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Women Do This Everyday

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MA Creative Writing

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1. Women Do This Everyday—A Collection of Short Stories

Mary

The visitor said, “I’ll be right back,” and quickly pulled her dress over her head. Her panties lay where they had earlier been discarded, at the foot of the old wooden table that had been Mary’s father’s work desk. Mary had, at some point, wanted to take it back into the house for her own use, but she knew, like her mother and aunts and cousins and neighbours knew, that some things cannot have second owners. Or secondary purposes. Her father’s desk was just that, but also it could only be that. Mary’s guest did not come right back. In fact she did not come back at all. Left alone in the tool shed, Mary sat with her back against the cold corrugated wall for at least half an hour, even though by then, she knew that the visitor wasn’t going to come back.

“Stop that!” she shouted at the top of her lungs at Kinuthia who had run a stick across the ridges of the corrugated metal of the tool shed. Even when she could hear him coming, and she knew that was what he was about to do, Mary still got startled when the rattling sound filled the shed.

The giggle of her little brother could be heard heading into the house. She waited for the bang of the door followed by her mother’s bellow from the kitchen. Ten years old and Kinuthia still had not learned to close the back door quietly. It hung too loosely on its hinges and Mary swore one time that she had exhaled on the door and it had banged against the frame. But she was sure that in his teen years, when he needed to sneak out in the middle of the night to go dance the night away at WaMatthew’s Pub and Grill, Kinuthia would learn how to shut that door so quietly they would even forget it was there.

The bunched up pair of black panties lay between the hoe and the grass slasher which was still green from that afternoon’s gardening.

‘Gardening' is what she had put up as a caption to the picture on her Facebook page that afternoon of the freshly slashed patch of Kikuyu grass. The truth was that it was work, housework that they all did but ‘housework’ would have made for such a boring and ordinary caption. Wangeci

had posted pictures of a road trip she was taking with her friends to Nanyuki. Susan was in Mombasa having the time of her life after landing that new job. Although far from glamorous, gardening sounded like some kind of leisure activity that rich people did in hats and gloves while drinking lemonade on a Saturday afternoon. A hobby even. A choice. 'Gardening the day away' she had put up as a caption for a before-and-after picture of the patch. Just before her visitor had arrived the post had received six likes. Mary had spent at least an hour cutting away at the long grass in front of her parents' house. It was now just her mother's house but no one knew that. Actually everyone knew that but no one said it, or acknowledged that Mary's mother was now a single parent. Not that it bothered Mary. In small ways it did, like her father's now missing laughter when he was drunk and happy. Baba Kinuthia's laugh, when he was drunk, had filled the house like hot hair, getting into the cracks on the walls and the stains on the old couches. His laugh had reminded Mary of an Instagram filter; it coloured their drab, dull lives sepia and hefe, and made the weight of the world feel a lot lighter. Sure, he wasn't sober, rent was late and school fees were unpaid, and both Kinuthia and Mary knew to try and not listen for the fight that was guaranteed to erupt in her parents' bedroom later. Her mother who had lived longer and seen more, did not laugh at his jokes and silly jibes about how he needed to be inebriated in order to survive her. Only the children managed to source some levity in those moments, because their home needed laughter like plants outside needed rain, desperately. When Mary thought about all the other drunks who were tolerated by their long-suffering wives and children, she did not miss her father. Between her and her mother, the lights stayed on and Kinuthia's fees stayed paid.

Mary's mind wandered back to the pair of panties on the floor of the toolshed, black and bunched up like a crouching cat. She got up and took the panties with her, folding them neatly and tucking them into her bra, which made her left breast look bigger than her right one. Slowly, for no reason other than that she was an incredibly slow person, she sauntered towards the main house,

carefully closing the back door so that it did not slam and her mother did not shout from the kitchen.

Anyone who knew Mary well would tell you that she was strange, but they would not be able to tell you how. Wambui who lived near the shopping complex at the bottom of the hill was also strange. But Wambui's strangeness was easy to point out. She was loud and lascivious, the neighbourhood slut and the matatu tout snack. Her parents sat right at the front bench of the church every Sunday, hands clasped firmly in prayer for their wayward daughter to find her way back to Christ. She never did.

Then there was Angela, who was completely transformed after a high school trip to Manchester in England with the school choral choir. She ate something there that brought her back home with a terribly clipped accent and references that no one understood. She sounded like every episode of *Neighbours* that Mary had ever watched. And the blue contact lenses and chrome wigs made her stick out like a sore thumb even more. Mary wasn't this kind of strange. She was strange mostly to people who had lived with her and heard her mother complain incessantly about her daughter. Mary seemed to live her life at sixty percent, doing just enough of everything to not be really great or really bad at anything. She was, in so many ways, the most average person that anyone knew. It upset her mother because she saw so much potential in her daughter that lay unexplored and unexploited in her house day in and day out. Like the Kivuli's house, all compound and greenery in a space big enough to put up two flats for rent, an irritation and such a waste of space. To think that they paid a gardner five thousand shillings a month to cut that grass and clip those bushes, Mary's mother could not stand walking past that home. Ever since she could remember, Mary did things well but seemed deliberately to mess up at the very last minute, undoing hours, days, even years of an otherwise worthwhile task. Even when Mary did the dishes, her mother would find the one unwashed cup or spoon in the sink, as if left there to rile her on purpose.

“Why did you leave the cup in the sink Mary?” Mother would ask.

“Because I did not see it.” Mary would answer. Then shrug like this cup was a magical thing that had just materialised in the sink. Even Mary’s mistakes were half hearted.

In her fourth year of secondary school she started sleeping with Kamau, who had dropped out of Chebisaas Boy's Academy to become a shop keeper in his father’s hardware store. It had been a scandal of note and Mary’s father beat her and Kamau within an inch of their lives. In the second month of the last trimester, when both her parents had attended enough prayer groups to enable them to accept the ‘blessing’ of new life, when their disappointment and shame had turned into hope and her father had come home with a sticker that harked *Hafadhali maisha kuliko kifo,* rather life than death, and stuck it on the fridge, just after her mother had started knitting the obligatory woollen booties and bib for her grandchild, Mary had a miscarriage. The funeral was as quick as both the pregnancy and the miscarriage, with her child (it was a boy whom she christened Kamau on a whim on the death certificate) buried in the back yard, between the tomato plant and the really big avocado tree, a small white cross peeking between the vines.

In the week of baby Kamau's death, Goretti's Facebook updates were filled with pictures of her trip to Italy, and Sanda had just had a manicure that matched her shoes and her handbag. Those who knew that Mary had been pregnant did not know this via Facebook. Those who knew about the baby's death heard Mary's mother sobbing in the back yard while picking skuma wiki for dinner. After working so hard to accept and to make room for a mistake as big and as embarrassing as a pregnancy outside marriage, both her parents were so completely heartbroken. Mary could not even finish growing a child.

Somehow, her father seemed to accept that his daughter was doomed to live her life at sixty percent, never seeking or trying or dreaming of finishing anything. Mary’s mother on the other hand never accepted this, and kept pushing her to do new things, to try and complete something, anything, to one hundred percent, which was like fetching water with a sieve. Mary’s average school

marks got her an average job at a lawyer's office on Koinange street. She was a receptionist there and that suited her fine. Not once did she announce to her parents that she was moving out, or getting married or planning to follow the expected trajectory for girls her age and in her area. In fact, her father beat her to that, the day he called a family meeting and announced that he would be leaving their home for another one two counties away, near Eldoret. Mary knew the there must have been another woman involved, while her small brother cried and her mother watched her husband like he was a TV show airing for the first time; gawking at the character that he had become. Somehow fully content with her sixty percent lifestyle, Mary would wake up, go to work, return home, do dishes, leave one cup in the sink and on some weekends, she would cut grass. But only half the patch.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Muite," said a young woman, out of breath and restless.

"Please take a seat and I'll check if she's available," Mary answered.

The woman hesitated as she tried to decide whether to sit next to the plastic chair near the water dispenser, which was usually where the security guard sat, or on one of the plush, faux-leather settees that surrounded a small coffee table laden with magazines and old newspapers. She chose the two seater settee near the golden vase full of plastic flowers, and sat down with a sigh.

"Hello…there's a visitor…yes…okay. Alright." Mary put the phone down. "Mrs. Muite is with a client now, but she asked if you can wait ten minutes, then she will see you."

The woman nodded and slumped back into the seat.

"Can I get you some water or tea?" Mary offered.

The woman shook her head no.

Mary went back to typing out an affidavit that Kigen had given her to do. After about five minutes, she heard low sniffling coming from the couch. She looked up to find the young woman sobbing into a small floral handkerchief. There was something about the woman on the couch that piqued

Mary's curiosity but not enough to ask questions or offer comfort. She had seen so many women and men sit on that spot and allow whatever overwhelming emotion that simmered bubble to the surface like milk left on the stove too long. At no point in the nearly four years that she had worked there had she felt compelled to comfort someone, and the young woman quietly sobbing in the corner of a couch that seemed to want to swallow her did not move Mary to express empathy. Mrs. Muite swung the door behind Mary wide open and said that she was ready to see the next client. When she was in a good mood, Mary shouted "next," as if at a doctor's office, which sometimes confused the clients because no one knew who was next. It was her own private joke and only Mary found it funny. She remembered that sometimes as a child, she would pretend to be a doctor and diagnose her whole family. By the end of Standard six, her two parents and new born sibling were just about to die of the diphtheria, bilharzia, diarrhoea and measles she'd infected them with in her doctor-doctor game and forgot to treat. Playing by herself in the backyard near the avocado tree, she would take turns playing the doctor and the patients, putting on her mother's high heels and her father's tie and crawling in the grass. She wondered if maybe she had wanted to be a doctor at some point, but the memory was blurry, with no strong feelings about her future as an adult. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was a question that irritated her as a child. Why did older people put such pressure on children to imagine an obscure future when being a child was already hard enough?

The young woman blew her nose, rose from the settee and disappeared behind the doors. Part of Mary's apathy came from the fact that in the end she always knew what was going on with whom. Client-lawyer privilege was a witty line in movies that gave people courage to seek legal advice. At Mutua, Muli, Kilozo and Advocates, this privilege did not exist. During lunch at McFry's or Savannah the lawyers usually spilled the beans on the morning's cases, sharing intimate details about other people's problems that made them feel better about their own slimy lives. Mary had long bought the confidence of the lawyers with her lethargic engagement with her workmates. They

saw Mary attempt interaction and conversation with Agneta who cleaned the offices, and rarely anyone else. What did Mary and Agneta know about cases that were *sub-judice* or people who were *compos mentis*. Nothing. But Mary did not care about the big words thrown in between forkfuls of chips and a quarter chicken with Coke. She was curious about the stories. Her entertainment for the long ride home was to try to piece together the who and the what of the where and the when. Was the sobbing woman the one with the abusive partner or was she the one trying to get a fair settlement for a dismissal at a job where someone had had sex with their boss? What was the problem with the man who showed up with an entourage of other men, possibly bouncers, and was he the one trying to prevent the Ministry of Immigration from deporting someone?

When she had just started at Mutua, Muli, Kilonzo and Advocates, it had crossed Mary's mind to write short stories about these people's lives. In a city with just over six million people and with piles of such legal offices, no one would be able to trace their own stories in hers. She had written two stories and shared them with her neighbour two houses down, but then let that lit candle die out into a puddle of wax. She was happy to hear and recount the stories to friends and relatives at church, on the odd occasion that she would go out with her friends and when her parents were in a good mood and feeling chatty at home, but nothing more. There was always a 'then what' conversation lurking at the end of a told story. Angela had attempted a 'You know Mary, you can become a columnist for the *Sunday Nation*, like Awino Biya' type prompt one day after work. Why did everyone think that her life could be so much better? What was this halo of 'potential' that she carried around that everyone but herself could see? Why did a *better* life have to be lived on other people's terms? Besides, Mary had problems, many problems, that seemed smaller, the smaller Mary allowed herself to seem.

As she predicted, that lunch time Mrs. Muite recounted the story of the sobbing girl to Mary and two other paralegals. She was working as a house girl for a rich family somewhere in Runda, and had just been fired because the house madam (a Canadian expat who worked for the United Na-

tions) had suspected that she was sleeping with her husband. These stories were a dime a dozen in every neighbourhood and estate in Nairobi, but this was the first time Mary had heard of someone seeking legal counsel for an unfair dismissal. Mary bit a sausage then frowned. Chances were, this case would not get far at all, but she thought it was gutsy for the young woman to try. It might even become a landmark case. But what did she know, she was just the receptionist.

During the week, Mary's free time was taken up by all sorts of meetings. There were the women's prayer group meetings that happened three times a week excluding Sundays, and her neighbourhood savings co-operative meetings, which happened once a month. There were some school meetings she had to attend on behalf of her mother because she did not seem interested in how Kinuthia was doing at school and someone from the family had to show up. Mary's life outside work was full of conversations and prayers with strangers and familiar people. Even Mary's mother did not attend that many church meetings, but she thought that maybe this was the thing her daughter was good at: prayer and support for people who needed help, which was a thought that helped her sleep better at night. And so, when Mary sometimes walked into the house at 10.00 in the evening, her mother did not ask any questions. Mary had thought that maybe she should become a member of the church intercessors group, but most people in her church knew about the illegitimate pregnancy and the botched birth. (For months street-corner rumours were that she had aborted this late term pregnancy. Sightings of her in shops buying all manner of pills and bleach spread like mould on a damp ceiling.) Because of this, Mary wasn't allowed to occupy spaces and roles that were reserved for the purer at heart. Mary settled for the Women's Prayer Group where sixteen women would meet to read the tiny slips of paper with prayer requests that members of their congregation dropped in the little Prayer Request box at the back of the church. In this space, twice a month for four years, Mary had slowly regained some semblance of community respectability. She was a prayer warrior, a woman who had changed her ways, a devout lover of the church. At the very least, and the most,

she was not regarded with the same kind of fatigue and disgust that Angela and Wambui were shown. The women would empty the Prayer Request box and take turns to read out the different requests. The small pieces of paper would then be put into piles according to the needs of the people. There was always a big pile of prayers from women begging God for a child and for husbands to come back to the Lord. This always meant that someone's husband, and on one occasion, wife, was having an affair, and their prayer for the wayward spouse to return to the Lord really meant returning them home. There were a few requests for people's children to pass exams or get jobs. The biggest pile was for more money. But of course no one was going to write that out on paper. The requests for money were disguised in colourful language that asked for 'a promotion', 'ascension in life', 'a year of jubilee', 'a moment of harvest'. All these meant that someone or a family could do with more money, but money is evil, so people instead asked for the things that more money could buy, rather than the money itself. Mary prayed from her heart and her soul. She never spoke in tongues because she believed that God did not need such a showy display of faith to hear prayers. She would pray her prayers, whispering them while the other women fervently moved around the room, throwing themselves (carefully) on to the furniture and the floor, tearing off headscarves, speaking in tongues, wailing and creating enough spiritual furore for God to at least raise a brow. Walking around the room, prayer request papers clutched firmly in her fists, Mary shut her eyes so tightly that she saw stars, and prayed along with these women for an hour three times every week. What the women did not know, what no one but God knew, was that Mary's heartfelt praying, occasional sobs and tears, her frequent seeking of solace from the Lord, were not for the congregation that requested these prayers, not for the mother with the child who would not stay home or the girl about to write exams. All her praying, her seeking of God's miracles and grace, was for herself.

The other thing that no one seemed to know was that Mary only went to the Women's Prayer Group once a week. On the Wednesdays and Fridays that the other women met to heave their chests toward the sky where God lay idle waiting for prayers, Mary had other meetings. Because she was who she was, no one at home thought to find out if indeed where Mary said she was going, was where Mary went.

On Wednesdays, you would indeed see her walk through the light blue gates of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in East Africa compound. But instead of walking into the chapel and disappearing into the second door on the left behind the pulpit with a big plaque written 'INTERCESSORS ROOM', she would instead walk around the chapel, towards the back of the property, where the Sunday school classrooms with their colourful doors and small chairs and desks were.In one of these rooms, under posters of a blue-eyed, long haired and bearded Jesus with light bursting out of his chest, Mary had been meeting with thirteen other women and men, once a week, sometimes twice, every week, for four months now. On this particular Wednesday, the bus from work was late because it had been pulled over by a pack of police officers. A commuter tried to raise the alarm and point out the injustice of these hyena-like police officers, but everyone else was too tired to join in this shouting match. The police kept the bus on the side of the road for nearly twenty minutes before collective unrest started to buzz in the bus. Only when an old lorry overloaded with timber came lumbering around the corner did the police let the bus go and rush to flag the new offender down. Mary was thirty minutes late for her meeting so she skipped the casual pace that was her saunter towards the church, as well as the usual greetings to familiar faces. Keeping her head down, she rushed into the church yard. The stray black dog that always rested near the flower bed outside the Sunday school classrooms glanced at her, one ear peaked, then went back to sleep. Mary slowly opened the door and all the heads in the room looked up and eyes turned towards her. She smiled politely and sat on an empty chair near the door. "Thank you Mary for joining us, we were begin-

ning to think that you weren't coming today," the group leader said nodding his head towards her. "Please introduce yourself?"

"I'm sorry I'm late," Mary said, using her church voice. "Hi everyone." She was met with a chorus of half mumbled and half spoken "Hi's".

"Greetings in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

More mumbles of affirmation.

"My name is Mary, and I am an alcoholic. It has been four months since my last drink, praise Jesus."

Amen, the room said, amen, amen, amen.

Mary was not an alcoholic. Sometimes, once in a blue moon, she had a Smirnoff Spin when she was out with friends. She had never been drunk and had never lost things and people to alcohol. She did not care much for the taste or effect of alcohol and kept a healthy distance between herself and the liquid. Baba Susie was an alcoholic. No one wanted to say it. So was Baba Boi and Baba Kamesh. Her neighbourhood was littered with alcoholics who sold their children's school shoes for nothing, and drank mixtures that would kill a herd of elephants. Everyone knew where the drinking dens were and who frequented them. Mary would not be caught dead there, not for any reason under the sun. She heard that Mama Njoki put ARVs in her brews which made the men come back for more. Mary was not an alcoholic by any measure of the word. Much as she despised these people who had no self control, she thought that maybe, because their demon had a name, it was easier to be an alcoholic than to have the problems that she had. Mary needed help, desperately, and somehow, this place seemed to be doing what it was supposed to do. It *really* had been four months since she had slipped down the path that brought her to prayer and to Alcoholics Anonymous. Because maybe she was addicted to something or dependent on something, but it wasn't alcohol. In her mind, it was worse. A young man with a scruffy beard and a missing front tooth was mumbling something to the

group. He had come here for help, he said. Did they have those pills that you swallow so that if you drink while on the pills you get violently ill?

"No, we don't do that here," the group leader said with conviction. "You can't use drugs to get over drugs. Here we use the will of God and power of prayer."

The young man looked crestfallen. He was looking for a quick fix no doubt, Mary mused. *Weakling*, she branded him, and thought of her own willpower, her own determination and resolve over the last four months and how good she was feeling about being good at something for once in her life.

"Mary, do you have anything to share?" the group leader asked her.

"No, not today," Mary said, suddenly self conscious of how smug she must have appeared smiling to herself in the corner.

A woman in the far corner raised her hand and spoke about her hard week and how she had nearly surrendered to temptation but God is good, and merciful, and gave her the strength to resist. The room mumbled amen. Because she was sure that alcohol abuse was not her problem, Mary wondered often why this place and these people seemed to work for her. Was it listening to other people's suffering that made her think that her own problems were much smaller? Maybe this formula worked for all addictions. Maybe her problem was not as bad as she had imagined. She even dared to think that she was healed. Two more people spoke before the group leader said that the meeting had come to an end and he would be seeing them the next Wednesday. They all recited the Serenity Prayer, then bowed their heads and closed their eyes while one of the attendees led them in a closing prayer. Mary looked at her feet, noticing that the nail polish on her left big toe was chipped and needed a fresh coat.The prayer was over. Amen, the room chimed. Amen, amen, amen.

Exactly four months ago to that Wednesday, Mary had woken up in Albert's bed. It was six o'clock in the evening and she needed to head home soon. Albert lay snoring to the left of her with his

whole body limp and his mouth open. He wasn't the most handsome man around, but limp and sideways, Albert looked better than he did awake and alert. Sitting up and pulling the sheet over her breasts, Mary began to do that thing she did, sitting in the silence and smells of sex and thinking. Albert grunted and turned his head. She had promised herself countless times that she was not going to find herself here, like this, having sex in the middle of a public holiday while other people toiled or rested or slept their day away. Two weeks ago it was Kamau, and the week before that it was Hassan, and earlier that year it was Njeri but she wasn't trying to think about that just yet. Mary sat there, quietly, looking for shame. In the dimming light of a setting sun and the roar of boda bodas and evening human traffic, Mary longed to feel ashamed of herself. The first time she had sex, back in high school, Mary had grudgingly agreed to Kamau's advances, giving in over the August school holidays in fourth form. Kamau was tall and handsome and had access to money from his father's hardware store that other teenagers their age did not. But it wasn't the money or the good looks that led her to Kamau's room that Sunday morning. It was curiosity, maybe even lust, something unholy and dirty and she wanted to know what this thing was, more than anything under the sun. She had tried to speak to her friend about this, but somehow the words in her head never formed sentences that could become questions. And so she sat with these questions, these longings, until the beginning of the August holidays when Kamau stopped her on her way to the shops. He said all the things boys that age say and Mary knew he was lying. She knew that more than her wit and company, Kamau wanted to sleep with her. She had read every single Mills and Boon novel she could get hold of at school. During evening self-study time, Mary would bury herself in stories of star-crossed lovers who lust after each other for chapters and chapters until one day, somewhere idyllic, clothes are peeled or torn off bodies and it happens. Reading these novels made Mary feel strange. Something grabbed at her chest and pulled down towards her stomach, then her crotch. She was sure at some point that her heart had moved, travelled down to her pelvis and was now beating between her legs. She had so many questions. The school library offered no answers, and neither did the school

nurse. She thought she was unwell. Maybe malaria? She tried to take it to the Lord in prayer. But these prayers echoed endlessly in her head with no answers echoing back. And so, tired of feeling this way with no place to get answers, Mary allowed Kamau to think that he was courting her. That he was so funny and silly. That he was this man now and knew what to do with a woman. Mary convinced herself that she was this woman. Or was ready to become her. In the same space where her strong curiosity to feel like the books said sex felt, also dwelled the wrath and anger of God, and the conflictedness that Mary felt was heavy. She prayed harder and fasted sometimes, but the pull of her curiosity was like gravity, an invisible force impossible to resist. That Sunday morning after she pretended to give in to Kamau's advances, Mary did the same thing she did with Albert, lay in bed, her breasts covered by the bed sheet and stared into nothing. Kamau sat up, ready to console a crying woman who had just been deflowered because his friends told him this was what was going to happen. But Mary wasn't crying. Even she was waiting for the tears to flood her eyes and blur her vision. But none came. Not a drop. Not a choked sob in her throat. She lay there, waiting for disappointment and anger to wash over her, and send her to penance. But like a missed bus, it did not come. And so she lay there watching nothing and regarding Kamau, who suddenly looked like the one who had been deflowered. He probably had been deflowered, but Mary wasn't trying to find out. She gathered her clothes, carefully and slowly dressing, and told Kamau that they would have to do this again, next week sometime, but this time in the afternoon.

Alcoholics Anonymous was possibly the biggest secret that Mary had ever kept for herself. No one knew. Through rudimentary research disguised as light gossip, she deduced that people would be more forgiving of a woman who was an alcoholic than they would a whore. A quick Google search had led her to believe that she was a nymphomaniac, but she did not know where to get help for this kind of affliction. Some years back a movie of the same name came out, and she'd secretly asked Jamo, the man who sold pirated copies of movies to the neighbourhood, to put it on a USB drive for

her. Jamo had laughed, winked at her, and copied the movie onto the drive. Mary watched *Nymphomaniac* with a mix of disgust and horror, and decided that maybe she was not a nymphomaniac. Maybe she was just a really bad Christian. Maybe, she had a demon that could be exorcised one day, if she eventually knew what it was called.

Many Sundays ago, after surviving the shame of Kamau's pregnancy and the still birth of her son, after secretly asking a nurse in a small town far away to inject her with the five year contraceptive implant, after having more and more sex and feeling nothing, not even the mudslide of love that came with sex in novels, a Sunday sermon made her realise that in order to become whole again in the eyes of the Lord, Mary needed to feel shame. She was sure that if somehow, she could find a way to feel ashamed, that she would be healed. Shame was her salvation, if only she could find some.

Pastor Goroh had said that shame was such an important emotion. That there was nothing more evil than a shameless woman. Like the damned Kardashians and the evil women that participated in Nairobi Diaries. Pastor Goroh said that one needed to seek the Lord in all ways and allow the spirit of shame, especially for women, to grow in one's heart like trees. That in the shade of the tree of shame a person would find modesty, chastity and piety. And this is the one thing that Mary did not have, and could not find. After that first time with Kamau, and a second time and a third, Mary still had not found the words to explain what she was feeling in those moments. Both the pregnancy and the miscarriage were meant to be a punishment, a sign from God himself, raining down his anger on this wayward child of His. But when the wound of disappointment had healed, she found herself back in Kamau's bed, allowing him inside her, and still not experiencing big emotions, not even the wrath of God, who was no doubt watching her sin, and preparing a punishment.

Later, in university after joining the Campus Christian Union, Mary found herself drawn to Lukas, and his loins. Like her, Lukas was a man of God and their fellowship was powerful. It was with Lukas that she realised what she had somehow replaced pleasure with shame. But still she

could not name it. She could not explain it, not to herself and certainly not to anyone else. That she could choose to allow the full weight of Lukas on top of her and twist and turn her body like the sisal ropes bound into ciondo baskets. That a man of God used his name in vain in between breaths and thrusts. That she chose this as her only sin, but also the biggest sin, the very sin that had Adam and Eve cast out of the Garden of Eden. Mary decided that it must be a demon possession that allowed her to not feel embarrassed, or enjoy the fruits of modesty and piety. And so her life's work became finding a way to cast out this evil spirit from her life, until, like other normal women, she no longer found such pleasure in such sin. Only an evil spirit would make her feel powerful while sinning like this. It was the only one time with Lukas that Mary cried after sex.

She had finished leading an evening praise and worship session on campus and was walking back to her dorm when Lukas, who had followed her from the prayer session, invited her up for some tea. Twice already she and Lukas had sinned with each other, but they prayed about this fervently and four months had passed since the last incident. Mary climbed the stairs to the fourth floor with the energy of a soldier of God marching into war. She and Lukas held hands in prayer before he offered her a cup of Cadbury's hot chocolate. They sat on his hostel bed, which was the only place they could sit, and spoke about this and that. About Lukas' father, a farmer, whose cows had calved successfully. About Mary's mother and little brother, about politics. They spoke about some courses and the previous night's sermon. And then Luke placed his God-fearing hand, trembling, on her God-fearing thigh. A night of sin ensued, with Lukas' hands muffling Mary's moans because the hostel walls were thin, and the worn springs on the bed creaked. The angels were not on duty that night, and Lukas and Mary vowed to repent in the morning, because His graces are new everyday and their benevolent God would forgive his children. The following morning, before the mist had lifted off the university lawns, Mary walked slowly back to her own hostel room, closed the door, and wept. She cried for a long time, until there were no more tears, just sobs and dry heaving inside her bed. She could still feel the moisture in her panties, and she curled herself into a ball,

and cried some more. When she woke up, later that afternoon, her heart sank when she realised that her crying and outpouring of sadness did not come from a newfound sense of shame, but from a deep place of release, and pleasure.

At some point, she thought that her shamelessness might be some genetic anomaly. Maybe she had inherited this from her father. Her father had disappeared into thin air with a woman no one knew. She wondered how someone could just leave behind a whole life, children, a wife, and travel across the country to be with someone else. Was it sex? It must have been that because Mary could not imagine anything else more destructive. At some point, after Lukas and a fresh re-dedication of her life to Christ, Mary thought that she could try and get the demon cast out of her, if she did enough research and found out what it was called. But she did not do as much research as she could have, and gave up three weeks into digging into books at the Don Bosco Seminary library in Karen. She hoped instead that the grace of God would shine on her and relieve her of this burden that she bore so easily and so painfully.

“Hi everyone, my name is Mary, and I am an alcoholic.”

“Hi Mary,” everyone mumbled.

“This has been a very hard week for me. But I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and I have not given into the will of the flesh.”

The collective mumbled and nodded their heads in solemn silence. One after the other, the Alcoholics Anonymous attendees spoke about their trials and triumphs, seeking forgiveness more in themselves than in the blue-eyed and bare-chested Jesus looking down on His flock.

“His mercies are new every morning," the group chorused after the man with the missing tooth gave a testimony about his will to overcome the desire to smoke some ganja with his friends. Mary was sure he was lying, just like she was. Or was she? She was not sure. The more she said the

phrase about God's mercies, the more she questioned what mercy looked like. Was God's mercy a second chance to make the same mistakes again or a last chance to change?

She listened as one after the other spoke and offered silent prayers for them. She sat in the space and thought back to the toolshed, and her guest. And the forgotten panties. Her father's desk that should surely be used instead of lying there, trapping memories. She was lying about fleeing temptation. Or was she? She had been spending more time than usual with Akinyi, who told her what to do. What did the Bible say about women who seek pleasure in other women? Was that a sin too? Was sex with a woman even sex? Was this maybe God’s mercy?

Naserian

Naserian hated to fly. It always baffled her how flying was considered the fastest means of travel. Air travel always took too long, and the plane seemed to move too slowly in the sky with the clouds sitting on air like fat cows grazing. It was exhausting. She wondered whether her anxiety came from the complete letting go of control that had to come with flying. Of being completely at the mercy of pilots and the sometimes moody Mother Nature. Her flying experience always needed numbing. Usually, gratuitous violence in movies that she was sure she was not watching and the odd dose of Bailey's Irish Cream distracted her enough to watch and nap through the five or so hours that it took to get her home. Home. The word sat heavy on her tongue like too big a bite of sweet potato and not enough chai to wash it down with. She had not been home in a long time, so long in fact that her mother had alerted her cousins and aunts and uncles and there was to be a great fete to celebrate her homecoming. She looked down at her hands, beautifully manicured, and the diamond engagement ring that glittered on the fourth finger of her left hand. She let out a deep sigh and signalled for an air hostess to bring her another Bailey's double with ice, and a glass of water. She glanced at her screen, where a well-planned car chase played out, and sighed again. Three weeks, she told herself, three weeks and she might never have to go back there again. Naserian did not feel the plane land. The last dose of Bailey's had delivered just enough alcohol at that altitude to send her into a much needed deep sleep. Her neck hurt from the twisted angle at which she had slept, but other than that, she felt ready to face the world. The queue at immigration was short and she took some time to look around while the conveyor belt spun no one's luggage around. The airport had changed considerably since she last flew via Nairobi. While the arrivals lounge offered nothing worth capturing in a picture, it was still yards better than the one she had left behind nearly five years ago. The last time she had travelled, there were two tourists, she assumed, who whispered to each other that JKIA had not changed in the twenty years that they had been travelling through East Africa. Naserian remembered feeling a little embarrassed by this. She now wondered why. Why would she, a simple citizen,

feel responsible for the maintenance of a national airport? Her therapist had a name for this. Her therapist had a name for everything. Looking around the airport with all its hints of red (Kenya Airways' corporate colour) and stained Kitengela glass windows and decor, she was a bit pleased that *something* had changed. Sure, the story was that it had taken a few fires to force the upgrade, but here she was waiting for her bags in an airport that she barely recognised anymore. She paused at that thought and realised that five years was a long time for anything. Yes, she Skyped with her family and some relatives, but she knew better than to use that as an excuse to justify her absence from home. She felt that she looked the same, of course with a few changes that different weather and food can bring about in a woman in her thirties. She was a bit more round in the belly, and her once firm breasts and behind were now softer and easier to coax into sizes she knew were no longer hers to wear. Her smile, with its hint of mischief, had not changed. Save for the weight gain, the southward-bound body parts and the defiant strands of grey hair that stood out at her temples, Naserian was still easy for anyone who knew her to spot in a crowded airport.

Preparing herself for this journey home, she had made a bigger deal out of this visit than it needed to be. She'd prowled Facebook and Twitter to try to catch up on local politics, and looked at her relatives' posts to make sure she remembered that Letepian now had three children (not the one weepy little boy she'd left behind) and that Aunty Melba had passed away two years ago.

Her bags had finally arrived, but Naserian watched them go round the conveyor belt a few more times before she hauled three suitcases and a carton box onto a trolley. She smiled politely at the woman in the customs uniform who waved her through. Usually they would have stopped her, they always did at every customs counter all over the world. Something about her seemed to scream 'contraband', but luckily they never found her with anything worth taxing or taking away. It was likely to be a whole other story when she went back with packs of Farmer's Choice beef sausages frozen and packed under a book or two. She hadn't been caught yet. The air outside International

Arrivals was warm and balmy, with the smell of the rich, red, loamy soil that could stain your shoes forever. It was November in Nairobi and the short rains were doing their most to make Naserian almost trip and fall over the wave of nostalgia that hit her. She suddenly remembered the blood-red soil of Ngong, and the taste of clay crumbling in her mouth. If she had doubted that she was back home, this smell of earth reminded her that finally, she had landed. A not so gentle tug of her trolley brought her back to the present. A taxi driver who was just about to grab her trolley and push it to his car.

" Hapana. Sitaki. Ah-ah!" She wheeled her trolley away from the short man.

"Lakini madam?" But miss, he almost implored, but left it at that. The taxi driver clicked, sucked his teeth at her and walked away.

Naserian pushed her trolley to the side to make way for other passengers and looked around at the faces of other taxi drivers and families, trying to find her own features in the crowd. She had been waiting nearly twenty minutes when she decided to sit down on the sidewalk and find her phone in her large tote bag. She remembered that her Airtel SIM had expired and clicked at nothing. As she stretched out her longs legs in front of her, as airport security officers walked past and threw her some glances. She half expected the askaris to reprimand her, but they walked on, ignoring this new arrival, from out there, probably the child of someone important, always used to taking up space.

Nearly forty minutes into her arrival and no sign of her sister. Naserian had just stood up and wiped the seat of her pants (feeling grateful that she'd decided to wear black jeans) when she saw the shorter form of her younger sister appearing from the left of the parking area. She smiled instinctively as she prepared to hear the flurry of excuses she was sure her sister would spill.

"Seri!" Lela shouted while still so far away.

Naserian cringed playfully as they ran into an embrace. They stood like this for a while before they stepped back and looked at each other. Despite the nearly ten year age difference, people often said that Lela and Naserian could be twins. Naserian's younger self looked at her and they smiled and broke out in giggles.

"Please tell me it's just you who's come to pick me up?" Naserian implored cautiously looking over her sister's shoulder.

"Gosh no, they are still parking the car."

"Oh shit. Who came? But I said…"

Lela was smiling widely and seemed about to burst out into loud peals of laughter. "It's just me Seri. Ebu relax please. I didn't think that you had the stomach for all the pomp and ceremony that Mama and Baba had planned for your homecoming." Lela winked at her sister.

Naserian knew that look, and was so thankful that her sister's sneaky ways were good for something.

"Goodness no! You're making things up right?" Naserian half-heartedly tried to pry. She really didn't want to know.

"No, I'm not actually, they had dancers and everything planned, but then Uncle Maina got sick with his kidney thing, and you know how Uncle Maina gets." Lela rolled her eyes.

Naserian had forgotten how Uncle Maina got and so she just raised her eyebrows in fake acknowledgement and nodded her head. She didn't remember much about Uncle Maina, but she did remember his wife, from kitchen conversations with her mother about the man. Bless that saint of a woman who had married him, borne him children and put up with his histrionics. Naserian knew that even she was not capable of such endurance. Nor did she ever want to try and find out if she could indeed be that woman. Sainthood be damned.

By now they had been walking for quite a bit and Naserian was tempted to ask Lela if she remembered where she had parked the car. Did Lela have a car? Did Lela know how to drive? How did Naserian not know any of this? Quietly, she followed her sister. There was an uneasy tension between them like a piece of meat lodged between teeth, so uncomfortable, but needing slow, deliberate and sometimes delicate finesse to extract. Naserian and Lela were the meat in each other's teeth, something they were both aware of but refused to confront or address. For longer than necessary, Naserian had tried to shelter and steer the course of Lela's life, doing a number of well-intentioned things that had all exploded in her face. All but one of course, because there are no absolute losers. Naserian had forced Lela to go on a blind date with her best friend's younger brother and they had been inseparable ever since. Granted it had only been three years, but then a year was like a decade for young people. It was an achievement of sorts which Naserian used as salve when looking over and licking her wounds of failure at trying to shape her younger sister into the woman she sometimes wished she had become.

They had finally reached the car and Lela announced, "Here we are!" She fished in her oversized handbag and found the keys to her little red Renault Clio hatchback and opened the boot. They helped each other load suitcase after suitcase into the small boot and the big carton box onto the back seat.

Lela slumped into the driver's seat and let out an exaggerated sigh, "Jesus, are you moving back? I'd swear that's the kitchen sink in the back seat!" and they both laughed.

Lela started the car before she turned to Naserian and asked her older sister whether she wanted to drive. Naserian was a little nervous, because if the airport was anything to go by, then she was sure the rest of Nairobi's features had changed like those of a growing child's. But she shrugged yes, always the older sister, always the composed and confident sibling who had it all together.

Nairobi had changed in ways that Naserian struggled to understand. She asked Lela whether she had GPS and Lela laughed. She assured Naserian that the way home was still the same and Nairobi traffic was still as terrible. The two things that Naserian wished would change were the two things that stayed the same. How ironic, she thought to herself, and prepared to drive at two kilometres an hour down Mombasa Road. An hour or so into traffic and after Naserian had bought a pair of Golce and Dabanna sunglasses from a very convincing Mombasa Road salesman, Lela suddenly squealed,

"Oh my god! Is that an engagement ring?" She grabbed Naserian's left hand and held it up to her face."No way! I mean, Jeff proposes and this is how we find out? That's not okay Seri, Mama and Baba with have a moment!" Lela spoke while she slowly pried the ring off of Naserian's finger and slid it onto her own and held her hand up.

For a short woman, Lela had the longest and most elegant hands Naserian had ever seen outside of a magazine. Lela should become a hand model, she thought to herself, but smiled with one side of her mouth at her sister instead of saying this out loud.

"It fits me perfectly," Lela mumbled.

Naserian inched forward two centimetres.

"Is it a real diamond? It's so shiny!"

"I don't know to be honest, I didn't ask," Naserian offered dryly.

"Ok. You have to tell me everything. Every last detail. Everything." Lela turned to face Naserian and her eyes bored into her sisters with a thousand unasked questions.

"Well, there's really nothing to report, we went to dinner, he popped the question, I said yes, and here we are."

“Back up. Which restaurant? Where?”

Naserian thought, and frowned. “The Radisson Blu,” she lied.

“Which Radisson Blu? The one in Sandton?”

Naserian lied again and nodded. It was a nice restaurant. She just couldn’t remember it’s name.

“Oooh! So fancy! Gosh! Okay, what did you wear?” Lela’s eyes were were getting that hazy look that happened when someone was about to start daydreaming.

“Clothes?” her sister said and laughed.

Lela punched Naserian on the thigh. “Focus Seri! For fuck’s sake this is important!”

“Important for who Lela? The man proposed, I said yes, kwisha ama?” Naserian was done playing this game.

“*The man proposed? The man proposed?!*” Lela squeezed the words out from between her teeth like an almost empty tube of toothpaste. “You’re so ungrateful Seri. So fucking ungrateful.”

There was a real sadness in her voice that made Naserian turn to look at her small sister. She felt a short, sharp stab of guilt pinch at her heart and conceded to tell her sister the story.

“Okay, okay Lela, what do you want to know?”

“Clearly, this is no big deal to you, but some of us live for this day,” Lela said, still wearing the ring and looking at it glint in the sun of a Nairobi afternoon. Lela snapped out of the cloud that was coming, clasped her hands and said,

“Now. Spoil me with the details. What did you wear? Did you know? What did you eat? How did he present the ring? Did he hide it in your shrimp cocktail or something romantically cheesy like that?” The questions poured forth from Lela like a dam having its sluices opened.

“I wore a floral summer dress and beige heels. I had my afro out. You *know* I’m allergic to seafood so that shrimp cocktail situation is a complete no, no. We had a section of the restaurant to ourselves, and yes he got down on one knee.” More quietly she added, “And no, I didn’t see it coming. Besides, you’ve met Jeff, you know the kind of man he is, what did you think he’d do?”

This managed to keep Lela distracted for the briefest of moments while she contemplated the possibilities. But also Lela was done listening to Naserian and was busy dreaming up her own proposal. The traffic had eased enough for Naserian to turn left onto Ngong Road and drive down past the colourful matatus and the touts with their even more colourful language.

“The conductors now wear uniforms? How interesting.” Naserian thought out loud as she watched them tease, cajole and sometimes bully reluctant commuters onto their buses.

Lela thought Naserian was trying to change the subject and she made it clear that she would not let it fly so easily. Too tired to delve into such a discussion, Naserian promised to sit Lela down with some wine and tell her even more detail once she got home, said her hellos and took a shower. Lela agreed to this and took one last look at how the ring sat on her slim, long fingers. It looked exquisite. She remembered that it was not her moment, nor her ring, and she slowly slid it back onto Naserian’s finger and let out a sigh.

Five years away from home might as well as have been fifty for Naserian, the home she left was not the home she found. She knew that her mother was obsessed with renovations, and was constantly trying to keep up with the Jones, the Kamaus and the Orinas. Anything they could do, she could do better, and bigger and usually less tastefully than her neighbours could. But no one

ever wanted to be the person who said this sad truth to their mother. Naserian's childhood home was unrecognisable. The space where Tommy's kennel used to sit was gone. So were the trees that had dotted the compound where Naserian would sit and play cha-mama, making believe she was the mother to her five blonde and blue-eyed dolls and making them eat concoctions of mud and water, and take naps. Those were all gone. The trees and the dolls, and a childhood she now saw no remnants of. In front of her stood stone and concrete and what looked like a three door garage, with only two doors. She asked Lela where to park and Lela pointed straight ahead. Their gardener, Moses, had by then opened the garage door and Naserian drove in. Moses was still there. Another thing thing she had hoped *would* have changed but had not. No sooner had she parked and switched off the engine than her mother's beautifully aged face peeped around the corner. Involuntarily, tears welled up in Naserian's eyes and she jumped out of the car and rushed towards her mother. Until this moment, she had not realised how much she had missed her. They hugged each other while Naserian sobbed and her mother shushed her. "Lela, you see, this is what happens when you make people drive after long trips, *eh*? Really now, what's Baba going to say about this?" Mama admonished Lela like a naughty child.

Five years ago, Lela would have dived into a defence so watertight and inspiring, even Kethi Kilonzo would not have been able to dream up a defence that good. But now, Lela shrugged and let it pass, besides she was way past being threatened with Baba's non-existent wrath. She asked Moses to help her empty the car of bags and left Naserian and her mother to their little reunion. When she finally ran out of tears, Naserian stepped back to look at her mother. The five years showed on her more than anyone else she had met so far. Streaks of grey hair coloured her head and her eyes looked smaller and more tired. Her smile was the same and so was her high pitched voice which got higher the more concerned about something she became.

“Oh Seri look at you! All grown up and living so far away that you only see your mother once every five years. That has to change, I’m getting too old!” Mama joked lightly.

Naserian didn’t know what to say to her mother so she hugged her again.

“I’m so happy to be home Mama. Please tell me you’re making your pumpkin chapati?” Naserian moved into the kitchen looking for a diversion. Her mother chuckled and said yes, she was making pumpkin chapati and curried vegetables with ndengu stew. Naserian’s stomach rumbled involuntarily, she had forgotten about these small things that made homecoming so much more worth it.

Naserian found her way to her childhood room and then realised that it was not her room anymore. Save for the posters of Da Brat and B2K that were now pasted on the closet doors, Mama had done something to it, perhaps knocked down a wall and built another one? Her bedroom looked much bigger, and just then, Lela shouted from around the corner that they were now sharing one bedroom. *That’s* what had changed! Mama had knocked down the wall that had separated their rooms as children. Naserian threw herself onto her bed and giggled while Lela laughed. Fully clothed, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep and everyone, even Lela, knew better than to wake her. She would have her chapati for breakfast.

Nairobi in November is alive in all sorts of ways. The sun will scorch your skin into forming all the melanin it can. And just when you are convinced that the whole town is walking around with their flesh baked to anything between medium-rare and well-done, the clouds will part and rain will pour out like the sky and the sea switched places, or a bet was lost between the two and it was decided that everything was to get drenched. Naserian loved this weather, the smell of wet earth, and particularly this hot mid-morning which found her gardening with her father, whom everyone called Baba.

Naserian gardened for at least two hours with her father, now nearly seventy but showing no signs of letting up. He spoke as deliberately as he plucked the weeds, giving careful thought to words as he said them.

"Your mother thinks these roses should be uprooted. I don't, and we keep arguing about them. So I have to make them look nice and neat so that she can stop complaining. You've seen what she's done to the rest of the place." Baba gestured with his head towards the 'guest' wing of the compound, which was a two-storey monstrosity that no one lived in.

Naserian chuckled and followed her father's lead in uprooting weeds and pruning barren branches from the thicket of rose bushes. This pink rose bush had bloomed outside her window for as long as she could remember.

"Didn't you have a say? I mean, as far as the house is concerned?" Naserian asked lightly.

Baba stopped pruning and smiled, cheekily cocking an eyebrow,

"I see you have been gone too long! *When*, in the thirty some years that I have been married to your mother have I ever had a say?"

They both laughed at that and Naserian remembered the first time she'd heard her father say it. The family had all been out getting movies for Sunday night family time. Lela wanted *Nuns on the Run*, and Baba wanted some Jean Claude van Damme movie that no one else wanted to watch. Completely ignoring the two options offered, Mama picked *The Sound of Music* and left the store. Baba complained all the way home about how he had no say in anything in the house.

Ten metres to the gate and Mama simply offered, "But I let you drive, don't I?"

Even through the fog of her teen angst Naserian had understood that this conversation was really about power, who had it, and who didn't.

Nearly three hours into the gardening and idle, pointless conversation with her father Naserian was ready to quit. She excused herself from his side near the flower bed and headed into the house.

Never one to do anything small, her mother had extended the house so much so that you could no longer walk around it. Naserian remembered chasing Lela around until they collapsed under the bottlebrush tree hear the neighbour's fence. There was no more bottlebrush tree. And Mama had broken down so many walls that now the kitchen, the dining room and the veranda were all one big family room. This was where Mama hosted her church and chama friends, when her house was not full of her own children and family members. The living room still had the two armchairs that were the domain of Mama and Baba at seven when all of Kenya stopped to watch the evening news. Baba sat on the right and Mama on the left. Some things never changed.

Naserian poured herself a glass of cold water and stood on the veranda absentmindedly looking out at the backyard. Her gaze wandered over the hunched figure of Baba wrestling with a stubborn weed, and the new family dog, who's name she had not yet bothered to ask, was gnawing at something. Her eyes then met Moses' eyes. The older man, possibly as old as her father, smiled at her and allowed a hint of empathy, maybe comfort, to flash in his eyes before he moved the hosepipe he was using to water the skuma wiki. Naserian sighed, and went to go find Lela.

After wandering around the house for a while, and not finding her sister, Naserian decided to go for a walk to the bottom of the compound where her favourite dog Tommy had been buried under an avocado tree. It was a warm, sunny day in Ngong and Naserian wanted to enjoy home. Jeff had not understood why she had to go home so suddenly, or why he could not come with her to share the 'good news' of their engagement. Naserian had pleaded, begged that he let her do this alone, her way, and he had relented. She reached the avocado tree winded and happy to find that there was a part of her home that had withstood Mama's never ending change offensive. She leaned

on the rough bark and looked at the pieces of blue sky peeping from behind thick branches and big leaves. Just then, she heard a voice say her name through the holes in the fence to her right.

"Naserian?" the voice asked.

Immediately Naserian knew who it was. She wanted to run back into the house and maybe even back to the airport, but the communication between her brain and feet was broken and she could not move. She was grateful for the support of the tree. She would have known that voice anywhere, and how it said her name, with an emphasis more on the *na* than the *an*. Before she could respond, long legs had climbed over the fence and Muthoni jumped into her compound landing nimbly on both feet, two metres away from where Naserian was sure Tommy was buried, and three metres from her. She stood transfixed, with her hands clasped behind her back and leaning on the tree.

"Oh wow it *is* you. I wasn't sure since you and Lela really look alike these days. But I'd know those legs anywhere." Muthoni said and smiled, casually putting her hands in her pockets.

"I see the whole tomboy thing wasn't just a phase," Naserian said. She took in Muthoni's short cropped hair and plain jeans and boots. She immediately regretted the words. She was not ready for the conversation that her insinuation might invite. She wanted to apologise but Muthoni's smile widened, as if accepting an unspoken challenge that Naserian had just thrown her way. Muthoni took a few steps towards Naserian.

"No. it wasn't a phase. You knew that then like you know now, this look works for me. Allows me to climb fences and reconnect with childhood friends and such." She laughed. Naserian wanted to laugh too. But she was unable to do anything but move her lips and her eyes.

"I don't know whether to hug you or shake your hand right now with you glued to the tree like that." Muthoni took a few more steps closer and held Naserian's gaze.

Naserian took a deep breath and pushed herself off the tree and walked towards Muthoni then stopped. “It’s been what? Six years?” Naserian opened her arms to hug her childhood friend and neighbour.

“Ten.” Muthoni corrected her.

It seemed impossible that it had been ten years since she had seen Muthoni but still, hugging her was a big decision. Muthoni closed the distance between them and held Naserian in an embrace. Memories flooded Naserian’s mind when she inhaled the softness of Muthoni’s neck and felt the impression of her breasts on her chest. Overly conscious of her own body leaning in on Muthoni, Naserian pulled away suddenly and stumbled over an exposed root and fell on her bum. Muthoni smiled and held out a hand to help her up. Naserian felt embarrassed and faked an emergency that she needed to attend to.

“I’m helping Mama with dinner, so I have to go. Sorry. It was nice seeing you though. Really.” Naserian let out a weak smile.

“You too. You look good. Really good.” Muthoni held her gaze and a buried memory surfaced in her eyes like a ripple on a lake.

Naserian started to walk away.

“Do you think I can use your gate next time? I’m a bit old to be climbing fences and such.” Muthoni shouted in the direction of Naserian’s retreating form.

“Well you should have thought about that before you jumped the fence in the spirit of being nosy and whatnot!” Naserian shouted back and smiled over her shoulder.

Muthoni laughed out loud and watched Naserian head back home.

Lela was cutting spinach and Naserian was stirring gravy. The kitchen smelled like the first day back home during holidays after boarding school. The Kamaus were coming for dinner so Mama was making all her best dishes. The uncles and aunts were already there, and a few cousins were in the kitchen with them. Naserian had already broken the engagement news to her family and Mama wasted no time in calling up her sisters and brother and summoning the family over for a small celebration. The original idea was to celebrate Naserian's return, but now with the news of a possible engagement there was an even a bigger reason to celebrate. She showed her mother the ring, but for this visit she chose not to wear it. She'd said yes to Jeff, but Naserian knew that she wasn't sure if this was what she wanted. Mama had already decided that Naserian was getting married. Who turned down a marriage proposal these days? Who turned down a proposal ever? Mama reminded Naserian to book the tailor while she was still here so that they could start making dresses for the bridesmaids.

Not one to waste time, or miss a free meal, Uncle Maina was the first to arrive. Lela, always the hostess and the sweeter niece of Mama's two daughters, ushered him into the living room and quickly disappeared before he started firing off demands for this and that. Naserian indulged him as much as she could before she passed the responsibility on to her mother. Mama's sisters arrived one by one until the house was full of older women ululating each time they heard that not only was Naserian home, but that she was also engaged. They all mouthed 'finally' at her, relived that she still had time to start a family and do what women her age were supposed to be doing. A few neighbours had been invited as well and Naserian helped welcome them in. Naserian was fetching more gin for Uncle Maina in the kitchen when that familiar voice found her.

"Hey. Bet you didn't think you would be seeing me again so soon." Muthoni stood at the door and smiled. She was wearing a dress and earrings, which Naserian had never seen her do. Despite herself, Naserian smiled and looked her up and down and nodded.

“Can’t say I’ve ever seen your legs before,” Naserian said.

“Yes you have.” Muthoni crossed her arms and leaned on the kitchen threshold.

“Not like this, I haven’t.” Naserian’s palms became moist. She hoped Muthoni didn’t ask for a handshake, touching any part of her now would throw her off her hostess performance.

“I do this from time to time. You know. In family meetings. Otherwise they ask too many questions.”

Naserian took Uncle Maina his gin and poured herself and Muthoni some. The two of them sneaked off into the backyard after switching off the security lights. No matter how old she was, she felt strange drinking or smoking around her parents and other elders. Some things women just didn’t do. Drinking was one such thing. Naserian had done many things that women and girls weren’t supposed to do, but there was that one thing that she hoped no one ever found out about. And it wasn’t that she occasionally enjoyed a glass of gin. Her biggest secret wore a dress and earrings this evening and Naserian fought the urge to jump over the fence herself.

The night was lovely. The stars and the tall apartment buildings competed for attention. Naserian and Muthoni tried their best to summarise ten years, sharing stories and bits of their pasts lightly. Muthoni worked as a graphic designer for a magazine in town, and Naserian nodded that the job suited her. Naserian told her childhood friend about her life in South Africa, and how she should visit one of these days.

“Really?” Muthoni asked, cocking a brow.

Naserian was quiet. She didn’t mean to invite Muthoni to visit her in South Africa, in fact that was the last thing she needed. And Muthoni knew this, and sipped her gin in silence. Despite wearing a dress, she sat on the step of the back verandah the way a man would, legs spread wide and knees bent, with the hem of her dress tucked in between her thighs. Naserian was still strug-

gling to understand who Muthoni was to her. She knew who Muthoni had been, but wondered who Muthoni had become. She could not possibly remember everything from those many years ago in high school, but there were moments, things, which she could not unknow or forget.

As if reading her mind, Muthoni asked,“Do you ever think back to that time? And the things that we did?”

The hairs on Naserian’s forearms stood up, and it was not because of the light breeze that had begun blowing. She remembered not so much what they did, but rather how she had felt.

“It was so long ago Muthoni. I don’t remember everything.” Naserian responded more to the bottlebrush tree than to Muthoni.

Muthoni was sitting much closer now and the knees of their crossed legs were touching.

“That’s not what I asked. But I hear what you’re saying. It was long ago, and some things should have been forgotten already. But then, some things we can’t forget so easily.”

Silence filled the space between them as they both thought of what to say next. With her glass of gin almost empty, Muthoni seemed to be the one with more liquid courage than the other.

“Look Nas, I know this isn’t the best of times to bring this up, but it’s been ten years and I don’t know if I want another ten to pass before we talk about what happened.”

Naserian turned to face Muthoni, then opened her mouth as if to say something, then shut it when no words came out. She looked down at her hands then folded her arms around her knees. She wished now that she had worn her ring, with its decent-sized diamond beaming up from between them creating some kind of forcefield to protect her from whatever was brewing here. Above everything else, Naserian realised the deeper reason for her sudden trip home.

“I know you’re engaged and everything but I think you should know.” Muthoni said.

“Maybe I should get you another drink,” Naserian interrupted.

Muthoni ignored her.

"It wasn't just a phase for me. It wasn't just curiosity and hormones." Muthoni took a big gulp of the remainder of her gin and put her glass down.

All Naserian seemed to be able to do was breathe and look at Muthoni.

"It never went away. The feeling. That thing. It's still there."

Naserian tried to count stars.

"It's a thing I am now, some people know. I just thought you should also know, because…" She left the sentence unfinished.

"That was so long ago Noni. So many years. I'm getting married." Naserian tried to plug the hole of Muthoni's unfinished sentence with any words that she thought would fit. None of them did.

"And I know this. I'm not here to say anything to change your mind or convince you of anything. I'm just saying. I wanted you to know."

"And then what? Then what, now that I know." She might as well have spoken Mandarin or Italian or whatever other language that they both could not understand.

"But again Nas, I'm not the one getting married here. I'm not the one deciding not to try…"

Muthoni didn't finish the sentence. Naserian wondered what words Muthoni had left out. Did Muthoni know what she wanted? Was it another tryst? This time with less experimentation and more knowledge? Then what? What then if the seed planted ten years ago was ready to sprout? Would it grow here? Naserian could not ask Muthoni for this thing they both didn't know. But also, Muthoni wouldn't say what she wanted.

What felt like a whole day passed before Muthoni spoke again. Naserian said nothing.

“I think I should head inside. Dresses always leave me colder than I am used to. Thanks for the gin. And the conversation.”

Even though her eyes were fixed on the swaying flowers of the loquat tree, she could hear the humour in Muthoni’s voice and she smiled back. Just then Lela ran out into the garden and summoned Naserian into the house for a toast. She brushed the dust off her skirt and went into the house with both hers and Muthoni’s glasses. Naserian looked at the small crowd of people gathered there, raising their glasses to toast her return, her engagement and her life. Muthoni was not in the room, and in many ways, neither was Naserian.

The next few days were filled with visits to friends and family, as well as catching up with work and Jeff. There was something about being the ‘engaged daughter’ that Naserian was enjoying. Suddenly, Mama treated her like a peer. The downside of this new-found peer treatment was that Mama was now full of unsolicited advice on everything about being a good married woman.

“He’s going to come home late reeking of Konyagi. I guarantee it. I have had many such nights with your father. But here were are. It’s not for nothing you know, my praying ways. I am a praying woman and God fearing. And for a praying woman, Mungu halali, God doesn’t sleep. If suffering won’t, then I’m sure that marriage will bring you back to Christ.” Mama rearranged chairs for Bible Study.

The expected response to that monologue was a resounding ‘hallelujah’ and a convicted ‘amen’. But Naserian knew better than to offer one and Mama knew better than to expect it. This trip was proving to be a good idea thus far. A large part of her felt that she was ready for the next big step. But what that big step was remained blurry in her mind. Marriage had never been a mile-

stone for her, but she felt that she needed to embrace conformity and do what thirty-something people do.

Naserian and her family did the careful choreography of family. She politely side stepped any conversations about the wedding, and after a week of asking, Mama finally got the hint. She left well alone, but would sneak in a special prayer during dinner for her first daughter to realise the blessing that marriage was and to get with the programme. Naserian agreed to attend one of her mother's Bible Study sessions where she sat through the conversations the same way a wooden stool would, silent and weighed down. After two weeks of being at home, she realised, a bit sadly, that her reasons for seeking out her family were not to resolve any unsettled childhood issues. She decided that her family had as much to do with her hesitation as the price of potatoes at Dagoretti market. It was a big relief but she still had questions nagging at the back of her mind that she could not access.

Three weeks into her visit and she had yet to catch a glimpse of Muthoni again. She was glad that she didn't have a number because she would have called her and not known what to say. One afternoon, with everyone away from home Naserian walked down the garden to the avocado tree. She had just started picking the fallen fruits when a whistling sound caught her ear. It was Muthoni, checking if the coast was clear for her to climb over the wall. Moses was never a fan of this habit of hers, so many years ago they'd devised a series of whistles that signalled when it was safe for her to climb over. The more things changed the more they stayed the same. Naserian whistled back the 'okay' tune, and Muthoni hauled herself over the wall.

"Hi," Muthoni greeted.

"Hey." Naserian pretended to continue to pick the avocados.

"Need help with that?"

“No, not really, there aren’t that many.”

More silence. Muthoni leaned on the tree while Naserian continued to pick up avocados. When there were none left on the ground, Naserian had no choice but to have a conversation with Muthoni.

“Have you been avoiding me?” she asked, putting down her basket and finding herself a spot on the generous trunk of the tree.

“Who me?” Muthoni feigned surprise, and smiled. “Maybe, I don’t know. I didn’t think we had anything else to talk about. I said everything I wanted to say.”

“Really? I don’t think you’re being honest Noni.”

“Do you know that no one calls me that? Noni? No one.”.

“Ask me again. The thing you wanted to ask that night and you didn’t.”

Both women were leaning with their backs to the tree, close enough, but not touching. The silence this time was comfortable, comforting, the big deep breath before diving into a pool. Muthoni tried to speak a few times and stopped. It sounded like two deep breaths and interrupted thoughts.

“Did you ever…try that again. With other people?” She asked.

“People?” Naserian was being cheeky.

Muthoni turned to face her and leaned her right shoulder on the tree. “Women, Naserian. Have you fooled around with other women?” her question came with warm breath on her friend’s cheek that smelled like oranges.

Naserian knew that if she turned her head to face her friend, she would be crossing a line that she might not be able to uncross.

“Yeah. I mean, during my undergrad there was someone. It was quick. I mean, it was short. A few months?” Naserian squinted at the gate at the end of the garden that had rusted shut years ago and was crawling with pumpkin vines. “You?”

“What do you think?” Muthoni was grinning.

Naserian turned to look at the smug look on her friend’s face and rolled her eyes. She found Muthoni looking at her, looking into her, like you look would a fortune teller’s globe for a future something. Before she could look away, Muthoni placed a warm palm on her arm, and left it there. If Naserian didn’t want what was coming, this was the time to say so. But her words had turned into rocks that sat at the bottom of her brain, useless and heavy. They stood there, in that place under the avocado tree and tried to learn again how to breathe. Suddenly, Naserian got up from the tree, Muthoni’s arm falling away. She bent to pick up the basket of avocados and started to make her way back to the house.

“Well? Are you coming?” Naserian was waiting for Muthoni to come with her. But where to? And what for? Muthoni didn’t respond, she got off the tree and wiped her sweaty palms on her pants. She followed Naserian out of the garden and into the house, and into Naserian’s childhood room with posters of Da Brat and B2K and a bed that was now too small for two adult bodies.

Kageha

As Kageha took a sharp left near Mama Nduta's kiosk, she remembered to skip over the pothole that had been growing almost as fast as her nephew Wilson was. The pothole now looked more like a little pot of githeri, the kind that her aunt made with the speckled beans. She always put in too much water or too much salt. Kageha wondered whether it was how she sought abundance in a world with so little: she used a lot of salt and a lot of water, for whatever else she didn't have enough of. It was a cold, sad afternoon in June and the traffic on Muranga Road had been the worst she had experienced in a while. She wondered, as she passed Mary's gate, why the rain brought out the worst in people. The tout on the matatu that she had got onto by elbowing a tall, dark man out of the way had overcharged her by thirty shillings. It was pouring when she got onto the small bus, and the touts, hell bent on living up to stereotypes, saw this as an opportunity to make more money.

She tilted her umbrella slightly to the left, because the rain had now changed direction and increased in strength. Staying dry in May was like having a free and fair election in Kenya. Kageha wondered whether these wet months would be more tolerable if she had a car, a little Toyota Vits. But she also knew that she couldn't afford a car, not anytime soon anyway. And so she balanced on roughly placed stones that made a path towards her gate. More than the rain, more than the grey clouds that sat over Nairobi like dirty cotton, more than the cold, Kageha hated the mud. She thought back to her trip to Brussels some years past, and how it had been as rainy and as grey as Nairobi, but there was no mud. Well tarred roads and well paved pavements lined narrow streets full of busy cafes. There was so much rain for the two weeks she was there, but no mud.

No matter how long she lived in Nairobi, she never got used to the mud. A new trend had started some months back in anticipation of the rainy season and the transformation of the red dust into shoe-ruining brown soup: plastic shoes. Not the gum boots she grew up wearing to school or

the fancy wellingtons that Uncle Mboya had sent over from London. Actual shoes, high heels, brogues, boots and all, but instead of leather or pleather, they were made of plastic. The kind of plastic that could be melted to make small plates and cups for primary school children. Women took to the trend like flies to offal, but somehow Kageha was not convinced that they were the solution to the seemingly undefeatable presence of mud. They were certainly easier to clean, and her office now had a bucket of water and a dirty rag at its entrance where workmates would wipe the mud off before entering the building.

Kageha kept it old school.

She wore her rain boots to work, and changed into her work shoes at the office. The idea of having to wear plastic shoes as a grown woman took her back to parts of a childhood that she was still trying to let go of. The whole lower half of Kageha's skirt was now soaked, and her rain boots were slowly filling up. She saw the hazy light blue of her gate a few meters away, and some relief began to settle into her. Humble as it was, home was home and very few things could match the feeling of settling down in her own place.

She took her house keys out of her pocket and let herself into her small apartment. Her boots were abandoned at the door, in the small veranda that was shaded from the rain. Kageha took off her sodden socks and tip toed to her bathroom so as not to leave dirty marks on her floor.

Kageha hated her job, and this was not okay because she didn't hate many things. She had the noisiest neighbours and the most annoying family, but somehow, they were more tolerable than her job. She was working at SACCO, a Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation in her neighbourhood, while finishing her post-graduate diploma in childhood psychology. The SACCO she worked for was operated by a matatu company, which made her job even worse. Matatus were the necessary

evil that nearly everyone she knew needed to get from A to B. The drivers and touts who manned the routes in Eastleigh where she lived, had a reputation for being some of the most brash and aggressive around. But even that she could live with. She'd survived worse in high school, with teachers hell bent on playing out worst-case scenarios of life on earth. Kageha's problem with working at a SACCO seemed trivial, but it was a burden, now slowly morphing into a grudge that she had been carrying for years.

Noble intentions and all, SACCOs had become that saving grace for civil servants and underpaid public service providers to access loans that banks would never trust them to pay back. People trusted completely the purpose and function of the SACCO, or the SACCOs that they belonged to, and made sure that their contributions were paid on time every month. Kageha, along with three other young women were the entry point. Daily, and at an average of seven people a day, Kageha had to listen to sob story after depressing sob story. People who had not been saving long enough with the SACCO needed to take their share out and access a loan. *But you can't*, Kageha would tell them. *Lakini msichana, hauelewi. Mtoto wangu wa kwanza, kijana, anauma, na inabidi nimtafutie dawa.* You don't understand young woman, my first born child, the boy, is sick and I need to get him medicine. See little girl, I need to get surgery for my knee, otherwise I won't be able to walk again. Listen here you cunt, this is my money and I can demand it back if I want to. You clearly don't know what you're doing and how this works, where's your boss? Can I talk to a man here, where are the men?

It always happened like that. When the pity didn't work, which it never seemed to with Kageha, the tones of the sick, pleading and dying suddenly became harsh and demanding, and then angry and aggressive. Kageha had a list of death threats as long as her skinny, middle finger, but she didn't really care. She was yet to hear of people working at SACCOs being attacked on their way home.

She wondered why their boss had decided that women were the best people to have to listen to the members' requests for cash. Truth was that it didn't matter whether they approved or refused the requests, the final decision always lay with their boss, Mr. Maina, and to a great extent his wife, Lucy. Kageha and the three other women were a smokescreen. An attempt to make the SACCO look like a legitimate savings company. This is why she was convinced there were so many women at the SACCO, women generally appeared to be more trustworthy and caring, and less likely to lie and steal from a business. This annoyed her, but she sucked it up and went about her business of pretending to wield power she didn't have.

Her dislike for the SACCO was not the sob stories she had to hear, nor her dodgy boss and his dodgier wife.

SACCOs reminded her of her mother and the endless debt that she seemed to incur from these savings and loan schemes. She remembered the many times that men with pick-up trucks had shown up at their home, either late at night or early in the morning, and carried off their fridge and television. She remembered that one day the men also took her tiny piano keyboard with them, along with her sister's little toy robot. She'd asked her father everyday when she was going to get her piano back, and everyday her father told her tomorrow. She stopped asking after three months, and she never saw her piano again. It was as simple as that. Her parents liked to borrow money that they had no idea how to pay back. But that was the story of nearly every family back then.

Wangeci's school bag, the new one with the dark haired, big-eyed princess on the front went missing at home. Clothes and shoes went missing at Carol's house. Maids were blamed then fired. But in casual conversations decades later, parents admitted to selling their own belongings as well as their children's in order to pay back loans from scary and unscrupulous shylocks who threatened to take everything. Not that SACCOs were any better, but there seemed to be more room for reason

when the SACCO henchmen showed up and tried to take people's fridges and flat screen televisions.

She didn't have a higher sense of moral obligation around this, but there were stories she sat through that reminded her too much of a childhood and a family that she preferred to have remain in the closet that she kept tightly shut from all that asked.

In summer, when the purple and white Jacaranda trees bloomed and dropped their flowers on sidewalks like colourful snow, she didn't mind her job so much. But when it rained in Nairobi, She nurtured a deep desire to escape her everyday, to travel to warm tropical places where colourful drinks were offered and she, in her reverie, would sit on a towel by a sea she couldn't swim in and pretend she was born into such indulgence.

"How much?!" the man shouted over the loud music that blared from the speakers that surrounded the dimly lit club.

She swallowed her drink in one quick gulp before she leaned in and shouted back.

"Depends. What do you want?" she asked, making eye contact with the man a little longer than was comfortable for both of them.

His eyes held hers for a while before they quickly darted around the small but packed club and said, "Si the usual ama?"

Kageha looked at the man in his white shirt, clean, but now creased from a day of working at an office somewhere. His pants still held that neat line that ran from the thigh to the toe. *He's married*, she thought to herself. Men in Nairobi, young or old, especially the kind that came to clubs such as these, didn't care much for their appearance. Men didn't have to try as hard as women to fit in anywhere. He was probably newly wed, married to a virginal village girl who didn't know what

to do with herself in bed. He didn't seem to know the drill around soliciting Kageha's services, which she found interesting.

The man began to fidget. She leaned in again and spoke loudly into his ear, trying not to shout, "Three thousand shillings." He seemed taken aback by her quote, and she smiled to herself. He was definitely new to this. He hesitated with a thought while he considered haggling down the price. Corruption and a flexible economy had made many people believe that everything with a price could be bargained down to something else. Often, this was true. Even for sex. Actually, especially for sex.

For an entry level workman at an office in downtown Nairobi, three thousand shillings was not small change. It was what some of the members of the SACCO she worked for paid as monthly instalments. It was an investment. In schools near Kibera, it was a month's fees. For Kageha who lived alone, it was a month's groceries. She wondered whether she quoted three thousand shillings to put him off, or whether she felt like that was what she was worth at that moment. She watched him hesitate as he took out his wallet and counted his money. She hoped he had enough because she hated having to walk clients to the ATM. Those moments made the transactional nature of her service so open to herself, and she didn't need the reminder.

To her surprise, White Shirt Man had enough money. And somehow, feeling like he could actually go through with this, he straightened his back, tucked his wallet back into his trousers, and asked her, "Where?"

Without a drink to finish, Kageha had no reason to stall. She got off the bar stool and adjusted her weight on her shiny black high heels, and gestured with her head for him to follow her. She wove her way through drunk men dancing and made-up women pretending to have the time of their lives. She looked back to make sure that she hadn't lost him in the crowd, and saw him making his way after her. Out of the corner of her eye, Kageha spotted a young woman, too young to be in this

kind of place, making a face as a drunk older man seemed to belch something into her ear. Their eyes met for the briefest moment, a knowing glance was exchanged, and everything said between two strangers with nothing to say to each other.

Finally outside in the damp cold air, Kageha pulled out her umbrella and continued to walk. The pavement was slick from an earlier drizzle and she walked slowly, not wanting to slip and fall. White Shirt Man, not too familiar with how things worked, followed her five or so steps behind. The taxi drivers parked along Koinange Street wolf whistled after her in her black liquid leather tights and red sequined top. She ignored them like she always did, and the most that they did was catcall and let her go her way. Except that one man, on that one day.

Twenty minutes later, because she had to walk very slowly, Kageha arrived at Vision Towers, which was a mixture of all kinds of businesses and premises that the working girls and their clientele sometimes used. Mama Boi, veteran queen-of-the-night and a pimp of sorts, made some rooms available on the third floor for the women to use. Kageha always used Mama Boi's place because it was clean and she felt safe there. An irrational reason for her safety was that the fourth floor of Vision Towers was the Church of Christ Redeemed Spirit and Power for Deliverance. She felt a degree of spiritual insurance selling sex a floor below, and for that she was yet to have any horror story to tell, about a client that went too far or did too much.

White Shirt Man followed Kageha up three flights of stairs and down a dark corridor. At the end of the corridor was a door to the left with the words OFFICE on it. This was an inside joke that Kageha had orchestrated to tickle her a little just before she saw a client. She smiled at him and opened the door.

"What's your name?" she asked the man, who slowly entered the room, carefully looking around to make sure that this wasn't a trap.

"Ste…wait, do I have to give you my real name?" he hesitated.

"No, you can make one up." Kageha said as she switched on the only light in the room.

He was looking around and taking in the place. The small room was lit by a single lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. The right corner of the room, under the window, had a small single bed, made up and covered in a floral bedspread that used to be her mother's. Next to the bed there was a small study table and chair, with a few books and a candle and matches. A small beige rug with red slippers were at the side of the bed. There was no bathroom, but there was a bucket and some water in the corner, just in case.

"The bathroom is down the corridor, four doors down, on the right. I suggest that you go now. Before we begin."

He looked at Kageha for a second, considering defiance, when he realised that this was advice he was being given, not an instruction. He left the room, and Kageha hid her handbag under the bed. Her confidence when dealing with clients always surprised her. Out there, in the muddy streets and the dusty offices of her everyday life, she had no upper hand, but here, now, for however long it took for the man to regain his wits, she was boss. She imagined that this was what cocaine must feel like. Before she took off her heels, she decided to wait until the man got back so that she could ask him what he preferred. After doing this for two or so years, she'd learned very early that the first timers were the safest bet. Regular clients tended to get cocky and arrogant over time, and eventually, with many of them, some violence took place. Kageha hoped she didn't have to sell sex long enough to have to deal with these kinds of clients. The man knocked twice on the door before opening it. Kageha smiled. Hands akimbo, tall (in those shoes anyone was tall) and commanding, she watched him enter the room. He tried to match her confidence by clearing his throat, taking off his jacket and folding his sleeves. But the sweat on his brow and the slight tremble of his hands betrayed his bravado.

“You didn’t tell me your name. You can call me Catherine. Or Cathy.” Kageha sat on the lower half of the bed.

The man, after folding his shirt, didn’t know what to do with his hands. She watched him put them in his pockets then take them out again. The light sweat on his brow had formed a bead that was travelling slowly down the left side of his face. Kageha wanted to ask if this was his first time, but she knew that not every one liked this question. A few times when she’d asked this, someone’s bruised ego showed up during sex where they tried to compensate for what they felt was some kind of emasculation. So she kept quiet and decided that maybe if she started the process, he would follow suit. And he did. Kageha unstrapped her heels and put them under the bed. She slid out of her pleather tights then red top, and put the clothes on the chair near the study desk. The man’s eyes never left her body, but also never found her face. He was embarrassed at the slight erection that was showing through his trousers, and couldn’t look at Kageha. In black lace panties and a red bra, Kageha sat back down on the bed.

“As usual during these things, there are rules.”

The man looked up from her cleavage to her face. His silence was beginning to worry her.

“You pay two thousand first, and the remaining one thousand after we’re done.”

He was standing in the middle of the room in his underwear, a white vest with sweat stains and a pair of brown socks. There was a hole where the smallest toe of his right foot peeped out. His clothes were discarded in a pile next to him. If he was the chatty kind, she would have told him that it was better to keep the clothes well folded to avoid noise at home, but she just smiled.

“Another rule is that I always use a condom. I have a variety to choose from. I provide my own protection. This can’t be negotiated.”

The man nodded, his hand hiding his growing erection. His wedding ring glinted in the dim lighting.

“My services usually last two hours, maximum three. The askari downstairs expects you to be out of here by two AM, if you’re late, they come up to get you.”

This was a lie, the timeline, the askari, everything was something she had just made up because she couldn’t read him. But then she thought that maybe they should become permanent lines in this story.

Taking charge, Kageha took a condom from a drawer on the study desk, and switched off the light.

The room was filled with the neon lights from billboards and the sound of matatus. Late night prayer intercession had just began upstairs and the beating of drums and off-key songs of praise created a rhythm in the room. Condom in hand, Kageha took off her underwear in the dimly lit room and got into the bed. He slowly walked towards the bed, as if approaching a sleeping lion. Small, silent steps, his previously dull white vest now the brightest thing in the room. At the edge of the bed, he stopped and took everything else off, except the socks. He got into the bed and lay on his side next to Kageha. It was the only way they could both comfortably fit on the bed.

“Can I kiss you? Do you allow kissing?” He finally spoke.

Kageha’s earlier bravado melted into a puddle that seeped through the mattress and onto the floor. No one had ever asked her about kissing. They would ask other types of questions, but never if it was okay for them to kiss her. Clearing her throat so as not to sound shaken, she said yes, and pressed her lips onto his. His body was cold from standing in the middle of the room for so long, but his lips were warm. He tasted like beer and smelled like sweat. His hands were soft, the kind that sit at a desk all day and type things. His skin was smooth and he didn’t have much body hair.

She liked him, which made her happy, she didn't always like them. They negotiated their way around the small space of the bed until he was on top of her. She wanted to ask him if he preferred sound or silence, whether he'd like her to say his name. Small things that made all the difference to some people. But she didn't. She decided that this man came to here to feel, and just that. To feel the warmth of another body. Not conversation, not to pretend to get to know her, not to make friends. He came to feel, and she let him feel what he wanted to.

He lasted fourty-five minutes, including the time it took to get dressed. Kageha knew that he wouldn't be back. He paid the agreed three thousand shillings without fuss. He washed his hands and face in the bucket in the corner before he left. He said thank you.

"How much will that be?" Kageha asked.

"Six hundred shillings." Mama Nduta said, putting the groceries into a plastic bag.

"Thanks." Kageha smiled.

"You know what?" Mama Nduta was doing that thing where she makes small talk that no one wants to take part in. "You're such a good girl, you know?"

"Am I?" Kageha asked, curious about where this conversation was going.

"You know Halima, from down the road? I hear she's one of those girls, the town girls, makes easy money. You're not like that at all. You do honest work for honest pay." Mama Nduta furrowed her brow at a jar of sweets, lost in her thoughts. Kageha wanted to say thank you, but she didn't want to bring the shopkeeper back from her reverie, and so she quietly walked home, groceries in hand, remembering to skip over the puddle outside the small kiosk.

Alusa

You can't just like the soft parts, she was told. You can't just wish to dance in the sun and soak your skin in the rays of warmth and optimism alone. You can want that, but beware the dark days. Beware the dimly lit, dark corners and hidden spaces where life hides her claws. Like a kitten's paw: underneath the soft fur lie talons so sharp they can put your eye out.

Her aunt reminded her that life is lived in that interesting and necessary balance of good and bad, hope and disappointment, sadness and happiness. Her aunt's wisdom was well intended, but it made no sense to her.

She was too young, and too in love and it could not and would not make sense. She didn't understand how his caresses could be hidden claws. She didn't know how his stolen kisses on her cheek while pretending to get the salt were hidden daggers under a velvet cloak. She could not fathom anything outside the pulse between her legs that never stopped.

She lay awake at night and imagined that he had magic. That the witchcraft that her grand aunts and uncles spoke of was real. That there were spirits out there sent to deceive and lead astray innocent young girls. But why did it feel so good? Can sin be sinful when the sinning brings you joy? How was it sin to seek a smile, and to receive ten every hour? She knew what her body was telling her and she had to listen. She had tried to say no. She had prayed about the temptation. She had implored the good Lord to lift her longing past that of the flesh and to make her spirit soar above the sound of her beating heart.

She had knelt at the altar and lit candles and asked questions to her Lord. Are you not the God of love? Is this not your will being done? I am in love. There is a longing of the flesh. There is a desire in my heart. My love for you Lord cannot compare to my love for him. But he touches me lord, in ways you have never, in ways you can never touch me oh Lord. She shut her eyes to her

blasphemy, and went to sleep. She tossed and turned in the nightmare of a wet dream. She came awake. And she prayed.

She sat in the family living room counting the blue squares on the beige carpet. Her mother sat to her right and said nothing. Her father was barely breathing. There were aunts, uncles and cousins in their small house in Nairobi West, and she counted squares.

One hundred and five.

"We expected so much more from you Alusa."

One hundred and six.

"Do you know what this is doing to your father?"

One hundred and seven.

"But he's the garden boy Alusa and you're a graduate. Are there no decent boys on campus that you could have dated?"

One hundred and eight.

"Now what example are you setting for Sweetie. She looks up to you. Why did you have to shame us like this?"

One hundred and nine. One hundred and ten. One hundred and eleven. The voices blurred into a humming like that of bees. Or hornets. Or flies. There was nothing that they could do or say that would make her feel more shame, or feel more sadness than she already did. But still, the pounding between her legs started again, and she could feel her body responding to the cool breeze that blew into the small crowded room. She let one heavy tear fall. They saw it as remorse, she knew it was release. She needed him now. She wanted him now. She wanted him to pin her down and drown the sound of her family with the sound of their moans. She let another heavy tear fall. They saw it as shame, she knew it was longing.

Dear Lord, she prayed in the silence of her mind. I'm sorry. I really am. I feel no shame. I feel no remorse. I listened to the river flowing between my legs and now, I will bear a child. I can-

not bear a bastard. I will marry this man. And have children blessed by the union of marriage. They don't need to suffer the consequences of my desires of the flesh. I'm sorry dear oh God, that I have shamed my father like this. That this is a pain they might never recover from. But dear God Almighty I tried. Was Eve not tempted by fruit? This was more than the Apple from the Tree of Life, from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This was more, dear God. I locked myself in my room, and I hid my key. I ran from his smell of sweat and man which made me dizzy. I tried touching myself. I tried everything to resist the lure of him. But you made him man, oh Lord. You made him big and strong. You made his muscles shine in the afternoon sun glistened by the sweat and oil. You made hair grow on his chin so that it tickles when he kisses me. You made him tall. And you made me. You made my soft fit his hard and his tall cover my short. How could we not try and make our parts fit each other like pieces of a puzzle? How? And the parts fit! Oh the parts fit heavenly Father in the way that you designed them to. Were we not to follow the nature of how you made us? Dear God, if I could have stopped myself, then I too can stop the sun like Joshua marching around Jericho. But I can't stop the sun any more than I can stop the rivers from flowing between my legs.

Her prayer ricocheted inside her like bullets in a barrel. The relatives were quiet. Her cousins were upstairs, wondering what was going on. Her friends at the gate anxiously waiting to see what would happen.

"She will have to marry him."

"Quickly, before it begins to show."

"No, she cannot marry *him*, he's a garden boy. He was a street child. He has no name. No family. He has nothing to offer her."

"No one knows that. We cannot be shamed further."

"But he's a muslim!"

"She will have to convert. Her actions have consequences!"

“They grew up together. He’s like her *brother*!”

“He does not have our blood. He is not ours.”

Her fate was sealed. By women and men who could not understand why. Or how. She would marry Abdi and convert to Islam. She would move out and bear his children. She would be the shamefaced one at all family gatherings. She would change her name to Habiba, meaning ‘the loved one’. She would pray, five times a day, and she would conform. her father's heart would shatter, and he would die. She would not be invited to the funeral. She would kneel at her prayers in her room, in the silence, choked by her sobs.

She would religiously pray her *Fajr, Zuhr, Asr, Maghrib* and *Isha*. And she would face Mecca.

Alhamdu lillahil lathi hadana lihatha wama kunna linahtadiya laola an hadanallah. Praise be to Allah, who has guided us to this. Never could we have found guidance, had it not been for the guidance of Allah.

She would die in a car crash and leave behind her husband and two children. And she would take her shame with her. Veiled. Covered from head to toe. Re-named. And now buried.

Nelao

Summer in Windhoek was unforgiving. Unless, of course, it was your kind of thing. The water in the taps was always warm and the breeze that blew in through the windows was warmer. The earth would get baked so fast that, by midmorning, mirages of pools of water would play five metres in front of you on the tar road surrounding the University swimming pool. The pool itself was now a gaping hole, drained, and closed off after a series of drowning incidents happened in first year. People said that some were suicides while others were drunken accidents. Rumours flew across campus like migrating birds when this one time they found the body of a male student at the bottom of the pool. Some whispers said that he fell into the pool by accident while drinking at a party, and that the weight of his Timberland boots planted him firmly at the bottom of the deep end, like an anchor, where he stayed for the whole night. It sounded incredible at first, but some truths are hard to hear, especially when the most you get are seven different versions of the same story which you piece together into your own, more believable account. Besides, the truth is sometimes more convoluted than rumours could ever be. The little science in me was convinced that the pool alone would help give us some respite from the relentless heat, but I had no proof, and the water had long been gone. I heard that there were now plans to build new lecture halls where the pool sat bare and empty, like a tiled scar.

The trip back to the University of Namibia was not planned. I was there to attend Gloria's wedding. The wedding was to be held at Gross Barmen, some kilometres outside Windhoek, near hot springs that I had never managed to visit in my almost ten years in the country. But Anna had insisted that I first attend a seminar she was hosting at the Academia campus, which spoke to the work I was doing. The campus was a place of many memories for me, some bad, and many good. Everyone called it Unam. I often joked with friends that if buildings could talk, the ones at Unam

would whisper my name as I walked down the brown and grey walls the way my older aunts whisper when I visit the village with my pierced brow and nose ring.

Very little had changed at the university on that hot, November afternoon. The main blocks X and Y sat on the flat land like a spaceship that had crashed decades ago. It was one big continuous building that had seemed overwhelming to navigate as a naïve, first-year student. Like many places and experiences, it shrank faster than I anticipated, and soon enough, there wasn't a corner or crevice on the campus that I didn't know. Driving in through the security boom gate, I realised that some effort had been made to plant more trees along the walk from the taxi rank to the New Hostels past the University stadium. I remembered how thankful I would have been for those trees some six years ago. It was easy to remember the heat in Namibia and how it bore down on everything with equal anger. And how we all used the heat as an excuse for bad behaviour, late assignments and unexplainable disappearances. Lecturers too used the heat, albeit more intelligently, as an excuse for no shows and delayed tests. We all cut each other some slack back then.

As I turned to park the rented car near the administration block, I saw a familiar face. Seated on a concrete bench, smoking a cigarette was Selma. Six years had passed and a lot had changed, but Selma was still herself, rounder, more commanding and just as feminine as she had been back then. I smiled to myself and allowed a memory, blurry and scratched like the VHS tapes we treasured as children. It had been five years since I had seen her, and six years since she had tried to borrow a book from me that we never managed to find. I got out of the car and walked towards her. She was about to finish her cigarette. Without a word, I sat down next to her and watched her smoke. She took the last drag of her cigarette and put it out with the toe of her high heels.

"Hi," I said.

She turned, not recognising my voice, nor my face, and faced me. Recognition showed on her face and she smiled.

“My God, Nelao?”

“Yes, me.” I said.

We looked at each other’s faces, searching for a hint of something. The sign of a flashback or the glint of that secret that we kept buried under our beds and in the back of our closets. Selma gave nothing away.

“I didn’t know you were around? You left immediately after graduation and people couldn’t keep up with you.”

“Yeah, I know. It was time to leave,” I said.

“You look well. More comfortable in your skin.” she said cheekily. We smiled at each other. “I have to go back inside. Before my boss gives me a hard time.”

“You work here? I knew that you liked Unam, I just didn’t think you liked it this much.” I teased.

Selma laughed, “Well, this time I’m on the other side, I have some power now.” And then she winked. “It’s nice to see you Nelao. You look well.”

At that, she stood up and sashayed on her high heels back into the administrative building. I stood up and began walking towards the gym hall, where Anna was giving her speech. And like I imagined they would, the brown-grey walls began whispering my past back into my ears, and bringing to life the blurry memory of me and Selma, those six years back.

The short walk from X Block to the New Hostels was tortuous. Tortuous of course when compared to the shorter and more shaded walk to the Old Hostels. They called the New Hostels Katutura because of all the noise that students made from Sunday to Sunday, just like in the township. I had ap-

plied for a room at the Old Hostels, with its colonial era architecture still intact, and the brick walls I liked so much. All the rooms were taken by the time they got to my application and I was assigned a room at the New Hostels. Block C, room 12. The room was the size of my grandmother's dining table, but somehow, the small space suited me fine. It was like a cocoon, and after successfully managing to get the same room for the previous three years, I had woven and welded myself into every corner of the small space so much so that entering my room felt like crossing a portal into another dimension. I was ridiculously private. I had six friends and all of them could count on one hand how many times I had easily let them into my room.

Today seemed hotter than all the days of summer combined as the sun beat down on my head. Ahead of me, students with better sense had umbrellas and sauntered lazily towards the cafeteria. I really should have bought an umbrella, but umbrellas are for rain and I had all this melanin. I knew better than that in my head and my overheated heart, but I was too stubborn, even for the sun and the real and present threat of melanoma. By the time I was passing the stadium, I had very visible sweat patches under my arms and bigger, wetter ones under my breasts. I never understood why I had to sweat there. It made no sense to me physiologically. Armpits I understood, I also understood why I would sweat between my thighs, but underneath my breasts? Boggled my mind. As I walked and the sweat patches grew, I wished I could shelve my breasts. I wished that we could unscrew body parts that we did not need and go about with them safely stocked on shelves and in drawers. I wished that I could change my breast size at will, maybe even get longer legs or bigger hips while I was at it. The future in that sci-fi kind of sense had never felt more inviting.

I was well clear of the stadium and the field and walking in the shadow of Block Y when I heard the faint echo of my name. I stopped, turned and saw someone running towards me from the direction of the taxi rank I had been walking from. As she got closer, I realised that it was Selma. She ran in that way we were taught how to run as young, well behaved women, with one hand hold-

ing down her breasts and her other hand swinging beside her hips. She ran from the knees downwards because the skirt she was wearing would not allow her to run any other way. I didn't know what she wanted from me but I was happy to wait for her in the shade of Block Y, while I fanned my t-shirt and hoped that my sweat patches would evaporate.

When she finally caught up with me, she leaned her heaving body against the red brick wall and tried to catch her breath. Realising how awkward I must look standing there fanning my shirt, I leaned my left shoulder on the wall and greeted her.

"Hey," I said.

She continued gulping big breaths of dry air and fanning her sweat-beaded face with her hand.

"You are brave for running across hell on earth like this." I joked, seeing an opportunity for levity.

She turned and looked at me, puzzled, out of breath and tired all worn as one look. I realised that I had to explain my joke.

"Hell as in hot, not that this is hell on earth. I mean it's hot." I hated it when my jokes missed the mark.

Selma was uninterested in my joke."I know, I kept calling to you but you weren't hearing me. What's up with your ears?" She rasped at me.

"Ah, sorry, I had my music on." I dangled my earphones in front of her.

She straightened her back against the wall and took what looked like her last desperate gulp of air. She was recovered now. And audible. "Listen, sorry but I really need to borrow your Introduction to Sociology. The one by Giddens. Please."

“Why? Is there an assignment?”

“No, I need it for someone else actually. They’re doing an assignment and I know you have one.” Her tone had begun lilting towards that high pitched, almost whiny tone that children begging for ice cream use on their mothers.

“Yeah I have a copy, but I’m not so sure where it is. Let me go look around my room and I’ll message you once I find it.” I still had sweat patches under my breasts and I was reluctant to continue having the conversation out in the hot air.

“I’ll come with you, help you look.” She said this as she pushed herself off the wall and began walking in the direction of the New Hostels before I could protest.

The thought of her in my room made me really uncomfortable and I tried to excavate excuses to dissuade her from setting foot there.“My room is a real mess, it’s embarrassing. You can’t go in there. It’s going to take me ages to find the book. Let me look for it and let you know,” I said as firmly and boss-like as I could.

“Pshh! Those rooms are the size of my feet and I’m a size five. We’ll find it fast.”

By now, walking in the hot sun and past the security turnstiles leading into the hostels, I was back at sweating, but more out of anxiety than heat.

“Where’s your block?” Selma stopped and asked.

“There,” I pointed towards the bottom of a small hill, “Block C.” I gestured, defeated.

“How on earth did they plan this place? How can block C be next to block S?” she thought out loud.

I didn’t try to answer this question.

When we arrived at the threshold of Block C, Selma stood back to let me go ahead because she didn't know which room was mine. She was about my height, but curvier and than my mother and I put together. She rarely ever said anything in class, and when she did, it was always to ask for an extension for an assignment or a presentation she wasn't ready to submit. She often came across as inattentive and disinterested and was always fiddling with her phone. Her insistence at this moment came as a surprise, and no less for a book in a subject that I was sure she was flunking.

I turned left at the top of the first-floor stairs and walked all the way down to the last door down the hall. It crossed my mind at that time to fiddle in my bag for twenty minutes and pretend to look for my keys. Then announce them as lost and shrug and shoo Selma away. I then realised that while she might not be the next Kimberle Crenshaw, Selma wasn't stupid. I fished in my bag for my keys and opened the door to Room 12, Block C.

My hostel room was my sanctuary. The walls were covered in posters that my mother forbade on her own walls while growing up. In one corner of my human-sized shoebox, was a pile of books as tall and as wide as I was. I hadn't read them all, but I liked how they smelled and I waited for the day that some genius would invent a pill, a device, anything, that would allow us to inhale knowledge through some osmotic process. I'd be ready with all the books I wished to inhale. My bed was a single, pushed into the right-hand corner of the room and made up. Made up because sometimes the voice of your mother follows you to the ends of the earth and wills you to make your bed or face the wrath of her continued cursing the nine months and twenty four hours of labour it took to bring you into the world.

My curtains were red, with what looked like oriental or Persian embroidery at their base. There were other, smaller, stacks of books and magazines, a desk, two chairs, and a built in wardrobe. I had a little bar fridge that doubled as a table where I kept some toiletries and a framed picture of my

grandmother, Guku. My kitchen was scattered in my room; some of it on the shelves (my utensils), which were next to more books and a picture of my sisters and I one Sunday before church. Some of my kitchen was under my bed (my hotplate) and the rest of it was in my closet (my groceries). I had a small rug at the foot of the bed that I liked to tug at with my toes when I watched movies. Despite the overwhelming presence and smell of old books, my room was not messy at all.

While I tried to get used to the idea of a stranger in my room, Selma was busy looking at my books and posters with interest. She'd gone completely quiet and all I could her was her breathing, and the movement of pages opening and closing between her fingers, and her putting books down.

Not knowing what else to say, I murmured, "I'll open the window."

The late afternoon sun rushed into the room and made the space seem bigger, as if the rays were fingers pushing the walls apart. Distractedly, Selma asked for a glass of water. I opened the fridge and poured us both some. I quickly realised that she was getting comfortable when she sat on the bed and picked up a magazine. I remembered that it was the Giddens book that was standing between me and getting my sanctuary back, so I started looking for it. While looking for the book I thought that maybe I should give some books away and make room for people. Selma couldn't be bothered about finding the book. And I was losing patience.

Nearly fifteen minutes into my fruitless search for the Giddens book, Selma stood up, and started reading the pro-left, feminist rant-type posters on my wall.

"So it is true what the guys were saying the other day/"

"Which is what exactly?" I asked absentmindedly. How hidden could a book I used every week be in a room this small? The sweat patches were returning.

"That you're a lesbian."

I slowed down my search, then I stopped completely. I looked up to find Selma watching me from the corner of her eye like I was a science experiment she was afraid was going to explode. I smiled, and then I laughed. Selma fidgeted.

When my fit stopped, I asked Selma how on earth people were talking about that in class and why it was an issue in the first place.

"Well, firstly, you're always going on about feminist this, and feminist that. That I'm-so-angry-at-men vibe you give off."

"Yeah but there are many of us that give off that vibe. Sheefeni is an annoying sexist, how am I supposed to not say anything back? It's him that's saying all this shit right?"

"You see? Those words, sexist this and whatnot. It's that stuff that has the guys thinking you're a lesbian. But it's not just that. It's also how you dress. All tomboyish. It's like you don't like being a girl."

"Oh I *love* being a girl! A young woman actually, but that's beside the point. I like comfortable clothes, is that a crime? Those reasons are stupid if you ask me."

"So you're saying that you're not a lesbian?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to answer and then I shut it. I'd honestly never thought about it. I shrugged, and put down the Charles Dickens that I had stolen from my high school library. "I don't know actually. How do people know if they are lesbians?" I asked out loud, more to myself than to Selma.

"I think you kiss a woman, and see how it feels."

Selma's voice had softened into something between butter and cream cheese, and I became scared. And excited, at the same time. She was standing in what would be the middle of my room, if

it were big enough to have a middle. And she was looking at me. Almost the way she had been looking at my feminist posters some minutes back. I thought she was suggesting that I kiss her, but I wasn't sure. Did I want to kiss Selma? No. Maybe. Probably yes, since she was in my room and she had asked a question I had never asked myself.

Selma put her hands on her hips and tilted her head, "Well? Aren't you bothered by their comments?"

I said nothing but stood there and considered what she was suggesting. That I might be a lesbian and that the whole class seemed to think so except me. Many thoughts began rushing past me, trying to find moments in my short history where I might have indicated that I was attracted to girls. High school perhaps? Sharing showers with my best friend and occasionally sleeping in the same bed? But it was a girls-only boarding school, we all did that, didn't we? That didn't mean that we were all lesbians? That time in second year that Helvi let her hand linger on my lower back longer than anyone had in a while. Something inside me tingled. Something rattled in fact, but I didn't push Helvi's hand away. Was that an invitation? Why did I remember that?

I realised that I was beginning to look strange, standing there, less than a metre away from Selma thinking all these thoughts. So I took a step towards her, and shrugged again, "Ok." I said. "Let's suppose that I am able to find out whether I am a lesbian by kissing a woman, is this what you are suggesting?"

Selma shrugged her shoulders and looked towards the poster of Audre Lorde on my wall that had the words, 'If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.' It was a dare. And Selma was using my own arsenal against me.

"Ok."I said again. This time more firmly. And took another step towards her. I had never kissed a girl. I had never considered it an option until that moment. I had kissed enough boys, some

good, one great, most just terrible kissers. Must have been all the porn they watched that suggested shoving your tongue down a woman's throat was a good idea. I remembered the one guy I went on exactly two dates with, and how time and again he had tried to get me to watch porn because he was convinced that I would enjoy it as much as he did. He shoved his tongue down my throat that one time we attempted a kiss, and once was enough for me to know that if he was as terrible a lover as he was a kisser, then I was safer alone, in my room, with my books, and my imagination.

In the small bioscope in my head, I imagined how the kiss would play out. Our lips would meet and we would kiss each other for five minutes and she would leave. Then I would confirm that indeed I was not a lesbian. I was a feminist and a tomboy and that did not make me a lesbian. But the bioscope lied.

Selma looked at me and smiled, like she knew something that I didn't.

"For this to work our lips have to touch you know. Come closer."

I took a step closer. Our breasts touched before any other part of our bodies, and the sweat patches underneath mine reappeared. Selma was my height exactly, with brown eyes and a scar above her left eyebrow. She had six more scars, traditional incisions, three on each cheek, which were now rouged pink. She wore a lot of make-up. She smelled like sweat and something sweet and tropical, like mangoes or pineapples dipped in ether. Her eyelids were lined with mascara and they looked heavy. Carefully, like looking at an expensive glass vase in a shop, she put her hands on my cheeks and pressed her lips against mine.

My lungs, which I suddenly realised were actually inflated balloons, were pricked and deflated. Air rushed out of my mouth as if I was drowning, and I grabbed onto Selma's waist for support. I couldn't think. Selma broke the kiss to look at me. She looked fuzzy, like the holy apparitions that supposedly appeared to saints and sinners in life changing moments. Later, I realised that

it had a lot to do with the light coming in from behind her, and the fact that all my blood was rushing away from my brain and towards my breasts, and legs, and thighs and yes, my cunt. I leaned in and this time I kissed Selma. We inhaled each other for what felt like a whole day, and then I pulled away.

I started looking at parts of my room that I thought I hadn't seen for the three years I had lived there. There was a cobweb on my ceiling with a spider sitting there, watching us. I wasn't afraid of spiders, but I made a mental note to kill it as soon as Selma left. If Selma left. When Selma left. I saw a half drunk cup of black rooibos tea on top of my fridge and was making another mental note to clean it when I realised that Selma was taking her clothes off. She had taken off her blouse and was peeling her skirt off her body. I began to panic. I wasn't sure whether to kill the spider first then close the window, or wash the cup. Instead, I made sure that the door was locked. By then, Selma, in a floral bra and plain black panties, was climbing into my small bed. I checked the door again, and looked at the curtain blowing in the warm, afternoon breeze. I wanted her to say something. Anything really, but all she did was look at me. Her face was two-dimensional and expressionless as she lay there, flat on her back in my bed, which now looked like the edge of an envelope that had been torn open. I took off my t-shirt, my jeans, and left my underwear and socks on. All I could hear was the pulse of my heart in my head and between my thighs. My hands were trembling, and again I wondered whether this was fear, or passion, or both. Selma gestured with her head that I should join her in the bed. I lay next to Selma and lay perfectly still. We lay there for a while, before I dug up words, like carrots or potatoes, buried deep in the earth.

"I don't know what to do. Despite what you think."

Selma said nothing, and instead, placed a sweaty palm on my stomach. *Good*, I thought, *she is nervous too*. I turned to face her, and she began kissing me. Her waist seemed to be the one thing that anchored me to a reality that felt like air, there but not, visible, but not. So I held onto her waist

for dear life, and she slid a smooth, warm thigh between my own and pressed herself against me. Somewhere in between kissing and touching, both our bras had come off and the straps were making a kind of net that was trapping our arms. Giggling, we sat up to take off our bras, and slid back into the bed. Carefully, I cupped her breast, and squeezed it, firmly enough to feel her nipple harden on my palm, but softly enough not to hurt her. Just how my mother had taught me to check for ripe pawpaws and mangoes at the market. Selma let out a sound, and buried her face in my pillow, smudging her make-up. Was she enjoying this? I had so many questions. I wanted to ask her whether she could hear her heart in her head as well, and whether she'd done this before.

"Are you left handed or right handed?" she whispered suddenly.

"Right handed," I whispered back quickly.

She took the middle finger of my right hand into her mouth and sucked it. At that point I was sure that my organs were going to fail and that I was about to die. She sucked my finger, and let go of my hand. It didn't feel like a part of my body anymore. I looked at my hand as if a foreign object had been plastered onto me. I must have made a sound, because then Selma covered my mouth and whispered a harsh shhh. Three short knocks were heard on my door, and a voice shouted my name. We both started. Then lay as still and as quiet as we could.

"Nelao! I need to borrow your hotplate!"

Shit. No. Okay. Shit. It was Valeria from downstairs, and I knew in a few minutes she was going to call me. She had been borrowing my hotplate for a month now, and it didn't bother me at all. Until this very moment. As quietly as possible I reached out for my jeans and found my phone. I put it on silent just as Valeria's name flashed on my screen. I lay back down with Selma and we covered ourselves, trying not to laugh out loud. After three or so minutes we heard Valeria's heavy

footsteps retreating down the corridor, and then down the stairs. We let out sighs of relief and allowed laughter back into the room.

Selma looked at me and smiled, then climbed off the bed and began to dress. I wanted to ask her to get back into the bed and tell me what to do with the middle finger of my right hand. But I couldn't. She dressed slowly, carefully, making sure that nothing was out of place.

"No chance that you have mascara or eyeliner, do you?" she asked.

"No, sorry." I breathed.

She unsmudged her eye-make up with some saliva and the corner of my towel leaving a black stain.

"I have to go now. I'll see you in class tomorrow." She looked down on me, lying with my breasts bare in bed. She casually ran her hand across my chest, grazing my left nipple the way you would a sculpture at a garden somewhere. I wanted to beg her to stay, ask her to come back into the bed and, do something. Anything. Nothing. Instead, I spoke.

"Ok. You know, this doesn't make me a lesbian, right? This doesn't prove anything." I said, trying to connect the dots of this experience to come up with an image I could understand.

"No it doesn't. That wasn't the point. Come lock your door." Selma turned the key and held the door slightly open.

I sat up and leaned against the cool wall behind me."What about the book?" I asked.

"I'll come by tomorrow sometime and we can try and find it again."

Claire

"Akinyi, please don't. Please." Her voice is small. She's whispering. She's begging. But Akinyi can't hear her, won't hear her, and just like that she's gone, disappeared, dissolved like a pack of Eno in water, leaving Claire clutching the foam of effervescence, which is really just air, and wind, and water. The nightmare turns into a dream again. She and Akinyi, driving down Uhuru Highway in the middle of the night, again and again. Akinyi laughing, so loud, with tears in her eyes, gasping for air, clutching her chest, crying tears of joy. A joke Claire cannot remember. Brown skin in a white dress, like a wedding day, the closing credits of a romantic movie. And they lived happily ever after- the end. The dream is a nightmare again, "Akinyi please, come back. Please don't." Claire is talking to nothing, the vast nothingness of sad. She's talking to herself, because Akinyi is gone, and she's not coming back.

Is it supposed to be showing at three months?

Claire isn't sure, so she she quickly Googles 'pregnancy progression' while her boss is busy with Mr. Kunal. Her search materialises a white woman, with big teeth and dark hair standing, back straight, thin thighs and long legs, lovingly watching her reflection in a mirror, modelling what a three-month pregnancy is supposed to look like. It looks like nothing. It looks like the 'after' photo for a weight-loss program. It looks like the woman just had breakfast and is standing in front of the mirror to see how the two grapes and a pear she ate are digesting. Claire looks down at her own bulging belly, noticing the protrusion of her navel showing through her shirt. Also, a button has come undone.

I wasn't this big this morning, was I? Shit. Does that mean that I'm more than three months along?Shit.

Claire tries to remember the date, the day, the moment. She can't, or maybe she doesn't want to. Instead, she starts to wish that she was one of those women who kept track of their period and all manner of body changes, like her friend Alice, who knows every month, sometimes down to the hour, when her period is coming.

They'd be out at Toi Market when Alice would stop mid sock-hunt, wrinkle her nose, sniff the air like a dog and declare that her period was on its way, that by the time she had made it home that evening, she'd be bleeding. Claire found it fascinating, that anyone could know their body so well. The few times she'd tried to predict her own period, she'd failed. It surprised her every month, shocked her sometimes. Her body didn't do those things that other bodies did, sensitive nipples and nausea and cramps. Her period showed up like relatives, suddenly, without warning, and sticking around longer than they needed to.

She minimises the grape-sized pregnancy woman and Googles 'pregnancy flatulence'. Another white woman shows up, this one rounder and clearly pregnant, holding her belly and smiling. *Why are all these women so happy?* She also doesn't look flatulent, or bloated. She looks pregnant and smiling. But the search reveals that pregnancy flatulence is a thing. She'd also had beans for dinner which aren't helping much.

"Claire," Mr. Singh, her boss, pokes his head from behind the door, his voice muffled by the surgical mask he is wearing.

"Yes?" she says looking up and minimising her Google search windows.

"Please book in Mr. Kunal for a check up next week Friday?" he disappears back into the consultation room.

"Sure." She pulls up an spreadsheet and puts in Mr. Kunal's details, who, for a young man, has the worst dental luck she's seen in the three years she's worked there. At least four times a year he comes in to have a tooth replaced, or filled, or filed, or cleaned. He never leaves with a smile, and is never gone long enough to come back with one.

She feels something in her gut shift, and slowly lifts her left buttock and lets out a high pitched whistle of a fart. Just then the dentist ushers Mr. Kunal out of the consultation room, one mouth still wearing the surgical mask and the other one full of bloody cotton wool. Claire first settles her bottom on the chair, interrupting her fart, then nods bye to Mr. Kunal who looks at her the way people look at those who cut queues at supermarkets and banks: angry and powerless, seemingly envious of her full set of healthy teeth. But Claire knows this as his face, sour, angry and often in pain.

Mr. Singh takes off his mask and asks Claire when the next appointment is. The smell of Claire's fart lingers in the air and they exchange a look. Mr. Singh fidgets uncomfortably and Claire fills this awkward space with information.

"At three o'clock, Mrs. Kibet is coming in."

"Remind me again?" Mr. Singh asks, trying to remember his patients.

She hates how they make her call everyone Mr or Mrs or Miss.

Claire stands up to go to the filing cabinet, buttocks clenched shut, trapping her unfinished fart.

"Mrs. Kibet came in two weeks ago for a cleaning and a filling and is coming to get the rest of the job done." She is lying, but Mr. Singh isn't listening.

He mumbles, says okay and returns to his consultation room. Relieved, Claire relaxes her buttock muscles. The fart has retreated back into her body, something that used to fascinate her. After holding one too many farts in school and church and around lovers and friends, she'd sing along to the Whitney Houston classic, only she'd ask loudly, *Where do broken farts go*?

"You're what? Where?" Patricia asks her during lunch, looking Claire over with a smirk.

"Pregnant," Claire says, taking a bite of her chapati. It tastes old. Like it was made with the same oil Kenchick uses to deep fry their chips. It tastes as though the oil and salt and water are

coming apart in her mouth and she can taste them separately. She knows that this is all part of her situation, and so she says nothing more about the pregnancy to Patricia.

"But I am also bloated, which is why I look bigger today." Patricia didn't need to know that.

"No you're not! How?" Patricia laughs. "I know you're a bit conscious about the weight you've put on over the last few months, but it's understandable you know. After everything…" She lets her voice trail off, not wanting to finish that sentence.

"Well…" Claire hesitates. "I just am."

"You're what?"

"Pregnant." Claire says this as seriously as she can.

Patricia laughs.

"Is it some kind of immaculate conception? We all know Jesus wouldn't pick you for His second coming. Come now, what did you really want to talk about?" Patricia helps herself to a corner of Claire's chapati.

Big Square in Karen is buzzing. The lunch crowd is mostly young adults, crop tops and big hair, loud music from cars and matatus alike, and street vendors. The dry, dusty air has coloured everything brown. The buildings are brown and so are the cars. The world looks sepia. Claire and Patricia meet at the stairs at Big Square everyday to have lunch. Except when it rains, then they meet up at either one's office.

"You're the only one who knows Patricia. I'm serious." Claire tries again.

"You're seriously playing games, that's what." Patricia is now eating more of Claire's chapati than her own fruit salad.

"I'm not. I am pregnant."

"Okay, okay, you're pregnant." Patricia isn't listening. "Who's the daddy?" she asks then laughs.

Claire is quiet. Her eyes follow the fruit vendor, his wheelbarrow full of apples and oranges imported from South Africa and a jerry can of water for washing them. The South African oranges are always shinier, rounder, perfect like the oranges in books and movies. Kenyan oranges are mis-shapen and scarred. Kenyan oranges aren't even orange. Claire had seen, some years back a What-sApp clip showed a picture of a suspicious looking man scraping wax off these 'imported apples', followed by long text, with many typos, declaring these apples carcinogenic. We ate them anyway, cancer or not. When you want an apple you want an apple. Two nuns approach the wheelbarrow of fruit and each buy an orange and an apple. The vendor washes the fruits with water from the jerry can and hands them over to the women. No words are exchanged, not even an inquiry into the price of the fruits. The nuns walk away, a warm breeze lifting their habits like ship sails. Claire suddenly craves pineapples.

"It's complicated," the words are said out loud like a statement, the way you hang a picture up and step back to check wether it's crooked or not. Claire knows it's not complicated, but she sees how it could be seen as so.

"Isn't it always?" Patricia winks. She's eaten both hers and Claire's lunches and is picking her teeth with an unbent paperclip.

"Your life is *always* complicated." She rolls her eyes as she says 'always'. "I mean. That thing with Akinyi…" her voice trails off again and she is back at picking her teeth.

Claire says nothing.

"I have to go back to work. Am I seeing you over the weekend? At The Meeting?"

"Yes, I'll be there." Claire realises that she's still hungry, with no lunch left.

The doctor's appointment is also her first pre-natal check up. Dr. Wambugu's practice is a thirty minute walk from the dentist's office. On a cool day, and un-pregnant, it takes Claire less than thirty minutes to walk to her family doctor. But in the middle of December with the sun beating down on

her head and not a tree in sight, the walk feels like a day in the life of Israelites wandering around the Sinai desert, lost and praying for rain. The walk takes forty minutes.

Claire arrives fifteen minutes early for her doctor's appointment, with large wet patches all over her shirt, and between her thighs. She can smell her sweat pushing past the deodorant and cheap perfume, creating its own scent. She read somewhere that at some point pregnant women begin to piss involuntarily. She is suspicious of the moisture in her pants. She tries to remember if this was before or after they'd had children? She doesn't know.

The doctor's waiting room has three other women, all in various stages of pregnancy, waiting. They look up and watch Claire walk in and sit down. None of them seems to want to be seen to be staring, but their sudden averted looks are as telling as a direct stare would have been. Claire smiles uncomfortably, makes no eye contact and sits down on a chair nearest to the fan. Directly across from Claire, on the opposite side of the room sits the most pregnant woman she has seen up close. She sits with her legs spread in a red and green tie-dyed dhera. Everything on this woman is swollen. Large breasts sit on a larger belly and large feet rest on top of large slippers. You can hear each breath she's taking: a deep inhale, the expansion of her belly, the rise of her breasts, the flare of her nostrils, and a deep exhale, reversing the ripple effect of the inhale. She looks uncomfortable. She looks unhappy. She looks defeated sitting there with her swollen feet, and maybe growing three humans. She has to be carrying more than one child, and they all must be turning two years old inside her. The woman's head is leaning against the wall, her eyes staring at the ceiling. Large sweat patches cradle her breasts and sweat beads descend slowly down her face. The other two women wear their pregnancies a lot easier. Both wear modern maternity dresses, figure hugging and floral. One woman keeps caressing her belly, smiling to herself, pleased at something, carefully carrying this egg, after maybe breaking a few before it. The other one pretends to flip through a magazine and checks her watch too often. She has better things to do or other places to be. This is probably her fourth child, she has a PhD in pregnancy and childbirth and being around these amateurs is up-

setting her. Claire pretends to study the pot plant in the corner, squinting at the leaves and trying to decide whether they are real or fake. One after the other, the women are called in by the receptionist cum nurse, including the swollen woman, who needs to be helped up and takes nearly ten minutes to shuffle into the doctor's office. Claire waits her turn, thankful that none of them is feeling chatty or genial.

"Hi Claire, it's been a while." A tired Dr. Wambugu greets.

Claire smiles and watches the doctor scribble something she can't read. He looks old, older actually, and really tired.

"Yeah I know. Isn't that a good thing?" she jokes.

"It is, it really is. So, what misfortune brings you here?"

Dr. Wambugu is her family doctor. He treated the first malaria infection that nearly killed her. Every other one she'd survived with Malariaquin from the pharmacy. He treated her when her appendix burst in high school and she nearly died. He treated her after the car accident in university that broke her friend Wanja's leg and nearly killed Claire. Dr. Wambugu is a repeat performer in the play called *The Near Death of Claire*, and now, after nearly four years of not seeing him, Claire wonders whether this too is a matter of life and death and whether Dr. Wambugu can save her again.

She fidgets and scratches the back of her head.

"Claire? What's going on?"

"I need a check up, I haven't been feeling well." Claire says, her foot tapping against the leg of her chair.

"Ok. What's feeling bad?" He readies his pen to scribble something. It's one of those pens that make clicking sounds when the nib is retracted. He clicks the pen twice, and draws a circle on the corner of his desk calendar. The circle joins a family of many other circles he's been collecting on his desk from unsure patients taking too long to respond to his questions.

“My stomach.” Claire avoids his eyes. Her stomach turns. Or maybe her womb. *Isn’t it too soon for babies to be kicking and turning and such?* She doesn’t know, so she sticks with stomach and hopes that it’s the flatulence.

“Is it the ulcer? Is the pain back?” He scribbles. It looks like he is drawing waves on a choppy sea.

“No, not the ulcer.” She has forgotten that she has an ulcer.

Dr. Wambugu is tired of drawing circles.“Ok. Let’s examine you first then I will ask you a few more questions and we take it from there.” He stands up and waves Claire onto the examination table. She untucks her shirt, takes off her shoes and lies flat. The ceiling has a small mural of a jungle scene with baby jungle animals.

“I know how nervous this makes you Claire, please bear with me.”

She searches for a distraction. Above her, a baby monkey, big bright eyes and pink tongue, is hanging off a branch that is floating in thin air. A baby lion and a baby gazelle are nuzzling, the way all animals seem to get along in paradise in those Watchtower magazines distributed by Jehovah’s Witnesses. There are non-jungle indigenous animals in this jungle. Claire spots a baby kangaroo and a baby polar bear before a sharp pain pulls her eyes shut, and away from the petite mural. He has pressed down hard on her abdomen, in response to which Claire flinches and lets out a short moan. She shoots him a look. Unfazed, the doctor continues examining Claire. Some minutes later and no telling expression on his face, he sits down and motions for Claire to join him at his desk.

“There’s definitely something going on with your abdomen, but the rest of you seems fine. Your blood pressure is okay, and so is your temperature.”

Claire looks at her hands. The cut on her left thumb is healing well.

“Tell me about the pain? How long has it been there?”

She looks at the lamp on his desk.

“It only hurt just now when you pressed down on my tummy.” She avoids looking at him. She hates how she says tummy like she’s a little girl again. “Abdomen.” She says out loud. Righting an invisible wrong.

Dr. Wambugu takes off his glasses and massages his temples.“How’s your period?”

“Doc…” Claire starts. “I think I’m pregnant.” The words leave her mouth like a train arriving too fast at a station and unable to stop.

Dr. Wambugu takes a deep breath and frowns. A half puzzled, half amused look crosses his face. After maybe five minutes of silence, he laughs, loud, the way we laugh at politicians’ promises.

“I needed a good laugh. Thank you.”

It’s Claire’s turn to look puzzled.

“I’d forgotten how much of a joker you can be sometimes. Okay, I’m going to ask to test your urine and stool, and see if there are any urinary tract infections that show up, then we take it from there.” He resumes drawing waves, bigger and more fierce on Claire’s file. He pulls out a prescription pad from his drawer and pauses to ask Claire whether she needs some pain medication to tide her over until the lab results are in.

“But Doc, I don’t think I should take any medication that can affect the…the pregnancy.” She says, this time looking into Dr. Wambugu’s eyes and not fidgeting. “I really am pregnant Doc. I took a home pregnancy test and I passed. Or failed. I never know how to say that sentence; is it a pass if you’re not pregnant or a fail if you are? I don’t know. All I know is that I’m pregnant.” Her joke isn’t funny and Dr. Wambugu isn’t smiling.

He opens a drawer and pulls out two latex gloves and a small white tub with a number of pregnancy tests in it. He hands this and a test strip to Claire.

“I imagine you know the procedure?” he asks, looking at Claire over his glasses. He looks worried.

"I do." She stands up and heads towards the bathroom across from the waiting room. She's glad there's no one in there to watch her go collect her urine.

The doctor opens his door, "When you're done, put the test stick in the sample and leave it there. Okay?" Claire nods.

"Who did this to you? Who?" her mother is furious. Her mother is angry. She is pacing up and down the living room. "Who!" she's shouting now.

"Shhh." Claire pleads. "I did it to myself Mama, honestly."

"But why? How? Isn't IVF expensive? But why would you do this, right now. The thing with Akinyi is still so fresh. Claire, what is going on?"

Her voice softens when she looks at her daughter sitting with her legs crossed, and a small baby bump protruding. Amina knows she's seeing more than she needs to. Claire has always been a round child. She's not sure if she would have noticed the bump without Claire's confession. But Claire says so, she has even brought along a letter from Dr. Wambugu saying as much. She's pregnant. But somehow, she seems…calm.

"Claire…what is going on here?" she asks again, softer, calmer, searching her daughter's face for answers she knows won't come.

"I'm pregnant, that's all. I want to have a baby." She had this conversation with herself over and over again for weeks, months in fact. And until now, she couldn't bring herself to admit that underneath the complexity that her pregnancy brings, this is what she really wants. She's wanted this for a while, but it was more complicated then, and after Akinyi, she doesn't really care anymore.

"How far along?" her mother asks the clock on the wall.

“Dr. Wambugu reckons it’s four months along now. I think it has fingernails. And a tail.” She offers this information to let her mother know that she’s present. That she knows what she’s doing.

A deep sigh. Her mother stands up and goes to the kitchen.

Claire looks at the family pictures hanging on the walls, and various certificates from so many trainings that her mother has attended over the years. Her favourite is the picture of her and her younger sister Cathy, wearing their mother’s dresses, and shoes, everything too big, except their smiles, which are the only things not out of place in the image. She misses Cathy. She should call her small sister and ask her what she’s up to. She is always getting into some kind of shit that turns out to be funny or silly.

Amina returns with a tray, two cups, a bowl of sugar and Thermos flask of tea. She pours Claire a cup first, then herself. Black tea, strong, with no sugar. They sit and sip tea for a long while, in silence, both of them looking at the pictures on the wall.

Amina puts her cup down, and turns to face her daughter.

“Well. It seems you have decided that this is happening. I don’t understand. I also don’t know how to ask you questions about this at all. I don’t know if you’ll be safe Claire. I honestly don’t. It’s taken years for people to understand you. And be okay with you. But this, this will just create issues that I don’t know I can deal with. Maybe…,” she pauses, her voice cracking, “Maybe you should go stay with Senge Maria for a while.” She slumps in her chair like a deflated balloon, back at watching the clock, trying not to cry.

“But I have a job, that I have to do so that I can support the child.” Claire knows this is not what her mother wants to hear. But she’s not sure what to say to her. She knew that this news was going to be shocking, but she's past every point of no return she can think of.

“Claire,” her mother’s spine is back, her voice an old brick house in a hurricane, refusing to move. “This is not about that. And you know this. You know this!” She’s about to start shouting again.

“Mama, I know. What do you want me to say?” Claire is well aware that this is unfair to nearly everyone she knows, but she’s here now, a rudderless boat in a rough sea. All she can do is hang on for dear life and hope that there are no rocks hidden in the waves.

“Nothing. There’s nothing you can say. It’s done. Think about going to stay with Senge Maria. No one knows you there. You can live quietly and deliver the baby there and return when you’re healed and the baby is a bit older. Then we can tell people…” she doesn’t know what to tell people. She’s thinking, while watching the second hand of the clock. Tick. Tock. “We can tell everyone that you adopted the baby!” It’s brilliant. It’s a brainwave. She’s solved this problem. This immoveable something just shifted slightly to the left.

“And where will you tell people I went? For the I don’t-know-how-many months I’m supposed to go hide in Senge’s house?” Claire asks. She’s provoking her mother, poking holes in her plan.

“I don’t care. People go away all the time, did anyone ask where Mama Kamau’s child went to for nearly three years? No one asked.” She’s decided.

“I’ll think about it.” Claire says.

“What’s there to think about?” Amina turns to face Claire, eyes replaced with fire-balls that burn into her. Claire wants to remind her mother that she has a whole life here, a house that used be a home when Akinyi lived there. That she has a job, not the best job out there, but a job nonetheless, and friends and places to go and things to do. Claire doesn’t want to have to move away just because she’s pregnant and it will make people uncomfortable. But she knows, and agrees, that this is a big deal.

Claire wants to skip this Meeting. She is so tired, all the time. Her belly juts out a bit more, and tucking in her shirts is becoming less possible. Untucked, she can get away with saying she's gained weight. But not for long. People aren't fools, and certainly not the gropey group of queers that she hangs out with. The Meeting also reminds her too much of Akinyi, but she'd promised Patricia, and so she must go. Patricia is a nag of note, but also her best friend, so Claire has to go to the Meetings, if for nothing else other than to stop her friend from fighting with her.

Claire picks a big shirt, an African print one with silver embroidery around the neck. She looks like she's going to a wedding, a really bad wedding. She practices in front of the mirror how to fake a flu. She can't, she looks healthy. She decides to sniff some pepper on her way out of the house, which works, sending her into a fit of sneezing, tearing eyes and a runny nose. This way, she can tell people at the meeting to keep away from her and she can also blame the flu for her really bad dress sense.

"Juice?! Why the *fuck* would you bring juice without gin to the Meeting? This is *not* Bible study!" Patricia is not happy to see Claire, her shirt and the juice. This also isn't the time to remind Patricia that it's her turn to bring the gin.

"I forgot, this flu."

"Whatever, it's okay, Martha is bringing wine, and I'm sure the others will come prepared." Claire is forgiven. "That flu of yours looks nasty. Please stay away from me. I have a date in two days."

The pepper is working. The sneezing has stopped, but Claire thinks maybe she looks worse than she feels. One by one, always alone, people show up for the Meeting, greeting each other and catching up. Someone calls everyone into the small, colourful room, and the Meeting begins. Everyone goes around saying hi, sharing about their week, or just introducing themselves. Some inside jokes are shared, and other odd stories. There's no topic for the week, so people pipe up from

all corners of the room, telling stories of street harassment, embarrassing sexual encounters and cheating. Claire remembers why she needed gin for these meetings. Patricia invites her outside for a smoke and Claire says no thanks, you know, the flu. Patricia shrugs and disappears into the messy garden at the back of Mano's house where the Meeting is usually held. Two hours later and nearly everyone but Claire is drunk. The conversation has now become about queer women turncoats, who decide suddenly that they're straight.

"Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!" Patricia shouts from across the room, pointing a finger at Claire. "That one, thinking I'm an idiot, tells me she's pregnant." She can hardly finish the sentence without screaming out in laughter.

She's beside herself. And so is Claire, but for a different reason. Sweating now, almost scared, worst of all, sober. Claire shoots arrows out of her eyes at Patricia. The room joins Patricia, laughing and glancing at Claire.

"The biggest dyke I know, who can't even imagine what a dick looks like, is pregnant, please."

Claire smiles, grins like an emoji, her eyes still bows shooting arrows.

"Gosh I can't stand women that say they're queer then go off and fuck guys, like what the fuck?" Someone she doesn't know throws in her two cents.

"I know right? Like, oh my god, imagine someone as butch as Claire having sex with a guy?"

There's a collective shudder in the room, and the sad shaking of heads.

"I mean, if you say you're bi that's one thing, but if you say you're a lesbian, why would you do that?"

Another shudder in the room.

Claire needs to go out, she needs to leave the room, she's too sober for this. She tries to remember, wading through her memories of meetings past, whether this is what her drunk self might

have slurred at some point. She must have. Why would everyone agree so easily on something that maybe one of them would do one day? Is that why Melissa has stopped coming to Meetings? But they are all drunk, Claire tries to rationalise, drunk people talk so much shit. They're now talking about something else, and she's relieved. Patricia is slurring and swaying more now, making eyes at someone across the room. Claire glances at the rainbow-coloured clock and watches the second hand tick. She really should have stayed home.

Pregnancy sucks. Clothes don't fit, and the ones that do are so uncomfortable. Claire decides that maybe it's time to wear oversize everything. Oversize trousers and t-shirts. Maybe even surrender to the dhera trend sweeping the country. They do look breezy, but the cold doesn't allow her to dress down like this. And this sudden taking to dresses would need explaining. Maybe she should become a recluse, hide away, disappear to another place, and be pregnant in peace. She can't wear a dhera to work, she can't wear one and not have to explain herself to Patricia. She would have to explain so much to everyone and she doesn't want to. But she knows that she has to at some point. Claire looks at her body in the mirror and sighs. Everything is bigger. She's thankful for her small breasts, but even her small breasts are full now. She's seven months into the pregnancy and tired of everything. Her mother and Aunty Marion have come around, and she feels held. She never moved to the village with Senge in the end, but she's glad that she can call on her mother and aunt. On a particularly cold day, Claire considers moving back home, just so that she can have someone to make her cups of tea and maybe even rub her swollen feet. She needs company. She wasn't supposed to do this alone, but she's here now. Claire throws on the biggest shirt she owns, which she's wearing for the second time this week, and a pair of maternity trousers. She calls a Taxify to take her to work because she's both tired of the commute and tired of the stairs. People don't know what to say, and so they say nothing. Chatty shopkeepers and flirty touts now move out of the way of the confusion that Claire's body has become.

She looks pregnant, there's no doubt about that, but everybody wants to ask *but how*? Not even nosy, chatty Patricia dare ask her this question. Claire is pushing boundaries that people didn't know existed, and no one has the language to form good enough questions to get good enough answers. And so Claire, for the first time in her life, feels her otherness in her everyday, and it's exhausting. Her bosses know she's pregnant, but they don't care. They just need her to work. Thankfully Claire spends her days sat behind a desk so her confusing appearance isn't offensive to anyone. In two months she'll apply for maternity leave and find a cave to hide in.

The nesting urge hits her hard a few weeks later, and the cocktail of hormones that her body and growing baby are feeding her, comes at her worse than the weed she smoked that one time in Naivasha. Claire cries at the drop of a hat, or has fits of hysterical laughter at times when it makes no sense to be laughing. But she experiences all this alone because she has slowly shut out all her friends and family. Patricia finally (albeit reluctantly) accepts that her friend is pregnant, but decides that she is also a bore and a buzzkill. Once or twice a week she calls Claire to find out how she is doing, but that is the full extent of her interest in Claire's life. No one organises a baby shower, but her mother and sister occasionally drop off some baby things and food for her. It isn't much, but it is all the attention that Claire can handle at this time.

In the silence of her house, while folding and unfolding tiny baby socks, she has conversations with Akinyi, and imagines what it would be like if she were still her partner and housemate. She imagines that Akinyi would be the pregnant one, and that she would breeze through this like she did nearly everything else. That they'd have a baby girl and fight over what to name her. These conversations with Akinyi make her cry, and laugh and ask herself if she is doing the right thing. She wishes there is a way to reach out, but she can't. Sometimes, it is just too late.

Claire wonders what this child will look like. Whether it will be a boy or a girl. Whether it will remind her of herself. Whether it will be queer. She has unanswerable questions for non-exis-

tent teachers, and time, she realises, is the only thing able to answer her questions. She often wonders whether this child will be like him.

"Alex?" Claire asked the static on the line. "Alecki?" She asked again.

There was a distorted response, and the sound of garbled words that Claire could not make out. She hung up and called again.

"Sema. Hi."

"Hi. How are you?" Claire carefully asked. She wanted something from this man that no other man in his right mind would give her.

"I'm good Cece." He threw in the familiar pet name as a warning. Alex was saying *I know you Claire, so cut the bullshit and get straight to the point.*

"I need a huge favour Alex. The biggest favour I will ever ask you."

There was silence on the other side as Alex waited for Claire's question.

"Bigger than the flowers?" Alex asked.

The flowers? What flowers? Claire was confused for a second and then remembered. The flowers. The wreath she had Alex deliver to Akinyi's family for the funeral. The funeral she couldn't bring herself to attend. The unsaid goodbye. Oh. That. That was a huge ask, but this, was much bigger.

"Alex this is bigger. Much." She said softly. "But can we have coffee, a drink, smoke some shisha and then I can ask you to your face?"

"You just want to make it hard for me to say no." They both knew that Claire rarely asked anyone for anything, but when she did, it was hard to say no. "Okay. Tomorrow? J's in Karen?" he asked.

"Perfect Alex, thanks!" Claire hung up.

“You need what?!” The shock in Alex’s voice startled some of the other patrons who turned to roll their eyes at Claire and him. “You need what?” He asked again, this time softer and leaning in.

“I need some sperm.” Claire said again, and bit into a mandazi. She knew there was no nice way to ask Alex for this, and so she came out and said it.

“So?” Claire asked, sipping her tea.

“So what Cece? What the hell?”

“I don’t know how else to put this. I need sperm, and you’re the only person I know that might even consider giving me some.”

“What the fuck for Claire?”

“What do you think for, *Alex*?” She said his name with a mocking lilt and smiled. Only his family called him that, everyone else calls him Alecki.

“So, is the sperm for someone else ama?”

Claire paused. Until this point, she had made clear decisions. One of the decisions was that she wanted a baby. That she needed Alex’s sperm to father this baby. But she hadn’t decided whether her body was going to grow this child.

“Cece? Are you okay?” Alex asked. It had been nearly a year since Akinyi, and Claire knew that a lot of his concern came from worry over whether she had healed. Sometimes the living need to get on with living, and for Claire, this baby was that.

“I’m fine. I’m more than fine. The sperm is for me. I’ll be growing the baby.” The language around pregnancy and child rearing that she was using sounded like a farmer breeding cattle. Being pregnant, having a child, had never been a possibility for her, not even the possibility of adoption had crossed her mind. But now, it was, and had quickly become the only option. Claire wanted a baby, and she wanted to carry it herself.

Alex wiped a tear from his eye. He had been laughing and laughing hard.

“You? No way. Do you even have a womb?”

It was insensitive but Claire knew that he meant it in jest so she let it pass.

“Okay. Okay.” Alex composed himself. “Okay, cool. You can have my sperm. But how are you going to knock yourself up?” he asked, raising a brow and sipping his beer.

“I’ll figure it out. There’s that turkey baster thing I’ve heard people use.” Claire had no idea. None. Her temporary confidence was being carried by too many episodes of The L Word, but there was the internet and the internet was full of answers. She would find out. She just needed Alex to be on her side for this one.

“Once I figure it out, will you give me the sperm?” She needed a firm answer.

“Sure.” Alex shrugged. He didn’t think Claire was going to go ahead with it, and she could tell from his slumped shoulders and lazy smile. “Just say when.”

“Cool.”

“Cool.” They smiled. “Are we smoking shisha or what?”

“Yeah sure,” Claire said and called for the waiter.

The internet was no help. Everything that was offered as a solution to a DIY home insemination process Claire couldn’t do. It took her three weeks to find a turkey baster, which cost nearly two thousand shillings at the fancy homeware store at The Junction. But there were all these other things. With a turkey baster and Alex in the same room, there was the risk of infection, and only a thirty five percent chance of getting pregnant. There were home insemination kits available but Claire would have to buy them online which she couldn’t afford. Her plan was falling apart pretty fast, without the money and tools to do it right. Unless. Unless she did this the traditional way, which was daunting to her. She asked herself daily how badly she wanted this baby. Pretty badly she decided. This was something she had to do.

A joint, a bottle of rum and an ecstasy pill were laid out on her kitchen table when Alex arrived.

"Hey," Alex greeted, putting down his own bottle of rum. "Great minds I see." He nodded towards Claire's bottle. They both laughed.

"Are you hungry? I have some left over githeri in the fridge if you'd like." Claire offered food.

"No, thanks, I passed by Mama Boi's on my way here. I'm good." It was suddenly awkward, very awkward.

"Drink?" Claire asked.

"Sure."

Claire poured two servings of rum with some ice and offered one to Alex.

"So…"

Silence rushed into the small kitchen and they both sipped their drinks while thinking of what to say next.

"Let's watch some tv," Claire suggested.

Alex followed her into the living room and they sat on the couch watching nothing.

"Okay, how's this going to work?" Alex finally asked, in the middle of a news story about a goat that was found with human features in a village somewhere in Busia.

"Well. See how I'd told you about the turkey baster thing?"

"Yeah."

"So, we're not going to do that." The silence that was filling up the kitchen leaked into the living room and sat down between them.

"Oh yeah?" Claire could see that Alex was prodding her to go into detail about what was going to happen. Claire didn't want to.

"Yeah. We will have to…take a more…traditional approach."

The tv newscaster was now reading the business news. The price of cotton was not doing well, but coffee and tea were doing okay.

"I need another drink." Alex got up and went to the kitchen.

"Please just bring the whole bottle with you?"

Claire imagined that this must be hard for her friend. She was practically a brother to him, despite being a girl and everything. But sex with him had never been anything she has ever imagined. Whether with Alex or any other man. Claire didn't know how to make this easier for him. She hoped that alcohol would do this for her.

"Alex!" Claire called from the living room. He went back to the living room with a bottle of rum and sat down next to her.

"Were you thinking of running away?" Claire giggled.

Alex laughed. "Yeah, I mean…It crossed my mind."

"Me too, but I live here so it's not like I can go anywhere." The rum had squeezed some of the silence out of the room, and they both relaxed.

"So we're going to have sex?" Alex wanted it to be clear.

"Yes." Claire says.

"Have you ever…with a man?" Alex was curious.

"No. But Iv'e watched porn so. I know what goes where."

They both giggled nervously.

"It's basically like legos, right?" Claire asked. And then they both laughed.

A bottle and a half of rum later with Alex slightly more drunk than Claire, they attempt a conversation about the finer details of this once-off transaction. Should we kiss? Alex asks, and Claire says no. I think you should get a hard on and just do it, she says. She imagines that all she needs is for him to ejaculate inside her, but it's not that simple, and Alex has a hard time getting an erection. Claire decides that they will have to have regular sex and she shows Alex to the bedroom.

The lighting is dim enough for them not to have to make any eye contact. But in the semi-darkness of a night with a full moon, they do look at each other.

"This is hard." Claire says, and Alex nods yes.

It takes an hour for them to touch, and another hour for them to move their bodies in ways that allow them to feel comfortable enough to lie with each other. Claire has never been penetrated by anything, not even a tampon. She tries to imagine Alex with breasts, with the softness of women that she's used to. But it's impossible, she can't find anything familiar in Alex's body to give her comfort. But then she imagines herself pregnant, growing life, becoming something other than the lesbian in the neighbourhood, more than the woman who killed her lover. Claire then imagines Akinyi's pride, beaming at her from across anywhere, telling her she's done well. Claire allows Alex inside her, and a familiar pleasure from an unfamiliar body emerges, and she shuts her eyes and tries to travel away from this moment. Alex seems to have forgotten that this is Claire, and is lost in the sensation of flesh on flesh, of bodies on bodies. He groans a guttural sound, as if someone punched him, and convulses briefly on top of Claire. He's done. It's done. Alex rolls off Claire as she crosses her legs and lifts them up. In the clearing fog of his orgasm, Alex looks at Claire and she's not his buddy or sister or brother. She's a woman, naked and soft and hoping for anything to fill the vast emptiness inside her. He wants to touch her, but knows not to. They lie like this for a long while, before Alex gets up to dress and leave. It's four thirty in the morning, and Claire is fast asleep with her legs still folded to her chest.

The little baby is asleep on the corner of the couch when Patricia visits. The house is deathly quiet, except from outside sounds that carry into Claire's small living room.

"You really were pregnant Claire." Patricia looks at the little sleeping bundle in disbelief. "I thought it was a phantom thing, like a fake pregnancy." She says, not taking her eyes away from the child. "She looks just like you Claire."

All Claire can do is smile at her friend and her child in turn. She has ran out of words and all she has now are wordless feelings.

“What’s her name?” Patricia asks.

“Akinyi,” Claire says.

A knowing dawns on Patricia’s face as she fights back tears. “Oh Claire. You know it was an accident. It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have seen that other car if you tried. You can’t punish yourself for the accident forever.” Patricia’s heart is breaking and Claire doesn’t know why.

“I know all that. But look, I did it. I brought her back. I brought Akinyi back to me.” Claire smiles.

Patricia puts down the loaf of bread and litre of milk she’d brought her friend. She still doesn’t understand, but she hugs her friend and says, yes you did Claire. Yes you did.

Guku

"Get me the album."

And then silence.

Maybe she was asleep again. I waited two minutes before I stood up and pretended to head down the dark corridor to her room at the end of the small house. Instead, I stood five feet away, watching her. Guku's scarfed head was resting tilted to the left, and a small stream of drool was slowly descending down her plain blue, cotton dress, turning the parts it touched a light navy. Her tiny chest heaved as in deep sleep.

Suddenly, she slurped up a bead of drool on its way down and opened her grey eyes, small with cataracts, and snapped, "Well! Where is it?"

But Guku you can't see, I wanted to say. But I knew better than to tell her what she could and could not do. Truth was, we *all* assumed that she couldn't see, because of the grey cataracts that covered her once brown eyes. But what did we know? What was sight anyway? Blind people saw with their hands, and skin and noses. So maybe Guku could see, maybe she couldn't, but I still had to get her the album.

Halfway down the corridor, "Which album Guku?" I asked loudly.

"The red one! And stop shouting! You will wake the baby!" She was the one shouting, but again, in her house, that was relative.

I walked down the corridor, my blue Bata slippers making slapping sounds against the smooth polished red of her cold concrete floor. I remembered some years back, when my mother had attempted to tile Guku's house, with left-over tiles from a small flat she had built at the back of the house in Syokimau.

No! Guku had shouted while trying to make tea in the kitchen. *Absolutely not!* Pouring tea leaves into the sufuria and missing entirely. *There is nothing wrong with this house.* Stirring the

aluminium pot that only had warm water. *If you want to do something, you can re-paint my floor red.* Still stirring. *Your father built this house with his bare hands and I won't let you come ruin his hard work with fancy things like tiles and whatnot.* Reaching for a cup and missing.

The house, the hard work of Guga's hands, nestled in the hills of Matunda in Maragoli, had in fact been built by a team of local construction workers at the instruction of my uncle Thomas, their eldest son. Guga had been dead six years already and his memory was sullied by the addition of a spare room, a hot water shower and a modern-looking kitchen with a gas stove. It seemed that Guga Luis's memory was held in the red concrete floor, which is how it remained.

The red album lay on top of her dresser, which also held an old Singer sewing machine with all sorts of abandoned projects nearby. Close to a pile of hymn books and a Bible older than herself, was an old dusty picture of Guga, in an old, rusty frame. Guga unblinkingly stared back at me, a man with the features of men of his time, conventionally handsome, with a confident gaze. He looked taller than he really had been in this studio picture with its three-legged stool and pot plant as props. Towering over everything and everyone in that moment, larger than life.

I missed Guga in that moment, but not because of the stories of ogres and monsters that he told me on his knee as a child. Or how he used to steal sweet potatoes off the pot for me when I was little and Guku wasn't looking. Or how he'd chide my mother when she was being instructive and harsh around him. I missed those things, yes, but I missed more who Guku was when he was around. She shouted less and listened more. He had a calming effect on her, as though he were an angry-woman whisperer, and she allowed her softer sides to leak out around him. Since his death, Guku had become more and more difficult, more and more loud, more and more angry. Or maybe she just seemed so, and really wasn't. Maybe it was the failing eyesight that was frustrating her, and she was trying to compensate sight with sound. Who knew.

I grabbed the album, the only thing on the dresser that was not dusty, and made my way back to the sitting room where Guku was. Dozing. In fact, fast asleep. She was snoring with her

mouth open and her teeth facing the ceiling. Guku still had all her teeth, all of them. Not one was missing. At forty-three I'd already had three extractions, thankfully none at the front. Why didn't I get her dental genes I wondered. I was tempted to count her teeth and smiled at the thought. I carefully laid the red album on her lap, expecting her to startle and slurp and get up. But she continued snoring, her left leg occasionally twitching the way a cow's flank shakes off a fly.

I thought to make myself a cup of tea, and as if reading my thoughts, Amani woke up. Her rousing cry more a scream than the cute little whimper I expected, I abandoned my tea mission and instead went to pick her up.

"Shhhh toto," I soothed her, picking up her pink swaddle and putting her over my shoulder. They say you forget these things, which always surprises me when I do. A mother of four children, all aged between ten and twenty-one, I was sure that watching babies was something I'd be able to do with my eyes closed. But Amani was different, she was a girl and I'd raised four boys. It had only been two weeks but whatever worked for the boys wasn't working for Amani. She marched to the beat of her own heart and for someone so small and so helpless, she did whatever she wanted and whenever, with the power of her wail. I'd never heard anything like it, like a cat being flung across a field.

"Unasikia njaa ma'm?" Are you hungry mummy? I asked her.

Two little wet eyes looked back at me, as if reading a book. A lower lip jutted out, an upside down frown formed, two little hands sprung up from inside the swaddling, and a deep breath was taken.

"Shhhhh basi, sawa, twende tutafute maziwa, twende baby." I shushed Amani, not giving her a chance to holler, promising her milk, I rocked her gently back and forth and went into the kitchen to find her some.

Breast milk was another thing I didn't have that would have placated her faster than I was able to. But Amani's journey into being was so incredible on its own, that even if I had breastmilk, I

was sure that nothing short of thunder and lightening would able to placate this miracle child of Maragoli. Balancing her whimpering body on my left shoulder, I fetched the bottle of milk that I had made earlier and tested the temperature on the back of my hand. Lukewarm. Perfect. I carried her to the siting room where Guku was. She was awake and quietly turning pages in the old photo album. I sat next to her with Amani on my lap, and presented her with the bottle. As if starved for years, she nearly swallowed the bottle whole. She closed her little wet eyes and sucked, and sucked, fingers curled in pleasure. I smiled at her little face, glad that for the first time in two weeks, the oldest and the youngest people I knew weren't shouting or screaming at me.

"Guku?" I wanted to offer her a cup of tea.

"People think they know you. But they don't." Guku mumbled. "They don't know me. They don't know anything. They are so foolish, such idiots."

I sighed.

They said that the delirium was going to come eventually, but why did Guku's delirium have to be so full of vitriol? Who was she so angry with? She'd outlived anyone and everyone, I was sure there was no none left to hate. But here, even in the weakening shell of her once large and robust body, the power of her anger dripped forth like her drool, a steady stream of harsh words and insults directed at no one in particular. The bottle was almost empty and so was the ferocity of Amani's sucking. Milk dribbled down the side of her face and into the folds of her hidden neck. I carefully unlatched the bottle from her lips and placed her on my shoulder to burp her. She let out a hearty burp, along with come curdled milk, which descended warm down my shoulder.

"Guku, would you like a cup of tea?" I offered.

She nodded, one too many times for me to assume that it was a 'yes'. So I asked again. Her grey eyes turned to try and look at me, but bounced around her sockets like torches in a dark room.

"Have you seen these pictures? Come let me show you these pictures," she said looking back down as arthritic fingers ran across the cover of the photo album.

I sighed again. Amani was too quiet, there on my shoulder. I laid her on my lap to find that she'd fallen fast asleep, a chocolate-coloured cherub with dark brown lips and tiny nostrils. Not sure whether I was going to make some tea or not, I sat there for a short while before I decided to go put her down in the visitor's room. I waited to hear Guku shout something at me, but no sound came out. The tea would be quick to fix, and also a custom, at four in the afternoon in the light of a setting sun. Nowhere else in the world did the water, and consequently the tea, taste as sweet as it did in Maragoli. The water that was collected from the frequent rains was soft and sweet, and made the best tea. I made a whole pot of the stuff, knowing that soon the others would be returning home and would also want some.

I cooled a big mug of tea for Guku, black, with no sugar, and placed it in front of her as I sipped my own piping hot, milk-rich tea with lots of sugar.

"Come, let me show you," she said again, opening the red album.

Every evening of every day of every visit I had ever made to Guku and Guga's was spent looking at album after album of pictures.

"Here's your father when he was starting school." An old black and white dog-eared picture of eight children would be presented. A skeletal finger and a dirty nail would jab at a small boy, in rags and barefoot, standing between two girls and grinning from ear to ear. "That's him," Guga or Guku would declare. When I was much younger, imagining my father as a naughty, dirty little person used to thrill me. But after nearly forty years of seeing the same knobby knees and naughty smile over and over again, I was tired. I knew these pictures and these faces like I knew the birthmark on the left buttock of my eldest son's body. But Guku was old, older now, and so was I, so I indulged her, allowing the ritual of memory to carry on.

Despite the cataracts, Guku knew every picture on every page, when it was taken and why. I was impressed by this, this kind of memory, this way of remembering people. I began to pay a bit more attention to see if she got any of them wrong – it was a game now.

Aunt Magda in her jacket and dress, looking like she's about to murder someone, or like she just came back from doing so. Aunt Magda inherited Guku's stern look but Guga's gentle heart, which sadly no man stuck around long enough to get to know.

Guku and Guga at a studio somewhere in Kakamega, holding the teddy bear of a dog. They look in love, only this time it's Guga that looks shy, and Guku looks sure.

Guga in short soccer shorts balancing a lithe leg on a soccer ball.

Aunties Elizabeth, Magda, Isla, Christine and Frasina lined up next to Guku, according to age. Aunt Fransina's dress is too big and she looks like a coat hanger, with the lacy collar of the frock falling off her bony left shoulder. Her hands are clasped demurely in front of her, but her face is lit up like an airport runway, bright and welcoming. I knew now why she was my favourite of the bunch, because she was the happiest of them all. Guku was the gloomiest, the matriarch, sitting on a chair in front of her daughters, arms and legs crossed, eyes cold.

And then Guga with the boys all standing together, with Baba the smallest, always the smallest of the boys, cheeky grin plastered on his face, ashy knees showing even in the black and white picture. For the first time, I realised that Uncle Fanuel wasn't in this picture. There was Uncle Thomas, Uncle Michael (always pronounced Meeh-kah-eeli), Guga and Baba. I let the realisation pass and sip my tea.

Page after page, nodding and mumbling hmm after hmm, and sipping tea, she came to the end of the red album and pointed at Uncle Fanuel, alone, near a tree that was cut down long ago, all by himself, smiling into the camera.

"Isn't he handsome?"

"Hmm,"

"Elizabeth looks just like him."

"Hmm," I sipped my tea.

"People just don't know, they think they know everything, but they don't".

‘Hmm,” I sighed.

“I should have never returned that night. You know I ran away?” Guku said.

The delirium was kicking in again, with me amused at the thought of my eighty-six-year-old grandmother running away to anywhere. She could barely walk, let alone run.

“I really loved him.” She declared, closing the red album.

“Guga?” I asked, not really paying attention.

“No, Fanuel.” Guku said, with a voice I had never heard her use before. I looked up to find Guku staring ahead, towards the television that had some politician speaking to a crowd of people somewhere in Kenya. Her fingers ran along the edges of Uncle Fanuel’s picture, again and again, corner to faded corner, like a nun would caress the beads of a rosary. Not really knowing what to say, and knowing better than to take her hand, I put a warm palm on Guku’s back, now bent, with her spine showing through her blue dress.

“Where is Uncle Fanuel buried?” I asked.

Twice a week, on Sunday and Wednesday, Guku asked to be taken to the family graveyard at the bottom of the hill. Here, tombstones jutted out of the red earth like children raising hands in class. Small plaques and roughly scratched names on concrete crosses sat idle, waiting for nothing. It was a day’s affair taking Guku to the graveyard. She insisted on walking there, saying there was nothing wrong with her legs, and chiding whoever was tasked with taking her there to hurry up and stop being slow. It took nearly two hours to walk Guku slowly down the hill to the graveyard. On the way, she asked whether we had planted sweet potatoes this year, and whether we were done weeding the maize and pumpkin. She insisted on trying to check how the crop was doing, despite not being able to see the crop. We had to take several stops along the way, most of them for Guku to stop and pee. She was too old to care who saw her, she was also too old for anyone to care where she peed. The walk back was worse, because it was uphill, and Guku needed to take breaks every ten steps or so. When the whole family was visiting, we would play a game of cards to decide who’s

turn it was to take Guku to the graveyard and back. Often the boys would do it in pairs, because the sheer boredom of the trip would kill them without each other for company.

"He's not," she said after five or so minutes.

"He's not buried?"

"Your uncle." She let out a sigh.

"He's not my uncle?"

"No."

My tea was finished and I had nothing left to sip. My arm on Guku's back was getting heavy and we had nothing more to say to each other.

"Do you want to go lie down now Guku?" I offer. Guku is quiet again, staring at the now dancing crowd of political supporters and women in kangas gyrating on a rickety wooden stage.

"I loved him you know," She said again, and slumped back on her chair, her hands still holding onto the red album.

"I know you loved him Guku, tomorrow I'll take you to the gravesite." And then I remembered that tomorrow was Alex's turn, but that was none of her business so I said nothing.

"But he's not buried there."

"Guga?" I was puzzled. More by the fact that I was entertaining this conversation than the content of it.

"Fanuel." She said his name like he was in the room, like she was calling out to him to come to her. I let out another hmm, and made to stand and take the empty cups to the kitchen for Amadi to wash later. Her dry hand held my forearm, restraining me from getting up. For an old woman, Guku's grip was strong and firm. I sat back down and placed my own hand over hers.

"Take me to my room," she commanded.

We shuffled slowly down the corridor until we got to her room. It used to be her and Guga's until he passed, and despite his absence, it still looked like he lived there. She slept only on the left

side of the bed, and the right side still had his things on the side table. An old Bible, his watch and his brass wedding band. They were all covered in dust because Guku forbade people from entering her room let alone cleaning it. His clothes were hanging in the closet, and his slippers by the side of the bed.

Guku slid her slippers off the bed and got into her side of the bed. I was glad she was lying down, so that I could check on Amani and get back to weeding the pumpkins at the back.

"Alice," Guku said.

She never said my name. The last time Guku called me Alice, I was twenty-three and getting married. She spoke to me at my wedding and wished me and Ambeva the best. She wished us many children. She asked that I be a good wife, that I listen to my husband and stop being so stubborn.

"Yes Guku?" I tucked her in, pulling the blanket over her small shoulders. Her eyes were closed, but she kept speaking.

"I ran away you know. Only Fanuel knows why. I really loved him. Not even Guga knows."

She was dozing off now. There is a point between being awake and asleep that your mind straddles two worlds, when your words are dropped fruit, both ripe and rotten. I ignored her rambles, a bit embarrassed by my grandmother speaking about her love for my uncle. It's sad what happens to the minds of old people, I thought. I imagined that the brain matter too shrivels and folds in old age, memories mush into each other like papier mache, blurring thoughts and ideas into one continuous moment, never fully in the present, never fully the past. Often, Guku's delirium made sense. It was misplaced moments and forgotten names. It was seeing the face of her husband on the body of her last born son, and asking him why he disappeared those many years ago, and whether he had another woman that she needed to know about. Sometimes it was hearing the voice of her eldest daughter, Aunt Elizabeth in the sound of Mama's singing and shushing her, accusing her of trying to wake her small sister who was asleep in the kitchen hut. As much as possible, we indulged Guku's lapses in lucidity, allowing her to think that Baba was Guga, or that anyone was whomever

she wanted them to be in that moment. We let her mind take her where she felt safest, or most present and useful. Interestingly, for her brash and abrasiveness, Guku was very gentle with Amani, so gentle in fact that no one had seen her this gentle with anything, or anyone, ever.

It was she who found Amani, in the graveyard, two weeks ago when she'd woken herself up in the middle of the night to run away. At least this is the story that Guku insisted on telling. A frantic search in the morning, after Mama wasn't roused by Guku bellowing for someone to heat her up some bath water, that we found her at the graveyard, barefoot, in her long cotton nightie, holding a wailing child in her arms, still covered in afterbirth.

"Are you taking me to the graveyard?" she asked sleepily.

"Only tomorrow, yes Guku." I soothed. I wanted to stroke her scarfed head, soothe her somehow, but I didn't.

"Okay." She fell fast asleep.

"Alex, it's your turn to take Guku to the graveyard," I instructed at the breakfast table.

Alex was fourteen, impatient and busy with nothing, but also uninterested in walking his great grandmother to the graveyard.

"But mom, I did it last week. Why can't Amadi do it?" He tried to get the farm helper to take Guku.

"Because you lost the last game, and you know only family members are supposed to help take her there."

"But mom, I'm busy. I'm helping Amadi fix the tractor." He tried harder, lilting his breaking voice in a way that made it sound like cat claws on a chalkboard.

"Alex." I say, and it is over. It's a skill, being able to force your will on children using their first names. It's in the tone. You have to imagine that this is how God said 'let there be light', and

there was. Alex knew better than to counter my firm order, but his mouth lay open and his shoulders slumped in protest and disappointment.

Suddenly alert, Guku looked up from her cup of tea and declared, "Alice let's go."

Alice sounded like Alex when said between a mouthful of bread and tea. Again using my English name. Guku always called me Kakiya, my Maragoli name, just not of late it seemed. I wanted to kick my son under the table but Guku was looking straight at me, grey angry eyes squinting. Alex gathered his dishes and went out the door long before I could force him to go in my stead. Guku's gaze had wandered off to some other part of the small dining room, intently looking at the nothing in-between the far wall and the table of people having breakfast.

"Okay," I said, loudly, to bring her back to now. "Amadi! Make sure that there is a fresh bottle of milk for Amani every two hours okay?"

Amadi had lived his whole life in Maragoli, and no one knew his age. He had the face of an old man but the body of a young one. He was painfully obedient and revered my grandmother. Or feared her. It was hard to tell sometimes. But Amadi never questioned orders, and rarely raised his voice, except when shooing the chickens into their coop at the end of the day. Once I heard the boys trying to come up with stories about Amadi's origin. That he was some kind of djinn who watched over Guku, and that they knew he wasn't a family member because she never let him walk her to the graveyard. My mother had told me that he was an uncle three times removed from my grandfather's side. I didn't believe her. But he had been around as long as I could remember, and in many ways, Amadi was as much a member of our family as anyone else. Despite his age and size, I trusted Amadi with Amani completely. There was a gentleness to the man that I didn't see in many men his age, whatever age he was. I fetched two pairs of Ngoma shoes, one for Guku and one for myself.

"Guku?" I wanted to ask if I could help her with her shoes but decided to go ahead and do it anyway. Guku didn't protest as she held onto my shoulder for support while I lifted one foot after

the other. Guku had big feet for an old woman. I took her left arm and handed her her cane. She tried to straighten her spine, but only managed to lift her head up.

The walk to the bottom of the hill took everyone else at most twenty minutes. It took my boys ten because they ran there and back, even the youngest one. Guku and I hobbled along, taking small and laboured steps down the gentle slope. The path to the gravesite was narrow and shaded from the mid-morning sun by large avocado trees. To the left there were maize saplings swaying in the slight breeze, and to the right vegetables and a small paddock where a single cow grazed. It was a beautiful morning for a walk and I was glad, despite my earlier resistance, that Guku had commanded me to take her to the gravesite. My grip on her arm tightened as the land sloped downwards towards the small clearing where the family graveyard was. I wondered who's idea it had been to bury all members of our family here. There wasn't much room left, maybe enough space left for two bodies. I was positive that Guku's ghost would haunt us if we didn't bury her here. And the last space would have to be for Amadi, despite him not being a family member. As far as we knew, he didn't have anyone to bury him.

The graveyard needed some tending, and I made a mental note to do this as soon as I had settled Guku down onto a small rock near Guga's headstone. Her silence was strange, but welcome. I started to steer her to the left of the opening, towards the large tree under which Guga's headstone lay.

"Where are you taking me!?" She bellowed.

"To Guga."

She pulled her arm away from me and stumbled instead to the right side of the clearing. The area was rocky, and it would only be a matter of time before she hit her foot on something and fell forward. I took her arm again and she stopped to glare at me with her unseeing eyes. She pointed her cane to the far edge of the clearing, where none of us had been for a while. I walked Guku through a small forest, the ground soft and full of decaying leaves. It smelled like eucalyptus and

sage, and the silence here was loud. Guku was trying to walk quickly, and failing. We got to the end of this small forest, just before the stream that ran between these two hills. Deliberately hitting her cane against the ground, Guku 'felt' for something. Her cane connected with a rock, and she made to sit down next to it. She brushed leaves away from this mound and closed her eyes. Why was my grandmother hugging a rock in the middle of nowhere? I thought I should leave her alone and go weed the other graves, but she called "Alice." The English name again.

"Yes Guku." I was feeling strangely patient with her.

"He's here. Fanuel." Her dry and ashy hand ran over this boulder.

It occurred to me that the dementia must have been at an advanced stage. I decided to sit with her. I knew it wouldn't be long before she needed to shout at someone and I'd need to take her back up the hill for her to do this.

I offered a sad 'Hmmm.'

"I loved him. But…"

"Why is he buried all the way over here Guku?" I needed something to keep me busy and thought I might as well participate in her alternative reality.

"Because we did a bad thing." Guku is pensive. Is she trying to remember? Or is she trying to forget?

"Your grandfather knew everything, and saved me from them, when they came for me." Guku spat. Some spittle remained on the side of her mouth, and I wiped it away. By this boulder, on this day, Guku let me.

None of this made sense.

"He could dance. That's how I knew I loved him. I saw him dance. He had shoulders as wide as trees."

Was my grandmother having romantic thoughts about a boulder that she had decided was the burial place of Uncle Fanuel? I wondered whether it was time for pills. Sedative drugs that kept

her asleep and rested. But that sounded cruel. I preferred Guku awake and angry over asleep and quiet anyway.

"Guku? Who was Fanuel?"

"A man I loved. Very much. But we couldn't be together."

I couldn't believe that this was a real conversation, but I was invested now.

"Why is he buried on family land?" I knew the answer, but wanted her to say.

She didn't. Her grey eyes looked into the distance, towards the stream.

"Guku?"

She had become one with the boulder, quiet, solid, stoic, unmovable.

I began to fill in the gaps myself. Maybe he was a relative and they had an affair? Or he tried to steal Guku away from Guga? Maybe he was an old boyfriend who'd had no one to bury him.

"Oh Fanuel. You'd be so proud of your children. They have done well," Guku blurted out.

What?! Even though I was seated down, blood rushed from my legs to my head and I immediately got a headache.

"Okay Guku, we have to go." I wanted to leave this place. My grandmother was saying things that could break families and hearts.

"No, I need more time." Guku was pinned to the ground by the weight of memory.

"Guku, do you know what you are saying?"

"I know. Guga knew. But the children don't know."

"Guga knew?!" I was shocked. I looked at this frail and stubborn woman and tried to imagine what other secrets had been glossed over by her grey cataracts.

"Your Guga couldn't father children. And Fanuel. He could. He saved me from shame."

None of this made any sense, even though it did. I wasn't ready to be the carrier of this memory. Why me? Why not my mother? Should I tell my mother? Or my aunts? I really wanted to leave this place.

"Guku. Let's go." I stood up and brushed dead leaves off my skirt.

"No, not yet. I need more time."

This sounded more like a conversation between her and death, and the time she still needed to tell more secrets, more stories buried between memory and delirium and the pain of being the only person left to tell. Guku sounded almost desperate to get these secrets off her chest.

I sat back down with my grandmother and took her hand.

"I loved him you know?"

"Who, Fanuel?"

"No, Guga."

"Are some of the children Guga's?"

"Maybe. I don't know?" Was my grandmother sleeping with two men at the same time? How did she convince Guga that he couldn't father children so that he allowed her to sleep with Fanuel? Who was this woman? I wanted to dig deeper into her brain, deeper into her spirit, past the jumbled mess that was her memory and find the truth. Did my grandmother find a way to have two lovers at the same time?

"So Guga could…make children?"

Guku snapped out of her reverie and shouted at me "How dare you accuse me of that! How dare you! You don't know me! You don't know anything!"

Guku's bellow was not the bellow of an old and frail woman. I wanted to apologise when she said, softly, "Yes."

I suddenly understood many things. My grandmother's anger and temper protected her and her children from the prickly tongues of women and men in the village. Maybe my grandfather

couldn't father children. But maybe he could. What I did know was that my grandmother loved two men, and found a way to be with these men and bear them children *at the same time*. Of course I couldn't tell anyone this. Who would believe me? Who would believe Guku?

"Guku, let's go?" I was pleading now.

"Okay. Help me up." I took her arm and she leaned on her cane. "Idiots all of them. They think they know everything. They don't."

"Hmmm," I said. But this time I meant it.

Maggie

Maggie decided at the last minute that she had too many things to do. She had these imaginary conversations with herself a lot more these days. She did not make up the work that she needed to do, she *really* was busy. She had to do Mama Njoki's laundry, but first she had to go to the dairy around the corner and collect milk for the five households near Calvary Baptist Academy that paid her to deliver their daily ration of fresh milk. If she allowed herself a moment of honesty, Maggie knew that she would be done by noon, or half past noon if she decided to be slow. But with the clouds sitting the way they did in the sky, heavy, and dark, with the weather gloomy, wet and decidedly sad, she allowed herself the luxury of procrastination.

If she missed today's meeting, it would be three weeks since she had attended her last health support group meeting. A large part of her did not mind. But there was this nagging at the back of her head, this constant sound that told her, maybe the experts knew what they were doing when they suggested that she attend these weekly meetings. The 'experts', were the team of nurses at the clinic near the Olepolos High School in Ngong where she went for her monthly check-ups.

Sister Jane was her favourite. Older and arrogant, Sister Jane was not everyone's cup of tea. Maggie watched how the other nurses were around her, scared and skittish, which Sister Jane was aware of, but revelled in. In fact, Maggie thought that perhaps she enjoyed the fear that she inspired in her workmates. Despite her acerbic personality, Sister Jane was good at her job. She knew her way in and out of the human body and she held no punches when the time came to interact with her patients. Maggie remembered her first meeting with Sister Jane.

She had just received news of her diagnosis and she was hysterical. She sat at the clinic and wept. After what felt like forever, and after running out of tears and possibly experiencing a mild case of dehydration, the attending nurse left the room, and Sister Jane walked in. She slammed the door shut, which startled Maggie.

“Where is the other nurse?” Maggie asked.

“She’s not here. I’m Sister Jane, and I will be your consulting nurse from now on.”

The nurse sat down opposite Maggie and placed her hands on the table. She looked at Maggie’s grief-stricken face for a while, then let out a long, tired, sigh. Maggie stared back at the nurse as if watching a movie. Big glasses sat on a bigger nose behind big eyes. She thought that Sister Jane looked like an owl. They blinked at each other before the nurse dived into a monologue.

“I want to tell you that this is not a death sentence. But the truth is that it can be. Anything can kill you these days, and eventually something will.”

This was not what Maggie was expecting and a puzzled expression creased its way onto her face.

“You can’t treat this like it’s the end of the world. Unless you want to die of course, in which case, sit there and cry.”

Maggie’s creases deepened. While she knew nothing about the bedside manner of nurses or medical professionals, she had read a few newspaper articles about how lovely and gentle nurses can be. Sister Jane was not trying to give truth to Maggie’s limited knowledge.

The nurse took another deep breath and locked eyes with Maggie.

“You will start treatment today, and it is going to be hard. You will have to come to the clinic every week for three months until we know that you are taking your treatment seriously.”

Maggie then remembered her diagnosis and fresh tears gathered in her eyes. She let them fall, but she did not cry out loud. She briefly met the nurse’s eyes, and looked away. Sister Jane’s owl eyes told her that she was not in the mood for Maggie’s outbursts, so she sat silently in her sadness.

Sister Jane continued,

“And I think you should also start attending the support group that meets once a week on Saturdays at the St. Joseph’s Church hall.”

Maggie was not listening and Sister Jane could tell. Another deep sigh was expressed.

“I know you don’t think that these meetings will help, but I know many women who have attended these meetings and they said that they helped them deal better with their illness. You should seriously consider this.”

Maggie had heard enough, and was ready to go home and fall apart.

“Can I leave now?” she asked, not looking at anything or anyone in particular. She asked the question to herself more than she did to the nurse, she needed to flee.

The nurse looked at her and nodded towards the door.

“Go. Take care of yourself, but come back for your check-ups.”

Maggie lifted herself from her chair and walked out of the clinic. She reluctantly accepted the small bottle of medication that a nurse waiting at the door offered her. It took all her might not to fall apart again.

The world outside was too bright, too loud and too alive. Nothing had changed between her bad news and now, and she loathed the world for not recognising her sadness. It rained all the time in Ngong, why not today. Where were the clouds when she needed them? She decided to walk home instead of taking one of the boda-bodas that were parked outside the community clinic.

The walk home was not beautiful, but it was calming. Her feet knew where she needed to go and she trusted them to carry her there. She nodded polite hellos to people she knew, and silently shooed away boys and men who tried to get her attention. The sun was beginning to set and the

slow chill that blew across the Ngong hills was there. She began to climb the hill that led to her small house, and halfway up she stopped. She was tired. She was tired from carrying the heavy burden of her bad news, and the heavier burden of not knowing whether she would survive her illness. At the top of the hill, she let herself into her small back-room, closed the door and collapsed onto her bed, allowing the darkness of a setting sun to swallow her up. She began to cry, slow deep, mournful sobs that left her body like blood would a severed artery; in gurgles and spurts. As she drifted away she imagined that this must be how Jonah felt in the belly of the whale; alone, abandoned and trapped.

The following day was just as hard, and so was the day after that. Life itself prevented Maggie from wallowing in the quickly growing pool of self-pity and despair. She had things to do. People depended on her. People needed her. No one knew she had been given that diagnosis, but then again no one needed to know. But how was she going to tell Maina? Should she tell him? Was this any of his business? Of course it was! It had everything to do with him, everything! She seethed with anger every time she thought of him, tall, dark, handsome and completely oblivious of the wrecking ball he had let loose on the little wooden house that Maggie felt her life was. She hated him. She detested every fibre of his being with every fibre of her own. He was unforgivable and yet he was at her door. On this sunny Saturday afternoon.

The familiar knock – three short, sharp raps on the wood of her door quickly brought her out of her midday slump. She was pretending to watch some pastor on television heal a woman of her barrenness. Again the three knocks. She stood up from her seat and moved to the door, then stopped as suddenly. She stood looking at the handle of her door like it had turned into a disgusting animal that she could no longer touch. A snail. A slimy slithering snail, leaving a trail of mucous in its path. She recoiled from the door and she hated herself in that moment, an eager puppy rushing to be kicked by its evil owner. She disliked the reflex that he had created in her that made her remember

his knock, that made her body remember what her heart and mind tried hard to forget. She wanted to be irritated, angry. She wanted to be those women from Nyeri that cut off their husband's penises and testicles and waved them around like some macabre trophies of war. She wanted to be large, bigger than trees, and look down on him and the nothing she was willing him to become. She wanted vengeance, but more than anything, she wanted yesterday back, with the hard of his chest on the soft of her breast and ignorance of their contaminated love sitting abandoned in the corner.

He knocked again, four times this time. He was growing impatient. She had ignored his calls and texts for two weeks, but now he was at her door. She could not ignore him anymore. She had to face him eventually. And maybe today was the day. Maggie stepped back from the door and straightened her skirt. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Maina was leaning on the frame of her door with his left hand, smoking a cigarette with his right. He looked up slowly and met Maggie's eyes with his own. She furrowed her brow, and he smiled. She simultaneously wanted to hit him on his smirking, handsome head with her frying pan, and burst into tears. The pan was far, and now that she saw him again, so were her tears.

"What do you want," she demanded as she started towards the entrance of her home. Maina, like Maggie was already taking the one big step it took to find himself in her makeshift living room. Their bodies met each other at the threshold, and Maina put his arms around her. Maggie felt her will weaken and evaporate like the sweat on her anxious and angry brow. She took a deep breath to steel her nerves, but all that did was waft that musky, smoky, scent-of-man which she was convinced was testosterone into her nose.

"I want you," he finally answered her question. His voice angered her more than his presence and his smell. She pushed him away with all her strength, and he stumbled backwards and out of her house. A look she had never seen crossed his face, something between anger and amusement,

as though he could not believe she had just pushed him away like that. He stood in the dust and sun outside her door and crossed his hands.

"What is the problem? Why aren't you answering your phone?"

Maggie thought to tell him the news. But she realised that it would make no difference. She was still too angry and confused to make sense of what she was feeling. Her emotions were shredded, and she was not going to spend the last dregs of her sanity trying to answer Maina's questions. She had questions of her own that he could not answer, and seeing him became more and more annoying. Maggie looked Maina up and down, and sucked her teeth. She retreated into her home and slammed the door, then locked it. There was some silence. She half expected Maina to bang on her door and demand that she open, in that clichéd romantic way that lovers demanded their lost loves back, but she was also very unsure of who she was to Maina. Whether she was the lover people chase after, or the kind people transit through. She needed to do some more crying, and a little more hating of Maina. She crawled back into her bed, and exhausted herself with weeping and hating.

It was three months before Maggie managed to drag herself to the support group meeting. She was never sure what it was that took her there that day. She had gone to visit Jackie in that part of Ngong, and passed by the St. Joseph's Church compound on her way back home. A pink poster hanging onto a wall for dear life caught her eye. 'Akina Mama wa Afya Women's Support Group' it announced. It also told her that there was a meeting underway at that very moment in the church hall to the left of the chapel. She thought that she could sneak in and sit at the back and listen and watch. She knew that it was wrong for her to do this. Attending this meeting was her admitting to herself that she had accepted her diagnosis, and was trying to learn to live with something she never wanted in the first place. But it also meant knowing all these other women who were in the same situation as she was. What did they talk about? How long had they been attending these meetings for? How many women were brave enough to attend these meetings? Did their families know?

Maggie immediately realised that the only way to find out was to go. She headed towards the hall, quickly before someone who knew her saw her. She reached the door short of breath and sweating.

She walked in to a small group of women, twelve, sitting in a circle and listening. The hall was empty and Maggie's footfalls could be heard. The person speaking stopped, and the entire group turned around to face Maggie who was trying to find a bench to sit on.

"Hello? Are you looking for someone?" another member of the group piped up. Twelve pairs of eyes looked back at Maggie and blinked.

"Yes…I mean no. I mean…I'm supposed to attend these meetings," she stammered.

"Well then join us here. Grab a chair," the woman who had responded offered. The twelve pairs of eyes followed Maggie's movement to the circle. No one said anything. Completely self-conscious, like a child caught stealing sugar, Maggie joined the group and fixed her eyes on her hands on her lap.

The group leader, Maggie decided, then instructed a woman called Samira to continue. When Maggie was sure that the other women were no longer fascinated by her newness, she allowed herself to look up and finally take in the women in the group. Samira who was speaking now, was very young. Maggie thought that she might be in her early twenties, maybe in school, or not. Many girls her age in Ngong never made it to college or university. Maybe she was a maid. Or worked at the Naivas supermarket up the street. Samira was explaining something, as the other women nodded their heads in agreement. Maggie tried to look at the women there, then thought that maybe she should not be so curious. She was afraid to meeting someone who knew her here. She started listening to Samira's story.

Samira was talking about her family. She was explaining something about her mother and the relationship that they had. The women listened in complete silence, and only offered nods and

frowns of agreement to encourage her to keep sharing. Maggie was feeling calmer now, and allowed herself to relax a bit. After ten or more minutes of listening, the group leader spoke up.

"Thank you Samira, for sharing that with us. It couldn't have been easy, but it's a lesson for us all, and it's a story that many women tell." The women nodded and murmured their agreement with her.

"Thank you for coming today. Remember, we take it…" she let the words fall off, as the other women picked up their chant, "…one day at a time!" they responded.

"Okay, Mable, do you mind leading us in a closing prayer?" she posed the question to a dark, beautiful woman with the biggest hair Maggie had ever seen. Mable nodded her agreement. The women clasped hands, bowed their heads, and Mable prayed.

Maggie wanted to sneak out the same way that she had come in, but the group leader headed straight towards her as soon as the last amen was said.

"Welcome! We rarely have people who just walk in to participate here. It's always nice to have a new face in the group. What's your name?"

Maggie responded with her name and familiarity flashed on the group leader's face.

"Aaaah! Maggie! We were expecting you ages ago! What happened? Sister Jane from the clinic told us to you were coming months ago."

Maggie knew that the woman meant well, but she suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

"My name is Achien'g by the way, and I sometimes lead these group sessions." Achien'g smiled warmly at Maggie and extended a hand for a shake.

Maggie felt a lot more at ease, and took Achien'g's hand.

"Look, it doesn't matter how long it took you to get here, it's a good thing you came eventually." Achien'g said.

Please don't say better late than never, Maggie thought.

"Better late than never!" Achien'g smiled and took her bag to leave.

Maggie watched the women leave, seemingly uninterested and unconcerned with her presence in this space. She stood in the middle of the circle of chairs for a while and thought that maybe these meetings were not a bad idea. A way of spending her Saturday afternoons. A way of meeting women with similar problems as hers. She decided then that she would attend the next meeting, and see how she liked it.

And so it happened that every Saturday, Maggie would attend the women's meetings, sit in silence and listen. She never offered to share, and no one expected her to. For five or so weeks, Maggie sat and listened to the stories that the women shared. They spoke about their jobs, their children, their homes and their husbands. They shared about their health, their fears and their expectations. What they did not seem to speak about was how they had contracted their illness. She had expected that to be a conversation that would have happened already, but five weeks in, it had not.

By then, Maggie had made a friend in the group. Jackie was bubbly and sometimes a little over the top, but she provided the group with the kind of energy that they needed to survive the discussions they had. Jackie was a married mother of three children, and she owned a salon called Cornrows and Curls on Zambia Road, near the hardware store. She looked about mid-forties, but her energy was that of two twenty year olds. Maggie took an immediate liking to Jackie, and they would go off and have their own little chats after the sessions were over.

On such a Saturday, after the session, the two friends sat in the shade of an acacia tree near the car park and talked about everything and nothing.

"Jackie?" Maggie ventured.

"Yes?" Jackie lazily swatted at a fly.

"Why don't we ever talk about how we contracted this…illness?"

There was a pause. And an eternity of silence. Maggie was worried that she had offended her new friend, but then she read the expression on Jackie's face and saw contemplation. Several times Jackie tried to start a sentence, but no words left her lips. Just as Maggie was about to apologise and change the subject, she spoke.

"I found out about my diagnosis while I was pregnant with my youngest. She's ten now. So it's been ten years of asking myself that question."

"I don't understand…don't you know?"

"Oh it was my husband alright, but where did *he* contract it from? It's not as easy as just blaming him, there's a story behind his story and my story and that's the story I really want to hear."

Maggie then realised that it was a lot more complicated than just sharing the when and the how of the moment that changed your entire life. Jackie turned to face Maggie and posed the same question, "How did *you* contract this thing?"

Maggie paused, now her turn to be contemplative and pensive. She had gone through the emotions, all the emotions she could afford to spend on this, and she had realised something that she was scared to share with anyone.

Jackie gently nudged her with her shoulder and smiled, "How Maggie?"

Maggie took a deep breath and said, “Well the truth is, it’s honestly hard to talk about. Because I can’t talk about this without talking about the…sex.”

Jackie looked confused. “I don’t understand. What does sex have to do with this?”

“Everything Jackie. Everything.” Maggie smiled a sad smile.

“Tell me more Maggie?” Jackie coaxes.

“More about what? Didn’t you get this having sex?” Maggie asked Jackie.

“Yes, of course, of course, but was it great sex? No. My mother taught me that sex is for children, not for pleasure. I don’t know many women my age who have sex because it’s just so good.” Jackie looked pensive.

“I had no business sleeping with him. He was a married man. Well, he still is, but you get my point. He chased after me for months. I had a boyfriend but he was boring. Very boring, and not just in bed. Then he showed up one day at the pharmacy across the street, you know the one near the Moregas Petrol Station? Well he showed up and started flirting with me. But there was something else about this man. He was charming, and not in that cheesy way. I was very attracted to him.”

“Mhmmm,” Jackie encouraged.

“Well, for weeks he came to the pharmacy and bought lots of nothing. And soon enough we had tea together at Bonapet Café. I knew that he was married, because I asked and he told me, but I didn’t care. I sometimes feel bad about that, that maybe this is my punishment for messing with sacred vows.”

“But…being with him was unlike anything I had ever experienced.” Maggie smiled secretly to herself.

Maggie could see that Jackie was intrigued. But also a bit horrified.

“But Maggie,this is the sex that got you this illness! How can you think back on it so fondly?” Jackie asked the question for both of them, because Maggie still didn’t understand.

“You don’t understand. Not many people do. No one wants to talk about this illness in this way. I was…satisfied. Of course he said he loved me. They all do. But this man…showed me that he loved me. And not with things. Not with presents. With his body.” Maggie’s recounting of her and Maina’s lovemaking made her body involuntarily respond to the memory. Her nipples hardened. And she crossed her hands on her chest, trying to summon the anger she’d felt a few weeks ago. She tried to remind herself that she was now diseased, and no memory could undo the fact that she would never be able to love like that, or be loved like that.

“What did he do? That other men don’t?” Jackie was feeling adventurous.

“Can I tell you next week?” Maggie offered with a smile.

“No! What if…” Jackie paused on her joke. “What if I’m not there next week?” It was not funny. And Maggie’s heart broke. She smiled and shifted in her seat, leaning forward in anticipation. “Many things, very many things. He made me feel good about my body. He would do things that no man has ever done.”

“Things like what?” Jackie leaned in.

“Well, he sucked my nipples several times.” Maggie said then clasped her hands over her mouth and giggled.

Jackie gasped and her hand flew to her chest. “Really?” she breathed.

“Yes! It was glorious. This one time…” Maggie paused and Jackie playfully hit her knee. They both laughed. “This one time, he brought a can of condensed milk along. I did not know what

to expect. I was a bit scared because I had never imagined food being used in any way in bed. He poured drops of the milk on different spots of my body then licked it off. Even there." Maggie giggled and gestured towards Jackie's crotch with her lips.

Maggie was beside herself with laughter. She could not believe that they were talking about this, here, in the compound of the St. Joseph's Catholic Church. She had never spoken to anyone about her and Maina. She had never been able to have this conversation before. But here, with Jackie, she felt safe.

Maggie sighed. "It was more than him pounding against me until kingdom come. He was gentle, he was attentive to what I was feeling and responding to. He touched me like he was trying to get to know me though my body. I never cared much for sex. It was never for my pleasure. And then, suddenly it was. It became something I could want without guilt. It became something I could demand and act on; he listened to me and I to him. Our bodies were in sync somehow. This was sex that changed my life." Maggie paused, then added, "In so many ways."

Jackie nodded yes, that she got it now, but her mood had changed. Jackie had fallen into a pit that turned her eyes dark and her mouth dry. Maggie wondered if this conversation made her new friend wonder about her own pleasure, and how maybe she'd never had any. They sat in silence for a while before they realised that it was almost six o'clock and they both had to head home before it became dark. Jackie told her friend that she was was jealous of her, and Maggie was relieved. But the earlier warmth of friendship was now lukewarm, and the heat of Maggie's sexual confession tepid. Maggie realised that she had wanted to tell someone, anyone, this story, this side of her understanding of the illness and how it sat in her body. She could not hate it, or him, in fact sometimes she thought to herself that if this is what it took to experience a different kind of intimacy, then this is the price she was willing to pay to feel…good about something that was supposed to be so bad.

What Maggie didn't know, was that when they parted ways that evening, Jackie rushed home, a memory simmering at the back of her mind, triggered by something Maggie had said. Maggie didn't know that once home, Jackie emptied her fridge, digging, searching for that thing, that her husband had suggested they try and she'd said no. Maggie didn't know that when Jackie found it, the old, now rusting, half open can of condensed milk, her friend asked her eldest daughter to cook for the younger children and locked herself in her room. All Maggie knew was that Jackie stopped coming to meetings, and stopped taking her medication, and refused to have any guests. And that Jackie was now looking for this death that had already called her by name, and Maggie didn't know why.

Susan

The clicking of tar under Susan's black patent leather heels felt very unfamiliar to her. She was used to the dry thud of her shoes and the occasional squelch of mud underfoot when she made her way down Salama Close to catch her bus to town. She had also grown used to the clouds of dust that rushing school buses left in their wake. Leaving home every morning had long stopped being a hopeful journey into an uncertain future and had become more like a defeated return home from a disappointing day. Twenty-eight years old and still unemployed in her parent's house is not how Susan had thought or even dreamed of starting off her adult life. The torn, brown envelope with her laminated degrees and letters of recommendation was too big to fit in her purse, and so she kept it tucked away under her arm as she swiftly passed the shack where the construction workers had their breakfast. Loud chewing and louder slurps of hot milk tea from steaming metal cups accompanied the click-click-clicking of her shoes. Large groups of men made her uncomfortable and worse still were large groups of men having breakfast – somehow making her half-walk, half-trot some kind of accompanying bite to this breakfast. She waved a quick hello to Mama Simo, who was bent over a hot jiko turning over a pile of chapati. Mama Simo ran this little breakfast shack which was always full, even when the construction work in the area wasn't as busy.

"Sasa Susie!" she shouted over her shoulder.

Some years back, Mama Simo used to clean Susan's mother's house and do their laundry. One day a teal skirt that belonged to her mother went missing and a nasty exchange ensued. Susan's mother accused Mama Simo of stealing from her and threatened to report her to the police. Mama Simo sucked her teeth at Susan's mother, called her an ugly hag with sagging breasts and marched off into (a much better) career change. The skirt was found weeks later under Thunder and Simba's kennel, half eaten and completely destroyed. But these were not Susan's problems and she and Mama Simo knew this.

"Sasa Mama Simo!" Susan shouted back. "I'll pass by later this evening for some mandazi. Keep 10 for me okay?" She hurried along, not waiting for an answer because Mama Simo had known that the request was coming and Susan knew what the answer would be.

Although the new tar made the walk to the main road smoother, the distance of nearly two kilometres remained as long as it had been before the improvements. As recently as three weeks ago, cars dodged potholes while humans, animals, motorbike taxis, school buses and private vehicles somehow all fit on this same road. And for some reason, this tar made people behave better. The kiosk owner near Mama Simo's milk shop stopped throwing her dirty left over water onto the road and instead poured it into the drainage burrows that the Chinese company had dug up. Evenings were filled with couples, young and old strolling under crooked street lights and politely smiling at each other. Motorcycle taxis no longer ducked and dodged pedestrians like some kind of a game. People seemed…nicer. Like somehow the tar brought along with it good manners and a feeling of being better to Salama Close. That now we were no different from the fancy people in Karen and Runda and so we had to behave like we live in a neighbourhood with a tar road. This thought made Susan chuckle out loud, and smile a little.

At the bump near the yellow wall, little Kimberly stood waiting for her school bus. Her school uniform was already dirty and somehow her sweater was tucked into her school tights. She stood there fidgeting while Njeri, her nanny, carefully typed out a message on her cellphone.

"Hi Kimmie, sasa Njeri," Susan greeted them as she made her way over to fix Kimberly's school sweater and dress. The little girl gave her a big hug and Susan picked out pieces of cornflakes from her pigtail cornrows. Neri was looking for a fullstop or an exclamation mark, some kind of punctuation on her phone, completely unbothered by what Susan and Kimberly were up to. A big hug goodbye, and Susan was back on the tar road snaking its way into town.

The poorly painted ‘HELP WANTED’ sign outside RamCo Computer College made Susan pause at the threshold and think, *If it is indeed a computer college couldn’t they have typed out and printed nice posters advertising this vacancy?* With nothing but time to lose, she went in and asked a young woman with purple hair and five earrings dangling from one lobe whether the help was still wanted.

Slowly looking away from her computer screen, the young woman paused to take in Susan’s very formal attire. A neatly pressed white cotton blouse with thin navy blue stripes, and a form fitting black tweed skirt. She was behind a tall counter so she could not see Susan’s shoes. Susan took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled.

“Em…I don’t know if this is the work your looking for to be honest.” She finally spoke. And swivelled her head away from Susan’s furrowed brow and back towards the blinking green screen of a solitaire game.

“What work is it exactly?” Susan asked.

The young woman, using exasperated gestures lifted both her hands off the desk and placed them one on top of the other, like a primary school principle about to hand out a punishment. A purple braid tumbled out from the messy bun that held it captive and fell on the side of her right eye. She swung her neck so that the braid moved away from her eye and wandered around the back of her ear. Purple Hair took a deep breath.

“Ni kazi ya kusafisha hapa.” It’s a cleaning job.

“And? How much does it pay?” Susan asked, unfazed by this little performance of power.

“Kitu fifteen kay a month,” Purple Hair said, letting the words come out like vomit, as if fifteen thousand shillings was candy money lying at the bottom of her handbag.

Drumming short nails on the counter Susan considered this work, it was very meagre pay, and the possibility of having to take orders from this child whose father probably owned this shop cum computer college, and it didn’t seem worth the pain. After holding out and turning down such jobs for over a year, this couldn’t be the work she was willing to announce back home as her big

break. No. A better offer was around a corner somewhere and all she had to do is persist in her search.

"Okay, thanks." she said in the direction of Purple Hair and turned to leave. The woman with the purple braids mumbled something under her breath as she returned to her game of solitaire. Susan was past caring what the woman said and stepped back out into the hot February Nairobi sun.

No matter how they dressed, and how they sauntered through the streets of Nairobi, carefully putting on airs of happy abandon, Susan could spot a job-seeker anywhere. There was always a crack in this performance when you looked close enough. There were at least five minutes when the despair and disappointment leaked though the carefully ironed shirt and the beautifully applied make up. The jaunty way in which a man leaned against the rail at a store hid fidgety fingers inside pockets that kept rattling keys. The hearty laugh and full lips spread wide over white teeth distracted people from the restless leg tapping away underneath the table. They were a nervous, anxious and terrified bunch of people who could not and would not let the world outside know that their biggest fear was unemployment, and what that meant to people with three degrees from two international universities. Susan's own tic was biting the edges of her nails. There was nothing there to bite but still she would dig into the corner of her nail and bite off a piece of something. Anything. Last week she bit so deep and so hard that she drew blood. And so Susan sat at the GPO bus stop and bit into her finger. Looking for a job *was* a full time job.

When she graduated from the University of Nairobi with a Master's Degree in Forensic Accounting, she felt like she could fly. She didn't know anyone outside her classmates, all twenty one of them, who had degrees in this field. The world was a goldmine and everyone would want or need a Forensic Accountant, wouldn't they? She would lie awake at night thinking of where she was going to build her house and what she was going to wear to the upcoming Safaricom Jazz Festival. Hugh Masekela was the main attraction and maybe she could even treat her parents to such an expe-

rience, because she knew they both enjoyed Hugh's trumpet and expletives. This was nearly two years ago and maybe hundreds of doors knocked on and doors shut. People *didn't* need forensic accountants apparently. The regular accountant worked just fine. Plus also with a Master's in the stuff potential employers worried that they wouldn't be able to afford someone with Susan's qualifications. And the language of forensic accounting sounded ominous, scary, like her job was to find something wrong with their books and shut them down – a financial undertaker one Human Resources manager had joked. It wasn't funny then, and it still wasn't funny to Susan now.

There was a moment where she had considered becoming a receptionist at a dentist's office in Karen. Dr. Something-or-the-other Patel had said they don't need an accountant or a bookkeeper or anything to do with money, but that Susan had a nice set of teeth and a good smile and that Claire, the current receptionist was going away on maternity leave soon, so if Susan was open to temping, then the almost-job was hers. Susan said no thanks, and left. There was also that one time she nearly agreed to do the books for a timber yard in Dagoretti Corner where the owner, straight faced and serious, told her that she needed to learn how to cook the books. He went on and on about how the new tax rates and systems in Kenya were dodgy and that he paid a ten percent tithe at the Fire of Christ Tabernacle every month and that's the only tax he owed. His salary offer was forty-five thousand shillings a month and that was the highest offer she had received in the eight months she had been looking. Susan thought back to her parents, to her siblings and grand parents and for a moment saw her face on NTV news at seven, Susan Nasimiyu arrested for cooking books at Kwa-Mugo Hardware and Timber Yard. She politely declined this offer, and late at night while her father's audible snoring purred through the house, she sobbed into her pillow and vowed that the next day would be better.

For a moment, for around six weeks the year past Susan courted the idea of running away. The type of work offered was not her problem. She was willing to be that woman that handed out rolls of tissue paper and collected ten shilling coins at the city council public toilets if it meant that

she would have some money at the end of the month to do her hair and maybe buy another pair of shoes. The weight on her shoulders was the ever dimming glint of hope in her parent's eyes when she returned home every evening and shook her head no in the kitchen. Her mother would take her hands and say a short prayer of thanksgiving while her father would repeat out loud what the newscasters were saying on the tv during the seven o'clock news.

Susan was the first daughter of three girls and against everyone's advice, her parents had begged, borrowed and probably stolen to put her through the Master's programme at the University of Nairobi. They begged, borrowed and stole some more to throw her a big graduation celebration because like any wise investment, this money they dug out of hard earth and squeezed out of dry sponges was going to give back in the end. It had to. The Kamaus down the road did the same and their eldest daughter worked for the UN now. Susan's mother started planning her retirement and wanted to open a small tailor's shop where she would make school uniforms for other people's children the way she had made them for her own over the years. In the heady days post her graduation, her father would make comments about how he'd always wanted to live in a double storey house and that maybe it was time that the house was extended. Susan would chirp in and suggest that maybe tiles were also a good idea and that it was about time that they got a hot water shower. Her two younger sisters looked at her like she was a mix of some kind of holy apparition and pop superstar. She was a sun in her own universe, and for those few months, she couldn't imagine that anything so bright and hot could burn out into nothing. Her hopeful returns home became slow and laboured shuffles, with her standing at the gate sometimes for an hour before letting herself into her home.

Were it not for the hope that her parents had in her landing a huge job with lots of money and the restoration of financial security, she was ready to mop floors under the guard of Purple Hair at RamCo Computer College. But she couldn't do that to her parents, and she couldn't live with the

shame of an expensive and wasted education. So she persisted and turned job after job down until the right one came along.

The sun beat down on the back of Susan's neck with the ferocity of a slave driver's whip. Many beads of sweat burst out of her pores like little rivers on her face, as she frantically mopped up the sweat with a white handkerchief her mother had given her. People would say that it's the kind of sun that calls the rain. Her mother was an unfaltering Christian and had been fasting for twenty days now, and not saying what for. Everyone knew it was for Susan's good fortune, but not all ears want to hear good news and so she kept her prayers and wishes between herself and her God.

The past Sunday Pastor Okun visiting from Nigeria had called for a great anointing, and had decreed from God's mouth to everyone's ears that for the strong of faith a great gift was waiting. They were asked to purchase anointed cloths (at a cost of two hundred shillings) and present them to Pastor Okun for prayers. Susan's mother did just that, and knelt before Pastor Okun that Sunday and asked him to bless her small rectangle of hope. He held both her hands in his large sweaty ones and said to Mama Susan that the work of the Lord is not done yet, and that a great gift for her years of piety and faith awaits her in the weeks to come. Susan's mother later told the family over dinner that she had felt the spirit of the Lord course through her spine and she knew that her deepest desires were to be soon fulfilled. That she stood up from the alter with her faith restored, her back straighter, her neck longer and gently went to offer Susan the little handkerchief that evening.

The next day, while looking through the newspaper, Susan saw that Mitchell Inc. a big construction magnate was hiring. They needed several financial accountants and women and people with disabilities were encouraged to apply. A tertiary qualification would be an advantage and they were an equal opportunity employer. She had read at least a thousand such advertisements and applied for them all. But because the possibility of quitting at the threshold of her big breakthrough cut her deeper than the possibility of more disappointment, she applied anyway. She re-worked her

CV and wrote a passionate cover letter that boasted her achievements and abilities. She filled the nearly two year unemployment gaps with short ‘consultancies’ done at fictitious business that her friends would help her vouch for. She walked to the Zoom Zoom Cyber Cafe and sent in her application.

Two weeks later, while biting into the flesh of her forefinger at the GPO bus stop, she got an email inviting her to come in for an interview.

Mitchell Inc. was situated somewhere in Old Muthaiga at an old house that must have been some country’s consulate. The Mitchell people hadn’t bothered to change much about the place, and a lot of the old consulate features remained. The reception area had the thick glass barrier that separated the visa applicants from the visa givers, like some kind of quarantine that the people within needed to protect themselves from. Indeed the reception area still had a sign that said ‘VISAS’. Susan sat in this waiting room, trying not to bite her fingers.

Across from her sat three other women and two men, equally fidgety, shuffling already shuffled papers and doodling nothing on plain corners. She noticed the bright light of a recent graduate who sat closest to the door into the ‘VISA’ section. Her back was straight and her hands and feet sat still and calm. Her lips were painted bright red and matched her nails and shoes and bag and jacket. She oozed confidence. She made and maintained eye contact with everyone who looked at her, and sat apart from the rest as if smelling the air of despondence and defeat that the other five interviewees seemed to wear like deodorant. Susan held no hopes for getting this job, but as she slowly pulled at thread that was fraying off on the ends of her little white handkerchief, she couldn’t help but hope that maybe this would be the end of the search. She wanted so badly to walk in through the door of her parents house and announce that she’d got the job. That she would earning an exciting salary and that the extensions to the house could be made. That she’d be taking a loan and buying a

car and that this year they were all going to the Safaricom Jazz Festival to enjoy the rhythm of Dobet Gnaore, whom she'd heard of and was a big fan.

One after the other, the various interviewees were called, and they all walked out looking lighter and more hopeful than they had gone in. The Lady In Red practically floated out of the interview room and smiled warmly at everyone as she left. She looked like she had been told on the spot that she had been hired. Susan regarded her own white blouse with ruffles and her black chino slacks. Her lack of make up and her short nails and hair. She had practised her poise and facial expressions in the bathroom mirror late at night while the house slept and her father snored. Her mother stayed up listening to the whispers and praying for her daughter.

"Susan Nasimiyu," a deep voice called from a speaker on the other side of the 'VISA' section. Quickly bunching her handkerchief into her pocket, Susan stood up, gathered her papers and disappeared into the wooden doors.

The interview panel was made up of four men sat in a semi circle, in suit jackets and pressed shirts. The men regarded Susan the way you look at snakes at the Botanical Gardens at Museum Hill. With a careful curiosity and guarded caution, as if assessing something that could potentially harm you. She took a deep breath and perched on the edge of the seat at the centre of the room, and looked briefly at all the men.

"Tell us about yourself Susan." A voice to the far left of the room asked. And Susan smiled her dentist receptionist smile, and began.

That evening, tired from performing confidence and wit, thunder cracked and the skies opened up with so much rain that Susan got drenched on her way home. She smiled her small smile at her mother as she entered the house. And her mother smiled back. She knew it was a sign, an omen that

this was the one. This is the interview that will reap the rewards of her love of Christ. This was the miracle that they had been waiting for.

It had been raining non-stop for two weeks when Susan got the call from a thin voice with a thick Kikuyu accent.

"Hello? Hello?" the voice asked on the other side of the line.

"Hello?" Susan echoed.

"Hello, I'm looking for Susan Nasimiyu. Hello?"

"This is Susan. How can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Kate from Mitchell Incorporated. I am calling about your interview for the accountant position." Susan held her breath. "You have to come in for a second interview. Can you make it on Saturday?"

"This Saturday?" It was her youngest sister's birthday but somehow this seemed more important than anything planned or happening at home.

"Yes. At eleven in the morning," Kate from Mitchell Incorporated said.

"Sure, yes I'll be there at eleven sharp."

Kate hung up the call without the obligatory goodbye and performed politeness that secretaries have. Susan exhaled. And inhaled again. She didn't tell anyone that she had a follow up interview. She didn't want to jinx this opportunity. Her hands shook as she texted her friend Mary to vouch for her Saturday absence. Friday couldn't come fast enough for Susan. She apologised to her family that Friday evening and promised to make it up to Grace who would be turning fourteen on the Saturday of the second interview. In the privacy of her room she carefully picked what to wear – a skirt this time to show versatility and femininity, now that she knew that it was going to be a panel of men. A floral blouse and maybe even a splash of colour on her nails. Or maybe not the nails. The same black patent leather heels would have to do until she could afford another pair. She went to

bed early that Friday and was out of the house before anyone woke up. She went window shopping down Kenyatta Avenue before she caught her matatu to Old Muthaiga. For the first time in ages she allowed herself to dream of possibilities. She imagined a new pair of shoes and a nice present for her parents. She imagined chicken on Saturday night with chapati, like they used to do when she was younger and her father still worked as a clerk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At half past ten she jumped onto a bus and slowly walked to the former consulate and now offices of Mitchell Inc. Karen wasn't at the front desk and the 'VISA' sign had finally been taken down and replaced with big letters that read RECEPTION. Susan sat down in the same seat she had occupied the last time as if for good luck. The same booming god-like voice echoed her name into the empty room after a few minutes.

Susan sat down on the same seat and in the same way as she had done nearly two weeks ago, only this time there was no panel. There was one man, tall, lean and with a beard. She wasn't ready for a one on one conversation and was a little surprised by this sudden turn of events. She relaxed a little and allowed the back of the chair to support her weight.

"I brought my laptop today because I assumed this would be the practical aspect of this process." She said as she absently stroked the bag resting on her lap. She in the end decided to go for a light shade of pink on her nails, which she borrowed from Agnes who lived two houses down. It bounced some light off in the room and she smiled.

"That won't be necessary at this point. I called you here to try and get to know you better. To see who we are employing." The bearded man said.

To see who we are employing. These words echoed in her head over and over again. She had so many questions. Did she get the job? How much do they pay? When does she start? Don't they want to test her skills? Will there be an opportunity to practise her forensic accounting? Did she get the job? Despite herself she smiled. Slow and wide and allowed the happiness to reach her eyes and

pour out. She noticed that her palms had become a bit sweaty and she carefully wiped them on the bag on her lap. She looked up to see the man with the beard watching her. Attentively. Not smiling back.

"Okay. What would you like to know sir?" Susan asked.

"Call me Kevin. Sir sounds old and I'm not." This time he smiled.

Susan smiled back.

"You see Susan, Mitchell Incorporated is embarking on some of the biggest real estate projects Nairobi has seen. I'm talking malls and residential houses as well as business complexes that sell a certain type of life to a certain type of person, you know?"

He was talking to a Jacaranda tree outside the office, with his back to Susan. She wanted to chime in on all the research she had done on Mitchell Inc. and the various projects around the world that they had done. She had come prepared to show that she was a woman who thought about and knew things on top of being particularly good with numbers. But all she said was yes. Her thoughts and words had turned into hopes and dreams that flew out the window and perched onto the the Jacaranda tree that Kevin was speaking to.

"And we need the right kind of people on board. People that won't disappoint us along the way. We are looking for long term team players, you know?" He said this as he turned to face her.

"Yes." Susan said, and left it at that.

"I'll personally need people on my team who I can trust. And I think I can trust you Susan."

Susan smiled.

"We will have to work closely together you and I, and I'm a tough boss. I don't like excuses and I expect nothing less than one hundred percent all the time from everyone." Kevin added.

Susan nodded her yes this time and made eye contact with Kevin. What felt like hours passed between them with no words spoken. An itch of an idea in the back of Susan's mind suddenly came to life, and she let out a small gasp.

They both knew that all the dots finally connected and the picture was clear now. Susan put her hand over her mouth, and Kevin sat on the desk directly opposite her and crossed his arms. Susan tried to look away but the whole room felt full of Kevin, his shirt and his beard and his footfalls on the faded red carpet. He seemed to swell and take up all the room and all the air and Susan worked hard not to start gasping.

"Do you want to be on my team Susan?" Kevin asked again, not sounding impatient or trying to hurry her response.

"Yes." Susan heard the word leave her mouth like a brick dislodged from a wall. It hit the ground between her and Kevin and sat there. It was understood. Without words or pictures or gestures it was decided.

Between saying yes and putting on the seatbelt in Kevin's Toyota Corolla sedan, only one thought crossed Susan's mind. Would he keep her there long or would she make it home in time for Grace's birthday. Her mother had suggested that they could wait until Susan returned home later in the evening to sing happy birthday and cut the cake. Suddenly it became important for Susan to not be late. But she couldn't say this, because the words felt heavy and loaded, like unstable bombs that might detonate her dreams prematurely. So she stewed them in her head instead, allowed them to mingle in with other fears and hopes, until every colour became brown and the world outside turned sepia. She tried to count the trees lining Rhapta Road in Westlands but lost count at around fifty six, when the trees became bushes then fences then walls. He stopped outside a black gate and hooted once. An askari in a G4S uniform opened the gate and he drove through a small driveway and parked his car under a Jacaranda tree. She took her laptop bag and followed Kevin's footsteps, making sure not to make any eye contact with the security guard whose gaze fell and shone on her like the sun in a cloudless sky. Susan had nothing to shield her from the distaste of his gaze.

The house inside was warm, but Susan's arms were covered in goosebumps. She clung to her laptop bag like a life buoy, and stood still and tall in what she thought was his living room. The hot afternoon sun that burned down just before the late afternoon showers brought a lot of light into the space. She wasn't trying to remember much about his experience so she kept her eyes trained on the right tail light of Kevin's car, and tried to remember his car's registration number. KCD 404X. That would be easy to remember. For years and years. She kept looking at the yellow number plate and running the numbers and letters in her head over and over.

Kevin gestured to her to follow him and she did, her footfalls on the wooden flooring suddenly too loud. Each footstep felt like a knell or a big gong that echoed through the room. She was ushered into a large bedroom, with a big bed and very white sheets.

She hoped he didn't say anything. She hoped he didn't ask questions about whether she was a virgin or not. She hoped he used protection. She hoped it was over soon and that she made it home in time for Grace's birthday. She hoped it was something she could wash off.

Kevin disappeared into a small adjoining bathroom, while Susan took off her clothes. She left her underwear on and climbed into the crisp white bed. She lay perfectly still and closed her eyes. The soup of thoughts began to churn.

KCD 404X. Did she have the job? Member of a winning team. One hundred percent. Did she have the job?

Kevin climbed in beside her and put his arm around her. She wanted to sob. But somehow her tears had travelled to her toes and all she had was a dry throat and dry eyes. She opened her eyes and looked at his face. He looked like the hundreds of boys she had gone to school with years ago. He looked like Uncle Paul. He looked like her ex boyfriend Mike. He looked like everyone. Part of her was miserable and the other part was still hopeful. She had been willing to mop floors and clean public toilets as work, and thought that maybe this wasn't so different. Something had to

give. If it wasn't her family's pride and hope in their first daughter then it would have to be her own pride and hope. Maybe she could wash this off. He said she got the job, right?

Kevin began kissing her neck and the sound of his body moving between the sheets sounded like snakes. Thousands of slithering snakes in a pit where she was trapped and couldn't move. She tried to move but somehow her body was frozen in this one position. Something slithered into her mouth. Kevin's tongue. And something slithered between her legs. Something slithered around her waist and on her breasts. The snakes were everywhere. Inside her, on her, around her. Something licked her ear and she whimpered. She still hadn't found her tears. She waited for a bite, some kind of pain, a reminder of this transaction and who needed who more. It didn't come. She didn't come. The slithering sensation persisted and covered her whole body, and somehow her body responded. Susan realised that there was no pain yet, and allowed the physiology to overpower the emotion of her heart. There was a surprising moment of gentleness when Kevin climaxed and held onto Susan, tightly, let go and slid off her.

Tears rushed to her eyes then, in gushes and splashes and wet the crisp white pillows. But no sound left her lips. Susan and Kevin lay there silently for a while. And the sound of snakes stopped.

A week later Kate called again, and told Susan to come in on a Friday morning to sign her contract with Mitchell Inc. She needed to bring a copy of her ID and her National Social Security Card if she had one. They were open from eight in the morning and she would need to report to Mr. Mbithi, the Human Resources manager.

Susan said a string of yeses and sat on her bed. She took a deep breath and burst into sobs. She cried herself to sleep, and when her mother came home from teaching, she asked that Susan be left alone for the evening.

Friday evening, after window shopping, Susan bought a bag of pears and walked slowly home in time for dinner.

Between a mouthful of ugali and sukuma wiki, she looked at her mother and smiled.

“I got a job today.” She said, pinching another handful of the hot ugali.

There was silence in the room as the voice of Victoria Rubadiri on NTV at Seven took over the room, announcing the rise in the price of maize meal given the ongoing drought and poor rains.

“It’s with Mitchell Incorporated, a real estate company that’s going to be doing some construction work all over Nairobi and I’m joining the accounting team.”

More silence.

“I start work on Monday next week.”

There was a collective sigh of relief in the room. Like a rope that had been held too long that everyone was allowed to let go off all at once. Later that night, just before bed, Susan found that her mother had washed, ironed and folded her little handkerchief and placed it on the end of her bed. The frayed edges were tucked and sewn, and her initials embroidered on the edge, fixed.

2. Women do this Everyday—A Reflective Essay

In the beginning…

A lifetime ago, in the infancy of my activism, I was a trainer in HIV and Aids awareness for an organisation called Kicking AIDS Out while in my second year of my undergraduate studies at the University of Namibia. The Kicking AIDS Out approach used sports as a model for teaching awareness of and protection from HIV infection to at-risk, school going youth in Namibia. I participated in a good number of training of trainers and was eventually a certified facilitator of sessions, conversations and trainings. On a hot summer day, maybe in Maun in Botswana or in Cape Town South Africa, I can't remember, I facilitated the training of peers, young women and men my age, who would go out and become trainers themselves. Only now do I realise that the title of 'trainer' gave me a certain amount of power and authority over people my age and some older than me. In any other space, very few people, whether women or men, would have been willing to listen to a 20something year old speak to them about HIV and Aids. At this particular training, a young man, fit and healthy looking, a sportsman, was participating in an activity that focused on protection and transmission of HIV and how to engage with young people about the risks. One of the activities of this session involved lining up the participants and reading out 'true' or 'false' statements. If the person agreed with the statement, they were to step to the right, and if they disagreed with the statement, they were to step to the left. Once on opposite sides of the line, the participants were to then engage in conversations and argue or defend their positions. Amongst the many questions, one that the participants had respond with 'true' or 'false' answer spoke to consent. I can't remember the exact question, but once the question was asked, this young man, alone stood to the left of the room, disagreeing with everyone else. The ensuing conversation has stayed with me for years. Each time I recount this story, whether to others or to myself, I am reminded that sex, desire, power and consent are not ideas that African women are allowed to own easily. The young man, very matter of factly stated that, 'When it comes to sex, everything is harder for the man. He's the one that has to get the erection, he's the one whose penis gets flaccid and useless. The man does all the hard work.

The woman just lies there, with her hole, doing nothing.' Of course the room giggled and guffawed, I'm sure I smiled awkwardly, and redirected the conversation to the people on the right side of the room, trying to swiftly move along. But this moment, years later, made me realise that women's sexuality, or at least the sexuality of women as seen by African men, was a submissive, passive, absent sexuality, or rather, non-existent. The lack of agency over our sexual lives, in this moment, and indeed in numerous other moments in my life, and the lives of other African women that I loved or lived with remains evident in our day to days.

The training work that I did as a Kicking AIDS Out facilitator came with so much discomfort, most of it because we had to, in some ways, talk about sex. We, African women and girls, were raised to not speak of sex, let alone have any. When I first got my period, at the age of fourteen, my mother told me that I had to be very careful around boys, because I could now get pregnant. She never told me how, and of course never told me how not to. In my later years, through the mentorship of older feminists and women, this discomfort turned into a sustained interest in how sex is shaped by our societies and how African women especially, engage with and in sex, within the confines of societal expectations, religious guilt and obligation, as well as how women living in the margins of society, whether as queer and lesbian women, or as sex workers, disrupt ideas about what it means to be a woman having sex in Africa.

It took the writing of these stories, and now the retrospective thought process of this reflective essay to first realise, then admit, that along with the stigma, exclusion and death that it came with, the ongoing HIV pandemic had finally allowed us, women, to talk about sex. It is through working in communities in Namibia, which at the time had a HIV prevalence rate of 19.9% (Third National Development Plan of Namibia, 2008), one of the highest in the global South, that allowed me to openly and publicly speak about sex. But the context of these conversations was shrouded in fear, judgement and stigma, with carefully chosen language, and mostly medical terminology. Although I had not done this work for many years, I doubted then, as I do now, that these spaces are

completely devoid of this fear. Although the focus of the work needed that we talk about the virus and how to reduce its spread, the conversations created a public discourse on sex amongst the African women that I interacted with that was completely devoid of a desire for sexual pleasure, or any pleasure at all. The sex spoken about in these spaces was not, in any way sexy. But also, I was very young, still naive in my own private sexual interactions and discovering aspects of my own sexuality that would only emerge much later in life, and therefore I had not yet asked myself these questions about desire and pleasure and the role they play in influencing women's ability to decide whether they have sex, what kind of sex they have, and whom they have sex with. And indeed whether we (as African/black women), could actually choose this, if it were made available to us. Also missing at this stage of my growth was an understanding of the relationship between sex, desire and power.

At the time of deciding to do this project, I was fortunate enough to work in a space that allowed me to access to spaces and conversations that expanded my knowledge and consequently inquisition into the interplay between desire and power and how this affects our experiences and articulations of sex. Even in my political adulthood, armed with language and experience, I found that sex, sexuality, desire were still elusive conversations and articulations, but more so, when it came to expressing pleasurable, affirming and consensual moments of desire that were testament to African women's agency and yes, power over their sexual lives.

Patricia McFadden affirms this apprehension in her essay on *Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice*:

> The fears that these concerns often raise constitute what I call "socio-sexual anxiety". The intensity of this anxiety is generated by the fact that there is an extremely intimate relationship between sexuality and power, a connection which is manifested in a range of circumstances and experiences. In fact, the potential for meaningful resolution of socio-cultural crises (such as those generated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic) rests squarely on our ability to

confront the intersection of these two templates of human existence (McFadden, 2003, p. 50).

McFadden's words about 'socio-sexual anxiety' became especially true during the writing journey. The interplay of power and sexuality emerged as I tried to ensure that my short stories had accounts of erotic agency and as much as possible, pleasure. With an almost overwhelming presence of and reference to sexual violence, both within and outside literature I was reading, it became important that some of my stories included moments where the characters could decide for themselves when, where and how to participate in and where the story allowed, own their own erotic agency. But also move beyond the survival of sexual violence towards claiming sexual agency, pleasure and power. Finding ways to express this erotic agency required that the characters also inhabit a certain amount of power over their erotic experiences and their sexual lives. This was tricky because much as these were fictional short stories, they had to be an honest representation of the lives and realities of women. The reality remains that women, especially African/black women, inhabit lives where we are either completely asexualised or hyper-sexualised, with stories, experiences and narratives of violence taking up a lot space, leaving little room for pleasure. Scholar Sanya Osha writes;

> In essence, a series of erasures and misrepresentations have been visited on black sexuality since the advent of coloniality. The colonising agent either unduly romanticised the colonised subject by virginising her/him through a powerful process of de-agentilisation and also by objectification (fossilation in the Eurocentric imaginary) or by hypersexualising her/him, employing tropes of excess, unrestrained carnality, irrationality and violence. (Osha, 2004, p. 92)

Osha here surfaces the fear of my erotic stories reinforcing long-held ideas about the sexuality of African women. In this same space of mind, a classmate, Noluthando Ncube, as feedback, asked whether it was possible to include the telling of 'celibate erotica' or erotica that spoke to

whether there can be an erotic experience that was not pinned onto the sexual lives of women. This was an interesting writing challenge that I did not feel well equipped to pursue, but offered an important question in the writing of the erotic experience of women worth pursuing. My project would focus instead on the idea and presumption that African/black women *are* hypersexual and what this means for the erotic and sexual pleasure narratives.

Osha's academic thought on this type of hyperseuxalisation of the African (woman and man) is present in several short stories I read. In the collection *Erotique Noire/Black Erotica* this hypsersexualisation is present in several short writings by African American authors. However, in this collection, some of the writing (which is easily perceived as sexual hyperbole), is offered almost as a subversive and rebellious stance against the trope. An example;

> I loved my all day sucker.
>
> He was my best fucker
>
> He could suck, lick and fuck until day's end.
>
> You took mu all day sucker,
>
> And I thought you were my friend. (My All Day Sucker, M.J Morgan, *Erotique Noire/Black Erotica*, p.33)

The collection is full of writing that takes ownership of the presumption that Africans (and African Americans) are an oversexed people that enjoy an almost hedonistic approach to the erotic. This was a refreshing find, not unlike the SlutWalk Movement which began in 2011 in an attempt to upturn the negative connotations associated with the naming of women who speak, present and take up space in a certain way was 'sluts'. I found this collection to be powerful and affirming, but this was not the kind of writing that I wanted to pursue in my project. I felt that the audience, African women, might not easily connect with writing that presented such a shamelessly bold and powerful sexuality, that didn't easily exist in many geographical contexts. In the many day-to-day spaces that I find myself, also in popular African literature, have I seen this level of owned and powerfully

wielded sexual agency by African women. As an experiment, I shared a few excerpts of the writing in E*rotique Noire/Black Erotica* with friends and lovers, and the feedback (as I had expected) was giggles and guffaws similar to those in that room so many years back. I decided that maybe my audience was not ready for writing that strongly subverted tropes on African sexuality. By and large, the language, images and representations of African women as hypersexual or asexual remains visible today, in subtle and overt ways.

A reinforcement of the idea (and reality) of African women's muted and misrepresented sexuality appears in the editorial of *Agenda*'s issue on Sexuality in Africa, where Vasu Reddy lends credence to McFaddens thoughts on 'socio-sexual anxiety' when he states '*Sexuality therefore emerges as a distinct marker of social life, one that accentuates a view that the current material conditions of women's lives in particular, are still informed by violence and victimhood.*' (Agenda, 2004, p.9). The title of this publication, although more academic than literary, *Sexuality in Africa*, created the expectation that the wide range of sexuality related stories and experiences would feature, including sexual pleasure and consensual desire. In this particular publication, the collections of academic and creative writing that are offered focus mostly on the surviving of various kinds of sexual violence by women in Africa. It is not wrong then to assume that the sexuality (and by reference and association the erotic) of women in Africa is mostly synonymous with sexual violence and in many instances HIV and Aids.

Another epiphany that presented itself in the process of this project was the fact that, despite my publicly owned, privately enacted, healthy relationship with sex—meaning that for the first time in my adulthood, while I was able to have guilt-free, desire-based sex, writing about sex and desire remained difficult. I was encouraged by my first year course mates, almost pushed to 'just do it'. Just share stories that had sexy sex scenes and moments featuring African women owning, participating in and receiving sexual desire. But I could not. There were times, as the only Black woman

student in my 2015 class where writing, sharing and presenting stories of intimate sexual desire of African women felt like I was telling secrets. This feeling, which is what it was, is best expressed by African American playwright and poet Ntozake Shange in her forward titled Fore/Play, for the book *Erotica Noir|Black Erotica*:

> We are lost in the confusion of myths and fears of race and sex. To be a 'good' people, to be 'respectable' and 'worthy' citizens we've had to combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts and loves, to the extent that we disavow our own sensuality to each other. Rape and rapists are intimately connected to the culture's unconscious perception and prescriptions for people of colour anywhere in this hemisphere…So how do we speak of our desires for each other to each other in a language where our relationships to our bodies and desires lack dignity as well as nuance?…Here at the end of the twentieth century, with the African continent shattered by war, famine and AIDS, with our folks dazed by the deconstruction of Reconstruction, sex and sensuality are elements of any progressive discussion. (Shange, 1992 p. xix-xx)

Besides learning how to tell a good story, I had to learn how to tell a good story that spoke to the erotic experiences of African women without feeding the trope of the hypersexual/asexual dichotomy. I read the prompting of my classmates to write more sex into my stories more as an act of voyeurism, than an encouragement to dig deeper and find stories that expressed an unfettered and unconstrained desire from African women. With the sexuality of African women so heavily policed and critically watched, both inside and outside myself, writing about our sex and desire and presenting this to a class of predominantly white students and lecturers was daunting. I feared that my short stories wouldn't accurately reflect the real experiences of African women, and that my work would not be well received, both within and outside the course. I feared that I would have to explain my writing, and in fact I did just that in my early stories. Feedback during seminars was 'show, don't tell', which I appreciated very much, and my over-telling in my short stories was read

as a struggle between the writer and the activist. This tug did exist, but less visible in the critique received was a deep fear or being misunderstood and misrepresenting the lives of African women. There was a moment when, slightly egged on by this chant for more sex in my stories, I submitted two very short short stories which were, if nothing else about sex. Below is an excerpt from the story *Ascension:*

> Her mind drifted again as her small, but deliberate sips of wine began to take effect. She always felt alcohol journey through her body. Different kinds of drinks travelled to different places. Vodka went straight to her knees. And wine went straight to her arms and neck. She couldn't sit up anymore and lay on the arm of her couch as she had done earlier. In the distance-she heard her child stir – but didn't wake up. She allowed herself to feel the wine travel through her veins, red finding blood red, and dancing through her body. In her absentminded play with herself she realised that she was hard. And wet. She giggled lightheadedly at this thought and continued pulling at her pubic hair, and sipping the last drops of her wine. (Ascension, submitted 26th November 2015).

The reception of this submission was tepid. The feedback from my classmates of the whole story was that the writing did not 'properly contextualise' the sex and sensuality. That the sex, in as much as this was a sexy sex scene, needed more story and less sex. Finding this balance remained difficult, with the first year almost coming to an end and my submissions having more story than sex. This made me wonder if maybe, the erotic experience for African women needed to be communicated in other ways. I wondered if the issue was not the sex or sensuality at all, but rather *how* these stories were told. I began to explore what sex and sexuality read and sounded like when written by and for African women. The question, 'where is the sex?' asked often in class was a question I carried around as I sought to find stories and inspiration. Another prod from my supervisor in my second year, Bronwyn Law-Vilijoen, was the question of whether it mattered how much sex a story

had, if in the end, it was a well told story. While I agreed with this provocation, the challenge remained in telling stories that primarily focused on the lust and desire of African women. This was the challenge, and remained the challenged until the end. The telling of the stories was not as taxing as the telling of stories that *had* to focus on the sex lives of the characters. In the second year though, this became a lot easier, when I exercised the 'trust in character' that James Woods refers to in his book *How Fiction Works*. An example of a story that not only included but focused on the sex life of a character was the story of *Mary*. My treatment of this story was the least strained writing process that I have experienced. Besides trusting the story and character and muting the inner tug-of-war between storytelling and being an activist, what I feel made this easier to tell was the honesty and authenticity of Mary's voice, her worry at her lack of shame, and her unending curiosity to try and understand her own sexuality. *Mary's* own reflections on her journey towards understanding herself have an honesty that I could relate to, which made the writing process lighter. In *Mary*, the story's protagonist of the same name reflects;

> Alcoholics Anonymous was possibly the biggest secret that Mary had ever kept for herself. No one knew. And it was a strange kind of secret because she wasn't an alcoholic. Although, she was convinced that people would be more forgiving of a woman who was an alcoholic than a whore. A quick google search had led her to believe that she was a nymphomaniac, but she did not know where to get help for this kind of affliction. Some years back a movie of the same name came out, and she'd secretly asked Jamo, the man who sold pirated copies of movies to the neighbourhood, to put it on a USB drive for her. Jamo had laughed, winked at her, and copied the movie onto the drive for her. Mary watched *Nymphomaniac* with a mix of disgust and horror, and decided that maybe she was not a nymphomaniac. Maybe she was just a really bad Christian. Maybe, she had a demon that could be exorcised one day, if she eventually knew what it was called.

> Many Sundays ago, after surviving the shame of Kamau's pregnancy and the still birth of her son, after secretly asking a nurse in a small town far away to inject her with the five year contraceptive implant, after having more and more sex and feeling nothing, not even the mudslide of love that came with sex in novels, a Sunday sermon made her realise that in order to become whole again in the eyes of the Lord, Mary needed to feel shame. Mary was sure that if somehow, she could find a way to feel ashamed, that she would be healed. Shame was her salvation, if only she could find some.
>
> Pastor Goroh had said that shame was such an important emotion. That there was nothing more evil than a shameless woman. Like damned Kardashians and the evil women that participated in Nairobi Diaries. Pastor Goroh said that we needed to seek the Lord in all ways and allow the spirit of shame, especially for women, to grow in our hearts like trees. That in the shade of the tree of shame we would find modesty, chastity and piety. And this is the one thing that Mary did not have, and could not find. (*Mary*, Submitted 31 May 2017).

Before I was able to do this, I had filled my stories with many unnecessary details and explanations, when in fact I could have just told the story. I had given myself the responsibility of telling a story or stories that moved away from any idea or experience that was seen as 'stereotypical of the African woman'. Poet, lecturer and reader during the course seminars Phillippa Yaa Devilliers was a powerful prompt in the class, encouraging me to do the poetic thing and tell the story, politics and feminist responsibility be damned. The effect that this imaginary responsibility was having on the writing was not good. I became anxious about the stories and feedback to the point of not writing at all. It took conversations with friends, classmates, supervisors in the course and some therapy to relive me of this 'burden'. Again, I had to remember to trust the characters and the stories I was telling to do the work of showing this agency, this 'non-stereotypical' narrative of the African woman. But also understand and accept that the stories had to be rooted in a reality that included some stereotypes and I had to be okay with that.

Outside the seminars and the course, I was faced with an emerging politic, led by women, that was speaking truth to power around sexual violence. I imagined that, at a time when more women, in Africa and beyond, were gathering courage to speak out about the pervasive nature of sexual violence, writing that focused on sexual desire and agency would not find space, time and empathy even from the African women that the stories were meant for.

2015 saw the emergence and spread of the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement across tertiary institutions in South Africa. Across the sea, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement had also become a rallying call for African Americans and Africans alike to speak up against social, institutional, intimate and structural injustices, and take up spaces that they are denied. At the forefront of both the BLM and the FMF movements were African American and African women respectively, and at the fore of women's issues in both these movements was a call to address and expose the sexual violence that many women experience in the world. These moments, dear to me as a feminist, and important to me as an African woman, made it even harder to write about desire, let alone open, honest, free, sexual desire. Who would read these stories? Are African women experiencing desire, open and honest sexual desire even in the face of unimaginable sexual violence? These questions consumed me, and slowly I drifted further and further away from the objective of my project. I felt, in every way imaginable, that this was the wrong time to present sex and desire as paradigm political tools necessary for the emancipation of African women.

But I read a few essays, inspired by Audre Lorde, Patricia McFadden, Charmaine Perreira and even bell hooks, and believed again that there *must* be room for the erotic in the writing about African women and by African women. Both as a literary necessity and as a political tool for the emancipation of women in Africa. In the book *Erotica Noir|Black Erotica,* I read a short story titled *Nasty Delightful Things* by Piri Thomas, about an erotic encounter the male narrator had while crammed into a New York subway train. In this story, he is pressed up against a woman's buttocks, a stranger, and the motion of the subway as it starts and stops to let more people on and off, causes

enough contact between his body and hers for him to get an erection. Things like consent are not very clear in this story. The woman, who knows what is happening, and at some point turns to face him, makes enough eye contact that somehow 'allows' the storyteller to grab hold of her breast and tease her nipple. There are moment's he's afraid that his erection on her buttocks will make her protest and yell, but she doesn't. At some point before the trains stops, in the back and forth motion of a fully packed subway train, both he and her (he decides) climax. They part ways when the train 'vomits people' out onto the streets, and they have no interaction after. Later in the story, while taking a shower, he tries to imagine her conversation with her friends, where she expresses the gratitude of the next stop and losing each other in the crowds '*... 'cause I couldn't bear to have him say anything to me after my practically going to bed with him.*' The woman in this story expresses shame and embarrassment after participating in a sexual act or moment that the narrator, a man, had 'decided' that she had consented to. This story is important for many reasons, but especially because at this time and day, it's important because it blurs the lines between consent and who decides what 'yes' is. Ten, maybe fifteen years ago, debates about this erotic moment would be very different to a debate held today. Immediately after reading this short story I had questions. Which I asked a few friends and asked them too to read the story. I wondered whether the woman's reaction was driven by desire or fear. Women in public spaces are not safe, and especially on public transport. That the narrator expected her to scream is proof of this—the constant encroachment of men into women's spaces, and especially in public where men take up more space than women do. Or maybe, she was a willing participant in a mutually pleasurable and consensual sexual moment, in a public space, with limited ability to voice out her consent. This public calling out of sexual misconducts again influenced how I told the stories. In the story titled *Susan*, a young woman, well educated but long unemployed, the apple of her family's eye and the only hope for financial success, opts to sleep with a man that offers her a job in exchange for sex. This story was tricky because it's not outrightly clear whether she was coerced into sleeping with this man, or whether she agreed to this

out of desperation and need for a job. The sex is strange, but not unpleasurable. The public narratives around transactional sex leave women with very little room for negotiation and agency. The exchange of sex for a job, on the surface cannot be viewed as something that a woman would *choose* to do. But somehow, in this story, the young woman, Susan, had enough room, in the moment, and agency, to say no, to a transactional sexual encounter. And yet she chooses to go ahead with it, even after turning down a number of other jobs, that paid significantly less, but would have spared her the discomfort of this encounter. While dealing with these conundrums was interesting, I kept asking myself whether this what I was writing was indeed erotic. Feedback from the class was affirming of this, despite my doubts. As did Audre Lorde's words on the erotic:

> The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.' (Lorde, 1978).

In this particular story, despite the circumstances, I can argue that this character, Susan, acted with agency. And that what might not have began as an erotic moment, *had* an erotic moment. Telling stories, erotic ones, in this highly charged atmosphere with a strong awareness and desire for justice made it exceptionally hard to write stories that did not include elements of sexual coercion or indeed, abuse. But I wrote the stories anyway, and I will have to allow the readers to decide for themselves what the stories mean.

Justifying the fictional short story while politicising pleasure

I completely believe in the feminist maxim that the private is (public) and political. In writing these short fictional stories about women, I realised that I have been these women at different times in my life and that I know women who are living the stories I have written. At first I tried to externalise

the characters in my stories, distance them from myself and my own experiences because I imagined that these stories that I have already lived or that I already know were not interesting enough. I didn't not want to end up writing fictionalised accounts of my own experiences. I convinced myself that they (the women in the short stories) didn't offer anything new for African women to engage with and critique. In order to write stories that had sex that was properly contextualised, I tried to imagine situations that could lead to or build into an erotic moment. I read up on parts of Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya, looking for texture for the stories in places I'd lived, but the writing remained strained and devoid of erotic expression. I realised that I could not completely write fictional stories that spoke to the experiences of black African women that did not include my own reality and in some ways, my own experiences. I realised that, although fictional on paper, the women who appear in the short stories are as real as rain, tangible, alive, present, and that their stories a*re* interesting, and need telling. A friend in conversation, where I expressed this struggle to said to me that 'fictional does not mean unreal.' This has helped not only in the writing of the stories, but also in other spaces and conversations where black African women critique the fact that my writing is fiction. This part of the writing process made me confront the very real experience of the feminist maxim that says '*the private is public and political*'. At some point I wondered if maybe, this attempt at distancing my own sexual and social experiences was not just a manifestation of 'socio-sexual anxiety' but also an attempt at distancing or perhaps hiding my own sexuality from the audience. bell hooks reflects on the importance of using fiction as an important way of telling what can be difficult stories. In her book, *Sisters of the Yam*, she reflects on both her teaching experience and on Alice Walker's writing of real-fictional stories of African American women. hooks states:

> In Alice Walker's novel *The Colour Purple,* Celie, the black heroine, only begins to recover from her traumatic experiences of incest/rape, domestic violence and marital rape when she is able to tell her story, to be open and honest. reading fictional narratives where black fe-

> male characters break though silences to speak the truth of their lives, to give testimony, has helped individual black women to take the risk to openly share painful experiences. We see examples of such courageous testimony in *The Black Women's Health Book*. Yet many black readers of Alice Walker's fiction were angered by Celie's story. They sought to "punish" Walker by denouncing the work, suggesting that it represented a betrayal of blackness. If this is the way folks respond to fiction, we can imagine then how much harder it is for black women to actually speak honestly in daily life about their real traumatic experiences. (hooks, 1993, p.25)

This reaction to fiction isn't new or unique. The creative literary scene in countries like Uganda has suffered similar strains over the year, and, unsurprisingly, African women experienced the most resistance to publishing and distributing creative fiction. Author Goretti Kyomuhendo who founded FEMRITE, the first writer's association for women in Uganda has written about the struggle of women writers to get published in Uganda over time. She reflects;

> Many other women who joined FEMRITE had similar struggles. Some of them had been writing for a long time, but lacked the courage to present their manuscripts to publishing houses dominated by men. Some had been courageous enough to present their work, but as happened in my case, publishers were reluctant to take risks with fiction, especially in the case of first time writers. (Kyomuhendo, 2003, p.69)

This dance between the private and the political is fluid, like water, taking the shape of the vessel that it's kept in. In this way, the stories became the vessels and the characters the fluid. The characters in the end (I hope) do the work of making the very personal, very intimate moments of desire and sex political, without my interference. The politicisation of pleasure is hard, when especially my daily work and life are doing the work of politically naming private oppressions such as rape and intimate partner violence. The nature of my occupation makes it hard not to pontificate to a political idea when developing a character or a story. This was a constant critique of my writing

during the first year of the project, that the voice of the activist takes over the voice of the characters and changes the story into a lecture on social inequality and oppression. In that first year, I didn't trust that the story in itself, with well-developed characters and ideas was enough to do the work of politicising pleasure. I had to find a balance between speaking to the context of the characters in the stories and allowing them to speak to this themselves. I had to learn how to trust, both my ability to tell a story, and the ability of the character(s) to carry the story and convey the political message I was seeking to deliver. What I was most afraid of in my writing, was for these stories to become apolitical, self-indulgent drivel. In the process of learning to trust the characters in my stories, I found great inspiration in the book *How Fiction Works*, by James Wood, where he states:

> But to repeat, what is a character? I am thicketed in qualifications: if I say that a character seems connected to consciousness, to the use of a mind, the many superb examples of characters who seem to think very little, who are rarely seen thinking bristle up (Gatsby, Captain Ahab, Becky Sharpe, Widmerpool, Jean Brodie). If I refine the thought by repeating that a character at least has some essential connection to an interior life, to inwardness, is seen 'from within', I am presented with the nicely opposing examples of those two adulterers, Anna Karenina and Effie Briest, the first of whom does a lot of reflection, and is seen internally as well as externally, the second of whom, in Theodor Fontane's eponymous novel, is seen almost entirely from the outside, with little space set aside for represented reflection (Wood, 2008, p. 82-83).

When I learned how to better allow the inwardness of the characters to show, did trust in the work and consequently the characters develop. This exercise in trust led to what I felt was my first well written story titled *Nelao*. The story is well paced, and I allowed my memory of the heat of summer in Windhoek, and that of my time at the University of Namibia to help contextualise the story. In this story I allowed the main character Nelao, to show and say what she was seeing an feeling, without trying to 'imagine' the space and sensations. After being advised during feedback ses-

sions during the seminars to 'show, not tell', I included more dialogue between different characters in stories to express the texture of moments and capture what people were feeling. This allowed more introspection of the characters, more description of what, where and why, I also felt that this expanding of the feelings, thoughts and words of the characters built more trust in their story and my own confidence in telling these stories. All these elements together, I feel, show this inwardness, a certain 'aliveness' and 'realness' of the characters in the stories.

Another challenge I encountered in the 'politics versus pleasure' conundrum was the already existing hyper politicisation of African women's sexuality. In 2015, South African actress Mmabatho Montsho published a series online that explored how women's sexuality is viewed in South Africa. The series of YouTube videos features a number of women, all residing in South Africa, of different races, religious convictions and classes. A common reflection in all these women's contributions is the fact that for the African woman, pleasure is an experience that we are expected to make accessible to men, and not for ourselves. In the series, clinical psychologist Khosi Jiyane mentions society and culture's (both popular and traditional) fixation on the woman's vagina, completely ignoring that this is an anatomical part of what makes a whole woman. (Women on Sex, 2015).

In places where women gather, or are allowed to speak openly about sex and sexuality, the topic of desire and agency don't easily dominate such spaces. In this video series, publications, books, social media and popular culture, the last few years especially (between 2015 and 2017) the experiences of sexual violence, the denying of women's sexual agency in multiple spaces, both public and private, have taken up a considerable amount of space. These years have seen the emergence of powerful movements in Africa and beyond, many of them led by black women, that have featured women pushing back against sexual violence that has been surrounded by a lot of silencing, structural and institutional violence. In numerous conferences, meetings and gatherings that I attend as part of my occupation, these narratives of victimhood, survival and sexual violence continue to

be dominant. Spaces that speak to sexual agency, pleasure and the erotic experiences of women and especially black African women are found mostly in social creative and artistic spaces, and dominantly online, in private and anonymous and often social media platforms. While these conversations about sexual agency exist on the margins, there is almost a reluctance to foreground the erotic as a truly emancipatory tool and experience for black African women. McFadden affirms this feeling when she observes:

> For many African women, even the suggestion that sexual pleasure and eroticism have political implications elicits alarm, and it is seldom recognised that sexual pleasure is fundamental to our right to a safe and wholesome lifestyle. (McFadden, 2003, p.50).

I wondered if perhaps the struggle for both myself and other women in spaces that have been made safe enough for us to speak about a pleasurable erotic experience is the *how*. I wondered whether there's a certain way of speaking about sexual pleasure that we haven't fully explored that allows us to claim our sexual and erotic agency in multiple spaces. An african erotic lexicon perhaps? But would such a lexicon be inclusive of the variety of erotic experiences of African women and where would it be used?

The tug-of-war between pleasure and politics remains evident in many places, with very few people speaking candidly about desire and lust in connection to sex and sexuality. The need to politicise pleasure is evident, but also, it is necessary. African women, both in literature and in other spaces, haven't yet occupied enough space to allow us to speak honestly and openly about sexual pleasure and desire, and without a direct or inferred reference to sexual violence. This tug is very evident in my short stories. There's almost a shyness that comes across in the writing, a carefulness to not dilute the politic of pleasure with self indulgent sex, sensuality and desire. Indeed, this push and pull is evident in quite a few stories, which ended too soon, or didn't have 'enough' sex or sexual desire in them. This was a consistent critique offered by course mates in the first year of this Master's class, who noticed the careful way in which I presented my characters and my stories.

I think there are two reasons for this. At the core, the heart of this project is the necessary work of depathologising black and African women's love, lust and desire. This means that African women should be able to write about their sexual experiences without them being regarded as smut or pornographic, and move away from the earlier mentioned topes of hyperseuxality and asexuality. This brings to the fore the second problem — how to write about sexual desire in it's most 'natural' form without it being read as smutty or pornographic, or exceptionalising the sexual lives of African women from those of other women. Audre Lorde writes:

> The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.' (Lorde, 1978, p. 54)

I wanted to write strong, powerful, sexy (yet realistic) stories about African women, but having myself read very few such stories, I struggled with the 'how' of telling these stories. I didn't want my stories to be *read* as pornographic, which brought up the recurring anxiety of the audience. In my proposal, I intended that these stories feature and be read by black African women. As a black African woman myself, this seemed like a logical and doable plan for writing with a clear audience in mind with an authentic claim and honesty of experience of black womanhood. Despite these (mostly internal) affirmations of my project and it's purpose, a consistent nagging at the back

of my head was the question of *which* black African woman I was writing for. Often, both in literature and life, African women are clumped into groups according to either our geographical location—for example the black African women in Africa versus the ones living in the diaspora; rich versus women living in poverty—the educated and the uneducated; or any other dichotomy that might exist to classify the different ways and types of people we can be in the world. The audience that the writing was intended for mattered. A lot. Because by choosing to do a written project of short stories, I'd already decided that this project could only be enjoyed and experienced by black African women who are literate. In addition to this was the choice to do the project in English, which immediately excludes non-English speaking African women from accessing the writing. In all honesty, these factors are retrospective concerns that have emerged while writing this reflective essay. My education and class privilege allows me to assume that the women I write for are women like myself—educated, employed, well travelled and with enough financial and social agency to choose the lives we live. While a large part of me is saddened by the unintended exclusion that my writing comes with, an equally large part of me feels strongly that 'women like me' too, need these stories. There are many assumptions that are made about black and African women that inhabit a certain class privilege. We assume that as a homogenous collective of people that look alike, talk, walk and sound alike, that our experiences in the world are the same. But this isn't the case. bell hooks found this to be true in her teaching experience as a professor at a university in the United States of America. hooks writes in *Aint I A Woman*:

> It has been in my role as a professor, teaching the work of black writers in general, and black women writers in particular, that I became more fully aware of our contemporary collective suffering. teaching young black people at one of the most prestigious universities in this society, I was amazed by their lack of self awareness and understanding, their lack of

knowledge of black history and culture, and the profound anxiety and despair that was so pervasive in their lives. (hooks, Sisters of the Yam, 12.)

There was also the assumption that other African women desire to read stories and accounts that focus on agency, the erotic and power. I'd like to think that we do, whether or not we see the direct link between owning our sexuality, our erotic agency and upsetting various social, cultural and political power imbalances. My stories attempt to span the various lives of women in Africa, young and old, queer and straight, urban and rural, formally educated and women from the school of hard knock. The struggle to tell some stories that speak to a life I haven't inhabited show I think. Although, time and again, in class, it was said that it matters less what we write about or who we write as, but more *how* we tell the story. That in the end, a well told story, on whatever issue, communicates the intention of the writing better than a poorly written story with an interesting storyline. In some stories I succeed at both, and on others I fail at both, and some have a bit of everything.

Power and pleasure/ The death of desire

Pleasure, desire, sexuality, sex are all, in many ways, manifestations of power, or lack thereof. They are attempts at seeking power, understanding it, realising it, living it. Mixed in this is the language of love, which carries its own weight in terms of creating a wider plane for the ideas around sexuality and desire to play.

When we speak of sex and power, a knee-jerk reaction or response to how these two collide, often with disastrous consequences, is the word, the experience, the horror, the pain of rape. When the words sex and power are juxtaposed in a narrative dominated by black or African women, often, women aren't the protagonists in widely shared stories, mostly non-fiction. As an example, the popularity of Professor Pumla Gqola's book *Rape: A South African Nightmare* is an indication of the

social psyche of the times, at least in South Africa. When it comes to discourses on sex, sexuality and power for women in Africa, sexual violence occupies more space than sexual desire and agency. If we consider another important political and social moment for black women in South Africa recently, the brave and unexpected disruption of President Jacob Zuma's seech in 2016 by four young women who held up papers that reminded those gathered of the rape trial that saw Zuma's accuser, Fezeka Ntsukela Kuzwayo's life upturned and Zuma acquitted of rape charges. A year later to this moment, and after the untimely passing of Fezeka, journalist and television personality Redi Tlabi authored the book *Khwezi: The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo.* During what is now commonly referred to as the 'Zuma rape trial' author Mmatshilo Motsei wrote *The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court: Reflections on the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma.* Although nearly ten years apart, both accounts focus on Fezeka's life during and after the trial. But very absent from both accounts, is any expressions or references to Fezeka's sexuality and sexual agency. Activist and feminist Kwezilomso Mbandazayo reflects on this in her writing for the Johannesburg Review of Books:

> There is no doubt that you are the person best positioned to write about Fezeka, to decide which parts to leave out and what to expose, and to determine how you should be depicted. With you gone, though, the parts of you that don't make for spicy commentary from another's perspective are being lost in public Memory, capital 'M', a theme that emerges strongly as the womxn speak about you, and as I reread Kanga and pore over Khwezi for the first time.
>
> What of the silences that remain as we pick and choose what we want Memory to remember? This question lingers over me.
>
> Ordinary things, such as the fact that you were so terribly neat, are being lost in Memory. So, too, is the fact that you carried your passport everywhere, and that you existed, prior to that night in Forest Town, as a terribly warm-blooded, sexual being, that you had studied theology.

(Johannesburg Review of Books, *[Conversation Issue] Kanga and Khwezi: Kwezilomso Mbandazayo challenges the memorialisation of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo,* 2018, January 15.)

Granted, the purpose of the two books was not to shine a light on Fezeka's sexuality or sexual agency. But the easy forgottenness of her sexual agency feeds the idea that our sexuality, when it comes to stories of pleasure and agency, are not as popular as stories of sexual violence, and it's survival. These ongoing political moments remained strong, although subtle influences on my writing over the course of the project. Although fictionalised, the lived realities of African women's lives had to be included and reflected in these stories.

I was pleased and fortunate to find a few collections of erotic writing by African women. One such collection is *African Love Stories,* an anthology of love stories written by African women from across the continent and edited by the iconic Ama Ata Aidoo. This is a rich collection of stories that offered so much food for thought. One of the first contestations about the erotic that this collection presents to me is the impression that African women's moments of desire and lust are closely accompanied by the language of 'love'. I feel like 'love' is subtly inserted to soften the hardness that sex and power come with in relation to women. This might be seen as an unfair generalisation or even assumption, and possibly comes from juxtaposing *African Love Stories* with *Erotique Noir/Black Erotica*. Which I'll agree is an unfair comparison between two similar types of writing that are speaking to a particular context and audience.

In her collection of short stories *Tropical Fish*, Doreen Baingana writes about sex, but not sexual pleasure. Even in situations where the story's main protagonist Christine has lacklustre and transactional sex with Peter, the main character's sexual pleasure is muted, quiet, almost completely absent. But there is desire, a desire to live a different life, a desire to be seen differently to other women dating or sleeping with white men, a desire to make decisions for herself, and the strongest desire is for independence. Christine's expression of her desire for Peter is muted. She calls Peter 'a

comfortable habit' (Baingana, 2005). In its place is the desire to escape the humdrum of everyday Kampala, the dirt and dust of African bodies in the equatorial heat. In Doreen's telling of Christine's story, she alternately uses the words sex and 'making love', but in this telling of Christine's story, we find an agency, a subtle power to control her sexuality and redirect her desire. She says, 'Sex was like school, something I just did. I mean, of course I wanted to; I took myself there, no one forced me.' (Baingana, 2005). Christine's power and its uneasy and stuttering relationship with sex doesn't jump out at the reader easily. I had to read *Tropical Fish* several times to fully appreciate Christine's seemingly blasé approach to sex with Peter to find the decisiveness and agency in her decision making, and eventually the desire.

Power and desire stratify sex and sexual expression in ways that make it subtle and hard to see. Or perhaps it is also the other way around, sex is also what changes, camouflages in some cases, transforms or alters situations of power and desire. Another story that presents a subtle power/desire interplay is Lela Aboulela's *Something Old, Something New.* This short story has no sex, and the desire is told through the eyes and the voice of the male lead character, whose desire to marry his Sudanese fiancé compels him to travel to Khartoum, and weather all manner of misfortunes before he is granted her hand in marriage. The sexual tension in this story is light, almost nonexistent and hovering in a fuzzy background. What is present is the interactions between the ideas of home, culture, pride and belonging. In Edinburgh, she, a native is foreign and therefore less powerful than he, the Scottish native. And vice versa for him in Khartoum, where she holds some power in steering the destiny of her life. Again in this story, desire is directed away from sex for the woman, and towards doing the right thing, which is getting married. This story appears in the anthology *African Love Stories*, edited by Ama Ata Aidoo. In the introduction to the above mentioned book, Ata Aidoo reflects:

> It is indisputable that, apart from what nature endows humans and occasionally visits on us in the form of disasters and destruction, love is at the bottom of nearly all earthly happenings: great achievements, as well as mischief, murder and mayhem. Indeed, what we may choose not to remember is that love is not only the most serious literature, but one of the only three human tales that are. The other two being our quest for and worship of the Creator, and politics. (Aidoo, 2006, p. vii)

Here, Aidoo is setting the scene for the book *African Love Stories*, and stating the case for this collection of short stories. She doesn't refer to sex, the erotic or sexuality, but focuses on love and it's relevance in African life and society. In her opening paragraph Aidoo says 'One clear problem with stories is that the moment you describe anything as such, readers and audiences begin to look for the frivolous and the sentimental.' This sentiment not being to far from my own fear of my erotic writing being read as pornographic.

Temporary conclusion(s)

I honestly thought that this project would come easily to me, I was so sure that writing short stories of desire, lust and love would flow forth. This isn't the part of the reflective essay where I talk about how difficult it is to write or be a writer. Honestly, I don't think I'm a writer, yet, but a writer is something I'd like to become. The purpose of this project, and the writing done over the course of the three year's it's taken me to get this far has changed in purpose, weaving in and out of the initial proposal, which was to create literature that presents African women's sexuality and erotic agency and how it manifests in our everyday lives.

Through the course of this project I have met a lot of questions around what purpose this project will serve in the wider world, and especially for many African women who remain surviving multiple oppressions and attacks on our sexuality. Time and again, I was gently advised that I

should allow the writing to do the work of the activism, that maybe my starts and stops in my writing were a result of the conflict between my desire to tell stories but also right some social wrong that I had seen or was experiencing. This was something that I had refused to openly admit to myself, that this writing project was it's own form of activism, and not escape as I had several times told people. The moving in and out of wanting the writing to do the work of activism and wanting to *just* write remains unsolved. I need to write more. I need to embrace the power of the writing process and how characters in stories where you play God change shape, grow and evolve outside your imagined power.

This project made me confront my own sexuality, how I perceive my own sexual agency and moments when in my daily life, in intimate and public spaces when it goes missing. A real fear of writing about sex materialised, which was a metaphor for the vulnerability of writing, the power of the audience I'd even dare say an attempt at seduction, but with rational and irrational insecurities about my writing emerging with each story, the seduction is not flawless, and neither is the writing, both in the substance and the process. I know, thanks to the thousands of women who have written that the anxiety of writing in general, and writing fiction more specifically, for women in Africa, who exist in deeply patriarchal societies is a shared experience. The feeling of not being a 'writer' or that our stories are not 'good enough' to be written or published is a common feeling (Kyomuhendo, 2003). One would think that over ten years later, with hundreds of African women writers published and celebrated across the continent, and the continent exploding with fiction, some of it erotic, that this anxiety about the necessity and purpose of this project would be slightly reduced. It was not. By and large because the same oppressions, despite the taking up of space by women, still exist. And then I read the book, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by Lola Shoneyin, and my passion and hope for stories about fictional accounts of the erotic lives of African women was restored.

> The dark building were full of women whose faces glowed under ultraviolet lights. These women lived for other women's men. they cooked for them. Drank with them. Fought over them. Fucked them. Nursed them. Slapped them and loved the. And when the longing love caused made them ill, they surrendered their lives and died for them. (Shoneyin, 2010)

The second page of the book set the scene for what I knew was going to be a sexy story. Yes, there's violence, death, loss and poverty, but there is also agency, power and desire in this story. After completing this book, I was both elated and deflated. Elated because, in every way I imagined, this was the perfectly told story of the desire, lust and agency of African women. Although set in Nigeria, a country I have never visited, the emotional texture of the story is so well written that I could taste food I'd never eaten and feel emotions I'd never felt. But I was deflated because Shoneyin had written the book that I wanted to write one day. Still, the importance of telling stories that we think we have heard time and again was reaffirmed in this, because the *how* of Shoneyin's storytelling (to me) stood out.

I still maintain that there is power in owning, affirming and vocalising our (African/black women's) erotic agency. And more importantly, telling stories for ourselves, by ourselves, building the language of desire so that it can be accessed from multiple spaces and by many (one day all) African women.

I remain unsure whether this project achieved what it set out to do, but I'll agree and insist that this is an important and valiant attempt at making space in literature and society alike for the stories, experiences, narratives of African women. In this project, I imagine I set a foot inside a door that was earlier cracked open by the many unpublished *and* published/written stories about the lust, desire and pleasure of black and African women by black and African women.

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