

DON'T
ANSWER
WHEN THEY
CALL YOUR
NAME

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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Prologue



MBIDO

Our story begins on a farm.

It was the year of the white yam, and Big Father was pleased with his harvest. Mother was not.

Big Father was a man of great height and resolve. A dedicated farmer, he had broken the hard soil and ridged the land. He planted his yams and when they had germinated, their tendrils creeping towards sunlight and tangling with each other, he drove stakes into the soil and watched as the plants curled around them, reaching for the sky; the healthiest yam farm in the whole of the universe, one that stretched from one end of the world to the other.

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The yams flourished. The roots gobbled up the manure fed to them and they spread their hands, the tendrils thick and fat—the width of a baby’s hand. Weeds sprang from the earth and tried to suffocate the yam plants, and Big Father pulled every one of the weeds out and dumped them in a pile to wither. After he was done, after he irrigated the land and fed it cow dung and dead things—organic fertilisers that nourished his precious crops; after the yams grew without impediments, birthing tubers as fat as toddlers, he stood back and breathed, pleased with the work of his hand.

Big Father had a wife—Mother—who was eager to help, and who wanted to join in the farming of the yams, for she came from a race of industrious and ambitious women whose stories travelled the universe. But Big Father rejected her help. He gave her a small piece of land far from his yam farm, and said she must only cultivate female crops, like cassava and cocoyam; what mothers before her had done, and which to him were suitable for a woman.

Mother was furious. The first child of her parents, she had worked her father’s yam farm and made profits from selling the rich crop. Her father

did not mind that she preferred to work on the land; he did not mind that she kept the profits she made after trading her harvest at the Universe Market; he did not mind that she did what sons were meant to do, because she was his only daughter and he would bend some rules to make her happy. He had initially insisted she work with her mother on the female farm, but Mother was a stubborn, cocky sort of child who did what she wanted. Her great-great-grandmother was Ifejioku, the mighty deity responsible for yams in their world, and to whom farmers prayed before and after they harvested the noble crop. But over time, men took over the responsibility of farming the crop, appropriated it, declared it “the male crop,” because it had become a household staple and because they had gotten fat off the wealth they made from it. They dedicated their sons to the service of the crop and called themselves “Njoku,” rising to the position of nobility in their communities.

Mother fought against this, insisted she must farm the crop. Her father tolerated this until she saw her first blood, then he quickly plucked her from her farm, audited all she had amassed for herself, and divided them among her brothers.

“But, Papa,” she protested.

He shut her up with a raise of his hand and reminded her that a girl would always leave her father’s house and move into her husband’s, where she would start her own family and raise children; where she could do as she pleased and manage her own affairs. Mother did not care about marriage or children, but the idea of doing as she pleased in her own home appealed to her, and so she obediently agreed to marry Big Father.

She danced energetically on her wine-carrying day. She smiled into the faces of her brothers, who had bought for themselves the rarest jewels and the finest silks from the proceeds of her hard work.

“Watch me flourish,” she told them as she left their world and moved in with Big Father on his vast farmland.

The sight of the blooming yams welcomed her—their rich green leaves, the properly manured ridges, the irrigation paths Big Father had crafted. She stood on that land, on the first day of her new life, and something lifted in her chest.

“This will do,” she muttered, then tilted her face to the sky, where she sensed that her brothers were watching. “Watch me flourish,” she said again.



Her marriage began to disintegrate in less than a year.

Mother stood on Big Father's farm and hissed at the rich crop taunting her with their fat, healthy green tendrils. She was nineteen years old and she didn't want a child yet. She wanted to become a successful yam farmer and trader, just like the mothers before her who were famous for their exploits at the Universe Market. Getting Big Father to give her some seedlings or even allow her to venture into yam farming had become a major problem. And yet, despite her desperation, Mother would not beg; she was beautiful and arrogant and stubborn, and she tended to sulk. Her father would scramble to indulge her, to get her to smile for him; not her husband. Big Father did not bother to ask why she sulked, why she hissed when he walked past, why she would not share his bed, why months passed and she refused to farm female crops.

A neighbour noticed the rivalry between husband and wife and offered to hear their grievances, to make peace between them. But Big Father did not

care at all; he would come home from the Universe Market and sit in the middle of their compound and spread out bags of jewels, his returns from the sale of his yams. That haughty display of wealth was hard to miss, making Mother angrier. When it became clear that he would never approach her to make peace, that her emotional fits would not break down the walls he built around his heart, she stopped sulking.

Mother was stubborn and arrogant all right, but she also had a good head on her shoulders. She knew that to get what she wanted, she would have to find a way to break down Big Father's walls, to make small compromises so that she would be happy in his house, so that she would regain all she had lost to her brothers on account of marriage. She waited until the harvest season was over and harmattan had come and gone, and the rain had poured and prepared the earth for farming again, before she went to Big Father with a great plan.

There were many stories about Big Father depending on who you asked: some said his mother, The First Mother, suffered many stillbirths and so the creator, Onye Okike, built new bodies until they

found the one who gave them children; that The First Mother finally gave birth to Big Father after a lifetime of trying; that the creator gave Big Father a farmland, which was this world, on the runt of the universe, to cultivate chosen crops and populate the earth; and Big Father worked it so assiduously, broke the hard soil and made much profit, more than all the other children; that he acquired more worlds from his siblings that stretched from one end of the galaxy to the other; that the humongous size of his estate was why everyone began to call him Big Father; and that he was a ruthless man who guarded his acquisitions jealously and was merciless towards anyone who trespassed on his property; that his mother was buried in this world, not on the hallowed grounds where Onye Okike and the first mothers rested; and so he loved this world like a child would their living mother. The stories about him were numerous, but they all agreed on one thing: Big Father would never budge on matters concerning his yam farm. And this was why he did not care for his wife's petulance.

But Mother was undaunted by the stories. She had set a goal for herself, and with that, she went

to Big Father's quarters, at the front of their vast compound, bordered from hers by a short ogirisi fence. The distance between their quarters was a day's journey. The dust whorled that morning as she set out, sweeping red up into the air, tinting everything brown-red. Coconut trees flanked the entrance of his quarters, and birds pecked away at the overripe bananas dangling from the squat trees on either side of the compound.

She knocked on Big Father's door and waited. She should not have had to, but she had been angry with him for a long time, and it had been months since she shared his bed. So she felt like a stranger again, just like she had felt that day, one year before, when he came to their house to ask her father for her hand in marriage. It took a moment, and then she heard the shuffle of his feet, the heavy thud of his steps as he approached the door, and then he stuck his head out first, his brows meeting at the middle in a quick frown before a teasing smile spread over his fine face.

"This one you have decided to show up at my door, I hope everything is fine o," he said, clearly resisting the urge to laugh.

She clenched her teeth and clasped her hands behind her back; she wanted to punch his face. “I am well, my husband,” she told him. “I have an important matter I must discuss with you.”

He laughed again, leaned against his door frame and folded his arms. “Ehen? What is this important thing that finally dragged you out of your hut to my quarters at this time of day?” He looked at the setting sun, the orange glow washing into his yard. He raised a brow in mischief, stared at her hard. “Have you finally decided to return to my bed?”

“Yes,” she blurted, out of breath.

“To give me children?”

“On the condition that you will let me farm yam crops.”

He straightened up, dark clouds rising in his eyes. “You can only farm female crops.”

“Listen, you are no longer a young man,” she said. “You have to start thinking of the children who will take care of this place when you can no longer do everything by yourself.”

Her submission caused him to laugh, a loud cackle that shook the very ground she stood on. “Look,” he said, “when I am desperate for sons

who will take over from me, I won't have to beg you. I can easily find women who will be willing to do what I want."

"Good luck finding anyone as resilient as me. Do you know the mothers I come from?"

"Your great-great-grandmother is Ifejioku. We already know that."

"Yes! And we do not bend for anyone. We never succumb, no matter what. This is what you should want in your children. Children who would stubbornly defend your territories from those vultures you call brothers, who are waiting for you to keel over so they can take over your properties."

Big Father reddened in the face. "No one would dare!"

"You have no idea how jealous people are of your wealth."

He breathed hard, his nostrils flaring. "You will not put ideas into my head, do you hear me?"

And she stood her ground, lifted herself to the tip of her toes so that she matched his height, so that she met the fire in his eyes with her rage. "Your mother did not give up—"

"Don't you dare talk about my mother."