

The man and the boy marched slowly. It had been a long journey and they were nearing the end of their strength. It had been two weeks and three days since they left their home in search of water. The desert had proved too strong for their fellow travellers. The men and women had dropped dead from dehydration, their parched throats and dry mouths unable to continue the journey. The man remembered his friends who died. Men and women he grew up with as a child. Men and women he had given a hasty burial, covering their bodies with the hot desert sand. The boy remembered his friends who died. There was Aisha, Ahmed, Farouq and finally, Haruna and Hassan, the twins.

The desert was a large expanse of waste. There was sand everywhere you looked, lots of it. It reminded the Boy of the coins in the Man's bag, without beginning and end. Just a loop of continuity. It did not remind the man of anything. Apart from the cold bodies he had buried in the desert sand, he did not remember much these days. He did not talk much as well. His lips were dry and cracked, his throat scratchy and screaming for a drop of water. But they kept trudging, both man and boy. Heading East as the Oracle had instructed.

The sun had disappeared from the skies and the moon had taken its place. The cool evening breeze was a respite from the unforgiving harshness of the afternoon heat. The travellers stopped to camp. With no meat to roast, no fire to keep them warm, and water too little to be drunk at night, they lay down their heads, the fine grains of sand giving the back of their heads an itchy feeling. The man stared at the sky full of stars and as hard as he tried, he could not remember their names. Knowing the names of the stars and their constellations was the last thing he had from his late father. And now, it was gone. He wanted to cry but men did not cry. Especially not

beside little boys. The boy slept on his side, his back to the man. He did not care for the stars and once his head touched the ground, he fell asleep. Then, the dream came to him.

It was the village square just as he remembered it. There were children gathered under the guava tree poking the ripe fruits with long sticks. Anytime one fruit fell down, a large cry of celebration arose from the kids and the fruit was placed in a basket to be shared later. A fat woman sat on a bench watching the children, her rear end taking up all the space. The men sat in front of Yaro's shop drinking wine and talking in loud voices. Most of the women were at home, preparing the evening meal.

Suddenly, flies began to appear. In twos and threes at first, before rapidly multiplying by hundreds. The ground was completely covered by flies in a matter of seconds. The children were fascinated by the insects initially and had fun killing them off. But the blanket of insects grew thicker, morphing into a sea of black in the village square. Some of the children began to cry and the fat woman swatted at the flies with her massive arms.

Yaro's face began to morph and the boy realised he was changing. His face had become that of a big fly, his massive eyes a shining yellow green. Wings sprouted out of his back and he took off, flying straight through the roof of his shack leaving splinters of wood and sawdust behind. The children were hysterical now, screaming at the top of their voices, tears and mucus flowing down their faces. Yaro the fly hovered above his shop for a moment flying in small circles as if testing his new wings. His legs dangled in the air as he completed his circuits. He began to hum, a low buzzing sound. As he turned his insect head around, his large eyes locked on the boy's and he flew straight at him.

The boy woke up with a start, his breathing ragged and sweat pouring down his cheeks. The sun was coming out of hiding and a light breeze kissed his skin. He looked up and saw the man sitting down, fully dressed. It was typical of him to be prepared so early. "What was your dream about?" the man asked. "The flies," he replied. The man nodded and pointed to the ground. Beside the boy's feet were a couple of dead flies.

The sun had come out in full force, its yellow rays bathing the desert sand. The boy no longer paid attention to the beads of sweat that dotted his face. They would dry and pop out from his pores again as they had done throughout the journey. He saved his strength for more important things, like remembering. Unlike the man, he remembered. He remembered the heat.

It was like nothing the people of the village had ever seen. It had come slowly, like a cancer eating up its victim. Ma Muni, the old blind woman that sat at the village gate during the day had warned that the heat was not what it seemed and would bring disaster upon the land but the men, young and old had dismissed her cries. Sometimes, the gods liked to tease mortals before the harvest. It was nothing to worry about. They had no idea.

By the second week, the heatwave had killed most of the infants. The poor children could not withstand the severe conditions. The mothers wailed and thrashed themselves on the ground. The fathers, beginning to see the truth in Ma Muni's words, approached the Oracle for a solution. A blood sacrifice came the reply. The gods needed blood to be appeased, the sin committed against them still unknown

to the people. And after lots of goats and cows were slaughtered, the heat abated. But, not for long and when it came back, as most things tend to do, it came back twice as strong. The rivers dried up, livestock died in their numbers, and as their traditional sources of food disappeared, the people found a new one.

The man held out the bottle of water to the boy. He took it and drank a little before corking the bottle and giving it back. He looked round them and sighed deeply. There was no indication that they were close to the oasis. It was the same as it had been for weeks. Heaps and heaps of hot, dry desert sand. The man dropped his bags and stretched. After a while, the boy followed suit. The sun was setting and it was time to camp.

The man was mad. Spittle dribbled down the sides of his mouth, the huge globs of saliva flying around anytime he shook his big, crazed head. The most prominent feature was the grin on his face. His upper lip was raised while the lower lip remained in position wrapped around the incisors. His teeth were large and the gap between the two in the front was large, giving him a rabbit-like appearance. His eyes seemed to hang out of the sockets and the skin around his mouth was stretched in what looked like a warm smile. But the light did not reach his eyes. Suddenly, he jumped and faced the boy screaming "I am Jalla! You are Jalla!"

With a sickening feeling, the boy realised the lunatic was right. As he looked closer, he saw that the mad eyes were his, the big teeth belonged to him and that smile...

The man held the boy as he rolled on the ground. He was mumbling under his breath and flailing his arms about. His eyes were closed and his teeth were

clenched firmly in his mouth. Finally, he calmed down and the man let him go. As he opened his eyes, tears rolled down his cheeks. The man wiped them and nodded. "What was the dream about?" the man asked, his voice cracked and loud in the desert night. "Jalla," the boy replied.

The boy noticed the beast just as the sun had reached its zenith. Since the dream, he had felt like there was a dark cloud above him, one that foretold doom. This uneasy feeling had made him watchful, and as he turned his head to avoid the gaze of the harsh sun, he noticed it a couple metres behind them. He tapped the man who looked at the animal with a shudder. It was a night cat, he said. It had probably been tracking them for a while now. Just ignore it and keep your head down, the man advised.

In times of disaster, the concept of morality and all its connotations are thrown to the side. The lines between right and wrong become blurred and a person's essence and humanity are stripped to one basic instinct: survival. When the goats were either dead or too sick to be eaten by anyone, the villagers turned towards the next option. Mothers sat at their tables to feast on their daughters, fathers devoured their sons.

As the remains of partially consumed humans cluttered the village streets, a swarm of flies arrived. Initially, they came in the hundreds, then multiplied into thousands. They congregated on the roads, settling around and engaging the corpses. However, when they grew tired of the deceased, they shifted their attention to the

living. The flies infiltrated the houses, blanketing every possible surface and every corner. Yet, one morning, without any forewarning, they vanished. The people jumped and praised the gods. Surely, the worst was over. Some even swore that the heat had reduced in intensity. There was a lifting of spirits in the land and as night fell, the people retired peacefully to the comfort of their insect-free houses.

The sun was setting and the tired shadows of the travellers lugged behind them. The nightcat continued to stalk them, its silky black skin shimmering under the rays of the setting sun. The boy turned back every three seconds and even though he did not expect any other outcome, his heart skipped when he saw the beast. "What do we do when night falls?" he asked the man. "We pray." came the grim reply.

Soon enough, the sun set and the moon took its place. The man dropped his bags and the boy did the same. They could not see the animal in the darkness and no matter how hard they tried, their ears could not pick up any sound. "It's probably gone," the man said. "Get some sleep." The boy lay down, his heart beating fast. But, after a few minutes of listening to the silence of the desert, he drifted off. Beside him, the man waited a while before laying his head on the makeshift pillow.

It was midnight when he heard the nightcat. He had no idea why, but he was sure it was midnight. He jumped to his feet and there it was, standing before him. The man had heard it too and was up beside him in a jiffy. It opened its mouth to bare two rows of sharp, white teeth. Its brilliant black fur shimmered under the moonlight. But what struck him the most were its eyes. They were green and luminous. It was as though they did not reflect light like eyes usually did but instead, produced their own light. Just like the frogs. He remembered the frogs.

On the night the flies disappeared, the villagers slept with a peace of mind that had eluded them for months. However, around midnight, they were startled by strange noises. They emerged from their beds, curious about the commotion, and were met with an unexpected sight—frogs. The frogs blanketed everything in sight, much like the flies had done before. They had skin as tough as leather, orange tongues that were slit halfway like a snake's. And their eyes. They were green and bright, very bright. They did not have normal frog diets either. Instead of little insects, they preferred to eat the rotten flesh on the streets.

After what seemed like hours, the nightcat turned around and walked away. The boy plopped on the ground, sighing deeply. The man simply packed his bags from the ground and put them on his back. "He will be back, we better start moving."

The frogs drove the people mad. The sanity of the village snapped in two once they appeared. There was nothing left to fight for, nothing to protect. And so a collective madness ensued. Old men sat on the floor playing with sand like little children. The women forgot about decency and walked naked in the streets. Unkempt people walked around the village engaged in loud conversations and arguments with themselves. The village was a large, chattering mess. The ones who had retained their sanity consulted the Oracle. The dying Chief Priest made one last divination. "Paradise" came the reply. There was an oasis in the desert. There, they would find water and food and rest. They just had to travel East. And so the journey began.

It had been three days since the nightcat had returned with two others. Time was a past memory, and the travellers just existed to escape the beasts not caring what the time was. They had not rested at all because the trio had stalked them

throughout, day (WHY ARE THE NIGHTCATS CHASING US DURING THE DAY?) and night. The boy's legs were weak and wobbling. He felt they would give out anytime. His left arm hurt from the bite one of the beasts had given him. It had jumped on him, taken a good bite and walked back to where the others were waiting. The man had tied it up with a piece of cloth and told him that the nightcats were asserting their dominance in the cruel, teasing way that only animals were capable of. He did not know if they were still moving East, their movements had been a blur. His stomach growled, his throat was parched, his entire being was a riot. The man looked worse off. He was not talking anymore, he only grunted and jerked his head to the side.

The desert sun was in top form, its gaze unforgiving and hot. It occurred to him how ironic it was that they were in the desert trying to escape the heat. The rays of the sun bounced off his eyes and he began to see figures in the light - people he recognised. He saw Hassan and Hussein, the twins playing with the sand. (THEY ARE DEAD!) He saw his mother. She looked the same way she always did, her wrapa tied around her breasts, her face tired from all the day's activities. Selling kunu in the village square, and cooking and washing and cooking again. (SHE TRIED TO EAT YOU!) He saw Ma Muni, her blind face glowing under the sun's rays. Her tribal marks stood out on her face and she spoke in a slow voice.

"The heat is a disaster. It is a curse..."Her voice echoed in the desert. (ECHOED IN THE DESERT? WAS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?)

The man was pointing to something and grunting loudly. When the boy saw it, his legs gave out and he dropped to the sand.

In front of them stood gates - weathered brown wooden gates with decrepit hinges. A chair sat before the gate, upon which rested the sun-bleached skeleton of an elderly woman. Worms crawled in and out of her eye sockets, her bony fingers clung to the chair's edges, and her mouth was frozen in what appeared to be a cry of anguish.

Tears streamed down the boy's cheeks as he came to the realisation that he was gazing at the remains of Ma Muni. The man collapsed to the ground beside him and shook his head. He was crying too. It was the end of the road; they had returned to the village gates, right where their journey had commenced. Paradise was out of reach. They had merely travelled in a circle. They lay there, staring at the sun, their chests rising and falling with each laboured breath.

A few feet away, the nightcats closed in for the kill.