

KISA

AN ANTHOLOGY of African Short Stories



Compiled and Edited by **Onchoka Ongoro**

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To Africa, whose great stories are yet to be written.

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The Midnight Race

Chidi Iheanacho (Nigeria)

That field over there has harboured more dry bones than the feet of those who go to rest their loved ones. Grass, like well-spread butter on slices of bread, graces the terrain. Headstones at a few intervals peek out of the ground like little billboards. The air over that dead yard has always been thick and gloomy. The smell of dirt and dampness and evil hung in the air. Even the sun cautiously threads this ground; its rays carefully avoid others while bouncing off some headstones, leaving the latter shrouded in darkness all day. Rumour has it that those tombstones that refuse even a single ray of sun belong to witches who, even on their deathbeds, had refused to renounce their craft. It rarely rains on that field, even when there is heavy downpour all over the village, but when it rains on that field, parts of human skeletons flow into the streets and drainages. Anyone who made direct eye contact with these bones was rumoured to experience devastating misfortune.

Nwunye Gerald had a miscarriage on getting home the evening she claimed to have seen a femur while urinating near a drainage. Chude's father fell ill the night he returned from his in-laws' place. He remembered taking the footpath near that field but wasn't sure if he had met any skeleton part on his way, but his death later that night unravelled the cause of his sudden illness.

"Mba! This can't continue! Something must be done!" Nna anyị Okiri lamented on the day we gathered at the village square to discuss the matter. "If it were in the days of my father, Ezemuo, he would have put an end to all this rubbish! But no! You Christians have spoilt everything! Everything!" Nna anyị Okiri remains one of the few titled men in our

village who still believe Christianity is too weak to confront our dark realities. After long deliberation, the community decided to write to a distant Reverend whose news of Holyghost powers and miracles had spread throughout the neighbouring towns. Many women say whenever he sings and claps, demons confess their names and apologize for inhabiting their hosts. Yet, Reverend Bernard won't cast them out, not until he has dealt them several lashes with his anointing oil, a spectacular process that leaves the host's body writhing and sprawling on the floor like a wounded snake.

Father Bernard's visit was in two days, and everyone was getting ready. Many women prayer groups took to dry fasting to prepare the grounds of our community, Ụmụọjị, for the holy feet of Father Bernard.

"The days of those skeletons are numbered..." one of those women told my mother.

"Only but a while they will feel the power from above."

I couldn't help but wonder how these skeletons would feel the power from above. Will they wriggle and writhe in pain on the swampy soil of the cemetery? Or perhaps confess their names and apologize for disturbing our peace?

Two days for my village was a long time to wait, but Father Bernard kept his promise; he arrived. He gave a condition: the prayers and consecration of the burial ground can only be at midnight when the demons will be present to be battled face to face. He also said about 50% of the community members must be present to witness the power of God.

Later that evening, the community gathered to select volunteers, which almost ended in fistfights.

"*Chukwu aju!* God forbid! At midnight? We will all be dead before we enter that field," a young man protested.

"Please count me out. I'm the only son of my family," Chude said politely. It's obvious he wasn't done mourning his father.

When asked to provide volunteers, the women's prayer groups said they are not afraid to battle demons at midnight, but they won't join because virtuous women don't keep late nights.

“The Reverend should go alone. He is a man of God. We don’t have holy water to take with us in case of emergency, but he does,” Nna anyị Okiri said, trying not to laugh.

Finally, it was decided that every family must provide one person to join the prayers. My father came home looking worried. His shoulders sunk as though a heavy load had been dropped on them.

“Nna m,” he called me in very suspicious politeness. “You will go for the family.”

“*Me kwa!*” I screamed. “*Me kwa!* Papa, but I’m still young!”

With tears dropping freely, I imagined the skeletons digging into my flesh, licking up the smallest drops of my blood. I refused, threatening to run away from the house before midnight. Father eventually changed his mind. He will go instead.

An hour to midnight, the Reverend was already at the community square, muttering inaudible words as he gently walked around in circles, with prayer beads in his right hand, a big black bible, and a bottle of holy water in his left hand. His cassock shone brightly in the moonlight as he waited for the villagers to convene.

When the community youth leaders came to our house to pick up our representative, Father asked me to open the door. The door squeaked, revealing many nervous faces. Most of the young men had weapons of all sorts: cutlasses, sticks, and dagger knives to fight the skeleton demons. Father was standing behind me, fully prepared. He wore his usual baggy shorts with an old shirt my mother’s father had given him. He had with him the only torchlight in the house. I wondered how useful that torchlight would be to him in case of an emergency since the light only comes on after about four to five knock and start sessions.

There was a sudden push from behind, and I found myself outside. The door was immediately closed. I could hear my mum screaming and begging my father to open the door. It took a while before I realised what had just happened.

“Jesus! Papa abeg open the door!” I cried, banging on the door.

“Okay, open. Let me change my clothes!”

I had only my singlet and a pair of shorts, with no slippers to shield my feet from the midnight cold. The youth leaders were impatient. They grabbed my arm and dragged me to the village square, where we met up with Reverend Bernard.

It was a few minutes to midnight. The Reverend stood in front with a reasonable distance between him and the first person in the crowd, and we followed suit. I squeezed my way to the middle, a strategy to afford me an opportunity to run home in case the demons attacked us from the left, right, or even front or back. In a short while, we got to the field. We were welcomed by the pungent smell of dirt and dump, the whistling sounds of strong wind, and the eerie sound of rustling leaves.

“Blood of Jesus! They are awake!” a man nearly screamed.

“Abeg, shut up and man up!” a young girl barely my age retorted from behind, with no trace of fear in her voice.

Father Bernard began praying, binding and casting, sprinkling holy water to the left, right, and front. It was pitch dark; even the few with torchlights were too scared to switch them on.

“Close your eyes! Focus! Allow no distractions!” the Reverend thundered. No one listened to him, as I could see open eyes darting from side to side, tightening their grip on their many weapons.

I felt a quick tap on my shoulder. I looked behind; it was the same young girl that had snapped at the other man earlier.

“O boy, look!” she whispered in fear.

“Where?”

“Over there!” she said in a frenzy, almost screaming.

I strained my sight in the direction she was pointing. As the dark cloud shifted gently, a shaft of moonlight dropped on six figures, reflecting them in grey-white. They moved towards us in a coordinated formation with their feet barely touching the ground, their empty black sockets fixed on us. Their hair stood in long grey spikes, with fingers like talons floating in the air.

“Hei!” I screamed to the limits of my lungs. I took to my heels, and others followed. I thought I was fast enough, not until I was far behind Father Bernard.

All In God's Name

Stephen Orukpe (Nigeria)

[One beautiful Sunday after church proceedings when people are scattered around.]

“Hello, Sister Martha,” greeted a man.

Turning around, “Oh, good afternoon, Pastor James,” replied Martha.

“How was the service today?”

“It was splendid. I felt the presence of the Holy Ghost right in this place. Your sermon was inspiring.”

“Let’s give God the glory. I was also highly lifted by your unique number. It made me see the glory of God come down.”

“Praise be to God, who accomplishes all things through His Son Jesus Christ.”

“Sister Martha, I won’t be staying long, as I mentioned earlier, but I wouldn’t want to miss the golden opportunity of meeting a highly exulted sister in Christ.”

“And who might that be?” asked Sister Martha.

“It’s you, of course.”

“Me?” quite surprised.

“Yes, you, throughout my ministerial journey, I haven’t met a more glorified, highly exulted and beautiful songstress as you, and please pardon my indulgence.”

“No, not at all. God be praised, but I don’t think I am any of these compliments you said.”

“Sister Martha,” somebody called. She answered and excused herself to attend to the caller.

“I will be waiting for your return,” Pastor James said.

“I don’t think I would be long,” she said, taking her leave.

“Hello, Pastor James,” someone cuts in.

“Hi, sis.... ter.”

“Grace,” she answered.

“Yes, Sister Grace. Bless you.”

“We have our singles and youth meeting, and it’s time already. Sister Martha is the secretary,” she explained.

“That’s nice. Let me see the pastor,” he said as he took his leave.

Pastor James was visiting the church for the first time. He had known the pastor-in-charge for quite some time before they lost contact. At some pastors’ conference, both met again, and he was invited to the following Sunday worship by the pastor-in-charge as a guest.

On Sunday, after welcoming visitors, Pastor James was introduced formally by the pastor-in-charge. Although he had earlier hinted to his congregation about having an important visitor in their midst,

“I want to introduce someone I had lost contact with for quite some time, but we met dramatically. Let me introduce Pastor James to you,” announced the pastor in charge.

Everyone in the congregation stood and applauded the man of God as he stepped to the altar to shake and embrace the pastor-in-charge.

“I believe you have a word or two for the congregation,” asked the pastor-in-charge as he handed over the microphone to his guest.

“Praise the Lord,” Pastor James shouted into the microphone.

“Alleluia,” everybody answered.

“It is true; we have known each other for quite some time before losing contact. All this while, I’ve been on mobile ministration, travelling from place to place. I’ve been fortunate to have ministered in countries like Canada, South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Britain, The United States of America, Ghana, Senegal, and many others. I just recently returned from Senegal, where I am helping build a church. As I stand here, the

holy spirit just ministered in me, ‘Dry bones shall rise again.’ Repeat after me, dry bones shall rise again.”

“Dry bones shall rise again,” everyone shouted.

“Just believe it, dry bones shall rise again in your business.”

“Amen,” chorused everyone.

“In your marriages.”

“Amen.”

“In your family.”

“Amen.”

“At your place of work.”

“Amen.”

“In your going out and in your coming in.”

“Amen.”

“In your every work of life. I see it, I see it; in this church.”

“Aaaaaaaaameeen!” everyone thundered with applause.

“Somebody shout alleluia.”

“Alleluia.”

“Ooh, I feel it, somebody!”

“Yes,” shouted everyone.

“You know, during ministration, the keyboard should be sending some soul-inspiring tunes, but I can see that there isn’t one around. For this, I will provide the church with a keyboard,” he said.

At that moment, everyone rose to their feet and cheers of “Praise the Lord!” filled the air.

[Handing the microphone back to the pastor-in-charge, he stepped down from the pulpit to his reserved seat in front.]

“We give God the glory for that exulted ministration. I hope you will be challenged to come forward to do something for God,” explained the pastor-in-charge.

[Before the service ended, Pastor James had already sighted a lady he felt was right for him. After service, when all formalities were over, he calculated his time and proceeded to finish his work.]

“Ah, you are back!” Pastor James exclaimed.

“I want to be going home,” Sister Martha explained.

“Where do you live?” he inquired.

“Three streets from here, at the ECOMOG quarters!” she replied.

“Then we are practically heading in the same direction because I am staying with a friend at the oil resources quarters. Shall we go together?”

“Sure.”

“But please, let me say goodbye to the pastor,” he said.

“No problem,” she quickly put in.

[On their way home.]

“Sister Martha, please, let me apologise; my car is in Senegal.”

“Oh, I understand.”

“So, Sister Martha, tell me a little about yourself,” he asked.

“Well, there is nothing really about me. I work with the ECOMOG in the library section as the head librarian.”

“And you say there is nothing. Sister, learn to keep thanking God, no matter how little,” he explained. “Are you engaged in marriage?”

“No, why are you asking?” she interjected.

“I was just a little curious, you know. I see God using you extensively, especially in the music ministry. Have you ever thought of it?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she said.

“Anyway, I think it is worth mentioning to your pastor.”

“It would be nice, but I don’t think I am ready yet.”

“What do you mean by not being ready yet? Many of us were called into ministry when the going was really good, but as the bible says, one has to forsake his father, mother, everything, pick up his cross and follow God,” he explained. “So, my sister, always be ready and keep praying about it.”

“I will.”

[It is now three weeks, and Pastor James hasn’t gone back as planned. All this while, he was always around Sister Martha, visiting her at home, staying late at her

place, escorting her after each service, and encouraging her with the message of the gospel. He was yet to fulfil his pledge to the church concerning the keyboard.]

“Sister Martha,” called the pastor-in-charge after service on the fourth Sunday.

“Yes, pastor,” she answered.

“I called you here to find out what is the matter.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” she replied, looking lost.

“What I mean is your relationship with Pastor James,” he inquired.

“Oh, there is nothing between us other than the friendship of the body of Christ,” she explained.

“But the way you two are going troubles me in the spirit. Something isn’t right, but I can’t figure out what it is. You see, truly, I know Pastor James, but that was a long time. I can say nothing about him right now; his faith is questionable.”

“I’ve heard what you’ve said, pastor. I will be careful,” she answered.

“Goodbye, Sister Martha.”

“Goodbye, pastor.”

“I will continue praying for you.”

[During the evening of the same day at Sister Martha’s house, Pastor James came around as usual on a visit.]

“Good evening, pastor.”

“Good evening, Sister Martha. I can see the glory of God radiating around you and shining on you, making you as beautiful as you can ever be.”

“Haba, pastor!” she answered, blushing.

“I mean it; only you cannot borrow my eyes. You then might see and thus believe,” he explained.

“Pastor, you see! Abeg leave me jare,” she said, feeling impressed by his comment.

“Look here, Sister Martha. I believe the Lord is calling the both of us to become one,” settling himself properly.

“What are you trying to imply?”

“It is simple; the Lord has put it in my heart right from the beginning that you are the one I would settle down with. I am saying, will you marry me?”

Feeling confused and not finding words, Sister Martha was jostled out of her slumber into reality.

“You are proposing to me, right?” she asked.

“That’s exactly what I am doing,” he replied.

“But I don’t know you well.”

“Does it matter? Anyway, I want to travel down to Lagos in a week. Tell me, will you marry me?”

“Let me pray over it before answering,” she answered.

[Moving closer to her and holding her hands.]

“Look here, Sister Martha, look at me. Right from the first time I saw you, the Lord told me that is your woman, in whom I am well pleased.”

[He moved in closer, holding her hands tightly and caressing her face as he kissed her.]

“What are you trying to do, Pastor James?”

“Relax, Sister Martha. I am showing you the conviction needed to prove that we are destined for each other.”

“But the bible says a thing as this is an act of fornication, which is a sin,” she tried to explain while showing signs of shyness.

“Don’t you know the bible also said that to the pure. All things are pure, and it is not good for a man to be alone; he must seek out his bride, and the two shall become one.”

At this stage, he was caressing her, touching her sensitive parts, fondling her breasts and kissing her lips. He was only slowed down by the weak protest of Sister Martha. Capitalizing on this sign of weakness, slowly, gently and soundlessly, they became one.

[A few weeks later.]

“Pastor James, I’ve missed my period,” explained Sister Martha.

“Since when did you notice it?” asked Pastor James.

“Two weeks now; you met me at my peak period, and you were not protected.”

“It is no problem. As I said earlier, I am going to marry you.”

“Then we have to get married before the pregnancy starts to show,” she said, looking worried.

“In that case, I have to go to Lagos to inform my people, but as you know, I don’t have a kobo, and all the money I am expecting hasn’t come.”

“Like how much would you need?” she asked.

“About seven hundred thousand naira.”

“But that is too much.”

“I know, but it’s only a loan. I have a reputation to preserve, and it will help me fasten the money I am expecting and prepare for a grand wedding with you.”

“Ok, but all I can afford is five hundred thousand naira. It’s all the money I have in my savings.”

“Good, bring it. That can do something,” he said, adding, “Darling, I won’t make you regret this. Were it not that the money I was expecting hasn’t arrived, I couldn’t have collected this money from you. After all this, I will take you to Senegal, where all my assets are. From there, we will relocate to the United States or any European country of your choice and continue our ministry,”—kissing her forehead.

[It is two months since Pastor James left for Lagos, and Sister Martha is already agitated and worried.]

What would I do now? I would wait a little longer. He will come back soon. Oh God, please, let him come back soon and keep him safe, she prayed.

[A knock on the door brought her to consciousness.]

“The door is open,” she said.

“Sister Martha, what is wrong with you?” inquired her visitor.

“Ha, Sister Grace, you are back from Makurdi. How was your trip? Three months seem like yesterday?”

“It was wonderful. How are things around here?”

“Everything is fine.”

“But you don’t look fine,” she replied. “If I may ask, where is Pastor James?”

“Em, he travelled to Lagos!”

“Travelled? Look, sister, do you know that all the testimonies of Pastor James are very rotten and false? All those talks about Europe, Asia, Africa, and South Continental are all but lies.”

“Tell me something.”

“Do you know that all this while he had been at Otukpo doing his ministerial job before indulging in fornication with a lady in the church, promising to marry her afterwards, before he was expelled, whereas he already had a wife and two kids?”

[At this instance, Sister Martha jumped up on her feet.]

Speaking absent-mindedly, “Ah, my pregnancy, money, life, oh, I am finished.”

“What’s all this you are saying?” inquired Sister Grace, looking confused.

[...Collapsing....]

“Sister Martha, Jesus, Jesus, can someone please help me?”

Miss Daisy And Sister June

Thabo Mooke (South Africa)

Nobody knew who brought Miss Elizabeth Daisy to the Sunrise Old Age Home. And nobody knew if she had children, family, siblings, friends, or acquaintances. Yet Mrs Olivia Smith was glad Miss Daisy had settled for her lodging three months in advance with her credit card. Sister June Buthelezi started working at the old age two days after Miss Daisy had moved in. During Sister June's introduction, Mrs Smith peeped into Miss Daisy's room, and already another sister was dispensing medicine. She and Sister June proceeded to another room.

It was dusk. Sister June Buthelezi's ebony skin shimmered with a thin film of perspiration from the heat. Her starched white uniform sparkled under the orange sun rays of September. She gazed at the elderly people, some tottering about on the grass, others lounging on wooden chairs under the trees.

She glided up the cascading lawn toward the main entrance of the old age home in her long, elegant legs dressed in bright grey stockings. She reported for night duty at 7 a.m.; she had arrived much earlier. She went to the lockers, put away her handbag, sat at the desk, and signed in for duty. She stuck her pen into the pocket of her tunic and wandered down the long hall. Sister June peered into the rooms of the more infirm old people who spent most of their days lying in bed, with nothing better to do but wait for the ultimate day.

In the next room, she noticed Mr Eddie Blanco lying in his bed, staring blankly at the beam. He was sixty-seven or thereabouts, but he

had aged past his age. The strand of his grey hair framed his aged face, his forehead bearing trenches of regular displeasure and scowling.

“Hello, sweetheart. How are you feeling today?” Sister June beamed a grin at him.

Mrs Olivia Smith, a veteran nursing sister and executive director of the Sunrise Old Age Home, accompanied Sister June on the first day of duty; she was awed by the younger nurse’s exceptional endowments.

Sister June had a remarkable ability to make her work appear effortless. She showed great patience towards most elderly people. She was empathetic towards their ailments and illnesses. Her upbringing in a family that placed a high value on respecting elders, regardless of their background, race, or beliefs, instilled in her the commitment to not treat the seniors as if they were feeble and close to death. Sister June’s frequent use of endearing terms like “sugar,” “sweetheart,” “my love,” and “sweetie” also earned her Mrs Smith’s approval. This proved particularly effective when Sister June administered their regular dose of pain medication.

“Is there no other nurse in this darn beside you?” asked Mr Blanco with a trace of resentment.

“Unfortunately, no, sweetheart.” June’s affectionate gaze settled on him.

“You’re stuck with me. Don’t you worry. You’ll grow used to me.” She took off when Mr Blanco turned the other way on the bed to face the wall.

Mr Blanco was a retired colonel of the former South African Defence Force. He was one remnant of South Africa’s evil system of apartheid, which used to treat Black people like trash. He could not imagine how a Black maid, “pretending to be a nurse,” could order him to take medication, undress, and bathe him. He loathed the idea of being at the mercy of Sister June.

In the other room, Miss Elizabeth Daisy sat with her back against the headboard, reading a novel. She peered over her brown-framed

reading glasses and placed the book on the bed beside her. Her keen green eyes fixed on Sister June.

“Hello, sugar. Are you well?” Sister June moved toward the bed, picked up the glass case, and put it on the chest of drawers next to Miss Daisy’s bed.

“Sure. Thanks for asking. What’d you have done if I said I wasn’t well?”

Sister June Buthelezi had worked on a four-year contract at a hospital north of London. Though she enjoyed her stay in the UK, she failed to get used to the bone-crushing cold weather and was delighted to return home.

She was used to what she would tell her friends was “the English people’s dry humour.” The older lady’s accent was English.

Sister June’s lips parted with a smile, “Well, I suppose I’d do everything to make you right.”

“But you’re not a doctor. Just a nurse, right?”

“You’re right. But nurses also have a way of making people feel well and happy again.”

Miss Daisy burst into a peal of amused laughter, rocking her emaciated shoulders. She brushed back her thin grey hair with her wrinkled hand. “You’re not long here. What’s your name?”

“Just started. My name is June; June Buthelezi.”

She made out her hand. “Elizabeth Daisy. Are you a relative of Prince Mangosuthu?”

“No.” A pleasant laughter escaped Sister June’s throat. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs....”

“No, no... Miss Daisy.” Her tone was stern. An indication she did not like to be referred to as “Mrs.”

“Well then, Sister June, get on with your duties. Hope we’ll talk again.”

“Will see you later for your dose of medication, sweetheart.” Sister June moved to the door.

“You sure can make a person feel better.” A radiant smile crossed Miss Daisy’s face.

Long after dinner had been served, Sister June moved across the large room. Some people had left, and a few others remained to chatter. Others wore gloomy faces, their food untouched before them. A woman with a cleanly shaven head sat at the table next to Mr Blanco. She waved at Sister June. Sister June blew her a kiss, waved back at the woman, and walked on.

“She’s a pretty thing. Hey Blanco, don’t you agree?”

“Speak for yourself.” There is a trace of malice and resentment in his tone.

“Come on, Blanco. She’s such a pleasurable person. This world would be better and more delightful with more people like her.” The older lady watched with eyes widened in shock as her companion sprang from his chair and walked away. Blanco did not bother to say goodbye to her.

As she walked past, Sister June saw the lights on in Mrs Smith’s office; she guessed her boss might have left the light on when she went home.

Without knocking, she pushed the door open. Sister June stopped dead at the door and covered her mouth in shock. “I’m sorry; I didn’t know you were in here. I thought you must’ve left the lights on.”

“Come right in, Sister June.” Mrs Smith closed the drawer on her desk, holding a set of keys in her hand. “I’m here to retrieve some documents I forgot to take home with me. I have a meeting with a funder tomorrow morning, and I need them.” Mrs Smith then walked over to a steel cabinet, unlocked it, and pulled out the top drawer. While searching for the documents, she turned to face Sister June, her eyes reflecting a hint of curiosity. “How are things going between you and Mr Blanco? I hope everything has been resolved.”

Sister June shrugged with a satisfactory smile plastered on her face like it would stay on her forever. “Told him he was stuck with me. He’ll get over it.”

“You told him?” Mrs Smith’s brow lifted with amazement. “Poor thing, the lot that refuses to accept the change.” She pushed back the drawer, moved back to her desk, and tossed away the keys.

“I met Miss Daisy.”

“I’m sorry, Sister June. I forgot to tell you about her. She’s such a stuck-up, tough, and always complaining about food and everything else. She always keeps to herself. I think she’s even pretending to be reading.”

“Oh... no, she’s such a spot, Mrs Smith. It’s pleasant to talk to her. She’s got this dry English sense of humour I find amusing.”

“Sister June, I can’t find words to even start describing you.” With a yellow folder in her hand, Mrs Smith stepped away from her desk and warmly embraced Sister June. “How you transform unpleasantness in people and situations into something beautiful is truly captivating.”

Mrs Smith switched off the lights and locked her office, and the two women wished each other a pleasant evening.

After having lunch in the canteen one afternoon, Sister June left the oppressively hot room and stepped outside to breathe in some fresh air. She shielded her face from the bright sun and gazed at the luscious green lawn, the vibrant daisies, and the white and red roses. As she looked around, her gaze fell upon Miss Daisy.

Miss Daisy sat on a wooden chair next to the pond, which, for reasons Jane never found out, was waterless and in a state of neglect, covered in grass and twigs. Miss Daisy lifted her head from the book she was reading.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” said Sister June.

“No.” She closed the book. There was a broad smile on her face. “Sit down. I’ve been hoping to have a moment with you so we’d know each other better.”

“The feeling is mutual, Miss Daisy.” Sister June was curious. Mrs Smith had informed her that Miss Daisy had booked herself into the nursing home and paid for her lodging in advance. She had said she found

it baffling because it was usually the children or relatives who brought their parents to the facility.

“Are you married? Please tell me you’re not,” said Miss Daisy.

Sister June was taken aback by what she believed was Miss Daisy’s anti-marriage sentiment. She shook her head, “Never was.”

She held Sister June on the knee and gently shook it. “Good for you. Any children?”

“I have a son studying music at the University of Cape Town.”

“That’s all they’re good at, these bastards. They spread your legs apart and leave you with the responsibilities of motherhood.”

There was an uneasy quietness between them. Sister June reflected on how damn right the elderly woman was. When she informed the father of her son about her pregnancy, he vanished without a trace, as if he had been consumed by molten volcanic lava. She was eighteen and in matric. After giving birth the following year, June went back to school to complete her matric, leaving her son in the care of her mother. The boy was raised by his grandparents.

“And you, do you have children? I guess you never married, too.”

“No, I don’t have children. I never married. I don’t know my father. My parents got divorced soon after I was born.” Her voice now carried a tone of sternness and sharp resentment. “My grandmother raised me after my mother died of stress-related illness.” Her tiny shoulders rocked, sobbing.

Sister June ran her hand down Miss Daisy’s back, feeling the bones of her spine, and it seemed to her that Miss Daisy didn’t need to carry on with her emotional story.

“We’re friends now, Sister June, aren’t we?” Sister June nodded in affirmation. “Poor thing, my grandmother also died when I was in high school. I grew up in different orphanages. I was born in Liverpool, UK. I was awarded a bursary and graduated with a master’s degree in Anthropology. I taught at various universities in the UK before I came to South Africa.”

Miss Daisy wiped off the tears trickling down her face with the back of her hand. Sister June wondered if Miss Daisy had siblings, and if she had, was she in contact with them? Considering that Miss Daisy was eighty-five, Sister June also wondered about her friends – did she have any, and if not, why?

Sister June had many questions she wanted to ask Miss Daisy, but she considered they would not serve any purpose.

The first week of December signalled a mixture of exhalation and deep sadness for the old folks at a nursing home. Some children and relatives came to take their fathers, mothers, and grandparents to spend the Xmas holidays with them and bring them in the New Year. But some old folks, not by their design, would be left neglected at the facility to spend the season alone.

Because there would be fewer than six old folks left, the place would run on a skeleton staff to save running costs. The home would be quiet, with no clinking of pots, whirring of refrigerators in the kitchen, and the endless ringing of Mrs Smith's telephone. There will be no sounds of the engines of delivery trucks. All that would be left would be the sound of the wind through window frames.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" asked Mrs Smith. She leaned back in her chair and threw Sister June a curious look seated in front of her. The nursing sister had come to inform Mrs Smith that Miss Daisy had agreed to spend the holidays with her and her son in their home in Mamelodi.

"What if she doesn't like the atmosphere in the township? Most white folks have never experienced life on that side of our country. Will that not be an inconvenience to you?"

"Well, isn't it time for some white folks to learn the ways of life of their Black compatriots? I'm sure you still hold fond memories of the times when you managed the SOS Children's Village in Mamelodi."

“Of course I do.” Mrs Smith moved around her desk, and she and Sister June stood in a lingering embrace. “Merry Xmas to you and your son.”

“Merry Xmas Mrs Smith. Give my profound love to your family.”

On Christmas Eve, the sun was scorching hot, and the sky was cloudless when Sister June’s son, Tshepo, parked his mother’s car in front of the nursing home entrance. He gazed to the side and saw his mother strolling out alongside Miss Daisy.

With her handbag slung over her shoulder, Sister June pulled her wheeled luggage bag. Tshepo stepped out of the car, walked to the back, opened the boot, and waited for the two women.

“Miss Daisy, this’s my son, Tshepo.”

“Look at him, such a handsome young man. I’m telling you, June, you’ll need a whip to keep them away from him.”

Tshepo burst into amused laughter, took the bag from her mother, and placed it inside the boot. “I’m delighted to meet you finally, Miss Daisy. My mother never stopped talking about you when she called me on the phone.”

“You’re lucky to have a mother like her,” said Miss Daisy. “June is such a pleasant person. I’m lucky to have such a friend like her.”

As Tshepo drove from the upscale Sinoville neighbourhood in the north of Pretoria to Mamelodi, the air in the car was filled with lively conversation and laughter. Tshepo and Miss Daisy got on like a house on fire. Throughout the holidays until the day he drove his mother and Miss Daisy back to the nursing home, their talks centred on music: rhythm and blues, jazz, and classical music.

Sister June could never fathom why people always became ill and ached with pain during the night, whereas during the day, they showed no signs of pain. That be so, though, she preferred working night shifts. Night work kept her on her toes, dashing from one room to the other to attend to someone curled in the bed, screaming in acute pain.

After administering a dose of painkillers, often later into the night, Sister June would go back to the wards and watch an old folk, deeply asleep in a moment of bliss and tranquillity.

Sister June burst into Mr Blanco's room just before midnight, gasping for breath. Her eyes quickly scanned the room and settled on him lying in bed. He was drenched in sweat. He was panting, and his brown eyes were clouded with pain. Despite his usual angry demeanour, Sister June couldn't help but notice that his eyes held the same dulled expression as they always did when he was in pain.

Sister June tore a piece of paper towel secured against the wall above the hand's basin. "What's the matter, Mr Blanco?" she reached for his face to wipe off the sweat.

"Don't you touch me." The bark of his voice sneered with tension, and he pushed her away. "Get me the doctor."

"Will do that, Mr Blanco, but you must allow me to take your blood pressure first to determine what could be the problem. You look feverish."

"I don't care how I look. Call the damn doctor." He turned away from her and faced the wall.

Sister June hurried out, realising there wasn't much she could do to persuade Mr Blanco otherwise. In her office, with frantic fingers, she dialled Doctor Jethro Cullinan's number. "You know I'd not call the doctor if it weren't an emergency. Mr Blanco refuses me to treat him. Thank you, doctor." Sister June drew a long breath of exasperation and slumped into a chair at her desk.

In what seemed ages, Sister June heard car doors slamming after twenty-five minutes. She guessed it must be Dr Cullinan. She hurried to the entrance, unlocked and held the door open for the doctor.

"I can't understand how the miserable old Blanco can be so unreasonable." Doctor Cullinan walked past Sister June, his stethoscopes dangling in his long hands.

Sister June shrugged. “He’s so difficult, doctor, seen no one so stubborn. He would rather be tended only by white nurses.” She trailed the doctor.

In the quietness, his forehead furrowed with creases of annoyance. Doctor Cullinan moved his stethoscope over Mr Blanco’s chest. After a while, he removed the stethoscope and glanced at Sister June standing at the foot of the bed.

“Nothing to worry about, sister; you can administer an antibiotics drip.”

“No, she can’t do that.” Mr Blanco’s eyes glistened with rage.

Dr Cullinan turned to look at Mr Blanco. The doctor’s eyes narrowed with irritation. “Yes, she can, and she will, Mr Blanco.” His voice was stern. “Sister June is a professional nurse who knows exactly what is best for...” The doctor stopped short of saying, “Your pathetic life.” Dr Cullinan balanced his weight on Mr Blanco’s bed. “You know what? If you’re not satisfied with your stay here, you’re at liberty to go somewhere else to live the last days of your horrible past of racial prejudices,” he stormed out.

Three hours after she had administered the drip, Sister June went back to check Mr Blanco; he lay in his bed in tranquillity, purring softly like a kitten.

Sister June did not leave for home immediately after her night shift ended that Thursday morning in February. She was concerned about Miss Daisy’s health; she complained about chest pains around 9 p.m. the previous night. Her blood pressure was recorded at 160/90. The dose of painkillers did not provide any relief, and she lay curled in her bed, excruciating throughout the night.

Miss Daisy’s face was pale, drained of any signs of amusement; her eyes showed a tale of solemnness. Her limbs moved like they did not belong to her as she tried to point toward the chest of drawers at the head of her bed. Though tired, Sister June still smiled at her standing at the bed. “Cheer up, sugar. Doctor Cullinan is coming to see you. Everything will be fine.” She took her hand and squeezed it in reassurance.

A weak smile plastered Miss Daisy's face. Her voice was weak and trembling. "Open the drawer."

June opened the drawer, took out books and the old women's magazines, and placed them atop. "What do you want me to get for you?" she turned to look at Miss Daisy.

"A business card..." she cupped her mouth as her body quivered with a dry cough. "I want you to call Mr Lipmann and ask him to come and see me right away. I have an urgent matter that I need to discuss with him."

June looked at the card, its corners bent inwards like dog ears, and read the information: Lipmann, Shapiro, and Schoeman Attorneys. At that moment, Dr Cullinan, followed by a nurse, walked in.

"OK, old girl, will do so." Sister June bent and kissed the elderly woman on her iron-hot forehead. "See you in the afternoon," she waltzed out.

When she arrived home after an hour, Sister June placed her handbag on the table, retrieved the business card, and called Mr Lipmann's office. "No, I'm not a client," said June to the receptionist. "I've been asked to speak to Mr Lipmann personally by her client...."

"Oh... yea. Miss Daisy, of course. Please hold on for Mr Lippmann," said the receptionist.

After listening to the silent telephone for a while, a husky male voice broke the silence.

The attorney coughed endlessly into the telephone as he listened to Sister June. "Yes, will do that right away, Miss Buthelezi. you said you're a nurse at the old age home, right?"

"Sister June, please come on in," said Mrs Smith as she saw Sister June walking past her office in the late afternoon for her shift that evening. She walked around her desk, wringing her hands, and the radiance in her green eyes evaporated. "Please sit down." Her gaze fell on the floor as Sister June sat in a chair. "I've sad news for you."

“Is it Miss Daisy?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, June; I know how close you two had become.”

“When did she...?” Sister June’s voice choked with emotion.

“Her lawyer, Mr Lipmann, came to see her this morning, and she passed on an hour after the two of them had talked. Listen, June. I know how hard it is on you. You may go back home and come tomorrow evening for your shift.”

“Thank you, Mrs Smith, that’s so kind of you.”

Sister June lay in bed that night, staring blankly at the ceiling, unable to find sleep. She struggled with the dilemma of Miss Daisy’s burial. At 7 a.m., she pushed her foot out from under the sheet but couldn’t negotiate with her limbs to function. When she finally dragged herself out of bed, she took her cell phone from the dresser, grabbed her gown hung behind the door, tucked the phone into her pocket, and trotted to the bathroom.

She looked into the mirror and ran her fingers below the bags underneath her eyes. In the kitchen, she plugged the kettle on. Sister June was seated at the table, with her face rested on her palm as she sipped her coffee. She jerked in a startle as the phone vibrated against her thighs.

“Oh... Mrs Smith, what can I say? I guess I’ll be fine.” Sister June pressed her itching eyes shut. “No, she has no living relatives nor close friends that I know of. I suppose that shouldn’t be a problem at all, Mrs Smith. I’ll arrange everything for her burial. Yes, the service, everything. She’ll be buried here in Mamelodi. OK, I’ll keep you in the loop.”

An hour later, Sister June parked her car outside the gate of the Anglican Church mission house in Mamelodi West. In the backyard, she negotiated her way on the stone path dotted with weeds after every stone to the back door. After three or five knocks, Sister June heard the trudging of footsteps inside the house approaching the door.

“Miss Buthelezi, please come in.” Father Jeremiah Zulu brushed back his wispy grey hair and stepped aside to let Sister June in. She trailed behind the priest, trudging in his oversized black slippers. In the living room, Mrs Zulu, a heavyset woman, was slumped on a brown and

battered couch. Even though the temperature was 32 degrees Celsius, Sister June noticed the windows were closed, and the thick brown curtains were not drawn. There was inadequate light inside the room, like some movie theatre. The wall, once painted white, showed concrete beneath them, with fattish smudges. The red and run-down floor smelt of dust.

After sitting down on a chair at the table, Father Zulu listened intently at Sister June, seated on the couch next to Mrs Zulu.

“Miss Buthelezi,” the clergy allowed a mocking smile to cross his unshaven face. “From what I’ve gathered from you, this person was not a relative, she was just a friend of yours, right?”

“Yes, she was a friend.”

Father Zulu shook his head. “She was not a member of any church, nor was she a member of my congregation. I cannot see how you expect me to bury such a person.”

“Father, doesn’t the church have a social responsibility towards fellow humans?” Sister June’s eyes glistened with rage, and her voice trembled with irritation. “Miss Daisy did not have children, never married, and had no relatives. I was her only friend. Doesn’t the church care about the plight of such people?”

Sister June felt a drop on her cheek, the second, the third, and tears ran down her face. She felt a mixture of anger, regret, and frustration inside her. In the UK, Sister June had earned a decent salary, incomparable to the peanuts her South African colleagues earned. Besides her tithe and other contributions towards the church, she donated R10,000 for the maintenance of the church and the mission house. She was appalled by the condition of the room she was seated.

She wondered as she stood up if her contribution to the church wasn’t a social responsibility effort. “I’ll not wonder anymore when people are critical of the irrelevance of the church. That is why they have stopped going to church. I know,” she pointed towards the window, “out there, there’d be someone prepared to bury Miss Daisy regardless of whether she was a member of their church or not.” Sister June stormed out.

As Sister June had prophesied, at the Mamelodi West cemetery, a stocky priest in a navy-blue cassock, a purple collar, and a large wooden cross hanging on his chest presided over the burial of Miss Daisy. Back at home, hundreds of mourners stood in snaking queues in and outside the yard of Sister June's house. They held disposable plates to be dished for food.

"These people," Mrs Smith nodded with her head towards the queue inside the yard. "Did they know Miss Daisy?"

Sister June squeezed past some people standing in the queue, making way for Mrs Smith, followed by Eddie Blanco.

"No, some are friends, neighbours, friends of the friends, and friends of the neighbours. Black people do not invite people to funerals. Those who have the time join others to lend a helping hand to the bereaved family or friend."

"A sign of Ubuntu, I suppose?" said Mr Blanco.

"That's right," a pleasant smile plastered Sister June's face. She could not imagine Mr Blanco understood the principle. "I think that's what makes us South Africans unique."

Mr Blanco held Sister June tightly and pecked her on both cheeks. "You're a wonderful person, Sister June. You are. He held her hands. "I'll forever remain indebted to your kindness."

At that moment, a car parked in front of Mrs Smith's car. She gazed at the car; her face beamed with recognition as the passenger stepped out, and she gazed at Sister June and Mr Blanco.

"That's Mr Lipmann, the lawyer that I told you came to see Miss Daisy on the morning she passed on."

"Yes, I remember that." Sister June's eyes widened with curiosity.

"He had phoned looking for you, and I told him you're not in. He asked me for your home address and said he wanted to see you". Mrs Smith turned to look at Mr Lipmann approaching in slow strides. He held a white envelope in his hand.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Smith. What are you doing here?" asked Mr Lipmann.

“I came to Miss Daisy’s funeral.”

Mr Lipmann masked his surprise, bewildered that his client was buried in a township graveyard. “You didn’t tell me she’d be buried today. Anyway...”

“This is Sister June,” Mrs Smith turned in and looked at Sister June, “Mr Lipmann, I guess you two have not met before.”

“Miss Buthelezi, we spoke over the phone.” Mr Lipmann shook Sister June’s hand but continued holding it in his clasp.

“This document here,” Mr Lipmann waved the envelope at Sister June, “is a testimony of your humility, a gesture of a profound friendship of two women from different backgrounds.

He handed Sister June the envelope. “Should you wish to discuss your inheritance with me, please come to my office.”

Sister June held the envelope in her shaking hand. “Thank you, Mr Lipmann.” She glanced at Mrs Smith and Mr Blanco with teary eyes as the two strolled to the car. She wiped off her eyes with her forefinger and waved at Mr Lipmann as he drove past her.

A Journal: The Boy On The Bench In The Park

Thabo Mooke (South Africa)

That evening would be the last time I'd talked to my sister.

"Udo." She placed her hand on my lap as we sat on the mud stoep of our mother's hut, also kitchen, covered in pork-marked red soil. "I've started saving money for you. I want you to study medicine at Makerere University when you complete high school." She turned to look at me, the thick lips of her wide mouth parted, showing her even white teeth, and her large, round eyes glistened with fondness.

"Sis, isn't studying medicine quite expensive?"

"Don't worry about that. You'll be far from home, and I will miss you." She pulled me closer to her and laid my head on her heaving chest dotted with small, firm breasts.

"I have books to mark. Good night." She rose and strutted on her shapely legs and lean body like the painting of a virtuoso.

"Goodnight Sis. I love you."

She turned, blew me a kiss, and walked on.

I had just arrived from school and stood outside the thatched rondavel of the bedroom I shared with my elder brother. It was a scorching, sultry afternoon with no wind, and a swirling silence engulfed our weary village. In the distance, I saw my mother balancing a calabash of water on her head alongside my sister, her goat-skin bag hanging on her shoulder. Behind them, a group of older boys and girls from my school were sauntering home.

Suddenly, gunfire erupted from all directions, with spent shells bouncing off the ground near my parents' bedroom and the main house.

I watched in horror as the gourd fell from my mother's head, water spilt on the dry red earth, and bullets spurted beside her. Her face was filled with terror. She bolted towards our house, my sister trailing her. The school children screamed with terror and ran in all directions. Others wailed and fell to the ground. A paralysing terror spread through my body like a piercing spear, and I was numb. Men with their faces covered in scarves and their AK-47 assault rifles pointed, chased after my mother and sister, screaming obscenities.

My father and elder brother, wide-eyed in fright, ran to the forecourt of my home. My mother bolted towards me, scooped me from the ground, and dashed into the bedroom. She locked the door, and we sat huddled against the wall. Her body quivered as she held me tight against her chest, muttering.

I could not figure out why my mother had chosen to seek refuge in her bedroom. The room was bare, with only a coconut mattress on which she and my father slept. Their clothes hung on a string across the wall.

A man kicked the rickety door to the ground. Wielding an AK rifle, he jumped over the door, followed by two other young men who stood behind him.

"Please don't kill my son," my mother pleaded.

"Shut up," he ordered with his bloodshot, prideless eyes fixed on my mother as he towered over her, pointing his rifle at her head. "Take the woman and the boy outside."

Outside, several shots rang out. The two young men hung their rifles on their shoulders and lifted my mother. Still clutched in her arms, they dragged us outside. The young men wrestled me out of my mother's arms and forced her to kneel on the ground.

At the sight of my father's bloodied body, riddled with bullets, my mother covered her face and wailed. My sister lay naked on the ground, screaming.

I wanted to scream, but my voice was trapped in the back of my throat. A broad, tall man stood between my sister's sprawled legs, his rifle placed beside her. He zipped up his army trousers, picked up his rifle, and sprayed my sister with bullets like he was in combat.

Two other rebels shepherded my brother away, one of them stabbing him in the back with his rifle.

"Bring them along," said the man who had just raped and murdered my sister. One of the young men lifted my mother under her arm and dragged her. The other young rebel pushed me behind the head.

After a long walk through dense woodlands, we arrived at an open space teeming with people sitting on the ground. It was like a war zone. The place reeked of blood, human faeces, and a buzz of a symphony of flies.

The air was filled with groans of agony as people writhed in pain, their garments stained with dried, caked blood, while others, unclothed and bleeding from their wounds, lay bare. The insurgents commanded the men to pull the deceased, who had succumbed to their injuries, behind the bushes.

At dusk, the rebels, as if they had just won a gold medal at the Olympics, celebrated their victory by consuming the alcohol they had looted from bottle stores during their rampage. In their drunkenness, some rebels walked around, inspecting their captives like they were some precious cargo.

"You, stand up!" a rebel commanded a woman, dragging her to the bushes. I couldn't help but imagine that he would rape her, just like one of them had raped and murdered my sister. Unfortunately, some of the victims of these cruel individuals were young girls, some as young as twelve years old.

We stayed in that God-forsaken place for days. Every night, the drinking and chattering amongst the rebels would continue into the dead of the night. Jackals and other scavengers would forage on dead bodies. At that, the rebels would be stone drunk, deep in slumber and snoring, their rifles carelessly laid next to them.

In the morning, a few rebels would be left behind to guard the captives, while the rest would mount another invasion of nearby villages.

The rebels' binging of alcohol and the orgies of rape were their embedded routine. The effects of alcohol were their demise. They were supposed to secure the captives until they were dispatched to various camps for military training or for only God knows. Their weakness provided the younger prisoners with the opportunity to formulate daring strategies to escape from their captors.

A group of other older boys and girls and I were the first to escape. As I write this narrative, I'm not sure, and never will I ever know what happened to my mother, my elder brother, and my fellow country boys and girls that were left behind that night.

But having observed the viciousness and monstrous behaviour of the rebels, my mother, brother, and the others must have paid dearly with their lives for our actions. Given the rebels' viciousness, there is no doubt that they were shot in close range behind their backs and their heads chopped off with machetes and hung on tree branches to signal a stark warning to the others about what would happen to them should they dare an escape.

Our escape voyages were strictly undertaken during the night in rugged terrains, walking up the hills, crossing streams and crocodile-infested rivers. The older boys, who were well-built and robust, carried us on their backs. During the day, under the scorching heat, we would lie in dense bushes, oblivious to deadly snakes and other reptiles.

After several months, we made our only daytime escape voyage. One of the older boys told us we were now in Zimbabwe, and we needed to swim across a river into South Africa. He said many of our countrymen and women who had fled from other villages had long run into this country and had been granted refugee status.

That afternoon, after we had all swum safely into South Africa, we arrived on the outskirts of a town near the South African and Zimbabwean border. We slept in tents with hundreds of other refugees from strife-torn countries. Two days after we arrived at Beit Bridge, I lost

contact with my fellow countrymen. That night, in a state of panic and confusion, I slept in a tent with men and boys who spoke languages I did not understand. In the morning, a boy, four or five years older than me, started conversing with me despite the language barrier.

“We need to leave this place. I’m from Sierra Leone. I know that some of my countrypeople live around Johannesburg. They’ll offer us a place to stay and food,” he said. His English was not that good. Even though I did not know where Johannesburg was or how far it was, I was delighted to join my companion. We left the transit tent camp soon after we had eaten samp and brown beans.

After walking for about one kilometre under the scorching heat, we started hitching rides from trucks my companion told me were transporting goods to Johannesburg. We arrived outside a place called Alexandra, as I would later learn from my companion at around 5 p.m.

We navigated through a throng of bodies on the fringes of a taxi rank covered in a speckle of unimaginable dirt. Uncaring residents discarded nappies, plastic shopping bags, fast food containers, and empty bottles everywhere. There was an awful smell of water from a leaking sewer pipe. The air was hard with tension. The people on the sidewalk of old, dilapidated shops walked silently, their faces wrinkled with anxiety.

My companion suddenly stopped to greet a woman standing outside a fabric and clothing store.

The woman asked in dismay, “Touré, what’re you doing here?”

Her eyes opened wide, and there was something dreadful and fearful in her tone. She let out a slow, controlled breath and her body movements tensed. Without looking at me, she spoke to my companion in their language. Though I couldn’t fathom their conversation, I could deduce the woman was burdened by something dreadful.

The woman lived in a one-room shack in Alexandra. The yard was crammed with other rickety shacks occupied by foreign African nationals. After dinner, I told Touré that I needed to record the atrocious deaths of my father and sister and my experiences back home. The woman went out to visit some people from her country. I slept on my stomach on a

sponge mattress on the floor and began writing in the book the woman had given me. Touré dozed off beside me, purring softly like a kitten.

Outside, the doors slammed shut. There was a dull thud of hurried footsteps. Women in pitched voices called out their children and husbands in panic-stricken voices. The door swung open, and the woman entered, her eyes wide with fear.

“Touré wake up; you must go. The residents are attacking African foreigners.” The woman removed two jerseys and a woollen bag from a string fastened on the wall. She tossed an oversized brown jersey and the bag at me. “I’ve arranged for someone to take you out of this place. Come, hurry up.” She opened the door, and we followed out.

The dark yard was in chaos, with people running in all directions like headless chickens. There were wailing children being pulled along by their mothers, while others tripped and fell as they tried to keep up with their parents. Men were helping their wives with babies on their backs into waiting bakkies. Touré had vanished amid the pandemonium. The woman pushed me into the back of a bakkie crammed with women and crying babies. A man closed the canopy door, hurried away, and the bakkie drove off.

Strange as it was, I remained insulated from the possible violence I was yet to encounter as I sat in quietness. Crammed like sardines in the back of that van, I observed how scared these people were. Perhaps I was scarred deeply to imagine the atrocities of violence.

As the gold sun filtered through the canopy’s back window, the bakkie came to a halt. A man opened the canopy door and spoke to the passengers in a language I did not understand. I stepped out to allow other passengers to get out and waited at the back of the bakkie. Some of the women walked into a café. I had no reason to follow these people to the café, even if I was hungry. I had no money.

Because of the language barrier, a woman who had remained behind with a baby on her lap tried to communicate with me. I think she was at her wit’s ends. In broken English, she said, “Hey, go and buy me some milk and bread.”

When I came out of the café with the woman's bread and milk, the bakkie was nowhere to be found. I stood outside the café in a fuddled state of mind. I wondered. What if the money she gave me to buy her bread and milk was all she had?

As I stood outside the café, I could feel my chest heaving with fear. It sat in my stomach like a ball of fire and my body shook with anxiety. I had traversed foreign territories in my determined escape from the atrocities of my countrymen, oblivious of being bitten by dangerous snakes and being attacked by lions and other predators. And now, in this place I hardly knew, I was gripped by fear and terror of being attacked by my fellow humans simply because I was a foreigner.

I pondered how the locals would be able to determine that I was a foreigner, lest only by talking to them. Would it be possible for the pigmentation of my skin to give me away because it was a darker hue of black? I wondered.

The café stood on a street corner across a park. In my trance-like state, I walked across the street to the place that would become my sanctuary in the days that followed. During the day, the park teemed with people. Some sat on benches reading books, and men, whom I guessed were unemployed, slept under the tree shades.

When everybody had gone home in the evenings, I sneaked into the male toilets and slept on the floor. Sleep is like a drug; it numbs the body. I slept like a baby after suckling a mother's breast. I woke up early in the mornings and rinsed my face in the hand basin. I did not want the men who tended the park to suspect that I slept anywhere in the place. I sat on the wooden bench, basking in the warm sun and writing my experience in the book. I was so absorbed in my writing for several days that I never felt hungry.

There he was that morning, this ragged man with sparse grey hair around his bald head and a long grey beard that seemed to cover his mouth. He always came to the park at 9 a.m. or 10 a.m. with a newspaper in his hand. There was something weird about him. He never took off his jacket, even when it was scorching hot. From time to time, he would

take out a bottle covered in brown paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and take a swig.

From the corner of my eye, I observed that he was strolling toward the bench I was seated. I cursed under my breath and continued writing in my book.

“Morning.” He sat down and tossed the newspaper on the bench.

“Beautiful morning.”

There was an element of friendliness in his tone. He glanced sideways at me and flashed me a smile, revealing his tobacco-stained teeth. I did not reciprocate his courtesy, and I cursed in silence. There goes my peace of mind.

“What’re you writing?”

I closed my book and put it under my jersey beside me. “I can’t see why it is any of your business.”

“I’m Professor Ben Le Roux.”

I turned to look at this clown, my eyes wide open, startled. Professor whoever, he did not even look anything similar to the village teachers at my school.

“I’m only trying to make conversation.” He made out his dry skin hand. “What’s your name?”

“Udo.”

The spot where I sat had become “my bench.” I wished to move away from this man and find a place to sit alone. But I was reluctant to do so in case I would encounter another unwelcome and curious stranger like the Professor. We remained seated in quietness, whereas from time to time, the Professor tugged into his jacket, took out the bottle, and drank from it. He did not wince, but from the potent smell of its content, I knew it was alcohol.

“Listen,” he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and put away the bottle. “We’ve been sitting here all day; let’s go and grab something to eat.”

And suddenly, my stomach groaned. I hadn’t eaten anything since the day when a woman asked me to buy bread and milk for her. Professor

Le Roux must have noticed my reluctance to accompany him. He rose from the bench and held my shoulder.

“Come on, who said strangers can’t be friends?”

I grabbed my bag, put away the book, and took my jersey. We walked out of the park and made our way toward the café across the street. It was where I had purchased the bread and milk for the woman who left them with me. The smell of food filled the room. There were a few people seated at the tables. Most customers stood at the counter making purchases. We sat at a table next to the window, looking at people walking up and down the pavement.

“Afternoon, Prof,” said a waitress. She looked at me and nodded. “What’re you having today?”

“The usual. This is my friend Udo.”

The waitress wrote down the order in her book. “Hi, Udo. *Wena o ja eng?*”

“Udo doesn’t speak Sesotho.”

Damn Professor Le Roux, how did he know I did not speak some of the languages spoken in his country? As with my pigmentation, I guessed my accent must have given me away.

“I’m sorry, Udo. What’re you ordering?”

I wasn’t sure what “the usual” was, but whatever it was, since it had not killed Professor Le Roux, I could as well have it. “His usual,” I said to the waitress.

We arrived at the block of flats where Professor Le Roux stayed at 3:30 p.m. While standing outside the lift door, a man approached us from behind. “Good afternoon, Professor Le Roux. Who is this one?”

Professor Le Roux turned, his face cast downwards. He looked up at the man and allowed a contemptuous smile to cross his face. “This is Udo. He’s a friend.”

“I hope he’ll not cause any trouble here,” said the man.

“Mr Smith, whoever I bring to my flat is none of your business.”

At that, the lift door opened. Professor Le Roux took my shoulder, trailed me, and we walked in. “Damn caretaker. Who the hell is he to order me who I should bring to my flat?”

He was delighted to show me around his one-bedroom, kitchen, and lounge apartment. The place was neat. The lounge was furnished with leather sofas, a coffee table in the middle, and a glass bookcase. There was a framed family picture on top, and though he looked younger, I guessed it was him, his wife, and his daughter. As he walked to the kitchen, I took a book that lay on the table.

The Ravages of Conflict and the Plight of Victims in Africa — BJ Le Roux.

I put the book back and looked up as Professor Le Roux walked in. He held a bottle and a glass in one hand. He smiled and sat down on the sofa opposite me. I was curious to know which countries he wrote about were ravaged by conflict.

“What made you write this book?”

“I lectured at various universities where there were upheavals, including Nigeria and Uganda.”

“I wish I could understand why these egocentric men do not seem to care about the misery they inflict on young people. Innocent lives of children and women”.

He took a swig from his drink. “I wish I had answers to that.”

“Do you still write books?”

“I’ve not written anything for some time. Why’re you asking?”

I reached for my bag and took out the book I had scribbled about my experiences. “Will you help me write my book?”

He made out his hand, and I handed him the book. He stood up, strolled towards the bookcase, and retrieved his reading glasses. “Is it what you were writing when I found you at the park this morning?” He looked at me, smiling, and sat down. I nodded.

He put on his glasses and began reading as we sat in silence. He turned to the second page, and I noticed tears streaming down his face. He closed the book and took off his glasses.

“I’ll prepare for you a bath, and I’ll read the rest before I go to bed.”

We did not go to the park that week. We remained trapped in his flat. When I woke up around 6 a.m., Professor Le Roux sat in front of his computer working.

That morning, he sat with a bundle of white pages on his lap, scribbling with a red pen on some of the pages. “I’m editing your manuscript.”

“What’s a manuscript?”

He burst into amused laughter. “I’ve finished writing your book. I’ll be taking it to my publishers to have it published.”

Several months later, Professor Le Roux, cleanly shaven, wore a navy blue suit, a white shirt, and a red tie. As I sat in the front seat of his yellow Mercedes-Benz, I noticed that this was the same road Touré and I had travelled when we came to Alexander.

We walked along a shiny corridor until Professor le Roux stopped and knocked at a door written with golden letters, *Jill and Co. Publishers*. People milled around, holding orange juice glasses, some nibbling at their snacks. At the far corner, a table was stacked with books. The room shone with blinding television lights.

“Hi! Ben, is this the boy on the bench in the park?”

“Mike, this is Udo,” said Professor le Roux.

I felt my knees quivering like jelly as people surrounded me as if I was a film star. A female reporter talked to the man Professor le Roux had referred to as Mike.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Mike. “Can we all move to the boardroom to allow the television people to interview the man of the moment?”

“You’re a brave young man, Udo,” said a female reporter.

I tried to steady my sweaty hands. “Just relax,” the female reporter said. She sat me down, pulled a chair, and held a book opposite me. I saw my name underneath the title of the book. “I’ve not yet read your book, but the jacket sleeve. I’m going to ask you questions based on that.”

The reporter struggled to control her quivering voice as she asked me about the occurrences at the captive camp.

“What are your plans for the future?”

“Well, I plan to remain here in South Africa. I hope to return to school and complete my education like my sister wished.”

The reporter cleared her throat. “Do you plan to go back to your country after that?”

I felt tears stinging my eyes, and my throat tightened. “I’ve nowhere to go back to. My country has been ravaged by war. It’s in tatters. I’ve nobody to go back to; my mother and my brother,” I shrugged, “must have been shot in the back of their heads because of me.”

“Cut,” said the reporter. She rose and embraced me. After a while, the guest filed back into the room.

Professor Le Roux handed me a copy of my book. I don’t have a recollection of how many copies I had signed. I dozed off back to Pretoria.

“Wake up; we’re home now,” said Professor Le Roux.

Tale Of Yewo

Jonas Zaithwa Chisi (Malawi)

This time, it wasn't the noon ding dong that woke me from my usual lunchtime slumber. It was something worse. That particular Friday, I woke up with a strong feeling that something weird would happen. My grandma, Nyanjelo, used to say that man has the power to see into the future. She said that human beings are the most powerful of all creation. They have the power to see into the future. The problem is that everyone is too preoccupied with useless things or is unwilling to listen to or feel the seer in them. This is one of the few things I remember about her. She died many ages ago.

Now, here, on my broken chair merely held together by a plank I fixed as a temporary leg, I sat awkwardly, half-awake, half-asleep, trying to piece what was happening together. Everything seemed hazy. Clouds were gathering for their own meeting. Trees screamed and surrendered as the wind threw kicks and blows on the helpless vegetation. Everything seemed disoriented, both to me and to nature.

"There is a meeting in the hall," Nyengo yelled as he rushed out.

"Sleepyhead, wake! Wake!" Temwa tapped my forehead.

It felt like I had slept for eight hours straight. The dream I had the previous day slipped through my consciousness. I dreamt I was Gervaise in Emile Zola's *L'assommoir*. I can't explain how, but I was a female character.

"I must have been exhausted from yesterday's classes," I lied to Temwa, who stood in front of my desk waiting for me.

We walked along together to the hall, asking each other what the meeting was about. The time was 11:10 a.m., and we were not getting an early lunch break. As we walked, students from all directions were thrilled, running towards the hall. They were happy not because there was a meeting. They were happy that classes had been interrupted.

Mr Nyirenda, the deputy head, yelled something at Temwa and me, but we didn't hear what he said. We just nodded as we rushed in his direction. We, teachers, usually made fun of him, not because he was less of a teacher than us, but because of his choice of clothes. While most of us were moving together with fashion, Mr Nyirenda stuck himself in the past of big trousers and oversized suits.

I sat on the chair that was reserved for me, and Temwa did the same. All the teachers were in except Mr Kwenda, who was almost always not on campus. We weren't sure anymore if he was teaching his students or not. After five minutes, everything was settled, and the school's principal took on an old microphone and greeted everyone.

"Many of you wonder why we are here at this time. It is with a heavy heart that I convey to you this message that the Ministry of Education has just released. As we all know, the world has been hit by this novel COVID-19, and as such, the ministry has decided that all schools be closed with immediate effect," he paused to let the words sink in. And they did.

Students yelled, jumped and said all the crazy things students say. Within the jubilation of students, my head suddenly felt very heavy. I felt like the devil had put the whole world on my small head. I could hear mild murmurs from my fellow teachers, but they sounded like they were a thousand miles from where I was. Slowly, the feeling that I had in the morning returned. I felt something unpleasant recoil in my stomach. I groaned, and Temwa asked if I was alright, to which I said yes and looked away.

"So, classes have been suspended with immediate effect. Day scholars can go home. For boarders, ensure no one is here by Monday

next week. As for teachers, we shall call you when we need you again,” he finished after minutes of silencing the wild students.

I am not sure how everything ended because I woke up three days later in a district hospital where I had been hospitalized.

“He is finally up, thank God,” screamed Temwa at the top of her voice. She didn’t care she was in a hospital where many people died than recovered. She called doctors, who came and attended to me. They explained that I had been in a coma, but they are yet to establish what caused it. It might have been shock, thoughts, or simply my soul’s attempt to exist apart from my body. Temwa was my closest friend and the only family I had because all my parents had died while I was young. My grandmother died soon after them. The ‘other’ family I had disappeared around the same time my parents died. I was raised at an orphanage. Through sheer hard work, I got into one of the best colleges where I did teaching, and now I was independent for the first time in my life, three months after finishing my college studies.

The government had stopped employing teachers and nurses long ago, even though schools and hospitals lacked qualified personnel. So here I was, unemployed for the uncertain future with no money to pay my rent. Our country had not yet recorded any COVID-19 cases; schools were closed, churches banned, and football matches stopped, but borders and airports were still operational.

At 5 p.m., I was discharged from the hospital, and Temwa walked me home. She had always been there for me, and my friends had asked me if I was ‘tapping from her uninvaded territory’. I said no, and they laughed at me.

“She will get tired of waiting,” said one of my friends. I did not respond. I walked away.

What’s with the youth of today? I asked myself as I walked home. *They can’t just see a man having a female friend possible.* I considered myself ‘old school’ even though I was younger than most of my workmates. Against

all their predictions, Temwa was still here by my side, walking me home. She explained how she had been there at the hospital all along. She also told me news buzzing around about COVID-19, which everybody initially thought was for the whites and the Chinese.

“Now, cases have been recorded in Zambia and Tanzania. With the borders still open, soon we will have our case,” said Temwa, looking very sad. I nodded, still heavy with many thoughts I was trying to string together.

Days passed, the first month passed, and we finally had our first case, the second, and many more cases. Schools would not open soon. Stricter rules were introduced at other gatherings, but political rallies were allowed. Hopefully, our political leader was happy. Elections were going to be cancelled.

One day, as I returned from one of those afternoon wonderings, I found my mattress, blanket, and a few kitchen utensils I had acquired outside my house. I walked on and read the note from my landlord:

**GO FIND A HOUSE WHICH CAN ACCOMMODATE YOU
FOR FREE.**

I sat down on the veranda. I took out my phone and re-read the text my principal had sent after I asked if I could be helped with my financial situation. “We are very sorry, Mr Yewo. We are a private institution. We rely on students’ school fees to pay you. Without students, no payment for you.”

I scratched my head. The hell I had been in throughout my life had followed me. I felt more like an orphan than I had felt my whole life. I surely wouldn’t go back to the orphanage to beg for a place to crash for a few days while I searched for a new job, and it was obvious that no companies were hiring as news of firing people topped the news every day. Teachers weren’t the only victims.

After miraculously getting my job, I vowed that twenty per cent of my salary would always go to the orphanage that raised me, and I did as I committed for the three months I worked as a teacher. By the end of each month, though, I found almost sixty per cent of my money given out to

charity at church, at school, in the street and everywhere because I couldn't stand to see any kid struggling the way I did in my life. My salary was small, but I still followed the teaching of the Holy Word that we have to share whatever small thing we have. Now, here I was, with nowhere to go. The strange thing was that now I felt very calm, a sort of calm I had not felt before. Everything was peaceful around me, and I felt like a stream flowing on one windless afternoon. And suddenly, as if from nowhere, Temwa appeared, descending slowly towards me.

“Are we going home?” she asked softly, and I smiled.

In The Line Of Duty

Ashitiva Wa Omukuya (Kenya)

We had agreed that after a successful operation, Kalizama would return the tool to me and the remainder of the money he owed me as part of the agreement we had in place for the last four years of our working relationship. It was a relationship built on a strict code of secrecy that made each party involved sure of the other but also wary. We liked to operate that way, for in this country of ours, one can't risk being too comfortable with the other. But for a person who always brings up their part of the bargain, you can cut them some slack. He had stayed with my tool, a gun, for almost forty-eight hours, which is really baffling. Our lease agreement was twenty-four hours maximum. He would take it strictly from me at dusk on a Friday in the dark playground of Olocho and return it to me at the same place the following day. I had gone there that Saturday, but Kalizama was nowhere to be seen.

Meanwhile, I was also to delay and divert my fellow police officers from the route in which Kalizama would be raiding for the week. It always worked like magic. Hiring the gun out was easy. I would take out the bullets. Kalizama had his ways of procuring the slugs from God-knows-where, and I never had a bullet fired that was unaccounted for. I never knew where Kalizama got the bullets for himself and his group's operations, which bothered me. But I dared not ask; some things are better left unasked. But I suspected the one who had the keys to the armoury.

Hiring the gun at dusk on Friday covered me. I would report with it on Sunday evening and feign some unavoidable mishap that had made

me go with it home. Returning it to the armoury fully loaded and with no hitch made my weekend story credible.

The armoury man came to expect my gun at dusk on Saturday. Now Kalizama was about to put an end to this beautiful arrangement. It would be a very long weekend for me. With each passing moment, Saturday inched closer to turning into Sunday, and I felt increasingly uneasy at the thought of what might happen to me if Kalizama met the inevitable fate. Kalizama led the dreaded *Watatii Wanati* Gang, which was giving the residents sleepless nights. We had become friends, or rather working partners, out of mutual necessity.

I joined the police force after my father sold his precious land next to the river for nearly half a million and greased the palms of the big bosses from the bottom to the top —bottom up. We had expected that upon finishing training, I would be deployed to the traffic wing of the police, where one year would have been enough for me to recoup the dent made in my father's finances. But the general inspector had other things, for he deployed me to the slums of Olocho to go and fight crime. Upon further inquiry, he bluntly told me to top up another two hundred thousand for the lucrative traffic police deployment. I could not even tell my father what was asked of me.

I set out to chase the bhang smokers and prostitutes of Olocho with a bitter vengeance. One day as I was walking through the Olocho playing field, which the local boys called *Estadio Olocho*, I heard a brave voice call me from a crowd of marijuana-smoking youth, "*afande niaje, nawezekucheki dakika jamo?*" It was rather bold of him to ask for an audience from me while smoking marijuana, but I had made it easy for them by accepting the weekly bribe to look the other way. At that spot in the playground where they smoked, they also sold their wares. I waited for the voice to arrive. And he shot straight to the issue at hand. That he had a gang, and the job was low because the officer who used to give them his tool had been transferred after impregnating several schoolgirls. That if I did not mind, I should fill the gap for handsome rewards per raid. That they raided weekly, and it was good business. He was prepared like a salesman, and

my desire to repay my father's kindness did the other part of the convincing. But I gave one feeble condition: no person should die during their operations. He laughed, and I did too, out of embarrassment at exposing my soft side. I told him to pick it up on Fridays and return it on Saturdays for the plan to work, to which he replied, "*Hio tunaelewa brathe. Hii ndenga ni ya gava, we ni kuibeba tu.*" I was relieved after knowing that I was dealing with an experienced hand. As we talked, he kept dragging heat from his smouldering bhang stick and exhaling strictly through the nostrils. I have never smoked bhang, but the smell of its' smoke has a tolerable touch to it that beats cigarettes hands down. Cigarette is just dirty dust to me. But bhang, now that is something a man should consider smoking if compelled to smoke something. After five minutes of talking, the deal was sealed with a hard man-to-man fist bump, *gota*.

The first Friday came, and at precisely 6:53 p.m., Kalizama took the tool for an essential operation in the leafy suburbs of Krena. My first job was to tell my colleagues on patrol duties to head in the opposite direction, the east side of Wacholo, and then conclude with a patrol in the Krena area. I succeeded in the mission, and the *Watatii Wanati Crew*, or *WWC* in short, did their work skillfully.

In the morning, an elderly couple whose grandfather had collaborated with the colonialists came to the station to report a robbery. I was at the station passing by when I heard of the unfortunate incident, which Constable Meu recorded diligently. They got assurance that no stone would be left unturned. They left while hopefully clutching the piece of paper with their occurrence book (O.B) number written on it. In the evening, I got back my gun, an envelope with thirty-five thousand shillings, and the cheeky remark from Kalizama: "*Hao mangati watajua hii nchi ni yetu wote mawe.*" He then left, bouncing into the darkness. I was in.

My father got to live a life he had dreamed of courtesy of his son. Work was good. My salary remained sitting in the bank until one day, I figured out that the nosy oversight authority would shine a torch on me and ask why I did not spend the meagre pay I was supposed to get for my upkeep. So, I started withdrawing at regular intervals to show the efforts

of an active user. But the nineteen thousand shillings was nothing compared to what my side business brought me. Kalizama and the boys did a fantastic job with my gun; each month, I always had a six-figure in my pockets. My father started calling me “my able son,” and I accepted. It was an automatic arrangement where Kalizama got the gun every Friday and returned it with the week’s pay — Business was flowing.

Grandpa had fought for the white man in Burma, and when he came back, he carried the stories with him. I found him at the tail end of his life, and when he was not hiding from imaginary bombs, he would always tell us, his grandchildren, how it was seeing the white man fall down dead just like any man. They saw how fragile the white man was despite lording it over them in the colonies. When he came back, he eagerly wanted his son to join the police force, but my father had broken his right leg when he fell from a sugarcane tractor in his teenage. Although his leg had eventually healed, its weakened state prevented him from being able to join the police.

The other sons had other things to do. They did not like the tag, “he who waits for death,” and others did not like the pay offered. But father had wanted it, maybe for his father, and so he wanted me to join the forces to appease the restless spirit of Kuga, the lion. I did not mind joining the police, especially propelled by the helping hand of a heavy bribe. In our country, some jobs require an upfront payment before you can begin working. And you don’t pay by preparation or discipline but by actual cash. It smoothes the process and propels the certificates to the necessary authority that stamps appointments. We accept. I joined the forces for many reasons, but looking back, I can say a lack of a clear goal or purpose in life played a big part in my decision to do what my father wanted. I found the discipline of training relatively rigid, but being a good learner. I adapted to the routines. The job was quite uneventful, and even the crime in Ocholo wasn’t particularly daunting.

Boredom also made life slow. What we had been told to be a crime in Ocholo was just young boys striving to be men, which is expected of boys with no plausible male mentorship. We did several raids, and in some

weeks, the crime was now restricted to the few robberies conducted in the affluent suburbs by the WWC. However, the officers at the station were often reluctant to assist them. They believed that since the wealthy already had private security, they should report any issues to their guards instead.

Being poor and being rich has a price. When the WWC approached me to become a business partner, my life in Ochole got a certain depth, a thrill that made me look forward to weekends. It was not the cash only but the chance to play a role only found in movies I used to watch at the Kulalu video halls when growing up — the role of a criminal syndicate mastermind, the man with the brains who, in the background, called the shots. And the shots I called with abandon. On Fridays, I felt powerful as I diverted officers away from our target areas and rented out my government-issued gun to complete a job elsewhere quickly. I was the boss of this show, and we rarely encountered any failures, although there were a few close calls due to spending too much time in the target zone. Nonetheless, my team always managed to emerge unscathed. Kalizama always led the operations with the gun I gave him and him only. And only Kalizama returned the gun with a summary of the task done.

Whenever I heard it being reported in the news of a raid in this or that area near the Ochole over the weekend, I would inwardly smile and thank the heavens for being part of such a thrill. What made me proud was that no one had been killed so far. It was always the older citizens with grown-up children in America and Europe who lost a small part of the limitless loot that got robbed, so it was not that bad. In a way, the boys were getting back what their parents had been too timid to demand some years and months after independence. We were doing some much-needed re-orientation of society as it should have been from the beginning but in a small way.

Any crime committed before weekends was a tainting stain on the WWC, and I always took it upon myself to ask Kalizama first if he had any clue who the imbeciles were. In most cases, he did not have a hint, and when he had one, I got my suspects to the cells in record time. This dissuaded any upcoming criminals from venturing into this monopolized

sector. The gun and I were on the public side since we were government-sanctioned and taxpayer-funded. At the same time, Kalizama and his boys were the private wing that brought to a conclusion the public-private-partnership or PPP that was becoming famous in our country as a mode of bringing service to the common citizen. Every ministry in the government was steeped deep in those PPPs and it was only fair that we, too, joined the bandwagon for our own good, just like the ministers. Unlike them, ours was unknown to the public, and we wanted it to remain so.

We were sailing on nicely in our venture. My house in the village was in the finishing stages and I was super proud driving there on Sundays to check on the progress made by the *fundis*. It was something someone in the service would not dream of without some blood-sucking loan from the banks in our country. My father had remained alone since my sisters, Janet and Jane, had left home to be married. He had lost our mother more than a decade ago and vowed not to remarry as he was tired. When Kalizama came into my life, my father stopped being tired. He acquired a motorcycle for himself that he used to go on long trips. He toured the sides of the areas around our village. I was a happy son seeing my father share pictures of his adventures on social media with clever captions and hashtags. *Aki*, you money. They say money is the soap that washes suffering from the heart and I agree. To make my sisters stable and respected in their marriages, I opened a business venture for each of them that she wanted, and with that, their husbands both respected and feared me. From then on, they called me *mbesh* despite my being younger than them. No finger was ever laid on Jane by her husband again since that day when I had come with my gun to officially open the boutique shop she had told me to finance. I was the small brother with big things. I was running things as a man should. Three years into our partnership, one woman was already chasing me to care for the baby we had sired. Even if the boy looked nothing like me, I obliged and opened a shop for her to stop nagging me because the money was there.

Only now was Kalizama threatening to burst the bubble. If only I had finished the house in the village, I would have found for myself one of those naïve village girls called *kienyeji* and married her immediately and installed her there as my wife. I was growing restless by day as the gang escalated its operations into the homes of noted government officials. They had robbed the house of a sitting CS and the criminal investigators were on the ground sniffing with their dogs. But the bullets were our salvation, for they did not show where they had been procured. That was three weeks to this weekend. And the gang had gone on a hiatus to beat off the traps laid for them by the detectives.

Kalizama was a master tactician. He would instruct the boys to lie low for even a month as he sought to find out how much the investigators knew and from which source. They would lie low or masterfully, yet strike in a corner of the county that had been left exposed by the concentration of detectives in that previous crime scene. This disordered the detectives, who now had to shift focus to more than one place — a force divided is a force ineffective. They would change tact too; if they had attacked with knives here, they would attack with several toy guns and a real one (mine, of course) and shoot in the air to confirm their seriousness. In some places, they did not take anything; in others, they took only cattle and yet, in most places, they took every coin they could lay their hands on, even in the ones stashed in mobile phone accounts. And we grew up together. Kalizama would tell me the secrets of the men I worked with at the station, showing me the snakes I was working with. The fact that each one had his own illegal source of income to supplement their meagre income killed the last shred of conscience that had remained in me.

That Sunday, I went to witness the roofing of my village house—a bungalow, in fact. It was drizzling, and the ride was slow. Somehow, I was pensive because my gun had not been returned, as agreed. I was worried about the turn of events. What bothered me was that I was in the dark. Inwardly, I told myself that once Kalizama returned the gun, I would stop this dangerous game and focus on legitimate business.

When returning from the village, the road was muddy, and I had to drive even more slowly. It was a hard drive for me as the car kept on skidding on the road's surface. Ahead of me, I saw the unmistakable Subaru that the criminal investigators of our country commonly drive. The focus on driving did not give me time to think, but I finally understood when the car slowed down and out came the men in plain clothes. They had come for me. The chicken had come home to roost.

“The grandmaster of crime, the hyena in sheep skin, your able servant Kalizama, has drowned at last. And your gun was lying at the crime scene.” Hearing those words, I only regretted not finishing my village house on time and marrying a naïve village. Now, she should even be carrying my child in her. At least I can say I left my father and sisters something for lean times, which is something in this country.

But this is Kenya, and Kenya is our business. The worst did not happen as I envisaged. I visualized a cell and a long life behind bars, but the sleuths and my bosses had other ideas. They covered it up so well. As I tell you this, I am in the South on redeployment. Here, there is no Kalizama to supplement my earnings. And I am waiting to finish my house so that I can get married.

Glossary

Afande niaje nawezakucheki dakika jamo — hallo officer can I see you for a minute.

Hio tunaelewa brathe. Hii ndenga ni ya gava, we ni kuibeba tu – we understand that this gun is the government's, you are just a carrier.

Hao mangati watajua hii nchi ni yetu wote maze – those home guards must know that this country is for all, man.

Mhesh – the short form of Swahili word *mheshimiwa* to mean honourable.

Fundis – builders of all kinds, in this case, house builders.

Kienyeji – traditional, but in this context, it means naïve.

I Am The Future

Benedicta Chiwendu (Nigeria)

Dedication

To every African child living in the slum, we have been made to believe that Africa has nothing to offer us. However, you are a seed and evidence that the future is green.

Chapter One

The sound of Kalangu drums, flutes, trumpets, and horns enveloped the atmosphere. “*Yi bakuri Mama.*” Papa Ogoja turned to apologize to an elderly Hausa woman he collided with as he pressed through the excited crowd to get to Oga Uche’s door. He was greeted by a young girl carrying a wide tray pan filled with oranges on her head. Finding her way through the crowd out of the compound, he patted her on the back after they had had a brief conversation, and he looked around, then found a small wooden stool to sit on.

It’s an old-storey building with cracked walls, weathering paint, wooden doors, and grimy windows, somehow dilapidated as if buried away from civilization. The way the building stood, it was easy to convince anyone that a giant had sat on the roof before. A tall, broad-shouldered, ageing man came out from a house detached from the main building, which is most likely the communal toilet and bathroom all occupants of the building share.

“Ah-ah, papa Ogoja!” Oga Uche screamed in surprise, walking towards where his guest was seated.

“You didn’t tell me you would be coming around for me to prepare kola and groundnut,” he said with a childish grin, wiping the back of his hands on the wrapper tied around his waist.

“My brother, don’t worry about kola. By the way, I just saw your daughter, Ada. She is now a big girl o. The last time I saw her was four years ago, and just look at her now, a woman already,” Papa Ogoja said to his friend, extending his hand to receive his handshake.

“We thank God, my brother.”

Papa Ogoja’s eyes roamed around the compound again. His gaze settled on a group of women covered in veils. They were using long and hollow calabashes to strike against their thighs, producing distinct thumping sounds and tapping with their fingers to make light clinking sounds, all making merry.

“Oga Uche, what is the celebration all about?”

“My landlord’s daughter is getting married, my brother.”

“Ah-ah, I thought he had given out all his daughters except little Aisha?” The bewilderment on his face was mixed with curiosity.

“It is the little Aisha that is getting married today,” Oga Uche replied, dragging a bench to where Papa Ogoja was sitting.

“You mean she has grown that big, wonderful! If Aisha is now a married woman, it means I am a very old man,” Papa Ogoja chuckled.

“Aisha is just seventeen, still very young and naïve. She is being given out in marriage to that Musa boy that sells *shayi* (tea) at the junction close to where Nkarishor, your son, learned mechanic...,” he paused to attend to a half-naked, crying child, helping him fix his paper kite and tighten the string, and turned back to his guest.

“My brother, this is my last child. He is very smart and active like his father. He is just four years old but acts like he is forty-five,” he said as he gave back the kite to the child and sent him away.

“Oga Uche, Oga Uche, when will you rest? Okay, this child you introduced to me now, is he the last of the second or the last of the third batch of children? I remembered the last time I visited, you introduced

me to your eleventh child, so where did this one come from?" Papa Ogoja asked with disgust clearly expressed on his face.

"I am a man; don't speak to me as if you're speaking to a boy. I take care of my children. Seven of my eldest children have finished secondary school, and the boys are learning trade while the girls will soon be married; I am a successful father," Oga Uche barked at his friend in an attempt to defend his deeply hidden masculine ego.

"Calm down, my friend; I have not come to make a quarrel with you. You know why I am here," Papa Ogoja retreated politely to restore sanity to the moment.

Oga Uche took a deep breath and lowered his head, covering his face with his palms as though he was about to pray. Both men sat in silence, avoiding eye contact with each other. Just then, the bride appeared, elegantly adorned with jewellery, and the crowd's cheers grew louder, accentuating the silence between the two men.

The gate of a mosque swung open. Groups of small children spilt out onto the dusty street, chattering and each clutching a book to their chest. The street was dominated by mechanic workshops, barbershops, and provision stores, contributing to the noisy atmosphere. The untarred road was damaged by animal dung and plastic waste, making it necessary to walk with caution. Electric cables cascaded down haphazardly, barely above human heads in a street packed with busy, hardworking people. "Have you told her?" Abdul's friend asked him in a sharp and highly excited tone, though half expecting an answer to his question.

"I didn't," Abdul replied absent-mindedly.

"You got scared?" he asked him another question sarcastically.

"Please leave me alone. I'm not in the mood right now," Abdul waved off the question.

"And what were you two talking about when I saw you yesterday in class after school?" he pressed on.

“Normal talk; we were just talking about the Intro-tech assignment, nothing more; moreover, love is not for children.”

“Moreover, love is not for children,” he humorously mimicked Abdul. “Just say you are not bold enough and stop defending yourself. I know you like her,” he said, teasing Abdul, then paused when he saw the worry on his friend’s face. “Abdul, what is the problem?” he asked with friendly concern.

“My father said he can no longer pay my school fees, that since I’m fifteen, I am a man now, and I should be able to help meet some family needs,” Abdul finally said.

“We are already in SS1, two years and we’re done with secondary school. Talk to him. At least let him let you finish,” Abdul’s friend’s voice was soft now, as if his heart was breaking.

Abdul noticed the sadness in his friend’s voice and regretted saying what he said. He wished he could take it back. He hated being pitied; he believed pity was for people with disabilities, and he was not disabled. He is only unfortunate, unlike other kids whose parents give them the liberty to dream for themselves and live a life of their own making. He has no life of his own. What he wants does not even mean a worthless kobo to his father, but he has been living out his father’s dreams since childhood. Perhaps that makes him a good boy in the eyes of his father. He turned around and his eyes locked with his friend’s; just then, the weight of his shame fell upon his shoulders, and he scoffed at his inability to carry his guilt. Maybe he was disabled. Perhaps he needed pity too. The more he thought about his situation and that of his family, the more his chest tightened.

“Sophia is a Christian, and I am a Muslim, so I can’t tell her I like her because we don’t have the same religious background. I don’t even think our parents would give consent to our friendship,” Abdul said to lighten the intensity of the moment, but his friend only responded with a weak smile, which was a sign that he was no longer interested in his silly talk about girls anymore.

The setting sun reflected on the grimy glass windows of the dilapidated story building in shades of fading red and orange glow, which could make an observer think he is being watched through the bloodshot eyes of an evil old man.

The skunk smell of cannabis drifted through the cool evening air into Oga Uche's room, where he was counting some naira notes.

"These fools have started again. I wonder why Baba Landlord still keeps them in this compound. One cannot get good air in his house because of some useless neighbours," Oga Uche hissed and cursed. Just then, Ada walked in with a tray half full of oranges.

"Daddy, good evening. I thought I heard you talking to somebody," she asked with a child's curiosity.

"*Nabata mwa'm* (welcome my child), it is these boys that live next door. They have started smoking marijuana again. By the way, Ada, I saw you talking to one yesterday; what were you discussing?" he asked with keen interest, raising his head to look at her for the first time since she had walked in.

"He was asking me if I was the one who used the water in his bucket," she replied without hesitation, then sat down on the floor to count the oranges she came home with.

"You didn't make many sales today. Where is your mother?" Oga Uche asked his daughter with his eyes fixed on her tray. He watched her count the oranges and started counting the money she made from her sales.

"I don't want to see you close to those boys. Ada, I hope you are listening to me; they are useless. I would rather prefer God make me impotent than father such boys," he continued cursing after giving Ada a stern warning.

"Ok, sir, mummy said I should tell you she would be coming home late today. She went to see the pastor," Ada replied, not minding her father's bad mood.

“Pastor again? This woman will never listen to me. That is how she would be taking money and food to church all the time, sowing seed and offering, and the pastor would be getting fat while we barely have enough to manage with,” he fumed.

“Daddy mummy does not take any money to church. As a matter of fact, Pastor just helped her secure a job in the bank, and she went to thank him,” she quickly added with her voice full of excitement.

“What kind of job is that?” he asked, finally paying her undivided attention.

“Office cleaner,” she said eagerly.

“Office cleaner,” Oga Uche repeated, then let out a long yawn.

“*E-hen* Daddy, I saw your friend Papa Ogoja. He said I should tell you that you should not forget you agreed on the weekend, that he does not want any more excuses,” she delivered the message to her father with a sad voice, wondering when her father would stop being harassed by his creditors.

“Ahamefuna Njokwu,” Mr Bassey’s clear voice called out.

“Present, sir,” a girl’s voice answered.

“Abimbola Adepoju.”

“Present, sir,” answered another student from the back.

“Anna Ejiro.”

“Present, sir,” another girl’s voice rang out.

“Abdul Muktar,” there was no answer.

“Abdul Muktar,” Mr Bassey called out again.

“Absent, sir,” answered the girl occupying the front desk.

Mr Bassey called out two more names, paused, and turned to the class.

“Does anybody know the reason for Abdul’s absence from class for three days now?” he asked intently.

His question was met with the blank stare of students, each turning around to look at the other. He studied their faces for a while and then called out students' names to mark his class register.

"Ah, you are highly welcome, teacher. Abdul, come and welcome your teacher," the voice of Abdul's father rang through the house as he stood up to clear some clothes from a chair in the living room for his guest to sit down.

"Thank you, sir," Mr Bassey appreciated as he sat on the space created for him. The house was sparsely furnished, but the paintings and artwork hung on one side of the house carried him away. He was still admiring the portrait of Muhammad, who, according to Islamic doctrine, was a prophet sent to preach by Allah, the creator, when Abdul walked in to greet him.

"Good evening Mr Bassey."

"Evening Abdul, I noticed your incessant absence in school for some days. That is why I am here; I hope it is well," Mr Bassey stated the purpose of his visit without wasting much time.

Abdul nervously fiddled with his fingers as he searched for what to say.

"Ehm...teacher, thank you for coming, but my son Abdul is not coming to school again. He has come of age and should be helping me in my vegetable business. He is the firstborn of my six children, and you know what that means. As his father, I am responsible for teaching him how to handle financial pressure and adult responsibilities," Abdul's father broke the long silence.

"Sir, did you say adult responsibilities?" Mr Bassey asked with widened eyes, barely believing what he had just heard.

"Yes, Abdul is fifteen already. I was not even seven when I joined my father's vegetable business. Look at me today; I have a wife and six children depending on me. This business has been helping me," he explained to the bewildered teacher.

Mr Bassey hesitated for a while, then nodded.

“If I followed you well, you have been a vegetable farmer all your life, and you have not yet attained the standard of living you want, and now you are withdrawing your son from school to join you in the business that can barely sustain you. With due respect, sir, can I ask you a question?” Mr Bassey paused to observe the elderly man’s face. He then continued when he saw he was listening to him.

“What kind of life do you want for your boy, Abdul? Has it ever occurred to you that withdrawing him from school would make him end up just like you?” Mr Bassey asked.

“Are you here to insult me?” the elderly man asked, and Mr Bassey could feel the infant anger emitting from him.

“No, sir, you have to calm down and hear me out,” he pleaded. “All I am saying is, this is the business your father did and died with nothing to show. It is the same business you are doing and have not achieved much from, and now you are withdrawing Abdul from school to do the same business. What kind of life do you want for him? Are you trying to give him a future better than yours or a future like yours? Sir, all I ask is that you give your son a chance to dream beyond the reality he was born into. I know education is not a poverty escape route, considering the country’s unemployment rate, but education is the process where the mind is enlightened. If we say we desire the best for our children, we must let education shed its light on their minds and emancipate them from the darkness of ignorance. Abdul has to return to school, sir,” he spoke calmly, his voice full of passion.

A hush came over the house. The golden silence can only be compared to the silence that dominates the solemnity of Roman Catholic mass at the point where the people stop to recall and confess their sins to observe the penitential rite.

“All I am saying is that if her elder ones didn’t go to university, she is also not going. You want Ada to go to the university because she said she wants to become a nurse, then is it me, Oga Uche, that would be hawking oranges in the streets of Lagos for you?” Oga Uche asked his wife.

“The way you are going about this is making a simple matter look complicated. Of all our children, you and I know that Ada is the only one interested in school. Since the others graduated from secondary school, have they ever mentioned that they want to further their education? My husband, this girl, is interested in school, and the only thing we can do is support her. If it works for her, fine. If it doesn’t, fine. At least let it be that we did all we could to see her through,” Mama Ada tried convincing her adamant husband.

“Okay now, even if I say let her go to school, who would pay for tuition because I cannot do more than I can?” he asked his wife with a voice of concern.

Mama Ada searched her purse and brought out a contribution card to show her husband.

“I have some savings, and I also picked up a job as an office cleaner in a bank, so money cannot limit how far our daughter can go. When she starts making money, she will remember our sacrifices, and we are still the ones who would enjoy her good fortune,” Mama Ada said, trying to tease her husband.

“Okay, she will go to the university,” he finally agreed. Ada, who had been eavesdropping on their conversation, became very excited.

She heard the sound of footsteps and hurriedly ran out before she got caught. The night was cold but good for Ada because her excitement knew no bounds. She remembered her teacher’s remark on her previous term result sheet: “The sky is your limit.” She looked up at the black inky canopy dotted by vibrant stars and wondered why the moon was much bigger than the stars. Her mum would always say there is space for everyone to shine, that the moon is big enough does not mean the stars are useless, and that is why the good Lord created enough space in the

sky. In the same way, the moon has a place, and the stars have their place, too.

“There is a place for me in this world because the world is big enough,” Ada said to herself and continued rinsing oranges for tomorrow’s sales so that she would not have to do it tomorrow morning to avoid going to school late.

“What is the noise all about? The three of you there stand up!” Mr Bassey ordered Ada and her friends.

“This is a classroom and not a marketplace, so you should not disturb the serenity of the atmosphere,” he added.

“We are sorry, sir. I was only explaining to them that medicine is the best profession, and they started arguing with me,” Ada explained in defiance.

Mr Bassey looked at the three girls and shook his head.

“First of all, Ada, no profession doesn’t need the other. We are all part of each other. It is just like the human body. The legs cannot say they are more important than the eyes; neither can the eyes say they are more important than the fingers. They all need each other to function effectively.”

“Yes, sir, I understand better now. No profession should be placed above the other,” Ada apologized.

“Yes, Abdul, do you have anything to say?” he turned to Abdul, who lifted his right hand.

“Yes, sir, I want to quote Martin Luther King Jr., who said if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, “Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.” Abdul said.

“That’s beautiful, Abdul, but I hope you are not planning to become a street sweeper,” Mr Bassey joked, and the entire class laughed.

Kalimba The Village Liar

Nkono Yeeko (Uganda)

Right from when he was a young boy, Kalimba never told the truth. All he did was tell lies. He used to lie to adults and fellow young children. He would lie even for the slightest reason. Everyone used to wonder why such a young child would lie. Kalimba only told the truth by mistake. “Lying will one day land you into serious problems, my son,” his mother warned him worriedly. Several times, she advised him to stop lying. On some days, she would spank him for not telling the truth. But Kalimba never dropped the bad habit.

Twenty years later, Kalimba continued enjoying his evil habit of lying to the entire village. To him, lying and fooling people was a source of fun. He would lie to people and land them in trouble. And then he would laugh and laugh and laugh. The entire village of Kaako hated him for lying. His tricky and dramatic lying always made people think he was telling the truth. It would tempt them into believing him and then land them in trouble.

One evening, old Tondo was coming from the well, carrying water in her precious pot, which was given to her by the Kyabazinga, the king of Busoga, when she was still young. She had won it as a prize for her great dancing prowess. When Kalimba saw her from a distance, he removed his belt and put it across the grassy path she was using. It was a long black belt. He then hid in the bush under the Mutuba tree and quietly waited for her. “I am going to have fun,” he said to himself as he anxiously waited for Tondo to reach the belt lying across the path.

After a while, Old Tondo appeared carrying her pot while singing songs of the olden days. These are the songs that gave her company. With

the pot on her head, she slowly walked with support from her walking stick. Old age had bent her back. Just by looking at her, you could tell that she was struggling to carry the pot of water. Old Tondo walked even slower when she reached the Mutuba tree. She liked its shade and the cool breeze under it.

“Old woman! You have stepped on a snake,” shouted Kalimba, as he suddenly jumped into the path from the bush where he was hiding.

He was as loud as the First World War guns and sounded as serious as a sensible adult.

Old Tondo was too scared that she jumped like a young girl. The only thing she had on her mind was to dodge being bitten by the snake. At that moment, it never crossed her that she was carrying a clay pot, which she treasured as her most precious item. She fell flat along the path. Her precious pot fell right next to her, breaking into as many pieces as one can imagine. While she lay flat on the ground, Old Tondo felt a very sharp pain in her leg. But she was more worried about her pot than her leg.

“*Katonda wange onkozeeki kino!*”—“What have you done to me, my God!” cried out Old Tondo.

She couldn’t believe her pot was no more. The pot that always reminded her of her maiden days when the entire village envied her for her outstanding dancing skills.

Kalimba was so excited by how Old Tondo acted and fell just because of a belt. You would think he had won the lottery! He laughed and laughed and laughed. Kalimba laughed until tears emerged from his eyes. The happiness was so much that he sat down in amusement. “How can an old woman fear a belt like that!” he mocked Old Tondo as he picked up his belt. Old Tondo was now lying in a pool of water that had burst out of her broken pot.

Old Tondo sat down in pain and anger after realizing that Kalimba, the prominent liar, had fooled her. She could not hold her tears as she looked at the pieces of the precious pot she had carefully kept for decades. “I wish lightning would strike you right now!” Old Tondo angrily said to

Kalimba as she reached for her *gomesi* to wipe away her tears. She tried to beat him with her walking stick, but he was out of reach. The more she cried, the more he laughed because she looked funnier every time she wept. “One day, your laughter will turn into tears because of lying,” she pitied Kalimba. “Laugh and laugh, but the gods of our land will punish you one day!” Old Tondo cursed him as she collected the pieces of her broken pot. Painfully, she walked to her hut just a short distance away. She was so heartbroken because a man young enough to be her grandson had fooled her, making her break her pot and injure her leg.

One month later, Kalimba met Mbala, who was carrying a huge sack of fruits. Mbala was the village protector. He used to watch over the sacred tree in the middle of the village. It was the tree of *Nkuni*—the god of their land. The sacred tree had juicy-looking fruits, but no one was allowed to eat them. It was an abomination. So, every season, Mbala watched over the sacred tree to ensure no one climbed it or ate its fruits, especially the young children who never knew much about *Nkuni*.

“What are you carrying this early morning?” Kalimba asked Mbala.

“I have harvested the fruits of the sacred tree. I am taking them miles away in the forest where no one can find them,” answered Mbala.

Quickly, Kalimba planned how to get some fruits from Mbala.

“This is the chance I have to taste these fruits,” he thought.

He wondered how everyone believed the tree in the middle of the village was sacred and they forbade eating its fruits.

“But why did you leave some fruits on the tree?” Kalimba lied to Mbala.

He assured him that some fruits remained on the sacred tree. Even when Mbala emphasized that he had picked all the sacred fruits, Kalimba insisted he had just seen some fruits left on the tree. So, Mbala requested him to keep the fruits in the sack because they were too heavy to carry back to the sacred tree. So, he chose to run back to pick the remaining fruits as Kalimba kept the sack of the sacred fruits for him.

As soon as Mbala left, Kalimba picked two fruits from the sack. He hid them in the nearby yam plantation just under the Muvule tree. His

heart was filled with joy because his plan had worked out perfectly. He carefully tied the sack just like Mbala had left it. Soon, Mbala returned, panting and angry.

“Why did you lie to me, you village liar?” he angrily asked Kalimba as he reached for his breath.

As usual, Kalimba laughed and laughed and laughed. To him, Mbala looked funnier every time he panted while sweating. He also couldn’t imagine that he had believed such a simple lie. Mbala was so disappointed that Kalimba was wasting his time.

“Never waste my time again. I would have been very far by now,” Mbala warned him as he picked up his sack of fruits to continue his journey.

As soon as Mbala left, Kalimba went to the yam plantation where he had hidden the two sacred fruits. He sat down and took a bite from the first fruit. It was sweeter than honey. The fruit dripped with juice every time he took a bite. They had a scent like that of fresh cookies out of the oven. He regretted having taken only two fruits.

“I now understand why they don’t allow anyone to eat these fruits,” he said to himself as he licked the juice from his elbow.

He suspected the elders of the village to be selling those sacred fruits expensively through Mbala. The fruits were too nice for them to throw them away like that.

As Kalimba was still meditating upon the sweetness of the fruits, a cool breeze blew through the yam plantation. The wind was so nice that it soothed him to sleep against the trunk of the Muvule tree. In no time, he slept like a baby. You could think he was in a well-laid bed. It was hard to believe that someone could sleep outside early in the morning. He slept and slept and slept.

By the time he woke up, it was already midday. Surprisingly, he woke up to the horror of his tongue hanging out of his mouth. It was longer than that of a chameleon. At first, he thought it was just a dream. He slapped himself on the cheek to confirm that he was not daydreaming. Then he touched his hanging tongue.

“I am not dreaming!” he realised.

Kalimba wondered how his tongue could hang out up to the navel. He tried to shout for help, but his voice could not go any farther with a hanging tongue. He was so scared. Saliva was flowing out of his mouth without control. He did not know what to do. He thought of how he would reach home with a hanging tongue.

What will I tell the people? He asked himself.

After endless hours of thinking, Kalimba walked home to his mother, who was now too old. It was a long distance away. As he walked, he believed he was slowly becoming a monster. He could not hold his tears whenever he looked at his tongue hanging like a necktie. Along the way, he met the little girls he once tricked into being stung by wasps when he told them they were harmless. When they saw him, they laughed and laughed and laughed. The excitement was so much that they even sat on the ground laughing. Laughter brought tears out of their eyes.

Kalimba reached home while crying and exhausted. He narrated to his old mother all that had happened. His mother reminded him of how she always warned him against lying.

“I told you lying would one day land you in trouble, but you never listened,” she pitifully reminded him.

For days, word went around the village about how the tongue of Kalimba, the prominent liar, hung out of the mouth. Everyone wanted to see him. People could never hold back their laughter every time they set their eyes on him. Kalimba had lied to almost everybody in Kaako village. So, laughing at him felt like payback time.

After weeks of searching for help, Kalimba’s mother was told that it’s only the old woman at the end of the village who could heal her son from the curse of the gods. She was so relieved to hear that her son had a chance of having the hanging tongue restored. When Kalimba heard the good news, he was so excited. He was finally going to look right again. It was time to put an end to the shame he was going through. That evening, they went to bed early because they had to wake up early for the journey

to the old medicine woman who was to heal Kalimba. The journey they were to walk was too long.

The following morning, Kalimba and his old mother embarked on the journey to the end of the village. As they walked, Kalimba remembered all the people he had lied to. Every lie he had told crossed his mind. He heard the voices of all the people whom he made to cry. He regretted why he never listened to his mother. He got visions of the crying faces of all his victims. It was so disturbing. He was so bothered that he wanted to undo everything he had done, but it was too late. He wished he could call the entire village and apologize, but that would not take away the pain he had caused them by fooling them for years. Kalimba and his mother never spoke a word throughout the whole journey.

After long hours of walking, they reached the old woman's hut at the extreme end of Kaako village, exhausted and hungry. But all they needed was to take the curse of the gods away from Kalimba. The old woman was inside the hut doing her chores. After calling her several times, she came out to meet her visitors. Her back was bent, and she limped even with the support of her walking stick. When Kalimba set his eyes on her, he immediately recognized her as Old Tondo, the woman he had disgraced. He wished the ground would swallow him. Filled with fear and hopelessness, he fell to his knees and wept. He remembered how he laughed at her as she cried for her broken pot and injured leg.

Old Tondo also broke into tears upon seeing him. He reminded her of her precious broken pot. She recalled how that young man embarrassed her and laughed at her. She slowly supported herself with her walking stick and walked back into the house. She brought the broken pieces of her pot and threw them before him.

"This was my precious pot that broke the day you fooled me with your belt as a snake," she said to him.

"Remember, I told you that the gods of our land will punish you for lying and fooling people," she added.

It was clear that the gods were punishing Kalimba.

Kalimba's mother begged her to forgive her son and heal him from the curse of the gods. She reminded her how they grew up together. They recalled their maiden days when they were outstanding dancers. They were once great friends as well until they separated after marrying.

After a long silence, Old Tondo murmured, "I have forgiven your son."

Hearing that relieved both Kalimba and his mother. They thanked her for having a heart kind enough to forgive them. Kalimba promised never to lie again. He had learnt his lesson the hard way.

"Please, heal my son of the curse from the gods. He ate the sacred fruits and angered Nkuni, our god," Kalimba's mother requested Old Tondo.

Kalimba was now as quiet as a grave, anxiously awaiting medicine and healing. He was truly sorry and was ready to start a new life as a good man.

"I cannot heal your son," Old Tondo answered.

They suspected she had not genuinely forgiven him. Kalimba thought she was trying to revenge for what he did to her. He thought she lied when she said that she had forgiven him.

"If only you had come on the day he ate the sacred fruit, I would have been able to heal him." Old Tondo explained.

She told them that her medicine could not work unless they applied it on the day one ate the forbidden fruit, but it was too late. It was over two weeks since Kalimba ate the sacred fruits. And it was, therefore, impossible to get the curse of the gods off Kalimba.

Kalimba and his mother completely lost hope. They broke into tears. Kalimba wept and wept and wept. Old Tondo wished she had another way to help. But it was impossible. That's how Kalimba remained with a tongue hanging out of his mouth because of lying. To this date, when people see Kalimba, they never fail to laugh at his hanging tongue.

The World Outside Is Cold

Akoth Opiyo (Kenya)

During those days, people were trying hard to adapt to civilization, especially those living in suburban areas. People sent their children to schools. The schools were built in far places, so if one was from far, they had to wake up before the cock crow to start the journey to school. Not everyone enjoyed going to school. Some dropped out of school, and most girls were being abducted on their way to school for forced marriages. I was lucky to have reached standard seven before I got married off to Musa.

During those days, Tanganyika was believed to be the wealthiest country ever. Men from my village spent their entire time discussing how to obtain wealth from Tanganyika. Chief Ogoye's home was the meeting point. At daybreak, men would wake up early and walk to the Chief's homestead while bathing their feet with dew. Chief Ogoye gathered news from various people who traded within the borders of Kenya and Tanganyika. He was the only chief in the area who believed Western culture greatly impacted black people. After independence, the British vacated the land, but some remained. The native people found freedom of movement, most adventuring new lands in Tanganyika. Some were believed to have gone before the independence to help the People of Tanganyika fight the Germans but never returned.

That evening, when dusk had fallen, my husband came home restless. He was from Chief Ogoye's home. I was at the corner, sitting on a woven mat wrapped up in the heavy shawl he had bought me from a trader. It was cold, and I rubbed my palms occasionally crooning sentimentally.

“It’s time; let’s go,” he said restlessly, reaching for his goatskin bag.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“Just pack your things! You don’t need to carry everything—just a few clothes. Don’t forget to wear a coat; the outside world is cold, and it seems it will be colder,” he shouted.

“But where are we going exactly? It’s already dark, and I don’t think I will manage to walk in the darkness. The path is full of potholes. Besides, I am pregnant, and the midwife said I should be more careful,” I lamented.

“Let’s go. I will hold your hands,” He held my hands, dragging me out.

The moon was in an unusual posture. A sign that misfortune was on its way coming. From afar, we could hear whispers and footsteps. Wild dogs cried, instilling fear in me, and the cold wind ran through my veins, making my fingers numb. Musa held my hand tightly like a poor child led out of a burning forest. Once in a while, he looked at me with promising eyes that seemed to tell me it would be fine. We raced along the lonely path with our mouths shut, but then I felt like a cow blindly being led to a slaughterhouse.

“Musa, I am afraid. Take me back home,” I cried.

“Shhhhhh, they will hear us. This place isn’t safe; we need to hurry up,” he whispered.

The wind was swirling so high. The cries of wild dogs stopped, and the only thing that came to our ears was the hooting of owls. I was tense with fear and worry. From a distance, dim lights could be seen.

“Listen, my love. I am sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I am taking you to live in the church. Many other women like you have been staying there for many months. Their husbands had gone to search for wealth in Tanganyika. I know you are almost delivering the child, but I promise

once I get the land, I will come and fetch you. I had talked to the priest earlier,” he explained.

“But Musa, why do you want to go to Tanganyika? You can still make wealth here. We will make a good family, and you will be a good father,” I said.

“I know that, my love, but getting land there is very easy. I had communicated with some of our people who already have homes there. Do you remember Mayaka? I sent him a letter two days ago. I managed to find a messenger along the border. He was a trader. I got his reply this evening. It won’t take long before I get the land and build a small, beautiful home for us. Promise you won’t get tired of waiting for me. I am doing this for you, for me, and for our baby.”

I was lost in thoughts. We hurriedly walked down the path, and within no minute, we reached the church gate and stopped. The church’s compound was full of serenity. Almost everyone was sound asleep.

“I am making a stop here. You now need to go. I had talked to the priest. He knows you very well. I will start the journey at daybreak. Take care. I love you,” he walked away.

He gave me a tight hug. I drew an audible shuddery breath, and everything was like a dream to me. I wanted to run after him, but my belly was heavy. I wanted to cry, but my voice was vague. I watched him ebb in the darkness, and at that moment, someone appeared from the backyard and called out.

“Who is there?” he shouted.

“It’s me, Musa’s wife,” I replied, my hands shaking. “He said the priest is aware of my stay here tonight and maybe for the rest of the days.”

“Oh, Veronica, push the gate and be careful. I am the priest,” he said to me.

He led me into a hut, and a certain woman spread the mat and gave me a blanket. I hardly slept that night.

Life in the church was nice and boring, but I got used to it. Women wore long dresses, and the few men who were around wore big caftans.

Thirteen months had passed, and yet I received no word from Musa. I waited day and night, but there was no sign that he would return. Among the women in the church, I was the only one with the hope that my husband would return. The rest of the women had lost hope. In fact, some disappeared, and some even found other men from the neighbouring villages to marry them without the priest's consent. I remained faithful to my husband even though there was an elephant of distance and silence between us.

My son, now ten months old, had feeble legs and would reach for anything to provide support. He reassembled his father and smiled elegantly with youthful bravura. He was the source of my Felicity. He was handsome like his father and loved by many in the church compound. Sometimes, I would leave him with the older children whenever the priest requested that we work on the vegetable farm. The church was our new home.

The church was established not so many years ago when the English priests landed on the outskirts of the area to spread the gospel of God. The church was established to provide shelter for the less fortunate, like orphans, widows, and women who ran away from their abusive husbands to seek help.

Father Benedict, who was mostly called Father Benedictus, was one of the English priests present at the beginning of the establishment of the church. He later travelled back to England after the church was fully stable. It was rumoured that he went to the England Missionary Church Headquarters to submit the reports. He Left Priest Ephraim, Sister Violet and Sister Judith in charge, with the help of other native men and women who gave their lives to God.

One morning when the rising sun cast a rosy hue across the morning sky, shining softly across the village, bringing with it a flurry of early-morning activities, we were out preparing the day's meal. Toddlers moved

around crying to be breastfed. The older children helped draw water from the well, and the men were busy building a new hut.

We were busy peeling potatoes with our mouths shut. No one talked. It seemed we all had a bad night, and no one wanted to talk about it. I then suddenly cracked a joke.

“Look at your husbands. At long last, they are coming back home,” I said, smiling.

They both looked up, ready to run to embrace them. But it was all a lie.

“You know what!? I almost jumped up going to embrace my husband,” said a woman called Grace. We both laughed.

“I wanted to run and slap him on the face and ask him why he abandoned us all these days,” said another.

We both laughed and went back to work. It was fun and joyful. We hardly remembered our sorrows. We found a new family and a new home in the name of Jesus Christ. The priest would say that whenever he convened us for a short prayer. We left the memories we had along the way and were busy making new memories for the future. We lost hope in meeting our beloved men who maybe were already dead or married to Tanganyika women.

Food was not a problem. There was plenty of food. The church also got funds from England. Several huts were built, making the place more than a home.

One night, I was out watching the stars in the cold. It was not past midnight yet, but almost everyone in the compound was asleep. Priest Ephraim came out to ensure that the gate was locked. He saw me and came straight to me.

“Veronica, what are you doing out at this hour?” he asked.

“Just taking fresh air,” I replied in my native accent.

“Is it not cold out here?” he asked again.

“It’s always cold. There is no warm place on this earth,” I said.

“You must have had a hard time since your husband left, right?” he asked.

“Yes, I should go inside now, priest. Let’s talk tomorrow before the midday prayers in case you need my help with anything,” I said, walking away.

“Yeah, sure, sleep well,” he said, walking away.

It had been five years since Musa had left, and many things had left my heart broken during that time. Priest Ephraim died out of malaria, and that was a great demise. Sister Violet and Sister Judith went back to England, and new priests and sisters came: Priest Paul, Sister Sarah and Sister Mercy. We worked together in faith and prayers. Many women left with their kids to find new husbands. My in-laws had died before Musa married me. My parents, too, died earlier due to the cholera outbreak, so I had nowhere to go. My son, who was now five years old, tried hard to master the Lord’s Prayer. He had already started going to nursery school, which was managed by the sisters and some of the women who trained as teachers at Missionary College. I learned to tailor, and most of the time, I mend clothes for people around.

The dappled sun shone through the trees, creating mysterious shadows. Specks of dust seemed to dance in the shafts of afternoon sunlight that slanted through the window. I sat under the mango tree, watching the butterflies fly from flower to flower. From afar, a man with unkempt hair was coming dressed in a white shirt, black trousers and brown sandals. He pushed the gate and found his way into the church compound. He came straight to me.

“Good day, ma’am,” he greeted me.

“Good day, too,” I replied. “How can I help you?”

“I am looking for a priest called Ephraim. I have a message for him from Tanganyika,” he explained.

“Who are you?”

“I am Mayaka. I used to live in this village before I moved to Tanganyika.”

“Well, Ephraim died five years ago,” I said.

Mayaka was the man Musa mentioned before he left five years ago. At that moment, I felt like screaming out loud. Mayaka was bringing back old, painful memories.

“Are there others he worked with?” he asked again.

“No, When Ephraim died, Sister Violet and Sister Judith returned to England. And others were brought,” I explained.

Something was fishy. Maybe it’s Musa who sent Mayaka to come and get me. I thought.

“What message do you have for him?” I asked curiously.

“Well, I am sent by a man called Musa to drop this letter to the priest. I think it’s about his Wife Veronica. Is Veronica still here?” he asked.

“Where would I go? He told me to wait for him here with our...” I broke down into tears.

“I am sorry, ma’am, but if Ephraim is not around anymore, you can take the letter,” he handed me a brown envelope, staring at me with sorrowful eyes.

“I am sorry, Veronica, I should Keep going. I still have a long way to go. I need to reach my family before dusk. May God keep you safe,” he said, walking away.

“What’s in this letter?” I asked, running after him.

“I don’t know. Just read it. Bye,” he hurried out of the compound.

Life is not fair sometimes. It takes everything we have and leaves us with nothing. I gathered courage and opened the letter. The letter was written three days ago. I read the words one by one.

Dear Veronica,

If you are still alive, then may God protect you for me. It has been a long time since we were last together, and I hope that you and our child are doing well. Tanganyika is a nice place.

Veronica, as I promised, I built a beautiful home for us. Last month, I had planned to come and fetch you, but things did not go as expected. I was arrested along the border and framed for stealing money. I'm in jail right now; today is my last day to see the sun. I just requested that they allow me to write this letter to you. Tomorrow, at daybreak, I will be sentenced to death. I can feel my blood boiling. So, don't hope for my return if you don't hear from me anymore. I am sorry for disappointing you. I couldn't make a good husband. You can find another man to marry you. Goodbye, my love.

My Father's Bitter Truth

Rita Andrawus (Nigeria)

I was inside the kitchen doing house chores that morning when I heard my father's loud, angry voice from the sitting room. He was barking at my mother.

"Woman, be careful the way you go about advising these children. These children are too young, so don't misuse their time. Teach them what is good. Rose was supposed to register for her JAMB, but you took away the money I gave her and sent her to sell at the market," my father shouted at her, his voice shaking the entire house. I quickly abandoned the plates I was washing and drew closer to the kitchen door so I could watch them. I saw my father standing close to the single couch in the sitting room where Mum sat. Dad was red in the face. Mum was undisturbed. She wore that "I-don't-care" expression. Her lips pursed in disdain. Fear gripped me—the fear that my parents would soon break into a fight like they usually did over little misunderstandings. My sister Rose was often the bone of contention between Dad and Mum.

Suddenly, Mum flew into a rage. She rose to her feet.

"What do you mean? You are a useless man, and I don't think I should be standing here talking rubbish with you. Did I go to school? Did you go to school? I am trying to show my daughter how to work hard and make money. What is your own business? If you had worked hard in your youth, would you be this poor?" Mum retorted.

Now, the air was more tense. I was not surprised my mother had talked back to my father. It was the usual build-up to their many squabbles that always called for the intervention of neighbours. But then they

weren't painting a good picture for us. I mean, what should we learn from my parents' endless quarrels?

"Call me whatever you like," said Dad. "I am satisfied with my life. If I didn't go to school, my children would go and make me proud. At least my little job can take care of my family and me."

"Indeed," said Mum sarcastically.

"One day, you will leave my house before you spoil my children with your wrong mindset," angry Dad stormed off. Mum gave a loud hiss and sat back.

Later, my father, Mr Amos, summoned my siblings and me to the living room. Rose was the eldest among us. She was eighteen while I was ten. If it were her beauty that drew men to her, I don't know. But this was what Dad hated, coupled with Mum's undisturbed attitude about Rose's admirers.

Dad cleared his throat, "Rose, Monica, I called both of you here because you are becoming women. This gathering has nothing to do with your brother Reuben." Dad paused and continued. "I don't support your mother's carefree attitude. I call the shots in this house, and I know what is best for my family. I am not one of those men whose wives are controlling." Dad turned to Rose. "Rose, don't let your mother toy with your destiny. Learn self-control, try to control yourself and don't tow the path of destruction."

Dad had a straight face all through the discussion. This serious demeanour was unusual; it was unlike the other days when my siblings and I would have a good laugh at Dad's jokes amidst conversations like this. Reuben had said that Dad would have a glittering career in stand-up comedy.

At the end of the discussion, Dad stood up and walked into his room. It didn't make sense to me—all that dad said. What does he mean by self-control and by Rose not to tow the path of destruction?

When my mother returned from the market that evening, she sang a gospel song by Paul Woke Ocha. I helped her to carry the loads into the kitchen. Just then, Rose came out.

“Rose, Chief Benjamin asked for you. He said I should give you this money,” Mum looked around as if to be sure nobody was watching her before dipping her right hand into her black purse. She held out a burden of neat five hundred Naira notes. My mouth fell open as she gave the money to Ross. I wondered what business deal Rose and Chief Benjamin had struck that he should give her such an amount of money.

My curiosity doubled as Rose had to look around before collecting the money. She said “Thank you, mummy,” before securing the money in her pocket.

“Don’t forget; Chief will love to see you. Go to his house tomorrow morning for appreciation. Do not go there and be Virgin Mary,” said Mum. Rose, smiling, nodded. Virgin Mary? Rose and Mum got me confused. In one of his sermons, the Pope taught us that the Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus. And that she played a crucial role in bringing salvation to the fallen humanity. So, what did Mum mean that Rose should not be like the Virgin Mary? Again, everyone in the neighbourhood knew that Chief Benjamin was a rogue. A few months ago, police officers had raided his house, and Chief had been taken away in their patrol van. Rumours had it that Chief dealt with hard drugs. Somehow, the police officers got wind of this and came to arrest Chief. Although Chief was released the next day, everyone who came in contact with him henceforth did so with caution. Although I knew nothing about their business deal, I thought it would be safe for Rose to avoid Chief. I concluded I was going to confront her.

“What is it? Why are you not sleeping at this time of the night?” Rose grumbled in between slumber when I woke her up that night.

“Please, wake up. I have something to discuss with you.”

“At this time of the night?”

“Just wake up; it’s very important. You know you’re the only sister I have. And I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Tell me, what business deal did you have with Chief Benjamin that he should give you that huge sum of money?” I shifted close to Rose, my ears eager to hear what she would say.

“Nothing,” she said, turning to face the wall.

“I don’t trust that man, Rose. Remember the other day when the police came to pick him up? It would help if you were very careful with him. I don’t want anything bad to happen that would result in Chief implicating you.”

“Nothing bad will happen to me, Monica.”

With that, Rose adjusted her head on the pillow and slept.

During one weekend, Saturday precisely, after Dad had gone out, Rose came out of the room, skimpily dressed. She went straight to Mum, who was busy preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

“You look so sweet, my daughter,” said Mum, smiling. “I think Chief will like this. It looks good on you, and I am going to get more of this for you.” Rose swirled in front of Mum. I watched her bask in Mum’s eulogy. To me, it was madness to be dressed in such a way that exposed your body. Dad would have none of that. Besides, why is she going to meet Chief?

Mum looked at me. “Monica, go and dress so you can follow your sister to Chief’s house.”

When I heard that, I angrily left the sitting room without saying a word.

“Leave your sister. Your sister is a little devil. She is jealous of you. Don’t mind that little devil.”

When Rose left the house that morning, Mum gave me a little helping of the stew rice she had prepared. It was served without meat to punish me for refusing to follow Rose to Chief’s house; she said when I complained about the rice without meat.

“Do you think your father provides the money I use for cooking in this house?” she said, sneering at me. “You must be joking if you think so. Chief Benjamin gives me all that money; what a lovely and kind-hearted man he is.”

Furious, I ate my food in silence.

Dad was mad at Rose that evening. “Tell me, where are you coming from?” Dad yelled. He had returned before Rose. When he enquired

about Rose, Mum said she had sent her to the market. It became clear to Dad that Mum was lying about Rose's whereabouts when Rose didn't return hours later. Dad had sat still in the living room so he could catch Rose sneaking into the house.

"I...I...I," Rose stammered.

Dad rose angrily, "You what?"

"What is it? Please allow my daughter to have peace of mind. Is she not big enough to live her life? Don't control my daughter's life, biko," Mum came to Rose's rescue.

"Is it the market she is coming from with this loose dress?"

"Yes, it is. And what is wrong with that?"

"And where are the things you sent her to buy?"

Hissing, Mum grabbed Rose's arm and led her away into our room. Dad bit his lips and sank back into the couch, trying to contain his anger. I would say it was the grace of God that prevented another fight between my angry parents from occurring.

That didn't stop Rose from seeing Chief Benjamin. She would sneak out of the house in the morning and sneak back late at night. That was when it became clearer about Rose's relationship with Chief and the men of his ilk. Mum was solidly behind her to protect her from Dad's anger. When these ugly trends continued, Dad let them be. Rose had set her mind on the aberrant path of destruction, and Mum was her guide.

"You see how your mum has turned Rose into a prostitute?" Dad had said sadly. "I do not want you to be like her. Do you think she will ever be useful to herself?"

"No, Dad," I shook my head.

"Your mother is evil. I made the biggest mistake of marrying her. She is the type every man should avoid."

It was shocking to hear my father say that of my mother, but I knew he was angry to watch her daughter go out of control before his very nose.

"Dad, Mum and Rose will change someday," I said to console him.

Dad only shook his head and bit his lips.

Two years later, Rose had carried out several abortions. The situation affected her education. That was when it dawned on her that she was heading for doom, but then, it was too late. It's too late to cry over spilt milk! The sad thing is that Mum had destroyed Rose's life and future. Her own daughter!

Meanwhile, while Rose was busy going about with men, Reuben and I studied hard. We sat for JAMB and passed at a go. We both graduated from the University of Calabar, where we studied Structural Engineering and Medicine, respectively. Of course, my father's words "learn to control yourself" were inscribed in my heart throughout my stay on campus. It was then I learnt that Dad meant one should avoid premarital sex at all costs. Premarital sex has the power to tarnish one's destiny. It was what Rose had failed to see. But then, wasn't she being lured by her mother, my mother?

I thought it wise to enlighten the students at my school about this. As part of the obligations that came with my youth service, I have been posted to teach mathematics in a government school in the suburbs of Nassarawa.

"Say no to premarital sex; it will only destroy your future. Say no to men who come around, showering you with gifts and professing love to you; they are only deceiving you. If any man truly loves you, he should wait till you are married before sleeping with you," I said after I had told them about my sister Rose's sad story. To believe my proposition, I felt it would strengthen my conviction to present a real-life story to them. It wasn't my intention to castigate my sister before the public. No. Not at all.

I had struck a chord, and the impact of my speech on the faces of both students and teachers could be felt. A clapping ovation rented the air as I stepped down the stage.

The principal commended me, and at the end of my service, I was given an award as the best youth corper that came to teach in that school. It was a success story as I returned from Texas, where I had gone for my PhD. Years later, I became the owner of the best hospital in Nigeria,

competing as the second best in Africa. At this time, Reuben was planning to get married to his heartthrob. He had just completed the house he was building in Lekki, Lagos State.

Our past would always come to hurt us. Most times, the things we do are irreversible. One should tread cautiously because each step we take would either build or destroy us. Mum and Rose came to beg for Dad's forgiveness when they later realised their mistakes. At first, Dad refused to forgive them. Who wouldn't? After all, they made him pass through emotionally and psychologically! It took the collective efforts of Reuben and me to calm Dad.

"Dad, please, have mercy on them. Let go of the past," I said.

"Please, Dad, let's embrace this opportunity that God is giving us to start a new chapter in our family," said Reuben. "We know Mum and Rose have wronged you, but please show them mercy."

"Have mercy on them, Dad," I repeated.

Dad walked to where Rose and Mum knelt begging, tears clouding his eyes. He held them up. They embraced tearfully. We all took time to embrace each other, happy at the reunion. My family lived happily evermore. Reuben and I were able to build Rose a supermarket to save her the rigours of going back to school and because she expressed her love for business. So far, business is booming, and Rose is now looking forward to settling down with Alex, the guy she has decided to spend the rest of her life with.

Nearly Every Man Is Mad?

Wafula Khisa (Kenya)

The first time Zena touched her husband's phone, something died in her. *So, it's true that all men are the same?* She wondered. They had just checked in at Usalama Lodge in Mombasa, where they had gone for a three-day vacation. Simiyu had left his phone on the table while going to freshen up. And someone had called. The phone vibrated a million times until Zena decided to pick it up and inform the caller to wait.

"Hello darling," a woman's voice greeted.

Zena hesitated for a moment before replying. It was as if a thunderbolt had hit her. She struggled to recover from the shock. And when she finally spoke, the anger and bitterness in her voice was dangerous.

"He's not around. Who's this, please?" Zena asked sharply.

The caller hung up at lightning speed. Zena dialled the number a couple of times, but it was off. Before she could put the phone down, a message popped up on the screen.

"Hey, handsome... having you inside me was so delicious. I'm still burning with the desire to have you more and more. Can't wait for our next. I love you."

Zena's head spun. Her immediate decision was to smash the phone against the wall, but she thought otherwise. She scrolled a little more and read hundreds of similar heartbreaking sexts. Shockingly, they were from different women. *So my husband has been sleeping around with other women? Are these the reasons he's been staying out late and travelling often?* Her stomach

grumbled, and she wanted to diarrhoea. She lost her strength and felt weak instantly. She would have fallen were it not that a chair was nearby.

“Darling, are you okay?” Simiyu asked. He had just returned from the bathroom and was now dressing up.

“Not really, just a little headache, but I’ll be fine,” she lied.

“It’s okay. Let me get you some painkillers. They’d help a great deal,” he said.

“There will be no need for that. I’ll be fine,” she replied and turned against the wall.

Simiyu was a little disturbed by her sudden change. It was unlike her to become cold and gloomy while on a date. Even God knew how passionately they had been looking forward to that outing. He felt there was something sinister behind that sudden change of behaviour which he could not easily put his hand on. But the puzzle was solved for him when she handed him his phone. His heart thundered, threatening to burst.

“Oh, did somebody call?” he asked, trying hard to hide his shock.

“Whose call were you expecting?” she asked, her tone sharp with anger.

“What’s the matter with you, dear? I don’t understand...” he replied.

“Of course, you know what I mean... Are you surprised to see me with your phone? Well, I only told my co-wife you aren’t around,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Who?” he asked, his tone innocent. He knew pretty well that Zena had discovered something, but would not swallow it.

“The woman whose goods you sampled yesterday,” she said. “You thought I wouldn’t know? She sent a sext...”

He was tongue-tied. He remained silent for a century, probably thinking of how best to deny and condemn such an allegation in the strongest terms possible. *Has she been suspecting me? What on Earth was she looking for in my phone? Why the hell did that fool contact me despite my warning? What am I going to do now?* A series of questions wrestled in his mind. He was in deep shit. But every man is always in deep shit, whether by choice or default.

“Look, my dear. It’s not what you think. I don’t know this woman. I don’t even know where on Earth she got my number. I’m saved, remember. How could I do such a thing?”

“Tell that to the birds, please,” she said. “*Ati* you’re saved? Wow, now I understand what my friends say.”

Confused, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“A man is only saved from the waist upwards. Anything that dangles below the waist foolishly follows a skirt, like a flag in the wind.”

“I don’t believe that. It’s a mere fallacy.”

“I don’t care whether you believe it or not. It’s none of my fuckin’ business,” she shouted at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, trying to be gentle.

“Sorry for what?” she asked, eyeing him sharply.

“This little embarrassment.”

“Oh, my God! You are cheating on me! And you dare call it ‘little embarrassment’? What do you take me for? An idiot?” she shouted at the top of her voice. Completely insane.

“Quiet, please. Must you announce it to everyone?” he desperately pleaded.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m the one who’s hurt here. Simiyu, who’s this woman?” she asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know her. I know nothing,” he stammered. He sweated profusely like a pig.

“How can someone you don’t know send you messages? How can you chat with someone you don’t know about your sexual escapades? What does she mean when she says it was delicious to have you inside her? Where did you go yesterday?” she fired questions at him like a machine gun.

He tried to open his mouth and speak in vain. His tongue was heavy like a bag of cement, and his lips stuck together as if they were bound with super glue. He had reached the end of the road. That was his day to die, and on the day a monkey dies, all the trees become slippery. He could not understand how she had sneaked into his inbox, as his phone had complex

passwords. He could not understand why she had touched his phone in the first place. Aren't such things private? Why are women itching to touch things they aren't supposed to? Surprisingly, that was the first time she had gained access to his phone. Simiyu always switched it off or carried it wherever he went. He wished the floor could open and swallow him whole. His stomach grumbled with discomfort, and he felt the urge to rush to the toilet. Simiyu couldn't help but curse the day he met Angela.

It was on a warm evening one year ago at a party organized by their company to mark the end of the year. Everyone was in attendance, accompanied by their spouses and partners. But Zena was not present. She had travelled upcountry to see her parents. So Simiyu sat alone, like a man without a shadow. Food was served in plenty, and rivers of wine and beer flowed endlessly. Soft music played in the background, alluring and comforting. But it was swallowed by the incessant laughing and chattering of the revellers. The party had just started. There were speeches to be made, a number of new brands to be launched, and awards to be given to the deserving persons of the year.

The company's kitchen cabinet had not arrived. So, it seemed like they would have to wait for an eternity. Food, drinks and music were only meant to keep them comfortable. After all, no one speaks or thinks well on an empty stomach or dry throat. Simiyu considered this a waste of his valuable time. He knew pretty well that his damn name was not on the list of the awardees, not even among those to be promoted. He served as an assistant sales manager for Haraka Motors Limited without promotion for many years. He had watched hundreds of people join the company and rise through the ranks as if they were rushing to finish a marathon. He had wondered why his star was forever dim. Why God was not in a hurry to smile at him. Why his prayers were not being answered. He had first suspected that most of his female colleagues were using their bottom power to secure promotions. But his suspicions were dispelled when he learned it was all about luck. Every dog has its day, and his had not come. Were it not for his strong Christian beliefs, he would have sought the intervention of a native doctor. So that day, he expected nothing out of

the ordinary. He wanted to go home to avoid the embarrassment of missing out, but two things stopped him: first, his wife was away, and he knew it would be damn boring to stay alone. It was better to will the night away in the company of people, even though everyone was minding their own business. Second, there was something on his mind telling him to stay and at least witness everything that would transpire that night. Furthermore, there was plenty of free wine.

“Why are you sitting here all alone? Don’t you have company?” a soft, angelic voice whispered.

He was startled for a moment because he didn’t expect to be joined by anyone. He was alone in a small tent at the far end of the compound. He quickly turned to find out who it was, but he was mesmerized by the towering figure of the woman who stood next to him. She had a smooth round face and big round eyes that glittered even in the dimly lit compound. Her bewitching smile and long, overflowing hair that made her resemble a supermodel warmed the blood in his veins. She wore a tiny skirt, originally designed to be a belt, that generously revealed her wonderful thighs and the gateway to paradise. She merely had threads that loosely held her big round breasts that looked like two giant gourds of milk. Simiyu didn’t know what to say for a moment. Sometimes, a man’s tongue fails when he is in the presence of great beauty.

“Oh, you scared me...” he said, cursing himself for uttering such silly words. How could a woman who had probably fallen from the sky scare a man? Men are not scared of sweet things.

“Can I join you, please?” she asked softly.

“Yes, please,” he said quickly, pulling a chair for her. He poured a glass of champagne for her. Being a gentleman was an art and science he had mastered since childhood.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t mention it, dear. A jewel like you deserves the best from this unforgiving world. I can even readily spread my tongue for you to walk on, a red carpet...” he said excitedly.

“Oh, man! How’s that even possible?” she laughed. A loud, infectious laughter that tickled his ribs.

“A man in love can do anything, my dear. He can move a mountain or drive across a river without a bridge to meet the woman he loves,” he said.

Her laughter was like music to his ears. Her words gently warmed his heart. He enjoyed every moment he spent with her. They drank a little more until they became tipsy. He didn’t even hear his name when he was called among the outstanding employees that had steered the company to greater heights. He was completely lost in the wilderness of their newly found union. They spoke freely and recklessly, which is only possible when one has emptied a few bottles. That night, he wandered into her promised land. When he woke up in a hotel room with Angela breathing softly on his chest the next day, his heart swelled with guilt. What had he done? What would Zena do if she found out? Would she leave him? What would he tell their bishop if she reports him? He was a respectable member of the church. What would people say? Endless questions danced in his mind, giving him an acute headache. He was helpless. He felt his heartbeat; it was threatening. *Relax, man! You aren’t alone in this*, a voice at the back of his mind consoled him. *Every man does this. It’s a necessary sin that one must commit as long as they live. All you need is to be smart about it.* He shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

“How did we end up here?” he asked stupidly.

Angela turned lazily. She didn’t even hear him. He gently pushed her away and sat up. He gulped the remaining contents in his glass and shook his head. The events of the previous night were now clear to him like rainwater. He had irrigated his throat with too much alcohol that could fill an entire ocean, rendering him incapable of summoning the strength to walk back home. Angela was not any better. She had started speaking a lot of English and dancing provocatively as soon as a few bottles were inside her system. When he took her hand and staggered into a nearby taxi, she did not refuse. She did not even ask questions when they pulled up at Mzalendo Lodge. All she kept murmuring was, “Darling,

take me to bed. I want to sleep.” And she clung to his broad shoulders firmly as if she was holding a cross, yearning for salvation.

“Shit! I was drunk,” he bitterly cursed. He wondered what magic is in beer that turns someone’s mind upside down and makes them too excited once they swallow it.

“Sweetheart, you’re awake already?” she asked in a soft voice that was too delicious to be ignored. His thoughts and worries melted into thin air. He turned immediately to behold the beauty on her face. The dim, red lights illuminated her well-contoured body, stark naked, giving her the aura of a beautiful goddess. His body ached. He wanted her badly.

“Oh dear, what have you been thinking?” she asked softly.

“Nothing really, my gentle one. Just life and its endless surprises. Did you miss me?”

“Yes, of course. You’re gone for ages,” she lamented.

“I’m sorry. I am here now,” he whispered, gently caressing her beautiful, long hair.

They had been on fire when they arrived, as the desire for each other was high. Angela didn’t think of covering her hair. Her breasts were like two lovely gourds on her chest. They were big, full and firm. It was difficult to tell how she had managed to keep them that way. After suckling once or twice, most women carelessly leave their breasts to flatten and hang loosely like a pair of old empty balloons. They would keep them firmly hidden inside their bras, never to see the sun. Don’t breasts left bare or decolonized from suffocating bras grow healthy and strong? Well. You could not tell that she had two kids. He had always admired them as they peeped out through her tight tops and loose dresses. He always longed to hold and feel their weight and softness in his hands. He had always longed to suck her sharp nipples that seemed to point at him whenever she stood before him, but that was one of his wildest dreams that he never imagined would come true.

“You have a nice body, my dear,” he said gently.

“Thank you,” she whispered, trying to hide the lovely gourds with her hands.

“No need, honey. I’ve already seen the whole world,” he said, smiling at her.

Beer had seemingly worked a miracle in bringing them so close that they affectionately referred to each other as honey, darling, and dear, among other sweet endearments. The charm in it that excites and inspires people to walk in angles, speak in tongues, and do incredible things must be wonderful.

She threw a pillow at him. He couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed. She pushed the sheets away and laughed her lungs out when he returned the pillow and tickled her. He wrapped his arms around her massive waist and caressed it gently, navigating through every contour and curve. He was breathing fast and heavily, like someone who had just finished a highly competitive marathon. She closed her eyes, waiting to be touched in the most sacred places as she moaned gently. Their lips slowly found each other and interlocked. The sweetness of her tongue dissolved in his mouth, making his blood to scatter in his veins. His heart burst into a thousand flowers of joy and pride.

“I wanted this badly,” he whispered into her ear.

“Oh, babe! You never said,” she answered amidst gasps of pleasure.

“I was afraid. I didn’t know what you would think of me...”

“When you want someone, you speak. You don’t suffer in silence. Anyway, I’m all yours now, in body and soul,” she said, apparently uninterested in too much talk. She was wild with desire.

Angela was like a vast sea with deep waters, much like any other woman, and Simiyu, like a wild adventurous sailor, navigated through her deep waters with a real appetite. He sailed gently, then fast and methodically. He did not relent, even amidst her cries to slow down. Meeting her was something that could not come easily. It was by sheer luck that he was with her. Many beautiful women are admired and even dreamed about. Therefore, it was prudent to make good use of the rare opportunity. The affectionate look in her eyes gave him the satisfaction of someone who had won the most coveted trophy. He planted a

passionate kiss on her forehead and lay next to her, breathing heavily and violently like a faulty engine.

A thick silence engulfed them, merging the rhythm of their breathing and heartbeats into one beautiful song. Song of love. Song of victory. Song of satisfaction.

They remained that way until a hotel attendant knocked at the door. It was time for breakfast. When they parted afterwards, they had agreed to keep it a secret until the end of the world. But he had slipped into a deep hole that men hardly come out of. She completely refused to erase him from her mind. She called him occasionally, forgetting that a married man is never contacted until he does.

“I want to go home,” Zena said at last.

“What?” Simiyu asked shockingly. Zena’s words had hit him like a thunderbolt.

“You heard me. Are you deaf?” she replied harshly.

“Honestly, you can’t be serious, darling. We’ve just checked in...” he lamented.

“I don’t care. You’ve spoiled my day,” she said while packing her items.

He put up a spirited fight but lost terribly. Besides, his guilt could not allow him to be hard on her. He did everything she wanted, hoping that he would soothe her wounded heart and be forgiven. He was wrong. The sun had already set. But they still managed to find a bus back home. It was a long, tiresome, and boring journey. Simiyu tried talking to her, occasionally cracking jokes, but she hardly responded to anything he said. Her thoughts were in another world. She had already made up her mind to leave him the moment they arrive home.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked. Zena was packing her clothes in a hurry, like someone running away.

“Don’t you have eyes? I can’t stay here anymore,” she said without blinking.

“Look, sweetheart; you don’t have to do this, please. I know I messed up, but I’m sorry. It won’t happen again...” he pleaded.

“Oh, now you’re admitting your sin?” she asked sarcastically. “Would you mind telling me how long this has been going on?”

“Please forgive me...” he apologized.

“You don’t have to plead with me. Just move in with her. Perhaps she would give you what I have failed to. Don’t ever come looking for me,” she said and left.

A cloud of sorrow engulfed him. He ran after her, trying to get hold of her, but Zena pushed him away. He eventually gave up, as the drama was attracting a few onlookers. His neighbours watched with amusement, and he knew they would air it on Gossip FM for many days. His knees weakened, forcing him to sit and regain some strength. He tried to figure out what to do. For the five years they were married, they had never quarrelled. They had no children yet, but that didn’t bother them. His parents had asked questions and complained, but that didn’t bother them. He only asked them not to interfere with his marriage, as he was still waiting for God’s time. For a moment, he didn’t like Zena’s words. Did she think her inability to give him a child fueled his involvement with Angela? He wanted to go after her the next day but thought against it. It would only make matters worse. Besides, it is not good for a man to beg a woman. It makes her too arrogant to think that the sun won’t rise without her. All she needed was plenty of time to be alone and heal. Time heals the deepest wounds. She would come back to her own volition. He stayed indoors, too tired and afraid to step out. But he needed someone to talk to and share his predicament with. Someone to give him a shoulder to lean on. The burden he carried was too much to bear alone.

“Whatsup, bro? Is everything okay?” Keno, his long-time friend, asked.

“I’m finished, bro,” he replied in a subdued voice.

Keno shook his head, puzzled. He looked at his friend with little amusement, trying to figure out what was amiss.

“So why is your face like this? Did someone die in your family?” he asked.

“What sort of question is that? Would I be here drinking like a whale?” Simiyu asked angrily. It would take ages for him to explain his predicament to his friend. But that did not help things at all. His friend burst into laughter.

“Sim, how could you be that careless? C’mon, I thought you’re smart, man...” he said.

“I thought you were here to help, not to condemn me,” Simiyu argued.

“You’re damn right. But I must also tell you that you dug your own grave by leaving your phone in your wife’s hands. No fool does that even with a gun on his head!” Keno said.

“I didn’t give her my phone. She took it ...”

“Don’t you have a password?”

“A strong and complicated one. But I just don’t understand how she managed to unlock the phone.”

“You shouldn’t trust these people with your phone, bro, not even when it’s off. They’re born with a unique microchip that detects cheating. They would find out no matter how long you hide...”

“How could I know that?”

“Well, it’s because you aren’t smart. Look, every man has a side chick. It’s necessary to ensure that all women are cared for to avoid chaos. But the man can’t talk to the side chick anyhow or keep every conversation he has with her on his phone forever. *Kwani* is it a ticket to heaven? You should have briefed your side chick on a few dos and don’ts...”

“I did that, bro. I just don’t know what the hell came over her.”

“Well, the damage is done already. It’s useless to cry over spilt milk. What do you intend to do?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. That’s why I called you. Aren’t you still a professor of sexology and women’s affairs? This should be as simple as a-b-c-d for you to handle.”

“Well, I suggest you give her time, say, three weeks before you make a move. Go down to your knees, admit how stupid you are, and beg her to return home. Tell her how your life is an empty shell without her. Cry if you can...”

“What? You want me to kneel before a woman? You want my ancestors to strike me?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, bro. Your case is complicated. Remember, she saw the evidence. You’ve got no other option unless you want to continue sleeping with your hands between your legs like *omusumba*.”

Zena did not tell her parents what had transpired. They did not ask either. They knew she had visited as usual and were excited about it. After all, which parent does not celebrate when their children from the city visit them with lots of shopping and cash? Their excitement prevented them from seeing the cloud of sorrow that hovered over her. She carefully concealed it with her beautiful smile and incessant laughter. However, after one month, they started suspecting something. It was strange for a married woman to leave her husband’s house for that long.

“Beatrice, is everything okay with your daughter?” her father asked one evening.

“Why do you ask? She would have told us long ago if there’s a problem,” her mother responded.

“She’s been here for one month now, and she doesn’t talk about going back to her husband’s house. A truly married woman doesn’t leave her husband to stay in her father’s house. Can’t you read the handwriting on the wall?” he asked.

“Oh, but she told me that her husband travelled. She didn’t want to stay lonely, so she came...”

“That’s a big lie, Beatrice. Did she also tell you that he won’t return? Who is taking care of her husband now? This is how women break their homes. Talk to your daughter, please,” he said firmly.

However, his suspicions were confirmed the next day when Simiyu arrived in the company of Keno. They were welcomed warmly and accorded all the hospitality they deserved. They talked excitedly about politics, the war in Ukraine, and the weather until Simiyu finally cleared his throat and dropped the bombshell.

“Sir, Zena and I had a little misunderstanding, and she left the house...” he said fearfully.

“Oh, I knew it! A toad does not move during the day for nothing; it’s either something is pursuing it or it’s pursuing something. I was talking to her mother last evening about it,” he said excitedly.

“Did she tell you everything?” Simiyu asked, his eyes popping out dangerously.

“No, she hasn’t opened up about anything. Did you fight or something?” he asked.

“Not really, sir. It’s just that...”

Zena spilt the beans when she was called and made it clear that she wasn’t returning to his house. It was so embarrassing. Her father was very annoyed that his daughter would be humiliated that way. He ordered his guests to leave his house, never to see them again over that issue.

“You see what you’ve done?” Simiyu projected his anger at his friend.

“What the hell do you mean, bro? This is your funeral, not mine,” he replied.

“Wasn’t it your stupid idea? See how we’ve been chased away like ordinary criminals...” he lamented.

“But that was expected. Did you expect them to embrace and treat you like a king after knowing what you did to their daughter? C’mon bro, don’t be silly. At least you’ve made a statement. Everything will fall in place,” Keno explained proudly.

“Are you sure?” his friend asked.

“Good things don’t come easily. You have to pay through the nose. Let’s wait and see...”

Zena's parents, after lengthy deliberations, agreed that their son-in-law had made a mistake, but to err is human; to forgive is divine. They felt that Zena had punished him enough and that it was time for her to return to her house. Cheating alone is insufficient for a woman to leave her thriving marriage. There must be something she can do to prevent it. They decided to engage her grandmother to convince her.

"*Kukhu*," her granny said, "what exactly is so bad about your husband that makes you detest him?"

Zena was silent for a while, figuring out what exactly to say. Her grandmother seized that opportunity to continue speaking, hoping to convince her.

"You see, ending a marriage is normal. I have seen it happen many times, and the reasons for that are violence, childlessness and sexual dissatisfaction. Does your husband beat you?"

"Not at all, granny."

"Doesn't he feed you?"

"He does."

"Doesn't he eat your food?"

"He does."

"Doesn't he return home to you?"

"He does, granny."

"Oh, what's the matter then? Or he's cold in bed?"

"No, Grandma, he's just unfaithful. He's cheating on me with other women..."

"Oh, my granddaughter, that's how men are. Naturally, they are polygamous. It's the church and society that limit them. But they'll still do it. That shouldn't give you sleepless nights at all. Look at me; I'm the sixth wife to your late grandpa. And none of my co-wives quarrelled when I was married..."

"That was your time, granny. This is a new age..."

"That's what I meant. A man in the new age won't bring a second wife home because the church and society will fry his buttocks. But he'll

be seeing someone anyway. That's the sad truth. It rains everywhere. Not in your house alone..."

"NO! I can't share my man with someone else..."

"Then talk to him nicely about it. Give him the best you can. That will blind his eyes from seeing other women. Quarreling and running away won't solve anything."

Zena eventually agreed to return to her husband's house. But that didn't happen until Simiyu was called and lectured on his unbecoming behaviour. He admitted it was the devil's work and promised it wouldn't happen again. Everyone was happy about their reunion.

Back in their house, she didn't talk much. She did her duties without showing whether she had forgiven him. But that didn't bother him. The fact that she was back in the house was enough to make him happy. Sadly, he didn't know that once a woman discovers you are cheating on her, her feelings for you naturally die. She only lives to pretend and please you. On his part, he worked very hard to win back her love. And bring back her old smile and laughter. But Zena had transformed into a different being. She trusted none of the things he said or did. That's why what she heard at the salon one evening enraged her, turning her into a ferocious animal that bayed for his blood.

"Men are wild dogs that shouldn't be trusted," one lady said.

"I don't agree with you, Agnes. Mine runs when I cough. He won't dare try such rubbish..." another one said.

"Oh, a man is only yours when he is in the house. When he steps outside, he is public property... Take Simiyu, Haraka Motors' new sales manager, for example. Isn't he married? But how many women are dying for him? How many women does he lay wherever he goes? I pity that man's wife. She made a terrible mistake by marrying a handsome man like him. He's like a tree with ripe fruits in the middle of the road. Everyone wants to have a taste."

Zena swallowed hard. Her heart sagged, and she felt hot tears stinging her eyes. When she returned home, she could not even eat. She did not even answer her husband's call. She completely refused to reply

to his texts. Simiyu had travelled to Kisumu in the company of the marketing team of his company for a workshop. He had been away for four days. But that seemed like months, and she couldn't understand why. He had promised to be back in three days. Why he was extending was only known to him. There must be a woman behind that. She refused to buy his bullshit when he said the workshop had been extended for two days. "No, I'm not a fool. I must put an end to this madness." She told herself.

It happened then that she was ready for war on the day of his return. She had assembled all her weapons, artillery, and all she needed for a little provocation to strike. She cleaned the house, prepared his favourite dish, and waited.

"Hey, my beautiful darling," he said as he entered the house. He stretched his arms for an embrace, but she didn't offer him any. He hid the embarrassment behind his gentle smile.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply.

"Oh dear, what do you mean? The workshop..."

"Don't tell me about that! The workshop ended two days ago. Which woman have you been with?" she asked.

"Look, my love; I haven't been with anyone. If you don't trust me, call my boss and confirm..." he said while handing his phone to her. But to his utter shock, she smashed the phone against the wall.

"What have you done?" he asked angrily. His heartbeat thundered, and his eyes popped out dangerously.

"You can't fool me. I'm not a child. Do your worst..." she said rudely and walked away.

He was too shocked and tired to do anything. When the sharp smell of leaking gas hit his nose, he rushed to open the windows. But they were completely closed. He rushed to the door, only to find it locked. He rushed to the bedroom, calling his wife at the top of his voice. No sooner had he reached the room than Zena struck a matchstick.

A Tale Of Two Looters

Wafula Khisa (Kenya)

At 9 a.m., Martino yawned loudly as he stretched his hand to pick up a call. It was a weekend, and he had nothing important to do that day. He had spent the Friday evening partying with friends until late.

“Boss, *ni kubaya*,” his PA shouted on the other end.

“Go straight to the point. What the hell are you talking about?” he asked angrily.

“Have you read today’s headline?” Madson asked.

“I’m not in the mood to answer silly questions. Do you hear me?” he said angrily and hung up. He yawned once more and cursed.

He sluggishly got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Breakfast would soon be ready, and he didn’t want to be served before reading the newspapers. He sat at the table quietly, humming a few favourite tunes to pass time. Breakfast came at the same time as newspapers. And a mere glance at one of the headlines made him jump to the edge of the seat. “Oh my God, who published this rubbish? What am I going to do?” he wondered. He quickly called Madson. What he had tried to tell him on the phone a while ago was now making sense.

“Where are you?” he asked desperately.

“In town, sir. Anything I could do for you?” Madson asked.

There was a brief silence. Martino didn’t know how best to describe the situation. All that Madson could hear was some violent breathing and heaving.

“Please come. There’s fire on the mountain,” Martino announced.

He didn't have time to respond. His boss had already hung up. *What could be bothering this man? Is it the newspaper headline? Is the wife causing trouble again? Has one of his mistresses threatened him again?* A series of questions ran through his mind, and he could not figure out what was amiss. However, one thing was clear: his boss was in hot soup, and it was something that needed his intervention. The boss only swallowed his pride when he was in dire need.

There was no luxury of exchanging pleasantries when he arrived. As soon as he parked his car, a servant ushered him into Martino's dining room. An array of food, beverages, and other delicacies were strewn across the table, left untouched. Martino pushed a newspaper into Madson's hands.

"What nonsense is this?"

County Losses Billions Through Graft, the headline screamed, and a few unpleasant stories followed, littering a whole page. *Yaani*, the whole story was out, like a stubborn breast that rebels against being suffocated in a bra. Madson stared at the paper in disbelief. It was not the headline he had called to inform his boss earlier about. He was damn sure that if the governor got the wind of it, he would collapse. Was God punishing him, or was the devil using his enemies to bring him down? He could not tell. He could not answer his boss. He was too shocked to think of anything tangible to explain the unfortunate events.

"Who published this?" Martino inquired. "Didn't you talk to Collins?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't know who did this. Collins was at the office yesterday. And I carefully combed through his reports. Nothing left my office that could uncover your nakedness," Madson explained.

"So, who could this swine be?" he insisted.

"As I said sir, I don't know..."

"Well," Martino lowered his glasses and moved closer to Madson, "who knows? What the hell do I pay you for? Aren't you supposed to know what my enemies are conspiring to do and handle it? Aren't you

supposed to protect my name and interests? Of what use are you to me if you can't handle this simple task?"

"I know, sir, but..."

"Get out of my house!" he blurted at him. "And," he added as Madson headed for the door, "you've got only two days to handle this. If I don't get results, you and I are done. Don't come back to my office."

"I'll do as you say, sir. Don't worry," Madson answered.

Martino summoned Collins to his office that evening, but it didn't help much. He had not divulged any secret information to anyone.

"You know well I can't betray *Mheshimiwa*. He pays us good money for the job we do. Why on earth would I tarnish his good reputation? Didn't you see my report yesterday?" he defended himself.

"I'm damn sure of that, but who could this be?"

"Maybe the bloggers. Everyone is reporting about anything today, whether true or false..."

There was nothing much to be done. Martino's house was raided that evening by some officers from the Directorate of Criminal Investigations. He was arrested, and several things such as laptops and documents confiscated. It was a Friday, and even though his lawyers termed the act as malicious and frustrating, the police would hear none of it. Thousands of phone calls were made, and demonstrations staged, but the police maintained their stand. He comfortably spent the weekend in a cell as a guest of the state.

He was released on a hefty bond the following week, thanks to his gifted team of lawyers who had put up a spirited legal showdown. However, he was barred from accessing his office, and everything therein, for an entire month until investigations were over. Madson called four days later. He had been working round the clock, and it seemed it was bearing fruit. He had found out that the information about the governor's scandal had been published by a well-known blogger, and that was not all. Someone within the governor's inner circle had leaked the information for reasons only the devil knows. "You know what's to be done, right? I need to hear good news as soon as possible..." Martino said.

“But sir...” Madson interrupted.

“What’s it?”

“Don’t you think it’s very dangerous to try such a thing now? All eyes are on you... The world is watching, you know,” he replied.

“I know that. But I can’t be quiet and watch someone ruin everything I have built through thick and thin. I need to act fast. Don’t forget these are desperate times; they call for desperate measures. They should know they are playing with an angry tiger, not a toothless dog. You do your bit; my lawyers will do the rest,” he explained.

Shawn groaned in pain as a nurse removed a blood-stained bandage from his forehead. He was covered in bandages all over his body, with fractures in both his arms and legs, rendering him unable to move.

“Who did this to you?” the nurse asked. “Did you fight or something?”

He was silent. He tried to shake his head in response, but all was in vain. It was heavy, like a bag of cement. All he could do was stare at her. His mind was far away, enveloped in a dense mist of confusion. He could not even tell how he got himself into that hospital.

“Ho... How....di...did I get here?” he asked desperately.

“A good Samaritan dropped you two days ago. He said he picked you by the roadside *ukiwa mahututi*...” she explained.

“Where is he?” he inquired.

“Nobody has seen him since then,” she answered precisely. “But that’s what happens here every day. People drop patients here and vanish into thin air, probably fearing to shoulder responsibilities.”

Shawn didn’t speak again. He tried to turn, but his body hurt everywhere. He remained motionless for a while, leaving his mind to wander far and wide. That’s when things started making sense to him.

Two days ago, he received an urgent call from someone who identified himself as Mr Stoney. He had said he had a very important story that he would like to share with Shawn, hoping that once it is published

in the mainstream media, it would help unearth shame and even bring down an influential politician, and, if used well, it can fetch them a huge potato. Without hesitation, Shawn became intrigued by the proposition and embraced the idea. They agreed to meet at Maridadi Bar that evening. Because that was a sensitive matter, Stoney requested to meet him alone.

As the appointed time arrived, Shawn made his way towards the bar. The atmosphere inside was becoming livelier as it was a Friday, a day when people flocked to drinking establishments to commemorate recent successes or lament unfortunate setbacks. Additionally, it was the maize harvesting season, meaning that finances were abundant for many individuals, and there was no shortage of patrons at the bars. Mr Stoney occupied a solitary spot at the distant corner of the bar, engrossed in reading a newspaper. Shawn had no trouble recognising Mr Stoney as he enthusiastically waved upon Shawn's arrival at the entrance.

"Hello, I'm Stoney. Please have a seat," he said while pushing a chair to him.

"Thank you very much," Shawn said as he looked around.

"Please make yourself comfortable. You are a hard person to find, man. What are you always busy with?" Stoney asked excitedly.

"Oh, not really, my brother. That's how life is. Everyone must be busy with something," he said.

His head thickened after downing a few bottles, and the conversation became lively. Engrossed in conversation, they exchanged words with enthusiasm, delving into a wide range of topics as if they had been acquainted for a significant time. Then Stoney excused himself to visit the gents, but took centuries to return. He had not even divulged the juicy story to him. At a moment when Shawn's patience was wearing thin due to the wait, two imposing individuals clad in black suits approached the table and sandwitched him. This got him nervous. He quickly gulped his drink and tried to rise. But the men who identified themselves as police officers could not

let him. They walked out with him into a waiting cruiser and sped off. He didn't see Stoney again.

The news of his disappearance was all over. He felt something odd about the two men and quickly texted a friend about the situation, hoping that everyone would know if things went South for him. His friend had visited all the nearest police stations to inquire about Shawn's whereabouts. But he was shocked to find out that the police had not arrested anybody by that name that day. Shawn had been abducted!

From the time he was abducted, Shawn knew it had to do with his job. He had rubbed the feathers of many people with his pen. He had been fired many times because of that, and he was used to it. But he didn't expect things would go that way to the point of threatening his life. The first time someone had threatened him was five years earlier when he was abducted in Kitale in the evening, blindfolded, and driven to Naivasha and dropped in a forest at night. His abductors warned him against posting incriminating political shit on social media lest they cut off his hands. He had stopped immediately, only to resume after being hired by a powerful presidential aspirant as a communications strategist.

He was left for death. It was a miracle that he was still alive.

"That will teach you a lifetime lesson, idiot," Martino said as the news about Shawn's abduction aired on TV. He was dead sure that nobody would poke their nose in his affairs again. He was also sure that it would just be a matter of time before another scandal was revealed to get everyone's attention and his will be swept under the carpet. So many things were happening. Many bodaboda riders would publicly assault a woman and spark national outrage. Dead bodies would be discovered in River Yala and keep people talking. Another deadly Covid-19 strain would emerge and sweep away everyone as the government threatens everyone to be vaccinated.

But things didn't go as he expected. He was summoned to the Directorate of Criminal Investigations office three days later to record a

statement concerning Shawn's abduction. All fingers were pointing at him. A week later, he was banned from travelling to and doing business in the US because he was corrupt. But he brushed it off as a conspiracy of his political opponents to bring him down. That was before the many scandals he had tried to hide were unearthed.

"You kept me waiting; where have you been?" Delilah asked.

"I'm sorry, madam, I was running a few errands for his excellency," Madson replied.

"All these days? What business are you doing with my husband, dear?" she inquired.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, just business..." he explained.

"I hope nobody has died this time," she interrupted.

"Oh, no, madam. Not again," he answered.

"Good. And I hope no woman is involved in those errands..." she said.

"I haven't seen any. Unless it happens behind my back... Tell me, how is he?" he asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. The doctor says his condition is getting worse each day. Besides that, he will need a blood transfer urgently," she said.

Madson's mouth fell agape as he skimmed through the medical report she had handed him. His heart raced, and a faint sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead. It appeared that the situation was spiralling out of control.

"When did the doctor say that?" he asked desperately.

"Last week..." she said.

"But you should have done that already. What's keeping you?" Madson asked.

"That's where the problem is, my dear. I don't know what to do," she explained.

"Problem? What do you mean...?" he asked stupidly.

“Madson, my husband’s blood and mine are not compatible with the kid’s blood. My husband was dumbfounded when the doctor revealed the horrible news. He nearly fainted. You should have been here to see the angry and suspicious look he gave me,” she explained.

“What? Then what happened?” he asked.

“He stormed out of the hospital, burning with anger. He hasn’t talked to me since then. Whenever I talk to him, he only sneers and looks at me contemptuously like rejected goods,” she said sadly.

Delilah was Martino’s youngest wife. He, like a true African man, had four more and concubines everywhere. He had married her a few months after meeting her. A friend of his had introduced her to him when they went hunting girls at the University of Nairobi. She had attracted him instantly. She was not only beautiful, but also outgoing and intelligent. This motivated him, upon the advice of his friends, to put her in the family way quickly. After all, he had the financial muscles to care for and raise as many families as possible. Moreover, he was a leader, and a prominent leader is one that can raise and sustain a big family. That means he can do the same for the people he serves. No wonder people worldwide are naturally reluctant to be led by a bachelor or spinster.

He did not wait for her to finish college and graduate. No. He knew pretty well that girls of her age are like mangoes. When you wait for them to ripen, someone else would be eating them with salt while raw. He didn’t want to gamble. After agreeing with her, he visited her people, paid her bride price and took his prize.

But she already had someone in her life: Madson. They had been dating for two years. Like many ambitious lovebirds, they dreamed of getting married and raising a beautiful family. But the sudden turn of events, when he learned that she was getting married to another man, broke him. He hated her. But there was nothing he could do. A man with neither style nor substance has nothing to say before men who own the world.

“Don’t mind that stupid boy,” Martino told her. “Let him establish himself first. He has nothing to give you apart from his useless

words of love. And you know, my dear, words can't buy you a wig. Words can't even take you anywhere. You can't eat love! Just be content with me and forget that you ever had a thing to do with him."

She had abandoned him physically but emotionally remained tied to him.

"But what do you expect me to tell him? That I'm moving on just like that?" she lamented.

"Well. What do you suggest, then? Just ask anything. And I will do it," he said.

"I don't know. You're the man here. Anything you do will be okay for me," she replied.

"Good. What if we give him some money—pretty good money? Something like a whooping one or two million would blow his mind off. I'm pretty sure he has never seen such an amount of money except on TV. That would enable him to start a new life and do something meaningful for himself," he said.

"If you say so, then I totally agree," she affirmed.

But Madson could not take it. He violently disagreed with her.

"What do you take me for? Just some hungry idiot that can be lured with money?" he asked angrily.

"I am sorry, dear. It's not that way. Just think about it; it could turn your life around..." she said.

"Don't tell me that shit! Have you now reduced yourself to a commodity for sale? I know his money and power have attracted you to him like a magnet, not love. What happened to the promises we made to each other? Is this how to end the beautiful world we've laboured to build?" he asked.

"Not really, dear... But nobody eats love..."

"See, I don't want to hear anything from you. Go with him. It seems I can't do anything to convince you."

However, Delilah didn't forget Madson. He was her first love. And first love never dies. Many years into her marriage, she still cherished him. She could not stop thinking about him. She would secretly look for him

and have a good time with him. He had not gotten a job. So, she provided everything for him. This was possible because her husband was too busy with party meetings and business to attend to her. He was physically and emotionally absent.

She helped Madson to find a lucrative job in one of her husband's companies. Although he was a hard-working and dedicated man, she helped him rise through the ranks until he impressed Martino to appoint him as his personal assistant when he became a governor. And during that time, a lot happened. Her love for him flourished and blossomed like never before. They had two kids.

"Do you think he suspects anything?" he asked after a century of silence.

"I don't know," she said, "It's hard to tell, you know," she said. Her mind seemed to be wandering far away.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"Honestly, I've no idea. What is important now is to save our child," she said.

"How?" he asked.

"Wait for blood. That's what the doc said," she said.

"For how long, dear? Can't I donate mine?" he asked desperately.

"Well, that'll be a great relief for us. Why can't we call the doctor to test if it's compatible with Akido's?" she asked.

"Why test? Is Akido no longer my blood? Anyway, as you say," he said as he rose to call the doctor.

A few days later, Madson was found dead in his house. He was holding a gun to his head despite having three bullet wounds on the chest. Whether it was murder or suicide, only the police could tell after embarking on their endless investigations, whose findings are usually swept under the carpet.

In a separate incident, Martino had been apprehended a few days prior, linked to the misappropriation of two hundred million dollars

designated for the construction of a county referral hospital. Additionally, he was still being sought for questioning regarding significant financial losses incurred through extravagant foreign trips and futile projects. The DCI had gathered enough evidence and was ready to prosecute him.

Virgin Of The Delta

Dumka Bie (Nigeria)

After bolting the door, the honourable moved to sit closer to me, but I shifted nervously. He tried to touch my breasts, but I pushed his hand and stood up from where I was sitting, surprised. Then he dragged down a Ghana-must-go filled with money and showed me if only I would allow him to touch me.

I had never allowed any man to touch me before. My mama always warned me never to allow any man to touch me. She had told me it was for the man who would cross a keg of palm wine on my head when I was ripe.

Those were her exact words, which I did not fully understand. I started crying for my life. The honourable grasped my two hands. For a long time, we struggled. I was only fourteen, and he was forty-five. I could not withstand his strength for long. He pushed me, and I fell over the couch, hitting my shin on the hard surface of the couch.

He growled and moved menacingly toward me with the stick in between his thigh, sticking to breaking and tearing his trousers, giving me a hot slap across my face. Darkness and fire immediately engulfed my eyes.

I had become very weak from struggling with him. I screamed as he pounced on me with his overweight belly, tearing my pants. My screams seemed not to reach the roof.

We were members of the Christ Army Church (CAC), and the prophecy had come that Wednesday morning during the fasting and praying programme. We don't go to the farm on Wednesdays. My mama said that it was a day given to God, a day God's people would hear from Him, a day we must passionately be in the presence of God for direction and guidance.

The prophecy had confused everybody. Even our catechist was very confused, together with other elders and deacons. I could see it written on their faces. During the prophecy, God forgive me; I had opened my eyes for the first time to look at the congregation. Our catechist, Winzigaka's eyes, were also opened with something like a sparkle of light moving across them. He was nodding—that type of nod that portends something drastic was in the air. The auditorium was very quiet. Everybody was silent. This was due to the nature of the prophecy. It had never been like this before. Was the world coming to an end as the catechist had always been preaching? Fear gripped my throat; fear took over me.

The Prophetess had said that our crude would make our farmlands crude; it would make our waters and creeks together with the mangroves crude and would also make our people crude and rude. She had said that all our lives would become crude because of our crude. I was very confused by these crude, crude statements. How could the land of Dukana Kingdom, where we played under the moonlight on joyous nights be crude? A land where big masquerades like Ekpo and Lokpo displayed their grandeur would just be crude? How could Dukana, where we had plenty of fish, yams, vegetable leaves, and gari, be crude? How could all our lives also be crude? I did not understand these prophecies.

The sun had already risen in our village of Dukana Kingdom. As I had said, it was a village of proud husbands and women. Many of my people were farmers, fishermen, and women before this experience. It was a peaceful Monday afternoon. The afternoon birds were chirping on the nearby trees. Cocks crowed and went after their female counterparts. Dogs barked. The rays of sunlight hit the earth, and the thatches on the huts went *crak, creek* under the heat. The villagers, including my mama, had gone for their normal farming and fishing business. She was a farmer. Although, we did not farm large farms since my papa died. My mama could not lease other farmlands to add to our only piece of land. Therefore, my mama rotated the planting of crops on our only piece of land.

That afternoon, I was peeling cassava, which my mama would fry and take to the market three days away to gather money for my school fees. I had been out of school for two years since I lost my papa because my mama could not pay the school fees. This she had all along been struggling to do; even these cassava tubers whose skins I peeled now were for that purpose. My papa died when I was in JSS 2. I had been praying and believing that things would work out for me. I couldn't wait to go back to school. I was peeling off the skins of cassava when I saw three big, big vehicles. They drove past our frontage. Our hut was close to the road that led to our King's palace. Cars used to drive past, but today, the ones that passed were very big, big ones. The vehicles carried people with caps on their heads. They were big caps of different colours. Some were red, blue and black. Others wore yellow and brown colours. They wore coveralls and heavy boots. As was normal in Dukana Kingdom, children would always run out to see vehicles. In a short while, children were all running toward the King's palace. I stood up and looked at my tubers of cassava. The shouts from the children moved me like magic. I dropped the kitchen knife and ran toward the palace. When I got to the palace, the men had alighted from the vehicles. They all wore coveralls with heavy boots. Some were fair in complexion; others were black. One of the White men brought sweets and chocolates and gave them to the children. I was

shy at first, but when I saw other girls going to collect, I followed them. I removed the covering and took a bite. It was very tasty. We all hoped they could give us again. Our King and his elders shook hands with the men and welcomed them into the palace.

“You are welcome members of Seley International. The future of Dukana Kingdom now rests in your hands. Explore the land and develop it for us,” he said.

“We thank you King Poromon Tuatua 1 of Dukana Kingdom. The opportunity you and the government have given Seley International to prospect oil shall be greatly appreciated. We shall do our best to develop your land and your people. All we need is your cooperation,” the Whiteman said through the black man who interpreted it. He spoke through his nose. Our King would raise his ears to catch the words whenever he spoke, but they eluded him. Until the black man interpreted the words, we would not understand what the Whiteman had said. I stood at the window, squeezing myself among the adults who had crowded it so that I might hear the conversation. I saw one man bring many bottles of small stouts and other assorted drinks and gave them as gifts to the adults. The King and members of his Council were drinking and laughing *kie kie kie kie*, revealing their teeth decayed by constant snuffing.

“Adukale, Adukale, wake up. It is already dawn.” My mama shook me from sleep.

“O mama, let me sleep some more,” I said, rubbing my eyes with the back of my palms.

“I said wake up; others are going to fetch water.” Then it occurred to me that I had to fetch water to fill our native water pots. The time was exactly six in the morning. In Dukana Kingdom, there was no pipe born water, no tap, no electricity. We had to trek some distance to the stream to fetch water, or we gathered at the well like ants around a cube of sugar waiting for turns to fetch. If you were unlucky or if you could not wake

up early, you would be assured that you would never get any water that day. As I got up from my bed, the sound of *kele* (gong) moved through the air. Our Town-crier's voice resounded from a distance. My mama inclined her ears; I, too inclined my ears to catch his words, but because he was still far off, we could not make out his statement. I collected my water pot and my *iga* (rag) and followed our neighbours who were already going to the well.

On the way, the Town-crier passed us. He gave his message a few metres away from us, which was very clear. The Town-crier had said that our King had instructed that oil workers would be exploring the land for oil so that Dukana would be developed like Port Harcourt, Lagos or Abuja and other beautiful places. The people were to give them support. They should not panic if they come to their farm. The purpose was development, development, and development, he had said and hit his *kele* and moved on. Immediately, my mind hovered like a kite across a burning bush. My mama had only a piece of land on which we farmed. Let them not come to explore it because there was no oil there. We got to the well and met other people. In Dukana Kingdom, people woke up at three o'clock to search for water. Those who could not wake up earlier would fetch dirty water, which they had to allow to settle before it could be used. Today was one such day. We stood in awe. One after the other, those who had arrived earlier started leaving. I lowered my fetching custard rubber into the well, but there was no drop of water. We were all sighing. What a disaster! No water at all. It would take another one hour for a little pool of water to gather again.

"How could these people finish the water? Eh!" my neighbour said angrily.

"This is very bad," said another person.

"What do we do now?" the first woman asked.

"I think we have to try the stream," I suggested.

"That is the only way out," the second woman agreed. With that, we marched toward the stream. On our way, they started a conversation. The wife of Chief Gberekpege, who was a member of the King's council,

said her husband had said that the oil company was going to develop the land. They were going to bring pipe born water and electricity. We would also have hospitals and our women would not be dying again during childbirth. Children would be trained in schools for free, no payment of school fees anymore. I was very happy about this. It meant that children of very poor parents like me would attend school without any form of payment. I prayed for the fulfilment of this good news. My mama would be very happy to see this come to pass.

The stream was far from home. On our way, we met and greeted other people who had gone to fetch water. We arrived at the stream and fetched water. One truth was that there was always water to fetch if you could reach the stream. All you needed to do was to move the fallen leaves aside and fetch water. The water was medicinal, my mother would always say.

I got to the house around 7:30 am. How we suffered to get drinking water in Dukana Kingdom was very disheartening. Was it like this in other places? The people who had been to Port Harcourt said water was rushing from taps everywhere you went. There was water in the kitchen; even where they answered the call of nature, there was water. Why are things so different in Dukana Kingdom? My mama felt sorry for me. I could read it on her face when she saw me coming.

“O my daughter,” that was how she called me when something concerning me was on her mind stressing the o.

“Yes, mama. I am back.”

“Sorry, my daughter. When would this suffering end for us?” she asked, lifting the water pot from my head.

“It’s ok, mama. It would end,” I said. I used my *iga* to wipe the drops of water from my body and went to sit at the fire to get my body warm.

“They said very soon we would have good water for drinking.”

“So, I heard. Let the oil company help us. They asked us to pay tax, but we have never seen anything from the taxes we have been paying to the government. I pray they do something.”

“We would continue to be hopeful. Things would certainly change.”

“We’ve seen evil for long. Let good things come our way. We’re waiting. Or are we not part of God’s creation?” My mama asked, looking at the sky.

“Mama, you hear the Town-crier?”

“Yes, I did.”

“It would be better,” I said, walking into the house. The house welcomed me, and I was happy. I reclined on our native mattress made of grass and stretched my legs.

We had gone to our farm to stake our yam tendrils. We left home around 8 a.m. My mama had said that we were to work very fast before the sun’s rays emerged. The sun was not only the reason. Another reason was that we were to watch the Amanikpo Cultural Society, which was going to exhibit its new masquerades in the evening. The ceremony attracted many people from different parts of the Niger Delta. We must not miss it. Mama had said. The stakes were ordinary sticks because my mama grew only women’s yam. My father used to grow men’s yam when he was alive. Then, we used Indian bamboo to stake our yams. The women of Dukana Kingdom do not struggle with their men in growing men’s yams because it involves a lot of work. The women grew only their own yam, which was far easier to maintain.

We had been working till around midday when we heard sounds of striking metals. My mama inclined her ears and discovered that the sounds were not far away from our farm. Then, two boys who were coming from that direction said that they were sounds from hitting metal of the oil company workers exploring oil on our land. We continued to work on our yam tendrils for a long time before my mama said we were to go home to prepare for the ceremony of the Amanikpo Cultural Society. I packed our tools: cutlasses, hoes, water gourd and the plates we had used for food

into the basin. When we arrived in the morning, I plucked the mushrooms, cut a wider leaf of togo, and wrapped them. We left when the sun had become a little bit tired.

My mama set the pot on the fire. She had said we must start cooking because she did not want to miss any part of the Amanikpo ceremony. I went on errands one after the other. Today my mama was cooking *kpasa-ep* (a soup prepared with pounded vegetable leaves). It was our best soup; it was what we could afford without much spending and the type of soup cooked in Dukana Kingdom. My mama was a good cook. I dreamt of being like her. She dipped the dipper into the pot, boiling *kpoto*, *kpoto*, *kpoto*, turned the mushroom and the periwinkles I had cut. Then she brought it out and hit the back of her palm, and gently she licked the drop of soup to test the salt quality and the soup's tastiness. I began to salivate as the air was filled with its aroma.

“Adukale.”

“Yes, mama.”

“Put water to use for baking gari.”

“Ok, mama.” I hurried into the house and returned immediately with a kettle filled with water. She brought down the pot and put the kettle on the fire. I put the logs into the fire to rekindle it. A few minutes later, I heard the water sending its signal noise. I brought our gari bowl and baked the *eba*. My mama did not like strong *eba* like the type our next-door neighbour made the other day. So, I always ensured there was plenty of water on it. As we were eating, we heard the sound of metallic objects coming from our village square. It was the Amanikpo. It was getting closer to the time of the ceremony. We ate faster because my mama had said we must not miss any part of the ceremony. I licked my fingers and watched my hands, waiting for my mama to finish so that I could carry the dishes and watch them.

The village square was already jammed with crowds. We had carried our wooden chairs. Everybody carried his or her wooden chair. Older people came with woven mats. I sat on my wooden chair beside my mama. The first masquerade was Lokpo. He was fearful and dreaded by

everyone. He moved on barefoot. He carried Belokpo (wooden instrument) in his right hand, which he shook, and it went *koro, koro, koro koro*. In his left hand was a *diila* (a local crossbow). Then at his waist was tied dug-out wood cut into square shapes that made noise wherever he bounced his legs on the ground. When he moved, one could hear the noise they made. He displayed. He moved. He threatened people and left. I sat in amazement. In all my fourteen years of existence, the Amanikpo had not performed this ceremony where the villagers come to watch. It was only in April every year that Amanikpo came out at dusk – this was the period of *naabiradee* when we had to return from the farm as early as possible because it was not a good thing that someone should be caught by the Amanikpo.

We sat facing a black demarcation. Behind the demarcation was the structure that the society would be revealing. The beating of metallic objects zoomed out from behind it. Members of the Amanikpo secret society wore different colours of *tu*. My mama said all the members of the Amanikpo were strong men. They were well-versed in juju powers. This was why it was not good for someone to commit an offence or have a problem with them. The beating of metallic objects assumed a crescendo. Then suddenly, the black demarcation was removed, and we saw a structure in the form of a house. In fact, it was upstairs. The people, including my mama, stood up to give it an ovation. They cheered. They clapped. They yelled. It was amazing. The cheering died down, and everybody sat with great expectation. I asked my mama what was next and she said I should keep my eyes on the structure.

I fixed my eyes on the structure like a monster gazing at the moon. The beating of metallic objects grew louder, and little-talking babies appeared. I called them baby masquerades because their voice resembled that of a baby. They were talking like humans. Their jowls moved in the course of their speech. They were made of different kinds: male and female, adults and babies. There were fowl feathers on their heads. They turned left and right as they danced, bouncing and shaking the structures.

I was so surprised. My mama had said that the Amanikpo was one of the mysteries of Dukana Kingdom. I could see it was true.

The people at the other entrance to the village square parted to usher in our honourable. He was the honourable of the people, my mama had said. His entry was heralded with a rapturous ovation from the baby masquerades. The beating was heightened, and the dancers danced excitedly and hilariously. The reason was that the honourable would not go without buying them two or three live goats. He was a politician. His stomach protruded and pushed the *agbada* he was wearing. He had a square face with two heavy arms. He held a short staff in his left hand, swinging from left to right. His voice was hoarse and slightly husky. As he approached the structure, one of the older men brought a wrapper and tied it around his waist. The honourable threw a step, and the people roared in laughter. He balanced his waist, bent low with his face moving towards the ground and pirouetted with his waist. He appeared to have mastery of the waist dance of the Dukana people, but his paunch belly and age would not allow him. The honourable dipped his right hand into his *agbada* and brought out bundles of mint naira notes. He dropped them in the native pot stationed at the front of the structure. He waved to the people, putting on a bewitching smile, and departed.

As dusk approached, we started deserting the village square one after the other. Only those who were members were free to watch the ceremony until very late. My mama said at a point, those who are not members would be spiritually mesmerized to join in the dance and that would mean great expenses because by then, the person had committed a taboo. We took our chairs and left the ceremony with other people at about six o'clock.

Everybody went to the farm after the general market day, which was a day after the ceremony. On the general *Deejoo* market day, no member of Dukana Kingdom was permitted to go to the farm. It was our custom and tradition. We all go to the market to buy or sell. So, after the market day, I walked before my mama, carrying a basin containing items such as hoes, cutlass, water for drinking, food, etc. As we walked down the farm

road, we heard shouts and plenty of talk from the direction of our farm. We increased our pace, surprised and confused. We met a group of people, some raining abuses, others screaming and shouting.

Then we saw a straight road across the farm connecting other farms. Mama Dumle was shouting that the oil people had killed her. The oil workers had made a straight path through her farm and dug holes. The worst part was that they destroyed the crops with their boots and the holes they drilled in the ground. My mama and I walked down the path. We did not follow the normal road because the path they created led directly to our farm. When we got to our farm, the pictures we saw instantly triggered our adrenaline. The young cassava stems were trampled on. I saw something like a stream of water when I moved further into the farm. I walked towards it. It was black as charcoal. It had engulfed our crops. I rushed to call my mama, who said it was oil, and started screaming. The oil had taken over our crops. I stood speechless. Then I tried to remember the day I saw the oil workers working. They had carried heavy irons in their hands. They hit it on the ground several times. They were digging the earth. They had been around for about three months now. I remembered last week, I saw two brothers bringing out a white wire from the spot where they had dug. People came over to our farm. They shouted and screamed. They suggested we all go to our King's palace to make complaints of what the oil workers had done to our farms and crops. Everybody agreed, and we started moving.

The women were crying, including my mama. When the villagers heard about the destruction of our farms, they, too, joined. This caused an uproar in the village. I saw the honourable's jeep parked as we approached the King's palace. It was a black Jeep with tinted glasses. They came out together to meet us.

"My people, our elders say a toad does not run in the daytime for nothing. Either he is pursuing something, or something is pursuing it. What has happened in the land? The tears of women, mothers, and widows like you are not good for our land."

“Your Highness, our land is gone, our farm, our crops are all gone. We have lost our creeks. Our streams, the only source of drinkable water, have been contaminated with crude oil. The land is polluted; we are polluted. We came this morning only to encounter disaster on our farms and our waters. Oil spillage has taken over our farm, and our crops are destroyed. Here Mama Adukalewin’s farm is swallowed by oil. All her crops are destroyed; those who went to get water from the stream this morning said our stream has become oily. Are we supposed to be happy?” Then our honourable joined his head with our King in a whisper. He moved a step forward and spoke.

“The people of Dukana Kingdom wipe your tears. Wipe your tears because our God has decided to bless us with crude oil. We are rich. Which is better, to struggle in rain and sun or to feed as you like without struggling on the farm? I tell you, we are blessed.” They asked us to wait while they went to see it. They took a bike and rode away.

When they returned after our King had finished speaking to us, our honourable spoke.

“As your King has said, this is the beginning of our blessings. Mama Adukalewin, wipe your tears. From now on, I will look into your needs. Crude oil has just been discovered on your farm. It means you can no longer farm there, but whatever you need would be provided. The company workers are already fencing your farmland. You all should go home. For the others, you can still use your farmlands. Go home, my people. The government and the oil companies would compensate everybody,” he said. My mama started shivering immediately as we all departed.

It had been a month. The shock of what had happened made my mama not walk on her two legs again. She was very sick, and I was the only one taking care of her. She could not go to the toilet anymore. I used a wrapper to wipe her shits and the urine she passed often. The few people who came to visit us could not spend time with us because of the room’s odour. Then I remembered that our honourable had said we could come for anything. But we had sent messages to him, and he had not shown up.

I told my mama I was going to see him. She did not reply. I closed the door and left. The time was around 8 a.m. When I got to his house, people were drinking and talking. I told the guard I wanted to see honourable, but he ignored me. I was confused. I stood out there like an abandoned kitten. Then, fortunately, he was coming out, and I ran towards him. He stopped, and I knelt before him as the guards tried to stop me.

“Allow her.”

“Ok, boss.” He asked to come in. The spacious sitting was air-conditioned. We heard that the honourable’s family live in the Whiteman’s country. I sat on the big settee facing the gigantic flat-screen television on the wall. I explained to him what had happened to my mama. As I was talking, the honourable stared at me from up to down that I was afraid.

I told him my mama could not walk anymore. Her hands shook. He said she would be well and gave me some money. He told me to buy medicine for my mama and promised to come to see us. He said I should come whenever I needed money, and that the government was working to settle everybody. Then I left.

After a week, my mama’s health became so bad. She was very sick. She was breathing small, small, and she could not eat well. I did not know what to do. The government had not done anything; the oil company had not done anything either. However, people were saying that the oil company had given a lot of money to our king and our honorables for the people whose farmlands had been damaged, but they had decided to use the money for themselves.

That was what I overheard from the other compound. I decided to go see our honourable again based on his promises that we could come any time for anything. The guard took me to the sitting room where he was seated. He greeted me with smiles and entertained me with a bottle of soft drink. I kept the drink on the side stool. He asked about my mama, and I told him everything.

He said he was planning to take her to the hospital. Then he went and bolted the main door to the sitting room and adjusted the curtains such that no one could see inside the house from outside.

I limped home, weeping with blood dripping down my thighs. The honourable had done a terrible thing to me that would continue to go down my memory lane. A few metres from my house, I saw a small crowd talking and shaking their heads. I ran toward our house with hotness in my thighs. When I reached the doorpost, I saw my mama stretched out on our native mat, lifeless.

The Legendary Tale Of A Warrior

Chidiebere Enyia (Nigeria)

The children of Umuike kingdom gathered at the *Oziobi*. The moonlight illuminated the *Oziobi* palace. The glowing hurricane lanterns that lit the huts were shining with impeccable gusto. Logs of fire were made to keep the *Oziobi* warm. Roasted corn and pears were kept beside the fireplace. The children were learning new moonlight songs for the forthcoming *Okwumba* festival. When Ikeobi emerged from the inner chamber of his Obi, the children became quiet. They bowed their heads and chorused:

“Nnanyi, we greet you! Nnanyi, we greet you!” Ikeobi, the Onuowu and the famous warrior of the land, waved his hand to touch the children. Obidike, the tallest and the bravest of the children, stood up.

“Nnanyi,” we greet you. The father of the land, we greet you,” he said respectfully. “We have come to listen to your legendary tale. Children of Umuike are here to listen to your words of wisdom.”

“My sons and daughters, you are all welcome to the Obi,” Ikeobi replied, smiling cheerfully. Ikeobi was a kind-hearted man. He loved telling great stories to the children of Umuike. He began his tale after clearing his throat.

“Our patriarch’s name was *Ike*, meaning *strength*. It was from *Ike* that we derived our name Umuike, meaning children of strength, and with the passage of time, we increased in wealth and population,” he said, looking at the children who were listening attentively. “Ikenga, a fearless warrior, great and Legendary, was the founder of our village. His son Dike was my grandfather, who bore my father, Ikechukwu. Ikechukwu was his first son and was brave like his ancestor. The story about our people,

culture, and heritage is a fairly long one, and it is an epic indeed. For time, I shall be brief,” Ikeobi said, munching the roasted corn on the table. “I come from a lineage of warriors. My grandfather Dike, a seasoned hunter, wrestler, farmer and merchant of palm oil, married many wives and had many children. He was a man of exploits, warlike and hardworking. He was tall, strong, industrious and handsome.

He told me this story many years ago. He lost many of his children to the cold hands of death when *Iba* attacked his family. My father was the only surviving male child. It was an *Eke* market day. My grandfather called me to his *Obi* where he told me the story of our land. I was his favourite grandson. I carried his bag on so many occasions and ceremonies. That made me know so many things about the history of our people. I became a repository of historical titbits. My grandfather told me stories of national conflicts and inter-tribal wars. He said his mentor was Sundiata, son of Sogolon of old Mali. He also told me of Osei Tutu, Osei Kwame, and Shaka of South Africa. In my grandfather’s *Obi* were professional bards responsible for recording the victories, history and glorious qualities of our ancestors whose war exploits they extolled with panegyric songs. They sang with flutes and beat the *Okolo* drum during festivals such as the new yam festival, *Itu* aka, and ibuza ceremonies. Our people were great people,” Eze Ikeobi said, touching his white beard with the back of his palm. “Umuike clan became popular among neighbouring communities when my grandfather Dike led the war against the fetish *Mbaike* people. They had planned to invade our land and take over our farms, property, wives and children. They were envious of our prosperity and growing fame. In those days, the *Mbaike* people were renowned for war conquest. They had conquered many communities across the rivers and borders. They were advancing fiercely towards the eastern lands. This war took great warriors from our land, like Nkume, Igiriogu, Mbajiogu, and my father, *Ikechukwu*.

I was a young boy, thirteen years old. Before this great war, my father was told by Agwotumbe, the great debia of our land, to fortify me and entrust the mystery sword in my hand. The *Mbaike* and *Abam* teamed

up to defeat us. We fought and resisted. They killed many of our warriors, but we dislodged them from taking over our farm lands and oil wells. After my father's death, Ikechukwu, my grandfather Dike taught me the act of warfare, the mystery of the sword. He fortified me with charms and amulets that fuelled my aggression during battle.

He was still burning with chagrin at the death of his finest warriors, including my father. Many young men of my age were gathered in his Obi. He invited several medicine men from *Ohafia* to pour libations to our ancestor, Ikenga. Ikenga had never lost a battle throughout his conquest across the rivers and borders. These medicine men made incantations and sacrifices of goats and chicken to rejuvenate our strength. Women were not allowed to come close to us for fear of contamination. We stayed in the shrine for several seasons. After the tenth season in the year of the full moon, we came out and roared like lions. Propelled by the death of our Hero warriors, we attacked the *Abama* and *Mbaike* people. They saw war and warred no more. All their property, sheep, cattle, chickens and warriors went down under our magic swords. We also lost some men. It was the mother of all battles. Mountains and highlands vibrated at the clatter and clang of swords and lances. We made mincemeat of them. Blood flowed like a river, and we saw victory. It was a most brutal war; beyond tongues could tell. Beautiful maidens were captured, and they returned with us. My grandfather passed on at the ripe age of 130 years. The *Okwumba* festival is done in honour of him and other fallen heroes.

Sons and daughters of Umuike, this is my story, your story, our story. The moon is strolling gently to his peaceful abode. I can hear the voices of night ants fading away. You must go home now. The next Eke day, I shall tell you the story of our resistance against the Alien culture," Ikeobi said amidst cheers from the excited children of Umuike.

The Chief's Daughter

Borusei Kipkirui (Kenya)

Dear Mabel,

There is always an itching hope to see you, out of unreal happenings and the cover of imagination of human thinking. Whenever this hope that one day our souls will twin comes as a flash beyond eager hearts, I yearn to grasp a third degree of love from the partakers. And all the prospective suitors who come swearing loneliness to you can't believe you are a rose that turns crowds of men into a "cold-blood murder" over several tastes of love. They draw imagination that I am sure will lead them to pits of regret and nursing wounds of a bruised "forever".

Love—this old friend has been a victim of the "murder". A lonely soul dies for you here, a poor man whose mother brewed lethal *chang'aa* that swept a multitude for him to go to school, to get the fount of hope to furnish the flaws that met his elder brother. Mabel, no pain escapes a wounded puma. Shadows and light have been supernatural beings that show me the way of life, and the storm of my heart would recede if I find someone to share my plight with.

It was a beautiful tale to be loved by a tall, elegant and all-smiles lady. Your beauty surpasses that of a maracas' end, your angelic voice that was barbiturate to my soul. The wish to cover these imaginations with a tale of love is, and it was a constant reminder that you were to be there for me.

It has been two years since we last met. I remember the day we spent a whole Sunday in the *Silanga* that covers the memories of lovers who proposed each day. Gutters that collected the water were thickened with rust that seemed to etch to the walls like leeches fighting for diseased blood. I remember how you tripped over and splashed dirty water that had turned pale green and was confused for kitchen waste that consisted of decaying beetroots. You smiled and suddenly cried over my shoulder, and it was a serene moment. The only indifferent incident was the sight of an infant floating near the reeds you were about to pick. You said it was a pity to see a mother flush an angel into the water as if it had been a disease in the womb.

By that dam, we constructed the foundation of our love pillar. You used the analogy of the tower of Babel to explain how we should never be in confusion to regret it later. I wonder if the waters that cooled our feet as we kissed do not come to your mind, like how fast our love turned so sharp and you left me hopeless, turning into a recluse! It is like the dismay of an announcement of a baby's birth that bivalves to the caves of *reresike* and gets swallowed by the foul smell of their waste. The reeds that fed from the infant's blood that you picked and wove into a heart-shaped model. Does that not remind you of the formative moments we had?

Some time ago, I recall you coming to our home and telling my parents you were my favourite friend. Could they believe me? My mother is that individual who never loathes visitors regardless of their suspicious character. These days my mother asks where the wicked of the earth took you. She had already "signed" a treaty with the *motiryot* to take the role of turning you into a woman- it dawned on me you had told her we were in plans to get married. It is a pity to know that you were taken as the third wife of Martin, an old man who's your father's best friend.

I hear you are not the lady I knew; they say you are grotesque. Permanent scars have replaced your once beautiful dimples. You are a mother of three and an ever lachrymose woman. They say you nearly bled dry when they forcefully took you to undergo an ominous rite in the name of "transforming" you (though this was also my mother's intention). The

bright girl I knew now sits with the old illiterate women to speak of their husbands and experiences of love. I know you are simulating and cussing under your breath. Your father is such a heartless man. He used to advocate for education in our location and beyond, a chief whose eyes can break a glass with a gaze! I hear your mother got divorced when she tried to defend you, saying you were a bright girl who could revive the family. I don't blame your father; he did that to get rid of a becoming harlot. Your brother tells me you once were on a string-end of death trying to terminate a pregnancy. And it pains to know you, one whom I saw as a Christian, can do such things. It bites at the revelation even when I knew from the beginning that you had used an analogy that best fits any love.

On a Saturday, I met your elder sister, who told me you were married off at Sirikwa. I pitied you. I became remorseful, feigned a smile, and told her we live to see the edges of knives slicing our hearts. It reminded me of our last day in Soya Secondary, as we wrote our last Business Studies paper in the morning to mark the end of our secondary school life. We held each other in our arms and kissed as the students saw us; we cared less. It was like an evil love. But you saw me as a cradle of hope to your fears, and you buried your face in my chest, and I felt affection running through my spine. I knew I loved you, and your love will never be daubed.

About our first meeting, it was like a utopia. I remember you participated in the science fair; reasonably, you were the best chef, and I knew you would make it to the regionals. That day, I held your index finger and told you with my best bass, I love you. You spat on my face and went to the hall where you were to showcase your prowess. I don't know what coincidence made you forget a tripod stand; the only person who could assist you was me. I was yet to go to my hall for the robotics competition. You hesitated as you picked it up and smiled. I knew we were in love. I knew men had always painted their words to lure you into loving them, but the scribe used the magic of simplicity: confession and a noting bass! After the fair, we were back to school, and it was the most trying time for you as you remained ever quiet. I don't know what went

on until we found ourselves in love. The only thing that I can remember was using Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* excerpt: "What if we two shipwrecked people could join forces..."

Mabel, something drives me to get to terms: do you recall the day we were together in school? When Mr Franklin, our Business Studies teacher, tried to take you from my heart? I remember you told me money could not make you leave me, and it now rises to me that at least I read Japhet Langat's Poem that read: "*The grave is a rectangle, but a man must be all rounded...*" I decided to be all-rounded and forget about you. But it was not possible. In the least, money is not evil; money is life and the artery through which blood drains into the rotten skeletons of humans. To say of money, it is worth noting that you were from a well-to-do family; a chief's daughter, as your poor old friend here cries over the temptation to fall in love with a rich girl. It is a pity, I repeat, that you turned from a rose, a daisy to a chrysanthemum that survives the droughts because there is no other recourse.

These days, I have tried to reveal the meaning of Kenny Roger's *Lucille*, and truly, you *picked the fine time to leave me, Mabel*. I have gone down in life—a recluse with no one to watch up to. My ashtray can reveal I have been the chimney of *Sportsman, Superman, and Safari*, and I can't afford the expensive brands as I am still the pauper you knew. Clusters of filters of cigarettes are my favourite friends. Sooner, I will get to know that discipline in love is Paramount.

How will I ever pay my parents for the kindness they have given me? I failed my course despite joining the university and getting sponsored by stiff-necked villagers. I have been left a loner with no life and no love. I think my brother's hope to find solace in me after my studies is dying. In this world of cares, where politics, assassinations and corruption are the breath, we live to see the same blade cutting our hearts. Will I be able to regress from suicidal thoughts like a character I read who was stopped from hanging himself by a lie: *the sun has never given up rising*;

you still have a chance... I wonder if the statement fits the putrefied soul here.

As I end, I hope this letter finds you well and remember that I love you each day a new.

Yours loving,

Sendeu

A Piece Of Meat

Bradley Sikolia (Kenya)

When news broke out about the death of Real's cow, it suddenly became a race against time. Within minutes, her compound was full of curious villagers, hungry to the core, all looking forward to leaving the place with a piece of meat. Her once lonely home was immediately filled with every kind of person, from small children to youths to old men and women, the latter who formed the majority. They all arrived carrying *sufurias* and small baskets, while others had plastic bags safely folded in their arms.

It was the last day of the year, known for celebration and merrymaking. This was, however, not always the case in Mlimani village. Christmas and New Year celebrations seemed to be enjoyed by a few families with working-class individuals and a handful of rich, generous relatives. The vast majority of villagers lived from hand to mouth. Miserable peasants beat up by life's cruel hand and left with nothing to smile about but hope; the everyday fuel kept them going. Village life seemed to drag along slowly, with few events to look forward to. That's why All and Sundry came in droves when Kumbe announced to his fellow drunks that a cow was being slaughtered at Real's place.

"When I woke up this morning, I was choked by my own saliva. I immediately knew that it was a sign. The sun would not go down before I eat *shinulu*," Mbesia remarked excitedly.

"We better get going before the whole village mills there. I want to get the softest and most tender part of the steak," added Jamine, another footloose wanderer, getting up from their small roadside session.

The three would announce the slaughter to everyone they met in the short distance to Real's homestead. Kumbe would turn out to be the evil genius who conveyed wrong information about the death of Real's precious cow.

I was returning home from the shopping centre when I met a large group of women at the junction. They were almost running. After one of them finished talking on her phone, she gingerly announced that the meat was already being distributed. The women broke into a run. I stood there surprised before momentarily breaking into laughter at the sight of what resembled kindergartens running to take their porridge at ten o'clock.

Mama had sent me to buy a kilo of pork to bid farewell to another year of toiling and welcome another one full of doubts and uncertainties.

"Tell the butcher to give you two half-kilograms. He shouldn't know all the meat is ours..."

She had given me the clearest instructions; instructions she always read out when sending for a kilo of meat or anything above it. I understood more than anyone what she was implying. The butcher had this disturbing behaviour of announcing the names of people who bought a kilo of meat or anything above that at the local pub during happy hour every Saturday. These individuals would be labelled rich and always attract evil stares during market days. Beggars and idlers would also have found new targets to milk.

I almost collided with Mama at the front door as she hurried outside. She looked nervous.

"Why is every woman running around? What's happening?"

"What's going on up there?" she asked.

"I don't know..."

"I need to go see for myself. I just got off the phone with Number One. She says she's just seen Real walking around with hands on her head. I think something is wrong."

I watched as she hurried ahead, gaining speed with each step until she started jogging. Whatever was going on, there was surely something sinister. I handed my sister the shopping and checked into the kitchen for

any sign of what was being prepared for lunch. There was no smoke coming from the chimney; a bad sign. I opened the door only to find mum's large basket standing at the centre of the floor. Huge pieces of newly harvested sweet potatoes stared back at me, waiting to be washed and boiled. I cursed and left, slamming the door behind me. I'd save my hunger for the sumptuous pork in the evening. I took off to the place where all roads were now headed.

I arrived to find many villagers, large enough to consume several adult elephants in one sitting. How will these people share a single cow equally by themselves?

They will each get at least a piece of meat, I thought.

I scanned the place with my eager eyes. Most women were sitting around the main house's *mukuru* gossiping. Another crowd was sitting by the benches facing the kitchen. I knew Mama would be in neither group. She was among Real's closest friends, so she might be somewhere inside the house.

Several men were gathered in small groups in the large field behind the homestead. I am not quite sure whether it's behind or in front of the homestead. Mama always criticized the Reals, as was the case with most native settlers in the scheme, for being poor planners. The front of the house operated like the back, while the back was actually the front.

They have a lot of land but don't know how to plan it. I used to think it was because they didn't go to school, but I later realised that's not the problem. It all comes down to common sense.

We would make fun of Lukalo for positioning his homestead in the middle of his large piece of land. He claimed it would prevent his in-laws from tampering with his farm's boundaries and landmarks.

I quickly spotted my friends. They were sitting at the top of the pile of tree trunks that would soon be used to burn bricks. Before running to our famous spot, I looked sideways to ensure Mama hadn't spotted me. I climbed up the pile and bullied Isca from the most comfy trunk atop the pile. It's well-known around here that this seat belongs to the group's most popular boys: Strong, Steve and me.

From where I was seated, I had one of the best views of the whole compound...houses to the left, the whole field before me and the maize farm to the right. The corrugated iron sheets were brown with rust. A small hole was gaping from the kitchen's thatched roof. The cowshed was leaning onto the boy's *simba* like it was tired of standing on its own. Did I not mention that the pit latrine sunk into the ground during the El Nino downpour in June, with Real herself inside?

It was by sheer luck that she had survived the tragedy. That's why the household was using Bernard's toilet and toilets from two other homesteads. The latrine's roof remained partly visible. The grass on the thatch had been eaten away by the daily duties of sun and rain. The narrow poles remained visible above, partly buried like a stepped-on mushroom skeleton.

"Where's the cow?" I asked. The question wasn't specifically directed at anyone.

"There..." Godi answered.

I followed his gaze to the banana garden behind the main house. I had not yet seen this group; the tall banana plants had blocked my view. In the middle of the garden was another group of men standing around the dead cow. The brown carcass was lying on the right side of its belly, with the left feet hanging out in the air. Its eyes stared wildly as if it had died in great pain. There was some foam on the mouth and muzzle. The whole image was chilling, at least to me. I couldn't remember if I had ever seen a dead cow or not. I finally noticed the trail of dirt and crushed grass coming all the way from the maize farm where the dead cow had been dragged from.

I spotted a familiar pink dress. It was Mama! I suddenly saw that the group in the garden wasn't just made up of men. Besides her was Real and her sister-in-law Caro. She was holding her chin with her left hand like a mourning woman. After a couple of minutes, she retreated from the group, holding her hands on top of her head. I feared she would cry out in pain.

The small group was discussing something. Whatever it was, it was definitely of great importance. They talked in low tones with occasional gestures and body movements. Once or twice, I saw Caro point behind her, gesturing at the women sitting on the *mukuru* and the men waiting in the *shikuri*. Above their heads, the tall banana leaves danced in the afternoon wind, oblivious of the situation below them. After conversing among themselves for a while, the group dispersed one by one. I turned abruptly and looked away as soon as Mama retreated to the amusement of my friends.

“What’s she doing?” I whispered.

“She is talking on the phone. Just look, she’s not facing this way,” Obongi said.

Mama was talking on the phone, walking to the main house. The women on the *mukuru* looked at her curiously, as if expecting a coin to drop from her mouth. As soon as she disappeared behind the house, we turned our attention back to the dead cow. Two men were standing over it; Caro’s husband, Ben, and another man whom I had met several times on the village roads, often drunk.

“How did Mrembo die?” I finally managed to ask. The question had stayed buried under my chest for a while now, burning inside like hot embers and choking the curiosity out of me. I had found it hard to ask, primarily because most of the kids around me were Real’s children and also because it was weird asking the victim to narrate how everything had transpired. It was like adding insult to injury. Up to that moment, I had thought it would cause the children pain like their mother, but I was wrong. Everyone’s faces seemed to light up at the end of my question. A few smiles, giggles and chuckles before Godi exclaimed, “Today, we must eat meat!”

Derrick narrated to me how everything had happened from that morning up until the cow’s last breath, all the while admonishing anyone who dared interrupt him. He was the eldest of Real’s sons and, alongside his brothers, had been responsible for looking after the now-dead cow. That’s why he believed his version of the story to be correct.

The day had started normally, like any other day before it. Derrick had milked the cow and cleaned up its shed. After breakfast, Godi grazed Mrembo in the maize field with their cousin's cattle. At around ten o'clock, Derrick arrived with the first sack of grass he and his friends normally cut from the river banks below. He let the grass remain in the sun for a while before summoning the cow. It appeared tired and weary but attacked the grass immediately. When Derrick brought the second sack of grass thirty minutes later, the cow wasn't eating like he had left it. It was on the ground, in fits, with its mouth foaming. Its stomach was growing bigger every minute. He immediately raised the alarm. Curious children came to witness. Real came running from the house only to find her precious cow dying. She called her husband right away, but he didn't answer his phone. Unfortunately, it was also too late. The cow breathed its last, with Real watching helplessly. She sent for Maina, her husband, who was felling trees near the market. The sound of his powers saw could be heard in the distance. But now it was all silent, a sure sign that he was on his way.

Mimi ni mimi! The shout caught everyone by surprise. It was Musa, Real's famous brother-in-law, also known as Mimi-ni-Mimi. He was very popular amongst us, the village children, for all the wrong and right reasons. When drunk, which he usually was, he'd sing us circumcision and war songs and tell us folktales and his life experiences. We would run around the field with him, singing and dancing until we could not have a shred of energy left in our bodies.

The children love *inderema*
Ya mmwaloo!!
The children love *inderema*
Ya mmwaloo!
The children love *shimechero*!
Shio mmwaloo
The children love *shimechero*!
Shio mmwaloo!

Musa would then sit at the top of the pile—on the same comfy trunk I was sitting on and narrate us stories at the top of his voice as if he were addressing the whole village. We would sit down below the pile and listen earnestly, our eyes glued to the narrator, enjoying every moment of his drama and storytelling theatrics.

One more shout and we broke our small gathering to meet the piper. But this wasn't one of those normal music classes.

"Where is that meat?" he demanded. "I want to get my share right now before it starts raining," he said, pointing at the clear sky above. The crowd roared with laughter.

When we showed him the carcass, he ran to the garden like he normally did during our little festivities. Excited children ran behind him like a shoal of fish around a shark. Some entered the damned garden with him, but I was too scared of the dead animal. I stood at the periphery of the garden and watched as Musa ran around the cow several times like a witch doctor chasing away demons before standing abruptly as if he had spotted something.

"Ala! Haven't you skinned it? Why? Why is everyone so reluctant? If you can't do it, then bring me the knives we finish this task faster faster..."

Two men approached him to try and calm him down, but he ignored their presence. Everybody watched him run to the kitchen and return with a *panga*. That's when we knew something wrong was going to happen. One or two women shouted for the men to stop him, but the fact that he was holding a panga made everyone think twice about tackling him. We merely watched as Musa approached the cow and aimed at the neck. He struck the weapon, but his grip wasn't strong enough. Instead of disappearing inside the brown skin, the *panga* bounced off the cow's neck and left his grip. It flew dangerously in the air before landing near the feet of a lucky child. Women shouted and screamed in fear. Everyone rushed to the scene. Before he could react, two men attacked Musa and pinned him on the ground while another took the *panga*. The children were chased

away from the garden. We retreated and watched the remaining events from atop our hallowed pile.

Shortly after, Maina arrived on his old motorcycle. As soon as they heard the motorcycle engine roaring, everybody went out to meet him, as if he were the Messiah—thick smoke billowed from the bike’s exhaust. Maina slowed down and packed behind his kitchen. Derrick and Godi helped offload the power saw and other equipment their dad always carried around.

“We’ve been waiting for you, *Mdosi*. People want meat...” Maina ignored him.

“Yeah, you know you’re the head of this household. Just say the word, and we’ll start skinning it right away,” Jamine added. Trying to pat Maina on his shoulder. The man turned abruptly and pushed Jamine away. He staggered for what seemed like an eternity before tripping over a brick and falling awkwardly on his back.

“So you all want meat?” Maina shouted, addressing no one in particular. “Is that what has brought all of you here...to feast on my loss, to celebrate my pain. Huh? You’re just a bunch of useless neighbours. Get out of my face! Leave my compound right away! Go!”

“Don’t be like that, *Mdosi*,” Kumbe protested.

“Who are you calling *Mdosi*!” He retorted, charging aggressively towards the drunk. However, powerful hands intervened before he could cause any more trouble. Ben led his brother into the main house for what would be a consensus.

Confused men and women looked at each other in astonishment. One or two women got up and left. The majority remained behind, gossiping. I heard one swear that she won’t leave that homestead without meat, eliciting a string of replies from everyone.

“Wananchi! let’s calm down. Please, let calm down. I want to clarify something.”

It was Chief Likono, otherwise known as Tiksi, a short form of politics...or rather politiksi. It was one word he liked using at every gathering. With weddings and funerals being scarce, it was no wonder he

had made it to this gathering, perhaps to give his end-year speech or deliver DC's message on teen pregnancies.

Milembe vosi Milembe khandi...! He greeted the crowd, which replied in unison. "Today I am not here for politiksi...okay?" he clarified, having now gotten everyone's attention.

"I simply want to explain why we shouldn't be expecting a piece of meat from the cow lying there dead." He pointed out at the carcass. "As I have told my daughter Real, the fetinari is on his way here. He'll arrive any time from now. Whether you'll get out of here with a piece of meat or not rests solely upon him. As we all know, fetinari has read many books about livestock, how they are born and how they die, so he'll just know whether the cow is safe for consumption or not. Okay?"

"Yessss...."

The chief continued to highlight and stress the normal things he had been repeating all year long; taking children to school, building toilets, and planting trees, among others. This signature speech always baffled me. I always wondered why the chief wouldn't touch on other matters like the growing number of *chang'aa*-cooking households in the village or address the new daily wages for weeding maize. Within no time, the crowd was already bored. Their hope was, however, raised when Ben and several other men appeared carrying knives and *pangas*. They went straight to the cow and got down to business. Excited whispers rent the air, forcing Tiksi to increase his voice. Ten minutes later, he was forced to adjourn his speech midway because the vet's arrival further distracted the crowd's attention.

With a funny walking style and heavy bag on his back, the man of the hour proceeded straight to the damned garden where Ben's men were finishing skinning the cow. I followed the curious children to go see how the vet would measure the purity of the meat. We stood at a fair distance and observed as the vet gave clear instructions to the men who were now done slaughtering and skinning the cow. He was speaking surprisingly fast. He observed the cow in silence for a few minutes, rolling his bloodshot eyes like a cornered puppy before reaching into his big green

bag. He put on a white lab-coat that seemed three times his size and a pair of plastic gloves. We watched closely as he retrieved the equipment and placed them on the ground beside him, one by one. After a short while, I noted some amused glances emanating from the people around.

Maina was the first to speak. He held the vet's hand and moved him away from the crowd, whispering something into his ear. A few people burst into fits of laughter, attracting more curious eyes into the already swollen crowd.

"Get away from here. Give the doctor and his team enough space and air. Move! Move! Give us some space!" Bernard shouted, dispersing the people.

I was still trying to piece things together when a strong hand patted my shoulder.

"Let's go..." It was Mama. I looked at her for a moment, still bewildered by what was going on.

"What's wrong with fetinari?" I asked her.

"Let's go. I'll tell you on the way," mum said, leading the way. "Hunger will finish people out here..." Mama started as soon as we left the compound.

By the time we finished our sweet potatoes and water lunch, Mama had narrated the whole event thrice. The crowd wasn't amused because of the vet's drunk state; they were intrigued by what he was doing. He was laying down tools for artificial insemination!

"Real and Maina have barred anyone in their household from eating the meat, that's if the meat is found pure and safe in the first place."

"Why?" I wanted some more information.

"First, the cow must have eaten a poisonous shrub from the swamp grass. We doubt if that meat is pure. Secondly, *kehane*, that cow was pregnant...three months and counting. It's *luswa* to eat meat from a pregnant cow."

"What will happen if they eat?" My sister pressed on. I was glad she'd predicted my next question.

"Such meat is ritually impure..."

Mama was cut short by the running and loud shouts of someone outside. We ran just in time to see several men going to Real's place.

"They're dividing the meat! Hurry, or you'll miss."

One look at her was enough to tell you that Mama had made up her mind. After warning me against any cunning manoeuvres, she disappeared into the house. I remained at home for the rest of the day, played marbles with my sister, and helped her cook supper. Late that night, the first case of stomachache, diarrhoea and vomiting was reported. By morning, a dozen households had been hospitalised for food poisoning. Fetinari had disappeared into thin air.

"I can't blame them, though. Everyone wants a good meal, so much for a piece of meat." Mama noted.

Glossary

Shinulu – Delicious meal,

Sufuria – Cooking pot

Mukuru – Steps of a house

Simba – Boy's house

Inderema – A traditional Luhya vegetable

Shimechelo – A type of mushroom

Mdosi – Swahili word for a rich person

Chang'aa – Illicit brew

Luswa – Taboo

Amarula

Bradley Sikolia (Kenya)

Grandfather had nicknames for all of us. For instance, he called my cousin Sanya “Franco,” after his favourite Rhumba singer from Congo. My brother Edu was “Motorola” because he always knew how to handle Mom’s Motorola burner. My young sibling Charlie was “Tabu Ley,” another rising Congolese singer. I was, however, the most popular and most sought-after child in the village due to my daily adventures, childhood adventures that always led me into some sort of trouble. Like the time I climbed the guava tree in Uncle Saidi’s homestead, only for my khaki short to be caught tightly by a protruding branch. I remember hanging there like a skydiver for almost an hour, too embarrassed to scream for help before my uncle noticed me and saved my hanging body.

These adventures seemed to equal me to the famous hare in African folktales. Grandfather thus nicknamed me differently. Not after his favourite singer or any of my troublesome traits, but after my favourite character in those Luhya folktales he liked narrating to us. I was “Nakhamuna,” small, adventurous, dramatic and troublesome like the notorious hare ever present in grandfather’s stories. We, in turn, called Grandfather “Kuka,” the easiest name to speak and the hardest name to forget.

“A long time ago, Nakhamuna lived with his grandmother in the far countryside near Chetambe. Koko loved him very much; she would cook him anything. But there was one problem: Nakhamuna was very lazy...”

At that moment, Kuka would roll his dark eyes across the small room, resting his gaze momentarily on each of us, our eager eyes glued on

him, looking for any clue whatsoever as to where this story was taking us. After this brief silence and suspense, he would go on and narrate the tale of Nakhamuna and his grandmother and finish it off with a lesson.

We loved Kuka's stories. He always had something different to tell us. He always had something new hidden away at the back of his old mind. He had narrated hare's tales several times, and each time he did so, there always seemed to be another idea being presented.

"Kuka is a genius," Sanya would say excitedly.

"No, he is not!" my friend Cimuka would refuse.

"Why...?" I'd ask.

"Because he adds things that are not there."

"Things like what?"

This time Edu, the eldest among us, would chip in. "I have heard Dad's story. Koko never slaughters a red cock for Nakhamuna, but yesterday, Kuka told us that she went as far as slaughtering a bearded goat for him. A whole Billy goat..."

"If you don't like Kuka's stories, then go to Nairobi and listen to Dad's stories!" I shouted, pointing as further away past Kuka's hut as I could in the direction I thought Nairobi was located.

Kuka's hut stood lonely at the furthest end of the compound, several meters from the small cliff that faced the main road to Mbande. Sometimes, my cousins and I would sit on the cliff and greet *bodabodas* as they ferried customers on their bicycles to and from the tarmacked road. Kuka lived alone in this small, round, thatched house. It was heavily thatched with dried elephant grass and papyrus reeds from the Nambilima River Swamp. Its mud walls were old and cracked. The inside of the hut had the persistent smell of tobacco from Kuka's snuff box that never left the round room. On sunny afternoons, it was refreshingly cool inside the hut, while on cold nights, it was unusually warm in there. These conditions always fascinated me.

However, my grandfather wasn't supposed to be alone. Kuka had married three wives before, but they had all left him in mysterious circumstances. His first wife fell and died in the milking pen one morning.

No one knew what caused her fall. Some suspected that Kuka's cow, Shirima, had kicked her in the chest. But there was no way Shirima could have kicked her because the cow's hind legs were tied very well, ready for milking. So it was that Kuka's first wife died mysteriously. She left him with two sons and a daughter. Kuka then married a second wife. She, too, exited the scene with a story behind her.

At the time, Kuka offered to fight in the Keya. He had gone to Sigalagala to join the white man's army. He wanted to fight the Germans in Tanganyika or even Burma. Kuka had left Caroli, the wife, several months pregnant. After staying alone for a while, she left Kuka's house to stay with her parents. She needed someone to take care of her in the final months of her pregnancy. But she never made it to her parents' place, or so they say. Nobody ever saw Caroli after that, and no one knows where she went. Then stories started circulating. Some claimed she had arrived at her parents' safe and sound, but they had married her off to another man on the same day. Others claimed that she went to Uganda, believing that Kuka had been posted to fight there. However, the majority claimed that Caroli never meant to travel to her parents. She had actually travelled to Nairobi, where she had found a rich *Mzungu* guy. The guy promised to take care of her and her unborn baby, so they went to London together.

When Kuka returned from the war, he was pummeled with different versions of his wife's disappearance. He was so confused by everyone's claims and rumours that he failed to do the obvious: travel to Caroli's parents and hear what they had to say.

Consequently, Kuka married his third wife. He built a new hut for Namayi and settled down to the normal village life. Namayi bore him twins, a boy and a girl. Her second birth was a son, as well as her fourth. It took almost three seasons before she could conceive again. But as fate would have it, Namayi would die during this birth. This time, she once again bore twins, but in a strange way.

When her water broke, Namayi was quickly attended to. She delivered a daughter. But unknown to the midwives, another child was still in Namayi's belly, lurking somewhere in the shadows. That night,

Kuka threw a party to celebrate his fruitful wife. He invited his extended family and friends. Several goats and chickens were slaughtered. *Busaa* flowed like no one's business. That night, however, this son came out. With everyone drunk and wasted, no one had Namayi's cries of pain as she delivered the twin. In the morning, shocked villagers woke up to a dead mother and a newborn son. The baby looked weak but somehow made it against all odds.

Kuka was devastated and extremely frustrated. He was angry at himself for choosing pleasure over his lovely wife. Grief overwhelmed him. It seemed like the demons from his past marriages had come back to haunt him, and they had succeeded in destroying his legacy. No one would remember him for the good he had achieved or for bravely fighting the Germans in the Great War. His name would be mentioned and narrated alongside the disappearance and death of his wives. He tried hanging himself, but concerned villagers were watching him closely. He was thoroughly caned and warned never to contemplate suicide again lest he brings a curse to the entire clan and sends the village into damnation.

Kuka swore never to marry again. He became a lonely man. *Kangara* and tobacco became his new companions. He clung to *busaa* and *chang'aa*. Mama blamed it for Kuka's fading eyesight. His sons and daughters avoided him like a leper. His friendship circle became small. Many cared less about what he was up to, what he ate, where he slept...all except my dad, whose dad had been accused of killing Namayi at his birth in the dead of the night.

Kuka's hut was the second home to me and my troublesome cousins. It was never locked during the day. Not because it had no valuables, but simply because we had to deliver his food there. My mum and Sanya's mum took turns feeding Kuka, alternating daily. The old man had several valuables to his name. He had a large wooden chest which he claimed was given to him by the British Queen. When dad gave him two Kaunda suits, I peered inside the sacred chest and saw a dark leather attire—probably military uniform—some heavy boots and a sheathed sword. The attire looked too heavy for a human body to carry. Kuka's

sacred chest sat expertly on a three-legged wooden stool. Like the chest on top of it, this stool also had its won story:

"This stool was made several seasons before my great-grandfather was born. It's a symbol of fertility and prosperity. It portrays the continuity of our lineage among the Lù clan. This stool is given to the first-born male of his time in our family tree. He only sits on it during the handover ceremony, a very special moment. You'll see it on the day when I pour milk on Franco's dad's head..."

His voice would trail off on realizing that I wasn't grasping anything.

Everything in that hut seemed to have a story, even the small snuff box. We got used to asking questions about anything that looked amazing in the hut, and any amazing story would come out. The hut was also where our parents never punished us for going or even spending a night. Whenever mum wanted to beat me for dipping my dusty fingers in little Charlie's porridge, I would run away and hide under Kuka's bamboo bed. On the day Sanya's mother beat him for stealing his dad's mushrooms, he stayed in the hut until evening, when we went to fetch him. That hut was like a shrine, and Kuka was the Rabbi. He never yelled or scolded us. He always welcomed us with open arms. That's why we loved staying around him, hearing his stories, singing with him and eating with him. However, neither of us had ever slept on Kuka's exotic bamboo bed. That was until I misbehaved.

On this day, my dad had prescribed me a dose of nine strokes of the cane for missing school. I used to hide in Uncle Saidi's sugarcane on days when I didn't feel like going to school. Madam Indombo reported me to Mum, who referred the case to Dad, who was on leave then. That morning, dad beat me three canes before breakfast. He scheduled another three at lunchtime and the last dose before supper. But at lunchtime, dad was nowhere to be seen. I knew he would come back in the evening and combine the remaining six strokes on my poor buttocks. That's why I ran to Kuka's hut immediately after being washed by mama in the evening. I stayed there until dark. Kuka had only one *koroboi*, but it was dry. I couldn't go and ask mama for paraffin; Dad would surely catch me. Edu

came to fetch me, but I refused to accompany him back to our house, even when he reminded me that the Rock would be fighting the Undertaker in a cage. The six strokes scared me to the bone; I'd rather miss watching wrestling and save my backside.

So, I stayed in the darkness and eventually fell asleep. Kuka arrived later in the night drunk. He fell asleep without even noticing that I was right there beside him. In the morning, he wasn't surprised to see me there. He was, however, shocked to realise that I had wet his bed! You see, Kuka's bed wasn't like our metal double-deckers in the bedroom I shared with my siblings. His bed was made of bamboo. Two strong bamboo sticks were dug into the mud floor. The other two legs were dug into the hut's wall and sealed with mud. The bamboo wasn't held together by nails. It was tied and woven together by sisal ropes. And in place of a sponge mattress, Kuka's mattress was one of a kind; dried grass, sheep wool and feathers were all arranged in a large sack. This bed never creaked or moved. It was one of the strongest beds I ever came across. It was also one of the most comfortable places I ever slept on.

So, Kuka complained to dad about me wetting his mattress.

"It will take days before drying up and eventually start smelling," he lamented.

Dad looked at me sullenly. That serious look meant one thing: I was in double trouble. I had messed up my own plan. I could see our future escapades to the hut banned. Dad chased me to go to Mama. He later left with Kuka after breakfast. They returned that evening with three bicycles, two of them carrying dad and Kuka and the third some goodies. Dad had bought Kuka a mattress, blankets, and a chimney lamp. Kuka was very happy. His wrinkled face was covered with a wide grin. I saw his wisdoms for the first time. We helped carry the items into his hut and replaced the unique mattress with the new one. Mama took the old blankets. She would later wash them up and store them in our room for future use. Father would leave for Nairobi the next day, but before he left, he gave Kuka a goodbye present: a bottle of Amarula. That bottle changed Kuka's life.

I recall the exact moment dad handed Kuka that bottle. I had woken up early enough to see Dad off, but it wasn't until 8.00 am that he left. We had a family breakfast with Kuka present. He was amazed to see my bread spread with jam but refused his slices to be spread with anything.

"That blood makes me lose appetite. Blood is sacred..." He shrugged us off, even when Mama pointed out that the jam wasn't made from blood. Mum cleared the table after we were done. I remained behind to eavesdrop on dad and Kuka's conversation. That's when dad went to his room and came back with a tall brown bottle decorated with what looked like the picture of a big cow with a tall nose. The bottle also had some white strings that looked like small sisal ropes. Kuka was overjoyed. He received the Amarula with open arms, grinning like the other day and hugged Dad tightly. I had never seen Kuka so happy before. I think he would have shed a tear if I wasn't present.

Kuka took his time with Amarula and drained the bottle at his pace. I think he used to take it in small doses like medicine, the way Mwachi, the doctor, used to tell my mum how to give us the cough syrup. It was several weeks later that I saw the bottle empty. Sanya and I were eating lunch in Kuka's hut, enjoying a tasty meal of ugali and *seveve*. I was very hungry, but the food was very hot, especially the ugali. Mama loved doing justice to her ugali. It was always smoking hot. I had therefore figured out a way to eat, even when the food was that hot.

I would *meka* a big chunk of *ugali* and bounce the *shirionje* off my small hands while blowing it at the same time. This would cool off the food just enough for my tongue to handle. With time, I became an expert in this process. Mama's *ugali* was never too hot for me to handle, and in case things went south, I always had a plastic of cold water beside me to cool my fingers and throat. But on this day, Kuka noticed my wanton behaviour.

"Don't blow into a *shirionje* of ugali! You will never win a fight!" He hissed.

We exchanged comical looks with Sanya, thinking the old man was perhaps joking to merely encourage our appetite. I went on with my normal habit.

Kuka saw me again.

“Khamuna, don’t blow into your ugali. You will never win a fight! Everyone will wrestle you down; even young Tabu Ley will beat you!” Kuka almost screamed. He bent down from his wooden chair and offered his help. He cut a big chunk of ugali, moulded it in his big hands and arranged it on my plate. He arranged two other pieces and left me to deal with them.

After washing his hands, Kuka walked to his wooden chest and retrieved Amarula and his small brown glass. We watched him pour himself the small dose like he always did, a quarter of the glass. He shook the slender bottle to feel the remainder but alas! The bottle was empty. The final contents of Amarula were in the glass he was holding. The old man’s expression changed instantly. He gazed at the bottle sadly and took his position to have his final drink in peace. After eating and clearing the utensils, Kuka gave us a small plastic basin and sent us some hot water.

When we returned, we watched in amazement as he washed, or rather, bathed the Amarula bottle and his small glass in the steaming hot water. He put the bottle safely in his small sisal bag. Later that evening, I saw him leave with the bag. He was in the company of his drinking buddy, Juma. Kuka always called his friends *wangwana*. These were the chosen few, and Juma was one of them. I always speculated what *wangwana* meant. It would be years before I knew the name was a Swahili word for gentlemen.

After draining the Amarula, Kuka changed drastically. He began drinking heavily. He became a footloose wanderer alongside his bunch of *wangwana* who were always drunk. This time it wasn’t for merry; they drank extravagantly. He would leave with his buddies at the crack of dawn and would not be seen until late in the night. He would sometimes stagger to his hut, singing his favourite Rhumba tracks along the way. Or some passersby turned well-wisher would drag him from a roadside slump to

the safety of his hut. Those were the days when people still cared about the wellbeing of others, especially the elderly. Even then, he wouldn't let go of his Amarula bottle, which he now filled with different brands of traditional brew.

Lunch with Kuka became a rare thing. We rarely saw him sober. Most of his meals started going untouched. Our dog Jimmy really enjoyed the stale food. She would bark anxiously each time I approached Kuka's hut to fetch the utensils. With time, she added so much weight that Mama started wondering whether Jimmy could chase after a thief and catch them. But all was at the expense of my grandfather. Kuka's health started deteriorating. His sight must have been affected, too, because he would take time to recognize us. In one such instance, he confused Sanya with Edu and yelled at me for the first time when I went to pick up the utensils. I was very shaken. When Mama had of the incident, she blamed the type of *kangara* and *chang'aa* Kuka was taking. She warned us to avoid him when drunk. She then mentioned something I had never heard before.

"He will be completely blind unless he ceases talking malwa ke lichina."

"Mama, flash Dad. Tell him to send Kuka another bottle of Amarula on *Msamaria Mwema*. Maybe that will change him..." I remember proposing. My mum merely laughed me off.

Meanwhile, my friends and I continued with our adventures. When you're young and curious, life is good. You're always looking forward to tomorrow to try something new. That's why we started hunting birds and rabbits. We were fed up with playing hide-and-seek or one-touch football. We convinced Cimuka's elder brother Kataka to make us bows from the strong *Lusiola* tree. We then fumbled with ourselves and made some small catapults to shoot down pigeons and doves. Our hunting expeditions became the ideal hobby. Our party comprised a majority of kindergartens and was active throughout the village. Kataka taught us how to make good arrows and set up strong traps for catching rabbits. Several days later, we caught our first rabbit by the small hill near river Nambilima. Kataka showed us how to skin, split, and roast the meat.

The next day, we caught another one. This one was bigger and fatter. We prepared everything, just as Kataka had taught us, and set it for roasting. That's when we realised that no one had carried a matchbox. Ours was the nearest home, so I had Sanya accompany me to our kitchen to get, or rather steal, a matchbox. But unluckily for us, Mama was sitting with her friends outside the kitchen gossiping while winnowing baskets of beans. There was no way she would let us leave with a matchbox. Mama always believed that I was capable of setting the whole village on fire. That's when Sanya gave me an idea.

"You are the smallest. Go to Kuka's hut. He always has a matchbox for lighting his *koroboi*. It's usually beside his snuffbox on top of the wooden chest. Go through the window so Mama won't see you," he said excitedly.

We went through the banana garden past the cowshed and sneaked undetected behind Kuka's hut. Mama and her friends were busy gossiping about the Chief and his upcoming *baraža*.

Lucky for us, Kuka's window was open. Sanya helped lift my small plumb body to the cross frame. I maneuvered and snaked my way through the small opening and prepared to make my landing. The hut was dark and quiet. I couldn't see where I was landing. I let go the frame and jumped inside. I landed on Kuka's stool, crashing onto the cold mud floor. Fortunately, I wasn't hurt. But as I stood up, I hit something on my head. I raised my hand and tried to feel what it was.

Fear gripped me instantly. I ran to the door and swung it wide open. Before me, Kuka's body hung from the thatched roof of his hut. I suddenly found myself screaming out, yelling at the top of my voice, not from the deathly image before me but from the pain that shot up my foot. I had just stepped on Kuka's broken bottle of Amarula.

Glossary

- Bodaboda* – bicycles and motorcycle taxis commonly found in East Africa.
- Busaa*– an African alcoholic drink(traditional beer) made from sorghum, maize, or millet flour.
- Chang'aa*– a traditional home-brewed spirit, popular in Kenya.
- Ugali*–a Kenyan food made from maize meal.
- Seveve*–Traditional vegetables
- Meka*–Cut with a hand.
- Shirionje*–A piece of ugali
- Wangwana*–Gentlemen
- Kangara*–Traditional tree
- Lichina*–Stone
- Koroboi*–A small kerosene lantern

Poor Betty

Patience Marie Chilinjala (Malawi)

Within a few weeks after her mother's death, fifteen-year-old Betty felt out of sorts. She was often depressed and deeply missed her mother, and without her presence, she felt like a ship without its helm, floundering helplessly and without direction in a sea of pain and grief. She and her nine-year-old sister, Mada, and six-year-old brother, junior, had been taken in by the only relative they knew. But living with their aunt wasn't easy. The woman clearly didn't want the children in her home as she resorted to ill-treating them. There was no compassion and love from her. One fateful day, she mercilessly beat young Junior on the ground because he had eaten the bread she had reserved for her children. The young boy cried bitterly as he ran out into the dark night. Betty had been sent out to draw water and upon arrival, found the incident. She had had enough and after a few words exchange, they were sent packing. That was how they found themselves living on their own.

Living on their own brought a huge weight of responsibilities on her back. As young as she was, Betty would get up early to look for any work to earn money for their well-being. With the little she made, she bought food and paid the weekly rent.

"Here you go." Betty tried to pass a spoon of porridge to her sister, who had been ill for the past few days. Propping herself up with one hand, Mada lodged the spoon in her mouth. After swallowing, she pushed her sister's hand, crying, "I don't like it. It tastes funny, and I feel sick."

Betty sat back on her knees and stared at her sick sister without a slight clue about what to do next. She'd never seen her this ill before, and she was getting worse each day. She chided herself; it's only fever, and it'll

go in no time. But her silent protestations did nothing else to ease her mind. The following day, Betty was left with one option. She raced back to her aunt's house, hoping she would be of help. As expected, the stern woman turned her down as she only handed her several painkillers she had kept in her house. Betty returned home with a broken heart. The very thought of the obstacle they had endured since the death of their beloved mother was enough to drive anyone mad. The poor girl was hopeless. What was she to do? Nobody wanted to help them. The days of grief she had endured had accumulated in her mind, and her nerve-racking system could no longer take it.

The height of the crisis came later that night when Mada moaned with pain. She lay weak as she continued to shiver. Too full of grief and exhaustion, Betty could only grip her hand and watch her sister.

"Mom, I wish you were here," she murmured.

Betty watched her siblings sleep, then her eyes searched the dilapidated house they called home and everything in it. Will things ever be different for them? She wondered. How would she make enough money to sustain them and keep her sister and brother in school? Certainly, not her menial jobs that hardly bought enough food. Yes, there is, a voice in the back of her mind whispered to her.

The thought that sprung unbidden to her mind caused the hairs on her body to stand. Running a hand over her face, she shook her head in denial. *No, dear God. I can't do that.* She started sweating as the voice in her head kept coming back. *It's easy money. You won't have trouble finding a customer, and you will use the money to get your sister to the hospital, besides it will only be for this night.* The voice taunted her.

She watched her siblings sleep as she gathered her confused thoughts in order. Lord knows she had tried her best. She had washed and cleaned, drawn water for people, sold some of their valuables to sustain her family, and had nothing else to do. No one wanted to help them, certainly not her aunt either. All options were exhausted than to sell herself. She quietly left the house and walked into the dark night.

Betty arrived at the fleet of bottle stores across the main road pub and stood afar, watching with keen interest as she fought a silent war within herself. She stood there in the cold night, eyes sweeping through the dirty alley as she spotted a few girls who were provocatively dressed, each trying their luck. How could she be this stupid? She suddenly thought. The idea had seemed easy earlier on, and now that she was here, she couldn't go with it as her nerve had vanished. On her way, she'd not thought how much to charge, where they would go to accomplish the act, and, most importantly, what she was to do when the act was being performed. Shivering with shame, Betty hurriedly turned back for home, ignoring hot, stinging tears; she embraced the pride. Whatever happens to her family happens; only God knows tomorrow. As she stumbled through the darkness, she failed to see the man whose presence had been known by his rough hand that pulled her into a narrow alley thrown roughly against a mouldy wall.

"How much?" he demanded, his hands urgently tugging on her blouse. Stunned by the attack, Betty only managed to pull the stranger's hands, invading her breasts. She tried to scream, but her voice was gone.

"No, no, no, please, you've made a mistake. I'm not here for..." She got no further. It all happened fast. The stranger's cold hands ripped off her blouse, and she froze as he touched her stomach. She started kicking and clenching her fists, pounding the man, but the man pinned her tightly against the wall. She felt cold as the night's wind hit her bare body as the man invaded her. She moaned with pain as it thrashed into her wildly.

At last, it was all over. She slid silently down the wall, struggling to cover her exposed body and run into the cold night. She ran madly as tears streamed down her face. She reached her house in a couple of minutes and opened the door. She sat there in the dark, leaning against the closed door. Her initial shock had faded, replaced by a feeling of lethargy and a curious sense of unreality. After what felt like a long time, she crawled to the mattress she shared with her sister and tightly pulled the blankets close. As the night drowned, all she could hear were peaceful

sleeping sounds made by her brother and sister. Those sounds made her feel secure and at ease. She closed her eyes tightly as the sounds drove away the nightmare she had just witnessed, and it gave her a sense of relief that she would always be fine around her family.

Saturday Night At The Flamboyant

Emelda Nyaradzai Gwitimah (Zimbabwe)

i. Mandy on Saturday

What annoys the women of Felix Mine Compound 2 the most is discovering she is married, thanks to someone calling her “*Mukadzzi waKhedha*” that Saturday morning.

“Shame, poor man!”

“O-hoo! Married to a coloured man. That’s why she dresses like that. You know these ones!”

“Got married in their thirties. You know these old brides.”

Mandida hears all the gossip—and there’s been a lot of it in three weeks but is unphased. It’s contradictory anyway. None of these tales matter. Her man is coming to take her back home on Sunday, thank God. She’s going to see her boys. She is jolted as the truck skims over a pothole and rolls the window up to stop the wisps of hair flying into her face. August is always windy, but as she tells her colleague on the drive back from the derelict gold claims in the Miombo woodlands near Felixburg, these are the winds of change. Something was definitely changing for the better that year. She could feel it.

Mandy Render, née Mandida Chibande, 36 but not a day over 26 to those who’ve never seen her ID, certainly has no shortage of enemies. As the health inspection manager deployed to Felix Mine from the head office in Bulawayo, she’s gathered a disgraceful reputation for doing her job.

“Doesn’t wear work suits, that one. Always dresses, short ones even.”

“So much perfume! She’s going to attract bees, and we’ll all be stung.”

“You know she went *kunobata maoko* at Shumba’s funeral without a headscarf? Bare hair flying everywhere at the old man’s funeral!”

“We know these light-in-complexion ones. They’ll take your man if you’re not careful. Then they’ll bewitch you and your children!”

“Bossy.”

The women and their husbands are not accustomed to taking orders from someone who doesn’t fit the typical look of a woman in mining. Unlike the husky female engineers who occasionally come to the site and even play soccer at Sunday boozier games, she wears her hair loose under the helmet. She dons safety shoes only when she has to descend the shaft. She wears make-up under her mask. She touches people when she speaks to them. She eats with the miners and the grounds staff on site. She smiles at people when she greets them. She offers lifts to town without being asked first. She disagrees with her male co-workers and actually says her opinions (out loud, mind you).

She makes the men want to go to work every day.

One of her co-workers later walks her to her hotel room.

“We’re going to Charles Austin Theatre tonight. Are you coming?”

She ponders.

“No. I won’t join you. But I’ll be at *The Arms* for a bit.”

“Don’t know why you like that place.”

“It’s cosy.”

“It’s common.”

She’s used to the classist opinions of those she works with. She thanks him, then floats into her room. She removes her helmet and kicks off the dirty boots. She showers, blowdries her relaxed hair, then sets her watch alarm for 6 p.m. After oiling herself, she rolls into the bedsheets but reaches to the floor for her diary and scribbles a few lines before dropping it again, settling in for a nap.

The soft chime of the timepiece wakes her at six. She carefully selects her outfit: a billowy navy blue sleeveless maxi dress patterned with red and yellow flowers, a light eggshell jacket, yellow earrings, a gold bangle, and a gold toe ring. She douses herself in fragrance and heads down to the bar.

ii. Josh on Sunday

31.8.97– “Dear God, please forgive me for laughing at these women’s husbands. Truly, I am appalled they think I’d want any of them. Thank you for Lucas, Lord. Thank you that he’s coming to get me. I don’t want to sound ungrateful for this job, but Masvingo is a lifeless town. And please take care of Princess Diana’s sons, Lord. What a sad way to go.”

As Josh Jonga of *The Kyle Tribune* scans the last entry of the dead woman’s diary, his stomach twinges. He’s not proud of his excitement, only aware of what this story could do for his career. This wasn’t the first murder he’s covered, but homicides are still a rarity in the quiet city. *The Kyle Tribune* usually publishes fluff like marriage notices and congratulatory messages, silly disputes from the teacher’s college, and occasional news pieces supplied by a network of freelancers. Josh is sure that this story will save the paper from closure: this was not only front-page news but a national interest piece. As a favour from his cousin at the police station, he’s been given access to suite A43 at the Flamboyant Hotel. He’d been in the vicinity of the premises the previous night, the Saturday on which the murder took place.

He slams the floral book shut. He’d seen the corner from under the side of the bed and saw no harm in taking it for a little bit. A lean man of almost door height, Josh struggles to get up from the crouched position he’s taken next to the bed. His knees crack, and he sighs. His fortieth birthday was the month before, but his whole body seems to have aged since then. The patch of white hair at the centre of his crown is starting to become visible, as are the other greys near the V of his receding temples. He needs new spectacles and a new pair of pants, as most pairs

he wears now show his ankles. Back at college, he'd played basketball. Now his only exercise comes from jumping to conclusions and dodging his wife.

He needs every story he can get. This one is the story, the one that will save his career.

So far, he has the facts: the woman was rich and married to a mine boss. She left *The Arms* at 8.30 p.m., and the power had gone out at 9 p.m.. There'd been no screams. Well, not from the victim, at least. A member of the housekeeping team had seen the door to her room slightly ajar at 10 p.m. as he was walking through the second-floor hallway with a lamp. He reached to shut the door, but it wouldn't budge. It was then that he noticed the fabric of her dress stuck and the tail of blood snaking down from behind the door. He called, "Excuse me?" and knocked. Then the screaming started.

Too drunk to go home, Josh had used yet another complimentary stay ticket that night. He was one of the guests startled by the young man's sobering screams. He'd joined the other guests peeking from their doors and only moved when he saw the manager rush past him. The manager happened to be his neighbour, Stan. At 11.30 p.m., Stan called him from the reception and asked him to come to the Guest Relations office. He'd been asked if he had any private numbers for police detectives at Rhodene Station (he did) and if he knew who was on duty that night (he did not). Then he'd been told the news and asked to maintain confidentiality by Stan. He'd been tipsy still and asked to lie down in the little room behind the bar. Josh Jonga is known, so, yes, they'd let him get some rest until the police arrived at dawn. Then the sun rose on Sunday, and all hell broke loose.

The police had come in and cleaned the place, taken the body, and locked the room. They took a single hour for a service that usually took ages. Josh had returned to his room and showered, then called home. That had been a bad idea. His wife's shrill accusations came as soon as he'd said "hello." She'd hung up, but what else was new? Let Memory think what she wanted. He was about to change his life. At noon, he'd called

his cousin at the station and asked if he could check out the room. He'd gotten an "Are you crazy?" but not a no and was instructed not to break the story until the deceased's spouse was informed. Instead, he'd proceeded to get the key from a naïve receptionist under the guise of assisting the police. Now he stands in the middle of the room, wondering how they had missed the diary despite a pretty good job of searching the drawers. It had been partially obscured under the bed, but he'd seen it quickly enough.

He stretches his long arms above his head, left bent at the elbow beneath the right. As he clicks his neck—a bad habit, he knows—he glimpses the outline of a figure at the door.

"Hello, who's there?"

A man shuffles forward into full view in the doorway. He is short—then again to Josh, everyone is—engulfed in corduroy slacks, and a safari shirt, the khaki type National Park rangers wore. His dark bald head shines, his forehead speckled with sweat, as is his large, scarred nose. He looks down as he speaks and wrings his hands around a grey cap.

"I saw her. I saw who killed her."

"What?"

"She was so nice to me. But..."

Josh hesitates, looks behind the man, and asks, "Who are you?"

The man looks up, his red eyes swollen, and croaks, "Patrick Muleya."

Josh knows better than to stand around a crime scene with a stranger.

"Well, Patrick. You'd better come with me."

iii. Patrick on Saturday

Patrick sits in a dim corner of the Flamboyant Arms bar, sunken into the plush velvet seat behind a dirty palm. The bar is marinated in browns, reds, oranges, and so much velvet is interspersed between grubby mirrors and low lights. It's an old bar, part of an even older hotel, in desperate need of an upgrade. Patrick moves the beer on the table again and rubs the round mark left by the moisture. There is no coaster on this table. He stops and fingers the edge of the A5 exercise book in his lap. The discharge card is stapled to the first page. It's a thin book but feels heavy, but not as weighty as the white plastic sachet of Diazepam in his breast pocket. It won't last him another week. He sips the Castle Lager occasionally, trying to make it stretch for the whole evening. The groundsman at Ngomahuru has given him \$10 to help him get on his feet. It's not enough to catch a lift to Beitbridge, almost 300km away, so he settles on a plan to use it to buy a daily dollar meal, and this, his first beer in five years. Looking at the book again, he thinks of the meds and slides the beer again. His bald head shines in the overhead light. He keeps his head down and shakes it. He rubs his breast pocket again.

The nurses in the ward only gave him fourteen. They didn't even try to call his mother, or his brother. His brother works at Mpilo Hospital in Bulawayo, so it would have been easy for them to call. He intends to ask the barman. He thinks about it and hesitates, trying to recall the last number of the landline series, then concludes that he must finish his beer first to regain his courage, confidence, and voice. The bar is not full, but the people gathered are all drunk and loud. He chooses to focus on the drops flowing down the sides of his beer.

"Hello! Are you alright *mkoma*?"

Patrick looks up, stunned at the creature whose voice cuts through the din.

The woman sits, setting her yellow handbag on the floor next to her. Her brown hair, parted to the side, sweeps her shoulders. Two round yellow earrings dangle from her lobes. A bead of sweat trickles down her

collarbone. She fills a long dress, where her red-tipped toes peek out from its edge slightly, but just enough to make Patrick uncomfortable. There were no female nurses or female patients at the hospital.

“This chair seems alright, so if you don’t mind?” she continues, “And those ones at the bar keep talking! Yap, yap, yap about nothing, really. I kept trying to look at the TV up there, but it’s so silly without sound on. Watching the news is so depressing today. It makes me think about my sons, you know? Two boys. Do you have children, *mkoma*?”

Again, Patrick shakes his head in silence.

He isn’t accustomed to conversations with strangers, especially ones that aren’t scared of him. He’s not used to being called brother by beautiful strangers. Maybe his face is no longer as ugly as the nurses say?

“I used to work at St. Giles, the rehabilitation centre in Harare. Under Sister Matavire?”

She cocks her head as if expecting a response. Patrick shifts uncomfortably. The lady smiles warmly and shrugs.

“But that was years ago.”

She points at the yellow book with its blue and green health ministry logo.

“It’s not fair how they colour-code the notebooks. It’s ok for records, but still, once people know...Well, I don’t have to explain it to you. Have you eaten tonight? Beer without lining your stomach first is not a good idea.”

She waves over a waiter and orders a plate of sadza and pork trotters for Patrick, who still sits, observing. As the waiter leaves, grinning at the \$20 tip she’s placed on his tray, she faces Patrick square on and lowers her voice. He quickly averts his gaze.

“Well, listen. If you’re not going to speak to me, or you can’t, that’s ok. But just promise me you’ll take your pills on time, every time. There’s no condition that can’t be managed. The sister in charge used to tell us that one day in the future, even HIV will be controlled by pills, just like diabetes or Blood Pressure.”

She gets up and pulls up her handbag, fishes in it before continuing: “The thing is, *munhu ngaanwe mapiritsi ake*. Just take your medicine. It will be fine. Whatever your condition is, just try to fight the clouds if you can. Try your best to pretend to be normal, whatever normal is to you. You know how we are, *vanhu vatema*, the moment we suspect a person may be ill.”

Patrick briefly recalls the face of the traditional healer who’d tried to cure him. A painful flash briefly brings back his brother’s voice, “You’re not bewitched, my boy, just different.”

The pretty lady now crouches beside his chair.

“Put your book in your inner pocket so you don’t lose it. Trying to get a new prescription without the book is hard. And so, people don’t start to worry. And at least shake my hand before I go, *mkoma!*”

She laughs, a giggle like trickling water.

She grabs his moist, calloused hand, not flinching at the cold droplets, and curls his fingers around two purple notes. She grabs the arm of his seat and hoists herself up.

Entranced by the smell of her perfume and the swing of her hips, Patrick watches her wave at the barman, then looks down at the \$200 in his hand.

iv. Josh on Sunday

Josh has to strain to understand. Patrick speaks in low laboured phrases, in deep Karanga. He mentions Ngomahuru Psychiatric Hospital and all Josh’s hopes fade. He could lose all credibility if his by-line is associated with a mentally challenged witness. But there was a sincerity in the man’s slow words that beckoned him to trust the desolate wreck.

Patrick had allegedly had a brief conversation with the woman. Any other woman would have likely avoided the man in mismatched clothing and a rather frightening, scarred countenance. He also claims she gave

him money. He places two crumpled notes on the edge of Josh's bed and begs:

“Here. Please, you can have it. I just want to go home.”

“Patrick, you know how serious this all is. You'll have to tell the police.

As he says this, Josh knows that telling the police would end badly.

“Please, I didn't do anything! If I tell the police, they'll send me back! We didn't have enough food. They were giving us medicine, but it eats at your insides if you don't have it with a meal. And some of them would beat us. No! Don't send me back!”

Josh was understanding. Patrick's fear was almost tangible.

According to Patrick, he'd gotten up about five minutes after the woman left the bar to thank her. The woman had gone up the stairs, presumably headed to her room. But then he'd been stopped in his tracks when a man in a leather jacket had stopped her on the first-floor landing, which was visible from the ground floor. He could only make out the lady, as the man was partially obscured. He said he'd stepped back in embarrassment, shielded by another of the hotel's dusty palms. He didn't suspect they knew each other, though, as the woman had started walking away as the man spoke. The man allegedly stopped to tie his shoelaces. That's when the power went out.

Josh prods Patrick about where he'd gone after. Patrick shares that his first instinct was to run outside to the car park with solar lights because darkness made him feel like he wasn't himself, like he was “in that place” again. After waiting in the car park for a while, Patrick had slept behind a few dustbins next to the toolshed at the side of the main villa, hoping to get his sadza as leftovers the next morning. Then he'd been woken by the kitchen staff chattering about police on the premises and the beautiful woman found dead.

“Okay, okay. But do you have relatives in Masvingo?”

For a brief moment, Patrick uncovered his face and said, “I had an uncle who stayed at Target Kopje in 1992.”

“Good. Go there.”

“Can I take a bath, *mkoma*?” Patrick booms as he sits on the bed, fear bouncing off his frail frame as thick as the smell of sweat does.

“Yes, yes, sure.”

Josh jots down a point in his notebook. As soon as Patrick is out of the way, he’ll call his over-eager secretary Tariro to type it out very fast on the home typewriter she’s so often told him about. Forget that it’s Sunday.

Patrick shuffles unsteadily to the bathroom. As soon as Josh is sure, water is gushing from the shower. He grabs Patrick’s book, which he’d left on the bed.

“Mutasa?”

“Who is this?” Doc Mutasa is annoyed. His Sundays are important to him.

“Josh Jonga. I am at the Flamboyant.”

“This is unexpected, Jonga.”

“I know.”

“Well, I don’t have any stories for you, Jonga. But I remember you slept at the Flamboyant. Are the rumours true, ey? A murder?”

“So, they say. You know I am on the case. Doc, I just came across your signature in the medical book of, er..., a friend.”

“Which friend now? You know those books are private, right?”

“Of course, of course, but this friend is acting erratic, you see. I thought it best to call.”

“What’s his name?”

“Patrick. Patrick Muleya.”

There is a silence on the other end, followed by a deep sigh.

“Doc?”

“How do you know him?” the doctor asks, genuinely concerned.

“I, uh, I am writing a story about mental health. I met him through a freelancer,” lied Josh. Doc Mutasa shook his head.

“I didn’t know he was discharged. I didn’t even think they’d let him out—”

Josh cuts him short. “Why wouldn’t they?”

Doc Mutasa lowers his voice to almost a whisper.

“Patrick was an inmate at Ngomahuru.”

“Patient?”

“Yes, fine, whatever. Patient. He got a confinement sentence because of his history. Patrick strangled his brother, accusing him of trying to inject him with poison. His brother was a good friend of mine, a ward nurse at Mpilo in Bulawayo.”

What?

“I’d see him on my district rounds. Attended to him a few times. He stopped speaking when he was admitted. He’s never been violent; quite the opposite because of the cocktail he was on. But when the clouds descend, I tell you, no medication can hold the force of that anguish back. No one can get through to him through the howls. He scratched his face so badly that we got him special handcuff gloves. Whatever he sees in his mind causes him immense pain. When I called his sister two years ago, she said the family didn’t want him back. I should take him.”

Murder? Wow, what were the odds? Still, for a story...

“You can’t exploit him for a story, Jonga; he’s very ill.” The doctor’s statement sounded very much like a warning.

“He was legally discharged. I saw his book,” replied Josh.

“He needs a family to get back on his feet. I know them.”

Josh listens as the doctor spells out his concerns.

“You’re right, doc,” he says, lowering his voice, “He’s acting strange. I...I don’t feel safe. You see, that’s why I called. Mutasa, I am scared. He’s in the bath right now, but I don’t know, doc. I am worried.”

The doctor’s alarm filters through his panicked tone.

“Ok, ok, Jonga. Look, the best thing is for me to come and get him. Can you lock the bath from the outside?”

Josh agrees to lock Patrick in the bath and to leave the room door open so Doc Mutasa can collect Patrick. It will give him time to head to Tariro’s with his story notes. He doesn’t feel too bad for Patrick—he’s going to be in the care of a doctor, right? Far better than hunting for what could be an imaginary uncle.

Yes, Josh was being helpful. It would all work out.

v. *Josh on Saturday*

Josh grinds his wisdom teeth. Yet again, his wife has not left a plate of sadza for him. He wonders what happened to the fun young thing he'd met after the war; the one who loved to cook and serve him meals in his special set of green Kango dishes. He opts to go in search of his favourite two-dollar sadza special, ignoring her protests about how he loves his job more than her as he locks the gate, the shiny pocket of his jacket being caught in the wire he's neglected to fix for months. He sighs, not because of his wife's venom, but because it is true: loving her is far down his priorities list. He catches his neighbour, Stan, who is heading west towards the city in his battered old Mazda 323.

Stan is pleasant, never asks much. Neither does he comment on the Jonga's blazing (often overnight) rows.

"Are the tourists still coming in?" Josh asks, adjusting his seatbelt as they drive off.

"They are, mostly the South Africans. The US and UK ones, not so much. It's that exchange jump from \$14 to \$26 for a single US dollar, which was really bad."

Josh nods.

"I wrote about that, you know. The editor said I was being too bleak about the fall of the Zim dollar. But I have a feeling it's going to get worse. Might as well enjoy our lives now."

A silence as Stan navigates the traffic circle that leads on one end to the city, on the other, out of the country. The Flamboyant sits a little way from it.

"I think I'll use up my complimentary stays, ya?"

Stan nods.

"They have been paid for, and we still have rooms."

A road leads off the highway and snakes behind the hotel. Stan drops Josh off at the rusty iron gate next to the Hotel's back service

entrance. It's KwaGidza, the backyard barbecue joint with the worst hygiene standards and the best food in town.

Josh greets a few fellows he knows playing pool under the blinking solar light. Two of his colleagues are throwing darts. He has to crouch to step onto the pavilion to avoid hitting his large forehead on the corrugated sheets covering the veranda. He orders two plates, knowing he has to share them with his mates. The waitress takes his order and shouts, "Two sadza beef!" to the ladies sweating over an open fire at the side of the pavilion. One of the women waves at Josh. He waves back but doesn't recognize her. Gidza himself hands him his first ice-cold beer, complimentary in thanks for the piece he wrote on "Masvingo's Best Restaurants."

As the Lion Lagers and the good times start rolling, more greetings follow:

"More time, Jonga!"

"Ey, Mr BBC!"

"Big up, Fourth Estate!"

This is why he prefers it here than in that cramped house on Gwavava Rd, kwaMajange. Despite his being lead at a small regional paper, he is appreciated. He is even considered a minor celebrity, expected to know all well-known people, even criminals, on a personal level.

"But what can you tell us about Chidhumo's escape? You must have details, Jonga. How did that murderer and rapist escape for a second time from Chikurubi? I mean, it's a *Maximum* Prison! There has to be foul play!"

Blurry-eyed but happy, Josh is in yet another current affairs discussion around the pool table. He is too drunk to tell who says what but knows the irritating nasal voice of Dr Mike Mutasa.

"Heard my son's friends calling him Chidhumo while playing soccer. I told them all I would thoroughly beat them if I ever heard that again!"

Laughs all around. Doc Mutasa is that guy. Josh has never liked the scrawny district medical officer (there is zero need to wear a lab coat

everywhere), but as a journalist, he is not in the habit of making enemies if it can be avoided. Plus, he admired how the doctor had been active at the war veterans' demonstrations in July. He is still hobbling with a very obvious limp from being beaten under the feet with a baton.

"How goes it, the healing, Doc? Have you healed? Healer has healed, hmm?" Josh knows he's drunk but is trying to prolong his time with this crowd. He cannot hold liquor very well, but he sure does try. Besides, it's not even late.

Doc Mutasa swigs from his bottle and rests on his pool stick.

"Doctors are meant to ask patients about pain. We don't do so well with it ourselves."

"Hmm. Hmm."

They mumble here and there until the doctor loses his game to an unknown student, who pockets the \$20 and promptly leaves.

At 8.30 p.m., Gidza switches off the radio as a sign that he's closing up. The little crowd of imbibers departs, including Josh, who heads next door to The Flamboyant and is relieved that Stan is reception, not one of the student staff.

"Stan the Man! You know what to do!"

Stan hails a young steward. Josh leans against the counter, regretting every drop of the (*how many?*) Lion Lagers he'd downed.

"Nelson will help you to your room. It's A35, first-floor, East Wing."

Josh starts to laugh, looking at the young steward. The kid is at his waist level; there'd be no leaning on anything. Instead, Josh raises his hand and shoos him away, taking the room key with the blue label as he does.

"Nelson? Mandela. Yes, free Mandela! This short Mandela will not help me. Too, too short, is Nelson. Go away, Nelson!"

Stan shakes his head and attends to a ringing switchboard.

Josh totters away, out of the reception, and up the stairs.

At 9 p.m., all of Masvingo is plunged into darkness as a crow step on an exposed cable of Transformer MSV7, feeding straight off the National Grid.

vi. The Flamboyant on Monday

At 5 p.m., the owners of The Flamboyant shut the hotel. They arrange a shuttle to bus guests to their other hotel, The Ophir, and offer free sightseeing on Lake Kyle. Three police mill about, scuffing the red carpet with occasional snubs of their shiny maroon steel-tipped shoes. Josh Jonga walks in. He's been summoned by Stan. His shoulders droop, and his hair, though short, is not combed. Instead, it has curled and twisted into little tufts of curly popcorn.

One of the police officers calls him over—his cousin, Biggie.

"I thought I told you to wait. You don't even have a name, but you're already planting conspiracies in your silly little paper! This is why you people get censored. You lie to people and write what you like without checking facts!"

Josh shrugs.

"My source described him."

"Who is your source?"

Josh is annoyed, "You know I can't tell you that. What kind of journalist do you think I am?"

Stan marches over in anger, "Were you in room A43?"

Biggie gives him a scathing look, warning him not to lie.

"Only for a bit. Had to get the story out."

Stan uses a curse word Josh doesn't expect and promptly heads out, calling the barman to follow as he does. Only Josh, three police officers, and the hulking man at the bar remain.

"Who's the Coloured guy?" Josh asks, angling his head to the bar.

"Ask him."

Josh rolls his eyes and proceeds to where the distinguished gentleman sits. He appears older than Josh, his well-trimmed beard lightly peppered with grey, but his dark hair closely cropped. His straight nose is a definite indicator of his mixed-race ethnicity. His green eyes are set deep in his face, under two thick brows. He rests one hand on the counter and

the other in the pocket of his tan blazer. Josh makes out gold cufflinks in the shape of the letter R on each sleeve. On the pocket of the cream-colored shirt, Josh can make out the edge of the label depicting a polo player. The man's scent is an expensive woody and citrus burst that cuts through the waft of beer empties on the bar.

"Maswera sei, vaJonga."

Josh looks briefly at his cousin, then turns back and answers, "Hello. I am afraid I don't know who you are."

The man is straight-faced as he responds.

"Lucas Render."

The name is well-known to Josh, though he'd never actually seen the face. Lucas Render is the President of Flame Lily Industries, the holding company that took over Felix Mines when Consolidated Gemstones left the country in 1995. He is known for living a very exclusive life, opting out of all major openings and appearances. Most people who hear the name think he was a white man, one of the last rich barons from the Rhodesian era. In a way, Lucas does fit the bill. His great ancestor was apparently the first Westerner to see the Great Zimbabwe ruins, and he later settled with the daughter of a local chief.

He speaks in impeccable Shona.

"You wrote the story about my wife?"

Josh shifts uncomfortably.

"I did. I am sorry for your loss."

"I don't know if you are... Your theory is that a serial killer did it?"

"Stephen Chidhumo was released this month."

"So, they say, but no one knows his whereabouts. A witness told you it was him?"

"Yes."

"Where is your witness?"

Josh grows weary, remembering he has left Patrick in the care of Dr Mutasa at Masvingo General.

"I can't tell you that."

“But you must.”

“No. Sorry.”

“I see.”

The two officers at the door mumble between themselves. Biggie removes his police cap and scratches the bald spot in the centre of his head. Lucas Render pulls out a receipt from his pocket and lays it on the counter in front of Josh. It has the lion insignia of Barclays Bank. It's a withdrawal slip for \$200 at 1400hrs from the Heller St. ATM.

Lucas again reaches into his pocket and lays a small floral-covered booklet with two purple hundred-dollar notes visible.

Josh immediately straightens, aware of what it looks like.

“Why was my wife's diary in your room?”

“Wait, I—”

He is cut off by another quick question.

“Were you at Felix Mine Compound on 13th?”

“Yes, but I was only there for a minute. I've only been there twice. My team was actually headed to Morgenster, and Felix Mine is along the way.” Josh remembered the bumpy ride and momentarily, the coke and sugar buns he'd shared with Tariro on the way back into town from the Mission. What a strange time to be thinking about that!

“And the first time?”

“The first time what?”

“That you'd gone to Felix Mine?”

Visiting my son's mother. C'mon say it. Going to taste her delicious peanut butter rice and wishing Mercy could cook even half as well as that sweet canteen cook. Going to watch her spin those waist beads in the moonlight again and wish I'd married her instead. Get it off your chest, Jonga. It's high time.

“I had to take care of a few things there. It was a story. Tip-off from one of the miners about safety.”

This was true; the mine had a terrible record, but he wasn't interested in that story because everyone knew miners often told lies, hoping to get the \$15 for a story. What he left out was that a woman had seen him waiting, agitated, at the door of the canteen. She said she knew

everyone who worked there since she was part of the HR team. He had to think on his feet and claimed he was investigating the possible sale of the mine. It hadn't ended well, and he'd had to depart in a huff, escorted out by security and missing the opportunity to see his secret son's mother before heading back to town.

Lucas motions Josh to sit beside him. Biggie sits on his left side, raising the discomfort Josh is struggling to hide. Lucas continues, his voice steady but his hand shaking.

"She's not even buried yet."

"I know, sir; that's why I respectfully left out names."

"Oh, you left out a lot. How long have you been a journalist, Joshua Jonga of The Kyle Tribune?"

The contempt is heavy in the widower's voice. Josh clears his throat.

"About nineteen years."

Lucas looks away from Josh and at the line of bottles at the bar.

"And yet you saw fit to print a few paragraphs of pure generalisation and speculation to sell some papers?" *The wife of the Felix mine boss was said to be overtly friendly with men from all backgrounds, one of whom may have been paying for her multi-week stay at the Flamboyant. They say she was found naked.*

Lucas snorts. He points at the diary, "Open it."

Josh shakes his head.

A controlled but venomous instruction follows, "VaJonga. I insist."

Josh reaches for the book, his right hand shaking, suddenly clammy. He flips it open to the page where the two conspicuous notes are wedged, and the air from his lungs is sucked out by the short entry from two weeks earlier:

14.8.97 – "I saw that tall journo in the premise again claiming all sorts. Made me uncomfortable. I don't want to run to Lucas for every small thing, so I'll handle it. It's so windy; needs to wear trousers more!"

Why My Africa!

Elijah Chambiwa (Zimbabwe)

Saudacao, salibonani, makadii, greetings, sons and daughters of Africa.

Abstract

“The main reason why Africans are poor is because their leaders have made their choice. The records show that countries can grow their economies and develop faster if leaders take first decisions in the national interest....”

-Ali Mazrui.

Native African masses blatantly endure the object aversion and deliberate distaste from fellow Africans who are especially in positions of power and authority. Stretched to unanticipated extents is our birthright DNA: that of love and tolerance; unfortunately, we are unable to address injustice, poverty, degradation, and suffering. There being a vacuum of basic patriotic love and advocate for those of kin and kith. Unfortunately, leaders cannot make sacrifices on their behalf.

Our failed state churns out millions of talented individuals daily: a desperate retreating of the able, and a search for greener pastures, as here the grass is poisonous (Mbeki, 2009). Abundant are nearly inexhaustible natural resources dormant under native feet, which could be fully developed if its people were free. Unfortunately, the resources are being sucked and squandered by the criminal vampire elite, who deposit the resources plus the loan and grants in western and eastern banks, making vain purchases in superfluous real estate commodities.... and or cars, gourmet meals, lavish vocational trips, and extravagant escort harlots. Keen investment in shell company and private businesses is second nature

for these, making one even lament for the return of the white colonialist, for even he invested what he stole from the state. As the “blacksmith” assumes the role of colonialist, they feel shielded by common sense ethics as “you cannot be racist to your own race” and are not bound by the royal charter in their occupation of the territory. All the war heroes who understood how traitors of war were to be dealt with lie turning in their graves, witnessing this literal friendly fire issuing from firearms of the once-thought fellow soldiers (Meredith, 2002).

We annually celebrate Independence Day ululating in our not first, not second world but third world country; two dimensions away from the rest of the same and civil humanity with our cities and villages parched waterless, dark without electricity, and with dilapidated key infrastructure like hospitals and clinics: an earnest reversal of all signs of civilisation, the most foreign concept in Africa. According to Mutubuki (2019), Majority of the feminine youth is now dawning in maternity, the young juveniles enlisted into the realm of motherhood in Africa, sitting outside on the threshold of their wretched huts, their precociously shrivelled breasts struck in the gums of the starving children, their eyes sunken, vacant, and distant without hope or consciousness. They do not know whether they are alive or dead and incapable of caring. In the stagnant gutters of urban slums, prematurely aged mothers void their wombs like vomit into open pits. They cannot bear the agony of another empty mouth to feed. Those lucky to survive face the uphill struggle as their bodies, health, and lives are assaulted by poverty, corruption, and cruelty.

In Africa, incompetence and loyalty is the key to survival. In this part of the world, common sense often dictates that the pursuit of the truth is not always the wisest thing to do (Olowu, 1995). And a handful of brave souls who do it at their own peril, literally, for they almost invariably are made to give up to the ghost. Because of this, African scholars can be pardoned for what is increasingly becoming apparent as a deliberate evasion of truth or objective discussion.

Antonakis et al. (2004) notes that the tendency to swing and go along with the popular tide of fantasising as well as glorifying Africans

and glossing over their mistakes is very tempting. Most African regimes are not just ruthless and corrupt but extravagant, careless, and incompetent. They have killed; their hands are dripping with blood. They cling to power at all costs to avoid the inevitable uncovering and exposure. So, it is not out of charity but out of self-interest, self-preservation, and survival that they hang on to power. Adejumobi (2004) laments that Corruption is a pandemic in most African governments, right from the top. They are more exploitative than the colonial masters of the past, consuming more and contributing less if not very little. Leaders rule by ruse by subterfuge; they think with the spinal cord, they are primitive savages.

Professor Lumumba postulates that Totalitarianism reigns supreme on the African continent, but we do not run short of reasons to justify it. Because of the prejudices and inaccuracies, and because we strive so hard to find scapegoats for our failures, we cannot be sincere. It seems nowadays, Africans find nothing wrong in keeping silent when Africans massacre fellow people. The deafening silent sounds as though, by some miracles, the massacred would come back to life. There is even a strong school of thought gaining currency that Africans are incapable of a democratic form of government (Olowu, 1995). In other words, in our effort to justify ourselves, we are in the process of denying our very humanity. Our failure to admit our humanity and, therefore, our mistakes make us incapable of dealing with those mistakes. This can only earn us international scorn and contempt. To add to the woes and misery of Africa, the continent is not short of these extraordinary creatures that evolution sometimes throws up. They are the African proverbial witching owls who stare at their victims with holes for eyes that seem to reach down into hell itself. They are a disaster for the human race. One wonders how it happens that such monsters are allowed to control the destinies of millions of people.

The majority are forced to stay out of school to scavenge, steal, prostitute themselves, baby dump, and ravage their bodies with cheap alcohol and drugs. One is deeply cut to the heart by such callousness.

Meanwhile, the vampire elite, the beneficiaries of the resources of the loans and grants, continue to grow fat. Their children go to school overseas. The victims are punished while the real criminals go scot-free and are shamelessly and spectacularly rewarded.

With the evidence at hand, it doesn't render one speechless that Africa, the once dark continent, is now verging on black hole status, a natural celestial mass so dark even the light is sucked in. Our African leaders have innumerable complexes at the expense of starving, impoverished, destitute, and emaciated masses.

In lower Gweru, Zimbabwe, Northeast of the provincial capital Gweru, impoverished, unemployed, and socio-politically frustrated youth have now reached the brink of poverty-induced insanity, wielding arms against their brothers and sisters, friends and family as the human instinct of survival and self-preservation assess the situation at hand and begins to modify priorities accordingly. An anthropologist's fascination: human devolution acting out right before our eyes. Thus, violence and crime have become commonplace in the area. Scrounging around and scratching for a living is now the norm.

In towns, people move like ants in search of work and food, but alas, it is like chasing a mirage. The poor are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, and there is nowhere to escape from it, refugees without a refuge. In a dog-eat-dog society, competition for survival is the order of the day. The philosophy becomes that of cannibals: eat or be eaten. Painful indeed.

The political leaders in Africa forget that they came from the people, belong to the people, and should be destined for the people, individuals who view politics as more of a game than servitude, dirtying the responsibility (Rost, 1991).

No human being owns another human being. Africa is in danger of real death; it is in its death throes due to its lack of good and wise leadership (Mbeki 1999). Independence from colonial powers has brought no liberty for millions of Africans; tribalism, nepotism, greed, unworthy leaders, and half-backed ideologies have taken over and ruined everything (Rost, 1991).

According to Meredith (2002), Zimbabwe, once a breadbasket of Africa, has been reduced to begging and imploring the sires to the world of sustenance—at least Lobengula had to be tricked into colonialism, unlike how we hand over all we own to the east; we imitate Nigeria, oil-rich but poor people, Congo, mineral-rich but poor people. And in turmoil, hundreds of thousands have been shot, stabbed, drowned, fed to crocodiles and hyenas, killed in road stage-managed accidents, tortured, maimed, and burnt to death. The majority of these kleptocratic statesmen only know how to bamboozle people.

Mbeki (1999) notes that Africa south of the Sahara is a rich continent endowed with natural resources such as land, minerals, flora and fauna, and people, but most of these countries' coffers are empty, and their currencies are worthless.

Their dull leaders are termites of the economy, devastating pests of national development. Africa's starving children are saved by charitable people in developing countries while Africa's vampire elites watch with overflowing larders at home. Bribery and nepotism are rampant, the taxpayers' money is wasted, and there is interference with courts. Petitions are treated with contempt.

They glorify petty tyrannies and extort money and women. Most of the African leaders displayed the arrogance of a person who has been poisoned by power. Their arrogance leads to megalomania. One of the African scholars noted that a pack of wolves cannot Sheppard a flock of sheep without the wolves getting fat and the sheep getting fewer. Pickpockets and robbers cannot run a country with full coffers.

They get rich, and the country gets poor. Rules set by cheats will never be fair. Laws made by the guilty will never be just. Elections run by liars will never be honest, and the results will never be celebrated. This is the plight facing most African countries today.

There is need for a fresh start to escape this self-inflicted disaster in Africa. We cannot live without freedom. We are living in a world of unreal reality. Africa's silence in the face of gross abuses of basic human rights

undermines Africa's moral authority. Won't we clear our mess, brethren, and sistren? Let's rise to defeat injustice, tyranny, and oppression.

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About The Editor

Onchoka Ongoro is a writer and editor from the vibrant town of Kisii, Kenya. He is the best-selling author of books that have never been published. He has a bachelor's in Education Arts, English Language and Literature from Kisii University. He is further honing his craft by pursuing a master's in English Language and Literature from Unicaf University. Onchoka is passionate about African Literature and Culture. He is notorious for talking more about writing and books than he writes and reads.

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