

THE DAYS OF SILENCE

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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a novel

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MASOBE

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For Joy, our star...
Keep Shining

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BOOK ONE

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One

It was on a Tuesday, the 22nd of January 2013, Mama told us she would return. “Thursday night or Friday morning,” she said, but she wasn’t sure if they were arriving first in Lagos or flying directly to Abuja. It would depend on the final destination of most of the other officers.

In less than seventy-two hours we would see her again. But it wasn’t the prospect of seeing her after a whole year away in Sudan that excited us. She was coming back with a big surprise for us, and she wouldn’t tell us what it was.

“Could it be a new car?” Ejiro was the first to ask. She wished Mama would buy a new car after selling her old Toyota Starlet.

“Could it be that she’s been promoted finally?” Peace asked, and we all hoped it would be.

Could it be a man? It wasn’t the sort of thought one gave voice to. Each of us pondered within ourselves what the surprise could be, but we came up short. Then Ejiro who couldn’t tame her curiosity decided to ask Mama

the same thing I was thinking when she called again. As if she knew.

“Are we expecting someone we haven’t met before?”

“That shouldn’t be your business. If I said it was a surprise, you should wait for it,” Mama replied sternly. In the last two weeks, she no longer sounded as enthusiastic as she did when she first spoke of the surprise. But it didn’t stop us from playing the guessing game each time she called, a game that never earned us answers. “I have told you to wait for it,” was all she would say.

While our mother was away on the peacekeeping mission in faraway Sudan, my sisters were home, making war with each other. But, since she told us of her return, they managed to call a truce and avoid each other’s path.

Peace cleaned Mama’s room and changed the sheets on her bed. Ejiro removed the dusty curtains and the centre rug for washing, although, she was not particularly enthusiastic about the task. I was responsible for getting rid of the dust and making the windows sparkle. Later in the day, Peace cooked Mama’s favourite dish—vegetable soup and pounded yam. She was the only one that could cook it just the way Mama liked it. Unfortunately, Mama did not arrive that night. She arrived the next morning.

Our laughter echoed across the bright living room, which still smelled of paint. Ejiro and I had repainted the walls white so it complemented our new black sofas. It was a slight alteration to Mama’s favourite pale yellow which

she painted our walls every Christmas. Surprisingly, she liked it when she walked in, except for the sofas, which she referred to as, “burial colour.” We were not surprised by her disapproval because she disliked black. We just didn’t think she would forbid it on furniture. According to her, black was a symbol of death and mourning.

“Classy you mean?” Ejiro said.

“Boring, depressing,” Mama said. “Person die? I’m changing these chairs as soon as I can. Who uses black chairs these days?” She rubbed the tip of her fingers on them and sank into the single sofa. “How did you let them choose black when you were there?” She turned to Peace.

“I didn’t like it at first, but see, it’s really not so bad. Besides, these were the cheaper ones.”

“You’re just old school, Mama! This is what you see in the houses of big men,” Ejiro teased.

The living room was littered with Mama’s suitcases. Her brown handbag lay open on the carpet, with its inner pocket revealing some dollars. We spent the best hours of the day listening to her peacekeeping and flight experience while unwrapping the gifts she brought. Although she had not mentioned the surprise since she returned, with each gift we unwrapped, we anticipated it like it was the surprise.

Ejiro whispered to me to ask her, but I refused. We were happy with our gifts, except for Peace who returned the jeans she got from Mama. She had told Mama that

she wanted skirts over the phone when we were asked what we wanted: “Long black skirts or navy blue, without slits, so I can use it for church.”

Peace had stopped wearing trousers, tight dresses or anything that hung above her knees and revealed her arms, for almost two years. It didn't matter to her that we constantly told her she had a body for trousers. Unlike Ejiro, who showed off her small waist, full breasts and round buttocks in tight dresses, Peace preferred to overlay her smaller features with oversized clothes.

“I can't accept the trousers Mama, sorry,” Peace said gathering the rest of her new clothes.

“But they are not even tight. I bought the loose ones hoping you'd like them, and there's nothing really wrong with you wearing them at home.”

“Everything is wrong. A woman should be modest in her dressing and should not tempt men, if not, what would be left of her virtue? It's in the Bible that we shouldn't wear men's clothing.” She was still talking when Ejiro chuckled.

“Don't you dare come for me today,” Peace said.

“If you don't want them, please give me.”

“Ejiro, mind your business,” Mama said waving her forefinger in Ejiro's direction.

“Don't worry Mama, she can have them.” Peace thanked her and left quietly for the room.

Ejiro and I continued to try on the rest of our outfits

for Mama, but she seemed distracted. She was constantly glancing at her phone. When she went to the balcony to make a call, we dipped our hands in her bag, hoping to find a clue to the surprise. We checked the inner pockets but found nothing. When she returned, I noticed her eyes looked like they were begging to be shut.

“Maybe our surprise has been delayed,” I whispered to Ejiro who was now engrossed in her phone and biting her lower lip.

Later, we joined Peace in the room. She was kneeling by the edge of the bed, praying, with a Bible in one hand. She was dressed for choir practice. Somehow, I was happy not to have been in the room with her earlier. She would have asked me to join her in prayers, and to please her, I would have obliged. Ejiro had warned me to always speak up when I'm not in the mood to pray with her, but I could never be so bold. We snuck quietly on the bed. Ejiro's phone continued to beep with new messages and she kept smiling as she typed her replies.

I grabbed the ELLE magazine beside her. It was one of the several she brought back from Stranger's house. She got them from him whenever he travelled to Paris. I flipped through its pages, enjoying the sight of skinny blonde women, yet secretly wishing to see a brown skin like mine. I smiled when I recognised a few words from the little French I managed to learn in junior secondary school. I peeled out samples of perfumes and creams from

a few pages, and softly inhaled their fragrances, saying the word, “parfum” with an affected French accent. I giggled, reached for my journal and began to scribble.

C'est Osssas. Osaass! I dragged the name out of my lips.

“Osasé, are you okay?” Ejiro’s voice silenced the voice in my head.

“Of course, I was wondering how the French would pronounce my name,” I replied.

“Na so madness dey start oh,” Ejiro said and shook her head.

Ignoring both of us, Peace got up, carried her handbag and left the room.

“Who have you been chatting with? I asked Ejiro.

“My Stranger,” she replied with a shy smile, before putting her phone aside.

We heard Mama scream and we rushed out to see what had happened. She was lying on the cold concrete floor of the balcony. Her phone was by her side and a few clothes that were hung to dry on the rope had fallen on her shoulder. Her face was to the ground. She didn’t move.

“Mama, Mama! What happened?” Ejiro tried to pull her up.

“What happened Mama?” I asked.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “It will never be well with

your father oh, never ever. After everything I have done for Peter?" She heaved a long sigh. "How can it go well with him?" She placed her palms on her thighs as if the answers she sought could be found there. She would not look at our faces.

"What has Papa done this time? I thought you said you'd never contact him again. Is he okay? Did he die?" Ejiro asked.

"May thunder fire that your mouth there!"

"Sorry oh." Ejiro moved back so that Mama could get up. I gave her a hand and managed to pull her up. We stood aside, trying to hide our confusion.

"Didn't she just curse him? Why is she now using the same mouth to defend him?" Ejiro whispered to me.

Mama stood up, groaning as if she was in pain.

"Sorry Mama." Ejiro and I spoke at the same time.

"I am fine. Can you please go inside and give me some time to rest?" It was as if the weight of her frustration had found its way to her voice; it was croaky.

I tried to imagine what was going on with her. It was typical of Mama to fight her battles in silence and through prayers. Although I worried, I knew she would be fine. She had always been resilient.

At eighteen, she had joined the police force and had been dedicated to it for thirty-four years. It was from her income, we fed, clothed, and paid debts in the countless pubs Papa frequented. Even while we still lived with him

in Kano, she single-handedly raised us after Papa lost his job due to his recklessness. Amidst their constant conflict, she found innumerable ways to prove her love for us. Food was always her main love language with us; she would go out of her way to place rich meals in front of us whenever she could.

We were back in our room when we heard sobs coming from her room. Papa must have hurt her for her to break down on a day we should all be merry. Ejiro was lying on the bed with her headphones on and humming to the music she was listening to. She asked me to bring the boiled corn and coconut she had bought the day before from the kitchen.

As I walked through the veranda, I noticed Mama's door was partly opened. I tiptoed in and tried to steal a glance. She sat on the bed, with her back to the door. My heart was racing because I knew if she turned and saw me, I would be sorry. I thought she was asleep where she was seated until I heard her muttering. I strained my ears to listen to what she was saying, but the words were unclear.

I tiptoed to the kitchen and rushed back to the room. I wanted to tell Ejiro what I'd seen but I knew it would only make her curious and since I couldn't explain what I'd seen, I said nothing. Ejiro removed her headphones and grabbed a corncob from the bowl.

"So that's how we will not see our surprise again because of that man?" She sucked her teeth and made a