

MOTHER OF MIRACLES

The axe was small and blunt, but with every strike the shelf gave way. I was eleven years old that morning. No one knew except me. I had counted the days, every day, for three years since mother left.

My village was the only place I knew as a little child. Every morning I would stand in my shorts without a shirt, look over miles of enchanting rocky land and see the sun rise. I would join other children of my age grade to walk far distances to gather dry brushes, sticks and whatever was left at places where trees had been felled. As much as we hated these morning tasks, the bits of wood we gathered served as fuel for cooking our lunch. On the mornings of my birthday, my mother would hug me tight, look into my eyes, tell me my age and say “Happy birthday, son.” This ritual of hers was how I had kept track of my age.

Surrounded with beautiful rolling hills, lush with green vegetation, our village was small and many miles away from the nearest city. On some mornings, brightly coloured birds flew from tree to tree, one calling to another. They would sing, mostly before dawn and I would imagine what stories their songs told. Curiously, I was convinced that they sang of the Plateau, the magic in the ever breezy hills, the enchanting waterfalls, the miracles in the soil. The farmers had been heard to refer to this land as Eden. Eden, I was told, is any place without sorrow or hurt; a place of joy and ceaseless mirth.

Here in my village in Bokkos, we had no need for a calendar. No one was in a hurry. There was nowhere to go. Aside looking for food and entertainment to pass time, there was nothing to do. Time was measured by how long it took to build a house, marry a wife, or give birth to a child and then die.

On the morning of my eighth birthday, my mother told me how many suns I must count to keep track of my age. Something she had never done. That morning she gave me an extra treat. She asked me to stay back at home and watch Grandmother while she went to gather sticks for lunch. Grandmother was very old, what was there to watch? She was the one who watched. Every day, she sat in front of our hut and watched. I cannot remember ever speaking to Grandmother. She kept alone, spoke and sang to herself and I learned to avoid her. Mother tended to her but I don't think they got along fine.

On the morning that Mother left, I watched Grandmother while she sat on her wooden stool and stared at the vast open sky – a sky forever heedless to my complaints. After two days of waiting for Mother and the sticks she had gone to gather, after four days of searching and not finding her, I took the little axe and broke into pieces Grandmother's stool. The bare earth now

became her stool and I felt no guilt. Watching her nearly crumpled frame, woolly hair, grey eyebrows, wrinkled skin, I wondered how old she was. Had anyone kept count of her years? Although she seemed unaware of me, her eyes could see far-off places, even at night, and her ears could pick out the faintest cry kilometres away.

After Mother left, I developed a strong aversion to gathering sticks. The very thought of gathering sticks plunged me into overwhelming depths of despair. The task of caring for Grandmother fell on Tambas, a concerned neighbour who traded in spices. His wife brought food to Grandmother daily, including millet and fermented milk. Sometimes she brought a little meat. I was left to fend for myself.

The difficulty was not in watching Grandmother, whose frail body and slow movements I watched with every new dawn. The difficulty was in hearing her, enduring that breaking voice crying out in melancholy like withered leaves beneath hard boots. The voice possessed a rasping quality, like fingers fiercely scratching against slabs of concrete and metal. These shrill notes drove my spirit to the knife edge of madness. Although I did not know the language, the meaning of her ceaseless songs hit me like nails on coffin lids. How could one person feel so much anguish and loss? One morning, just like I had done to her stool, I tried to break her monologue of bleakness.

“Mother has left.”

“Did you hear me?”

“I said mother has left.”

“She is not coming back, is she?”

“Everyone leaves, don’t they?”

Without as much as a glance my way, it seemed she responded to my words in her language, a language I could not fathom. If she understood my words, I was never to know.

“I blame you.”

“I blame you for Mother's leaving.”

“I know Father left too.”

“Grandfather too.”

“I have heard stories in the village.”

“They say it’s a curse.”

“They say all the men of Mundat family leave to roam the wild lands.”

Again, in gibberish, her responses came, to everything I said.

In the third year after mother's disappearance, I split the only piece of furniture we possessed, an empty shelf. I sold the wood to Tambas. He gave me a jacket and an old pair of shoes as payment. At nightfall that same day I stole two sheep, and made my way through the rocky terrain out of the Plateau, out of Bokkos my village. I was sad to leave my Eden, my Paradise and the sweet stories sung by those captivating birds, but I had to be firm in my resolve. I believed that there was nothing here for me. I told myself, when I felt shockingly a tear escaping down my cheek, that I would make something of my life and come again to spend my last days in Bokkos, my heaven on earth.

I fancied myself as one of the great explorers and discoverers in the stories the coloured birds sang. So at the early stage of my flight, journeying through rocky, mountainous lands felt more adventure-like to me than escape. I loved Bokkos too much. It would not do to admit to myself that I was escaping from it as though it were a source of unbearable grief. Like a shy lover, night approached. Alone in the hills and knowing that I could not turn back, and feeling that it would be safer to sleep on a tree rather than in the open hills where I would be easy game for snakes, scorpions and other harmful animals, I promptly climbed a huge tree called *O' ye digish*. I was soon fast asleep.

From the top of the tree where I had spent my first night outside the comfort of my mother's house, I saw a most beautiful sight: sparks of soothing yellow and gold. I had felt her reassuring warmth long before I saw her. It was as though the mountains parted, making way for her triumphal entry. To get a clearer look, I climbed higher on my tree and, at the topmost branch from which I perilously dangled, I did not become certain but attained certitude that sunrise on the Plateau was the mother of all miracles that any person alive must witness before they go the way of their fathers.

Continuing on my great travel, at the outskirts of Mangu, two villages away, a band of cattle rustlers adopted me. Jallo, their leader, called me 'brother' and asked me to refer to them in same manner.

With one hundred cattle we headed north to Jos. At dawn one fateful day we were attacked. Our assailants had knives and locally made guns. We would have engaged them in a fight but we were ill equipped and they outnumbered us three to one.

"Kill them!"

"Kill them and get done with it!"

"Kill the bastards destroying our farmlands!"

"Send them and their blasted cows to hell!"

We had been rounded up, our hands neatly tied behind our backs, waiting for a sure execution!

Our attackers surrounded us while a few of them rounded up the herd.

“So you enjoy destroying the livelihood of farmers?” their leader spoke. He alone had a red band tied around his head. The contempt in his ice-cold voice sent shivers down my spine. He paced up and down spitting rhetoric.

“So you want a grazing right bill, to allow you free ownership of other people’s property?”

“What arrogance!”

“Murderers!”

As far as I could tell, we had not murdered anyone, but what did I know? I had only been part of the band for a month now. I had not a single idea of all that was being said. It was true though, that we had knowingly led our stolen cattle to graze on a few farmlands.

“We will fight you people!”

“We will not rest until you leave our lands alone!”

What if they knew that our herd was stolen property? What if they knew that we were no more than thieves? I had no time to think of the turn my life was taking. With ceaseless inciting from their red band leader, our captors were screaming blood and becoming more agitated.

“You will die!”

“All of you!”

Suddenly our eyes met and he dismissed my youth with a smirk. Then, I knew that hate seldom discriminates.

In a single file, we were led into the bush, flanked on either side by armed bloodthirsty men. The only time I had been this close to fear and death was when mother left.

“Run!”

“Run! Run! Run! Soldiers!”

We heard the alarm before the gunshots. Then the commotion began. Sporadic gunfire screams of injured men and loud voices were approaching. Our captors opened fire. I took to my heels only after I saw two of my ‘brothers’ fall. I didn’t go very far before darkness drowned me.

I didn't know how many miles we had ridden in the military truck. I didn't know what became of my 'brothers'. I was alone in a prison yard with boys my age. Like my grandmother's gibberish, the language of the soldiers was incomprehensible. It was Liman – another boy, coal-black and tall like a walking tree – who spoke my language. I told him my story. He in turn translated my ordeal to the soldiers and the guards at our prison home. We were overworked, our spirits broken along with our juvenile backs.

Reading and writing in English came as a miracle. Sister Nenpan would come every Tuesday and Thursday with books and tell stories that exploded my mind and ignited within me a craving for words, for newer worlds revealed in the books she read from. After a year of teaching me to read and write in English, she said:

“You're very good at reading. You should go to school. I will arrange for you to write the university examination.”

“Can Liman write too? He has been very kind to me.”

“Liman is not half as good as you are, but if he promises to work hard, and passes the examination, I can guarantee the both of you a place in the university.”

All these she said on my sixteenth birthday.

Apart from visiting prisoners to bring them hope, Sister Nenpan had a school for school dropouts. I had nothing but what she offered. She became like a mother to me. Every time she came to visit at the prison, I would become uncontrollable with excitement. Every time she left, endless muttering and meaningless songs of despair would occupy my brain and I would remember the sheer terror of picking sticks and the meaninglessness of watching Grandmother.

“You could write a book, you know?” sister Nenpan said to me one joyous Tuesday morning, two years and six months after she had been coming to us faithfully.

“Have you written any?” I was quick to ask.

“Yes, I have. It's titled Naanniap.”

“Naanniap?”

“Yes, it's a story about a girl who lost everything.”

“Tell me about...”

“She didn't know she had lost everything though.”

“How is that possible?”

The smile that clouded her face only fuelled my need for Naanniap.

“You will know after you have read the book. It’s a story of girl who became a woman, a woman who must run away from everything she loves.”

I watched her wide-eyed. I could see her lips move but beyond their curves carving out words, Naanniap became more than fiction to me. She somehow transcended the unreal, assumed mental form and became a constant companion to whom I could speak freely at all times. Sometimes she was Mother. Other times we fought and she became Grandmother’s endless dirge and grumbling.

“Are you hurt?” a gruff voice barked.

“Yes,” I answered, but the response stuck at my throat. The blood on my puffed up upper lip tasted familiar, but amidst the loud voices of soldiers, wailing of tortured men, approaching siren and unseen arrows piercing my skull, my mind failed to remember the taste.

Forsaken by my vocal powers, my dusty fingers held out Miss Nenpan’s complimentary card, which my captor snatched and promptly began to scrutinize.

“School boy, why didn’t you say so all along?” His voice was mellow. “You could have been shot,” he added in a whisper. “An inmate was shot in Maiduguri yesterday. Go over there.”

I walked in the direction of his outstretched arm and found myself at the entrance of a sickbay. Someone held my hand, led me to a chair, and proceeded to clean my wounds.

Naanniap would not leave my mind even as I was being patched up. Her smile which I imagined curved like an upturned rainbow, plagued my soul. I groaned.

“Sorry, next time be more careful.”

“What?” The question leaped from my swollen eyes. The sergeant held my gaze, but not for long. In that brief exchange my eyes had betrayed me. She could tell that it wasn’t the cut around my left eye that pained me. It wasn’t even my lips that had assumed the size of the doughnuts sister Nenpan sometimes brought as a treat.

“You can rest here for a while if you like.”

It is incredible to think that there are still humans as warders. I looked up, a second time, eye ball to eye ball. A second time my eyes pledged no loyalty. Much like Naanniap, this soldier could read my thoughts. Without a word I declined the offer.

“School boy you can go!” a voice roared. That voice belonged to the architect of my last one hour. I doubt I would forget quickly the steel in that voice. The heartlessness that had made him confuse me for one of the thieves who had ventured through our facility in the wee hours of

that morning, sneaked and hid behind my matchbox room. They had barged into my room, caught and brutalised me. Liman intervened, much to his hurt, before they realised their mistake. Walking out of that prison disguised as a youth correctional camp, my bag lazily clutched, I felt many things, but freedom was not one of them. In my musings Naanniap had always said, “Who is as free as a writer?”

Who is as damned? I sometimes thought.

“School boy, you are lucky, that woman must really like you.”

“What?” I responded, temporarily lost.

“That big madam has arranged for you and your friend to go. But your friend is stubborn, so we will keep him for another day.” He gave a satisfied smile, feeling happy with his last statement.

I looked within and around me and realised, as I often did, that setbacks in a person’s life are testaments that pleasant times lie ahead, waiting to be appreciated.

The narrow dusty path mocked my solitude. I sat underneath a tree. My mind was in a whirl. Liman was not allowed to leave. Miss Nenpan would have to go and get him. Fighting with the guards was a serious crime. He had come to my rescue just in time and I owed him his freedom.

On my nineteenth birthday, I walked through the imposing gate of the University of Jos. Miss Nenpan walked a few steps ahead of me. At that moment, a curious realisation dawned on me. My entire life had been leading up to this point.

“I quickened my steps.”

“Where do I find her?”

“Where do you find who?”

“Naanniap?”

“*Naanniap* is the title of my book? After your registration, you can ask for a copy at the library.”

Liman joined me that evening, and that night Naanniap came to me.

It’s been four days since Nenpan was kind enough to lodge me into the boys’ hostel of the University. With every rising of the sun, I grew more and more impatient with the registration process, impatient to be done with it and go in search of Naanniap. Somehow, I

strangely believed that when I finally held her in my hands, the secret and purpose of my life would be revealed to me.

Policed by constant nightmares, every night I would jerk from sleep, go to the balcony and watch the twinkling stars mock my sleeplessness. One particular dream kept reoccurring. I was back in Bokkos, hunted by old grumbling women and mercenaries with heads of cows. Every time I tried to run towards my mother and father, whom I could see in the distance quarrelling over something, I would wake up bathed in sweat.

From this same nightmare I awoke one night to a kind of pandemonium. The entire hostel was agog with shouts and screams of alarm.

“Fire! Fire!”

I leapt from my bed. The night was alive with flames piercing the darkness, jostling for space and growing bigger. From the balcony of the hostel where we stood, our hearts breaking, we witnessed an event as rare as the last sighting of a unicorn. The University of Jos was on fire, not the fire a girl singer crooned about from Liman’s radio, or the graffiti of half-dressed wannabe models hanging on the walls of the hostel. The massive four-storey building which housed the university library was wrapped in flames. That was when I heard her screaming.

“Naanniap!”

“What?” Liman asked, turning down the volume of his radio.

“Naanniap! I must save her!” I made to run, but Liman grabbed me by the arm.

“You want to run into a burning building?”

“I can hear her calling!”.

“She is not real! This is not bravery. This is stupidity!”

“Foolish! Has he lost his mind?”

All around me, my roommates chastised.

The screams in my head became even more piercing. I pushed Liman away and fled. Barefooted, I ran towards the fire, heart pounding, feet burning against rough earth and thistles. Voices of panic mingling with the cry of crickets in the undergrowth, the cackle of the growing flames and the mournful wail of sirens did not matter.

Through the crowd, through the night, I pushed my way into the beckoning blaze and towards the voice calling my name. As one might, to a newfound love, the library offered itself to huge lusty fingers of fire. All around me it rained blue, rained fiery gold, and my screams of Naanniap drowned in the pit of my stomach choked back by armies of smoke. Forging against

the fume, oblivious to the tears falling freely from my eyes and the soot coating my skin, I fell to my knees. That was when I saw her against a ball of fire shooting from a burning sky. Bold, untouched, elegant still, I grabbed at her, held her close to my chest, felt her spine and whispered to her that it would be okay.

“I will get us out of here... I promise you, I will.”

She said nothing and my heart bled. The laughter of the fire drowned my assurances. It teased whatever comfort I offered. On the blackened floor, holding her close to me, I inched away from the pursuing flames.

I could feel the heat. Surprisingly, it came from within my chest, the exact spot where I held Naanniap close. My limbs were growing numb. Debris fell all around us and no matter how hard I tried; I could not go past a huge shelf that had fallen across our path. My village flashed across my mind. Open stretch of desert land cuddled by sun and dust. My breath slowed, darkness forced itself upon my eyes and I could feel a thousand stings on every pore of my body.

