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I will tell you why Ngai is the most cunning and powerful god of all.

Eons ago, when the Europeans were evil and their god decided to punish them, he caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights and covered the earth with water—and because of this, the Europeans think that their god is more powerful than Ngai, who sits on His golden throne atop Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya.

Certainly it is no small accomplishment to cover the earth with water—but when the Kikuyu heard the story of Noah from the European missionaries, it did nothing to convince us that the god of the Europeans is more powerful than Ngai.

Ngai knows that water is the source of all life, and so when He wishes to punish us, He does not cover our lands with it. Instead He inhales deeply, and sucks the moisture from the air and the soil. Our rivers dry up, our crops fail, and our cattle and goats die of thirst.

The god of the Europeans may have created the flood—but it was Ngai who created the drought.

Can there be any doubt why He is the god that we fear and worship?

\* \* \* \*

We emigrated from Kenya to the terraformed world of Kirinyaga to create a Kikuyu Utopia, a society that mirrored the simple, pastoral life we led before our culture was corrupted by the coming of the Europeans—and for the most part we have been successful.

Still, there are times when things seem to be coming apart, and it takes everything I can do in my capacity as the *mundumugu* —the witch doctor—to keep Kirinyaga functioning as it was meant to function.

On the morning of the day that I brought the curse down upon my people, my youthful assistant, Ndemi, had overslept again and once more forgot to feed my chickens. Then I had to make the long trek to a neighboring village, where in direct contradiction of my orders they had begun planting maize in an overused field which I had decreed must lay fallow until after the long rains. I explained once more that the land needed time to rest and regain its strength, but as I left I had the distinct feeling that I would be back again the next week or the next month, giving them the same lecture.

On the way home, I had to settle a dispute between Ngona, who had diverted a small stream to irrigate his fields, and Kamaki, who claimed that his crops were suffering because the stream no longer carried enough water to his crops. This was the eleventh time someone had tried to divert the stream, and the eleventh time I had angrily explained that the water belonged to the entire village.

Then Sabella, who was to pay me two fat, healthy goats for presiding at his son's wedding, delivered two animals that were so underfed and scrawny that they didn't even look like goats. Ordinarily I might not have lost my temper, but I was tired of people keeping their best animals and trying to pay me with cattle and goats that looked half-dead, so I threatened to annul the marriage unless he replaced them.

Finally, Ndemi's mother told me that he was spending too much time studying to be a *mundumugu* , and that she needed him to tend his family's cattle, this in spite of the fact that he has three strong, healthy brothers.

A number of the women stared at me in amusement as I walked through the village, as if they knew some secret of which I was ignorant, and by the time I reached the long, winding path that led to the hill where I lived, I was annoyed with *all* of my people. I craved only the solitude of my *boma* , and a gourd of *pombe* to wash away the dust of the day.

When I heard the sound of a human voice singing on my hill, I assumed that it was Ndemi, carrying out his afternoon chores. But as I approached more closely, I realized that the voice was that of a woman.

I shaded my eyes from the sun and peered ahead, and there, halfway up my hill, a wrinkled old woman was busily erecting a hut beneath an acacia tree, weaving the twigs and branches together to form the walls, and singing to herself. I blinked in surprise, for it is well known that no one else may live on the *mundumugu's* hill.

The woman saw me and smiled. “*Jambo, Koriba,*” she greeted me as if nothing was amiss. “Is it not a beautiful day?”

I saw now that she was Mumbi, the mother of Koinnage, who was the paramount chief of the village.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded as I approached her.

“As you see, I am building a hut,” she said. “We are going to be neighbors, Koriba.”

I shook my head. “I require no neighbors,” I said, pulling my blanket more tightly around my shoulders. “And you already have a hut on Koinnage's *shamba* .”

“I no longer wish to live there,” said Mumbi.

“You may not live on my hill,” I said. “The *mundumugu* lives alone.”

“I have faced the doorway to the east,” she said, turning to the broad, sprawling savannah beyond the river and ignoring my statement. “That way the rays of the sun will bring warmth into it in the morning.”

“This is not even a true Kikuyu hut,” I continued angrily. “A strong wind will blow it over, and it will protect you from neither the cold nor the hyenas.”

“It will protect me from the sun and the rain,” she responded. “Next week, when I have more strength, I will fill in the walls with mud.”

“Next week you will be living with Koinnage, where you belong,” I said.

“I will not,” she said adamantly. “Before I would return to Koinnage's *shamba* , I would rather you left my withered old body out for the hyenas.”

*That can be arranged*, I thought irritably, for I had seen enough foolishness for one day. But aloud I said: “Why do you feel this way, Mumbi? Does Koinnage no longer treat you with respect?”

“He treats me with respect,” she admitted, trying to straighten her ancient body and placing a gnarled hand to the small of her back.

“Koinnage has three wives,” I continued, slapping futilely at a pair of flies that circled my face. “If any of them have ignored you or treated you with disrespect, I will speak to them.”

She snorted contemptuously. “Ha!”

I paused and stared at a small herd of impala grazing on the savannah, trying to decide upon the best way to approach the subject. “Have you fought with them?”

“I did not realize that the mornings were so cold on this hill,” she said, rubbing her wrinkled chin with a gnarled hand. “I will need more blankets.”

“You did not answer my question,” I said.

“And firewood,” she continued. “I will have to gather much firewood.”

“I have heard enough,” I said firmly. “You must return to your home, Mmubi.”

“I will not!” she said, laying a protective hand on the walls of her hut. “*This* will be my home.”

“This is the *mundumugu*'s hill. I will not permit you to live here.”

“I am tired of people telling me what I am not permitted to do,” she said. Suddenly she pointed to a fish eagle that was lazily riding the thermals over the river. “Why should I not be as free as that bird? I will live here on this hill.”

“Who else has told you what you cannot do?” I asked.

“It is not important.”

“It must be important,” I said, “or you would not be here.”

She stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. “Wambu has said I may not help her cook the meals, and Kibo no longer lets me grind the maize or brew the *pombe*.” She glared at me defiantly. “I am the mother of the paramount chief of the village! I will not be treated like a helpless baby.”

“They are treating you as a respected elder,” I explained. “You no longer have to work. You have raised your family, and now you have reached the point where they will care for you.”

“I do not *want* to be cared for!” she snapped. “All my life I have run my *shamba*, and I have run it well. I am not ready to stop.”

“Did not your own mother stop when her husband died and she moved into her son's *shamba*?” I asked, slapping at my cheek as one of the flies finally settled on it.

“My mother no longer had the strength to run her *shamba*,” said Mumbi defensively. “That is not the case with me.”

“If you do not step aside, how are Koinnaga's wives ever to learn to run his *shamba*?”

“I will teach them,” replied Mumbi. “They still have much to learn. Wambu does not cook the banana mash as good as I do, and as for Kibo, well...” She shrugged her shoulders, to indicate that Koinnaga's youngest wife was beyond redemption.

“But Wambu is the mother of three sons and is soon to become a grandmother herself,” I noted. “If she is not ready to run her husband's *shamba* by now, then she never will be.”

A satisfied smile crossed Mumbi's leathery face. “So you agree with me.”

“You misunderstand me,” I said. “There comes a time when the old must make way for the young.”

“*You* have not made way for anyone,” she said accusingly.

“I am the *mundumugu*,” I answered. “It is not my physical strength that I offer to the village, but my wisdom, and wisdom is the province of age.”

“And I offer *my* wisdom to my son's wives,” she said stubbornly.

“It is not the same thing,” I said.

“It is precisely the same thing,” she replied. “When we still lived in Kenya, I fought for Kirinyaga's charter as fiercely as you yourself did, Koriba. I came here in the same spaceship that brought you, and I

helped clear the land and plant the fields. It is not fair that I should be cast aside now, just because I am old.”

“You are not being cast aside,” I explained patiently. “You came here to live the traditional life of the Kikuyu, and it is our tradition to care for our elders. You shall never want for food, or for a roof over your head, or for care when you are sick.”

“But I don't *feel* like an elder!” she protested. She pointed to her loom and her pots, which she had brought up the hill from the village. “I can still weave cloth and repair thatch and cook meals. I am not too old to grind the maize and carry the water calabashes. If I am no longer permitted to do these things for my family, than I shall live here on this hill and do them for myself.”

“That is unacceptable,” I said. “You must return to your home.”

“It is not *mine* any more,” she replied bitterly. “It is Wambu's.”

I looked down at her stooped, wrinkled body. “It is the order of things that the old shall make way for the young,” I said once again.

“Who will *you* make way for?” she asked bitterly.

“I am training young Ndemi to become the next *mundumugu*,” I said. “When he is ready, I shall step aside.”

“Who will decide when he is ready?”

“I will.”

“Then *I* should decide when Wambu is ready to run my son's *shamba* .”

“What you should do is listen to your *mundumugu*,” I said. “Your shoulders are stooped and your back is bent from the burden of your years. The time has come to let your son's wives care for you.”

Her jaw jutted out pugnaciously. “I will not let Wambu cook for me. I have always cooked for myself, ever since we lived beside the dry river in Kenya.” She paused again. “I was very happy then,” she added bitterly.

“Perhaps you must learn how to be happy again,” I answered. “You have earned the right to rest, and to let others work for you. This should make you happy.”

“But it doesn't.”

“That is because you have lost sight of our purpose,” I said. “We left Kenya and came to Kirinyaga because we wished to retain our customs and traditions. If I permit you to ignore them, then I must let everyone ignore them, and then we will no longer be a Kikuyu Utopia, but merely a second Kenya.”

“You told us that in a Utopia, everyone is happy,” she said. “Well, *I* am not happy, so something must be wrong with Kirinyaga.”

“And running Koinnaga's *shamba* will make it right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But then Wambu and Kibo will be unhappy.”

“Then perhaps there are no Utopias, and we must each be concerned with our own happiness,” said Mumbi.

*Why are old people so selfish and unfeeling? I wondered. Here I am, hot and thirsty and tired, and all she can do is complain about how unhappy she is.*

“Come with me,” I said. “We will go to the village together, and we will find a solution to your problem. You may not remain here.”

She stared at me for a very long moment, then shrugged. “I will come with you, but we will not find a solution, and then I will return here to my new home.”

The sun was low in the sky as we climbed down the hill and began walking along the winding path, and twilight had fallen by the time we reached the village and began walking by the various huts. A number of men and women had gathered at Koinnage's *shamba*, and most of them displayed the same amused expressions I had seen earlier in the day. As I approached Koinnage's *boma*, they followed me, eager to see what punishment I would mete out to Mumbi, as if her transgression and my anger were the highlight of their evening's entertainment.

“Koinnage!” I said in a loud, firm voice.

There was no response, and I called his name twice more before he finally emerged from his hut, a sheepish expression on his face.

“*Jambo*, Koriba,” he said uneasily. “I did not know you were here.”

I glared at him. “Did you also not know your mother was here?”

“This is her *shamba*: where else would she be?” he asked innocently.

“You know very well where she was,” I said, as the light of the evening fires cast flickering shadows on his face. “I advise you to think very carefully of the consequences before you lie to your *mundumugu* again.”

He seemed to shrink into himself for a moment. Then he noticed all the villagers behind me.

“What are *they* doing here?” he demanded. “Return to your *bomas*, all of you!”

They backed away a few steps, but did not leave.

Koinnage turned to Mumbi. “See how you shame me in front of my people? Why do you do this to me? Am I not the paramount chief?”

“I would think that the paramount chief could control his mother,” I said sarcastically.

“I have tried,” said Koinnage. “I do not know what has gotten into her.” He glared at Mumbi. “I order you once again to return to your hut.”

“No,” said Mumbi.

“But I am the chief!” he insisted, half furiously, half whining. “You must obey me.”

Mumbi stared defiantly at him. “No,” she said again.

He turned back to me. “You see how it is,” he said helplessly. “*You are the mundumugu ; you must order her to stay here.*”

“No one tells the *mundumugu* what he *must* do,” I said severely, for I already knew what Mumbi's response to my order would be. “Summon your wives.”

He seemed relieved to be sent away, however briefly, and he went off to the cooking hut, returning a moment later with Wambu, Sumi and Kibo.

“You all know that a problem exists,” I said. “Mumbi is so unhappy that she wishes to leave your *shamba* and live on my hill.”

“It is a good idea,” said Kibo. “It is too crowded here.”

“It is a bad idea,” I replied firmly. “She must live with her family.”

“No one is stopping her,” said Kibo petulantly.

“She wants to take a more active part in the daily life of the *shamba*,” I continued. “Surely there is something she can do, so that the harmony of your *shamba* is preserved.”

For a long moment no one spoke. Then Wambu, who is Koinnage's senior wife, stepped forward.

“I am sorry you are so unhappy, my mother,” she said. “You may of course brew the *pombe* and weave the cloth.”

“Those are *my* jobs!” protested Kibo.

“We must show respect for our husband's mother,” said Wambu with smug smile.

“Why do we not show her even more respect and let her supervise the cooking?” said Kibo.

“I am Koinnage's senior wife,” said Wambu firmly. “*I* do the cooking.”

“And *I* brew the *pombe* and weave the cloth,” said Kibo stubbornly.

“And *I* pound the grain and fetch the water,” added Shumi. “You must find something else for her to do.”

Mumbi turned to me. “I told you that it wouldn't work, Koriba,” she said. “I will gather the rest of my possessions and move into my new home.”

“You will not,” I said. “You will remain with your family, as mothers have always remained with their families.”

“I am not ready to be cast aside as my grandchildren cast aside their toys,” she replied.

“And *I* am not ready to allow you to break with the traditions of the Kikuyu,” I said sternly. “You will stay here.”

“I will not!” she replied, and I heard some of the villagers chuckling at this withered old lady who defied both her chief and her *mundumugu* .

“Koinnage,” I said, directing him and his family inside the thorn fence of his *boma* , so that we might be further away from the onlookers, “she is your mother. Speak to her and convince her to remain here, before she forces me to take some action that you will all regret.”

“Do not continue to shame me in the eyes of the village, my mother,” pleaded Koinnage. “You must remain in my *shamba* .”

“I will not.”

“You will!” said Koinnage heatedly, as the men and women of the village crowded closer to the *boma's* entrance.

“And if I don't, what will you do to me?” she demanded, glaring at him. “Will you bind my hands and feet and force me to remain here in my hut?”

“I am the paramount chief,” said Koinnage in obvious frustration. “I order you to stay here!”

“Hah!” she said, and now the peoples' chuckles became outright laughter. “You may be a chief, but you are still my son, and mothers do not take orders from their sons.”

“But everyone must obey the *mundumugu* ,” he said, “and Koriba has ordered you to remain here.”

“I will not obey him,” she said. “I came to Kirinyaga to be happy, and I am unhappy in your *shamba* . I am going to live on the hill, and neither you nor Koriba will stop me.”

Suddenly the laughter stopped, and was replaced by an awed silence, for no one may flaunt the *mundumugu's* authority in such a manner. Under other circumstances I might have forgiven her, for she was very upset, but she had challenged me in front of the entire village, and it was the end of a long, irritating day.

My anger must have been reflected on my face, for Koinnage suddenly stepped between his mother and myself.

“Please, Koriba,” he said, his voice unsteady. “She is an old woman, and she does not know what she is saying.”

“I know what I am saying,” said Mumbi. She glared at me defiantly. “If I cannot live as I like, then I prefer not to live at all. What will you do to me, *mundumugu* ?”

“I?” I said innocently, aware of the many eyes that were focused upon me. “I will do nothing to you. As you yourself have pointed out, I am merely an old man.” I paused and stared at her, as Koinnage and his wives shrank back in fear. “You speak fondly of the dry river we lived beside when we were



children—but you have forgotten what it was like to live beside it. I will help you to remember.” I raised my voice, so that all could hear. “Because you have chosen to ignore our tradition, and because the others have laughed, tonight I shall sacrifice a goat and ask Ngai to visit Kirinyaga with a drought such as it has never seen before, until the world is as dry and withered as you are yourself, Mumbi. I shall ask Him not to allow a single drop of rain to fall until you return to your *shamba* and agree to remain there.”

“No!” said Koinnage.

“The cattle's tongues will swell in their heads until they cannot breathe, the crops will turn to dust, and the river will run dry.” I looked angrily at the faces of my people, as if daring them to laugh again, but none of them had the courage to meet my gaze.

None but Mumbi, that is. She stared thoughtfully at me, and for a moment I thought she was going to retract her statement and agree to remain with Koinnage. Then she shrugged. “I have lived by a dry river before. I can do so again.” She began walking away. “I am going to my hill now.”

There was a stunned silence.

“Must you do this thing, Koriba?” asked Koinnage at last.

“You heard what your mother said to me, and yet you ask me that?” I demanded.

“But she is just an old woman.”

“Do you think that only warriors can bring destruction upon us?” I responded.

“How can living on a hill destroy us?” asked Kibo.

“We are a society of laws and rules and traditions, and our survival as a people depends upon all of them being equally obeyed.”

“Then you will really ask Ngai to bring a drought to Kirinyaga?” she said.

“I am tired of being doubted and contradicted by my people, who have all forgotten who we are and why we have come here,” I replied irritably. “I have said I would ask Ngai to visit Kirinyaga with a drought, and I will.” I spat on my hands to show my sincerity.

“How long will the drought last?”

“Until Mumbi leaves my hill and returns to her own hut on her own *shamba* .”

“She is a very stubborn old woman,” said Koinnage miserably. “She could stay there forever.”

“That is her choice,” I answered.

“Perhaps Ngai will not listen to your supplication,” said Kibo hopefully.

“He will listen,” I replied harshly. “Am I not the *mundumugu* ?”

\* \* \* \*

When I awoke the next morning, Ndemi had already built my fire and fed my chickens. I emerged from

my hut into the cold morning air, my blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

“*Jambo, Koriba,*” said Nedmi.

“*Jambo, Ndemi,*” I answered.

“Why has Mumbi built a hut on your hill, Koriba?” he asked.

“Because she is a stubborn old woman,” I replied.

“You do not wish her to live here?”

“No.”

Suddenly he grinned.

“What do you find so amusing, Ndemi?” I asked.

“She is a stubborn old woman and you are a stubborn old man,” said Ndemi. “This will be very interesting.”

I stared at him, but made no answer. Finally I walked into my hut and activated my computer.

“Computer,” I said, “calculate an orbital change that will bring a drought to Kirinyaga.”

“Working ... done,” replied the computer.

“Now transmit those changes to Maintenance and request that they enact them immediately.”

“Working ... done.” There was a moment's silence. “There is a voice-and-image message incoming from Maintenance.”

“Put it through,” I said.

The image of a middle-aged Oriental woman appeared on the computer's holographic screen.

“Koriba, I just received your instructions,” she said. “Are you aware that such an orbital diversion will almost certainly bring a severe climactic change to Kirinyaga?”

“I am.”

She frowned. “Perhaps I should word that more strongly. It will bring a *cataclysmic* change. This will precipitate a drought of major proportions.”

“Have I the right to request such an orbital change or not?” I demanded.

“Yes,” she answered. “According to your charter, you have the right. But...”

“Then please do as I ask.”

“You're sure you don't want to reconsider?”

“I am sure.”

She shrugged. “You're the boss.”

*I am glad that someone remembers that,* I thought bitterly as the connection was broken and the computer screen went blank.

\* \* \* \*

“She talks too much, and I don't like the song she sings, but she has always seemed like a nice woman,” remarked Ndemi, staring down the hill at Mumbi's hut after I had finished instructing him in the blessing of the scarecrows. “Why did Koinnage make her leave his *shamba* ?”

“Koinnage did not make her leave,” I answered. “She chose to leave.”

Ndemi frowned, for such behavior was beyond his experience. “What reason did she have for leaving?”

“Her reason is not important,” I said. “What *is* important is that the Kikuyu live as families, and she refuses to do so.”

“Is she crazy?” asked Ndemi.

“No. Just stubborn.”

“If she is not crazy, then she must think she has a good reason for living on your hill,” he persisted. “What is it?”

“She still wants to do the work she has always done,” I replied. “It is not crazy. In fact, in a way it is admirable—but in this society it is wrong.”

“She is very foolish,” said Ndemi. “When I am *mundumugu* , I will do no more work than you do.”

*Has everyone on Kirinyaga conspired to try my patience?* I wondered. Aloud I said: “I work very hard.”

“You work at your magic, and you call down the rains, and you bless the fields and the cattle,” conceded Ndemi. “But you never carry water, or feed your animals, or clean you hut, or tend your gardens.”

“The *mundumugu* does not do such things.”

“That is why she is foolish. She could live like a *mundumugu* and have all these things done for her, and yet she chooses not to.”

I shook my head. “She is foolish because she gave up everything she had to come to Kirinyaga and live the traditional life of the Kikuyu, and now she has broken with those traditions.”

“You will have to punish her,” said Ndemi thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

“I hope the punishment is not a painful one,” he continued, “for she is very much like you, and I do not think being punished will make her change her ways.”

I looked down the hill at the old woman's hut and wondered if he was right.

\* \* \* \*

Within a month Kirinyaga was feeling the effects of the drought. The days were long and hot and dry, and the river that ran through our village was very low.

Each morning I awoke to the sound of Mumbi singing to herself as she climbed the hill after filling her water gourd. Each afternoon I threw stones at her goats and chickens as they grazed closer and closer to my *boma*, and wondered how much longer it would be before she returned to her *shamba*. Each evening I received a message from Maintenance, asking if I wanted to make an orbital adjustment that would bring rain to my world.

From time to time Koinnage would trudge up the long, dusty path from the village and speak to Mumbi. I never eavesdropped, so I did not know the details of what they said to each other, but always it would end the same way: with Koinnage losing his temper and yelling at his mother, and with the old woman glaring at him obstinately as he walked back to the village, yelling imprecations over his shoulder.

One afternoon Shima, Ndemi's mother, came to my *boma*.

“*Jambo*, Shima,” I greeted her.

“*Jambo*, Koriba,” she said.

I waited patiently for her to tell me the purpose of her visit.

“Has Ndemi been a good assistant to you, Koriba?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And he learns his lessons well?”

“Very well.”

“You have never questioned his loyalty?”

“I have never had cause to,” I replied.

“Then why do you make his family suffer?” she asked. “Our cattle are weak, and our crops are dying. Why do you not bring the drought only to Koinnage's fields?”

“The drought will stop when Mumbi returns to her *shamba*,” I said firmly. “She is the one who will decide when it ends, not I. Perhaps you should speak to her.”

“I did,” said Shima.

“And?”

“*Shetold me to speak to you.*”

“She brought the drought to Kirinyaga,” I said. “She can end it whenever she wishes.”

“She is not the *mundumugu* . You are.”

“I have acted to preserve our Utopia.”

She smiled bitterly. “You have spent too long on your hill, *mundumugu* ,” she said. “Come down to the village. Look at the animals and the crops and the children, and then tell me how you are preserving our Utopia.”

She turned and walked back down the hill before I could think of an answer.

\* \* \* \*

Six weeks after the drought commenced, the Council of Elders came to my *boma* as I was giving Ndemi his daily instruction.

“*Jambo*,” I greeted them. “I trust you are well?”

“We are not well, Koriba,” said old Siboki, who seemed to be their spokesman.

“I am sorry to hear that,” I said sincerely.

“We must talk, Koriba,” continued Siboki.

“As you wish.”

“We know that Mumbi is wrong,” he began. “Once a woman has raised her children and seen her husband die, she must live with her son's family on his *shamba* , and allow them to care for her. It is the law, and it is foolish for her to want to live anywhere else.”

“I agree,” I said.

“We *all* agree,” he said. “And if you must punish her to make her obey our laws, then so be it.” He paused. “But you are punishing everyone, when only Mumbi has broken the law. It is not fair that we should suffer for her transgression.”

“I wish things could be otherwise,” I said sincerely.

“Then can you not intercede with Ngai on our behalf?” he persisted.

“I doubt that He will listen,” I said. “It would be better if you spoke to Mumbi and convinced her to return to her *shamba* .”

“We have tried,” said Siboki.

“Then you must try again.”

“We will,” he said without much hope. “But will you at least *ask* Ngai to end the drought? You are the *mundumugu* ; surely He will listen to you.”

“I will ask Him,” I said. “But Ngai is a harsh god. He brought forth the drought because Mumbi broke the law; He almost certainly will not bring the rains until she is ready to once again obey the law.”

“But you will ask?”

“I will ask,” I answered him.

They had nothing further to say, and after an awkward silence they left. Ndemi approached me when they were too far away to hear him.

“Ngai did not call forth the drought,” he said. “You did, by speaking to the box in your hut.”

I stared at him without replying.

“And if you brought the drought,” he continued, “then surely you can end it.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Then why do you not do so, since it has brought suffering to many people, and not just to Mumbi?”

“Listen to me carefully, Ndemi,” I said, “and remember my words, for someday you shall be the *mundumugu*, and this is your most important lesson.”

“I am listening,” he said, squatting down and staring at me intently.

“Of all the things on Kirinyaga, of all our laws and traditions and customs, the most important is this: the *mundumugu* is the most powerful man in our society. Not because of his physical strength, for as you see I am a wrinkled old man, but because he is the interpreter of our culture. It is he who determines what is right and what is wrong, and his authority must never be questioned.”

“Are you saying that I cannot ask why you will not bring the rains,” asked Ndemi, confused.

“No,” I said. “I am saying that the *mundumugu* is the rock upon which the Kikuyu build their culture, and because of that, he can never show weakness.” I paused. “I wish I had not threatened to bring forth the drought. It had been a long, irritating day, and I was tired, and many people had been very foolish that day—but I *did* promise that there would be a drought, and now, if I show weakness, if I bring the rains, then sooner or later everyone in the village will challenge the *mundumugu's* authority ... and without authority, there is no structure to our lives.” I looked into his eyes. “Do you understand what I am saying to you, Ndemi?”

“I think so,” he said uncertainly.

“Someday it will be you, rather than I, who speaks to the computer. You must fully understand me before that day arrives.”

\* \* \* \*

There came a morning, three months into the drought, that Ndemi entered my hut and woke me by touching my shoulder.

“What is it?” I asked, sitting up.

“I cannot fill your gourds with water today,” said Ndemi. “The river has dried up.”

“Then we will dig a well at the foot of the hill,” I said, walking out into my *boma* and wrapping my blanket around my shoulders to protect me from the dry, cold morning air.

Mumbi was singing to herself, as usual, as she lit a fire in front of her hut. I stared at her for a moment, then turned back to Ndemi.

“Soon she will leave,” I said confidently.

“Will *you* leave?” he responded.

I shook my head. “This is my home.”

“This is her home, too,” said Ndemi.

“Her home is with Koinnage,” I said irritably.

“She doesn't think so.”

“She must have water to live. She will have to return to her *shamba* soon.”

“Maybe,” said Ndemi without much conviction.

“Why should you think otherwise?”

“Because I passed her well as I climbed the hill,” he answered. He glanced down at Mumbi, who was now cooking her morning meal. “She is a very stubborn old woman,” he added with more than a touch of admiration.

I made no answer.

\* \* \* \*

“Your shade tree is dying, Koriba.”

I looked up and saw Mumbi standing beside my *boma* .

“If you do not water it soon, it will wither, and you will be very uncomfortable.” She paused. “I have extra thatch from my roof. You may have it and spread it across the branches of your acacia, if you wish.”

“Why do you offer me this, when you yourself are responsible for the drought?” I asked suspiciously.

“To show you that I am your neighbor and not your enemy,” she replied.

“You disobeyed the law,” I said. “That makes you the enemy of our culture.”

“It is an evil law,” she replied. “For more than four months I have lived here on this hill. Every day I have gathered firewood, and I have woven two new blankets, and I have cooked my meals, and I fetched the water before the river ran dry, and now I bring water from my well. Why should I be cast aside when I can do all these things?”

“You are not being cast aside, Mumbi,” I said. “It is precisely because you have done these things for so many years that you are finally allowed to rest and let others do them.”

“But they are all I have,” she protested. “What is the use of being alive if I cannot do the things that I know how to do?”

“The old have always been cared for by their families, as have the weak and the sick,” I said. “It is our custom.”

“It is a good custom,” she said. “But I do not feel old.” She paused. “Do you know the only time in my life I felt old? It was when I was not allowed to do anything in my own *shamba* .” She frowned. “It was not a good feeling.”

“You must come to terms with your age, Mumbi,” I said.

“I did that when I moved to this hill,” she replied. “Now *you* must come to terms with your drought.”

\* \* \* \*

The news began to reach my ears during the fourth month.

Njoro had slain his cattle, and was now keeping gerunuk, which do not drink water but lick the dew off the leaves, this in spite of the fact that according to our tradition, the Kikuyu do not raise or eat wild game.

Kambela and Njogu had taken their families and emigrated back to Kenya.

Kubandu, who lived in a neighboring village, had been found hoarding water that he had gathered before the river ran dry, and his neighbors burned his hut and killed his cattle.

A brush fire had broken out in the western plains, and had destroyed eleven shambas before it had been stopped.

Koinnage's visits to his mother became more frequent, more noisy, and more fruitless.

Even Ndemi, who previously had agreed that the *mundumugu* could, by definition, do no wrong, again began to question the need for the drought.

“Someday you will be the *mundumugu* ,” I said. “Remember all that I have taught you.” I paused. “Now, if you should be confronted with the same situation, what will *you* do?”

He was silent for a moment. “I would probably let her live on the hill.”

“That is contrary to our tradition.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But she is living on the hill *now* , and all the Kikuyu who are not living on the hill are suffering.” He paused thoughtfully. “Perhaps it is time to discard some traditions, rather than punish the whole world because one old woman chooses to ignore them.”

“*No!*” I said heatedly. “When we lived in Kenya and the Europeans came, they convinced us to discard a tradition. And when we found out how easy it was, we discarded another, and then another, and



eventually we discarded so many that we were no longer Kikuyu, but merely black Europeans.” I paused and lowered my voice. “That is why we came to Kirinyaga, Ndemi—so that we could become Kikuyu once again. Have you listened to nothing I have said to you during the past two months?”

“I have listened,” replied Ndemi. “I just do not understand how living on this hill makes her less of a Kikuyu.”

“You had no trouble understanding it two months ago.”

“My family was not starving two months ago.”

“One has nothing to do with the other,” I said. “She broke the law; she must be punished.”

Ndemi paused. “I have been thinking about that.”

“And?”

“Are there not degrees of lawbreaking?” said Ndemi. “Surely what she did is not the same as murdering a neighbor. And if there are degrees of lawbreaking, then should there not also be degrees of punishment?”

“I will explain it once again, Ndemi,” I said, “for the day will come that you take my place as the *mundumugu*, and when that day comes, your authority must be absolute. And that means that the punishment for anyone who refuses to recognize your authority must also be absolute.”

He stared at me for a long moment. “This is wrong,” he said at last.

“What is?”

“You have not called down the drought because she has broken the law,” he answered. “You have brought this suffering to Kirinyaga because she disobeyed *you* .”

“They are one and the same thing,” I said.

He sighed deeply, and furrowed his youthful brow in thought. “I am not sure of that.”

That was when I knew that he would not be ready to be the *mundumugu* for a long, long time.

\* \* \* \*

On the day that the drought was five months old, Koinnage made another trip to the hill, and this time there was no yelling. He stayed and spoke to Mumbi for perhaps five minutes, and then, without even looking toward me, he walked back to the village.

And twenty minutes later, Mumbi climbed up to the top of the hill and stood before the gate to my *boma* .

“I am returning to Koinnage's *shamba* ,” she announced.

An enormous surge of relief swept over me. “I knew that sooner or later you would see that you were wrong,” I said.

“I am not returning because *I* am wrong,” she said, “but because *you* are, and I cannot allow more harm to come to Kirinyaga because of it.” She paused. “Kibo's milk has gone dry, and her baby is dying. My grandchildren have almost nothing left to eat.” She glared at me. “You had better bring the rains today, old man.”

“I will ask Ngai to bring the rains as soon as you have returned to your home,” I promised her.

“You had better do more than *ask* Him,” she said. “You had better *order* Him.”

“That is blasphemy.”

“How will you punish me for my blasphemy?” she said. “Will you bring forth a flood and destroy even more of our world?”

“I have destroyed nothing,” I said. “It was you who broke the law.”

“Look out at the dry river, Koriba,” she said, pointing down the hill. “Study it well, for it is Kirinyaga, barren and unchanging.”

I looked down upon the river. “It's changelessness is one of its virtues,” I said.

“But it is a river,” she said. “All *living* things change—even the Kikuyu.”

“Not on Kirinyaga,” I said adamantly.

“They change or they die,” she continued. “I do not intend to die. You have won the battle, Koriba, but the war goes on.”

Before I could answer her she turned and walked down the long, winding path to the village.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon I brought down the rains. The river filled with water, the fields turned green, the cattle and goats and the animals of the savannah slaked their thirst and renewed their strength, and the world of Kirinyaga returned to healthy, vigorous life.

But from that day forth, Njoro never again addressed me as *m'zee*, the traditional term of respect the Kikuyu have always used to signify age and wisdom. Siboki built two large containers for water, each the size of a large hut, and threatened to harm anyone who came near them. Even Ndemi, who had previously absorbed everything I taught him without question, now seemed to consider and weigh each of my statements carefully before accepting them.

Kibo's baby had died, and Mumbi moved into her *boma* until Kibo regained her health, then built her own hut out in the fields of Koinnage's *shamba*. Since she was still officially living on his property, I chose to ignore it. She remained there until the next long rains, at which time she became so infirm that she finally had to move to the hut she had formerly occupied. Now that she needed the help of her family she accepted it, but Koinnage later told me that she never sang again after the day she left my hill.

As for myself, I spent many long days on my hill, watching the river flow past, clear and cool and unchanging, and wondering uneasily if I had somehow had changed the course of that other, more important river through which we all must swim.

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