

The Wicked Walk

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To my beloved Father

Thou shalt keep them, O Lord,
Thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever,
The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.

Psalms 12: 7,8

PROLOGUE

It was a beautiful, warm Dar es Salaam morning. The famous coastal music, taarab, blared from radios set at full blast. It mixed with the sounds of people yelling at each other, calling each other, exchanging nasty words and the result was one big roar. From time to time a boy would pass shouting: 'Bread for tea!' or 'Buns for breakfast!' or '*Matako ya mke!*'* They were cheap and they sold nicely in this area during breakfast hours.

The whole district was a giant brothel. As Deo walked along the sandy path, he met an assortment of faces worn by shy men coming out of the whores' houses. Their clothes were shabby and shambled into uncountable folds. The greasy, unwashed faces showed white saliva solidified into broad lines extending from mouth to cheek. The hazy look on the men's faces showed self-satisfaction, but also deep exhaustion and physical weakness. There were a good number of cars parked outside the prostitutes' homes.

Deo peeped into the houses as he passed. The whores whose men had left were already preparing their breakfasts, ready to sustain the strong thrashes of the daytime customers. These houses were not very attractive. Most of them were roofed with coconut palm leaves; and those made with iron sheets were full of rust making them look like triangular anthills. The windows were purposely made small to stop some unfaithful customers from escaping in the night, paying nothing for the services. The walls of the houses were unplastered.

During the daytime trade most of the doors of the houses were wide open and each prostitute sat not very far from the door, about two or three yards from the entrance. Usually they sat on mats woven from palm leaf fibres. Their bodies facing the entrance, they observed anyone who passed nearby and welcomed everyone who peeped or knocked at the door. Those whose houses were known to many customers never sat at the door, they just waited inside and the customers would come.

*Meaning a woman's buttocks, which was an expression for a kind of large maize fried in oil?

Deo turned round a corner and faced the house for which he was looking. He wondered whether he would meet Nancy's mother busy with a man. He rapped lightly on the door. There was no answer. He put his ear to a crevice in the door, expecting to hear the sounds of a bed squeaking as the woman conducted her trade. No sound. He walked to a window on the side of the house and rapped with a careful gentleness. No reply. He hit it harder and harder. Still no reply, nor was there any movement that indicated the presence of people. He peeped into the room through a crack in the window. The scene inside made him gasp and dash a few yards away in fear. He kept away for some time, nursing his shock. Then softly he wiped his eyes, went forward and took a long, concerned look into the room. After observing the scene thoroughly he stepped back and cried to the neighbours for help.

When neighbours arrived they kicked open the door and rushed into the house. Inside, a naked woman dangled peacefully from a rope. She was dead.

Deo looked at Maria hanging dead, then at the assembly of neighbours, most of whom were customers of the prostitutes and he remembered the last line of the psalm by David: "The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted."

Part One

Sugar

MARIA

I

She was a prostitute. Throughout her womanhood all men had been hers and all women had been a challenge to her. She felt herself in a world alienated from that of other women; they seemed to look at her through eyes coloured with hostility. When she got the news of her brother's death in hospital a few weeks past, she wept vehemently, because the people around her felt contented in themselves. She was a cur. Other people rejoiced at what grieved her; they regretted what she liked. Some tried to console her, and some few wept with her, but this made her hate them more. She felt the sting of hypocrisy in their condolences. She remained an outcast, a leper in their moral world. Her unwanted presence was a grain of sand in the eyes. They mourned it. Among the men were those who came to mock her existence, and those who came to her because she was there, because she could serve them. She hated those who came and tried to change her into another kind of a woman, 'a good woman'. She knew she could never change.

A girl on a sofa-bed moved to avoid the rays of the sun which struck her face. She cursed. Maria looked at her, shaking her head worriedly. 'Another whore,' she said to herself. She feared that she was bringing up another prostitute who would take her position when she was dead. The girl looked exactly like her mother. She was the fruit of sin between brother and sister. Maria had sinned with her brother, a sin which grew into a dark spot in their hearts. Nancy was a star in this darkness and her presence glittered, trying to wash out the darkness, but instead exposing it more 'Nancy, it is seven now, aren't you going to school?' Maria asked. She wanted the girl out of her sight. In the presence of her daughter, Maria had a

feeling of guilt which nearly drove her mad. Sometimes she wished she could kill Nancy and wipe out her accusing presence. She had tried to kill the baby just after birth but whenever she showed death the prey, it would not respond. One day she had picked up the baby and gone with it to a latrine, but when she tried to drop it into the pit her hands would not let go and she was shaken. She had fallen down and the baby was hurled into a corner of the latrine where it cried wildly.

Now the baby had grown into a girl, she could no longer kill it. The earlier incident had made her suffer a guilty conscience which broke into wild delirium in the night. She had become frightened when her neighbour, Ana, told her that she spoke strange words in the night. She did not want to blurt out things in the darkness again. She could do it by other means, but then she feared those 'other means'.

'She is my daughter, God presented me with her. Why kill her?' There was something which united them both and the urge to kill her seemed like an urge to commit suicide.

'Mama, I am going to school,' Nancy said, as she walked out the door with a bundle of books. Maria looked at the girl through the window as she disappeared amongst the other houses. She envied her daughter's well-built body. 'A good mother-to-be,' she thought.

There was a knock on the door. Maria knew who it was and she dreaded him. The heavy body of a man, bearded or fat-bellied, lame or blind, the stench of sweat mixed with cigarettes. She hated her profession. But there was Nancy, there were clothes to be bought and what-have-you.

Money, and the cheap sale of one's body to get it. The labourious work of twitching one's hips throughout the day, the pains, the heated insides worn out by hourly thrashes, daily thrashes. She feared for her health, feared herself and the type of life she was leading.

She remembered the times a man would come – hot, charging like a bull racing towards grass in the fields – and this man would hand Maria the money and rush her to bed. She had to handle such men to control their wild jerkings, their urges to make her

feel pain, otherwise they would hurt her. When she was still new to the profession and a young girl, such men made her whimper or scream. This made them very happy. She marked their faces and never accepted them again. Then she became experienced and such actions made her laugh aloud at the men, mocking them and looking them straight in the eye with derision. They would begin violently and wildly, plunging this way and that, making sure they touched every corner of her body, but after a short time they would sit and soften like jellyfish.

'Come in,' she said, as she sat upon her bed. The door opened slowly and the man walked in quietly, as if there were a serpent he did not want to disturb. He closed the door behind him and stood erect before the woman, his eyes cast shyly towards the ground. Maria looked at him as though questioning who he was and what on earth he wanted in her house. But she said nothing, she just looked at the man who stood there waiting. His shirt was bright white; his trousers, black, with the toes of his shoes peeping from beneath like lizards coming out of a hole.

'Nafasi?' he asked hesitatingly.

'What do you mean, "nafasi"?' Maria asked back rather rudely, but her lips smiled at him.

'I mean, can you serve me?' the man said, now more firmly.

She looked at him from tip to toe, virtually stripping every bit of cloth from his body. She seemed to X-ray him with her eyes. There was no disease. Her eyes rose and looked straight into his and remained fixed there. The man thrust his hand into his pocket and fished out a ten-shilling note. He handed it to her. She took the money and tucked it into her bosom. Then she tried to put the bed into order, but the sheets were too disheveled to be rearranged in a short time.

'Come,' Maria told the man as she lay flat on the bed. The man had already unbuttoned his trousers, the waist band already down to his knees. He went to her. Maria cursed as she washed herself from a bowl. 'It is all shit,' she said to herself, sneering. She wondered how it would have been if she had never been touched, if

she were a nun. How would she look? A woman- simple, beautiful and natural. Nobody would have degraded her.

But then, there was her body, used! Money, that was it's name. It was all the wealth she had. If somehow a man came to her and chopped off that which made her a woman, she would starve. Yet there she was, cursing her womanhood, dreading the smells in the room which were nothing but the smells of her trade.

She stood up and walked to the door. The sun outside had already heated up. She gazed upon the busy street. Different types of people stirring like bees in a hive. Some others, beautifully shaped girls of Nancy's age, going in and out of shops. A good number of shabby, tough, ugly-looking men carrying sacks and huge loads on their backs into and out of Indian shops.

'Mami Nancy!' a voice called from outside, through the back door. Maria walked sluggishly to the door, her legs moving lifelessly below her flopping buttocks. She opened the door.

'Come in Mami Joseph,' Maria said as she walked back into the room. The other woman followed, tall and massive. Her fat body seemed to be falling onto her bamboo – shaped legs, her feet sweeping softly on the cement floor.

'You had a man early this morning?' Ana asked knowingly, for the smell in the room, the tousled sheets and the tired look on Maria's face showed it plainly.

'Ah, yes. One of those single-grain birds. They peck a single grain of maize and they are satisfied,' Maria said.

'I like them, you know. They hit once and fast, which doesn't tire you much,' the tall woman rejoined, patting her buttocks as she spoke.

'But some of them are dangerous, they go and chew some herb then come to you stiffer than ebony. Then they will thrash you till you feel like vomiting!' Maria said, and they both laughed loudly as Maria tried to imitate how the man would move about.

'I sometimes enjoy it,' said Ana, 'don't you?'

'No, I don't I don't enjoy it one bit. It is only the money I am after, even if a man came and asked for a thrash on the buttocks, if

he gave me a double sum, I would let him!, Maria said, and another burst of laughter followed.

'But they say it is common nowadays. Some of our business mates at Kisulu do it, you know, and they get lots of money.'

'No,' Maria said, 'I just made a joke. Let's not talk about it, it sounds very bestial.'

They remained quiet for some time. Maria looked without expression at the rough bed, unbothered by it. It looked like a jungle where two elephants had been fighting. The couch where Nancy had been sleeping had no cover. The girl had left some books placed carelessly on the small table. Near a corner of the room were dirty teapots, a cooking stove, a cupboard. Flies tried to penetrate through the wire gauze window of the cupboard. They buzzed everywhere, jumping from the bowl Maria had used for washing herself to the teapot, and from there to the bed, to the wire gauze, then back to the bowl.

'I've brought the herbs,' Ana said, producing a bundle of well-wrapped roots and leaves of an herb they called bombo.

'Thank you,' Maria replied to Ana, and smiled with satisfaction.

'You know how to administer them?' Ana asked.

'No.'

'Now, listen,' Ana said, trying to be more serious. Maria moved closer. 'You boil these roots in water mixed with man's urine, then you take some of these leaves, smear them with some semen, then dry them. In the morning, wash yourself in the liquor of boiled roots. And the leaves, put them in fire, letting the smoke fill the house.'

'Are you sure it will work?'

'Sure,' said Ana firmly, 'don't you see my size, my old, ugly look? But men come flocking to me like cows to a stream at noon. Fat-bellied men, teenaged kids and college boys!'

Maria smiled to herself as she put the herbs under the pillow. Ana also smiled.

'I am going,' Ana said, standing up lazily.

'Yes. Business must be hot now,' Maria escorted Ana to the

door. There were two men standing at the door peeping in. Ana grabbed the arm of the one who looked older and he followed her.

'Karibu,' Maria told the other one. They went in.

II

Nancy was late from school. Joseph, the son of her neighbour, reported to Maria that he had seen Nancy go into a house at Livingstone Street. The place he named was not very far from where they stayed, and this relieved some of her worries. Yet there was some uneasiness which haunted her, a fear that there was something wrong somewhere. There was this common talk of town boys beating and raping schoolgirls. One day Nancy had stormed into the small house breathless. When Maria asked her what was the matter, the girl said that a pack of thugs were after her. Then Maria had gone outside to see who was after her daughter, only to find a group of decently dressed young men, talking and laughing excitedly. Seeing her, the whole mob advanced to her, their arms stretched forward. Maria screamed, rushed back into the house and locked the door.

The youths who had chased Nancy were a group of bhang smokers, a mob composed of school boys, local band musicians, bus conductors and sometimes a few off-duty policemen. They spent most of their evening the outside brothels if they had some money to give the prostitutes, or at the beaches looking for someone to rob. Sometimes they raided shops which were open late. It was believed that policemen supplied them with arms and they used these weapons to commit crimes.

Yet this was not what disturbed Maria so much. From Livingstone Street to her house the streets were always filled with armed policemen. What then did she fear? The time was a quarter to six. What was wrong? The girl was never later from school, nor had she ever been reported to have a deep association with any boy, other than Joseph.

The boy seemed to Maria to be well brought-up. She did not expect anything bad from Joseph's association with her daughter. Still, there was this thing which came into her thoughts but not