

Killing Trees

A short story

I killed my first tree when I was in class three.

My parents were secondary school teachers. My father taught Biology and Agriculture but his love shone more in football because the first thing he ever taught me was neither Biology nor Agriculture but the reason why a football team had eleven players. My mother taught English Literature and Christian Religious Education, but we all knew Jesus was like that green brooch she wore to church, she called upon him when she wanted to but when it came to a beating or a tongue lashing, Jesus, just like Father took a backseat often raising the newspaper so high you'd forget there was a person hidden behind those leaves.

We were at the table. Mom had prepared my favorite dish, ugali and omena, for supper. My sister was eager to share the events of the day starting with the unnecessary fact that I had lost the pencil given to me by Mom that morning. Lowering my head did not help for if there were two things Mom hated was one wearing your shame on your face and two, not answering a question that she asked you not to answer. It always came in bouts of 'don't talk back at me,' and in a span of three seconds she would demand 'don't you have anything to say for yourself?' My sister, two years older but never wiser than me had perfected the art of silence when Mom confronted her. She would keep her lips tightly shut for days until Mom would beg her to talk by buying her patco. I on the other hand would let my tears do the talking and when it got too much for her, the sniffing and the blowing of the nose would make her send me to my room without supper or a treat.

Mom pulled me out of the chair, the piece of ugali I had pinched still stuck in the palm of my hand, she took her red, Ever-ready torch and we walked to the backyard. She pointed the torch at the big Jacaranda tree in our backyard, the light falling on its large stem. I wanted to tell her that a tree had three parts: roots, stem and branches.

“Did you know that a tree has to die just so you can get a pencil?”

I shook my head and looked down. She pulled my ear, the sting of her fingers forcing me to lift my head and get on my toes so it would not sting as much. “I will not raise a child who does not care for living things.”

How was I to know that trees died to give us pencils? How did they die? Did we kill them to get pencils or did we just wait for the trees to die and then we would pick pencils from where they were? Why did trees grow while pencils shrunk?

Why did we water trees but sharpen pencils? Mom sent me to bed that night saying I was not worthy of her food if I could not look after a brand new pencil. When I asked for a glass of water, my elder sister was quick to add that if I had water before going to bed I would wet the bed. She did not want to sleep next to me if there was a chance that I would wet the bed. I cried myself to sleep keeping my tears to myself and not sniffing because Mom would come and beat me.

In the morning as we left for school, Mom packed my books and lunch but she did not give me a pencil. I could not bring myself to ask for one because in her eyes I saw the wrath that would befall me if I dared to ask.

When I got to class, Mrs. Ochieng' asked us to pull out our books and open a blank page ready for dictation. English was my favorite subject because when I got all ten words right during dictation, Mrs Ochieng would give me two Eclairs sweets. As she walked to her desk, I raised my hand and asked her for a pencil.

"Where is your pencil?"

"I lost it."

"How did you lose it?"

"I do not know, Teacher, it was in my bag when I was in school but when I got home, it was not there. I looked everywhere but could not find it."

"Did you tell your parents about it?"

"They were not home, Teacher. I will tell them today, so, can I borrow your pencil, please? I promise I will give it back."

"Come and take the pencil."

So, I wrote using Mrs. Ochieng's pencil and I gave it back to her during break time. She looked at me and told me to tell my parents to give me a pencil. It was the first lie I told Mrs. Ochieng' but how would she know about Mom pulling my ear for killing a tree?

Would she buy me another pencil if I gave her a tree? How would I find one tree and carry it home to her? I spent the whole day thinking about trees but in our school, there were no trees. Arya Primary School was one of those schools in the middle of a busy

town, if you were a bird, like the noisy black and white ones that walked like people, you would see that our school was in the middle of high rise developments. We walked through Patel Flats often buying ice from the Indian lady's house in block A, or mabuyu from the old man with brown teeth who lived on the second floor in Block F. During break time we would all rush to the playing field where if you threw a ball the person right behind you would catch it, or it would hit a window in classes five, six or seven, where they stayed in while we played and played while we went back to class. My sister said that we were babies and they were too big to share the playground with us. She would sneer at this, her eyes looking at me like I should not utter a word lest I lose my voice, and she would shrug her shoulder and give Mercy and Beryl high fives.

I wondered if I too would get my own Mercy, Beryl, but I never spoke of this in her presence. She did not know me in school and I had to live as though she did not exist. It was during these break times that we would make fun of the two schools that shared a fence with our school, there was M. M. Shah primary where they shared desks and Lake primary where they constantly carried jericans of water to school every morning. Our uniform was the best of the three even though all of us made use of a primary color, I knew that red was the best and only color to ever matter.

When evening came, I sat in the corner of the room going through my books, because I did not want Mom asking me about school. I did not want to tell her about getting two Eclairs for proper spelling. My Sister was doing her homework, playing

with her pencil, poking me with it when no one was watching and sticking her tongue at me.

However, Dad came home before Mom and called me to their room. I made my way to him counting my steps hoping Mom would come before he too, punished me for losing a pencil.

“Daddy, I did not mean to lose the pencil Mom gave me.”

“Do you know what kind of pencil she gave you?”

“A long one, it was red and black and it wrote nicely, Mrs. Ochieng’ said so.”

“No, she gave you a Staedler pencil.”

“So, did it come from a Staedler tree? Because Mom said that trees die so I can have a pencil, but I have never heard of a Staedler tree.”

“No, a Staedler is one of the best pencils you could ever use. It is manufactured in Germany and it is the best of the best, just like you always say that Pele is a good football player, a Staedler pencil is one of the best and it is not easily affordable so very few people have it.”

“I did not mean to lose the pencil Daddy. I tried telling Mom but she did not want to hear it.”

“You need to be very careful with what you are trusted with. Mom is simply making sure that you know what is right, so here’s a pencil. I got you another Staedler and you

will take good care of this one, because if you lose it, then you will have to explain yourself to me.”

“Thanks Daddy, I promise, I will not lose it.”

I did not say a word to my Mother about the pencil that my Father gave me that evening. She saw me writing using a new pencil but never asked where I got it from. I would not get it past her because Mom knew everything, like the time when I wanted to steal sugar from the kitchen and she yelled from the sitting room “Thieves are always caught and burned with a tyre around their neck!” There was also the time when my sister and I beat up Patty of house number sixty eight and when her mother came we denied it saying Patty had insulted us and we just pinched her.

I hated killing trees because they were big and fun to climb, like the mango tree in our backyard. For years, I would look outside, waiting to see if the Jacaranda and Mango trees would die just so as to see what their demise was like. Did they get funerals? Did people attend their burials and cry out in anguish for having lost such great trees? I wanted to ask my sister if there were other ways of killing trees aside from losing pencils, but she never liked it when I asked questions. I also did not want to be pinched or kicked for disturbing her, but even so, I needed to know how trees died.

As my luck would have it, no one ever told me and I was never bold enough to ask.

The second time I was accused of killing not a tree, but trees, was when I was in the University. I had just returned from my Saturday treat which unlike my colleagues

involved books and not drinking or partying. My elder sister looked at my bag and asked “what did you get?” and when she looked inside, she shook her head, clicked her tongue, the sound of it reminded me of a judge banging his gavel. “Books! Are you going to eat books? Do you seriously intend to keep killing trees without making the effort of planting even one?”

“I love reading books and besides, is it not better to read than to go out drinking and dancing every weekend?”

“If you have to utter reading and partying in the same sentence to justify your actions, then you are a fool, for the two never stand on the same stage and you’d think that you learn that from all those books you read!”

I looked at my sister and looked away because she had reduced me to an eight year old girl who felt guilty for committing a crime that she was unaware of. However, this time around, I kept buying books from vendors along the streets of Nairobi because I knew how trees died, I also knew what Kenya had done to her forests and what she did to keep my love for books and writing alive. I would have given it one answer, but why give one when you could give two: imports and tax.

No one accused me of killing trees because I never let them. When someone would lean towards the conversation, I would do what my Mother taught me, look at them- bore my eyes into them and pick something they seemed to cherish and tear it apart. My sister stopped when I told her that her foundation was enough to buy not

three new books but thirty books off the vendors in the streets, and that translated into a library for her son. My friend stopped when I told her that one pair of heels was enough to buy me twenty books and lunch at Java while at it.

However, my Mother never stopped, she would turn to me and ask “so what?” and I would be reduced to that eight year old again, right when I thought I was winning the argument. So, when I lost my pencil at the office, I had to summon the courage and finally ask her “why did you accuse me of killing a tree when I lost the Staedler pencil you gave me back in class three?”

She laughed.

My Mother’s laughter always sounded better over the phone. It was smooth, rich, never ending, just like the many lessons she taught us while growing up.

“Oh, so you still remember that?”

“I never forgot it.”

“Well, you should, because you never know the value of something until you appreciate what it took to make it valuable to you.”

“Wait, so you are saying that I never appreciated the fact that you gave me a Staedler pencil because you spent so much to buy it for me?”

“All these years and you still don’t get it, Achieng’, it was never about the brand but of what value the pencil was to you. You loved writing and asking about words. You

would write down words everywhere you went and without knowing you would lose pencils, so many pencils, I got tired of buying something that I knew you would lose because you were so engrossed in getting the words down on paper. You had to learn to value what you had and that is why I told you about killing trees. I did not accuse you of killing a tree, where would you get that?"

"Don't mind me Mama, someone just stole my pencil from my desk and it reminded me of that incident."

So, just like that, I knew what crime I had committed, but a part of me could not help but wonder for how long I'd been killing trees and why I continued to kill them even after knowing about it.

I could ask my Mother, but between you and me, she's not going to take it kindly. She hated the last book I wrote and now she says I play around with words, writing and erasing things that matter only to leave those that don't.

The only thing I wish I could stop is killing trees.

About the Author

Dora is wandering somewhere along the shores of Lake Victoria as you read this.

She's the author of The Currents Series. Visit her blog: www.nilichoandika.blog