

# LITTLE ROT

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PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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*To those of us who cannot  
help but look at true things.*

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I'm just trying to look at something without blinking,  
to see what it is like, or it could have been like, and how that  
had something to do with the way we live now.

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS  
TONI MORRISON

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



# ONE

**Friday, 6:46 PM**

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**T**he sun was setting in an oily splash of colour, streaked blood in the sky under swollen clouds. A train circled the airport like a rusting tapeworm, lengths of loud metal dragging against old elevated tracks that the government could barely be bothered to maintain. Down on the ground, Aima looked up with nausea slicking greasily inside her. Metal screeched against metal as the train turned a corner, and she winced.

It had been years since she had stepped into one of those death traps; Kalu had insisted that a driver from his company shuttle her around since they had moved back home. She had thought she was blessed then, to have a boyfriend like him. He was generous, he adored her, and she was absolutely sure he'd never been unfaithful, which barely any other woman in the city could claim of their own partners.

None of that had mattered in the end. If there had ever once been anointing oil on Aima's head, it had long since dried up, leaving her faith unhappy and flaking.

From the cracked sidewalk, she stared at Kalu as he pulled her suitcase from the boot of his car, his shoulders strange under

his shirt, his face warped. His hair was cut low and neat as always. A plane whined above them as it descended, the sound fanning through the hot air. Kalu's mouth was pressed into a stressed line. It looked out of place on his soft face—his mouth was always meant for easy smiles, his broad body for drowning embraces that Aima used to cherish. Her friends back in Texas had joked that Kalu was her personal teddy bear, somewhere safe and warm, someone who would never hurt her.

Now, he looked like a foreign place, and Aima wanted to tap him on the shoulder. He'd look up with those dark, dark eyes of his; and she would ask who he was exactly, what he was doing here, and what had happened to the man who had laughed with her in Houston and promised to never let her go. She didn't move, though; she just kept staring as a dry breeze blew the tips of her black braids across her back. Aima had loved him for four, almost five years, and this morning, after she'd booked her tickets away from him, Kalu had refused to let the driver take her to the airport. He'd slid behind the wheel himself, and for the whole ride, Aima had pressed her forehead to the glass of the passenger window, her earphones locked into her ears.

Over the gospel music she was playing, she'd heard ghost snippets of his voice trying to get to her, timid and weak attempts at connection, tendrils dying in the air between them. It was all small talk, nothing she could hold with both hands, meaningless chatter that avoided the truth of what they had both become. So, when they pulled up to the curb of the airport and Kalu had reached out to touch her arm, Aima had shrugged him off and stepped out of the car without saying anything. If he wasn't going to talk about it, he didn't deserve to touch her.

Her dress whipped loosely around her legs as she stood next to the car, and she could feel the eyes of the uniformed men at the

door moving over her. She wondered if they could see her thighs through the flowered chiffon—it was thin, and her skin was bare underneath.

“You should wear a slip,” her mother used to say. “Don’t be indecent. God is watching you.” But it was hot, and even though God had crawled His way into her life since she had come home, Aima didn’t think He particularly cared about her clothing choices. With a body as full as hers, she’d been hearing people call her indecent since she was a child. She smoothed her hands down the front of her dress and waited as Kalu placed her suitcase on the ground beside her.

The terminal for international departures was full of people seeing others off, families gathered with their children darting through a forest of legs, gorged bags being unloaded from taxis, voices flapping and thickening the air. Aima wanted Kalu to drive away, but she knew he wouldn’t leave until she was safely inside the building, as if someone was going to kidnap her from the pavement. As if another car was going to pull up, wheels smoking, arms and bodies leaping out to grab her and throw her inside and drive her off to a different kind of life, a secret part of the city, one that didn’t involve Kalu. But there was nothing, nothing except traffic and voices and polluted air and ruined love and a cracked faith. Aima sighed and watched dully as Kalu extended the handle of her suitcase, pulling it up in two sure clicks.

“You don’t have to go,” he said, and she stared at him.

Two and a half hours in traffic coming down from the highland because there had been an accident on the South-South Bridge that squashed everyone into a single lane. There’d been blood on the road, a bus on its side, armed personnel guiding cars past. Two and a half hours, and it was now that Kalu had decided

to find mouth. All that evasive small talk just to bring up the true thing when they were about to part.

Aima fixed her eyes on him and said nothing. His tone was an insult anyway. He'd made it too casual, as if he was presenting an informal option. He didn't want to sound like he was begging her. Pride. Another thing she didn't recognise in him. What other sins had he accumulated since they had come home? When had he become so set, so unwilling to be soft with her?

She stared at his face, at the instability of his eyes. Four years together, four years of his pupils dilating for her. She had seen those eyes in all their permutations—clear and bright, dim, narrowed, wet. Aima knew the forked wrinkles that crowded in the corners, the way they changed course like undecided rivers when he smiled, the swoop of his eyelashes falling as he laughed. It was amazing how strange his eyes looked now. You could be so intimate, so familiar with someone's skin and flesh and spirit, only to wake up one day and find that it had receded from you, suddenly, like a tide rushing back out into the sea, leaving you with dissolving foam and a damp heart.

"You don't have to go," he said again, the same way.

Aima knew she should ignore him, but to her regret, she was still soft. "What do you want me to do? Stay here? And do what?"

"What we've been doing," he answered. She knew he meant loving each other, but they'd already been over this.

"Wasting time? Living in sin?"

He flinched. "Please don't start that again; it's not true. We're not wasting time, and you didn't care about this living in sin nonsense until we came home."

Aima wiped a thin film of sweat from her forehead and sighed. It was humid beyond belief; New Lagos was in the middle of the rainy season. Of course Kalu didn't care. He was the man—

he would get congratulated for getting her to live with and fuck him without having to marry her. She was the one considered to be a whore, a slut, a loose girl, easy, no morals. He didn't care that she'd woken up one morning and seen the sunlight break through the glass and something about the New Lagos dawn had woken God up in her heart. She had tried explaining it so many times, but he was hung up on the woman she used to be, and she was disappointed in the man he still was.

"I don't have energy for this, Kalu. Not again."

They'd been arguing for months and it was tiring, so tiring to fight for what was supposed to be love, allegedly love. It didn't feel like love anymore. Their relationship felt distorted, a mask of dissatisfaction or apathy that had fallen into the skin underneath, cannibalised it. Whatever it had been, if it had been love, that thing was gone, dead. Aima wrapped her hand around the handle of her suitcase and swiveled it to start entering the airport. If she didn't move, Kalu was just going to stand there and continue being the coward he'd recently decided to be. Before she could walk away, though, he came in for a hug.

"You can't just go like that, without saying goodbye."

Aima made a face and reached around him with one arm, going for a pat on his left shoulder, but Kalu wrapped her up as if nothing had changed for them. His palm was wide and gentle at the back of her head, and he buried his face in her neck, muffling his voice. "Please," he whispered. "I love you so much, baby."

Aima felt tears start up and it made her angry. He smelled like home. He smelled like a hundred sleepy mornings together, and it wasn't fair. As if she didn't love him. As if any of this was happening because they didn't *love* each other. He smelled like light, clean and bright and tearing through her. Aima squeezed her eyes tightly, refusing to cry in front of all these people.

“Love isn’t enough, and you know it,” she snapped, pulling herself away.

Her wheels clattered against the cement, and she didn’t look back as she dragged her suitcase past the men at the door, ignoring their voices as they tried to get her attention. Once inside, she put her suitcase on the conveyor belt, through the X-ray machine; then she collected it from the other side and stood in the crush of people.

What was she supposed to do now? The counter for British Airways already had a long queue of people waiting to check in, heaping their bags on the scale and arguing with the airline employees about weight restrictions. Aima stood motionless and considered. She could get to the lounge, put her earphones back on, and listen to some music, pretend that none of this was actually happening. In three hours, she would be airborne and out of this damn place. The night would carry her away, and before sunrise, she would be in London.

Her phone buzzed and she glanced at the screen. Kalu. I love you so much. I am so sorry. Have a safe flight.

Aima wasn’t sure why that pissed her off all over again. It should be fine that he gave up. It showed who he really was, and besides, she *wanted* him to give up, didn’t she? If she was leaving, didn’t that mean she wanted to be let go of? Her jaw clenched with a surge of rage. No, Kalu shouldn’t have caved. She wasn’t sure what he should have done other than be a different person who wanted something different, or wasn’t afraid, or whatever, but he had definitely done the wrong thing. Aima shoved her phone into her handbag and turned left, walking to the Airtel booth, temper steaming off her. People stepped out of her way with curious glances at the set of her face. She recharged her phone credit, bought a new data plan, and went down to Arrivals,

leaning her suitcase against her thigh to carry it down the stairs. Standing outside a snack stall, she took her phone back out and called Ijendu.

“Bebi gehl.” Ijendu’s voice sang over the line. “How far? Have you checked in yet?”

“Ije, I have a favour to ask, biko.”

“No problem. What do you need?”

Aima hesitated, then jumped. “I don’t want to take this flight. Is it all right if I come and stay with you? Just for a little bit?”

Ijendu whooped in her ear. “Ahn, of course, bebi! My house is your house. You don’t even have to ask. So, you and Kalu are working it out, abi? I knew it. It’s not possible to just have everything end like that, not for the two of you.”

The rage hammered under her molars. “No, we’re not working anything out. Unless he proposes, I’m not interested in whatever he has to say.”

“Ahn ahn now. It’s not by force, Aima. Let him propose on his own time. Men don’t like it when you pressure them like that.”

“I don’t care what he likes. That’s his own problem.”

Ijendu tsked in her ear. “Babe, this your vex is much. The man loves you.”

“Ije, please—”

“Okay, okay, sorry. Go and find your taxi. I’ll be at the house.”

Aima hung up and called an Uber. Eleven minutes. She sighed and sat down on her suitcase, trying not to put too much of her weight on it, hovering on the edge. She was good at that, trying not to put too much pressure on things, trying to fit into slivers of space, press herself against the edges so she wouldn’t bother anyone. It was probably why Kalu was so shocked when she stopped doing it, when she looked around and thought—*Wait, I’m not happy like this.* When she’d told him what would

make her happy, he'd acted like she'd asked him to kill his own mother. Maybe he'd thought she would go back to the edges and give him back the space to do whatever he wanted on his own time, but that's the problem with pressing yourself down too much, folding and folding when you're not really made of a material that's suitable for those kinds of creases. At some point, you just spring back up when you can't take another bending, not a single pleat more. And upon that, you spring back with force, and your momentum can be quite upsetting to people who didn't expect you to claim your space.

Aima had thought about folding back, of course; she knew how much easier everything would be if she just agreed with Kalu that, yes, there was no rush to get married and they didn't have to do things on the timeline of anyone else; except that she wasn't anyone else. She mattered in this, and he'd acted like she didn't even have the common sense to think or decide or want things for herself, like she was just giving him an ultimatum because everyone else said it was somehow for them not to even be engaged yet. Something about that, how pliable he thought she was, had annoyed her to the point where she couldn't give way, not this time. And so here she was, suitcase packed and Kalu driving away after four whole years. Amazing.

Her phone rang and she picked it up, coordinating with the driver, who pulled up in a small but clean blue car. He made to get out of the driver's seat, but Aima waved him off and put her suitcase in the back seat herself, climbing in next to it.

"Mbano Estate?" the driver asked.

"Yes, thank you." Aima slid her earphones back into her ears and rested her forehead on the glass of the window again, watching the city reverse the way it had come less than an hour before. It was a thick city, especially in the lowland—brash and pungent, a