PRAISE FOR
A BROKEN PEOPLE'S PLAYLIST

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STORIES (FROM SONGS)

Chimeka Garricks

MASOBE

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Public figures in this work are used in a fictional depiction.
All other names, characters, organisations and events appearing in
this work are the product of the author's imagination.
Any other resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Some of the stories in this collection have appeared elsewhere,
in slightly different forms: 'Music' in *The Kalahari Review*; 'I Put a Spell on
You' in *Juked*; 'I'd Die Without You' as 'Tears in Heaven' in *ALTARWORK*;
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For the unforgettables: Chris, Morgan, Wabiye,
U, and Dame;

and,

theirreplaceables:Biyai, Ebinabo, Kala-Wabiye,
and Uwhetu.

TRACK LIST

1

LOST STARS[1]

They will ask me when I first knew I was in love with you.

I will sigh and say I don't know.

It happened in fragments, piece by piece, separate moments over the years. Moments – that's how I remember it.

They will be surprised when I say you are the only man I have loved.

I hear that familiar whistle from my teens and know it is you. I smile, and my legs pull me, past my parents' suspicious looks, out to the balcony. You are downstairs on the street, looking up at me, with your smile, still cheeky.

I haven't seen you in almost two years since the last time I was in Port Harcourt. I make a show of folding my

1 Written under the influence of *'Lost Stars'* by Adam Levine

arms. “Hey!” I say. “You can’t still be whistling to call me. Don’t you have a phone?”

“Next time I whistle, you better come out fast.”

“Wait o! Because you’re now riding okada, you think you can talk to me anyhow?”

“Bush woman. This is not an okada.” You pat the black and silver motorcycle you are sitting astride on. “This is a Triumph Thunderb—”

“Ehn, your mates who drive cars, do they have two heads?”

“I have a car. Or rather, a van, but I use it to deliver eggs from my farm. It’s either that or this. Choose one.”

“I’m not choosing any.”

“Let’s go. Lunch. There’s this buka on Station Road. I promise, you’ll sell your soul for their Fisherman’s Soup.”

“You want to take me to a buka on an okada? You can’t be serious.”

“Your mates who eat in bukas and ride okadas, do they have two heads?” You look at your wrist which doesn’t have a watch. “You’re wasting time.”

“Come up and greet my parents while I think about it.”

You smile, “Still using me, abi?” But you get off the motorcycle.

“I’ll use you more in the next few days. Besides, you enjoy it.”

“Beg me first.”

"You'll die of old age if you're waiting for me to beg."

You sigh and get back on the motorcycle.

We stare at each other till I say, "OK. You win. Abeg now."

"How long are you in town for?"

"Till a week from today, Monday, after the wedding." Nua, my immediate younger sister, was getting married on Saturday. "You're coming, right?"

"Of course."

I add. "And for the Thanksgiving on Sunday too?"

You nod.

"Thanks."

We'd gone by taxi. The buka had almost emptied out from the lunchtime crowd by the time we arrived. It was clean though, meaning we didn't have to swat flies from sharing our food. The Fisherman's Soup was good, but I'd had better. I told you so. After eating, we sit back on the wooden benches, waiting for you to finish your Gulder. I take sips from your glass. The beer is almost flat, and I don't enjoy it. But I keep sipping. "My mother was cold to you today."

You chuckle. "She saw me with a girl the other day on my bike. She's been carrying face for me since then." You tilt the glass as you pour the last of the beer from the bottle. "I don't blame her sha. She thinks we've been dating for two years, I've not shown any intention to marry you, and I'm carrying girls all over town."

After Nua's wedding, I'd be the only one among the four sisters in my family who wasn't married. And at thirty-five, I am the oldest. It was a prayer point for my mother, and the start point for our many battles. I sip more beer. "I'm sorry. That's how she is."

"After this wedding, perhaps you should stop acting like we're dating."

I sigh. "I only do it when I'm in Port Harcourt." I add, "I'm sorry this is cramping your style with your girlfriend."

You smile, "You're not sorry. And she's not my girlfriend."

"Who's she?"

You shrug. "We meet each other's needs. You know how these things are. She's not important. Wait! You're jealous?"

"No!" I hiss. "You wish."

Your smile says you don't believe me.

I point at you. "It's you who's jealous."

"Me? Jealous? Of who? Femi?"

"Yes. You've always been jealous of Femi."

"His money? Yes. Him? No." You chuckle, "How're you and Femi sef?"

I pause before I answer. "We're fine."

"How many years have you guys…" Your words trail off, but I know what you're asking.

"We've been together for over four years, thank you very much." I hear the irritation in my voice.

You raise your glass to your lips, but before you drink, you cut me with, "Still believe that he's about to leave his wife?"

You drink. I don't answer. You leave some beer in the glass and signal-ask if I want it. I shake my head.

"I'm sorry," you say.

"You're not sorry."

You smile. "You're right. I'm not."

We never quite happened but everyone assumed we did. Even from when we were teens.

Although we both grew up in D'Line, and saw each other around the neighbourhood, we first met in '97: you were nineteen, in uni; I was seventeen, about to get in. Your father's bakery was down the road from our house, though your family lived on the next street. You worked at the bakery, evenings and holidays, sometimes over the counter where you handed out soft, warm loaves, and shy smiles. You stopped smiling when your father died. He was a well-liked man, and the neighbourhood pulled together for your mum. That was when my mother and your mum became close. And when she brought me along for one of her many visits, you and I first talked. It was nothing, just awkward commiserations and silence. Then, on a balmy day in July, I accompanied my mother to your father's funeral in Omoku, and I remember being struck by how you, the last child, stayed deadpan,

while your mum and siblings wailed and thrashed as they lowered the casket. Weeks later, my mother sent me to drop off a big cooler of Jollof rice at your house. I walked into what looked like a meeting in the living room involving your mum, elder brothers and some older men. As you helped me take the cooler to the kitchen, you quickly wiped off a tear, but I'd seen it. You were as surprised as I was when I asked you to walk me back home. Till today, I don't know what pushed those words out of my mouth – all I knew was that I could sense that you needed to be somewhere else at that moment.

Rather than go to my house, we ended up strolling through more than half of D/Line, crisscrossing the railway line twice at the Fruit Garden Market and at the bole and fish stalls at Agudama Street, and even heading up as far as the close on Udom Street and U-turning in front of *Hotel Chez Therese*. Somewhere on that walk, you told me about how your uncles were demanding ownership of the bakery from your mum. I talked of my parents' unhappy marriage, how I eavesdrop on my mother when she goes to cry in the bathroom, and how I didn't get along with any of them. You didn't talk about your father. I didn't talk about Victor, my boyfriend at the time.

But Victor's friends had seen us walking. Later, he was with two of them when he asked me about it. I said it was nothing. He said I was lying. He said that I was "perambulating" around D/Line with you and

embarrassing him. I said he was overreacting. I even apologized. Then he slapped me.

I was used to my father beating my mother. He did it almost with a nonchalance that came from regular practice and confidence in her perpetual surrender. But I am not my mother. I slapped Victor – so hard, my wrist almost snapped and the pain volted up my arm. By the time his friends succeeded in pulling him off me, my face was bloodied, my top torn, and my ears rung with, "Ashawo! Ashawo!" which was what he'd been screaming at me.

The beating didn't hurt as much as the stories which I heard afterwards. I heard I slept with Victor, then with three of his friends, then with you, then with every man who winked at me. Some of the stories had specific details – places, dates, one even had the colour of my panties. I don't know how, but somehow, the stories found my parents' ears one day. That evening, my father's tirade lashed me till I red-misted and answered back. That was the first time he told me to leave his house.

You didn't seem surprised when I turned up at your room at the BQ behind your parents' house that night. You didn't ask why I was there, and I wasn't in the mood to talk. I flicked through your photo-album, books, and music collection. You played your homemade CDs – Smokie, U2, Bon Jovi, Oasis – tuning me to Rock for the first time. You got me dinner – fluffy bread; Blue Band margarine; and thick, sweetened Milo. I smiled because

you dipped your bread in the cocoa before eating. You convinced me to try it when you joked that it was more than comfort food: it was also one of the secrets to happiness. You watched me do it, and the expression on my face confirmed you were right. You laughed. It was the first time I heard that infectious rumble. It prised a chuckle from me, and the simple magic of everything flipped my mood. I told you everything. You didn't say anything for a long time. We lay on your mattress on the floor and stared unabashedly at each other, but it was soothing, intimate. Inevitably, still in silence, we cosied up till I rested my head on your chest, feeling your heart pound as you stroked my hair. Looking back, I wish I had bottled the peace of that moment and carried it through my life.

We were still in each other's arms when your mum, without knocking, pushed open the door. My mother was behind her. I trudged home in silence beside my mother. She didn't speak to me till the next morning when she banned me from talking to you. I managed to obey for only one month. I wish I rebelled sooner.

Years later, we would talk about that night and play out what might have been. We agreed that we would have made love. You tell me that you'd wanted to, but you were reluctant to make a move when I was vulnerable. I tell you that it would have been my first time. I don't tell you that I'd hoped you'd been my first, and I still wish you were. My first was Victor, who came to apologise