

BOOM BOOM

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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*For the warriors who have fallen
and those who are still fighting.*

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1

Life Is Beautiful

When I was born, my mum said that I didn't cry for five long weeks. All I did was squint and rub my tiny hands together as though praying. The nurses spanked my bare bottom, but I didn't make a sound.

They pricked my tiny foot, and all I did was wiggle it. No matter what they did, I didn't cry.

My mum said she and my dad were worried at first but stopped worrying because as the days passed, instead of crying, I smiled and yawned a lot. She also said that when everyone was fast asleep at night, I would burst out laughing loudly. When she woke up, she would see me staring at the ceiling as though someone hanging there was making funny faces at me; and when she tickled me on the cheek to distract me, I would look at her, smile, turn back to the ceiling and laugh even louder. At those times, my mother said I made her feel like there was a grown man hiding inside my body.

Even though they weren't worried that I hadn't cried for a while, they took me to the hospital because the neighbours kept on badgering them that something was

wrong with me. When they got there, after I was examined by the doctor, he told them in a comforting tone: “Don’t worry, some babies just take their time. As you can see, his eyes follow you when you speak, so this baby, I must say, will be a very intelligent boy. A boy who will cry in his own time.”

When I finally cried, it was because I was hungry. So hungry that my mum had to immediately feed me with baby food because she couldn’t produce enough breast milk for me. I always wanted to suckle, and she was sore from breastfeeding me.

The doctors were surprised at my appetite but were not altogether concerned. They told my parents that over time I would develop a normal appetite for a baby my age, but I didn’t. Instead, I ate more and more until I became chubby and round as a ball.

My mum said that my laughter was usually infectious. It was the kind of laughter that made you laugh with me even if you didn’t know the reason I was laughing. She also said that though I didn’t cry early, I spoke at four months old. It was a babble that was made up mostly of the names of foods, like:

Water, Milk and Dodo.

Words like:

Hungry, Sleep and Toilet.

Soon those were followed by phrases like:

Give me, and Oops, me burp!

These words were sometimes followed by long giggles that most times transformed into lingering laughter. It was

as though I wanted to make up for not crying early. My mum said she was glad that since I was already bigger than my age, she didn't need to answer questions from people who would have been shocked that I had started to talk quite early.

I was a very big baby, so much bigger than all the babies my age that, during the days after I was born, my mum couldn't find my size of nappies at the store, and she had to buy the size for toddlers. I grew up fast, spoke faster, and played without boundaries at every opportunity I could get. But I wasn't fearless. I had a healthy dose of fear. But somehow, I never allowed it to hold me back. I just stared it in the face for a short while before I pushed it aside and went ahead and did what I wanted to do.

My mum said there was something about me that was attracted to exploring things, figuring them out and using them to discover even more things. I would check the shoeboxes that were kept in the storeroom at home and, upon finding them empty, I would stack them up in front of the huge wardrobe in the bedroom and climb on top of them so that my hand could reach the knob of the door. Once my hand reached it, I would open it a little bit, climb down the stacked shoeboxes, and open the door even wider before stepping inside to explore the contents. Usually, I ended up wearing a mismatch of clothes and shoes that were way too big for me, so that when I walked into the living room where my parents sat watching television, I'd draw a loud report of laughter from them.

My mum would say, as she spoke about me to her friends and our relatives, “Trust me, there is no boring day with him. When you think there is nothing crazier or funnier he could do, he will surprise you in the next instant. In fact, his dad and I already know that he’s going to be either a comedian or a soldier when he grows up. He is fearless.”

I was a quick learner. Actually, my mum said I ate knowledge like I ate food. But unlike food, which made me put on weight, knowledge made me lose all the baby fat I had. So, as I grew older, I became slimmer and taller. And my light-complexioned skin became more like the colour of chocolate, which was exactly like my mum’s, yet I looked like my dad. Everyone did say I behaved like a mix of both of them. I was caring, outgoing and fun-loving like my mum, and stubborn and courageous like my dad—but no one knew where I got the ability to hear things no one else could.

As I grew up, I surprised everyone with my claims that I could hear trees, flowers and animals talk. First, they thought I was daydreaming, and when I insisted, they would look at me, worried. It got so bad that at school, the students would crowd around me, asking me what the birds that flew over us were saying, or the goats across the street, or the trees in the playground. I would respond, and they would marvel at my answers even though they really didn’t believe me. But when the headmistress summoned my parents and me to her office one day and explained to them that I was becoming a

distraction to the other kids, I had to stop talking about the sounds I heard.

Though I stopped talking about it at school and left it only to my parents at home, I was still very popular. My classmates always wanted to play with me, even when there were no stories about animals or trees talking. I had no idea why but I was open to playing with them as long as they allowed me to lead the way. I didn't like them expressing their fear when I suggested we do something daring, like climbing a tree and doing somersaults from the branches onto the ground. This is because if someone expressed fear, somehow I would begin to feel that fear and would end up not doing what I wanted to do. So I just went ahead and did what I wanted, and, usually, the others would join in, or they would step aside and watch. I was like a superhero. All I needed was a cape or a bodysuit.

Life was beautiful. It was fun when I was the only child and a different kind of fun when my younger sister was born. I used my fierce imagination to explore everywhere I found myself. The schoolyard became a forest where I was a hunter, the backyard at home became an ocean in which I was a pirate sailing on a large ship, and the car that dropped me off at school and picked me up again became an armoured tank at war. But all of these were regularly disrupted because my mum and my sister were both born with a dangerous illness.

It attacked my mum frequently, and when it did, the house became silent—either because my dad had rushed

her to the hospital, or because she was lying in her bed and moaning in pain.

I would stay in my room and cry when she cried because I knew I couldn't stop the pain and it made me realise how powerless I was: a superhero without any powers.

My sister didn't suffer as much as my mother. One night, as we sat around the dining table and ate fried plantains and eggs, my dad told us of a doctor friend of his who had told him of another doctor in London who could cure my sister of her illness.

I had asked if the doctor could heal my mum too and my dad had said that he hoped that would happen, but first, the doctor had to see my sister because she was younger and the treatment worked better on younger people.

I looked at my mum listening to my dad as he spoke and I wasn't sure at first if she was happy or sad, so I opened my mouth to ask her—but my dog, Kompa, brushed against my leg.

And when I looked down at him, he said, while shaking his head, "Mum is not sad, she is happy that one of them will get well, so don't open your big mouth to ask her if she is sad."

So I closed my big mouth and listened to Dad tell us all about the trip he had to take to London with my sister.

I listened to them talk about the chances of the illness being treated and how cold London was and how far it

is from Lagos, where we lived. As I sat there listening, I began to imagine myself as an eagle flying free across the ocean towards the city they described as beautiful, clean, and filled with miraculous healing.

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2

The Night My Mother Slept

The night my mum slept and didn't wake up, my dad and my younger sister had travelled to the cold, faraway city of London.

I was alone with her that night, and I remember all she told me in her weak voice as she lay on her large, queen-size bed.

My mum cried and screamed a lot, not just that night, but on a lot of the other days when she suffered her crisis. It lasted a couple of hours sometimes and other times a couple of days. Once, it lasted for months. Sometimes, during the crisis, she would be rushed to the hospital and admitted; other times she stayed at home and cried out in pain as my dad looked after her and my sister and I watched in concern.

That night my mum didn't speak to me about the concept of sleeping and not waking up any more. The same thing she had called dying or death. I didn't ask any more questions either because I didn't know she would sleep

and not wake up until she slept and didn't wake up. Yet when I think back to that night, I realise that there was a way she looked down at me as she stroked my dark curly hair that showed that she actually knew that she would sleep and not wake up. It was an I-will-miss-you-so-much look. The kind of look you give someone you love who is leaving for a long time and you don't know when you will see them again; or the kind of look that you give the last piece of a bar of delicious chocolate you have been eating, because you know that once you eat it, there will be no more of the chocolate left for you to eat.

There was a deep sadness in my mum's eyes when she stared at me with that look. It was a long look and tears were rolling down her cheeks before she said to me in her weak voice, "Promise me you will look after your sister and your father."

I promised because I thought that if I said I would, my mum would get better and go back to her normal happy, always-smiling-and-singing self.

"I will, Mum."

"Kompa will take care of you," she continued.

Kompa's head shot up, and he stared at us from the foot of the bed.

"I will take care of him," I countered in my big-brother voice.

She laughed and then winced audibly before she coughed and coughed and coughed while covering her mouth with her right hand and stroking my hair with her left.

Kompa looked at her in concern.

When she stopped coughing, she said, “You will take care of each other.”

Kompa barked once. It was his way of saying yes to people like my mum who couldn’t hear him speak, but to me he said, “It’s high time you agreed that it’s me who takes care of you and not you of me. But since Mum is ill, let’s agree with what she says so she can get well—we will take care of each other.”

“You wish,” I said to Kompa. Then I turned to my mum and continued, “Won’t you take care of all of us like you always have?”

She looked down at me as she stroked my hair and responded, “I will.”

“Thank you.”

I was eight years old small, my sister was five years old tiny, my mum was thirty years old frail, my dad was thirty-three years old strong, and the Border collie, Kompa, who my mother had given me for my seventh birthday, was a year and three months old feisty.

The bed in which my mother and I lay had big comfy pillows in white pillowcases that matched the white bed sheet and duvet. She cradled me in her thin arms and I felt her shiver. When I looked up at her, her tired eyes, which had dark circles around them, appeared to be sinking into her head. Her eyes were open very wide, and I stared at them for a while until they finally closed.

Unlike other times when she would simply smile when I asked her to tell me why she fell ill so often, my mum