permit me to open a parenthesis here. Music fans agree that they already have an activist in the problematic Burna Boy. His position in the music industry is not open for contention, at least not till the end of the current calendar. But an addendum is not a bad idea, right? Especially if he is a provocateur. Okay, seal the parenthesis shut and let's rewind to the beginning of the sequence.

Back in May, Naira Marley encountered trouble in the guise of EFCC, the country's anti-corruption agency. This is not a surprise if you consider the

connection between the Nigerian music industry and Nigerian princes - the quantity of songs eulogising con artists or celebrating scam successes is big enough to constitute a genre that would include some of the biggest hits of the last fifteen years. Artistes may scream into studio microphones by day, night transforms some of them to pretend-lovers of lonely white people. It is for this reason that Naira Marley was tucked away behind bars; but not before he released ‘Am I A Yahoo Boy?’, a song which capitalised on a controversy that began with Simi criticising internet fraudsters. The subtle appraisal of Yahoo Yahoo had Zlatan supplying irony, invoked the canon of the world's dead self-righteous prisoners and asked, "Olopa kole mu wa, tani SARS fe mulo ni bi?" Perhaps the authorities considered it a dare.

Naira Marley is not the first artiste to see the inside of a cell and use it as a muse. A fair number of songs from the great Fela Kuti's discography owe their existence to the activist's prison experiences. Listening to ‘Expensive Shit’, ‘Unknown Soldier’ or ‘Beast of No Nation’ asserts the notion of incarceration as a period of reflection. And indeed, Naira Marley borrows from Fela's mind when he appropriates Fela's designation of prison as "inside world" and makes it a crucial part of the bridge on Soapy. Unlike his ancestor, Naira is not much of a thinker-singer. He is a nihilistic controversial punk with a tendency to throw himself under a bus if it guarantees him a hit. His music career is propped up by clout, every move geared towards drawing attention. The song that inserted him in the Nigerian consciousness, ‘Issa Goal’, was pushed as the unofficial Nigerian World Cup anthem, leveraged on the Shaku-Shaku rave and featured street favourites, Olamide and Lil Kesh. He followed up with ‘Japa’, another song rooted in a style propagated mostly by Olamide: a catchy slang and supple delivery, upon which he brought his background from the London AfroBashment scene to bear. Naira Marley knows how to ride the wave of pop culture and is better for it, earning himself a diehard fan base.

A certain cliche goes, no such thing as bad publicity. Naira Marley, recognising the talent of the unwitting Nigerian authorities for making martyrs out of equally unwitting rabble-rousers, pushed out two singles, ‘Why’ and ‘Opotoyi’, while he still tangoed with the EFCC. Opotoyi, especially, went on to become a staple in both clubs and the streets, further signaling his potential as the anarchist that Nigerians are always seeking. They served him lemons, he swallowed them whole without grimacing. Say you weren't impressed. Soapy is the latest Naira Marley track to be pushed hard on the back of the EFCC drama but it most likely won't be the last. The song has suffered rebuke at the hands of culture journalists and choreographers. But criticism has proven to be a part of Naira Marley's material. He thrives mostly on the internet's outrage culture. When was the last time a single inspired a deluge of armchair commentary and as many feverish polemics as Soapy has?

To Naira Marley, Fuji artiste, Obesere, who traded extensively in obscenity, carved an explicit niche for himself and employed the female body as muse is a closer precedent. Except that Naira Marley is not entirely interested in obscenity, at least not in the way Obesere was. It only happens to fall within the range of provocative content, his actual currency. A currency that wasn't his until he crossed over to the Nigerian music industry. Receipt: When Naira Marley still occupied the UK's AfroBashment scene, before he found his druggy vocals and its complement in the producer Rexxie, he put out a seven-track EP titled ‘Gotta Dance’. Gotta Dance was preoccupied with more agreeable themes, even including a birthday track. He goes as far as playing at patriotism, proclaiming early in the EP, "If it ain't green, white, green then it's all black." That was in 2015.

So what happened between Gotta Dance and Soapy? The attempt at an answer begs another question: how many Marlians existed in 2015? Music is a business of popularity, and the agreeable Naira Marley was an underdog trying to break into the mainstream on the strength of his talent. But talent is as cheap as salt. The amount of quality music gathering dust on streaming platforms bear testimony, and Naira Marley's were some of them. Until he learnt to upset the apple cart, that is. Until he lent his rhotacism to the task of provoking eardrums and sensibilities. In the Naira Marley cosmos, love and hate are conflated. They both translate to attention which in turn translates to engagement with his music. It's a mad formula the artiste has found, a vicious play on the Nigerian psyche. ✚

Adeosun Adams is a writer of fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry with work in Arts and Africa, Brittle Paper, Litro UK, Catapult and Transition Magazine.

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How To Make a Sextape

This month in fiction,* Olisa Eloka *tells the story of two characters seeking to break even through blackmail.

To mitigate rape, we must stop going in circles. Photo Credit: The Financial Times

We had no home, Bloda and I, for we were predatory wanderers. Our legs were fastened to the road, in any direction that glimmered with potential. We moved through towns, basked in cities and operated in hotels, taking control of people's lives through blackmail. We knew that to completely knock a man down, you simply had to know the right place to hit. And sex was almost everyone's kryptonite.

It was Bloda that lured me into the game. That was about four years ago. I wouldn't say he lured me, really; he made me an offer I thought I would be a fool to refuse. He was my elder brother's friend, and after my brother, Nandochukwu, was killed during a failed kidnap operation at Amawbia, Bloda asked me what plans I had for my life. I stuttered and mumbled a chain of nonsense of how I intended to write my West Africa Examination Council exams and go to university. He had laughed, some short laughter that discomfited me. He wondered how I enjoyed

basking in the illumination of some treacherously spinning fantasy, a resplendent mirage doomed to be out of my reach.

"No be you Poison tell me say no sabi spell your name?" Bloda asked.

We were under a guava tree at Student Field, a football pitch at the outskirts of the community, watching a dozen half-naked urchins kick some half-deflated *felele* around. And when some lad kicked the ball into the small iron goalpost, half a dozen boys from the sideline poured into the field. "Na our set o!" they chanted, ready to fight their way into the game if need be. I wished I could join them, too, in the field, but my football skills were as horrible as it could be. It didn't help that Bloda wanted to talk to me. When Bloda wants to *talk* to you, you better let him talk to you, else you risk your eardrums being smacked out of your mouth.

"I can read," I said. I wondered why my brother would tell him that, that I couldn't spell my name to save a life. Was that what kidnappers discussed—whose sibling was dumber than the other?

"No be so Poison tell me," he said, and I wondered if that was a sigh of disappointment he just gave, "but e no mean; no wahala."

Silence wedged between us as we watched the boys resume a round of football. Someone was asking the right winger to watch the offside trap the opponent's defense were setting.

"I tell am say I go take care of you," Bloda suddenly said, breaking through the heavy barricade of muteness. "Poison wan make you no hungry or sleep for underbridge."

I nodded. Whatever my brother may have done, whatever he represented to society, he cared about me. And it still remains the subject of wonder to me sometimes, how he protected me but abducted people, hurt people. My brother only loved those in the tight, small circle of his life. There was a UEFA Champions League group game the day he died. I was at the viewing centre when I got a call from my sister. She was wailing on the phone and her speech was incoherent with worry. I told someone to watch over my seat while I found out what was going on over the phone. As I stepped into the open night, the wind surging through space, Ijeoma's words hit my ears with astounding clarity, splitting my breath abruptly into gasps. I asked her what, what did you say? Even when I could hear every word that bounced on my head like marbles, even when the sandy earth on which I stood spun like the coin of a jester, I kept asking her if she said our brother just got shot.

*

Nando and his gang (a gang I could swear on my morning erection Bloda was part of) had tried to abduct a priest at St Matthew Catholic church, Amawbia. They were pushing the man into their car when a Special Anti-Robbery Squad patrol drove by; it was mere coincidence, a prank of the gods, people would later say. There was a brief shootout and the first bullet blew Nando's brains into the gutter.

The shuddering priest was rescued. The kidnappers escaped. Nando's body was identified, but the SARS agents never released it.

"His body now belongs to the government," my sister and I were told when we went to Awkuzu police station to claim the body. "Criminals belong to the state."

*

It was a month after Nando's death that Bloda, one of the street guys I often saw him discuss girls and football with over bottles of Hero and smoking sticks of oris, came to our miserable apartment and asked my sister if I was home. When I came out, he said, "Follow me. I wan make we rub mind together."

I followed him and by the time we were done rubbing minds, he was able to tell me that the only way to elude poverty is to be rich, and the only way to be rich is by playing some harmless game with him.

"We go blow for this life, Mezie, I dey tell you. Money go dey flow into your account like flood. Boys go dey respect you and you go fuck girls tire. You don fuck toto before?"

I wondered if having sex with pornstars in my dreams was enough to rule out my virginity. The closest I'd come to a girl was in Primary 6 when I mistakenly touched Fola's poorly formed breasts in the course of playing Game Box during recess at school. She had reported me to the plump teacher and the teacher had flogged me till my palms went numb, till I swore for a millionth time that no devil would ever make me look at a girl's breasts again, let alone touching it. I told Bloda that I had had sex before; if he was looking for who to call a novice, I wasn't going to be his candidate.

"You don start to dey fuck?" he asked, his eyes widening in excitement. "You na correct guy. You dey rep Poison wella. But no worry; once we hammer you go fuck sotay your prick go bend."

I smiled.

"Now this is the game," he said, adjusting where he sat, licking his lips, ready to make me that offer I couldn't refuse.

*

The game was as simple as gulping down a glass of water. We would apply for work at the major hotels in the city, and our position of interest would be that of receptionist. Behind the counter was the perfect place from which we could note whoever lodges at the hotel: important men that signed in with their mistresses by their side; gay partners blinded by forbidden lust; the elderly women escorted by boys with the physique of fitness coaches; randy university lecturers arriving with empty-headed girls. Then there was the undergraduate boyfriend that had come to have some good time in the privacy of a hotel room with his undergraduate girlfriend; the girls always fasten their mild gazes on the floor as their horny boyfriends or side-cocks made entries in the log book, and their shyness never

made me stop wondering if they actually knew what to do with a thick, well-veined dick if it was presented to them on a platter. Bloda told me to quit being naïve, that girls are dirtier and nastier than you could ever imagine. By the time these girls mount you, you'd know better why Beyonce said they run the world.

These people always signed in at the reception desk under false aliases, but the wealthy have this particular air they exude, this smell of invincibility that made them our perfect prey. The easiest man to take down is one who is convinced that he is untouchable, beyond the claws of society.

At first we never went for undergraduates, no matter how affluent their background may seem. The rich figures were the subjects of our blackmail. Cheating husbands never really cared if they were discovered, but whoring wives would sell the earth to you just so you don't take a step in the direction of her husband, let alone telling him what a Mata Hari he had at home. The lecturer, whose job was at stake for fucking his student and who was at risk of being publicly embarrassed if he is found out, would do whatever it is you demand. Ask him for one of his balls and he'd smilingly hand you two.

I don't know what changed, but we started to include undergraduates. Tell the student to wire you his or her school fees and you could be sure he'd do that; especially the girls, they never failed to meet up to our demands. No girl can stand the shame of a leaked sextape, for to release a girl's fuck-video is the same as raping her, only that it is more gruesome than rape: People would call her a slut, uncles and aunts and relatives that she never knew would call her on the phone to thank her for publicly spitting on the family's image; her father could kick her out of the house and her mother would throw herself on the ground and ask God why He let this horror come her way. Then the girl had her friends to deal with, even her girlfriends that were a step away from being initiated into the All Sluts Progressive Congress would stick out their tongues and call her more names than she could ever answer to; then there were the boys, some of them would whistle at the girl whenever she walked down the street, and the really ambitious ones would ask how much she'd charge for a round. The naughty boys would cook up stories of how they "chopped" her, of how sweet or smelly her cunt was—this depends on the reaction the boy wants to elicit from his crew. And this girl whose sexuality had been controlled and programmed by society's endless virtuous demands of the vagina, confronted by this horrific vision of her life if her sex life ever gets blown open, would do anything you say to elude this shame. *Anything.* And because of this, university girls became our easiest victims. And what beautiful casualties they made.

*

Bloda used to sell CCTVs sometime in his dirty past, so he had access to micro-cameras. We would plant the devices in the air-conditioners in the hotel

rooms, then connect it directly to Bloda's Toshiba laptop which served as our monitor. There was nothing we did not see in that laptop. We watched a priest thrust into the behind of a boy almost twice below my age. We witnessed the murder of a politician by a whore, and we dared not disclose what we saw else we'd explain to the police how the camera wound up in the room, and thanks to our silence, the homicide remained unsolved. Before our eyes, a Sugar Mummy asked some guy with the body of a demi-god to eat her ass, and this man dug his mouth into that butthole. University lecturers always humped like they're having a heart-attack. And undergraduates, the most flexible of all groups, did it like that was all their life was about. This particular fair-skinned, lean girl once rode this guy in bed till her eyes rolled back and her body quaked and she seemed to be out of breath. I wondered fearfully if I was about to witness another death, this time in the hands of epilepsy. Bloda chuckled. "That girl sabi come sha."

Three days after each footage was made, we'd quit our jobs at the hotel, move out of that town completely, then contact our victims. Then we'd send them clips from the video, followed by our eternally simple demand: wire three million naira to this account or your tape would hit *Instablog.* From the students, we kindly asked three hundred thousand. Bloda owned two-thirds of the money, while the rest belonged to me. The few preys that dared us to do our worst actually experienced our worst: we released their tapes and self-righteous Nigerians on social media did the rest of the dirty work. The first time we released the tape of a stubborn victim, I tossed uncomfortably in my sleep. I couldn't help but think what the elderly woman would be going through. Would her husband divorce her? Would her kids, if she had any, be called the children of a whore? Would her friends laugh at her? Would the life we damaged ever be the same again? But, with time, I got used to it all. To be able to feed myself, I had to burrow my pipe into people's uninhibited sexual acts and suck their weaknesses into my strength, convert their moments of pleasure into my enduring instrument of control, of power.

*

It was on our eight month of travelling round the country, blackmailing people, that, one rainy evening, Bloda returned to the hotel at Ekehuan road in Benin-city, where we were working as part of room service and told me that someone would love to meet us the next day at Mat-Ice restaurant, just before College Road.

"Her name na Ivie," Bloda said, "She wan make we do work for am."

I didn't ask the work this lady wanted us to do for her, for the answer naturally came to me, like a toddler seeking a milky nipple.

*

It started drizzling as Bloda and I strolled on the sidewalk, bound for Mat-Ice restaurant. Because it had rained earlier in the day, the long road which seemed to stretch into the heart of the city was wet and muddy; vehicles with conductors hanging on its side splashed water as they ploughed through pot-holes. You could never get used to Benin weather. This moment it's all sunny and promising, and the next it's pouring like God wants to re-enact Noah's story. Bloda loved saying that girls and Benin weather share the same trait: both are unpredictable.

Within the premises of the highly illuminated restaurant, music boomed. Two girls emerged from the front door as we approached, and when it was our time to step in the uniformed guard nodded at us; I nodded back and Bloda strode in as though he was oblivious of the guard's welcome gesture, as though he wasn't really conscious of what was happening around him.

We were on the ground floor, and half of the city was crowded up at the food counter; the whole place smelled of rice and spice. The air-conditioning was doing its job, filling the entire hall with crippling chill, and I wondered if these seemingly unperturbed people were cold-proof or something; my body was freezing up.

Bloda headed in a direction and I followed suit, then we were on a staircase which led upstairs, and in a matter of seconds we were on another floor, another hall, and this place had less chill, less people and the air was dominated by the smell of soup. My mouth watered. I wondered if Bloda was waiting for my intestines to snap and spill out of my mouth before he placed orders.

"Mezie," Bloda said and nodded at a table in a corner.

At the table sat a lady that had no makeup, had no brows, and could have been Eniola Badmus's doppelganger, only she had lean cheeks and bigger eyes, distinctions which made her look like some Mike Asukwo caricature. She nodded at us as we approached her. I only realized that her table was empty when we sat right opposite her. This was Ivie.

"How body?" Bloda asked, as though he was talking to some old comrade.

"Body dey," she replied, and I wondered how one's voice could be as cold as the evening weather. For the first time I became conscious of how drenched my clothes were. "Na your boy be this?" She was referring to me now.

"Yes, na my colleague," Bloda said, and I liked that; *colleague* sounded better than *boy. Colleague* was how you addressed someone you respected; *boy* was what you called the laundryman. "He sabi whatsup."

Ivie looked at me for a moment, as though she was trying to resolve a debate in her mind. Then she turned to Bloda and said, "You see the picture wey I send you for WhatsApp?"

"I see am."

"Na the girl be that. I wan make you set am up. She go dey with the commissioner for hotel. Make sure say her face show wella as dem dey fuck. I go send you the advance payment before una reach home this evening."

"No wahala."

"When una go arrange am?" she demanded. "I wan make dem sack am for office before month end."

Bloda was thoughtfully silent for a moment. I couldn't guess what must be zigzagging in that crafty mind of his. "You sure say dem go come fuck for our hotel?"

"Ehn na. I go tell am make she go lash the man for una hotel. Una job na to arrange the tape. You get? Everything go happen three days from now . . . one more thing, this your colleague na fine boy sha." She didn't glance at me as she uttered the compliment. Did I make her conscious of her facial shortcomings? Then she rose and marched away, and I sat there, wondering why only ugly girls appreciate how handsome you are. Only girls so ugly they could pass for the devil's cunt see the good in us.

*

From where Bloda and I sat at the reception hall of the hotel that evening, we watched the stout, bald Commissioner and the fair skinned girl on a crop top and tight pants talk to the receptionist at the counter. There were short laughs as our receptionist repeatedly said, "Yes, sah," as she bowed again and again, like she was in competition with some lizard. Then Commissioner wrote something on the log book, turned to the girl and nodded in the direction of the exclusive bar by the poolside.

Soon a uniformed steward was pouring drinks for Commissioner and the girl where they sat.

Bloda tapped my knee, the cue for me to keep watch while he went to work. He walked over to the receptionist and began to talk to her. The girl chuckled at whatever he said, she seemed not to mind that he was staring at the open log book where Commissioner had checked-in. Then she handed him a key. Bloda made a hand signal to the girl that he'd be right back, then he hurried up the stairs to the second floor, where it was apparent that our targets would be lodging. He had the screwdriver and recorder discreetly tucked in his pockets. The game was on.

My attention was divided between Commissioner and my watch. The success of this operation depended on the speed with which Bloda fixed the video recorder. The manner Commissioner was looking at the girl as she drank, I could tell he was imagining how he would bang her in all the positions conceivable to man. And the girl, this person we were asked to frame up, did she know that before her sat a horny he-goat? Well, she must know, I decided. Girls know everything. No

matter how hard you squeeze your prick in between your legs, a girl can tell when you are having an erection.

"Mezie!"

It was the receptionist. I rose and went to her. The telephone's receiver hung loosely in her grasp.

"The occupant of Room 213 wants you to come up."

My brows abruptly narrowed. "Come up? To do what?"

"I don't know, she wants to know the delicacies we have."

"She could have said that on the phone," I said curtly. I looked at my watch, then shot Commissioner and his girl a glance. They were chattering. I hoped Bloda could get on fast with whatever he was doing.

"Well, she didn't. Go find out what she wants."

I climbed the stairs which Bloda had taken, in a hasty search for Room 213. My legs were slightly quaking. I needed to attend fast to the occupant so I could resume my position at my watchpost. I was about knocking on the door of the room when all the lights in the hallway went out. I was alone in the darkness. For a moment, my mind was numb. And before I could wonder what had gone wrong with the electrical connection, lights flooded the hall again.

And then I heard it almost immediately power was restored, a sharp cry filled with agony, followed by a thud from a room along the hall. I stiffened; my senses were jolted. Gradually, the air was filled with the smell of burning cable.

I drifted away from Room 213 and walked briskly down the hallway. At the end of the passage, a door was slightly open. Who was in there? What cry did I hear? I wondered which I should do first: return to Room 213 and attend to the business of the patron, or call Bloda to know how he was getting on, or just forget it all and go back to my watchpost; I could tell the receptionist to find another worker at the hotel to attend to Room 213. And she dared not start an argument. As I contemplated what to do, I found myself irresistibly drawn to the unlocked room, and, quite mechanically, I held the door knob which was as cold as a cadaver. Gently, I pushed the door open and stepped in.

Although the ceiling fan was swirling, the room was partly covered with smoke and the smell of burnt cable hung thick in the air. I choked, coughed. Light sparked from a corner; I turned in the direction of the snappy sound. The air-conditioner was shrouded in smoke and it was with great difficult that I saw that the box had been opened; its inside were as red hot as a corn-roaster's hearth. I edged closer and stepped on something. I looked down. A screwdriver lay on the gleaming floor and beside it was the awfully cracked micro video recorder with which Bloda worked. And there was Bloda, his right leg hanging on the bedpost while the rest of his motionless body sprawled on the floor. His eyes were as open as the cunt of a paid whore, but there was no reflection, no warmth, in them. I whispered his name,

nudged at him. The silence made me nauseous. What had happened presented itself to me. Bloda had not turned the electrical power of the room off. He had been so caught up in the moment that he threw away caution. And now this. The smoke had filled the whole room now, I coughed again, choking hard, my eyes misty.

Gripped by a wild impulse, I picked up the camera from the floor and retrieved Bloda's wallet out of his pocket; I slid both items into my pocket. Then I staggered out of the room, almost crashing into the wall. And once I was out of that overwhelmingly suffocating cloud of smoke, once clean air touched my face and breezed into my nostrils, relieving my stuffed-up lungs, I flung my hands on my head and let my screams blast through the length of the glowing hallway. ✚

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