

THE GREATEST GIFT Jackson Kitili

Kate stood out from other students in the Mathematics Club at school. She was larger and louder than the other members and often paid close attention to small details about the club's operation. During my tenure as the club's Chairman, she had falsely accused me of squandering the club's money meant for contests. This hurt me. Fortunately, the principal cleared the matter up and gave an explanation of the money and its expenditure. When she realized her mistake, Kate was embarrassed. She came up to me and begged for forgiveness. Embittered, I quickly dismissed her. She had sabotaged my reputation. Soon, schools closed for the vacation and I went home to the village to stay with my grandmother.

My grandmother and I lived at a small irrigation scheme called Olen. Both Kamba and Kuria people live in Olen. These two tribes had a feud over the land and the Kuria often threatened to chase the Kamba, our tribe from the region because they were the majority and the original inhabitants of Olen.

In the productive season of the year, the Kuria, out of spite and in an attempt to chase away the Kamba, burned the food stores, houses and even uprooted the seedlings of the Kamba people on one chaotic evening. It was in that fateful day that my old frail grandmother was raped by someone who she knew, Ellie.

When grandmother recovered at the local hospital, I took her to our home village, Mbyani, for some time. After the terrible ordeal, grandmother was no longer the same. She was full of resentment and hatred. Though I was only fourteen, I was zealous to avenge her. When the unrest abated, I persuaded my grandmother that we return to Olen and she reluctantly agreed.

Back in Olen, the two tribes were still under conflict. Dissatisfied with the situation, I solicited the local chief who happened to be a close friend. He therefore organized an open baraza to promote peaceful coexistence between the two tribes. We had to design a plan of action to address the land issue. Before the roughly two hundred inhabitants of Olen who had gathered, my grandmother walked in. Her sudden unexpected appearance shocked Ellie, who was among the audience in immobility: he was petrified. She stood before him and softly said, "I forgive you."

I stood in amazement. Forgive! Despite all the physical and psychological trauma he had caused her. I could not understand why grandmother would forgive him. Ellie was overcome with emotions and he openly wept. This was startling as African men rarely cried, especially in public. My grandmother took a heavy sigh and proceeded to an empty seat amidst the shocked crowd.

Grandmother had let go of the bitterness; had forgiven and forgotten. The happy cheerful grandmother I knew was revived. Six months after, she passed away. Her funeral was attended by all the people from both tribes in Olen. I sat on a rock trying to convince myself that these were the same people who had caused so much chaos months ago. Strangely, all this had changed.

Grandma's ordeal taught me that I had failed as a leader back in school at the club. My ordeal with Kate came in to mind. I had to make amends. Since schools were closed for vacation, I quickly rushed to her village and begged for forgiveness. She smiled and gave me a hearty hug. I felt relieved. I learned that forgiveness is the greatest gift with the greatest impact that you can ever give to a person.