

Her First World

Nosim felt sleepy in the warm silence of the afternoon. The dry dust tickled as it trickled between her bare toes. The sun was hot on her back but the breeze cooled as it played lazily with her 'karash' – the small square of cloth she wore knotted over one shoulder. The yellow grass was rustling restfully around her and the occasional far-off tinkle of a cowbell reminded her that she was not alone under this vast blue sky, with its white worlds of cloud.

Down the slope in front of her, her father's great herd of sturdy, stunted cattle were wandering slowly down to the water-hole. There her brothers, great lordly creatures of ten and twelve summers respectively, were directing the herd with skill and swaggering confidence as the cattle drank thirstily, knee-deep in mud in the dwindling pool.

Presently, feeling hungry, she got up and strolled down the slope towards her brothers. To a little girl who had just lost her front baby-teeth it seemed a long time since the drink of milk in her mother's warm smoky hut that morning. It was still several hours till the sun would be making those long shadows which would tell them it

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was time to take the cattle home. It was not the custom to take food with them but sometimes the day seemed long to one as small as Nosim. Maybe her brothers, Taki and Tombo, felt hungry too but they would never confess such weakness to a mere girl.

'I'm hungry,' announced Nosim with just the right amount of pleading and confidence that would flatter these male lords. They were kind to their little sister in a condescending way, providing she played her destined role of admiring female faithfully.

'Wou,' (come) called Taki as he beckoned her, curling his fingers under the palm of his hand in the accepted way. He caught a cow for her and held it while she scrambled down to where he was, crouched under the thin animal and milked the warm sweet milk straight into her mouth.

Then she got up and wandered off. She did not thank him. One does not thank a superior for a gift. Nor was it necessary for him to warn her not to tell Father about the stolen milk – she knew and could be trusted.

The cattle all watered, the boys started playing. Nosim did not presume to join them. She watched for a while as they challenged each other to ride the biggest and most restless of the herd. They took their falls manfully. Presently she wandered off to pick 'ilamuriak' – the small black berries on the thorny bushes near the water-hole. She collected the blackest, juiciest ones and tied them in the corner of her cloth to take home to her mother. Soon her fingers and

mouth were stained and sticky, and her arms and legs scratched from the prickly bushes.

As she wandered on she spied, high up on the trunk of the umbrella thorn tree near her, a hardened trickle of gleaming, golden gum. No Maasai child could resist the hours of delicious chewing which that would give. Without hesitation she scrambled up the tree. The branches were thorny and brittle and the bark dry and crumbly, but Nosim was used to climbing trees. Besides, if she called her brothers to get the gum, her share would be very small. At last she was there and prising the precious sticky lump from the wound in the side of the tree. She called out in triumph to her brothers, popped the sticky lump into her mouth and waved gaily as they spotted her high up in the tree.

Then it happened... With a loud snap the branch on which she was standing broke! She reached out wildly for another but it came away in her hands and she went slithering down, crashing through the thorny branches and on to the hard ground below.

In next to no time her brothers were picking her up and making a fuss and comforting her in a most satisfactory way, for, although they naturally looked down on her for being a mere girl, they were fond of her. Also they were well aware that Father would hold them responsible for any harm that might come to her while they were out together with the cattle. But all the dusting down and clumsy reassurances did not dry her tears this time. She felt cold and the

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pain in her arm made everything turn round in front of her eyes.

'*Nini, Nini*, (Mummy)' she cried, and when the boys saw her arm they decided to get her back to her mother as soon as possible. Taki set off at a trot along the little winding path back to the village. Nosim, sobbing, wailing and holding her painful arm, ran stumbling behind him.

'*Nini!*' she wailed again loudly as they entered the village and made for Mother's hut. Soon Mother was hurrying out with loving concern and everyone was crowding round.

'The bone is broken,' they pronounced as they heard the story of what had happened from Taki and saw how bent her little arm was. Mother led her off to the shade next to their house and sat down on the cow-skin spread there. She gathered Nosim on to her lap and rocked and comforted her, singing to her and petting her. Nosim relaxed against her hot ochre-greased skin and nuzzled at the withered breast for comfort. Presently her sobbing stopped but the ache in her arm remained and she felt miserable.

'Menye Sinet will come soon,' reported Taki. He had been sent by his mother to call the old man in a nearby village who was skilled at dealing with broken bones. Father would pay him a goat but he would pay it gladly because it was not everyone who could set bones well. It would cost another goat too. That would be slaughtered and the meat boiled to make nourishing '*motori*,' or soup, for Nosim so that she would soon be well and strong again.

Presently Menye Sinet arrived and, at sight of him, Nosim's screaming started all over again. She buried her face in the warm, smelly, familiar cloth under which she had hidden so often when she was a baby. After solemn greetings all round Menye Sinet squatted down next to the screaming Nosim and took her arm gently in his hands. He felt around skilfully with exploring fingers and then, suddenly, just when she was beginning to feel reassured that he would not hurt her, he took her arm more firmly and pulled and twisted it smartly. She screamed with pain and fright but he held it firmly in place. Then he beckoned to a woman standing nearby and she handed him a small soft square of fresh cow-skin.

He wrapped it gently but firmly round Nosim's throbbing wrist, adjusted it and held it in place just where he wanted it. The woman was fumbling in a little tin for her 'oltidu' – a sharpened piece of iron set in a stick for a handle. This found, she also pulled out a piece of thread made from the long sinews in the back of the cow that had been slaughtered last time the village had a celebration. With these she skilfully sewed the edges of the skin together, deftly making holes with her 'oltidu' and then poking the thread through and pulling it tight.

The operation over, Nosim started feeling quite important. Everyone made a fuss over her, coming to see her arm and asking how it had happened. Menye Sinet instructed her mother to take care of the arm for a day or two till the

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skin hardened and assured her that soon she would feel no pain.

By the next day the skin was getting hard and stiff round her arm. By the second day it was so tight and supported her arm so well that she felt no more pain and was not afraid to move it. Now she settled down to enjoy the petting. Nosim lay in bed in the mornings while the other girls in the village got up before sunrise to help their mothers with the milking. Nosim sat in the shade later in the morning when the other girls were collecting the fresh, steaming cow-dung and helping their mothers smear it on the houses to make them more rainproof, in anticipation of the



rain they were hoping for soon. When mothers and big sisters went off with their large tins to the water-hole many miles away, or took their big knives in the endless search for fire-wood, Nosim was not even given a baby to look after – she just sat with 'Kokoo,' her wizened grandmother who was now too old for work.

Kokoo might be too old for work but she was not too old to tell stories, wonderful stories of the great days of the proud Maasai people and of the far-off Beginnings of the World.



