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Finalist - Pumaya

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Pumaya

Solomon Akesseh

Pumaya couldn't focus. There were too many thoughts floating around in her head. That was usual with her. Always too many thoughts. She couldn't control it. Her brain flitted from one thing to the next, making connections, pursuing new trains. Ideas bubbled up and then morphed into other ideas, proliferating. Associating and Merging. That was what her brain did constantly. The association of ideas. One idea leading to the next. One idea getting incorporated into the next. When she was younger, it had been exhausting and even sleep brought no pause in her brain's ceaseless exploration. She would just dream. Bizarre dreams that she couldn't make sense of even in her waking hours. In those days, nine years ago, when her mother still lived at home, before she left for the camp, she would cradle Pumaya, stroking Pumaya's hair and rubbing her forehead at night. This would usually quiet Pumaya's frenzied mind somewhat, allowing her a few hours of precious sleep. But her mother had left for camp leaving Pumaya with her mother's father. While he was kind to her and loved her very much, he was usually so sound asleep from a hard day on their shea farm, that he did not hear Pumaya tossing and turning fitfully throughout the night while her brain raced.

"Pumaya!"

Mr. Agambilla's voice cut through her reverie, spittle flying from his mouth. Pumaya started. If there was anyone who could stop her wandering brain temporarily, it was Mr. Agambilla, her teacher. He was a tall man with a frightful scowl. His belly threatened to

spill out of his ugly striped cream shirt and over his worn khaki trousers. Mr. Agambilla's trousers were always crooked. Pumaya often wondered whether his wife saw him before he left home in the mornings. He always wore the same red tie so tightly about his neck that his jugular bulged out above his collar and threatened to burst. He shaved all his hair daily because he was going bald. There were mornings, like today, that he could not get to it and on those days his head was ringed with a faint crown of dirty gray hair.

“Did I not ask you a question?”

Mr. Agambilla demanded angrily. His jugular standing out in relief against his neck, sweat running down his face, to be soaked up by his collar which was beginning to turn brown. It was as unbearably hot as it could only be in Gambaga. The sun was riding up the sky and with no clouds, its rays scorched the orange dirt. There were very few trees and not much foliage cover to absorb the rays. The earth was heating up rapidly and radiating out the heat. Pumaya had not heard the question. In addition to the fact that her brain was generating and playing with its own ideas, the heat was also distracting.

Pumaya scanned the classroom from her desk in the back. The other students turned around in their desks to look at her. Half of the eyes were filled with suspicion and the other half just seemed fearful. Pumaya was starting to get anxious. There was something very different about today. She looked away from the eyes and away from Mr. Agambilla. The man truly scared her sometimes. She dared not look in his direction.

“What was the question again?” Pumaya wondered.

She still couldn't recall it. If she could stop her mind's wandering for five seconds and focus, she could review the events that had been going on before she slipped into her latest musing. It wasn't that Mr. Agambilla disliked her. Far from it. In fact, he liked her very much. He had often said that Pumaya was the most extraordinary student he had ever seen in his 30 years as a teacher. That was high praise indeed. Mr. Agambilla had attended the prestigious Achimota School in Accra where he had completed his Ordinary and Advanced-Level certificates in 1961 and 1963 respectively. He then went on to the University of Ghana, Legon where he completed a Bachelor of Law degree in 1967. Those were quite elite credentials.

Mr. Agambilla was very proud of his educational pedigree and his career. He was always reminiscing about his time at Achimota. Anytime Achimota came up, he did not forget to mention that the President, Jerry Rawlings, had been his junior at school and that the Vice-President, John Atta Mills, and one of the key members of the opposition Nana Akufo-Addo had been his classmates. When Mr. Agambilla was in a prognosticator-y mood, he insisted that both Atta Mills and Akufo-Addo would be presidents eventually. Mills for his brilliance and Akufo-Addo for his illustrious lineage.

While Pumaya could not hope to be like the aristocratic Akufo-Addo – his father had been president and several of his family members had been knighted for services to the colonial government – she hoped to emulate Mills. Mr. Agambilla often told Pumaya about how he'd gone on with the Vice-President from Achimota to Legon where they'd

both earned their LLBs but then Mills' brilliance had propelled him further than Mr. Agambilla could ever hope to go. After Legon, Mills had studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science where he had obtained an LLM in 1968. From there he had completed a PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1971. He was then selected for the Fulbright program where he studied at Stanford Law School for a year. Mills returned to Ghana after Stanford where he embarked on a remarkable career.

Mr. Agambilla, unlike Mills, had stayed in Ghana and started to teach at the high school level immediately following his graduation from Legon. 1967, when he graduated, had been a difficult time for the country. No lawyers were needed and trying to be one would have entailed risking one's life. The excitement of independence in 1957 and the early years of decisive action by the country's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, had given way to the doldrums of Nkrumah's latter years in office. Partly through his own shortcomings and partly through the global forces of the Cold War, Nkrumah had proven ineffectual as a leader and threatened to become a tyrant. He had amended the constitution to declare himself president-for-life while he swayed dangerously between east and west. He had brazenly played the Americans against the Soviets, while publicly proclaiming he was non-aligned.

One side was soon going to tire of his antics and seek a change in the status quo. The Americans had been the first to reach breaking point. On February 24, 1966, Nkrumah was forced out of office while he was on a state visit to North Vietnam by the military and the police with tacit support from the CIA.

That's how it came to be that in 1967 when Mr. Agambilla finished law school, the army's National Liberation Council was firmly in control of the country and contrary to their name were not interested in granting liberty to anyone. Trying to be a lawyer in that climate was simply unwise and he opted to teach. He was hired at the Presbyterian Boys' Senior High School, fondly known as Presec, where he had stayed for 30 years. He'd thought everything on the curriculum but his favorite courses to teach were math and government. Many of his former students from Presec had gone on to impressive careers. When Mr. Agambilla retired, he returned to his hometown of Gambaga where he and his wife had settled on a small shea farm. He had not planned to return to teaching, but boredom had forced him into the classroom of Gambaga Secondary School.

After his first day at the school, he came to Pumaya's house to tell her grandfather how extraordinary Pumaya was and all that she could hope to accomplish. That made Pumaya really happy, but it only made her grandfather apprehensive. After Mr. Agambilla left, her grandfather repeated his warning to her to not be so eager to display her book knowledge in class. Pumaya was at once resentful and understanding. He knew his grandfather's worries were well-founded given what had happened before, but it also seemed so unjust at the same time.

She tried to listen to her grandfather. She moved to the back of the classroom at school and allowed herself to daydream as much as possible. But Mr. Agambilla would not leave her alone. He did not understand in general, but he also did not understand why a

brilliant young woman like Pumaya would often zone out so much in class. He kept insisting that Pumaya could be anything she wanted and kept encouraging her to apply herself. He told her of his classmates and of his many students over the years and how well Pumaya compared to all of them.

Pumaya doggedly ignored Mr. Agambilla like her grandfather wanted her to do but last year, the teacher had taken her to see a campaign rally at the market in Gambaga by the then vice-presidential candidate, John Atta Mills. After the rally, Mr. Agambilla had taken Pumaya to meet his old classmate and told him

“John, this girl is a much better student than you ever were.”

Mr. Mills gave Pumaya a firm handshake and told her that the country needed people like her. He told Pumaya how important it was to keep learning as much as possible because she never knew when the call would come. She'd found that very cryptic but later that day when Mr. Agambilla gave her his newspapers after he was done with them, Pumaya read the remarkable story of how Mr. Mills had become the ruling NDC's vice-presidential candidate.

Mr. Rawlings had been president since 1992 and was running for a second four-year term. Mr. Rawlings' vice president for his first term was Kow Arkaah, another old boy of Achimota School. According to the paper, a brawl had broken out during a cabinet meeting where Mr. Rawlings had beaten up Mr. Arkaah. Pumaya found the whole story bizarre. On December 28, 1995, Vice President Arkaah had been presiding over the cabinet meeting, as he always did. President Rawlings interrupted him to ask about

derogatory statements that Arkaah had made about the government during a party meeting the previous week.

Apparently, the Vice President had told certain party members that corrupt things took place during cabinet meetings. Mr. Rawlings was incensed and challenged Mr. Arkaah to prove his assertions. When Mr. Arkaah would not oblige him, Mr. Rawlings stood up and grabbed the Vice President's arm and insisted that he leave the meeting. Mr. Arkaah refused to leave. The papers claimed that Mr. Arkaah reported to journalists

“He gave me a terrible blow on the shoulder which sent me falling to the floor. He attempted to pull me up by the shoulder in order to hit me further. He tore the shoulder of the jacket in the process. In his frustration, he kicked me a couple of times in the groin before members present were able to restrain him.”

Pumaya had not known what to make of this extraordinary account. On the one hand, fake news was a thing, but it also seemed sort of credible given Mr. Rawlings' history, which Mr. Agambilla recounted to Pumaya when she went to discuss the cabinet meeting story with him.

Mr. Rawlings had been a pilot in the air force. He rose to the rank of Flight Lieutenant in April 1978. Ghana was governed by the Supreme Military Council II. The Council was contemplating handing over to a civilian government when five weeks prior to the proposed elections on May 15, 1979, Flt. Lt. Rawlings led a group of junior officers to stage a coup against the Council.

Luckily for the Council, the coup failed, and Mr. Rawlings and his accomplices were arrested by the military. General Fred Akuffo miscalculated and decided to make a public show of Mr. Rawlings' court martial. Rawlings was allowed to make speeches in his defense and his immense charisma and spirited denunciation of the injustices that motivated his actions moved public opinion in his favor. Nevertheless, the military court sentenced him to death. While on death row, a group of soldiers broke into the prison on June 4, 1979 having apparently been convinced of Mr. Rawlings' speeches.

He then led the soldiers in another coup attempt which was successful. He would not hesitate like the Council had hesitated with his own execution. He commenced on a series of executions and consolidated his power. He formed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council. Pressure from the international community forced the AFRC to continue with the elections that the Council had proposed. Rawlings handed over to Dr. Hilla Limann who won the elections. On December 31, 1981, Rawlings dissatisfied with Limann's government led another coup to oust that government. He formed the Provisional National Defense Council which then governed from 1981. Under pressure from the international community once again, Mr. Rawlings exchanged his fatigues for a suit and ran as a civilian in the 1992 elections as the flagbearer of the National Democratic Congress.

After this account, the paper's reporting of what had happened to Arkaah seemed plausible. It also seemed to explain why Rawlings had needed a new vice president and so had drafted Mills for the job who was at that point the Commissioner of Ghana's Internal Revenue Service.

Meeting the Vice President at the rally last year and listening to Mr. Agambilla's stories had caused Pumaya to start believing that there could be more for her beyond Gambaga. But her grandfather's warning still echoed in her ears and she was still holding back from immersing herself completely in her studies like the teacher wanted her to do.

"Pumaya!"

Mr. Agambilla's voice cut through her thoughts again. Pumaya started and collected herself. She was still in class and the teacher was still waiting for her to answer his question. Her classmates were watching her. There was something sinister about their looks.

"Pumaya, you're going to answer my question, or you are going to work on the school farm for the rest of the week. Your choice."

She wanted to respect her grandfather's wishes, but she also had no desire to work on the school farm while everyone else was in class.

"Do not think about telling me you don't know the answer to this question. Give me the correct answer or work on the school farm. Your choice."

Pumaya realized that Mr. Agambilla was not going to give up.

“You are smarter than all the students in this room, Pumaya, don’t be ashamed of that.”

Pumaya could sense that her classmates were getting increasingly irritated. She wished Mr. Agambilla wouldn’t single her out so. She decided to answer his question so he could move on and pick on someone else. Pumaya closed her eyes and started to listen to what the teacher had been saying before. Once she heard something, she did not forget even if she did not actively listen to it. She could always go back and replay it like a tape.

“A three-man jury has two members each of whom independently has probability p of making the correct decision and a third member who flips a coin for each decision (majority rules).”

Mr. Agambilla intoned from Frederick Mosteller’s probability text.

“A one-man jury has probability p of making the correct decision. Which jury has the better probability of making the correct decision?”

Pumaya opened her eyes. Smiled at Mr. Agambilla who smiled back and nodded impatiently.

“The two juries have the same chance.”

“Why?”

Mr. Agambilla probed.

“Two cases. Either the serious jurors both reach the correct decision, or they split with one reaching the wrong decision. In the first case, where they both reach the correct decision, the probability is $p \times p = p^2$. In this case, the vote of the flippant juror does not matter. In the second case where the serious jurors split, that happens in a fraction of the cases $p(1-p) + (1-p)p = 2p(1-p)$. The coin will favor the correct side half of the time. So, we have $p(1-p)$. Adding the probabilities of the two cases together $p^2 + (1-p)p = p$.”

Pumaya paused.

“You need to conclude.”

Mr. Agambilla pressed further.

“When there is one juror, the prompt you read out stated that he had probability p of making the correct decision. When there are three jurors, what I said before shows that there is also probability p in that case. So, both juries have the same chance of making the correct decision.”

“Brilliant, Pumaya. Absolutely brilliant!”

Mr. Agambilla applauded.

He returned to the lesson. Drilled other students. Berated them on their inability to be more like Pumaya. When the bell rung for the end of school, Mr. Agambilla headed out. They sat quietly and waited for him to leave. When he was gone, Pumaya grabbed her books and made for the door.

“Witch!”

She was shoved in the back. She went sprawling through the door.

“She’s a witch.”

Another student agreed.

“She has stolen our intelligence with witchcraft.”

A third proclaimed.

Pumaya, got up and run. She was terrified. She needed to get home and warn her grandfather. But she didn’t get home. In fact, she didn’t get very far. She was knocked over the head and she passed out. When she regained consciousness, she was lying on the floor in the main room of the house of the Chief of Gambaga. She was surrounded by the elders of the village. Old men with long white beards looking sternly at her. Her grandfather knelt on the floor beside her. She could hear Mr. Agambilla’s voice, full of indignation.

“She’s not a witch! This is ridiculous. She’s just really intelligent.”

The chief raised his hand, impatient.

“Don’t come here from Accra and tell us what to do. Before there was an Accra and a government there, we lived here in Gambaga for hundreds of years. Our traditions have been handed down to us by our fathers who had more sense than the corrupt men in Accra. She is a witch! If she wasn’t a witch, how is she so smart? Her grandmother was a witch and that is why she was banished to the Witches Camp. We discovered that her mother was also a witch when she would just know things. It is obvious that her daughter is also a witch. The women in that family are witches.”

“Stupid!”

Proclaimed Mr. Agambilla.

Pumaya’s grandfather sobbed quietly by her side.

The Chief went on

“Mr. Agambilla, we allowed you to teach in this village on the understanding that you would teach our sons so that they could get government jobs. We did not allow you to teach here so that you could encourage witches. You have shown great disrespect to me

and the elders. You are banished. Leave Gambaga before midnight today or anyone may kill you.”

“Rubbish! The Constitution of Ghana ...”

Mr. Agambilla started before he was shoved rudely out of the room.

The Chief looked at Pumaya’s grandfather.

“I feel sorry for you, Ambene. To find yourself surrounded by witches. You will send your granddaughter to the Witches Camp to join her mother and grandmother.”