

THIS MOTHERLESS LAND

A NOVEL

“A spirited exploration of culture and kinship—of how we belong, and to whom.” —BONNIE GARMUS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lessons in Chemistry*



NIKKI MAY

**This
Motherless
Land**

Nikki May



MARINER BOOKS

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Dedication

In memory of my little brother, Deji.
Much loved. Much missed.

Epigraph

“The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”

PSALM 118:22

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Grease was the word as Sandy and Danny sang their way into our hearts.

~ Funke ~

“FUNKE! HURRY UP!”

“Coming, Mum.” Funke scowled as she buckled her black Bata shoes. Mum said the biggest difference between Nigeria and England was that here everyone moaned about the traffic and there everyone moaned about the weather. Funke had more reason to moan than most. A mother who taught at your school came with a lot of downsides; having to wake up at half four (practically the middle of the night) was in the top three. And to make matters worse, today was Friday, an odd day.

The ridiculous “odd and even” business had started last year. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, only cars with odd-numbered license plates could use the roads. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays were even days. Dad had sworn it would create a two-tier society where the thieving rich would thrive and the hardworking poor would suffer. Funke hadn’t paid much attention—she was used to him ranting about illiterate army dictators. By day, he lectured undergraduates on ophthalmology. By night, his go-to subject was the corrupt government intent on destroying his great fatherland.

The traffic did improve for a couple of months, but soon people who could afford it bought a second car and those who couldn’t got a second number plate and a screwdriver. The Oyenugas fell into the first category, because although Dad moaned about his “third-world useless salary,” Funke knew they weren’t poor. They weren’t nearly as rich as her friend Oyinkan’s

family, though. The Bensons lived on the Island, had a driver and *two* housegirls. They went to France on holiday—Paris in actual France, not Lomé in Togo, which was a bit like France because they spoke French and ate croissants.

On odd days, Mum drove her new pale-blue Toyota Corolla, LAG 3479. On even days, Dad's three-year-old gold Mercedes, LAG 4966.

The “who sits where” argument had started the first morning, when Funke and her brother, Femi, had both been desperate to stretch out on the back seat and get a bit more sleep.

By week three, Mum was fed up. “Please, will you stop fighting!” She'd thumped her fists on the steering wheel and burst into tears.

Funke had frozen. Mum hated them quarreling but she didn't usually get *this* upset. “Sorry,” she'd whispered.

“No, *I'm* sorry for shouting,” her mother had apologized between sobs. “I just couldn't bear it if you two ended up like me and Margot.”

Funke had never met Mum's sister (she lived in England, thousands of miles away) but she'd heard plenty about her. Mum had been their father's favorite and Margot resented her for it. Mum said jealousy was the most evil thing in the world (which was stupid; everyone knew it was armed robbers). She acted as if a squabble could turn into hatred if you weren't careful, so Funke tried not to moan about things being unfair, even when they clearly were. Femi was annoying but she didn't hate him, she loved him. It wasn't his fault he was Dad's favorite—it was a boy thing. All her friends had brothers who were treated like little chiefs. They got more pocket money, more attention, more freedom, more everything—except telling off, which they got a lot less of.

In the end Mum had tossed a coin to decide who sat where. Funke got heads, which meant she sat in the back on even mornings. Femi got *three* mornings in the back, which was completely unfair.

“Oluwafunke Oyenuka!” her father bellowed, loud and angry. “I'm counting to three. One . . .”

“Coming!” Funke grabbed her satchel and ran. Luckily, Dad was too busy kissing Mum goodbye to tell her off. They were doing TV kissing, with tongues, proper *yama-yama*. Why couldn’t they be like other parents?

“Are you in trouble?” Femi asked as she slid into the front seat.

Funke clicked her seat belt, ignoring him.

“I’ve got a present for you,” he said. “I’ve been saving it.”

She turned, eyebrows raised. He beamed, lifted one cheek off the vinyl seat and let out a long and incredibly loud fart. Funke wound down her window and stuck her head out to escape his disgusting smell and irritating laughter. Femi was a proper Oyenuga: he loved being the center of attention, just like Mum and Dad. “Hello, I’m Yellow Femi,” he said when he met someone new.

Her mother threw her hat on to Funke’s lap and slammed the car door. “Shut your window. Quick! You’re letting mosquitoes in.”

Funke did as she was told; Mum was paranoid about malaria. “It’s his fault. He stinks.”

“You stink!” said Femi.

“Don’t you two start. Do you want to go to the club on Sunday?”

“Yes, Mum!” Funke and Femi answered in unison.

“No fighting, then.” Mum crunched into first gear.

“Will we go even if it rains?” The rainy season had started and Funke knew a downpour was an easy excuse to cancel plans.

“My little worrier, we won’t let a few drops stop us,” said Mum. “Did I tell you about the time Margot and I went swimming in a thunderstorm?”

Funke loved Mum’s childhood stories—it was like listening to an Enid Blyton book. Mum had grown up in a house with a name, not a number. It was called The Ring. She made it sound like a magical palace. It had *three* woods and a swimming pool that was round, not rectangular like the one at Ikoyi Club. Everything about The Ring was extraordinary. The roses smelled sweeter than perfume, the tree branches were big enough to lie on, it even had a folly. Funke didn’t know what a folly was and Mum’s explanation hadn’t helped. In the end she had drawn a picture of a small building with no

doors or windows, just pillars and a conical roof with holes in it—a bit like the hats the Fulani cattle herders wore. Funke had seen them when they'd gone to Kainji Dam on an exceptionally boring holiday. She'd asked what the folly was used for but Mum didn't seem to know. Last summer, she'd had the grand idea of getting Boniface, the gardener, to build one in the garden. Dad said it was foolishness. Funke and Femi agreed with him—a swimming pool would be much better. But, according to Dad, only millionaires had pools.

“Well, it was the middle of the summer holidays,” said Mum. “I must have been about your age, Funke, Margot would have been twelve. We were mucking about one afternoon when this storm came out of nowhere. I was in the pool, treading water, counting the seconds between the thundercracks, trying to work out how far away the storm was . . . *For Christ's sake!*” The car swerved violently. Mum gripped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles went whiter than usual.

Femi leaned forward, his face between the two front seats. “What was that?”

“A parked oil tanker with no warning lights. I swear, this country will be the death of me.”

Funke wanted to get back to The Ring. “Mum, the storm . . . what happened?”

“Oh, yes.” Her mother wiped her forehead and adjusted the AC. “Margot panicked, scrambled out of the pool, shouted at me to do the same. But I was busy counting, so I ignored her, which made her crosser than usual. She was yelling her head off when a bolt of lightning struck a tree and sliced it right in half. A huge branch crashed down, squashing the pool ladder. It would have squashed me if I'd listened to Margot.”

“Weren't you scared?” asked Femi.

“No, it was exciting. We ran back to the house, Margot wailing about how she'd nearly died, blaming me, of course.”

“But how could lightning be your fault?” Funke was dumbfounded.

“As far as Margot was concerned, everything was my fault. Still, no one got hurt that time. The tree's still there—you'll see it one day.”

“When?” asked Funke.

“Soon,” said Mum. “We’ll visit soon.”

“Will Dad come too?” asked Femi.

“What’s your first lesson?” Mum changed the subject.

Funke and Femi exchanged looks in the rearview mirror. Dad and Mum didn’t row often, but when they did it was always about family. He got vexed if Mum talked about taking Funke and Femi to The Ring. “Don’t fill their heads with useless nonsense,” he’d say. “Prejudiced people, disowning their own child. I can’t imagine such a thing.” Funke didn’t know what “prejudiced” meant, but it clearly wasn’t good.

“Do they know who we are?” asked Femi.

Mum turned and smiled at him. “Of course they do. I send pictures every Christmas. And when they meet you, they’ll love you. How could they not?” She patted Funke’s leg. “And you too, my little worrywart.”

* * *

It was still dark when they got to school. Mum parked in her usual spot under a palm tree and they traipsed into the squat concrete building, along deserted corridors, past dark classrooms.

A cleaner stopped sweeping and dropped to her knees as they approached. “Good morning, *ma*. Allow me carry your bag, *ma*.”

“Hello, Charity.” Mum reached out and pulled the woman to her feet. “Please don’t kneel. And I’ve told you, call me Lizzie. How’s your little girl? Did the dress fit?”

Funke kept walking, head down, satchel over one shoulder, Mum’s Singer sewing machine in her other hand. “Hurry up, Mum. This is heavy.”

Funke dumped the sewing machine outside the staffroom and waggled her arm, willing her mother to stop talking. Femi always stayed with Mum until assembly—he loved being called *omo kekere* and getting his Afro ruffled by the teachers. Funke preferred waiting in her empty classroom.

“Come and give me a kiss before you run off.” Her mother stretched out her arms.

Funke ducked under her mother’s huge hat, gave her a quick peck on the cheek and rushed off. She loved her mother but wished she taught at a different school. Mum stood out too much; it made it harder for Funke to blend in.

It wasn’t just because she was white. Two other teachers were white as well—Mrs. Onadekan, the headmistress, was English, and Mrs. Mehta, who taught science, was Indian. But unlike Mum, they *acted* like teachers—they were boring, miserable and strict. All the other teachers were “Mr. This” or “Mrs. That” (except Monsieur Pottison, who was from Côte d’Ivoire and taught French). But Mum couldn’t be plain old Mrs. Oyenuga. She insisted everyone call her Lizzie—pupils, housegirls, waiters at Ikoyi Club, even the Hausa *mayguard* at LUTH Gate. Of course, no one dared, so she became “Mrs. Lizzie.” Yoruba doesn’t have a “z,” so it turned into “Misses Lissie.” It didn’t roll off the tongue—way too many “s”s.

It wasn’t just in “s”s that Mum was excessive. Everything she did (and everything she didn’t do) screamed: *Look at me!*

She dressed for school the way she dressed for the club. In short (very short) sleeveless minidresses made of *ankara*, batik or, worst of all, her homemade psychedelic tie-dye. No brown sandals for her; she lived in cork platforms, the higher the better. And then there were the hats, dozens of them—all oversized, over-floppy and over-the-top. Mum “didn’t do sun” (her phrase) because she had porcelain skin, red hair and freckles, and burned easily. But she didn’t have to “do sun.” None of the other teachers did. Not “doing sun” was why the staffroom had AC and the classrooms had shutters and fans. It was why there was a huge canopy in the playground for teachers to gossip under when they were supposed to be monitoring playtime. Mum’s idea of “not doing sun” was standing in the midday sun wearing a huge hat, slathered in Piz Buin, which she bought at Kingsway Stores on Marina. Funke loved Kingsway; it was the one place in Lagos where you could buy

real chocolate. And because Mum used a lot of Piz Buin, they went there a lot.

Mum's conspicuousness wasn't limited to looks. She taught art and had the misguided idea that classes should be fun. She couldn't stick to drawing. No, she had lessons on tie-dye, pottery, origami, even masquerade-mask-making (hence the sewing machine). Everyone except Funke loved her class. Of course they did—you could muck around and still get a gold star for creating an ugly misshapen blob of clay and calling it an ashtray.

Every Crown School teacher had a preferred approach to corporal punishment—sharp end of ruler against knuckle was the most popular, but Monsieur Pottison preferred the head konk and Mrs. Mehta was mistress of the ear twist. Misses Lissie thought hitting children was cruel—she lavished cuddles as often as Mrs. Onadekan shelled out slaps. Worse, she'd banned the teachers from hitting Funke and Femi—which meant they got called *ajebutter* or *pepperless*. It was so embarrassing. Funke would much rather have had her ear twisted than be singled out as special. And she wouldn't have got punished anyway, because, unlike Yellow Femi, Funke followed the rules. While Femi loved standing out, Funke longed to disappear. She couldn't stop being “*omo* Misses Lissie” but she compensated by keeping a low profile. She sat in the third row and came second or third in exams (being first got you an *efiko* tag). She dodged when her mother tried to slather her with Piz Buin (the browner she was, the better) and got Bimpe, the housegirl, to braid her hair on Sundays. All the girls in her class had plaits.

Funke made sure she sounded like her classmates too. *Ehn?* instead of “pardon?”. *Pele* instead of “sorry.” *Abeg* instead of “please.” Mum wanted her to learn French, not Yoruba. But what use was French? Funke didn't want to show off to the waiters in Lomé like Mum did (embarrassing); she wanted to join in the playground gist. Monsieur Pottison could keep his *je suis, tu es, il est*. Funke needed the words Bimpe taught her—*e ma binu, olodo rabata, kosi nkankan*.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, DAD made breakfast—yam and egg sauce. It was their regular Saturday routine. Bimpe boiled the yam and did the chopping but Dad was in charge of everything else. While he cooked, he tested Funke and Femi on capital cities. The winner got one naira, enough for FanIce *and* a Gala sausage roll.

He tapped at the huge map on the kitchen wall with his wooden spoon. “What’s the capital of Gabon?”

“Libreville!” Funke squealed, her knees bouncing against the tabletop.

“You always jump in—give your brother a chance.” Her father added diced onions to hot palm oil.

“Sorry,” whispered Funke.

“Nicaragua?” Dad stirred in a teaspoon of curry powder.

Funke mouthed the answer. *MA . . . NA . . . GUA.*

Femi grinned his thanks. “Mana . . . er . . . car?”

“Good try! Clever boy.” Dad ruffled Femi’s hair. “You are very nearly correct. It’s Managua!”

He gave them a naira each. Funke for winning, Femi for being a boy.

After breakfast, Funke found Mum in the garden, talking to the magnolia tree. She was always chatting to her plants. She’d grown six varieties of hibiscus (Funke loved the swirly pink one, the same color as Bazooka Joe), three kinds of bougainvillea, oleanders, bird of paradise and a moonflower, which only opened at night. Mum was in a white vest and denim shorts, her battered straw boater tipped forward to shield her face from the sun. Boniface was beside her, barefoot as always, a cutlass in his hand. He lived in the boys’ quarters, a small bungalow at the back of the garden, hidden behind three pawpaw trees. Bimpe lived there too.

Boniface hacked at plants rather than talking to them—maybe Mum’s flowers only spoke English? Dad said Boniface was bush, but then, to him, everything was bush.

“Hello, darling. Isn’t it beautiful!” Her mother gestured at the tree. “Have you ever seen so many flowers?”

The tree looked the same as usual to Funke but she pretended to be impressed.

Dad strode across the garden, car keys jangling in his hand. Boniface dropped the cutlass and did a full *dobale*—bending double, left arm behind his back, touching the floor with his right hand. Dad said prostrating was bush, but Funke had the feeling he secretly liked it—he always stood straighter when he was bowed to. Dad ignored Boniface and kissed Mum full on the lips. Funke squirmed. Boniface kept his eyes on the ground.

“I’ll be back by five, latest,” said Dad. He went to the village once a month to visit his mother. He used to take Funke and Femi but stopped after their grandmother, Iya Nla, had slapped Funke on the face. Funke had handed her a drink with her left hand, which was, according to Iya Nla, evil and disrespectful. Mum had hit the roof when she’d found out and her parents had had one of their rare rows, this time about Dad’s heartless and ignorant Nigerian family rather than Mum’s prejudiced and ignorant English one.

“I know she wishes you’d married a village girl but she’s not allowed to take it out on my children,” Mum had yelled.

“Your family wish you’d married the postman,” Dad had snarled. “Anyone white would have been better than me.”

After a lot more shouting, each saying the other’s bloody family was worse, they’d agreed Dad would visit Iya Nla on his own in future. Funke and Femi were thrilled; they hated going to the village.

Funke rubbed her cheek as she watched her father drive off. She was glad she’d been slapped.

* * *

Later that evening, Funke sat on her mother’s bed watching as she brushed her red hair, one eye on the Clairol box. When the two red dots turned white she passed her the rollers and color-coded clips. As the heat did its work,

Mum worked on her face, drawing a black line across each of her eyelids, flicking it in the corners and dabbing on blue eyeshadow. The Max Factor palette contained four colors, but Mum only ever used the blue—it matched her eyes perfectly. Today she wasn't in a rush, so she did Funke's eyes too, using the goldy-bronze and putting a dot of red lipstick on her forehead, like Mrs. Mehta's.

The last thing Mum put on was her necklace. She lifted the double strand of shiny white pearls from the cushioned box they lived in and stroked them as if they were alive. She handed them to Funke, who undid the clasp and passed the pearls around her mother's neck, leaning forward as she slid the silver fishhook into the oval filigree clasp, careful not to trap any strands of red. The clasp had originally been gold but it had broken one night at Ikoyi Club. Mum hadn't realized the pearls were lost until the next morning. She'd sobbed when Dad said she'd never see them again. They'd driven to the club straightaway, Funke and Femi in the back, fingers crossed. When they got there, a waiter was at the gate, waving at them, the necklace in his hand. He'd stayed for eight hours after his shift, knowing they'd return. He hadn't wanted to give the pearls to his manager, afraid they might "disappear." Dad said it was a miracle, the necklace was worth more than the waiter would earn in ten years. Mum said it showed people were inherently good, which made Dad laugh. He'd insisted on fixing the clasp himself, didn't trust the bush jewelers in Lagos. He'd used a catch from one of Mum's bracelets—silver rather than gold, but it did the job.

Her mother touched the biggest pearl, the size of a marble, checking it was centered in the hollow of her throat. "This will be yours soon, sweetheart. How long now?"

"Not till I'm eighteen. Eight years and three months—it feels like forever away." The countdown had started as a way of testing Funke's maths but now it was a ritual. The necklace had been Mum's eighteenth birthday present from her parents. She'd chosen it herself—the pearls had spoken to her (Mum often had conversations with inanimate objects). When her sister had found out the pearls were from the South Sea and had cost twice as

much as the diamond earrings she'd chosen for her eighteenth birthday, she'd caused plenty *wahala*. In the end, their father had gone back to the shop to get her an identical necklace.

Funke heard a car and ran to the window. It was the Bensons. Auntie Chloé was Mum's best friend, Femi and Olumide were best friends, and she and Oyinkan were best friends. Funke loved the symmetry of it. Dad and Uncle Ade pretended to like each other but Dad was always moaning about him to Mum; he hated the way he used his long-leg connections to get what he wanted. Funke was glad Dad pretended, though; they all enjoyed staying in Uncle Ade's chalet at Tarkwa and going to Ikoyi Club as his guests.

At the foot of the stairs, Mum did a twirl, perfectly balanced on red platforms, and Dad wolf-whistled. Her dress was white with big red circles, shaped like an A, tight at the top and flared at the hips. Even by Mum's standards it was short. Her long red hair, released from the hot ceramic rollers, swished around her shoulders. She was beautiful.

Mum's parties always followed the same pattern. Men talked to the men and women talked to the women until the dancing started. On party nights, the posh glasses came out, *chin chin* and peanuts were called "canapés" and Mum got involved in the cooking. She'd spent an hour this afternoon teaching Bimpe to make chicken *chasseur*. It tasted like a not-so-good version of Bimpe's chicken stew, the main difference the addition of mushrooms—Mum had found a tin at Kingsway Stores. They were slimy and squishy, proper *yama-yama*. Fresh field mushrooms were delicious, according to Mum. Funke was pretty sure she could live without them.

Apart from Auntie Ndidi, all Mum's friends were white. Auntie Ndidi was also the only one with a job; she was a consultant in emergency medicine. The other aunties were housewives. They thought it odd that Mum chose to work, didn't believe her when she said she loved teaching. They called each other "darling," drank Campari and wore lots of makeup. Their husbands were like Dad, Nigerians who had studied abroad and brought some of it back with them. They had Jimmy Cliff-style Afros instead of trimmed buzz cuts and wore pastel short-sleeved safari suits instead of native. They used