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A short story

by

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My dad had brought in graduates from Lusaka to teach in the new college, but they had to leave in a lorry in the middle of the night.

‘They didn’t have the right tribal scars on their faces to protect them from the witchdoctor’s bad medicine,’ Dad told the Jacobs when they came for a visit.

The farmer laughed and wrapped a big arm around Dad’s stiff shoulders. ‘Don’t worry *my bru*. There are plenty more college kids with fancy degrees. Not enough reliable farmhands, that’s my trouble. Forget about it. Have a cold one.’

The Jacobs had brought a case of beer for the grown-ups and biltong for us kids. Mrs Jacobs kissed Mum and settled down next to her on the verandah sofa; the men sat on the wicker armchairs. On the coffee table a tray held the Johnnie Walker Black Label, soda siphon, ice bucket and a silver box with stale cigarettes. Sitting on the red tiled floor, I chewed on a salty leather strip, my back against Mr Jacobs’ solid brown legs.

Fireflies spiralled through the blackness like sparks from a bonfire and bullfrogs pushed obscene croaks into the night. The women’s murmurings twined around each other and drifted out into the dark. The men’s rumbling voices were easier to hear – and their stories more gripping.

There had been a panga murder in the village the night before. A man from another tribe had come to study at the new college and had been sleeping with all the wives and girlfriends. He’d been chopped into little pieces.

‘They had to use a dustpan and brush to sweep him up,’ Mr Jacobs said.

‘Christ, what a country,’ Dad said.

Mr Jacobs laughed. 'You'll be all right, James, They're like children. Just show them who's boss, *ja*? Get yourself a gun and patrol the perimeter fence at night.'

'I saw a snake today,' my mum said, her voice thickened by whisky. 'A green loop hanging off the verandah roof. It swung its head down, looked at me and hissed. Its mouth was black inside.'

'Black mamba. You don't want to mess with one of those,' said Mr Jacobs.

'I thought it was rather pretty,' Mum said. 'Come on kids, last one in bed's a hairy egg.'

'Oh, Mu-u-um! Why can't we stay here with you? I'll be really quiet, I promise,' I said, looking up at her tired face. Her white hands around the glass were knuckled with ruby and gold rings from the bazaar. Her hair was piled high and stuck with hairspray. She was wearing a linen dress embroidered with gold and brown lilies. She looked elegant next to Mrs Jacobs whose large bottom and chest were covered up by her floral cotton frock.

'Come on, Lizzie,' my brother said. He had been hanging around Mum's neck, chewing on a strand of her long auburn hair he'd pulled free. He held out his warty, ink-stained boy's hand and pulled me to my feet. 'I'll race you. I've got a brilliant trick we can play on Annie.'

'Now, John, what have you got up your sleeve? She's only a baby and I don't want you playing tricks on her,' Mum said, picking up my sister, a sleepy two-year-old with a tousled mop of white-blond hair that defied any brush.

My brother stood on one leg in his khaki short-sleeved shirt and shorts, one bare foot resting on the other. He leaned his sun-bleached head to one side, trying to look innocent, struggling to wipe the lopsided grin off his face. One of his front teeth had been chipped when he hit it with the back of a hammer. He'd been building a tree house ten feet up the tallest tree, the one with the smooth trunk that was hardest to climb.

'Oh, nothing, Mum, I was only kidding. Come on, Lizzie. Last one in bed's a hairy egg with purple spots and green snot.'

With a squeal I ran after him, my skinny legs and arms flailing in happy panic as I tried to keep up.

‘Children! What do you say to Mr and Mrs Jacobs?’ Mum said.

‘Night, Mr and Mrs Jacobs, thank you for the biltong,’ we sang before racing off.

At the bedroom door, John stood laughing and panting. He ducked my blows and headed off to his room. I had changed into my nightie and was under the covers when he came back in his pyjamas to hover at the door. Mum came in with the baby and climbed into the double bed next to me, Annie snuggled up at one side and me at the other.

John said, ‘If you like I could get in too and make sure the girls are all right.’

‘Just until the wee one falls asleep, then,’ Mum said.

She read us our favourite scary story about horrible creatures called the Hobbies who sneak into an old couple’s cottage. Their little dog, Toby, frightens them off with his barking until the old man ties up his mouth. The Hobbies come back and cut up Little Dog Toby with their axes and put him in a sack. Inside, where they’d cut off his arms and legs, he was all yellow, like a sweet potato.

‘Creep, creep, creep went the Hobbies. Run, run, run went the Hobbies.’

There was a scratching at the open window’s fly screen. A strangled moan came from outside and a face appeared, lit by an eerie yellow light. I screamed. John screamed. The baby woke up and started to wail. Someone started laughing.

‘James! For goodness sake! Of all the stupid things...’ Mum threw the storybook at the window and it bounced off the metal insect mesh. We could hear Dad and Mr Jacobs laughing and see torchlight bouncing around outside.

John laughed so hard he fell out of bed. ‘That was the trick, but I forgot about it. It was my idea!’

‘Get out! No pesky boys allowed!’ But I started to laugh too and let John jump back into bed.

When the men had been shooed away, Mum got Annie off to sleep again with a mournful lullaby about being buried in an old churchyard in a black coffin, six little angels at her back. She whispered good night and quietly left the room. John and I looked at each other over our sleeping sister.

'Go on, you do it.'

'No, you. I did it last time.'

'Okay.' I pinched Annie's fat little arm and she started to whimper and fuss.

'Mu-u-um!' we took turns calling. 'The baby's awake.'

Mum never did get wise to our trick that brought back her warm presence, but we couldn't risk doing it more than once in a night. When the funny little song had put Annie back to sleep and Mum had gone back to the grown-ups, we started whispering.

'John.'

'What?'

'Do you think that snake will come back?'

'The black mamba? Samson says it lives in the crooked tree at the bottom of the garden. He tried to smash its head with a panga, but it was too fast. He says we're not to climb that tree. He says it's the deadliest snake in the whole of Zambia. One bite and you're dead in ten seconds flat. There's no cure.' Samson was our houseboy; a grumpy man we feared more than Mum or Dad.

'I bet the witchdoctor can cure you. Elijah says he has a cure for everything, even sleepy sickness.'

'Sleeping sickness, you twit. You shouldn't listen to everything Elijah tells you. He's only little, like you.'

'Am not.'

'Are.'

'Am not.' We went on like this for a while before we fell silent.

I was drifting off when John said, 'Don't worry about the black mamba, Dad says snakes are scared of us.'

The next day I met Elijah at our den. It was an old brick chicken coop with a corrugated iron roof and a door just big enough for us to squeeze through. We'd shovelled the mess off the floor and it was my job to clean it with a toy dustpan and brush. The packed dirt had scraped my knuckles raw so I'd brought one of Mum's evening gloves to protect my hand. I bent to go in but now the door's black mouth frightened me.

‘Let’s go back to my garden and build a fire to roast lemons,’ I said.

Elijah and I were proud of our fires. We never burned ourselves. The heat made the lemons sweet and sticky. We sat on our haunches and peeled back the charred, ashy skin. When we finished, Elijah started tinkering with the car he’d made from old bits of wire. It as the size of a toy car but the steering column was so long he could run along pushing it in front of him.

‘Elijah?’

‘Hmm?’

‘My brother says the witchdoctor can’t save you from a black mamba bite.’

‘Ssssh! He’ll hear you and put a curse on you. Put out the fire. Let’s go, quick, quick!’ Elijah kicked dirt over the embers and pointed to the mango tree. ‘Up there, we’ll hide from his bad medicine.’

The branches were heavy with sticky-topped mangoes. We picked some and bit into their green skins. Inside the flesh was hard and white. We knew we would have sore tummies but didn’t care; they were too good to stop. I didn’t think about the witchdoctor’s curse until later, when I got sick. I thought it was just the mangoes but Mum put me to bed in the middle of the day and brought out her *Nurse’s Guide to Tropical Diseases* with its worn green cover. The rest of the summer was a dream. I was too sick to be moved to the clinic in Lusaka and no doctor would make the journey out to Chalimbana to my bedside. Anyway, Mum didn’t trust doctors. Doctors had got her mother hooked on barbiturates. Doctors had pressed Mum to take the new morning sickness wonder drug, thalidomide, when she was pregnant with my eldest brother. She refused and Daniel was born healthy, with long, lean arms and legs.

I couldn’t keep anything down and grew thinner and paler. One day I wanted mulberries and Mum sent the boys out to pick them from the garden. But when Daniel brought me a small bowlful of the plump berries, I turned my face away. With the help of the medical book, she diagnosed hepatitis. Years later, in my twenties, I was tested and my blood showed no trace of a disease that has become associated with drug addicts. I told her and she shrugged. ‘It could have been Weil’s disease. Whatever it was, you nearly died.’

The next summer I was able to get out of bed. My legs trembled but they carried me to the pool where Daniel and John were jumping into the green water, soupy with frogspawn, water scorpions skating across the surface.

'Mum, can I go in, please?'

'Oh, all right.'

With a whoop I took a running jump high into the air over the water and splashed down on top of John.

He went to duck me in revenge but stopped. 'Do you want me to teach you the backstroke?'

'Okay.'

Mum said I was better and could go back to school soon. But things were never the same after I was ill. My brothers were sent to boarding school in Scotland. Elijah had moved away with his family and I had to amuse myself. It was the rainy season and I'd spend hours playing in the dirt. The earth broke off in my hands like chunks of chocolate. It sparkled silver and gold with flakes of mica.

Mum invited a girl to come and play with me. Teresa was at the mission school. Her hair was tied with black thread and made patterns on her head. She was older than me and looked at me with disdain. She disappeared and I played on my own for a while. When she came back she was wearing a sparkly orange swimsuit with a big bow at the side and carrying a dark red leather handbag.

I smiled at her, delighted that we had something in common. 'I've got a swimsuit just like that. And I've got the same handbag. It was my mum's. Did you get it from your mum?'

Teresa's mother, in her white plastic earrings and trouser suit, came out of the bungalow with my mum.

'Look, Mum, she's got the same swimsuit as me,' I said.

Teresa's mother swooped down and slapped her. 'Get changed at once.' She pulled her arm and marched her back into the house. 'Come on, we're leaving.'

Teresa looked back over her shoulder at me with a face full of hatred. I felt ashamed. I didn't understand until years later that she'd tried to steal my things.

Even school was different. It had been Zambianised and the new children wouldn't speak to us white kids. I started staying away from the playground full of girls and boys in secret huddles playing five-stones and hung around the enclosure where the little animals were kept behind chicken wire. There were rabbits and guinea pigs, but I wanted to see the bush baby that never came out of its box. Sometimes you could see its green penny eyes shining out of the darkness.

The Chalimbana store, which had never had much, started running out of basics.

'At this rate I'll be feeding the kids *nsima* and *kapenta*,' Mum said to the Australian woman next door.

I made a face and held my nose. 'Yuck. Stinky fish.'

In the servants' compound, Samson's kindly wife had once given John and I chipped enamel plates piled with *nsima*, cornmeal mash, and *kapenta*, dry-smoked baby river fish. Samson went into one of his rages when he came in and saw us squatting there among his ten children. He chased us with a thick stick. We thought we'd get into trouble, but he didn't tell Mum.

With John and Elijah gone and Annie too little to play with, I drifted to the compound most afternoons after school. One day, Samson's wife was feeding the chickens dried corn kernels. She scooped them out of a square wooden bin and scattered the corn on the dirt.

'I'll help!' I ran to the bin and lifted the heavy lid and sank my arms down to the elbows in the orange corn. I threw handfuls to the chickens until the yard was covered in a carpet of corn. I laughed at the way they scuttled in the dirt and fought for food. Samson's wife was smiling and nodding at me.

'What are you doing?' Samson came out of their house with its corrugated iron roof. He started shouting at his wife in ChiChewa. She hid her face in her hands and went into the house, Samson pushing her rounded back. I scrambled off the bin where I had been sitting, and ran to the elephant grass gate and back into our garden. It was cool and dark under the trees

after the baked heat of the servants' yard. When I was older I understood the corn was the family's food too. My face still goes hot when I think of the waste.

Mum and Dad held a cocktail party and invited Henry Cizinga, the principal of the college where Dad was director of the new language centre. I thought Mrs Cizinga looked magnificent in her turban and long dress printed with the greens, browns and blacks of Africa. Mr Cizinga wore a suit with a waistcoat, his shirt cuffs and collar snowy white against the dark wool. Dad, smiling through his short, black beard, topped up tumblers of whisky. The Jacobs came too but they didn't stay long. The next day Mr Jacobs stopped by and Dad went out to see him. From the mesh window of my room I could hear them talking.

'James, if you're going to have those people at your house again, will you let us know? We can't be at the same parties. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is for us.'

When Dad came back into the house his face was set. He didn't say anything, but he took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes and sighed.

We didn't see the Jacobs for a couple of weeks until one Saturday morning, around the time the Chalimbana store was down to a couple of rusting tins of condensed milk and a sack of mealie-meal. Mr Jacobs arrived at our bungalow in his pick-up truck, its sides streaked with dried mud. I ran out in my flip-flops and jumped up and down in front of him.

'*Haai, Lizzie. Hoe gaan dit?* One of the farm dogs has had puppies. Would you like to come and see them? *Ja?* Go and tell your mum and dad. We'll cook up a *braai*.'

I started down the steps just as Mum and Dad came out on the verandah. Mum was wiping her hands on her apron.

'Mum! Dad! Mr Jacobs says there are puppies on the farm. Can we go and see them? Please?'

'*Ja, kom.* Lettie and I have some beef we want you to take off our hands. Since the kids moved to Jo'burg for college we've got too much of everything. You'd be doing us a favour.'

'Thank you, Piet,' Dad said. He held out his hand, but Mr Jacobs pulled him into a bear hug.

'Okay, *my bru*. I'll go and start the *braai*. *Sien jou later*.'

We climbed into our car and drove to the farm. Mrs Jacobs took me by the hand and we walked down to an outhouse. The bitch was one of their fierce guard dogs, a brindle mongrel with a heavy brow and snubbed muzzle. But she only lifted her head and watched when I lifted one of the pups to hold it close to my face. It was warm and smelled of puppy, but its eyes were closed and sticky with infection. I was glad when Mrs Jacobs put it back in with its mum.

When we got back to the house, the steaks were charring on the *braai* and the long boerewors sausage was coiled like a hosepipe on the grill. Mr Jacobs and Dad were standing in front of the cut-off petrol drum, laughing and drinking beer while they turned steaks, but Mum sat in the shade under a mimosa tree, looking out to the blue hills.

Mrs Jacobs went to sit next to her. 'You know, Sue, it's not so bad here for the men. They have their work. But it can be lonely for the wives. It's different for me. I grew up here. I've got the farm and this big fool to cook for, but I worry about you alone in that house all day.'

'I have the children. I keep busy. I'm fine, really. I'll be fine.'

We were driving back home, Annie asleep on Mum's lap in the front seat, the trunk packed with a sack of potatoes, a side of beef, a tray of eggs and a couple of chickens, when Mum said, 'Dad has a new posting. We're moving to Madrid. It's a big city in Spain.'

I looked out the car window at the downpour that was churning up the mud into a red river. 'Will there be other children there for me to play with?'

'Yes, you'll have lots of friends.'

'Then, I want to go.'

My dad sold his 1954 R-Type Bentley to Mr Jacobs, who had always admired it. He drove off in it, his big bare feet curling around the accelerator and clutch. I last saw it winding down the dusty red track out of Chalimbana. A couple of years later the Jacobs visited us in our Madrid flat. They'd had to leave Zambia.

'They took the farm, *my bru*. Everything me and my father and his father worked for. It'll turn back into bush. *Ach*, there's no use crying over it. Zambia is finished for us. At least we're all right. My cousin was tied up and tortured with burning sticks when they took his farm.'

'What did you do with the Bentley?' Dad asked.

'We drove it over the border into Rhodesia when we left. We had to sell it. Pity, it was a beautiful car, *man*.'

'Good suspension. Better than a Land Rover on those dirt roads,' Dad said, handing Mr Jacobs a drink.

That night I dreamt about a black mamba. It reared up and swayed in front of me, its jaws opened, showing the blackness inside. I woke, sweating, and moved into my sister's bed. 'Budge over. Do you want to hear the story about the Hobbies and Little Dog Toby?'

'No,' came her sleepy voice. 'The one about the Moomins. I don't like scary stories.' I stroked the tangle of her hair, longer now and darker, and started to undo some of the knots.

'Me neither. Once upon a time there was a Moomin Papa...'

Annie fell asleep and I stopped talking. It started to rain, pattering on the wrought iron balcony outside our bedroom. In Zambia it would be the rainy season, the rains hammering on the corrugated iron roofs, churning the roads into a red river.
