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4030 words

Caraway Seed Cake

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

A seed neither fears light nor darkness, but uses both to grow.
Matshona Dhliwayo

It was a long haul from Capitol Hill to his walkup apartment near Florida Avenue, but that mid-September afternoon Chester Cassidy felt too full of himself to notice the hike.

His mind was occupied with the new project he had been assigned as he entered H Street and found himself walking through a raucous crowd. This was strange, as this part of town was usually deserted on Saturday afternoons, to become repopulated later in the evening. Then he realized it: it was the H Street Festival, an annual extravaganza that went on for block after block of music stages, merchandise stands, artist exhibitions, and food trucks and stalls. He bought a can of soda from a truck and began strolling through the milling crowds. As he did, he realized he was a little hungry and in the mood for a snack.

He stopped in front of a table set up by a wrinkled black woman wearing a cloth skirt and a strange head wrap made of intertwined cords. The table displayed a variety of baked goods, some which looked appetizing; others were unrecognizable. He pointed to a slice of black forest cake and asked: “How much for that?”

“Two dollah” replied the woman in a heavy foreign accent.

His mind was still racing through the new assignment. “Where are you from?” he asked in an accusatory tone.

The woman was startled and shuddered a little before responding: “I’m from Maridi.”

“Where is that?” he pressed, increasing the menace in his voice.

“In the country you call South Sudan” she allowed, in a pained sort of way.

Chester’s thoughts turned again to his new assignment. South Sudan was one of the targets of the aid cutting project the Senator had assigned to him: humanitarian aid to that country must be cut for it was going to waste in a country racked by violence, disease, flooding, and other natural and man-made disasters. Those thoughts spilled into the next words he uttered: “You escape your hellhole of a country, manage to land in America, and try to get rich at our expense!”

The old woman’s eyebrows rose and her nose wrinkled in surprise, or perhaps fear. She responded quickly: “No, sir, I no steal from you!”

Chester felt reassured he was dealing with an inferior being and decided to have fun. “Yeah, that is all you wetbacks say. You sneak into America and start taking everything that ain’t nailed down!” he asserted loudly.

The woman blanched but said nothing. She may have thought his tirade referred to the price of the cake, for she turned around and rummaged through a basket behind the table. She produced a plastic-wrapped yellow-brown square of crumbly cake from which protruded a multitude of black seeds. “Here, this one for one dollah!”

Chester thought of correcting the woman’s misunderstanding, but the cake she proffered looked interesting. “What are those black things, seeds?”

“Caraway seeds.”

Chester took out a dollar bill and tossed it to the woman. She inserted it inside her blouse and looked at him inquisitively, in case he was going to demand something else. Chester shook his head with contempt and walked on.

As he moved through the festival crowd, Chester unwrapped the cake and took a bite. The dessert had a pungent, anise-like flavor emanating from the seeds. He did not care for licorice, so he considered throwing the rest of the cake away, but then other competing tastes assaulted him: citrus, fragrant woods, some earthy aroma he felt he knew but could not place. He decided it was too unique a taste experience to miss and kept on eating, bite after bite, so the entire pastry was consumed before he had advanced another block.

He still had an unpleasant fennel taste in his mouth when he arrived in his apartment, so he poured himself a glass of rough California chardonnay to wash it off. He had his usual TV dinner, watched some porn, and called it a day.

Stabs of pain emanating from his stomach woke Chester up in the middle of the night. He ran to the bathroom seeking to relieve himself, but was unsuccessful. The pain was planted firmly, right in the middle of his gut, and gave no signs of abatement. He drank a full bottle of water and ate a banana, and these caused his stomach to begin churning but provided no relief. There was nothing in his medicine cabinet that would seem to help, and the pain was getting worse, so he threw some clothes on and ran to the 24-hour drugstore a couple of blocks away. There, he walked right up to the pharmacy counter and woke up a dozing clerk to ask: "Please, I need quick help. I have this excruciating pain in my stomach. What do you have for that?"

The woman yawned and replied: "Look in Aisle 9, where we keep the stomach discomfort products. The best thing we carry is called "Stomach Relief – Maximum Strength." It

come in a large pink bottle..." The clerk was still talking when Chester bounded for Aisle 9 and began searching frantically for the medication. There was just one bottle of the stomach relief liquid. He seized and returned to the clerk. "Can I pay you for this?"

As she was running the sale through the credit card reader, Chester asked: "Do you have any plastic cups I can borrow?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, no." She returned the card and added: "But you can sit right there and drink it out of the bottle, if you wish."

Chester grabbed the bottle and sat on a chair near the counter. He violently flaked the plastic cover off the bottle, yanked the cap, and took three big gulps of the thick, viscous liquid. As he swallowed, he anticipated that relief would soon arrive. He threw his head back against the wall and relaxed.

When the medication coursed down his esophagus and reached his stomach, he was assaulted by a sense of revulsion that made him instantly feel like throwing up. He hurried to the bathroom, where he vomited the pink liquid in a series of spasmodic discharges. As he did, a thought assaulted him: "Whatever is in there does not want to be disturbed." He tossed the useless bottle of medication in the trash can and walked out of the store.

As he rushed back to his apartment, Chester felt the pain in stomach worsen, to the point he could hardly breathe. He needed help, quickly. He changed course and headed for the nearest hospital, a couple of miles away, hoping to be able to make it before he fainted from the pain. The streets of the city were deserted, as it was past 3 a.m. on a Sunday morning, but by a stroke of luck he noticed a taxicab approaching from the opposite direction. He went onto the street and started to wave his arms frantically to attract the driver's attention. The car stopped and he ran

across the road, opened the back door of the taxi, and collapsed inside, whispering with his last breath: “Take me to the ER, please!!”

A few minutes later he found himself in an emergency room full of the casualties of weekend partying: the wounded, the drug overdose cases, the drunks. As he filled the admission form, he realized his emergency was probably less severe than those of the unfortunates surrounding him, but the pain he was suffering was no less intense. “Please, I need to be seen right away! I am in excruciating pain!!” he implored.

The nurse looked up and noticed Chester’s sweating and agitation and the extreme pallor on his face. “I’ll see if I can get you a bed.”

Getting a bed in a crowded emergency room is always time consuming, and it was almost an hour before Chester was led to a cubicle, empty except for a narrow bed and a chair. He lay down, breathing with difficulty, and begged the nurse: “Please give me an injection! This pain is killing me!!”

They eventually hooked Chester to an IV pole and administered a dose of Ketorolac, which reduced the pain but did not erase it entirely; Chester continued to feel as if something was gnawing at his stomach, taking a bite at a time. He closed his eyes and descended into a stupor.

Arrival of a doctor brought him back to reality. The doctor, reading the details of Chester’s medical history, asked breezily: “So, you are experiencing severe stomach pain. Is this the first time your tummy hurts like this?”

Chester felt some irritation at the condescending question, but replied as briefly as he could: “First time. I’ve never been sick a day in my life.”

“What did you have for dinner?”

“A frozen fried chicken TV dinner.”

“Anything unusual about it?”

“No. It just tasted like cardboard.”

“And to drink?”

“A beer.”

“Nothing else to eat or drink in the last twenty-four hours?”

“I had lunch on the Hill. I work there. I had a hamburger and fries, and a diet Coke.”

“Anything unusual about your lunch?”

“No. The hamburger was overcooked and the fries were soggy, but that’s the way they always are.”

“Anything else to eat or drink?”

The question brought to Chester’s mind the African street vendor. “Oh, I had a piece of seed cake from a street vendor. Just a snack.”

“And are you in pain now?”

“Yes, but not as much as before. I still feel there is something inside me.”

“Well, we’ll run some tests, like blood, stool and urine, but we may need to take a good look at what’s going on. We may need an MRI of the stomach area.”

“Whatever you have to do. My pay as a Congressional Staff member is low, but I have good health insurance.”

“We’ll keep you here and run the tests. By later tonight we should know what we have.”

Hours later, a visibly disturbed doctor walked into the holding room where Chester had lingered since his arrival at the ER. “All your tests came out negative – blood, urine, stool, are all

normal. But –” The doctor paused, as if he was having trouble getting his words out. “The MRI shows something very odd.”

“What is that?”

“It looks as if you have things growing in your stomach.”

“Like a cancer??”

“No, these things are not part of your own body but some foreign matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“The human stomach has several layers of tissue, the innermost is the mucosa, a membrane where the acid is generated to digest the food. Around that mucosa is another layer, the submucosa, that contains blood vessels and nerve cells. Next is the main muscle of the stomach, wrapped inside a thin strong membrane that confines the organ and holds it in place. The MRI shows many small dark items adhered to the mucosa, some of which seem to be penetrating the mucosa and the submucosa and reaching into the muscular layer. That intrusion into the muscle layer is probably what causes your pain.”

“Do you mean those things are drilling holes on my stomach from the inside?”

“We don’t understand the mechanism, but that is perhaps as good a description as any.”

“But what are those things?”

“We don’t know yet. We’ll have to consult a specialist.”

They put Chester under anesthesia so they could make small incisions on his body and find and remove some of the pieces of foreign matter for analysis. The results were astonishing: under the microscope, the dark pieces were shown to be caraway seeds that had taken hold on the inner surface of the stomach and had germinated quickly. Then the little plants had drilled

through the stomach's membranes and sunk their rootlets into the rich outlying muscular tissue.

"He appears to be growing caraway plants in his stomach. I have no idea how that is even possible, but it's happening" concluded the doctor.

When Chester recovered from his astonishment, he asked the obvious question: "How are you going to get rid of those things? Are you going to open me up and take them out one by one?"

"That would be risky and perhaps unfeasible. The MRI showed that some of the seeds appear to be close to breaking through the stomach's outer membrane, allowing digestive juices and food to leak into the abdominal cavity. That would call for immediate removal of all or part of your stomach. At the same time, if plants break through, they may travel within your abdominal cavity, so they could be poised to take root in other major organs – liver, kidneys, even heart – and their removal could prove fatal."

"So, what am I going to do?"

"You have three choices: first, do nothing and await the inevitable; second, undergo a very risky operation from which you may not survive; and third, maintain yourself in as good a physical shape as possible while the medical community investigates ways of removing the seeds safely."

Chester realized he most likely was going to die, and his death would be an exceedingly painful process. He could be given painkillers and be provided with palliative care, but the end was inevitable and would happen in the not-too-distant future.

"I'll take the last option" he declared. "I'm going to fight this to the end."

But, in the meantime, he would try to figure out how he got in this predicament, and come up with a way to fix it if the doctors could not do it themselves.

The image of the old black woman who sold him the seed cake kept recurring in his thoughts. He took a medical leave of absence from his Senator's office, barricaded himself in his apartment, and devoted every hour of each increasingly painful day to doing research about South Sudan. He had forgotten where in the country the woman was from, but her peculiar appearance provided some help in identifying her. From articles he consulted and pictures he saw he learned that some members of an ethnic group known as the Azande wear headgear made of ropes to preclude malevolent spirits from penetrating their brains. Other facts seemed to confirm that the Azande were the right group to investigate: their area of the country was impoverished and subject to flooding and other disasters, and after South Sudan's secession from Sudan a number of Azande had been given humanitarian visas allowing them to migrate to the United States.

The next step in his research was contacting the organizers of the H Street Festival to find out the identity of the woman who had rented space for a table during the festival. With some effort, he learned that space for a table to sell food and souvenirs from "Central Africa" had been leased to a Boukrine Angbapio from somewhere in Virginia. The lessee paid in cash so no bank records existed of the transaction.

Through his State Department contacts, Chester ran a parallel investigation of the INS records to determine whether immigration records existed for a Boukrine Angbapio. No such records existed. But the State Department was helpful in a different way: a staffer at the South Sudan Desk of the Department put him in contact with Achol ("Daisy") Lokonyen, an employee of the South Sudan Embassy in Washington. Daisy, a middle-aged woman with an amiable face, agreed to meet with Chester.

Their meeting did not go well. He was curt and condescending, but she took pity on his dire circumstances and agreed to help him locate the caraway seed cake vendor.

“A thing that you must understand is that witchcraft is prevalent among the Azande. The woman who gave you that cake is most likely a witch, and because of her advanced age, a powerful one. Witches like her operate by sending out a spirit, a bodiless messenger of their own witchcraft, to perform their evil deed upon her intended victim. In your case, she was probably at home asleep when the spirit she summoned caused the caraway seeds in your stomach to become active and start eating you away from within. We need to be very careful on how we deal with this woman if we find her.”

“We *have* to find her” pressed Chester. “I am in more pain each day and have been seen by every doctor in the city, and no one can do anything for me. I can’t sleep more than a few minutes at a time. I’m dying horribly. How can we find that witch?”

“With some difficulty” she conceded. “The way to find a South Sudanese needle in the big haystack of the Washington D.C. area is to become aware of the public events held by our community. The largest number of South Sudanese around here live in Alexandria, Virginia, and their events may be advertised in the Alexandria local papers. Let us look through the Alexandria Gazette Package and see what we find.”

After a search, they found a small advertisement placed by the South Sudanese Association for a charity event that had taken place at a local church a couple of months before. The ad asked for food donations in support of the gathering. Daisy volunteered to call both the Association and the church to make inquiries about donors of food, particularly desserts, for that event. She struck gold: a secretary at the Association remarked that an old widow who lived in one of Alexandria’s poor neighborhoods was a frequent donor of home baked desserts for

Association events. She gave Daisy a name, Atonita Malual, and an address at a low-income apartment building.

“They probably would not have given any information to a condescending gringo like you, but I am one of their number, so they opened up to me” bragged Daisy.

“Very good!” replied Chester, ignoring the rebuke. “Let’s go, now! My stomach is literally killing me!”

“Not so fast” replied Daisy. “She will probably deny having bewitched you. We need proof.”

“What sort of proof?”

“The Azande use divination methods or “oracles” to determine whether a person is guilty of witchcraft. These days, the method they most commonly use is consultation by cutting the neck of a chicken while posing the question whether a person is a witch; if the answer is yes, the dying chicken falls with its left wing topmost, and if the answer is no, it falls with its right wing topmost... Alternatively, they go to the *Nagidi*, a prophetess. One goes to her and explains the matter, and she dreams about it. The dream will tell her whether the accused is guilty of witchcraft or innocent.”

“Do we have to kill a chicken or hire a prophetess to find out whether that Atonita is a witch?”

“Hopefully not. It may be sufficient to threaten her with doing this to get her to confess.”

“Isn’t threatening the woman sort of taking a big chance?”

“We have nothing else to go on. So, we have to try it.”

Atonita Malual lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a low-income housing project. She opened the door to Daisy when they knocked, but her eyes widened upon recognizing the young white man that accompanied her. The old woman stepped back in fright at the couple of visitors, but allowed them in.

They sat on a worn-out sofa, while she occupied a chair across from them. As they talked, Chester noticed the dilapidated condition of the apartment: there were holes in the walls and the floor appeared to be buckling. Water stains dotted the carpet, and the slats on the blinds of the window were cracked. There was a noticeable smell of decaying or rancid food that permeated the apartment.

“Mrs. Malual, my name is Achol Lokonyen” started out Daisy, assuming an official tone. “I am an official of the South Sudan Embassy in this country, and have been asked to investigate a complaint against you.”

“A complain? I done nothin wrong. All my papers are in order.”

“The complaint is not about your papers. Do you know this man?” She pointed to Chester.

“I seen him a few weeks ago at the Festival.”

“Didn’t you have an altercation with him?”

“What’s dat?”

“I mean a fight.”

“No fight. But he treated me bad. Called me names.”

“Did he make you angry?”

“Angry no, but very upset.”

“Did you feel like he had to be punished?”

“Nooo. But maybe he deserved.”

“Did you sell him some pastry?”

“Yeah, a cheap piece of leftover cake, the butt of a bar I baked.”

“Caraway seed cake?”

“Yeah. I make my mother’s recipe.”

“That’s the problem. He ate that cake and is now very sick. The caraway seeds in that cake are eating him from the inside.”

Atonita’s face drained of color and she started to shake. “Can’t be. I sold pieces of that cake to several people, and ate a slice myself. Nobody harmed.”

“That doesn’t prove anything” insisted Daisy. “The cake in itself may have been fine, but if you are a witch, you may have sent an evil spirit that caused the caraway seeds to start growing in this man’s stomach.”

“I NO WITCH!” bellowed the old woman. “I’m poor woman living on pension! Never did harm to nobody!”

Daisy was unmoved. “You may not know you are a witch. Witchcraft resides in *mangu*, a substance in the witch’s belly, inherited from a parent of the same sex. The substance leads a life of its own and can independently afflict people, especially those with whom the witch has a disagreement. You may have powerful *mangu* in you and may be unaware, but it may have sensed your anger at this man and may have acted to harm him.”

“I no witch!” repeated Atonita.

“We can get a Nagidi, a prophetess, to dream up the answer to the question whether you have a *mangu* that harmed Mr. Cassidy here. If her dream answer is yes, you may end up in jail.”

“Nooo, I don’t wanna go to jail!” Atonita wrung her hands, breaking up in tears. “Is there a thing I can do?”

“I have looked into this” replied Daisy. “The practice is that once the person committing an act of witchcraft has been found, the victim will confront the witch and ask her to stop the witchcraft. The witch will then make amends by expressing her goodwill toward the victim and asking the mangu to cease its attack. Are you willing to do this, and do it sincerely?”

“Yeah, I never meant no harm to dis man.”

They went through the reconciliation steps, and Chester and Atonita ended up embracing each other. For once, he was even sincere in his feeling of gratitude towards the dark woman.

As they left the apartment, Chester asked: “Do you think it will work?”

“Let’s hope so” replied Daisy.

The mangu apparently ceased prompting the caraway seeds to spread further into Chester’s body, but the damage had been done already. The injuries to Chester’s stomach were analogous to that caused by severe stomach ulcers and were so numerous that a gastrectomy had to be performed and much of the organ had to be removed. Recovery from the operation was slow and very painful and the quality of Chester’s life was irreparably affected.

Chester was still struggling to regain a normal life three years after the operation. He had aged prematurely and no longer harbored hopes of pursuing a career in Capitol Hill or anywhere else in the public light. He became a recluse and never married.

Several thoughts kept haunting him. He blamed himself for his arrogance. He lamented the suffering he had experienced and the still lingering effects of the attack from the malignant

seeds. He took some comfort from his decision to fight his condition and his perseverance in continuing to struggle through years of agony, but lamented that full success in defeating the malevolent spell was never to be achieved.

He was grateful to be alive. He lived frugally and ate sparingly, for his stomach gave him no peace. And he never ate any cake again.

END