

I AM THE MAU

‘Walk with me, son,’ my father said to me. And, without looking backwards, he set off.

I followed. It was the day I turned ten. We walked in silence along the path on the forest floor. Occasionally I would step off the path to allow others going in the opposite direction. My father, of course, did no such thing – nor was he expected to, unless we came across another elder. Then they would both stop and lift clasped hands to each other in respect, but no words would pass. He would also stop from time to time to examine a plant or to redirect a renegade vine.

Presently, he stopped by a *yemdit* tree, upon whose branches sat a log beehive. Father hadn’t uttered a single word since we left home. We sat on the log, me opposite him on a spot he pointed to, and I had my first formal lesson in beekeeping.

‘See that tree, the *tongotwet*, and that other one the

kureyet? Both those trees are important to us. The honey from the nectar of both make for good medicine. They cure a lot of ailments. They cure: one, the chest, ticking off the list on his bent fingers, ‘two, the stomach ...’

‘Three, the bones,’ I had heard this so many times.

‘Three, the bones.’ Father went on as though I hadn’t said a word. ‘There is a fourth cure too, though nothing to concern yourself with. Your mother will teach your sisters all about that – it is for ... um ... it works for women and their issues.’

‘Yes, *Bamongo*.’

‘But today is about you. Look around, and remember this spot.’ He stood up and beckoned me to do likewise. He pointed to the hive right above the spot I was sitting and said, ‘Now that is yours.’

I nodded. I knew what that meant.

‘Son, we are beekeepers. It is what our people do. It is what we have always done. This is the same tree of my first hive.’

‘*Wei, Bamongo*.’

‘Son, you never forget the taste of your first harvest. I was about the same age as you are now. My first one came after the dry season. My father told me not to rush to harvest my new hive. He taught me to smoke bees. I did

what he always did. I gathered dry grass, lit it and, when it was smoking, gently placed it in the hive and then waited for the bees to calm down. That first harvest had a taste of wild flowers that lingers on.’

‘Is that why you like eating flowers?’

‘Only certain types. They always take me back to my first harvest.’

When Father spoke of setting up hives and of blooming flowers, of bees bearding and bees swarming, of the whitish-grey of the dry season honey and the reddish-brown of the rainy season honey, I knew the words out of his mouth went beyond him to the generations of fathers before him. He was indeed the son of the Mau.

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The last time my father and I went to that spot was eight years ago, just before I started university. Father walked behind me. It was raining. We walked slowly, pushing through the damp foliage and taking in the earthy smell. I stopped occasionally to pore over plants or to redirect the creeping ones, as I had seen Father do countless times before. I took my time to allow him to catch up. His steps had slowed with the effort of avoiding the underbrush that grabbed at his feet, and his back stooped a little more

than I remembered. Father had me count his hives with him. When he gave me my first hive, his were more than three hundred but that number had dwindled to eighty-four.

‘It is all slipping away,’ he sighed.

I said nothing. He slung one side of his thin blanket over his left shoulder as he readied himself to climb one of the *kureyet*. I wanted to do it for him.

‘*Bamongo*,’ I said, as respectfully as I could, ‘let me.’

He turned and looked at me briefly, his eyes betraying something I was unsure of, before he continued the ascent up the tree as swiftly as I had always remembered. There was something about him that day. He had been tender on that last climb – touching and smelling the bark, and tasting the leaves with devotion. He had taken his time. His fingers were delicate when reaching into the hive for honeycomb, and even more so when they removed the few bees that still sat on the comb. The sun filtered through the trees, making it difficult to read his eyes. When he descended, something about him reminded me of the great prophets coming down the mountain with God’s word. Had my father communed with God? Did he know that he was never going up that tree again?

Once back on the ground, Father took the honeycomb,

broke it in half, and then broke it in half again. He took one of the pieces and kept halving it until he had a handful of little pieces. He paused and bowed his head slightly in calm reverence. Then he began to throw the bits as he made pronouncements in every direction.

‘This is for you, my fathers.’

At some point I heard him say, ‘I am sorry.’

Purged, Father then sat down on his log.

‘Son, we are the last generation to call this home. And by that I mean me and my age mates. Those of us who were born in this forest, and have never known a home anywhere else. We are the last to call Mau home. You were born here, but I don’t think your children will come into our world.’

I wanted to say something to assure him that I understood his reverence for the Mau, but I did not know what words to use.

‘Son, promise me,’ his voice urgent, ‘promise me that when your sons come along, you won’t let them forget that we were once a people. We are the Ogieks.’

‘I promise, *Bamongo*.’

He held my gaze for a moment to make sure I understood what I had just promised.

‘Now, they say they want to protect the forest! What

have we been doing for generations?’ Have we not watched over this Mau? How dare ...? How can they say *they* want to look after the Mau?’

My father was on his feet, pacing. Clenching and unclenching his fist and jaw. His voice rising and dropping suddenly. ‘We *know* how to live with the forest.’

That last bit was both quietly forceful and forlorn. Was he speaking to me or someone else? There was a sadness in his voice, a longing for something that was just out of reach.

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We had barely enjoyed a full honey harvest, after that last time, before the government notice arrived. It warned us that the Mau had to be ‘depopulated’. We laughed it off. How were they ever going to do it? It was unthinkable. But then more notices came, and still we hoped nothing would come of them. Ejecting the Ogiek out of the Mau was just as ridiculous as draining Lake Victoria of its fish, we said. But when the government arrived in police vans to deliver the notice in person, a meeting of all the Mau Ogiek was called. We gathered at the open space closest to the stream. We took our places as boys, warriors or elders. It was my first meeting as an initiated member of

the clan, and so I took the warriors’ position alongside my *bakuleywek*. We had an exalted spot with a sweeping view of the Ogiek and our forest home. The elders sat on the ground to one side, the older ones on the old, fallen tree trunk. Some elders were huddled and speaking quietly. The women and children sat opposite them on the ground chatting, and occasionally a voice would be raised to call an errant child back.

The first elder, who really was the youngest in the group, stood up. He read the notice out, pausing to translate and explain its contents. He explained that the Mau Forest had come under government protection as a national heritage. The Mau, he said, was a significant water catchment area for the region and, over the years, the rainforest had shrunk to just a quarter of its original size. That much we agreed with and murmured so in cautious approval. The young elder held up his hand for quiet and then went on to say that, because of the forest destruction and land lost to agriculture and timber, the government had decided that it was urgent to restore and rehabilitate the Mau. This included resettling all its inhabitants. The cautious murmuring from before burst as tempers sparked.

‘*Shenzi* government!’

‘Take my land, take my life!’

‘Then they will have to dig up our ancestors and umbilical cords so we can find peace in a new land!’

The clan became a crowd and the crowd was on the verge of becoming a mob. Had the young elder not been one of us, had he not been the son of Mzee Nyongi, our spiritual guide, I believe the crowd would have found a way to make him unsay everything he had said.

Mwalimu Rono rose next and walked to the centre. She taught me in primary school. She was old then and was still old now. The only thing new was the cane she had in her hand. *Mwalimu* was what we all called her.

‘Our sacred trees have been cut down to make way for what they call development. Between them – and let’s not forget the other outsiders nibbling at our feet for charcoal and maize, and building houses where children once played freely – they have choked the life out of the Mau, and choked us as well,’ she said.

‘Look around you,’ she instructed.

I looked around at my community, whose life was nestled in the Mau. There were more than twenty families in this spot we called Heaven’s Breath, a large verdant open space. The ground was damp, as usual, as was the air. A few huts, built in and amongst the trees, were

in view. The ground sloped east towards the bubbling stream. On any other day, the melody of the birds and the monkeys and the stream buoyed the meditating soul.

‘Look around you,’ *Mwalimu* Rono instructed again. ‘We love Heaven’s Breath but we do not want the entire Mau to be this open. That will happen if nothing is done about the outsiders. We are beekeepers and our way of life does not destroy the Mau. Young man, we need you to tell that to the *serikali*. The government needs to hear us.’

Up until then, my father had listened quietly, shaking his head and occasionally spitting on the ground. He was next to speak. When he rose, it was as if he was holding up the entire Mau. The clan went quiet immediately and leaned forward.

‘Yes, my people, it is true that our Mau has been destroyed. Large chunks of the forest have been lost. But who has done this to our Mau? Is it not those outsiders – those who are destroying the Mau for charcoal? When you come to the edge of the forest,’ my father turned his body to the right and pointed, ‘the new edge – what do you see if not the Kiptagich Tea Estate – who owns that?’ He then turned to point to his left, ‘And what sits at the edge of the forest, creating a new edge, if not a timber factory? They are certainly not owned by the Ogiek.’

My father seemed to understand the threat the Mau faced from deep within his being. I could hear in his voice the pain of one being ripped away from his world. In his stooped back there was fatigue and regret too, when just a season ago he had been climbing trees and inspecting beehives.

‘We must talk. We need to talk. We cannot be foolish. This ground is ours. They say they want to re-settle us elsewhere, but what other forest do they want to take us to? We have lived here with all our fathers and I intend to leave this to my children.’

His voice and hands were raised in exasperation. There was none of the usual stammer in his voice, and his open hands were shaking in fury. He turned to the young elder: ‘Tell them the Ogiek are the very first conservationists. We the Ogiek know how to live with the forest. We the Ogiek are the Mau. We are the environment they are trying to conserve. Without us there is no Mau and without the Mau, we as a people no longer exist. I am Ogiek. I am the Mau.’

‘I am Ogiek. I am the Mau,’ chorused the village.

With that my father sat down and another elder took his place. I drew my coat closer.

‘Young man, tell the Kenyan *serikali* that we have the

knowledge to look after this forest. They should seek our counsel in this matter. I am Ogiek, I am the Mau.’

One after the other, elders stood to reinforce what another had said.

‘We must fight for our lives and our livelihood. We must be prepared to die for the Ogiek or there will be no Ogiek left after these ones here.’

‘It is just that we should be able to hold onto what is ours.’

And so it went on, each speaker punctuated by a more fiery, ‘I am Ogiek, I am the Mau.’ By the time the meeting ended, the call to arms was clear: the beekeepers seemed a murmuring, angry swarm.

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It was not until several months later that I realised how much I had underestimated that call. I got home from university to find my *bakuleywek* sharpening *pangas* and inspecting bows and arrows. They were humming a song that was only ever sung in *tumin* – a war song! These were my age mates, all twelve of them. I looked from one to the other and on each face was a resolve that I had not seen before. We did not have that look at *tumin* when we swore that we would always protect our own. But that was not in

wartime, so we had sworn with the seriousness of a school assembly loyalty pledge. This time, my *bakuleywek* shared the same taut look as they hummed through tight lips. I did not need to be told that their purpose was singular, but I asked anyway.

‘What is going on?’

No response.

Somewhere along the way I had become out of step with them. I wanted to fight for the Mau, but not like that.

‘How many?’ I pressed on.

‘Every clan is getting ready,’ someone replied.

I stumbled out. I had to get distance. Space. I needed to breathe. I didn’t know where I was going but I trusted my legs to take me there. And then the path was there, and my feet followed. I could feel the temptation to break into a run, but I willed my feet to slow down: I did not want to outrun my thoughts. Words were whizzing in my head but taking forever to step in line – into coherence. Slow down, I commanded, slow down! But it was my thoughts that heeded my command, not my feet. And so I ran – then jogged. My feet propelled me into a sprint. Pain in my side ... pushing past it ... trying to breathe. But still I ran, and would probably still be running now if I had not tripped against a buttress root that caused me to stumble and reach

for a log. I closed my eyes, put my head between my legs and tried to breathe. I was gulping in air. *Breathe in deeply, exhale slowly.* I opened my eyes. My shoes were covered in sludge. And they were my good shoes – I hadn’t had time to change out of them. The sludge came all the way to the hem of my drenched trousers.

Then the buzzing came. First from a distance and then closer. In the wind I could hear the words, ‘Mau, Mau’. The buzzing grew louder. It took a moment for me to realise that the buzzing sat right above my head. My eyes followed. Something was familiar. It was not just the buzzing, but the specific spot from which it emanated. Bees! One was right next to my ear. I went to flick it off, but my hand was held in mid-action by my father’s words – *work with the bee*. I stood up slowly and carefully stepped back over the log. I watched the bee as it made its way up the tree to what was a familiar sight.

Aiya! Could this be the very same hive? The light poked through the trees and spread widely so I couldn’t really be sure. *No, not possible*, I thought. How? I squinted across the forest canopy and then around me. I recognised the *yemdit* tree right in front of me. That must mean that the trees on either side of me would have to be ... yes, indeed, they were the *tongotwet*, and that other one the *kureyet*.

I stood stunned for a little while longer. There I was, at the same spot. I looked above me and saw a hive box and immediately knew it was the one. My very first hive! The very same one my father gave me when I turned ten, when he told me about the ways of the Ogiek and taught me about bees. It was years later, at that same spot again, where he showed me his oneness with the soil and with his fathers.

Longing for that oneness, I sank onto my father's log. The memory of that moment stabbed me. I leaned over and grabbed the back of my legs until the pain eased. Then, pushing past fatigue, I fumbled in my pocket for a newspaper clipping that had been everywhere with me in the last six weeks. The Mau was perpetually in the news. *Two Ogiek killed in land clash*. My father had given his life for the Mau and here I was wringing my hands, without the stomach to join my *bakuleywek* in mounting a challenge against the police. Tell me, *Bamongo*, tell me you understand!

'Son, we are fighting the same war, but your battle is different from mine,' he'd said to me. 'So, go to school. Learn to speak the language of the government. We need you to take our fight to the offices where these decisions are made.'

I closed my eyes to hear him better, but he was slipping away. I swallowed hard. A tightness began to form inside of me; I balled my fists and pushed them into my ribcage to dislodge the knot causing me to gasp. The knot moved upwards and settled as a lump in my throat. I had to bite hard to stall the cry that almost escaped me. My tears were not far off, and nor was my anger. I chose to embrace the latter. I was on my feet.

'Speak to me Mau! Our umbilical cord is buried deep in this soil. You gave us life but you have taken my father. This soil here that is ours, didn't you say not to let go?'

My voice was raised, yet the words that left my mouth were not mine but my father's. He was gone, but in the forest he was alive, offering a libation of honeycomb to his fathers and reminding me that I was Ogiek. But I had only just started at university. By the time I was done and ready to challenge the government, would there be a Mau left? The war was real and present and we were armed with bows and arrows against a big government. How do you fight a government without being trodden into the very soil you are fighting for? The fight was over. A greater god had won. The Mau was lost.

I got up to leave. The Mau had already changed anyway, the government said, and our habits were changing, too.

Living away from home had allowed me to imagine a new kind of home as possible. Maybe that would not be so bad after all? Maybe someday I would raise my sons there? But I would keep the stories of the Mau alive.

I came to a stop immediately. *My sons!* Somehow my feet had brought me to the very spot I stood on when I made that promise to my father. *Son, promise me – promise me that when your sons come along, you won't let them forget that we were once a people. We are the Ogieks.*

The hollowness of that promise had stayed with me. Those who cared deeply enough to give their lives for the Mau had failed. I didn't know how *I* would be able to hold onto the Mau. I couldn't reduce the Ogieks to a story. I couldn't let the Mau die without a fight. Father wanted me to fight one battle, my *bakules* another. I had to face the fight that was on my hands right now. I must, I knew, fight for my father, who had given his life to the Mau. And for his fathers, who were now my fathers. I did not know what would happen from then on, but I knew my feet were fixed on the path I must tread.

I am Ogiek. I am the Mau.

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After a thirteen-year court battle, The African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights ruled that the Kenyan Government grant collective land titles to the Ogiek and make reparations for the continuous evictions of the Ogiek from their ancestral lands in the Mau Forest.