

DREAMS

By Ayobami Adebayo (Nigeria)

While scavenger rats nibbled at Ademola's feet, he dreamt of big and lavishly furnished mansions. He would wake up with a smile on his face every morning to find small portions of his feet gone. He paid little attention to his disappearing feet, holding on to his dreams throughout the day like a lost lover's letter. He ate a portion of each day's dream for breakfast, sitting with a large bowl of water, thinking about his dream and taking a sip of water intermittently to wash down each morsel.

He stopped dreaming after Okanlawon started his campaign. Okanlawon who wanted to be the local government chairman and brought nothing for the people during his campaign rallies, no motorcycle, no bags of rice, no kegs of vegetable oil, not even salt. He brought only the promise of a community school that would meet the standards of the private schools that only the politicians in the council could afford to send their children to. The other candidates continued to bring their gifts and promises of road, water, scholarship and even a university. It was at one of such rallies that Ademola got his motorcycle, singled out for the graciousness of a gap toothed aspirant whose teeth glistened like stainless steel in the sun. The people kept attending every political rally, waiting and cheering in the sun, which felt as though it had become a fiery disc that was melting its way through their skin. They collected the offerings of the candidates and went to their homes to discuss Okanlawon, the man who had given them nothing.

The motorcycle became a source of livelihood for Ademola. He sent for his wife and daughter who lived in the village. He bought rat poison to kill the scavenger rats and carefully inspected his feet every morning. He bought a small black goat as a surprise gift for his daughter who was to arrive with his wife a day after the elections. Instead of his dreams, he chewed on the thought of his little daughter heading for the community school. He feasted on the image of her returning, speaking in English, in words he would not understand. In the evenings, he would join other men at the local beer joint to discuss the coming elections. Most of them were going to vote for Okanlawon, there was excitement in the air as the elections approached. A pregnant expectation that the people had not known before, all because of Okanlawon, this man who had brought nothing.

It rained heavily on the Election Day. Ademola would later lie that the driving sound of the rain had disturbed his hearing, that it had prevented him from hearing the voice of the policeman in the cubicle where people were to cast their votes privately telling him not to vote for Okanlawon. But it was that he had not finished chewing on his breakfast, a vision of his daughter traipsing to the community school, her chattering voice had risen in cadence with the sound of rain and drowned out the policeman's voice. He cast his vote for Okanlawon.

They came that evening, led by the policeman who had been in the cubicle. His landlady, an old woman with no teeth left knelt down to beg the men not to beat Ademola up. They took the motorcycle and the goat, dragging the stubborn bleating creature down the dusty road on its side. The gap toothed had contestant won. There was no one at the beer joint that night.

Ademola dreamt of lavishly furnished mansions again that night.