

CASTING THE DIE

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It was just the other day that grandfather decided to divide his three acre piece of land among his six sons for a final time. He has done that severally this year but never concluded the death-bed activity. Grandpa is very afraid of death. Poor him: he is always giving verbal wills every time a part of his body pains. Unfortunately, that happens often ever since he lost his sight to *changaa*, the local illicit brew, which he could not stop taking in spite of several warnings from ophthalmologists.

Usually such talks are held under the family tree. Other than the sons and two village elders, no one else is allowed to attend; not even our own mothers. This time, however, there is a heavy downpour outside so they are gathered in grandfather's house - the *thingira*. Another thing we all know about the talks is the heated disagreement and verbal fist-fights that dominate them; no wonder they have never reached a conclusion. This round is no different. I happened to eavesdrop on the talks from grandmother's nearby hut where my aunts and cousins gathered around the fireplace to chase away the harsh morning cold.

"You have no son to leave your land to," someone shouted to father. So true but still it hurt, and made sad the treasured memories I had of my baby brother's demise. I claim such a vivid remembrance though it is some years since it occurred. I had just acquired my chest-marks. (Grandmother always made these beautiful tattoos at the base of our chests once some small lumps appeared to lift the dress a bit. She claimed it was a mark of identity and a source of beauty once one was fully grown).

It was risky, but mom conceived after she had been diagnosed with some 'threads' in her uterus-fibroids as I later came to learn. She had us all worried but we understood. See, we are six girls in a row and the last thing any Mmeru wants is to lack a son in the family. It's even worse if he or she is from the Mugoiri clan. We all hoped it would be a boy, my younger sisters excited at the thought of having a baby brother. God heard our prayers. But fate had a different story for us.

Kiogora passed on hardly two hours after his birth. Only the traditional midwives laid eyes on him. Anger, bitterness and regret followed his death. Rumors soon emerged that our neighbor had a hand in the death. Didn't everyone in the village know the strength of his witchcraft? Wasn't it an open secret that he was jealous of the progress father had made in educating his daughters? We were first in the village to step into boarding school and all thought of father as a hero. But they did not know the sacrifice he was making to provide good education for his large family.

Inside the *thingira* things are getting louder and tougher; one would think they are exchanging blows. All sorts of things were being said out loud and we listened in tense silence, our heads looking at our dusty bare feet, guilty and embarrassed at the same time. We loved each other and it was hard to tell that we were not born of the same mother. We had grown up together, playing games and making all sorts of pranks. We

would even exchange hats some nights and our parents would have no clue what we were up to. Other schoolchildren envied and feared us in equal measure. Laying a hand on any one of us meant instant retribution from the whole family. But now our fathers fought each other, and we, their children, could only stare blankly on the earthen floor.

I felt that no one would let go. Of course, not father. He would stand strong and fight; not for the piece of land, but for his and his daughters' ancestral rights. He would defend his belief in the equality of his daughters to their male counterparts. He was doing it for us. I admired and loved his conviction, courage and love, but I felt sorry for him. I wanted to storm out and stand by him, but I held myself back. That would be a grave mistake and mother, too, would suffer for it. Still, I felt my soul speak to his, and I think he heard it all, "Great daddy, and don't you worry for I will not let you down. I promise I will serve the universe and make you and the world proud of me." I was not entirely sure how this would happen but good education would definitely play the greatest role in it.