

Title:

A Walk in Shea Trees

Word count: 3854 words

The town looked in every way different from how I had imagined.

It felt as though we had stumbled upon a graveyard as we clunked deeper into its sinister confines. The dampening scent of freshly turned earth mixed with moss rot pervaded the air. Obscurity stole the character from the buildings amassed on the sides, and like a sprawl of weathered tombstones they stood in dreary hues of grey, drowning in the dawn's mist.

But that wasn't actual mist. It was a veiling of murky smog particles drifting in the air and casting a generally gloomy appearance on the township.

"Have you checked tomorrow's numbers?" The travel mate Lamisi asked, drawing his medical box from under the seats as the bus crunched to a stop. "It's nothing like I've seen before".

Lamisi worked as a recovery nurse for the hospital where I visited my neurologist and sometimes contentious friend Dr Gyan.

Gyan had assigned Lamisi to me, maintaining that I used some company on the night-long journey to a town I had not been to in years, with no returning memories whatsoever of neither its people nor their hustle.

Despite my early disapproval to the arrangement, I was beginning to imagine the misery that awaited a lone stranger in those mystifying alleys. I was relieved however for the long break I was about to enjoy away from Gyan.

Throughout my time as his amnesia patient, I knew it was to him an undertaking solely for the credentials, which per the records were already exceptional. Really, if he wasn't

to be with critical acclaim, I wouldn't have ever walked through his doors despite him being a long-standing team buddy at the Seniors Tennis Club.

In the consulting room he would wear this forced smile, nodding repeatedly at my every whim. Probably hopeful that those gestures would conceal his erupting desire to credit himself with yet another ground-breaking medical victory.

He was fond of using words he knew would evoke reactions, to later leave me gnashing my teeth or wagging a foot like I was a damn dog. Sometimes I would scrape my nails under my seat as he gawked right into my soul from behind his rimless glasses. As if saying 'Remember wimp! It shouldn't be that hard'.

Those tactical preliminaries to resuscitate my affiliation to times I dreaded wandering into were the reasons our meetings soon came to be erratic.

To come to terms with my own complexities, which was all I hoped to accomplish from the sessions, I resorted more to hashtags and primetime sitcoms than I did with him. He was simply an impossible old chap with book long approaches that barely fanned my sails – the one I needed to reach a better mental state, not one that played out like an exorcism exercise.

The period before the travel was a daunting one. I remember avoiding his sessions the best I could, like a nonconforming criminal on the run.

So, for the matters of persuasion, he attacked at very unexpected times.

That evening the game was going well. I tightened my waist strap and tested the grass beneath my feet, readying for the opponent on the other side. Then from nowhere...

"This could be it, your chance to reconnect with your people" he blared out as he slammed the ball to my end. One could almost hear the reverberations from the taut racket strings.

I raised my head to the ball mid-air, then caught his usual bearing; dour. But every player in the club knew of those in-court intimidations.

"This is for work" I was relentless

And with the last traces of air left after slamming back, I reminded him.

"Let's keep it that way"

He smirked.

6-4 6-0, whistle.

Before my life had taken those turns, I was none but an impoverished hobo hustling in the Agbogloboshie slum area of the city, living off scrap merchantry with other wild men whose stories may never be heard anywhere beyond the dilapidated slum cabins. Some of whom would never know the freedoms that life never gave them.

As an early retirement procedure, I slithered my way to being a realtor for a plush beach estate along the Bortianor shores. Eventually I secured for myself one of the cribs and that was when all of a sudden who I was before did not matter to me anymore. I was never again to wake up in the middle of the night hoping to remember what my

childhood looked, felt and smelt like. Perhaps, or perhaps not it might have just been the same story of destitution.

All I needed was to be aware of my present then more than ever, which was what had brought Gyan and his therapy to the picture. Along with the tennis practise and some practical Islamic routines I read somewhere may help with mindfulness. I needed to be mindful in order to understand what I was. Afterall, I reckoned my life's journey was half gone.

Anytime I stood in front of the mirror and saw the creases that crusted my nakedness, I would be reminded of my years living as a lice-ridden nobody in the low-class portions of Accra. The creases were more than just a simple aging spectacle.

I was finally a man of his own terms, so it was time that I looked to what I could put forward as heirloom, to remain with my soul after my flesh would long be buried.

I was finding delight in discovering the untended portions of my being, and finding company in my own solitude.

The scenes at Bortianor endowed me with the gentle feelings of alignment.

Zoning out every morning to the sound of waves hushing through my ears, I yearned to protect it. Whatever that was; the sea, the moments, my feelings I was beginning to embrace, the blurry intersection where the sky met the sea or the restless one where the sea met the shores, or simply nature in its entirety.

I would inhale the briny scent of flushed-out sea algae in the late afternoons on my daily strolls, sipping on coconut juices as the sand fell out my bare heels.

'Home is where you heal, not necessarily where you hailed.' I had noted that from a podcast. Gyan's approaches contradicted this reality, and I wasn't going to risk the pleasures of a new found niche just so some medical file would close.

Slumped in the backseats with our luggage as the taxi drove from the bus station to the government bungalows, I was not sure I caught anything else the nurse said after the forecast complaint. I couldn't stop myself from processing the turnouts, just in case, so that too may not somehow disappear.

At 11.am the next morning the bungalow door knocked. It was the driver from the ministry. I glanced at the label on his shirt.

*Northern Regional Carbon Capture Station (NRCCS), Tamale.*

A black Ford Ranger stood a few yards away.

I kicked off my *chalewotes* and swiped out the podcast app.

Lamisi's "almost ready" text clinked in from the next room

I took a few hefty breaths to quench the usual first-day anxieties and in ten minutes we were enroute the ministries.

My host, the Northern Regional minister Musa Azindoo was heading a three-year energy and wildlife project for the region, and proposed that I be part of it. There was a bit of a crises and responses were immediate.

I had never met him prior to the day. I knew he most certainly must have encountered

me in the papers. Many people I knew did. It was a regular beach hazard I helped calm, but the journalists always heighten the story perspectives whenever the subject has a defect sad enough to keep the conflict perky.

A few minutes into the drive there was not much to perceive, just revving two-wheelers and the heated tarmac we were rolling on. Then later the people seemed to be deserting the outdoors as temperatures read past an astonishing forty-two degrees Celsius.

The windows were lowered, and the air rushing in could bake. The driver had a towel he drenched in water and patted on his shaved-to-the-brain head. He would strap it on the window pane, to be wetted again in the next minute.

Occasionally the nurse would glance my way, but there was not much I remembered as the milieu reeled through the windows. Just traces of how the charcoal dust smelled, and portraits of the gene pool figures walking by. It was all a wavering picturesque, as if in one of those smudgy archival photos from the centuries.

Not a single hint from nostalgia, thankfully. Dr Gyan and his pull offs had nothing on me. Also as Lamisi was leaving to Accra the same day, life was about to be good.

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“The surviving number is a little short of hundred”

I turned to meet Musa’s ardent gaze; a bit surprised that his breathy words made it through his woollen mask. Operations were about to commence so we had driven to what had remained of the plains. Extensive patches of forests that had been severely logged by charcoal burners were to be recovered as part of the project.

Musa was seated in the dirt, reclined on the bristled bark of a slain tree, distressed. A completely different character from the well-respected, smock wearing minister. I stood there loomed in the haze like a hovering illustration on the cover of a ghost novel. With my back facing him, I pulled out my mask and immediately kept it back as acrid dust filled my nostrils down to the lungs, certainly searing away the lining cells in there. We could hear chainsaws in the near distance, growling and growling. The remaining trees didn’t stand a chance.

My contemplation shifted to the vastness of the lowlands on the far side of the terrain. Scanty, parted clouds hovered above a portion of the area. At the horizon, the building remains of a game reserve were visible. Apparently, it had to close down a few times with the dwindling tourist numbers until reconsidered by the project. That was where Musa had stationed me to work. To invigorate the wildlife in order to recover their colonies. The carbon capture station where the brainy lab units were set to capture carbon from the atmosphere could also be spotted on the other side. The sun reflected on its huge metal tanks.

On the drive back to the ministry the vehicle was quiet. Musa still looked beat up. His face sagged, there was a tribal mark slicing down with the wrinkles.

Even I, 'Mr. save the world' wouldn't be that much broken about nature. I understood him, the before and after pictures I saw were simply jaw dropping. But still I wouldn't be caught sobbing.

I fixed my gaze on the settlements beyond the strip. Distant calls came from the buildings, and for once I wondered about the people. Their faces, their contributions, and whether they were aware of the extent of danger that had befallen. What were they doing to appease their guilts if there existed any at all? I kept wondering whether it was the same kind of cowardice as mine. For one to avoid processing a past turmoil because they have learned to adapt to the aftermaths.

Musa would swerve suffocating small mammals and birds whining on the road. Dead arthropods littered the path, we heard them crush under the tires.

Mollifying life forces were diminishing from the mere ego of entitlement and dominance. Squeals, trumpets, hisses and bleats were silenced, replaced with crackles from thirsting bone remains. Scattered all over on where should have been waterholes when there was none to mention of such anymore.

A town whose livelihood depended on nonstop logging till soot overwhelmed the blissful terrain. Fauna heavily poached; some of whom declared extinct to the area. What was there to like about it? Who would want to be affiliated with such? I was uncovering more reasons proving why Gyan was mistaken.

Musa veered onto a rough diversion of the road, he said we needed to meet someone.

When the door closed behind us, I froze for a second. Unbeknown to myself why.

We walked down a hollow corridor and stopped halfway through at one of the many doors to the sides. Behind the door were four men, one of whom had a look I knew to have encountered similar. He had command over the space, looking like he thrived by bossing everyone else around.

The room was dimly lit, and awkwardly silent in the first few seconds. Each man was with his own head of thoughts until a silent snore came from one corner. I shifted my vision slightly to where the sound emerged, and there laid a huge lump of a man passed out on the cold hard floor.

“So, what now?” Sanda, the boss man asked, pulling out a pack of cigarette from his pocket.

Musa and I exchanged glances

“You have to close down the site.” Musa spoke.

Sanda scoffed; puffs escaped the cig.

“We are recording very high numbers. For once you can think of other income options like shea butter processing or even farming”

Sanda’s grimy henchmen laughed. Like the shameless bootlickers they were. Their mouths wide open, revealing rows of brown stumps

“Farm?” Sanda was disgusted. “Haven’t you heard about the plague?”

“There have been reports of locust plagues” Musa admitted

“Far up in the air they look like buzzing specks of wheat grains descending to strip crops off their foliage.” Henchman number 1 mocked. His master looked impressed with the broken poetic humour.

“And the poor farmers, with labour torn trousers, and irreversible callouses cry”

Henchman number 2 didn’t want to miss out on the later crumbs.

I saw their points. There were no longer birds to pick locust nymphs out the burrows.

“Charcoal burning is not as alarming as those emitting real harmful carbons, why don’t you look their side?” Sanda said. More puffs covered his face

“There are no longer tree covers, temperatures are brutal, rains are unreliable. The ministry is reviving the reserve.” Musa replied

A beat passed.

“And is that why Danaa is here?”

Blood rushed to my head. He knew my name! I span through my entire brain space for a thought that could replace the panic welling within, there was none. I left my fate in the hands of unsaid prayers. May it not be that he had recognized me from the past, may it be a prior-to-the-meeting mention from Musa, or from the papers like everyone else. I felt my fingers tremble for a scratch. I hid them in my pocket so they would get my thighs.

“Yes” Musa replied.

The rest of the conversation was between Sanda and his henchmen as Musa and I just sat there. They hollered as he said unfunny jokes.

Then the project begun. Musa would at times visit me at the reserve. That month we had built temporary shelters where we nursed wounded elephants from the surviving herds. Student veterinary doctors from a nearby training centre passed by occasionally to volunteer.

All the units under the two operations; carbon capture and the wildlife revival were seeing progress. We were all working hard, haggling over workplans and deadlines. It was mandatory for progress reports to be presented at the end of every month to the board at the station. Everything seemed to be moving as envisioned.

Work at my unit started each morning at six. The night shift would shuffle the pens and rake the dung before clocking out. Breakfast was served in the fellowship hall, one of the many halls in the building. Apparently, it was used in the past to register and prep tourists who wanted to go camping or safari in the deep. Canvas roof wreckages for open seater jeeps could easily be spotted laying around. The rest of the halls remained locked.

Supervisors, workers and volunteers would gather in the hall for those thirty minutes of chatty good mornings and smiles. I was beginning to miss a lot of my online appointments that Gyan had resorted to, but that was the least of my worries.

Then for the first time in our six months of operation while he hauled a milk bottle to a cub, Musa asked about my condition.

That wasn't typical of our rapport. I believed he might have eavesdropped on one of my meetings.

I hated when people would speak about it, especially in ways that made it look like it hindered anything I did. I lived just okay, like the many diseased senior men around. And no one has ever asked a diabetic what that last ounce of sugar was.

"You've chanced on some papers. Haven't you?" As casual as I could arrange the words, and went right back to hanging lianas on the wooden beams.

He stood still for a while. I wasn't sure if the look was pitying or what.

From that point I couldn't wait to get done with the project and go back to Bortianor.

But as events unfolded, the project did not end when I left. A lot of things started to throw me off.

Musa kept bugging about my condition until people begun knowing about it. They would stare and murmur behind my back.

The last straw was when I bumped into Lamisi in town. Turned out that he lied about going back to Accra. He stayed and by orders kept sending my supposed family my way.

I immediately cancelled all my appointments with Gyan and called it quits at the tennis club.

By then the project had seen some progress. Reports said 89% so I left.

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The mail came in that morning, it was all over on TV too. Everyone had gathered to witness the grand declaration of the Northern Region as the second region on the continent to reach carbon negative. All the hard work had paid off. People hugged and cried. Especially the workers who worked in cold sweat – some of whom I recognized on the screen.

Musa gave this predictable long speech. When he mentioned my name, I smiled as a big mug of spicy tea steamed my face.

I remember taking a long walk on the beach after that. I loved what I was feeling.

From then the years just went running by, one could easily lose count.

But like the Highwaymen 'I am living still'. Eighty-five years old; not many people make it this far. Retired without any friends or family. Not that I am complaining, I knew of the consequences when I made those decisions.

Over the years however I got to witness the big change. The world had learned to be better. And more climate victories were celebrated each year worldwide. I was grateful to have lived long enough to see it. Coastal sub-Saharan and its beaches were blissfully clean. Even the famous *borla* beach was now only an irony to its name.

But at the end of it all, my legs couldn't keep me running. I had come to admit that I needed to meet that boy I feared knowing. At least to find out why.

So, I went back home, to my birthland. By a bus arriving at dawn like the last time, rode in a taxi and slept at the bungalows.

6:00 am the birds were chirping. I wandered off with my walking stick. A long walk into the revived forest was all my soul craved for. I marched through the stuffiness of clean moss, moisture and dense. Every hair strand on my body met the dew. The deeper I reached, the more predictable it became and the lighter my head weighed. I saw myself morphing into a younger, more naïve me. That was him, the boy I avoided all my life.

I was taken back into the days, to the seasons when we raced with our sacks into the shea trees, and everyone would secure the best bearing trees to pick from. I heard the wind sougning through my ears, creaking the branches and rubbing the leaves. Tranquil kinds of soft lighting streaked all around me. Little chirps filtered through the tree branch canopy above, and spread forth with fleeting resounds.

In that child's skin I turned to the side and saw Musa. Then I saw Sanda, both of whom were children too. We were swaying, gripping on machetes and stolen bayonets from someone's father's hut. We said we were hunters, we said we were wild, succumbing to the riled-up energy. Something about that youthful exuberance kept growing. Young boys in their prime, doing as they saw their fathers do.

As I reached further, my frail joints became less of a burden. My fingers stretched out, like I no longer needed the stick.

I allowed myself to remember everything exactly as it was. Like yesterday, or just as it was right then.

It led me to the building area of the reserve where I used to work. A lot had changed. The walls looked stronger, ornamental plants bloomed therein. Rangers were attending to a number of tourists who had come to see.

I walked to the fellowship hall and stood at the entrance of it. Tears came falling as I thought of all the time that had passed. Opposite the fellowship was another hall with a sign 'mini museum'. I walked inside it and I found myself looking at buffalo skulls, cement imbedded hoofprints and crusty python skins on display. They were collections from when the reserve first opened.

I strolled on, up to the end of the hallway where a transparent little glass stood. What I saw in it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was the last piece to my puzzle...

The only information I had known of that boy was that he stowed away on a charcoal truck to the capital city when he was fifteen. That was the beginning of running away from himself. It was at midnight, one day in April 1998.

I remember coiling up on the heaps of sacks, scared to death and crying as I could not remember my life before then. Even for the many years after that when I tried to remember, it would come as something of fear and regret, something of waste.

That thing in the glass took me to the very last moment when I was staring into a pair of terrified eyes. That poor elephant was frightened, ambushed away from her herd by

some weapon bearing youngsters. When I shot at her, she struck me in the head with her trunk. We both lost a whole or part of ourselves; waste.

I stood there, back into my creaky knees and looking at the pulpy carcass of ligaments and weakly formed bones preserved in formaldehyde. The label at the bottom would haunt me forever, even after the casket is lowered and darkness befall my tomb.

It stated,

“An elephant foetus. Mother killed by poachers.

April 1998”.