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DILMAN DILA

How My Father Became a God

My father was a god, though he looked like any other old man. He had a thick white beard, and a bald head with tufts of hair above his ears. He had no wrinkles. His ribs showed. His gait was slow, shuffling. He always wore large, green earrings, a rainbow-coloured necklace, and a black goat skin loin cloth. He looked ordinary, but I knew he was a god. I confirmed this the day he showed me the egg-shaped thing. It stood on two bird-like legs that were taller than he was, and it had a pair of wings that were so large he must have skinned twenty cows to make them. I wondered where he got the hide, for he had no wealth to buy cattle.

“It’s buffalo skin,” he said.

“You don’t hunt,” I said.

“I paid a hunter.”

I frowned, but was too courteous to ask how he had paid the hunter. He was so poor he could not afford to buy a chicken.

“I sold him a trap,” he added.

It had to have been a unique trap for this hunter to pay with twenty buffalo hides. I did not press him about it. The egg-shaped object enthralled me.

“Can it fly?” I said.

“Not yet. But soon, it will take you to the sky to become the bride of the sun.”

I giggled. “Is it a new type of bird?”

He smiled. “No. I call it a bruka. Do you remember Bruka?”

I nodded. Bruka was an eagle. A boy had tricked it with a chicken and it had come to the ground. Then the boy had jumped on its back and rode it through the skies. Yet this egg-shaped thing had no life. How would it fly?

“Will you put the spirit of a bird in it?” I said.

“No. I am still making its—” He paused. “I don’t know what to call that thing.” He pointed at a box-shaped object fixed between the wings. “For now, let’s just call it a heart. It will make the bruka fly, but it needs special sap for it to work. I haven’t yet found that sap.”

We were behind a hut that looked like a fallen tree trunk. He called it the ot’cwe, the house of creation. My family had banished him from the homestead, so he lived alone in this hut. The walls did not have the beautiful red-and-white designs Maa had painted on our home. The walls here were cracked, and full of drawings of the things Baa tried to create. The grass-thatched roof had holes that leaked when the rains came. I wished I

were old enough to help him with repairs so he would not sleep in a place worse than a kraal. When the rains became too heavy, my mother allowed him to sneak into her bed. I could hear them giggling all night. She had to be careful or else my uncles would beat her up. They once thrashed her when they discovered she had prepared a dish of goat meat for him. They insisted he should eat only their leftovers, which they dumped in a calabash at the edge of the compound. He never ate that garbage. Maa secretly sent me with food for him.

“Lapoya!” Okec, my eldest brother, shouted from a distance, interrupting us.

Baa gave me a look of surprise. They forbade anyone to visit him. They wanted him to live in isolation like a leper, hidden away from the eyes of the public, because they thought he was a lapoya and a shame to the family. Whenever I visited him, I made sure no one saw me, so why was Okec here? Had I made a mistake? Had he seen me? A bush still hid me from his view.

“Hide,” Baa said.

He lifted me onto a window. I jumped into the hut and hid in a giant pot. They thought Baa was a lapoya because he tried to make magical things that did not work, like this pot which would make water during droughts. Nothing he made worked, but I had faith in him. In the great stories, Lacwic, the creator, kept trying to make humans. Each time he failed, he instead created an animal or a bird, so we have all these different species. Eventually, he succeeded.

Baa was a god. He had to experiment until he came up with the thing he was supposed to create. He had spent all his life on this pursuit. Everybody laughed at him, but he did not stop. He could not stop.

“What do you want?” I heard him say.

“I have a husband for Akidi,” Okec said.

When I heard my name, my flesh turned as hard and cold as a hailstone. Baa had ten sons. I was the only daughter, the youngest child from his third wife. Since he was a poor man, his sons had no cattle to pay dowry for brides. Because he had no mature daughters, there was no hope of wealth coming into the family anytime soon. His sons could not get married.

“She’s still a child,” Baa said. “She’s too young to have breasts or to know that women bleed.”

“Okot has offered a thousand head of cattle,” Okec said.

A thousand? Only the Rwot’s daughter could command such a rich dowry, not me. If it were true, then all my brothers would have enough cattle to marry.

“She’s still a child,” Baa said.

“That’s why she’s valuable,” Okec said. “Okot lost his manhood. The ajwaka says he needs a wife as young as Akidi to regain it. That’s why he’s offering all this cattle. You can’t refuse.”

“If you mention it again,” Baa said, “I’ll cut off your head.”

“You are cursed,” Okec said. “Your madness has wasted our wealth. We now can’t get married. This is our best chance. Don’t say no.”

My father was not listening anymore. I knew, for I heard him entering the ot'cwe. He sat on a stool beside my hiding place.

"We don't need your permission," Okec shouted. He remained outside. They feared to enter the ot'cwe, which they believed was infested with demons. "You are a lunatic, so your brothers will give the permission."

He stomped away.

I climbed out of the pot. Baa's face had wrinkled. I hugged him. His tears fell on my cheeks.

"I'll go to the forest." His voice crackled like dry leaves. "I'll find the obibi tree. Its sap will make the bruka fly. We'll go to the clouds, just you, me, and your mother. We'll start a new home up there."

I held him tighter. My fingernails dug into his flesh in anger. I was still a child, but I knew obibi was a myth, a monster that lived only in fairy tales. Before I could berate him for giving up, love drums started to beat. The musicians were already in our homestead, which was a short distance from my father's hut. My brother had come to ask for Baa's permission only as a formality. He had conspired with my uncles, and they had already organised the amito nywom feast. In the ceremony, boys gathered at the bride's homestead and danced larakaraka, and she chose the best dancer for a husband. Rarely did the bride choose a man only because of his dancing talent or good looks. Often, she would know her choice long before the function. In some instances, like this one, her family would force her to pick a boy they preferred.

"Akidi!" I heard my mother shout. "Run, my daughter! Run and hide!"

Baa charged out of the hut with a vunduk, a lightning weapon he had created. Shaped like a gourd, it was a ball with a long pipe attached to it. I followed him out, praying to Lacwic to make the vunduk work.

Maa ran through the bushes with three of my brothers chasing her. It reminded me of a hunt I once saw, where a group of boys chased a hare with bows and arrows. They did not catch it. My brothers, however, were faster than Maa. They overtook her, pushed her aside, and came for me. Baa pointed the vunduk at them and pulled a string that dangled from its ball. The weapon made a low sound, like a harp's string when strummed, but it did not produce lightning to strike my brothers. They kept running towards us. Baa pulled the string, again and again. My brothers started laughing at him.

"Run!" Maa was shouting. "Run, Akidi! Run!"

I ran. Unlike the hare, I could not outrun my brothers but I could hide. I saw a hole in an anthill. Someone had dug it up recently in search of a queen. I ducked into the hole and into a tunnel big enough for me to crawl on my hands and knees. I went in deep, where my brothers would not be able to get me. I snuggled in the darkness, trying not to cry. I felt safe until the mouth of the burrow darkened with someone peeping in.

"She's inside," Okec said. "Make a fire. We'll smoke her out."

"You'll kill her!" Maa cried. "Don't use fire! You'll kill her!"

The burrow went deep under the ground. It became so dark that I could not see. I groped, but as long as I could feel open space ahead, I did not stop moving. The voices became faint, until I could not hear them anymore. I feared a giant snake would swallow me or a hundred rats would attack me. Still, I did not stop. Such a fate was better than marrying Okot.

When the smoke flowed into the tunnel, I was so far away it did not bother me. The burrow widened, becoming big enough for me to stand. I ran, stumbling over the uneven, soggy ground. I ran for such a long time I feared the tunnel had no end, and that I would get lost in an underground maze. Still, I refused to cry. I went round a bend and saw a light. A draught of fresh air tickled me into laughter. The tunnel narrowed again. I went down on my knees and crawled out.

At once I wished I had remained inside.

I was at the Leper's Swamp. No one ever went there, not even powerful shamans. It was about the size of four large homesteads and deep enough to swallow a man. In the middle stood a black rock, shaped like the mortar we used to pound groundnuts into flour. The rock was larger than three huts put together, two times taller than trees, and it had a surface as smooth as a polished pot. Every full moon, blood dripped out of it to colour the water. They called it Leper's Rock. Spirits lived there.

I ran away from the haunted water, to find a place to hide, but then I heard hunting dogs. They had picked up my scent and were coming after me. Wherever I hid, they would find me, though not in the water—they would lose my scent if I went there.

But there were spirits in the water.

The dogs came nearer. Their barking pricked my eardrums. My brothers were urging them to get me, and my mother screamed, "Run! Akidi! Run!"

I saw my face in the water. I resembled my father. He was a god. Surely, spirits would not hurt the daughter of a god. The barking grew louder, angrier, and I had no choice. I closed my eyes, said a prayer to the creator, and slipped into the swamp. The cold water stung my skin. Goosebumps sprouted all over my arms. I waited for something else to happen, for fire to consume my body, for spirits to strike me dead. Nothing happened. I swam fast, through papyrus reeds. Frogs and fish swam with me. I took it as a sign that Lacwic had answered my prayers. The spirits would not harm me. I reached the middle, where I climbed onto the rock. Still, the spirits did not do anything to me.

Long ago, a thirsty leper had found a group of girls at a well. He had asked for a calabash to drink water, and the girls had laughed at him. One, however, had given him her calabash. After he had quenched his thirst, he told her to stay away from the dance that night. She had heeded the warning. The other girls did not. During the fiesta, this rock had fallen from the sky and buried all the dancers. The well from which the leper had drunk dried up, and a swamp grew around this rock. It was not just another fairy tale. The blood that seeped out every full moon proved it to be true. Red stripes stained the rock's surface.

I sat still in the reeds. The dogs whined on the banks. They had lost my scent. My brothers were shouting, my mother was wailing. Their voices came as if from another world. I longed to hear my father.

"Did she enter the water?" Okec said.

"She wouldn't dare," someone responded.

"Useless dogs!" I recognised Okot's voice. "Useless!"

A dog yelped in pain. Maybe Okot had kicked it.

I could not stand my mother wailing as though I were dead. I put my fingers in my ears, but that did not shut her out. I walked around the rock. The tall papyrus hid me

from their view. On the other side, their voices were faint. I saw a cave and went in. The mouth was low, but inside it was bigger than a hut and I could no longer hear Maa or my brothers. I felt safe, and cried myself to sleep.

A dripping from further inside the cave awoke me. Something glowed on the floor and filled the room with a weak, reddish light. I was not afraid. Baa was a god, so this spirit would not harm me. I crept to the light, which came from a pool of thick blood. Above the pool, on the cave roof, hung a sculpture that resembled a cow's breast with three nipples. Somebody, or something, had carved it up there. Blood dripped out of the nipples.

Was it really blood? It looked to be thicker than porridge. When I touched it, the liquid stung me like a thorn and left a glowing stain on my finger tip. Blood could not do that, but sap could. Maybe it's what Baa needed to make the bruka fly and take us to a paradise in the heavens.

I ran out of the cave. The sun had sunk low into the horizon, giving the world a red tint. I had been asleep for far much longer than I had thought. I could not hear my mother, my brothers or the dogs. I crossed the swamp and crept through the bushes. By the time I reached the ot'cwe, darkness had fallen. A small fire flickered under the tree in front of the hut. My parents sat beside it like prisoners, their backs to me. Baa still had the vunduk, and held it as though it were a real weapon. Okec, Okot, and an ajwaka in a costume of bird feathers, stood around them. I climbed up a tree, silent as a cat, and curled up in the branches to hide.

"She's our sister," Okec was saying. "We can't harm her, but every girl has to get married. Why delay her happiness when a wealthy suitor is interested?"

"There are other girls in the village," Maa said.

"We are the poorest," Okec said. "We don't even own chickens."

"Work for your wealth if you want to marry," Baa said.

"You squandered our wealth," Okec said through his teeth. "You must make amends by giving us Akidi. Where is she?"

"Even if I knew," Baa said, "I wouldn't tell you."

"I won't stop looking for her," Okot said. "I'll marry her, whether you like it or not."

He walked away. The ajwaka said something to my parents in such a low voice that I did not catch it, then followed Okot. My brother jeered, hissed insults, and went away too. After a while, my parents begun to roast maize. They worked in silence. I stayed in the tree for a long time, watching them, until I felt it safe to climb down. They did not notice me until I had crept right up to them.

"Baa," I whispered. "I found it."

They turned to me. Their faces were bruised from a beating.

"Akidi," Maa cried.

They hugged me tightly.

"The sap." I wrung myself out of their grasp. "It's in the Leper's Rock." I showed Baa the stain, which still glowed on my finger.

“The Leper’s Rock?” Baa’s eyes turned white in terror. “You were there?”

“Oh, my daughter.” Maa’s tears shone in the lights of the fire.

“Nothing happened to me,” I said.

That night, I dreamt that my father’s bruka took me to the stars, where I became a princess in a world whose sky was red like blood. My finger with the sap stain glowed while I was awake to give this world day. When I awoke, the stain had peeled skin off my finger, leaving a scar that I still have to this day.

My parents had sat up through the night, Maa armed with a machete, Baa with the vunduk, ready to defend me, but my brothers had not attacked.

“We shall hide in the Leper’s Rock,” Baa said.

They must have reached that decision while I slept. Maybe Baa also knew that, being a god, the spirits would not harm him or his wife. We set off before dawn. Baa took some of his creations, and I carried his tools and other materials in a sack. I wanted him to take the bruka, but it was too big and heavy. Maa packed a basket of food that she had secretly taken from the gardens during the night. At the swamp, Baa built a papyrus raft. We rowed to the other side just as light broke.

We hesitated at the cave, where a strong red glow spilled out. Was it spirits?

Maa took several steps away, her face tight with fear. “Let’s wait a little,” she said. “It’s still dark.”

Baa grinned at her then crawled into the cave. I wanted to follow him, but Maa grabbed my arms and made me stay with her. We sat on a boulder and waited. Baa took such a long time I feared the red light had eaten him. The sun rose. The red light weakened until it went out completely. Still, Baa had not returned.

“Baa!” I called, alarmed.

He crawled out, smiling, and brushed dirt off his knees and palms.

“There are no spirits,” he said. “The light came from the sap. It seeps out of the rock and people think it is blood. It shines at night and goes out at sunrise. I’ll call it the leper’s blood.”

I looked at the scar on my finger and thought of the red world in my dream. Had the Leper’s Rock fallen from there? I did not tell my parents about the dream.

We settled in the cave, in a spot as far from the breast as possible, though it had stopped bleeding. By the time it started again, just before sunset, the pool had dried up.

Baa went to work at once. He made gloves that enabled him to touch the sap without it pricking him. I prayed that the leper’s blood did not turn out to be useless. I wanted it to make the bruka work so we could escape from my brothers, but this made me think of the world in my dream. The blood red sky suspended over a land without vegetation or soil, without living things as I knew it, but full of black, mortar-shaped rocks. I suddenly did not want to go to that world.

Maybe Baa could create something else, like the cooking stone that used the power of the sun rather than firewood. I hated collecting firewood. I had to walk with other unmarried girls far from the village. The snakes did not scare us, nor did the monkeys or elephants. These were merely animals. We did not fear obibi, for we knew they were mythical, but we dreaded the warabu. These were evil spirits in the shape of

humans, with albino skin and black hair that was long and straight like a lion's mane. They kidnapped people and put them in black ropes of a strange material, which was harder than rock, and took them across the great desert to work as slaves in the land of the dead.

If Baa made a stove that cooked without firewood, he would become wealthy, for every homestead would want to own such a stove. With such wealth, my brothers would not force me to get married.

Baa did not want to make the stove. It would take a long time to bring him wealth. But if he had a super weapon, no one would dare touch me, so he concentrated on the vunduk. He worked fervently for the next three days. On the fourth, as he tried to make the vunduk shoot fireballs, he accidentally created something that worked. He moulded clay into an orange shape the size of my fist, mixed it with leper's blood, and put it out in the sun to absorb heat, but the ball was harmless. Instead of fire, it gave off the sunlight it had absorbed. The longer Baa left it in the sun, the brighter it shone.

Baa groaned in disappointment, though the ball could be a valuable source of light in every household. Back then we relied on kitchen fires and the moon for lighting. He called it the sunball.

"It's a step forward," I told him. "You made a ball that can trap the light of the sun. Don't give up. Now make one that can trap its heat."

That night we went to the mainland for firewood and food. We dug up wild roots and collected fruits. We stole hares from traps. As we returned to the swamp, we thought we heard someone following us. We hoped it was only our imagination, but the next day we heard shouting from across the swamp. People were singing and chanting. I could make out Okec's voice, and that of Okot, but the ajwaka's voice rang clear above that of everyone else as he led them through a ritual.

"He is preparing to enter the home of spirits," Baa said.

Spies had seen us during the night and now Okot and my brothers knew where we were hiding. They could not attack us at once, for they still believed there were spirits on the Leper's Rock.

We crept back into the cave. My parents did not know what to do. In a short while the ajwaka would finish the ritual and the men would row rafts to attack us. My brothers would then force me to marry that old devil.

"I know what to do," I said.

Before they could stop me, I put seven sunballs in a goatskin bag to mask their light, then I crept out of the cave. The ajwaka had finished the ritual. The papyrus hid them from my view but I could hear oars as the men rowed in silence. I could smell their fear. I took a deep breath and went underwater, where I released the balls, one at a time. They sank to the bottom, right in the path of the rafts, and sent seven red beams jetting out of the papyrus. I silently crept out of the water.

"Demons!" the ajwaka screamed. "Go back! Go back!"

I clamped my hands on my mouth to stifle laughter. Their oars splashed frantically as they scrambled back to the other bank. Then I heard running. I finally laughed aloud. Even today, I laugh every time I picture men running from lights.

"They'll come back," Baa said. "Okot has enough wealth to hire Olal."

Olal was a famous sorcerer. Some claimed he was a god who lived among mortals. They said he could raise the dead, and that he once caused the sun to stand still because he did not want to travel after dark. If Olal came, red lights would not frighten him. Baa had two days to make the vunduk work, because it would take messengers a day to reach Olal and another to return with him.

Baa did not sleep for those two days. On the third day, when he pulled the string on his vunduk, it spat out a ball of flame as big as my head. The fireball fell in the swamp and, rather than frizzle out in the water, it rolled about as though it were a rat looking for an escape hole. The papyrus it touched dried up and burst into flame. By the time it lost its energy, half the swamp was on fire.

“People will stop calling you a madman,” Maa said, watching the flames.

“You are a god,” I said it aloud for the first time, and Baa laughed at me. His laughter sounded as though he were singing in a strange language. It reassured me of his divinity. Normal people did not have such beautiful, musical laughs.

“If I’m a god, then what are you?” he said, and laughed harder, but it turned into a coughing fit.

“Do you use magic?” I said.

“No,” he said.

“Then how did you make this thing to trap the heat of the sun?”

He laughed and coughed. “How did the first woman learn how to cook?” he said. “How did the first farmer know how to plant? How did the first butcher know how to skin goats?”

I thought about that. Maybe in the future, making fire-spitting weapons would be an everyday activity. But knowing how to put the fire of the sun in clay was not the same as knowing how to skin a goat. If he did not use magic then he had special powers of his own, and that was proof that he was a god.

The fire died, leaving a black waste on the water, and revealing to us a tortoise-man on the other side. He had a long, green beard that dangled over his chest, and hair that stood on his head like green flames. For a moment, I feared the fire had destroyed the home of a spirit, and now this spirit stood on the other side of the swamp, glaring at us. Surely that tortoise shell, that green beard and green hair could not belong to an ordinary man.

“Olal.” Baa’s voice was hoarse, as though with thirst. Other people stood in the far distance behind Olal, hiding in the bushes and behind trees. I could only guess they were my brothers, and Okot.

“Burn them!” Maa said.

Baa pulled the string of the vunduk. His hands trembled. He could not release it. Setting the swamp ablaze had been easy, but taking a life was something even gods hesitated to do.

“Are you Ojoka the madman?” Olal shouted at Baa.

“I’m not a madman,” Baa shouted back.

“Did you burn the swamp?” Olal said.

“Yes,” Baa said. “And I’ll burn you too if you don’t leave us alone.”

“Do you know me?”

“Yes. You are Olal.”

“So you should know better than to threaten me. I can kill you even if you are in the protection of spirits. But if you hand over the girl, we can settle—”

He did not finish speaking, because Baa released the string and a fireball flew over the water. Olal gaped at it for several heartbeats then he stepped away shortly before it landed right where he had been standing. The fireball danced on the ground, drying up the wet green grass and setting it all ablaze.

Olal waved a bull’s tail at the fire, casting spells to put it out, but the ball of flame seemed to grow in intensity, and it sped faster from here to there, and the bush came alive with terror. Grasshoppers jumped away, frogs ducked into the water, rats scampered from their holes, and birds flapped away in panic. Okot and my brothers fled. Even Olal, seeing he could not fight the fire, dropped his wand and took flight.

Well, that’s how Baa earned his place among the gods. Okot dropped all his plans of marrying me. He gave Baa three hundred head of cattle in apology and lived the rest of his life with the torment of lost manhood. Baa became famous and wealthy from his creations. His other two wives and his sons begged on their knees for mercy. He forgave them. I don’t have to tell you all this, but if you are good children, I’ll tell you of my adventures in the bruka. It flew, and it took me to the skies. Just be good, and you’ll hear it all.
