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# *A broken road in Utopia*

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“Carry the gun and come along.” Father would order me.

I was only 12, old enough to contain the weight of a gun but young enough to put the barrel on my chest.

My father wasn't a common man, he was a god, and he had kingdoms in him, in his heart, his head and in his body. You know a man is a god when his mouth utters echoes drummed by ancestors, and my father did just that. He tied a knot around his neck and laced the world to his body, a world that had faces and voices of men who lived and died before him. Sometimes he would bring home a calabash of beer and a handful of wild fruits, and scary tales he collected from the woods, and blend them to make a meal and a night that he fed me when my belly turned into an empty well.

At night, while the moon drew my gaze into its crater-like pockets, he would pluck a lullaby from his heart and break it into a dirge that painted mother's face on every wall in our house. His tongue would undress and cover itself in his wife's voice, his wife who lost but found her shadow in a land where men sang hymns of death.

My mother never knew how to spell sadness; she wasn't illiterate; she carried in her heart a balm full of happiness. At least that's what father confided in me. She sewed strips of love to her soul and knew not how to peg bitterness on her tongue; in her mouth was a bungalow full of joy. Each time her face illuminated my father's house, tears would roll down my cheeks engraving verse-lines in my heart of how a son yearns to kiss the palms of his mother.

Our house was small, built from wood and mud with a roof that tirelessly swallowed light and raindrops. It was dressed in a cheerful yellow paint that faded under prints of clenched fists father periodically reigned on it each time a fire flared in the belly of his heart. Although it was a small hut marooned in the hands of a dark forest, it was big enough to hold a million memories we tied to it.

When a woman dances on fire without shoes, pain doesn't caress her feet but her heart. This is what happened to mother. One rainy night, father

went out. He took along his blunt knife, a sack, and a nylon rope. Lightning flashes pierced the dark skies sneaking in between grey clouds that formed with loud bangs above the horizon. On the roof, the cacophony of dancing raindrops turned into a song that stroked my mother's nerves like a brush of thorns. It was unusual to see father go out hunting late at night. With him gone, mother knitted her husband's love together with hers, breaking into a mournful dirge before splitting her fear into pieces.

We knew it was getting late, very late, even though we had no clock to read what time it was. I was young, but I could see how mother's eyes slowly turn a reddish-color before large hot tears found their way out. She held me to her bosom and pampered me with a lullaby—she loved to sing when nights became scary. Mother wrapped me in her arms until every word in her lullaby curled around my ears like wisps of smoke. I shut my eyes. The rains were waning with each thunder burst. The sound rumbled through our house, shaking a roof that was only partially pinned to the fragile mud structure.

Morning came, and I stretched to the awkward sound of my yawning. I dropped my left arm on the side of the bed that mother slept. Even though our house was small, we had a bed, made out of tree branches. Being a man handy with his hands, my father made all our furniture from tree branches and pitched them in the ground.

Our furniture was beautiful though not colorful enough to attract a single bee. I traced my fingers along the breadth of the sheets, but could not feel mother's body. I climbed off the bed, carefully dropping each leg on the ground as the bed was quite high, though just right for my height even if I looked so small. I staggered around calling for mother. She did not answer back. I peeped through the small window, and the new dawn splashed a beautiful light that stained the slate grey clouds.

The rains had vanished, and the ground was muddy, decorated with branches, leaves, and mangoes that had fallen from the trees because of the wind. I pulled open the door and ran outside to pick a few mangoes, my belly was empty, and it would be a shame not to put some in it.

It was a cold and damp morning, the breeze moved about in crinkled motions on the rain puddles. I could feel its moist breath settling on my laps and around my shoulders. I called out for mother, all I could hear was an echo rushing in my eardrums.

A warm yellow sun was now beaming between the grey clouds, tingling

my skin with a sensation that made my belly crave more mangoes. I was used to the idea of not having breakfast early in the morning because mother would first collect firewood, make fire and complete her chores before preparing food. She served us with the best food in the village, its mouth-watering taste building an immeasurable feeling in our tummies.

The morning was becoming sunny. Lazy clouds slid away to the other side of the earth transforming the sky to a clear blue color. I called out for mother one more time before shouting for father. Suddenly a loud cry pierced the air; it was a man's voice, I could tell from its weight when it struck my ears. It sounded as though a snake or something vicious had bitten someone. I held my breath and dragged my feet to where the sound was coming from.

The loud cry sounded one more time, much louder and more somber. I pinned my gaze on a line of trees that hedged the front of our compound. I saw a man staggering around, weeping like a widow. I looked carefully, straining my sight on the man's face. Alarm bells began to ring in my head. It was father, holding mother's body in his arms. I felt a cold twinge of fear course through my body. This is how you tell when death sucks out the last breath of your beloved. I was old enough to read between the lines. Father's eyes played out an entire episode of our bewildering calamity. The kingdom in him was crumbling into pieces, each piece a picture of his beautiful wife.

“Belitah! Why Belitah?” He cried out.

I could read the sorrow in his eyes, but my mind refused to understand what was going on. I rushed to him, but he walked passed me. He took his wife's body inside the house and laid her on the bed. I stared at her body, traced my fingers along the veins on her hand before touching her face. She was cold. I smiled and shook her limp hand which rested comfortably on the edge of the bed. I was praying she would smile back and sing me the beautiful song she had engraved in my heart, the one she sang each time we were preparing food outside.

Father left in a rush for God knows where. Many villages in the Eastern Province of Zambia are far apart. Weeping voices and bodies started to trickle in. It was unusual to see people flocking towards our hut, especially so early in the morning. I walked out of the hut and bumped into a group of women dressed in crazy-colored waist wrappers and head covers. Among them was one I knew, my mother's friend. She was fat, tall and as

dark as the midnight sky. Amai Tembo was the name mother used to call her by. She was one of the senior women in the village. She came to me with a sorrowful face and held me to her bosom. The pity on her face made me wonder what was going on. All the women trooped into the house and immediately burst into loud wails that were entwined with regretful phrases in our local dialect. I couldn't understand what they were shouting, all I heard was mother's name over and over again. The women kept touching and shaking her limp body, but she didn't wake up. I stood at the doorstep, wrapped the flimsy door curtain around my body and for a moment stared at the weeping women.

I rushed outside to look for father who had since vanished into the woods. I realized that the news about my mother had spread like wildfire. Many more people darted around the village, some pointing their fingers up the mango trees while others pointed theirs at me. Soon, father appeared with a group of men behind him with logs of firewood on their shoulders. His eyes were slightly less red, and his face looked calm. He gave me a slight smile. Greedily I grasped at the feeling that smile fed me.

Father took me to the other side of the village and told me that poor mother was gone never to return, that she had undressed her soul and carried with her the essence that knew how to light up our lives with her smile.

Five years later, Father re-built the crumbled kingdom within him, stopped the bleeding from his heart and once more turned into a god. By this time I knew from the village elders that when fathers turned into gods, they began to teach their sons how to become men; how to pull the toes of death without being burnt so that the heat of their fear ceased to exist. Father taught me how to hold a gun, how to feed an animal with a bullet and bury its flesh in my belly.

"You are what you eat." He would tell me.

He also taught me how to break a dirge into a verse, a chapter, and finally into a book if he's shadow lost its way back home because life was an unpredictable game in my village and people sometimes simply disappeared never to return. It was an exciting time in my life. Father and I would go out in the bush at midday in a fever pitch that made me feel as though I was a professional hunter. Each time I shot on target, I would carry the memory on my brain the whole day, sometimes even a week. We did not know much about school in my village; education was a ghost that

journeyed beyond our mango-tree fence. Traditional teachings and superstitions were much more relevant to our daily living.

Often Father left me alone at home without saying where he was going to. Usually, he left early in the morning before the sun slid above the horizon and I was still asleep.

One Saturday morning, Father came home with lines of joy sketched on his face and two dead rabbits swinging from a branch perched on his shoulder. He loved rabbit meat and had taught me to love it too.

"How are you doing?" He greeted; in between smiles.

"I'm fine," I replied with chuckles passing from ear-to-ear as I hooked the rabbits off his shoulder. I gave him a stool and rushed to collect some pieces of firewood from the previous night; there was enough to make a fire for the day. Within an hour we would skin them, smoke them, stuff some chopped tomatoes in their clean bellies and make a delicious rabbit stew.

"Zuze." Father said my name thoughtfully to as we sat down to eat the stew. He looked me in the eye and told me that men like him wore their mother's love on their bodies and lived their lives like shadows in the dark. He said only other gods could spot what journeys they took on this Earth.

"Pay heed to what I have to say to you." He said.

"If tomorrow I disappear, knit my teachings into one thread and tie it around your

Neck. Death, he said firmly, limped around with a gun hunting for boys who did not know how to lace the sun to their bodies. His words broke my rabbit-stew enjoyment into two pieces; one full of curiosity, and the other full of fear. I knew that this is how elders say goodbye in my village.

"Am I going somewhere?" I asked; while doing the rabbit justice it needed.

He chuckled.

"Just be prepared. When the time comes, don't forget to carry my words with you." I stared at him, trying to read the wrinkles that appeared and disappeared around his mouth as he spoke.

The next morning, as the birds chirped their usual melodies, I snapped out of my sleep and in between yawns, called for father. I called his name and shook him several times, but his eyes didn't open. His mouth too was shut. His hands and legs were cold. Suddenly, I was in a world that knew

nothing about sketching smiles for boys who lost their father's faces in the dark and who stood alone as the wind dried up rivers in their eyes and caused their tears to cease. A day later, our village turned into a burial palace that fed on a cacophony of falling leaves that settled comfortably on the pile of Earth thrown hastily over my father's body.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in a long corridor. A few boys sat on the sides, all of them staring at me. I looked around. The skies looked beautiful, and the clouds were lit by rays from the sun. I stood up, walked a few steps and looked around again. My gaze fell on a tall building, a bridge, and a stream of slow-moving cars. I was mesmerized; I had never seen such things.

"What am I doing here?" I asked myself. Was this is the place where boys become men before turning into gods? I heard my father's voice echoing in my ears, but it said nothing about how to teach my limbs to get back home if my shadow lost its way in a land that suckled on pain of fatherless boys, or how to speak the language of fallen mothers, or drink from the calabash of wisdom without breaking it.

Together with the other boys, I journeyed around the city under the raindrops of life's endurance on the broken road of our utopia. I asked for alms and bread and butter to fill a belly that only knew how to digest rabbit stew.

As time swiftly journeyed by, my utopia turned into a ramshackle, a hellhole that sizzled at my feet. I came to understand that my mother, father, and my village had served me clever meals of words, songs and rabbit stew and taught me to grasp every breath that my ancestors breathed. Life was meant to be lived. I wore father's teachings and wrapped his voice around my fists. I never shed tears or let my mother's voice slip off my tongue. I was now a man, and so the river in my eyes dried up, and my tears ceased to exist. One day I killed a man because I was curious to learn how it feels to be a lunatic walking on a bridge beneath which blood oozed like a river that led to those who swallowed fire before turning into carcasses. Even without my father's words and my mother's songs, I knew that taking a life, yours or another man's was how men turned into gods. On a broken road in utopia.