



TEKAYO

The period of short rains was just starting in a semi-arid part of the Sudan. The early-morning mist had cleared, and faint blue smoke rose from the ground as the hot sun touched the surface of the wet earth.

"People in the underworld are cooking."

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The children shouted, as they pelted one another with wet sand.

"Come on, Opija," Tekayo shouted to his son. "Give me a hand, I must get the cows to the river before it is too hot."

Opija hit his younger brother with his last handful of sand, and then ran to help his father. The cows were soon out of the village and Tekayo picked up the leather pouch containing his lunch and followed them.

They had not gone far from home when Tekayo saw an eagle flying above his head with a large piece of meat in its claws. The eagle was flying low, searching for a suitable spot to have its meal. Tekayo promptly threw his stick at the bird. He hit the meat and it dropped to the ground. It was a large piece of liver, and fresh blood was still oozing from it. Tekayo nearly threw the meat away, but he changed his mind. What was the use of robbing the eagle of its food only to throw it away? The meat looked good: it would supplement his vegetable lunch wonderfully. He wrapped the meat in a leaf and pushed it into his pouch.

They reached a place where there was plenty of grass. Tekayo allowed the cows to graze while he sat under an *ober* tree watching the sky. It was

not yet lunchtime, but Tekayo could not wait. The desire to taste that meat was burning within him. He took out the meat and roasted it on a log fire under the *ober* tree. When the meat was cooked he ate it greedily with millet bread which his wife had made the previous night.

"My, what delicious meat!" Tekayo exclaimed. He licked the fat juice that stained his fingers, and longed for a little more. He threw away the bitter herbs that were the rest of his lunch. The meat was so good, and the herbs would merely spoil its taste.

The sun was getting very hot, but the cows showed no desire to go to the river to drink. One by one they lay down in the shade, chewing the cud. Tekayo also became overpowered by the afternoon heat. He rested against the trunk and slept.

While asleep, Tekayo had a dream. He was sitting before a log fire roasting a large piece of liver like the one he had eaten earlier. His mouth watered as he watched rich fat from the roasting meat dropping into the fire. He could not wait, and although the meat was not completely done, he removed it from the fire and cut it up with his hunting knife. But just as he was about to take the first bite, he woke up.

Tekayo looked around him, wondering what had happened to the meat. Could it be that he was dreaming? "No, no, no," he cried. "It was too vivid to be a dream!" He sat upright and had another look around, as if by some miracle he might see a piece of liver roasting on the log fire beside him. But there was nothing. All he saw were large roots of the old tree protruding above the earth's surface like sweet potatoes in the sandy soil.

The cattle had wandered a long way off. Tekayo got up and followed them. They reached the riverbank, and the thirsty cows ran to the river. While the cows drank, Tekayo sat on a white stone cooling his feet and gazing lazily at the swollen river as it flowed mightily toward the plain.

Beyond the river stood the great Ghost Jungle. A strong desire for the rich meat came back to Tekayo, and he whispered, "The animal with that delicious liver must surely be in that jungle." He sat there for a while, thinking. The temptation to start hunting for the animal nagged him. But he managed to suppress it. The afternoon was far spent and they were a long way from home.

The next morning Tekayo left home earlier than usual. When his wife begged him to wait for his lunch, he refused. He hurried from home, taking his hunting spears with him.

Tekayo made it impossible for the cows to graze. He rushed them along,

lashing at any cow that lingered in one spot for long. They reached the edge of the Ghost Jungle and there he left the cows grazing unattended. Tekayo could not see any path or trail leading into the Ghost Jungle. The whole place was a mass of thick bush and long grass covered with the morning dew. And except for the sounds of mating birds, there was a weird silence in the jungle that frightened him. But the vehement desire within him blindly drove him on, through the thick wet grass.

After walking for some time, he stood and listened. Something was racing toward him. He turned round to look, and sure enough a big impala was running frantically toward him. Warm blood rushed through Tekayo's body, and he raised his spear to kill the animal. But the spear never landed. He came face-to-face with a big leopardess that was chasing the impala. The leopardess roared at Tekayo several times, challenging him, as it were, to a duel. But Tekayo looked away, clutching the spear in his trembling hand. There was no one to fight and the beast went away after her prey.

"What a bad start," Tekayo said slowly and quietly when his heart beat normally again. "That wildcat will not leave me alone now."

He started to walk back toward the plain, following the trail he had made. The roaring leopardess had taken the life out of him.

He saw another trail that cut across the forest. He hesitated a little, and then decided to follow it, leaving his own. The trail got bigger and bigger, and without any warning Tekayo suddenly came upon a baby wildebeest which was following a large flock grazing at the foot of a hill. He killed it without any difficulty. He skinned the animal and extracted its liver, leaving the rest of the carcass.

Tekayo returned to the herd, and he sat down to roast the meat on a log fire. When the meat was cooked he took a bite and chewed it hurriedly. But he did not swallow it: he spat it all out! The liver was as bitter as the strong green herbs given to constipated children. The back of his tongue was stinging as if it had been burned. Tekayo threw the rest of the meat away and took his cows home.

He arrived home tired and disappointed; and when his young wife set food before him, he refused to eat. He pretended that he had stomachache and did not feel like eating. That night Tekayo was depressed and in low spirits. He did not even desire his young wife, who slept by his side. At dawn the young wife returned to her hut disappointed, wondering why the old man had not desired her.

The doors of all the huts were still closed when Tekayo looked out

They milked in silence until one of the little girls came to fetch some milk for preparing vegetables.

At suppertime the male members of the family sat around the log fire waiting and talking. One by one, baskets of millet meal and earthen dishes of meat and vegetables arrived from different huts. There was fish, dried meat, fried white ants, and herbs. A little food was thrown to the ground, to the ancestors, and then they started eating. They compared and contrasted the deliciousness of the various dishes they were having. But Tekayo kept quiet. All the food he tasted that evening was bitter as bile.

When the meal was over, the adults told stories of war and the clans to the children, who listened attentively. But Tekayo was not with them: he was not listening. He watched the smoky clouds as they raced across the sky.

"Behind those clouds, behind those clouds, rests Okenyu, my great-grandfather. Please! Please!" Tekayo beseeched him. "Please, Father, take this longing away from me. Give me back my manhood that I may desire my wives. For what is a man without this desire!"

A large cloud covered the moon, giving the earth temporary darkness. Tears stung Tekayo's eyes, and he dismissed the family to sleep. As he entered his own hut, a woman was throwing small logs on the fire.

He offered many secret prayers to the departed spirits, but the craving for the mysterious liver never left him. Day after day he left home in the morning, taking his cows with him. And on reaching the jungle, he left them unattended while he hunted. The rough and disappointed life that he led soon became apparent to the family. He suddenly became old and disinterested in life. He had nothing to tell his sons around the evening fire, and he did not desire his wives. The sons of Tekayo went to Lakech and told her, "Mother, speak to Father—he is sick. He does not talk to us, and he does not eat. We don't know how to approach him."

Though Lakech had passed the age of child-bearing and no longer went to Tekayo's hut at night, she was his first wife, and he loved her. She therefore went and asked him, "Man, what ails you?" Tekayo looked at Lakech, but he could not look into her eyes. He looked at her long neck, and instead of answering her question he asked her, "Would you like to get free from those heavy brass rings around your neck?"

"Why?" Lakech replied, surprised.

"Because they look so tight."

"But they are not tight," Lakech said softly. "I would feel naked without them."

And Tekayo looked away from his wife. He was longing to tell Lakech everything, and to share with her this maddening craving that was tearing his body to pieces. But he checked himself. Lakech must not know: she would not understand. Then he lied to her.

"It is my old indigestion. I have had it for weeks now. It will soon pass."

A mocking smile played on Lakech's lips, and Tekayo knew that she was not convinced. Some visitors arrived, and Lakech left her husband.

Tekayo hunted for many months, but he did not succeed in finding the animal with the delicious liver.

One night, as he lay awake, he asked himself where else he could hunt. And what animal would he be looking for? He had killed all the different animals in the Ghost Jungle. He had risked his life when he killed and ate the liver of a lion, a leopard, and a hyena, all of which were tabooed by his clan.

A little sleep came to Tekayo's heavy eyes and he was grateful. But then Apii stood beside his bed, calling: "Grandpa, Grandpa, it is me." Tekayo sat up, but the little girl was not there. He went back to sleep again. And Apii was there calling him: "Can't you hear me, Grandpa?"

Tekayo woke up a second time, but nobody was there. He lay down without closing his eyes. Again the child's fingers touched his drooping hand, and the playful voice of a child tickled the skin of the old man. Tekayo sat up a third time, and looked round the room. But he was alone. The cock crowed a third time, and it was morning.

And Lakech died without knowing her husband's secret, and was buried in the middle of the village, being the first wife. Tekayo sat at his wife's grave morning and evening for a long time, and his grief for her appeased his hunger for the unknown animal's liver. He wept, but peacefully, as if his craving for the liver was buried with his wife.

It was during this time of grief that Tekayo decided never to go hunting again. He sat at home and looked after his many grandchildren, while the younger members of the family went out to work daily in the fields.

And then one day as Tekayo sat warming himself in the early-morning sun near the granary, he felt slightly sick from the smell of grain sprouting inside the dark store. The shouting and singing of his grandchildren attracted his attention. As he watched them playing, the craving for the liver of the unknown animal returned powerfully to him.

Now, among the children playing was a pretty little girl called Apii, the daughter of Tekayo's eldest son. Tekayo sent the other children away to play, and as they were going, he called Apii and told her, "Come, my little one, run to your mother's hut and bring me a calabash of water."

Apii ran to her mother's hut to get water for her grandfather. And while she was fumbling in a dark corner of the house looking for a clean calabash, strong hands gripped her neck and strangled her. She gave a weak cry as she struggled for the breath of life. But it was too much for her. Her eyes closed in everlasting sleep, never to see the beauty of the shining moon again.

The limp body of the child slipped from Tekayo's hands and fell on the floor with a thud. He looked at the body at his feet and felt sick and faint. His ears were buzzing. He picked up the body, and as he staggered out with it, the air seemed black, and the birds of the air screamed ominously at him. But Tekayo had to eat his meal. He buried the body of Apii in a nearby anthill in a shallow grave.

The other children were still playing in the field when Tekayo returned with the liver in his bag. He roasted it in his hut hastily and ate it greedily. And alas! it was what he had been looking for for many years. He sat lazily resting his back on the granary, belching and picking his teeth. The hungry children, back from their play in the fields, sat in the shade eating sweet potatoes and drinking sour milk.

The older people came back in the evening, and the children ran to meet their parents. But Apii was not among them. In great desperation they asked the grandfather about the child. But Tekayo replied, "Ask the children—they should know where Apii is. They were playing together in the fields."

It was already pitch-dark: Apii's younger brothers and sisters sat in front of the fire weeping with their mother. It was then that they remembered their grandfather sending Apii to fetch water for him. The desperate parents repeated this information to the old man, asking him if Apii had brought water for him that morning.

"She did," Tekayo replied, "and then ran away after the others. I watched her go with my own eyes. When they came back, I was asleep."

The grief-stricken family sat near the fireplace, their heads in their hands. They neither ate nor drank. Outside, the little crickets sang in chorus as if they had a secret to tell.

For many days Apii's parents looked for their child, searching every corner and every nook. But there was no trace of her. Apii was gone. Months went

by, and people talked no more about the disappearance of Apii. Only her mother thought of her. She did not lose hope of finding her child alive one day.

Tekayo forgot his deed. And when he killed a second child in the same way to satisfy his savage appetite, he was not even conscious of what he was doing. And when the worried parents asked the old man about the child, Tekayo wept, saying, "How could I know? The children play out in the fields—I stay here at home."

It was after this that Tekayo's sons said among themselves, "Who steals our children? Which animal can it be? Could it be a hyena? Or a leopard? But these animals only hunt at night. Could it be an eagle, because it hunts during the day? But no! Father would have seen the eagle—he would have heard the child screaming." After some thought, Aganda told his brother, "Perhaps it is a malicious animal brought upon us by the evil spirits."

"Then my father is too old to watch the children," put in Osogo. "Yes, Father is too old, he is in danger," the rest agreed.

And from that time onward the sons kept watch secretly on the father and the children. They watched for many months, but nothing threatened the man and the children.

The sons were almost giving up the watch. But one day when it was the turn of Apii's father to keep watch, he saw Tekayo sending away the children to play in the field—all except one. He sent this child to fetch him a pipe from his hut. As the child ran to the hut, Tekayo followed him. He clasped the frightened child and dragged him toward the fireplace. As Tekayo was struggling with the child, a heavy blow landed on his old back. He turned round sharply, his hands still holding the child's neck. He was facing Aganda, his eldest son. The child broke loose from the limp hands of Tekayo and grabbed Aganda's knees, as if he had just escaped from the teeth of a crocodile. "Father!" Aganda shouted.

Seeing that the child was not hurt, Aganda pushed him aside, saying, "Go to your mother's hut and lie down."

He then got hold of the old man and dragged him toward the little windowless hut built for goats and sheep. As he was being dragged away, the old man kept on crying, "*Atimo ang'o? Atimo ang'o?*"—What have I done? What have I done?

Aganda pushed the old man into the little hut and barred the door behind him, as you would to the animals. He went to the child, who was still sobbing.

The rest of the family returned from the fields, and when Apii's father broke the news to them, they were appalled. The family wore mourning garments and went without food.

"Tho! Tho!" they spat toward the sun, which, although setting on them, was rising on the ancestors.

"Great-grandfathers, cleanse us," they all cried.

And they lit the biggest fire that had ever been lit in that village. Tekayo's eldest son took the old greasy drum hanging above the fireplace in his father's hut and beat it. The drum throbbed out sorrowful tunes to warn the clan that there was sad news in Tekayo's home. The people who heard the drum left whatever they were doing and ran to Tekayo's village, following the sound of the drum. Within a short time the village was teeming with anxious-looking relatives.

"What news? What news?" they asked in trembling voices.

"And where is Tekayo?" another old man asked.

"Is he in good health?" asked another.

There was confusion and panic.

"Death of death, who will give us medicine for death? Death knocks at your door, and before you can tell him to come in, he is in the house with you."

"Listen!" Someone touched the old woman who was mourning death.

Aganda spoke to the people. "Men of my clan. We have not called you here for nothing. Listen to me and let our sorrow be yours. Weep with us! For several months we have been losing our children when we go to work on the fields. Apii, my own child, was the first one to disappear." Sobbing broke out among the women at the mention of the children's names.

"My people," Aganda continued, "the children in this clan get sick and die. But ours disappear unburied. It was our idea to keep watch over our children that we may catch whoever steals them. For months we have been watching secretly. We were almost giving up because we thought it was probably the wrath of our ancestors that was upon us. But today I caught him."

"What man? What man?" the people demanded angrily.

"And from what clan is he?" others asked.

"We must declare war on his clan, we must we must!"

Aganda stopped for a while, and told them in a quavering voice, "The man is in that little hut. The man is none other than my father."

"Mayo!" the women shouted. There was a scuffle and the women and

children screamed as if Tekayo was around the fire and they were afraid of him. But the men kept quiet.

When the commotion died down, an old man asked, "Do you speak the truth, man?"

The son nodded. Men and women now shouted, "Where is the man? Kill him! He is not one of us. He is not one of us. He is an animal!"

There was nothing said outside that Tekayo did not hear. And there in the hut the children he had killed haunted him. He laid his head on the rough wall of the hut and wept.

Outside the hut the angry villagers continued with their demand, shouting, "Stone him now! Stone him now! Let his blood be upon his own head!"

But one of the old men got up and calmed the people. "We cannot stone him now. It is the custom of the clan that a wicked man should be stoned in broad daylight, outside the village. We cannot depart from this custom."

"Stone me now, stone me now," Tekayo whispered. "Take me away quickly from this torture and shame. Let me die and be finished with."

Tekayo knew by the angry shouting of the men and the shrill cries of frightened women and children that he was banished from society, nay, from life itself. He fumbled in his leather bag suspended around his waist to find his hunting knife, but it was not there. It had been taken away from him.

The muttering and shouting continued outside. There was weeping, too. But Tekayo was now hearing them from afar as if a powerful wave were carrying him farther and farther away from his people.

At dawn the villagers got up from the fireplace to gather stones from nearby fields. The sun was not up yet, but it was just light enough to see. Everyone in the clan must throw a stone at the murderer. It was bad not to throw a stone, for it was claimed that the murderer's wicked spirit would rest upon the man who did not help to drive him away.

When the first rays of the sun appeared, the villagers had gathered enough stones to cover several bodies. They returned to the village to fetch Tekayo from the hut, and to lead him to his own garden outside the village. They surrounded the hut and stood in silence, waiting to jeer and spit at him when he came out.

Aganda and three old men tore the papyrus door open and called Tekayo out to the people who were now demanding, "Come out, come out!"

At first it was too dark to see. But soon their eyes got used to the

darkness. Then they saw the body of Tekayo, hanged on a short rope that he had unwound from the thatched roof.

The men came out shaking their heads. The crowd peered into the hut in turn until all of them had seen the dangling body of Tekayo—the man they were preparing to stone. No one spoke. Such a man, they knew, would have to be buried outside the village. They knew, too, that no newborn child would ever be named after him.

—1968