

NAUAI WA T'HIONG

Weep not, child

It was common knowledge that they had loved each other very much. Before the war, it had always been said that such love between brothers was unnatural and portended no good.

Boro, Kori, and Kamau were all sons of Njeri, Ngotho's eldest wife. Njoroge's only true brother was Mwangi who had died in the war. But they all behaved as if they were of one mother. Kori worked in an African tea shop called Green Hotel. Green Hotel was a very dirty place, full of buzzing flies, while the stench of decay hung in the air like a heavy cloud. But it was a very popular place because there was a wireless set. Njoroge looked forward to Kori's homecoming because he brought with him the town gossip and what was happening in the country. For instance, when Jomo came from Britain, it was Kori who brought the news home. Home was especially a nice place when all the brothers and many village girls and boys came in the evening and, sitting around the fireplace in a big circle, they would gossip, laugh, and play. Njoroge always longed for the day he would be a man, for then he would have the freedom to sit with big circumcised girls and touch them as he saw the young men do.

But sometimes his brothers did not come. Home then was dull. But the mothers could tell stories. And Ngotho too, when he was in the mood.

'Our elder mother wanted you,' Njoroge said when they reached home. It was already dark. While Njeri was always 'our' or 'my elder mother', Nyokabi, being the younger wife, was always just 'Mother'. It was a habit observed and accepted by all.

'What does she want?'

'I don't know.'

Kamau began to move. Njoroge stood and watched in silence. Then he raised his voice. 'Remember to come back to our hut. You remember the story.'

'Yes,' Kamau replied. His voice sounded thin in the dark.

Later in the evening Kamau came to Nyokabi's hut.

'Tell us the story.'

'It is a bad woman this. If I had been my father, I would not have married her.' Kamau liked teasing Nyokabi. Tonight his teasing sounded forced. It did not provoke laughter.

'Oh! But he could not resist me.'

'It isn't true,' said Ngotho, who just then entered the hut. 'You should have seen how happy she was when I proposed to her. Nobody could have taken her. So I pitied her.'

'I refused all the young men that wanted me. But your father would have died if I had refused him.'

'Don't you believe a word she says!'

Ngotho was given food. He began to eat and for a time there was an awkward silence. The children could not joke in their father's presence. Njoroge broke the silence.

'Tell us a story. You promised, you know.'

'You children! You never ask your father to tell you stories. Tonight he *will* tell you,' she said smilingly towards her husband. She was happy.

'If you all come to my *Thingira*, I'll tell you one or two.'

Njoroge feared his father. But it always made him feel good to listen to him.

'... There was wind and rain. And there was also thunder and terrible lightning. The earth and the forest around Kerinyaga shook. The animals of the forest whom the Creator had recently put there were afraid. There was no sunlight. This went on for many days so that the whole land was in darkness. Because the animals could not move, they just sat and moaned with wind. The plants and trees remained dumb. It was, our elders tell us, all dead except for the thunder, a violence that seemed to strangle life. It was this dark night whose depth you could not measure, not you or I can conceive of its solid blackness, which would not let the sun pierce through it.

'But in this darkness, at the foot of Kerinyaga, a tree rose. At first it was a small tree and grew up, finding a way even through the darkness. It wanted to reach the light, and the sun. This tree had *Life*. It went up, up, sending forth the rich

dark night of thunder and moaning. This was Mukuyu, God's tree. Now, you know that at the beginning of things there was only one man (Gikuyu) and one woman (Mumbi). It was under this Mukuyu that he first put them. And immediately the sun rose, and the dark night melted away. The sun shone with a warmth that gave life and activity to all things. The wind and lightning and thunder stopped. The animals stopped wondering and moved. They no longer moaned but gave homage to the Creator and Gikuyu and Mumbi. And the Creator who is also called Murungu took Gikuyu and Mumbi from his holy mountain. He took them to the country of ridges near Siriana and there stood them on a big ridge before he finally took them to Mukuruwe wa Gathanga about which you have heard so much. But he had shown them all the land – yes, children, God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them,

“This land I hand over to you. O Man and woman
It's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing
Only to me, your God, under my sacred tree . . .”

There was something strange in Ngotho's eyes. He looked as if he had forgotten all about those who were present: Kamau, Njoroge, Boro, Kori, and many other young men and women who had come to make the long hours of night shorter by listening to stories. It was as if he was telling a secret for the first time, but to himself. Boro sat in a corner. The expression on his face could not be seen. He did not once move but kept on looking past his father. It was as if Boro and Ngotho were the only two who were there at the beginning when these things came to be. Njoroge too could imagine the scene. He saw the sun rise and shine on a dark night. He saw fear, gloom, and terror of the living things of the creator, melting away, touched by the warmth of the holy tree. It must have been a new world. The man and woman must have been blessed to walk in the new Kingdom with Murungu. He wished he had been there to

roge could not help exclaiming,
‘Where did the land go?’
Everyone looked at him.

‘. . . I am old now. But I too have asked that question in waking and sleeping. I've said, “What happened, O Murungu, to the land that you gave to us? Where, O Creator, went our promised land?” At times I've wanted to cry or harm my body to drive away the curse that removed us from the ancestral lands. I ask, “Have you left your children naked, O Murungu?”

‘I'll tell you. There was a big drought sent to the land by evil ones who must have been jealous of the prosperity of the children of the Great One. But maybe also the children of Mumbi forgot to burn a sacrifice to Murungu. So he did not shed His blessed tears that make crops grow. The sun burnt freely. Plague came to the land. Cattle died and people shrank in size. Then came the white man as had long been prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, that Gikuyu seer of old. He came from the country of ridges, far away from here. Mugo had told the people of the coming of the white man. He had warned the tribe. So the white man came and took the land. But at first not the whole of it.

‘Then came the war. It was the first big war. I was then young, a mere boy, although circumcised. All of us were taken by force. We made roads and cleared the forest to make it possible for the warring white man to move more quickly. The war ended. We were all tired. We came home worn-out but very ready for whatever the British might give us as a reward. But, more than this, we wanted to go back to the soil and court it to yield, to create, not to destroy. But Ng'o! The land was gone. My father and many others had been moved from our ancestral lands. He died lonely, a poor man waiting for the white man to go. Mugo had said this would come to be. The white man did not go and he died a *Muhoi* on this very land. It then belonged to Chahira before he sold it to Jacobo. I grew up here, but