

GRADUATION DAY

By Bwocha Nyagemi Bwocha

Omobe was just twenty-five years old when he graduated with his MB from the University of Nairobi's School of Medicine. He had done his family proud; his father, Mzee Omuya, had expressed this fact at his graduation when he heaped praise after praise on the young doctor. He had described Omobe as that beacon light of hope that had shone so brilliantly for his younger siblings to see more clearly and follow his footsteps toward academic success. To say that Omuya was satisfied with the way Omobe had progressed as a young man would be an understatement.

The ephemeral reality of what seemed like a dream would nonetheless draw Omuya aback when, minutes before concluding his congratulatory speech in the wake of Omobe's graduation, his wife, Madam Gracious Ogake, stood up and walked towards him. She tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear, "Do not lose your composure, my love. No matter what transpires from this point onwards, I'll explain it in detail to you later, please, darling." As Ogake walked back to her chair, Omuya moved two steps towards her as if to ask her a question but chose to put off the matter. He returned to his speech.

"Academic excellence and life's vicissitudes tend to conflict," he philosophized.

"You must therefore go ahead and demonstrate that your academic performance is reflected in your work life. Your relationship with family, friends, and colleagues must not be tempered with clinical indifference. Let warmth and amiability dictate the greater part of your life as you attend to the indisposed." He surveyed the friends and relatives listening to him for a few seconds as if to invite their affirmation, then continued, "For without these, money, in its abundance, won't make you human."

With this, Omuya beckoned the emcee to take over the function and invite more speakers to pay his son their copious compliments, besides offering words of encouragement to the young doctor on the auspicious occasion of his graduation. He returned to his seat, clearly perturbed by what Ogake had whispered in his ear. What did she mean that I should not let my guard down? He wondered. He remained contemplative, looking forward to what the day held in store for him.

Speaker after speaker complimented Omobe for his excellence. They all urged him to work diligently and professionally so that he would be of value to his family and nation. During that time, both Omobe and Ogake appeared troubled. Omuya stole glances at them every now and again. He could see clearly that Ogake's previous mood of celebration was now imbued with melancholy. Meanwhile, Omobe looked tense with distant indifference. As he surveyed the crowd, Omuya spotted the faces of unfamiliar men, almost his age, seated. He wondered who they were and what their business could be. He shrugged his wild mind back to the present moment and proceeded to observe the unfolding events.

It was Omobe's time to speak. What had seemed like an eternity quickly unfolded in a manner that both Ogake and Omuya had not expected. The agitated faces of Ogake, Omuya, and Omobe made everyone suspect that something was amiss. Omobe began with a sense of amity; he praised his parents and friends for the never-ending support they had given him

throughout his life. Omuya did not miss the fact that Omobe said ‘fathers’ instead of ‘father’, but he shook the thought off. *Perhaps my boy is just appreciating all the elders of our village who have been like fathers to him.* Omuya thought. However, when Omobe asked ‘his fathers’ to stand up so that he could formally introduce them, Omuya could no longer mistake what his son was implying in his speech. Omuya stood up and looked around, as if to identify the people Omobe was referring to as his fathers. The crowd was equally confused. What did Omobe mean by fathers being introduced to each other? They wondered.

Of course, Omuya had not forgotten that he had married Ogake when she already had Omobe. However, he had not met Omobe’s biological father. He had adopted Omobe and raised him as his own child. The new revelations began to raise many questions in his mind. Why has Omobe’s biological father decided to show up now when his son has just graduated? Would the new turn of events break up his family? Omuya recalled how he had met Ogake. He was only twenty-four years old. He had just graduated from medical school with a diploma in clinical medicine. He met her and fell head over heels in love with her. Ogake was beautiful, ever-smiling, polite, and voluptuous. She struck him as a young but confident single mother. The attraction between them was mutual. Obviously, that stranger in the crowd is Omobe’s biological father,” he thought. Before he could move on to the next thought, Omobe resumed his speech.

“I know all of you are wondering about my use of the word fathers.” He turned and pointed to Omuya: “This here is, of course, the man who raised me, my father.” Omuya stood up and waved to the crowd, smiling happily. Omobe continued addressing Omuya, “I want to thank you most kindly, Father, for the love and care you have showered me with all my life.” He paused, perhaps to recall a few more of his obviously cleverly crafted words. Ogake was suddenly overcome by a wave of pride. She stood up and rushed to Omuya, who was still standing next to Omobe. She hugged her husband tightly as tears flowed down her cheeks. “We raised a good child,” she whispered to Omuya, who smiled and held her hand. Her actions momentarily interrupted her son’s speech. The strange man in the crowd suddenly stood up. He then steadily walked towards where Omuya and Ogake were standing. Ogake’s face suddenly turned angry. The strange man extended his hand towards her. She pulled herself together and pushed him away.

“Shame on you, Mouri!” she shouted, with a tinge of bitterness in her weak but furious voice.

“Your heartlessness will haunt you to the grave.”

Mouri was the embodiment of Ogake’s traumatic past. Her sighting of him brought back bitter memories of how he had abandoned her while she was pregnant with Omobe. He had made empty promises about child support. One particular incident painfully struck a nerve in her. It happened that when Omobe was about five months old, he fell seriously ill. Ogake naturally had to send word to Mouri, requesting financial support to take the little boy to hospital. Mouri worked as a police officer; he obviously had money. However, he could not be bothered to move quickly and help save the boy’s life. He instead promised to see Ogake that day. Ogake waited for two hours, but Mouri was a no-show; he did not even send word to explain his failure to show up or to send money. A year later, Ogake had requested cash from him to buy a few essentials for the baby. Mouri curtly replied, “You can as well sell yourself to raise that baby. How can I be so sure it’s mine own!” Ogake had wept bitterly.

The recollections triggered a gush of tears down her cheeks. She tried to speak more amidst the tears but she had lost her voice. The sight of Mouri hurt her deeply. She thought herself unlucky that such a sad past had come back to haunt her. How could her beloved son Omobe bring Mouri back into her life! She wondered.

Amidst all the unfolding drama, Omobe could not continue his speech. He had not even had time to properly introduce Mouri. The relatives and friends seated before them curiously followed the events with bated breath. Omobe turned to Omuya, who quickly turned his face away. Omuya then led Ogake back to their seat as Mouri stood next to Omobe, looking lost. There was a long silence. Even the patron and host at the Senator Obama Resort in the capital city's Westlands Estate, where Omobe had paid for the bash, were transfixed. People began to murmur, and Omobe lost the crowd for a moment. He turned to Mouri and whispered in his ear. Both hurriedly left the function, to the shock of all in attendance. Ballooning with vexation, Ogake shouted curses behind them. She was extremely upset with Omobe for bringing Mouri back into her life.

Omobe's friends came to seek a truce with Omuya and Ogake. They explained everything to the distraught parents. According to them, Mouri wanted to take Omobe back from Omuya and Ogake. In his twisted wisdom, Mouri believed that all it took to raise a child was money, which he had amassed in plenty over the years. That fateful day, he had come to discuss financial compensation for Omobe's upbringing with Omuya.

Mouri had managed to sway the young heart and mind of Omobe over the years Omobe was studying in Nairobi. He had at first stealthily approached Omobe on campus. He had introduced himself to him. When Omobe requested a DNA test, Mouri obliged, and used his wealth to cover all the costs involved. This way, he had portrayed himself to Omobe as a sincere and apologetic father seeking to reunite with his long-lost biological son. Mouri was careful to omit the story of his neglect of Ogake in her time of need. In fact, he persuaded Omobe that he had tried on many occasions to reconnect with Ogake, but to no avail. He said he had provided the money Ogake needed to bring Omobe up properly. To cap it all up, the new Subaru Impreza saloon car that Omobe had been seen driving around campus a few months before his graduation had been bought for him by Mouri as a present for his graduation. Revelation after revelation popped up as it was narrated to Ogake and Omuya how Mouri had been spoiling their son with presents and cash time after time.

With these gifts, Mouri won Omobe's loyalty. Omobe allowed avarice to take over his heart and built a concrete wall around it to cushion him from the tender feelings that would remind him of his upbringing. It did not take long before Mouri broached the idea of compensating Omuya for all the costs incurred in Omobe's upbringing. Never mind that both Mouri and Omobe understood nothing about raising a child: That it takes a village to do it! Besides, how were they to quantify the emotional investment Ogake and Omuya had put into raising Omobe? Mouri had no regard for the bond that had been cultivated and nurtured for twenty-five years between Omobe and his parents.

In one of their many interactions, Mouri trained Omobe to love money more than anything else. "Listen Omobe. Don't be like your stepfather—that broke man. Money rules the world. Do what you must to be financially free, even if it means abandoning Ogake, Omuya, and your brothers." In another meeting, Mouri had emphasized: "Besides, blood is thicker than water; you are my blood. I expect you to make hard choices to make good money. Despite

loving Ogake, I had to chase money. Had I stayed, I would not be able to buy you anything right now.”

The next day, the family drove back home. Omuya was silent throughout much of the trip. His eyes kept gazing straight into the horizon as Ogake sobbed incessantly. She had yet to come to terms with Omobe’s betrayal of her. She wondered if Omobe could have been bewitched. Her mind wandered back in time. She remembered how her male cousin once took alcohol believed to have been laced with charms that slowly transformed him into a zombie. Another of her relatives had dropped out of campus after a strange concoction had been clandestinely added to his vegetables, ultimately blurring her ability to study. She was later killed by her violent boyfriend in a tussle over a puff of marijuana. The third, a bewitched neighbor who was a secondary school teacher, suddenly deserted his duty, preferring to loiter around the village on a *chang’aa*-drinking spree. Ogake was fully aware of the power of witchcraft in her community. It was the only reasonable explanation she could think of to justify why Omobe would desert her. “Why would he make such a move without informing her? Was he not mama’s boy? Are children not supposed to confide in their parents?”

The betrayal she felt made her feel hate for her own son, Omobe. Her mind raced with these queries without an iota of respite. “Could he not find any other way to handle the situation? Was he not the brilliant child she had always been proud of? Could he not discuss with his classmates the possibility of consulting his mom about Mouri? Had his education robbed him of any empathy for his mother? Did he act alone and out of his own volition?” Of course, Ogake knew that Mouri would one day emerge to show interest in Omobe. She was not oblivious to the possibility of Mouri trying or wishing to take Omobe from her.

The driver kept himself busy by conversing with Omuya’s two younger sons, Onsara and Onchome, who were in high school. The two sons did not mention their elder brother throughout the journey back to Nyamache, the land of water where both life and death converge. It was evident that the events that marked Omobe's graduation party had also deeply hurt them. They nonetheless remained stoic, perhaps to save their mother from the humiliation that was already too much to bear. They were familiar with their elder brother’s tendency to be avaricious; he often displayed uncommon narcissism. The young brothers knew Omobe to be so egoistic.

Omuya recalled the stories Ogake had shared with him about Mouri. At the time, Nyaura sounded like a spoiled young man who was too scared to settle down. “It is his loss that he left you,” Omuya had remarked one day. Omuya wondered if Mouri wanted to break up his marriage to Ogake by taking Omobe away. He wondered if Omobe had contemplated the full repercussions of Mouri’s abrupt appearance. Omuya had loved Omobe ever since he fell in love with the boy’s mother.

They alighted from the car. As they rested outside their abode and watched the sunset, Omuya suddenly felt the need to admonish Onsara and Onchome to follow in the footsteps of Omobe and work hard in school. “My sons, your brother Omobe took after me, becoming a doctor like me (people call me Doctor Omuya, as you both are aware). I expect nothing less from you; you are the next generation of doctors. Pursue your heart's passions, but learn the hard tackles of life, and learn quickly.” Ogake, who was watching silently, broke down again. Omuya went over to her and said, “Ogake, please stop this incessant crying. Omobe will come

back to us.” He then turned to the young sons and said, “Never bring such a kind of disappointment to your mother.”

That evening, Onsara and Onchome remained pensive and silent. Ogake appeared to have significantly reduced her pool of tears, paving the way for Omuya’s turn to unburden himself of that painful experience as they proceeded to their bedroom. Under the cover of darkness, he sealed himself under the blanket and cried like a baby, protesting mistreatment. The teary night reignited the family’s compassion, easing the impending journey of learning to live without Omobe.