A Season of Disillusion

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"Kaka-moto-bi, hey!"

The taunt that followed the Christmas masqueraders resonates in my head sometimes, far from the African bush where I first heard those cryptic syllables.

For my elder brother and sister and myself, being in town and being in the bush held different enchantments which distracted us from questioning the mix of cultures that clashed and merged within us daily. To have worried about a sense of identity might have started a never-ending debate about exactly what sort of Africans we were anyway – whose father and whose mother’s father were called West Indian and in whose home English was spoken, rather than any language native to this land of our birth and our mother’s birth and our mother’s mother’s birth. The immediate explanation was that my father, in a reversal of the triangular trade that deprived him of the right also to be born on African soil, had made a journey from inauspicious beginnings in colonial Trinidad, on scholarship to medical studies in Dublin and Scotland, via general practice in working-class east London, thence to the rural Gold Coast, bringing a plethora of Western remedies to remote villages on market days. The frugalities and frustrations of life in the bush, where fetish still held sway, were relieved by sporadic trips to the capital to replenish essential supplies, which might have included energy.

In Accra there was the sheer novelty of living in a downtown ‘upstairs’ house, a modest shuttered building on solid concrete legs, but to us children what an amusement palace! I remember clomping up and down the wooden stairs in my father’s shoes until I was forbidden such dangerous exploits. Better still was to pull a stool up to the front window to watch whatever was showing across the road at the Royal, the open-air cinema directly opposite; invariably it was an Indian film in which fighting and dancing, singing and romancing alternated. It was not just the music, colour, and action that held us rapt but
the punctuating jeers, cheers, and other uninhibited encouragement from the audience, as hero and villain vied over some pneumatically beautiful woman. To us, the storyline was immaterial; in any event, our restricted view didn’t rise to the subtitles, the lower part of the screen being obscured by a wall. (I suspect, too, that the onset of this filmic interest pre-dated our ability to read, when the three of us had a combined age of less than fifteen.) It was a peculiar perspective on another culture, at once familiar and alien and fascinating, like the Indian and Syrian stores on the corner, overflowing with bales of expensive cloth, piles of bangles like sliced kaleidoscopes, innumerable glittery trinkets and bottles of scents and lotions and potions.

Some of the adventures to be had on town visits seemed routine at the time: the rent-paying trip to Mrs Murrell, the frail old St Lucian landlady of the Derby Avenue house where we stayed, who was as placid as her talkative grey parrot was crotchety; the expedition to Mrs Seidler the German dressmaker, who had a cigarette-smoking pet gorilla. We looked forward to childish harassment of the crazy Fulani watchman we knew as Two-Belly, who would pretend to be vexed and wag a crooked bony finger at us warningly as he took us for walks. A particular treat was to play on the beach at Christiansborg, near the governor’s castle, or be taken for a drive to the airport to watch propeller planes land and take off. Almost as good was the noisy high street, the pavement-vendors presiding over stocks of sweet-smelling talcum powder and school exercise books with sun-faded covers, Lagosian market women with cigarette-tins heaped with groundnuts, hands stained blue from their indigo-dyed cloth. There was the exotic promise of Kingsway and the other large department stores known only by inscrutable initials – UAC, UTC, SCOA, CFAO. Never mind that the goods they flaunted were beyond our pockets, let alone our desires, it was entertainment enough to gawp at the tailored clothes awkwardly stiffly displayed on European-featured dummies.

By contrast, Suhum, where we were based, offered the simple attractions of a small bush town. Space, freedom, seclusion, and unlimited possibilities combined within the corrugated-iron perimeter fence of our compound. It boasted at its centre a huge ring of lavender – my mother’s pride – an ideal arena for chasing the ducks, chickens, guineafowl, and turkeys with which we shared the space. We eagerly took up the challenge of outstaring the fierce-looking dragon lizards with orange and black bobbing heads – ‘spiteful spitters’, my brother christened them. Always too soon it was time for the ritual of lighting kerosene lanterns and Aladdin lamps as sudden dusk fell, in the shortened day of our electricity-free zone. Then came the seductive twilight rasp of crickets, the