IT TAKES A WOMAN

A LIFE SHAPED BY HERITAGE, LEADERSHIP
AND THE WOMEN WHO DEFINED HOPE

NANA KONADU AGYEMAN-RAWLINGS

Former First Lady of the Republic of Ghana

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Mɛnkatakyie etwa sa kɔ to kro no,
Na mmaa awo ama kro no ase adore.
– Akan Proverb

The mighty man will fight for a land,
Yet the woman births its strength and future.

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing could have prepared a young woman for the tumultuous years to come in the late 1970's Ghana, an era when every moment seemed uniquely important to the strides the country was taking away from the shadows of its pre-independence years. There were spells of uncertainty in a country that was quickly changing, and a people hungry for economic stability and social development. In the dizzying pace in search of progress, women had an incredibly significant role in society. They were the mothers and daughters standing alongside the men who stood at the forefront, while having to fight through the restrained expectations that culture placed on them.

At a very young age, Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, whose name *Konadu* means "fight 'til the end," learned a striking truth that was to shape the rest of her life. The Asantehene (King of Ashanti) was the preeminent figure of the Ashanti and wielded tremendous influence over the destiny of the empire and his people, yet, as tradition would have it, it took a woman—the queen mother—to nurture his ascent to power.

Named after the valiant Ashanti Queen Mother, Nana Konadu Yiadom II, who ruled the Ashanti kingdom in the absence of the exiled Asantehene Nana Agyeman Prempeh I in 1896, Agyeman-Rawlings' journey has been one with stunning subplots in a country where every man, woman, and child could find hope of a future. The lives of the women, and indeed, the men, who mentored her along the way became reminders of the urgency of service to the nation, despite the long and undefined road ahead.

It Takes a Woman retraces the early life of Agyeman-Rawlings who rose to prominence and served as the First Lady of the Republic of

Ghana (1982-2000). She redefined the privilege of serving a nation and sought every platform to champion the causes of underserved citizenry and women. While her husband, former President Jerry John Rawlings embarked on a relentless pursuit of transforming Ghana into a model of African democracy, Agyeman-Rawlings founded the 31st December Women's Movement, an organisation which played a pivotal role in the empowerment of women, and in addressing issues of systemic gender inequality, not only in Ghana but across the African region.

The narrative captures the family history of a spirited little girl, and as she walks us through the refreshingly detailed scenes from her childhood, we are transported to a hopeful and quintessential Ghana, where a sense of national pride resounded powerfully at the time of independence. But as she recalls Ghana's struggles post-independence, we are also confronted face to face with her juxtaposed emotions of elation and frustration, hurt and joy, certainty and dread. She was not to know that her personal life being upended early one morning in 1979 would also become a turning point in the nation's history and thrust her into the glare of international publicity.

Born in an era when women were overtly marginalised, Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings' strong relationship with her father, mother and family elders formed the core of much of her formative years. Fortified by her unique family history, she was raised never to accept the notion that "***there were some things she could not do, simply because she was a woman.***"

Agyeman-Rawlings' values, outlook and indeed, life itself, have been sculpted by the nurturing hands of strong female leaders in her life, from her grandmothers, her mother, to sisters and mentors. Her father stands tall as the patriarchal inspiration throughout her life whose voice echoed that of the women who encouraged her to fulfil her potential. Her journey of political activism and women's empowerment is etched into a broader narrative of Ghana's political history and destiny.

It Takes a Woman, written with unflinching candour, is an absorbing portrait of a life devoted to public service and shaped by heritage. Above all, it is an account of resilience. The voices of the women who stood tall will forever inspire Agyeman-Rawlings to stand for many more whose voices may not be loud enough to stand on their own.

CHAPTER ONE

Drifting into Sunset

Accra, Ghana

It was June 4, 1979. Just before dawn that morning I was home in bed, soundly asleep when suddenly, I was awakened by the roaring sound of jet planes and helicopters. They seemed to be hovering directly overhead. Under the spell of overpowering fatigue, I quickly dismissed the oddity of the early morning commotion and drifted back into deep slumber.

I needed the rest.

The sudden flurry of activity following the recent arrest of my husband, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings—a fighter pilot with the Ghana Air Force—had left me feeling physically and mentally spent. With my husband on trial for his life, it felt as though I was already in the midst of a brewing crisis. My only relief was sleep, which for a short time, seemed to allay some of my anxieties. I could not have known that the crisis was just about to escalate.

Around 5:30 that morning, I heard a faint knock on the front door of our two-bedroom flat. "Huh?" I mumbled sleepily, stirring but not waking up. It felt like a dream. The knock grew louder and more forceful – it felt like the door was being pounded. Startled and confused, I forced myself to my feet and grabbed my morning coat but my pace didn't match the persistent hammering, as I wondered irritably who could be knocking at this time of the morning. My sleepy eyes strained

to make out objects in the dark, but the shadows seemed impenetrable. As I inched closer to the door, groping about with one hand, the other clutching a table, then a chair, I could hear the utterance of a muffled voice, "Nana, open up!"

I opened the door. I saw the face of a frantic woman who was visibly shaken. It was my mother. My eyes grew wide, and I felt my heart sink. My first thought was, *have they killed him*?

Panting, my mother pushed herself through the door. She spoke quietly and cautioned, "There's something going on. I think it is Jerry. We have to get you and the baby out of here." The baby was our one-year-old daughter, Zanetor, who was our only child at the time.

Knowing Jerry was in prison and due back in court later that same morning, I looked at my mother in disbelief and said, "Maa, you're imagining things."

Impatiently, she snapped back, "*Ohhh no.* You've got to listen…"

Just then, Elizabeth, a lady we both knew and who worked as a journalist at the time, came to my door. She was equally frantic, and blurted, "Jerry has run out of jail."

I stiffened. All I could think was, *I don't believe it!* Just four days ago, he had promised me that he wouldn't do anything outrageous. Then I began to reflect on our last conversation while he was in detention. We were given only a few minutes of privacy during the trial. This was the first time I was allowed contact with him in the two weeks since his arrest.

"Nana," he whispered within the confines of a small room, "these people are not really watching me that well. I could run off if I want."

His eyes were wide and full of hope, searching my face for a reaction.

"No!" I said firmly. I was concerned about his safety and unwilling to encourage any thoughts of escape. "Don't do such a thing. That is probably what they want you to do so they can kill you," I stressed, holding his gaze. "*Don't give them a chance*." Reading the distress in my face, he relaxed his posture and feigned a smile. "Ahhhh, don't worry

CHAPTER FOUR

Politics, Service and Dee

Dr. Nkrumah Calls on Dee

Even though British law rendered Maa and other married women virtually powerless in the Gold Coast, addressing the issue of gender inequality was nowhere close to being a priority in our nation's agenda. A far more pressing issue at the time was the widespread subjugation of the African population under the control of European colonial masters. This was a deep-rooted problem that, at some level, affected every African in the colony.

Under the yoke of colonialism, modern conveniences were provided primarily for the use and comfort of the transplanted European. While African labour was being used to build schools, construct roads and erect 'European' hospitals that served the interests of the British, there was practically no involvement from the African population in the political processes of the country. What's more, black workers were forced to toil night and day just to eke out a living so that whites in the colony could enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the developing world.

It was no wonder British occupants often described the Gold Coast as a 'modern colony' and a 'peace-loving country with extremely sensible people'. The unwillingness of the British to give up any power to the African in the Gold Coast triggered growing unrest and deep anti-British sentiments among the African population. By the 1950s, nationalist

movements were rising in popularity and spreading across the country.

But even as African resistance grew, the white expatriate community continued to doubt the readiness of the Gold Coast to rule itself. I remember my father telling me, "Misewaa, even when African political parties organised marches that passed right by the European Club in Accra, members would raise their voices and go on discussing polo and trade as if the gathering outside was in hopelessly bad taste." He explained British leaders felt little, if any, pressure, to implement any kind of change that would place real power in the hands of the African. As a result, executive power remained firmly in the hands of the British governor, who was neither answerable nor required to take notice of any political activity or advice from the African.

As a young girl during these times, I remember overhearing my parents and their friends as they sat deep into the night engaged in spirited political debates. In the workplace, my father would stay clear of politics, but at home, he would gather together with friends and family and debate passionately about the future of an independent Gold Coast. They would sit on the veranda and sip on Johnnie Walker Black Label scotch or drink Lipton English tea as they discussed and debated the political viewpoints of emerging leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Kofi Busia—both of whom were personal friends of my parents and former schoolmates of my father at Achimota. Now both men were leading political figures, but with fiercely opposing viewpoints about the vision of the country's future development.

"*You wait*!" Dee would say with vigour. "It's only a matter of time! Our people are tired, and the British are scared." Even as a child I could tell by the inflection in my father's voice and the intensity of arguments presented that something big was about to happen in the Gold Coast. Kwame Nkrumah was a man of extraordinary energy, idealism, and patriotism. He had spent a decade in the United States and Europe travelling and studying during the thirties and forties.

While in the US, he struck a friendship with my Uncle Harry Osei

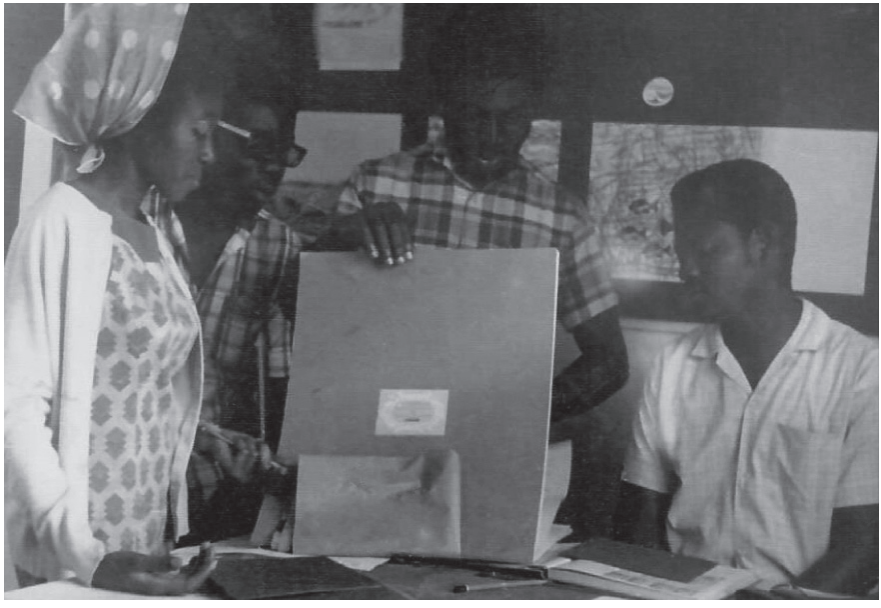
Family after a Sunday service at Ridge Church, Accra.

Back: Nana Konadu, Nana Sefah, Owusu Sekyere, Nana Serwah, Cecilia Antwi (Maa's cousin) and Nana Afriyie
Front: Kwame Otchere, Nana Yaa Ofosuhemaa

Nana Konadu with Kate Narnor as part of the cast in the comic opera with music by Arthur Sullivan and libretto by W. S. Gilbert, Achimota School. 1968

Nana Konadu at Africa Hall, University of Science and Technology.

Nana Konadu with friend Rosemary Baddoo at the University of Science and Technology. 1971



Nana Konadu with colleagues in and the university's graphic design studio. 1971

Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings signs wedding register after ceremony. 1977

Nana Konadu Agyeman with friend Heidi Hubarn in St. Gallen, Switzerland, while on attachment with Jelmoli company.

CHAPTER TEN

The Last Page of History

What We Leave Behind Leads the Way

It had to be a painful journey for my father, seeing all of the promises the country held in its grip slip away one moment after another. It was as if the politics of the day had overtaken the heart and common sense of the men and women who held the reins of power and not even the most obvious turning points eluded them. Gradually, the CPP had been fixated on fulfilling campaign promises to such an extent that any voice that raised a contrary viewpoint to what they were bent on achieving had to fall by the wayside. My father somehow believed that a country could reset its priority and still become the shining example it had set out to become at the dawn of its independence.

By 1965, there were several United States' CIA operatives active in Accra. As Nkrumah prepared for his second state visit to China, this time to try to negotiate an end to the Vietnam War, he composed his last will and testament, which began, "I Kwame Nkrumah of Africa," as if he sensed his own end was near.

The night before his departure, Nkrumah called my father, as he often did, to come to Flagstaff House for a late night meeting. Dee never told me what was discussed that night, but he did remark almost quietly to himself that Nkrumah was a very lonely man. The following morning, on February 22, 1966, my father went to see Nkrumah off at the airport, not knowing that would be the last time he would ever lay

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Barefoot on a Cloud

Love, Marriage and Forever

"What was wrong with the white girl?

What has she done that you have to leave her?" she asked as if I was not in the room.

What I had imagined would be a warm reception had quickly turned awkward, and I felt odd standing in the middle of it. Perhaps it was due to Jerry's Scottish ancestry that his mother had so badly wanted her youngest son to marry a white woman. She made this abundantly clear the day we first met in 1976 when Jerry and I had decided to get married.

Informally, his mother and I had seen each other often and had even greeted one another on several occasions when I was with her son, but this time was different. I had recently returned to Ghana from working in Switzerland when Jerry excitedly took me to his mother's home to formally introduce me and announce our plans to get married.

Madam Agbotui, as she was known, lived in a tidy residential block of flats reserved for government employees in a well-kept area of Accra, Airport Residential. At the time, she had become the Chief Matron at the State House and had a noble history of cooking for every Head of State and President of Ghana from the time of independence, starting with Osagyefo. Her duties now included supervising a team of caterers at the State House.

To my surprise, our visit to her home that day became explosive. Hoping to get his mother's blessings, Jerry's brimming excitement was met by his mother's deep disdain and disapproval. Upon receiving the news, Madam Agbotui switched from speaking English to their native *Ewe* language, perhaps assuming I would not understand. As she spoke to her son, however, and he replied in English, I was able to piece together enough information to know what she was saying.

She asked about a white girl, and blurted out, "What has she done that you have to leave her?"

"I never thought of marrying that girl," Jerry snapped back, his voice rising with each word. "The person I want to marry is right here, the woman I have brought to you. If you do not want to give us your consent or blessings, that's fine. At least we have come to inform you and I am going ahead with my plans," he said defiantly.

His mother was neither moved by his words nor by our announcement. She showed no interest in learning more about me or my family. She simply disapproved of our relationship and our plans for marriage and made no attempt to hide her disappointment. Her wish was for her son to marry a white woman, plain and simple. To her disappointment, I was a dark-skinned black woman, who, unlike her son, was not of mixed race. Even worse, I was not even an *Ewe*, but rather an Ashanti, which did not seem to help the situation. Ironically, she, too, was dark-skinned with a wide nose, full lips, and a deep black complexion, no different from mine.

Taking no part in her son's excitement, she stood her ground and refused to even look at me. Her mulishness infuriated Jerry, and he exploded with anger. This was far from what I had envisioned such a day would be for me. Banging his fist against the wall, he yelled, "What did a white person ever do for you?" I felt I had driven a wedge between the man I fell in love with and his mother, and the longer the heated dialogue continued, the more the whole encounter seemed bizarre. There was nothing I could say or do. It felt odd.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hope Rising

May 15, 1979

May 15. I woke up that morning around 6 a.m. to find that my husband had not made it home the night before. My first reaction was not panic, but rather a sneaky suspicion of his whereabouts. My mind raced. Wherever he was, he had used a friend's Datsun 140J car, which was left in our care temporarily.

I did not want to upset myself by jumping to conclusions. I resolved to focus my energies elsewhere and prepare for a busy day ahead. Normally, that would have included getting the baby ready to spend the day at the Tiny Tots kindergarten on Independence Avenue that my mother owned and operated, and getting myself ready for work.

This week was a bit different. I was attending classes as part of a four-week management course required for my position at UTC. So instead of going to the office, I was getting ready to attend another day of professional training at the Management and Productivity Development Institute (MDPI) of Ghana, in Accra. Suddenly, the phone rang:

"Nana, do you know where Jerry is?" The voice on the other end was panicky and breathless. It was my neighbour Miriam, calling me from her upstairs apartment.

"No," I replied, with deliberate calm. "I don't know," I added, believing that she knew the answer to her own question. Then I continued, "If you've seen him, you tell me." I was certain that for her to call me at

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A World Apart

Truth and Valour on Trial

Perhaps the strangest twist to this turmoil was the fact that, ironically, during Acheampong's regime, General Akuffo had tried to use Jerry to get rid of Acheampong in his own plot, so that he (General Akuffo) could take over as head of state. The modality of this plot and its latent consequences were not spelled out clearly to Jerry, except that he was to use a fighter plane and drop a bomb on the Chairman's house, and then leave the country. The plot seemed fundamentally flawed in that it required Jerry to flee from Ghana instead of being in the country to explain himself. *"Why do I have to run,"* he must have thought to himself. Jerry could not fathom the vision behind this plan, and refused to take part. That plot never materialised.

Now, after the May 15 chaos, General Akuffo and the other leaders of the military regime resolved that the best way to teach my husband a lesson was by arraigning him and his six co-conspirators before a public court-martial. During Acheampong's time, there had been a long tradition of putting attempted coup-makers on public trial.

With the general election barely a month away, Akuffo strongly believed that he had the support of the civilian population and that his regime's remaining weeks in office were very secure. So that weekend, a highly confident General Akuffo left the country for Senegal on his final diplomatic mission abroad. In an unusual turn, the head of the SMC

was absent from the country when my husband and his co-conspirators were first brought before the Military Tribunal in Burma Camp on Monday, May 28, 1979.

"Plead that Jerry's insane," were the first words of advice I received after Jerry's arrest from one of his closest friends. This was a man who had served with Jerry in the Air Force, and one who was not oblivious to the prevailing sentiments around the country.

"What? No!" I said emphatically, "I can't plead that he's insane."

He tried to convince me to change my mind.

"That's the only way he'll get off," he said striving to be the voice of reason. "If you can get a doctor to certify that he's insane, they will have to let him go," he said referring to the military government.

"No! I'm not going to do that. If I do that, it's going to follow me for the rest of my life."

"Listen, Nana, that is his best bet. Otherwise, he's definitely going to be executed," he said bluntly.

"No, no. I can't do that," I told him firmly, standing my ground. I knew the man I had chosen to spend my life with, and the passion that drove him every moment. He would rather I never show a moment of weakness for anyone to exploit. "It's better for him to die in dignity, than for him to be imprisoned, and labelled insane, and have to live out his sentence in 'indignity'. He put his life on the line for what he believed in, and I know he would not be happy for me to plead insanity or claim he has a mental problem just to save him now."

All this was happening quickly, yet very slowly. I was confused and tried my hardest to articulate my thoughts in my own mind.

Leading up to the trial, getting through the night became increasingly difficult for me. The first two days went by torturously slowly. With Jerry in the custody of the very regime he sought to overthrow, I knew the chances of him getting out alive were slim to none. That