

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 fifteen years. 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. 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 film opens in celebration. Music moves through the settlement in layers. Elders receive greetings. Women cross the open ground with practised ease. Children dart between bodies. Young men perform strength for no audience in particular. Zainab, fifteen, is everywhere in this sequence, quick and useful, her presence assumed. She is betrothed to Bashir, a junior water marshal. They move around each other at the water station without having to look, adjusting their trajectories the way two people do when the other's body has become part of the room.

The celebration becomes a procession toward the boundary station at the desert's edge. People carry small personal items, combs, beads, cloth. At the boundary the items are placed into a single ceremonial basket. A cord is wound in a standard pattern. A clay plug is pressed into the knot. A stamp impression is set into the clay. Idris, 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 sealed basket and balances it on her head. She does not flinch. She does not look at the crowd for reassurance. She has the quality of someone who has been prepared for this, not resigned to it, prepared for it. The moment she steadies the basket, the entire village turns its backs in unison. Muna takes one last look at Dandaji, and then she walks into the desert alone. When she is out of sight the village resumes singing and turns home.

The record room. Idris at the ledger table, alone. He turns pages until he finds Muna's entry. He has made marks like this before. He will make them again. But he holds the pen above the paper longer than the task requires, as if calculating something that has no clean answer, the weight of the mark against the weight of not making it, and finding both sides equal in the wrong way. A tear drops onto the page. He does not wipe it away. Then he completes the mark and closes the ledger.

Zainab enters moments later with slips, already moving through the room like someone with standing here. She is his trainee, the hikma's designated successor. Idris composes himself and continues. A couple arrives with a newborn to register. He records the name, updates the allocation, issues a small rolled writ. After the couple leaves he opens a second ledger, older than the first, its cover a different weight. He turns to a page near the front and shows it to her. The oldest entry in the hikma's records: a child found near the desert in a drought year, the water that followed, the settlement built around both. He tells her this is the foundling procedure. When a child appears near the boundary following a drought-year rain, this is the category, this is the cross-reference, this is the notation that confirms the pattern. The hikma has always had a place for it. Zainab keeps asking questions but Idris closes the ledger and says nothing further.

Late afternoon. The hikma's schoolroom after the children have gone. Zainab stays behind, updating the attendance register and sorting slips. He watches her work. His approval is giving her more of this. He asks, without loading the question, when is Bashir's family coming to set the date. She answers calmly. She is looking forward to it.

Idris pauses. Then he crosses a line. He tells her she is too bright to disappear into domestic rhythm. He tells her marriage is a burial, not of love, but of the mind. He tells her there is a world beyond Dandaji where she could become herself.

Zainab keeps working while he speaks. When he finishes she stops and looks at him directly. She tells him he calls the village a prison because it has rules. She calls it a home because it has a pulse. She wants a life where she wakes up and knows whose face she will see. She wants the dignity of being known. She wants to be part of a structure that holds. She tells him his books do not carry water. Her marriage will. Idris is quiet. Not embarrassed. Destabilised. He looks at the ledger on the table. She picks up the next slip and continues.

At blue hour Zainab and Bashir slip to the dunes outside the village's outer wall. The settlement is still audible behind them, faint now, belonging to another room. They roll down a slope and she loses her headwrap and laughs trying to recover it and he catches it before she does 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. They speak about the future as though it is certain, as though the future is a place they are simply planning to travel to together.

Zainab demands a promise: no other wives, even when she is old. Bashir says even when you are impossible to live with. She says especially then. He promises. She finds a stone in the dust, too smooth, too white, belonging to a different landscape entirely, a different water system, with no business being in this one. She holds it up and turns it in the last light, then presses it into his palm

and closes his fingers around it. If he keeps it, he keeps her. He tucks it into his vest against his chest. They stay on the dune until the light is gone. The desert is quiet around them as they walk back side by side, her shoulder against his arm.

Bashir is assigned to the next great pilgrimage, his first time. He leaves at dawn. Zainab watches the procession move toward the boundary station and cross the line. She watches until they are out of sight. Then she goes back to the hikma and works.

The marshals return on the scheduled day. Bashir is not among them. The others give their account. 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 is at the boundary station when it forms. She asks to join but is refused. She watches them cross the line. She stands at the boundary for a long time after they are out of sight. That night she crosses the line herself.

The desert does not change immediately. Then distance begins to behave incorrectly. She moves forward and returns to the same ridge. She 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. 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.

The search party finds nothing. After the procedurally correct number of days, Idris marks the entry. Bashir is filed as lost on pilgrimage. His post is reassigned. His household effects are returned to his family. Zainab is given back the items his family determines are hers. Among them, nothing. The white river stone went with him.

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.

Bashir's father arrives. The procession is elaborate and regal. He has come with senior men from his lineage, with gifts arranged by category, with witnesses. Zainab receives him correctly, performs every ritual, gives no opening for misreading. 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.

The matriarchs arrive at the hikma with the rule book open and the export scroll already prepared. The record is incomplete. Idris closes it with a name or he authorises removal. Today. He argues. The matriarchs open the rule book to a specific page and show him the rule. 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: I have no secret, only the certainty that any name would be a lie. And you taught me what happens to a hikma whose records are not accurate. He returns to the record room and signs. The stamp presses into clay. The scroll is rolled and sealed. Idris sits alone in the room where they 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. They see their source of life drained in daylight, the body pulled from it, the water poured out 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 contamination is connected immediately to Zainab's unresolved case. A group moves toward her household before any assembly has been formally convened. The brothers meet them at the compound gate. There is shouting and then bodies and the situation escalates past the point where it can be contained by strength alone. Sani invokes the Nasab Seal.

The Nasab Seal is older than the hikma's current authority structures. It is a kin law by which the eldest male of a lineage formally assumes the record of a disputed family member, closing the civic case within the bloodline and removing it from the village's open file. The assembly has no procedure for overriding it. The crowd stills. The matriarch reads the invocation and confirms it. Everyone disperses.

Inside the compound the brothers turn on each other. Sani says he did the only thing that could stop it. The others say he has closed Zainab's case, he has just closed it differently. They are both right. That night Sani sits with Zainab in the compound after the others sleep. He does not speak for a long time. Then he says her name once, as if trying to fix it in his 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 Zainab 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. Sani stands with his back to her. She looks at the back of his head for a moment. 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. She counts her steps. She 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. She times them. She 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.

After days, or weeks of this, she collapses. A camel appears in a wide static frame, small against ochre land. It treads a worn perimeter, stopping at shallow depressions where wind has exposed objects in the sand, tin cups, beads, torn cloth, chalk stubs, copper wire. The camel noses through them with the attention of someone sorting a ledger, pulling objects free and placing them in specific depressions with specific care. Then it drags Zainab toward shade. She wakes and watches it work before she moves. When she imitates the method and places an object incorrectly the desert resets her. When she places it correctly a new depression becomes accessible. With the camel as company, she continues deeper.

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. Then she stops.

The white river stone is in the sand in front of her. She picks it up and it slips from her fingers and tumbles across the ground. She scrambles after it, rolling in the soil, and finally closes her palm around it. She buries her head in the earth and sobs into it. She knows this object. She knows which ledger it belongs to.

She moves forward with a new direction in her body. Moving with that urgency she comes across a woman standing in the open, too still for the conditions, older than she should be. She stands upright and unhurried, her hands at her sides, like someone who has been there a long time and no longer expects the wait to end. She does not explain herself. 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. A figure works at the water's edge, methodical and unhurried, moving along the perimeter 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 particular 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, and starts down again. Back at the ridge. She calls his name.

Bashir stops. He stands still at the water's edge, his back to the ridge. A long moment. Then he turns his head, not all the way, as if he is not certain he heard it. He looks out at the flat around the pool. Not up. He stands there for a moment, neither searching nor finding. Then he returns to work.

She starts down the slope. Back at the ridge. She tries from the left side. Back at the ridge. She shouts his name, shouts it again, and the sound goes somewhere but not to him. She tries running at the reset point and is back at the ridge before her feet find flat ground. She gets onto her hands and knees and crawls toward the slope's edge, pressing her palms into the sand, moving slowly, as if the system might not notice her if she is low enough. Back at the ridge. She turns around and tries walking backward down the slope, facing away from the pool. Back at the ridge with the sand smooth below her and her footprints ending at the same point they always end. She sits at the ridge top. Her hands are shaking. She has been in the sun a long time and has not had water in longer than she can track and she is not sure anymore whether she is being returned to the ridge or whether the ridge is simply where she is, whether it has always been where she is.

She stands. She shouts his name until the sound tears something in her throat. Below, Bashir moves along the water's edge. She watches him work. His hands know this task. His body knows this task. She watches him for a long time. Then she sits back down on the ground at the ridge top and the haze comes up from the flat below and the light changes. She rises again, ready to resume getting to Bashir, when she spots something on the horizon. A large animal is closing fast. She can hear the crack its legs make on the soil.

She runs in the opposite direction. The animal is right behind her. It slashes at her just as she jumps into an enclosure made from a broken rock face. She hides inside. The hyena growls as it parades the perimeter.

Night. The clattering sound rises from the base of the ridge, like clay pots knocking together, and low eyes appear in the dark moving upward.

Days pass. Running out of options, Zainab comes out into the open. The hyena seems to have

gone, until the animal jumps at her from behind. It does not go for her throat. It goes for her hands. She begins to understand, from the precision of its interest, that this is not predation. It wants the stone. She pulls her hands back and it follows. She puts her body in front of it and it goes around her and goes for her hands again. She backs up and it follows. She throws her headcloth. It ignores the cloth. She runs and it runs with her, not attacking, tracking. She turns and puts both arms out wide and it stops. 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.

Zainab looks at the stone in her closed fist. She looks toward the pool. She looks at the hyena. She opens her hand. She crouches and sets the stone on the ground and steps back. The hyena takes it in its mouth and begins to walk away.

Zainab tracks it, following the animal deeper into the desert, until she sees a man at a distance maintaining a boundary marker. The hyena is nearby, settled in the shade of a rock. She approaches with caution. His name is Ibrahim. He looks to be in his sixties, though he moves with the particular stillness of someone who stopped counting time long ago. He was a boundary guard, from a posting he does not name. He crossed the line one day 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 finds he has to reach for, as though they are tools he has not needed in some time. He does not appear to notice this. She does.

She asks if there is someone at the pool. He does not answer for a long time. Then he says: the desert gives you work that matches what you already know how to do. The question worth asking is what you know how to do that you have not done yet. He walks back toward the boundary with the hyena and does not look back.

She stays where she is. She picks up a stick from the ground and writes in the sand, a mark, a notation, 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. The wind finds it anyway. She looks at the smooth sand where the mark was. She sets the stick down. She understands.

The haze thickens. She moves only in the windows now, repairs herself with filed objects, pays the desert before it asks. She works out where she needs to go from the pattern of what she has already seen, the same way she would locate a missing record by triangulating from adjacent entries. Copper wire repair work on objects in the depressions, done with a specific tension, a specific knot, the same hand each time. She follows the method backwards toward its source. Her

belly is large now. It is becoming more difficult to walk, to breathe, to move through the windows before they close. But she keeps going, slower, more deliberate. And just when she is about to give up, a lamp glows far away through the dark. Not a beacon she stumbles toward. A location she has deduced. She moves toward it and the horizon does not betray her.

Inside, a woman already working. Copper wire in her hands, lamp on the table, water measured precisely in a bowl. It is Muna. Not a ghost, simply older, time rearranged. She looks up at Zainab as if she has been expecting her. She sets down the wire, portions water, examines Zainab's wounds and stitches what needs stitching. She works without speaking until the work is done.

On the far wall there is a ledger. Old, its cover a different weight from anything Zainab has seen since she left the hikma, handled by many hands across a long time. Muna has been adding to it in a second hand alongside the original entries, her notations patient and careful, the work of someone who has been trying to read a document in a language she was never taught. Zainab looks at the original entries and recognises the hikma's administrative grammar, the same cross-referencing marks, the same allocation categories, the same witness notation Idris taught her. The oldest entry in the ledger is the founding myth of Dandaji rendered as a delivery record, with a cycle number and a notation confirming the transaction completed. She does not say anything. She closes the ledger carefully and sets it back.

Zainab says yes. She describes the woman on the salt-flat, the boundary worker, and then: I saw someone at the pool. Someone I knew from the village. I could not reach him. He could not see me. I tried everything I could find.

Muna goes still.

She asks: did you try to cross. Zainab says yes. Every time. She describes the crawling, the backward walk, the shouts, his name going somewhere but not to him, the moment he stopped and turned his head and looked at nothing. Muna is quiet for a long time. Then she returns to the copper wire. Her hands move with the same precise unhurried attention as always. She adds what she has been told to the ledger in her incomplete hand. She does not ask again.

Labour begins. It is long and physical and without ceremony. There is no rain.

The baby emerges. Muna works with the competence of someone who has done this many times. Her hands are certain. Her instructions are few and precise. At the worst of it she holds Zainab's face in her hands and says something very quietly, not encouragement, not procedure, something personal, the only personal thing she has said. We do not hear it.

Afterwards the hut is quiet. Zainab's body empties. Muna wraps the child. She prepares to move.

Zainab looks at the ledger on the wall. She looks at it for a long time. Then she moves to the corner of the hut, draws her knees up, and sits with her back to it. Muna watches her. She does not speak. She takes the child and goes.

The hut is quiet. The lamp burns. The ledger is on the wall.

After a time she rises. She crosses to the ledger. She opens it to the first blank page after Muna's last entry. She reads what is there from the beginning, every cycle recorded in the original hand and Muna's patient incomplete additions alongside. She reads the founding entry last. Then she picks up the copper wire from the table and holds it. Then she begins.

Muna carries the baby toward the boundary. She walks the way she walked into the desert the first time, steadily, looking ahead.

At the pool, Bashir continues his work. He maintains the water's edge with the same attention he brought to the water station at Dandaji.

Muna reaches the boundary marker. She sets the child down at the base of the marker. She reaches into the fold of her cloth and takes out a small fragment of clay, dry and stamped, the same impression as the seal from the opening ceremony's basket. She presses it into the sand beside the child. Then she straightens. She looks at the child for a moment. Then she turns back toward the desert. She does not look at Dandaji. She walks.

Bashir is still at the pool.

The child is alone at the boundary marker. The clay seal is in the sand beside it. On the other 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 does not know what this is. The child does not know what anything is yet. The rain falls and falls.