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THE SOUNDS OF LIONS

Short Story

by Rashid Mahamed Jabane

Darmaan stirred uneasily on the cowhide, waking up from deep slumber. He sat up and listened to the nervous sounds coming from the cowpen. He emitted a steady breeze into the dark wall of night. Even the spear which lay beside him did not glitter as he picked it up. He girded his loincloth and silently crept out of the enclosure. Suddenly, he heard the shuffling of hooves, a bleat, a rush, and a great ripping sound of thorny branches from the cattle enclosure. Instinctively, he crouched with the spear pointed forward.

The sounds grew less and the silence clung to his ears. Darmaan listened, tilting his ear to the mute stillness, hardly noticing his brother Soofe who had crept to his side. Soofe was carrying a torch and he brushed aside his brother's restraining hand as he went forward and examined the cow pen.

"The white calf is gone," he announced to Darmaan, who now stood at his side. They checked around the enclosure and stooped to examine the inflated paw marks on the ground.

"Lion," whispered Darmaan. By this time, the other brothers and cousins had arrived at the scene of the calf that had been killed. Soofe wanted them to track the lion immediately, but Darmaan turned down the idea.

"It is futile and pointless to track a lion in such darkness. The damage has already been done. The best thing to do is to set out at dawn and track the animal to its lair."

Soofe was displeased, but he consented to his elder brother's counsel. They went back to unwind on their cowhides, and they slept soundly, for they knew that the beast would kill no more that night.

* * *

The grizzled old man walked around his camp, bare chested, his pink skin glistening in the sun. A slight breeze ruffled his great mane of white hair and blew the sweat off the set wrinkles on his face. He was alone in the camp, except for his driver and two orderlies. His wife had been dead for ages and he had no recollection of her, no children to remind him of her. For all intents and purposes, he was alone in this world. Not really alone, for he had his children all around the camp.

They prowled around his camp, hungry and fierce, fearing no man except him. He walked among them, their lord and master, giving them huge cuts of meat. He would buy camel carcasses from the locals to feed his pets. He hated the locals, but they provided meat for his lions, so he had to deal with them. He had managed, however, through his numerous friends outside, to pressure the government to declare their ancestral lands a game reserve. He became the sole caretaker of the remote place, patrolling the vast ranges with a creaky Landrover, a trusty .303 rifle and his pride of lions.

He was a self-declared conservationist, though his work was not welcomed in certain conservationist circles. They saw no scientific or aesthetic value in his work. His former colleagues who had hunted big game with them, smuggling, whoring, and thieving across the plains of Africa, saw him for what he was; a senile, dotty old man who was playing some subconscious fantasy in those last stretches of wilderness. Nevertheless, he had many admirers in Europe, people in places that mattered, who thought they saw in him what they should have been, and thus kept him alive in his little outpost, covered from view and fire. Thus he would receive them in his camp, landing on his specially constructed runway, regale them with stories of Dark Africa and the last frontiers of the wild, surrounded all the time by hungry and ferocious lions.

So funds kept coming to sustain him and keep his project of taming lions and releasing them into the wild to live as free as they were born. To please his friends, the government coerced the pastoralists inhabiting the plains and forcibly removed them from their ancient grazing lands. However, the nomads kept coming back to their pastures and the government kept on pushing them out until the situation turned into an impasse. The old man came to the government's rescue by conveniently suggesting that any person found within the reserve should be declared a bandit. To his joy, the government went a step further, declaring that any unauthorized person found in the reserve would be shot dead on sight. So the old man patrolled his reserve with his well-oiled .303 and, periodically, he would be assisted by the government security forces to weed out the ever persistent nomads, so that he would remain alone with his lions, to tame and release them into the wild. In his spare time, he trained his pride of lions to attack locals on sight, and at night he released them to prey on the camels and other livestock reared by the nomads.

He strode around the camp, feeding his children. A big lion, the one he had named Killer, lazed under the lofty acacia tree, and something in his practical mind told him that the beast had fed the night before. He dangled a camel shank, but Killer just yawned and went back to sleep. The old man wondered where the carcass lay, and whether it was a wild or domestic animal. If it was a domestic animal,

then that meant that the pesky Somalis must be in the park. His brow darkened as he contemplated this. He would have to look for the carcass, and if the need arose, the Somalis.

"Toto!" he cried, and a burly black man came running. "Prepare for a trek, you and Mambo, and bring me my rifle."

Toto ran to the house and filled a haversack with dried rations and beddings. The lions gambolled in the camp, rolling on the iridescent morning sands. The old man put on his safari hat and jacket, and set off with his rifle, his two orderlies trailing behind him.

* * *

The search party set out early led by Darmaan and composed of Soofe and two other cousins. Soofe was still disgruntled by his brother's refusal to track the beast at night. Since childhood, they had competed in everything, and in their boyish scraps they amazed onlookers with their ferocity and intensity. Yet they were very close when it came to action, working closely together to maintain their meagre herd of camels. Although he would rather die than admit it, Soofe had a tenacious love and loyalty for his brother. Darmaan too would sacrifice his life for his brother. Like the sun and the earth, the brothers struggled for supremacy. One had to be a mountain or lean on the other, said the elders, and every nomad child was brought up to believe that he was stronger, faster, braver, more handsome, and more intelligent than any other child. But in their fragility, they also struggled for harmony.

The young men closely followed the paw marks on the ground as they diminished or grew better delineated according to the terrain. Darmaan walked briskly, pausing only when the tracks became muddled and unclear. They held their spears aloft as if, after dipping them in the molten sun, they were raised to dry. They moved silently and by midmorning had gone far into the bush. The tracks eventually led to a small thicket where they found the bloated remains of their white calf. Darmaan squatted near the carcass, picking at it with his spear. It was Laan, his favorite. This was not the first time the lion had entered their flock, or those of their neighbors. He had seen and heard of these lions that came cleaving through the night, randomly butchering the nomads' source of livelihood. Darmaan stood up and angrily drove his spear into the ground.

"Let's go ahead," he said.

They scanned the ground and silently walked on. The prints were leading them to the south where the lonely, hated old man lived. It was said that he tamed lions and would let nobody near his camp. Darmaan had seen him once, when the old man had come to buy a camel carcass from his family. They had given it to him free, refusing his

money, and he seemed puzzled. But that was a long time ago, when they freely ranged the Pastures of the Red Sands. They now grazed in secret, avoiding both the old man and the security forces who would periodically swoop on them.

They were brutal men, these soldiers, and Darmaan thought bitterly of how many of his people had been killed in violent one-sided clashes. He remembered the time Keynaan's betrothed was gang-raped by the soldiers. She was found hanging from a rope the next day, her body dangling from a tree. The old man would travel with his Landrover to look for camel carcasses. Yet after every visit, the family that had welcomed him with warm, frothy camel milk would find itself surrounded by security forces, battered and driven outside the perimeter of the reserve. People learned to avoid him.

They followed the tracks between the thorn thickets and evergreen mareer trees. They came to a clearing and stopped. From there they could see the prints stretching along the clearing to the old man's camp. The camp was fenced all around by strong, high wire mesh. The old man was standing outside the gate, holding his rifle with both hands, pointed at them. His two orderlies shuffled nervously. He looked sullen and angry at these nomads who had invaded his territory.

"Stop!" he shouted, raising his rifle. Although they did not understand his language, they realized what he meant and halted under a tall acacia tree. The old man accosted them, muttering, "Bloody shiftas! What are you doing here?"

Darmaan answered in gestures, pointing to the paw marks leading to the camp. The old man shouted angrily, but Darmaan couldn't understand what he was saying. Gazing beyond the old man, he saw the lions prowling in the camp. He turned to Soofe and said, pointing with his spear, "Those must be the lions that took the calf."

The old man became enraged at the spear pointed towards him. He stepped forward and slapped Soofe. Darmaan lunged and struck the old man down. Soofe was stunned, unable to react. The old man rolled on the ground and suddenly there was a loud report. Darmaan collapsed to the ground and Soofe with a cry rushed to his fallen brother. But even as he held the blood-stained body, he saw his two cousins collapsing next to him, gaping crimson holes in their bodies. Bewildered and terrified, he ran back into the bush, forgetting his spear. His heart skipped a beat at every whiz of a bullet and he ran on, oblivious of the tangle of thorn bushes and thickets. He lost his sense of direction, fleeing deeper into the bush.

* * *

The old man sat over his crackling radio set. He requested to speak directly to the Director of Wildlife, a good friend of his. He told

him that he had shot three bandits dead, but one had managed to escape. They had tried to raid his camp in the early hours of dawn. The Director promised to send a team as soon as possible.

* * *

Soofe drank palmfuls of the muddy water that lay on the ground. He had spent the whole afternoon trying to retrace the route home. He paused, sitting under a tree and began removing the thorns that had pierced his feet. A distant rasping sound startled him. It was coming nearer and as the roar increased, he realized with horror that it was the sound of lions. His fingers grasped the empty sand next to him, groping for a spear that was not there. He clambered up a tall fig tree. Three lions bounced up to the tree, circling it with deep growls. Daylight abandoned the land, but the lions remained, prowling in the clinging night.

Soofe cradled the branch on which he sat, fearing to fall off. All the eerie night sounds reverberated with each roar, and as he looked down on the lions, he remembered Darmaan and his cousins.

"I am a man," he harshly whispered to himself, but huge tears erupted from his eyes.

The lions kept their vigil and then in the dim morning light, sauntered off lazily into the bush. Soofe waited with bated breath for an hour and then stiffly came down, retracing his previous day's route. As he walked, he heard again a dim roar, though this time it seemed to come from the sky. He picked up a long forked stick and sat under a thick thorny bush. The roar grew distinct and he looked up through the framework of thorns. It was a helicopter. He wondered where they were going but he recalled that the old man was known to the government. Soofe pressed his forehead in bitterness. That old man would pay for Darmaan's death. Soofe silently swore to his God and the roar from above receded into a hum and finally disappeared.

Soofe picked his way and after walking for an hour, met Galleydh's children with their camels. Old man Galleydh was not there but his sons rushed to him as he cried, his voice breaking, "Give me life." They gave him water and milk and prepared the sweet, syrupy tea that nomads drank. They listened to him as he talked and when he asked of his family, they looked painfully at each other. The eldest son of Galleydh spoke.

"May Allah give you forbearance. The government rounded up your family and some others. They tortured some, and some they shot. Your family has perished and your livestock is in the hands of the government. People say that they are looking for you."

Soofe did not hear the last words. Everything fell silent and he no longer heard their words of consolation. The breeze stopped, the

birds did not sing and no leaves rustled. He gazed at the sun and saw none of its luster. He looked far into the ground but saw nothing. Ina Galleydh was telling him that the safest thing for him to do was to cross the border. They too were trekking to the border to escape the security forces who were prowling the area.

So he sojourned with the sons of Galleydh for the next two days as they moved towards the border, herding their camels with them. They reached the border the next evening, as the setting sun cast a warm, coppery glow on the grazing camels. The sons of Galleydh would not migrate any further, but here they would remain unmolested. Equipped with some sugar, tea leaves, and dried meat, Soofe set off across the border.

* * *

The Commissioner of Police sat opposite the Director of Wildlife. The old man sat at the head of the table and they sipped whisky under the canopy of a large, shady qudhac tree.

"I wish to congratulate you Mr. Commissioner," said the old man, "on your very successful effort to remove bandits from the park. To you also, Bill."

"Oh no," smiled the Director, "the credit is entirely John's. He did the cleaning up."

The Commissioner smiled broadly, showing his clean, sparkling teeth.

"Well, it was really simple," he said. "We found out that the best strategy of eliminating the bandits was to wipe out their source of food, water and life, that is the nomads. You know in this bush that every one of them is a shifta, and knowing that, you have no problem with them."

"Indeed," said the old man, "you couldn't have expressed my sentiments better. This land belongs to the lions and the wildlife, their last sanctuary. These people are known for their indiscriminate killing of wildlife. You can never feel safe when they are around, especially now, when many of them have been trained as soldiers across the border and carry all sorts of automatic weapons, AK's, Uzis, and so on. Ha! But I keep my old .303 cocked and ready. But as you say, their source of food has been removed."

"Thanks to you," said the Director. "Who can forget six months ago when you shot down those bandits right outside your gates? I can still remember the headlines, CONSERVATIONIST GUNS DOWN BANDITS IN SHOOTOUT. Why, the whole world threw in their lot with you and I'm sure the funds for your research have trebled since."

"Oh yes," said the Commissioner, "and thanks to your brave action, We got the go-ahead from the government to mount a massive operation to scour the whole area, clearing it of the last bandit."

"Well, we must be off," said the Director, looking at his watch. "Tomorrow is black Monday."

The old man drove them to the runway and he watched as the twin-engine plane faded into the moist sky. He went back and the lions started coming in for their evening meal.

* * *

Soofe walked slowly, avoiding the open spaces, his Faal rifle suspended from his shoulder, his companion softly trailing behind with his Kalashnikov automatic. Both men wore dun-colored fatigues. Soofe, together with his kinsman Faarax, had deserted the military to go back to their ancestral lands. They had crossed the border two days earlier, making their way across the deserted savanna. They avoided the small government garrisons as Soofe retraced the routes he had used as a camel herder with his brother Darmaan. It seemed such a long time ago. His wavy hair hung in shaggy curls and his face had a hardened, older look.

He had planned to come alone but Faarax had tagged along in the hope of getting some booty along the way. Soofe ambled between the dwarf qansax and tall acacia trees, remembering the old tracks with nostalgia. Stories had filtered to him how his people had been savagely removed from their ancestral grazing lands, many of them being killed in the process. Now that he was back, he could not adjust to this desolate land, devoid of all human beings except Faarax and himself. How many times Darmaan and he had wrestled on the sandy clearings! And somewhere in the middle of this wilderness lived the old man who had slain his brother. Like the camel, Soofe knew that he would one day return to the saltlicks and hareeri trees of his land.

They killed an antelope and roasted its meat on an open fire. Soofe knew the old man's camp was not very far off and that they would make it there by dusk. The sun moved with them, and at that time of day it blanketed every tree, rock, or being with crimson colors. They arrived at the edge of the clearing where the camp lay. It was dusk and the dying sun filtered its rays through the stunted acacia trees. Soofe's heart pounded wildly and with passion as he crouched among the bushes, hardly breathing. His heart almost stopped when he saw the bearded old man emerge from the grass-thatched house. He was wearing only his shorts and lugging his rifle as he strolled outside the gate and summoned, "Killer! Killer!"

The words ricocheted in Soofe's brain. Against all his instincts and training, he stepped out of the bush and into the clearing. The startled old man dropped the meat and raised his rifle, but Soofe had his finger on the trigger. A distant memory whizzed before his mind and he saw Darmaan collapsing, full of blood. He pressed the trigger, the

impact of the bullet throwing the old man backwards. Soofe knew he was dead and his body shook a little as Faarax came out of the clearing and pulled at his sleeve.

"Let's loot the place," he urged, but Soofe refused to listen.

"There is no time," he harshly shouted. "Let's get out of here." They turned and sprinted into the darkening bush.

Killer, the lion, came after a while and sniffed at the morsel of meat that lay on the ground. It sauntered off in the direction where the old man's body lay, nosing the wound on his chest and licking the blood. Soon, other famished lions came and surrounded the body, snarling and growling as the night finally fell.

* * *

They moved the whole night and slept in abandoned animal dens the next day, until their sleep was interrupted by the roar of helicopters. Soofe felt like the proverbial bird whose master's grip prevented it from quenching its thirst. He was a hunted man for the second time in his life and his heart lay as bleak as the land. He hardly thought about his life, which he believed had been left too much to fate. He knew that migrating from oppression was only a temporary succor. The helicopters meant that a search was on, ground and aerial, but he did not have the same beleaguered feeling he had before. Late in the afternoon, Soofe and Faarax emerged from their holes and set out in the direction of the border. They scrambled for cover as the dim roar of a helicopter grew louder.

A small helicopter flew close to the ground and sighted the two men, strafing them with bullets as they rolled on the ground, trying to change cover. Faarax was hit on the leg and as he writhed in agony, he looked around to see where Soofe was. He was lying on his back, tranquil, even as the small helicopter landed, blowing dust on his bloodstained jacket. The soldiers pounced from the helicopter and advanced towards Faarax as he lay helplessly on the ground, his Kalashnikov far from him. They kicked Soofe's body, but he did not move. One soldier muttered, "Dead bastard!"

They picked up Faarax and flew away with him. They discarded him from the far sky and he landed not very far from where Soofe's still body lay, his limbs twisting on impact. The helicopter circled the two bodies and then swiftly soared away.

* * *

The Director of Wildlife flung the newspaper on his desk. He was going to attend the funeral of the late conservationist, or rather, whatever remained of the old man. The Police Commissioner was

waiting for him downstairs. He took one last look at the headlines, "BANDITS SHOT DEAD IN NATIONAL RESERVE," and softly closed the door behind him.

END