

Die, Dear Tofa

By Taddeo Bwambale Nyondo (Uganda)

Tofa lay still inside his small grave.

He was dead, but then his chest was still so heavy with fear. It seemed his tiny little heart wanted to come out, and tear the very last bones that covered it.

What if I die? Tofa thought.

There were no people about this hour of the morning. Amande played the drum, her stick-like fingers trying to create a frightening sound. The same sound that played on radio every evening, to warn people about AIDS.

Do not move an inch, Zugata said. Don't even blink, until we are gone. Adana placed a papyrus mat on the grave. The children gathered around, their eyes so low in expression of grief.

He is dead, Amande said. He is dead.

I won't die, Tofa thought. I can't die. The earth grew warm and warmer beneath him. Zugata placed a papyrus mat on him and poured some soil on it.

You can't let us down, Zugate whispered. Hold on till we tell you to wake up. You won't die.

Tofa had no bloodline, except his three faithful friends. Surely, he would not hurt them now; he would only pretend to be dead. He'd have not a thing to lose, in case things went wrong. Just a pair of deep sullen eyes, and a fiercely thin body.

Tofa felt thick, warm soil seeping through the mat, and moving fast all over his feet, arms and chest. He tried to cough. He tried to come out of his grave. But the children held him in a firm grip. Just in case he'd change his mind, and ruin the only chance they had summoned to see how the dead were buried.

Die, dear Tofa, Amande whispered.

It is just a game, Tofa thought. Just a game. The children watched his jutting eyes, his twitching lips and dark outlines forming around his face.

He's not going to die? Andana asked her friends. What if he dies?

"He'll come back as an angel," Zugata said, tightening his grip on the dead man. Don't you like angels?

Tofa saw many moving images. His dead parents, his little bed stuffed with cotton lint, the stubborn bed bugs in his worn-out blanket, and the cold streets at the trading centre.

Tears flowed down the corners of his eyes. Then the tears started to dry, not with the heat of the rising sun, but with dust that had covered his face.

There was no passer-by. Not even a neighbour.

Tofa wriggled and gasped and kicked so hard. The children held his folded arms. Together, the three of them were stronger. They pressed hard and harder, taking out the fear in him. Taking out his doubt.

Tofa lay still.

He let out a deep sigh and lay silent again for a while. For a long while. The children stared at each other, like chicks frightened by the sight of a hawk. They stood beside the grave, tossing soil onto the dead man. The children prayed and sang dirges. Ash to ash, they chorused.

He's not dead, Amande said. He can't die.

Someone is coming, Andana said. We must wake Tofa right now. Someone must help us wake him.

No, we must go now. Dead people can't wake up, Zugata said. Just then, he heard footsteps approaching and glanced over his shoulder.

Did I not stop you from playing marble in my compound? an old woman said, holding a hoe in one hand, and a big stick in another. And who told you to build your fairy house here? asked the woman, pointing towards the large heap of soil in her compound.

The children took a quick look at each other and darted away.