

Rafiki
Meja Mwangi

Times were changing. Manu hammered his calculator with less bile and even Manish's stare seemed to have mellowed a bit. He did not speak more than his usual one word, but the smile, if it could be so called, the hint of a smile that had been always there lurking somewhere in his dark thoughts, had started to appear at the corners of his eyes.

"What's wrong with Manish?" Rafiki had to ask.

"He does not want to die anymore," Manu informed him.

"Why not?"

The question, as awkward as it felt, seemed the only logical one to ask.

"His wife is not leaving," Manu revealed.

"Why not?"

"The bank is not taking his house."

"Why not?"

"They are not taking my house either," Manu reported.

"Why?"

"The bank is happy with us," a rare smile touched his lips. "Now our wives' jewellery and our cars can come out of hiding."

The cars and the jewellery had been in hiding for ages in fear of the bank. Now it was all over. The cars and other hidden assets could all safely come home. It seemed enough reason to break out in song and dance. But the Patel brothers seemed to find no cause for celebration. They were still heavily in debt, Manu explained, but, now, thanks to Rafiki and his son, they were slowly rising above the water. The bank was happy and the brothers could once again sleep at night.

All of it was good, thought Rafiki. However, something deep inside him seemed to cry out, *Na mimi je?* What about me?

"What about you?" Manu looked up startled by the anguish in the voice.

"What about me?" Rafiki asked him. "I have helped you and your brother Manish keep your business, your stuff and your wives. What do I get out of it?"

Manu pulled the drawer to show they still had no money. It had all gone to the bank.

"Boss," Rafiki pulled up the visitors' chair and sat down heavily. "Will you help me get back my bed and my wife?"

"How?" wondered Manu.

"I'll think of a way."

"Not money?" Manu asked, doubtfully.

Rafiki did the Manu thing with the hands and the shoulders, the one that meant whatever it was understood to mean. Manu worried. They were not out of the woods yet, as far as money was concerned, and he could think of no other way he could help Rafiki.

"Don't worry, Boss," Rafiki said to him. "I don't want your money."

The phone rang. They searched for their phones. It was Rafiki's.

"Man Guitar," he announced in his loud, business voice. "Hallo, *Mami*, it's good to hear from you. How is University? Good. I believe in you. I know you can do it. You are strong-minded, yes, like your mother. You can do anything. I'm very happy about it. *Soma kwa bidii*. I don't want you to be a drop out. Yes, he gave up school. He works for me now."

Rafikison looked up startled. Rafiki gestured at him to keep working.

"Don't worry about him," he went on, loud so that his son would hear him. "I'm teaching him to be a man. He's learning to be responsible. Yes, like a real man. With my guidance, he will make it. Yes, I have a lot to teach him. No, your mother doesn't think so, but we'll show her. Have you talked to her lately? I get news from time to time. She needs a break from the farm. You know she works very hard and is always coming up with new ideas. She wanted me to sell camel meat. No, I didn't even want to know from where. You don't worry about her. She is full of good ideas too. *Wene soma kabisa*. Concentrate on your studies and I'll take care of the rest. I have a job now. You heard about it? No, no, you know I would never give up music completely. I'm just trying to make her happy for now. I'm glad someone understands that. I love you too. I'll tell him you said hello. Bye."

The call lit a glow in his heart.

"Your sister said hallo," he yelled at his son.

Rafikison did not acknowledge. Rafiki rose and went over to the worktable.

"Did you hear that?" he asked him.

The boy nodded, finished repairing the radio he was working on, carried it to Manish's desk and left it blasting the shop with Hindi music. Manish did not seem to mind, but it bothered Manu enough to go over and turn it off.

"By the way," Rafikison said to his father. "You are expected at Marura on Saturday without fail."

"Why?" asked Rafiki. "What's happening?"

"They didn't tell me," answered Rafikison. "They just said - tell your father to be here on Saturday, without fail."

Rafiki nodded, like he understood it, and walked out of the shop to think. He stood just outside the door with his hands behind his back, worrying-Manu style, and watched the *matatus*, the *piki-pikis* and the plastic bags fly up Main Street. People hailed him, and he hailed them back, but he did not really see any of them, so deeply was he engrossed in his worries. Up until now, his chief worry had been that Simon and Karanja might succeed in killing him if he returned to Marura. Now they wanted to see him without fail. Without fail? What would happen if he failed?

"Who exactly said it?" he asked, returning to the worktable. "Without fail?"

"Your father-in-law," said his son.

"The old grouch?" Rafiki was not surprised. "I bet he wants his ten cows."

His son shrugged.

"What did your mother say?"

"Dad," said the boy. "We don't discuss you with Mum."

The jinni was watching and grinning at Rafiki from behind the cash register. He stepped back to the entrance and did some more thinking. Did his father-in-law want him for peace talk or for a battering? He wondered. For a reconciliation or for a final dissolution of their difficult relationship? Was this it? Was it possible she did not wish to see or talk to him again, ever? That their marriage was over?

He returned to Manu and dropped back in the visitors' chair.

"Boss," he asked gravely, "how is your car?"

"My car?"

"The one that the bank doesn't want anymore."

Manu shrugged. He had not had a chance to test-drive it to see how well it worked.

"I have an idea," Rafiki said to him. "Now that you don't have to hide your car anymore, why not take Manish for a drive in the country?"

Manu paused with his hand hovering over the calculator, tried to calculate what Rafiki was up to. Their last outing on the donkey had not gone at all as promised. As a result, they had agreed to never go out on a donkey ride together again.

"I want to show you something," Rafiki said.

Manu considered. He had been itching to get back behind the wheel of his car and do something different for a long time. He would have preferred to take the wives out to Naro Moru River Lodge for lunch, but perhaps this was a good chance to test the car first and see if it still worked.

"We'll see," he said, and went back to his calculator.

Rafiki returned to his worktable, touched this and that, but his mind was not on work anymore. It was too late to go hunting for appliances, so he contended himself with watching his son work.

The singers and the beggars came by, but Manu was busy counting and Manish was watching the door, so it was left to Rafiki to take care of them. Sometimes he obtained change from Manu to give out, but when Manu was in a bad mood, or had no change, Rafiki had to use his initiative and handle the problem in his own way. He tried to make the beggars see that things were different now, that Manu had better things to do with his money.

"Was I talking to you?" they said to him.

"You might as well talk to me," he told them. "The Boss is busy and *Mzee* doesn't talk to strangers anymore, so get lost. *Potea*."

They left, grumbling, and he went back to his worrying.

Manu did not ask where they were going until the car leaped off the end of the asphalt, landed with a bone-jarring bump on the dirt road and raised dust down the Dol Dol Highway.

"Is it far?" he asked, shifting gears uncertainly.

"Not too far," Rafiki assured. "Just up ahead."

The just ahead was another five miles down the rough and dusty road before they came to a turn off to somewhere, then another two bumpy miles along old roads and cattle trails that seemed to lead to nowhere. Manu was beginning to worry about Manish and threatening to turn round and drive back when the gate to Marura Estate appeared up ahead.

"There," Rafiki pointed. "See, it wasn't all that far?"

As the car pulled up at the gate, two thugs in faded camouflage jackets and wearing military boots came out of hiding to open the gate. Simon and Karanja had evolved from soldier and jailbird to security men and dog handlers.

“*Jambo*, Simon,” Rafiki greeted them out of the window of the car. “Are you now watchmen?”

The men bristled, and the dogs growled. Had he come alone and on foot or on *piki-piki*, no doubt, they would have let the dogs have him. Rafiki had thought of the possibility when he suggested his employers take a ride in the country.

“What’s the matter with them?” Manu wondered, as they drove through the gate.

“They have no wives,” Rafiki informed.

The drove a long a well kept, tree-lined driveway that seemed to run for miles before finally opening onto a compound with a huge stone mansion and vast flower gardens.

“What is this?” Manu was awed.

“My father-in-law’s country manor,” Rafiki informed.

Even Manish seemed impressed by the extent of the place. There were sounds of people talking and laughing not far away. A woman Rafiki had never met before came for them and led them from the driveway and round to the back of the house.

There were people everywhere eating, drinking or simply walking around apparently aimless. The guide abandoned Rafiki and his party in the middle of the throng and went off, leaving Rafiki to fend for himself and his company. In the invitation, that Rafiki had received via his absent son, he had not been issued with an agenda.

“They want you home on Saturday,” was all the boy had said.

He had assumed it was to fetch his wife. Now it seemed that he had to improvise. He led his bosses into the thick of the thing, introducing them to people who were too busy to care and who spoke in a language they did not understand. Manu and Manish shook the offered hands and tried to smile, as the people seemed to be welcoming them to whatever it was they were doing.

“Who are all these people?” Manu asked, bewildered.

“My wife’s people,” Rafiki said to him. “I told you where we were going.”

“For a country drive,” said Manu.

“This is it,” informed Rafiki. “This is the country.”

Manu had assumed something other than this. He had imagined a leisurely drive over undulating, grassy knolls with grazing sheep and shepherds with crooked rods and sheep dogs at their heels. He looked at Manish. Manish seemed at ease, accepting, but that did not mean he wanted to be there either.

“And what are we doing here?” Manu asked Rafiki.

“I want you to meet my wife’s people.”

“Why?”

“It is customary,” Rafiki explained. “When fetching back your wife, you must bring your best friends.”

Manu turned to his brother.

“Manish?”

“Huh?”

“Did you hear that? We are Rafiki’s best friends.”

“Huh,” said Manish.

When Rafiki had persuaded them to close the shop and take the car out on the road, since they did not have to hide their cars from the bankers anymore, thanks mostly to Rafiki and his son’s genius, he had not told them they would be going to anyone’s mansion or be meeting anyone they did not know. Manu had assumed that the something he wanted to show them was a physical feature, a hill or a waterfall, something to take their minds of the rigors of the past months. He had not imagined they would be meeting a whole clan of Rafiki’s relatives, some of who were responsible for his recent woes.

“Get us out of here,” Manu said suddenly.

“Not before you meet my wife,” Rafiki took them by the hands and led them towards the house. They had taken but a few paces from the rest of the gathering, when Simon and Karanja and their guard dogs suddenly appeared blocking their way. Rafiki took one look at them and turned his party round.

“Maybe later,” he said to Manu and Manish. “When those two are not around.”

As they returned to the party, a woman Rafiki did not recognize took Manu’s hand and, speaking in a language that was not Swahili, English or Hindi, and which Manu could only guess to be Nanyukian, she welcomed him to their home. Then she led him to a high chair next to a grumpy *mzee* who did not look like he needed or even wanted anyone’s company and left Rafiki to do the introductions.

“This is my employer,” Rafiki said to the old grump.

His father-in-law glanced at Manu. Then turned so that there was no doubt he was talking to Rafiki and him alone.

"It is good that you have come," he said to him. "Your mother needs another *sberahani* machine. The one I bought her is broken and I understand that you work where they come from."

"My father-in-law," Rafiki said to Manu, continuing the introduction. "He says he is happy that you and Manish could come."

"I heard *sberahani*," Manu said.

"Oh, yes, that," Rafiki was yet to repossess his mother-in-law's sewing machine, as ordered eons ago. "He says that the *sberahani* you sold him ..."

"Which he hasn't paid for," said Manu.

"Broke down," Rafiki continued. "He has heard that I work where it came from, and, therefore, I must return the old *sberahani* and bring my mother-in-law a new one. That is what he says."

Then he sat down on a low stool next to Manu ready for the arrows. His father-in-law turned to Manu and spoke to him as if he understood every word.

"We thank you for giving this Dorobo a job," he said to Manu in mother tongue. "He has been sleeping on his senses like a retired crocodile."

Rafiki had come expecting a fair amount of animosity. He had been taking it since marrying into the crazy family, anyway, but he was taken aback by the extent of the hostility. His father-in-law was an original too, educated at Nanyuki High, then at Alliance and also in Manchester. He could, if he deigned to, or when he got decently sauced, speak English like a Yorkshire man. The fact that he had chosen to use Rafiki as an interpreter meant he wanted him to feel every one of his barbs.

"What did he say?" Manu asked.

"He is happy to see you," Rafiki said simply.

His father-in-law looked up startled. Then he turned to Manu and gave him a Yorkshire English version of what he had really said.

"You have done good to give this wanker something else to do with his hands," he said. "The bugger has been basking in the streets like a vacationing crocodile."

Manu turned to Rafiki confused. Rafiki shrugged and smiled back like, *see what I have to deal with?* His father-in-law pulled Manu's seat closer to his for a supposedly intimate conversation which non-the-less was loud enough for everyone, and especially Rafiki, to hear.

"I knew he was no good the moment I laid eyes on him," he now went on fired up. "I warned my daughter about him, but ... you know women. Now see what happened to her."

"Nothing happened to her," Rafiki dared deny. "She didn't like that I had no money. Now I have a paying job."

His father-in-law looked round Manu at Rafiki.

"We have heard about that too," he said to Rafiki.

He leaned closer to Manu's ear, so that Rafiki would not hear.

"I don't know what you people see in this rogue," he said. "He's just waiting for a chance to rob you."

Manu glanced at Rafiki, but kept his peace.

"I have land, as you can see," the old man said to him. "I have cows, goats and even camels. I would be a better business partner."

Manu turned to Rafiki alarmed. He crooked a finger at him, rose and walked aside with Rafiki following him.

"What have you told him?" Manu asked when they were out of the old man's hearing.

"He and I don't talk at all," said Rafiki. "But my son may have told him what a good employer you are, how you love and care for your brother Manish, and also how you two are my good friends."

At the mention of Manish, they both instinctively turned and looked about for him. They had lost him, in the heat of the encounter with Rafiki's nemesis, but they now saw Manish ensconced in the company of grey-haired peers watching the goings-on from behind a beer horn. A triangle started playing. An accordion joined it, and then a raspy, old voice and soon the old timers were tapping their feet.

"What else have you told them?" Manu turned to Rafiki.

"What else?"

"About business partnership?"

"That just slipped out, Boss," said Rafiki. "I was trying to impress the old devil. But, as you can see, I failed; he hates my guts still. He is, however, glad that you and Manish are here today. And, now that I have a job, my wife can come back home."

"So, everything is *theek hei*?" asked Manu.

"Better than *theek hei*," he confirmed.

"Then you are fired."

"What for?"

"For lying to your father-in-law."

"What do you care about the old grump?" Rafiki asked, genuinely startled. "He lies to me too. He told me he sold five cows, when he only sold three, and then he tried to stick me with ten."

"You lied to me too," Manu admonished. "To drive you here."

"You don't like it here?"

"You are still fired."

"You can't do that here," Rafiki's voice rose in protest. "They think you are a really good man."

"Ok, you come to work on Monday," Manu said. "Then you are fired."

He turned and stormed off back to his car.

"Boss?" Rafiki was at his heels.

"Monday."

"You forget Manish."

Manu stopped, startled at himself and frustrated by his own anger. Manish was deep in silent conversation with his peers, a beer horn in one hand and roast goat's rib in the other and looking happier than either of them had seen him in recent times.

"The old guy has not had a good day for months," Rafiki said. "Let him enjoy his little country outing, before you take him back to his drab, old life."

Manu considered. Manish looked the happiest he had seen him since the banks came calling.

"*Theek hei*," he said to Rafiki. "But, you are still fired."

"On Monday," Rafiki agreed, leading the way back to the old grump. "Beer?"

"I don't drink beer."

"Then you will love this."

Rafiki snatched a cup of honey wine from a passing tray and handed it to Manu.

"The nectar of the gods," he revealed. "Why Manish is so happy."

Manu sipped, smelt it, and sipped again.

"*Theek hei?*" Rafiki asked him.

He did the thing with his hands, took another sip and another. Rafiki began to relax. The grump had gone back in his shell, from where he was now watching them as if he could not wait to see them leave. Rafiki was peeved at not being allowed to see his wife, but he could not appeal to his father-in-law. He would probably invite a barrage of admonitions and criticism and stuff he had rather not hear about himself.

"So all is *theek hei*?" Manu asked watching him. "With the wife and family?"

"Not quite," Rafiki spoke deliberately loud so that his father-in-law would hear and know that he was angry about it. "There's a small matter of a bride price."

"You have to buy her back?"

"Not exactly."

"Ah, I see," said Manu. "You bought on credit and didn't pay all the instalments."

"Boss," Rafiki's voice was so strained it was about to break. "The principle is never paid off. Otherwise, where would be the need for continued relationship? With wives, you pay until you die. And then your son, if you are unlucky enough to have a son, pays until he dies. Then his son pays. It's a ... a lot like the bank. Right now, her father wants ten cows from me, her people want thousands of shillings and her mother wants a water tank."

"Water tank?" Manu wondered.

"Don't even try to understand that," Rafiki told him. "You hear that music? That is not just music. It is a coded message telling everyone what I owe the clan."

Manu tried to understand it anyway. Not just the water tank, but also the people and all the movement and quiet mayhem that seemed to be going on about them. A party that was not a wedding party, but involved in-laws, an unhappy bridegroom, bride price, and a lot of happy people who did not look all that happy with the bridegroom, and Manu was yet to see the wife bride. Where was she?

"Don't worry about her," Rafiki advised. "In fact, don't worry about anything you see or hear here today."

Manu began to really worry, not just about what might happen, but also about what was really going on, about his own safety and especially that of Manish in the middle of all those uncertain relations.

"You are safe with me," Rafiki assured.

"You brought your knife?"

"Not funny, Boss," said Rafiki. "I'm their son-in-law. Whether they like me or not, without her say-so, they can't kill us."

The old grump rumbled, from deep inside his shell, as if to say, *don't be so certain*, but he kept his peace.
Meanwhile, a raspy old voice crooned a rusty old song -