

CHANTAL ABOA

The Murderous Archipelago

“Wherever you go, do as you see,” she remembered her late grandfather telling her once. Simple advice. And undoubtedly sound. Why stay in someone else’s country while refusing to adopt their ways?

No. It was not fair to attribute her deplorable conduct to her reluctance to adopt the ways of the people of this country. She was just unaware of what was going on. But since when was ignorance a good enough excuse to absolve one?

“It is Guy Fawkes Night, also known as Bonfire Night,” Charles answered when she asked him what all these nocturnal fireworks were about.

“Guy Fawkes Night?” she queried.

“Yes, darling. It celebrates the failure of the 5th of November 1605 Catholic plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament.”

“How horrible. Why would the Catholics want to do that?”

“Because the Protestant King James I of England was there at the time, and they wanted to kill him, you know.”

But all this was later. Much later, after her appalling behaviour. Would she ever tell Charles? She should. Wives should share everything with their husbands. No.

That could not be true. Everybody, men, women, married and unmarried alike, should be allowed to lock certain things in a secret safe. The question was: should this be one of them?

Poor Noah. Only four years old and already a victim of this ineluctable clash of cultures. But was it really a clash of cultures? And was it really ineluctable? Maybe everything stemmed from her own silliness. Or stubbornness.

Noah. They did not exactly name him thus in common accord. As the train left Dartford station, she recalled how she had pressured Charles into following her wishes.

“You must be joking!” her husband shouted when she told him that should they bear a son, she would like him to have her father’s surname. “How can I give someone else’s surname to *my* son? It is not even your surname, for heaven’s sake! Why do you want us to do that?”

“Because it is the tradition of the Ewondo people!” she shouted back. “Every Ewondo person like me must name their first son after their father, and their first daughter after their mother. It symbolises one’s gratitude towards one’s parents. For without them one would never have seen daylight.”

When she fell silent, she glanced at him. He was frowning as he leant against the greyish marble table, his long arms folded, his brown eyes fixed on the parquet floor.

She coughed. He did not even blink. She thought for a moment. She had no choice but to go for his jugular.

Slowly, she pulled herself up and trudged towards her husband. Once in front of him, she riveted her black eyes on his.

“Look, C. P.,” she said softly. “You are always telling me that you did not know what happiness was until we met. Don’t you think you owe the two persons who made that possible a bit of gratitude? Am I really asking too much?”

He opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, but said nothing. Then he began to shake his head again and again.

She smiled imperceptibly. She knew these were the final hops of a headless cock about to breathe its last.

“Noah is not such a bad surname,” she added even more softly. “Neither is....”

“How do you spell that?” he interrupted her.

Her smile became conspicuous as she replied: “N-O-A-H.”

“Like Yannick Noah, the French tennis player?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “As a matter of fact, he too is half Cameroonian, like our child will be. Many people mistakenly associate his last name with the biblical patriarch. Noah is, in fact, a typical Ewondo surname, very common in Southern Cameroon.”

He sighed before enquiring: “Can we add my surname as well, or does it have to be only Noah?”

She shrugged. “Of course we can add your surname. And a first name too. I am not so keen on Nathan as I told you, but I know how much you are.”

He smiled at last. Her heart skipped a beat. She still found his slightly lopsided smile as enticing as when they met years earlier.

“Nathan Noah-Powell,” he gently said. “I rather like the idea of my child having an African surname as well as mine.”

After a moment, he asked: “And if it is a girl?”

“Meba, like my mother. As we both fancy Gloria, she would be Gloria Meba-Powell.”

He squatted and placed his hands on her bulky belly. As he began to caress it, he whispered very gently: “We are eagerly awaiting your arrival, Mr Nathan Noah-Powell, or Miss Gloria Meba-Powell.”

Life was not her husband though. She could not manipulate it at will. Her intransigence could well end up destroying her. Or worse still, Noah.

She reminisced about the events of the previous night. Charles was out dining with some American customers. She put Noah to bed at 8 pm as usual. He began to cry, bellowing like a mad bull, about ten minutes later.

She hesitated for a moment, then opted not to go and see her son. She had accompanied him to the toilet, read him a story and kissed him goodnight. So he had no reason to complain.

“No, I will not allow myself to be treated like one of these silly, weak Western parents bullied by their own children,” she thought as she turned up the volume of the TV.

An hour later, she rose to go to the lavatory, located on the second floor. As she emptied her bladder, she was, all of a sudden, startled by a series of explosions accompanied by loud crackling noises. After a few seconds, they stopped as abruptly as they had started.

She flushed the toilet and washed her hands. As she dried them, the explosions and crackling noises began again. She suddenly thought about Noah and rushed up to his bedroom, on the third floor.

He had stopped crying, but the little boy was still wide-awake. Curled up under the enormous quilt, he was shaking convulsively. The explosions could be heard much more loudly in his bedroom.

“Mum, I am frightened,” he said when his mother entered. “I am so frightened. Please hug me, Mummy.”

She broke down as she bent over and picked him up. “I am so sorry, Noah,” she whispered as she cradled him, tears streaming down her face. “I am very, very sorry.”

The explosions carried on stopping and starting intermittently. She put Noah on her shoulder and half opened the curtains. She then saw multicoloured flashes, and realized that these were fireworks.

She went downstairs, carrying Noah with her. When he fell asleep, she took him to the matrimonial bed for the first time since his second birthday.

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Guy Fawkes Night. What was the point of commemorating something that happened more than four hundred years earlier? Hadn't British Catholics and Protestants made peace with each other yet?

No. That was not the issue. The problem was her reaction, not the celebrations. She had failed to comfort Noah when he needed her most.

The train stopped. She peered out of the window. Barnehurst. Still six stations before Lewisham.

She glanced down at her wristwatch. Twelve noon.

When she looked up again, her eyes fell on a woman and her young son as they boarded the train. The boy, aged seven or eight, was manifestly Asian. He sported sparkling white trousers, a knee-length golden robe and a matching conical hat. The woman wore an ample, full-length black cloak and an equally black veil covering all her face, save for the eyes.

“Why does this woman wear this veil?” she wondered as mother and son passed by her. “It is obvious that she is an Asian Muslim, and all women probably dress that way in her country of origin. But why flaunt such a glaring symbol of separateness here?”

No, she immediately rebuked herself. That was not her speaking. That was what she had recently heard a politician, a non-Muslim politician, say.

How could she? How could a black woman like her yield to such stereotyping? She, as well as all black people, had the moral obligation to reject and fight stereotyping, prejudice and bigotry. For they had suffered beyond words from these evils in the past. And who knew how many were still affected by them daily?

It could not be easy being a member of the Asian Muslim community living in Britain in November 2006. Most people were convinced that all the individuals arrested three months earlier for their alleged involvement in the plot to blow up aeroplanes bound for the USA, and all the four 7/7 London suicide bombers, belonged to this group. Suspicion and resentment of Asian Muslims were widespread.

How would she feel if she knew that she was constantly mistrusted or even disliked just because of the crimes committed by people with whom she happened to share the same ethnic or religious group? She should be ashamed of herself. What did she know about this woman apart from her external appearance?

She sighed as she mused. Nothing could guarantee that only Asian Muslims would always be the main victims of the current climate of suspicion and resentment. She remembered hearing or reading that there were young black Caribbean men involved in both the 7/7 attacks and the recent plot to blow up transatlantic aeroplanes. And what about Richard Reid, the British shoe bomber currently serving a life sentence in the US? He too was of Caribbean origin. Caribbean origin.... Like Noah!

Could her Noah swell the ranks of these criminals one day? Come on, what a silly idea. There was no way her son could mingle with extremists, let alone become one of them.

Both Charles and she were determined to give Noah, and any other children they might have, a loving, stable home. But what if this was not enough? Were all the 9/11 or 7/7 terrorists coming from unstable homes? Surely not.

What could drive young individuals to become suicide killers? Was there anything parents could do to prevent this from happening?

Maybe the current wave of Islamic terrorism would no longer exist by the time Noah reached his adolescence or early adulthood. Islamic terrorism? Was it really the correct way to refer to it? Was it all about religion? Maybe. The 5th November 1605 Catholic plotters were only motivated by religious fervour. Why should twenty-first century plotters be different?

But hang on, did Charles really say that Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators were *only* driven by religion? What if she had misunderstood him? She should carry out a bit of research on this subject. Or ask Charles for clarification.

Charles. Her heart was full of tenderness as she thought about him. She, the daughter of impoverished Cameroonian farmers, met him, the British-born son of a white Jamaican property developer and a black Guyanese waitress, in Paris in 1999.

A year earlier, aged twenty-five, she had been awarded a scholarship to pursue an MA in French at a Parisian university. The scholarship was not nearly enough to cover her needs as well as those of her parents and three younger siblings. As she was fluent in English and French, she worked as a part-time interpreter.

In July 1999, she was contracted to interpret at a computing exhibition for a group of British software entrepreneurs, amongst whom was thirty-year-old Charles. They were immediately attracted to each other. He invited her out barely a couple of hours after meeting her. They had married eight months later in the English town of Gravesend, where they lived thereafter.

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The train stopped once more. She did not look out this time, and carried on musing. She loved Charles and wanted to make him happy, as well as Noah. To achieve this, she needed to be a good wife and mother. Charles certainly thought that she was both. But if she were to tell him about the events of the previous night, wouldn't this dent his faith in her maternal qualities?

This was not, in fact, her biggest worry. She feared, above all, that her tendency to posit herself as an outsider in relation to the Western society could prove utterly disastrous for Noah. What if he were to behave like some of these Asians who, although Western-born and bred, identified with their Asian roots and Muslim religion, rather than with Western society and values?

For a moment, she comforted herself with the thought that since she herself, Charles and their son were all Christians, Noah would be shielded from anti-Western extremism by their Christian faith. To become a Western hating *jihadist*, he would have to dabble

in, or convert to Islam; like the shoe bomber and all the other men of Caribbean descent involved in Islamic attacks and plots. And the possibility of this happening was minimal.

But doubt soon gnawed at her. If it were all about the Islamic religion, how was it that the Muslim parents of the current Islamic radicals lacked their children's abhorrence of the Christian West? They would never have emigrated to Western nations otherwise. Would they?

Perhaps, although these parents did not hate it, they were, like her, constantly positing themselves as outsiders in relation to the West. In so doing, they failed to inculcate in their progeny a sense of belonging to this society. Ultimately, they compelled them to turn to their roots and religion to develop a sense of identity.

As a black African immigrant, she had certainly been confronted with Western racism and rejection on numerous occasions. She remembered how many of her French classmates used to taunt her for her accented French. She also reminisced how, at a supermarket in Gravesend, a blond man had shouted, "F...ing coon!" when she had inadvertently bumped into him. She was sure that had she returned to her native Cameroon, it would not have proved impossible for her to become a French lecturer, as it had proved so far in Britain. But was all this enough to justify her tendency to define herself in opposition to the Western society in which she lived?

"No, I will not allow myself to be treated like one of these silly, weak Western parents bullied by their own children," she kept repeating last night while her terrified son was crying his eyes out. She often claimed that she wanted nothing more than Noah's happiness. Yet, rather than his well-being, her chief preoccupation when she heard him cry was not to behave like an unassertive Western mother.

Granted, she was unaware that Noah was scared to death by the Guy Fawkes Night fireworks. But after six years of residence in Britain, shouldn't she have known what was happening? What did that reveal about her attitude towards the society in which she had *voluntarily* chosen to live? If she persisted in always defining herself as an outsider, how could she hope to shield her son from the alienation to which so many children of immigrants were often exposed?

"I will spare no effort from now on to become more integrated into this country," she promised herself. "I need to change, if only for Noah's sake. I might have successfully coerced his father into giving him a Cameroonian surname, but I need to accept once and for all that this Western society, not the Cameroonian one, is where he lives."

What could she do to facilitate both her own and her son's integration? She cogitated for a while. She was not sure, but she thought a good starting point would be to establish and cultivate a genuine friendship with British couples, preferably with children. There were the Ramsays and the Johnsons. The former were their neighbours, and had two young daughters. The latter, who had a five-year-old son, were Charles's long-standing friends.

Both couples had invited them many times; however, they had only visited them twice. She had nothing against them. But like many Cameroonian-educated women, she was reluctant to go out and, except for business purposes, Charles disliked going anywhere without her.

"I will speak to Charles and ask him to invite the Ramsays and the Johnsons to lunch next weekend, or whenever they can come," she said to herself. "I need to change, if only for my son's sake."

She now realised that detachment was not the solution. How could she sit on the fence, in perpetual judgement of a society in which she hoped to live happily with her loved ones? All she had offered her son so far was only negativism and social separateness.

This had to stop. She had no intention of transforming Noah into a Western-based island of anti-Western feelings. There were already too many such islands. She did not want him to be part of this murderous archipelago.

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The train halted. She glanced out of the window. Eltham. Still another two stations to go before Lewisham.

She looked up. At that moment, a black woman in her mid-thirties boarded the train. Their eyes met. They both smiled.

“Hi, Melu,” she greeted the woman in Ewondo as she came and sat beside her. “What are you doing boarding a train in Eltham?”

Melu struck her hands together, then put the right on her heart. It was a common Ewondo way of expressing disappointment. Shaking her head, she replied: “Ah, Ngali, my sister. What can I tell you about the damn trains of this damn country that you don’t already know? The one I took in Gravesend this morning trundled its way to here. Then we were asked to evacuate it. I hoped I would be in Peckham by now.”

Ngali could not suppress a smirk. A Cameroonian complaining about the lack of punctuality of British trains? When did she last catch a train in Cameroon?

“Well, Melu,” she said. “At least that gave us the opportunity to meet. I am really glad to see you.”

“Me too. But tell me, how come you are not tied to your Master’s trousers today? Where are you going alone?”

Ngali grimaced. She had only herself to blame. They had met at their GP’s surgery three years earlier, and became friends when they realised that they both came from southern Cameroon. Since the beginning of their friendship, Melu, a single mother, had always criticised what she saw as her emotional dependency on Charles; and Ngali had never attempted to stop her.

“I am going to Lewisham,” she replied. “I need couscous, plantains and dried fish. Charles could not accompany me because he had to take Noah to the leisure pool for....”

“For his swimming lesson,” Melu interrupted her. “Yes, you told me about that. I see that you didn’t follow my advice. My boy is two years older than yours, but I have never taken him to a leisure pool or whatever you call it. Too many perverts in this immoral society. You should be more careful.”

Ngali sighed. Again, she had nobody else but herself to blame. Criticism of Western society had always been the main subject of her chats with Melu. Why should this one be different?

“Come on,” she said in English before adding in Ewondo, “there are perverts everywhere as far as I am aware.”

Melu was quite taken aback. She fell silent and looked straight ahead. About nine feet away was an old white man clutching a luggage rack to keep his balance, while several teenagers and young adults were seated. Melu poked Ngali with her elbow and pointed at the old man with her chin.

“What have I just told you?” she asked triumphantly. “An immoral society. All these young people can’t even give up their seat to that poor elderly man.”

Without giving her friend time to reply, Melu stood up, walked towards the old man and, while indicating her empty seat, asked him in English: “Would you like to sit down, Sir?”

“You are most kind, my child,” he nodded.

Ngali rose as they approached, and gave up the corner seat to the old man. He thanked her and made himself comfortable. Ngali sat next to him, while Melu stood beside her.

“What a shame!” Melu exclaimed in Ewondo after a moment. “They call themselves civilised, but they can’t even let an old man sit down.”

“You are right,” Ngali agreed.

No sooner had she said this than Ngali felt uneasy. Whatever happened to her recent decision to stop her constant criticism of Westerners?

“Mind you,” said Melu. “This old white goat is not blameless either. Why can’t the stupid thing stay at home with dignity as befits his age?”

Ngali hesitated. Then she shrugged. What the heck, it was just a harmless chat. “They have no dignity, these people,” she declared. “No dignity, old or young.”

“None at all!” shouted Melu. “This silly old one here, what must he do now that he couldn’t do when he was younger?”

Ngali was about to laugh when, in an accented but otherwise perfect Ewondo, the old man asked: “Why are you badmouthing me, my dear children? What have I done to you?”

Bemused, Ngali and Melu exchanged glances. No words needed. They both knew they had to go to another carriage.

As they walked away, Ngali could not help looking back at the old man. At that moment, he rested his elbow on the window frame. His coat opened up, exposing his neck. Only then did Ngali notice his dog collar.