

EATING MOSES

WHEN THE ENTRANCE was wide enough, Salt pushed his head and shoulders through and barked in the hole.

There was a sudden quiet from within. We got down on our knees and put our ears to the ground to listen. We heard the sound we had heard once before, the rumbling of approaching thunder. The sound grew louder as it came nearer, and the earth shook.

We jumped to our feet and prepared to run. Then Salt gave a yelp. He shot backwards out of the hole and went spinning in the air. He crashed into Pepper and both dogs went down in a cloud of dust.

Old Moses stuck his head out of the burrow and shook his tusks at us. Then he retreated and crashed to the bottom of the hole with a thud.

The dogs picked themselves up from the dust. They were shivering from the shock. Salt limped over to Nigel, but Pepper dove angrily into the hole, pushing his way in until only his tail was left wagging in the air.

Again the deep, expectant silence. Pepper was older and wiser than Salt. He did not bark in the hole. He listened, as we did, to the start of the rumbling that would warn us of the approaching thunder.

We heard it coming, the ground shaking from its force, and we jumped back as before.

Pepper wriggled out of the hole and sprang away from the mouth of the den at the very last second.

With a loud whooshing sound, Old Moses shot out of the hole and into the air. Pepper had timed the moment just right. He leapt onto the old warthog's back and sank his teeth into the massive mane. They landed ten yards away from us. Pepper was still on top, trying desperately to sink his killer fangs into the warthog's thick neck.

Old Moses charged on through the grassland. We waited for him to turn around and come charging back to his den.

It took us a moment to realize that he had no intention of returning to his hole. Then we ran.

Salt had by now fully recovered from shock and he dashed forward to help his brother.

Then Old Moses stopped so suddenly that Pepper flew off his back and went crashing into the dust. Old Moses veered to the right and made for the first line of bush, about half a mile away along the river valley. When the dust cleared, we saw Pepper pick himself up and go furiously after Old Moses, with Salt right behind him.

We ran after them. I stepped into a mole hole and fell down. Nigel was fifty paces behind me and doing his best to keep up. I stopped to wait for him. He was panting heavily, and his arms and his legs were almost black with sweat and dust.

"Shall we go home now?" I asked while he caught his breath.

"No." His face was red with excitement. "We almost have him now."

"But he is gone. We'll never see him again."

"We shall," he said. "The dogs will catch him now."

"It will be dark soon," I pleaded. "We must go home."

He looked around and for the first time seemed to realize where he was. The sun was sinking over the hills and we were still miles away from home. Way up in the east, thunderclouds poured from the mountains into the valleys. Lightning flashed and thunder clashed. There was the smell of dust in the air, a sign that the rain had started its gradual descent into the plains.

I worried about flash floods. I worried about the river flooding.

"We must go home now," I said to Nigel.

"But the dogs," he said. "We must get the dogs."

"It will soon be dark," I told him.

"We must get the dogs," he insisted. "We can't go home without them."

We ran on.

The old warthog had disappeared in the forest. Salt and Pepper dove in after him. We came up to the first line of trees.

I stepped on a thorn and sat down to take it out. It was a long and hard acacia thorn and it had gone through my foot. I called to Nigel to stop and help me take it out, but he had already disappeared into the forest after the dogs.

I gritted my teeth and yanked out the thorn. Then I rubbed leaves on the wound to stop the bleeding. My foot was extremely painful. I could not run any more.

I called out for Nigel. There was no reply. I limped into the forest after him. It was gloomy and silent except for the crickets now rising to sing their eerie night songs.

The sudden silence was frightening. With growing panic, I finally woke up to something that had been nagging me since the whole affair with Old Moses had started. It was the silent and savage way the Alsatian dogs had gone after their prey. They were trained attack dogs, not hunting dogs. Unlike the jimis, they had not raved and ranted during the attack on the warthog. They had not uttered a single bark during the whole chase, and they were dead silent now. The jimis would have made enough noise to scare the whole forest. The jimis would have been easy to follow. But the Alsatis were impossible to follow in the thick forest.

I limped on, calling for Nigel with mounting alarm. The forest was dead still. Darkness was closing in fast.

I walked on. Lighting flashed, throwing grotesque shadows into the trees around me. A sudden thunderclap echoed eerily through the undergrowth. I was petrified with fear.

I was about to turn round and run home when I heard a muffled sound in the undergrowth and stopped to listen.

The forest was quite still. A sharp cry cut into the night, a frightened sound that sounded like a sheep that was about to have its throat cut.

Then silence.

"Nigel?" I called out. "Is that you, Nigel?"

There was no reply. I heard stealthy movements up ahead. Then silence. Fear tore at my stomach — a cold, screaming fear that filled my mouth and made it impossible to breathe. I moved on slowly. It was nearly dark now.

Lightning lit up the night, blinding and illuminating at the same time. In its terrible light, I saw a large black thing lying on the ground.

I stopped. My fear told me to run home and get help. But my mind told me no villager would dare go in the forest after dark. The soldiers had warned us against it. The soldiers had made it very clear that anyone found in the forest after dark would be shot dead.

I approached the thing lying there on the ground. Then I recognized it.

It was the body of fearless old Pepper, and he was dead. His head was split wide open, and there was blood all around him.

I cried out with fear. I ran in panicked circles and called Nigel's name until the forest rang with it and I was hoarse from yelling. I got no reply.

I ran back the way we had come and tried to find my way home. I had to get some help. If Old Moses could do so much harm to such a big dog, I needed all the help I could find. Forgetting the wound in my foot, I ran like the wind. The river was rising when I crossed back into the village. I got home long after dark, scratched and battered by the trees I had run into in the dark, and frightened like I had never been before.

Father was still at work and Hari was not at home. Mother sat alone by the fireplace worrying about us all.

"Where have you been?" she asked me. "I have worried about you all evening."

"Nowhere," I said.

I did not know how to tell her that I had lost the white boy in the forest. I was not supposed to go in the forest in the first place. I was not supposed to be with the white boy either. So, in the end, I told her nothing. I had been nowhere and had done nothing with no one, as usual.

She looked me in the face, saw the fear in my eyes and said, "Wait until your father gets home. Then you will tell him where you have been all day."

I was tempted to run back to the forest and stay there until I had found Nigel. But I could not go back alone. It frightened me just thinking about it.

I knew of only one person who could go into the forest so late at night.

"Where is Hari?" I asked.

My mother regarded me with renewed interest.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Nowhere."

Throughout dinner I thought about my predicament. Dozens of desperate thoughts went through my head, and all of them were terrifying. I could not eat or sit still. I went outside the hut several times and thought seriously of drowning myself in the river. I thought of going to Bwana Ruin's. Instead I sat trembling and hoping my mother would not notice.

But she did. She watched me stew in my own terror.

"Kariuki," she asked again. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing."

About an hour later, my father came to ask whether I had seen the little white man that day. The rain was starting and his white uniform was dotted with dark raindrops. He looked so miserable that he frightened me.

I told my father I had not seen the white boy at all that day.

"Where could he be?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

He went back to the farmhouse looking more miserable than ever. My mother watched me intently. She stared at me with that all-seeing and all-knowing look, and I was afraid she had seen me sneak into the forest with Nigel.

I was on the verge of confessing everything to her when Father suddenly came home and told us the little white man was missing.

"The dogs too," he told us. "Bwana Ruin has called the army."

I lay awake that night, listening to the thunder crash and the rain beat down in earnest. I decided I would wake up before dawn and go back to the forest and find Nigel. I would search the whole forest. I would not eat or rest. I would not return until I had found Nigel.

Then a desperate thought entered my mind. What if I did not find Nigel? What then?

I would run away from home, I said to myself. I would go far, far away and stay there. I would go over the Loldaiga hills to the land of the Dorobos and change my name. I would go where no one would ever find me. I would never return home if I did not find Nigel.

By dawn the village was surrounded by an army of angry white soldiers. They rounded all of us up and herded us into the auction pen. The rain during the night had turned it into a mud pool. They made us sit on the mud while they went through our huts as before.

This time they were not looking for guns or for the mau-mau. They were looking for clues that would link the villagers to the disappearance of the white boy. However, this time they unearthed things that would send a lot of people to detention for a long, long time. They found things for which some villagers would no doubt be hanged.

They found a homemade gun and three rounds of ammunition. They found stolen maps and medical supplies — things that illiterate villagers were not supposed to know anything about.

Then they called the villagers out one by one and marched them to the farmhouse. Bwana Ruin had set up an interrogation office in a tent on his front lawn. They were ordered to produce their identity cards, their movement passes and their work permits. They were asked whether they or anyone they knew was mau-mau. Some of them were released right away and allowed to go back to their homes. Others were herded to one side under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

Then my turn came for questioning. I limped into the tent and stood in front of the table set up there. Behind the table were Bwana Ruin and three white officers.

The questioning was done by a serious-looking officer with gray hair and grave, old eyes. He asked what had happened to my foot. I told him that I had stepped on a thorn. He asked me how old I was. I told him. He wanted to know where I went to school. I told him that too. The soldiers had found a toy pistol in my mother's hut. He showed it to me and asked if I knew what it was. I told him.

"Do you know where we found it?" he asked me.

"Under my bed," I said. "I put it there."

He glanced at Bwana Ruin. The old man was sitting slumped in his chair with an angry frown on his face.

"Whose gun is it?" the inspector asked me.

"It is mine," I told him.

"Yours, *aye*?" Bwana Ruin sat up. "Where did you get it from?"

"Nigel gave it to me," I told him. "The Bwana Kidogo gave it to me."

"He did, did he?" Bwana Ruin asked me. "Whose *toto* are you, *aye*? Whose child are you?"

The inspector interrupted him to ask me when exactly the Bwana Kidogo had given me the gun. I could not remember exactly when. But it was after we got tired of playing cowboys and discovered hunting. It all seemed so long ago now.

"So you are a friend of the Bwana Kidogo?" he asked me.

I answered that I was.

"When did you see him last?" he asked.

I hesitated. What did they know? Had someone found out about our hunting expedition with Salt and Pepper? Nigel would never have told anyone about it. That was our understanding.

"Yesterday," I said to the inspector.

"Where did you last see him?"

"When the soldiers came to surround us," I said to him. "He was standing over there with mamsab."

Among the suspects waiting to be taken away to Nanyuki for further investigation was Hari. I saw him sitting on the grass with other suspects while armed soldiers stood guard over them. When our eyes met he looked right through me. I realized I was not supposed to know him.

I turned to the inspector and answered his questions as best as I could. When the questioning was over, the inspector said I could go back home. My mother was there, worried as I had never seen her worried before.

"I told you," she said gravely. "Your father told you all the time too."

"Told me what?" I asked her.

"To keep away from the little white man. Now see what misfortune you have brought upon us all."

"But it is not my fault," I said.

"Whose fault is it?" she asked, her voice full of pain.

"I don't know."

"You don't know, you don't know," she said, close to tears. "When will you ever know anything?"

I had no idea. Nobody ever told me anything that was not an order. But the very first opportunity I got, I called Jimi and together we sneaked out of the village and down through the forest to the river. We forded the swollen river, way downstream from the village, and set out to look for Nigel.

We covered a lot of ground that day. Starting from where I had left off the night before, we worked our way up the valley, searching under every bush and tree. We found the body of the other Alsatian about a mile away from the first, big and bloated and beginning to smell. He had died from two deep cuts on his head, and there were blue flies all around him. The area bore the signs of a fierce fight, and there was blood all over.

I was really scared now. Jimi whined from fear. I had never seen him so terrified. It took all the promises I could make to persuade him to stay with me a little longer.

My foot hurt terribly. It ached with every step I took, and I had to stop every now and then to rest it. I cut a stick to lean on, and we continued our search. I called out Nigel's name. Jimi barked out Nigel's name. We stopped, listened, then moved on.

Sometimes we came across a human footprint. Sometimes a broken twig was all that was left to tell us that something, or someone, had been there. We came across a herd of buffalo browsing their way quietly through a glade.

I knew we had nothing to fear from the herd. Only a lone or a wounded buffalo was dangerous. I led Jimi quietly around the glade. They saw us and snorted a warning at us to keep our distance.

We searched in countless caves along the river valley. We found nothing but bat droppings and old animal lairs.

In the late afternoon we called off the search and returned tiredly home. Along the way, we came upon a party of white soldiers searching for Nigel's body along the river bank. They thought he might have gone fishing and drowned in a flash flood.

When we got back home, we found soldiers about to arrest my father. They had him in handcuffs and were preparing to take him away.

"Don't cry," he said to my mother.

I had never seen her weep. The closest she had ever come to crying was when my little sister died of measles. Now, as the soldiers prepared to take my father away, she put her arm around me and drew me to her. He seemed to notice me then.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Nowhere," I said.

"Stay with your mother," he ordered. "And do not cry."

I was too frightened to cry. It seemed that my life had been turned upside down. Nothing was the same. Even my own father, Bwana Ruin's most important man and the toughest, bravest man I knew, was not immune to the terror that had suddenly descended on us. Worse still, he seemed to have resigned himself to being shot.

They took him roughly by the arm and led him away. Even Jimi seemed to understand what was happening. He whined faintly and crawled under the grain store to hide.

"Where are they taking him?" I asked my mother.

"I don't know," she told me.

"Will they hang him?"

"I don't know."

We watched them until they disappeared among the village huts.

"What happened to your foot?" my mother finally asked.

"Nothing," I replied.

"You run to the river and fetch some water," she said. "We have a lot of washing to do today."

It was very late in the afternoon and there was not enough sun left in the sky to dry any clothes. I did not understand why she wanted to do her washing at this time of day. But I took the bucket and obediently limped down to the place where I had first met the little white man.

There was no joy in it any more. There was no joy in anything any more.