

DAKTARI

Before the militia finally climbed onto the roof of the Holy Family church and ripped off the roof, the Boy had looked out of the window one last time. The church windows, like the doors, had impregnable, steel bars on them. It heartened the victims a little and raised their hopes again, to know that the militia could not easily get into the church to kill them. But the attackers had only given up trying to break into the church with hammers and mattocks and were waiting for a bulldozer from the army to do the job for them.

Then, looking out of the window, the Boy saw hope run away from them, as the parish priest, the man who had done such a good job of keeping the militia at bay, and the man they had all placed their last hopes on, sneaked away from behind the besieged church, dressed in his fear-stained, white cassock and carrying only his Bible and a small cardboard suitcase.

Feeling their eyes on his back, the white priest had stopped and looked back. His grey hair was a mess, his face haggard and streaked with dirt and fear. His shocked eyes had looked into the Boy's eyes and, in that brief moment, before the man who had baptised them all, married most of them and buried their relatives, the man who had worked so hard to keep their commune close to God, turned and walked away, the Boy had suddenly understood why Father Clément had to abandon them to their fate. Then the militia had torn off the roof and started raining bullets and grenades down on the terrified people below.

"How much tobacco did you want?" the Boy asked the Thief.

"Just enough for one night," said the Thief. "I never ask for more."

"Take some then," said the Boy.

The Thief came back, walking a little livelier, and, making use of the last light of a dying moon, picked two of the largest, ripest leaves from the old tree.

"I thank you," he said, carefully rolling them up.

"Is that enough?"

"I'm not greedy," said the Thief.

"Take more," the Boy told him. "Take all you want, but do leave some for the other thieves."

The Thief took four more leaves, picking them delicately with the tips of his fingers, and with the gentleness of one used to scarcity.

"These will last me a while," he said.

"Go well then," said the Boy.

"Stay well," he said turning to leave. Then he stopped and asked, "Is the Old Man really asleep?"

"He is."

The man hesitated. He wanted to talk to the Old Man, he said, about things that had happened long ago. Things he felt had been beyond anyone's control, but for which he had recently begun to experience great pangs of remorse and shame. He had

discussed it with his wife, who was very sick and about to die, and she had agreed with him that all should seek forgiveness for their deeds and misdeeds, and though no one, not even God, may pardon them, it was good that all should seek peace with one another for the sake of the nation, and so that they may find a little peace in their own hearts.

“What about the dead?” the Boy asked. “How do you make peace with those you butchered? How can they ever forgive you?”

“Those too have their revenge,” he said. “In so many terrible ways, they too have their revenge.”

They were silent again. He touched the bandage on his head and winced.

“There are many policemen in the City,” he said. “Are you so brave you will face guns with placards?”

“I’m not alone,” said the Boy.

“With whom will you be?”

“With the boys.”

“Just the boys?”

“Just the boys.”

“No one else?”

“They are enough.”

“What about the Student?” asked the Thief. “Does he come too?”

“He comes too,” said the Boy. “The Student has always been one of us.”

“He is a good one, the Student,” said the Thief. “He would have been a good doctor too, had they not chased him from university.”

Many were the good people whose lives and careers had been derailed by brutally and terminated by genocide.

“Will there be soldiers?” the Thief asked.

“You can be sure of that.”

“Will they have guns?”

“Soldiers always have guns.”

The Thief was quiet, thinking.

“I shall come with you,” he decided.

The Boy was so startled he did not know what to say.

“There will be dying,” he reminded.

“Let there be,” said the man.

“And you will still come?”

“I have decided.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think that people should suffer and die because they are poor or different,” said the Thief. “It is not right and it is not just. I’m tired of living in the Devil’s hole. Who knows when the Devil might decide that I too don’t deserve to live?”

Again, the Boy was startled into silence.

“It’s not fair that the boys should go alone,” the Thief cleared his throat and added. “It’s not right that the boys do alone what men ought to do for all.”

“There may be a terrible bloodletting,” the Boy pointed out.

“So be it,” he said. “It’s more terrible to live one’s life in fear in this - the Devil’s anus.”

The eastern sky lightened, slowly changed from charcoal to dead ashes.

“We start in an hour’s time,” said the Boy.

“I’ll be there,” said the Thief. “Stay well.”

The Thief went back into the shadows leaving the Boy to his thoughts. Presently, the Old Man coughed, to let know he was awake and alert, then asked, “Is that you?”

“It is,” said the Boy.

“Is it cold?” asked the Old Man.

“Very cold.”

“Whom are you talking to?”

“He who harvests in the dark,” said the Boy.

“Give him my greetings,” said the Old Man. “I know the man.”

“He’s no longer here,” said the Boy.

The Old Man went back to sleep and the Boy sat under the old tree and thought. He thought till the eastern sky was red like blood and it was time to go.

“I’m leaving now,” he said, waking up the Old Man. “I go join the others.”

“In the hills?”

“Those days are gone, Old Man,” he said. “In the City.”

The Old Man paused to recollect his thoughts.

“Is it still dark?”

“Very,” the Boy told him. “But not for long.”

The Old Man thought of the enormity of the task the Boy had set for himself, the uncertainty of the future.

“Must you go?” he asked.

He had asked the question so many times he knew the answer word by word by heart.

“Take care of yourself,” he said finally.

“I always do,” the Boy said. “The Girl will bring you something to eat. She will take care of you today.”

“Go well,” said the Old Man. “Be very careful today.”

“I will,” said the Boy. “Stay well, Old Man.”

As he walked to the door, the Old Man asked him, “Have you taken your *thing*?”

“I have,” said the Boy.

“You said there would be no shooting.”

“Not by us,” said the Boy. “But something tells me I should take it with me today.”

“Go with God, then,” his voice was sad and broken. “Go with God, my Boy.”

“Stay well, little father,” he said. “I must now go reclaim our dignity.”

And, with that, he was gone. The Old Man followed him with his ears, and with his heart, until his footsteps died away and were buried by the dust and the ashes of decades of Pit fires.

“It’s true, mother,” he said to himself. “The Boy is grown to a man. Woe unto they who abused and spat on his mother.”

He lay for a while unable to sleep and thought of the boys, and of the woeful things that could happen before the day was over. He had been in demonstrations himself and seen what happened when a regime, bloated with power and arrogance, refused to hear the people’s cry. He had seen unarmed demonstrators shot dead in broad daylight. He had seen ferocious policemen pursue women and aged pastors inside churches and beat them senseless with rifle butts then walk away laughing. He had also seen how one misplaced word, or one wrong move, could fire a crowd with passion and trigger an avalanche of violence that no army could control. And all these events had left many innocent people wounded or dead, and everyone’s conscience bruised and injured. And most of them had happened on a quiet and peaceful morning, just like this one, and on a day when it seemed that nothing could go wrong. But there was no telling it to the indignant boys. They too had to face their reality, to confront their fate and forge their own destiny.

When he could not stand his own terrible thoughts any longer, the Old Man rose and felt his way to the fireplace. The fireplace was still warm; the ashes hiding the red coals that had outlived the night. He felt for a stick, broke it across his knee and dropped it in the fireplace. He broke two more sticks before squatting by the fireplace and blowing until the fire flared and lit up the hut. Soon he had a small fire burning and he sat down to warm by it, and wait.

A short while later, he thought he heard the boys leave the valley, many light and furtive feet, a sound so discreet it was more imagined than heard. Still later, he heard the roar of voices as the boys overrun the first roadblock. He heard the feeble coughs of frightened gunfire as the policemen manning the barriers fired and ran. Then silence. A deep and portentous silence, the ominous silence between lightning and thunder, the cold and clammy moment when the fainthearted died a thousand deaths from expectation of death. A fearful moment.

He had experienced it before in his life as he lay in the mortuary, where he had sought refuge among the dead, while militias scoured the hospital looking for him. As he lay under a pile of slaughtered corpses, he had heard the door open and a voice call out his name.

“*Daktari?*” the voice had called. “*Daktari*, come out of there so that I can kill you.”

He had held his breath, and lay very still, and heard an awful chopping as the men hacked at the corpses to make sure everyone was dead.

“*Daktari?*” the voice called again. “Where are you hiding?”

Then he had suddenly recognised the voice. It was the voice of his medical assistant, Gaston, a man he had employed and trained out of pity for his children, a man who had suddenly become a butcher of great notoriety.

“I hear that you have been spoiling our work,” Gaston said. “Helping and curing the *cockroaches* we try to kill. That is very bad, *Daktari*. Come out here so we can talk. Then, maybe, I’ll not kill you so terribly.”

Silence. The Old Man sat very still.

“*Daktari?*” he heard Gaston as clearly as if he was in the yard by the old tree.

Then some people had joined Gaston. Talking in whispers, they had discussed what to do next.

“We know you are in there, *Daktari*,” said the Voice.

Silence.

“*Daktari?*” the Voice called.

Silence.

“Come out now so that we can kill you and continue with our work.”

The Old Man sat very still.

“Don’t waste my time any more,” Gaston said to him. “I have many people to kill today.”

Silence. In low voices, they debated what to do next, whether to kill all the corpses again, just to be certain, or move them out and search for him.

“*Daktari?*” called the Voice.

Someone suggested using grenades to shift the bodies, but they had dropped their last grenades through the church roof at the people crammed there. After that they could not get inside the church anymore, for the victims were piled up against the doors, so they had decided to go kill the *Daktari* instead.

“*Daktari?*” Gaston asked loudly. “Are you going to hide here all your life?”

The Old Man was hardly breathing. He heard another man suggest setting fire to the mortuary. But they could find nothing flammable inside the cold, concrete structure.

“I didn’t know you were such a coward, *Daktari*.”

Laughter. They could still laugh.

The Old Man had held his breath till he thought he would die. He heard the killers debate whether it was worth the trouble searching through dozens of cadavers, some of them days old and beginning to fall apart, just to find the *Daktari*, when they had wards full of helpless women waiting to be killed. Finally, they had decided to leave his murder for another time.

“*Daktari*,” called Gaston. “Don’t think you are so lucky that you have escaped me; I shall come back to finish you off as soon as we have killed the others. You just keep on hiding there and, I assure you, we shall come back and search this whole place for you. We shall bring tear gas and see if you can remain *dead*. We are leaving now. Goodbye.”

But the door had not closed immediately. The Old Man had held his breath longer, sensing they were at the door waiting to hear his sigh of relief. Then Gaston had laughed, the harsh, demonic laughter of a creature that was no longer human, and slammed the door. Soon after that the Old Man had heard more voices, then screams

and gunshots, and more laughter and screams as the militia went from bed to bed finishing off the patients he had admitted there that day with severed limbs and crushed skulls.

Then silence.

The Old Man sat very still, listening to the greater silence that suddenly engulfed the Pit.

“What can it all mean?” he asked himself. “What can it be?”

He held his breath until he nearly collapsed in the fire.

Then he heard more voices and more guns, angrier and stronger, barking like mad dogs. And, again, silence. He waited to hear the boys come roaring back in full flight, defeated, routed and driven back by the police. But nothing of the sort happened.

“Is it possible?” he thought. “Is it possible that the boys have overcome the police?”

No, he decided, that was not at all possible. That easy, it could never be. The police were armed with guns and had bullets to shoot at the boys. The boys had ... what did the boys have, other than their courage and their determination?

He sat to await the first news of the boys' venture. It was a terrifyingly long wait.

The sun rose over the skyscrapers, and over the Pit, and the Pit people woke up and shook themselves like sick and despairing animals that had suffered debilitating disease for far too long without hope. The wind rose, a hot stuffy wind that had a strange hint of decaying lavender and hot roses in it, for, unbeknown to the Old Man, the *devil's salad* had started to bloom in the Pit again. Then the wind stirred up the dust, and the smells that would bubble and boil all day long, and the hapless souls, who would inhale these poisonous fumes till they drove them mad, rose to their fate too, as their children woke them up crying from hunger.

The old hen went to scratch under the old tree for chicks that she would never have, for all the cocks had gone into the pot to assuage unassuageable hungers.

No one, not even the Old Man, understood how the old hen survived the many famines that swept through the Pit like raging epidemics and drove formerly decent people to such hopelessness they stopped short of cannibalism. But the old hen, like the old tree, was the common property of the people, and only a mad man, of a kind unknown in the Pit, would dream of killing her for food. Similarly, not even the bloodiest murderer, and there were many former butchers of people living their last days in the peace and anonymity of the Pit, would have thought of cutting the old tree down for firewood. Thus the old tree thrived and the old hen survived to move freely through the narrow alleys between the huts, looking in at all doorways and sometimes, if she felt comfortable enough in the place, leaving a gift of an egg or two on the owner's bed. The egg belonged to the owner of the bed, and this was acknowledged and accepted by all. The hen then moved on to favour another soul with her gifts worth more than gold. Sometimes she was gone for weeks from the Old Man's hut. But she always came back home to rest from her travels and to scratch under the old tree for worms and ants and memories.

It was deadly silent in the Pit. The hen scratched and scratched but not a memory stirred in the Old Man's mind.

"They have done it," thought the Old Man. "The boys have re-entered the City. The outcast has returned."

But the silence was unsettling.

"I should be there," he said loudly to himself and to the ghosts of fear and doubt that larked in the dark shadows in his heart. "We should all be out there with the boys, righting what we wronged."

But with whom could he go? Most of his contemporaries and peers were dead, some at the hands of fate but most at the hands of their friends, their neighbours and their countrymen. The few that were left alive did not have enough life left in them to give to any cause.

He remembered how the world had once been so full of causes, how, when he was younger, the future had been so bright and beautiful, and smelling of lavender and roses. As young intellectuals and overzealous socialists, they had philosophised a great deal trying to intellectualise the vanity and the vacuity of leadership that plagued *their* people. They had discoursed endlessly on the politics of ethnic divide and rule, and the moral decay that threatened to destroy an entire continent, while mad and senile politicians groped in the dark without a clue as to what Government was about. They had talked about genocide, out of the hearing of the furies at the lavender and roses court, and their secret police. They had tried to intellectualise genocide, like everything else, and finally fooled themselves into believing that it could not happen again in a civilised, God-fearing country, and that it could not happen to them; that the civilised world would not stand for it, and would not let it happen. Then it had happened, and the world had watched aghast as nearly a million people were systematically butchered in their fields and in their homes by a regime so evil that the world had rarely seen the like of it.

Gaston, his medical assistant and self-appointed murderer, had haunted him for the duration of the genocide after his superiors ordered that *Daktari* be allowed to live. Gaston had dropped by the hospital every now and then demanding drugs and frightening the Old Man by asking him if there were *cockroaches* left at the hospital to kill. The Colonel had ordered the *Daktari's* life be spared so that he could treat the soldiers and the militia who sustained injuries in the hills, where their victims put up a desperate resistance. But when the Colonel was himself killed by the resistance, shot with his own gun, Gaston had resumed his mission to finish off *Daktari* with renewed vigour. Then in the dying days of the genocide, when the masterminds finally realised that they had failed and fled to the jungles with the resistance hard on their heels, Gaston had played his final card. He had led his death squad to *Daktari's* house, butchered his children, slaughtered his chickens and drunk his liquor, while Beloved roasted them chicken meat at the point of a gun, as they waited for *Daktari* to come home from work.

The silence and the memories were killing the Old Man.

As always, when it was too quiet in the darkness that was his life, the Old Man talked to himself, to the old hen, to the hut, to the old tree, to the fire, to the spirits of his ancestors and to the silent-footed ones who came to pick on the old tree when it was known that the Boy was not about.

He picked at his old instrument and sang songs of old, of old, old things from deep in his heart, things that spewed out of his soul like pus from a festering wound. He sang and he wept, as he remembered. He told old tales and fables from way back in the darkness of his time, things meant to give hope in times of despair and courage in times of fear, times such as these. Now they brought him only sadness.

His heart suddenly broke and he wept, remembering how, after they had killed most of him, Gaston had declared death too merciful for the *Daktari* and stopped the militia from finishing him off.