

## **THE MAN (2078 WORDS)**

There was a man under the bed holding a machete. He was huddled close to the mud wall of the *idisi* (*ee-dee-see*), behind the dirty sheets that uncle Musa had thrown under the bed earlier that morning. His luminous green t-shirt had drawn baba's attention and he had spotted the strange figure trying hard to stay hidden, his sharp machete shining brightly in the *koroboi* night light. Baba had slowly risen from the *rijambi* (*re-jam-bee*) on the floor that served as an extra bed for him and his younger brother and pretended he needed to use the latrine outside. He then playfully called out to his brothers to come and witness a suspicious naked figure running in the night, feigning an excitement that made his brothers curious enough to join him.

When they had all come out of the *idisi*, my father slowly put his index finger over his lips and whispered, '*There is a man in the house. A man in the house, lock the door behind you*'. Uncle Musa who was standing close to the door quickly pulled it shut behind him, barricading the intruder in their little hut, his once sleepy face taking on an urgent but terrified expression.

*'He has a machete in his hand.'* Baba continued his voice steadily rising *'and is hiding behind the dirty sheets.'*

*'Bring the largest stitch you can find,'* yelled uncle Musa as uncle Bebi dashed into the banana plantation to snap a hefty twig off the heavy branches of the blue gum tree.

Uncle Musa held the lock firmly tightly with both hands while my father ran towards the other side of the *idisi* to ensure that there were no open windows for the intruder to escape from. The plan was to get the man to loudly surrender himself and walk out of the front door with his hands up in the air. Then they would interrogate him to

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find out what his intentions were as they did not recall offending any villagers at that particular time. Afterwards, they would give him some sort of disciplinary beating for good measure, a lesson for messing up their happy night.

It was a delicate time in the village and rumors of witchcraft and diabolical curses were flooding the neighbourhoods, and everyone was treading carefully in order not to offend anyone. So they waited, guarded and shouted in agonizing tones, imploring the man to show himself and own up to his intentions, attracting the attention of the neighbours who peered through the windows to see what was going on.

In the village, it was common for a man do strange things in the name of the spell hence villagers had become wary of their actions towards their neighbours because they did not want any misfortune to befall them. In fact, there was a scary story of a grandfather who had yelled curses towards his own grandchildren because he very much disliked his daughter-in-law. (His first born son had refused to marry a girl he had handpicked for him and had married her instead). The grandfather had accused her of bewitching his son and had cursed out her entire household. He had then proceeded to wish his grandchildren bad luck and a terrible future with no children. He plucked leaves from the nearby musunzu tree and passed them between his legs, a sign that the curse would stick good and proper. Then he had rolled on the ground, mumbling a few words under his breath then walked back to his own house, swearing that the gods of evil would definitely hear him. Many years later when the oldest granddaughter had failed miserably in life, the grandfather would go on to brag about the power of the curse and the villagers having witnessed firsthand the implications of his words had become very wary of this. Some had turned to religious spaces to ward off evil while others had invested in witchdoctors across borders, a local organization that promised the most lethal and effective vials against any

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potential curses. Others like my father and his brothers had simply learned to stay out of peoples' way to avoid any animosity.

But this intruder had outsmarted them and was quietly chopping through the thin makuti roof whilst they were screaming and shouting. He had made a hole, big enough to let him through and was escaping, his feet taking on a life of their own, the poor machete left sticking forlornly into the roof top beams.

Loud shouts of 'yiwe yiwe' (yee-we!) did not stop the man from bolting past them like lightning and uncle Bebi's attempts to catch up with him were futile, as the man had sprung across the field and dashed into the thick maize field, disappearing into the thick bushes of the farmlands, never to be seen again.

The night was long and the brothers stood guard terrified that he would return to complete his mission. Everything went silent, except for the loud cheeping of crickets that heightened the terror on their faces, revealing a vulnerability that they had kept so well hidden. Time passed and three hours later the cock crowed signifying the beginning of a new dawn and the brothers, still sleepy from the uncomfortable night, set off on a mission to find the stranger. They walked towards the direction of his escape route, trying to retrace the foot prints that had been left behind. However, these foot prints somehow disappeared right before the *Musasa* stream that split their *shamba* into two big halves. The man could have gone anywhere! Uncle Musa and my father went left as uncle Bebi went right, circling the entire stream, looking for any visible signs of the man. Toby, the old guard dog followed closely, barking loudly, at the sight of any neighbours he saw along the path, their relentless efforts, fruitless.

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He had disappeared just as he had appeared. A ghost of some sort, his verily sharpened machete a quiet symbol of his cruel intentions.

*'Do you think he was sent here to finish us all?'*, asked my father, his fingers rubbing the edges of the well sharpened machete, his mind wondering what would have happened had he not spotted the man.

*'I think so, there are far too many hateful villagers here. Our successes must be making them jealous'*, replied uncle Bebi, his eyes darting from left to right.

*'We just finished high school and someone wants us all gone'*

Getting a high school certificate in the village at that time was unheard of and most villagers who had achieved this status, had quietly left the village to avoid any evil eyes and threats of the curse. Some had even relocated to different towns around the country, permanently, never to return to Musasa.

Days passed and there was still hushed talk of who the intruder could have been. Some thought it was the crazy son of Ijami, a lonely man, whose wife had left him for his older brother. Others thought it was Adembesa, the weird lad who always sat atop the *musunzu* tree, facing their homestead. You see, Adembesa had always been a strange man. He had dropped out of high school due to lack of school fees and would consistently tease my father and his brothers when they walked to school every morning. The brothers sympathized greatly with him. If it was him, they were willing to be more forgiving. However, Adembesa continued to sit atop that tree and watch them, signifying that he had nothing to hide. My father had even walked closely past him just to see if he had any thicket scratches on his face from the previous night's take off into the farmlands, but he appeared quite his usual self.

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A *Barasa* was called the following week and it too bore nothing but mere speculation. There were quiet murmurs that the man was an apparition that had been sent to punish the boys because of their father's notorious reputation in the village. My grandfather, Reuben Musambi, was a tough man. I can barely recall a time when he sat down with us and uttered more than a single sentence, but the villagers respected him greatly and he was elected village chief for a greater part of his life. Maybe someone was jealous of him and had sent this figure in form of a man to exterminate his future generation.

Weeks passed, then months and the story was quietly forgotten even though the brothers had taken bigger measures to keep themselves safe. They replaced the lock on their door and took the machete with them to the village dances for protection every time they went. But their resolve was even greater. They vowed to be successful and to bring back their own children to this village they very much loved. The actions of one coward would not deter them from chasing success with their high school diplomas and neither would they stop them from being the proud sons of Musambi, the most respected man in the *Kambi*.

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*Years went by and my father travelled many miles to Nairobi to chase his dream of becoming someone in life. Back then, all people wanted to become was someone. He had ended up in the hospitality industry and become one of the best chefs in a leading hotel in Nairobi. Uncle Bebi, had ventured onto a different continent and brought back tales of the Middle East every time he visited. He too had followed in my father's footsteps and had become a chef, their endless conversations about food leaving us all in awe of what they had mastered. But uncle Musa had stayed on*

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*and become a police officer who was very respected in the village. He had risen to the rank of corporal and everyone knew his name. After the incident with the man, uncle Musa had sworn that no one was ever going to trouble his family again and had gone on to join, Kiganjo, a famous police training institute in Kenya. He was the protector and even we, his own nieces, saw him just as that. He spoke only of tough things, his eyes squinted, the little scar under his left eye, a testament of the tough times he had endured during training.*

It was the year 2000 and the brothers were planning a reunion in their father's village. It was going to be special as uncle Musa and my father had grown up sons who needed to be circumcised the traditional *Tiriki* way. So plans were laid out and in December of that year, we all travelled back to my father's home anticipating an exciting get together. My brothers on the other hand were not too eager to go as they dreaded the season of the *mdiri* (*m-dee-ree*).

We arrived safely and the next day the brothers met and sat together, recalling tales of their childhood days especially their encounter with the strange man. This time, they laughed about it and the house was filled with extreme joy. It was great to see my father loosen up and laugh on top of his lungs, his eyes tearing from his brothers' dramatic reenactments. It was clear that the brothers loved and enjoyed each other's company and that, that night in the 80s had brought them much closer together. They each had something funny to tell, uncle Musa's police adventures jolting everyone into hysteria.

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A week later, the village horn was blown to signify that the circumcision season had begun. Uncle Musa and my father rounded up their five sons and they all gathered in

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my grandfather's house, their only possession, the clothes on their backs. My mother and auntie Abigale, strutted around proudly as women, who had borne sons, were highly respected during this season of the knife. They rushed around, cooking delicious meals and urging us to stay well behaved.

Soon, the brothers would depart, their sons following closely in their footsteps. They would spend the next month in the forest, under the strict eye of Wisitsa the villager circumciser and his assistant Buge.

### **Glossary:**

Idisi: A little hut made for the boy child to live in. A sign that they are grown up.

Koroboi: A little lamp

Yiwe: You

Musasa: A village in the Nandi hills

Shamba: Farm

Musunzu: A type of tree

Barasa: Meeting

Kambi: The name of the area in the village

Tiriki: A luhya sub-tribe

Mdiri: The circumciser

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