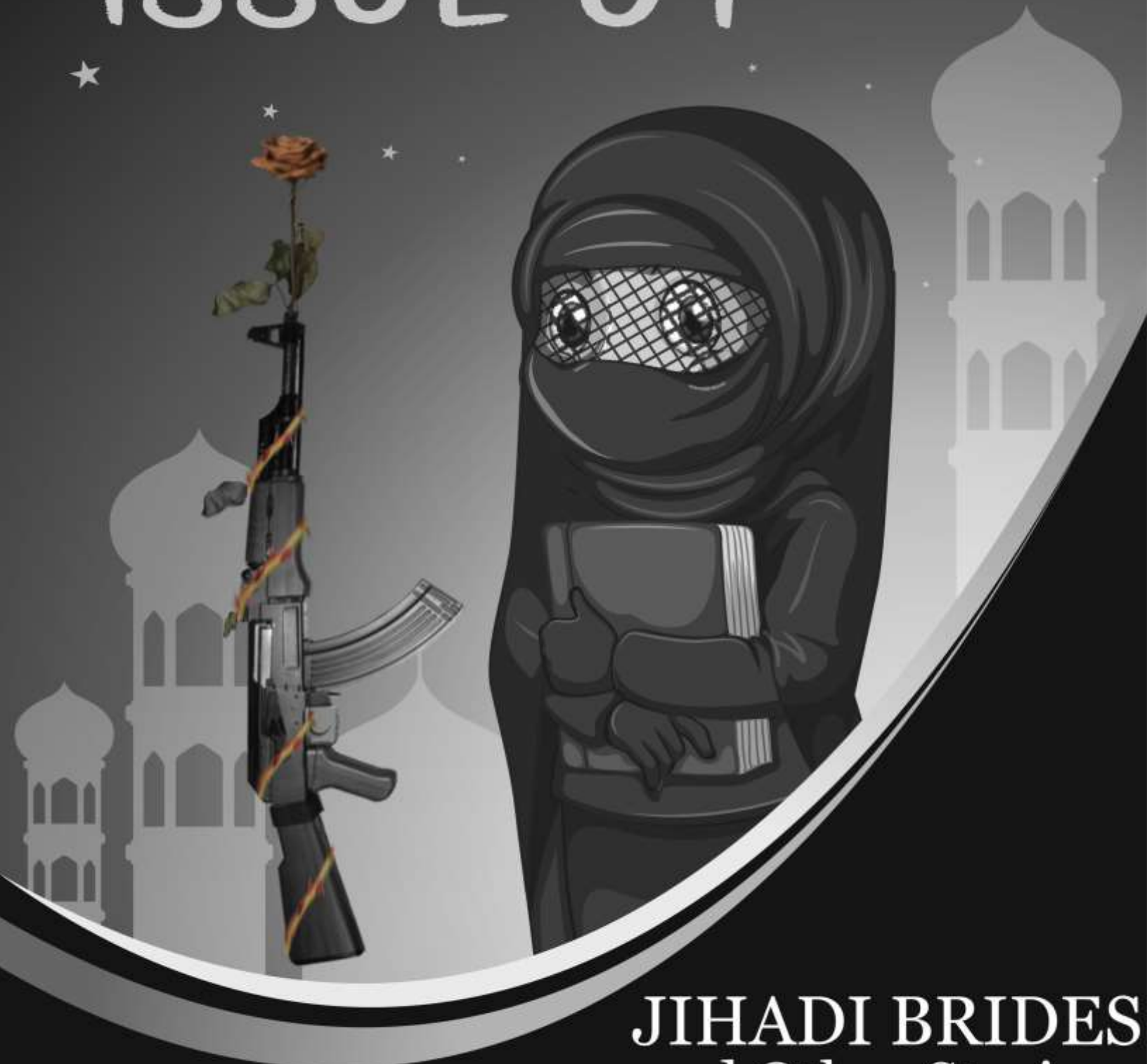


HEKAYA

ISSUE 01



JIHADI BRIDES
and Other Stories



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JIHADI BRIDES

and other stories.

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With gratitude to our partners Creative Writers League and Writers Network Mombasa.

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FOREWORD

This is our first publication as an initiative set to amplify voices from the East African Coast and it's been a terrific experience editing these narratives which represent a diverse range of themes.

It also happens to be the first short story anthology comprising different authors from the Coast.

While it would have been quite appropriate to go with a predetermined theme for the callout, we felt it would be cool to keep it open and accord the writers freedom of choice. The end result was a mix of wonderful stories which cover a multitude of themes.

Themes explored in the anthology are radicalization as told through Latifah's voice in '*Jihadi brides*' - the anthology's theme story, love or lack thereof in '*Faded*', the haunting secrets in a flash drive found in a floating bottle in '*Sand in the Bottle*', (an excerpt) a wonderful localized detective story in '*The holmes gene*', the power of a dream and empathy in '*Kazungu's dilemma*', FGM in the very compelling '*Maria*', the struggles of a widow in '*The Digo widow*', betrayal of friendship in '*Sante*' (an excerpt), the encounter of a call girl with a supernatural element in '*The client*', grappling with pain and loss in '*Not like that*', identity in '*The three counts of Rose*', and to crown the anthology we have a Kiswahili story which explores the theme of a young girl trying to reconcile the sudden reappearance of a mother who abandoned her and a father who abandoned her pregnant mother in '*Wanyika Nyikani*'.

Wanyika Nyikani is a representation of our adoration for the beautiful language of Kiswahili which has influenced and bound the East African communities cohesively. Hekaya will be publishing more of Swahili literature from across the East African Coast through a productive partnership with Creative Writers League which holds training forums promoting the genre and Writers Network Mombasa, another platform working to promote writing in the East African Coast.

Through these partnerships, we hope to tell the Coastal narratives in a better, more interactive way which will enable us to improve story telling skills in the region. *Pamoja*, we can have conversations about writing the East African Coast happening.

Meanwhile, enjoy Hekaya issue 001 and be sure not to miss upcoming posts where we interact deeper with the authors and their works.

Karibuni sana!

Abu Amirah,

Founding Editor.



Jihadi Brides

Story by:

MORAA GITAA.

Outside, the men are about to perform ablution required before acts of worship, washing their faces and limbs. I listen to them as they make the *niyya*-intention to do ablution and recite, ‘‘*Bismillāh i’r Rahmān i’r Rahīm. In the Name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.*’’

Syria is hot. I always thought Mombasa my hometown was hot but this heat beats the dense humidity of my coastal hometown in Kenya. The midday scorching sun makes the black hijab covering my head and face feel like a hot iron-box and I’m sweating profusely. Peeping from my veil, I catch a glimpse of the men doing ablution intent on purifying themselves, yet I know no matter how much they scrub, they can’t purify themselves of their filth. Though I don’t want to judge, I’ve come to the conclusion that my husband and his friends are filthy because of what they’ve been planning – murdering innocent people, beheading most and locking others in cages, all because they refused to join the Islamic State. They even burnt others alive including small babies while forcing young girls from these families to become sex slaves. Their attempts at purification are in vain, I believe. They can cheat us, but they can’t cheat Allāh. I’ve been taught that on Judgement day, the same hands and feet will betray them and say what *haram* they committed in the name of religion.

Staring at my husband as he prays I realize that I’ve submitted blindly to him. My husband says that jihad against the unbelievers is all binding upon him and is ordained for all Muslims. I pray that were he to die on his dangerous missions, Allāh would make him realize the fallacy of his radical beliefs which are even against the teachings of Islam. I also pray that Allah grants me a way out of this marriage.

My mind is already made up. I want to escape back to Kenya.

Growing up, the Ustadh at our Madrassa in Mombasa never taught us anything about killing innocent people. I regret my rash decision of leaving home to join the Daesh as a jihadi bride.

This is how I ended up in Syria.

It was mid last year when they surrounded our mosque that our troubles with the anti-terror detectives began. Their very intimidating presence made me tremble with fear, and i was

scared not only for myself but for our Baba the Imam and our older brother Fareed who was always with him. I peeped from across our house at our local Masjid which was surrounded by armed police. The police later came out of the masjid with jihadist flags like the ones flown by the Al Shabaab militants, grenades, petrol bombs, pistols, ammunitions and gunpowder, what they called bomb-making material, knives and machetes. All these things were put on display right outside the mosque for the media to take photos of, including audio and video recordings of Ba's sermons. There was a lot of tension and we heard that one youth was shot dead after he 'tried to hurl a grenade at the officers', though we were not sure of this. A bag containing laptops, surveillance pens, military boots, external hard drives and satellite phones were also seized.

To Baba and many of our neighbours, our masjid was a beacon of hope. Even as young as I was, it did not add up how dangerous weapons were found in the holy place. I was only twelve but I was getting irate as to how the newspapers and the news anchors on TV were describing our Baba. Why were they calling Ba a radical Muslim cleric? Later at a press conference the police chief said they raided our mosque after getting a tip that Baba was organizing a jihad convention. He said that the CDs that preach jihad messages recovered in the raid earlier that day proved that the masjid was a recruiting ground for Islamist militants. The previous night the police from the anti-terror unit had again raided our neighbourhood. They said it was a security operation to arrest youths who had been radicalised by rogue Imams. I didn't understand what this word *rogue* meant. All I know is that the police were shooting and beating people with batons and they arrested many of the young men from our *Mji wa Kale* hood. "*We had information that this particular group of youth had been recruited to attend the jihad convention at the masjid and thereafter they were to plan a terrorist attack. That is why the raid was conducted,*" the Mombasa police chief said on prime time news. "*We have arrested several of them, including ten notorious ones who were on our security radar, having come back from Somalia.*" What scared me is that the police chief on live television said that our Ba was an Islamic extremist suspected of arranging funding for Al Shabaab militants. He said the seized recordings of Ba's sermons were proof of his radical inclinations.

But what the world didn't know was that the youth had decided to take refuge at the masjid because of what Baba called arbitrary arrests and killings of clerics accused of

radicalising them. The world will never know this. I remember Ba's words: *Our masjid provides solace to grieving Muslim families who have lost their loved ones to extra-judicial killings suspected to have been carried out by security agencies.*

Last night's raid had been terrifying yet exciting at the same time. The raid had started just when the Muezzin was calling for evening prayers and people had started closing their shops. From the speakers mounted atop the minarets of the mosque, the ancient call to prayer rang throughout Mji Wa kale, marrying seamlessly with the same from other mosques. The police sirens started right at that moment as if the end of the call to prayer was their cue to strike.

I had watched the commotion outside from our window, some protestors running away from the armed police hiding behind shields in their bullet-proof jackets while others charged towards them hurling stones and shouting anti-government slogans. Ma dragged me to my room as I raised a protest of my own to be let out in the street with Fareed and the rest. Ma said I was just a little girl and girls are not supposed to be out fighting with the police. She said we should leave that to the men, which made me feel like I was missing out on something huge in my life. I stop my protest in respect to Ma. I feel envious of the young neighbourhood boys bursting with energy in the crowd, of the way it is all happening without me and the other young girls in our neighbourhood who have been told to stay indoors. At the same time as I long to join Ba and Fareed outside, I feel scared when I see the bloody faces and the gunshot wounds of injured young men running with the baton-swinging police hard on their heels.

From the opposite rooftops others join in the chants, 'Allâh Akbar!' 'Takbir!' 'Allâh Akbar!' 'Takbir!' Tear gas cans are thrown into the charging crowd by the police to disperse them, but despite their tearing eyes, they continue to demonstrate. From the ancient building's rooftops, invisible grandfathers, grandmothers, the elderly and the sick and young girls are shouting, hidden in the darkness but chanting in solidarity with their older sons, husbands, brothers and young men in the alleys below. 'Pwani si Kenya!' 'Pwani si Kenya!'

Even in the safety of my room, I'm mesmerised by the unity in the crowds - the harmony of it all. Young people chanting slogans against the wrongs done to us, both past and present. Not only the current indiscriminate fight against terrorism but historical injustices meted against the

coastal people; what Baba says is land alienation and economic marginalisation and Mama calls a search for identity.

‘*Pwani si Kenya!*’ ‘*Pwani si Kenya!*’ *The coast is not part of Kenya.* This slogan has put many people in trouble and Ba says some might be charged with treason because of their calls for secession of coastal Kenya. Baba had tried to explain though being only twelve I couldn’t understand much of it. They continue to chant slogans for whatever injustice they can remember. Their calling on God is all that they have. Ma and Ba always tell us that when all else fails, shout ‘*Allâh Akbar!*’

The chants are contagious. Ma takes my younger sisters and me to the rooftop to join in the chanting. Still, the feeling of exclusion does not leave me. I feel madly jealous yet inspired by Fareed and the other boys who’ve been allowed to go into the streets to join the crowds. The chants are uplifting and even though we are not down there where the action is happening, we still feel we are part of them.

On that dark painful evening, looking at Ba’s bloody body, I thought about what death really meant. Would Ba rise later as if from a deep sleep? Would we ever see him again? Fareed was not crying. He was numb with shock. Sobs had risen up in my throat but I had stifled them because I did not want to cry anymore and I wanted to be strong for Ma who was also trying to be strong for us.

Our Baba was dead.

They killed him.

They had pumped ten bullets into him, as if one or two weren’t enough to quell his energy. Ten bullets! What had he done? What terrorists did we hide? As Ba’s body wrapped in his white shroud was taken for burial, I felt my world collapse around me as it dawned on me that I’d never see him again. I was a girl and stayed home because tradition dictates that women are not allowed to go to the cemetery. *Ina lillahi wa inna Illaihi Rajiun.* May Allâh grant Ba *Jannat ul Firdaus.* *Ameen*, I silently repeat the recitation to myself- we surely belong to God and to Him we shall return. All I remember is Mama wailing over Ba’s bloody body on the street where he had been shot. The neighbours had come to call us. Ba was gunned down as he was

crossing the street to come home from the evening prayers which had been delayed by the protests. Two men with faces covered in black balaclavas riding on a *boda boda* sprayed him with bullets. Two more hooded men following behind on a *tuk tuk* had gotten out to inspect Ba's body and for good measure had pumped more bullets into his already lifeless body as if to make sure he was dead! They had then sped off.

The ten bullets ushered unimaginable gloom and sadness in our home.

It's been many months now. Today as I come home from school and enter our house, I see one of our masjid Imam's and Uncle Hassan sitting with Mama, talking to Fareed with serious looks on their faces. Uncle Hassan is my best friend and cousin Asma's Ba. I can't see Ma's face behind her hijab veil, but I get the feeling by her wildly gesturing hands and raised voice that she is very angry and tense. Ma rises up, "*Latifah, come with me.*" She takes my hand and leads me to the girl's bedroom. I try asking her what's wrong but she doesn't tell me. She scolds me for being insistent and asks me to be patient, and that everything is all right, "*Latifah, my daughter, don't be afraid. When you are scared, always remember Allâh.*" I don't believe her that nothing is wrong.

Later, I come out of my room when I hear Uncle Hassan and the Imam standing up to leave. But before they exit, our uncle lowers himself to Fareed's height and says sternly to him, "*You are the man of the house now, son. Your Baba's death must be avenged. You can't fault Islam.*" As I try to understand what he's just said, the Imam adds, "*Fareed, take good care of your mother and sisters. You are the son of a shahid. You must also leave a legacy behind.*" With this they leave and I'm more puzzled than ever.

I'm just about thirteen now and there is a curfew imposed by the government in the Old Town. Curfews instill a different kind of fear especially at the thought of being shot on sight if seen walking around after the curfew. I'm older now and understand the fear that hovers over Mji wa Kale with its tense silence encroaching into our homes. This curfew fear sits crouched with the cats in our living rooms feeding on the slips from our tongues and Mama whispers that we have to be careful lest our words be carried by the wind to the ears of the police. Nowadays we are even afraid of our own voices. This fear – you can try to shut yourself off from it but when you are jailed in your own house where can you escape? Its sweat stinks of subjugation

and penetrates every part of your being. The stink of it becomes a part of everything in your life. Even when the curfew is finally lifted and you walk out of your house at last, you still carry its stench wrapped around you in your *buibui* or *kanzu*.

The worst of it is that it is not an unreasonable fear, but a fear of unreason. What do you do when you know the khaki of the police uniform is of callous disregard, a hard coral cliff like the hard outcrop from which the Portuguese built Fort Jesus more than 400 years ago which is adjacent our home? A cliff that you can beat your fists to pulp against, and still it will give you no respite.

There is something frightening in being only thirteen years old and knowing the face of your death so well, that when some of your friends and classmates refuse to meet your eyes you wonder if they are thinking about your Baba's murder and that he was branded a *gaidi* and a terrorist sympathizer. I've learnt a lot this past year. When the whole neighborhood burns, is it possible for any sane person to remain untouched? Is that not what it means to be a patriotic citizen, that when your neighbours are in mourning, you die a little too for all the unjust deaths? What do you do when rumors circulate that the anti-terrorism agents are coming again to arrest and slaughter your family and friends for no reason?

Fear has become the most effective form of vigilance.

The first Ramadhan without Baba is upon us. I stroll through our Old Town towards Fort Jesus. Mji wa Kale is home but I'm always mesmerized as if seeing for the first time the beauty of the stunning labyrinth of narrow alleys and passageways between rambling bazaars, ancient Arabesque houses and mosques. Today I've come to one of Baba's favourite spots adjacent the fort and I sit and stare at the line where the horizon meets the endless blue ocean. I watch the dhow labourers and fishermen approaching the old harbour from a day's work to drop anchor. The previously harsh sun now prepares to withdraw and dangles timidly between the receding day and appearing night.

I climb up to the topmost cliffs. I can only sit here on the cliffs and stare at the fort's walls – I'm always amazed at how the fort was hewn and built by the Portuguese from a vast coral outcrop overlooking the Old Town on one side and the Indian Ocean on the other. The sound of the sea was soothing and the huge Fort Jesus an imposing landmark with its grubby,

ancient grey walls, menacing, forbidding and insurmountable – just as I had thought our Baba was. I weep for the hopes I had and the future I had seen when Ba was alive. With Ba's assassination, I saw a very bleak future. When the pain had lessened I had realized that it had swept away good feelings in my heart and mind, and another terrible part of me was taking the place of my true and noble feelings.

Ba's death was a rebirth for me, a brutality that dragged me out from a decade of being protected by Ba, Ma and Fareed. The happiness that had allowed me to believe that I and my sisters were special was rendered obsolete. I had never accepted Ba's death, couldn't erase from memory the traumatising scene of the murder, his blood flowing into the gutter like he was nobody. The police spokesperson said they would investigate yet as a family we've never been told the results of that investigation. The pain of betrayal cut deep into my heart. I spit in disgust but it does not come out exactly how I had anticipated. My mouth is too dry with sudden rage; the spittle sprays weakly across the rugged coral cliffs as if protesting at my unreasonable thoughts and disappears without landing on the beach below.

* * * *

That was several years ago.

Tomorrow is cousin Asma's Laylat Al Henna night and so today the women are drawing *henna* and *piko* flowery patterns on my hands and feet when we heard three near-simultaneous loud blasts. A piece of delicious baked *mkate wa sinia* on its way to my mouth fell from my trembling fingers. Why did I suddenly think of Fareed? Was this a premonition? I postponed the henna application and said I had to rush home. When I reached the city centre I started hearing about bomb blasts at the railway station, the north coast Mainland Bridge and the huge upcountry bus terminal near Mwembe Kuku. Police vehicles and ambulances with blaring sirens were speeding across town.

Mombasa was in pandemonium.

When I reached home the scenes on TV were distressing – many innocent people were dead. Fareed didn't come home that night and his phone was switched off. Every time my smart phone rang I rushed to look at the caller ID but it wasn't our brother. Ma spent the night by the window

holding Ba's prayer beads and chanting the Tasbih. She kept repeating *La haula wala quwatta ilabillah-* to Allah belongs all power and might. Where was Fareed? A strange sense of foreboding filled my heart. I joined Ma by the window, under my breath recited, *Yaa Allâh, Yaa Rahman, Yaa Raheem*. The words of prayer spewed out of my mouth in a long anxious murmur.

The rhythmic quality of Arabic soothed my soul.

The detectives from the anti-terror unit were at our door the following morning. Fareed was dead, they informed us coldly. He was one of the suicide bombers who had detonated the bombs the previous day. They had found his national identity card in his pocket but needed us to accompany them for DNA tests. Something about their narrative wasn't adding up. How would they find his ID intact while everything around him including his person was destroyed completely? When I saw my three small sisters huddled in fear in the living room corner crying inconsolably, I trembled with pain my tears threatening to choke me. I swore to Baba that he and Fareed had not died in vain "*Wallâhi Billahi Tallâhi.*"

* * *

As I've grown older and researched the time surrounding Ba's assassination, I've come to learn that Ba was on several US and UN sanctions lists for allegedly supporting Somalia's Al Shabaab militants. Ma never even told us that the UN Security Council had imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on Ba saying he had provided financial and technical support to Al Shabaab. This was not the Ba I knew. There must be an explanation and I feel that Ba as Imam must have been in a difficult ideological situation of dealing with the threat of our Muslim youth's split identity crisis, threat of political Islam, the war against terrorism fueled by systematic discrimination, profiling and marginalisation.

Do I want to avenge my loved ones unjust deaths?

I'm so full of rage and anger!

Kaffirs and agents of Ibilisi!

Murderers of our Baba and all the brave men like Fareed who stood with him! They have destroyed our family. I ask you, can the oppressed and the victims be the villains? *Wallahi*, with Ba and Fareed dead, I say goodbye to my first negotiation of love and loss.

After Ba and Fareed's death, I stopped reading our family Quran. I rarely entered our masjid. I've been driven into this cycle of helpless sorrow. My eyes are always large with unfinished mourning and incomplete weeping. I'm distraught despite the fact that Ba and Fareed died *Shahids*, martyrs in the right cause. Ba used to say that Allah wills us a lot of good things in our lifetime but I was not seeing any good in my life. He always said that those who don't believe in Allah can say and do anything.

* * * *

I was young and naive. I met him through an online Islamic chat group. He was charismatic and promised me heaven. When he first talked to me about recruiting he told me, *"When you and the other girls get here, you will be treated the way you deserve to be – like queens."* From our online trainings I would hurriedly shut down the computer and rush home because the curfew was about to begin. Ma must never know where I've been spending my afternoons. With some of our aunts' help, she's been taking care of my sisters who have no understanding of this politics that has taken the lives of our Ba and brother.

I rush past the ancient narrow alleys of Mji wa Kale leaving behind the alluring pull of the sea. I'm late as I run past grey shutters of closed shops, silent mosques, and bolted Lamu-carved doors behind which mothers are hiding their children, darkness of deserted alleys with police sirens piercing the night. I lift the hem of my *buibui* not to trip and fall and run past shattered shop windows from previous police raids and past colorful graffiti on the ancient eroded coral sea-wall by the water front proclaiming *'Pwani si Kenya!'* At last the door of our home comes into view. I tighten the folds of my hijab under my chin and quicken my steps.

* * *

Both I and my cousin Asma have acquired a celebrity status. Other young girls from our Mji wa Kale ring rely on us for advice on what to expect as jihadi brides in Somalia and Syria. Today we are on Skype and the other eager girls have joined us. *"Salaam alaikum my sisters. What do you*

think about mujahideen?" My fiancé asked, *"the only real truth is Allâh's truth and Jihad,"* he continued.

He talked to us about *Hijrah* and encouraged us to leave Kenya, a country filled mostly with unbelievers to join the Islamist countries. *"It's unbelievable that we're talking to a mujahid in Syria,"* the girls marvelled in awe. Asma and I could tell that the group of girls surrounding us was impressed. *"Syria is amazing,"* he said *"As jihadi brides, you will lack nothing. You will have everything here. Masha'Allâh. It's paradise! It's the same in Somalia. We are Allâh's warriors,"* he said *"Alhamdulilah for accepting to be our wives. SubhanuAllâh, many people die but it is for the cause,"* he reassured us again.

We watch a video link of a sermon the group's admin has forwarded to us.

'There is no doubt whatsoever that Jihad is the only truth!' shouts the Imam delivering the sermon, his Adams apple moves in his throat, bobbing up and down as he stabs and slashes the air with his forefinger. His red face seems to burst from his henna colored goatee. His alert eyes, shining with an intimidating awesome intelligence sweeps over the awe-struck faithful assembled in the packed masjid. He settles his weighty stomach and humongous backside more comfortably onto the ottoman on the floor.

'No doubt about it my brothers and sisters. It's as true as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. I have examined our Indian Ocean and the other seas and consulted with the heavens. The long awaited hour has arrived. You need to only listen and heed. We need Mujahideens for Allah! Those who doubt this will burn in hell. The devil dwells in such doubters and he will find inextinguishable fuel in their flesh!' His red flaming eyes again sweep the audience and subdues them into mesmerized silence. He continues, *'Jihad is the only antidote to infidels and kaffirs! Who would dare measure his pitiful self against the almighty Lord?'* At this point the preacher strikes both his palms together sharply and shouts loudly *'Astagfirullahi!'* A smile curls his lips and he suddenly switches moods and gently shakes his head, preparing to end his fiery sermon, he shakes his index finger at the crowd *'We are Allah's soldiers my brothers and sisters. Victory and no less is our vocation. Paradise is our sanctuary. Should one of us mujahideen die in this battle, he will find a thousand virgins awaiting him, as beautiful as the sun that sets over our Indian Ocean and the stars that fill our East African nights.'*

'Allah Akbar!' one of the Imam's assistant suddenly bursts out.

'Allah Akbar!' the assembly roars back in response.

I log off and stare around at the group of girls who seem mesmerized by the sermon. In a few days these girls as jihadi brides will be at our Kenyan El Wak border point to cross into Somalia and some en-route to Syria. I remind myself that though Allâh all-seeing, all-knowing protects me, I should always tie my camel. That is why I've made sure that for every jihadi bride I recruit, I earn three-thousand US dollars. This is for my sister's upkeep and my college tuition now that Ba is no longer alive and his accounts and assets are still frozen, and Ma is overwhelmed by financial constraints. May Allâh forgive me. *Astaghfirrullahi!*

This is how I, Latifah Al-Hajj Moustaffa a Kenyan Muslim ended up in Syria.



Sand in the bottle

Story by:

FARRAH BHAIJEE



There are many reasons why this small island is the African Hawaii. Timeless attractions such as lighthouse whose trademark is fresh crunchy *kachri* that one can eat Cliffside while watching the guy sliding his knife effortlessly on the hard coconuts, fresh *mahamri* and *viazi* every morning and the *bhajia*, *viazi* and *ukwaju* in the evening at almost every corner, the warm breeze swaying around the towering palm trees all over the compact island, the vibrant culture pulsating through the ground and its people. The beautiful and breathtaking sandy beaches, crowded town streets where one can find handmade goods and really cheap second hand imports.

Mombasa is a fusion of culture, religion and language coexisting in perfect unity. It's amidst this diversity that I've created my own space where I can sit on top of a huge rock facing the sea, La Marina English Point standing elegantly on my left and the vast ocean on my right. Behind me, Fort Jesus and sporadic greenery where the sun hasn't scorched it, the concrete amphitheatre seated like a flight of stairs into the fort. The sound of the sea murmuring and the trees rustling behind me form the soundtrack of my little space. Once in a while I can hear people exploring the corners and taking pictures with a few people shouting '*emu simama vizuri ndio nipate bahari pia.*'

Swahilipot Hub has been my creative retreat since they first opened in a year ago. Sitting on a rock, my earphones locked in, I watch the water dance with the wind, wondering about an entirely different world that must be taking place below there.

To get the pleasantries out of the way, I'm called Khalid Abdulsahad, twenty five years old, currently jobless(not that I was actually looking for a job) and living at home with my recently single dad and my two younger brothers who have mental capacity of a toothpick and rabid hell-raisers in high school.

It was early January and my dad was pestering me every single day about getting a job at the local butchery to earn a few shillings to pitch in the house and help give my younger brothers food for school.

In all honesty if I gave them that cash they'd just buy *miraa* or smoke it all up. My sweat would have gone to waste entirely on two branch looking rascals. Plus dad had enough *shamba* in Kwale to sell an acre and we'd have been sorted for a while. I know he was whining just trying to get me off my lazy ass.

As I watched the sea hit the metallic pipe skeleton of the sea wall, something caught my eye. It was a bottle that floated a few feet away from the red frame structure of the sea wall. The bottle was upright and had a shiny Gold top. I stared at it for a while as it rode on the gentle waves.

Nudged by the need to explore, I headed down the shore and took off everything except my boxers and swam towards the bottle. I picked it and within seconds my curiosity peaked. There was luminescent light blue flash disk in the bottle. I looked around the sea to see if anyone was watching but the few people around the shore weren't interested in whatever I was doing.

Minutes later, I got to my room to inspect the bottle, taking a lot of pictures and posted them on my social media handles, hoping that with every snap, the bottle would reveal its story. Carefully, I turned the heavy golden knob and pulled out the flash disk and inspected it. Nervous I called my neighbor and best buddy, Cheupe. He came in less than ten minutes in his boxers and stretched out white vest.

‘*Mazee!* I’m starving. Do you have anything I can munch on?’

‘There should be some coconut rice and meat curry in the fridge,’ I said, still inspecting the flash disk. Cheupe rushed to the kitchen to build a hill of rice and curry, placed it in the microwave and brought himself to my room with a glass of my dad’s tamarind juice. ‘One day mzee will kill you for always drinking his juice.’

‘*Usinitatize!* Even mangoes *ni mbao mbili markiti!* *Mshow mzee, hata sungura huchoka kukula carrots kila saa. Tumechoka na ukwaju!*’

As he stuffed his face with rice that constantly kept on falling back into the plate, I explained to him how I found the bottle. He didn’t seem overly amused with my situation.

‘*Sasa* what are you waiting for? Connect it we see. *Labda kuna pesa ndani.*’

‘I don’t think there is money in the flash disk,’ I said shaking my head. Everything of his always had some monetary importance and when it didn’t it had no value in his life.

‘Then why am I here?’

‘Because I’m scared.’

‘Of a flash disk?’

‘*Ah weh,* how often do you find flash disks in bottle floating by the sea?’

Cheupe put his plate on the bed and sneakily wiped his hands on the edge of the bed thinking I wouldn't notice. That was a fight for later. He grabbed the flash disk and stuck it in the laptop port. He did the quick virus scan that only recognized one file and smirked my way. He opened the file explorer and saw one video file. He opened the video and pulled himself back and continued eating.

There was a black screen then webcam footage of three girls dancing in front of the camera in what looked like a warm yellow background with a large vase of flowers. They were all in *buibuis* singing along and laughing when something happened in the background. Behind the girls, the room door swung open to pitch black and the blink of a pair of yellow eyes focused on them. In a split second the eyes were gone in the background and something black came over the screen and the camera tumbled on the floor knocked the visual to a blur. Two big dirty dark legs moved in to view and stopped. The screen went to a black background and had 'come find us' in big bold right in the centre.

Cheupe's mouth froze open with half-chewed food oozing out as the screen claimed his attention. The parch of dryness at the back of my mouth felt uncomfortable as I tried to swallow hard.

'Bro,' I begun.

'Those girls are hot!'

'Seriously?'

'Yeah!'

'We just witnessed what could be a possible kidnapping and you think they are hot?'

'There is no way that's real. Ni jokes *tu*. I'm sure these girls are casually enjoying themselves taking selfies and updating their statuses. This isn't Hollywood, no kidnapper has such video making skill *mazee*. No kidnapper makes a video of kidnapping. We send text messages and make calls. Na *hiyo hata* when we have credit.'

I pulled out my phone to search on any news for something similar. Cheupe was right in his twisted ways; things like these don't really happen here. I casually typed knowing that I would probably see some prank news or some Facebook post or if I'm lucky something on MOMBASA CRIMES where some salty thirty-something Indian with enough bundles and time on his hands would write a whole paragraph on such video footage.

Scrolling through my search engine, I bumped into a picture of three girls faces side by side which made my heart drop into the emptiness in my stomach. I felt my heart beat harder against chest. It was the same girls we had just seen on the footage with a big red MISSING sign right above. I turned the phone and put it right on Cheupe's face.

The light-skinned girl with green lenses was called Halima, the chubbiest of the group with more powder than a baby's bottom was called Aisha and Zainab was the one with heavy eye bags and an almost rectangular face.

'You know what you need to do, right?' Cheupe asked his voice now apprehensive, eyes bright.

'We need to go to the police and give them this video.'

'Yes. And we need to help them. It's no mistake that you picked this up.' He paused momentarily, gathering his thoughts to gauge for my reaction. 'No fucking way man! Throw this flash disk back in the water and forget the whole thing. I'll keep the shiny bottle!' He admired the golden top that attracted me to the bottle in the first place.

'It's not real gold you know,' I assumed at the time. Not that I was an expert at identifying it, it's just who would have a gold cap and throw it in the sea?

'Many fools don't know that,' he said, shrugging.

We quietly watched the video a few more times trying to pick any details we could from the different frames. 'I think we should just go give it to the police and stay far away from this,' I said hoping to convince Cheupe to take me there.

Cheupe gurgled the tamarind juice in his mouth, 'I feel like I recognize the chubby girl but I can't seem to place her correctly.'

We went back to the beginning of the frame where she was on the complete left. I looked at her soft chubby skinny and her not so subtle red and blue eye shadow. I stared at her for a while but nothing came to mind except fruit scones- the ones you used to see advertised on those twenty bob buns back in the day.

'Do you see it?' Cheupe asked.

'She reminds me of fruits scones. The yellow ones you see hung up on shops when we were young.'

‘I got it!’ He tapped my shoulders a few times. ‘*Budaa* I think that’s KK’s kid.’ KK was the nickname we gave Kasimu because he owned a Kibanda.

‘No way.’ I moved my face closer to the screen.

‘Look closely. They have the same fluffy nose and big brown eyes and that weird face that looks like they weren’t completely molded.’

He was right. ‘Do you have Kasimu’s number?’

Cheupe got his phone from his boxer pocket. The screen had so many cracks he could barely see the number he was looking for. He called and grooved his frail body to *Zilizopendwa* on skiza as he waited for the phone to be picked up.

Kasimu didn’t pick up the first time and Cheupe redialed at least four times before Kasimu’s low grunting voice picked up and said, ‘*watakaje?*’

‘*KK! Ni Cheupe.*’

‘I know. What do you want?’

‘*Skia*. I saw a poster about your daughter on Facebook *sahii* and I wanted to know if everything is ok.’

KK remained quiet.

‘Have you found them?’

‘Yes.’ His voice broke off before he could say anything else.

Cheupe hinted to me with a thumb up that the girls had been found and I felt a huge relief.

‘Alhamdulillah. What happened?’

‘They were killed.’ I saw Cheupe’s mouth drop open.

‘They....they were all... killed?’ he asked quivering.

I moved closer to the phone to overhear the conversation. ‘*Nashukuru* you’ve called but I’m just from burying my...my Aisha...’ his voice began to shake and he gasped for air.

Some lady picked the phone from him and with her heavy Swahili accent she shouted. ‘*haaaalo!*’

‘Hallo?’

‘*Skia. Naomba mumwache Kasimu kuna-*’

‘Pole mama. I didn’t know what happened. I just saw a poster and thought I’d call to ask if I could help in any way. I didn’t know...’ I saw Cheupe struggle with finishing the sentence. He listened for a while before he put his phone down. ‘*Braatha... Wame-deadi.*’

I leaned back on my bed and looked at the frozen frame of the girls smiling before the door even opened. ‘That’s not human...that’s...’ I wasn’t really sure what it was.

Cheupe got up and went to the kitchen with his plate and glass and washed it. He shouted from across the house. ‘I think we should take this to Kasimu to see first.’

‘Are you crazy?’ I got up and rushed to the kitchen. ‘He’s already in pain. Showing him this could throw him over the edge.’

‘But he’s the father. He deserves to know.’

‘No. We’ll make it worse. Let’s just go and drop it at the police station.’

‘*Hapana.* You’re on your own with this.’

I went back to the room first to pack up the items when I noticed the laptop had been shut and the flash disk placed back in the bottle.

‘CHEUPE!’

He came running and stared at my shocked face. ‘*Nini?*’

‘Someone shut the laptop and put the flash disk back in the bottle.’ I said, pointing to the bed.

‘*Heh! Braathaa!* I’m out, this is some serious shit,’ He picked up his phone from the side table and left. ‘Drop it to the police and let it go. Then call a *maalim* to come home and pray for you. *Sina time ya shetani!*’

I left the house two minutes after Cheupe heading to central police station with the bottle safely tucked in my backpack. They took me behind to a back office with a hefty man sitting on a chair barely able to hold him up. His buttons strained to the last thread to hold his stomach intact. I carefully placed the bottle on his table as I kept thumbing the *tasbhi* in my right hand as I prayed ‘*Subhanallah.*’

‘What is this?’ he picked it up and stared at the flash disk in the bottle.

‘I found it by the sea. I took it home thinking it would be something fun but it’s a video of the three girls who went missing last week and were found dead. It could be their last video before they died.’ I explained in more detail what had happened while at Swahilipot.

‘So you’re telling me, *you* found this in the sea?’ he asked. Where *exactly* were you?’

‘By the trees up near the back of the fort,’ I answered.

He rubbed his chin. ‘What were you doing there?’

‘I usually chill there.’

‘Doing what *exactly*?’ His questioning nearly made me doubt my reasons for being there.

‘What everyone else does there? I get in touch with my creative side.’

‘If you were so high up how did you see the bottle in the ocean below?’

I felt my mouth get dry and any attempt at swallowing would end up in a coughing fit. My answer of just chilling really wasn’t going to help him. ‘I was staring at the sea and noticed something shinning in the water’

He looked at the golden cap, rubbing it with his finger. I noticed he hadn’t once tried to open the bottle and check the flash disk. ‘Did you see anyone in or around that area who may have thrown the bottle in the water?’

‘I really wasn’t looking at people.’

He rubbed his nose like there was a foul smell coming from the bottle and opened the big golden cap, dropping the flash disk in his hand before putting it in his old computer. He went through the same footage I went through expressionless. When the footage was done he turned his attention to me.

‘How many people have seen this?’

‘Only you and me,’ I knew it was better not to mention Cheupe; he was notoriously involved in the old town street gang who were linked to one of the tourist’s death by the fish market. Though he shaved his head and lost a lot of weight, his face could have sold him out with his thumb sized birthmark right above his lip like a Hitler moustache.

‘Do you have ID?’ I took it out and handed it to him. He took it and made a copy on the side on his small HP unit. He then took a picture of me and took down my number and I was on my way.

I was headed to Azad Ice Cream across the road for some Sugarcane Juice when Cheupe called me.

‘*Skia*, have you dropped the bottle?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Come to Kasimu’s right away!’

‘Not now.’ I really wanted the Sugar Cane Juice to take down the anxiety from the interrogation. My mouth watering for that ginger filled drink as I stood opposite the road by the *shawarma* place looking over at Azad to see how many people were there.

‘*Hapana*. Come now!’

‘Why?’

‘You need to see something. *Njoo bana, wataka nikutongoze ka dem?*’

I took a *tuk-tuk* from Central Police after getting my drink and headed to Kizingo minutes later. When I got there, Cheupe was in the sitting room with a cup of tea in his hand listening to the father talk. I gave my apologies to the whole family repeating, ‘*Pole. Kua na subra. Ni mtihani tumepata, hiyoni safari sote tuna pita.*’

‘*Tumepoa*,’ was the common reply. I sat next to Cheupe and was served tea by a young girl. The family carried on with their sorrows and talked about all the troubles they had been through and speculated on Aisha’s death.

‘*Watu wengine ni mbwa!*’ shouted a skinny lady from the corner of the room as they dwelled on who might have done it.

According to Kasimu’s sister who was heading the conversation- The three girls had gone to Zainab’s house. They never came back that night and when Kasimu called Zainab, her mum picked up saying all the girls had left their phones there. They all got worried and started calling everyone and going to the neighbors houses. Nothing. One week there was no information on them. No update in any form.

‘*Hata* the police didn’t know. There was no break in. It was impossible that they left without their phones. They suspect whoever took the girls knew them.’

‘They have no suspects yet?’ I asked feeling out of place the moment I finished the statement.

‘*Hakuna.Hakuuuuna.*’ She got up and headed outside to pick up another call. Either case she seemed like she had said everything that she wanted to.

The rest went on to discuss other people who had been through similar issues as Cheupe turned to me and whispered, ‘*Cheki.* There. At the shelf there’s a bottle with a golden top.’ I looked at his face and saw him pointing with his lips to a big wooden shelf with glass sliding doors.

Following his pout I saw the identical bottle with the same top except this had a brand logo on it unlike the other clear one. The water probably took it off. I strained my eyes just enough to note the floral design and golden writing written ‘Rose Syrup’ across the top.

‘It’s the same one. That bottle is from here *Braatha,*’ he said with pride like Sherlock unlocking the key piece of evidence to finish the case.

To be honest, he had my curiosity peaked. The same kind that had me swimming in my boxers towards a bottle in the ocean. I got up and headed towards the shelf like I was going to look at an old black and white photo of a family by old lighthouse. I quickly glanced at the picture then directed my attention towards the bottle that had some sand in it. The sand was a dull brown and had small blue and purple shiny particles in it. It didn’t really look like much at first until you noticed it made the sand sparkle.

I picked up the bottle and shook it a bit unbothered by everyone behind me talking about a neighbor’s cousin who died last week from Chikungunya. Cheupe came and snatched the bottle from my hand.

‘*Braatha umechizi*’ he placed the bottle back on the shelf. ‘Who puts sand in a bottle and displays it on the shelf?’

‘A lot of people. *Wazungus* love this.’

‘What *Mswahili* does that? I was getting whipped left right and center for coming with even a spot of sand or shadow of a footprint?’

‘What the hell is shadow footprint?’

‘It when your feet leave a wet print on the floor when they are humid?’

‘I don’t think that science is right.’

‘What do know about my feet? *Usiniletee ujuaji!* I’ve had my feet since I was a baby.’

‘I’m not even going to argue.’ Cheupe noticed the sparkling pieces of the sand and picked up the bottle, opening the top and sniffing it. ‘Is that jewels-’

‘*Tafadhali!*’ a hefty pear shaped woman grabbed the bottle from Cheupe. ‘What are you doing?’

‘*Tulizaa.*’ Cheupe said confidently as she went for the bottle top and covered the bottle. ‘We were just checking what’s special about the sand till you have it in your house.’

‘Don’t touch things. *Kilichokuleta ni machozi ya maiti, watia pua kwa vitu zetu ukitafula nini?*’

She stormed off with the bottle cushioned under her molten underarm

‘The first ones always get scary,’ Cheupe whispered.

‘What?’ I watched as she struggled to hold her red and black *leso* that awkwardly clashed on her beach-colored *dera*.

‘That’s Kasimu’s first wife.’

‘The mum to-’

‘No. That’s the lady near Kasimu there. The one who has those heavy eyes,’ Cheupe continued with *udaku wa mtaa* background. ‘Mzee Kasimu had married Gulamu from high school. It was a love marriage, but she couldn’t give birth. He married a second wife but she died of anaemia. It was messed up. She was four months into her pregnancy. Then he married her, Asha. She’s the mother to the only three children Kasimu has. That’s why I say the first ones always get scary. Gulamu is scary. Imagine not being able to provide kids to your husband.’

‘Yeah.’ At this point a quick thought came to mind. It was more of those cliché stories you always hear *mtaani* right before the *magrib* Adhan; stories of resentful wives who usually made life a living hell for the husband’s other wives.

‘I’ll marry just one or none at all,’ Cheupe clarified. With his dating trend he would reach the latter faster.

I was still engrossed with the thought of Gulamu being somehow involved in the girl's disappearance and thought of gauging Cheupe's reaction. 'Imagine how weird it would be if it was Gulamu who killed those girls.'

'*Wallahi*. It's true.'

'We should tell the police to-'

'Excuse me. Do you get paid their salary? You keep on wanting to do their job for them.'

'But it's the right thing to do.'

'*Braatha!* Stay out of their business. You have a flash disk that moves around. If she's the one doing that shit you don't want to be on her wrong side. Look at her.'

I don't pray five times a day and once in a while I find myself having a drink here and there but I try to always do right by Allah. My mother told me the key to opening heaven was a clean soul.

KK went on about how Aisha had gotten a scholarship to USIU to study hotel management and when done she would have a trip to continue for one year in Norway. She was the oldest of the three by five years and was an idol to her siblings. 'Everyone,' according to her mother, 'loved her. Not a single person hated her. She had a pure heart.'

'Cheupe...'

'*Braatha! Sitaki*. Leave it alone. You can't just tell the police that the other wife did it and expect them to do anything about it.'

'I'll just say I saw it at their house and they'll do the rest.'

'This isn't some CSI that you watch online. What connection do you have to the girls? They'll start making links and you can't say *wanijua* because there is no way I will meet them. They will throw my ass in jail. *Braatha*. Let. It. Go.'

I wasn't going to let it go, but I understood what Cheupe was saying. I would get into trouble for simply being associated with him. I had to find another link and how I would phrase this to the police.

Gulamu stormed back out of what looked like a small store room and headed back to the guests. She passed a quick angry glance warning us not to pry then sat near Asha.

‘*Wallahi*. The first time I saw her I had a nightmare of her holding me down slowing stabbing me asking me where it hurts the most. *Braatha* she just has those bad vibes,’ Cheupe said frowning in her general direction. He was right; Gulamu had that cold vibe taround her like looking into the face of a snake up close: are they smiling with you or at you before they eat you? ‘We should leave *ki-sniper*,’ he added turning towards Kasimu.

As I gave my hand to give my regards I asked a question. ‘Baba Kasimu let me ask you, what do you think happened to those girls?’

‘Look at all this unrest in the country, people think they can do what they want? I have no wealth to give. No job worth coming after. What reason would they have for taking and killing my blood?’ He paused to look at everyone around him. ‘This wasn’t because of my daughter. This is the curse of one of those two girls.’ I noticed Asha throw a quick glance to Gulamu who kept her eyes fixed on her husband.

Cheupe intervened, ‘Mzee. We should go and let you rest.’ He nodded and we stepped out.

‘What are you doing *braatha*? Gulamu looked at you like she wanted to eat you.’

‘But did you see how Asha looked at her?’

‘I don’t care. I called you to see the bottle design. It’s that fancy Dubai brand they import. A lot of people use it but it’s expensive. But did you notice the cap. It’s different. I remember those bottles Kasimu used to sell them a long time ago. I bought one as a present.’ He bought it as a present for his mother for her birthday. It was the sweetest thing he had ever done according to him. ‘The cap is small and light. Those caps aren’t the ones.’

‘What are the chances?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s none of our business.’

On my way home I tried convincing myself all the reasons for and against reporting this to the police. Cheupe was right. That bottle was probably pretty common. It could be anyone, but there was that aching gut instinct; the kind you get in a split of second when you realize you’re somewhere you’re not supposed to be; like when you see the GSU truck braking right in front of you in the CBD during unrest or when you pass *makaburini* at night and some woman in a *buibui* starts following you.

The feeling where you know this is nothing short of God now wholly grabbing your guts and shaking them in their place to check if they are working. These feelings are absolute and final. That was the feeling I had of Gulamu and that this wasn’t over. I had to at least try and talk to Asha and see if she

needed anything and maybe try and convince her to go to the police. They would have listened to her more than a twenty five year old.

It was perhaps almost seven in the evening when I went back to Kasimu's house. I had tried calling Cheupe a few times and left a few messages but no reply. It wasn't like him to stay away from his phone. Maybe he was just flat out ignoring me. There were still visitors at the house with two women cooking outside on *makaa jikos*. I walked in unnoticed by anyone. I found Asha by the kitchen talking to someone in a *buibui* and blue headscarf

'Asallamu aleikum.'

They both cordially replied 'Waleikum Salaam.'

'Ma Aisha can I talk to you?' I asked her, 'alone,' I added. Both women gave each other a glance.

As the other lady made her way out while adjusting her scarf and shouting at the boys running around the open space in the house, I took a quick look around for Gulamu then quickly started talking. 'Ma Aisha. There's something I found today morning that I need to tell you about.' She waited, unmoved. 'There's a bottle I found at the sea. It had a flash disk with footage of your daughter and the two other girls-'

'Don't! Stop it!' She moved closer to cover my mouth.

'No you don't understand...'

'No. *You* don't understand. You keep on talking and she'll hear you and she'll start again...'

'You know, don't you? You know who killed those girls.'

'A mother knows. Gulamu has been up to no good ever since she heard that Kasimu was getting slow,' she hissed. 'She's like a shadow behind the walls sometimes.'

'If you know then you need to talk to the police. They need to arrest her and...'

'*Hapana!* The police won't catch her. Her brother works there. He's the OCS. Anything you tell him he tells her and when she finds out she summons him. You keep on talking and I'll lose another child.'

I was almost taken aback by what she said next. She grabbed me by the hand and dragged me to the end of the kitchen as if to keep away from any prying ears.

‘You don’t understand. I know she’s done it. I just can’t prove it. I’ve seen her do things to people. She mixes stuff at night and prays to her spirits and the next day her problem is gone. Once in a while I get those random bags with chicken bones she hides around the house and I return them where they are.’

She moved closer; her stale breath hitting right through my nose. ‘One of our neighbors got snakes in her house out of nowhere. She woke up to snakes all over her bed. Sumara was being haunted by cats that stared at her as she slept. Rishad had things in his house thrown to the floor as they slept. All these people pissed her off at one point of the other and in less than three days they paid the price.’

‘Have you told KK?’

‘He never listens. Not when it comes to Gulamu. She can do no wrong by him.’ She was more of a third wheel in the house from the way she carried herself. ‘Leave it alone. I already lost my daughter.’ Tears began rolling down her cheek. ‘My beautiful Aisha. She was going to be a star: carried my mother’s name and determination. She wasn’t even Kasimu’s blood, but he treated her like his own.’

‘When she gets mad again she will go for your next child and then the next and eventually you. Let’s go to the *mzee wa mtaa*, the...the...maalims, the sheikhs. We’ll bring *waombaji* and...’

‘*Nyamaza!* This woman is untouched. Whatever she has for herself is powerful and dark.’

end of excerpt



The Holmes gene

Story by:

ABDULQADIR MAHMOUD



The ocean wavered, transferring its energy through gentle crests which crushed against the coral below us. The sound of the crushing waves fused with the cheerful laughter from my friends harmoniously. I zoned back in to the energy of my friends as they cheerfully tell stories, sipping away at their *gahwa* beneath the residential storey buildings shading us from the setting sun. The buildings gave way to a cemented patio that stood just at the edge of the corals with a railed ending; this made up the coffee joint. I loved my *gahwa* as sweet as they come.

It was our favourite spot in Kibokoni where we'd have coffee after parkour practise runs near Fort Jesus every Friday evening. We made considerable progress that week so the coffee and *visheti* were super sweet. We just about filled the joint, whiling away the time with snacks and stories complimented with a view of the ocean. The eye-catching English Point Resort gazed at us from the other side of the ocean. The stories kept us there even after our cups were dry. They were good stories.

"*Nisave na hiyo kikombe* bro," a lanky, light-skinned guy around my age said, pointing at my empty cup. He had sharp cheek bones, brown-framed, thick lens glasses which he kept pushing above his nose and messy, black hair.

I smiled as I handed it to him but he never looked at my face. He put it in the small bucket half-full of water by his side and begun arranging the other cups to create more space for the rest. As he sorted away a few etres beside me in the rather quite packed joint, I glanced at the notifications on my phone and realized it was time for Maghreb prayers. I bid my friends goodbye and headed for Baluchi mosque. Listening to the imam's beautiful voice leading the prayers was a superb way of ending an equally beautiful day

Approaching the main road, I heard someone calling behind me. Initially I thought that it wasn't meant for me but the urgency in the call made me turn around. I turned to see the lanky guy from the coffee joint running in slow wide steps as he struggled to hold his oversize pants to his waist while pushing his thick glasses back to their place.

"Bro! *Ngoja!*"

I grabbed my track pockets to see if I had dropped my phone but it was there. He finally got to me and bent over to catch his breath for a few seconds.

"*Asalaam aleykum* bro!" he said, still panting.

"*Waaleykum salaam warahmatullah,*" I answered.

“I just wanted to ask if by any chance you practice parkour and free running,” he continued.

“Yeah, *ata* we’re from training just a while ago *hapo* Fort Jesus,” I said

“Oh *maa shaa Allah* this is so great!” A wide smile came over his narrow face and he continued, “I’ve been practising a little *pia* but I never had anyone to practise with.”

“Sucks, right?” I said. “We’ll be here for practise tomorrow. Feel free to join us,” I added.

“That would be awesome *wallah* bro. What time?”

“Usually *tunaanza* after *Asr* prayers but you can come earlier *nione* how good you are then *tuanzie hapo*.”

“How’s 3 pm?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’ll do great,” I said, feeling like an accomplished athlete.

“*Ajeeb* bro,” he said gleefully. “Can I have your number?”

We exchanged our numbers and I gave him my names. He started walking back to the joint and I announced, “And what should I save you name as?”

“*Twariif!*” He yelled back as he back-peddled. I smiled at the thought of being a teacher of my favourite sport for the first time.

The *adhan* sounded from all over Kibokoni and so I started again for Baluchi. I wanted to make it to the first row in *salaah* and get every *rakaah*.

I didn’t want to be late for my first lesson so by half past two in the afternoon, I was in the *matatu* waiting for the driver and conductor to be satisfied by the scarcity of passengers on a Saturday afternoon. It was one of the slowest *matatu* rides I’ve ever heard in my life especially since I was determined to break my known reputation of coming late to important events. I was so anxious to make sure I don’t keep my first student waiting. Looking back at it now, I wish I had the time to savour the full tide ocean as we crossed the bridge into town.

After multiple stops and waits, we finally arrived at my stop and I started for Fort Jesus on foot. What started as a pacing walk turned into a slow jog after I realized it was five minutes to three. On the

way there I thought of the beginner moves he might have known already and which moves we'd train that day. My first student, I thought, smiling. I caught sight of a homeless man staring at me with a smirk on his face. I nodded back at him as if to tell him that I respect him for all he's been through and I sympathize with him; even though I couldn't assist with his situation.

I jogged past the last corner to the park just in time, expecting to see him waiting anxiously. He wasn't there. I put down my string bag and warmed up as I waited for him. Good thing there weren't a lot of people on site so the weird stretching had no attraction value at this historical site.

I collapsed on the grass after trying to go for a leg split. What in the world was I thinking, I thought silently laughing away the transcending pain. My breath slowly steadied as I marvelled at the humongous blue sight of the sky, extending its signature convex nature to the edges of my view, its glassy depth emanating from the heights as it settles in still beauty, its majesty so pronounceable yet never seeking the attention of anyone or anything. Just existing in its own natural beauty. It was peaceful.

I slide my phone from my pocket and switched my view to its screen,

Nineteen minutes past three.

I opened my contact list as I sat up and selected Twariif's name for a message.

"HEY, WHERE ARE YOU AT? WEAR COMFORTABLE SHOES TO STICK THE LANDINGS."

My gaze fell back at the ocean which never ceased to amaze me in its beauty. Stray thoughts cut at my fabric of sanity with questions about who I was, what I meant for people and what my purpose, my calling was in this broad world of digital dementia, stereotypes and identity crisis. This was the curse of a wondering mind; the unravelling of nothing but the harsh realities that surround every border and will of our dreams and the definition of our lives that vary everyday like the combinations one can use to solve the Rubin's Cube.

I wasn't ready for that roller coaster today. I put my phone in my string bag and set it aside. Let's start flying, I thought. Parkour is my second love- those single moments when you execute a vault perfectly and you feel the air moving alongside the adrenaline coursing through your veins as you float for just a fraction of a second in the air as the crows glide around you, clueless in their search for food, totally unmoved by your poor attempt at flight. There and then, it is just me and my world...

I was sweating reasonably from my short workout and I pulled out my phone to check for replies.

It was forty-two minutes past three.

“4 NEW MESSAGES FROM...” It was a new number. I huffed curiously at first but figured it might have been Twariif with another number.

I double-tapped on it as I took a seat back at my spot on the grass. I was right.

“HELP PLEASE! (3:28 pm)”

“IT’S TWARIIF (3:28 pm)”

“I’M IN DEEP TROUBLE (3:34 pm)”

“PLEASE! (3:37 pm)”

“HELP! (3:39 pm)”

My heart sank to my stomach and every sweat cascading down my skin turn cold as every muscle tensed me into place. I couldn’t believe what I read. I redialled that number and waited as the call in tune called for the first time, then the second and then the third...

‘CALL ENDED’

What’s up man, I thought to myself, running every possible scenario in my head of what might have happened to him.

“CAN’T TALK (3:45 pm)”

“WATANISKIA (3:45 pm)”

“COME OPPOSITE FORODHANI (3:46 pm)”

“ITS HAPPENING (3:48 pm)”

“HURRY! (3:48 pm)”

I threw my phone back into my thread bag instinctively heading towards Forodhani. All manner of questions were going through my mind; what was happening to Twariif, a seemingly simple coffee seller? Why did he choose to text me yet we barely know each other? Should I alert the police? Should I just assume I didn’t see his texts? It was then I realized I was hurtling down the street and running out of breath. I slowed down a bit, trying to organize my thoughts amidst the sounds of *adhan* all over Kibokoni.

I stopped in front of the Resort, looking at its subtly curved wall-art after its name as I caught my breath. I then noticed the vibration oscillating in my bag. I pulled out my phone and saw the recent missed call and one message,

“BEHIND YOU (3:57 pm)”

I turned around to see Twariif standing at the entry on an alley wearing an amber yellow t-shirt that complemented his light skin, a dark brown trench coat that went just below his waist belt and deep black pants that extended to a pair of dark brown open leather shoes that resembled a boot but with narrow slits running across its fore side. He looked smart.

He signalled me to follow him as he walked briskly into the alley, hands sunken into the side pockets of his trench coat as its bottom end whipped back with the same urgency as his steps. I followed him confused as I harboured the butterflies taking flight in my stomach and the feeling of my throat drying up.

“Hey!” I called out.

He kept walking.

“Hey!” I repeated as I started to jog towards him. “Twarriif!” I finally said, raging out as I caught his shoulder, turning him to face me. He didn’t resist. He turned having placed a finger on his lip and looked at me intently, his cheekbones pronounced more by the upped collar of his trench coat and narrow dark eyes and messy black hair. He didn’t have the thick lens glasses this time.

“We’re here,” he whispered, glancing around

I looked at him blankly, my throat now drier than before.

“I need your help,” he continued.

My heart beat was in my ears as I kept looking around for any possible danger.

"I'll explain later but right now I need your expertise," he added "Something is happening over this wall and I need you to get to the top and take a peek."

"*Allahu Akbar!*" the imam at the neighbouring mosque begun *Asr* prayers.

Now, aside from the fact that he made me wait, run and worry like a mad person, he was now asking me to get over a wall with no explanation. He noticed my confusion as I stared fiercely at him.

"Please. A kid might die if you don't," he added

I calmed a little. "Even if I was to help you, how am I supposed to get on top of this wall? It's at least three meters high," I said, looking up the wall.

"Using that," he pointed at one of the support beams holding up a wooden balcony of the neighbouring storey house that extended below the wall.

"But these beams are ages old. A little excessive hurdle could bring the whole balcony down."

"Not today. The county government made sure of it 3 years ago with their urban development plan to reinforce the Old Town and its structures. They are as safe as a rail bar can be," he said, confidently.

"Come-on, we haven't much time," he added. "Your soft sole loafer shoes won't make much noise when you make the run."

I looked at him reluctantly and knew he was right. I sighed and took a few steps back to face the wall. I then jolted in quick wide strides running up to the wall, put one foot on it and pushed myself up, transferring my momentum upwards towards the support beam. I reached out at my peak height and grabbed the end of the beam, reinforcing my grip with my other hand as I adjusted myself into a cat grab position with both feet on the wall. I flew again, I thought, and smirked. I then set myself for the final leap to the wall ledge and pushed off the wall upwards to grab the corner ledge of the three metre wall. I finally pulled my chest onto the wall and pushed my upper body above it with my arms then sat on the ledge.

A strong concoction of bhang fumes hit my nostrils unbelievably hard as I took my seat almost knocking me off.

Twariif signalled from below to inquire of what I had seen. me from below of what I see. Looking down into that side, I saw a couple of boys seated in a circle at the corner side of the wall and storey house passing around a single strip of bhang to each other. A laughing young boy with properly groomed hair stood out from the rest with the level of neatness he carried compared with the others.

Just then, one of the boys made a slight bob to raise his head towards the wall ledge and I quickly moved back to the cat grab position on the wall, listening intently whether he had noticed anything.

He hadn't.

"*Asalaam aleykum warahmatullah*" The imam finalized the *Asr* prayers in the neighbouring mosque as I savoured my short relief.

I leaped from the wall, landing softly near Twariif.

"Did you see a boy with a Persian cat's fur for hair?" he asked.

"You mean neat? Yes I did," I said, wiping the dust off my palms. "What's he got to do with any of this?"

"Just a moment," he said, retrieving his phone to do a quick text about something to someone.

"Come," he said, sliding his phone back to his coat pocket. "Walk with me. I know you have a lot of questions to ask."

"Who was that boy, and why did you say someone's going to die?" I asked as I complied with his request.

A group of people holding walking canes led by a smartly dressed man with a white beard walked by us, disappearing behind the alley whose wall I had just scaled. They all looked bound by the same mission..

"You see that old man?" Twariif said, pointing to the smartly dressed one. "He's that boy's father. He is a successful businessman here in Mombasa. Nothing much about him, really. As for the boy, he ran away from home almost a week ago and I was tasked with finding him. I just texted him the whereabouts of his son."

"What do you mean you were tasked with...wait. Who are you man?" I asked, studying him like I was seeing him for the first time.

"I am a consulting detective here in Mombasa, and no," he chuckled. "It's not in an official capacity as government agent. Working this way keeps me away from getting swallowed in the rampant corruption."

I scratched my jaw, not knowing how to respond.

"I know, I get that a lot. I assume you want to know why you're involved in all this," he said, motioning for us to move away from the wall.

We had reached the end of the alley when the boy's screams rent the air.

"Baaa pole...baaa!"

He signalled a *tuktuk* to stop and he hopped in. instinctively, knowing that he was a detective, I jumped in too. The boy continued screaming. I remained silent as I tried to process my thoughts, imagining what my role in this sudden adventure was.

"Baluchi mosque, please," he instructed the *tuktuk* driver.

"After scoping out the place the boy hangs out, I knew that direct confrontation was out of the question because I'd be out-numbered by the boy's smoking buddies and, the *mateja* here have a habit of revenging with grave consequences. The other option was the wall and clearly I wasn't agile enough to get up there. I needed someone with gymnastic abilities," he said, glancing at me.

"I see," I said,

"I knew that the only probable place local acrobatics would be training here in town would be Fort Jesus beach and since it's easy to form groups at the beach when your sport is similar, *yallah*."

I nodded.

"I chose the coffee joint because it's the cheapest place for groupies to hang out during the evening especially on Fridays and Saturdays because it signifies a mild version of a boy's night out. I took the cup collecting job for the day at the joint for a tiny wage and observed the people who came by and you and your group were among them."

"But how did you single me out from the lot?" I inquired.

"Simple really. I observed. In sports, runners have a more developed shin muscle build than others. With you I noticed bigger left shin muscles than the right which is a sign of injury, especially knee related ones. You use less of you injured leg. And I didn't notice any scars of surgery which meant you got the injury recently around the introduction of arthroscopic surgery where they use tiny equipment and a camera to operate for efficiency and accuracy. It was either surgery or limping of which the latter was ruled out during our exchange of numbers."

"Impressive," I said, thinking to myself that he might as well be a surgeon too,

"The grains of sand on your head and back too, a result of frequent rolling, and the major giveaway was when you unlocked your phone to check the time. There was an Instagram notification with a username, 'parkourho' which openly suggested that you practiced parkour."

"The devil is in the details, huh?" I said, chuckling. "Still, why me?" I asked as the *tuktuk* pulled by Baluchi mosque.

"Rather simple, again" he said. "You smiled and contributed more to the group. You seemed to admire nature more and you seemed almost one with it, which are both signs of an introverted personality and one of the qualities of such people is they are good listeners. So I had a higher probability of convincing you compared to other members of your group. Zoning out from a sports group is also not a common thing unless you're undergoing mental illnesses like stress or depression. So preventing you from being alone afterwards was a good win for both you and the case. Besides, I do know the feeling."

"So you took a job and dressed up as someone else completely to play detective for a case?"

"The art of disguises is one I love to explore. And the cases are a distraction for my wondering mind."

"This is just....just.. Incredible!" I remarked.

"Huh, that's not what other people usually say." he said, subtly impressed.

"Oh, *wanasema*?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Suffice it to say they are ideally not as positive as you," he responded as I stepped out of the *tuktuk*. I expected him to get out too but he remained glued to his seat busy typing something on his phone.

"You're not getting out?" I asked, bending slightly to get a better look at him.

"No," he answered. "*Ntawahi Asr baadaye hapo* Aga Khan mosque. Baluchi pray at half past four so you'll have time for your training with you group," he said not looking up from his phone.

I stood there not sure whether to thank him or expect gratitude from him. He then stopped typing and looked up at me with a smirk

"What do you say we do this again sometime?" he said, winking at me.

"I'd say, hell yes!" I said, smiling broadly.

"See you around, champ" he said as the *tuktuk* readied to go.

"Wait!" I called. "Is your name really Twariif?"

"Yes. *Allah azza wa Jal* made sure it spelled out my destiny," he said. "Look it up!" He added as the *tuktuk* sped away.

I removed my phone while I looked at the disappearing *tuktuk* and typed in the meaning of his name on Google search. It came back, 'Twariif meaning Curious'

I smiled as I put my phone away. The *Adhan* sounded from the minaret above me, signalling time for *Asr* prayers.

End



Hazungu's dilemma

Story by:

MUNYIRI MUCHOKI



Kazungu had only read about convictions and death penalties in books and newspapers, and it perpetually made his flesh crawl. On that awful day, he had asked his wife to confirm the clear and annoying sound that came from the car. He drove an old *PEUGEOT-504* which had been passed down generations from his grandfather, a local chief to his father a palm wine tapper and finally ending its course of life with a middle aged teacher, whose students had nicknamed the “beetle” not because of how he looked or walked but how the car moved rapidly from side to side along the dusty paths of the village.

The whining sound from the back of the car was now alarming. Noticing that his wife had become oblivious of it and was just shaking the crying baby, Kazungu decided to bring the cranky car into a halt on the roadside. He exited the car supporting his huge belly which had kept growing in spite of his fast decline towards poverty. He walked round the vehicle assessing the source of concern, wishing that the government would increase his salary to accord him freedom from the debts which were suffocating him. From a distance Kazungu noticed two well-built men with sleeveless shirts approaching with clubs and machetes and he assumed to be the village askaris doing their patrols. He also observed that they were walking more purposefully, a stark difference from the relaxed way the askaris used to patrol the village.

Bending over, he inspected the rusty rear bumper which was held together on both sides with binding wire. The exhaust pipe which was also held in place with similar wires had broken off near the edge which kept scratching the ground whenever he hit a bump. An urge to see if the men had passed grew heavier as he had an awful instinct; their awkward lack of communication and the way they swung their weapons had unnerved him a bit too. Taking a quick glance at the men, he saw them make quick steps towards him and before he could react, the taller one lunged at him, his machete missing Kazungu’s head by inches. The attacker lunged again, screaming, and missed a second time, giving Kazungu time to get up quickly to assume an offensive position. He wasn’t sure what to do, so he just raised his fist, heart beating furiously as he taunted the man to come at him again.

The other attacker had gone round to the passenger side, his machete raised and Anyika, Kazungu’s wife started screaming as the machete landed on her arm while she protected the baby. Her screams filled the air and it must have scared the attackers because they fled into the bushy cocoyam farm. Fear turned him into a stationary pillar while Anyika kept creaming. The baby was crying very loudly too.

Anyika was hurt badly and her dress was filled with blood. Kazungu wasn’t sure of the extent of the injury. The baby, whom she had hurled on the driver’s seat, was still crying, eyes wide in shock,.

Instinctively, he went round, lifted the baby as he tried to console him before placing him on the back seat. His thoughts were on two things; making it to the village dispensary a few minutes away and his recollection of the two attackers the previous day drinking palm wine with Maduka, his creditor, and the looks they gave him as he drove by.

Kazungu had fallen out with Maduka several months back after he declined the latter's offer to surrender his coco yam farm as repayment for the money he owed him. Kazungu knew his coco yam was a gold mine and surrendering it to Maduka would mean being displaced from his ancestral home. He rather preferred paying off the debt gradually from his meagre primary school teacher earnings and Maduka had threatened to get his land by any means necessary. He was a brute, this Maduka.

Later on after Kazungu and his wife had received treatment, the chief had confirmed that the two attackers had been apprehended by the youth in charge of security and they were being held at the local cell awaiting the baraza to decide on their fate. He also confirmed that they had confessed to have been sent by Maduka to commit the crime. They were however not supposed to hurt anybody, they said, the devil had used their lack of sobriety and pushed them to almost killing Kazungu and his wife! Anyika's arm was suspended on a sleeve and Kazungu had to manage with a walking stick.

Two weeks after the incident, Kazungu's wife slowly recovered but missed three fingers and even though Kazungu didn't air his concern, he was worried about who would take care of the farm now that his wife could not do much with her hand. He couldn't afford to hire labor and he was more of a class person than a field one. He acknowledged with a heavy heart that much as he wanted her to work the field, she could not manage. The baby also needed her attention too. He imagined taking another wife, but remembered that finances were a thorn in his flesh; he was barely managing with his small family.

The palm oil lamp gave a yellowish glow against the darkness in his hut. The night was still, the moon had been swallowed in the sombre night clouds. His neighbour who normally slept outside and snored like an old scooter was also unusually silent that night. The crickets were a bit silent too, and Kazungu pondered over the case hearing the following day. Maduka had been apprehended too, and Kazungu had mixed feelings about the whole thing. While he felt that the perpetrators deserved to be dealt with accordingly, he also felt that were he in Maduka's shoes and someone owed him such an amount of money, he'd almost have resorted to the same action. Maybe they were right about the devil having influenced their deed, maybe they just wanted to scare him a bit so he could speed up the payment.

The following day, the case was set to begin around mid-morning before the noon sun raised high to burn the wisdom from the sagacious baraza's minds. Kazungu made his way slowly, hopping on his

walking stick as he could no longer drive. His car was out of commission having suffered a terribly from the attacker's blow. The exhaust pipe was out and the rear bumper was beyond repair.

It was a warm day. The chief's compound was packed. Leather sandals blocked the entrance, which always got into his nerves. Out of respect, he took off his straw hat and joined the silence, which enveloped the whole compound. After a few formalities, the two attackers were brought before the baraza, bound. The chief pronounced that an attack on a fellow villager was a terrible crime and that they had come to a conclusion that the best resort would be to banish the two together with their families. They were however accorded the luxury of leaving with their meagre moveable properties so they could start life afresh wherever they went.

Maduka was summoned as well. His sentencing was heavier since he was the brains behind the whole operation. The baraza pronounced the death sentence on him and his family was also going to be banished to avoid what the baraza called a reoccurrence of the same from the initial seed of hate planted by their patriarch. His sentence would be carried out after the new moon.

Suddenly, as is wont to happen in the region, the clouds gathered together, squeezing each other so hard that it started raining. The old men of the baraza hastily picked up their stools, seeking the shelter of the main hut as Maduka was left soaking. It was one of the youthful askaris who made a dash in the pouring rain to pull Maduka back into the cell, but before he could make it to him, a terrifying bolt of lightning struck Maduka who fell on the soggy ground, eyes wide in shock.

The sweet aroma punctured the air around Kazungu's grass-thatched hut. It was another warm and he could hear the pestle and mortar rhythmically grinding what he assumed to be cassava flour. It was the best time of the season as they gathered the bountiful harvest into their stores. Women flocked fields while men carried along attending to their herds. The cool winds blew all day and night in ecstatic anticipation. There were many preparations to be done as the planting season would also begin shortly. Maduka's burial was also to be conducted by the village women. Normally burials were conducted by village elders, but due to the circumstances that surrounded him, he had to get a miserable send off.

Elders met severally at the chief's quarter to deliberate on the issue at hand. Maduka's untimely death had left them pondering on whether to still banish his family or let them stay as nature had taken its course already. His family were beside themselves with worry. Ihuoma, Madume's wife grew edgy around people who viewed them as an outcast. His own bicycle was drowned at a nearby river hoping to

kill the bad omen that had been left behind roaming together with his belongings. His clothes had been shredded and taken to the edge of the forest and buried in a meter-deep trench. Nothing was left to chance. This was the way of the village and their beliefs.

Kazungu decided to pay a visit to the council of elders regarding the issue of the poor family who were suffering because of a mistake they had no hand in. The issue was not going to be easy but he carried on hoping to change the cause of action. He got there just before the elders retired for their afternoon nap.

He was welcomed well, each elder asking about his wife's recovery and how she was faring. They made mention of the way in which Maduka had died, happy that the gods had taken the responsibility off their hands. No one could point a finger at the gods; their power was absolute. He tried to convince them to let Maduka's family be, but they were adamant.

"You know Maduka has always been a rabble rouser in this community," Ikidieze, the chief elder said. "This is not the first time he's caused pain to families within our community and those of our neighbouring village. He is the reason we have lost the honour we once commanded due to his heedless behaviour. You know a closed mouth catches no flies," he explained, his colleagues nodded in support.

Kazungu left when he realized his pleas had landed on deaf ears. He expected Ikidieze to understand, solely because he was the only one among the elders who had embraced modernity and decided to join school even in his advanced age. He expected him to show some sympathy. As he left, he made up his mind to work out a way to assist the poor family. He sympathized with them and could no longer handle their accusing looks since they felt he was the reason why Maduka was dead.

That night, he slept early as the decision weighed heavily on his mind. As he closed his eyes, he was ushered into another dimension where Maduka's homestead was up in flames and all the villagers were running everywhere with buckets of water trying to put off the fire. Ihuoma, Maduka's widow and her children stood by the fence, watching the commotion as if they were not even part of what was happening.

Suddenly, Maduka seemed to emerge from the flames, cutting through the commotion heading straight for Kazungu who stood at a distance. No one else seemed to see Maduka, not even his family.

"See the fire you started?" Maduka whispered in Kazungu's ear. "An innocent family is suffering because of your actions."

"It was your fault," he said. "You ought not to have sent people to kill me."

“And what’s the punishment for those who owe the dead?”

Kazungu remained silent.

“The fate of my family is in your hands,” Maduka said as his figure receded back into the flaming homestead.

“Wake up, wake up!” Anyika hissed, shaking Kazungu from his dream. “Can we no longer sleep in peace because of your dreams now?”

As he heaved, Kazungu made up his mind on what he was to do when darkness gave way to daylight later.

End



Maria

Story by:
LORRAINE KWOPA



Entry 1, 14th September 2001

My name is Maria and today I became a woman. I became a woman of the society, a woman from filth. The other five girls and I were paraded in front of our mothers and fathers, slatted painfully in the joy of the crowd and became *whole*. The situation was neither embarrassing nor shameful. It was depressing, nonetheless. In between our tears and Mucus River, we became women. The soil drank us whole and felt fulfilled. They claimed we were of age because our breasts danced underneath our *shukas*. They argued that our bottoms which had started wobbling and dancing freely were getting unwarranted attention from the young men. They insisted that desire would fill us up and our legs would ramble apart, ushering us to sin. They were convinced our minds would imagine the wrong things, ears would hear the forbidden and hands would touch what would evoke desire. A vicious cycle, they said. They neither saw apprehension in our teary eyes nor the curses lurking behind our quivering lips. With the spilt blood, our destinies became one with Tumolo village.

“She is ready,” my father would mumble between his drunken teeth. Words that my beloved mother despised. Detested. Disliked.

Today I became a woman. A woman my father wanted. A submissive woman of Tumolo village.

Entry 2, 17th September 2001

Two nights ago I became a victim of the female cut. The ignorant clapped at Female Genital Mutilation. I had to undergo this because my culture dictated so and my father was the vessel that saw that it was fulfilled. I had to go through this because my ‘suitor’ was ready. I had to undergo this, because my beloved mother did too, a painful baton passed on from mother to daughter. The pain was severe that Mama Bena, the elderly village herbalist had to be summoned to my rescue. My father shrouded himself with a coat of grief at the thought of losing his cattle should the pain claim me. I was being sold off at the price of a few cattle I could count on both hands. I was to leave my beloved mother behind. *It was tradition*. In between my blurry eyes, I saw him pacing left and right, up and down in the tiny brown thatched muddy hut. His discomfort out-shadowed my pain. His chest heaved. He was breathing hard. I had to live. I had to live for my father, for his pride, for his cattle. I had to stay put and prevent my mother from leaving. My endurance to the pain was the adhesive holding this whole arrangement together.

I felt the lower part of my body fade away. I was a flower, a decaying flower. It was Christmas for the ground as it danced to the smell of my blood, got wasted and could no longer hold my little mattress. All the organs inside me were crying for attention. While the drums inside my head increased their tempo, my bonny muscles felt weak. I could neither lift up my arms nor pull myself up; but I had to live, for my father, and prevent my beloved mother from a shamefully separation.

Mama Bena, the village savior, gave me boiled herbs from the bitter *ekhwe* tree which soothed my pain. My father is relieved. We are all relieved.

The famous *ekhwe* tree is Tumolo's go-to pharmacy. It is located at the center of Tumolo. It has tiny thin curved green leaves, sore thorns, gigantic roots and its medicinal effects are remarkable. Its sap is not the ordinary type but blood-colored to signify life. These leaves according to Mama Bena can be munched raw, pounded and sprinkled on a sore scar or boiled hard to release breath-taking results. "It was a tree which knew our roots, our frailty. Our great grandparents had sought its cure, and now sadly, its cure was being imposed on us. Long live the *ekhwe* tree."

Entry 3, 18th September 2001

"We have to stop these secret meetings," my mother cautioned, "you will be married soon, you need to act dumb."

My mother has been teaching me how to read and write. It is taboo for women to learn this in Tumolo village. If caught, we could be ostracized. My mother would receive a severe beating from my father. In this village, the roles are distinctive according to gender. Men do 'everything' that women should not. While the women have to be extremely submissive, non-responsive, non-influential and caretakers, the men have to be leaders and planners. They share a collective dislike of learning to read or write. I am expected to be my mother's diligent, subdued shadow while the men their fathers. We are all illiterate of the books but literates of the world. The world of Tumolo. Tumolo village is our teacher.

My mother also was cut like me. She cried like me. She almost died like me. She fought hard to sire sons for my father but fell third as my his wife. She sired a child, Maria; I, a girl whom the society had no use for. A male child would have been better!

As I grew older, she let me in. She was full of wisdom and sweet words. She knew how to curl her words into colourful flowers. she possessed an intelligence that could neither be learned or unlearned. She taught me what she learnt from the woods, from the missionaries who once came about and were chased by *these* goons. Yes, missionaries did come, long before I was to be sired, they preached good news, wanted Tumolo to be educated, but the men in the village saw and heard their wives speak, they were raged with jealousy. *No woman should be better than their husband*. They chased away the teachers, almost chased away their wives, but held back, ultimately beating them back into their illiterate boxes they were in before, hence our 'dumb' mothers.

My beloved mother taught me how to write, spell and pronounce words. In the wee hours of the night when my father was bedding either of his other wives, the moon fully lit and Tumolo was as silent as a grave, she would come to my tiny hut and breathe wise knowledge in me. My father knew nothing, dumb like the others; he had to remain that way.

"When you take one potato and another potato, you have two potatoes, the creatures you see or hear in the woods are called wild animals, stay away from them! P.o.t.a.t.o, is a spelling for potato," she would say.

“I want you to be better and smarter Maria, to think, speak, engage and act different and break free from these strong tiny but loose chains”, she would utter.

I write when the village is asleep with no sounds from the noisy crickets. I write with no light, but I write. I write to give from to my agony and separate myself from these traditions. I write to be a different girl of this village. I write to forget the daily hard chores. I write to give myself meaning. I write because I know how to. I write because if I fail to write, I will lose sleep. I write to continue with this beautiful art that my beloved mother taught me. I write to make her proud for I am her only seed. I write because I have those words, I can utter them and spell them. My book is comprised of old brown papers, a gift from my mother. I use a blunt pencil to scribble my thoughts away then hide my thoughts inside my *safe wall*. I will dig my own pit and throw myself in; It would be better not to be found.

Entry 4, 19th September 2001

Days morph into nights at Tortoise speed. I am to be sold off soon. Anna, my sister from the cut joined our forefathers today. Her pain was too much and life ebbed out of her through her excessive bleeding. She was a thin stick with sickly eyes. Her cut bore infections. Mama Bena claims that *ekhwe* tree performed its duties but Anna was weak. She claims Anna was a sinner too, a reason she had to leave. The village is torn between mourning for her or dismissing her as a sinner who had it coming.

Anna’s father, Mzee Matamu has been abandoned. He was to receive land and cattle as bride price but they are no more. His hope has been swallowed in the darkness of the grave. Cattle is a symbol of class in Tumolo, your respect quadrupling as your herd increased. He walked braggingly shouting how her daughter Anna would be the fifth wife to his friend and how he would use his rewards. He made my father sick from those remarks. Now, her daughter is no more.

Mzee Matamu sits outside his hut. His head is bowed and you can see the gray strands of hair in the middle. His three-legged stool submits to his overbearing weight. It shakes once or twice to achieve balance. The sun hits him thoroughly, drying his words such that he speaks nothing, sees no one and has taken to eating his own words. He mourns the loss of his gifts first, then his daughter. He shakes his head constantly, beating his chest and spitting furiously on the ground. He blames not himself, but the entire village, especially Mama Bena. He blames the shrill razor blade and infection but fails to see past the harmful tradition. *Do not count your chicks before they hatch.*

Entry 5, 23rd September 2001

The village has been busy with the marriage preparation of the remaining four girls and me. Our men have been working harder in the woods, hunting and gathering essentials for the celebrations. Our mothers are busy making us wedding attires and accessories. Every night they sit in circles on the grassless grounds and hum away as they knit and grit. Their excitement goes past the humming and they share their own stories of how they received the

cut, got married and have been siring since then. A sickening silence gathers around them after they narrate their experiences. We, the girls are nervous and confused.

Sadly, Anna was thrown to the wild beasts. It is tradition. When you die a filthy death, you receive a filthy burial.

Tumolo village is a large old structured community with strong beliefs, traditions and taboos that guide us. The occupants live in huts. The more wives one has, the closer they are to *ekhwe* tree. They believe in urgency. The huts comprise of a wooden door with no latch. Privacy is not accorded in this community. The women cook in one place and distribute the foods to their husbands and children unequally. In the evening, the fathers take their sons deep in the woods of Tumolo village away from the vulnerability of the women and teach them how to be men. The women stay at home with their daughters and teach them to be dumb.

This village is comprised of elders and sub elders who are in charge. All these positions are male-dominated. My father, Mzee Tanju, is a sub elder.

Our elders ensure that all the cultures, beliefs and traditions are upheld. A man whose homestead comprises of only females is looked down upon, labelled as weak and lacks a table with the *Wazee*. An adulterer, thief or witch if caught are banished and killed respectively. We have to adhere to the rules and regulations of this place.

Topo, the village adulterer, who was once a respectable woman and married to Mzee Tanju, was stoned to death because she loved to be with different men. She was found in her own bed with the chief sub elder and stoned afterwards. Her death was a lesson to all those women who admired other women's husbands. No other woman has been found out yet.

Entry 6, 24th September 2001

My mother beckoned me today and confided her recent concerns to me. She seemed worried for her face kept creasing. The way she kept fidgeting meant that whatever she had to say wasn't pleasant.

"Has father found out about our secret?" I jumped in before she could say anything.

"No!" came her sharp response. Her face remained creased.

My mother broke down as she revealed I was to be the tenth wife of Mzee Boko. I was shocked. Shaken. As her words sank in slowly, I felt deflated, like every word was displacing any amount of strength I may have had. Was my father this greedy? Tenth? How?

"Maria, you don't have to do this," she continued, "You could escape then..."

The sound of approaching footsteps killed her words before she could utter them.

Mzee Boko is the wealthiest elder of this village. He only goes for young, fine things- cows, goats, girls. He owns three quarters of this village. The villagers almost worship him, and whenever he barks, the villagers respond promptly. I hear that he mistreats his wives, beating them with or without mistakes, always expecting them to only bear male children. What if I am my mother's daughter and fail to bear a male offspring? What will happen to me then? Will I be beaten to death? Tortured? Or made the villagers laughing stock?

I am to be sold off a day from now. I am scared.

Entry 7, 25th September 2001

I spent the whole of this day locked in my hut. My father believes that I am anxious for tomorrow. My mother is aware of my pain. The other girls believe I want to outshine them. I have cried until there are no more tears. I have cursed my father in silence continuously. I am in conflict for I am not ready to be a wife, a tenth wife to an older man. My father is wrong in his choice. His pride has blinded him. He sees no more.

I am only fifteen years of age. I have flowered into a beautiful woman. My mother says I resemble white doves for their beauty. I am aware of my good looks for the other girls envy me and the young men can hardly tear their gaze away from me when I walk past them. I deserve to enjoy the careless bliss of my youth. I deserve to make my mistakes. I deserve much better than Mzee Boko.

My father whom I loved and adore has failed me. I will punish him. I will embarrass him. I will ruin his reputation. I will turn him into Mzee Matamu. I am sorry father.

Entry 8, 26th September 2001

Greetings, I am Teresa, Maria's mother. Today was the girls' older wedding but Maria failed to show up. The whole celebrations had to be cut short. The other girls are sobbing for they are ready to sire. It is our tradition for all the girls to be married off at the same time. Mzee Boko is furious with my husband. He claims to have influenced her flee. I remain silent and dumb as they always perceived me. I know nothing, I heard nothing. My husband has tried to beat an answer out of me. I only ooze silence. I have to protect my daughter, the only daughter I have ever known.

In the wee hours of the morning, Maria left for the woods. I knew of her writing and where she hid her thoughts.

Her father has sworn war on her. He is agitated at having lost his rewards. She has demolished him, and even if he is not ready to accept defeat, it's obvious he is at a loss. A few young men have been sent off to search for her. I am at fault for I swayed her decision. She was my fruit. The only fruit I cherished in this village. She deserves better. She deserves to break from these chains.

I'd rather she gets killed by a wild beast in the woods and not by societal wrath!



Faded

Story by:

VIVIAN VANISHA

Ever since the end of the rainy season, ever since the destruction of the village green house and the chief's little *baraza*, Kombo's heart bore the weight of the universe. It wasn't because of the rains that had swept away three huts, thirteen cows, five goats and a toddler. It wasn't because his alcoholic father was down with liver cirrhosis or that his elder sister Nyakara was a harlot who when 'decent' wore short skirts that squeezed her expansive thighs too tight she had trouble walking, a strapless top that let her breasts almost hang out loose for the ravenous eyes to feast on and heels which made her walk as if the ground was burning.

No, Nyakara was out of the trouble list this time.

Omboji village was still with the calm evening breeze. Kombo filled his lungs with the breeze and grinned in appreciation. The glorious sun was taking its last dip, painting the lake water an illusionary orange which from his homestead looked like a magnificent piece of art. Smoke rose from the neighboring houses and the smell of burning pine and blue-gum penetrated into his lungs. Tired birds noisily chirped returning to their nests. The valley below was hollow with silence and all he could hear were a few frogs on the little stream croaking softly.

He cleared his dry throat and headed for his mother's house. Yambo, his younger brother was on a rocking chair, staring into space, oblivious of his overwhelming presence. His mother was doing Max, her husband a hot water foot bath while profusely plastering his forehead with a wet dripping face towel such that one would have thought she was waterboarding him.

"Kombo, there is no change, will it always be like this? When will we take *mzee* for another checkup?" she asked somberly.

"Mum, when he is done with his current medication. Should there be no change, we'll seek further intervention," he replied calmly.

"Baba, how are you feeling today?"

"I am more than fine.... but your mother here insists on inserting my feet in hot ...water and washing my face with this soaked towel here," he mumbled between coughs.

"Stop being stubborn, if only you had stopped smoking when I.... "

"No, mama," Kombo raised a restraining hand, cutting her short. "Let him be, don't start stressing him out. Baba will be fine, just make sure he takes his drugs on time and faithfully."

"Okay, but this old man has given me enough trouble," she whined, dipping the towel in cold water once again before placing it on her husband's face.

Dansela.

The name kept ringing in his mind.

Dansela.

No matter how hard he tried to concentrate during dinner every once in a while a frown would form on his face and his all-knowing mama would inquire as to the reason for his apparent discontentment . He wore a calm demeanor. He found it unnecessary to trouble ma with his misery.

Later while laying out his bed about to retire, he heard their two dogs barking, then Nyakara's drunken voice cut through the dark as she returned home from one of her many night escapades. There was a huge thud and Kombo concluded that she had lost her balance due to the alcohol in her head.

There was a long-drawn silence before he heard feet shuffling towards his door.

"Gooooombo.... "

He switched off the last corridor lights in his room.

"Gooooombo..... I wan't you to..... to.... Ooveeen this....roooooor...",she stammered.

He sat on a stool, not moving a muscle and waited for Nyakara to calm down. He didn't open the door and after banging on it profusely and fumbling with the handle to no avail, she gave up and left,, dragging her feet along and uttering all sorts of profanities.

Hadn't the whole family talked to her on her drinking habits? Hadn't the women from church prayed for her and even urged her, quoting verse after verse from the Bible that she needed to change her ways? Hadn't Kombo himself signed her up for Roots Rehabilitation center and she somehow managed to escape? Hadn't he done enough for her and she still remained adamant?

Let her drink to her own death! He didn't care anymore. The village women gossiped. Mothers warned their daughters about recklessly living like Nyakara, wanting complete disassociation with her.

"A woman that wears men like clothes and drinks alcohol like water will she ever get married, such a disgrace!" he once overheard them say at the community water project. He had tried, everyone had, but clearly Nyakara was beyond help.

Dansela,even despite all these family storms. Dansela. There was another thud in his father's house below. Nyakara had probably fallen down again. Dansela,Kombo got up, switched on the bedside lamp and sat on his bed, feet hanging in midair. Her name kept ringing in his mind. She was his past, the past that he never wanted to let go. A story best left untold but even so, in moments like this, her memories were a good distraction from his miserable life.

He remembered the first day she joined his school, a little girl in a black tunic and a cream-colored shirt. She was from another school in the city but her family had relocated to Omboji village. Beautiful dimples formed on her cheeks every time she laughed, shy to the core but a chatterbox with those she was well acquainted with. She sang like an angel and a smile was a constant feature on her face. Young as he was, Kombo had liked her.

He recalls one Friday evening when rushing back to class, he'd accidentally bumped into her and they both came tumbling to the ground, tangled, him on top of her. He had stared into those soft black eyes and seen them change from shock, to anger to embarrassment. She had immediately pushed him off her and winced in pain as she struggled to get up.

"You ...hurt me," she muttered with pouted lips, straightening her tunic and getting up from the ground.

"I'm sorry..... It was... It was an accident," he'd whispered back.

"Where have you two been? Why are your uniforms dusty?" the Social studies teacher roared when they reappeared in class.

"We... we.., " she stuttered.

"Sir we fell down while running back to class," Kombo said, saving the day at the expense of giggles from the other classmates.

The social studies teacher Mr. Obi scrutinized the two pupils, his wild and ever red eyes boring into them, not satisfied with the answer. He then pulled his trouser higher to his chest, adjusted his extravagant coat and soot-black glasses before finally motioning them to take their seats.

Kombo spent the rest of the lesson stealing glances at her. She was inspecting her limbs for any major injuries. She dusted off her tunic and wiped her face with her school sweater before turning to him with a murderous look on her face and didn't get Mr. Obi's question.

"Dansela Melody, which is the longest river in Africa?"

"Sorry sir, River Nile."

Kombo remembers the English teacher. Madam Rozette having a skit on girl-child empowerment. She selected Dansela, him and Tessie. Tessie was their 'mother' and the duo were 'siblings'. Kombo was to eat, watch TV and play while Dansela was to do every house chore as stipulated by the iron lady miss Tessie because she was a girl. Every while Dansela would complain that the chores be shared equally but her 'mother' would punish her, then in fury she'd 'burn' her brother with hot water. Tessie would then come to her senses and treat her 'children' equally.

That had been ages ago, little primary school kids with lofty ambitions. He wanted to be a journalist, she wanted to be a scientist. The two had even been selected as the weekly newscasters of Jacaranda primary School. She always thought his pieces were better and he also felt like her pieces outweighed his. Time whisked them off to different high schools for four years.

After high school, Kombo spent three months trying to find Dansela's contacts. Ever Since then they'd been conversing on phone, catching up and just being casual. At times he thought he stood no

chance and that Dansela probably had a boyfriend, or she was just being nice to keep the flame of childhood friendship burning. He scolded himself for sounding so insecure.

This Friday night however, her parents were away on trip and she said she was home alone. This would be it; he would just give her a surprise visit and tell her how he felt about her. Maybe the feeling was mutual, just maybe.

Kombo recalls that night, May fifteenth because he had just turned nineteen on the tenth of the same month. His mother always told him that men have no trouble finding what to wear but here he was, proving her wrong and just not finding the right attire. He tried one outfit after another and the mirror just proved how horrible he looked. Racing against time, he finally settled for black sneakers, denim pants, a white old navy T-shirt and a black cap. He felt confident in this because his buddies always told him it gave him a model look that could sweep girls off their feet.

Should I carry flowers? What if she rejects them?

What do girls like? She said she likes white chocolate Should I buy two at the store? Wait.. One costs a-hundred-and-fifty shillings, I only have a-hundred shillings with me. Damn! Its already eight O'clock, I better get going.

He hurriedly splashed on some cologne, grabbed his phone and after telling his mama that he was off to visit a high school buddy, he left.

Just when he was going to knock the door for the third time, there was a clutter of keys from the inside and slowly the door opened displaying an anxious-looking Dansela in a blue night dress, a white pullover and a glass of water on her right hand. Her mouth parted in shock upon seeing him and the glass immediately slipped from her hands onto the floor, shattering. Then rooted to the ground, she stood still, staring at him and fidgeting with her fingers.

"Did I scare you?" he asked jokingly.

"Uum... Well... no, not really," she stammered. "Come in."

"I'm sorry, let me help clean this mess first," he said, bending to pick the broken pieces of glass.

"No, don't, I'll do it. I'm sorry I wasn't expecting anyone. Come on in," she said. "And you look funny," she added, smiling.

"How, Dansey, my face, anything wrong with it?"

"No, your face is....,"

"Handsome?"

She just smiled.

"Does that mean yes?"

"No. Your face is okay, it's the outfit that looks funny."

A simple oh, was all he could manage to say before swearing to kill all the boys in his gang for always giving him false confidence.

"It's night time, you know, I don't have to be extravagantly dressed, simple is good," he said.

"Okay," she replied softly.

Kombo thanked the cosmos for the TV which offered a much needed distraction for what would have otherwise been a moment of awkward silence. He stared at the screen and the varying figures displayed therein dancing in his vision. She stared at the walls one at a time.

"Did you paint these walls recently?" he asked, peeling his eyes from the screen to the wall.

"No, why?" she asked, avoiding his eyes.

"Well, you've been admiring them ever since I got here tonight."

She just smiled, studying her fingernails.

"You look tensed, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong."

"Oh, so someone is all nervous and nothing is wrong? Interesting."

"You're still the same annoying boy I knew back in primary school. You never changed much."

"And you're still the same shy girl that was once my 'sister'."

"I'm not shy," she said flatly.

"You're sure about that? Okay look me directly in the eye," he teased.

"Dansey, look at me, try not to be mesmerized, I know I'm handsome! Prove that you're not shy."

"Okay," she said laughing.

Same black-toned eyes and long eyelashes steadily boring into his, searching for her place in his life, finding a straight path into his waiting heart and settling there as his heartbeats picked up reaching out for hers.

"There. Happy now, 'brother'?"

"I don't want to be 'brother' unless it is 'twin brother'."

"Okay, twin, are you happy now?"

"Ecstatic! You're beautiful."

Dansela grabbed a pillow from the extreme end of the chair and threw it at him.

"Don't be silly," she said.

He caught the pillow and threw it back, and a pillow fight ensued, ending with him drawing her in a tight embrace. She smelt fresh and her skin felt soft against his. Kombo bugged her tighter, and she clung on to him, hearts beating faster. No words were uttered, only gasps escaped their mouths. He ran his hands on her back, pulling her closer, and they stayed in that position until late into the night when he finally left.

Kombo spent the days after that night reminiscing and thinking of Dansela. How she blushed after every sentence, her soft puckered up lips and how he had to resist the urge of kissing her with abandon that night. He remembered how she felt small in his massive arms and gave him the urge to constantly protect her. He loved her. How he had to take deep breaths to calm his heart. He wished to see her again, so when Justin, his high school buddy called to invite him to his birthday party, he didn't hesitate to invite Dansela too.

The party was on the first Sunday of June. That night his brain felt woozy at the sight of Dansela, wearing a red strapless dress that clung to her small frame in all the right places as if it had been made with her in mind. Her makeup complimented her already gorgeous looks. Thoughts of further exploring her body filled his mind, making it hard to concentrate on their dance moves. When everyone else was lost in dance and music and Dansela felt tired, he grabbed her by the hand and sprinted away to a spot of wild grass where the only light was a lonesome full moon hanging loosely in the sky.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, panting, the moonlight falling on her eyes.

Kombo turned her to face him and held her face in his hands, eyes locked on hers.

"Dansela, the moon is glorious, right?"

She nodded.

"Don't you feel cold in this dress? Here," he helped her wear his huge trench coat, "I don't want you to freeze."

"Thank you," she said looking him in the eyes.

"I don't wish to hold this back anymore. I love you, Dansela Melod, very much," he said, staring at her full pouted lips.

Silence.

"I... I...," she struggled to find words.

His lips found hers. Fervently, ravenously devouring her in a hungry kiss. All his years of waiting suppressed in that moment. His arms exploring her body, hers clinging onto him. For a moment everything was hazy, time stopped and the moon hid behind the clouds.

Finally breathless, they broke the kiss and clung to each other.

Slowly, after a while she pulled away from him gently and nervously held his face in her arms.

"I love you too, Kombo," she whispered before giving him a long passionate kiss. This time he didn't hesitate, he covered her lips with his and kissed her with abandon, like he was branding her, owning her. His hands caressed her body, touching all places he could access. He moved back a little bit to find more balance when his right leg got stuck in a tuft of grass that he hadn't seen earlier as both tumbled down, this time Dansela on top of him.

Deja vu.

"I won't hurt you this time," he whispered before claiming her lips again.

In that epic night, he promised her venus.

That was a year ago and life changed dramatically, pitting him as the villain and Dansela as the victim. First, he majored in medicine, she in journalism, and just as their destinies seemed to change, so did his promises for her. He had managed to convince her to appoint she could have dropped everything in her life to be with him, but he started cheating on her. He broke her heart, feasted on her innocence, eventually leaving her in the middle of nowhere. Hordes of girls became his constant feature and almost every girl in campus had had a fling with him. Dansela questioned him and his response was carefree, as if her love meant nothing to him. She had forgiven him far too many times.

"What happened to us?" she'd asked over the phone in tears.

Three months ago, she had called to say she was pregnant, and he didn't want anything to do with her.

"Listen, I was desperate, you were convenient, I'm sorry if you thought this could lead somewhere. I guess you should just move on with your life and get rid of that baby because I will not offer any support. Perhaps if we were in the same campus it would've been different, but you're elsewhere; how can I even be sure the baby is mine? Which by the way raises an..."

"...I hate you! I hate you Kombo...", she cut him short before finally hanging up.

That was the last he heard of her and the moment he put his phone down, he realized the vanity of the choices he had made. Thoughts of the life growing inside her filled him with remorse and at that moment, the girls and fast-paced life and numerous one night stands he had chosen over Dansela felt like nothing.

It was ten at night. Kombo removed his phone from the back pocket, the screen lighting up to a picture of Dansela in a little white dress, a red hat and heels smiling. He'd taken the picture on her eighteenth birthday, the same night when their bodies intertwined in passion, bonding them closer. With shaking hands he dialed her number and placed the phone on his ear. No response. He tried once more with a terrible foreboding this time. He had tried calling her the previous night but his calls were never picked. His texts were undelivered and his email not replied. It has been three solid months since they last talked. He needed to make it up to her. He needed to see her in person and apologize for taking her through hell. Even if she wouldn't take him back, he had to redeem himself.

It started raining and his calls remained unanswered. Finally, someone did.

"Hello," he heard her soft voice on the other side.

She sounded weary.

"Hello...Dansey...how are you?"

Silence.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"I called to say I'm sorry. We need to talk."

Silence.

"Dansey, are you there?" he asked.

"Hello," a sharp soprano voice cut him short, "I'm sorry but Dansela can't talk on the phone right now. Perhaps later, please," she said.

"Hold on, please don't hang up on me, is she fine? She sounded ill?"

"She's not okay," the woman said. "Something terrible happened. Who are you, again?"

"Umm, I'm a friend. What happened?" Kombo asked, heart beating faster.

"I'm Ava, her friend. A granny of hers died, her auntie is seriously ill in hospital, and Dansela is five months pregnant with a baby whose father denied from the start, and her divorced mum will kill her if she learns that she is pregnant at only nineteen. She...," Ava sobbed.

"...She what?" Kombo asked, swallowing hard as a tear rolled down his cheeks.

"She attempted suicide and has been in the ICU for a week now," Ava said. "Hold on a second...hey Doc how is she doing? ,, Is the baby fine?"

"I'm so sorry Ava, we did all we could," Kombo heard a male voice say.

That was all he heard before the line went dead. He called immediately but the phone was switched off. Terrified, he sat down on his bed, staring into the darkness.

"I should be the one suffering, not you. Please live for me, please hold on for me, please stay.... Stay for me to make it up to you, stay....," he prayed, weeping.

He dressed hurriedly and grabbed his car keys, ready to jump into the chilly night and find Dansela. He then realized that he didn't know in which hospital she was in.

End



Sante

Story by:
MARCEL ADUDA.



February 3, 2013

(Prodigy)

“Useless!” he yells, violently tumbling books off his desk and down to the floor. “Why can’t I get it right?”

“Dude!” Malik’s voice pierces through the commotion from an adjacent hallway. “What’s the problem again?” he asks, his hand pushing a partially open door into a dimly lit room.

“Malik, the equation is unstable I’m having problems with a variable,” Koech says.

“Really? And here I was thinking you were in a life threatening crisis,” Malik responds sarcastically as he strides past a pile of books and scattered papers towards the now slumped figure in the middle of the room.

“You’ll never get it brother, if I crack it I’ll be able to unlock and replicate with precision, any numerical sequence generated by man or machine.”

Malik always knew koech was a genius and here was his opportunity to make something of himself, but all he had to do was temper his friend’s erratic moods enough to finally pull a fast one on him. He realized that this somewhat beautiful friendship would not last once Koech discovered his true intentions.

Koech and Malik have been friends since childhood. Having accidentally bumped into him on his way home from school, their friendship has been as solid then as now. Koech has never regretted meeting Malik. Whenever they have a bad argument he always remembers that brief sunny Monday afternoon when he saw him.

Malik was sitting alone on the side of the road playing marbles. Koech was rushing home to watch cartoons, it was his favorite past time event and on this particular day he had decided to take a shortcut.

Normally Koech would have to pass through five streets, take a fly over at the last major highway before he could get home. It was a dizzying fete of navigating past oncoming traffic topped with timing the street lights and cars at the stipulated zebra crossings assigned for pedestrians. With the hustle and bustle of city living drivers paid no mind to the people crossing the roads as they zipped to and fro in their own frenzied competition to see who got to their destination first.

The highway had already claimed two of his schoolmates who thought crossing the streets in a reckless dash would provide an adrenaline pumping experience to brag about. To his peers it was sort of a rite of passage among them. Only the bravest in the school dared to ignore the fly over and risk their life and limbs escaping the speeding mechanical bulls (what they referred to as cars) to and from school.

On that particular day, however, Koech's favorite cartoon was airing earlier and he didn't want to risk his life to miss it. He took the fly over at the highway, crossed one more street and opted for a shortcut from the third street. Along his way he suddenly became fascinated by an image of a weird looking kid playing on his own by the side of the road. Other kids would pass him yelling insults and mocking him but despite all of the provocations the kid would carry on playing marbles, undisturbed and simply lost in his own world.

Koech was surprised; the boy looked immensely content on his own. It was an intriguing sight; growing up in a big family he couldn't imagine life without his brothers. But here was this boy, on the side of the road trying to defy his belief. He approached him slowly, cautiously as if this new boy would bite him if he drew too close or made a wrong move. When he was close enough he asked

"Nani anashinda?" (who's winning?). The boy stopped, jolted from his game by the abrupt question, looked up with a crooked smile, paused for a second then broke out in hysterical laugh to Koech's surprise who now feared the lone boy he had just introduced himself to was truly insane.

Instantly, almost without transition, the laughing boy became as serious as a monk and looked straight at Koech with big intimidating eyes. A fraction of a second went by without any exchange of words. Koech felt the need to break the silence by putting on a timid smile as a signal that he wasn't there to start or provoke a fight.

"I am the winner," the boy finally replied in a friendly tone

His answer amused Koech who couldn't resist the temptation to enquire about the loser in this one man game.

"You're the loser." the boy answered, pointing at Koech.

"How?" Koech asked, hands in pocket. "I never played against you."

The challenge was set and Koech had to prove this lone boy wrong. They first split the marbles in two and the challenge was on. After ten games Koech had seen enough to admit that his challenger was way too good at his game.

“No wonder no one played with him,” Koech said to himself. From that day their friendship grew and Malik was no longer that weird lone boy who played marbles on his own.

“Hey, let’s get out of here I think you could use some fresh air, you’ve been stuck in the apartment for weeks,” Malik said, snapping Koech back from his nostalgia.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Koech said “I could use a cup of coffee right about now. So what will it be today, coffee house, restaurant or hotel?” he asked pulling out his jacket from a pile of books.

“Hotel. I’ve got some good news to share and I think we can have lunch afterwards to celebrate,” Malik said while checking the time on his wrist watch as they headed out.

(Table for two)

The hotel was nearly empty. Malik fiddled on his phone then set it down on the table and shot a question to his friend

“Done checking the menu?”

Koech lifted his head up from the massive menu and replied “I think I’ll have some French toast and a cup of coffee, not feeling that hungry today.”

Malik motioned to the waiter who diligently walked to their table and picked up their order. Koech looked back to the pay area and noticed a pair of gorgeous looking waitresses giggling amongst themselves and a chilling thought came over him.

“Malik, I think the waitresses over there think we came in as a couple,” he said with a mischievous grin knowing he was luring his friend with a loaded statement.

“Where?... Oh God forbid Koech, you’re not even my type,” he responded back loudly with a hearty laugh that got the waitresses attention. One of the waitresses laughed as the other covered her face in shame as if their privately shared thoughts were no longer a secret.

“All this liberalism will be the death of us some day,” Malik said as he picked up his phone again.

“You told me you knew someone who would help get our product on the market” Koech asked as he sipped his warm cup of coffee. Malik switched off his phone and placed it on the table.

“Yes, there’s a friend of mine called Sante. He’s got good connections. I told him about your app but he wanted me to get him a beta version to present to his boss.”

“I’m working on it. There’s one variable in the command set that’s giving me a problem, but I’m sure I will have a beta version by next week,” Koech replied.

“That’s great to hear. Free your schedule two weeks from now. I’ll introduce you to him. He’s a good guy, met him at campus. He isn’t much of a talker, but gets things done. I’ve watched his Uncle’s company flourish from his counsel. But don’t tell him I said that,, it will only inflate his ego” Malik replied with a chuckle.

“Sure, your secret is safe with me,” Koech responded as he signaled the waiter to come for the cutlery.

“You stormed through that breakfast quickly, are you sure you don’t want anything else?” Malik asked as he gulped down the last contents of the glass.

“Thanks bro, but I think I’m good to go for the day,” Koech responded.

(Gifted)

It was five o’clock in the morning. Koech had just finished checking the beta version on his laptop and everything was running fine. Too excited to wait for Malik to wake, he rushed down to his room with his laptop in hand like an excited kid with a new toy he wanted his friend to see. He didn’t even knock at his door.

“I figured it out! Malik its running, it’s finally running smoothly!” Koech shouted. Malik groaned as he covered himself, turning to face the other side.

Malik was what you would call a night owl. His job at a non-governmental youth empowerment organization enabled him to work at night and mostly online editing news stories and posting audio and video content on their website, so he could enjoy long mornings of sleep unlike most nine to five employees.

“Koech, the sun’s not even out yet, remember our rule, if the suns not awake yet then don’t wake me,” Malik replied in a groggy tone.

“I know, but wait, let me show you something,” Koech said as he flipped on the light switch causing Malik to growl even louder in displeasure. He then sat on the bed and propped the laptop in front of Malik.

Malik adjusted his posture and stared at the blinking screen running numbers at lightning pace and converting large files into compressed formats. It looked something out of a science fiction movie. It was dizzying but beautiful at the same time. He stared at Koech whose face now glowed with excitement, wide eyed and content at his masterpiece.

“This is amazing. Can you make a portable version that can run off a flash disk?”

“Ehh. Sure it will take me a few minutes but I can,” replied Koech hesitantly sensing something was a little off about Malik’s request. He seemed more concerned with the applications potential than how it functions. The thought puzzled him but he figured since Malik knew little about programming he would not be able to appreciate what he was seeing.

“I’ll set up a meeting in the afternoon with the friend I was telling you about. Have a beta version on a flash disk ready for him. Now would you please let me catch some sleep? I need to be well rested if I’m to convince our friend to get on board.” A little disappointed Koech got off Malik’s bed with his laptop in hand walked to the door and turned to find Malik already snuggled in a fetal position. He flipped off the light switch returning the room to darkness and walked out closing the door behind him.

(The meet)

The drive from the apartment to the business complex had taken two hours. He was still groggy from the abrupt awakening. Malik reached into his pockets while in the elevators heading to the ninth floor where Optimus Communications offices were located. He pulled out a small yellow bottle of pills labeled levoamphetamine took out a pill and tossed it in his mouth.

No one knew he was taking medication to stay awake during the day. The night life had taken a toll on his sleep pattern. He was having difficulty staying awake during the day. He would find himself dosing off on occasion at park benches, bus stops and in buses, whenever he decided to take public transportation. Worse he would fight strong urges for sleep during his regular monthly meetings.

The elevator stopped and its doors opened upon reaching the night floor. He stepped out quickly chewing the last remnants of the pill and swallowed the crunched lump down his throat. The reception

area was big. The walls were all white decorated sparsely with fine art paintings with names of local artists he's never heard of. He walked to the far end where a large semicircular metallic grey table rested with a beautiful young receptionist behind the desk. From the table at both sides were two glass doors with a card reader and key code lock for access.

He walked straight up to the receptionist's table adjusting his collar and smiled

"I'm here to see a Mr. Sante."

The receptionist looked up and smiled "Mr. Malik we've been expecting you. Please walk in to the door to your right I will buzz you in. A Miss Mumbi will direct you from then on."

"Thank you," he said, alarmed at the fact that they knew he was coming, though intuitively he figured that Sante and his company knew they needed them. He felt small, predictable and desperate but he had no choice, this was the best choice for them. No man is an island; even Steve Jobs needed Bill Gates at a time before Bill figured out he was more valuable on his own. Their Gates moment would come, he consoled himself, but now they need someone who already had his foot in the industry.

The receptionist flipped on a switch underneath her table and the door before him opened automatically. He smiled, realizing the power she wielded. She was the company's gate keeper. No one could enter the sacred inner sanctum without her approval. It made her even more attractive before him knowing that she wielded such power.

The door opened and he walked through, before him was a vast line of desks in pairs of four neatly arranged, open with no separation. It was transparency at its best. He was impressed.

"A quasi Google model, huh?" he quipped to himself. As he took a look at the office layout, a young woman in white approached him. She was very attractive, with an even bronze tone and an hour glass figure to match.

"Hi, I'm Mumbi, Kindly follow me," she said with a smile. As she walked ahead navigating through the maze of adjoined desks and finally into a hallway of glass opaque offices he stared at her feature, how her legs moved effortlessly, how her hips swung in unisons after each step. It was a pleasure to watch her walk, he thought to himself.

Then she stopped at a door labeled conference room "Here you are. Please enter, Mr. Sante will be with you in a minute," she said as she walked away without waiting for a response. Malik turned the knob at the door, pushed and walked in.

The conference room was simple yet elegant. A large table lay in the center of the room with black leather chairs around it. An ode to King Arthur's round table. On one side of the wall lay a picture of the head of state on the opposite wall a picture of the founder of the company surrounded by his board members. He could pick out Sante's face from the people huddled around the central figure. He was two chairs away clearly signaling to anyone that he was part of the inner circle.

He took a sit two chairs from the door and took out his phone. Just when he was about to check his messages, the door opened and in came Sante carrying a stack of files in one hand and a bottle of mineral water in the other.

"Hey, Malik, hope you didn't have to wait for me for long. Just came out of another meeting. Let's get down to business," Sante said as he took a sit next to him, putting down his files and his bottle of water and turned to face Malik who was now had an amused look plastered on his face.

"Do you have it?" Sante asked as he reached underneath the table as if searching for something with his hands.

"Yes, here you go," Malik responded sliding the flash disk towards Sante.

"Great," Sante responded picking the flash disk from Malik then slipping it under the table. Suddenly, a projector screen descended slowly above the photo of the president on the wall, then he heard a click and a small projector box pooped down from the center of the roof in line with the screen and begun to beam a light.

"How come the screen is not on the other side?" Malik smirked. Sante laughed still fidgeting with the flash disk underneath the table.

"No one would dare cover up the company photo even briefly. As you know my friend, presidents come and go, but corporations are immortal." The screen flickered then suddenly came to life with a dialogue box asking for permission to run the software. Sante pulled out a remote and pressed enter. The program begun to load, seconds later a series of numbers and letters filled the screen, then disappeared showing a series of documents and files in various formats.

"So walk me through this. What I'm seeing on the left are normal files and on the right are their encrypted versions?" Sante asked studying the screen intently.

"Yes," Malik responded.

“This is amazing. It’s interesting how you are able to encrypt a one gigabyte file to a tenth of its size” Sante added as he scrolled through the files.

“The program spits the audio from the video, compresses the audio, then breaks the video into a series of codes then layers them over each other,” Malik explained as they both stared at the screen.

“Whose name is the software registered under?” Sante asked, catching Malik off guard.

“It’s under my name,” he said clearing his throat.

“You don’t think that would cause a problem knowing that Koech is the actual author?” asked Sante as he flipped off the screen.

“He owns the source code but the actual end product is registered under my name. I offered him a royalty contract and a share in the future company.”

Sante pulled the flash from under the table and handed it back to Malik.

“Sneaky but smart. I guess you’ll be the one I deal with from now on, but we need Koech for maintenance and upgrades. I like what I see. Set up a meeting, venue of your choice. I would like to meet this Koech friend of yours.”

(Musketeers)

It was Thursday around six o’clock. Koech didn’t like making business meeting in a bar but Malik had promised him that everything would be ‘Kosher’ whatever that meant. Malik was a walking contradiction. He liked American gangster movies played by Jewish and Italian mafia characters but he boarded between a pacifist and an intellectual anarchist with a penchant detest for political elitism. In short he portrayed an amalgamation of contradictions.

Koech arrived at the i-club thirty minutes ahead of the agreed time. He took a flight of stairs up to the top floor where he figured Malik would be, took a sit and gestured to a waiter to place his order.

As the waiter walked over to his area he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure near the DJ booth. It was Malik, he was chatting up a beautiful waitress and the DJ at the same time. That was Malik for you, a man of the people. Koech would joke that he should have considered running for a parliamentary sit, but

the thought only elicited a constipated look on Malik's face as if the notion was too revolting to even imagine.

After a few laughs Malik walked to the counter where he sat next to an unknown medium built well-dressed man in a casual suit. From Malik's body language he could tell that Malik knew this man very well. They laughed and appeared to be in their own world. Malik had already caught his eye and was now making his way towards him.

"Hey Malik who was that guy you were talking to back there?" Malik turned casually setting his drink down at Koech's table.

"Oh! That's my old campus friend I was telling you about... hold on I'll introduce you two, just give me a minute." Malik walked back to Sante as Koech watched keenly. Malik mentions something to Sante. They both turn and face Koech who still has his eyes set on them. Malik breaks eye contact pats Sante on the back and winks as they both walk towards Koech laughing jovially. Koech has always been used to such situations. To him Malik was by definition eccentric. He learned not to judge a situation by their appearance but to confirm its meaning by deduction. He trusted Malik, never in their fifteen years of friendship has he ever done him wrong. They were a few misunderstandings here and there as they grew older and had to part for a while, but even that hadn't jeopardized their friendship.

Malik and Sante walked to Koech's table and one by one took a seat.

"Sante, I'd like you to meet Koech. Koech this is Sante and with his help we will be fabulously wealthy, or well... richer than we are now." Sante stretches his hand towards Koech who meets his reluctantly. They shake hands and a moment of silence passes. Sante stares at Koech as if uncertain of the man before him. He stares dead into Koech's eyes and grins.

"Malik are you sure about this fellow?"

"I beg your pardon, Fellow!" Koech shot back equally perturbed by the arrogance behind Sante's remark, instantaneously Malik and Sante burst out laughing.

"What's so funny" Koech retorted.

"I had a bet with Sante that if he made a wise crack you wouldn't take it kindly," Malik interjected.

“I’ve looked over the beta version of your app and I liked what I see, Malik briefed me in on the rest, I think if I ran this by my uncle the company will be able to push the product regionally then internationally in a matter of months.” As Sante spoke an air of seriousness returned and Koech was relieved to know that the man now standing in front of him was serious after all.

“I’m glad to hear that, funny Malik has never mentioned much about you let alone what you do,” Koech said.

“That’s totally Malik’s fault, I work for a marketing company, actually my Uncle’s; he deals mostly with getting brands on the market, so between that and school I’m rarely around.”

Koech was taken aback, now he was the one staring at Sante with an unsure look.

“School? What sort of school?” Koech asked.

“Doing my master’s in business management, my parent’s idea, but I’m hoping to branch off and help manage a new company and with what Malik says, I think we’d make a good team the three of us.”

“So you still stay with your parents?” Koech shot back with a mischievous grin.

Sante paused, looked at him then at Malik and laughed.

“Straight to the point, interesting... yes if you must know, they watch me like a hawk, but in a few months if all goes well I won’t.”

“Splended” Koech responded.

“Here’s my business card, check out the company, the links are at the bottom if possible schedule a tour. I have already informed Mumbi our HR assistant to arrange for everything if you do call.”

Koech picked the card hesitantly and looked at the name. “Optimus Communications,” he read out loud.

“I floated the name to my uncle when the company was starting up; I guess he liked it too.” Sante added as Koech flipped the business card over to the back.

“From the cartoon character optimus prime,” Malik interjected with a sly smile on his face.

“Hey, best cartoon every made, you’ll get no objections from me,” Koech responded with a laugh as all three men lifted their glasses of beer and clung them together and cheered “to us”.

In a dark corner a man sat concealed with a phone at his ear.

“Are they all there?” a man’s voice blurred from his phone.

“Yes Sir, they are... the programmer, the marketer and the passive anarchist,” he responded to the delight of the man on the other end of his phone.

As they drowned their drinks, Sante paused and felt as if he was being watched. He looked around but could not see anyone. He focused on a dark corner at the far end of the club, but it was too obscured to make out any image. He ignored the feeling rationalizing it as nothing more than mere intuition.

The man in the dark corner flipped shut his cell phone and sat quietly enjoying the last sip of his vodka. He was trained well to infiltrate any location without raising suspicion. His warm countenance and youthful appearance had a hypnotizing effect of calming anyone who came into close contact with him. He was bronze brown, tall, broad shouldered, clean shaven, physically fit with long hands and feet. Features ladies would commend him delightfully on various occasions. However, his most prized skill was his ability to disappear in a crowd and blend into his surrounding like a chameleon. Today this skill proved handy but as he looked on he noticed something peculiar. One of his targets sensed something. He was intrigued and somewhat pleased. It was a small sign but enough to entice his hunting spirit.

“He will be fun to play around with,” he said to himself as he finished his drink, making an exit without anyone even noticing he was there.



The Client

Story by:

ABU AMIRAH



I met him at club Fly So Fly where I had ceased being a butterfly having suffered a broken neck after falling head first from a stripper pole, an incidence I had seen coming- I have terrible eye-hand coordination by the way- and just like that I fell from a remunerative stripper to a mere call girl.

He sat there, hunched over his drink, studying it like it held within its sparkle the solution to a profound mystery, twiddling the glass before taking a quick draw, withdrawing his lips slowly from the glass. Savoring his drink, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a phone, its brightness illuminating his face. He looked sad, aloof, like he had been forced to sit there by a power he couldn't resist, unlike everyone else who seemed to have merged into the atmosphere of the club.

He wasn't interested in the strip entertainment on stage even as Caramel Baibe, my best friend and star attraction at Fly So Fly danced seductively before him, bending over and shaking her well-endowed posterior at his face. He neither looked up nor even acknowledged her efforts. Not a smile. Not even a note tucked on her G-string.

There was an edge of enigma in his very composure that drew me to him. It was like he was present and absent at the same time, the phone's brightness bringing his face to life before the semi-darkness at the corner he sat in swallowed him, to a point I felt like he was a mere blur, a muted interruption projected to this den of debauchery. Being that it was my night off and I had come to while away time out of sheer habit, I decided to explore this enigmatic character.

"Name's Shiz," I whispered as I slid on the seat next to his. "Shiru," I added. The music kept playing and the ice cubes in his drink moved to the slow beat.

"I haven't seen you around you here before," I offered. "You must be new in Mombasa," I added, taking a sip from my glass. Caramel cartwheeled across the stage, jumping on the pole monkey-like, sliding all the way to the bottom before throwing her legs wide open like an umbrella.

Men gasped and stared.

Mister Enigma didn't even venture a look like the rest, hoping to catch a glimpse of something that would set his blood boiling.

I figured it was a waste of time conversing with this wall, and I slid from my seat, drifting away to my world. Suddenly, he gripped my wrist with an ice-cold hand, pulling me such that his face was looking down on me like a huge hammer about to strike, brown eyes boring into mine intensely. Even in the smoky, semi-lit room, his eyes didn't betray any emotion. I imagined they were the kind of eyes

which would perceive everything from a glass of wine, to a dying human to a blossoming flower with the same vacant look. Then, as suddenly as he had gripped me, he let me go, fishing inside his pocket to push a card in my hand.

“Come to this address. Tomorrow. Nine O’clock,” and with an ill-fitting smile he turned and resumed his earlier position, thrusting me out from his cold, enigmatic halo into the warmth of the club.

“Name’s Nathaniel,” he mumbled.

Later on as I told Caramel about him, thoughts of my daughter’s impending cataract surgery crossed my mind. I needed the money and I thought Caramel was being histrionic by warning me against going to Nathaniel’s.

“I saw his eyes, Shiz,” she said, wriggling to push her tight jeans over her thighs. “Those were not the eyes of a human being.”

In retrospect, I wish I had listened to her. Nathaniel was far from being human.

When the tuktuk dropped me at the address on the card at exactly eight-fifty-five in the evening, I smiled to myself as I observed that it was an unusually early time for a booty call. Then again, the earlier the better; I could be done with him and swing by the club to make some extra money. I didn’t imagine he would afford my all-night fee, time that I’d probably, if he did pay, spend sleeping.

It was an average address tucked somewhere in Nyali away from the conundrum of traffic, covered with a warm splash of jungle-green and beige painting, a perimeter wall gathering it protectively. A mango tree towered behind it. Looking at it with its high roofs on either side, flat in the middle, it was hard to tell whether it was the house that influenced the owner’s hunched manner or vice versa.

I sighed, as I reminded myself why I was there against not only Caramel’s advice but my own instincts. I had to do this, more for my daughter than myself. I came from a well-to-do family, my father being a famous pastor in Mombasa. The mere thought that a pastor’s daughter who ought to have been, by default, anointed with holiness and probably a member of the church choir waiting for a proper husband to take her virginity, had turned, to use my father’s words- to a harlot- was enough for my family to disown me. It was as if my gravitation to explore the other side of a life that my parents spat malediction at was contagious and my younger sisters would catch the Jezebel fever. My mother called it so. Religion was a deterrent to my curiosity about sexuality and the extent to which one could derive pleasure, pain or

both from sex. Thoughts of not only the amalgamation of energies as two bodies met in desire but the penetration of the consciousness during love-making made me ever more curious.

For my troubles, a commodious church plumber anointed my young womb with seed at seventeen, something I was too ashamed to disclose to my fastidiously religious parents. The disownment sadly included my daughter as well.

Nathaniel's presence interrupted my nostalgia. I didn't hear him approach. He was just not there one minute and there the next. I didn't even hear the gate opening.

"You came," he said, a smile appearing and disappearing so fast that it looked like a twitch. He led the way without as much as a welcome and I followed obediently.

Something told me to turn back and leave.

Half an hour later with my incredibly high pay safe in my purse and a fresh shower on his insistence, Nathaniel stood at the foot of the bed exploring my body, first with his eyes then his unusually cold fingers. He had asked me to strip and lay on the bed- a perfectly normal order for a call girl- while he remained fully dressed in a white shirt neatly tucked into gray cotton pants. His fingers felt like a huge spider crawling on my body looking for an appropriate place to build its web. It filled me with an eagerness to be explored further, a yearning to be turned into a safe which he would try to crack open with every touch.

"Turn," he said. I tried to be all sexy on him, asking him if I should unbutton his pants and show him heaven. For the pay he had given me, I'd have done anything to make it worth his while, but his stern eyes knocked the sexiness off me like a bad habit. I turned and lay on my stomach, legs slightly apart. I could feel the AC cold between my thighs. Nathaniel's fingers were colder as they traced invisible contours on my back for minutes on end.

"Sleep now," he said, eventually. He had paid for a whole night and his order left little room for negotiation. "Another bathroom is that way, first door to the left" he added, pointing to one door as he exited through another.

He didn't sleep in the same bed with me, and while i had long familiarized myself with sleeping in beds that weren't mine, Nathaniel was an unexpected character and thoughts of him forcing himself on me later kept me awake. I had met every imaginable character in my line of work and such incidences

were wont to happen. They happen to call girls every time and we still manage to look beyond these horrors and find ourselves staring up the same faces that abuse us.

I woke hours later to two surprises.

One was a naked Nathaniel lying next to me with a knife pointed at my jugular.

“Don’t. Move!” he whispered, edging the knife closer, supporting himself on one elbow to rise and stare more closely at my neck. His fingers pressed my throat slightly as if to quell my rising heart rate. “Do you know how easy it is to kill someone? The slightest puncture to your jugular and you bleed out in minutes. You actually *feel* your life departing from you.”

I panicked. I asked God to forgive my evil ways and promised to never be a call girl again. Promised to even go back to my father’s house and beg, *beg* for forgiveness.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, turning my chin with his finger, his eyes holding my fearful ones, trance-like, before swinging his legs to get out of bed. His eyes both scared and comforted me. “Same time on Friday,” he added, placing the knife on the bedside stand as he walked out.

The second surprise was the way the bed in its coziness seemed to have a life of its own; hugging me so dearly that I imagined even if Nathaniel was to intend harm upon me, the bed would protect me. I was anxious to get back to it.

Friday evening found me outside Nathaniel’s address; a lone figure dressed in a jungle-green skirt which stopped mid-thigh, trying to be one with the perimeter wall. This time I saw him approach, fully dressed in a suit and tie as if in readiness for a business meeting. I wondered how he managed to dress this way in spite of Mombasa’s fuming night air. His rules were rather direct. I was required to take a shower before he joined me in bed. Just like the other day, he paid me as soon as I was in the house.

Meeting me in the bedroom, he asked me to drop my bathrobe and remain standing. I let the robe slide down my body, covering my breasts in a show of shyness before dropping my hands. This time I hoped he’d do more than just explore my body with his fingers and eyes, and I hoped he’d do it in *that* addictive bed. I had waxed earlier and was certain that the nude image the discarded bath robe had peeled from was more resplendent than anything he’d ever set his eyes on.

Nathaniel didn't even show any interest as he left me standing there wondering what to do next. Closing my eyes, I imagined all sorts of things, like how he might blindfold and lead me into a chamber where he'd torture me into submission. I imagined him doing inconceivable things on my body. The AC made my skin quiver and for a moment I wanted to jump on the bed and roll myself in the white linen.

"Lie on the bed," he whispered, squeezing my shoulders with soft hands which felt warm against the cold breath of the AC panting above the window.

I expected him to drop his robe and claim his money's worth, to crawl on the bed, tear my thighs apart and do what all clients do- treat me like a piece of purchased canvas meant to absorb their desires regardless of pain and still manage to show up the next day, canvas wiped cleaned of the previous night's horrors.

I closed my eyes and the bed sucked me in; soft, sleep-inducing linen caressing my back. Nathaniel was slowly turning into a blurry image holding a tiny container from which something thick and cold was pouring on my breasts and I could feel it trace its way down my stomach, his lukewarm tongue in pursuit.

The bed continued to suck consciousness out of me and the last thing I felt was a sensational mixture of the thick, cold liquid and his tongue on my inner thighs before getting lost in another dimension.

I woke, probably hours later to find a naked Nathaniel holding the muzzle of a gun against my inner thigh, prodding gently.

"Say if I was to fire this gun," he said, moving it upwards to my crotch, "what are the chances of you surviving?"

Silence.

I heard the unmistakable click of the gun.

My whole body grew cold.

"And if at all you survived," he said calmly, "would you ever be the same? Would you still offer your body like a canvas for men to paint their desires on?"

A sigh escaped my mouth. How did he spell out my thoughts as if I had spoken them out aloud? Had I spoken in my sleep? Did this penetration of my consciousness include reading my unspoken thoughts?

“There’s breakfast in the kitchen,” he said, getting up and placing the gun in the bedside locker. “Take as much time as you wish. See you same time tonight.”

My neck had grown stiff.

It was only after he had left that I managed to breath and move, drawing the white linen all over me as the bed sucked me in caringly.

Minutes later as I walked from the bathroom, someone called me from behind a locked door.

“Who’s there?” I asked, looking around to see whether Nathaniel was close by.

“It is us,” the voice whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” I whispered back.

“Because we are imprisoned here.”

“Imprisoned? Like abducted? And who is *we*?”

“We are imprisoned souls and spirits.”

“Nathaniel, is that you?” I asked.

“Shhhh, don’t shout his name!”

“Is this some lousy joke?”

“It’s not. He is not who you think he is. Nathaniel...Nathaniel is a timeless spirit that thrives on holding souls hostage. He seeks immortality.”

I remained quiet, not sure how to appropriately react to that.

“Your soul is next,”

Silence.

“You are the key, the web,”

“To what?” I managed to ask.

“His immortality!”

“Listen, I have no time for your sick jokes,”

“It’s a joke until it isn’t.”

Shaking my head, I turned towards the bedroom to leave.

The words that were uttered next froze me.

I was pacing in the bedroom engulfed by thoughts that I had come to the end of my line, fear numbing my left hand as the words I had heard kept echoing in my mind. Sweat kept sprouting in my palm. Intending to wear my own clothes, I found myself wrapping the bathrobe around myself tighter as my mind interpreted the effort to put on my own clothes as an overly tedious endeavor. Staring at the bed, the words came floating back in bits.

“You are the key to his immortality...you are from a unique lineage...your daughter... he shall come for her and sacrifice her... you shall be forced to partake of her blood before he slits your throat...stay away from that bed, it’s the portal to his rituals...help us to help you...help us to help you...help us...”

I backed away from the bed which regarded me calmly and rushed down the corridor to knock on the door whence the voices had come from.

“Come in.”

The room was so dark I felt like I was walking into a solid black wall.

Striking the wall socket, the fluorescent tubes coughed to life to reveal an empty room with no furnishings.

“Hello,” I said.

“We see you, but you cannot see us.”

My heart was beating in my ears and propelled by nothing else other than the fear of what I was witnessing and the thought that my daughter was in grave danger, I stumbled out of the room, ran through the corridor and collapsed into the yawning sunlight in the yard.

I'm not certain how long I ran barefoot on the hot tarmac before I saw the security response truck parked under a shade, the uniformed driver sitting with his legs crossed on the steering wheel. I must have cut a horrific sight- a seemingly scared, sweaty, barefooted creature cutting through the tranquility of Nyali in a bath robe in spite of the heat- because he jumped from his seat like he had seen a ghost.

He stared at me, minutes on end as I struggled to piece together the unbelievable story of spirits talking to me and a man who was out to get my blood.

“Are you deaf?” I asked.

“No. I'm trying to process your incredulous information, ma'am.”

He was among the few good men I had met, and he agreed to accompany me back to the house to collect my clothes. Again, a surprise awaited me.

My life transformed completely since that day. I ceased being a call girl.

Nathaniel was by my side; has been for a year now, forever holding me trance-like in his intense stare.

That day, accompanied by the security guard, we approached Nathaniel's house only to find a shadow where the house had been, the mango tree still looming, solo. I went back and forth countless times, retracing my steps, working with the picture I had in mind of the several times I had come there. There was no way I would have been mistaken; the house had been by the road. No way.

“This space has been unoccupied in years,” the guard had offered. “There was a house, once. It burnt to the ground, killing the man who owned it.”

I kept muttering to myself, hoping that at any moment I'd wake from my dream.

I returned later in the evening, and the morning after that, and the evening again and the only thing that changed was the direction of the shadow on the empty space.

Nathaniel has become a constant feature in my life, appearing and disappearing as he wishes. My daughter's surgery went well and Nathaniel means her no harm, thank God. He says he harnesses energy through my eyes and that one day I'll just keel over and depart from this physical world to become one with him. Then, he says, I'll have the power to visit the physical world like an invisible being.



Not like that

Story by:

MS. KYESUBIRE GREIGG



It was a warm Saturday morning; an ideal time to divorce oneself from demanding tasks. James was listening to the subtle sounds of nature when a shadow obstructed the warm rays of sunshine on his face.

‘James,’ he heard his mother speak from above him.

‘Yes mum?’ he responded without as much as cracking an eye open.

‘We are heading for a meeting at the Kombo’s and then we will go and see a farm near them,’ she said.

‘Town or the farm?’ he asked lazily.

‘Out of town,’ she replied.

‘How long will that take?’ James asked sitting up and giving her his full attention.

‘Most of the day, I would expect,’ she said looking over the lush green garden.

‘When do you leave?’ he asked.

‘As soon as I get to the car,’ she said, laughing as she turned to walk away.

‘Ok, have a great day and be careful,’ James said chuckling to himself

‘You know we will,’ she said. A moment later she paused, ‘James, please do me a favour,’

‘Anything Mum,’ he replied watching her delicate posture.

‘Check on your sister for me. She was so mad at me when I spoke to her a few minutes ago,’ she sighed looking off in the distance, wringing her hands and looking down.

‘Do you think things will ever be cool between you and Juliana?’ James asked

‘Hard to say. I just wonder about the things she says to me,’ Mum said looking away.

‘Why? What did she say?’ he asked watching her jaw twitch as though she was grinding her teeth

‘I’d rather not repeat it,’ the hint of a blush beneath her chocolate complexion spoke volumes.

‘I’ll check on her Mum, have a great day,’ he smiled at her

‘We will,’ her voice tinkled.

‘Hey James, why are so quiet?’ Andy asked

‘I’m just wondering about my folks,’ James replied turning to his long time oldest friend.

‘What about them?’ Andy asked running his fingers through his uncombed hair.

‘They went to the Kombo’s, then to see a farm, but they should be home by now or at least they should have called by now,’ he said quietly, glancing at the clock.

‘What are you, their time keeper?’ Andy asked.

‘You know us, we talk all the time especially while on the road,’ James said glancing at the clock again.

‘Have you tried to call them?’ Andy asked watching James brow crease slightly.

‘Of course I have but their phones are both off,’ he said.

‘That is odd for your folks, I see why you are concerned,’ Andy responded. Do you have the Kombo’s numbers?’

‘No,’ James replied, ‘Do you think your mum has them?’

As Andy calls his mum, Juliana walks in. She was the most adorable little sister a guy could have and she was growing up to be a beautiful young woman. The seven year age gap makes him very protective over her.

‘Hey girl, have you heard from mum and dad?’ He asks keeping his tone level

‘Nope!’ she responds as she flops into a seat, ‘We barely talk so silence between me and them is normal,’ she adds, cranking the television volume up.

‘Do you have to do that Juliana?’

‘What?’

‘Turn up the volume at night?’

‘You are so boring. Ah!’ Juliana says, stomping out in disgust.

Just then his phone lights up with an incoming text from #GET411

This evening a trailer heading down the escarpment lost control, ramming into five vehicles including four personal cars and a fourteen seater minibus. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the driver of the trailer lost control after his brakes failed as he descended the final section of the Rift Valley escarpment. He is said to be injured but alive. Two occupants of one car, a man and a woman died on the spot with many other casualties rushed to hospital.

He grabs his tablet and spends time checking out updates, momentarily forgetting his phone which kept ringing incessantly. It is after eleven pm and regardless of the odd hour, he grabs it.

‘Hello?’ James says.

‘Yes. My name is Sergeant John Kibet from the Naivasha Police station,’ the caller responds.

‘How can I help you sir?’ James responds, straightening up.

‘Are you James Kasina?’ Sergeant Kibet asks.

‘Yes I am,’ he responds.

‘Is your father Michael Kasina?’ Sergeant Kibet asks.

‘Yes he is,’ James replied.

‘Where are you?’

‘Sergeant Kibet, what are all these questions about?’ James asks stilling himself waiting for the punch line.

Breathe dude, breathe! Get your emotions under control.

The mention of a police officer caught Andy’s attention and he watched James face keenly for clues.

‘Did you hear about the Kinungi accident?’ Sergeant Kibet asked.

‘Yes, I have just seen the story online,’ James said.

‘I regret to inform you that your parent’s car was part of that accident,’ Sergeant Kibet said.

James held his head seeking balance. Many thoughts were running through his mind, are they ok? Why is Sergeant Kibet calling and not them? How did they get his number? His breath hitched as he struggled to

calm his racing heart and keep his body in check. Even with his hand lost traction and his phone fell to the sofa beside him. Andy saw the phone fall and picked it up,

‘Hello?’ Andy says

‘Who is this?’ Sergeant Kibet asks

‘I am Andy, a friend of James.’ he responds.

‘I’m Sergeant Kibet from the Naivasha Police station,’ Kibet said.

‘Sergeant Kibet, is something wrong?’ Andy asks

‘Mr and Mrs Kasina were in the Kinungi accident and I would like James to come down. Can you organise that?’ Sergeant Kibet asks.

‘We’ll be there as soon as possible,’ Andy responds, glancing at James and wondering where to start.

‘James, we need to get going,’ Andy said.

‘Alright,’ he replied. ‘Will you drive?’

‘Of course! Which car do we take?’ Andy asked.

‘Let’s take the Subaru, it has the best lights and mum keeps it fuelled,’ he said, driving hands deeper into his pockets as he turned around to stare at a portrait of his parents. Thoughts of the events which had just occurred filled his mind.

‘Hey...hey...,’ Andy jabbed him, jolting him out of his thoughts.

‘What dude? Can’t you just call me instead of jabbing with your bony elbow?’

‘I have called you four times, what else did you expect me to do?’ Andy retorted.

‘What?’ James asked.

‘We need to get going now.’

‘What will we do about Juliana?’ James asked. Juliana’s had reacted unexpectedly, coiling herself in the sofa as she sobbed, saying she wanted to accompany her brother to Naivasha. It took some amount of convincing her to stay, and she had eventually calmed down.

‘Sarah is on her way over to stay with her,’ Andy replied. ‘I told mum what happened and she will be dropping Sarah as soon as possible.’

He picked the keys from the key rack at the door and went to warm the car as James did one last check of the house before following him out. Naivasha was only eighty kilometres from Nairobi and with a good car and clear road they did it in less than an hour. For the first time in many years it was a silent drive, listening to music each one lost in his own thoughts. Andy kept drumming the steering wheel in tune to the music, throwing in a few words to try and cheer James up. Once parked at the police station, they took a moment to gather their thoughts.

‘Call it intuition,’ James said, softly, ‘but I think my parents are the couple that did not make it.’

‘Don’t be like that...hold onto faith man, hold onto faith,’ Andy said.

‘I am still hoping but I just have this thought that I can’t get off my mind. It is them who died,’ he said

‘Why?’ Andy asked

‘If they were alive we would have been told to go a certain hospital not come here,’ James said

Andy remained silent as he tried to process the information.

‘Anyway, let’s go and see what’s going on,’ James said, opening the door.

Sergeant Kibet was quickly called once they identified themselves.

‘Thank you for coming so fast, gentlemen.’ Sergeant Kibet said. ‘This way, please,’ he added, motioning them to follow.

‘To where? What’s happening?’ James asked.

‘Well, I needed you to take possession of their belongings pulled from the car,’ Sergeant Kibet answered.

‘Why? Where are they?’ Andy chimed.

‘We are still trying to figure out who is who at the hospital,’ Kibet replied

‘Really? Still figuring it out?’ James snorted. Andy kicked James just as Sergeant Kibet gave him a pointed look.

‘Sir, can we see the car?’ Andy asked politely.

They walked out with Sergeant Kibet to the left side of the parking where impounded cars were parked and indeed there was the Kassina’s car. The car was mostly intact with only evidence of a minor hit on the driver’s side. How was that even possible? The floodlights came on just as Andy was about to put on the light they kept in the boot.

‘How is it possible?’ Andy asked. ‘This is just a simple side swipe.’

‘They were at the tail end of the impact,’ Sargent Kibet said.

‘What does at-the-tail end even mean?’ Andy pushed.

‘They were one of the last cars in the line. So it is one of the least damaged,’ Sergeant said

‘Andy!’ said a familiar female voice

‘Hi mum,’ Andy said.

‘James, I am so sorry,’ she said hugging him. ‘Hello,’ she turned to Sergeant Kibet, ‘I am Jane Kimani, close friend of Mrs. Kassina and mother to Andy,’ she added, pointing at her son. ‘I followed these two as soon as I could.’

‘Thank you for coming.’ Sergeant Kibet said. ‘We were just looking at the car as the boys sought an explanation.’

‘Have they been taken for treatment?’ she asked. ‘Which hospital are they in and why are we here instead of *there*?’

As if on cue, Sergeant Kibet’s phone rang and he walked a few steps away to answer it. All James could hear were his short responses but they were enough to catch his attention.

‘Okay... I see...both?...tragic indeed... Yes... Yes they are here... I hate this part of my job...’

Sergeant Kibet turned and looked from Andy to James, then to Andy’s mother who was standing next to her son. They all looked at him expectantly.

‘I’m not sure there is a better way to say this,’ he said, sighing. ‘That was the hospital. I am sorry James, your parents died on arrival.’

Life stopped and went black for a long moment and only the hand on his shoulder kept him upright. *How? Surely how? It can’t be. It can’t be!* Bending over with his hands on his knees he struggled to even his breathing and still his heart but it wasn’t working. *How God? How? Why today? Why us? Why?*

The screaming in the background brought him out of the darkness...who was that? What were they screaming about?

James turned to watch as Aunt Jane crumpled to the ground next to the car and wailed like a little child and Andy did his best to calm her down. *Now I don’t have anyone to console or be consoled by,* he wondered to himself. *Why Lord would you do this to us? Why would you take both of them? Didn’t you think we needed at least one of them?*

‘James, I am sorry. You need to be strong,’ Sergeant Kibet said.

James just sighed.

‘I am sorry...’ he said again, patting his shoulder.

‘Sorry won’t bring them back you know,’ James retorted. ‘Besides, it wasn’t your fault.’

‘I know. There’s something else you need to know,’ Sergeant Kibet said.

‘Something worse than death?’ James asked sarcastically.

‘The doctor cannot find the cause of death,’ he replied.

‘How?’ James asked.

‘They have no visible injuries and x-rays show no internal injuries either,’ he replied.

‘Uh,’ James retorted and walked out of the police station to cool off.

Dear God, for some reason you send me this faraway place to tell me that my parents who served you diligently have died in an accident with no signs of injury and what caused their death and you want me to be happy with you? That is impossible my friend, You have taken it too far today.

It took a while to exhaust her tears and find balance then Jane Kimani became a woman on mission. Notwithstanding the fact that it was not yet two in the morning, she picked her phone, walked away and

made a series of phone calls. Sergeant Kibet, a fellow officer and Andy had caught up with James walking in a daze along the road, led him back to the station and had found a place for the young men to sit as they processed the situation. He even provided a cup of strong tea but Jane wouldn't sit for even a moment. Her phone rang nonstop and she responded to question after question with clipped precision. Watching her was a marvel because from the broken, beaten woman a few minutes earlier here arose a warrior queen, ready for battle, marshaling troops with precision and determination.

As the sun rose and the day begun to warm the day, a convoy of six cars arrived at the Naivasha police station with reinforcements for the three. Sergeant Kibet watched in amazement as the occupants poured out and quickly surrounded James and Andy with love, hugs and prayers before they fanned out each with a different assignment. With military precision, tasks were assigned from confirming the process for transportation, to insurance assessment, to accident investigation, to release of the remains and the people were set to task.

'Who are these people?' Sergeant Kibet quietly asked Andy.

'Family friends,' Andy answered.

'Do they always behave like this?'

'Yes! They are a well-oiled machine mostly,' James said.

'They seem to know someone everywhere,' Kibet said

'They do, and that is a very scary thing,' Andy said

'Why scary?' Sarge asked

'Just scary,' Andy said as they exchanged looks with James.

James walked away to stand by his parent's car once more and Sergeant Kibet turned to Andy.

'Was he close to his parents?' he asked.

'Very,' Andy said, 'his mother especially.'

'He seems unmoved by this. He hasn't broken down again since the walkout or is he just being a man?' Kibet ventured.

‘He was mostly silent after your call and all the way here but as we got here he simply said, *my parents are the ones who perished*,’ Andy responded.

‘How could he know that for certain?’

‘I don’t know but I remember the look on his face and he was serious...he knew something on the inside.’ Andy responded

‘Mmmhmmm! Interesting! Well, you have a long road ahead.’ Sergeant Kibet said ‘Is this normal behaviour?’

‘Is what normal behaviour?’ Andy asked

‘The stoic face, the lack of tears, the silence, the random joke?’

‘For James, yes! He keeps his emotions in check most of the time but not today?’ Andy replied.

‘His behaviour is almost psychotic. I see a problem once all that emotion is finally let out,’ Kibet said.

‘I’ve just had the same conversation with Daktari over there,’ Andy turned at the sound of Uncle Jim Oloo’s voice who joined them. ‘It isn’t normal to be so calm.’

‘Clearly you don’t know the Kassina’s,’ Andy responded.

‘What do you mean?’ Uncle Jim asked

‘Do you remember when Grandpa died?’

‘Yes,’ Uncle Jim said.

‘Did you see either James or his father shed a tear?’

Kibet and Jim exchanged a look.

Standing in the police station next to the hardly damaged car that his parents had died in brought tears to James’ eyes but he wouldn’t allow them to fall. He walked around it then sat on a large stone behind it and just stared into nothing lost in thought and deep sadness.

He vividly recalled his last conversation with his mother and wished he had hugged her instead of just responding to her questions while lying down.

I told you to take of yourself mum, he muttered to himself. Why didn't you?

It was all like a bad dream really, but the days had turned into weeks and today they would be laying his parents to rest side by side at the farm in Kitale. People had travelled with them in droves but James didn't see most of them and Juliana had chosen to stay close to Aunt Janet and Sarah. Andy was a good friend often by his side and assigning people they both trusted to him when he had to be away. But the pain and grief and sadness was all his; he couldn't share it with anyone. It was just too heavy. The only relief he had was often angry or pained conversations with God.

You know God; we haven't had a conversation in a while because I don't know what to tell you. You are supposed to know everything that happens even before it happens so you knew that my parents would leave the house after mum and Juliana have an argument and they would not come home ever again. You also know that Juliana is at the stage she needs her parents most but you decide to leave me with the work of raising her. So help me understand...why should I even remain and serve you.

Look at all these people here, saying how much my parents meant to them and how much they will miss them but I know that after we lay them to rest this weekend most of them will disappear like a cloud of smoke never to be seen again. How do you call yourself a good God? How do you live with yourself saying that all things work for good to them that love you yet you allow wahala to follow them all their days? How do you expect us to live in harmony with you when you hurt us so deeply? Surely God, do you deserve the place of Father? Do you deserve to be called a good God? Is there any logical reason to follow you?

Yes you sent help from unexpected sources to get things worked out but how do you want me to live my life and raise a sister I don't understand and now my prospects of the job of my dreams is a dream because I have to take over the family business. Is that even fair?

Don't be silent!!! State your case! Fight for your place! Be a man and come let's have a conversation man to man! You say you are God? Show up! You say you have a plan? Explain it! You say you are good? Prove it! Because right now...you are nothing but a liar. Right now I just want to walk away from you and never return...Who will walk my sister down the aisle? Who will teach me to run the business? Who will I ask questions about life?

You are unfair God! You just came and scooped up both my parents if we didn't have need for them. surely you could have taken one and left one? Surely you could have allowed me to get another hug from

my mother. All I want now is a hug from mum. I just want to hear dad say it will work out. I just want my little sister to stop crying and cursing the fact that her last conversation with mum was a fight. How do I comfort her? How do I teach her that it is ok? Is it even ok?

Everyone keeps telling me contradictory things. One set say I need to cry while the other set say be strong, don't question God, He knows best. Why can't they understand that I don't know how to express emotion? Why do they want public displays of grief? Why can't they leave me to grieve as I know? Why are they making demands on me yet once we are done today they will be gone?

I'm so tired Lord, so tired, yet my life doesn't give me the chance to just let go and kick back. I'm so tired and lonely! I just want my parents back.

James had sunk deeper into himself as they sat through the burial service and now his head was bowed, his eyes closed and silent tears run down his face as he accepted that today was final and his parents won't be back ever.

A gentle nudge of a bony elbow brought James out of his thoughts to find the pastor speaking directly to him.

'What is he talking about?' he asked Andy, barely moving his mouth

'Long or short version?' Andy asked

'Short!'

'He's been going on about how God knows the good this situation will bring out,' Andy replied

'Well, God and I aren't talking so he can take that message and park it in his back pocket and peddle it to a more gullible soul,' James retorted

The preacher sat down and invited an older man to pray for the family but James wasn't listening till he walked up to him and said gently,

'Beloved son of God, I know right now it doesn't feel like God is good or fair. I know that your life has just been turned upside down and all your hopes and dreams have been tossed to the wind. I know that you now have responsibilities you'd rather not have, yet we are all saying God is good.'

He paused and looked into James' eyes and said, 'God is good! There's no debate about it...He is good. However, his goodness is not based on our understanding of good but on what He knows will bring Him the most glory. You have a choice to make today, you can take this word and believe he is good and something good will come out of it or you can get angry, walk away from him and decide he is bad. Whichever way you go, there will be results and you will have to live with the results of your choices. Note that I said results not consequences because it is a result. Whether you pass an exam or not isn't always premised on reading...you could study and pass, guess and pass, study and fail, guess and fail, or steal the exam and still pass or fail. Something comes out of every choice...it is inevitable. Choose your response wisely son of God, even though right now you don't want to talk to him or even hear his name. Choose wisely because this is the beginning of a new chapter. Choose wisely!

As the old man walked away, tears filled James' eyes and poured out.

How could that man know what he had just told God? What are the odds that whole conversation could be responded to in a matter of minutes? Could it be that God was indeed interested in his life? Right now...he just needed to make it through a few more days of visitors, smiles, tears, and hugs from more people than he knew. Right now, he needed to keep it together but the words of the old man would be unpacked later when he had time.

End



Three Counts of Rose

Story by:
SHADRACK KATANA



Rose stared at the clock wishing it could move quickly so that she could live her life. The time had finally come to appear before the Church Council. She had been accused of many things and wrong doings. This was the time to set the record straight. The provost at the reception of the church office had served her with nice lemon tea and snacks and informed her that she would beckon her to go in at exactly four thirty. Rose loved tea, lemon tea and she wondered how the provost knew this.

She had been a Youth Chairlady at the church for three consecutive years and she had risen through the ranks having started out as a normal church member seating at the back pews. She would duck out every church service and kept a very low profile. She had been chosen as a leader a while back when she was pursuing her Masters Degree in Marketing when the pastor asked her to do an article about customer service in the Church.

‘Rose Kasena, please come to the office after service,’ the announcement was beamed on the plasma TV screens across the whole church. It was the church way of doing things. UCC was a digital and modern church. Every announcement was done like a news bulletin and the church media crew did it to their best rivaling the mainstream media. All eyes from the back benchers’ crew stared at her. She had felt a bit coy and cold on that Easter morning.

When the church service ended she didn’t rush home, and thought maybe her prayers had finally been answered, that she would eventually land her dream job. This Urban Church of Christ in Mombasa was very big, in terms of size and membership, so a call to the pastor’s office would mean a lot.

‘May I come in?’ Rose asked before she entered the Pastors office.

‘Come right in,’ the pastor said in a smoother and less husky voice different from the one he used at the pulpit to scare congregants on the dangers of missing heaven.

The pastors office was a big one, Rose had not entered before. The leather seats, the carpets, the air condition and the sleek mahogany tables all exquisite as though it belonged to a government minister. The pastor is a minister too, Rose mused.

‘Kindly have a sit,’ the pastor said.

‘Thank you,’ she sat down meekly.

‘I understand that you are an MBA student,’ he said, clearing his throat.

‘Yes I am, sir,’ she said, her heart beating faster in anticipation of a life-changing offer.

‘Can I ask for a small favor from you?’

‘Anything for you Pastor,’ she said.

‘Kindly do me a proposal on how I can treat the church members better.’

‘What do you mean pastor? Kindly expound.’

‘You see,’ he said, ‘the congregants are like my customers. Contented customers tend to pull in more customers.’

‘So, customer service in the Church?’

‘Exactly! Will it be ready within a month?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Excellent. After you finish up, kindly send it to my personal email and copy the Church mail,’
‘Take this business card, it has all details. You may also send a text once done.’

‘Okay pastor,’ she answered in a determined tone, ready to rise up to the occasion. She knew that the Pastor wielded power, power that controlled the masses in the Church, bending their minds towards accepting Jesus the Savior. Rose walked out of the office and disappeared in the crowds of people who had come for the second service and were slowly trickling in and filling the pews. She deeply knew she could deliver the task at hand.

The article was the best she had done since she started her studies. She had done a similar Seminar Paper for her Masters. The pastor applauded her and thanked her, telling her that her reward is in heaven. Rose read the return mail from the pastor and thought it was a joke. She expected some monetary gain by doing that assignment.

‘A fifty page document, well researched, not plagiarized goes like that and pastor has the audacity to tell me my reward is in heaven? Hunger and lack of rent on earth cannot be rewarded in heaven. I have bills to pay!’ she wondered, shaking her head. ‘The church ought to be more considerate!’

Easter had passed. It was customary for the church to replace its leadership every Easter. ‘Epiphany should reinvigorate your souls,’ pastor kept on saying at the end of the every Easter weekend. The Church holds an election via secret ballot when replacing its leaders for every department. Pastor and

the outgoing leadership fronts names for each position, departmental heads and their deputies plus their committees. The departments ranged from Media, Youth, Choir, Hospitality, Instruments, Ushers, Teens amongst others. Roses' name was floated and appeared on the ballot papers on the voting day.

'Rose, please come here,' Pastor called her to the altar to introduce her to the Church. It was the tradition that the pastor introduces the contestants so that the congregation can make a choice. She was supposed to be chosen as the leader of the Youth department. The voting underwent in phases; phase one was for the first service and phase two for the second service. An eligible voter was a sound adult who was a registered member. Not just any member. Being a member at UCC, you had to pay a joining fee and pledge a monthly amount which you have to honor for 12 months on the trot and that qualified you to be entered into the church books.

The votes were counted after both services and the results were to be made official. The provost who had now known Rose sent her a text message congratulating her for being the incoming Youth Leader. Sunday came, and the new leaders were paraded before the congregation, prayed for and ready to be commissioned. The outgoing leadership handed over in an auspicious ceremony with lots of photos, videos, selfies and other such life distracters. Rose couldn't imagine how she became a leader since she was not a paid up member of the church. She was born again, correct, but her life struggles had lowered her self esteem to a point she didn't have what it took to be a leader.

Rose would be engrossed with midweek and weekend meetings with other leaders. She detested these constant meetings and considered them a waste of time since many agendas were left unattended before the next meeting. It was futile. She only enjoyed one training, the one conducted by the pastor on Sunday Morning before first service. Pastor carried out a leadership series on John C. Maxwell books.

She was now through with her Research Project at the University. She was scheduled to graduate the first week of December, after which she had some issues to handle. One, and perhaps the most important was to find gainful employment which she would have to juggle with her leadership position in church, and her family and society in general was putting undue pressure on her to get married. She was already fed up with her mother's constant questions on whether she had a fiancée, and she was sure everyone had a notion of how she was supposed to live her life. Her mother would probably want her to get married while the pastor would have asked her to be committed to God's work. Her heart would yearn for employment in spite of the many rejected job applications she had received.

Taking up the mantle of leadership at the Youth department was daunting. She had to draft the Youth activities Calendar which was to be merged with the church calendar to ensure harmony. With the

help of the other members of the Youth leadership she was able to come up with activities to attract the urban youth and to make sure they grow spiritually. The draft was presented to the Church Council in the monthly meetings. It was accepted with glee as it had fresh ideas and was bound to bring the much needed change in the youth department.

One of the activities was setting up a youth service, they planned that it had to be held every Saturday at two in the afternoon. The youth service was to be launched in style. The planning was also done in style- re-arranging the hall to give it a youthful look, repainting and rebranding everything to suit the youth. This youth event was hyped on social media, themed ‘Youth Entertainment Lounge’. Fun-in-Christ was the tagline. Pastor volunteered to be the guest speaker and the event went on well. A record number attended, food was served and everybody was happy. Rose felt elated to be the leader of the moment!

Internally, Rose felt hollow and unaccomplished. She had dedicated herself fully to church activities but waiting for her heavenly reward was beginning to make her skeptical. She lived a dissonant life, fulfilling the immediate needs of the church while hers took a back seat. She worked on bringing and retaining new members to the church. The pastor kept telling her that she ought not to give up and that something big was about to happen in her life. It did, eventually, but not as the pastor had envisioned. She also found it ironical that youth brought her prayer requests for jobs while hers had not been answered yet. Would God be fair if she answered theirs before hers?

She resorted to books. Rose would buy books from Soko Ndogo- a second hand bookstore in Mombasa town. She used the little monies she had acquired from her blog-The Pool-Pit, which she started as a platform to cast a stone at life. From serving the unresponsive God, who was only interested in receiving offering and scaring people about Hell, to the frustrations of not getting married, she was thirty-two. She found solace in books. She would read anything that she found. Eventually she settled on Literature, Philosophy and Psychology as her favorite genres.

She slowly drifted away from the value systems she had been indoctrinated to follow since childhood like the idea of God, Heaven and Hell. Christianity was not making sense to her anymore. If God really cared for her He would cater for her immediate needs. She felt cheated and decided to remove any trace of religious and salvation beliefs in her life. By now, two and a half years later in leadership, she had a library of over 400 books on her favorite genres. She didn’t need God in her life, since God was that

far away Deity who was not concerned with her affairs. Her service to the youth began to show signs of neglect and collapsed.

Fellow youth leaders started pointing fingers. She had lost the zeal that she started with. She didn't pray, fast, give offertory nor read the bible, the basic tenets of a believer. Her Facebook posts were also drifting towards atheism and nihilism. The church members who were facebook friends could no longer comment on her posts. They were too extreme. She also un-friended her pastor and other church leaders on Social Media. Rose had gone the whole gamut from the extreme end of the Dawkins scale to the other extreme end.

It was four-thirty on the dot when the provost ushered Rose to meet the Church Council. It was the highest governing council at Urban Church of Christ.

'Come in and take a seat,' the Pastor said, his voice deep and serious.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Shalom! Shalom!' the greetings were exchanged. The sitting arrangement was familiar as Rose had been here countless times doing presentations on the progress of the youth ministry, and other official departmental engagements. The faces were familiar too, only that they were now shrouded in anger. Meetings always started with a prayer and the Pastor prayed to lead the seven members Council to a wise, informed decision regarding the issue at hand.

'Rose Kasena we are concerned about you,' said one of the council members, who was chairing that meeting. 'We have heard many things about you and we have been monitoring you after you became a youth leader. Whether the allegations are true or not, we are giving you this opportunity to explain yourself to us,' he said.

'Okay I'm here,' she said flatly.

'We have summarized them in three counts and my colleagues will read them out one after the other starting from my immediate right and you are required to respond to every count.' The other Council Members consulted the print-outs in front of them.

Council Member One read her the first count. ‘You are accused of slackness in your ministry towards the Pastor and towards God whereas you started with exemplary zeal. What’s your response to that?’

Rose cleared her throat and answered ‘I have no objection to that, it’s true that I have lost interest in ministry. This whole issue of serving an unseen God does not make sense to me. I wish to be relieved off my post. I’m not a believer anymore, I have been suffering in silence and the God we pray to everyday has not helped me. That’s my response.’

‘What?’ the pastor cried out, ‘you are blaspheming against the most High! You must repent.’ The council members sighed and shook their heads in disapproval at her conduct.

Council Member Two read the second Count. ‘You have, in many instances in your blog, the pool-pit, shown inclinations to nihilism and atheism. You are also leaning very much towards secular humanism. What’s your response?’

Rose, now gaining more confidence, from her new found identity, stood up and answered. ‘You said it! I started doubting the existence of deities when I saw the hypocrisy you, the Church Council, were showing. If I’m to mention a few instances, some of the church council members have been caught in bars drinking themselves silly and yet on Sundays they portray a different life. Also a member of the youth ministry was impregnated by one of you. You behave as though He doesn’t exist! I hate it that I came close to the church leaders. The liberating moment came when I researched more on the same and found that the church is just a money making enterprise to enrich a few individuals while the rest of the congregation is wallowing in abject poverty. You keep on saying that their reward is in heaven while you the Church Council are already in Heaven, flowing with milk and money!’

‘Stop it! Stop it!’ Council member one interjected angrily. ‘This ingrate should be ex-communicated!’ There was already a commotion in the room.

Council Member Three cleared his throat and read the third and final count. ‘Back to your blog, there is a post that was done on Valentine’s Day this year, you made a commentary on a classic work, Q.E.D by Getrude Stein’. In the blog you were celebrating the affair that Getrude had with her female partner. Does this mean you are a lesbian?’

Rose who was still sitting slowly stood up, smiled and answered. ‘Let not those who live in glasshouses throw stones at another man’s house!’

With that, she walked out of the door.

End.



The Digo widow

Story by:
ABDULLAHI JAMAA



Mrs. Mwanaidi Juma is seated in front of her rectangular makeshift hut. A few meters from her is a warm open hearth beside an old towering coconut tree. On her right there are three monster mango trees that allow the late afternoon sunrays to permeate and dance on her face.

Her new neighbor Mrs. Lulu Rashid has visited her for the first time. Standing on a snaking root of one of the mango trees, Lulu drinks tea from an old plastic cup as she listens keenly to her host.

“You see this tree,” Mwanaidi says, towards the gigantic coconut tree while shielding her eyes from the sunrays. “It was the first one we planted together in nineteen-eighty-two.”

It was the same year she wedded her late husband Juma Idi, a bubbly, lovely man from her native Digo tribe. This particular tree marked the embryonic foundation of their love. They planted it together on a day when the sky was threatening to break with rain and what made it memorable was that it was a blessing to have rained the same day they planted it. It grew to become a towering reminder of the love between two people who seemed to have been made for each other.

“He was strong both in brain and brawn,” Mwanaidi said, recollecting her late husband’s memory.

“Sometimes, when he climbed on top of the coconut tree, he used to drop one deliberately but near where I was seated, and then he’d laugh and call out to me saying, ‘*Mwanaidi, kofi la mapenzi haliumizi!*’ (A slap of love does not hurt).”

Mwanaidi is tall, slender with long hair that fell just below her shoulders. She was the apple of her late husband’s eye, a true product of love that was built at Ndo’oni village, a traditional coastal neighborhood on the outskirts of Kwale.

“The tree,” she says, a deafening silence following her downcast face. “*Waswahili husema...*,” she pauses once more, “*...mpende akupandaye* (Love the one who loves you).” She then looked up into the tree for the second time as if something up there reminded her of her late husband. Pimple-like beads of sweat line her forehead as her eyes become teary.

She turns her face away from Lulu and wiped the tears with her lesa.. The pain of lost love was hard to get used to. Ever since her husband died, Mwanaidi and her two sons have been eking out a living

in the most deplorable conditions. There are two things that always crossed her mind: the sudden manner in which her late husband departed and the uncertain future of their two young boys, Ali and Omari.

The nondescript huts in the village are far and fetched from one another, a canopy of coconut trees towering above the maize plantation, mango trees offering sporadic shades across the farms. When the bluish coastal sky is littered with clouds, Ndo'oni's horizon gives an impression of a lively neighborhood, hence perfectly covering the abject poverty that thrives here.

As Mwanaidi wipes her tears, a lone figure approaching through the main gate catches her attention. It's her last born son, Ali, who is kicking a plastic bottle, happy and unassuming of his tattered pants and torn shoes. He was just happy as he was in his own innocent boyish world. A half-open bag swings from his back. Mwanaidi makes a mental note to stich in the zipper later.

"Mama," he said, running towards her, the plastic bottle completely forgotten. He poses, deeply looking into her sunken, teary eyes, trying even in his tender age to decipher the pain in them.

"How was your day?" she asks, smiling.

"Not bad," he says. "Mwalimu said she wants to see you tomorrow."

"Oh, I see. So you've been a bad boy, uh?" she asks, poking his ribs. "What, you beat up someone at school?"

"No, Mama," he says. "Mwalimu said I was doing well in my studies. I don't beat up other boys, Omar does," he said, referring to his older brother who was turning into a bully. Mwanaidi understood it was just a teenage boy's reaction to the loss of a parent and hoped it wouldn't get out of hand.

Mwanaidi knew that the headmistress wanted to see in regards to the boys' pending school fees. Her pleas to the local Member of Parliament about acquiring a bursary had gone unheeded. It had been a rough decade without the family's breadwinner and she had not had it easy raising two boys on her own.

Ali proceeds to their hut and his mother follows him with a cup of tea and a plate of *mahmari*, she puts the tea on a fledgling wooden stool and quickly comes back to Lulu, a middle-aged plump woman from Malindi who has recently wedded a Digo man from Ndo'oni.

"How many years have you been raising the boys alone" Lulu asked

Before she answers, Mwanaidi's attention rests on Lulu's garb, a Swahili *leso* that wrapped around her waist, a mixture of yellow and blue strips forming a beautiful image of a rose flower. On the

edge of the *leso* are blue highlights with six powerful Swahili words written in white; '*Penzi la mama tamu, haliishi hamu* (The sweetness of a mother's love never ends). The words serve as a reminder that her role as a mother is eternal and reminds her that even in the absence of a patriarch, a mother's role becomes twofold.

"Are you ok," Lulu asks, having noticed that Mwanaidi had zoned out a bit.

"Yes of course, I am ok" she replied speaking in a polite low voice. "So, let me tell you, it has been thirteen terrible years since my husband died."

Even after more than a decade, she still finds it hard to speak about her late husband. She takes a deep breath before continuing.

"Ali my last born was three months old when it happened," she started, recollecting fragments from that fateful day that opened a new chapter in her life, that day that she became a widow and a single mother who had to shoulder the burden of raising a young family.

"He left us one Thursday morning never to return alive.."

The morning before he left, he had kissed and held her longer than usual. He always did that every other day but it was different this time.

"I escorted him up to a few meters out of our compound..."

The words that her husband spoke more than a decade ago are still fresh in her mind; they were too sweet to be forgotten, gentle and poignant. It was as if he meant to leave words that would still echo through the years

"He held me by the shoulders and said, 'darling, anything can happen in this world, take care of yourself and the boys. I'll see you tomorrow, Insha-Allah' ...,"

Her husband neither returned that day nor the next. It took two days for news to reach her that he had perished in a grisly road accident along the Mombasa-Malindi highway while heading to Shanzu to visit his uncle. While he had left home smiling and dressed smartly, he was brought back in a white shroud. The accident had wiped all remnants of a smile from his face.

"We shall all leave this world, one way or another," Lulu said, patting Mwanaidi's shoulder. Lulu understood her colleague's struggle very well, having lost her husband five years earlier before

getting married to her recent one, an aging man whom she had no love for. Her circumstances could not accord her such freedom of choice.

“Be patient, things will work out soon,” Lulu said. “Years will pass by quick enough and your sons will finish school and start assisting you.”

“Insha-Allah,” Mwanaidi says, sighing.

“I think you should marry again,” Lulu proposed with a shrug of her shoulders.

“What?” Mwanaidi asked, eyeing Lulu as if she had uttered the most unbelievable thing.

It is sunset in Nd’oni and while the two women had moments earlier been close to wrapping their talk, the proposal to remarry had opened a whole new chapter.

“What is the use? What would be the point of remarrying?” she asked apprehensively.

“It’s worth a thought,” Lulu says getting ready to leave. “Life is hard ofr a single woman. Think about it, for you and for the boys.”

The idea of marrying is alien to Mwanaidi’s disturbed mind. It had never crossed her attention even for once. The thought raises more questions than answers. Would she ever find it within herself to love another man the way she had loved Juma? Would the said man love her as much Juma did? What about the boys? They are in their teenage-hood, a very confusing stage of their lives. Would they accept another man in their house?

This questions plagued her mind all night, pushing away sleep. Much as she did not fully buy into the idea of getting married again, life had taken a toll on her and at times she had found herself doubtful whether she’s manage another month in that condition. In spite of Ali’s patience and apparent lack of complaints, she desired to see him with a new uniform at the beginning of every year, but as things were, she had to either decide on uniform or keeping them fed.

Then on one side, she craved ofr a masculine touch. It’s been over a decade since she was with a man, and she was only human. It was perhaps due to her constant struggles that her mind never dwelt much on men.

And Ndo’oni is an impoverished village, a forgotten hamlet deep in the North Coast. The absence of government is very evident. Several decades after Kenya’s independence, residents are grueling under

devastating underdevelopment. Schools are neglected, water is still a scarce commodity, and healthcare is almost non-existent except for one ill-equipped dispensary.

She wondered whether she would manage to see the boys through school in such an underprivileged community and whether the presence of another man in her life would make the journey any easier.

Morning creeps in and she wakes Ali up for the morning prayer as they prepare to go visit her eldest son Omari who was schooling in a sponsored orphanage. She was worried about him; his teachers kept complaining that he was too aggressive with other boys especially when they questioned him about his father. The lack of a complete family was something shared in the orphanage but Omari always took offense at being questioned.

As she is busy sweeping her compound before leaving, pondering on what to do with Omari, a voice interrupts her thoughts.

“Mwanaidi, *shikamoo!*” a man greets her jovially. He is on a rickety bicycle, a bottle of water tied to one side and a shovel on the back seat. It was Hamisi Abedi, a close friend of her late husband. He is from a neighboring village.

“*Marhaba*, Hamisi” she answers, dropping her broom to approach the fence.

Hamisi is a true friend, a man who always stood for them and helped them in their farm. Since the death of her husband, Hamisi has been checking on regularly, and the boys, especially Ali, had taken to liking him a lot. It’s been a while since the last time he had visited.

“It has been long,” he says. “How are the boys doing?” he asks.

“Alhamdulillah, we can’t complain,” she says. Hamisi sets his bike near the gate, pulls a black bag from the seat and hands it to Mwanaidi.

“Some chapatis for you,” he says, smiling. “My wife made them for you,”

For the past one year, she had noticed a change in the way Hamisi was treating her. He had become more concerned and always appeared to worry a lot about her well-being. At times she caught him staring at her but never made anything from the sheepish grin he made when caught. Unbeknownst to

her, Hamisi had developed strong feelings for her, and he had utilized his recent absence to try and come up with adequate words to express his feelings for her.

He had it all planned out, how he's approach her and give her compelling reasons why he was attracted to her without seeming as if he was taking advantage of her situation and dependence on him. He had decided to take her in as his second wife and take care of her sons as if they were his own. He had planned to hold her hand as he proposed...

"Mwanaidi...I love you...I want you to become my wife!" he blurted out as soon as she had set the black bag on a stool.

She stared at him, wide-eyed.

End



Wanyika Nyikani

Story by:

LEAH ODUNGO



“Mama...?” alimaka Wanyika baada ya kuitwa na nyanyake na kuelezewa kuwa mgeni aliyewasili alikuwa mamake mzazi.

Jua lilikuwa limewaka sana na ulikuwa ni msimu wake wa mwezi wa Januari ambapo jua huwaka bila msamaha. Lilichoma kila jani, mimea ikakauka, shamba likabaki kavu na udongo kupasuka pasuka na kufanya machimbo makubwa makubwa kama mikorongo nyikani.

Mchana huo, Wanyika alikuwa akisanya mizizi ya viazi vitamu angalau yeye na nyanyake wapate chajio. Imekuwa ni siku ya nne sasa kabla ya kupata chakula cha haja cha kujaza matumbo yao. Mara nyingi walikunywa maji ya moto tu ili kudanganya matumbo yao na kulala. Na asubuhi ilipofika mpango ulikuwa ni kusaka vibarua kutoka kwa majirani angalau wapate posho. Haya ndiyo yaliyokuwa maisha ya Mgange Nyika, wakati wa msimu wa kiangazi. Matajiri walitoa vibarua aina kwa majirani zao na kuwapa kibaba cha posho kama malipo badala ya ngwenje.

“Huyu ni mamako mzazi,” Nyanya alimsisitizia Wanyika. Maajabu ya Musa, ukistaajabu ya Firauni utayaona ya Musa. Wanyika msichana mkubwa sasa wa miaka saba, hajajua maisha mengine ila yale ya uchochole akiwa na nyanyake pekee. Maisha ya sina sinani, ukiulizwa husemi. Umaskini wao ulikuwa wa aina yake, hadi mafukara wa kijijini waliona aibu kujisuhubisha nao. Kila walichokuwa nacho kiliashiria umaskini, si nyumba yao ya udongo, wala paa waliloezeka kwa mabati makuukuu bali kila kitu kiliashiria ulalahoi wao.

“Wanyika,” mamake aliita baada ya kimya kutawala. Kweli kimya kingi kina mshindo na naam, Wanyika alimkodolea macho mamake tu kwa muda wote huo. “Mwanangu...” alisema mamake Wanyika huku akimkumbatia na kutokwa na machozi. Alimfumbata Wanyika kwa muda, wakakamatana wote wawili. Lakini Wanyika bado alikuwa na hisia mseto, alimkodolea nyanyake macho, alikuwa amesimama mkabala naye kana kwamba anataka kufunguka hivi, lakini wapi!

“Mimi ni mamako mzazi,” alipumua, huku akimdadisi Wanyika kama simba mla watu anayekagua windo lake kabla ya kulirarua vipande vipande.

Ilikuwa mnamo mwaka elfu-moja, kenda-mia na sabini ambapo Maria akiwa darasa la sita katika shule ya Mtakatifu Hannah alikutana na kijana mtanashati aliyejulikana kama Pius wakati wa michezo ya riadha. Ulikuwa ni muhula wa pili kipindi ambacho mashindano ya riadha na michezo mingine yaliendelea. Pius hakupenda sana riadha na wala hakujishughulisha na mchezo wa aina yeyote ule. Yeye alipenda sana

masomo. Alikuwa wembe masomoni akihifadhi nambari moja bila upinzani wowote. Alikuwa mwanafunzi katika Shule ya Upili jirani ya Mtakatifu John.

Pius katika pitapita zake ndipo alikutana na Maria aliyekuwa amejikalia ovyo kwenye kivuli kilichotolelwa na mti wa mwembe.

“Hujambo dada!”

“Sijambo.”

“Mbona umejitenga na wenzako...unaumwa?”

“Ah... sina neon,” alijibu, huku akijitia hamnazo.

Pius alimkaribia pale alipokuwa kivulini.

“Nimesema sina neno mbona hunisikii!” alikasirika Maria.

‘Aaa...usiwe hivyo dada mimi sina ubaya wowote nawe ni salamu tu. Sikunua kukuudhi samahani basi. Mimi pia naona nimebinyika kiasi. Naona pia wewe huipendi michezo hii. Haikupi shangwe,” aliyasema maneno haya kama tayari ameketi karibu naye pale kivulini.

Maria aliogopa kuonekana na kijana akiwa mbali na wengine. Ilikuwa mwiko kwa msichana kuonekana na mvulana peke yako. Angechukuliwa kama kibiriti ngoma. Maria ni mhafidhina.

Mara Maria akaamka ghafla na kutaka kuondoka pahali pale. Pius kamdaka mkono na kumvuta karibu naye. Maria hakukaidi kwa sababu ya kuogopa kuzidisha mvutano kati yao. Akatii amri na kuketi.

Pius alipata nafasi tena ya kujijulisha kwa Maria kwa mara ya pili. Maria naye hakuwa na budi ila kujitambulisha pia na kumueleza mwenziwe sababu yake kukaa peke yake pale kivulini. Alikuwa anajihisi mgonjwa - kichwa kilikuwa kinamuanga sana. Ulikuwa ni wakati wake ule wa mwezi lakini hakutaka kumfunulia Pius hayo yote. Alimwambia kuwa ni kichwa tu ambacho kilikuwa kinamuanga.

Pius kusikia hivyo alitoka hapo akaenda madukani kumnunulia dawa ya kuumwa na kichwa. Hivyo ndivyo urafiki wao uliaanza. Lakini urafiki ukavuka mpaka na wakawa wapenzi. Mapenzi yakakita mizizi katika kipindi cha likizo cha mwezi wa Agosti. Muhula wa tatu ulipoanza bado wawili hawa waliendelea na mapenzi yao kwa njia ya barua. Wakati wa likizo la Disemba walikutana, wakashana kiapo kuwa penzi lao litadumu milele. Ni msimu huu ambapo alipatikana Wanyika.

Maria alikatiza masomo ili kulea mimba ya Wanyika. Upande mwingine naye Pius alipogundua kuwa penzi lao la siri limetibuka na matunda yake kuonekana na walimwengu, alimkana mwenziwe na kusingizia kuwa yeye gumba na hakuwa na uwezo wa kumpa haragwe banati yeyote yule. Ilimbidi Maria kujikaza kisabuni na kulea mimba ya Wanyika bila usaidizi wa Pius.

Maria alipojifungua mtoto Wanyika aliamua kumuacha chini ya ulezi wa mamake mzazi na kufunga safari yakuenda Mombasa ili kutafuta kazi ya uyaya anagalau apate uwezo wa kumuangalia mamake mzazi na mwanawe. Alifanikiwa na kupata kumfanyia mhindi moja kazi ya nyumbani, japo kazi yenyewe ilikuwa ni ya sulubu, alijikaza kisabuni na kuwajibika. Wakati mmoja alipokuwa anaenda sokoni Kongowea kununua mboga na vitu vyengine kwa ajili yakutayarisha mapishi alikutana na kitana mmoja na wakatokea kuwa marafiki. Usuhuba wao uliendelea kwa muda, ikawa wanakutana mara kwa mara. Kila walipokutana ukuruba wao ulizidi, hatimaye kitana yule aliamua kufunguka na kumueleza Maria yale yaliyokuwa moyoni mwake, kwamba anampenda sana na angetaka sana wawe na uhusiano wa kimapenzi. Maria naye hakusita bali alimueleza kinaga ubaga ukweli wa mambo, kwamba yeye sio mwari na ana mtoto mdogo wa miaka saba anayeishi na mamake mzazi, na wawili hao walikuwa wanamtegemea yeye. Kitana kwa upande wake hakuona tatizo lolote, ila alkikuwa na sharti moja tu! Wanyika angebaki na nyanyake. Kitana hakuwa tayari kuchukua jukumu la kumlea mtoto wa Maria ambaye si damu yake. Maria alikata kauli na akaamua kuipa nafsi nafasi nyingine ya kuwa katika mahusiano. Mda si mrefu walifunga ndoa na Maria akaacha kazi yake ya nyumbani aliyofanya kwa jumla ya miaka saba. Maria na mumewe makaazi yao yakawa Jomvu, wakiishi kama mume na mke rasmi.

Miezi miwili ndani ya kuishi na Kitana, Maria aliamua kwenda nyumbani kwao na kumjuza mamake kuhusu mahusiano yake mapya na pia kumjulua hali mwanawe baada ya miaka saba ya kuishi Mombasa.

Wanyika hakufurahishwa na ujio huo. Aliishi miaka saba! Aliishi miaka yote hiyo bila ya fununu yoyote kuwa alikuwa na ‘mama,’ tofauti na nyanyake, ikawaje tena leo pakaja mwanamke mwingine nakujidai eti ni mamake mzazi? BI Chao hakuwa mlezi wake tu bali alimfahamu kama mamake mzazi na hata kumpa jina la kupanga –“atele” –Jina hilo halikuwa na maana yoyote maalum ila ndivyo walivyoitana mtu na bibiye.

Baada ya kusimuliwa kisa chote, Wanyika alipukuruka mbio nje hadi nyuma ya nyumba yao akilia akiwa na mchanganyiko wa hisia. Si furaha si huzuni. Alikuwa katika hali ya taharuki. Alikimbilia mafichoni mwake alikoenda kujifarji, kujiliwaza, kuomba au kusoma alipopata wakati. Alikaa huko kwa muda na akakata kauli kuwa hangejikusisha na “mama’ huyo kivyovyote na kumwacha bibi yake.

Maria hakukaa sana kijijini baada ya kuona kuwa hapakuwa na uwezo wowote wa kumshawishi mwanawe kumtambua kama mamake mzazi. Alirudi Jomvu, Mombasa kwa mumewe. Mamamke hakupinga uhusiano wake na Kitana ila alishauri wawili hao uhusiano wao utambulike kirasmi na watimize mambo ya kimila.

Zikapita siku nyingi sana tangia kuondoka kwa mamake mzazi Wanyika. Maisha ya Wanyika na nyanyake yaliendelea kuwa ya kutamausha lakini Wanyika hakukata tamaa kamwe. Walifanya vibarua kukidhi mahitaji, wakavuna mavuno wakati wa masika na mjombake ambaye alimfadhili masomoni pia. Licha ya changamoto zote, Wanyika alikuwa wembe shuleni akawa kivuli cha babake, Pius ambaye alikuwa hajawahi kumwona ila kumsikia tu. Wanyika alisoma hadi kidato cha sita yani (KACE) wakati huo. Alikuwa katika shule ya bwenini na aliutumia wakati wake kudurusu kwa bidii.

Siku za kutembelewa wanafunzi na wazazi wao zilimpata Wanyika maktabani akijisomea kwani hakuna aliyekuja kumtembelea. Ila siku moja kati ya siku za kutembeleana mwandani wake Peninah alimwita, “Wanyika, Wanyika?”

“Eee,” alijibu.

“Una mgeni nimetumwa nikuite na mwalimu wa zamu,” alisema Peninah.

Akashtuka. “Mimi nipate mgeni...mgeni atoke wapi! akajisemea kimoyomoyo. Anakosomea kulikuwa mbali na nyayake anakoishi na hangeweza kuja kumuona. Akawa ana maswali na kibao moyoni kuhusu mtu huyo aliyekuja kumtembelea

“Ni nani huyo...,” aliwaza hayo alipokuwa akitembelea nyuma ya Peninah haraka haraka.

“Wageni wako wapo kwenye ukumbi wa shule,” Peninah aliendelea kusema. Alimfuata kimya. Ndani ya ukumbi alimwona mjombake akiwa na mtu mwingine mfupi, mweusi, mnene na aliyekuwa amevaa kweli kweli! Hamna shaka mtu huyo alikuwa tajiri kulingana na mavazi yake, hata alining'iniza funguo za gari katika vidolee vyake. Wanyika alijaribu kuvuta kumbukumbu, kwa matarajio kwamba aweza kumjua jamaa yule. Lakini wapi hakupata!

Mjombake hajawahi kutembelea shuleni abadan japokuwa yeye ndiye aliyekuwa na jukumu la kumlipia karo Wanyika. Baada ya salamu, Wanyika alijulishwa kuwa ujio ule ulikuwa ni wake na yule jamaa aliyeandamana na mjombake alijulikana kama Pius na ndiye babake mzazi. Alimaka, akashangaa na akashtuka!

“Eti !Baba? Babangu?” Haijawahi mtokea siku moja kwamba angekutana na babake mzazi hata ndotoni hajawahi kumuota. Nyanyake alikwepa swala la babake mzazi kila alipomuuliza; leo iweje katokea jamaa na kudai kuwa ni babake mzazi? Hisia kinzani zilimvaa, hakujuu afurahie au alie kwanza. Alibaki kuchanganyikiwa...

Babake alipomuona yupo hoi alimdaka mara moja na kumpaa kiti akae kabla hajaanguka kutoka na hisia mseto zilizomvaa. Pius akamueleza matokeo yote, tangia kupatana na mamake Wanyika, msiba uliowapata na kupelekea kuvunjika kwa penzi lao. Lakini Pius hakuwa mkweli akaongezea na ya kwake. Alidai alimposa mamake Wanyika lakini akakataa ombi lake na ikaampelekea yeye kumuoa mwanamke mwengine na sasa ana familia naye. Kwa jumla alizaa naye watoto tisa! Hilo lilimshangaza Maria lakini halikuwa linamhusu kwa sasa.

Maria aliwaangalia wote wawili kwa macho makavu, maelezo yale yalimchoma lakini hakuwa na budi yaliyopita ni ndwele. Lililomchoma zaidi ni jinsi alivyokula mwande ilhali ana baba aliyekuwa na uwezo wa kumpa maisha mazuri. Alizama katika mawazo, wawili wale waliongea lakini alikuwa hayupo pale, katekwa kitambo na mawimbi ya mawazo chungu mzima. Baada ya muda mjombake alimuashiria amuandame hadi katika gari la babake, aina ya Toyota. Akafungua buti ya gari na kumtolea Maria mapochopocho na zawadi zengineo. Maria alivipokea japo shingo upande na kufufliza hadi bwenini na kukosa hata kumshukuru babake mzazi.

Kumbe wakati huo wote Peninah alikuwa amekalia gogo mkabala na ukumbi wa shule akitazama sarakasi yote. Alikimbia bwenini na kumpokea zawadi Wanyika. Kumbe alikuwa na lake, akaanza kumuuliza maswali Wanyika. Wanyika akashindwa kujibu, maana yalikuwa yanaandamana moja baada ya jingine bila mapumziko.

“Peninnah! Peninnah! Naomba unipe muda nitulie,” alimwomba Wanyika, Peninah naye akamuelewa. Bila ya kusita Wanyika alijibwaga kitandani na kupumzika. Baada ya muda aliinuka na kumueleza mwandani wake yale yote yaliyotokea. Peninah alishangazwa na tendo la Pius la kumtelekeza mwanee kwa miaka yoye hiyo. Swali hilo la Peninah lilizidi kumchoma Wanyika lakini hakuwa na la kufanya bali kumeza machungu tu!

Siku na masiku yakasonga, Wanyika akakalia mtihani wake wa Kitaifa wa kumaliza shule. Alipoumaliza akarudi nyumbani kwa bibi yake na kumueleza matukio yote yaliyompata. Bibi alizipokea habari hizo bila mshangao wowote! Wanyika akajiuliza, “Je alikuwa anayajua yote haya?” lakini wapi, hakupata jawabu.

Wakaendelea na maisha yao ya uchochole, vibarua hapa na pale. Wanyika akajitahidi zaidi na kupata kibarua kama mwalimu wa shule ya msingi, japo ilikuwa ni kazi ya muda ya kushikilia aliyopata bila cheti. Majibu ya mtihani yalitoka na alifaulu vyema, azma yake sasa ilikuwa ni kujiunga na chuo kikuu. Pale shuleni alishikilia kwa mihula miwili na akapata barua kutoka kwa babake mzazi. Alimtaka amtembele mjini Mombasa ili apate kujua nduguze wengine. Akamfahamisha nyanya na mjomba kuhusu mwalikule. Wakamuhimiza aukubali naitakuwa vyema kwake yeye Wanyika kujua familia yake nyengine. Alikata shauri na kukubali mualiko ule wa kwenda Mombasa.

Ilikuwa ni mara yake ya kwanza kufika Mombasa na babake alimsubiri katika stendi ya Mwembe Tayari. Akampeleka nyumbani na kumkaribisha vyema, ila mamake wa kambo hakupenda ujio wa Wanyika, na hakuficha hisia zake katu. Wanyika akaliona balaa likijileta, mamake wa kambo hakutaka ale na wanawe hata pia kuongea. Wanyika akaona asijiumize roho, akasubiri siku babake yupo nyumbani na kumueleza kila kitu. Akamuomba amtembeze Mombasa, maana alikuwa na hamu nayo. Babake akampeleka kuina bahari ya Hindi, ilikuwa mara yake ya kwanza na alifurahishwa sana na jinsi mawimbi yalivyojibeba yakitupana bwelabwela!

Jioni moja baada ya chajio, Wanyika alimuita babake kando na kumuelezea dhamira yake ya kutaka kurudi bara. Maisha ya mama wa kambo yalikuwa yamemshinda na kachoka kuvumilia. Babake kwa roho safi alimkubalia ombi lake. Asubuhi yake alimuandalia zawadi za kupeleka bara na kumpeleka stendi. Wanyika akaabiri basi na kuanza safari yake ya kwenda bara. Lakini kuna jambo lilombughudhi. Katika ujio wake wa pwani alipata kuwahi kufanya urafikina kijana mmoja muuza madafu aliyefahamika kama Odour. Siku chache zile alizokuwa Mombasa, alitokea kumpenda kijana yule. lakini kafanya kosa la kutomuaga kijana yule na kumuelezea hisia zake.

Nyumbani akapokelewa vizuri na nyanyake, na alikuwa na hamu ya kuelezwa kuhusu habari za Mombasa. Waliongea wawili hao hadi usiku wa manane. Walikuwa wamepezana sana. Mapenzi baina ya bibi na mjukuu wake yalidhihirika. Hatimaye machovu yalimfika Wanyika na usingizi ukamtwa kwa pupa akishtuka ni machweo akiamshwa na bibiye.

Asubuhi ile Peninah, mwanafunzi mwenziwe na jirani yake kule bara alirauka kwa kina Wanyika ili kumuuliza kuhusu habari za Mombasa, naye Wanyika hakumficha alimuueleza yote mpaka kuhusu muhibu wake Oduori. Peninah alifurahishwa na habari zile, nako huko Mombasa Oduori alimuulizia Wanyika kutoka kwa ndunguze, akaambiwa Wanyika si wa Mombasa tena na alirudi zake bara kitambo. Oduori alihuzunishwa na habari zile, lakini akaomba anwani ya Wanyika na akapewa.

Wanyika kule bara alitamani sana azisahau kumbukumbu za Oduori, maana alijua kuwa hatosamehewa na muhibu wake. Lakini barua ya Oduori ilimfikia, kwa mshangao alichana bahasha na kuanza kusoma barua ile...

SLP 2067

MOMBASA.

Kwa muhibu wangu,

Wingi wa salamu. Natarajia barua hii itakupata ukiwa buheri wa afya. Mimi pia ni mzima ila wasiwasi kwako.

Muhibu wangu, nilipata habari kuwa uliondoka bila hata kuniaga. Nilijibiidisha nikaipata anwani yako kutoka kwa dadako Sarah. Mbona ukafanya hivyo?

Wanyika, lengo la kukuandikia barua hii nilitaka nikukueleze kuwa, mara nilipokuona moyo wangu ulitokea kukupenda na nilitaka uwe wangu wa maisha. Na tafadhali usinikatalie ombi langu.

Mimi wako mpenzi,

Oduori.

Barua hiyo ilidhibitisha hisia za Wanyika kwa Oduori, maana aliipokea kwa furaha. Oduori akawa mpenzi wa kwanza wa Wanyika. Akafanikiwa kujiunga na chuo kikuu baada ya muda mfupi. Alienda kusomea ualimu, na chuoni Oduori mara kwa mara akawa namtembelea Wanyika. Wanyika akaona bora mapenzi yao yasiwe ya siri tena, na akapanga mkutano pande mbili zikutane ili watambulishwe rasmi. Japo ya tofauti za kikabila na kimila baina Wanyika na Oduori, wazazi walibidi waghairi japo shingo upande na kukubali mkutano huo. Baada ya chuo kikuu, kibali na baraka kutoka kwa wazazi wawili hao waliowana na kuishi raha mustarehe. Kwa kweli wa nyika halii nyikani akashiba, hata pwani atawinda tu!

Mwisho