

Maame's Special Gift

“Kofi, come!” Kwame shouted as he looked toward the field behind the house. He could see his younger brother dragging his bare feet along the dusty path. “Why are you sad, Kofi?”

“I want to go with maame¹ to get the gift. She says I must stay here with you!”

“I need you to help me finish making baskets so that we can play Pilolo² later.” said Kwame. He took his little brother's dirty hand in his own. Kofi's frown turned into a grin as he skipped along beside his big brother. The boys ambled along the trail toward the mud and thatch hut that was their home. It was time to eat lunch.

Most days, the center of the village was filled with women sitting on benches talking in low tones or singing quietly to their babies while they worked preparing food or turning the cocoa beans to dry. But today, the women were rushing about gathering supplies and making plans for the trip.

Kwame thought about the day Mr. Ampewua had come through their village. He had told the mothers that on their next visit to the clinic in Kumasi an obroni³ would be there to give them a gift. He said it would help prevent deaths from the bad air.

Many children in Kwame's village had died of the bad air. Some, before they were even able to walk. This was especially true if they were born during the rainy season like Adwoa, Kwame's baby sister. When she died, their mother had cried and cried. Then, after Nyameke was born Kwame had not seen her cry again. Still, the sadness never seemed to leave her face.

¹ mother

² A game similar to hide and seek using objects like stones and sticks

³ White man

Kwame saw his friend Yaw scurrying through the village. She waved to him and shouted, “I get to go with my maame! She needs me to help her with the baby because she is taking plantain for the market. I will tell you all about our trip when we return!”

Kwame waved back. Maybe one day he would get to go with his mother to Kumasi. Today there would be no room on the mammy wagon⁴. Still, it seemed as if everyone was leaving.

After they finished eating their lunch, Kwame helped his mother put the bowls away. She gathered her bag, adjusted little Nyamekye on her back and walked toward the road where the mammy wagon and the rest of the women were waiting to start their journey. Kwame and Kofi waved goodbye as the truck loaded with women, children, babies and a goat left a cloudy trail.

“Come on, Kofi; let’s get to work on the baskets so that we can play Pilolo when the older boys come back from the bush.” Kwame took his little brother’s hand and turned him away from the road before he could start crying. “Maame said she would bring us oranges from the roadside market if we get the baskets finished before she returns tomorrow.” Kofi’s flashed a big, white grin against caramel-colored skin.

All day long Kwame wondered where his maame was and what she was doing as he and Kofi toiled away bending and weaving the cane to make the baskets.

“I think the gift will be an oware game⁵”, said Kofi.

“That’s silly, Kofi. How could that stop the bad air?”

⁴ Trucks with roofs and open sides used to carry passengers and freight, including live animals, usually in the same trip. The word "mammy" (from the Twi word, *mame*) is a respectful term, usually referring to wealthy women who control trade in food and retail products

⁵ A counting game with seeds and bowls also called *mancala* in other parts of Africa.

“I don’t know, but it would be a nice gift.” said Kofi.

“Maybe it’s a magic stick like the one in the story of *Anansi*”, laughed Kofi. “That could stop the bad air!”

“Anansi will beat you with that magic stick if you don’t get my supper!” grumbled his big brother Kwabena as he and their paape⁶ walked up to their hut. He ruffled the hair on Kofi’s head and winked at Kwame.

Kwame stuck out his tongue at Kwabena as he gathered the fufu⁷ and soup left over from their noon meal. He handed the bowls all around and sat down beside his paape.

As they ate Kwabena asked. “What did you do today, little brothers?”

“We made baskets,” said Kwame.

Kofi smiled. “Maame is going to bring us an orange. And, we will find out what the obroni is giving to her that will stop the bad air.”

“I don’t think the obroni’s gift can do anything about the bad air. Nothing will stop it.” said Kwabena.

“Even if the gift doesn’t work, Maame was excited about it,” said Kwame sorrowfully.

⁶ father

⁷ Common dish which is a starchy accompaniment for stews or other dishes with sauce. Ususally made from yams, cassava or plantain or a combination of these. To eat fufu you use your right hand to tear off a bite-sized piece, shape it into a ball, make an indentation in it, and use it to scoop up the soup, stew or sauce.

Kofi's lower lip began to tremble. "Let's go play Pilolo." bellowed Kwabena. "I will beat you both!" He ran to pick up the sticks and stones they kept laying beside the door and shoved Kofi and Kwame out of the hut.

Other boys were already at the finishing place⁸ in the center of the village. Many of them were speaking of the gifts that their maame's would bring home tomorrow. Like Kwame and Kofi, they were wondering what it could be. Soon the game began and the conversation turned to laughter and shouts of "Pilolo!" When the games were finished Kwabena was declared the winner.

"When you grow up little brother, you will be as fast as me!" Kwabena said as he dropped his arm on Kwame's shoulder and tugged on Kofi's shirt.

"I was tired from all the work I did today or I would have beaten you tonight." Kwame stretched and yawned as they slowly ambled back to the hut.

"Ha!" Kwabena laughed. "Just wait till you work in the bush like I do. You will really be tired."

Kwame didn't reply. He was thinking of sleeping on the big mat in the hut. There would be more room tonight with his mother and the baby gone.

Later, as he lay in the bed with his paape and brothers, Kwame slowly drifted to sleep dreaming about a time when his mother's laughter would drift across the field behind their house – a time before Adwoa had died.

The next day Kwame and Kofi were picking up pieces of wood left under the woodcarver's bench when they heard shouting and saw the mammy wagon's hazy plume on the road beyond the village.

⁸ A designated place or base for the game of Pilolo. See information on this game in resources.

Kofi began hopping around in a silly dance, “Maame! Maame is coming!”

Kwame dropped the wood, grabbed his little brother’s hand and ran to the road to watch as the truck came to a grating stop. The first person out of the truck was Yaw. She was holding a blue and white plastic bag.

She saw Kwame and yelled, “The nets! The nets will keep away the mosquitoes!”

Yaw’s maame quickly pushed her toward their house. Kwame wondered why she was talking about nets and mosquitoes. Just then the boys saw their mother carefully jump from the back of the truck. She pulled them both into her arms. Squeezing them she said, “I have brought you both oranges from the roadside market. Did you finish the baskets?”

“Yes. Is that the gift?” Kwame said pointing to the bag in her hands just like the one Yaw carried.

“Yes, it will keep our family safe from the mosquitoes!”

Kwame and Kofi followed along quickly as their maame turned toward their hut. Kwame was puzzled. Both his maame and Yaw had said “*mosquitoes*”. What did they mean? And, how would it stop the bad air?

As they walked back to the hut clutching their oranges, their maame began to tell them about the gift. It was a net that they would hang over their sleeping pallet. She said that it would keep away mosquitoes and that would help keep them safe from malaria, which is what caused their little sister to die. Kwame thought it was bad air that caused his sister’s death. He was still confused.

“I must hurry and feed Nyameke and get the evening meal started. Go and get water from the standpipe in the middle of the village. We will talk more, later.” his maame said.

The rest of the afternoon the boys spent running errands for their mother and finishing the chores for the woodcarver. Kwame's head was spinning with unanswered questions. He was trying to figure out what the mosquitoes, malaria, bad air and bed nets had to do with one another. The net could not keep out the air. And if malaria is what killed his sister, what did that have to do with mosquitoes?

Just before the men and boys come back to the village, Yaw came running.

“Did you hang the net?” she asked.

“Not yet.” Kwame answered as they both sat down on the soft earth in front of his hut.

“But please tell me what the mosquitoes have to do with the nets and the malaria.”

“Mr. Ntim from the Ministry of Health chose three people to act it out and I got to be the mosquito!” she laughed. “A lady was the malaria parasite, and a girl from Nkawkaw was the victim. The lady pretended to bite me. I pretended to bite the girl! This is how he taught us that the malaria parasite is what kills babies, children and even adults-not the bad air. It gets into the mosquito and when the mosquito bites you it passes the parasite to you. There are more mosquitoes during the rainy season when the air is bad and that is the reason there are more people dying during that time.”

“And the nets keep out the mosquitoes, so that is what makes the nets so special?” exclaimed Kwame.

“Yes, the nets are treated with something called insecticide which kills the mosquitoes and keeps them from biting you while you sleep. It should last for about four years and protect your whole family!”

While they were talking, Kwame's mother came to call them to supper. When she heard their conversation she laughed and said, “Mr. Ntim told us not to make wedding dresses out of the nets! They are so soft. Many of the women have not seen such beautiful and

unusual fabric before. But, I want to make sure we don't get bitten by the mosquito with the parasite so I will not be making clothes out of ours!"

As Kwame, Kofi, and Kwabena ate their supper, they listened and watched their Maame talk. She held little Nyameke as she joyfully told how the women who had traveled many miles had visited as they waited in the clinic to get their nets.

"Only those with medical books ⁹ who had come to learn how to use the nets could have one ¹⁰. Many people came and stood outside the clinic shouting for the nets. There was almost a riot!" she said. "The obroni and Mr. Ntim told the people that there were no more nets. He said they would try to get more and next year they would come again."

Kwame worried as the sad look returned to his maame's face.

She turned to paape and whispered, "I heard the obroni tell a man from the newspaper that one child from Africa dies every thirty seconds of malaria. Just think about how many children may die in that one year while they wait for the nets! I am so thankful that we have a net. Maybe now we will have no more sadness in our home."

Kwame's maame slowly turned to see him watching her. Her face softened, "Go play before it gets dark outside. We will have the net ready when you get back!"

As Kwame and his brothers ran to the finishing place he heard his maame laughing with his paape at something little Nyameke had done. It was then that he realized the gift the obroni had given his family was more than just protection from malaria. It was the return of their Maame's brilliant smile and magnificent laughter!

⁹ medical and immunization records of children/adults distributed by the free clinics.

¹⁰ Training to use the nets is required before distribution. This is done to insure their proper use.