

## BLACK-EYED BEANS

Inside the matron's office, a few moments later, he listened bewildered as another hard woman told him a strange story, and an even longer tale, that had nothing at all to do with his simple and orderly world, and made no sense whatsoever.

"You say it is not sick?" he asked her confounded.

"It's perfectly normal," the Day Matron assured him.

"And it is not bewitched?"

"It's not witchcraft."

"Why is it ... different?" He asked her.

"Why?" she asked, exasperated. "Because it is different."

It was a cramped office. Files and empty boxes lay all over the place. The shelves along the walls were packed with more files and empty cartons. On one wall were two portraits of two white women, one old and the other holding a baby. Tomei recognized the Madonna and Child, but he had never heard of Mother Theresa, nor ever felt as outnumbered as he did now.

"Where is it from?" he asked the matron. "That is what I want to know."

"It's a type, not a tribe," she explained. "Very rare, but it happens."

"How come I never heard of it?"

Such things never happened to his clan.

"It's extremely rare," she explained, talking slowly and clearly, as to a child. "A strange but normal thing."

But, she went on to add, the strangest things were getting common every day.

"It's all the pills and things your wives take not to have babies," she said to him. "The skin-whitening creams and foreign soaps and things you make them use to beautify themselves; it's a wonder the babies are born with any skin at all."

"Not my wife," Tomei informed her.

His wife Grace was a real woman, a traditional woman. She did not need to change her face to beautify herself for him. In fact, he would be very angry with her if she changed herself. But that was not why he was here.

"Men!" They never ceased to amaze her. "It's not all about you, you know."

"Not about me?" he asked startled.

"Not about men," she laughed. "It is also about us women. We are not the beasts of burden and baby machines you take us for, you know. We are people too; people with feelings and needs, just like you. We need to look good, and to feel good too about our bodies and ourselves. We'd like to be desired for things other than our fertility and our industry. To be desired for ..."

"Desired?" Tomei was at a complete loss. "Why? Desired by whom?"

"By our husbands," she eased, "just by you. Not that it ever stopped a man from wandering."

“Wandering?” What on earth was she talking about now?

And before he could begin to understand her, she was off on a different track, dragging him along winding bush trails, full of wild and obscure ideas, he had never imagined existed. She told him of cell formation, and of fertilisation and mitosis. She talked of things called chromosomes, mitochondria and DNA, and about a dozen equally mystifying things that he had never heard of, and didn't care to understand. It left a ringing in his ears.

“Were you there when the baby was born?” he asked, returning to the more pertinent issue.

“The Night Matron would tell you the same thing too, if she were here.”

It's a natural phenomenon.”

“A what?”

“A natural occurrence.”

Tomei shook his head, scratched his chin and was lost for words.

“So what do I tell the clan?” he asked himself.

“Exactly what I have told you,” she advised. “It's a natural phenomenon and nothing more. I'm sure the clan will understand.”

She did not understand at all, he now realised. The son had to be like the father; like the father in every detail. He tried enlightening her.

She listened patiently while he educated her, moaning and groaning and grumbling about clans and traditions, and about what it meant to be a man, until she wearied of him. Then she picked up the phone and made a call to Nairobi to consult an expert. The expert confirmed what she had just told Tomei, that it wasn't anyone's fault, and that he and his clan better start liking it, because, like it or not, that was the way it was. That was it.

Tomei settled deeper in his chair, and it seemed he would not leave unless she told him something he could understand. So she made one more telephone call, this one to a renowned doctor in Canada. Professor Churchill confirmed that the boy was perfectly normal and would do just fine, as long as they kept him out of the sun.

“Out of the sun!” Tomei shot to his feet. “What sort of chief doesn't go out in the sun?”

“Sit down!” She ordered, slamming down the phone.

He was so startled he sat down immediately.

“What is your problem, man?” She was looking him in the eye, something he found troubling. “My problem?”

“Your problem.”

“My problem?” He tried to think of a language that a woman could understand. “When you plant millet ...”

“Millet?”

“Yes, millet,” he said it slowly so she could keep up. “When you plant millet, you don't expect ...”

“Millet?”

Obviously she did not get it.

“What I am saying is,” he tried again, slower still, “when you plant sorghum, you don’t get ...”

“Sorghum?” She laughed suddenly, startling him. “What have sorghum and millet got to do with your baby? Are you saying that you did not plant this seed? Is that what you are saying?”

“What I am saying is ...” he persisted, refusing to be sidetracked.

“That your wife slept with another man?”

“What I’m saying ...”

“Will you stop meandering in the bush and say what you mean?”

He was near despair. Why was it always so difficult for women to understand? He shook his head confounded, cramped his mouth shut and decided he would not utter another word to her.

“According to my records,” she said, opening her register and turning the pages, “only two babies were born here last night. One of them was ...”

She stopped suddenly, and examined the records closely, looking puzzled and raising his hopes. The last entry was hardly legible. It seemed to indicate that two babies had been delivered at approximately the same time. Most of the entry was a jumble of figures and letters that did not have to make any sense to the visitor. In any case, one mother had left for Nairobi with her baby, right after delivery, and, so far, there had been no complaints from anyone other than Tomei.

“What I’m saying is,” Tomei tried again, “when you plant black-eye beans, you don’t expect ...”

“Rice?”

“You understand,” he sighed with relief. “You do understand.”

“Understand?” She laughed explosively and slapped the register shut. “You’d be surprised the things I have seen here. Just last week, a mother delivered eight babies. Imagine that. Eight babies. Here I am, expecting one, maybe two babies and she drops eight on me. Can you see that? Eight tiny boys one after the other? Even goats don’t do that any more. One minute she is childless, the next she has too many. Just like that. And there sits her husband, exactly where you sit now, with an ego as large as a beer gourd, swearing that only one of the eight is his. He sat exactly where you are now refusing to believe his own eyes. And you think you have a problem? A problem? Just because you don’t like the way your baby looks? You should thank God he has any eyes at all.”

Tomei thought about it, shook his head.

“I cannot accept this,” he concluded.

“His words exactly,” said the matron.

“I will not accept it!” He was decided.

“Accept?” wondered the matron. “The baby is already here, your wife is happy with it, so what’s there to accept?”

Tomei stormed to his feet.

“You are all alike,” he informed her.

Then he strode to the door and slammed it behind him.