

ONE AND ALL FOR CAESAR

The old men were unhappy. Eva's offer to meet them halfway did not make any difference. Ordering them to raise fifty per cent of the burial expenses for Caesar was outrageous.

"Why?" they asked.

"He is your brother," she said to them.

Kasim had to translate that, though she said it in Kikamba.

"It is your duty to bury your brother," he told them.

They already knew that. That part of the relationship they understood. Caesar was dead. They had to bury him. What they wanted him to translate was the fifty per cent thing. Kasim gave them the condensed version of it leaving out the bit that would have had them itching to lynch her. Eva had to get back at them for all the wrongs they had done to their women and for being as stubborn as oxen. And for making her change her return flight plans and pay more for it. In clan-speak, it sounded much worse. But there it was.

They buried their heads in their hands in woe and groaned and sighed and despaired. Before Eva came and usurped Sam's role, everyone donated what he could, whatever he had, and the clan understood, and the clan was grateful for it. Being told what, or how much, to contribute was not King'oo. It was from her mother's side of the family, not theirs. This funeral was not supposed to be like that. Caesar was a reasonable man. Caesar was educated. Caesar was able. He was King'oo through and through. Caesar was a man among men. Caesar would never have demanded such a thing of them. Caesar would have buried himself.

The men's corner went into mourning, but not for Caesar. This time it was for their traditions, their way of life, their manhood. If only Caesar were here to tame this woman.

"Stop moaning like beggars," Aunt Kamene said to them. "Go home now and fetch the money."

"From where?" they asked. "Our wives are here too. Ask them if we have money."

"Even goats know King'oo men hide money from their wives," another woman said.

The old men had to turn to Kasim again, this time with a hypothetical question. How many goats would each have to sell to pay for half of Caesar's funeral?

"Very many," Kasim spoke plainly.

He had no sympathy at all for men who thought goats more important than their sons' education. Some of these very men had sided with his father on the issue of sending him to school. 'Let him herd goats with other boys,' they had said. Now he had the perverse pleasure of informing them they could not raise enough money to bury Caesar. Not if they sold their *shambas*, their wives and their grandchildren.

"Woe," they cried, we are finished.

He watched them wilt, sink deep in their embarrassment and despair. If they had known how Caesar's burial would turn out, they would have gone on long journeys until after the funeral.

Then uncle Tivo stirred. He was slowly coming out of the *chang'aa* gin cloud he had brought with him from Mzee Musau's off-license. The old men were his peers. But though they shared a drink now and then, they were not his kind. They worried too much, like women, and they were always complaining about life, the cost of living, the state of the economy and the county's hyena politics. Again, like women. They made it hard to let go, to forget the drudgery of life and live. He took the opportunity to put them straight.

"Here is what we do," he said to them. "You, Kimeu, go sell two of your plough oxen."

"*Aisi*," Kimeu sat up alarmed. "Sell my bulls? Will you pull my plough when I till?"

"Your wife can do that," said Uncle Tivo. "That was why you married her, was it not? And you Musau ..."

He turned to the next one.

"And you, Musau," he said to his friend the brewer. "Go bring all the money I spend in your bar."

"*Aisi!*" said Mzee Musau, outraged.

"You Mzee Kiribiti," Uncle Tivo said to the next one, "Go sell your Kathiani plot to Kilonzo. He has been begging you to do so for years. And you Karafuu ..."

"I will not sell my shop to bury Caesar," Karafuu rose to leave. "If Caesar wanted to be buried inside a Mercedes, he would have bought one for himself. Caesar was not a bloodsucker. Caesar was a man."

"Sit down," Eva ordered. "No one leaves this house before he gives money."

As it was, she said for those not aware of the true situation, Caesar left behind an empty granary. Not even money for his coffin.

The room stopped breathing. Now it was not just the old men that were worried. They looked at one another, at the floor at the ceiling and anywhere her eyes were not. What did she mean Caesar had no money? Was he not minister for finance for all those years? The President's own right-hand man with the keys to the national treasury?

Mzee Karafuu grumbled. If he had suspected this was how Caesar's burial would be, he would have closed his shop and gone to visit his old friend Meja in Nanyuki Town until after the funeral.

"And you?" Aunt Eva asked Uncle Tivo. "What will you sell?"

"What can I sell?" he said to her. "Everyone knows I wasted it all sending you to America."

Karafuu sat down next to him. He too had sold a cow for that lost course. A solidarity of losers. He had also sold something towards Uncle Richard's overseas education too. Caesar made them do things, including dig pit latrines for schools, and some of those things had yielded only pain. Few of the children they sacrificed for came back to Kathiani to buy them a soda at Kilonzo's bar.

Salim finally decided he had given enough time to the clan and informed Uncle Sam he would not be available for any chores during the following days meeting. He had handed in his reports and his assignments were up to date. Kasim would be there if anything involving them both came up.

Kasim rose to protest.

"Sit down," Aunt Eva ordered.

She turned to Salim, waited for an explanation.

"I have a date," he said it to Uncle Sam.

She gave him a penetrating look.

"With a girl," he hastened to add.

"How come you don't bring her with you to the meetings," she asked him. "Is she one-eyed? Where is she from?"

"Seychelles," he said, hesitantly.

"What is wrong with you King'oo men?" she said. "Now you have to go and marry a woman from India?"

"Seychelles is not India," he said, avoiding her eyes. "Not that it matters. And we are dating not getting married. Not yet."

"Not yet?" she said. "Why don't you all go marry Chinese women and leave King'oo women to run this clan?"

"Just a date, Aunt Eva," he said. "A date."

"There is a reason frogs don't date toads."

"Aunt Eva," he said recklessly, "You are married to an American."

"A man worth ten King'oo men."

With all King'oo eyes now on Roger, Salim could hear the old men's minds grind gears trying to understand what she meant by that. A foreign man worth ten King'oo men? Their eyes were on Roger, weighing him.

"That thin lizard of a man worth ten of us?" Salim heard one say in Kikamba. "Worth ten of us?"

"Not on this earth," said the one sitting next to him.

"*Aisi!* What is wrong with this woman?" another one wondered.

Roger instinctively ducked his head between his shoulders like a tortoise and lay low, his eyes studiously examining his wedding band, afraid he might be challenged to step outside and prove himself. He stayed that way until he felt the tension dissipate like a grass fire that ran out of grass. Then he started breathing again.

"You realise she will get you killed here, don't you?" Kasim whispered.

"Am afraid so," Roger whispered back.

"Look needy and harmless," Kasim advised. "That is how men survive here."

"I try, Kasim, I try," said Roger. "Here, there, and everywhere, I try."

Aunt Eva caught the tail end of the exchange, saw Roger's bemused smile, and called out.

"Roger, I told you to stay away from those two."

Kasim shrunk back, tried to squeeze away from Roger, but there was nowhere to go. The bench was overloaded with cousins and grand cousins and neighbours and people he had not known had anything to do with Caesar. Salim sat on the edge of the armrest uncertain what to do next. Whether to sneak out and go or stay and face the hurricane.

Uncle Tivo leaned over and spoke to Roger in Kikamba. Roger, confused, turned to Salim. He had heard what the old man said and did not wish to be involved in it. Translating Uncle Tivo was Kasim's business.

"You don't want to know," Salim said to Roger.

"Why not?" Roger asked.

"He wants to know if you were the best she could find in America," Kasim told him.

Roger smiled, the worried, patient smile he had to learn since his arrival.

"Salim?" Uncle Sam called.

They were waiting for his report. Salim rose and Kasim took his seat.

"Tell me," Roger said. "How are we really related?"

"Your wife and my mother are brothers," said Kasim.

"Brothers, huh? And which one of these ... brothers is your mother?"

"The big one with a beard."

Roger looked about, saw no woman with a beard.

"Just kidding," said Kasim. "My mother is not here today. But she's every pound as formidable as your wife."

Roger, taking it all too seriously, worried.

"We can have Uncle Richard's pickup," Salim reported. "On condition Aunt Eva is responsible for any damage and we return it with a full tank of petrol."

"What do you mean we?" asked Aunt Eva. "You offered to take care of the hearse."

"Aunty, I did not promise to pay for it."

"We heard you," said Aunt Wavinya. "Even Kasim heard you. Kasim?"

Kasim looked up from chatting with Roger, saw the stern look on her face, nodded. It was always safer to agree them.

"How much have we raised?" Aunt Eva asked Sam.

"Little" said Sam.

"How little?"

"Nearly nothing."

"I always said there were no men in King'oo's house," she said.

"Aunt Eva," said Salim, "this is only our second or third real meeting."

She turned to Sam.

"What does he mean real? Were all the other meetings you told about imaginary?"

"Uncle Tivo forbade us to make any decisions without you."

"Forbade you?" She turned to Uncle Tivo.

He was on the phone with his imaginary friends.

"All right, then," she said. "Before we go any further, let us see what you men can do. Where is the *chondo*? Bring it here."

Aunt Kamene handed her a woven bag large enough to carry a goat. She placed it by her feet.

"Salim," she said, "Show them what to do."

"Why me?" he said startled.

"You are the most educated."

"No, I'm not," he said. "Uncle Richard is."

"Apart from you, Aunt Eva," Kasim said.

"You are next in line," she said to him. "Salim, let us see your money now."

Salim took out his wallet, saw how little there was and paused to calculate how much he needed to survive for the next two days. They saw the uncertain look on his face. Suddenly some men started eyeing the door.

"Shut that door!" she said. "No one leaves before this bag is full."

Salim took out his money, covering it with his hand so no one could see the amount, and dropped it the bag.

"One thousand?" Aunt Kamene announced looking in the bag.

"Only one thousand?" said Aunt Eva. "You are a lawyer; you can do better than that. More money, Salim, more money."

"That is all I have for now," he said. "More to follow."

"Write a cheque," she said.

"I don't carry cheques."

"I want to see more money from you tomorrow," she said. "Who is next? You with the torn jacket. Take out all the money you brought for *harambee* and bring it here."

The man bolted out of the house.

"Who left that door open?" asked Aunt Eva. "Someone shut that door."

"*Kwani*, how much petrol does Uncle Richard's pickup drink?" Uncle Tivo asked aloud.

He knew about cars. What Salim had given was enough to fuel any pickup from Nairobi to Kathiani and back.

"Quiet," she said to him. "I want to see your money too. One by one starting with the young men. Maina?"

As the men started to file past Aunt Eva dropping their contributions in the bag, Uncle Tivo turned to Roger and spoke to him in Kikamba.

"What does the old guy want now?" Roger asked Kasim.

"He wants to know if it is true that money grows on trees in America?"

"He too is kidding, right?"

"One never knows with him."

"Who is he?"

“Uncle Tivo. He is as crazy, as everyone in this family.”

“Kasim?” Aunt Eva called.

“Now the torture begins,” he said to Roger. “Watch.”

“Kasim!” Aunt Kamene said. “Bring the money you make in bars?”

Kasim rose, adjusted his belt, and clowned his way to the aunts. Uncle Tivo turned to Roger, spoke to him in Kikamba. Then he nudged the boy by his side to translate.

“He says,” said the boy, “Uncle Tivo says that there is a reason frogs do not with toads marry.”

Roger looked at the old man, then at the boy and back at the old man.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. “I know you can speak English.”

The old man smiled and winked.

“Kasim?” Aunt Eva asked, “Where is your money?”

“That was for Salim and me,” said Kasim.

“Salim?” Aunt Eva asked. “Is that true?”

Salim shrugged, nodded. Always safer to agree.

“More money from you two tomorrow,” she said.

She looked in the bag, did a quick count and threw up her hands in despair. At this rate she would never get to go back home.

“Just enough for a donkey cart,” she said to them.

The aunts did not know what to make of that statement. They turned to Aunt Charity. Aunt Charity had withdrawn to her quiet place in her mind. She nursed Caesar through his sickness. Now it was their turn to take care of him.