

PAPA'S TEARS

by Mercy Adhiambo

Darkness was fast approaching. I stuck out my tongue at Naya, and she reached out as if to grab me, but I dodge neatly and reached and she on the ground. We burst into loud laughter.

'I will catch you tomorrow', Naya panted.

'No tomorrows. Catch me now!' I shouted. I did not wait to hear what she had to say. I ran home.

A bright dust of fireflies swept ahead of me. I captured one of them and clutched my fist tightly. I made a small hole among my fingers and peered inside to see if the fly still had its tiny green light, but I was disappointed to find out the light was gone.

I heard Mama shouting my name from a distance and increased my speed. She was standing by the door when I arrived.

'Don't you have some sense in your head to see that it is dark?' she asked, poking my forehead furiously with her finger.

'I was playing with Naya', I whispered.

'Eish! Playing with with Naya at this time?' she said, then turned to look at her wrist, although she had no watch.

'Ma-', I started, but she did not let me finish. She rushed into, and it was difficult to predict whether she was going to get a cane; which she always kept in the kitchen, or if she had gone to continue with cooking.

I remained outside for a while, to watch the situation. When she did not come out and I heard her hum a tune in the kitchen, I entered the house and sat on the mat that was spread in the center of the living room.

Papa came and found me playing with the shadows of my hands. I made images of fierce dogs, venomous snakes, scorpions...

He slumped himself on his chair and it creaked loudly under his weight. There was only one chair in our hut, and it belonged to Papa. Nobody ever sat on it, not even when Papa was away. When

we had a visitor, Mama would get a stool from the neighbour; not letting anyone sit on Papa's chair.

Papa scratched the hairs of his chin vigorously. He always did that whenever he had nothing to do. Occasionally, he pulled one strand of hair from his chin and examined it carefully. I wondered what he always looked for in those strands.

I pretended to be reading my *Progressive English* textbook. My eyes were fixed on the book, while my thought wandered to my day at school.

'Papa, is it true that all children are angels?' I suddenly asked. Our class teacher had told us during Religious Studies that all children were angels.

He continued scratching his chin without saying anything.

'Papa'

'Eh!'

'Are children Angels?'

'They are'

'Is Jiwe an angel too?'

'He is'

'But he is crippled Papa; he has no legs'

Papa smiled.

'Papa, am I an angel too?'

'You are.'

My eyes shone. I had never thought of myself as an angel.

'Is it right to slap an angel papa?'

'No'

'Then why did you slap me the day I took one shilling from your wallet?'

'Angels do not steal'

' I did not steal, I took'.

'Took without my knowledge — you stole.'

'No, I took'

Our conversation was interrupted by a loud hammering on the door. Papa was sitting next to the door, but he did not move to open it; instead, Mama came from the kitchen fastening her *leso* around

her waist. There were little beads of sweat on the tip of her nose and her forehead was shiny. Opening of doors and other inferior jobs belonged to women.

Mama wiped her forehead with the back of her hand when she reached the door, but before she opened, it was kicked violently and it flung open.

Papa shot up in alarm. I also stood.

It was Chief. He was not wearing his uniform. He stood towering in front of us.

'I salute you Chief', Mama said bowing her head.

Chief did not look at mama. He stepped into the hut and his heavy shoes made a *Thup! Thup!* sound as he walked on the loose soil on the floor of our hut.

Thup! Thup! He walked towards Papa.

He stopped about two footsteps from Papa. His shadow was thrown on the cracked wall of our hut; it was enormously exaggerated and his image looked like a giant; ready to devour Papa.

The air was still.

'Have a seat Chief', papa said, pointing at his chair — the one nobody ever sat on.

'Did you abuse your employer today?' Chief said, ignoring Papa's invitation.

Papa folded his eyebrows as if trying to remember something and shook his head immediately.

'What did you do?'

'I told him that I cannot wash his inner clothing'

'Why?'

'We are both men Chief; and none is lesser. Will my grandchildren in future ever respect me if they learn that I washed the inner garment of another man? Will they? I am his House boy, but above all, I am a man...'

'Are you a man? Do you know that Asians are the backbone of this region's economy? Do you know how much your employer pays me in rent? Do you? It can buy you and your miserable family! I will

allow nobody to insult him, least of all you Dog...' Chief said. His words pierced my bowels.

He caught papa by the collar and slapped him. Yes, Chief slapped my papa. He slapped him again and again. Papa did not move, neither did he try to shield himself from Chief's blows.

He was kicked on the stomach and he groaned in pain. It was terrible. Every time Papa groaned, I felt intense pain in my stomach.

Mama screamed. Chief kicked Papa harder.

In the agony of my mind, I wondered if Papa would come out alive. He tried to stand but Chief kicked him so hard on the head that I thought Papa's skull was going to shatter on the floor.

Mama screamed louder. I was half dead with fear

'Cant you see how poor you are before exchanging words with your employer?'

I felt the need to defend Papa.

'My papa is not poor. There is a hundred shilling note in his wallet. I saw it'

Chief walked out and disappeared in the darkness.

Mama covered her mouth with her hand and a severe sob rocked her body. Papa reached for the table for support and stood up.

'Papa, Chief will burn in God's big fire.'

In spite of his pain, Papa smiled.

'Baba Mercy, what did you do?' mama asked.

'I cannot wash Patel's innerwear just because I work for him...I cannot'

I noticed that papa did not call him Mr. Patel like he always did — he just said Patel.

'What are we poor men before rich men? What are we?' mama asked, wiping her tears with the hem of her *leso*.

'Mother of the house, do not serve my meal. I am full' Papa said.

'I am full too' I said.

Mama went to the kitchen, and she let out a full-throated cry.

'Papa, is Chief a black Asian?'

He lifted my chin and looked right inside my eyes. His breathing was fast.

'Your eyes are still too small to see the big things of this world Mercy. One day you will know...' he said.

He carried me and placed me on his lap. I lifted my hand and wiped the blood on his temple. I felt my eyes mist. I rested my head against Papa's chest and felt his heart beating fast. Like how my heart beats when Naya and I chase each other around.

'Papa, does God love poor people?'

'I don't know'.

'The teacher for Religion taught us a song today'

'Sing it'

***' These mountains shall move says the Lord,
These troubles shall fade, says the Lord
It's not by power, nor by might,
But by spirit says the Lord.'***

'I know that song. We used to sing it back then when I was a little boy'

***' These mountains shall move says the Lord,
These troubles shall fade, says the Lord
It's not by power, nor by might,
But by spirit says the Lord.'***

We sang together, and our voices merged with the stillness of that night. We became one in song. Papa stroked the back of my hand. I cried.

Papa continued singing and with each note, his voice became bitter. He choked on the words; then he started crying. For the first time I saw papa cry. I sang on as he cried.

'Papa, will you go to work tomorrow?'

'No'

'Do you have another job?'

'No'

The light of the lamp in the room glimmered weakly in the darkness.

'Go to sleep' Papa said.

As I lay on bed, my mind wandered to so many places. I couldn't quite comprehend the events of that night, but one thing I was sure of was that Chief would burn in the fire the teacher had described richly. The fire that burns for all eternity, burning all people who had been wicked in their stay on earth. I was sure Chief would burn in that fire. I fell asleep smiling, imagining how Chief would yell out, crying for Papa's help as he burnt away, slowly by slowly...

