

The Black Dog

by

Ndongolera C. Mwangupili

Evening was fast approaching. Downcast, the man sat on the veranda of a thatched hut, waiting for nothing. Inside, the woman whimpered, carrying a baby tied with a piece of cloth on her back. A woven reed mat lay on the floor, covering almost half of the room. On it lay a torn blanket, a greyish bedsheet and a pile of clothes folded like a pillow at one end. Propped up against the back wall, a dirty sack bag, bulging with more clothes, faced the door. Just above it hung an outdated blue calendar with a photo of the state president's face, smiling. In the other half of the room, pots, a wooden cooking stick, plastic spoons, plates, cups, a plastic bowl, and an empty metal bucket were scattered all around, a layer of dust on them. Their purpose almost forgotten from disuse. Dry pieces of nsima lay on the floor, attracting an army of ants and cockroaches. Above, cobwebs formed a ceiling, spiders dancing in them. Sunlight penetrated through holes in the thatch. During the rains, it leaked mercilessly.

The baby girl's yellowish-brown hair was plaited, and she stared out with darting, anaemic eyes. Bones on her cheeks protruded like swollen boils.

With the child on her back, the woman paced around the tiny room. She was of average height, but thin, with cracked and bleeding lips. Though she was dark-skinned, she bore some paleness and ridges on her face, and veins were noticeable on her bare arms. A chitenje cloth was wrapped upside down around her waist, showing the president's face across her backside, surrounded by cobs of maize.

The man, seated on the veranda, could hear the woman's whimpers and insults from that round-shaped hut. Yonder, on a section of raised land, the affluent community was visible – mansions, flower gardens, children playing and riding bikes on tarred streets ... But down here, there were only ngomi huts made of mud. The grass around his hut was overgrown and littered with dead leaves and dog shit. A few steps away from the man, a skinny black dog was lying fast asleep. Green flies hovered around it. Once in a while, it woke up from its sleep and made frail attempts to bite the flies. Just like the woman and her child, it was weak and starved.

It was a house of famine. A house of dearth.

Now, the baby was crying in her weak voice.

The sun was sinking below the western horizon. Darkness, black as the dog which lay asleep, was creeping in. Crickets had started to chirp on top of the thatched hut, and dark clouds were gathering over the land from all corners of the earth. The man could see flashes of lightning along the skyline and hear thunder from afar.

'Where's food?' the woman asked, at the top of her lungs, from inside the hut. He knew the question was directed at him. He had nothing to give. Not even answers.

'Where's food?' she asked again.

Silence.

'Where's food, chimunthu iwe?' she asked, this time punctuating her question with an insult.

Still, there was silence, dead silence, from the man. The baby's wailing filled the silence.

The man lowered his gaze. Shame mixed with despair. His eyes rested on his slippers of different sizes and mismatched colours, then on his overall jeans, torn at both knees. This was his work suit. A long-forgotten memory ago, he might have been a muscular man. But, as age ran

faster than time, fatigue mixed with desperate hunger, his muscles lost firmness, his gait stooped, eyes bulged, until he became a shell of the promise of his youth.

It had been months since he had last worked. Not since December at Shang Hai Supermarket, where he had been a security guard. He had arrived at 5pm on the twenty-third and gone to meet his boss inside the shop. The supermarket was full of customers, and the tellers were busy serving those buying.

‘Here ess your Deceembeah pay.’ His boss spoke with a strong accent, throwing the envelope at him.

He picked up the khaki envelope from the floor at the door and began counting the money.

‘Go do dat oudside. You’re smellin’ and filtfy. Get outta heeere!’

With empty eyes, he looked at his Chinese boss. He was a small but fierce man who had a strong presence in the supermarket. With a move of his hand and flick of his hair, he would tell his workers what to do or not do. He was hated.

‘I sai’ get outta and go to yor bench!’

He turned, walking away. He wondered how he could not be filthy with the payment he got monthly. K50,000 for feeding himself, his wife, and their baby. Being its resident, his boss was aware of the poverty in the city; it was visible in his community. Several times the boss complained of fuel prices; the man, at least, had little to do with fuel. Unlike his boss, he walked to work, and he never travelled to his village, as he could not afford it. Surely, goods required fuel to be transported, he knew that. He, and all the people, were feeling the rise in prices. And he had heard the president say this rise was worldwide due to one big country in Europe occupying a neighbouring small country. And people said trade between countries was affected as the war was being fought. One minister singled out flour to blame for making bread expensive. Party cadets

repeated these things several times. Those in the opposition had their own stories, too. It was all confusing, he thought. They said this. They said that. The man knew only one thing for sure. Every day was a struggle to survive to the next day of struggle.

He sat outside the shop waiting for closing time. People came and left the shop, carrying plastic bags with groceries. He envied them and wished he had some. He held tightly the khaki envelope in his pocket, his hand refusing to release it.

As they locked the shop, he went to his wooden bench, his bed. He had no blanket, so he made do with his overall jeans. Every night he lay on that bench, trying to court sleep, while night drunks passing by called him names. He never answered them back. He knew the limits of his job.

In the morning, he returned to his family. Nearing their hut, he found his wife sweeping the compound, the child on her back. She stood straight, welcoming him with a smile. It was payday, she was joyed. He gave her the envelope.

‘Did you get a Christmas bonus this time?’

‘Those goats know no bonus. But we’ve enough for Christmas shopping, mother of my child.’

‘May you be blessed, father of the child.’

December 24 was a shopping day. The woman had wanted to have a Christmas shopping spree. And here the man had honoured her wish. It was his wish too. Every man desires to make his family happy. If not daily, then at least at Christmas. Every man longs to be the head of his house, even if only once a year. He gave her the money, and she shopped and shopped. On Christmas day, there was eating and eating, drinking and drinking, dancing and dancing, merrymaking and merrymaking ...

The black dog barked at the flies that would not leave it alone. The man came back to his senses. Here they were now. The Christmas festivities had passed, the house was overflowing with sobs and wails.

Weeks without a proper meal seemed like a long, long time. Having little food, or missing meals, was not new to them. They had gotten used to that, but now they had no food. The man, the woman, their child, and their black dog were wearing out. They saw themselves slowly dying of hunger. The man thought about the Bible. In his sorrows, he always found solace in the holy book. *Man shall not live by bread alone.* Yes, for he shall live by other types of food apart from bread. But what? He and his family had no food, no bread. Nothing could be called food in their house. His mind wandered. He was in church, holy communion. God's presence is in bread and wine. That is God's body and blood. Food is the body and blood of God. Thus, food is life. Without food, they were dying physically and spiritually ... Food is life, and the absence of food is the absence of life. A man shall thus live by food alone, for it is life and living ...

The man sat mute outside the hut. Coming from the upper land, a gentle breeze caressed his face. It carried the sweet odour of freshly cooked rice, reminding him of Christmas. Kilombero rice and chicken was what they had eaten on December 25. His belly growled. But he remained motionless in his thoughts.

The woman suddenly stormed out of the hut. The baby on her back continued howling. It was a howl of anguish. A howl of distress. A howl of hollowness.

'Where's food, you fool?'

But there was no response from the man. He just sat there, his hands supporting the weight of his head, holding his lower jaw, his elbows resting on his legs. His thoughts had drifted again ...

He was back in his village. He felt the rawness, the virginity of the land, the greenness of the vegetation, with the freshness of rain-wet soil. He saw her there, in that village. She was a village girl again, dark, with dimples when she smiled, her body shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle, large breasts, tight waist, and big hips. She was a beauty, but innocent and young, full of hope, hope of being married to a man working in town. She had heard that in town, married couples shopped together, ate together in fast food cafés, walked in parks while holding hands, bathed together, and slept on the same bed. True love existed in town, not in the village.

They had fallen in love. It had been quick. He thrilled her with his talks and, during their courtship, he had told her town stories. Stories of buildings on top of each other. Stories of cars cruising along the roads every second. Stories of streetlights dancing with possibilities. Stories of town life, day and night. But he had also told her stories of tricksters and conmen. Bottle store stories, church stories, and workplace stories. Stories of prophetic miracle money. Stories of money being everywhere on the streets like litter. Ghetto stories and suburb stories. Stories of factory workers and construction labourers. These stories had built in her a vision of town-life paradise. A life of adventure and fun. When he asked for her hand in marriage, she could not say no. She wanted to experience that life of bliss with him. She dropped out of school, form 3, to marry him.

But that girl was long gone. In her place was the woman, standing over him, breathing heavily, the baby on her back. She was angrily tense. He looked up, staring at her. She had changed. She was not the woman he had married. Now, with her hips deflated and dimples gone, he blamed

himself for what he had done to her, for soiling her. He sighed. Love? Love is stupid, and people are stupider in love. They had fallen in love, stupid love, and it had made them stupider. Now, here he was, failing to provide the life he had promised her. He wanted to curse God. How had He, the all-powerful one, allowed this in their life? Was he an evil man to deserve that? Was he not religious enough? Had he called upon his family the wrath of God? Was poverty a punishment on him for things he had failed to do in his life?

His thoughts floated further ... Every Sunday, he knelt before the statues of Christ and Holy Mary, receiving the holy communion. He had never stolen or been in any fight with neighbours. Was he not a good man? Praying and being good are not the same. One can be prayerful but not do good to people, or be good to people, but not prayerful. Blessed are those who have both. He pondered ... he knew it, he had both. But why the poverty in his family then? Was it a sin of what he had failed to do?

They were silly thoughts. Yes, what else could they be, but silly thoughts? He lived in a silly country, surrounded by silly people, and lived a silly life.

The woman could see the protrusion of collarbones above her man's chest, and two ligaments stretching up from them on the sides. He was no longer the strong man she had feared before.

'Where's food, you lazybones?'

Silence, dead silence, from the man.

The woman was on him, shaking him and beating him, whimpering and repeating the same question, 'Where's food?'

The man was immersed in thoughts ... This was not the life he had dreamt of living with his family. He had not dreamt of violence. But here it was, and he wondered if poverty and violence were in their lineage, their blood.

He was back in his childhood village, his mother cooking, his father seated on a stool under a mango tree, him close by on the ground.

‘You’ve finished schooling. We expect you to support your siblings now. Find a good job in town,’ his father had told him, as if the town had jobs that people plucked like mangoes from a tree.

And, indeed, he had been fortunate and had found his job as a security guard without many struggles. But the money was little; he wanted more for his family. They deserved that kind of happiness, he had assured himself, especially at Christmas. Was Christmas not supposed to be a day of happiness? Was God not a God of happiness? Could he deny his family a godly happiness on a godly day? So he had given out all he had, knowing God provides food for birds that have no farms. God dresses mountains and valleys in beautiful colours of vegetation. Would the same God fail to feed and dress his family?

That reflection hit him hard. He saw God as a leader, leaders as gods of their country, and his family as a country; God failing, leaders failing, and he, too, failing. He was a failed leader of his family, his people. A leader of promises and lies. Leaders in his country were as stupid as he was. Promising miracle money, miracle progress, and miracle food ... It was a country of people believing in a religion of miracles ... a people praying for miracles ...

The man’s heart burned with anger. It was not anger towards his wife. It was not anger towards himself. This was anger towards his country and his people, of which he was one. He felt cheated by his country. He felt cheated by his society. Everyone seemed not to care about where

they were coming from, where they were, and where they were going. The motionless movement of daily activities. The aimlessness of action and inaction.

He had questions no one could answer, questions about freedom, about the power of the people. He was going crazy. He was dying; he was bursting with thoughts. The thoughts were killing him, eating him up, silly thoughts. He was silly, as he lived in a silly world.

The man stood up from where he had sat and she stepped away. In silence, he walked towards the door. As he opened it, the woman pushed him from the back. He fell forwards, onto the utensils inside, scattering them. His hand hit the sack bag. Clothes spilled out. His head hit the metal bucket in the room, leaving a cut on his forehead. He was bleeding. Blood dripped down, forming a stream on his face, down to his overall jeans.

He stood up, and, picking up a cloth from the mat, wiped blood from his face. He fumed and foamed. Boxer-like, he turned around and released his left hook. It caught the woman on the lower jaw where she was standing at the door. She flew back, and it was like she really was flying, like she had become a feather, floating slowly through the air, before toppling on her back three steps away, hitting the ground with a thud. He watched in shock. He did not know he had the strength to punch his wife so hard. He was amazed by the energy he had. Despite the hunger and his weakness, with his punch she had flown weightlessly like that. And then, for a moment, the man wished she had fallen on the black dog lying on the ground, wished it could have cushioned her, protected her and the baby from a crash landing. But he saw the dog jump up in fright as the woman landed on her back. There was a sharp cry from the baby. Then silence. Dead silence.

In a state of confusion, bits of memories and thoughts flashed by him like fleeting bursts of light ... His life ... His family ... His country ...

The dog barked again, rousing him from the passing horror of his thoughts. Here now, they were hungry and fighting. And now their baby, their only baby, lay motionless on the ground. Overhead, heavily pregnant clouds had gathered above them. Some small drops of rain began to touch down. The soft breeze was gone, and now a windstorm was developing.

Swiftly, the man picked up the lifeless baby in his hands and began running to the hospital downtown, miles away. The woman dragged herself after him, still whimpering. The piece of cloth she had used to wrap the child now hung slackly around her waist, covering the smiling face of the president. The black dog followed them. And the darkness swallowed them the way the black dog had swallowed the flies around it.