

Petals of Fate

A Romance Novel

COLLINS TEUREY

AUTHOR OF SAVING THE LAST SIMP

PANDA BOOKS
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
AUTHOR'S NOTE.....	viii
CHAPTER 1	1
ARROW AND BOW	1
CHAPTER 2	11
OBSESSIONS.....	11
CHAPTER 3	21
SAD GOODBYES.....	21
CHAPTER 4	30
BAD TIMING MAYBE	30
CHAPTER 5	45
REUNION	45
CHAPTER 6	62
CONFESSIONS.....	62
CHAPTER 7	77
IMPOSTOR.....	77
CHAPTER 8	93
LAST-MINUTE RUSH.....	93
CHAPTER 9	107
SUPREMACY BATTLES	107
CHAPTER 10.....	123
I HATE YOU	123
CHAPTER 11.....	137

NICE TO MEET YOU	137
CHAPTER 12	156
SHARING IS CARING	156
CHAPTER 13	173
TESTED LOYALTY	173
CHAPTER 14	189
LET'S DO WITHOUT	189
CHAPTER 15	210
WHAT NEXT?.....	210
CHAPTER 16	224
THE WIND OF CHANGE.....	224
CHAPTER 17	236
THE WEDDING BELL.....	236



FOREWORD

It is not unusual for writers to look back in time in an attempt to understand when and where their passion for writing germinated. It is an exploratory reflection of how events in childhood and adolescent periods, however minutiae, contributed, in one way or another, to the writer's slant. This is a key consideration in critically appraising the forest of themes that populate a writer's canon for the rest of their writing life.

Several examples abound. In *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenya's foremost novelist, euphoniously recounts how his Math teacher at Alliance, Bethwell Ogot—then freshly minted from Makerere, who would later become an authority in History after furthering his studies at St. Andrew's and London—inadvertently set his curiosity in literature afire. Bethwell was carrying Peter Abraham's text, *Tell Freedom*, as he gave a sermon to students. The book's title would occupy much of Ngugi's mind and brain, so much so that all his writings revolve around freedom – a snack for Marxist literary critics.

In *There Was a Country*, Chinua Achebe recalls how his elder brother John often corrected his spoken English so easily that he often wondered where John, who had what would pass for elementary education, had learned his grammar. Indeed,

Achebe's decision to attend the Government College, Umuahia, where he solidified his literary interests and met great personalities like Christopher Okigbo, was his brother's influence. It is no coincidence that tradition, culture, and the place of family define Achebe's body of work. Similarly, John Steinbeck's nostalgic description of life in the Salinas Valley in Northern California in *East of Eden* is a predictor for the kind of romanticism that forms the bedrock of his literary work, ditto Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, whence violence and stoicism percolate his other works.

In this book, *Petals of Fate*, Collins takes the reader through an odyssey of a fun-filled adolescence where his love for writing, a talent that made him stand out among his peers, took form. As an adolescent in high school, he is enthused with the written word. He can skillfully write love letters for fellow male students who are high on testosterone, but cannot craft letters that can guarantee them a listening ear from the damsels in their immediate environment. If the reader is awed by the events described in this book, especially the mischievousness of teens and their decision-making, then it must be due to Collins' effervescent narration. h

So beautifully, the story is told in such a way that the reader feels like occupying a space similar to the writer's at the time. But there is a lot more in the book—a task I will have to let readers find out themselves and relate to their circumstances. It is safe to predict that love and human relations themes will dominate the gamut of Collins' writings as he carves a niche in

a field so rich with venerable raconteurs and wordsmiths. Although these themes have been written on for millennia, there is some freshness with which Collins writes his stories, eliminating any banality to them—his *Sunset Bliss and Other Poems*, an anthology of poems and a sequel to this book—lends credence to this fact.

Samson Onyango
Loitoktok, Kenya
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Reflecting on this extraordinary journey, I am grateful to the remarkable people who have walked beside me. First and foremost, I pay tribute to my late father, Julius Teurey Odera. You opened my eyes to the magic within storytelling and taught me that the most unforgettable tales are told through writing. Your legacy lives on! I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Daktari Samson Onyango for graciously writing the foreword for this work. Your insights and encouragement have added immense value to this journey, and I am truly honoured to have your support. Thank you for believing in my vision and for sharing your wisdom with my readers.

I am deeply grateful to my mother, Dorcas Odera, whose unwavering support and steadfast prayers have been my anchor. To my siblings—Eunice Odera, Felix Odera, Kevin Odera, and Victor Odera—thank you for being my greatest cheerleaders. Your encouragement has lifted me through every challenge, and your unwavering belief in my dreams has fueled my passion for writing.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.

—Marcus Aurelius.

CHAPTER 1



ARROW AND BOW

My meeting with Michelle was strange. Actually, I met her without designing it. A case, similar to a hunter who aims his arrow at a warthog for its chubby meat, but misses it for an unintended target. Say, an ornamental gazelle that, in his own right, resolutely decides to domesticate instead. That was how I ended up with Michelle, the woman who took me head over heels and, one day, after so much wait, rode on my *dick* and took away my virginity. If I say she did that out of coercion, I would be telling a lie. It was purely out of my sole volition and a bit of sexual curiosity that often comes with the temptations of puberty.

By this time, the information alleging that I was the leading composer of love letters and poetry pieces knitted with sweet nothings, had become a word on the wire among my peers. Quite frankly, there was more truth in what was going around than the usual gossip synonymous with every lip on the streets. The news spread far and wide like the word of the arrival of a

COLLINS TEUREY

Caucasian oracle in a village inhabited by people as black as a moonless night. And indeed, the case was not different from mine; just like that, I had become an overnight celebrity!

It soon became a routine for people to come to me as soon as word reached them. The majority of them were boys in the homestretch of their teenage phase of life, and that notorious girl or two with an eye for a guy that made their undergarments drench with horniness. Now, were ready to move heaven and earth, to get his attention. Don't be surprised. Those days, women had started making first moves, too. Better than some men, even.

Well, if there is one thing that makes us all even, it is the perpetually burning desire to fulfill the wants of our hearts because the heart wants what it wants, even if the mind protests, you know. To me, the girls were doing nothing out of the ordinary. So, let's cut them some slack, shall we? Another category that also came to me, and here, your guess is as good as mine, was the modern-day Thomases—those who simply wanted to confirm if it was true what they were hearing about me, and yes, they were left awestruck.

August holiday was fast approaching, and everyone was waiting for the closing day with bated breath and fervour. Some perilously wanted to take a break from the stressful class environment. Conversely, others prayed for the day to come so that they could finally reunite with their mates from caged schools with whom they were experimenting with what it was like to live the life of a husband and wife without needfully becoming one. They were like a cigarette addict harrowing to quit smoking but still depended on a snort to calm down their

PETALS OF FATE

nerves. Hormones appeared to be taking a toll on them. I sympathised, then empathised with them by offering to write love pieces on their behalf, which they later pretended were their own before their presupposed half-lives. Of course, this only happened after making them part ways with a few coins here and there.

There were a few who imagined I would do all that for a God-bless-you. Even so, I couldn't because my tools, too, needed oiling, and I was tickled they understood that language well without much gripe. At that time, my star was shining the brightest on the blue sky and guided the smitten ones to me in quest for my writing services. One or two things stuck out like a sore thumb to me during that juncture; letters served a great deal to those people whose mouths were heavy and not so good with words, but with hearts under the sheer spell of, I don't know — love, infatuation, or maybe both.

I suppose you now comprehend why so much importance was attached to the love letter writing stuff. Being a poor student in Mathematics, I was well informed that my classmates could beat me in a Mathematics contest, but not in this one: wordplay. My biggest strength— the talent of taking to words like a swine to filth. Sometimes, I thought about that audibly and proudly grinned.

“Man, you are enviably excellent with words. Putting you to the test with words is like throwing a turtle into the water with the prospect of killing it. The opposite is always the outcome.” My high school friend, Adrian, asserted.

He was looking at me straight in the face as though to make sure I noticed his splendid synchronisation of words and if he

had achieved his target, which was to make me reap meaning out of his astute statement. No offence, but that was the first time I heard him say something witty to describe another. I was pleased.

He leaned in and lowered his voice, almost conspiratorially. “Here, take this number. It’s for a girl who once turned me down. Her name’s Linda. But I’m sure, if you work your magic, she’ll be eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“You would both fit like a surgical glove into one’s fingers. She’s a goddess, wait and see!” He assuredly said while pushing a piece of paper carrying her mobile number into my clutch in the manner with which paternal aunties furtively give money to their nieces and nephews, lest their mother takes it all as her own.

“And one more thing,” he pressed, “if it ever culminates in a wedding, at least let me dance and have a few bites of rice during your big day— in case you won’t find it befitting to elect me as your best man,” he intimately added with a genuine look in his eyes, amidst giggles.

It was during the closing day, and we had all been assembled at the humongous school hall as buttressed by the school’s tradition. All this while, we were waiting impatiently for the director of studies to preside over the closing ceremony for that day. His name was Mr Othuol, and all eyes were now on him to read out the results before the school could shut its door, albeit for an ephemeral, to allow students an academic time-out. As usual, the exam master was expected to read out the top ten and the bottom ten, followed by a lengthy speech that, to me, appeared like a sermon read to those who hold piety in

PETALS OF FATE

high regard and the sinners who, although are well versed with the beauty of living beyond the azure skies— the heavens, still choose to be consumed in the mundanity and the vanities of this world.

In such a congregation of believers, it's only obvious to find those two motley categories of people being warned and reminded of what it takes to have their names jotted down in the book of eternal life— and with the exactitude of that verse, *'remind them even if they know'* in the bible. In these sermons, sinners were the dismal performers, and the pious were the *crème de la crème* of the class. It was exactly how the situation was in our school during closing day. That said, our 'heaven' was different, I mean, the kind you find while still on earth as a mortal and had absolutely everything to do with life after school. It was symbolic of a good life laced with the promises of good education, say a plum job, clothing, food, and healthcare. Stuff like that. And even good families for those who cared to start one.

Our teachers relentlessly reminded us it was at the colleges that we would find 'better partners,' the perfect opportunity just waiting to be seized. That was mostly fueled by whispers or the slightest suspicion that so-and-so had been caught in a "horizontal tango"—that age-old euphemism for sneaky romance. We, of course, were spellbound every time one of the teachers delivered that advice because they had perfected the fashion with which they told it that, in return, created a flawless resonance with our thoughts back then. Everything clicked so naturally that we eventually believed the narrative without much interrogation. If you ask me, the stratagem, as

COLLINS TEUREY

we later on realised it was, worked magic on some of my classmates, especially the males.

I know you might find this sounding ridiculous, but believe me, some people I know raked in motivation from that to work frantically harder to secure a slot at the university so that they could ‘see for themselves.’ And I can produce evidence to back my assertions if you want me to. Adrian, a friend of mine, who always behaved like an iron held close to a magnet with girls, confessed that to me! Besides, I am well acquainted with some other two plus others who might not wish to lift the lid on the matter.

Sometimes, when we organised those reunions, we had once in a while for banters later in life, we laughed a good one for days on end, reminiscing the poignant contrast there was between what we were made to believe and what we witnessed with our own eyes upon setting foot on the campus soil. We saw many women who were more fearfully made than beautifully made there, which was way below our huge expectations. I won’t lie to you; we were so disappointed that we decided with resolve that we would retaliate by focusing more on our academics than what had pristinely motivated some of us to be there. Of course, which you already know.

We were younger and suffered from the ineptitude of having misplaced priorities in life; if only we could turn back the hand of time, maybe we would look at everything with a different lens, far from the euphoria born of adolescence. Anyway, I don’t want to sound like I regret anything. Let’s save that for the future, perhaps —if one ever comes.

PETALS OF FATE

Again, whenever I remember that some of my friends with whom I shared a great camaraderie ended up not dating at all in college, let alone the luck of finding a lifetime partner as was promised, I die in amusement. That is for reasons: One, because the few breathtakingly beautiful women they bumped into accused them of bad looks without mincing their words, adding that they were too bad for them or not just good enough for them to allow them entry into the divine gardens between their thighs.

The debate of whether my friends were too bad or just not good enough to suit the women remained unsettled for a protracted time until one day, I told them that the damsels meant they were not just good enough for them and not that they were too bad for them. I fancied that if I told them so, it would sound like music to their ears, and true to that, it served its purpose well.

At least, that was what I reiterated to Kelvin when he requested me to intervene on the matter again later in private, even though deep down, I knew the women he was pursuing had a point. My two friends had these funny looks that would make anyone imagine that God's apprentices must have run out of creativity when their time to be moulded reached. Honestly, to be told by a woman that you are too bad for her, especially after trying to woo her like a chicken thief does by throwing grains at it with the hope of a catch, certainly gives you the kind of mortification that makes you want to change your entire name. A thought, Kelvin mulled over, after the ugly ordeal.

COLLINS TEUREY

Kelvin was another friend of mine I had intentions of mentioning to you, although I seldom called him that. He preferred being christened Voke, a moniker he cherished more than professors adore their professorship titles. He was the third stone that completed the ember that held in balance the cooking pot where the stew of our friendship was brewed.

The three of us spent most of our time together physically, except when either Kelvin or Adrian had a running stomach or an inflated bladder that needed them to flee to the lavatory for defecation, pissing, or both. And honestly, that, could happen to any of us, interchangeably. Another time we weren't all together was when one of my friends had his girlfriend visiting and was in an amorous mood, intent on having sex. At those times, the "antelope owner" would exile the rest of us from the 'den' so they could enjoy their "good bite" unperturbed.

When the time for transitioning to the next level of learning came, we had the rare happenstance of joining the same college straight from the same secondary school. Then, it would occur to me that, some things happen by fate that humans can't fathom, and indeed, this was one of them. I won't tell you how exhilarated—beyond measure—we were when the news of being placed on the same campus reached our ears.

Another reason they couldn't date was the fear of being teased for seeing women who looked more handsome than them. The ones with whom they were very much alike in physique except for the 'wet crack' between the women's legs and the peeping boobs, different from my friends' flat chests and the blind 'snakes' between their legs that every man carries around attached to two eggs— that show no signs of ever

PETALS OF FATE

hatching. You get it? Something that met the expectations of none of them.

It was through that experience that we realised everything we had been told back at school about meeting hotter girlfriends on campus was just big talk—a subterfuge to entice people cut from the same cloth as Adrian, with an undying love for insanely curvy buttocks. People who shared one thing in common: coital curiosity! None of my friends was a dimwit, though. I can say, without a doubt, that the “good partners” talk wasn’t entirely the motivation behind their good performance; it was just the icing on the cake. Just to clear any doubts. Those experiences would still amuse us many years later, whenever we met to share the nostalgia of the good old days. Even as we got older, with kids of our own—kids about the same age we were back then.

I quickly grabbed the piece of paper with the mobile number on it, the way someone does when they’re trying to be careful not to be seen—even by their own shadow—and stashed it in my breast pocket, ready for a deferred assignment: hunting down Linda—not to kidnap her, but for her love. However, if it meant abducting her, then it was her heart I was after—not the physical heart, don’t get me wrong. I was very categorical about that. I needed the part responsible for reciprocating feelings—the part that could return the romance my forlorn heart now was yearning for, almost to the point of desperation. I needed to handcuff her in chains of love and lock her up in a jail built right at the centre of my heart—vast and unoccupied. I desperately wanted her to help me solve the jigsaw puzzle of my love life, to complete me, to

give taste to my insipid existence, and to teach me what it felt like to be loved. To be whole.

My mind was whirling with imagination about how Linda might look. I conjured up images of my celebrity crushes in my mind's eye, hoping they might offer me a clue, but all I did was get more confused. I wondered if she resembled Kim Kardashian, with her hourglass figure and alluring breasts that beautifully sprouted from her chest, or if she was as petite as Ariana Grande, with a tuneful voice, or maybe even a doppelganger of Marilyn Monroe, the iconic temptress of the twentieth century. I tried to picture all the women I had always found hotter, comparing them to Adrian's description of Linda. I added this and subtracted that, but all in vain. The more I tried, the more confounding it became. Everything about her still remained a mystery to me!

Amidst that temporary confusion, there was one thing I was sure of, as certain as a gunshot: Linda was in no way close to being hideous. After all, my friend had sworn she was a comely goddess, and I wasn't about to second-guess him. That was it. I felt as if Cupid's arrow had struck me in the heart, and having a change of heart about what I'd programmed my mind to believe wasn't something I even entertained—not even in my weirdest dreams. So, I hung in there. I prayed and hoped that things would turn out just as I had imagined, by some good stroke of fate.

CHAPTER 2



OBSESSION

Mr Othuol walked into the closing venue, a couple of files held close to his heart. He scanned the hall with his powerful eyes, which had the rare ability to see what was in front of him, sideways, and even partly behind him—without turning his head a single arc. One day, the class was left bitterly divided over whether the new director of studies could see things in 360 degrees, without moving a muscle—in an attempt to look around. It all started when a classmate, arriving late, dared to sneak into the classroom by tiptoeing behind him, only to be met with the question: “*Kijana*, where do you think you are going?” And so, the discussion gained momentum.

It’s possible you might say that maybe he saw the boy approaching from afar. But this was different. It wasn’t the first time it had happened. I was there. My classmates were, too, and we witnessed it again. I must admit, the whole thing was bizarre, leaving us astounded more times than we could count.

COLLINS TEUREY

Anyway, I'll leave it to you to make your own judgment. Let it not be said that I talked you into believing the theory.

After scanning the venue with his eyes, as he always did—like someone gripped by paranoia—he finally settled. He sat in his *sina tabu* chair, a swivel chair that had been specially moved from his office to the closing venue. The name "Sina Tabu" came about from us imagining that the chair was excessively comfy. We observed how Mr. Othuol sank into it rather than sitting on it.

However, sitting on that chair was something no one could dare to do, no matter how their asses became restless with the desire to try it. It was forbidden more than eating the fruit in the middle of Eden during Adam's time. So, we exercised great restraint to avoid expulsion the same way we would later learn that a Form Two student was expelled two years after we had left for trying her ass on the very chair. Word of mouth had it that a snitch had tipped off Mr Othuol about it.

Reportedly, that was the last time the poor girl was seen arriving at the school compound as a student, and efforts to locate where she had vanished snowballed into an exercise in futility. No one has had the vaguest idea of her whereabouts since—not even her closest friends! Not even the search parties sent out on several occasions to intercept her movements could recover a single strand of hair or a piece of torn cloth that might have belonged to her. Not even the many "MISSING PERSON" posters, printed with her image, could provide a signpost to where she had gone. It was as if she had vanished into thin air, like the Malaysian passenger plane into the place scientists call the Bermuda Triangle—never to be found again.

PETALS OF FATE

Thoughts of how I would start that first conversation with Linda, without being shut down on the first try, occupied a bigger chunk of my mind. I was a strange stranger to her, and I knew how first impressions mattered in a situation like that. In preparation, I rehearsed a few introductory lines, trying to decide which one would make the best impression. Soon, I realised I was present at the closing venue without really being present.

The fact that the ceremony seemed to take an eternity to conclude started to develop a bad feeling in me. It was like waiting for a river to carve a canyon. Who has that kind of patience? “Patience pays”? Screw that! I had none left. I threatened to leave if another minute was eaten off my clock. I hurled expletives at the speakers without raising my voice, trying to control my words, because I have the kind of rage that can blow off a roof when unleashed—and I was well aware of it.

Now, I resorted to keeping track of time like a timekeeper on a moderation panel. My wristwatch indicated it was five minutes to two o’clock. We’d assembled in the closing hall by half past ten. You understand the context of my protest now, I suppose. That was far too long to sit back and do nothing. To twist the knife in the wound, it was on those rock-hard chairs that warmed up when you sat on them but got as cold as a dog’s nose as soon as you stood up to stretch your bones. I was suffering a burnout from the daunting task of doing nothing. Those hard chairs had squeezed my orange-slice-like buttocks to the point that I started feeling sore. Every so often, I’d get dismayed to find my butt had flattened, and I’d stand

up at intervals to touch and feel if they were still in their original form.

Through the window, I could see pupils from the neighbouring primary school chanting in unison, celebrating the blessing of a few weeks to breathe. They were relieved to be away from that stern mathematics teacher who chose easy sums for class examples but then assigned the ‘undoable’ ones for homework. This practice was very typical of most mathematics teachers. Some of them were also celebrating the idea that it would be a while before they saw the face of that curvaceous teacher of English. The lady who always was in a high-heeled pair of shoes—the ones the pupils called *pamsi*. A red lipstick, long fingernails, and a huge mobile phone that she was constantly on, smiling like an evil witch. They had grown to love hating her because she constantly locked horns with them for speaking in *Dholuo*, their vernacular.

That, they said, was the sin they had suffered the most retribution for at the hands of their teacher. There was one thing that made them love to hate her even more: her habit of telling them their heads were full of sputum and that they could hardly amount to anything in life. It hurt them like a deep cut.

One day, I hope to gather the temerity to tell you about my own vicious experience with a one-time mathematics teacher. The one who thought he had my destiny wrapped around his little finger—that he had my future reflected in the view from his side mirror. That he had the right to twist my fate as he pleased. That he had the authority to tell me the meanest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. For days, for months, for ages, his words kept ringing in my head like a wrongly set alarm clock—

PETALS OF FATE

one that never knew when to stop crying. Those words became a festering wound, slowly oozing into the fragile corridors of my heart.

His declaration left me feeling like dust that had been trampled upon, whose only proof of worth would be to rise and settle on the heads of those who had written it off. I vowed that I would become that dust in record time. And it is my sworn wish to confide in you what transpired. Maybe not today, but I give you my word—I will.

Another reason for their excitement was the prospect of escaping the clutches of that one teacher who resided within the school compound. The one who treated them like workhorses, commanding them to toil in his school garden—planting seeds they had brought from home under his relentless orders, using their own compost as fertiliser. They toiled through every step of the farming process: sowing, weeding, administering top-dressing, harvesting, separating grains from cobs, winnowing—you name it. The only tasks they were spared were the final acts of ingestion and egestion.

Fighting kids was also a common sight I noticed in the middle of my boredom. It was an age-old tradition deeply rooted in the village way of life among children and seemed to transcend generations. I'm not so sure if it still thrives in the countryside; perhaps someone here can enlighten us—we, the city dwellers. From where I stand, I've witnessed it move from comatose to eventual death. I vividly recall how, from our kindergarten days to the senior classes of primary school, we would challenge our perceived foes to duels on the last day of each term, determined to settle scores once and for all.

COLLINS TEUREY

There was probably that one class prefect who seemed to take pleasure in flogging your butt for no apparent reason, marking your name on the noisemaker list even on days you were bedridden and unable to attend school. Then there was the notorious pencil thief who would swipe your prized new HB pencil, leaving you itching for revenge. And let's not forget the gluttonous classmate who would tiptoe into your absence, wolfing down your *madondo*—a mix of chopped *chapati* soaked in beans stew—before slipping the empty lunchbox back into your bag without you ever noticing.

There were all sorts of reasons for wanting to kick someone in the ass. We had kids who just wanted to try that RKO, whatever they call it, on someone after they'd seen Randy Orton applying it on the Great Khali, bringing him down with a thud like a falling *Ng'ou* tree. I can't list all the reasons; everyone had their own. I had mine, too, which I promise to share with you along the way—just remind me!

So much had changed since Mr Othuol assumed the role of Director of Studies. It wasn't just the policies and procedures that shifted; on a personal level, he had morphed into a different kind of man, almost unrecognisable from the one we once knew. Even his taste and preference changed. He ditched his propensity of dressing up and started grooming up. He stopped wearing clothes like he wanted and began adorning suits as he pleased. I hope those statements have not left you disconnected.

PETALS OF FATE

As a matter of fact, I think he'd commanded a complete facelift for his entire wardrobe. A new epoch had arrived! He now wore neckties, paired perfectly with three-piece suits, complemented by belts that matched his latest pair of shoes—and there were more than five pairs—I took my time to count. In one of those many groupings where the girls would huddle and whisper, I overheard them saying that he'd started looking a little handsome. I couldn't help but agree with them. However, to me, the change was still subtle and required a hawk-eyed observer to truly appreciate.

I also realised that his walking style had changed. Initially, he used to walk while dragging his feet like a rapist who had his legs tied up with a barbed wire after stealing the innocence of a neighbour's girl-calf. Now, he strode with his head held high, adopting a lopsided gait we used to call the “academic angle”—a style, that used to be favoured chiefly by Physics, Business, and Geography students. One needed to carry naked books from the library and ensure that the outer covers bearing the names of the subjects I've mentioned, were visually conspicuous for the Religion and Agriculture students to see. It was a good way of making jest of them because we were constantly embroiled in an ‘academic war’ that had no basis whatsoever.

Well, that was the revived Mr Othuol for you. Despite all the metamorphosis he had undergone, two things remained stuck with him like a staled name: his sand-paper rough face and his vast baldhead that looked like *Kabunde* Airstrip that had perpetually given a sight of something under construction at that time.

Inviting someone to a fight was surprisingly simple, thanks to a phrase that had been coined and passed down through generations of instigators. All you needed to do was lock eyes with your adversary and declare, “*nyaka alor kodi skul*,” which loosely translated to “I must close the school with you!” In context, it was a way of keeping your enemy abreast of a showdown that was imminent on the last day of the term.

The rest would then be left to fomenters to execute. The professionals who knew how to brew feud like they did with the back of their hands. Usually, they staged no fights themselves and often wore the heart of a chicken, but they were great sadists, if you ask me. They thrived on words like, ‘If you know you’re tough enough, touch your opponent’s head’ as a way to ignite a fight.

On other occasions, they would ask one to step on the foot of the other or offer a hot slap in reprisal to see both parties charged and up in arms. Sometimes, it was drawing a line on the ground and daring the one who thought he was stronger to cross it first. They would continue until their efforts had paid off before they commenced cheering them on.

Fascinatingly, these instigators had their favourites and formed clear factions as well. You didn’t need a magnifying glass to spot them; they all shared strikingly similar features, as if they were cast from the same mould. Their heads were invaded by *siling*, otherwise known as ringworm, with sparsely populated hair that looked like goat’s pellets from acts of defecation and cracked but strong heels that cowed not before a

PETALS OF FATE

thorn. This was because of the many miles they traversed barefoot with the heat from the earth, roasting their feet to numbness.

Shoes were almost unheard of as we grew up and in elementary school. Only a few had the mercies of trying something not beyond a simple *akala* —sandals made from burst tyres. The rest of us relied on our God-given soles. Those from well-to-do families who could afford the then-worshipped *Bata* shoes often found themselves ditching them for home use after just a day or two of trying to cope with the discrimination at school that came with possessing one.

They were seen as braggarts, lumped together with those who dared to speak *Kiswahili*—let alone a fluent one, just a random word. Those who spoke the language were perceived to be boastful, like those who wore shoes. The majority of us were Luos. *Kiswahili* language and one born from the Luo tribe were always like chaos and order. They almost never made good buddies. For sure, that's no secret. Even today.

When the small talk became too much to bear, they often resorted to the Roman way of doing things: going barefoot or slipping into *akala*, those humble sandals. Coming from financially well-off families (or so we believed), they opted for the latter, as we could hardly expect them to walk with naked feet, like us.

Moreover, the fomenters, or jo *thupo*, had less meat covering their bones. It was as though the creator denied them weight and rewarded them with powerful tongues for compensation. They spoke endlessly like a radio with freshly recharged batteries, wielding their words cunningly with precision.

COLLINS TEUREY

Strangely enough, they always seemed to evade the consequences of their mischief, slipping away from trouble like shadows in the night.

CHAPTER 3



SAD GOODBYES

At this point, the director of studies was nearing the final stretch of his speech. He had already read out the names of the first best ten, myself included. I grabbed position four, Adrian came fifth, and Voke sixth. It was such a coincidence that many who knew about our close friendship were left baffled. We stood up to join the queue so the world could see us, as was customary with the school. An applause ensued in our names as a sign of encouragement to double or triple our efforts next time if possible.

I emerged the subject champion in four—no, actually five—subjects. English/Literature was definitely one of them. The other three? I have chosen to let you guess, and there is nothing you can do to rescind that decision. The speeches went on in earnest. A lot was said, but since my mind was preoccupied with other things, I only managed to grasp a little, enough to prove my half-presence. If at all someone needed proof of it. Attending a function and stepping out with just a fraction

of what was said is natural. However, you would agree with me that it's a bit embarrassing to attend one and fail to remember even the names of the keynote speakers, save for what they said.

After the business closed with the top ten, attention quickly shifted to the best bottom ten, or should I say the worst bottom ten? You can help me decide. They were also paraded before the audience in a much similar fashion to how we'd been so that the world could also acknowledge their existence. However, much was not said about them while in front. It required a proper sitting to lecture them; to effect that, they were advised to resume their seats, which they naturally obeyed.

Glaringly, they could not bear the reproach of standing before the crowd another second, knowing exactly why they were there. That explains why they automatically made themselves scarce upon the first call. In his closing remarks, Mr Othuol didn't hold back, chiding the top performers and those who'd fallen short.

He reminded the top students that their results were far from adequate, urging them to "pull up their socks," a phrase he loved using a lot. I often felt that if the students hadn't feared him so much, "Socks" would have been a fitting byname for him. He didn't let the bottom ten off the hook either, addressing them and anyone else he deemed to have underperformed with the same level of frankness.

"And to you, I am displeased that you aren't putting as much effort into achieving your worst as you really should," he declared rather sarcastically with a long face.

PETALS OF FATE

“You can’t tell me you’re failing to do better while equally struggling to do your worst! If you want to perform, then perform! If you choose to fail, you’d better do your best to fail spectacularly. There are no in-betweens!” he lectured, more seriously, almost to the point of screaming.

Those were his final remarks before handing the microphone to the principal, who officially documented the closing day and announced the reopening dates in accordance with the directives from the Ministry of Education. One bit from his speech particularly stood out to most people: he pointed out the inability of poor performers to put in the requisite effort to fail properly. His well-timed mockery had the entire hall in stitches. Imagine being offered a chance to do your best to achieve your worst and still fail at that! The absurdity of it provided a good comic relief that got everyone laughing, even people who didn’t intend to or were too jaded to afford a good laughter like me.

“I declare the school closed for the August holiday. You may now disperse,” the principal promulgated in his rich Luhya accent, hinting at his place of birth, *Bungoma* County.

It was his fifth season at the school after his predecessor retired without getting tired. The statement from the head of the school cuddled my soul. It gave me a sinister sense of a breakthrough from an ostensibly challenging situation. I examined my watch, and it was half past two. Damn it! Time had sprinted, and I was famished. My throat, too, needed irrigation with so much urgency. In response, I hurriedly butted my way through the rear exit door and made my way to the water tank sitting at the foot of the hall and helped myself.

"Tell me you didn't just fly out of the hall!" I heard a voice behind me—one I instantly identified as Ondiek's before I could even have my final swallow of water. I bothered not to turn around. It was utterly needless since I had recognised to whom the voice belonged. Ondiek, was Adrian's middle name. In case you were wondering.

"I have looked in the direction where you sat, just barely before the principal could complete his last word, only to be greeted by the sight of your empty chair. That was fast! What's the haste for?" Adrian proceeded, and now closer to me, he could tap my shoulder to appeal to my attention.

"Does anyone feel as hungry as I am? Goddamn it! If I don't bite something now, I'll die!" Voke interrupted before I could reply to Adrian.

"Man!" Adrian interjected, "I can eat a whole cow with its hooves and tail right this moment." his statement cracked our ribs, so we burst into laughter in support of his budding comedy, but instead, he laughed the hardest, that his laughter, out-rivalled ours.

"My stomach is glowing with hunger. Thank God that you're my friends. I would have eaten you all already," I finally found my voice.

The laughter intensified. Our legs were constantly whining about our weights from exhaustion and numbness that comes with abnormally extended sit-downs. Therefore, we had to beg them for a lift to the class teacher's office, where report forms were being issued. A request our legs gave in to but on condition that it was them to decide the walking pace, generally. It

PETALS OF FATE

was a deal; thus, we left. We did not spend much time at the class teacher's office.

Our stream, known as 4G—where the 'G' stood for "green" and not 4G network, like some internet fanatics might think—had forty-two students. Back in our day, the whole Form Four class was divided into two streams, Green and Blue, making us one hundred and something in total. If I was ranked fourth overall, with only one person from my stream ahead of me, what had my position been in 4G? You can do the quick math! The report forms were arranged in ascending order, with the cream of the crop placed at the top, followed by others.

That points to the reason why we did not piss away time and also that we were actually among the first few people to arrive. Mine was called, then Adrian's and Voke's in that style, so we heeled towards the school gate. Sigh! I was relieved. I was finally homeward-bound from school. It warmed my heart that I would have some rest, even if it meant only for that day. That was so because I was in a candidate class, and nature dictated that I burn the candle at both ends.

After all, I had only three months to make up for the time I must have squandered on things that didn't matter as far as my academics were concerned. In addition, I felt excited that it was that same week that all schools were expected to close, and it was only evident that Linda was already at home. It was me delaying. She was in a national sleeping school, or boarding school, for more clarity. I rummaged through my breast pocket to ensure that the piece of paper that carried her number was still intact, and yes, that was correct. I returned it and turned

to my friends, walking side by side with me as we headed to the layby to *monkey* a vehicle home.

We chatted about a myriad of topics—some were sensible, and others were just errant nonsense. That was the face of our conversations, which had no well-known structure and, in most cases, were jumpy and marred by banters and youthful laughter. The distance from the school to the main road was a leisurely twenty-five-minute walk on a moderate stride.

Surprisingly, we managed to cover it on foot in just seven minutes or ten at maximum whenever we were on the verge of running late, which nearly was every day before we rented the shack I mentioned, conveniently located around the school. Mr Othuol was as dangerous as his name would suggest. ‘Othuol’ was a Luo name whose meaning was derived from the word snake. None of us wanted to face him. He was the perpetual teacher-on-duty, and his punishments were often egregious. We would always do anything within our power to avoid falling into his fangs—including mastering the art of sprinting that distance in record time.

My friends and I shared an emotional time for saying adios, thanks to the long distance that allowed us enough time to pour the contents of our chests to each other. We confessed how badly we would miss each other, that even the once-in-a-while cellphone connection could not remedy it. The situation could be further compounded by the fact that we didn’t have mobile phones of our own, except for a way of devising our own mechanisms of accessing one.

That included stealing your mother’s or close sibling’s and chatting within that stolen time. Conversations like that were

PETALS OF FATE

spellbinding because they ended prematurely without proper conclusions. Or with, “*Hey, this is my last text, don’t text back. mom is back!*” Such warning messages were prone in cases where the person from the other end was a girl you were practising horizontal engineering with. Or having sex with, if I am to be more exact, and vice versa. The rule of the game was always to delete everything afterwards.

We went on to bless the day and curse it in equal measure. We decried the three weeks we were bound to spend away from each other. At this time, *piny owacho*, the government, had issued a stern red alert against schools carrying out tuition programmes. And we were the very first casualties of that new normal. I recall their reason for that was to give students adequate time for a brain rest. The consequences were dire to those who dared to turn a blind eye to that order, and that, included interdiction on the part of the teachers who acted in contempt of the directive or incarceration for both the teachers and the parents of the children who conspired to try something stupid.

Even the daredevil principals who were known to laugh off matters like that, coiled their tails between their legs in fear of the big arms of the authority catching up with them. For that reason, they gave up the idea and let the authority carry the day. As a result, we ruled out the possibility of reuniting soon through tuition. That was fate, and our hands were tied, leaving us with nothing to do to reverse it. Therefore, we took an oath to exercise the patience of boiling a stone to softness until we would meet again during the reopening day.

“Goodbye, bro. We’ll meet again soon,” Voke said to me as he took me into his embrace.

COLLINS TEUREY

"I'll miss you to death, dude. Bring back your ugly face in one piece, bro. See ya!" I said to him simultaneously, grabbing and pushing him away concurrently as men do in the name of hugging.

"Hey, and remember to tell us how things go when we get back. I can't wait!" Voke added while in motion, giggling like a weaver bird.

All this while Adrian seemed to be buried deeply in thoughts. He was audibly silent, which was very uncommon with him— so I decided to tease him into a smile and lift his spirit.

"Did someone die, sis?" I asked him sadistically, and he chuckled.

"Bro, I feel so bad about this whole thing," he said faintly, attempting to wear a smile that did not fit his face. Perhaps that was because he was faking it.

"I feel the same way, but you know this is out of our reach. We would have done something to change it already." I told him, "You know we are not the kinds that sit pretty without trying to change what we can. This one is just different." I consolably told him as I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Dickhead! You really know my weakness, and that's what you capitalise on, huh? I honestly stand moved by that one. You really have a way with words, eish!" he exclaimed joyously, choking with laughter.

"Goodbye, bro. I am looking forward to seeing you soon. I wish you luck with that our stuff. You'll tell us how things turn out." He added.

PETALS OF FATE

“Sure thing! You’ll be the first person to know when we meet again. Goodbye, man.” I assured him as we hugged and finally parted ways.

CHAPTER 4



BAD TIMING MAYBE

“Hello there, gorgeous! Do you have a minute to spare? I have something I would like to talk to you about.” That was the message I eventually sent to Linda after composing and deleting quite a number of them, I meant for trial. I read it once, then twice before decisively pressing the “send” button. That was to ensure that no mistake was made and it was sufficiently catchy. Yes, it suited its purpose well.

I was tensing and literally shaking like a leaf in an open, strong wind. My fingers were crossed, and my head was buried between my legs. I think I was saying silent prayers— something of sorts, or hiding my face from the fear of the unknown that was destined to come. I waited to see her response without really wanting to see it. The kind of feeling I had was mixed and overpowering. It was the same as the one I would later have when our Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) final results were released.

PETALS OF FATE

“Hello, there. Sorry for the late reply. I was a bit swamped by the time you texted. What do you’ve in store for me?” Linda reverted inquisitively in a response that took me by surprise. My heart lurched with admiration because I did not see that coming. She was apologetic, calm, and ready to give me the audience I very much needed.

She handled me well, like she had known me her entire life despite me being the goddamn stranger who was bothering her from lord knows where! I felt like Cupid’s arrow had struck me twice. She ticked the box of a very pertinent quality I wanted, no, needed my woman to have, and that made me covet her even more desperately.

When I messaged Linda, I considered the option that she might turn out to be the insolent type, you know. The ones whose only first reaction to situations like that would be “*ni nani na umetoa namba yangu wapi?* (Who are you, and where have you gotten my phone number from?). The *orudo nyar ojuok*, the uncivilised type.

However, she proved me wrong. She belonged to a family where children were well cultured, and morality wasn’t just anything but everything that guided their social interaction with people they were familiar with and the ones they did not know. Meanness, therefore, had no place in such a society, and modesty was the order of the day.

I faced the temptation of replying to her message immediately out of excitement, but I thought twice and held my horses. It was not as simple as it seemed to hold the conversation in place. That was because the next thing I was preparing to say would either make or break the conversation. Such a

path required one to tread carefully lest you slide and crash down to the ground. I was aware of the risks involved, so I took my time.

I held the phone in my hand, unsure of what best action to take. Put it on the edge of the bed I was sitting on, wrung my finger, and picked it up again. The text box was open, and Linda's number was visible at the top, though I hadn't saved it in order to cheat the catastrophe of my mother, Nyanam, finding out. With the phone gripped in my hand, I reached for the doorknob to twist the door open with the intent of peeping to see if the owner of the phone, my mother, was coming.

It was not that I didn't inform her prior to using the phone. No. She was the one who gave me the blessings of using it, but I lied; it was Adrian I wanted to call. Maybe that explains my guilt at that time. As a result, it was only proper that I take precautions just in case she came back unexpectedly and studied my body language, which was determined to betray me.

Back in the vehicle, as I travelled home after closing, I found myself asking many questions I couldn't answer. I wondered why that issue of Linda had taken control of my mind that much. Was I okay? Was something amiss with me? And why was I obsessed with a girl I had not seen or had no slightest idea of how she looked? Something was wrong. If not so yet, then it was on its way. That was my conclusion. I felt like another being had dethroned me from my own body, and it was now having my system on the remote control. Was I in love? What's love? That had never been my thing!

PETALS OF FATE

All along, I had come to terms with the idea that I would never experience that thing they called love because I hadn't felt it in favour of anyone. I was persuaded that my mission on this planet was simply to write love letters and poems for people upon request. The people who needed it, and had been swallowed by the whole idea of falling in love, and staying in it. Not me!

Mine was only to help them achieve that ultimate goal. Very ironical! That, there was me. Confused. Anxious. Lost. And all. For the first time, I was learning a lesson. Do not judge someone based on their behaviour in the name of love. I did that a few times with those people who asked for my help with the letters, almost begging me, but not again in the future. I felt sorry. I don't know for myself or for the people I misunderstood. All in all, I apologised.

I took myself back down memory lane to try to understand what was so special about the woman Adrian had filled my head with. And why I was the way I was. Then I remembered the number of girls who had shown interest in me, and I gave a cold treatment. First was my encounter with a girl whose name I would learn later as Mercy. I was in form one. Still very fresh in the school. It was hardly a fortnight since I was admitted. This one girl kept feasting her eyes on me at any small chance she got, and I started feeling uneasy. She was in form three at that time, and it was as if she'd trained her lips to smile at me and her eyes to wink at me seductively whenever our paths crossed. And I hated it.

One day at break time, two girls approached me. I was in the company of my classmates. Voke was there, too, I think.

COLLINS TEUREY

They told me that someone wanted to talk to me, though they wouldn't disclose who that was to me, not even with herbs. After much agitation, I agreed halfheartedly to go and see for myself. You won't believe it! It was her, Mercy. She made that whole arrangement with the girls who appeared to be her close friends to call me.

Meanwhile, she hid surreptitiously at a spot she deemed vantage behind a Godforsaken building. And where she could observe me like a sniper baying for my blood. It was so embarrassing, very much so, that there were a couple of other girls waiting at bay to see my reaction to her advances.

"Hi," she said shyly. Her face beamed with a smile.

"Hi," I curtly replied.

"My name is Mercy; what's your name?" She asked me while licking her lower lip as a sign of seduction. Her gang stared at me anxiously.

"*Mustafa*," I lied.

That was because I was cognizant that she was testing me. She had me under a microscope around the clock. And I knew she was spying on me. She probably learned a lot about me already, including my real name. If anything, women are the best detectives. And nothing beats them at that!

"*Carlos*," holy cow, she called me by name! "I wanted to tell you that you're so handsome, neat, and irresistible. And ask you if you could be my boyfriend," she went on, now looking me straight in the eye. She meant it.

No way! That wasn't happening to me. Christ! She was blunt and direct. Her friends were glancing in amazement, others just silently laughing. Never had I seen something like

PETALS OF FATE

that. It was like a bad dream I longingly wished to wake up from. And forget everything in a flash. Okay, assume you were me, which you blatantly are not—what would you have done? For me, I walked away without uttering a word. I was stunned. I don't know yours.

Ultimately, I found something to reply to Linda's text with. I decided to do my part and leave the rest to God like we were always advised whenever we were faced with a situation of holding a tiger by the tail, a very difficult one. I fished the phone that was now in my pocket in a 'hurray!' manner and typed responded.

"There's no problem at all, Linda, dear!" I was already calling her dear without knowing it. It truly amused me to imagine.

"Let's just blame it on bad timing on my part," I agreed to carry the blame and then proceeded.

"I meant to tell you that I've got a crush on you, and it's been going on for a while now. You're such an amiable girl. That I can affirm. Very attractive. What remains is to discover the beauty of the heart you've hidden in your chest cabinet. I've no doubts that I'll prolly like what I'm yet to know if you let me," I pressed on, "so, would you give me a chance to get to know you better if I asked you to? I like you! And that was the message I needed to reach to you." Sent. Successfully delivered.

That was the long text I sent to Linda. I made sure I reinforced it with three heart emojis to be able to communicate

my intention more vividly. I tried to be moderate enough with my words. Saying a lot would've raised so many questions and curiosity from her. I avoided that because the information I had about her was quite scanty, except for knowing her home place and school and that she was beautiful based on the theoretical evidence adduced by Adrian.

Another turn for waiting was here. This time, my anxiety had subsided, and that was replaced by a bit of confidence and hope. Thus, I was more at ease. Composed. Bring it on! I quietly said to myself. The evening was fast approaching. The sun was setting out on a journey to sink beneath the orange skyline on its way, leaving behind a faint silhouette. The night was doing press-ups to take over from the day and soon entered the dusk.

The following day, after closing day, I didn't try Linda's contact as I'd anticipated upon returning home from school. It was on a Thursday. Our area had experienced the worst power outage, which went on until the next day. My mother's phone, which I had hoped to use, had its battery dead. That left me with no access to a cell phone until the following day, when the power finally returned.

My two older siblings were out in town attempting their luck with life. That robbed me of the option of using their phones. At home, I was left alone with my two younger brothers. And mum. One was preparing to write his final tests for class eight, and the lastborn was still in elementary school. I was an open book to my mother, though the new development was something I never wanted her to realise, at least not so soon. I could use her phone at will to communicate with my

PETALS OF FATE

friends when time allowed. This time, it was a special ilk of a friend.

I sensed my mother was about to return to the living room. Since returning from the market, she had been busying herself in the kitchen, fixing dinner to feed our hungry mouths. She had yet to know how we had fared at school. My younger siblings also shared the same closing day with me. Maybe she did that intending to pick verbal fights with any of us for posting poor results or registering a negative deviation—just in case.

She was always cautious about killing our moods before eating for fear of us refusing her food. She was a kitchen wizard, and her culinary skills were unmatched. Us feeding to our fill was something she valued with her dear life. I loved her terribly for that. Also, her commitment to educating us and ensuring that everything was fine since we buried our father.

“Whoa! I’m speechless. Many thanks for the kind words. I honestly do not mind. It’ll be an exquisite pleasure. What’s your name?” Linda finally pieced her words together.

We went on with the conversation with much vigour and told each other what necessity demanded at that time. This-that, this- that until we finally resigned for the day. Before we concluded, I told her the brutal truth that the phone wasn’t mine, that it belonged to my mother. I promised to stay in touch as soon as I could since I had her number, and she had mine. I deleted the chats before handing the phone over to its rightful owner. That was it for the day. A massive success, according to me.

That evening, we were happy as a family. We ate. Made stories relating to the past and nodded off when we got too tired

COLLINS TEUREY

to keep our eyes open. We didn't have our mother raise her voice to scold us for poor performance at school. We did satisfactorily well, and her heart swelled with pride. She motivated us to work even harder, that education was the only granary that provided stocks that never run out, even if one were to feed like a termite. She disclosed how painful it'd been to her that she never was presented with an opportunity to see the gate of secondary school, let alone sit in class like her peers.

She continued, "My reason for not attending secondary school was my older sister's mistake. She caught *stomach* twice in high school. First one in form two and the other in form three, at the genesis of term one."

My mother was characteristically in agony. She opened up that she, together with her younger sister—my maternal aunt, lost the privilege of proceeding with schooling because they were busy paying the debts of their bigger sister's sin. Her father, the then church reverend, was so disappointed. His daughter's action made him discard the idea of ever educating a girl again. And it was my mother and the younger sister who felt the pinch of his irreversible decision. For this reason, my mother got married at a very tender age. Just sixteen! And her sister, too, followed suit when her clock ticked.

The following morning, I woke up like a top minister who had spent his night in a five-star hotel room. However, the condition of my room and bed wasn't any close to depicting that. I had a bed that constantly saw pity for itself because of its con-

PETALS OF FATE

dition. There was no single night I jumped on it to sleep without it letting out a cry. When I inherited it from my older brother Oyier, who graduated to a better bed, this one of mine had already started complaining, but it wasn't as serious as it now was.

My mattress, too, was an example of one. Let's just say that I called it mattress because it lacked a better name. It was only a few inches fatter than a mat. But I was thankful I wasn't sleeping directly on Earth like vermin. After all, nature had given me the same hours of sleep as people who owned ample beds with chubby mattresses, after all.

It also crossed my mind that there possibly were people who had nowhere to sleep. I was convinced that if I offered that bed to them, which I was struggling to accept as mine, they would literally wash my feet in gratitude. It was more of a scenario of one complaining of not having a better shoe and the other wishing he had a leg.

In the end, sleep was, and still is, sleep. I consoled myself. But it was true. Or is there anyone you know who enjoys extra time from the one nature provides just because they own a larger bed and a fatter mattress? Unless they extend their sleep, but again, that doesn't change a thing. The status of my blanket? No. That, I won't tell you about. The law gives me the right to privacy, too. Thanks.

I stood up from my bed. My mother and father had always cultivated in us the routine of waking up early in the morning. They were both early birds. And they infected us with it. I always made up my mind about what I would do first thing after wheeling away from bed every day. I brushed my teeth and

washed my face. Then, I grabbed a machete and headed to the *shamba*, sitting just a few yards from home. That was despite the many pleas from my mother to eat my breakfast before I left.

I convinced her that I was good, that I could manage. She let me go, although with a heavy spirit. I told you how happy my mother was whenever she saw our stomachs bulge after eating a lot of food. Now you understand. For real, I wasn't hungry. Not that I refused to eat. I got butterflies flying all over my stomach from the previous day's encounter with Linda. That gave me complacency. Furthermore, if I ever felt hungry, I would simply return home and enjoy brunch. The distance favoured the situation.

It was harvesting season, so the commitment for the day was harvesting maize and cutting down stalks that would be later burned down or lifted for storage to serve as foliage for animals. Our homestay was timely because it gave respite to my workaholic mother. We offered to run errands for her without her being asked or ordered to do so. It was the right thing to do to show our importance to her after handling so much alone during our busy days at school.

The harvesting would be just a one-day thing. My mother had already done the bulk of the work. We always warned her against overworking herself, but she wouldn't listen! It was like there was a trophy she expected for it. The day to follow was then booked for something else. I looked around. The grasses around the fences were outgrown from not being stepped on for a long time. It was at this time that I became familiar with things like that. We always left for school at the first crow and

PETALS OF FATE

returned at dusk, weekends included. That denied us time to see this and that. Now that I was aware and had a day off, I had to fix the messes.

The air was littered with the sounds of children playing. Yelling. It was a holiday, and a good number of them were in the village. Some were already transported to see their uncles and aunties staying in various towns. A very common practice in those days. Older girls, too, were no exception. I can count up to twenty girls who married through these holiday visits. That is from my area. Yours may be different. The funny thing was that these girls were not even certain of the fate of their innocent visits until it happened.

I did what I could do to exhaustion that day with a hand lent by my younger brother, the one I told you was in class eight. You remember? Maize pushed home with a wheelbarrow. Stalks of maize were cut and piled, awaiting the final verdict of what to do with them. Burn or store for foliage? Both options carried weight. There was always a notion that burning plant remains made lands more fertile because of the ashes. Others believed that burning had a far-reaching effect of killing bacteria in the soil, thus rendering the land barren.

Everything about it felt like a puzzle with missing pieces, and I was torn between what to believe. From my limited experience, I knew that ash holds a treasure trove of nutrients—calcium, potassium, and phosphorus—all vital for a plant's life cycle. Think about the times you've planted vegetables in soil that had seen a charcoal fire; the difference in growth is often astonishing. If you haven't tried it, I highly recommend giving it a shot someday.

COLLINS TEUREY

Ultimately, whether I decided to burn the remains or leave them intact, both choices had their merits. On one hand, burning could clear the way for fresh growth, enriching the soil with ash. But on the other, keeping the remains could provide vital foliage, especially during a drought—something I had to consider for our three cows. It felt like a tough decision, one that weighed heavily on my mind.

After wrestling with it all day, I decided to call it quits. My thoughts drifted to the refreshing cold bath I craved, and I couldn't shake the desire to borrow my mother's phone to check in with my friend 'Voke.' Sometimes, a little distraction is all you need to gain some clarity. So, I opted for that.

A week after that awful day with Mercy, she decided to show me just how serious she was. This time, she aimed her sights on someone I couldn't ignore: my older sister, Aketch, who was in her final year while I was just starting Form One. Aketch was my rock, and now Mercy was tugging at the threads of that bond. It felt like Mercy had become a stubborn weed in my life—persistent and hard to uproot. It occurred to me that she had once been a friend to Aketch, a classmate even, until distance stood between them after Mercy was forced to repeat Form Three on account of poor performance.

Those days were different. Promotion to the next class was hinged on merit. Forget about today; the government has made it a law that all students must advance to the next classes, regardless of whether they hit the pass mark or not. It's the

PETALS OF FATE

same way they did away with inter-school ‘mock’ examinations, academic contests, and school ranking. Reason? It bred unfair competition. It doesn’t make so much sense. But honestly, what could be more unjust? If anything, the directive had only precipitated a lot of laxity in most schools, which once drew motivation from such activities. The dwindling performance in schools today is essentially to be blamed on it. How I weep for my country! You should weep, too.

My sister washed her throat by feigning a cough. That was so of her when she wanted to make fun of something or gossip. Then—she called my name. You know how you call someone when you really want their whole attention? Yes, that one. I gave it to her. Attention. Still, she was just staring at me in a manner of saying, “Oh, poor you! You’re already grown and now attracting girls.” But, without actually saying it. Deep down, I was starting to lose my patience, almost to the extent of shouting at her in disgust. I hate being kept waiting. My sister knew it, but I couldn’t bring myself to comprehend why she was pulling the stunt on me.

“Do you know Mercy?” She finally asked.

“Mercy!”

“You heard me right. She’s in form three Blue.” She retorted.

“Oh! Ah, that lunatic!” I screamed.

“Ha-Ha! Why do you call her that?” She enquired.

“What’s with her?” I asked, pretending I didn’t hear her question.

COLLINS TEUREY

“She sent me to you because she likes you, but her efforts to win you have suffered a hurdle. She asked me to talk to you to at least reason with her. Has she told you anything already?” She curiously asked, silently laughing.

The conversation went on like that. I told my sister the whole story and how it all started. And for how long it had been going on. She was amazed, then amused. The entire thing looked scripted. Sadly, it wasn't. She advised me on how to take care of things like that. I told her about past similar experiences I'd had, which were very close or the same as that. I'd never shared the ones from primary school with her or anyone close to me. According to my sister, I shared part of the blame. My handsomeness was responsible for my woes. Really?

CHAPTER 5



REUNION

Linda must be waiting for me. I thought to myself and left to bribe my mother with words to lend me her phone. For a moment, she hesitated and even reminded me that it was a day before that I spoke to so-called friends of mine. She was serious, by the way. I told her not to be like that.

“Son, you’re like a beggar who keeps on coming back!” She opined. Laughing.

“Ma-ma!” I screamed, ideally, to manipulate her.

“Yes! It is as if we own an equal share of this phone. If you intend to split hours of using this phone halfway with me, then stand guided that it’ll only happen the day the pig starts flying!” She declared. Half serious. Half joking. She gave me the phone anyway.

I reached for the phone with appreciation. Nothing gave my mother ecstasy more than showing gratitude to her. For the things she did, however little. It was her weak spot that we took advantage of. Especially me. I knew it was always a guarantee

that I'd get what I wanted from her, provided I approached her with great humility. It flattered her into submission. Of the many life lessons she taught us, that part stood out as her favourite. She repeatedly reminded us that humility and forgiveness were the richest virtues every human should possess. Showing gratitude and saying 'sorry' were constituents of the two. We learned from the best.

I texted Linda. And true to my thoughts, she was expecting to hear from me. It was only my instruction that she shouldn't text back the number until I did myself, which was holding her back. She confirmed that to me when she replied to my message almost immediately. Her phone was in her hand, somewhat. I don't know if the phone was her own or if she was also a beggar who kept coming back like me, in my mother's own words, ha-ha! But I was lured that the phone was hers; otherwise, she could have given me conditions on when to call or text like I did.

Before I could process her reply, my phone, no, my mother's phone buzzed with a call. Checking, it was her number. She was calling! What should I do? Pick or let it go unanswered? I didn't know. I think I was too shy or just timid. I settled on the former option, so I picked but chose to listen rather than speak. I heard her artistic voice come through the phone's earpiece. "Hello...Hello! Can you hear me?" I just held my breath. Listening. When she saw that unyielding, she hung up the call. I would later blame the "poor communication" on a bad network, and she believed me and apologised instead.

PETALS OF FATE

From what I remember, we kept in touch whenever we found space. We talked about many things. She told me more about herself, and I responded by doing the same.

She confirmed the details that Adrian had told me about her. The school she was studying at, Sky View Girls' High School, was very reputable then. It boasted a stellar performance, making it one of the few sought-after secondary schools in that era.

Students from all walks of life studied there, and no barrier stood in their way. Ethnicity, race, height, name it—provided, their parents were able to fork out the stupendous amount of money they charged for school fees. It was purely a boarding school and very costly. By the time I met with Linda without the actual meeting, it was in the category of provincial school. Were it not for the usual politics that filled the process of school rankings, *Sky View Girls'* would have been at par with *Starehe Boys'*—in terms of category. My thoughts.

The biggest challenge Linda's school was grappling with was the problem of water. It was the same year in and year out. I don't know why. At times, it became a crisis that prompted the school administration to give a nod, allowing the students to fetch water from outside the school. It took them several kilometres to walk to the *Kogonda* River, which was the only available alternative. There were dangers involved, as anyone would expect. Some students were swallowed by the river by accident, others just for being careless, trying to swim in the crocodile-infested river as their friends cheered them on. So voracious was the river that it spared no one from its insatiable appetite

for human meat. It was as if it suffered a curse from somewhere unbeknownst to many.

From another angle, there were cases of rape. The number was sometimes staggeringly huge and difficult to control; that gave leeway to scumbags to take advantage of the innocent school-going girls. Some girls were already in 'stable' illicit relationships with the random men they ran into as they cut across the village in quest for water. Frequently, they could disappear and reappear, something that gave the people manning the convoy a long day.

Some girls from the group were too *horny* to live the next day without feeling a rod inside them. They would beg the men they met along the way to service them in the bordering thickets without considering the dangers attached to it. They referred to that as 'removing the lock.' Therefore, young men hanging around purposelessly along the paths they strode became a common sight. I evaluated all these happenings and prayed that Linda never fell victim to such. Now that she was mine or about to become mine.

My school, *Milambo Mixed Secondary School*, was at the level of a district school with regard to the pecking order back then. That shouldn't make you look at me with disdain. We used to beat giant schools within and without our region. To be more exact, our school would send more than three-quarters of candidates to universities under government sponsorship every year. I tell you what, with very limited resources, including inadequate learning paraphernalia. I leave it up to you to imagine what the school would have been capable of if only

PETALS OF FATE

they could acquire even half of the benediction bigger schools enjoyed.

She also talked to me about her home area. A place called *Ng'ok Olewe*, meaning 'the vomit of a talkative one,' in my vernacular. The first time I heard about that name, I laughed until I cried. I knew where it was because the vehicle I once boarded stopped at *K'Olewe* town centre to regurgitate a passenger. That was a while ago before I knew if Linda ever existed. My mother, who dealt with selling second-hand clothes, also used to talk about the place, *K'Olewe* market. She clothed people there with her fragrantly smelling *mitumba*, second-hand clothes. I admired the place a big deal for its industry-like appearance. It boomed with business activities that, on market day, would be filled to capacity with people, and even a place for air to pass was a problem.

Ng'ok Olewe was the same area Adrian was coming from. His mother cooked there for his father. Voke was from *Ma-binju*, with some good strides from *K'Olewe*. So, it occurred to me that Linda and Adrian met there. Later, when I paid him a visit, he toured me around his entire village, including 'Linda's' place. I've placed that name in quotes because her name then was no longer Linda like I'd always known her for or called her. She was now Michelle. During my visit, I noted that the two were, in fact, neighbours, though not that close. But, from Adrian's place or her end, you could clearly see the roofs of each home. You could even hit the roof with a stone from a sling or catapult, depending on your skill. However, there was no proper reason whatsoever to cause that unwarranted disturbance.

COLLINS TEUREY

After my sister told me that I had my handsomeness to blame for my troubles with girls, I didn't know whether to believe her or not. Was I really that handsome? I wondered. The following morning, which was a public holiday, so we didn't go to school, I spent most of my time secretly before the mirror. I wanted to verify if what my sister said was true. I selected a bigger mirror that my mother used to see if her wig was sitting well on her head before attending a *Chama* meeting. I wiped clean traces of mist-like substances from it to make it crystal clear.

I then mounted it on the wall with the help of the nail I hit on the wall. The mirror had something like a hook that helped with that. I took a few steps backwards, one, two, three. That was it. I had done all the usual preparations this time before leaving for school. I had brushed my teeth and combed my hair—we were allowed to keep medium-long hair, and keeping it neat was the only way to survive. Anything far from that would attract a penalty of shaving it clean, the Jordan style, and there was no appeal for that.

Lovers of long hair like me were careful to that effect. I wore my uniform and a tie to augment my looks. I wanted to look exactly how I used to when I was going to school. I also painted my shoes and put them on with a pair of socks. I knew those last two or four gentlemen. (shoes and socks) served no purpose before the mirror. Nonetheless, I chose to wear them. Should I carry my backpack too? No, that was crazy. I dropped the idea. I was set. I looked at my face and touched it to feel its texture. It was as smooth as the feathers of a bird. I felt

PETALS OF FATE

proud of it. I can't begin to tell you how my friend's face looked as rough as a crocodile's skin after being attacked by *aruodhi*, or acne.

I tried to smile. I liked it. It carried a lot of innocence. Then I laughed to see what I looked like when laughing. The idea was to spot the difference from what I had witnessed in some social gatherings during a church camp meeting. Someone laughed, and everyone wondered why he was crying. It was hard to tell the two apart. Again, I passed that test. I looked at my chest and arms. I was musclebound, the kind you're born with.

Downwards, I was also well endowed with strong abdominal muscles and something else I don't want to tell you about. Besides, I was dark-complexioned and tall. Generally, I was good-looking, and I'm not bragging. I agreed with my sister. She was right. Later, when I was in the advanced stages of learning and mature enough, I heard many women describe exactly the qualities I possessed as what they required from their ideal men. The men of their dreams. And, of course, the 'must have money' bit.

I have always felt like I was waking up under a lucky star since I met Linda or knew Linda. This was because within that week of starting a conversation with her, something happened that would solve the challenge I faced with communicating with her permanently. With that, I mean the coming home of my sister. It was sometime before she returned home. Six months, thereabout. She was constantly held up at work because the nature of her job directed so. She worked as a teller at one of the KCB bank branches in Kenya's capital, Nairobi.

COLLINS TEUREY

It was her first job after graduating from college. She read a course leading to accountancy, and you just understand how first jobs have a way of making people devoted. That first salary you're earning in your entire life! And knowing that the only way to earn another was to stay and prove that you deserved it through competency and versatility. My sister understood that concept well.

She, therefore, gave it her all, including running shifts for her colleagues upon the slightest requests. As a result, this left her with almost no time to do stuff like coming home. It was a case of an apple not falling far from the mother tree. Her mother, who also doubled as my mother, loved working that, even if it meant messing up a well-spread bed to spread it again, she would— just to make sure she spent even her supposed-to-be free time working. In this particular instance, my sister's supervisor had to intervene and put her on a forced-off for one week after observing that attention-grabbing trend. Then, she resolved to spend it at home with her family. She wasn't married yet at the time.

Her off from work coincided with the end of the month, so she received her salary for that month in tandem with her leaving for the one-week break. The pay was fair enough to enable her to pick this and that from the shelves and pay for it with some remaining change to sort her rent and have enough to push her through to the next month.

"By the way, ma-ma, I bought you a new phone. Ochogo, get me my black handbag from that chair," She ordered my youngest brother while pointing to where the bag was.

PETALS OF FATE

“*Adier nyathina?*” Mum asked with anticipation. She meant, ‘sure, my child?’

“I think I put it in here,” she said while checking through the bag, “I don’t seem to find it; where did I place it then?” She asked with surprise visible in her eyes.

“Virgin Mary, Mother of God! Are you sure that was where you placed it, Aketch?” Asked my mother, making a sign of a cross. We were staunch Catholics.

“Get me my bigger suitcase,” She signalled to me before starting to remove clothes one by one, leaving everything in disarray.

“Oh, thank God, here it is; I almost thought I lost it!” She said, sighing.

“Let me see. It looks so smart. Is this also a Moto...Motoroa..Uh, I don’t know those things!” Mum declared. Laughing. The phone in question was a Nokia 1110 model. A very popular model back then. It was seductive in the eyes and a bit more sizeable than the Motorola my mother had owned for the longest time.

“Haha! Mum, it’s called Motorola,” I corrected her while laughing, “but, this one is Nokia.” I added.

“These things are for you, young people, to know, *nyathina*. Not old dying people like me,” mum responded while laughing.

“Don’t say that, mum. You aren’t dying anytime soon, *riswaa!*” I spat that bad saliva.

“No, it’s motola!” My younger brother forgot to mind his business.

“The last time I checked, we weren’t babysitting here! First, learn how to pronounce words well before you gatecrash in adults’ conversations!” I shut him up.

“It’s motola!” He insisted.

“Hush! Enough of that already,” my sister quelled the altercation in the offing.

“This will be mum’s new phone,” she said with finality.

“But I don’t know how to use it,” my mother protested.

“You’ll learn it bit by bit, momma. Even me there was a time when I didn’t know how to use this one of mine too. You can give the older phone to Carl now.” Carl was short for Carlos; that was how they called me at home.

“Okay, daughter. May God bless you. At least now someone won’t bother me with borrowing my phone,” She said, smiling.

It was me she was referring to. My mother had been using a Motorola C113 model, a very dwarf phone that was also not so appealing to the eye. First of all, it had been overused, and its dial pads were worn out and tired. Secondly, its original colour had blanched, and it was too small in size as well. However, two things about it could win it a trophy regardless: it preserved battery power for a long time and had a strong network. To me, it looked more like a toy than an actual phone. I didn’t have one of my own, so I embraced its flaws. Did its ugliness matter? I don’t think so. Of importance was communication, and it helped so well with that. Her concern was that she couldn’t use the new Nokia model since her fingers had gotten used to the Motorola.

PETALS OF FATE

Time moved faster, like someone chasing it away with a deadly weapon. Soon, I would only have three days left to return to school. Having my own phone now saved me from the stress of borrowing one. There's always that degree of freedom you feel deprived of whenever you're using something that doesn't belong to you fully.

It was the feeling I always had with my mother's phone, now mine. I always had to look over my shoulder as I used it because of the secret I was trying to keep. Yes, I still carried the secret with me despite having the phone as my own now. The relief I had was that I was able to use it more comfortably without hiding like a rat and deleting our sweet conversations that would otherwise serve as evidence for good memories in the future between me and my Linda.

I was sure it wouldn't be until forever that I could keep what was happening in my life from my mother and sister. Especially my sister. We were joined at the hip and always enjoyed a great level of openness. It was always her that came to mind first whenever I faced a storm I didn't know how to get out of, and her advice always worked well for me. For my mum, she was never a bad listener at all. In fact, if there was anyone who was more understanding in a critical hour of need, then that was her. But, she was strict. Very strict when circumstances required her to be. Something that all of us understood without any form of explanation.

Since my father went to book a plot in heaven where he would live with his family in the afterlife, my mother was left with a bigger shoe to fit into. She had to be a mother and a father, all in one piece. An assignment that no one trained or

prepared her for, so she needed to learn it all by herself. It was for this matter that she became very vigilant to be able to follow up on our every step. Any indolence from her side would mean leading us astray, an outcome she termed her greatest fear.

At the same time, she was confronted with the responsibility of ensuring that we felt motherly and fatherly love without my father being present to offer that himself. There's nothing as hard as standing in for someone. You may end up losing yourself in the process of searching and trying to fit in. Even at the workplace, there's always that one employee who has remained irreplaceable even after the employer tried to replace them. Their peerless performances keep on haunting the organisation. Their successors hurt in return for being compared, or simply being reminded, or told that their outputs cannot measure up to someone the company still misses. This kind of accomplishment of becoming someone else needs skill and a feat of strength. How my mother managed to make us feel our father's presence in his absence, still to date, is a wonder of the world to me.

With my own phone and a new SIM card, Linda and I could now communicate more often. The restriction I put on when to be texted or phoned was lifted forthwith. Our conversation deepened, and we talked most of the time during the day up to very wee hours in the night. We had already grown so fond of each other that we began sharing top secrets regarding our personal lives. Do you remember when I called Linda 'dear' on SMS when we commenced talking? This time, it was her turn. She wasn't calling me just 'dear,' but dearest.

PETALS OF FATE

She confessed to me, with a certain vulnerability in her voice, how addicted she had become to me. She told me she felt empty inside whenever it took too long to hear from me. I replied that the feeling was mutual, that I, too, felt that same emptiness when we didn't talk.

She then shared how special it felt to hear the notification on her phone, the excitement of discovering it was my text, or the rush when her phone rang, and it was my call.

There was a brief silence before she continued, almost laughing, telling me how, since we'd started talking, people around her had begun to notice the change in her. They asked her why she always seemed so happy, smiling and laughing like someone who had inhaled too much-laughing gas. I could almost hear her grin through the phone, the joy in her voice unmistakable.

"It's all because of you," she said, and I could sense the sincerity in her words.

The days went by, each one strengthening the bond between us, until one thing led to another, and the rest, as they say, became history.

She slowly became a brain cancer in my head. There was no removing it without interfering with my brain's normal functioning. Removing one such cell would definitely lead to the proliferation of a million others. It was better to be left alone, for that matter. She had really taken control of my head almost to the point of making me lose focus. I thought about her every passing second. Sometimes, when I missed her, my heart bled with heartache.

My phone had become my closest company now. Most times, I kept staring at it, hoping that she'd call or text. I prayed that any incoming calls or texts indicated her name, and when it happened otherwise, I felt very disappointed. The day I bought my SIM card, she was the one who first got my number. I called her as soon as I loaded it with airtime and asked her to erase the one I initially gave her. I informed her that I now had my own phone and that she could reach me any time around the clock without acting with reserve.

I placed my books back on the small table I used for my private studies, then leaned back in the chair, stretching one leg across the table and resting the other on top of it. I was taking a break—done with my studies for the night. My timetable had me focused on Business Studies, with a study plan carefully broken down into topics and subtopics. Tonight, I was revising Demand and Supply, specifically the law of demand and supply and the concept of equilibrium.

According to the law of demand, when the supply of goods and services decreases, the demand for them increases, and vice versa. In my mind, it was the perfect analogy for missing Linda. When Linda was away (the decreased supply), I found myself missing her more (the increased demand). And when she was around, the reverse was true.

Equilibrium, I thought, is reached when supply equals demand. It was the same as when both of us were available at the same time—supply and demand perfectly in sync. I know it might not make sense to you, but it made perfect sense to me back then. The language of love, after all, doesn't always need to make sense to everyone.

PETALS OF FATE

Linda had asked me to loan her some time to help her mother—my mother-in-law—prepare *chapatis* for supper that evening. She promised she'd repay the favour, with interest. It seemed like a good business deal, so I agreed. That meant our conversation could stretch into the night, compensating for the time stolen by other commitments. I decided to use that opportunity to go back in time, to reflect on the moments that were ours, while I waited for her to finish.

I looked at what I had become in such a short time, all because of falling in love. The change was almighty! I couldn't understand why I couldn't dismiss what I felt for Linda as I had effortlessly dismissed feelings for other girls. Forget about Mercy—there were more than I could even count—but just like with Mercy, this one, remained indelibly written in my memory. It was about a classmate called Beryl. I hope she sleeps well and finds the kind of love in heaven that I couldn't offer her while we both had plenty of time on this green planet.

We were in form two. Somewhere at the beginning of the first term, when I noticed this girl always staring at me admiringly in class and everywhere else, she spotted me. She blushed irredeemably when our eyes met. Beryl was the kind of a girl who wouldn't hurt a fly. She was soft-spoken and smiled more than she uttered a word. She was friends with another girl from the same area at home with whom I was coming.

Her name was Yvonne. Most of the time, they were together in the school compound and in the evening when people were breaking for home. I used to overhear Yvonne telling her, "*Mwite ama unamwogopa?*" A *Kiswahili* statement meaning,

COLLINS TEUREY

‘Call him, or do you fear him?’ For a long time, I had wondered without success why the statement frequented their conversations every time they came behind me. It was as if they were always timing me because in a week, let’s say, they lost track of me only once or twice by extreme.

Maybe because she knew we were coming from the same area, Beryl depended on Yvonne to get to me. It was beginning to dawn on me that way. I might be wrong, but why did all these things happen only when she was in her company? There were instances when her friends pushed her towards me, and she withdrew shyly. Sometimes, I heard a voice call my name from behind in their procession, but when I turned to look, I was met by a loud silence that made it as hard as solving a Rubik’s Cube blindfolded to tell who had called my name from who hadn’t. The trend continued for a whole term. I couldn’t broach the subject with Yvonne because we were from the same area and even studied in the same primary school. We were naturally distant. There was no way then I could start that conversation with her to learn what was happening in Christ’s name.

I thought the end of that term would mark the end of that drama, but it was actually preparing its beginning, now more intensely. The start of the second term seemed good for Beryl, as it showed her determination and made her intentions known. I caught her staring at me more recurrently now and without wearing the shy face, she used to.

One time or the other, she called my name without purpose, just to appeal to my attention. She hid behind buildings to stalk me. She had become so ubiquitous that anywhere and

PETALS OF FATE

everywhere I went, I would take notice of her presence with just a simple squint of an eye. The eerie bit with this was that, unlike Mercy, Beryl never owned the guts to approach me until her last day under the sun.

We had just finished our mid-term exams, and as the school programme dictated, we were leaving for a half-term break that would last for five days. The principal always ensured it was given on Friday to correspond with those two days, making it a weekend. That meant we would report back on Wednesday or Thursday if we left on Friday. In his words, the principal said that would save time wastage.

On this fateful day, Beryl timed me as usual, given guard by her crew. It was never business as usual, and she would not sit pretty and see her friends poke fun at her. She made her move. Threw herself at it. What she wanted with her life. Called my name, and when she felt I wasn't prompt in my response, she came walking to me with the courage of a suicide bomber, ready to give up her life if it killed her. She grabbed my hand, and her friends laughed. I ignored her because I felt so debilitated by that, and then I arm-twisted her, broke loose, and fled without caring what that meant to her in front of her mean friends. I didn't look back to see if she broke into a sob or just braced herself and accepted her fate.

CHAPTER 6



CONFESSIONS

“Good morning, my love. I must tell you something before I go back to school, but I need you to promise me that it won’t change how you look at me.” Linda texted me at first light on Tuesday, a day before the opening date. It sounded like, ‘You, poor creature! I suggest you look for enough shock absorbers because what’s about to come your way might be too hard to handle.’ It’s a very common way for women to approach their men when they’re about to drop a bombshell that would take the men ages or even a lifetime to recover from.

Interestingly, as a man, you would still be expected to behave normally, as if nothing had happened. Any question in relation to that would be misconstrued. It’s no wonder having your woman at arms akimbo, spouting off and yelling that you love her no more after that. Every day is a learning and unlearning day. If you ever enrol in a school of studying women, trust me, no one ever graduates therein, and you’re not spared! Women are supposed to be loved and not to be understood. A

PETALS OF FATE

little bird who started this game of the heart way ahead of me once told me, and now, more than ever, I was starting to make meaning out of it. I was firmly gripped with consternation, not knowing what was lying in wait ahead of me.

Was she planning to break up with me and that her call to promise was a way of tricking me into it—that, after all, I still would be able to ‘understand’ her rationale for breaking up with me? Was she going to tell me that all we shared was just a mere coquetry? That I needed to land off that cloud of misguided fallacy finally? Was she going to eventually substantiate my one-time fear that, maybe, the issue of Linda would just turn out to be an idea that only existed in an empty, wandering mind?

I was deeply drowned in my own thoughts. After my questions failed to bear answers, I decided to take a deep breath and grasp the nettle. It reminded me of the first day I texted Linda, and I was too scared to read her response. History was repeating itself, and I was set to have yet another test on my faith happening to me again. I braced myself. To accept my fate in whichever form it came.

Consequently, I typed back and assured her that it was a promise. Just the way she wanted to hear me say. I then sat back and anxiously waited for her response to strike hard. I felt very vulnerable.

“I truly hope you forgive me,” she responded back. I could feel her emotions run high from that simple yet complex text.

“I don’t understand, darling. You really are making me nervous. Won’t you just tell me what’s going on already?”

COLLINS TEUREY

“Okay, but... I don’t think I’ve got any idea how to begin...” She retorted.

“Try and find one. I already made a vow to you, remember?” I countered. That was in reference to my promise to her about not letting anything change how I would look at her henceforth.

“Well, I’m not actually Linda. My name is Michelle. And Linda is my paternal cousin. I’m so sorry I lied to you about it.” She spilled her guts.

The half-term break was finally over, and Beryl’s friends waited for her arrival at school to no avail. And soon, the whole class would take notice of her palpable absence. She was well-known for two things at school: she hardly came to school late, and you would never find her absent from school. She was a very quiet person, and everyone felt her presence through the voice of her silence. For the first time in over a year and a half that we’d known her, she was not only late for school but also absent, with no one having any clue of where she was or what had happened. The new realization suddenly sent panic across the whole class as everyone stared blankly at her vacant seat—subsequently, the joyous mood of the after-half-term reunion dissolved into a sullen atmosphere, *tout de suite*.

Yvonne and Joanne, her closest friends in the class, couldn’t provide any answers to the many inquisitive mouths. They were in the dark, just like everyone else. What begged the million-dollar question was how the two could afford to have no

PETALS OF FATE

hint of their friend's whereabouts. It was like Voke and me failing to provide such information about Adrian. That would be unimaginable to anyone who understood the nature of our close friendship. Aren't friends supposed to be their brother's keepers and have all the essential information about them at their fingertips? It was the question everyone was asking, albeit not so openly, but the looks in their eyes made it seem pretty obvious.

So great was it that it made Yvonne and Joanne guilt-ridden. I was equally quick to crucify them for that until it later occurred to me two years from that day that having one as a friend doesn't equip you with all the information concerning what's happening in their lives. That followed the vanishing of Adrian for a week without a trace, and none of us, his friends, had any freakin' idea where he had gone to. Beryl's absence that day was a case of a man biting a dog. It was utterly paranormal, and in a matter of seconds, the blabs had crossed over to the neighbouring stream.

I remember someone like Voke could be absent from school without the matter becoming a great deal because occasionally, he would wake up and say, "I'm not in the mood," and that was it. Ironically, he would be familiar with everything taught and all the notes given in his absence copied before dusk that material day. He was insane! It was how people got used to his unoccupied chair, but Beryl, no! Something was seriously not adding up. It wasn't about school fees; hers was paid in time, not even on time. What could it be—sickness? No day did I or anyone else hear her whinge of a mild headache. Was it a family brawl? We had no idea because she never

spoke or showed any sign that she came from a disorderly family. Then what?

Amidst the puzzle of where Beryl had gone and people trying to weave the pieces together to find any leads, there was one person in our class who already knew what had happened, and that was the voice in here: me. I was too dumbstruck to say a word, and again, I didn't have the energy to break the awful news to them in the first person. The memories of the last day still nagged me so badly. I didn't know what to do. I felt like screaming, but I couldn't. It wasn't in my position to crack open the news that would send waves of shock through the entire school. The dissenting voices in my head got louder time after time. I wasn't the one to!

The confession that it was Michelle I had been dealing with and not Linda made me numb with shock. It practically left me bereft of the power to respond to the situation coherently. I was caught up between the devil and the deep blue sea, and the only reaction I could give was silence. I didn't want to upset the situation even more. I wondered why Michelle would steal Linda's identity and what motive she had behind it all.

For a moment, I wished it ended up being a prank, but no, it was the truth that I was required to adjust to. What was next for me? I had fallen in love with Michelle for the idea of Linda, and now that it turned out that she wasn't Linda, was I to back out? Had I fallen in love with the idea or the person? If it was the idea, then everything I had imagined about Linda would remain nothing but an imagination in Michelle. And

PETALS OF FATE

Michelle? Would I still be able to hold on to what I had started feeling for her, knowing it was Linda? Or would all that be washed down the drain with the death of the whole idea of Linda? Was she as beautiful as I had created in my mind, or was she far from being close to it? None of these made sense to me. My situation was inexplicable, and I didn't seem to have any way out of it.

Michelle took it upon herself to make me understand why she had to make that hard choice of pretending to be someone she was not. Her voice was very authentic. She narrated to me that it wasn't originally her intention that even to her, things happened so fast. So fast that before she realised it, she had already started becoming very overprotective of me. She never wanted to lose connection with me to anyone else. Not even her cousin.

To her, my first message to her had a strange way through her heart like a hot knife through butter. What's more, she felt like she had finally had a word with a part of her that had always been missing in her life. Guising herself as Linda was all she had left in order to keep me from slipping away from her clasp. I couldn't fail her. Matters of the heart are beyond one's comprehension. I learned that through personal experience and swore never to pass judgment on anyone.

The real Linda hardly came home. Michelle said it was close to five years since she last did. Linda had been staying with her father in western Kenya, where he worked as a regional manager of a reputable insurance firm. She was in form four and was preparing to sit for her final examination the same year, just like us. The marriage between her *Taita* mother and father

had failed to stand the test of time for reasons the married people understand better.

Consequently, Linda remained in the custody of her father while her younger brother took sides with his mother. That wasn't surprising to me. Male children are always known to attract the bond of their mothers, whereas females enjoy great chemistry with their fathers. It's one of the things that exist without proper exposition.

After paying attention to all the details, I was seduced into believing that my hope to meet with Linda would remain a pipe dream. There was no signage ever to guide their paths home. The separation in the family had changed everything. What was left was the debris of a once flourishing home with a house lying destitute to prove its one-time existence. If we go by the very words of the late Luther Vandross, that a house isn't a home, then the house they left behind standing carried very little hope of a possible return. In quick arithmetic, I did, and my findings were that the last time Adrian saw Linda, she was in class eight. It was such a long time, considering the fact that it was four years later he was telling me about her. In class eight, Adrian had known what goldmine lay underneath skirts and knickers. Good lord!

"Imagine that my sister died last night," Dave broke down after a long silence from our ongoing conversation.

"Which sister?" I inquired, alarmed.

"Beryl," he replied melancholically, wiping his wet eyes with the back of his right palm.

PETALS OF FATE

“What do you mean Beryl died? What happened?” I pressed to know. Bewilderedly.

Too engulfed in emotion was he to make a sentence. He stuttered in agony, which made my heart shrink. Dave doubled as Beryl’s maternal and paternal cousin. Their mothers were sisters married to consanguine brothers. Dave’s father was the eldest, and Beryl’s father was the youngest in a family of five brothers. While we were in form two, he was in form three, and he had earned a lot of popularity in school for his prowess in co-curriculum activities, notably football and handball.

Besides, he was talkative and had a great sense of humour, so everyone scrambled to be around him. He didn’t bother about making friends. It was the business of other people to catch friendship with him. And true to that, his social circle had enlarged more than anyone I knew in those days. We called him a man of the people.

Dave and Beryl were like Siamese twins, not for anything but for how fondly they were of each other. In a day, he would come to Beryl’s class twice at least just to check if she was all right. I’m unsure if she responded by doing the same because of her unpredictability. To me, their good blood was one of the cases of relation mixed with friendship, *wat kod osiep*. The way they got along well killed many people with envy. Me included.

On the contrary, my cousins were under the influence of my ever-complaining aunties, who persistently backlashed us for rarely calling or visiting them, forgetting that their children (my cousin), too, never cared about our parents. It was the effect of that double standard that adulterated our should-be good relationship. Let me not say another word for it because

COLLINS TEUREY

my cousins are here, listening, and I'm scared they might snitch on me. I met Beryl's cousin along the way to school that day. It was nearly a quarter to six. I had decided to leave for school a bit early to fetch my locker and chair from the store where they were kept whenever school closed for holidays, even for a short time as a half-term.

I planned to be first in line and pay school fees and return, get my stuff, and prepare for class in a timely manner before the bursar's office started bursting with people. That was when my conversation with Dave began, and we discussed an English Premier League game played the previous night. He played along well to our chats that I could barely realise something was astray before he could feed me with that heart-wrenching news of Beryl's untimely demise.

After Dave had regained his emotions and composure, he opened up to me about what had transpired. Beryl had been taken ill a day into the half-term break, and she had been diagnosed with acute Pneumonia and Cerebral Malaria. Her condition was beginning to deteriorate at an alarming rate when she was taken to the ward for close medical observation. She would later be transferred to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for developing breathing difficulties, where she lost it to the ghost in the godforsaken hours of the night that marked the end of the half-time recess.

There was no way I was letting Michelle go because of what she did. The justification for her action, however absurd at that moment, made sense to me in the end. Everything was inspired

PETALS OF FATE

by love, which was also what I was looking for. It wounded me, yes, so badly, but I wasn't going to castigate her for that forever. I found it pointless. Perhaps it was fate taking its course and trying to change that was like defying the will of the gods. I wasn't ready to take the risk of being at the mercy of their wrath. Darkness is driven out by light and not another. To love someone is to will the good of that person. To the gods of love, let your will be done. I declared and embraced Michelle as my own and interred the idea of Linda into the bottomless abyss of oblivion.

Loving Michelle was now something I swore to do with my life. It was my first love, and I got very fixated on it. Thoughts of ever ending up like that man in Elvis Presley's 1956, *Heart-break Hotel* song never crossed my mind a tiny bit. In the song, a story was told of a lonesome man who decided to jump from a hotel window in an attempt to fix his loneliness problem. There was no way I was ending up like that. I had Michelle for a companion, which gave me the confidence you only find amongst the wicked. In any event, I was convinced I would never have any reason to jump anything, not even a rope because that part of loneliness was already sorted.

They say a woman prays to have a man as her last lover, while a man has the desire to be the first lover in a woman's life. You might not automatically understand that unless you have been in the game for a long time. And you wielded a good mastery of the rules of the game very well. In that journey of the heart, there was always a widespread belief on the side of the men that if you happened to be the first man in a woman's life, chances were high that she wouldn't forget about you so

easily. Particularly if you were lucky to be the first man to thrust her *bean* and take away her innocence.

Women had great attachment to their virginities, which extended to whomever they decided to lose them to. It explains why it somehow proved difficult for a woman to move on after a relationship soured. The memories of giving away their 'treasures' kept crawling back to them. Something that made them want to forgive more than to let go of that *scoundrel* of a man who did them dirty. And in return, men used that knowledge as bargaining power to soothe their way back into the lives of those women. Every man understood that perfectly; hence, their constant wishes to be first in a woman's life.

Another thing is that women only had one instrument for love: their hearts. Men had two; it was either the heart or the head. I guess the latter points to the reason why a man could have sex with a woman or multiple he wasn't betrothed to without having any dependence or remaining attached to all of them after that. It was quite the opposite with women. Women in normal circumstances slept only with the men they had romantic affection with, and there was no double-dealing. Save for the cases of *twilight* women in those days.

However, if that happened, it was most probable that the woman had mentally left the man before physically leaving. Women would leave men twice. Mentally and, finally, physically. About men, I must say it was a bit complicated, so I'll leave it at that before I'm flogged in the butt for exposing the secret cards of our golden days.

The preference for a woman to have a man as her last lover was anchored on the fact that it meant being struck by luck.

PETALS OF FATE

Such ordeal was as rare as a four-leaf clover. Men lived an overly promiscuous life, and having multiple sexual partners appeared to be the style most of them identified with. It was that reality that saw the birth of the nobility wrapped around being the last lover in a man's life on the part of our very good sisters. I really hope that this information has given you a sketch of how things were. If you're curious to learn more, I would suggest that you dive a little bit deeper, but on your own, to be able to.

The ocean of information is always vast and deep. It takes a good swimmer to fish out what he or she wants from what's not needed. That was what it took me as well from the moment I became a passenger in this voyage of love. The love that I knew so little about. Don't forget to remember that curiosity killed the cat, even as you do so.

The time to get back to school was finally here. It ran too fast yet so slow. Some things made me sad during that holiday, but the good things that made me happy overshadowed the ones that dulled my joy. And that was something memorable about it. I was returning to school not the way I left but as a different person with an entirely new perspective on something I had always been contemptuous about. Whoever said change is inevitable was right.

The one who opined that it's only a fool who doesn't change his mind was even more right. I refused to be that fool. I might have been one before I saw the light, but all that was now in my past. I felt like a reptile that had undergone an *ecdysis* and shed off that habit of being a hardliner together with the rest of my skin. I felt new and rejuvenated. I dangerously wanted to meet my friends and talk to them about it.

COLLINS TEUREY

Michelle was the first to leave for school, and then I followed. For example, let's say she left today, and I hit the road the day after. Something like that. I felt very inundated with emotions to say goodbye to her. It pricked my heart that it would be another three months before I could get the leisure to say a word to her again. Gracious heavens, I was just getting to know her! Why did it have to be so soon? Why couldn't time be generous enough with us and extend a trifle? Or go back to the beginning so that we can start all over again? I hoped, but all that was wishful thinking. It was never going to happen.

Mixed feelings crept in, and I developed reservations I don't know from where. I felt thoroughly unsure about how things would be by the end of those three moons devoid of communication. Constant communication is the wheel upon which every relationship rides; lack of it is like attempting to move in a vehicle with deflated legs. It won't be long before the rims wear out and grind to a halt. That was common knowledge, and it tormented me a lot to think of it. More so, given the twist that my relationship had suffered from the start.

It would have dealt me a big blow if it ever faced another unexpected twist. Was she going to change her mind upon return? No, that was a pessimistic way of looking at the future. My late dad always reminded me to be a beacon of optimism, to hold on to hope until there was no more left to hold on to. He told me that life stops where hope ends. I didn't want to veer off the path of his teachings. Consequently, I swore by his words to help me eliminate the feelings of a 'possible' future disillusionment I had.

PETALS OF FATE

We promised to wait on each other hands and feet until time brought us together again. We talked about many issues that I wouldn't begin to mention one by one. Our conversation was similar to one between a soldier leaving to fight a bloody war in a distant land with his wife before departure. Yes, it was similar to that. She played the soldier's wife role very nicely. She expressed her fears and asked me to take good care of myself, neither to present my body as a shield in the front-line nor as a barricade from the fire that ambushed from behind. She loved me dangerously and wanted me to return with my organs and body parts in one piece.

I likewise asked her to keep the gourd's mouth safe from contamination, away from other stinking lips that might itch to drink from before I did. Me, now the rightful owner, to keep it safe from breakage, that I loved my milk fermented in there and sour. I promised I would drink from her calabash, too, as soon as I came back, God willing. It was the longest phone call conversation I've ever had with any skirt owner. It was a moment like no other.

My Michelle painfully sobbed and sniffed on the other end of the receiver. She made me feel like I was dead, or was I? Ew! God forbid. I was still alive and talking to her. I promised myself I would keep my pulse beating until I met her again. She requested my school Postal Address, which I willingly gave her without putting a question mark on it. I didn't know what was cooking in her head when she asked for that until much later. If you've already guessed, well and good. You beat me at that. I'm too lousy at guessing, but I'll still tell you what happened with it anyway. Before that very last valediction, I decided to

COLLINS TEUREY

dedicate this piece of a poem to my now unintendedly intended one:

*I've been staring lonely upon the shore,
Thinking falling in love was my foe,
But you've set me loose from my fears,
And replaced them with feelings I never had for years,
Take my hand now,
To survive these strong winds, I don't know how,
It pierces my heart that you're leaving,
But a sigh of relief I'll be heaving,
On you, when I finally set my eyes,
My soul is freezing with the coldness of the ice,
Darling, I'll be staring at the silver moon,
Hoping that it sends you my way again soon.*

CHAPTER 7



IMPOSTOR

It was on the morning of Wednesday, the first week of September 2005. The morning was whistling with cold, and the sound of chirping birds annoyingly rented the air. I had always fallen in love with the seraphic voices of the birds. And I always wondered why they possessed a talent for singing so divinely. This time, however, it was the very opposite. I woke up under the weather. I wore the moods of a bickering old married couple. Everything seemed off to me. Even the air I breathed didn't smell as good. I was tired in body, mind, and soul.

It fleeced my energy and killed my morale that Michelle was gone, and for the first time since we ran into each other, I slept without her 'goodnight' wishes. I slept on and off, thinking about her. Initially, it injured me that it would take me some time before I saw my friends again back at school. I was always dying for the school to reopen so we could meet again. That changed. In lieu, I became very hesitant. I wished the

school could remain closed for a while, or even forever, if possible. I needed more time from everything around me to spend with Michelle. I had jumped into it so deep, and the waters were at the height of my neck. Damn, I was about to drown.

Outside, the lazy sun was slowly stretching out of its bedding to start its boring journey heading to the west. The trees were doing what they do best, just standing. The monkeys and birds took advantage of that and twitched from one tree to another. The wind was calm, and the sky was clear with no signs of gathering clouds. There was a sense of monotony everywhere. I finished packing my personal effects, including a small shopping for toiletries I had bought the day before. I was prepared to spend a night at the rented shack I told you my friends, and I had over their heads, a small distance from the school vicinity.

The following morning, I reported back to school with my mind made up to turn into a bookworm, like the situation needed me to. I was in a candidate class with roughly two months left to rehearse for the final examination. We were the twentieth cohort set to sit for KCSE, following the introduction of the 8-4-4 education system, with primary education comprised of eight years (classes 1-8), four years in secondary education (forms 1-4), and four years in university education. The new system replaced 7-4-3-2 in 1985 under the patronage of former president Daniel Moi's administration.

This final stretch truly marked a great turning point in my life. I was literally balancing on the precipice between achieving my childhood dream and plunging headlong into the grave

PETALS OF FATE

to bury it with me altogether. The voices of my teachers advising us on the after-benefits of education in class sounded on every street in my head. It was that time that I needed to handle things more painstakingly and undeterred by any bump on the road. It was time to polish what I had been investing in for the last four years.

A tremor was coming that would shake the foundations of houses built on porous sand. There was no assurance of desirable outcomes. It would be disastrous to the unprepared. The sun had closed its eyes for people who thought it was the right time to begin drying hay. Time was up. Woe unto the lazy bones who waited until it was too late to refill their lantern with paraffin, for they wouldn't have enough light to see through to the other side of the tunnel.

We came from different backgrounds. Some had so much to inherit from their parents, and then there was me, whose one remaining parent needed something to inherit from. Despite not telling me she expected anything from me, I felt obligated. I wanted to give her, my mother, a better life someday if life allowed. So that she could also stop feeding like chickens and feed on chickens as others did. Abject poverty was my sworn enemy by default. The goal was to see the tables turn, kick indigence hard out of the window, and lock it tightly.

My good understanding of the terrain of where I came from and the urge to forge another, saved me from the delusion others had during our days at school. The illusion that they would be under the care of their parents until the end of the end. The mentality of choosing not to chart one's own path and to remain wholly dependent on someone else. Maybe I looked at

things with different optics because I had nothing material to expect from someone, a godfather, to look up to for inheritance. That was still fine by me. That kind of dependency, to me, was like an insidious form of bondage, far worse than the one where you openly dig out minerals from rocks in the field with bare hands— on orders of an infamous stone-hearted master. I never wanted it. Came what may!

The school compound was not tidy by the time we returned. Therefore, time was allotted for general cleaning to restore normalcy in the school and make it look like one. And that could only happen in the evening. Reason? The school was busy with entry examinations. It was the kind of assessment done after the end of every academic holiday to monitor students' performance. Also, it acted as a litmus paper aimed at gauging whether the students, made friends with their books during the holidays or were just rambling around the *thorax* of the village, committing small sins.

I will tell you what: This test was very important, and the school dedicated a considerable quantum of requisite resources to make it successful. It was mandatory, and absconders had heavier prices to pay. Should I say suspension on a good day or expulsion on a bad day? No, this was a known rule, and there was no other way around it. Invigilation was done during the exam period. And it was a very serious one. The exam period lasted four days, and the week after was set aside for marking, compiling, and releasing the results.

Did I say it was taken seriously? Well, if I didn't, then I'm already saying it. Those who registered negative deviation com-

PETALS OF FATE

pared to their previous tests were granted an involuntary, unpaid tour to the devil's tomb. If you know what I mean. There was just so much to do as punishment around the school. Flowerbeds to weed, huge tree remains to uproot, a whole earth of hall to mop, firewood to split. I can go on and on. Of course, after getting some good strokes on your *ass*, the kind that makes you want to sit while standing.

Those who performed well had their wedding day and honeymoon. The school gifted them handsomely with stationery, cash sometimes, and a daycation to Impala or elsewhere to see a tortoise the size of a 500-litre super drum, or there's no such size? Visit *Simbi Nyaima*, the man-made lake that purportedly came into being due to an aggrieved woman's tears. I heard the woman was denied water for drinking in one of the homesteads she visited; in reprisal, she cried a river, no—a lake, until the area submerged, leaving behind a lake they named that.

I know the story sounds like the ones you hear at the *Miraa* joints. I didn't believe in the tale, either. And just like you, I took it with sheer scepticism when it was told to us as we grew up. That was exactly why the school sent people like me, the top performers, on that trip so that we could get the history surrounding it in chapter and verse. If you want to know the truth about it, I'm afraid you might need to find out on your own because I don't give that information for free. Giggles.

Sometimes, top performers would also be taken to view *Kit Mikayi* in *Seme* to share their own thoughts on how one big stone got on top of the other apart from what was widely known. Here, there was so much to argue about. Have you ever seen people argue about something they're *tabula rasa*

COLLINS TEUREY

about? It's always chaotic. Just like in the case of *Simbi Nyaima*, this one had its unique kind of folktale, too.

Finally, there was another way of giving us motivation. It was baptized as a 'Special Diet.' This particular diet was prepared strictly for exemplary performers. From time to time, it involved a diet of beef, *sukuma wiki*, and *ugali*. The rest of the school population would eat *githeri* and black tea that day. I detested this one with venom because the rest of us, who suffered allergic reactions from beef consumption, were advised to chew *sukuma wiki*, and there was no room for negotiation about it, argh!

The news of Beryl's death was a bitter pill to swallow. It paralysed everyone. No way was that happening. After the whole class was absorbed in contemplation about where she disappeared to that day, to no avail, the news that I lacked the courage to break eventually came out. It was Yvonne. Dave knew she was the closest of friends to Beryl, and it was only natural that she became the first person to know. So, with the bravery I didn't have, she acquainted the class with the reality of the situation. Soon, the information would spread to every corner of the school. You could feel how lifeless the atmosphere at school had become soon after.

Beryl was loved more than she was hated. Her demise tore the hearts of both teachers and students. Some people cried. Some sobbed. Some wept. Some screamed. Some moaned—oh, sorry, I mean mourned. Some did all of those. And some, like me, were hit hard with paralysis, not knowing what to do

PETALS OF FATE

in denial. It was one of the worst pains I've ever felt. I felt so much remorse. Do you think I was too mean to Beryl with how I handled her the last time? I'll take your silence as a yes. And I won't even try to repudiate that. I felt guilty. I screamed violently without screaming.

Maybe if I had spoken to her one last time and given her some hope for what she desired, she would have slept more peacefully. But that wasn't the case. I rejected her openly, and her friends laughed about it. It broke her heart to many tiny pieces. And it butchers my heart now to remember. She carried the pain to her grave, and there would never be another opportunity for me to change that fate. It haunts me to date. Sobs.

I've never understood until now why things ended the way they did between Beryl and me. I wish I could return her love, but I wasn't feeling things like that at that time. I think, unlike many, it took me quite some time to mature to handle things of that magnitude. I was just sixteen and in form two. Girls ripen faster than boys, I get it. It was only after I got to form four that I started getting attracted to girls. It wasn't that Beryl was uncomely. Not at all; I couldn't use that as an excuse. She was the kind of girl you would pay for her dowry with gold coins without a single murmur. She was too beautiful to be true. Her dimples sunk into her cheeks so sweetly whenever she smiled.

Her walking style was the kind you only watch on beauty pageant shows. She stepped on earth like she was being careful not to step on an invisible thorn. She had the voice of a bird and a winsome chip between her teeth on the lower and upper

COLLINS TEUREY

jaws. Her body complexion was fair, she was meticulously neat, and she had a mermaid-like figure that complemented her look. She was a snack, baked well enough for a good bite.

I've never been so honest about something. I won't pretend. I had a soft spot for Beryl— and I liked her very much. The only difference was that it wasn't the type of liking she wanted from me back then. If it were today, I would have given it a big consideration. I mean, who could reject such a luscious creature under normal arrangements? You see. Silence everywhere! Her sexual appeal definitely would get you as a man, pocketing for no reason other than to lull "*John the blind*" to stop erecting anyhow in public before anyone notices. If you see a guy keeping his hand in his pocket during a conversation with a beautiful woman, chances are, he's doing his best to hide a certain reaction. Shh, don't tell anyone about this little secret.

I carried my phone with me as I left for school to help me communicate with my mother at home and to set an alarm for my morning preps. My mother trusted me with it because I was never the kind of son who needed to be under tight watch to get things done right. I faced no opposition when I told her I was going with it to where I nested around school. She reminded me to behave, though. It's a duty of every parent, you know. But something crazy happened.

Michelle texted me two days after she had left for school. It made me feel very excited. We talked that night about things I can only say were personal. One thing begged the question. Wasn't she supposed to be in school? I didn't expect to hear

PETALS OF FATE

anything from her until after closing, and that wasn't to be any sooner. Yet, there she was. She told me she had gone to school but was turned back for not having the bare minimum amount required for fees. I rapidly grasped that because I knew the insane amount their school charged for fees.

The information Adrian had given me about Linda, with Michelle now in the picture, left me more confused. One thing, however, remained constant: the name of the school he told me Linda was studying at, which turned out to be the same school Michelle was studying. It became clear to me that Adrian had confused Michelle's school with Linda's. At least, that one was true. The rest were contentious and only remained to be seen.

I felt something was wrong during our conversation. That was in the way Michelle composed her text messages. It wasn't the same as what I had gotten used to. Given that I had spent time consistently talking to her for a while, I had learnt how she wrote her messages, and I could even read her mood just by the way she typed or responded. Any slight difference from that would probably raise suspicion. It happened to me that time; nevertheless, there was no way I was going to ask if truly she was Michelle I was talking to. I felt it would be too sensitive or insensitive to ask for fear of making it seem like I was doubting who she was. Some women can create such a big fuss out of that. Worse, if it came out, your doubts were totally misplaced. For that reason, I let it slide.

Even so, she appeared not to be up to speed with some of the things we had talked about just a few days before she left for school. It was blatant, looking at how the conversation was

COLLINS TEUREY

somehow shallow. I was prompted to ask if everything was all right, and she corroborated that it was true; everything was perfectly okay. She professed how in love she was with me. When she was asked to return home, for the reason I had told you fueled her coming back, she got very elated. With that, she got me right. Michelle, the one I knew, accurately said things like that to me. Without a doubt, it was her! I was just overthinking, I guess.

After three days of being at home and routinely talking to her every evening, she told me her fee problem was fixed after I was done with my usual private studies for that evening, and she was ready to leave before midday the following day. I bid her goodbye for the second time that morning before I left for classes— because I knew she would be gone by the time I returned in the evening. However, this time, unlike the first *adieux*, I didn't compose her a poem but reminded her that I loved her like ants love sugar crystals. I looked forward to talking to her again when the time was right, and He, the Lord, made it happen.

When the results of the entry exams were released, I scored a mean grade of B+; I looked at it and said, that was good! The same way the creator looked at what He had created. Only that, His was an extraordinary way of doing it. By just word of mouth! No mortal could match or understand that. It was an impressive improvement from my last time's scores. I moved to position three, generally. Why do I get the feeling that some

PETALS OF FATE

of you thought I would regress in my studies owing to my obsession with Linda, then Michelle—over the holiday? How wrong could you be! My books were always at the top of my priority list. It was only that I didn't have to broadcast to the whole world every time I sat down with my books to read, oh, *mea culpa!* I mean study.

One evening, my father summoned me, like he always did. I was still at the length of my mother's knee. I was still young, not that small, though. I was twelve, thereabout. I remember he had his favourite chair leaning against the wall that separated the living room from the bedroom. It was his preferred place to sit whenever he felt like looking at my books. It was obvious what he was looking for. That was to see if I was a cow with its intestines, *dhiang' gi nyimbiye*, meaning a good-for-nothing person. That was in reference to my performance at school.

At that one sunset, he asked me one question: What is the difference between reading and studying? I told him that when someone reads, they make a sound, whereas when studying, they remain quiet the whole time. Was I any close to the answer? Or was my answer just a bunch of a well-packaged piece of crap? You tell me. The man of the house kept mum and gave me the simplest version of the answer he thought I owed him. When you read a book, chances are you won't understand a thing. You could read two hundred and something pages but only memorise a two-page worth of what you read.

On the other hand, studying meant having a pen, paper, and eraser. It was never about the volume of pages you go through. It was about grasping the entire concept once you

COLLINS TEUREY

closed that book. Reading is for newspapers, magazines, and stuff like that. He lectured me. That was his view of it, and I couldn't agree more. He finished by telling me that when it came to academics, one was required to study and not to read, a method he recommended for me without much ado. That was why I said I was sorry when I told you I created time to 'read' my books, and not just on the phone mollycoddling Michelle on text messages, day and night.

I was blinded by the sight of Beryl's books, which she had left in her locker, stuffed in a polythene bag. How could life become so lifeless? It befuddled me. She would never have carried her books in a *juala*, polythene bag like that, if she were still alive. She was such an organised girl. It sliced my heart to hear her name being read out so that she could take back her exam papers after marking, but she wasn't there to pick them up. Instead, she was sprawling in the cold at the morgue, her body sprayed with morphine for embalmment, tucked in a drawer like a dry piece of big meat. This one crashed my soul, and I cried without control. There was no one to console me, to console the others. Everyone had themselves to give solace. It was a classic case of being on your own.

Before her last homage was paid, we, as a class, both Form Two Green and Two Blue, visited her family to express our heartfelt sympathies and condolences, as well as say a prayer to shield her family members from the unknown and give them hope and strength to endure and soldier on during that difficult moment. It looked better to bury your kin, at least after

PETALS OF FATE

they've lost the war to a prolonged ailment, than to constantly watch them suffer in agony every first light and dusk.

Entombing them may quickly help you to learn to numb the pain, but losing one under a week for a short illness was just too much to stomach. If you saw how her mother broke down, you would relate to what I mean. Disheartening, to say the least. Her burial was on a Saturday that has remained engraved in my heart to date. I didn't attend that funeral, by design, to avoid seeing her lifted down into her new inhospitable home. I chose to remain in denial instead. Don't judge me for it; you never would understand how more hurting attending would be than not. I prayed that she slept well.

"You haven't talked about how things went over the holiday," Adrian asked one evening.

"I knew there was no way you would forget to ask something like that. And my silence was on purpose," I amusedly responded.

"By the way, ha-ha! Or did things bite each other? Tell us..." Voke, too, joined the conversation. By 'things biting each other,' he meant to ask if things didn't go as anticipated. It was a common phrase directly stolen from the Swahili street phrase, *kimeumana*.

"I ain't tellin' you shit, you faggots," I stood my ground. Excuse that French. It was our way of doing things, and none of us took offence to it.

COLLINS TEUREY

“Ah, you can’t be like that, man.” They said softly. Almost simultaneously. The idiots sunk to their knees to plead with me.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do you both the favour of getting you what you want, but on one condition...” I said, pretending to be firm.

“Which one?” They asked now at the same time.

“There’s no nosing around about it after this. Did I make myself clear?” I bawled.

“Yes! Your honour!” They saluted me, and we all burst into a noisy laughter.

It was on Friday. The following morning was slated for a tour to a place called *Kokwanyo*. It was the destination the school had decided to take us as a sign of motivation for scoring good grades. It was a craft industry where pots, mats, traditional baskets like *adita*, *otete*, *atonga*, canoes, and anything you could imagine made of clay, papyrus reeds, or sisal was made. The choice irked almost everyone as it was never a place many would have settled upon granted an opportunity to vote. Honestly, why would we be taken to see how a mat is made or how a rope is woven from sisal? It must have been Mr Othuol’s decision. He was that one teacher who appeared to be going to bed with anything that rubbed the students the wrong way.

We had all the time in the world to talk that evening because classes were strictly suspended for that visiting day. Adrian and I went on that tour, except Voke, who didn’t perform well in the entry examinations. I don’t know what happened to him or with him. Dude looked so discomfited, and I

PETALS OF FATE

felt for him. Anyway, failure is only declared when you fall and fail to stand up again.

We knew he would bounce back and greedily grab what was rightfully his. I gave them a whole book of how things turned out to read, plus the twists and turns that came with it. They were awed. Seemed Adrian hadn't done his homework well and ended up confusing who Michelle or Linda was or was not. Mostly, my two friends exuded confidence that they knew something good would come out of the newly ignited flame of love. That time had finally come to rescue me from the world of loneliness as if my ribs were extracted and used to make soup for the rich man's cat. That was savage. And who told them I was lonely? Nosy humans!

I always enjoyed the sessions I had with my father. He used to give me a sizeable pie of nuggets of wisdom. More than my age could allow. Explained better why my reasoning was topnotch compared to the people I grew up with at the same time. My agetmates. I learned a lot more from him as a young person than I did from the world. He indeed prepared me to embrace the thorny hugs of the occasionally ruthless world. And it gave me the courage of a hyena in the dark. I remember how he could sit us down around the table and ask us what we intended to become in the future, career-wise. He would have nurses, engineers, pilots, lawyers, and journalists in the family. He would smile proudly like that was already materialising.

The obsession of every child with these careers is unbeatable. I'm sure you once said you would become any of these,

COLLINS TEUREY

but now you're a farmer or something you never planned for. It's life. We can't always get what we want. And life is to be lived to the maximum, regardless. At least before you wither out like a raisin when your heart stops beating in your chest. It was from this that my interest in journalism was conceived. And I was now in the eighth month of my pregnancy. Any blunder would result in a stillbirth, and I wasn't coming that long way only to lose my baby. Never. So, I had to do what had to be done for a safe delivery.

CHAPTER 8



LAST-MINUTE RUSH

As the school bus swallowed us, ready to leave for the tour, we spotted two roosters fighting, and our focus shifted to them. We swiftly took sides and started supporting the one that was deemed the favourite to win. But just before the fight could climax, a stone from nowhere was thrown that split the two wrestlers. What the...! Oh sorry. Our short-lived excitement was foiled. Why are some people too quick to meddle in the affairs of animals? It's the same as finding someone pelting stones at dogs having sex. Like what's your intention? Do you want to join or what? Let's learn to mind our business, please. We fumed with disappointment.

After that, my mind raced into the past to exhume the memories of the fights we used to have as kids, especially during the closing days. The ones tailored to teach your enemies a hard lesson. As I promised earlier, I'd like to share my reason for wanting to break someone's nose, since everyone had their own distinct cause back then. I'm a promise-keeper, unlike

your boyfriend or girlfriend who left you after promising things they couldn't live up to, not even a quarter of it. Receive my hugs for that. Back to our story, there was this boy called Atinda.

He always thought he could beat me, and I played dumb. What he didn't know was that that was like selling his soul to the devil, and there was no asking back for it. So, one day, he came to where I was with my other kid friends and started badmouthing me. He said there was a time I bit him at school. That was all a lie. Biting was a thing for girls or boys who were extremely weak. I wasn't one! In rebuttal, I decided to change the narrative from biting to beating.

It was the laughter from my friends that added kerosene to the fire. And their petition to redeem my image that the rascal had put in a bad light. Me? Biting someone? That was so belittling! The die was cast. The monkey had asked for a long tail and was getting it. I challenged him to a fight, and he impetuously obliged. May God help him. I prepared a good fist bump and retreated by taking a few steps backwards to create enough space between us.

Then I pounced on him with full force and arm-twisted him. He let out a deafening scream like a siren. Before he realised it, I punched him hard at the foot of his ear until he saw seven black stars form in his eyes. All this time, he had not thrown even a single blow. I pulled away a bit to formulate my next style of attack, and as he struggled to recover from that punch from the group of schools I gave him, I made a somersault that scared him to death, then made a rotation that covered between 180 and 210 degrees, and my kick landed on his

PETALS OF FATE

neck. And on to the ground, *punglu pangla*, like a sack of cabbage. Our dear friend fell to the ground, lying on his stomach helplessly and groaning in pain.

He stood up staggeringly and tried to defend himself by sending a blow my way, but I held his hand. I lifted him to my shoulder like John Cena and threw him down like a hot piece of charcoal. He bounced thrice like a tennis ball as he hit the ground. My friends held me. After some time, he got back to his feet and wheeled away at the speed of an antelope, calling his grandmother's name, *Sipi Nyang'udi*. He used to stay with her.

It's often said, knock on the door; it shall be opened to you. To me, Atinda had knocked on that door for beating, and for him, it was opened. And now, he was getting beaten to a pulp! However, we became very good friends after that fight. Some respect is born of wild beatings. He respects me a lot, and I respect him too these days. Or does he fear me? You know respect is far from fear. As respect is earned, fear is given. I am not so certain which one best describes the situation. But I'm delighted we now have defined boundaries to maintain. That was my reason for that fight; as I said, everyone had their own. That was mine, I don't know yours.

Our last term at school made us as busy as a beaver. Everyone was now realising that there was this, and there was that they hadn't done, and time was nigh. It was a rush hour to make up for the time they fuffed about on things that didn't make sense when the majority thought time was still a girl and that

they had the whole day. Still, everything had changed at that moment, and little of what we had done earlier made sense to us. A complete paradigm shift had taken over and ushered in whole new perspectives.

That was when everyone scrambled to skim through every book they could get their hands on. The line at the library swelled dramatically with students borrowing books—not money, as you’d find in a bank. An insatiable hunger for knowledge surged among us, astonishing many. Texts and revision materials deemed essential for exam preparation—like C. Muturi for Mathematics and A+ for Business Studies—became as rare as hen’s teeth on the shelves.

We had people who borrowed revision materials and uphoarded them like unscrupulous maize farmers hide cereals and wait until hunger strikes to release them at exorbitant prices. The irony in this was that some of these people with the character of a witch amassed piles of books, not because they intended to use them for learning. No, it was purely out of an ill motive of denying others chances to revise for fear of academic competition. Library rules and regulations were flouted at will. It completely was a state of disorderliness. A dog-eat-dog scenario it was, and academic jealousy took centre stage. Those who struggled with a defeatist attitude left it to fate to let the maker's will be done. They picked to wave the white flag even before the battle could begin.

With all these beehive-like activities ongoing, time also showed its determination to frustrate those who forgot that it waits for no man. The more they prepared, the less prepared they realised they were, and the more the unprepared wished

PETALS OF FATE

they had more time at their disposal, the more time sped on. Boom. Half-term was here! Was it necessary to break for half-term? Oh no! Let's stay in school and use that time for studies. Beleaguered voices of students pleaded. Like before, even the eagerness to meet with mates from boarding schools had lost its shine like a fool's gold would. Everything could wait but studies. The majority had their way, and the minority had their say. Staying behind for studies earned more votes, and it was decided so. The rest of the classes were released apart from form four. After all, good performance was the pillar upon which the school was founded. Anything that gave that leverage played second fiddle to none.

By coincidence, it so happened that Michelle's side did not give weight to the half-term rest, too. I don't know if that was because most of them felt not fully baked like most of the fellas from our bloc. Or had schools just gotten busier? Maybe so. Most schools didn't release their students for the short break, except for a handful of them. That was for sure. For the schools that gave the green light for half-term to the candidate classes, could it have been that they were well-prepared to handle what seemed to be sending chills down the spine of a buttload of other schools? Or were they just being the new Sheriffs in town who wanted to do things their own way? Well, that remained a wait-and-see scenario, and the results of the National Examinations would help separate the maize grains from the chaff.

Mr Othuol had a way of making authority feel like something you could commandeer—provided you wore the right tie and spoke in the right tone. By the time anyone cottoned on, the office of the Director of Studies had become a seat of power—greater in influence than even the deputy head's. Not officially, of course. On paper, he was just another cog in the machine. But in practice? He ran the place.

What followed was a slow-burning turf war—the sort that never made announcements but soured everything beneath the surface. Teachers whispered, students speculated, and even the caretaker seemed unsure who had the final say. Mr Othuol would often override the deputy's instructions—openly, with a faint smile that left no room for rebuttal. Occasionally, the deputy tried to push back, but by then, Othuol's roots had grown too deep.

The rift between them widened by the week. Anyone paying the slightest attention could see it. They no longer walked the same corridors at the same time. They avoided being in the same meetings unless absolutely necessary. And when they were, the tension was thick enough to slice.

Mr Othuol thrived on that sort of chaos. He liked to keep people unsteady, off-balance. It made him harder to pin down. His charm was a veneer—impeccably polished. He'd slap a colleague on the back with one hand while twisting the knife with the other. The sort of man who'd compliment your lesson in the staffroom, then quietly suggest to the headteacher that your teaching style might need "tightening up".

PETALS OF FATE

To the uninitiated, it all looked like a coincidence. But anyone who'd spent more than a term at that school knew better: nothing around Othuol ever happened by accident.

And he wasn't the only one of his kind. Every workplace had someone like him—too observant, too friendly, too well-versed in playing people against themselves. Someone who could turn praise into a weapon and friendliness into control. It didn't matter whether it was a school, an office, or a government department. The tactics were always the same.

He didn't need to shout. Didn't throw chairs. That wasn't his way. Mr Othuol's war was quieter. More calculated. He undermined with soft-spoken corrections and helpful suggestions, always delivered with just enough professionalism to remain above suspicion. But his intentions were clear: climb as far as he could—and crush anything in his path.

It was a hard lesson to learn, especially for those new to the staffroom. The real danger never came from the loudmouths or the bitter ones who wore their resentment like a badge. No, the real threat was the quiet colleague who never raised their voice, never missed a birthday, and always seemed just a little too helpful. Because not every enemy looks like one. Some just look like Mr Othuol.

Through a well-orchestrated witch-hunt, Mr Othuol was underhandedly promoted to become the new Director of Studies. An office previously occupied by Mr Otuoma. Upon leaving, the latter informed the students that his exit was prompted by his decision to upgrade to a Master's Degree. However, it turned out that the reason he gave was a mere smokescreen to disguise the actual reason why he had given up his position.

Mr Otuoma was a celebrated *Kiswahili* and *Fasihi* teacher until he left our school. His mastery of the Swahili language was second to none. He was one of the few people I know who could calm an irate crowd without signalling or pleading with them to be quiet. His refined language massaged everyone's ears to allayment. Thanks for his stay at our school.

Arch-rival schools feared challenging us in any *Kiswahili* contest the same way people feared AIDS in the late '90s and early 2000s because of him. We lifted many trophies courtesy of his tricks of passing *Kiswahili* as a subject. This position became a near-impossible task to reclaim after he left. In his classes, he passionately urged us to embrace the *Kiswahili* language and to stop idolising English. "Using *Kiswahili* in our daily conversations reflects the value we place on our African roots," he would say, his disappointment audible. "English only makes us subservient to *Wazungu*." His fluent *Kiswahili* was both inspiring and forceful, as he praised the Tanzanian people for their widespread use of the language. He admonished other African nations still shackled by the influence of the colonisers, calling it an insult to Africa and the worst form of neo-colonialism.

When you read more, you realise that you know less; when you read less, you feel like you know more. That was how Mr Otuoma felt before he decided to further his studies and become a *Kiswahili* lecturer at one of the prestigious universities in the country. According to him, his quest for more knowledge made him realise he didn't know as much as he had thought, and time had finally beckoned him to widen his scope of expertise. To effect that, he made up his mind to leave. He

PETALS OF FATE

supplied us with that reason when we demanded to know the rationale behind his sudden departure.

What on earth remains hidden forever? I don't think there's any. If that were the case, then maybe even Osama bin Laden's hideouts would have remained unknown to this day. As we grew up, narratives were being peddled that Bin Laden lived underground like a mole, and for years, I believed it until the day he was captured in some dilapidated-looking building from the outside. Sometimes, it frightened me to death to be teased that the Al Qaeda leader was underneath my feet everywhere I stepped. There was never really a single version of the crazy things we were never told as kids. That's a story for another day.

Mr Othuol had a hand in Otuoma's departure. He conspired with some 'big man' to have Otuoma's goose cooked. It was one hard truth that the former *Kiswahili* guru wouldn't want to disclose to anyone, particularly students who had a cult-like love for him, but walls had ears around the school, you know. And much later, the truth came out. We burned with rage when what Mr Othuol had done reached our desk, but the time had come for us to write our examinations. The last thing we wanted was to start a war at an imperative moment like that. That way, we left it to the generation coming after us to pick up the baton from where we had left it.

A man on a mission never stops until his mission is complete and successful. It even worsens when he's motivated by his selfish interests and strong backing from a more influential person. The target this time was on the deputy principal and the senior teacher, who was slightly above him in terms of rank.

A plan was, therefore, to be hatched and implemented without leaving any loose ends. The man on a mission here was Mr Othuol! Handling the senior teacher was a breeze for him, and it took him not a single drop of sweat to strip her of her powers and assume her duties. That was down!

Madam Judy, the senior teacher, was always a crusader for peace. Her philosophy was that sometimes, the best way to win a war is never to stage a fight. She believed that battles were won in the mind. And it was totally needless for her to wrestle a pig in the mud unless she wanted to get herself dirty, as well—but no, that wasn't her style. So, she sat back and played the goof through it, waiting to see who would have the last laugh.

The director of studies, realising he had put the senior teacher out, without dilly-dallying, encroached on Mr Opondo's, the deputy principal's territory, and launched his missiles. His end result was to inherit the position from the incumbent, whether he was still alive or gone to heaven. He didn't know that the deputy principal was the kind who takes actions like that as a compliment. And if someone compliments you, it's only kinder to express your gratitude in kind. Mr Opondo made a covenant to defend his position, even if it meant getting physical with the rabid dog on a rampage.

The exam timetable was out. It was put on the notice board display for everyone to see and plan accordingly. Classes were suspended to pave the way for personal studies. The teachers

PETALS OF FATE

had done their parts and washed their hands as a sign of accomplishment in their assignments. Rehearsal was scheduled for Wednesday of the last week before the beginning of exams. Being an Anglican church-sponsored school entrenched in the teaching of the Bible, there was no way we would begin examinations without lying prostrate before God and calling His name.

The very week, Friday, was subsequently set aside for prayers attended by parents and guardians. My mother was the first to arrive at the church compound, and it didn't shock me a wee bit. Things like that were always invaluable to her. The vicar in charge was spectacled Bernard. The Anglican church had given him the freedom to marry and enjoy good lovemaking, unlike his male Catholic counterparts whose 'bignesses' were being eaten by rust from long bedroom dry spells. Bernard was youthful. He was nothing beyond thirty-two years and married to a middle-sized woman, he loved smooching and doting over brazenly. He had a small kid, too. A beautiful girl. He loved to flaunt his family like a trophy. If you weren't too careful, you would probably want to tie the knot as soon as he finished his sermon because everything he did made marriage look celestial and all a bed of roses.

The day's teaching was themed on the verse, "*Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" The question of the day was: "Do you fear the Lord? And what's your personal relationship with God?" Souls could be seen perched in heaven, literally. It was a critical moment stirred in emotions and self-pity. There, I saw people who approached the vicar to administer words of salvation to them. Just like that, lives were given to Christ.

COLLINS TEUREY

Praise and adulation subdued the atmosphere. Gents and ladies sang along to songs of adoration at the top of their lungs, jumping up and down like they were under the influence of evil or holy spirits, depending on which one they served between the kingdom of light or darkness.

I learned that everyone has their breaking point. And even the devil's agent can turn to God when cornered, even if it means just for a day or until they've achieved what they wanted. I saw people break into tears with their hands suspended in the air in surrender to the son of the carpenter, Jesus. Many joyriders who were busy selling their futures to their pasts were now beleaguered to buy back the same with gold coins. Time was like a mirage on the road right before everyone, but the more they tried to catch up with it, the more it pulled away and finally disappeared from their sights. It's funny how time behaves; it appears to be everywhere at the start, and before reality hits, it becomes nowhere in particular. Oh time!

It's hard to be in the position of God. No wonder we were created humans because that's what we are. Having the heart of God is only a preserve of being one. Imagine everyone deserting you in their time of comfort. Others even beat their breasts that the breakthrough they have made is by their own power and will. They are quick to throw into the trash bin any idea that it has taken God's hand to be the way they are. But when the sky turns red, and their world darkens, they run to the same God. Crying and ripping off clothes from their bodies to supplicate for His blessings and entreat His intervention

PETALS OF FATE

in a difficult situation, but guess what? This God— still helps them, nonetheless.

That's why it's blasphemous to compare your *balls* to God's. A typical man, after all these, would show you the middle finger or ask you to eat *shit* all the same. I won't lie to you; those who shed the most tears during the prayer day were unprepared. Their only remaining hope was a miracle; for that to happen, they needed faith more than anything else. In a dispute, if you want to determine who is culpable of wrongdoing, the one who talks a lot often carries the clue. Now relate that with those crying and rolling on the floor like the wheels of an over-speeding chariot. That was simply what I saw during the prayer day.

Sometimes, we need luck more than merit. Combining the two is, however, better. It is something my friends and I understood well. Having all our eggs in one basket wasn't a smart move. What

if they got broken? Or what if Adrian fried them for his many girlfriends? That would be a stupid mistake. We did justice to our books to have our best foot forward, and now we needed that luck. Either way, we were confident enough that we were good to go. So, instead of crying and tearing clothes, we said our silent prayers and asked God to grant us good health and memory to effortlessly slay 'Goliath' with a single stone as David did. The vicar laid his hand upon everyone's head and ordered torrents of blessings from heaven to shower down upon each of us.

Along the way back to school, the unexpected happened. The rain! We were convinced it was in response to the vicar's

prayers, which we believed were answered with blessings descending down in torrents. Naturally, when it rains, you anticipate that people would scamper to seek shelter, right? I'm afraid this wasn't the case with the majority that day. Many believed it wasn't a normal downpour; instead, they braved it and remained transfixed under the rains the entire time until it subsided to harness to the last drop of their blessings. We called it a day. Monday of the following week would mark the beginning of our examinations, which would run for three weeks.

Our lockers and chairs had been well scrubbed to erase any unauthorised written notes on them, with the ill motive to circumvent examination rules. It was activities like those that the rehearsal sought to take care of. We were equally familiarised with how we were generally expected to carry ourselves around during the exam period. Each locker was uniquely arranged depending on the index number and had passport photos identifying each candidate. Cases of imposters sitting for examinations under the pretext of real candidates were gaining traction, and that was a mechanism employed to abate instances like that. The referee had waved play on. The tests commenced in earnest.

CHAPTER 9



SUPREMACY BATTLES

The principal wasn't in good books with his deputy, and from his calculations, he knew the best way to get to him was through Mr Othuol. At least, that way, he would influence the whole thing without openly getting his hands dirty. When your assistant becomes the only hurdle to your plans as the bearer of a senior position, the ultimate solution is always getting rid of the nuisance. It's a secret card most bosses use to castrate junior bulls trying to compete with them on mounting females and being on heat.

This long-term power tussle saw the formation of an alliance similar to the political ones wired to achieve set objectives during the electioneering period. Mr Ojwang' allied himself with the Mr Othuol. At the same time, his deputy, Mr Opondo, and Madam Judy, the senior teacher, who felt sidelined by the school leadership style, also formed their wing. An enemy to your enemy is your friend, and for a common cause, you may join hands to achieve something that interests you.

That is, until you find another reason to make you enemies again. That was the face of that arrangement.

Mr Opondo's problem was that the principal was trying hard, together with Mr Othuol, to secretly hound him out of his position. The senior teacher, Madam Judy, on the other hand, who had nothing against the principal, needed a hand to put her new nemesis, Mr Othuol, in his rightful place—shithole! Indeed, power corrupts the mind, and the mind contaminates the soul, which, as a result, breeds vengeance. The outcome of revenge is, however, unpredictable. Still, I would tell you without blinking an eye that it's not something you could ever wish for. Disastrous.

Being at loggerheads between the principal and his deputy was catalysed by their opposing beliefs in the rule of law. The principal was a corrupt man to the core. According to him, the law could always be bent to favour any circumstance. It didn't matter to him that twisting the law worked to the detriment of others. That was their problem. He gave no hoot about it. Call the cops if you want to. He would dare them. He was always under the delusion that laws are created to govern the have-nots, and the have-it-all have no business at all maintaining any form of *frigging* order.

Despite his relentless efforts to earn a name for *Milambo Mixed Secondary School*, my school—in academics, his chief undoing remained his insatiable appetite for wealth. I wouldn't say our school suffered from a lack of very basic learning miscellaneous—no. We had enough stock of books and modern science laboratories, which was impressive, given that our school was just a district school. There, he deserved credit.

PETALS OF FATE

And it's only fair to give it where it's due. However, a considerable amount was lost to his pocket and those of his accomplices, notably the school bursar, Mr Rakuom, who played around with figures of squandered cash to leave no traces of any dubious dealings behind. An art he had perfected through many years of experience of having a long hand.

'You eat where you work' was a phrase coined by Mr Ojwang,' the principal. It was his way of imparting sense in the heads of people like Mr Opondo, who were too 'rigid' and incorruptible. He had a spellbinding way of finishing off his dissidents. His tactics reminded me of Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, the *Medellín* drug cartel, who would approach someone he felt wasn't on his side with the promise of a good amount of 'tea.' And If they gave in, well and good. If they turned down his offer, they had everything to lose. Later, he would coldheartedly split open their throats and take away the 'tea' with him as a reward for having dealt with them successfully. Mr Ojwang' had almost become like Pablo's reincarnation. However, he didn't take life like Escobar but would find a way of subtly getting you out of the picture if you dared his balls.

He had the silver bullet to get that done. He was a well-connected man with means within the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), the body in charge of employing teachers. A phone call to "a big cheese" who mattered was more than enough to earn you an interdiction and throw your career under the bus. But first, he would attempt to harass you into submission to see if you could heed; failure to do that was a red card. That was how he had planned to deal with Opondo, his

deputy. Mr Othuol was considered a potential replacement because he was a bootlicker and a 'yes boy.' A quality that befitted his errands so well.

Suppose you think Mr Opondo and Madam Judy, the senior teacher, were busy dicking around all that while; you need to think again. They had a plan, rolled up their sleeves, to give Mr Othuol a taste of his own medicine. They sat across from each other in the teacher's lounge, their calm exterior belying the plotting beneath. While everyone else assumed they were just passing time, they were quietly scheming, determined to give Mr. Othuol a taste of his own medicine.

"You know," Mr. Opondo murmured, "he's been pushing us too far, acting like he's the one in charge. But we've been patient, Judy. Very patient."

Madam Judy gave a small, knowing smile. "We've let him think that, Opondo. All the while, we've been working in the shadows, especially with the exams coming up. The students haven't a clue what's been going on, and that's exactly how we wanted it."

"Exactly," Opondo replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "The exams were the perfect cover. The students have been able to focus, undistracted, and we've stayed out of the spotlight. But behind the scenes, we've been making our move."

Judy nodded. "The best part is that we've kept it all covert. No one's suspected a thing. And when the time comes, Mr. Othuol won't know what hit him."

Opondo's eyes gleamed with a hint of satisfaction. "He won't see it coming. He'll wish he hadn't underestimated us."

PETALS OF FATE

They shared a brief, silent understanding. Soon, their carefully laid plans would unfold, and Mr. Othuol would find himself caught in a trap of his own making.

The KCSE exams started on a high note without any friction at all. We arrived on Monday at the exam venue, the school's enormous hall. The chairs and lockers were arranged far apart to curb any cheating aided by close sitting. This made the room tense on the first day, but we got accustomed to it with time. Those who had plans to giraffe on others' work felt disarmed. The deal was thwarted big time, and they felt like their necks had been chopped off their shoulders.

The activity was properly manned, and the invigilators tasked with overseeing the success of the exercise guarded us like officers guarding a G4s van transporting wads of cash from one bank branch to another. They were friendly, though, and at the disposal of anyone who needed a hand in borrowing a thing or two from a neighbour. You may have something at times, but there is absolutely no guarantee of having everything at all times. With that knowledge, sharing was allowed except for answers. With the lecture given to us during rehearsal against exam malpractice, there was no need to play with fire unless you were the devil's angel. However, I still doubt if that could save your *ass*. No one dared to deviate from the set codes of conduct required within and outside the examination radius.

The first week of the examination went well without anything unusual recorded, and so did the second week. The tension had significantly reduced, and everyone handled the exam paper with much sobriety and composure. We were orgasmic that finally, we were going outside there, in the world, to try new things like everyone else who had left ahead of us. The stories about campus life and the highly talked about 'freedom' stimulated us even more, adding to our desire to be there to have a firsthand experience.

We were born in the village and lived the village way, often stifling our self-esteem. We knew we needed to leave for the urban centres to change that, and education was the key to unlocking that desire. Every evening, after finishing our papers for the day, we carved out time to revise for the next day's exams. Those evenings were particularly comforting, especially on days when we had no papers at all. They gave us a chance to review our notes briefly. Later, we laughed hard as we reminisced about our experiences at school—both the good and the bad—since day one.

We often made sport of Adrian's knack for asking ridiculous questions in class, especially during Chemistry lessons. His antics, particularly the teachers' reactions to his silly inquiries, entertained us. They would remind him of the old saying, "garbage in, garbage out," suggesting that a foolish question deserved a foolish answer. The classroom would then erupt in laughter, creating one of those lighthearted moments we knew we would cherish long after school ended—even years later. We spent those hours revelling in our camaraderie, savouring

PETALS OF FATE

the joy of simply being together. We beguiled hours away in style.

In the same breath, we recalled the day Adrian overheated a test tube in the laboratory, causing it to explode like a small grenade. The memory of his reaction still amused us; he jumped up so high in shock and fear that his head almost touched the ceiling. You know how he was—a tall, lean, bow-legged guy with a hint of a moustache threatening to sprout on his upper lip. His chin, however, remained as smooth as a baby's bottom, showing no signs of a goatee. We affectionately called him Vasco for that. He was hilariously funny, which explained why girls of all kinds flocked to him—beautiful, not-so-beautiful, and everything in between. He welcomed them all without discrimination. He'd often quip afterwards that "what's eaten isn't lost." What a bastard!

We also turned our teasing toward Voke, backcombing him about his habit of devouring food like a horse. Ever since the three of us—Adrian, Voke, and I—started living together, we developed a mistrust of him when it came to anything involving food. He was a true food worm!

One night, we found ourselves forced to share a meagre portion of food that barely sufficed for a weaning baby. We had a routine we followed religiously: no one person would cook every time while others sat around to be fed like nestlings. Forget it. To get a balanced work routine, we agreed to cook alternately, and there was no bribing our way out of it.

This time, it was Voke's turn to cook. While we left to study, he prepared a lump of *ugali* to accompany the freshly dried *omena* that my mom had sent the day before. Our cravings

were so intense that we'd read a line and then pause, our minds wandering to thoughts of food. The meals served at school that day barely made it to our bellies; with the kind of hunger we felt, it was as if the food dissolved in our mouths like glucose, never quite reaching our stomachs. We blamed ourselves for it. We had decided that day to get to the service point after everyone else, hoping to snag the lion's share. Our plans terribly flopped. Little did we know that there were others with crappy thoughts like us who thought by arriving late, they would get the most of the remains.

That miscalculation saw an overwhelmingly bigger number getting to the service point at the same time. It meant only one thing—the little there was to be shared amongst us. We almost screamed, man. Later, we heard that those who got first in line ate their fill. For sure, life has no balance. Whenever we got to the line first, people, we regretted it; what about being last in line? The difference was the same. What about the middle? The last time we tried it...uh, maybe we were lucky in other things, but not for eating a mountain of food like we always wished to. We made peace with fate, eventually.

A little delay here and there before returning to our nest did us more harm than good. We found Voke had finished cooking, served himself, and slept off face up like a python that had just swallowed a whole goat. He was snoring like an old maize mill machine. We tried to wake him up, but he responded in his half-sleep, "You just eat. I've already eaten". We said fine. After all, it took longer than expected for us to return to the house. It was understandable that he chose to eat alone owing to the pressure our stomachs were giving us.

PETALS OF FATE

We opened the food where he'd innocently covered it, and you won't believe what we found! Was it some bad joke or something? We first laughed and crawled on the floor with our bellies flat. We were at a loss for words. The *piece of shit* had eaten three-quarters of what he had cooked! And to dip a finger into the beehive, he thought it was all funny. There's always someone in every family that if he or she happens to serve first, the rest will be sure to sleep hungry or have very little left to share. That person was Voke!

We immediately grabbed our belts and whipped his butts before he broke loose and ran away, crying and laughing at the same time. That was the *alpha* and *omega* of his cooking and serving himself in that house unless he did that under our very keen observation and scrutiny. This time, his defence was that he was too hungry to think straight. We felt like hitting him again, but we forgave him and laughed about it instead.

They said I was a miserable person for a long time. I only busied myself with writing love letters for others who used them to find their soulmates. Leaving me lonely and alone. I don't know who was feeding them the falsehood that I was lonely. Was it written all over my 'personal' face? I take back that. I wasn't ugly. I had girls knocking at the door to my heart from all directions. That doesn't happen to anyone else, right? I'll take your silence for a yes. I didn't just possess the character of a lady's man—and my time, too, was yet to come. Now, we were all somehow even. I had my Michelle. They had enough of them to make a crowd, but I was content with one. We resurrected old memories and created new ones, too. We were happy about a lot of things.

It's always better to stay one step ahead. That is if you know someone has put a bounty on your head. There's no room for making mistakes. A mismove, you're done. While Mr Othuol was busy training his guns at Mr Opondo to replace him, the duo —Mr Opondo and Madam Judy had already figured out how they'd exterminate his ill plans. The laws on paedophilia were unforgiving, and the government had issued a stern warning to anyone who would be found guilty of sexually abusing a minor. Other humanitarian groups on minors' rights equally had 24/7 surveillance in every government and non-governmental institution to tap cases of infringement on the rights of children. Notably the young girls who were the most vulnerable at the hands of sex predators. The constitution of our school, too, was created in a way that left no loose ends untied concerning sexual offences. On this note, teacher versus student romantic involvement, or any inappropriate relationship between the two categories of people, was highly frowned upon. And the consequences were brutally grave, to say the least.

In this respect, Mr Opondo and his newly found ally, Madam Judy, found a loophole. Unbeknownst to many, until much later, Mr Othuol had been secretly having illicit affairs with young girls. And that was done on grounds of blackmail and intimidation. Explains why most of his victims were scared stiff to say a word of it. During his period as the head of academics, and having acquired so much power that allowed him to suspend or expel a student, there wasn't anything he didn't

PETALS OF FATE

do to that advantage. Many students were suspended and turfed out under very controversial circumstances.

There was more than meets the eye on this. It surfaced that many of the female students he'd expelled from the school were either the ones he had sinned with and now posed a great danger of ratting him out to someone he didn't want to. Similarly, they could be girls he was sensually salivating for but adamantly refused his advances. In this way, retaining the two remained a considerable risk. Getting rid of them, therefore, was his only messiah to lead him out of the mess, so he did what he had to do—showing them out.

A shred of evidence had been gathered to implicate him in crimes of paedophilia, abuse of office, and malice against co-workers. Like a time-ticking bomb, it was waiting for the right time to discharge. With watertight evidence like this against you, and to add insult to injury, at the disposal of your perceived opponent—you're *screwed* up. An exposé of the biggest scandals in the school's history was in the air. Mr Opondo and Madam Judy wouldn't let grass grow under their feet. They had to get going with their plan. Madam Judy lodged a complaint at the provincial TSC offices. Mr Opondo joined as an interested party in one part of the case regarding abuse of office and the others leveled against him.

When these cases opened, a campaign on women's empowerment was being spearheaded across the country. A report like this coming from a woman meant not only something but everything. It was given a listening ear that it deserved. A man against another man might be seen as a witch-hunt, but what does a woman hold against a man she's not having an orgasm

with? Nothing. The idea was to get Madam Judy to start the legal suit as a principal plaintiff.

The case on a sexual offence involving under-ages was opened separately, and the other on malice was used as supporting evidence in the one about the abuse of office. And here, even Mr Otuoma agreed to be added to the witness list. Mr Othuol's forty days had been numbered, and it was on its extreme thirty-something. His wings had been clipped, and there was no way he was flying out of this without being pushed back by forces of gravity to the ground.

The case of paedophilia carried tons and tons of weight, more than Opondo and Judy had anticipated. The number of interested parties willing to be adjoined to the case was insane. It gave the claimants an operating leverage which bolstered the case and gave it merit. All the victims—the girls together with their parents standing by the sidelines—cheering them on, gave an account of everything that was happening behind the scenes. They narrated how it became arduous for them to speak up because they were gagged through intimidation and threats, which made them fear for their lives.

The school principal, yes, known for his kleptomania, there were things he couldn't condone, and taking advantage of young girls by lowlives like Mr Othuol appalled him upon learning so. In every trash basket, there's a treasure hidden somewhere. It could be by mistake or just by nature that there's a good hidden in every bad somewhere. How it took him longer to learn of the evil was revealed when he saw a picture of himself as a sluggard sleeping with a snake in the same bed, thinking it was his shoelace.

PETALS OF FATE

For a long time, Mr Ojwang' spectated Mr Othuol while he bullied colleagues and students without uttering a word to obliterate the habit. Maybe it was because of his vested interest in controlling certain things and his desperation to have people by his side. But now, his time to speak had come. At the back of his mind, he knew Mr. Othuol had known some of his dark sides and that he might be fooled into trying to pull him down with him in case push came to a shove. However, that would be a wild dream. He, the principal, had good links to people who could stand up for him at all costs, and that was the kind of immunity he enjoyed, which Mr Othuol didn't. He did the unthinkable: he asked him to step aside to pave the way for an investigation into the allegations. Madam Judy was appointed as an interim director of studies until the case had been established.

The examination exercise concluded officially on Thursday. We had people who completed their exams as early as Tuesday and Wednesday, possibly because they had their papers done ahead of others, unlike those who didn't even have a single paper. Voke was lucky enough to complete his on Wednesday. Instead of travelling home like others, he decided to stay behind and wait for us to finalise before we could leave all at once. The happiness in his eyes couldn't be concealed. We got jealous of him. At one point, he laughed at us for finishing first, but we jokingly reminded him that the finishing line was way ahead, and it hit him hard, leaving him to eat his humble pie.

COLLINS TEUREY

Our absorption with our examination left us fully alienated from the school's happenings for the entire exam period. On this last day, a Thursday, a suspicious vehicle, which we later realised was a police Land Cruiser, made its way into the school compound. We stared blankly, wondering what the heck was going on. In a matter of seconds, we saw someone being whisked into the buttocks of the Land Cruiser. Hurray! It was...I don't know why everyone appeared so elated. Was he hated that much? Well, no one hated him, really. His behaviour and feeling of grandeur lacked the approval of many. We didn't know exactly why he was being shoved into the back of a cop's vehicle. It occurred to us that somebody had finally had his cross to carry.

My last paper was Biology Practical. Voke, on the other hand, had always dreaded studying Biology, particularly a topic called Movement and Locomotion. It was amusing to think that he preferred the thrill of moving on top of sweaty, wailing humans in birthday suits instead. It was like drinking beef soup but claiming you're allergic to the beef itself. He opted for the other two sciences, Physics and Chemistry, which allowed him to finish ahead of us.

We were divided into three groups based on our index numbers, with the first and second groups starting first. The school had two spacious science laboratories, each capable of accommodating more than three-quarters of the students. The third group, which was the last to begin, consisted of fewer than fifteen individuals.

Sigh. I was finally done. God had guided me every step of the way. I was forever indebted for that. My hope had renewed

PETALS OF FATE

more than ever. The feeling of being closer to my dreams massaged my soul. I had never felt so close to paying my debt like that. The debt I owed my father, that, for an unfortunate reason, he would not live to see. But I always sensed his presence around me. I imagined the good news would make him smile to his last tooth, and brag about me to his friends if he were still alive. I was happy too that I hadn't disappointed my mother, who singlehandedly educated me without hanging on anyone's coat begging for help. I felt proud that I never had any disciplinary cases to answer in my four years. Many thought it was a weakness, but a lot of strength was hidden in it. Sometimes, one's power and strength are revealed in one's ability to control the excesses of it. Weak people believe that proving their strength means puffing out their chest, unaware that this very act reveals a weakness.

I found solace in the closure of this chapter, which sparked my curiosity to open another chapter of my life and discover what's written about me. I was overjoyed that I would keep in touch with Michelle after waiting for three months, which seemed like a lifetime without her. I was happy that I had done my best to handle my examination because it meant more than you could ever imagine.

I was thankful that I got good friends who became my second family away from my own. I felt relieved that no one was watching me like a hawk on a chick it plans to rob. I got admitted to the school as an underage, but I was leaving as an adult with a waiting card for my ID set to come out in three months. I had reached the legal age of taking full responsibility

COLLINS TEUREY

for my choices, both earthly and heavenly, if you know what I mean.

Before we left for home that day, the school had organised a session that called upon those who had hit the legal age of registration for an identification card. Those who were in haste were given the blessing to leave at will. Those who were also a year or two away from graduating to adulthood were also given the green light to leave. It was something that was announced prior, so we had all the time in the world to source out other requisite documents to aid the process. You know how that *shit* works. The process was time-saving because the number that preferred to leave exceeded the number that opted to stay for the exercise, which worked to our advantage.

After everything was done and dusted, we collected what rightfully belonged to us and left for our various homes. There's indeed a time you're going to return home in the end. You could stay away all you want, but the lord will make it happen when the time is right. It won't matter if you come by yourself or are chauffeured in a small four-cornered wooden house, a coffin. Home is home at the end of the day, even if it's a snake's hole. We left.

There wasn't pressure this time because we were sure we would easily find a way to connect, even if it meant not so often. In that vehicle, I boarded home, P. Diddy's song "*Coming Home*" was playing in my head. Well, the truth is, I was getting the lyrics wrong, but I reminded myself that I didn't owe anyone the correct lyrics. I sing what I hear and what makes me happy, period!

CHAPTER 10



I HATE YOU

I planned to have a quiet word with my mother about Michelle. Now that I was out of school and had a waiting card for my national ID to prove my growth, I felt more at ease broaching that subject with her. However, I didn't want to be a hothead about the matter. A little wait wouldn't hurt. I thought to myself that it would only be better to do that after having a physical meeting with Michelle and confirming that everything about this was genuine. Until then, I would treat everything as rubbish.

I sat at my study table. Should I call it my ex-study table? The way some things happen is almost funny. It's just like life and death. Today, you're here; tomorrow, you're nowhere to be seen. Today, you call me by my name; tomorrow, you'll add the prefix 'the late' to my mother's given name. Today, I eat rice with you; tomorrow, you jump in line to serve rice at my funeral, or I find myself eating a plate of the same at yours and lying about how good a person you were to please the dead

you. Life is the best-scripted comedy whose taste of fun never goes bland, but with the most boring ending.

At this table, I sat, but not for the usual purpose. It was a different one. I imagined someday, the table would begin to ask itself questions about why I was no longer engaging it as frequently as I did back then. The table would wonder if I suddenly stopped being serious about life. I was sure I would take an extended break from studying vectors and algebraic expressions, which had absolutely nothing to do with my life to come. This was a break from the joke of reading theories of human beings having tails at one point in time and that they disappeared because of their infrequent use. Still, I couldn't understand why men were left with tails fixed in front. Was it because they used it a lot, or was the infrequent use of the rear tails the reason behind their disappearance? I silently questioned.

I was reading and admiring the good wishes of success written to me by Michelle. It was through a success card. A dry five-hundred-shilling note had been well tucked in the card, and a red rose flower was placed alongside it. The card was sprayed with the fragrance of a strawberry. It smelled like heaven. I showed it to Voke and Adrian, and they swore they were going to dump the asses of the girls they were dating who didn't send them a thing—not even a simple nothing. I laughed at them until I dropped a tooth. Remember when Michelle asked for my school's Postal address? That was her plan. It never occurred to me from the start, but thanks to my dysfunctional mind at that time. It made her gift come out as a pretty good surprise.

PETALS OF FATE

It was a gesture that quite moved me. I had never received any gift from the sister gender—in whatever form or shape. That tells you how much her present meant to me. Instead of spending the five-hundred-shilling note she gifted me, I conclusively decided to keep it as a souvenir in tandem with the card and the flower. That was despite the protestation I got from Adrian and Voke, who wanted me to spend it on buying them some roasted cow's intestines, known by the street name *mutura*. Put that in the bin!

No one was going to dictate to me how to spend my money. The money I got was courtesy of being a man with a third leg that does not step onto the ground. If anything, everyone had their own *phallus*. And I saw no fault in one using what they've got to get what they don't. Long live Uncle P—I silently and jokingly said to myself. The "P" in the Uncle stood for penis, just in case you were wondering.

Michelle's mobile number wasn't going through when I tried to contact her that evening. What could the problem be? In all senses, I thought by evening, she would be home that Thursday. Assuming she wasn't among those who completed their examination on Tuesday or Wednesday. Even if it were so, I hadn't heard from her since then, which automatically precluded such a possibility. I was beginning to get worried. I'm an overthinker, and I must confess the things I imagined were from the same school of thought as a pessimist's.

That night, I slept off after convincing myself that there was a good reason why tomorrow was created after today. It didn't just happen for the sake of it. So, I said to myself, tomorrow is another day. I wished myself a good night and called upon the

spirits of sleep to lift me off to the slumberland. The night appeared abnormally long, and I thought someone had broken the hand of time, and it wasn't moving at all. The insomnia kept me tossing about on the bed like a badly thrown dice.

The following day, at 10 am, thereabout, I received a good morning text from a new number. I got an inkling that it was from Michelle just from its tone. That's how it happens when you've known very basic details about the person who can comfortably see your nakedness without you having the feelings of wanting to hide. However, in our case, that had not yet happened.

"Good morning, babe," the message read.

"Finally! Good morning to you, bearer of two crowns of beauty," I responded with obvious excitement and relief.

"Wow, that's so sweet, darling. You make me blush like an imbecile. How have you been?" She replied.

"Health-wise, never better! Mentally, terrible! I have been missing you like a pregnant woman misses her menses when she catches stomach." I dropped a pickup line.

"Ha-Ha! You're just funny as *fuck*. I love you!" She declared.

Michelle was back! I was over the moon for that. We proceeded with our conversation for the day in such high spirits, chewing the rag and talking about subjects like school and others far from that. The weather was good. The outside sun was mild and warm on the skin. The air around me was full of the promise of life. The grass was evergreen and glistened with stains of drying dews. The butterflies were beautifully dangling on the nearby shrubs, and the male dragonflies performed their usual acrobatics with the aim of courting female ones. On my

PETALS OF FATE

lap, two houseflies were making out, and the female one seemed to be enjoying the act the most. The *whoredacity*! Other flies were busy roaming around, looking for rots to feed on. It was a good day, and everyone concentrated on minding their businesses.

I was having a siesta under the Umbrella tree, named for its umbrella-like canopy. It was planted outside the fence that bastioned the main compound. That was according to the cultural beliefs of the people of my mouth. Planting the tree in the heart of the homestead was largely believed to be a hoodoo that brought bad luck of killing all the adults in the home until there was none left to rob life from. Just like anyone else would, I wondered how the two were interconnected. To cheat any bad luck, my father opted to plant it outside the fence as culture dictated.

While under the tree, I received a text message from the phone number Michelle had given me as her own. When she left for school, she never touched on anything that she would change her contact or that she had two of them. That was why I was a bit shocked when a text came through from a strange contact. More confusing was that, in the morning, when I talked to Michelle, she didn't bring up anything about her new contact. Well, I responded to listen if anything new could come up.

"How've you been my love? Please accept my apologies for being out of touch for this long. I know you were troubled by it, but I've had it sorted," Michelle wrote to me.

"What happened, honey?" I asked

"I couldn't find your number from my contact list. The funny thing is, I had it saved before I left for school," She lamented with signs of tears in her text.

What did she mean by all these? Wasn't she the same Michelle I had talked to in the morning? I chose not to mention that to her. The mood of that conversation was completely different from the one I had had with 'her' in the morning, and my suspicion was beginning to set in. For a moment, I thought of the time when someone texted me hardly a few days after Michelle left for school. I had my doubts then, but I stepped on it. Was it true after all that I had thought? Was I probably dealing with another Michelle's evil twin without knowing? Were things going to turn out as they did with Linda's? No way! I felt very toyed.

While talking to Michelle, I received another text from the number that texted me in the morning asking me how my day was coming along. I played the fool's role to see if there could be any links between those two separate conversations I'd had that day, but no—the person using this new number was acting just normally, like nothing was taking place. It confirmed my fears. One of these two people was a fraud. The more I chatted with them, the more distinctly I could tell apart the difference by the manner in which they composed their texts. I played along to this absurd joke for two days.

On the third day, Michelle, the one with the original number I was given from the start, called me up and told me she urgently needed my audience on something that was eating her up. Her voice was characteristically shuddering, a sign of someone who had lost her cool over something. She asked me if I

PETALS OF FATE

knew of a girl by the name of June, and I said I was hearing that for the first time. June was her little sister, she informed me. She was in class eight. As we sat for our KCSE examination, she also sat for her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE).

She was the fake Michelle in here. The one who called me by pet names that got my heart melting. The one who made me believe she was Michelle without even struggling to explain a thing to me to prove herself. I was dumbfounded. Michelle's own word of mouth explained that the two of them shared the same phone. When she departed for school, she left the phone with June, who had her own separate SIM card. However, since she knew her PIN, nothing could stop her from accessing everything inside it. Succinctly, that was what June did.

No one would have expected June to pull a stunt like that at just class eight. But there she was. It was almost the same as underestimating *Gor Mahia* as an underdog team, only to beat a team of Arsenal's calibre like a drum of war at their home-ground pitch. I know ardent Arsenal fans would lose sleep over that if they heard me say so. I didn't mean it. I simply used that as a bad example. So, I hope Arsenal supporters don't wear long faces for that.

Much of that was never shared by Michelle. She told me she would love it more when she narrated the whole thing to me while lying on my bare chest—molycoddling. I loved the sound of that. Molycoddling? The answer was a big YES. The snippet of the story was that she didn't like me talking to her younger sister because she had seen our chats, and her heart sank in pain. I was innocent in this, and you all know it.

COLLINS TEUREY

After learning the truth, I decided to confront June and know her real identity. At first, she insisted she was Michelle. I warned her to cut the crap, and it scared her that she was finally busted. Feeling cornered, she peeled off her mask and denounced that stance. She gave me a different name, far from what her sister had given me. What a spoiled kid!

I made it clear to her that I had already known who she was and that she needed to come clean about her identity. It was when she told me something close to the truth. Her name was correct. But something wasn't adding up about her level of studies. With a hard face, she told me she was in form two. Contrary to what her sister had told me. I didn't want to argue with her about that, so I turned a deaf ear to it.

Adrian called and informed me that he had now acquired his mobile phone. That was fast. He assured me that constant communication between us would now be a guarantee. I was honestly happy for him for that milestone. If you've been keen, you'd realise that Adrian's name is more on my lips than Voke's name. You see, you're nodding! But you never bothered to know why. No harm, I know it's my sworn duty to tell you things...Adrian was, and still is, my best friend to date. I think calling him a friend is an understatement. He's more of a brother to me. You know of that one person who started as a casual friend, became a best friend, and turned into a second family with time? That's what best describes my relationship with him.

PETALS OF FATE

Voke's case was different. I'm not insinuating that he wasn't my friend. I say 'was' because I lost touch with him after college. Friends come and go like the wind; some may come and pass. The most constant thing is change; you feel me. I met Voke through Adrian. A friend to your friend is your friend. That's pretty much how our friendship began. We shared a lot together like friends do, but my well-known closest friend was Adrian. At school, at home, even. The same thing happened on his side, too. His mother would tell you so in a heartbeat.

Like my mother, Adrian's mother was also a widow. She lost her husband when Adrian was too young to differentiate between what should be worn on the left foot from the right. That was *ik long gi pat opuk*, many years ago before my mother entombed her best friend, my father. The two superwomen only met once in a while during parents' meeting at school. And that wasn't very regular. With time, they became friends, very mutual friends, for that matter.

Friendship easily kicks in when there's a lot you share in common with someone. It gives you the kind of natural flow of things and reasoning without unnecessary ambiguity and misunderstanding. This was exactly the grease that smoothed the friendship between my mother and Adrian's mother. The two were very much alike in the circumstances and will. Both were widows who, despite having the charisma to remarry anyone they pleased, voted in the ideas of stepping in and stepping up to perpetuate the legacies of their late husbands.

What's more, instead of feeling sorry for their situation of single-parenthood, they rang up the curtain. They embraced

the responsibilities of becoming two in one (mothers and fathers) with a positive mien. The results of their devotion stood out like a white splash on a dark background. Look at me. Then look at Adrian, for instance. The homes under the leadership of these two women showed no signs of absent men. Unless someone told you, there was no way you would come to that realization. And still, it was as hard as Chinese algebra to believe it— even after being told— because there was no evidence to accompany that, just by looking at how things were arrayed.

Away from the picture, it wasn't that we were the only achievement these two had made. Like I told you before, I had two other siblings who were older than me. Even though life had not clicked well for them career-wise by this time, they were erudite with promising futures. My older brother, Oyier, was an economist, and my sister, Aketch, was a banker with ocean-deep accounting knowledge. My mother played a key role in educating them both at different levels of education. My other kid siblings were going to school as well.

Adrian, too, was a third-born child in his family, just like me. Ahead of him were his two older brothers. One was already in an active profession, saving lives as a neurologist. The other read Agri-Business and was gathering the right tools to lay a solid foundation for his career. I don't need to tell you who should earn plaudits for their educational journey, do I? He had other younger siblings. A biological sister and a half-brother whom his mother adopted from her sister, who had bitten the dust while trying to give birth to the boy.

PETALS OF FATE

June never forgot the idea of treating me like I was romantically involved with her. It gave me nausea. How would the world look at me for sexually entertaining a 14-year-old girl? I was eighteen—actually almost nineteen. She was way far from the legal age of sinning. Any involvement like that between her and me would be not only child abuse but also child labour. I couldn't bend so low. I, therefore, scratched my head to find the right way of talking her out of it without leaving any black and red electric wires open.

She was my sister-in-law-to-be, and I didn't want to trade that for anything. Having crosswords with in-laws that soon would be mathematically erroneous. And I had a deep understanding of that. Women fall in and fall out of what they hear. It's quite the opposite with men. Men fall in with what they see; there's no falling out with it. Take, for example, a femininely good butt; there's no way a man can unsee that once he has seen!

I carefully prepared my approach to June. I tried to make her see that it was outrightly wrong to be enfolded with her at the same time I was seeing her older sister. It was the least I could do, minus factoring in the age aspect of it. June was extremely a high horse girl. The kind that loved gloating about anything and believed that even her own death would never be wrong. Without a doubt, I knew that age was the wrong button to press and that any mention of it to her would give her the fury you only find in short people. At her age, she was incredibly insolent and entitled, and she was poised to get whatever she wanted as long as she had her eyes on it.

COLLINS TEUREY

She trashed my talk and deliberately failed to see the logic in it. With a straight face, she opined that there was nothing wrong with sharing me with her sister. That sharing is caring; if her sister truly cared, she would find no fault in that. I was speechless, and any attempt of mine to make a meaningful conversation about the subject ended in a stalemate. I thought of almost telling Michelle about her intentions and persistence, but I felt that would jeopardise their supposedly good relationship. I didn't want to be the repulsive force between them. That wasn't my intention from the very start. I intended to add more love where I believed there already was and not create hatred where there was none.

I knew how volatile the situation had become. June was wading through the turbulent grasp of adolescence. Her apparent preoccupation with me made it even worse. Adolescents are overly impulsive, you know. Lack of proper control of their biologically changing bodies and over-ambition can really cloud their judgments, resulting in reckless decision-making. June was seemingly not the type to take a NO for an answer, and gentleness was the only remedy to handle the situation until the dust finally settled. The thought of waking up to a lifeless body swinging on a rope with a note scribbled in my name as the cause of death scared me more than the death itself. I chose to remain accommodating to her while trying as much as it was humanly possible to dodge any discussion that swerved in the direction of romantic aspirations.

With time, as June learned that I had blatantly become nonchalant towards her intimate dispositions, she went berserk. She threw all manner of tantrums in the world. She told me

PETALS OF FATE

how she hated me for being such a *dick*. That was her very own word. My phone exploded with texts carrying loads of emotions. There were insults, followed by apologies. There were chest-thumps on how she needed nothing to do with me.

Some messages carried heartbreak songs dedicated to me. Up to this time, it appeared rock-hard to me to understand why a young girl her age could easily lift an elephant's weight of rage and vendettas without collapsing under. And about love... How did she know so much about it and heartbreaks? And the breakup songs she sent me. How come she knew so many artists who had sung on the same subject—because it wasn't from one artist that she dedicated to me a heartbreak song from?

In her final appeal, June told me that should Michelle fail to welcome the idea of her dating me, we would be forced to resort to doing it stealthily without giving her a footstep sound of it. What a

crazy psycho! It was not just too much to ask for from me. It was *bullcrap* to even imagine of it. She had just finished class eight, and her main focus should have been on how to join form one.

Was it soap opera movies giving her this kind of hallucination or something? I remember our days as I prepared to join Form One; I was already drowned in Form One books to understand each discipline. I had familiarised myself with the *Bios* and *Logos* of Biology, its branches, and others. But June? Getting horny! How did June come to know about me? Her sister Michelle had the correct answer. As we started dating, Michelle, like any girl would, shared the news with her

COLLINS TEUREY

younger sister. I don't blame her for that. Not after I learned that's a weakness of most women, if not all. The creator never trained their lips to be calm about some things, and finding a partner is one of them. Moreover, Michelle and June were very close sisters. And there were things they shared freely between them despite their age gap. As I would later be told by Michelle, by the time June began staging the 'I love you' histrionics with me, she'd already carried her luggage from the first relationship she started at class six with a guy alleged to be triple her age. What could I say? I was at a loss for words.

CHAPTER 11



NICE TO MEET YOU

Michelle and I eventually decided to meet each other. We had said enough of what we could say on the phone, and it was time to take our relationship to the next level. The idea of meeting her thrilled me and left me very anxious all the same. Remember, this was the first time I was going to have this kind of encounter with a girl. First times are always the most unsettling.

I had no *fucking* idea how a man should behave in an event like that. I had always had the courage over the phone to tell her anything I wanted. But this time, the confrontation of saying all that to her face made me feel like I had been forsaken in a wild forest that seemed quite without beginning or end owing to its vastness. I felt stranded, somewhat—but I had already unclothed for a shower. It was a must to have it. It forced me like *yuak punda*, the cry of a donkey.

The uphill task was initiating the discourse about Michelle with my mother. I had always waited for the right time to do

that. Is there really the right time to do something? I'm starting to lose faith in that lie of motivational speakers. There was nothing right about my wait.

I had procrastinated all that time, but I still felt more unprepared than I ever thought. I braced myself for the outcome and said to myself that if the driver were to die, then even the vehicle wouldn't be spared. It was momentous that I finally opened up to my mother. Reason? I didn't want to meet with Michelle in the *stomach* of the market, as if I had nowhere to call our home. I intended to bring her home like the honourable man I was and still am.

I set an alarm in my mind to correspond to the time my kid siblings weren't at home so that I could have a silent talk with my mother about the unknown visitor. She was in the kitchen boiling a mixture of *osuga*, *dek*, *boo*, and *kandhira*, traditional vegetables from a huge black pot she inherited from my grandma. The ember was all red with glowing firewood cut from a toothbrush plant or *Grevillea*.

We had several legs of the plant at home. I heard it used to be my grandfather's favourite, and its liking was passed on from generation to generation. We would always cut down the old ones and replace them with new ones. This time, we helped cut down a huge one to burn charcoal and provide firewood for my mother, who loved cooking anything mouthwatering.

I walked in and sat on a three-legged stool, known as *orindi* or *mbero*, (depending on the area), beside the ember to roast myself and chase the cold. My mother studied me rather than look at me and asked if everything was all right, and I said yes,

PETALS OF FATE

except that I was craving roasted maize. I used that as an excuse. She had realised something unusual about me, and it was her talent, just like most mothers, to flip through the mental pages in their children's heads. It's almost like magic.

It was a harvesting season. She gave me the go-ahead to break some maize from the *shamba*, the one I once told you was located a few yards from home. I sprang to my knees and headed to the maize plantation to pick some two for that evening. I chose the biggest two to provoke my mother. It was part of my plan to kickstart our conversation. I knew best how. You won't understand even if I told you.

"The award for the best maize farmer of the year goes to you," my mother said while clapping her hands, followed by sarcastic laughter.

"What's that supposed to mean, mum?" I asked, laughing. But I knew where that statement was headed.

"I don't think I need to remind you to check what you're holding in your hands, do I?" she said in a quick rejoinder.

"But mum, it's forever since I ground maize," I said teasingly. There was nothing she would do. She was in a very light mood. Besides, my mother preferred us to eat until we belched. Do you remember me telling you so? Yes. I took advantage of that.

"Ground? Are you a posho mill?" She asked. This one amused her, so she laughed until the wind entered her lungs. She was coughing.

"Yes, I'm —but a posho mill with two walking legs," I declared, amused.

"Continue roasting maize. You can even roast the whole *shamba* if you want. Planting season will soon be here, and you'll weed until your hands swell with blisters. Just laugh, you'll see what the donkey saw in the hole of *bala*!"

Just like some of you, I didn't know what "*bala*" was. However, it never mattered to me because, after all, my mother said all of that while lovingly laughing. She was a tough lover.

Well, the stage was set. I roasted the two ears of maize and gave her one, which she didn't refuse. I mentioned that to her, but she reminded me that the *shamba*, the ember, and the maize were hers, too. What a hard-hitting stopper. We talked about other random stuff, and then I began:

"Mum, I honestly have something to tell you," I said with finality.

"I know, my son," she cut in.

"How is that possible, mum?" I asked, a bit shocked.

"I'm your mother, remember..." She said, laughing like she had proved me wrong about some notion. That annihilated her anxiety to a considerable level.

The conversation went on like that, like that. I was shocked to get the kind of reaction I hardly foretasted. When I started that discussion, I thought my mother would reprimand me over it, but she looked very happy for me. According to her, I had already become an adult, and it was only normal that I felt things like that. I told her the whole thing, how it came to play, and the progress so far. She gave me her blessings after a few pieces of advice. You know, parents with their things.

However, the part about our meeting made her a little doubtful, but she assured me there was no mischief in meeting

PETALS OF FATE

with her since she knew the place Michelle was coming from very well. I heaved a sound sigh of relief. I communicated with my girl that night and picked a day for the visit. Friday, a week that followed, was the day for the lion to eat grass. How you interpret that is entirely your choice. But for me, that would be a day like no other. Michelle was scared when I mentioned I would introduce her to my mother the first time I met her. She cried because of her shyness, but I assured her there was no need to panic because my mother was an outgoing, hospitable, and understanding person. It was very satisfying that the day we had both waited, like the calming of a storm, was finally materialising.

The friendship between my mother and Adrian's mother officially started the day the latter visited our home impromptu. There was a big problem. Adrian had disappeared from home, and no one knew where he had been holed up for two days. Efforts by his mother to discover where he had gone hit a rock. After running out of options, she finally thought of one place her son could have been, which was our place. Ahead of her coming, I had not interacted with Adrian's mother that deeply. It was all casual pleasantries whenever she came to school, and her son went to meet her, given a guard by me. On such occasions, I talked to her.

It happened when we were in form three. I had not started renting around school, so I would commute back home to school. We hadn't gone to school this particular weekend, so I was up to my neck with light duties around home. Suddenly,

a woman who appeared to be a familiar stranger entered the compound. She instantly recognised me. I tried hard to remember where I had seen her before my memories came to my rescue. Yes. I remembered her. My mother warmly welcomed her into the house. I suspended what I had been doing to listen to what had brought my friend's mother home, which I knew could have been motivated by some emergencies. It was pretty odd because she had never come home before. How she traced the place, knows heaven how.

To her explanation, her son had suddenly vanished from home without warning anyone. The school principal caught Adrian flat-footed that day, cutting bus tickets. It was one of the many activities the school boss had issued a red alert against finding any of his students getting involved in. Adrian's mother, being the parents' class representative, had constant communication with the principal, and fear gripped Adrian that word on his busting would reach his mother. His mother was the kind not to mess around with. She was gigantic and a well-known disciplinarian. She spared no whip for anyone, and even age would not limit her from restoring sense to her all-grown sons. There was even a time she beat her eldest son indiscriminately for cheating on his wife.

Being caught in a situation of holding a wolf by the ear, Adrian decided to run away from home. His mother was aware she could be wrong to think he had come to our place. But she was positive that as his closest friend, I could be in a position to have leads on his whereabouts. She was wrong in both. Her son had played truant and picked Nairobi as his destination of choice.

PETALS OF FATE

He had a maternal uncle working in the city at that time, and that's where he sought asylum, at least for a few days, before he was deported back to the village where he belonged. The news of Adrian's arrival at the country's capital was pursued by his uncle, who was shocked to see him at such an unexpected time. After amicably agreeing to resolve the dispute, it was concluded that the wandering boy would travel home that evening and get back to class.

Michelle informed me that she had climbed a vehicle bound for *Nyandiga* from the *K'Olewe* market centre. It was on the material day, Friday, that we had agreed to meet. It was a distance that would take a vehicle about forty minutes running at an average speed to reach the alighting point. I had planned the day so well and informed my mother of Michelle's visit. What to be eaten for the day was sorted.

The kitchen had transformed into an industry, and the cloud of smoke coming out of the traditionally designed chimney was a sign good enough to give you a clue of the Whiteman's sampler of food prepared that day. There was *githeri*, tea (black and white) just in case she preferred one to another, *mandazi*, and *chapati*. That was for breakfast. Michelle left her place by 9:30 AM; don't mock her for that. It was all my idea that she come early enough so that we could have time to share what that day could allow.

Back in the day, the universal time for meeting was 2 pm onwards. It was an ideal time for a boy and a girl to meet. This was because a time like that would find most adults away from

home and children scattered in different playgrounds far from home. Time was, therefore, plenty for the adventurous humans to 'get on top of things' without the interference of others. The empty grandmother's house or an older brother's *Simba* provided an ambient meeting point with much-deserved privacy to do A and B, even C if it was proper. Since I had nothing to hide, I saw that time Michelle and I agreed upon as the most appropriate. Also, Michelle's parents were away from home, so she could easily sneak out and return without them noticing anything.

Unlike me, she had not discussed anything with her parents about me. She had her reasons, and I respected that. Some parents are too fierce to start such conversations with unless you want to be turned into minced meat through thorough beatings. Here, my mother was ahead of the rest. My father would have been a different story.

I saw how he once looked at some bad-looking girl my bigger brother had brought home as his girlfriend after finishing form four. I'm still not sure if it was the idea of bringing that girl home that exasperated him or the girl's death-like looks. He didn't explain himself, but he was certainly not very pleased about something, partly or wholly, about it.

For lunch, my mother had killed a hen. And the traditional veggies she was boiling that day weren't eaten as you would think. My mother could prepare one like that and preserve it for a fortnight with milk and regular warming. This was done repeatedly until the meal was pulverised into a near-paste. It's

PETALS OF FATE

called *alot*, *mokwok*. This food was and still is no joke. Its palatability would make you shamelessly bring down a ten-people lump of *ugali* without knowing.

Many people forgo dishes of fried beef upon spotting a bowl carrying it. Today, if you go to these Five Star hotels, you'll realise the price of one dish is worth seven pieces of corrugated iron sheets. It's a dangerously sweet dish. Sweeter than a stolen kiss done under a faint moonlight. There was also an assortment of drinks I bought for refreshment with some money I got from charcoal burning.

I knew three minutes were enough for me to shower. No, bathe. Showering is for rich folks. *Hoi polloi* and their offspring wash themselves. I belonged there. So, I rushed to wash myself inside a structure I had erected behind my brother's *simba*. It was clothed in banana leaves to prevent peeping people from seeing your bony, lacklustre buttocks as you scrubbed yourself with *suthru* made from a cut piece of sack.

The structure had no door. It was only open at one end, which was made to face the direction of the wall to act as an eye curtain. Washing oneself was for people like me, and it took the shortest time. That explains why I said three minutes was more than enough to finish it. I did my quick calculation and realised that about twenty-five minutes had passed before Michelle's arrival. It was something like a ten-minute walk from home. I intended to get there in good time so she would fall into my arms the moment her legs touched the ground. I was dressed in my favourite black pair of hugging pants and a top I had inherited from my sister. It was a pink t-shirt that drew my chest very nicely and exposed my massive arms for

Michelle to see. It was chosen for a purpose. It was a unisex top. My black pants, too, didn't fail me. I fit into it like a bone frame fits into one's flesh. It left my manhood bulging. Again, that was done on purpose.

On my feet was a second-hand pair of loafers I bought from the market with my little savings from a piggy bank. I carefully combed my hair and sprayed myself with a strawberry-flavoured cologne, exactly the one she had used on the success card she sent me some time back. I had not discovered the similarity in fragrance until I finally wore it. I had stolen the cologne from my sister's handbag, and I had been waiting for the perfect time to try it on since then. It was here! I gave myself one last look in the mirror, and everything was splendidly in place. Eventually, I took to my heels and left to meet with my unintendedly intended one.

Adrian walked in through the school gate accompanied by his mother. Information about his disappearance had spread around the school like the legs of a *slut* in a lodging room. All eyes stared at him as his mother escorted him to the principal's office like he'd grown a third eye on his forehead. His return had to be intervened in order to save him from the trouble of being absent from school without permission, and also for touting bus tickets at the market centre wearing a windbreaker with the school emblem. Thanks to his mother's influence and her invaluable contribution to the school's progress as a key board member. It saved Adrian's skin. After a series of 'last

PETALS OF FATE

warnings' lectures, he was allowed to return to class and continue his studies.

Later that day, as we rounded him up to hear his side of the story, Adrian explained to us that his issue was a perfect case of a throw from a sling going bad. In his version, he went to buy something from the shopping centre. That was when his step-brother, a bus conductor, asked him to hold some bus ticket books for him. It was on a Saturday morning, and he had not changed into home clothes since he got home the previous day. He wore school pants, a games kit T-shirt, and a windbreaker. Unfortunately, it was the same time the principal had alighted from his car and recognised him. He took off like he had seen a ghost and decided to escape due to an overwhelming fear of his mother's and the principal's wrath.

I got to *Oriwo*, a budding shopping centre not far from home. It was where Michelle was to descend from the vehicle. I stood there with anticipation to see a girl vomited out of a *matatu*. Many passenger vehicles were pouring in and picking up and dropping commuters. My hand was in the pocket, and from the look on my face, you could easily tell that I was looking out for someone. I struggled to remain composed amid the disquietude that had trapped me like a fly in a cobweb. But the feeling was much stronger for me to contain.

The first vehicle came and dropped a middle-aged woman. No, that cannot be her. It picked up some passengers with it and then left. Another came again and offloaded a mother and a young boy. There was no sign of anyone who looked like her

based on the image I had built in my head. The third vehicle came and stopped to pick up a passenger but left after the tout disagreed with the passenger on fare. As the third vehicle left, the fourth appeared from a distance, and out of the blue, my heart started beating in my chest like the drums of *Roho Sabato Church*. The Nissan *Boflo*, you know, these 14-seater passenger vehicles with bodies designed to look like a loaf of bread? Yes. That one. The *matatu* slowly drove and pulled in.

From it stepped out four passengers: a man in his fifties, a girl about thirteen years old, a woman carrying a basket, and a lady about the legal age of “sinning.” She had a small black handbag with a strap worn on her shoulder connected to it. She stood there looking unsure, and then I saw her reach for her mobile phone to text something. My phone hummed with a message notification. She turned in my direction, and our eyes met. She smiled—and began to walk toward me. I smiled back. As she neared closer, I stretched my hand to greet her, but she ignored it and jumped on me with her arms wrapped around my neck.

Good lord! What did I do to deserve such beauty for a partner? Her unbelievably good looks made me feel ashamed of my own. From that point, I learned that there are two categories of people on Earth: the real creatures and the remains of creation. I guess I fell somewhere in between. I was a few inches taller than her, so when she ran to hug me, she had to swing a bit to reach for my neck. Her hug was precise and without mistake. Her sassy breasts rubbed against my chest, and I almost lost that war. She smelled like food, and for a moment, I shared the situation of a cat being entrusted with watching over

PETALS OF FATE

a glass of milk. I swallowed saliva with the smell of her natural scent. Savior, come for me!

“Carlos, right?” She asked. Looking into my eyes seductively.

“Michelle, if I’m not wrong,” I enquired.

“Michelle! Excuse me!...” She said with a changed mood. I was shocked and wondered if I was doing things with the wrong person. She burst into laughter and stretched her hand now to shake mine. She said it was all a joke and that she wanted to tease me a little. We laughed heartily about it. Man, she got me.

“Nice to meet you finally, Carlos.”

“It’s such an exquisite pleasure to me,” I replied.

“Shall we?” I asked with a broad smile as I led the way.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. You look handsome,” she said as she nodded in agreement. She touched my hair.

“And you’re inexplicably beautiful,” I shyly said, touching her hand, and she blushed— then thanked me as though I had done her such a great favour by saying that to her.

How could someone be so beautiful? I asked myself as we walked home. Michelle’s beauty was the kind that made me think she had bribed the creator to look the way she did. Everything about her was without blemish. She was criminally pulchritudinous with a wasp-like waist that threatened to break away, given the weight from her behind that bulged like a boil ripe with pus. She had a two-powerful set of eyes that appeared extraordinarily white. And with a luscious look. Her breasts were medium-sized and pointed like mouths of guns ready to fire. I admired her walking style and her well-carved

golden legs on our way. She was super attractive. Her voice made me want to listen to her more than I could talk. She sounded like a little singing bird.

The air now blowing buffeted her long, dark, natural hair admiringly from west to east. The pine trees wondered about her beauty with a whistle as we entered the compound. I felt so proud. Along the way, I reminded Michelle that I had felt she was attractive, but not as much as she turned out to be. I was so stunned by her ornamental looks that I felt as if our combination was that of the beauty and the beast. She told me that she was pleased with everything about me, that I was a complete menu to her. I got so flattered that I wished that I had an ex-lover; I would have called her to beg for a second breakup. I felt like breaking up with a *bitch* for no reason.

My mother was standing at the door entrance. She was all smiles. I guess she was bragging by heart that her son had an unparalleled taste for fine things in life. She feasted her eyes on Michelle and turned them away with satisfaction when she realised it somehow made her nervous. She gave way for us to enter. The neighbours who had noticed the arrival of the lion with its hunt were staring blankly at us. I knew I had given them something to chew the fat about for a week or so. Michelle proved to me that she was a well-mannered girl, just like I felt the first time I talked to her. Her courtesy and maturity were out of this world. She confirmed that it wasn't like any other usual charade you find from the daughters of *Obel Sibuth*, the evil one.

She bowed to greet my mother. That was something I had only seen happen at the king's castle. And in movies. Yes. My

PETALS OF FATE

mother was queenly in character and physical beauty. But she lacked the mundane possessions to complete that noble title. It didn't matter to my visitor. She accorded my mother the kind of reverence no one else had ever done. My heart skipped a beat out of that gesticulation. There's something most women don't understand, especially the ones born in the iGeneration. It pleases a man to watch his mother and the woman who warms his bed get along well. There's that attachment a man has with his mother, and any discovery made on that by him always makes him a complacent son and a husband.

Just like a woman would cross the ocean to marry a man with the qualities of her father, that is, when she believes her father carries the features of her ideal man, so do men. Men, too, marry their mothers: the heart of gold, the selflessness, the love given with a bit of strictness, the good culinary skill, you know, I could go on and on—these are some of the reasons a man would desperately want to wed his mother in another woman. That first impression Michelle gave me made me triple my love for her. I wished I had already grown old enough to propose to her. The thoughts of some opportunistic guy grabbing her from me denied me sleep. It would kill me to watch her wrapped in the arms of another man.

I offered to bring everything for breakfast to the dining table. In the meantime, my mother continued to make acquaintances with her daughter-in-law. Their chemistry was amazing. They laughed about things at intervals that I didn't know about. I didn't want to poke my nose in their conversations, either. So, I let them have their moments. It was too late to call

it a breakfast. But I knew there was enough empty room in our stomachs to accommodate what was coming.

For Michelle, I had asked her not to have a bite on anything. There was abundantly so much to eat. I hoped that she did as I had requested. The necessary preparations were made, and my mother made the prayer before we started eating. My kid brothers were also present. They looked a bit reserved because it was not every day they were receiving visitors like that. I imagined they were wondering where the hell their brother had removed such a clean wealth, *mali safi*. There was no girl in my entire village who could match even a quarter of Michelle's beauty. She was also exposed and led a town-like life. Let alone the other girls from the countryside who looked like something dragged in by a cat.

After finishing the late breakfast, Michelle insisted on fixing the mess despite my attempts to stop her. She even wanted to clean the utensils, but I refused that with a flat belly on the ground. I begged her to leave that for a subsequent visit. I didn't feel comfortable letting her do that on her first visit. What if a knife deeply cut her by accident?

Mum had other plans to attend to. It was a day for *chama* meeting, and that meant that she'd leave in the afternoon and return much later in the evening. She prepared us emotionally for that and told the girl of the house about it. We remained seated on the chair. We had wooden chairs. Mum was busy organising herself to leave. She arranged everything about lunch and asked us to ensure we ate when it was time. She said goodbye to Michelle in advance because she knew she would

PETALS OF FATE

be gone by the time she returned. They both agreed that it wouldn't be long before they met again.

We waited for some minutes to be sure my mother had left without any possibility of her coming back in the name of forgetting something behind. With the conviction that she was gone, we left for my brother's hut to have some privacy. My siblings had sublimed from home, as it was in their culture, after eating their fill. We locked the door to the main house behind us. Michelle picked up her purse, and we left.

It was another time I was having a full view of her to pay attention to small details of her beauty I might have overlooked moments ago. She wore a black dress with small perforations on the sleeves for this day. This dress hugged her in the right places, fitting her perfectly like she had been born with it. It was not in any way sexually provocative, but her feminine features were boldly revealed. Her charming looks wouldn't be tamed by anything. Even a sack would look just as good on her if she wore one. Everything about her tempted me, and to control my feelings, a high level of sanity was required. It was a struggle more than breaking away from the clutch of a starving leopard.

We sat on the one couch my brother had bought a month earlier before our meeting. Looking at each other without uttering a word. We were sheepishly smiling. The moment seemed awkward because it was the first time we had met, and now just the two of us—alone.

I felt like touching her eyebrows to remind her I loved how lush they were with hair, but my hand was rendered immobile by some external forces. Her dress had rolled upwards as she

sat down and now exposed her juicy thighs. She had not bothered to stretch it back in a bid to conceal the irresistible sight of her thighs. I'm sure she knew she owned a rare breed of edible thighs, and no shame could prompt her to hide them from me, like a roll of prohibited narcotics—as if I were a cop from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

I glanced at her sapful lips, and in response, my lips itched yearnfully for her kiss. My blood had heated to a boiling point, and I could feel it burn hot beneath my skin. She looked back at me longingly. Her eyes had turned groggy, and it started becoming difficult for her to sit upright. She acted like someone with an upset stomach. She was fidgety. I asked her if everything was all right, and she said yes. She drew closer to me and leaned her head on my shoulder. I moved away a little because my manhood had started growing aggressively bigger the moment she made contact with me. Her scent to me was like the smell of blood to a shark. And you know what a shark does best with its prey.

“By the way, do you remember there was something you said we would share when we meet?” I finally broke the silence. She just looked at me and smiled.

I put my hand into hers to get her reaction. Like a cat that had been timing a playful rat, she pounced on my lips and started kissing me wildly. I swear it was the first time I was having a kiss. She ate me! It gave me the best feeling in the world. Michelle was seated on my lap, her thighs apart, facing me. I don't know if you get that picture. I placed my palms on both sides of her dimpled cheeks and kissed her back.

PETALS OF FATE

She was a great kisser, and I was only learning from the best as a first-timer. My *cock* had become as hard as a bone. I reached for her breasts that had noduled invitingly out of her chest with a touch, and she squirmed in my arms like a snake in a cage. Her breathing pattern had entirely changed. We were both panting. Weak in one way and strong in another. If you know what I'm talking about. I lifted her up with her arms around my neck, and her legs swirled around my waist.

She was heavy, but no woman is too heavy for a man to carry around. More so on a journey whose destination is the bedroom. It is the only reason a man can effortlessly lift a 50kg woman alone without breaking a sweat, but complain of the same weight as a bag of cement. Scientists call it an adrenaline rush. But I call it the power of a curvaceous *ass* and full breasts. A bag of cement? Has none of that.

In the bedroom, Michelle leaned back on the wall as we continued kissing and caressing. She had removed my pink t-shirt, and her hands trailed down my chest. She praised my shredded body. I had rolled up her dress, and she was halfway naked. I grabbed what her momma gave her, and she breathed with complications. Where did I get the creativity to do all these on the first day? I was surprised by myself. That was way beyond what I thought I was capable of. I looked at Michelle, and she was too helpless. The foreplay left me susceptible, too. We were lost in a foreign land of glory.

“Not today, love,” Michelle said faintly as I tried to explore her thighs to reach for her little garden. And by the way, her thighs were as smooth as polished wood.

CHAPTER 12



SHARING IS CARING

“If you can’t love me back, let me have your brother,” June texted me the following morning after Michelle’s visit. She was referring to my little brother, Edgar. Edgar had equally completed his primary education and was preparing to join class nine, just like in June’s case. They were age mates if what Michelle told me was anything to go by. He and June were born the same year, with only two months separating their ages. Until now, she had not known about my brother, but now she did because Michelle must have informed her about him. My brother was an introvert type. That made me uncertain whether he had started knowing bad manners or not.

The new turn of events came to me as a shocker and gave me a feeling of reprieve all the same time. That was because I didn’t expect that from her, but it was all for the better since I had thoughtfully tried to find the best way to kill her preoccupation with me without any success. This was for two reasons: first and foremost, my brother was too young in my eyes to

PETALS OF FATE

start discussing matters of sliding thongs on the other side to enjoy the full view of that uncooked edible meat. Secondly, I felt shy about initiating that kind of conversation with him because I had never done it before. All these notwithstanding, I promised June I would become the bridge to link them together. And I owed her one.

How I would begin to tell my younger brother that a girl whose name he was hearing for the first time wanted to make out with him became the million-dollar question. But I had to find a decent way to test that precarious water. I hated anything that would make him paint me in a bad light, assuming he was as innocent as I had always felt in my heart. June was already mounting too much pressure on me over the matter. It's like she made it her only business to deprive me of peace. Unlike my brother, it was clear that she was an overexposed spoiled brat. She put me under great duress to talk to my brother before she could lose her patience and change her mind. Can you believe that was what she told me *verbatim et literatim*, word for word? Jeez.

After scratching the hair germinating on my chin like men do when they are buried deeply in thoughts, I told June that I had already talked to my brother. The idea of him spanking her ass someday made him as happy as a pig in *shit*. What she didn't know was that I cooked that up to put her restless ovaries into sedation. She calmed down on hearing that. Two weeks had already passed since my first meeting with Michelle. We had started missing each other dangerously, and the only way we could save the situation was to arrange for our second meeting. Fridays were always convenient. Michelle's parents

were away from home from morning up to sundown every Friday. In the absence of the cat, the rat automatically becomes the king. And the king does what he wants. Therefore, she used that privilege to come and mark her new territory. The Friday of that week was subsequently earmarked for our next meeting.

I was convinced this second visit would be more comfortable for Michelle owing to the hospitality she was accorded recently. She was also familiar with the place. Women are super good with directions. It is one gift the creator denied me. It would take me a few more times to get lost before I finally settle on that one landmark to guide my steps to any new place I go.

The good thing, however, is that when that ultimately happens, there's no way it will slip my mind in a thousand years. I informed my mother that her daughter-in-law was scheduled to come, and she was very excited. This newly found bond between the two was astonishing. I don't know if it was because we only had one female in our family in the middle of men or lord knows what. That reasoning made some sense to me because if that were the case, then it would only be natural that my mother looked at Michelle as the second daughter to her that never was.

Or was it medicine? Argh! Of course not. She was too young to harbour such evil intentions of a barren woman who is in the face of her fourth chaotic divorce. But on the whole, I loved it like a village girl loves collecting firewood. There was no misgiving that my mother loved my girlfriend a great deal. There was more than enough proof to corroborate that. I got it from the horse's mouth. On the day I dragged my plunder

PETALS OF FATE

home, my mother was as pleased as a man who has had his erectile dysfunction mishap counteracted. And now the cries of his woman under the night sheets have worsened. And he likes to bask in that new glory of being called a bed bull by his mourning and moaning woman.

Do you remember when I said my arrival with Michelle at home would serve the villagers with something to shoot the breeze with for days or weeks? It became the talk of the town, just as I had prophesied. My mother even told me of a neighbour who approached her over the matter and praised how beautiful my selection was. It gave me so many bragging rights to walk around the village and hear people whisper in groups in my name.

Even my friends gave me some fear. I mean that ‘this shoe is too big for me to wear’ kind of look. It went on for many days until I was compelled to call a small meeting with my peers to remind them that it was okay to look at me the same way. I was a king who was very much willing to dine with his ‘servants.’ At least that reduced the tension significantly. Having Michelle as a catch earned me a good reputation from the village folks. Thanks to the power of my third leg. I was now greeted as *kiongos*, the boss, by the same people who called me whatever they pleased before. I enjoyed the attention, honestly. And I would laugh to think of it privately.

In her previous meeting, Michelle didn’t stay to eat lunch. I understood it because we had a late breakfast, and you know, girls. I had not known her side with food. A woman is someone you can take out on a swanky dinner date to eat a lump of expensive chicken meat, only for her to touch the food with

just a few bites and leave the rest of it wasted like that. It pains a man's pocket to pay for wastefulness with a good amount of money. I wonder why some women don't get it. The ludicrous part is that the woman may be on an empty stomach but chooses to waste the food to keep up with appearances. As if that's not enough, she ends up denying you the chance of hitting her 'cat' with your 'rod.' It hurts more than being stepped on by a cow.

My mother was displeased with the realisation that we did not eat the food she prepared for lunch that day. Nothing crashed her as bad as someone not eating something she had spent time preparing. Time spent on that wasn't the bone of contention. She just loved the sight of protruding stomachs around her as long as she had enough firewood in her kitchen and what to spend it on. I begged for an apology on behalf of Michelle.

We ate the food at supper time, so it didn't go to the trash after all. If only my mother would realise that both of us were full from the juice of saliva we drank from each other's mouths as we kissed last time, she would be happy for us instead of fretting about us not eating that earthly food. Anyway, we promised we would make it up to her this time. She had prepared some red-eyed tilapia fresh from the lake for lunch. Holy moley! That was one of my favourite dishes. And there was no way I was trading that with a kiss this time. I would eat that fish and enjoy that kiss after that because both were very important to me. That was the deal. And deals aren't supposed to be broken.

PETALS OF FATE

Michelle arrived at 11 a.m. on the dot. This time, she requested that I let her have breakfast at home, and I granted her that wish. I went to pick her up from the layby as soon as she called my phone to let me know of her arrival. This time, I wore a spotlessly white t-shirt that exposed my stamina and a pair of black shorts. The hair on my thighs down to my legs was visible. And it was intentional. Previously, she had worshipped the hair she saw on my hands, and she confessed it was her number one fetish on my body. So, I thought if I showed her a little bit more of it on my thighs... these things require creativity, you know. And I had high expectations that one thing would lead to another. You feel me?

She was in a red knee-length dress. How she knew it gave me goose pimples to see her in a dress, I don't know. Her breasts stood courageously in front of her delicate chest. It aroused me that very instant. A cornrow hairdo on her head gave her a charming African look. She looked like a toasted bread. The dress fit her perfectly like a *dick* inside a rubber. She looked winsome, like a virgin mermaid. I hugged her tightly, and she naughtily ensured that I felt her breasts rub against my chest. I got tempted to give her a hickey there and then, but I remembered we were at a public place, so I behaved myself. As we walked home, everyone seemed to be relishing what they saw. Michelle's attraction could only measure up to that of nectar to bees. Every man we came across wished she was his. I loved the idea but hated the reality of it happening.

The girls we met along the way felt ashamed of their sorry looks. They could not afford the price of looking twice in the direction of my woman. They ended up admiring their own

feet instead. We ignored the world and went on with our journey home. If beauty was killing, then I'm sure Michelle would be the first among equals to be buried.

Even though we walked side by side, there were times I slowed down deliberately to allow her to go past me so that I could see how beautifully her ass swayed side to side. Unlike other girls in the village who made it too hard to tell whether they were coming or going, she had her back and front created proportionately. It gave her the rare characteristic of looking beautiful from far other than far from beautiful like the rest of the girls I knew. And I'm not being unfair to anyone here. I'm just being brutally honest.

I informed my mother that we would have an early lunch when we reached home. To avoid making it look like it was food that brought her home. I decided it was good to buy time on other things. It's not cool to bring food to the table immediately after a visitor pays a visit. Don't do that unless you want to deny them the freedom to eat your meal more freely. It's a special kind of knowledge you won't be taught at school. We spared some time to chat and also allowed her some space with my mother to explain why she didn't have lunch that day and other small jokes about 'so longs.'

My mother was preparing to leave for a *chama*, meeting. I don't know whether she had started to wonder why we chose Friday for the visit when it was obvious it was a day when you would hardly find anyone else at home. But I believed she knew how things like that work. Some alone time was good, and we wanted to go about our business without having someone sticking their noses into it.

PETALS OF FATE

After lunch, I decided it was time to move to my brother's house for some privacy. Michelle comprehended the reason superbly. Truth to tell, the kind of look she was giving me after we were done eating and seated on the chair like a sister and a brother in Christ hinted at her intentions of wanting us out of my mother's house. I took advantage of that and gave her my hand before leading her out of the house. I banged the door behind us and placed my arm around her waist. I then guided her to my brother's hut like a butcher guiding a sheep to an abattoir. We were alone, and we could do what we felt with ourselves. My siblings had gone to roam about as usual, and I knew it would be later before they returned.

I was never at peace since she told me there was something she wanted to tell me, but only by lying on my chest. This was a perfect time if she wouldn't ignore my inquisitiveness on the matter. So, I decided that I would revive that discussion as soon as we got into the house. Our compound was huge, and sometimes, you would see neighbours passing through the compound to other homes. The number of people passing and staring in the direction of the hut appeared to be abnormally large. With her request, I closed the door without putting it under the key lock. At least it was too early to lock it tight. However, I was very flexible in doing that as long as a need arose. I sat back and silently waited for what the day had in store for me, for us.

I sat my ass next to her and pressed rather than request her to tell me what she had promised she would say to me only as she slept on my bare chest. I wanted both—to be told what was bothering her as well as to have her sleep on top of me.

COLLINS TEUREY

This time, she wasn't hesitant to talk about it. She laid her back on the couch and used my lap as her pillow. She was looking at me straight in the face and then started the conversation with an open heart.

"Love, tell me something, and don't hide any detail from me. Promise?" She said to me like a woman does when she wants to bribe you with her words.

"All right, gorgeous. I'm all ears. Ask me what you need to know..." I replied. My heart was racing like a Toyota Yaris in the World Rally Championship because of anxiety about what was coming.

"Promise. Promise me," She persisted.

"Okay. Okay. I promise!" I assured her.

"What's going on between you and June?" She asked with a shaking voice.

I expected it! From the day she told me she had something stirring her mind, the feeling that the issue about June was at the heart of it or would turn out to be one of the things she intended to talk to me about crossed my head straight away. She was visibly hurt by it, but she handled it most maturely. Maybe that was because she knew exactly what her kid sister was capable of doing. I explained everything to her and how it started. Right from the beginning, when June masqueraded as her as soon as she left for school and the lie she told me to buy her trust and assume she was Michelle. It amazed her. It depressed her. It disgusted her. My revelation triggered her to open up to me about something I had never envisioned.

When I first made acquaintances with Michelle and agreed to Ignite a flame of romance, the first person she ostentatiously

PETALS OF FATE

flaunted her new status to was her sister, June. She said all the good things about me and how she felt we had a promising future as a couple. From her own interpretation, the praises she heaped on me attracted her younger sister to me. Little did she know that her sister would scheme behind her back and make a move on me to snatch me from her. Or having a secret bedroom encounter with me. During this conversation, Michelle disclosed how she came back from school with so much zeal and eagerness to talk to me first person but faced the challenge of not finding my contact from her contact list.

It would later occur to her that her younger sister had changed my name as it was on the phone book and replaced it with a female name that she couldn't identify. For this reason, she found it hard to trace my phone number since she had not memorised it as she left for school. Her sister intended to block her from ever accessing my contact until the coming back of the son of Mary, the virgin.

She continued to narrate how the realization of that almost wounded her relationship with her sister. It was such an emotional moment, and a lot was said, more than words can type. We cursed the day for all of what had happened and vowed always to do anything within our reach to prevent something like that from happening again. We held each other, caressed each other, and bonded with sweet words dictated by the circumstances.

I loved something about my girlfriend. She simplified everything for me. For example, I have always heard stories about men complaining that the most challenging step during a date was to make a girl move from the living room to the bedroom.

Although most women have their own styles of making their interests known to their men, some are a hard nut to crack. They would wait for you to make every move as if they weren't aware of the right thing to be done.

On this one, I would love to thank heavens my woman often understood her assignment well. She wouldn't wait for me to drag her like a sack of English potatoes to the bedroom. I told you up to this time, I had not sinned with any woman, and I was still a greenhorn on stuff like that. As much as I would wish for it, I still felt guilt-sick to open conversations like 'Let's go to the bedroom' for fear that she might profile me as a *pussy* lover.

"*Lor dhot mondi*," Michelle whispered. By which she meant, "close the door first." I jumped onto my feet like I had springs on them and helped with the door. We had deep-kissed by this time, and her eyes had turned scarlet red from sexual thirst as I mercilessly sucked her succulent lips. I mean the outward lips, not the inward lips. We have two categories of lips. I suppose you know.

After closing the door tightly, I returned to the seat where the action began. She stood up and put her arms around my body. The temperature of my blood suddenly skyrocketed. And a lot of blood was supplied to my penile veins that it became as hard as a macadamia seed. I stretched my hands and grabbed her from behind like someone lifting a pot from the ground. She gasped for breath and noisily swallowed her saliva. She grabbed my manhood to feel the nature of the trouble she was about to get herself into.

PETALS OF FATE

The look in her eyes expressed her worries. It was a dangerous arsenal, but what could she do? She would put it into use, for there's no harder bread before tea. I unbuttoned her dress and found a good allowance to reach for her breasts. She had no bra on. I don't know if it was because she was prepared for anything that could happen that day, or it was because she had them firm and erect that a bra would serve no purpose. By the way, it was true. Her breasts were young and fearless, not like some that look flaccid like a deflated balloon. Forgive me if that offended you.

I rubbed her boobs gently with the expertise of baking wheat flour for a wedding cake. Her nipples pointed out like pimples on one's skin. I strummed on them with my fingers like a jazz guitar before she started to beg for mercy she didn't even need.

"Let's go to the other side," she requested me.

She meant the bedroom, in case you're wondering. It looked like the day had finally come. I was a virgin. I don't know if men ever are. I was prepared to lose it to her. As soon as we reached the bedroom, we helped each other undress, and then I pushed her onto the bed. I was loaded with enough ammunition, and as I cocked my gun to fire, she stopped me and reminded me to wear a wrapper. I quickly lifted the mattress, and under it, I removed a sachet of a condom. I had asked my friend for a few the previous day, just in case things happened. It's called prior planning.

I must confess that I had no idea how a condom was worn. And I feared asking for help. So, I struggled with it before she told me I had put it on inside-out. I was just about to get inside

of her. She was laughing at me this time. I removed it and tried to fix it in the right way, but because time waits for no erection, she threw caution to the wind and permitted me to go in bare-clawed. Oblivious to the consequences of the risks involved. I went on to kiss her more to add gas to the fire. I had read from some books that foreplay that is properly done well enough is the master key that unlocks the door of rigid thighs. I confirmed it. It was true.

I took charge like a man. I desired to ride on top of her like a horse rider does on top of a stallion, but I didn't have the skills to do that as an amateur. Instead, even gaining access to the playground became a problem. I tried to push it in, but it kept sliding sideways. I tried several times in futility. I was sweating like a fish. It bothered me that I couldn't perform as I wanted. It stressed me out, especially as I tried to reflect on what Voke had once told me: that it was easy for a girl to break up with you if you failed to deliver on the first day. And there was me with a performance as low as the price of a *kamisi*. It killed my soul that Michelle was laughing at how much I was struggling to get the hole right. Finally, she told me it was all right that we would give it another try, another day.

Information reached schools that KCPE results were set to be released in the coming week. It had been almost two months since the class eight candidates wrote their answers. Teachers had travelled to Nairobi, where the examination papers were being marked. The exercise was slow this time, given the huge

PETALS OF FATE

number of candidates who sat for the exams that year. Composition and *Insha* impeded the marking exercise since they required word-by-word marking and thorough cross-checking. The rest of the papers were fed into a computer system that helped with accurate marking and compilation of the results. That was class eight. Edgar, my brother, and June were anxiously waiting for their results to find out if they would be joining class nine or not. Ours was equally on the way in a month or less. We were all very optimistic and desirous to know how we performed.

The school expected a lot from us that year. From the observation given by the administration, our lot showed impressive potential to perform even better than the previous class. In the previous year, our school had achieved a mean score of 8.5. For some reason, we were challenged to aim for 9.5 or nine as the minimum mean score in our year. You could tell the nature of the task we had to be able to hit that target. It was quite an ambitious goal, but we took hold of it because that is how every goal should look. In the same way, a wise person once said that if you want to hit the moon, it is good to aim at the stars so that, should you miss the stars, you would still land on the moon, your initial target. I guess they had that in mind as they settled on that projected mean score.

I had missed my friend Adrian miserably. After much consideration, I decided to call on him at their home. It had been a long time since we last saw each other, and I felt it was enough for an over-the-phone conversation. And the time had come

to break the trend. His hometown and Michelle's were close. This visit was essential because it would allow me to reunite with my friend, and we could share one or two about what had transpired.

He picked me up around the *Bodaboda* shade built by the area member of parliament during the last election period to gain political expediency. You know how crafty politicians can be. His father's compound did not sit far from the main road, so we didn't have to walk for long before we got there. The first to receive me at home was his mother. She had grown to like me like her half-son.

My friend left for the nearby shop at the shopping centre to pick a few bottles of soft drinks to irrigate our throats as we shared moments of 'I miss you, I miss you toos.' My arrival was even timely, I would say. His mother was busy preparing a late lunch, and I was automatically added to the mathematics of the quantity of food to be prepared. I believe she had added another cup of water to the pot meant for cooking ugali, as we ate well without any shortage.

Later, we left, and Adrian volunteered to show me around his village. It was important because, to me, the area was probably where I would be driving a herd of cattle to my in-laws' place in the future in exchange for my endeared Michelle. You don't want to lose your way during an auspicious occasion like that.

We walked to every corner our legs could carry us to as Adrian told me why one *shamba* was ploughed the way it was, why another road was bent, or why there were groups of people walking in pairs, a man and a woman as though Noah had

PETALS OF FATE

instructed anything living to walk into the ark with mates for a second time—I mean every detail about his area. I asked him to take me to where the real Linda lived with her parents, and he offered to do that happily.

We went there, and the compound looked lonely and neglected. It required not being told that it had been a long time since Linda and her family returned home. I confirmed Michelle's words. It was true when she told me her cousin had left home with her dad, never to return home for the longest time. It was never another ploy to block me from her, as I might have thought. This could have been the place to call my father-in-law's place if all plans had gone well, as I had imagined from the very start. I thought to myself.

The next place to tour was Michelle's. I desperately wanted to know where she was coming from, all while avoiding her discovery that I had been stalking her without her knowledge. We carefully walked towards where they lived. It was such a magnificent house! The compound was huge, like the appetite of an elephant. The fence was well trimmed, and flowers of all species were planted in the compound.

A modern metal gate was erected at the entrance to block unwarranted visitors. I wondered why she chose to love me. We were just worlds apart, given our family backgrounds, which were as different as day and night. If Michelle could still love me the way I was, then she truly meant it when she said she did. I was touched. Before we could turn back, Michelle and someone I suspect was her stubborn sister poured out of the door, playfully chasing one another as they laughed their hearts out.

COLLINS TEUREY

We quickly responded by lying flat on the ground to hide from them. It would have been a mistake to score into one's goalpost. We crawled on our knees like kids do when they pretend to be cows in one of their random games and disappeared like dew on the grass under a hot sun. Time was running late. Therefore, I requested that Adrian take me back to his mother so that I could say goodbye.

I never wanted to take a French leave just like that. After being welcomed and fed a palatable dish! That would be rude and ungrateful of me. My hurry was further propelled by Adrian's revelation that Michelle and her sister usually visited the shopping centre at that time. My fear was the imagination of bumping into them, and leaving as soon as possible was the only way to prevent that from happening.

CHAPTER 13



TESTED LOYALTY

Edgar performed exceedingly well in his KCPE examinations. He felt like a heavy weight had just been lifted off his shoulders when the results were finally out. Out of the possible 500 marks, my younger brother had scored a resounding 410 marks. It didn't come out as a big shocker to us because he was naturally born an intelligent kid with something close to a photographic memory. Although he scored within the range of 350 to 370 marks in the first and second terms, the third term, being the final term, was marked by nights of burning the midnight oil for him. He could sit at the study table for dismayingly long hours until my mother intervened to negotiate or commanded him to catch some sleep.

Apart from reading for his exams, Edgar had cultivated a routine of reading storybooks, old newspapers, and anything readable. Something tells me that, in addition to his desire and motivation to achieve a good performance in his National Examinations, he naturally loved books. Reading was a habit we

reaped from our late father. He was a reader, and another thing that made us ingrain a reading culture was my father's tendency to ask us random questions. Therefore, there was a need to read for exposure and knowledge. In his very own words, treasures and powers were hidden in the books. And we knew better. Most of the world's valuable treasures, such as gold and diamonds, aren't found idling on the earth's surface. It requires some digging to get to them, you know. In our imaginations, we likened the situation to the information concealed in a book that could only be obtained through reading and comprehension.

My mother couldn't be more delighted. It ballooned her heart with pride to witness her efforts finally paying off. The joy for any parent, and owing to the struggles she had always gone through to see us through school, anyone who knew so little about that would have thought she was overreacting. The good news was tempestuously received by kin and friends alike. Enemies, even.

Edgar's stellar performance became a trophy everyone wanted to flaunt to the world boastfully. It didn't surprise me much. It reminded me of the '*Oyundi bi chiem*' mockery song we used to sing or was being sung to us to reprimand us for laziness and obstinacy. My youngest brother—Ochogo, was not left behind in the celebrations, even though everything didn't mean much to him then.

Oyundi, as it's well-known in my mother tongue, is a small bird. It is almost impossible to see this bird move around alone without its partner's presence. It's very easy to conclude that maybe one has just gone through a messy divorce with their

PETALS OF FATE

wife or husband if you ever spot one chirping helplessly without a partner in sight. Possibly, you would imagine that one had just gotten killed by a stone carefully thrown from a catapult by a skilled bird hunter or trapped with a basin the same way we would trap them as children back then when our notoriety of catching and eating birds was out of control. It's as rare as locating a perfect diamond to find this bird species not moving around as husband and wife.

Distinguishing between the male and female *Oyundi* is no simple task, especially when size is considered. Their primary distinction lies in their colours: one is a plain grey, while the other flaunts a striking blend of red and shades of blue around its neck. Oyundis are notoriously gluttonous, spending most of their time scouring the ground for whatever they can find—be it maize flour or the tiniest of insects. If a skilled storyteller like Voke were to claim they also feed on soil, I might just believe him, despite it straying far from their typical diet.

The song "*Oyundi ni dhi chiem*," which invites the bird to join in a feast, was crafted to mock those too lethargic to engage in honest work. The kind of sluggards who would spring to life at the sight of food but would go to great lengths—to feign illness or even stage their own deaths—to avoid labour. In the eyes of the songwriters, the Oyundi embodies a perpetual tendency to complain about everything except the joy of eating.

Thus, the melody is often directed at those who thrive off the efforts of others, living off the sweat of hardworking individuals without lifting a finger themselves. As I watched everyone celebrate Edgar's performance, even those who hadn't

COLLINS TEUREY

contributed a single coin to buy him a pencil and eraser when he desperately needed one, the infectious tune played an active band in my mind. It was a reminder of the hypocrisy concealed beneath the surface of their cheers.

In my family, there was a popular notion that there could never be a regular celebration without something dying. My mother was the high priestess of that gospel —she still is to date, and to live up to that belief, she decided to kill a huge rooster to boil for soup that evening. It was a gesture of her complacency toward my brother's peerless performance. However, my brother was not to feed on that alone because there were hungry mouths that naturally volunteered to support him with the task of eating. Consequently, we ate as though the day belonged to us. We belched in satisfaction. That was a good evening!

It had taken a long time since we heard from Voke since we completed our exams. Unlike Adrian, whom I could talk to after finishing form four, though not as frequently as I would have prayed for, Voke was visibly missing, just like the waist of a snake. Communicating with him had become more like passing a camel through the eye of a needle. This situation was brought about by the fact that as we bid goodbye to each other that day, he never shared any contact with either of us. We, however, couldn't pin him down for that, as the poor boy had nothing to his name. So, expecting him to own a phone was like expecting blood from a guava fruit by squeezing it. I im-

PETALS OF FATE

agined his parents, too, were strict and belonged to the category of parents that the only time you could touch their phones was when they asked you to pass one over to them from the charging spot.

That evening, I received a text from a strange contact, and before I could respond, a voice call came through. For a moment, I hesitated. I had trust issues with unfamiliar numbers and always felt a shiver of discomfort when answering them. The reason was simple: once, there was gossip in my village about someone—name withheld—who collapsed and died after speaking to a ghost over the phone. It sounds like sheer nonsense, but it was easier to worry than be sorry in a place like mine, where half-truths and outright lies flourished. That, had become my newly adopted survival tactic. You can call me a coward if you want.

“Yoh, big head, it’s me, Voke,” a voice came through.

The voice was unmistakable—Voke’s, instantly recognisable with his exaggerated, fake American street accent. He was obsessed with those “bad boys” American movies, the kind that made you cringe with their over-the-top swagger and raunchy dialogue. His attempts at mimicry were always entertaining, a blend of admiration for the films and a complete lack of self-awareness that made it all the more amusing. Yes, that was his stuff, and he tried to imitate the characters so much. Sometimes, he overstated it, to my annoyance. Where in God’s sinful world had he been holed up all this while anyway? And how did he even get my contact information? We had tried reaching out to him to no avail, and now here he was. Those

questions swirled in my mind, nagging at me like an unresolved mystery.

I was starting to feel like Voke was becoming one of those friends you have for just a season, and I desperately hoped that wasn't true. There was no way he could be gone for that long without feeling compelled to check in on what was happening on our side of the world. No genuine friend would do that, unless he was the biblical wolf in sheep's clothing. But I reminded myself it was too soon to draw any conclusions.

Perhaps he was searching for a way to reach us as hard as we were trying to connect with him. Who knows? I metaphorically plucked a leaf from my "chequebook" and paid attention to what the prodigal son had to say. After thoroughly grilling him about his loyalty to our friendship, I compared notes, absorbed everything, and committed to burying the hatchet. Our moment of brutal honesty could have easily rubbed either of us the wrong way, but true amigos call each other out when one tries to pull any nonsense.

I wasn't wrong in my suspicions. After all, the KCSE results were set to be released in a week, and tension loomed over every Form Four candidate who had sat for the examination. It made sense that Voke reached out, perhaps seeking our support, as his friends we were. I didn't want to convince myself that this was the sole reason for his sudden call—to tap into a shared mood. That would paint him as opportunistic, and I didn't want to see him that way. Regardless, we consoled one another and prayed for good luck for all of us, the indomitable trio—an identity we would baptise ourselves with a year later after we joined campus.

PETALS OF FATE

That evening, I took a stroll away from home. Beneath the golden hue of the sinking sun, I wandered along the familiar paths of my village, each stride awakening a blend of sweet and bitter memories. My heart, weighed down by past known and unspoken regrets, began to feel lighter, filled with a flicker of hope and optimism for something I couldn't quite grasp. Could it be about the examination results? Only heaven knew. My confession to Michelle about her sister June and the confusion it stirred had unshackled a burden I had long carried. The village lay in a tranquil hush; the only sounds were the rustling leaves and the distant shouts of children winding down their daily games—a perfect soundtrack for my thoughts.

Dusk was settling in across every homestead, the sun bidding its final farewell as night donned its dark cloak to claim the world. As I approached the large *ndege*—the eucalyptus tree by the riverbank, where we used to take our animals to quench their thirst—I paused, flooded with memories of childhood escapades. Its gnarled roots, which had witnessed our secrets, seemed to beckon for more. Under this very tree, we would stay up late, crying and confessing our mistakes, bracing ourselves for the inevitable flogging, waiting for our return home for the apparent reason—messaging around.

Letting livestock graze in a neighbour's *shamba* while we played football with makeshift balls crafted from plastic bags and sisal strings was a mischief that often invited a beating. In that way, the tree had borne witness to our childhood excesses. There was something almost sacred about it: it was unnecessarily big that no other tree in a million neighbourhoods could

rival its might. It stood proudly on my family's soil, and according to the stories I had heard, my great-grandfather planted it when he was barely ten years old—long before the concepts of self-governance and decolonization had even begun to take root in the minds of the founding fathers, who would later become the black colonialists. Now, approaching its 150th birthday, the tree seemed to embody the history of many generations before.

I took a deep breath, feeling the ice-like breeze brush against my women-attracting face, carrying the gossip of the river's perpetual flow. Here, in the middle of the whispers and the subtle warmth of the already set sun, I resolved to make peace with my past fears and embrace what was coming ahead as I began the intricate, youthful life. The death of my father and the uphill task he left to us of learning to do without him (something he never taught us), the childhood traumas, and the mistakes we made all were burdens I needed to ease myself from.

"I'm set," I sweetly said to the breeze with a furtive smile. Set to leave the past behind and weave a new path from the old roads. My emotions were volatile. I was excited and also sad. I was in low spirits yet felt so much strength within my fibres. It was confusing. To me, even.

With the sky adorned in strokes of orange and purple, I made my way home, each step feeling lighter than the last. I gazed toward the horizon, where the sun caressed the earth with a tender kiss, and felt a swell of hope. The night enveloped me in a blanket of stars, each twinkling like a beacon in the darkest hours.

PETALS OF FATE

I headed straight to my study—if you remember it—and sank into the old wooden chair, which creaked pitifully under my slight weight. I rummaged through my bag and pulled out a small notebook I had purchased with my charcoal-burning savings a few weeks ago but hadn't dared to mark with my ink. The night felt special, different. As I held the pen, the chemistry of the touch was superb. With the pages eager to absorb my thoughts, words flowed freely and naturally from my heart. This time, I decided to write a poem.

*I compare myself to an eagle aloft,
A tree that breaks not before the strongest of winds,
My lyrics are a rhythm that floats tall,
Through the stretch of the borderless clouds.*

*My feathers, in heavenly move, scrattle,
The vast deep-blue sky on sunlit days,
I glide where the faltering brave not ascend,
Embellished in feathers, desirous of my type.*

*I am scornful to the commonplace bough for a perch,
Searching dry sands or where emeralds are clothed,
Where fruits break with privacy, mature and obscure,
Tendering sustenance God-given.*

COLLINS TEUREY

*My home is a sanctuary roosted within the galaxy,
Where westerly winds blow through the frail leaves,
I carry spring's message in my beak with honour,
Declaring the seasons, loud and crystal.*

Michelle had been planning to enrol in computer training for a while now. It was almost like a norm among the children from the families of the haves. Being one, her parents thought it wise to have her acquire basic computer training before she joined campus. Training on the computer packages meant something and a bonus on top of it for them. The choice of computer training college rested entirely in the hands of her father. After all, he was the one to sponsor everything.

Obviously, as Michelle would put it, Kisumu City was not just among the options to explore but the only one. So, her father scanned for a better college offering computer training in Kisumu city. The reasons for strictly choosing the mentioned city could have been myriad, but the most authentic ones were that Kisumu was close to Michelle's home. Her father preferred to have her close to him.

He was carved from the same wood of fathers who are excessively fond of their daughters almost questionably. He knew too well if he had a flexible schedule from work, he would simply run to his daughter to ask her if someone dared to pinch her on the cheeks and that if one did, he would wring them

PETALS OF FATE

with his naked hands like moist clothes and complacently hang them to dry in the sun.

Another reason was that Michelle had a brother who was pursuing a degree programme in nursing as a self-sponsored student at one of the reputable universities on the outskirts of Kisumu at that time. However, it was his father paying for his fees. Being like a chicken visiting the river for the first time, Michelle needed someone to help her manoeuvre through the hustle and bustle of the busy city, and her brother would fit in that role so flawlessly.

Her brother was in the final stretches of his university training, and having spent quite some time in Kisumu, he understood the corners of the city almost as the back of his hand. The issue of where to stay was never a matter of scratching one's head because Micky, as I had grown fond of calling her, would reside with her brother, Kennedy, for the next three moons until she was done with her computer training programme.

Michelle had a health complication. She was battling gastric ulcer, and good Lord, it was terrible. Occasionally, she would cry about it to me, especially at first light whenever she woke up with munchies. Her condition made her heavily reliant on fresh milk and, of course, my lovey-dovey words of consolation that lulled her to quietness every time her wound began to pain, and she was wailing at the top of her lungs.

Moreover, she was put on a strict diet for her condition and couldn't accept any form of indiscriminate eating. Her family doctor had instructed her to avoid anything acidic like the plague, leaving her no option, similar to the scenario of a lion

eating grass whenever meat was unavailable. I would silently thank her mother, who always made it her obligation to serve her milk on every occasion when her ulcer started to bite in the morning. I honestly needed not to be told that which equally served as to why her father wanted to be close to her: his desire to visit her every time he had some loose schedule or had created one specifically for that particular purpose.

Meanwhile, I remained at home as my girlfriend left for Kisumu. I had the same temptation of going with her even if it meant not doing the same thing that was taking her there, but then I realised wishes were no horses, and there was no way I would ride. On the day of her leaving, emotions perched high on the expanse of the heavens. We talked a lot on the phone, making promises and reaffirming the ones we had made. It was another time we would be separated, which was not a sweet herb to chew. She expressed her worries, and I responded by clearing any doubts she harboured as I shared my own.

She begged me never to talk to any other girl back in the village that an imagination like that was sure enough to kill her. She promised me she would return the way she left and that her lips would be unknissed, breasts would be untouched, and her mighty hips ungrabbed. Further, instead of promising me, she swore she would not smile back at any man making advances on her and would always be frowning and wearing a long face to ward them off.

Michelle, an empath and attuned more with emotion around what was happening, cried the most. I again found myself comforting her. On my part, I promised her that I would never invite another skirt wearer to my brother's hut and that

PETALS OF FATE

she was the first and always would remain the last to enjoy that hospitality. I assured her that no one would feel the size of my swelling manhood apart from her. I swore to her that no one would play with my goatee hair sprouting attractively on my chin. I didn't stop there.

I affirmed to her that my eyes would not lust on any feminine figure from the front or behind and that all my eyes were glued to her. I swore I would always play as blind as a bat to the rest of the women because I was more than content with what I was getting from her. It went on and on until we finally said the until-we-meet-again part. Our love, to me, was like magic, and nothing harder ever could break it.

I knew times would never be the same for the time I would take before seeing Michelle again. Without masking anything, the crude truth was that, I was insecure. She was too beautiful not to be seen alone by me. I was scared someone would look at her in a better way than I did probably, with the eyes of money. I was a church mouse, and my name and shadow were the only valuable possessions I could confidently say were mine. Still, the family name wasn't entirely mine. I found it quite strenuous to imagine. However, I remained optimistic that nothing would go amiss.

Back at home, I busied myself with all that required my intervention. The mood of examination release was inseparable, and I always got that constant reminder in my head as though I had set an alarm for it. Three days were left to count until the minister of education called a press to announce the KCSE results. Fear and hope scrambled both to have a grip on me. Not because I felt I didn't do my best in my tests. No, I think that

is somewhat subliminal, and anyone who sat for a national examination must have felt it unless you were a witch or an offspring of one.

I felt lonely and orphaned. Quite often, I would spend time at home alone because my mother was usually out going about her second-hand clothes business. After performing well in his KCPE, Edgar did not ask to leave home. My sister, Aketch, offered to stay with him in Nairobi as a gesture of kindness for his pleasing grades, at least for a short period.

There, he would be showered with more goodies of clothes and footwear and moments of kid-glove handling. I felt a bit jealous thinking about it, but he genuinely deserved it. My little brother was always away. He loved to play more than a kitten. Given his tender age, there was nothing coherent I could discuss with him. Besides, he had a big mouth, and I almost disliked him for that. I can't begin to fully tell you the number of times he had snitched on us by taking advantage of the immunity from flogging my mother gave him for being the last-born in the family. The condition only left me with my mother to rely on for a company.

I was anxious to receive my results. I wanted to know my scores. I wanted to get over the feeling of being unsettled by the fear of the unknown that was eating me up at that time. One thing made me a little petrified. In my mother tongue, there is a saying that goes, *penj en ajwa*. It usually compares the outcome of something to that of a chess game, which sometimes can be very unpredictable.

PETALS OF FATE

Once in a while, I have witnessed students who used to perform exemplarily well in their academic work flop on their final examination, like the one whose results we were looking forward to hearing, KCSE. It bothered me if I would ever end up as part of those statistics, given that I had already performed well in all my previous evaluations.

It would prick my heart to find myself in that unfortunate turn of events. What would people think about me, particularly those who saw academic jealousy with me? And my strict mother who had always told us education was the only granary where many generations feed without ever sleeping on an empty belly? What would happen if my two friends beat me in the final examination? Would they keep me as one of their own, or would they discard me like chaff from grains into the air?

Many questions wrestled in my head violently. However, I knew I would not fall victim to circumstances. I had always been a good student during my school days. Never had I rubbed a shoulder with a teacher. Not once. Never had I been found culpable for any disciplinary issue, nor had my name been mentioned in any ugly ordeal. I always prayed and fell in love with my books, but not until later when I fell in love with Michelle. Was that wrong? Would that be half the reason I would not perform in my last test?

The answer to all the conflicts in my head was positive. If there was anything I wasn't taught, it was pessimism and throwing in the towel. I wasn't cut from that linen. So, I held on to hope and hoped for the best. I sat somewhere and asked myself, what's the meaning of life without hope? I remembered

COLLINS TEUREY

the quote I'd read years earlier in a Christian Religion Education class six book: life stops where hope ends. Indeed, I wasn't ready to watch my life stop, and so I needed plenty of hope. Nothing would damage me as much as failing to clinch a spot at the university after putting in so much effort. It would kill me. It would bury me. And I wasn't ready for any of that.

CHAPTER 14



LET'S DO WITHOUT...

Suppose you thought June had given up on pursuing my brother—think again. She had the stubbornness of a bedbug, the kind you try to get rid of, but like some magic, keeps coming back in greater numbers, even. She was always on my neck. Her emotions seemed to shift unpredictably. One moment, she'd claim she wanted my brother, but in the next breath, she'd insist she wanted me.

The last time I spoke to her, I lied that I had talked to my brother about her request and asked her to exercise the patience of a spider weaving its web in the wind until I had given her a conclusive reaction from my brother, Edgar. This time, though, as much as I would say I lacked the confidence to mention something like that to my brother, I resolved to talk to him nicely about the matter and see how he would react. He had spent close to a month at my sister's place. Because he needed to start preparing for Form One, he had to return

COLLINS TEUREY

home before fully enjoying the city's paradise, if what we had heard about Nairobi was accurate.

Edgar was characteristically shy. I didn't quite know or have a clue how he would take the matter. At the least, I was pretty sure he wouldn't discuss it with my mother, unlike Ochogo, the youngest in the family, I told you was bad at keeping anything secret or that which was not. So, I said, why not? Edgar had been my close ally. Times without count, we had covered for each other to save our skins. We shared so much in common and felt at home with each other.

We loved reading, and just like me, he was transforming into a lethal poet for whom the literary world needed to be prepared. I loved that bit about him. His language was also well-polished, and it was no wonder he scored a straight A in English. I suspect chances were that he scored everything or left a mark or two not to make the examiners feel bad about themselves or question their exam-setting technique. He was reserved like my father but most outgoing when he finally clicked well with someone. He was in adolescence. He had grown taller than me with a deep voice. Pimples had also started showing signs of convening a meeting on his face. It disturbed him. Any keen observer would understand that without being told. Maybe that was what added to his shyness.

"Edgar," I began one evening.

"Yes," he responded. Staring blankly with eagerness.

"I've meant to ask you something for some time now, but I haven't known how to begin," I went on with the conversation.

"Is it something good or bad?" he inquisitively asked.

PETALS OF FATE

“Well, it can be good, bad, or a bit of both. It depends...” I teasingly responded.

“Depends on what?” He curiously asked. His nervousness was detectable now.

“Alright, let’s get to the point—have you ever thought about having a girlfriend? Or do you already have one?” I prodded him for an answer.

“No, I don’t,” he calmly said, a grin spreading across his face, clearly amused.

The calm response from Edgar left me more confused than shocked. I had envisioned that he would react a certain way in my head. May be mad, embarrassed, or befuddled. But there was me, having the feelings of the last two in that particular order, embarrassed, then befuddled. We went on with our discussion on that specific topic. According to my brother, he felt he was still young and having a girlfriend was something that had not intruded his mind.

He was as innocent as I had always thought about him. The village life had not exposed him to so many things. For a moment, I thought things would have been different if he stayed in town for a protracted time like some of his age-mates. The case would have been far from being the same. His peers had been badly exposed. They knew stuff that, under normal settings, their ages could not have allowed, but I couldn’t expect any less from the lifestyle displayed by the folks in towns and cities.

The conversation went on like that until I mentioned to him the issue about June, who desperately wanted to give me “head,” but after I scattered her wishes, she shifted interest to

him, Edgar. His reception to that was rather unusual and unexpected. It left both of us cracked up. The person who laughed even the hardest was him. This was for two reasons from the horse's own mouth:

One, June had no idea what Edgar looked like. Whether he had no head pivoted on his neck or not, was a complete mystery. Whether he was tall enough to walk while his shoulders touched the sky or short in stature enough to use a mushroom in place of an umbrella to protect him from the scorching sun, she had no idea, either. Then what? Why would she be besotted with someone who only lived in her head? Those were Edgar's words, not mine. Two, it amused my brother that the idea of having a girlfriend had never crossed his subconscious mind, but somewhere, a girl was already making out with him in dreams and drenching her undergarments in his name. It gratified him. It perturbed him. It disgusted him.

I felt exonerated at last. At least, because I had finally amassed the courage to talk to Edgar about something that had been eating my head up, like performing a chemical test with either the wrong reagents or wrong procedure with an expectation of a given outcome, which was equally uncertain to me.

Edgar dimmed the prospects of June ever being with him and scattered them like chaff from golden grains into the whirlwind. I felt the nightmare was over, but again, I knew it was far from that. What would I tell June? That question constantly played in my head like a full jazz band. June was the type that never took NO for an answer. It would kill her. I knew June would cause trouble. One that could only be compared to the storm that Christ lulled through divine command.

PETALS OF FATE

In any case, I was prepared to wail like Jesus's disciples did, hoping that something would miraculously come to my rescue.

To use my brother as a bait worm to get rid of June would be awfully iniquitous before the creator and the creatures. If anything, I only needed to get the matter off my chest and bring him up to speed. At his age, I hadn't envisioned him dating anyone already. He still had some time ahead before getting ready for that. Even as I broached the subject to him, I hoped he wouldn't sip from that poisoned chalice because, just like me, he had never been a spoiled child.

Edgar was practically nonchalant towards June's proposition. He was very blunt, saying that he had not developed any feelings for a girl and was not ready to start doing that. I felt proud of him, and as an older brother, he, as a protégé, had always looked up to me; I told him it wasn't wrong to have a girlfriend. However, that only would be so when it was done at the right time and his moment had not come. We reasoned together.

In our brotherly talks, I opened up to him to make him understand all the frustrations I'd stomached from Michelle's sister. Though still young in my eyes, my brother was intellectually old enough to hold coherent conversations. He reasoned like he'd two sets of brains. He sympathised with me. He joined forces with me to heap blame on June, chide her, and wonder why she was the way she was at her tender age.

I unveiled more details to him about how June had tried and almost managed to trick me into thinking she was Michelle. I kept him in the loop about what led me to ask him

whether he had a girlfriend or if he had pictured having one. I explained everything and anything. After our session that evening, I told Edgar how flattered I had always been to call him my brother and how impressed I was to see the gentleman he was growing into and his recent academic achievements. I warned him to be wary of making company with scapegrace characters because friends could influence habits, especially on an individual without known personal precepts.

I went to bed unusually early that evening, feeling mentally drained. As I rested my head on my lonely pillow—stuffed with old clothes and tucked inside a cover my mother had randomly picked from a bale of second-hand clothes—I reflected on Edgar's words earlier that evening. I innately loved to listen and analytically digest every word, so as I lay there, half asleep, Edgar's voice echoed in my mind. I recalled how he had laughed off the idea of June wanting to be with him, even without having set eyes on him.

He felt that was the most insane thing he had heard, and it thrilled him. He laughed. He mocked the whole idea. Unbeknownst to him, his words made me a bit uncomfortable because that was the same obsession I had had in the case of Linda when I was first told about her. I felt like it was easier for him to look at it that way because he had not had a palpable experience with matters like that. Obsession is a terrible thing. Ask me. But in all these, I wasn't certain whether to think June had a compulsion concerning Edgar's case or it simply was a "smart" move to serve convenience.

PETALS OF FATE

The D-day for results release was finally here. I sat close to the radio as if sitting even an inch away would not let me hear anything. I hated any form of noise, and even my own breathing sound was too loud for me, making me indignant. That family radio was called *Tens*, and it was yellow with a torch fixed to it, almost the size of a motorbike's headlight. It had remained a family's souvenir for over a decade. It was a one-in-many type of radio: It played cassettes, it dubbed sounds, it had a torch that shone brighter than most relationships and marriages of modern times, and it was rechargeable with the option of using dry cells. It was equally fitted with a security alarm that sounded like a siren.

In addition, it also had all the types of radio modulation: Amplitude Modulation, Frequency Modulation, and Phase Modulation. I wouldn't forgive myself if I failed to tell you that its sound was also as clear as the water flowing downstream. It makes me simpler to narrate how my father used to parade it before his friends so that they could see what magic it was. It gave him satisfaction somehow. His friends hoped the radio belonged to them. A confession they made loudly.

My father was a worshipper of electronic items. He was married to the idea of always purchasing them. I firmly believe that his love for electronics was what came closely second after that of education. Our home was flooded with old electronics, most of which had been phased out by advancements in ever-growing technology. His taste of them was always unparalleled. It reminds me of the small TV set called *Aniko* he once bought, which gripped many people's hearts with potent hands of envy.

COLLINS TEUREY

For this one, he never had to flaunt it to anyone. Naturally, people talked about it admiringly because of its uniqueness in size and how images appeared on its tiny screen the size of one's average palm. I would wonder if TV sets of that size ever existed. Today, I imagine it has possibly joined the statistics of other electronics that have suffered the unforgiving wrath of new technologies.

As I sat there quietly and attentively, my mind raced. I was anxious. I was scared, too. The time I'd always waited with fervent anticipation had finally come. The world was set to see what we would reap after spending four years in school ploughing, planting, weeding, watering, and top-dressing, all to boost our academic bountifulness. From the motions on the radio, I created images in my mind's eye of how the minister of education at that time was preparing to make his appearance on the press and begin announcing the results. As I waited with the patience of a saint, I imagined how it would have been if my father were still alive. He had a keen interest in matters like that.

The situation would have been different. I even doubted if I would have the composure to sit there waiting. I would have faked something to be away from home. Or take the animals to the river to drink water even if it was too early for that and none felt thirsty. Honestly, it was around 9:30 am. Tell me, which animal drinks water that early in the morning? It didn't matter. I would go about slashing the compound, but I had done that just three days ago, and the grasses were still too short to be cut. I would vanish. I would. It wouldn't matter where.

PETALS OF FATE

“Ladies and gentlemen, members of the press, good morning...” The minister finally opened his speech after clearing his voice.

My heart lurched. My fears decided to show, and I heaved a sound sigh of anxiety. I listened avidly to grasp all the crucial parts of his speech. My core interest largely rested upon the general performance of schools across the country, which I believed would give me a fantastic pointer of how the performance would be spread to the schools and narrowed down to individual student performance. The speech carried hope. I felt relieved when the speaker said that that year’s performance had registered a positive deviation compared to the previous year. It gave me an ounce of strength and a landing ground for my spirit, now soaring without wings.

The presser went on like that. The schools had fairly performed, though the gap between the top and the bottom was as wide as that of the social class between the haves and the have-nots. The majority comprised the average performance and was concentrated in the middle. The million-dollar question was, where would I find myself? My hopes hadn’t dwindled because I was aplomb; I belonged to the Hall of Fame.

I was exposed to the thought that there are always washouts in life, especially in the last stabs, but I prayed and hoped it never turned out like that with me. My mother was out all this while. It was a market day, and she’d gone to try her luck with her business. At home were Edgar and Ochogo, our last born. My older siblings had started calling me to inquire about my performance. The minister had finished with the business of the day. Radio stations that had not proliferated as they are

COLLINS TEUREY

today were busy giving insight and breaking down the results for easier consumption for parents and the students who had sat for the exams.

I counted days left before I finally got to be with Michelle again since she left for Kisumu. Sometimes, I thought so hard about her that my heart began to ache. The two days she had been gone appeared like a lifetime, and a lifetime was too long to wait. How would it be for the three months that she'd be away? I didn't want to even think of it. It was like passing a dart through my heart. My insecurities had not left me. Every new dawn was accentuated with the fear that some man would have his eyes on my girlfriend. I don't know why. I tried. I really did, to suppress the feeling, but they outgrew my strength. It's the ugly thing about falling in love with a woman with an alluring countenance. All of these were happening not because I lacked faith in her or thought she was easy to have. No. I can't tell why, but that was far from my reason.

I was becoming too vulnerable and beginning to hate it or hate myself for it altogether. It was my first love, the first kiss I ever had, and the first touch my skin had ever felt, but no. Did that cumulatively contribute to that? I needed to man up! I screamed to myself. I ran, grabbed the mirror, looked at myself, and agreed with the guy from the other side that it would be what to do moving forward.

Michelle enrolled in computer studies and commenced her training expeditiously. She would brief me every day about her

PETALS OF FATE

experience with handling computers. One thing I didn't understand was why she opted not to acquire computer skills at school while her former high school had an expansive computer laboratory besides teaching Computer Studies as one of the subjects. It disturbed my mind, but I reasoned along with the idea of one having preferences. For instance, I dropped Agriculture and picked Business Studies despite impressively performing in them. Maybe that was the same case with her. I assumed.

I left Geography, where I was among the best, and took History and Government, where I had not even been featured in the top ten when picking our subjects. But now, obtaining hands-on computer skills had become very integral to her. She had to train on it if not for knowledge, then for exposure and survival. I couldn't judge my girl for that. She was as right as the right hand.

Kennedy, Michelle's brother, was a calm and composed guy. During her time in Kisumu, Micky often showered him with praise. He treated her like an honoured guest throughout her stay—not in a way that felt awkward; I mean the kind of treatment you're given, as if you're someone honourable even if you're dishonourable. It melted my heart. In that house, they stayed the three of them.

The unfamiliar third party was Kennedy's girlfriend, Joy. Apparently, they had been cohabiting and enjoying the benefits of marriage without any form of official arrangements in place. It was their third year together under one roof. Joy wasn't coming so far from Kennedy regarding geographical location back home. They'd been seeing each other's nakedness

for the longest time since they were in secondary school. They loved each other. They were low-budget Romeo and Juliet of their time. If whatever Michelle told me was anything to go by, they were planning to tie the knot after graduating from the university. Joy was pursuing a diploma in Agricultural Extension and Community Development.

The computer training sessions started at 8 am and ended at 4 pm daily, save for Saturday and Sunday. To take advantage of our distance and feel more in each other's arms without actualising that, we agreed as partners that we'd spend more time than ever through constant communication. In that respect, Michelle would text me at the slightest opportunity she got during her training days.

In the evenings, we would spend more time chatting and calling each other whenever our pockets allowed us. Everything was fun. In fact, we felt more bonded that way, and even my initial anxiety had fled to a place no one could trace. We would flirt at night and indulge in sexting. The rainy season at that time played a significant role in causing the cold that we needed to fuel our horniness. Sometimes, it would come down in buckets, and we would lose ourselves imagining we were having sexual intercourse, our waists spinning with a rhythm born of the sounds of rain droplets on our roofs.

We talked about a lot of things. We made promises that only the horny people were good at. I hope you can relate to what I mean. We gave birth to our children and named them in our dreams. We imagined buying an ample bed and playing pillow fights the whole time after work. In our fantasies, we

PETALS OF FATE

bathed together and made out in the shower; I took her shopping at the grocery stores and supermarkets and accompanied her to the maternity clinic to have herself checked when she was pregnant with our first kid. We shared the possibility of raising twins someday because Michelle came from the seed of a family where twins were born.

According to her and her mother's speculations, the chances she'd also carry one someday were indispensable. I loved children, and being a father to twins would definitely make me the most delighted man in the universe. I carried all those in my head, and I kept wondering why time wasn't moving at the speed I desired, that we could get married in an auspicious wedding ceremony and start planting those babies in her womb. It was funny, almost stupid, because all that time, I had never gotten on top of a woman, and I had no idea what and what not to do during lovemaking. Damn, but this day, I felt like I needed something like that so dangerously.

The schools were in a celebratory mood. Students were cheering jubilantly, carrying twigs and jumping up and down as if they had springs on their feet. Top achievers in the just-released examination results were tossed in the air. Teachers, school bosses, and students held long processions chanting songs of victory and merriment. In the middle of the happy tumult, some students who had performed poorly had nowhere to veil their faces. They covertly hid or locked themselves in places to cry out their eyeballs for their twisted fates.

Some homes in the neighbourhood were pretty chaotic. Husbands and wives fought over having divergent views of their sons' or daughters' satanic results. One was on the defensive side, and the other was on the offensive side. Homes were on the brink of collapsing. Everything around was just a mess in a good and a grotesque way. Agitated parents and guardians stormed schools that had performed dismally, and principals and their deputies were frog-marched like chicken thieves outside the school gates. It was such a satisfying scene to watch. Many felt that the blame rested squarely on the teachers at the helm, where performances were not so enticing.

At home, by the look of things, something would lose its life that sunset. It would be a wonderful hour for one and a gloomy one for the other. How unfair could the world be! My mother and two brothers were seated in the living room, conflicted about the next action to take, whether to accept it as it had come or live in denial.

The signs were clear. It was such an intricate decision to make. Would they slaughter the white rooster we all were very fond of or the favourite brown ram? My outstanding performance meant a lot to my family; they couldn't express their excitement and pride enough. My long-time dream of joining the university was no longer a matter of "wish" but "will." I was proud to the point of almost boasting, but I remembered that I valued modesty.

Unlike the case of Edgar, a ram was slaughtered to celebrate me for the bountiful harvest I had brought home. The way I was treated like a newly discovered goldmine made my hatred for failure triple. It felt fulfilling and rejuvenating. I cried tears

PETALS OF FATE

of joy. I collapsed under my weight, worshipping rather than praying to God. My hopes in Him never frayed, and here, He had rewarded me handsomely for being such an ardent believer. I was eternally indebted. My older siblings Oyier and Aketch agreed to travel home to mix with the rest during the family celebrations. They were genuinely happy that I was their sibling. A special one, for that matter.

My former school had achieved remarkable success, surpassing the mean we once thought was unrealistic. In terms of rankings, our school had toppled its way up to the second position in the whole of *Nyanza* province, a stunning feat for a district school. In a class of 102 students, only four fell short of securing spots at the university through direct entry, missing out by the narrowest of margins. But all was not lost; they could still enrol in colleges and pursue the courses of their dreams. My friends Adrian and Voke had performed equally well, and we basked in the glow of our shared success, reflecting on the hard work that had brought us to this moment. Together, we dreamed of joining the same university, even if our paths diverged into different fields. We vowed that nothing would extinguish our determination to make that vision a reality.

June didn't take the response from Edgar kindly. She was furious, and like I had foreseen, she threw tantrums. I realised that she was young and a dimwit. I felt like telling her that, but I refrained because she was my sister-in-law, and mostly, no one wants to be on the wrong side of their relatives. I was

COLLINS TEUREY

deeply clutched in the arms of love, and anything like future disappointments was entirely alien to me. She tried to talk to me for a couple of days, but her impatience was appalling. I tried not to lose my cool, trying to be as accommodating enough amidst her endless sadism.

I consoled her to take things slow, so she'd finally find someone to reciprocate her affection when she was sufficiently old enough to experience what love truly is. However, my words of reassurance all fell on deaf ears. I considered telling her sister about her insolence, but I held back because I knew it would tear apart the fabric that held their consanguinity together, and I detested that acrimoniously. After many futile attempts, she finally stopped talking to me by reminding me that she hated me more than pork is hated in the Arabic world. That was the last time I would hear from June again. Honestly, I never wanted to burn bridges because no one ever really knows when they might need to visit the other side that needed crossing.

The three months of training for Michelle were finally over. She was over the moon that she was finally coming home to feel the warmth and safety in my arms after being lovesick for what had seemed like an eternity. The feelings were mutually mutual. She had told me a lot during her stay in Kisumu. Sometimes, she had it rough, more so when they had not so much to eat as it would have otherwise been while she was at home. Life at school is always complicated. Anyone who has been there, can give a testament to that. It doesn't really matter

PETALS OF FATE

whether one is coming from an affluent family. Life at school is cursedly bad for all. It's always as if everyone suffers for being a student, and somehow, by some existential law, regardless of one's family background.

Anything indecent Michelle experienced during her time of stay? No. Not any that I can mention. Her brother treated her like a delicate egg. Joy, his girlfriend, was a darling who wouldn't hurt a fly, so she enjoyed her stay and at least had the rare opportunity to visit the mall and such fancy places. Her dad also visited her whenever he could, and that made her feel loved, like the apple of her father's eye that she was. In one of her father's random visits, she was gifted a new smartphone. She would then take several photos that she hoped to show me to give me a glimpse of her new environment: the computer college and where she stayed, some of the towering buildings she had visited, and other details.

We made sure that we planned our meeting as soon as possible, as if it were urgent, which I would say was the case. We had missed each other to the point of gasping for breath. Any delay would upset the already worse situation even more. As usual, we fixed the meeting on Friday. Oh, blessed be this day! It was an ideal day for fornicating. My mother had gone for her *chama* meetings as it was a routine. Edgar had gone, the creator knows where, but I was as sure as the possibility of one urinating during a long call of nature that he wouldn't return home any time soon, and it panned out just like that. Ochogo was like a kitten; he loved playing more than sleeping and eating. He was no threat to our business of the day.

I picked Michelle up from the alighting point. This time, she was a bit late, and by the time of her arrival, my mother had already left. It was just me at home. For the first time since we started dating, I didn't keep my mother posted about her coming, which hardly worried me. I was fully aware of what a normal Friday looked like at home and would proceed with any of my sinful or Godly plans undeterred. Edgar was, however, familiar with the coming of his in-law. This particular meeting wasn't ceremonial like the previous ones. It meant there was no need to waste time eating and engaging in activities of a similar nature. If anything, we were set to devour the soul and flesh of each other. None of us was interested in the bland taste of ordinary food. We didn't need that. Thank you.

Everything appeared very organic. We had spent weeks planning for what was coming. Michelle's face looked more arresting; her smile was new and succinct, her waist had grown dangerously slender, and her hips were threatening to burst with edible flesh. Her nipples were peeping invitingly for my touch. She wore a white dress that revealed the secrets of blessedness she hid inside. In my preparation, I had borrowed a condom from a more experienced pal who had been in the horizontal engineering game for quite some time, and his experience was expansively rich. He lent me some tips on how to attack, too, and I paid attention to that with some extras like I was a child mastering catechism.

We led each other to my brother's house, rather than leading her as we had in previous encounters. Her obedience could only be compared to that of Isaac, Abraham's son, as his father led him to the place where he would be offered as a sacrifice to

PETALS OF FATE

God. She was ready. I was ready, and our souls were burning with so much desire that needed immediate extinguishing, or else it burned us down to fine ashes. Into the room, we locked the door behind us and started with a passionate kiss that grew more wildly intense with time.

I grabbed her from behind, lifting her white dress up, revealing her beautifully forged buttocks that gave a similar sight as that of the Greek love goddess, *Aphrodite Kallipygos*, when she raised her robe to display her tempting backside back in the day. She swallowed her saliva hard. We carried on with the foreplay; before we knew it, our clothes were disarrayed carelessly on the floor.

I scientifically searched for the protective gear I had retained after our first attempt that day. I could feel the condom's excitement the moment my hand reached for it. It looked like I was the one delaying in making use of it. I burst open the wrapper and emptied its contents. I kept the other foil packet aside, just in case there would be a second round. Michelle was sprawled on the bed with pleading eyes. I tried to wear it on my manhood, only to realise again, for the second time, that I had worn the *condom* inside out after I did so during our previous failed encounter. Nervous and embarrassed, she sweetly whispered to me, "Let's do it without."

I went and stood beside my father's grave and told him that I'd made it to the university like he would have frankly loved. It irked my heart that he would never respond to my good news. However, I believed that his spirit was hovering around

all the time. It would carry my message to him where he peacefully rested. Memories of how he sat us around the table to ask what we would like to be in the future came back to me.

I remembered how he made us admire those on TV screens at news time, sprouting my interest in becoming a journalist and appearing on TV screens like Badi Muhsin; he so cherished watching. That dream and hope felt more alive to me than ever before. In my father's wish, I swore an oath that I would pursue a journalism and mass communication degree and become a journalist to live up to my promise to him as a young person back then.

Time was moving so fast, like it had lost its brakes. The university intake was divided into two parts: The May intake, mainly for self-sponsored students, and the September intake for government-sponsored. I was set to join in September. I researched the best institutions that offered the most prolific training in media studies. I wanted to be the best, if not first among the best, and there was no way I would gamble with that. I had heard that some institutions offered more theoretical journalism without in-depth, hands-on training skills. I honestly didn't want that. Ending up as a half-baked journalist is something I scorned. I was a perfectionist, and I needed to be all-rounded, too. Finally, I found a suitable institution with which almost all the reputable media names had a history. That was the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication.

The college was known for producing one of the most versatile journalists whose careers had transcended the international media arena. I can't mention the number of individuals who, by that time, had already joined CNN, BBC, and other

PETALS OF FATE

giant international media houses, trained by the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication! The University of Nairobi was another befitting option. So, I made KIMC my first option during my selection based on the information I had received about their training and settled for the University of Nairobi as my second option in case my wish to join KIMC hit rock bottom. And that, was a fair deal for me.

CHAPTER 15



WHAT NEXT?

For the second time, I sent the code the Ministry of Education had provided to receive my results via SMS, but nothing came through. Reason? Huh! I couldn't tell. Infuriated and frustrated, I decided to share my index number with Michelle, who resent it on my behalf from her end. *Voila!* The message with my results arrived almost immediately. Thrilled, I received a congratulatory message from Michelle before she sent my results.

Heavens, I had made it to the university! However, something was evidently wrong with Michelle's sudden grim mood. Concerned, I asked if everything was okay. She responded by resending the message with her results—poor thing. My future wife had missed the entry points by just a single point! At this stage, she was sobbing as if she had lost someone very dear to her to the callous hands of death.

I felt her anguish. Having known her weakness since we were handcuffed together by fate, I used my word, which had

PETALS OF FATE

become like a pain balm to her. I consoled her to silence on the phone until she eventually saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Despite her disappointment, she was unmistakably happy for me, and that, in true truth, was the most undiluted form of love and support I could ever receive from someone who was grieving. We were like a team, and she demonstrated that immaculately. Until this time, Michelle had not returned home from her computer training since the results were released while she was still in Kisumu.

Time is indeed the ultimate healer. With time, Michelle completely recovered from her shock. The good thing was that, she came from a family with substantial financial muscles. Her parents were not plagued by what had transpired to her; like I did for intervention, they placated her with words of love. Having the financial stamina, her father decided to sponsor her university education as he had previously done in the case of Kennedy, her brother, which resuscitated her vision of joining the university. Ambivalent about what to pursue, like many other students with uncharted career paths to decide on after completing secondary education, her next headache was to conclusively decide on what to pursue without the possibility of future career suicide.

We were in March, and a lot had already happened in such a short time. Edgar had gone to school. With his good scores, he secured admission to a national school but could not join due to financial constraints. On the other hand, June joined a provincial school that the government had placed her in. Though painfully, my brother agreed to join form one at my former secondary school with no option left.

COLLINS TEUREY

I felt for him, but he grasped the nettle like a child raised in a family, where people embraced the heart of accepting the situation and breaking their backs to ensure it never remained the same. The common goal here, was annihilating poverty and restoring the hope and legacy of our late father. After all, it dawned on me that it didn't matter where you school but the effort you pump into your academic work. I was a living testimony to that. Besides, my former school wasn't any bad, going by the history of its academic excellence I had given you about it.

My bedroom encounter with Michelle that day was messy. I still laugh about it to date, even now. There were a lot of things I didn't know except enjoying the feeling of watching my penal erection. After she asked me to bury the idea of using a condom, I threw the wrapper away like it was a hot piece of charcoal I had been holding in my palms for a while. I was nervous and sweating buckets. Michelle was, with her thighs widely opened like the mouth of a shark. Her *pussy*, waiting to swallow my *dick* whole.

First impressions last. I remembered the phrase as I struggled to access the land sweetened with the flavours only the soul best understood. She knew I was a virgin, but that was no excuse. I was expected to drill the well until 'water' gushed out to the surface. I don't know if she was laughing in a good or mocking way, but she did. She asked me to let her help me, and she held it tightly and inserted it where it belonged, and

PETALS OF FATE

she wriggled in pleasure. Once in, I kept firing until I ran out of my missiles.

Having sexual intercourse with Michelle made me attracted more to her. The bond we shared thickened and solidified that nothing imaginably strong could go through or around it. We grew more fondly of each other. I felt completely new since I lost my virginity to her. She promised she would guide me more as a greenhorn on matters like that because at least she'd some little experience in that, having dated before me.

We were fettered in love with invisible chains, and I wished nothing ever broke it loose, whether it came to push or shove. With time, I started to realise that disappointments may strike unexpectedly in life. However, I was optimistic that our love would triumph amidst all storms. Sometimes, we argued, but we would always prioritise our communication and solutions. As a young couple, we agreed that we'd always look at issues correctly based on what was right and not who was right or wrong. Goal-shifting and blame games are a venom to any relationship's health, and we'd known that right.

On her last visit, Michelle brought me her photograph and a novel titled "*Petals of Fate*," which explored more about young relationships that come to life when no one expects them and the twists surrounding them. The novel was a perfect resonance for our case. I took these gifts with one heart and kept them as souvenirs that would one day remind me of my love for her regardless of the turn of events that the future held.

The picture was her beautiful self, seated on a plastic chair, smiling shyly. With the luxury of owning a smartphone just

like her after my sister gifted me one for my excellent performance, Michelle sent me some of her favourite photos she had taken while in Kisumu to my phone via *Xender* app. I would look at the pictures when I woke up and at bedtime before hitting the sack. I spent quite some time reading the novel with love from page to page until I mastered it to the point that I could narrate it word for word without reference.

After weighing her options, Michelle settled on pursuing Criminology. Something that I talked her out of without any hesitation. I wasn't so sure where she had come up with the resolve, but I felt it was something that wouldn't sit so well with her. I had known her like a book. She was very predictable and full of emotions. Besides, that course sounded more male-oriented to me. I might have been biased in my judgment. Since we hoped for a future together as husband and wife, I felt a combination of a journalist and a teacher would be enviable in raising a good family. After much consideration, she finally agreed to pursue a teaching course, and I thanked her for hearing me out.

Registering as a self-sponsored student meant that my sweetheart would join the cohort of May. That was barely two months away. Her father had completed the due process to ensure she was admitted to *Maseno* University. This period was marked by Michelle's endless travels, leaving us with little space for meetings. In fact, for the first time, we spent almost a month without meeting because of activities that were taking place ahead of her reporting. I felt lonely, but I had her photos to look at whenever I felt like seeing her pretty face, which lulled my soul.

PETALS OF FATE

We talked on the phone to compensate for that. Her parents spent more time at home during that period, and it became almost impossible for her to leave home, given that they were very strict. It starved me of her a great deal, but I had to devise a mechanism of growing into that because there was nothing that I could do to change that. Our love was still intact, which mattered most to me.

What would I be doing before joining campus in September? I wondered. The month was April, and I still had four moons to prepare. I looked at my results, and they were incredibly good. I decided to look for something to engage me in the meantime. How about I look for a chance to teach on an assistantship basis before joining campus? Yes. That made so much sense. I went to the area school and requested an opportunity, which was granted to me without a second thought. Thanks to my outstanding grades. *Twinkling Star Secondary*, the school I went to seek opportunity at, was a private secondary school. It was a mixed school with both boarding and day-school programmes. As a first-time teacher, I put my whole heart into it, and within two months of teaching, I was installed as a senior teacher despite my protests about my age.

Obviously, the hearts of my older colleagues and teachers were gripped by jealousy and envy, and that's when the scheming of my downfall began. My new position didn't sit well with so many people. Even so, I felt I didn't deserve it because I was a complete starter with barely any experience, especially with my new assignment. The envious eyes were the beginning of my troubles.

COLLINS TEUREY

I remember promising I'd tell you why you shouldn't be too friendly with your co-workers because none really is your friend. This is what befell me. After my new role, colleagues started talking dirty to the school director about me so I could be given the chop. The allegations were appallingly fake. In one instance, they accused me of screwing the girls at the school. Creator forbid! I was in love with someone you all know about.

In another instance, they accused me of incompetence. Yes, I may have been having a new experience in my role, but to baptise me as incompetent? A gross insult. I had always been an apt learner! After all their plans flopped, they poured poison into my food to send me to an early grave. I sobbed my heart out on that day, and were it not for the professionalism of the doctor who handled my case, I would be bearing "the late" initial on my name. I honourably resigned. This time, only one month was left until my time to join campus came.

Michelle came home to say goodbye before she reported to school. She didn't spend so much time at home this time as she would always. She had escaped from home and needed to return before her parents did. We had good sex for the last time. It was an excellent way to seal what we shared. It was clear that the next time we'd meet was only after three months. That would be after she was done with her first semester.

I wished, no, we both wished we would join at the same time and the same institution. That would have allowed us to cohabit like Kennedy, her brother, and Joy did. Unlike before, she wasn't going to stay with her brother. Given her ulcer condition, her father had made all the arrangements and got her a

PETALS OF FATE

house where she could cook special meals. We discussed what time could permit us before I walked her to the layby and picked a vehicle home.

Just as we had hoped, Voke, Adrian, and I were placed at the same university, the University of Nairobi. We got so excited by that, more than a bitter ex would by seeing his previous partner get dumped. I was finally going to pursue journalism. A dream I had held close to my heart even before I was conceived. Voke chose to pursue a career in teaching, while Adrian settled for Biochemistry. We couldn't calmly wait to be together again as friends and travel to Nairobi, a place worshipped on the lips of so many. Education presented a lot to us that we never had and would be able to experience. More than ever, I realised why my father loved education more than he loved purchasing electronic devices.

Moreover, it made sense to me now why my mother compared education to a granary that never runs dry with bountifulness. I felt a profound sense of contentment and satisfaction. I concluded that, honestly, education is an equaliser. A bridge that fills the vast crack there's between the well-to-do and the impoverished. See, I came from a family without a name, but I was pretty sure I would sit in the same lecture hall with the daughter and the son of an unscrupulous politician who, as others smell sweat, smelled the aroma of money.

It filled me with the satisfaction that there would never be separate training for people, depending on their family backgrounds; even though I didn't measure up to the financial

COLLINS TEUREY

muscles of many, my status, compared to others, almost made me feel like even a background for someone like me would be challenging to afford to have. I was at the tail of the pyramid in wealth but at its top with health. I was rich in hope and optimism. I was aware of preferential treatment accorded to people created with the clay at the heart of the Garden of Eden at the expense of others made from the sparse dust at its gate. But that did not freeze my blood. I knew I would go for what rightfully belonged to me and, as always, have it like a devil determined to cause harm to the children of God.

With my salary from my teaching assignment, I could save the little I could to at least buy myself stuff without heaping all the financial burden on my mother and older siblings. My then-employer wasn't paying me so badly after all, and I could save enough to take care of one and two, with September starting just in front of us. We remained eager to join campus, have a bite of what it felt like to be there, and confirm what our teachers always told us about the beauty of being on campus.

The first week after Michelle joined the university was splendidly fine. We spent a lot of time talking, and she would tell me a lot about her campus experience as a "fresher." Every tale she told me only made me miss her more and raised my curiosity of getting to feel the same way again. She praised how the towering buildings in her institution were such a vision to behold. The infrastructure was magnificently celestial. The mode of dressing was utterly unique, and the part that thrilled me more was the freedom to do as you pleased. Freedom is sweet

PETALS OF FATE

when used well but can be so venomous if abused. That's one thing I always reminded her of. The constant partying, the outings, and the lifestyle where people were constantly walking in pairs like Noah was doing another rescue mission, as was the case of Ark.

She complained that she had started feeling lonely, admiring how men and women walked and held hands like they were on a beach in Miami. Her heart furrowed that I wasn't around, so we could do that as partners. I couldn't begin to understand how these words had hit me in a certain way. I felt things were not headed in the right direction, and she was being lured by what she saw. It spelt an incoming danger to me, particularly how she admiringly stressed the part about campus relationships. I won't lie. I started feeling very doubtful about whether she would ever be able to resist the temptation because clearly, she was already falling for what was before sight.

Days passed, and we tried to maintain regular communication to sustain our relationship. However, by the second week, I noticed inconsistencies. Michelle became increasingly busy and often unavailable. Calls went unanswered, texts ignored, and sometimes her phone was switched off entirely. I initially thought she was caught up with lectures, only to discover she hadn't even started attending. Instead, she claimed to be investing more time in new friends who would support her in my absence. That revelation left a bitter taste of betrayal in my mouth. I tried to attribute it to the adjustment of a new environment, hoping things would improve once settled. Yet, each day, it seemed I was mistaken.

With time, there was no doubt that our relationship was limping towards its deathbed. Most of our conversations, which had become infrequent, were accentuated with arguments, flimsy excuses, and condescending attitudes. She would give me inane reasons, such as she had attended the ‘freshers’ party after ghosting me for the better part of the night. What I didn’t fully comprehend was how often these parties were held. Sometimes, she would say that she had taken a female friend to visit her boyfriend and that they had been watching television and weren’t in a place to talk. Her phone would be dead, or she would switch between her SIMs to dodge me. There’s no better adjective to describe how broken I was. I didn’t need to be told that I had already been betrayed, or that it was coming thick and fast like a time-ticking bomb.

“Don’t you trust me? You know what, I’m getting sick and tired of this. If you can’t trust me, I can’t force you to. It’s your problem!” Michelle told me one midmorning in a long, ranting text. That day, I stumbled upon a Facebook post where an unfamiliar, not-so-good-looking man had tagged her. On that post, the guy referred to her as the love of his life.

In my pursuit of an explanation, I ended up with a rotten egg on my face. She defended the guy in her insensibly incoherent explanation, referring to him as “just a friend” next door. *Fuck* that! This time, I wasn’t going to buy another poorly wrapped garbage and ask her to keep the change. We had a heated altercation, which ended in a breakup. The stark irony was that she was the one who called for that. She told me she needed some alone time to think things over, but with my

PETALS OF FATE

little knowledge, I knew the statement carried more weight than it casually appeared.

We would only talk again after two weeks. During this period, I was slowly dying in silence because communicating with her was like a strict prescription of drugs I needed to take regularly. It was as if I depended on that for my survival. I would see her online, but it wouldn't move her a single bit to even begin a word with me. It pierced through my heart like a dart. I tried contacting her friend to inquire what it meant when a lady says she needs time alone, but the response was too gruesome.

According to her close friend, that statement would only mean that she'd started seeing someone else or was in the talking stage and was putting her chances on a weighing scale while still leaving her options open. I couldn't agree more. That was it because I knew Michelle couldn't spend an hour, let alone a day, without talking to me. For her to stand no contact for that long only dawned on me that things had changed so swiftly, and I had a bleeding heart to focus on nursing. Poor me.

I felt a whirlwind of confusion, happiness, and sadness when she finally reached out. As I'd suspected, something was amiss. I confirmed it through her friend, who confessed that Michelle was seeing someone else. It turned out it was the same guy we'd argued about, and she defended tooth and nail. I felt taken for a ride. I was consumed in so much fury. I was still in love with her and developed a strong resentment toward her, too. To imagine someone had slept with her disgusted me. It seemed our relationship had become a mere facade.

She appealed to me to apologise to my mother on her behalf and even sent her an apology message herself. I demanded to know what had happened, and she confessed to me that it was true. She'd been seeing the guy for a while. They'd met at a party. I cried in devastation. I cursed. But now, the guy had dumped her after eating her *cookie* and moved to his next target in the fashion of the angel of death during the killing of the first male children in Egypt. She was now using me as a fallback, a rag to dry her tears.

I forgave her and tried to salvage the relationship for a week, but it was long dead, like a *dodo*. What a *jerk* I was! With time, I realised nothing was working out except for constant squabbles, outright doubts, and everything nasty. It was too leaking to be mended. It was too shredded to be pieced back together. I refused food for several days. I feigned sickness. My mother, having a good knowledge of me, noticed a practical change in my mood, and in her silence, she was aware there was more than meets the eye in my horrible condition.

As the situation worsened, she sat me down and confronted me about it, and I spilt the beans. She was perplexed, very much so that she didn't say much like I had thought. She reminded me that such was always expected from people who are averse to accountability and self-direction. She advised me that the best way to retaliate against her was not to seek solace in the arms of another woman but to focus on my studies, which she said was the right hook to drive more fish my way in an ocean with incongruent collections. I painfully swal-

PETALS OF FATE

lowed hard, enfolded the situation, and stared straight with anticipation into my future, which I believed would be as open as the land.

CHAPTER 16



THE WIND OF CHANGE

I arrived at my sister's place a day before joining college. The following day, my two friends also showed up. Being well-acquainted with Nairobi, my sister escorted me to school and assisted me with the registration process, having already helped with the necessary paperwork. I opted to reside in a hostel near campus during my first year. Everything proceeded smoothly according to plan, and soon after, I was happily reunited with my friends. The entire experience felt nothing short of heavenly. We explored the Central Business District but got lost more times than I could count. Were it not for the green building of Afya Centre and Kenya National Archives, hmm. Anyway, to console us, we were reminded that getting lost was part of the adventure in Nairobi and that the only unusual thing would be continually getting your map correct.

The first week was dedicated to admissions, followed by orientation and the start of lectures. We were all guided through the essentials as new faces in the new Jerusalem. A freshman party awaited us, reminiscent of one Michelle had attended

PETALS OF FATE

earlier. However, I opted out, not being one for such revelry. My two friends, Voke and Adrian, enthusiastically joined in, shouting at the top of their lungs. A renowned musician was invited to ignite the party atmosphere with an electrifying performance. Still reeling from the recent end of my relationship, which I had hoped would endure indefinitely, I couldn't bring myself to attend. The morning after the party, my friends were already exchanging numbers with new acquaintances they had met. I couldn't help but chuckle at their antics.

Our learning began earnestly, as it is in the typical campus environment. We would take walks, go to the library, try the gym, and eat cheap food whenever life punched us hard sometimes. We coincidentally found days when we had no lectures at all, and we took advantage of them to connect and have fun. We stared around to see the divine things teachers would tell us back in high school, and many were hoaxes.

The beautiful women? Yes, there were some, and others were more handsome than us, and we joked about it all the time. Our first year was marked by adventures and learning more things, including how to survive in school. Times were tough, especially when we were penniless, which was mostly the case. We both loved our careers. I would spend more time at the school editing suite to hone my audio and video editing skills. I joined the broadcasting and reporting crew, too.

By my second year, I had excelled in various aspects of journalism, earning admiration from my peers in the faculty. I was unanimously elected head of the school magazine club, overseeing the publication of numerous feature stories and articles covering campus life, modelling, politics, and more. During

extended holidays, I returned to school as a teaching assistant. The Teachers Service Commission hadn't yet emphasised the need for a TSC number for teachers. Fortunately, I secured a position at a nearby school, teaching throughout my university years. That allowed me to earn enough to support myself at school without relying heavily on my family with a begging bowl.

Michelle's attempts to reconnect felt increasingly desperate, especially after her string of failed relationships. It was clear she wanted to use me as a rebound, and I couldn't shake the feeling of being a fool waiting on the sidelines. I struggled to understand why she thought so little of me—perhaps it was because the affection I had shown her seemed absent in her other pursuits. She confessed that since our breakup, she had tried dating three different guys, each encounter unfolding like a predictable script. They seemed more interested in what was in between her thighs than her soul, and I couldn't help but wonder if any part of her spirit remained to be truly cherished.

Meanwhile, I had stayed single all those years, never seeking out another woman or contemplating anything beyond a fleeting connection. Little did Michelle know that I had finally begun dating her paternal cousin, Linda. It was a twist of fate that added a bittersweet layer to my solitude, one that Michelle would never expect.

With its sprawling student body, dedicated staff, and vibrant support community, the University of Nairobi was so vast that it was entirely possible to navigate your entire four-

PETALS OF FATE

or six-year course without ever encountering someone you know. On this particular Friday, I was accompanied by Adrian while Voke was preoccupied with a class project. As we meandered aimlessly across the campus, I noticed a stunning girl who exuded the grace of a princess. I nudged Adrian to confirm if my eyes were deceiving me.

"What! Isn't that Linda?" he nearly exclaimed, looking in the direction I was directing his eyes.

"Shut up, idiot. Which Linda are you talking about?" I asked incredulously.

"How many Lindas do you know, man? I mean your Linda, your wife!" he affirmed, mouth agape.

"No. Tell me you're joking. It can't be!" I refused to believe him.

"Shh, let's find out," he urged. We moved closer, and Adrian confirmed it was indeed Linda.

"Hello, excuse me!" Adrian opened the conversation after preparing his voice to grab her attention. She turned around in a demonstrable surprise.

"Yes," she replied in a voice sweeter than a banana juice. Hurriedly, I wanted to stretch my hand first to say "hi" even before she could draw closer, but Adrian had signalled at me to stop.

"Knock it off, *moron*," he whispered, "let me prepare the way for you like John the Baptist did for Jesus. Do you want to spoil it? He reprimanded.

"Spoil what?" Linda interrogated.

"Hi, Linda, long time!" Adrian cut in while faking a cough to brush off her inquisitiveness.

“What! Adrian! What the hell are you doing here?” Linda exclaimed in sheer disbelief as she shook Adrian’s hand. She instantly recognised him. It appeared his ugly face hadn’t witnessed any transformation for the better.

“Basking in the sun, Linda,” Adrian responded while laughing cheekily, “Anyway, what do you expect? Of course, I’m a student here.

“Asshole!” Linda dismissed as she choked in a hearty laughter.

“I never thought I would meet you again, least, in an unexpected place like this!” added Adrian with evident nostalgia.

“Mmhh, Long time Adrian. How have you been? Linda asked.

All the while, I was standing there like a tree. I almost thought I was invisible. Adrian was beginning to get on my nerves. I didn’t like how sweet he was starting to sound with Linda. I gave him what we called a bombastic side look to remind him he was beginning to cross the red line.

“And who’s your friend? Linda enquired, “Please, forgive me, I forgot to say hi; trust me, I’m not always like that. I just got carried away by circumstances,” Linda added as she turned to me while stretching her hand for a greeting. If you think an over-boiled pumpkin is soft, remember her palm was softer!

“Hi, Carlos. I’m Carlos Otieno. It’s okay, never mind about that. I perfectly get it,” I assuredly said. Revealing the sweetest of smiles that even Adrian had no idea I possessed or had seen before.

“Linda, Linda Anyango. Pleased to meet you,” she responded.

PETALS OF FATE

"The feeling is mutual," I kept it brief in a well-calculated move of a gentleman.

The conversation continued in much the same way. To give you an idea of Linda's beauty, imagine everything I described about Michelle, but then multiply it by three. She looked so pretty, almost as if she had been given a set of idealised templates to choose from when designing her appearance during creation, and she picked the best of them all. That day, she wore a bold, eye-catching red dress that clung to her curves, accentuating her hourglass shape. Her fair skin and dazzling smile had the power to outshine even the brightest of suns. As she was about to leave, I hesitantly asked if she would share her contact information. With a warm smile, she said, "Oh, sure."

Linda? No, for a moment, I felt it was a dream I needed to wake up from. But it was real! That evening, I pondered how strangely fate can weave its way into our lives. When we met, the look on her face signalled a spark between us. How she looked at me, bit her lower lip, and winked as she melted from the scene tipped me off her soft spot for me. We chatted briefly that night.

As days passed, we grew fonder of each other and arranged a few meet-ups. Sometimes, she suggested the meetings herself, and most times, I did, playing the role of the pursuer. Our chemistry blossomed, and we began to confide in each other. We were both in the first semester of our final year; she was pursuing a degree in computer science, which suited her perfectly. Our friendship deepened, and our meetings became increasingly frequent.

COLLINS TEUREY

I interviewed her about whether she was single, and she told me it depended entirely on who was asking about it. Frankly, that sounded impudent to me, but her playful smile revealed she didn't mean anything close to that. Later, she would confirm she was as single as she could be. She had endured a terrible breakup two years ago, which led her to choose solitude. I shared that I was also single and that meeting her had made me feel inexplicably complete, which made her blush.

During our many conversations, she opened up about her parents' ugly divorce, mirroring the stories Michelle had told me earlier. I listened empathetically, and my concern was evident. She explained that she chose to stay with her father in Mombasa after her parents' marital split, and plans were in the offing to return home for a family reunion. I was cautious not to mention my past with her cousin Michelle, fearing it might drive her away. Eventually, I summoned the courage to tell her I was interested in her and asked if she would allow me to embark on a romantic journey with her.

Unlike her cousin, who was conspicuously shy and only flirted through the texts, Linda was authentic and a great conversationalist. She had a lioness-like confidence and looked me in the eye as she spoke about anything and everything. She would openly tell me, "Babe, I feel so horny. When will I've you inside me?" Whenever she was sexually stimulated, and that was not only during her ovulation period. It was any time she felt like it. I loved that about her. She was real and as open as a book.

She told me a lot in such a short duration that it left me baffled how I had earned her trust that fast. But what's love? It

PETALS OF FATE

does wonders, mostly the things one would swear not to do. She left me with a word that she would think my request over. Very typical of most women, but deep down, it was apparent I had won that war because I could see her body language. She had fallen flat for me. She never beat about the bush. At night, she sent me a text to confirm that, indeed, she had mutual feelings. She wouldn't mind not just falling in love with me but walking in love with me, and that's how our fairytale-romantic journey began.

We spent countless hours at the campus cafeteria chatting and imbibing on *Miranda* drinks during our free time. *Miranda* was a cheap drink in price but rich in flavour. Orange was her favourite tang, which she automatically recruited me to like without deviation on my part. Despite her royal demeanour that could make anyone feel small, Linda was a down-to-earth woman with no pretensions during our meeting. A trait she has effortlessly maintained throughout the years of us exchanging body fluids without any shred of doubt. We kept things simple, often enjoying affordable meals.

Whenever I suggested going to a fancier place to impress her, she usually turned me down, insisting it was better to save for the future instead of splurging on fleeting pleasures without any long-lasting thrills and frills. Unlike many, she valued deep commitment grounded in shared interests and goals. Ideally, her enthusiasm about the future made her sound more like my mother, making me fall in love with her even more.

She had a dimpled smile accented by a charming gap between her teeth and was drop-dead gorgeous. Whenever I walked with her around campus, it felt as though the entire

world paused to wonder what I had done to deserve her. Most guys who had tried to pursue her prior to our meeting cursed their barren efforts, their frustrations palpable. Perhaps that explained the envious glances I received whenever she was by my side. I felt like I was on top of the world.

She wore her pride like a badge, eager to claim me in public, especially when we ran into other men who had pursued her before we met or when women began to take an interest in me. Linda wanted everyone to know that she was mine and I was hers. I loved that fierce possessiveness; it made our connection feel all the more powerful.

One peculiar thing I noticed during that time was how women were often drawn to me after I was taken. Taken to heart. Not for granted, and I was so sure about that. My connection with Linda sparked a newfound interest from other women as if I were a choice cut of meat on display for a pack of starving hyenas. I found myself revelling in the attention. Attractive women expressed interest, as did those who were less conventionally appealing and even those who were decidedly not my type. Suddenly, I was the quintessential ladies' man. As our relationship became a subject of discussion, we quickly became the campus couple of the year.

At that time, I was the chief editor of the school magazine, "*The Campus Flex*," and I ensured we featured prominently on the front page with the headline "*Campus Romeo and Juliet*." It was my way of signalling to everyone that we belonged together. It was a clever move that showcased our romance and heightened the competition while reducing it, creating an intriguing dynamic on campus.

PETALS OF FATE

I can say that Linda made my stay on campus worthwhile, and I even wished I met her immediately after joining college. I don't know if things would have been that spicy. Before our meeting, I had been nursing a bruised heart, which you all know about. But I appreciate whatever led to our delayed encounter. It debunked the popular saying that equates delay to denial. By the time our paths finally crossed, I had healed well enough and was ready to return to the crime scene again.

We left campus in March of that year. The final year on campus wasn't always as busy as the rest of the academic years. The number of units had significantly reduced. Save for the time dedicated to conducting research for the final school projects that made us both run around like a headless chicken as we focused on that, and you all know better how frustrating that can be. Much worse if you find a supervisor with the heart of a dustbin. Gracious heavens. You would cry harder than hard.

Linda helped me in my project in areas she could, especially by bringing her friends on board, whom I interviewed for my journalism project. I did something on podcasts. Even though she was a Computer Science student, her enthusiasm for journalism was nonpareil. I don't know if it was something she developed after our meeting or if it was sexually transmitted.

The first time I buried my face between her delectable thighs and used her soft backside as a pillow for my head, I fucking enjoyed it. She had this ass that any man could willingly swallow a grenade for. Initially, I thought I would never get a better ass than Michelle's, but I couldn't be more wrong. It constantly reminded me of a saying in my mother's mouth

that goes “*wuothi e kinee*,” which can be translated as ‘walk then you can see,’ and it was true. I had walked, and now I was seeing a better ass — Linda’s. I tell you what, there’s always something better. I almost hated myself for the scarcity mentality I had reared for a long time, but now I knew better.

For love, I made sure I was also academically resourceful to my girlfriend. To prove it, I also came to her rescue by helping with stressful areas of her project. Of course, my capability in the other sinning room spoke for itself. Needn’t I mention that? The good thing was that we both had supervisors who had no ulterior motive. You know, the pesky ones who would swear in the name of their mother’s side-guy to walk you barefoot in academic hell because their own children refused school, and it pained them that you were different from their children. We were fortunate that our supervisors had no ulterior motives, which made our final touch a beautiful one.

Mr Momanyi, my Media Law and Ethics instructor, supervised my final-year project. He was a devoted Adventist, so short in stature as the distance between the nose and the mouth that one would easily mistake him for a fire extinguisher from a distance if he wore red and you didn’t examine him keenly.

He had a penchant for regaling us with tales of how hot his wife was. If he wasn’t talking about her, he was boasting about his children and the prestigious schools he had sent them to. He was a braggart. A big one that he frequently left many wondering why he hailed from *Nyamira* rather than *Kisumu*, where such flamboyance and braggadocio were more commonplace. His tales became so repetitive that they veered into the realm

PETALS OF FATE

of predictability, leaving some of us bored to death and yearning for variety.

Another thing about him was that he never, not even hardly, missed lectures. He seemed to be handling almost all units across different departments. Even more astonishingly, I never saw him skip a session in my four years of coursework, unlike other instructors who frequently missed lectures for all the excusable and inexcusable reasons.

He was a true testament to the phrase: "Teaching is a calling, not a profession." Mostly, I doubted if money ever was the primary motivation behind his teaching career as opposed to many other lecturers who clearly were in the profession for the bag. Having him in charge of my project was a great relief. Reason? He always maintained a professional distance from his students, which made for a truly fulfilling experience.

CHAPTER 17



THE WEDDING BELL

Mr Othuol's life was irredeemably upended after the incident that saw him frog-marched and unceremoniously tossed into the buttocks of a police Land Cruiser. His sexual behaviour with school-going children, all of whom were shockingly underage, could only be likened to that of a sexually starved buck goat pursuing a doe—his chief reason for being handcuffed.

The charges against him painted a damning portrait. He was the masquerading feline with blood on his lips and claws. He faced the grave accusation of paedophilia in addition to several cases of disappearance female learners. However, he would later be acquitted for lack of compelling evidence, leaving the shocking vanishing of those innocent girls shrouded in mystery.

Despite being cleared in the eyes of the law regarding the students' disappearances, the villagers remained unconvinced of his innocence. In their eyes, he was far from exonerated; the court of public opinion linked him to alleged ties to a sinister

PETALS OF FATE

cult rumoured to sacrifice young girls for dark rituals. At the time of his confinement, three female students had vanished in a similarly eerie manner, leaving no trace behind.

"Hello, Carlos, if I remember correctly," a somewhat frail voice reached out to me. It was Mr Othuol!

"Absolutely, that's me. What a small world we live in!" I responded, almost with a hint of joy.

"It's been such a long time. How have you been, my son?" he pressed.

"Your son?" I wondered silently, then feigned a smile and replied, "God has been good. We give thanks. How about you? I honestly thought I'd never see you again after that unfortunate ordeal."

"Life has a way of surprising us, my son. But here I am now. And forgive me for being nosy, but is that your wife... and your child?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes! That's correct. My wife, Linda, and our daughter, Janelle," I proudly said.

"Linda, meet my high school mathematics teacher, *Mwalimu* Othuol," I introduced her to him.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir. He must have given you quite a bit of trouble in mathematics—he's terrible at it!" Linda joked, looking at me, and we shared a nostalgic laugh. Mr Othuol seemed a bit embarrassed, but my daughter stepped forward to shake his hand and save him from his own embarrassment.

"Pleasure to meet you too, my daughter. You make a lovely pair!" he remarked, shaking Linda's hand, smiling warmly.

Linda, our firstborn daughter, Janelle, and I were returning from the shopping centre that evening, just a few days, shy of

Christmas. We had gone home as a family to prepare for the holiday festivities. It was then that I heard a voice calling for my attention—Mr Othuol's. I could hardly believe my eyes! Shouldn't he be in jail, serving his 20-year sentence? I wondered. Seeing him out and about, wandering like a caged animal released into the wild. The poor old man looked as though he had been rained on.

After being found guilty of the crime of paedophilia, the judge had sentenced him to twenty years behind bars. During our conversation, amidst discussing little about much, he told me he had been released on parole ten years into his sentencing, citing what he called "good behaviour." I suddenly recalled the presidential amnesty that had occurred that year and realised he was among the fortunate inmates granted release for demonstrating reformed behaviour. I couldn't say how it all transpired, but I was genuinely pleased for him. He seemed changed—his demeanour and even how he spoke carried enough evidence. We took some time to catch up, discussing whatever time allowed before I drove back home with my young family.

That evening, as we settled into bed, I recounted my tumultuous relationship with Mr Othuol to Linda, and she listened with perplexity. Our rapport had soured over time. He had been my teacher throughout my O Level, so he knew a thing or two about me—namely, my struggles with mathematics. I wouldn't say we were at odds from the beginning; it all started in my final year.

I remember the incident vividly, as clearly as I recall my own name. I had made a foolish mistake on a mathematics test,

PETALS OF FATE

something that deeply displeased him. I felt ashamed, too. But his reaction was harsh; he unleashed a torrent of unpalatable words upon me. He called me foolish, cursed me, and concluded by telling me that I would amount to nothing more than a *bodaboda* rider or a mere hand splitting firewood at funerals.

Linda was visibly disappointed in Mr Othuol. She felt a bit awkward about the mathematics joke she had innocently made earlier, but I reassured her that it had nothing to do with the meanness of my former teacher. She reminded me that no one controls another's fate but God, and that truth had already manifested in our lives. She was thriving in the corporate world, earning a good salary—one I won't disclose.

My career had also begun to flourish, and although we hadn't reached our final destination yet, our hearts were filled with gratitude for the blessings the Lord had bestowed upon us. We had built a beautiful home and transformed my mother's house, realising a dream I had long held. We were driving a decent car, and life had finally found meaning for both of us. I also took it upon myself to share our excesses with those less fortunate around us, ensuring that our good fortune would touch the lives of others.

As a gesture of goodwill to celebrate the birth of Christ, we gifted Mr Othuol enough to see him through the New Year celebrations. The honest truth was that, even during our meeting, I still harboured resentment for the hurtful words he had directed at me. But as my mother would say, darkness doesn't drive out darkness—only light can do that. So, I chose to respond with kindness, determined to start the new year with a

lighter heart. I decided to forgive him, after expressing my long-standing displeasure over the hurtful comments he made over a decade ago.

He was detectably happy to hear that. He apologised and confessed that life had taught him how dark his heart had been toward many. He shared the sins he could, leaving the rest cloaked in discretion, as some were undoubtedly darker than tar—like the whispers of cult membership and allegations of sacrificing other people's children. He stood there, grateful for the gift we had offered, watching as we walked toward the car parked a few yards away. We exchanged goodbyes, and I could hear the regret in his voice, a longing to take back his words. But words, like spilt milk, can never be gathered once they escape your lips.

I didn't ask if he had a family, but I suspected he was living alone. His wife must have left him. Now, possibly moaning in sexual pleasure, calling another man's name in the Godforsaken sinful night. You couldn't blame her, especially given his past of sexual exploitation of the underage. And if she weren't aware of the whispers of cult involvement, that would only strengthen and add to her reasons for fleeing, especially if she held onto her faith like my mother did with her rosary. I sensed the weight of wifelessness in his breath and the hollowness of a soul that had tried to reform.

What I didn't realise at the time was that it would be the last time I saw him. His teaching career had ended, and his indictment led to an automatic interdiction by his former employer, the Teachers Service Commission. That decision was irrevocable, leaving no chance of reinstatement. Perhaps, if he

PETALS OF FATE

still had a sliver of passion for teaching, he could still pursue a role in religion and offer priestly teachings on the second coming of Christ, now that his reformation had earned him a premature release from the “*house of raw beans*,” the jail. Alternatively, he could decide to become a teacher of life to generously share the lessons he had learned with those who might follow a similar path.

Evidently, the load of never being employed again had taken a toll on him, reducing him to little more than a collection of moving bones. I felt compassion for him, but there was no way I could help him out of that hole. Two years later, I received the shocking news of his death. According to my source, Mr Othuol had gone to bed, but neither his soul nor his body ever woke him up again. That was the last time he was seen alive.

I sent out numerous request letters for my internship programme to the few available media houses, which were far fewer than they are today. At the top of my list were reputable organisations known for their strong listenership and viewership. As a multimedia journalist, I was versatile enough to fit into any department within the media realm, so I aimed to maximise my chances by exploring all available options. Many students scrambled for the limited opportunities available, as the media landscape had not yet seen significant multiplication.

Among my choices were the major players in the industry: *Royal Media Services*, *The Standard Group*, and *The Nation Media Group*. My silent prayer was to secure a position at *Royal Media Services*. At the time, they owned *Citizen Television* and *Radio Citizen*, which had become a household name. Thanks to their informative, entertaining, and educational programmes. They resonated deeply with the public, establishing themselves as the most sought-after media organisation—surpassing Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, which had previously held that position as if it were its birthright.

A week later, a call from the Royal Services office invited me for an interview. Just as I had hoped, they were offering me the chance to undertake my internship with them. True to my nature as an early bird—a trait I’ve shared with you—I prepared before dawn. It’s a habit ingrained in me, one I inherited from my parents, and it seems I’m utterly beyond recovery. By 8:30 a.m., I had already arrived at their sleek offices on *Kilimanjaro Maalim Juma Rd*, *Off Dennis Pritt Rd* in Nairobi. The interview was set to begin at 10 a.m., but I didn’t mind the wait.

Perched on a reception bench, I mulled over the old adage about the early bird catching the worm. It resonated with me, a personal truth; my early risings had consistently brought me unexpected rewards. Arriving well ahead of the interviewers, I chuckled at my own enthusiasm—perhaps a bit excessive, but a delightful quirk of mine. The night before, sleep had eluded me as I fretted over the possibility of being late.

As I scanned the modern surroundings, taking in the state-of-the-art studios, I thought: Yes, indeed, the early bird does

PETALS OF FATE

get the worm. I could feel the familiar rush of anticipation, knowing that my early arrival allowed me to acclimate, easing my nerves before stepping into the interview room's spotlight. The advantages of being an early bird were clear to me. Yet, a whimsical thought crossed my mind: why is it always about the early bird, with little consideration for the latecomer? If the early bird catches the worm, doesn't that spell doom for the unsuspecting worm? Why shouldn't a worm choose to sleep in, evading its fate? It seemed absurd to dwell on such musings, so I quickly dismissed the idea. But what if there's a hidden wisdom in being late? After all, there must be a silver lining for the late worm, though few dare to explore that notion openly.

My interview was a resounding success; in fact, my presentation impressed the interviewers so much that they couldn't help but admit it before I left. A crowd of hopefuls had gathered to vie for this golden opportunity—some seeking internships, others as volunteers. Out of 33 candidates, only nine would be selected. To say the vetting process was a walk in the park would be a lie. It required someone properly baked to survive the rigorous selection process. As I stepped into the interview room, I exuded confidence. Thanks to my early arrival, I had time to gather my thoughts and soak in the atmosphere of the Fourth Estate. I had even made a few friends already from the list of interviewees of that day and one or two random employees of the company! Thanks to my outgoing nature.

Everything felt right. I was set to report on Monday, just two days after the interview, and I couldn't contain my excitement. I rushed to share the news with my family and with Linda, who had promised to pray for me the night before. She

had faith I would seize the opportunity, and she was right—without a doubt, it had manifested!

On the other hand, Linda hadn't secured a place for her internship. It wasn't until a week after I reported to *Royal Media Services* that she landed an opportunity with *Google's* Nairobi branch. Although it wasn't a graduation requirement for her, she chose to pursue it, a decision that would later prove to be a blessing in disguise. Typically, an internship spanned three months, with the option to extend for those hoping to seize future opportunities. Both of us had our graduations lined up for July, but shortly after completing her programme, Linda decided to leave and explore new avenues.

I developed a strong rapport with my colleagues at the station. My outstanding performance in production, reporting, scripting, and various assigned tasks quickly made me a stand-out. I earned praise for my exemplary service, and my versatility as a multifaceted journalist further impressed them. My supervisor particularly admired my work, and his recommendation gave me a significant edge over my peers. As I approached my final month, he summoned me to his office one day and disclosed the possibility of my retention. I can hardly find the words to express the joy I felt upon hearing that; it felt like a scene from a scripted movie. Everything was aligning perfectly in my favour, that I even began to be suspicious if it were a setup or something. It was an excellent example of too good to be true.

Unbeknownst to Linda, I was orchestrating a surprise marriage proposal on our graduation—a moment I knew would leave her acutely happy to the point of bursting into tears. She

PETALS OF FATE

loved surprises. One done pleasantly. In my quest for creativity, I added a magical touch: a serenade.

My friend Adrian, with three other musical talents I had befriended on campus, were guitar wizards. Their mastery over the strings far surpassed my own talent of strumming on nipples during foreplay—let's just say, if I were to strum, it would be more like fumbling than finesse. But these guys? They played like they were weaving dreams into melodies, and I knew their skills would elevate the moment to something truly unforgettable. On this one, the singer would be me, and the song I had carefully chosen was Westlife's "*As Love is My Witness*," Linda's all-time favourite.

The graduation ceremony brought together both our families. My side was represented by my mum, my sister Aketch, and Oyier. All members of Linda's family were present. They were not many after all—her mother, younger brother, and father. Her parents hadn't seen each other in ages since their split. This graduation served as an unexpected matchmaker. For Linda, it was a moment of joy on multiple fronts: reuniting with her mother and younger brother after what felt like an eternity, the surprise proposal I had planned (which she remained blissfully unaware of), celebrating her academic achievement, and witnessing a family reunion that would rekindle her parents' love.

Initially, Linda had hinted at the possibility of her parents reuniting, envisioning their return to the matrimonial home. To solidify this hope, her father had taken the initiative to renovate their village house, transforming it into a vibrant space

brimming with life and anticipation for its occupants. The ceremony kicked off at 8 a.m. and wrapped up by noon.

My mother and her father were not complete strangers; Linda had introduced me to her father, who had also spoken with my mother over the phone. What remained was the physical exchange of greetings as future in-laws. In the seven months we had been together, Linda had visited my father's home thrice—the first time, was for introduction, the second and third, to stamp her authority as the incoming daughter-in-law. My mother had grown increasingly fond of her, to the point where I found myself quietly questioning the authenticity of her past affection for Michelle.

We both excelled in our respective fields of study. Linda graduated with second-class upper honours in Computer Science, while I earned first-class honours in Journalism and Mass Communication. With little time for interaction before the ceremony, our families had agreed to hold an engaging session afterwards. Our academic achievements brought joy to both families, and I felt a sense of honour meeting her parents for the first time. Her father, particularly, had a warmth about him that reminded me of my late dad; he was supportive of Linda in every decision she made, which I believe played a significant role in his acceptance of me in her life.

Her mother was equally a sweet soul, with a magnetic smile that could turn strangers into friends in the blink of an eye. It was uncanny how much she and Linda resembled each other—they were practically mirror images. She welcomed me as if I were her own son, and I could see the budding friendship between her and my mother. I imagined they would soon be

PETALS OF FATE

sharing stories and gossiping about us as they exchanged glances in our direction. Ah, women and their gossip!

As we all gathered beneath a magnificent tree that stood sentinel over the college grounds, Adrian and the musical talents I had contracted to deliver the surprise for the day burst onto the scene, guitars in hand. Before long, they began strumming the familiar chords of the Westlife song I had chosen for this momentous occasion. With my heart fully invested, I began to sing for Linda, our parents looking on in amazement and adoration.

No one would have suspected a thing, given the meticulous secrecy that surrounded the plan. A crowd quickly gathered to witness this seventh wonder of the world, with younger women whispering amongst themselves, curious if I had a brother or cousin who shared my traits. Little did they know, the rest of my male relatives were far from charming. Even my own mother was unaware of my singing voice, but there I stood, proving everyone wrong, pouring my heart into every note.

The lady of the moment stood there, motionless, as if struck by lightning, her face washing over with tears of joy as though she had just experienced the bittersweet pang of loss. I slipped my hand into hers, locking our fingers together. As I sang, I held her gaze, pouring every ounce of emotion into the words. Then, with a deep breath, I sank to one knee and pulled out the ring.

“Sweet Linda, would you accept to—”

“Yes! Yes!” she exclaimed, cutting me off before I could finish, her hands reaching out to receive the ring. The crowd

erupted into a frenzy of ululations and applause, their excitement inexpressible.

With trembling hands, I gently placed the ring on her finger as she leapt up and down like a playful heifer that has suckled enough mother's milk, her sobs punctuating the air. We embraced, kissing passionately as her mother reached out, half-heartedly trying to save her daughter from her own happiness that was now making her cry uncontrollably. Just like that, Linda and I were engaged!

My internship programme was a resounding success. I honed my hands-on skills, broadened my knowledge, and navigated the whirlwind of a fast-paced media outlet. With my graduation behind me, I returned to my workplace, no longer an intern but a full-fledged employee. My responsibilities included editing, programme production, and news reporting, and my dedication quickly propelled me from the ranks of a novice to the position of assistant chief news editor.

During my internship, I received a decent stipend that helped me manage my budgetary needs, and the glowing recommendations I garnered fueled my commitment and passion. I carried no regrets; my compelling performance opened doors for me with relative ease, and I felt a deep gratitude for the opportunities I had been given.

While I celebrated my retention, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness for my fellow interns with whom I had formed strong bonds. I understood all too well how challenging it

PETALS OF FATE

could be to secure a position, especially when many media outlets were still struggling to establish themselves. Yet, I held fast to my belief that there is a reason God created only three days in our lives: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Each day brings its own promise, and I knew that brighter opportunities awaited my colleagues, even if they couldn't see them just yet.

Despite our recent engagement, Linda and I decided to hold off on cohabiting for the time being. We believed that living together as husband and wife before the official ceremony would dilute the excitement of our union. Our plan was to tie the knot within six months, a timeline that felt both thrilling and achievable. With my job progressing well, I felt confident in my ability to save enough for our wedding. The pay was generous, and my steady ascent within the company made everything feel more manageable.

On her end, Linda had ventured to the coast of Kenya, where her father had secured a position for her in an insurance firm, leveraging his experience as a senior employee after being transferred from Western Kenya, where he had previously worked. With her now new role, Linda became incredibly supportive, and with our wedding on the horizon, she insisted on contributing to our savings.

"Marriage isn't a one-person affair," she would remind me, emphasising that she was entering this union as an asset, not a liability. Initially, I wanted to shoulder the financial burden alone, but I quickly realised that it was simply not in her nature to be a burden like some partners might choose to be. Educa-

tion had empowered her, offering new perspectives that challenged outdated notions about gender roles—ideas that often worked to a man's detriment.

We chose a church wedding, but as someone who deeply valued my roots—the Luo culture—I felt it was essential to first honour our traditions with a pre-marriage ceremony known as *tero ayie*. The ceremony involved formally expressing my intentions to marry by visiting Linda's parents and presenting a token of appreciation for raising her and acknowledging her close relatives—uncles, aunts, and siblings. Since this took place in contemporary times, my token was in the form of cash discreetly tucked into an envelope. The period was marked by significant change, with modernization reshaping our customs. Our engagement served as a poignant reminder of that cultural evolution.

To me, the traditional aspect felt more like a formality; by the time I was organising everything, both of her parents were already aware of my intentions and had given us their blessings. While the engagement might have come as a surprise, it was clear they had accepted me as the man destined to take care of their daughter and, eventually, to help create new lives together. After all, why wouldn't they have put a stop to it, especially her mother, whom I hadn't yet met?

Michelle graduated a month before us, and it struck me that her being away from school seemed to have dried up the well of admirers who once flocked around her, leaving her feeling desperate. I wished I could believe that she had given up on

PETALS OF FATE

me, but that was far from the truth. After I shut down her attempts to reconnect, she vanished into the background, choosing not to burden me with her sob stories. But now, she was back, as if she had never left.

She wasn't home when I went for my *tero ayie*. Her place wasn't far from Linda's— a detail I hope still sticks with you. Her absence during our visit was a blessing in disguise. As she reached out to me again after I visited Linda's place, I imagined she might have gotten wind of the news that her cousin had received suitors and would soon leave for cooking. Perhaps she had realised it was me, her former lover, and it had robbed her of sleep.

Even now, I felt uncomfortable discussing my past with Michelle in front of Linda. I feared it would create an awkward rift between us, but how long could I have kept that secret? The thought of Linda discovering it on her own terrified me far more. I didn't want to carry this weight, especially at a time when we were about to embark on the journey of wearing the "handcuff of life"—marriage.

After much contemplation, I resolved to have an open conversation with Linda. I knew that discussing it over the phone would only amplify the discomfort, so I decided to wait until she travelled to Nairobi during one of her visits from the coast. With the wedding day fast approaching, we needed to meet in person to fine-tune the last details of our ceremony.

The day arrived—Friday, the day we'd unanimously designated to be together. While the weekdays kept her busy with work, Fridays felt like our paradise. A time to reconnect and unwind. As we settled into bed that evening, with the night

wrapping around us, I felt a familiar knot of anxiety in my stomach. It was time to open up about my past with Michelle. I turned to Linda, searching her eyes for understanding.

"There's something I need to tell you, my love," I began, my voice steady yet tinged with nervousness. This was the moment I had been waiting for, the moment to reveal the truth about my past with Michelle. I could see the curiosity in her eyes, but I also sensed a flicker of apprehension. The atmosphere was thick with anticipation, and I knew it was time to lay everything bare.

"What is it, son of my mother-in-law?" she asked, a teasing smile playing on her lips, as if she sensed the gravity of the moment. I hesitated, feeling the weight of my words.

"I don't know how to say this, but it's important. We haven't really discussed our past partners, and I don't want to stir up any old wounds for either of us," I explained.

"I understand, honey. Go right ahead. I'm all ears," her expression softened. She nodded in approval.

Taking a deep breath, I continued, "Before I met you, I had something with someone I suspect is your cousin. Do you have a cousin named Michelle?" I asked.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Yes! She's my cousin from the father's side. How do you know her?"

"Well," I said, reaching for her hands, "that's what I need to talk to you about, my love." The moment felt monumental, and I knew we were crossing a bridge into uncharted territory.

"Michelle and I had a relationship before you and I met. It wasn't serious, but it was enough that I felt you should know." Linda's expression shifted, a mix of surprise and concern.

PETALS OF FATE

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she asked, her voice moist with confusion.

"I was afraid it would change how you see me," I admitted. "I didn't want to add any unnecessary tension, especially with our wedding so close. But now, with everything happening, I realised it's better to be open with you." She took a moment to process my words. I could see her brow furrowing slightly.

"I appreciate your honesty," she finally said, her tone softening. "It's just... I didn't expect that."

"I understand," I replied, squeezing her hands gently.

I laid it all bare for Linda, recounting the tangled web that led to her cousin Michelle tricking me into believing she was her. "It was a confusing time," I explained, "and I genuinely fell for Michelle, thinking I was in love with you."

Linda listened intently, her brow furrowing in concern. "That must have been so hard for you," she said softly. I went on to share the struggles I faced with June, Michelle's younger sister, and the emotional turmoil that followed. To my surprise, Linda's expression shifted to empathy instead of anger.

"I can't believe she would do that to you," she said, shaking her head. "It's infuriating!"

"Very much so, honey," I added.

"Promise me you'd cut all ties with my cousin. I'm not going to play second fiddle or compete with her—or any other woman—for your affection," she pressed, her eyes locking onto mine with fierce determination.

"I promise, *jaber*—the beautiful one. I want you to know that what I had with Michelle was from the past. My heart belongs to you now, and nothing will change that," I assured

her. She studied me for a moment, searching my eyes for sincerity.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said at last. “It means a lot to me that you trust me enough to share this.”

The tension began to dissipate, replaced by a sense of relief. We were still standing on that bridge, but now, I felt we were moving closer to the other side—together. I knew I had dropped a heavy truth on Linda, one which could have made the night tense. Yet, there’s often a silver lining where there’s bad news. The moment she shared the exciting news, my heart soared. Linda had been contacted by Google, the company where she had interned, with an offer for a position that promised better pay.

“Should I take it?” she asked, her eyes seeking mine for guidance.

“By all means, my sugar,” I said.

I knew this was a great opportunity for Linda. After our official marriage, it would only make sense for us to move in together. The fact that both of our companies were based in Nairobi made it even more convenient. The thought of us working in different locations, especially as a newly married couple who needed time together, really bothered me. It didn’t feel right.

I was overwhelmed with happiness for Linda, so much so that tears welled up as I thought about how much had changed in such a short time. She was truly the key to my fortune, and I felt a deep sense of gratitude for having her in my life. In that moment, I realised just how lucky I was—not only because of

PETALS OF FATE

her career success, but because of the love and partnership we were building together.

With the matter of Michelle finally off my chest, I felt an incredible sense of relief wash over me. The load I had been carrying was gone, and I knew nothing stupid Michelle could say or do could touch me now. As we talked, Linda shared that after learning about her engagement, Michelle had been relentless in trying to find out who the lucky guy was. Linda, however, had decided to keep that a secret, opting instead to let Michelle discover the truth for herself at the wedding. She had even agreed to invite her, along with other family members and close friends.

Having already informed Linda of the visiting plan, she'd contacted her family to make all the necessary arrangements. After agreeing on a date that worked for everyone, I gathered the crew who would accompany me to her house—my uncle Rabuor, cousin Augusto, and my mate Adrian. It was a simple visit, nothing too formal, as the important stuff had already been done in front of both families. The engagement was clear, but today, it was more about finalising the details and ensuring everything was in order.

“Right then,” I said, looking at my uncle, cousin, and Adrian as we gathered by the door. “Linda's ready for us. We've got everything set for later today. It's all about sorting the details now.”

Uncle Rabuor gave a satisfied nod. “Sounds good. No pressure, then. We've already made our intentions clear. Today's just about solidifying things with a bit of a chat.”

Agusto, leaning casually against the wall, grinned. "Yeah, it's a proper friendly visit now. No more of the heavy stuff. Just making sure the families are comfortable and everything's sorted."

"That's right," I said, feeling a bit lighter now that the serious part was over. "This is more of a catch-up, finalising the little things."

Adrian, ever the easy-going one, gave a cheeky grin. "You know me, mate. I'm just here to make sure everyone's having a laugh and keeping the mood light. Nothing too serious. I'll keep everyone relaxed if it gets a bit tense."

I chuckled. "We'll need that. The whole thing's gone pretty smoothly so far, so hopefully, it stays that way. I'm sure there'll be a few laughs when we all get talking."

Uncle Rabuor, who had been quiet for a moment, let out a small laugh. "You two can keep the mood light, but we still have to make sure the bride price is sorted. We'll need to make sure it's respectful, but there's no need to drag things out. Just a little conversation, a handshake, and it'll be done."

"Exactly," Agusto added, "It's a formality now, nothing more. We'll keep things respectful, but no need to get bogged down in the details."

Adrian raised an eyebrow playfully. "Formality or not, I'm still ready for some food. I'm guessing Linda's family's got something nice planned for us, eh?"

I smiled, feeling the familiar warmth of the day ahead. "I'm sure they've got something in mind. It'll be good to just sit down and have a proper chat."

PETALS OF FATE

“Good,” Rabuor said with a slight nod. “We’ll make sure everything’s squared away, then.”

I looked at my uncle, cousin, and Adrian, realising how much I was looking forward to this. It wasn’t about the heavy stuff anymore—it was about family, tradition, and making sure everyone felt at ease.

“Alright then, let’s go and enjoy the day. We’ve all been waiting for this, so let’s make it a good one,” I said, a sense of calm settling over me.

“Right behind you, mate,” Adrian replied, grinning. “Let’s make it a proper visit. We all left and jumped into the car.

The journey to *Ng’ok Olewe*, though familiar, felt different now. It was my second time travelling this road—this road Adrian had taken me down years ago, when my heart was still with Michelle. Back then, my mind had been preoccupied, and the landscape seemed to blur unnoticed. But today, everything looked different. The road, once long and winding, now seemed like a passage of time, one that had witnessed countless changes. The area, already developed in its own way when I first visited, had blossomed further, with the market centre now more alive with energy. The streets were lined with colourful stalls, and the hum of business filled the air. Shops, vendors, and businesses had flourished, a clear sign of the area’s growing vibrancy.

As we neared Linda’s home, I couldn’t help but notice the transformation that had taken place there, too. When I had first visited, the homestead had stood in quiet neglect. After her parents’ separation, the place had seemed abandoned, al-

most forsaken. The once neat compound had fallen into disrepair—paint peeling from the walls, the garden overgrown, and the silence that hung in the air spoke of a family torn apart. It was a place that seemed to carry the weight of loss, with its tired structure and forgotten corners.

But now, as the car drew to a stop before the homestead, I could see that things had changed. Linda's family house, once a shadow of what it could have been, now stood proudly—refreshed, renewed, and full of life. It was as if the land itself had healed with the reuniting of Linda's parents. The walls had been painted, vibrant colours replacing the faded ones of the past. Once wild and untamed, the garden was now carefully tended, with neatly trimmed hedges and flowers blooming in the sunlight. There was a sense of care, of effort, and of love that radiated from every corner of the compound. It felt as if the place had not just been physically transformed but had also regained its spirit, reflecting the newfound harmony within the family.

Linda greeted us at the gate, her smile beaming as she walked toward us, the sunlight catching her feminine features. "Welcome!" she said, "I'm so glad you could make it, my love."

"Thanks, sugar," I replied, pulling her into a warm hug. Her arms wrapped around me easily, and I could feel the excitement and joy in her embrace. "It's great to be here, daughter of my father-in-law." She blushed.

Behind her, her parents stood, looking not just welcoming but also composed, with the kind of calm that comes with years of experience. Linda's father, tall and dignified, extended

PETALS OF FATE

his hand first, his voice deep but gentle. “Welcome, my son,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to have you in our home.”

I shook his hand with respect, smiling back. “Thank you, sir. It’s an honour.” Then, he turned to my company.

Linda’s mother, standing beside him, gave me a soft smile, her kind eyes expressing approval. “It’s lovely to meet you, my dear,” she said, her voice full of compassion. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

We stepped into the house, and I couldn’t help but be impressed. The place was a far cry from the modest homes I was used to. It was spacious, modern, and carefully designed, with sleek furniture and an open-plan layout. The walls were adorned with elegant paintings, and large windows let in the natural light, filling the room with a welcoming glow.

This wasn’t the house I remembered from when Linda’s parents had been separated. The place had been left somewhat neglected then, but now, it had been transformed. The renovations had clearly breathed new life into the home, with every detail thoughtfully considered. A beautiful chandelier hung from the ceiling in the sitting room, adding a touch of glamour, while a rich rug covered the floor, adding comfort to the otherwise sleek décor.

There were two cars parked outside—one belonging to her father, a black SUV, and the other a shiny, modern sedan that her mother drove. Both cars, parked side by side, felt like symbols of the new beginning that this family had experienced.

As we made our way into the living room, Linda’s parents led us to the seats. The room felt more like a place for relaxed

family gatherings than the setting for a serious discussion. Still, I could sense that today was significant.

We all settled in, and Linda, standing beside her mother, cast me a glance full of quiet encouragement. She didn't have to say anything. I knew exactly what this moment meant to both of us.

Uncle Rabuor, who had been quiet until now, cleared his throat and began. "We're here today," he said, his voice diplomatic, "to discuss the bride price for my nephew. We understand the importance of the tradition and want to ensure that it's handled properly."

Linda's father gave a slight nod. His expression was thoughtful, but there was a hint of kindness in his eyes. "We are happy to have you here. This is not just about the bride price. It's about our daughter, and we want what is best for her. Above all, we wish for her happiness." His brothers, who were also Linda's uncles, including Michelle's father, were in attendance.

I glanced at Linda, whose smile seemed to say it all. She was the link between two families, two worlds, and this was where it began.

Uncle Rabuor nodded in agreement. "Of course, sir. We are here to show our respect and, in doing so, want to ensure we meet your expectations. We value the customs, and we want to build a strong foundation for the future."

Linda's mother, with a soft but somehow firm voice, added, "We don't ask for much. Our greatest wish is for Linda to be happy. But the tradition must be observed, and we respect that."

PETALS OF FATE

Agusto, who had been quietly observing up until then, spoke. "To ignore the ways of our land is like enrolling into slavery. We honour our traditions. That's why we've come prepared."

The aunties, who had been sitting nearby, exchanged glances in admiration. One of them, a woman with sharp eyes, finally spoke. "The bride price is a symbol of respect. It shows the man's commitment. We can't allow it to be overlooked, that's for sure."

I nodded, understanding the weight of her words. The room fell into a brief silence, the tension palpable. There was no easy way around this. It was tradition, and it had to be respected.

Uncle Rabuor, unshaken, addressed her, his tone respectful yet firm. "We understand. And we want to honour you. We've come prepared to offer seven cattle."

The room went quiet, and I watched Linda's father exchange a look with her mother and his two brothers. His brow raised slightly, impressed. He turned back to us. "Seven cattle? That is indeed a generous offer," he said, his voice filled with approval. "You honour us with that."

Linda's mother smiled softly, her eyes gleaming with approval. "You are a good man," she said, her voice filled with affection.

The aunties seemed to relax, their stern faces softening, though there was still a careful assessment in their eyes. Actually, if it were not for the dictates of tradition, Linda's parents would have offered a free exchange. They loved me a lot, and besides, what we could offer them was nothing. They were very

much capable of acquiring it at any time. However, I was convinced if that were to be the case, one or two of Linda's many aunts present would have had other ideas. I saw their faces, especially the one with sharp eyes who spoke that day and seemed to be the group leader.

At that moment, my uncle took out the envelopes I had prepared, each one filled with cash. He placed them gently on the table, offering them as another token of respect on my behalf to the parents, aunts, uncles, Linda's only brother, and other invitees present that day. How did I know the number of people present? Linda and I had it all figured out. Besides, it was an all-invited-relatives-affair.

"And these," he said, "are a small gesture of my nephew's gratitude. I hope you accept them as a sign of his appreciation for everything."

Linda's mother took the envelopes, her hands steady as she looked at them, then up at me. You know, women with money. "You've honoured us today," she said, her voice full of warmth. "We accept your offer with gratitude."

As the tension began to ease, Adrian leaned over to me with a grin. "Nice work, mate. They like you."

I smiled back, but my focus was on Linda. Her eyes met mine, and she responded with a cheeky smile. It was done. The formalities were behind us. And now, we could move forwards, together.

PETALS OF FATE

Catholicism was the foundation upon which I would build my marital vows. Having been raised in the Catholic tradition, it felt like my only natural choice. Yet, my fiancée, Linda, was a Seventh-Day Adventist—a pairing that was quite rare. In fact, it's not often you find members of those two denominations marrying, and it's even less common for an SDA member to switch to another faith.

To my surprise, Linda willingly agreed to embrace Catholicism for the sake of our relationship. I had expected some resistance or perhaps even a suggestion that I join her church, but she understood the dynamics at play. In many inter-denominational marriages, it's often assumed that the woman will, willingly or not, abandon her faith to follow her husband's lead. However, in our case, everything felt like it was falling into place effortlessly. It was a true testament to the depth of Linda's love—a love that had been unwavering from the very beginning.

A match made in heaven. That is how I would describe my relationship with Linda. We blended so well, like water and milk. With so much in common binding us together, I was convinced walking into marriage with her would give us little friction as a couple, except for some not-so-good nights when she would be forced to sleep while facing the wall for satan knows what. That, for sure, I knew would be inevitable. With the wedding day nearer than near, my fiancé and her dad had travelled home in preparation for the big day. I had carried myself home, too.

Traditionally, a man and a woman were expected to come from their respective places of birth and meet at the church, and ours was no exception. Everything had been put in place. I invited colleagues from work, close friends, and family members. I didn't want anything extravagant. My plan was to have a well-organised, intimate event that would bring together just a select number of people to celebrate our union.

Linda, too, took charge of her guest list, and hers was notably larger than mine for obvious reasons. Most women tend to relish this kind of spotlight. It was her day, after all; she had every right to invite anyone she wished and to exclude those she didn't want around. Among her guests, as she had promised, was Michelle. I couldn't help but wonder how she would react when she finally realised it was me—her former lover—standing at the altar. It would appear like the case of the biblical stone. The one that had been cast aside by one mason, only to be repurposed by another. Now, set to form the foundation of a new home.

All roads converged at St. Mary's Parish, where Father Wasonga was set to officiate the ceremony. He was a witty and hilarious man, having dedicated his life to serving God while embracing the trials of celibacy. As I sat in the car, I couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of his chosen path. My mind wandered to the taste of Linda's lips, and the idea of spending my life without the sweetness of a woman's kiss like him felt absurd.

I was eager to seal our vows with a kiss that would leave no doubt about our love. One, so exaggeratedly sweet that, it

PETALS OF FATE

would leave even Father Wasonga questioning his commitment to a life without companionship afterwards. My mother, uncle, and cousin were in the car with me while the rest of my family, including my siblings and extended relatives, travelled in another vehicle. And my invited friends, in another. The air was thick with the scent of a new marriage, excitement, and anticipation, and I could hardly contain my joy.

Being a Saturday, I imagined the church would be somewhat quiet with not so many people in attendance. On the other hand, I envisaged a case where I would be caught by surprise to find the venue already buzzing with excitement from a horde of attendees. Most of them intruders you'd always expect in events like that. I knew such a turn of events was likely to happen. Also, I envisioned the pews would be full of people when I snail to the venue—people whose faces shone with eagerness for the bride and groom's arrival.

My family had strategically arrived first; as the man welcoming my future wife into my life, I wanted to symbolise this moment by receiving her at the church, a true homecoming. I was dressed to impress in a tailored black three-piece suit paired with a crisp white shirt and a butterfly-shaped necktie that added a touch of flair.

On my wrist gleamed a beautiful watch that perfectly complemented my attire. My signature Afro hairstyle framed my face. This style had never failed to turn heads. Don't play, especially among the ladies. My sharp-shooter shoes shone brighter than a polished trophy, darker than an African dictator's heart. They gave a stunning finishing touch to my ensemble. I looked good, and deep down, I could feel it.

Outside, the wedding bells rang out, heralding the joy of the day ahead. My groomsmen, dressed to match my stylish ensemble, mingled with Linda's bridesmaids, who had just arrived and were exchanging laughter and friendly banter. Naturally, I had chosen Adrian as my best man, a decision that brought back memories of his playful jest about making him my best man as he handed me "Linda's" phone number back in high school. That lighthearted moment had blossomed into reality we were witnessing before our own eyes.

Inside the church, the choir filled the air with melodious hymns, singing praises to the sanctity of marriage. The atmosphere was electric, with lively dances and jubilant laughter renting the room. It felt as though the very air was charged with excitement with the promise of an unforgettable celebration ahead.

A few moments later, my bride arrived too, after I arrived at the wedding venue. Her face wrapped in smile and resplendence, accompanied by close friends and family members. Behind her, you won't believe who was. It was Michelle!

She was practically labouring to identify my face in the middle of the multitude. I dodged her eyes like a bullet and proudly walked to embrace Linda. The groomsmen and the bridesmaids came to my rescue by forming a circle around us, seductively dancing. That made it all the more difficult for Michelle to recognise my face because of her small height in a throng of taller humans. The two teams welcomed us in pairs, dancing and singing in joyful harmony as we poured in through the church door, leading the procession towards the

PETALS OF FATE

front seats which had been specially reserved for us. Excitement was palpable in the air.

Linda's gown was a breathtaking shade of blinding white, complemented by a delicate veil that floated behind her like a whisper of dreams. Her ivory shoes added a touch of elegance, and the watch on her wrist—a perfect choice I had helped her select—sparkled under the church lights.

Upon laying her eyes on me, Michelle's face went pale with bewilderment as if she had seen a ghost. In a flurry of shock, she excused herself and hurried out. It felt pretty awkward. Meanwhile, the crowd went on with their assignment of letting out wild cheers. Their energy was alive with yearning and anticipation as we prepared to exchange our vows.

After we settled into our seats, Father Wasonga began reading bible passages that beautifully underscored the sanctity of marriage. He recited verses from Ephesians 5:22-27, emphasising the bond of love and the importance of wives submitting to their husbands, alongside Genesis 2:18, Matthew 19:4-6, and 1 Corinthians 7:2-5—each verse suiting the occasion. He then held in his hands the materials from which he would read the vows as we stood at the foot of the pulpit.

“May the groom and his bride now step forward,” he announced.

Linda and I stood lovingly from our various seats and walked close to the pulpit.

“Does anyone in this gathering have any objections to this marriage before I officiate it? “Let them know that they're free

to express any form of dissatisfaction," he added while clinically observing the venue to spot if there was any incoming dissidence.

A heavy silence enveloped the church as all eyes turned to scan the room for any aggrieved party. Linda and I exchanged glances, tension creeping in as we spotted Michelle at the far end, looking utterly dejected. She clutched a handkerchief in her hands, dabbing at what seemed to be tears. We had no idea if her tears were tears of joy for us or tears of sadness for herself. We held our breath, with the fear she was preparing to do something stupid, but she managed to compose herself. Her restraint was such a sigh of relief to both of us.

"No bitter ex?" The man of God jokingly asked, while laughing. The attendees, too, burst into laughter while looking around more intensely now.

"Very well then. There be no case lodged; we can now confidently proceed with the vow," he declared enthusiastically.

"Dearly beloved, he began, "we are gathered here in the sight of God and in the presence of this company to unite this man and this woman in the holy bond of matrimony. Marriage is a sacred institution established by God, who created us male and female. It is a covenant of love, a commitment to mutual support, respect, and fidelity. Carlos and Linda, you have come here today to affirm your love for one another and to pledge yourselves to each other in marriage. Before you make these vows, I invite you to reflect on the sacredness of this commitment you are about to undertake," Father Wasonga opened his speech.

PETALS OF FATE

"Do you, Carlos Otieno, take Linda Anyango to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love her, to honour her, and to cherish her, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, for all the days of your life?" He enquired.

"With all my heart, I do," I replied confidently and proudly.

With a playful glint sparkling in his eyes, Father Wasonga continued, "And do you agree to share with her all that is yours, including your phone password?" Silence.

"Do you?" he teased, as the congregation erupts into joyful laughter.

"I knew that would be a tough one!" he joked, chuckling as he turned to Linda.

"And do you, Linda Anyango, take Carlos Otieno to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love him, to honour him, and to cherish him, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, for all the days of your life?" He went on.

With uncontained excitement, Linda bounced on her toes. "Yes! Yes! Yes, I do!" Her enthusiasm ignited applause and cheers. The church was tangible with energy. We exchanged rings as a lifelong symbol of our love and commitment.

"With the power vested in me by the Church and by the State, I now pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. You may now kiss the bride." Father Wasonga declared in a voice, rich with emotion.

As I leaned in to kiss Linda, the crowd held its breath in suspense and waited. As our lips met, I felt like our world had

suddenly blurred. It felt almost like we were the only two people in existence, and the rest of you had melted like wax. The cheers and ululations crescendoed.

Suddenly, a playful voice from the back called out, "Kiss her like you mean it, Carlos!" Laughter intensified. Followed by a hearty clapping. A few of Linda's bridesmaids also let out excited squeals. They were jumping up and down as if they had just won a lottery. With warm smiles, the older relatives nodded approvingly. We kissed again. Now, more sensually.

"That's it, Carl! Now that's a kiss to remember!" Someone in the front row shouted. And laughter turned into a chorus of congratulatory shouts. I could notice the giggling of children as they spun in circles. Clearly, everyone was caught up in the revelry. Elsewhere, a couple of uncles began a playful chant, urging us to "do it again!" but we ignored them with a smile. We saved the rest for our wedding night.

It felt so *fucking* good. In my heart, I felt that the kiss we shared had a lasting impact on Father Wasonga, just like I had intentionally planned. Why? I saw how he longingly looked at us. Poor miserable celibate! Next was cutting the cake, which we happily fed each other in turns like a mother bird does with its nestlings.

After considerable bites and intentional *mis*bites, we generously decided to share the cake with attendees, starting with our parents, then relatives, friends, and even gatecrashers who, like some magic, seemed to possess a remarkable talent for smelling places of funerals and weddings for free food, almost much like a *Labrador Retriever* dog sniffing out hidden narcotics in a crowded airport. Being a student of my mother, who

PETALS OF FATE

always insisted that one should eat until the stomach protruded, we had ordered enough kilos of cake to feed the mouths of all attendees and intruders alike.

If you thought the celebrations ended at the church, you're wrong. A bigger one waited at our home that evening, where there would be more than enough to satisfy every appetite and leave plenty behind, as in the case of Jesus feeding the five thousand men.

Once the church ceremony came to an end, we made our way to our appointed vehicle—one of the three sleek black Mercedes-Benz E-Class cars freely offered to us by our friends for the occasion. Alongside those, we had hired three pristine white Toyota Crowns from a well-known car dealer to take care of our other travel arrangements for the day. The symbolic choice of black and white mirrored the colour of my suit as the groom and Linda's blindingly white gown as the bride. I'll leave you to guess whose idea that was.

Each car was adorned with balloons in a thoughtful combination of red, black, and white—colours chosen not only for their aesthetic appeal but also for the deeper meanings they carried. As we wormed our way through the bustling town centre, onlookers stared at us in amazement and admiration. Some even paused in their tracks to take in the sight. Inside the car, I turned to Linda and watched her face with satisfaction. I had, at long last, grabbed her from her parents, who seemed hesitant to let her go and stared at us with begging looks, tears visible in their eyes as we made our way to the vehicle.

COLLINS TEUREY

In that moment, I secretly thought about how we would raise a toast that evening to mark our journey together as husband and wife. The innocence with which we sat in the car, longingly fantasising about how we would consummate our marriage in a steamy bedroom session, left me all the more amused. It was as if we hadn't already shared countless moments like that. But, to tell you the truth, it wasn't going to be the first, second, or even third time!

Life is full of surprises, isn't it? We often navigate through waves of uncertainty, unaware of what lies ahead. We curse, pray, and struggle to change things frequently beyond our control. Pain and pleasure come unannounced, and we find ourselves grappling with the unexpected. We ask questions without answers, casting blame when things don't turn out as we hoped. Some prayers are answered in the blink of an eye; others linger in the silence of time. Yet, all of it unfolds for a reason.

It's been four years since Linda said, "I do," and as I sit on our couch, I reflect on my mother's wisdom: tomorrow is always a gift. If today doesn't fulfill the desires of my heart, there's always the promise of a new dawn as long as we dare to muster its unknowns.

Looking back, I can't help but feel grateful for everything I have now and hopeful for what tomorrow might bring. As I set down my pen, Linda and I are blessed with two well-formed daughters. Tonight, though, I find myself contemplating planting another seed inside her—hoping for a son I can

PETALS OF FATE

superciliously name after my late father, Owich Rabala. The rest, I'll leave to the gentle hand of fate.

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