

Wish Maker

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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by

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Contents

1	The Stranger	9
2	Mother	15
3	The Stranger Drops By	19
4	Father Loved Fishing	25
5	Odi	28
6	Feathers	31
7	The Second Visit	34
8	The Treasure	41
9	Selfish	46
10	Rain	52
11	Malaria	55
12	The Fight	57
13	Mother Will Get Better	62
14	Christmas Eve	64
15	Under the Almond Tree	66
16	The Farmlands	74
17	River Urashi	77
18	The Big Catch	83
19	The Strange Bird	92
	Acknowledgements	99
	About the Author	101

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1

The Stranger

“WHY IS THAT man staring at us? I bet he wants to eat us.”

“Who?”

Odi nudges my shoulder. “Are you blind? Can't you see?”

We are standing at the well with our buckets on the ground. My back is to the man. I try to turn around, but Odi grips my elbow.

“Don't, Ebele,” he says. “He looks mad.”

I throw Odi's hand off. The word *mad* flashes across my mind. An old woman told me that if a madman bites you, you'll end up one yourself.

“Let's run before it's too late—” I break off as I hear footsteps behind me.

The air suddenly smells of rotting fish. Odi crinkles his nose like he wants to throw up. I spin around, thinking I might, too. The stink

comes from the man's white gown, streaked brown with mud. Did he fall into a gutter?

The man has bushy brows and thick lashes. His eyes remind me of a dog pretending to be asleep. His hair streams over his shoulders in chunky black curls. Like the fancy-fancy wigs worn by city girls who visit the village only during the Christmas holidays.

“Good afternoon.”

“Don't answer.” Odi pokes me in the ribs.

I wince, wanting to poke him back. “What did you do that for?” I eye Odi and rub my ribs.

“He's a stranger,” Odi says, eyeing me back. “He is not from our village.”

I look at the man's bare feet. His toenails glisten. “So?”

“If you talk to strangers, you'll lose your tongue. Go ahead.”

I squeeze my tongue with my thumb and index finger. “Who told you that?”

“My mother. And I believe her.”

The stranger raises his hand. Odi and I jump back.

“Get me some water,” he demands.

“No way,” Odi blurts. “We are not your servants.”

The stranger grunts and shakes his head. “Bring that to me,” he says, pointing at the empty plastic bucket for fetching water.

But Odi snatches it off the ground and slings it over his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Not yet,” I insist. “Maybe we give him the bucket.”

“Something is wrong with your head.”

“What harm could it do?”

Odi looks me over like I’m a fool. He places his bucket on his head, looks at me again, and walks away.

“Boyo,” the stranger calls, as I balance my bucket on my head. With a flick of his wrist, he wiggles his hand in the air. Feathers float from his fingers. How did he do that?

I hurry after Odi, gripping my bucket.

“What a strange man,” I pant.

“Not strange. Crazy,” Odi says.

We slow to a walk.

“He is only dirty. But did you see his toes?”

“No. Why? He’s a dirty beggar.”



“Maybe he’s a magician.”

“Even worse. A crazy beggar magician.”

I frown. “No, he is not.”

Odi snorts. “How do you know?”

I try to describe the feathers in the stranger’s hand. “Maybe he’s just tired and thirsty,” I say.

“Take him home with you then. Your mother could feed him.”

Other children scoot by us, heading to the well. Will they meet the stranger there?

“Do you think he has a family?” I ask.

“My mother bought me Christmas gifts,”

Odi says, ignoring my question.

I struggle under the weight of the bucket, which now feels like a giant stone on my head. I’m afraid it will slide, so I tighten my grip. The sun burns my neck. I should be happy for Odi, but I am not.

“Did you hear what I just said?” Odi crows in my ear. When I don’t respond, he continues: “I’m excited for Christmas. Are you?”

I am not, but I reply, “What did she get you?”

“New pair of shoes. Jeans. T-shirts.”

I can’t think of anything nice to say, so I look straight ahead.

“So, what did your mother get you?” Odi sounds like a mosquito.

I want a bicycle for Christmas. But Mother can't even buy a second-hand helmet. She looks tired most of the time, though she won't stop selling plantains. She doesn't make money from her trade, which she complains about now and then.

I can't tell Odi any of this because his parents have more than enough. He boasts that his house has three rooms and is built of cement and zinc. Ours is mud and thatch, just a single room.

Odi taunts me as if he has read my mind. “Your mother hasn't bought you anything, has she? Better stay at home on Christmas Day.”

2

Mother

MOTHER AND I sit out on the veranda. She is tall and has a tired, wrinkled face. She likes how the breeze dances around us. It cools her skin, she says, which is hot from the hours she spends hawking plantains under the sun. At dinner, she had eaten as if her mind was elsewhere. She had gazed above my head as she dunked eba in the okra soup and brought it to her mouth.

“Are you thinking again?” I ask.

“It’s too hot to think,” she replies, fanning herself with the hem of her wrapper. “This heat could kill.”

The air is hot and dry, but I still nestle against her body. She wraps her arms around me. There is a power cut, so lantern lights flicker in our neighbours’ houses.

“Mother, tell me a story about Father Christmas.”

“Not tonight.”

“Did you sell all your plantains?”

She cocks her head away from me. A roadside bar blasts music in the distance.

“Mother?”

“*Gini?*”

“Are we going to have any chicken this Christmas?”

“I can’t say.”

“Will you still get me a present?”

She doesn’t answer.

I sit up to study her face. “Will I lose my tongue if I greet a stranger?”

“All these questions,” she says, yawning.

“Why do you ask?”

I tell her what Odi said and she peers at me.

“Did you see a stranger?”

I think of lying to her. “Yes. At the well.”

She rubs my head. “Be careful.”

“Do you think he’ll harm us?”

“No one can harm you. I promise.”

A bat shoots past overhead, causing Mother