

Gideon NYIRENDRA

A Story

We were having our supper in silence. I looked forward to Saturday evenings because our usual dish of Nshima was served with beef stew. A glance at my kid brother showed he was enjoying his pieces of beef. I didn't like the way he was munching...Greedily.

"Now, Jimmy, take your time, the food is not going to run away: I prodded. He looked up and our eyes met "the way you eat is as if you're being chased". Whenever I reproach like this he would completely ignore me. Many a time to my irritation I have been tempted to slap him...

I took a lump of nshima and molded it in my palm and dipped it in the rich gravy prepared by Inonge. "Ma! Come and see Towela on the telly!" she screamed. Startled, we rushed to the sitting room. There she was on the screen... dressed in a red business suit. Colourful scarf on her neck. Her hair adorned in wetlook.

"We demand equal opportunities with our men folk at all levels of the social ladder. No longer should we women regard ourselves as second class citizens. What we need now is women's power!" The audience roared amid cheers. Then the clip was cut. We all looked at each other searchingly. "She is the one," Jimmy said rather coldly. "Off course, she is," mum replied, looking more sad than surprised.

"Indeed she is the one," I put in unconsciously. "Where is she?" Inonge asked, not at anyone in particular as she nibbled at her food.

"What did the first part of the bulletin say, Inonge?" I asked. "It said Towela Chilekwa, Chairperson, Women Action Group, addressing... I didn't get the last part" For the mention of Towela's name was taboo in our home...Then everyone left the sitting room. My appetite gone. I washed my hands, Jimmy resumed at the dining table, unperturbed.

"What do you think of Towela?" I asked

"Nothing much, Richard... let her be free. If she goes for good, then she doesn't belong to us."

“She is our elder sister, mind you.”

“I know she is our elder sister,” he replied quietly.

His answers were annoying me. My temper was raising. I went into the sitting room and sat before the telly. I was all-alone. I wasn't concentrating on the feature film being shown. Towela's clip has disturbed me. Indeed, it has been five years since dad chased her from our home. Mum had tried in her humble manner for a reconciliation but what she received in turn was a battering. That sent a signal to us children and the subject closed.

I sat wondering what had become of our family.. memories of that fateful night flashed before my mind screen: Dad had come earlier in the evening than usual. A glance at him told me he was preparing for battle. I saw the danger signs, the sharp voice walking in menacing manner. Within a few minutes of his arrival , mum and Lydia, the first born, were summoned to an impromptu Kangaroo court in the sitting room. Dad called them to answer as he put it, conspiracy charges:

How many times had she been sleeping out?” dad asked.

“Twice or so,” Mum answered in an unsteady voice.

I was in corridor eavesdropping. I wondered why mum was always treated like a child. “Answer properly woman, before I break your neck, “twice or so” what do you mean?”

“ Four times now.”

“All along you have kept quiet.. Until I discovered on my own last night,” he accused.

I then decided to enter the sitting room. He looked at me threateningly. His eyes blood shot. He must have been drinking as usual .

“Did you go to school, boy?” he asked

“Yes, the teacher reminded me to pay school fees on time or I will be chased from classes.”

“To hell with your teacher!” he yelled. “Does he think we pluck money from branches of trees?”

He shifted in his velvet chair and looked at mum. She was heavy with pregnancy.. The other day I overheard mum telling Mrs. Mutale, our neighbour that she felt ashamed to be pregnant whilst she had teenage children.

“So your daughter is a prostitute,” he shook his head. “I am sure, you even share the spoils,” he laughed and clapped his hands in mock surprise.

“Where on earth would a mother support such behavior? It is just girls of these days are stubborn and know too much.”

“Know what? It is your duty to see to it that your daughters are in line... so you have failed in your duty.” He pointed his forefinger at her.

“How? I ‘ve tried my best.”

“Be silent woman!. before I make you ugly head into mincemeat!” He roared like a lion.

His Stalin moustache twitching. Then he looked at Lydia. His stance suddenly softened. From the look of things, Lydia seemed like she was the favourite among us.

“Listen, Lydia, your sister by completing school doesn’t mean she has the freedom to do anything she wants. This is my house and she is under my roof.”

Lydia nodded. In her reading spectacles she looked professorial. For all I know she could be reciting the Lord’s prayer mentally. Lydia was the most pious in the family. Charismatic Catholic as she called herself when the mood was on her...

“So today, I am chasing her I don’t want her in my house. She is a thorn in my fresh”

“Oh, daddy, just talk firmly to her and forgive her,” she pleaded.

“Stop it, and now everybody go and sleep,” he ordered in his deep military voice. So reluctantly, like everyone else, I retired to bed. I didn’t sleep a wink. I turned and pondered over what dad was going to do to Towela.. Then for what seemed an eternity I heard a soft knock on my bedroom window.

“Rich..., Rich...” She whispered

“Hello”

“Is dad in?”

“Yes, he is and you’re in hot soup”

“Just open for me, Richard.”

“For all I know, he could be in the sitting room waiting for you”.

“Rich, just open for me, I will face the music alone.”

“Okay” I woke up and walked cautiously to the sitting room. I switched on the light. For sure dad was seated in his favourite chair. He nodded to me to open. I opened. She entered and closed the door behind her. Then she looked around and met father’s eyes.

“I’ve been waiting for you for a couple of hours.” He stood up and walked menacingly towards her, leather belt in hand. Then like lightening he struck – Lap! Lap! Lap!... She screamed. She tried to duck around but it was no use. The leather belt kept on following her in rapid speed.

“Daddy you’re killing me please!”

“Go back where you’ve come from... I no longer want you in my house,” he said as he continued hitting her.

“Let me go then.”

“You good for nothing,” he muttered.

My heart was pounding fast I couldn’t do anything when dad was violent. Past experience warned me not to interfere or else you face hits wrath. I looked around, mum was in the corridor doorway, looking sad and hopeless as usual.

“You silly girl... you are tarnishing my name”

“Dad, let me go then...” Lap! Lap! Lap!...

“That is enough dad, that’s enough” I appealed to him. Then suddenly she got hold of the belt from dad’s grip with all her might. Like a snake it slipped away from him. Dad was mad. The challenge was too daring. “Ha! I will teach you a lesson today.” He approached her with bare hands. She retreated against the wall. Suddenly without warning, in a flash of seconds she took off her chitenge dress... and threw it towards dad. Dad ducked...

“Towela!” Mum screamed... She wore no bra... Full and firm breasts heaving, nude except for the knickers, Dad perplexed, mouth open. He turned away and left the room.

“Towela... “I mumbled “That’s what he wanted,” she replied firmly. She picked up her dress slowly and began dressing slowly and headed for the bathroom. It was indeed tough! I went into my bedroom thinking what bad omen is going to happen to the family, undressing before your father! An hour later she came to my room.

“Richard, see you, “ her voice steady as if she didn’t go through the whipping.

“Towela, where are you going at this deadly hour of the night?”

“Well, you bore witness to what you father said, I must go”

“Our father, Towela please!”

“Goodbye, I’m leaving,” she closed the door and left. That was five years ago.

I switched off the television and retired to bed. Jimmy was already snoring in his bed opposite me. I envied him. He seemed not to care about anything, I’ve always wondered: Is it because of constant abuse by dad over years that he has made us so indifferent to each other?... Many a time I’ve been tempted to lay charges against dad at YWCA, but couldn’t gather enough courage to enter the offices.

As I climbed into my bed, an idea flashed in mind. I must make inquiries in the city tomorrow morning about Towela. She should be known among women NGO’s. She must come back to the fold and reconcile with dad.

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THE RETURN

I was searching for something in the drawers when I came across it. The picture. Oh Palije It has been a long time. Palije the comedian. Palije the storyteller. Palije the philosopher. I took the picture and studied it. He was sitting on a rock., Books in his hands. Smiling. Oh Palije where are you?... Memories from my childhood started flowing.... I remembered the long walks we usually took on weekends. He could tell all sorts of stories under the sun. The long walks were short because of the spicy stories... Palije was somehow a loner. But he did not seem lonely because of his usual activities. He always told me in his lecturing manner “books are people”. And I could just laugh and wonder how books could be people. There were times when he could read a book: sunrise to sunset”, Mum said that’s not the way, it is being queer. As for Mum herself, I have never seen her read anything. Her passion was the radio.... And she always turned to the vernacular service. Coming to Dad, I have never seemed him reading a book too. He loved newspapers. And while knocking off he would come with a newspaper. As for me I loved Television. Especially the Muppet shows...

In the neighborhood Palije seemed only to get along with Monica. “ Sweetie Monica” as he usually called her. During our long walks when the mood was on him, he could recite some poetry about her being. As a growing boy I could wonder at such majestic descriptions.

I remember the magic words partially “Blackshine she is, smooth long neck she has, milky eyes she has, luscious lips she has, Oh Angelic Monica, beloved sweet heart. ” He could recite to me amid a lot of suggestive body gestures. He made me look at girls and women in a poetic light as beings to praise and appreciate...

At times to my astonishment, I could find Palije in our bedroom seated on the cushion in a lotus style. Eyes closed. Breathing in and out. His posture reminded me of the image of the Buddha I saw in one of our supplementary readers at school . when I asked him what he was doing , he told me he was communicating with God. How?. I wondered. Is it not by kneeling down and praying to God as Brother Phiri taught us in our Sunday school lessons? I could argue and he could only smile and beg me to leave him alone. Then one day he told me something which has kept haunting me over the years. “You know boy, ” he said philosophically, “ You and me have been together since creation.” He paused and looked at

me searchingly, “ We shall only separate after we pay debts we owe each other”. He left it like that without much ado. And I did not know what to say.

I particularly do not know when Palije joined the family. I must have been a toddler then. He was twelve years my senior. But we were good friends. He confided in me. So did I. As some people say, age isn't anything but a number.

Palije used to defend me very much. I recall one particular evening when the whole family was in the sitting room watching Television when dad referring to me said, “This chap hasn't done very well again” I felt uncomfortable, “Number fifteen in a class of thirty-five. He has failed.” “No uncle, he has done much better than last term when he was number twenty-two, “Palije put in as he sipped his glass of orange juice.

“He is a slow learner like his mother, “ Dad said harshly. Mum, in her usual corner, looking sad and tired glanced at him disapprovingly and remained quiet. I know he was trying to provoke her. That's how their quarrels usually began.. And that is another story.

Then one night, Palije awakened the whole household by a penetrating, nightmarish scream of terror. I jumped out of bed in fright. “What is Palije?” He was shivering uncontrollably. “Sacrifice, sacrifice,” he kept repeating the word. He was completely nude. For, like me, he loved sleeping in the natural way. Just then my parents burst in and said almost at once, “What is it?”

“The spirit ancestors, uncle!” he replied. His eyes bulging. “They want me for a sacrifice... please help me,” he pleaded. Breathing heavily, he looked blank and lost, and then abruptly he sat down and began crying like a baby. It was the first time I saw him crying. I could not bear it and found myself shedding tears.

He became suddenly violent, abusive and refused to dress. Dad called for neighbours and together they tied him with thick ropes. That night we could not sleep... wondering what has become of Palije. Towards dawn he was taken to the hospital. And that was the last time I saw him...

For a couple of days I was the saddest boy in the neighbourhood. For Palije meant a lot to me: I missed his deep laughter. The seriousness on certain matters. His spicy stories especially the intimate one where I derived a lot of

pleasure it made my body tense with desire! And lastly but not the least, the poetry in him...

At times in my childishness, I could wait for him at our balcony hoping was going to come and resume our comradeship. But all in vain. As seasons came and went, my memory of him was dying with time... until I saw the picture...

As I sat on my bed and put back the picture in my drawers, wondering what to do in the afternoon Mum called me "Nelson!" almost screaming. I was startled, "Yes ma, I'll be with yo shortly." These days Mum irritates me to the point I want to scream at her.

Since the time Dad dumped her and went for a "sweet 24" a year ago. She has not been the same, complaining to whoever would listen to her, how bad men could be. Lecturing me on my responsibilities to the family as if I did not know.....

I got up hesitatingly and went in the sitting room. What I saw before me baffled me... before my own eyes was Palije! Just a few minutes ago I was looking at the picture! What is the connection? And here he is – alive; immaculately dressed in a blue ventless suit, thick moustache and he was more lighter in complexion than before.

"Palije!" I screamed.

"Nelson, my boy!" he stood up smiling. I rushed to him and hugged. It was too real and just too good to be true. Palije...Alive and looking so well. Somehow, I became emotional and began to sob....

THE LAST FIGHT

I was awakened by loud noise in the next bedroom. Oh my God, it was them again. Papa and Mama fighting. I hastily dressed in my pajamas; for I usually slept naked. I rushed to their bedroom, tried the door. It was locked.

Mama was sobbing. “ Kill me.... Kill me. Today you have to kill me... and end my suffering”. My heart started pounding fast. Never before had I heard mama utter those words wherever they quarreled and fought.

“Mama what is wrong?” I shouted, “Open the door,” I pleaded.
“Go and sleep you bastard!” papa shouted instead.

“No papa, stop beating mama!”

“I will come for you after I finish with her,” papa threatened. Then I heard him whipping her lash! Lash! Lash... I couldn't stand it any longer. I banged the door harder.

“ Open the door,” they ignored me. All this time the whipping was going on. I had a terrible fear that papa was indeed going to kill her. By this time my two young siblings had awakened up. They were standing in the corridor crying helplessly. This made me mad and I banged the door hardest.

Then the door opened, it was mama. She was almost naked .She was only wearing a half-slip, blood was oozing from her nose .I was in the doorway; she pushed me and rushed to the kitchen. I trotted behind her.

She picked up the sharp knife from the sink .Her eyes bloodshot. Bruises clearly marked on her naked body. And I saw the killing instinct of an animal in her eyes. The madness.

“Mama.... What do you want to do?” I pleaded with tears in my eyes. As I was pleading with mama, papa came in the kitchen with a leather belt in his hand.

“ Papa, please leave mama alone.”

‘Go and sleep before I kill you!’ I was standing between them. Then unexpectedly papa pushed me towards mama, she ducked and I fell on the floor. The next thing I saw papa leap in the air and hit mama a karate style kick on the head. She hit the floor with a sickening thud and the knife fell away.

“Papa you’ve killed mama!” I shouted and began to cry. Mama seemed lifeless on the floor.

“I’ve taught you a lesson,” papa was saying.

Then he began dragging her towards their bedroom. My two fellow siblings and I cried uncontrollably. Then papa looked closely at mama. He

seemed unsure of himself. I saw mama breathing faintly, then papa began applying first aid on her.

“Stop crying!” he ordered. “She will be alright.” He cleaned her thorough. After a few minutes we saw her coming to life. We watched in silence. Pap’s face was exhibiting pity.

I was taken aback. Just a few minutes ago his face was twisted with anger and hate. And now he was as soft and sober as a priest and showing care. I was baffled...

Then mama sat up. “Can I give you some aspirin?” papa offered. “No, it’s okay,” mama answered in an emotional voice which made me, want to cry. Mama looked at us. She seemed disturbed by our presence.

“Go and sleep my children... I’ m alright,” she said to us. Papa looked at us as well. I saw the guilt in him. Then he left us with her. After what seemed an eternity, mama decided that we go to sleep. To my surprise, she changed bedrooms. She went to the spare bedroom.....

For the next couple of weeks our home was no longer a happy place. Mama seemed most of the time thoughtful and withdrawn. Her sense of humour gone...she seemed to be growing older by the day.

Instinctively at that time, at a tender age of thirteen, I knew mama was just living for us... later as I grew up I learnt that last fight broke the bond between my parents.
