

THE STONE HILLS OF MARAGOLI

By

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE trip to Kakamega town was going to be exciting for the whole family, and he was secretly thrilled, partly by the inane mindlessness of the whole thing. Here they were, about to squander a chunk of their hard-earned savings on pleasurable things-he hadn't quite revealed to Sayo exactly how much he projected, knowing full well she would hit the roof. This one day's indulgence would mean their dream of putting up a decent house slipping back into indefinite oblivion. Well, that was quite a setback, he was honest enough with himself to admit, but then, he also just didn't care. Sometimes in life one needed to let go and just live, he comforted himself, at that moment feeling like a boulder that was rolling downhill, feathery with that benign, oft delusive, self-bolsterism that inundates a hapless pauper.

It was still early and the market-town of Chavakali hadn't roused. They stood by themselves waiting at the deserted bus stage, save for a handful of sleepy touts who were perched atop someone's upturned handcart in a little gang sharing a cigarette, along with it the miseries wrought by the early-morning chill that only a small-town matatu tout understands. There was also the madman, Ababu, a permanent fixture to the market place night and day, curled up in a bunch of greasy old rags on a shop verandah, fast asleep in between the many stray mongrels of the town which usually guarded him. A fat nanny goat, belly hanging with the perpetual pregnancy that she never relieved herself of, was busy scavenging for edibles in a heap of garbage the townspeople had put out in the night for the garbageman to collect. The old garbageman, leaning on his long broom made from viraji shrubs, laboured his way slowly up the street. Other than these, everything else was still asleep.

Ombima stood beside his family, head held high with pride. Everyone had come out in their best dress; Aradi's plastic shoes, bought in Mbale just the other day to make up for his old pair, were as bright as a bundle of path side leaves would ever get them. His

wife's were slightly worn at the unaccustomed raised heel, pointed at the front with the old leather stiff and cracked. She had spent most of the previous afternoon polishing the huge chrome buckles on them, and now they shone as if the shoes were denying the twelve years-old that they were. Saliku on her part was like a bright flower that stood out from the rest of them in her bright print dress with puffed sleeves. She now looked at her domineering elder brother following her good performance in school with barely disguised pride.

The family had to contend with the chill of the morning for a while before a matatu came along. It turned out to be an old contraption that belched black diesel fumes like an old man on his last stretch of a long and tortuous life. It rattled into the bus-stage with much needless cacophony, wheezy horn twittering like a tubercular. It was as if the driver was at liberty to make such loud noise this early in the day, before the arrival of the flashier manyanga minibuses, when his old heap would have to get off the road.

With it's arrival, the horde of touts who had been sharing a cigarette sprang to life. There were two passengers already in the matatu; an old man who seemed asleep on his walking-stick which was planted firmly between his knees, and a pretty girl sitting opposite who might have been the old man's grand-daughter, but for her sophisticated dress and coiffure which surely couldn't have spent the previous night underneath the same roof as the old man.

Ombima and his family settled themselves on the narrow benches that served as seats and waited for the matatu to fill up. They hardly talked, all of them pensive with apprehension now that the trip had actually begun. Ombima sat Saliku on his lap, knowing the touts would eventually ask him to do so in order to make room for another passenger on the narrow bench. The little girl rested stiffly against him, looking out of the grease-splotted glass window at the familiar market-town, her anxiety given away by her strained breathing. And there was reason too for her anxiety, for this was her first ride in a motor car.

Presently, a handful of other passengers trickled to the bus-stage. The touts aptly shepherded them into the matatu, reminding them they might be in for a long wait if it was the bus they wanted. The driver, tiring of firing the engine and honking, got out and banged the door, calling to one of the touts to push a rock underneath the front wheel to

keep the car from rolling away since he had left the engine running. Perhaps he was upset because the vehicle wasn't filling up fast enough. He ambled away to relieve himself on the garbage heap on which the she-goat had been foraging, a disconsolate whistled tune on his lips. Afterwards, he lit a cigarette and stood surveying his vehicle, maybe puzzled by the amazing manner in which it hung onto the front suspension. They had to wait for him to finish his smoke. And then he hurled the glowing butt onto the garbage heap, spat on the ground and jumped into the vehicle. He gunned the croaking engine repeatedly before he leaned out the window and threw a couple of shillings on the tarmac for the touts to fight over. They crawled out of the stage with an engaging jolt, dousing the touts in black fumes as they ran after the matatu, shouting insults at the driver for cheating them first thing in the morning.

It was fascinating country that rolled alongside the road that they had taken; deep endless valleys painted in a fine carpet of green that merged with the straggling little hills sprawled languidly on the periphery, their invisible tops shrouded in curls of grey mist. There were trees, tall as pillars out of the gently folding earth, rising out of the overgrown marshes on which perched scrawny black birds watching the speeding vehicle with sleepy insouciant eyes, knowing full well the heap of rattly metal could not harm them. And from the little huts dotting the hillsides, one by one emerged the people who dwelled in this country; squat, dark and hasteless, leading out their cows or chickens for yet another day.

Close to the big town they were headed to they saw a group of young men on a roadside farm urging on a team of oxen yoked to a plough, their rawhide whip snaking through the air with an explosive twap against the shiny coats of the muscled oxen as they churned the earth a steaming rich red in readiness for the seed of the coming season.

There was more traffic on the road as they slowly approached the town. Battered farm trucks transporting loads of produce to the local municipal market competed side by side with the sleek saloon cars that took the office people to work. In between these wove the loathsome handcarts, cutting at tight angles into the road as if they had right of way, and yet they couldn't pick up speed enough to keep up with the flow.

The townspeople walked along the paved streets, looking like people from another world in their immaculate dress and delicate poise of movement. Mingling with these were the

conspicuous in-assimilable country folk who had trekked from far to come and do whatever business it was brought them to the town, their bare cracked heels covered in the fine red dust of the country.

Elegant flat-roofed buildings dominated, their wide glass windows reflecting like huge mirrors set in the plastered walls. They stood among the trees, competing for height like a new civilisation; a far cry from the rusted zinc-roofed shops of Chavakali. There were no crows perched on sagging power lines and no buzzards circling lazily above the town slaughterhouse. Neither were there flat-headed lizards crawling up cracked sun-dappled walls, nor goats fattened on banana peels lying with their kids in the shade of huge gum trees in the market-place. Here, all was clean and orderly, even a little cold.

Ombima herded his family along a wide paved road that led to the showground, feeling a measure of pride as he walked amid the townspeople who crowded the sidewalk. He asked everyone to link hands as they made their way in the swirl. There were many people and it was noisy, with everyone shouting for right-of-way. The wide road along which they walked was packed, the honking of impatient motorists mingling with the piercing ringing of the fidgety bodaboda bicycle riders who ferried people to and from the market square for a fee. One would assume the milling crowds were all destined for the show-ground. It was almost impossible to detach themselves from the solid column in the event they were being led the wrong way.

Ombima's big fear was that he would lose the children in the crowd, and he expressed this to Sayo. Then, he knew, they wouldn't be found but for a stroke of luck. As for the children, they were speechless with awe at all that they were seeing, hardly conscious of the direction they were taking in the spinning traffic. Not even Aradi, for all his bravado, had anything to say out here, miles away from the familiar valleys and hills of home.

Ombima hoped they were going in the right direction. He had been to the town that time long ago when he had sought a national identification card in the Government Registry Office; and then that other occasion when he had accompanied his father and another old man to see about papers concerning legal ownership of their parcel of land back in the village. On both occasions, he had made as much time as he could to walk around. Even then, his exploring had still been limited to whatever time he had before dusk when he

had to find his way back to the bus park. From these two trips, he had a general idea of what the town layout was.

As for Sayo, he didn't know exactly how much she knew, even though she claimed she had often passed by here as a child on her way to the settlement schemes in Lugari where she had relations. All the same, whatever she still recalled didn't seem much, judging from the rather baffled expression on her face every time they went round a bend; like someone who was seeing something for the first time.

Luckily, the place didn't need to advertise itself. And, indeed, like the announcement over the radio had said, there were many people on this second day following the official opening. Most of the people in the streaming crowds were headed there too.

In front of them, rising twelve feet above ground, was a perimeter wall that shielded the grounds so no-one could see what went on behind. From the other side of the wall emerged the electrifying sound of a brass band playing, a rolling panim-pam-pam of a hundred drumsticks on tight-stretched skins that made one want to scale the walls and join in the fun.

The entry was through narrow passages in the walls, past a revolving turnstile that let in only one person at a time, and which was manned by a posse of guards. There was just no way to get in, unless one queued for a ticket at a tiny grilled window beside.

It was another world inside the perimeter walls; a world miles away from the noisy hustle and bustle of the town. There were many people everywhere one looked, all neatly dressed and jolly of face. Only they weren't elbowing and shoving like those on the streets outside. There were many colourfully decorated stands which the exhibitors had put up on straight flower-lined avenues to which people streamed to see what was displayed. Some exhibited tractors as well as other complicated farm machinery, and others the processed products that came from the farm. There was a stand where cabbages were growing as big as pumpkins, the leaves a healthy green, and another where grade cows as big as two of those in the village put together were on display. Aradi and Saliku wanted to see them all. They were so excited they could hardly keep still.

"Let's go and see what that man over there is doing, Father, please" pleaded Saliku. The object of all the attraction close to where they were standing was a snake-charmer who was busy with his act. Just when they got there, he was in the process of inserting the

head of a shiny black serpent coiled like a rope about his shoulders into his wide open mouth. Sayo recoiled from the scene, horrified. No wonder a hush had fallen over the little crowd of spectators.

There was a stand close by in which a leopard and a lion were kept in cages, besides other scary animals of the wild. The two cats gazed through the mesh wire at the hollow-eyed show-goers with eyes laced with ire, pacing their tiny cages with barely contained restlessness, as if they were not too amused at their confinement.

"Can't they tear through the wire?" Aradi wanted to know, getting as close as he dared, greatly captivated by their close realness, so different from the pictures in books.

"They can if you get close enough and they feel you can make a juicy meal," warned Ombima.

Just at that moment some daring boy ventured close to the cage and touched the grills, whereupon the glaring lion uttered an angry growl. It was so deep and spine-chilling it sent everyone scampering in all directions. The cage-keeper ran after the boy who had irritated the lion, threatening to whip him.

By midday, it was quite hot and dusty. Ombima took his family to the arena where a series of shows were in progress. They sat in the shaded stands and bought cold sodas from a passing vendor at double what they usually sold for in the dukas in Chavakali. A tiny cream-coated cake for each one of them was even dearer. It didn't matter, though. What they were seeing more than compensated for their extravagance.

It was cool in the shade of the covered terraces after the hot sun of the open. Sayo rested her head on Ombima's shoulder, closing her eyes when a slight, albeit dry wind blew across the terraces. The children were playing a little distance away with three other children they had made friends with only the way kids at a big gathering do.

"We are spending all our money, Ombima," she said, rather dreamily. She had kicked off her shoes which were a trifle tight judging from the corns of pale skin that had formed on her little toes. She was idly wriggling the toes, more the way she used to during those evenings long ago when they met on a flat well-side rock in her maiden village on their first date. Her eyes, closed like that, reminded him of a timid young girl who was afraid of snakes and centipedes, and who dreamt of a romantic distant place where the sun never quite set, and where the nights were starry and warm; where she ate lots vusangula

berries just before she went to bed; a shy young girl who had never been alone with a boy before.

"What does it matter, Sayo?" he said, pulling at his soda straw. "We didn't steal it in any case, did we?"

She looked at him, then directed her gaze far across the stadium and shrugged. "True, we didn't."

They were sitting in the topmost terrace and so he could safely slip his arm around her waist. There were many other town women seated on the terraces with their families making Ombima realise that Sayo's dress was certainly not the most fashionable. Earlier in the day as they had left home he had thought she would pass for the most immaculately-dressed lady of the occasion in her outfit.

He looked at her face, burned by the sun of the open fields over the years, but still remarkably smooth and blemish-free save for a few wrinkly lines that were just starting to show around the eyes from her endless worrying. Her beet-root lips which had just a moment back been scaly and cracked from the anxiety that country people experience when they come to a big town, were now softened by the soda. Her sensitive nostrils dilated slightly as she breathed in the cool wind blowing over the terraces from the direction of the trees beyond the stands.

An impulsive urge suddenly came over him, watching her sleepy face resting on his shoulder, and he called out her name. She muttered a reply on her half-open lips without stirring, eye-lids drawn half over her eyes in her light snooze.

"You know I love you?" he said thickly, an affectionate tightness at the back of his throat. She raised her eyelids an inch and looked sideways at him, assessing the look on his face as if for honesty. Then a weak smile played on her lips and she whispered, "In front of all these people, you mean?"

"No, not in that way, silly!" He slapped her cheek playfully.

She laughed softly, her teeth glittering in the afternoon sunshine. "I'm not quite sure," she mumbled in the same sleepy tone, still not opening her eyes fully.

"Well, you had better believe it," he said, reaching out to caress her chin. "Because it is true." He looked at the faint scar beneath the hairline which she had once told him came from a childhood accident out cultivating the fields side by side with her elder sister. It

was significant because he had a scar on his face too; a tiny shallow pock above his left cheekbone just underneath the eye which he had sustained similarly in his childhood.

Perhaps their two scars bore some deeper meaning, he thought.

"I truly love you, Sayo."

She didn't say anything for a while. And then she sighed and turning to face him, buried her face in the hollow on his shoulder and roped her arms in her lap over the black leather purse she carried and which he couldn't remember when it was it had come into her possession. She liked to pose that way whenever she suspected he was pulling her leg.

"It is true too, Sayo," he whispered into her hair, tightening his hold about her slender waist. "Please say you believe me." He did not know why he had gotten so sentimental all of a sudden. He was looking at her intensely, waiting for her answer.

A couple of youth who were eating ice cream close by were looking at them with interest, probably wondering whether the way they were holding each other wasn't rather old-fashioned. Realising they had a keen audience, Ombima quickly withdrew his arm from her waist and looked towards where the children were playing.

There was a parachute display by the Kenya Army about to commence in the arena and crowds of showgoers surged in to watch. On the public address system the announcer sounded hilarious with excitement. Ombima took Sayo's hand and led her down to the lower terraces, hurrying after the children who had rushed to the edge of the arena with the mounting excitement.

There were belly-filling roars as the large, camouflaged, military helicopters passed over the arena and, one by one, the battle-drilled paratroopers dropped out of the sky. Poised up there against the clear blue sky they looked momentarily like tiny black ants the huge winged insects had defecated, just before their many coloured parachutes unfurled and they jerked upwards, drifting slowly down to earth with their long limbs sticking out like those of a weightless flying insect.

The crowd of spectators cheered and clapped every time the showmen hit the ground and rolled, sprinting to the sidelines as they pulled in their chutes.

After the show, some officials took the dais to offer a lengthy speech in praise of the fine showmanship displayed by the daring soldiers. The children promptly lost interest as, one

by one, they sauntered off towards the green-and-white striped marquees, where the sassy music of the band enticed.

There was just enough left to buy the children the ice-cream they were clamouring for and pay for a carousel ride inside one of the tents. And then Ombima realised that he was left with barely what would pay for their fares back home.

The early evening sun had softened and the shadows lengthened on the ground when the sweep of the swirling crowds changed course and, in little groups, the showgoers started leaving for home.

"Let's go now, before we miss our matatu home," Sayo said, drawing her shawl closer about her bare arms because a chill had suddenly crept into the air, blowing from the direction of the forest. The many events of the day had left a calm, over-indulged expression upon her face which, though inscrutable, certainly wasn't unimpressed. She had clearly enjoyed herself, regardless of the misgivings she had earlier on.

For the children, their wind-blown faces were expressive of their weariness, sleepy eyes glazed with the effect of too much excitement crammed within a short spell of time. They looked like they could drop off to sleep right there on their weary feet.

Ombima hoisted the girl onto his shoulders and they slowly made their way towards the town bus park, sandwiched between crowds that reeked of sweat and tiredness, everyone anxious to get home. They were just in time for the last matatu for Chavakali and they squeezed in, trying to fit in the cramped space left inside the cab as best they could. Right then, it didn't matter if they were trussed up like chickens. All they wanted was to get home to bed. And as a shroud of darkness slowly descended on the endless populous town, the town lights slowly blinked on all around.