

The **Widow** who **Died** with
Flowers in **Her** **Mouth**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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OBINNA UDENWE



MASOBE

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For Nwamaka
whose love is like the ocean

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“Men are fools who barter their lives for the possession of a woman’s mere body...”

—*Maria Corelli, Sorrows of Satan*

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John 101 or The New Ridiculous Way to Commit Suicide and Be Famous

I know a man who concluded he had had enough of the troubles in the world and decided to kill himself.

It was the year Donald Trump sent warplanes to Syria and Muhammadu Buhari's aides lied to Nigerians that he was 'hale and hearty' even though the president returned from an overseas trip sickly and emaciated. Millions of stolen US dollars hidden away by politicians were being discovered, yet Nigeria was in recession. It was the year of chaos, and this man was going berserk because no one was doing anything about it all. His heart was bitter for fate had refused to recognise him and not even the world leaders he had written long letters to, cared enough to give a response. He concluded that since he had no role in the world, the best he could do was kill himself—for there was nothing that attracted attention to one more than their death—and allow the folks alive manage what was left of the world.

So, he went about looking for the best possible

ways of achieving his aim. Not that there were no ready means of subjecting oneself to easy death but he did not just want any death—say by ingesting rat poison or falling off a tall building or slashing his wrist or hanging himself in his room (using an old Sunny P tie)—he wanted the kind of death that would add to the chaos in the world. Having lived for fifty-two years and not left a mark yet on earth, he thought it would be best to die in such a way that his death would make headlines. In fact, if he did it right, he presumed, other folks like him without anything to remember them by might just follow his example. He hoped he could trigger some sort of apocalypse.

So he took all his savings made from wheeling goods for traders and went to a printing factory located near a busy river where cyclists washed their motorcycles and children dived and swam all day. There, he was shown the master printer whom he provided with a handwritten inscription and his photograph, one he took some years ago when he still had youth on his side and his hair was not all grown and grey. The master printer saw the polaroid and flinched.

“This is you in the photograph?”

“Yes, it is, Sir.”

“You want me to print your obituary?”

“Don’t you print obituaries?”

“Of course, we print obituaries.” The master printer beat his chest. “We are the most reliable and modern

printers in town. We print most of the obituaries of famous men and politicians in this state. But—”

“What then? Tell me!”

“Never in my thirty-eight years in this business have I received such a job.”

“Well,” the man shifted from side to side. His gaze held the eye of the master printer. “There is always a first, Printer Man, Sir. Will you do it?”

The master printer hesitated. “This way, please,” he said.

And he was led through a corridor to a tiny yet crammed office, where posters and brochures of all sizes took up positions on all corners, and there, arrangements were concluded over bottles of Coca-Cola on the dimensions of the obituary poster and the colours to be used. The master printer’s forehead furrowed.

“You want it to read thus.” He read it out loud: “Obituary! Obituary! Obituary! Having suffered mercilessly in the hands of both fate and country for years uncountable, I wish to announce my death planned as follows: Means—New form of suicide. Venue—Central Post Office. Date—Sunday, September Twenty-Third, Twenty-Seventeen. Time—Twelve Noon.”

The master printer dropped the paper on his table. The man nodded his approval. The master printer had no doubts in his mind that this client was suffering from some mental illness. He contemplated what to do.

There was no way his company's name would appear on the posters. The master printer gulped the remainder of his Coca-Cola and smiled awkwardly.

"All right then, we will do this."

The man nodded but did not return the smile. He was not used to smiles. What man smiled in a world that blessed only a few and was so unfair to most? Many years back he had believed in God but now he was not sure anymore if He existed at all. Perhaps the idea of God was an illusion created to keep mankind in check.

The master printer stood up and offered his hand. The man refused the handshake. Withdrawing his hand, the master printer said, "Your work will be ready in forty-eight hours, Mr Edoho—"

"Call me John. My name is John."

Now the issue of the poster was settled. As he walked down the street, sweaty and wiping his forehead with his dirty handkerchief, John could not stop himself from smiling—fame would soon be his.

It was 3 p.m. John could feel the heat in the air bouncing off the tarmac. The sun burnt his skin as he walked hurriedly down the street towards the post office where he had made acquaintances over the years with the postal staff. Every day for countless years, he had walked into the postal agency with long letters written and addressed to various people whose names surprised the postal agents but whose addresses the agents were sure did not exist.

John had written letters to the Nigerian President, the American President, Russian President, the Queen of England and the Chinese Consulate in Nigeria and many more. The day Prince William and Kate Middleton had their first child, he wrote them a long letter, but the address scribbled at the back of the envelope was 22 Forks Street, Quebec, Canada, so the postal officers did not send the letter. They took it out of the envelope and read it, like they did most of his letters. Each time he brought his letters for postage, he purchased countless stamps. In fact, it seemed as if he spent all the money that he made from wheeling goods buying stamps. And since he paid for his stamps and helped the post office generate revenue, the agents did not bother that he brought wrongly addressed envelopes every single day.

John regularly sent out letters to world leaders advising them on the best possible ways to change the world and requesting that they write back but none ever did. He never stopped talking to himself about this (and would have talked to friends if he had any), expressing his deep-felt sadness and frustration that failure to heed to his advice was ruining the world.

Inside the post office, he checked his watch to be sure he was on time, straightened his coat and patted his greying hair.

“Good afternoon, Mr John,” the agents greeted cheerfully for they were sure he was going to buy over five-hundred-naira worth of fifty-naira stamps. He

shuffled to the counter and placed his two hands on it.

“Good afternoon, Doris.”

He did not return the smile the obese Doris gave him even though it was a warm and affectionate smile, one an onlooker could easily identify to mean that something was going on between the two, or one of them wished something was. He scanned the office, which seemed to be his habit every time he walked into the post office for the last six years.

“How is your day today?”

Doris caressed John’s arm on the counter, but John withdrew his arm swiftly and looked away.

“How is business? Hope you are pushing the hustle?”

“We are trying...please can I have my stamps?”

“How much worth of stamps do you want today, Mr John?”

Doris leaned towards him. He could see her cleavage.

“Six hundred and fifty naira, Doris.”

She smiled at him, flashing brownish teeth. One of her colleagues approached the counter. “Where are you sending your letter today, Mr John?”

“To the Nigerian Senate, Madam.”

“The senate?” both agents said in unison.

He nodded, dipped his hand into his side coat pocket and fished out his letter.

“You’ve never written to the senate before.”