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The great mountain was hiding itself. At a glance, it seemed there was no mountain there at all—only a gray tent of clouds rising into the blue sky.

Wambui stood, her feet apart, as if planted in the red earth. Her body was bent over in an inverted V-shape, legs absolutely straight, bottom uppermost, her trunk slanted down to where her hands were planting seedlings in the fertile ground of the *shamba*. She was a slender girl, her skin black and glowing. Her full bosom was heavy and brimming with milk for her boy-child, who lay asleep against her back. She and the baby were bound together with a swathe of African cloth which was knotted at her stomach and shoulder. The vivid yellow and purple cloth enveloped the child completely, covering even his head from the fierce rays of the afternoon sun. Wambui straightened up. Her hand went instinctively to hold the baby as she moved.

She bent again and continued with her work, her right hand slitting open the soil with the blade of the

*jembe*, her left deftly slipping each plant into place and closing the earth tenderly around it. She never looked back at what she had planted, but moved along, slowly and meticulously, in a perfectly straight line, over to the perimeter hedge, then back along the next furrow.

As she turned again, her eyes were drawn to the tallest of the banana trees. It was in the shade of that tree that Irungu had sat, making his plans for the *shamba*.

“We will plant the maize there,” he had said, indicating the area she was now working, “and the orchard will be over there.”

She glanced across at the cluster of young banana, avocado, and orange trees, all thriving under her care.

“And at the back we’ll have rabbits and hens.”

The wooden frames of the hutches were just visible behind the house.

“And if we have a good crop of maize, we will build a stone house with a tin roof.”

“A house like Shiku’s!” she’d said, joyously. “With stone walls and glass windows.” She would be so proud to live in a house like that.

She could remember Irungu exactly as he was on that day. She could see him, her husband, his sensual lips and his handsome face under that old straw hat of his. His dark eyes had twinkled and glowed as he had spelled out his plans. Then he had lowered his head to concentrate on the piece of wood that he was carving. Even when he was relaxed, Irungu’s hands were never

still: always whittling away at pieces of wood, creating shapes of animals and birds.

“What is it you are making, Irungu?” she had asked.

“Ngai, god of the mountain,” he had answered, smiling up at her.

The blade of his knife was working round and round a single point, sharpening it like the tip of a spear.

“I know,” she had said. “Ngai, the warrior, coming to destroy the people who have forsaken him for the Christian god!” It was a constant theme of Irungu’s.

He had smiled. “Wait. You will see.”

When he had finished carving, he inspected his creation, then handed it to her.

As Wambui took the effigy, she laughed. The little figure had laughed back at her—its teeth open in an enormous grin.

Holding Ngai in her hand, she had seen the sharp point she had thought might be a spear. It was Ngai’s phallus, erect and jutting out beneath his pot belly. At the back, Irungu had carved a tiny pair of buttocks.

“Now, I know why Ngai is so happy!” Wambui’s laughter shook the leaves of the banana tree.

“He is like I am when you are beside me.” Irungu’s grin was as broad as Ngai’s and he had pulled her down beside him on the ground.

“You,” she had scolded him. “You pretend to respect tradition, but if you really did, you would say that this is taboo.” She had smiled provocatively as she spoke and run a finger gently up and down his chest.

“But it is your duty to bear children for the continuity of the tribe.”

“By carrying on like this in the middle of the day?” she had mocked. “Ngai might laugh, but he would not approve!”

“Pah,” he had spat. “To hell with Ngai!”

Still feigning protest, Wambui had followed him into the house. It always used to be like that with Irungu. So much fun. There was a wildness in him that she loved. It was part of his charm.

But she had been proved right in what she had said about him. Irungu had no respect for tradition—or anything. She looked with disgust at the dry stalks of last season’s maize, standing taller than herself. She had picked and burnt most of them, returning the ashes as fertilizer to the soil. But that was Irungu’s job. He had promised to do his share. She had left some straggly stalks behind for him, as reminders of his neglect.

She let a wave of disappointment and anger well inside her as she looked up at the circular straw hut that was still her home. It had been a good maize crop. Irungu must have fetched plenty of money for it in the market in Nairobi. Not one shilling had come back to her.

Wambui straightened again and squinted up to where the mountain was hidden. She wondered if those clouds would bring rain to settle in her newly planted seedlings. Maybe Ngai was visiting his mountain now and would see her need. Maybe he would not. He was a fickle god,

that one. Anyway, she didn't believe in all that superstition. If her plants needed water, she would draw it herself from the new water scheme in the village.

Wambui paused in her work as a movement caught her eye. A blue and green bus had pulled in below at the road and a familiar figure was alighting. Her aunt, Wairimu, was back from the city.

Leaving her *jembe* and sheltering the unplanted seedlings from the sun, Wambui hurried down the lane to meet her aunt. Old Wairimu had begun the steep ascent. On her back was a heavy bag, which was anchored to her forehead by a long strap. Her frail body stooped forward under the strain. She had a live chicken tucked under her arm and an array of brightly-colored plastic bags.

Wambui took the smaller bags from her. "What news of your journey, Tata?"

"Fine, very fine," her aunt replied. "What news of yourself?"

"Quite fine. What news of Nairobi?"

"Fine."

Wambui bit back the question that was uppermost on her tongue. All the usual pleasantries had to be gone through first. Or maybe, just maybe, she was afraid to ask.

There was silence for a minute while the old woman negotiated a steep slope. Wambui put out a hand to give her some support. When the aunt had recovered her

breath, Wambui asked, as casually as she could: "Tata, what news of Irungu?"

"Irungu will come tomorrow."

"He said that before, but still he never comes."

"He has been busy."

"What is it that keeps him so busy in Nairobi?"

"He will come tomorrow. He has more time now he's finished building—" She broke off, biting her lip.

Wambui felt as if she were choking. Her voice came out high-pitched and strangled. "What is Irungu building in the city? A house?"

"I was not supposed to tell you. Sorry."

"But how can you lie to me? How can you protect him?"

"Forgive me, child. It was not Irungu I was trying to protect."

They had reached the *shamba*, and Aunt Wairimu gathered back her belongings.

"Go, now, Wambui," she said gently. "Finish the planting before Irungu comes."

The child was waking now, so Wambui sat herself down under the banana tree. She unwound the cloth and brought the baby round to her lap, opening the buttons of her blouse and slipping her nipple into his mouth. His huge, dark eyes stared steadily at her as he suckled. She felt a fierce surge of love for the child and then a shudder of revulsion for Irungu. For the pretense. The lies.

What a fool she had been to imagine that her marriage was different from all the others! She knew the stories of so many girls in her position, and she had often participated in deluding these women—assuring them that their husbands were faithful, when everyone knew they weren't. All that time she, herself, was being deceived. And she had never suspected.

The first time Irungu came home from the city, driving that shining silver car, Wambui had been worried. He was dressed in a dark suit and tie and a gleaming white shirt. His leather shoes shone.

His mother, aunts, sisters, brothers, cousins, and neighbors had all gathered round, admiring him, admiring the Mercedes, where it was parked halfway up the lane. The little ones touched the car tentatively with their fingers and Irungu scolded them, making a big show of taking out a cloth and polishing off fingerprints. He told them that his boss would be very displeased if he found marks on his Mercedes. Being a driver was such a responsible job. Not only did he have to drive the boss to work and take the boss's wife shopping and his children to school, but he had to keep the car spotless. Wambui could see them all looking at him in awe. Every child among them was wishing he was grown up, so that he, too, could be a driver like Irungu.

And Wambui had felt proud, but troubled. Now that Irungu had this new job, he could come home only for a few days each month. He would be away in the city

most times without her. And the city women would not be immune to his charms and his good looks, so enhanced by his new attire and by his job as driver of a Mercedes. She had caught sight of herself in the panel of the car, her body heavy and pregnant with Irungu's child. She had smoothed back her short hair, plaited into itself in a kind of zigzag pattern. She was conscious for the first time of how unsophisticated she must seem in his eyes.

Two weeks after the birth of his child, Irungu had come home again. Proudly, Wambui had placed the baby in his arms. "Look Irungu, your first-born. A boy-child."

The baby was perfect and beautiful. But it seemed that his joy at the birth of his son was muted. He was restless, impatient about the harvesting of the maize, anxious to be on his way back to the city. That night, he had lain beside her but remained preoccupied and distant. His body, usually insatiable, never stirred with desire for her.

Yes, of course she had known. But she had hidden that knowledge in some shadowy place in her mind, where it could not hurt her. She had deluded herself. Anger boiled inside her, not just against Irungu, but against herself, against Aunt Wairimu, and everyone else who had supported the lie.

They said a man could not last more than a few weeks without a woman. That was their nature. If it was only some woman from the streets he was dallying with,

it would not be so bad. She would have expected that. But this woman had been favored over herself. Irungu had taken the money Wambui had earned—money that was promised for her new house—and had spent it on a house for another woman.

Of all the feelings churning through and through her mind, the strongest one was hatred for that woman. She took the feeling for a moment. Held it. The intensity of it frightened her.

Wambui pulled her hand into a fist and pounded the earth under the banana tree. It was the woman's face she saw. She punched the tree trunk; punched and punched, imagining the woman's body. A crimson stream of blood flowed across her fingers. She sucked the injured knuckle and realized it was her own blood she was tasting. But she did not care. The need to hurt was too great. She punched the tree again.

The child began to cry, disturbed by the movement and the agitation of the mother.

“Sorry, baby, sorry.”

She moved him round to the other breast and forced her body to be still.

Wambui looked back at her straw house. Through the hole in the roof, a stream of smoke was rising from the fire that Aunt Wairimu had lit. The house stood defiantly. It goaded her. It insulted her by its existence. It was primitive. It was old. It was rickety. It leaked when it rained. It stank of decay. It was riddled with termites.

She hated that hut. Irungu had promised her a proper house. He had cheated her. First he had gone away and now he had built her house. Built it far away from here. Built it in the city. Built her house. Her stone house.

“I will not be treated like this!” she resolved. “First, I am going to burn down that heap of sticks that he expects me to live in. Then I will go to Nairobi and demand to live in my stone house.”

But the plan was no sooner made than it was discarded. How could she go there? That woman would be there.

Wambui strapped the baby on to her back and went to finish her planting. She gave another look of disgust at the hut. And then she thought that if Irungu had built a house in Nairobi, that, at least, meant that he would not bring his other woman here. Thank God she would be spared the disgrace of that! Anyway, a city woman would not come here to live in a straw hut. A city woman would not dirty her hands in the clay of the *shamba*. City women wore fine clothes. They smoked cigarettes and drank beer. They bleached their faces and wore extensions in their hair. Wambui had seen them herself, on the few occasions she had been to Nairobi.

The planting was finished now. Wambui shouldered her *jembe* and trudged wearily back up the *shamba* to the house.

A smell of cooking wafted from the pot above the fire and Aunt Wairimu spooned mashed potato, maize

and beans onto a plate. The old woman dandled the child on her lap while Wambui ate.

“I have left the chicken for tomorrow when Irungu comes,” she said.

“He deserves nothing from me, or from you, either,” Wambui complained.

“Ah, child,” said Aunt Wairimu, sighing. “Always, it is like this in the beginning. But you will get used to it. Like I have.”

“You, Auntie. Yes, I know. But I did not expect this. My parents have a Christian marriage. Why can’t I?”

“Things are not always as they seem, Wambui. Somehow, we are caught between the old values and the new ones. People find much room for disregarding any rules that do not suit them.”

Wambui nodded. She knew the truth of what her aunt said. Irungu might have made promises to the priest and the Christian god, but he would argue that those promises were made to the god of the white man and that his people had their own god and their own traditions.

In her heart she knew that those promises Irungu made meant nothing. He would believe in whatever belief suited him best.

Wambui lowered her head and let the tears fall from her. The aunt put her arm around her and Wambui looked up into her face.

“What will I do, Tata?”

“There is nothing to be done, Wambui.”

The aunt turned from Wambui and concentrated on the baby on her lap, stroking his back gently to lull him to sleep. "You will always be the first wife, Wambui. Mother of his first-born son. It is not so very bad." Then the aunt half closed her eyes and began her story: "Long, long time ago, when the great Ngai was dividing the universe, he brought our father, Gikuyu, to these lands to be the first tiller of the soil. Then he created the mountain of brightness as a dwelling place for himself, so he could rest there when he came to inspect his territory.

"Gikuyu's wife, Moombi, gave birth to nine daughters. Gikuyu made sacrifice and raised his hands to the mountain of Kirinyaga. Ngai came to his assistance. 'Go down to the sacred fig tree,' Ngai told him, 'and there you will find nine handsome young men who will marry your daughters.' And so it was.

"Gikuyu's descendants were many in the next generations. The daughters of Moombi ruled over the world and over their menfolk. But the women became selfish and cruel. They took many husbands and, through spite and jealousy, they put their men to death, even for trivial offenses such as infidelity. No matter how the men pleaded with them for leniency, they would not bend their ears to listen.

"At that time, the women were very fierce fighters and were stronger than the men. And so the men came together and thought out a plan to free themselves. They

all went home at the same time, and every man lay down with his woman. After six moons had passed, all the women were swollen with child and were helpless. The men rose up against them and won the world for themselves. And so it is that men have won the right to decide what is best for all of us.”

“I do not believe that, Tata.”

“You can believe or not believe. It is still part of what we are.”

Late the next afternoon, Wambui saw the green and blue bus pull in at the stop below. Irungu jumped down the steps and waved up at her where she stood. She felt the rising pace of the blood in her veins and tried to quell any trace of joy she felt at seeing him. All that was over now.

As he made his way up the hill toward her, she watched him, wondering vaguely why he had traveled by bus instead of driving. Perhaps he did not want to be seen when he arrived, she thought, because of what he had to tell her.

When he approached, she saw that his handsome face had been damaged: the nose flattened and bent slightly to the left, a purple snake of scar twisting through his right eyebrow. She paused, in shock for a second. He caught her off-guard with his embrace. Already, she was holding his face away from her, surveying it, forgetting that this was not the same Irungu, her husband.

“What is this? What happened?”

His smile was radiant and unchanged. “Ah, that? It was an accident.”

“The Mercedes?”

“It was not as lucky as I was.”

She almost smiled, but remembered herself and drew her mouth into a tight, hard line.

“Wambui, what is wrong? Are you not glad to see your Irungu alive?”

“Yes, I am glad.” It was the truth. She might wish his woman dead, but not Irungu.

He had turned his attention to the child now, and was making a great fuss of him, tickling him and holding him up in the air so that he laughed. And then Aunt Wairimu was waiting at the door and was ushering them in, serving up steaming bowls of chicken soup. It was not turning out at all as Wambui had planned.

After the meal, Aunt Wairimu went back to her own house, while the young couple went to inspect the *shamba*. It had rained a little overnight and the maize plants were looking pert and green.

“Take me to Nairobi,” Wambui said. “Let me live in your new stone house.”

Irungu looked steadily at her. There was no sign of guilt in his eyes. And then he laughed, a huge, merry laugh, and Wambui hoped in her heart that that meant it wasn't true.

“Ah, you have made a mistake! This shack that I built is so small, it would fit three times into our house.”

“It is not made of stone?”

“Timber and tin.”

That was some consolation at least. “How can you afford to buy land in Nairobi?”

“Ah, Wambui, what would you know about these things?” Again, he was laughing at her. “This land is squatters’ land.”

“You have built a house on someone else’s land? Without permission?”

He shrugged. “That land was taken from the Kikuyu, anyway.”

“So, you do not mind if any Kikuyu comes in here to live on your land?”

“Ah, Wambui, why are you so angry with me? It is a hard life in the city. These landlords are so corrupt. Even they do not own the lands for which they charge rent. How can I afford to pay these people?”

“And you have no job?”

“That *mzungu* was always ordering me around. ‘Jackson, do this. Jackson, do that.’ As if I was his boy. Tomorrow, I will find a better job.”

“When will you take me to see your new house?”

“Why would you want to go there, Wambui? You hate the city. Remember the time you went to Peponi Road?” How typical it was of him to disarm her like this, by prodding at her sore point, reminding her of her shame.

She had gone once to visit her friend, Shiku, who lived in a rich suburb of Nairobi. The name *Peponi*

meant “heaven” and for years Wambui had fantasized about the mansion in which Shiku lived. But Peponi Road turned out to be a formidable place, with all the gateways locked and shuttered. Wambui had peered through a tiny peephole in a huge, black gate. She had barely snatched an eyeful of what could be seen of the house behind, when the gruff voice of a watchman spoke beside her: “What do you want?” Wambui jumped in fright. She wasn’t sure if he was watching her through another peephole that she couldn’t see. She looked around cautiously.

“Is Mama Shiku home?”

“Mama is not here.”

She had wanted to explain that she and Shiku were the same age and had been at school together. If he told Shiku who she was, she would be glad to see her. But the words would not form in Wambui’s mouth. There was a sign on the gate: *Wabwa wakali*. She was terrified of dogs. Later, Irungu told her that people in Nairobi put these signs on their gates even when they had no dogs. The signs were intended to keep thieves out. But that was what she had felt like then—like a thief—someone who had no right to be in that place. Wambui had slunk away from there, sad and ashamed. She had never told Shiku about her visit.

Irungu was right. She hated the city. It was too crowded, too hot, too airless. The streets and the buildings were all very bewildering, from the wide city streets

and the skyscrapers to the tiny filthy tracks and clustered shacks of the slums. And there were so many women to steal her husband.

“You are not allowed to take another wife.”

“According to whom?”

“The priest. The Catholic Church.”

“I see. It is this priest who is poisoning you against me, interfering in our lives as usual.”

“This has nothing to do with the priest.”

“But it is he who says I must have only one wife. Tell him that I will have as many wives as I like and that my marriages will be approved under the customary law.”

“So there *is* another woman.”

He was calmer now. “No, Wambui, there is only you. But there is a principle. I will not have any white man telling me what I must do.”

The clouds suddenly disappeared from the mountain and the huge peaks rose up dazzling white and breathtaking. Wambui felt a chill of cold air from the snowy glaciers. It seemed Ngai never tired of playing this game of hide and peep. Just when she thought she had escaped him, he appeared to drag her back to the old ways. She imagined Ngai laughing at her and her modern pretensions. Her wish to be an only wife. Her hopes for a stone house with glass windows. Ha ha ha.

Irungu put his two hands on her shoulders and looked her full in the eyes. “You know me, Wambui. Your Irungu. Your husband. I will not cheat you.”

So, this is how it will be, she thought. He will lie to me and I will pretend to believe him. I will not do as Aunt Wairimu does—traveling up and down to visit her husband and his other family. And, in time, perhaps I will come to believe him—or to forget what I know.

As quickly as it had appeared, the great mountain was lost again under the blanket of night. Wambui followed her husband back to the refuge of the circular straw house.