

BOUND TO SECRECY

SAMPLE

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'Sherif's novel is written in a concise, accurate and relentless language.... The writer plays confidently with the classics of world literature' **Mannheimer Morgen**

Vamba Sherif was born in Kolahun, Liberia in 1973. In his early teens he moved to Kuwait, where he completed secondary school. The First Gulf War compelled him to leave Kuwait and settle first in Damascus, Syria, and then in The Netherlands, where he read Law. Vamba is also a journalist and film critic. His passions include music, film and rare books on Africa. His books include: *The Land of The Fathers*, *The Kingdom of Sebah*, *The Witness* and *The Black Napoleon*.

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Vamba Sherif



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To the women of Liberia who inspired this book

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 1

On an oppressive day in the dry season, a man stepped off a bus and crossed the main street of the border town of Wologizi. He approached a young man who was bending over a cistern filled with water. The youth had been gazing for quite some time at his own reflection, and the face that greeted him in the clear water wore a beatific smile. Though the stranger walked with a limp, over the years he had learned to conceal his handicap cleverly by strutting, so that the youth who heard his footsteps and turned fully to face him assumed he was arrogant. In fact, the youth was less fascinated by his suitcase or tailored, three-piece suit than by his manner of walking. It was the assertive gait of a man well aware of the effect his appearance had on people.

The stranger sat down on a bench under a leafy tree not far from the youth, and he heaved a deep sigh that betrayed his contentment. Wologizi fulfilled his expectations, for as he glanced across the dusty street, he could see several old men: two of them were stretched out in hammocks, and the others were lying on mats, whiling away the stifling hours in the shade of a breadfruit tree. The border town was asleep, in the thrall of the heat. While travelling to the town, the stranger had toyed with the idea of yielding, like those old men did, to the lethargic spell of the heat without a care in the world. And as if to confirm that thought, a gentle breeze

started from his right, from the direction of the youth, and drifted peacefully towards him. He closed his eyes to savour it to the full.

‘Come here,’ he called to the young man.

The stranger watched him cover the short distance between them, his gestures languid, his gait remarkably feline, but not until the youth stood before him did he notice the fear in his eyes.

‘Can you show me the way to the mansion?’

This was how the house was called in that part of the country, the mansion, and the stranger knew this. The youth raised a slender hand and pointed to a house in the far distance. The hand, the stranger noticed, was pocked with burn marks, which did not appear to be ritualistic, but he stood up, choosing to ignore them. Beyond an ochre hill through which the main road had been carved, the stranger could see the mansion perched proudly on another hilltop.

‘Who lives there?’ he asked.

The youth did not answer.

‘Tell me who lives there?’ he insisted.

Although the identity of the occupant of the mansion was common knowledge, the youth remained silent.

‘Come on, don’t be afraid. Tell me.’

The stranger’s tone was reassuring, even appealing, but the young man continued staring at the ground. Perhaps, the stranger thought, the young man’s reluctance was due to his timidity.

‘Why are you so silent?’

It was at this point that he reached out to pat the young man on the shoulder, a gesture he immediately regretted, for it triggered a reaction that baffled him. The youth recoiled, broke into a run, and never looked back until he disappeared behind a curtain of dust.

The incident still disturbed the stranger even after he had traded the pleasant shade for the terrible heat, and when he turned to the old men he saw that they had not stirred from their positions.

The road he took to the mansion was punctuated by dust-swathed houses, from which an occasional voice could be heard, subdued to an almost sensual whisper by the noonday heat. On reaching the town centre proper, he saw a Lebanese man, one of many who traded in that country, standing before his shop and munching a loaf of bread with the avarice of a child. On his right, he saw several youngsters gathered around a poster, in front of a cinema, discussing the film – its heroes and heroines and the murderous tactics of its villains. It reminded him of his own childhood. The stranger passed a gas station where some men were playing checkers beneath its rusty roof. Incited by a handful of spectators, the two main players were slandering and insulting each other, cursing and swearing in the most exaggerated tones, as if locked in a duel of death. The first threatened to defeat the second, warning that he would forfeit his wife and property to the winner and never play checkers again. The stranger ignored them, but could still feel their eyes boring a hole in his back, even after he'd rounded a bend. On turning around, certain he would face one of them, he saw nothing but a cloud of dust rapidly heading his way.

Soon, he arrived at a junction with divergent paths which went on to enclose collections of thatched huts and mud and brick houses. Instead of taking the road to the mansion, he opted for the main one that led up a mountain and down a valley. He wanted to see the river that formed the border between his country and the other, and how the border was manned. However, the ascent was difficult, the

heat unbearable, and soon he was sweating profusely. The stranger loathed the smell of his own sweat, which was acrid now despite the fragrance that he wore, and more than once he had to stop to dab his face with a handkerchief.

It took him nearly an hour to reach the river which lay at the foot of the mountain. Long before he could see it he could hear it gurgling softly, as though it was whispering a secret. Contrary to his expectation, there was no building on either side of the river to indicate where one boundary ended and the other began, no custom officers, in fact no sign of life at all but an occasional call of a lone bird or an animal. Even the river was carelessly bridged. Some logs had been thrown across it, which were now old and worn out. Beside the bridge, tied to the trunk of one giant tree and extended across the river to another, were strings of woven ropes, a phenomenon known in that part of the country as the monkey-bridge, a bridge used only during rainy season when the river overflowed and covered the main bridge. What manner of a border town was it without clear-cut borders?

The stranger turned back and headed for the mansion. Long before he could reach it, the house rose before him, majestic and imposing, overlooking Wologizi with evident pomposity. The three-story building was cut off from all sides – from the valley at its rear and the town sprawled below it – by walls of cement bricks topped with shards of bottles. The first thing that caught his attention was the radio antenna which towered over the house. Then he saw a warning boldly written on the gate which read: **BEWARE OF MY PRESENCE**. He reasoned that perhaps it referred to a ferocious canine trained to pounce on intruders like him, so he shouted to lure it out but got no response.

On drawing closer to the legend, he noticed that unlike the rest of the walls it had been repainted recently. The gate stood open, and he entered with some reluctance. On his right was the one room-radio station which he approached, listening for any sign of movement. It had no door and its windows were broken. The stranger entered and discovered that the radio which connected Wologizi with the outside world was out of order. All of a sudden he had a distinct feeling that someone was spying on him, and he left the radio station as if in a daze.

Climbing the stairs up to the first floor of the house, he emerged into a spacious living room with a high ceiling, stained at the corners as a result of leakages. Everything was covered with dust: the once beautiful chairs and tables with the flag and seal of the country carved with precision in them, the wooden cupboards with an impressive display of Chinese porcelains and vases, and the gilt-framed portraits of various dignitaries, were all entangled in mass of cobwebs. Even the walls were not spared. Spiders were perched in many corners, the windowpanes grimy. The smell of decay lingered in the air, dominant and pervasive, and for a while the stranger stood still, taking in that neglected splendour, overwhelmed by it all.

Outside, at the rear of the house, he searched for an explanation for the condition of the mansion but was offered none. There was a kitchen without utensils, and a well beside which stood a rusty bucket. He paused to gaze at a mountain rising up before him, just one of a long chain of colossal mountains that enclosed Wologizi.

Once again he felt a presence behind him, furtive but persistent, and he turned around only to face a tiny, emaciated old man in a homespun baggy gown, his jaws moving determinedly as he chewed a kolanut. The old man

looked wary of the stranger. The sun was at its zenith now, beating down with cruel intensity on the two men; the air was still, trapped momentarily in the oppressive silence of that deserted place.

‘What a beautiful mansion you’ve got here,’ the stranger said.

To this unusual form of introduction, the old man initially responded with silence but could not resist the disarming smile of the stranger who moved towards him, his hand stretched out in a greeting.

‘That’s what everyone who comes to Wologizi says.’

The stranger’s handshake was firm, and as it tightened around his hand, the old man felt an unbearable pain but chose to conceal it.

‘One cannot miss it,’ the man went on, his voice carrying the same note of spontaneity and charm as at first. ‘When I stepped off the bus I saw it in the distance and decided to admire it from close.’

Only then did he let go of the old man’s hand, and he quickly moved to the front of the compound where he stood gazing with rapture at the mansion, as if he was seeing it for the first time.

‘It looks so out of place here,’ he finally said.

‘The mansion was built a long time ago for the president who’s yet to visit us and occupy it. Until then we’ve decided to keep it empty. Every once in a while we come up here to dust it.’

The old man, as he said this, noted the stranger’s every reaction but apart from the warm smile on his face he betrayed no other emotion.

‘It’s indeed a house befitting a president.’

The old man moved a few paces away from the stranger, as if he was about to leave him, but suddenly turned to him.

‘You said you stepped off the bus here?’

‘I was just passing through.’

‘Never been to this part of the country?’

‘It’s my very first time here, old man.’

‘Then you should have known that a bus comes this way once every few days and sometimes once a week.’

‘Once every few days?’ the stranger asked.

The old man nodded. The two were standing under an acacia tree, facing the radio antenna to which the stranger’s eyes often turned, as if wondering about its relevance to Wologizi. In silence both men pondered the exchange, each lost in his world, each weighing what to say next, and then one of them spoke: ‘There is nothing I crave right now in this unbearable heat more than a cold palm wine.’

It was the stranger. This frankness brought a smile to the old man’s face, for it confirmed what he’d been thinking at that every moment.

‘Then you’ve come to the right place,’ he said.

Both men laughed. The sun was at their backs, fierce and implacable, as they climbed down the hill.

On the roadside, in front of them, a snake lay basking in the sunlight, but on noticing the two men it slithered into the grass, becoming one with the bush. When silence fell in the wake of the footsteps of the two men, the snake emerged out of hiding and glided languidly to the roadside.

Wologizi was still in the grasp of the heat, but in a few hours it would shed off this numbing influence and usher in the evening with a flurry of activities.

CHAPTER 4

Makemeh was the only one besides him walking on the main street. At that hour of the day, the street exuded the sensual smell of dust as after a slight rainfall. She reached the town centre proper which was crowded with marketeers, and all the while William followed her but at a discreet distance. Soon the centre was behind them, and he saw a man approaching Makemeh with swift steps, saw him reach out to stop her by placing his hand on her shoulder. The man was tall and heavy-set like a wrestler, and he wore a tailored grey suit and a broad-brimmed white hat. From where he stood, William could not tell whether Makemeh was responding in any way to the man, as she was standing with her back to him. Suddenly she left him and walked on.

William waited, just like the man, until she veered off the main road and took a grassy path, climbing a hill towards a house he would later come to know was her home. Then the man crossed the road and entered a carpenter shop from where the sounds of machines emerged. On both sides of the path Makemeh had chosen were verdant bushes, and at one point she stepped into the bush to the right of the path. William pursued her at a quick pace but lost track of her when she stepped into the bush. He found himself in a coffee farm which encompassed a huge area, including some parts of the mountains. Fiery ants assaulted him. One

got lost somewhere between his waist and nape, and just as he was about to give up after a thorough search the ant bit him. He fumbled through his clothes but failed to find it. On lifting his gaze to a coffee tree right above him, he saw a colony of agitated ants, and broke into a run. He stopped to catch his breath, and from close by he heard the furious fall of coffee seeds into baskets hooked to the coffee trees, while a singer spurred the workers on with her praise songs.

On tracing the source of the voice, it led him to Makemeh. Her voice was clear, almost sparkling, as she wove the names of the workers into her songs. Most of them were women. Their bare backs and their tough and tested shoulders glistened with sweat, as they filled baskets with coffee seeds which they then carried on their heads to a warehouse to be dried and cleaned. The women pulled frenziedly at the coffee seeds, their faces, their bared shoulders and breasts exposed to the assaults of killer ants whose bites sometimes occasioned fever or even death. They were in the grip of filling and emptying baskets with a dedication that rendered their faces the aspect of fierce competitors.

With the workers was an old man who looked on with an air of solemn importance. He was tall, dressed in a long gown, and with a trimmed goatee. On seeing William emerge from the cover of the bush and into a clearing, the old man stopped, and Makemeh did the same.

‘So you followed me here,’ she said.

She was sweating but sounded calm, her voice mirthful, full of delight and promises that made William’s heart skip a beat.

‘I wanted to know where you lived.’

Most of the workers had by then stopped and were watching William and Makemeh. A silence fell on the farm.

The man turned to his workers and roared at them:

‘Go on with work or you’ll have no lunch today. Who is this man?’ he asked Makemeh.

‘Mr Mawolo, meet my grandfather Boley.’

William extended his hand, but Boley ignored him and instead turned to his granddaughter with a stern gaze.

‘Is he one of your suitors?’

Makemeh laughed.

‘My grandfather is a jealous man, Mr Mawolo.’

‘I came to repair the generator,’ William said.

This piece of information brought a smile to Boley’s face, and all of a sudden he was friendly and charming. ‘Mr Mawolo, we truly hope that you are the man who would once and for all put a stop to the chronic malfunction of our generator. We are fed up with it.’

There was an aura of importance about him that even his working clothes could not conceal; his trimmed goatee with its dash of grey gave him an air of cultivated arrogance punctuated by his habitual toying with the edges of his gown.

‘Where are you staying?’

‘At the mansion.’

‘That makes you the first person to ever occupy that house. You must be a very important man, Mr Mawolo.’

‘The mansion was Old Kapu’s idea.’

Boley nodded without a comment, as if he could read into William’s answer the real purpose of his being in Wologizi. This was a man, William thought, one could easily get to dislike.

‘It’s lunch time,’ Boley then shouted.

The workers came out of the coffee farm in rags, their sweaty faces lined with extreme fatigue, and they headed for the house where lunch awaited them. The house was a large, whitewashed affair which thundered at that hour of

the day with the cry of children. Boley showed William to a sofa in a spacious living room and then disappeared into one of many rooms in the house, only to emerge later in a fresh, embroidered gown, ready for lunch. When William was about to join them, Boley stopped him. 'I'm sorry Mr Mawolo,' he said. 'I only feed those who work for me. That's the rule of this house.'

The tantalising smell of chicken cooked patiently in peanut sauce tormented William. His stomach churned, and despite the insult he craved to be part of those people squatted around the lunch in groups according to age and stature. On a dark-blue wall before him was a portrait of Boley right beside the president's, both large and impressive. The president looked young, full of vigour and promises, but a moustachioed Boley looked serious and with the rough edge of a hard-working farmer.

Makemeh came to William's rescue. She led him to a shaded corner of a courtyard with more than a dozen rooms looking out on it, and gave him a calabash of cold water. That afternoon, some boys had plucked a basket of mangoes from the trees that surrounded the house, two of which Makemeh decided to prepare for him. She covered the distance between him and the kitchen, which was part of the courtyard, aware of his intense gaze – felt it burning her nape even when she was not with him but in the kitchen, preparing the mangoes. Later she came out with chunks of the fresh fruit in a bowl. William attacked them, his hunger heightened by her presence.

'Is your grandfather always like that?'

'The townspeople call him "the Miser."'

'How was his relationship with your father?'

She seemed uncomfortable, and William thought that perhaps her father was a sensitive subject to her,

his disappearance unbearable. She must be suffering, he thought, not knowing his whereabouts.

‘You’ve started off on the wrong foot, Mr Mawolo.’

‘No, I don’t think so; you are the one who came to me.’

She pondered this for a while, and then decided to throw him a fragment from the past and see what he would do with it.

‘It began with the storm, Mr Mawolo.’

Makemeh related the day her father came to see her on the rice field, which was part of the large farm, two years before his sudden disappearance. It was in the wake of a terrible storm that had spared most houses in Wologizi except her father’s. The storm had carried away the entire corrugated iron roof, spreading the sheets scandalously on top of a tree behind his house. Before the disaster, Tetese had scraped a living by telling stories, an unrewarding profession, because he was not taken seriously by the townspeople, and as result he was often penniless. The incident with the roof only added to his misfortunes. Makemeh was pinching rice plants in the swampy soil, her feet knee-deep in the mud, the sun steadily burning her back, when she heard her father say, ‘I came to see my daughter.’

Those words were directed at Boley, his father-in-law, and there was an unmistakable tone of anger in his voice. It was the first time she, Makemeh, had ever seen her father stand up to her grandfather. She had quickly crawled on all fours out of the swamp, anxious to reach her father before the situation escalated between the two men. On her face was a smile she was certain would calm him once he saw it.

‘So you’ve heard about the roof,’ Tetese said to her.

He seemed mollified by her presence, as if being with her made it possible to bear his misfortune with some pride. He would tell her that day that the one thing he regretted

the most in life was not being able to bring her up, or to father her as was required of a man. Makemeh could see herself in him: the broad forehead, the impatient lips which moved constantly but would close whenever he became aware of them, as though it was a habit he loathed. And then there was his height: Tetese was as tall and as slender as she was. She noted, as if for the first time that day, the sharp difference in the colour of their skin, her father's as dark as soot, hers as bright as amber.

'What are you going to do now?' she'd asked.

Tetese had shrugged – 'I don't know.'

'And then,' William prompted. 'What happened then?'

'It was then that I suggested to my father to approach the Lebanese, Mr Mawolo. I told him that perhaps the Arab could help him with some corrugated-iron for his roof.'

'Why not your grandfather?'

'The two were not the best of friends,' she said and paused, gazing in the direction of the main door. 'My father always accused him of stealing the one person dearest to him – me.'

'What did the Lebanese do?'

'Why not ask the man himself?'

'How could a mere storyteller, who was not taken seriously by anyone, make it to the paramount chieftaincy?'

'I'm sorry, I cannot tell you this. My only suggestion to you is to begin your investigation with the Lebanese.'

She had a point, he thought. Perhaps it was better to hear out the Lebanese, and even though he doubted whether that would unravel the mystery of Tetese's disappearance he hoped it would lead him on the right track. The Lebanese, being a foreigner in that town, might know things that would be of some value to his investigation.

Makemeh promised to see him that afternoon. Then she stood up and led him through the house to the front door. The house was by then empty, most people having returned to work. For a while after she was gone, he paused before the closed door, vacillating between climbing down the hill or confronting her and ridding himself of the doubt that had gathered like phlegm in his throat. Though he'd been aware of every phase of their interaction, had he ended up yielding a part of himself to her? There was no sound of her footsteps on the other side of the door, which meant she was watching him. Was it to make sure he was gone and then gloat over the fact that henceforth he would be at her beck and call? What role was Makemeh actually playing?

Through a peephole Makemeh noted, as she watched him leave, that the stranger limped. Not even his lofty disposition, not even the expensive suit, could conceal the handicap. The stranger looked so solitary, so fragile before the storm of a series of events that had been unleashed before his arrival that she feared for him.

END OF SAMPLE