THE MADHOUSE

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MASOBE

Published in 2021 by Masobe
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanyan,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
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A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-979-651-9

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Layout: AI's Fingers

Cover design: Anderson Ofuzim Oriahi

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To Julie and David Benson

'Time will break what doesn't bend – even time.
Even you.' - Kaveh Akbar

BLUE

When they were young and still shared dreams, the younger brother woke up from a nightmare and whispered to the elder, 'I saw the future.' Now the elder wonders if this is what the younger brother saw: three men struggling to follow a dead woman's vanilla-cake recipe in a small kitchen; three men gravely looking at the big glass bowl of batter as if it holds her body, in the dead silence of a Kaduna afternoon.

He tries to be reasonable again. 'Sir, she is not coming back.'

'She left the recipe.' The father's voice comes out muffled, a sound that has escaped from under water. 'She wrote it down in her own hand.'

The younger brother throws his hands in the air. 'Why don't we just buy the cake, ehn, Max?' Side-eyes the elder brother. 'Why do we have to go through all this stress?'

'Because she wrote it down.'

Hot afternoon. Fly buzzing in some window, punctuating each period of silence.

'Your mother wrote it so that she wouldn't forget it when she came back.' Black-rimmed eyelids looking down.

The elder brother, whom the younger called Max, can use the steely silence in their father's pause to gauge the tumult tucked behind it. Fly buzzing still. Max's eyes on the large hands on the table, straining under the weight of the body of this man who brought him into the world. Sweet Mother always said those were the first hands to carry him.

Max remembers those hands from childhood, how they had picked him up from the ground and flung him high up to the hungry sky and shot up to snatch him before he got swallowed; hands that never missed. He remembers when he stopped trusting them, that heat time in February two decades ago.

‘Okay, sir.’ Rolls up his sleeves. ‘Where did she stop?’ Ignores the raw hurt in his younger brother’s eyes. He is used to it. ‘What next?’

Their father looks up from the bowl, and the youth of the face, intact from their childhood, startles Max. ‘We put the batter in the oven.’

‘But we don’t have baking pans.’ The younger brother still grasping at something, anything.

Max studies both faces and wonders for the first time if they look alike, but decides not so much: André light-skinned like their pops but his eyes darkened from grief; their father’s eyes dark from tozali. The man had been wearing it on his eyes since they were born, every morning.

Max pulls back from the kitchen table, relieved that there is a tangible problem to solve. A true task. Freetown Street had finally joined the rest of the Quarters’ development so their house was no longer the last house on the right. There was now a small supermarket down the road. ‘Let me go and buy a pan.’

‘No, no, no.’ The father beckoned him back. ‘Let André go.’ Caught his eyes. ‘You will stay and explain why you stopped calling your mother.’

But Max is already opening the door and stepping outside, his mind drifting to that February heat of ’94.

Heat. Bringing out the reek of urine and the stench of shit from roadside gutters. Bringing out scorpions and snakes from the forest just after the last house on the right.

Everyone went crazy when the heat came in February. The alcoholic husband living in the second house on Freetown Street – Mister Sly he was called – got fed up with the remorse that followed his daily beating of his wife, so he hanged himself from his parlour ceiling fan on the night of the twenty-fourth while his family slept. Aresi, the long-suffering wife, quit her job at the bank and abandoned her clothes and the house and was last seen disappearing into the forest just after the last house on the right to look for her dead husband and children, even though she was the one who woke up and untied him.

Their five children cried in their house from morning till noon, when busybody neighbours came to break down the glass-panel door, yet the Freetown Street children didn't cease their eternal drama of death: each child took turns to play the deceased, and the child who could hold their breath the longest as his or her corpse was transported on the shoulders of other children, had rights to everyone's biscuits or one kobo.

The children made sure Mrs Kufre was not around when they enacted the death play, wailing and falling on each other, overcome with pretend grief as they paraded down the street, stopping to replace the dead child who could no longer hold his or her breath with an eager one. Little fights broke out when this happened and they all fought for turns. Everyone claimed to have been truly dead. Everyone wanted to die and be lifted up.

Baba Rotimi was rumoured to recruit people in their sleep for free labour from the hours of three to 5.30 a.m. That February, people in the Quarters were beginning to wonder how he was able to cultivate that vast amount of land deep in the forest. People were wondering because in those days it was getting harder to recover from a long night's sleep; instead of feeling refreshed in the morning, they woke up with bodies pressed down from exhaustion. Baba Rotimi was accused of hypnotising people with voodoo to do his work. Jungle justice prevailed that February, in spite of his likeability and cries of innocence, because local logic held that even if he was innocent he must have been guilty of some similar secret offence and this was karma. His farm was not destroyed because there were rumours of cannibals in the forest who tempered their appetite with raw crops, but he was beaten in the night by the area boys and advised to get a job.

The thing was that everyone in Sabon Geri was wary of hypnotists. It was in that same February that some of them, masquerading as a dance troupe, complete with all the steps from all tribes of Nigeria – from the mesmerising snake-like Swange of the Tivs to the vigorous shoulder flexes of the Jukuns – visited Sabon Geri. By the time they were gone, everyone who came out to watch had something missing: old expensive jewellery hidden under the bed, naira notes in the purses and shoes, coins in empty tins, even Mama Kufre's expensive wig.

The people of Sabon Geri did not joke with omens. When news got to the Quarters of the new Biro pens with perforated cork-tips that killed students who were greedy enough to write till the last drop of ink, there was considerable panic. Parents and guardians bought extra pens for their children and reiterated the stern warning.

Mrs Kufre saw her death when she saw the procession of children acting the notorious death play one day. She had gone to get ingredients to prepare vegetable soup for Mr Kufre, since he had forgiven her for an unmentionable in a telephone call to her office and promised to come back home. Something had rushed in her chest when she hailed a motorbike taxi at the market but she hadn't known what it was. When the okada man turned into Freetown Street and she saw the procession of pretend mourners roll down, she recognised the rush she had felt in the market to be premonition, and it clenched its claws round her heart each time the okada man threw her into and out of a gallop. She shook it off with rage. Her house came into view and the claws clenched.

'Drop me off, oh drop me off!' She slapped the Okada man on the back. 'Stop, stop!'

He had been whistling Victor Uwaifo's *If you see mammy water o, if you see mammy water o, never never you run away*, when she startled him with the slaps, so he lost control of the motorcycle and crashed into Baba Halisu's enduring Peugeot 504 parked in front of his house. The car had not been moved in a decade and its tyres were long gone, but it probably caused more accidents than any moving vehicle in Sabon Geri. Mrs Kufre's skull cracked in the gutter she had been flung into, some brain matter splattered on the new concrete work begun by the governor in fulfilment of a promise older than his tenure, and the terrified children who saw everything before their mothers and elders could come and cover their eyes never played the game again.

◆

Long after light has left the rooms of a house, after sounds of daytime wane and curtains settle for the night, it is possible to find, trapped in a bottle of oil or jar of water, the heat of an afternoon.

It burnt from the inside.

No occupant of the Quarters could remember what electricity had looked like in their homes, so no electric fans could cool those hot afternoons and no refrigerators could chill water for drinking. The father sawed one of the rubber Geepee tanks in half and filled it with tap water. When the children came back from school he was already immersed in it, stripped down to his white underpants.

'First person to jump in,' he announced and both boys began to wriggle out of their clothes as fast as they could. With big splashes that made the father cackle, they dunked in, André sulking because Max got in first.

'Don't worry,' said the father. 'Sweet Mother will be the last person,' and to that the boys started singing the Prince Nico Mbarga classic *Sweet Mother! I no go forget you, for this suffer wey you suffer for me yeah*, punching the air and beating the water. By the time Sweet Mother walked in from work and kicked off her high heels in the corridor, André and Max had exhausted their day's activities with their father. When they saw her, they pointed wet fingers at her.

'Mummy, you're laaaaast! Mummy is laaaaast!' called André.

'Last at what?' she asked with a distracted smile, mind still at her day job.

'To get in,' replied the father, eyes flashing with a private heat.

She whipped her hand in a circle round her head before snapping her fingers at him to say *over my dead body* and starting to walk to their bedroom, but he caught her by the arm, ignored her half-chuckle protests and pulled her in, and the children cheered at the big splash. She screamed and laughed and they