

Netalixi Fau

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The ancient woman, Iker, seemed to rise out of the earth's primordial sleep. She looked away into the distance where the sparse trees gave an illusion of greenness and melted into the blue sky of the horizon. She was half-naked. The outlines of her rib cage were cicatrised into her withered chest. When she was still a child, some artist of the village had nipped her skin tightly between wooden splints and cut into her young flesh with a saw-shaped knife made of bone. Each day the torture was renewed as they poured cold water over the wounds until the scars of the design had healed and become permanent. She sat straight-backed now on her mat outside the Professor's door in the shade of the rakuba.¹ The stick-thin legs stretched out before her were neatly wrapped in a faded cloth. She scooped up a bowlful of merissa² from the large clay pot next to her, drank it down with eyes closed and replaced the bowl as lid. She then continued working her way through a pile of korofo lubia³ twisting the stalks off and dropping the leaves into the bowl on the other side of her.

There was an unspoken contest between Iker and the Professor as to who would be the first one to carry the other's bones; although Iker herself was hardly more than a skeleton now.

- Where are you going so early?

The Professor was dressed ready to go out with a book under his arm. Iker guarded him like a priestess watching her cauldron, in whose sympathetic magic the flies were rendered completely senseless to the exquisite agony of their imminent death. She was becoming as nosy as his wife Asiya, poking her head into his room even when he was asleep and coughing loudly to wake him up.

- Useless man, it's me who should be resting my bones, not you.

Irritated at being disturbed, he would tell her,

- Go outside! Go outside!

He found her one day repeating this to herself over and over, her face cracked with glee and revealing more than a few missing teeth. Her delight in her mastery of English was increased still further when he explained that this was the name of the area of informal housing, Atlabara, on the outskirts of Juba where people had been moved to make way for government housing.

- Ha! So you are not dead yet Iker. If you must know where I'm going, I'm going to pray. To pray. Where else can I go at this ungodly hour?

In protest at such levity, the old woman made the sign of the cross.

- You're not supposed to go anywhere. The doctor told you. I'll tell him when I see him.

The Professor took the hint and slipped her fifty piastres.

He didn't have far to go. Prayer then breakfast, he thought. Or perhaps it should be breakfast then prayer. He felt for his trouser pocket. Damn. I'm a fool. Why did I give that old witch my coin. Pray for breakfast. He gripped the book tighter under his arm and found his shirt pocket where he heard the reassuring crackle of paper. Wallahi. Not so stupid. I forgot that one. The shirt was far from clean. He'd obviously secreted a note there for a rainy day. It had rained today. The first rainfall on the cooling earth. Cause for celebration. Spit on the seeds. Sorghum drinks the rain. Was that the shirt he was wearing when they'd taken him to the hospital last time? Revolting people. Couldn't let him sleep it off peacefully. What a nightmare. He shuddered and scanned the tops of the fences down the road. Behind one of them a faded rag of pink cloth was suspended from a slightly bent bamboo pole. Thank you Lord for the food we are about to eat. He quickened his step and swept a hand over his shirt in the general direction of his flies to check they were done up. There were few worshippers inside. He sat on an empty bench and put his book down beside him. He tapped his pocket and winked as the lady of the house eyed him suspiciously. And five minutes later he was looking at a half drowned red stencilled flower in the muddy dregs swirling around at the bottom of his chipped white enamel bowl. Made in China. He turned it upside down and the remaining liquid fell on a large flat stone embedded in the ground. Clutching his book he saluted the stone with a belch and stood up.

- Alhamdullilahi my grandmother.

As he came out into the sunshine his foot slipped on the loose stones and his book and he parted company. He tumbled headlong into a deep ditch where the day before a dead donkey had come to rest. In the hot dry air its belly was already swollen tight as a drum like a cosmic pregnancy about to come to term. Doubtless full of worms.

Fortunately the enigmatic sphincter was closed. He unlocked his own house of winds and felt his soul lighten. The donkey's huge organ was erect and pointing prophetically to the sky where a bright star could be seen. He was lying in heaven. It must be heaven. Where else can day change so swiftly to night? The crescent moon looked down at him from the blackness of stars as if it wanted to say something.

- Is this yours?

A familiar voice was speaking in his ear. He opened his eyes again cautiously.

- Aha! Hakim. You find me here.

- Want a lift? I'm going to the hospital.

- No, no. I was just . . . I mean . . . I slipped on that book there.

Hakim handed him the book and dusted him down as he climbed out of the ditch.

- I am not glad to see you like this.

- I was just going to classes you know.

The Professor beamed as if suddenly inspired and pointed to the title on the cover, "Catastrophe Theory." Hakim eyed him sharply.

- Classes you say? You'd better go home and take that damn thing off. I'll be round later when I've paid my respects at the clinic. This is the last time, Professor. I'm serious. You can't go on like this. Just because you've quarrelled with your wife.

The Professor looked down at his shirt. It seemed a little long and his trousers had disappeared. It wasn't that dirty though, just a little dusty where he'd tripped. His feet emerged from the bottom of the jellabia in sandals. Not his. He frowned and tried to remember. He put the book back under his arm thinking it needed some sellotape. That's it. The sellotape was in his desk in the tukul. Or at least that's where he'd left it. He'd just go and check and be back for when Hakim came. He stared mystified at his clothes again. Does he think my wife is going to wash and iron for me. She who rages upon the mountain. She's got her own house now. She'll be repairing the roof. Well, I don't see how I'm going to tuck this shirt in, it's devilishly long. I haven't got any more. Iker put them all on the wire fence to dry so they wouldn't blow away and now they're full of holes from the barbs. Rending the veil of Isis. Go home and change first. How lightly religion sits on man. I put it on. I take it off. I have become a man of dust. I never told her I was an angel. If I was I would be immortal. I wouldn't have to drink. She calls me a buffoon. A buffoon. I am a philosopher, a poet, a mathematician. I would have written books, then my words would have been immortal. They would have taken wing, flying like angels. But they are lost. Even my personal library keeps falling to the bottom of the river. What a slut I am. Wearing this dress, to make me squat like a woman. No wonder I fell. I should be putting on trousers. It's immoral. You close your eyes to pray and suddenly everything is Inshallah. She says I am the King of Disaster. Love can be cured but this divorce is going to last forever. Let the moon cry for me. One day . . . the ruler of the Southern sky. And then Hakim joins in the tirade. He says I am on a collision course with disaster. But how shall I endure thirst? I am not a stone. He was hungry now, too. His stomach had embezzled all that alcohol and the rumbles were becoming ominously mutinous.

My daughter asks me "Daddy, why do all your stories end in disaster?" I am not a lamb to be rescued. Do I look like a lamb? Anyway, I don't want to be rescued. It's not the end of the world. I am of the opinion that it's something in the water. I heard myself falling into the ditch. The sound of a body falling. The water flows from my body like a sluice each evening and every day the level in the ditch rises. I was trying to find a solution for this problem of the Sudan but I've run out of calculations. Hakim thinks I am just a drunken dog. They can think what they like. I used to write to those scientific journals. Fancy bumping into the Beast of Set. Seventeen years. How quickly we forget. Myself, the donkey and the moon. I seem to have lost my coherence in the Intelligence Department. The state of my brain. Hakim asks me every time, "I hope you are well," and laments the lack of soap on my clothes. A packet of soap. I wish I'd asked my wife how to whitewash. How long does it take to obliterate bitterness. If she says I am guilty then I am. I was a miserable husband. Marriage is not a pesky little difficulty. She is at war with me. I am fighting for my very survival. Can't keep my house in order.

It was still early. There was hardly anyone on the road. Just a few children running back inside pulling up their shorts, imagining no one knew what they were doing. He found himself facing the old woman.

- Forgotten something?

She cackled, nodding her head at the chair over which a pair of black trousers was neatly hung. He pretended not to know what she was talking about, walked straight past her into the house, threw the book on the desk and lay down on his bed.

- I'm just having a nap. The pain is troubling me. Wake me up when Hakim comes.

Iker waited till he was snoring then took the remaining change out of the pocket in the jellabia and went off to Konyo-konyo to buy some dura.⁴

Notes

Note on title: *Netalixi Fau* translates to "cooling earth."

¹ shelter

² beer

³ bean leaves

⁴ sorghum