

The **YNBA**

"A stellar debut that will keep you turning the pages."

-Tunde Leye, author of *Afonja*, *The Rise*



a novel by

Ọláolúwa Òní

The
yNBA

a novel by

Ọláolúwa Òní



Published in 2020 by TLsPlace Media
No. 2Yomi Ajisola Street, Langbasa,
Ajah, Lagos
Tel: +234 803 820 5282
Email: ajileyeb@gmail.com

Copyright © Ọláolúwa Ọní 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher.

The right of Ọláolúwa Ọní to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Laws.

A catalogue record for this book is available from
The National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-57281-2-5

Cover design by Anderson Ofuzim Oriahi
Cover Art: Joseph Ogbeide
Layout by AI's Fingers

To Young Members of the Nigerian Bar Association.

We will fight, we will fight, we will fight...

PART ONE
(2016)

When the revolution spoke
they said it was treason,
but couldn't jail the rhyme without a reason.
When the revolution spoke,
one million youths marching
all in their paths they're smashing...

— **Efe Paul Azino**
“When the Revolution Spoke”

CHAPTER ONE

Ọ̀túnbá Yẹmí Carrington adjusted his gown at the shoulders before he continued addressing the hushed courtroom. There was something about the drape of black fabric over his broad, towering form and the baritone of his voice that commanded attention. And even if he was not speaking from the *Inner Bar* of the courtroom, taking up the space of two chairs in the first row of seats, it would still have been clear that he was a Senior Advocate of Nigeria.

In the last row of seats at the right corner of the court, Ọ̀túnbá's clients watched, smiling and nodding as he pleaded their case to the judge. The six of them, brothers, were dressed in matching sets of *bùbá* and *sòkòtò* made from a garishly patterned, yet somber *ankara* fabric, and they sat with their *filàs* folded in their palms. They were united against their oldest brother, the defendant, who was absent from court that morning.

At the first meeting, before they hired Ọ̀túnbá, the brothers explained twice, once in English and the second time in Yorùbá, "Our brother has filed an application asking the judge to stop the sale of the property in Victoria Island. What we want you to do is to make sure that the judge flings his papers into the dustbin. Let the judge block his ears to anything our brother wants to say. And if you need us to give you more money to make it happen, let us know. Money is not our problem."

Ọ̀túnbá always expected that clients would find a way to pass bribes to judges if they thought it would help their case, especially in a dispute involving real estate in Victoria Island. And this set of clients, he quickly learned, were particularly stubborn. After the brothers signed the retainer agreement, Ọ̀túnbá, acting in what he thought was the best interest of his clients, tried to talk them out of the proposed sale. He pointed out that it made no sense to sell off a debt-free property that would only increase in value with each turn of the calendar.

“A ní h-our h-own is to pay you what you ave charge, your h-own is to go and say what we ave told you to say,” one of the siblings said, the multiple cicatrices across his cheeks danced as he spoke. “If we want you to give us h-advice, we would ave told you. But we ave not h-ask for any h-advice,” he added. His English was so warped by the Yorùbá accent it sounded as though he was blowing air between his words and when he smiled, as if pitying Ọ̀túnbá for the assumption that legal advice was required from him, he showed teeth that had taken on the brownish-red colour of kolanuts.

A few days before the court hearing, the siblings had held a family meeting with their dissenting brother in what was supposed to be a last-ditch effort to resolve the case amicably. Ọ̀túnbá watched as the six men pooled their voices against the older brother: No! They did not share his sentiments about preserving the three-story block of flats that had been in the family for longer than any of them had been on earth.

Defeated, the brother—a frail, bone-thin man with more wrinkles than smooth skin—seemed like he might start crying and he turned to his lawyer for help. But the lawyer merely grunted and continued unravelling the knots in his beard. Ọ̀túnbá knew the other lawyer the way people in an industry know their competitors so he would not have been surprised to

learn that the developer, who wanted to buy the land on which the house stood, and who had offered the six siblings enough money to tarnish their sense of respect for age, had also cut a deal with their brother's lawyer. The application which the lawyer prepared on behalf his client was, at best, a compilation of watery legal arguments and a succinct illustration of the many ways to mar the rules of English grammar.

As he headed to court that morning, Ọ̀túnba ran through his arguments. The art of oral argument was a skill he had long mastered and it always set him apart from other lawyers, even fellow Senior Advocates. He knew judges enjoyed watching him perform and had learnt from a court registrar, who became talkative after receiving a "Christmas present" a few years ago, that judges fought to have his cases assigned to their court so they could experience the thrill of seeing him in action. Public speaking was a thing of instinct to him. He led the debate team in both primary and secondary school and was the president of the moot society as an undergraduate law student at the University of Ìbàdàn. However, it was the late Chief Ọ̀láfáwálé Ọ̀láfáńsílé, also a Senior Advocate, that had taught Ọ̀túnba how to perform for a court: where to pause, when to sigh, how to raise his voice in anger when he sensed a witness wasn't being truthful and when to lower it in deference to the judge.

Ọ̀túnba had worked with Chief for eight years before setting up his own practice. In the first half of those eight years, Chief had taken a sledgehammer to the confidence of the brilliant former president of the moot team. In those first four years Ọ̀túnba became a whimpering thing, a broken lawyer who stuttered when he had to answer questions and who preferred the obscurity of the research desk to the glory of courtroom advocacy. Then, Chief had gathered the pieces and started the process of molding him into a litigator fit for the Nigerian

courts. By the time he left Chief, Ọ̀túnba was back to accepting invitations to train moot court participants across the country and was appointed a patron of the moot society of his alma mater. So, while Ọ̀túnba resented the process that made him, he also respected it. Years after, during an interview for a profile in the University of Ìbàdàn law students' magazine, he was asked how he developed his grit as a litigator. He answered, "Tough love. A firm hand and a willingness to learn opens up the mind."

Of the many perks of being a Senior Advocate, Ọ̀túnba enjoyed the privilege of attending court proceedings with a posse of junior associates to service his every need. On this day, the responsibility was Jíbóyè's. The task was clear: employ such foresight as came close to mind-reading and provide any documents—law reports, court processes, or evidence—that would support Ọ̀túnba's argument to the judge, as argument was being made. It had been that way since Jíbóyè started working with Blake Partners LP four years earlier, after he graduated from the Nigerian Law School with a First-Class degree, overall best in his set, and best student in three of the five subjects the law school offered.

He sat in the second row, a hidden figure in Ọ̀túnba's shadow, and looked even more diminished stooped over a pile of books and files. He waited for his next prompt and whispered along as Ọ̀túnba spoke: "No cognizable foundation upon which to maintain the defendant's application before the Court...", "Not unlike a hapless stable boy who put a cart before the horse...", "...surely Rome cannot burn while Cicero watches."

Jíbóyè liked the one about Cicero watching and Rome burning, and was especially proud of himself for having crafting the analogy, the point being that not selling exposed the property, which was residential, to compulsory acquisition by the state government in its unofficial scheme to make the

area a purely commercial district. The phrase also served as a mental marker in the fifty-paged argument he spent two weeks drafting and a full day explaining to Òtúnba. If they were already at the Cicero bit, then they would soon get to the part where the Supreme Court had once refused to grant an application like the one the defendant was requesting. Jíbóyè turned to the stack of books in front of him to search out the Law Report containing the Supreme Court decision because he knew Òtúnba would want to read directly from the judgement text.

As he searched through the pile of books, he felt his phone vibrate against his chest. He would have ignored the notification however, around him phone screens lit up and several devices buzzed so he stopped searching and reached beyond the pleated layers of his barristers-gown for his phone nestled inside his suit jacket. A text message from “The yNBA”. He read quickly then joined the other young lawyers in Court who were, through slight change in countenance, all asking one question: “*Did you also receive what I just received?*” More slight movements—brief nods, tightened jaws, controlled blinks—replied: “*yes*”.

Without pausing speech or breaking attention from the judge, Òtúnba, reached behind, fingers pointed backwards expecting to receive a law report. It should have been funny, a grown man with his hand stretched as though to imitate a tail, but there was something about the way Jíbóyè tucked his phone away and resumed searching the pile of books that sucked humor out of the scene, a tangible fear that forestalled laughter.

Junior associates who had to accompany Òtúnba to court quickly learnt to make a companion of fear. The first instruction new members of Blake Partners LP received, even before they were assigned desks was, “When you are in court with Òtúnba, you must never delay in providing what he needs.” There was, in solemnity that cloaked the advice, a conjuring of the image of

Moses repeating God’s commandments to the people of Israel; a warning that turned potential disobedience into a dangerous thing.

So, Ọtúnbá’s lawyers developed schemes to make them adept at pre-empting his arguments and were ready to hand over documents as soon as prompted. Occasionally though, something went wrong and a lawyer delayed, perhaps stalled telepathy. Or worse, the document required would be missing, lost or left behind in the office. In those instances, all lawyers present, however connected or removed from fault, were liable to punishment. “Punishment” could be anything from creatively crafted insults hurled against the offenders—no matter if court proceedings were still ongoing—to suspension from work without pay. Once, Ọtúnba forced a junior lawyer to strip off his wig and gown in court, an ordeal akin to being stripped naked in public, before sending the disgraced man to stand outside the court, in the sun, till proceedings were over. The offence? The new lawyer forgot to put his phone on silent mode and the device had rung out while the court was in session.

However, and Ọtúnba made a point of talking about this often, Blake Partners LP had never fired a lawyer since the firm was founded. It was as though Ọtúnba reserved that punishment exclusively for non-legal staff, whom he fired if they as little as popped their chewing gum too loud or came to work with crooked gators on their trousers. It was of no matter to him that his junior lawyers resigned often, creating a monthly turnover of new faces, and that Jíbóye, with only four years at the firm, was his longest-serving employee.

When the judgment text was not immediately placed into his back-stretched hand, Ọtúnba issued a second prompt—several sharp flicks of the wrist—still, nothing. So, he suspended his exhortation of the court—*one second my Lord*—but as he

turned around, folding his wide-eyed earnestness into a frown of irritation, Jíboýe found the Law Report—a thick, hard-backed volume, navy blue except for the gold letterings on the front cover and spine that read,“(1991) Nigerian Weekly Law Report Volume 1”.

Thing is, Òtúnba was unaware The yNBA had just sent out “*Code: Article 9 Review*” and that just beneath the code was indication that his conduct towards juniors in his firm was up for review by vote cast. The accompanying bliss to this ignorance was why he, irritated at what he considered slow instincts, did not restrain himself from calling Jíboýe an “Òpònú” as he collected the book. The insult was issued straight, lips curved downwards, a broad “n”, as though the idiocy were a proven, scientific fact.

Jíboýe showed no visible indication he had heard the insult. However, all around him, lawyers narrowed their eyes. Some followed narrowed eyes with a head shake, others, a shoulder shimmy: *Òtúnba had sealed his fate, and on Friday no one would speak in his defence.*



Friday.

The closest any president had come to exercising “Article 9” powers to review the conduct of business in a law firm was at the inception of the yNBA, nearly eight years ago, under Dr Ayò Sótádé’s tenure. Unfortunately, Dr Sótádé had been unable to secure the sixty percent vote required to put Doctor Emeka Jidenna, Managing Partner of the then leading Corporate Commercial law firm, Hirst LP, out of business. As he addressed the members after the vote-cast, Dr Sótádé did not hide his disbelief that he had failed to secure what he referred to as a *mere* sixty percent. When the members of his executive team

pointed out the cup-half-full-victory in the fifty-eight percent of the members that had voted in favour of the motion, Dr Sótádé countered, “But forty-two percent voted in favor of that mad man!”

Dr Sótádé resigned from office a few months after the loss, without completing his two-year tenure, and the whispers that followed indicated that many thought him misguided for his faith that young lawyers would vote against a steady salary when no alternatives were proposed. Délé Adéşokàn, who had served as vice-president to Dr. Sótádé was then sworn in as president. He too tried to exercise Article 9 powers against Chief Ọlówálé Ọláníşilé whose litigation practice was more famous for its ill-treatment of lawyers than its courtroom victories. Délé was even less successful with eighteen percent of the votes in his favor. Successive presidents learned to leave the matter alone. Until President Léye Àdàmú, armed with a thick dossier of complaints, called for a vote against Blake Partners LP and Ọtúnba Yẹmí Carrington.



The solemn, silent room swelled with expectation as the two vice presidents emerged from the voting room—a corner of the wide hall shrouded from view with black velvet curtains. Each man was carrying a custom ballot box; the flat tops had round holes instead of a slits. Both boxes were wrapped in black velvet that had the crimson yNBA logo—a hand gripping another in a handshake gone past the elbow—scattered around it. One of the boxes was labelled “Yes” and the other, “No”. The vice presidents placed each box on a stool in front of the hall and returned to their seats, handing a figurative baton to the president. As soon as both vice presidents were seated, Leye, a thickset, balding

man with a round face and full cheeks, stood and faced his members.

“And now, for the unveiling of the boxes.” He pointed at the large cubes of black velvet in front of him. “I know it is customary among Nigerians that one gives a lengthy speech before performing any action, especially one as significant as this. But we are not average Nigerians. We are not even average lawyers. We are the Y-N-B-A. With your votes, the Y-N-B-A has spoken and my only duty here today is to act on your votes, your instructions. I will now unveil the boxes and count the votes.”

He reached into his pocket then pulled out his hand and raised it high above his head to show the audience a red, plastic, key-holder bearing two brass keys on the ring. One key was labelled “Yes”, the other “No. He lowered his hand, considered both keys and selected the one labelled “No”. He bent over the corresponding box, fiddled with a padlock securing an edge, and stripped off the covering.

The applause started even before the president straightened himself. Now stripped, the clear glass box told the room what they needed to know: only two lawyers of the seven hundred and sixty-two members present had indicated their dissent to the motion by placing their membership ring in the “No” box. The president had secured the required number of votes.

President Léye allowed the applause a few seconds. His small eyes roamed the room but his face betrayed no emotions. Then he called the house to order.

“We still have to unveil the other box and count the votes. Let us not get ahead of ourselves, please.”

Gradually, the applause died and the president stripped the second box of its covering. This time, it was a standing ovation. The edges of the president’s lips twitched with a smile. The “Yes” box was nearly filled with bronze membership rings.

The excitement ran free from rein for a few minutes. The young lawyers reached out, around, and across for high-fives and back-slaps. Jíbóyè who was sitting in the right-hand corner of the room pulled his girlfriend, Aisha, into a hug. He felt in his chest the relief of a man broken free from the power of an ominous presence that had trailed him, even while he slept, for four years.

Again the president called for order, “Lawyers! Please. We are not the Nigerian senate. We have to do things properly. Let us count the votes and no more outbursts please.”

The applause stopped.



The fluorescent lights of the hall blinked three times signaling to members that they had five minutes to leave the buffet table and return to their seats for The Ceremony. For the second time that evening, the president stood at the podium. With the earlier tension dissolved into anticipation, it was easy to focus on the president’s solid frame. The room fastened to him, congregants to their messiah. He fixed the bottom of the two buttons on his plaid jacket before he boomed into the expectant silence.

“I imagine that all our members have received their membership rings back?”

He paused to allow the registrar record the members’ murmurs of assent.

“Good.” He shifted from the podium to signal the end of protocol. “In that case, let us get along with the business of the day. I want to start off by thanking all of you for coming out on such short notice for this agenda. Of our seven hundred and eighty-five members, seven hundred and sixty-two are present. And I have it on good authority that many of you travelled in from different parts of the world for this purpose. On behalf of

the Association, I thank you. I also thank you for R-S-V-Ping to allow us adequately plan the logistics for such a huge gathering.”

He acknowledged the courteous round of applause, then he continued,

“As you all know, the primary, indeed, only purpose of this association is to cater for the welfare of young lawyers. The Young Nigerian Bar Association is a reaction to the shortcomings of the Nigerian Bar Association in protecting the interest of the younger members of this profession. About two months ago, you all voted me into power to carry on this mandate created eight years ago. And I am dedicated to ensuring that the lot of young lawyers is bettered in my tenure. This is not a promise or a goal. It is a fact.”

Although a few lawyers started clapping again, the president continued without breaking. “Under Article 9 sub 2 of the Constitution of this Association, the president has the power to call into question the conditions of work in any law office or chamber or organisation. And if the employers in such offices or organisations are found wanting, then the president may, after securing at least sixty percent of the votes of the members of the Y-N-B-A present at the time of voting, recall all the members of the Association working in such offices or organisation and place the office or organisation in the Association’s Blacklist. Let me remind you that where an organisation or office has been placed in the Blacklist, it means no member of this Association will be permitted to take up employment or in any way whatsoever, derive income through the practice of the law, from this organisation.

“A month ago, the executives of this Association sat and agreed to circulate a motion to exercise the president’s powers in Article 9 Sub 2 with respect to Blake Partners LP. The record of the Association is filled with several petitions against the Senior

Partner, Ọ̀túnbá Yẹmí Carrington, and the management of Blake Partners regarding the dehumanizing and unacceptable work conditions in the firm. Two days ago, I sent out the call for votes and just an hour ago all of you present voted on the motion and your decision was near unanimous.”

The president took in a deep breath before he continued speaking:

“As president, I hereby exercise the powers vested in me under Article 9 sub 2 of the Constitution of the Association and decree that no member of this Association shall work with Blake Partners LP. Any member of the Association working with the firm shall tender his resignation before Monday and cease to work or in any way associate with the firm. Blake Partners is hereby placed on the Blacklist of this Association until such a time that the Association passes a vote to delist it.”

The entire hall stood in applause and the president watched, his lips stretched wide at having caused such joy. In his corner of the hall, Jíbóyè smiled at Aisha and she smiled back, showing straight, white teeth that had a delicate gap in the middle of the top row. At his full height, and because he was standing beside the rather petite Aisha, and particularly because he was not cowering in Ọ̀túnbá’s presence, Jíbóyè cut the image of a tall but delicate sapling that, if well-tended, might grow into a sturdy palm tree. The couple hugged. Aisha was about to say something when the president continued speaking. Still standing, they turned their attention to him.

“The executives of the Association have also agreed to make some modifications to the provisions of Article 9. We have decided that all members of the Association who, by reason of this decree, have to turn in their resignation shall receive compensation from the Association matching up to one hundred per cent of their current remuneration from Blake Partners LP.”

The applause quietened to hushed whispers and the members resumed their seats.

“Members so affected shall be entitled to receive compensation for a period of one year or until such a time that the member secures new, suitable, employment, whichever comes first. Where a member, after exhausting his best endeavor is unable to secure employment after one year, he shall be entitled to use the facilities of the Association’s pool office under an associate-ship structure of law practice and under such terms as may be subsequently negotiated. Any member of this Association that fails to abide by this decree shall forfeit his membership automatically unless and until just cause can be furnished as to why membership should not be forfeited.”

Jíbóyè and Aisha joined the other members in another standing ovation as the president left the podium. They held hands as the mass of lawyers made their way to the door. The president’s words meant more to them than it meant to the bodies that pressed against them on all sides, jostling to leave the hall. They claimed it as a personal victory. They didn’t speak; no words could express their hearts. So, they just kept their fingers intertwined and allowed the crowd push them towards the exit.

On his part, Jíbóyè began debating with himself on how best to tender his resignation: by email, formal letter, phone call, or whether to pay the courtesy at all. The sound of his name ringing out interrupted his thoughts. He stopped walking and turned in the direction of the voice. Two men were waving at him. He nodded at them before turning to Aisha.

“I’ll meet you at the car,” she said, smiling. She squeezed his hand before continuing towards the exit.

Jíbóyè watched to be sure she got out safely before he turned back and headed towards the men, both founding members, one

of them a former president of the yNBA, who had called out to him.

“Mr Adéşokàn, Mr Martins,” Jíboyè greeted when he reached them.

“Just call me Délé.” The first man smiled and offered his hand. He was wearing a white shirt, open at the collar with the sleeves rolled up. He had the look of a man who was always busy. His slender face was beginning to show age and smile lines sagged the corners of his mouth. Jíboyè placed him in his late thirties or early forties, at least less than forty-five since it was the cut-off age for membership within the yNBA.

“And you can call me Firepè mí,” the other man said extending his hand. He was wearing a navy-blue blazer with a white pocket square over a white shirt, and a pair of grey trousers. His skin, which had the light brown colour of tea brewed with milk, was smooth, as if airbrushed of all blemishes.

“Don’t mind him,” Délé said. “Call him Fireman, everyone does.

Jíboyè had heard of the nickname, it was as famous as the man, but he still turned to Firepè mí to confirm that it was alright before he said, “Fireman.”

“I don’t know if you know us—” Fireman started.

“I do.” Jíboyè smiled. “You are founders of the yNBA and senior partners of Cart and Wright LP. President Léye is also a partner. Your firm has a wonderful reputation among young lawyers,” he added.

“Thank you for saying that.” Délé smiled. “And yes, we are *co*-founders of the Y-N-B-A. We were many that came together to launch this organisation. Léye, or as you call him, President Léye, was also part of us too. And yes, he is also a partner with Cart and Wright LP. But beyond Y-N-B-A and Cart and Wright, I also worked with Ọtúnba, when he was a young lawyer with

Chief Ọláńsílé. He left about a month after I joined Chief's firm so we didn't work together for long. But it was still something. And I might be able to help if you have some questions."

"And me," Fireman added. "Even though I never dealt with Ọ̀túnba, the battle I fought was much tougher. I'm sure you've heard about how the Y-N-B-A came to be. The whole thing with Doctor Emeka Jidenna? That was my fight."

Délé turned to Fireman, eyes narrowed, "Ọ̀gá, calm down. Doctor was everyone's fight. Everyone in the Y-N-B-A came together."

"But it was only my name listed as Plaintiff on those court papers—" Fireman countered.

"Okay. We've heard. You fought alone." Délé cut him off and turned back to Jíbóyè. "Well, Jíbóyè I'm just here to tell you we are available to help if you think you might need it. However, if you want to fight alone like Fireman here, it's up to you."

"I'd appreciate any help I can get," Jíbóyè said and smiled at Fireman because he sensed in jokes, an edginess that was grounded in the history of the two men. It seemed important that he make clear that he wasn't, by accepting Délé's offer, taking sides against Fireman.

The men offered him their business cards and he took them. More handshakes and the three parted ways.



In another world, barely twenty minutes from the hotel where members of the yNBA had cast their vote, Ọ̀túnba Yẹmí Carrington was driving into his home thinking of Christie, his young wife, who'd texted to say she was waiting up for him.