

Sample Reading / Leseprobe

1. Mama Tom or the Barbarism of Power: (a true story)

Mama Tom nodded, comfortably propped up on pillows and sipping her tea. She had come a long way, raising up Tom all by herself. She had devoted all her life to her son ever since 1956 when she had written off Lukas, Tom's father, and banned him from her life. Tom had been barely two years then. She had denied herself much in life but managed to put her son through school and the university. Without these nuisances known as husbands.

She joined her family in the dining room for breakfast half an hour later, dressed in her elegant African costume, clutching her large *ciondo* handbag.

"There comes Nana Rawlings," announced Tieni with a soft laugh as the table turned to admire their beloved Mama Tom, who indeed had a striking likeness to the Ghanaian president's wife. She was a very good-looking and graceful woman, tall and slender and had the Luo dark skin of the Nilotes.

Tieni herself was dressed in a pale blue trouser suit and wore laced-up college shoes in soft leather. Knotted on her throat was a white and pale blue kerchief, the knot at an angle. For some reason, Mama Tom found herself consciously taking note of what her children were wearing today. She never did this so consciously before. Looking at Tom, she saw that he was in his conservative dark blue three-piece with a starched white shirt and silver cufflinks. He still dressed as if he was going to appear before the Chief Justice of Kenya.

"My precious beautiful Mama, are you out to break suitors' hearts again?" laughed her son, teasing his mother. Mama Tom made a disapproving noise although she was thrilled to the marrow by the compliments from her children. But in Luo society it was not decorous at her age to openly appreciate such compliments from her son and daughter-in-law and in front of her grandchildren. It was decorous to be secretly thrilled but outwardly disapproving. And the children and older grandchildren knew this. She sat down on one of the twelve dining chairs upholstered in dark red velvet at the matching oval mahogany dining table.

As she sat down she asked, "Where's my Magendo?" even as Joel put a plate of omelette and Uplands bacon and sausages before her.

"Benta's feeding him in the kitchen, Mama," Tom replied to her, still smiling. "And we've kissed him and hugged him good morning." He worshipped his mother and she him. And Tom had yet to remember a time his mother could ever sit down and eat without having a child on her lap. She now promptly held out her arms to Jamoko, four years old, who came into them and was just as promptly placed on Mama Tom's lap. He continued, "But you know how it is with him in the mornings when we all have breakfast together on weekdays. When we finally rise up to leave he'll be screaming his lungs off. So he's banned to Benta and the kitchen."

Tieni pushed Jamoko's plate next to that of his grandmother, who now said, "I have a very exciting meeting at the MYWO today." *Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation* was the oldest national women's NGO in Kenya. Mama Tom continued as she ate while also helping Jamoko to eat. "We have three foreign speakers today, my children. All sponsored by UNIFEM's Trust Fund. From Nigeria, Honduras and some European country I can't pronounce." It was a fact, so she didn't laugh.

But Tieni laughed, helping out, "Bosnia-Herzegovina. We watched the TV reportage together last evening, Queen Mama, remember?" Now they all laughed.

Tom joked, "Out to put down men again, are we, Mama. What's a good wife for if you can't beat her up every now and then, teach her to obey you as her husband any time you feel like having your manly requirements accommodated and forbid her taking the pill?"

"Try that on my daughter, son of your father, and you'll know the feet of my name."

Tom winked, "Except for the pill, I take it. Otherwise you'll run out of babies to hold on your lap while you eat." And they all laughed again.

Mama Tom continued, "I hope Bernadette keeps the topic of FGM out of the discussions – it always makes my skin crawl." Unlike the majority Bantu people of Kenya, Mama Tom was Nilotic, a Luo, and Luos did not practise female genital mutilation.

"I bet she will," said Tieni in jest. "Complete with intimate video tapes!"

"Don't assist in ruining my appetite for this good breakfast, my nectar."

And she smiled as her son joined her daughter-in-law in laughter.

Rana and Belfast who had a vague idea of what was being discussed smiled at each other knowingly as they passed the bottle of mango juice between them. "Another glass of juice, Pach?" Rana asked her younger brother. Pacho nodded holding up his glass.

"Me too," said Adisa sitting next to her mother. Adisa had inherited much of her mother's Nilo-Saharan genes. She looked like a mysterious Yemeni princess in the shadows of a seductive moonlit night, waiting to lure wayfaring enemy lords and princes into an enchanting fatal trap just beyond the undulating corrugated dunes of the desert sands.

Rana passed the juice to Tieni who filled Adisa's glass. Tom looked at his watch and announced, "Come on, clansfolk, drink up and eat up. Time to go in a minute. And you, Information Technology Chief, what'll you be up to just to surprise me with this evening?"

"Elect'onic hacker champion!" replied Jamoko enthusiastically as his father tweaked his cheek. "And chat master, Daddy!"

"Great stuff. See if you can get to our bank account and smuggle in a few extra zeros!"

Breakfast over at last, the four older children, their grandmother and parents piled into the military green Range Rover. Tom had acquired it only four months ago after splitting the cost with his company and giving up the company Benz. He had needed a larger vehicle for his large family. The children were dropped off at their school in Parklands. It was their last day of school before they had their Michaelmas holidays.

"Where's Jaherana's hug and kiss?" Tom said to Rana holding out his arms to her. He was standing next to the car at the school gates. *Jaherana* was a Dholuo term of endearment that stood for a variety of meanings. Tom and Tieni had always called their first sweet baby girl Jaherana from the moment she was born. By the time she learnt her first words, Rana thought the endearment *Jaherana* was actually her name, so she would say to friends and relatives who asked her what her name was, "Rana", since she could not properly pronounce the entire word. And so it became her name. Tom now hugged his daughter, his first born, the child that had promoted him to the rank of fatherhood. Rana was an extremely good-looking child too, if not the beauty that Adisa would one day turn into, and the mirror image of her grandmother, who now remained sitting in the car. She kissed her father's cheeks, then hugged her mother and grandmother. Belfast, Pacho and Adisa followed suit then. Rana had first priority because she was the first born. And Tom's invitation to Rana for a hug and a kiss in goodbye was an invitation to all the children. Only it had to be addressed to Rana "officially". The children now waved until the car was out of sight, then walked into the school compound, Rana and Adisa holding hands.

Tom drove to downtown Nairobi and next dropped his mother at the MYWO headquarters. As she got out he asked, "Should we come for you for lunch, Mama, or will you be partaking of the midday meal with Bernadette—the-assistant of Bernadette Wetu the Executive Director of your MYWO? Or with your fellow foreign legion of men-bashing giantesses?"

His mother smiled her warm smile at her children, so proud of them. "Off with you, lion cub. And keep him in line, my nectar, he's getting too big for his territory. I'll see you both at home this evening." She decorously shook their warm hands in goodbye, giving her son a last adoring gaze at his handsome face. Tom was a true Ogot, his maternal great-grandfather.

"Enjoy the indelicate videos, Queen Mama!" teased Tieni. A last time.

Mama Tom stood aside still adoring her son. A tall, dark handsome Nilote with male backbone, thought she as she waved to the moving car, with his equally tall willowy sepia princess with some ancient but stubborn Abyssinian genes.

Then she turned and walked into the MYWO building.

The first foreign guest speaker on the podium in the Conference Hall of MYWO, Mama Tom read on the programme, would be Mrs Selma Akumadu, one of the founder members of

Nigeria's Peace and Anti-Violence Education (PAVE) as well as being the Assistant Executive Director of Nigeria's WOPED – Women's Centre for Peace and Development. Next would be Mrs Consuella Mendez from Comayagua in Honduras, who would talk about the endeavours of The Messenger of Peace organisation, a self-appointed committee of women working in several projects with Honduras' Ministry of Health and the UN Human Rights Commission, to mobilise groups who protect women and children against machismo and domestic violence. The lady from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Angela Dubrovic, would be the third speaker and would talk about the plight of women in the cogs and wheels of her country's judiciary and how role plays were utilised in her projects "to give judges the perspective of female litigants who go through a legal process that works against them". Finally Mrs Bernadette Sibuur, the assistant of her namesake Bernadette Wetu the Executive Director of MYWO, would talk about Alternative Rites of Passage, a programme which had been successfully introduced by Kenyan women NGOs and the MYWO to combat the problem of female genital mutilation without denying the involved young Kenyan girls their traditional initiation ceremonies into womanhood.

Mama Tom looked forward to a fulfilling and enlightening day with a bunch of close to two hundred and thirty delightful people who were also endowed with excellent common sense and large human hearts beating in their breasts: women.

Tom and Tieni both worked for the local branch of Abercrombie & Richardson Consultants, a subsidiary of a large South African company with an international clientele around the globe. Tom had been with Abercrombie & Richardson Consultants for five years as Executive Company Secretary. When he had finished his studies in England and got his degree, he worked with the government in the Attorney General's Office. He did very well and could have done better still, but he was his mother's son and therefore he was a man of integrity with his heart in the right place. When he got the opportunity to work for Abercrombie & Richardson Consultants, he grabbed it and never looked back. His wife Tieni had been an administrative assistant to the Marketing Director of Hilton International Hotels in Nairobi when Tom met her during an international conference that had been organised by The Bar Association of Kenyan lawyers at the Hilton Hotel. Now Tieni also worked for ARC since 1995 as Accounts Executive. Tom and Tieni's offices were on the sixth floor of the Ufundi Co-operative House, next to the Embassy of the United States of America.

"You owe me," Tom kissed Tieni after they got out of the lift on their floor at Ufundi Co-operative House. It was their standard goodbye.

"Just reach into your pocket, husband mine. And you owe me twice as much,"

"Simply check your heartbeats' frequencies, my delightful Nyaroya. I'll come for you at the lunch break. Think of a good restaurant where we can go and hog ourselves silly today without Mama." And they walked to their respective offices on opposite ends of the floor.

Their standard goodbye had been born on the morning following their honeymoon when Tom had dropped her off at the Hilton with a kiss, "You owe me all those hours you'll spend with other people this morning instead of with me."

She had laughed joyfully, "Put me in your pocket, husband mine."

"Done, my lovely Nyaroya," he had kissed her again. Nyaroya was Dholuo for heifer and a popular term of Luo endearment among newly wedded couples which was used even by friends and relatives to refer to a young bride until the birth of her first child when she achieved the revered motherhood status. But Tom still fondly called his wife his heifer.

"And you owe me twice as much," Tieni had smiled.

To which Tom had replied, "Tuck me away in your heart, my delightful heifer."

"Done, husband mine."

Tom had at the time driven away feeling like the Pharaoh Neferkheprure Akhenaton.

In the packed Conference Hall of the MYWO building, Mrs Akumadu continued talking about the youth network that functioned as multipliers on the fight against gender-based violence in Southern Nigeria.

"When we organised workshops and came to the conclusion that men and boys had to be equally effectively informed of our endeavours, PAVE clubs were channelled into forming theatre groups. We realised that men and boys were disinterested and bored by addresses and speeches on our mission. But we recognised the importance especially of boys growing up with a positive attitude towards women and learning to shun gender-based violence as an act against human rights before they had negative attitudes ingrained in them from an early age. So the best method was to act out our messages in theatre groups because this came across better since it was entertaining as well. Women's solidarity groups in various communities in all the regions of Southern Nigeria..."

Mrs Akumadu stopped in the middle of her sentence and turned towards the door.

Bernadette Sibuur, the assistant, burst into the soundproof conference hall and hurried straight to Bernadette, the Executive Director of MYWO, sitting in the first row. The assistant spoke to the director and seconds later the director rose with a piercing scream, "Oh, my God!" hurrying to the microphone on the podium. The director more or less shoved Mrs Akumadu aside and announced, "Ladies! My sisters! Somebody has just bombed the American Embassy in town and all the buildings near it!"

The more than two hundred women in the hall rose as a body with screams and shouted questions and various exclamations and remarks. They surged out of the room in pandemonium. The television set and the video and video cassettes that had been mounted and piled on a table for the conference were unintentionally knocked down and crushed on the floor. But nobody seemed to notice that.

Mama Tom, who had been sitting on the far right of the first row, propelled herself forward like a paper aeroplane. She had to find a telephone. She had to get to town. Her children worked at the Ufundi Co-operative House right next to the American Embassy. The heart of the Commercial Business District of the city. A hundred or more other women were looking for telephones too. The lucky handful with mobile phones were frantically screaming questions into them. Having found no public telephone booth she could use, her heart pounding in her ears, Mama Tom fought her way through the throng to find her friend Bernadette. Bernadette would have a phone free. And Bernadette would have a car. She burst into the Executive Director's office. A young plump secretary was agitatedly talking on the phone in the outer office. Mama Tom went no farther. She unceremoniously ripped the phone off the secretary's hands and began to dial. The plump secretary did not even complain. All hell was loose. The Third World War was brewing in the city.

Bernadette The Assistant burst once again into the outer office and repeated her screaming, "They've bombed the American Embassy in Dar es Salaam as well! I just spoke to the editor of the Nation Newspapers! What's going on, in God's name? I can't even get out of here, my car was taken for exhaust pipe repairs this morning and is not yet ready!"

Mama Tom could not get through but was going out of her mind. The phones were dead at the other end. She heard Bernadette's latest news but uttered not a word. She rushed out and ran all the way to the bus stop. And maybe a chance taxi would cruise by. Mama Tom needed to know that her children were safe.

In his office Tom was standing at his desk while talking on the phone to his managing director about a new client's contract which Tom had drafted the day before and left on the managing director's desk for his information and endorsement. The managing director was very pleased with the draft contract, he told Tom, but he wanted a few phrases amended. Like Tom, the managing director had also studied law.

Tom's office overlooked the Embassy of the United States of America which he could now see through the huge west window of his office. Suddenly he heard an awful sound louder than anything he had ever heard in his life. No sooner had he heard the sound than his thoughts went to his wife Tieni. Something was wrong. Surely this wasn't the police at it as usual with the notorious bank robbers again. He dropped the phone in the middle of the managing director's sentence but the man too had stopped talking half a second later. Tom headed for the door. His office was *moving!* Folding in on itself! He didn't reach the door. Then he heard a second and even more deafening explosion. The thick glass pane of his west window splintered into sizeable shards and came flying across the folding room. One

would have cut him across the belly into two parts. But because the room was folding in on itself and sinking, the splintered flying shard hit Tom at the neck just below the ears and severed his head cleanly off. It was as if the shard was a red-hot knife going through a cube of butter. It didn't even stop in its flight. Compounded by the momentum and the velocity, Tom's head remained perched on the shard as if the piece of glass pane was its own flying carpet. But seconds later the seventh floor of the Ufundi Co-operative House caved in on Tom's flying head and it was gone forever.