

Girl

At first we thought it happened because the girl was a village girl. Had she been a Nairobi girl, we said, she would have known not to open her arms. But she was a village girl, and she had come from one of those places, which surprisingly still exist, where mothers send their children with tin plates to borrow fire from the hut next door. Coming from such a place and arriving at our national hospital in the Upper-hill area of town--which is not a town at all, but our capital city, which we can't help referring to as 'town' out of habit--, this girl, who had left the cocks crowing in her village, found herself number one hundred on the queue to see the doctor. Unfortunately, city dwellers due to their proximity to the national hospital had arrived before her and taken up all the space on the benches lining the path to the nurse's triage. And so the girl had to sit on the patchy grass and hold her rebellious head in her hands and wait until someone could tell how to make it her own again.

The queue did not seem to move for an hour then two and when she asked she was told it was because the nurses and the doctors had not arrived. Who she asked was number ninety nine, a woman with a baby, whom the girl, seeing as she had been strapping siblings to her back since she was three, thought was swathed in too much shawl. It was December; even the shades of the trees were evaporating. The girl did not need to be told that there was something wrong with the baby; it would not stop crying. The woman told her that indeed there was something wrong with the baby, and this thing had been wrong since the baby's birth, but that everywhere the woman had gone, the doctors and medicine men and tongues-talking preachers could agree what the thing was. The national hospital, she said, was her last attempt. The girl tilted her head to look

better at the crying bundle and in so doing momentarily lost focus in one eye. If only the child would stop crying, she thought, her head would feel a little lighter. And this thought led to another that if she, the caretaker of twelve siblings, held the baby it would fall silent. The mother seemed hesitant to give her baby to this girl with a head that was swelling and eyes that were pushing out to the sides. Indeed, the girl was turning into a cow. But then the mother gave the baby to the girl who peeled away one layer of shawl and handed it back to the mother, then looked into the bundle and saw a baby boy. The girl began singing to the boy, and the boy kept crying and as he cried, the girl sang harder, and the mother said keep singing, I will run to the toilets there and come back. The girl kept singing and an hour passed, then two and the queue did not move and the woman did not return.

That is how the village girl ended up on the seven and nine o'clock news along with the police and representatives from the Ministry of Children, whose recent arrival in our list of Ministries following a Cabinet reshuffle we now recognized as fortuitous. While the news anchor explained what had happened, we could not help asking one another, is that girl not turning into a cow?

The news anchor, who for professional reasons could not laugh at that head, sighed instead and asked us to send sms answers to the following question: was the woman wrong to abandon her child? He assured us that our opinions would be tarried and presented to us in neat bar graphs at the end of the news briefing, and then we would know concretely what we city dwellers thought about the matter. We waited, but then there was a war being fought in one of those Muslim countries and Presidents, ex-Presidents, our parliamentarians and several foreign dignitaries also wanted to give speeches about the way forward for new Kenya.

Meanwhile certain men and women who stood in our street corners wielding oversized books and summoning thunder and lightning from our indifferent clouds began seeing what we had failed to see in the village girl's story. They said to us, the end times are here; it is written that when the end is near, women will refuse their children. They were loud, these street-corner prophets, and so we said to ourselves, let us appease them and win back our quiet moments. On a Saturday morning, we came out of our houses in thousands and tens of thousands and marched on the highway carrying banner urging mothers to accept their children.

Only this did not appease our prophets. They began following us home and planting themselves firmly in the aisles of our buses, right under the sign "No Hawking or Preaching". We tried ignoring them and struck up conversation with the strangers squeezed into the narrow seats with us, our hips welded to their hips. We were already in March, but the rain clouds were still contemplating us from up above and we wondered, one to another, if the people in North Eastern province, who were always mentioned on our radios and T.V.s and newspapers around this time of the year, would not be requiring our donations of maize, oil and beans anymore. Only, our radios and T.V.s and newspapers had begun speaking the language of the prophets: the lions are lying down with the lambs. They told us that in a national park far from our city, where only tourists and poachers ventured, a baby Oryx was walking and sleeping besides a lioness.

The experts among us wondered whether this was nature setting an example, reminding us the value of children. The cynics among us, laughing over *Tuskers* and digging incisors and canines into roasted goat, said, value of children? nonsense, it's just hoarding; just wait and see what happens when that Oryx is nice and fat. Then, to our relief, for really, the street prophets had multiplied to an unmanageable number and

begun holding crusades and calling for a nationwide fast, a lion came along while Kamunyak slept and ate the little Oryx.

It was at this time, as Kamunyak mourned her dead Oryx, that we heard of the village girl again. When she appeared on T.V. scenes, we noted immediately that her head had shrunk to normal size, but then listening to the news anchor, we realized that this was not at all the same girl, but another girl. Seeing this new girl, we remembered that other girl and began wondering what had become of her and the baby boy. We heard from others, who had also heard from others, that our village girl had actually returned to the hospital queue after bringing the baby boy to our attention. She had waited in the queue for several days, her head growing heavier every passing hour, and at last arrived at the nurse's triage, where, since her story had already ceased being news, she had not been recognized as the village girl from the T.V. and therefore had not being excused for not having the amount due for registration. We were told that she then boarded a bus head to her village and returned to oblivion.

The baby boy, however, remained in our city in the care of an unidentified orphanage. The donations of well-wishers fed, clothed and sent him to school where he was discovered to be good at Mathematics and nicknamed the professor. But before any of these good things began happening to the boy, another girl, with a small, normal head appeared on our T.V. screens.

That this new girl was from Nairobi, albeit from one of our illegal settlements, made us wonder if we had been wrong about the village girl. She too appeared on our T.V. screen between police officers and representatives of the now very useful Ministry of Children. We noted that for a Nairobi girl she was shy, not looking into the camera as she told of the woman, a tall woman, a very black woman, a woman with breasts still leaking milk and an

abundance of buttocks, a woman in a yellow dress with red flowers and a torn collar. We each could have drawn this woman. In fact, the chief of police said they had brought in an artist to draw her because this business had to stop. We were a little afraid because in glaring at the camera, the chief of police seemed to be accusing us. But what had we done, wrong? Our own children were safely inside with us, behind padlocked doors and windows reinforced with metal grills against men (and women) armed with guns imported from Somali, who nevertheless brought power saws and cut their way into our houses and asked us to help them pack our belongings and carry them to lorries spewing diesel clouds outside. What could the chief of police be insinuating with that look?

Perhaps we were being paranoid. The man did deliver on his promise. The search for the tall, very black, big breasted and giant buttocked woman in a yellow and red dress with a torn collar did not last as long as we had expected. We had been prepared to wait for years and even decades as patiently as we were waiting for reports about various corruption scandals and ethnic skirmishes. However, the very next day, the woman appeared on our T.V.s. We looked at each other and exclaimed, but she is exactly as we imagined her. The more we looked at her, talking with loud gestures, her sagging breasts shaking unrestrained under her extra large T-shirt, her weave standing on her head like chicken feathers, the more we realized that something was terribly wrong, for this woman was not begging for forgiveness, not offering excuses. People like this, we said one to another, people like this should not be in our city. Even those among us who had never smelt the thickness of human body odour at a political rally or felt the sting of tear gas, found themselves pumping fists into the air. It was they who suggested the old method of justice with a rubber tyre, kerosene and one match stick. They said, let us go find this shameless woman, and teach her the lesson of Kamunyak the lioness. But as we were

getting up to go do the work, the partially deaf among us began shouting, telling us to shut up and increase the volume so that they too could hear what the woman was saying. The T.V. volume thus turned up, we heard the woman say, that girl, yes, the shy one who would not look into the camera, she is the mother.

The wise among us, who wore spectacles and sat on taller chairs, said they had suspected as much. Even that village girl looked suspect, they said. When we asked them why they had said nothing, they sighed and turned new pages in their books and said, without looking at us, that we were missing the point. We had always suspected that they did not know what they were talking about, and so on that day, tired of parables, we decided to act. A rubber tyre, kerosene and a match stick.