

## THE LONG NIGHT

As I waited I knew the night was tired. It had heard so many sad stories. Like its storytellers it too began to cry. It wanted to go somewhere else and begin a journey across the seas and mountains to another country. It left its tears on the leaves of trees and the windows of the people. It began the long walk over the seas, mountains and the sky. The sun rose. With its bright red handkerchief it wiped away night's tears. Birds awoke up and sang with small voices to rouse up the children. Then I was awake too. I went outside. The sun was warm.

GrandPat used to end every story he told me with those same words – always the night was sad. Always it cried. Always the leaves and windows were wet with tears.

I think he told me those stories, as I was often a sad little boy. The games my brother and sister and friends played never seemed to be important. I was bored with tag, or games about secrets, which I knew, were not secret but just silly words made up by children. And neither my brother or sister or my friends thought that animals were different from them. They are the same as us, said my small sister with an absurd confidence in her voice, they only look different. We had a dog-called Spotty – he was like one of the family. All my friends thought he was like a child as he played with them, barked and went crazy when they went crazy.

But I saw a dark side in him. One day he caught a new kitten and he began to tear it to pieces. No one saw it except me. I knew then Spotty was different to people. No person I knew would do what Spotty did to that kitten. Afterwards, I cried by myself. GrandPat found me, as it was getting dark. He said no one knew where I had gone. GrandPat saw the remains of the kitten and covered it up with soil. He placed a stone over what was left of the body, and then said it was time to go home. No, I said, Spotty is a demon. I want to stay here in the dark and think.

GrandPat sat down beside me. We didn't talk. He looked at me once more. Time to go home. You must be hungry. It's almost dark now. Your mother will have dinner ready and you know Freda doesn't like to be kept waiting. I shouted out - I don't want to eat. Spotty is a devil.

GrandPat put his arms around me. He told me the best food was a story. When you are sad it fills you up. When you have a story your whole body eats, and your head has a huge feast too. Then it becomes tired and you sleep. Did you know, he began, every night the darkness all around us hears many stories as it goes around the world. Just a few hours ago, the night was in Africa. Families have been telling stories all night. They've been talking with spirits of all the dead people they know –old uncles, aunties, great great grandfathers and grandmothers. And the children, they've been hearing stories of naughty spiders like Anansi and the clever monkeys. And the bright stars you can see in the sky have stayed awake all night listening to everybody talking. There are happy stories but there are sad stories too, like Spotty and the kitten. After many hours the night becomes sad. It wants to go away and live somewhere else. So its cries too. Then it begins its journey to another country when the sun has wiped the tears away.

I can't recall what the story was but GrandPat must of told it well, as I walked home with him feeling that the world was not so big and strange as I had thought it was. I looked at Spotty sleeping in the corner of the room. As I came in, he woke up for a moment looked at me for a moment and went to sleep. He did not care about the kitten. He was different.

In my childhood I learned to listen to the stories of GrandPat – they were strange, frightening, sometimes funny but I was never hungry after hearing the, He was right, they were like food. He often talked about food. I remember he said his beautiful African wife had died because of food. I

asked him why – he said – Africa, paused and then said again – food. I did not understand. He went quiet. I asked Mum what had happened to his wife and child, but she didn't know. He was young, she replied, and worked in Africa. He took a local woman as his wife and had a child with her. But when he came back home many years later, there was no wife and no child. We never found out what had happened. Some people said he had left her behind, but that that was not like GrandPat. When he had a love, it stayed with him. I don't know what happened to her. It's all-strange. But that is GrandPat, secrets fill his life.

I was now becoming a teenager and reading more and more factual books and it seemed that GrandPat's stories did not matter anymore. I left home eventually and began to turn into a man. The stories I loved hearing from GrandPat began to be just another memory of childhood. I had thought now and again of GrandPat and his life in Africa. I thought I would ask him again about his wife and child.

But the day I went home and I realized I must have been away for longer than I had thought GrandPat was looking so old and weak and Mum was worried about his health. He won't eat, she said and he moans at night and cries out. What does he say, I asked? It sounds like a cry of fear – a long oooh-tsaaaaa... and avoo...and so on. I don't know what he is saying. But he seems frightened. And he won't eat a thing after one of those dreams. Oh, so often I think he is dying. I said nothing.

I was home for several weeks. GrandPat lived in his own world. He seemed oblivious to me at times. But I could see eyes looking this way and that way when he went into the garden. He appeared to be looking for something. And he never seemed to want food. It was my last night at home when GrandPat went into one of the dreams. I was asleep and woke up when he screamed out loud as if somebody or something had grabbed him. I rushed into his room and he was standing there with a sheet held up in front of him. What's up, I asked? He held up his sheet towards the light and looked closely at it. It's torn, he said sadly. The sheet was nearly new. I could see the light shining through it. So what was going on his mind? He burst into tears. I held him close as his frail body shook. I can't go out now, he said, it's dark and it's hungry. It could still be there.

He was mumbling – about hyenas and vultures. Listen to them. And the railroad for the train. We never finished it. Mum came into his room at that moment. We both held GrandPat as he raved on about darkness and birds and violet sunsets. Mum looked at me. Africa, she said. He was in Kenya and worked years ago on the East African railway. He was there for years. I think that's where he met his wife. My mother told me about it when I was a child. He'd been a carpenter. One day he told her that he was off to Africa to look for his future. Next day he was gone. Your Grandmother never found out much more about the work he did. But for twenty years she received monthly payments from him through a British train company based in East Africa. Then one day a stranger came to the door. He's worked with GrandPat and had a message to say that GrandPat would never come back home. He had decided to remarry and live in Africa.

But some years later he did come home. He was by himself. All he had were a few small African ornaments and a set of deep scars on one arm. He never talked about his wife or children. He lived by himself.

I felt GrandPat go into a shiver as he recalled some past event. Oro, he called .... Oro, Oro. Oro, Oro. After a while I asked Mum to leave us together and to get some sleep. GrandPat and I sat there for a long time while he shivered, and looked at the sheet and cried. I had no idea of what to say. Eventually he quietened down, but I still held him. I thought I was dropping off to sleep when he said to me, "You remember Spotty and the kitten". I looked at GrandPat. He was now fully

awake and his eyes were clear. “...he killed it. He was different to us”. I nodded and GrandPat began to talk. Africa, he said, a land that was never silent. Always there are animals wandering about and people singing, dancing, crying and working. Ancestors lived forever and people talked with them about their problems. Sometimes dark spirits hated people and put spells on them. Jealous families asked the spirit to hurt people. GrandPat lay in my arms as he talked. He told me of his work on the railroad, of the great heat and snakes that bit once and killed a person. Then there were the lions. Ancestors, said the African workers, they are our ancestors. Simba will guard us or kill us. And the elephants. I listened as GrandPat talked about the giant elephants of Tsavo roaming through the work camps. Sometimes they walked carefully avoiding people. Other times they ripped up tents and attacked people. Always the Africans treated the elephant with a deep respect. He is King, they would say – we cannot do anything.

My wife – Oro, she was African – so young, so beautiful and her skin was like gold. When our baby was born I cried for joy, for it too was like her, but so small. Her shining gold skin never seemed to be anything other than a gift from the sun. We were happy and she went with me everywhere. Always little Oro was on her back when she washed or cooked or walked beside me. I had never been happier in my whole life. She too was happy, but when she went back to her village her face darkened and she became quiet. I thought it was because she missed her parents, but I found out later she had been sent an evil spirit by a neighbour.

It was the week of Easter. The camp closed. We were to be together for four whole days. I decided to go into the great Tsavo Park and see the animals. I wanted our little daughter to see zebras and monkeys and the thousands of birds that flew around from dawn to dusk. For two days we lived in our tent and rose with the birds. I held little Oro up on my shoulder. She chortled when she saw a large hawk and tried to catch the dozens of small birds that crept around our eating bowls as we fed them remnants of rice. Oro, my wife kept feeding the birds. The animals, she said, they need food. That is what they need all the time. We must feed them. It is our way. I laughed at her, saying, they will find food anyway. If they do not get it from you, they will take it from somewhere else. Yes, she said, but whoever gives them food becomes part of them. If it is a bird, they will fly one day, if it is Simba, it will become strong. And the elephants, I said, should we feed the elephants. No, she smiled. He is King. All Africa is his already.

We ate that night and went into the tent to sleep. There was not much space. I slept with Oro in my arms and little Oro was in her arms. I heard the night sounds begin, the strange cries and the soft sound the grass shaking in the wind. The moon rose and shone on our tent. Oro was asleep and I listened to her breathing as I held her breast with one hand and felt little Oro resting on her. My life seemed to have reached a peak of happiness. The moon moved behind clouds I fell asleep.

There was a cracking sound. Cloth ripping. I could smell a stench, heard a deep choking type of breath and felt the immediate presence of a demon spirit. Oro woke and shouted her name out. She screamed as it she was identifying herself to a person a long distance away. I held her tight, but in a moment she was gone. My arm burst into intense pain. I felt blood running down my side. The smell filled all the air around me and I fainted.

It was still dark when I began to recover my faint. My right arm was still dripping blood. I could feel it rolling down my body. I did not even try to call for Oro and the baby. I knew they were gone. With the cool night Tsavo air entered the gash in the tent, I sat there holding my arm and trying to bandage it with part of my torn shirt. Dawn was not far away. The first morning the call of birds began. I drifted in and out of a fainting fit and dreamed of my first meeting with Oro and our first day as man and wife. I remembered the last evening. She had fed the birds and talked about their

perpetual search for food. I must have been crying as I next woke up my face was wet and I was shaking.

GrandPat did not talk again for a long time. Then he started again. The dawn was rising fast. You have never seen an African dawn he said, red, redder than any blood you have ever seen. That day it was red too. My arm was still bleeding and I held it as I looked at the rising sun. Birds were moving towards our rice pots. I watched them, thinking. Oro's voice was in my ears. They need food; all the time they need food, she said. It's their way of life. They must have food.

It was time to leave. I did not even look for Oro and our baby. Oh, India, you should have seen that dawn. It was the end of the saddest night. Like its storytellers it too began to cry. It wanted to go somewhere else and begin a journey across the seas and mountains to another country. It left its tears on the leaves of trees and began the long walk over the seas, mountains and the sky. The sun continued to rise and with its bright red handkerchief wiped away the tears of the night. Birds woke up and sang with small voices to rouse the children.

I looked at GrandPat. He was silent, still and cold. I laid him on the bed and looked outside. Dawn was beginning. Dew, like small tears was dripping down the windows.

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September 2020