

# STRANGE DAY

**T**he clouds amassed on the horizon one day last year. A new member of the community noted they looked like rain clouds. No, was my response, they might look like rain clouds but they'll never spill their contents here. Not in Africa. Not during the dry season. I spoke with a certainty gained from too many years suffering the continent's predictable weather patterns.

That's what was so strange.

So unusual.

It did rain.

The locals were a bit concerned. They tried to go about their business as if nothing unusual happened, but it was evident in their eyes and in the long pauses that marked their conversations. The market didn't matter to them that day. Selling their wares didn't matter to them that day. It rained that day. That's what mattered to them. It was the dry season, and in Africa that means no rain. But it rained.

Strange.

I remember the day well. Perhaps because of what happened to Ebrima that day, or maybe it was because of the butterflies.

When it began to rain, I was sitting on my front porch

reading. My little bungalow sat one block in from the main road leading into the capital. The main road was paved. My road was sand in the best of times and mud in the worst. During the dry season, everything was covered in a thick layer of fine dust kicked up from the road, or blown in from the Sahel. The normally vibrant African colors were dulled by the rusty-brown film of dust, and the bright hot sun further bleached everything in sight.

I was engrossed in my book and only afterward would I remember that everything around me had stilled. The usual cacophony that is urban Africa — the street vendors, the greetings of passersby, the cluck of chickens, the bleating of goats, the sputter of poorly-tuned combustion engines, pied crows cawing from rooftops, the grinding and grating and squealing of bearings in need of lubricant, the regular schwok-schwok sound of a machete being used to trim bushes and cut back the tall grass, and, yes, the incessant chorus of insects — fell away. I was less aware of the sudden lack of noise than I was of the sound of the wind playing through the fronds of the palms and the leaves of the hibiscus that sheltered my porch. It was a sound I usually only listened to in the



Donald Mulligan

A MAN REALIZES  
THE RHYTHM OF LIFE AND DEATH  
IN A RAINSTORM IN AFRICA.

*BY MICHAEL E. KELLY*

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quiet of the night, when Africa slept. Then, sometimes, I would steal away to my roof to watch the moon arc across a perfect sky, or stare in awe at the Southern Cross as it slowly rotated in its ascension.

As I listened to the quiet of the wind, I lowered my book to my lap and looked out at the sky. It was as if a shroud was cast across the sky from horizon to horizon. Not so much clouds as a pale green veil that deepened into turquoise as I watched. I put down my book and stood, transfixed. The usual harsh shadows of the mid-day African sun were gone. The sun's rays were diffused so that everything was bathed in an even light, and the breeze that played through my garden was almost refreshing. Almost cool.

It was a bizarre experience. The world around me was at once familiar — yet strangely surreal. I felt transported, detached, unplugged, and a feeling of unease spread from my stomach to my bowels, then up my spine. The hairs at the back of my neck pricked to attention. In retrospect, I think I was approaching the steep edge of a deep and primal panic the likes of which I had never experienced before. But that is when the wind stopped blowing and it began to rain.

It started as soft, evenly-timed pats, not unlike someone holding a sheet of paper and flicking it with his finger. I watched as the drops, fat and wet, struck the dusty leaves of the hedge surrounding my porch, leaving them clean and bright. I watched as the drops hit the dusty path leading from my porch into my garden. They struck hard and heavy, like little artillery shells, sending up barely-perceptible puffs of dust and leaving dime-size craters.

But then it started to rain in earnest.

Something overcame me. The next moment I was in my garden in the deluge, barefoot and soaked to the core. My light cotton shirt clung to my body; my hair was plastered to my head. I lifted my face to the sky. The rain fell in my eyes and ran down the creases of my face, into the corners of my mouth. It was sweet. It

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was clean. It was cool.

Then, as quickly as it had started, the rain ceased. The veil that covered the sky and muted the sun lifted. The heat returned in an instant, and the air was suddenly muggy and thick. The insects took up their chorus. The animals joined in, soon followed by the rest of the noise of urban Africa.

I lowered my head. A blush rose to my cheeks and I found myself looking around to see if anyone had witnessed my baptism. That is when I noticed the butterflies, scores of them. It was as if they simply blossomed out of the bushes. One moment they weren't there, and the next they were everywhere. They danced and flitted about. I stared in wonder. Most were light blue and trimmed in black. Others were orange. I followed my footpath around to the back of my garden. The butterflies were there too. I could hear their wings flapping, and the air verily pulsed with each tiny wing beat.

My garden was a carefully planned and tended chaos of flowers, shrubs, bushes, and trees. Ebrima, my gardener, was tasked with its care, and in that he was unsurpassed. He was before me now. Not standing, but lying in the middle of a patch of green grass. He was in his work clothes — brown trousers cut at the legs so they came just below his knees and one of my old dress shirts with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows. He wore the shirt tucked in the trousers and open to the waist, not as a fashion statement, but simply for lack of buttons. The trousers were cinched around his waist with a tattered piece of rope. Oddly, his plastic flip-flops rested next to him side-by-side, as if placed there with care. His machete, the tool of choice for all of his gardening chores, lay on his other side, again as if placed there by a gentle hand. The wool cap he normally wore, was rolled up and loosely rested in his right hand. His body was still wet from the rain, droplets glistened in his close-cropped gray hair, and pooled in the hollow at the base of his neck and the corners of his closed eyes. His body shone magnificently in the bright sun. He looked fresh and alive like the rain-cleaned greenery that surrounded me, but I knew without going any closer that he was dead.

Ebrima had been my gardener from the day I moved my battered suitcases into the tiny bungalow I came to call home. He was there waiting for me at the gate as the bush taxi dropped me off. He stood proud

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*One of the butterflies broke from the group and began a slow, wavering spiral up into the sky, as if caught on an errant breeze.*

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but short and withered with age in what were probably his best clothes. He greeted me, told me his name, and in a manner that was not rude or arrogant told me he was my gardener. He explained he had been the gardener for every previous resident. I saw no need to break the cycle.

Over the years, my dealings with Ebrima were infrequent and brief. He knew what he was doing and he did it well. He managed to stretch out a day's worth of hard work into six full days of steady toil. For his efforts, he took away a reasonable weekly wage, all the firewood he could cull from my trees and still leave me with shade, and half the crop when there was fruit to be harvested from the mango, papaya or avocado trees. He never bothered me for extra money, never asked for a loan, never coveted my meager possessions, and never troubled me with conversation beyond his formal greeting every morning as I left my bungalow to try to save the continent. In the evenings when I returned from my efforts, frustrated and hot, he was already gone.

He had 12 children. That's right, 12 children. Eleven girls and one boy. The boy was the last to be born. The day his son was born was one of the few occasions Ebrima and I spoke at length about anything. He waited for me to come home from work that evening to tell me, his face twisted into a wrinkled mass of beaming flesh that took me a moment to realize was a smile. I noticed for the first time that he was almost toothless. Eleven daughters and one son—he was a rich man in a land where riches were counted by one's progeny. There were several wives too. That's just the way it was. Each one younger than the last. He must have been close to 80 when his son was born. That was just a couple of months back.

I knelt down next to Ebrima's still form. His skin shone and was pulled tight across the frame of his body, not stretched, just a perfect fit. What I could see of his chest and arms were lean and fit; only his face gave away his great age. At first I didn't want to touch Ebrima. I wasn't worried my presence would disturb

him from his well-deserved rest; I just didn't want to destroy the sanctity of his final moment. I was witnessing a mystery where flesh meets nature in its greatest and final glory, and I wasn't sure I was worthy. Still the butterflies flittered and fluttered about the garden, but even they seemed to be losing interest. Where their efforts had been focused on the bushes and blossoms a moment before, now they were breaking up and flying about in random loops and whirls. I knew the moment was passing. It had rained. The butterflies had come. And now they must go again. As they performed their last dance across the garden before disappearing, a handful passed over Ebrima in his repose. They seemed to hover there a moment before moving on, and one of them, one of the butterflies, broke from the group and began a slow, wavering spiral up into the sky, as if caught on an errant breeze. I watched that butterfly as it was carried higher and higher, above the limbs of the avocado, above the tall palms, then up beyond view. By the time my eyes returned to my garden, the rest of the butterflies were gone. Only Ebrima and I remained.

Finally, I reached out and gently took his hand in mine. His fingers were long, the pads on them and his palm surprisingly soft and warm. This was never my garden, never my home, never my Africa. I held his hand in mine. I held his hand and I cried.

A year has passed since Ebrima's spirit was set free in the garden. The husband of his oldest daughter now tends it. His touch with the land and the greenery isn't as gentle and perfect as was Ebrima's, but that will come with time. I greet him as I leave for work every morning. Sometimes I linger and ask how the family is doing, or if he needs any supplies for the garden. Sometimes we just talk about the weather, and I ask him if he thinks it will rain.

It is the dry season again, but there has been no rain, and there is no sign of rain. Just like it has always been. Just like it should be during the dry season: hot, dusty, and dry. There have been no butterflies either. No other surprises. Africa is as it is — as it should be. Finally, I understand that. ■