IN THE WAKE OF YESTERDAY

A Treatment by Babatunde Apalowo

Part I - Dandaji

Dandaji is a Sahel settlement built around a hikma complex of ochre walls and geometric courtyards. Rain has not fallen here in the memory of anyone now living. Drought has not made the people feral, it has made them precise. Once a month the Water Marshals, an elite group trained from childhood, journey north to the only well that exists, at the farthest border with the desert. Water is not scarce in the way drought is usually understood. It is administered. Records are kept, penalties enforced. Everything requires a witness. Everything requires a seal. The village survives by civic rhythm, and nothing inside it, not even joy, is casual.

The hikma is the system by which Dandaji knows what it knows. It records what can be confirmed and nothing else. The records have never been wrong because nothing enters them that cannot be proven. The village trusts the hikma the way it trusts the well.

The film opens in celebration. Music moves through the settlement in layers. Elders receive greetings, women cross the open ground, children dart between bodies, young men perform strength for no audience in particular.

Zainab, fifteen, is everywhere in this, quick and useful, her presence assumed. Older women greet her by name and expect to be answered. Her brothers move through the crowd in her orbit, deferring to her without seeming to. Her father watches her from the elders' side of the ground with the particular stillness of a man whose standing is partly his daughter's doing. Zainab is Idris's designated successor. Every hikma administrator takes three trainees at once and always has, for as long as anyone can remember. Idris took only her. She was nine. There were other candidates and he declined them all, saying only that the hikma had made its preference known. People objected. The objection faded, because everyone assumed the future would justify the choice. When Idris is gone, Dandaji will know what it knows through Zainab.

That afternoon the celebration becomes a procession toward the boundary station at the desert's edge. People carry small personal items, combs, beads, cloth, and place them into a single ceremonial basket. A cord is wound in a standard pattern, a clay plug pressed into the knot, a stamp impression set into the clay. Idris, in his forties, the hikma's record keeper, verifies the seal. Marshals witness. A ledger is marked. Then Muna is brought forward, fifteen, ceremonially dressed. She receives the basket and balances it on her head. She does not flinch and does not look at the crowd for reassurance. She has the quality of someone who has been prepared for this, not

resigned to it. The moment she steadies the basket the entire village turns its backs in unison. Muna takes one last look at Dandaji, then walks into the desert alone. When she is out of sight the village resumes singing and turns home. Sani watches the desert long after the others have turned.

The next day, at the water station, a woman three places ahead of Zainab in the queue is explaining the same thing for longer than the explanation should take. She had water. A neighbour came, the neighbour's child was sick, the household's allocation had run short, and she gave what she had. No witness was called, because it was not that kind of moment, a child and a bowl and a neighbour at the door. She reported the event the next morning. Now her own allocation has been deducted as punishment.

Zainab listens and says it is not possible. The woman swears it happened, on the well, on her mother, on the seal. Zainab goes inside the office. Bashir, eighteen, a junior marshal, is copying entries in the compressed hand the marshals are trained to from boyhood. He does not look up, but he shifts the stool beside him out with his foot before she has asked for it, and she does not take it. Their eyes meet once, longer than the room requires. Bashir takes the woman inside to the men in charge. They are not unkind. They listen fully. The woman explains that the transfer was made in desperation, that the child might not have survived the night. When she finishes, the marshals confer quietly. The senior marshal eventually speaks. No one disputes that water changed hands. No one disputes why. She is not being punished for giving away water. The difficulty is that the transfer was not witnessed.

Outside, Zainab tells Bashir the woman did not steal, she gave, and the hikma has filed the two as the same act. He says the hikma did not file an act. It filed an absence. She says that does not change what happened. People fail to witness things all the time. Even the matriarchs. Everyone does. She is certain the two of them have done things that were never witnessed. Bashir lets that sit for a moment. "It isn't that nobody witnessed it. It's what wasn't witnessed."

The record room. A couple has just registered a newborn, the water adjusted for a new life, witnessed, sealed, entered. Zainab challenges the ruling on the woman who gave away water. Idris responds by showing her the complete record of the case. The hikma already knows everything that can be known. Zainab argues that knowledge is not understanding. A woman who gives is not a woman who steals. Idris reminds her that the hikma carries more than allocations and disputes. It governs pilgrimages, routes, survival calculations, and every decision upon which the village depends. Water reaches Dandaji because people trust records that cannot afford uncertainty. "The record has never been wrong because nothing enters it that cannot be confirmed." Zainab is unconvinced, though she says nothing.

Later, Idris asks about Bashir's family setting a date. He warns her against disappearing into marriage and urges her toward a larger life. Zainab rejects the premise entirely. Where Idris sees limits, she sees belonging. Where he sees structure, she sees community.

The introduction, the ceremonial meeting of the marrying families, is held at Zainab's family compound, prepared for days. Her father has been instructing the servants since before first light. When one returns and mentions that at the last notable engagement the host family had laid kola on beaten silver and slaughtered two rams at the gate, her father stops, looks at the single ram already tethered in the yard, and tells them to find a second before noon and to bring out the brass his own father was buried with. In the inner room her mother manages Zainab's presentation with the care of someone who knows that cloth and posture are arguments. The daughter should show well. Bashir's family arrives with ceremony, his father leading, gifts arranged by category, witnesses. The receiving follows its correct form, greetings at the appropriate length, kola presented and accepted. There was dance and music and the family celebrated deep into the night.

At blue hour Zainab and Bashir slip away from the festivities to the dunes outside the outer wall. They roll down a slope and she loses her headwrap and laughs trying to recover it, and he catches it and holds it out of reach until she gives up, and they lie at the bottom breathless, looking up at the sky going dark at the edges. He tells her he has been assigned to the next great pilgrimage, his first time. He does not speak of it as duty performed reluctantly. The pilgrimage is the highest expression of what he believes a person is for, to go into the deepest and most literal danger, to conquer water, to bring it home. Your life is not more important than the next man's. She is quiet a moment. She finds a stone in the dust, too smooth, too white, belonging to a different landscape entirely, with no business being in this one. She turns it in the last light, then presses it into his palm and closes his fingers around it. This is the first stone in the house we will build for out family. He tucks it into his vest against his chest. They stay on the dune until the light is gone.

He leaves at dawn. Zainab watches the procession cross the line, watches until they are out of sight, then goes back to the hikma and works. The marshals return on the scheduled day. Bashir is not among them. They reached the well, drew the water, began the return crossing. Bashir was with them and then was not. They searched within the permitted distance and found nothing. A search party goes out the following morning with witnesses and clearance. Zainab asks to join and is refused. She watches them cross the line and stands at the boundary a long time after they are out of sight. The search party finds nothing. After the procedurally correct number of days, Idris files Bashir as lost on pilgrimage. His post is reassigned, his household effects returned to his family. That night Zainab crosses the line into the desert herself.

The desert does not change immediately. Then distance begins to behave incorrectly. She moves

forward and returns to the same ridge, tries again and is returned again. Then she finds water, a pool, cyan and still, as if the sky has pooled into the ground. She enters it. She struggles like she is drowning. She goes under. The surface calms, and the camera holds on the still water until nothing moves. Cut to Zainab at the desert's edge, standing as if she has just been set down. No marks on her. No memory of how she returned.

Weeks pass. Then Zainab's pregnancy is discovered. Greetings change. Her position in queues shifts, her seat at school is contested, her household's allotment becomes conditional. One question moves through the village: who is the father. Her brothers ask privately, wanting a name to negotiate with. She refuses. The elder asks publicly and she refuses again. She is removed from school. Her household is penalised.

Sani watches all of it, the greetings changing, the queues shifting, his father's standing absorbing the damage, his mother making small adjustments to their routes through the settlement, the ones that avoid certain households and certain gatherings. Her father seeks formal audience with the matriarchs. He has prepared his case through the law and argues with precision. The hikma chose her, years ago, he says, and Idris refused every other candidate because the hikma had made its preference known. If that choice was legitimate, the hikma is bound by it. If the hikma can now reject what it once chose, then one of those decisions was wrong, and he asks them which one. They remind him of the rule: every record of a birth requires a name, and in the hikma a name passes only through the father. A child with no named father has no entry, and what has no entry cannot be held.

In a show of solidarity, Bashir's father comes with gifts and men of his lineage to visit Zainab's father. They have come to fulfil their duty, the completing of the engagement between their children especially with the prospect of a possible heir. Then Bashir's mother asks for an inspection of the daughter. It is not clear which rule she believes she is invoking, but the room shifts. Zainab's father is quiet for a moment. When he speaks his voice does not change register. If there was something they wished to know about his daughter, he says, they could have asked, and since the question has been raised in this manner, he will answer it plainly. Yes, Zainab is pregnant. The room holds that. Bashir's father moves before anyone else can. He says his wife misspoke, apologises, and asks them to continue. The engagement continues, the atmosphere repaired because both men have decided it will be, but the room has changed and everyone in it knows. Later, when the formal business has concluded and the two fathers are briefly without audience, Bashir's father makes an offer, his manner almost gentle. It can be covered, he says. No one has to know. He does not mean it as insult, he means it as solution. Zainab's father receives this. He does not answer immediately.

When the formalities have been observed he asks her quietly, in front of the witnesses, is it for my son. Everyone wants her to say yes. She wants to say yes. She refuses.

As the days go by, the matriarchs arrive at the hikma. The record is incomplete. Idris closes it with a name or he authorises removal, today. He argues. He goes to Zainab one last time. He does not accuse. He begs. Any name, he says. Any name and she will live. She says she has no secret, only the certainty that any name would be a lie, and he taught her what happens to a hikma whose records are not accurate.

He returns to the record room. He works alone. He selects the scroll, smooths it flat, weights its corners. He warms the clay in his hands until it takes the pressure of the seal. He winds the cord in the standard pattern, the same pattern wound at the boundary, presses the plug into the knot, sets the stamp into the clay and holds it there longer than the impression requires. He turns the ledger to the page and opens the inkwell. He holds the pen above the paper. A single tear drops onto the page. He does not wipe it away. Then he completes the mark and rolls the scroll and seals it. He sits alone in the room where he and Zainab have worked together for years.

The next morning his body is found in the water reservoir. The water has to be drawn out. The whole village watches their source of life drained in daylight, the body pulled from it, the water poured onto the drought-cracked earth. For the first time in living memory the orderliness of Dandaji has cracked. The civic rhythm stops. People stand at the edge and do not know what form to give to what they feel.

The burial proceeds exactly as Dandaji knows how to bury. The body is washed, the water measured and entered into the day's record. The procession moves in the order processions move, the men of the hikma first, then the marshals, then the household, then the community. Prayers are said at each of the three stations. The grave is sealed. Then the procession returns to the hikma for the final step. A ledger is opened, the correct page found, the pen set beside it. The date is known, the name is known, the category and the cross-references are known. Everything required to make the entry is present.

But… there is no one to write it. The only two hands the hikma permits on the ledger are dead or exiled.

The contamination of the reservoir is connected immediately to Zainab's unresolved case. A heightened group marches towards Zainab's compound. They arrive with sticks and machetes, threatening to break the house down. Sani goes outside to address them but they keep pushing him around until a marshal comes to stop them. He raises the export scroll for everyone to see. Zainab has been exported to the desert.

The crowd stills.

Inside the compound that night the family sits apart and in silence. The father does not raise his eyes from the floor. Later Sani sits with Zainab after the others sleep. He does not speak for a long time. Then he says her name once, the way you say a name when you are trying to fix something in your memory. She looks at him. He looks at the ground. That is all.

In the morning the assembly forms. At the boundary a junior water marshal approaches the compound with a basket, sealed, stamped, a cord wound in the standard pattern, a clay plug pressed into the knot. The same form as the basket Muna carried. He places it in her hands. A horn is blown. The village turns its backs. Sani is last. She looks at the back of his head a moment, looks at her mother's back, her father's back, the backs of men she has known all her life. Then the marshal leads her forward and she does not look back again. She is delivered into the desert.

Part II - The Facility

Heat. Thirst. Dizziness. She walks and returns to the same places. She runs and collapses. She follows the sun and arrives where she started. She hoards water and finds it gone. The first thing she tries is the hikma's method. She marks her path, counts her steps, notes the position of fixed landmarks and moves between them in deliberate sequence. The desert erases every mark before she returns to it. Her records do not hold here.

Then she finds the windows. Moments when everything goes quiet, the wind stops, insects go silent, the light shifts, and in those moments she can move and the landscape holds. She tests them, times them, notes what precedes them and what closes them. She treats the desert the way she treated an unfamiliar ledger, reading before she writes in it. The resets become less frequent. She is not yet fluent, but she is reading.

Then the method gives out. She places everything correctly and the desert resets her anyway. She runs at a window as it opens and is returned. She runs at the next and is returned. Her strength goes. She falls in the open and does not get up. When she comes to she is lying in a shallow pool of water that was not there before, and the water is her own. Her waters have broken. The labour comes as pressure, then insistence, then a demand the body makes regardless of what the mind intends. There is no shelter she has time to reach. It is long and furious and she is alone in the open with it, and at the worst of it, when she has stopped believing she will survive it, a camel comes out of the haze and folds its legs in the sand beside her and stays. The birth is loud and physical and without ceremony. There is no record, no witness, no seal, no ledger entry. Only Zainab, the child, the camel, the desert. When it is done she lies with the child on her chest, her breathing slowing, the camel at her side as if it has decided this is where it will be until she

indicates otherwise. The child is alive. That is the first fact.

She wraps the child in cloth cut from her own garment, retied until it holds. She learns to collect the camel's milk, first spilling most of it, then almost none. She learns the child's sounds, the cry that means hunger, the cry that means something else, the stillness that means it is watching something she cannot see. She learns which positions carry them both through a window's duration, learns to time her rests by the child's rhythms and not her own. None of this is decided. It accumulates. The nights when the crying pulls her out of sleep and will not stop, when she walks small circles in the dark until it does, become simply how nights are.

She reaches the salt-flat, a vast plain where wind has stripped the surface and exposed thousands of objects from the village's opening ceremonies across many cycles, tin cups, beads, torn cloth, chalk stubs, copper wire. She walks it with the eye of someone trained to read an archive. She works the depressions the way the desert requires, placing an object correctly and finding a new depression accessible, placing one wrongly and being reset, learning nothing she can explain and simply continuing.

Then she stops. The white river stone she gave Bashir in what feels like a lifetime ago is in the sand in front of her. She picks it up and it slips from her fingers and tumbles across the ground, and she scrambles after it, rolling in the soil, and finally closes her palm around it. She buries her head in the earth with the child pressed against her and sobs into the salt-flat floor. She knows this object. She knows exactly which ledger it belongs to.

She moves forward with a new direction in her body. She comes across a woman standing in the open, too still for the conditions, older than she should be, standing the way someone stands when the waiting has become simply where they are. She does not explain herself. She looks at the child. She says: they turned their backs. The desert did not. She steps away and disappears behind a rock. Zainab keeps moving.

She reaches the ridge. Below, the cyan pool, and a figure working at the water's edge with the attention of someone performing a task they have performed many times. She knows that movement. She has watched it every day for years at the water station in Dandaji, the way he moves along the measure line, the angle of his attention when a task is fully known to the body. She starts down the slope and is back at the ridge. She checks the window, waits for it to open, starts down again. Back at the ridge.

She calls his name. Bashir does not stop. The sound reaches him and does not reach him. He continues along the water's edge with the same attention, the same pace. She shouts again. The sound goes somewhere but not to him. She tries the left side, tries crawling with her palms pressed

into the sand and the child across her chest, tries walking backward down the slope. Back at the ridge each time, her footprints ending at the same point they always end. She sits at the ridge top. The child is awake now, making the small sounds of a child becoming aware that something is wrong. She holds the child and looks down at Bashir and finds she has already run through every option available to her body.

She stands. She shouts his name until the sound tears something in her throat. Below, Bashir tends water, the pool luminous around him. She watches him a long time. Then she sits back down, the child in her lap, and the haze comes up from the flat below and the light changes.

The hyena comes at night, low eyes in the dark, a clattering sound like clay pots, moving upward from the base of the ridge. She pulls the child in and gets into a rock enclosure with her back against stone and the child between her body and the wall. The hyena parades the perimeter. It does not leave. Days pass. The camel milk keeps them both alive. When she comes out into the open the hyena is still there. It does not go for her throat. It goes for her hands. She pulls them back and it follows. She puts her body in front of it and it goes around her. She throws her headcloth and it ignores the cloth. She holds the child up and it stops, reads the child with the same attention it has given everything else, then refocuses on her hands.

She opens her right hand. Empty. It reads. She opens her left hand. The stone sits in her palm. The hyena moves toward her left hand. She closes her fist. It stops. They stand there. She looks at the stone, looks toward the pool where Bashir tends water, looks at the child. She crouches, sets the stone on the ground, and steps back. The hyena takes it in its mouth and begins to walk away. She follows.

The hyena leads her to a man maintaining a marker at the desert's edge. His name is Ibrahim. He looks to be in his sixties, though he moves with the stillness of someone who stopped counting time long ago. He crossed the boundary once and did not turn back. She asks how long he has been here. He says he is not certain. There are words she uses that he has to reach for, as though they belong to a way of thinking he has not needed in some time. He does not appear to notice this.

Ibrahim is uneasy around the child in ways he cannot explain. He watches the child constantly, falling silent whenever his attention drifts toward him. One evening, while Zainab tends the fire, Zainab offers him the baby so she can work with both hands. Ibrahim recoils before he can stop himself. The refusal is immediate. The hut falls quiet. Later that night, Zainab wakes to find him sitting awake in the darkness, watching the sleeping child from across the room. When she asks what troubles him, he is silent for a long time. Then he says, almost to himself: "I think I knew a

child once."

The next morning she wakes before dawn and finds that Ibrahim is gone. At first she assumes he has gone to his marker, but when the light strengthens she discovers the marker is gone as well. The tools he used are gone. The traces of his work are gone. Even the ground where he sat appears untouched. She walks further than she intends to, searching for some sign that he was ever there at all, but the desert offers none. By the time she returns, she can no longer say with certainty where the marker stood. She stays where she is. She picks up a stick and writes in the sand, the hikma's symbol for an open record. The wind takes it before she has finished. She writes it again. The wind takes it again. She tries a third time, shielding it with her body, and the wind finds it anyway. She looks at the smooth sand. She sets the stick down.

She moves on through the days that follow, reading the copper wire repairs across the depressions, tracing the pattern back toward its source the way she would locate a missing record by triangulating from adjacent entries. The child is heavier now. Her body has adjusted to the weight. She stops noticing it as weight and starts noticing when it is absent, the moments she sets the child down to work a depression and the wrongness of the lightness until she picks it up again.

The storm arrives without the warning the windows usually give. The sky compresses, the light goes the colour of old cloth, then the wind comes all at once and the sand with it, and within moments there is no horizon, no landmark, no fixed point in any direction. She turns her back to the wind, pulls the cloth over the child's face, and keeps moving, but moving means nothing now because she cannot read what she is moving through. The camel is somewhere behind her, then she cannot hear it. At some point she cannot account for, a stumble, a shift in the wind, the cloth loosens. She feels it. She pulls the child tighter. Then her hands find only cloth.

She stops. She turns in a full circle. Sand in every direction, sand in her eyes and her mouth, two arm-lengths of visibility. She calls out, not a name, just sound, and the wind takes it. She goes to her knees and sweeps the ground with her hands. Nothing. She moves and sweeps again. Nothing. She cannot read what she cannot see. She cannot record what she cannot confirm. She is crying now, not as an expression of feeling but as a physical function, the body doing what it does when it has run out of other responses.

Then she hears it. Thin against the storm, barely distinguishable from sand against rock, the child's cry. Not the hunger cry, not the other one. A cry she has not heard before, the cry of a child that has lost the one thing it knows. She moves toward it. The wind shifts and the cry shifts and she corrects, and shifts again and she corrects again. She is not navigating. She is following sound with her whole body, every other faculty closed, moving through the storm on nothing but the

thread of that cry. She hits rock, goes around it, the cry closer. She goes to her knees and sweeps the ground and her hands find the child wedged into a shallow depression in the rock face, the cloth over its face, crying into the cloth.

She pulls the child out and holds it against her chest and keeps moving, not stopping, because stopping is not safe, until the wind drops and the light returns by degrees and there is a horizon again and the sand settles. She stands in the settling desert with the child against her chest. The child has stopped crying. The camel appears from the direction she did not come from, moving toward her at its own pace, indifferent to the storm's aftermath. She leans against its flank for a while and then continues.

She follows the pattern of the repairs again, slower now, checking each depression twice. The child rides against her chest. She does not put it down. Her movement is slower than it has ever been, but she reads the pattern correctly and the horizon does not deceive her. A lamp glows through the dark. She moves toward it, and the closer she gets the darker it becomes, the haze thickening rather than thinning, the lamp dimming as the distance closes, until she is almost in full night when she reaches the hut and the lamp is at arm's length.

Inside, a woman was already working, copper wire in her hands, lamp on the table, water measured precisely in a bowl. Zainab gets through the doorway and collapses. The woman sets down the wire and comes to them. She takes the child first, then sees Zainab, portioning water, examining her condition, stitching what needs stitching, working without speaking until the work is done.

Days pass. Zainab recovers slowly. She is bedridden and weak, and from where she lies she watches the woman handle the child, lifting it, settling it, reading its sounds, with a familiarity that does not belong to a stranger. The woman's eyes do not track the child the way hands that careful should. They do not track anything. She finds the child by sound and by touch and never once by sight.

Their first real conversation comes when Zainab can sit up. The woman crosses the hut in the lamplight and turns at the sound of her shifting. The light catches a thin scar above her eyebrow. Then she turns fully. The line of the jaw, the set of the mouth, a face decades older than it should be and unmistakable for all that. Zainab goes still.

"Muna?"

The woman's hands stop. After a moment she says it has been decades since anyone said her name.

As her strength returns, Zainab begins taking over the work of the hut. It becomes clear that Muna cannot see. The woman who nursed both her and the child back to health has done so by memory, touch and sound alone. One evening the conversation turns to the child. Muna holds him for a while before returning him to Zainab, and the ease with which she does it makes the question unavoidable. Muna says she had a child of her own. She was fifteen when her village cast her out. She gave birth in the desert. When the time came to carry the child to the boundary, she could not do it. She walked to the marker and turned back. Then she tried again and turned back again. She did that twenty four times. Eventually she brought the child home.

They continue walking for some time before Zainab asks what happened. Muna says she does not know. The answer settles heavily between them. She remembers the child learning the paths around the hut, learning where water collected after rain, learning the habits of the camel and the rhythm of the seasons. Then one day the child was simply gone. Whether a boundary was crossed, whether a choice was made, whether the desert itself took part in the decision, she cannot say. It was many years ago and she still does not know.

By now the hut is visible in the distance. Zainab walks a little further before asking what she has been trying not to ask. What if she does not do it? What if she keeps the child?

For a long time there is only the sound of their footsteps moving through the sand. Finally Muna says that she once asked herself the same question. Neither woman speaks again for the remainder of the walk.

Not long after, Zainab wraps the child. She takes from the table a small fragment of clay, dry and stamped, the same impression as the seal from the opening ceremony's basket. She holds the child against her chest and goes out. The path from the hut to the boundary passes the ridge. She does not plan to stop. When she reaches it she stops.

Below, Bashir tends water. His hands know this task. His body knows this task. The pool is around him and the day moves and he works in it. She stands at the ridge top with the child and watches him, the way she watched Muna work the copper wire, the way you watch a person whose hands have learned something yours have not. She thinks about Muna walking back from the marker three times. She does not call his name. She does not try the slope. She watches.

Then Bashir pauses. Something makes him pause, not a sound, not a movement she has made, something she cannot account for. He turns his head, briefly, the way you turn toward something you are not certain you felt. He looks up toward the ridge. Not directly at her. Near her. His eyes do not find her but they come close enough that she goes very still, the child against her chest, not breathing. He holds that position a moment. Then he returns to work.

She stands at the ridge top longer than she intended. The almost of it holds her. She is aware of the window and the child and the distance still to cover. She watches him one more moment, thinks of Muna in the hut sitting with what she does not know, thinks of the child in Muna's arms at the marker and the walk back and what it cost afterward. She turns and continues toward the boundary.

The boundary marker. She sets the child down at its base and presses the clay seal into the sand beside it. She looks at the child for a moment. She straightens. She turns back toward the desert. She does not look at Dandaji. She walks.

The child is alone at the boundary marker, the clay seal in the sand. On the Dandaji side, in the distance, a junior marshal will begin his morning check. He is not here yet. There is only the child and the marker and the seal and the drought and the silence.

Then rain. The first drops fall on the sand around the child. Then more. Heavy rain on a landscape built for drought. The child looks up at something it has no name for. The rain falls and falls. Cut.