

PEOPLE LIVE HERE

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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TJ Benson

PEOPLE

LIVE

HIDE



MASOBE

Published in 2022 by Masobe
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
Tel: +234 906 730 5909, +234 701 838 3286
Email: info@masobebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-990-721-2

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Cover Design Oriahi Ofuzim Anderson
Layout by AI's Fingers

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For Felicia

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'Our name emerges from this wilderness'
From 'Ghazal in the Wilderness' by Sihle Ntuli

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Other books by TJ Benson

We Won't Fade into Darkness

The Madhouse

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. . . and so I had to leave. On the very first day of the subsidy protest. You see, that was the earliest date I could find and there was no need to wait any longer because you don't wait in Nigeria. Wait one more hour, one more night and you'll realise one day you've been waiting your whole life.

Lagos is fast-fast but everything in Abuja tries to slow you down, tells you to take it easy, even the traffic lights, even those useless men that have sweet mouth and will promise you marriage, even the bus I boarded from Nyanya to Wuse . . . all of them. You see, my plan was to get a taxi from Wuse to the airport before 6:45pm, that was my scheduled time of flight, but then our bus entered one heavy traffic on that Nyanya road. It was not normal because it was evening. It's morning time that you will see traffic going to town, but it was evening, and the heat that day! God, the heat. I told myself, *kai Lia, is like hellfire has yawned out of its very bowels into this city.*

In the bus I had entered that day there were all kinds of people, but the loudest of them was one lekpa man with afro and American accent that tried selling us a phone number that could text you your soulmate's name, and a wicked looking woman—you remember the kind of wicked mother-in-law Patience Ozokwor likes acting in those films I showed you? Ehen, imagine her wearing a reverend's black garment and white bishop's collar begging us to give our lives to Christ. The way she was trying to shout louder than the lekpa man with her wicked face I knew I didn't want to go to the same heaven with her.

When they saw nobody was paying them attention, they decided to do divide and conquer. The pastor woman or should I call her reverend woman, I don't even know what to call her, started tapping my shoulder to tell me Jesus is the way the truth and the life. Me I just tucked my braids behind my ears and ignored her. The man tapped the girl on my right, 'Sister,' he said, 'don't you want to be married by the end of this month?' His fake American accent was so annoying ehn! I wanted to knock his head. Why couldn't he learn the good fake accent like those radio broadcasters small? What the girl did sweet me sha. She just turned to burst her chewing gum in his face then faced her front. There was small quiet in the bus. Very soon we reached the bus stop, but when we told the driver to allow us come down, he didn't want to hear word. He said, 'Madam, I no fit drop for here o . . . Road-Safety officers go nab me now.'

The reverend woman continued her quarrelling in the name of preaching as if nothing else was happening in the bus, punching the air and shouting *You Are Blessed In Jesus Name, You Are Blessed In Jesus Name*, as if it was fried rice. Everybody in the bus was shocked when a young girl shouted, 'If you no drop me here now I no go drop again o! I go follow you go where you dey go o! Hmm . . . I don tell you.' Everybody was shocked because we couldn't believe such a young girl will have plenty wahala like that. I tried to calm her down but she insulted him Dan-iska! As if she could fight.

The driver turned to squeeze his face for her and I saw the madness in his eyes matched her own. He turned to the other side to face his conductor, 'Yellow, open door for this woman. My time never reach! Yellow!'

As Yellow began to wrestle the stubborn slide door of the rickety, rusted bus, I asked myself all over again why women ventured into this trade. I'm not saying women conductors in Abuja are plenty o, that's not what I am saying, but I saw at least two every week. I am not even saying women should not do conductor work sef, but you see this albino woman now, this Yellow, she is not supposed to be in the sun like this, doing this type of work. She had a silver wedding ring on her finger and after the shouting above the vehicles screaming pim-pim from 5am to 11pm on this Nyanya Road, her husband will still be expecting her to come home and cook. Is it not Nigerian men? I know my people.

The yeye salesman of magical phone numbers had

managed to stretch hand to where I sat in the first row after the driver seat. He said, 'Madam just try it, if e no work I go refund your money.'

I cringed at the madam part. I was just in my mid-twenties, haba. And I didn't need a life partner.

I checked my wristwatch. It was 5:17pm. I had to shout at the driver like the other passengers. I had to make him understand me too I wanted to drop. No gentleness in the jungle. He shouted back at me, 'But madam, na naw-naw that woman carry her wahala commot for my vehicle, why you no fit drop dat time?' I made the mistake of mentioning my flight. It was a mistake because immediately, the reverend woman started asking me to sow seed, telling me of blood suckers in the sky lusting after my blood. Me, what concern me? Once the bus stopped near the fly-over at A.Y.A. Junction, I left them and their bye-byes and requests and phone numbers they shouted out of the bus at me.

When I was in the plane, staring at the disappearing lights of the airport, I realised that these people were the only ones to wish me good-luck on my journey: of all the people I know. And they didn't know who I was or where I was going to. Even Jumaima, my best friend didn't want me to go. She told me it wouldn't end well. But these people wished me well, even though it was for me to bring things back for them, they wished me well. For the first time I felt I was doing the right thing. It was with the strength of their wishes that I came out from the plane in the next city, because the cold? Jesus.

But before I got to the airport, I had to dance past trucks and cars and buses stuck in traffic, I had to shimmy-shimmy through the heat. I had to do excuse-me, excuse-me.

I quickly climbed the pedestrian lane; I didn't want to block a car from climbing unto the flyover, make one driver no come swear for me. You see, in Nigeria, when you are travelling abroad you have to be very careful. You have to make peace with your neighbours, you don't want any bad luck. The most important rule of all is that you must tell no one of your movement until you have safely landed in your country of destination. You don't want any rude surprise. Don't mind me, this one that I was telling even passengers inside bus, it's because I'm not too superstitious like that. And Jumaima says I am not a true Nigerian. I always pinch her when she talks like that but she is right because a true Nigerian telling you about travel dates? Hian. Unless it's your pastor or your mother. I guess my own is different because I have none of the above. Anyway, there was this car that was horning at me as I was walking in the heat. At first, I didn't know it was horning at me because in Nigeria horning is the language of bus drivers.

Then the driver of the car asked me,

'Hello, do you want a ride?'

I bent down and packed my braids from my face well-well to see the face but the braids kept falling. Jumaima should have braided the thing shorter. I would have

ignored the joker, but I really needed a ride. I had to be sure he wasn't playing so I had to ask him,

'You will help me in this traffic?'

His moustache was so full that remain small I would have missed his smile. Lips as red as palm oil. What was a man doing with that colour of lips? When last did I feel a beard scratch my skin small? He said I was too pretty to be walking in the sun to wherever I was going and I almost laughed. The guy was—well not too bad. Definitely one of those bankers who worked in the outskirts like Nyanya and Kubwa but lived in places inside town like Wuse and Maitama. Probably going back home. And must be a top banker too, because they recently let go of several bankers nationwide. I sha didn't rush because I am a big girl and big girls don't rush these things.

And I knew he would want my phone number. And I would want to give him, because those lips, God. Other cars were horning angrily behind him and I didn't have plenty time and then the Abuja heat again, so I just had to enter his car. I told him I was going to Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport and the idiot smiled at me. I think the idiot knew what his smile could do. He smiled at me and said the cheesiest pick-up line ever, I can't remember, something about he was superman and nothing was impossible for him.

What will I do? I rolled my eyes and got into the car. It was a Honda or Peugeot I can't remember, but I think it was navy blue or purple. I do remember he switched