

# THE RAINBOW

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Bola had a fascination for colours. She had an uncanny ability to effortlessly identify different shades of colours. She believed her eyeballs protruded – or bulged like throbbing hearts – in order to pronounce their uniqueness and her pride thereof. She wasn't an artist and had no common impetus for her obsession. Maybe that's the reason why she kept it a secret. Although she prided herself as an adept secret keeper, she sometimes wondered whether people could decipher the essence of the rainbow keyring she had been keeping since God knows when. She believed we lived too fast, that her cosmic perceptions were too abstract and the keyring was her totem, although it wasn't chosen arbitrarily. She chose rainbow because of colours: her mystic fascination, her paraphernalia for taming the sweeping abstractness of life. She also preferred dresses with many strong colours and seldom wondered whether it could be another clue to her secret. But that was before she realised, after discreetly probing a few friends, that everyone only considered her weird. No one had eyes so piercing to see what happened monthly in her small, rotund head.

'People are too lazy,' she supposed. 'How many more traits, clues to interesting secret lives of individuals have been similarly reduced, with shrugs of indolence, to mere weirdness?'

The flaming curiosity with which she was born – and which she refused to starve when she became conscious of it – was the cause. She felt that atmosphere was too plain, too void to unimpeachably

caption life and its essentially supple meaning. She realised that she wanted to open her eyes to concrete, revealing novelties every now and then. And since she was typically too restless to live with whatever she deemed shallow, she was going to try in order to alter things for herself. She began to experiment and soon discovered that all she wanted in place of the permeating void was colours. She wanted to open her eyes daily to a hybrid of colours whose diverse elements, she hoped, would help to perceptibly demystify her days the way a coat of arms bared bellies of nations. She then began to name her months after colours and whenever she opened her eyes to the atmosphere, she would pretend to see whatever colour she had decided the month was. This way, her mind felt consummated with the soul of creation and her perceptions became less abstract. Her moods stopped getting lost intermittently like a purblind person's sight. And she wondered no more why colours were important in India.

For her divination, she relied on her intuition, whatever it was that preoccupied her mind and traditional and cultural implications of colours. For instance, her January was **magenta** – a mix of restlessness of red and nobility of purple – because of the task she had to accomplish. Before the previous year ended, she got mobilised for her one-year mandatory national service after completing her bachelor's degree. She was expected to be actively involved in community development services or CDS during her service year. She could join any CDS group she preferred and she would be given orientation during the initial three weeks she would spend camping: receiving patriotic indoctrinations, etcetera. She volunteered for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) CDS group and found her exposition to the goals quite inspirational. She left camp with a burning desire to make things happen, to make a difference in her service community. The SDG colour wheel also

fascinated her. She printed the colour wheel and then laminated it thickly. She perforated the edge, attached her keys and carried it as her rainbow totem.

For her primary assignment, she was posted to a junior secondary school in Kajola, an under-served agrarian community in Ondo State, Southwest Nigeria. She was to assist the school's librarian and she realised the first storm she had to weather as soon as she stepped into the school's library. The state of the school itself was nothing to write home about – the few structures standing were decrepit – and the shack they called their library housed spiders, cockroaches, lizards and probably snakes instead of books. When she moved closer, cautiously, to the rusty metal shelves, after greeting the librarian, she realised that her guess was correct: the few books available were outdated. She opened a decaying 5th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary and cockroaches fluttered into her face. She shuddered, screamed mildly. The librarian chuckled, but did it as if she was choked by something. Sardonic instincts? She heard her and was confused.

'Let me rather not be rash,' she thought and shrugged.

"And what do you do here every day?" she asked the middle-age woman after they had exchanged further bland pleasantries. She looked tepid and that appeared to be her permanent countenance. She was snacking on popcorn and groundnuts.

"What do you mean by that?" she countered with a gesture that eloquently suggested that she felt really offended.

Bola was not surprised. She had spent four years in university interacting with recalcitrant civil servants who were not perturbed by the disheartening state of public institutions in the country, since it allowed them to idle their days away and still get paid at the end of every month. She believed they were complicating matters and

had long concluded that the country's civil service, perhaps more than her politics and leadership, would never let her progress. She knew she shouldn't get into trouble with her and quickly retracted. She apologised and asked for a sheet of paper. She wrote speedily. Afterward, she took some pictures of the library, did a short video and left for the principal's office.

He had endorsed her posting papers before she returned. He struck her as warm, polite and hopefully conscientious. She really prayed he was one of the few whose conscience hadn't died yet. His office was not befitting but she could see that he had tried his best to keep it neat and habitable, although the chair he sat on was creaking. She presented what she wrote the other time, a request for approval of a community development project to refurbish the library.

"Young lady, I appreciate your concern," he said as he quickly minuted his approval on the letter.

"People have tried previously but they didn't succeed. Your gusto, however, strikes like a difference and I must confess that I'm impressed and quite hopeful."

He stared at her, perhaps expecting her to blush a little. She didn't. "Others used to start late, you know. And the few who started relatively early left all their plans to die on paper. I pray you're different."

"I pray I succeed," she responded. "And thank you very much for your express approval."

He didn't respond but got busy searching his drawer. A penetrating silence that echoed the chirps of birds and rustles of leaves by the Harmattan breeze then pervaded. It revealed how sparsely populated the school was. She looked quizzically around and remembered she was supposed to be bothered by the stark rurality of the village. But she was rather feeling comfortable and she thought it was quite strange. Her spirit wanted to be here, she concluded.

The principal was a lanky man in his mid-fifties. His look and carriage grudgingly reminisced a fairly handsome youth. He eventually emerged with a document which he called the most recent budget for the renovation. He gave it to her.

“Thank you once again, Sir. This will help a lot.”

“Maybe you don’t have to thank me.”

“Fine,” she chuckled, “Maybe I should take my leave already. You know I must return the papers to our secretariat before work closes.”

“Yes please. We’ll be expecting you in January,” he said as he rose to shake her hand.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, beaming.

“And do not forget to bring us stuff from Lagos,” he said jokingly as she disappeared.

The local government inspector of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) was equally impressed by her enthusiasm, which she described as unprecedented.

“Don’t forget that you must never spend your own money, please,” she entreated after giving her approval.

“Very well, madam,” she said. “Thank you.”

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She planned to get busy raising funds for the project during yuletide by exploiting social media in order to tell compelling stories with the aid of the video clip and the pictures of the library that she had taken. She recorded little or no success when she started and felt it was because she wasn’t particularly social media savvy. She thought she needed help and began to reach out to influencers and celebrities. Many did not respond to her. The few who did first asked that she pay them. She then began to feel discouraged.

She was already thinking of quitting when a respected celebrity she didn't remember hitherto retweeted one of her tweets. Likes and more retweets then came in thousands and so did money. She tweeted her gratitude and noted that she'd gotten enough donations on New Year's eve. She spent her January supervising the project. The massive failure of Nigeria's vision 2020 disappointed her greatly. It perhaps made her feel more urgent about everything. 'This decade must be different,' she often declared. She bought books at discounted rates. A few publishing houses also donated materials. It was her first time experiencing human generosity so massively and she was impressed.

Her February was teal – abundance of green and calming essence of blue – because she realised the infiniteness of life. Her success made her conclude firmly that the future of social development and inclusion was in the hands of privileged individuals who took their responsibilities to life very seriously; that *real nation building is done outside of politics*; that *societies are built by men and women and not spirits*. The coordinator of NYSC in her state of service was more than impressed.

*"Your strides give us more hope and confidence in our purpose, especially at this time when some misinformed groups clamour that the Scheme be scrapped ..."* he noted in a letter of commendation he wrote her. *"Yours is an infectious patriotism and you should keep it up,"* he concluded.

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The euphoria began to evaporate when the library began to function. The students would neither borrow books nor come to study unless they were forced. And when they did come, they only played about

and made noise. They looked dirty, tattered and malnourished. She realised that the project had earlier preoccupied her mind to such an extent that she was looking at them without seeing them. Each time she complained aloud, her superior, the tepid woman chuckled mockingly. She hated her the more. She became worried that she had only solved a 'mild' problem at the expense of a greater one. The students could barely read. She remembered an SDG implementation rule she learned in camp: subjects must be actively carried along in every project, and regretted that she didn't consult the students. It made her feel bad, but rather than be weary, she resolved to spring to action in order to help improve their literacy. She informed the principal and was permitted to liaise with the school's teachers. "There's always more work to be done," she resolved and got busy.

But the students progressed too slowly. They hardly paid attention in class. She then resolved to involve their parents. She wanted to inform them that they had to make their children realise the importance of education; that they had to tell them to take their studies seriously. But when she began to visit their homes, she was disappointed. Poverty was the air they breathed and hunger had grown vampire claws around their soul. She met mostly with women who complained that they had been rendered jobless by gun-wielding Fulani herdsmen whose cattle now grazed freely on their farmlands.

"Our husbands have gone far into the bush to plant cocoa. We women used to plant maize, cassava and vegetables in nearby farms so that our children do not starve, but since they (herdsmen) have come, we can no longer farm. If we decide to be stubborn, they threaten us with guns, they rape us. They have once kidnapped our king. Our men are too scared of guns and

the government has forgotten us. Help us Aunty, if you can ...” one woman effused bitterly and Bola was moved to tears. Her teal February ended pale.

The statement: *help us Aunty, if you can* kept ringing in her head and she grew sadder and sadder. The spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria complicated her plight. Schools were abruptly closed and she had to return to Lagos before she concluded on her next step. The crimson image of the Coronavirus displayed constantly by her favourite TV station partly sinisterly encroached her psyche and the darkness of her grief and fear did the rest. She would have called her March oxblood, but for her realisation of the need to add a tinge of blue – turquoise, *filament of hope* – which was the colour of *medicare* and nose masks worn majorly by people. She finally divined her March as **maroon** and felt she was very apt when she realised that the word could be stretched figuratively to describe the current state of the world and herself.

*Help us Aunty, if you can.*

She had nightmare after nightmare and her April was tense. She dreamt about the village. She saw vultures preying on emaciated corpses of her students in her dream and was scared to her marrow. She woke to news of more COVID-19 infections and deaths, and more conspiracy theories spread via social media. She called April **maroon** as well. She couldn't also help feeling for the frontline workers.

She called her May **maroon** too.

The partial ease of lockdown and little normalcy didn't really count for her because schools weren't yet reopened. But she later began to feel better generally, especially when she met, online, a childhood schoolmate of hers who was serving in the northern part



of the country. He had before the lockdown, with a few colleagues, empowered some women with the skill of liquid soap production – homemade – in his service community. He recommended some *YouTube* videos for her. She couldn't wait to replicate the same in her service community. She also wanted to educate them on COVID-19. She left in June even though schools were still closed. She left with many nose masks and hand sanitizers, which she distributed before they began their first meeting. She made them observe social distancing. The women were amazed that she was keenly interested in them and couldn't wait to be taught by her. She was happy they liked her and left feeling elated. She would afterward divine her June as **violet**.

Later that night, she received a call from the village's King. She had to stop the programme. He asked her to see him the next morning. She couldn't stop wondering what could have gone wrong, although she wasn't really bothered. She knew it would be easy for her to resolve any issue with the King because she knew him to be polite to a fault; he was well educated and civilised. He supported her while completing her first project. She slept a little soundly and dreamt about stars and the moon.

The King said he received a delegate of village men with a complaint that 'she was teaching their wives how to become their *husbands*'. The allegation left her dumbfounded for seconds. What made them think the way they did? She didn't want to think it's scourge of gender inequity staring at her and was happy that the King understood her purpose when she relayed it. "Please carry on. I will speak with them," he assured her.

He further informed her that the men were seen around because an unprecedented storm and erosion wouldn't let them farm in peace. They both expressed their concerns about climate change, how the

fast shrinking Lake Chad, etcetera, caused herdsmen troubles in the South and so on.

“You must keep pestering the government for help. Your men and women need to be helped,” she advised on a final note.

“We really need help, Bola. And thank you for lending a hand,” he replied as she bowed in homage and made to leave.

“Perhaps we also need to learn to stand up for ourselves. We aren’t supposed to be enslaved by our circumstances,” he added and Bola nodded in affirmation.

She walked sprightly back home. On her way, few lines of Beautiful Nubia’s Path came to her mind:

*“There’s no reason to wallow in sadness  
Face the truth and stand for justice  
Provide shade for future wayfarers  
Make this land better than we met it.”*

She loved the lines and also liked to identify with another couplet:

*“Don’t you worry about me.  
I’m just a flash of light passing through.”*

A fleeting lightning then struck and when she looked upward, the sky was deeply blue. Rain threatened to burst in torrents. She looked far eastward and saw a brilliant rainbow creeping forth from the horizon. It fascinated her greatly and she remembered her old totem with nostalgia. ‘Rainbow means that the rain might not fall,’ she recalled the Yoruba myth, but quickened her pace nevertheless.