

EFUA TRAORÉ

CHILDREN
OF THE
QUICKSANDS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

EFUA
TRAORÉ

CHILDREN OF THE QUICKSANDS



MASOBE

First published in Great Britain in 2021
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

This edition was published in 2022 by Masobe
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
Tel: +234 906 730 5909, +234 701 838 3286
Email: info@masobebooks.com

Copyright © Efua Traoré, 2022

All rights reserved.

Efua Traoré has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-991-457-9

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and incidents
portrayed are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by AI's Fingers

www.masobebooks.com



*For my daughters
Shola, Enina and Leila.
And in memory of Ese.*

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



1

Holidays at the Other End of the World

Simi climbed into the taxi reluctantly. The seats were threadbare and it smelt as if the last passengers had been goats. She wrinkled her nose, desperately trying to suppress a new wave of anger and tears.

Her mum, who had just given the driver instructions, came around the car and put a slim hand on the still open door. Simi ignored her, folding her arms across her chest and looking straight ahead.

‘Simi, it’s only for two months,’ her mum said softly.

She didn’t reply.

‘Please don’t make this more difficult for me than it already is. I am so happy to have found this new job. But I have to go to London for training and I can’t leave you alone in Lagos for so long. And you know we really need the money now that your dad and I . . .’ Her mum broke off.

Simi winced at the reminder of the divorce they had all gone through in the past year.

‘Simi, believe me, if I had any other option, I would definitely have chosen it rather than send you there. But we do not have the money for any summer camps and I do not have any other family than *her*.’ The way her mum always said ‘*her*’ made Simi really nervous about meeting her grandmother.

She felt her mum’s eyes on her, hoping she would smile and say that she understood, that she forgave her. Simi did not look up. She had spent the last weeks begging. Telling her mum that she was thirteen and old enough to stay at home alone. That she could borrow the money for a summer camp from her dad, who definitely had enough of it. But her mum had shaken her head and ignored her pleas. So now she ignored her back.

Her mum sighed, then pulled something out of her handbag. It was a little envelope.

‘This is for *her*,’ she said. ‘You must give it to her immediately. On the spot! And I mean as soon as you get there!’

Simi looked up, irritated. What was in the letter? And why was her mum acting so strangely again? All this secrecy really annoyed her. She didn’t know

anything about this woman who was supposed to be her grandmother. She hadn't even known that she existed until recently, when the holiday decision had been made. Just like that: *'You're going to your grandmother! That's where you will spend the school holidays!'*

And as far as Simi had understood, this grandmother lived in the middle of some jungle! A place called Ajao. She would even have gone to stay with her dad and his fancy new girlfriend instead. But her mum was too proud. She would never ask him or anybody else for help.

'Are you listening to me at all?' she asked impatiently. She held the letter under Simi's nose. 'It is very important that you give her the letter at once!'

'Yes, yes. OK,' Simi muttered and took it from her. She slid the envelope into her rucksack, which was on her lap. For a brief moment she felt her mum's hand on her shoulder. Then the rusty car door slammed shut with a rattle and Simi immediately felt the sticky air enclose her like a heavy blanket.

Simi suddenly panicked and rolled down the stuttering window to make one last attempt.

'Please, Mum! Can't you at least take me there? Only until . . .'

Her mum immediately took a step back. Her expression tolerated no further discussion and Simi gave up. She knew that stony, distant look all too well. Whenever it came to the subject of the past or her family, her mum fell silent and became a total stranger to her. The past was an absolute taboo. Simi had always assumed that her grandparents had died in a bad accident or something, and that her mum couldn't bear to talk about them.

She sighed. Now she would have to go alone to this grandmother that she had never met. And she would just turn up at her door unannounced. Her mum had come most of the way, taking the five-hour bus journey from Lagos with her. But now Simi was to travel the last stretch to Ajao in the taxi on her own.

'But what if she's not there?' she'd asked desperately on the bus earlier.

'She never goes anywhere,' her mum had replied dryly. 'Except into the forest to her heathen . . .' She had stalled before continuing more gently, 'She visits a few neighbours, but everyone knows where to find her.'

'Yes, but what if she is not, erm . . . not living there any more?' Simi had stammered. She had actually wanted to say 'alive'.

‘She still lives in Ajao,’ her mum had replied. ‘And she is *alive*.’

‘And what if she doesn’t feel like having her granddaughter for two months without being asked?’

But her mum had just shaken her head. ‘She’ll take you in. She’ll be very glad to see you.’ And that had been the end of the matter.

Now her mum gave the old driver a few more instructions. His name was Mr Balogun, and he had been very excited to hear where he was to take her. He even recognised her mum from years ago.

‘You will be in good hands with him,’ her mum said as the car rattled to life.

And that was that.



2

Journey to the Unknown

The journey to Ajao turned out to be terribly exhausting. The untarred road was deeply rutted by rain and erosion, so that the driver only made slow and difficult progress. The car screeched and moaned so much that Simi worried they might not arrive in one piece.

To the left and right, the dense forest crowded into the road. Tall trees and bushes, higher and thicker than she had ever seen anywhere around Lagos, gave the road a pleasantly cool shade. But at the same time, the forest, towering high above them, felt threatening.

‘What are these trees?’ she asked the old driver, who hadn’t spoken a word since they left.

‘Trees?’ He turned his gaze from the road to look at her, and she immediately worried about him not seeing the next pothole.

‘What are those trees called? The tall ones,’ she asked a little louder.

He looked at her from underneath his wrinkled eyelids. Brown teeth stained with kolanut flashed as his mouth split into a crooked grin. ‘Iroko! This is iroko tree. Tree of spirits,’ he said in a cracked voice.

She nodded quickly and breathed a sigh of relief when he finally turned back to face the road. *Tree of spirits*. His words echoed in her mind like ghostly whispers, and she felt queasy as she stared at the long-limbed trees.

‘Woman, where I dey take you, she be your grandmother,’ he said after a short while.

That didn’t sound like a question but she felt she had to say something, so she replied, ‘Yes.’

‘Your grandmother, she be very good woman. People know am well-well.’

Well, not known by me, Simi thought, and looked out of the window listlessly.

After an hour’s drive, as Simi had feared, there was a loud crash and the car got stuck in a pothole. The driver made a hissing sound and clicked his tongue loudly.

‘You go help me,’ he grumbled over his shoulder.

He got out of the car, bent down and disappeared

from view. Simi opened the door and climbed out gingerly.

The old man knelt in front of the car on the rough ground, muttering.

‘Kiakia!’ he suddenly called. ‘Quick!’ He pointed to the back of the car with a crooked index finger. ‘Push!’

Simi stumbled quickly to the rear. A sudden rustling sound in the bushes beside her made her look around nervously. The huge iroko trees on both sides of the road trembled in the breeze and seemed to arch over her like agitated giants. Goosebumps formed on her skin as she remembered the driver’s words.

‘Push!’ the driver called again.

Simi’s head jerked up. The rustling from the bushes came again and she tried to put away all thoughts of snakes and other animals that might be lurking in the forest. She began to push the car with all the energy she could muster.

The car hardly budged.

What if they did not get the car out? she thought as she looked around fearfully. In the last half hour they had not driven past a single village or town, or seen a single person.

Simi pushed again with all possible force, sweat

breaking out in her armpits. The driver heaved against the car at the same time and this time the car clattered briefly.

‘More!’ he shouted. He twisted the steering wheel through the open driver’s door and pushed the car at the same time. Simi pushed with enough strength to burst her veins. She wanted to get out of this place as quickly as possible.

After three attempts, it worked. The car jerked out of the pothole.

‘Kiakia!’ the driver called again.

Simi jumped into the car, dusted off her dirty hands and breathed out in relief. As the car began to move again, she pulled a book from her rucksack and used it as a fan. The old man’s driving was more cautious now, and gradually she became tired. She leant her head against the seat, despite the risk of her braids smelling of goat, and closed her eyes.

When Simi woke up, the car was slowing down and they were driving into a village. She sat up and looked out of the open window. Everything was the colour of dark red clay – the houses, the compounds and the road. Even the rusty iron roofs seemed to want to blend in.

On either side of this one red road Simi counted ten houses, which were not much more than little huts. She saw goats, chickens and naked toddlers running around. Under a tall mango tree two elderly men faced each other on a bench, playing Ayo. And as Simi watched the round seeds drop into the pits of the wooden game board, she groaned. No TV, no internet or phone to chat with friends, just a board game with seeds. How was she ever going to survive eight weeks here?

She glanced at her phone. Zero signal! She sighed. What had she expected?

At the end of the village, just before the road disappeared into the forest, was a tiny house made of the same reddish-brown clay as all the others. Two faded wooden shutters framed a single window beside an open front door.

The driver parked the car in front of it. They had arrived.

‘Ajao!’ he announced.

Two hibiscus bushes adorned the yard in front of the house. The leaves and flowers were covered with red dust, so even the plant was the same colour as the whole village. A large pot stood waist high next to the front door, a small cup hanging on a cord from the handle.