

Volunteers for a Year and Friends for a Lifetime

A story about a small girl in a big world, about youthful irresponsibility, about life in Nigeria in the end of the 1990's. But, above all, about rock solid friendship that lasts forever.

"Oyinbo! Wetin yu dey do for hia, dis be dangerous times-o. Wia be yu papa?" The guards' machineguns pointing right at me, piercing black eyes fixing me, loud voices shouting at me. This was supposed to be the year of my life. Now I see it ending. Right here, at Lagos Airport, before even making it past the customs. But then, an everlasting minute later, the stern faces surrounding me break into smiles. *"Welcome to dis Naija. Now yu dey go enjoy am."*

I arrive in Nigeria in June 1998. Decades of military rule and political turmoil has blackened the reputation of the Motherland. These are indeed dangerous times. I fill my lungs and my heart with the pungent smell of death mixing with fumes and spices and pouring heat. The driver taking me from the airport to the ICYE office orders me to hold the door of his rickety Toyota to keep it from falling off, while furiously manoeuvring through the congested streets. Never have I felt more alive. Never felt life being more brittle.

And then comes that first hesitant hello. Solla, Marion, Jason, Tini, Carmen, Anne, Kristien. They have all arrived a few days earlier, already dirty feet in flip-flops and braided hair. I'm flooded by utter loneliness: there's no place for me here. But in a split-second, strangers turn into friends. Someone grabs my backpack, someone passes me a bottle of water, someone takes my hand. And we hold on. Through happiness, homesickness, hospital visits, hangover and heart break. There's always room for one more in the ICYE family. Always.

My guide book states that the only way to survive Lagos is to leave it quickly. I bury it in the proud company of killed cockroaches that first evening, when darkness falls like a blanket and my local friends laconically establish that *"NEPA don take light"*, that there is a power cut – again. I stay in Lagos for a year. But Lagos stays in my heart forever.

In 1998 there are no cell phones. No Internet cafés, no social media, no easy way to stay in touch when we disperse to our work placements. But there is a hub; the ICYE office in Sabo. There, Adeolu's smile is always greeting me. There, by the magnetic force of friendship, we are pulled as soon as we have days off work. A sanctuary, a haven, a refuge from reality – a reality that takes its toll on a naïve 19-year-old.

No sane person rides an *okada* over Third Mainland Bridge. But we do. Immortal teenagers, squeezing in two by two on the speeding motorbikes. No one in their right mind lets a witchdoctor in the dark woods of Osogbo rub ashes into freshly cut tribal marks. But we do. High on life and a bit too much of Star beer. No rational being jumps on the night bus to Maiduguri, only to be chased back through the darkness by Chad rebels. But we do. Crazy kids, we do all those things that we promised our parents not to. Hand in hand, heart in heart. As a team. As a family. As volunteers for a year and friends for a lifetime.