

Black Papyrus

A Year in the Life of an African Village

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Map of Botswana</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Prologue</i>	<i>xi</i>

Part I: Pula (Rain) I

Under the Baobab (January)	3
Queen of Kgadi (February)	13
Footprints (March)	23
Cool Dark Waters (April).....	35

Part II: Legodimo (Sky) 55

Ke Moloji Ene (May)	57
Badge of Honor (June).....	71
Go Hithla Motho (July).....	89
Eggshells Are for Drinking (August)	111

Part III: Phefo (Wind) 133

Fa Ele Jalo (September)	135
A Burning White Sky (October)	149

Part IV: Mbu (Earth) 163

Black Papyrus (November)	165
Pula (December)	179

<i>Glossary</i>	<i>197</i>
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Part I

Pula (Raín)

Botswana



Under the Baobab

WARM MUSTY RAIN, like whispers; sky, purple-gray. Rolling, swirling clouds: so dark. Spread my arms and catch the rain. Rain feels good running down my nose and chin. Let it fall: on the chest and run between my breasts, spread out happily in my dress against my belly. A delta. Not a teacher. The Okavango delta! I am the Okavango river and the delta. I am the delta and the rain that soaks me. I am wet. I am mad!

I am.

Rain, love rain. Every drop is a mother's caress. Please, keep falling. See how the small trickles flow down the packed sand, past my feet and down to the river. Leaf caught in a tiny pool. Turning and turning wants to escape to become one with the river. Push it; go on; there, it's moving now. All things go home, all things return to their mother. Rain. Feels warm soft. Beautiful rain without wind, like this rain, so peaceful so soothing so embracing so forgetful. Rain is forgetting: forget Motsholathebe. Not so easy. Think only of the rain. Rain rain rain rain rain rain. Forgotten. Only the tickling between my breasts and the itchy drops on the ends of my chin my nose my ear lobes. Wash away all memories, return to happiness. Clean, pure, fresh. Getting cold. Should go in. Will the cold help me forget? No, not like the rain; don't seek it out, don't want to bury myself in it. Funny, cold is not feeling and yet one remembers; rain is all feeling and one forgets. Must go in but don't want to. Forget. *Jo, jo, jo, mosadi*, mustn't forget the water jug. Can't come all this way and leave the water; too far to come back. No longer remember the small things. Sethunya, have the *badimo* bewitched you? Got to be careful.

Exams. I must mark the exams this afternoon, but first make some *bogobe* and a salad . . . Is there enough cabbage? No, must go to Dumfries' maybe they have some don't want to walk all the way out to Alexander Karapo's farm. But I might see him at Dumfries'. Don't want to go. Have to, though. This path is so overgrown. Hope

I don't tear my dress: too expensive. Maybe send for another through the mail-order catalogue, the deep blue sun dress with white flowers or the beige two-piece. Not polyester, smooth but too hot, must get a cotton blend. Anyway, have to wait till month end; not enough money now. There, finally at the top of the hill. Easier going. Will pass the baobab tree soon. Had forgotten. But can't forget. Try! Should've gone another way. Exams. Must do . . . the rain is so soft. Almost like the time when he and I . . . must forget. Forgetting is happiness; happiness forgetting.

*Here we go round the forgetting bush,
The forgetting bush, the forgetting bush,
Here we go round the forgetting bush,
So early in the morning.*

Too much teaching. Singing nursery rhymes, foreign nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes *are* foreign. Reminds me: still have to mark exams. Will take five times thirty-six times two . . . six hours. All day. Should've become a . . . what? Nothing to do in this country, let alone this faraway corner. Maybe a bookkeeper or . . . or what? Isn't much. Coming up to the baobab. Forget. Why did I go to teachers' training college? To learn, to read and think, to make some money. To discover there wasn't anything to read in this country, no one to talk with and nothing to think about, nothing but hot sun and deep sand. Better off without it. No opportunity for an educated woman. No, not completely true. At least there's more money being a teacher. Might build a house in a few years. Yes, better than the past. Just frustrated and hurt. Being silly and selfish, and . . . oh no, Motsholathebe! Where to go? What to do? Too late; must act calm, unconcerned.

"Dumela, Sethunya."

"Dumela." Walk on, keep going. You've said hello. Now go.

"Waii, pretty lady, you are going to make yourself sick, walking about in the rain like that. Come and let me share my tree with you. It'll keep you dry."

The same Motsholathebe. Talking smoothly . . . like some kind of conniver. Isn't, though; not a conniving hair on his body. Just his way. Must avoid, must go.

"Ija, I am not a lion, you know. Tla kwano, mosadi. Come out of the rain. It hurts to see you suffering so." Knows I want to walk on.

Sees it in my eyes, my body. Tense. His smile. “You can leave when the rain stops, pretty lady. It’s my promise.”

Everything spinning confusion what to must go just like a dust devil *tshus lu tshus lu* goes the dust devil round and round and I must go. Wait. He looks ill; pale and thin. Eyes floating and blank; no lust no anger.

“You’re not well. What is it?”

The smile again. “Nothing pretty lady. I’m the same strong Motsholathebe as ever.” Wants me to believe him; knows I don’t. “Don’t look at me like that, Sethunya. You frighten me. I’m not a dead cow drifting down the river. *Gao, wena*, you are always worrying.” He knows. “Nothing is wrong. Couldn’t be better.” Smile is empty.

Leave now. “*Go siame.*”

“*Mosadi*, you will get wet. Really you will.”

A flash in his eyes. Something still there. Is it . . . no, must forget. Thought about it too much already. Can’t do it again. There, feet are moving. Going away, leaving, forgetting. Happy. No, don’t be so foolish: not happy and nothing forgotten. Must I remember again? I am getting wet; he is right. Usually is. Didn’t look well at all. Should’ve stayed . . . no, better to leave. All is quiet again; only the rain whispering. Beautiful rain. Why did he have to betray me, why did he have to lie? *Ijo*, feel so tired now. Go home and rest. Do the exams tonight. Just rest. And forget.

Sethunya remembers nevertheless. Thoughts crowd in and toss all others about. She must calm them and so she sits upon the grass along the top of an embankment and looks out over the flood plain. Let the memories come on, she thinks.

“*Waii*, the moon is beautiful tonight.”

His first words. Not hello and not hey baby you are beautiful. He said: The moon is beautiful tonight. He saw that in my eyes, in the reflection. Switched places and I saw too. He was right, always is. But what a romantic way to be right. *Ijo*, the most romantic man around and he doesn’t even know it. Truly innocent. Maybe the reason why. Was he lying that night? No, you know he wasn’t. But. And the other times? The Fridays when you met in front of Dumfries’ General Dealer? The times he walked with you and laughed? Making love beneath the baobab tree? What is lie and what is truth—how can I know? Did he lie the first time? No. The others? Too many questions. Think, remember, feel. *Nyaa*. No, he didn’t. I always said