

KNOWING ALL

Kondwani Mpinga (Malawi)



The village headwoman began speaking one afternoon several moons after the village took the initiative of ‘knowing all’ as it was termed. “My people, I have called you,” she began, “As you all are aware, we the people of Mulomba have made strides in developing our village through the use of information. It has not been an easy road but still we believe we can achieve great things with what we have.

“Over the past moon, we have reached out to all the orphaned children whose parents died in the pandemic that struck us almost ten years ago, by using their abilities and passions after taking time to talk to them using the questionnaire that we developed locally, with the advice from the government office at *Boma* and assistance from our own child from this village, Tiyamike, we have been able to target the right beneficiary,” she paused to allow a cup full of the locally brewed sweet beer (*thobwa*) to descend down her throat while looking at the far end of the attentive and anxious villagers who were now murmuring and pointing at Tiyamike who was seating on a brown circular cattle hide which had patches of white markings about ten footsteps to the left of the village headwoman.

Mulomba, a small village located several kilometres away from the main tarmac road, had been almost isolated with no road other than footpaths to reach it. It was bordered on the North by the Zoombokali Mountain so named because of the bees that inhabited it in the early days of its existence and used to bite people who went

there looking for firewood. That was a long time ago when, as the old people used to say, ‘cattle used to lay eggs’ before Zoombokali had been cleared of all its trees. To the South and East of Mulomba lies Nswaizi River, which was so named, because clay potters, who used most of its banks for their crafts, used to chase children away from the river in order to prevent them from breaking the pottery, shouting ‘muswa izi’, and the Makolooto Forest Reserve is to the West. The land of Mulomba was hilly, with small streams running along its slopes. Due to deforestation, there were no big trees except a huge *mombo* tree outside the village headwoman’s house, centrally located in the village, and a few mango and guava trees. Banana plants grew throughout the village providing scenery of beauty like meandering rivers of green.

The lives of the villagers solely revolved around subsistence farming, with the exception of only a few industrious ones who sold potteries and other artworks, bananas, in the surrounding tea estates on pay days which came fortnightly and were popularly known as *chombo*. These fortnight market days presented a great opportunity for the people of Mulomba to access luxury goods, clothing, iron hoes, fresh fish and other commodities not locally produced or otherwise hard to get by. This was due to its remote location which made access to basic goods and services extremely difficult.

In their teens, Tiyamike and his friends counted days left for the next *chombo* which meant a chance to play football with teams from afar, an opportunity to taste roasted fish and many other luxuries that could not be enjoyed back home. It was during these days that even those stay-at-home grannies were reminded of the days of old with new porcelain plates that their wards used to bring back home. For some children of Tiyamike’s age, *chombo* meant an opportunity to experiment with the bitter drinks that gave their

fathers courage to speak the language of the *azungu* eloquently. Though Tiyamike could be with them during these endeavours he did not partake in their foolhardy. This meant that he had to carry some who could not even feel the call of nature down their tight fitting, multi-coloured and faded trousers. Owing to the passing of his father when he was only 8, Tiyamike made a vow not to associate with those beverages that had directed his father to an early grave. The death of his father was particularly painful due to the way he died and how he was buried. Since he was considered a useless drunkard, he was not given a ceremonial burial rather he was buried with his hands holding his face and facing downwards. No one was allowed to mourn him. For years, this was the talk of the village and it embarrassed Tiyamike. He devoted his time and efforts towards helping his mother and working hard at school though this did not mean education was easy to get by in Mulomba.

There was only one primary school made of mud and unburnt brick with only three teachers for the whole school. Most parents viewed school as a waste of time for their children. They gladly accepted help at the farm other than useless demand for such trivial things as notebooks. However, some students like Tiyamike, who were hard working with the help of their teachers, finished primary school. They did menial jobs like weeding banana fields so that they could buy school uniform, notebooks and ball point pens. For studying during the night, they used paraffin lamps which their parents or guardians would switch off as they were going to bed. This was to prevent witches from suffocating them in their sleep since they could not get it in their feeble minds the fact that it was carbon monoxide poisoning. The students usually carried roasted maize to school, the only thing they had for breakfast and lunch.

After completing their primary education, the students like Tiyamike joined secondary school. The only community day secondary school close to Mulomba was about 15 kilometres away from the village. This made life hard for those not lucky enough to be selected to a district secondary school which had boarding facilities. The combined daily 30km journey meant that many eventually dropped out of school. Tiyamike had scooped good grades and was selected to join Maphunziro Secondary School, one of the prestigious secondary schools in the country. He excelled further in secondary school and was among the 8% in the whole country who were selected to pursue a degree at the university. He studied statistics as he believed that data has a potential to change policies for the better and it can be used to reduce inequality which he had experienced throughout his life.

After completing his studies, Tiyamike returned to his home village and started a project, Knowing All. This is what the headwoman was talking about. This idea was born during the late night teas that Tiyamike and his nine friends at campus had. Unlike other students at the university who spent their spare time taking alcohol, Tiyamike and his friends engaged in many discussions. They also had a common background as village boys and so called themselves the 'trads' and were often seen together.

One Thursday evening, Mwamulima a tall, slender and particularly talkative member of the 'trads' said, "Gentlemen, I know we are the privileged few from our villages who have had the chance to pursue university education, see big cities and brush shoulders with the who is who of this nation. Can't we find a way of helping our communities or at least have an impact on our fellow brothers and sisters back home?"

This formed their discussion for that evening. It was one of the most heated discussions they had ever had as some felt that it was the government's duty to take care of its people while others maintained that they should take care of themselves and buy 'big cars' and live in luxury.

The discussion was almost getting out of hand and being the most sensible, Tiyamike decided to intervene.

"Gentlemen, I know almost all of us come from terrible backgrounds, that is, why we are the 'trads'. We may choose to blame someone from the past or the present for our misfortune, but that does not mean we cannot change the future. Remember, we are the ones who are best informed about the predicaments of our fellow brothers and sisters from our respective villages. No one can address their problems better than us. Remember, our government is already strained by the impact of the recent financial slump due to the pandemic that has affected almost all the sectors of the country's economy. I suggest that we sleep over it and come up with solutions to the problems facing our villages, which we will discuss tomorrow evening," he said.

The next day they gathered as usual, and had a sober discussion about the best solutions to the problems of their respective villages. It was agreed that everyone must use what he has learned as they were from different faculties and departments and later they would share their successes, failures and experiences.

A year later, they all graduated and embarked on different journeys of life. Tiyamike decided that he must use his knowledge of statistics and numbers to help his village. He first discussed with the village headwoman what could be done (with little or no cost) to the villagers and to himself. In their discussion, they agreed that they

should collect information about the villagers and help the most vulnerable in the village. Tiyamike, after designing a questionnaire, decided to also get input from the National Statistics Office authorities on data collection and how it could be done with ease and ensure that everyone participated. The questionnaire included such details as number of people per household, age, ownership of property, and many other variables.

Through these consultations, it was agreed that the data collection should be done by those who were literate enough and had undergone three weeks of intensive training. It was further agreed that they should conduct the exercise in the dry months of August to October when there was little farming activity going on in the village. This was to ensure that as many people as possible were interviewed. The data collection exercise was successfully completed and Tiyamike analysed it so that it made sense to the common man. He computed the dependency ratio (the ratio of over 65s and under-15s to the working population), poverty indices and other useful measures that could best address the problems of the village.

After completing all these, Tiyamike presented his findings to the village headwoman and the village elders, explaining in greater detail what the numbers meant and what their implications were. After the presentation and deliberations, key priority areas were drawn. That was nearly three months ago. It was agreed that they should use the information they had to reach out to orphaned children as Tiyamike had found this group to be worse off than the rest. They decided to use the resources they already had like land, hand craft skills, sports, literature and other forms of art, to help the people in the village.

About 25 young people benefited from the initiative as they made hoe handles, reed baskets and many other handcrafts using knowledge and resources from skilled and well-off members of the village as means of resource sharing. They sold their merchandise at the *chombo*. The result was unbelievable changes in the lives of these young people.

This is what led to the meeting that day. The village headwoman was overjoyed by the changes in the village. They celebrated the milestones they had made as she emphasized the importance and goodness of data to the development of the village. She commended the efforts of various people who reached out to the vulnerable and those who were ready to offer their help. She expressed her hope for a lot of things that can be accomplished in the village with reliable data and information. She concluded by posing a question: “Is it not better to make decisions based on data rather than heresy?”

THAT PIECE OF CHICKEN

Amwene Etiang (Uganda)



He looked down at his audacious granddaughter, waiting to hear her plan.

Two days before.

“Adai, turn up the volume!” you politely ask your little sister after she insists on hogging the TV remote.

“Oh, so Blessing is now in this woman’s house to confront her about her sister?” you say with the certainty of a student who’s just solved a Maths problem. You are engrossed in a Nollywood movie you have been watching for three minutes and don’t know the name of when a thunderstorm starts. The picture freezes, the sound crackles and then the screen goes blank. If you weren’t so invested in the movie, you may have taken time to laugh at God’s humour. Load shedding plus bad weather never makes for good entertainment on a rainy day at home in Kampala.

“*Banange*¹ this weather! It’s January and it’s already raining!” Mama exclaims, “Ha, that means jam on the way. By the way, did you people buy the brown bread for *Papa*² and *Kuku*³?”

1 *Oh my goodness* in Luganda.

2 Grandfather in Ateso.

3 Grandmother in Lugisu.

Today is the day you're meant to go to Tororo. You stare at her blank-faced with a cheeky smile, remembering the detour you and *Yaya*⁴ took to the bakery section to buy *kabalagala*⁵, forgetting the bread. When the rain stops, you and *Yaya* stroll out of the house, laughing at the Nollywood movie, in search of the bread.

As you step out of the house, the air is thick with humidity but the ground is cool. It's a weird atmosphere, between hot and cold but not warm. Your bodies adjust as you walk towards the gate. Strolling along the road the small rev of a *bodaboda*⁶ sounds from behind you and it soon slows past you as the rider nods his head. So you nod your head back. Then he stops.

"*Jhebale ko ssebo*⁷. *Ku Capital Shoppers meka*⁸?" you say with the confidence of a zealous student on a school trip to France using the French phrases they learnt in class ordering something from a Parisian crepe vendor.

"*Nkumitano*⁹."

He senses your unfamiliarity with Luganda and, at first, charges you the *mzungu*¹⁰ rate. He'd take any chance to make an extra two thousand shillings after the lockdown. But *Yaya* sweeps to the rescue and bargains to a fairer price. It is funny – in a sad kind of way – how it's assumed that you are rich because your Luganda is poor. Despite the concoction of dust and diesel fumes floating in the air, as you ride to the supermarket, you feel like you're in a music

4 Aunt in the Ateso language.

5 A Ugandan deep-fried pancake made with cassava flour and bananas.

6 A motorbike. It's a common form of transport in Uganda.

7 Greeting to a man in Luganda.

8 *How much* in Luganda.

9 5,000 Ugandan shillings.

10 Means a white person. Reference is made to tourist prices.

video. The sun is high in the sky, afro beats blare from the speakers in the *dukas*¹¹ and the sound of Bobi Wine and Radio and Weasel from the campaign trucks, the breeze whips through your hair, but your hair isn't sailing in the wind – it can't. Especially today. It sits still on your head, curled in a million little coils because you were not bothered enough to comb it this morning.

Then. Toot toot.

Taxis¹².

One rattles past, almost knocking you both off the bike. Then, without indicating, it swerves and stops on the side of the road so you almost ram into it. It chugs a bit, lets out plumes of smoke and the conductor sticks half of his body out of the window and yells: '*lukumi lukumi*¹³ *mu town*' trying to get customers. The *bodaboda* weaves through the cars. Stopping, starting, stopping. It takes skill and practice to sit and stay on a *bodaboda* in Kampala. It seems *Yaya* has mastered this skill. She can sit like a 19th century Elizabethan high-class woman on her pony, even for long distances. You don't have that kind of strength, so instead, you sit astride. When you reach the supermarket, *Yaya* is smiling in a reminiscent sort of way.

"*Naye*¹⁴ you people," you say, pushing her shoulder, "you had my whole childhood to teach me Luganda yet you laugh at me for trying to speak Luganda and complain that I don't know the language."

11 Small shops on the side of the road that normally sell household items, snacks and airtime.

12 Not to be confused with small cabs. In Uganda, taxis are 14-seater vans that are used as public service vehicles.

13 *One thousand* in Luganda.

14 *But* in Luganda.

“*Gwe*¹⁵,” *Yaya* responds, laughing, “don’t you remember how we tried, but you refused. You always said you were too exhausted from a long day at school, in Year 4!”

“*Eyiii* how can you expect a 9-year-old child, whose parents signed her up to multiple afterschool activities to finish all her energy before 8 pm, to voluntarily learn another language?” I ask.

But still, I tried. Whenever stories were being dished out after dinner, I’d always ask, “What are you saying?”

But the response was always, “*Akoku*¹⁶, this conversation is for big people.”

To you, Luganda is a language that is familiarly foreign; one often spoken but rarely understood. You wonder for how much longer you can excuse your lack of knowledge on *Yaya* and your parents.

With no further lines of argument, you both smile and go in to buy bread.

On the way back home you tune up the Ugandan part of your accent and the *bodaboda*, thanks to your much improved Luganda, doesn’t charge you *mzungu* prices.

Just as you are approaching the house, the clouds swirl and change, like millet porridge on the stove, from smooth and light to volatile and dark in seconds. You are swept away from standing in the weird spot between hot and cold to one that is almost icy, reminding you of the Kenyan highlands. For a second you wonder whether you’re still in Kampala.

15 *You* in Luganda.

16 Female child in Ateso.

“*Banange* this weather! Now I have to do my hair again!” exclaims *Yaya*, running towards the house with the effort of an unfit child made to run laps.

You grin while running in the rain, knowing that you won’t have to do your hair again, because you never did it. Soon, brown streams with plastic bottles, *matooke* peels and the odd shoe flow out of the roadside gutters. This city is not built to be rained on.

Soon you are off to Tororo. Bustling through trading centres with *bodabodas* carrying logs, doors and everything in between, breezing past an old man dressed in an old pale ‘Harvard University’ shirt, knee-deep in a rice paddy and blazing across the grand, ivory Jinja bridge. The one some people say makes you ‘forget you’re in Uganda.’ You always cringe at that statement, as if Ugandan engineers can’t design and build such structures. But then you remember the morning’s headline: *Mulago imports 100 hospital beds* and the other cover story, *Government plans to expand the Buy Uganda, Build Uganda campaign for development.*

Entering the gate to your grandparents’ home, Adai flies out of the car and yells, “*Papaaaa*” while running towards the glass door with white netting behind it. The kind of fabric that seems like an immutable trend in modern African interior design, particularly in homes of older people in towns and villages. It goes on chairs, armrests, tables, food and even the occasional *gomesi*¹⁷. She runs into his arms. Well actually his legs, she isn’t yet that tall.

“Praise God,” he says with a smile.

“Praise God,” you smile back.

17 Traditional dress of Baganda women.

In your heart, hoping for Him to show up in that moment as He did to Moses in a burning bush. Knowing full well that's not how He talks, at least to you.

That's how *Papa* always greets you and you marvel at his faith and steadfastness. You almost hug him but then remember, COVID. After the 'school is good', 'home is fine' and 'ah this government' conversation, *Papa* catches you up on the latest developments on his farm and starts getting ready to take you all on a trip there. You listen attentively, wondering why you weren't taught this way about plants back in secondary school, maybe you would have done more than barely pass Biology and Geography. Adai, *Kuku* and *Papa* sit in the front of the pickup while you, Mama and *Yaya* get comfortable on the iron sheets at the back.

Again you and *Yaya* feel the wind in your hair but there is no background music this time, just the sound of the wind and the scene of rolling hills with maize and millet gardens. Reaching the farm, *Papa* gets out of the car barefoot. Without fear of stepping on manure or stones, he says with absolute confidence, "I know my farm." Walking around the farm, dodging stones, sticks and cow dung, again, you marvel at his faith.

At dinner, the table is covered with steaming pots of *atapa*¹⁸, *eboo*¹⁹ and meat. *Kuku* picks up her fork and starts serving, beginning with *Papa*. After serving him meat she puts some on your plate.

"No, thank you *Kuku*. I don't eat meat," you mutter.

18 A starchy dough-like food made with cassava and millet flour. It's a staple of the traditional Ateso diet.

19 A type of leafy greens in Ateso.

From the looks on their faces, you sense an avalanche of questions. “You don’t eat meat? Why?” *Kuku* asks.

They all wait for you to respond. Mama and *Yaya* have slight smiles on their faces, knowing what you are going to say. “It’s not good for the environment,” you say.

Kuku looks shocked and intrigued. *Papa* looks like he is re-reading a complex argument in one of his philosophy books and *Yaya* and Mama are straight-faced. They are used to your speeches about saving the environment and being vegetarian.

“What does meat have to do with the environment?” he asks you. “Well, I was reading somewhere that in America, the production of red meat contributes more to global warming than all forms of transport combined. Also, cows produce methane which is a greenhouse gas. Besides, it’s inefficient. If I can reduce my demand for it and other people can as well, then we can reduce the supply and slow down the impact of climate change. If we don’t act now on climate change then we’ll all be doomed, basically,” you recite. This is your explanation for when you’re asked why you don’t eat meat during family dinners, half-cringing at yourself and half listening with pride.

The following day you take another trip to the farm and meet a stranger. He is dressed in an oversized brown suit, black gumboots and is slightly greying. *Papa* greets him like an old friend and he introduces himself to you all as Papa Junior. He greets you in Ateso, you stumble your way through to *jokuna*²⁰ and he smiles,

20 Greeting in Ateso.

disappointed, noticing you don't speak Ateso. You're disappointed in yourself too.

Soon he invites you to his home and you walk out of the farm and follow him along a muddy path to his homestead. His home also has that in vogue white netted fabric everywhere. As you sit down, he offers you tea as his wife prepares lunch. When lunch is served at the table you are offered meat but politely decline and recite your reasoning again, sparking tufts of laughter on the table. Adai insists on serving herself and so she reaches for the ladle, dips it into the chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard.

You all freeze. But you're proud of her audacity.

"Young girl, that piece isn't for you," says Papa Junior.

"But I want it," she replies, defiantly pouring some more sauce on the piece of chicken, and the plastic-covered table mat with a picture of fruit on it in the process.

"Young girls are not supposed to eat the gizzard. It is a piece for big men," he says.

"Why? What is the gizzard anyway?" Adai asks, confused about the big deal surrounding this piece of chicken.

"It's like the stomach of the chicken. Chickens have special stomachs that can grind food, pu-ro-pa-lé²¹!" answers your cousin.

"Why is it important?" she asks again.

"Well, traditionally the head of the house or important guests are given the gizzard since it is the best part of the chicken," *Yaya* answers. She looks at *Yaya* confused and offended. Adai looks at *Mama* to save her chicken piece. *Mama* sighs and is beginning to reassure her that girls can eat gizzards too when *Tata*²² Junior (you assumed

21 Properly.

22 Grandmother in Ateso.

since she is Papa Junior's wife) picks it off her plate. She stops mid-sentence and looks at them unamused.

After lunch is finished, Papa Junior takes you around his home. Reaching his small, packed wooden cattle kraal, he stops and beams at it with pride. They all look well-fed and beneath the mud and purple insecticide, you can see their brown, black and white colours.

"That one is called Peace, the other Ejakait, the other Apese. They sustain my family and I. There is no way I can live without them, even if you people complain about the environment," he says.

"But according to statistics ..." you smile like a lawyer about to rebut in court and start on your environmental campaign again. Not registering that this man depends on cows for a living, not just to enjoy his meal.

"Here in our village, we rely on these animals to survive. I don't know about you people in Kampala but how can we think about the end of the world when we need to put food on the table?" he responds calmly.

Your insensitivity and hypocrisy slap you in the face.

"But Papa this is a serious issue," you say, more timidly than before. "If we don't try and hinder global warming then the heavy rains or the hot sun of this week will happen more frequently and then what will be left of your cows? Won't all their feed be destroyed? Won't the blazing sun dehydrate them?"

"Okay. But today, I have to feed my family," he says with a slightly resigned smile.

A thick cloud of awkward silence looms over you.

"Now what can we do about it?" asks Adai innocently.

"Well, we use solar energy at home, grow our food and take good care of our cows," says *Papa*.

That eases her worries and when you get back to *Papa's* home, she is bent on becoming an eco-warrior. But you aren't comforted. Even if your country reduces its greenhouse gases, it still only contributes a minute fraction of emissions in the world. You think that the real decision-makers are in the boardrooms of global corporations, state houses and halls of parliament regardless of what you do.

Lord knows how much you want to stand in the middle of town, poster in hand and demand that your government does something. But you'd rather not taste teargas as well as dust and diesel fumes while moving around Kampala.

Kuku sets the table and you smell the steaming rice, reminding you of the farmer you saw on the way. You want to help him, but don't know how if you can't even speak to him in his language, what's meant to be your language too.

"The headlines. The new Kiira Motors bus which runs on electricity took its first trip around Kampala today. This is the first of a thousand that the government has commissioned to be produced in the next five years," the TV screen crackles on, interrupting your train of thought as you sit down to eat dinner.

A glimmer of hope, a glimmer only, but hope nonetheless.

"When we get back home, we have to figure out how to make our house eco-friendlier. Oh, and we can also get our neighbours to do the same. Papa, what else do you think we can do to fight climate change?"

As *Papa* thinks about an answer to Adai's question, he reaches into the pot of chicken stew and scoops out a gizzard, puts one on your plate and another on hers.

LIVING LIKE WEAVER BIRDS

Amumpaire Gift Anthea (Uganda)



Twee-twee twee-twee... the birds sang in the dense green foliage above Nyonyozi's head. Like a young giraffe stretching its neck to locate predators, she raised her head to look at them. Two of the flock broke into a frantic pursuit and the other dashed into a nest nearby like it was late for the feast inside. Her mind raced backwards. "Free from any dangers and worries. Were we like them we would fly up, very far away from this village and its heartless people."

"Helen, it's not that everybody is bad."

"Nyonyozi, a bad egg will spoil the whole omelet."

Nyonyozi remembered this conversation very well. They were at the same forest for firewood, a few days after Helen's mother found them and called her aside for a 'woman-to-woman' talk. They all knew what that meant.

"Don't tell me those things again mother. I don't need the knife to make me a full woman. I am content with the way God created me," Helen had said to her mother. Nyonyozi watched them from a distance.

"Helen... will you watch your father lose his inheritance because you don't want to face *rotwet*? We'll see how far your God will protect you," Helen's mother said and stormed away.

Above them, the weaver birds were singing, flirting and playing. Helen looked up at them for a moment; bemused.

Look at them, they are free of all worries and dangers. Helen used to tell her.

“Dear Helen! My heart bleeds for you,” Nyonyozi mumbled as a tear dropped from her eyes.

The sky was slowly darkening as the sun hastened to hide behind the cloud. Soon, the hyenas and all other creatures of the night would come out for their daily hunt.

She remembered Walinga, the man-animal that was said to hang around the village. People said he was a man during the day but turned into a leopard at night. He ate young children that walked alone at night or made them his slaves. Nyonyozi threw the bundle of firewood on her head and hurried home.

The hen flapped its wings trying to chase away the eagles that hovered in the sky. Nyonyozi quickly placed the bundle of firewood in one corner of the kitchen near the fireplace and joined in the chase. She glanced at the hen. *Coo-coo-coo-coo*. It clucked and drooped its wings like a canopy of trees above young plants. The chicks needed no further invitation. They crept under for protection. Nyonyozi remembered similar moments in her life. Her mother always carried her in her chest like a kangaroo as if to protect her from hawks plying the sky.

Nobody was home. Being a Saturday evening, her mother, Kentaro was at church for a Mothers’ Union Program while her father Cheptoyek was most likely at a beer party at the trading centre. Nyonyozi heard Mayenje mooing for attention. She picked a milk calabash from the kitchen rack and rushed to the kraal.

Mayenje now behaved like a child throwing tantrums. She moored and stamped swinging its long horns backwards, forwards and sideways. When she saw Nyonyozi, she stood still for a moment

and then started running as if challenging her to a race. Nyonyozi knew this game too well. She ran after her this time determined to drain the cheekiness out of her. They did two rounds around the kraal but Mayenje wasn't about to give up. She increased her tempo and the mood grew more competitive scattering the rest of the herd into confusion.

Nyonyozi never saw the big stone that always sat at the edge of the door to the kraal. She tripped over crushing the calabash into pieces. She heard heavy feet and scornful laughter above her head. It was her grandfather!

“Ha-ha... coward! The prize of rejecting tradition. That cow wouldn't have fought you had you been woman enough.”

Nyonyozi quickly gathered herself on her knees. Bowing down her head, she greeted, “Good evening Grandpa.”

“I can't be your grandfather. Not to a coward. If your father won't rule over your mother, I will take you for cutting myself. I, Kwerit, son of Kulany, the mighty Chief of Binyiny won't stand to see our family desecrated. Cheptoyek failed when he married that uncircumcised goat, your mother. Then she denied him a son. All we have is you, filthy girl,” Mzee Kwerit roared as he raised his right foot and moved towards Nyonyozi. She ducked in time to escape the kick.

“I swear you and your mother will never have peace in this home unless you embrace our culture. Take the knife and become women.” He turned his back and started to move away. Then, he stopped and turned to address Nyonyozi, “Don't deceive yourself. Educated or not, you must face the *rotwet* and bring us bride wealth. At your age, you would be breastfeeding your third child.”

With that, he trotted towards the trading centre.

Sounds of laughter filled Binyiny trading centre as the sun disappeared with a brilliant flash behind the bastion of mountains. The smell of wood from the cooking fires filled the atmosphere as men gathered around a pot sipping the locally brewed maize beer, using foot long straws.

“Clansmen, our next beer party will be at Cheptoyek’s household,” Cheborion, his elder brother shouted.

There were murmurs in the gathering. As Cheptoyek stood in the middle of the gathering to raise the beer pot as a sign of acceptance, someone gripped his hand.

“Ha-ha, who would want to drink something prepared by cowards that never faced the *rotwet*?” Mzee Kwerit roared creating silence.

“Neither my wife nor child is a coward. I won’t allow you to ruin their lives with your worthless *rotwet*. Tell me Chief, what happened to my sister Chespi? Why is she crippled? And Helen? Huh? Where is she? I have always told you that female circumcision will never be a mark for a woman into adulthood,” Cheptoyek hit back at his father.

“You are testing my patience, Cheptoyek. Uncircumcised women aren’t allowed to enter kraals. Yet your daughter and wife do so. Listen to me, I, the Mighty Chief of Binyiny, swear on my clan and ancestors that Nyonyozi will not skip the coming *rotwet* season.”

He raised his walking stick in the air as some people cheered him.

The moon was a warm milky glow in the sky, making the tree trunks gleam as if they were brushed with iridescent paint. Nyonyozi sat with her mother by the fireplace in their hut. The walls were dark

with decades of wood smoke. Kentaro watched her daughter mingle the millet flour into a millet bread. She was proud to have groomed her into the lady she was.

“When you were little, your father always said your eyes shone like stars in the sky. That’s why he called you Nyonyozi. In my mother tongue, Nyonyozi means a star. You are our star. Don’t let anyone steal your gleaming light. Don’t mind people’s words. We love and support you. Right baby?” Kentaro asked her daughter who had now finished preparing supper and was lying on her lap as her mother gently stroked her hair.

“Right Mother. Do you think schools will open soon? Am worried that most parents are marrying off their daughters for bride wealth.”

There was a knock on the door and Nyonyozi hurried up to open. “Welcome back, father. How was your evening?” greeted Nyonyozi. “It was fine. How is my darling?” Cheptoyek said as he pecked his wife on the cheeks. He came home early today, and was surprised to find supper ready. He automatically knew that Nyonyozi was the one who cooked, not that his wife was a slow cook but because their daughter always prepared supper early. He sat on a wooden stool and looked at his wife and daughter on the mat beside him. “Nyonyozi, I have good news for you. The president has directed schools to re-open next week.”

“What?”

Nyonyozi couldn’t believe her ears. “Papa, where did you get the news?”

“Everyone in the trading centre was talking about it. They said that the Coronavirus cases have reduced.”

Finally, she was going back to school!

Buildings with rusted iron sheets welcomed Nyonyozi to Binyiny High School. The iron sheets on the Form Six block had been blown off by the wind. She could see clouds gliding past the sky above her head. She looked through the window and saw the bushy compound outside. She remembered Helen's fatigued face whenever they had to slash the compound. *Helen. Helen. It can't be true that she is gone forever.* Helen was the only friend she had. Not that everyone at school hated her but Helen was the only one who could stand the pressure that came along with befriending an uncircumcised girl. She remembered how Helen often defended her whenever Chebet attacked her.

"Coward, that's why you refuse to become a 'full' woman." Chebet did not only bully her. She hated her.

Maybe Helen was tired of Chebet's taunts that is why she decided to face the knife.

"Nyonyozi dear, I have decided to face the *rotwet*," Helen said one day as they were in the forest, collecting firewood.

"What? Are you serious? Is it because of that conversation you had with your mother last week? Helen please, you know *rotwet* has caused more harm than good. Do you choose it?"

"My dear, there are times when your choice doesn't matter. You can't fight the whole village, can you? You know, I have always wanted to live like those weaver birds. What big respect they have for one another! A male weaver bird builds a nest for the wife-to-be. But if she doesn't like it, she tears it down and her decision is respected! Hmn. The male keeps building nests until she is satisfied. That's how I hoped my life would be. To be able to make decisions that will be respected without any worries of me being a woman or not. But... that's not possible now. Grandpa has threatened to disown my father. In order

to protect his inheritance, I have to face the knife. I am sorry, Nyonyozi.” Helen’s eyes filled with tears before she ran away, leaving Nyonyozi dumbfounded.

Days turned into weeks. Being uncircumcised, Nyonyozi couldn’t attend the ceremonies. After the circumcision, all girls were taken into isolation where no one was allowed to see them. Nyonyozi prayed and hoped that Helen was alright not until when her father and uncle Cheborion came rushing home.

The strong smell of disinfectant hit Nyonyozi’s nostrils as she entered the hospital room. Helen lay on the bed looking weak and pale. Nyonyozi’s face was near hers and there were tears on her cheeks. Helen put up a hand and brushed them away.

“Don’t cry Nyonyozi. I am gone.”

“No. Please Helen, don’t... You will be okay.”

“Nyonyozi, I lost too much blood. I am dying...”

“No, Helen. Don’t die... I am sorry. I didn’t protect you.”

Tears nipped her throat. She sank her face in Helen’s shoulder, not wanting her to see how broken she was.

“Dear, you don’t need to be sorry. You also had no choice. Though you have it now. To live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions that will be respected. To build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.” She closed her eyes. Her rasping breath ceased; her grip slackened.

It was the second week. There was a low turnout of students. Her class which had twenty students before the Coronavirus pandemic, now had only eight. Nyonyozi’s mind kept drifting to Helen’s words.

She had to do something. It was towards December when the circumcision festivities would start.

She walked to the headmaster's office, and knocked on the door. She remembered the number of times she had knocked on this door pleading for more time to pay for her tuition fees. This time she was on a different mission. She wanted to help the girls.

"That's a very good cause Nyonyozi. The low student numbers are worrying. You have our full support as a school. I will contact our District headquarters and other schools for support. Good luck and let the stars shine."

The mountainous terrain of Kapchorwa made movement difficult. They traversed many villages sensitising people about the dangers associated with early marriages, teenage pregnancies and female circumcision. Nyonyozi bonded with most of her schoolmates except Chebet. Probably because Chebet's grandmother, Chalengat, was a famous *mutik*, the surgeon. A good granddaughter would never stand against her grandmother's cultural office.

"Ha-ha, a group of cowards. A coward at 18! Nyonyozi, you're a coward forever. There is nothing to tell us when you haven't faced the *rotwet*. Go away before something happens," Mzee Kwerit threatened.

"There is no coward here, Grandpa. Helen didn't face the *rotwet* to get rid of cowardice. She was forced. Where is she now? That's why we are here. We won't lose any more lives to the *rotwet*."

"Shut up coward. I am your Chief, coward."

"Don't call me a coward again. You can't reverse what happened to Helen or Aunt Chespi."

"You're getting on my nerves coward. I hope you'll like what happens to you," Mzee Kwerit gritted his teeth and moved away.

The resistance gradually decreased. Many school children supported Nyonyozi's project. They traversed many villages holding placards with messages against female circumcision. This awakened the District officials who formally feared to lose their electoral offices.

Nyonyozi's heart beamed with pride as she walked briskly back home. The District officials and her team prepared an event the next day where they would join hands to mobilise the communities. She heard an unusual sound. Suddenly, she was hit just over her left ear. She slumped to the ground without a word.

Nyonyozi opened her eyes but couldn't focus. Her brain felt loose like she was floating on water.

"Good, you are awake!"

A voice of a man! Mzee Kwerit's voice!

"Grandpa! What am I doing here?" Nyonyozi asked, sobbing.

"Ha-ha, of course you know why you are here. Congratulations! You will be a woman, finally."

Mzee Kwerit was scornful. In a moment Chebet's grandmother, the famous *mutik*, entered carrying the concoction of herbs in a calabash.

Nyonyozi seethed with fury. As Chalengat reached for her, Nyonyozi cracked a fist as hard as she could against the *mutik*'s jaw. As Nyonyozi got to her feet, Mzee Kwerit gave her a blow on the back of her head. She fell to the floor. Mzee Kwerit held her legs as Chalengat applied the pre-circumcision herbs.

"Silly coward. You try saving others when you can't save yourself!"

Mzee Kwerit mocked as Chalengat held out her curved *rotwet* ready to make Nyonyozi a full woman.

A sharp sound of drums and people chanting suddenly filled the air. Mzee Kwerit and Chalengat were startled. Mzee Kwerit ran to the entrance and came back worried. Angry voices shouted out their names.

“Get out. This must stop.” A group of young girls and boys stormed the compound. They carried sticks and *pangas*. With them were the police. Nyonyozi could hear the clanking noise of handcuffs as her captors were led outside.

Where had all these people come from? School children, men and women, young and old surrounded the hut holding placards while others beat the drums as they sang Nyonyozi’s name. She was still awestruck when her mother embraced her in a tight hug.

“I feared I had lost you,” Kentaro said with tears in her eyes. “Chebet, your classmate helped us. She heard Mzee Kwerit plan with her grandmother to cut you. News of your disappearance had spread throughout the village and everyone including the district officials were concerned. They all came to your rescue.”

“Today we celebrate the successful rescue mission. We still remind everyone that the law against Female Genital Mutilation enacted in 2011 still holds and will take its course on anyone who violates it. Nyonyozi has been appointed as the regional ambassador for children’s rights. Her project will be launched by the President officially soon,” Miss Chelimo, the Resident District Commissioner told the press.

Nyonyozi’s gaze shifted to Chebet who grinned at her. That’s when she realised that they were being recorded as cameras beamed at them. Her lips curved into a smile as they hugged each other knowing that the journey had just begun.

Nyonyozi knew that it would take time for all her people to accept change and allow it to settle in and take a firm root. But she wasn’t scared as she looked at the weaver birds that flew over to their nests in the trees. With their bright yellow and orange feathers, the birds re-assured her of life’s rebirth. She brought the hem of

her dress to dry her tear-filled eyes. Helen's last words echoed in her mind. *Live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions. Build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.*

SOUND OF HOPE

Funmilayo Adeboboye (Nigeria)



“I don’t want to see her...” my faint voice trails off.

I am fortunate not to have found myself in this situation when hospitals were more cautious in admitting patients. No one wants to contract the virus that makes face masks, soap and sanitizers must-haves.

Nurse Vivian looks perplexed. She opens her lips wrapped in a white and blue coloured face mask to speak but closes them almost immediately. She steps out. After a brief mumbling behind the door with my mother, she enters but moves towards another patient. My mother’s footsteps can be heard fading away into the distance; people do say that she drags her feet while walking like a village girl. This is a visiting hour. Anyone but my mother can visit me.

Here, those who share food after being visited are everyone’s favourite. It is no child’s play to be sick and hungry at the same time. I hate the nauseating smell of the hospital and the rude behaviours of the nurses yet being here has changed a lot about me. I don’t have to share a tiny bed with mother. Uncle Imoh, our next door neighbour, also can’t fondle with my body any time I enter his room to watch TV; I don’t like it but he gives me food. I don’t have to hawk anymore before mother agrees to send me food. But I miss my legs; I would rather hawk under the scorching sun than live without legs.

Weeks ago, mother was in the room cutting vegetables. It was Sunday, the only day we enjoy her presence. I dropped the 50 naira worth of crayfish she sent me to get on the table beside her. Fish or meat was a luxury. She had reluctantly handed me the last 200 naira she had.

“Where is my change?” mother asked.

Change? I checked my hands and was holding nothing. I dashed out like lightning. My eyes stuck to the floor as if my life depended on it until I got to Mama Tina’s shop; I had bought the crayfish from her. I was sure I got the change but how it left my hand was what I couldn’t account for. Everything felt so dramatic.

Going back home terrified me. That money meant a lot to us. My eldest brother, who my late father had sold our two plots of land to send abroad for greener pastures rarely helped; he was probably trying to survive over there too. Mama Dozie once told my mother that white women were ‘merciless spenders’. She said they might be spending his money on makeup, weave-ons and surgeries.

My other siblings couldn’t help. Chima was an apprentice at a mechanic workshop. He didn’t like school. Chinonso would be through with secondary school soon. According to him, his teachers preferred talking to teaching. So, mother was saving to get him enrolled in an evening class. His friend, Nnamdi said that Chinonso was only interested in the lesson because his crush was a student there. Since mother started saving, we consumed soaked garri often. The desire to be called Mama Lawyer was enough motivation for her. I would have to stop school for some time; more hawking time meant more money. Money would be needed to pay Chinonso’s fees on admission into the university. I could continue my education afterwards. Mother didn’t tell me. I overheard her tell her best friend.

I wished I wouldn't have to be my brother's sacrificial lamb but I knew better. Disobedience to mother equaled hunger. Quitting school would be for a while unlike some girls in my neighbourhood. Iyabo, the daughter of the woman whose 6-year-old son was forcefully drugged by their neighbour, stopped schooling two years ago. She actually got pregnant and was ashamed to continue. She moved in with the taxi driver who impregnated her. Not all girls got such acceptance. They bore the responsibility like the cases of Ada, Mariam and Nofisat. Those were the cases I witnessed.

"How are you fine girl?" a masculine voice jolted me back to reality. I looked back to see a man smiling in a funny way. He was inside a black car.

"Why are you crying?"

I wiped my tears with the back of my right palm.

"What's wrong? Come inside the car. Or do you want me to take you to Chicken Republic?"

I realised I had not eaten lunch and was hungry already. The man sounded nice. I wanted to ask him for money but what if after touching the money, I become a yam? He will just wrap me and put me in his car and use me for some money ritual. I took a few steps away.

"Fine girl come na!"

I did not bother to look back. My stomach mustn't rule my head. Bukky, my former classmate had been missing for three years. Her family members have given up on seeing her. She might have been used to renew a wicked person's charm, for money or for something else.

I sighted Aunt Mabel in her shop. She has been a nice woman. I felt shy to ask for her help but I couldn't face mother's wrath.

"The irregularity of power supply is getting worse o. I don't even have any ice block to sell," Aunt Mabel spoke with her phone fixed to her left ear. I was behind her.

She kept quiet at intervals to listen to the voice on the other end of the call.

“Muna is at home. Her schooling is one day on, one day off at the moment. She said it’s one of the ways the government is controlling the spread of the virus. Muna that doesn’t know how to read when school was from Monday to Friday! Is she the one that will know how to read when she goes to school thrice in a week?”

She continued, “Do you think I will be speaking with you for this long if not for WhatsApp call? You know it’s cheaper. Please, send us something if you don’t want hunger to end our lives before you come... Mama is also sick. The doctor said it is typhoid. It must be from the water we drink o. I will get her drug when Harrison gets to his shop tonight. I don’t trust that small girl in his shop o; a girl that just finished secondary school last two months already handling a chemist... My own is that Mama should just get better because I don’t have time to spend in that hospital. You can go in the morning and get to see the doctor in the afternoon. Hmmm... it’s not funny at all...”

She was in a tight situation. So, I left.

It was already dark. I stood at our room’s entrance afraid to go in. I moved back in fear when the door opened. Chinonso came out holding a small bowl of water. They must have just finished eating. “Where have you been? Mother will kill you today.” He gestured with his right hand moving across his neck as a knife is used on a chicken. “Don’t mind him. Mother is already sleeping,” Chima said as he stepped out.

I moved backward, scared that my troublesome brothers might force me into the room.

“See na,” Chima opened the door and moved the curtain aside.

Mother was in bed.

I entered the room, afraid, tired and hungry. Asking for food was not an option. I decided to lay my aching head. Carefully, I climbed the bed to lay quietly beside mother. Suddenly, the torch beside mother's left foot fell and its annoying sound woke her up.

I jumped up.

"Where have you been and where is my 150 naira?" she looked angry. I wanted to urinate. There was no one to plead on my behalf. Chima and Chinonso were outside.

"When did you become deaf and dumb?" she gradually stood up. I ran to the door.

"Where do you think you are running to?"

"I... I... I did not... I did not see... see it," I stammered.

Mother wanted to grab me but I was faster. I ran out of the room, out of the compound to nowhere. I continued running because I could hear my mother running after me. As I left our compound to cross to the other side, I felt something hard hit me to the floor. That was how I got here.

I've lost my legs. Moses, our landlord's son studying Medicine in the university said that if the accident happened in a civilised country, my legs won't be chopped off. I don't know how true his words are but I blame poverty for making 150 naira my mother's millions. I blame my mother for delaying in forgiving me. Her uncontrolled anger has cost me a lot. I blame the driver of the car that was on the move with a bad headlight; the tyres crushed my bones and put me through pain and discomfort. I blame the force personnel who might have ignored the careless driver in exchange for cash; they indirectly exchanged my legs in the process. I blame...

My mother has been mourning. Only a miracle can change my situation. I have stopped her from coming to see me. Chima and Chinonso share the duty of caring for me. It's no easy task caring for

me though they don't say it. Mother keeps pleading for forgiveness through them but I'm still angry.

Chima and Chinonso work in the factory on weekends to assist mother with the cost of caring for me. Our brother sent some money and promised to send more.

The ongoing conversation gets my attention.

"My boss lost two relatives to the South Sudan flood. He has not been himself since that incident. Yesterday, he received the news that his daughter studying abroad tested positive to Coronavirus. I really pity that man o... Such a nice man!" Mama Adeola's visitor sounds hurt.

"What if he decides to relocate to be closer to his family? Many of us will become jobless because he may just sell off that company. It is really difficult to get a job during this pandemic period. The cost of living is also increasing."

"Is the virus truly spreading again? I've heard something like the second wave..." Mama Adeola remarks looking paler than she was before her visitor arrived.

She must be worried for the safety of her children. Every patient in the ward looks curious except Eno. I heard Eno said that she has nothing to lose. Her parents are dead. Even if she contracts the disease and dies, there is no one to cry for her.

"Don't even disturb yourself... Which virus? Go to the market and you will see how people move about freely. It is the 'I too know' set of people that do compress their nose inside this thing. The funny thing is that most of them don't wear it properly."

He tosses his face mask. "I only brought it along with me because it's a criterion to enter here."

"But you said that your boss's daughter tested positive..." Mama Adeola says finding it difficult to be convinced.

“His daughter doesn’t stay here,” he defends his view, “What worries me is not Coronavirus but the conflict in the country. Those of us with children in the force can relate.”

I am confused. My brothers told me that Mr. Chuks, the man who lived in a better part of this state and promised to sponsor ten children from the slum where we stay, through school even to university level has died. He died of Coronavirus. Two distant relatives, according to Moses, lost their lives to the virus too.

There’s a war within me. A war between what is and what isn’t. What is the fate of journalists whose news has lost the trust of many? What is the fate of a government far from the grassroots? What is the fate of a people who lack the necessary knowledge in a fast-paced world? “Doctor!” the visitor calls out to a team of medical practitioners passing by.

They stop and turn to face him.

“Yes?” the lady questions, maintaining social distance.

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the doctor,” he says, pointing at the only male in a team of two females and a male.

“I’m the doctor,” she answers.

“Oh! Alright madam. Please, my head is aching badly.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes doc...doctor.” It seems strange to him to call her that. “I have a terrible headache,” he says.

“Nurse Johnson,” she says facing the male in the team, “administer analgesic.”

“Okay ma.”

The visitor looks confused. Calling a man ‘nurse’ sounds odd to him. It is past visiting time. The visitors are leaving. Some will stay with their sick although the hospital does not provide any provision for them. They are therefore exposed to harsh weather and blood thirsty mosquitoes.

Anita hobbles on crutches to Helen's bed. Helen's bed is next to mine. I know that an argument will soon ensue. That is how their discussions always end.

"See the posts on Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation. I'm so happy for her!" Helen says handing her phone to Anita.

"That is the point I was making the other day. If she hadn't studied abroad, do you think she will get to that height?" Anita continues, "Who will see me and know that I'm a second-class upper graduate?" "Everything is not all about studying abroad. Mamokgethi Phakeng achieved her BSc and MSc in Africa yet she is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town," Helen replies.

"I have told you about my closest friend at home na!" Anita responds, 'She graduated with a first class but her fiancé got involved in hard drugs to be able to pay her bride price. He was scared to lose her; her mother was already pressuring her to get married even though she was only 28 years old. He got caught and is still in prison. She is a psychiatric patient at the moment. If her uncle did not intervene financially, she would be among those mad people roaming the street, living in misery and wasting their potential."

Helen pats Anita's shoulder, "Have you given up on having a better country?"

Anita flings her hand away, "If the government subsidises the costs or offers free drugs, then those mad people will get healthy enough to contribute to the better country you are shouting about. As for me, I can't wait to leave this country. Do people just wake up in the morning and decide to migrate?"

Anita sounds frustrated, "Mass migration and displacement here is because of poverty, violent conflict and environmental stress. Tell me, aren't you stressed?"

Anita hisses, drops Helen's phone and takes hold of her clutches, "Moreover, it's a man's world here. I'd rather go to a place where my worth will be appreciated."

"It's a man's world as much as a woman's world. If you treat yourself like the queen that you are, others will learn their role in your palace," Helen asserts.

Anita looks at her like she just spewed trash and leaves angrily. My eyes are heavy already. I adjust my bedspread while still sitting on it. A folded paper lay on my bed. Curious, I glue my face to it. Oh! It must have dropped from Anita.

Dear Anita,

How are you? Hope you feel better. I'm sorry about the barrier caused by the distance in your trying times. I've missed you so much and do think about you. It feels ridiculous that I'm writing a letter but your faulty phone gives me no option. I have gist for you.

Do you know that Madam Eno wanted to make me a prostitute when I got here? That one is a topic for another time. At the moment, I work as a nanny for Mr Stanley's family. You still remember him? The man who used to lavish money in our village. The one who impregnated Kachi to be certain she was fertile before paying her bride price. He shouts at Kachi at will telling her how useless her life is without him. While plugging in his phone last week, my eyes popped. I think he has another family elsewhere. Little wonder he protects his phone more than his children.

I lost interest in watching news after I had to listen to talks about End SARS protest, the flood that ended lives and destroyed properties in South Sudan, hunger crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, displacement crisis in Burkina Faso, locust outbreak in Ethiopia, conflict in Mozambique... I was getting depressed.

This morning, on my way home, I passed by the COVID-19 vaccination centre though not sure I wanted to get vaccinated because someone said the vaccine can clot one's blood. Despite social distancing, someone stepped on me and still looked at me like I ought to apologise for her fault. So saucy! I couldn't contain my displeasure; I left the place. If I was in my homeland, there would have been no fear of expressing myself.

Hope you got the money I sent to you. Let me know when your phone gets fixed; it's been long since we video-chatted. Get well soon.
Your friend,
Onome.

I fold the paper, unsure of how I will hand it over to Anita. What if she demands to know if I read its content?

Onome is right. Our homeland should provide the shell and freedom our sanity needs. It dawns on me that I am not useless. I don't have legs but I have hands and a brain to contribute to the formation of the country I desire. I choose to forgive my mother and others; strong families make for a standing society. I long for a place to call 'home'. No one truly triumphs and nothing thrives in malice.

EVEN THE WEAK

Thabo Mpho Miya (South Africa)



Maybe it's because I am a woman. It may even be because I am black. All I know right now is that, over the past few months, this disciplinary committee has tried hard to tear apart my side of the story so much so that I even began to doubt that it actually happened at all. Before I tell you what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020, I would like to tell you a little bit about myself.

My name is Phelile Mahlalela but my friends call me Pheli. I cannot even remember when or why they started calling me that but I like it. Like all young people, after I completed my higher diploma in tourism and hospitality, the sky was my limit. I knew that I would immediately land myself a job with one of the big five hotels in Cape Town – read Emperor Hotel in Sandton. After my parents passed away, my grandparents took me in and brought me up as their daughter rather than granddaughter and so I wanted them to also enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Well of course without a job, I could not afford a house in the suburbs or one of the highrise buildings so I rented a three-bedroomed 'weatherman shack' in Johannesburg's CBD. I call it that because you could tell by 5 o'clock in the morning just how hot or cold the rest of the day would be by feeling the temperature of the walls. I knew that we would not live there for long. One month turned into the next and the next and the next. I lost control.

One day, I overheard my neighbours discussing about a hotel that was hiring waitresses. One of them mentioned that they knew a waitress who earned R8 000 per month and this was before adding the tips. I knew that this was my chance. I had to get the job.

I went to the nearest internet café and can you imagine that the man charged me a whole R50 for just typing and printing out my CV which was only 2-pages long. Anyway, the R50 was not mine to keep as I had also silently borrowed it from my neighbour while she was deep asleep. And of course I also had to ‘shop’ for some clothes as well.

On the morning of the interview, I woke up very early as I had to wear my new clothes and leave before anyone else woke up. I was a definite sight to behold. But that did not matter. My eyes were set on the job. To cover myself, just in case I met someone from one of the places I had shopped, I wore my grandfather’s long coat. I was ready for the interview.

You may think that I should be ashamed of what I did that day to get here. But I am so unashamed about that day. In fact I always commemorate it with some tasty takeout for my family. That was the last time that I helped myself to something that was not mine. In hindsight, I might have had to continue living that way if I hadn’t gotten this job.

But I don’t have to live that way anymore. This is why I am so surprised to hear that the current manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton has accused me of stealing from one of our clients on 8th June 2020. He even managed to present an affidavit from the client in question who alleges that I stole her cell phone. I might as well have been accused of stealing all her belongings including the

hotel's bed. I was not given a chance to defend myself and within no time, I was disgracefully chased from the hotel. But I am a fighter. There was no way I was taking my grandparents back to the weatherman shack. So I kept calling and I called the boss of my boss. Well call me lucky but she agreed to give me a chance. Maybe it is because she was a woman or maybe because she was also black. But there was a problem...

You see as soon as I went home, the next day, South Africa announced the first COVID-19 case and from there it took a turn for the worse. Johannesburg was a hot spot. I had to be vaccinated before I set foot in the hotel. Well, I am glad for my days living in my weatherman shack. Let us just say that I got the shots – two months apart before I set my foot in the hotel. I even have my vaccination card. I can show it to you if you want.

Today is 25th September 2020. I am before the disciplinary committee. I have to explain my side of the story. I cannot mess it up. "Miss Phelile Mahlalela please tell us what happened between 8th to 25th June 2020 in this very hotel," my boss's boss asks. 'Of course, it has to be in this hotel,' I almost say but catch myself just in time.

I look at my boss's boss then I look at my boss and I know that one of them will not like what I have to say.

"My dear disciplinary committee," I begin, "Thank you for giving me an opportunity to talk about the events between the dates you have mentioned. As usual, we have to pick our tips from Mr. Walters here. So this particular Friday when I went to pick up my tip, I was

informed that Mr. Walters had temporarily relocated his office and I had to go and see him at the basement.

“I really needed my tips because I had to make some payment. I found him in this so-called office. It is a small room that is used occasionally by construction workers. Oh I forgot something, one of our clients had given me a cell phone as a gift. I showed it to Mr. Walters as I am required to do by the HR manual. This displeased him immensely.

“My dear lady and gentlemen of this disciplinary committee, there is a part of this story that I had hoped I would not have to tell. As we were arguing on my tips, I saw a bag with a lot of money. I knew that it was money that he had stolen from the hotel. I told him that I would report him to my seniors and that is when Mr Walters said that he would teach me a lesson that I would never forget.

“Lady and gentlemen, I cannot explain what happened without crying. Here is my medical report,” I finished as I handed the report to my boss’s boss.

She read it and passed it on. Mr. Walters did not speak. That is the last I heard from and of him.

This is another two months later ...

THABO MPHO MIYA

Internal disciplinary committee
The Grand Emperor Hotels (Pty) Ltd
10 Downer street
Cape Town, WC

November 25, 2020

Phelile Mahlalela
Food and beverage services conductor
The Grand Emperor Hotel
807 Naledi Street
Sandton, GP

Dear Ms Mahlalela,

We would firstly like to offer you our deepest apologies at what you suffered at the hands of one of our managers. You have truly been brave, in expressing your story. In so doing, you are making our company a safer place for all women, from the highest-ranking ones to others, like you, who keep everything running at our various hotels.

Our initial investigation into a case of theft against you has been an evolving and dynamic one. In it we have had to investigate claims made against you, as well as the counterclaims which you presented to the committee.

Finding the truth has been a difficult and humbling journey for us as the committee. Be that as it may, we also respect the ways in which the work of this disciplinary committee has affected you. We suspended you and stripped you of your livelihood for six months.

This is just one of the many errors which we have made, as the disciplinary committee, that largely disadvantaged you. We have made some decisions which we hope you would accept as a token of our remorse.

- Your suspension at the company has been lifted.
- You will be awarded the full sum of the salaries withheld from you during your suspension.
- Those salaries will be awarded as a lumpsum plus interest at 2% above the rate of inflation.

Your accuser has been fired from the company.

Furthermore, given the fact that his absence creates a vacancy, we are offering you the role of manager of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton. We wish that you will accept this offer as we have the utmost faith in your ability to serve the guests and employees of the hotel. We look forward to leaving the management and administration of the Grand Emperor Hotel of Sandton in your very capable hands.

Sincerely

Charlize K. Theunissen

Chairperson of the Internal Disciplinary Committee

BREAKING THE SHACKLES

Oluwatobiloba Grace Lawalson (Nigeria)



I have to hurry to go back home. I am getting impatient waiting for my fellow Chief Executive Officers to make their comments. We are discussing the current realities of the continent. Our continent has gone through a lot of changes and by sheer determination, grit, hard work and courage we have managed to beat all odds. In fact, our exchange rate is currently one of the best in the world – 1 Fikan is exchanging at 70 Dollars, 75 Euro and 70 Yuan. And this is the story I am burning to tell my grandchildren. The last time they all visited, we had a great time together. I can still remember their faces as I shared with them some of the lessons that I have learnt in life. This is why I cannot wait to get home and truthfully, this conference is wasting my time!

Today I will share with them something that is very personal to me. I do not know how they will take it. I hope that they will still consider me as their grandmother and not judge me so harshly.

I am at home now. We have just had our supper and are seated on the verandah! It is a warm night. My grandchildren are all gathered around me. They are looking up to me ready to hear my story. I have to take the risk. I am transported to a far away time.

“My grandchildren, today I will tell you about me. I was born with the joy that heralded every birth of a child to a middle class family after several miscarriages and attempts at conception. However, my family still appeared disappointed just because I was a female. My Papa never failed to mention that he would have preferred a male child. He was a devout Catholic, and probably as a result dedicated and baptised me as was expected. I grew up knowing that my brother got whatever he wanted despite my superior grades in school. I was always trying to get better so that I would also have access to some of the things that he enjoyed. I always ensured that my uniforms were neat and clean and was always among the top ten of my class. My Papa would always say, ‘Do well in school to justify this huge expense and investment that I am making so that you can pay me back for not marrying you off despite the fact that you would not bear my surname for long.’ I always replied, ‘Papa I would do well and you would be proud.’

“I knew I was privileged to be sent to school because I had too many friends who were not allowed to go to school and were forced to marry so that they could provide for their families and protect the family name. While I resented the fact that I did many of the house chores along with Mother sometimes till midnight ‘to prepare me for my husband’s house’, I was grateful that such an experience was still far better compared to being married off. Father taught me that I should be submissive to all the men around us, claiming that was an injunction of the Holy Bible. He would remind me that the suffering and pain in the world was a result of the disobedience of Eve who cunningly lured her husband to eat the forbidden fruit, making him to disobey God. A woman could try to appease for her sins by being submissive. This would reduce her pain during childbirth, otherwise all her children would die at the birthing stool and in the afterlife, she

would endure a long purgatory if at all she made it to heaven. From an early age, I learnt submission.

“I had always been submissive until the day my father met Sango. Sango was a merchant who promised lots of money if only he was allowed to take me with him overseas. Father had often been lured by the promise of a good life overseas. He was determined that I should go overseas despite Mother’s and my protests. I even promised to stop school to start working if he allowed me to stay but his mind was made up. I attempted to run away from home but Papa found me and brought me back. He then resorted to blackmail. Papa said, ‘Remember you promised to make me proud?’ What could I say? Indeed, I had and so I just nodded. Papa said sternly, ‘Do this act of selflessness and bring honour and respect to the family name. You will start earning money that will provide for us all and repay all the expenses I have incurred on your education.’ According to Papa, that was the end of the discussion and I had to prepare for my day of departure.

“The day arrived and although I knew that things were not quite right I had no choice. Mother sobbed loudly as we said our goodbyes. I was going overseas to study to protect the family name and bring back money to repay Papa. ‘Be the strong woman that I have raised you to be and the Lord will preserve you for your obedience,’ Mother said as I left. Papa on the other hand was smiling from ear to ear as he knew that within a short time I would start sending him some money.

“I braved the future. I did not want to bring shame to the family name. We were driven outside the city to a forest for purification. I wondered why this was necessary before we travelled. Little did I know that this was a trick. We were a group of twelve girls and before long we were surrounded by men. I was so scared

but remembered Mother's words and feigned courage. We were taken into a secluded hut and the men surrounded the hut. There was no escape!

"They would escort us every day to a nearby stream where we would bathe using different soaps and herbs while swearing an oath of allegiance to the deity, never to run away. I wondered where this was leading to as no one ever explained anything to us. I often wondered what was going on at home. The final rites of initiation came. It was horrific as I had learnt about Female Genital Mutilation at school. This is all we were being prepared for.

"Sango believed that the girls who went to school were rude and looked down upon their culture which was not true. So he took it as his mission, together with his cronies, to ensure that we also went through the cut.

"That was the most painful experience I have ever gone through. Most of the girls succumbed to the pain and their bodies were disposed of in the forest. I wondered what Sango would tell their parents.

"My grandchildren, for several days I was in pain and I thought that I could not make it alive. I could neither eat nor sleep.

"Unknown to us, the authorities were monitoring Sango and finally the law caught up with him. Some of his cronies escaped but most were caught. We were four girls who survived. We were rushed to the hospital for care. It was too late; the damage had already been done. "After spending almost a month at the hospital, we were discharged. I was filled with self-loathing and I had no self-esteem. I wondered whether I could look Papa in the eye without hating him for his selfishness or despise Mother for her weakness in not standing up for me. The journey back home seemed like a long road, a long road to freedom, freedom I didn't feel or appreciate."

I wondered whether I should continue with the story as any time I thought about it, it brought back very sad memories. But anyway, I had to continue. My grandchildren were all looking at me and I could tell that none wanted me to stop and yet, they did not know how to ask me to continue. After a long pause, I continued.

“On reaching home, I would not even talk to my parents. Their apologies and regrets fell on deaf ears. I wondered if Papa had really thought through what Sango had promised. I knew that I could not stay under the same roof with my parents. The bitterness I felt was too much. I decided to get solace in my books as that is what I enjoyed doing the most. I had to get away from home. I was determined to get an education even if it meant that I had to self-fund. And that is exactly what I did.

“I focused on my academics and got admitted into the university to study agriculture. Although I was doing well academically, my social life was not going on well. I could not seem to hold onto any meaningful relationships and within no time, I turned to hard drugs and alcohol to fill the void.

“Academic excellence, my only sense of accomplishment, gave me fully funded scholarships for my Masters and Doctorate degrees. It was towards the end of my Master’s program that I met Sekhukhune, your grandfather. As with every great relationship, we started out as friends. His unusual opinion about gender and nationality intrigued me. He didn’t discriminate, feel superior or ever use religious tales to seek subordination. He instead insisted that he believed that we were to be submissive one to another and to love our spouse better than our own selves. As we continued to get closer, his love, care, understanding and attention made me feel better about myself and eventually, I agreed to marry him towards the end of our doctorate program after so much persuasion. As he fondly reminded me, that I was the most difficult investor

he had to persuade to believe in him. He also convinced me to forgive my parents because like he always says, ‘Unforgiveness, bitterness and resentment are like poison that ravage the soul.’ He helped me to work through my issues with alcohol and drugs. I even forgave my parents and was re-united with them upon my return. Oh how I love my husband, my grandchildren!

“On our return, armed with a strong sense of purpose, we decided to start an agricultural financing company. It wasn’t a walk in the park, but certain strategies and determination made the growth of the company a worthwhile adventure. We worked tirelessly with the small-scale farmers training them on sustainable agricultural methods. This required patience and hard work. We shared with the farmers some of our experiences in the various countries that we had visited. We also convinced the Africans in the diaspora to invest back home.

“Our governments also created the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. This agreement allowed for borderless trade and allowed our market to become the largest trading area in the world. Seeing the benefits it brought to our economies, we decided to develop one currency, the Fikans. Of course our company, like many others benefited from the agreement that culminated into the largest agricultural conglomerate in the world. We have collaborated on many landmark projects and matters ranging from climate change, renewable energy, manufacturing, just to mention a few.”

I finished my story and was enveloped by seemingly grave yard silence. I was terrified to look at their faces. Despite all the accolades the world had given, if my family did not respect me or understand their grandma based on this new revelation,

I would have been shattered. The applause startled me. I burst into tears. The warm hugs and understanding faces, however, made me realise that although I could not change the past, it turned out okay.

ODDS

Blessing Peter Titus (Nigeria)



Uma was disturbed. He didn't know what the future held for him especially now that they were relocating to the village after his father's retirement. All his life, fifteen years and four months to be precise, he had lived with his family in the city of Jos. Not once within this period had he ever visited the village. Whenever his parents were visiting the village, they left him in the care of Auntie Margaret, his mother's elder sister who lived in the same estate with them.

He didn't mind staying with Auntie Margaret but as he grew older, he wondered why he was never taken to his village. All he knew was that he was from Benue State, Gboko Local Government area and Ihugh Village precisely. The only extended family he knew were those who came to visit and a few others who he had seen in pictures. When he asked his father why he was never taken to the village, especially after a lot of his classmates at school told wonderful stories about their Christmas experiences in the village, his father told him it was because he was protecting him from their village people who had killed his first wife and his other children. "My son, I was born to the family of Tervershima, during the time of yam harvest. At that time, birth certificates were not known and women gave birth at home with the help of older women. Births were remembered by the season when the child was born. My father was a very wealthy man. He had large farmlands and storage space

for his farm produce which included yams, maize, beniseed, melon and guinea corn. It was very common for a man to show the extent of his wealth by the number of wives and children he had. My father had six wives and over thirty children.

“My mother, Iveren was the last wife. She was his favourite. It was that same year when I was born that modern education began to take root in our locality. For years the white people tried to convince people to go to the schools but a lot of parents weren’t interested. They believed that going to school would make their children lazy and unwilling to work on their parents’ farms. My mother convinced my father to let me go to school. Although mother wanted me to start immediately, the school administrator refused to enrol me as they said I was too young. I had to wait for another year. I was finally enrolled and began class one. I was at the top of my class until I finished class seven and proceeded to the Teachers College in Kaduna. After completing my studies, I was employed to teach in a school in Jos.

“I met and married my first wife two years after that. When she was seven months pregnant, I took her to the village to stay with my mother. It was the custom then to take your wife to the village as she would be taken care of by her husband’s mother before and after giving birth. Our first child was a boy but he was constantly ill. We still visited the village to bond with our relatives. My wife became pregnant again and this time she gave birth to triplets. The children kept falling sick over the next few months. Within two years, two of the triplets died and only one survived. She was however, very sickly.

“On the tenth year of our marriage, she gave birth to twins who died few weeks afterwards. Two years later, she gave birth to twins again.

They too were sickly and after a short while, one died. We now had three children – Andrew, Agatha and Anita – who were sickly.

“That same year, we all went to the village for Christmas as usual. When we came back from the village, the children became so sick and they all died on the same day, three months later. My wife fell into depression and she also died a year later.

“I know it was the witches in our village who didn’t want my happiness and progress. They killed them all and I don’t want that to happen to you. It was three years after her death that I met and married your mother and thankfully, we have been blessed with you and your siblings.”

This story made Uma to fear going to the village. He believed that there were witches in the village and even though he later learnt about genotypes, he did not want to be associated with his village. He knew that it was probable that his half-siblings were sicklers and were unlikely to survive into adulthood. This however, did not assuage his fears about the village.

When they finally moved to the village in November, Uma was surprised to see that his village had good tarred roads, piped water, electricity and well-built duplexes. He was shocked by the fact that a very large percentage of the people could even speak English and were well educated. He had had a very dreary idea of how life in the village would be. He was impressed with the level of hospitality the people displayed. Every home offered plenty of food when they went visiting and it amazed him that most people left their homes unlocked yet, there were neither cases nor reports of stealing.

By December, he was already in love with the village. He finally understood why most of his classmates back then never missed going to the village for Christmas. There was so much to do and

enjoy: picnics at the stream, village dances and masquerade displays, endless chatter between different age groups and extended family members, visiting people and eating a wide range of delicacies especially his new found favourite; pounded yam, with adenge soup and bush meat.

Uma enjoyed his stay in the village immensely and wished that he would be staying there longer. However, he had to go to the university. He was barely done with registration and settling down in school when disaster struck. Nigeria reported its first case of Coronavirus. Things quickly deteriorated as the cases were continually rising and many people succumbed to the disease. The government had to take stringent measures and soon schools were closed and lockdowns imposed.

He had to go back to the village. He hoped that the lockdown would be lifted but January turned into February and February into March. Soon it was April, the rainy season. Like all farmers, Uma's family had to prepare their farms. Uma was excited as he would get to practise what he was studying at the university – agricultural engineering. He however, soon learnt that it was not easy as each family had to work on their own. Families were saving the little money they had and so could not afford to employ anyone. Also the government encouraged people to social distance and this affected the village life. Everyone stayed with their family members. The months rolled by and it seemed that Coronavirus was getting worse. Meanwhile Uma was so tired of working in the farm as it was too tiring. This inspired him to think of ways to make farming efficient especially for the small-scale farmers.

They had been out of school for a whole year. Schools started teaching online to cover the needed curriculum before the academic

year was completed. They had many assignments, seminars and even examination was done online.

One year later, the pandemic ended and students resumed physical learning. Uma was excited as he hoped to work on his ideas. He shared his ideas with his friends who laughed at him. He shared the ideas with his lecturer who also laughed at him. They cited lack of funds and inexperience as factors that would make him not to achieve his dreams. Uma was so discouraged that he shelved his ideas.

On his final year, Uma had to do a project before graduating. His supervisor was Professor Kyari. The professor rejected his proposals one after the other citing them as irrelevant to the society today. After more than ten trials, Uma was so discouraged that he almost gave up and went back to the village.

One day as he was contemplating his next step, Professor Kyari called him to his office. He told his professor about his experience during the pandemic period and some of the ideas he came up with. Professor Kyari was so excited and he agreed to guide Uma in working on the project. They worked day and night as they had a limited time. Uma did not even realise it as at last one person believed in his dream.

Finally, it was time for all the final year students to present their projects. Uma's project was a machine called the double M2. Its function was to harvest maize, peel the back and remove the kernels from the cob. The most impressive thing about it was that it was solar powered and very handy. Everyone was impressed by this and Uma got a grant from the government to start up his own business of producing the double M2 in commercial quantities, as well as develop his other ideas of the planter, weeder and tractor which were also to be solar powered whilst creating job opportunities for people within the community. Uma became a celebrity overnight as his invention helped to ease the burden on many small-scale farmers.

LIFE GOES ON

Rudy Kadimashi (Democratic Republic of Congo)



“You stir it like this ...” she stopped and watched as the boy struggled to imitate her motion.

She smiled, “No ... Kokio. You’re doing it wrong.”

Holding the boy’s hand, they stirred the mixture together, slowly.

Kokio stopped then looked at her. “I get it now mama,” he said.

Kokio had baobab powder all over his body – on his forehead, nose and chin.

“You look like a baby meerkat ...” she said laughing then she grabbed a little tissue, “Baby meerkat, let me wipe your face.”

“If you succeed this time, I promise to make for you baobab juice for the next three years ... every morning,” Mama said.

Koikoi looked at his mother. “Deal!” he said.

From a small gourd, she poured baobab juice on a grave. “As promised my little meerkat,” she whispered.

She emptied the little gourd before putting it down. Liwe stood, looking at Kokio’s grave. Dawn was breaking over the horizon piercing the thin mist covering the graveyard. The mist obscured but didn’t hide the scattered tombstones, the sprinkled trees and leafy bushes. She could still see the red rope enclosing the cemetery or *makabouri* as they called it. In her culture, that rope meant that

the village marabou had exorcised and purified the site allowing the buried to rest in peace.

This new *makabouri* was smaller than the *makabouri* of her ancestral village. She remembered that fateful day when armed rebels invaded their village killing anyone they could find and raping women and girls. Those who survived had to start anew.

“We have an unpeaceful life now, but we will have a peaceful after life and... life goes on,” Liwe muttered, looking at the tombstones around her.

The new *makabouri* was like her second home. She knew who was resting where. Kokio was laid to rest here with his favourite hat, next to Nandi, buried with her comb. Villagers buried their loved ones with things they liked to use during their lifetime. Buried six feet away from Nandi, she noticed Siya’s tombstone leaning back. Liwe froze.

“Bongi?” she gasped reading the name carved on the tombstone.

“Siyi was ... is supposed to be buried there next to Siya his twin brother and not Bongi.”

She examined the suspicious grave, and then decided to inspect the area. Few minutes later she found Siyi’s headstone, stained with blood, on Bongi’s grave.

“Who could have done this?” her heart was beating faster, her jaw tightening.

“Calm down Liwe... this could be an animal... don’t jump to conclusions,” she mumbled.

Inspecting the grave, she noticed footprints on the burial mound. Hands clenched, she followed the prints with her eyes. Then she noticed it, a silhouette crouched at the entrance of the *makabouri*. Was it an animal or a human being? She inched closer... Then she heard a sound behind her.

She stopped and turned but all seemed normal.

“I guess it must have been all in my head,” she muttered.

She took a deep breath and was determined to find out what the silhouette was... but it was gone. She heard the voice again, this time louder. It was coming from the bushes behind her. She tiptoed to the bushes not to make a single noise.

She was petrified by the sight before her. She noticed his shirtless, hairy and bruised muscular back, arched like a bear then his bulky arms, sunburnt and full of scars. His big hands pinned the hands of a thin woman down. She recognised the green red dotted pair of trousers he was wearing, from the rebel army uniform. Beads of sweat ran down her face. Connecting pieces together, she knew what was about to happen. A feeling of nausea rose from her stomach. She covered her mouth.

The soldier mounted the thin woman. He pinned her down using his weight and immobilised both of her arms over her head using his left hand, restraining her movements.

The thin woman was trapped. She tried to scream but a tissue tied around her mouth muffled her voice and the soldier, taking his time, licked her neck.

“Mawa, if you stop resisting you might enjoy this,” the soldier was saying.

Liwe turned and walked away, shutting her eyes, covering her ears with her hands, mumbling, “I... I’m... I can’t... I’m sorry.” It was as if she was trying to erase from her memory what she saw. Images were flashing in her mind... soldiers... Kokio... screams... her hands are tied... she is on her knees, with ripped clothes... three soldiers are surrounding her... she is starring at the door of Kokio’s room, screaming, “KOKIIIOOOOO ... DON’T COME OUT!”

“Time to get serious ... Mawa ... you will enjoy it. Trust me they all do,” the soldier whispered in her ear. Mawa felt her heart pounding louder and louder.

The soldier slowly unbuckled his belt with his right hand, sweat trickling down his face, lips curving upward.

Mawa begged, Mawa cried, Mawa cursed, Mawa prayed, Mawa fought desperately trying to free herself, hoping for a miracle then she heard a shattering noise while the soldier was unzipping his pant. A noise coming from somewhere, behind the soldier. The soldier froze then collapsed on his left, revealing a crouched, concealed, Liwe behind. Liwe dropped the shattered gourd then gestured for Mawa to keep quiet. Liwe surveyed the surroundings before approaching Mawa. She untied the tissue around Mawa’s mouth.

“I’m Liwe. Are you hurt? Can you walk?” Liwe questioned.

Mawa nodded and grabbed Liwe’s hand. They heard footsteps.

“Come ... let’s go,” Liwe gestured to the opposite direction, deeper in the bushes.

The second soldier, seeing his companion lying on the grass, grabbed his AK-47 and scanned the surroundings. He knelt beside his companion and checked his pulse. “Wake up pal.” He followed his demand with a slap in the face.

Moko woke up with a jolt. Rubbing the back of his head and in pain, he looked at his companion and asked, “The... girl... where is the girl?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Something hit me on the back of my head... aaaarghh... and I...” he groaned, wiping the blood off the back of his head.

“Wait... you mean... there was someone else? What the...?” he interrupted then face palming himself he continued, “You and your weird fetishes... I warned you to get rid of that cassava bread seller girl at the market. What is wrong with you Moko? The plan was simple... find the bag of coltan buried somewhere among these

graves before sunrise but noooooo... you and our fetishes ... now they saw us. Couldn't you restrain your urges for once?"

Moko stood and grabbed his machete hidden in the bushes. He examined what was left of the shattered pieces of the gourd then looking at his companion, he reassured him, "Calm down. They shouldn't be far. We've been in worse than this."

"I was digging around the entrance ... and I didn't see anyone coming here," his companion said looking behind.

"Which means they are still in this cemetery and the only place they could have gone hoping to hide is in that section over there," he added.

"You're right. Look trampled grasses!" Moko exclaimed.

Following Liwe behind and creeping among the graves, trees and bushes, Mawa slipped and fell, legs still shaking, blood dripping from a low back injury.

Liwe knelt next to her and with a gentle tapping on the back tried to calm her, "It is okay now ... we need to get going."

They heard crackling noises. They both looked around then at each other, shivering. Liwe saw dense tangled bushes and gestured to hide there. From behind the bushes she kept scouting the surroundings when her head stopped, her eyes lit up. She turned, facing Mawa, "I think I know how we can get out of here."

The cracklings of footsteps kept getting louder and soon the women overheard voices too.

"KLIK!" they recognised the sound of a loading gun. Mawa bowed her head and closed her eyes, Liwe tried to calm down by taking deep breaths.

“We cannot risk to use a gun here. It will alert the villagers and they might have guns too,” one voice said.

“Fine let split up. We will cover more grounds and get over with this quickly before sunrise,” the other voice responded.

As soon as his companion disappeared among the trees, Moko, holding his machete, got down on his hands and knees and started sniffing the grass, crawling like an animal. Soon he found a fresh trail of blood. He smiled, “I am coming Mawa.”

Liwe grabbed a thick piece of wood lying next to her. “Here is the plan. On the count of three, I will throw this to create a diversion and we will run to the opposite direction toward that headstone. The bushes behind that headstone hide a red rope and on the other side of the rope there is plantations and people, good people. All we have to do is run as fast as ...” While she was talking, Mawa raised her head to nod but froze. Her skin turning pale, her mouth dropping open, her eyes wide staring at Moko. Moko was standing behind Liwe, holding his machete high, ready to swing down on Liwe’s head.

Mawa screamed pushing Liwe aside, causing the blade to miss its target narrowly and smash the ground.

Liwe fell on the side and turned. Realising that her aggressor was trying to regain his balance after missing her, she jumped up and grabbed his arm with both hands, preventing him from using his machete then looking at Mawa, she screamed, “TO THE PLANTATION... RUUUUNNNN!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Mawa saw an open ploughed field and the sun rising on the horizon. She saw people, holding rakes and grape hoes, gesturing her to calm down.

She looked behind and pointed a finger at the graveyard saying, “There ... woman ... danger ... two rebels ... she ... help.” Coughing, trying to catch her breath she collapsed.

The following day Mawa, with her neck and left leg bandaged, and a scrapped forehead, sat with two elders, a man and a woman, under the shade of a mango tree, protecting them from the hot midday sun. Facing them she told them her story.

After she finished, the old man stood and tried to summarise the story, “You’re from the Mangaribi village and you sell cassava bread for a living. One evening you saw a soldier dumping a body in the lac. Unfortunately, there was another soldier hidden, who caught you. Since you saw them, the soldiers discussed what to do with you. One wanted to kill you but the other one, Moko, suggested to keep you as a trophy after completing the mission. Moko knocked you out. Later you woke up in our *makabouri* and Moko was trying to take advantage of you and that is when a woman from our village saved you. Right?”

Mawa nodded. The old man took out a pipe, lit it and started smoking it before continuing, “Yesterday after the men brought you from the plantation, some went to the *makabouri* and they found the two soldier you described but they didn’t find the woman, even after searching for hours.”

Mawa slightly raising her voice responded, “I swear she is still there somewhere. Check again please.”

She paused, thought about the story again. Lifting her eyebrows and jolting she added, “Liwe ... that’s it ... her name ... tall with a green headwrap ...”

Before she could finish, she noticed the elders’ eyes getting wider and wider, the more she described Liwe. The man dropped his pipe. The woman slowly covered her mouth.

“What’s going on?” Mawa asked with a distressed tone, head tilting to the side.

The old woman stood up, took a deep breath before saying with a melancholic tone, “Liwe died two years ago. She stopped eating, sleeping. She was depressed and grieving. She never recovered from the loss of her son.”

Mawa went pale.

END

Author's note

I was inspired to write this story by the long decade war in eastern Congo between the rebels and the Congolese army with the villagers caught in the middle, trying every day to survive.



ideas
for a
prosperous
Africa

