



Creative Work

The birds return

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My name is Fridah Esiteri Nyarangi. I used to fear birds so much when I was very young indeed, but I admire them so much now. Not that I am very old, but I feel I am old enough to tell this story. The year 2010 was a very special year to me. It is the year that changed my perspective about birds and this is not going to change any time soon.

I loved hanging around dad most of the time — hop onto his lap, play with his mobile phone, ask him to buy me sweets, blah blah blah. He seemed to enjoy it as well because he never complained. My mum, on the other hand, kept complaining that I was troubling dad unnecessarily. However much she tried to push me away, I found my way back onto dad's lap, and he enjoyed it. On this afternoon, he received a call and I rushed to peep at his mobile phone. The name of the caller was displayed clearly but I couldn't read it because of its length and spelling.

Nevertheless, I handed dad the phone and I listened to the conversation keenly. The lady on the other end spoke English with a strange accent.

'Hello Doc?' the caller started.

'Hello Prof,' my dad responded.

'We have agreed that we shall hold our party at the arboretum,' she proceeded. 'What is your take?'

I never listened to the rest of the conversation. That word 'arboretum' was too sweet to let go. That was the first time I heard it and I kept singing it in my mind lest it escaped. I wanted my dad to explain this arboretum thing once he was through with his caller. Whatever it was, it sounded sweet to me. I promised myself that I needed to see this thing that sounded so sweet to my ears.

'Dad, arboretum *ni nini*?' I asked in Kiswahili.

'Hehehe, hehehe!' he chuckled loudly before answering my question, without giving me the answer I solicited from him. 'That word is too big for you!'

When I insisted, he sent me to fetch my pencil and notebook. He had insisted that I keep a record of all those words which excited me. Every time I encountered a word which excited me, I wrote it down. My dad could then explain what it meant immediately when

he came home after work. He taught me how to pronounce and spell such words. It was so exciting to me. At times he would set his phone in such a way that a voice would guide me on how to pronounce certain words.

When I brought the notebook, he asked me to write the word. I tried many times but couldn't get it right.

'Just write it as it is said,' he ordered me.

He sent me for his big book of words — the dictionary. We used to see it as dad's big book with an endless list of words. He guided me to where the word was and I saw its correct spelling. This English language baffled me a lot! Spellings and pronunciations were most of the time quite unrelated.

Arboretum was now where I wanted to be. So I told dad that I wanted to accompany him there for the party that the caller was inviting him to. He agreed.

The 25th day of May, 2010, found us on the way to Egerton University. I was beside myself because I was not only going to see the arboretum but be in the arboretum itself. Dad used to speak proudly of Egerton University. Every time they had a small argument on this or that with mum, we could hear him close the argument with:

'Remember I am a double graduate of Egerton University! Don't you ever forget that!' Mum could laugh heartily and it made me feel that she loved this bit a lot. She was also learned but not as much as dad. I could see it from the many high-profile workshops and seminars she facilitated at her place of work. She was a senior officer in one of the most prestigious sections of government employment: The Judiciary. But I loved the way she never used the same to counter dad's 'double graduate' thing. After all, dad was so learned and there was no dispute about it. Mum was very proud of him, and I saw it in her hearty laughter.

Whatever they taught him at Egerton University, he sounded very knowledgeable on many topics and a variety of disciplines. From the thousands of photos in the many albums, I could tell that Egerton University was a beautiful place. I looked at the photos and laughed. That the tiny young man enjoying himself was now dad — the very man of authority in our house! I saw people coming to our home to consult him on many different issues. The same was true in our church. I saw old men who looked very wise pull him aside and engage him for a couple of times. I also heard his name mentioned in almost every committee set up to handle various matters in our church. To me, he appeared to be the resident Consultant General for our village. I admired this double Egerton thing — whatever it was. All I cared about now was that I was going to Egerton University and I was going to see the arboretum. After this, I would ask what being a double graduate means.

I asked many questions but mum kept on silencing me with:

'Can't you let your dad concentrate on the wheel?' To which I retorted, 'Is he driving with the mouth?'

Dad was busy singing along with the CD that was playing on the car's stereo system. It was his favourite rhumba hit ... *oyaa makambo ezali minene... Franco abeleli na Amerika ooh...*

I never understood a thing but dad seemed to enjoy his music. He occasionally smiled back and answered my questions. But he kept lecturing us as if he were our tour guide.

We finally arrived at Lord Egerton Castle. Dad explained at length the story behind Egerton University. I had always wondered what that name meant, but I now understood. The caretaker of this vast building took us round and explained the life of the white settler who was the dreamer of the dream that became a premier agricultural institution many years after his demise. The conception, midwifery and birth of Egerton University became very clear to me. No wonder dad was so proud of it. The beauty of the farms around this large building was breathtaking. We moved swiftly and within no time we were at the familiar gate — familiar from the many photos in our albums.

‘Here we are,’ dad simply declared as he pulled over.

We all got out of the car and started taking pictures. My younger brother, Junior, posed in the same manner as dad appeared in his many photos. We all laughed. Dad told us to walk into the compound and enjoy ourselves. The paved paths meandering through green trees and neatly cut flowers and manicured lawns with name tags on trees and direction markers all over blended very well with the beautiful environment. Dad guided us along well-tended vegetable, fruit and flower gardens before arriving at the graduation square. He took us through the many hostels and we saw where he was housed: Kisii, Nyandarua and Nairobi Hostels. Wonder of wonders: there were still people who called out his name with excitement. Dad must have been a popular student in his days.

Our next stop was the main cafeteria. A sign board read ‘Central Mess’. What a Mess! I identified the building immediately. It was as magnificent as it looked in dad’s photos. It was a giant of a structure with very attractive glass walls. In fact, I discovered it was a combination of four different massive halls and kitchens joined together — like quadruplets conjoined at the head.

Next in our itinerary was the iconic ARC, Pavilion and then FASS Complex. And then out of nowhere, I saw the signpost and a pointing finger drawn at the bottom: ‘Welcome to the Arboretum!’ Everything else lost sense to me. I tagged at my dad’s jacket and read loudly: ‘Welcome to the Arboretum!’

Dad looked at me knowingly and smiled.

‘Don’t you want to see how yoghurt is prepared?’

‘The arboretum first,’ I responded firmly.

We walked straight ahead through many animal structures till we came to an open ground. Then I saw ahead of me a very beautiful batch of woodland that stretched as far as the eye could see. What a beautiful forest!

This is the thing I wanted to see. It was right here before my eyes. Dad signalled us to keep walking. We came to some sort of entrance. There was a man at the wooden cabin that marked the entrance. Dad talked to him nicely. I was surprised to hear the man call dad by his official name. So they knew each other? After introducing himself, the man welcomed us to the garden, as he called it. He explained in summary the history of this garden and its importance, and outlined some of the activities that could be hosted there.

He then gave us flyers before calling an attendant to take us round the garden.

This is what I wanted. There were a number of beautiful trees and shrubs. I copied down their common names, botanical names, and their importance to humanity. Most of them were medicinal, besides being home and food to many birds. Our guide told me that most of the trees were almost extinct and they were now working hard to propagate them for posterity. Some of the tree species were from as far east as Japan. How I loved the trees! Everywhere we moved, beautiful birds darted from one branch to another — chirping and singing nicely. I loved those beautiful birds and wished this arboretum was near our home. I would come here every weekend were this next to my home.

We finally arrived at the central part of the garden. There was a beautifully done water fountain that was surrounded by beautiful flowers. Birds of all kinds flew in and out gracefully. It was a scene to behold. I wondered where all these birds came from. Our guide told us that the moment they planted the garden, birds started returning. The birds' return saw the growth of certain tree species that no one planted — some native to South America and the Amazon. The birds also brought rare fruit trees and berries to the garden. It was a perfect world. By the time we were through with the tour of this grand garden, I had made a strong resolve in my heart to start my own arboretum at home.

We finally gathered at the special partying square within the garden. We were tired and hungry. We settled down to a sumptuous late lunch of all sorts of food. We ate to our fill. The next day was the big day dad had been informed about. I came to learn that it was the annual alumni party for the university. Dad was one of the officials. I also met the lady with a strange name who had called dad. Her name was Professor Androvitchienovic Ilieva. My dad was kind enough to introduce me to her. I took the opportunity to tell her how much I loved the arboretum and how I had resolved to start my own at home. She was so excited and promised to come visiting and see my arboretum.

After meals, she took me to her office and gave me a big book entitled *East African Birds*. She then gave me a magazine for children entitled *Environmental Enthusiasts*. She then told me prophetically:

‘Just plant a small garden of common fruit trees and berries at the corner of your garden. The birds will return with all sorts of seeds from all over East Africa.’

This is what I wanted down at my grandfather's farm. There was a section along the river that was neglected. I promised myself that I would convince grandpa to let me start my own arboretum there.

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The long Easter holiday of the year 2012 was full of political activities in my home. One of our uncles was contesting the local political seats in our County. My dad was fully involved in the campaigns, but my grandpa was free. I talked to him and showed the pictures of the arboretum at Egerton University. He loved the idea and gathered a squad of men and told them to start slashing and fencing the batch of land along the stream. The work started the next morning.

Grandpa supervised the young men as they worked. They were under strict instructions not to injure any fruit trees growing there. By the time they finished slashing, there were loquats, guavas, mangoes, passion fruits, gooseberries, blueberries and coffee trees standing. Grandpa promised to add other species that were medicinal. He told the men to dig a trench into the garden that would bring some water from the stream into the middle of the garden. My idea of the arboretum was taking shape and I was very happy. By the time the holiday was over, something attractive was happening down at my grandpa's farm. Grandpa's two brothers were also interested in creating something similar in their gardens. The fever was catching fast.

I went back to school and read the magazine letter by letter. It explained how one could collect seeds, preserve them, start a tree nursery, care for the seedlings, and how to propagate different trees vegetatively. I wanted to do this once we went back home for the holidays. I joined the Young Environmentalists Club and my magazine was a great resource for our deliberations. Our patrons were very enthusiastic about our activities. We planted beautiful flowers and ornamental trees in our school compound and everyone was happy.

The school activities gave me little time to enjoy my arboretum down at grandpa's farm. However, the years 2019 and 2020 were a big blessing in disguise. Covid-19 disease broke out and all schools closed down indefinitely. We were home for a whopping one and a half years. That is exactly what I needed to enjoy my garden and add other species that I had gathered during our environmental club tours. As if the authorities knew what I needed, the government imposed total lockdown in the country. Nobody was allowed to move from one locality to another. Schools were closed indefinitely and all markets were closed too. Movement of people from one area to another literally came to a standstill. Everybody was required to stay home. Home we stayed for a whole year and beyond. Even dad and mum had to stay home — all offices were closed. Working on my project was a big relief for we all found it the most convenient place to spend the too much time at our disposal. Grandpa had introduced beehives and there was a stream of bees into and out of the hives. My other grandpa had established fish ponds and more beehives were hanging at strategic corners of their gardens. No wonder grandpa was adding generous quantities of pure honey into his porridge! I now had the luxury of applying honey to my toast of bread!

What surprised me most was the huge number of people who were streaming into our home to solicit for this herb or the other. The novel Covid-19 disease was likened to a flu epidemic which ravaged the region in the early nineteenth century. The older men and women identified some of the trees in our garden as cure to this strange flu. My grandpa and grandma were very strict in the way the leaves, barks and roots were harvested. They never wanted any of the trees harmed. For the first time, I learned that each of the trees, grasses and flowers in my arboretum had a name. I asked dad and mum to assist me label the trees. Dad knew some of the trees' common and botanical names and at times mum questioned him — just to irritate him. As usual, he responded with the usual 'Remember I am a double graduate of Egerton University!' We all laughed, not because it was funny, but because of the appropriateness with which this phrase was used. An idea rang a bell in my

mind — why don't we compile the local names of these plants and their medicinal value?

That evening, I approached dad as calmly as I could.

'Dad, you are a very learned man. Did they teach you the names of trees at Egerton University?'

'Oh yes. That is the very first thing you learn once you get into Egerton University — regardless of your area of specialisation,' he answered proudly.

'Then assist me compile a big book of names for the many trees in my arboretum. I must do it soonest before the lockdown is lifted,' I begged him.

Mum laughed and told me that dad knows very little about the names of those trees. Dad disputed this by pouring out a list of names for the trees and the exact location where they were standing in the arboretum down at the river: *Omonyenya*, *Omokonge*, *Omosoogwa*, *Omokorori ngabi*, *Ekerobo*, *Ekebuura nchogu*, *Omotembe*... Grandma was overexcited as she joined in and gave her list as well. Grandpa added other names and synonyms. This was wonderful. Dad was going to supply the common and botanical names for these trees.

Out of nowhere, grandpa posed a question that I had not thought of.

'What will you call this garden of yours?'

'Nyarangi's New Millennium Arboretum,' I responded without much thought.

Then another question popped out of my mouth spontaneously.

'What is the meaning of Nyarangi? Who was Nyarangi? I mean, who am I named after?'

Dad explained that Nyarangi was his beloved grandma. She was also known as Esther. It is this Esther that was nativised as Esiteri. She was a great herbalist and her herbs saved many children from death. She loved trees and some of her favourite trees have rejuvenated in the garden down at the river. Grandpa smiled as he listened to such accolades being rolled out against her mother's name. He quipped:

'Nyarangi was my mother. She was the traditional paediatrician. I want you to work hard in school so that you become a paediatrician. You have all it takes. In fact, you can blend our traditional medicines with modern conventional medicine to tackle some of the diseases ravaging humanity. Look at how many people are flocking into our compound in search of herbs to protect themselves from this Corona disease!'

'You know, some trees have germinated out of nowhere! I think the many birds which come to the garden bring along seeds from faraway places. I have noticed many birds that I have not seen for decades fly about in our garden. The birds have returned,' Grandma added.

Dad agreed to assist me compile a list of all those trees and the ailments they treated. Grandma offered to teach me how to prepare the herbs to make concoctions and powder to treat different ailments. Grandpa agreed to assist me name the many birds that had returned to our home. Mum agreed to let me use her phone to take photos of the many birds and name them. I wanted dad to help me gather the many young people who were now free in the village and urge them to start small arboretums in their homes. We all needed these trees for our survival. What a wonderful holiday it was going to be!

The next morning, we were all down at the arboretum. Dad summoned my cousins and

the great lecture on the importance of man respecting and preserving nature began. The many young fellows were excited to be in the garden. They were surprised by the beauty of the many birds which flew about freely and happily. This project was going places. I could tell from the word go.