

LIVING LIKE WEAVER BIRDS

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Twee-twee twee-twee... the birds sang in the dense green foliage above Nyonyozi's head. Like a young giraffe stretching its neck to locate predators, she raised her head to look at them. Two of the flock broke into a frantic pursuit and the other dashed into a nest nearby like it was late for the feast inside. Her mind raced backwards. "Free from any dangers and worries. Were we like them we would fly up, very far away from this village and its heartless people."

"Helen, it's not that everybody is bad."

"Nyonyozi, a bad egg will spoil the whole omelet."

Nyonyozi remembered this conversation very well. They were at the same forest for firewood, a few days after Helen's mother found them and called her aside for a 'woman-to-woman' talk. They all knew what that meant.

"Don't tell me those things again mother. I don't need the knife to make me a full woman. I am content with the way God created me," Helen had said to her mother. Nyonyozi watched them from a distance.

"Helen... will you watch your father lose his inheritance because you don't want to face *rotwet*? We'll see how far your God will protect you," Helen's mother said and stormed away.

Above them, the weaver birds were singing, flirting and playing. Helen looked up at them for a moment; bemused.

Look at them, they are free of all worries and dangers. Helen used to tell her.

“Dear Helen! My heart bleeds for you,” Nyonyozi mumbled as a tear dropped from her eyes.

The sky was slowly darkening as the sun hastened to hide behind the cloud. Soon, the hyenas and all other creatures of the night would come out for their daily hunt.

She remembered Walinga, the man-animal that was said to hang around the village. People said he was a man during the day but turned into a leopard at night. He ate young children that walked alone at night or made them his slaves. Nyonyozi threw the bundle of firewood on her head and hurried home.

The hen flapped its wings trying to chase away the eagles that hovered in the sky. Nyonyozi quickly placed the bundle of firewood in one corner of the kitchen near the fireplace and joined in the chase. She glanced at the hen. *Coo-coo-coo-coo*. It clucked and drooped its wings like a canopy of trees above young plants. The chicks needed no further invitation. They crept under for protection. Nyonyozi remembered similar moments in her life. Her mother always carried her in her chest like a kangaroo as if to protect her from hawks plying the sky.

Nobody was home. Being a Saturday evening, her mother, Kentaro was at church for a Mothers’ Union Program while her father Cheptoyek was most likely at a beer party at the trading centre. Nyonyozi heard Mayenje mooing for attention. She picked a milk calabash from the kitchen rack and rushed to the kraal.

Mayenje now behaved like a child throwing tantrums. She moored and stamped swinging its long horns backwards, forwards and sideways. When she saw Nyonyozi, she stood still for a moment

and then started running as if challenging her to a race. Nyonyozi knew this game too well. She ran after her this time determined to drain the cheekiness out of her. They did two rounds around the kraal but Mayenje wasn't about to give up. She increased her tempo and the mood grew more competitive scattering the rest of the herd into confusion.

Nyonyozi never saw the big stone that always sat at the edge of the door to the kraal. She tripped over crushing the calabash into pieces. She heard heavy feet and scornful laughter above her head. It was her grandfather!

"Ha-ha... coward! The prize of rejecting tradition. That cow wouldn't have fought you had you been woman enough."

Nyonyozi quickly gathered herself on her knees. Bowing down her head, she greeted, "Good evening Grandpa."

"I can't be your grandfather. Not to a coward. If your father won't rule over your mother, I will take you for cutting myself. I, Kwerit, son of Kulany, the mighty Chief of Binyiny won't stand to see our family desecrated. Cheptoyek failed when he married that uncircumcised goat, your mother. Then she denied him a son. All we have is you, filthy girl," Mzee Kwerit roared as he raised his right foot and moved towards Nyonyozi. She ducked in time to escape the kick.

"I swear you and your mother will never have peace in this home unless you embrace our culture. Take the knife and become women." He turned his back and started to move away. Then, he stopped and turned to address Nyonyozi, "Don't deceive yourself. Educated or not, you must face the *rotwet* and bring us bride wealth. At your age, you would be breastfeeding your third child."

With that, he trotted towards the trading centre.

Sounds of laughter filled Binyiny trading centre as the sun disappeared with a brilliant flash behind the bastion of mountains. The smell of wood from the cooking fires filled the atmosphere as men gathered around a pot sipping the locally brewed maize beer, using foot long straws.

“Clansmen, our next beer party will be at Cheptoyek’s household,” Cheborion, his elder brother shouted.

There were murmurs in the gathering. As Cheptoyek stood in the middle of the gathering to raise the beer pot as a sign of acceptance, someone gripped his hand.

“Ha-ha, who would want to drink something prepared by cowards that never faced the *rotwet*?” Mzee Kwerit roared creating silence.

“Neither my wife nor child is a coward. I won’t allow you to ruin their lives with your worthless *rotwet*. Tell me Chief, what happened to my sister Chespi? Why is she crippled? And Helen? Huh? Where is she? I have always told you that female circumcision will never be a mark for a woman into adulthood,” Cheptoyek hit back at his father.

“You are testing my patience, Cheptoyek. Uncircumcised women aren’t allowed to enter kraals. Yet your daughter and wife do so. Listen to me, I, the Mighty Chief of Binyiny, swear on my clan and ancestors that Nyonyozi will not skip the coming *rotwet* season.”

He raised his walking stick in the air as some people cheered him.

The moon was a warm milky glow in the sky, making the tree trunks gleam as if they were brushed with iridescent paint. Nyonyozi sat with her mother by the fireplace in their hut. The walls were dark

with decades of wood smoke. Kentaro watched her daughter mingle the millet flour into a millet bread. She was proud to have groomed her into the lady she was.

“When you were little, your father always said your eyes shone like stars in the sky. That’s why he called you Nyonyozi. In my mother tongue, Nyonyozi means a star. You are our star. Don’t let anyone steal your gleaming light. Don’t mind people’s words. We love and support you. Right baby?” Kentaro asked her daughter who had now finished preparing supper and was lying on her lap as her mother gently stroked her hair.

“Right Mother. Do you think schools will open soon? Am worried that most parents are marrying off their daughters for bride wealth.”

There was a knock on the door and Nyonyozi hurried up to open. “Welcome back, father. How was your evening?” greeted Nyonyozi. “It was fine. How is my darling?” Cheptoyek said as he pecked his wife on the cheeks. He came home early today, and was surprised to find supper ready. He automatically knew that Nyonyozi was the one who cooked, not that his wife was a slow cook but because their daughter always prepared supper early. He sat on a wooden stool and looked at his wife and daughter on the mat beside him. “Nyonyozi, I have good news for you. The president has directed schools to re-open next week.”

“What?”

Nyonyozi couldn’t believe her ears. “Papa, where did you get the news?”

“Everyone in the trading centre was talking about it. They said that the Coronavirus cases have reduced.”

Finally, she was going back to school!

Buildings with rusted iron sheets welcomed Nyonyozi to Binyiny High School. The iron sheets on the Form Six block had been blown off by the wind. She could see clouds gliding past the sky above her head. She looked through the window and saw the bushy compound outside. She remembered Helen's fatigued face whenever they had to slash the compound. *Helen. Helen. It can't be true that she is gone forever.* Helen was the only friend she had. Not that everyone at school hated her but Helen was the only one who could stand the pressure that came along with befriending an uncircumcised girl. She remembered how Helen often defended her whenever Chebet attacked her.

"Coward, that's why you refuse to become a 'full' woman." Chebet did not only bully her. She hated her.

Maybe Helen was tired of Chebet's taunts that is why she decided to face the knife.

"Nyonyozi dear, I have decided to face the *rotwet*," Helen said one day as they were in the forest, collecting firewood.

"What? Are you serious? Is it because of that conversation you had with your mother last week? Helen please, you know *rotwet* has caused more harm than good. Do you choose it?"

"My dear, there are times when your choice doesn't matter. You can't fight the whole village, can you? You know, I have always wanted to live like those weaver birds. What big respect they have for one another! A male weaver bird builds a nest for the wife-to-be. But if she doesn't like it, she tears it down and her decision is respected! Hmn. The male keeps building nests until she is satisfied. That's how I hoped my life would be. To be able to make decisions that will be respected without any worries of me being a woman or not. But... that's not possible now. Grandpa has threatened to disown my father. In order

to protect his inheritance, I have to face the knife. I am sorry, Nyonyozi.” Helen’s eyes filled with tears before she ran away, leaving Nyonyozi dumbfounded.

Days turned into weeks. Being uncircumcised, Nyonyozi couldn’t attend the ceremonies. After the circumcision, all girls were taken into isolation where no one was allowed to see them. Nyonyozi prayed and hoped that Helen was alright not until when her father and uncle Cheborion came rushing home.

The strong smell of disinfectant hit Nyonyozi’s nostrils as she entered the hospital room. Helen lay on the bed looking weak and pale. Nyonyozi’s face was near hers and there were tears on her cheeks. Helen put up a hand and brushed them away.

“Don’t cry Nyonyozi. I am gone.”

“No. Please Helen, don’t... You will be okay.”

“Nyonyozi, I lost too much blood. I am dying...”

“No, Helen. Don’t die... I am sorry. I didn’t protect you.”

Tears nipped her throat. She sank her face in Helen’s shoulder, not wanting her to see how broken she was.

“Dear, you don’t need to be sorry. You also had no choice. Though you have it now. To live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions that will be respected. To build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.” She closed her eyes. Her rasping breath ceased; her grip slackened.

It was the second week. There was a low turnout of students. Her class which had twenty students before the Coronavirus pandemic, now had only eight. Nyonyozi’s mind kept drifting to Helen’s words.

She had to do something. It was towards December when the circumcision festivities would start.

She walked to the headmaster's office, and knocked on the door. She remembered the number of times she had knocked on this door pleading for more time to pay for her tuition fees. This time she was on a different mission. She wanted to help the girls.

"That's a very good cause Nyonyozi. The low student numbers are worrying. You have our full support as a school. I will contact our District headquarters and other schools for support. Good luck and let the stars shine."

The mountainous terrain of Kapchorwa made movement difficult. They traversed many villages sensitising people about the dangers associated with early marriages, teenage pregnancies and female circumcision. Nyonyozi bonded with most of her schoolmates except Chebet. Probably because Chebet's grandmother, Chalengat, was a famous *mutik*, the surgeon. A good granddaughter would never stand against her grandmother's cultural office.

"Ha-ha, a group of cowards. A coward at 18! Nyonyozi, you're a coward forever. There is nothing to tell us when you haven't faced the *rotwet*. Go away before something happens," Mzee Kwerit threatened.

"There is no coward here, Grandpa. Helen didn't face the *rotwet* to get rid of cowardice. She was forced. Where is she now? That's why we are here. We won't lose any more lives to the *rotwet*."

"Shut up coward. I am your Chief, coward."

"Don't call me a coward again. You can't reverse what happened to Helen or Aunt Chespi."

"You're getting on my nerves coward. I hope you'll like what happens to you," Mzee Kwerit gritted his teeth and moved away.

The resistance gradually decreased. Many school children supported Nyonyozi's project. They traversed many villages holding placards with messages against female circumcision. This awakened the District officials who formally feared to lose their electoral offices.

Nyonyozi's heart beamed with pride as she walked briskly back home. The District officials and her team prepared an event the next day where they would join hands to mobilise the communities. She heard an unusual sound. Suddenly, she was hit just over her left ear. She slumped to the ground without a word.

Nyonyozi opened her eyes but couldn't focus. Her brain felt loose like she was floating on water.

"Good, you are awake!"

A voice of a man! Mzee Kwerit's voice!

"Grandpa! What am I doing here?" Nyonyozi asked, sobbing.

"Ha-ha, of course you know why you are here. Congratulations! You will be a woman, finally."

Mzee Kwerit was scornful. In a moment Chebet's grandmother, the famous *mutik*, entered carrying the concoction of herbs in a calabash.

Nyonyozi seethed with fury. As Chalengat reached for her, Nyonyozi cracked a fist as hard as she could against the *mutik*'s jaw. As Nyonyozi got to her feet, Mzee Kwerit gave her a blow on the back of her head. She fell to the floor. Mzee Kwerit held her legs as Chalengat applied the pre-circumcision herbs.

"Silly coward. You try saving others when you can't save yourself!"

Mzee Kwerit mocked as Chalengat held out her curved *rotwet* ready to make Nyonyozi a full woman.

A sharp sound of drums and people chanting suddenly filled the air. Mzee Kwerit and Chalengat were startled. Mzee Kwerit ran to the entrance and came back worried. Angry voices shouted out their names.

“Get out. This must stop.” A group of young girls and boys stormed the compound. They carried sticks and *pangas*. With them were the police. Nyonyozi could hear the clanking noise of handcuffs as her captors were led outside.

Where had all these people come from? School children, men and women, young and old surrounded the hut holding placards while others beat the drums as they sang Nyonyozi’s name. She was still awestruck when her mother embraced her in a tight hug.

“I feared I had lost you,” Kentaro said with tears in her eyes. “Chebet, your classmate helped us. She heard Mzee Kwerit plan with her grandmother to cut you. News of your disappearance had spread throughout the village and everyone including the district officials were concerned. They all came to your rescue.”

“Today we celebrate the successful rescue mission. We still remind everyone that the law against Female Genital Mutilation enacted in 2011 still holds and will take its course on anyone who violates it. Nyonyozi has been appointed as the regional ambassador for children’s rights. Her project will be launched by the President officially soon,” Miss Chelimo, the Resident District Commissioner told the press.

Nyonyozi’s gaze shifted to Chebet who grinned at her. That’s when she realised that they were being recorded as cameras beamed at them. Her lips curved into a smile as they hugged each other knowing that the journey had just begun.

Nyonyozi knew that it would take time for all her people to accept change and allow it to settle in and take a firm root. But she wasn’t scared as she looked at the weaver birds that flew over to their nests in the trees. With their bright yellow and orange feathers, the birds re-assured her of life’s rebirth. She brought the hem of

her dress to dry her tear-filled eyes. Helen's last words echoed in her mind. *Live your life like weaver birds. Happy, free and able to make decisions. Build a strong nest and live in it. Protected from the hyenas and creatures of the night. Goodbye.*