

A
QUIET
TEACHER

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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Adam Oyebanji

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MASOBE

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BRACING DAY

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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For Barbara and Alex.

*And for teachers: without whom this book — or any book,
really — could never have been written.*

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MONDAY, THE NINTH

06:10 A.M. EST

Traitor.

The word echoed through his dreams. Sometimes in English, sometimes Russian. Though it was difficult to differentiate between them. He was diving from the harbor wall yet again, and for the first time. The slap of cool seawater a blessed relief from Djibouti's night-time heat; a shield against the bullets spiraling after him, their fury spent against the effortless resistance of the ocean.

It was hard to swim with a broken arm. At least, he was pretty sure it was broken. It hurt. He couldn't move it. He kicked hard with his feet, bare and bloody, pushing deeper into the water, praying to the Almighty that he was headed in the right direction. That his SOS had gotten through.

He was more worried about his eyes than his arm. The right was OK – at least he thought it was – but the left was closed shut and burning, the sting of it far worse than saltwater against a bleeding eyelid.

Morosov had used battery acid.

His body was arching upward now, seeking the surface. He came up in the pitch black, maybe twenty-five meters from the jetty. A couple of torches were flailing wildly in the darkness, their beams too weak to pick him out, even if they somehow managed to find him. He rolled onto his back, breathing in the hot, tropical air, and kicked out like a frog, careful not to break the surface with his legs. This far out, his bedraggled body would be invisible to flashlights, but the frothy splash of water would not. He kicked on doggedly,

heading to a scuffed, concrete jetty and the lee of a small cargo ship. There was a name for the way he was swimming, he thought, even if the style had never made it to the Olympics. He just couldn't remember. And his left eye was killing him.

The flashlights had disappeared. Polukhin and Morosov would be considering their options. They could run to the jetty far quicker than he could swim, but they'd need to think to do it.

Please, God, let them go the other way.

He reached his destination, the stern of the cargo ship towering above him; the name Excelsior stenciled across it in pale, rust-pocked letters. He found a set of steps onto the dock, but he was too exhausted, too injured, to pull himself up. His head dipped below the water. Came up once.

Twice.

But not a third time. He was going to drown within a meter of safety. It was OK, he realized. He was tired of it all, anyway.

Please, God, don't let it hurt too much.

As if God had ever answered his prayers.

And then, as if to spite him, a miracle. Someone grabbing him by the shoulders, hauling him safely above the waterline.

'We've got you, mate. Don't worry. You made it.' The accent was crisp and well rounded. Tea parties, and manor houses, and red-coated palace guards.

He remembered the name of the swimming stroke he'd been using.

Backstroke. English backstroke. He couldn't help it. He started to laugh. And once he started, he couldn't stop . . .

‘You’re listening to *Morning Edition* on WESA 90.5 FM Pittsburgh, National Public Radio. Today: city sanitation workers are out on strike for the first time in . . .’

Greg Abimbola’s right eye cracked open. There was sweat on his forehead and his heart was thumping against his ribcage. He forced himself to take slow, easy breaths, staring into the distance until his brain attuned itself to reality.

It was still dark. Winter wouldn’t start spending its tightfisted allowance of daylight for at least a couple of hours yet, and the inside of the apartment’s dormer window was coated with ice.

A cold one, then.

He swung his legs out from under the duvet and sat on the edge of the bed, bare feet sinking into the carpet. After a moment or two, he padded into the living room, a loud yawn drowning out NPR’s cheerful recitation of municipal discord. The living room was spotless, hard surfaces gleaming with polish, soft ones vacuumed to a showroom finish. Freshly painted walls hosted carefully curated fine-art prints and several rows of books. Even though most of the furnishings remained the same, his landlord, more accustomed to Pitt students than neatniks, would have had difficulty recognizing it. The thought brought a smile to Greg’s lips.

This place, he reminded himself, was a real shithole.

Except the word he used wasn’t ‘shithole’. It was ‘*trushchoby*’.

‘English, you idiot.’ The words sank without force into the apartment’s sloping wall/ceiling. The apartment was at the top of the building, an undergrad-infested rowhouse in the middle of Bloomfield, so either word worked. There was nothing on the other side except battered slate, and maybe some sleet. He could hear its gritty pitter-patter against the windowpane.

Retrieving a set of free weights from the landing outside his apartment door, Greg worked himself into a lather while NPR jabbered on in the background: political gossip, natural disasters, whimsical human interest, all mixed together in the usual perky burble. He stopped listening almost immediately, concentrating on his aching arms and legs, making them work far harder than necessary.

It was better than thinking.

He managed to avoid any meaningful thought until after he was showered and ready for work. It was always the same, this moment when he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and pulled the patch over the top of his wrecked left eye. What if, what if, what if . . .

What if I hadn't climbed the stairs that night? What if I'd been a better son – a better Christian? What if I'd had a fucking spine and done what I should have done? And lastly: why didn't I just suck it up and let Polukhin and Morosov get on with it?

He stared hard at the mirror. With the patch on, he was still good looking – dashing even. The jawline was still firm, the caramel skin smooth and unblemished. His one, good eye was a bottomless dark brown, gleaming with apparent good humor. And if there were gray hairs speckled through the close-cropped black, they were still too few to see. If he'd been fully white, they'd have gathered around his temples and aged him ten years at least.

A wry smile. *One for the plus column, then.*

He shrugged on a dark, knee-length coat, and headed out.

07:30 A.M. EST

Greg stepped smartly up the broad steps to the main entrance, waving to the security camera as he did so. He was rewarded with a buzz and a click. The glass doors barring his way unlocked themselves.

‘Good morning, Mr Abimbola. Warm enough for ya? Even colder than England, I bet.’

‘Yes, but it’s a dry cold.’

Stacey, the security lady, chuckled. Although she was her usual, cheerful self, she was standing behind the front desk instead of sitting. And she was still wearing her outdoor gear, right down to the fleece-lined galoshes she’d used to stomp her way in from the bus stop. The faint reflection from a bank of TV monitors glimmered on the shiny quilting of her coat.

‘What’s up with the heating?’

‘Furnace is out. Custodian’s had an earful from the principal and is swearing fit to burst.’ Stacey’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘I’d steer clear of both of ’em if I was you.’

Greg shot her a quick smile.

‘Will do.’

Keeping his coat buttoned, Greg headed past the front desk, crossed the opulent lobby, and skipped up a wide marble staircase, passing beneath Calderhill Academy’s ornate coat of arms as he did so.

Calderhill Academy, pre-eminent among the private schools

clustered in the city's Shadyside and Squirrel Hill neighborhoods, would not take well to the indignity of being without a furnace. As a child, Greg Abimbola had spent more than his fair share of winters in unheated classrooms – and on days far colder than this one. But then again, his mother had not been a member of Pittsburgh's one percent. He was not the son of some financial guru, or tech whiz kid, or prominent doctor. Calderhill's parents, who paid their five-figure school fees with little outward complaint, expected an Ivy League placement, excellent alumni connections, and something approximating an outstanding education. A properly heated building was so far beneath their expectations it wouldn't even register.

Until tonight, anyway. It was all too easy to imagine the fuming regiment of emails that would be lining up in the principal's inbox. He didn't envy her in the slightest. But that, of course, was why they paid her the big bucks.

'Greg?'

Emily Pasquarelli, the registrar's assistant, was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. She looked anxious. Leather-gloved hands meshed together like ill-fitting gears.

'Good morning, Emily. Elegant as always, I see, even when bundled up for the cold.'

He meant it, too. At Calderhill Academy, the faculty's fashion vernacular was best described as 'rumpled'. Lots of natural fibers and not quite matching outfits. Emily bucked the trend, though. Bobbed, strawberry blonde hair topped a petite, boyish frame, which she had wrapped in a red cashmere coat, brightly colored complementary scarf, and luxurious looking brown gloves. Brown calf-length boots completed the ensemble, their tops hiding coyly beneath the hem of her coat.

Emily smiled at the compliment, touched a brief hand against his wrist.

‘The principal would like to see you. Soon as you get in, she said.’

Greg pulled a face.

‘What have I done now?’

‘No idea. But Lindsay Delcade is with her.’

Greg tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

‘I’d best be getting along, then. Oh – before I forget – how’s your mother? Better, I hope?’

The shoulders beneath the red coat shrugged stoically.

‘Physically, much better. And thanks for asking. Doctor said it was just a mild sprain and she’s recovered fine.’ Emily tapped a gloved hand to her temple. ‘But she’s starting to lose it up top, you know? I swear, she gets more absent-minded by the day.’

Greg nodded sympathetically.

‘Watching your parents get old is no fun. It was good of you to take her in.’

‘The dutiful daughter, that’s me.’ The words were said lightly, though, with no trace of bitterness. Emily glanced at her watch and looked pointedly down the corridor. ‘Your nemesis awaits.’

‘So she does. See you later – assuming I get out of there alive.’

Emily’s tinkling laugh rang in his ears as he turned left instead of right and headed to the principal’s office. Or, more accurately, the principal’s *outer* office. The door to Elizabeth Ellis’s inner sanctum was closed, though the amount of privacy this afforded was minimal. The office was glass-walled. On the far side of the partition the willowy figure of Lindsay Delcade, mother to Vicki and Chandler, and royal pain-in-the-ass, was leaning over Ellis’s desk. Her porcelain-pale skin and mane of bright red hair were in sharp contrast to the principal’s ruddy cheeks and gray-flecked auburn bun. It was

easy to hear her, too. Greg sank into a brand-new leather sofa and listened.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Lindsay was saying, voice raised. ‘Absolutely, goddamned ridiculous! We need a few more days, that’s all. I don’t see why my daughter has to suffer because of your stupid, arbitrary rules, and I won’t stand for it. I won’t!’

‘They’re not *my* rules, Ms Delcade. It’s how this admission process works. The deadline’s passed, I’m afraid. But next year is still a real possibility. It will give you time to—’

‘I’m not waiting another goddamned minute for this, never mind a year! You fix this, Elizabeth. Fix it right now!’

Ellis’s hands spread themselves placatingly on top of her desk.

‘It’s simply not fixable, Lindsay. I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? *Sorry?* You will be if you don’t get this sorted. I’m not kidding. I’ll bring the whole school down on top of your goddamned head if I have to!’

Delcade turned on her heel, ready to storm out. Seeing Greg through the glass, her expression darkened even further.

‘You!’ she screamed, opening the door. ‘How do they even let people like you work here? Go teach in the ghetto. It’s all you’re fit for!’

‘Ms Delcade! That’s enough!’ Ellis’s words bounced pointlessly off Lindsay Delcade’s back. The doors to the outer office were already closing behind her. She stomped off down the hallway, high-heeled boots click-clacking on the gleaming hardwood floor.

Ellis, with a resigned wave of the hand, signaled for Greg to come in.

The principal’s office, even when he wasn’t in trouble for something, invariably made Greg feel uncomfortable. It was riotously untidy in a way that only an academic could manage.