

THE LAST SUPPER

Joe Nyirenda (Zambia)



The dry and cracked earth spoke what the locals dared not to say: their home was dying. Never ending footpaths crisscrossed each other like careless drawings. It was mid-December, yet it had been weeks since rain clouds had last gathered over the town. As far as the eye could see, this part of the province had no trees except for sparse shrubs and distant mango trees with drooping leaves. After depleting the forest, the charcoal burners had indiscriminately gone after every other tree in sight to satisfy the market demand. Houses, mostly made of sun-dried bricks, sprawled the land that was once a thick forest. Some were spread farther apart while some were clustered together. Behind some of the houses, the land was tilled in neat rows with maize seeds underground, safe from the prying birds.

One of the houses with a small cultivated backyard, was on the verge of collapse. Smoke escaped into the evening sky through its shut door and dilapidated roof. Inside, smoke from the twigs on the brazier choking the small room, a son stared angrily at his ailing mother. For over an hour she had pleaded with him. Now, she placed her frail hands on his arm, pleas in her tearful eyes. Five of her other children, circled around the brazier, watched in silence.

“Son, it’s late, this will do for supper.”

She pointed at the pot of boiling corn kernels on the brazier. Because there was no promise of the rains, the children had been digging

up the seeds they had planted weeks earlier. It had been their only food for days now.

“You don’t appreciate whatever I do for this family,” the boy said. “No wonder Father left you!”

His mother quickly withdrew her hands and slowly sat down on the tattered rug, hurt written on her face. The boy looked away, unwilling to let feelings stop him from providing food for his family. “Even without your permission, I am going to find supper.” He walked out and shut the door behind him. While outside, he could hear the low sobs of his mother.

With the sun long set, the slim moon smiled over the quiet town. The boy’s stomach groaned at the smell of roasted chicken hanging in the air. It had been long since he last ate chicken that he had forgotten what it tasted like. Imagining the grasshoppers and mice were chicken made it manageable for him to repeatedly eat them. He had always fought the temptation to steal chickens, his mother’s only warning that he had never dismissed. The boy respected his mother but lately, he trusted in his own understanding. For as long as the boy could remember, his mother had been the one supporting the family with her fishmongering. Despite his father continually stealing her money, going on drinking sprees and physically abusing her, she had never complained. Even with a swollen eye and a bruised face, she still went out to the market. She had always kept her family fed. Then the market was closed earlier in the year after some traders had tested positive for a disease they called Coronavirus. The boy, like many other locals

thought it was only a common cold which would soon go away and life would get back to normal.

With his father's charcoal burning business long defunct, this had been the beginning of his family's misery. His mother stayed home for months without selling, and soon all her fish stock had been consumed by the family. The boy was hopeful that life would change when the government gave the affected traders incentives to resuscitate their businesses. His mother received the funds on Friday, his father eloped with a local girl, the same age as the boy, on Saturday.

"I swear that you'll never go hungry," his mother, teary eyed, had promised the children.

But her health and sanity seemed to have taken a downward spiral since then. She had been to the clinic many times before. After standing in a queue for hours, all they would give her were some paracetamol tablets and prescribe expensive medication for her to buy. If only he knew where they stored medicines in the clinic, the boy often thought, he would have long broken in to steal some for his mother.

The trail descended into a dry stream that always flooded and was impassable whenever it rained. But it had not flooded in a long time, not last year or the year before. Clusters of houses spread out before him. Except for the distant sounds of crickets, the night was silent. People locked themselves indoors early, sharing what little food they had with only their family. Even salt was no longer shared between neighbours.

This part of the province had always been known as poor and the Coronavirus had worsened its status. The boy used to unload goods for the traders from cars and then would ferry them inside the

market for a fee. But now the market was abandoned, bringing life in the small town to a standstill. Only a few traders sold in the market, yet had almost no one buying from them. Despite most families not being able to afford decent meals, the boy considered his family the poorest in the community, poorer than a church mouse.

He was only seventeen, but he had seen enough to decide that people were never equal. The children of the rich grew up to procreate a generation of wealthy people, continuing their family legacy. Likewise, the progeny of the poor were poorer and very miserable humans. Life is not fair, he often mused. Since the rich never shared their wealth, the boy had decided to steal from them.

He left the trail and trampled over the low and dry grass, away from the big unfinished house in which he spent time with his peers, smoking while plotting illicit schemes. The boy knew his mission would be a failure if they saw him and decided to come along. He could hear distinct chatter come from inside, the smell of marijuana in the air. He quickly crossed the gravel road, looking behind to make sure that no one saw him get to the other side of town. He was in the residence of the affluent, away from the slums. The gravel and the name of the town was all they shared.

In this part of town, they grew crops that they watered daily. Unlike the frog-infested wells in the slums, the water here was clean. They had abundant evergreen trees and plenty of food that they even grew maize for their cows. The land was divided into large farms that were each barricaded by barbed wires or electric fences, sometimes with both. The boy never went beyond the first

farm for his family's food. He had done some piece works here before and he was certain the young looking owner would just let him go if he were caught.

The boy looked around him, convinced no one was watching, put on his face mask and stealthily went over the wire. He always made sure to wash the mask before putting it back in his mother's worn out handbag. A few months earlier, the mask had helped him run away with a woman's bread and sugar without being recognised after he had snatched the plastic bag she was carrying.

The maize leaves danced slowly in the gentle breeze. The cobs were huge and the boy wondered how anyone could grow a whole field of food for animals without considering the people across the gravel road. His mother would be glad he had gone to find supper for the family. He was not a coward... like his father.

The boy took off his flip-flops as he proceeded further into the field. He had made it a rule to always pluck from the stalks that were deep in the field. Plucking from the periphery of the farm would arouse suspicion and lead to the field being guarded.

The boy began plucking the cobs as noiselessly as possible, stopping quickly whenever he thought he heard any noise. He had just finished filling up the second plastic bag when he heard the voices. Although they were not very clear, he could tell that one was a man and the other, a woman. The boy listened in silence, craning his neck to pick up on the conversation. Then a thought occurred to him and he smiled. He quietly moved towards the voices.

"I told you to wait for my call," the man's voice was shaky.

The boy recognised him. He was the farm owner. The two were on a small trail that lay between the maize and sorghum fields. The woman had her back to the boy, but he could tell she was from the

slums. When she spoke, her voice was high-pitched and piercing in the quiet night.

“I am hungry and your baby won’t stop kicking!” She moved her hands to her stomach.

“I told you to get rid of that thing,” the man said.

“I won’t!” There was a stubborn finality in her tone. “I can’t risk my life.”

“I can’t have a child in the slums.” This time the man raised his voice. “We’ll see what your wife will say about it.” The woman walked passed him.

He pulled her back forcefully. The boy watched as the man took off his jacket, threw it on the grass and then hurled obscenities at the woman. While they argued, the boy had his eyes on the jacket. It would fetch enough money for a bag of maize flour, enough to sustain his family for weeks. The boy moved closer to the jacket and pulled it to himself slowly. It smelled of a beautiful perfume, then the boy bundled it under his shirt. As he picked his plastics to leave, the boy saw the man charge at the woman with fists while she held up her arms in surrender. The boy knew he would have a story for his friends if he waited a little longer.

When the woman fell down, the man got on top of her and circled his hands around her neck. The boy stood transfixed, eyes unblinking as the woman unsuccessfully tried to remove the man’s hands from her neck. She writhed like a snake but the man was too strong, she gave up struggling too soon.

The boy’s eyes went wide with horror. The argument had escalated too fast, and now the woman lay lifeless on the grass. The man still had his hands around her neck, perhaps oblivious that the woman was no longer alive. The boy stood motionless, unsure what to do. He then started to retreat backwards, further into the maize field

while he kept his eyes on the man. He had only taken a few steps back when he fell over a maize stalk, it went down with a sickening sound. The man's eyes instantly went to the source of the noise. The two pair of eyes met. The boy ran blindly through the dense field, the heavy jacket under his shirt and a plastic bag full of maize cobs in either hand.

“Thief! Murderer, here!” the man yelled.

The boy's legs gave in and he went flying over some maize stalks. He quickly picked himself up and without looking back, resumed running with the plastic bags still firmly in his hands. He could hear the footsteps of his pursuer closing in on him. When he glanced over his shoulder, the man had outstretched an arm and was about to pull him by his shirt. He ducked and the man went past him, missed a foot and fell down, flattening a few maize stalks.

“Somebody help! A murderer in my field!” The man quickly picked himself up.

The boy continued running ahead despite the weight of the maize, his thoughts racing. He was a thief, not a murderer. But if people heard the man's calls and then waylaid him, the boy knew he wouldn't be able to convince them otherwise. Much against his will, he let go of the plastic bag. His heart ached and his stomach groaned with hunger.

The boy's legs carried him despite his mind willing him to stop. He could hear dogs barking in the distance but drawing closer. He looked behind but his pursuer seemed to have given up the chase. The boy turned his eyes ahead too late, he hit himself on the barbed wire. Ignoring the pain, he quickly went over the wire. He saw men with dogs charging towards him.

“Somebody stop the thief!” the men shouted.

The boy removed the jacket under his shirt, threw it and then crossed the road into the slums. If only he could get past the unfinished house, the boy thought, then he would disappear. Heart thumping, knees shaking and stomach grumbling, the boy felt something hit him in the side of his head. It was a dull thud, he fell forward. He could feel a warm and profuse flowing down the side of his face. He could hear the sound of feet rushing towards him, voices muffled. Stones and kicks landed on him. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe, the mask was suffocating him. The last sounds he heard was the approaching barking of dogs.

As he fell into darkness, the boy knew his family would starve.