

**The  
MIDDLE  
DAUGHTER**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

By the same author

*On Black Sisters' Street*

*Night Dancer*

*Better Never Than Late*

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DAUGHTER**

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**CHIKA  
UNIGWE**



MASOBE

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*For my goddaughters:  
Maaika Okeke, Cindy Okeke,  
Zite Unigwe, Gabriella Gideon-Nwogu,  
Inne Vandenhoudt and 'Baby' Owolabi.*

*May this world never stifle your dreams.*

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'The pervious earth affords me a passage, and,  
carried beneath its lowest caverns, here I lift my  
head again, and behold the stars which I have  
not been used to see . . .'

— from Book V, Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*,  
translated by Henry T. Riley

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PART ONE

The Present, 2014

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## Udodi, the Chorus

When Komosu, the beloved,  
Wife of the great god Chukwu  
Went into his ime obi and opened that door they say  
she shouldn't have  
Komosu was struck dead by light –

Oke odachi dalu, uwa welu waa  
And the world came into being  
Chukwu cried to lose his heart, his right hand, his breath

Idemili the divine, the strong, daughter of Chukwu and  
Komosu,  
Worthy offspring of gods,  
Consoled with the bag  
Chukwu slung around her neck to heal the world  
Of the ills that escaped from akpa afi  
Hidden in that room that should have stayed closed

And so the world came  
And so evil came  
And so beauty came

And so life is . . .

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## Nani

I fear the man who is my husband.

The mattress heaves every time I turn, unable to sleep. The darkness outside is absolute, as if someone has upended a bottle of ink. A blackness that swallows up light. The room is cool and quiet. Sleep should come easy, swift in its suddenness, but I am fiddling with my phone, knowing that even though my mother can help me now, I will not call her. Too much has happened. If only I could call Doda. When I think of Doda, my father, this is the memory that comes to the fore: Doda sitting at the edge of his bed, my two sisters and me huddled joyfully together in it, his voice washing over us as he tells us a folktale. He smells of Lux soap and Marlboros. In this memory I am nearly eight. Ugo is six. Udodi is twelve. It is the first day of the long vacation and we are already predictably bored. Our mother is somewhere in the house but it is Doda that we seek out. It was always Doda. It was with him that I felt the safest. Even now, when he's no longer here, I will not go to Mother.

I also remember Uncle Ade, Doda's friend, visiting. It

is the Friday that Udodi won her school's spelling bee competition and Mother's voice is girlish and happy as she announces this to the guest. 'My daughter is the smartest girl in her school! She's going to be a lawyer!'

'Too much book is not good for girls ooo,' Uncle Ade says with a little laugh.

'There's nothing like too much book,' Doda says. 'My children will have as much education as there is to be had!'

'You want your daughters to school themselves out of marriage? Who too much book help?' Uncle Ade asks, his voice moist with the laughter that is already spilling out.

'Marriage isn't more important than education,' Doda says, and Uncle Ade bursts into full, raucous laughter now.

'Let me hear you say that again when your three girls are old maids!'

'God forbid,' Mother says. 'My girls will marry and marry well!'

'It wouldn't matter to me if they never did. Their Auntie Enuka's perfectly happy without a husband,' Doda says to Mother, pinching my cheek playfully. I am ten years old. Too young to be thinking about marriage. Old enough for the conversation to make me uncomfortable. But I knew then as I know now that Doda meant it. If he were alive, Ephraim would never have happened.

I did not like Uncle Ade. Mother used to say that he carried himself with the smugness of a man with many sons.

'Why?' Udodi asked once. 'What's the big deal about sons?'

‘There are people still . . .’ Mother said, and paused to remind Auntie, our maid, to freeze some of the guavas she had plucked from the back yard that afternoon. ‘There are people who think sons are more important than daughters. Thank God your Doda isn’t like that. Not the sort to kick his wife out for giving him only girls!’

Three girls. Udodi was the beginning, I was the middle, Ugo the conclusion. ‘You are my short story,’ Doda said all the time. The perfect short story. But perfection never lasts, a sleight of hand and everything splinters, your whole life is upended. And then one day you are in someone else’s house wondering whether you will ever see your own three children again. My heart’s tightness chokes out the rest of my thoughts.

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