

## The Mzungu Boy

Meja Mwangi

When the entrance was wide enough, Salt pushed his head and shoulders through and barked in the hole.

There was a sudden quiet from within. We got down on our knees and put our ears to the ground to listen. We heard nothing for a moment. Then came the sound we had heard the day before, the rumbling of approaching thunder. The sound grew louder as it came nearer. The earth shook.

We jumped to our feet ready to run for it. Then Salt gave a terrified yelp, shot backwards out of the hole, and went spinning in the air. He crashed into Pepper and both dogs went down in a cloud of dust.

Old Moses stuck his head out of the burrow and shook his tusks at us. Then he retreated and crashed to the bottom of the hole with a thud.

The dogs picked themselves up from the dust. They were shivering from the shock. Salt limped over to Nigel, but Pepper dove angrily into the hole, pushing his way in until only his tail was left wagging in the air.

Again, the deep expectant silence. Pepper was older and wiser than Salt. He did not bark in the hole. He listened, as we did, to the start of the ominous rumbling that signaled approaching thunder.

We heard it coming, felt the ground shake, and jumped back as before. Pepper wriggled out of the hole and sprang away from the mouth of the den at the very last second, as, with a whoosh of air, Old Moses shot out of the hole and into the air.

Pepper leapt on his back and sank his teeth into the massive mane. They landed yards away from us with Pepper hanging on and trying to sink his fangs in the warthog's neck.

Old Moses charged through the grassland. We waited for him to turn around and come charging back to his den. It took us a moment to realise he had no intention of returning. Then we ran.

Salt was now fully recovered from shock and he dashed forward to help his brother. Then Old Moses stopped, so suddenly Pepper flew off his back and went crashing in the dust and veered to the right and made for the first line of bush along the river. When the dust cleared, we saw Pepper pick himself up and go furiously after him with Salt right behind him.

We ran after them. I stepped into a mole hole and fell. Nigel was fifty paces behind me and doing his best to keep up. I stopped to wait for him. He was panting heavily, and his arms and his legs were almost black with sweat and dust.

"Shall we go home now?" I asked while he caught his breath.

"No," his face red with excitement. "We almost have him now."

"But he is gone," I said. "We'll never see him again."

"We shall," he said. "The dogs will catch him now."

"It will be dark soon," I pleaded. "We must go home now."

He looked around and for the first time seemed to realize where he was. The sun was sinking over the hills and we were still miles away from home.

Way up in the east, thunderclouds poured from the mountains into the valleys. Lightning flashed and thunder clashed. There was the smell of dust in the air, a sign that the rain had started its gradual descent into the plains.

I worried about flash floods. I worried about the river flooding before we crossed back home.

"We must go home now," I said to Nigel.

"But the dogs," he said. "We must get the dogs."

"It will soon be dark," I told him.

"We must get the dogs," he said, running on. "We can't go home without them."

I ran after him.

Old Moses had disappeared in the forest with Salt and Pepper after him. We came to the first line of trees and crashed into the undergrowth. It was almost dark inside the forest.

I stepped on a thorn and sat down to take it out. It was a long and hard acacia thorn and it had gone through my foot. I called to Nigel to stop and help me take it out, but he had already disappeared into the forest after the dogs.

I gritted my teeth and pulled out the thorn. I rubbed leaves on the wound to stop the bleeding. It was so painful I could no longer run.

I called out for Nigel. There was no reply. I limped into the forest after him. It was gloomy and quiet, but for the crickets now rising to sing their eerie night songs.

“Nigel,” I called.

The sudden silence was frightening.

“Nigel,” I called again.

With growing panic, I finally realised something that had been nagging at me since the hunt started. The silent and savage way the Alsatians went after their prey. Salt and Pepper were attack dogs, not hunting dogs. Unlike the *jimis*, they had not uttered a single yelp during the attack on the warthog. They had not uttered a single bark during the chase, and they were now dead silent. The *jimis* would have made enough noise to scare the whole forest. The *jimis* would have been easy to follow, but not the Alsatians.

“Nigel,” I called.

The forest was dead still, but for the sound of the crickets. I limped on, calling with mounting alarm. Darkness closed in. Lighting flashed, throwing grotesque shadows on the trees around. A sudden thunderclap echoed through the forest.

“Nigel!”

I was cold with fear. I was about to turn round and run home when I heard a muffled sound in the undergrowth. I stopped to listen. The forest was quite still now. A sharp cry rang out, a frightened sound like a sheep that was about to be slaughtered.

Then silence.

“Nigel?” I called out. “Is that you, Nigel?”

There was no reply. I heard stealthy movements up ahead. Then silence. Fear tore at my stomach — a cold, screaming fear that filled my mouth and made it hard to breathe. I moved on slowly. It was nearly dark now.

Lightning lit up the night, blinding and illuminating at the same time. In its terrible light, I saw something lying on the ground. I stopped. My fear told me to run home and get help, but my mind told me no villager would dare come to the forest with me after dark. The soldiers had warned us against it. The soldiers had said that anyone found in the forest after dark would be shot dead.

Fearfully, I approached the thing on the ground. It was Pepper with his head split open and blood all around him. Fearless Pepper was dead.

I cried out in fear and ran about calling for Nigel. The forest echoed Nigel’s name, but there was no reply. I called until I was hoarse from yelling.

I had to get help to find him. If Old Moses could do what he did to Bwana Ruin’s Pepper, I needed all the help I could find. I ran back the way we had come. The river was roaring with rising floodwaters when I crossed back to the village. It was dark when I got home, scratched, and bruised by the things I had run into in the dark, and scared like I had never been before.

Father was at work and Hari was not yet home. Mother sat alone by the fireplace worrying about us all.

“I have worried about you all evening,” she said, the moment I entered. “Where have you been?”

“Nowhere,” I said.

I itched to tell her more, but I did not know how to tell her that I had lost the *mzungu* boy in the forest. I was not supposed to be with him, in the forest in the first place, and I was not supposed to be with Nigel at night. In the end I told her nothing. I had been nowhere and done nothing with no one. That was the usual reply, but this time she saw the fear.

“What have you done?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Wait until your father gets home,” she said. “You will tell him where you have been all day.”

I was tempted to go back to the forest and stay there until I had found Nigel, but I could not go back alone. Just thinking about it left me cold with fear.

I knew of only one person who could go in the forest at night without fear.

“Where is Hari?” I asked her.

She regarded me with renewed interest.

“Where have you been?” she asked again.

“Nowhere,” I said.

She nodded quietly and left it to father to drag the truth out of me, when he came. She served my dinner and sat watching me eat. Dozens of desperate thoughts went through my head, as I ate. All of them were so terrifying I could neither taste the food nor sit completely still.

I rose and went outside several times with mounting anxiety.

“Nigel,” I heard someone call from Bwana Ruin’s house.

I thought of going to Bwana Ruin and telling him I had lost Nigel in the forest. Then I remembered what father had told me would happen to us and sat trembling by the fireside hoping my mother would not notice. I thought of drowning myself in the river before anyone found out what I had done.

Mother watched me stew in my own terror.

“Kariuki,” she asked again. “What have you done?”

“Nothing,” I said and went back outside.

Rain arrived down from the mountain, raindrops rattling on the roof of the chicken house.

“Nigel,” I heard his grandmother call.

I ran back in the house.

Father came moments later to ask whether I had seen the *mzungu* boy. His white uniform was dotted with dark raindrops and he looked so miserable it frightened me.

I told him I had not seen Nigel since that morning.

“Where could he be?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said.

He stared at me hard. I was afraid he had seen me sneak into the forest with Nigel. Then he left and went back to the farmhouse looking more miserable than ever.

Mother watched me from across the fireplace, with her all-seeing and all-knowing look, and waited for me to tell her the truth. I was so frightened and confused that I was about to confess everything to her. Then Father came home and told us the *mzungu* boy was missing.

“The dogs too,” he told us. “Bwana Ruin has called the soldiers back.”

That whole night I lay awake, listening to the clash of thunder in the forest and the rain beat down on our roof, and waited for the soldiers to come and take us all away and shoot us. If I survived the night, I said to myself, I would rise before dawn and go back to the forest. I would search the whole forest and would not return until I found Nigel.

Then a desperate thought entered my mind. What if I did not find Nigel? What then?

I would run away from home, I said to myself. I would go far, far away and stay there. I would go over the Loldaiga hills to the land of the Dorobos. I would go where the soldiers could not find me. I would never return home if I did not find Nigel.

It was too late. We woke up to find the village surrounded by angry white soldiers. They rounded all of us up and herded us into the auction pen. The rain had turned it into a mud pool, but they had us sit on the mud while they went through our huts as before.

This time they were not looking for guns or for the *mau-mau*, but for clues that would link us to Nigel’s disappearance. Nevertheless, they unearthed things that would send some people to detention or worse. They found things for which some people would hang.

The soldiers found a homemade gun and three bullets, maps, bandages, medicines, and many things that villagers were not supposed to know about.

They called the villagers out one by one and marched them to the farmhouse. Bwana Ruin had set up an interrogation tent on his front lawn. They were ordered to produce their identity cards; their movement passes and their work permits. They were asked whether they or anyone they knew was *mau-mau*. Some were released right away and allowed to go back to their homes, while others were herded to one side to wait under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

When my turn came, I limped into the tent, scared almost to the point of wetting myself, and stood in front of the Bwana Ruin and three white officers. Two of them were army officers, while the third was a police inspector. The interrogation was done by the grey-haired army officer with grave, old eyes.

“What happened to your foot?” he asked me.

I told him that I stepped on a thorn.

“How old are you?” he asked.

I told him.

“Where do you go to school?” he asked.

I told him that too. He picked up a toy pistol from the table and showed it to me.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

I told him.

“Do you know where we found it?” he asked me.

“Under my bed,” I said.

He glanced at Bwana Ruin. Nigel’s grandfather sat slumped in his chair with a sad look on his face.

“Whose toy gun is it?” the inspector asked me.

“It is mine,” I told him.

“Yours, *aye?*” Bwana Ruin sat up. “Where did you get it from?”

“Nigel gave it to me,” I said. “The Bwana Kidogo gave it to me.”

“He did, did he?” Bwana Ruin asked me. “Whose *toto* are you, *aye?* Whose is your father?”

The inspector interrupted him to ask me when exactly the Bwana Kidogo had given me the gun. I could not remember exactly when. But it was after we got tired of playing cowboys and discovered hunting. It all seemed so long ago now.

“So, you are a friend of the Bwana Kidogo then?” he asked.

I answered that I was. He glanced at Bwana Ruin again before continuing.

“When did you see him last?” asked the police inspector.

I hesitated. What did they know? Had someone found out about our hunting expedition with Salt and Pepper? Nigel could not have told anyone about it. Did someone see us leave for the forest together?

“Yesterday,” I said to the inspector. “I saw him yesterday.”

“Where did you see him?” he asked.

“When the soldiers came to surround us,” I said to him. “He was standing there with *mamsab.*”

The inspector talked to the other officers, while Bwana Ruin stared angrily at me. I looked away from his eyes and saw where the suspects squatted waiting to be taken away to Nanyuki. Among them was my brother Hari. When our eyes met, he looked away.

“That will be all,” said the inspector. “You can go back.”

I ran all the way home. My mother was there, worried as I had never seen her worried before.

“I told you,” she said gravely.

“Told me what?” I asked her.

“Your father told you,” she said. “We all told you.”

“Told me what?” I asked her again.

“To stay away from the *mzungu* boy,” she said. “Now see what you have brought upon us all.”

“But it is not my fault,” I said.

“Whose fault is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t know, you don’t know,” she said, close to tears. “When will you ever know?”

I did not know.

The first chance I got, I called Jimi and told him what had to be done. We sneaked out of the village together and entered the forest. The river was dangerously swollen, and we had to walk way downstream from the village to find a safe place to cross. Then we set out to find Nigel.

Starting from where I had left off the night before, we worked our way up the valley, searching under every bush and tree. We found Salt’s body, about a mile from Pepper’s lay. The body was bloated and beginning to smell, and there were blue flies all around. He had two deep cuts on his head. There was blood all over and the area bore the signs of a fierce fight.

I had never known Jimi to be so terrified as he now was. It took all the promises I could make to persuade him to stay with me a little longer. I was very scared too, but I had to find Nigel.

My foot hurt terribly too, with every step I took, and I had to stop every now and then to rest it. I cut a stick to lean on, and we continued our search, calling Nigel’s name from place to place. When I called out Nigel’s name, Jimi too barked Nigel’s name. We stopped, listened, then moved on.

Now and then we came across a human footprint, but we found none of Old Moses. Sometimes a broken twig was all that was left to tell us that someone, had been there. We came across a herd of buffalo browsing their way through a glade.

I knew we had nothing to fear from the herd if we kept far away from them. I led Jimi quietly around the glade. The lead buffalo saw us and snorted, warning us to keep our distance.

We searched caves along the river valley and found nothing but bat droppings and old animal bones. We covered a lot of ground that day.

In the late afternoon I called off the search and Jimi and I returned tiredly home. Along the way, we came upon a party of soldiers searching for Nigel’s body along the riverbank. They thought he might have gone fishing and drowned in a flash flood.

There were more soldiers around our compound when we got back home. They had father in handcuffs and were about to take him away.

“Where have you been?” he asked me.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“Don’t cry,” he said to my mother.

I had never seen her cry. I had seen her suffer, but I had never seen her shed a tear. Not even when my little sister died. Now, as the soldiers prepared to take my father away, she put her arm around me and drew me to her. He just noticed me then.

“Where have you been?” he asked again.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“Stay with your mother,” he ordered. “And do not cry.”

I was too frightened to cry. Nigel’s disappearance had turned our lives all upside down. Nothing would ever be the same again. Even my own father, Bwana Ruin’s most important worker and the toughest, bravest man I knew, was not safe from the terror that had suddenly descended on us.

They took him by the arm and dragged him away. Even Jimi understood what was happening, for he whined faintly and crawled under the grain store to hide.

“Where are they taking him?” I asked my mother.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Will they hang him?”

“Hang him? She seemed startled.

“Shoot him?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

We watched until they disappeared among the village huts.

“What happened to your foot?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You run to the river and fetch some water,” she said. “We have a lot of washing today.”

It was late in the afternoon. There was not enough sun left to dry any clothes. I did not understand why she wanted to do her washing at this time of day, but I took the bucket and went down to the place where I had first met the *mzungu* boy.

There was no joy in it anymore. There was no joy in anything anymore.