

THE BOY GIFT
Meja Mwangi

The corridors were spotlessly clean, from the grey walls to the whitewashed ceiling, to the black and white linoleum floor.

Turning a corner, he walked into a stern nurse. The nurse wanted to know who he was and why he was loitering in a women's hospital. Did he have business there? Did he have permission to be there?

It seemed the place was full of hard women who did not listen and tried to humiliate a man every chance they got.

"My wife has a baby," he said to the nurse.

"Why didn't you say so?" She laughed, making it seem that she had been teasing him.

Now he remembered that the nurses enjoyed nothing better than to laugh at a man.

She pointed him in the opposite direction and warned him that visiting time was nearly over.

Down the corridor, a sterner nurse showed him to a glass window and ordered him to be gone by the time she returned with the cleaner.

Inside the viewing window was a vast room with rows of white metal cots. A gloomy nurse was making the beds and tidying the room, talking to herself and to the babies. She looked up when Tomei stepped up to the window, smiled faintly and continued her work.

He waited. She worked. He waited. Finally, afraid that the stern nurse would return to chase him out before the gloomy nurse noticed him, he tapped on the window. She looked up, scowled at him, and continued her work. He rapped again, louder. She ignored him until she had finished doing her things. Then she approached the window.

"Speak up," she ordered.

"Tomei."

"What?"

"I want to see my baby," he said. "Toma Tomei."

The gloomy nurse consulted a register, muttering to herself as she ran her finger down the list. There was no Toma Tomei on her list.

"I am Toma Tomei," he said.

"What's your baby's name?"

"Name?"

"What do you call it?"

"Call it?"

Apart from the fact that he had not seen it to call it anything, babies were not named until it was clear they would live, not die. She would have known that, had she not been a foreigner, perhaps even an *Out Worlder*, as they all were, judging by their lack of proper respect for men.

"It was born last night," he tried enlightening her.

It would be named Dark Warrior, Night Comer or something equally appropriate. But, for now, all he wanted was to confirm that it was a boy.

"Wait," she ordered.

He waited. She searched through the cots, peering at faces and reading nametags. She made a round of the nursery. He waited. She took so long he again feared the sterner nurse would return and send him away before he had seen his son. It had to be a son. He had sacrificed enough chickens and goats to guarantee it. He had slaughtered roosters and brewed honey beer for the spirits. Muti had assured him that this time he would succeed. This time he would have a son, a giant among men, a warrior and a conqueror, a son like no other. This time he would be a man. This time he would vanquish and silence all his enemies.

Then the gloomy nurse returned bringing him his baby, a tiny thing fitting snugly in the crook of her arm, and so swathed with towels it seemed to be all towels and held it to the window for him to see.

"Baby Tomei," she announced, with an air of triumph.

Tomei gaped. All the great names he had dreamed up for his son fled screaming out of his mind, and left a dull, brain numbing ache in his head, a resounding emptiness.

"My baby?" he asked her.

"Your baby."

She uncovered it for him to see and, sure enough, it was a boy.

“Baby Tomei,” she announced.

“My son?”

“Your son.”

He looked in the mirror, looked at the baby and back in the mirror again. Finally, he shook his head resolutely.

“Look again,” he managed to say. “That one is not mine.”

“There’s no other Baby Tomei here,” she informed him.

He shook his head, his eyes twitching wildly.

“Are you all right?” she asked him.

He continued shaking his head, his mouth working but no voice coming out, and craning his neck to see past her to the cots. She smiled encouragingly and held the baby to the window.

“He’s a fine boy, really,” she said. “Look he has got your fingers. He’ll grow so big and strong you will hardly recognise him.”

Tomei went on shaking his head, his mind in turmoil. She saw it every day; men struck dumb at the first sight of the fruit of their loins.

“Are you done then?” she asked, when it was clear she could not cheer him up.

He nodded just as resolutely and said he was done. But the matter was far from over. He wanted answers and he wanted them now.

Inside the matron’s office, a few moments later, he listened bewildered as another hard woman told him a strange story, and an even longer tale, that had nothing at all to do with his simple and orderly world and made no sense whatsoever.

“You say it is not sick?” he asked her confounded.

“It is perfectly normal,” the Day Matron assured him.

“And it is not bewitched?”

“It is not witchcraft.”

“Why is it ... different?” He asked her.

“Why?” she asked, exasperated. “Because it is different.”

It was a cramped office. Files and empty boxes lay all over the place. The shelves along the walls were packed with more files and empty cartons. On one wall were two portraits of two white women, one old and the other holding a baby. Tomei recognized the Madonna and Child, but he had never heard of Mother Theresa, nor ever felt as outnumbered as he did now.

“Where is it from?” he asked the matron. “That is what I want to know.”

“It is a type, not a tribe,” she explained. “Very rare, but it happens.”

“How come I never heard of it?”

Such things never happened to his clan.

“It is extremely rare,” she explained, talking slowly and clearly, as to a child. “A strange but normal thing.”

However, she went on to add, the strangest things were getting common every day.

“It is all the pills and things your wives take not to have babies,” she said to him. “The skin-whitening creams and foreign soaps and things you make them use to beautify themselves; it’s a wonder the babies are born with any skin at all.”

“Not my wife,” Tomei informed her.

His wife Grace was a real woman, a traditional woman. She did not need to change her face to beautify herself for him. In fact, he would be very angry with her if she changed herself. But that was not why he was here.

“Men!” They never ceased to amaze her. “It is not all about you, you know.”

“Not about me?” he asked startled.

“Not about men,” she laughed. “It is also about us women. We are not the beasts of burden and baby machines you take us for, you know. We are people too; people with feelings and needs, just like you. We need to look good, and to feel good too about our bodies and ourselves. We’d like to be desired for things other than our fertility and our industry. To be desired for ...”

“Desired?” Tomei was at a complete loss. “Why? Desired by whom?”

“By our husbands,” she eased, “just by you. Not that it ever stopped a man from wandering.”

“Wandering?” What on earth was she talking about now?

And before he could begin to understand her, she was off on a different track, dragging him along winding

bush trails, full of wild and obscure ideas, he had never imagined existed. She told him of cell formation, and of fertilisation and mitosis. She talked of things called chromosomes, mitochondria and DNA, and about a dozen equally mystifying things that he had never heard of and did not care to understand. It left a ringing in his ears.

“Were you there when the baby was born?” he asked, returning to the more pertinent issue.

“The Night Matron would tell you the same thing too, if she were here.”

It is a natural phenomenon.”

“A what?”

“A natural occurrence.”

Tomei shook his head, scratched his chin and was lost for words.

“So, what do I tell the clan?” he asked himself.

“Exactly what I have told you,” she advised. “It is a natural phenomenon and nothing more. I am sure the clan will understand.”

She did not understand at all, he now realised. The son had to be like the father; like the father in every detail. He tried enlightening her.

She listened patiently while he educated her, moaning and groaning and grumbling about clans and traditions, and about what it meant to be a man, until she wearied of him. Then she picked up the phone and made a call to Nairobi to consult an expert. The expert confirmed what she had just told Tomei, that it wasn't anyone's fault, and that he and his clan better start liking it, because, like it or not, that was the way it was. That was it.

Tomei settled deeper in his chair, and it seemed he would not leave unless she told him something he could understand. So she made one more telephone call, this one to a renowned doctor in Canada. Professor Churchill confirmed that the boy was perfectly normal and would do just fine, if they kept him out of the sun.

“Out of the sun!” Tomei shot to his feet. “What sort of chief doesn't go out in the sun?”

“Sit down!” She ordered, slamming down the phone.

He was so startled he sat down immediately.

“What is your problem, man?” She was looking him in the eye, something he found troubling.

“My problem?”

“Your problem.”

“My problem?” He tried to think of a language that a woman could understand. “When you plant millet ...”

“Millet?”

“Yes, millet,” he said it slowly so she could keep up. “When you plant millet, you don't expect ...”

“Millet?”

Obviously, she did not get it.

“What I am saying is,” he tried again, slower still, “when you plant sorghum, you don't get ...”

“Sorghum?” She laughed suddenly, startling him. “What have sorghum and millet got to do with your baby? Are you saying that you did not plant this seed? Is that what you are saying?”

“What I am saying is ...” he persisted, refusing to be sidetracked.

“That your wife got the baby from another man?”

“What I am saying ...”

“Will you stop meandering in the bush and say what you mean?”

He was near despair. Why was it always so difficult for women to understand? He shook his head confounded, cramped his mouth shut and decided he would not utter another word to her.

“According to my records,” she said, opening her register and turning the pages, “only two babies were born here last night. One of them was ...”

She stopped suddenly, and examined the records closely, looking puzzled and raising his hopes. The last entry was hardly legible. It seemed to indicate that two babies had been delivered at approximately the same time. Most of the entry was a jumble of figures and letters that did not have to make any sense to the visitor. In any case, one mother had left for Nairobi with her baby, right after delivery, and, so far, there had been no complaints from anyone other than Tomei.

“What I am saying is,” Tomei tried again, “when you plant black-eye beans, you don't expect ...”

“Rice?”

“You do understand,” he sighed with relief. “You do understand.”

“Understand?” She laughed explosively and slapped the register shut. “You'd be surprised the things I

have seen here. Just last week, a mother delivered eight babies. Imagine that. Eight babies. Here I am, expecting one, maybe two babies and she drops eight on me. Can you see that? Eight tiny boys, one after the other? Even goats don't do that anymore. One minute she is childless, the next she has too many. Just like that. And there sits her husband, exactly where you sit now, with an ego as large as a beer gourd, swearing that only one of the eight is his. He sat exactly where you are now refusing to believe his own eyes. And you think you have a problem? A problem? Just because you don't like the way your baby is? You should thank God he has any eyes at all."

Tomei thought about it, shook his head.

"I cannot accept this," he concluded.

"His words exactly," said the matron.

"I will not accept it!" He was decided.

"Accept?" wondered the matron. "The baby is already here, your wife is happy with it, so what is there to accept?"

Tomei stormed to his feet.

"You are all alike," he informed her.

Then he strode to the door and slammed it behind him.

He remembered where the ward was, down another long, evil-smelling corridor patrolled by nurses whose sole purpose in life, it seemed, was to disrespect men. He did not meet any of them this time and made it all the way to the ward without incident.

An old cleaner, standing by the door of the ward with bucket and mop, stepped aside to let him pass, then followed.

It was a small ward, holding about twenty beds, all of them neatly made. There was no one in the ward. The cleaner watched from the doorway as Tomei stood in the middle of the ward scratching his head and muttering to himself. He was about to turn around and leave when he saw his wife's sweater hanging on the back of a chair by one of the beds. Her Bible was on the bedside table next to the chair. Through the open window, he saw the patients and their visitors out in the garden enjoying the sunshine.

He was shuffling his feet, thinking what to do next, when he noticed the handbag partially hidden under the bed. It was made of fine leather and had a strange sweet scent of perfume. He shook it, heard the rattle of keys and bottles and did not know what to make of it. He was about to place it on his wife's locker when something fell out of it. He picked it up and unfolded it, examining the lines and the symbols with growing bewilderment. He had never seen such a *thing* before and had no idea it was *Vasco da Gama's Route Map Of The African Bush*. He returned it in the bag, and was stuffing the bag in his wife's locker, when a shout from the doorway startled him.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the stern nurse.

Did he have any business there or was he just another pervert looking to steal something? Did he have the matron's permission to be there? Why was he loitering in a women's ward?

"I am looking for my wife," he said to her.

"It is basking time," she said harshly. "Outside!" She made no move to get out of his way and he had to walk round her to get out of the ward.

"You too, out!" She yelled at the cleaner.

The sun had scared the mist and fog back into the hills, and patients and visitors were out in the hospital gardens enjoying the warmth of the sun. Mothers sat on white, metal chairs nursing their babies while husbands stood morosely by or walked about distracted. Stern nurses, in smart white uniforms, patrolled the grounds, going from group to group, keeping the peace and ensuring everyone was reasonably happy.

Tomei found his wife sitting alone in the shade of a thorn tree nursing her baby as though there was nothing in the world wrong with it.

"What is this now?" he asked her.

Grace Tomei was a patient woman. Speaking slowly and respectfully, she answered his question the best she could, even as screams rose inside her bosom.

It had been the most difficult birth she had ever endured. A long, dark night full of pain and anguish; so much pain that she thought she had died and gone to hell. But there was no fire or warmth there, only voices, cold and strange voices and another woman crying in anguish, saying - "Take it away, I don't want it, it's not mine."

"But you are having it," the midwife's jolly voice was there too.

"Take it back," the woman cried. "Please make it go away."

The midwife had laughed her merry laugh.

"I cannot do that."

"Oh, my God, it is killing me."

The matron's laughter had echoed from the walls of the delivery room, as Grace sank in a warm, light fog all the way to unconsciousness. When she came to, hours later, she had found herself on a cold, metal bed, covered with a plastic sheet. The Night Matron had apologised for abandoning her in a corner of the delivery room thinking that she was dead. But Grace was not complaining. She had given Tomei a son, and now he could be a man.

"Wasn't that all you wanted?" she asked him.

"He doesn't look like me," Tomei still grumbled.

"No one looks like you," she informed him.

He worried even more. She let him worry. Her mother had warned her about short men from Happy Valley. They were bitter, vindictive and never happy, never satisfied. They were petty, secretive and insidious. They could kill you with their nagging, and with their need for affirmation. And they were most dangerous when they were silent, because that was when they did desperate things.

"What am I supposed to do now?" he asked finally.

"Why must you do anything?" she asked. "Your other children don't look like you. Why must this one? No one in your clan looks like you."

It was no secret he was the most unattractive man in Happy Valley. Women often told her so, sometimes with laughter in their voices and sometimes without. They said that he would have died a lonely man, had Grace not married him out of pity.

Now, watching him suffer, she pitied him even more.

"Tomei," she said. "This is not the way to thank me for the pain I have endured to give you a son."

"A son they will not accept."

No one would accept it.

"Accept?" She picked her words with great care. "What are you saying, Tomei? Whatever you want to say, come out and say it now and stop hiding in the bush like an old buffalo. I was a girl when you found me in my mother's house. Whatever is wrong with your son is your own doing."

"My own doing?" he asked astonished. "Am I the one who gave birth?"

"Do you think I do not know how many chickens you paid Muti?" She asked him.

"My own chickens!" He said.

"Your own chickens?" Her voice rising.

"Everything you have belongs to me."

"Including this baby!" She finally yelled.

The stern nurse was approaching. They kept quiet, expecting her to pass and go on her way, but she came straight to where they were.

"Is there a problem?" She asked them.

"There is no problem," Grace said.

The nurse was not new to Happy Valley men, and their ways. Tomei was festering, babbling like a gourd of discontent, and about to blow.

"Can I help?" she asked him.

"No one can help this man," Grace said to her.

"So there is a problem?"

"There is no problem."

"All right," said the nurse, "out with it!"

Tomei started to speak, but Grace beat him to it.

"There is no problem," she said. "We are talking family things."

Tomei snapped his mouth shut. He suffered the nurse's glare until he could not stand it anymore. Then he turned to her, pleading with his whole being.

"Look at this baby," he said to her.

"A fine baby."

"Look again," he ordered.

She knew where he was heading, but she made a show of looking at it anyway, kissing a soft cheek and caressing it.

"A sweet baby," she said.

Tomei stared at her, flabbergasted. Where on earth did women go to learn duplicity?

“Well?” she encouraged.

“Does it look like me?”

“He is a handsome boy.”

“See,” Tomei said to his wife.

“See what?” asked the nurse.

“I am supposed to be the father.”

“Supposed?”

“Leave him alone,” Grace said to her. “He is the father of all my nine children.”

“Nine children?”

“I had to give him a son, didn’t I?” Grace explained. “And what do I get for my pains?”

“Men!” The nurse clacked her tongue sympathetically.

Grace turned to her husband.

“Tomei,” she said to him. “If you are looking for an excuse to marry another wife, you will have to look harder now.”

“Wait until I get you home,” he said. “Just you wait.”

“Wait for what?” She stormed to her feet and dumped the baby in the nurse’s arms.

“Wait for what?” she turned to Tomei, swung a right to his chin and, catching him by surprise, sent him flying off his feet to land flat on his back, on the grass. He was out cold.

“Wow!” The nurse was totally amazed.

Grace took back her baby and sat down to continue nursing.

“What do men want?” she asked herself.

“Beats me,” said the nurse.

She took out her whistle and gave two sharp blasts. The ambulance bicycle came clattering across the lawn, pedalled by the perennially intoxicated rider, and managed to get to her without running over patients or visitors. The nurse helped load Tomei onto the stretcher.

“I have often thought of doing that to my man,” the nurse confided, as they watched the ambulance take Tomei away.

Grace was shaking all over.

“Are you alright?”

“I do not know,” she said. “I do not know what came over me.”

“He will be alright,” the nurse assured her.

“I have never struck my husband before,” she confessed. “For sure he will kill me.”

“He will not,” said the nurse. “You will see. He will be just fine.”

He was not.