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VIRGIN

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## INDEPENDENCE

### RALLY

When at last the Father of the Nation arrived for the Independence Day celebrations, no earlier than 3:28 in the afternoon, the citizens, congregated at the Jidada Square since morning, had had it with waiting; they could've razed the whole of Jidada with their frustration alone, that is, if Jidada had been any other place. But the land of farm animals wasn't any other place, it was Jidada, yes, tholukuthi Jidada with a -da and another -da, and just remembering this simple fact was enough to make most of the animals keep their feelings inside like intestines. The fierce sun, said by those who know about things to have been part of His Excellency's cheerleading squad by decree, had been up glaring since midmorning, doling out forceful rays fit for a ruler whose reign was nearing all of—not one, not two, not three, but four solid decades.

The Jidada Party regalia worn by most of the animals for the occasion—jackets and shirts and skirts and hats and scarves in various colors of the flag of the nation, many of the articles embossed with the face of His Excellency—trapped the sun's terrible heat and made the wait even more

unbearable. But not all of the animals were going to stand for the torturous wait—some indeed started to leave, grumbling about having work and things to do, about places to go to, about the leaders of other lands who arrived at things right on time like God’s infallible machete. These disgruntled animals started as just a smattering—two pigs, a cat, and a goose—but the faction very quickly grew to a respectable mass, and, emboldened by both their number and the sound of their own voices, the dissidents headed for the exit.

At the gate the group found themselves face-to-face with the Jidada Defenders, tholukuthi the dogs appropriately armed with batons, ropes, clubs, tear-gas canisters, shields, guns, and such typical weapons of defending. It was a known fact all over the nation and beyond its borders that Jidada Defenders were by nature violent, morbid beasts, but it was especially the presence of the notorious Commander Jambanja, distinguishable in his signature white bandanna, that made the dissenters promptly turn around and retrace their steps, miserable tails between their legs.

**ENTER THE FATHER OF THE NATION: THE RULER WHOSE REIGN IS LONGER THAN THE NINE LIFE SPANS OF A HUNDRED CATS. ALSO THE LONGEST-SERVING LEADER IN A CONTINENT OF LONG-SERVING LEADERS, AND INDEED IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD.**

Now His Excellency’s car wove its way through the throngs with the slowness of a hearse, and the animals fell over themselves like intoxicated frogs, hoping to catch a glimpse of the legendary Father of the Nation. At this point the sun, upon seeing arrive the leader who was decreed by God himself to rule and rule and keep ruling, a leader who’d in turn decreed the very sun to head his cheerleading squad, took a deep, deep breath and thoroughly blazed to impress. A select group of dignitaries—all mals, most of them old—accompanied His Excellency on hind legs. Accompa-

nying the accompanying dignitaries were decorated Defender leaders in military gear, colorful embroidered ropes cinched at the waist, caps pulled low, shiny constellations of medals glinting on solid chests, star insignias bouncing off the shoulders, white gloves on front paws; these were the generals, tholukuthi the true lynchpin of His Excellency's rule. Throughout the square, animals whipped out their phones and gadgets to take pictures and videos of the procession of power.

**BEHOLD, HIM. YES, THOLUKUTHI HIM AND ONLY HIM HIMSELF.  
THE ANOINTED ONE. THE ONLY ONE. THE SUPREME ONE. THE  
MOST MAGNIFICENT ONE.**

With the arrival of His Excellency, Jidada Square came alive. Tholukuthi the Father of the Nation had such an aura his mere presence in any space automatically rearranged the atoms in the air and shifted any given mood—no matter how hostile or dismal or foul—to a positive and electric one. Those who know about things say this quality had especially been a dozenfold more potent a long, long, long time ago, during the first years of His Excellency's rule when his appearance alone made unripe things instantly ripen to the point of rotting, cured the sick of whatever ailments molested them, turned rocks to mush, deactivated storms and heat waves, rerouted floods, wildfires, and plagues of locusts, cured fatal viruses before they even thought of attacking, made dry rivers overflow with water, yes, tholukuthi the Father of the Nation's appearance alone had once upon a time started engines, bent steel beams, and in separate documented occasions, made scores and scores of virgins pregnant so that long before he married the donkey and sired children with her, streams of His Excellency's blood were already flowing throughout Jidada. And now, here was the Father of the Nation lighting up Jidada Square by merely happening, by simply being there. The place ignited in flaming

applause, and even the animals who not too long before had been trying to leave were now part of the uproar, standing on hind legs and cheering His Excellency, not just with their voices and bodies, no, but also with their hearts and minds and souls. Cows mooed, cats meowed, sheep bleated, bulls bellowed, ducks quacked, donkeys brayed, goats bleated, horses neighed, pigs grunted, chickens clucked, peacocks screamed, and geese cackled—the cacophony reaching deafening levels as the entourage of power came to a final stop in front of a raised platform.

### THE POOR AND THE RICH DO NOT PLAY TOGETHER

Under a sprawling white tent sat the Seat of Power Inner Circle of the Jidada Party, which of course was the ruling party, otherwise known as the Party of Power, of which His Excellency was president. With them were some of His Excellency's family members, friends, and honored guests. Tholukuthi the group of elites were, in all honesty and jealous down, a magnificent sight—the most exquisite cloth, expensive jewelry, and precious accessories of adornment, together with beautiful, well-groomed, and healthy bodies, told of wealth and good living. These animals represented some of Jidada's Chosen Ones, and were indeed proof of the Father of the Nation's benevolence, for most of them had been made rich by His Excellency, if not directly, then through some kind of connection to him. They were proud recipients of gifts of land, businesses, tenders, government loans that didn't need repaying, inheritors of confiscated farms, grantees of mines, industries, and all kinds of riches.

With not much to occupy them being that the celebrations hadn't started, the miserable animals in the sun feasted on the Chosen with coveting eyes, and at moments actually forgot the heat cooking their bodies, the hunger gnawing at their bellies, the thirst parching their throats, yes, tholukuthi besotted with the pretty picture of their shaded betters sitting

in comfortable chairs and sipping cold beverages. The hot, salivating animals lapped at the sight with their eyes like it were a cool glass of honey-wine, and when they licked their dry, cracked lips, they were pleasantly surprised to taste faint traces of actual sweetness.

### THOLUKUTHI HUH???

The car doors opened to a bloodred carpet, and the Father of the Nation emerged. As if on cue, Jidada Square gave a collective gasp. Tholukuthi Jidada Square gave a collective gasp because they'd seen emerge from the car a long horse so frail it looked like the slightest breath of breeze would send him teetering and crashing unto earth. It was a good thing then that it was just hot and there was no breeze. The animals watched agape as the Father of the Nation—older now than the last time they'd seen him, when he'd in fact been older than the last time they'd seen him prior to that—walked toward the platform, one careful, careful, foot after the other, his thin body weighted down by a huge green shirt on which were numerous black-and-white prints of his own face, though a much younger and handsome version. The Old Horse crawled and crawled on the very same hooves with which he'd once upon a time galloped up and down the length and breadth of Jidada at the speed of lightning. When he finally got to the platform, after what felt to the animals in the sun like it were two and a half years later, he leaned on a stand for support, hung his oblong head, and stood swishing his tail as if he were counting the minutes with it.

“What is this place? Who are all these animals? And why are they looking at me like maybe they know me?” the Old Horse said to no one in particular.

“Ah-ah, but what kind of question is that, Your Excellency?! They're your subjects ka, every one of them! Don't you know you rule this land, all of this Jidada, and that what your subjects want is to hear you speak?

Today is Independence Day, Baba; we're here all of us celebrating our freedom, the freedom you sacrificed your life for in the long War of Liberation that you your very self pioneered and prosecuted to its victorious end those many years ago, which means, in essence, we're really here to celebrate you!" the donkey gushed with great glee. She reached to adjust the horse's shirt and smooth out his pitch-black but thinning mane.

Tholukuthi the donkey wasn't just any regular jenny but the wife of His Excellency, which may have been implied by how she looked and moved and spoke and generally carried herself with the unquestionable swagger of power. The Old Horse let her lead him to his seat. The animals closest to the pair promptly got up to make way—some straightened His Excellency's chair, some kissed his face, some fondled his tail, some caressed his ass, some adjusted his clothing, and some swatted flies that were not there.

"What I really want is a nap," the Old Horse said, carefully putting himself down like his backside was made of expensive porcelain. The Father of the Nation wasn't lying. He was at an age when what was most important to him was to be left alone, and besides, those who know about things said the state of affairs inside his head wasn't unlike a tumultuous country without a clear leader.

## **THOLUKUTHI AHAI**

It happened that around the perimeter of the platform were mounted poles bearing the flag of the nation. The brilliant colors of black-red-green-yellow and white caught the eye of the Old Horse. He concentrated on the flags until the colors magically pulled him out of the mist clogging his head. Tholukuthi memory began to return to him. He recognized the flag; it flew in his heart and head and dreams. He didn't at that moment understand what the colors themselves meant, but they were indeed supposed to stand for something, that much he was very sure of. He focused

on them and thought and thought—could it be the white perhaps stood for the teeth of his ferocious dogs, the Defenders? And the red for the blood they could very easily spill? “Perhaps,” he said to himself, and his eyes moved on.

He recognized the tall, beautiful donkey by his side—smelling like fresh flowers and decked out in bright colors and flashy jewelry; it was Marvelous, Jidada’s First Femal herself, otherwise called Sweet Mother for being his wife and for being sweet, and now generally referred to as Dr. Sweet Mother after earning her famous PhD. He saw too his beloved friends and family, and their presence filled him with joy. He also recognized his Comrades, and swiveled his head this way, that way, scrutinizing them to make sure those who were supposed to be there were there. Tholukuthi they were. Some nodded. Some waved. Some pumped their limbs in the Party of Power salute.

Next, the Old Horse surveyed the packed throngs in the square. They weren’t just his subjects, they were bona fide supporters who’d stood with him and by him over the decades, with many of them going as far back as during the struggle for Jidada’s Independence. They’d been loyal then and had stayed loyal and were still loyal and would always and forever be loyal. They died loyal and took that loyalty to the grave so that even their ghosts, too, were loyal. They left behind offspring who were born already loyal. The Father of the Nation then caught a glimpse of himself on a mirrored panel, and he didn’t start in confusion because he at that moment happened to know exactly who he was and without needing Dr. Sweet Mother to remind him whatsoever. Now—fully in charge of his memory, he sat back and stretched his limbs in front of him and nodded to the sun directly overhead. He adjusted his glasses, made himself comfortable, and tholukuthi, with the seasoned serenity of a very old baby, promptly fell asleep.

## LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

He dreamt of the days of glory when Jidada was such an earthly paradise animals left their own miserable lands and flocked to it in search of a better life, found it, and not only just found it, no, but found it in utter abundance and sent word back for kin and friends to come and see it for themselves—this promised land, this stunning Eldorado called Jidada, a proper jewel of Africa, yes, tholukuthi a land not only indescribably wealthy but so peaceful they could've made it up. His Excellency also saw himself in his dream as he'd been back then—beautiful and brimming with unquestioned majesty, a horse that stepped on the ground and the earth agreed and the heavens above agreed and even hell itself also agreed because how could it disagree? Tholukuthi lost now in Jidada's past glory, the Old Horse nestled deeper in his seat and began to snore a sonorous tune that the Comrades around him identified as Jidada's old revolutionary anthem from the Liberation War days.

## DEFENDERS, DEFENDERS, DEFENDERS

Being that His Excellency was arrived, the Jidada Army Band started playing. Blood-stirring music accompanied the procession as it poured onto the main part of the square. The Jidada army, just like the rest of the security forces, was made up entirely of dogs. And now, dogs, dogs, dogs, and more dogs marched toward the tent, shimmering black boots lifting and landing with stunning synchronicity. Tholukuthi there were pure breeds and mixed breeds and cross breeds and mysterious breeds of no certain classification. Tholukuthi there were dogs in green tunics, dogs in khaki tunics, dogs in blue tunics. Tholukuthi there were dogs playing musical instruments, dogs flying the flag of Jidada, dogs flying the military flags, and dogs toting long, glinting guns.

It is often easy to forget the beauty and grace of a dog—a creature that can rip flesh into chunks, spill blood out of sheer impulse, crush bone like it were fragile China, hump anything from a human leg to a car tire to a tree trunk to a sofa, all without a single grain of shame, shit all over the place as if it excretes unadulterated gold, be faithful to its master even if that master were a known brute, murderer, sorcerer, tyrant, or devil, viciously attack without apparent provocation, devour human excrement no matter how well fed it is. But at that moment in Jidada Square on the occasion of the nation's Independence celebration, tholukuthi the dogs were simply magnificent. You wouldn't have known they were in fact sweating and drowning in the hot, heavy tunics that also covered tattered underwear that barely held together what needed holding. You wouldn't have known the soles of their boots were worn, or that the majority of them were actually famished being that they hadn't been paid their salaries for at least the previous three months.

**I WILL RAISE UP FOR THEM A PROPHET LIKE YOU AMONG  
THEIR BROTHERS. AND I WILL PUT MY WORDS IN HIS MOUTH,  
AND HE SHALL SPEAK TO THEM ALL THAT I COMMAND HIM.**

Much later, after the dogs had concluded their display and marched off the field, and after speeches from the Minister of the Revolution, the Minister of Corruption, the Minister of Order, the Minister of Things, the Minister of Nothing, the Minister of Propaganda, the Minister of Homophobic Affairs, the Minister of Disinformation, and the Minister of Looting, and after performances by various entertainers, the donkey nudged His Excellency awake. The Father of the Nation opened his eyes and woke from his dream of Jidada's days of glory but found he couldn't at all remember it. He was struggling with his memory thus when his eyes settled on a fancy-looking pig hinding to the platform with the stride of an ostrich. The

Old Horse didn't recognize him and wondered who he was. He fell asleep again, analyzing the pig's long legs.

The long, lean pig was none other than the one and only Prophet Dr. O. G. Moses, founding leader of the famed Soldiers of Christ Prophetic Church of Churches. Most things in Jidada naturally included a prayer—that's how come the charismatic Prophet, who was also Dr. Sweet Mother's spiritual adviser, was on the program. Those who know about things said the pig's church was the top evangelical sect in Jidada and boasted the largest following of congregants, not just in the nation but in the whole entire region—yes, tholukuthi a congregation that, according to those who know about things, wasn't only inspired by the word of God but also by desperation, disillusionment, idiocy, frustration, and a search for a lifeline—something, anything, to help the animals cope with the business of surviving a life that was daily becoming unlivable as Jidada's economy struggled.

Prophet Dr. O. G. Moses did indeed provide that something, that anything—through his gospel of hope and prosperity, through his famous line of miracle products that included anointing oils, and anointing water, anointing purses, anointing wallets, anointing underwear, anointing bricks, tholukuthi through prayer, through his rumored awesome power to cast out the demon of poverty, through his blessed healing touch. By the sheer force that was Jehovah-Jireh alone, the Prophet promised to transform the miserable lives of the government-forsaken Jidadans, and so the desperate masses flocked to the Soldiers of Christ Prophetic Church of Churches like flies to dung. When those who know about things said the Prophet's followers loved the pig to hell and back, tholukuthi they meant the Prophet's followers loved the pig to hell and back. As it is he'd attended the celebrations in a private jet bought by the tithes from his flock so that you may have been forgiven to think his was a church full