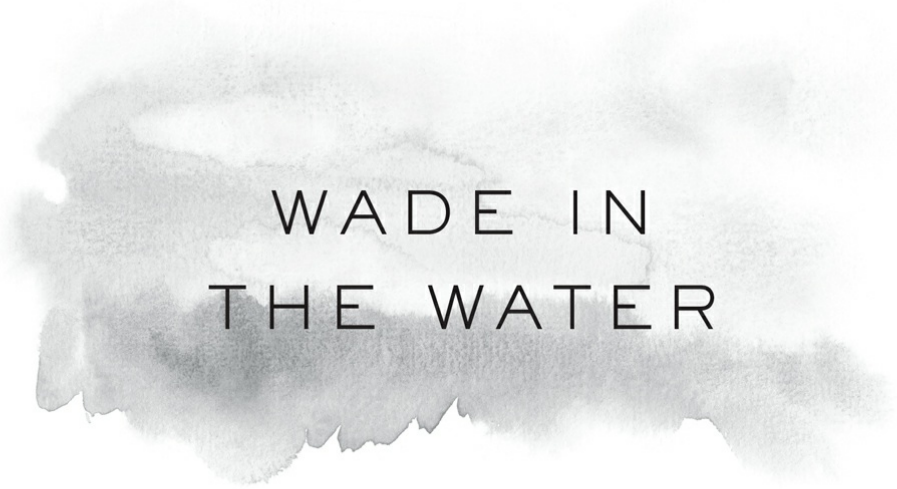


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WADE IN THE WATER

A
NOVEL

NYANI
NKRUMAH



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THE WATER

A Novel

NYANI
NKRUMAH



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Dedication

For Mansa Nkrumah, with love

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Part One

Chapter 1

Ricksville, Mississippi, Summer 1982

There weren't many people I loved when I was eleven, but I loved Mr. Macabe. I knew he couldn't be my daddy because he was too old, but I always thought of him as my granddad even though I'd never had one. Mr. Macabe said his blindness gave him the second sight. That he could see deep into souls. I didn't believe him one lick.

"I go to Sunday school," I would say sharply to him, "only God sees into souls."

He would grin back at me, his partly toothless smile reminding me of my seven-year-old cousin, Devin.

I ran all the way down Ricksville Road to get to Mr. Macabe's house at number 2, feeling the last memories of school fade with every step I took. I wanted to keep that feeling going all day, so I dawdled by Cammy's house, wishing she hadn't gone away to her father's somewhere up in Indian Reserve country, and dodged around that half-naked crazy Sammy who shouted obscenities at anyone who came within his sight.

Finally, I was at Mr. Macabe's.

Mr. Macabe lived on the right, five houses down from mine. I walked up the porch stairs and up to his front door. I pushed the door open and went inside and there he was, sitting in that old wicker chair. I went right up to him like I always did and stared into his milky eyes, willing him to open them and see me. He was wearing a dirty, torn, pale blue shirt.

My eyes swept up and down to scrutinize his skinny frame, taking in the overgrown gray beard that partially covered strong carved-out, oak-colored features, and finally settled on his worn and calloused feet. Every inch of him was as familiar as the red dirt that filled the potholes on our street.

"That you, Ella?"

"Yes. It's me, Mr. Macabe. Just wanted to tell you that we won the Ricksville mud battle this morning." The mud battle happened only in

May, a few days after school ended, and it had to have rained enough for the soil to get so sopping wet that we could scoop it up like clay and mold it into balls. The battle was one side of the street against the other, and every child between the ages of four and fourteen had been outside hurling mud balls.

“Heard you all a-hollering this morning. Couldn’t even sleep in. Must think I’m deaf, too.”

He took his time packing tobacco into his pipe, and I stood by his side, close as I could, while he finished.

“How’re your legs doing?” I asked.

“Still not working as good as they should, Ella. You’ve been asking me the same question since you were six.”

“Because I’m still waiting on God. He’ll fix those up good as new, same as your eyes.” I looked at him again, wishing that what I believed would just flow from my eyes into his brain.

“Ella, why you always waiting on a miracle? Those don’t come by here often, you know.”

“I know God can make many miracles,” I said. I was tired of having to convince Mr. Macabe that if he believed hard enough, he would see. He was so old, you’d think he would know these things by now, but no, I always had to tell him.

“Have you seen Fats around here?” I asked.

“Why you all keep calling that boy such a horrible name? What if people started calling me blind old Mr. Macabe? Would that be nice?”

I wanted to tell him that everyone *did* call him blind old Mr. Macabe when they were talking about him, but I didn’t want to make him mad because then Mr. Macabe would raise that cane of his and bring it down every which way about, and you’d have to duck just in case it hit you.

“He was just here, not ten minutes afore you, looking twice as muddy.”

Fats was my second-best friend, after Cammy. Everyone called him Fats, even his ma. Every single part of his body was round, from his full soft bulging lips to his pudgy rolling belly. Fats was the color of sandpaper, but when you looked carefully, that color seemed to depend on which part of his body you were looking at. His face was like butterscotch, all smooth and warm, but his belly, hanging out over swim trunks, was pale and pasty, like the underbelly of an octopus, while his arms and legs were a chocolate brown.

Mr. Macabe reached and took my thumb out of my mouth and put his hand in mine. I could feel the calluses in lumps and bumps under the hardness of his palm. I could never figure out how he knew the minute my

thumb was in my mouth. He had long grown tired of telling me that I was too old for that, and I'd get rabbit teeth.

"You all right, baby girl?" he asked me. "Things all right at home?"

I nodded.

"Leroy's still away?"

I hesitated, not wanting to say anything because maybe Mr. Macabe had that second sight that made him sense things no one else did, but in those seconds I waited, Mr. Macabe's voice was back again, sharper. He was now leaning forward, looking through me, trying to see deep into my soul again.

I kept it out of his reach, buried it way, way down.

"Is he back?"

"No, he's still away." I managed to keep the wobble out of my voice.

"That man's been away almost nine months this time." Mr. Macabe seemed to be talking to himself again.

He leaned back in his chair.

Leroy, my stepfather, was Ma's husband and the father of my sister and brothers. I knew he hated me. Couldn't stand to look at me.

I wanted Mr. Macabe to go right on talking about something else and not try to look into my soul, so I said quickly, "You going to be all right?"

"Yes, don't you worry that pretty head of yours over me. Just hand me a clean shirt."

I went to get Mr. Macabe a clean shirt and came back with his favorite gray shirt with the white collar.

"Want me to fix you a sandwich before I go?"

"That would be real nice. There's a piece of bacon in the fridge and some bread on the counter. Make sure you wash those grubby hands first."

I fried up the bacon and made the sandwich.

"Now, what's your new word for the day?" he asked.

"*Preposterous.*"

"My, my, my. That's a handful for a little girl. You know what it means?"

"Yes," I said, rolling my eyes to give him some sass. "It means ridiculous, absurd, foolish, inane."

Mr. Macabe could hear that sass right in my voice, but he only shook his head and said, "You keep it up, hear now?" He stretched out his hand, and when I grasped it, he pulled me close to him for a quick hug.

I ran down the street. Past the tiny, mostly rented clapboard houses that made up my neighborhood in the black part of town; past the big old sign where if you squinted you could just make enough sense of the peeling red

paint to read “Town of Ricksville, MS, Population 8014”; past our neighborhood liquor store; past Fats’s house at number 6; past Cammy’s at number 8 until I reached the smallest house on Ricksville Road, number 12. It was a slightly lopsided house that you could just about tell used to be yellow. We lived in the poor, all-black neighborhood of South Ricksville, which, on our classroom map, was south of Main Street.

Years back, in 1964, Main Street and most of its stores had been burned to the ground in retaliation for what happened near Philadelphia, Mississippi, when the Ku Klux Klan had killed those young election workers turning out the black vote. All that had put in stone the open resentment between blacks and whites, and even though the white owners had rebuilt, we kids almost never ventured north of Main Street into the white part of town. Those lines, drawn in the sand between north and south, stayed unchanged over the years. Every child in Ricksville knew where they were supposed to be when the sun set. If we were sent to get something from the larger grocery five blocks into the north side, the moment the glow of the sun started to retreat, our feet had better be on North Perry. If darkness was moving in fast, we would have to run at full tilt—only when we hit South Perry could our feet slow down, and our hearts steady, and our lungs fill with air. Then we would settle into a stroll, because from there it was a straight shot from Perry to Woodlawn, Woodlawn to Grace, and Grace to Ricksville, and then we were finally home.

Chapter 2

Princeton, New Jersey, January 1981

She wore a white dress, one of those pretty cotton sheer dresses. She had felt like wearing a summer dress today, but it was freezing, so she had it on over her warmest wool turtleneck and her thickest leggings. The dress was sleeveless, gathered at her narrow waist. Pearly buttons ran down the front of its length, just stopping short above her ankle. She was all fingers and thumbs as she tried to button it up quickly. She slipped on her black boots before stopping to glance at herself in the mirror. Her father, who preferred her all dressed up the older she got, would have approved of the dress, all southern and demure. But he wouldn't have liked the shoes, nor the turtleneck.

She never was one for mooning in front of mirrors, but she took a glance at herself out of habit. She knew what she was: nondescript. She had shoulder-length straight brown hair, brown eyes, and pale white skin that burned easily in the sun. An everyday person that barely afforded a second glance. She made up for that with a well-placed belt, or shoes, something that would cause them to take another look, if not at her face, then at the rest of her, which she knew was very well proportioned.

She would be late, and she couldn't afford to be. She paced up and down the tiny apartment searching, first for her black cross-body satchel, her coat, her journal, which she took everywhere with her, then her ruler and pens, and finally her watch, which she hurriedly shoved in the bag. She didn't stop to grab anything to eat but almost ran down the stairs, jumping over the steps two at a time, till she was at the bottom. Ten minutes of brisk walking and she was almost there. Relief at the sight of the massive dark brick administration building ahead of her slowed her down a notch. Two minutes later, she pushed through the large spring-loaded doors and immediately could hear them even before she saw them, a raucous crowd of students, the din of their excited voices filling the hallway. She joined the line in front of a long desk behind which sat four

ladies, each busy registering second-semester classes, papers and books strewn all over the desk in front of them.

“Is Dr. Livenworth’s class still open?” she called out, even as she stood eighteenth in line.

“Wait your turn,” someone said behind her.

She turned and stared into a set of hazel eyes. It was an undergrad. Lank brown hair, needing a cut. She made an impatient gesture.

“What’s so important about getting a class with Livenworth anyway? Heard he’s a terrible grader. A guaranteed C or below.”

She had no time for him. She ignored all the babies, or so she called them. Those eighteen-year-olds who were at least fourteen years younger than she was. She was a graduate student, but certainly older than most of the graduate students in her year group. She screwed up her face in concentration. She considered buying someone’s spot in the line, but she had not thought to bring cash with her. She had to get into this class, *The Rise of the Black Working Class in America*. Her advisor had said it would help her as she began her thesis research on the impact of the black migration and the civil rights movement on southern society between 1940 and 1980. She had become more and more liberal since college, fully immersing herself in the diverse environment of NYU, where she had been an undergrad, and now at Princeton her friends were a mix of every race, creed, and color under the sun, as were her interests. It was deliberate, and her thesis topic was just as deliberate as everything else she had done since she left the hospital.

By the time she reached one of the registering ladies at the table, there was only one spot left in Dr. Livenworth’s class.

She almost wept in relief.

Chapter 3

I looked down at the state of my clothes after the mud battle; Ma would surely give me a hiding. So I left my shoes at the door and went upstairs to wash. I changed, put my dirty clothes in a bucket and gave them a good scrub on the washing board, like Ma had taught me, before hanging them to dry on the line outside.

I sat on the front step, reluctant to head back into the steaming house. It was getting dark, and the sinking sun gave the clouds a heavenly golden-red aura. I reached up and waved to God, who I could just see by his wispy beard. I didn't need a Bible or preacher to tell me God was there; all I had to do was to look outside, past the buildings and the roads that humans had created, to the magnificent magnolia trees that spread out on their own, branches outstretched as though the trees were praising God. Then, finally, I would look up, way up, past the clouds, past the edge of the earth, almost into the Third Heaven.

"Hello, God," I whispered. "It's Ella again."

The clouds moved and God's mouth opened into a wide smile. I smiled back, taking in the gentle breeze and the responding rustle of the leaves. God was passing by in the wind.

"Please make another day just like today," I asked silently.

I never got an answer, because just then I heard the shuffle of Ma's feet down the road, heavy with weight and tiredness. I ran to help her carry in our evening meal—a bag of leftover chicken and fries from Nate's Diner, where Ma worked. The last stretch was downhill, but she was still breathless from the steep climb where Grace meets Ricksville Road.

"Ma, please give me the bag . . . Ma . . ."

Ma's mouth twitched a little, but she said nothing.

"Ma, give it over."

Ma handed me the bag, and I ran past her, wishing that someone could do something about her sore legs. I flicked on the lights, dumped the bag on the table, and took out the place mats to set the table.

Ma finally came in. She moved slowly past me and stood heaving by

the kitchen counter. She opened the bag and began putting chicken pieces and mounds of fries onto the paper plates, and I took them in turn and carefully set five heaped plates on the small kitchen table by the window.

Finally, she turned.

I waited, knowing that she would now speak.

“Get the others.”

She never called me by my name.

I was the sin that she couldn’t wash out.

I went out the front door and yelled, “Kitty, Callun Thomas, Stevie! Ma wants you!” I waited ten seconds and bellowed out their names again, hard. Stevie came first, running from behind the house, carrying a baseball bat and gloves. He was thirteen, almost fourteen, two years older than me. C.T., the baby and only four years old, trailed behind him. Kitty, who was sixteen and the eldest, was always late. I left Ma to deal with finding her and banged the door shut. Then I scooped C.T. into my arms. He was a bit slow, but he was the sweetest boy I knew. I ruffled his soft light-brown hair and rubbed my face on his cheek.

“You’re so pretty,” I said.

“No!”

“Okay, handsome. You’re the most handsome boy in the world.”

C.T. smiled, a big broad toothy smile. I took him to wash his hands, and by the time I got back into the kitchen, the others were all there. Three heads that looked like Ma and Leroy: soft light brown curly hair; vanilla-hued skin and almond-shaped green eyes. They were so pale they could almost pass for white, except for the curls in their hair and the slightly generous set of their mouths.

I sat at the end of the kitchen table, dark as an oil spill, looking like a cuckoo in their nest.

Becky, my ex-best friend, had taken me behind the woodpile four years ago when I was seven and whispered that I was illegal and that my real father was an Army man with short steel-wool hair, coal black, just like me, who had stopped by Ma’s house while her husband, Leroy, was away on one of his long trips. “Just long enough to hang his coat before he was gone,” she had added, with her ma’s snide smile.

“Illegitimate, not illegal,” I had corrected, furious enough to strike her dead. I hated her from that moment on, and I planned an exacting revenge—hacking off all the hair on her baby doll with the open-and-shut eyes. I swore I’d never talk to her again, and I never did.

Ma spent most of the meal with C.T. on her lap, feeding him like a baby even though he was old enough to use a fork. She was breathing

better now. Her hair, pulled into a bun for work, now hung loose and luxurious down her back. As soon as she was done with C.T., she put him down on the floor. Kitty put her arms around Ma, and as she did so, Ma's face became soft and relaxed, like putty. I wondered what it would be like to have that effect on people, on Ma.

Kitty was pretty, slender, and waiflike with wide-set eyes, a button nose, and long wavy hair. Ma had once said that looking at Kitty was like standing beside a blue ocean and gazing over the sunset. In our house, we knew that she mesmerized Ma and Leroy with her beauty and her dainty flounce. Somehow the rest of us had escaped her spell.

Stevie saw me looking at them and winked. He was tall for his age, and handsome, except he had big old buckteeth. No one made fun of his teeth, though, because he was the smartest kid in town. Ask Stevie anything about math, physics, or engineering and he would talk you into an unexpected nap. He wolfed down his dinner as usual and waited for Ma. She was who we all yearned for, and Stevie and Kitty constantly fought to be first place in her affections. But we were never able to forget that it was Kitty who was to be Ma's ticket out of the poor side of Ricksville. Ma was going to get Kitty married to a lawyer or doctor up in Atlanta, one of those Morehouse graduates who was looking for a beautiful wife. Never mind that she couldn't divide eight into fifty-six without having to recite the entire eight-times table.

"Do you want some more food, Stevie?" Ma finally noticed Stevie's empty plate.

"Yes. Ma, you sure can fry up some chicken."

"Yes what?"

Ma was a stickler for good manners. She didn't want us disgracing her in public. She wouldn't let anyone forget that although she had sunk this low, she hadn't started out this way.

"Yes, please, Ma. We're in the finals for the baseball tournament, Ma."

Ma turned her attention fully away from Kitty and smiled at Stevie. "We'll be there," she said. "I told Nate there was a chance, and he said he'd give me the day off if it happened."

"Ma, we won the Ricksville mud battle today," I said loudly.

No one spoke.

My words hung in the air and disappeared. Kitty kept picking at her food, and Ma was wiping C.T.'s nose, her eyes keenly on him.

Stevie twitched in his seat.

Why did I even try? How could I have been so stupid? What an idiot you are, I said viciously to myself. What a stupid, ugly idiot. I looked past

Stevie. Caught the pity in his eyes and hated him for it. Hated his legitimate birth, his fair skin, and that he was still loved despite his buck teeth.

The silence grew and held.

“You mean our side of the street won?” Stevie’s voice was raspy, and too loud.

I felt nothing but shame. I didn’t need rescuing. I could rescue myself.

“Yes,” I said flatly.

“We never won before,” he said.

I shrugged, wishing he would just shut up.

Ma pursed her lips. She turned and lifted C.T. into her arms and carried him off to be cleaned up.

“Hey, Oreo,” Stevie said softly.

“What?” I answered meanly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I stared at him blankly, as if I didn’t know what he was talking about. Hated the name that many outsiders thought was a sweet, pet name. Only I knew it was Leroy’s particularly sly way of branding me, so I never forgot that I was the illegitimate child of his wife, a constant reminder of her infidelity, neatly sandwiched between his legitimate children. Only I knew how deep it went, for didn’t we all know that the paste in the middle of the cookie was white, when I was as opposite to that as you could get? How could I forget even without the nickname, looking so different than they did? But that was never enough for Leroy.

I willed my tears to slide back into my eyes by thinking how much I hated them all.

And my lovely day shattered and crumbled into dust at my feet.

Chapter 4

Philadelphia, Mississippi, Early 1953

She was white and was never allowed to forget it. But she wasn't quite the right type of white. Wasn't blond, or blue-eyed. Just the mousy brown of an ordinary white person. Her mother always told her that her hair was near white when she was born. It had taken two years for it to turn a pale blond.

"You were so adorable. Like a cherub," her mother would say wistfully. "Skin like cream, eyes the palest blue-green. You took after me then." Her mother always paused after saying this, as though she didn't want to relinquish the image. "Then your father's genes kicked in and now look at you, all that beautiful hair and eyes turned brown, just like your brother." Then, perhaps feeling guilty, her mother would add hastily, "Well, at least you still have your beautiful skin. You need to stay out of the sun, or you will burn. I keep telling you that." She must have heard this almost every day of her life, right up to when her mother died.

Yet she remembers a time of being out in the sun all day, hatless. It was a time when her mother didn't care or had other things to occupy her. She doesn't remember her mother much during this time. All she remembers is running barefoot outside, and someone, Bessie, their black cook, calling her name, running after her, swooping her up, smooshing her laughing face against that soft round mountainous chest before swirling her around and around. It was a chest she returned to time and time again: when her stomach hurt, or when she felt lonely, or when her brother, Randy, was tormenting her. Bessie would swoop her up, kiss her with a big resounding smack, and put her under her skirts, where she would stay, quiet as a mouse, as Bessie hummed and sang as she washed the clothes in the tub, till Randy disappeared. She would then crawl out from under those skirts and Bessie would say, laughing, "Go on with you, chile. I gots work to do. Don't think I got time to play games with you," and then she would wink at her.

“Don’t go encouraging that chile,” Mary, Bessie’s helper, would say, scowling. “You know how they be. One minute all cute and babyish, and the next like the very devil take them over. Look at that Randy over there. See how quickly he turn? Wasn’t but five years ago he was sucking on your breast, and now can’t barely stand the sight o’ you. Sooner spit at you than say hello.”

“This one’s different. I knows it.”

“This one’s just the same as her ma. You just slow, Bessie. How many of them babies you raised?”

They were always talking about her and her ma, but she wasn’t sure what they were saying, just that Mary looked mad, but she always looked mad, and Bessie, well, Bessie was just Bessie. She put her thumb in her mouth and listened awhile more before going to pull on Bessie’s long skirt.

“I’m tired.”

Bessie immediately sat down on the kitchen chair that was pushed against the wall. Reached up and pulled her across her lap, so that her head was resting on that mountain of pillows. She relaxed into Bessie’s soft flesh.

“Sleep, chile.”

Chapter 5

Nate's Diner stood right in the center of town on Main Street, an oddity because it was the only black-owned business on the white side of town.

If you were on Main Street, you could not miss the brand-new Greyhound Bus Station, nor ignore the delicious, greasy fried chicken smell that wafted in and out as Nate's doors opened and closed; so tempting it made everyone waiting for the bus wonder if they had time to slip out of line to grab a quick bite to go before the bus driver shouted, "Bring your tickets, step up, bring your tickets."

And if you decided to make a run for it, all you had to do was follow your nose, and it would lead you across the road and half a block up, right to the red neon sign. Ma was the tall, heavy-set woman you saw behind the counter fixing and wrapping sandwiches or burgers or sometimes frying crispy chicken wings and fries. She worked afternoons six days a week at a job that she said was way beneath her.

"My mother would turn in her grave," she'd often complain. When I asked Stevie why, he said it was because Ma's father was a white lawyer, and her ma was a mulatto seamstress. I didn't know what it meant then, but from the proud way Stevie said it, I knew it somehow made Ma better and more genteel than everyone else.

* * *

I did chores for Nate on Saturdays, mostly helping him clean the diner and earning three dollars for my trouble. It was Nate who had bandaged my knee at age five when I was too scared to go home and tell Ma that I had jumped off Kitty Hawk Bridge, right into the Big Black River because Fats dared me.

For many years, Nate's Diner used to be called Catchedy Groceries, white-owned and the town's only family grocery store. It was the only store that had not been burned to the ground during the Ricksville riots of 1964 that followed the murders of the civil rights workers later called the