

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: I Forgive You But it is My Christian Duty to Punish You
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This is a collection of stories about Kenyan characters that are the public face of homegrown success. They are obedient children and responsible working adults. For many of these characters it becomes clear that there is a big gap between voiced facts about their lives and the unspoken truths about what they are. Rumors, gossip, letter writing and private prayer undermine this public face. During Daniel Arap Moi's Presidency between 1978 and 2002, Kenyan children were taught in school that Moi was the generous *Baba wa Taifa* or father of the Nation who supplied them with free school milk. He was the number one farmer, teacher, headmaster and chancellor of all universities in Kenya. This is where the characters in this story collection live.

I FORGIVE YOU BUT IT IS MY CHRISTIAN DUTY TO PUNISH YOU

A Collection

By

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For Muderwa

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FALLING

Dear Mum and Dad,

This is a girls' prison! For every rule you break there is a punishment and the prefects all walk around with notebooks to record what you have done wrong then they read the list at lunch time on Saturday and tell you the punishments you have to do. Did you know that it is against the school rules to look at the fruits on trees? They told us during orientation that it is wrong because it is a sign of greed. Greed is a sin. As I am writing this letter, I have just come back from dusting the banisters of the hostel staircase, three whole floors just because I had not covered all my textbooks with brown paper. I am lucky because some people in my class spent the whole afternoon scrubbing the kitchen floor because of noisemaking. Noisemaking is one of the worst crimes.

Also Wanja is here but she says that she is going to transfer next term. I will try to stay out of trouble. Please find out for me if I got accepted at another school. Some people said that some acceptance letters were sent to their old primary schools instead of their home addresses. Please please check for me. I think I have lost 10 kilos already.

Your loving daughter,

Stella

1. No talking

We are in class, English with Mr. Boit. Whenever he catches someone dozing he

exclaims, “Girls! Literature is life!” Mr. Boit has a loud voice. The class next door is having our English class together with whatever other class they are having. His loud voice ensures that we are all seating upright leaning as far back into against our chairs and if our classroom had more space, I am sure some of our chairs would have fallen backwards. We read *The Burdens* out loud but he interrupts each reader to correct wrong pronunciations. “Stop. The g in gnaws is silent...” He says. We don’t get very far reading this play. I don’t mind. Mrs. Keya comes into class with her clean white high-tops (she still owns those) for the maths class that is a revision session from last week’s test. Yes she is wearing the blue skirt suit with white high tops. They are a little worn but they are covered with white shoe cream for that extra shine. She used to play netball in college. We are all quiet as Mrs. Keya walks along the isles that separate three rows of desks. She picks students to answer questions on the blackboard. Her shoes squeak so I can tell where she is without having to follow her with my eyes. At least I don’t get picked this time. It is always strange to have your back to the whole class, your hand on the white chalk and to rely only on the sounds and murmurs of the faces behind you to confirm that your answer is right or wrong. The last lesson before the 10.00 a.m. break we get a surprise chemistry test. It’s not really a surprise because Mrs. Ng’ang’a does this whenever she does not feel like teaching. If she is five minutes late and arrives with just a sheet of paper, her own dustless chalk and blackboard duster then everyone knows that it will either be a test or we will relocate to the lab and get lectured about safety in the lab instead of doing real experiments.

12. It is illegal to walk across the grass lawns. Use designated footpaths.

The prefects have left for the National student leaders conference. The headmistress Mrs. Kamau is very pleased that all fifteen prefects got selected after the rigorous prefects - only application process. I am happy that they will be gone for a full day. Our head girl is going to give a speech; she is probably giving it right now. She rehearsed it at the morning assembly two weeks ago; it has words like scholars, echelon, mentorship and cohorts. “ Wonderful. Perfect!” Mr. Boit was very happy with her speech. As the head of the English department he would know. She sounded just like him. Mr. Boit, nodding vigorously said, “A big hand of applause!” So we clap clap clapped.

Dear Mum and Dad,

How are you? I trust that everyone at home is well. I'm OK except that they made me scrub the kitchen floor with a hand brush for noisemaking last week.

Telling my roommates goodnight after lights out is noisemaking. My fingers peeled in the process of scrubbing that kitchen floor so now I can't wash my clothes without gloves because the detergent gets inside my skin and burns. I don't have gloves.

Anyway my roomie volunteered to wash my blouse and socks for me this week so I am not dying yet.

Your loving daughter,

Stella

I did not believe that we would have a full day without prefects monitoring our

movements until I saw the school van drive out of the big black school gate. A normal school day includes morning, lunchtime and evening duty inspections, shoe and collar inspections and desk inspections. We must always be neat and tidy. On a regular day a prefect will include my name in the morning assembly announcements “The following students, you have not tucked in your sheets and blankets to make proper hospital corners. Before reporting class go back to the hostel and make your beds properly.” Then she will call out our names, “...Stella Meto,” that’s me. Now the teachers know that I don’t even know how to make my own bed.

14. Sheets and blankets must be tucked in using the hospital corner.

This uneventful day will end with me and a group of students standing at the assembly ground as the sun sets singing over and over the song we sang off key at the morning assembly to make up for offending the person who took the trouble to arrange the song in distinct Soprano One, Soprano Two, Alto One and Alto Two voices just for a group of careless students to disregard their effort. “Round your voices!” we are told over and over again. Today If I just mind my own business nothing will happen to me.

Dear Parents,

This letter is written to implore you make arrangements to transfer your daughter from this institution. It may concern you that her health and other faculties are in decline and the only viable solution would be a transfer.

Treat this as an urgent matter.

Respectfully,

Miss. Stella Meto

It's break time so I go outside to bask in the sun and escape the cold in the classroom. I am using up my twenty minutes free time discussing periodic tables with Wanja when my deskie Chela interrupts our impromptu study session, "*Si* you heard that Thin Mati is off duty today? *Kuna vile* we should just raid our lockers and get some grub while she's away. You know Fat Mati won't even notice." The matrons are in charge of the dining hall and everything around it. Matron Risper is Fat Mati. She is not really fat. She is just bigger than Thin Mati. Thin Mati is thin. Whenever I think of Thin Mati – Matron Paula with her straight kit, which is like a perm but oilier, and her ever frowning face, I hear her screeching, "You *siro ritro gao*, come for a punishment!" She doesn't have L in her vocabulary. I've been in this school for almost two years and that is all I have ever heard Thin Mati say, "Come for a punishment!" Fat Mati only calls us by our surnames and doesn't really bother anyone as long as the dishcloths and floor dusters are clean.

22. It is illegal to sing off key

On our first day as Form Ones in this school, they served us pilau rice for dinner and the whole school sang. "Welcome to the family, we're glad that you have come to share your life with us..." Our parents left us in our high school uniforms – white blouse, green skirt and green pullover. No more pulling up socks like primary school children.

Our newly appointed Form two school mums who promised to help us get settled surrounded us. The evening routine is a silent study session in class after supper but as new students we had a special orientation lecture on that first evening. Just a few hours after waving off our parents, they let us know that we had a one-week grace period to learn all the school rules. They read the rules to us, they were many instructions to govern our time between 5.30 am when we woke up and 9.30pm when it was time to sleep. Even as we tried to remember these rules, we discovered that the real challenge would be in obeying the unwritten rules.

Dear Mum and Dad,

How are you? I hope you are fine. I am fine but I think I am allergic to peas. We are now having dried peas all the time instead of ndengu. The ndengu always had stones anyway and I could have broken my tooth like another Form 2 girl who bit into a stone and that is why we are not being given ndengu because Mrs. Kamau said we do not do a good job sorting the dried ndengu. I saw weevils floating in the beans yesterday. Did you know that they put paraffin in our beans? Is that safe? Ever since I found out I smell paraffin everywhere. Even in the small packets crisps and the peanuts from the tuck shop. I have never seen such small packets in my life anywhere else.

Other than that I am working hard in class and trying to do my best under the circumstances. Yes I am trying to maintain a positive attitude. For example I am thankful because I made new friends with a girl called Dama, she was in our rival primary school in Senior Quiz. My deskie Chela also thanks you for your

greetings. I patiently wait to hear from you.

Your loving daughter,

Stella

Chela is obviously not as paranoid as I am about spies being left in charge of the school while the prefects are away. Chela's hobby is to record school rules. She says that since all the other fun hobbies are illegal all she can do is collect the unwritten rules; it's just like stamp collecting she says. She says it is evidence for the day when people from the ministry of Education will raid our school. Whenever she finds a new school rule, she records it in her notebook. It's funny, I write letters home but Chela just writes down school rules. She borrows my writing pad sometimes, writes down a list and sends it home without even including greetings. Her list started with just twenty rules but it's been growing.

Chela was the Girl Guide troupe leader in her primary school and got the stamp collector philatelist badge. She wanted to join the Rangers in high school but she missed a spot and ended up in the Wildlife club instead. They make plans to go for real outings. They got first priority when the school was invited for World Environment day, to clean Nairobi River but Form Ones don't go for outings unless they are in choir. They tell us that we might get lost out there but I think the teachers are afraid that we might run away. Wildlife club also have an exchange program where every year two people out of the whole club of about thirty members are selected to travel abroad to another school for half a term. The exchange students who come from that abroad school always leave our school in tears. You can't really know if they are sad or happy but seeing them cry like

that makes us know that we are thick-skinned people. It is a good characteristic. Chela really wants to be chosen to fly out. "I have a plan." She tells me.

46. Students must only speak in Swahili on Wednesday (Jumatano)

**Or/Au Wanafunzi wanaruhusiwa kuzungumza Kiswahili pekee siku ya
Jumatano (Wednesday)**

Dear Mum and Dad,

How is everyone at home? Did you get my last letter? I went to see the nurse because of a stomachache and she told me that I imagined the pain. By the way I don't think she is a real nurse. You know nuns' uniforms and nurses' uniforms look the same. I think I need to see a real doctor.

Please send me more stamps. Also feel free to enclose some extra pocket money. If you put it in a card then it is less likely that it will be stolen at the post office. I will really appreciate it. Thank you.

Your loving daughter,

Stella.

I'm not brave like Jeptoo. She started skipping meals in last term. She got full support from seven tablemates who were very happy to take turns having an extra slice of bread at breakfast once a week while she got closer to her goal of self-inflicted anemia. In Mr. Weru's history class Jeptoo's forehead would bang on her desk or less disruptively slump on her deskie's shoulder. We are sitting in class listening and suddenly plonk!

First her deskie Angeline stands up, our desks screech as Chela and I and everyone who wants to, runs to her Jeptoo's side with notebooks to fan her for fresh air. "Give her some air!" Mr. Weru shouts. We jostle for positions to carry Jeptoo out of class. Chela gets the right leg and I have the left leg. Angeline is at the head and others have their hands under her back. We walk slowly, with Jeptoo in between us, out of class and slowly to the dining hall. There's a cushioned bench for this particular purpose. We did anything to escape double history and Jeptoo turned us into expert first aiders and actors. At night in her dormitory Jeptoo regularly disrupted her roommates' sleep by screaming because of nightmares. By end of term everyone's skirt sags around the waist but Jeptoo had somehow found a skirt that was two sizes bigger than her so her weight loss, she hoped, would be more alarming. Jeptoo did not come back for third term. She didn't have a thick skin.

Dear Parents,

You are hereby requested to visit your daughter forthwith. Failure to do so will result in dire consequences. As you may note, several concerns have been forwarded to your docket but none of these have been sufficiently addressed.

Yours Sincerely,

Miss. Stella Meto

52. No giving out your food without permission from the matron.

I am still here.

Chela is back from the dining hall having broken the no – eating – at – break - time – unless - you – have - ulcers or anemia rule (Number 10) I will be labeled an accomplice to her crime and will waste another Saturday afternoon scrubbing clean kettles cleaner and shinier. She is holding a biscuit and jam sandwich in her hands and making it sound as if I invented all these restrictions, “*Yaani*, Fat Mati was not even in the dining hall to stop me. *Yaani...*” Chela’s story will have to wait because the bell is ringing and we have to jog to class. Students must jog to their destination whenever the bell rings. Jogging saves time.

During the mid morning classes we discretely pass each other notes about Chela. “Did she really do that?”

“So now what's the plan for lunchtime? “

“Uwongo. Lies!”

“We will still be in trouble for something at the end of the day so why not?”

It’s a wonder that no teacher has intercepted any of these notes. Mr. Weru’s selecting students to answer his questions and this doesn’t deter us. “Stella. What was the black hole of Calcutta?” At first I think he’s seen the note in my hand but then I answer the question and he moves on to another student. In a few hours the prefects will be back and I am wondering if Chela can rebel a little why can't I?

The lunchtime bell rings. The high tables are empty. In the dining room where we have designated sitting that must be adhered to, a majority have decided to sit in the wrong houses. Somebody fished out all the meat and potatoes from the bowl on my table. I don’t have a secret stash of chili sauce and curry powder to show off. I remain my regular boarding school self on my designated chair at my assigned table with my

usual table mates because that is what the rules say. I have never smuggled in anything to school, not even salt. I've finished the food on my plate – meatless soggy cabbage and rice. I am still hungry.

34. No adding chilli powder into your tomato sauce.

It's 2pm and in just four hours the prefects will be back. They will return and then we will go back to the usual surveillance and worrying about dust on windowsills. All of Form One and two and three and four with just a few exceptions have their socks either folded or pulled up to the shin completely disregarding the socks - must – always – be – folded – at - the - ankle rule. There is no use pretending to be good now. The most I have done in my attempt to join in is drag my feet when the bell rings for class.

Nobody dares loosen their tie in Mrs. Limo's triple geography class that she arranged because she will miss class next week. For her class, everything is back in place – hair flattened and tied back, socks correctly folded and shirts tucked in because she will notice anything that's out of order. Mrs. Limo has chameleon eye and tongue coordination. When you least expect it, Mrs. Limo will chase you from class for slouching or scratching your elbow while she is talking. Today it's Rita's turn to be in trouble, she's been sent out for using a biro pen instead of the recommended Hero Fountain pen. Though I'm taking notes as Mrs. Limo speaks, my eyes are more focused on the clock in front of the classroom. If I do not act within this hour I will have nothing to boast about what I did when the prefects went away.

The bell rings the first time, the bell rings the second time and then it rings the third

time for Mrs. Limo to leave but she stays an extra five minutes just to finish what she was explaining. Mrs. Limo leaves class and I'm quickly outside but instead of rushing to my evening duty as I always do I'm looking for something to do, anything. I walk across the grass lawn. The punishment for that will just be picking leaves and it's the thought about picking leaves that directs me.

From the door of my classroom, if you look at straight ahead, there's a open grass lawn with flowers, fruit trees and concrete benches donated by the Parents and Teachers Association where Form Fours get priority sitting - when they can find the time to be outside. I notice an out of place loquat that somebody neglected to sweep away. The next thing is I'm climbing a tree the way my brother used to and the way I never could when we were both in lower primary school and Mama D was always rushing to my mother, "Mama Stella, I saw your boy on a tree just now. That boy is like a monkey, eh! He just climbs every tree he sees, yawa!" and my mother would pinch Luka's ear and the flesh under his armpit so he hopped around as she once again forbade him from climbing other people's trees. "We have enough trees at home for you to climb!"

I am Luka on the tree. My shoes are on the ground below and I don't know how my socks came off but now I am on the tree snatching loquats and stuffing them into my breast pocket and my side pocket and cursing my stupid skirt that only has one very shallow pocket. For our evening chores we pick up the leaves that the trees shed and occasionally we are lucky enough to find loquats and mangoes in good condition just lying there on the grass but we never pluck the fruits of the tree or look at them. But today I hear myself commanding, "Chela get me a paper bag! *Harakisha!*" and I shake and shake the branches and watch it rain loquats below.

Others have joined me. There are just a few fruit trees on this space but these are enough for those who are daring enough to climb. We are girls dressed in curtains in that scene from Sound of Music. Our fans surround the trees, they cheer and pick up loquats on the ground. The noise is enough to draw Fat Mati out of her dinning hall domain and onto this side of school to see what's delaying the students who are supposed to help with serving supper. Fat Mati is ringing a bell and shouting at students to disperse but I just stay on the tree until everyone down below disperses and an exasperated Fat Mati leaves.

I know I'm in big trouble so as everyone including the other people in the trees disperse hoping that this episode will be erased, I am still sitting on the ground now; my hands are dirty and sticky with loquat juice. I will not be hurried. If only the mangoes were in season too. I am licking the juice as it drips from my palms onto my elbows. It's so sweet and sticky. Luka will be impressed. Where is Chela? Maybe I will get expelled and never have to come back. Chela will be jealous. Maybe this is the best news ever. Where did Chela go?

I miss supper and I'm the first to see the school van return while everyone is in the dinning hall. I am outside Mrs. Kamau's office because somebody called her to deal with me. Mr. Gesare is also here so I know it's bad. He is the official discipline master. He only deals with the very bad cases. So I am a bad case. We all enter the office and I have to record a statement just like in a police station. I have to be excused to wash my sticky hands so that I can write it again on clean paper in my own handwriting. Mrs. Kamau sits behind her desk while Mr. Gesare stands there watching, as I write. I finish writing and put down the pen. I keep my eyes on the trophies and certificates on the shelf behind Mr. Gesare's head as his words float past me.

I am standing outside staring at the blank the wall outside my classroom instead of sitting in class with everybody else for the evening prep. I am doing the silent punishment; I am not allowed to talk, nobody is allowed to talk to me and I must ask for permission to go the toilet. I can hear them whispering inside. I am swaying side-to-side, back and forth just a little. I slap the mosquitoes that buzz around my head. I know they are passing also notes around. Maybe Chela is writing something in her notebook.

Dear Mum and Dad,

How are you? I hope you are well. I climbed a tree today. I saw loquats on it and I thought I should eat them so I climbed the tree. They tasted so good. Did you know that scientific name for loquat is Eriobotrya japonica? I think they are sweeter than the ones on the tree at home.

Your loving daughter,

Stella

77. No climbing trees.

I am going home.

SICKNESS

To really shine in this school you have to be on the hockey team – play forward or attack. Being the back does not count because everybody knows that our school Kawangware Girls' has the best team after Pangani Girls' and they only ever meet Pangani at the finals and when we lose the game and it is the back who will get blamed for the loss. If you cannot be on the hockey team then you at least should own a good hockey stick even if it is just for P.E. Please get yourself a Maharaja Hockey stick, not those fake ones sold at Somo Outfitters. If you cannot be a star hockey player then you should be a choir member. Choir members also take part in the choral verse competition, but that is not cool. The choral verse is for the really dedicated choir members who cannot sing. Your third option is Wildlife club. Wildlife club is rather disappointing, seeing that they hardly ever go for outings, but it will look good on your school-leaving certificate. You want a good school-leaving certificate.

The really important people in this school will always be people like Violet Chepkurui. There are fourteen weeks between Opening Day and the four-day half term break and then fourteen more weeks between the half term break and Closing Day. You need a special reason to get out of school – being a choir member or a hockey player might help but there is no guarantee since the school van can only transport fourteen people at a time. Violet Chepkurui belongs to the special class of people who always succeed in contracting high risk and extremely dramatic illnesses that require parent notification and subsequent breaks from school. When she gets sick, she goes home. Just a day out of school and you can see the difference it makes.

This time Violet Chepkurui returns to school in the afternoon, three whole days after going home because of another undisclosed infection. It's like a whole midterm break. She expects the usual eye stares from jealous schoolmates thinking about the fact that she got to see her parents, eat home food, wear home clothes and sleep in a home bed for all those days. She dreads having to spend her very limited free time to copying notes from all the classes she missed when everyone else is having fun but she prefers most people believe that her illness is a pretend illness like Jeptoo's anemia.

She reports to headmistress Mrs. Kamau's office and then walks to the small field behind the classes where she is sure to find her classmates enjoying their Saturday. There they are, her two friends, Mary in her every – Saturday Bermuda shorts and stretched green "I am a winner" t-shirt sitting cross-legged on a lesso combing her hair. Susan in a pink dress is also sitting and facing Mary. Mary is the first to see Violet. She waves as if Violet is a long distance away and gets up, "Yaani! Violet, you chose the wrong week to go home!"

"Mary, what is the right time to get sick?"

"The right time to get sick enough to go home is six weeks after Opening day or seven weeks after Half term. Somewhere in the middle when all your biscuits are finished" Susan answers hugging Violet.

"But it is six weeks after Opening Day, surely!"

"Never mind that. Violet, for the rest of our lives we will be talking about the day that Chela shook hands with President Moi and you will just be pretending to remember it." Susan says this as she returns to her comfortable position on the ground. Violet takes off her shoes and socks and sits with Susan and Mary making space by pushing aside

packets of crisps, chevda, biscuits, peanuts, soda and books.

Mary repeats her first statement. “Yaani! Violet, you chose the wrong week to go home!”

Violet already a little irritated rolls up the left sleeve of her pullover to display a bandage “I was sick for real! I wasn’t faking it. Why volunteer to be injected? See for yourself!”

Reaching into Violet’s bag Mary she says, “No need to get so worked up! So how was home? And did you bring us anything? Medicine, more medicine, it’s a pharmacy in here! You take all these? Aha, Cadbury’s!” She pauses then holds up a box of chocolates, “You and I will be best friends forever, we can dump Susan.”

“Me, I think chocolate or no chocolate, Violet you missed!” Susan insists.

“I feel nothing.” Says Violet.

“You could have stayed in the sanatorium like a normal sick student, His Excellency the President, Commander in Chief of the Armed forces would have stopped there to visit you.” Mary returns to the leso on the ground and resumes combing her hair. The combing takes all of Mary’s energy; her round face contorts showing the slight discomfort of dealing with her thick hair. When Mary combs her hair, it’s an event. Violet is momentarily distracted by the idea of Mary’s muscles flexing as she pulls comb through the hair. The sound of static reveals how dry her hair is.

“Just imagine Susan, Violet on TV! First on the news then on repeat.” Mary says as she removes clumps of hair from the comb before continuing to comb.

“I don’t see why you are making it such a big deal. So he came and I missed. How did he end up this side instead of going to BD Girls’ as usual? Where was he going to that he happened to be on this road? ”

“Firstly, Susan make yourself useful,” Mary replies while handing Susan the comb and indicating to her to help oil her hair. They shift their sitting positions; Mary remains cross-legged while Susan kneels behind her. Violet takes Susan’s previous sitting position. Mary holds up the small tub of hair oil next to shoulder so that Susan can dip into it and scoop out oil to rub it onto Mary’s scalp.

“Firstly.” Mary starts. “On Tuesday people from State House came to school. It’s not like they came with sirens and that *kelele*. They just had that State House look, you know. Plus the cars with GK number plates. There wasn’t any big announcement, we came out of class at lunchtime and there were all these people busy piling chairs and tables outside the big hall. There was a van parked over there. I got closer to see what was going on. That chair was being unloaded, in fact they put it over there.” She points in the general direction of the parking lot next to the hall.

“There is nothing like firstly, Mary. Which chair?” Violet asks while opening a packet of crisps and offering it to the others. They shake their heads so she puts it back down.

“The chair, the one that he sits on during public holidays. That chair with the emblem”

“It’s not an emblem, it is a coat of arms.” Susan continues to part Mary’s hair and oil her scalp.

“Fine, the coat of arms. So, they brought out the red chair and the red carpet. You know it was dirty.” Mary continues.

“Wait do you mean the chair or the carpet was dirty?” Violet asks.

“The carpet, it had so much dust on it.”

“So what did I miss? And stop saying firstly for everything Mary! Are you ever going to get to the interesting parts? They brought the chair and then what?”

“By this time the whole school was crowding around so much that a second bell rang to make us to go into the dining hall for lunch. In the dining hall, Mrs. Ochieng’ came and announced that choir members should go for practice after lunch.”

“So you missed double Chem on Tuesday, I’m jealous.”

“Why are you jealous, *si* you were at home being sick?” Susan speaks with her mouth full.

“Next time I go to see my doctor and he gives me a note, I will make photocopies for you two!” Violet sneers.

“Relax.”

“I was talking about the choir.”

“Mary, you can’t tell that part you are not even choir member.”

“Fine.”

“After lunch we went to the small hall for practice. Two people from State House were there to listen to us practice. You know they kind of looked like the Kenyan version of Mulder and Scully on a tight budget. Me I was waiting for them to unleash walkie-talkies or talk to their wrists like this. Anyway Mrs. Ochieng was in a happy happy state of affairs doing that thing she does with her shoulders. ‘Which songs do we want to sing for the President?’ she asked. We made a list: Sengenina, the wedding song, the Ukimwi song, that Ugandan song and the Welcome to the family song. Scully suggested that we sing all of them then she and Mulder and Mrs. Ochieng’ would tell us the one they preferred. We sang. Triza’s solo was the best so we were not surprised when they chose

the Ukimwi song.”

“*Enyewe*, Triza has a voice.” Mary agrees.

“Susan, you watch too much TV! By the way, nobody was bothered that the Ukimwi song is a song about AIDS killing people?” Violet asks. Susan signals to get Mary to lean her head sideways before responding.

“Well, Senginina is a very moving sad song, you don’t even have to know what we are singing to know that it is sad.”

“And the Wedding song has excess harmonies.” Mary adds.

“People, stop interrupting me. I am the one telling this part! So I was saying Mrs. Ochieng’ was conducting like no one’s business. If that was Music Festival finals, we would have definitely taken the trophy.”

“That’s not important. While these choir members were busy singing the rest of us were scrubbing the school as if M O One is a cleanliness and health inspector...”

Susan interjects, “Stop talking so loudly, you will get us in trouble.” Then Mary continues with an exaggerated loud whisper, “OK, I’m talking softly now. If it wasn’t so cold we would have also washed the curtains.”

“All the female teachers left school early. All of them except Mrs. Ochieng’ of course, because choir practice did not end until at night!”

“By evening, the school was clean like the day before Form Ones arrive.”

“Then it was supper time, for non-choir members!”

“Did you eat special food?”

“No the usual Tuesday special – rice, two pieces of meat and cabbages.”

“Mary, you get two pieces of meat on your table?” Susan asks.

“Didn’t I tell you that chic on my table, Diana, is in her vegetarian phase, we take turns eating her meat.”

“There, I’m done with your hair Mary.” Shifting from kneeling behind Mary, Susan lays flat on her stomach and hold up her chin with both hands as she speaks. “During the supper, Mrs. Kamau came and announced properly, ‘Young ladies, some of you may have already heard, we are very honored that His Excellency, President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi is going to come to our school on Wednesday....’”

“Ah! Susan you exaggerate. No way she said all his names!”

“ I promise, she said everything including those initials that come after the name.”

Mary starts laughing and shouts, “Lies! She just said ‘the president’ .”

Defeated Susan continues, “But she said that the day was going to go on as normal in class and outside until he comes.”

“You had evening prep?” Violet asks.

“No not really, we just sat in class talking until it was time to go to bed. All the teachers on duty had gone to iron their clothes last minute or something like that.

Wednesday after morning assembly we went to class to pretend to learn.”

“The way I was busy studying because of all the classes I was missing!”

“I thought you were in hospital Violet?”

“Yes, I was...”

“Susan, you’ve skipped the part where all the female teachers show up in their Sunday best. Mrs. Ochieng: maroon skirt suit, black shoes and stocking! Mrs. Oyoo: yellow outfit with flowers everywhere. Even Mrs. Sisenda had a new blouse, new skirt and a new wig. You will see it on Monday. In fact you will see that wig for a long time.

Also Mr. Weru arrived with that blue Kaunda suit. The one and only.”

“Cobalt blue, not to be confused with navy blue. Matching the white shoes.”

“But of course!” Violet exclaims and then girls take turns giving each other high fives as they laugh.

“By the way, we were told not to wear scarves and legwarmers.”

“It was a freeze and shine kind of day.”

“We were in class when the bell rang and then all of us ran to the school gate to sing. Mulder and Scully were standing there distributing small flags.”

“What time? Was he already there?”

“No not yet.”

“But you know how we switched into public holiday celebration mode.”

“Everyone started mimicking that tune that is always played by the police band. Tin tiri - rin Nyayo! Tin tiri- rin Nyayo! Tin tiri- rin Nyayo! Tin tin tin! Repeat, repeat, repeat to infinity.”

“We lined up at the gate. Even teachers.”

“The guard of honor?”

“The Rangers had dressed up in their blue uniforms, scarfs and berets and were lined up for the guard of honor.”

“No flower girls?”

“Sandra, Mrs. Kuria's daughter of course.”

“I like her, I'm sure Mrs. Ochieng' volunteered her twins but they had budget for one girl only.”

“I wonder who paid for that?”

“I think Mulder and Scully.”

“When did M O One finally arrive?”

“Something like 11am. You know just like when he enters Nyayo Stadium or Uhuru Park on top of that Range Rover. It was exactly like that.”

Violet shakes her head; “I see you are now on first name basis with His Excellency the President. Eh?” Susan sticks her tongue out at Violet.

“He came in the Range Rover?” Violet asks.

“Stop interrupting.” Susan says sounding harsh. “No, he came in the limo, his was standing with his head and arms out of the limo and he was waving the stick.”

“The Fimbo ya Nyayo. You can’t really call it a stick, it’s a rungu.”

“The Fimbo ya Nyayo.” Mary echoes with an emphasis on ‘the’ while picking at the crisps. “Us we were just shouting nyayo, nyayo, nyayo...and waving our small Kenya flags. I saved one for you Violet. It’s in my desk.”

“Thanks, at least I know someone was thinking of me!”

“The car with the sirens, policemen on motorcycles and then finally the limo stopped. Mrs. Kamau was the first to greet him at the gate then she introduced him to all the teachers.”

“I think Mrs. Ochieng’ curtsayed.” Susan adds.

Mary rolls her eyes and says to Susan, “You are obsessed with Mrs. Ochieng’.”

“She is very gisty!” Susan laughs and continues, “The rest were just bowing their heads and bending half half and shaking his hand and smiling extra extra big.”

“Fat Mati and Thin Mati *walika* smart!” Mary says.

“You have to witness Mr. Gesare, Mr. Discipline master, Mr. I Will Expel You

greeting a president. It is a humbling experience. For everyone!”

“You make it sound as if God himself had come.” Violet says.

“Well...”

“Sh sh that is blasphemy!” Susan covers her mouth. “Mrs. Mutai told us to go and line up at the assembly ground. We ran to line up at the assembly place while M O One was receiving flowers from Sandra and then guard of honoring the Rangers and then greeting the teachers and matrons.”

“So you did not sing it at the gate? Violet asks. “Mhmm.” She mutters and then unconsciously starts to flip through a book without actually reading it.

“Can that song ever miss? I didn’t have time to mention it before. If this was a movie, that would be the soundtrack. Background, obvious stuff! We didn’t even have to practice that song during choir practice. Scully just told us that we would sing it. You know the moves: right hand up, right hand forward, right hand down at the same time as right foot forward. Repeat with left hand and left foot. ‘Tawala Kenya Tawala.’ Me I was ululating, Alili Alili Alili!” Susan stands up to demonstrate the dance for Violet.

Violet drops the book and blocks her ears. “You call that ululating? I’m surprised you were not arrested.”

“Violet! I told you, you missed,” Susan says again.

“As we continued singing with Susan ululating like she was going to get paid for it, M O One came walking with Mrs. Kamau and Mr. Weru and then they stood in front of us with the bodyguard positioned behind him.” Mary picks up the comb and starts to comb hair again dissatisfied with the two lines she just braided. The comb passes through more easily.

“Then it was time to sing the anthem,” Susan says.

Standing up, Violet asks, “Who started the song?”

Mary blurts, “Is that a question? Mrs. Ochieng’ of course! You know the way we are told that you can be arrested if you don’t stand at attention when singing the anthem? ...I have pins and needles.” She stands up and shakes her legs and stamps her feet to cure the numbness.

Violet tells Susan, “You always get pins and needles. What’s wrong with you?”

“Violet you have a mean heart. I’m going to rub you from my list of friends!”

Mary laughs, “ Susan, I don’t think two friends make a list.”

Susan continues, “By the way he had raised the rungu. By the way, I was wondering. Do you think it's made of ivory?”

“Now, how would we know? I've never seen ivory except on an elephant.”

“I think it’s wooden,” says Violet.

“No it isn’t, but it has some elaborate decorations. I had never noticed them before. The top part of the rungu has gold things engraved on it. Does his hand shake when the rungu is up there in the air? Mine would shake if I had to hold up a heavy thing like that.” Mary shakes her hand vigorously.

Susan holds up a hollow bic pen to demonstrate, “Maybe it's hollow plastic.”

“No way it’s plastic, it would be shiny or something.”

Smiling, Violet replies, “Somebody said it is white gold.”

“Maybe, I’ve never seen white gold. Maybe that is why we only sing the first verse of the anthem. It must be heavy if it is gold. Come to think of it, I had never thought of it.” Violet opens her mouth to say something but holds back, she looks at Mary and lets

Susan adds, “Maybe there is a knife inside or a James bond type of gun inside underneath the white?”

“This rungu business could go on forever and make us get arrested. We finished singing the anthem and then Mrs. Kamau officially welcomed M O One into our school.” Mary says.

“So are you ever going to get to the interesting bit?”

“Are you saying that nothing we have told you is interesting?” Mary pretends to walk away.

“No you are both telling it too slowly.”

“Where had we reached?”

“Yeah, Mrs. Kamau speechified *kidogo*, ‘Your Excellency, Commander in Chief...what what...’ she said many things. Her voice was a bit shaky. She stopped talking and then M O One cleared his throat, He said the usual things. We were all quiet except for cameras flashing flashing. Media houses had set up on that strange stand with many slots for microphones. The one that looks like an upside down rake before they stick the labeled microphones for each TV and radio station.”

“Susan, did you see the way the teachers were laughing at his jokes like their salaries depended on it?” Mary asks

“I know they were receiving those jokes and bouncing back laughter the way you catch a ball in katii before you hit the person in the center. But Mr. Gesare was missing them all. He had collected himself from the floor and was back to Mr. Discipline master face. Daggers. But then, it was kind of strange seeing Mr. Weru laugh like that. He never laughs.”

“Exactly how was he laughing Susan? You are both such fake reporters, at which point did the real reporters come?”

“He was laughing the way you laugh when you are posing for a photo in the studio. As in, trying not to show too many teeth...the reporters came at the same time as the police and all those State House people. In case you want to know, the District Commissioner was also here. I’ve never known his name so don’t ask me. He was in that uniform the upside down bowl hat and khaki shirt and trouser.” Mary spreads out her feet, at ease, and clasps her hands behind her back when she’s saying this.

“Like an explorer.” Susan holds imaginary binoculars to her face.

“And what else did M O One say?”

“Me I don’t know. Violet, M O One is tall! Gosh. He had a rose flower on his coat lapel as usual. Then he stood there saying, ‘Ahem, ahem...I am very pleased to be with you here. I have been hearing about the hard work you girls are doing...Education, discipline...’ He said he had just come to greet us. He said he had heard many good things about our school. He would say something and then we would all clap. I’m not even going to try to imitate his voice. You know it. He said he was going to leave us lunch. That is the part that mattered to me. Then he finished talking.”

“And you did not sing?”

“Yes, yeah, we sang the Ukimwi Song, Mrs. Ochieng’ started solo – isting before we could even object?”

“Haki Mrs. Ochieng, stealing Triza’s spotlight like that!”

“Man, you know the way she had dressed up for the occasion.”

“He liked the song, Mrs. Kamau was standing next to him telling him about our

choir or something.”

“Even me I like that song,” said Mary.

“When the song ended we were told to remain standing while he walked with Mrs. Kamau and the teachers to the big hall for lunch.”

Violet’s eyes open extra wide, “Oh wait, he ate food from our boilers? Is that safe?”

“No. This is the problem with letting Mary say almost everything. A catering vehicle came in the morning while we were in class. They set up in the home science kitchen and did things there. So at some point food was carried to the hall. Honestly we did not see this part, we heard about it later. You know how the home science room is on that other side of school.”

“So did you guys go to eat while M O One was feasting with the teachers?”

“No we got sodas and Britannia biscuits instead, lunch after the president left.”

“It’s not like we were hungrier than usual. Sodas were unleashed from one of the many cars that came with the president. Prefects were told to pass around the crates. Soda in the middle of the week, in the middle of the term! Half-liter sodas, not like this small ones we are having now. You shouldn’t have gone home Violet.”

“I had soda at home.”

“It’s not the same.”

“And when does Chela shake M O One’s hand?”

“So after we had our sodas, Mulder and Scully and Mrs. Kuria came to tell us that we should go back to the gate to tell M O One bye bye as he leaves.”

“At the gate, it turned out that all of Kawangware had come out to greet M O One. Him and all the others came out of the hall and then went straight to the limo, he entered

and then it was time for us to start singing and waving our flags again. Tawala Kenya Tawala. ” Susan dances.

“Chela?”

“Chela had positioned herself as close as she could to the parking space. When his head popped out she just leaped up in the hair and high fived him? The security guys were not amused. They grabbed her but the car was moving and now all the girls in the front row were trying to do the same thing and M O One was high fiving them back. So in the end, Chela became the star of the day. I thought she would be in trouble but nothing has happened to her,” Mary explains.

“Is that it? Is that all of it?” Violet raises her hands in surrender and then says, “The way you were talking I expected something more dramatic. Nothing? An arrest. A teacher getting fired. Something big *bana!* Ok, do you think Mrs. Kamau will become M O One’s girlfriend?”

“She better. I mean it’s not like he was coming to see us. *Si* you know these *mambos*.” Mary snaps her finger.

“I want a new school bus. Look the lunch was wonderful. Violet, We had chicken and goat meat, pilau, extra sodas and then we all got chocolates. There were small fudge and mint-chocs for everyone. The last time I was full like that was the day you smuggled in home food last term. *Lakini* a school bus would confirm more names on the list for the outing next Saturday. I mean, how else did Pangani get such a nice school bus while we are stuck with that tiny box?”

Mary asks. “What outing? Yeah, Pangani’s school bus is more like an aeroplane. It even has a fridge and a toilet inside. And an actual radio that plays actual music.”

“Hockey tournament, City Park, I’m the forward for Team A this time.” Susan says while collecting the now empty packets of biscuits and snacks and rolling them into a ball.

“Then you don’t need to worry about not getting space in the van.” Violet says.

“That reminds me Violet, what is all that medicine for?” Susan asks.

“Oh we need to hurry up, I have to take it to Mati before I’m accused of drug trafficking. It’s the usual. Not a big deal.” She helps Mary fold the leso and then the girls pick up their stuff, put on their shoes and walk towards the dining room. It’s almost suppertime.

I FORGIVE YOU BUT IT IS MY CHRISTIAN DUTY TO PUNISH YOU

That “It’s home time!” excitement preoccupied us all day. It was a day when I got to wear my loose fitting house purple t-shirts and green wraparound skirts with those annoying green bloomers underneath instead of the inhibiting school uniforms. Bloomers under our wraparound skirts, with their elastic bands that went around our thighs, were somehow more decent than shorts. I walked around in our Bata slippers all day. No shiny shoes and white socks. After breakfast and for the whole morning everyone was busy with a designated task depending on the house they belonged to. As we worked we splashed water everywhere and got distracted trying to surf on smooth soapy floors. We laughed and talked about the good and the bad times in school. We scrubbed the concrete foot paths and cemented floors, we cleaned all the classroom and hostel windows until they became invisible, we washed the curtains, dusted the framed pictures on the walls and the skirting boards on the edges of the walls and floors in all the rooms. We washed our blackboards to remove the accumulated layers of chalk dust so they were a gleaming black that we knew would have to be covered with chalk dust all over before it was nice to write on and easy to erase. All the chairs in the school were upside down on top of desks and tables waiting for the cleaned floors to dry. The outdoor drains were covered with small hills of rainbow colored bubbles from all our cleaning activities. When we were done our hands felt dry and cracked and extra clean. All that morning the bell did not ring until it was lunchtime.

As was the third term tradition, on the last afternoon before the midterm break we gathered for a special assembly. It was always a long and informal meeting so we

dragged the mobile benches that were usually spaced out along our class corridors to the assembly space to avoid sitting on the smooth cold floor with our lesos fastened around our waists to keep our clothes from getting dirty. Some people hang around the pillars and walls that they intended to lean against for support. It was a habit that was illegal during regular term days. This was not like the regular daily assemblies where I constantly worried that maybe my shoes were not shiny enough and my socks were not folded properly and that my thick hair that was supposed to be held in place at the back of my head with a black ribbon or a black shoelace was actually out of place. Dama and I and some classmates got to the assembly space even before the bell rang.

At this assembly, among other things, the list of the new Form Three prefects to replace the soon to be leaving Form Four prefects would be announced. Since I was a Form Three the list would have students from my class. I imagined that Kish who had spent all her three years in high school being that model student and attending mass more than the compulsory twice a week was an obvious choice. Others likely be on the list would be the active YCSers, and those who no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't find anything bad to say about them so you tolerated them. Even though some of my classmates were going to be school prefects I was confident that the rest of my time in Form Three and Form Four would be nothing like Form One; that had been my worst year.

Dama was entertaining us with her stories. We were still in our P.E kits – orange, green and purple t-shirts, secondary colors for a secondary school. We were comparing our sunshine deprived pale arms and feet. For each of us there was a line at the ankle showing how much skin our folded socks usually covered.

“Ai! Look at our legs?” I said.

We formed a circle and compared our different shades of brown. Triza had lotion. We passed it around and oiled our feet. Kish got us laughing when she started to oil underneath her feet.

“You are very strange Kish!” Belinda echoed what we had always thought about Kish. With Kish it was only weird when she acted outside what felt like her persistent dazed and happy with everything state. Teachers loved her.

“Do you remember that day Pancho busted us?” Dama asked.

“The day she became more like Pinch - O!” Triza added leading us all into sharing our personal experiences about Pancho.

“What was her real name? I seriously don’t remember,” I said.

“Seriously?” Dama asked.

“It was Patricia, there were like three Patricia’s in that year,” Angeline explained.

“No wonder we gave her that nickname,” I said. We had nicknames for every prefect in the school. Some of the names were Bougainvillea, Tape-recorded, Madame and Tellateach. They were names that came out of their personal traits or specific incidences relating to the individuals. Tape-recorded was the eavesdropper who reminded people things they had previously said when they had no idea that she was listening in. Pancho was what we called a certain prefect who pumped her fist in the air whenever she was trying to make a point. She was fierce. Form One was a very long ordeal, but we had endured and somehow made it to Form Three.

“She liked pinching your cheeks.” Belinda reminded me. I felt my ears get hot as she said this. Three years later it still embarrassed me.

“She had a thing for pinching. Violence against Form Ones I tell you!” I laughed it off. We listed all the things that we had gone through with Pancho.

“You guys, do you remember the day we got a class punishment to scrub the class floor, wash the walls and blackboard clean and scrub our desks? It was Ash Wednesday and she reluctantly agreed to excuse the Catholics to go for Mass.” Triza reminded us about what was probably our worst collective experience.

“Oh it was the time I had food poisoning.” Angeline said.

“Dama over here tried to say she was also a Catholic just to escape the punishment!”

“But she had never been seen her at YCS or Catholic hour!”

“I wanted to tell her I had just converted but that would have been extra drama. Anyway Form One would have been very different without Pancho.” Dama concluded.

The fact that we were all united in disliking our prefects had made us all much closer to each other than all those group activities - singing, doing a class play and a fashion show – that felt forced on us during our first month in the school when we were still adjusting to the all the rules. Now in Form three, there was a growing discomfort about us. In fact Dama and I had already secretly written down our lists of possible prefects and taken a bet. In previous years we had openly and publicly speculated about who would be our new prefects but now we were too aware that our future prefects were among. In some schools people elected their prefects but for us we just had to wait and see who the teachers would pick to boss us around on their behalf for a year. Our new prefects were laughing with us, maybe for the last time. If more people on Dama’s list got selected, then I would owe her half a packet of biscuits and if more people on my list got

selected then she would owe me half a packet of biscuits. I was not worried.

The bell rang; the small circles of students at the assembly space formed one big group. The benches were all pushed to the back rows. The conversations got louder as we arranged ourselves and then it faded into murmuring and finally complete silence as Form Ones, Form Twos, Form Threes and Form Fours got settled sitting or standing in their chosen positions to form a kind of semicircle facing the teachers standing in front of us. The headmistress Mrs. Kamau dragged through the preliminaries reminding us about things we really did not want to think about.

“Young ladies.” This is what she always called us. “Remember to study during the break. The gate will be closed on Sunday at 5.30 pm, not a minute later.” Groans from the students who were not sitting in the front rows were accompanied by simultaneous calls for silence, “Sh sh sh...” from the same students. She continued talking about unpaid school fees, and exam dates on and on she talked unmoved by our obvious outward restlessness. Sitting on the floor was only fun for about ten minutes.

When it seemed as if she was never ever going to stop talking she stepped aside and let the Deputy Headmistress Mrs. Oyoo take the center stage to announce the names of the new prefects. Some of us stamped our feet in lieu of the drum roll. Mrs. Oyoo did not fail to get straight to the point of this assembly. In between enthusiastic cheers and whistles and other underwhelming applauses she read the names of the new prefects.

“Beatrice Nzioki, Sharon Kamau, Diana Pendo, Wanja Githua, Damaris Njiru...” She had to stop for a few minutes because all the other names would not have been heard above the excited clapping and screaming after Dama’s name. It seemed that many were particularly happy with Dama’s name being mentioned. I turned to face Dama who was

seated on the floor one row behind me. A smile replaced Dama's initial blank expression. It was that smile that was reserved for dancing during the national music competitions after countless rehearsals and constant reminders to bring the winning trophy had squeezed out all the fun in the actual dancing. It was the smile reserved for the second batch of reporters who arrived five hours after the release of KCSE examination results and all the initial excitement about being top ranked girls' high school had to be played out for the cameras so that we could see ourselves on the 7 O'clock news on three local television stations and possibly on international news. Dama stood up slowly; I hugged her and told her, "Now I owe you half a pack of biscuits!" It was all I could think to say. "No you don't." she replied and pulled away to join other students whose names had been called out. They lined up beside Mrs. Oyoo as she continued to read out more names on the list.

The cheering persisted as more names were called out. I was already thinking about how things would be from this point. Those hideous maroon prefects' pullovers, rags as we called them, which clashed with the green school uniforms, crowded my mind. After midterm Dama would be one of them – a prefect. More announcements followed the names and then the assembly officially ended. We were released to go and do our evening duties; nobody needed to tell us that the new prefects were officially excused from their duties. They all walked, some of them with their heads bowed down, to the dreaded Prefects Common Room more commonly referred to as PCR to have their first of several prefect meetings.

PCR was that room near our old Form One class which only prefects were allowed into. Angeline had once peeked inside and reported that the prefects had coffee,

juice, sausages, chocolates and other brands of biscuits that were forbidden for the rest of the student population. Every once in a while another student would report that she had seen something else like a computer, loaves of bread or illegal novels. We easily got irritated when we heard the prefects laughing in that room when for all we knew they were busy plotting the next midnight locker raid, surprise tidiness inspection or deciding what sort of punishments to give us and how many demerits we deserved for doing things that we did not know were wrong. The older, soon to retire prefects in their overstretched one-size-fits-all maroon pullovers smiled happily and followed the newbies knowing that at last they had been freed from their dreaded responsibilities but they would still enjoy the privileges of being prefects until they left the school.

The prefects meeting ended just before the supper bell rang. At supper everyone scraped the last of their remaining stash of margarine, avocados and tomato sauce and mixed them into the boiled maize and beans. It was as if this would be the last time that we would ever have to eat school food. Our Continuous Assessment Tests (CATS) were over and done with and instead of compulsory night prep there would be a movie to watch after supper. In less than twenty-four hours the midterm break of home cooked food, of junk food, of boys and of no rules would start. I could not even find the energy to laugh at the fact the Kish had not made the list. I saw her two tables away from me eating happily. I wondered why she did not look sad about being overlooked. I ate quickly and only half listened to my seven tablemates chattering about the new prefects. In less than ten minutes I had cleared my plate of food, washed my plate and spoon, stored them in my locker walked out of the dining room. I was not surprised that Dama was behind me. We half walked half ran to the stone benches about two hundred meters

from the dining room. There was a corner near the tool shed at the taps that was hidden but not too concealed that we would look suspicious to the prefects. Not that it mattered anymore since Dama was a prefect. “So I’m not supposed to tell you anything but...” Dama, at first very calm and then later a little hysterical revealed all the secret details of the meeting that new prefects had with the discipline master, Mr. Gesare.

As Dama spoke, I was reminded that she was still that girl in Form One who did the longest silent punishment because she could not sit quiet during the three-hour night study. Together we had stood silent outside our Form One classroom staring at the blank white walls in front of us and noticing all the tiny lines formed by cracks in the paint and overzealous cleaners while classmates inside tried to study. Twice, she had done the punishment for boldness and arrogance of eyes. The one you get for looking at somebody, usually a prefect, badly. My friendship with Dama was established around those interesting evenings and Saturday afternoons that we had spent scrubbing the kitchen floor and lamenting about our situation, as we got extra bonding time with the school matrons and the school cat. Apparently she had so perfected her skill of evading punishments that the teachers and prefects believed that she had changed. In talking things through we reduced Dama’s being on the list to a minor disruption and complication that we could certainly find a way to evade. There was no other option. Dama started to cry but stopped quickly. My arms wrapped my around my waist as I stared at the ground; I was not going to start crying now that for the first time ever Dama was shedding tears before me.

She brushed away the tears with her sleeve. She even laughed a little, both of us aware of our momentary reversed roles. Regaining composure Dama said, “I could

always come back with a diagnosis for hyperacidity.”

“Or anemia, you just have to keep faking the fainting. Can you do that?” I continued to stare at the ground around our feet.

“Easily, my cousin is a doctor.” She cheered up.

“If that does not work, then you have to fail exams. All of them.”

“Ouch, it will not come to that.”

“It might, and you know academics matter.”

After coming up with these alternative plans we talked about the midterm and even joked about all the potential prefects that had spent so much time silently campaigning but had not made the list. Then we compared our secret lists and found out that we had the same number of correct names. I was glad about that, it reassured me that Dama and I were more alike than different. We rushed back to the dining hall to reserve good seats for the movie and then hang around outside the dining hall with Kish and Triza until it was time for the movie to start. I had that feeling that Triza had quickly changed the topic when we got near them. “Dama, are you going to Eldy?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Dama replied. Then we stood around talking about things unrelated to the big announcement. I could see that Triza was already acting strange, she would make sideways glances at other people who passed as we talked but I decided to ignore her. Soon enough it was time to go back to the dining hall to watch our movie. We watched *Sister Act 2* and imagined for a while that our high school, our classmates and our teachers were very much like the ones on the big television. There was a collective “sh sh” when some students joined in the second performance of the song “Oh happy day” as if we had crowded around the school television to hear their voices instead of the voices

inside the movie. We all knew that that song was going to be a morning assembly favorite for the rest of the term.

Nobody slept after lights out at 9.30 pm and some people were up and out of bed even before 5 am as if waking up early would bring home a little closer. I did not bother to shower or to have breakfast; I was not going to endure handfuls of cold water splashing onto my back when I was sure to get at the very least a bucket full hot water to myself in over two months at home. My mother had promised to be in school by 8.30 am when the final morning assembly was scheduled to end. She was always on time. I was thinking about soda, chocolate, milk, fried eggs, nyama choma, bread with anything but red plum jam; any of these would be good for breakfast lunch and supper combined into one endless meal. I did not polish my shoes or tuck in my blouse a little curious about what these new prefects would do about it.

Mrs. Kamau gave the same speech that she had given the previous day. She said everything that she always said before the midterm break. This was my ninth midterm break; I had practically memorized her speech about school uniform regulations, school fees and studying during the midterm break. She asked us to remind our parents that visiting was prohibited. Then we sang the very long school anthem in double time and rushed through the prayer so that the only “Amen!” was coherent. In typical high school fashion people stood making emotional goodbye gestures when it was just Wednesday and we would be back in school on Sunday. I looked for Dama, we hugged and said goodbye and then I went and picked up my bags from the classroom and then ran straight to the car park. My mother was waiting.

Every term Mrs. Kamau threatened to shut the gate and force latecomers to return on the next day and every term I tried to convince my mum to get me to school late. “Just to test the rule.” I pleaded. My mother’s compromise was to show up at the last possible minute. One time she had parked the car at the petrol station outside school because we had fifteen minutes left and I did not want to spend those last fifteen minutes together inside the school compound. My stomach was bloated from last minute overeating as if this could somehow postpone the cravings that would follow as soon as my mother turned to leave. My skirt felt really tight around my waist and hair felt clean and light and shiny after washing and blow-drying it at Kara Salon. I arrived just two minutes before the 5.30 pm deadline. I hugged my mum and for the first time since I came to this school I did not plead with her to find me another school. I did not even threaten to fail all my classes or ask to see a counselor who would confirm that I was not exaggerating things to her. I waited until the car was out of the school compound before picking up my bags and going to my classroom. I carried my clean laundry, and fresh supply of fruits and dry foodstuff to the classroom.

“Hi Nduku I see you have been fattened!” Wanja called out to me in a suspiciously friendly voice as if I could ignore that she was now a prefect.

“In two weeks it will all be gone!” I replied equally friendly.

“No tears, this time?”

“I gave up! Just one more year Wanja, just one.”

I kept walking and meeting more and more of my classmates also laden with

bags, looking happy, rested and hopeful. I had not seen or talked to Dama during the break so I was anxious to get to class and talk to her before the luggage inspection began. Triza was talking when I walked into our classroom.

“Just imagine, prefects had lunch in school,” Triza said. I wondered how Dama had not mentioned this to me on the day the announcement was made but then I thought knowing Dama, she had probably skipped the lunch anyway. In class, we all separated our foodstuff from our other luggage. The peace I had felt as I said goodbye to my mother was already being replaced by the strangeness of knowing that six, maybe seven if I included Dama, out of my 40 classmates would be excluded from this inspection because now they were prefects. Foodstuff had to be stored in the dining room while the other items remained in our locked classrooms for an inspection before we could store in our hostel lockers. I went to the dining hall with my keys for the usual inspection before we are allowed to store our food in the dining hall lockers. Dama stood at one of the doors looking sad for someone who had just spent four full days and four nights at home. I really tried to convince myself that something else was the matter but it seemed that I was the only one who had not yet accepted that Dama would soon be wearing a maroon pullover and saying, “I forgive you but it is my Christian duty to punish you.” to me and my fellow classmates who had been with her through thick and thin for three whole years, I tried to push my doubts away. I even told myself that I should have more faith in Dama. She was still the same Dama wasn’t she?

My food was neatly arranged to appear just as the school rules specified; two packets of Marie biscuits a little heavier than normal because I had steamed it open and replaced it’s content with ginger snaps, 500 grams of tomato sauce, 500 grams red plum

jam actually a rebranded strawberry jam jar, 500 grams Blue Band Margarine, a 250 gram glucose powder box that had been stuffed with chocolate éclair sweets. Everything was glued and ironed back in place with the supermarket stickers still on to prove that they were brand new. I had fresh fruits in their normal state.

Dama undoubtedly knew that I had chocolate bars taped to my thighs. It was something I had learnt from Dama. As the queue got shorter I got closer to Dama who was inspecting all the other students with the precision of a reformed criminal. It was Angeline's turn then my turn.

“Hi Nduku!” She said.

“Hi. How was home?” I asked while slowly emptying the contents of my paper bag taking in every detail of that moment. First there were the boxed of Marie biscuits didn't shift around the their packets as she inspected them. She lifted the red plum jam jar to her face so she could see its deep shade of pink and she put it down. The dented glucose box was not the perfect cuboid it had once been. I realized too late that I had been a little sloppy with that package. Dama saw this. After all, she and I had spent previous school holidays figuring out new ways to slip through the inspection system. She pushed everything to one corner of the table, looked sideways to the line behind me and said, “Next.” The inspection was complete. She had not answered my question.

I quickly returned the stash into my paper bag, held the bag close to my chest then walked to my locker that was unfortunately very close to the high table that Dama and all the new prefects would soon occupy. As I unlatched my tiny locker and arranged the contents of my bag inside it, I wished that another prefect or even a fellow non-prefect would tell the teachers that Dama had let me get through the inspection. Then Dama

would be instantly demoted and things would be normal. There would be prefects, and there would be us. Then after inspections like this one I would not have to think about whom to catch up with, and what not to say to them, because my best friend was too busy *prefect-ing*.

I used the same door walk out of the dining hall but I avoided looking at Dama who was still busy dealing with the long line of students waiting to have their bags inspected. Since we could not access our classrooms or dormitories before the luggage inspection was completed in the classrooms, I went and joined my classmates sitting and standing around the benches outside our classroom. I did not feel like talking about my midterm break even though barely half an hour before the inspection I had looked forward to this part of returning to school. This last catch up session always was as a kind of cool down exercise before the next mornings rude awakening into the predictable strict school routine. It was like Dama's home was situated on Adrenalin Avenue and everything absurd and funny and incredible happened there before the rest of our neighborhoods tried to copy them. Now I would not be the first to hear Dama's stories. She would likely be sharing them in PCR. They would laugh loudly and we would continue to imagine the worst. I thought about how friendly Wanja had sounded when she saw me. Maybe Wanja already had insider information about Dama's adventures.

I saw Kish and Triza and tried to join in their conversation. "Hi Triza! Hi Kish!" I said trying to sound excited to see them. They were neighbors back at home and had spent most of the midterm break together. I had always thought that this is the only reason that Triza stuck with her but now I thought maybe they were real friends. The way Dama and me had been. "Sema Nduku." Triza smiled and gave me a pitying look. Every

year this thing I was experiencing happened to some girls, I had anticipated it happening to other people but had never imagined that I would be the one trying to find my footing all over again. Triza took a step back to widen the invisible circle. Kish had that usual look, placid; everything in her life was just the same as it had always been. I hated her.

MOTHER TWO

It was Thursday evening when Senje Helen arrived with a bag full of sweet potatoes, green vegetables, dried mushrooms, roasted groundnuts, simsim, dried chicken wrapped in old newspapers and bad news. There are no sweet bananas in her package for us that time. Senje Helen is Tata's big sister. Senje Helen lives in Nairobi but always has a way she goes to Kakamega very often. We had supper on a mat on the kitchen floor because Tata, Mama and Senje Helen wanted to talk privately in the sitting room. We cleaned up the dishes after supper and as usual played noisily until Mama appeared and orders us to be quiet.

“Go to your bedroom now!” She ordered before calmly telling me, “you will sleep with Joy so that Senje can use your bed.”

We hurried ourselves to our bedroom, got changed for bed and whispered until we fell asleep. They must have been in the sitting room talking until very late because we did not hear Senje Helen when she finally came to the room to sleep. Mama woke us up in the morning for school but said that I would not go to school with Penina and Joy. She told me that I was going to travel with Senje and return on Sunday.

“Why?” I ask as she helped a very drowsy and irritable Joy get dressed for school.

“Senje will explain. It is important that you go with her. She will bring you back.” Mama's eyes were turned away from me and her voice trembled as she spoke.

“What is wrong with your eyes?” Joy pointed her finger. Penina stopped putting on her cardigan and also turned to Mama.

“Oh nothing. We slept very late yesterday, I'm just very tired”

“Sorry, Ma.” Joy replied.

“Sorry, Mama.” Penina and I repeat in unison.

Everyone was ready for school and work except for Senje Helen and me but we all have breakfast together. I then walked my sisters to the gate to catch the school bus before returning to the house. Mama got into the car and waited for Tata who was saying something to Senje. I tried to listen in but nothing they said made complete sense to me. Tata gave me some money for chips and soda and then also got into the car and waved as he drove out of our compound onto the road. Senje and I shut the big gate and walked back into the house.

“Listen, We are going to go to a funeral. There is a lady who died and it is important for you to go.”

“Sorry Senje, sorry. Who is it? How come the others are not coming with us?”

“You need to know your people.” She replied.

“Which people?” I asked.

“Let me help you pack your things. We must hurry. I will tell you more later.”

We locked the house and left the keys at the neighbor’s house and then Senje held my hand tight the way Mama holds Joy’s and my hand whenever we cross the road with her. We took the first matatu into town. I had to sit on Senje’s lap, with my head touching the roof of the matatu because Senje wanted to save money and anyway there are no seats left. We walked to the Akamba bus stop, purchase two tickets to Kakamega and got into the bus. It must have been break-time in school as we made our way out of Nairobi. The bus moved slowly in the traffic of buses, cars and pedestrians crossing everywhere and then picked up speed as the roads emptied ahead of us. The buildings stretched out, no

longer so close to each other and zoomed in the opposite direction of the bus. The bus stopped at Kangemi to pick up one passenger and also in cold and foggy Limuru to pick up two more. I drew flowers on the misty window beside me.

“Senje, how come it is only me who is travelling?” I asked.

“Your Tata will join us tomorrow, he had to go and ask for leave from work.”

“And Mama and Penina and Joy? Why can’t they come?”

“Now now, your questions will never get finished eh! I have told you what you need to know. Aren’t you happy to be with me?”

“Of course I am Senje but...” I stopped midway afraid of making her angry.

After Limuru it was a nonstop ride to Nakuru with Senje asleep for most of the journey while I stared outside at the scattered pyrethrum flowers and maize fields along the road and listened to the engine groan as the bus struggled uphill and then downhill. Every year before Christmas we all sat like this in an Akamba bus and travelled to Kakamega. Penina and I would share one seat while Joy sat on Tata’s and Mama’s lap. We liked to kneel on the seats and stare at things outside and the people around us inside the bus. For a while I counted the cars that overtook us but it was not as interesting doing it alone as it was with my sisters. We stopped in Nakuru and I got my chips and sausage and soda. I was happy, no dividing the sausage into three parts, one for me, one for Joy and one for Penina. I woke up later and found that as I slept I had been dripping saliva on Senje’s side. I whipped my mouth. She laughed at me. We laughed.

Senje and I alighted at an unmarked bus stop. It is getting dark. I knew we had reached Kakamega but this was not the stop that I could remember. The road was empty but there were so many cyclists and people walking on the roadside. Many of the women

had bags balancing on their heads while children in different school uniforms talked loudly.

“Senje, where are all these people going?”

“Home.” She replied as she hands me my bag. She took my hand and we walked towards a group of cyclists.

“Hurry up, we are going to be late and it is not good if we reach there at night.”

“Where is *there*?”

“Home.” she replied.

The cyclist tilted the bicycle so that I could get onto the seat behind the saddle. There were small handlebars sticking out just below the saddle so I held onto them. My bag was pressed onto my lap and after the cyclist hopped onto the saddle the bag was balanced in place like a cushion between his back and my face. I kept my legs spread out and suspended. I was afraid that the bicycle spokes moving so fast would scratch me. I told myself not to look up or down. I leaned sideways to see what was in front of us but the bicycle shook.

“Balance.” He said and so I instinctively returned my head to the center and faced my bag. It was my school bag but this time it has no books inside, no lunchbox with crisps and biscuits inside, no juice bottle; just clothes. Enough clothes for three days, a toothbrush and toothpaste and the bicycle shook again so I shut my eyes and held on tighter. I lifted my legs high until my knees were touching my fingers. I was afraid that they could get scratched and bleed because of bicycle spokes. I was afraid to look down.

“Polepole” I told the cyclist to slow down. He ignored me. I missed Penina. I missed Joy. The cyclist’s radio was playing loud but I could still hear words flying from

the conversations on the roadside as the bicycle weaved through the people who crowd together and then scattered just like their exclamations and the sound of the bell that punctuates the eish... ah... vaane...not true...you don't mean that...we will be late. I could not keep my eyes closed for long.

“Polepole!” I screamed. He slowed down and immediately Senje's boda boda overtook us. Senje had a bag on her head and she was sitting sideways and comfortable as if she was on a sofa. She had a long skirt and grey socks and black Ngoma shoes. My hands gripped the handlebars tighter as my ride sped up to catch up with Senje. I finally looked down and it was not scary, just the wheels rolling over the road and legs pedaling up and down and up and down. We stopped.

I could have walked if I had known that our destination was so close. My legs were unsteady on the ground. Senje paid for the bodabodas and then we started to walk again.

I saw my father's other sister Senje Rose and my grandmother Koko. They were waiting for us.

“How are you doing?” Senje Rose asked me.

“Very well thank you.”

“Look at you! Wasn't it just the other day? Your mama is taking good care of you eh?” She pinches my arm as she said this. It was no use protesting.

“Let me carry it for you?” Somebody grabbed my bag.

“Uwii! Uwii!” The Senje who I travelled with was now holding my hand and wailing. It was like somebody has turned on a tap and now the tears were flowing. All around they were crying. All those happy greetings turned into tears and I did not

understand how they changed so fast.

“Uwii Uwii!” The screaming and shouting was so loud I wanted to block my ears. My hand was trapped inside Senje Helen’s and so I am moving with them. We got into the compound, closer to the red brick house, past the gate, past the blue plastic chairs and the big green tent, closer to the small tent and then next to the brown coffin on top of a wooden bed under the small white tent. We had reached our destination.

We are standing next to a coffin. It is on top of a bed. Somebody starts singing a hymn and they all join in. All of them, but not me. Then they say long long prayers. I keep my eyes shut until it is unbearable and I open them to see people just outside our tent are going on walking and talking and sitting completely uninvolved with our prayers. We start the Lord’s Prayer and for that I close my eyes mumbling the little Luhya that I know.

“Amina!” At last it is over.

I open my eyes and immediately look away from the big picture on a tiny stool beside the bed and notice the mud and wet grass under my feet and other people’s muddied feet passing. Around me people are shaking hands with each other and with me again. Women with firewood on their heads pass us and then somebody brings us a kerosene lantern. The prayers took away what was left of daylight. I will not look at the coffin. I look at the picture again. Senje reaches a hand inside her bra and brings out an old handkerchief that wraps around a small purse. She puts warm coins in my hands and points to the bowl on the same stool as the photograph.

“There.” she says. I drop my coins into the bowl that is almost overflowing with

envelopes and crumpled notes. We walk away from the tent to the red brick house moving very slowly because people keep stopping us to shake hands.

“Pole.” They say sorry.

“Pole,” I reply.

As we get closer to the house there are less faces saying sorry and more faces smiling big white teeth. Strangers and even my Senjes and Koko are smiling as if they are not the ones who were wailing and screaming back there.

“Oh we thank God...this is Selina kabisa!” Somebody remarks while shaking my hand, touching my cheeks. I am the person who looks like Selina.

“Senje, who is Selina?”

“Your mother.” She answers.

I look like my big sister Penina who looks like our father so very few people ask over my head, “Whose child is this?” the way they did when I lived with Koko. Joy is six years old. I am a member of this family. At night when Joy is asleep, Penina tells me things. She tells me that before I was born they were four in the photograph. There was Penina the girl, Mama, Tata and a boy. Paul Odanga, the boy, died. The printed cut out newspaper obituary was hidden on the back page of one of the old family albums. Odi, as they had called him, was only three years old when he died. Penina used call him “Hodi!” like “knock knock” and then she would tickle him repeating “Karibu!” come in. I was born just one year after Odi so the family still had two children but there are no photographs of that time when it was just my big sister Penina and me. I remember that Koko snores loudly. I used to sleep with her in a bed that was so I high up that I could not climb on it without help. I remember her washing me in a basin outside and oiling my

face and hair with oil. Koko and I came by bus to our home in Nyota Estate, Nairobi after our baby sister Joy was born. Koko went back home and I remained. We are all his children, so I am Mama's to take care for also. When visitors come to our door they say, "Hodi?" and we say, "Karibu!" We are not supposed to talk about Odi.

"We are not supposed to talk about this." Penina reminds me. "Go and find your own mother." She once told me when she was angry.

I told Mama and Mama made Penina stop being mean. Penina is my big sister. Penina told her best friend that I am not her real sister but she said that her best friend promised not to tell anyone.

"Senje, I want to go to the toilet." This is how we get away from slow walking, the handshaking, the sighing, saying sorry and smiling to strangers. Afterwards we eat and I am introduced and reintroduced to more people and then spend the night with Senje Helen in another house in the homestead in a small room crowded with women and children. I have been told that they are all my aunties and my cousins. Mattresses and mats cover the concrete floor but they aren't enough for all of us to use so we put our heads on the mattresses and let our hips lie on the hard mats. I am lucky to be small enough that my body up to my keens can fit on the mattress. My stomach is full of boiled maize and sweet potatoes and the tea that I had for supper. Senje Helen smells of smoke and bar soap because she went to help in the kitchen. I am woken in the middle of the night by the sound of drums and wailing outside. I fall asleep and wake up again when a woman in this room starts singing and crying and somebody gets up and leads her outside. For a moment I am freezing cold as they shift outside and continue singing and

then Senje Helen shakes my shoulder.

“Wake up. You need to go and bathe.” It is already morning.

It is while I am outside waiting for Senje to direct me that a tall woman introduces me to two children, a boy and a girl, and I hear her telling them, “This is your big sister Maureen.”

“This is your brother, Mark and your sister Millicent.” She tells me. We all shake hands. “Hello...Pole” I add quickly.

I’m going to avoid then for as long as we are in this place. All our names start with M - Maureen, Mark and Millicent. The names repeat in my head. I am in the dress that Senje Helen told me to carry. It is the dress that I wore when Penina and I were flower girls in Senje Rose’s wedding. I sit on a mat on the grass and eat my food outside the kitchen while watching people moving around doing different tasks. Some women empty jerry cans of water into big cooking pans; firewood is added to dying fires and some women sit sorting maize and beans. The seats at the big tent are organized and soon a church service starts with songs and prayers. Senje takes my hand and we relocate to the second row in the big tent.

At some point during the service I have to stand up and go in front of the congregation. Koko also at the front positions me next to Mark and Millicent and then she stands behind me protectively. Their father speaks and then Koko says something about Tata and Mama. She says they could not travel. I’ve been waiting for him; Senje Helen had said that Tata would come. There is a little murmuring when she says this. I look down. They are all staring at me. I start to cry. We go back to our seats and there I can’t stop crying. Senje has to take me away from the tent for a while as the preaching

continues. We have to return when they stand up to bury the woman and after that I have to put flowers on the grave when it is covered. I have to eat with her children, chicken and rice and soda that they made only for close family. Not the boiled maize and beans for other people. So I am close family. I am not other people.

It is hot outside, the food is hot and I am not hungry. Senje Helen says, “You must eat, it is bad if you don’t. People went to a lot of trouble to make it for you.” So I sweat and struggle with the hot food. We are there eating food in the red house, when Senje Helen tells the people with us, “We have to go, her mother and father said she must return tomorrow morning.” With this statement, Senje Helen starts to become the person I have known for most of my life. She has remembered that my Mama lives in Nairobi and that we do not belong here.

But our leaving involves another long process of saying sorry to many people and saying goodbye to many more. Before we leave they give me some of the woman’s things.

“Please, you must visit us again. Don’t be lost.” The woman’s husband and father of the two children tells me.

“Yes.” I nod my head.

They give me a photograph of her holding a baby wrapped in a leso and nestled against her right hip. I get a second photograph with Mark and Millicent in matching school uniform. They also give me a green dress that they say belonged to the woman. I don’t want it. Senje tells me she will keep all these things for me. I don’t want them. I want to tell her she can keep them forever. This time we leave in a car that takes us all the way to Kisumu where there are more buses going to Nairobi.

“When you go back home, you must be very good to your Mama. She is a good mother.” Senje tells me on the bus.

“Yes, she is.” I agree.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“But Senje, why do I have two mothers?” I ask.

“These things will be clearer to you later. For now your Mama in Nairobi is looking after you. Does she mistreat you?”

“No.” I reply. She gives me a melted chocolate bar that she has just taken out of her purse. “Then you will be fine.”

I put my forehead on the window and watch as Kakamega moves further and further away from us. I keep my head pressed to the window until it is too dark to see anything but scattered lights and electricity poles. Light from the bus illuminates trees outside. When I wake up we are in Nairobi and Tata is outside the bus waiting for us.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I ask Senje Helen.

“Oh no, I have to go to work tomorrow.” I’m happy she’s not coming.

Tata carries my bag. His car is parked a short distance away. We stop at the supermarket, get milk and bread and then continue home. I get out of the car and see Mama’s serious face turn into a smile. She rubs my back but does not ask about the trip. So I don’t tell her anything but stand there being babied like Joy.

“Here sit down. Breakfast then you can go to sleep. Are you tired? You must be very tired.” She does not wait for my answer. She sends Joy and Penina to bring me cereal and milk and stands around me without saying anything to me directly. Nobody

asks me about my journey, Penina whispers the word sorry when the two of us are left at the table for a second. I am home.

Later in the bedroom when Joy and Penina ask me about the trip, I tell them that we went to visit Koko. I tell them about my first and very interesting boda boda ride. “Ah the cyclist was in color clashing clothes... his radio was sooo loud. I nearly fell off the bicycle.” They laugh.

“Senje Helen, she was wearing boys socks!” I pause, they laugh.

“She had ngoma shoes. Her bag was on her head”

“No!” They laugh some more. Penina rushes to shut the door.

“It’s been so quiet since you travelled and yesterday Mama spent the night at Aunty Susan’s place. She just came back before you.” Penina says.

The door opens before Penina can continue and Mama comes in telling Joy and Penina that they should give me time to rest. She holds the bedroom door open leaving space between her and the door so that they can pass. She tells me to lie on my bed and sleep for a few hours.

“We will wake you up at lunch time.” I don’t want to be left alone inside this room. She shuts the door behind her, and I start to worry about they are saying while I am alone in this room. Maureen, Mark and Millicent, I wonder if I should tell Penina about them. Sleep finds me quickly.

It is Monday and I am back in school and I do not need to explain my absence because Mama already talked to them. I am supposed to say that I was unwell if anybody asks. I try not to think about the woman whose face was in the picture. Today I saw her

in the mirror and I saw less of me in Penina, less of me in Joy and even less of Tata. I am good, just as Senje Helen told me to be. I am going to be good and obedient and mama will be proud of me. I do not want to think about Kakamega but it is hard to forget it all. When Senje Helen comes to visit I will ask her for the things that they gave me in Kakamega. They are mine.

OUR EXAMPLE

The houses were identical. Each house had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a sitting room and a dining room. The people who built these houses had put single unit servants' quarters behind each of the houses and beside their gates they had rectangular units that were the size of upright coffins – shelters for the night watchmen. Every evening our night watchmen came to work with clubs, bows and arrows to protect our families inside these burglar proofed houses. Every family had a watchman. The landscaping people hand planted fruit trees; pawpaw trees, mango trees, loquat trees and guava trees in each compound along the kei apple hedges and bamboo fences that separated two houses so that every household could get two varieties of fruit.

We all had potted money plants that grew along the inside walls in our sitting rooms. We believed that our financial statuses could be measured by these plants' steady growth as the vines crept along our walls, wrapping themselves around our framed graduation photographs, our wedding photographs, our dead relatives' photographs, our calendars, our framed certificates, our plaques with inspirational messages and everything else we nailed to our walls.

Our children who were old enough to go to school bathed at around 4pm on weekdays. They sipped their porridge or drank their tea as they watched our flag fly inside the television as the National Anthem played in the background. They watched Kipindi cha watoto and other children's programming on the television before we got home from our jobs just in time to catch the Mambo Leo television show followed by Habari, the news at 7pm. We switched off our televisions at midnight after listening to

The Epilogue and the National Anthem that marked the end of the day.

Except for the Litunda family at the corner of the street, we who lived in these houses had not yet become the people that the planners had in mind. We preferred to have kales, cowpeas, beans or maize sprouting in the places that had been designated for flowers. Some of us bought dog kennels and put the *Mbwa Kali* ferocious dog signs on our gates and then converted the kennels into chicken houses. We let our chickens roam anywhere but into the Litunda compound. Mr. Litunda had no problem with going to the local chief to report this kind of trespassing.

The Litunda household had Mrs. Rael, Mr. Joseph Litunda, a daughter Berita, Gertrude the maid and Obed the gardener. Their green gate had the Mbwa Kali sign even though there was no dog. Mr. Litunda had plans to acquire a police trained dog. He wanted to replace the watchman with the dog. He also planned to install the first electric fence in Nyota Court. The Litunda home was so different from our houses that Obed told his upcountry family that he worked as a caretaker in a big hotel. The Litundas' watchman arrived every evening at 6pm and got a plate full of food and a thermos flask full of tea and then in the morning he left promptly at 6 am. Sometimes he stayed behind to help Obed clean Mr. Litunda's car so that he could ask Mr. Litunda for a salary advance. Mr. Litunda with his black briefcase and polished shoes always said no.

I found Nyota Court when it was bricks and cement becoming houses. I set up my own kiosk close to what would become the main entrance facing the main road. I became the man who found them their maids, supplied them with their first money plants and shared with them the news that they would never hear in their radios or read in my newspapers. Some of them became my customers who only bought the Sunday Nation

when they stopped to ask me why I did not go to church with them. Mr. Litunda was my only customer who always bought all three newspapers, The Daily Nation, The Standard and The Kenya Times every day.

Mr. Litunda rolled down his car window and greeted me with Mrs. Rael next to him and Berita at the back. She sat like a real boss's daughter – back left. I had sweets for Berita. I sold him flowers for Mrs. Rael, “Mkubwa, support my business, if you buy, others will follow.” He liked that I called him Mkubwa, the big man.

“Rono you want to finish my money eh!” He protested but paid anyway. Then I went and told his neighbors that I had sold him fancy gardening shears.

“How much did you charge him?”

“500 shillings.” I said.

“That man doesn't know what to do with his money!” They sneered. I gave them time to think about it, time for them to see Obed the gardener trimming the fence with his new tool and then I pounced on each one of them separately.

“Can you believe my luck? I got new shears; just like the ones I sold Mr. Litunda. For you my friend, a special price...” Business was good. I could see my kiosk becoming a supermarket and me already living inside Nyota Court.

The Litundas were the only people who had real parties in which everybody, including the workers, was welcome and everybody got soda. More importantly there were always plenty of strong drinks, Tusker and White Cup beers and Cinzano Bianco. The children were kept busy outside. The Ng'ethes and the Pundos also had gatherings in their house that they wanted us to believe were also parties but these were not real parties. These get together events always turned into lengthy prayer meetings, impromptu

fundraisers and displays of new acquisitions to show us that they were just as well off as the Litunda family.

We were at Berita's ninth birthday party when Mrs. Rael announced that she was going to work abroad. Berita would go with her and then Mr. Litunda would visit them and maybe even join them permanently. We all agreed that a man with his professional experience would surely do even better in London. We pretended to be happy for them but we were mostly jealous. We had just arrived at that place where the Litunda's were no longer the only people in Nyota Court with a car, and they were once again making themselves different from us.

"Rono will you keep an eye on Mkubwa for me?" Mrs. Rael asked me.

"Of course Madam. But we must do some import- export business, yes?"

"Ah Rono, you pretend with your newspapers and yet you have a mansion in Lavington." She teased.

I laughed though I could see that many of my business opportunities were flying away with Mrs. Rael. In the afternoons and weekends when I was not selling newspapers I would be at Nyota exchanging and selling plastic buckets, dresses, old irons, shoes and mirrors. Mrs. Rael often supplied me with some of these items that I could go and sell elsewhere.

Gertrude the maid went to work for a Litunda relative on the same day that Mrs. Rael and Berita left. She returned and pleaded with Mr. Litunda to give her back her old job.

"*Tafadhali*, Mr. Litunda, I'll take less money," She pleaded.

"No." He replied. Mr. Litunda without his wife and his daughter had no need for

a maid now that Obed was both the gardener and the cook earning the same salary.

Already Mr. Litunda was in the habit of driving off without stopping at the roadside to buy my newspapers or anything else I had to sell.

“How are the travel plans Mkubwa?” I stopped his car.

“Soon, very soon, Rono. Madam sends special greetings for you.” He replied.

Sometimes Mr. Litunda waved at the neighbors at the bus stop but most of the time he did not acknowledge them at all. He had never been the type of person to stop and offer a lift; even on rainy days so the only thing that bothered me was that he no longer took my newspapers. He also did not give me a chance to sell him my new gadgets – the penknife that I thought he would like, the special booster television aerial and rabbits I had found that might have interested Berita even if she was abroad. I tried to be content with my one or two newspapers per day customers. I knew that I would find his replacement eventually. Ah, but this was a big setback.

Mr. Litunda’s “soon” came and left Christmas, Easter, Labor Day and Madaraka Day holidays behind but Mr. Litunda was still making plans to go. Obed had stopped working for Mr. Litunda after Christmas. When I eventually caught up with him in town “Eish!” was all he could say to explain what had happened. I could imagine him telling his upcountry family that hotel Litunda had shut down. I did not want to press him to share his money problems. I had my own.

Mr. Litunda now received all his calls from the Ng’ethes home because he was waiting for the Kenya Posts and Telecoms people to fix his phone. When on the phone, he stood next to the closet by the door talking to his wife. Sometimes he put his head in the closet when there was something he did not want the Ng’ethes to hear. They heard

everything anyway. Risper Ng'ethe stopped offering him a chair to discourage him from talking for too long. They let him stand so that he would at least try to hurry up. Sometimes they lied that they were also expecting an important phone call so that he would cut short his shouting. Risper told everyone about this but we all acted as if we did not know anything. Mr. Litunda still left every morning driving his car, always in a hurry, but we knew that he no longer had an office to go to.

Risper Ng'ethe is the one who started the rumor about Mr. Litunda being denied his visa. We heard that London only had a shortage of nurses. They had everything else. Mr. Litunda was not the only stranded one. We heard in Nairobi many husbands, whose wives were also nurses, had also waved at aeroplanes rising out of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and remained behind with promises that could never be fulfilled. Instead they were leaving Nairobi for upcountry villages to die or start afresh. Mrs. Rael had been the only nurse among us and so we were not worried for ourselves.

We let Mr. Litunda convince us to pay him to drive our children to school instead of using the school bus. We couldn't argue with the fact that the school bus broke down too often, was overcrowded and always late. The school term was not yet even halfway and our children complained everyday.

“He makes us cover the floor mats and fresh newspapers every Monday”

“We have to cover the seats with khangas to keep them clean”

“No talking in the car!”

“He plays that Franco song every single day!”

It was not yet August; not yet a year after Mrs. Rael had travelled when Mr. Litunda slowed down his car beside my stand. The same car Obed used to clean every

morning now old and dusty like a farm vehicle. Mr. Litunda popped out his head and smiled like a politician, “Brother, how is business?”

“I can’t complain.” I told him.

“I have a business idea, we need to meet and talk seriously.” He said.

“Mkubwa, you know I am always open to extra money, when shall we meet?”

“Today evening, meet me at the shopping center, Manda Bar.”

That evening, he waited until my bottle was half empty before he started to explain things.

“I will be frank with you, things have not been going very well for me.”

“Oh!” I said. He presented his plan and I listened as he put a fresh coat of paint on his walls, filled his sitting room with a new sofa set, bought a new car for Mrs. Rael and for Berita to come back and sit in the back seat. “First” he leaned forward, before continuing to explain why I mattered, he needed to get rid of the old things. These things did not fit in his big plans.

I met him at his house to collect the first item. The house, though fully furnished, was very far from what he said he wanted it to be. The sofas were still there just missing the finely embroidered seat covers. Who would have washed them anyway? The photographs on the wall were still there and even a more recent one of Mrs. Rael in her nurse’s uniform and Berita in a class photograph. The money plant was dying, its brown leaves drooped over the curtain boxes. When he disappeared into his bedroom for the thing he was going to give me, I went into his kitchen filled a cup with water and fed it to the plant. He returned from his bedroom with a box containing the big radio that I had always admired at their parties. We put it on my bicycle, fastened it with sisal ropes and

then he pointed me towards the back gate instead of the front one I had come through.

Mkubwa was excited about the money I gave him for the sound system a few days later. He grabbed my hand and left a note on my palm. “Very good, very good brother!” I stopped calling him Mkubwa after that, he was just Joseph. No longer a boss. He was not so happy with the returns on the sofas and the suits and after that he had nothing big to sell and nothing big to tell me.

We heard from Mr. Pendo who worked at the bank where Mr. Litunda kept his money that nothing had come from London. Somebody told us that Mr. Litunda had recently caused a scene at the Post Bank insisting that his name was on the Western Union money transfer list. The teller at the Post Bank branch on Banda Street did not like to deal with him, that man with a brown suit. Schools had closed and so now he could not even rely on the money that he received for taking the children to school. The car did not move from his compound.

We agreed to attend Risper Ngethe’s special prayer meeting for the Litunda family. It was really a chance for all of us to meet and connect all our stories about his situation. On the day of the prayer meeting we were surprised that Mr. Litunda turned up in his brown suit calling everyone brother. Even though Risper had invited him we all knew that they had had a disagreement ever since they discovered that he was calling long distance on their phone without their permission. This Mr. Litunda whose humility that denied us the pleasure of sneering at him embarrassed us all. We were there to pray for the return of a neighbor who planted flowers, and never ever cooked with charcoal

and kerosene. The Ng'ethes and the Pendo's had certainly failed to come close and we knew that without this then our vision of ourselves as residents of Nyota Court would be lost forever. We ate together and prayed.

When the auctioneers came to evict Mr. Litunda they found that there was nothing that was left that did not belong in a dustbin. We raised enough money to put him in a bus with the possessions that he thought were worth carrying. We hoped that he would go like other husbands and start a new life, get a wife, have children and find ways to be important in the village. Though we encouraged him to call us and tell us how he was settling, we were happy with his silence. We would not have known what to tell him if he asked about our lives. We were confident that with his skills he would find something to do. He was a trained professional after all.

A new family moved into the Litunda house. The family did not care for dogs, flowers, beans or chickens. They did not want a watchman. The first thing they did was to find a tenant for their servants' quarter. They added an extension to the servants' quarters so that they could have two rooms to rent out. We hoped that they would have parties and invite everyone. Mrs. Risper Ng'ethe had banned alcohol at her house and the Pendos were fading away just like the Litundas. We were back to the times when nobody had a car except the new neighbor.

Mr. Litunda found his way back to Nairobi. He stood near the Outer Ring road junction near the same bus stop where he had often ignored us his neighbors. He had replaced his brown suit with a green trouser and a red shirt just like the colors of our flag. He would be heard shouting, "Attention! Jogoo! Attention! *Fuata Nyayo!*" *The Cock* and *follow the footprints* were slogans that we heard every day from our radios and our

televisions but we were not preoccupied by them. Mr. Litunda had never seemed bothered with politics so this turn of events took those of us who knew him by surprise. He stood there and directed traffic like a traffic policeman but drivers learnt to ignore him because his hand signals did not make any sense.

“Joseph? Is that you? When did you come back?” I asked him on the first day that I saw him.

“Rono, Nairobi is in my blood.” He saluted and then continued to chant his slogans. His answer did not satisfy me but I saw that asking him to explain himself would probably not give me the response that I wanted to hear. I had newspapers to sell and could see my customer’s car around the corner. I waved to my customer and asked, “Mkubwa, how are you doing?”

“Same as always Rono, give me Nation and Standard please.” He replied while staring at Joseph Litunda who returned to his self appointed task of directing the traffic. He looked at me and I nodded. He did not need to ask me the question. We exchanged the money and the newspapers; he rolled up his window and drove away.

SIRENS

Moses is no longer interested in running around with his old car tire all alone, kicking his ball against the wall, playing imaginary Safari Rally with his toy cars picking up sticks and stones and throwing them. When he looks at the tarmac road outside the gate everything appears blurry. He is waiting for Doris the maid to leave. He sits on the floor in the sitting room jotting down names from the telephone directory. He copies the names that sound funny to him meticulously spelling them out as he writes them down K-I-N-Y-A-S-A Kinyasa like trouser, M-O-T-O-K-A -A Motokaa for motor vehicle. He hears Doris shut the door, listens to her footsteps as she walks to the gate and then peeps through the open window just in time to see her open and shut the gate. At last, she is gone.

He returns to the telephone, clears his throat, picks up the receiver and he dials. He fakes his grown up voice, "Hallo." He says.

"Hallo."

"Is that Mr. Kinyasa?"

"Who is speaking? "

"I am looking for my trouser Mr. Kinyasa!" He frowns.

"Who is this?"

"Heh Heh ha ha!" Moses laughs, imagining that he sounds like Gargamel on another evil mission to trap the blue Smurfs. He puts down the phone receiver and dials the next number and the next asking silly questions and laughing his evil laugh. It seems like he is on the phone all afternoon. He never gets to talk to any of the names on his list, instead he talks to their maids, their gardeners or relatives who stay at home while the

owners of the telephone numbers are at work.

To make things a little more interesting, he practices his serious grown up voice and then he calls 999. “Hello police. Help! There are thugs at my door!”

“Kijana! We can see you!” The policeman knows it’s a boy. “We are coming to arrest you, put down the phone immediately. You better not try to escape!” Moses puts down the phone. He does not need to pretend anymore. He is seriously panicked believing that the walls in this house might have hidden video cameras or maybe the phone receiver has a camera inside it. He picks up the phone turns it around to see where the camera could be. He can’t find it. He walks around the sitting room wondering how he is going to escape. He listens for the police sirens.

He goes to his bedroom, thinking that maybe the cameras are only in the sitting room. He does not shut his door. He waits to hear the sirens that will precede the bell ringing at the gate. He can already see himself in a children’s prison somewhere in Kabete eating rotten food and turning into a street child, a chokoraa. He waits. Doris returns, he hears her open the gate, walk to the door, unlock it. She noisily unloads the plastic bag that carries the usual milk, bread and fresh sukuma - wiki. He hears her open the fridge and store the milk and bread. She leaves the kitchen, inspects the sitting room to see what has been destroyed while she was away. Satisfied she goes back to the kitchen and continues her work. She slices the sukuma- wiki. Every time the knife touches the chopping board he hears it. It makes a kind of rhythm that matches his heartbeat. She calls him to go and bath and then to come for tea. Joseph his big brother returns home from his evening classes. He is in upper primary getting ready to do his final exam. It is night and his parents return home but the expected sirens are never heard.

Moses is very quiet at the table and his mother noticing his silence makes a mental note to inspect the boys' bedroom for stray wires and cables, to inspect the clock, the radio cassette player and the television. She has already been through this with the older one. When Joseph was Moses' age she was constantly apologizing to relatives and friends and replacing damaged watches, toys and even once she had to save money to replace a VCR.

There's a spike in the phone bill. Moses' mother sees this as a sign for what might happen if Doris continues to work for them. She complains that Doris eats too much of their food, so Doris has to go. Moses says goodbye and then for a few days he is the one who gets sent to the shops for milk, bread, tomatoes and charcoal. He gets to keep the change until Frida, the new maid, arrives. Whenever the telephone screeches kring kring kring! Moses gets uncomfortable. He doesn't rush to pick it like he used to. Moses avoids the telephone and finds things to do outside in places where he feels hidden away from the road and cars. He starts to forget about the about the policeman's threat. When his mother beats him for deliberately puncturing his one tire on his new bicycle, because he wanted to see how sharp that thorn was, he decides that he should fear his mother more than the police and that Frida is a bigger threat to his freedom than hidden cameras that he cannot find anyway. Still, Moses learns to differentiate between police sirens that go wee u wee u wee, ambulance sirens that are more like nino nino nino, and the sirens used by hearses that wail uwii uwii uwii transporting bodies for upcountry burials. The police never come for but in his mind he has rehearsed what will happen so many times that it is as if he has been arrested, sentenced and locked away already, everything else is just dreaming.

The thing that sticks with Moses during the weeklong First Year orientation activities at the University of Nairobi is the way freshers are constantly reminded that this University is the best University in Africa, south of the Sahara and north of the Limpopo. This phrase is used to confirm the importance every physical structure and everything else that represents the best of the university. It is uttered so many times that it becomes the running joke among his new comrades. During these first weeks, whether he's at the CCU Cafeteria or at Kitchen One getting lunch or supper he hears the phrase.

“This is the best veg curry, south of the Sahara and North of the Limpopo!”

“But Comrade, have you tried the ugali and sukuma – wiki?”

“Yes Comrade, the best ugali and sukuma, South of the Sahara and North of the Limpopo. Only ten shillings!”

It is the best conversation starter since everyone is still a stranger. That is everyone except a few familiar faces from his high school years.

The word comrade makes him uneasy but also gives him the sense that he is finally an insider. His new roommate Mato sometimes calls him Comrade Moses. Mato treats the term comrade with a strange seriousness, as if he would be offended if a non-Campusarian, as they like to refer to outsiders, was also called a comrade. When Mato says comrade, Moses feels like he should stand at attention or start jogging on the spot or say something like “Revolution!” to match his tone.

After receiving his acceptance letter months earlier, Moses has endured dead B.A jokes like, “You mean Being Around?” and “so you are going to get your degree in Being Available?” He laughs very hard having discovered that defending himself only makes things more uncomfortable. When he skips the details and says that he is an Economics

student, heads nod and then blurt out generic statements like, “Oh you are so clever. Now you just need to do a marketable course like accounting class to strengthen your degree preferably at Strathmore College or KCA.” This well-meaning advice got him registered for accounting classes and now he is scheduled to repeat the two units that he failed three months ago.

In Hall Four, where he lives, there are always clothes hanging out of every window. Four floors of dripping wet or dry clothes suspended on makeshift clotheslines that are fastened between two open windows. Even when there is no water, there is always someone bent over a bucket outside washing clothes. It is a men’s hostel but there are very many women here – in the bathrooms, in the kitchenettes along the corridors, fetching water and hanging laundry outside on the designated laundry lines. That big “Say No to Cohabiting” poster at the hostel entrance has had the opposite effect. He has spotted somebody dressed in the green cleaners’ uniform who occasionally walks along his corridor with what he assumes is cleaning equipment but there isn’t any evidence that the hostel is ever cleaned. Hall Four may be crowded and dirty but Moses does not mind the being away from home. It’s been one year of waiting to start this new chapter in his life. The fact that he can walk into town at anytime without the bus fare constraint is enough incentive to stay here even on weekends when he could easily go home.

He was assigned a square room on the second floor. The grey door has a handle that bears knocks and bruises of too frequent lock replacements. He is always careful not to pull the handle too hard because it looks like it is about to fall off. Inside the room there are two narrow rectangle beds and not enough space between the beds for a person to get out of bed yawn and stretch properly. There are cockroaches that roam freely in

and out from underneath two layers of cheap tearing-apart wallpaper that is actually gift-wrap paper. Having only Mato as roommate is a definite upgrade from his high school dormitory with sixteen double decker beds. The square marks on the floor indicate that the room used to have standard square PVC floor tiles. Now it's just bare concrete that Mato litters with his sports shoes and socks and sweaty sports gear.

Mato is tall, he keeps his head bald and this has a funny contrast with his bushy eyebrows. They are hard to ignore when he talks. Loose fitting tracksuits are his daily campus wear. Mato has a way of making everything seem bigger than it really is.

“I play handball?” He tells him soon during their first encounter.

“What's that?”

“You've never heard of handball? Come for our next practice session tomorrow”

“No, I know what handball is, but I thought it was only for P.E.”

“You should be very proud Comrade Moses, do you know you are sharing a room with a member of the Kenya National team?”

“*Kuwa* serious! Will you give me an autograph?” Moses waves a piece of paper in his face.

“You can talk *matope* now, but you will be boasting that you used to live with me in this *karoom!*”

“Even if you paid for full DSTV subscription there's no dedicated TV channel! So do you get updates on short wave radio?” Mato ignores his comment and goes on talking about travelling for international tournaments that get hosted in places that Moses do not sound international enough. He boasts about long bus rides to Mwanza, Kigali and Soroti. For Moses, when he thinks about going abroad, it's places in other

continents or at least as far away as Egypt and South Africa. All these places that Mato boasts about are in the same timezone as Nairobi.

“It’s not really abroad if you can go without a passport. All you need is a travel document – letterhead, rubber stamp and signature on a plain white piece of paper.”

Moses cuts him off.

“Which countries have you been to?” Mato asks.

Moses falls silent, ashamed to admit that he’s only ever been to Namanga, the Kenya – Tanzania border, so close to Nairobi.

Another Thursday morning, two weeks after orientation Moses walks out of class. The lecturer has just walked in. Moses can’t find a seat in the large lecture hall and is unwilling to sit on the stairs again. He stuffs his books back into his backpack and then rolls up his shirt sleeves as he walks to the library with Mato just to pass time, shelter from the sun outside instead of making the long trek uphill to their shared room in Hall Four and then having to make the return trip for the next class in just two hours.

Outside the library there are students chanting, “Comrade power! Comrade power!” This is the students’ organization, SONU’s way of calling student for a meeting. On previous days the gathering has been subdued but this time the gathering is more organized and is drawing a larger than usual audience. Moses wants to ignore them but Mato having heard the word comrade is already walking to join the crowd so Moses just follows. The leader Dagi shouts, “Comrade Power!”

“Power!” The growing crowd echoes. Moses sees familiar faces from Hall Four

and the CCU Cafeteria and the orientation the week. The SONU leaders step up onto the stone benches outside the library so that more people can see them. Dagi the SONU chairman and six other leaders stand out in their very formal office attire surrounded by students in casual attire. They distribute printed and hand written posters while Dagi speaks to the crowd. “We are going to show them that we are not hooligans. We are just asking them to be fair. Comrade Power!”

“Power!” Everybody including Moses shouts back.

For this week, everything that is wrong with the University is being blamed on the new Parallel degree program. Moses and Mato are regular students admitted into university through the Joint Admission Board and paying subsidized fees and going to class in overcrowded lecture halls. Parallel students are the privately sponsored students who get admitted directly into the university and pay higher market rates to attend smaller evening or part time classes. Dagi does not need to say much to draw the collective rage of the regular students in his audience.

Dagi emphasizes that he wants students to march peacefully to the Ministry of Education to deliver a formal complaint to the Minister of Education. This is the plan. The crowd grows to the point where there could be five hundred or more students. A call out reveals that all other University of Nairobi Campuses; Upper Kabete, Kikuyu, Lower Kabete, Parklands and Chiromo are present but as expected, the majority are the B.A crowd from Main Campus.

Mato and Moses are part of this crowd that walks to the closest gate out of the campus and spreads out on the wide road with placards written, PARALLELS NOT AT PAR and DILUTE DEGREES shouting “Comrade power!” Moses moves to the front of

the crowd where he can see Dagi turn to conduct this group as it turns and makes the ten-minute walk along the main road pausing briefly at the roundabout. Now they shout repeatedly. “Hatuta piga kelele - We won’t make noise!”

Pedestrians hurry away, changing their walking routes and determining which roads to avoid and which meetings to skip. Women clutch their handbags tighter. Vendors, shopkeepers and restaurant managers within hearing distance of University Way and Uhuru Highway are rushing customers out and locking others in. Security guards are jumping into action pretending that their helmets, batons and hardcover registration books and visitor tags will protect the buildings from rioting students. Shop front security shutters close as the students’ voices rise above the sound of hooting cars. The traffic lights closes to the Main Campus do not need to be secured; they are still guarded by metallic shields that were welded onto them to protect them from flying objects after the last riot.

Moses sees students he has seen around campus and takes this opportunity – student solidarity and all – to talk to them.

“Is this your first time on the streets?”

“No, but the last time I was in a riot, I was one of those people running away,” She points at the pedestrians and then continues, “this time I am one of the comrades.”

“But I don’t think this one will be bad.” Moses says.

“*Kwani*, how naïve are you? She takes of her sweater and ties it around her waist. Then she adjusts the black and white bandana that covers her hair.

“It will be the most peaceful demonstration, South of the Sahara, North of the Limpopo!” They both shake their heads and sigh.

“It’s like Safaricom, the better option.” He makes a lame reference to a cell phone advert.

“The answer is yes!” She replies with a tag from the rival company.

“You chose the wrong day to wear those shoes?” She points at his shoes.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Pamela, and yours?”

“Moses. Are we in the same econ class?”

“No, socio, I didn’t take econ.”

“This is Mato, my roommate. He plays handball.” He taps Mato who is talking to another student. Mato smiles at Pamela and reaches to greet her. She waves her “Hi!” instead of shaking his outstretched hand. There will be running, Moses is sure of that even though Dagi has said that this is going to be a non-violent protest. The students fill Uhuru Highway with their laughter and cheering as radios everywhere alert drivers to stay away from the area and get out of town because the students have taken to the streets again.

Glass shards fall to the ground somewhere behind the crowd but it does not distract many who are singing jubilant rugby and football cheer song. Moses is among those who turns back to get a closer look. More stones strike a second floor window and this time more students notice it. Some of them shout “Peace!” Hoping that this will stop the stone throwers. Moses considers leaving the crowd, just a quick walk to the St. Paul’s Chapel compound a few meters away and then making his way back to the library where he can get a good view of the action from the third floor. Some people act on this impulse but he stays convinced that it is not yet bad.

“Did you hear that the government bought riot trucks from South Africa?”

“It is true! Apparently the trucks spray a special paint that does not wash off for two days so that police can find you...”

“And knowing this, you came to the streets?”

“You have to see some things for yourself.”

“*Haki*, but you can’t put anything past Moi!”

“Shortly we are going to hear that Dagi is a government insider.”

“And we are still here.”

Dagi at the front stops the crowd and starts to talk again about peaceful protest.

“Comrades, you know that there are those who hire thugs to distract students from real issues.” Dagi adds.

“*Kweli!*” The crowd agrees.

“Those stone throwers look too old to be real university students.” Dagi is still speaking when two men, one in baggy jeans and the other one in a suit and holding a walkie talkie, pounce on him, grab both his arms and lift him off the road, gripping his belt. He twists and turns while the men lift him higher and run with him suspended in the air and shove him into the lorry that is parked further along the street. Feet scatter in different directions, some into the city center to blend in with the non – student pedestrians and idlers while others retreat to St. Paul’s chapel but Moses remains in solidarity with his comrades and continues to chant, “We wont make noise! Hatuta piga kelele! The build up of uniformed police officers in front of what remains of the crowd does not frighten him. From a loud speaker come the first orders. “Go back to campus!” This is followed by the distinct sound of police car sirens. He knows that sound very well. An assortment of cars

– Mahindras, Peugeots and Nissans all fitted with those lights and that sound. He pushes back his already rolled up sleeves, he stays.

It is already a much smaller number of students left behind with torn posters and scatters shoes that could not keep up with their fleeing owners. Behind Moses' crowd not more than ten meters away is a distinct stone-throwing group. They hurl objects and smash the abandoned roadside telephone kiosks and Charity Sweepstake stands. A tear gas canister lands next to Moses' feet. The canister is spinning and emitting grey smoke. He covers his eyes. Students push, trip and fall around him. The burning sensation in his eyes will not stop. Another tear gas canister lands. Squinting from the first one, Moses bows his head just in time to see a hand snatch it and hurl it in the direction where it came from. He has space to run, he sprints with his eyes shut. He falls over someone who is already on the ground. He stands up. All around him other students keep running. He can see a group of students that block direct view of the police he is running away from. Another teargas canister lands within his reach. He ducks and blocks his eyes anticipating more of that burning and choking. Nothing happens. He picks up the canister and throws it just as he had seen. Somebody cheers, "Well in Moses! Well in!" It is Mato's voice.

"And where did you disappear to Mato?" Moses asks.

Some students start picking up stones and breaking concrete slabs from the sidewalk so they can throw them at the police. Somebody calls out and says that the roundabout has even big boulders that they could break into stones so a few run there. Moses follows them and they claim it as a fort in readiness for the next assault. The signing has stopped but in between coughing, wheezing and panting students still shout, "Let them come... we will show them.... Comrades!"

Policemen with big shields and batons and tear gas canisters ready march towards the roundabout. At some point before joining university, Moses' uncle had cautioned him about being seen on television during a riot, "Make the most of being there, throw stones but be careful that your future employer does not see you!" He had said. The reporters are here now, with their microphones and video cameras. Moses on his hands and knees looks at his surroundings and feels a little regret. He wipes his face with his shirt. The bruises on his palms remind him that this is not the thrilling adventure that Mato had alluded to. He coughs, fills his dry mouth with spit and swallows to stop the fire in his throat. He lifts his unbuttoned shirt and covers his face with it.

The police have created a barrier to keep the students from moving in any direction except back to campus. It is now just gunshots in the air, laughter, screeching whistles and stampeding feet. There are brief intervals of calm when all around him it's just panting and coughing and then a loud bang, policemen charge forward and students run backwards, the isolated group of hooligans who started the looting are now fully in charge. Dagi is out of the picture and the remains of his suit-clad team seems to have scattered. "Mato, I think I've had enough for today. *Nimetosheka!*"

"Save me a chair in the library," Mato replies.

Moses crosses the road to St. Paul's Chapel where a large number of students is watching the events from this safe distance. Despite the panic around them, the fruit vendors at the corner continue with business offloading their stock before the end of the day. He lingers for a bit and watches the overly animated students looking clean and unscathed as they make reluctant steps towards Uhuru highway and return screaming and laughing every time they hear a gunshots. He feels foolish for not staying behind like

them to hear nostalgic second and third hand riot stories from previous eras when it was mandatory for students to get NYS paramilitary training before joining university. Their commentary reduces this event to a low budget production with an inexperienced cast.

“They only use rubber bullets these days.”

“Of course when you are hit, you wont know the difference.”

“At least you won’t die.”

“True, you die in a safe police cell instead.”

“Very safe. As safe as houses.” They laugh. He notices Pamela and stops to say hello again. “Are you going back?” he asks her.

“Maybe, I just want to see how it finishes.” She adjusts the sweater that is still fastened around her waist. Turns to another girl, holds her hand and says, “Let’s go back.” He walks away from them and returns to campus.

Outside the library he finds people talking, people smoking and Oketch the unofficial campus photographer in his khaki jacket and khaki trousers and his large bag filled with photographs and camera equipment doing what he does everyday. He gets students to pose for group photos at all the usual spots – The Fountain of Knowledge, The Great Court and outside Taifa Hall. Fellow students, some of them earlier deserters from the procession, are telling other students about what is happening outside beyond the walls that surround the campus. They sit calmly at the stone benches outside the library. Everyone can still hear the clash between students and the police but it feels distant, further than the ten-minute walk. The tap outside the library has water. Moses waits patiently as another student hurriedly fills two bottles of water and empties one on his head before refilling it again and running off, maybe to continue in the stone throwing

and tear gas exchange. Moses bends down to the knee – high tap and drinks from his palms before washing his face and dusting his trouser. He had forgotten about his bruises on his hands until now.

At the library door he meets another classmate and borrows his notes. “I’ll bring them to your room later today” he promises. Inside the library, there are people standing at the windows watching the action outside. He decides to leave the library, no longer interested in seeing things unravel outside. He decides to get something to eat, and then rest in his room. Later, in his room, he is woken up by a sudden surge of people, loud voices and footsteps, entering the hostel. His clock says that it is just a few minutes after 5pm meaning that he has been asleep for two hours. His brother Joseph had told him that sometimes riot police come all the way to the hostel, but this is rare. He gets out of bed and opens his door.

“What is going on?” he asks the first person he sees on the corridor.

“Where have you been? Campus is closing. I was in the library when the attendants came and told us to leave. We have to be out by 7pm today.

“But it’s already after 5pm!”

“There’s a fresher who had to be rushed to hospital. Maybe you know the guy. I can’t remember his name. A socio student, a tall *jamaa*...I have to go pack my bag.”

“*Sawa*, good luck!” Moses shuts his door.

Moses unpegs his shirts and trouser that he had hung to dry outside his window. He packs a bag, stuffs everything that he doesn’t want to carry home into his closet. He puts on his sneakers this time. He waits in the room. Every so often he opens the door and looks out to see if Mato is coming. The corridor gets quieter as students leave the hostel.

Finally giving in to the urgency of this situation, he scribbles a note: *Mato, I have gone home. My cell phone number is. 0722298032 Call me we meet next week. Sawa.* He folds it writes Mato's name on the top and leaves it Mato's desk. Despite his so-called status as an international sportsman, Mato cannot yet afford a cell phone. Moses straps his bag onto his back and steps out of the room, locks the door and joins other students heading to the nearest bus stop.

When he gets home his parents are relieved to see him but not particularly surprised by the strike. "At least you are not like your brother, that one used to give us headaches going on the streets." Moses nods in agreement and wonders how his father would react if he told them he was on the streets.

"*Aki* Mum, how do you know I wasn't there?"

"You! No, you are practical like your father. Not a firebrand like me."

"Now I wish I had delayed paying your hostel fees. This is why I was telling you to be a day scholar for the first semester. Now all that money, down the drain!" Moses and his mother start laughing. For years they have joked about the fact that his father's favorite opening statement is always, "I don't have any money." From childhood, Moses learnt that the only way to get anything from his father was to go through his Mother or start with an equally disarming statement like, "I have saved X amount so I just need Y amount to pay the balance." Moses father's is always impressed by any suggestion of savings.

"Don't worry Dad, at least when we reopen, you won't have to worry about fees."

Jennifer the new maid prepares supper. Apparently while he has been away

Jennifer's predecessor travelled home for a brief visit and decided not to return. Moses and his parents trade student riots stories; both his father and mother had taken part in one back in their student days.

"There was this girl, Gathoni, she was in my year," his mother starts. "She made the GSU officer believe that she had doused him with paraffin."

"But it was a bucket full of water." His father lights up when he says this.

"She stood at the door in her room with a matchstick ready to strike and said to him, '*Nitawasha!*'"

"Did she really do that?" Moses listens to the story with a little skepticism.

"No, the officer was just shocked, he just turned and walked away!"

"*Ati*, just turned away and ran? *Ati!*" Moses is not convinced.

"*Lakini* Gathoni used to make up some of those stories!" His father adds. His mother puts down her spoon. "No this one is true! Our rooms used to have wooden tiles, we came back from the long holiday and the floor was damaged."

"What happened to her after you graduated? Pass me the salt."

"I don't know, there are people I have never seen since the day we graduated."

"Your rooms used to have wooden tiles?" Moses asks.

"Those were the days! Yours is just a shell of the university we went to. A shell."

Their emotions contradict what he remembers about Joseph's brief stint in student politics. Joseph, who has since graduated and moved out of home, had briefly been involved in student government but gave in to pressure from home. Moses' parents were always quarreling and his father even threatened to have Joseph thrown in jail for a weekend, just to teach him a lesson. It's not like his mother would have agreed to it but

somehow the threat was convincing enough especially because Joseph and Moses had always heard of strict parents who did that kind of thing or took their children to approved schools. For now Moses is content to be enjoying free food and not yet concerned about the indefinite break. Later in the news broadcast, they all watch half entertained and half appalled by the story about the student riots. “Come and see! Moses’ mother calls Jennifer out of the kitchen. There is an image of an ambulance, lights flash but the sound is almost muted. The camera is too far to catch specific details. The wounded student still remains unidentified but he is more relieved that the press did not catch him or Mato on camera. He recognizes some faces that flash across the television screen. He doesn’t watch the rest of the news but sits there long after everybody had gone to bed. He falls asleep watching the late night movies.

The following morning, Moses settles in front of the television just the way he used to before he started at university. He wishes he had waited for Mato just a little longer. The house phone rings and Moses picks it up expecting Mato’s voice.

“Hello, Mato?”

“Hello, can I speak to Moses Kibara?”

“Yes this is Moses, who’s speaking?”

“My name is Wilson Obure, calling from Hall Four.” Moses recognizes the custodian’s voice.

“Yes, can I help you?”

“You need to report to the hostel, it is regarding your room. Please come quickly or we will be forced to break down the door.” Moses wants to tell him the door is already broken anyway, it is practically held together by broken nails, but the custodian doesn’t

give him time to talk. He hangs up once he is sure that Moses will be on his way. He changes into a clean shirt and leaves the house.

Moses meets his roommate's brother Kevin at the custodian's office. He stands tall very much like an older well-fed version of Mato. He has thin unkempt hair and the same bushy eyebrows. Moses feels ashamed, somehow it had not occurred to him that that Mato might be the unnamed student who had to be rushed to hospital. Kevin does not go into detail and instead insists that he needs to collect Mato's things. Moses is slightly taken aback, he thinks how strange it is that Mato is in hospital and somehow getting his property from the campus is very important. He begins to suspect that Mato is already dead, maybe they are just trying to keep delay the shock, but decides that if that were the case then Kevin wouldn't be so calm. He opens his door and immediately notices that the note he left is not on the desk is not there. He his heartbeat quickens before he spots the note the floor. He sighs, deciding it was probably the draft from opening or shutting the door that caused the piece of paper to fall down. Everything else is exactly as he had left it. "This is Mato's side." He tells Kevin. Kevin first opens Mato's closet. He stands and surveys the content. Moses asks, "Is there something you are looking for, I could help?" Kevin shakes his head, pulls the suitcase above the shelf and dumps it on the bed. He opens and then turns back to the closet and selects items to put into the suitcase. Moses watches, he folds his arms across his chest and then steps back to sit on his own bed, rests his elbows on his knees, cracks his knuckles and waits.

"Are you sure I can't help?" He asks again. He notices that Kevin shifts a little to block his view of the suitcase. "No nothing, just making sure I have everything that he needs" Kevin dismisses him.

“Can I come to the hospital?”

“No,” he responds almost before Moses finishes the question. “Not today, tomorrow maybe, they are still carrying out tests.”

“What sort of tests?”

“He hurt his head, the doctors don’t think it’s anything serious but they have to make sure.” He stops packing, shuts the suitcase and pulls it off the bed. He straightens the bed covers. “There, I think I have everything.”

“Let me help you with that.” Moses grabs the suitcase before Kevin can protest.

“Thank you.”

Moses helps Kevin carry the suitcase all the way to the bus stop before they part with promises to meet the next day. Moses spends the rest of his day roaming in town unable to calm the growing sense of trepidation and guilt. Everything in town seems to be back to normal since the previous day’s riots. On University Way there are still bits of glass, stones and leaves scattered but traffic flows slowly as usual. He gets home in time for supper. He does not tell his parents about his day or his roommate in hospital. He has a feeling that he should talk to his older brother about it instead or at least until he sees Mato in hospital. He knows his father will say “Have they said anything on the news about reopening the university?” His father asks. “I haven’t heard anything?”

“You should find a job.” His father says this in a matter of fact way. “We can’t have you around here, idling and eating all day.”

“Which reminds me Moses, I told Aunty Joyce that you can help her this weekend.” His mother says. Aunty Joyce rents out tents for wedding receptions and other events. He nods and finishes his food. His mother wonders about this son who is one day happy and

the next day sulking as if staying at home for a full day is such a punishment. She decides that working for Aunty Joyce will do him good. Moses stays up, watches television and tries not to think about Mato. At some point in the night, he decided to write Mato a note. *I might be overreacting but...* as he writes it he chides himself for concluding that there is some kind of conspiracy. He folds the note and stores it in his pocket. He turns off the television and goes to sleep in his bed.

It is easy enough to find Mato's ward in the hospital the next morning. Moses walks in with a packet of orange juice and bananas for the patient. He recognizes Kevin and then it is obvious that the person in the wheelchair with his head partially covered with bandages is Mato. Moses waves back at the bandaged hand that acknowledges his presence.

"You are lucky you just got here. We are leaving. The ambulance is waiting for us downstairs." Kevin does not hide his irritation.

"Did you bring me those socio notes?" Mato asks.

"I did better, I copied them for you." Moses replies before introducing himself to Mato's mother. "I share a room with Martin." He explains as he greets her. She's is tall just like her sons. He is surprised by how firm her handshake is. She lets Moses take charge of pushing the wheel chair. Moses is glad about this because he senses that Kevin does not want him there. While they are walking and Kevin is speaking to his mother, Moses tries to talk to Mato. "I don't understand how it happened to you Mato, you were not even in the frontline..."

"*Bahati mbaya.*" Mato calls it bad luck. Moses leans to the side and says "I did not hear what you said." while slipping note that he wrote at home into Mato's side

pocket.

“He will get specialized care at the hospital we are taking him to.” Mato’s mother appears calm even though her voice betrays her anxiety.

Moses pushes the wheelchair down the ramp that leads them to an outdoor parking. Moses looks to Kevin for direction. There’s no ambulance waiting, only parked cars. Kevin points out the cream white Peugeot 504 station wagon just a few meters away from the wheel chair. Moses pushes the wheelchair, while speaking to Mato,

“Here is my cell phone number.” This time he gives him the note he had left in the hostel. Moses and Kevin together help Mato into the back seat of the car. The wheelchair is deposited in the boot while Mato slides into the center so that he ends up seated between his mother and another male passenger. The male passenger does not introduce himself even when Moses takes the time to go round to his side of the car. His window stays shut. Kevin seats in the front seat and the car moves away. Moses returns to the pavement staring at the driver and trying to memorize the letters and number on the license plate KAA 542 J. The car backs out of the parking space and exits the hospital security barriers. There’s no reason for the watchmen at the gate to detain this car.

Moses traces his way back into the hospital and Mato’s ward hoping that in some way this will answer the question he has not yet formed in his head. It is also the only way he thinks to get out of the hospital since he came in through a different entrance. Nurses and doctors in uniform attend to patients and the reception area is crowded with patients waiting to see doctors. It smells of methylated spirit and Tropical air freshener, sickening. He doesn’t see anyone he could talk to even if he wanted to say something. From behind her desk, the receptionist calls out the next patient, “Room 104” she says.

He walks out. He walks to the bus stop and gets into the first bus he sees. He doesn't even wait to hear the conductor say its destination. After two stops he realizes that it is not going in the direction he wants to go. When the bus slows down in traffic, he rushes to the door, pays the bus conductor and jumps out. He decides to walk. It is not too hot outside today and this time he has the right type of shoes on. Cars and buses pass him as he makes his way to his destination. He doesn't hear the bicycle bell as it rings behind him. He thinks he is walking quickly but men, women and school children overtake him. He knows that it is going to take him a long time to get to the address in Hurlingham where as he expects there will be no hospital, not even a small clinic or pharmacy. He thinks that once he gets there, once he confirms that there is nothing there, he will think about what to do next. He will know what to do once he gets there.

GONE IN NOVEMBER

It started like a good year. The new Form One class joined Kawangware Girls' High School in late January and after the usual confusion of orientation – getting to know each other and understanding their new school - my outgoing Form Four class assembled outside the big school hall and sang for them our modified version of *Gone till November*. “We will be gone in November, we will be gone in November! January, February, March, April, May. We will be gone in November...” The last of the final KCSE national exam papers was already scheduled for the twenty first of November so it was true that after that my whole class would be over and done with high school forever. Of course it was Dama and Chela leading the singing while the rest of us, three classes each with over thirty students, were kicking up the red dust around us as we danced with our pullovers rolled into thick belts that we fastened just below our hips to exaggerate our movements as we gyrated sinking lower and lower to the ground until we were down to squatting and moving like it was live dancehall music booming and the drum beats were coming from something better than just our plastic upside down laundry buckets.

I was dancing next to Violet and Nduku, an interesting show of how even though we were all so different, this sense of togetherness had brought us all to the same place. A lot of my classmates, Nduku being the best example, were forever complaining about the rules and the teachers and the matrons but to be honest I didn't really mind it here. I imagined that Violet would have been a crazy type of girl if she did not go home so often and get exempted from so many things because of her condition. When everyone was suffering from homesickness, she had the opposite feeling. There was no name for it. She borrowed my exercise books to copy my notes whenever she came back from home. I

had to help her with maths, but I didn't mind. I liked the quietness and the way everything in our school was organized around us. I liked that I always knew what to expect. Even when the teachers tried to shock us with surprise tests, I never felt worried about it. I looked forward to Mass and to seeing the old Sisters always occupying the front row benches in the chapel and sending out prayers for all the things that I forgot to pray about every morning when I woke up before my roommates. There were times when even I felt stifled by all these buildings hidden behind that big black gate marked KGHS for the school's initials and the thick concrete wall that surrounded our school. We had small buildings that told the story of how KGHS had grown over the years. For every small building there was a newer bigger taller building with stairs. Just like there was a Thin Matron and a Fat Matron, there was a small hall and a big hall, a small lab and a big lab and no one had considered giving them more distinct names than these. Sitting at the stairs I got a view of everything that was happening down school. From the fourth floor stairs of the hostel I counted buildings and people and trees that made interesting geometrical patterns. During the breaks from class, I sat with Violet and together we worked on her mathematics homework. If Susan and Mary had not told me, I would never have known what exactly was wrong with her. I have never been the type to ask and Violet was really sensitive when people tried to find out anything about her.

Looking at the fresh-faced Form Ones watching and laughing at our antics it felt good to know that we had come this far. It was the year when all of a sudden all the things that I did not care for mattered and everything I did care for was not that important. So for example the people who had finally settled into being club chairladies, team captains or prefects would have to relinquish all those titles at the end of second

term and come back to being regular students for the sake of the final exam. As Form Fours we couldn't be in choir or be in anything active anymore. Mr. Gesare the discipline master explained that we had to avoid the risk of getting injured or needlessly distracted instead of focusing on the exam. Lucky me, I had never had ambitions. I had joined the mathematics club and stayed in it from Form One to Form Four. We did our homework during club meetings and did not have any members who were interested in outings. On the other hand Mrs. Kamau kept telling us about our Leaving Certificates. At assembly she would say, "Young ladies, you have to be rounded. Out there, there are many who have missed good opportunities because they were not all rounded." Being all rounded meant playing a sport, getting merits for good behavior and passing all the exams. I had worked out that chess was also a sport and after I finished high school and anyone out there asked me about it I was going to say that I played chess.

Despite the veto on too much activity, this was the year we did not have to look for outings. Outings came looking for us. Every week we got invites to academic symposiums in different high schools. The luckiest people were the ones who had chosen the less popular and smaller subject clusters like Agriculture, Commerce and Music. They ended up going for more outings than the rest of us who could only go for the symposiums dedicated to compulsory subjects like literature and geography. I had long given up on that dream of a big school bus. It's not that I really cared about going out but somehow school life felt incomplete without a proper bus and stories about the other schools out there. Now whenever I went for Mass or to the chapel on my own all I ever prayed for was for God to help me pass exams and to get a scholarship to fly out to Canada, U.S.A, Japan, South Africa or even Russia because of my good results. I was

really focused.

First term was the pre- mock exam and then second term was the mock exam. We were getting ready for the mock when the teachers went on strike. The KGHS teachers did not strike but all the teachers in the schools in the newspapers were striking. Everyday Angeline updated us on schools that had closed. “ Just imagine Mbooni Girls’, Namanga Girls’ and Kibos Boys’ have closed!” She exclaimed. Half the time she mentioned schools that we had never even heard of before but there was that straining in her voice that made us all feel personally afflicted by these closures. Her hysteria began to affect us all. Nduku, Angeline and Triza were in the camp that wanted to go home, Violet and I were probably the only ones who were quietly praying that school did not close but we acted neutral like the majority. Every morning I prayed, “God please protect our teachers, please protect our school, please help us to stay focused in the face of these trials and to do well in exams.” All our teachers, even the scary Mrs. Keya got afraid of the repercussions of going against the teachers’ union. In the newspapers there were pictures of teachers breaking into schools and threatening other teachers. Gradually they stopped actually coming to teach us. They stayed in the staffroom and called the class representatives to give us tests and endless revision exercises to discuss on our own in our classrooms. They told us to keep the curtains closed. The whole school became even more quiet than usual.

Everyone had already been told to give the Form Fours space and peace to study but we also stopped ringing the bell because the administration feared that outsiders might hear it. Instead a student was appointed to walk around telling us, “It is break time, it is lunchtime, it is end of prep time...” just incase we did not read the wall clocks in our

classrooms. Just when we thought our teachers were going to officially join the strike it was already time for the midterm break and we were all going home anyway. Like many people, I packed more of my belongings a little doubtful about the scheduled return at the end of the break. The television news clips showed angry striking teachers all over the country singing daily, “Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever and the union makes us strong!” Everyday they sang, and everyday I studied less and less. I was losing focus but then on Sunday, the last day of our midterm break some teachers went to State House and they sang a different song for Moi and promised to go back to work. I went back to school on Monday.

This part of the term went by quickly because we were counting days to the mock exam. Violet did not come back immediately. She was sick again, she was going to miss the mock exam. Her closest friends Mary and Susan came to me with a prayer request. Mary is the one who shared first, “Kish, please pray for Violet, she is really needs healing right now.” She said.

Susan agreed. “Yeah, please pray, I think it is getting worse.” My classmates used to come to me with different prayer requests about issue with their roommates and issues from home but most of the time it was exams. I used to pray about everything. They had seen me acting the part for long and I couldn’t admit to anyone that I was down to just praying about the exams. I prayed for Violet. When the mock exam started the teachers outside our school were once again threatening to go back on strike. We did ended up doing our papers dressed in home clothes to conceal that fact that school going on as usual. Except for the lab exams that got supervised by Mr. Nyamu the lab assistant, we timed ourselves and collected our own examination papers and then dropped them off

at the staffroom. This is how dedicated we all were to our exams. School closed at the end of July but for my class it would be just a week at home before we returned as day scholars for the two weeks of holiday tuition.

My cousin Esther was getting married in August. It was still those days when nobody believed that it was worthwhile to hire an outside caterer. Virtually everyone in the family had a task to do for the wedding and was still expected to turn up dressed up and with a gift on the actual wedding day. As a teenager what it meant was that I was going to spend Friday night at Aunty Joy's house and stay up all night peeling and slicing onions, sorting buckets of rice and doing other things to make sure that the food for the over five hundred expected guests would be ready the next day. "While you are in town, get something for Esther." Mum gave me some money to buy a gift for the wedding. She suggested a few shops I should go to.

I was in town when it happened. I was in a shop on Biashara Street looking at cutlery and crockery and trying to decide what mum would have liked me to buy as a wedding gift for Esther. I didn't know Esther very well. A loud bang set off the car alarms outside. The glasses on display started to shake as if it was an earth tremor and I stepped back afraid that I would be accused of breaking something. While stepping back I tripped and then realized that the whole shop and people around me were shaking too. The shaking stopped and we laughed off our embarrassment, nothing was broken as far as we could see. I come back to this moment and try to remember it in slow motion but my brain at the time wasn't thinking to remember it as a big event. Some people went outside to see what was happening while I found matching tea mugs for the couple and I paid for them, got out of the shop and walked to the bus stop and to catch a matatu to

Aunty Joy's house in Kinoo.

Walking down to the bus stop I saw a few people running away from town. This was not unusual to me. This thing happens in town where one person is running and then a mob follows shouting, "Mwizi!" but you can never tell who the real thief is. It is best to just avoid it. What could a seventeen-year-old girl have done anyway? The number of runners was increasing and more of them appeared to have dust and blood stains on their clothes and bodies. I was briefly torn between the desire to stop and find out what was happening but decided to get out of town before finding out what they were running from. At the bus stop I quickly found a matatu but it was a strange time in the day. It was going to be a long time before it filled up so that we could leave. I stood outside like a few other passengers. This is when I noticed that everyone was looking up at the sky and pointing at thick black smoke that was rising up and blackening the skyline, " Ngai, hao walimu!" Oh God, those teachers! Somebody exclaimed. I saw women with skirts lifted to keep from brushing against their bloodied legs. They walked, limped and ran with shoes in their hands. Some people ran with handbags and newspapers held over their heads. It was hard to see their face. Some of them came to our bus stop and the matatu filled up quickly. I got a seat near the door but I saw the man behind me holding his sickly looking kindergarten aged daughter whose dress was wet presumably because she had urinated on herself.

As the matatu made its way out of town he explained. "I had come to town with my daughter to see the doctor. We were walking to the clinic on Muindi Mbingu Street then we had that explosion. She just stopped and urinated. I am telling you she was screaming in a way that made me feel pain in my heart." He shook his head and then

went on to say, “You know such things traumatize children...” He lifted her onto his lap and rocked her. After that other passengers speculated about what had caused the explosion. Nobody in the matatu knew exactly what had happened. Even though it was not yet 12 p.m. the roads were suddenly full of people and cars and buses trying to get out of town. Traffic was slowing down. Somebody scolded the driver for not having a radio in the matatu. If there had been a radio we might have known that it could not possibly be the teachers who made that loud explosion. I got to Auntie Joy’s house to find a few relatives already gathered with lists of tasks in readiness for the big wedding feast. “Were you near the bomb?” Auntie Joy asked me. “No. I didn’t even know what it was until I was in the matatu.” I replied. I told her about the child. She had the TV and the radio both on full blast but it was only after I had lunch that the news started coming in on television. The words *Amateur Video* appeared in the screen alongside images of buildings, the shell of a burnt bus and people running and crying. Even then I just remember thinking how it looked like a movie. I had seen many movies with explosions in made-up real places abroad. It was disorienting to see places I knew appearing as disturbing background images as Kenyan accented voices spoke to reporters about what they had gone through. We worried because we had many relatives in town on wedding related errands. There was nothing to do but wait for them to turn up. My older cousins Cosmas and Danson showed up in the evening with a bloodied pickup. Cosmas quickly reassured us that it was just the load he was carrying, several kilos of fresh raw beef, which had made the big mess. Watching them offload the raw meat from the pickup and carrying it to the kitchen, especially the way struggled with it, reminded me of the bloody faced people running out of town. I went to hide in the bathroom for some time until I

was sure that they had finished.

The house was crowded uncles, aunties, the bridesmaids and the bride stressing about their hair, flowers, the wedding décor and other minor issues. This was further complicated by the regular phone calls that came asking about our safety and other people's safety. Nobody knew anything about what was really happening even though we kept the television on and watched the slow updates about what had happened in the city center. I helped peel onions and garlic alongside my age mates but I refused to help chopping the meat it into smaller pieces. The dishes piled up as we kept washing them. I found out that Esther rented her own small flat and was getting married just a year after graduating from university. Her parents, Dad's cousins, didn't live in Nairobi and this is why Aunty Joy was hosting them. There wasn't enough space for everyone to sleep properly but this was normal with weddings in my family. I didn't really mind.

It was a cold wedding day and I regretted not carrying my sweater because it did not match with my dress. We had gone to a sport club in Kiambu, the outskirts of Nairobi. Though there were now widespread reports about the bombing, at the wedding, everything worked out. The couple was alive. Esther and her bridesmaids looked really nice. The bridesmaids' dresses were light blue chiffon. Some invited guests did not turn up and others left abruptly but there was no big disruption. There were gate crushers too so everything balanced. We had a moment of silence for the victims of the bombing at the start of the wedding reception party. During the speeches, somebody told us that we should go and donate blood at Kenyatta Hospital but it was all blurry and in the middle of other speeches directed at the bride and the groom. Mum and Dad and sister Eunice were fine and though I had had fun spending time with my cousins, I declined Aunty Joy's

invitation to sleepover for an extra day. I wanted to be at home after the wedding.

They kept saying that there were people alive underneath the collapsed buildings. Everyday we got reports about people talking and giving the volunteer rescuers hope that there were even more survivors. And then all the unreached survivors died and it was time to go back to school for holiday classes. Everyone was late on that first day back because the bus stops in town had been rearranged to make people stay away from the bombsite. Since Triza was my neighbor we got lost in town together before finally finding our way to the Kawangware bound buses. Mrs. Oyoo came in to class and asked us to share our experiences. Angeline is the one that had the most real life experiences to share. She told us about her uncle who died near the blast, she told us about another aunt who was recuperating at Kenyatta Hospital, and she told us about her neighbor who was missing. She listed people and people until even I started to think she was making things up. When I commented to Triza about it she shrugged and said, “Kish, that is a sign of trauma. It is a coping mechanism.” Triza was accumulating all these terminologies because her mum was volunteering with counseling victims of the bombing.

In my home church, we collected sodas and carried them to the families of bombing victims who were crowding outside the mortuary near to our church. An unexpected power blackout meant that we could smell the stench of dead bodies from the gate. Our youth leader told us not to go into the mortuary compound. He told us that we would be traumatized. We left the soda bottles at the gate and waited for people to come and collect them and then return the bottles. We were scared of touching the bottles but he told us not to show it because that would add to the stress they had. We carried the empty wooden crates with empty soda bottles away.

For two weeks I had a routine, I went to school in the morning and then returned home in the afternoon unless I had youth group meeting. We studied hard and made up for all that time that had been wasted with teacher's strike. KCSE was coming and we would be ready. We had past papers and revision textbooks dissected and stamped inside our brains. Simply, it was like I had nine boyfriends named: Mathematics, English, Kiswahili, Geography, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Commerce and Christian religious education. All of them wanted me. The holiday classes ended and then I had one more week at home before the whole school reopened and I would go back this time to live as a boarder for my last time. Violet died that week.

Somewhere between the striking and the bombing when I was busy surviving, we had all missed seeing her name among the many death announcements in the newspaper. This was the news that we got when we came into the school. Mary and Susan along with Mrs. Oyoo had already travelled all the way to Kericho where Violet was going to be buried as we had our first weekend in school. Mrs. Kamau had decided that we couldn't all travel that long distance. It was only five hours away. Friday evening she came to our class and told us that after the family returned to Nairobi we could all go and visit them in their Nairobi house. I just kept thinking that Violet had never looked like she was about to die, now she had ended as the girl with "Long illness bravely born," while the rest of us continue our all rounded lives out there. Mrs. Kamau explained Violet's heart condition but my mind kept going back to that day when we had danced to welcome the Form One class. I felt ashamed for all the times I had not prayed for her to get well. The school flag flew half-mast for the people we had lost in the August 7 bombing and an extra week for Violet.

We never went to see Violet's parents. Mrs. Kamau told us that Violet's parents needed time to grieve. Mary and Susan came back with the printed funeral program from the funeral service in Kericho. We all cried that Saturday night and on Sunday during the special service in school when we prayed for her soul. We had a few weeks left to the final exams and Mrs. Kamau and all the other teachers told us that the best thing we could do for Violet was to pass our exams and make it to University. Before the exams we got a big success card from Violet's parents. Angeline stuck it on the class notice board. Mary and Susan stopped sitting on what had always been their favorite spot behind the Form Three classrooms. "It's strange when you know Violet isn't going to suddenly appear from home like she used to." I wanted to say it was also strange to have an empty desk and chair and no chance of somebody else to take her sitting position because Form Four was too late to allow a new transfer student into our school. I stopped studying at the stairs.

September ended and I did not feel ready. I prayed to God to forgive me for not praying hard enough for Violet. I asked him to bless our entire class with good exam results and I prayed for open doors in a university abroad. Out there anywhere would be good, maybe except India I prayed. At the end of October on the morning of our first exam day, Mrs. Kamau and Mrs. Keya gave us sweets to suck on to keep us calm. Mrs. Kamau told us there was glucose in her office for anyone who needed it and then we held hands to form a tight circle, prayed together and walked into the exam room that was still just as we had arranged it the previous day. Our desks were lined up in rows according to our student index numbers. There was an empty space where Student Index Number 55: Lagat, Violet Chepkurui should have been. Mrs. Oyoo had wanted us to

move the desks to close that gap but Nduku screamed, “No!” and for once we all sided with her. The rest of us, the remaining one hundred and nine of us, were all present for the first of our final exam.