



the king of women

THEY HAD decided a long time ago to make life hard for their father. He had broken their mother's heart, and though the twins had not been born then, some women in the village still hum the song, popular many years ago, about Lamang's philandering before and after he had married their mother. The song, a ballad that grew in detail and complexity with each rendition in the moonlit village square, called Lamang the "King of Women/Owner of ten women/In every village from/Keti to the state capital." The refrain described how women stood longingly on their doorsteps as he passed, and how mothers locked up their daughters at night to save them from "the handsome ravisher," and ended with the lines:

Mother sighing with longing
Daughter sighing with longing
Ah, King of Women, show some mercy

The song mentioned one woman especially by name, Saraya, the "black beauty." She was his first love, but she had married someone else, a distant cousin preferred by her family to Lamang's penniless charms. But according to the song, and to village gossip, the relationship had not ended with her marriage—there were trysts in neighbouring villages, secret visits at night, suspicious shadows behind the compound wall. Saraya's husband, a truck driver, died in a road accident one year after the wedding.

The twins were almost thirteen when they first heard the stories of their father's early love life, and their mother's heartbreak. They overheard two of their loquacious aunts whispering about how the twins' maternal grandfather, known by all as Owner of Cattle because he owned more head of cattle than any of his neighbours, had called Lamang into his room one day and asked him to marry his daughter, Tabita.

“Musa,” the old man said to Lamang, which was Lamang’s first name, though everyone called him Lamang because of his striking resemblance to his grandfather of that name, “marry my daughter and I promise you will not regret it.”

Tabita was the most beautiful maiden in the village, but her beauty was marred by a sickly disposition. She had been born a twin, but her twin sister had died at birth, then her mother had died when she was only five, and now her father thought the best way he could make her happy was to marry her off to the most sought-after bachelor in Keti. Owner of Cattle had no male child, and Lamang, a shrewd businessman even then, had immediately seen the financial benefits of such a marriage. He said to the old man, “I love your daughter, I will be happy to marry her, but I am only a poor student, how can I take care of her in the style you’ve brought her up in?”

First the old man waived the bride-price, which Lamang wasn’t in a position to pay anyway, and then he gave him twenty head of cattle as a wedding gift, and promised to make him his heir. A month later the marriage between the beautiful but sickly girl and the village playboy was solemnised in the village church.

There were other versions of the story, but though the details varied—some said more head of cattle might have been involved as dowry, others said less, some said Lamang had actually seduced the poor girl and got her pregnant and that was why her father agreed to pay him to marry her, to avoid the scandal—what all the versions agreed on was that the wedding made Lamang a rich man. Five months after the wedding his in-law died, leaving him everything, over a hundred head of cattle. Lamang promptly left the Teachers’ Training College where he was a student and went into business as a cattle merchant, buying cattle cheap from the nomadic Fulani herdsmen and transporting his live cargo to the big coastal cities, Lagos and Port Harcourt, where he sold it at more than four times its cost. Before long he was among the richest men in the village.

Fifteen months after the wedding Tabita died. Many years later, when he wrote his mother’s story in his book of biographies, *Lives and Times*, Mamo, the elder twin, tried to capture in words the night she died—it was also the night he was born.

He wrote of the darkness, and the rain that fell for two days without abetting, of the cornstalks in the yard shaking and sinking to the muddy ground

under the weight of the fierce wind and the rain and darkness, of the small square room in which Tabita lay in a narrow bed, sweaty, fainting, her hands grasped tightly by the midwife who was seated on the edge of the bed. A single lantern, fighting valiantly against the wind that leaned with both hands on the wooden door and the darkness that advanced and withdrew playfully in umbra and penumbra, revealed the other occupant of the room: Auntie Marina, who had arrived two days earlier from a neighbouring village to be a witness to the birth of her brother's first child. Lightning flashed through the window like a camera capturing this grim tableau of parturition and expiration. Tabita screamed and thrashed about and in a lucid moment just before she died, she contemplated how life had given her all she had wanted with one hand and then taken it away with the other: she had married the man of her dreams, but he was in love with another woman, and life had given her a child, but she knew she wouldn't live to see it grow and run in the field, like other children, seeking the sun.

She died without knowing she had given birth to not one child, but two children. Mamo came out first, then his brother LaMamo, who had to be dragged out by the midwife. This accounted for his slightly elongated head.

The shrill cries of the babies above the rain and thunder brought Lamang from the next room, where he had been pacing, waiting. He stood at the entrance, his eyes taking in his wife's sprawled motionless figure on the bed, the petrified midwife whispering, "She is dead, she is dead," and the twins in Auntie Marina's hands. She lifted the bloody bundle and approached her brother with it, but he lifted his hand, stopping her. With one last look at the sweaty, still figure on the bed, he pushed open the door and walked out into the rain.

Poor Tabita was buried the next day, under a baobab tree in the village burial ground. It was a lonely burial. Lamang did not turn up—most people assumed he was too heartbroken to come, but some, those who still hummed the song about the King of Women, said he might have been with his lover Saraya, and couldn't be bothered.

In her retelling of the same events to the twins, Auntie Marina never dwelled too much on the unhappy aspects of the story; she had a light touch, skimming and flying over the surface, always aiming for the folktale's happy reversals of fortune and resolutions. And so the sound of thunder that roared outside as

Tabita's spirit left the room became angels' trumpets welcoming the ascending spirit; the furious flashes of lightning became guide angels' torches lighting the path to a new celestial home. Then there was the dramatic run in the dark—not desperate and clumsy as in real life, but a dignified hurry, with the twins swaddled and cozy in a blanket, all the way to her brother's, Uncle Iliya's house, where she first broke the sad news to Auntie Amina, Iliya's wife. She then gently revealed the mewling contents of the blanket and said to Auntie Amina, "Take them, poor orphans, they are now yours. If only I had any milk in these shrunken breasts, I'd take them with me."

The twins stayed with their uncle Iliya for the first three years of their lives, believing him to be their father, his wife their mother, and their cousin Asabar, whose meals they shared, their brother. But after three years Lamang came and shattered their illusion, he took them away—that was the day the seed of their hatred for him was planted, and when they grew older and began to hear the song about the King of Women, and about his maltreatment of their mother, the seed sprouted into a tree.

Lamang, for his part, never took much interest in his children; he left them in the care of their aunt Marina, who had been staying with him since the breakup of her marriage, and the village widows who occasionally dropped in to help with the housework and to generally advertise their availability to the once again eligible Lamang. He smiled at the widows and flirted with them, but he remained single. He couldn't marry his Saraya because after her husband's death she had suffered a stroke that destroyed her memory, leaving her only sporadic recall of the faces around her: her daughter, her brothers and sisters, and Lamang himself. Sometimes she'd look at him as though he were a perfect stranger, smiling politely at his words, but her eyes would be blank. It seemed fate, for once, had taken Tabita's side.



fever

WHEN HE was four, Mamo was discovered to have inherited his mother's blood disease, and it was, for the first time, given a name: sickle-cell anaemia. He would make a lengthy reference to this in his biography of his mother, explaining in detail the chemistry and the biology of the disease. He also painted a picture, mostly in indigo and blue, of his earliest memory of his illness, and he described the occasion as "similar to being born again," and also "like emerging from some cave" where he had been dwelling in silence and darkness. He wrote:

I was in my father's room, lost in the huge four-poster bed, and everywhere was shadowy and blue, I felt like a dolphin coming up for air. There was a strange woman seated beside me, smiling and muttering: "You will be fine, Twin. You will be up and about in no time."

She had a kindly face; she looked like a sea spirit, riding the waves with me, helping me to stay afloat. Her nose was aquiline; her head scarf was a severe turban, beneath which a few grey wisps peeked, but her eyes were soft and soothing; there was also an air of sadness about her, as if she had known loss and heartbreak. She laid a piece of wet cloth on my forehead, cooling the red-singeing fire in my head. She smelled of outdoors, of fresh grass and the earth after rain.

"Mummy," I muttered, mistaking her in my fever for my mother returned. I closed my eyes. She was there when I woke up again—hours or days or years later. She told me I had been in a coma and everyone feared I wasn't going to come back, but she said she had known I would return, that I was a fighter, like my mother.

"You knew my mother?"

"Yes, I was fond of her."

"Who are you?"

"She is our auntie Marina and she will be staying with us," LaMamo said, jumping onto the bed. I was happy. The room was dark; I wanted air, and sunlight. As if she could read my mind, she went and opened the window; the light came flooding in,

throwing the room into focus. The door opened and my father came in, there was a man with him—he was a real doctor, not the village quack, Dr. Shangle—he had a stethoscope around his neck. He came and put his hand on my forehead. I shrank away. He smiled. He lifted my eyelids and peered into my eyes, and then he patted my cheek.

“You will be fine,” he said and rejoined my father by the door.

“. . . sickle-cell anaemia.” The doctor’s words carried to me, whispery, conspiratorial, grave. I didn’t understand what it meant, but I knew it was me they were talking about. My head ached. I turned to my auntie. She was also looking at the doctor, but she threw me a quick smile and sat down again.

“It is a disease of the blood, hereditary,” the doctor went on.

“His mother had it,” Lamang said gruffly.

“Not only her. You also must carry a trace of it, that’s the way it works.”

“His brother is a healthy, strong boy. He takes after me,” Lamang argued. The doctor paused a moment, then he went on. “There’s no known cure. He will either learn to live with it or . . . most people suffering from it die before they reach their twenties.”

“He will recover, Doctor,” my auntie said. “The good Lord will not abandon him.”

Auntie Marina saved me from early death, she taught me how to live with it, how to deride it, even. She did this in a very simple way. She was a magician, a witch with words. She could conjure up mountains and undersea kingdoms with words. I stayed alive from day to day just to hear her next story. She was Scheherazade, I was the king, but she told stories to save my life, not hers—at least that was how I saw it.

But of course much later I came to realise that no one can really save another’s life, and if someone does, it mostly happens more by accident than by intention. The stories she told us and the neighbourhood children in front of the mud kitchen, far into the moonlit night, she told not only to entertain us, but also to push back the time when she’d have to go to her lonely bed and stare at the bare wall that mocked her nightly with images of her failed life: her abusive husband who had infected her with gonorrhoea, and who, when she couldn’t give birth, had married a younger woman to whom she had to defer, turning her into a maid in her own house. Cleaning-cooking-farming, and there were also the nightly beatings. And when she couldn’t take it anymore there was the long tearful trek with only her nanny goat for company and her bag on her head, from the neighbouring village where she lived to her brother’s house. My life is linked to hers like it is linked to my brother’s, in a straight and uncomplicated line. There are no mysteries, no shadows—just light.



Auntie Marina never told the same story twice, unless the twins asked her to—she seemed to have an inexhaustible stash somewhere on her farm from which she daily replenished her store. One story the twins never tired of hearing, and which their auntie never tired of telling, was the wedding story. She described the flow of relatives to Lamang’s compound as if they were water from a broken dam, and the two cows that were slaughtered, and the sacks of rice that were cooked, and how for more than a week after the wedding people still routinely stopped at the house to eat because the food just refused to disappear. Lamang had invited the best musicians and dancers from the state capital to entertain his guests, turning the road in front of his house into one big dance hall. And the bride—the whole village had agreed that they had never seen a prettier bride. Tabita was only seventeen, and the bloom of youth sat on her cheeks like a rainbow on the sky. Auntie Marina would point at the wedding picture on the living room wall: Tabita in a plain white cotton wedding gown, the veil raised and resting on her head, and Lamang, with a “follow-me” haircut, in a three-button suit, both of them smiling at the camera. They were alone, without groomsmen or bridesmaids, inside the old mission compound; behind them was the old church with its sloping thatch roof.

“See how she smiles happily,” Auntie Marina would repeat over and over.

And so Mamo came to think that it was these stories that kept him alive. He imagined the stories insinuating themselves into his veins, flushing out the sickle-shaped, haemoglobin-deficient red cells that clogged the nodes in his veins and caused his joints to swell painfully. It was the stories and not the folic acid tablets that he swallowed daily, or the green vegetables and liver that were staples in his sickler’s diet, or the special care not to get bitten by mosquitoes; it was his auntie’s stories slowly working their magic in his veins, keeping him alive.

But with time, under the harsh daylight of reality, even Marina’s words of magic lost their spell—and as they grew older the twins saw that in the wedding picture the glow on their mother’s cheek hid an incipient dark tinge of sadness and apprehension, and their father’s smile had a nervous sneer at the edges, and though the couple held hands, they leaned away from each other, looked away from each other, as if both were looking into the congregation for deliverance. Lamang was certainly looking for Saraya. And Tabita? Her old, foolish father, perhaps—or the angel of death, whose ominous wings were even then already circling over her.