

## **Extract from Born on a Tuesday, by Elnathan John**

(taken from the start of Part Three)

Last month Malam Abdul-Nur stopped me at the entrance of the mosque and asked me if there was anything I wanted. First I was confused, thinking that perhaps he wanted to scold me for having done something wrong. But then his eyes were relaxed and the lines of his forehead weren't so many and he wasn't breathing hard like he does when he is upset. Reluctantly I told him I wanted a radio that has stations outside Nigeria – something like the big one in Sheikh's office, but smaller, so that I can carry it around. At some point it crossed my mind that perhaps he wanted me to do something for him.

A few days after, he sent for me. He had just moved into his own office at the back of the mosque not far from where our rooms were. The new office has white walls and tiles and a small toilet inside. Since Sheikh has decided to make Malam Abdul-Nur the headmaster of the new school that is to be built on the land adjacent the mosque, the office will also be the office of the headmaster. I wonder about toilets that are built inside rooms. Will the whole room not smell when someone uses the toilet?

The office has a ceiling fan and a standing fan. The curtains in the office are not the normal type hanging from a rope nailed into the wall. They close and open when you pull a rope that has tiny plastic balls like a small chasbi. Alhaji Usman's workmen built the office and they finished the construction and painting in only three weeks. The same men will build the school.

I chewed on my nails as Malam Abdul-Nur picked up two small cartons from under his table, and made some notes in his exercise book. I could not read what he wrote because it was upside down from where I was sitting, but I could see that he was writing in Arabic.

Malam Abdul-Nur did not raise his head from his exercise book when he asked: If Allah asks you to do something, will you refuse?

When I did not answer, he stopped writing, dropped his pen slowly and massaged his eyeballs. Then he looked at me.

‘No,’ I said, confused.

‘Are you just saying it, or do you understand it, what it means to do what Allah wants without any question?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Are you ready to do what Allah wants when He wants it, without asking why?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes. I know you will.’

He pointed at the two cartons.

‘Your radio is in the bigger carton. And because of how well-behaved you have been since you came here – I have been watching you; I see everybody, those who are bad and those who are good and those who are just here eating our food – the smaller carton is also for you.’

‘Thank you Malam.’

‘Will you be able to use it or do you want me to show you how to set up the phone?’

‘Let me try Malam.’

‘If you have any issues let me know.’

In my heart I should have been happy but I was not. I have a funny feeling about Malam Abdul-Nur, Allah forgive me. It is hard to describe. It is a little bit of fear, a little bit of anger that he doesn’t want Jibril to talk to me, and a little bit of confusion because I don’t know what is going on in his mind. I cannot say that he is kind because he slaps people when he is angry. I cannot say that he is wicked because he also gives people gifts; and Allah only judges what is inside a person’s heart.

I came back into the room and saw Jibril opening a small carton just like mine. He got a phone too. I watched how he opened it and put the SIM card inside it. Then I did the same with mine.

Tuning the radio to find stations, I find BBC Hausa and BBC English. I like BBC Hausa. Especially the news. It is surprising that I learn new Hausa words from a foreign radio station. Comparing the news on BBC English to that on BBC Hausa is

interesting. Sometimes I do not know a word in English and I hear it in Hausa and I understand. Other times there is a Hausa phrase I have never heard before, like Majalisar Dinkin Duniya, which BBC English calls United Nations. If I had not heard the English, I would have translated it to mean 'Association of Joining the World'. But then if I had heard United Nations I would have called it Dinkakun Kasashe in Hausa. Words turn into something else when they change from Hausa to English and back.

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Sheikh has been planning a fundraising campaign and launch for the new school. We sent lots of invitations out and we expect the local government chairman to come. Alhaji Usman has already pledged to give most of the money once the plans are ready.

A group of five men from England came to visit Sheikh recently and only one of them was white. The rest of them were black and had names like us. The difference was the way they spoke English, just like the people on BBC English. And they spoke Arabic too. It was exciting. I do not know much about this, but I think I prefer England to America. Or maybe it is that I don't like America at all. I did not realise there were black people and even Arabs who call England their country. They don't just live there - they call it their own, just like the white people.

Malam Abdul-Nur raised his hand when one of the men from England had finished speaking. The man had said that Islam means peace and that all Muslims should be examples of peace in the community. Malam Abdul-Nur said he wanted to make a correction.

'Islam does not mean peace,' he began. All of us went quiet in the room apart from the boys who follow him everywhere he goes and shout Allahu Akbar after everything he says. They are very annoying, those boys.

The way he spoke English, I did not believe it was Malam Abdul-Nur speaking. I was taking notes so that I could find out later from Jibril any words I did not understand. Malam Abdul-Nur's voice was different. He sounded almost like the men from

England, as if there was a small man inside his chest pushing the words out from his nose.

‘Islam means submission. Submission to the will of Allah. And the will of Allah is not the will of the infidel or the will of America. Islam means that we do not submit to anything or anyone but Allah.’

It is not that I do not agree with Malam Abdul-Nur. It was the way he tried to make them look like they did not know what they were saying. We all understood what they were saying. They were telling us to be good and kind to change the way the world sees us Muslims. One of the men said that after the planes entered the tall buildings in America and killed people, many people started talking of Islam as if all Muslims were bombers or terrorists. He said that we must change the way people think of our religion and always ask ourselves if anything we are doing will give Islam a good or bad name.