

The Cockroach Dance
Meja Mwangi

Toto sat on his bed smoking his breakfast cigarette and trying to psyche himself up for another day at work. Unlike Dusman he did not dread every new day, except Monday. All he wished was that every new day would start a little later, by about an hour. His nights were not long enough and his mornings arrived too soon. He hardly closed his eyes before he had to open them again and go to work.

He sat in his underwear, his bare feet hanging over his slippers. He felt his lip with the tip of his finger wondering if it was bad enough for him to miss work. His head hurt from hangover and, now more than ever, he hated his job at the bank. It was a job with no prospects and he detested everyday handing out bundles of money to complete strangers, while his pocket was always empty. It was forced labour; forced by the need for money. Too much work for too little pay. The equation would never balance, he thought each morning, as he sat smoking his breakfast cigarette and listening to Dusman go on and on how the scrambled, breakfast music from the neighbouring rooms was driving him insane.

“Dusman?” he said finally. “Just keep quiet and let me hate my job in peace.”

Dusman covered his head and tried to go back to sleep. Toto rose to make some tea and discovered they had no tea.

“Dusman?” he called.

“What?”

“Today we have no tea.”

“So what?”

“Just letting you know that today we have no tea.”

“Now I know,” Dusman said. “Go to work and leave me sleep,”

“I am starving,” Toto said quietly to himself. “Last time it was milk and before that it was sugar. Why is it that there is always something missing from breakfast?”

Dusman let him figure it for himself.

“Dusman?” he called finally. “Why is that so? Why is it that when we have everything to cook we have no kerosene or the matches to light the stove?”

“I told you this place was cursed,” Dusman turned, suddenly animated. “Did you know this place was a Maasai burial ground?”

“Dusman,” Toto said seriously. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Dusman asked. “It’s in history books.”

“Only the ones you write in your head, Dusman,” Toto told him. “If you want to go crazy, do it after I leave.”

Dusman lay back grumbling, while Toto tried to figure out how to have tea without tea.

“We’ve got to get organised.” Toto made the statement every morning, when they had no breakfast.

The smell of frying eggs from the neighbouring rooms crept under the connecting doors to do battle with the stench from the toilet across the yard. Sunlight trickled into the room through the rents in the curtain, that Toto’s tomcat had made moments before going out on the road to commit suicide. Dust particles flew about searching for a clear place to land among the other dust particles that covered everything.

“It is seven o’clock,” Toto said, rising to go take his place in the shower line. “In case you didn’t know, today is Monday.”

“I am on leave,” Dusman informed him.

“Again?”

“Sick leave,” Dusman told him. “They think I’m crazy.”

“They must be crazy themselves,” he grabbed his bathrobe, soap and towel and went to join the shower line.

Dusman reached on the table and turn the radio off. He cursed his neighbours, especially Sukuma Wiki and his radio, and tried to sleep. Then Toto returned, closing the door loud enough to wake the rest of the house.

“Sukuma Wiki beat me to it,” he switched the radio back on. “He takes hours to shower. They should move the Bathroom Man further down the yard. He has an unfair advantage over all of us.”

“He lives there,” Dusman said, still covered up. “I hate him.”

“You hate everyone you don’t like,” Toto reminded him.

He decided to forgo the shower and whistled as he combed his hair and dressed to go to work. He peeped

at himself in the broken mirror, which, like the split comb and other things in the room, needed replacing. It used to be a large mirror before one of his women friends smashed it to pieces, during an argument over her dues. She wanted money and he had none. When he reminded her they had spent all his money on beer the night before she flew into a rage. She wanted her money, all of it, and no nonsense about who drank what. Toto demanded a refund for the beer, the chicken and chips, the Dunhill Lights and for the night's accommodation. That was when she lost her mind and smashed Toto's mirror that she was using to fix her wig. Her rash action at once shifted the balance in Toto's favour. Now she owed him a mirror on top of everything else. Toto booted her down the stairs, minus the wig and one platform shoe.

And that too had happened one hateful Monday morning between Toto's waking up and going to work. They had tried to involve Dusman, as a mediator, but he had a special hangover that morning and could not understand any of their arguments. He lay back and watched, as indifferently as he had watched their friendly arrival the night before and, when the battle was won and lost, got up, showered, dressed, and went to read water meters. That morning too they had had no breakfast.

Toto's friend came back weeks later to plead for her property, but Toto was broke and tried to sell her stuff back to her for money she did not have, because it was during the *nylon* scare and men were not talking to women for fear of coming down with the curse. She pleaded with him for a long time but eventually had to leave without her property. The mice and the cockroaches finally devoured the platform shoe and the wig was turned to a floor mop.

Dusman could not remember whether it was the same lady friend or another who had presented Toto with the tomcat named Paka that eventually committed suicide.

"What is this?" Toto exclaimed.

Dusman uncovered his head and turned to squint at him.

Toto had his wallet in his hands and was examining it with a frown.

"I have got someone else's wallet," he said.

"How?"

"I don't know," said Toto. "I must have mugged someone."

The wallet was the same size and colour as his but it was not his and, when inspected, it contained only scraps of paper with phone numbers, and used bus tickets and dust. He threw it on the table and sat on his bed defeated.

"I must get my money back," he said to himself.

"How?"

"I must go back to Bamboo Bar."

"Those friends of yours will kill you."

"I have been robbed. Is that all you are going to say?"

"I lie awake half the night listening to your babbling and then you wake me up at dawn to tell me about your money."

"But I have been robbed," he glanced at his. "And I am late again."

He snatched his coat, made one confused round of the room, then dashed out.

After a moment, Dusman got up to shut the door. He kicked Toto's tattered clothes under his bed and the cockroaches scurried for cover. He needed a cigarette to settle down again, but the half-dozen or so cigarette packets on the table were all empty. He crushed one and tossed it on the kitchen corner. The garage downstairs opened and, once again, Grogan Road was back to life. Panel beaters beat the rust out of car bodies, as ailing car engines growled and mechanics called obscenities to their spanner boys. Grogan Road was finally awake.

Dusman opened the window to let the trapped heat escape, then lay back on the bed squinting turned at the ceiling where it was mouldy and sagging from years of water leaking through the rust roof. Rainwater had washed away the paint from one wall, leaving a dark brown stain that hung in jagged tails like Chupa na Debe's long coat. The last time that Dusman had suggested Tumbo Kubwa repaint the room, the landlord had admitted it was a good idea and left. That was the closest any tenant ever got to having the man acknowledge that his building was a mess.

It was on the morning after the night that Dusman met a faceless lady in the rain on a lane off River Road. One thing led to another and, a few days later, Dusman was lining up with other similarly afflicted persons outside Doctor Patel's surgery.

Doctor Patel was the best doctor in all of River Road and Grogan Road areas. Most area men were agreed that his charges were considerate and that he valued his clients too.

At sixty he was a shriveled, fatherly figure with sparse hair, a freckled face and dark, sad eyes that inspire

respect and confidence even in the most cynical of his patients. He dressed in baggy, black suits and white or light blue shirts with neckties to match. Over these work clothes he wore a white overcoat with a breast pocket lined with different coloured ballpoint pens he rarely used.

He settled in the city about the same time as Kachra Samat, but while the latter came to build a colonial railway, he arrived as a young veterinary doctor armed with a fresh medical diploma, a new bag of tools, a bundle of reference books and only a few rupees in his pocket. His first practice was along the new Grogan Road, a few blocks from Dacca House, in a building belonging to his cousin. Business was bad then, there being no animals to treat in the city, and for hours he stood outside his surgery waiting for European pet owners to discover him. His compatriots did not own pets and the Maasai, who grazed their herds on the outskirts of the city, had their own traditional medicine animal doctor.

Circumstances eventually forced Doctor Patel to convert to human medicine, through a long and tedious correspondence course, followed by months of practical medicine at the Royal College. Then he had moved from Grogan to River Road where for many years he had treated all manner of maladies and clients that the *mzungu* doctors would not care to bother with. He became an expert in tropical diseases, many of them unrecorded in medical books. But first and foremost, his reputation rested on his magic touch with the problems of men.

When Dusman Gonzaga first made his acquaintance, Doctor Patel's surgery was situated at the lower end of River Road at the junction where Hasrat Road empties its load of humanity into River Road. It was on the ground floor of Tumbo Place, owned by the then councillor and prominent businessman Tumbo Kubwa. Next door to the surgery was the rickety-chaired Home Restaurant and Bar, also owned by Tumbo Kubwa, where big barmaids with bad attitude served three-legged chicken and flat beer. Above the restaurant was bar and above it two floors of lodging rooms full of unemployed young women.

Tumbo Kubwa, in his shrewd fashion, supplied the beds, two to three to a room, divided the rooms with curtains for privacy and left the girls to their own devices. Every evening he sent his brother to collect the day's rent and that was all that was required of the residents. There was no police harassment and bar patrons could wander up the dusty stairs discreetly and without fear.

It was not by chance that Doctor Patel's surgery was situated next door to Tumbo's boarding house. Most of his regular clients got their trouble from walking up the dusty stairs above the bar. Afterwards, Doctor Patel's was the nearest place they could find solace and understanding. They slunk in sad and repentant and dying from the shame, but, after a few days treatment, they rushed straight back up the dusty stairs for more trouble. Then they came back embarrassed and confessed to Doctor Patel, and then went back up again, and again, in a seemingly endless cycle. Their frequency could be charted against whatever virus was afoot at the time.

The good doctor never criticized, never admonished or complained, but just did what he had to do and sent them off with his usual advise.

"No beer, no girls and no hot pepper for one week," he told them. "You will be fine in seven days."

During the great *nylon* scare, his office was packed with anxious men waiting for him to discover the telltale nylon threads that would spell the end of their mortal lives. Doctor Patel went through his routine of question and answer with everyone of them, and assured them repeatedly that they were healthy and that there was no such disease as *nylon* anywhere in his medical books. They did not believe him and they left shaking their heads, only to rush back the minute they broke one of his cardinal rules. Again he went through his interview with them, gave them aspirin to make them happy and sent them home. Some did not come back, but most did.

Finally tired of treating an imaginary disease, he told his more pesky clients that he had found *nylon* in their urine. Word went out that the good doctor had confirmed the existence of the deadly disease. The rumour spread like a garbage fire throughout the city's lodging houses. It was said that two of Patel's clients had died from *nylon*.

The news shook the bar and boarding business to its foundations. Men lost heart and steered away from the bars. The bar business went and so did Doctor Patel's business. Tumbo Kubwa's mint ground to a halt. Unaware of the rumours going round, Tumbo Kubwa evicted the old girls and rented the place to a new lot of girls. They too could not pay the rent and he evicted them and got a new lot. They could not pay him either, nor could Doctor Patel, his only other tenant.

During those lean and hungry days, the doctor was seen standing outside his surgery, hands held behind his back, looking expectantly up and down Hasrat Road and hoping for clients. None was in sight. He could have cursed himself, but he did not. He knew the truth about men. They would come back, as soon as they

forgot why they were not visiting Furaha Bar, and they rediscovered the dusty stairs leading up to the lodgings above it. But he had made history, albeit unwittingly. From that day on, the dry period came to be known as the *nylon* age.

His clients finally came back as anticipated, singly, at first, then in the normal droves. Furaha Bar filled up to capacity, the lodgings upstairs chugged with life and the city was back to dicing with trouble once again. The men went their wayward ways and Doctor Patel treated them and handed out his standard advice of no beer, no women and no hot pepper. Just as before, no one paid any heed.

They sat quietly in his waiting room as before, a dozen or so unhappy men, and whiled away the time reading Gujarati and Hindu periodicals they did not understand and promising themselves to never, never ever go up dusty stairs again. The more mortified ones hid their faces behind the periodicals, wisely provided by the doctor for the purpose, and kept still until their names were called out.

“Jesse James,” next called the old attendant.

The man so called emerged from hiding and dashed into the examination room, where the doctor waited with hypodermic needles and sackfuls of capsules. The rest waited and read without understanding. Doctor Patel had a collection of old magazines in his waiting room. He understood it did not make any difference what reading material he provided, since no one came there to read, and consequently sent his attendant down River Road to buy magazines by the kilo.

Juma the attendant had been with Doctor Patel for over twenty years. During that time he had risen, mostly through self-promotion, from toilet cleaner to messenger and tea maker, and finally, when times were such that Patel could not afford a secretary, Juma had embraced the position of the receptionist as well. When the clients skulked in he gave them cards to fill in then stacked the cards on the table in the order of arrival. Sometimes, when the traffic was heavy, as during the *nylon* era, Juma could give injections and make like a medical assistant as well. The two had been together for so long that Juma considered himself the assistant doctor, when Patel was not around.

“William Tell,” the attendant called next, as Jesse James emerged from the doctor’s room, limping from the injections.

William Tell dashed behind the smoked glass door to confess to the doctor in low tones. No one would speak in a normal voice inside the confessional for the others were probably listening from behind their Gujarati magazines. It was a futile gesture. They all knew why they were there. They may even have met on their way up and down the dusty stairs.

They dug themselves deeper in the overstuffed sofas lined against the walls and waited. There used to be women and children coming to see the good doctor too, but the influx of distressed men had crowded them all out. Out of the display window, where the name Central Butchery had been unsuccessfully scraped off, the attendant could see women and children visit surgeries on the opposite side of the street.

William Tell emerged from the doctor’s room rattled, slunk out without looking at anyone, but paused by the exit to make sure no one he knew was on the street before slipping out and headed up towards River Road.

“Faustus,” the attendant called next.

There was sudden silence. The men peeked from behind their magazines.

“Faustus?” the attendant called again.

Dusman materialised from a ten year-old *Newsweek*, out of which he had not read a single word, and dashed inside the doctor’s office. He had been waiting for exactly two hours, he realized as he shut the door behind him. His case was different from those of his fellow sufferers. This time round, he did not get in trouble walking up any dusty stairs. He got it walking in the rain, something he could boast as a first, if he were not so concerned about the cost of the cure.

“Sit down ... Faustus?” Doctor Patel looked at the card in his hand and again at Dusman.

“Faustus,” Dusman confirmed.

The doctor cocked his head thoughtfully, decided it mattered not and again pointed at the chair.

“Sit down, Faustus,” he said to the man he knew as Felix, Fanuel, Francis and, once, as Bingo.

A table by his side was packed with tins and plastic bags full of capsules and tablets. A smaller metal table on casters held boxes of hypodermic syringes and bottles of penicillin

Dusman sat on an unsteady chair across the desk and waited while the doctor took off the heavy glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“What brings you here this time?” he asked.

“Well, *Daktari*,” Dusman started, then shrugged and left it at that. “You know what.”

No one came there with any other problem, but, just as he was not expected to recognize his clients, the

doctor was not supposed to know their trouble

“Same old trouble,” Dusman hinted.

“Is your ...?”

“Not exactly,” said Dusman. “You see ...”

Patel was already nodding to indicate he understood it all. They had been through the routine of same questions and the same answers, for so many times they did not have to talk at all to conduct the examination.

“Good, good,” he nodded to himself. “Does it . . .”

“No,” Dusman answered.

“Good, good,” he indicated the examination table. “Take off your trousers and lie down.”

The plastic was cold and sticky on Dusman’s back. The doctor put on his glasses and started the examination, which was also routine and, to Dusman, totally unnecessary. He had once tried to forgo the ritual and get on with the cure saying, “*Daktari*, I’m sure you are a busy man too, so stop playing the good doctor and bad patient, and fetch the needles.”

Patel had stared blankly back for a moment, then continued examining him.

“Have you been here before?” he had asked.

“Have you seen me here before?” Dusman had replied.

“I don’t know,” said the doctor. “I see too many people. Have you been?”

“No.” Dusman had lied as usual.

“Good,” the doctor had nodded. “I don’t like it when my patients tell me what to do. I charge them more when they advise me.”

He was not to be dictated to by his patients. He did things his own way, thoroughly and systematically, as he had learned in the old school. Dusman could not decide whether the doctor simply understood that he had to lie to him, or he was just too old to remember him.

“First the big test,” the doctor fetched a mouth swab. “Open your mouth.”

Dusman obliged. The doctor swabbed his mouth and passed the swab to his laboratory assistant in a back room.

“Results should be here shortly,” he said, unhooking his stethoscope to listen to Dusman’s organs. Starting with the heart, he worked his way meticulously down, nodding and grunting, apparently satisfied, until he reached the crucial parts. He listened, paused, sighed wearily, listened again. Finally, he cleared his throat breathing garlic in Dusman’s face.

“Let me see your tongue,” he said.

Dusman was about to say his tongue had nothing to do with it, but then he obliged to save time.

“When did it start?” he asked.

“When did what start?”

“The trouble.”

“Yesterday morning.”

“And when did you last ...?”

“Last week,” said Dusman.

There was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” said the doctor, examining Dusman’s eyes.

The assistant came into the examination room, dropped a sheet of paper on the doctor’s desk and withdrew.

“Pull up your trousers,” he said, unhitching the stethoscope from his ears and letting it dangle from his neck. Then he scrubbed his hands in a basin full of antiseptic, dried them and sat down behind his desk. He picked up the sheet of paper the lab assistant had brought and squinted at.

“Sit down, please,” he said, squinting some more.

Dusman left the examination table for the visitors’ chair.

“The good news is you are still HIV negative,” said the doctor, studying the report. “The bad news is ... you are still a very sick man. You have the flu.”

“Flu?” Dusman said startled. “Just flu?”

“Hong Kong flu,” The doctor said.

“How is that?” Dusman asked when no more information was forthcoming. “I have never been to Hong Kong.”

“That is just a name,” said the doctor. “It is a cross between the Asian and European flu. There is a lot of it around these days. The sailors, you know. Very hard to cure, very expensive.”

He rubbed his nose to let the bad news set in, and give Dusman time to worry how he would afford it.

"This is more serious than anything you are used to," the doctor went on. "You know this country would be safer and cleaner if there were not so many sailors and tourists coming and going. They bring us new diseases before the new drugs get here. Now the normal Nairobi flu, that's nothing ..."

Dusman at once suspected he would be out a good deal of money. In his experience, when an expert talked at length, or resorted to technical terms, you were in real trouble. They said the same thing several different ways and charged for every one of them.

"You need six injections," the doctor said, in the usual unhurried manner. "I'll give you tablets and capsules too, just to be sure, but in a week you will be as fit as a horse."

"How much?" Dusman asked.

The same question elsewhere had landed here, he realised.

"Not much," said the doctor.

The same answer elsewhere.

"The injections will be a thousand each," the doctor told him. "The tablets and the capsules are free."

"Can I have just the capsules and the tablets?" Dusman asked hopefully.

"Same charge," Patel did not flinch.

"You always charge me too much," Dusman complained.

"That is to discourage you from going up dusty stairs."

"I haven't been upstairs for two years," said Dusman.

"I give you the best treatment," the doctor shrugged. "Other people will charge three times per injection. Try the young one down the road. Just try that one and see."

Dusman had no wish to try anyone new. It was hard enough coming to see old Patel.

"Can I bring you the money tomorrow?" he asked.

Doctor Patel shook his head. He had learned a few good lessons in his many years in the profession. In order to remain friends with and keep his Grogan Road clients, he never accepted cheques or credit cards. Cheques bounced and customers vanished without trace. His Grogan Road clientele seemed to find it hard to keep promises.

Dusman had once asked, in jest, whether cats ever caught the flu. The doctor had paled slightly and wondered what he had been up. Dusman tried to explain Paka's escapades. Patel, holding him by the handle in the process of examination, shook his head and advised him to reduce his alcohol consumption. He treated men not cats.

"You will be fine in a week," he now said. "Otherwise, any further treatment is free. Guarantee."

Dusman unbuttoned his trousers.

"Thousand today," he said. "The rest next time."

"Tomorrow," said the doctor. "One injection a day for a week."

I'm dead, Dusman thought. He lowered his trousers and lay face down on the examination table.

"Have you ever used condoms?" the good doctor asked him.

"Condoms?"

"You know, *mpira*."

Dusman could not decide on the right answer. He started to say something, then the doctor jabbed him with a syringe and the lie came out in a muffled scream. He clenched his teeth, his eyes shut tight against pain.

"The best medicine for the flu," the doctor said. "Lie down, the pain will go away."

Dusman waited, teeth clenched, until the pain eased. Then he dressed, paid with his hard-earned thousand, and was left with no money to live the rest of the month.

"Capsules."

The doctor counted out several different types.

"One of each in the morning, afternoon and night, after meals."

"One each?"

"After meals. Now some tablets."

He counted different colours and sizes.

"Same as the capsules, one of each after breakfast, after lunch and after dinner."

"Dinner?"

He thought to mention he did not eat three times a day, but why should the doctor care. Now that he had no money left, the medicine would be his breakfast, lunch and dinner. All the food he ate for the next seven days. He wished he had bought food with the money he had paid to get his back wet.

“No beer, no women, and no hot pepper for one week,” the doctor said. “Leave your name with the attendant.”

Then he reached in his drawer and handed Dusman a handful of condoms.

“Next time try these.”

Six weeks later, Dusman was still visiting Doctor Patel and paying for the visits. The guarantee was voided, when he admitted doing everything the doctor had forbidden, except eat hot peppers. He could not resist Toto’s beer, and then one thing had led to another, and here he was back with his face in the rubber.

Without going into details, he told the doctor how the pills, which he took on an empty stomach, played havoc with his body, so that he spent his working days reeling from parking meter to parking meter. By the end of the day, he needed a drink to see his way home, and, after the drink, he needed someone to talk to and Toto was not always around.

Doctor Patel nodded his understanding and gave him more pills to eat for meals.

“No women, no beer, no hot pepper,” he said.

That was months ago.