

AN ISLAND

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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**THE
FIRST
DAY**

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It was the first time that an oil drum had washed up on the scattered pebbles of the island shore. Other items had arrived over the years – ragged shirts, bits of rope, cracked lids from plastic lunchboxes, braids of synthetic material made to resemble hair. There had been bodies too, as there was today. The length of it stretched out beside the drum, one hand reaching forward as though to indicate that they had made the journey together and did not now wish to be parted.

Samuel saw the drum first, through one of the small windows as he made his way down the inside of the lighthouse tower that morning. He had to walk with care. The stone steps were ancient, worn smooth, their valleyed centres ready to trip him up. He had inserted metal handholds into those places where the cement had allowed, but the rest of the descent was done with arms outstretched, fingers brushing the rough sides in support.

The drum was plastic, the blue of workers' overalls, and remained in sight, bobbing in the flow, during his hastening to the shore. The body he saw only once he arrived. He side-stepped it, walking a tight circle around the drum. It was fat as a president, without any visible cracks or punctures.

He lifted it carefully. It was empty; the seal had held. Yet despite being light, the thing was unwieldy. It would not be possible with his gnarled hands to grip that smooth surface and carry it across the jagged pebbles, over the boulders, and then up along the sandy track, through

scrub and grasses, to the headland where the cottage sat alongside the tower. Perhaps if he fetched a rope and tied the drum to his back, he could avoid using the ancient wooden barrow with its wheel that splintered and caught on the craggy beach, often overturning as a result of its own weight.

Yes, carrying the drum on his back would be the best option. Afterwards, in the yard, he would hunt out the old hacksaw that lived amongst sacking and rotting planks. He would rub the rust from the blade, sharpen it as best he could, and saw the top off the drum, then place it in an outside corner of the cottage where the guttering overflowed, so that it could catch rainwater for use in his vegetable garden.

Samuel let the drum fall. It lurched on the uneven surface, thudding against the arm of the corpse. He had forgotten about that. He sighed. All day it would take him to dispose of the body. All day. First moving it, then the burial, which was impossible anyway on the rocky island with its thin layer of sand. The only option was to cover it with stones, as he had done with others in the past. Yet it was such a large body. Not in breadth, but in its length. Twice as long as the drum, as though the swell and ebb of the sea had mangled it into this unnatural, elongated form.

The arms were strong, disproportionate to the naked torso's knuckled spine and sharp ribs. Small, fine black curls formed patches on each shoulder blade, and more

coloured the base of the back where it met his grey denim shorts. The same curls, small, too small for a man of his size, grew on his legs and toes, across his forearms and between the joints of his fingers. They unsettled Samuel. They were the hairs of a new-born animal or of a baby who had stayed too long in the womb. What had the sea birthed here on these stones?

Already, as the mid-morning sun was rising, the curls were silvering with salt crystals. His hair, too, was grey where sand had settled in it. Grains adhered to the only portion of the man's face that was visible – part of his forehead, a closed eye. The rest of the face was pressed into his shoulder.

Samuel tutted. That would have to wait. First he would tend to the drum, then next morning, if the body hadn't drifted back into the sea, he would have to break some of the island's rocks, creating enough pieces to cover it.

There had been thirty-two of these washed-up corpses during the twenty-three years that he had been lighthouse keeper. All thirty-two nameless, unclaimed. In the beginning, when the government was new, crisp with promises, when all was still chaos, and the dead and missing of a quarter of a century under dictatorial rule were being sought, Samuel had reported the bodies. The first time officials had come out, with clipboards and a dozen body bags, combing the island for shallow graves,

for remains lodged between boulders, for bones and teeth that had become part of the gravelly sand.

“You understand,” the woman in charge had said, as she looked down at a scuff mark on her patent-leather heels, “we have made promises. We must find all those who suffered under the Dictator so that we can move forward, nationally. In a field outside the capital, my colleagues found a grave of at least fifty bodies. Another colleague discovered the remains of seven people who had been hanged from trees in the forest. They were still hanging, you understand, all this time later. Who knows how many we will find here? I am certain it will be many. This is an ideal dumping ground.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh yes, just look around.” She waved at the view. “No one for miles. No one to see or hear or do anything at all.” She leaned closer, lowered her voice. “They say there’s been some talk that he had secret camps, like concentration camps, where he sent dissenters to die. Of course, we don’t know yet if it is absolutely true. We haven’t found evidence of that, but this could well have been such a place, don’t you think? Isn’t this a place where you would send someone to die?”

Samuel did not reply, and the woman had already turned from him, was calling to a member of her team, tapping her watch. “Keep looking,” she said after the man had shaken his head. She faced Samuel again and said, “Once we’ve found the bodies, that’s the time when the

healing will begin, for the nation, for us all. We can't heal until then. We need the bodies."

When the crew returned one by one, empty-handed, with only the washed-up corpse to show for a day's work, she rushed to the boat, her departure abrupt, without the courtesy of a goodbye. Samuel did not hear from her, nor from her department. He did not know what happened to the dead man, or who he might have been.

Months later, perhaps a year, he found three small bodies washed up side by side. A young boy, a girl, a baby in a blanket. In those days, the lighthouse's radio still worked and he'd contacted the shore to report. The woman called him back, her voice clipped by the static.

"What colour are they?"

"What?"

"What colour are they? The bodies. What colour?"

He was silent.

"What I am asking is, are they darker than us – their skin – that is what I want to know. Are they darker than you or me?"

"I think so."

"And their faces? Are they longer? What are their cheekbones like?"

"I don't know. They're children. They look like children."

"Listen, we're busy people. We have real crimes to deal with. Actual atrocities, you understand. We cannot come out to the island every time another country's refugees flee and drown. It's not our problem."

“What must I do with them then?”

“Do what you like. We don’t want them.”

By then he had already started his vegetable garden beside the cottage, had used his wages to import soil from the mainland, had ordered seeds and clippings. And to protect all of that new growth, he had begun to fashion a dry-stone wall around it. He gathered all the brick-sized stones of the island, fitting them together one on top of the other, until they were high enough, stretched far enough to form a barrier. After that he ordered a sledgehammer and broke apart the many rocks and boulders that comprised the coastline, using the rubble in his construction. Slowly the island began to change shape. Had a helicopter been in the habit of flying over, its pilot would note the widening of the small bays, the curves where serrated edges had once been.

Samuel continued with the wall along the perimeter of the island until everything was encircled. It was into this outer wall that he began to introduce the bodies. Most times before burying them, Samuel went through their pockets for objects of identification, but there had never been anything of significance. Not beyond an old man’s fist, lumpen with a wad of foreign money squeezed to pulp in his grip. Samuel had buried him with it. He selected spots for the corpses in those sections of the wall that were furthest from the cottage, where the smell of their decay would not reach him. Still, they attracted gulls which for weeks hovered and cawed around the wall,

trying to peck their way in. With time he learnt to make these parts sturdier, so that they bulged a little around their contents. Even so, sometimes the gulls managed to break through and pick at the body inside. In those places where corpses were left to disintegrate unaided, the stones often collapsed.

Samuel half-nudged, half-kicked the body where it lay beside the drum. The impact caused the arm to shift, the head to roll from its position and reveal the face. Both eyes opened briefly. The throat growled and fingers on the extended hand twitched, tapping a pebble beneath them.

Samuel shuffled backwards. "Hello," he said softly. Then, "Hello."

The man did not move again, but there was now the visible slow throbbing of a pulse in his neck. Up-down, up-down it beat as the sea hissed onto the pebbles and away again.

Samuel counted. Fifty beats. Two hundred. Three hundred and fifty. At five hundred he turned to the plastic drum, wrapped his arms around its middle and lifted it awkwardly in front of him, unable to see as he stumbled up the shore beyond the high-water mark. He laid the drum on its side, chocked it with pebbles and then returned to the body, counting one hundred more pulses before making his way up towards the headland through the well-worn paths that never altered.

The gulls had arrived while he was gone. They stood a few metres from the man, calling uncertainly, darting forward with low heads. One of them flapped its wings, approached the right leg, and took an awkward peck at the man's shorts. But by then Samuel was on the sandy path, pushing the heavy wheelbarrow in front of him.

"Get away there! Go on! Get away!"

The birds rose, hovering low as Samuel struggled through the boulders to the pebbled shore. He stopped beside the body and removed some rope from the bowl of the wheelbarrow, walking to where he had left the drum. He tied the rope around it, twice across the middle, twice along its height, and fastened it to a tall boulder. There were no trees on this part of the island, only dry, leafless scrub that snapped if touched.

He returned to the man, put a hand under each armpit, and tried to pull him towards the wheelbarrow. The body would not move. Samuel grunted as he continued to tug, hoping that with persistence the body could be yanked loose from whatever held it in place. Soon his arms were aching, the small of his back aflame. He cried out, falling backwards as a pebble came loose underfoot. Now the body was on top of him. A foreigner's damp hair, a foreigner's sweat and breath. He pushed the weight off, lifted himself up. The hair under the man's arms was coarse and long. As Samuel heaved, he felt himself pulling out those rough long strands: they stuck