

PRAISE FOR WAKE ME WHEN I'M GONE

“A powerful tale about the limits and possibilities of courage, the pull of tradition, and the price that must be paid by those who dare to challenge it.”

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“A beautiful, dreamlike story which lingers in the mind and heart. There is oppression and tragedy, sincerely conveyed, but there is also remarkable triumph, a stunning rebirth and shimmering hope. A treat – especially for fans of Ben Okri and Elechi Amadi.”

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“Atogun has combined folkloric elements with a strong central character to create a haunting and unusual narrative . . . beautiful and evocative.”

– **Helon Habila**, *Guardian*

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WAKE
ME
WHEN
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a novel

ODAFE ATOGUN



MASOBE

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For Victoria

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ONE

It was in the painting that I first saw myself as countless suitors had often described me. Before then, I would frown at my face in a hand-held mirror, wondering what they saw that made me so beautiful in their eyes. In the painting I am tall and slim; my dark hair is brushed back into a neat bun; a slightly bemused expression spreads across my face, teasing my lips with a soft smile. It is however difficult to tell whether I am light, brown, or light-brown; the artist's pencil had caught me in many colours.

This was a long time ago, when we had not seen much of civilisation, and our daily existence was guided by ancient rules and traditions. At that time, no one knew that it would be that painting that would be the key to the lasting prosperity of our village, or that the face of a son who would be gifted to me smiled faintly in its background. We saw it merely as a beautiful painting. And then it was stolen from our village on a dark, rainy night. Only then did we come to realise its true importance—

after the High Priest gave a chilling prophecy, warning us of a curse that would beset our village for many years.



I should start my story appropriately . . .

My name is Ese, pronounced *essay*. I come from a small village of about four hundred people, a thousand cattle and one white horse. A dirt road connected us to the world, and it was this that brought merchants from distant lands to our commercial centre known as Main Street.

Market-days were rowdy; thick dust rose in the air, and everyone drove a hard bargain. Because business was good, the merchants came often, and so the road became the key to the prosperity of our village, bringing new faces and things, and the promise of more to come.



At the height of the village's fortune, I took a stall on Main Street, where I sold vegetables. My husband Tanto had encouraged me. He was a big-time vegetable farmer, and he ensured that I got enough supplies to meet the merchants' demands. At this point, it so happened that some of the local traders had begun to resent the merchants. They believed that they were losing business to them and wanted them to stop coming. But I managed to convince them that the merchants were crucial to the

growth of our economy. Buoyed by my support, the merchants developed a close relationship with me. Soon, I became a key figure in our market, which took place every five days. As time passed and I received more and more orders, I began to nurse the ambition of acquiring a second stall. For a while, I was consumed by this prospect, but, shortly after my twenty-fourth birthday, a few months before the seventh birthday of our only child Noah, my husband passed away.

It was on a market-day, a Friday. Gloom swept across Main Street as the news filtered in from the farms, from mouth to ear and mouth to ear. Somehow I was the last to receive it, though it buzzed in sad whispers all around me. When it finally reached me, I collapsed in a heap, at first, too afraid to cry. And then the tears came in unstoppable waves of the blackest grief.

Main Street shut down business for the day. And the merchants returned to their lands with bowed heads. For many market-days they did not return, knowing that the village would be immersed in mourning and that business would be slow.

My son and I wept inconsolably. On many days Noah refused to eat or drink. Seeing his pitiful state, I managed to pull myself together and, for him, found a reason to live again.



Slowly, a bit of normality returned to our lives, but I was too devastated to go back to business. I sold my stall for a paltry sum and set the money aside, and I took to basic farming on a smallholding that I had always maintained in our backyard.

Even though I thought about it, I could not muster the strength to go to my husband's farm to harvest the endless expanse of vegetables. He had died there, struck by the branch of an iroko tree. The neighbour who found him fled to spread the news. Afterwards, none of the villagers would go near the farm because they believed it to be cursed, so all the vegetables rotted away.

I pushed the farm out of my mind as best I could, yet the memory kept coming back to me, leaving me so lost and alone. I struggled on for Noah's sake, wishing I would wake up from my nightmare. In the privacy of my bedroom, I heard Tanto's voice, gentle as ever, professing his undying love for me, and my eyes would pour out my heart. I'd tell him how much I missed him, beg him to make everything right again.

At other times, fond memories of him lessened my grief. In those moments, I could almost smell him nearby and feel his essence, and I tried to trap it all in my heart so I could live the moment with him again and again.



Not long after Tanto's death, some of the young men who had wooed me before I got married began to show interest in me again. Now that I had become a widow, they saw an opportunity to win my heart at last. But I did not allow them near me, so they greeted me from a distance each time they walked by and saw me working in our backyard. When not on the farm, I enjoyed some welcome privacy as a result of the wall around our house; it shielded me from the prying eyes of men and of curious neighbours who wondered why I no longer worked the stall or my husband's farm.

As time passed, Noah began to play again, and I began to view the future with optimism. But I failed to envisage that the way I looked could create such problems for me, as it had in the days before I got married. Back then the Chief of our village had done everything in his power to win my heart. He would ride to my parents' house on his handsome white horse, promising me wealth and more wealth. I spurned him each time, repulsed by the idea of marrying a man old enough to be my father, who had passion only for gin and women, and who neglected his duties, key of which was to commune with the gods, through the priests, to ensure the prosperity of our village.

I was not yet sixteen at that time. The budding romance between Tanto and me was the talk of the village, and no amount of pressure from my parents

could dissuade me. Eventually, against their wishes, Tanto and I were married, and the old Chief retreated sullenly from my life. For a while, he was not seen in public, but he soon went on the prowl again, riding on his horse to pursue and acquire any young girl who pleased his heart.

My parents and siblings were incensed. They vowed never to forgive me. They said I had brought them shame, that I had spoilt their chance of becoming affluent citizens, so they disowned me. Soon after, the Chief added Tanto's young aunt to his legion of wives, and, instigated by their new son-in-law, who promised to make them rich, Tanto's family disowned us too. And so we became a man and a woman with no family.

It was a very difficult time. On many nights I cried myself to sleep, with Tanto whispering comforting words to me. I could not imagine life without a family. Thankfully, Tanto had a good friend called Kpofe. He treated me like a sister, and he became our family. But soon after Noah's birth, he travelled to the city to pursue his fortune and he would not return for a long time.

Noah's arrival brought us so much joy. The rain had poured incessantly for many days prior to his birth, and this was said to be a good sign. As if to affirm it, a missionary arrived in our village on the day he was born. It was the first time a missionary would visit us; and though he was black, not white, we were very much excited all the same. A great multitude came out to welcome him.

Many said that Noah was a special child. The missionary said so too, and we asked him to conduct the naming ceremony. Although it was the duty of the father to pick a child's name, we gave the honour to the missionary, and he picked the name *Noah*, which, he said, meant *to comfort*.

On the seventh day, the day of the christening, the omens were good—the weather was bright and sunny, and birds sang in the trees. The turnout was impressive, even though both our families were notably absent. We prepared a great feast for the guests, and it was the climax of a love story that warranted us a colourful mention in the village's folklore.

The missionary stayed in our village for three weeks, and, in that time, he taught us about a greater god who dwelled in heaven. He showed us the Bible to prove his point, and he taught us many things contrary to all that we had ever known about our existence. All of us, even the Chief and the shrine priests, were intrigued, although none believed him. He attempted to use his teaching to reconcile Tanto and me with our families, but they remained adamant, saying that the concept of forgiving such an act of disobedience—as we had committed—went against the laws of our land.

He spoke about meekness and turning the other cheek. Many wondered at his words. By the time he left our village, his teaching had stirred something in me.

And the rain, which had taken a lull during his stay, came back in torrents soon after he left.

In time, the missionary's visit became a distant memory, and his god a mere fable. Meanwhile Noah grew big and strong. By the time he turned four, Tanto encouraged me to go into business, and so I began selling vegetables from his farm—tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbages, carrots, spinach and a few others that changed with the seasons.



Main Street divided our village into two unequal halves. The middle portion of this road was our commercial centre. Several wooden stalls were scattered over it, and it was a thing of great prestige to own one as a trader. My decision to give mine up after Tanto's death turned out to be of ruinous consequence for the village's commerce. The merchants returned after our period of mourning was over, and discovered that my stall had been taken over by another trader, who did not give them the quality of service I had. It didn't help that there were a handful of traders who were still resentful towards them. They began to come less often to our market, and, eventually, they stopped coming altogether. As a result, the fortunes of the stalls' owners fell into a downward spiral and their businesses soon reached the verge of collapse.

One day, the woman known as Chair-Lady paid me

a visit. She was one of the traders on Main Street; and by virtue of owning the biggest stall, she was regarded as the head of our market. Without being told, I knew why she had come. I welcomed her and fetched her water in a small calabash. After she had drunk, she wasted no time in getting to the purpose of her visit.

‘Business is at its lowest ebb in our village,’ she began, and spoke for several minutes. She wanted me to come back to Main Street. I remained silent for a few moments after she had finished. She waited eagerly for my response, and finally I found my voice.

‘I’m so sorry that business is not going well, and I wish I could return.’ A small sigh escaped me. ‘But I’m still devastated with grief, and my son has been badly affected by the loss of his father. He needs me more than ever. Going back to business will not give me the chance to care for him as he deserves. Besides, if I were to return, how would I get the vegetables to meet the merchants’ demands, seeing as my husband is no longer alive to supply them?’

‘There are other vegetable farmers in the village,’ Chair-Lady replied with some hope. ‘They’d be glad to supply you.’

‘But they already have other traders they supply,’ I countered.

‘I could get them to give you preference.’ She said this with the authority of her status, trying to impress me with it.

‘It could be difficult,’ I said, looking away from her.

‘Not if I talk to them. I’ll make sure you get supply regularly, and that way the merchants will be encouraged to come back.’

‘The other traders could sell to the merchants just as well. The farmers could even sell directly to the merchants.’ My voice was unyielding. ‘What difference does it make?’

‘It makes a lot of difference,’ Chair-Lady replied anxiously. ‘The merchants prefer to do business with you. And, I must say, you seem to be our good omen on Main Street. Without you, things are not the same. Please come back, Ese.’

A long moment passed. I shook my head slowly. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t. Maybe someday I will come back. Maybe. For now, my son is my priority. I wish I could gladden you with a more positive answer. Please understand.’

‘Our village is facing economic ruin,’ Chair-Lady said despondently.

I lowered my head. ‘I really am sorry,’ I managed to say.



Noah had been eavesdropping on our conversation. He came to take my hand after Chair-Lady left. ‘Mother,’ he said, ‘you know, I’m not a child anymore. I can look after myself and you can go back to your business.’ He smiled warmly at me.