

Broken

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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A novel
PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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To the girls who read Gibran, Rumi, and Darwish.

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ABUJA

September 2016

We were alone together in one of the three living rooms in my parents' house. I didn't want to turn around because I could not look him in the face. Instead, I walked away from his voice, from his question, and in an attempt to further distance myself from his gaze, I opened the fridge and took out a bottle of milk. The bottle slipped from my nervous hand, shattering on the floor, spilling milk on the cold, grey, marbled tiles of the dining room, missing the brown carpet by inches.

I grabbed a kitchen towel to clean up the mess.

“Do you seriously not want to talk?”

He maintained his distance even though I could hear the hint of frustration in his voice. He was always good at taking a step back and giving me space—far enough for me to not feel suffocated, close enough for him to hover over me whenever he felt the need to. Still, the strong scent of his *oud* cologne in the room reminded me of happier times. It compelled me to turn around, to look at him. But I was determined not to. My eyes filmed over with unshed tears. I focused on the marble tiles, the shards of glass and the spilled milk which I could not seem to mop up with the kitchen towel.

The door in the outer hallway closed with a slight bang. His voice dropped to a tight whisper. “Your mum is here.”

Still on my haunches next to the spill, I heard him walking away from the dining room and towards the living room. *Let the charade begin.*

“Umma, *ina wuni*.”

He greeted my mother customarily. I imagined his accompanying crouch from my position in the dining room. Then I heard her footsteps heading toward me. I looked up to find her as regally dressed as the mother of a bride, her gold bracelets clanking together with the slow, deliberate movements she made coming down the stairs.

She adjusted her maroon veil over her head as she answered him: “Ahmad, how are you? *Yaushe ka dawo?*”

“I came back last night, Umma,” he answered.

“Oh yes, that’s right. Your mum mentioned that you would be coming back this week.” She smiled at him as he escorted her to the hallway from the bottom of the stairs. She passed her bag to Atine, our house help.

“*An gama Masters din dai?*”

“Ph.D., *ne*.” He corrected her with a smile and the practised humility northern Nigerians perfect at an early age.

“*Haka fa ne*. That’s true; it’s Ph.D.” After a brief pause, she added, “I suppose you came to see your friend, Amin?”

Still in acting mode, he looked around the room to give the impression that he had just come down to the living room too. “Yes,” he said. “I thought I would find him here.”

My mother looked at me, then back at him and in the most casual tone, she asked:

“How are the wedding preparations going?”

He opened his mouth as if to protest, then swallowed back his words. “Um . . . *Alham—Alhamdulillah*.”

The always articulate, ever-charming Ahmad Babangida who always had a witty comeback for everything was struggling to find words other than “Thank God.”

“Aunty Fa’iza let me clean it,” Atine said, startling me. In my determination to keep my eyes glued to the spill I hadn’t even seen her walk into the dining room.

“I have told you to stop calling me aunty,” I mumbled under my breath, blinking rapidly to force back tears. I stood up and grabbed my car keys and travel mug from the dining table.

“Umma,” I said to my mother directly, “I’m going to work. I’ll be back by *Zuhr*, *Insha Allah*.”

I walked out of the house without acknowledging him. What would be the point of feigning courtesy or familiarity? I got into my car, slammed the doors shut and drove away. It was only when I got well past the gates that I parked the car on the curb. The silence in the car swelled, overwhelming me. I slammed my closed fists repeatedly against the steering wheel, losing my battle with self-control, tears streaming uncontrollably down my face.

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One

Letting go of a nameless thing should be easy,
but the web created is difficult to untangle.

It takes a lifetime to scratch out oaths,
to unlearn the imaginary traces
of fingertips on skin.

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HELLO/GOODBYE

Abuja

September 2010

I looked around my room one last time. At my queen-sized bed and its pink pillows, my half-empty closet. My fingers absent-mindedly traced over the rows of novels and textbooks on my bookshelf. Above the bed's headboard was the family portrait that I got from Umma's room when she redecorated a few years ago and had kept ever since. It had my father, my mother, Umma, my brothers, Amin and Abubakar and me, the youngest. It was taken ten years ago on my parents' fifteenth wedding anniversary. Looking at it, my legs felt heavy, and my heart was filled with immense sadness.

"Fa'iza, have you prayed?"

Abubakar's voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned around to respond but only caught a glimpse of his black shirt as he rushed into his room without waiting for an answer. In our household, questions like that were rhetorical; it was past eight already.

After *Isha*, I had spent about thirty minutes reading my Qur'an, alternating between praying for a safe flight and the strength to not break down and cry. I was about to be separated from my parents, my family, for the first time in eighteen years.

I closed my bedroom door for what would be the last time in a while and walked to the other side of the house towards my parents' living room. The scent of *turaren wuta* permeated the hallway that connected my father's section to the children's section. I followed the scent to my father's living room. Abba, a slender, grey-haired man in his fifties was sitting in his usual spot, a deep brown leather armchair facing the television, an open newspaper in his lap. His silver framed eyes were trained on the newscaster relaying the latest headlines about his political party, PCP.

"*Assalamu alaikum*," I announced my presence.

"*Wa alaikumus salam*," he responded, enunciating his words the way he always did. He folded away the newspaper and removed his glasses, looking up at me with a smile. "*Kin shirya?*"

"Yes, Abba." I sat on the Persian carpet next to his feet, ready to receive his *nasiha*, the reason he had sent for me.

"Fa'iza, you have always made me proud," he started. "As you head for your first year in university, please know that the path you take right now can be the difference between a first class and a second class. Make sure you take your studies very seriously," he paused. "*Kina ji ko?*"

I nodded silently, tears pooling then falling from my eyes. Even with my determination not to cry, I couldn't help myself. How would I cope being so far from him for so long? Could I really start a new life all by myself in Canada?

My mother walked into the room.

"*Ba kuka zaki yi ba*," she said in a firm but conciliatory tone. She had on a white lace boubou, a long white veil loosely draped over her dark hair, which was tied in a single plait that reached the middle of her back. My mother's features—her long hair, light brown skin, almond shaped eyes, and dainty pointed nose—were a delicate mix of my part Lebanese grandmother and Fulani grandfather. "Pay attention to your studies and surround yourself with the right people. Most importantly, *kar ki ba mu kunya*."