

THE DANDELIONS

By Sheila Anyango

I am Muri, the great Baobab. The oldest tree in the vicinity of Tuba village. The ancestor of all beings in this town. I do not know how old I am, but counting from when I became conscious, 1000 springs have passed.

I have taken observing humans as a pastime. Although I cannot move, my consciousness can hear the whispers and chants of all near me. I have seen the rise and fall of countless eras. Humans are a very interesting species. Their ability to develop is astonishing, and equally is their ability to destroy. I have followed the lives of countless humans, watching them busy with their little lives, wallowing in their joys and sorrows. But the more things change, the more they remain the same.

This village is called Tuba, barely a century old. Given its remote location, it's still very backward compared to the villages near the towns. Although the village is not very large or prosperous, the drama that exists is still entertaining.

Take for example the Guya family of 4. They have a son and a daughter. They are living their lives as best as they can, planting the land like their ancestors. But they're extremely patriarchal. This practice has been the norm for generations in many eras. Sons are valued more than daughters.

But in the Guya family, their eccentricity has been taken a notch higher. The boy, Gido, is highly pampered and all good things are given to him. While the girl, Chiya, is the main labor force of the family. The Guya couple used up all their wealth to send Gido to school in the nearby town. While Chiya stays home to handle the family chores. They rarely have a good word for her. While buying new clothes for their son, their daughter can only settle for her brother's leftovers.

Of course not every family is like this in the village. There are those who are not so eccentric and treat their daughters well. The Kari family is such an example. They have 3 sons and one daughter. Although they place more emphasis on the sons, they treat their daughter kindly. She has even been enrolled in the town school, the very first girl in the village to do so. When this happened it caused quite a sensation in the village and many persuaded the Kari family to stop wasting money on a girl's education, after all girls will be married off sooner or later.

Many girls in the village are envious of the Kari family's daughter. Watching her in her uniform going to school with her brothers, while they're busy with chores upon unending chores. But what can they do, they are not as lucky.

A whole new world opened up to Chiya when she first heard the news. She would hide in the bushes watching Kari's daughter coming from school on the weekends, wishing that she too could also go to school. But knowing her parents, they'd never allow it. She was envious of her brother, watching him using books and pens that she had never seen before. And of course she was never allowed to touch her brother's things. She could only secretly touch the books when no one was in the house.

Her brother became more arrogant after going to school. He followed his parents' attitude and looked down on her, occasionally taunting her for not knowing how to read. To make it worse, now that he had become a full time student, all the work in the house fell on her. After all, her parents had placed all their hopes on their son and would not allow him to do these mundane tasks.

The only reason why I paid attention to her specifically was because of her incessant chants. She was a particularly shy child, and not having any friends to confide in, she would come to me and whisper away her thoughts. She would lean on my trunk daydreaming about the things that could be.

The Guya family's eccentricity was unmatched. Both children were the meat that fell from their mother's body, but the treatment was as distinct as east from west. For example, the villagers weren't well off, except for the Kari family and a few other families who could afford to take their children to school, many could not even afford to eat meat except on special occasions like weddings or New Year's day.

But there was an exception in the Guya family. Despite struggling to make ends meet, they would not hesitate to squeeze themselves to meet their son's needs. So if Guido wanted to eat meat, the family would strive to make it happen. Selling whatever valuables they had left, or trading things with the other villagers. As for their daughter, it was enough to have food and a roof over her head. Anything else was not in their consideration. After all, the son was the hope of the family and when Chiya got married, she would rely on her scholarly brother to be able to have a firm foothold in her husband's house. So it was just right to let her brother have all the good things in the family.

Several winters and springs passed by and Guido was set to go to high school. Over the past few years, despite his parents spending most of their savings to educate him, he had performed averagely, just enough to pass the grade. Chiya's desire to study was strong, but circumstances would not allow it. Although she didn't understand her brother's books, she would occasionally flip through them when no one was around. Gently tracing through the letters she couldn't understand. She would sit under my shade and jerkily draw the few characters she had secretly learned on the sand. She would whisper about the beautiful girls she had seen in the town center on the rare occasions when she followed her mother to visit her brother.

I have heard the whispers, secrets, tears, and joys of many a human being. Many are neither good nor bad, depending on the circumstances. Some are downright evil while few have very pure souls. Chiya was such a being. Simple minded with few desires.

When Guido completed his junior schooling, he managed to convince his parents to allow him to continue studying. But they didn't have the money to cater for the school fees required. Guido set his sights on his sister. While the girl was out running errands, he whispered to his parents about marrying off his sister and using the bride price to pay for his school fees. At first the parents were not very keen on this idea, after all she was barely 15yrs old. If she married out now, who would take care of all the house chores? Moreover, where would they find a son in law willing to pay such a high bride price for her?

It was at this moment that Guido told them about the old widow from the next village. This widower was almost as old as their father and was known for domestic violence. His first wife ran away, and the 2nd died. But Guido did not hesitate to send his sister to the fire pit. No family in the surrounding area was willing to send their daughter to marry the widow. Although they coveted his wealth, their life mattered the most. But the Guya family was undeterred by this. In their eyes, their son's future was the most important. To compensate their daughter, they discussed that they would try to treat her better before getting married. Chiya, who was busy picking firewood, was unaware that her future had been set.

In the next period of time, both the father and son would leave home early and come back late. On one of their late returns, they came back hurriedly beaming with joy. The 3 members of the family immediately locked themselves away in the main house to discuss matters. Chiya was not suspicious or surprised, after all it wasn't the first time for this to happen. She was used to being treated like an outsider in this family. In the room, there were excited whispers from the father and son. They had convinced the widower to marry their daughter, as long as he could give them the bride price requested. The widower had demanded to see the girl first, after all the goods needed to be inspected to avoid being cheated.

When the three came out of the room, they looked visibly happy and excited. So much so that Chiya's mother added more vegetables for her daughter, something she had never done before. Chiya was very surprised as this was the first time the family had treated her kindly. She didn't ask anything but ate her food quietly, albeit a bit happy in her heart.

In the next week, her parents acted even more strangely. They would not let her do many of the hard chores in the house, and occasionally spoke kindly to her. Her food increased visibly. Her mother pulled her aside and told her to relax and take care of herself and not worry about all the work at home. Although unaccustomed to this new treatment at home, she couldn't do anything but comply. Occasionally when no one was in the house, she would come and sit under my shade, whispering about the changes in the family, and her excitement at being treated so well for the first time. Although she had doubts, the excitement at being recognized at home overshadowed everything else.

One evening, she was sent by her mother to deliver some clothes to one of the aunt's at the other end of the village. On her way there, she saw an old man looking at her and smiling strangely. She had never seen this stranger before but she didn't take it to heart. She met him again on her way back. Although uncomfortable at being stared at so brazenly by a stranger, she didn't pay it any mind and rushed back home. Watching all these from my position, I wished I had the ability to speak. To warn the poor girl of the impending danger.

Soon, there were rumors in the village about the Guya family marrying their daughter to the widow from the next village. One person passed to ten and before the week was over, the whole village was talking about it. It was only a matter of time, after all nothing could be hidden in such a small village. Chiya who had been kept home was unaware of the rumors flying around. It was only when she went to fetch water from the river that she heard the young girls she would walk around with congratulating her on her upcoming marriage. The shock was so great that she couldn't

remember how she walked back from the river. Wandering around like a lost soul, thinking back to when things started being weird at home. The realization that they were going to sell her to a violent widower, old enough to be her father was earth shaking. She couldn't go home out of fear, so she came and squatted on my roots and wept quietly like a wounded animal.

In a remote village like this one, early marriages are very common. The value of a girl's life is tied to how much benefit she can bring to the family. Although not every family is as cruel as the Guya family, girls are raised to provide domestic labor for the family until such a time when they will be married off to their husband and become his responsibility. It is why many families prioritize sons, because they believe that having a son to support old parents, to provide a strong labor force and be a backing for their female relatives is much more important than having daughters.

I watched Chiya walk home dejectedly, as if resigned to her fate. That night after cooking, she tentatively asked her parents if what the villagers were saying about the marriage was true. They seemed more shocked that there were rumors in the village than that she was being married off to a widower almost thrice her age. She listened as her mother persuaded her to sacrifice for the family, after all, once her brother passed his exams and got a good job, he would not ignore her.

Watching her cry ceaselessly, her brother arrogantly told her that he could not stop schooling and he would be the pillar of the family in the future, it was her duty to help out when called upon. Her pleas to cancel the marriage fell to deaf ears. She begged her parents to not marry her to the violent widow, but it was a foregone conclusion. Her mother ushered her to the room and tried to persuade her further.

The next day she watched as her parents and brother shepherded her and kept watching wherever she went. They could not allow anything to go wrong and the marriage plans were set into motion. Chiya was not allowed to go outside on her own, unless accompanied by her brother. As the wedding day approached, Chiya became withdrawn and quieter. Since she wasn't allowed to go outside without supervision, she couldn't come to visit me. However on the D-Day of her wedding, I was surprised to see her sneaking around at night. She quietly sat on my roots without saying anything. She cried for a while and suddenly stood up and walked back quickly as if she had made up her mind about something.

Early the next day, the whole village was woken up by a scream from the Guya family compound. I watched as villagers rushed into the compound. Soon there were wails and shouts of shock from the group. I knew what had happened to Chiya. The resolute back she showed yesterday seemed like a final farewell. I was only sorry that I couldn't stop it. Soon there were rumors in the village that Chiya had committed suicide. Many accused the family of pushing their daughter to death. Especially after the widower came to pick up his bride only to be told that she had died. What ensued was the drama of both parties quarreling over the bride price. With one party demanding a refund and the other group denying responsibility.

Death comes and goes and time seems to dilute its effect over time. Her funeral was hastily done. In a few weeks new gossip had cropped up in the village and many had forgotten the quiet

girl of the Guya family. The government's arm is not long enough to reach such remote places, and that's why such practices, although frowned upon, are still very common. A life was quietly snuffed out, and the perpetrators went on with their lives. Occasionally you'd hear cursing from the Guya family members when talking about their daughter. After all, who told her to inconvenience the family with her death. They lost a capable laborer and the bride price that they were forced to return.

Maybe in time, no one would remember her. Like dandelions in the wind.

Those whose lives are cut off abruptly before soaring linger on my mind the longest. Even though time erases their existence in the world, they still leave their traces in me.

THE END