

Copyrighted Material

The chaos amongst the people of the earth
threatens to destabilise our universe

J. N. Fox

A black silhouette of a person stands in a field of large, ancient stone structures under a clear blue sky. The person is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, facing right. The stone structures are massive, rectangular blocks of weathered stone, some standing upright and others stacked horizontally. The ground is covered in green grass. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

Three
Voices

The Battle of Ignorance

Three Voices

J. N. FOX



Raguel Publishing House
Registered Office
85 Great Portland Street, First Floor
London W1W 7LT

First published in the UK in 2023 by Raguel Publishing

Copyright © J. N. Fox, 2023

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, copied, distributed or adapted in any way, with the exception of certain activities permitted by applicable copyright laws, such as brief quotations in the context of a review or academic work. For permission to publish, distribute, or otherwise reproduce this work, apply to the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction.
Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-7393217-0-3

Also available as an ebook

PART 1

Before Joshua
met Jonathan

BENJAMIN

A woman stood on the riverbank. To the left and right of her the water was still, as if it held no past and had no future, yet straight ahead it was moving like the continuity of life.

On that July morning the world was floating by. The eights boats, the cyclists, the jaunty joggers, the strident strollers. She raised her hand to wave at them. They waved back, smiling, making her smile; the river brought out the best in people.

Behind her was a charming scene: a country house with newly mown lawns; her son playing Mozart on the upright piano in the hall; her daughter laughing, swinging on her swing in the rose garden. Turning, she watched a darkly handsome man walking towards her carrying a drink.

But things were not what they seemed. It was all ballast against the bigotry, which lurked at the margins of her meticulously created heaven.

It would be sunny for Lucille's sixtieth birthday party. Delsea revelled in the sunshine, acknowledging for once that luck was on their side. It had been raining earlier, a sort of steamy rain, and the thought of them all cooped up in Lucille's parlour with the children running wild and no space to play was not her idea of fun. This was to be Lucille's present – to have her children and grandchildren around her making noise. Touching Michael's hand lightly, she took her drink, fetched their daughter and followed him back to the house.

'What else?' he said once inside. She watched him closely, this man, her husband. There was a solidity about him, which she'd always loved. He was a tower of strength. What would she do without him?

'The rice,' she said.

‘The rice is burnt.’

‘It’s only burnt on the bottom. You know how Marcus likes burnt rice.’

‘Josh, will you stop that. We’re going,’ Michael shouted. Josh, reluctantly crashing the piano keys, insisted that he was ready. He was going just as he was. He wasn’t even going to wash; what was the point? He thumped up the stairs in his boots, which he knew he wasn’t supposed to wear in the house. He thought it was going to be boring. He hated going to Chippenham. He was reminded of Jonathan Ainsley, his biological father. Michael was his dad. How he hated being related to that posh git.

‘How many times have I told you not to wear those boots in the house!’ Michael called after Josh.

‘Leave him,’ Delsea said, ever ready to keep the peace between adopted father and son. Amy would not be helped into her car seat. ‘My, do it?’ she said. She was one determined child.

As Michael sped southwest, Delsea’s mind also turned to Jonathan. Like Josh, she too could not go to Chippenham without thinking of him. She had been six years old when she met him. When she heard that the Ainsleys were back, she was consumed with curiosity about the type of people who lived in such a palatial house. Aldbourne Court, a stately home housing one of the nation’s most prized art collections, was open to the public. She had long ago found ways of sneaking into the grounds. Hidden away from the public was a picturesque lake, complete with a jetty and small boat. It was there, hidden by rushes, that she liked to curl up with a book and seek refuge from the outside world. Tired of the arguments at home and the taunts of her companions, she would go down to the lake where it was so perfectly quiet that she could even hear the water ripple.

One day she was feeling incredibly sad. There was a flash of light, a draught of wind. A presence landed beside her on the water. There were beautiful colours. She sensed someone – a glimmering shape.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘An angel, with a message for you.’ She thought she must have invented a companion to keep her company. Just in case she hadn’t imagined it, she asked out loud, ‘So what is the message?’

‘Write down your feelings.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘Not if you don’t want to. Tell no one except the golden boy.’ She started to write how she felt, and it seemed to help.

She’d seen the Ainsley’s at St. Bartholomew’s, the parish church, which had once belonged to the Aldbourne Court estate. Watching the family as they filed into their own pew with its faded kneelers embroidered with the Ainsley coat of arms, she hadn’t liked the look of them. They reminded her of the stiff figures she had seen at Madame Tussauds on a school trip.

She had heard that there was a boy, Jonathan, two years older than her, though she hadn’t seen him yet. As she readied herself for church that Sunday all those years ago, she wondered whether he’d be there. The Ainsley’s were several rows in front. If she remained standing, she could get a good look. She felt a sharp pinch on her meagre arm. This was Lucille’s way of saying kneel down. Squeezed into the tiny space between her parents, trying to peer above the pew in front of her, she could see that the boy had blonde, honey-coloured hair. Then it clicked: he was the golden boy. A haze of late summer sun beaming through the stained-glass window heightened the effect. He was like an angel from her school play. Viciously she hoped that all angels weren’t like him, if they were, she wouldn’t be welcome in heaven. As they were leaving the church the vicar called to Lucille. ‘Mrs Johnson, meet Lady Ainsley.’ Delsea had watched this ritual the previous two Sundays. It was their turn, last and least. The golden boy smiled. At first, she thought he was looking at someone else. Tugging one of her many plaits she moved closer. He was about to say something when his mother drew him back. Then the moment was gone, and the Ainsleys moved on.

She’d had a terrible day. Her parents had fought all night. Both wounded, neither was speaking to the other. Later she was whispering in class when the teacher singled her out, stood her on her desk and slapped the back of her legs with her hand to make an example of her. There had been uproar and laughter. She’d felt humiliated. From the back of the classroom, she couldn’t read the whiteboard, that was the reason she couldn’t pay attention. And besides, there was nothing to interest her. If she knew the answer to a question and put her hand up, she was always ignored. The

teacher looked at her superciliously as if to say: 'Don't you know you are not allowed to answer questions? You cannot be seen to be clever.'

Then at lunchtime she wasn't allowed to eat with her form. One of the dinner ladies kept sending her to the back of the queue every time she got to the front. She had to wait until every child in the school had been served before it was her turn. That was resolved by Lucille writing a letter to the unnamed dinner lady, care of the headmaster, addressed to Mrs Enoch Powell.

She did have one friendly teacher at the school who taught maths. Once when she was crying, he told her that there were more people in the world like her than like him. 'Mark my words,' he had said. 'The world is getting smaller and one day we will know what it is to be treated like the minority.' Delsea hadn't understood what he meant, but she remembered the words and felt their kindness.

In times of trouble the lake had called to Delsea in a small voice. It was as if someone very gentle and kind was saying: Peace awaits you, come. She had just settled in the boat and was about to set it adrift when the golden boy appeared. 'I say, don't you know this is private property? Didn't you see the signs?'

Of course, she'd seen the signs. She wasn't blind. She was simply fed up with other people's rules. She was tired of struggling against an enemy that was sometimes so subtle it was like fighting off feathers. Then the golden boy visibly relaxed.

'I'm Jonathan Ainsley,' he called.

'I know. Church, remember? Where have you been?'

'Africa, Nigeria.'

'Well?'

Jonathan realised he was still standing on the bank. 'Do you mind if I get in?'

'It's your boat.' The tethered boat strained gently on its rope. 'Tell me about Africa. Were the people kind to you?'

Delsea smoothed her seersucker dress. Jonathan took an instant liking to her. She had coloured ribbons dangling from the ends of her plaits. They fluttered in the breeze. 'Most of the time.' But he didn't want to talk about Africa. The thought of Nigeria made him cry. Despite the beautiful surroundings of Aldbourne Court he was lonely. The sunshine seemed to beckon from the rich upholstery,

conjuring up Africa and the colourful people he'd left behind. And he was always cold. The sun in England seemed so weak.

'People here think I'm stupid,' Delsea said. It came out in a sigh, as if she was letting go of some of the pain she felt. To a small number of villagers, she was not a person. She was a novelty, an object of curiosity, an object of hatred – and even an object of art to one local artist. But equally she didn't want to dwell on Corsham. She didn't want to compound the hurt, which filled up her eyes. She found Jonathan intriguing. He was dressed like an adult. She wanted to touch him to see if he was real. He was leaning forward and she accidentally felt his hair. It felt smooth, like silk. He jerked away. People were forever feeling or patting her hair as if she were a dog. She couldn't abide people touching her hair. It would be so nice to have a friend, she thought. She didn't know that Jonathan was thinking the same thing. 'Don't you think it's strange that you lived in Africa, while I live here?'

Someone was calling him. Typical, thought Jonathan. 'I'd better go.' 'What time is it?'

He looked at his watch, 'Ten to five.'

'Raas. I've got to go to tea with the Greens.'

'Raas?'

'I know a lot of rude words in Jamaican,' Delsea said, smiling precociously.

'Who are the Greens?'

'Mom cleans for them. They are a nosy family and all the children have ginger hair. Mom thinks it's important for me to go. Their mum thinks I'm some kind of experiment. It's as though she expects me to explode or something.'

'Why do you go then?'

'Well, it isn't that bad. They've got horses. I love horses.' Animals were docile and self-contained.

'Will you come again?'

'Whenever,' Delsea said, smiling. Jonathan didn't ask stupid questions, like when would that be. Time was immaterial back home. It would be tomorrow, next week, whenever.

Delsea, Michael and the children were the first to arrive at her mom's. Lucille was still in her housecoat. The grey wig she wore to hide the scar on her head was slightly askew, showing the shiny

puckered skin that had been transferred from her thigh to replace the patch where the benign tumour was removed. Sliding past Delsea she beamed at Michael.

‘How you doing, Mom?’ Michael said, kissing her.

‘Nat so bad.’

Just then Delsea’s brother Marcus arrived with Emma, his new wife – a softly spoken blonde who was proudly clutching their baby, Nico, as if to say isn’t he cute. Marcus’s women were always blonde and leggy. None of the family held out much hope for this new relationship, as Marcus changed women more often than he changed cars, and Emma had already committed the cardinal sin by having Nico. Marcus, the big man, was turned off by children and domesticity cramping his style. But Emma didn’t know that – yet.

Lucille sighed. There were always new women to get to know. Still, she’d try for Marcus’s sake – a mother’s tender care towards the child she bore could never cease. She’d love Emma just a little bit; inch by inch, just like she’d taught her children, as her mother had taught her, and her mother before that. Inch by inch, then when things go wrong you still had a little love left to give.

A further two exes who still doted on Marcus dropped off grandchildren for Lucille to dote on. The women didn’t stay too long, they were offended by Emma, the doer of African Caribbean things. She might just succeed where they had failed, with her provocative youth, her boldness and her as yet untapped ability to love inch by inch. Now they were making noise Lucille was happy. She made herself comfortable in her favourite chair with a glass of sweet sherry and Nico on her lap. She held him high in the air. He dribbled clear spit in her face. ‘See how him fat.’ She loved children to be fat. Thinness was a sign of poverty. Michael rolled a joint. Delsea wished that he wouldn’t.

‘Could I have a little of that for my pipe?’ Lucille asked. She couldn’t remember when she’d last had ganga. Not these past few years; not since Delsea and Michael’s wedding, in fact. Of course, Ben had been there then. Ben, from whom she’d expected the most opposition, had bowed to the inevitable. Putting aside his old agitations Ben had taken pains to know Michael. Ben had been nervous. Lucille remembered him cramped and diminished, rolling a joint. He’d been up half the night smoking with Michael, listening to blues and drinking Jamaican overproof rum.

They were all there making noise; all except Ben. Delsea too felt his absence. 'Mom. Do you want Ben?'

'Wat I warnt wid dat man?' Delsea knew that this meant that she wanted him. 'Go get Ben, Michael.' Michael was reluctant: he was having a good time, he was winding down from the working week, easing into his stride. 'Please.' Delsea begged her husband. 'If you go, he'll come. If Marcus goes, he'll argue.' Michael couldn't argue with that. Ben lived in Corsham, the next town. Living apart from Lucille made little sense to him. But Lucille had never put his needs first. She was a woman who didn't understand that her children were not her companions.

Ben wasn't expecting anyone, least of all his son-in-law, and he was damned if he was going to be nice to anyone who was interrupting his cricket on a Sunday afternoon. Michael rocked on his heels diplomatically, trying to explain the reason for his visit. This irritated Ben. As if good old Ben didn't have anything better to do than wait to be summoned by her majesty. 'Mi to leave mi dinna fi dat badmind woman. Twenty-five years I live wid dat woman.'

Ben's nickname for Lucille was MisCam, on account of the fact that in Jamaica she had owned a dressmaking shop specialising in wedding dresses, and imported silk Cami knickers from Paris for her brides. She always wore them herself. She'd made it quite clear that he was not good enough for her or their children, or the white man who was bay-faced enough to be standing in his house, cajoling him to attend his own wife's birthday party.

On the doorstep, little by little, Ben scraped the hair from the cow foot he was preparing for his dinner. He never failed to brandish the knife in Michael's direction to ram home a point. In calmer moments Michael watched him clean it against some newspaper, on which a thick paste of hair and excrement was forming, until, naked, the cow foot lay at his feet, pink, fleshy and ready to cook. Michael was more than a little wary of Ben, with his rough ways, sudden outbursts and small kindnesses.

'Ever try cow foot. Mek yu strang like ion.' Ben was annoyed by the cowardly way in which Michael was observing him. It was as though he expected him to turn psychotic and knife him for no good reason other than he had nothing better to do. 'A weh yu a look pan? Chuh.' Ben kissed his teeth. A hissing sound came from the kitchen,

the sound of water boiling over. 'Weh yu nuh turn di gas down man. Mek yusef useful.' Michael went into the dismal kitchen and turned the gas down under the pot of water, while Ben threw the stinking newspaper onto the compost heap. Michael waited for Ben to finish washing the cow foot in the Belfast sink.

'It would mean so much to her. She's sixty today.'

'I know dat, don't I. Why we nu live as man and wife? Arske yusef dat.'

It wasn't a conundrum, but Michael thought of joking to relieve the tension. But he didn't joke. He was sensible enough to restrain himself. He knew Ben would get mad. Ben didn't like people to joke at his expense.

Instead, Michael replied, 'Cos she badmind?'

'Dats right. She badmind.'

'Just this once.'

'And why she nu arske me herself. A wey she a sen yu fa? Dem tink di sun so shine out a yu dat me nu gwain refuse yu. A weh kind a pussy logic dat?' But Ben was grinning. His single gold tooth winked. Yu strike a hard bargain man. I like dat.'

In no time at all Ben came downstairs in his best church suit, a charcoal grey three piece. 'Yu nu dress man.'

Michael was wearing black jeans and a blue linen shirt, which Delsea said matched the colour of his eyes. 'No. Not today.'

'Yu nu ha no style man.' Prising open a drawer Ben pulled out a gold watch: the thick chain he fastened through a buttonhole, the watch he tucked into the waistcoat pocket. The watch was his retirement present from the rubber factory in Melksham. Thirty years he'd spent in that Godforsaken hole. Thirty years stripped raw born naked, shovelling coal, frying at the furnace. The beads of sweat were thick like grease and not one of the other men would hand him a glass of water. They called to him, usually to make him the butt of some joke. 'Hey Ben?' Then it would start. He never paid them malata backside hole, no mind. Their mouths spouted more rubbish than a sick Baccra's arse. They couldn't see the whole person. He could hardly see them, for his eyes were surrounded by rubber floaters like raining black rain. They were faceless anyway, their heads on backwards like duppy. He could still smell the stench of rubber and feel the acrid smoke clawing at the back of his throat. What

for? What did he have to show for the sweat he'd poured into this country? No more than he'd had back home in Jamaica: a run-down cottage on a piece of land. Except this cottage belonged to the council. He didn't even have the sunshine. The sun was not hot enough to burn.

Jonathan and Delsea completed each other
day and night, dark and light

The novel leads the reader to understand the
microaggressions in British life that can be so painful.

J. N. Fox does an incredible job with the pacing. In
places it is stunning.

