

Two Trees

Sometimes when the sun drooped low in the sky, and the crickets began their song, Akello would sit under the old mango tree at the edge of the village. There he sat for hours listening to the old, old woman. Cloud-head they called her, as her white hair and tall stories lightened the dark nights.

“Tell me a story *Nneochie*, grandma” he said to her. “Why is that forest of baobab trees so close to the village?” he asked.

“Well now” she said stretching out her legs and settling down for the story. “This vast land of ours is so old, older than me, older than even the trees.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice.

“And close by here is the land of the earliest garden, where the first people came alive. But even before man was shaped out of the very earth, two special trees were created. And they are still here!

Not so very long ago, a boy from this village discovered them. Lencho he’s called, as brave as a lion and an endless wanderer too. Every evening his mother would spend hours calling him home before the sun set.

And one day he didn’t come home. No, not until the night was as dark as a hole. He told the story to only me; he knew no-one else in the village would believe him.”

“What happened, *Nneochie*?” asked Akello eagerly.

“On his wanderings through the bush, he stumbled across an old garden with broken gates, crumbling walls and overgrown paths. The place looked so wonderfully undiscovered, and as he stared, a sudden breeze waved a tree branch, beckoning him in.

Lencho sneaked past the snoring gate keeper, and wandered into the mysterious place. All paths seemed to lead to the very centre of the

garden so he clambered over the high grass and bush that blocked the path. There, in the heart of the garden, stood two colossal trees.

The branches were bending low, inviting him to climb, so he did. Up and up he climbed, as far as he could go until he was at the very top. It was then he saw the fruit.

It was unlike any fruit he had seen before: red, round and soft. He saw it and realised how hungry he was so he pulled it off and bit into it. The sweet juice squirted out, running down his chin and cheeks. *Mmm mmm!* It tasted delicious! So he took another bite.

'Urgggh!' he cried spitting it out. At the centre, the fruit was rotten and stinking. His stomach heaved up vomit. His head started spinning so he grabbed tight to the branches and closed his eyes. Then he had a vision, real and frightening.

And in this vision he saw people. People everywhere, here and in far off lands cutting down trees for land they could farm, for fuel they could burn, or wood to carve into tables and chairs.

Everyone was thinking of what they need today, but nobody was thinking of tomorrow. So tomorrow came, and the trees were dying out. People who had been friends started fighting over who would get the last few trees left.

The air was thinner as fewer trees were making precious oxygen. Those who were ill or weak or young gasped for air. And on the farmland, fertile soil blew away in the slightest breeze because there were no roots to hold it in place. Food was scarce; people became hungrier and hungrier, and fought over scraps. So, bit by bit, one by one, as the trees died out, so too did the humans.

Lencho couldn't bare the dream any more. He forced his eyes open and clambered down the tree as fast as his shaky legs would carry him. He paused at the bottom breathing deeply. It was just a dream he told himself. Just a dream.

He looked up at the strange tree. The branches blocked out the sun, as it towered above him. Shuddering, he moved away towards the other tree.

This other tree looked warm and inviting. Sunlight filtered through its branches, and the fruit hung big and ripe, and just out of reach. He climbed up to pick one, but it was just too high. He climbed up again, and again, and again until he was at the very top.

He stared in wonder at the view. The garden looked smaller, and the river beyond was near. He laughed, and took the nearest fruit.

This fruit looked different from the other tree's; it was golden and oval, like a soft egg. *Mmm mmm!* It tasted so good! He ate another, and another and another until his belly was so full he could hardly move. As he lay back against a branch, he fell into a peaceful sleep.

“What do you think happened next?” asked *Nneochie*.

“He had another dream?” guessed Akello.

She smiled and nodded. “Right. But a better dream. And in the dream, every child on their birthday plants a tree near their village. And the village people protect the children's trees. They don't cut them down and they gather around to stop others cutting them down.

And every village did the same, across the world the children planting forests that grow and grow. And do you know, for every tree a child plants, the tree can plant more! Soon, the air is rich again, people can breathe easily and the soil stays in the field, growing delicious food for the village people.

Lencho woke up with a start. *Where am I?* he thought. The sun was low, and it was getting dark, so he jumped down and down and down through the branches, sped past the sleeping gate keeper, raced along the tracks and paths through the bush until he saw his village again.

Quietly, he sneaked into his bed, but his mother saw him and held him so tightly. “My son, my son” she cried “I thought you had gone for

good.” Lencho couldn’t sleep all night thinking of all he had seen in his strange day dreams.

“What did he do next, *Nneochie*? Did he plant a tree?” asked Akello.

“He did Akello, every birthday he planted a baobab tree outside his village. He trained his Daddy’s dogs to guard them. People laughed at him; ‘look at that crazy boy’ they called. But his friends joined in, planting baobab trees on their birthdays too.

And over the years, the forest grew and grew. And as that forest grew, all the other trees around the village were cut down one by one as people needed land to farm or wood for their fires. And people started to complain that their lungs were sore.

Then, one terrible year, a great wind came from nowhere, snatching all the soil from the farmland and carrying it far away. It smashed the wooden homes into splinters, scattering them across the bush. People were terrified. They had lost their shelter, their food, their cattle, and they had nowhere to go.

When the angry wind died, they gathered as one and asked ‘what do we do now?’ Lencho, still a young boy, stepped forward and said:

“Come and use our forest. We can rebuild our houses among the shelter of the trees, where the wind blows only gently. And there is good soil held in place by their roots. We can plant vegetables among the trees, and have enough food again. And the air is good there. You can breathe freely.”

The people were astonished. But this time they didn’t laugh. Lencho’s mother started to clap slowly, then another clap started, and another until the whole village was applauding the boy.

“My son, so brave and clever!” boasted Lencho’s mother. And everyone agreed.

Soon, everyone was helping to find broken pieces of wood to rebuild the houses. As the men were sawing and fixing the wood, the women planted vegetables among the baobab trees. Soon, the whole village

was replanted, and they had a fire and a feast to celebrate, with dancing into the night.

So that was how those old baobab trees saved our village. I look at them sometimes, and think ‘don’t they look like people! Happy people, with bellies full of water, and grateful arms lifted up to the heavens. Surely, surely, we are blessed among all the villages of Africa.”

The sun had almost sunk completely when the old woman turned to the boy. “You are clever too, like your father. One day your day will come.” She placed her hand upon his head. “Now run home to your mother”.

Akello jumped up and ran home. Papa was waiting; he picked Akello up and spun him around. “Where have you been, my boy, out wandering in the bush, like me?”

“Learning about those trees!” Akello smiled and pointed to the baobab forest.

Papa looked surprised. “Oh, don’t believe all of Old Cloud-head’s stories...” he said, laughing. “You never know which ones are really true.”

Word Count: 1499