# A MAKOLA RUN

A boy lifts his head from a muddy puddle. He spits out dirty water, rubs his eyes with his shirt, and lunges into a sprint. The sprint puts him back on path before he is aware of any direction. Clearing his sight just in time, he jumps over the car tire that must have hit him and finds himself speeding toward the big man he is supposed to be running from.

Willy, the boy, still short for the age of nine, has experience enough to know the predicament his current path leads to, but it would also be stupid to abruptly change his direction. The least interruption of such a sprint would see him had by his older taller pursuer, and that'd defeat the whole point of running as hard as he is. He keeps his speed, but slowly alters the destination from the big man to a small opening that few would notice in Makola market.

Makola market is a busy place, the busiest and only place Willy has ever seen. The market is always packed with people, different people: slim girls, fat women, fat men, and built men. The man following Willy is extremely built, not fat but not small either. There is no way he would be able to get Willy, once the boy gets through the small opening. Only two groups of the Makola usuals can make use of such openings: the small boys and the babies, and only the small boys ever make use of it.

The story would end differently though, if Willy is caught before reaching his opening; so, he flies over the muddy grounds of Makola. The rain has forced most of the usuals to seek cover, so there are barely any hurdles for the boy to evade as he runs for his life. And while he was previously running against the wind, in this direction, the wind facilitates a flight over the ground. The universe at least seems to be determined to assist his escape.

He takes his eyes from the opening to stare at the man. The big man's direction matches the current trajectory of Willy's sprint, and he is running even faster than before. Willy swallows his throat and refocuses on the opening; he knows he cannot be caught by a man that big once he is through the opening. He runs for his life.

The targeted entry is only some stretches away, and Willy sees himself jumping and making it to safety. He is so close. He pulls closer and slows down slightly in order not to hurt himself going through the two metal kiosks. A final step through the opening and he is free. He takes the step… but is stuck.

Something is pulling his shirt from him. Without turning back to identify the cork in his path to freedom, Willy forces both hands backwards, parallel to each other and to the ground. This act causes pain but rids him of his favourite shirt and plunges him face-first into another muddy puddle.

He anticipates the effects of the puddle this time and shuts his eyelids while shielding his face with his bruised hands. As soon as he makes it out of the puddle, he turns to face the

opening he just came through. The burly man is rummaging through the pockets of the shirt he just tore off. Willy anxiously searches his own body and smiles in satisfaction at seeing the bag still hugging his body.

His satisfaction is cut short as he processes the loss of his favourite shirt. The black singlet on his body is a poor substitute for the shirt in defending against the rain and the accompanying chill. His odds for survival are worsened when he looks up to see the burly man entering the opening. The man is sideways between the first two metal kiosks. This position enables him to enter the opening, but he is too big and is slowed by the compact space.

Willy is not taking chances though. He glances once at his jeans shirt, now tossed into the mud behind the man, and moves in between the metal kiosks. The path is bounded by six metal kiosks, three on each side; it becomes smaller as he moves forward, and he is tempted to give up and stay in the safe space. The temptation is amplified when he looks back to find the burly man gone from the path. However, he's not stupid to stop or turn back. Such paths exist for boys like him, and for situations like these: he must pull through.

Inside the path, it is hard to determine the intensity of rain or sunshine: the path is inherently gloomy. So, Willy can't help himself but smile when he walks out to mild rain and a singular sun ray piercing the clouds. The ray falls directly on his face, and he stands straight to admire the heat. His see-through singlet pulls him out of his reverence of the sun as the chill from the rain and wind travels to his bones. But, it is still better on this side.

Traders on this side of the market make the most of the milder rain by using huge umbrellas and plastic coverings for their tabled goods. Willy is not exactly bothered by these sellers, but being here is uncomfortable. He knows some, and most know him, but this is not the side of Makola he grew up at. Even though visitors complain about Makola's small size, it has always been huge for Willy. He can run through the entire market in about nine hours at full speed, but he prefers to stay at his side, and this is not it. He sets off.

Free from a stimulated mind, he considers the reasons for his predicament. It makes no sense for that man to denounce him as a thief and launch into such a prolonged chase. Sure, he occasionally takes the shiny thing that doesn't belong to him, but he is unable to remember taking anything of value…

He jumps into his hug-me-bag. It takes seconds to go through the entire thing, and after the short but excruciating search, he finds it empty. Not completely empty; he still has the five cedi note he got from his errand this morning, but *it* is not there. Did he drop it in the run? Or did he lose it before running into that unsavoury man? No matter, he must find it.

He glances through the opening and considers going back that way. It would be the riskier option, but also the convenient one if he could avoid another run. He decides to take the smart path and sets off in a different direction. The chosen path is packed and requires more

evasion. But thankfully, it isn't likely he will be chased on this path. And if he is, his pursuer would also have lots of hurdles to jump.

His path leads to one he is more familiar with. It's less packed, so he glides in between kiosks, tables and the buyers who have now come out for their Saturday groceries. The market is still not as packed as it is on a usual Saturday morning, but with the rains getting milder by the second, a steady flow of humans commences to the pleasure of the traders. Willy is not happy with the increase of buyers though; it makes running errands for the traders harder.

He makes his way to the little restaurant he visited on the errand. It is tempting to immediately ask the food seller if she came across his *thing,* but he does not risk the potential wrath from the three big men buying. The first two in the queue are of the fat men group, but the third man is even bigger than the chaser. The shiny heads of the three men lend extra intimidation to the scene and effectively keeps Willy beating the ground with his feet.

Eventually, the three men take their parcels away, and Willy is free to consult the seller.

"Aunty. Morning. Again. Have you seen my thing?" he asks, rushing in behind her to check the table. He had placed the meat here about two hours ago. If the *thing* would be anywhere, it'd be around this table. His search ends in vain, and he slumps onto the bench beside Aunty.

She speaks, "Are you tired now? What are you looking for?"

"My thing, Aunty. I don't have it now. It was in my bag when I came."

"You didn't leave anything here. Eat something. The yam is ready now."

Willy gets up to leave, but Aunty grabs his hand and forces him still. "Take some yam. You can give it to your sister if you are not hungry." She packages some pieces of fried yam and places the parcel in his bag. Aroma drifts to Willy's nostrils, forcing him to sit down. He dives into the parcel; the yam pieces are ten, so he decides to eat five and take the rest home.

"Have you heard about the chase? Macho is searching for a thief." Aunty says while Willy has his mouth full of yam.

"What did he steal?" He replies through the food in his mouth.

"A phone. Don't join the stupid people who go about chasing any denounced thief. Most have no idea who they are running after. They just join such chases to avenge a past theft they remember being victims of themselves. Be safe out there. Keep your head down and complete your errands. Don't go running when you don't have to."

*A phone?* Willy thinks. There's no way he's the culprit of this crime. He's never held a phone before. So why would Macho chase him then? *Because you ran when "thief" was shouted,* he tells himself. He laughs mid-chewing and sets off from 'Aunty's Kitchen', slow-paced to find his *thing*.

Retracing his steps is not difficult. He's been on the one errand today, and he knows that route well. Also, now that he knows he is not the culprit, there is no risk in taking time to thoroughly search the streets. He follows his path carefully, considering all the places it could have fallen. It takes him longer than he expects, but he finds it. Some paces ahead of him, there it lies.

He runs over and picks it from the ground. He moves to wipe it with his singlet, but stops when he hears another denouncement, "Thief." This time the word is louder than the first denouncement, and a crowd slowly gathers. They all move toward Macho as he moves toward Willy.

Willy doesn't move; he has no intention of doing so. He is not the culprit. He stands his ground and conceives in his mind the nicest way to tell Macho that he is not the thief he is looking for. Macho promptly covers the ground between them, and Willy opens his mouth to speak. Before he finishes saying "Bra Macho" though, the big man slaps him to the floor.

Willy feels a foot stump his body repeatedly, but his eyes and mind wander for the thing he just dropped. He finds it lying in the mud behind Macho. He lunges through the man's spread legs and grabs the thing. This time the wind is against him, and the place is more packed, but he sets off in a run faster than he has ever seen in Makola.

A single tear runs down his face. It started from the eye opposite the cheek Macho had just destroyed. Willy wipes it away and focuses on his escape and *thing*. The mob behind Macho sounds bigger, but stopping is not an option. He remembers the slap, then shudders, trips, and falls to the ground.

On the ground, facing the crowd, he is lucky to see a man hurl a stone in his direction. He barely evades it and gets a better look at the man. A bigger man than Macho, with a very shiny head. Willy turns away from the crowd and runs, trying his best to avoid the stones hurled toward his head: a difficult task as they are hurled from behind him.

He eventually finds a small path by which he can escape. It's a bigger opening than the one he used in his first escape from Macho, but he knows this one and can lose anyone who follows him in. This opening leads directly into *The MS*. Finally through the opening, he turns to find Macho unable to follow, but three of his chasers manage to pass through, keeping up the chase.

Willy moves slower on this path. It's bigger than before, but it has multiple adjoining paths that can lead him anywhere in Makola. He carefully chooses one that will lead to his

housing shed. The obstacles inside these paths are more, and it quickly proves a challenge for his pursuers. Minutes after entering, he loses them. But he does not stop. He runs till he is home.

In front of the shed, he jumps straight inside avoiding the blocks. Just as he guessed, the baby is still crying in his sister's hands. He hands over his bag to his sister with the yam and takes the baby.

"Mummy is still not back?" He asks her while getting some water to wash the thing.

"No, she is not. She is not coming back." The sister replies through the yam pieces.

Willy washes the thing and puts it in the baby's mouth, and as he hoped, the baby stops crying.

"What is that?" His sister asks with clear shock.

"A rich woman called it *pasifier.* When she put it in her baby's mouth, he stopped crying; so, I took one from the seller." He looks at her sister and with a smile on his face he adds, "It's good right?"

"Yes, it's very good." His sister drops the yam and takes the baby back.

Willy stretches to grab one more piece of yam, but he hears angry shouts. *The mob.* He puts his head out of the shed to find some men going through all the sheds and kiosks around the place. Returning to the shed, he gazes at his sister and baby brother and jumps outside.

This part of Makola, The MS*,* gets very little sunlight. The sheds and kiosks are packed close enough to provide an eternal shade in the pathways. But even with the shade, Willy makes out Macho standing on one of the path. He moves from the shed his sister and the baby brother sit in, and shouts, "Macho."

He doesn't wait to see the result of his shout and launches into another sprint: his best sprint yet. He falls multiple times, but he always gets up, avoiding a car tire or stone. He takes the mob on a journey around The MS, but he's eventually forced out. Out of The MS is less comforting. There is more space, but also more hurdles. Plus, it's not as familiar as The MS is to Willy.

The run tires Willy out. He thinks of stopping, but just as he plans to stop, he sees an opening that only he can make it through. It is the same opening from his first escape. He moves toward that path, but he feels pressure against his back and is forced to the ground. Raising his head, he finds a car tire beside him.

Willy looks through the opening and contemplates going through the path to the other side. Milder rain and a ray of sunshine. He can make it if he moves now, but he doesn't. He is too

tired, and every part of his body hurts. He takes his favourite shirt, even dirtier now, and puts it on. He gets comfortable on the floor. *I can't run forever.*

The first of Macho's mob makes it to him and forces a car tire around him. He is vaguely aware of a second tire and some liquid being put on him, but he searches his mind for his baby brother's favourite lullaby. He sings it to himself and feels the world slowly get hotter.

He flies above the muddy grounds of Makola.