



Tehteh

**H** E SAT UP THE STAIRS LIKE A DRUGGED HEIFER WATCHING THE WORLD through a fog of stupefaction. The big head thinly haired had long given up the complex processes of gathering, analysing, storing, assimilating, and utilising data on this unfathomable world. His big head, big stomach, big eyes, big cheeks, were enough data in themselves which remained buried in his fog.

Manu, son of Morkor. He was one week short or rather one week beyond his first birthday. It was a day the mother would rather not dredge out from the lost days in the sea of time. The trip to the hospital for the emergency childbirth was a complete surprise just as the pregnancy was. The labour pangs hit her like a missile in the middle of her petty hawking in the streets of Accra. A passer-by managed to hold her before she hit the tarmac. In the labour ward, the pain was murderous, horrible! It was sheer torture! They gave all sorts of reasons why she

Morkor should suffer so - under age, malnutrition, failure to attend ante-natal clinic, etc.

But why should she suffer just because of a baby she didn't want - a useless, worthless baby? Her plans to desert the baby immediately after the childbirth came to naught only because she felt too weak even to keep her eyes open. By the time she could sit up on the bed, the nurses had firmly inflicted her baby on her. Just not to come into conflict with the law, she had to live with the baby.

The cracked stairs led to a couple of similarly cracked rooms which were barely lifted above the slum compound of stagnant moss-infected marsh and almost carpeted of poultry droppings. The house itself seemed to be giving up the will to support itself above such luckless grounds. But it was in good company as some two hundred of such human dwellings built of mud bricks, plastered with cement and roofed with rusted corrugated iron sheets, spread out uglily in this old part of the city. Nima.

What was left to be said about the slum of Nima? Nothing. What was left to be done? It was all there on paper. Had been for a couple of decades. The big houses to line the arterial road had started springing up. But they said the hundred thousand or so inhabitants could not be lifted up above the luckless grounds. They had to be hidden behind the camouflage mansions rooted in the market forces.

Far removed from the traffic-jammed road the din could still be heard of the traffic and the buying and the selling of every conceivable thing - bleaching soap and alagbin analgesic, crab and bales or pieces of calico, plastic buckets

and pocket knives, mosquito netting and chamber pots, Mexicano jeans and cerelac baby feed, high density diskettes and Michelin tyres, American dollars and iced yoghurt....

The boy sat there on the stairs holding on to his quarter ball of kenkey as if waiting for it to be transformed into a crystal ball by all that din.

The fish piece was gone. He didn't know whether he had eaten it or lost it to the predator fowls. Or perhaps he wasn't given any at all by the mother who was in too much hurry to catch the tro-tro vehicle to Makola to hawk her petty assorted items: razor blades, camphor balls, blue washing powder, hair plaiting threads, et cetera. The kind of items that brought more losses in net than in gross profits and got the seller into fights with her creditors.

The fish was gone. The kenkey remained. That kind of data was sufficiently self-saving so the boy did not need to make any effort to store that in his big kwashiorkor head. Poor Manu. But there was nothing poor little Manu could do. He sat still, balanced between action and inaction. On the Stairs.

Kweiki was the little cousin that was to look after Manu on this occasion. It took Morkor many days of sweet talking to get Kweiki to agree to this repugnant task of baby-sitting Manu. The last time she did Morkor that favour, Morkor showed up late in the night. It was not a favour done without failings as Manu was again abandoned to the grandmother who barely had

strength to hold a walking stick. Kweiki heard from the grandmother how late Morkor returned and immediately she assumed the right to reprimand Morkor. 'If you want to stretch your back for another baby, please take this one along.'

'I won't let you insult me Kweiki. I am your elder sister.'

'Psst. With a caricature like that baby you can talk about age. But it is a question of gumption. You don't start opening your legs until you are sure that goat won't dare slip through again.' 'I say I won't stand here for you to insult me, Kweiki.'

Predictably, it ended up in a fight. It wasn't the first nor would it be the last. As always, it was Morkor who took the initiative to patch up. She needed to borrow money from the relatively better-off Kweiki. Just enough money to get her onto a tro-tro van for her ritual petty hawking.

'You better carry your own baby, Morkor.'

'I beg you Kweiki. Just this once. I've got to see Aunti Dora today and she's ten miles away. And I have to walk. I don't have money.'

'Tie him onto your back. You always do.' She did that even as she hawked. Looking at her slight physique, it was a wonder she had enough strength to carry another human being even if under-weighted like Manu. She had to tie him to her lean back and run and dodge as the city task force men appear suddenly to drive hawkers like her off the street.

Naturally, Morkor was lighter and a shade taller than the average woman. Her long face and thick lips meant she had to work hard to attract men. She hadn't done too

badly by her expectations. The only thing was the one fatherless child. Manu. It was a name she picked for him in defiance of tradition and customary practice. Manu was a common Akan name and she was insisting the father was Akan. If she would be absolutely honest with herself (which she never was), she picked that name because that was the name of the richest man who ever slept with her. He rode a brand new Honda bike and he worked with a courier service. Unfortunately, he was only interested in a one-time scene. The curtains fell and he always zoomed past Morkor as if she was a litter bin. But he etched the name Manu indelibly on her lusty mind.

'Why don't you ever do me this favour Kweiki. I always ask and you always refuse.'

'You wanted a baby and you have it. Wanted this ugly thing.'

'You know damn well I didn't want him.'

'I never believe you. How can a serious abortion fail, eh?'

'Must I repeat my curse? This boy here is a devil. I used all the herbs. I doubled the coffee. I almost killed myself with the chloroquine overdose. This baby stuck to my womb like a mistletoe.' She gave Manu a knock on the head to make her point. Kweiki liked that. If a baby wasn't wanted antenatally it wasn't wanted post-natally. She deliberately teased Morkor about the failed abortion to make her beat the baby. She had a mysterious satisfaction of seeing the baby beaten. Perhaps it was the unconscious fear that it could

also happen to her. To her, babies like Manu had no business messing up with young girls like her.

That was not to say they had no business in the pleasures of making babies. No, no. How else could they eat and perm their hair and wear their second-hand clothing and second-hand shoes and go to watch the latest films and be a little better-off than Kweiki? It was their life - the only kind they knew. Grow up to thirteen, just past or even right in the thick of puberty, drop out of school and drop under a new kind of tutelage - the business of handling men. You got fruiting buds on your chest to show for this kind of fortuitous age, you got the well-rounded and unruly arse to support yourself. Parents would give up. Some would even nudge you on. You had a whole range of men. You got to be smart and know how to milk well. Carpenters, drivers, masons, just call them artisans. Of course some office staff too - salaried workers shifting files redundantly in public offices. Or even good 'should-have-been-responsible' men - the type they called senior staff with office desk and chairs for visitors. It was like climbing a ladder. The bottom rungs were there to step on first - the apprentices in trade such as the drivers' mates. You learnt fast that way; learning to do things in back seats of vehicles in which the apprentices had to sleep against thievery. Or simply taking appropriate positions in dark corners. You got for the troubles enough to buy a couple of meals of kenkey and fish the following days. There was always the

urge to go for something better and something bigger. Especially watching the good life adverts on beers. That kind of ambition had no space to hold a baby. Every baby got to know that. It was what made you smart to get around two or three permanent men to raise the income. All the time you refined the lies if they should get jealous. More importantly you had by then graduated way above apprentices. The masters invariably were even handing over to their betters. Already, the hair was permed and the lip-stick was riotously red and thick; and the second-hand clothing had adequately brought out the teenage resources available, and everybody heard this girl in that neighbourhood had grown up into such a juicy one. You were open to all categories of men upwards. That surely was the way to the top. At thirteen.

Still, only you and your friends knew how very grown up you were; how very tidily you handled the messy things like babies with your own anecdotes which often would and could not fail. Until curses like Manu incarnated.

Of course there was a father - often fathers in fact. How could there ever be none? In the case of Manu there certainly was one. Morkor chose a father who had two wives and a fitting workshop. Forty-three-year old, father of eight children, tenant of one chamber and one hall apartment in a compound house, drinking often and not quite able to stay many days without getting drunk, he refused flatly that he was the father.

After Manu's birth everybody said the baby resembled him. But his business was collapsing and he was loosing his clients to smarter and more sober competitors. Even his expertise in Japanese vehicles was waning like his youth. He refused fatherhood to the end standing on the ground that he knew three other men who as he put it, ate in the same cooking pot with him. How could he distinguish meat cooked for him from meat cooked for the others? Morkor threatened him with civil action at the family tribunal. He just laughed and stuck to his denial. He had been summoned to family tribunals on countless occasions. Rumours had it that, his first wife of thirty-seven who was invariably the main prop of his family swore to pack bag and leave him if he accepted the child with the sixteen-year-old whore. He didn't even need that kind of threat to make him deny his son to the very end. As it were, he had chewed a piece of sugarcane and he was left with some bagasse. It was up to him to decide whether to let it remain bagasse and discarded, or gathered for the home for some good work. That was a simple decision to make really. Let bagasse remain bagasse.

But, well, right now it's very much okay. It's another plausible index of life of the suburb in addition to the others: drop-out rate by end of second-cycle education, thirty per cent for boys, sixty per cent for girls; infant mortality rate, 120 per thousand births; teenage pregnancy, fifty per cent of girls give birth well

inside their teens; average number of persons inhabiting a standard ten feet by twelve feet room, eight. The additional index of fatherless children (including those claimed but with shirked responsibility), those left for bagasse, only tidies up on the figures of demerit. Sixty out of every hundred!

It was like.... Morkor dumped him up the stairs, thrust the quarter kenkey in his hand and waved goodbye. Manu was crying, Kweiki was applying bleaching soap to the face with a broken mirror. She was chewing stick. She took out the stick, spat and shouted at Manu to stop sneezing bad luck into her day.

'Shut up there! Devil. You said you wanted to be born. You've been born. What again? Your mother is gone. Even if she were here I could still beat you at will. Shut up!' As if Manu was a grown up, not a year-plus-or-minus-old baby incapable of handling data about his living world, Kweiki went up the stairs to put her bleaching face close to Manu's kwashiorkor face. 'Alright, don't stop crying, okay. Cry all the tears and fill the Volta up. Maybe it will reduce your kwashiorkor head.' Kweiki pulled the ear sharply to make Manu give a yelp.

'Tears will not bring back your mother. As for your father, whoever he is, he is as good as dead. Nobody cares one hoot about you. Why don't you just die? Nobody will even notice when you stop crying. So is this world and you chose to

come in. You've got to suffer for it. Hei, I say stop sneezing bad luck into my day, devil!' She gave the baby a whack almost dislodging the kenkey from his hand before turning to dance away from him, as he seemed to choke on his tears. Oh how good she felt when she saw this devil in such anguish! That would teach all babies to think twice before pulling tricks on unsuspecting girls. Stupid babies! Agents of witchcraft!

In real good spirits, she lifted up her broken mirror and turned to her face-bleaching.

Kweiki was a pretty girl. Far prettier than Morkor her cousin and younger by a couple of months. She was black (a complexion she hated). With persistent bleaching she had browned in the face, neck and on the arms. She had a supple body, and apart from the round, pretty, smart face, men couldn't easily tear their gaze from the flourishing busts that rolled under her blouse when she walked. She knew this too well and she missed no chance to use them as her prime weapons in her war on men. The arse and the thighs could only have been fashioned for her to immobilise her victims.

Altogether she hadn't done badly in the neighbourhood and beyond. She had graduated into working the streets by night. At circle, she made good bargains to come home with some thousands of good cedis. She'd begun dreaming of night clubs. But that would come with time. She's got to have the right spots, the right connections to join the 'old women' (her own term)

working there. With that visionary goal why should she condescend to a life with babies? Indeed she would forever remain in raptures to see nuisances coming in the name of babies placed in physical hell. To her, Manu was the personification of all the hateful babies rolled into one.

So, as soon as some friends called and the talk was serious enough to excite her (only talks about men were serious talk), she rushed off to clothe herself and leave giggling with her friends. Manu was totally forgotten. Even if she had remembered, would she throw a chance to meet a new man for a baby? Madness!

He was king of the house which was empty but for the livestock - rebellious chicken, goats, cats and dogs and...well the houseflies. There were grandmas and grandpas and many other adults but they were gone to their multifarious businesses. The grandma and grandpa had a funeral to attend. The aunties and uncles had this and that to do to snatch a square meal for the day. This was life in the city; life in the margins. There were cousins of all ages scattered onto various trajectories from the house. Manu was the only one left of a house inhabited by at least fifty human beings - old people, middle-aged people, young people like Morkor and Kweiki, children and babies younger than Manu. It sometimes happened. By day, the whole house was deserted. In the night it filled up for the filthy compound to become sleeping places to the immense joy of mosquitoes.

What was the use of crying? Kweiki was right. Who cared? The tears stopped automatically. The eyes were left clear to stare at a blank world of emptiness. When the senses connected the blank images there remained this fog of stupefaction. It was a kind of fog which made it impossible for his kind of brain to distinguish between a real world and an unreal world. In any case what was his point of reference? That kind of fog permitted no access to any baseline data even if he could assemble, analyse, store, retrieve, disseminate, handle such data like any functional neural system.

He sat on his stair still clinging to his kenkey as if it was his only reality. The flies were also reality enough. They were doing their concertoes on the kenkey and on his stupefied hairless head and all over his kwashiorkor body. For he had soiled himself. The sun was also exacting its own penance in a snow-balling reality. The rays hit him like bullets of AK47. The hairless head, the parched skin, the running nose and tear-dried eyes felt like skewed meat thrust onto an open fire.

Because of that he decided to descend. His crawling even at his first birthday showed very little confidence. Healthy children walked. He was careful and hesitant. He debated how to do it with the kenkey in hand. He was still debating when his grip on it failed and he saw the kenkey roll down the stairs. He watched it with an involuntary gape. The rebellious chicken met it half way on its fall and preyed on it. The dogs jumped on them to snap it away. That was the

end of a kenkey meant more as a companion than a means of meeting the need for food.

Manu waited as if ruminating on this bit about the end of his kenkey before finally continuing his descent. Everything for him was uncertain. Where was he going? Why was he going? Where he was going? What was the objective? What were the chances? What were the options? What principles, what ethics, what rights were involved? Probably by a cosmic intuition he would know that such abstract things - ethics, rights, etc. - existed. But how would he define them with reference to his reality? It was all a tumble of strangeness. For the din of the capital city life was reaching him, the life of traffic and commerce and... generally society. Right around him, in spite of his fog, there was the burning sun and flies, and his own excreta and desertion of every human being.

He fell on the last but one stair which would have brought him into shade and into more flies and a filthy marsh and the stench of putrefying things. He didn't even have the will to cry although he felt some kind of pain somewhere in his body. He was just content to lie flat on his thin back and swivelled buttocks and look up to the roof which was rusted and peeling away. As he looked, he did not miss the ubiquitous brightness of the sun and it sent him squinting with tears.

A dog came to lick his ear.

The children who came to the house to find him prostrated thus were on their normal truancy from school.

School was such a pain in the throat. They didn't need an excuse to run from it. What they needed was the will. Fortunately, the fathers and the mothers who had to obstruct their truancy from school were partly on their own manner of thinking that, school was such a pain in the throat-a pain stuck somewhere internally, where one simply could not reach with the hand and excise.

Back from school they would hunt in every corner of the house and if necessary break into locked containers. If there were monies, they were the lucky ones. The aunties and the uncles would come and scream, shout and curse and threaten lightening by the power of voodoo and other principalities, the monies would remain stolen.

That day, the children were frustrated. There was not a cedi anywhere. It was Manu who had to suffer for it. Coming down the stairs they saw him lying there with his faithful flies. One child suggested his head gave the best promise of a goal-kick. Ha-ha-ha-he-he-he!!! He liked creating laughter. And, he also liked doing things to show how tough he was. So, he took his time to march down the stairs and took a footballer position behind Manu's head. Ha-ha-ha-he-he-he!!!

It as his toes which bore the brunt of the kick. It sprained and he squealed so cowardly the others laughed and laughed. Manu was crying and as he struggled to get onto his wasted buttocks, the children thought at least each of them should try finding the best technique to kick his head without a pain to himself. One pushed the struggling Manu's

head down, the other took position and kicked. As the baby shrieked, the children squealed with laughter. Oh what fun!

It was the grandparents who came to save him and drive the dangerous gang away. The grandma picked the baby, raining insults on the mother for leaving the helpless thing to fend for itself. When she noticed she would have to do some work on Manu, clean him of his excreta, she snorted at Manu and turned her scolding on him. 'Silly baby! always shitting and soiling himself! I have never picked you clean without stench. It's jinx on you Manu, shame!!' She screamed at him to shut up as she found some cold water and threw it at him.

The grandpa went up the stairs grumbling that the wife was not minding her own business. If Morkor could not look after her own child, who was she an old hen to take over that job? Did Morkor ever give them a morsel to eat knowing that once in the house they could be of some use? He stood up the stairs berating his old wife. It was the exact position where Manu sat a while ago wielding a piece of kenkey like a talisman. The old lady climbed up after her husband holding the crying Manu like an abominable package not bothering to wipe the water off him.

Because the baby cried, the stranger who entered the house had to raise his voice several times to announce his presence. Grandma came out to invite him into the room where they sat. It was a very spare room indeed. There was a hard

bed which sometimes doubled as a seat for both of them. They had a couple of stools and a small table. Even if they needed more than these furniture, where was the money to buy some more? Through and through, they had grown very used to this room and its meagre furnishing.

The arabic dressing, the staff on which the big luggage hung gave the identity of the stranger away. Here was a foreigner fortune teller coming to visit them. Grandpa openly grumbled that his peace was being disturbed. He shouted at Manu to at least shut up for some peace! Grandma struggled with a dilemma. She did not like these foreigners. They always begged for alms. Yet, they had the gift of looking into the future and she had this deep crave for peeping into the future to see what lay in store for her before she died. This man could tell a good fortune for them. She ignored her husband's grumbings and invited the stranger into their room.

The fortune-teller asked for his palm to be crossed. Those who looked into the future of others needed the mark of approval. Moreover, one could not see fortunes with dry eyes. Tears of gratitude needed to glaze these psychic eyes to make them see better. They were waiting for a kind niece to come and give them food. The fortune teller still held out his hand for the crossing and the woman untied from a corner of her cloth, her last one cedi note which even her husband did not know she had and put it in the hand of the stranger.

He grunted and murmured blessings barely within comprehension. He told their fortune. He told them of the unlimited wealth waiting to

pour from above into their laps. They were not meant to die so poor; why should the Good Allah keep them living this long? They were good people and in their hearts he saw whiteness which Allah himself would reward from above. But, it was not just witchcrafts holding back the rains, so to speak, it was their own inaction. Grandpa was forced to abandon his cynicism, and pull a stool to where grandma sat with the stranger. Together they gave all their ears.

The stranger mentioned as an afterthought, a woman who needed a child. Was it possible they could help?

'She wants to take a maid?'

'Whatever. Maid, houseboy, babies....'

'Babies?'

'Yes, babies.'

'Is she barren?'

'Yes. She wants a child to have as her very own. In fact she prefers a child just about a year - just walking.'

They looked at each other and being married for so long, forty-eight years, their minds worked as one. 'The one we have here is barely a year. Probably a year. Nobody knows. But he is not walking. Not even crawling properly - dullest of babies.'

'That's even better,' the fortune teller said through his cola-nutted teeth. 'If you are willing....'

'Well, the mother is not here....'

'If you have to bring in the mother then forget it. She never deals with mothers.' It was a terrible and reckless way to approach a dangerous deal as this one. But the stranger had used it often and he knew it worked. Perfectly.

The grounds for its success were prepared during the fortune-telling. The whiteness he foretold in their hearts were pure whiteness of greed.

'Then she has bought babies before', the old man shot back at him. It was quite a surprise that the oldman could match his daring and bring it all in the open as if they were discussing the tapping of a palm tree.

'Well...okay, yes she has bought babies before.' He looked directly into the eyes of the oldman, exposed the redness in his gums and teeth and added impersonally, 'but they are all dead.'

Would the oldman dare to continue along the path of truth? It was a challenge he waited for him to take.

The silence which descended was a replica of the grave's. 'They are all dead...all dead...dead' It was the key thing they needed to know before coming to the decision. The fortune teller waited, happy and he had passed on the burden to them. Some of their likes were so cunning they would leave you with the burden of guilt though strictly speaking they made all the decisions and made the deal possible. The old couple looked at each other and then at Manu lying forlornly on a torn mat in a corner of the room, sobbing. Each waited for the other to speak.

'How much?' asked the old man. He was the man, he would play his manly role. 'You quote your price', the stranger spat out cola mucus.

They mentioned their price. Sky-high, enough to repair their leaking roof and to leave some cash for square meals for sometime. They were surprised the stranger did not flinch. Nor did he ask for any reduction. He immediately

reached into his luggage to count the money. They were so surprised they kept gaping and letting flies into their mouths freely. That was the kind of scenario which met Kweiki as she entered the room.

Occasionally she brought her men to the house. This one did not appear to need much time. She had to pass by the old couple's room before getting to her door. She saw their door opened and she knew that they had come from the funeral. When she entered, sighted the money, and sighted the stranger, she knew something was amiss. If she wasted time, if she played dull, if she missed a false step, she would miss a chance to take a good cut of the deal.

Fortunately, she had heard the rumours that these foreigners had been buying babies. She didn't believe grandpa and grandma could be up to that sort of thing. But all that dealing with men had made her discover things about the unpredictability of man.

She went straight to where the stranger was counting and picked two bundles. 'That's my share of the Manu's fortune' the oldman jumped at her. 'You put that money down.'

'I could put it down...here. See, you have it back. I'm going to the police.' The old woman jumped up to block her way, pleading.

That was how she got her suspicions sealed. She went on to force the truth out of the oldwoman who knew for a fact that Kweiki would be all for the deal. If nothing at all, they would all be rid of the dullest baby on earth - Manu.

Yet, contrary to their expectations, she declined

picking her share of the money. When the stranger looked at her, she smiled and told him, 'I think we can have a little chat together. You tell fortune, don't you? Come into my room next door. No, not right away. There is a man with me. In about five minutes, I'll call you. Come tell my fortune.' She eyed the stranger's money bag and gave him a lipstick smile.

Grandpa and grandma wondered what tricks this shameless tart had up her sleeves. The stranger knew what it was all about and he was happy to be prepared for everything.

'Tell me my fortune first.'

'You must cross my palm'

'You are going to cross, really cross, my palm.' She was happy to place the emphasis where it ought to be. She was extremely happy. 'This is fortune telling. Very spiritual. I can't see any fortune if my palm is not crossed.'

Kweiki gave in and pulled a two-hundred-cedi note from what her man had given her. She made a mental note to be sure she demanded that specific cedi note back in addition to whatever she took from the man. She placed it in the hand of the stranger. They both seemed to take it all seriously as if her life depended on it. She listened to the prayer and blessing. She spread out her palm and listened keenly to the fortune told. 'You are the tigress incarnated set to devour the feeble in the jungle. You must know your catchment of the cosmic force is greater than you can contain. Don't destroy yourself by riding roughshod into the heart of tornadoes. You will succeed anyhow and no force can hinder you except your own.'

There was a sense of mystery and fatality and it

made it all the more believable and feasible for her. She was satisfied. Her fortune had been told. She was a tigress and she deserved to devour all babies. The truth rang in her soul. Death to all babies. Death to all babies!

When it came to her mentioning her price (for her palm to be crossed), the stranger was surprised she acted out exactly her tigress part. She insisted on three times what her grandpa and grandma took. As soon as the stranger paid, she led her out and personally went and picked up the dozing Manu and handed him to him. This time she held Manu tenderly for he had brought her a sum more than all the men in her life had ever done. She could also afford to be tender since it was the last time she was seeing him.

When the stranger was gone with the baby drugged into his luggage (he kept a bottle of chloroform on him), Kweiki remembered Markor. She ran up to the old couple who had immediately locked themselves up to recount their money.

Kweiki laughed at them pouring scorn on them 'at your age, what do you want that kind of money for? You give me my cut, right now.'

'But didn't the stranger pay you?' asked grandma incredulously.

'I only invited him to come into my room and tell my fortune.' Grandma looked dubiously at her. Grandpa felt like running after the stranger and asking him. He knew his grandchild was as greedy as a hyena.

'So how much do you want?' asked the grandma, grandpa looking at Kweiki with distaste.

'I like my bundle. What

I picked, and grandpa wanted to eat me up.' It carried the highest denominations and she was taking more than half the money. Grandpa wanted to protest, grandma not wanting trouble with Kweiki personally picked the money and handed it to her.

'That's very good. You've done the right thing now. But look let's look ahead, right. Sit down grandpa, and you grandma sit down. I'll sit here.'

'What else do you want, Kweiki?' Sheer loathing for their grandchild was making their skin twitch.

'Softly, softly, grandpa. Walls have ears. See, what do we do to Morkor?' It was clear they hadn't seriously thought of the question.

'Nothing,' said grandpa furtively.

'You mean Morkor will come back home here and when she asks for her Manu, each of us will look into her face saying nothing. Doing nothing?'

'We'll tell her the baby is lost,' said grandma trying to settle the matter convincingly. 'And she wouldn't ask how the baby got lost? Who carried him the last time? Where the baby was lost? I mean not that Morkor is that intelligent but a mother is a mother. She has rights where her baby is concerned. You know that.'

'She did hate giving birth to the baby.'

'Right on target, grandma. So, we take it from there. We act on that basis. That is our best defence. Our best hope. We don't hide anything.'

'But,' the old woman was alarmed. 'How can we tell her?'

'You put her share of

the money in her hands, before you open your mouth with the truth. I swear, she'll quickly make another baby and give it to you to sell.'

So again grandpa saw their money cut down by the half of what ever remained. They could not protest. They could not talk. They just prayed that Kweiki would be done, gone out of their room and leave them in peace.

'See how cleverly I've handled everything for you? You should cross my palm in gratitude.' At that point, grandpa would have thrown the money at her and strangled her. But she was only joking and she danced, actually danced merrily out of their room, overjoyed at the birth and sale of Manu.

Morkor returned in the night pretending to be sorry for overstaying, Kweiki, made sure she would get her to talk to immediately before anyone else. Not that the old couple were up to the task. 'Why did you always have to come home this late, Morkor? Go ask the time. It's nine o'clock.'

'I tell you, it's my customers. And I couldn't get vehicle.' Morkor tried to make the lies genuine even as Kweiki pretended she was open to conviction.

'You have put me into a terrible situation, Morkor. I don't even know how to begin.'

'What is it, Kweiki?'

'Aren't you going to ask of your baby?'

'Oh that!' She made a face and apologised for burdening Kweiki with that despicable thing for so long. She was afraid she would get into a fight with her cousin. 'Kweiki, I'm terribly sorry I came this late. But I managed to make a little extra, so here. I'll pay your loan back and

**'You put her share of the money in her hands, before you open your mouth with the truth. I swear, she'll quickly make another baby and give it to you to sell.'**

add a little extra. Thanks for your patience.' 'You put the money down here, but you must know I've lost the baby.'

'You've lost Manu?' Morkor's surprise was completely undefinable. Instant shock and instant pleasure! She had the good sense not to rejoice openly. She was free of the leech. Free. Freedom at last! But Kweiki was smart to notice. She saw that it was safe to go on, 'I took this your stupid baby out with me. I had a man. He was talking a lot of money!'

'Oh yeah!' Kweiki caught the glint of envy in her cousin's eyes. She went on, 'he had to take me somewhere where we could be alone. You know where this rich man took me?'

'How would I know? As for you, you're always lucky with men.' Morkor was happy to be taken into confidence. She was all ears waiting to hear about the good time with the rich man.

Kweiki told her about the baby instead. 'I left Manu under a tree.'

'Please tell me about your richman'

'Please listen to what happened to your baby first.'

'Forget him, Kweiki'

'I can't forget the poor thing, Morkor. When I came back, he was gone. I was confused. I rushed to my police friend. The officer. He told me if I should bring the mother to make a report....'

'Me, Morkor...report? For what?'

'And of course find some money to bribe the officer on the job....'

'I don't have a pesewa!'

'Hoo! You should have rested your soul, Kweiki. Me, go to the police to report?' Kweiki knew it, she would do anything on earth to stay clear of the police. 'And the bribe. Where am I supposed to get the money from. If the thief had come to me personally and asked for him, I would have gladly given him this one....' She continued to speak the language Kweiki wanted to hear. Thoroughly satisfied with herself, she decided it was time to celebrate. 'Well, Morkor, I'm sorry your baby is lost. But let me tell you of my richman. Go take your bath, put on your best second-hand dress and let me take you somewhere we can have a beer.'

'You offering me a beer! You really did have a richman!'

'Hurry up Morkor and I take you to where he took me. If you are lucky, you can get a man. It's time for another baby.'

'Oh no! damn, damn all babies. Damn all babies forever!'

Each in her own way was so happy with the fortune of Manu that they came together and danced out, singing a popular hit with an arm wrapped round the other's neck. The people of the house saw the two enemies mysteriously happy and united and wondered. Grandpa and grandma smiled to each other happy to know the secret and happy that their good old age had given them wisdom to take a chance on a baby, when that chance came their way. **GR**