

CONFUCIUS

Confucius was a dog. No one doubted the fact, not even Juda who did not feed, shelter or treat him any better or worse than a dog. Most days, the only attention Confucius got from his master was a poke in the ribs when it was time to go home. Although they spent some time in discussion, Juda selfishly doing all the talking, Confucius would never understand him. Still for some strange reason that many could not understand, Confucius would have died for Juda. However, it was becoming increasingly clear to the dog that his master had read too many books.

“Why do you call him Confusions?” Pesa wondered on one of the rare occasions they exchanged something resembling a conversation. “He is less confused than you.”

“The name is Confucius,” said Juda. “Con-fu-cius.”

“Why?”

“He’s a thinker.”

“A thinker?”

“Philosopher.”

“Philoso ... what?”

“Philosopher,” said Juda. “Someone who thinks great thoughts. It comes from the Greek word *philos*, meaning love, but in Chinese it means great-wise-head. Confucius was from China.”

“Choma Choma too came from Chania.”

“China, not Chania,” Juda said, unusually patient. “China is a little farther than Chania. You can’t walk to China.”

“How did he come here then?”

“Who?”

“Confusions?”

“The man or the dog?”

“The man.”

“Confucius never set foot in Kambi,” Juda informed, delighted for the rare opportunity to educate his father. “He lived thousands of years ago. He was a great believer in harmonious coexistence and a teacher on how people ought to live and interact with one another and with their surroundings. You know father, even in the old days, there were rich people and poor people and they had the same kind of problems you are having today.”

“But why do you call your dog a man’s name?” That was all that Pesa was interested in learning.

“Because he is wiser than you or I,” Juda said. “And he’s loyal to family and friends, and he treats others with respect.”

“He’s just a dog,” observed Pesa. “Why don’t you call him dog like other dogs? He’s a slaughterhouse mongrel, isn’t he? What makes him different from other dogs?”

The same question from a friend in Fujo Bar had started a brawl that had lasted a whole weekend. But Juda did not have the permission or the energy to lay a hand on his father so he let it pass.

“You have heard of seeing dogs?” he asked his father.

“Seeing dogs?”

“Dogs for the blind? People who can’t see? What about rescue dogs?”

“Rescue dogs?”

“You know of police dogs? Policemen have them.”

They occasionally brought police dogs from Mweiga police station to remind Kambi that Chief Kahiu and Pata Potea were not the only Government.

“Confucius is a thinking dog,” Juda explained. “A thinking man’s dog. He helps me think, helps me find answers. You should try him one of these days when you get in trouble with Mama Pesa.”

“Talk to a dog?” Pesa asked, scandalised. “Are you mad?”

“Confucius is not a dog,” Juda finally lost his patience. “How many times do I have to tell you he’s like my brother?”

“Don’t insult me, boy!” Pesa bellowed at him.

They would have been at each other’s jugulars in a flash, egos suddenly inflamed, had Mama Pesa not suddenly appeared to inform them that Confucius had ran off with the leg of lamb she had grilled for their lunch. Pesa went for his shotgun and, Juda, relieved that there was no reason to hang about anymore, left for Kambi. Along the way he was joined by Confucius looking well-fed, happy and in no way remorseful.

“I’d stay away until things cool down,” Juda said to him.

Confucius barked his acknowledgement and accompanied Juda down to Fujo Bar, where they got drunk and disorderly, and caused so much trouble the Chief had to call the police from Ngobit to sort them out.

And so it was that Confucius came reeling home alone, in the early hours of dawn. Baba Pesa stood on the veranda about to fill his first pipe of the day when the dog arrived looking old and ragged, and limping on three legs. He forgot all about filling his pipe, or fetching his shotgun and settling the issue of the missing leg of lamb, and asked out loud where Juda was. The entire household worried when, as rarely happened, the dog came home without his master. What happened to Juda? They asked themselves and each other. Where and why had the dog left him? Only Confucius could tell them, but this time he was not talking. He slunk to the back of the kitchen to forage for his breakfast and to brag to the house cats.

When the war Juda had started was well and truly underway, Confucius said to the cats, he had as usual heroically risen to his master’s defence, snapping at bare heels and ripping trousers, causing so much mayhem under the tables that Fanya Fujo had to kick him outside. Then, continuing his rampage, he had raged through Kambi, biting at anything that moved, until his drunken frenzy had carried him to the centre of the market square, where the oldest and the meanest village mongrels reposed. The gang was gathered under the collapsing windmill, hating their existence and wondering why Confucius was allowed inside the warm, stuffy bars while they froze to death out in the open. When they suddenly found Confucius among them, fighting mad and spoiling for a fight, they went after him with a vengeance. By the time the policemen arrived from Ngobit to haul Juda away, Confucius had decided enough was enough and fled up Pesa Way with the whole army of mongrels in pursuit. It had taken all of his great cunning and determination to shake them off and head home.

Baba Pesa was the first to see him crawl home, in the goat-milking hours of dawn, and break the news to Mama Pesa.

While she sought Mutiso to go see if Juda was lying down somewhere on the road, Pesa sucked on his empty pipe and thoughtfully watched a police car wind its way up the road from Kambi. It came up slowly and ominously like a hearse, its shadow appearing to shimmer on the road, though there was not enough light for a shadow, leave alone a mirage, and Pesa had no idea what to expect. He watched with trepidation as the car drove past Baru’s place and entered his compound to stop by Mama Pesa’s rose bushes.

Four policemen stepped out of the vehicle and looked about nervously as if expecting trouble. Baba Pesa’s reputation as a belligerent man was known even by people who had never met him. The three constables were led by a smartly turned-out young inspector, in meticulously starched

khakis and carrying his cane of office with quiet authority. They stood by their car looking up at Pesa, waiting for him to invite them in.

Pesa sucked on his empty pipe and watched them instead. After a dignified moment he stepped down from his veranda and demanded that they state their business.

“Good morning, *Bwana* Pesa,” the inspector greeted, saluting respectfully.

“Have we met?” asked Pesa.

“Not yet,” said the inspector.

“Then why do you call on me at such an early hour?” asked Pesa. “My morning is never good before my breakfast.”

“We come about your son.”

“Why, is he dead?” Pesa asked him.

“He’s under arrest.”

“Arrest?” he could hardly conceal his relief. “Is that all?”

The constables glanced at their inspector, as if to say, “We told you.”

Their suggestion had been to forget Juda in a cell for a month and save themselves nightly trips to Fujo bar to pick him up. But their inspector, being learned and all, had thought it civil and constructive to waste their scarce petrol driving up here to have a word with the boy’s father first.

“Why is my boy under arrest?” Pesa demanded of him. “On what charge?”

“Charges,” said the inspector. “Drunk and disorderly, for one, drinking after hours, inciting to violence, behaving in a manner likely to cause a riot, resisting arrest and ...”

The list was endless.

“Where is he?”

Two constables helped Juda carefully out of the boot, where they had unceremoniously tossed him for the journey, and stood him face to face with his father. When they let go, he swayed and leaned on the vehicle.

“What have you got to say for yourself?” Pesa asked him.

Juda finally focused on his father, and found him as laughable as ever, but he had no energy to laugh.

“Though walking forwards is easier than walking backwards,” he told them, “coming back is easier that going. Ergo, progress is a beast of many colours. As Confucius will tell you, everything is ... relative.”

Baba Pesa, failing to make sense of any part of the argument, nodded and turned to the inspector for explanation.

“Drunk,” said the inspector.

“Very drunk,” he agreed. “Stupid too, but, as for resisting arrest, you got him here, didn’t you?”

“Not without a fight,” laughed the inspector. “Your son’s an extremely combative person.”

“A what?”

“A warrior.”

“Whom did he worry?”

“He was warring with a gang of town thugs who have no qualms about beating anyone’s brains out,” said the inspector. “Which brings us to convening an illegal gathering.”

“Illegal,” Juda stirred awake and shook his head heavily. “The beer gathered them. All I did was talk to them.”

“Why?” asked Pesa.

“They were there,” he said. “And I had things to say, so I said things.”

“What things?”

“I told them to think with their heads, not their stomachs. I told them they were foolish to grow tea for cash when there was no food to buy with the cash they got for it. I told them ...”

Pesa had heard it before, for his son was obsessed with telling people what was good for them, things they did not want to know, and never tired of helping people who were better off without his help. Pesa had once found him experimenting with what he said was an alternative to *sukuma wiki*, chopping up green tealeaves and frying it with onions and tomatoes to see if the result could go anywhere with *ugali*. He intended to name his invention *sukuma siku*, but the project failed when Confucius quit as chief taster.

“My son thinks he knows everything,” Pesa said to the inspector.

But some things Juda did and said were far from those of an even slightly sane person.

While Pesa wondered what to do with him, Mama Pesa appeared on the veranda and stood watching the proceedings.

“I told them to think or starve to death,” Juda rambled on. “I told them a man with one goat was richer than a don with one degree. You can’t slaughter a university degree for your father-in-law, can you?”

Baba Pesa shook his head, in spite of himself, for his son’s eloquence never ceased to amaze and impress him. Turning to the inspector, he said to him, “All that sounds true to me.”

“True it is,” the inspector agreed. “But it’s not what he says that is the problem, it is how he says it.”

The inspector was new generation police force, young men educated enough to understand that police work was work like any other and not a licence to brutalise suspects, a job that had to be approached with prudence and civility. The days of brute force that characterised the colonial police were over and done with. He loved his job, and he did it without fear or favour, but he too understood the power of money. He intended to rise to commissioner or better, and was smart enough to realise that, by then, Baba Pesa could be the minister of Government in charge of such promotions.

“The point is,” he said, carefully, “His language offends ordinary *wana-nchi*, fellow citizens, as well as his friends who think he mocks them with such rhetoric, for he has a wealthy father and a university degree.”

“Two degrees,” Pesa corrected him.

“Two?”

“Two,” nodded Pesa. In spite of everything, he was proud of his son’s achievement, which he saw as his own.

The inspector, who had but one university degree, nodded impressed and said, “That might make some men jealous enough to want to do him in. Truth hurts, you know.”

“Truth is ...” Juda started. “Truth is ...”

They waited.

“The truth is . . .”

“Relative?” tried the inspector.

Juda squinted at him, trying to make him out.

“Go on,” said Pesa impatiently. “Tell us.”

They waited a whole minute before realising he was about to fall asleep. He was leaning on the vehicle, eyes closed and breathing heavily. He had bruises on his arms and on his face, and looked like he had lost a few fights.

“Did you beat him?” Pesa asked.

“No, *Bwana* Pesa,” said the inspector. “We don’t do such things.”

“Leave him to me then,” he said. “I’ll deal with him myself.”

“Very well,” agreed the inspector. “But next time I’ll lock him up.”

“Understood.”

The inspector turned to go, hesitated.

“Who is Confucius?” he asked. “He was asking for Confucius.”

Baba Pesa looked about. The dog was stretched out under a rose bush fast asleep.

“That’s Confucius,” Pesa pointed with the stem of his pipe.

“The dog?”

“The dog.”

The inspector was a widely read man and he got the joke faster than anyone in Kambi ever had. His laugh was loud and honest.

“We don’t find him funny,” said Pesa, glancing at Mama Pesa where she stood like a pillar on the veranda.

The inspector coughed out his embarrassment and said, “Of course not.”

Juda opened one eye, surprised that someone had finally got the joke, and asked him, “Who are you, really?”

“OCS Ngobit,” said the inspector, bemused.

“What do you do, really?”

“We have met, really.”

“Have we, really?”

The inspector laughed and turned to Baba Pesa.

“Your son is smarter than he looks.”

“I know,” said Pesa.

“Well, that’s it then.”

He saluted Pesa and led his men back into their car, and they drove away leaving Pesa and Juda face to face for the first time in days. As usual, they had nothing to say to each other. Then Mama Pesa came down from the veranda, stepped round her husband, and took her son by the hand.

Pesa thoughtfully filled and lit his pipe. He should have done so when the young inspector was present to be impressed. Sucking on it thoughtfully, he walked slowly down the drive and out of his gate to the nearest field to worry about the drought.

Over the Ngobit River, across Laikipia Plains and as far west as the eye could see, the earth cried for rain. Dust blew along the roads and the footpaths, and wandered over the hills unhindered. The only cloud in sight was to the east of the Aberdare and it was not a rain cloud but a fluffy, cotton ball that served no purpose known to Pesa. Even the hardiest tree of all, the gnarled, black acacia that could grow on a rock, appeared ready to give up waiting for rain.

Worrying about the approaching wheat season, Pesa rambled through his unploughed field and back up the road that separated his estate from Baru’s *shamba*. He noted, and was gratified by it, that his small neighbour’s land fared no better than his.

Baru was out inspecting his perched land, too, and he stood looking confounded at the maize he had planted hoping the grass rains would stay long enough to give him a crop. Now the maize was grey-brown from the drought, and reached no higher than his shins, and it was not worth the effort of cutting it to feed the ox that had ploughed the field. Tinga-Tinga would have to come down and browse for himself.

Pesa approached, drawn by the inexplicable bond that made all men brothers who considered the earth their mother, and stopped at the fence.

“Greetings,” he hailed.

Baru looked up, saw Pesa leaning on the fence with his boot on the second strand of his barbed wire and said, gruffly, “Greetings.”

“I told you, didn’t I?” said Pesa.

“What?”

“That it was a waste of time to plant before the rains. I told you it would die.”

Baru watched the wire sag from his weight and worried it would break.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“I know more than you.”

Noting the gloating tone in his voice, Baru squared his shoulders like a man in his own land and said, “No, it was not a waste of time. Tinga-Tinga will graze on it for a few days. Alas, drought, like rain, doesn’t know a poor man from a rich one.”

“Rich men wait for rain,” Pesa informed. “No rich man would do what you did.”

“Rich men can afford to wait,” said Baru. “Tell me then, *Bwana* Pesa, when will the rain come?”

“How should I know?”

“You are a rich man, *Bwana* Pesa. You and God may know something that people don’t know.”

Baba Pesa hesitated, uncertain whether he had been insulted, then snorted and walked away. Baru walked slowly back to his own house, following an old and rarely used footpath that took him between the grain store and the chicken house.