

Jambula Tree

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I heard of your return home from Mama Atim our next door neighbour. You remember her, don't you? We used to talk about her on our way to school, hand in hand, jumping, skipping, or playing run-and-catch-me. That woman's mouth worked at words like ants on a cob of maize. Ai! Everyone knows her quack-quack-quack mouth. But people are still left wordless by just how much she can shoot at and wreck things with her machinegun mouth. We nicknamed her "lecturer". The woman speaks with the certainty of a lecturer at her podium claiming an uncontested mastery of her subject.

I bet you are wondering how she got to know of your return. I could attempt a few guesses. Either way, it would not matter. I would be breaking a promise. I hate that. We made that promise never to mind her or be moved by her. We said that after that night. The one night no one could make us forget. You left without saying goodbye after that. You had to, I reasoned. Perhaps it was good for both of us. Maybe things could die down that way. Things never did die down. Our names became forever associated with the forbidden. Shame.

Anyango – Sanyu.

My mother has gotten over that night. It took a while, but she did. Maybe it is time for your mother to do the same. She should start to hold her head high and scatter dust at the women who laugh after her when she passes by their houses.

Nakawa Housing Estates has never changed. Mr Wangolo our SST teacher once said those houses were just planned slums with people with broken dreams and unplanned families for neighbours. Nakawa is still over one thousand families on an acre of land they call an estate. Most of the women don't work. Like Mama Atim they sit and talk, talk, talk and wait for their husbands to bring home a kilo of offal. Those are the kind of women we did not want to become. They bleached their skins with Mekako skin lightening soap till they became tender and pale like a sun-scorched baby. They took over their children's *dool* and *kwepena* catfights till the local

councillor had to be called for arbitration. Then they did not talk to each other for a year. Nakawa's women laugh at each other for wearing the cheapest sandals on sale by the hawkers. Sanyu, those women know every love charm by heart and every ju-ju man's shrine because they need them to conjure up their husbands' love and penises from drinking places with smoking pipes filled with dried hen's throat artery. These women know that an even number is a bad sign as they watch the cowry shells and coffee beans fall onto cowhide when consulting the spirits about their husbands' fidelity.

That's what we fought against when we walked to school each day. Me and you hand in hand, towards school, running away from Nakawa Housing Estates' drifting tide which threatened to engulf us and turn us into noisy, gossiping and frightening housewives. You said it yourself, we could be anything. Anything coming from your mouth was seasoned and alive. You said it to me, as we sat on a mango tree branch. We were not allowed to climb trees, but we did, and there, inside the green branches, you said – we can be anything. You asked us to pause for a moment to make a wish. I was a nurse in a white dress. I did not frighten children with big injections. You wished for nothing. You just made a wish that you would not become what your father wanted you to be – an engineer, making building plans, for his mansion, for his office, for his railway village. The one he dreamt about when he went to bed at night.

Sanyu, after all these years, I still imagine shame trailing after me tagged onto the hem of my skirt. Other times, I see it, floating into your dreams across the desert and water, to remind you of what lines we crossed. The things we should not have done when the brightness of Mama Atim's torch shone upon us – naked. How did she know exactly when to flash the light? Perhaps asking that question is a futile quest for answers. I won't get any! Perhaps it is as simple as accepting that the woman knows everything. I swear if you slept with a crocodile under the ocean, she would know. She is the only one who knows first hand whose husband is sleeping with whose daughter at the estate, inside those one-bedroomed houses. She knows whose son was caught inside the fences at Lugogo Show Grounds, the fancy trade fair centre just across Jinja Road, the main road which meanders its way underneath the estate. Mama Atim knows who is soon dying from gonorrhoea, who got it from someone, who got it from so-and-so who in turn got it from the soldiers who used to guard Lugogo Show Grounds, two years ago.

You remember those soldiers, don't you? The way they sat in the sun with their green uniforms and guns hanging carelessly at their shoulders. With them the AK47 looked almost harmless – an object that was meant to be held close to the body – black ornament. They whistled after young girls in tight miniskirts that held onto their bums. At night, they drank Nile Lager, tonto, Mobuku and sang harambe, Soukous or Chaka Chaka songs.

Eh moto nawaka mama, Eh moto nawaka,

I newaka tororo, Nawaka moto

Nawaka moto, Nawaka moto

Eh fire, burns mama, Eh fire, burns

It is burning in Tororo, It is burning

It is burning, It is burning

Mama Atim never did pass anywhere near where they had camped in their green tents. She twisted her mouth when she talked about them. What were soldiers doing guarding Lugogo? she asked. Was it a frontline? Mama Atim was terrified of soldiers. We never did find out why they instilled such fear in her. Either way it did not matter. Her fear became a secret weapon we used as we imagined ourselves being like goddesses dictating her fate. In our goddess hands, we turned her into an effigy and had soldiers pelt her with stones. We imagined that pelting stones from a soldier was just enough to scare her into *susuung* in her XXL mother's union panties. The ones she got a tailor to hem for her, from leftover materials from her children's nappies. How we wished those materials were green, so that she would see soldiers and stones in between her thighs every time she wore her green soldier colour, stone pelting colour and AK47 colour.

We got used to the sight of green soldiers perched in our football fields. This was the new order. Soldiers doing policemen's work! No questions, Uganda *yetu*, *hakuna matata*. How strange it was, freedom in forbidden colours. Deep green – the colour of the morning when the dew dries on leaves to announce the arrival of shame and dirt. And everything suddenly seems so uncovered, so exposed, so naked.

Anyango – Sanyu.

Mama Atim tells me you have chosen to come back home, to Nakawa Housing Estates. She says you refuse to live in those areas on the bigger hills and terraced roads in Kololo. You are coming to us and to Nakawa Housing Estates, and to our many houses lined one after another on a small hill overlooking the market and Jinja Road, the football field and Lugogo Show Grounds. Sanyu, you have chosen to come here to children running on the red earth, in the morning shouting and yelling as they play *kwepena* and *dool* – familiar and stocked with memory and history. You return to dirt roads filled with thick brown mud on a rainy day, pools of water in every pothole and the sweet fresh smell of rain on hard soil. Sanyu, you have come back to find Mama Atim.

Mama Atim still waits for her husband to bring the food she is to cook each night. We used to say, After having nine sons and one daughter, she should try to take care of them. Why doesn't she try to find a job in the industrial area like many other women around the estate? Throw her hips and two large buttocks around and play at entrepreneurship. Why doesn't she borrow a little *entandikwa* from the micro finance unions so she can buy at least a bale of second-hand clothes at Owino market where she can retail them at Nakawa market? Second-hand clothes are in vogue, for sure. The Tommy Hilfiger and Versace labels are the "in-thing" for the young boys and girls who like to hang around the estate at night. Second-hand clothes never stay on the clothes hangers too long, like water during a drought, they sell quickly.

Mummy used to say those second-hand clothes were stripped off corpses in London. That is why they had slogans written on them such as – YOU WENT TO LONDON AND ALL YOU BROUGHT ME WAS THIS LOUSY T-SHIRT! When Mummy talked of London, we listened with our mouths open. She had travelled there not once, not twice, but three times to visit her sister. Each time she came back with her suitcase filled up with stories. When her sister died, Mummy's trips stopped like that bright sparkle in her eye and the Queen Elizabeth stories, which she lost the urge to retell again and again. By that time we were grown. You were long gone to a different place, a different time and to a new memory. By then, we had grown into two big girls with four large breasts and buttocks like pumpkins and we knew that the stories were not true. Mummy had been to Tanzania – just a boat trip away on Lake Victoria, not London. No Queen Elizabeth.

Mama Atim says you are tired of London. You cannot bear it anymore. London is cold. London is a monster which gives no jobs. London is no cosy exile for

the banished. London is no refuge for the immoral. Mama Atim says this word “immoral” to me – slowly and emphatically in Jhapadhola, so it can sink into my head. She wants me to hear the word in every breath, sniff it in every scent so it can haunt me like that day I first touched you. Like the day you first touched me. Mine was a cold unsure hand placed over your right breast. Yours was a cold scared hand, which held my waist and pressed it closer to you, under the jambula tree in front of her house. Mama Atim says you are returning on the wings of a metallic bird – Kenya Airways.

You will land in the hot Kampala heat, which bites at the skin like it has a quarrel with everyone. Your mother does not talk to me or my mother. Mama Atim cooks her kilo of offal which she talks about for one week until the next time she cooks the next kilo again, bending over her charcoal stove, her large and long breasts watching over her saucepan like cow udders in space. When someone passes by, she stops cooking. You can hear her whisper. Perhaps that’s the source of her gonorrhoea and Lugogo Show Ground stories. Mama Atim commands the world to her kitchen like her nine sons and one daughter. None of them have amounted to anything. The way their mother talks about me and you, Sanyu, after all these years, you would think her sons are priests. You would think at least one of them got a diploma and a low-paying job at a government ministry. You would think one of them could at least bring home a respectable wife. But *wapi!* their wives are like used bicycles, ridden and exhausted by the entire estate’s manhood. They say the monkey which is behind should not laugh at the other monkey’s tail. Mama Atim laughs with her teeth out and on display like cowries. She laughs loudest and forgets that she, of all people, has no right to urinate at or lecture the entire estate on the gospel according to St Morality.

Sometimes I wonder how much you have changed. How have you grown? You were much taller than I. Your eyes looked stern, created an air about you – one that made kids stop for a while, unsure if they should trample all over you or take time to see for sure if your eyes would validate their preconceived fears. After they had finally studied, analysed, added, multiplied and subtracted you, they knew you were for real.

When the bigger kids tried to bully me, you stood tall and dared them to lay a finger on me. Just a finger, you said, grinding your teeth like they were aluminium. They knew you did not mince words and that your anger was worse than a teacher’s bamboo whipping. Your anger and rage coiled itself like a python around anyone who

dared, anyone who challenged. And that's how you fought, with your teeth and hands but mostly with your feet. You coiled them around Juma when he knocked my tooth out for refusing to let him have his way at the water tap when he tried to cheat me out of my turn at the tap.

I wore my deep dark green uniform. At lunch times the lines could be long and boys always jumped the queue. Juma got me just as I put my water container to get some drinking water after lunch. He pushed me away. He was strong Sanyu. One push like that and I fell down. When I got up, I left my tooth on the ground and rose up with only blood on the green; deep green, the colour of the morning when the dew dries off leaves.

You were standing a distance. You were not watching. But it did not take you too long to know what was going on. You pushed your way through the crowd and before the teachers could hear the commotion going on, you had your legs coiled around Juma. I don't know how you do it Sanyu. He could not move.

Juma, passed out? Hahahahahaha!

I know a lot of pupils who would be pleased with that. Finally his big boy muscles had been crushed, to sand, to earth and to paste. The thought of that tasted sweet and salty like grasshoppers seasoned with onion and *kamulari* – red, red-hot pepper.

Mr Wangolo came with his hand-on-the-knee-limp and a big bamboo cane. It was yellow and must have been freshly broken off from the mother bamboos just outside the school that morning. He pulled and threatened you with indefinite expulsion before you let big sand-earth-paste Juma go. Both you and Juma got off with a two-week suspension. It was explicitly stated in the school rules that no one should fight. You had broken the rules. But that was the lesser of the rules that you broke. That I broke. That we broke.

Much later, at home, your mother was so angry. On our way home, you had said we should not say how the fight started. We should just say he hit you and you hit him back. Your house was two blocks from ours and the school was the nearest primary school to the estate. Most of the kids in the neighbourhood studied at Nakawa Katale Primary School alright, but everyone knew we were great friends. When your mother came and knocked upon our door, my mother had just put the onions on the charcoal stove to fry the goat's meat.

Mummy bought goat's meat when she had just got her salary. The end of month was always goat's meat and maybe some rice if she was in a good mood. Mummy's food smelt good. When she cooked, she joked about it. Mummy said if Papa had any sense in his head, he would not have left her with three kids to raise on her own to settle for that slut he called a wife. Mummy said Papa's new wife could not cook and that she was young enough to be his daughter. They had to do a caesarean on her when she gave birth to her first son. What did he expect? That those wasp hips could let a baby's head pass through them?

When she talked of Papa, she had that voice. Not a "hate voice" and not a "like voice", but the kind of voice she would use to open the door for him and tell him welcome back even after all these years when he never sent us a single cent to buy food, books, soap or Christmas clothes. My papa is not like your papa, Sanyu. Your papa works at the Ministry of Transport. He manages the Ugandan railways, which is why he wants you to engineer a railway village for him. You say he has gotten so intoxicated with the railways that every time he talks of it, he rubs his palms together like he is thinking of the best ever memory in his life. Your father has a lot of money. Most of the teachers knew him at school. The kids had heard about him. Perhaps that is why your stern and blank expression was interpreted with slight overtones. They viewed you with a mixture of fear and awe; a rich man's child.

Sometimes Mummy spoke about your family with slight ridicule. She said no one with money lived in Nakawa Housing Estates of all places. If your family had so much money, why did you not go to live in Muyenga, Kololo and Kansanga with your Mercedes Benz lot? But you had new shoes every term. You had two new green uniforms every term. Sanyu, your name was never called out aloud by teachers, like the rest of us whose parents had not paid school tuition on time and we had to be sent back home with circulars.

Dear Parent,

This is to remind you that unless this term's school fees are paid out in full, you daughter/son ... will not be allowed to sit for end of term exams ...

Blah blah blah ...

Mummy always got those letters and bit her lip as if she just heard that her house had burnt down. That's when she started staring at the ceiling with her eyes transfixed on one particular spot on the brown tiles.

On such days, she went searching through her old maroon suitcase. It was from another time. It was the kind that was not sold in shops anymore. It had lost its glitter and I wished she never brought it out to dry in the sun. It would be less embarrassing if she brought out the other ones she used for her Tanzania trips. At least those ones looked like the ones your mother brought out to dry in the sun when she did her weekly house cleaning. That suitcase had all Mummy's letters – the ones Papa had written her when, as she said, her breasts were firm like green mangoes. Against a kerosene lamp, she read aloud the letters, reliving every moment, every word and every promise.

I will never leave you. You are mine forever. Stars are for the sky, you are for me. Hello my sweet supernatural colours of the rainbow. You are the only bee on my flower. If loving you is a crime I am the biggest criminal in the world.

Mummy read them out aloud and laughed as she read the words in each piece of stained paper. She had stored them in their original airmail envelopes with the green and blue decorations. Sometimes Papa had written to her in aerogramme. Those were opened with the keenest skill to keep them neat and almost new. He was a prolific letter writer, my papa, with a neat handwriting. I know this because oftentimes I opened her case of memories. I never did get as far as opening any letter to read; it would have been trespassing. It did not feel right, even if Mummy had never scolded me from reading her "To Josephine Athieno Best" letters.

I hated to see her like that. She was now a copy typist at Ramja Securities. Her salary was not much, but she managed to survive on it, somehow, somehow. There were people who spoke of her beauty as if she did not deserve being husbandless. They said with some pity, "Oh, and she has a long ringed neck, her eyes are large and sad. The woman has a voice, soft, kind and patient. How could the man leave her?" Mummy might have been sad sometimes, but she did not deserve any pity. She lived her life like her own fingernails and temperament: so calm, so sober and level-headed, except of course when it came to reading those Papa letters by the lantern lamp.

I told you about all this Sanyu. How I wished she could be always happy, like your mother who went to the market and came back with two large boys carrying her load because she had shopped too much for your papa, for you, for your happy family. I did not tell you, but sometimes I stalked her as she made her way to buy things from the noisy market. She never saw me. There were simply too many people. From a distance, she pointed at things, fruit ripe like they had been waiting to be bought by her all along. Your mother went from market stall to market stall, flashing her white Colgate smile and her dimpled cheeks. Sometimes I wished I were like you; with a mother who bought happiness from the market. She looked like someone who summoned joy at her feet and it fell in salutation, humbly, like the *kabaka* subjects who lay prostate before him.

When I went to your house to do homework, I watched her cook. Her hand stirred groundnut soup. I must admit, Mummy told me never to eat at other people's homes. It would make us appear poor and me rather greedy. I often left your home when the food was just about ready. Your mother said, in her summon-joy-voice: "Supper is ready. Please eat." But I, feigning time-consciousness always said, "I have to run home, Mummy will be worried." At such times, your father sat in the bedroom. He never came out from that room. Everyday, like a ritual, he came home straight from work.

"A perfect husband," Mummy said more times than I can count.

"I hate him," you said more times than I could count. It was not what he didn't do, you said. It was what he did. Those touches, his touches you said. And you could not tell your mother. She would not believe you. She never did.

Like that time she came home after the day you taught Juma a good lesson for messing around with me. She spoke to my mother in her voice which sounded like breaking china.

"She is not telling me everything. How can the boy beat her over nothing? At the school tap? These two must know. That is why I am here. To get to the bottom of this! Right now!"

She said this again and again, and Mummy called me from the kitchen, where I had escaped just when I saw her knock on our back door holding your hands in hers and pulling you behind her like a goat!

"Anyango, Anyangooooo," Mummy called out.

I came out, avoiding your eyes. Standing with my hands held in front of me with the same kind of embarrassment and fear that overwhelmed me each time I heard my name called by a teacher for school fees default.

They talked for hours. I was terrified, which was why I almost told the truth. You started very quickly and repeated the story we had on our way home. Your mother asked, “What was Anyango going to say again?” I repeated what you had just said, and your mother said, “I know they are both lying. I will get to the bottom of this at school in two weeks’ time when I report back with her.” And she did. You got a flogging that left you unable to sit down on your bum for a week.

When you left our house that day, they talked in low voices. They had sent us outside to be bitten by mosquitoes for a bit. When they called us back in, they said nothing. Your mother held your hand again, goat style. If Juma had seen you being pulled like that, he would have had a laugh one hundred times the size of your trodden-upon confidence. You never looked back. You avoided looking at me for a while after that. Mummy had a list of don’ts after that for me too. They were many. Don’t walk back home with Sanyu after school. Don’t pass by their home each morning to pick her up. Don’t sit next to her in class. Don’t borrow her text books. I will buy you, your own. Don’t even talk to her. Don’t, don’t, don’t do anymore Sanyu.

It was like that, but not for long. After we started to talk again and look each other in the eyes, our parents seemed not to notice, which is why our secondary schools applications went largely unnoticed. If they complained that we had applied to the same schools and in the same order, we did not hear about them.

1. Mary’s College Namagunga 2. Nabisunsa Girls’ School 3. City High School. 4. Modern High School.

You got admitted to your first choice. I got my third choice. It was during the holidays that we got a chance to see each other again. I told you about my school. That I hated the orange skirts, white shirts, white socks and black boy’s Bata shoes. They made us look like flowers on display. The boys wore white trousers, white shorts, white socks, and black shoes. At break time, we trooped like a bunch of moving orange and white flowers – to the school canteens, to the drama room, and to the football field.

You said you loved your school. Sister Cephass your Irish headmistress wanted to turn you all into black English girls. The girls there were the prettiest ever and were

allowed to keep their hair long and held back in puffs, not one inch only like at my school.

We were seated under the jambula tree. It had grown so tall. The tree had been there for ages with its unreachable fruit. They said it was there even before the estate houses were constructed. In April the tree carried small purple jambula fruit, which tasted both sweet and tang and turned our tongues purple. Every April morning when the fruit started to fall, the ground became a blanket of purple.

When you came back during that holiday, your cheeks were bulging like you had hidden oranges inside them. Your eyes had grown small and sat like two short slits on your face. And your breasts, the two things you had watched and persuaded to grow during all your years at Nakawa Katale Primary School, were like two large jambulas on your chest. And that feeling that I had, the one that you had, that we had – never said, never spoken – swelled up inside us like fresh *mandazies*. I listened to your voice rise and fall. I envied you. I hated you. I could not wait for the next holidays when I could see you again. When I could dare place my itchy hand onto your two jambulas.

That time would be a night, two holidays later. You were not shocked. Not repelled. It did not occur to either of us, to you or me, that these were boundaries we should not cross nor should think of crossing. Your jambulas and mine. Two plus two jambulas equals four jambulas – even numbers should stand for luck. Was this luck pulling us together? You pulled me to yourself and we rolled on the brown earth that stuck to our hair in all its redness and dustiness. There in front of Mama Atim's house. She shone a torch at us. She had been watching. Steadily like a dog waiting for a bone it knew it would get; it was just a matter of time.

Sanyu, I went for confession the next day, right after Mass. I made the sign of the cross and smelt the fresh burning incense in St Jude's church. I had this sense of floating on air, confused, weak, and exhausted. I told the priest, "Forgive me father for I have sinned. It has been two months since my last confession." And there in my head, two plus two jambulas equals four jambulas ...

I was not sorry. But I was sorry when your father with all his money from the railways got you a passport and sent you on the wing of a bird; hello London, here comes Sanyu.

Mama Atim says your plane will land tomorrow. Sanyu, I don't know what you expect to find here, but you will find my mummy; you'll find that every word she

types on her typewriter draws and digs deeper the wrinkles on her face. You will find Nakawa Housing Estates. Nothing has changed. The women sit in front of their houses and wait for their husbands to bring them offal. Mama Atim's sons eat her food and bring girls to sleep in her bed. Your mother walks with a stooped back. She has lost the zeal she had for her happiness-buying shopping trips. Your papa returns home every day as soon as he is done with work. My mummy says, "That is a good husband."

I come home every weekend to see Mummy. She has stopped looking inside her maroon case. But I do; I added the letter you wrote me from London. The only one I ever did get from you, five years after you left. You wrote:

A.

I miss you.

S.

Sanyu, I am a nurse at Mengo hospital. I have a small room by the hospital, decorated with two chairs, a table from Katwe, a black and white television and two paintings of two big jambula trees which I got a downtown artist to do for me. These trees have purple leaves. I tell you, they smile.

I do mostly night shifts. I like them, I often see clearer at night. In the night you lift yourself up in my eyes each time, again and again. Sanyu, you rise like the sun and stand tall like the jambula tree in front of Mama Atim's house.