

**AFTER  
THE  
END**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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# AFTER THE END

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MASOBE

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To Chigozie Obioma,  
the Akure-born-and-bred wordsmith who has written  
his footprints into the sands of time.

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# PART I

“The evil that men do lives after them.  
The good is oft interred with their bones.”

*Julius Caesar*  
William Shakespeare

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# ONE

## The Visit

September 2016

Google died on the day the UK voted to leave the European Union.

I had no inkling—not a knowing in my body or a murmur in my mind—that something fit to shatter the earth on which I stood was about to happen. I remember the day all too well, how I watched from our moderately-sized veranda, the garden flowers swaying to the rhythm of a gentle wind that cushioned the brutal afternoon sun. I saw a bird, bright yellow and no larger than my cupped palm, fly into a thicket of Firewitch Dianthus—at least, that was what Google had said it was. I made a mental note to mention this to Google, who would then proclaim to me what exactly this strange, beautiful creature was. A yellowhammer, maybe? Google always had the answer. I retreated to the living room, awaiting his return and since then, I'd been waiting. I never found out what kind of bird it was. Never saw my Google ever again. He was present that morning like he always was,

but by evening, he'd left us. Unlike Britain, Google's exit from life wasn't heralded by talks or consultation. He simply died, and my world crashed along with his demise.

Google, Ademola Philips, as named by his parents, was my husband. I nicknamed him Google because he had a habit of ending every argument with "let's check Google." Demola was my walking and talking fact-machine except when I was angry with him, which was rare during the ten years we were married. This wasn't the only rare thing about Google. I can't remember a time Google yelled at me, for example. Or the last time he fell sick. He was mostly sturdy, agile, and hearty—which was why I was stupefied to learn that he collapsed halfway through his shift at work. Prior to this, he wasn't ill or anything. And before the medics could get him to St Pancras Hospital from Euston Station where he was a manager, he was gone.

Gone as in, *the end*. How was this possible?

The autopsy reported that he died of sudden heart failure. His phone and personal effects arrived at our home, in a box the week after he was buried. I sat with the box on my lap in our quiet living room and wondered how a man can just fall and die. I imagined the indignity of his legs giving way first, his torso obediently following as his mind surrendered. Perhaps someone grabbed him before he reached the floor, his eyes blank to Euston Station's commotion, his heart failing, his soul gone. At the hospital, the doctor declared him BID—brought in dead. He was only forty-one; ironically, the same age his father had been when he died.

At thirty-nine, I was a widow with three children. Google left the small apartment in Woolwich to me and our boys: Tunmininu was ten, Pamilerin was seven, and Ilerioluwa was five. I interred his remains in a double-depth grave at Woolwich Cemetery in Plumstead. I decided that when my time came, I would lie in the same grave with him—right on top of him like I'd done many times when he was alive.

Three months after he was buried, I woke on his side of our bed. Google liked to sleep by the window, and I didn't because of the cold draft in the winter and the rays of early sunrises that prised my eyes in the summer. So, he would sleep on that side to be my shield.

I turned away from the window, staring at the empty half of our bed. I palmed my forehead, trying to unpack how I felt and maybe gauge my temperature. I'd been having a pounding headache as though my brain teetered at the brink of a nasty implosion.

Everybody told me that the grief would come in waves, and I discovered it was true. I'd lost count of the corners of the house where I'd been overwhelmed with tears and memories. But I'd also discovered that grief can feel like congestion, something heavy that sits on your chest. Something that you can't push aside. It passes, but it always returns.

I heard a soft knock on the door, and it slowly creaked open. Tunmininu walked in wearing his Naruto pyjamas and a look of concern on his narrow face. When he was born,

someone joked that nature affirms paternity by ensuring that first-born children looked exactly like their fathers, and we all laughed in the ward because with Tunmininu, it was true. As he grew older, he not only looked even more like Google, but also adopted many of his father's expressions.

Tunmininu didn't say a word; he just sat beside me on the bed and held me. Until that moment, I wasn't aware I was crying. I wanted to be strong for him and his brothers. I wanted things to be normal again, but I didn't have a firm idea what that meant without Google. I cried in front of him without shame, because I thought it was better for him to know how much I missed his father than to pretend everything was okay. More than anything, I needed him to know that it was okay to be vulnerable. Grief didn't have to be a silent, brave thing.

The doorbell rang, interrupting this delicate moment we shared.

A few moments later, Pamilerin, my middle son, came bounding up the stairs and charging through the door. "Mummy, there's a woman here. She wants to see you."

I sat up, struggling and failing to restrain my sniffles. "A woman?"

He nodded and reiterated, "A woman," then added, "and a boy."

A woman and a boy? "Has she been here before?"

He shook his head.

"Where is she now?"

"Waiting by the coat stand."

"Good. Tell her I'll be down in a bit."

I figured she was a long-lost relative of Google's, here to offer her condolences. Funerals and weddings often unearthed unknown extended family members. Still, I felt it was too early for a visit, barely 9 a.m., on a Saturday morning. I stood, composed my features, and asked Tunmininu to get his baby brother from their bedroom.

As I descended the stairs, I flashed the woman a modest smile and eyed the nervous looking boy standing by her side. He looked about the same age as Ileri, my last born. Now we were in the same space, I was certain we hadn't met before. "Hello," I offered.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm Lydia."

I immediately ushered her into the living room. "Please have a seat." I turned on the TV but lowered the volume so the children would have a distraction as we spoke. She sat across from me with her hands in her lap and wore a small, sad smile. The kind I was used to by now. "Do you need anything? Water? A drink? Tunmininu, please get her—"

"It's fine," she said, in a low voice. "Thank you."

I watched her briefly, my eyes scouring her features. She had clear, dark skin, was taller than me and dressed in black. Chubby and attractive but not conventionally beautiful. I couldn't tell if she was Yoruba from her accent, but I knew she was Nigerian. I noted that she didn't have any wrinkles. I wondered about her exact age, contemplating how to address her going forward, especially if she was part of my in-law's family. I presumed we were around the same age, but to be on the safe side, I decided to assume she was older.

"How can I help you, Ma?" I finally said.

She smiled as if to say the “ma” wasn’t necessary. While I waited for her to respond, my boys ran down the stairs and gathered in the living room.

“So, what can I do for you?” I asked again, a sense of unease enveloping me. Three months ago, I got a deadly surprise, and the sudden appearance of this stranger left me with a familiar, foreboding feeling.

“I came to speak to you about something important,” Lydia said, surveying the living room.

“I think you should start by telling me who you are.”

Maybe my voice sounded terse because she stopped smiling. She looked over at the children. My heart rate developed an erratic pattern. I asked Tunmininu to take his siblings upstairs.

“Can he go with them?” Lydia asked, gesturing to the boy with her.

I paused to consider her suggestion. A woman I had never seen, with a child whose character was unknown, was in my house, asking for unprecedented access to my family. My curiosity overcame caution, and I gave an approving look to Tunmininu. I had to know who Lydia was, why she was clad in an all-black fit and donning a palpable air of sadness.

When I heard the door to the children’s room close, I gave her a prolonged stare. She turned her attention to our family picture that hung on the wall above the fireplace. In it, Google wore a white shirt over a pair of white corduroys. I leaned against him in a flowing, blue-patterned, white dress and our children gathered about us on the floor, smiling. We

took that portrait last Christmas, but I had meant to take it down because seeing Google dressed in all white now that he was dead, saddened me every time I walked past.

“Did you buy the pyjamas you’re wearing from Marks & Spencer? Maybe two years ago?”

I looked down at myself, realising for the first time that I hadn’t bothered to dress appropriately before coming down to meet my guest. I wore Google’s pyjamas top, the typical menswear style made of striped cotton material. Since he passed, I’d found a way to wear any of his clothes that fit. But why was this Lydia woman talking about my clothes? Had I let a mad person inside my house?

“I’m sorry, but if you can’t—”

“Demola kept the same set in my house. He liked it so much, he kept a pair so he could wear it when he came over.”

I heard her words, but they made no sense to me.

“I think it’s about time you knew the truth.”

What truth? Yet another ridiculous, obscure statement. I was growing impatient.

Lydia continued, “Honestly, I don’t want any trouble. I’m just a grieving woman like you, except I’m sick of being in the shadows. Shortly before Demola died, the urge to leave the shadows overwhelmed me,” she said and paused. “I think you must know that my son, the boy who just went upstairs with your boys, is also Demola’s son.”

My throat constricted, and I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

“Excuse me?”

“In 2002, before he came to the UK, Demola and his

family came and paid my bride price. We had a traditional-rites wedding in Lagos. We planned to have a civil wedding here, but I was denied a visa for many years. I also sought admission for my master's but didn't get it, and that was the only reason why we never came here together."

What nonsense was this woman saying? Could she be talking about my Google?

"I'm sorry you had to hear it like this. I asked him to tell you, and he promised he would at the appropriate time, but that time never came."

I couldn't speak. I just kept looking at this intruder. I heard some more words streaming from her mouth, but my mind stopped processing them. She leaned over and dropped something on the table. Then she called for her son, who trotted down the stairs the next minute. She stood, took his left hand, gave me one last look and walked out the door.

How dare she? Come into my home and attempt to dismantle everything I've ever known, only to walk out the door just like that? Really? Google's son? A tiny cackle escaped my lips.

It didn't make sense. Google couldn't have done this to me. Our life together wasn't a lie. This was all a misunderstanding. But come to think of it, there was something about Lydia's son. An unsettling resemblance that I couldn't quite shake off.

In less than ten minutes, the man I loved and thought I knew completely, had become a stranger that I needed to investigate. Had I trusted him too much? I always thought