

## A STRANGE THING WE SAW

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The day we hunted for a parrot, a kind of bird we could train to call the dogs on an unwelcome visitor for fun, we found a baobab tree. And a man sprawled and dead under it.

He was so dead we sniffed him. He hadn't brushed his teeth before he died. There was alcohol on his breath.

We quivered our arrow and hung our bow across our shoulder.

The man didn't move his moustache. When we felt for his pulse we fretted! Half his body was hot, half cold. As if evenly divided between heaven and hell. His body tolled like a tiny school bell as coins fell from his full front pants' pockets—as though the coins were leaving his body through his pockets. We nudged him gently. Hopefully, he was dead asleep. More coins poured from him. Like the rain snaking down the hillside.

Perhaps alarmed by the noise of coins falling out, a fly emerged from his nose. Another fly, both now buzzing about us. A third fly burst out his mouth, its wings bruised from squeezing through the gritted teeth. Because it crashed with a soft thud to his chest, which was built broad and flat.

Four angry bees left each ear. Even though blinded by the brightness of the day outside the ears, they smelled the buzzing flies. Chased the flies zapping into the morning sphere.

We had no time to waste thinking and looking the flies and bees' way. The coins were still falling out single file to the soft grass under the baobab tree.

The bruised fly, out of fear for its life, we guessed, hid under the man's baban riga. And it died in there anyway because we heard its wailing buzz once and no more.

The dead man's potbelly swelled, well and hard, protruding awkwardly like a pregnant wasp. We could advance three reasons for this. Beer consumption along with eating pork. Coins which he had swallowed up to his throat. The dead body bloating. How could the body so bloated smell no worse than an infant's fart?

We lifted his pouted lips and viewed his dark gums.

"Is that biscuit?" Laka asked.

"Mashed melon, maybe," I said.

Our heads leaning forward, with our two hands we tried to force his mouth open. His teeth wouldn't part apart. We let him be gritting his teeth like a wild mule gritting teeth from bearing a century's books-load of the Supreme Court judgments.

We rolled him over. Our eyes traced the drawing of his wetting. We thought he pissed his pants before he died. We ferreted for something to identify him. Like a National Identity Card. Driver's license. International passport. Something to show who expired. All we found in his piss-wet, worn-out wallet were different women smiling at us, half naked in the half dozen pictures. We knew not one face.

His hair was jet black, silky—even slimy. Silly! Smooth shiny face. Nothing to show he had toiled. Ever. No wonder we wondered how he had come about possessing these billion coins.

Under his nape, a name with a bar code. Is this a beast? A bandit with some sort of a bar code? Not an alien, no. We hadn't seen a tattoo before, only in movies. And the henna we knew was done by girls on girls during occasions. Like naming ceremony. Wedding. Sallah.

We mouthed the name. Alitoto. It tolled a bell. Alitoto. Alitoto. It rolled off our tongues. Laka looked at me and I back to him. And we sprang up and away, as if pinched by a needle.

Could this be the same Alitoto the politician, who approved every political appointees list, who was said to be sponsoring banditry in the communal villages with rich gold deposits?

Our father forbade his children joining a political party. Or working for politicians. “Never near a politician,” the Shamaki said. “Never allow yourselves to be a tool in their hands.” But our older brother Musa was stubborn, had followed his friends to a campaign rally. They dangled dangerously from the car windows, like monkeys on tree branches, chanting the party slogan. At the venue, the gubernatorial candidate threw wads of naira notes to the crowd. Musa was handy. A six-foot athlete, he leaped into the air. And with both luck and fate caught the cash.

As he escaped the fists that pounded him next—as if he were a yam to be pounded, as if he stole the cash—Musa made toward the gate with capital speed, his blood trailing behind from a blow that had gashed the back of his skull, unfelt by him. Some dogged hand drove a dagger deep into his side. That Musa felt and dropped.

When his friends brought home Musa’s corpse, our father was in the mosque, his fingers counting his iridescent rosary. He gazed at his son’s bloodied body with confused calmness, his mouth filled with the words “*inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajiun.*” Our mothers discarded their scarfs and wrappers on their body, rolled on the ground, wailing “*Wayyo Allah!*”

The cops came, took statements, went away. At the murder scene, the two police detectives observed the setting sun had licked some of Musa’s blood, and the sandy soil had sucked the rest with a straw.

Nobody died in return. The governor’s golden signature wasn’t for appending death sentences. But for awarding contracts to cronies. And phonies. If the government had offered compensation for Musa’s murder, the Shamaki would have simply asked for justice for him. But

they didn't. No money. It was difficult paying salaries to civil servants at the same time sponsoring their candidate as next governor.

Our father quietly buried his first son, whom he had hoped one day would be the Shamaki. His only prayer for Musa's murderers: *Allah ya isa*.

We discussed dealing with the corpse. Maybe call the cops. But we reasoned we were too far out in the Sambisa forest. Too far removed from Sambisa town to blow a whistle for even our dogs Rali, Babarov, and Scream to come, swishing tails.

Perhaps we were too frightened. Although the cops tell us 'The Police are your friend,' we've never believed them, wholly. Not everybody's holy, we know. Some cops have come to love money, more than the bear loving honey. *Allah ka rabamu da sherin dan'sanda*, the people say. We had read about a monkey and a snake swallowing money in a government office in the national dailies. We feared the police may pin this politician's death on us. And no other word would be uttered, as some otters in black uniforms would swallow these billion coins.

We didn't think of packing the coins, now quite a pile. We didn't want blood money. Indeed, we scrubbed our hands in the fine sand and then washed them with the dew on the grasses.

To our right, red roses rose to puncture the August air with ample scent. And shied at the touch of the rising sun through the branches.

It crossed our minds to bury the dead politician. Truly. To fete the flesh. But remembered our hospitals. Our roads. Our schools. Our streams, wells, and the sky from which we collected water songs. Freebies from Allah. While the taps and rusted water pipes squeaked with rats and snakes racing marathons. The youths' jobless hands the devil used as his wrench.

We imploded. And burned with scorn.

We thought of the many ways we could hurt the body. And make it suffer even though the flesh was dead. To account for all the crimes against the people.

Skin the body, cut it up in tiny pieces for the vultures now circling above. Prop it up against the tree trunk and pop the eyes with arrows. Dig a hole; stick into the ground the thick, sharp spikes to make a bed; and throw the body down to splatter clotted blood. Or plant the body as a scarecrow in the field; sticking a direction reading “From grace to grass.”

When we touched the thought of burning it, we froze. We recalled our school hostel in flames. Trapped inside were the voices of some of our mates. Some our friends. Some our juniors, eleven of them about eleven years old. Twenty-one students screaming to be saved from the terrible charring of their flesh. So horrible.

Yet, the fire truck was stuck in the same spot. Out of water. Out of fuel. There was only one officer at the fire office that night. The more people screamed the more the fire fumed, grabbing more woods, walls, roofs. Later, the fire, tired of the soap water thrown on its back by daring schoolchildren, dancing naked in the night wind, unable to grab anybody by their cloth, died down. That year, our school made headlines.

But nobody was fired for the unfortunate fire incident. Instead, the fire truck got two spare tires. The government ordered for a brand new fire truck which knocked down one hundred kilometers from the wharf. The commandant got two eagles pinned to his shoulders and the fire service department received an allowance for hazard. Everyone moved on, and like pouring an ocean on a candlelight the matter died.

Five years after, the blackened walls of the hostel stood prominent against the background of dilapidated classes. A sad page of the school’s history—besides the notoriety of

its neglect by government. The people talked less about the incident, as if frightened by the haunting of the torched souls.

We turned toward the east, moving away from the baobab tree. And the dead politician. And those billion coins. We heard the vultures swoop down on the baobab tree. One wing smoking in the clouds, a jetting military plane missed jamming some bandits of sparrows.

We plodded a hundred feet through short bushes. Our anger dissipated. We hushed the little men inside our heads urging vengeance. Nudging violence.

“What killed him?” I asked.

“Greed. Or curse,” Laka said.

We said nothing further. We were made of few words. Besides, the dead was dead. To not be gossiped. Bad-mouthed.

We returned to the baobab tree. The vultures scattered into the air. Their bald heads, beaks bloodied. Already, the vultures had eaten his eyes—and put fleas in his ears. Hollow were the two holes through which—like binoculars—we glimpsed the dark void: his soul. And a smoke rose from within it. Leaving through the chimney of his nose.

As good Sambisans, we collected leaves, twigs and grasses and heaped them on the body. Head to toe.

We began our journey back home, the parrot we wanted for hunting forgotten for another day. After walking a while, we were now on top of the Goza hill. We watched a massive smoke rise from under the baobab tree, where we had abandoned the dead politician, hidden in the heap of dry leaves, twigs and grasses. The heap crackled into a huge ball of fire, hurtling toward the scarlet sky with a stripe of rainbow. We turned away. The heat in our heels, we stopped to take a breath.