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ON THE MARKET DAY
(A Short Story)

By

Kyalo Mativo

Kamali Lango woke up in the midst of the night, long before the village owl. Kokia, his wife, was already up; his food ready: maize meal--yesterday's left-overs--rewarmed in boiling water, a cup of grade-two hot coffee with a touch of powdered milk, and sour milk. He ate it with relish.

It was a powerful munching silence. The open air kerosene can-lamp, fondly baptized Shike-n'tandike, flapped its flame noisily in a concerted effort to break the uncomfortable silence, and the embers on the hearth cracked in positive response. It was a familiar cracking.

One of the young ones stirred, and the parents froze. The father stopped chewing, and the mother held her breath....If only there were a way of destroying that dangerous smell of food....But the young one merely turned on his other side and fell back into his sleep. That was all.

"Remember, my mother is coming here the day after-the-day after-tomorrow," Kokia said almost in a whisper. There was no immediate answer; he knew only too well what was in the agenda. But he had to respond in one way or another.

"Yes I know."

"What should I do then?"

"I intend to be back by then."

"And if not?"

The wife was not given to prying. But in the time of trial vagueness is a crime.

"The day after-the day after-tomorrow is not yet here," he was on the defensive. "There is no cause for hysteria. We are not yet vanquished, we can still find a way out. Have you joined those hopeless people who go around shouting 'we shall not survive, we shall not survive, this is the end of the tether....this is the end of the tether...this is the end of the tether....this is the.....'?" The words threatened to stick at the back of his throat. And an obstinate sonorous echo continued to ring in his mind like an alarm clock: '...is the end of the tether....the end of the tether....end of the tether.....of the

tether.....'

It was the end of the tether. At least as far as that unpleasant conversation was concerned. So he stood up, picked up his wrapped up blanket, his stick, his small torch, and stepped out into the dark and silent night. From across the Wingoo Valley, a faint and lonely wailing of a dog came riding the air-current.

After a reflective interval, the mother lifted up the can-lamp and held it above her head as she bent to survey the young ones. Then she put out the flame and went back to sleep.

All that was routine. Last week she did the same. The week before last, she did the same. Last month she did the same more than once. Last year, when she had only seven children, it was the same thing. And at the end of this year, when her ninth child begins to walk, she will do it again.

The man was counting his fingers as he groped his way through the dark. Well, he knew his way quite well; he has walked to and fro on the same path for....now let's see...eh three...four? No, five years at least. Somehow, even during the darkest of the nights he managed to find his way. "The sun always rises, even if not always to the Glory of God." That was his magic wand, his consolation. But a consolation.

Last year, he reckoned, he made, 'ooh, let's see...eh... about....one....or?...Yeah, one hundred shillings net.' He lost how many cattle?... 'The spotted one, the sharp-horned heifer, the brown bull, the white-crowned cow, the black-topped..... the.....; that's all. Or?...Yeah, that's all. Nevertheless....' Nevertheless, that's what he means, the sun always rises "even if not always to the Glory of God." This year, if all goes well, 'I mean if the rains fall.....,' he paused for a while to endure the agonizing memory. 'There used to be a thick forest here, saturated with life....and now all that remains is dry whirlwind.... Anyway this year if the rains come I could make as much as, ooh, two hundred, three hundred....' But he stopped there. There was this disturbing memory, you see, that for the last two years, if he could remember well--and it was a curse to have to remember, there had been no rain, not even an imitation of it. And, when was it....two, three days ago? Radio Wananchi reminded the people that lack of rain, and therefore famine, are natural phenomena against which man is powerless. It added: "Let that be known to those who are accusing the Government for doing nothing; let them know that their rumour-mongering will not be tolerated."

Kamali Lango had bought himself a Transistor radio two.... three rainy seasons ago to keep abreast with the Times. And that night after the message had been relayed to the people, the

peasants echoed it back and forth in the usual manner, nodding their heads to the truth of the Broadcast and beating their breasts cursing that harsh, invisible and uncontrollable power so magnificently blamed by the Broadcast: nature. Naturally it was their fault for failing to band up together to gather the necessary money for a water project. Every fool knew it. But one thing was clear: the weather Broadcasts had long ceased to bear the summarized forecasts of cold spills and low clouds. They had long turned into out-and-out political commentaries countering and combating any criminal incriminations against the Government of the people, freely chosen in the most becoming and the newest democratic fashion in the world.

Dawn.

Down the foot-path the man had eaten quite a distance by now. The first glimmer of light found him still tramping; but not alone. After every other kilometer or so he met with a line of villagers from beyond the mountains marching their donkeys in the opposite direction to fetch drinking-water. It was known that these villagers spent four days to and fro to accomplish the mission. And the old ones say it was the first time they had known that to happen. Ah well, it was rumour-mongering. But then so what? As the famous Broadcast so aptly put it, "you don't expect things to fall down like manna." And....and....; what was I going to say....: oh yeah: talking of rumour, rumour had it the other day--and this is only between you and me--rumour had it the other day that somewhere beyond those mountains, a newly widowed peasant woman trudged home from a begging excursion. Her empty basket bounced aggressively on her back, and her dusty dry feet kicked objects reluctantly on the edges of the path. At home her only remaining child curled up in front of a dying fire and waited. It was only recently that she had buried another one, bringing the total to four in less than two weeks. Anyway, the mother and the child stared at one another in pregnant silence, the one hopeful, the other desparate. Finally the mother walked past the child, put down the basket, picked up her fire-wood axe and walked past the child again as if to go out to chop more fire-wood. The child resumed its endless stare at the embers. The mother took her position behind the child....and.... and quickly and resolutely heaved up the axe above her head and brought it squarely down on the child's head, splitting it into two like an apple. There was no time and no energy for a defensive scream.

Rumour has it--and this is only for your information--rumour has it that that night the mother sat down and treated herself to a fleshy meal for the first time in ten years, yaaah ha ha ha ha haaa.....

"Greetings!"

"How do you fare?"

"Well. Only you."

"I'm well."

"And the People."

The people--Hmm, sorry--the people are well too.

Day-break.

The naked sun rose slowly and surely, an accursed red ball of ill-will. For days on end, it had risen in the same manner behind the same mountain. Sure enough, another day-break. And there, all around him, rose a sea of dust, stretching far and beyond the sky-line. It was a familiar sight and the man had long ceased to take note of it. His feet, covered with red soil, carried him triumphantly as they had always done for countless times before. He cocked up his head on one side and sent a couple bullets of spittle hurtling through the air. There was still enough saliva left all right. And when the times are good, a morning like this welcomes him like a ruling monarch; yes, it washes his feet with dew, and the clean air cleanses his foul breath. He shook his head as if to rid himself of an unpleasant thought. It was then, when he lifted his head, that he found out that actually he no longer had the monopoly of the path. He was walking in front of and behind an ever-growing line of other people, all like him trying to beat the dead-line of the tyrannical sun. The line of the people grew longer and longer, and the sporadic recruitment of new members became a steady flow of men and women. Now the path was a sprightly scene of dust from which silence was banished. A spontaneous murmur came into being, changing slowly into a buzz. Jingles joined, and out of this combination a rhythm was born. There was chanting in general and whistling in particular, with ingredients of various forms of tonality added when and where it was necessary. The song-leader was a fly-whiskied home-made poet in his own right. He marched in the very front of the line and dished out doses of the country-side's pride, and the men joined in at the prescribed intervals while the women provided the chorus. The current song was in praise of a young man, to judge from the words, who had collected all kinds of degrees from all over the world, but being a genuine product of the people, a classical off-spring of peasantry, he returned to his native home on foot. White civilization had failed to annex him. He had come home to serve the people in any capacity they would assign to him. The circumstances which went into the making of this young man's beautiful history were once again unfolded in the song, and all natural elements bore witness to them:

*LEADER: When the moon shines
It is because Mbula is out there
Visiting the people;*

*When the wind blows
It is because Mbula
Is there about caring for the sick;*

*When the sun rises
It is because Mbula
Rose up early to attend to the young:*

So what do you say?

*CHORUS: We have heard his foot-steps
Shuffling among the reeds
And on the country-side on rainy days
We have seen his deeds;*

*And we have felt his tears
Trickling on our cheeks:*

*ALL: And he will feed the hungry
For he is the sun of the country.*

It was high season. Every body knew what that meant. Even Kamali Lango couldn't quite plead innocent of it. Events were galloping up to a full steeple-chase leading inevitably to a general plunge into a muddy pool of political arena. And so was this procession. And so was the heat of the sun. And shortly they would be there.

Pancreas Mbula was already there. Unlike his opponents, he was the first to arrive. A few other people had already arrived too, but serious business hadn't begun until the group had been reinforced by the new recruits. Then he stood up and laid down the main points of his programme: free education, free medicine, provision of irrigation projects and establishment of clinics and nursery schools in the villages where the people lived, as he put it.

"But," he went on, "there is no substitute for self-help. We have to start somewhere, and the main force will come from you. On my part, I shall do, as I have always done, what I can to contribute to a fair social set-up. I shall persuade the government to allocate some money for these projects. I pledge myself and promise, as sure as I stand here now, to serve you with all my heart. Indeed I'm aware of what the previous Member of Parliament did during the term of his office; he abused the privilege you bestowed on him, and instead of representing you, he represented himself, his family and his close circle of

friends. Ten years ago he entered the Parliament as poor as a butterfly, ten years later he left it a fat maggot of a millionaire. And that is not all; he has the shamelessness to campaign for another term of office!.."

A thunderous applause.

"I say it again as I have done several times before, the real power rests with you. Your votes are too precious to give away to a blood-sucking parasite. Let it be your choice that I be the next MP for Ngangani, and I tell you, before the end of two years, you yourselves will be witnesses of change. If by then no changes have occurred, then you have the right to come to me directly to say it to me in my face. I will deserve to be removed without hesitation."

"What will you do about the lack of rain son?" a single fatherly voice demanded.

"Well," he cleared his throat, "you all heard the mish-mash on the radio about the lack of rain being a natural catastrophe. Now, right now we are sitting on a pool of water, and on both sides we are flanked by two perennial rivers. Lift up your eyes," he said, pointing away, "do you all see that mountain towering above the clouds with a white cap on top of it? Well, that 'cap' is actually a frozen lake whose water melts four times every year and trickles down the mountain-sides right through the thick forest surrounding it, zigzagging its way down the slopes. Now, four times melted water is equal to twice as much water again as we receive from natural rain. Indeed with that much water we can turn this semi-desert into a green field all year round. And we have the will and the energy for that...."

Another applause, general and particular.

".....Whoever doubts that, doubts the power of the people...."

Applause yet again.

"...And I'm asking only to be blessed with your votes, your valuable votes, in order to make this dream a reality."

The crowd jumped up and down and broke into the chant:

*We have heard his foot-steps
Shuffling among the weeds,
And on the country-side on rainy days
We have seen his deeds;*

And we have felt his tears

Trickling on our cheeks:

*And he will feed the hungry
For he is the son of the country.*

It was a familiar event processed in a familiar manner. He had seen and heard all that before, and like all others, had waited for the promised changes and was still waiting. So Kamali Lango left the scene of political action and continued on his journey.

Mid-day.

The market place was bursting with pompous peasant pride, a splendid scene of swarming flies, scorching sun, mooing cows and bellowing bulls. And from time to time, in the midst of this motley of differential noise, a sharp cry of agony would make itself heard. It was the cry of a baby demanding what at the circumstances was a simple impossibility: food. It was a familiar scene of a tragi-comic drama performed by familiar actors in a familiar style. So he walked right through it from the western to the eastern section of it, until he arrived at the most familiar of all the familiar scenes: the cattle-shed.

The auction was already in full-swing. Men had already heated up their tempers and were now expressing them in the usual way. The oppressive smell of dung, the ceaseless mooing of the cattle, the yelling of the merchants and the boiling earth, all these things added to the atmosphere of cut-throat competition in which men came into a beard to beard confrontation. And in wielding your dagger, you stabbed and got stabbed, for it was the nature of the trade.

"There goes a majestic family bull.....Look how he strides; what a public show of strength," it was the auction master announcing the subject of a bargain.

"Two hundred," shouted a prospective buyer.

"Two hundred," repeated the auction master.

"Two hundred and fifty," came a challenging voice.

"Two hundred and fifty....two hundred and fifty,....."

"Three hundred," yet a higher bidder.

"Four hundred."

"Four hundred....four hundred.....; FOUR HUNDRED. The purchase has been made," concluded the auction master.

Kamali Lango meditated for a while. He wasn't sure any more now whether he could participate in the buying process without taking a risk. But then that's exactly what the thing amounted to: risk. Meanwhile another bull was on line.

".....A healthy animal of beefy elegance," the master was saying.

"Three hundred...., three hundred....."

"Four hundred....., four hundred....."

"Five hundred....., five hundred.....; five..."

"Six hundred," a billy-goat-like voice pierced the air with a malicious intent. That was Menge. The audience let out a murmur of indifference. The new bidder was the renowned local cattle-dealer, rumoured to possess the capability to sweep out all the cattle in stock within and without the community at any one given moment. In matters of trade, his word was final. Every body knew it. But as a matter of formality, the auction master proceeded to count five. And as he did so, a forty-kilo wind-blown weakling climbed down the buyers' platform and wound its way to the centre of the bargaining shed. Aware of his financial power, Menge began to drive the animal out of the shed long before the count down was over.

"SEVEN HUNDRED!"

It wasn't the noise which startled some people, sent others chocking with laughter and knocked yet others numb. It was simply the unexpected turn of events. It was so devastating that Menge's stick fell down from his hand. He stood still for a moment like one who had been shot at the back with an arrow, then picked up his stick and walked back to the buyers' platform. He needed simply to shout 'one thousand' to silence every prospective challenger. But he wasn't going to accept a challenge from a nondescript peasant. No, he dismissed it with obvious contempt, quite becoming of him and what he personified. Meanwhile the auction master had finished the count, and, like a skilful hunter that he felt himself to be at this moment, Kamali Lango stepped down and marched proudly to collect his prey. All watched him walk across the bargaining shed as he drove his new deal out.

Then he went to the cashier's desk and counted seven hundred shillings from his pocket. It was all he had.

Seven hundred shillings was his life-savings, his working capital for five years. Now that it had changed into a four-legged commodity for self-expansion, he ought to get an added

value of....ooh,..., one...two hundred shillings? Who knows? Maybe more maybe less. But he didn't need to worry about that; it wasn't the first time it had happened to him. Now, as before, there was always the rising sun.

Twilight.

That night, as always, Kamali Lango will stay with a friend of his mid-way between the buying and the selling market. By sunset tomorrow he will have arrived at the selling market. And after selling his bull, the day after-tomorrow he will catch a bus leaving for his home that evening. But he will get off at Kaimu market to buy two sacks of maize and then wait for the midnight bus from the coast. He will load his two sacks of maize in it and travel to Kamulamba, the country-side bus station nearest to his home, where his wife and three other women will be waiting. They will unload the maize, tear the sacks open and transfer the contents to three smaller baskets. They will carry the maize home. At home his mother-in-law will be waiting. He will give her some of the maize, pay the three women with two can-fulls of grain each and keep the rest for his family. By that time, of course, there will be no food left in the house. But then that should keep them going until the next trip.

It was a familiar pattern. Nothing new, nothing eventful.

Dusk.

His bull behaved well and apparently didn't need a lot to eat. He gave it some grass he had been carrying for the purpose. They walked all day, the man and the animal, until they were both exhausted by the heat. So they decided to stop under a tree for a short rest. He tied the animal to a nearby twig and lay down for a small nap. The quietness of the place lulled him into a deep sleep. How long it had lasted he couldn't quite tell. And when he woke up the animal was still there, but this time it was also lying down. Well it was time to go, so he got up, untethered the animal and patted it on the back.

"Hey, up, up, we go."

The animal didn't budge. So he hit it slightly with a stick.

"Up, up, I say.....Get going."

The animal remained immobile. He hit it harder. Still the animal didn't move. He grabbed its ears and pulled them. That didn't help either. He gave it two or three canes on the back. Then the animal fell flat full length on the ground and began kicking in the air, with froth coming from its mouth.

The man dropped his luggage and hurried to open the animal's mouth. That proved to be quite a task. The animal gnashed its teeth and gave a groaning noise. Then there was silence.

It was a long while before the man picked up his remaining property: the stick, the torch, the wrapped up blanket, and walked away. A battalion of vultures watched him go, and then descended on the scene. They had been waiting impatiently all the while. Unlike the bull, these guardians of the sky had not succumbed to epilepsy yet.

At Kamulamba the day after-tomorrow, his wife and three other women will be waiting.....with three baskets.