

**BURIED BENEATH  
THE BAOBAB TREE**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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**ADAOBI TRICIA NWAUBANI**

WITH AFTERWORD BY VIVIANA MAZZA



**MASOBE**

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*To the girls and women of Nigeria,  
In the hope that they may know brighter times than these*

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*. . . They wrote the story on a column,  
And on the great church-window painted  
The same, to make the world acquainted  
How their children were stolen away,  
And there it stands to this very day . . .*

—Robert Browning, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”

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## BIG DREAMS

MY SWEETEST DREAMS UNFOLD when my eyes are wide open, after I roll my sleeping mat and begin my morning chores.

As I walk to the well from which every family in our section of the village fetches water, I dream of a new pair of shoes for church on Sunday, shimmering red and shining new like that of the golden-haired girl I saw singing on TV, instead of black and slack like the ones I've had since two Christmases ago.

As I bend my back to blow the wood beneath Mama's pot until the embers crackle with dancing flames, I dream of a more bounteous harvest, for Papa to reap more than enough corn and groundnuts and beans from his farms this year, so that we can eat our fill and have enough left over to sell for school fees.

As I thrust my hand into every cranny of the living room, veranda, corridor, and backyard with my broom, I dream of acing the Borno State scholarship exam and leaving home to attend the special boarding school for girls in Maiduguri, of being the first child in my entire family—nuclear and extended—who proceeds to university after

secondary school instead of back to Papa's farm or straight to my husband's house.

As I open my mouth to say "good morning" to Mama and hand her the pan of sleeping oil with which to fry the kosai for Papa and my brothers to eat when they awake, I dream of standing in front of a classroom full of children and telling them, "A is for apple!"

As I tighten my fingers around my youngest brother, Jacob, and stand his naked body in the basin of lukewarm water, then smear him with soap, I dream of being a good wife who kneels to serve her husband his meals and who bears him healthy sons.

As I load my arms with the empty plates my brothers have left behind on their way out, some to the farm and some to school, I dream of a sister instead of only five brothers, another girl to help with all the chores.

As I dip my palm into the—

"Hurry up! Let's not be late. I don't want to stay back after school to wash the toilet!"

The voice of my best friend, Sarah, slams my dreaming shut. She is at the door, textbooks and notebooks in hand.

Like me, she is the one who does the morning chores. Her two sisters have left home, married to men in the village next to ours.

"Please, give me a minute," I say. "Let me just rub some Vaseline on my hands."

That is the good thing about dreaming with my eyes

wide open. It's like moulding a calabash from wet clay. Some other time, some other day, I can always continue from wherever I stop, or even start from the beginning all over again.

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## SOMETIMES AND ALWAYS

SINGING FAMILIAR TUNES OR learning the lyrics to new ones. Telling ancient riddles and jokes. Whispering secrets that no other ears will hear. Guessing for how long the hills layered majestically high with dense rocks have lived, and the baobab trees with bulbous trunks and buttress roots that make them stand out like aliens in the sprawling savanna landscape.

Always hand in hand.

My best friend and I prancing side by side on our way to school.

## KOBOKO

MALAM ZWINDILA SCRATCHES THE date into the right-hand corner of the blackboard with a tiny piece of chalk. Mistakenly, he writes Monday instead of Tuesday.

With a handful of fresh green leaves from the pile on the teacher's desk, he wipes the wrong date off and writes the correct one. Then he turns to the right-hand side of the classroom, where the boys sit.

"You! What is democracy?" he asks.

Danladi, son of the village head hunter, rises to his feet.

"Sir, democracy is . . . democracy is . . ."

Malam Zwindila's eyes point elsewhere.

"You! What is democracy?"

Peter, whose three brothers are crippled from polio, gets to his feet.

"Sir, democracy is . . . errrr . . . it is when . . ."

"You! What is democracy?"

Ibrahim, a wizard who can calculate twenty-three times seventy-three without pen or calculator but who doesn't know the difference between *their* and *there*, stands to his feet.

"Sir, democracy is the government of all types of people."

Malam Zwindila tosses the pile of used leaves onto the teacher's desk and grabs his *koboko*.

"Some of you have brains made of sawdust," he says.

He runs his other hand from one end of the long, hard whip to the other, slowly. His eyes survey the class.

Those three boys have just earned ten strokes of the *koboko* each, either on their buttocks or their palms, depending on Malam Zwindila's mood.

Who is next?

It is difficult to believe that this man inflicting terror is the same man who stood on the altar in Christ the King Church nine months ago, watery-eyed as his little bride walked up the aisle.

But I am not afraid.

I remember everything Malam Zwindila taught us in the last class and the one before that and in every other one before.

He turns towards the girl's side.

He is about to point his eyes at Sarah when I stretch my hand high up in the air.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

Back at home, Papa and my brothers sit in the living room and talk about the news on the radio while Mama and I sit in the corridor, or in the kitchen.

Back at home, Mama must keep quiet whenever Papa speaks, and I must never question anything he says.

Back at home, the men and boys know everything, but here in school, I know more than all the boys. Salt may laugh at shea butter when the sun shines, but when the rain falls, it must hide its head.

“Sir, democracy is the government of the people, for the people, and for . . . and by the people,” I say.

Malam Zwindila keeps his eyes on me. He doesn’t waver, he doesn’t flutter, he doesn’t utter a word.

He slams his koboko whip down on the teacher’s table, hard and quick.

My heart jumps.

“Clap for her!” he yells.

The whole class claps, keeps clapping, and continues clapping.

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## PINEAPPLES AND LIMES

I GAZE LONGINGLY AT the two straps outlined underneath my best friend's white blouse. When will it be my turn to wear a bra?

She has pineapples; I have limes.

If only breasts were like tomatoes and onions, which were certain to grow succulent and healthy if you put them in good ground at the right time of the year, then watered and weeded weekly. So far, all my daily yanking in the bathroom has yielded no results.

"Just a year or two more," Mama says. "My breasts also took longer to come out. But look at me today."