

## Jimi The Dog

Meja Mwangi

One day, my brother Hari brought home a puppy. I was sitting in the yard, between my mother's house and Hari's house. I was carving a wooden spoon for my handicraft lesson at school.

"Here!" said Hari putting the puppy at my feet. "I have brought you a dog."

"For me?" I asked.

"For me," Hari said. "He is my dog, but if you look after him well I will give him to you."

It was a small puppy with a small body and long and thin legs. It had a big head, with long, hanging ears and begging eyes. It did not look like a dog.

I always wanted a dog of my own. Every boy I knew had a dog. Hari had five dogs that lived around the village and only came home to eat.

I picked him up and saw the fleas. I put him down quickly.

"He is full of fleas," I said.

"Wash him," said Hari.

"Where did you get him?" I asked.

"In Majengo," he said. "I bought him."

"How much?"

"Do you want him or not?"

Fleas or no fleas, I wanted a dog of my own.

"You must promise to take care of him," said Hari.

"I will take the best care of him," I promised.

"You'd better," Hari warned. "Otherwise I'll take him away and give him to someone else."

Hari was strict with me. If I did something wrong, he would slap me hard. I had to do what he said. The puppy crawled under my stool and fell asleep. He was tired from the long journey from Nanyuki.

"What is his name?" I asked Hari.

"Ask him," he said.

"He talks?" I was so excited.

"Don't be foolish," Hari said. "If the dog could talk he would be in your school, wouldn't he?"

Hari always made fun of me. I reached under the chair and took out the puppy.

"He is ugly," I said.

"He is a dog," said Hari.

He was a mongrel, he explained. The puppy was a mixture of different types of dogs.

"Shall I call him, Jack?" I asked.

"Like Bwana Ruin?" Hari asked. "Don't be foolish."

Jack Ruin was the white man who owned the farm where we lived. My father worked for him. Hari worked for him. Every grown man on the farm worked for Bwana Ruin. That was why we lived on the farm.

"Call your dog anything you like," Hari said, "but don't call him Jack. Bwana Ruin would be very unhappy."

"May I call him Simba then?"

"Lion?" Hari said, "No, he is not that big."

What about Chui?"

"Leopard?" said Hari. "He is not a cat! Must he have a name?"

"Yes," I said.

"Call him Dog."

Half the village dogs were called Dog. The other half was Jimi. I wanted my dog to be different. But I had no name for him.

"Call him Jimi?" Hari said.

"There are too many Jimis," I said.

"Call him Puppy then," said Hari.

That was sillier than 'dog.'

"I'll think of something," I said.

"But not Jack," he warned.

It took me the whole day to admit I didn't know any other names for dogs than Jimi and Dog. I named my puppy Jimi.

It was the most exciting day of my life.

When I finished my wooden spoon I played with Jimi. He was tired from the journey and did not want to play. I left him sleeping under the stool while I did my other home homework. My mother had enough duties to keep me busy all day.

First I went down to the river to get water for her cooking. I had already chopped her firewood. The next work was to run to the end of the village to borrow salt for her cooking. Then I ran to Bwana Ruin's store to line up with other children for the maize flour. The workers also got a free gallon of milk a day from Bwana Ruin. These were the benefits of working on the farm.

When I came back I told my mother that I wanted to go take care of my dog.

"Your dog?" she asked. She had seen me with a dog but did not think it was mine.

"Hari brought me a dog," I said.

"A dog?" she asked. "What for?"

"To look after," I said.

My mother was always kind and understanding. She said I could go look after my dog. She would do all the work herself.

"But you better know what you and your dog will eat for dinner tonight," she said. "I will not feed someone who does no work around the house."

So I ran to all the other places and did all the things I had to do. It was nearly dark when I finished. Mother said I could now rest. I played with Jimi until dinner was ready. Up to that moment, I had not stopped to think about feeding my puppy. I took the problem to my mother.

"I have no food for dogs," she told me. "If you want to feed your Jimi, you'll have to share your supper with him."

I gave some of my food to Jimi. He smelled it and crawled back under the grain store. He was not hungry. When it was time to go to bed I did not know where Jimi would sleep. We had two bedrooms. My mother and father slept in one and I slept in the other. My room was also the place where mother cooked and did all her housework. When the nights were cold and long, we sat round the fire and told stories. In the old days the goats and the sheep shared this room with me. Each day I had gone to school smelling like a goat. No one wanted to sit next to me in class.

The goats no longer lived in the house. There was enough room for Jimi and me. I knew Jimi would be happy sleeping under my bed. But, when it came to bedtime, my mother would not hear of it.

"No dogs inside my house," she said.

I took the problem to Hari. I asked him where Jimi would sleep.

"Not here," he said.

"Where will he sleep then?" I asked.

"Don't ask me," said Hari.

I was slowly getting desperate.

"What shall I do?" I cried.

"Get out of my house!" Hari ordered.

"Where will Jimi sleep?"

"Where other dogs sleep," said Hari.

I had never thought where other dogs slept.

"Outside!" he told me. "Under the grain store!"

"What if it rains?"

"It doesn't rain under the grain store," he said.

The grain store was built on sticks to keep it out of reach of the rats. Jimi would be dry enough under the grain store. He was already asleep under the grain store.

"What about other dogs?" I asked. "What if they eat him?"

"Don't be silly," Hari was getting annoyed with me. "Dogs don't eat dogs. Only leopards eat dogs."

This did not give me peace of mind. The forest by the river had many leopards. From time to time they came to the farm and ate sheep. Bwana Ruin had set traps in the forest. He only caught a hyena.

I walked out of Hari's house unhappy. I was halfway across the yard when he called me back.

"Shut the door!" he shouted.

I went back and shut the door. I left Hari staring at the roof thinking about things other than dogs. When I grew up I wanted to be like Hari. Hari knew everything and did not worry about anything.

Back in mother's house, I took one of the ropes mother used to tie her goats and went back outside. I did not want Jimi to run away at night. I crept under the grain store where Jimi was sleeping. I slipped the rope round his neck and tied him to one of the posts supporting the grain store.

"Don't worry, Jimi," I said. "Hari will build you a big, warm house."

It was late by then and most of the people in the village had gone to sleep. I returned to my mother's house. The fire was nearly out and mother was preparing to go to bed. My father was the cook for Bwana Ruin and did not come home until very late.

I went to bed and tried to sleep. It had been a long day for me. I had risen from bed at six o'clock and ran the five kilometres to my school in Nanyuki. After school I ran all the way home. I wanted to be there early to do my homework and my other duties before bedtime. Jimi had spoiled all my plans. Now I could not sleep for worrying about them.

I lay on my hard bed and listened to the night outside. In the silence of the night, heard the river, bubbling over the rocks. From far away, on the other side of the forest, came the frightening scream of a hyrax. From nearer home, I heard a night bird cry - "Ooh dear, where do I sleep?"

I listened very hard, but I did not hear any leopards creeping up on my dog. I was about to doze off, when father came home. I watched him shut and bolt the door.

"Father," I called softly.

"Go to sleep," he said.

He was tired when he came home late in the night. Using a torch to light the way, he walked to the door of his room.

"I have a dog," I said.

He stopped and searched for the dog with his torch.

"A dog?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, excited. "Hari gave me a dog."

"What for?"

"To keep," I said. "To look after."

"Where is it?" he asked, blinding me with his torch.

"Outside," I said.

"Good," he said yawning. "You go back to sleep then. You can tell me in the morning."

He would be gone to work when I woke up, but I did not remind him. Sooner or later he would have time to talk about my dog. He went into his room and shut the door. I heard him move about, then silence. I heard him snoring. I turned over and covered my ears with my hands. Then I remembered the leopards and uncovered them. I wanted to hear if a leopard crept came to eat my dog. I was awake for a long time before I fell asleep.