

The Sacrifice

Dembe touched her cheek to a mango that was almost ripe. She had hoped to find one blushing, a red surprise against the tree's umbrella of leaves. She would have tucked it inside her shirt, let it cool her in the car trip to Kyakoro. When they were almost at the shrine of the witchdoctor and Tata was deep in his map, she would have split her secret harvest with Ogwambe to comfort him.

A tongue of black shook the grass near her foot and Dembe jumped back. A branch caught in her braids and broke away. She rubbed the spot on her scalp and watched the mamba dart for a crevice in the compound wall, relieved that it was frightened and not angry. It pushed its head between loose stones, but for a moment the belly looped like a rope. Dembe almost laughed at the undignified tangle, until with a quick twist the snake broke free and the darkness swallowed it.

The house was ten paces away. Dembe sprinted them. Her bare feet scuffed the dry red earth, made dust-prints on the pale tiles of the foyer, crept past her father's office and into Ogwambe's darkened bedroom. She lifted the edge of the mosquito net and crawled over the mattress to his sleeping body, wanting to wake him with a kiss on his ink-dark cheek. Ogwambe stirred and turned to her.

- What is it? he croaked.

She put her head next to his on the pillow so that their noses touched.

- Witchdoctor day!

- Oh God! I feel like a goat to the slaughter, Dembe. I do not know why

Tata thinks...

Dembe lowered her voice to a prophetic monotone.

- I have seen signs and portents of change, Brother, of cure. I saw a black mamba!

Ogwambe smiled.

- What you saw was the totem of the famous Dr. Mukasa. Tata is so in love with that witchdoctor he will drive halfway across Uganda to meet with him. Did Mukasa look like he might eat me?

Dembe chuckled at an image of the mamba's skin wrapped round an Ogwambe-shaped meal.

- I think he had filled up on bird eggs, since his belly was too fat to get inside the wall. I wanted to kick him.
- Then you are silly. Dr. Mukasa would be right to bite you if you did that. And those witchdoctors can kill.

Ogwambe sat up unsteadily and the sheets fell around his waist. Dembe put her arm around him, relishing his sleep-warm back. Two weeks ago, they'd turned sixteen but the celebration had been family only. They relied on each other more than ever now. Dembe nestled her face against Ogwambe's upper arm, sensed that his lips were caught on unsaid things. The door swung open and Tata walked in. His eyes were red, his hair tousled. He saw their intertwined arms and his lips narrowed.

- Why is Ogwambe not dressed?
- Tata, I am just getting his...
- We said an early start, Dembe. After today Ogwambe will have his sight back. I think that is worth an extra effort.

Dembe untangled herself from the mosquito net and went to the dresser. She pulled the middle draw so hard it nearly fell out.

- I want to dress myself today, Dembe.
- You don't even know where your socks are.
- Please. Just let me try.

Outside, the heat had thickened. Dembe looked over to where the mangoes were beaded with sweat, her eyes avoiding the white stone with her mother's name etched on it. It was unheard of to bury family members in the compound, but Tata had said they should be able to see Mama each day.

Tata blinked as he walked into the sunshine, polishing his glasses with a cloth. When he put them on, he did not look at the headstone either. Instead, he stared at the rusted Hyundai that had been so well serviced when they could afford it.

By the time Ogwambe shuffled out, Dembe was in the back seat with her bag beside her. When she didn't move to help Ogwambe, Tata looked sharply at her but said nothing. They watched him tap his stick on the red dirt, turning himself so that he faced away from them. Tata coughed and Ogwambe stopped, came towards them with agonizing slowness. His dark glasses hid the scar on his temple, but his shirt was buttoned wrongly and half-tucked into his trousers.

Dembe closed her eyes and gripped the nylon seat cover so that she wouldn't be tempted to help him. Ogwambe had settled himself in the front seat, his stick folded up between his knees. Usually they sat together on outings, but today he was avoiding her.

It was late afternoon when they reached the black-green tent of forest that stood between their country and the witchdoctor's. Dembe's stomach rumbled when she saw boy vendors with sticks of roasted pork and girls her own age walking along

the roadside with green oranges. It was hard to imagine how they took a job like that so young - and here in the impenetrable forest where bandits were common as monkeys!

The Hyundai pulled in at a roadside market behind a tourist bus. Tata wound down the windows and coarse sales patter filled the car. Dembe opened her window and a woman pushed a stick of barbecued chicken in her face. She fished out some coins and bought the chicken, almost trapping the saleswoman's finger in her haste to get the window back up.

- Shall we get out to eat, Ogwambe? asked Tata.
 - No. I hate the way those vendors press in on you. Anyway, I am not hungry.
 - You must be by now, and you will need your strength for the consultation.
- Ogwambe turned on his father, spitting his words like lemon pips.
- I said I would not like to eat!

Tata got out and slammed the car door behind him with uncharacteristic force.

Dembe followed him.

- Ogwambe is so angry about this trip of ours.
- He feels like a goat being led to the slaughter, Father.
- Why would you say that?
- That is what Ogwambe said.

Tata sucked his teeth.

- It would help me if you two had some faith in this.

Dembe took a bite of her chicken. It was slippery with grease. She mumbled through a full mouth,

- We *do* have faith...in Jesus...in modern medicine...not in *juju*!

- Medicine has failed Ogwambe. I've told you this will work.

Anger bubbled up in Dembe's chest. She heard him say that so many times and each time she felt more sick of hearing it. There were *mzungu* tourists standing near them, and they had turned to gawk at the argument. Dembe knew she should keep quiet, but she couldn't help herself.

- For heaven's sake, Tata! You're ridiculous. Can't you hear yourself talk? You were never like this before Mama died. I pray each night that God will bring her back, or else set me free from your nonsense... and your orders!

Tata glowered at her. He always did when she let her temper get the better of her. Dembe thought of him bent over his gears and wheels and pallets, tweezing and winding and nudging the watch till its metal heart ticked once more. It was his passion, the trade he had been training Ogwambe for. Now he squinted at Dembe in the same way he would eye a rusted main spring. When he spoke, his voice was icy.

- You know, Daughter, that the loss of our business means there is no dowry for you, no goat or cow for your husband's family?

Dembe sighed.

- That doesn't matter! I have nobody to give a goat...

Tata interrupted her.

- When Ogwambe has his sight back, he will not need you to look after him. You will be free of us and I will have to give you to your husband.

Dembe rolled her eyes.

- And where will you look for this man who will take me with no goat?
- I have already found him, Daughter.

His lips pursed, then turned up at the corners as if he were trying to smile. His eyes bulged, showing a crescent of white like the mad eyes of the beggar in the village market. Dembe had to look away. She felt sick. The chicken sat heavily inside her belly like a meal of poison berries.

After the forest came the desert. Soon red rocks piled high on either side of them.

I have already found him, Daughter.

Had Tata really said that? An arranged match. What about school? Dembe distracted herself by trying to imagine their destination. She had heard many different versions: a hut propped on elephant legs, a temple made of bones. Dr. Mukasa was nine feet tall. No, he was four feet, but had the power to squeeze beneath doors. He had been alive for two hundred years. He had dozens of wives whom he imprisoned alive in the honeycomb caves of Kyakoro when they displeased him.

She had pillowed her head on Mama's lap, her hair twining with Ogwambe's. Both of them had shuddered pleasantly at the images their mother conjured in the air around them and pleaded for more stories before bed. So she told of the miracle cures and the desperate deals people struck to get one.

My right hand for a boy child, Doctor!

My life for my grandson's health!

The car turned onto a narrow dirt track. Soon, it hit a hairpin bend that flung Dembe against her seatbelt. Her head bumped the glass of the window. Ogwambe gasped. More than anything, she wanted him in the back of the car so that they could hold hands. They took another sharp turn and the belt knocked the wind from

her. Why was Tata driving so fast? Dembe thought she might be sick. She leaned closer to the front seat, glimpsed Ogwambe's lips move rhythmically. He was praying.

It was round the third bend, hidden by a dome of orange rock, that they saw a small sign reading Kyakoro. Dembe's heart beat faster. It was hot in the car, but she didn't want to get out into the red dust and walk amongst the squat mud huts that straggled from the rocks. She could see no cassava, no garden crops of green tomatoes. Not even a chicken scratching in the bare dirt yards. Under a stooped thorn tree sat a child of six or so. He was naked and stared blankly ahead while the flies landed on his lips and brow.

Tata slowed for the narrow track between huts. His map was no good to him now. An old woman with a purple head-cloth walked out of her hut to sweep. Tata stopped the car.

- Dembe, ask that woman for directions.

Dembe wound her window down.

- *Ssebo*, can you help us?

The woman looked up, her broom clutched tightly in both hands.

- We're looking for the house of Dr. Mukasa.

The knuckles of the woman's brown hands whitened and she looked down.

Dembe reached into her pocket and fished out some change. She held the money out like birdfeed. The woman edged towards the car, still clutching her broom. She looked around her on both sides then peered inside.

- Dr. Mukasa? You know where he lives?

The woman cupped her palm and Dembe's coins trickled into it. She closed her hand, her dry lips parting to reveal a toothless darkness. She propped her broom

against the car and slowly raised her arm until she was pointing down the track they'd just come from. Dembe tried to sound as gentle as she could.

- *Ssebo*, we have come from there. We are looking for Mukasa.

The woman pointed harder. The ends of her thin fingers shook. She drew back her lips and leaned in close to Dembe as if she might try to bite her nose off with those gums.

- Dembe! Wind up the window! said Tata.

Balls of sweat broke out on the back of his neck while he struggled to get the car into first.

- Where are we going? asked Ogwambe

- To the Doctor's house! snapped Tata.

The Hyundai grumbled, its wheels spinning on the dirt road. It juddered, almost hitting the old woman. Something brushed her knee and she jumped, half expecting a snake. It was Ogwambe's hand, damp against her jeans. He'd reached back behind the seat. She squeezed his fingers.

At the end of the track was a bend with another sign. *House of Bees* was daubed in crude white capitals. They heard the buzzing before they saw the round mud building. It was tin-roofed and much larger than the village huts with a grove of banana trees shading it. In neat fingers forming a fan rectangular hives were stacked, the combs inside them hidden behind metal lids. A woman in a black dress pumped smoke from a metal fire-pot. She turned towards the car, her face hidden under a veil.

Tata parked and got out. He approached the woman and she kneeled to him in the old greeting Dembe hated. She never kneeled, even to Tata. Ogwambe's hand was still in hers.

- I will get out first, she said.

Dembe peeled her damp legs off the seat. She went round to Ogwambe's side. There were salt-tracks on his face. She wondered how long he had sat silently crying.

- He will not hurt you, Brother.
- How do you know?
- Because I'll be there to protect you.

Ogwambe let out a strangled sob. She put her arms around his neck and kissed his forehead. He clung to her. Tata's face appeared through the window behind Ogwambe's head. He squinted at her, his face tight with anger.

- Are you two coming?

Ogwambe put his hands on Dembe's shoulders and she guided his head so that he wouldn't hit it. He took her arm and they followed the veiled woman to the dark doorway of the hut. The buzzing grew louder. A pall of smoke hit her face and she coughed. In the centre of the room embers glowed. Above them was a white shape like a waning moon. When it turned, Dembe saw it was a mask with steeply slanted eyeholes and pouting lips. She came closer, leading Ogwambe behind her as if her body might protect him from this place.

The mask's wearer was sitting down, his stooped form hidden by a bark-cloth cloak. His gloved hands gestured to Dembe to kneel. She hesitated. The smoke made her eyes smart. Moving behind it were others dressed like the bee-keeping woman, but the hut was so dark they seemed like shadows shifting with the smoke.

- Dr. Mukasa wants you to kneel, Dembe.

Dembe stayed standing. Hands closed round her neck. At first she thought it was Ogwambe, then realized Tata was pushing her, forcing her knees to the ground.

His fingers pinched her shoulders. She fell forwards, bowed before Mukasa. She breathed in smoke and coughed until her chest hurt.

Rough cloth brushed her chin. Mukasa's hand, gently tugging at her face. She looked up and saw the mask. The dark space of the eyeholes fixed her.

What's happening, Dembe? asked Ogwambe.

He was beside her, kneeling. His hand slipped around hers. Tata's hands were on his shoulders.

- I don't know, whispered Dembe.

Mukasa turned to Ogwambe and the gloved hand closed around his face. Ogwambe shook his head.

- Be still! cried Mukasa. His voice was like the hissing of a snake.

He reached behind him and his gloved hand came back dark and wet. Dembe smelled honey. Mukasa pulled Ogwambe's glasses off and Dembe saw her brother's eyes, wide, unfocussed. Mukasa smeared the dark liquid over them. Ogwambe whimpered, his eyelids fluttering. His hand tightened on Dembe's. A stray bee flew through the smoke and landed on the bridge of its nose, its belly quivering.

- It is done, lisped Mukasa.

He turned back to Dembe.

- And the girl will stay here.

Dembe was too shocked to speak. She had heard of the reckless bargains.

My right hand for a boy child!

But could he really imagine...?

- Father, you must give him his payment.

Tata patted her head.

- It is a good match, Dembe. I told you I had found a man to take you.

He sounded pleased, proud. Dembe spun round.

- What?
- Shhh. Do not offend your husband, Daughter!

She jumped up.

- But Ogwambe needs me at home!
- He will not need you now. And you must not try to leave, or the charm will fail.
- Worsse than fail, said the sibilant voice. If you run, it will kill him.

Dembe stepped backwards. There were hands around her back and at her side.

The figures from the shadows crowded round her. One held up a veil, another a black dress.

- Yes, it will fit her, murmured one of the women.
- Daughter, celebrate! Tata cried.

His tone was victorious. He stood in the doorway of the hut, his arm through Ogwambe's. He was grinning.

- Just think, Dembe. You will be free of my orders and my nonsense. Free at last!

Tata pushed Ogwambe outside. Dembe struggled but the arms around her were too strong. One gripped her waist, another pulled her arms above her head.

- Ogwambe! Ogwambe!
- Sister! Sister! came his voice from far away.

A door slammed and the engine started. Dembe cried out. Black cloth muffled her cry. The dress was tight over her t-shirt. A veil swathed her face. Through the gauze she saw a waning moon, a mask with slanted holes for eyes.