

# **THE MAN IN THE ROOM**

*An Anthology of Short Stories*

By Irene Muchemi-Ndiritu (NDRIRE001)

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*When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left in me, and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'*

– **Erma Bombeck, American humorist and columnist**

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*For my parents.*

**THE WEDDING PHOTOGRAPH**

Mother arrives in a month.

She doesn't know that I've been living in my lover's apartment for the last three months. She doesn't know about my lover, a man named after a pharaoh. Akhenaten.

Mother will brush Akhenaten off quickly, like a marketplace fly perched on a cut melon. She'll clean him out of my life in the same quiet yet determined way she cleaned out our wood-and-wire chicken coop every Saturday. I was a little girl but it still stiffens my bones: the way she ground the broom on to the creaking floor, brow sweating. She'd stop only when her lungs couldn't hold the grief inside any more. In those moments, she'd lean on the broom and heave as if her chest might explode. Then she'd straighten her back, wipe her nose on the sleeve of

her weathered housecoat, and continue sweeping the green and black droppings to the door of the coop. I saw her pain. It unsettled me. I wished my father would come back, not for me, but so she wouldn't sweep in that way.

Mother doesn't know I quit my job three months ago.

I left a week after the email arrived in September, with a simple phone call. Matthew Gross bleated in my ear for an hour. He was vice president on my team at the boutique investment bank where I'd worked for four years. I was an associate, two short years away from making VP. There was the compiling of the big IPO pitch book as well as the Madison acquisition. I was on both projects with Matt as my lead.

“You can't do this, you can't leave me hanging on two huge projects. Fuck! I've had to Blackberry oversleeping analysts to get reports I needed like, yesterday, and that's not even my job – that's yours!”

I visualized Matt from where I sat in Akhenaten's unlit living room on the green felt couch that had become my home. It was designed in the shape of a leaf, with its right arm just wide and slanted enough to fit my pillow.

Matt would tear his neon-frame glasses off and toss them on his desk. He would curse the overweight intern ("No way we're hiring him – how can I possibly put a guy with man boobs in front of a client?") for getting his third order of Starbucks wrong that morning.

Even though it wouldn't be wrong. He would pop the cap off the Xanax on his desk and throw a pill in his mouth. He would cover his face with his diminutive hands and howl, "This place is going to fucking kill me."

"I want to go into photography full time," I said to Mother on the phone. "I'm not happy in banking any more. You wanted me to do it and I did, but it's not for me."

She cleared her throat as if she were on a daunting stage about to sing the national anthem.

“Soila – you can’t leave a big career like you’re leaving a job at a dairy farm. Photography is not a serious profession.”

I couldn’t tell her I’d already quit.

“I just need some time out,” I said. “I can’t go into that office every day like nothing ever happened, when my best friend is gone.”

“The grief is driving you mad,” Mother said, and told me to look to God for strength. “Kneel fourteen times, once at every station of the cross. Your pain is no worse than Jesus’ when he carried His cross along the Via Dolorosa.”

Why did I have to kneel fourteen times to remember Jesus’ suffering? Where was He when Marla was suffering?

Perhaps Jesus was an allegorical figure, a leap of imagination to help take on the sadness of our inhumanity. That's what I wanted to tell Mother. But such words would break a pious woman in half.

Instead, I stopped taking her calls and started taking photographs. I wandered around the city, a new Nikon around my neck, spending whole days walking outside, riding the subway to far-off neighbourhoods, sitting on a park bench in the middle of a Hispanic neighbourhood in Queens, eating empanadas at 10 a.m staring at nothing in particular. On the F train to Brooklyn, the conductor called Bedford–Stuyvesant. I had never been there, but I had nothing else to do.

I found Carl Jefferson, owner of the oldest barbershop in a beat down section of Bedford–Stuyvesant. *Jefferson Cuts, Since 1930.*

"I'll never leave this block," Carl said, hands trembling on an electric shaver over a little boy's head. The boy's father was listening keenly to Carl's stories, seemingly unbothered by the shaver teetering too

close to his son's ear. "It's all about gentrification now. It's whitening the place, is what it is. I've been cutting hair since Hoover was in the White House. They'll have to come over here with a digger and dig me out. Only person who'll get me off this block is Death himself; put that down next to my photo when you get it printed."

Carl said he'd met more famous people than he would have remembered had they not left autographed black-and-white photographs on the wall.

"Look at this place – losing it will mean losing all these memories." He pointed at a photograph of a light-skinned black woman with soft curls. "Lena Horne was so beautiful, I could've ate off the chair she sat on."

A few men waiting for a haircut with their newspapers folded in their arms bent over laughing.

“I would have washed her feet if she asked me to, that’s how beautiful she was.”

I shot Jefferson on a roll of black and white. He didn’t need more colour.

On a warmish day in the first week of December, the first snowflakes fell and, just as unexpectedly, I got a text from Mother.

“I’ve bought a ticket to New York. I’ll be there on 5 January.”

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Akhenaten is standing over a boiling pot of udon noodles on a red gas stove. The noodles are simmering next to a pan of beef he’s sautéing in ginger and lemongrass. I watch his bare feet move across the room to the media player.

He ups the volume and the jazzy beat drowns out the dizzying New York traffic outside and the sputtering of his stir-fry. He’s talking about his mother, who I still haven’t met.

For the past two years, he's been asking me to go with him to Louisiana to visit her. She sends me Christmas and birthday cards signed, "Love, Estelle Maude", as though her first name is worthless without her middle name. On the phone her voice has the power of a gospel vocalist in a spirited black church.

"Your schedule is wide open now that you're not working," Akhenaten says, rubbing his temples.

"I don't know how long my mother will stay." I shrug him off, feeling suffocated. "I can't make any plans right now."

"We can go after she leaves. Winter is a great time to be in New Orleans."

He's been working hard in his studio for an upcoming gallery showcase and the fatigue is drawn around his eyes like rings of smoke. I hear a few other words – Creole crispy Cajun, gumbo, mausoleums. I nod, but I'm not paying attention. Since Mother texted me with news of her visit, I've been flattened. Every conversation I have with him feels wrung out, every word dragged from me.

“You’re so worried about your mother.” He tilts his head to the side to face me and his dreadlocks slide over the muscle of his left shoulder.

“Uh-huh.” I nod, my fingernails pinched tight between my incisors.

He pulls my hand out of my mouth, puts my torn cuticles to his lips.

My neck flushes and the heat travels up to my ears.

He gets up to scoop a spoonful of sauce from the pan of stir-fry and brings it to the kitchen counter where I sit sandwiched between the toaster and the coffee machine. He tilts my chin and slips the wooden ladle of steaming sauce into my open mouth. I flinch from the burn, puff air in and out to cool my tongue. Akhenaten shushes me, traces his long thumb over the outline of my lips and kisses me from my mouth down to my nape. I start to cry.

“It’s going to be OK,” he says, wiping my tears with his thumb.

“Besides, it won’t change how I feel about you if your mother doesn’t like me.”

I nod, but I know it will change everything if Mother doesn’t like him. And she won’t.

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When I was sure I was in love with Akhenaten, I phoned my favourite aunt and told her the news. I sent her photographs. She was stunned by his tallness.

“He looks like us,” she said. “Maybe his people came from the Maasai.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Aunty,” I said. I couldn’t tell from her tone if she was serious or kidding. “You know his people came from West Africa.”

She liked best the photograph taken in Nantucket where we’re in our sunglasses, his large frame behind mine like a crucifix and the ocean behind us.

“Oh, your yeyo will die. She’s not ready for this kind of thing,” Aunt Nesian said. “This Bob Marley type. No way she’ll accept him.”

“Well, this isn’t the man I expected I’d end up with either; I didn’t plan on this. But I love him.”

“It doesn’t matter. Your yeyo has looked at the album of your life and seen the wedding photograph and this is not it. Are you going to become like your Aunt Tuli?”

Tuli was Mother's middle sister. She had the height of our Maasai ancestors with arms long enough to twirl around the branches of an acacia tree. She had studied in Scotland and brought home a flame-haired Scotsman. He was scraggly with pasty skin, a weak jaw and big ears.

“At least your foreigner is handsome,” Nesian said. “Tuli could have done better than your mzungu uncle. With his pitiful looks he failed to find a wife among his own people so he had to steal one of ours.”

“Aunty Nesian, why must you always bring up Uncle Angus being a mzungu? Aunt Tuli didn't go out searching for a white man. You sound racist.”

“Don't give me that. Don't be naïve. Race, culture and class are everything. Do you remember Tuli in her youth? She was something rare, like Lake Magadi with its unique pink hue. She could have had any Kenyan man she liked but no, no, she had to have the mzungu. The old women shook her like a farm basket and said, ‘Tuli, marriage is like a

groundnut! You have to crack it to see what's on the inside. Don't be fooled by the fantasy.' At the wedding, when the laibon spoke to Tuli and her mzungu in Maa about forgiveness and fidelity, his people looked up to the sky as if they hoped the hawks would tell them what was being said.

Out of pity, the laibon repeated his words in a sorry English and the sunburnt faces of our in-laws softened with gratitude.

When the young men slaughtered the bull, the white people's faces turned to chalk. When the elders sipped its blood from a calabash, the white people turned their heads to the side. When the young men pulled Angus into a circle to teach him the adumu, they jumped straight up like spears but he jumped from side to side, like a limp ostrich. When we adorned the white people with our beaded necklaces and wrapped them with matavuvale cloth, they curled their tight lips but didn't smile with their eyes.

“Tuli lives in a foreign land. Her children don’t know us, they don’t speak our language and her husband doesn’t even want them to visit us. He says they’ll catch typhoid. Tell me, how can they catch typhoid when we are a hundred times wealthier than the people in his small village in Scotland? Now you also want to bring us a foreigner? A Rastafarian?”

“He’s not a Rastafarian,” I said. “That’s a religion. Akhenaten is agnostic.”

“He’s a what?”

“He’s agnostic – he doesn’t have a religion. He doesn’t know for sure that God exists; he’s a doubter.”

“Will you also turn your back on God? How will it be? A believer married to a non-believer?”

“I wish my papai was still alive,” I said. “He would have loved Akhenaten, I know it.”

“This is true. Your father would have allowed you to marry a goat if it made you happy. But he’s not here. Soila, be careful when you try to kill the fly that perches on the scrotum. You must decide whether this Rastafarian’s love is worth the pain you will bring your yeyo.”

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Akhenaten speaks Japanese. He plays the sanshin and he does it without looking like a fool. When he recites the haikus of the poet Matsuo Bashō by heart, I am in awe. He plays me dusty vinyl records that belonged to his parents on an old LP player encased in wood, making quirky movements with his face and hands with the escalation of every scratchy beat. He tells me what the blues mean to him. I tell him it sounds like slave music, it’s depressing. He doesn’t give up on me. Slowly, I’m able to distinguish Muddy Waters from Count Basie, Duke Ellington from

Thelonious Monk, and I enjoy it. He tells me stories about his dead father, a black college professor in 1980s New Orleans.

“It was rare at the time for a black man in the South,” he said one evening over tom yum soup at the little Thai restaurant across the street from his apartment. My folks didn’t want to stain my world, give me bias. They said, ‘You’re as smart and talented as anyone else.’ But as I got older I saw white women hold tighter to their purses, or freeze in elevators when I hovered too close. I saw them quickly lock their car doors when I crossed the street in idling traffic.”

“I’ve got a lot of male African friends who don’t feel profiled. How much of it is in your psyche, from growing up in a racially charged society?”

Akhenaten looked at me, unfazed, but nodded as if with pity.

“This *here*,” he said, his large hand hovering over our little table like a low-flying helicopter, “is not something you would ever

understand.” He pushed his bowl of soup away. “If you didn’t grow up with racism, it could hit you in the face and you wouldn’t even know it.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far – obviously if a person uses a slur to my face I’ll get it, but my worry is that minorities in this country can’t tell a real incident of racism from the unfortunate case of perhaps not being the best candidate for a job.”

“So you’re basically saying that black Americans have a chip on the shoulder?” He was angry, and I didn’t want to finish my soup either.

“I think that, at times, you have an inferiority complex, which is strange because you embrace your blackness, and were raised in an environment that resisted that notion. And it’s not just you – it’s most black Americans I know.”

“So I’m the one with a problem?” he asked, stupefied.

“It’s got to be a burden always feeling like the world is against you. And sure, there are times I feel insulted, but I just refuse to go down that

rabbit hole. If I do I'll become bitter. You tell me not to care what people think yet you're the first to pick up that the waiter is giving us an attitude because we're black. How do you come up with that? I'm thinking the guy's just having a bad day. Even if he is racist, why do you let it bother you? That's *his* problem. Why make it yours?"

Akhenaten's blackness befuddles me. I see a defensive black man who still believes, despite his success, that he's a police target.

I see a black man who, despite feeling ostracized by white America, has to sell them his art, has to sell himself out. I know where my great-great-grandfather came from. I've been to his land.

I know what my name means and where it came from. Akhenaten doesn't know what his great-great-grandfather was named before he was given the name Johnson. I've seen the hateful stares I receive from African American women when I open my African mouth – I'm stealing one of their few men not in prison, I'm told. Yet I can't extricate myself

from this man. The Apostle Paul admonished the Corinthians to run from the sin of sex. It's what Mother told me as we sat under her lemon tree the day my body shed its first period. The smell of the red soil under my feet was intoxicating. Mother squirted my eyes with the tart juice of the lemons she peeled by hand. She opened the blistered bible in my hands and made me read then reread the words, "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you and was given to you by God. Your body does not belong to yourself."

Akhenaten snatched my temple from the Holy Spirit. He crashed inside and took ownership with merciless passion. The sex we have is not the neat, tucked-in-a-bed kind of sex. It's as messy and confusing as my love for him.

This sex has no rules – I am colouring outside the lines. Akhenaten has me in the kitchen, the shower, plastered on walls, even the balcony. My mind says we should be quiet but my body gives in to his madness.

I'm so loud; the neighbours pound their fists on the wall and tell us to

“shut the fuck up!”

God's temple is in ruins.

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I met Leticia at my college in New York City.

It was social orientation week and the kind of fall day that left bits of crisp, golden leaves trapped in my braided hair. Leticia was standing at the African American Students Association booth in denim shorts cut just underneath the panty line. She wore thick black combat boots and a red plaid shirt tied into a bow at her waist, exposing her belly button. She was twirling a lollipop in her mouth. She looked like a hussy.

“Hey! Pump the brakes,” she said, stepping right in front of me.

Her face was too close and her voice cracked like falling eggs. She poked my shoulder gently. I didn’t like it.

“What’s with the mood? Who peed in your cornflakes this morning? Where are you going?”

“I’m heading to the Black Women’s Ministry.” I felt the urge to muffle her, to stop the words spluttering out of her mouth like a wet cough.

“What’s that accent? Are you one of those blacks who went to Andover with the WASPS and learned to speak *proper*?”

“I’m African.”

“OK. So, you’re not African American – but are you black?”

Leticia said, eyes bulging out of their sockets. “Coz you look black to me.”

I nodded. “My name is Soila.”

“Very cool name. I’m Leticia, I do recruiting with Donna over there.” She pointed at an exceedingly tall woman with her lollipop. Donna had the sinewy physique of a Kenyan runner. Her hair was styled in cornrows.

She waved cordially at me, like an old friend she hadn’t seen in years, and I waved back because Leticia was standing next to me with expectant eyes, arms akimbo. She pulled me inside the tent, her lollipop jammed into one cheek so that she appeared to have the mumps. She was clenching my hand tight and her imposing demeanour made me so irate I wanted to punch her.

“Grab these – our calendar is in there – and come to our mixer tomorrow night at Donna’s apartment.” She smacked a few brochures on my open hand. “Her address is on the brochure.”

“I don’t know if I have enough time,” I said. “I’m also in the photography club.”

“So what?” Her lollipop was in my face. “It’s a social club. You’ll still have loads of time left for photography. And Jesus.”

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I graduated without much of a fuss. Mother stood next to me outside the campus gate for photographs, holding a handkerchief to her eyes. My father was on her mind. Leticia and I moved into an overpriced apartment in a three-storey brickface row house in Brooklyn. Professionally, we had arrived.

She had found a job as a writer at *Josephina*, an art magazine that featured the frou-frou art collections of the wealthiest New Yorkers and I was hired as one of ten investment bank analysts, the entry level for all college graduates.

I quickly understood the totem pole. Every tier behaved differently with the tiers above and below them. I was at the bottom, a lean workhorse plugging 100-hour weeks under the associates – working spreadsheets, redrafting copy until dawn – who all called me “the analyst”.

By Sunday I’d be so exhausted I hardly got out of bed. On the phone, when Mother asked about my church, I said I attended the 10 a.m. at the Holy Trinity. I’d never set foot in the church but I could see its steeple from the window of my apartment and it gave me an inexplicable comfort.

I was sniffing quietly in a toilet booth at work one day, suffocating from fatigue, when I heard a light knock. Under the half-door of my cubicle I saw black patent leather shoes with a block heel and the seams of well-ironed black pants. I stood up and inched the door open to make out lips the colour of pomegranate jewels.

“Might surprise you to know your job is the safest one around here – when things get tight there’s little legroom for the fat bonuses. You yield a ton of returns for them at a fraction of the cost, so chin up.”

That was how I met Marla, a vice president six years ahead of me on the hierarchy. She had tight blonde curls, lots of freckles and greyish blue eyes that reminded me weirdly of my great-grandmother’s eyes, which had grown lighter as she aged.

She eyed me appraisingly as I washed my face with cold water.

“I bet you’re good with ideas. You need a solid idea here, something that makes them see you as more than just ‘the analyst’. Do some research; you’ll find an angle. One thing about this place: it’s full of opportunity, but you’ve got to grab it with both hands. Nobody is going to do you any favours. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, feeling calm and powerful.

My success was born of the discovery of FuckedCompany.com, a website that gruesomely related the deaths of dot-coms by sharing inside secrets and revealing the identities of investors who were left with worthless stocks. I started to do the same, harvesting news of imminent collapses and buyouts.

It all went into *The Ten Things To Know This Morning*, an email newsletter in an easy-to-read format dotted with salient stats.

“Smartnose.com, transmitter of smells over the Internet – dead”

“Cyberfish.com dead; Amazon buys PayPal”

“Great job!” was the subject line of an email from Marla after a hard-nosed managing director mentioned my newsletter in a morning meeting. “Kudos girl! This totally cuts time spent reading the WSJ in half.”

When I swivelled my chair to turn to Marla's cubicle, she was grinning broadly, her eyes covered by layers of blonde curls. She pumped two thumbs up in the air.

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On a frosty Saturday night, I wrapped up eighty hours of a gruelling week and started a fast paced walk to the train station, my chin stuffed inside a thick woollen scarf and my hands clenched tightly over my chest. My bag started to vibrate and I dug inside for my phone.

“I wouldn't make you come all the way uptown if it wasn't worth it,” Leticia said. She was calling from an art show in a gallery in Soho.

“He is hot, and he is single.”

Leticia had taken it upon herself to match me up with several eligible men she met doing the rounds in her job. They bragged about

their worldliness – climbing Kilimanjaro, working for the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone to help the limbless casualties of blood diamonds, volunteering to help those *poor blind* dolphins in Japan.

““What do you say we go back to my apartment and open up a bottle of Cabernet?” I swear Leticia, all the dates end with that line, though Cabernet is sometimes espresso. Why not just come out with it and ask me for sex? Where do you find these assholes, and why do they all own espresso machines?”

“You must meet this one,” she said, her voice crackling on the phone. “Come on, just for me.”

“Just for you,” I said, resigned to my fate.

The address was a small upscale art gallery. Leticia was waiting for me eagerly – her head peeking outside the glass entrance door.

“Come, come, he just came back from Japan. He was living there for a while, had a Japanese girlfriend.” She tugged at my sleeve, pulling

me towards a table covered with white linen. There was a selection of wine bottles and slender glasses.

A thin woman dressed in a white shirt and black pants was standing behind the table. “White or red?”

“Red,” Leticia said, as if ordering for herself. She stuck the glass in my hand. “Akhenaten is really nice, and I think you two would hit it off. You being an artist as well, I mean.”

“Wait. Akhenaten? Is that his name?”

“I know, I know – it’s a tad out there,” Leticia said, still pulling my arm in the direction of the artist. “His real name is Lewis Johnson but don’t tell him I told you that.”

“Come on Tisha, I am so tired of these assholes you keep introducing me to. Besides, what do I have in common with a professional artist? What would I even say to him? I fiddle around with a camera but I know nothing about modern art.”

“Fiddle? Please – you’re so talented you could easily sell your work in this gallery,” Leticia said. “You do that a lot – undermine yourself. It’s not cool. Breathe confidence – like me. And loosen up!”

Leticia interrupted his conversation with an Asian woman who had a Cleopatra hair cut and he turned to her with charisma, his voice soft, which surprised me because it didn’t match his stature. He held Leticia’s hand gently as she spoke, and I noticed that he looked at her closely as if reading her lips. I wondered if perhaps Leticia had got it wrong and this man was actually interested in *her*. After all, she was stunning and unafraid to bare it all. She had soft curls, delicate features, an ample bust and moderate hips, as though God had taken the time to make every joint and muscle in her body fit perfectly.

“Leticia, I can’t do this tonight,” I whispered, tugging at her jacket. “I’m going to get a cab.” Leticia grabbed my hand and turned back to Akhenaten.

“This is my friend Soila,” she said to him. “I’ve known her for years; she’s Kenyan.”

As soon as Leticia left, Akhenaten asked me about myself – what I did, how long I’d been living in New York, what I liked, didn’t like.

I told him I liked the sense of anonymity yet inclusivity. New Yorkers didn’t care that I had an accent, just like they didn’t care that there was a black man in a Rasta hat and sunglasses sitting with a rooster on his lap on the morning train.

“I once saw Julia Roberts on the F train,” I said. “She was wearing a baseball cap pulled low to cover her eyes, minute headphones that made her appear deaf, and she was reading. Everyone recognized her but nobody spoke to her or asked for an autograph.”

He nodded and looked interested as if what I was saying was new to him. “I know what you mean. I’ve seen a naked guy trotting down

Madison and no one as much as asked him if he needed clothes, or if he was nuts. No one called the cops. Or bothered to cover their kids' eyes.”

I was caught in a burst of laughter and spilled red wine on the lapel of my woollen pea-green coat.

Akhenaten hurried to the server's table and brought back a handful of tissue napkins. He started to press down on the wool to absorb the moisture but his hand accidentally brushed my breast and I jerked, spilling more wine, this time on his boots. We both apologized, fell into more laughter and then found ourselves looking at each other in expectant silence.

“Why are you dressed like this in the winter?” I asked. He was wearing a light, white V-neck sweater – the kind one would wear in the spring – and he was odd-looking in a sea of black woollen winter coats.

“Don't you get cold?”

“Actually, I’ve never been inclined to dress for the weather.” He pulled a stray dreadlock behind his ear. His lobe had three piercings and he wore massive rings on his fingers. On his neck he wore a beaded necklace that reminded me of the wooden rosary Mother hung on her rear-view mirror in her old Peugeot.

“I wear what I want to wear, but I will throw on a coat when I walk out of here tonight and I’ve got some solid boots.” He lifted his linen pants to show his wine-stained suede ankle boots. “Anyway, I live around the corner.”

“So do you wear a winter coat in the summer then?” I prodded.

“If I wanted to, I would,” he said, throwing his head back with laughter. “Do you always say whatever’s on your mind? I like that.”

I wanted to tell him that what I didn’t like were people like him –

New Yorkers with silly names who cultivated eccentricities.

Instead, I told him I didn't like the utter chaos in the city, the filth, and I was slowly tiring of the hectic, go-go-go lifestyle. He agreed. He started walking me around the room to the pieces he was showing – bizarre three-dimensional installations.

“So, Akhenaten – that's an interesting name. What's it mean?”

“Akhenaten was a controversial pharaoh,” he said, eager to explain.

“He started worshipping the sun instead of all the Egyptian gods. He had serious balls, challenging something that had been done a certain way for centuries. Anyway, I went to Egypt and was so blown away by these people and their art that I came back a different person. It totally changed my thought process, my representation, my name.”

“Your art is definitely not the kind I know,” I said, walking towards a forlorn bench in a hidden space in the gallery. “I'm not really moved by inanimate objects. I prefer art that speaks to me in a humanistic

way. But obviously I'm in the minority since your stuff is selling out faster than you can make it."

Akhenaten bit his lower lip. A bronze face whose wide-open mouth appeared to be giving birth to a spiral-like creature was laid out in front of us, and we stared at it in awkward silence.

"This piece is about rebirth and the possibilities that can be harvested if only human beings allowed themselves to pursue their dreams," he said.

"I'm sorry – I was insensitive just now," I said. "I didn't mean to imply that people are only buying your art because it's 'in' at the moment. I don't know much about this kind of art—"

"I'm not interested in appealing to the masses," he cut in, agitated. "Of course I don't want to starve either. I used to do traditional sculpting, but I wanted to move away from representational art. I wanted to make art that would show rather than tell, to challenge people to acquire their

own meaning behind the work. Obviously, it's been very successful, which proves that art is extremely personal.”

“But do you know what it is you're creating when you start out?

Do you know that it's a shoe, or a bridge, or a phallic symbol?”

“Sometimes I have an agenda: to disgust, to trigger meditation.

Sometimes I move like a neutral vessel with whatever my spirit is telling me and see where it goes.”

I twirled my wine glass between my thumb and index finger as he continued to describe his work, and as I listened I only saw him and heard him – nothing else in the room intruded.

“Sometimes I know exactly what I'm making. See that figure there?” He pointed to the image of a man with a sculpted glass head and an elongated, misshapen body with a flying tail made from steel. “See how his head is clear and brilliant, but his body is metallic and dull? I knew I wanted to create a tortured man. I separated the textures and

colours of the head and the body to illustrate his brokenness. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so. You’re trying to show that even a brilliant mind can come apart.”

“Yes, yes.” His long fingers swirled in front of my face like tentacles. His nails were perfectly trimmed. I had the urge to put his fingers in my mouth and run his hand over my body. My palms were hot and sticky on my wine glass and I wished I had a wet cloth to tuck under my armpits.

“It’s the same as abstract paintwork,” he said. “Jackson Pollock’s work lets you drink and breathe in whatever it is you’re feeling. Sometimes I go to the Met and look at a Pollock and the emotions it elicits make me weak. All I can do afterwards is sit on a bench in the park and stare at the world around me with a new awakening. I don’t know if Pollock was dripping all over a canvas going, *Oh yeah ... I’m going to*

*make someone cry today.* I think he just wanted to make a beautiful piece of art and let it take us where *we* want it to take us.”

Akhenaten watched my face as I took it all in.

“I’ve been taking photographs my whole life,” I said. “When I was sixteen, I met a professional photographer who was an American missionary at our church. He taught me how to process photographs. I made a small darkroom in a shed in the back of our house that my mother had used to incubate chickens when I was a kid. Once I started doing it nothing could get me out of that darkroom, with its smell of dyes and the negatives hanging on pegs over my head. ”

Akhenaten laughed softly, his shoulders moving in rhythm with his laughter. “What happened to the chickens?”

“I don’t know; think she just got bored of them ... I’ve thought about becoming a full-time photographer. I’d love to live with an ancient

tribe who are going extinct, like the El Molo in Kenya – there’s only 200 of them left.”

“OK, so what’s stopping you?”

“Disappointing my mother,” I said.

“My mom wanted me to become a university professor, like my father. It was her dream,” he said. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I was kind of a late bloomer with many wasted years. Anyway, she came around in the end.”

“My mother is all I’ve ever had,” I said. “My father died when I was four. She put everything in me. She never remarried. But all I’ve ever wanted to be was a photographer. I remember in my last year of high school, I took a photograph of a camel that had lost its hump. I was travelling with my mother and a group of missionaries on the border of Somalia. There was famine across Ethiopia and Somalia. Dead animal carcasses lay all over, their cracked horns shining in the sand like shells

on a beach. That was when I spotted this emaciated camel. It was standing near a dry well. Its hump hung flaccid off its back like a deflated balloon. The family that owned it was even more pitiful. The father, Suleiman, had returned home with the camel from a ten-day trip into war-torn Somalia looking for food, but found none.

“His wife, Aisha, had a two-week old baby and that infant was latching on to his mother’s breasts with all his might, but her breasts had nothing in them. We gave the family three-months worth of cornmeal, rice, cans of lentils and beans, powdered milk and dried meat. We promised to send them two truckloads of water for their well. On our way home I asked my mother if the family would be fine. She said, ‘Well, the cows are mostly gone, the camel will die soon too, and that little baby will probably die. We do our bit, and pray that God does the rest.’ I still look at those photographs and wonder what happened to that family.”

Akhenaten was sitting still, not blinking.

“I’m so sorry, I’ve traumatized you,” I said.

“It’s not that. Just makes me so sad that you’ve experienced such harshness, and your passion is ten times more alive than mine ever was, and yet you can’t live the life you want because your mother won’t let you.”

I didn’t want to talk about Mother, yet it felt natural. I wanted to talk to him all night. I wished the people in the gallery could disappear. I wanted him to peel off my coat, rip my shirt buttons and splay me on the shiny marble floor. I willed myself to calm my mind of its impure thoughts.

*My body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.*

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“I can’t date him,” I said to Leticia the next morning. “He’s too *out-there*.

He wears more jewellery than me. And that name! I can’t go out with a man who calls himself after a pharaoh.”

“But I can see you want him,” Leticia said, shaking me aggressively, as if to rouse me from a deep sleep. She was stirring a pot of collard greens with ham hocks while ordering me to cut this and that, and our kitchen was filled with the warm smell of baking cornbread. She had taken to cooking Southern-style ‘soul food’ on Sundays.

“You have to go out with him. He’s not what you think at all – he’s not a poser. He’s got a very strong sense of identity. Plus he is well read and well travelled. He’s a globe trotter.”

“A *globe trotter*?” I snorted. “I can already hear my mother wailing when she meets him. *I sent you to America, and you brought me back mtu wa kuniabisha? Are you trying to make a mockery of me?*”

“Stop it!” Leticia was getting highly animated. “He’s amazing. Your mother would love him. He lived in Japan, studying Asian art. He’s spent time in Africa and South America! Who else do you know who speaks *Nihongo*? Girl, I’m telling you, he is a forward *brother*! Not a whole lot of black men come in this package.”

“No, my mother would die,” I said. “Besides, he’ll laugh me out the door when I tell him I’ve never slept with anyone. He’s probably propositioned by beautiful women every day.”

“Where did you get that notion?” Leticia looked insulted on Akhenaten’s behalf. She was that kind of friend – fiercely loyal. “How do you just assume he’s only interested in sex? And who the hell cares who your mother likes? She’s not the one dating him; you are!”

“He’s thirty-four! Eleven years older than me,” I said.

“So what? OK, maybe he breakdanced on the street with a boom box on his shoulder while you read Enid Blyton, but now we’re all adults!”

Akhenaten was more than six feet tall. When I stood up straight next to him, my head barely grazed his chin. He freely admitted to being in open relationships, and even participating in threesomes.

“Soila, you’re nearly twenty-four,” Leticia snapped. “It’s not what’s right for your mother, or Akhenaten or the church. You’re educated enough to know what stuff in the [bible](#) makes sense and what doesn’t. I mean, *my God*, it’s not like you’re going to become a total slut. It’s just one man, who worships you.”

“I am *miserable*,” I said. “I don’t even pray any more. I haven’t been to church in years. It feels like I used to do it all for my mother but still I can’t shake this feeling that having sex is wrong.”

“Girl, you are so brainwashed,” Leticia said, stirring the pot.

On a Saturday night in February, a nor'easter hit New York with a knockout punch, leaving snow climbing up to three feet and wiping out power lines. Akhenaten and I fell asleep huddled on the couch, the cold seeping into our bones, unbarred by central heating. I woke up before him at dawn to see the snow still falling quietly outside – a pristine white tablecloth blanketing the narrow streets of Soho. A bluebird flew briskly towards the kitchen window. I thought for an instant it would smash into the clear glass. Instead, it perched on the ledge. The bird's coat was a riveting blue in the midst of all the white. It turned its head to survey the scenery as if looking through an invisible pair of binoculars. It struck me how free the bird was.

*What about me?* I wondered. Was I living? Was I taking in the small moments and really being alive and free, like this tiny bluebird?

Akhenaten was still asleep on the couch, arms spread out as if awaiting a hug.

“Are you sure about it?” he asked, when he woke. “I don’t want you to compromise something that you really believe in.”

“I’m completely sure.”

He was careful and tender. He said he loved me so many times that the words carried me through my fear like a harness on a swinging trapeze.

I saw Mother standing at the corner of the room, her back turned to me, her shoulders heaving. It was a sin. I was a sinner. But I was insatiable.

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Spring roared in like a lion.

The snow had dissipated in April just when New Yorkers were commiserating on the subway that they couldn't take much more. As if overnight, the weather warmed up furiously and the flowers sprung out of their sockets, posing like trumpets blowing in the wind. Everyone walked a little slower. Bare thighs and painted toes went on display and in the mornings, strangers smiled at each other while they waited to cross streets. I arranged for Akhenaten and Marla to meet for the first time at a buzzing outdoor restaurant. Marla wore a frilly white skirt with a strapless pink shirt cut asymmetrically in the shape of a bandana. She was frothing over about the sale of a duplex brownstone she had put an offer on in Harlem.

“I mean, you can't believe this place,” she said, hands in the air like a congregant at a Christian revival. “In all my life I never thought I could own something like this in New York City. Two separate

apartments, one on each floor. I'll be downstairs. I couldn't ever afford to buy an apartment in Manhattan. In Harlem I'm buying a duplex!"

Akhenaten announced he owned an apartment in Harlem too, which surprised me.

"There's a lot you don't know about me," he said, chewing on the end of a toothpick."

"The seller's going to make a killing," Marla said. "When he bought it, it was a tenement for blacks living in squalor. He gutted it, stripped the floors – you have to see the oak floors, the large bay windows overlooking Morningside Park."

Marla and I chatted endlessly about the interior design plans for her apartment, nearly forgetting that Akhenaten was with us.

"You know, that comment you made about blacks living in squalor: I feel like you're celebrating the displacement of black folks," he

said, cutting in. “This is the kind of thing white folks say that make blacks mad as hell.”

“What?” Marla said, quickly straightening her back like she was sitting on a hot surface. “That’s not true.”

“It’s like, for you to increase, it’s at the expense of someone else,” he said, his tone acerbic. “Wealthy blacks trying to buy in the Upper West Side are like a plague to white people. But then whites will move over to Harlem, plant their flag and suddenly, it’s the coolest place to live.”

“So, what’s your point?” Marla said in the super smooth voice she used before she ate an analyst up and spat them out alive. “Poor neighbourhoods should stay poor?”

“No, no,” Akhenaten said, placidly, not growing half as angry as Marla. “My issue is, why does it take white people moving in to finally

get the garbage picked up, to make schools better, to get the police to do

their job?

“Whites come into black neighbourhoods at cut-rate prices and *improve* the neighbourhood, so that black folks can no longer afford to live there.”

“But you own a property there too?” Marla said. “Isn’t that a double standard? You can do it but I can’t?”

“The difference is I’m not trying to kick out black folks,” he said. “I rent out my place at probably half the cost you’re going to charge your tenant. I rent to a single mother with two kids on subsidies; the government pays her rent every month. It’s not a business venture for me.”

“You don’t even know me.” Marla was pale, like she had somehow found herself in a hostile neighbourhood and got her purse snatched.

“How can you be so judgmental?”

“It’s not about you,” Akhenaten said, soothing her hurt feelings.

“The city had a choice when they brought in millions of dollars to

rejuvenate Harlem. They could have built proper low-income housing, they could have rehabilitated the abandoned homes and rented them out to the same people who lived there for decades, but with subsidies. Instead they totally ripped the soul out of Harlem.”

“I’m sorry if I can’t believe that socialism is the answer to America’s ills!” Marla’s tone had turned from pained to scathing.

“If you ask the Mayor, he’ll tell you that the big businesses have brought jobs for the community at the mall and whatnot. But there’s no way the guy working the popcorn stand at the movie theatre in Harlem Mall or the barista at Starbucks can pay the rent you’ll be asking at your new digs. It systematically pushes blacks out.”

Marla wasn’t talking any more.

“Look, like I said, it’s not an attack on you personally,” Akhenaten said. “I’m just trying to tell you that your glee is built on someone else’s suffering.”

“Marla will commute thirty minutes from Harlem to Wall Street,” I said. “You don’t even live there, so why are you so gung-ho about it?”

“I don’t need to live in Harlem,” he said. “I live near my work. All the galleries are a few hundred square miles around my apartment.”

Marla stood up, gave me a kiss on the cheek, tucked her clutch under her armpit and said goodbye to Akhenaten from across the table.

“My God, what was that?” I said, loud enough to draw the attention of the people at the table next to us. “How could you be so combative when you’ve only met a person once?”

He shrugged, blasé in a way that made me boil. “White folks are in denial. Even though it’s not her fault Harlem is gentrified, she should still be aware of her privilege. White people are so fragile. They don’t want to hear the truth.”

“And who made you the evangelist?”

“You don’t know shit about what it’s like to be black in America,” he lashed out. “I can’t be on the Upper East Side after dark. Do you think white folks want to see some nigger skulking around their neighbourhood at night? It won’t be five minutes before they’ve called the police. But yet it’s OK for whites to buy out Harlem? Have you been to Harlem lately?”

“White folks just hanging out, having a good old time, while black folks, whose families lived in Harlem for a century, are now completely displaced.”

I waved a hand over his face like I was drawing a curtain and stood abruptly.

Leticia was home. I complained loudly, opening and closing the fridge door and the cupboards.

“I mean, how could he do that? How insensitive is he?” I yelled. When she didn’t answer, I walked back into the living room and found her head covered by a large pillow.

“Tisha! Say something. Tell me I’m not overreacting.”

Leticia slowly pulled off the pillow and looked at me standing over her, holding an empty mug.

“First of all, you need to take down the decibel a notch,” she said.

“My head is killing me. I agree with everything Akhenaten said, but I also agree with you that his delivery was wrong. But you know he’s genuine and that’s why you love him. Your friend Marla is a Park Avenue Pollyanna – I’ve told you that before. She’s ridiculously happy all the time! She’s never lacked for anything.

Akhenaten is gritty, he’s a realist and he doesn’t pander to society’s need for bread and circuses. That’s why he won’t even go to Fashion Week.”

When we first started dating, Akhenaten’s friend gave him passes to a designer showing at New York’s Fashion Week. I was thrilled but Akhenaten turned them down.

“You can’t give up the tickets,” I begged, as we lay in bed on a rainy Sunday morning. “I’ve never been. I want to go.”

“I don’t understand the point of it,” he said. “What happened to individuality? Who makes the rules that leg warmers are out and houndstooth is in? You don’t even buy that shit; why do you want to go? To watch coked-out bulimics parade in clothes you can’t afford?”

“I don’t know, I guess it’s like looking at real estate I can’t buy. What about your art? You want people to buy your ‘creation’. How is that different?”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

He yanked the duvet and jumped out of bed like an army of driver ants had attacked his rear. He stood over me, naked, scolding. I tried to listen but his dangling penis was distracting.

“It’s not the same. I create art, and if you like it, if you get what I’m trying to communicate, you buy it,” he said. “I don’t create an

illusion that if you're not buying my art you haven't got a clue. No one should dictate what you wear, or dictate the prices. That's fascism."

Akhenaten liked to meet unknown artists and hear jazz bands play in dimly lit lounges. He wanted to talk to people he met at dinners and parties about indie films and literature. When their eyes glazed over and they tried to steer the conversation back to global events, Akhenaten retreated into a quiet place of disinterest.

"You do realize that not everyone is going to have the same deep, passionate interest in the arts as you do," I said.

"New York used to be the centre of art and culture, but now everyone is driven by business and the media," he said. "No one sits and thinks and intellectualizes any more, except maybe the academics."

"You wouldn't be selling any art if it wasn't for the business and media industry. The people who can afford your art are celebrities and the people in my office who earn seven-figure salaries. So, if you meet those

people at a dinner and they want to talk about their yachts, you have to suck it up.”

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On the subway, I felt the stares.

“People expect a similar set of people together,” I said. “Look at us – we’re holding hands on the subway at 9 p.m. I’m in a pants suit and you’re in something that looks like pyjamas. What do you think these people are thinking?”

“They think you’re my psychiatrist, who has just signed me out of a mental facility,” he said, putting his arm around my neck like a noose. “You worry too much about what the world thinks. Your mother really did a number on you.”

“It’s not just my mother,” I said. “African society is very conservative and we still live in extended families, so I also have to worry what my eighty-year old grandmother and my intrusive aunties think. No one wants to be an outcast, the only one wearing dreadlocks, or tattoos, or piercings. No one wants to be gay, or transgender, or to be anything our society doesn’t see as *normal*.”

Akhenaten listened intently. The car had emptied and the train speeded around the corners of the tunnels, pushing our bodies back and forth.

“So you’re saying that in Kenya everyone is pretty much the same?”

“Yes. Pretty much.”

He leaned his head back on the window as if exhausted by the weight of the conversation. “That’s a sad society,” he said. “A tragic society.”

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It was 8:45 a.m. when the ground shook in my office building and 9:03 a.m. when it shook again. The towers of the World Trade Center were a block away and from my office window they seemed to be puffing clouds of smoke like two giant cigars. The rest of the day moved too fast. The towers imploded and crumbled as if being forced down a chute. There was darkness, coughing, burning eyes. There were more rounds of ground-shaking, little tremors, each one leaving me certain the ground was unravelling beneath my feet. There were firemen with tiny lights on their helmets telling us to move, move.

There was the moment we walked down at least seventy flights of stairs in a train of frantic human bodies, like first graders walking to the playground in a single file on their first day of school, unsure of what would happen next.

We were herded onto the Brooklyn Bridge in a tight crowd like livestock. A woman walking beside me repeated, “I know he’s dead, I know he’s dead.” I didn’t know who “he” was, or if he was dead so I held her trembling hand in silence. Together we walked over the bridge and the dark waters of the East River beneath us looked more ominous than ever. When I swung the door to my apartment open, Leticia was there and we fell in a heap on the floor crying and hugging. We were both alive. In the shower, I couldn’t wash out the asbestos. It was wrapped around my tight curls and my eyelashes like a coat of varnish. I trashed my contact lenses and returned to my bedroom numb. I switched on my bedside lamp and saw a hardcover book just as I had left it that morning on my small antique dresser. A pink, laminated bookmark peeked out. I slid it out and reread the quote.

*“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”*

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Or Life in the Woods*

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I didn't stop calling Marla. Her phone would ring and ring and then send me to voicemail. After a week, her phone didn't ring any more.

“I'm afraid I'll come home and find her hanging off the ceiling,” I heard Leticia whisper to Akhenaten on the phone. “Your hours are more flexible. She needs to be at your place for now – until she's better.”

Marla was really gone. She'd gone to a client breakfast meeting on the 102<sup>nd</sup> floor of the World Trade Center and never answered her calls again.

When I moved in with Akhenaten, I'd spend all day on the couch with my eyes closed because, in the dark depths of my mind, I could keep

Marla smiling. I could keep her walking down Fifth Avenue with me on a warm Saturday morning in her white cotton shorts and the butterfly-shaped sunglasses she admitted to paying too much for.

At night, I kept my eyes open, because in my wretched dreams I saw her asphyxiating in the far corner of a scalding room. I closed and opened my eyes day and night in this way until mid-October. When I finally let Akhenaten lead me out of the apartment for an afternoon walk, I was astounded by the purpling and yellowing of the leaves and by the air – so crisp it smelled like fresh mint.

I knew then that all I wanted was be outside taking photographs. Not in fluorescent-lit office spaces engaged in highly strung, money-driven, throat-slashing financial-world combat.

In December, as the first snow of the winter fell, I got the text message. Mother was coming to New York.

“In Kenya, it’s a really big deal to have your boyfriend meet your parents,” I told Akhenaten when he insisted on meeting Mother. “It means a lot more than it does here. It’s something people do if they’re planning on getting married.”

“I do hope you change your mind though,” he said.

“What’s the difference between our situation now and the one you experienced in Japan?” I asked.

I’d seen pictures of Akhenaten’s Japanese girlfriend, faded print photographs with dog-ears. She was short and unmemorable. She had a red birthmark on her neck – two coin-sized discolourations, one smaller than the other, like an island off the coast of a country. Akhenaten said his ex-girlfriend’s father banned her from the family home after finding out about their relationship. Akhenaten was a gaijin, a foreigner. She could only return home if she left him, her father said.

The woman moved in with him but after a year the exile made her so unhappy that she was joyless in the relationship. Yet she stayed with him.

He never said goodbye to her, though in an email exchange months later when he had returned to the US, he told her that he had to set her free because her sadness was more difficult to endure than his own sadness from losing her.

“It’s not different,” he said. “Perhaps I’ve hoped that you’re more emancipated after having lived in a western country, but you’re like a slave. You live for your mother. What happens after she dies? Do you try to reclaim the life you always wanted but could never have? It will be too late. Maybe I’m an idealist, but at least I live an authentic life.”

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Over the last few days I have found Akhenaten unbearably peculiar. The smell of beeswax in his hair is overpowering, though it never bothered me before. I have started to Google photographs of Maasai tribesmen, my people. They are tall and lean, with hair braided in intricate twists and painted with red ochre.

Their naked bodies are wrapped only in matavuvale. Aunt Nesian was right: Akhenaten could be one of them when he wears the kikoy I brought him on my last trip to Kenya. I used to like it on him. Now I want to rip it off his waist and smack his face with a pair of jeans.

As I sit in his kitchen watching him stir udon noodles with the same attention he gives his art and to me in bed, I wonder what future I can have with a man who wears linen in winter.

“Is it too much to ask that a person dress like they haven’t just arrived from a beach holiday in Honolulu?” I ask him.

It was supposed to be a fling, but he talks to his mother about me on the phone. He sends her photos of us on phone and email. She asks him when we are going to get married.

“I would marry you today,” Akhenaten says. “I would marry you in New York, in Louisiana near my mother, or in Kenya, if you asked. I would go to your home and take a flogging because I don’t care, as long as I have you.”

What would our wedding day be like? What stories would the photographs tell our children?

Me, begging him to wear a suit; him, not able to understand the songs the old ladies sing; him standing in the midst of the crowd under the hot sun, smiling at me. Him, having a sip of the fresh blood drained from the slaughtered bull. Him retching.

I want to change his clothes, his hair, erase his tattoos and cover his piercings. I want to introduce him to Mother as Lewis.

Suddenly I can't breathe. I need to get out of the apartment. I push him off me and grab my coat, step out of the door and descend five flights of stairs faster than my knees can move. I am on the sidewalk and for a minute I think about stepping off the curb. There's a man standing next to me, waiting to cross the street. He looks at me as if he knows what I'm thinking: the bluebird free in the snow, the Thoreau quote I can't get out of my head. Am I at least *trying* to live the life I've imagined? I'm whittling away into an ice sculpture of myself. I draw my coat closer, flapping the collar so it covers my ears. In about five minutes Akhenaten will be outside to check on me. This is the kind of man he is, the kind of relentless love he gives.

Then I see Mother standing beside me. The sun is in my face, there's a camera around my neck. We are in her garden. Two little girls are running untamed around Mother's grandiose lemon tree, jumping over her rose bushes.

They're calling me "yeyo". Mother is peeling the lemons, the tart juice sputtering into my eyes. All my aunts are there too. They are chattering in Maa. My daughters are learning about the lemon tree Mother planted years ago, when their grandfather passed on. It grew up with their yeyo and stood through floods and drought; an indelible stain that would live up to a hundred years as a constant reminder of where she came from.

Mother turns to me. She is telling me the truth. She is telling me to tell him the truth.

## THE BEAUTY OF THE NIGERIANS

from: buhlebeauty@gmail.com

to: liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu

date: 22 June 2016 at 2:23 a.m.

subject: I am back at work

Wele lam lenene, my twin, my better Liyema,

Thank you for calling us on Friday. I have news I couldn't share on the phone, not with Mama sitting on my nose to hear our stories. Wena uli wele lam, you are my twin, the other half of me, and I share everything with you. But this is not easy for me to share. I never thought of myself as a person who would go with a married man. We have been sleeping together for two years. He helped me pay for Zinzi's medicine and chemotherapy. If it weren't for this man, Zinzi would have left us years ago. Now I'm pregnant with his child. I'm talking about Ralu, my boss, my madam's husband, my big oga, as he calls himself.

I haven't told anybody else. Is it the right time, is it the wrong time? I don't know. I almost fell over in shock when the nurse at Langa clinic showed me the tests. But now it's been nearly 3 months and I'm starting to feel like this baby will help my pain. Not that it can replace Zinzile.

I hear the madam talking to friends who visit about all my problems. That I break dishes every day, spoil the clothes, forget to cut the fat off the lamb before I stew it. How she would eat her words, if she knew her husband cries with pleasure when he's with me.

Sisi, I can see you now with your mouth wide open but please don't judge me. Look at us now. We are 28 and you are about to graduate from university. I'm still in the same place, still in Kwa Langa, married to a big ixoxo! The only difference with him and a real frog is that he doesn't croak.

The one thing that made me proud was my little girl, my beautiful Zinzi, and now she's gone. Please don't think I'm complaining. We aren't all blessed in the same way, and perhaps my blessings await me.

This man came to me. Me? He has his own plane. Can you imagine having so much money that you never have to talk about money ever again?

In our family, money is all we talk about. We count every 50c trying to make it R1!

We cut every onion in seven slices so we have enough for every day of the week. We think about every trip we take on a taxi because every R15 counts.

I don't know what more I can say to make you understand that I did what any desperate mother would do. Burying my little Zinzi was the worst thing I'll ever have to do in this life. Everyone told me to be strong. They said, "Beauty! It's going to be terrible! Be ready, be strong."

I didn't believe it. I thought, Argh, there is nothing more terrible than seeing your child suffer and die – I'm strong. I'm the one who holds everyone together when the world is falling apart. I'm the one who does not cry when everyone else is dying! Remember when Tata died? Mama and Gogo were both rolling around on the hospital floor like a barrel being pushed down a hill. I stood there thinking, What is the matter with everyone? We knew the man was sick for months!

The night Zinzi died, I was in her bed, holding her like I did every night. I saw her breathe less and slower until finally, she lay still. She was holding my finger just like she did when she was a baby. When she passed, her hand let go and I knew she was gone.

The day before she died she sat up in bed and laughed a lot. Mama and Gogo whispered, "Yhooo – she is better today." But I knew she was close to dying.

Her smell had changed. She was very sweet and sour at the same time, like pineapple and ammonia, but no one else smelled it. Her fingernails were yellow and her tongue was grey, like those lizards we chased when we were kids.

When the first heap of dirt hit the coffin the grief made me mad. I climbed on top and begged to be buried me with her. I pleaded, “Let me keep her dead body, please don’t make me leave her in this hole all by herself.”

I remember thinking it was a mistake to wear a dress. I hadn’t worn my best panties and my dress was all the way up to my waist. I did not care that men were pulling at me, grabbing my thighs to get me off the coffin. I saw Mama cover her face with a white scarf before I passed out. She was humiliated.

I don’t remember much after that except the icy rain beating on my face. I do remember Sakhumzi leading me from the car to my bedroom. People I didn’t know were sitting on white plastic chairs on Mama’s verandah eating pap and tripe. I don’t know where the chairs came from. When I walked past them, their mouths froze.

I screamed like a crazy person: “Sanukwenz’ingathi nivelana nam, qhubekani nitye!” Eat! Continue! Don’t pretend to starve on account of my pain!

Everyone could eat tripe and pop open cold Fantas on Zinzi's funeral insurance. Then they could go home and continue on to the next day, the next funeral, the next wedding. What about me? Did I have to close my eyes and see Zinzi in a coffin every night?

I see her banging on the walls of the box and pushing and scratching the cover until her bony fingers bleed. I know she's dead. I dressed her cold body myself. Her limbs were stiff and her skin rubbery and when I tried to open her eyes all I saw was the white. So why do I have these thoughts of her being alive, screaming for help in her coffin?

Sakhumzi is in pain also, but he just drinks. I moved back home with Mama, Gogo and Zinzi a year ago. I was so happy to be away from Sakhumzi. I cannot tell you the last time we talked like we should, like a real husband and wife. We have sex sometimes, but it's mostly for him and I lie there like a dead fish, ifish efileyo. When he is finished I turn over and go to sleep.

For a year and a half, he pretended Zinzi was not sick. Spending his nights in MamLizzy's shebeen and going to work smelling like a BP station every morning. Lizzy! What kind of a woman will show her face in church without shame when she knows she feeds her fat isisu with money that should be feeding another woman's children?

Gogo says to me, "mzukulwana wam"; men will be men.

I'm tired of excusing him the way Mama excused Tata. They call themselves men? They are not men. I'm earning R4, 000 a month; how is it I can put away R500 every month? How is it I was able to buy a funeral cover for Zinzi? So I ask Sakhumzi, "why is your R10, 000 not enough for us?" It's a miracle Sakhumzi can keep a job but I suppose it doesn't take much of a brain to plaster a wall.

I'm just happy he is drinking umqombothi, not that nasty skokiaan him and his friends used to buy from the other shebeen witch who was brewing in her house. You remember, the one who blinded the men in the township with her methyl brew?

Anyway, I can't count on support from Sakhumzi. I just thank God for Mama and Gogo. We have cried and prayed together. In the end, Zinzi died in her sleep with little pain and I thank God for that.

So, a month after Zinzi is in the ground, I am back in Constantia. Madam Chica sent me an SMS the day after the funeral: "Beauty, I pray you are finding some peace in this time of pain. Would you please inform me when you will be returning to work?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Ralu sent me an SMS on that day too. He told me he is here to support me in any way. "Just name it," he said.

The truth is, even though my body wants to lie in bed all day from the grief and the pregnancy, being here is good for me.

Madam Chica is the same selfish, lazy woman she was when I started working for her 9 years ago. 1DERMUM WP. Ha! What kind of a number plate is that? What kind of a wonder mum cannot survive without her maid? Khusela thixo! God forbid she must peel a potato! Sjoe!

In the middle of the day she gets home from work and goes to her room to lie down. She says, “Beauty, please don’t let the kids wake me. I’ve got a headache from hell.”

What about me? What about the days I have a headache from hell?

Every Monday morning, I have to be up at 5 a.m. to make it to Constantia by 7 a.m. and khuselo thixo I’m late.

If she has to make the oats or butter the toast herself, she’s in a mood all day – hissing and puffing like keiskamma, and you know the puff adder is the worst snake you can ever step on.

I cannot say I blame her. She needs my help. The middle child, Obi, is hectic. If I don’t have my eyes on him for even a minute, I find him strangling the dog or feeding the fish. When the fish die, they blame me, saying I have been “overfeeding” the fish. What kind of a rubbish pet is a fish anyway to keep? What kind of animal dies from eating too much?

Anyway, one reason I looked forward to returning to work was to have Internet. The other big news is that Ralu is paying for my education.

I have just started working on my Higher Certificate with UNISA. Chica thinks I got a state bursary; can you believe this? The woman is blind.

She said she doesn't care if I study to be a nun or a doctor, as long as I do it correspondence and it doesn't interfere with her life. So I'm up on this computer they keep in their study till 2 a.m. every night working on my assignments. It's OK. In a year I'll have a diploma, then my plan is to start on a Bachelors in social work. Liyema, I'll make sure this man takes me places.

I'll write again soon.

Love, Beauty

from: buhlebeauty@gmail.com

to: liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu

date: 22 July 2016 at 00:06

subject: Please write soon!

Hi Sisi

You're as a silent as a cemetery. I know you're mad at me. But would you rather I didn't tell you?

My secret is that this child I'm carrying is not Sakhumzi's.

Do you remember when we used to ride in the taxi every evening from Mfuleni High? We were going to go to university on full bursaries. We were going to stop the madness of everyone in our family becoming a domestic worker. Gogo, mama, her sisters! We were in that taxi on the N2 saying, "No more domestic workers! Not us! It ends with us."

Then, there I was, pregnant in Grade 11. While you buttoned up your uniform for school, I was burping Zinzi on my shoulder. Staying at home for a year, returning to Grade 12 while you were already at university and then finishing matric with C's and D's – it just felt so unfair. My whole life, everyone told me I was sharp. There was never any question that I would make it. So how did I get here? I remember when I got the job with the Nigerians, I would see you heading to campus and wish you would carry me in your pocket so I could go to the lectures with you. Sisi, it burned.

Then we entered the Green Card lottery thing. It was like a big joke, haha. What a shock it was when you got that letter saying you had been selected.

We had to hold on to Gogo before she fainted! Mama kept saying, "My baby is going to America," and we danced around in a circle until we were dizzy. Mama borrowed from loan sharks, *omatshonisa bengingqi*.

The whole church came with their friends and relatives and we cooked pots of chicken and rice. Before the night was over we had raised enough money for your ticket, your medical checks and your first two months' rent.

Do you remember how we spent the last few nights awake until morning? Someone in our nothing family was going to America to live in a place called Dallas, with our cousin Siya. It was like a film!

Madam didn't help me much when Zinzi became sick. She brought her to Tygerberg for tests and she paid all the balances but then she dropped us when things became too difficult.

We tried a clinic here in Langa but they had no chemotherapy. We went back to Tygerberg and the government refused to cover us. I couldn't have done it without you and cousin Siya sending me dollars. Madam knows I only make R 4,000 but still she would say, "I'll just take it out of your pay cheque."

Then she blamed her husband! "Ralu says things are very tight with his business right now. We will help you where we can but we can't afford to pay for everything. Besides, I'm sure your sister in America is helping you, nhe?"

The woman spends R3, 000 on a blouse that not even Motsepe and his tsotsi boys would steal! Her weave is R6, 000!

She pays a white girl R7, 000 to take the kids around and to swim with them, but she taxes me R200 for broken bowls. She travels to London to shop and hosts Nigerian women she calls “my sistos” for lunch and tea. They come to the house and sit like idiots, with their long Brazilian weaves and their expensive handbags lined next to their high-heeled feet. They look like travellers waiting for the train.

“Oh my God, look at your hawnbeg! Is dat the new one from Lawndon?”

The other one answers, “Ah! Leave my hawnbeg! You are one to talk! Look at your shoes! I been eyeing dem since you walked through dat door. Are dis the ones you got in Dubai last month?”

After 9 years, I still get no gratitude. “Beauty, I go land you a slap now! Wetin dey happen? What’s going on? Dem send you? Have the gods sent you to torment me?” That’s how she talks to me. I want to cut her tongue out and throw it to the township dogs.

The other day I walked into the house and overheard the madam’s friends whisper, “Eh Chica, this one is too good looking. That light skin? Where does she get those clothes, the skinny jeans and the boots? You have to be careful-o! They may look stupid but they do steal husbands.”

Those Nigerian women must be prophetesses!

But what rubbish. Is it stealing a husband if his wife treats him like he is the oldest shoe in the closet?

She lies on the couch watching her Naija movies, eating popcorn that I must pop and bring to her in a special pink bowl. Khusela thixo, God forbid she stands at the microwave for 2 minutes to pop the popcorn!

She wears a white paste on her face like the Xhosa boys when they are getting ready for circumcision. She's in the bathtub with soap bubbles to her chin, cucumbers on her eyes and so many candles going it looks like the bathroom is on fire. I sometimes wonder if she smokes dagga.

I watch her rolling around with her black velvet sweatpants – the ones that say *JUICY* – in her echoing house and her fresh Brazilian swings from head to buttocks. She spends R 3, 000 at Woolworths on low-carb bread, wheat-free cake and sugar-free sugar, and pays me R4, 000. How? Then her fingers bend in my face with the weight of her diamonds as she speaks to me like a worthless servant.

“Beauty, fetch those groceries I left in the Range Rover and please don't slam the doors the way you like to do. It's not a Langa taxi!”

It's like a conference when the Nigerians visit and they all discuss their problems.

“Beauty has been with us 9 years and still we give her white shirts and get them back pink!” the madam says. “I no no, I no sabi. I just don't understand it! Ladies! I ask you, how much training can I give a person?”

“Chica, education is the key, abi,” I hear one of the other ladies saying. “And in this country, it’s going to take a long time before these people catch up.”

When the madam talks about Lovemore, the Zim gardener, I want to pull my ears out of my skull. Lovemore cannot do anything wrong in her eyes, even if he tried.

“Look at Lovemore!” she says, and then asks her husband to help her praise Lovemore. “Ralu, Ralu, please tell them about Lovemore!”

Lovemore walks around the garden three days a week in his black gumboots and faded Col’Cacchio T-shirt and sometimes I swear he is acting for an audience because no human can move with the swiftness of a swallow in the January heat or the June rains. He comes to work even when he’s dying of flu.

Ralu, my big oga, is very tall and balding. He shaves his head close with a razor and pretends he wants to be bald.

He wears small round glasses with a thin wire frame. He is a bit odd looking but where he lacks in looks he makes up in the bedroom and with his pocket. He says Lovemore is like a son to him.

“My friends, let me tell you – Lovemore was an accountant in Zim, with a commerce degree! And now he be here trimming trees and working as a waiter every night at Col’ Cacchio – imagine dat? His determination is not destroyed. But then you see dey South African boys.

Got every opportunity, got RDP house, got bursary, got student loan, got street light, got paved street! But what dey do? Dey want give, give, give. Dey young boys they just be area boys, go around mugging. Lovemore, he gone through losing everything under Mugabe and he starting over and he don't complain. I said to him, 'Lovemore, you work so hard, God don't butter your bread.'"

Liyema, I don't want to sound jealous. Lovemore is a good guy. Ndingamthengisa uSakhumzi nangeliphi ixesha, you know, I would trade Sakhumzi for him any day. He lives not too far from us – the other side of Biko, the side with the stone houses. He has been here five years.

Actually, he arrived to Cape Town around the same time you left for America. When he arrived he lived with his brother. By the time he married after two years, he was renting his own house – not even sharing rooms like most foreigners.

But he married a Xhosa girl. Yhooo ... big mistake!

Our Xhosa girls like Zim guys, and who can blame them? Our own men are forever in the shebeen and Zim guys work hard for their families. Lovemore doesn't drink. He is one face you will never see at MamLizzy's! So it's no surprise all the Xhosa girls were after him.

Last year, he bought a RDP house from a guy called Jones Sipehelele who is a regular at MamLizzy's.

It's a shame how people can be so stupid. Jones got maybe R20, 000 from Lovemore and invested it at MamLizzy's. He drunk it all and now he is dirt poor and back in a tin house and he is moaning about the foreigners who come here and take all the jobs.

Lovemore's wife is a yellow bone, as light-skinned as a coloured. But some women would not know a good man if he fell from the sky right on the top of their heads! Lovemore came to work one day looking like he had come straight from Nika Kumalo's Boxing Club. I took him his lunch as I always do – 8 slices of bread with 3 eggs and tea – in the back shed, where he also showers and changes after working in the garden. I said, "Lovemore, what's going on? What happened to your eye? What happened to your lip? It's about to burst."

He was rocking on the soda crate he was sitting on like his whole body was in pain. I said, "Lovemore, you are worrying me now."

Lovemore said he was curious when his wife started dressing nice and disappearing at odd hours. He pretended to go off to work one morning but instead he hung around. It didn't take long before the Mpele Tours guy was pulling up in front of Lovemore's house in his mini bus.

He is a Zim guy who's quite well known in the area because of his tour business. Lovemore saw his wife stepping out in her best clothes, which she doesn't even wear when she's going out with him.

Yhooo! Lovemore lost his mind. There was a big fight right on the street outside his house, neighbours watching and cheering him instead of stopping the fight. He kicked out his wife that same day.

“Let her go with her tours guy, if she thinks he’s better than me,” Lovemore said. His lunch was sitting on the cement floor in the shed, and I was begging him to eat.

“My mother warned me not to marry a Xhosa woman but did I listen? No. But then again, look – my own Zim brother is doing this to me. So in the end, it doesn’t matter. Xhosa, Shona, whatever. Anybody can be a snake in the grass and it seems women are only after money these days.”

As he talked I thought about myself. Maybe I am just as rotten as his Xhosa wife. But she had a good man and still wanted more. I had a lousy man and a sick child.

If Sakhumzi could be that kind of a man, I would still love him and maybe I would not be here slaving for these Nigerians or giving myself to a married man!

The Nigerians aren’t so bad sometimes. You must hear them talk about the whites. I know you would crack ribs laughing.

“Argh, dis whites and dey red noses!” Madam said that once to her lady friends while I was serving them tea and they all screamed so loud with laughter I nearly burnt myself.

“Poverty is all around dem but no, no, dey blind, dey blind. So dey be worrying about poached rhinos and dey be putting red noses on their bumpers! One lady at the hair salon, she was crying to me about a lion in Zim called Cecil dat was shot down by a rich American. It was a big news story I am telling you. Now, Cecil the lion had a brother called Jericho, who was now supposed to care for Cecil’s cubs, but alas, Jericho also be killed by a hunter. Now dis white lady she crying, crying.

“I swear I just wanted to go land her a hot slap! I said to her, ‘Maritze, my sister husband just died in Lagos and I have now to help her raise her boys, my cousin be sick with cancer and I be paying for his medical, my whole bloody village dey be looking at me and my husband for dis and de other. Do you think I got time to be crying for Cecil?’ That’s what I asked her.”

The whole room was booming with laughter. The ladies were falling back on their chairs, arms stretched out like they were being struck by lightening.

“Ladies! Behind Maritze’s mansion in Hout Bay, Imizamo Yethu township is burning. Every other month, 1000 people on the street. Where dey her tears for them? No tears. Only for dey stupid rhinos!”

When white people visit, madam changes her song and even her English.

You hear her, you think she's straight from London – or Lawndon, as she calls it! It's the mothers with children in Iffy and Obi's school. They visit for play dates and such and she is over here nodding her head as they go on about the ANC, President Zuma this and President Zuma that.

It's a good thing I learned early from Mama that maids are furniture because on those days, I'm filled with so many angry spirits that I want to speak in tongues. So, I say to myself, "Beauty, you are like that corner lamp in this lounge. You are to be seen but not heard."

They sip cool drinks while the children splash in the pool and they swing their yellow hair left and right. "Why do these blacks keep voting for ANC? The ANC does nothing for them."

I hear them talking about their DA party and their man Mmusi Maimane. They say "If only these blacks could see how Mmusi bring this country together; a bright black man, a young Mandela, the Obama of South Africa.'

I want to say to them, "Mmusi Maimane is your puppet. We may look stupid mos, but we were not born yesterday!"

It's true, the ANC is bleeding us dry, but I want these whites to point and show me what their DA party has done for me. And, what do these rich foreigners know?

It's easy to come into someone else's country, work with the whites, live with them, go to their schools and nod your head when they speak because you want them to like you.

When their Nigerian friends visit, Madam and her husband take them for tours to Robben Island and they go up Table Mountain and then they come back home and drink whisky on the patio. "Oga, dis place look nothing like Africa-oh. Dis place even dey townships have street lights and paved roads!"

Liyema, I ask you? What madness! Impambano!

Sometimes I want to stand on their mahogany table, kick their expensive plates, their bowls filled with that goat meat pepper soup Chica cooks for hours, and scream, mamelapha sbhanxa! "Listen up idiots! In Joe Slovo we have no bike lanes! In Joe Slovo, none of us has ever been on Table Mountain or Robben Island. In Joe Slovo, we have no beach.

In Joe Slovo we are too busy working in your houses and your supermarkets and your factories and guarding your security estates, to find time to lay on Camps Bay with bathing suits and straw hats and the fashion magazines Madam collects like change for the taxi. Can you imagine?

What a life that would be. Of course I must lose 30 kilos before I can fit in a bathing suit, but you know what I mean? They speak about things they don't know!

Did I tell you Madam Chica came home with the children and their granny to see Zinzi? It was the week Zinzi died. I never thought she would come.

Then she called me from the Engen on Steve Biko and spoke in a scared voice, so different from her usual boom-boom. She was talking so fast. I was worried a group of thugs was after her – maybe Motsepe and his tsotsis, or worse, the xenophobia assholes. I can just picture them screaming, makwerekwere, makwerekwere! and chasing her with burning tyres!

I could not imagine anyone would be in danger in Langa at 3 p.m. But you know how it is. These rich people think we live in a jungle.

“Where is your house, where is your house? I circled for half an hour and I can’t find it and the children are anxious,” she said.

Please! The children were fine. I could hear them singing “Whip Nae Nae” in the car. When she climbed out the Range Rover with the black boots that climb over her knee like a beanstalk, the children playing uqgaphu outside our house were silenced as if by a thick blanket. I have not seen those buggers pay so much attention to anything since the Soweto gospel choir came to perform at Guga S’thebe.

Of course she still had the giant sunglasses on her head and the Brazilian weave hanging down to her bum.

The children climbed out after her like ducklings following mother duck, in their newest takkies from Lawndon. Their granny also came. She was visiting from Nigeria. She is something else that one. You would never guess she's 73.

She does her nails and dyes her hair and wears the most expensive batiks. She smells of money but she has softness and grace. She reminds me of MamGraça.

I must say she's 10 times more beautiful than her daughter-in-law. One can only wonder what she looked like in her youth. Gogo is beautiful but the deep craters around her eyes have aged her 10 years. Worry and hardship have sucked her cheeks dry but comfort and money have puffed the Nigerian gogo out like a shiny blowfish. This is the miracle of what money can do.

So, you know how it is in our area. People have eyes bigger than their heads and mouths that run like watery porridge! As soon as the black Range Rover was standing outside our gate, children were running home to tell their mothers about a shiny car called 1DERMUM WP.

Mothers were running to tell other mothers, and all the men in MamLizzy's shebeen were stretching their necks like the small-brain ostriches they are to look outside her fence.

"Beauty I didn't know you live so well." She said that as she was walking through the verandah. "This is a very nice house!"

“It’s my mother’s house. It’s a RDP house,” I said. “My mother has been extending it slowly over the years. It feels like we are forever surrounded by bags of sand and cement.”

Madam stood nodding as I spoke. I was praying she would not know I was lying. Her husband’s money is building the house, not Mama’s.

In a year it will be the best house in all of Langa, then we will sell it to a Zim or a Somali for R450, 000 and buy something else in a nice neighbourhood.

Madam and the Nigerian gogo were looking all over the cement bags and stepping over large building stones.

“Be patient with the construction,” the granny said. “Nothing good comes from nothing.”

I wanted to say, Lady! You don’t know nothing about nothing! Instead I smiled. That is what I’m paid to do.

The madam made me feel important that day. It was unusual because most times when I speak, the madam is not listening, but when she speaks I must leave everything to hear her. Even if I’m washing the children, I must stop and look at her to show I hear her but God forbid the child falls and cracks their head open in the tub, or drowns. It will become, “Oh Beauty never pay attention and she dey killed my baby.”

Madam looked around the house like she was inspecting a piece of land she wanted to buy. Suddenly, I was aware of all the wrong things with our house.

The kitchen sink is still tilting, the living room is so dark and the pictures on the wall are crooked. Even the smell of the dampness under the rug became too much for me. I was so ashamed.

The children were very interested in the couch – you know the one Nonkhuleleko gave us with the black velvet in 1994?

The thing is still alive in our living room and it is now sinking so low that it's starting to look like a stoep! The children wanted to know why it sinks so low. Their mother and their granny looked at each other and covered their faces.

“I'm so sorry Beauty,” the madam said. “But you know, you've known them for years, they are good kids. They just don't think about what comes out of their mouths.”

“It's OK,” I said. “The couch is old but it was a gift from an auntie who died and it's not easy to throw it out. Anyway, it's not their fault that they have never seen a couch that sinks so low that when you sit, your face touches your knees.”

We all laughed, and I was glad I lightened the mood.

Gogo was watching her usual singing choirs on SABC and gave a polite nod.

My heart was pounding. I was so afraid Gogo would start to brag to the madam that I am building up the house. You know how Gogo is always bragging about us girls even when we have done nothing to brag about.

One time a lady came to our house with her daughter to visit when Zinzi was born. She's Mama's friend from church. You were doing exams. The lady started bragging about her daughter's matric marks. Gogo cleared her throat and said, "My Liyema will also pass the matric very well. She's already been accepted at University of Western Cape before her marks are even out! And my Beauty has given birth to the most beautiful baby girl in Langa."

She picked up Zinzi from her little basket where she was sleeping.

"Look at that baby. Have you ever seen a more beautiful baby? And let me tell you that I have never seen anyone give birth better than my Beauty. She did not need anyone's help pushing that baby. She pushed that baby out and cut the cord all by herself!"

As I stood shaking in the knees that Gogo would out me with her bragging, Madam's children sunk lower on our stupid couch and their granny sat on one of the wooden chairs at the table, and I saw the way she pushed it away from the table so her arms wouldn't rest on the tablecloth.

Of course nothing goes past Gogo. She was watching everything and turning her lips up like a storm was brewing inside her mouth.

I showed Madam to Zinzi's bedroom and she stood over Zinzi with her tall, thick frame like a crushing shadow. I saw the shocked look in her eyes and how she clenched her jaw. She had last seen Zinzi more than a year ago, just when the disease was beginning to have legs. Zinzi still had flesh on her bones back then. Now the madam saw a bald skeleton. There was an oxygen tank, a small table full of pill bottles, a bag of urine hanging out of the bed, a bedpan, wires running all around her body.

She moved her eyes away from Zinzi just as they were beginning to cloud with tears. She circled the room, looking at Zinzi's artwork that I hung up on all the walls. All the little ornaments she made – paper dolls, stuffed people, paintings – before she got too sick to think clearly or hold a paintbrush.

“Look at this room,” she said, staring at the walls, fidgeting. Her right hand was brushing over the jewellery on her left hand, twisting the diamond rings around then moving on to the gold hoops in her ears and twisting them around as well. “This child is gifted-oh!”

She stood looking at every detail. There was a bedside lamp with little birds painted on it and a bookshelf madam gave to me a few years back.

“Look at what you've done with all the stuff from Iffy's room. Nothing should ever go to waste. I tell the kids all the time not to take what they have for granted. You can't help what you're born into.

It's not their fault they were born with what they have. But still, I wish they would care more and know that not everyone is so lucky. This is exactly the reason I make such a fuss when I see them throwing out food. When I grew up in Nigeria, if a carrot was wilting, we made carrot soup!"

She ran her hands over the thick quilt embroidered by hand and the linen curtains and noticed the soft pink mat next to Zinzi's bed.

Her eyes rested on Zinzi's closet with its half-open doors and she saw the pretty dresses and shoes lined up. My heart nearly stopped.

"Zinzi has very, very nice things," she said. "Where did you get these curtains and all her lovely clothes?"

I wasn't prepared for an answer but I have always been a fast thinker and a good liar. I said you often send Zinzi presents from America. She seemed settled by the answer.

Thank God I never stole any of her things. Can you imagine what would happen if I had, and here she was standing in Zinzi's room poking her nose around? Sometimes I see perfectly nice things around the house that she doesn't even remember she owns.

I was in the children's closets the other day arranging things. Liyema, I counted more than 100 pairs of shoes between all the 3 children. The oldest child, Iffy, has so many leather boots – embroidered, studded, lined with fur on the inside.

Every design in the world and she's only 12. Before she has the chance to wear a pair, another pair is bought and the first pair is left still shiny and becomes too small for her feet.

My Zinzi wore the same pair from PEP Stores so long her big toe started to show itself to strangers on the street. That was before Ralu started showering me with money. I never spent it on myself. I spoilt Zinzi with things even when her foot was too thin to hold on to a shoe, and the rest I spent on medicine and construction.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I took 2 water glasses, or 1 old sheet – after all, Madam only buys white and they all look the same! Would she notice? Never. But I was born with clean hands and I will die with clean hands.

“It's amazing how much you've done with this room all by yourself,” Madam said. “After seeing this I almost feel ashamed for paying someone to do up my kids' rooms. But you know how it is. I really just don't have the time and plus I'm not as creative as you are.”

The late afternoon light was coming in through the small window above Zinzi's bed, lighting her tired face, and outside we heard the neighbourhood kids still playing on the street. The madam sat on Zinzi's bed and held her hand. She took off one of her beaded bracelets and put it on Zinzi but it dropped right off her wrist so she put it next to her pillow.

I left the room and went to sit with Gogo, Madam's children and their granny. Gogo pretended to watch her show but spent most of her time looking at the other woman's red leather moccasins, her polished nails, her gold jewellery and dyed hair.

Obi, the middle child, who strangles the dogs and pulls the fish out of their glass tank, moved from the couch and went to sit on the wooden stool papa built with you the summer you decided you wanted to be a carpenter in Grade 6. What were we? 13? Imagine that. It's hard to believe that stool is still standing 15 years later.

Obi was rocking on the stool and kicking its legs with his high-tops. His granny had her eyes fixed on him, burning him with rays of anger. I knew he was going to get a good hiding in the Range Rover on the way back home.

Iffy was sitting quietly on the couch and the little one, my sweet Amaka, came to me and sat on my lap and lay her head on my chest.

Obi became bored as he always is and flew back to the couch next to Iffy and started to pull her braids. Iffy complained, "Obi stop, stop it!" and held up her arms to shield her head.

"Abantwaba abathethi lwimi lwabo na?" Gogo said. These children don't speak their own language? As always, she was muttering words in the air the way she does when it seems like she's talking to the angels. "It's criminal; they have no identity."

The Nigerian granny was becoming uneasy. I tried to stop Gogo but she kept on with Xhosa, as if there was no one else in the room.

“My granny is just wondering how old the children are,” I told the granny. “She says they’re beautiful.”

The granny nodded in gratitude but turned her face to the side and sneered. She knew Gogo was backbiting. Any fool would know.

Obi asked to go play outside. I saw no harm in letting him. The granny was biting her lip so hard I worried it might bleed. She was afraid the township would eat her grandson up. But she also didn’t want to look like a snob, igwala.

“It’s safe outside,” I said. “The other children will run in and tell me if anything is not right. Let him go.”

She nodded at him and he stood up so fast he knocked down your wooden stool on his way out.

Gogo and the Nigerian granny are the same age and they both know English but they had nothing to talk about. They have the same shape too. The granny is taller but she is as round as the wine barrels that have caused many fights between the madam and her husband. He collects them and uses them as decoration around the property. She says, “Ralu abeg! I no sabi why you dey give me wahala with these bloody barrels!” He says, “I’m not giving you problems. I just like them, so let me be!”

The granny said it was too hot for it to be June. Gogo shrugged her off as if she were Funiswa’s gogo – remember her? The one who used to ask us who the people in the television are and why we are not talking back to them? Remember how we used to crack ribs laughing behind her back? Shame, she was so old it became a curse. She didn’t know her own name by the time she died! Anyway, Gogo wasn’t having it, not giving the granny even one inch!

“Well, it cannot be hotter than your country, can it?” she said.

“Gogo awazinto ngenageria noba kushushu, noba kuyabanda okanye komile, kubalele,” I said. You know nothing of Nigeria, about when it’s hot or cold, or wet or dry.

Gogo can be so rude sometimes, asking why foreigners come into our country if they’re going to complain about the weather, the food and the people, and she was putting me in a situation where I had to keep lying to the Nigerian granny.

“My grandmother is just asking what the weather is like in Nigeria?” I said. “She struggles with her English.”

The granny’s eyes pierced mine.

She curled her mouth to the side and sneered at the wall again, but this time she clicked her tongue and I held my breath because I knew she was raging at Gogo’s backbiting. She moved her eyes to the black and white framed picture of Mama and Papa on their wedding day.

“Where is he, your father?” the granny asked, pointing.

“He’s dead.”

“Mxelele ubulewe yingculaza kobamnandi ukumbona epitsholoza,”

Gogo whispered, laughing.

Can you believe that? She actually wanted me to tell the woman that papa died from AIDS. She thought it would be fun to watch the lady squirm, epitsholoza.

“He died of liver failure,” I said.

I did not tell her that when he died his body smelled like beer and ammonia and garlic and shit all put together in a stew.

Remember how we had to cover our noses with our hands when we brought him tea in the bedroom? God, I pray my liver never rots.

Madam was in Zinzi’s room for a long time so I went back to see what was keeping her. The magogo did not become friends but I was also tired of babysitting them! I found the madam still holding Zinzi’s hand. She was praying. Zinzi opened her eyes for a few minutes when I walked in the room and then she fell back to sleep.

Madam’s eyes were big with surprise. She was full of pride. It’s like when she tells her puppies to sit and they sit. All her time and energy coming to Langa from Constantia, getting lost on the rough streets, fearing robbery or death was not lost.

“The poor child opened her eyes when I prayed for her,” she said.  
“I feel so happy that I was able to bring her a bit of comfort.”

I can’t say I have ever seen her pray. They’re not a godly family. Here we are praying until our knees bruise to the bone and we still have nothing but sinking couches.

They kneel twice a year on Easter and Christmas and their good fortune pours through their doors and their windows, like water flooding a sinking ship. I heard someone say that prayers are for the poor. It must be true.

I had to tell her children that Christmas belongs to the baby Jesus, not Father Christmas. I can just hear you saying, “Beauty it’s not your business!” I told her children there is no way a white man in a velvet suit is going to be riding springboks all the way from ice land – or wherever it is they believe he comes from – to deliver their Christmas presents in Africa. Why would he then climb down a chimney, rather than just park his springboks at the gate and greet the children himself? Surely no one would make such a long journey with gifts for you and not even bother to hand them to you in person? It really is cruel the kinds of lies adults tell little children.

The madam was not happy but she held her tongue. I heard her complain to her husband as he ate his lunch quietly on the dinner table.

“Yoh, now be ready for the drama when our kids go telling everyone in school that Santa Claus is a fake-oh. I must now deal with those crazy white women and I swear I go slap them if dey bring me wahala!”

Mama came home from work that night just as the madam and her troop was climbing into the Range Rover.

She walked up and down the kitchen saying, “Beauty, why you didn’t tell me they were coming? Why you didn’t offer them even a cup of tea? They must think we are so poor we don’t even have food to eat.”

I said, “Mama, relax! They don’t eat our kind of food anyway and they don’t drink our kind of tea! They dip their English teabag in a teapot and pour a drop of milk in a cup. We boil our tea leaves in a big pot with milk on the gas. They won’t drink it! Plus, they brought us flowers. The flowers are R80 in Woolworths. It’s a wonder they don’t think to rather buy for us the 5kg sugar, or bread or milk. Argh! Rich people!

Love, your sisi.

from: [buhlebeauty@gmail.com](mailto:buhlebeauty@gmail.com)

to: [liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu](mailto:liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu)

date: 15 August 2016 at 00:14

subject: It is a girl!

Dear Sis Liyema

Good news! It is a girl! Ralu paid for a scan. The baby moves like a balloon in there. She is all over swimming like a fish! I am worried her head is very big but the woman said the head always looks bigger when the baby is inside.

I told Sakhumzi I am leaving him and he is not the father. He is free to go drink himself to death like Papa. I told Mama and Gogo.

Gogo started speaking to the angels who hang around her nowadays. She sits by the TV from the minute she wakes up and talks to the characters on *Isidingo* like they're having tea with her in the living room. She has become exactly like Funiswa's gogo! I don't know why old people start talking to the TV.

Mama said she knew two years ago that I was with the madam's husband.

"First there was the extra money, then you started saying too many nice things about the man," she said. We were in the kitchen. I was stirring pap and she was chopping ikhaphetshu.

She kept stopping the knife to talk one hundred words in one minute, then she would start chopping again. "He became a king, a humble saint. Jesus himself is not all of the things you say the man is.

Before you were his mistress you used to say ‘Argh! If she does not like how I make the fufu she must make it herself because I am not a Naija and I don’t eat fufu!’ When he became your lover, you started moaning that he buys the madam too many things she does not need, and that the madam does not treat him like a king. The truth is few men leave their wives for their mistress and no Naija millionaire with a plane of his own will leave his wife for a maid! I just pray he will care for this baby.’”

I know he will. My Zinzi was a PEP Store baby. Not this baby. Her road will be paved all the way to heaven by her Naija tata.

Love you always,

Your Beauty.

from: [buhlebeauty@gmail.com](mailto:buhlebeauty@gmail.com)

to: [liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu](mailto:liyemakona2009@utdallas.edu)

date: 10 October 2016 at 02:03

subject: Pray for me

Dear Sis Liyema

Much has happened in the last month and it is not good.

The doctors say Madam's sweet little girl Amaka has a disease. Not the kind of disease that will kill her but still a horrible one. I always worried something is not right with the child. She is 2-and-a-half years old and does not speak much. My Zinzi was telling stories before she was 2.

I saw that Amaka was always arranging things. She would be in her room arranging shoes. The shoes must be in a straight line. Then she would go to the other rooms and take out all the shoes and arrange them in a straight line.

When she has her crayons on a table, she wants them to be in a straight line. When the other children move the crayons she screams as if rats are biting her feet. When the white nanny puts her in the swimming pool in the afternoon, Amaka becomes stiff as a rod. You must see it – it's as if electricity is running through her body.

She separates her peas from her carrots and places them on each side of the plate. God forbid they touch. She won't eat sauce on her food. The rice must be separate and dry, and the chicken must be dry. The touch of sauce in her mouth makes her hang her tongue out like a snake for hours. When it became too strange for me, I told Madam Amaka is really not fine and she started to pay more attention.

Later, I came to find out that Amaka's doctor had noticed her slowness since she was 15 months but she told Madam they should give Amaka another year because she had walked on time and also passed her hearing test.

Amaka has been sent to another doctor and then another and they all say she has a terrible disease called autism. She will never be like other children. She will have to be taught how to speak and how to be with other people.

A woman comes home to help her speak by playing music and sounds and making Amaka repeat what she hears.

Another one comes in and gives Amaka a stuffed lamb and asks Amaka to pass it back while looking the woman in the eyes. She touches Amaka's arms and face with small and large feathers.

On some days Amaka enjoys her lessons but some days she is difficult. Yesterday, she threw a plate full of oats at her mother. Madam Chica lost her temper and spanked her. Amaka started biting her mother and Madam ran to the bathroom and started wailing like she had received news that someone died! She was banging on the door and throwing things – I heard glass smashing. In my arms Amaka was also wailing. When Madam left the bathroom after an hour, I went in. She had ripped the shower curtain, smashed bottles and all kinds of things from the medicine cabinet.

“Beauty, how can I be so unlucky?” she said later while I bathed Amaka. “Why am I the one God has chosen?”

There is more bad news. She is pregnant again.

When I found out I felt a big sack of water push down from my belly to my bladder. She was lying in her bed with a small cloth over her eyes as she always does nowadays. It seems that since she was told Amaka is not right, her headaches have gone wild.

I brought her tea to soothe her. When I was done pouring into her cup, I told her that I am 7 months pregnant. I said I need leave for 3 months.

She fell back on her puffy pillow and pulled the tiny cloth over her eyes again, her red nail polish shining over the cloth. I wanted to shake her and rip her weave out. What is the matter with this woman? I stood there quietly and she lifted the cloth to see if I was gone.

“Beauty I can’t do this now,” she said squinting. “My head is killing me and I am sick to my stomach. I haven’t told you but I am 3 months pregnant. When the speech lady is done with Amaka please give her a bath.”

The next morning I was in the kitchen boiling oats and eggs for the children. She came in dressed in white cotton pyjamas and a silk cloth around her head. She started to bring out the spinach, avocado and all the things she puts in her juicing machine every morning.

“Beauty, you cannot take 3 months leave,” she said. She was busy throwing the stuff in the machine. “You didn’t even take 3 months leave when your daughter died.”

I told her I wouldn’t leave my newborn baby at home from Monday to Friday to sleep in Constantia. “Even when Zinzi was born 10 years ago, I stayed with her for a year before I found this job,” I said. “My cousin is ready to work in my place.”

“No, absolutely not,” she said. “People are crying for jobs and you want three months?” She had walked up to me and was talking loudly in my face. I have seen this in the Naija movies. The women act very strong when they get angry. They grow tall and fierce.

“I can’t have a new person with Amaka. I will be nearly at the end of my pregnancy, barely able to walk.

How am I to deal with her when she starts having one of her episodes and deal with Obi when he won’t stop running around the way he does like a crazy person?”

I left the oats and the eggs boiling and left her standing in the middle of the kitchen. I must have cried for a whole hour. The baby would not stop kicking inside me.

That night I was sitting in the dining room with the kids while they ate their supper. The house phone rang and when I picked it up in the kitchen, a woman with a thick Nigerian accent said that she is Ralu’s

sister in Lagos. She said she had lost Madam Chica's mobile phone number and she urgently needed to talk to her in regards to Ralu.

I quickly took the phone to Madam on the couch where she was watching the Naija movies, still in her pyjamas that she had not taken off the whole day. When she took the call she said, "Who dis?"

She turned down the television and was quiet for a while.

"You saying your name Clara? Clara who? What you mean, you have a son? A son for who? Why you telling me about you son and I don't even know you even from the marketplace? I don't know what you talking about Ralu son, Ralu son. If he Ralu son then call Ralu. Don't comb here calling me about Ralu son, do you onderstand me? Don't ever call me again."

Yhooo! Liyema, I can't believe it. Andiyikholelwa lento ndiyvayo, ingaba lendonda yinto eqhele uyenza lhe. How many other women does this man have? How many other children? So it is true then what they say: lento uyenza komnye umntu, iyokwenziwa nakuwe. Lento ilivili iyajikeleza – what goes around comes around.

Chica stood up quickly and went to her bedroom and slammed the door. After a while, I cracked open the door.

She was on the floor, holding a pillow to her face to muffle the crying. She was grunting. Her arms were trembling so much they flapped like wings. Amaka strolled in with her stuffed lamb and sat cross-legged next

to her mother. She put her lamb on her mother's lap and stroked her arm the way she would with her feathers.

Sobabini intliziyo zethu zophukile zezindaba, kodwa akayazi eyam.

Both our hearts are breaking. But she doesn't know about mine.

Your twin, Beauty

## THE MAN IN THE ROOM

The morning she first saw the man, Bibiana was in the kitchen frying French toast and cutting it into small bits for the children. Khadija sat on the tiled floor, unpacking the last of her pots and pans.

Khadija and Gavin had bought their new home only three months before, a five-bedroom bungalow in a small Cape Town neighbourhood flanked by mountains that loomed large. The house had a white brickface exterior and a fence with deep violet petals of bougainvillea that, on windy days, fell like confetti on the heads of visitors.

Bibiana was a talker. She never shut up. Her words rippled into the noisiness of clanking plates and cutlery. She talked with her hands, flying the spatula like a baton. She would forget to turn the toast, and Khadija, exasperated by her older sister, had to remind her again and again.

“So a few months ago, Uncle Teju staggered home after midnight with an albino he met in a bar—” She broke off and ran towards the window. “Hey! Did you see that?” She craned her neck to look out, first to the left and then to the right. She was gripping her chest. “Something swept across the window. I think it was a man, though he moved as fast as lightening.”

Khadija was startled. She turned off the gas stove, which Bibiana had left burning under an empty frying pan, and looked over at her husband.

Unfazed, Gavin continued to flip through the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, taking big bites out of his French toast. One of his patients had an itching disorder. She scratched so much the doctors had to put mittens on her hands. They couldn't find anything physically wrong with her. It wasn't eczema, or psoriasis or even food allergies, so they sent her to him for psychotherapy.

"They think it's in her head," Gavin said early one morning while he examined hot, red razor bumps under his chin in the mirror. "She scratches her face and neck raw. She wears a veil, the poor woman."

In the kitchen, he continued to flip through the journal while Khadija and Bibiana peered anxiously out the window. The children had become restless too.

"Gavin, aren't you going to go take a look? Could be an intruder." Khadija said.

"It's probably just a hadeda," he said.

"No, It's absolutely not a bird," Bibiana said with a sudden shrill that made Sasha cry and raise her little arms in the air, begging to be picked up. "I know a bird when I see one."

Khadija went to the French windows to inspect the garden but Gavin stood up to stop her.

“Stay inside with the kids and call the alarm guys,” he said. “I’ll check it out but I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Khadija went back to Bibiana, who had become increasingly restless, and patted her shoulder in the Swahili way, like their mother had done with them as children. “Bas, Bas.”

Whatever Bibiana had seen, it wasn’t anything good, because she’d stiffened like Lot’s wife when God turned her into a pillar of salt.

When two armed security guards arrived in navy uniforms and bulletproof vests, they asked Gavin to stay indoors and made their way into the large back garden, guns appearing in their hands. Bibiana and Khadija cowered behind the French windows, each one holding a child.

The two guards circled back to the front door, moving slowly, then relaxed and holstered their guns.

“See? There’s no one,” Gavin said. “It was just a bird.”

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When Khadija and Gavin were looking at the house, the realtor said the sellers had abruptly moved after eighteen months, leaving behind bizarre

relics of their time there – stone Buddha statues and sage burners.

Khadija wanted to know if it was a death, divorce or relocation.

“It just wasn’t right for them,” the realtor said, shrugging. She was a redhead who frazzled Khadija. There was a sense of chaos about her; her constant motion distracted everyone. Even the way she climbed out of her car to greet Khadija was dramatic – shrieking about not being able to find the address, rustling in her bag to find lost keys.

Ginger. That’s what she called herself. But the name on her business card was Shirley Jonkershuis. She suffered from severe hot flushes. In those frantic moments, Khadija would have to help her out of her suit jacket while the crazed woman continued to twirl on her ridiculous heels, delirious, reminding Khadija of Malik when he was lost in a tantrum.

When Khadija was shown the house she had already looked at twenty-eight properties, going from one hideous home to another with a toddler and an infant in a pram. She was immediately taken by the mountains standing guard with the fortitude of centuries in the background of the back garden. A quiet stream ran through the property, continuing its wandering course through the adjacent greenbelt.

Shading the brook in the garden was a majestic wide-spreading tree Khadija immediately recognized from an extraordinarily large botany book she’d bought when she first moved to South Africa – a ghoeboontjie.

She'd been overwhelmed by all the trees and vegetation after having grown up on the small island of Lamu off the coast of Kenya. In Lamu, there was nothing but palm trees, sand and the sound of the ocean. After the move, she spent months reading about trees, flowers and snakes and was surprised by how much she didn't know. The ghoeboontjie's flowers, she remembered, were bisexual. And now here stood a grand specimen in the garden of the twenty-ninth house she viewed. The tree wasn't exceedingly tall, but its branches were covered in thick star-shaped leaves in hues of lime green and passion-fruit purple, and its sprawling nature and white, sweetly scented flowers made a large, picturesque canopy over the back garden.

"That's a ghoeboontjie," exclaimed Shirley, as if introducing Khadija to a human being with rare, undreamt of qualities. "A Cape almond. They only grow in the Cape!"

The rest of the garden had several other mature trees. A jacaranda, at least twenty metres tall and towering over the roof of the house's right flank, gave the bedrooms on that end a bit of shade in the afternoon since they were on the north side.

In the master bedroom, when Khadija opened the window to get a better look at the garden, the sun was coming in through the mauve flowers of the jacaranda and a few of its leaves brushed up against her cheeks. She felt suddenly and inexplicably happy.

The house itself wasn't grand but it was more than decent. The carpets would need to be changed eventually, but a good cleaning would do for now. The walls needed painting, but the bathrooms were modern and the bedrooms were well sized. Large French windows opened up from the dining area to the garden, allowing a good amount of light into the living area.

A wooden pergola swathed in bougainvillea laid a cool hand over the outside verandah. Khadija envisioned Gavin grilling lamb chops on the cobblestone patio, their children running in the garden and friends warming the house with cheer.

Khadija and Gavin were desperate to get out of their apartment. It had been perfect for them until Khadija found the pink panties and Malik was born. If it hadn't been for the new baby, she would have left Gavin. As if to erase the incident from their marriage, Gavin and Khadija filled their lives with more raucous distractions. First, a rescue golden retriever puppy they named Simba that perpetually jumped up and down as if on a trampoline and left teeth marks on the legs of their wooden patio furniture. Malik grew into an impossible toddler who rode the dog like a horse. Then they had Sasha, who spent the first six months of her life screaming with colic.

When she couldn't stand to be cooped inside with the children, Khadija walked her son to the neighbourhood swimming pool where he splashed and her mind grew calm.

While Sasha was in the throes of colic, her shrieks would echo around the neighbourhood, deafening neighbours who dared to leave their windows open. It wasn't just their neighbours who were gatvol, as Gavin said. After Sasha was born with a tummy full of gas, he got into the habit of sitting in his car for fifteen minutes every evening when he arrived home. Khadija watched him, peeking out from behind the heavy drapes of their bedroom window. From where she stood it seemed like he was weeping into a handkerchief – perhaps one of those crisp white ones he had asked her to pick up at Woolworths – but she couldn't be sure. All she knew was that he didn't want to come inside and that made her boil with anger as she paced the room, bouncing her daughter slowly up and down to ease the colic, in exactly the same position the paediatrician had suggested.

“What gives you the right to sit around in the car, dragging your feet,” she scolded, unable to stop herself. “It's not fair that you have the privilege of leaving the house every morning and spending the day interacting with other adults while I'm here going deaf, changing dirty diapers, and chasing after a toddler and a dog.”

“Who forced you to stop working?” Gavin asked, as if he should be absolved of the sin of watching her drown because she had wilfully jumped in the deep end. “Nobody asked you to quit your job. We could easily afford a nanny but you insist on doing it yourself.”

“Maybe I should get a nanny. Maybe I should get two nannies, one for each!”

But Gavin had left the room.

Khadija was so taken by the ghoebontjie and the jacaranda swirling its branches outside the open bedroom window that for the next two days she couldn’t think or speak of anything but the enchanting house.

Gavin, hoping the house might give her a distraction, made an offer. An inspector was called in to assess the structure, and he reported that it had a strong roof with brand new shingles and was free of flood damage and termites. It had clean drains and sewer lines and a powerful geyser.

When Khadija called her parents in Kenya, her mother, Sarah, a devout woman who’d abided by the strict ways of Islam all her life, wasn’t interested in the strong roof, the stream, the tree with the bisexual flowers whose name she couldn’t pronounce or the heart-warming jacaranda outside the bedroom window.

“Did you bring in someone to bless the house?” Her voice echoed and sounded hollow, as if she were buried in a tomb. “It’s very important that you bring in someone to say du’a before you move into that house!”

Gavin waved Khadija off when she recounted the conversation and said she wanted to do the cleansing ritual. “What is this ridiculous notion that we must pray for the house? Surely you know there is no such thing as an evil eye? This is superstition.”

“Just because you’re not a practicing Muslim doesn’t give you the right to stare down your nose at believers,” Khadija said.

Gavin became increasingly aggravated and Sasha – who until then had sat well in the brand-new, yellow baby walker they’d received at their baby shower but never used – started to wail. Khadija said she didn’t like his tone; he was always in a sour mood, snapping at her and the children.

“Show me a believer who died, went to paradise, came back to earth and reported that in Jannah he was given seventy-two gazelle-eyed houris who all had milky skin, and didn’t pee, crap or have their period.” Gavin said. “These ideas are not even in the Qur’an! People take verses and misinterpret them to suit their own motives. The fact that you believe in evil spirits is shocking to me. I should demand a refund as far as wives go.”

The refund remark cut Khadija deep. Gavin had grown up in a contemporary world with a western outlook. He'd attended mainstream schools and socialized with people of other religions and even atheists.

Khadija grew up on an island held so sacred that Muslims came from all over the continent for pilgrimage and teachings in the historic Riyadhha Mosque. Her town had two thousand donkeys and not one car. It had forty mosques, serene and haunting. Tourists walking through the ancient ruins and quiet streets would stop abruptly and shush one another. Khadija's mother said it was because of Allah's voice whispering to them.

“Even the kafir can hear it,” she told her daughters.

As a young child, Khadija watched the summer tourists with their bare legs and semi exposed breasts gawking at her mother and the other local women who covered themselves in abayas. The women were unbothered by the stares as they walked through the narrow streets, chatting and lugging large baskets from the market, and Khadija was proud of her heritage.

Her family home in Lamu dated back to the nineteenth century. The ancient building was constructed with blocks of hand-chiselled coral from the nearby quarries. Her father grew up in the same house, as did her grandfather and her great-grandfather – they came from wealthy Swahili merchants who traced their history back two centuries. Her great-great-grandfather had traded cinnamon, cassia and iron with the Persians

and Arabs who arrived in the nineteenth century in catamarans that were moored along the Indian Ocean coastline.

Every day Khadija's parents and grandparents laid down sajjada made from the finest Turkish silk and knelt to pray together at dawn and dusk.

It was routine: waiting in line at the bathroom door to wash her face, hands and feet, then collecting her sajjada from beneath her bed and lugging it to the centre of the living room. Her father led salat with her grandfather next to him, while Khadija stood behind the men with her mother, grandmother and Bibiana, kneeling, bowing, prostrating, asking Allah for His utmost protection.

It was her father who opened the door each day, so the family prayed with their faces to the open doorway, the path to Mecca, kneeling and standing, inhaling the salty ocean breeze as they recited the solemn words.

Later in life, when she was homesick in South Africa, she drifted off to sleep to the sound of the Indian Ocean in her mind. She heard the thud of her parents' front door and its thick brass knocker when it was slammed by the wind. She told herself that if she ever had the good fortune to own a large house, the first thing she'd do would be to put in a mahogany front door just like the one in her old home, carved from top to bottom in Arabic reading, *In the name of Allah, the most just and merciful.*

During their next phone conversation, Khadija excitedly told her mother she was replacing the front door on the new house. Her mother reminded her to perform the cleansing prayers for the house. Khadija agreed, but found herself unable to raise the subject with Gavin again. She admitted to herself that her devotion to her faith had slowly ebbed over the decade since she left home for university in South Africa.

Her first five months in Cape Town were pleasant, the weather similar to Lamu. She found a mosque near her dormitory. But when June came around, the gale-force winds threatened to hoist her up with the ease of one of the many building cranes around the city. Her daily walk to campus became difficult and she dreaded the longer walk to the mosque.

She had read about the Cape Doctor windblasts, the long winters and the rain that poured for three months, but she wasn't ready for the cold that infiltrated her bones when her satin abaya blew like a parachute and she lost her balance. Her umbrella would be turned inside out and hail pelted her ruthlessly.

In bed she shivered for hours before falling asleep. Her mind passed the night in a different place, where the warm winds of the Indian Ocean caressed her.

Khadija's body developed a ceaseless tremble, so that even on sunny days her arms stayed folded as if glued around her chest. On the phone, she told her mother about the shivering.

Pneumonia is around the corner, Sarah warned, adding that she would need to layer at least five sweaters to stay warm. But no amount of protective layering would block the searing cold, so Khadija's teeth rattled like the pulled strings of the kalimba.

A sympathetic second-year dorm mate took her to a dazzling mall where they picked out an electric blanket and a goose-feather duvet, several pairs of knit stockings, a pair of knee-high leather boots, thermal vests and a goose-down jacket with a shearling hood. And so Khadija had her first good night's sleep for the winter.

Shortly after, she put away her abaya and turned to wearing pants and jeans. It wasn't vanity, she told herself. It was acclimatizing.

Even though her new wardrobe lured men to stare at her lower body and the Qur'an said that a woman who revealed her body would not come within 500 yards of the smell of Jannah, Khadija convinced herself that the benefit of good health outweighed the risk of not entering the gates of Jannah. By the time she met Gavin in her late twenties, she rarely went to mosque. The only mark of her religion was the scarf she tied loosely over her head.

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Bibiana was older by five years, but she and Khadija had always been close. Bibiana had tried for several years to conceive but suffered one miscarriage after another until, possibly desiring a break from the grief, her husband, Salim, left to pursue a master's degree in America.

He returned home for his first visit after four years. He had been granted a work visa and a lucrative job at an oil production company in Texas. For years, when they emailed and spoke for hours on the phone, Salim told Bibiana about his empty life in America, and how he longed for her to join him. He had found the perfect house for them, close enough to a small park and a local college, where she could perhaps take a few business courses.

He had started the paperwork and sent her to Nairobi to the US Embassy, where she'd got each of her fingers pressed down on an electronic glass plate and been granted a spouse visa. She started packing up her life in Lamu. As soon as Salim arrived home, several farewell parties were held where mothers, aunts and sisters shed tears, and promised Bibiana the new life would for sure bring her a baby. Fathers and uncles doled out advice to Salim about how to care for a wife in a foreign land where she would know no one but him.

The night before they were to board a plane for Texas, Salim confessed to falling in love with an American woman, a kafir who'd fallen pregnant with his child. He wanted more than anything to be a

father, he said. Surely could she understand his predicament? Moreover, the kafir woman had agreed to convert to Islam. Would all of her efforts be for nothing? He had to marry her, he said.

He'd returned home to ask Bibiana for a divorce but after seeing the family's excitement and hearing their fervent prayers and blessings, his courage had waned.

Khadija heard the story from her mother, Sarah. "They went in front of Imam Idarus," Sarah whispered as if Bibiana were in the room. "Salim – you know him, how he moves as if on water, and the way he talks to Bibiana like she's only good for washing his feet – said to her, 'I divorce you' three times. The imam warned him that this form of divorce was haram. He said that a godly divorce is performed over a period of time, where both parties have thought deeply about their decision. But Salim said he couldn't wait, and neither could his American woman. So the divorce was granted and the next day he was on the plane."

Bibiana spent the three months of iddah, grieving like a widow.

"She's thin as a banana leaf, your sister," Sarah continued. "I said to her, 'You must close that faucet, mwanangu.' She will dry up like a prune and for what? *Salim ni mnyama*, a beast. He is not worth her tears."

Several months later, Bibiana was still laid up in bed, waking only when her mother admonished her for not taking a bath or changing the

sheets. Khadija phoned home and invited her sister to South Africa. She didn't bother to ask Gavin. He had never liked Bibiana.

“It will really do her some good – she's skin and bones, knocking at death's door,” Sarah said, thanking her daughter for her generosity. Khadija could hear her father muttering in the background, but Sarah rambled on. “I'm so worried Bibiana will kill herself. Who would blame her after what that mshenzi husband did to her?” I've begged her to make ista'aadha, but she lacks the strength.”

“What's Baba saying?” Khadija asked, phone pressed hard to her ear. Khadija's father was seventy and spoke slowly, logically, using few but wise words.

“As-salamu alaykum, Khadija,” Baba said pensively.

“Wa-alaikum salaam, Baba.”

“Now, Khadija, you know your sister can be a handful.”

Even on the phone, she heard her father's stoicism. When Khadija first saw the quiet stream in the back of her garden, she'd thought of her father. Steady, consistent but never forceful.

“I agree with you – it will be good for her to travel out there because Allah himself knows she needs a rest,” he said. “But are you sure your husband is fine with this? We mustn't interfere with your marriage.”

“It's fine Baba,” Khadija said. “She's my family. Nothing is more important – Gavin knows that.”

Bibiana arrived a week after they moved, making it difficult for Khadija to focus on unpacking quickly because she had to tend her to ailing sister. Bibiana's frail demeanour grated on Gavin, who was livid that he hadn't been consulted about the invitation.

"Can't she unpack at least one box?" he said, pointing at Bibiana in the other room with judgment that crossed walls. "There are boxes that have been lying around her bedroom for days, begging to be unpacked."

"You're a psychiatrist," Khadija snapped. "Why have you no sympathy for her?"

"I was the one who gave her the antidepressants! And referred her to Dr Schlott. I'm very sympathetic, but how long is she going to grieve?"

Gavin said, exasperated. "It's been months; first at your mom's and now here, just lying catatonic. We are not helping her if we don't give her a bit of a push."

It had taken many days for Khadija to get her sister out of bed and into the shower. Frustrated, she finally asked Gavin for help. He agreed reluctantly. He lifted Bibiana out of bed and deposited her on the shower ledge with her clothes still on.

Khadija noticed how gentle he was, calming Bibiana with a few words, holding her body firmly against himself so she would not struggle and hurt herself. There was that about Gavin: a loving side.

When Khadija turned on the faucet, Bibiana screamed defensively. She banged hysterically on the glass door and finally slid down to the floor of the shower stall and sobbed, grunting heavily. Her white nightdress was plastered to her, her hair a messy pile. When she calmed, Khadija turned off the shower, helped Bibiana out of the wet clothes, then she scrubbed her skeletal frame and shampooed her hair, washing away the stench of sweat and urine.

That day, Bibiana moved slowly to the living room in a long skirt and a long-sleeved blouse. It was the first time she had not worn her abaya in the company of a man who wasn't her husband, father or uncle. Khadija saw Gavin's face flash with uncomfortable excitement. It was the same look he had when he saw women in bikinis lying face up on the sand at the beach – a curious gawking at something he didn't necessarily want but that aroused his manly senses nonetheless. Bibiana shot a frosty look at Gavin, who was sitting on the couch, his legs up on an ottoman. He was holding a cold beer and watching a cricket match.

"I think the worst of it is over," Khadija said. Gavin nodded, eyes fixed on the television.

But it wasn't over. Bibiana took to lying curled with her knees to her chin. Khadija covered her daily with a faux chinchilla blanket that made her look like a large squirrel. She kept her face buried in cushions on the couch. After a few weeks, she started taking short walks and

though she often returned with puffy eyes and handfuls of used tissues, Khadija was pleased that she was at least getting out.

Sometimes Khadija took her to the mall, where she bought clothes no one would ever compliment because she was always draped in an abaya, her head tucked inside her hijab so tightly that she appeared to have no ears.

Bibiana was a handsome woman. She'd inherited her mother's milky skin, the remnants of their Arab ancestry still alive in the bloodline.

When Bibiana hit puberty, Sarah had said she was like a papaya tree, maturing so fast from seedling to fruit that their father didn't recognize his daughter when he came back from a three-month business trip to the mainland.

"She went to bed a child and woke up the next morning a full-grown woman with childbearing hips," Sarah told her friends. "She's only thirteen; what is she going to do with such big breasts?" Her tone invited envy as well as pity.

The other mothers in the neighbourhood whispered in Sarah's ears, begging her to dress the child in an abaya even though she was barely a teenager. The teachers encouraged it too, saying that Bibiana's voluptuousness was causing havoc at her school.

"The boys follow her with their eyes and spend their lunch period sitting where they can see her frolic," the principal said.

Ordinarily, Sarah wouldn't have forced her daughters to wear the robe – only the hijab was mandatory – because her own mother had given her the choice. But the pressure from the teachers, the neighbourhood mothers and even her own husband was too much and she caved, keeping Bibiana covered up.

Later in life, Bibiana's infertility had kept her body unspoiled, while childbirth had ruined her sister's. Bibiana's full breasts defied gravity, sitting firm and upright like Mombasa mangoes, even when she didn't wear a bra, while Khadija's, having breastfed two children, could have been mistaken for punctured water balloons.

Bibiana's stomach was flat; Khadija's drooped over her crotch like an apron. Bibiana's skin was smooth; Khadija's had been stretched by pregnancy.

The Bibiana Khadija knew was slowly being reborn.

She started cooking multiple dishes a day and some did not complement the others. One night she stayed up until 3 a.m. cooking a lamb stew, a lentil curry and a chicken curry.

She awoke at 10 a.m. so spent she had to return to bed at noon. She filled the house with the smells of frying cardamom, cloves and curries and even leaving all the doors and windows open didn't seem to air it out.

Bibiana rocked the daily routine in the house. She interrupted the gardener, who stood befuddled, holding his rake to his chest, as she

planted carnation seedlings in the vegetable patch. She unpacked boxes of old toys that Khadija had kept aside for donation and returned them all to the kids' rooms. "These are perfectly fine," she explained. She rearranged furniture. Khadija found stools in the corridor and large paintings moved from central areas to bathrooms. She couldn't find her everyday forks and knives but came to the dining room one evening to find her young children eating off fine china that had been passed down through generations of Gavin's family.

Bibiana seemed surprised that Khadija was fuming about the potential breakage. "Who are you saving them for? The Queen of England? You won't be buried with the things of this world Khadija. Enjoy them while you still can."

Several months after her arrival, during a walk in the park with the children, Bibiana suggested that Khadija return to working full time and let her care for the children. Khadija found herself welcoming the idea.

"Besides, you need the money," Bibiana said. "Gavin told me about his investment and I'm happy to help."

Khadija didn't know what Bibiana was talking about. But she nodded as if she did.

"I didn't want to say anything to you," Gavin said, when Khadija confronted him in their bedroom that night. "You're always mad at me

for one thing or another. I was going to tell you when the deal came through, but it's taking longer than we planned."

The deal concerned the development of four townhouses on an empty lot in an up-and-coming area near the Cape Town winelands. Gavin said he had a partner – a man Khadija had never heard of. Together they'd used all their savings and borrowed the rest to buy the land. To put up the townhouses, they needed investors. Khadija was incensed.

"I don't see how it's harming your sister," Gavin said. "Salim and his wealthy family gave her loads of cash in the divorce and she sits with it. At least this way she's investing it. The buyers are putting down 50 per cent before the houses are even up. It's a win for everyone."

"I feel like I don't even know who you are any more," Khadija said. "That you can put us into so much debt, tap out all our savings and not tell me, is hard to believe. But to ask my sister for half a million rand behind my back is a betrayal. It's unforgiveable."

"What about you? You didn't tell me she was coming here. I found out from your mother when she called to thank me for 'being so generous to offer our home'."

"It's not the same," Khadija said. "And you know it."

"I get no support from you. And you wonder why I keep things secret."

Seething with hurt, Khadija started to treat him with disdain. In the morning, when he couldn't find a matching sock, Khadija told him to go look in Bibiana's bank account. At suppertime, when he complained there wasn't enough beef in the pilau, Khadija mumbled that maybe there would be more if he hadn't put all their money in his secret venture.

Bibiana busied herself with the children and cooking too much food. She couldn't guess how much her brother-in-law loathed her. He called her a "motor mouth". "She never shuts up," he complained.

"Yet her money is good enough for you," Khadija said.

Some evenings, the women sat by the fire in the living room. Bibiana cradled Khadija's head on her knees, massaging her scalp with coconut oil, telling her stories she hadn't heard before.

"Bibi Nuru, mother's helper, is hearing voices," Bibiana said. "She runs through town being chased by invisibles; she hides in the mosques. And Bibi Mariamu – the one who employs a domestic worker for each of her three children – has snakes in her house. You know, that sprawling Portuguese colonial. Everyone says she should move but the previous owners didn't have the snakes and the imam said the curse is on Mariamu herself. She must find her enemy and pray against the shaytan."

Khadija said she no longer believed in jinn, evil spirits or the evil eye and admitted to not performing du'a in her new home.

"How can you say that?" Bibiana said, voice raised.

Gavin, unable to tolerate his sister-in-law, had taken to reading in bed immediately after he ate his last spoonful, and when he stayed in the living room, he turned up the volume on the television loud enough to drown out Bibiana's voice.

“Don't you remember Asha and Daud, our next-door neighbours who we played with as kids? They had a locked room that none of us was allowed to go into and the maids came and went, so many of them. And then finally, one of the maids met Mama in the market and asked her for work. Mama asked why she left her job if she still needed the money, and the maid cried that that the lady of the house kept al-jinn in a locked room in the attic. Every day, the maid was told to cook two large pots of pilau, enough for a wedding, and leave it outside the locked door. The maid realized she wasn't feeding a human being. In the meantime, the family got richer and richer even though none of us knew exactly how they became so rich. How could you forget this?”

Khadija couldn't remember any of it. She was five years younger than her sister and their memories of certain events often varied.

“It's no surprise her husband would leave her after he had a taste of the outside world and met a woman who could challenge him intellectually,” Gavin said. “The rubbish she spews is incredible and she really believes it.”

One particularly chilly night, while they sat chatting by the fire, Bibiana squeezed up next to Khadija as if three other people were sitting on the same couch.

“I have to tell you something,” she whispered.

Khadija became worried. “What’s wrong?”

“There was a man in my room last night,” she said. “I was groggy, but I’m sure of it. I didn’t dream it. He was hovering around, looking for something.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Khadija said. “The only man in this house is Gavin, and there’s no reason he’d be awake, loitering in your room in the middle of the night. When Sasha was a baby, she had colic and Gavin would sleep through the screaming. It drove me nuts.”

Bibiana slid back to her end of the couch in a way that reminded Khadija of the dejected, insecure puppies she had seen in the animal shelter when she adopted Simba. She pulled her sweater closer and crossed her hands around her waist as if engulfed by a sudden chill. She wound the scarf tighter until her face resembled a misshapen fruit.

In bed, Khadija held a book firmly in her hands but kept rereading the same sentence. She couldn’t sleep either. She elbowed Gavin in the crook between his neck and shoulder, and when he didn’t rouse, she jabbed him in the jugular with her nails. He woke up with a start.

“Gavin, did you perhaps stroll into Bibiana’s room last night?”

“What are you talking about?” he groaned, his eyes still closed.

“She’s quite sure there was a man in her room, looking for something.” Khadija said casually, trying not to let her voice betray her anxiety.

“Why don’t you ask her if it’s the same man she saw outside the kitchen window?” His voice was breaking into a sound somewhere between low-pitched laughter and groaning despair.

“Gavin, it’s not funny. Bibiana is many things but she’s not a liar.”

“Oh please! The woman is completely off-kilter! She’s manic. The constant yammering.” Gavin brought a pillow to rest over his face. “I’ve got a patient on suicide watch, another who is scratching herself to death and another who believes she’s dying from meningitis. The last thing I need is insanity brewing in my own home.”

“Is it possible you were sleepwalking?” Khadija was determined not to give up the interrogation.

“Why would I suddenly sleepwalk at the age of thirty-eight?” He lifted the pillow. “That’s absurd ... On the other hand, maybe your sister is driving me to sleepwalk.” And with that he turned over and promptly fell asleep.

Despite his denial, the thought of Gavin skulking over her sleeping sister continued to gnaw at her. He had dark secrets. One night when Khadija was eight months pregnant with Malik, she was awoken by

moaning coming from the bathroom of the master bedroom in their old apartment. Gavin was not in bed next to her. Afraid he was ill, she walked in to find her husband grunting with pleasure while masturbating. He was wearing pink panties.

“It’s not what you think,” he said. His face was clouded with shame. He couldn’t look her in the eye.

“I don’t know what to think.” Khadija was nauseous. “Are you gay? Or are you, like, a woman in a man’s body?”

“No, no, I just enjoy the feeling of silk on my skin,” he said, arms outstretched like a street beggar. “Anyway, we haven’t had sex for months now; what am I supposed to do?”

“How about masturbate like a normal man? This is sick Gavin.”

“You’re overdramatizing.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before we got married?”

“Well, because it has nothing to do with you. It’s a fetish.”

She felt stupid. Gavin had bought her lots of expensive underwear and lingerie throughout their marriage.

She had bragged to her friends and they, in turn, were envious. That night, Khadija slept in the room she had been preparing as a nursery for her unborn son and she remained there for two months after.

Gavin’s shame stifled every room and Khadija spent every moment taming her anger, trying not to explode. It was only after Malik’s birth

that their relationship warmed up again. The baby brought visitors, laughter, noise and food. Gavin's mother, Rukia, arrived from Melkbosstrand and fed them slow-cooked potjiekos and chakalaka.

She was different from Khadija's mother. She was Muslim but she wasn't conservative. She wore ordinary clothes with a hijab. She enjoyed a glass of wine and had a cheekiness that Khadija found charming.

"It's important that you don't completely abandon your husband after the birth of a new child," she said. "I know you feel tired and sore but your husband still needs your affection."

"It's hard – sometimes I feel like we are drifting apart, like I don't even know Gavin as well as I thought I did," Khadija said. "Something I learned about him recently is breaking us."

"Nothing can break a marriage if there is trust," Rukia said. "Gavin's dad and I had no secrets. Everything was laid bare. It made it very hard, but it also made it easy to forgive."

"Well, that's the problem," Khadija said. "There are secrets in my marriage."

There was no one she could turn to. Several times she picked up her phone to call Bibiana, but as soon as she dialled the number, she knew she couldn't get through it, so she hung up.

"You make me feel so dirty," Gavin said. "This is just a healthy fetish, a fantasy."

“If it’s a fantasy then why can’t you keep it in your mind? Why do you need to dress in those ridiculous pink panties?”

Khadija thought about Gavin in his pink panties every day. In the kitchen while she cut onions, while she read Malik a story or watched cartoons with him. At traffic lights, her mind ran away with her bewildered thoughts, and the drivers behind her hooted angrily when she didn’t go at green. She started searching for the panties.

The Imam at her mosque was sympathetic. She confessed that she hadn’t been a devout Muslim, and perhaps God was punishing her.

“Could you be a more committed Muslim? Perhaps, yes,” said Imam Muaddth Ali, a heavysset man with a kindness that made Khadija want to lay her head on his chest. His nose made a loud tractor sound when he spoke. He wore a taqiyah. “But Allah doesn’t punish us for our sins. It’s not an eye for an eye.”

“But is it wrong, that he wants to feel like a female; isn’t that a sin?”

“It’s not our job to judge sins. That is Allah’s job. Your job is to pray to Allah for your husband with all your heart.”

Khadija had worn an abaya for her visit with the imam. She played with the seams and embroidery of its wide sleeves, and tugged at the fabric on her neck where the robe met her hijab. She was suffocating, both from the heat of the summer and the humiliation but she believed the discomfort of her abaya was a small gesture of repentance.

“There are so many passages in the Qur’an I can go through with you that discuss these matters in full detail, my daughter,” he said. “There are hadith referring to men and women who do not behave in line with their prescribed gender role and references to men who dress like women being cursed. There’s a hadith instructing people to turn effeminate men and women who assume the manners of men out of their houses. My daughter, these are not issues we can discuss in one moment.” He pulled out a white cloth and wiped his misty forehead.

She found herself repulsed in a way that shamed her; *he* should have been repulsed by her confession, she thought.

“The first thing you must do is pray to Allah on this. Second, you must go with your husband to marriage counselling. Marriage is not a one-man journey. He must dig deep to understand his deviance and you must be in the trenches with him, forgive him, help him walk into the light.”

“Absolutely not,” Gavin said as he tossed his dirty clothes in a basket. He was in the bathroom about to shower when Khadija told him she had been to see an imam. “I won’t go for counselling specifically because you went behind my back to talk about me with a stranger. Who else will you tell? The neighbours? It’s a complete betrayal.”

“Betrayal? What betrayal?” she said, bitterly. “I should be the one singing betrayal. My husband desires to feel like a woman and I’m only finding out after three years of a marriage? I must be a fool.”

In the end Gavin agreed for the sake of peace.

The marriage counsellor, Uthman, was a young Saudi Islamic scholar with a far-reaching understanding of the Qur’an. Khadija was attracted to him, not sexually, but in admiration for a man who could lead her faithfully on a righteous path like her father had done with their family. A man unlike Gavin, who Khadija wished would be more dedicated to Islam.

She had grown tired of placing hints all over their house for him, such as the large bronze plaque on the wall in the dining room – *A family that prays together, stays together*. He was far from devout. He fasted during Ramadan and refrained from eating pork, but he drank freely, had lost his virginity in high school and very rarely prayed five times a day.

Uthman shared his own stories of fallibility – the period in his life when he fought the urge of fornication. “We are living in very different times from the Prophet and the world today is far more demanding of us. We have so many pressures and temptations from the media and the Internet; it make sense one would want to experiment, but we also know Allah’s word and we must use that to guide us.”

On the night in the new home when Bibiana spoke of her visions of a strange man in her room, the resentment all came flooding back to Khadija. Even though it had been years since she found him in the pink panties, she still feared that Gavin had more strange fetishes she wasn't aware of. She watched his chest move up and down as he inhaled and exhaled in his sleep, and the anger stewed inside her. Why did he get to sleep peacefully when she could barely sleep? What other vile secrets did he harbour?

The next morning was dark, windows frosty. It seemed the sun refused to rise. Khadija turned the light on dimly in Malik's room to wake him for school.

"Mama," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Sometimes there's a man in my room."

Her stomach churned; the bile rose to her throat.

"Why would you say that? You know it's not nice to make up stories."

"It's true mama." Malik's eyes were bright, piercing. "He visits all the time. He moves my cars."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"He doesn't speak to me. He is very bright – like the sun."

Khadija glanced around the room for toy cars. They were sprawled around. She couldn't remember if Malik had tidied his toys up the night before. Nerves pulsating, she pulled her husband out of the shower.

“Argh. It's those bizarre stories your sister tells. He obviously overheard you two. Look; if there really is a ghost, at least we know he's a friendly ghost; even a five-year-old is not afraid of him.” He chuckled hard in a way that made Khadija want to smack him across the face.

Bibiana on the other hand wasn't surprised.

“Of course there's a man in his room,” she said. “Small kids don't lie.”

“Gavin thinks I'm nuts,” Khadija said. “I think I should have listened to mama. I think we should have done the du'a.”

That night, Khadija woke to Sasha's loud crying, and the dog barking as if in tandem with her. The green digits on the clock read 4 a.m. The grandfather clock in the dining room sang its usual *dingdong* rhyme. Khadija walked to Sasha's room, across the corridor from the master bedroom.

She was standing in her crib, arms held out, her little face willing Khadija to pick her up. Khadija lifted her out of her crib and sat with her on the blue and white cushioned rocker. On the wall next to the baby's crib, the light of the moon fell on a large mural of kissing giraffes and their calf. Sasha started to calm as Khadija rocked them, the child's tiny

hands intertwined with her own. Simba was still barking when she lay Sasha back in her crib and rubbed her back gently until she drifted off.

The cold crept up Khadija's spine and her warm breath misted in the frigid air as she returned to her bedroom. She tugged her robe tighter around her shivering body and climbed into bed still wearing it. The warmth of the electric blanket enveloped her and she felt the unease leave her as her eyes grew heavy.

A streak like lightning flashed over her eyelids. She opened her eyes and trained them on the window across from her bed. The branches of the jacaranda outside her window swayed in the wind as if moving to the sound of an unheard ballad. There was no rain or thunder. Darkness fell again and she shut her eyes but as she started to doze off there was another flash. A few minutes later, the bedroom door burst wide open, waking both her and Gavin instantly.

“The man! He was in my room,” Bibiana said, completely out of breath. “Just now. He was wandering around as if looking for *something*. He was like the tourists in Lamu who lose their bearings amidst all the mosques. He kept bumping into walls.”

For the first time since the shadow crossed the kitchen window, Gavin looked perturbed. “Keep it down, you're going to wake the kids,” he said. “Are you sure?”

“I’m telling the truth! Allah slay me now if I’m lying.” She raised her eyes to the ceiling, her hands pleading for mercy. “When he finished moving around, he stood still and looked straight through me.”

“What did he look like Bibiana?” Khadija asked. She fumbled for her bedside lamp, knocking it to the floor. Bibiana had been standing at the open door, silhouetted by the soft glow of Sasha’s nightlight across the corridor. Khadija’s knuckles were numb. She had been gripping hard on the sheets since Bibiana burst in. Her whole body was stiff except for her heart, thumping hard.

“He was a man of no colour or race, not happy or sad. He was an image, a shadow bathed in white light. I turned to look behind me, to see what it was he was looking at, but all I saw was the bare wall. When I turned back, he was gone.”

“What?” Gavin was kneading his temples. “Well, the alarm didn’t go off.”

“Well, he wasn’t human,” Bibiana snapped. She was drenched in sweat. Khadija got her a cup of cold water and a wet face towel from the bathroom.

“Before you came in, I saw a flash of light – like lightning, but I was tired and I fell back to sleep,” Khadija said.

“OK. I’ve had it.” Gavin climbed out of bed to whisk Bibiana out of the room. “Don’t you think it’s strange how this *man* showed up just when you arrived?”

“I always knew there was a weird reason the seller got rid of this house so fast,” Khadija said. “When we moved in, the neighbour told me that she hoped we would stay long enough to get to know us. I didn’t know what she meant until now.”

“There is no such thing as a haunted house,” Gavin insisted.

“Malik said he saw the man playing with his cars,” Khadija said. “Bibiana has seen him three times now. Surely, they’re both not making this up. Look at her! She’s trembling.”

“You really need to calm down,” Gavin said.

Khadija couldn’t calm down. Her mother had told her to make *du’a* when they bought the house. She never had.

The next day, Bibiana moved out of the guestroom and into Malik’s room. She told their mother about their ordeals with the man on a long phone call. She painted the tales with broad strokes, amplifying them so that they morphed into something more mysterious and threatening.

Khadija finally admitted to Sarah that she had not performed the cleansing ritual.

“It’s not too late,” Sarah said. “Now do you believe me? You’ve got shaytan, al-jinn, in your house and you need to cleanse it with prayer. The devil is terrified of Allah and only Allah can get rid of him.”

“My mother was right all along,” Khadija said to Gavin when he came home that night. “We should have done the du’a.”

Gavin shook his head and covered his face just like he did when he got home at their old apartment and wouldn’t get out of his car.

“Call the imam, have your du’a, but after that we will never speak of this again,” he said. “No demon is moving me out of my house unless he is paying the bills.”

Bibiana wanted the guest room to be made into a shrine. “It’s the only thing that will keep his spirit at bay. We don’t know what happened to him in this house but we know he thinks he should be here. Du’a needs to be done to help his spirit leave, but his spirit may rest better when he knows that the house recognizes his pain.”

“No shrine; are you joking?” Gavin said. “The du’a will be done and we will move on from this. “Besides, if the goal were to chase the spirit, why would we create a cosy place for him? He’ll never leave!”

Khadija’s beloved Imam Muaddth Ali showed up the following day. He shook Gavin’s hand and introduced himself as if he had never heard about the man who wore pink panties. He shook Bibiana’s hand

and she tightened the hijab around her chin and greeted him with eyes averted.

*“Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh,”* the imam said. “I pray you’re in the best of spirits and health. Now, we shall start with a reading from the Qur’an to ask Allah to make the home a place of baraka, rahma and dhikr – blessing, mercy and remembrance. The Prophet of Allah himself used to seek refuge from the jinns and the evil eye of the human being, so who are we to consider ourselves above it?”

He wore a white thawb under a black bisht that was too tight on the chest. He paced around the home, mumbling in Arabic.

*“A`udhu bi kalimaatillahi taammati min kulli shaytaanin wa haamma wa min kulli `aynin laamma.* I seek refuge in Allah’s most perfect words from every devil, harmful thing, and accusing eye.”

The following day, Bibiana took a wooden stool from the living room and put it in the guest room. On it, she placed a glass vase with a carnation from Khadija’s garden. She twisted a string of prayer beads around the vase and lit a tea candle for an hour every day.

“What’s that about?” Gavin asked Khadija when he saw Bibiana’s burning candle.

“It’s a small shrine – perhaps because we didn’t allow for the whole room to be a shrine,” Khadija said. “It’s the only way she’ll move back to the room.”

“Those candles are a nightmare waiting to happen,” Gavin said. “What happens when, in her mania, she forgets to blow it out and the kids stumble in there and drop it on the carpet? Why do you indulge her neurosis?”

Khadija didn't know.

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The summer heat arrived with an oppressive thud. It became impossible to stay indoors and impossible to stay outdoors. The children spent all their time in the swimming pool, coming into the house only to use the toilet.

Khadija gave Bibiana one of her two brimmed hats and climbed onto a chair to search the top shelf of her closet for the other: a white straw hat with a brown leather band. She retrieved it and started to lower her body down when she caught sight of a small mahogany box she had never seen. She stepped up again and pulled out the box. It was filled with unwrapped Cuban cigars. She wondered where Gavin got them. She'd never seen him smoke, not even a cigarette. Underneath the cigars, a pair of red panties was neatly folded in four. She took them out, dropping the cigars on the floor and immediately recognized them. They were Bibiana's.

She felt nauseous and her legs were as heavy as pillars as she walked back to the swimming pool. Bibiana was playing with Sasha on the steps of the pool, wearing Khadija's yellow brimmed hat and a turquoise swimsuit. Around her waist, she had tied a kikoy.

"How could you?" Khadija held the red satin underwear in Bibiana's face. "How could you sleep with your sister's husband?"

Bibiana stood and took the underwear in her hands. "I've been looking for these for months. Where did you find them?"

"So they are *yours*?" Khadija screamed. "I wasn't sure, but now you've confirmed it. How could you?"

"What are you talking about?" Bibiana said. "I've been missing them, I couldn't find them. Where did you find them?"

"In my closet!" Khadija was still screaming. "In Gavin's things."

Sasha started wailing, but both women ignored her. She was sitting inside a rubber duck with her little legs paddling in the water. Malik stopped his game of ducking under the water to fetch rubber snakes from the floor of the swimming pool.

"That makes no sense," Bibiana said. "Why does he have my underwear?"

Khadija was frantic. "I know you're sleeping with him." She waved her finger in Bibiana's face. "That's why you gave him money behind my back. I can't believe you would do this to me."

“It must be the man,” Bibiana said, deep in thought. None of the accusations seemed to bother her and Khadija wanted to throw her into the pool and hold her head down until she drowned. “He moves things around.”

Khadija felt her mind swell. “You are an idiot!” she screamed. “Gavin’s right, you’re crazy! There is no such thing as a jinn walking around the house, stealing women’s underwear! Tell me the truth.”

“Khadija,” Bibiana said in a calm voice, “if you really think I’m sleeping with your husband, you’re the crazy one. After what Salim did to me, I would never do that to another woman, let alone my own sister.”

Khadija went back to her bedroom and started emptying Gavin’s closet.

She threw out every sock, every pair of boxer shorts and every folded T-shirt and looked in the pockets of every blazer. She found one more pair of panties. They were pink, similar to the pair she found him wearing years before, when she was eight months pregnant with Malik. But this pair was also Bibiana’s.

She fell on the floor and started wailing.

“Khadija,” Bibiana said. “Stop it.” She was holding Sasha on her hip and water from her wet kikoy was pooling around her feet on the cream-colored carpet. “Stop crying like someone died and listen to me: your husband is either stealing my underwear – though I’m not sure why

he would – or the man whose spirit lives in this house is playing tricks on us, moving things.”

Khadija stood up and ran her hands down her thighs as if she was brushing lint off. Then she tilted her head up, raised her chin and straightened her back like a cadet. She started to pick up the clothes she had tossed out of the drawers.

“I don’t trust Gavin,” Bibiana said. “I never have. I saw him once at the mall. You dropped me off so I could buy myself a few clothes. Do you remember? I saw him inside a lingerie shop. I waved at him from the outside but he pretended he didn’t see me, so I went in. He seemed embarrassed. He told me he was buying you something for your anniversary. He asked me not to spoil the surprise. But something didn’t sit right. I see right through him.”

“Did you tell Mama all this, on the phone?” Khadija said. She could feel the anger rising. “I know you tell her everything.”

“Yes,” Bibiana said. “I told her that I suspect Gavin is cheating and I’m wondering if I should tell you.”

“Why’d you do that? Why are you talking about my marriage behind my back? So that you could show her you’re not the only one with a bad marriage?”

Bibiana remained silent. Her turquoise swimsuit emphasized her cleavage. Her thick black hair was loose on her shoulders. Her skin was

radiant. It seemed to Khadija that Bibiana had never looked more beautiful, not even on her wedding day. Perhaps it was the glee of watching her sister crumble that gave her such a glow, Khadija thought.

“You’ve always been jealous of me,” Khadija said. “You couldn’t stand it that I got to leave Lamu, go to university and make my own money while all you did with your life was become someone’s wife, someone who didn’t even love you. How that must sting.”

“Khadija, I wish someone had told me Salim didn’t love me before I wasted my life sitting around, waiting for him. I felt like such a fool. Wouldn’t you rather know if Gavin was being unfaithful?”

“Well, how nice of you to help me.” She was growling and it scared her. “Is that the reason you agreed to giving him money behind my back? To help me? Or to help yourself, because now we are entwined, right? How do I ask you to leave when we owe you R500,000? Gavin was right. I should have never asked you to come here.”

Khadija went into the bathroom and shut the door. Too many thoughts ran rampant in her mind. She knew what Gavin was. She knew he had a fetish she didn’t understand. But she thought he had left the secrets behind. So why was she blaming her sister? Or was the spirit man moving things like Bibiana said, to make his presence known?

She left the bathroom and went to the guest room. Bibiana was unfolding her sajjada and lighting a tea candle. Khadija looked at her

watch. It was 3:30 p.m. – salat time. She watched Bibiana bend on her rug, kiss the ground then rise again.

A tea candle was burning in front of the vase of the little shrine, creating a reflection on the glass. It was beautiful, Khadija thought. Bibiana was right. A shrine was good.

She knelt beside her sister, her palms on her knees, and together they bent down, stood up and bent down again. Bibiana prayed for her sister's marriage. Khadija prayed for her sanity.

## THE BLESSING OF KALI

My granddaughter was born in a leap year, the year of confusion, *mwaka mrefu*.

She was born in a bathtub filled with warm water. I had never seen that even though, at sixty-five, I thought I'd seen everything. I was told that the new way to give birth is in water. I was told that it's soothing for mother and child. I was told a quiet atmosphere is important. I was given a chair and asked to please stay in the corner and not speak. I did as I was told.

Tessa's birth was strange. Outside, the moon shone in red and orange shades like it was on fire. Inside, the screams of my daughter-in-law were maniacal.

"My back is breaking, my back is breaking, my back is breaking," Angie chanted for hours.

Then, as if out of nowhere, Tessa's head crowned and Angie was silenced. She had so much pitch-black hair that my son, Mark, collapsed and smacked his head on the edge of the bathtub while he rubbed Angie's back in the throes of her agony. He lay on the floor, bleeding profusely from a gash on his forehead.

In that moment, Tessa floated out of her mother's body into the warm water and stayed in there for a minute or so in perfect harmony with the waves of the bath, seeming not to need breath. The midwife lifted her out of the water and laid her on her mother's chest. She was chalky and covered with bright red bits of afterbirth.

My daughter-in-law was breathless from the pain and the miracle she had pulled through, yet screaming for her husband who she said was dead on the floor. The nurses brought him back to consciousness with a pale pink strip doused in smelling salts, and then stitched his head.

Afterwards, Tessa was wiped down and swaddled tight as a mummy in a cotton blanket and handed to Mark, who was still jarred by the speed of the night's events. He held his daughter far from his chest like a football waiting to be passed on. But after a while, with no lesson in fatherhood, he cradled her close as the midwife demonstrated, and fell in love with her completely.

By the window, in the corner of the birthing room, I sat watching with the solemnity of old age. I knew without a doubt that this child's life would be extraordinary. *Maisha ya kuigiza*; a life of high drama.

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Mark returned from America after eighteen years with an African American wife with whom I had nothing in common. They bought a house my husband and I would have never bought. The kind that said, *I am here, and I am rich*. It was not far from where Mark grew up on a modest farmhouse in Karen, the remnants of the land Karen Blixen owned when she wrote the colonial memoir *Out of Africa*.

The new Karen was different. The old generation – mostly farmers – had left, selling their properties to developers who subdivided the land to build high-class gated communities. Mark and Angie bought one of the homes and became a part of Nairobi's matajiri, the rich ones. Their neighbourhood was surrounded by high stone walls and electric fences.

The view from their wide windows stretched out over the Ngong Forest to the outline of the Ngong hills. The air smelled like freshly mowed grass and the only sounds were the occasional barking of dogs and the singing of the speckled pigeons.

The neighbours were similar to Mark and Angie – educated couples with money to spare, who spent millions of shillings to live far from the city so they would not have to breathe the smog.

We taught Mark Kiswahili and Kikuyu as a child. It was part of his identity, we said. But, in Mark's new neighbourhood, the children gave me blank stares when I greeted them with '*habari toto*'.

They attended international schools, only spoke English and

French, and grew up never having seen the daily migration of haggard Kenyans walking to and from poor-people jobs on dusty pavements in pounding heat or rain. At the main entrance gates, two askaris carrying guns in black holsters wrote the names of guests on a clipboard and then called the house to announce the guests' arrival.

Mark grew up on a large farm in the old Karen; no paved roads, streetlights, large gates or gun-totting askaris. We grew roses for export and kept fat dairy cows for commercial milk and yoghurt. Our hidden driveway was an unmarked dirt road that branched unexpectedly off the main road.

Mark's new house was built in a modern style with no rules that I could understand, unlike the house my husband and I had built – a country style cottage with a wrap-around porch where we watched Mark learn to ride his bicycle. The new houses had strange geometrical shapes. They had clear glass doors that I walked into once while carrying my gardening pots.

They had oversized windows for admiring views, not for opening. They had steep roofs with great overhangs so that they resembled churches. We had taught Mark that a car is a box on wheels and a house is a roof over your head, but he and Angie loved their cathedral-like home, a remote-controlled garage, and shiny cars parked on a long spiral driveway– if it wasn't showy, it wasn't good enough.

“Ma, we just want a classy house that we can live in for a long time; it’s an investment,” Mark said. “It’s not showing off, if you’ve earned it with hard work.”

The times had changed. It was no longer shameful to wear your wealth out in the open like a bright red dress in a sea of black-clothed mourners, and it was fine, as well, to only mingle with those who looked and lived like you did.

Until his death, Kamau had driven the same old pickup truck since Mark was a child, yet he was not a poor man. His funeral was a large gathering of hundreds of people, all from different walks – poor, rich, town and rural. He had mixed with everyone. But one face stood out. I was following slowly behind the procession of pallbearers in the church aisle when I caught a glimpse of the shoeless mzee. For years, he came around our farm and wouldn’t tell us where he lived. He wouldn’t take offerings of money or clothing. Kamau treated him like a good son would treat his father. He ate with him and gave him small jobs – washing cars, painting yards. During harvest, he was given daily work, and though he was slow he was attentive and his pace was steady. I saw him sitting in the back row, head down, hands on his wooden stick. He had no shoes, but he was dressed in his best shirt.

The kitchen at Mark’s house was the only place where I felt at ease, invisible. Angie would tell me that it was my home too. But isn’t that

what I had told my mother-in-law thirty-six years ago, when Mark was born, when she would drop in as many times as she pleased? The memory of it still makes me shudder – the way she did everything over after I had done it, cooked everything her way.

“These chapattis are too thick!” She would grab the rolling pin and hold it with her elbows turned upwards and her wrists firmly pressing down on the round of dough. “Here – let me roll them out,” she would say, pushing me out of the way. “You fry.”

So I would stand next to the blazing jiko, sweat dripping down my temples, turning each chapatti round in circles to distribute the heat like I was told, but then she would drop the rolling pin and push me aside. “Nkt! You’re cooking them too long and the heat is too high – look, they are as tough as a cow’s hide.”

I sat in the tiny nook at the bay window in the kitchen one evening, humming songs I had learned as a little girl. I shucked corn on my old sisal tray, picked out the stones from the rice and pounded irio, watching the black beans mix in an intricate pattern into the potatoes and plantains.

Outside, Mark and Angie were chatting with their new neighbours in the garden over icy, sweating beers and expensive South African wine. Dr Shree Rego, a forty-something Indian neurologist with cascading waves of thick hair, had returned to Kenya after decades in the UK. Shree’s wife, Mandy, was English, but Shree made an effort to sound

even more English than her. Mandy was a petite blonde. Her bust seemed too big for her small frame. Her red nails were too long and filed in unnatural square-shape.

“This city is bursting out of its seams – too many humans, too many cars; it’s not the way I remember it growing up,” Mark said.

He had developed a new way of speaking – prolonging vowels and cutting words short. Angie said he had picked up a Boston drawl – whatever that was.

“The traffic; it’s hellish. Sometimes I sit in the car for an hour without moving an inch. What other city in the world has traffic at dawn on a Sunday? Most times, I change into my sneakers and start walking, and the driver catches up with me many kilometres ahead.” He held his head in his hands like he was about to break down crying.

I caught myself sneering. He was no longer the little boy who had always been too sensitive, worrying about the shoeless village kids and the township people on the news who were losing their shacks to floods. Now, I saw a man who was out of touch with reality but continued to moan about simple problems in his life while his friends sympathized and nodded with pity as if he was crying about the huge number of Kenyans killed by AIDS.

“Do you actually keep sneakers in your car?” Shree asked, sounding critical. “Is that an American thing?”

“What can I do?” Mark flapped his arms like a rooster that knows it’s about to be slaughtered for dinner. “It’s the only way I keep from completely going batshit crazy. It’s a broken system – nothing works. Sometimes I feel like I’m a fan desperately trying to cool the air on an impossibly hot day. But instead of trying to make it work, Kenyans have become complacent. I don’t know how many times people have been late for important meetings and excused themselves by blaming the traffic. It’s bullshit. It’s laziness. We all know what the traffic is like, so if you’ve got an 8 a.m. meeting, leave your at house at 5 a.m. to be on time.”

“Mark genuinely has a low threshold for traffic,” Angie said. “Actually, for anything that wastes his time. But what really got me when I moved here were the little things I took for granted back home – like deodorant.” She shook her head with disbelief, and Mandy laughed so hard that dark red wine sprayed out her mouth. “People don’t wear deodorant. I dread it whenever I have to queue for something, or ride in an elevator with a bunch of folks – I’ve become so good at holding my breath. They are marketing deo like it’s a luxury but it’s not!”

“That’s ridiculous,” Shree said. “We are talking about a country that’s been ranked sixth on the extreme poverty index and with no welfare system. Poor Americans can buy deo on your taxes. Kenyans are trying to give their kids two meals a day.”

“Don’t you think I know the situation here?” Angie barked. “Mark and I are involved in a project with the UN-Habitat to bring clean water into Kibera. Every time I go there with the UN guys, I’m hopping over raw sewerage, watching kids fetch water from a filthy dam. People are dying from typhoid and cholera in the twenty-first century. So yeah, of course I know deo is a luxury but it doesn’t make it easier going up ten floors on a slow-ass elevator that smells like a sweatshop.”

“Hey! How about a road trip?” Mandy said, cutting in. “I’ve been dying to go to Masaai Mara.”

The mood had gone cold. Angie walked back into the house, past where I sat in my nook in the kitchen, as if I didn’t exist, and slammed the door to the bathroom.

“You’re right honey,” Shree said. “I owe you a safari.”

He looked over at Mark, who was swirling his beer.

“We were supposed to do it for our honeymoon but life got in the way,” he said.

“Yeah, that happens,” Mark said. He excused himself and went after Angie, walking past me just as she had. He looked around the house and came back into the kitchen after failing to find his wife.

“Ma, have you seen Angie?” I pointed to the bathroom.

Outside, Shree and Mandy stood stiffly, sipping their wine.

“What?” Shree said, putting his hands up like he was being robbed at gunpoint. “Don’t look at me like that. She’s not Kenyan. She has no right.”

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Shree and Mandy were older than Mark and Angie but they had no children. Mandy was as an independent interior designer, charging wealthy Kenyans baskets of money for advice on something she called “yin and yang”.

She was designing a teardrop-shaped swimming pool for her own home and often brought Angie brochures about pool tiling and garden lights. Together they would pour wine for hours and marvel over images of lighting fixtures and soft furnishings on their computers. Angie said Mandy had designed interiors for castles in the UK and had brilliant vision. She offered to pay her for a few “sprucing up” ideas for the house.

I heard Kamau’s voice chattering madly in my head: *We behave like buffoons around white people – a man will use his whole inheritance to buy an empty box if a white man is selling it; that’s how we lost our continent to them.*

I chuckled to myself.

“Ma? Something funny?” Angie said.

“No, nothing at all,” I said, and took my pot of tea with me to sit outside in the garden.

I learned that Shree and Mandy couldn’t have children when I watched them play with my granddaughter for the first time. She was sitting on a play mat in the kitchen. Mandy sat cross-legged on the mat and taught Tessa how to build a tower with large pieces of Lego. I heard Angie ask her if she had ever wanted children. Mandy said she’d tried, had fertility treatments and couldn’t do it any more.

“What are you two talking about?” Shree said. He’d walked into the room mid-conversation and found Tessa on Mandy’s lap.

“Nothing,” Mandy said. An uncomfortable silence fell. “Just kids.”

“Oh yeah, kids,” Shree said. “We decided against them – they’re cute and all but there’s also joy in freedom. Our passion is travel, food and art and Dolly is our baby.”

I busied myself frying plantain on the stove and shook my head with pity for his foolish lies. Children were not dogs, nor were dogs children, and Dolly looked like a porcupine.

When Tessa was born, Angie took maternity leave and was on her computer every day. As soon as the three months were up, she sped back to work as if she couldn’t bear a minute longer at home. She told Mark that being a full-time mother “bored the shit out of her!”

Just a month after she returned to work, Angie found out she was pregnant again. She immediately told Mark that she wasn't going to have the baby. She said Tessa wasn't even teething yet and her career would take a hit. Mark came to me in despair. He spent full days pouting like a fresh mahamri, the fried dough that was his weakness, but Angie wasn't shaken. The tension between them hovered around the house for days. When I was in the same room with them, they only exchanged empty pleasantries such as "Tessa smiled today."

Angie's gynecologist carried out the abortion ten weeks into the pregnancy. She never told me. She didn't know that Mark had shared her darkest secret. I wished Mark hadn't told me. I hated her. I wished I didn't live in their home.

Two years ago I had buried my husband. On a beautiful day in August when the chill was gone and the sun not too hot, he'd slumped over on the wooden swing in the garden where we had sat together for years reading and drinking chai. I was in the kitchen pouring him a glass of water. It wasn't the kind of day a person died – the sky was blue, the trees rustled in the breeze, and the birds chirped – and he was a healthy seventy-two-year-old man.

Death is crafty in that way. He reels us in on perfect days, calls to us like voices whispering behind pine trees. Kamau's death threw me hard. It felt like I'd been pushed off a high bridge, blindfolded and hands

tied, into a turbulent river. Each day I struggled against the sensation of drowning, of swallowing water and not being able to come up for air. The loneliness beckoned at my bedroom door and the only place I felt safe was under my bed. One day Mark found me there and called Angie. She came over and bathed me, and then they brought me to live with them.

The shouting upstairs in their bedroom curled my shoulders inward with anxiety. I heard Tessa crying in the background, so I knocked on their door and asked for the baby. Mark was cursing, using swear words he would have never used growing up, words I shall not repeat here.

“Angie, you’re selfish,” he said. “Let’s be honest here; you always put your career first, before me, before everything else – the baby hasn’t changed anything.”

Angie had warm, bright hazel eyes in the shape of almonds. She had chiselled cheekbones, deep dimples and a peculiarly long chin. She was petite and when standing next to Mark – who nearly grazed the frame of every doorway he walked through – she looked like a child. I imagined what they looked like fighting behind closed doors, Angie’s small hands pushing on Mark’s broad chest.

“You’re the one who wanted to move back to Kenya. I gave up my job in Boston for you and had to start from scratch but you seem to forget that little nugget.” Her voice was breaking with anger. “You always knew who I was. You knew I wasn’t the kind to be a stay-at-home

mom. My job is what keeps me from losing it in this crazy country where nothing works. Now I'm supposed to sit at home wiping our child's bum all day?"

On most days, Angie ran out of the house so fast her hurried goodbye was cut short by the slamming of the front door. When she returned to work she was told that, with the new baby, it was understandable that she couldn't manage the long hours required, so some of her bigger portfolios had been passed on to other lawyers. The partners let her know they were being generous by giving her less responsibility. Angie was livid.

"I feel like I've been castrated," she said. "I worked on those cases for months, right through maternity leave. How is this even fair? In the States, this would *totally* be grounds for suing."

Mark told her to look at it as a silver lining – now she could spend more time with Tessa. That put her into another rage. She paced around the kitchen, rambling on about the "African male syndrome" and the "caveman syndrome" – syndromes I had never heard of. She busied herself with nothing – opening the lids of boiling pots and closing them – and spoke with such raw emotion that I didn't know if I should cheer her on or console her.

"You're just like them," Angie said bitterly. She pulled a dining chair out and slumped down hard on it like a flailing boxer. "I'm dealing

with men who had the audacity to ask me at the interview, ‘Are you planning on keeping your legs closed?’ I’m still reeling from that but when I told you about it, you laughed it off as normal.”

“Maybe you should move back to the States,” Mark said, shrugging dramatically, “if you’re going to keep bringing it up every five minutes. This is a patriarchal society. You have to get used to it.”

“Maybe I can’t get used to it. Maybe I made a mistake. But I’ll tell you now, I’m not gonna lie down and let these guys take what’s mine. So from now on I’ll play hardball – you’ve been warned.”

The next Friday night, she called Mark to report that she would be late getting home because she had decided to go for the after-work happy hour at the Norfolk pub with “the guys”. The Friday after that it was drinks at a Japanese-sounding place.

She paid for golf lessons with a pro and put her name up on the office golfing roster. Often, she would be on the course at first light on Saturday mornings, straight after breastfeeding Tessa.

“I will schmooze my way into the entire stuffy, Nairobi lawyers’ clique if I have to,” she declared.

But even if Angie was selfish, I could see that she loved her daughter. In the early mornings I watched her cradle Tessa on the rocking chair in her bedroom. She traced her fingers all over Tessa’s body while

she breastfed. I saw a shadow cross her face like a fog because she knew it would be twelve hours before she held Tessa again.

In the evenings, Mark came home to give Tessa a bath. I told him how much I admired that; Kamau had not changed a single nappy.

“How could you let Dad get away with doing nothing?” Mark asked.

“Oh, quit the whining,” Angie said. “At least you had a father.”

On a particularly hot Sunday, I returned to church. I hadn't been since Kamau's funeral, when I had felt the sudden urge to stab Father Robert, the Irish priest who spoke in fluent Swahili. He had spoken about how God had a bigger plan for us, and though we would never know why he took my beloved husband of forty years, we could be comforted by the knowledge that it was part of God's plan and that Kamau was in a better place.

I wanted to say, “Mshenzi! Fool, have you ever died and visited God and seen for yourself that there is a better place?”

But I had no time to fight with him. The day was running faster than me and the coffin was in the ground too soon. When Father Robert put his hand on my shoulder and said, “It'll get easier with time,” I turned to reply, but all I wanted to do was spit at him.

A year later, I told myself I was ready to light a candle at the altar for my Kamau. I stood at the mirror in the red feather corsage that was

my husband's favourite and stroked the necklace of pearls he had given me. I sat in the third pew, the same place we had sat for years each Sunday.

The church fans were still because of the power cuts and sweat soaked my turtleneck. My head grew heavy and my hands were trembling. A fidgety child next to me knocked rhythmically on the wooden pew with sparkly pink shoes for the entire service. Her mother pretended not to hear it and the *tap-tap-tap* pounded through my temples. I felt my body float away.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying in a cool, dark corner of the church. Above me stood the Virgin dressed in a red gown, her head lowered in humility, one hand clasping the rosary, and the other cradling the baby Jesus. Father Robert was talking to me. I tried to sit up but my head fell back down with weakness. The doctor said I had diabetes. My blood sugar was so low that I fainted.

As Tessa grew into her second year, she became faster and I became tired more often even though I ate frequent small meals. I heard Angie tell Mark that I could not watch Tessa any more. They were eating together while watching a tennis match on television. Mark said babysitting at least part-time would be good for me, and his tone let her know it was no good arguing.

Several nannies were hired but then abruptly fired. It didn't take much for Angie to fire a nanny, and it didn't take long either. One nanny, who was hired for her degree in childhood education, was fired for being "too sassy". Another was fired when Angie returned home early one evening and saw that Tessa looked different. She held the child up to the light streaming through the kitchen window and examined her closely, brows furrowed.

"Has she changed? Her face looks thinner ... I don't know, maybe she's had a growth spurt?"

When I told her Tessa's hair had been lightly snipped she went to find the nanny, who was tidying up Tessa's toys.

"Answer me one thing. How could you grant yourself the liberty to give another person's child her first haircut? A first haircut! Surely that is a mother's role? Or am I being completely unreasonable here? What are you gonna do next?"

The third nanny was fired for being too chatty with the housekeeper, Nyamunya. Angie came home to find the women in the kitchen, eating intimately with their hands from bowls of ugali and matumbo while singing along to soft Lingala music on Nyamunya's small stereo.

"What is this, the Buena Vista Social Club?" she asked, standing in the doorway with her laptop bag still in hand.

I didn't know what the Buena Vista Club was but I knew it wasn't a good club.

“Take your things and leave.”

Angie didn't like it that we all spoke languages she did not understand. Nyamunya and I communicated in Kikuyu; Nyamunya and Mark communicated in Kiswahili. When Angie walked into a room, she cleared her throat.

“American incoming, speak English,” she would say, pretending not to be upset.

She asked me ask to speak to Tessa in English.

“I'm an old Kenyan woman, so I shall speak to any child or grandchild of mine in whatever language I please,” I said firmly. “Besides you wouldn't want Tessa speaking my broken granny's English, would you?”

Our language became adulterous. It felt like we were doing something wrong even when the topic of discussion was something as inane as an expected rain shower. Sometimes I would forget Angie was in the room and speak to Mark in Kikuyu. And sometimes I would not forget but the urge to talk to him would overwhelm me and I'd ignore her. Mark's body would stiffen when Angie's angry eyes bore into his, and he would revert to English.

Priya Shah was the fourth nanny. She was unlike the others because she had never been a nanny. She got the job because she'd raised three boys who all ended up at Oxford University. Angie said she would never know whether or not the boys were always bathed and fed, or were polite or insolent, but one thing she did know, without a shadow of doubt, was that Priya must have done something thing right because "Oxford don't take no riff raff."

"I don't know honey; it feels odd," Mark said with a shrug over dinner that night. "Ma, don't you think it's a bit strange? Indians are the elite in Kenya. It's weird – a rich Indian housewife who wants to work as our nanny? The whole thing is upside down."

Priya was a healthy fifty-six-year-old woman recently widowed, looking for something meaningful to do with a whole new life that she didn't understand. I felt that I knew Priya because I *was* Priya, and I knew that as soon as she had her first grandchild, she would vanish.

"Look, you guys can debate all day about Indians this and Indians that," Angie said, pointing at each of us with her fork. "I'm not even going to get into the weird dynamic between blacks and Indians. What I do know is that there are no bums at Oxford – they wouldn't last a month. The fact is she's got three kids there – I'm sold."

Priya wore a tiny gold ring in her left nostril and a Bindi on her forehead. She left the scents of camphor and sandalwood behind her, so

we always knew where to find her in the large house. Her hair smelled of coconut oil and on the days when her fingertips were stained bright yellow, she also carried traces of turmeric and garlic on her breath.

Priya and I become unlikely friends. She was a decade younger than me. We were from different cultural backgrounds, different religions and under any other circumstances, we would never have socialized. She mesmerized me in every way. She wore gold rings on her toes, always with leather sandals.

Her belly rolled with tyres of fat, yet somehow she managed to fit into stretchy tank tops that held her bust tight. Her silk saris were deep shades of gold, green, red, orange and yellow, embellished with sequins and embroidery. I so admired them that one day she brought me one. She took me to the bedroom and showed me how to wear it, layering the red fabric around, stretching on the tank top and using another layer worn like a sash to cover up. The fabric felt soft on my skin and the sari was light and airy. She said I looked younger than my years but in the mirror I thought I looked like a fool.

“How come I’m not good enough for her?” Nyamunya asked me, while we sat in the kitchen one evening, discussing Priya. “How come I don’t get any gifts?”

Nyamunya was tall and light-skinned with a rounded bottom, but not too rounded that it would be the first thing a man saw. At work she

wrapped her head in a bright floral cotton cloth but inside her scarf her hair was shiny and thick.

I had seen Mark look at her in that way men do when they are in a room with a desirable woman. Nyamunya liked it.

“Let me do that for you,” she’d say when he tried to do even the simplest thing, like dishing his own food or pouring milk. She would wedge herself between him and the stove or the fridge, and reach over him while he ate so that he could not avoid being aware of her breasts.

Priya would mutter under her breath, look over at me and shake her head. “Look how she just leaves the onions frying,” she complained. “She will burn the house down with this foolishness over a married man.” We both laughed quietly even though we did not approve.

“It’s amazing how any woman can steal a man’s heart,” I said to Angie, hoping she would open her eyes. We were sitting in the garden watching Tessa soaking in a rubber tub shaped like a duck. “Even the ugliest woman can steal a man’s heart. Men are very simple creatures.”

“I think it depends on the man,” Angie said. Her large square sunglasses covered her face and she spoke with her eyes fixed on Tessa. “Some men are just not the type to run around with a floozy, while some men will chase after anyone who strokes their ego, even a paraplegic. Thank God Mark is not the type.”

Angie never got upset with Nyamunya. It was only ever the nannies. Priya, on the other hand, had no time for Nyamunya's whims; she treated Nyamunya as *her* maid, ordering her to cut this, mince that, blend this, bring a fresh burp cloth, fetch a nappy. When Nyamunya protested, Priya said her only job was to watch the baby.

"I'm not the maid." She'd wave her index finger in Nyamunya's face. "Actually, you are employed to help me. I'm not employed to help you *neh?*"

As soon as Priya turned around, Nyamunya sneered at her, mouthing '*actuuaally*' and moving her head from side to side like a dancing cobra.

Priya had unusual ways. She spent her days dancing and clapping along to Bhangra music on the Bollywood channel on television. Tessa would screech every time Priya swayed and moved her arms, four times to every beat, her big golden bangles clanking around her wrists, while casually adjusting meters of silk around her waist and shoulder. When Priya said goodbye in the evenings, Tessa cried so intensely that I had to keep her distracted in another room.

Angie took to moaning about Priya every day when she arrived from work. "Priya leaves her damn B.O. on the baby, on everything."

She particularly disliked how Priya was working to change Tessa's palate by sprinkling pinches of curry powder and chilli in Tessa's meals, saying it was important for her to learn to eat stronger flavours.

“Chilli is good for digestion and blood circulation,” Priya said. “The only thing worse than bland food is meat.”

She taught me how to pan fry iron-rich vegetables with the right amount of garlic, tomato paste and curry, and we started to eat more chickpeas, tofu and fish. At first, Tessa contorted her little face when fed the sauces, but after a while she wouldn't eat anything that didn't have at least a mild, lingering taste of curry, not even a peanut butter and jam sandwich, which drove Angie mad, because it was what she ate as a child. In the fridge, Priya always left homemade Indian confectionery, mango lassi and spiced rice puddings. Angie served it to Tessa and watched painfully as she lapped it all up.

Tessa started refusing to eat hamburgers and hot dogs, even on the days she was allowed to make her own food – arranging a sausage in a bun was something she had once loved to do. Mark and Angie tried every trick, promising ice cream and cookies or an extra hour of cartoons.

Over dinner she fed small pieces of meat and chicken to Angie's American cat, Lazybones, the way Priya did, and it drove Angie mad.

“Look, now Tessa won’t even eat the things we eat – she’s trying to inculcate Tessa with her culture” Angie said in a despairing voice. “She’s even talking to her in Hindi.”

Being in Mark and Angie’s home, caring for the same child, cooking together, we learned that we had much in common. Priya and I were both mothers of children who had left the country and become people we no longer knew. We were from the same generation of women – wives who allowed their husbands to shepherd the home.

She’d been a stay-at-home mom her whole life. One after the other, her children had grown up and left the house to study in the UK, and she developed a fierce restlessness. Unable to adjust, she continued to cook the same meal portions. She found comfort at the stove, turning the dough, watching it rise, stirring the curries. In the evenings, she’d watched her husband spoon food into his mouth, spurring him on, like he was a toddler.

“Eat, eat, you must eat,” she pushed him. “There’s more roti and more cauliflower and lentil curry – all for you.”

At first, he enjoyed the incessant attention, but with time he started to dread the numerous phone calls, and the questions about where he was going and what time he would be home.

“It was like there was another Priya doing all the things I knew annoyed him, but I couldn’t stop her.” She looked perplexed by all of it –

as if it hadn't happened to her, as if it was someone else's story. "I knew he liked to be alone in the evenings, but I was so lonely during the day that I would buzz over him from the minute he walked through the front door. I was driving him mad but I couldn't stop myself. Then one day, we were having an argument – about what, I don't even remember – and he just dropped dead of a heart attack. Right in front of me. He died in our living room and I became completely lost."

Priya had tried to live in England with her oldest son for a year, but his wife, a second-generation English-Indian woman, didn't like her.

"If you saw the way she talked to me, you would have shed a tear," Priya said. "She is smart, beautiful, everything. I met her parents – they're good people. But the women now, they're so different. Quick tongues; they speak their minds in the moment and say things they cannot take back."

I nodded. It was the same with Angie.

I poured Priya more tea. She drank hers holding the cup to her lips with one hand and the saucer with the other. We listened to Tessa's breathing on the baby monitor.

Our children had changed and it was a difficult thing to admit. Priya's sons had been given everything growing up, but after becoming adults, they seemed ungrateful, and ashamed of her.

“When I visited the oldest one, he said I was cooking too much, all the time frying things, and the neighbours could smell the ghee and the curries all the way from the ground floor. That was when I knew I had to come back home. I’d rather be lonely than be insulted by my own children.”

It was the same with Mark, I said. His life had been paved with good fortune. He grew up an only child who everyone fussed over like a hatching egg. He went to St. Andrews, Turi where his classmates were children of tycoons. He went to Harvard without a scholarship or a student loan – a free ride from his father – while most Americans in his class, like Angie, juggled two part-time jobs.

“But I feel like I lost him somehow,” I said. “I’m proud of him but something is amiss. I keep asking myself, would the Mark my husband and I raised buy this kind of house? Would he drive a big, shiny, red Mercedes? What good is their money if their child won’t be able to speak the language of her ancestors?”

“It’s of no good,” Priya said, and we shook our heads.

The day before Tessa’s third birthday, Priya took her to the mall and brought her back wearing child-sized gold bangles coated with a sprinkle of pink sparkles. Angie smiled and picked up the child, then noticed that her ears were adorned with gold studs. She broke into the

kind of yelling where her American accent became so strong that I couldn't make out her words, except, "Oh, hell no!"

Tessa started to cry so I took her from Angie and went to the next room. Priya insisted that Tessa loved the earrings and wasn't in any pain. She took out a brown bag with a bottle of methylated spirit and handed it to Angie.

"You just dab and wipe and turn it, every day, just turn it," Priya said. "It's 100 per cent surgical steel – the earrings. Hindu children wear jewellery to temple – maybe Tessa also can wear to church, neh?"

The next day, Tessa blew out her birthday candles in gold heart studs. We put the picture of her smiling face on the fridge door.

It was soon after piercing Tessa's ears that Priya arrived with the first god statue – a pink, pot-bellied elephant man riding a plump white mouse. She called him Ganesh and placed him at the entrance hall.

He had four arms and he was very important to her. Every day when she came in she would return him to the front door, right below the coat hanger, after finding that he'd been moved to the pantry. Another god arrived soon after Ganesh. This one sat cross-legged on the mantle with arms stretched out in meditation. She told me he was named Shiva, the great god – ruler of all the other gods.

A few weeks later, yet another god made his entrance. He was a dark blue fellow who sat up straight with one leg over the other, like a

yogi. He wore a red headwrap and played a harp. Priya was very proud of him and set him in the lounge by the piano. She called him Krishna and told Nyamunya and me that he represented dance, music, philosophy and all things enlightened.

Mandy completed her swimming pool. It was big enough that Shree could swim lengths as daily exercise. The tiles inside were silver and blue, and they reflected the light, giving the pool a magical shimmer. There was a pebble design around the pool and, on one end, a little fountain. We spent more and more time at Shree and Mandy's now that they had a pool. I enjoyed dipping my feet and Tessa wore her armband floaters and paddled around at the shallow end. Angie was very impressed with the pool and wanted one too, but said they were going to wait until Tessa could swim.

While whiling the afternoon away in the water on a warm Saturday, Angie climbed out and walked back to our house using the wooden gate in the Kei apple fence between the homes. The gate had a click latch that provided easy access for adults but was impossible for a child to open, and we often streamed in and out of each other's properties delivering food or anything else the two couples shared.

When she returned, Angie came carrying Priya's gods in her bright pink sarong as if they were rocks. She laid them, one by one, on Shree's patio table, right next to the foil-wrapped meats and potato salad.

“Shree, would you please tell me what these things are?” Angie asked. “I feel like our nanny is trying to put a spell on us and frankly, it’s a tad creepy.”

Shree bent over to examine the gods, and turned each one around.

“I haven’t got a bloody clue,” he said.

Angie looked flummoxed. “What do you mean? But you’re ...”

“Incorrect,” Shree said. “I am not Hindu.”

Shree explained that his family had moved from Goa to Kenya three generations past. He was raised Catholic but stopped going to church. He picked up the gods one by one, holding them over his head in the light. “Of all the Indians in this country, you had to find the one who is not Hindu.”

“What a bummer,” Angie said. Mark remained quiet, cutting up a seared slab of rare sirloin.

“You have to admit, it is quite a fascinating religion,” Mandy said, collecting the gods from Shree and lining them all up again, studying them closely. “I mean, why pray to one god – it shouldn’t be a monopoly. Christianity is so humdrum – it needs a total makeover.”

Everyone laughed and I felt a smile cross my lips. Mandy had a way with words.

“Do you know, the other day, I came by your house to pick up something or other, I can’t recall, and I found Priya sitting cross-legged on the study floor with Tessa and they were praying,” Mandy said.

“What? Are you sure?” Angie asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yes. They were sitting across from each other, holding hands, and she had all these little gods surrounding them. She was teaching Tessa how to meditate. It was a really powerful image – and there was such an atmosphere of peace, it made me almost want to join them ...” She stroked Krishna and his harp. “I wonder what’s special about this little fellow.”

I saw Angie look sharply at me and I felt my heart plummet. I knew Priya prayed with Tessa. I had kept it from Angie, even asked Nyamunya not to say anything. I didn’t understand the gods, but I understood Priya. She was a spiritual and prayerful woman. I trusted her. She was the only one in the house who really understood my pain: how much I missed my husband, how chaotic my life had become, how misplaced I felt, how useless I felt, why I had drifted away from my old friends. Mark asked me once about my friends, saying I hadn’t made an effort to reach out. I didn’t want to tell him that they all still had their husbands and it was too painful for me to be around them. That was the kind of thing I didn’t have to tell Priya, because she already knew.

Still, the gods confused me. Lakshmi arrived soon after, standing on a lotus with all four arms lifted in praise. Angie began to hyperventilate but Mark cooled her down like summer rain after a heat wave. It was the arrival of the goddess Kali with her ten legs, ten arms and ten heads that tipped Angie over the edge.

Priya's devotion to Kali was greater than to any of the other gods. She said praying to the goddess had made her the best mother she could be. I was afraid of Kali. In every photo Priya showed me, Kali was half-naked, with skulls around her neck, blood dripping from her mouth, a severed head in one hand, a machete in the other, all while she trampled her husband, Lord Shiva, with one powerful lot.

"I was afraid of her too, before I learned how to pray to her," Priya said. "She's extremely powerful –a force of nurture and love on one hand, but on the other, she will destroy everything that is not right to restore order."

She found a small shelf for Kali in a nook in Angie's study where she could pray to the goddess. In the afternoons, she placed a bowl of water on a little table in front of Kali.

She sent Tessa to bring her the nicest looking fruit in the basket on the kitchen table and the child ran with the joy of feeling needed. Priya offered the fruit to Kali with her right hand. She lit a candle and circled the statue three times, with Tessa at her heels. She circled Kali with

burning incense and still Tessa followed close behind, a dedicated servant. She reminded me of the altar boys at church.

When Priya was done with the circling she touched her head to the ground and exclaimed, “Jai Kali Mata!” Then she sat cross-legged with her back straight as an arrow and her shoulders dropped. She arranged Tessa’s body like it was clay so that she sat in exactly the same position. They brought their hands together at the chest, closed their eyes and Priya chanted, “Ohm” and then “*Aum kring kalikaye namah*”. She repeated the chants in intervals.

I asked Priya not to pray to her gods with Tessa.

“I only have only one God, the supreme God, the creator,” she said. “The deities are not God. They are the many gifts of God. See, just like Jesus and the Holy Spirit are your other ‘gods’.”

One afternoon, Angie was upstairs cleaning her room when a door slammed and she marched downstairs barefoot, her T-shirt half tucked into her shorts. She was holding Kali up above her head like a basketball player getting ready to shoot a hoop.

“Where’s Priya?” she howled.

Priya was outside, tending to the roses while Tessa played with the hose, drinking the water and wetting her body.

“Priya, what the hell is this?” Angie said, fuming in the garden.

“That’s Kali, the divine protectress. She’s the goddess of destruction,” said Priya.

“What?” Angie was breathing so hard I was worried she might pass out. “I mean, what is this doing in my wardrobe, sitting there looking at me with her creepy arms and a beheaded head?”

“Kali liberates us from our egos,” Priya said. “But she’s also a nurturer. She’s a very powerful goddess, a good one for mothers. The pujari in my temple always says that when you pray to Mother Kali, it’s like a child crying out to her mother, and Mother Kali always responds as a mother who hears her child cry.”

“What?” Angie looked disoriented and was struggling to breathe. “Priya – are you trying to piss me off? Who gives you the right, to go in my private things and leave one of your gods to protect me? To set up a whole shrine in my study and stink it up with incense?”

“Kali will protect you, but you have to put your pride away,” Priya said, unfazed by Angie’s sputtering rage.

“I don’t need protection,” Angie hissed. “I’ve come real far in my life and I’m not here because God, or the gods, protected me.”

Mark drove in just then and walked up to the garden with his black leather laptop bag strapped over his shoulder, looking perplexed.

All of us – Mark, Nyamunya, Priya and I – stood frozen in silence watching Angie dissolve.

She stomped back into the house and up the stairs to the attic, her feet thumping, objects screeching on the attic floor. Then came the *thud thud* of her feet coming angrily downstairs.

“Here, take this!” It was a cardboard box marked *Kitchen*. “Put all your shitty gods and goddesses in it, and take them back home with you. My house is not a Hindu temple and my child is not your grandchild. Do you hear me? I want you gone, now.”

Priya looked over at Mark – the man of the house – but he shifted his gaze down to the tassels on his brown loafers.

“What are you looking at him for?” Angie screamed. She started to sweep the gods into the box herself. “He’s not the one who’s talking to you. I am. Take all this crap. I don’t want to see it – or you – in my house ever again.”

The next morning Priya rang the doorbell as if the previous day had never happened. She scooped Tessa up in her arms, and Tessa wiggled with joy. Everyone seemed to forget about Priya’s gods. Tessa did what Priya told her like a robot. She got in the bath, picked up her toys, put away her colouring, listened quietly to Priya read a book, and closed her eyes for a nap – just because Priya told her to. As soon as Priya left, Tessa became highly strung. She had so many meltdowns in the course of one evening, it pushed Angie to a near breakdown.

On a particularly challenging day, she left Tessa rolling on the living-room floor, wailing. Ten minutes went by and Angie didn't return. The bathroom door was closed; I knocked but she didn't respond. She stayed in there for an hour.

When she emerged, her face was puffy from crying and I had managed to put Tessa to sleep. I put my arm around her shoulder and told her it would get better.

"All children are like this at this age," I said. "It's the terrible threes."

"No, ma," Angie said, with a haunted look. "It's Priya. She's got this strange hold over Tessa. It scares me sometimes. It doesn't feel right."

A few days later, I drove up the driveway to find Priya hurrying to her car, although it wasn't the end of the day.

"Ma!" She shook her head and waved her finger in my face and I suddenly understood why Nyamunya was constantly threatening to slap Priya. "*Nahin chaye, nahin chaye* – I don't want – it's enough nay," Priya cried. "It's enough." She was breathing heavily, chest heaving while she arranged her golden sari around her thick shoulders.

"My husband left me a rich woman," she said. "I can do whatever I want, go on a cruise, buy a fruit farm. I don't need to suffer every day in this job with that crazy American woman."

As Priya entered her car, I told her I would try to smooth things over and call her.

“No, don’t bother,” she said. “I love that little girl, but I can’t be here any more. There’s a restless, warring energy in that house, constant fighting. It’s a godless house. I’ve prayed over it and asked God to intercede but I cannot stay there.”

Nyamunya was standing on the doorstep watching her leave with a smirk on her face. Her tormentor was gone.

“She took Tessa to temple with her,” Nyamunya said. “Brought her back covered in coloured powder. It took us an hour just to wash it out of her hair.”

Inside, Angie was lying on the couch. She had come home early with a migraine and was taking a nap when Priya returned with Tessa, awash with bright colours. Priya had told Angie it was the Holi celebration, the Festival of Colours.

She showed Angie pictures on her smartphone of Tessa running amok at the temple, dipping her tiny hands in sacks of coloured powder, painting herself and pouring it on other children. There were pictures of Tessa eating from silver bowls, playing with prayer beads, and helping an elderly woman light a flame under a mysterious many-armed deity. I thought I recognized Kali.

Angie asked Priya to bathe Tessa. The dyes in the powder had completely bleached her hair. Priya called on Nyamunya to help hold the child's head back and for an hour they soaked and rinsed her hair multiple times to get the green and red dyes out. When they had finished, Angie told Priya to leave and never come back.

“The woman has no boundaries,” Angie said to Mark later that night. “I’ve said countless times that I don’t want Tessa around the gods or a temple but she won’t hear me.”

The next morning, Tessa asked for Priya. My heart sank into the cavities of my stomach.

“Priya’s gone my love,” Angie said. “She’s not going to come back.”

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Tessa was only three and she had never lost anything. Everyone had remained constant in her life since she was born – Nyamunya, her parents and me.

Even Lazybones, the overweight white cat with the irritating bell around his neck, had remained faithfully in Tessa’s life, as had Amos and Moses, the enthusiastic askaris at the gate who had grinned and waved at

Tessa every day for three years, ushering her out and back home, as she sat in the backseat of a car.

“I want Priya!” she cried, and for three straight hours, Tessa lay on the couch, grieving. Mark and Angie were unable to calm her.

She wouldn't eat or sleep. She had shed a little bit of her innocence. She had tasted a bite of life, and how sour it could be.

After that, Tessa and I spent our days alone. We had beautiful days in the garden. She would pick at her mother's roses, prick her tiny fingers, then forget the pain entirely and reach for another rose. She fascinated me in all ways. Her depth of language was remarkable. She expressed herself easily in English and Swahili, and spoke a few Hindi words.

“Bas!” She would exclaim, and move her small finger from left to right. It made me smile because it reminded me of Priya and Nyamunya's frosty relationship.

Every day, we had an early breakfast followed by a quick clean up. As Nyamunya did the laundry, I stacked the dishwasher while Tessa intently swept the kitchen floor with a tall broomstick. I would watch the dirt go this way and that. It reminded me of our family holidays in Mombasa when Mark was a child – the way the plankton would move back and forth in the tide and mesmerize him for hours.

Tessa jumped on beds while I made them, and cracked open with laughter when I brought a sheet down over her like a cloud. Some days,

we spent time at the Village Market mall in Gigiri, Priya's neighbourhood, and I hoped to run into her.

I missed her, our conversations, our unspoken understanding. Tessa and I would share a box of bhajia while she threw pebbles in the water fountain. The water rippled each time and the joy it brought Tessa made me laugh.

Nearly three months passed without Priya. Christmas was gone, New Years was gone, Valentines Day was gone and the summer was unseasonably, crushingly hot. It was another leap year, another year of confusion, *mwaka mrefu*. Tessa would turn four.

Weekend barbecues were held at the sparkling pool in Mandy and Shree's garden. Nyamunya carried trays of food from our kitchen through the little wooden gate in the Kei apple fence to Mandy's kitchen. Mark took his marinated steaks in Tupperware, and Tessa and I waddled through bearing armband floaters, towels, sunscreen and other odds and ends.

Tessa had started swimming lessons and was improving every week. She was agile and fearless. Her instructor said she would "swim safe, very soon" if she continued dipping in Shree and Mandy's pool. It's all practice and getting comfortable in the water, he said.

On 29 February, Tessa woke up and asked about Priya. She wanted to know if she would see her again. It made me wonder if young children have dreams like adults too, about those who are no longer there.

She was stubborn all through breakfast and her swimming lesson. At lunch she threw peas around the dining table, then her whole plate, splashing a ray of mashed potato and beef mince on the wall.

Outside, the heat was oppressive. I put Tessa in a cool bath and she finally settled. I laid her down on her bed, covering her lightly with a yellow summer quilt I had embroidered with red butterflies the year she was born.

She drifted off to sleep as I closed the door behind me. Downstairs, I slumped into an armchair and turned on the television. My head grew heavy and I dozed off. I woke up groggy when a gust of wind slammed a window behind me. The weather had turned.

The smell of rain was pungent in the muggy air. Big grey clouds were swooping in and an afternoon thunderstorm was imminent. I looked at my watch.

Two hours had gone by. Tessa would be awake. I edged my head quietly inside her bedroom door. She wasn't in her bed. Nyamunya was outside taking down the washing from the clotheslines as the stormy clouds moved in.

“Tessa is not with you?” I asked, bewildered.

Nyamunya turned to look at me, her arms full with folded laundry. She hadn't seen Tessa. We went back in the house, calling for her. I checked in every bathroom, where she liked to make mischief, rolling out toilet paper or slathering lotion all over her body. Nyamunya looked inside her parents' bedroom, where Tessa would get into her mother's makeup drawer. Then we both went back outside, an unspoken anxiety between us. Nyamunya walked around to the front porch overlooking the driveway and the street, while I stood in the backyard looking around the garden and the cobbled patio.

The wooden gate in the Kei apple fence slammed back and forth in the wind. Across the fence, Shree and Mandy's pool sparkled in shades of blue, like a tanzanite under the silver of lightning.

I ran to the swimming pool, my feet stumbling with the fear of what I was about to see, my eyes blinded by tears. She still wore the pink *I'm a Diva* T-shirt she begged to wear after every bath.

Nyamunya ran past me, jumped in and brought her out to me as if I would know what to do. I tried everything I knew but she wouldn't wake up, and I held her for what felt like hours. She was like a doll in my arms, her soft, curly hair tickling my face, but her feet and her hands were blue and ice cold. And then it started to rain.

Death is crafty. He mesmerizes like a red balloon in the blue sky. He had whispered at Tessa when she was supposed to be napping. Just like he had my Kamau, on a sunny, perfect day on our porch.

In the background I could hear the siren of the ambulance. Nyamunya, too afraid to call Angie, had called Mark. Mark called Shree, who worked five minutes away at Karen Hospital. He was the first one there, with an ambulance.

Shree took my granddaughter's limp body from my arms and carried her into the pergola, where they were sheltered from the rain. He laid her down on the concrete floor and put his index finger between her tiny chin and ear while looking at his watch. He pressed his hands firmly on her chest and leaned his weight on her, pumping her like a flat tyre to a count of five.

It seemed like years before Angie, Mark and Mandy arrived. I don't know why they all came in together. The sound of death was all around me with Angie, Nyamunya and Mandy's cries. A few of the other neighbours had gathered around us too. Mark was in a stupor. No part of his body seemed to move. Angie pried Shree off Tessa so she could hold her. She took Tessa in her arms and cried, "Wake up my baby, wake up my baby!" until her voice was hoarse. She was lost in a world where she cried unabashedly, agony ripping through her body, shaking her shoulders violently.

Shree walked over to the ambulance in the driveway and spoke to someone inside. A minute later, two uniformed paramedics walked back inside with him. One of them carried a black bag I knew well. The same bag they brought to my house when my Kamau died. Just seeing the bag again made me want to vomit, and whither and die. The men stopped at the entrance of the pergola where Shree signalled.

Then as if he was about to walk over a bed of coals, he carefully went over to Mark. He took Mark's hands in his own. When he brought him in closer, one grown man holding another with no words spoken between them, Mark's chest cracked open with a loud wail of grief that sounded like a clap of thunder.

In the pool, the water had turned a deeper shade of blue, almost grey. Small swirly circles formed around each raindrop. It looked like a normal pool, where nothing despicable had happened.

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Angie wouldn't leave her bed.

Mark and I went to the funeral home the next day. The funeral director wore a light grey suit that I thought was too bright.

There was a questionnaire on a clipboard. Mark placed it on his lap and stared down at it. The pen was in his hand but it didn't move.

There was guttural sound, a heaving. It was Mark. In the middle of the unforgiving questionnaire, away from his wife, in front of a strange, pale man in a grey suit, in a morbid colonial-style funeral home with a plush maroon carpet, Mark finally broke down.

The clipboard fell on the soft carpet and he collapsed in my arms, a giant crushed by grief, reduced to my little boy. So, I took over. I filled out the questionnaire. One hundred roses. Burial. Marble. I picked out the coffin. It was the smallest one I had ever seen but Tessa would have enough room for her yellow quilt with the red butterflies.

I wrote my granddaughter's obituary.

It was to run in the next day's newspaper and it would also go on the funeral programme. It had to be short – 300 words. I tore out sheet after sheet because there was too much to say even for someone who had lived barely four years.

Beloved daughter, treasured granddaughter ... Nothing else came to me. The funeral director in his too-bright suit suggested some suitable words: cherished, precious. It didn't matter. I wrote obediently. I found the picture of Tessa from her third birthday – the one where she'd proudly showed off her pierced ears while she blew out the candles on her cake. I picked out her dress. I couldn't remember doing anything more depressing in my seventy years on earth than walking through a brightly lit children's clothing store to pick out an outfit for my dead

granddaughter. What kind of dress was appropriate for such an occasion? I couldn't remember having this kind of pain while planning my husband's funeral.

In the end I bought nothing. We dressed her in a pink tutu from her wardrobe and a white lace top because Tessa loved tutus and she loved to dance. We didn't put her in shoes. She had never liked them.

Since the death, Angie seemed to glide on air, an apparition guided by a mysterious force. She'd cried for two days and two nights, making the same sound the pigs in my father's butchery made at slaughter.

On the third day she was put on a sedative. Shree said it was the only way we would stop the crying and help her sleep. She woke twenty-four hours later and sat in a dreamlike state on the rocking chair in her room, where she'd breastfed Tessa every morning, where she'd sat with the breast pump, filling little bottles with her milk for Tessa's day, where she'd rocked her in that difficult colic phase when all Tessa did was cry.

After the funeral, the house filled with friends and colleagues. There were little Swedish meatballs on toothpicks, samosas, beef pilau, chicken curry and fruit kebabs. Everyone walked in with a dish. I had seen this before. People used food as a symbol for all the things they wished they could say, or didn't know how to say. I didn't know what I would do with it all.

Nyamunya seemed to have lost ten pounds in one week. She hadn't eaten anything since the drowning and mostly sat on a stool in the kitchen dabbing at her bulging eyes. I asked her to get off the stool and help pack food into Tupperware. She walked over to the fridge, paused, then ran out of the room, sobbing. On the fridge door was a photo of Tessa wearing a red bikini, pink armband floaters and her mother's sunglasses. A wave of nausea washed through me.

I took the photograph off the fridge and put it in one of the bottom drawers. It was one more thing I would have to think about when the guests were gone – hiding photographs.

Mark walked about the room greeting and thanking everyone with a blank stare. Angie sat at the bay window in the kitchen looking out to the Ngong hills. She had the obituary on her lap and a cup of chamomile tea balanced precariously in her hand.

The bell rang one more time; it was Priya. She stood in the foyer in a white sari, holding a casserole dish. Of all the saris she had worn for a year in our home, this one was the plainest. It seemed like she had wrapped herself in white bed sheets. She said she'd read the obituary. I'd prayed she would.

When I saw her at the door, a priestess in white, I crumbled. She hurried to me and held me in her arms and sat with me for a long time at

the kitchen table where we'd spent many afternoons drinking tea and talking about our children, with the baby monitor behind us.

Later, Priya went to the bay window. She sat next to Angie and put her hand over hers, and for the first time in hours Angie moved. She looked down at the comforting hand, then stood and moved away, never letting her eyes meet Priya's.

She was gliding up the stairs when Mandy, in a short black and white floral print dress, black stockings and black suede heels, rushed to her side and held her arm, perhaps hoping to put her in bed. Angie pulled away as if she had been touched by something foul.

"It's not you," Mark told a distraught Mandy. "She just needs time."

I knocked softly on her bedroom door, carrying another mug of chamomile tea. She was sleeping, her back to me. I set the mug on the bedside table, where an assortment of pill bottles lay scattered, and sat next to her.

Angie turned to face me and stirred as if wanting to speak, but sleep overcame her and she drifted off again. Her neck and forehead were glistening with sweat. I wiped her face with a wet cloth and watched her feet thrash in the percale sheets.

Then I saw, clasped loosely in her right hand, a miniature goddess Kali in shiny brass. She had a necklace of skulls. In one hand she held a severed head and in the other, a sword. Her other six hands held an

assortment of weapons. She stood in a dancing stance with her feet over the god Shiva, who lay prostrate beneath her.

I remembered Priya's hand over Angie's while they both sat at the bay window in the kitchen. I reached out to take the statue from Angie so I could set it on the table. But when I tried, she clutched it tighter.

## THE UNCLEAN

### **Sheikha Salma Al Bashir**

It was I who found my mother-in-law's body. She was in the bath, naked, legs dangling over the edge, her ashen face floating underneath the water, dead eyes open in terror. My daughter was sitting cross-legged on the floor, howling so hard I feared the tiles would crack.

The khadima killed her. She'd been working in my home for a year. Her name is Zawadi; "gift". She arrived in Jeddah in February, dressed in a pink abaya with blue plaid trimming and a matching scarf tied carelessly so that it kept slipping down to reveal her hair. If this were Riyadh she wouldn't have lasted an hour before the street-trolling Mutawwa'in gave her something to cry about. When she climbed inside

my car, she was followed by a stench of sweat so strong my stomach wanted to bring up the ful mudammas I had eaten earlier that day. She gave me her hand in greeting and I wanted to be polite, but she was shrouded by uncleanliness.

She said she'd attended a private girls' school until she fell pregnant at seventeen. It was a bonus that I could communicate with her in English. The Ethiopian khadima I'd employed previously was a buffoon, thick as glue; nothing I said got through to her primitive brain and the agency had lied when they said she spoke English. Khadimas – in fact, all workers, not just maids – can be a real embarrassment to a distinguished family. It's like my husband always says: "A man's reputation begins at the front door." It's for this reason I chose to keep Zawadi. Even though poverty glistened like pomade on her dark skin, I knew she would learn quickly.

What I couldn't have known was that she was capable of something as gruesome as murder, though on the day she arrived I did see a bit of her madness when I searched her bags. You can't put anything past these workers. Just a few months ago my friend Bayan Al Kaber found large quantities of hashish in the room of her Filipino driver, the same man who took her children to and from school.

In a transparent plastic pouch of my khadima's wallet, I found a small photo of a little boy. He was sitting on a chair with a cake in front of him. He wore an orange cone hat. His eyes were big, shocked by the flash of the camera. The khadima asked if she could keep the child's photograph. It was her son.

"He's a beautiful child," I said. "Why did you have a child so young?"

"I was raped," she said without a blink. It was as if she had told me she'd been to the souq. I didn't know what to say. I stuck my fingers

inside the pouch but I struggled to pull out the photo. The heat had glued it down like adhesive. After a bit of tugging, the photo came loose but ripped in half. The boy's big eyes were separated as if by a saw. The khadima grabbed my hands, trying to pry away the pieces.

“Who do you think you are to grab me with your dirty hands?” I cried. “If you ever touch me again – Allah help me.” There was a nasty side to her meekness, like a tamed camel that turns mad and spits bile on its master.

Earlier, after my driver and I had picked her up from airport (smelling like an oil-rig worker at the end of a shift) I asked her if she understood her salary.

“The agency said I will receive 1, 200SR a month and I can leave after three months if we don't get along,” she said.

That wasn't true. These work agents will tell girls anything. The more girls they send here, the fatter they become. I explained that even

though her pay was 1, 200SR, I would pay 800SR. The rest of it would go into paying off her debt.

“Did you think you got here at no cost?” I said. “I spent 19, 000SR for your ticket, medical examination, visa, health insurance and the agent’s fee. So if you want to go, pay me back my money and there will be no problem. If you don’t have it, I’ll deduct 400SR from your pay every month. That means you will pay off your debt in four years. Is that clear?”

She started to cry. It surprised me further when she asked if she could take a month off every year to see her child in Kenya.

“Tell me something, Zawadi,” I said. “What is 19, 000SR in Kenya money?”

She fidgeted with her fingers, tugging on her shirt, pulling at buttons.

“You don’t even know, do you?” I told her that the amount was 500, 000 Kenya shillings. “Tell me Zawadi: do you have half a million Kenya shillings?”

She was silent.

“Uh-huh! I didn’t think so. Now tell me something else: would you lend someone in your country half a million shillings and then allow them to go wherever they wish for a one-month holiday?”

Zawadi shook her head.

“Exactly! You would not. Only a fool would do that. You’re free to go only when you pay back the money. Until that day, I will keep your passport.”

She turned away and looked out the window, then started to cry in this grunting way, like she’d just heard that someone she knew well had died. She was worn far beyond her eighteen years. Dark rings strangled her round eyes and her face was hard, though I could see that in another

life, an easier life, she would have been as striking as an exotic Tuareg, with her strange, elongated face and coal-dark skin. There was a birthmark over her left eyebrow in the shape of a thumbprint.

“Zawadi, we are responsible for you now because of our law – kafala. Did they explain to you the kafala?”

She shook her head and dug inside the large bag on her knees but then gave up and wiped the running tears with the back of her hand. Her nails were bit to the quick. I reached into my handbag and gave her my handkerchief. I told her she could keep it.

“The kafala is simple,” I said. “If I employ you, I am your sponsor so I am responsible for you in our country until you finish your contract. My husband will issue you with an iqama showing that you are his employee. And don’t try to run off. The Mutawwa’in will arrest you and put you in jail with all the other infidel maids and then you’ll have something to really cry about.”

A few weeks after Zawadi arrived, my mother-in-law and I returned from the souq to find her in my bedroom, stealing. She was bent over my safe, her abaya shrouding her small body like a sheet on a clothesline, sifting through my things. She'd found her phone. She lied, saying I was holding her against her wishes.

“Do you not understand the kafala law?” I asked her. “Do you not understand that I have the rights to your passport until you finish your contract? What right do you have to your phone? Did I employ you so that you can spend your time texting your family, your boyfriend, on Facebook? Did I not allow you to call your mother on your first day here, to let her know you arrived safely? Did I not promise you could get one phone call a month to check on your son?”

Once again, she became a spitting camel. She screamed hysterically – one would think I was trying to slaughter her – when I tried to take the phone from her. It flustered my mother-in-law, who was

begging me to let the girl be, but I wasn't going to cower to her. One thing I've learned from years of employing people in my home is that you must never show weakness. I gave the khadima a whipping with one of my husband's belts. It was a spectacle: me chasing her around my bed, smacking the belt on her dancing body; her, wailing, lifting her legs high like she was skipping a rope; my mother-in-law circling us like a referee, screaming out to God for help – “Ya rab! Ya Allah! Allah yusa'amah.”

### **Zawadi Jasho**

It started a month after I arrived, in the early hours before the desert sun cast its first light through the tiny screen in my basement wall. I saw the shadow of an ogre standing in front of me. I didn't realize I was screaming until the slap came hard and fast across my face.

“Ikhras! Ikhras,” he said. It was the sheikh. “Shut your mouth.”

He untied his white bathrobe with no shame.

When he had grunted his last grunt he slipped his large arms into the white bathrobe again, roping it around his fat belly as he walked out without a word. The next morning, he was bent over the open fridge, fishing for something while I ironed in the scullery. He was in the white bathrobe. Bile surged up to my throat and I ran out of the room just as the syeda bustled in.

“Hbibi, what’s going on?” She was dressed in an exquisite handmade abaya of deep-blue silk, her hair tucked neatly inside, ready for mosque.

She often called him her love, though I could see it was what he expected of her rather than how she felt. She looked the sheikh up and down and then her eyes rested on his bulging belly, hanging over the belt of his robe like a bag of maize meal. “What are you doing here without any clothes, and why is the khadima running off like she’s seen a jinn?”

“I don’t know what the khadima is doing with the ironing,” he said in a gruff voice. “Why must I chase her for my clothes? Make her hurry up with my bisht.”

I wanted to lose my mind, start screaming, “He raped me, he raped me!” Instead I hid behind the kitchen door, taking in his grotesqueness in the light of day. The sheikh was tall enough to change a light bulb on the ceiling, if he wished, though he wouldn’t know where to begin. Everything – with the exception of bathing, urinating and defecating – was done for him. Every day my shaky hands ironed his fine white thawbs made from the highest thread count of Egyptian cotton, my chest pressed over the iron to flatten seams and vanish even the faintest creases.

The robes were large enough to dress the driver, the Yemeni gardener, and the Indian deliveryman who brought vegetables to the house on a motorbike every morning. If the three thin men stood shoulder to shoulder, I could fit them all inside the garment.

“For Allah’s sake, where did you find this khadima?” he asked, when the syeda silently took the freshly ironed silk robe off the ironing table to give to him. He put his left hand on his hip and with his right he shook the garment violently in his wife’s face. “Look at this! The monkeys at the Al Ana’am Zoo can iron better than this.”

He dragged himself out of the kitchen, breathing heavily through his mouth, making a *ffff* sound like he always did. The syeda found me still standing behind the door and scolded me curtly, as if packing the matter in a box to open later.

When her husband raped me, his thick arms grasping my neck, she thought he was praying his 5 a.m. salat in the pretty prayer room with the view of the lavender bushes. She didn’t know I had smelled the garlic-stench of his hot breath in my ear. She didn’t know I’d been smothered by his rolls of neck fat, which reminded me of the slabs of lard my mother used to fry oxtail back home.

“My wife won’t let me have it this way,” he grunted when he pushed himself up my rectum. “You are my donkey, *ya kalb.*”

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The syeda is a very thin woman. She struggles to eat, playing with her food like a stubborn toddler. On the day I arrived, she was sitting in the back seat of a shiny white car with tinted windows. She was dressed in a black cloak and her face was covered with a niqab.

“Don’t worry. These aren’t the regular waarabu we hear about on the news, who torture maids and whatnot. This family will treat you like butter.”

That’s what the agent lady with the spectacles had said to me in Nairobi, in her small office with a whirring fan and a large, framed black-and-white photograph of Pope John Paul II on the wall behind her desk.

When I turned to greet the madam, her hands remained flat on her knees. She stared at me as if what I was asking for – a handshake – was an insult to her. She peeled her veil away, revealing a small face sculpted like a heart with a sharp chin and eyes set deep, as if they were hiding behind her forehead.

Her skin was so pale she appeared to be encased in a shell of alabaster. I knew she had spent her life sheltered from the sun. “Let’s rather not greet by hand,” she said. “You can call me syeda.”

Her driver, I later learnt, was Angel, a Filipino man who had worked for the family for five years. Angel’s shifty eyes met mine in the rear-view mirror. Even though I didn’t know the man, him being in the car comforted me somehow.

“Angel, turn your eyes to the road; your curiosity will get us killed,” the syeda said, turning her face to the side as she spoke so their eyes wouldn’t meet in the mirror.

The car pulled up to a gigantic black steel gate and circled the paved driveway to a garage where a fleet of cars stood. Inside, we took our shoes off and set them on a wooden cupboard with many slots. A flicker of shame stung my face as I looked at the sandals my mother had bought for the trip. The pretty red straps adorned with gold studs now appeared painfully plastic amidst the array of fine shoes.

Nonetheless, I was happy to have my tired feet rest on the cool marble floor and when I looked up, my face was bathed with the warmth of the sun coming through a glass ceiling in the shape of a large coconut. The house was what I imagined heaven looked like. But I can tell you now that God doesn't live in that house. He never will.

The syeda showed me around, pointing to this and that and warned me against breaking things. Framed black-and-white photographs of women covered the walls in the hall. They were wearing niqabs, carrying baskets and babies, walking in groups, standing in front of the Kaaba.

They were like faceless crows. Why were they photographed? Who could tell one from the other?

“I take photographs as a hobby,” the syeda said, as if reading my mind. She pointed up, at hanging crystals. “We have a ladder for the chandeliers. Every morning, I want these crystals to shine before I get out of bed. Breakfast must be ready by 6 a.m. They said you cook?”

“Yes.”

“Uh, yes, who?”

“Yes, syeda.”

“Good. You must also care for my husband’s mother, who lives with us. You must bathe her and use the oils to rub down her feet, neck and shoulders. Her legs give her trouble.”

I was led across the room to a large kitchen with so much light streaming in that I had to shut my eyes. On the left, a small door opened

to a wooden staircase that led down to a dark room. The air was musty and cool, a relief from the harsh desert heat.

“This is your room,” the syeda said as she flipped on the light switch.

She stretched out her arm and moved her open palm from left to right as if showing me the splendours of jannah. I didn’t mind the room. I grew up in a house so small that at bedtime, my older brother and I had to bend our young knees to move the velvet couch to the wall, then make up our cots in the living room.

“There’s a hot shower. You mustn’t use any other bathroom in the house.”

There was a small cot on one end of the room with a cardboard-thin mattress covered in vile yellow and bright red stains. My mother would have complained. She hated filth. When I was growing up, we

slept on sheets so worn they had holes in them, but they smelt like fresh dew. “Just because we are poor doesn’t mean we live like we are poor!”

The syeda pointed to a closet with folded sheets and worn grey blankets. Next to the shower stall was a kind of small, low-built basin I had never seen before.

“It’s a bidet,” the syeda said, pointing. “What do you use at your home?”

“A bucket and jug.” The humiliation covered my face like mist.

“There’s no shame.” She pressed on the tap to show me how the water jugged up towards the ceiling. “Lots of people use jugs in our country too.”

She looked through my things using only her index fingers and thumbs like they were pegs. She emptied the clothes on to the bed and put everything else in a duffel bag; my phone, passport, wallet and, inside it,

my baby's photo – the only one I had. She gave me three black robes and black headscarves. "Please tie that scarf properly so it covers your hair."

She asked me to strip naked and stood watching as I did, her arm folded over her black robe. I was wearing the same black cotton panties and black lace bra I had worn the day I left home. I could smell my own sourness. The syeda looked away, covering her nose. When she left the room, I stood under the warm shower, letting the water run down my face.

More things had happened to me that day than in my entire life. The pain that tore at me when my mother took Baraka from my arms at the airport was worse than that of his birth. I would have hurt less if a truck dragged me for a kilometre on a dirt road.

Over the running water, came a sound like Baraka's rattle. I kept my eyes closed. The sound came again, this time louder and nearer. I opened my eyes.

The child standing in front of me had thick, scaly skin. From her feet to her bald head, it was split into an intricate diamond pattern, each diamond separated from the next by a raw strip of flesh. The tightness of her skin stretched her mouth into a large ‘O’ and her eyes, too, were elongated, as if pulled by invisible pegs.

She wore an oversized dress. Her right hand held a rattle and her left was a stub.

I turned off the shower and backed away from her, still naked, until my back was flat on the cool wall. I wasn’t breathing. I hoped that if I stayed silent, she would go away.

Then I heard the syeda calling from the door of the basement as she paced up and down the kitchen. “Hala, Hala, Hala!”

The grotesque child climbed up the stairs, snorting and grunting with every step.

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A few days after I arrived, Hala had a fit. I heard a loud clanging upstairs, as if a tray of ceramic cups had crashed down, then a frantic yelping and calling from the jidd, the sheikh's old mother. I found the child lying on the floor of her room, her small limbs jerking, her eyes popping out like marbles.

The jidd was moving around in circles, squealing words I didn't understand. When I knelt to hold Hala's bald head, her skin felt like a cold shell and my hands recoiled. I closed my eyes and ears to the child's deformities and her grandmother's helplessness. I calmed my mind, returned my hands to her small body and turned her to her side to drip out the foamy saliva bubbling in her mouth. The fit continued for what seemed like a long day and the jidd deafened me with shrilling like the

crunching of hundreds of bird shells, until the syeda and the sheikh moved in like a storm and threw me off the child.

The sheikh knelt next to her with his thick fingers cradling her bald head, wincing as if the child's seizure was scalding him. The syeda was kneeling behind Hala, rubbing her back gently, bearing no expression, though she repeatedly looked up at the noisy black-robed jidd, irritated. The silence of both the sheikh and the syeda amidst the chaos of the seizure was calming. They worked with the finesse of ambulance workers. After the child's body had stopped jerking, the syeda picked her up off the floor and brought her to her lap.

The sheikh stood and brushed invisible lint from his thawb. He took his mother's arm and quietly walked her out of the room, shushing the old woman as she continued to mumble behind her veil.

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Sofia Khaled wasn't like me, I could tell. She hadn't fallen into a helper's job because she had to. She liked it. She walked through the door every morning like she was bouncing on a spring mattress, the way my brother and I did growing up. She called after hours to chat with Hala. The little girl walked around the house all evening with the phone in her hand, waiting for the ringing and Sofia's voice singing, "*laila sa'eda wa ahlaam ladida,*" goodnight, sweet dreams.

Sofia said the syeda was coming apart when she first met her.

"For six months, she made a little world of her own where Hala wouldn't be gawked at, where strangers didn't cock their heads in sympathy and touch her shoulder and mutter *inna lillaahi wa inna ilayh raaji'oon*, asking Allah for His mercy on her, as if her child had died.

When I took over and she was able to return to work, I saw light return to her eyes like the sun's first rays at dawn, when all the shadows disappear.”

Sofia gave Hala two baths a day and applied pasty oils to her gravelly skin. When she soaked in the warm water, flakes fell off her like bits of shaved coconut. After every bath, there was a thick layer of skin at the bottom of the tub as if a python had shed. I scooped out the flakes with a sieve before draining the dirty water. Sofia said the disease was called Harlequin.

“How did it happen to Hala?” I asked.

“Allah's ways are mysterious,” Sofia said, stroking Hala's many-toed feet. “Very few of them live past the first week of life. The reason she's come this far is because of her mother's love. The sheikh loves her too. You can see it when he talks to her, like she's a little woman, like she's the most intelligent person in the room.”

Sofia and I talked in low tones in the afternoons while Hala took her naps. I told her my mother was the one who wanted me to come here. From age ten, I was the star child. I received a bursary at a top convent school and had to travel alone on two buses to the quiet suburbs, while the other kids were driven in big cars and walked in to the classroom like they were high-priced cattle. In the afternoons I travelled back to a chaotic neighbourhood with too many humans and too many strange deaths, such as children drowning in manholes.

When they found out I was pregnant, my parents didn't speak to me for months. It didn't matter to them that the boy was six years older and forced himself on me at a party. I was banned from the mosque and kept hidden in the house like dirty underwear. The nuns said I could return to school after the birth. My mother said I had to work; It was my baby, not hers. I was the one who snuck out without my hijab to go to a wild township party, not her.

Everyone was talking about the jobs opening up in the Middle East for maids, nannies, oil-rig workers and drivers. But on the news we had also seen young women who arrived back reporting that they had suffered horrible hardships in the Arab world. Some weren't heard from again.

“Damaris, those stories are one in God knows how many,” the work agent said to my mother. Her teeth looked like piano keys and her obnoxious laughter made me feel stupid. My mother gave the woman a cold stare that made her quickly halt her laughter. “Do you know how many Kenyan girls are in Saudi today? Eighty thousand. If every one of those girls is being raped, even Queen Elizabeth would be talking about it from her throne.”

That evening, my father listened quietly as he chewed slowly on a tough piece of meat from Katweri's corner butchery.

“Baraka needs money now,” my mother said. “She needs to work *now*, not next year after she's finished high school, not in four years after

she's finished university. What about teaching her responsibility? What are we telling the younger girls if we allow the oldest one to have a baby and continue to live at home as if nothing happened?"

"Damaris, I don't like it," my father said. He had parked his food on one side of his mouth. "There's no life without an education. She must stay in school."

"No way." My mother circled the table, picking up dirty dishes and stacking them on her arms. She grabbed my father's plate as the last spoonful of food went inside his mouth, forcing him to throw the spoon back on the plate as it zipped past his face. "I say every day, 'Don't bring home babies!' Yet Zawadi saw fit to come home pregnant. Let this be a lesson to Dani and Dudu to keep their legs closed."

My identical twin sisters, only eleven and not yet wearing hijabs, sat looking at the adults like two foreigners in a country where they didn't speak the language. I was sitting on a wooden stool across the room,

bouncing Baraka on my lap. As my parents' voices got louder I felt the room become smaller.

When my older brother was shot dead by the police while trying to rob a rich man's car, tears were shed and candles were lit. Perhaps if I had died giving birth, I would have become a saint too. Instead, I was just someone who had committed zina and dishonoured my parents. Their marriage, once agreeable, had turned brittle with blame and innuendos.

My sisters, my only allies, had climbed into my cot every night I cried silently in my pillow for months through the pregnancy. They had wet my face with damp cloths and rolled our mother's rolling pin on my back like a chapatti. On the final day, while I was in breathless labour, they waited outside the room, ears pinned to the door. "Let them in," I said.

"Don't you think I am tempted to?" my mother said, her eyes popping out like they were being sucked out from a tube of bamboo.

“The sight itself would make sure they never fell pregnant, but no. No!

They’re too young!”

For three hours I knelt on all fours, the only way I found some relief from the aching, until I pushed Baraka’s little body out. He was a footling, born feet first. The midwife’s hands inside my body, swiping his little hand from the top of his head to his side, felt like a blunt knife stabbing my rear. My sisters knocked on the door and said in unison, “Shh, you can do it Zawadi.”

A year later, my mother and I picked up my shiny new passport at the agent’s office and a paper ticket with my name on it to Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

“Where is this Jeddah?” my mother asked the agent, raising her voice slightly. “I thought you said she was going to Dubai?”

“Don’t worry about that.” The agent waved her hand across my mother’s face as if scattering a swarm of flies. “The family in Dubai is

moving back to Sweden. There's an even better opportunity in Jeddah.

It's an Arab family – money comes out of their nostrils and besides, isn't it better that she works for a Muslim family?"

At home, my father was unimpressed by the shiny passport and the crisp air ticket.

"What about all those women in the news who have been killed or thrown in jail for crimes they didn't commit?" He was standing at the door in his taqiyah, about to leave for the mosque. Since I fell pregnant, he seemed to live at the mosque, perhaps atoning for my sin. His brow started to bead so he wiped it with his open palms as if rinsing his face in a bowl of water.

"Surely not all Arabs are beasts," my mother said.

"But what happens if she finds a beast? What happens if things go badly? I don't have the money to go find her. Do you?"

My mother turned away and left the room.

“It’s OK Baba,” I said. “I want to go.”

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Sofia was fired on a Tuesday, nine months after I arrived. It was the same day she caught my fainting body while I arranged the bookshelves in Hala’s room.

“He’s killing me,” I said.

I told her about the first night. I described the ways in which I could kill myself: hanging myself with the black scarf wrapped around my head; jumping off the roof; drinking the rat poison in the tool shed.

“That bastard! He pretends to be so holy,” Sofia said. “Allah help me, I will get you out of here.”

She sat in the kitchen quietly, waiting until the syeda came home. I kept the bees that hummed in my anxious belly at bay by cutting

vegetables and meat while my mind ran a tedious race of doubt and regret.

Would the syeda cry with mercy, call me a liar or say that I had seduced her husband? When she walked in, dropping a bag full of fruit onto the counter with a thud, Sofia stood quickly and spoke very fast, as if someone had shot a pistol to start a race.

“It’s obvious she’s sick,” Sofia said. “Look at her for Allah’s sake. She arrived with a straight back and now walks with a hunchback. Her eyes blink constantly as if a speck of desert sand is caught in them. Today she almost fainted, she’s got terrible headaches, and she’s so depressed that she’s spending half-days in her cot in the basement.”

“Depressed?” The syeda whined, looking me over like she was seeing me for the first time. I turned my eyes to my feet and felt my head hang low as if pulled down by a lever. In the past weeks, I’d been carrying tension like a baby on my back. “O Allah yusaeiduni! Zawadi, I

knew when I first saw you that I was going to have a problem with you.

How did I end up with the weakest mule?”

“She needs a doctor,” Sofia said, cutting her off. “My sister is a gyn at the women’s health centre; she can examine her today.”

“Absolutely not,” the syeda said. “She will be examined by our family doctor. My husband is too well known in this city. I won’t have my family’s private affairs out in the open.”

“We know he’s hurting her,” Sofia said. She pointed in the air as if he was in the room, invisible. “Your husband.”

The syeda took a step towards Sofia and breathed deep. She did this often around the jidd, when the old woman became impossible.

“Sofia, you have no idea how hot the fire you’re playing with is,” the syeda said. “You have no idea how powerful my husband is.”

“I’ll tell the police everything,” Sofia said. “If you don’t let me take her. I’ll tell them about your friend. Nadia.”

The words surprised me. I brought my eyes up to look at the syeda, my body stiff with fear. She saw me look at her, grabbed a glass from the counter and flung it at Sofia. Sofia ducked and the glass crashed into the wall behind her.

*“Ya sharmouta, you bitch! Get out! Get out of my house!”*

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### **Sheikha Salma Al Bashir**

Dr Mazra talked to the khadima slowly, as if he were talking to a young child. She didn't respond to him much. I had asked her to get up from her cot, where she was spending more and more hours. She shrugged her abaya over her sleeping dress like it was a raincoat. It made her body appear healthier.

Dr Mazra said she had a clenched jaw – “the worst I have ever seen.” He turned the khadima’s face from side to side with his hairy hand.

“What is that?” my husband yelled from the doorway. He had interrupted his afternoon meal with my mother-in-law to participate in the consultation.

“It happens when a person is very stressed. She doesn’t know that she’s doing it – it’s just her body’s reaction to stress,” Dr Mazra said. “Some people also grind their teeth in their sleep.” He continued turning her head back and forth. “This is what brought on her headaches.”

Dr Mazra was there for us from the beginning, when I lost all the babies, when Hala was born. He recently invited us to his son’s wedding, a large affair in the Al Embratora attended by sheikhs and their families, most of whom he had treated for years. Loyalty floated across the room like a winged spiritual being. Dr Mazra schmoozed from table to table, planting three kisses on the cheeks of every male guest. The guests, in

turn, handed him cheques and pointed to their large wrapped gifts piled on a table at the back of the room. He was like a father to me and his placid temperament reminded me of the traditional shaman my own father visited until he died. When Hala was born and I cried about my misfortune, Dr Mazra calmed me with a voice so soothing I wanted to fall asleep. No child has ever died from taking too many baths, he said.

“You’re sure she’s not just pretending to be sick?” I said. He felt the khadima’s throat and behind her ears.

“No, no.” He looked inside her mouth with a small torch and widened her eyelids.

“How long has she been here?” he asked.

“Nine months,” I said. “Why?”

“Your khadima has very yellow eyes. Her tongue is swollen. These are signs of malnutrition. No wonder she’s so tired.”

“She’s not a big eater; perhaps in her country the food is very different,” I responded.

“Is she having *fatrat alhayd*?” He looked inside the khadima’s ears, as if he were talking directly to them.

“Khadima, are you having your time of the month?” I asked. She shook her head.

“Is she pregnant?” my husband asked the doctor. He was still perched firmly at the door, as if planning an early escape.

“I doubt it,” the doctor said. “Anyway, she is probably too malnourished for menses. Her body has nothing to spare. However I will take a urine sample. She seems depressed. Is she not happy here?”

“She’s not here to be happy,” my husband said, shrugging. “She’s here to work. There’s no reason for her to be lying in bed all day.”

“Well, she will need vitamins; iron especially and vitamin D,” the doctor said, pressing on the khadima’s pale fingertips. “This is why she wants to sleep – she has no energy.”

“Surely she can’t sleep all day – she will put us in the poorhouse,” my husband shouted from the door. He started to walk down the stairs towards the khadima’s bed. “Why can’t you ever find a good khadima?” he asked me.

He had never liked any of them. He wanted me to leave the career I’d sweated for, to forget that I had graduated university with honours, managed thirty women at the food factory, quadrupled my salary in five years, pored over documents in conference rooms with male colleagues who still asked me to serve them coffee, even shaken hands with foreign men visiting the factory. It had nearly killed me, being home every day, watching Hala’s skin grow like lichen, watching marathon musalasaat television shows and cooking large pots of kabsah.

None of the khadimas were perfect. This one in particular suffered from bouts of anger and hysteria, which I attributed to her missing her child. But she was a hard worker. She learned to cook Arab food quickly and dedicated herself fully to my mother-in-law, massaging her feet, scrubbing her in the bath and listening patiently to the nonsensical tales she told in Arabic.

After Sofia's head grew bigger than a rhino's and I fired her, Zawadi played with Hala all day. She let Hala busy herself undoing beds while she made them, and unfolding clothes after she ironed them. She never lost her temper with her. She fed her raw carrots as she cut them, taught her how to count her five fingers and twelve toes.

"It's not just tension," Dr Mazra said, looking the khadima over.

"She's depressed. She may need an antidepressant."

When he unwrapped the khadima's hijab to examine her neck, his eyes widened, as did mine. There were large bruises from her upper back

to her neck. They looked like tattoos. Dr Mazra stood up from his squatting position and silently packed his small briefcase. Then he patted the khadima on her head in the same noncommittal way our guests patted Hala when she opened her arms wide, waiting for them to greet her with a hug.

“The khadima will need to put her urine sample in this,” he said, handing her a plastic cup.

Outside the room, the doctor wanted to know how the khadima had acquired such severe bruising.

“These khadimas are crazy,” my husband said, shutting his eyes and swiping a hand over the sparse hairs on his head like he did when the scan showed the baby wasn’t normal, when I said I wouldn’t have an abortion, when I told him I would kill myself if he refused to allow me to return to work. “She wouldn’t be the first to harm herself. Just last month,

another khadima fell off a high-rise trying to get out of her employer's apartment."

"This is not the kind of bruising that would come from tying a rope around your neck," the doctor said. "Have you punished her with a beating?"

"Of course not," I said. I didn't want to tell the doctor my husband had whipped the khadima mercilessly a few days ago when he saw her kiss Hala on her lips. I had whipped her when I found her in my closet, stealing, but that was months ago.

"Sheikh, I think I should take her to the hospital for more tests," Dr Mazra said.

"Absolutely not," my husband said. "Your job here is done."

The doctor shrugged and penned an illegible prescription.

“The doctor says it will relax your muscles,” I said to the khadima when I handed her the medication. “You should also eat more. There is really no need for you to lie in bed all day.”

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### **Zawadi Jasho**

I thought about telling Angel about the rape, but what would he do that Sofia hadn't already failed at? He was kept in a cottage the size of a small chicken shed and fed only twice a day. I'd seen the syeda search his room. They found a phone. He was not allowed a private phone, only the one the sheikh gave him for work, so they could track his calls. I had seen Angel lashed with his hands tied to his back. He was a waif-like man. He said he came to the Kingdom when he was eighteen, like me. It was hard to believe he was only twenty-three because his skin was as withered as

an old plum and his body was so bare of flesh that it vanished inside his clothes and he walked with bent knees.

On some afternoons, while Hala and the jidd napped, Angel sat on the step at the kitchen door and told me tales about the sheikh and his wife. I fed him leftover kabsah and biryani and he ate with his hands, using one of the melamine bowls kept separate for us workers.

“When she puts on too much make-up it’s because she will see her friend Nadia. On those days nothing can anger her. Even if you called her a goat, she would smile.” He slurped sauce from his fingers.

“Who is this Nadia?” I asked. “All I hear is Nadia, Nadia, but I’ve never seen a face; she must be a ghost.”

“She’s her lover.” The words poured out as though he was talking about his bad back. “The whole thing is bizarre, but then again, what is not bizarre about these wealthy Arabs? I’ve been taking the syeda to her house for years. That’s why she would never allow the sheikh to fire me.”

“And the sheikh knows this?”

“I don’t know how much he knows.” He had cleaned his bowl and was puffing a cigarette and chewing small quantities of khat like a rabbit.

He tucked it inside his cheek.

“The syeda and the sheikh are grandchildren of some of the king’s hundreds of sons in the House of Saud – the royals. There’s thousands of them. They are cousins. They receive privileges that would be difficult to live without once one becomes accustomed, like monthly stipends and business deals and employment opportunities that don’t come to every man.”

“It’s hard to believe you’ve not been caught with that khat.” I said, watching Angel chew.

“The syeda needs me.” He turned his face to sun, squinting. Then he lit up with a strange smile and slapped his arms hard on his thighs as if he was killing a mosquito. “Besides, if I didn’t chew it I would get my

hands cut off, because I would for sure steal food. By mercy, it keeps my stomach from grumbling.”

Angel was Catholic. The sheikh and his wife knew he attended mass with other Filipinos in the home of an oil-rig worker. The Mutawwa'in raided the service often, whipping attendants. The priest had been arrested multiple times. Angel had suffered a battered face, and in another raid he was whipped so hard on the torso that he could barely sneeze or cough without crying loudly like a child.

Angel and I went to the mosque on Fridays, though we never went inside. Angel's job was to drive the family; mine was to babysit Hala while they said their prayers. Together we listened to the indecipherable words of the imam's sermon and watched other nannies walk around the courtyard, soothing crying babies.

“They call us animals yet leave their children with us.” I pointed at the other khadimas. “They behave like they can't survive without us.

Would it kill them to give us a day off when most of the weekend they lie around doing nothing? They are the laziest beings I've seen in my life."

Angel chuckled quietly.

"What I really can't stand is the way the sheikh rolls his body into the passenger seat of his car, like a barrel," I said. "I watch him from the kitchen window every morning when you pull the car up to the front door. When he sinks on the couch and spreads himself out like a gutted tilapia, I sigh with sympathy for his swollen feet."

"Ah, how I miss that," Angel said. "Tilapia. I miss my mother's cooking. It's my favourite memory. I can still smell the pork, fried in soy sauce. I haven't had pork in so long I'm afraid my gut wouldn't know what to do with it."

"I don't know how you can eat pork," I said, watching him close his eyes and sigh deeply as if he was inhaling from a cooking pot.

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Every afternoon after she had lunch, I bathed the jidd. I listened to her stories while pouring warm water from a copper jug over her back. The old woman had dark skin, wrinkled and thick like cowhide, but she never took off her beaded silk abaya, not even inside the house as the syeda did.

I saw the humility on her face. When she prayed to Allah, it was to thank Him for his mercies. She would lie on the floor and spread her hands out in earnest supplication.

When the sheikh prayed, he raised his arms until I could see his woolly armpit hair. When he said, “Oh Allah, I have prayed and prayed, please here my du’a,” he was moaning to God that his blessings had not arrived sooner.

Every afternoon I stretched the jidd’s fingers inside mine and circled her wrists around until they made a crackling noise. I warmed her

bath water just the way she liked it, adding four cups of fresh milk, jasmine oil and a cup of honey.

I arranged her towel on a small chair next to the tub and pushed the floor mat all the way to the wall of the tub. I helped her out of the abaya and held her as she sat her heavy bottom in the tub. I pressed my fingers inside the rolls of fat underneath her breasts and around her large waist while she looked at my face as if searching for answers.

“*Min fadlik* Zawadi, you will do my feet after this?” She closed her eyes to the rising steam. “They ache like a camel’s.”

The jidd was the only who ever said “*min fadlik*, please” when she needed me. She gossiped about the syeda: her never-seen friend Nadia, her inability to carry pregnancies to term and the birth of Hala, as if it were the syeda’s fault the child had been born with defects.

“She’s like a haboob,” the jidd complained. “Her temper blows in any direction and all one can do is wait for the storm to pass.”

The hardest month was Ramadan, when starvation caused the jidd to become as jumbled as a mess of tangled rope. She moved around as if bothered by a swarm of bees. As I lathered her thick chest in the bath, trying to get the sponge between her wilted breasts, she stuck her arms out to keep me at bay and shifted her large bottom this way and that until the water spilled over in gushes. In the kitchen, while I rushed against the clock to have a spread of meals prepared by sunset, she put her fingers inside bubbling pots, complained that the basbousa was too dry and the rice pudding too soggy while I, not having eaten for twelve hours, flipped over with hunger pangs, and drooled so much I worried the saliva would pour into the pots.

“What is the point of fasting if one eats like a hog at sunset and then again at midnight and dawn?” Angel said, while he watched my forehead bead as I fumbled the pastry layers for the baklava. “Jesus fasted forty days and nights straight. You Muslims look like robed barrels by the

time the month is done.” His neck bobbed loosely on his frail neck, his mouth tirelessly chewing his khat as he examined my workmanship like a chef in a restaurant.

“Not all Muslim families can afford to eat a feast every night, you know,” I said. My mood was clouded by physical deprivation and I feared I would stuff a ball of pastry in Angel’s mouth to shut him up. “When I was a child we were so poor that sometimes during Ramadan we had to eat from the same bowl, passing it around like we were sharing marijuana.”

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“I know he touch you,” the jidd whispered, pointing her chin to her son. I was wringing almond oil from her knotted arthritic feet when the sheikh

walked past with a nod to his mother. I kept my head down, pretended I hadn't heard her.

“I know everything. I know he touch you. I know that's why they chased Sofia away. Oh Allah, help me.”

On some mornings when the sheikh was in my room, I thought I saw a dark, lumpy figure hovering at the top of the stairs where the door was. The figure would stand like a silent guard while the sheikh choked me.

“I follow him to the basement some mornings and I see him on you like a vulture,” she said, hissing in pain when I pressed on a large bunion.

“I can't continue to see this and do nothing. It's a sin.”

As soon as the syeda came through the front door the jidd moved her unsteady hips down the stairs and called her daughter-in-law into the kitchen.

“As if!” the syeda snapped. “These are the same lies she told Sofia and now she’s telling you! My husband would never touch an abeed. Look at her – she’s despicable.”

“No, *you* look at her,” the jidd said. “I’ve seen him with her in the basement at night. The poor girl is scratched and wounded. Should she strip down and show you his grim artwork? Why do you refuse to believe it?”

The syeda opened a kitchen drawer, brought out a knife and walked slowly towards me. The jidd shouted at her in Arabic, following her closely.

“Listen to me, abeed,” the syeda said. She was talking to me but she moved the knife from my face to the old lady’s. Her voice was a whisper. “If you continue to speak these lies against my husband, I will have you thrown in prison.”

I saw in her eyes that she was going to hurt the jidd to silence her. I moved quickly to grab her arms, to rip out the knife from her hand but her fingers clutched it like a vice.

I brought my knee up to jab her thin thighs. As she buckled, she loosened her grip and the knife slipped, slashing my arm on its way to the ground. The blood dripped at my feet. The jidd walked around the kitchen wailing in Arabic, her hands to the sky. She said it was her fault for birthing a monster.

The syeda picked up the bloodied knife and walked up to me where I was hunched in the corner by the kitchen door with my hijab wrapped over my open wound.

Is this how I would end? In the brightly lit, white, marble-tiled kitchen of a sheikh's mansion, in the middle of a desert, thousands of miles away from my son?

The syeda stared down at me, then threw the blood-stained knife into the sink and left. My hands shook uncontrollably while the jidd continued to scream at her daughter-in-law. I cupped my hands and tightened them into fists but they still shook. I put the fists between my teeth and bit until my knuckles bled.

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When Angel asked about my bandaged arm I told him the syeda tried to kill me. We were sitting in the car outside the mosque with Hala. She enjoyed the cartoons Angel played for her on the screen in the car.

“So this is what it has come to?” Angel said. “The sheikh raping maids while his wife protects him. The Ethiopian girl before you was only rescued because she tried to hang herself. At the hospital she said she would rather be put in prison than be returned to her job.”

“How can the syeda allow this?” I asked, completely defeated.

“Because she has a secret big enough to have her stoned to death,”

Angel said. “She won’t disturb the sheikh’s nest.”

We stared at a moth swirling in circles outside the car’s windshield for a long time.

“It’s dying, the poor thing,” Angel said.

“I’ve been thinking about stabbing him, when he’s in my bed,” I said.

He pointed out of his window to something I couldn’t see. “Behind those buildings there’s a large arena. They call it the chop-chop square. My friend was beheaded there. The crowd cheered when the head was cut off. They accused him of raping and killing his boss’s daughter. His syeda’s boyfriend was the one who did it. She would have been stoned to death for adultery. Your only hope is to get out of the house. And out of the country.”

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The next Friday, Sofia stood in front of me looking bigger and more radiant than I remembered. As if reading my mind she lifted her abaya to show me a rounded belly. We were parked outside the mosque while the family said their prayers. Hala played happily in the back seat. Sofia was with her husband, a toothy Arab named Tariq. His keffiyeh was cocked at a rakish angle and he grinned and bowed at me like I was an old friend.

“They’ll soon be out,” Angel said. I hadn’t seen him this nervous since the day they searched his cottage. Sofia and Tariq had climbed into the back seat of the car and Sofia sat snuggling Hala against her chest.

“I agree with Angel that we need to get you out of the country,” Sofia said. “There’s no other way.”

Tariq put an arm around Sofia's shoulder as she spoke, his long fingers rubbing her collarbone.

“Angel says the syeda has completely refused to allow you to make phone calls? When was the last time you called your mother?” Sofia asked.

“More than three months ago,” I said. “Just after you got fired.”

“Here, take it!” Sofia said, pushing her phone in my hands. “Call now while we've still got time.”

On the second ring, my mother's voice came on the phone.

“Alhamdulillah,” Sofia mumbled.

“I'm trying to get out mama,” I said. “I've got friends helping me”

My mother descended into rambling, saying she punished herself for sending me to a foreign place. My father punished her too, she said.

“He is at work all the time,” she said. “All he does now is drive the bus, morning and night, until he’s falling asleep at the wheel. He won’t even look at me.”

Baraka didn’t know my voice any more. When I left he was one year and six months old. I had counted the months until he was two years and six months. My mother prodded him to speak to me until her voice turned into a plea but all he gave was mumbling.

“My own son doesn’t know me.”

“It’s not true,” my mother said. “I show him pictures.”

“Is something wrong with him?” I asked.

“He’s been a bit slow to speak.”

I felt hollow in my gut, like I did inside the lifts in tall buildings. I grabbed my stomach. “But he talked early. He said ‘mama’.”

“I had a dream that you came home and as soon as you entered, he spoke,” she said.

Angel gestured that the muezzin was singing the last prayer.

“Hurry!”

“Mama, don’t worry. I’ve got good people helping me.”

“We are going to get you out,” Tariq said when I got off Sofia’s phone. “It won’t be easy, but by Allah’s grace, we will. First, you need to get out of the house and come to us.”

I nodded.

“My brother is a truck driver,” Tariq said. “He will drive you across the desert to the Kenyan Embassy in Riyadh.”

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At 2 p.m I took the jidd to the bathroom. The water was warm, mixed with milk and jasmine oil. I slipped the abaya off the old lady and helped her into the bath. Downstairs, I heard the sheikh whistling for Angel. He

had finished his lunch and was ready to go. I ran down the stairs from the bathroom to the kitchen to say goodbye to Angel.

“This is where I leave you,” he said. Fear and worry had clouded his eyes. “Don’t let anything get in the way.”

In my room, I shoved my weathered shoes into the deep pockets of my abaya and tucked Baraka’s picture inside my bra. Upstairs, the jidd called for me. She was tired of sitting in her bath and beginning to behave like a bratty toddler, as she did when she didn’t like the food. At the bathroom door I pulled my shoes out of my abaya and placed them by the side of the door.

“Where were you?” she said. “I’m calling and calling. This water is too cold.” I tried to grab her hand but she was already stepping out of the tub without my support. “Get me out, get me out.”

I looked at her watch, which I’d placed on the large hand basin next to the tub. It was 2:30 p.m. The syeda would be home at four.

“*Jidd, min fadliek,*” I said. “Please let me help you out. Stop being so difficult.”

“Abeed! I can come in or out as fast or slow as I like!”

I recalled Angel’s words: “*Don’t let anything get in the way.*”

The panic was beginning to overwhelm me. I wrestled the towel around her to hasten her.

“Abeed! What is the matter with you? Has a jinn entered you?” she shouted.

“Shut up! Just shut up!” I shrieked, surprising myself.

The old lady stared at me in disbelief. “How dare you talk to me like this,” she screamed. Her body was still bare. Her large breasts drooped low, flapping over her thick stomach. Her arms were in the air, her hands threatening to hit me. “You just wait until I tell my son how you have spoken to me.”

Suddenly, I felt a release. I didn't care any more. I walked to the door and reached for my shoes. The jidd was cursing and pleading for me not to leave her frail body.

I turned to run down the stairs but Hala was standing in front of me. She was supposed to be asleep.

“Ahp! Ahp! Zidi, ahp!” She raised her arms, waiting for me to carry her, just like I imagined Baraka was waiting. Which child would I hold?

I ran past Hala, past the spot in the kitchen where I had bled when the syeda slashed my arm, past the door to the basement of my silent screams and past Angel's cottage, where I had seen him getting lashed. Behind the large courtyard where I hung up the washing every morning, I scaled the high fence the way Angel had explained, with his voice playing in my head – *“Jump high up, not forward, otherwise you'll just*

*be throwing yourself into the wall. Then grab on the top and push your body using your feet and knees as levers.”*

I did it. At the top of the wall I looked down. Angel had said it would be about the depth of a grave. It was higher than that but the sand would soften my fall. I could jump or I could hang my body off the wall and drop straight down. I closed my eyes and played Angel’s voice in my mind – *Land on both feet, crouch your body, don’t lock your knees, keep your body firm.*

When I came down, my legs felt like springs. I had done it. But my right arm was being hacked by a dull pain. It was twisted and hung like a noodle.

Under the desert sun, I walked slowly, stopping every few steps to rearrange the crooked arm. The sweat dripped from my forehead and blinded me, but every time I let go of my wounded arm to wipe my brow, I bent over in torment. I walked faster until I was half running, while the

pain squeezed tears from my eyes and the hot tar burned through my shoes, punishing my soles.

As I neared the town centre, women in black sashayed in and out of the fabric shops and small jewellery stores that had gone past in front of my eyes when Angel drove us to and from mosque. The muezzin sounded and the streets started to clear. It was salah time, 3:30 p.m. Soon the syeda would be home, cursing me, calling the sheikh to report my escape.

I slid into a small bicycle repair stand on the side of a narrow street and pulled my headscarf to veil my face so that only my eyes showed. Two men bent over the pedals of an upside-down motorbike stopped their conversation and looked at me curiously until I gave a slight nod.

When the streets started to stream with people again, I slid out of the stand and continued to walk, following closely behind women in abayas.

Several Mutawwa'in stood in a circle, talking intently. I hadn't rehearsed any answers. I didn't have an iqama, the employee identification card, and I wasn't with a male companion. *Allah, you are my only protection, please help me.* It was the prayer I had whispered for days as I polished tiles, cut onions and ironed the sheikh's giant thawbs.

On a side street across from the small shopping centre where street vendors sat under makeshift kiosks selling vegetables out of cardboard boxes, Tariq was leaning against the front door of a tiny red car. When I reached him, we exchanged a quiet nod and I slid into the back seat. Sofia was sitting in front, grinning.

"You made it," she said. "Alhamdulillah. "

"Keep your face veiled," Tariq said, as he put the car into gear. He adjusted his rear-view mirror and glanced at me occasionally while meandering through the chaotic streets. "How did it go?"

I showed Sofia my arm. “The jidd was calling for me.” My voice shook with fear and shooting pains. “Hala was there too. I could hear her wailing as I left the house.”

The air in Nuru’s home was swollen with spices and fried food.

“I pray you can forgive me for not helping you sooner,” said a tall, handsome woman I had never met. “I’m Sofia’s sister, Nuru. I’m a doctor. I tried to help you but the sheikh has people in the police and the courts who help him bend sharia laws. His personal doctor, Dr Mazra, is paid to be silent. My hands were tied but I never stopped praying for you.”

She looked at my arm.

“You’ve twisted the elbow,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’m going wrap it up for you. When you get to the embassy, they will arrange proper medical care.”

An hour later, my arm was held tight to my chest, and the painkillers Nuru gave me brought my body such calm that I started to

doze off. Sofia huddled on the sofa next to me saying, “You’ll be home soon, you’ll be home soon, Insha’Allah.”

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At 6 a.m I was preparing for my long journey across the desert to Riyadh with Tariq’s brother Faizal, the truck driver. Sofia was helping me slip the beige shirt she’d bought me over my sling when there was a knock on the bedroom door. Tariq handed Sofia a newspaper through a crack in the door.

*Khadima Murders 74-year-old Jidd, Flees*

Below the headline was my passport photo. I barely recognized myself. The pudgy cheeks and soft, smiling eyes were gone now, replaced by sharp cheekbones, dead eyes and a long, thin neck. Sofia opened the bedroom door and in front of us stood Tariq, a hand to his

chest like he was about to start singing his national anthem. Behind him, Faizal shook his head as if he was being forced to eat a plate of roaches.

“I’m sorry Tariq,” Faizal said, pointing at the newspaper. “I won’t do it. If they find her in my truck, we are both beheaded.”

Faizal suffered from severe acne on a greasy face, which caused him to appear to not have bathed, but underneath his ugly exterior his eyes were kind, like Tariq’s.

“Please,” I cried. “Please, just take me to my embassy.”

“No,” Faizal said. “No. They say you’ve murdered a woman.”

The news was on every TV channel, along with my passport photo.

*“The khadima is accused of drowning Sheikh Mohamed bin Aziz Al Abdullahrahman Bashir’s mother in the bath and then fleeing the home.”*

Angel called. “Did you kill her Zawadi? Tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I said while Angel talked over me, urging me to remember the details.

Tariq and Faizal continued flipping channels on the small television as if comparing notes.

“Faizal is right,” Sofia said. “I’ve called the Kenyan Embassy and they say it’s too risky to smuggle you across the country – fourteen hours and there are checkpoints everywhere. They are sending a lawyer, an American woman they say is very good at this kind of thing and she will work for free. We’ve got a good case Zawadi. Can’t you see? They have no real evidence against you. The sheikh doesn’t want the world to know he rapes his maid. His wife doesn’t want the world to know she sleeps with a woman. The sheikh doesn’t want Hala in the public eye either. Do you know that it terrifies him to even bring her to the mall? She’s not the perfect child. They have too many secrets to hide. They will want this to go away as quickly as ...”

“I just want to make one phone call,” I said.

“Are you already at the embassy?” My mother’s voice was loud and hopeful. “How soon can they get you out of the country?” I had no voice. Everything was unfolding in front of me like slides in a film.

“Mama, I won’t be coming home. Everything’s gone wrong. Everything.”

## LUCKY GIRL

At 5:45 a.m. comes the knock on the door. I climb off my bed, kneel, and kiss the floor. “*Serviam*. I will serve.”

Still kneeling, I make the sign of the cross – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – then start on the rosary, holding on to every bead, centring my mind on the Virgin Mary, asking her to pray for us now and at the hour of our death, repeating the sequence of the Apostles’ Creed: one Our Father, ten Hail Marys, one Glory Be; five times.

It’s 6:30 a.m. I fold my rosary in three and slip it inside my pillowcase. In the shower I keep it short. Mother says many have no water to drink and most bathe with ice-cold water. While I scrub my feet with the pumice, I pray for my prelate, Alvaro del Portillo. In her bedroom, Mother whips her buttocks with the discipline – a whip made of cattail with knotted ends that she flings over her shoulders repeatedly.

“You don’t have to do it,” Mother says, when I ask her why. “You’re only ten. You’re too young to understand the reason behind it.”

Yesterday, I put my ice-cold lemonade on top of the brand new piano and it left a ring mark. This morning my left cheek sizzled where Mother smacked me. At school, I tell Sister Redempta that I ran into our glass door. A week ago, Mother whacked my thighs with a flip-flop

because she opened the rubbish bin to find a whole serving of rice and lentils tossed inside, covering the layers of potato and carrot peels. I swarmed around the kitchen, dodging the whips. I called “Kokoi, Kokoi!” and my grandmother came running in to stop Mother’s hand.

“It’s enough,” my kokoi said. “You’re beating her out of anger. There’s no wisdom in that.”

She pulled Mother to the living room by her arm. Something important was happening on the news. Crowds of people were running wildly from an army of men with oversized guns strapped across their shoulders. Some people fell and lay still like Simba did after the mamba struck him in our back garden.

“Just look at South Africa,” Kokoi said, sadness in her voice. “It’s ’85 and still they’re treated like animals.”

Mother turned to her, moving towards the booming television, but then looked back at me. I flinched. She pointed at me with the orange flip-flop. “Soila, if I see you throwing food out again, I’ll kill you.”

Princess, our maid, who all the gardeners in the neighbourhood bubbled over like a frothy beer, was peeking out of the hole in the kitchen wall where we passed bowls of food, her hands on her cheeks.

“Do you hear me? People are dying in Ethiopia,” Mother said.

“You must pay attention when you walk my child,” Sister Redempta said when I told her I fell down the stairs. “You’re a rainbow – always red, black and blue.”

Tonight, I play the piano, head hunched over the keyboard. Mother taps at my shoulders with a wooden ruler. Feet flat on the floor, back straight up, shoulders down, she said. I practised Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9, No. 2 for my exam. Mother doesn’t understand the music sheets. She pronounced it, “Cho-pin”. I didn’t dare correct her. Insolence. Her church group was visiting. They are all women like her who give time and money to the church. They wear the wooden rosaries they bought at the group pilgrimage to the Vatican. They prayed the rosary and recited the Preces, a collection of prayers in church Latin recited daily by members of the Opus Dei.

Mother gestures to them to be quiet when I play. They’re all ears, as Mother liked to say. When my fingers fumble – just a little bit like they sometimes do – Mother firmly places her hand on my shoulder and I know not to fumble again. I let my hands follow the gentle upward leaps, moving them slower over the keys to increase the lengths as the lines unfold. I play this way twice, thrice, creating the elaborate tones and trills in the notes, then slowing down again until the passionate crescendo, ascending to a high register. I play forcefully, my fingers burning at the

joints, the keys drumming, until I finally reach the highest point – fortissimo. Then the notes calm and I end the piece serenely.

“Can you believe what talent she has? Only ten?” Mother says, when the notes stop. “The discipline she has.”

The silence breaks like crackling firewood when Mother’s hands clap, her gold bangles clanking. All the women in her church group stand up, clapping too. Some of them hoot – *iririririiriii* – because that’s what our women do when something excellent happens. Mother walks around to the piano bench, cups my face with her soft hands and kisses my cheek. My insides warm, burst.

“Just look at that. That is the real love of a mother, the kind I never had,” Mrs Rao roars. “My mother died when I was too little, you know. What a lucky girl you are – very lucky.”

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I’ve been biting my nails since I can remember.

When I was little, Princess walked me home from the Catholic nursery school in our neighbourhood. She was my favourite person after Aunt Nesian, Mother’s sister, the third-born. Princess told me she loved me every day and tickled my bare armpits as she bathed me in the tub. She wore a headwrap and kanga, and hummed gently as we skipped over

potholes. I trailed three steps behind in my chequered uniform, watching her large bottom wiggle underneath her yellow kanga, wishing I didn't have to go home, wishing I lived at school.

After my 4 p.m. snack, I sat on the bright red carpet in front of our large wood-encased television set. It was a colour television. It came with a thick remote control. I didn't watch it much when Mother was home.

“Already you wear glasses,” she said. “That television will blind you. Read a book.”

The way she yelled frightened me so I watched television with my head tilted to the side and my ears open, listening for the sound of the garage doors rolling up.

I loved *The Cosby Show*. I dreamt about Clair Huxtable. I wanted her to be my mother. It wasn't just the way she dressed or the way her puffy hair swayed when she was being sassy; it was the way her children talked. They weren't afraid of her.

When I was ten, Mother bought us a VCR. My favourite film was *Annie*, a story about an orphan who is rescued by a billionaire. I knew the words to all the songs and I taught myself the tap dance. I would have done anything to be Annie, to live in Daddy Warbucks' mansion, to be kissed and hugged for eternity. I wanted to live in America. Everyone seemed so happy there. The children laughed and talked back to their parents in a way I didn't dare dream of. Even the orphans were happy. I

watched *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. Her real name was Adora, but with her Great Sword she transformed into She-Ra to fight evil. I wished I had the Great Sword. Mother wouldn't scare me if I had the power to put her in a cage.

Mother was known in our neighbourhood for her strong devotion to the Catholic faith. She would visit people in need, like the Omaris, the Somali family with seven children, who rented a cottage at the back of a wealthy family's mansion down the street. They had only one couch. She'd take them a basket of hot buns covered with a white napkin.

"Those poor children are always so hungry; no sooner am I at their front door than all the bread is flying off the basket," she said. "The landlord's children have more than they can eat, but he won't give Mr Omari even a cup of beans to feed his children."

She would smile with the Shahs, a Hindu surgeon and his plump wife, who draped exquisite saris over her fat belly. When the Shah daughters brought *payasam* to share with us over Diwali, Mother received it graciously. When Mrs Shah asked if the five-day lighting of fireworks was a nuisance, Mother said, "Nuisance? What nuisance? Anything for your gods!"

When Mrs Shah had a car accident that kept her hospitalized in a back brace for eight weeks, Mother made sure the family's workers didn't sit around all day. Dr Shah's work shirts were crisp every morning,

the girls' homework was done and they got to school on time in dapper uniforms.

At home, Mother sang praise songs in the kitchen as she directed Princess to cut this, chop that. Princess did what she was told, her head buried deep inside her shoulders. When Mother moved towards her, Princess backed away. When Mother stood in the middle of the kitchen, Princess's back scraped the walls, the cabinets and stove. She never turned her back to Mother, not even when she picked out onions, potatoes and canned tomatoes from the pantry. Her body stiffened with the clinking of a falling spoon or the clanging of a pot. I knew she was afraid. I knew what it was like to be afraid of Mother. I knew what it was like to not be able to control my body when she was in the room. My nerves rattled and drove me mad.

My kokoi lived with us, as did Mother's sisters. Kokoi talked ceaselessly, giving out dollops of unwanted wisdom.

"We are Masaai women," she said, thumping her chest. "We work our bones off. We build our houses by hand; we wake up in the night to fill up the holes with dung and mud while our men sleep; we can milk ten cows all at once."

Kokoi forgot to tell them their father beat her every time she gave birth to a girl. He sent her away with four daughters. Mother was the oldest. She was fifteen when she dropped out of school to clean homes

for white families. Then she found work as a chambermaid at the old New Stanley Hotel, saving up all the tips tourists left in white envelopes. She paid her way through night secretarial classes. She met my father at her first office job, in the secretarial pool of his biscuit mill. He was a playboy. He'd grown up with money, the son of millionaire coffee farmer. He was sent to England for school and returned fired up to start his own business. With a small loan, he started a biscuit mill and dabbled in rose farming.

By the time he fell in love with Mother, he was a wealthy bachelor who picked up and dropped women like they were fresh tomatoes at a vegetable stand. The way she disregarded him made her more attractive. Mother wasn't the most beautiful woman in the office, but her effortless grace was striking. She walked as though she had a pile of books balanced on her head.

“She learned it as a child when she had to help me bring back water from the community well, carrying the pots on her head,” Kokoi said. “She was a woman before she even sprouted breasts.”

Mother wore men's neckties underneath a blazer, while the other secretaries wore scarves over silk blouses. She wore her hair in a tied-up Afro while all the other women ruined their dress collars with curl activator, trying to modernize, to look like the African Americans on

television. When Mother walked into the office kitchen, gossiping secretaries cleared out fast.

“Your mother carried herself like she was the president’s daughter, even when all she had in her purse was a twenty-shilling note,” Kokoi said. “You don’t need money to look like an heiress. She was never one to talk needlessly, or care about being part of the group.”

Mother allowed my father to take her out one time. It was a simple lunch in a restaurant around the corner from the biscuit mill. She told him she had three sisters to put through school, and a mother who sold cabbages at the farmer’s market. She said she didn’t have time to fool around with a two-timer. My father wanted to show her he could be a good man.

He put out an advertisement in the *Daily Nation* classifieds, stating from that moment on, he would only give his attention to one woman and he wouldn’t stop trying. “She knows herself,” he said in the ad.

By the time I was born, Mother had returned to school, studied business administration and was helping run the business. Her whole family was living with us. In those years, she was the happiest she had ever been. Kokoi and my aunts said she would laugh so hard her head would fall to her knees.

Then my father died. Mother, my kokoi and my aunts didn’t talk about his death. They behaved as if he had never died. Or lived.

It was our driver, Ali, who told me the story. For years, I thought Ali was my grandfather. I didn't understand that the *taqiyah* on his head, his *kanzu* robe and the wooden beads on his wrist meant he was Muslim and therefore could never be my relative.

Ali said my father woke up one morning, went to the bathroom and collapsed in the tub. The way he told the story, Mother saw a flood of water streaming out under the bathroom door. When she went in, my father's head was cracked open.

"He died just like that – only 38," Ali, said with a quick snap of his fingers. I had started at a faraway primary school and Ali drove me [there](#) every morning and home every afternoon. As I grew up, he'd tell me stories about my dead father, fleshing out his character in fine detail so that I got to know him well.

He shook his head in disbelief while narrating the events around my father's demise. He put his tongue to the back of his teeth and made a "tsk, tsk, tsk" sound. "Shaytan, shaytan."

He chanted the devil's name intermittently for the rest of the way, so I understood it was the devil – not God – that took my papai.

"And your mother, she became someone else," Ali said. "She shed the part of her we knew, like a snake sheds its skin. It was as if she forgot how to laugh or even cry. She became as stiff as a baobab."

I didn't remember Mother laughing. I didn't remember my father either. I had a vague memory of Mother's screaming and the crying and turmoil in the house. The framed photographs that littered the living room were as insignificant to me as the pictures in Mother's *DRUM* magazines.

I couldn't remember my father holding me on his lap on a wooden stool in a photo studio, or standing next to me in flared pants while I posed on a red tricycle. I learned that my papai loved deep-fried tilapia served with ugali. He hated pumpkins and yelled at Mother when she forced them down my throat saying, "Must every baby in this country eat pumpkins?" More than anything, he hated backward African customs.

"Your papai craned his neck like an angered ostrich over any imbecile who said 'Don't worry, next time it will be a boy.' He changed your nappies and woke up at night to sing for you. He swore you would study in the best universities in the world. He was the kind of father most people hadn't seen back in the 1980s. He was like those American fathers. You know, like that doctor man, Cosby, who you like to watch on television."

Though Mother loved me, she scared me more than anything else. She scared me more than the Irish nuns in school, who clasped their hands behind their backs and inspected our uniforms as we walked in single file down the hall.

Often, I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up the image of a soft mother who held me every day, who didn't hit me, who cared about the things I loved and not just the things she wanted me to do. I couldn't.

The phone rang in the hallway, always at 5 p.m.

“Are you home?” It was the same cool tone she used when she asked, “How much for the turnips?” at the market.

“Yes, I'm home.”

“Start on your work and practise your piano; I'll be home in an hour.”

And then there would be the sound of a disconnecting receiver. At 6 p.m. came the crunching wheels on the driveway, the garage doors rolling up and Mother's high heels stepping through the front door. I pulled my cuticles apart.

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After my father died, Mother joined the Opus Dei, a branch of the Catholic Church. She said she wanted to dedicate her life to God. We spent our lives around the church, following the literal meaning of the Latin: “the work of God”.

“Josemaría Escrivá received a vision that the ordinary work of laypersons is just as important in the eyes of God as the work of a priest,

and the Pope himself made him a saint,” Mother said. “Who are we to not dedicate our lives the same way?”

Mother took up a way of life similar to the Opus Dei nuns, who wore secular clothes and remained celibate. They lived in communes but she lived as an outsider, a supernumerary in the church.

She inherited my father’s biscuit mill and worked hard for years to grow it into a large company. The year I turned twelve, a giant conglomerate bought the company. Mother became a multi-millionaire and devoted all her time to the Opus Dei.

Bishop Emmanuel, a man so pious he had personally met Pope John Paul II, frequently visited our home. Mother called him her spiritual guide. Father. He was the priest at St. Joseph Cathedral. He told us every Sunday how much help Mother was around the church, how much of herself she gave.

“What a lucky girl you are, to have such a mother,” he shouted, so all the church people could hear him, and Mother smiled in a way that she never smiled at me. “How the angels in heaven would sing if everyone had such a generous, caring mother.”

On Sundays, Mother smiled and sang in the car all the way to church and back home. She let me do what I wanted. I could lie in bed and read, splash in the pool for hours, eat as much ice cream as I liked, play my boom box a little too loud.

In the evenings, Bishop Emmanuel arrived for Sunday tea. Mother asked us not to dawdle around the living room while she served the Father a homemade sponge cake with tea in the china she used only for special visitors. Not even my kokoi was welcome while they sat in counsel behind a closed door.

“Everyone knows they are more than friends,” my aunt Laioni said. She was the last-born of the four sisters, the untethered one. “Everyone! What kind of a priest goes to a widow’s home for tea then drags it on to supper and a late-night coffee? Who drinks coffee before bed?”

“Who is everyone?” my kokoi said. “I ought to put you in a potato sack and whip you till morning. Your sister has given herself to care for this family and this is the thanks she gets?”

My kokoi kept her other daughters in order to keep them safe from Mother’s dreaded, unfrivolous nature.

“We are a prayerful family,” Mother said, when any one of her relatives complained. “If you have anything to moan about, take it to God.”

At my aunt Tuli’s wedding, Mother showed her pluck when she spoke about Godliness to a tent full of the atheist relatives of the Scottish groom. As they sat drenched in sweat, fanning themselves in vain with the wedding programmes, artificial smiles on their pale faces, Mother reminded Tuli of sacrifice.

“God gives fruit to those who sow and if your sowing is your blessing to others then God will bless you with more,” she said, her lips touching the microphone to produce a *phuf, phuf* sound after every word.

Mother loved my aunt Laioni, the youngest, more than her other sisters. She was as large and round as she was loquacious and prone to histrionics over small matters such as water cut-offs and electricity blackouts. Mother reminded her to temper herself and cultivate the grace of the Virgin Mary.

My aunt Nesian was my favourite. She was soft and nurturing, unlike Mother, yet she and her husband, my Uncle Kadu, had no children. Nesian was the only one in the family I could tell about Mother: how I was afraid of her, afraid of disappointing her, and how I sometimes wished I could climb into her bed and be cuddled.

“Your mother loves you in her own way,” Aunt Nesian said. “She wants what’s best for you. That’s why she’s so hard on you. She doesn’t know how to be a mother *and* a friend. That’s why God gave you aunties.”

When I turned thirteen, I woke up with a dull ache in my lower abdomen. The pain intensified every half hour and then started to shoot down my lower back. I lay in bed in the foetal position – the only thing that seemed to calm the pain. When I saw that I was soaked with blood I started to scream hysterically. My aunt Laioni burst into my room but

when she lifted the sheets the terror melted from her eyes and she broke out into so much laughter she could hardly breathe.

“My God, I thought you were engulfed in flames,” she said. “It’s just your period.”

She grabbed the moment with so much vigour it seemed she had been waiting her whole life. She gave me thick pads, taught me how to stick them on my underwear and gave me aspirin for the pain. She stepped on a stool in the living room and pulled down the calendar with the photograph of the Maasai men leaping in the air while they danced the adumu. She taught me how to count the days until my next period.

She explained, in great detail, how I could fall pregnant, describing the mechanics of procreation with a drawing of what looked like two prunes tied to a banana and, connected to it by an arrow, a diagram of what appeared to be the head of a bull with its tongue hanging loose.

That evening, Mother sat me down on a small bench under our lemon tree. The rainy season was drawing to an end, and the mud was thick, coating the ground under the soles of my shoes. Mother’s tulips had blossomed in shades of purple and the scent of her bright roses was strong. The lemons drooped heavy and formed round shadows on the bench.

“Everyone should have a garden,” Mother said, looking around at the work of her hands. “It’s amazing the amount of calm I find in gardening, and the number of demons I have slain here.”

She had planted the lemon tree shortly after my father died. Through the years I had seen her quietly pruning it, spraying its large trunk with oil to keep pests away. I saw her talk to the tree and wipe tears off her face the same way she did at the cemetery. The lemon tree had grown with me from a twig strapped in with sticks and a rope to protect it from the wind, to a formidable tree with enough cover to read or nap under on a hot day.

Mother read to me about chastity from a blistered bible. “Corinthians says, ‘flee from sexually immorality’.” She closed her eyes and led me in a prayer to the Virgin, asking me to repeat the lines after her, but I was distracted by the fragrances in the garden – honey, mud, citrus and whiffs of ginger. A buzzing bumblebee hovered over the patch of gardenias.

Mother slapped my wrist impatiently while continuing to say the prayers. “Repeat after me: ‘Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God. Your body does not belong to yourself ...’”

“Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to by God. Your body does not belong to yourself,” I intoned dutifully.

“Kayai, my small egg, you’re old enough now to know that I have been celibate since your father died,” she said. “Now that you have become a woman, you will be confronted by the pleasures of the body.”

Had she also been confronted, I wondered. Had she given in to pleasures with the bishop, like my aunts’ gossiped?

Mother stood and plucked a lemon from her tree, then sat down and started to peel it, throwing the peels into her flower patch. Then she pulled the fruit apart, spraying my face with a mist of tart juice, blinding me, from lust, she said. She offered me half. I shook my head.

She shrugged. “You should eat lemons; I tell you all the time.” She divided it into small sections. “They ward off diseases.” She held each section between her lips and sucked out the juice, then crushed it in her mouth. I winced. “Men will use you for one thing. Now that your body is mature, sometimes you will be filled with lust. It’s ungodly. God sees everything and He will punish you in his own way.”

The padding between my legs had grown thicker and rougher since my aunt Laioni gave it to me, and ripping pains were shooting from my abdomen to my lower back. I thought I smelt the stink of my own blood.

Could my mother smell it too? I wondered if I was being punished already.

My changing body began calling my mind with urges I had never known. I found myself putting a pillow between my thighs at night. No one taught me how to ride the waves of pleasure. It was an intoxicating energy, slithering through my body, begging me for release.

Afterwards, I felt sinful and dirty and I feared Mother would kick me out of the house if she discovered my perversions. I recited the mantra: *My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.*

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While my classmates spent weekends at cinemas and slumber parties, I worked with the Opus Dei in orphanages, selling produce from the convent farm at the local market to raise money for the church, and studying for Advanced Placement tests.

I had private piano lessons at home with a crotchety seventy-five-year-old English woman with arthritic fingers, who had once played with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra. Every morning, she brought out a round silver clock that her father had used in the war. I didn't know

which war. She placed it on the same spot on the piano and screamed, “Sit in middle C!”

“Your father would have wanted you to do well,” Mother said one night, over supper. My kokoi, Mother and I were sitting at our mahogany dining table – an extravagance with eight curved legs with solid brass tips.

Mother hadn’t changed anything in the house since my father passed away. It was as if she was afraid he wouldn’t be able to find the house if he ever came back. I was scowling into a plate of a stewed maize and beans after not being allowed to go to a friend’s seventeenth birthday party.

“There’ll be plenty of parties for you to attend in your life.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “Everyone else goes to parties, while I have to practise an hour a day on the piano, work at the orphanage, sell food for the church farmers’ market, work at refugee camps and study. I have no life.”

A solid smack hit my cheek.

“You should absolutely care,” Mother said, her hand trembling. “Your path is about getting into the University of Nairobi and serving God and others. Not partying with misfits who won’t go anywhere in life.”

In my bedroom I looked over the university catalogues I had collected from the Study Abroad Centre in town. They had photographs of students walking, cycling and sitting cross-legged in circles, with

backpacks and folders in their arms. The buildings were shiny; the libraries were enormous and immaculate. The trees weren't the kind I had seen. Their leaves were purple and red.

I told Mother I dreamed of America. She listened quietly while she sipped tea from a large mug, though her eyes looked around the room as if she wasn't paying attention. When I was done talking, she asked me to bring her the materials. I raced upstairs and grabbed all ten catalogues from my desk.

"Put them there," she said, pointing at the coffee table. Without even touching them, she simply said she would think about it.

After a month, Mother still hadn't said anything. The application deadlines were looming. I started to write the essays; starting with the college I thought I liked best. I had no reason to like any of them in particular. I had never been to America and I didn't know anyone who had lived there except the Cosbys, the people from Dallas, Falcon Crest and all the other television shows I stayed up late at night waiting to see.

I asked the nuns at school for recommendation letters. I emptied my childhood bank account – all of the birthday and chore money I had collected over seven years – to pay for the SAT exam. It was a blessing that Mother had demanded I save when I wanted to spend the money on "frivolous" things. When the SAT results came back, I had scored in the ninetieth percentile.

My applications were ready to be sent out but I needed a \$50 application fee for each one. In February, I was accepted to the University of Nairobi to study business. My heart sank.

“You have to talk to my mother, please,” I said to Bishop Emmanuel in the confession box at St. Joseph. “American schools start in September and the deadlines are already here. But she won’t even talk about it.”

The bishop’s head nodded behind the divider as I spoke to him about how well I could do in a university where the students didn’t protest over the quality of food in the cafeteria and the lecturers didn’t abscond for half the semester. The bishop pointed to the shut door behind me and asked me to meet him outside the confessional.

“It’s a tough decision for your mother,” he said, as we sat on the second pew. I had never been alone with the bishop or any other man, but his presence was comforting. “I know she’s praying over it and whipping herself every day for mercy. God will guide her and give her the wisdom and you must accept her decision knowing that she’ll do what’s right for you.”

I nodded. He stretched one arm out on the bench behind my shoulders so that my face was close to his chest. Then, with his other hand he gently patted my knee. I felt wonderfully protected, as if by my dead father.

“It’s going to be OK, because everything happens the way God has planned for us,” he said, almost whispering in my ear. His hand moved over my knees, rubbing them for a long while as if curing meat with grains of salt.

I saw the thick gold band set with a purple stone he always wore on his ring finger. Mother said the bishop was wedded to the church. His hand slid up over my cotton skirt and rubbed my thigh in the same way he had my knees. Then he slid it farther up on my bare arm, to my shoulder, then to my breast. He let it linger for a moment then cupped my breast in one swift motion and pressed on it like he was feeling its ripeness. I looked at his face. His eyes were shut, a blind man feeling his way around a place he had never been. My mouth was dry.

When he opened his eyes he smiled at me, touched my cheek with his bare hand and told me to do penance. “Ask God for patience,” he said. “Say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys.”

It was two days before the deadlines for the different colleges started to kick in. The University of Nairobi sent a letter asking me to tick a box indicating whether or not I would be attending. Mother said I should tick yes and mail the letter as soon as possible.

I looked at it. It had a crease in the centre where it had been folded in half. There was an emblem at the head of the page: a giraffe and a guinea fowl on both sides of a shield, a textbook over them. Below were

the words *Unitate et Labore*. In Unity and Work. I tried to tick the box but my hand refused to move.

I spent most days lying in bed, sick with worry. Sleep was all I wanted; it eased the anxiety. I didn't tell Mother the bishop had fondled me. I knew I'd brought it on myself, visiting a celibate man alone, tempting him with my youth. I had worn a short skirt and a fitted strappy top with no cardigan or shirt covering. I hadn't stopped his hand from swimming up my thigh, threatened him or tried to run off.

On a Sunday after church, I was back in my bed. I opened my eyes to see Mother standing over me with three catalogues in hand. Two were for small women's colleges in the north-eastern United States and one was a Catholic university in the South.

"You can go," she said. "If you get accepted."

Underneath her collar I saw the welts on the back of her neck, thick and bright red. She laid the booklets beside my head on the pillow and left my room in silence, the same way she'd walked in. I climbed out of bed and followed her downstairs as if she were a ghost, a creature from an outer world I had never met. The way she gave me what I wanted when I was sure she wouldn't, the pain of selflessness that flashed over her face, seemed unfathomable.

In the living room Bishop Emmanuel was visiting. He was sitting in his black shirt and white collar, a glass of fresh juice in front of him.

When I saw him, I quickly stepped back to hide behind the door. It was the first time I'd seen him since the fondling and over the weeks I'd been buried in nauseating guilt and shame. I peeked in again and saw that he was nodding as Mother talked in a nearly inaudible voice, busying herself with serving him shortcake biscuits from a plastic container.

The bishop stayed for a heavy dinner of pork and potatoes while I hid. I ate sitting on my bed, flipping through the college catalogues, dreaming about a place where the people were always happy. I would be free from Mother. I didn't have to whisper in the house, or turn the television down when Mother came home.

I stood up straight in front of the mirror, held my arm over my chest and saw myself standing on a bright-lit stage, shrouded in the American flag. I was never coming back. Yet my knees were feeble with fear. Mother, Kokoi, my aunts, the church, the morning prayers, the missionary work, the lemon tree: these were the only things I had ever known for sure.

I heard Mother call goodnight to the bishop and shut the front door. I knocked and entered her bedroom just as she was unzipping her dress and I saw the welts; the old ones that had turned into strips of keloid and the new ones that were red like the scratches of a wild cat that had pounced on her back. Mother turned to look at me, standing by the door.

I wanted to go on my knees and kiss her feet. I wanted to jump on her until she fell to the floor. I wished she would hold me until I fell asleep. Instead, I held on to the door and started to cry as bouts of relief and liberation, panic and fear swept through me, until I thought I was going mad.

“Soila, that’s enough,” Mother said. “You’re not the first person in the world to study abroad. Go up to your room and say your prayers, and make sure all the lights are turned off behind you.”

Her tart words shut me up, like they always did.

