

Papa, Snake & I

B.L. Honwana

translated by Dorothy Guedes

As soon as Papa left the table to read the newspaper in the sitting-room, I got up as well. I knew that Mama and the others would take a little longer, but I didn't feel like staying with them at all.

When I stood up, Mama looked at me and said, 'Come here, let me look at your eyes'.

I went towards her slowly, because when Mama calls us we never know whether she's cross or not. After she had lifted my lids with the index finger of her left hand to make a thorough examination, she looked down at her plate and I stood waiting for her to send me away or to say something. She finished chewing, swallowed, and picked up the bone in her fingers to peep through the cavity, shutting one eye. Then she turned to me suddenly with a bewildered look on her face.

'Your eyes are bloodshot, you're weak and you've lost your appetite.'

The way she spoke made me feel obliged to say that none of this was my fault or else that I didn't do it on purpose. All the others looked on very curiously to see what was going to happen.

Mama peered down the middle of the bone again. Then she began to suck it, shutting her eyes, and only stopped for a moment to say, 'Tomorrow you're going to take a laxative.'

As soon as the others heard this, they began eating again very quickly and noisily. Mama didn't seem to have anything else to say, so I went out into the yard.

It was hot everywhere, and I could see no-one on the road. Over the back wall three oxen gazed at me. They must have come back from the water trough at the Administration and stayed to rest in the shade. Far away, over the oxen's horns,

the grey tufts of the dusty thorn trees trembled like flames. Everything vibrated in the distance, and heat waves could even be seen rising from the stones in the road. Santana was sitting on a straw mat in the shade of the house, eating her lunch. Chewing slowly, she looked around, and from time to time, with a careless gesture, she shooed away the fowls who came close to her hoping for crumbs. Even so, every now and then one of the bolder ones would jump on to the edge of the plate and run off with a lump of mealie meal in its beak, only to be pursued by the others. In their wild dispute, the lump would become so broken up that in the end even the smallest chicken would get its bit to peck.

When she saw me coming near, Santana pulled her capulana down over her legs, and even then kept her hand spread out in front of her knees, firmly convinced that I wanted to peep at something. When I looked away she still didn't move her hand.

Toto came walking along slowly with his tongue hanging out, and went to the place where Santana was sitting. He sniffed the plate from afar and turned away, taking himself off to the shade of the wall where he looked for a soft place to lie down. When he found one, he curled round with his nose almost on his tail, and only lay still when his stomach touched the ground. He gave a long yawn, and dropped his head between his paws. He wriggled a little, making sure that he was in the most comfortable position, then covered his ears with his paws.

When she had finished eating, Santana looked at me insistently before removing her hand which covered the space between her knees, and only when she was sure I was not looking did she spring to her feet with a jump. The plate was so clean that it shone, but after darting a last suspicious glance at me, she took it to the trough. She moved languidly, swaying from the waist as her hips rose and fell under her capulana. She bent over the trough, but the back of her legs was exposed in this position, so she went to the other side for me not to see.

Mama appeared at the kitchen door, still holding the bone in her hand, and before calling Santana to clear the table, she looked around to see if everything was in order. 'Don't forget to give Toto his food,' she said in Ronga.

Sartina went inside, drying her hands on her capulana, and afterwards came out with a huge pile of plates. When she came out the second time she brought the table-cloth and shook it on the stairs. While the fowls were skirmishing for the crumbs, pecking and squawking at each other, she folded it in two, four, and eight, and then went back inside. When she came out again she brought the aluminium plate with Toto's food, and put it on the cement cover of the water meter. Toto didn't have to be called to eat and even before the plate was put down, he threw himself on his food. He burrowed into the pile of rice with his nose, searching for the bits of meat which he gulped up greedily as he found them. When no meat was left, he pushed the bones aside and ate some rice. The fowls were all around him, but they didn't dare to come nearer because they knew very well what Toto was like when he was eating.

When he had swallowed the rice, Toto pretended he didn't want any more and went to sit in the shade of the sugar cane, waiting to see what the fowls would do. They came nervously towards his food, and risked a peck or two, very apprehensively. Toto watched this without making a single movement. Encouraged by the passivity of the dog, the fowls converged on the rice with great enthusiasm, creating an awful uproar. It was then that Toto threw himself on the heap, pawing wildly in all directions and growling like an angry lion. When the fowls disappeared, fleeing to all corners of the yard, Toto went back to the shade of the sugar cane, waiting for them to gather together again.

Before going to work Papa went to look at the chicken run with Mama. They both appeared at the kitchen door, Mama already wearing her apron and Papa with a toothpick in his mouth and his newspaper under his arm. When they passed me Papa was saying, 'It's impossible, it's impossible, things can't go on like this.'

I went after them, and when we entered the chicken run Mama turned to me as if she wanted to say something, but then she changed her mind and went towards the wire netting. There were all sorts of things piled up behind the chicken run: pipes left over from the building of the windmill on the farm, blocks which were bought when Papa was still thinking

of making out-houses of cement, boxes, pieces of wood, and who knows what else. The fowls sometimes crept in amongst these things and laid their eggs where Mama couldn't reach them. On one side of the run lay a dead fowl, and Mama pointed to it and said, 'Now there's this one, and I don't know how many others have just died from one day to the next. The chickens simply disappear, and the eggs too. I had this one left here for you to see. I'm tired of talking to you about this, and you still don't take any notice.'

'All right, all right, but what do you want me to do about it?'

'Listen, the fowls die suddenly, and the chickens disappear. No one goes into the chicken run at night, and we've never heard any strange noise. You must find out what's killing the fowls and chickens.'

'What do you think it is?'

'The fowls are bitten and the chickens are eaten. It can only be the one thing you think it is—if there are any thoughts in your head.'

'All right, tomorrow I'll get the snake killed. It's Sunday, and it will be easy to get people to do it. Tomorrow.'

Papa was already going out of the chicken run when Mama said, now in Portuguese, 'But tomorrow without fail, because I don't want any of my children bitten by a snake.'

Papa had already disappeared behind the corner of the house on his way to work when Mama turned to me and said, 'Haven't you ever been taught that when your father and mother are talking you shouldn't stay and listen! My children aren't usually so bad mannered. Who do you take after?'

She turned on Sartina, who was leaning against the wire netting and listening. 'What do you want? Did anyone call you? I'm talking to my son and it's none of your business.'

Sartina couldn't have grasped all that because she didn't understand Portuguese very well, but she drew away from the netting, looking very embarrassed, and went to the trough again. Mama went on talking to me, 'If you think you'll fool me and take the gun to go hunting you're making a big mistake. Heaven help you if you try to do a thing like that! I'll tan your backside for you! And if you think you'll stay here in the chicken run you're also mistaken. I don't feel like putting up with any of your nonsense, d'you hear?'

Mama must have been very cross, because for the whole day I hadn't heard her laugh as she usually did. After talking to me she went out of the chicken run and I followed her. When she passed Sartina, she asked her in Ronga, 'Is it very hot under your capulana? Who told you to come here and show your legs to everybody?'

Sartina said nothing, walked round the trough and went on washing the plates, bending over the other side.

Mama went away and I went to sit where I had been before. When Sartina saw me she turned on me resentfully, threw me a furious glance, and went round the trough again. She began to sing a monotonous song, one of those songs of hers that she sometimes spent the whole afternoon singing over and over again when she was angry.

Toto was bored with playing with the fowls, and had already finished eating his rice. He was sleeping again with his paws over his ears. Now and then he rolled himself in the dust and lay on his back with his legs folded in the air.

It was stiflingly hot, and I didn't know whether I'd go hunting as I usually did every Saturday, or if I'd go to the chicken run to see the snake.

Madunana came into the yard with a pile of firewood on his back, and went to put it away in the corner where Sartina was washing the plates. When she saw him, she stopped singing and tried to manage an awkward smile.

After looking all around, Madunana pinched Sartina's bottom, and she gave an embarrassed giggle and responded with a sonorous slap on his arm. The two of them laughed happily together without looking at each other.

Just then, Nandito, Joãozinho, Nelita and Gita ran out after a ball, and started kicking it around the yard with great enjoyment.

Mama came to the kitchen door, dressed up to go out. As soon as she appeared, Madunana bent down quickly to the ground, pretending to look for something, and Sartina bent over the trough.

'Sartina, see if you manage not to break any plates before you finish. Hurry up. You Madunana, leave Sartina alone and mind your own business. I don't want any of that nonsense

here. If you carry on like this I'll tell the boss.'

'You, Ginho,' (now she spoke in Portuguese) 'Look after the house and remember you're not a child any more. Don't hit anybody and don't let the children go out of the yard. Tina and Lolota are inside clearing up—don't let them get up to mischief.'

'Sartina,' (in Ronga) 'When you've finished with that put the kettle on for the children's tea and tell Madunana to go and buy bread. Don't let the children finish the whole packet of butter.'

'Ginho,' (now in Portuguese) 'Look after everything—I'm coming back just now. I'm going along to Aunty Lucia's for a little chat.'

Mama straightened her dress and looked around to see if everything was in order, then went away.

Senhor Castro's dog, Wolf, was watching Toto from the street. As soon as he saw Wolf, Toto ran towards him and they started to bark at each other.

All the dogs of the village were frightened of Toto, and even the biggest of them ran away when he showed his temper. Toto was small, but he had long white hair which bristled up like a cat's when he was angry, and this is what must have terrified the other dogs.

Usually he kept away from them, preferring to entertain himself with the fowls—even bitches he only tolerated at certain times. For me he was a dog with a 'pedigree', or at least 'pedigree' could only mean the qualities he possessed. He had an air of authority, and the only person he feared was Mama, although she had never hit him. Just to take him off a chair we had to call her because he snarled and showed his teeth even at Papa.

The two dogs were face to face, and Wolf had already started to retreat, full of fear. At this moment Dr Reis's dog, Kiss, passed by, and Toto started to bark at him too. Kiss fled at once, and Wolf pursued him, snapping at his hind-quarters, only leaving him when he was whining with pain. When Wolf came back to Toto they immediately made friends and began playing together.

Nandito came and sat down next to me, and told me, without

my asking, that he was tired of playing ball.

'So why have you come here?'

'Don't you want me to?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Then I'll stay.'

'Stay if you like.'

I got up and he followed me. 'Where are you going? Are you going hunting?'

'No.'

'Well, then?'

'Stop pestering me. I don't like talking to kids.'

'You're also a kid. Mama still hits you.'

'Say that again and I'll bash your face in.'

'All right, I won't say it again.'

I went into the chicken run, and he came after me. The pipes were hot, and I had to move them with a cloth. The dust that rose was dense and suffocating.

'What are you looking for? Shall I help you?'

I began to move the blocks one by one and Nandito did the same. 'Get away!'

He went to the other end of the run and began to cry.

When I had removed the last block of the pile I saw the snake. It was a mamba, very dark in colour. When it realised it had been discovered it wound itself up more tightly and lifted its triangular head. Its eyes shone vigilantly and its black forked tongue quivered menacingly.

I drew back against the fence, then sat down on the ground.

'Don't cry, Nandito.'

'You're nasty. You don't want to play with me.'

'Don't cry any more. I'll play with you just now. Don't cry.'

We both sat quietly. The little head of the snake came slowly to rest on the topmost coil, and the rest of its body stopped trembling. But it continued to watch me attentively.

'Nandito, say something, talk to me.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Anything you like.'

'I don't feel like saying anything.'

Nandito was still rubbing his eyes and feeling resentful towards me.

'Have you ever seen a snake? Do you like snakes? Are you

scared of them? Answer me!'

'Where are the snakes?' Nandito jumped up in terror, and looked around.

'In the bush. Sit down and talk.'

'Aren't there any snakes here?'

'No. Talk. Talk to me about snakes.'

Nandito sat down very close to me.

'I'm very frightened of snakes. Mama says it's dangerous to go out in the bush because of them. When we're walking in the grass we can step on one by mistake and get bitten. When a snake bites us we die. Sartina says that if a snake bites us and we don't want to die we must kill it, burn it till it's dry, then eat it. She says she's already eaten a snake, so she won't die even if she gets bitten.'

'Have you ever seen a snake?'

'Yes, in Chico's house. The servant killed it in the chicken run.'

'What was it like?'

'It was big and red, and it had a mouth like a frog.'

'Would you like to see a snake now?'

Nandito got up and leaned against me fearfully. 'Is there a snake in the chicken run? I'm scared—let's get out.'

'If you want to get out, go away. I didn't call you to come in here.'

'I'm frightened to go alone.'

'Then sit here until I feel like going out.'

The two of us stayed very quietly for a while.

Toto and Wolf were playing outside the fence. They were running from one post to another, going all the way round and starting again. At every post they raised a leg and urinated.

Then they came inside the chicken run and lay on their stomachs to rest. Wolf saw the snake immediately and began to bark. Toto barked as well, although he had his back turned towards it.

'Brother, are there always snakes in every chicken run?'

'No.'

'Is there one in here?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, why don't we go out. I'm scared!'

'Go out if you want to—go on!'

Wolf advanced towards the snake, barking more and more frenziedly. Toto turned his head, but still did not realise what was wrong.

Wolf's legs were trembling and he pawed the ground in anguish. Now and again he looked at me uncomprehendingly, unable to understand why I did not react to his hysterical alarm. His almost human eyes were filled with panic.

'Why is he barking like that?'

'Because he's seen the snake.'

The mamba was curled up in the hollow between some blocks, and it unwound its body to give itself the most solid support possible. Its head and the raised neck remained poised in the air, unaffected by the movement of the rest of its body. Its eyes shone like fires.

Wolf's appeals were now horribly piercing, and his hair was standing up around his neck.

Leaning against the fence, Tina and Lolota and Madunana looked on curiously.

'Why don't you kill the snake?' Nandito's voice was very fearful and he was clutching me around the neck.

'Because I don't feel like it.'

The distance between the snake and the dog was about five feet. However, the snake had inserted its tail in the angle formed between a block and the ground, and had raised its coils one by one, preparing for the strike. The triangular head drew back imperceptibly, and the base of the lifted neck came forward. Seeming to be aware of the proximity of his end, the dog began to bark even more frantically, without, however, trying to get away from the snake. From a little way behind, Toto, now on his feet as well, joined in the barking.

For a fraction of a second the neck of the snake curved while the head leaned back. Then, as if the tension of its pliant body had snapped a cord that fastened its head to the ground, it shot forward in a lightning movement impossible to follow. Although the dog had raised himself on his hind legs like a goat, the snake struck him full on the chest. Free of support, the tail of the snake whipped through the air, reverberating with the movement of the last coil.

Wolf fell on his back with a suppressed whine, pawing convulsively. The mamba abandoned him immediately, and

with a spring disappeared between the pipes.

'A nhoka!'¹ screamed Sartina.

Nandito threw me aside and ran out of the chicken run with a yell, collapsing into the arms of Madunana. As soon as he felt free of the snake, Wolf vanished in half a dozen leaps in the direction of Senhor Castro's house.

The children all started to cry without having understood what had happened. Sartina took Nandito to the house, carrying him in her arms. Only when the children disappeared behind Sartina did I call Madunana to help me kill the snake.

Madunana waited with a cloth held up high while I moved the pipes with the aid of a broomstick. As soon as the snake appeared Madunana threw the cloth over it, and I set to beating the heap with my stick.

When Papa came back from work Nandito had come round from the shock, and was weeping copiously. Mama, who had not yet been to see the snake, went with Papa to the chicken run. When I went there as well, I saw Papa turn the snake over on to its back with a stick.

'I don't like to think of what a snake like this could have done to one of my children.' Papa smiled. 'Or to anyone else. It was better this way. What hurts me is to think that these six feet of snake were attained at the expense of my chickens. . .'

At this point Senhor Castro's car drew up in front of our house. Papa walked up to him, and Mama went to talk to Sartina. I followed after Papa.

'Good afternoon, Senhor Castro. . .'

'Listen, Tchembene, I've just found out that my pointer is dead, and his chest's all swollen. My natives tell me that he came howling from your house before he died. I don't want any back-chat, and I'm just telling you—either you pay compensation or I'll make a complaint at the Administration. He was the best pointer I ever had.'

'I've just come back from work—I don't know anything. . .'

'I don't care a damn about that. Don't argue. Are you going to pay or aren't you?'

'But Senhor Castro. . .'

'Senhor Castro nothing. It's 700 paus.² And it's better if the matter rests here.'

'As you like, Senhor Castro, but I don't have the money now. . .'

'We'll see about that later. I'll wait until the end of the month, and if you don't pay then there'll be a row.'

'Senhor Castro, we've known each other such a long time, and there's never. . .'

'Don't try that with me. I know what you all need—a bloody good hiding is the only thing. . .'

Senhor Castro climbed into his car and pulled away. Papa stayed watching while the car drove off. 'Son of a bitch. . .'

I went up to him and tugged at the sleeve of his coat.

'Papa, why didn't you say that to his face?'

He didn't answer.

We had hardly finished supper when Papa said, 'Mother, tell Sartina to clear the table quickly. My children, let us pray. To-day we are not going to read the Bible. We will simply pray.'

Papa talked in Ronga, and for this reason I regretted having asked him that question a while ago.

When Sartina finished clearing away the plates and folded the cloth, Papa began, '*Tatana, ha ku dumba hosi ya tilo misaba.*'³

When he finished, his eyes were red.

'Amen!'

'Amen!'

Mama got up, and asked, as if it meant nothing, 'But what did Senhor Castro want, after all?'

'It's nothing important.'

'All right, tell me about it in our room. I'll go and set out the children's things. You, Ginho, wake up early tomorrow and take a laxative. . .'

When they had all gone away, I asked Papa, 'Papa, why do you always pray when you are very angry?'

'Because He is the best counsellor.'

'And what counsel does He give you?'

'He gives me no counsel. He gives me strength to continue.'

'Papa, do you believe a lot in Him?'

Papa looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time, and then exploded. 'My son, one must have a hope. When one

comes to the end of a day, and one knows that tomorrow will be another day just like it, and that things will always be the same, we have got to find the strength to keep on smiling, and keep on saying, "This is not important!" We ourselves have to allot our own reward for the heroism of every day. We have to establish a date for this reward, even if it's the day of our death! Even today you saw Senhor Castro humiliate me: this formed only part of today's portion, because there were many things that happened that you didn't see. No, my son, there must be a hope! It must exist! Even if all this only denies Him, He must exist!'

Papa stopped suddenly, and forced himself to smile. Then he added, 'Even a poor man has to have something. Even if it is only a hope! Even if it's a false hope!'

'Papa, I could have prevented the snake from biting Senhor Castro's dog. . .'

Papa looked at me with his eyes full of tenderness, and said under his breath, 'It doesn't matter. It's a good thing that he got bitten.'

Mama appeared at the door. 'Are you going to let the child go to sleep or not?'

I looked at Papa, and we remembered Senhor Castro and both of us burst out laughing. Mama didn't understand.

'Are you two going crazy?!'

'Yes, and it's about time we went crazy,' said Papa with a smile.

Papa was already on the way to his room, but I must have talked too loudly. Anyway, it was better that he heard, 'Papa, I sometimes. . . I don't really know. . . but for some time. . . I have been thinking that I didn't love you all. I'm sorry. . .'

Mama didn't understand what we had been saying, so she became angry. 'Stop all this, or else. . .'

'Do you know, my son,' Papa spoke ponderously, and gesticulated a lot before every word. 'The most difficult thing to bear is that feeling of complete emptiness. . . and one suffers very much. . . very, very, very much. One grows with so much bottled up inside, but afterwards it is difficult to scream, you know.'

'Papa, and when Senhor Castro comes? . . .'

Mama was going to object, but Papa clutched her shoulder

firmly. 'It's nothing, Mother, but, you know, our son believes that people don't mount wild horses, and that they only make use of the hungry, docile ones. Yet when a horse goes wild it gets shot down, and it's all finished. But tame horses die every day. Every day, d'you hear? Day after day, after day—as long as they can stand on their feet.'

Mama looked at him with her eyes popping out.

'Do you know, Mother, I'm afraid to believe that this is true, but I also can't bring myself to tell him that it's a lie . . . He sees, even to-day he saw . . . I only wish for the strength to make sure that my children know how to recognise other things . . .'

Papa and Mama were already in their room, so I couldn't hear any more, but even from there Mama yelled, 'Tomorrow you'll take a laxative, that'll show you. I'm not like your father who lets himself get taken in . . .'

My bed was flooded in yellow moonlight, and it was pleasant to feel my naked skin quiver with its cold caress. For some unknown reason the warm sensation of Sartina's body flowed through my senses. I managed to cling to her almost physical presence for a few minutes, and I wanted to fall asleep with her so as not to dream of dogs and snakes.

1. *nhoka*—a snake

2. 700 'paus'—slang for 700\$ (about £8)

3. *Tatana, ha ku dumba hosi ya tilo misaba*—Father, we put our trust in Thee, Lord of Heaven and earth

The Bridegroom

Nadine Gordimer

He came into his road camp that afternoon for the last time. It was neater than any house would ever be; the sand raked smooth in the clearing, the water drums under the tarpaulin, the flaps of his tent closed against the heat. Thirty yards away a black woman knelt, pounding mealies, and two or three children, grey with Kalahari dust, played with a skinny dog. Their shrillness was no more than a bird's piping in the great spaces in which the camp was lost.

Inside his tent, something of the chill of the night before always remained, stale but cool, like the air of a church. There was his iron bed, with its clean pillowcase and big kaross. There was his table, his folding chair with the red canvas seat, and the chest in which his clothes were put away. Standing on the chest was the alarm clock that woke him at five every morning and the photograph of a seventeen-year-old girl from Francistown whom he was going to marry. They had been there a long time, the girl and the alarm clock; in the morning when he opened his eyes, in the afternoon when he came off the job. But now this was the last time. He was leaving for Francistown in the Roads Department ten-tonner, in the morning; when he came back, the next week, he would be married and he would have with him the girl, and the caravan which the department provided for married men. He had his eye on her as he sat down on the bed and took off his boots; the smiling girl was like one of those faces cut out of a magazine. He began to shed his working overalls, a rind of khaki stiff with dust that held his shape as he discarded it, and he called, easily and softly, '*Ou Piet, ek wag.*' But the bony black man with his eyebrows raised like a clown's, in effort, and his bare feet shuffling under the weight, was already at the tent with a tin bath in which hot water made a twanging tune as it slopped from side to side.