

# The Jasmine Tree

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*In Africa certain trees are revered, not only for their medicinal properties but for their effect upon the human consciousness. They are sometimes called hallucinogenic, but this is not quite accurate, for the images that they convey to the mind are not hallucinations; they may well involve a sense of heightened awareness — of nature, perhaps; of human nature, certainly. People who have become addicted may seem to have acquired a degree of insight into their own and others' psychic contents, and this may seem like something beneficial — even philanthropic. But any blissful experiences that follow may indicate that something rather sinister has taken place: a quite inappropriate forced entry into a paradise that rightfully belongs to the plants themselves. Such a state will certainly prove to be a prison difficult if not impossible to escape from. After death, perhaps, it may become permanent, solid, and real.*

*This is the story of an unsolved mystery regarding one man and a rare and beautiful tree.*



Chikwari Farm was one of half a dozen that nestled along the lee slope of the Ibuzi range, backing onto well-watered bush country. It enjoyed an interesting mix of environmental types: at the one extreme the rocky slopes of the Ibuzi hills, a place of mountain turf and aloes; at the other, the semi-dry bushlands. In between were the foothills rounded like supine breasts, clothed with such trees as *mahobohobo*, *mopane*, *musasa*, *murere*, *mufuti* and *mushava*, interspersed with bushy cover typified by sugarbush and wild gardenia. In the little river valleys that ran down from the hills was dense *tsoka* forest, evergreen jungle with occasional tall trees such as African redwood and mahogany. Over the scarp the land dropped away again into miles of dry savannah forests of flat-topped acacias and albizias. A more intimately varied part of Africa it would be difficult to find.

Daniel and his wife Dilys kept a small dairy herd close to their farmstead, and a few chickens, geese and guinea fowl. Chikwari had once been highly productive and prosperous, with a large herd of beef cattle. But now they were perilously close to poverty, while the farmland slowly reverted to the thick bush that had originally covered it. Daniel's herd of beef cattle had long since dwindled and finally disappeared. Their arable crops amounted to little more than a few rows of beans and potatoes, badza-hoed by hand. It could be said that nature was triumphing over human endeavour.

Their farming neighbours would often discuss the situation in concerned tones, whenever they met, half puzzled, half amused. Daniel had not exactly lost interest in the farm, it seemed to them; he loved Chikwari, and the bush all around. It was simply that he had stopped working the place. Dilys, it seemed, had lost interest in Daniel and in any remaining chance of making the farm pay as it once did. On Daniel's part, it was not as though he had lost interest in Dilys — he respected her, yet he never seemed to listen to anything she said; perhaps he simply took her too much for granted. As she saw it, if it were not for her organizing what little produce they had coming in, they would both have starved long ago. But in point of fact they did have one faithful retainer who had stayed with them, and this was Elisha, who with his family lived in a hut near the farmhouse and daily milked the cows, cultivated the vegetables and fed the poultry. His wages were at best meagre, at worst non-existent, but he seemed content to manage on a steady supply of potatoes and beans, eggs, poultry, milk, with an occasional treat of beef or venison.

Elisha did not mind that it was not he who was so often discussed by his farming neighbours. Daniel was the topic of conversation.

"It's not as though he's lazy," said a puzzled friend. "He's out every day; he doesn't lie in bed. He gets up at sparrow fart and disappears until dark — sometimes he disappears for days on end, according to Dilys. He always has some excuse, some unlikely reason: a fence needs mending, a water furrow needs cleaning out. But the farm is steadily going down the pan. Just what does he get up to?"

Dilys still had a car and, though it was decidedly elderly, she was glad of that. As often as she could afford the fuel she took to driving out to town, where she had gradually acquired quite a considerable circle of friends. Here in the local hotel she found a particularly sympathetic ear. She was still young enough to attract lonely men, and John, a bachelor farmer from Matoko, was more than a little interested. He had never met Daniel, but he certainly heard a lot about him.

"Everything I say to him nowadays goes in one ear and out of the other," she said. "Honestly, I'm thinking of having him alienated or sectioned, or whatever they call it..."

Chikwari farm belonged to Daniel, Dilys made that quite clear, and John had no interest in getting his hands on it, but he certainly had designs on Dilys herself. Often she stayed out the whole night, and when this happened she seriously wondered whether Daniel had

even noticed. He was certainly not jealous; she doubted if it were possible even to make him jealous.

"But how did it all start? You say your farm used to be thriving? You used to make a good profit?"

Dilys thought long and hard, trying to pinpoint the moment when the farm ceased to be a business venture daily occupying their thoughts, and became instead, not a millstone exactly, but at least a great useless white elephant.

"He used to get headaches. He did have malaria years ago and it would recur every now and again. Yes! I think those bouts of fever were the turning point. Daniel was having one of his bouts, and Tabitha..." Dilys smiled at the irony of it. "We used to have a woman who helped in the house — those were the days! Well, Tabitha offered to bring him some sort of infusion to clear the fever: some *muti* or other."

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Daniel was decidedly under the weather, feeling weak and headachy, and the two women clucked around him solicitously.

"Have you taken quinine?"

"My head's buzzing with quinine," he said. "I'll just have to stick it out, I suppose."

"No, I shall bring you some *muti* tomorrow that will do the trick," said Tabitha. "I know to a *muteje* tree, and I shall make an infusion just for you. It will clear your fever and clear your insides out as well..."

The next morning, as good as her word, she arrived at the farm carrying a Coca-Cola bottle full of dark green liquid.

"Drink as much as you think you need," she said. "But best not take too much or it will make you sick."

She was carrying a bunch of sweet-smelling white flowers and she put these down on the kitchen table.

"The tree was in flower, so I picked you a few of the flowers," she said. They will help your breathing too, and they will make the house smell very nice."

"Ah, that's it! The jasmine tree," said Daniel. "I remember it — there is one growing on the edge of the Ibuga river, and that's the only one I've ever seen. They are not very common trees."

"Yes, that is the one," said Tabitha. "They are very valuable — greatly prized. And this one is visited regularly by a great many people: very clever, highly thought of and wise people. They are what we call the shaman, the ones who can heal people and see into the spirit world."

"And this tree is their fountain of wisdom, eh? Well...as long as it cures my head."

Daniel truly did feel a great deal better when he had drunk most of the bottle. The fever had made him feel like a sweaty old sock shut up in an airless drawer. Now he felt much cooler, refreshed. The flowers of the jasmine tree, now in a vase on the windowsill, really did fill the house with their powerful scent, and it seemed to clear the lungs and sinuses of all past stuffiness.

It made him feel so good that after a day or two he decided to walk over to where the jasmine tree was growing, and pick a few leaves to bring home. It is a small tree that grows sparingly all over tropical Africa from the Limpopo to the Niger, and it never ceases to surprise anyone interested enough to notice, by the way it mysteriously appears so many miles from any other of its kind — almost as though it consciously limits its own distribution to one tree per tribal area. When he located the tree Daniel could not help but notice the faint footpaths, seemingly radiating outwards from this jasmine tree through the surrounding bush. It plainly acted as a powerful draw, a focal point for many miles around.

Daniel had a strange feeling that this little tree somehow knew all about him, before he had even laid a hand on its large glossy green leaves. This is a tree, he mused, that actually knows its own destiny, aware of its own value. Some people speak glibly of the spirit of trees, or of spirits that dwell in trees, and even of their tactile responses — their sensitivity; but no-one, as far as he knew, had explored the consciousness of trees — their

own awareness of their place in the world. A tree of wisdom... he was quite prepared to believe that.

Daniel looked thoughtfully at the fresh young leaves in his hand, then he rolled one up, put it in his mouth and started chewing. It tasted bitter at first, then cool. It freshened his mouth, and as the juice trickled down his throat it made his whole body feel cool and somehow spacious. Though the day was hot the coolness was real and comforting. It filled his body and then seemed to reach his innermost feelings. His everyday thinking mind could take no part in this: it could do no more than stand aside and observe, experiencing a world apart from itself.

He felt an urge to climb, to ascend; and as his physical body was an encumbrance, he needed to go to the hills. With this strange compulsion driving him on he headed towards the nearest shoulder of the Ibuzi hills raising their bulk above the surrounding bush. Strangely, one of the faint footpaths that radiated from the base of the jasmine tree led in the exact direction he felt drawn towards, and he followed this track until it petered out as the soil ran into smooth rock.

He had barely climbed a hundred feet when he met himself on the way down. This was something Daniel found interesting, but it did not strike him as particularly strange, and certainly not in the least alarming. He called out a merry greeting, but his other self ignored him and continued down the slope towards the valley and the farm boundary, staring straight ahead like a man with a fixed purpose in mind. He had always possessed a stern sense of duty, and it came to him now that he had perhaps shaken off old obsessions. By one simple action, it seemed, he had risen above the purely physical, temporal attractions of life,

Suddenly, it was all very obvious to him: why this had come about, why it seemed perfectly natural for him to meet his old, oblivious self still descending, while his new, conscious self had begun the ascent. His other, old self was his own past. His moving point of self had reached his climacteric: a new direction promising a different kind of future. The future itself was not for him to see, of course. To see your own past objectively is easy; to see your future can only be speculative at best. But this much he knew: his old self had been orientated towards solidity and security, building up a prosperous farm with all that it entailed. The new, conscious Daniel had left all that behind — all that obsessive preoccupation with the trappings of normality, always doing what was expected. At last he saw the pointlessness of that almost gravitational attraction of accumulation. His course from now on was upward.

As he reached the mountain turf the purity of the air helped him to see everything more clearly, without any trace of sentimentality. The colours of all things around him were intensified, their image clearer. The slopes were alive with little red *acraeid* butterflies seeking the miniature flowers that grew here and there; with their tumbling flight so close to the ground they seemed to bounce along on tiny wheels. Everywhere red and green grasshoppers chirped in the sun, springing out of his way as he climbed. When he reached



the peak he stood there, turning slowly to take in every aspect with his new clarity of vision. Then he walked downhill again, filled with new understanding. He knew how Moses must have felt when he came down from his mountain.

As he walked, a hornbill flew overhead, forming a perfect cross in the sky. A bush owl flew past low, turning its head to look at him curiously. Golden orioles and purple starlings whistled and preened. Vividly coloured bee-eaters hawked for their prey. Pink and blue rollers performed aerobatics. A king-of-six danced in mid air, trailing black and white plumes. Mongooses danced on their hind legs in the grass. Cobras danced with expanded hoods, swaying and gliding. It was not that nature was putting on a symbolic show for his benefit; it was simply that he was experiencing the regular show more fully, more inwardly than before. There was nothing in nature now that he could say he did not like, was not able to love.

Below the hill there was a natural glade where several trees had fallen and now lay higgeldy-piggeldy, covered with a tangle of creeper and shrubs, with young saplings competing for space. Daniel sat on a fallen tree trunk and lay back against a leafy branch. Relaxed and at peace, all urgency gone, he felt as if he could sit there until his body finally returned to the elements and sank into the mould. Life and death seemed one, locked in a continuous cycle which went on around and within him.



There was a scrabbling of claws on bark and a scattering of scarlet bauhinia blossom as a ginger-streaked genet, tail waving for balance, chased a field mouse along the log, teeth gleaming white as it wheeled and twisted. A green tree snake glided away through the tangle of twigs, then stopped and raised its head like a periscope, stock-still, black eyes searching, tasting the air with its tongue.



Daniel was part of the glade now: a component of that tangle of vegetation. A blue swallowtail butterfly settled on his arm to take in salt, and he welcomed its tiny sensation, watching its slowly pumping wings catching the sun, their iridescence now peacock blue, now purple, now green. A nyala buck trotted purposefully into the clearing, then stopped and rubbed his horns against a young *munondo* tree—plainly something it had done several times before, for the bark was stripped and chafed smooth.

The antelope looked at Daniel's reclining form, unalarmed, then moved casually across the glade towards him and began licking salt from his forearm, disturbing the butterfly which fluttered briefly before settling again on Daniel's forehead. It was as if the antelope and the insect were perfectly at home in each others' company, and Daniel himself had never felt so involved, never so completely aware of the bush and the intimate lives of all its inhabitants, animal and plant. He was one with nature.

Time passed unnoticed. The flowers on the jasmine tree withered, and turned into long, slender dark green pods, and the nyala came and feasted on them. Past, present and future seemed to blend in a single lifetime of transient moments. It was as though the life-force of the trees had invaded and occupied his own being: seeding, germinating, growing, flourishing, crumbling, in a continual cycle of movement, like a time-lapse camera left to function incessantly. To everyone else, the years passed slowly by. To Daniel it was as if the clock ran backwards. The jasmine tree flowered, seeded, and flowered again.

The beef cattle Daniel used to keep on the farm before the advent of the jasmine tree had caused the bush to grow sparingly. In common with other beef farmers thereabouts, as the season grew dry each year he would burn off the surface vegetation to strengthen grass roots and ensure a lush spring crop of good grazing. Domestic cattle, of course, graze; wild African buffalo browse on the bush — this is where they differ most strongly in their feeding habits. Grazing leads to grassy plains, wide open prairies; browsing leads to thick leafy bush. Daniel realized that he preferred the bush, and as his beef cattle reached the time for slaughter they were not replaced. The result was that the bush on Chikwari proliferated. Browsing thickened the cover of leaves and twigs through this constant pruning, gradually shading out the grass beneath trampling hooves. Chikwari farm had developed into a natural wildlife preserve, well fertilized and thickly leafy.

Daniel was not without feeling. He found that his own past deeds, and misdeeds, came back to his awareness very vividly, demanding remorse where it was due and forgiveness where it was not. He was well aware that Dilys had put up with quite a lot over the past few years, and he felt that he should do something positive about it.

With an idea formulating in his mind he returned to the house, only to find a note from Dilys propped against the teapot.

*Dear Daniel,  
We had some good times in the past, but all those are over. I am leaving you, and want no more to do with you, or with Chikwari Farm.  
Goodbye,  
Dilys.*

Sensing that matters had come to a head, Elisha the farmhand had come up to the house and was waiting to see him. Quite understandably, he needed to know how he stood: after all, he did have a family to feed. As they were talking a couple of insurance salesmen drove up to the farmhouse, optimistic in the way of all salesmen. Daniel called them into the kitchen.

"While you're here," he said. "I wonder if you'd be kind enough to do me a favour. I shan't be a minute." He took a piece of paper and wrote:

*I hereby give my farm Chikwari, including the land, the house and all its contents, the farm equipment, tools and stock unconditionally to my faithful employee Elisha, who may take possession forthwith.*

He added the date and turned to the insurance salesmen.

"Would you kindly witness my signature?" He signed it himself, then pointed: "Just there. Oh, and you'd better put your addresses too, if you don't mind, just to make it all legal and above board."

The men duly scribbled their names and addresses, hoping that a sale might yet come their way; but of course it did not, and they soon left for more promising territory.

Daniel took Dilys's note and stapled it to his will. "That's just to complete the picture," he said. He walked over to his bureau by the window, rummaged in the drawer and pulled out a large envelope. "These are the deeds of the farm," he said. Then he put the will in the envelope along with the deeds of ownership, and handed the lot to Elisha. "Okay," he said. "The farm is yours. Does that solve your problems? You can move into the house whenever you like."

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Elisha was a simple man, but not so simple that he wanted to end up in prison for the theft of a farm — or worse. That very day he set off for town to visit the magistrate's office, and find out whether it was all legal or not. The magistrate, like most others in the town, had already heard about Daniel and his eccentricities, and was rather amused by them. He was not at all surprised to hear that Dilys had left him, and having a shrewd idea about which way the government policies were heading, thought it no bad thing for the farm to change hands in this way. He gave Elisha an official note of approbation to go with the will, and was even kind enough to see to the Land Registration requirements on his behalf. Perhaps he felt it was his good deed for the day. Elisha returned home a happy man.

As the new land-owner, walking over his farm, Elisha was filled with the entrepreneurial spirit. There was good money in tourism, so he had heard, and besides various antelopes Chikwari supported a sizeable herd of buffalo. He turned ideas over in his mind. Perhaps he could organize conducted tours around the "Chikwari Buffalo Sanctuary". He trod warily when he caught the smell of buffalo, taking care not to disturb them. As he reached the very centre of the farm the wild cattle smell gave way to the exquisite scent of *muteje*. He knew of a tree growing by the Ibuga, of course; but not this one. There it was, however: a mature, luxuriant jasmine tree, its blossom snowballing the dark glossy green of the leaves, standing isolated in its own little glade.