

A PARAPLEGIC'S GIFT

By Sam Okello

There were tears in my eyes after she stoically walked me through her wrenching story a third time. Anyango had so graciously told me her story twice before, but I'd been too stunned to believe her. That's why I'd come back a third time to see if she'd waver, tell it a different way, or take back her sweeping forgiveness of the hooded men who'd so hatefully killed her two sons and young daughter. But Anyango stood her ground. Nothing had changed.

"I've forgiven them," she said.

"Even though they practically decimated your family? Left you paralyzed neck down? Subjected you to a life permanently trapped in a wheelchair, and thousands of shillings in medical bills?"

Anyango nodded with a wide, sweet smile. "I've forgiven them. In fact, if you can trace any of them, tell them they have my forgiveness."

My jaw dropped again, just like it had the first two times Anyango had told me her devastating story. How could she forgive the marauding, vicious men who'd pounced on her home that sunny afternoon, destroyed her meager property, killed her three darlings and beat her senseless...leaving her for dead?

How *dare* she?

It was five days after Kenya's disputed elections of 2007. By now it was clear that the ethnic violence that had erupted in the Opposition stronghold of Eldoret-where different ethnic groups had turned on each other, killing, maiming and burning helpless women and the crippled, and hacking men in churches-was about to engulf the entire nation. In Nairobi and other key towns across Kenya, tensions were rising. Matters were not helped by the highhandedness of the police, who'd been reported to have killed unarmed protesters in the lakeside city of Kisumu and in Kibera, a sprawling city slum.

Though Anyango-like other residents of Naivasha-knew that Kenya had suddenly become one of the most dangerous nations on earth, she was shocked by the speed with which events had played out. Only five days ago, people all over the country had celebrated the peaceful voting that had taken place across Kenya. The ensuing vote-counting had gone equally well, with the Opposition candidate showing signs of victory, leading by more than 1.5 million votes. There was excitement in the air. Change was coming.

Then three days into the vote-counting exercise, the President suddenly started closing the gap. His numbers started creeping upward steadily. By nightfall, it became evident that President Mwai Kibaki had somehow found a way to be re-elected. For Opposition supporters, it was the most flawed, most blatantly rigged poll in the nation's history. For Mwai Kibaki's enthusiasts, it was a time to celebrate.

Within moments, accusations of massive rigging echoed through the country. Kenyans pounced on Kenyans. Kalenjins, Kikuyus, Luos, Kisiis and other tribes that previously co-existed peacefully united in an unprecedented orgy of bloodletting. But unbeknown to Kenyans, the state of lawlessness opened a door for deadly militias. Mungiki, from the populous Kikuyu-tribe, found a playing ground to main Kenyans. Others from different regions sought revenge in previously-held grudges—perhaps against land disputes or any other misdeed that a person from another tribe had committed.

Members of this dreadful militia descended on Naivasha like an apocalyptic hurricane. Anyango was snoring silently, lost in an afternoon nap like was her custom on Saturdays, when the killers showed up. Suddenly she heard a piercing knock, followed by a ferocious kick to the squeaky door. As the door buckled under the weight of the heavy boots, Anyango came face to face with hooded men. They were six or seven. They drew bloody machetes from their dirty sheaths and proceeded to cut up her boys. Anyango watched helplessly as her boys-nine and six-were brutally chopped to death by these evil men, not strangers but people she used to greet on her way to the market, the neighbor who borrowed household items such as salt during hard economic times .

Within minutes of her sons' death, the leader of the squad turned on her daughter. The sweet, little girl was just five. As the overweight man started to rape her, burying her under his oversize stomach, Anyango found her voice and said, "Please let my baby go. You can do that to me instead."

The rapist ignored Anyango's pleas.

But when the rest of the squad couldn't take her whining anymore, they grabbed and threw her back on her bed. There, they took turns raping her. Then they reined kicks and blows on her, leaving her with gaping cuts all over her body...until she passed out. Five days later, Anyango regained consciousness at a Naivasha hospital and knew instantly that her daughter never made it. She'd lost all her children in one afternoon of terror.

"And you still forgive such hopelessly evil men?" I asked Anyango one last time.

Anyango nodded. "I do."

Was this woman crazy?

As she wheeled herself toward the kitchen-fussing about what to fix quickly so I could eat before I left-I followed her and stood in her way. I told her not to worry about me. Then I drew a deep breath. *Should I go through with this or let go?* I decided I had to watch her reaction when she saw the two men strategically hidden behind her door. So I said, "Anyango, do you recall that the first time I visited you told me that if I tracked down your attackers I should tell them you forgave them?"

"Of course I do. I'm not in the habit of forgetting things."

Looking at her calmness, I exhaled in a staggered fashion. She made me feel so unworthy. But I'd just made a conscious decision to go through with this next stage, so there was no backing off now. I said, "Anyango, I've tracked down two of your attackers."

Anyango suddenly sat straight. "You have? Did you tell them I forgave them? And did they accept my forgiveness?"

That very moment-just like I'd arranged-two teary-eyed men opened the door, walked with determined steps toward Anyango, and wrapped the paraplegic woman in a prolonged hug. "I am so sorry," each whispered between sobs, their words breaking with remorse.

"It's okay," Anyango said. It was the first time since I first met Anyango that I saw tears in her eyes. Allowing a controlled smile, she added, "Thank you for coming to see me. I knew that something good would come out of this incident."

Something good?

I looked Anyango in the eye. "Is that why you forgave these guys? Because you expected something good to come out of this?"

Anyango nodded slowly. She again hugged each of the guys, then she said, "You know, I have found peace and joy...and I'm looking forward to eternal life...where my body will be restored and my children will be there to witness the friendship that blossomed between their mother and their killers." She squeezed the guys. "I love you!"

What!

I said, "Anyango, forgive me for not understanding, but as far as I know, these guys never asked for your forgiveness. In fact, you didn't even know who they were?"

Anyango finally looked up. She knew I was lost. I was a man conditioned by my culture and society to seek revenge when wronged. I'd learnt since childhood to hit back hard at those who treated me without respect. In fact, I'd perfected the art of holding a grudge. I could hold a grudge for years. So as Anyango continued to look at me, I felt naked, so empty.

She said, "Let me tell you what you've not realized all this time. Forgiveness is not a present that a victim can withhold from an offender, it's a gift freely given to those who-in our arrogance-we decide don't deserve it."

After Anyango's words, the two guys loosened her off the long hug and told her the story of their journey to redemption. With tears trickling softly, they recounted how they'd been consumed with remorse after their heinous act. How they'd secretly visited Anyango's bedside at the hospital and prayed for her speedy recovery. How they'd gone to her shattered door twice, intent on going in to seek her forgiveness, but courage had failed them. How on the day Anyango came back home from the hospital they'd sneaked into her living room and cried while she slept in her bedroom.

"Is that where you met them...right here in my living room?" Anyango asked me, amazed at the lengths the guys had gone to correct a wrong that there was no earthly way to correct.

When I nodded, she smiled and tilted her head toward the guys. She looked at them with the most tender eyes I'd ever seen. Forgiving eyes. And I could tell that in spite of being trapped in the permanent cruelty of a powered wheelchair, the two guys thought Anyango was the most forgiving woman in the whole world.

She was an angel.