

Fanta Blackcurrant

She was our sister and our friend, but from the time we were totos, Meri was not like us. If the Good Samaritans who came to give us foods and clothes on Sundays asked us what we wanted from God, some of us said going to school; some of us said enough money for living in a room in Mathare slums; and some of us, the ones who wanted to be seen we were born-again, said going to heaven. But Meri, she only wanted a big Fanta Blackcurrant for her to drink every day and it never finish.

God was always liking Meri. In the streets when we opened our hands and prayed people for money, they felt more mercy for Meri. They looked how she was beautiful with a brown mzungu face and a space in front of her teeth. They asked Meri, where is your father and where is your mother? They gave her 10 bob and sometimes even 20 bob. For us who were colour black, just 5 bob.

All of us felt jealousy for Meri, like a hot potato refusing to be swallowed. We thieved things from her nylon paper. Only small things: her bread, her razor blade, her tin for cooking. But some of us felt more jealousy for Meri and we wished bad things to fall on her head.

And then one day Meri was put in the TV. It happened like this: a boy called Wanugu was killed by a police. This Wanugu he was not our brother or our friend, but some boys came to the mjengo where we were staying carrying sticks and stones. They said all chokoraas, boys and girls, must go to the streets to make noise about Wanugu. Fearing them, we went and shouted 'Killers, killers, even chokoraas are people' until TV people came to look our faces with their cameras.

All of us wanted to be put in the TV. Quickly, quickly we beat dust out of our clothes; we stopped smiling loudly to hide our black teeths; we pulled mucus back inside our noses. All of us told the story of Wanugu, how he was killed with a gun called AK47 when he was just sitting there at Jevanjee gardens, breathing glue and hearing the lunchtime preacher say how heaven is beautiful. He was not even thinking which car he could steal the eyes or mirrors or tyres. All of us told the story, but at night when we went to the mhindi shops to look ourselves in the TVs being sold in the windows, we saw only Meri. She was singing Ingrish:

'Meri hada ritro ramp, ritro ramp, ritro ramp.'

Some of us looked Meri with big eyes because we had not heard that before she came to the streets she had been taken to school, from standard one to three.

We said, 'Meri, speak Ingrish even us we hear.'

We beat her some slaps and we laughed, but inside all of us started fearing that someone was coming to save Meri from the streets. All of us remembered how last year people came to save a dog because it found a toto thrown away in the garbage. We felt jealousy for Meri. She was never thinking anything in her head. Even if she was our sister and our friend, she was useless, all the time breathing glue and thinking where she could find a Fanta Blackcurrant. If anyone came to save Meri, all of us were going to say we were Meri. Some of us started washing in Nairobi river every day to stop smelling chokoraa; some of us went to the mhindi shops every day to listen how people speak Ingrish on the TVs; some of us started telling long stories about how long time ago even us we had lived in a big house.

But no one came to save Meri. Days followed days and years followed years. We finished being totos and blood started coming out between our legs. And Meri, from staying in the sun every day, she changed from colour brown to colour black just like us. Jiggers entered her toes. Her teeth came out leaving ten spaces in her mouth. Breathing glue, she forgot her father's name and her mother's name. Every day her head went bad: she removed her clothes and washed herself with soil until we chased her. We caught her. We sat on her. We pinched her. We beat her slaps. We pulled her hair. We didn't stop until tears came out of her eyes.

All of us were now big mamas. When we prayed people for money in the streets, they looked how we had big matiti hanging on our chests like ripe mangoes. We felt shame because they were seeing we were useless. In the end, all of us stopped praying people in the streets. Even Meri, she followed us at night when we went to see the Watchman at the bank.

He said, 'Me, I am only helping you because I feel for you mercy.'

He said, 'You only pay me ten bob and remain with ten bob.'

He said, 'I will find you good customers.'

He said he was our friend, but when we asked him how to remove the toto inside Meri's stomach, he chased us away, calling us devils.

He said, 'Who told you me I know how to kill totos?'

All of us felt mercy for Meri. Maybe one time after a customer finished, she had forgotten to wash herself down there with salt water. Some of us said we knew a way to

remove the toto using wires; some of us knew a way using leaves from a tree in Jevanjee gardens; some of us started crying, fearing even us we had a toto inside.

But Meri, she was just breathing glue and singing a song to herself. In the mjengo where we were staying, with two walls and one side of the roof removed, she sat the whole day under the stairs going nowhere, telling us which man had put the toto inside her stomach. First it was a man walking with a stick who gave her a new 100 bob, and then she said it was a mzungu talking Ingrish through his nose, and then she scratched the jiggers in her toes and the lice in her hair and said no, it was the man who took her in a new car to a big house and washed her body and applied her nice smelling oil, asking her, does she see how she can be beautiful. We asked ourselves if she was thinking to find that man. If she was thinking he was going to marry her and take her to live in that big house, eating breads and drinking milks.

All of us pulled air through our teeth to make long sounds at her because she was thinking like an empty egg. But some of us, looking how Meri was happy, we gave her presents – soap remaining enough for washing three times, a comb broken some teeth, a mango still colour green. We wanted that when the toto came out she could not refuse for us to carry it and touch it on the stomach to make it laugh. Some of us started telling her which name was the best for the toto. We wished it to be a girl, even if boys are better, because boys can search inside garbage for tins, papers and bottles and take them to a place in Westlands to be paid some money. But girls are beautiful and you can plait their hairs and wear them clothes of many colours. All of us thought like this, but all of us could see the troubles coming to fall on Meri's head.

We prayed the Watchman for her again, but he said, 'No, no, no. Customers don't want someone with a toto inside her stomach.'

We had helped her the most. We could not share our moneys with Meri. She started standing outside a supermarket and following the people coming out with nylon papers full of things for their totos: milks, breads and sugars. She opened her hand for them, saying, 'Saidia maskini.' Some of the people threw saliva on the ground, thinking Meri was wanting to touch them.

But God was always liking Meri. Looking how she was wearing a mother-dress with holes and no shoes, Good Samaritans felt mercy for her. Before lunchtime, she was given 40 or 50 bob. But outside that supermarket, there were also beggars sitting on the ground showing people their broken legs and their blind eyes. They felt jealousy for Meri. When people were not looking, they stood up and chased Meri away, beating her.

From there Meri went to open her hand for people sitting in traffic jam at the roundabout near Globe Cinema. She showed them crying eyes, saying, 'Mama, saidia maskini'. But they did not feel mercy. They closed their windows and looked her from the other side, thinking she wanted to run away with their Nokias like a chokoraa boy. And sometimes cars came very fast almost knocking her and then heads came out of the windows and shouted, 'Kasia, get out of the road or I will step you.' Breathing glue, Meri did not feel bad in her heart.

But that area was for beggar mamas and their totos. These beggar mamas, every day their work was looking the people passing and telling their totos which people to follow and pray for money. When these mamas saw Meri being given a 10 bob, they caught her and beat her some slaps, saying even them they needed to put food in their mouths.

We said, 'Meri, stop fearing those women.'

We said, 'Meri, Nairobi is not theirs.'

We said, 'Meri, in the streets it is a must to survive.'

But all of us knew Meri was not Doggie who if you tried to take her things she could eat your fingers. Meri could not kick a chokoraa boy like Kungfu between his legs when he came to look for her at night. All of us felt mercy for Meri, but we had helped her the most.

She stayed sleeping on her sacks for two days and then her food finished. She put all her things inside a nylon paper and tied them with a shuka on her back, like a toto. She didn't say where she was going.

One day, two days, three days we did not think about Meri. Sleeping on our sacks, washing our faces at night and applying powders, waiting in the streets for customers to stop their cars and say kss-kss-kss for us to come quickly, counting our moneys and looking at the presents we had been given – plastic bangles, a box remaining two biscuits, a watch with the glass broken – all that time, we were thinking our own things. Some of us were thinking if we had jiggers in our toes. Some of us were thinking how we would be if our mothers and fathers had not died in Molo clashes. All of us breathed glue and counted on our fingers the days remaining until we finished being chokoraas.

Four days, five days, six days, and then we started fearing for Meri. We asked ourselves what if chokoraa boys had found her staying alone? What if City Council had caught her and thrown her inside a lorry to be taken to the police station? Some of us, who had never been inside a police station, closed their eyes and ears when we told them our stories of

being put in a cell with cockroaches and rats and big people criminals and one bucket for doing toilet in front of everyone.

They asked us, 'How did you come out of the police station?'

We told them the story. We said, 'Those police they do not even give you 10 bob, not like customers.'

And then Meri came back. She was wearing a dress we had never seen and on top, a bigger sweater that was hiding her stomach. She had washed with soap and clean water. We could see her nylon paper was not full the same way it was when she went away. We saw she was not just carrying the normal things for surviving in the streets: plastic Kasuku for keeping food given by Good Samaritans, bottles for fetching water, papers and sticks for starting fire, cloths for catching blood, salt, and tins for cooking. She was not just carrying things collected in the streets like shoes and slippers not matching each other, one earring, a cup broken the handle, a paper written interesting things. Long time ago, she had lost the things she brought when she came to the streets: her mother's rothario, the knife that killed her father, a song her brother sang for her.

We only wanted to see inside her nylon paper. We did not do something bad, just seeing. Even her she had seen inside our nylon papers many times before, but now she was sitting alone under the stairs going nowhere, singing to her stomach: 'Lala, mtoto, lala.' Some of us said her head had gone bad. Some of us said she was selfish. The way she was holding her nylon paper, we asked ourselves, was she thinking we wanted to thief her things? Even us we had our things, our moneys, our food. When she went to toilet, we went quickly quickly and looked inside her nylon paper and said, 'Waa.'

Meri was carrying three breads, four milks and two sugars. She was carrying sweets tied in a handkerchief and cabbages and rice. We could smell the chicken and chips she had not shared with us. In the bottom, she had two soaps, a plastic flower for putting in her hair and three Fanta Blackcurrants, remaining only the bottles.

We did not do something bad, but she shouted at us, 'Thieves, thieves.'

She removed the breads from our mouths and put everything back in her nylon paper. Remembering the way we helped her, we wanted to beat her slaps, to pull her hair and to bite her. We wanted to pinch her and put soil in her mouth. But because of the toto in her stomach, some of us felt bad in our hearts. We went to say sorry to Meri and sit with her under the stairs going nowhere.

We said, 'Meri, we are not going to tell anyone.'

We said, 'Meri, do you remember who shared with you her toothbrush?'

But Meri refused to tell us her secret. At night when we went to see the Watchman, Meri was left sleeping in our mjengo, not even fearing chokoraa boys could find her alone. In the morning, when we came back, she was not there and when she came back, she was carrying more things. All of us knew Meri was thieving somewhere.

Days followed days and then a week, and then Meri was caught.

It was January and the sun was smiling loudly in the middle of the sky. The wind was chasing nylon papers and going under office women's skirts. Makangas were shouting for people to enter their matatus and be taken to Kahawa, Kangemi and other places. People were refusing to enter the matatus because the fare was 40 bob instead of 20 bob. Some of us were sleeping and feeling we were dying; some of us were starting fires to cook our food; some of us were jumping a rope and remembering the days we were totos; some of us, breathing glue, were seeing dreams of eating chips and chicken.

We heard Meri running and then she passed under the mabati fence surrounding our mjengo. All of us saw she was not carrying her nylon paper and then four men entered behind her. There was a tall man, a short man, a man wearing a red shirt and a man carrying a big stick. They did not say to us anything. They went where Meri was hiding under the stairs going nowhere and covered her mouth for her not to scream. Some of us breathed glue and looked far away; some of us closed our ears and covered ourselves under our sacks.

Now we knew where Meri was thieving. From office women wearing nice clothes that shaped them a figure eight. She was following them behind slowly slowly, looking everywhere in the streets if there were any police or City Council. Office women do not walk fast, wearing those sharp shoes and looking themselves in all the windows of shops. At the place for crossing the road they stop because they do not want to be splashed dirty water by cars and matatus. This is the time Meri went quickly, quickly and opened her hand and said, 'Saidia maskini.'

If the office woman gave her some money, Meri did not do anything, but if the woman said something bad to her, calling her a malaya or asking her what she was thinking when she opened her legs, Meri removed a nylon paper she was hiding under her sweater. Every day Meri was carrying under her sweater what she toileted in the morning. In a small voice she told the office woman to give her money or be applied toilet and go back to the office smelling badly. And because office women fear toilet, they gave her 100 bob or even 200 bob.

And then, Meri was very clever: she did not run away. Before the office woman shouted she was a thief, Meri started talking to herself and falling down and applying toilet on her face until people started thinking she was a mad woman.

God was liking Meri, but she did not know that area was the area of big criminal thieves. They felt jealous how Meri was thieving cleverly. Four big criminal thieves came to our mjengo to beat her with the big stick; they kicked her with their big shoes, pom, pom, pom like a sack of beans being removed the dry skins. They cut her new dress and her sweater. Blood came out from her head, her neck, her hands and between her legs. They did not feel mercy for Meri.

All of us wanted to help Meri. All of us were hearing the screams inside her covered mouth. All of us wanted to run and call the people in the streets, the police and the City Council. But all of us were thinking, if the big criminal thieves did not feel mercy for Meri, with her big swollen stomach, how much would they feel mercy for us?

Days followed days, and Meri was sleeping on her sacks, not moving or talking to us. We brought for her water. We put food in our mouths to chew and put it in her mouth soft soft. Even if her head was an empty egg, she was our sister and our friend. We removed her dress and her sweater and washed them in Nairobi river. We poured soil where blood had come out of her body. We put her dead toto in a nylon paper and threw it in a garbage far away. Tears came out of our eyes for Meri. But some of us said in a small voice Meri was dying. They said we go find another mjengo where to live, far away from Meri. We beat them slaps. We pulled their hair. We put soil in their mouths. Meri was our sister and our friend.

We said, 'Meri, it is better like this, you will see.'

We said, 'Meri, now the Watchman can find customers for you again.'

We said, 'Meri, this is the life of chokoraa.'

But Meri was not hearing. Every day she was talking to herself. And then one day, she put all her things in a nylon paper and tied it on her back with a shuka, like a toto. She passed us and the mabati fence surrounding our mjengo. She closed her eyes a little because the sun was jumping everywhere – on the windows of cars, on the heads of passing people, on the roads shining black. She passed matatus blowing their horns and splashing mud-water on people. She passed hawkers running away from City Council. She passed watchmen outside banks and offices. She passed chokoraa boys climbing on garbage to find tins, papers and bottles for selling in Westlands. She passed streetlights looking down with yellow and black

eyes. She passed a man being thieved his shoes, his pockets, his clothes. Everywhere, we followed her asking her many times:

‘Meri, where are you going?’

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Days followed days and then years followed years. Some of us were caught by police and City Council. We were taken to the police station and from there, to the Jaji who looked us through the mirrors in front of his eyes to see if we were good or bad. He beat his table with a wood hammer and sent some of us to Langata to stay with big women criminals and some of us to a school to cut grasses. Some of us were killed by police with a gun called AK47. Some of us were killed by people we do not know. Some of us we decided to become the wives of chokoraa boys. Some of us, after many years, we had enough money for living in a room in Mathare slums and we started finding customers for ourselves. And some of us, because of breathing too much glue, our heads went bad and we started removing our clothes and chasing people in Nairobi.

But Meri, she crossed Nairobi river and then we do not know where she went.

The End

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