

# **A Meeting in the Dark**

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He stood at the door of the hut and saw his old, frail but energetic father coming along the village street, with a rather dirty bag made out of a strong calico swinging by his side. His father always carried this bag. John knew what it contained: a Bible, a hymn-book and probably a notebook and a pen. His father was a preacher. He knew it was he who had stopped his mother from telling him stories when he became a man of God. His mother had stopped telling him stories long ago. She would say to him, 'Now, don't ask for any more stories. Your father may come.' So he feared his father. John went in and warned his mother of his father's coming. Then his father entered. John stood aside, then walked towards the door. He lingered there doubtfully, then he went out.

'John, hei, John!'

'Baba!'

'Come back.'

He stood doubtfully in front of his father. His heart beat faster and there was that anxious voice within him asking: Does he know?

'Sit down. Where are you going?'

'For a walk, Father,' he answered evasively.

'To the village?'

'Well-yes-no. I mean, nowhere in particular.' John saw his father look at him hard, seeming to read his face. John sighed, a very slow sigh. He did not like the way his father eyed him. He always looked at him as though John was a sinner, one who had to be watched all the time. 'I am,' his heart told him. John guiltily refused to meet the old man's gaze and looked past him appealingly to his mother who was quietly peeling

potatoes. But she seemed oblivious of everything around her.

'Why do you look away? What have you done?'

John shrank within himself with fear. But his face remained expressionless. He could hear the loud beats of his heart. It was like an engine pumping water. He felt no doubt his father knew all about it. He thought: 'Why does he torture me? Why does he not at once say he knows?' Then another voice told him: 'No, he doesn't know, otherwise he would have already jumped at you.' A consolation. He faced his thoughtful father with courage.

'When is the journey?'

Again John thought: Why does he ask? I have told him many times.

'Next week, Tuesday,' he said.

'Right. Tomorrow we go to the shops, hear?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Then be prepared.'

'Yes, Father.'

'You can go.'

'Thank you, Father.' He began to move.

'John!'

'Yes?' John's heart almost stopped beating.

'You seem to be in a hurry. I don't want to hear of you loitering in the village. I know young men, going to show off just because you are going away? I don't want to hear of trouble in the village.'

Much relieved, he went out. He could guess what his father meant by not wanting trouble in the village.

'Why do you persecute the boy so much?' Susana spoke for the first time. Apparently she had carefully listened to the whole drama without a word. Now was her time to speak. She looked at her tough old preacher who had been a companion for life. She had married him a long time ago. She could not tell the number of years. They had been happy. Then the man became a convert. And everything in the home put on a religious tone.

He even made her stop telling stories to the child. 'Tell him of Jesus. Jesus died for you. Jesus died for the child. He must know the Lord.' She, too, had been converted. But she was never blind to the moral torture he inflicted on the boy (that was how she always referred to John), so that the boy had grown up mortally afraid of his father. She always wondered if it was love for the son. Or could it be a resentment because, well, they two had 'sinned' before marriage? John had been the result of that sin. But that had not been John's fault. It was the boy who ought to complain. She often wondered if the boy had . . . but no. The boy had been very small when they left Fort Hall. She looked at her husband. He remained mute though his left hand did, rather irritably, feel about his face.

'It is as if he was not your son. Or do you . . .'

'Hm, Sister.' The voice was pleading. She was seeking a quarrel but he did not feel equal to one. Really, women could never understand. Women were women, whether saved or not. Their son had to be protected against all evil influences. He must be made to grow in the footsteps of the Lord. He looked at her, frowning a little. She had made him sin but that had been a long time ago. And he had been saved. John must not tread the same road.

'You ought to tell us to leave. You know I can go away. Go back to Fort Hall. And then everybody . . .'

'Look, Sister,' he hastily interrupted. He always called her sister. Sister-in-Lord, in full. But he sometimes wondered if she had been truly saved. In his heart he prayed: Lord, be with our sister Susana. Aloud, he continued, 'You know I want the boy to grow in the Lord.'

'But you torture him so! You make him fear you!'

'Why! He should not fear me. I have really nothing against him.'

'It is you. You. You have always been cruel to him . . .'

She stood up. The peelings dropped from her frock and fell in a heap on the floor. 'Stanley!'

'Sister.' He was startled by the vehemence in her voice. He had never seen her like this. Lord, take the devil out of her. Save her this minute. She did not say what she wanted to say. Stanley looked away from her. It was a surprise, but it seemed he feared his wife. If you had told the people in the village about this, they would not have believed you. He took his Bible and began to read. On Sunday he would preach to a congregation of brethren and sisters.

Susana, a rather tall, thin woman, who had once been beautiful, sat down again and went on with her work. She did not know what was troubling her son. Was it the coming journey? Still, she feared for him.

Outside, John was strolling aimlessly along the path that led from his home. He stood near the wattle tree which was a little way from his father's house and surveyed the whole village. They lay before his eyes, crammed, rows and rows of mud and grass huts, ending in sharply defined sticks that pointed to heaven. Smoke was coming out of various huts. It was an indication that many women had already come from the shambas. Night would soon fall. To the west, the sun – that lone day-time traveller – was hurrying home behind the misty hills. Again, John looked at the crammed rows and rows of huts that formed Makeno Village, one of the new mushroom 'towns' that grew up all over the country during the Mau Mau war. It looked so ugly. A pain rose in his heart and he felt like crying – I hate you, I hate you! You trapped me alive. Away from you, it would never have happened. He did not shout. He just watched.

A woman was coming towards where he stood. A path into the village was just near there. She was carrying a big load of Kuni which bent her into an Akamba-bow shape. She greeted him. 'Is it well with you, Njooi (John)?'

'It is well with me, Mother.' There was no trace of bitterness in his voice. John was by nature polite. Everyone knew this. He was quite unlike the other proud, educated sons of the tribe – sons who came back from the other side of the waters with white

or Negro wives who spoke English. And they behaved just like Europeans! John was a favourite, a model of humility and moral perfection. Everyone knew that though a clergyman's son, John would never betray the tribe. They still talked of the tribe and its ways.

'When are you going to - to—'

'Makerere?'

'Makelele.' She laughed. The way she pronounced the name was funny. And the way she laughed, too. She enjoyed it. But John felt hurt. So everyone knew of this.

'Next week.'

'I wish you well.'

'Thank you, Mother.'

She said quietly, as if trying to pronounce it better 'Makelele'. She laughed at herself again but she was tired. The load was heavy.

'Stay well, Son.'

'Go well and in peace, Mother.'

And the woman who all the time had stood, moved on, panting like a donkey, but she was obviously pleased with John's politeness.

John remained long, looking at her. What made such a woman live on day to day, working hard, yet happy? Had she much faith in life? Or was her faith in the tribe? She and her kind, who had never been touched by ways of the whiteman, looked as though they had something to cling to. As he watched her disappear, he felt proud that they should think well of him. He felt proud that he had a place in their esteem. And then came the pang. *Father will know. They will know.* He did not know what he feared most; the action his father would take when he found out, or the loss of the little faith the simple villagers had placed in him, when they knew. He feared to lose everything.

He went down to the small local tea-shop. He met many people who wished him well at the college. All of them knew that the priest's son had finished all the whiteman's learning in Kenya.

He would now go to Uganda. They had read this in the *Baraza*, the Swahili Weekly. John did not stay long at the shop. The sun had already gone to rest and now darkness was coming. The evening meal was ready. His tough father was still at the table reading his Bible. He did not look up when John entered. Strange silence settled in the hut.

'You look unhappy.' His mother first broke the silence.

John laughed. It was a nervous little laugh. 'No, Mother,' he hastily replied, nervously looking at his father. He secretly hoped that Wamuhu had not blabbed.

'Then I am glad.'

She did not know. He ate his dinner and went out to his hut. A man's hut. Every young man had his own hut. John was never allowed to bring any girl visitor in there. Stanley did not want 'trouble'. Even to be seen standing with one was a crime. His father could easily thrash him. He feared his father, though sometimes he wondered why he feared him. He ought to have rebelled like the other educated young men. He lit the lantern. He took it in his hand. The yellow light flickered dangerously and then went out. He knew his hands were shaking. He lit it again and hurriedly took his big coat and a huge Kofia which were lying on the unmade bed. He left the lantern burning, so that his father would see it and think he was in. John bit his lower lip spitefully. He hated himself for being so girlish. It was unnatural for a boy of his age.

Like a shadow, he stealthily crossed the courtyard and went on to the village street.

He met young men and women lining the streets. They were laughing, talking, whispering. They were obviously enjoying themselves. John thought, they are more free than I am. He envied their exuberance. They clearly stood outside or above the strict morality that the educated ones had to be judged by. Would he have gladly changed places with them? He wondered. At last, he came to the hut. It stood at the very heart of the village. How well he knew it - to his sorrow. He wondered what he

should do! Wait for her outside? What if her mother came out instead? He decided to enter.

'Hodi!'

'Enter. We are in.'

John pulled down his hat before he entered. Indeed they were all there – all except she whom he wanted. The fire in the hearth was dying. Only a small flame from a lighted lantern vaguely illuminated the whole hut. The flame and the giant shadow created on the wall seemed to be mocking him. He prayed that Wamuhu's parents would not recognize him. He tried to be 'thin', and to disguise his voice as he greeted them. They recognized him and made themselves busy on his account. To be visited by such an educated one, who knew all about the whiteman's world and knowledge and who would now go to another land beyond, was not such a frequent occurrence that it could be taken lightly. Who knew but he might be interested in their daughter? Stranger things had happened. After all, learning was not the only thing. Though Wamuhu had no learning, yet she had charms and could be trusted to captivate any young man's heart with her looks and smiles.

'You will sit down. Take that stool.'

'No!' He noticed with bitterness that he did not call her 'Mother'.

'Where is Wamuhu?'

The mother threw a triumphant glance at her husband. They exchanged a knowing look. John bit his lip again and felt like bolting. He controlled himself with difficulty.

'She has gone out to get some tea leaves. Please sit down. She will cook you some tea when she comes.'

'I am afraid . . .' he muttered some inaudible words and went out. He almost collided with Wamuhu.

In the hut: 'Didn't I tell you? Trust a woman's eye!'

'You don't know these young men.'

'But you see John is different. Everyone speaks well of him and he is a clergyman's son.'



'Y-e-e-s! A clergyman's son! You forget your daughter is circumcised.' The old man was remembering his own day. He had found for himself a good virtuous woman, initiated in all the tribe's ways. And she had known no other man. He had married her. They were happy. Other men of his Rika had done the same. All the girls had been virgins, it being a taboo to touch a girl in that way, even if you slept in the same bed, as indeed so many young men and girls did. Then the white men had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways, which all men followed. The tribe's code of behaviour was broken. The new faith could not keep the tribe together. How could it? The men who followed the new faith would not let the girls be circumcised. And they would not let their sons marry circumcised girls. Puu! Look at what was happening. Their young men went away to the land of the whitemen. What did they bring? White women. Black women who spoke English. Aaa - bad. And the young men who were left just did not mind. They made unmarried girls their wives and then left them with fatherless children.

'What does it matter?' his wife was replying. 'Is Wamuhu not as good as the best of them? Anyway, John is different.'

'Different! Different! Puu! They are all alike. Those coated with the white clay of the whiteman's ways are the worst. They have nothing inside. Nothing - nothing here.' He took a piece of wood and nervously poked the dying fire. A strange numbness came over him. He trembled. And he feared; he feared for the tribe. For now he saw it was not only the educated men who were coated with strange ways, but the whole tribe. The old man trembled and cried inside mourning for a tribe that had crumbled. The tribe had nowhere to go to. And it could not be what it was before. He stopped poking and looked hard at the ground.

'I wonder why he came. I wonder.' Then he looked at his wife and said, 'Have you seen strange behaviour with your daughter?'

His wife did not answer. She was preoccupied with her own great hopes.

John and Wamuhu walked on in silence. The intricate streets

and turns were well known to them both. Wamuhu walked with quick light steps; John knew she was in a happy mood. His steps were heavy and he avoided people, even though it was dark. But why should he feel ashamed? The girl was beautiful, probably the most beautiful girl in the whole of Limuru. Yet he feared being seen with her. It was all wrong. He knew that he could have loved her; even then he wondered if he did not love her. Perhaps it was hard to tell but, had he been one of the young men he had met, he would not have hesitated in his answer.

Outside the village he stopped. She, too, stopped. Neither had spoken a word all through. Perhaps the silence spoke louder than words. Both of them were only too conscious of each other.

'Do they know?' Silence. Wamuhu was probably considering the question. 'Don't keep me waiting. Please answer me,' he implored. He felt weary, very weary, like an old man who had suddenly reached his journey's end.

'No. You told me to give you one more week. A week is over today.'

'Yes. That's why I came!' John whispered hoarsely.

Wamuhu did not speak. John looked at her. Darkness was now between them. He was not really seeing her; before him was the image of his father – haughtily religious and dominating. Again he thought: I, John, a priest's son, respected by all and going to college, will fall, fall to the ground. He did not want to contemplate the fall.

'It was your fault.' He found himself accusing her. In his heart he knew he was lying.

'Why do you keep on telling me that? Don't you want to marry me?'

John sighed. He did not know what to do. He remembered a story his mother used to tell him. *Once upon a time there was a young girl . . . she had no home to go to and she could not go forward to the beautiful land and see all the good things because the Irimu was on the way . . .*

'When will you tell them?'

'Tonight.'

He felt desperate. Next week he would go to the college. If he could persuade her to wait, he might be able to get away and come back when the storm and consternation had abated. But then the government might withdraw his bursary. He was frightened and there was a sad note of appeal as he turned to her and said, 'Look, Wamuhu, how long have you been pre- . . . I mean, like this?'

'I have told you over and over again, I have been pregnant for three months and mother is being suspicious. Only yesterday she said I breathed like a woman with a child.'

'Do you think you could wait for three weeks more?'

She laughed. Ah! the little witch! She knew his trick. Her laughter always aroused many emotions in him.

'All right,' he said. 'Give me just tomorrow. I'll think up something. Tomorrow I'll let you know.'

'I agree. Tomorrow. I cannot wait any more unless you mean to marry me.'

Why not marry her? She is beautiful! Why not marry? Do I love her or don't I?

She left. John felt as if she was deliberately blackmailing him. His knees were weak and lost strength. He could not move but sank on the ground in a heap. Sweat poured profusely down his cheeks, as if he had been running hard under a strong sun. But this was cold sweat. He lay on the grass; he did not want to think. Oh, no! He could not possibly face his father. Or his mother. Or Reverend Carstone who had had such faith in him. John realized that, though he was educated, he was no more secure than anybody else. He was no better than Wamuhu. Then why don't you marry her? He did not know. John had grown up under a Calvinistic father and learnt under a Calvinistic headmaster - a missionary! John tried to pray. But to whom was he praying? To Carstone's God? It sounded false. It was as if he was blaspheming. Could he pray to the God of the tribe? His sense of guilt crushed him.

He woke up. Where was he? Then he understood. Wamuhu had left him. She had given him one day. He stood up; he felt good. Weakly, he began to walk back home. It was lucky that darkness blanketed the whole earth and him in it. From the various huts, he could hear laughter, heated talks or quarrels. Little fires could be seen flickering red through the open doors. Village stars, John thought. He raised up his eyes. The heavenly stars, cold and distant, looked down on him impersonally. Here and there, groups of boys and girls could be heard laughing and shouting. For them life seemed to go on as usual. John consoled himself by thinking that they, too, would come to face their day of trial.

John was shaky. Why! Why could he not defy all expectations, all prospects of a future, and marry the girl? No. No. It was impossible. She was circumcised and he knew that his father and the church would never consent to such a marriage. She had no learning – or rather she had not gone beyond standard four. Marrying her would probably ruin his chances of ever going to a university.

He tried to move briskly. His strength had returned. His imagination and thought took flight. He was trying to explain his action before an accusing world – he had done so many times before, ever since he knew of this. He still wondered what he could have done. The girl had attracted him. She was graceful and her smile had been very bewitching. There was none who could equal her and no girl in the village had any pretence to any higher standard of education. Women's education was very low. Perhaps that was why so many Africans went 'away' and came back married. He too wished he had gone with the others, especially in the last giant student airlift to America. If only Wamuhu had learning . . . and she was uncircumcised . . . then he might probably rebel.

The light still shone in his mother's hut. John wondered if he should go in for the night prayers. But he thought against it; he might not be strong enough to face his parents. In his hut the

light had gone out. He hoped his father had not noticed it.

John woke up early. He was frightened. He was normally not superstitious, but still he did not like the dreams of the night. He dreamt of circumcision; he had just been initiated in the tribal manner. Somebody – he could not tell his face, came and led him because he took pity on him. They went, went into a strange land. Somehow, he found himself alone. The somebody had vanished. A ghost came. He recognized it as the ghost of the home he had left. It pulled him back; then another ghost came. It was the ghost of the land he had come to. It pulled him forward. The two contested. Then came other ghosts from all sides and pulled him from all sides so that his body began to fall into pieces. And the ghosts were insubstantial. He could not cling to any. Only they were pulling him and he was becoming nothing, nothing . . . he was now standing a distance away. It had not been him. But he was looking at the girl, the girl in the story. She had nowhere to go. He thought he would go to help her; he would show her the way. But as he went to her, he lost his way . . . he was all alone . . . something destructive was coming towards him, coming, coming . . . He woke up. He was sweating all over.

Dreams about circumcision were no good. They portended death. He dismissed the dream with a laugh. He opened the window only to find the whole country clouded in mist. It was perfect July weather in Limuru. The hills, ridges, valleys and plains that surrounded the village were lost in the mist. It looked such a strange place. But there was almost a magic fascination in it. Limuru was a land of contrasts and evoked differing emotions at different times. Once John would be fascinated and would yearn to touch the land, embrace it or just be on the grass. At another time he would feel repelled by the dust, the strong sun and the pot-holed roads. If only his struggle were just against the dust, the mist, the sun and the rain, he might feel content. Content to live here. At least he thought he would never like to die and be buried anywhere else but at Limuru. But there was the

human element whose vices and betrayal of other men were embodied in the new ugly villages. The last night's incident rushed into his mind like a flood, making him weak again. He got out of his blankets and went out. Today he would go to the shops. He was uneasy. An odd feeling was coming to him – in fact had been coming – that his relationship with his father was perhaps unnatural. But he dismissed the thought. Tonight would be the day of reckoning. He shuddered to think of it. It was unfortunate that this scar had come into his life at this time, when he was going to Makerere and it would have brought him closer to his father.

They went to the shops. All day long, John remained quiet as they moved from shop to shop buying things from the lanky but wistful Indian traders. And all day long, John wondered why he feared his father so much. He had grown up fearing him, trembling whenever he spoke or gave commands. John was not alone in this.

Stanley was feared by all.

He preached with great vigour, defying the very gates of hell. Even during the Emergency, he had gone on preaching, scolding, judging and condemning. All those who were not saved were destined for hell. Above all, Stanley was known for his great and strict moral observances – a bit too strict, rather pharisaical in nature. None noticed this; certainly not the sheep he shepherded. If an elder broke any of the rules, he was liable to be expelled, or excommunicated. Young men and women, seen standing together 'in a manner prejudicial to church and God's morality' (they were one anyway) were liable to be excommunicated. And so, many young men tried to serve two masters by seeing their girls at night and going to church by day. The alternative was to give up church-going altogether.

Stanley took a fatherly attitude to all the people in the village. You must be strict with what is yours. And because of all this he wanted his house to be a good example of this to all. That is why he wanted his son to grow upright. But motives behind many

human actions may be mixed. He could never forget that he had also fallen before his marriage. Stanley was also a product of the disintegration of the tribe due to the new influences.

The shopping did not take long. His father strictly observed the silences between them and neither by word nor by hint did he refer to last night. They reached home and John was thinking that all was well when his father called him.

'John.'

'Yes, Father.'

'Why did you not come for prayers last night?'

'I forgot . . .'

'Where were you?'

Why do you ask me? What right have you to know where I was? One day I am going to revolt against you. But, immediately, John knew that this act of rebellion was something beyond him – unless something happened to push him into it. It needed someone with something he lacked.

'I – I – I mean, I was . . .'

'You should not sleep so early before prayers. Remember to turn up tonight.'

'I will.'

Something in the boy's voice made the father look up. John went away relieved. All was still well.

Evening came. John dressed like the night before and walked with faltering steps towards the fatal place. The night of reckoning had come. And he had not thought of anything. After this night all would know. Even Reverend Carstone would hear of it. He remembered Reverend Carstone and the last words of blessing he had spoken to him. No! he did not want to remember. It was no good remembering these things; and yet the words came. They were clearly written in the air, or in the darkness of his mind. 'You are going into the world. The world is waiting even like a hungry lion, to swallow you, to devour you. Therefore, beware of the world. Jesus said, Hold fast unto . . .'

John felt a pain – a pain that wriggled through his flesh as he remem-

bered these words. He contemplated the coming fall. Yes! He, John, would fall from the Gates of Heaven down through the open waiting Gates of Hell. Ah! He could see it all, and all that people would say. All would shun his company, all would give him oblique looks that told so much. The trouble with John was that his imagination magnified the fall from the heights of 'goodness' out of all proportion. And fear of people and consequences ranked high in the things that made him contemplate the fall with so much horror.

John devised all sorts of punishment for himself. And when it came to thinking of a way out, only fantastic and impossible ways of escape came into his head. He simply could not make up his mind. And because he could not, and because he feared Father and people and did not know his true attitude to the girl, he came to the agreed spot having nothing to tell her. Whatever he did looked fatal to him. Then suddenly he said:

'Look, Wamuhu. Let me give you money. You might then say that someone else was responsible. Lots of girls have done this. Then that man may marry you. For me, it is impossible. You know that.'

'No. I cannot do that. How can you, you . . .'

'I will give you two hundred shillings.'

'No!'

'Three hundred.'

'No!' She was almost crying. It pained her to see him so.

'Four hundred, five hundred, six hundred.' John had begun calmly but now his voice was running high. He was excited. He was becoming more desperate. Did he know what he was talking about? He spoke quickly, breathlessly, as if he was in a hurry. The figure was rapidly rising - nine thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand . . . He is mad. He is foaming. He is quickly moving towards the girl in the dark. He has lain his hands on her shoulders and is madly imploring her in a hoarse voice. Deep inside him, something horrid that assumes the threatening anger of his father and the village seems to be pushing him. He is



violently shaking Wamuhu, while his mind tells him that he is patting her gently. Yes, he is out of his mind. The figure has now reached fifty thousand shillings and is increasing. Wamuhu is afraid. She extricates herself from him, the mad, educated son of a religious clergyman, and runs. He runs after her and holds her, calling her by all sorts of endearing words. But he is shaking her, shake, shake, her, her – he tries to hug her by the neck, presses. . . . She lets out one horrible scream and then falls on the ground. And so all of a sudden, the struggle is over, the figures stop, and John stands there trembling like the leaf of a tree on a windy day.

Soon everyone will know that he has created and then killed.