

CONDOM CLINIC

Janet watched helplessly, and quite disgustedly, as Broker hijacked her guest and led him on a wild chase into unfathomable, egoistic labyrinths, where truth had no meaning whatsoever and only cars mattered, and they forgot about Crossroads. They discussed cars for a long time, while Janet fretted and Chief Chupa seriously worried that Broker might survive to usurp his throne.

“We’ll look into the budget,” Don Donovan promised Broker. “We should be able to afford a Jeep for her.”

Then Janet opened her mouth and reversed every gain that Broker had made in the last half hour. What she really wanted, she said it loudly so as not to be misunderstood, what she really wanted, more than a car and more than anything else, was to have a free medical test for Crossroads.

They were startled into silence. Sensing something vital was at stake here, Chief Chupa turned to his henchman and asked what she had said. The ox had no idea, but Broker overheard them, and he was incensed enough with Janet to tell them exactly what she had asked for.

“*Hau!*” cried the Chief horrified. “You mean to test everyone?”

“Everyone who consents to it,” she told him.

“Do you know what it would cost?” he asked her.

Broker patted him gently on the shoulder and assured him that it would cost the earth, but asked him not lose any sleep over it, for it was not his money and he had exactly zero to do with it.

“Can anyone pay for the test?” Don Donovan asked.

“No,” Janet told him.

“What is the population of this place?” he asked them next.

No one had any idea.

“The last meaningful census was thirty years ago,” Janet told him.

Before Aids made its first appearance. Since then, people had died like flies and everyone had lost count.

“Many people are ill, anyway” Broker said. “We are talking very small numbers, indeed.”

“So you think it’s a good idea too?” Don Donovan asked him.

Broker saw the anguish on Janet’s face, but this was a once-in-a-life-time and he decided to speak his mind and be damned for all time.

“No,” he said, speaking the absolute truth for the first time that day. “I don’t think it’s such a good idea at all.”

The money could be better off used in providing medical support for those who were sick and protection for those who were not. That was his honest opinion.

Janet was so disgusted she was about to spit in his face.

“But it’s all up to Janet,” he added. “She knows best the problems of Crossroads.”

Don Donovan nodded thoughtfully and said, “We’ll look into the budget.”

Then he thanked them all for a very enlightening tour and promised to get in touch in due course. The delegation piled into their new vehicles and left Crossroads, in the same rush they had arrived in.

The last vehicle had not completely left Crossroads before Broker called back the boys and ordered them to surrender all the condoms they had received from Big Youth. The crowd dispersed, and were no better off, or worse off, than when they had arrived; except for the few youths who had had the foresight to disappear before Broker demanded the condoms back.

A few old-timers lingered, and were heard to complain that they had not come all this way and waited all this long in the sun for nothing; and they now wanted the presents that the visitors had brought for them. What had happened to the money that the visitors had brought? they asked.

Why was it not being dished out? They wanted answers to these questions, and they wanted them now, and they refused to go home empty-handed.

They confronted Chief Chupa and demanded the money that his henchmen had promised would be distributed by the visitors with the many cars.

Chief Chupa, totally confounded by the news himself, turned to Janet for help, and Janet obliged him, as only Janet could.

Giving vent to the anger and the fury she had endured since Broker told Don Donovan about the clinic, she responded by giving the old men a tongue-lashing the like of which they had never had before. What was the matter with Crossroads' men? she asked them. Did they grow up and turn to animals or were they hyenas from birth? Did they think with their heads, with their stomachs or with their hyenas' tails? When would they mature, start behaving like men? When would they realise that they were husbands and fathers, and not beasts of prey?

She insulted them for a full ten minutes, and one dared answer back, but, when she was done, they grumbled some more and swore not to leave before the money and the presents had been distributed. They were not fools, they said, they were total men and they had not come all the way out here to be insulted by a woman, not even one with elephantine testicles. They insisted that their Chief discipline the insolent woman and force her to hand out the money they knew she had received. But Chief Chupa had received the visitors himself, and had been with Janet all day, and he knew of no such money or presents, and he suspected that there wasn't any, and he too was helpless against this tempestuous woman.

It was going to sunset before most of them understood, and believed, that there would be no communal eating happening that day, and dispersed. They went away disgruntled, and lamenting it, all the way to their homes to vent their anger on their own hapless women.

Thus ended another great day in Crossroads, arguably the greatest day since *Mobil* brought out the giant cranes and tractors to exhume and carry away the corpses of the old fuel tanks from the impotent belly of Juma's service station; the underground fuel reservoirs that they had thought the town would never again need.

And Uncle Mark and Mzee Musa retreated to the teahouse veranda, from where they watched the cynics depart, reluctantly, to return to their accustomed oblivion.

Mzee Musa shook his head and marvelled, without real surprise, that, with such a huge gathering camped virtually the whole day at his door step, he had not sold a single cup of tea. What had this world come to?

Uncle Mark nodded wisely and tried to shrug the rising melancholia from his weary shoulders. With the parting of the crowd, something moved, something dark and sinister like the ghost of a looming disaster. Something cold and encircling like the belly of a swamp toad. Something apocalyptic, like the first labour pangs of a death too long in the womb.

Crossroads had silently, and without a struggle, sunk another foot in its yawning grave.

"Will anything come out of this?" Janet wondered to herself.

"Just might," Frank said encouragingly.

"But don't bet on it," Broker told them all.

He had witnessed many such a grand circus before. Tomorrow the show would be somewhere else, doing something else equally vital to the people it concerned. And also living and making a living for the wives and the children and the *Volvo* back home. As for Crossroads ...

"You said it yourself," he said to Janet. "It's up to Crossroads itself."

Sadness and gloom covered them with grief.

"But we gave it a fair shot, didn't we?" Broker added, laughing sadly. "No one will ever say we did not try."

"Did you get the car?" Big Youth asked Janet.

“No,” Janet told him.

“What did you get?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You got nothing,” Broker informed her, with a touch of bitter resentment.

“Nothing?” Big Youth was appalled.

“Zero,” Broker told him. “That is what she got.”

“You mean we did all that work for nothing?” Big Youth was devastated.

“No,” Janet said. “I don’t think so.”

“Yes!” Broker said harshly. “You did all that work for nothing.”

She did not argue with him. She was about to die from disappointment herself and Frank did not know what to do about any of it.

Then Big Youth remembered he had his book-work to do and they released him. Janet had to go home to cook for her children, and to think things over, and they released her too. Broker offered to drive her home, but she wanted to walk, alone, and to do her thinking on the way. She asked them to come around for dinner later on in the evening. Broker declined. He too had thoughts to think and things to do and he had to remain open a little longer and see what happened. Besides, Highlife Atieno had not come for her daily supply of condoms.

Then he looked up and saw again the false sign hanging over the door of the shop and remembered.

“Hey you!” he called after Big Youth. “This is a condom shop!”

Big youth looked back confounded and spread his arms to ask, “So?”

“Get rid of this *clinic* nonsense!” Broker commanded him.

“Tomorrow,” he promised.

“And get back the free condoms you gave to your friends,” Broker shouted after him.

Big Youth laughed and went on his way.

When they were all gone, Broker sat down to think the day over and to wait for the one sure customer in the whole of Crossroads. He could not help but feel that, all in all, the day had gone much better than anyone could have hoped.