

**THE  
ROAD  
TO THE  
SALT SEA**

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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**MASOBE**

Published in 2024 by Masobe  
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited  
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,  
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria  
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Email: info@masobebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-60517-9-6

Jacket design by Anderson Ofuzim Oriahi

[www.masobebooks.com](http://www.masobebooks.com)

*For Jahdiel*

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No one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark

—Warsan Shire, “Home”

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## A TRANS-SAHARAN MIGRANT ROUTE FROM NIGERIA



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# 1

After fixing the tire, Able God drove carefully through outlying streets in search of a guesthouse. The darkness did little to ease his anxiety. It would be harder to find him in the dark, when faces were barely noticeable. He turned down a road lined by buildings. He located one tucked within a maze of tenement apartments. The walls were stained brown, there was not a signpost in sight, and a long passageway led to the entrance. It was perfect.

The hotel attendant, a man with bushy eyebrows and a stubbled chin, stood behind the reception desk. There was a telephone on the counter, and a huge black-and-white television hung in a corner, encased in a cobwebbed iron frame.

"You are welcome to Mount Pleasant Guest House. How may I help you?" the fellow asked.

"I wan lodge for room."

"Single or double bed, sir?"

"Just give me anything you have." Able God responded impatiently. He wiped the sweat from his exposed palm on his trousers. The receptionist threw a suspicious look at him. Able God slipped some notes on the counter.

"Once again, you are welcome to Mount Pleasant Guest House," the man said with a smile as he unhooked a key from the rows of keys on the wall. The receptionist led Able God upstairs to a corridor with six facing doors and wiggled the

key into one of the door locks, pushing and pulling at the door before it finally creaked open. A rancid smell issued forth. The receptionist handed Able God the key and went back downstairs. In the room, Able God paced manically, shaking his head in panic.

He parted the curtain and gazed outside: nothing but a wall. He went to the bathroom to inspect the gash across his palm. He wet a wad of tissue paper under the faucet and, flinching, wiped the blood off the wound. Back in the room, he sat down on the edge of one of the hard twin beds. A folded, worn-out towel and a chip of soap were arranged at the foot of the bed. The asbestos ceiling was bloated with water and streaked black. The walls were collaged with chipped enamel. The air-conditioning system made a humming sound punctuated by a violent mechanical crunch, like a pepper grinder.

He pulled out his phone and dialled the number Akudo had given him. Five times he called, no response. He called Ben Ten. No answer. A curious thought flashed through his mind. Maybe calling Akudo from an unrecognisable number would work. He scribbled her number with the guesthouse pen on the pad on the bedside table, tore the page from the pad, and rushed downstairs. The receptionist was dozing, his head on the desk.

“Excuse me, sir,” Able God said.

The receptionist sprang up, wiping a streak of white saliva from the corner of his lips.

“Yes? Can I help you?” He peered at Able God with tired eyes.

“I want to call this number. Can you help me?”

The receptionist shot Able God a wary look. The man assessed him, his gaze falling on the wound in Able God’s hand and the bloodstains on the side of his trousers. At that moment, Able God realised that the receptionist had to be

aware that he was in trouble. He dipped his hand into his pocket and brought out a few crumpled bills which he slid across the desk.

“Oga, we no want trouble for this hotel o,” the receptionist said, smiling ever so slightly.

“No, my brother, I just wan phone somebody.”

The receptionist took a quick glance at the money and bundled it off behind the desk. Able God reached out for the handset on the desk and punched in the number. She still did not answer. Shit! He returned the phone to the receptionist and went back upstairs.

He thought about calling his parents, but immediately shot down the idea. He'd already caused them so much pain and disappointment. They would almost die of shame when they realised their son was running from the law, but that would be better than seeing him presented before the shutter-clicking press and surrounded by armed police officers. He'd be handcuffed together with Akudo, perhaps wearing just his underpants in the police's typical fashion of publicly humiliating suspects before trial. In this fevered imagining, Able God knew they'd allow Akudo to keep her clothes on, but not him. His face would be swollen and bloody after they tried to force a confession out of him. He was all entangled in this. There was no way out.

He ran to the bathroom and retched into the toilet, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He flushed, watching the vomit eddy and swirl around the bowl. He flushed again, watched the water disappear. Still not satisfied, he flushed the toilet again and again. Then he washed his face and looked in the mirror.

He lay on the bed and closed his eyes. No sleep. He felt weak, hollow inside.

A little later the electricity went off. Silence. He squirmed, rolled over. Now he could hear rats scratching in the walls.

In the quiet darkness his fear seemed to assume a more fearsome quality, bearing down on him till he gasped for air and drenched himself with his own sweat. He let his mind wander to distract himself from the feeling inside his chest, and his thoughts travelled to his stained work clothes. Time to get rid of them. Guided by the light on his phone, he grabbed his backpack from the bedside table. One by one, he pulled the items of clothing from the plastic bag, spreading them out on the mattress. They represented a past he would be forced to leave behind. That was when he noticed his name tag was missing.

**EARLIER THAT DAY,** Able God had been seated behind the driver, anxious for the vehicle to hit the highway. When it did, to calm himself, he watched trees and buildings rush by. Upbeat Fuji spewed from a broken cassette player in the driver's seat. The Danfo driver kept locking eyes with motorists, grinning as he flew past them. Steering with one hand, he switched cassettes. The broken cassette player expelled a tape, exposing strands of cascading wires, and instantly gobbled a new one. It groaned and spluttered static before coughing out a more upbeat Fuji tune. The driver cut off another vehicle. This time agitated murmurs filled the air. One passenger spoke up, asking if the driver wanted to kill them all. Another pleaded with him to take it easy.

Able God was unmoved, or rather, he was too preoccupied with his own anxieties to care. If anything, he wanted to get to his destination as quickly as possible, for with the crisis came a timely solution. As far as Able God was concerned, there was only one way—they both had to leave. If he escaped without her, then Akudo would take the fall for the crime they had both committed. What would happen to her daughter? If the three of them survived the treacherous journey, they would be on the other side of the sea within days with a new life,

and maybe he would be at peace. Maybe he would be able to atone for what he had done.

It was time to pay.

Able God buried his wounded hand deep in a pocket. The other hand, which did not stop trembling, was out. At first, he reckoned it must be because of the shock of seeing so much blood. But several minutes passed, enough time for the initial trauma of the incident to have subsided, enough time that he was able to scrub himself clean and think up a plan with Akudo, enough time for him to flee the crime scene without attention. Fearing someone would notice his trembling, he tucked his hand into his pockets. But that also made him look suspicious, especially when it was time to use his hands for what people used hands for, like paying the Danfo bus fare on his way to the rendezvous spot. The bus conductor, a gaunt-faced man with a receding hairline, gave what Able God deemed to be a concerned look when he produced a crinkled note with an unsteady grip, so he immediately turned away to avoid conversation.

Able God got off the bus and walked quickly along a bush path near a row of houses close to his neighbourhood. Anxiety swelled in his chest, and pain stung his hands. He studied his surroundings, his gaze finally settling on a heap of refuse dumped at the side of the path. Unzipping the corner of his backpack, he smelled stale blood as he peered inside the plastic bag at his stained work clothes. He was preparing to toss the clothing on the pile when he heard footsteps behind him. Seconds later, a passerby asked him politely to step out of the way. Able God stepped out of the way, and the passerby continued his journey.

He decided it was best to incinerate the clothing when he got home. But first, he needed to help Akudo get out of the country.

**A WOMAN HE** recognised as one of the madams sat frowning on a stool in the doorway of Akudo's room. A group of drunken ladies danced to reggae music pouring from a loudspeaker in front of the other rooms. They smoked and vied with each other to see who could make the most suggestive gyrations with her hips. Awkward and out of step with the beat, the group shrieked with joy and stuck their tongues out whenever the snare drum's rhythm was interrupted by a sharp break or the guitars twanged. Able God greeted the madam and peered into the room, expecting to find Akudo there packing her belongings. The madam spoke before he did. He strained to listen. She said something, but he could not hear over the loud reggae noise from the speakers.

"What?" he said in a loud voice, leaning toward her.

"She has left. She is no longer here," the woman replied.

"Left?" he said, confused.

"Yes, she left. She no longer works here."

"That's not possible," Able God said. "We spoke in the afternoon. That's not possible!"

The sudden fury he felt toward Akudo hardened his tone. There was a tightness in his chest. Her words made him feel nauseated. He drew a sharp breath, then glanced at the plastic bag wrapped around his injured hand. The wound had stopped bleeding, but it still throbbed with pain. The woman sprang up and signalled to the ladies to cut the noise. They obeyed promptly, and silence descended on the place.

"Akudo no longer works here," she said, leaning against the door frame with folded arms. "What is it that you don't understand about what I just said?"

Had Akudo reported him to the police, or had she blamed the death on him? Able God had been careful about removing all signs of his connection to the crime—as careful as his panicked state would allow. Now he wanted to ask the woman if she knew Akudo's whereabouts. He wanted to say