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Abstract

For a long moment, Mika sat awkwardly, without his usual self assurance, despite the alcohol singing in his veins. But suddenly feeling a fool for his unease, he cleared his throat, a trifle too loudly, and ventured: 'What's your name?'

6. Pol Ndu, *Songs for Seers* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1974), p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. Ossie Onuora Enekwe, *Broken Pots* (Greenfield Review Press, 1977), p. 1. All other quotations are from this volume.
9. 'An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu', *Okike*, 20 Dec. 1981, p. 66.
10. Obiora Udechukwu, *What the Madman Said*, ms. All other quotations are from this manuscript.
11. Chinweizu, *Energy Crisis and Other Poems* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1978), p. 53.
12. Odiá Ofeimun, *The Poet Lied* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 26.
13. Niyi Osundare, *Songs of the Marketplace* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1983).
14. Niyi Osundare, *Village Voices* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers (Nigeria) Limited, 1984).
15. Niyi Osundare, *Songs of the Marketplace*, pp. 3-4.
16. Kemi-Atanda Ilori, *Voices of the Hurricane* (Ile-Ife: Ife Monographs on Literature and Criticism, n.d.).
17. Femi Fatoba, *Petals of Thought* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984).
18. Harry Garuba, *Shadow and Dream* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1982), p. 50.
19. Idi Bukar, *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* (Zaria: Rag Press, 1984), Blurb. All other quotations are from this volume.
20. Catherine Acholonu has published in several journals including *Afa*, which she edits, and *Okike*.

TOLOLWA MARTI MOLLEL

A Night Out

For a long moment, Mika sat awkwardly, without his usual self-assurance, despite the alcohol singing in his veins. But suddenly feeling a fool for his unease, he cleared his throat, a trifle too loudly, and ventured: 'What's your name?'

'Mama Tumaini.' (Mother of Tumaini)

She did not lift her eyes but went on busying herself with putting the child to sleep on the mat on the floor; quite unexpectedly, the child began to cough, a violent, racking outburst that threw his little body into spasms.

Mika leaned forward and felt the child. His brow was damp and hot with fever. 'Has he had treatment?' he asked, relieved to find something neutral to say.

She replied, 'There isn't an aspirin to be had at the dispensary.'

Under the mother's soothing, the child Tumaini eventually lay still, asleep, his breath rasping in and out. Mama Tumaini wrapped herself in a *khanga*, then lit a mosquito coil. Smoke rose in a spiral, spreading over to the mat. The child stirred and sneezed. The mother, squatting, gently patted him to sleep.

'God grant you health, my little one,' she murmured, 'God grant you health and strength, good little mama's soldier!'

'Why soldier...?' Mika asked, rather pointlessly.

'Yes, soldiers don't starve, or get sick.' She spoke with such toneless simplicity, it could have been a child talking.

'Yes, they don't starve,' Mika said, 'they get killed!'

'Better to die than this nameless misery of ours,' she shot back. 'Better a quick clean bullet in the head than this slow dying and burning from hunger and disease!'

'Oh, soldiers starve too, you know, when there is nothing to eat...'
Mika said hardheartedly.

But she was sunk deep in her thoughts, she might not have heard. Then, as if to herself, alone in the room, she said, 'Tumaini's father was a soldier...'

'Was...?' went Mika.

'...a real bull of a man he was, with none to equal him. Life was easier then, with him around. He was like a father to me, to my mother, to all of us. He looked after us. Now living has become such a task. You have to struggle for each small thing. Everything, everything, you have to pay for in blood, if you can find it! If Tumaini's father were around still...' She seemed almost on the point of bursting into tears, but she didn't.

'Why, is he dead?' Mika asked, but purely out of curiosity, his voice too loud and untouched by the woman's dull sorrow.

'I don't want to talk, don't ask me, please...', she pleaded, then she began to cry and said through her tears, 'He went off to Uganda, to war, he might be alive, he might be dead...'

Mika said nothing. The child Tumaini was still again, his mother's hand on him, still patting, absently. At last Mama Tumaini straightened up and turned off the small tin lamp in the room. In the dark she submitted herself, silently, dutifully, and professionally. But afterwards when Mika rolled his body off her, there wasn't the usual feeling of having conquered; though fully sated, he lay back less than happy,

vaguely unsettled, the laboured breathing from the mat adding to his sense of deflation.

He did not know when he finally fell asleep and woke up with the panic of one who does not know where he is; it was not until he felt Mama Tumaini's body by his side that he remembered where he was.

He got out of bed and lit a cigarette. The coil had burnt out and mosquitos buzzed angrily. He sat frowning in the dark, something troubling him though he didn't know what. Suddenly he was aware of the silence in the room.

Mouth dry and head faintly throbbing, he got up putting out his cigarette, and went to the mat. There was no sound from the child and in the darkness he could only make out a mute, still haze, but he dared not strike a match to light the lamp. He put his hand out towards the child, and his eyes, gradually used to the dark, gazed down fascinated at the little body, lifeless and cold to his touch, its form now becoming distinct under the first stabs of dawnlight.

Mama Tumaini stirred, mumbled something, then went back to sleep. Mika waited until her breathing grew deep and even again before he sat back on the bed, gingerly, and lit another cigarette, his mind busy.

Then, moving softly, he picked up his clothes from the floor where he had dumped them in a drunken pile. Dressed, he paused awhile, his eyes involuntarily seeking the child's body. No, he must leave immediately, he urged himself. It wouldn't do to get caught in the mourning and the funeral ceremonies. There was no point and it would delay him further. And anyway, he found himself thinking, what was the child to him, or the mother for that matter? Mechanically, he took out his wallet, peeled off several notes, and with no attempt to make out the amount, placed the money on a stool by the bed, and set the lamp on it as a weight.

The door squeaked as he unbolted it. He paused, his heart pounding, his ear strained towards the bed.

Mama Tumaini stirred. 'You're going already?' she asked him.

'Yes,' he answered.

'This early?'

'You know that transport is a problem, and I have to travel today.'

Come what may, he just had to get out today, and try and make it to Dar es Salaam by nightfall. For two days now he had been stuck in this dreary little town, because a petrol shortage had crippled transportation and inundated the small town with stranded travellers. It was to get away from the sweating hordes hopelessly milling all over the town in search of transport, that on the previous day he had decided on an evening of entertainment and action. Drink had appealed to him as just the antidote

he needed for his despondency. But the search for beer, which he preferred, was doomed from the start. There had been no beer in town, he was told at the first bar he stopped in, since the day the beer truck went crashing over a bridge leading into town. The truck was still there, a useless wreck of scrap metal. Mika did not want to believe this although he suspected it was probably the truth. He would have given his little finger for a drop of beer, and he went all over town, which didn't take long as there was little of it besides the bus stop. A couple of depressing, dusty, narrow lanes made up the backbone of the town and beyond that was only a patchwork of slums. But he had no luck whatever in his search and had to make do with the local *pombe* which was in abundance. He had little stomach for local stuff but even though he imbibed it slowly and grudgingly, gradually the booze took hold and he felt some of his despair lift. He even felt cheerful enough to join a group of local drinkers at a nearby table. But just as the evening seemed to be taking off, he suddenly found himself abandoned, his fellow drinkers having left for other bars or their homes. He had left too, and gone stumbling through the night. He would never remember how he ended up in Mama Tumaini's place, or why he decided he could not spend the night alone in his bed in the room he had rented at the lodging house. Funny, he thought aimlessly, paying for a room then sleeping elsewhere; wasteful, he concluded grimly.

Mama Tumaini was talking. 'Even so,' she said, 'won't you wait for me to make you a cup of tea at least, to start you off?' That was the last thing he wanted, her getting up and finding out about the baby. He had to get away first.

'No, no,' he said quickly, 'my things are at the lodging house, I have to get ready. I'll eat somewhere.'

'Suit yourself,' she said, turning over. Then faintly, almost inaudibly, as if it was an afterthought, she wished him a safe journey.

He thanked her, then limply, guiltily he mumbled, 'Your money... I've put the money... your money... on the stool.' But she might have gone back to sleep or she might have had enough of him, as she made no response.

Mika opened the door walked away in quick, tense steps, as light broke out over the rooftops and wisps of smoke from the early morning cooking lazed over the slums, announcing the start of another day.