

Let It Die

By Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya

The women walked as if they carried dawn in their arms and the earth under their armpits. Slowly and silently, heads bowed like sheep, they walked on the footpath they had already been on several times that morning. Before the sun rose, as the night was tugging its shadow behind the mountains. They avoided stepping on sharp mazhanje seeds, sucked and spat onto the path by the children from the village. The hard yellow seeds, scattered over the village paths, cut soft heels and toes and could even draw blood if stepped on with unsuspecting feet. The muzhanje trees, now out of their leaves, were laden with ripening fruit. This was their season. On the dirt road leading to the nearby mission school, children could be seen walking in groups, the girls in navy blue skirts and light blue shirts. The boys wore navy blue trousers. The primary school pupils wore blue dresses and the boys, grey shorts and shirts. Both girls and boys carried packets of mazhanje fruits for their lunch.

Balancing buckets of water on their heads, while others carried them by their handles, the women moved as if they owned memories, sounds and the smell of the earth they walked on. They seemed to feel the burden of it all again. The deafness. The waiting. The struggles. Many struggles they had endured and the men's resignation to it all. Did freedom know this place? If it did, what did it look like? Had the men too missed it? Had it budded somehow on the older branches of their family trees?

The men, who sat by the huge log fire all night in front of the hut with a coffin carrying a dead war heroine, looked at the women, waiting for them to give them breakfast. Breakfast was not the only thing they had waited for. Those men. All their lives, they had been waiting. Waiting for their turn, or for something to happen. In previous vigils, the men drank all kinds of beer they liked and chatted about many things. The women would sing dirges inside the hut with the dead body, imitating in

dance the actions from the deceased's life. This time, the men had nothing to drink at all except the water fetched by the women. The women too could not sing and dance. The men looked at the women sideways, not seeing their upper bodies, just their waists down to their feet. The women were thin and most of them looked older than their age. White hair growing out of turn, wrinkles folding before time. The skinny men adjusted hats and huge jackets which had endured many nights like the one past unwashed. Different smells escaped those jackets, dust, smoke and sweat rolled together. Their relatives from town had not brought new them jackets or beer. They had brought nothing, except the dead heroine in a coffin they got made in Mbare while they waited.

The morning pulsed. The women, who felt the men asking for breakfast in their silent gazes, walked in a single file past the musasa tree in a field, past a huge avocado tree behind the homestead with the well they fetched water from. The men could suck on mazhanje fruits too like the children, the women seemed to be saying too in their mute language. But the men wanted breakfast; they could only ask for breakfast, nothing else. They would not bother because they knew the women would not give them what they asked. Back in their homesteads the women were always preoccupied with what to feed their children, where and how to get salt and sugar for the children's porridge. Also, some things were given only when mind, heart and body agreed. The women ignored the men and walked slowly, circling the kitchen hut at the back of that homestead. Still not talking but communicating their common intentions silently like animals of the wild, they kicked the mazhanje seeds and skins out of their way. The sounds of their feet in canvas shoes, sandals and slippers woke some of the dozing men. The women bought those shoes from second-hand traders after selling the vegetables they grew in their small gardens. The sound mixed with all other morning noises, birds singing, call-and-response mooing across the kraals, chickens squawking, pecking on mazhanje skins in rubbish dumps. The sounds jostled for space in the dust-speckled air. It had not yet rained. It appeared like there was no sorrow from the relatives of the deceased yet it was there, so intense their

tears fell inside their chests. Confusion and fear too laced the uncertainties. The women going to the well remained stoic; they would not die. There were things the men could kill, but not the women; they would not die. No. They would let it die instead.

On a highway on the west of the homestead, cars hummed to and fro the mission. The sun could have risen an hour before, hidden by the hills north west of the homestead with the hut hiding the coffin. The women could tell that the day was light. The sun's rays peeped from the gaps on the hill and lit the bright colors of the women's Ankara dresses. They shone in different colors, bright blue, yellow, green, pink, red. The women lifted their thin arms as if they were waving them in defiance yet they were just stretching. Earlier at the well, they had examined their chirped hands and feet, their sagging stomachs which had carried the youthful men, their sons, who now loitered in the streets of Harare. The women themselves knew they would not die. The men would not kill them. In the middle of the night someone had heard the dead heroine's voice from the coffin saying: "Let it die." The women were not frightened by the voice; instead they echoed it. They embraced it. "Let it die..." The heroine's voice became a song from the roof of the hut. Her voice was not part of her body. It was part of her soul. Her being died a long way back before the war even began. Her being died when she worked as Mrs Harrison's baby minder back in the 70's. Whilst she attended to Mrs Harrison's babies her own babies had nobody to take of them. Dorah, I do not want a cake...! Dorah, I do not want to eat porridge...! The brother and sister of the baby would scream at her as their mother sat drinking coffee in the garden, talking to her friends. Her children did not have porridge. At Mrs Harrison's, nobody thought she could have feelings of sadness or anything like that. She was not allowed to be angry. She could only smile at the babies. Nobody thought she had blood or tears or dignity or memory. She was given the same instructions every day. It was as if her mind could not survive in its own direction. She was a mutated being. Dorah, the heroine whose body lay in the hut. Nobody thought

she got tired at some point. Those children did not for once respect her privacy. They teased and laughed at her and her children sometimes.

When Mr Harrison tried to force himself on her for the eleventh time, she left. When he had done that to her for the first time, she had felt her dignity leave her and disappear into his hands, his body, his being like rain disappearing into earth without leaving a sound. It then became Mr Harrison's habit to just order her to come to his bedroom when his wife was not there. Mr Harrison had taken her being and buried it on the earth he walked. When she confided with other maids she knew, they told her it was what their bosses did to them too. Mr Harrison made her do all sorts of things to his naked body. He always covered her face with a pillow when she was under him. Mr Harrison. He had taken her to the clinic so the doctor could remove or tie something from her reproductive organs. Her twin boys, whose father disappeared to join the war before they were born, were raised by her own mother back in her village. After the war she came back to trade across borders to send them to school. Aunt Dorah visited her village often and told the women all the things Mr Harrison did to her. She told them things that happened during the war too. She told them that she thought after independence came, she would be whole. She would claim back her being from this earth which nurtured mazhanje trees. And indeed, when independence came she and other female comrades, walked with a peculiar freedom. Their footsteps claimed the freed earth with its mazhanje trees and other riches. "Let it die." The women heard her voice say again just before dawn. This, they did not tell the men.

The women. Once at the well, fenced with a worn diamond mesh wire given to the owner by his white farm boss, they placed their buckets in an orderly fashion, ready to draw water from a deep and wide well. A dangerously wide and too open well. A young mother who carried a baby called Bondnote on her back untied the wrapper and gave him to the eldest of the women who sat on a stone waiting for her bucket to be filled. The other woman received Bondnote with a smile directed at him baby

not his mother or other women in the group. Taking a small tin tied to a log nearby with a strong rope, Baby Bond's mother, Lebani, carefully and slowly let the tin into the deep well whilst holding the rope. The tin disappeared into the dark well. Splash! They heard it hit the water at the bottom of the well, and as soon as the rope felt like it was pulling her down, Lebani started pulling back with the help of the woman who stood behind her. Helping each other, they poured the first tin, filling it halfway. Slowly she let the tin down again and waited for the splash. Sitting and standing by the well as two women helped each other fill all their buckets with water, the other women looked at the fruit laden mazhanje trees nearby but did not think of shaking the trees so the fruits could fall onto their laps. They just waited for their buckets to be filled with water as they greeted the new day ahead of them with bright colored Ankara dresses they wore. It was sad they could not sing the earth songs that morning. Their minds were bitterly immersed in pain, confusion, loss, hopelessness. They looked at the meandering and weaving pathways leading to the well with sorrow. Not for the dead war veteran. No. It was their sorrow. They did not weep anymore; their tears fell into their chests, not down their cheeks, down between their breasts. Their tears had dried a decade before when the men, their men who worked in factories came home wearing unwashed clothes, carrying packets of mazhanje fruits, not Lobels bread and Buttercup margarine. The men claimed the money they earned could not buy things from the shops. The women asked them if there were no things to be bought from the shops in town. The men did not answer. They claimed the money they worked for and saved for years could not even pay for the smallest child school fees for just a term of school. Also the money they carried had no name. The money, both notes and coins, had no picture of Great Zimbabwe, or eMatojeni balancing rocks, not even the picture of the Queen of England. It was money which was not money, yet the men received it. The men, who could not tell the ridiculous from the plausible, laughed as they told the women about the useless money. The women understood that this could not have been madness but something serious. Something they could not even name. Something worth brewing

beer for and calling on the ancestors to intervene. All the ancestors from the year dot.

Could the silent drumbeat from the lands of eMatojeni be calling the men? The women thought in their silence. One man once claimed he heard the calling from the voices from the pit. The man did not sleep anymore. It was said he worked the fields till dawn with a lamp on his forehead. Could the echoes and sounds from the distant rocks have destroyed the men's minds? Sweeping through the distant hills of eMatojeni, the wind could have carried the silent voices to the waiting men.

They waited as they sat on the logs, not talking. The women watched them as they beat the air and the wind with their bright-colored Ankara headscarves. For a decade, those women had learnt to mute their voices but not their minds. Three decades ago, when they heard about the bitter histories, they did not believe. It was the fault of the people there. The people who were burnt alive and thrown in the pit alive were a bad tribe bent on destroying the country and its prosperity. This is what the children were taught in schools. They had believed that when their teachers taught them history at school, but not the women. They did not just believe such things. When the men came back with packets of mazhanje fruits, they knew the same monster that wrote and glorified its history had crept into their lives and was living in their dreams. Their dreams had become nightmares. The voices had brought dreams of misfortune among men. The monster with no name had brought sudden misfortunes of dismay, of pain, regret. Regret. The emotion so understanding. Echoes and sounds from the west, their vibes cut through mountains, rivers and cities all the way here. The voices had come to rest on mazhanje trees. The women understood that the echoes and sounds from the distant rocks were here.

Bondnote's father, Pindirai, was not there with the waiting men. He was in Harare, working for Mr Wang. Whilst the men waited for breakfast, Pindirai worried about Mr Wang's harrowing impatience. Not that it was all Pindirai had to worry about. How long was he going to work for Mr Wang without losing his dignity and senses

altogether? Mr Wang's factory was one of a proper kind. Hidden inside huge security walls, all that men and women had to do there was work. You did not enter the premises without Mr Wang and his men's approval. Not even if you claimed to sit in any office that was an office outside these walls. The nurse who worked around the clock for three months without leave was taken home to her relatives by Pindirai after she had lost memory. She shared her room with eight other female employees whilst Pindirai shared a room with twelve of Mr Wang's senior men. All the men slid freely side by side on their single beds. All the employees shared the bathroom and kitchen. In the living-cum-bedroom was also where their office was. Inside Mr Wang's high-walled factory. When Nurse Mary left Mr Wang's factory disoriented, dizzy and excited all the time, she did not remember children's names. Not that she remembered her own name. She just woke up one morning talking to herself loud and loud and loud. The next moment she was all silence. She just sat there on her bed, in her nighties, all morning, all afternoon pointing at invisible people and creatures, talking to them. She did not even eat anything. Mr Wang kindly suggested that she was missing her children. She could go and come back the following day. Pindirai saw that she was assisted to pack all her belongings. And so there was no nurse then at Mr Wang's factory. When a hard-hat worker fell off a heroic undertaking and broke a bone or two, or cut himself accidentally, Mr Wang would let him go home. There were no doctors at hospitals. Next day, someone would ably fill the post.

Pindirai's wife, Lebani, knew that her husband did not find the courage to convince Mr Wang that there was something human about him. After all, their children together had come out human. Would this excuse have sufficed for the boss to increase their living space and hose cleaner water up their rooms in the factory? Maybe not. All she had to do was look at him with disdain as he told her what happened at work, in the factory and outside where they went. Lebani restrained herself from pawing his face with her chirped nails. Pindirai could not see that. One evening she felt like hitting him with a wooden spoon after he told her how Mr Wang

had dumped an injured, bleeding man outside his premises. But a woman knew how to hold herself together. After studying language and linguistics at university, Bondnote's father worked as an interpreter for Mr Wang. He travelled everywhere in the country with him. Mr Wang knew which part of the country had which mineral, which place was for alluvial mining, which rivers could take his open-cast mines, despite the protest of the villagers. Besides that, Mr Wang knew what he needed to know and everything there was to know. He knew people in every office that was an office. Pindirai entered each office with him. He could not survive a minute without him. His wife did not remember what he looked or felt like each time she met him. He was always in a hurry to serve Mr Wang. He was a potent love portion, this Mr Wang. One that boiled on embers of impatience.

Pindirai, so accepting, least demanding, was, for the same reason, a constant worry to his wife. Why was Pindirai not complaining to Mr Wang himself or leaving the job if it did not give him time with his family? So he could not even come to bury his dead war-heroine aunt? Was it in mockery of her struggle with other war veterans who did not even survive to see the new day? Bondnote's father could work for eighteen hours a day. His linguistics did not give him enough words to complain if he was not paid his overtimes. Pindirai and his workmates had no time for church. They worked and worked at Mr Wang's factory where they lived also. Bondnote's mother was not allowed at this factory, not even outside the gate. Once, she had visited him at what might have been his office. Before she could be sure of it, she was met by Mr Wang's man who told her that Pindirai was busy. The man was so small, his face looked like a rat's. Pindirai's wife wondered at that.

Mr Wang and his men marked their territory with ease and indifference. They acted as if they already owned the earth with the mazhanje fruit trees, the rivers, the mountains and everything it supported. Mr Wang complained to Pindirai that people from Bulawayo were so backward. They had refused him permission to blast the Njelele Shrine and Khami Ruins to make quarry stones for sale to the locals. They

thought their cattle and dams were more important than business. They did not know the first thing about money, those Bulawayo people.

He had screamed at Pindirai to tell them that he could take care of them and their families. But their spokespersons said he could find someone else to feed. Mr Wang was angry at all his employees. After spending a month in Bulawayo without a different story, he drove back to Harare with Pindirai, not talking, not even stopping for a break. The linguist heard him curse in his own language.

For the past decade, the women had tried to tell the men what they knew using words. Then they told them, not with words; they let them wonder, wait and wonder. What happened to the women? The men asked each other. What were those bright-coloured Ankara dresses about? What were those bright-coloured headwraps about, the silent lips, the bright scarves, muted conversations? What happened to the women's loud voices as they fetched water and shared chores? They did not laugh even when they washed their clothes by the flowing rivers. The men continued to look at the women sideways. Then they sat on the stones, talking softly among themselves.

The women did not hurry back home. They sat on the stones near the well for hours. They felt their thin breasts which had fed the children who loitered the streets of Beira, Cape Town, Gaborone and London. Some were as far as Philippines, Guangzhou and Djibouti. Lebani breastfed Bondnote whilst sitting on the ground, on a wrapper spread about. Looking at him she did not know where Bondnote would end up at. Maybe Paris, Macedonia, Cameroon or Dubai. Some women just watched the sun as if it was a pastime. The sun's rays became intimate with them. They let it penetrate their wrinkled skins. They did not want to look at the men who still sat by the fire in front of the hut with the dead war heroine. But then they had to go. Father Mirirai would be coming to say Mass for the departed heroine. They all rose with difficulty and looked at the men with complacent looks. They looked at them as if they were looking at an old picture stuck on the wall during Rhodes' time. What the

women knew about these men could be as good as freedom, if only they could decide to take action. Still the knowledge was their freedom. "Let it die," the women sighed in near-unison as they lifted their buckets of water to their heads.

*"Let It Die" is the opening short story in Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya's forthcoming collection, Aunt Lena's House*