

The River that Went to the Sky

by Kasiya Makaka Phiri

Illustrated by Kasia Charko



Once there was a River. It ran from one side of the great continent to the other, and it was so wide it looked like a lake, and the land around it was rich. All the animals that lived there had plenty of everything—grass to graze, fruit to eat, nuts to crack, roots to chew, bark to nibble, and leaves to eat. The animals ambled all day long, eating a little, stopping, gazing into the distance, eating a little more, and going on slowly, for there was no hurry. The great vast River meandered across the land, avoiding all the mountains, choosing only the plains and the valleys, but always spreading wide, wide across the land. It rolled gently from one side of the vast continent and went to sleep and glided on the night tide to the other side. Backward and forward. It felt good and made happy noises on the banks, like the sound of calabashes filling with water, one gulp at a time.

On the banks, grew the low grasses that like to trail their roots in cool river water. With them grew the papyrus and bulrushes. Behind them grew those grasses that like to smell the water every day and hear the happy sounds of the River. Water trees stood knee-deep in the water, looking toward the grasses of the low plains that gave way to ankle-high grass, then knee-high grass, all the way to the towering elephant grass. Then came the tall trees of the woods, beyond which were the high plains and foothills of great mountains. The high plains were covered in shorter

grasses where the swift wind blew, keeping everything down except in the sheltered folds of the rolling ridges. In these hidden valleys were groves of rare trees and flowers and many other plants.

So everything was all right, until one day the River, gliding sleepily, looked up and saw the stars in the night sky.

"What is that?" said the River in a sleepy voice.

Hyena, who happened to be nearby taking a sip of water, looked up and said, "What's what, where?"

"Up there with the many eyes," said the sleepy River.

"That is the night sky," Hyena said and went on his way.

"Oh, how I wish I could go to the sky," said the River, sighing as it fell asleep.

The grass with the roots in the water heard this and whispered: "The River wants to go to the sky."

The whisper went on, to the papyrus, to the reeds, to the short plain grass, and to the knee-high grass.

"The River wants to go to the sky!"

"The River . . ."

". . . wants to . . ."

". . . go to . . ."

". . . the sky. . ."

The whisper went very fast until it was at the edge of the woods that are hedged by bushes guarding the foothills of the great mountains and the high plains.

"The River wants to go to the sky," said a bush, and the trees whispered from trunk to branch to leaf to leaf to leaf like a gentle stir in an invisible breeze all the way to the wind-swept high plains where the grass lay low below the swift wind.

The wind was quick at picking up whispers from the lower plains, so it snapped the whisper up and dragged it over the high plains up to the mountains and over the peaks where nothing grew because it was too cold. Away into the sky the wind carried the whisper.

"Shoosh-whoosh, whoosh-whoosh, the River wants to go to the sky."

The night sky heard it, the stars heard it, and early the following day before dawn, just as it was eating its breakfast ready to start the day, the Sun heard it.

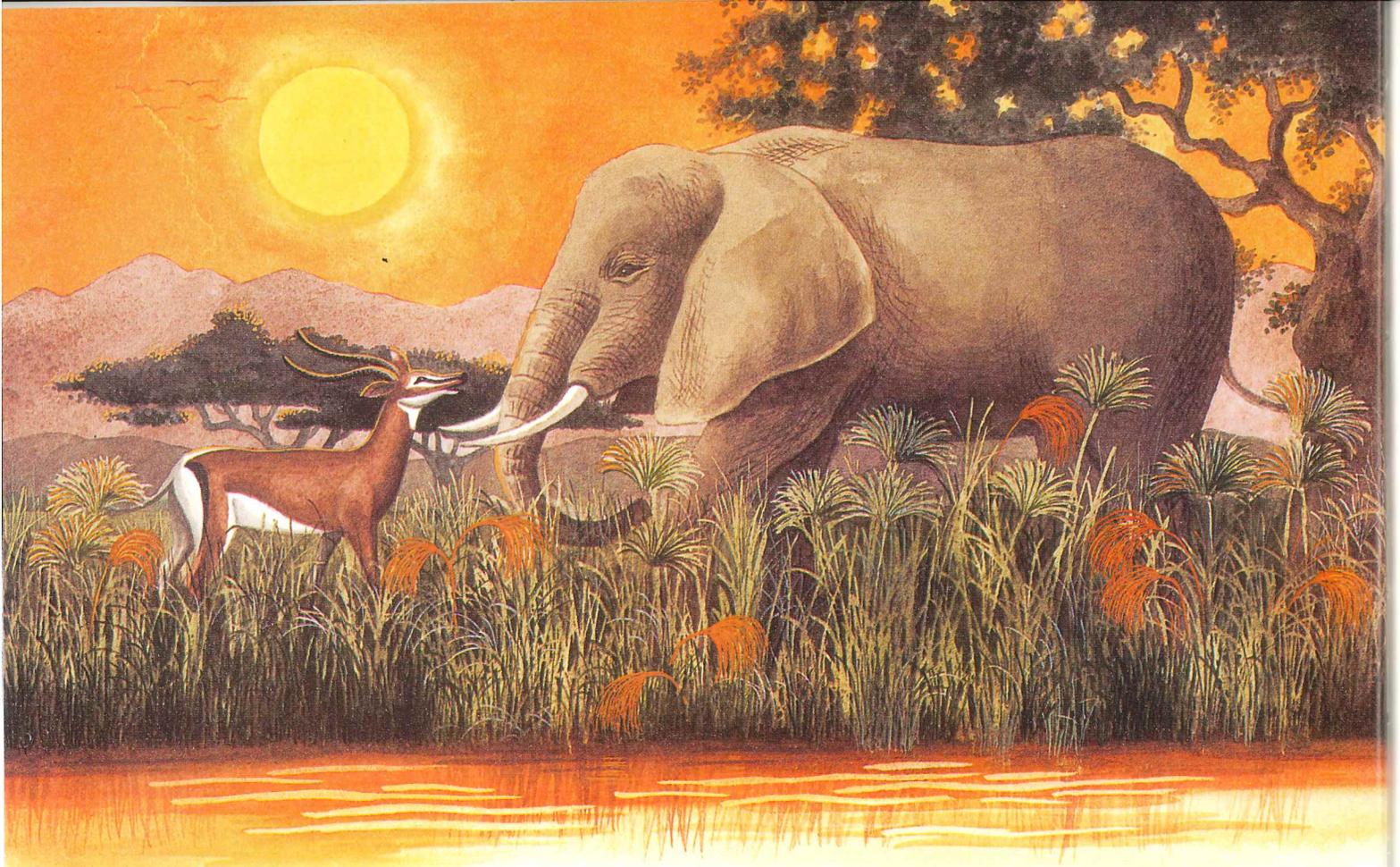
"Very well, I'll visit the River today," said the Sun.

The River woke up very early, and soon after, the Sun came to visit.

"I hear you want to go to the sky, meandering River?" said the Sun.

"Yes! Oh, to walk the blue and see the twinkling eyes," the River sighed.





“Very well,” said the Sun. “I can help you up, but you’ll have to find your way down.”

“Down! It looks so beautiful up there, I won’t want to find my way down.”

Gazelle, who happened to be taking a drink just then, sprang up and ran to Elephant and said, “The Sun is going to take the great River up to the sky, and she says she’ll never come back here again!”

Elephant thought for a while, then raised her trunk and blew a message into the air. The wind, who was always quick at picking up messages, snapped it up and everywhere it blew, the animals and the plants heard it.

The trees were the first to react. They gathered together into the densest forest ever and talked over the matter for days and days. The gathering of trees and creepers became a jungle, but the grasses, thinking it was too dark under the eaves of those huge trees, wandered out onto the plains, and they were so happy they rocked in the wind singing in their throaty voices. They spread as far as the eye could see. Some small thorn trees and bushes came out and dotted the grassy plains, and this became the savanna.

When the animals gathered, they too talked for days and days.

“This is a serious matter,” said Elephant.

“It is time to migrate to faraway places,” said Rhino. Saying so, he put down his head and followed his nose South. South, South, always South.

That started the exodus and animals wandered in all directions. Great Gorilla and Brainy Chimpanzee, feeling that they did not want to go too far, simply went into the jungle. Tree Pangolin, Leopard, Gabon Viper, and Royal Antelope did the same.

Elephant led a whole delegation South following the rhinoceros. Buffalo, Lion, Giraffe, Gazelle, Hyena, Zebra, Cheetah, and many others wandered South and roamed the grasslands. But rock-climbing Barbary Sheep, Camel, Addax, Sand Cat, Desert Hedgehog, Fennec Fox, Jerboa, Sand Grouse, and many others remained exactly where they were.

Meanwhile, the Sun had gathered all its strength. It sent its hottest rays to heat the River, and slowly, oh so slowly, you could not see what was happening, the River started to lift in particles too tiny for the eye to see. Up, up, up they went until they were so high that it felt cold. Then the tiny particles of the River huddled together and formed white fluffy clouds of all sizes. They were so happy to be floating in the air, and they waited in excitement for the spectacle of the night sky when they would walk among the many winking stars.

Sure enough, in the evening, the night sky prepared to lay out the best winking stars for the visiting clouds to walk among, and as it got darker, the stars winked and twinkled and sparkled.

"Oh, isn't this wonderful!" said a cloud. "Simply stupendous!"

Whoosh! A gust of wind came in.

"You're sitting on my bit of sky ledge," the wind said.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said the cloud, and she moved over to one side.

Whoosh! Gusts of wind came over and over again, here and everywhere. They claimed parts of the sky where the clouds were. Sometimes they came while the clouds were trying to get some sleep, and they would shake them awake and push them over.

Now, pushing and shoving is about the only thing that the gentle River would not stand. And all the clouds remembered the peaceful days of being water down on Earth. They remembered the gentle flow in one direction and the gliding back on the tide, and a small cloud said, "I want to go home."

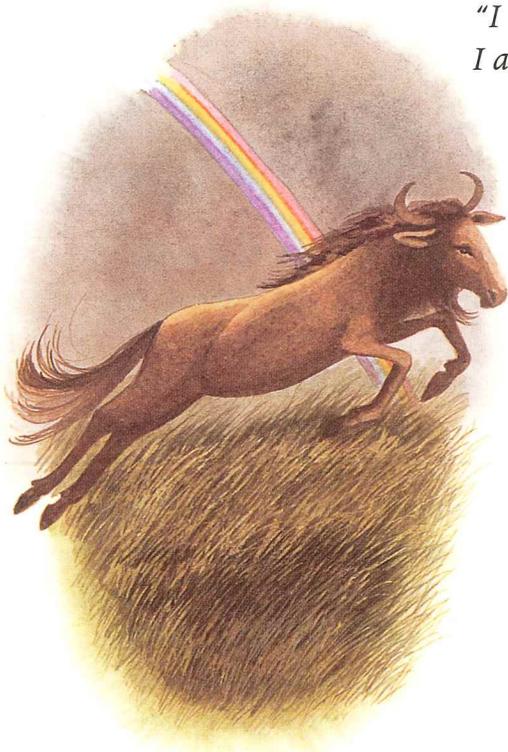
Yes. They all wanted to go home. But how? The wind, so quick at picking up conversations, snapped up the news of the clouds trying to go home, and it gathered all its sisters, cousins, and brothers.

WWHHOOOSSHH!!

They carried the clouds high and made them feel colder, and as the clouds huddled together, they grew heavy and began to fall as rain. Down below, the Sun was still burning out any manner of moisture that remained in the river bed.

But it rained. It rained all day long and all night long. It rained everywhere, but never in the old river bed. It rained in Abyssinia and formed the Blue Nile. It rained and rained and formed the White Nile and Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika and Lake Malawi and Lake Chad, Lake Turkana, and many small lakes besides. It rained and rained and formed the Shire River. It rained and formed the Zambezi. It rained some more and the Limpopo, the Orange, the Niger, the Luangwa, and many, many other rivers were born. It rained heavily and lightly, day and night, and if you put your hands over your ears and moved them on and off, you could hear something like a song, but not quite a song. Something like words, but not quite like words:

*"I am the River, the River that went to the sky for a walk.
I am the River, the River that went to the sky for a walk."*



It rained and rained everywhere, but never in the place where the River once lived. If any of the drops ventured anywhere near that place, the Sun bore down on them and sent them back into the sky. And it is true. If you go to the great continent of Africa today, you will see the vast expanse of sand where the meandering River lived. Sand everywhere, even in places where grass had been plenty. To this day, the wildebeest have not stopped running away from the Sun, following their noses to wetter places where the grass would be as it used to be once upon a time, a long time ago, on the great continent of Africa.

ABOUT THE

AUTHOR

KASIYA MAKAKA PHIRI

Born in Zimbabwe to Malawian parents, Kasiya Makaka Phiri was educated in Malawi. He later taught in schools and colleges there. He is a poet, playwright, and storyteller. He tells new stories and retells old ones first to his three daughters and then to audiences of all ages. Kasiya is currently studying African literature at the University of Wisconsin.