

BAD DAY

The giant crane groaned and grunted, and spewed clouds of diesel smoke, as it crawled to the next pit and lowered the giant tank in place. The first tank was already in its place and the army of labourers was filling in the soil.

The crowd of onlookers, no believers turned believers, braved the heat of the day and the dust to witness the greatest miracle of their life, the resurrection of an entire community.

Up till now, no one, least of all the old men at the teahouse, had believed the service station could be revived. Now the whole town watched with awe as the puny figure in a dusty, grey suit supervised the first stage of that miracle. One day they would be able to tell their grandchildren they were there the day Crossroads was raised from the dead.

Bakari Ben Broker, the saviour of Crossroads, was leaning a little too heavily on his ebony cane as he supervised the installation of the petrol pumps. The station building, a clean, red and blue structure, stood at the heart of Crossroads, a transplanted organ ready to start pumping life back into the corpse. But there was work yet to be done. The power generator was yet to be delivered and the air compressors and service machinery that *Mobil* had sent from Pwani were stranded in the vast savannah somewhere between Nipe and Nikupe. But, all in all, the project was progressing well and Broker was busy.

As the labourers buried the second fuel reservoir in its new womb, Broker limped back to his car and drove slowly away, wishing he could stop the reckless rush of time so he might catch up.

He was getting out of the car at the condom shop when the convoy arrived. It was composed of half a dozen Government vehicles and was led by the dusty jeep that, Broker recognized, belonged to the DHO. The vehicles parked by the post office and Broker at once knew who the visitors were.

The team was led by the same friendly Irish volunteer nurse who had led them when they had taken blood from the community. She too recognised Broker and introduced him to her team.

Broker sent Big Youth to fetch Janet and, while they waited for her, he invited the team to a cup of tea at Muse's. It was the largest single group Musa had ever served. Not only did he immediately run out of tea glasses, he also run out of ideas on what to do with so many customers.

Broker took over, telling him what to do and giving orders, as if he owned the place, and Musa gladly obeyed and did exactly as he was told, and said he would be for ever grateful to Broker for it. Broker suggested a fifty per cent reduction in his rent and Musa laughed happily and said Broker would have to work in the kitchen for a year to expect that kind of gratitude. When the visitors were contentedly gorging themselves on Muse's *mandazi*, he suggested serving his new, improved kale *samosa*. Broker opposed the idea at once. These were big-time doctors, seasoned far travellers who knew all about research and about experiments, and especially about salmonella, and were therefore the wrong type of guinea pigs.

But Musa, drunk on his success, insisted that they try his new recipes. He had added *terere*, he said, and *pilipili hoho* and several other indigenous herbs and some traditional ingredients that were known to kill stomach worms and to re-awaken old men's joints, and to cure all sorts of ailments besides. They just had to try them.

Broker was adamant; no experimental food to his guests today. But this was Muse's place and he would do exactly as he wanted.

"Not today," Broker informed him.

Today he would do exactly as Broker told him and like it. The argument was about to degenerate into a fistfight, their new-found alliance disintegrating before it was fully formed.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Uncle Mark intervened. "Why don't you ask your esteemed guests whether they want to try something out of this world."

“Have you any idea what he wants to serve them?” Broker was scandalised.

“The choice is theirs,” said Uncle Mark. “Let him ask.”

Musa asked and, to his delight, the visitors did want to try something new. Broker tried to discourage them, but it was all in vain. They were true scientists, and hungry to boot, and they insisted on trying. While they waited for Janet and the *samosas* they talked about this and that. Broker learned, for the first time, that it was not a surprise visit at all. The nurse had written to Janet weeks before to arrange a date.

Janet arrived at about the same time as the kale *samosas*. She had been on her way to Crossroads when Big Youth met her and she was excited that the reports were out. She was also apprehensive as to what the reports portended.

“Don’t worry,” the nurse said to her. “They are not as bad as we expected. We shall need several rooms for the counsellors and two rooms for the doctors.”

There were lots of rooms in the post office, Janet assured them. She sent Big Youth off to prepare the rooms.

“Here is how we do it,” the nurse told her. “The people will go through to the counsellors first. The counsellors will talk to them, ease their fears and prepare them for whatever reports they may get. The reports are confidential and the counsellors have no access to them. To get the reports, they will have to proceed to the doctors, who will break the news to them. The whole exercise is handled with extreme sensitivity and in strict confidence. No one but the doctor in charge sees the reports. It’s that simple. However, how the recipients react to the reports depends on their own psychological wellbeing.”

Janet was to find out the significance of this statement at very short order indeed.

Presently, Big Youth came to report that the rooms were ready and they rose to leave. How did they find the kale *samosas*? Musa was dying to know. Prudently, most of the visitors said they had no comment, while one doctor said he would wait to hear from his stomach and Janice, in her forthright and professional manner, told Musa his kale *samosas* tasted like unsalted, fresh cow pats. Musa was impressed by her candour and was not at all discouraged. He thanked her for her opinion and assured her he would add lots and lots of *pilipili* next time she came to eat at his teahouse.

Then Janet led the team across the road to the post office, leaving Broker to disentangle the hopelessly entangled bill. When he had done that to Muse’s satisfaction and paid the bill, Broker sauntered onto the veranda to join Uncle Mark in watching the people gather.

Two long lines snaked their way out of the post office and halfway to the condom shop. And still more and more people were arriving.

“This should be something,” Uncle Mark observed, in his perennially amused way. “This will be interesting.”

A gross understatement, as it soon turned out. The lines grew and grew, and Broker nodded tiredly and sank into a chair, looking older than ever, and concentrated on ignoring the pain that tore his insides with fire. The lines grew so long they baffled even Janet. Why were there more people in the lines than had been given blood samples? Had Crossroads finally woken from its slumber?

She did not know it then, but Crossroads’ rumour mill had been at it again, firing up old dreams and creating scenarios that stirred the dullest of Crossroads’ souls. The facts of the health team’s last two visits notwithstanding, many of those present had come seriously believing there would be money, or some sort of reward, handed out at the end of the exercise. But quite a few of the spectators, among them the old beggar, had no idea what the queues were for but joined them anyway.

The old men watched from the teahouse and wondered.

Then, just as they began to think that, maybe they were wrong, that everything would turn out alright, a man shot out of the post office, wailing and screaming like the devil himself was after him, and bolted to the highway. A few people ran after him, and with him, never to return for their reports.

“What’s the matter with him?” Musa asked alarmed.

“He knows,” Uncle Mark said to him.

“Knows what?” Musa asked.

“What the matter is with him,” Uncle Mark said, chortling quietly to himself.

Musa regarded him, long and hard, and tried to understand what he had said. Unable to make head or tail of it all, he withdrew to his kitchen to embark on a hot, new venture, the first ripe banana *samosas* ever invented.

Janet emerged from the post office, now unbearably hot and stuffy from the people and the sadness crammed in there, and joined Broker and Uncle Mark on the veranda of the teahouse. She was ominously quiet and was chewing on her nails, something they had never seen her do. As they watched, another man emerged from the post office, calmly put his medical report in his pocket and quietly sauntered away.

“Have you got Aids?” Big Youth called out to him.

“No,” he said.

“Then why are you not happy?” Big Youth asked him.

“What is there to be happy about?” he asked calmly walking away.

Musa wandered back onto the veranda to wonder where on earth all those people lived, since he hardly saw them, except when there was some strange madness happening in town.

After the man came a thoroughly distressed Alice Atieno, the diligent hostess from Highlife Lodge, she who had kept the condom shop alive with her patronage, clutching her medical report to her bosom like a precious deed. She appeared concussed and was thoroughly bewildered, as if she had walked through the door and found herself in a strange new world. She did not seem to know who she was, or where she was, or to recognise anyone in the crowd, most of them people she had known all her life. She just stood there for a brief moment, looking about in confusion, then focused on the assembled crowd and floated to the ground, unconscious.

The men watched confounded as Atieno’s colleagues from the lodging house went to her aid and carried her into the shade where they tried to revive her with the crowd milling about them and asking them what had happened to her.

The old men looked at one another. They did not know what to make of it.

“There must be another way of doing this,” Janet said to herself.

“You heard the nurse,” Broker said to her. “Some laugh, some wail. Others ... well, there’s no telling what the others will do.”

Frank joined them then, having just arrived back from Sokoni where he had gone to treat Inspector Iddi’s cow. The inspector had given him lunch, thanked him profusely and dispatched him to other clients who had also tried to pay him with lunch and with their gratitude. All in all, he had earned three lunches, numerous handshakes and countless promises to be paid for his labours when money became available. He slumped into a chair and the old men briefed him on what had happened so far. Then he joined them in watching whatever-it-was unfold.

The people were coming out in droves now, and their reactions were turning stranger, more bewildering and even violent. The crowd, fearful of an outbreak of something dangerous and catching, started to disperse, slipping away as surreptitiously as was possible in broad daylight; pretending they had just been passing by or had come to escort a friend and had nothing at all to do with the lunacy brewing up around them.

Then Sikarame, the robust young man well known for his rakish behaviour, burst out of the post office, laughing and yelling with joy, and changed the tide.

"I'm well," he announced going mad with relief. "I'm well, thank God, I'm well."

The crowd stopped and looked back. Then they gaped and were dumbfounded.

If anyone deserved to drink the brimming bowl of God's wrath, and to suffer the whole measure of divine retribution, no one deserved it more than Sikarame. And if any person at all deserved to perish from the plague, and do so in a slow and singularly excruciating way, that person was the young man now celebrating his wellbeing.

How now, they wondered, was it possible that the one being everyone wanted to see drop dead from the curses he received daily from indignant mothers had been spared the rigours of the dreadful plague? How was that possible?

The crowd paused to consider. If Sikarame was indeed well, then wasn't there a similar chance that they too were well, that there was hope for all of them, after all? They started drifting back in line, determined to be brave about it all.

Janet was speechless. Was it possible? Was it really possible? She hurried back to the post office as Big Youth emerged from there, calmly controlled, hands in his pockets, and slouched across the road to stand next to Frank.

"*Daktari*," he asked in a low voice. "What does it mean HIV minus?"

"It means HIV negative," Frank replied.

"Is it good news or bad news?" he asked.

"The best news you ever prayed for," Broker told him.

"Does it mean I don't have Aids?" his voice rose a notch.

"That's right," Frank told him. "You don't have Aids."

"You mean I don't have the plague?" Big Youth asked louder.

"That is what it means," Frank told him.

Only then did Big Youth have the courage to show him his report.

"I'm happy for you, Big Youth," Broker said to him. "You really are not a foolish boy."

"What does yours say?" Big Youth asked Frank.

"I haven't got mine yet," Frank said.

"Will you show me yours?" he asked.

"It's confidential," Frank told him.

"But I showed you mine," he said.

"You didn't have to," Frank told him. "Didn't they tell you anything in there? Anyway, you know my condition already."

Then Janet hurried back across the street and Big Youth pounced on her.

"Mine is minus," he told her excitedly. "What is yours?"

"I can't tell you," she told him.

"You must tell me," he insisted. "I told you mine."

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand, and turned to the solemn old men.

"It's very sad in there," she told them.

People were going mad in all sorts of ways, she reported. Some were broken by the reports, while others were reborn by them. Some were laughing, while others were sad and disconnected, in spite of the good counselling they were receiving in there.

"I have never seen such strange behaviour," she said, sadly.

"That's people for you," Uncle Mark observed. "That's people for you."

Before the day was over, he observed, some fool would have tried to take his own life or done something stupid like that. A sudden gloom descended on them as they watched Crossroads go quietly mad in its own way.

“This,” Broker said to himself, “is not fun at all.”

“But it’s more interesting than watching Crossroads die,” Uncle Mark thought to himself.

Julia Kata emerged from the post office and they all looked up expectantly. She stopped by the entrance for a moment, to reacclimatise herself to the searing white light, the crowd and the dust, then walked slowly across the street to Janet.

“I must talk to you,” she said quietly. “Alone.”

She was tired and scared, and quite distraught.

Frank decided to go for his report and leave them to their privacy. But Broker was tired, and Uncle Mark belonged there too, and they decided they were not going anywhere and stayed put. So Julia took her sister aside to talk to her there.

“I know you can’t lie to me,” she said handing her the report. “Tell me the whole truth. Tell me what it says.”

Janet unfolded the report, with worse apprehension than she had opened her own. Suddenly, she took Julia in an embrace and pressed her to her bosom. She held her there for a long quiet moment, overflowing with joy, and expressing her love for her with hugs and kisses.

“I dared not believe those men,” Julia said, when Janet finally let her breathe again.

The old men watched indifferently as they embraced again and celebrated their good fortune.

“Well,” Uncle Mark observed quietly. “There is one we do not have to weep for.”

Musa nodded thoughtfully and Broker grunted. His mind was fuzzy and everything, it seemed, was slipping away. A ruthless old devil was busy excavating his nervous system, with a rusty, old bulldozer, and he wished the pain would ease so he could doze a little.

“What about Kata?” Janet was asking her sister. “What about your husband?”

“Would he come?” Julia said.

“Then it is not going to be easy,” she told her.

That was up to Kata himself, Julia was decided. He had had more than ten years of her life, and she had given him more than enough children. Now that she had her life back, she would do everything to keep it. Everything, including leaving him.

Janet walked her as far as the highway, expressing her love for her and her joy at the report.

“As of today,” Julia swore to her. “I’m cured of men.”

She would never sleep with a man again, with or without a condom. Then she went joyfully home and Janet returned to the teahouse to wait for the exercise to end. She arrived as Frank was emerging from the post office, report in hand and looking very puzzled. Big Youth pounced on the report and ran with it to the teahouse.

“Minus?” he exclaimed, when he stopped to read the report. “HIV minus? But this one is just like mine!”

Janet snatched the report from him. She glanced at it, looked up thoughtfully, and waited for an explanation.

“There must be a mistake,” Frank told them all.

“Did you tell them?” she asked him.

“They said it was not likely that they had made a mistake,” he told her. “They were extremely thorough with the tests.”

“That is what they told me,” Janet said.

But she had to be certain. She rounded up the nurse and demanded an explanation.

“Quite simple,” the nurse told her. “The earlier reagents, that’s the chemicals used to perform the tests, were not as efficient as the ones we have used here. With this new test, the margin for error is so small it’s negligible. But we can repeat the test for you, if you wish.”

Frank was totally confounded.

“Just to be certain?” Janet said to him.

“You’ll have to give us another blood sample,” the nurse said.

“But everyone knows that *Daktari* has Aids,” Big Youth told them all.

“Go away,” Janet ordered him. “Go to your friends and stay with them.”

Big Youth left to tell his friends of the new development. Frank was in shock and the old men did not know whether to be happy for him.

“Cheer up,” the nurse said to him. “Sometimes we have to believe in a miracle.”

Most of the youth tested had been found to be free from infection, she had said to Janet, and that Janet knew to be a miracle in itself. Her prayers had been answered in more ways than she had ever hoped for.

The nurse went back to wind up the exercise and Janet hugged Frank. She clutched him to her bosom and held him there and embraced him with her whole being and felt him, and felt him feel her, and cared little what anyone thought of it.

Broker watched them quietly, a sad smile on his tortured, old face, and Uncle Mark decided it was none of his business, and Musa went mad with jealousy.

Over Frank’s shoulder, Janet saw Hanna emerge from the post office, dazed and confused and uncertain which way to go, Hanna paused by the exit, looking this way and that, and tried to compose herself. Janet’s joy suddenly died. She quickly released Frank and rushed across the street to meet her.

“Have you got your report?” she asked her.

Hanna gave her the report to read for herself. Janet glanced at it and a sudden chill gripped her heart. Her mind was suddenly numb and her mouth dry and she knew not what to say.

“After all the trouble I went to,” Hanna was close to tears. “After all the fears, the tears and the pain!”

Janet made to embrace her. Hanna stepped back and held out her arms to ward her off.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, through clenched teeth. “I’m alright. I’ll be alright. I’m alright.”

She was all dry and flaky inside; all light and airy and empty and dead and, if anyone touched her now, anyone at all, she would crumble to nothing and fall to the ground; explode like a puff mushroom and turn to smoke and dry powder, and blow away, and no one would be able to help her after that.

She walked slowly away from that awful place, slowly but determined and hardening inside. Janet walked with her, in a strained and gloomy silence, wracking her heart and mind for divine revelation, for something to say or do, one single word that could express the pain and the anguish that she felt for her friend.

They walked some distance in this sad silence.

Then Hanna began to talk, in a fast and bitter torrent that seemed to spew from her very soul. She would shed no tears, she said, for this was way beyond any tears. Though her very soul was on fire, though she hurt like she had never hurt before, though it burned worse than the circumcision blade she had endured, because her grandmother had convinced her that it was the true and only path to womanhood, though her heart pained worse than the worst labour pains she had ever experienced, she was calm and collected inside.

“No, I will not cry,” she said.

“No, do not cry,” Janet told her.

“And I will not kill myself,” she decided.

“No, do not kill yourself,” Janet told her.

“I will kill the dog instead,” she said.

“No, don’t kill your husband,” Janet told her.

They walked slowly on, Janet explaining how there was nothing to be gained from killing her husband; nothing but loss and more loss.

“Think of the children,” she said.

“That is exactly why I must kill him,” Hanna said resolutely.

Then she let out a tortured cry and ran for the highway.

“Stop!” Janet yelled after her. “Stop her, someone stop that woman!”

People turned and saw a woman rush hysterically down the road towards them. They stepped out of her way and she ran past them, so fast they hardly saw the tears raining down from her eyes.

Janet turned and ran back for her bicycle.

“Help me!” she pleaded to the old men.

No one moved. She mounted her bicycle and pedalled frantically after Hanna. Big Youth saw what had happened and ran after her. That was all the help Janet got from Crossroads that day.

The old men exchanged indifferent glances, shrugged, and went on doing what they were best at - nothing. The wheel that Janet had set in motion, with her grand ideas about change and about community service, was running full steam ahead. There was nothing they could do about it now, not even if they had the will or the energy.

They watched her pedal madly across the highway and disappear in the old cattle trails, after the wildly screaming woman, and knew that she would never catch up with her, never undo the harm she had done.

Musa watched another crowd disperse without spending a bean at his place, and was more than dismayed. He walked over to Broker to moan about it, and to wonder if it had anything at all to do with Armageddon and the prophecy that he and Uncle Mark talked endlessly about. Broker was tired and in pain and in no mood for conversation; but he assured Musa that religion had absolutely nothing at all to do with the events of the day.

“Then why are you building the churches?” Musa asked.

“I’m not building the churches,” Broker informed him. “I’m just helping an old man with his roof.”

“But you are repairing his church too,” Musa accused.

Broker grunted and wished Musa would stop bothering him so that he could sleep a little. He wished he could sleep for a hundred years. He had enough exhaustion for a century’s rest, but first he had to build the filling station.

“Will you repair the Mosque as well?” Musa demanded.

“What for?” he asked.

“So that we too can have a place to pray,” Musa said.

“We?” Broker smiled thinly. “I know of only one practising Muslim in Crossroads.”

“You used to be one of us,” Musa reminded.

“I used to be all things,” Broker said quietly. “But that was a long time ago. A long, long time ago.”

“You don’t pray anymore?” Musa was horrified.

“Oh, I do,” Broker assured him. “I pray all the time.”

Especially when the nights were so dark he could not see any hope at all. He prayed then, prayed, like everyone else, and prayed and prayed; prayed for God to reveal Himself and His purpose, and for the daylight to come and lift the veil of anxiety.

“But I don’t face any particular direction, or assume any special position when I pray.”

Musa regarded him with total incomprehension. For a seriously sick man not to pray for healing, it was all beyond his understanding.

“Didn’t they tell you there is no cure for this plague?” Broker asked him. “This Aids thing has no cure, neither here nor in heaven.”

To pray for a cure was like to seek for a resurrection.

“Frankly,” Broker said to him. “It’s a total waste of time.”

He was cold, in spite of the feverish heat that brought out sweat beads on his nose, and he was so weak that talking exhausted him.

“To tell you the truth, old bull,” he said to Musa. “I could do with a cup of tea right now.”

Musa did not budge.

“May I have a cup of tea?” he asked firmly. “With lots of sugar, please?”

Musa, thoroughly disgusted to discover he had been living with an impenitent *kafiri* all along, did not even acknowledge the order. Pigs and unrepentant heathens were two things he could not reconcile with.

Uncle Mark saw the approaching standoff and resolved to keep out of it.

Frank too discerned that Broker was unwell, and that Musa was offended by his presence, but he was too weary to help any of them. He had walked over numerous hills and valleys that day to treat livestock whose owners would never pay him, and he was not in a charitable frame of mind at all. Then the report springing such a surprise on him had left him fully drained.

After a long, disturbing moment, during which he wondered yet again whether life was really worth living, he rose quietly and, without a word to the old men, started out after Janet.

Uncle Mark, who saw everything, heard everything and normally understood it all, nodded quietly and admitted to himself this was all beyond him. In one short day, one girl had fainted, one man had gone mad and a woman had gone to murder her husband. And hundreds of other people had gone quietly home to do whatever it was that quiet people did when they knew for certain that their world was about to come crushing down on them.

This, thought Uncle Mark, would go down as the most calamitous day in the history of Crossroads. But perhaps even this was better than watching Crossroads die.