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Black Mamba Boy

Written by Nadifa Mohamed

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BLACK MAMBA BOY

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Now you depart, and though your way may lead
Through airless forests thick with hagar trees,
Places steeped in heat, stifling and dry,
Where breath comes hard, and no fresh breeze can reach –
Yet may God place a shield of coolest air
Between your body and the assailant sun.

Gabay by MAXAMED CABDULA XASAN

O troupe of little vagrants of the world,
Leave your footprints in my words.

From *Stray Birds* by RABINDRANATH TAGORE


TURKEY
SYRIA
IRAQ
PERSIA
N
W
E
S
Mediterranean Sea
PALESTINE
Alexandria
Port Said
Gaza
Romani
Cairo
JORDAN
Persian Gulf
Nile
EGYPT
ARABIA
Red Sea
Wadi Halfa
Khartoum
Kassala
ERITREA
Keren
Massawa
YEMEN
Gerset
Tessenei
Asmara
Omhajer
Gedaref
K'eftya
Adi Remoz
ADEN PROTECTORATE
Assab
Aden
Gulf of Aden
ANGLO
EGYPTIAN
SUDAN
Djibouti
Berbera
SOMALILAND
(Br.)
Addis Ababa
Hargeisa
Burao
ABYSSINIA
SOMALILAND
(Italian)
Mogadishu
UGANDA
BELGIAN
CONGO
KENYA
Lake Victoria
Indian
Ocean
TANGANYIKA

London, England, August 2008

Dark clouds are gathering in the twilight sky, the moon and sun admire each other but my eyes are on him. His oversized glasses perched on his bulbous nose, the flashing blue and white lights of the television dancing on the lenses, his ma'awis hitched up around his knees. To see his knees buckling under the weight of his thin body hurts me, but I respect those knees for walking across continents, for wading through the Red Sea. I will sing the song of those knees.

I am my father's griot, this is a hymn to him. I am telling you this story so that I can turn my father's blood and bones, and whatever magic his mother sewed under his skin, into history. To make him a hero, not the fighting or romantic kind but the real deal, the starved child that survives every sling and arrow that shameless fortune throws at them, and who can now sit back and tell the stories of all the ones that didn't make it. I tell you this story because no-one else will. Let us call down the spirits of the nine thousand boys who foolishly battled on the mountains of Eritrea for Mussolini, who looked like my father, lived like him but had their lives cut off with

blunt axes, the ones who starved to death, the ones who lost their minds, and the ones who simply vanished. Boys like Shidane Boqor. Our fiery boy! Our pilferer of canned goods! Our dead child! Light the torches for his flight to heaven. Let his shadow always haunt his tormentors. Let them bathe for all eternity in the Shebelle and Juba before their sins are washed away.

My father's life has been an exercise in a strange kind of liberty; if he outwitted death then his life was to be completely, perfectly his own, owing no debts to anyone or anything. Like his mother before him, he sharpened his spirit on the knife edge of solitude; stylites on their pillars, they saw loneliness, aloneness, oneness as divine states. The mother of all sailors is meant to be the sea, but Ambaro was more powerful, more tempestuous, more life-giving than any puddle of water. She gave life to my father over and over again, guarding him as Venus did Aeneas. She took his paltry little life and moulded it into something epic. Her love was violent, thick lava that she poured into her son's mouth, she cut her veins and transfused her hot wild blood into his soul. She was all that he needed in life and he remains here testament to what a mother's love can do, it turns wax into gold.

My father is an old sea-dog who sailed to freedom on a prison ship. Jama with his Somali Argonauts, who remembers each one of his ships like other people remember lost loves. Life as a sailor was ideal for him; wherever he was in the world, his steel leviathan would blast its horn and call him back to

his cabin. Even now, see-sawing engravings of galleons surf along his walls as we watch the exploits of Sinbad the Sailor. As a child I would plunge my hands into a King Edward Cigars box of coins, some ancient, some strange, some from countries, like ours, that don't exist anymore. In another box were cufflinks with glass stones that I mistook for rubies, emeralds, sapphires and coveted with all my heart; his golden pirate's treasure chest buried under old maps and certificates. He spun me briny old sea yarns, 'You see, I was being chased by deadly Zulu gangsters, tsotsis they called themselves. I ran along the wharf in Durban in the dead of night with them snapping at my heels, desperate to rob me and cut my throat, my heart was going BOOM BOOM, when a policeman came and fired at them. When the ship got to Venice I bought an ivory-handled pistol for our next journey to South Africa.'

Long ago, with a mouth full of clumsy braces, I would allow my father to take my hand and lead me on long purposeless walks. We usually ended up in Richmond Park, sitting amongst the broken trunks of oaks, elms and hawthorns pulled up by the great storm of eighty-seven. In our matching anoraks, we watched bats fly awkwardly from nook to cranny, and listened to the feral Somali parakeets that hid in the park, saying 'Maalin wanaagsan, Maalin wanaagsan, good day.' With fugitive African birds chattering above our heads, and the red and fallow deer hiding in the long grass, we could almost have been in the Serengeti or back in the Miyi. My father would reminisce about Eritrea, Aden, and the camel bells he played with as a child in the Somali desert. I would sullenly wait for him to finish; what could I imagine of life as a child soldier or as a street

boy in Aden, I was not allowed out to the corner shop alone. With a distant sigh, my old father Time would become quiet again and I would tell him what was on my mind, perhaps a new pair of trainers or a puffa jacket. I wanted to be a ragamuffin, never knowing that my father was the biggest ragamuffin, vagabond, buffalo soldier of them all.

And all around us the other vagabonds still pour in. Underneath lorries, stowed away in boats, falling out of the sky from jumbo jets. Even old grandmothers pack up their bags and start the tahrib. Those fortune men like my father who set their footprints in the sand, fifty, sixty, a hundred years ago, are the prophets who led the Israelites out of the wilderness. Whatever Pharaoh says, they will not be tied down, they will not be made slaves, they will make the whole world their promised land.

Aden, Yemen, October 1935

The muezzin's call startled Jama out of his dream, he pulled himself up to look at the sun rising over the cake-domed mosques and the gingerbread Adeni apartments glowing at their tips with white frosting. The black silhouettes of birds looped high in the inky sky, dancing around the few remaining stars and the full pregnant moon. The black planets of Jama's eyes roamed over Aden, the busy, industrial Steamer Point, Crater the sandstone old town, its curvaceous dun-coloured buildings merging into the Shum Shum volcanoes, the Ma'alla and Sheikh Usman districts, white and modern, between the hills and sea. Wood smoke and infants' cries drifted up as women took a break from preparing breakfast to perform their dawn prayers, not needing the exhortations of the old muezzin. A vulture's nest encircled the ancient minaret, the broken branches festooned with rubbish, the nest corrupting the neighbourhood with the stench of carrion. The attentive mother fed rotting morsels to her fragile chicks, her muscular wings unhunched and at rest beside her. Jama's own mother, Ambaro, stood by the roof edge softly singing in her deep and melodious voice. She sang before and after work,

not because she was happy but because the songs escaped from her mouth, her young soul roaming outside her body to take the air before it was pulled back into drudgery.

Ambaro shook the ghosts out from her hair and began her morning soliloquy, 'Some people don't know how much work goes into feeding their ungrateful guts, think they are some kind of suldaan who can idle about without a care in the world, head full of trash, only good for running around with trash. Well, over my dead body. I don't grind my backbone to dust to sit and watch filthy-bottomed boys roll around on their backs.'

These poems of contempt, these gabays of dissatisfaction, greeted Jama every morning. Incredible meandering streams of abuse flowed from his mother's mouth, sweeping away the mukhadim at the factory, her son, long-lost relatives, enemies, men, women, Somalis, Arabs, Indians into a pit of damnation.

'Get up, stupid boy, you think this is your father's house? Get up you fool! I need to get to work.'

Jama continued to loll around on his back, playing with his belly button. 'Stop it, you dirty boy, you'll make a hole in it.' Ambaro slipped off one of her broken leather sandals, and marched over to him.

Jama tried to flee but his mother dived and attacked him with stinging blows. 'Get up! I have to walk two miles to work and you make a fuss over waking up, is that it?' she raged. 'Go then, get lost, you good for nothing.'

Jama blamed Aden for making his mother so angry. He wanted to return to Hargeisa, where his father could calm her down with love songs. It was always at day break that Jama craved his father, all his memories were sharper in the clean morning light, his father's laughter and songs around the campfire, the soft, long-fingered hands enveloping his own.

Jama couldn't be sure if these were real memories or just dreams seeping into his waking life but he cherished these fragile images, hoping that they would not disappear with time. Jama remembered traversing the desert on strong shoulders, peering down on the world like a prince but already his father's face was lost to him, hidden behind stubborn clouds.

Along the dark spiral steps came the smell of anjeero; the Islaweynes were having breakfast. ZamZam, a plain, teenaged girl, used to bring Jama the mealtime scraps. He had accepted them for a while until he heard the boys in the family call him 'haashishki', the rubbish bin. The Islaweynes were distant relatives, members of his mother's clan, who had been asked by Ambaro's half brother to take her in when she arrived in Aden. They had done as promised but it soon became clear that they expected their country cousin to be their servant; cooking, cleaning and giving their family the appearance of gentility. Within a week Ambaro had found work in a coffee factory, depriving the Islaweynes of their new status symbol and unleashing the resentment of the family. Ambaro was made to sleep on the roof, she was not allowed to eat with them unless Mr Islaweyne and his wife had guests around, then they were all smiles and familial generosity, 'Oh Ambaro, what do you mean "can I"? What's ours is yours, sister!'

When Ambaro had saved enough to bring her six-year-old son to Aden, Mrs Islaweyne had fumed at the inconvenience and made a show of checking him for diseases that could infect her precious children. Her gold bangles had clanked around as she checked for nits, fleas, skin diseases; she shamelessly pulled up his ma'awis to check for worms. Even after Jama had passed her medical exam, she glared at him when he played with her children and whispered to them not to get

too familiar with this boy from nowhere. Five years later, Ambaro and Jama still lived like phantoms on the roof, leaving as few traces of their existence as possible. Apart from the neatly stacked piles of laundry that Ambaro washed and Jama pegged out to dry, they were rarely seen or heard by the family.

Ambaro left for the coffee factory at dawn and didn't return until dark, leaving Jama to either float around the Islaweyne home feeling unwelcome, or to stay out in the streets with the market boys. Outside the sky had brightened to a watery turquoise blue. Somali men asleep by the roadside began to rouse, their afros full of sand, while Arabs walked hand in hand towards the suq. Jama fell in behind a group of Yemenis wearing large gold-threaded turbans and beautiful, ivory-handled daggers in their belts. Jama ran his hands along the warm flanks of passing camels being led to market, their extravagant eyelashes batted in appreciation at his gentle stroke, and when they overtook him their swishing tails waved goodbye. Men and boys shuffled past ferrying vegetables, fruits, breads, meats, in bags, in their hands, on their heads, to and from the market, crusty flatbread tucked under their arms like newspapers hot off the press. Butterflies danced, enjoying their morning flutter before the day turned unbearably hot and they slept it off inside sticky blossoms. The smell of leather harnesses damp with human sweat, of incense lingering on skin from the night before filled Jama's nostrils. Leaning against the warm wall, Jama closed his eyes and imagined curling up in his mother's lap and feeling the reverberations of her songs as they bubbled up from deep within her body. He sensed someone standing over him. A small hand rubbed the top of his head and he opened his eyes to see Abdi and Shidane grinning down at him. Abdi was the nine-year-old, gappy-toothed

uncle of eleven-year-old gangster Shidane. Abdi held out a chunk of bread and Jama swallowed it down.

The black lava of the Shum Shum volcanoes loomed over them when they reached the beach. Market boys of all different hues, creeds and languages gathered at the beach to play, bathe and fight. They were a roll-call of infectious diseases, mangled limbs, and deformities. Jama called 'Shalom!' to Abraham, a shrunken Jewish boy who used to sell flowers door to door with him, Abraham waved and took a running leap into the water. Shidane's malnutrition-blond hair looked transparent in the sunlight and Abdi's head jiggled from side to side, too big for his paltry body, as he ran into the surf. Abdi and Shidane were two perfect sea urchins who spent their days diving for coins. Jama wanted them to take him out to sea so collected wooden planks washed up on the shore, and called the gali gali boys to attention.

'Go and find twine so we can go out to sea,' he ordered.

Jama sat on the seaweed-strewn sand while Abdi and Shidane tied the planks into a makeshift raft. Together they pushed the rickety contraption out to sea. 'Bismillah,' he whispered before they took off, holding on desperately while Abdi and Shidane propelled him forward. When Abdi and Shidane tired, they clambered on, panting beside him, their faces upturned to the rising sun. Jama turned on his back and smiled a contented smile, they floated gently on the young waves and linked arms, water droplets scattered over their skin like diamonds.

'Why don't you learn to swim, Jama?' Abdi asked. 'Then you can come pearl fishing with us. It's beautiful down there, all kinds of fish and animals, coral, shipwrecks, you could find a pearl worth a fortune.'

Shidane shifted position and the raft spun around with him. 'There aren't any pearls down there, Abdi, we've looked

everywhere, they're all gone, taken by the Arabs. Look at those stupid Yemenis, they don't deserve a boat like that,' sneered Shidane. 'If we had a gun we could take everything those fools had.'

Jama lifted his head up, he saw a sambuk hurrying back to port with crates piled up on its deck. 'Get a gun then,' he dared.

'Ya salam! You think I can't? I can make one, boy.'

Jama pulled himself up onto his elbows, 'What?'

'You heard me, I can make one. I've been watching the soldiers, some people are always active, always thinking. It's simple for someone like me to make these Ferengi things; you get a piece of hardwood, make a hole all the way through, get gunpowder, stuff it into the hole, then fill one end with pebbles and in the other put a lit string, then blow fools like those into the sea.'

'More likely you would blow your burnt futo into the sea,' chuckled Jama.

'Laugh all you like, you big-toothed Eidegalle donkey. I will be the mukhadim, if you are lucky you can be my coolie.'

'Yes! We could be shiftas of the sea, covered in gold, wallaahi everyone will shake when they see our ship,' enthused Abdi, firing imaginary bullets at the sun.

Jama felt water against his skin. 'Yallah, yallah, back to the beach! The twine is loosening,' he cried, as the planks fell apart.

Abdi and Shidane sprang into action, grabbing his arms and bearing him aloft like two well-trained dolphins.

Walking out into the dust and scorching heat, Jama instinctively headed for the warehouse district. He kicked a tin can down the streets of Crater, a town in the heart of a volcano, its hellish heat spilling people and cultures over its sides like a lava flow. Sunlight reflected against the tin roofs of the warehouses,

blinding him momentarily. The smell of tea, coffee, frankincense, myrrh swept up the hill and swathed him in a nauseating, heady mix. Reaching the first warehouse, bare-chested coolies chanted as they pushed heavy wooden crates onto the backs of lorries, slightly smaller crates onto the backs of camels and sacks onto donkeys. Standing outside Al-Madina coffee stores, Jama walked through the stone entrance and peered into the darkness, sunlight splintered through the tin roof, illuminating the dust rising from the coffee beans as they were thrown up and down to loosen the husks. A field of underpaid women in bright, flowery Somali robes were bent over baskets full of coffee beans, cleaning them ready for sale. Jama weaved around them looking for a woman with smallpox scars, copper eyes, canines dipped in gold and inky black hair. He found her in a corner, working on her own with a sky-blue scarf holding her hair back. She brought his head down to kiss his cheek, her soft freckly skin brushing against his.

Ambaro whispered in his ear, 'What are you doing here, Goode? This isn't a playground, what do you want?'

Jama stood in front of her, legs entangled like a flamingo's. 'I dunno, I was bored . . . do you have any change?' He hadn't been thinking of money but now he was too embarrassed to say he just wanted to see her.

'Keleb! You come to my place of work to hassle me for money? You think of no-one but yourself and may Allah curse you for it, get out now before the mukhadim sees you!'

Jama turned on his heels and ran out the door. He hid behind the warehouse but Ambaro found him, her rough dry hands pulled him against her. Her dress smelt of incense and coffee, he let his tears soak through to her skin.

'Goode, Goode, please, you're a big boy. What have I done

to you? Tell me? Tell me? Look at the life I'm living, can't you take pity on me?' Ambaro asked softly. She pulled his arms up and dragged him to a small wall facing the sea. 'Do you know why I call you Goode?'

'No,' lied Jama, hungry to hear of the time when he had a real family.

'When I was pregnant with you I grew incredibly large, my stomach stuck out like you wouldn't believe. People warned me that a young girl of seventeen would die giving birth to such a child, that you would tear my insides out, but I was happy, at peace, I knew I was expecting someone special. Following camels around is terrible work and I got slower and slower. I was often separated from my father's large caravan and would hobble with my swollen ankles until I caught up with the family. But maybe in the eighth month, I was so exhausted I had to stop even though I had lost sight of the last camel. There was an ancient acacia in a savannah called Gumburaha Banka, and I sat under the old tree to rest in the little shade it provided. I sat and listened to my heavy breath fall and rise, rise and fall, I was wearing a nomad's guntiino and the side of my stomach was exposed to the sun and breeze. Then suddenly I felt a smooth hand caress my back and move towards my bellybutton, I looked down in shock, and hoogayeh! There was not a hand but a huge mamba curling around my belly. I was scared its heavy body would crush you so I didn't move even one inch, but it stopped and laid its devilishly wise face against you and listened to your thumping heartbeat. All three of us were joined like that for what seemed like a lifetime until, having decided something, the snake flexed its sinews and slipped down my body, massaging my womb with its soft underbelly till with a flick of its tail it disappeared into the sand. I

wanted to name you Goode, meaning Black Mamba. Your father just laughed at me, but when you slithered out with your beautiful dark skin and your smell of earth I knew what your name was meant to be, I kept it as my special name for you.'

Jama melted in the warmth of his mother's words and he felt the liquid gold of love in his veins, he was silent not wanting to break the spell between them, and she carried on.

'I know I'm tough on you, sometimes too tough but do you know why I ask things of you? Things that you don't understand are good for you? It's because I have such high hopes, you are my good luck baby, you were born to be somebody, Goode. Do you know the year you were born became known as the year of the worm? Fat worms poked their noses out of the earth during the rainy season and came out to consume the grass, the trees, even our straw houses, until finished, they suddenly disappeared. Everyone thought it was a sign of the end but the elders said they had seen it before and it was barako as the rains were plentiful afterwards and our camels would breed fantastically. One old woman, Kissimee, told me that as my child would be born in the thick of that plague he would have the most beautiful luck, as if he had been born with the protection of all the saints and he would see the four corners of the world. I believed her because no one knew that woman to ever make a false prophecy.'

Despite the beauty of her words, Jama felt his mother was threading pearl after pearl of expectation into a noose that would sit loosely around his neck, ready for her to hang him one day. He pulled in close to her for an embrace and she wrapped her golden brown arms around his mahogany back, rubbing her fingers along his sharp spine.

'Let's go back home to Hargeisa, hooyo.'

'One day, when we have enough to go back with,' she said with a kiss on his head. Untying a knot at the bottom of her dress, she pulled out a paisa coin and gave it to Jama, 'See you back on the roof.'

'Yes, hooyo,' Jama replied and stood up ready to go. Grabbing his hand, his mother looked up at him. 'God protect you, Goode.'

Mrs Islaweyne had a problem with Ambaro, and she didn't inconvenience herself by concealing it. In the mother's long absences she went for the cub. When she realised in her sickly-sweet interrogations that Jama would never speak badly of his mother or let slip embarrassing secrets, she volunteered her own criticisms. 'What kind of woman leaves her child alone to roam the streets every day?' and 'I'm not surprised Somalis have a bad reputation, the way some of these newcomers dress, all naked arms, with their udders hanging out the sides.' The resentment was mutual and Ambaro and Jama mocked her behind her back. When Ambaro saw Mrs Islaweyne wrapping her nikaab around her face she would raise an eyebrow and sing in a bittersweet voice, 'Dhegdheer, Dhegdheero, yaa ku daawaan? Witch, oh witch, who will admire you?'

Dhegdheer was a strange, vain woman with short, plump limbs, always oiled from head to toe, her eyebrows drawn on thickly with kohl, a fat, hairy mole on her cheek blending into a luxurious moustache, small, swollen feet squeezed into shoes that Ambaro could never afford. Sometimes Dhegdheer would appear on their roof glaring at them for no particular reason, marking her territory. When she returned downstairs, Jama would copy her signature waddle and squint to perfection. 'Go eat yourself, witch!' he shouted when she was safely out of earshot.

'The one thing that woman is good at is breeding, she must have a highway between her legs, she gives birth to litters of two and three as if she was a stray bitch,' Ambaro would say, and she was right, Jama had counted eight children but behind every door there seemed to be more sleeping or crying. The older Islaweyne boys went to school and chattered away in Arabic, even at home. Jama had learnt a rough, street Arabic which they mocked, mimicking his bad grammar and slang in slow, imbecilic voices. Although ZamZam was not the most alluring of girls, Dhegdheer had her eye on one of the wealthy Somali men who imported livestock from Berbera and wanted her daughter to appear a delicate flower cultivated in the most refined of settings.

Jama heard Dhegdheer complaining to her husband that Ambaro and her guttersnipe son lowered the honour of their family. 'How can we be first class when we have people like that in our own home?'

Mr Islaweyne grunted and waved her away, but it was clear to Jama that his place in the home was precarious. As Jama spent more time on the streets to avoid Dhegdheer and her sons, the more their complaints about him increased.

'Kinsi said she saw him stealing from the suq.'

'Khadar, next door, said that he hangs around the camel mukhbazar joking with hashish smokers.'

Jama did joke with the hashish smokers but it was because he did not have brothers, cousins or a father to protect him like the other children. He knew his powerlessness so did not argue or make enemies. He had recently befriended Shidane and Abdi who were kind and generous, but friendships between boys of different clans tended to form and collapse like constellations of new stars forged in the heat of Aden, never lasting.

In the apartment the cold war between the women was thawing and simmering in the summer heat. Ambaro, tired and frustrated after work, became more combative. She used the kitchen at the same time as Dhegdheer, helped herself to more flour and ghee, picked out whichever glass was clean instead of the ones set aside for them, and left the laundry waiting for days at a time. Even with Jama she was like a kettle whistling to the boil; one day she wanted him to work, another day to attend school, another day to stay on the roof and keep away from those market boys, and yet another day she didn't want to see him ever again. Jama at first tried to soothe her, massaging away all the knots in her body with his keen, sprightly fingers but soon even his touch irritated her and he left her to spend the nights with Shidane and Abdi. He returned every few days to wash, eat a little and check on his mother, until one evening he came in to find Ambaro and Dhegdheer in the kitchen, bosoms nearly touching, nails and teeth bared, ready to pounce on one another. From what he could tell through the shouts of 'Slut born of sluts!' and 'Hussy!', Dhegdheer was ordering his mother out of the kitchen and she was cursing back and standing her ground, looking as if she was ready to spit in Dhegdheer's face. Jama grabbed his mother's arm and tried to pull her away. Dhegdheer's sons, older and stronger than Jama entered the kitchen, unable to ignore the shouting women any longer. Ambaro and Dhegdheer were now grappling with each other, pushing and shoving amongst the hot steaming pots. Jama hustled the pans off the fire and put them out of harm's way. Ambaro was younger, stronger and a better fighter than the housebound Dhegdheer and she pushed the older woman into a corner, daring Mrs Islaweyne to lay a finger on her.

'Soobax, soobax, come on,' jeered Ambaro.