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Short Story

Fate's Mockery

Benedicto Wokomaatani Malunga

“I cannot condemn for wrong-doing a boy I know as a well behaved pupil before I have heard his story. That is not my type of fairness. By the way madam, lawyers nowadays keep on reminding us that doing what you are suggesting is at variance with the demands of natural justice.” Mr. Dekhani paused.

“In this age of human rights, we need to exercise greater care than before if we are to be above board. After all, we are dealing with an orphan who lost both parents in succession and therefore had to be assisted to settle down emotionally by my staff members and myself.” He continued looking very concerned.

“This was at a time when he had generally become reclusive and did not want to speak to anyone. It was clearly a traumatic experience all of us had no choice but to sympathize with. But beyond this, since the time he recovered from his trauma and put everything behind him, he has been an immensely jolly good pupil who hardly causes trouble.” The headmaster explained. He maintained his calmness with his eyes riveted in those of his accuser.

“You seem to be all out to defend the indefensible even before I have finished my story,” the angry woman shouted foaming on both corners of her wide mouth like a gourd of newly tapped palm wine. Her eyes were restless.

“Madam, fairness compels me to observe that I would be lying irresponsibly if I were to classify the alleged offender as a troublemaker. To the contrary, the lad is hugely popular among his peers and teachers because he always wears a warm smile as he interacts with his colleagues peacefully.” Mr. Dekhani informed the unsettled lady.

“If you also don't mind being a bit surprised, your son is one of those the boy always hangs out with during break time. That is why I did not understand how Stamford could have beaten him so hard off campus that he bled through the nose badly. As headmaster, this is not the kind of treatment I expect my students to subject each other to. I can neither tolerate nor condone

barbarism regardless of who commits it.” He held his chin in his right hand as if in reflection.

“That is why when Stamford comes tomorrow, I would like to get to the bottom of the matter. I hope you realize madam that I am not belittling the agony you are experiencing as the nostrils of your son conspicuously show the remains of the blood that has come out of them. I would have felt the same if not worse, if I were in your shoes. I am therefore very sorry indeed that this disturbing situation has had its origin here.” He then stopped.

Mr. Dekhani was a very civil retiree who started working in government soon after completing his teacher training. He then retired when he attained the mandatory retirement age. As a headmaster before his retirement, he had been well known for his exacting standards as far as discipline and teaching were concerned wherever he had been posted.

He now headed a popular private primary school belonging to a highly successful business woman. This lady was once upon a time his student. That should be long time ago when he was a vibrant young teacher ready to conquer the world with his fresh pedagogical skills and knowledge from college. His record as a knowledgeable and credible professional was impeccable according to what his admirers said. Always calm and composed, he hardly raised his voice even when provoked to the extreme. He was not any different today as he faced a volcanic Mrs. Mapeto.

At this juncture she was fuming as she complained to Mr. Dekhani about how her son had been heavily beaten. This incident was said to have happened as the pupils who had knocked off from school walked to their respective homes. Whatever the cause of the altercation between Stamford and her son, she had not bothered to find out its genesis. Her anger was stirred like a hornet’s nest by the blood that had been drawn from her son’s nostrils.

As a mother who had previously undergone the agony of childbearing, she could not endure the pathetic sight that was her son. Needless to say therefore that she wanted to know the young devil that had inflicted such harm on her boy. She desired to see fairly quickly, the uncouth idiot who had visited misery upon Chantonda through this barbaric act.

She was not one that would sit and watch helplessly as someone messed up her children. She was made of sterner stuff than

this. Without strong academic credentials of her own, she derived her status from the professorial position of her husband whom she nagged a lot taking advantage of his quiet disposition.

“Mr. Headmaster, so you are dead sure that the fight never took place on your own premises?” She inquired with a tone of cutting sarcasm as she breathed rapidly. Impatience was conspicuously written all over her face like a story to be read by anybody. She had begun with demanding an explanation from the headmaster as to why the school authorities could not have held accountable and responsible a bastard who had beaten her son hard.

“If the incident that has angered you had occurred here madam, your son would not have come home alone because he would have been personally escorted by me. Yes, because my responsibility would have been to explain to you, what had transpired. If I neither came nor know about what happened to him, it is because whatever occurred did so off our campus. By the way madam, didn’t you ask your son to explain where he exactly was when he was being beaten?” The headmaster sustained his tranquil composure as he probed the beginning of the seeming crisis at hand.

“I didn’t because it was not necessary. The moment I saw my son bleeding, I knew I had trouble on my hands. I therefore jumped into the car and started off with him,” she explained hurriedly.

“After all, the boy whom he said had beaten him attends this school. Is that not so?” She asked the headmaster with a ring of impatience evident in her loud voice. What she said was packed with disdain of a tall order.

“Then it was most unfortunate,” Mr. Dekhani observed.

“How unfortunate if I may ask?” She queried belligerently bristling with vengeance.

“You ended up missing critical information which could have helped us to find a common starting and helpful point,” the headmaster reasoned still unruffled.

“Never mind Mr. Headmaster. I am now rushing to the home of the offender,” the angry lady hurriedly walked to her parked vehicle, opened the driver’s door and banged it shut in no time at all.

She then revved her engine. At tyre-burning speed, her vehicle sped away. The boy by her side on the passenger seat looked

satisfied with the abrasive manner in which his mother was handling the whole matter on his behalf. He had grown up seeing her boss over his father, who wore the petticoat in the house and confront people at will when they crossed her path either intentionally or unintentionally. He was now happy that they were driving to the house of his motherless and fatherless classmate who I would say “would now know” what his mother was capable of doing.

As the car gathered momentum, leaving behind a trail of dust, the headmaster looked on disturbed. Then he remembered how he had made Stamford recount how his parents had died as part of the process of finding an entry point for counseling him at a time when his sadness was affecting his studies. The details of the boy’s narration unfolded in his mind with amazing clarity making him shed tears as he stood alone in the deserted school yard. It was an experience he did not enjoy to go through again.

“Is this Mr. Mwanunkha’s residence?” Mrs. Mapeto asked the security guard she found at the main gate where she had parked her car. She was tightening her wrapper’s knot like one who was ready for combat.

“Yes madam. What can I do for you?” Majinya, the homemaker who was keeping the security guard company, asked politely as he opened the gate. He had been part of this home for a good five years now. He therefore sounded like he owned it because of his evident confidence.

“Is your boss home?” Mrs. Mapeto asked while studying Majinya from top to bottom like he was infectious bacteria.

“If he had been around madam, he would have normally been at the office during this time. However, today he is not in town. He has travelled to the capital city on duty. He will not be back until after three days,” he informed Mrs. Mapeto.

“Okay,” she responded.

“By the way, do you have here a boy called Stamford who attends Chadaine Private Primary School?” She asked.

“Yes. This is his home. Mr. Mwanunkha is his uncle. What about him?” Majinya asked patiently.

“Have a look at this boy,” she pulled her son out of the parked vehicle.

“What happened to him?” Majinya inquired. He was genuinely horrified by the bruised nose and the remnants of blood on the teenager’s forlorn looking face.

“That is why I am here. This is the work of your crackpot Stamford.” She began her onslaught.

“Come again Madam. What did you say happened to your son?” Majinya posed his question with sincere curiosity.

“Go and call Stamford for me. You will then know and appreciate what I am talking about,” Mrs. Mapeto explained in her bossy style.

Majinya called Stamford from the main gate. The unsuspecting boy responded and followed his home-minder immediately.

“Are you Stamford?” Mrs. Mapeto asked with an air of obvious hostility towards him. To her he looked like vomit that needed instantaneous clearing.

“That is correct,” Stamford answered without any tinge of emotion.

“What made you beat up my son?” Mrs. Mapeto began her interrogation.

“Is this why you are here madam?” Majinya asked disturbed by the turn events were taking.

“Exactly”. But stop interrupting me,” Mrs. Mapeto advised almost triumphantly.

“Then you should have waited for his uncle to come. Your present concern should have been drawn to his attention. I am merely a home-minder here. In the absence of Stamford’s parents who both passed away, his surrogate parent is his absent uncle. I am sure madam that Mr. Mwanunkha would be the best person to refer this matter to, your anger notwithstanding,” Majinya advised.

“You mean I should wait for someone in Lilongwe to come when my son is in pain now?” She protested loudly and with a chunk of contempt in her voice.

Not used to being challenged by women by virtue of being a traditional man, Majinya stopped talking and just fixed his gaze into Mrs. Mapeto’s eyes as if saying to her, what is it that you do not understand? While this happened, Stamford began speaking.

“Madam did your son tell you why I beat him up?”

“So you did devil? Stop asking me silly questions.” The uncompromising Mrs. Mapeto retorted. She was convinced that this boy was weird and therefore was not up to any good. She also

believed somehow that he was one of those poorly brought up orphans who had no respect for elders.

“If you had heard what he had said to me, you would have not come here to harass me the way you are doing. He said to me things no parent would want their child to be subjected to,” Stamford narrated.

“Cut out the irrelevancies and just come to the point. Don’t you know that time is money?” Mrs. Mapeto was not ready to argue with a little boy.”

“Madam if you have come in search of the truth, then you should be prepared to listen. I will say to you what exactly happened but only if you are ready to listen.”

Stamford was unusually firm for a boy his age and under such pressure. Being in the company of his highly intellectual uncle and listening to his erudition was turning him into a highly confident boy who was also articulate. His teachers at school noticed this and so did his peers. He had also become a voracious reader in a house where a mini-library was available. It was stocked with a wide array of mind-stimulating books on any subject of intellectual interest.

“Where do you derive this courage from silly boy?” Mrs. Mapeto demanded an answer with her eyes almost popping out of their sockets. She was not ready to accept a challenge from a little boy. She was used to being in control of situations no matter how meaningless such control was. “From the truth I am about to lay bare madam.”

“Are you this rude?”

“Only truthful.”

“I am hearing things. Is this for real?”

“Very real indeed. I have no mother to defend me as you attack me. I have no father to speak for me as you declare me guilty before you have heard my full story. You cannot even wait for my uncle to come so that you can engage him. If indeed you are a real mother as you want all of us here to believe, is this how you would want your child to be handled by a stranger? Madam with due respect, what is this?” Stamford protested.

“Young man stop blackmailing me emotionally. You are only a primary school boy by the way.” Mrs. Mapeto was unstoppable. Contempt was noticeable in her shrill voice.

She spoke like she had degrees because of her sojourn abroad in the company of her learned political scientist husband when in fact she was a mere house wife who had her good looks to thank for being a professor's spouse.

"Primary school boy or no primary school boy, you started it all. Now listen to this. Your son is a beast."

Stamford had lost his cool by now as anger took the better of him. It emboldened him.

"What?" Mrs. Mapeto was taken aback. She could not believe that Stamford could stand up to her.

"He was callous to me in total disregard of our long friendship. He chose to humiliate me by telling me in the presence of our classmates and passersby that my parents had died of HIV/AIDS as if he had been their doctor when they were ill. The more I protested against this unfair treatment, the more he ruthlessly poked fun at me for what I had no control over. The pain I felt as he said this madam was indescribable and yet; it was his source of laughter. The shock I experienced as he shamelessly continued to torment me whilst my colleagues remonstrated with him to stop shook the very foundation of my life; but he disregarded all this. The stigma directed at me was unbearable. I could not help wondering what sin I had committed to be treated like this by of all the people, my friend Chatonda. He who had shared my lunch box with me day in day out as if he did not have his own food. He I had assisted in doing his school work when he had no clue about how he would approach it. Oh my God!"

He choked, looked down and then raised his eyes. He cast them directly at Mrs. Mapeto as if x-raying her conscience with a scanner. Meanwhile Mrs. Mapeto's cell phone rang loudly and unexpectedly. This gave the emotionally charged Stamford some space to look back at the bumpy road of life on which he had travelled as his attacker busied herself with the modern piece of technology which was also her status symbol due to its sophistication.

On the screen of his mind Stamford saw vividly how his healthy mother's condition had begun deteriorating when the dreaded virus she had contracted begun dragging her to the grave. Slowly but certainly, she lost her weight as a persistent cough snatched away her peace. Her light complexion which was the envy of her peers gave way to a dark one which stole away the

glow that had made her a beautiful mother he had always been proud of.

By the time she began vomiting and purging persistently, even Stamford as a six year old boy then, knew that she would not recover from her sickness. She just could not keep inside her everything she ate and drank as the ominous shadow of death stalked her with disarming determination. She sweated profusely whenever dusk arrived as sudden fevers that never responded to treatment beleaguered her frail body. Every time her third born brother Mwanunkha visited her, she never stopped begging him to look after her last born child if she died.

Stamford got scared.

By that time her body was badly emaciated and her jet black hair had become pale like that of a kwashiorkor child. Then she died in her bedroom as he Stamford, his grandmother and aunt watched. It was a very disturbing moment for him.

Nevertheless, that time, he had appreciated that his aunt had taken leave to just come from abroad where she lived to help his grandmother care for his mother. The death of her only living elder sister meant that she would remain as the only daughter in a family that had previously three girls. This was after losing another sister not too long ago more or less in similar circumstances. His aunt had come to assist his grandmother because she knew what the old lady had been through when she nursed her other sister during the time cancer took her life away slowly.

He admired his grandmother for the quiet courage she had displayed throughout the year his mother was bedridden. It had been a trying time to her given her old age. But she persevered and never stopped praying. This was not all. Equally tormenting was how Stamford's own father departed. This was barely a year after his mother had died. In his case a fungal type of meningitis caused havoc to his brain. It left him demented. He hardly spoke as he lay in his bed wriggling with enormous pain. By this time Mwanunkha had already taken Stamford to live with. In fact Stamford left his father's home immediately after his mother had died because this was her death wish.

Day after day, Stamford called his father's house two hundred and fifty kilometres away only to receive the depressing news about his ever worsening condition which was characterized by hallucinations. His brother and sister in their teens were his

father's guardians at the Police Training School Hospital where he was being treated with limited success.

One day he died in the arms of his children. Stamford was seven years old then. The world crumbled on him. As these events replayed on his mind, he wondered if his playmate turned adversary would have withheld his stigma towards him if he had heard this story. What Stamford did not know though was that spoilt Chatonda had become hostile towards him because like the spoilt braggart he was, he could not live with the reality that he Stamford could have a tablet bought earlier for him by his uncle than Chatonda himself. Worse still he was unhappy because he had earlier in the day been refused permission to play with the tablet.

When their father passed on Stamford and his three siblings had to accept that they were on their own as the two people that had brought them into this world deserted them. From this point onwards they depended upon the kindness of other people. Parents they had taken for granted when they lived, created a huge gap that would eat away their minds as the challenges of life stared them in their faces. Thankfully Mwanunkha their uncle stood by them. One by one Stamford's siblings became independent as they benefitted from his tireless support. It was when Stamford thought about what he had gone through that was excruciating; that he could not understand how Chatonda could choose a disease he had not created, as a subject on which he could taunt him. What kind of chatter and banter was this? What exactly was he trying to achieve?

When he could no longer bear the unsavoury taunts coming from his playmate, he had no choice but to put to an end what he had failed to control with words. As the sonority of the derision he detested bellowed in his mind, he pounded Chatonda like an enemy with unprecedented anger. He exacted revenge with relentless fury. Even when he began drawing blood, he did not see it. He was blinded by the strong desire to bring the madness of his tormentor to an end. He was possessed by the attempt to preserve sanity which his colleague had failed to display. He felt propelled by the urge to restore decency where he had not seen evidence of any. He was not ready for remonstrations from anyone no matter how persuasive.

He was a different Stamford who had surprised most of his peers today. They until this point, had not yet understood how deeply insulted and denigrated their schoolmate had felt. By the time he was through with his punching, he was convinced that the revenge he had executed on his classmate matched the magnitude of the offence he had committed. At this stage, tears gushed out of the eyes of Chatonda. He had never seen this side of Stamford before. It therefore overwhelmed him.

As Mrs. Mapeto responded to the call on her cell phone, her belligerence suddenly disappeared. She froze for a while. Her face seemed to be in pain like someone had punched it. Whatever she was hearing seemed to disorient her. She shook her head in apparent confusion. Her huge nostrils flared as they drew in more oxygen. Disbelief crept into her widening eyes. As one hand clung to her cell phone, the other held her head in obvious desperation. She began sweating profusely. She could not find the right words with which to respond to the message that was being relayed to her by a nurse.

The nurse chose her words carefully. But the brutal fact was that her dear husband of all the people had been involved in a car accident and was in the intensive care unit. He was in a very critical condition. She was at a loss. She looked at Stamford and began wondering why the thunderbolt of fate would strike her that suddenly and as she dressed down the poor twit. All she could say to the now weeping boy whom she had mercilessly scolded was, "I am sorry Stamford."

Her son by her side was taken aback by the sudden change of mood of his mother. What had become of her to make her lose command of a situation which hitherto she had been on top of? Majinya and the security guard at the main gate were stunned. Was the aggressive woman capable of saying sorry so quickly? What had calmed down the raging storm? They wondered. She had come like a tsunami that could not be curtailed. She had arrived like the whole world was under her feet. But now she looked helpless. She did not seem to know what to do next.

Distraught, Stamford continued sobbing clueless. He was now walking back to the house from the main gate whimpering and confused. He wished his uncle were around to shield him. He was one man in this whole world he could wholeheartedly trust come rain or sunshine. When his father had been abandoned

by all the relatives who had considered him their bread winner during the period he enjoyed normal life, Mwanunkha escorted him to the hospital where he had been admitted. When they returned home he made his telephone available to him any-time. This would enable him to check with his brother and sister, playing guardians to his father, how their remaining parent was fairing in hospital. This pattern acquired intensity when he was on the brink of dying.

Upon receiving the message that his father's condition had drastically deteriorated, his uncle had ignored the malaria attack he had just been recovering from. This was after the burial of his own father a couple of weeks previously. He then organized his mother, brother and Stamford to follow the sick man to where he was battling for dear life. It was the same caring uncle who had suggested on the way that they needed to buy some heavy lunch for themselves. His reasoning then was that in view of the fact that they did not know what to expect where they were going, they had to be prepared for any eventuality.

To their shock, on arrival at the main gate of the Police Training School where commissioned officers received their training, they heard from the guards that Stamford's father had passed away two hours before their arrival. This happened in the presence of his son and one of the daughters. Hence, arrangements for carrying his body to where he had come from were under way.

When all was done, it was his uncle's car that led the way to his father's resting place some 120 kilometers away. Even when the relatives of the deceased who never showed interest in his sickness when he was admitted into hospital were all out to snatch away the property he had accumulated during his working life, his uncle was there to offer protection to him and his three relatives by making sure that their father's will was honoured. As these events unfolded in his mind, they overpowered him in a way that could not easily be described. He now realized why his mother had insisted that out of her six siblings she would leave behind, the one she wanted to take care of him was Mwanunkha.

Torn asunder by the ruthlessness of death, his uncle comforted him so that he could recover quickly and resume the journey of life. He provided for his needs and sent him to a better school than what his late parents would have afforded if they

had been around. Stamford was convinced that if such a man had been around, he could have easily tamed Mrs. Mapeto on his behalf. Little did he know though that fate had acted on behalf of his uncle.