Port Heya

1

The abandoned lot sat a few metres off the Nairobi River, a quarter acre of scree enclosed in a latticework fence that awakened memories of destruction and death. Its eastern neighbour was a four-storey apartment block, and an almost identical five-storey building abutted it to the west. On a warm Friday morning, motorists sped along a busy road past the property, hooting and hollering at the mass of pedestrians going about their day, most of them ignorant of (or willing to forget) the events only a decade before, when a single night of horror claimed the lives of three hundred and seventy-two people.

Dr Kwame Adala and his archaeology class from Green Valley College were among the select few allowed within the area long since designated a crime scene, a privilege he had only obtained after four long years of dogged determination.

“The ground on which you now stand is haunted,” Kwame said softly, his arms spread for effect. “Several residents in this neighbourhood have reported seeing people they were sure used to live here but have been confirmed dead. Eerie howling at night, mysterious lights, strange voices…” He knew shock would be too lofty an expectation from his languid audience. Maybe heightened interest, at the very least, but only a couple pairs of eyebrows rose. “Come on guys, nothing?”

“But, sir,” said Kamaria, Kwame’s star student, “we’re supposed to be scientists. Belief in the occult isn’t a proper science.”

“Very true, Miss Kamaria, but as archaeologists, isn’t it our job to prove *that* point? And don’t forget, mysteries exist that science hasn’t been able to explain to date. Who built the pyramids in Egypt? Or Stonehenge in England? Should we discover evidence that, without a shred of doubt, proves it to be the work of entities from other worlds, should we not endorse such findings?”

“But there’s nothing but rubble here,” opined another student.

“Yes, to everyone else, this maybe nothing but a pile of rubble, but not to us. To us, this is a priceless treasure trove of information. Think about it. Only ten years ago, there proudly stood, at this very spot, an eight-storey apartment block home to several hundred people. Who were they? What sort of lives did they live? What were the compositions of each dwelling unit? Only after we sift through this rubble—whatever remains of it, anyway—only after we perform a proper archaeological excavation can we come up with at least some of the answers to those questions.”

“You call this a dig?” One of the students said with a sneer. “Unless Tut and Carmen were among the residents in the building.”

“Mr Wanjala,” said Kwame, “I believe you mean the Egyptian pharaoh? His name was Tutankhamun. *One* person, *one* word.”

“Well, did he live here?”

Kwame sighed. *Why me?*

At five-foot nine inches tall, Kwame was neither tall nor short, and his median bones carried just the right amount of fat shy of obese. And therein lay the problem. Beginning with his frame and percolating into his professional and personal life, everything about him presented as average. An archaeology professor in a middling college abounding with below average students, his workaday face and unremarkable physique guaranteed he would never feature on the cover of GQ magazine or Farmers Weekly. And on more occasions than he cared to think about, he was afraid that his students would pick up on his frustrations.

But Kwame had one thing going for him, his ace in the whole, one might say. A dogged determination to pull the donkey at whatever cost.

“I know this is less than ideal when it comes to archaeological digs,” he said with his chin up, trying hard to find more cheer than he felt, “but there was, on the one hand, budgetary constraints within the college, and on the other, government red tape in play. That, I’m afraid, keeps us from accessing what most of you might consider a ‘proper’ dig site. Nevertheless, although most of the material on this site was carted away years ago, we have enough left to earn each one of you a top grade.”

Wanjala had more hairs to split. “But aren’t we supposed to be studying like, I don’t know… dinosaurs and the middle ages and stuff?”

“Mr Wanjala, if you recall our introductory class, archaeology—”

Kamaria cut in: “Archaeology is the study of the ancient and *recent* human past through material remains.”

Kwame nodded proudly. “That’s right, Miss Kamaria.”

“Of course, it is, Miss Knowitall,” Wanjala muttered.

Kamaria stuck out her tongue at him and raised her hand. “Dr Adala?

“Yes, Miss Kamaria?”

“Sir, in class you said you would split us into groups.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Are we allowed to select members of our own group?”

“As a matter of fact, you are. Each one of you get a partner of your choice, single out an area, and using the methods we learned in the previous lesson, mark out a six by six-foot square and start digging.”

Wanjala shot Kamaria a look that could’ve melted butter. “Don’t worry, Miss Knowitall, I wouldn’t dream of being your partner if I was a hundred you was gonna discover gold.”

And thus, went the lively back and forth until the class of thirteen stood in clusters of six pairs and a lone wolf.

“Mr Wanjala,” Kwame said, “I guess that leaves you and me.”

“But that’s not fair.”

“How come?”

“If I do good, they’ll think it was only because of you.”

Kwame stifled a snigger. “That’s ‘do well’, Mr Wanjala, and I wouldn’t worry about it. You’ll get the grade you deserve.”

“Oh, man.” Wanjala slapped his hips. “That ain’t no better neither.”

Kwame was still smiling as he drove the last of his two stakes into the ground and looked up to see if the student had done the same. “Now we tie our rope around each of the four pegs and get to work. Exciting, isn’t it?”

The loose plaster came off with ease under his small shovel, the bigger blocks he had to pry out with his bare hands.

“I’ll be doing *that* every day?” Wanjala asked. “Even *after* I graduate? Looks like hard, dirty work for years of college.”

“You can always teach.”

Wanjala smiled. “Is that why you do it? Because you couldn’t stomach the grime neither?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Lemme guess. You probably hit the sauce a tad too much in your last job, went batshit on your boss, and that’s how you ended up at Green Valley, right?”

“Wow. Mr Wanjala, that’s quite… specific. How did you come up with it?”

“I didn’t. That’s how Professor Chinua ended up as our math teacher.”

“Okay, then.” Kwame sighed. “Anyway, Serenity Towers collapsed due to a series of preventable circumstances. Corruption, shoddy contractors, substandard materials, you name it, resulting in the death and destruction. Our task is to determine the veracity of that information or if—”

“Uhm… excuse me,” Wanjala scratched his head. “Which one is Serenity Towers, again?”

“The building that once stood here.” Kwame clamped his eyes shut and exhaled. *You can do this, Kwame. Patience is the key.* He strained to look his student in the eye. “Mr Wanjala, do you deliberately choose to be this…. Erm, never mind.”

“This isn’t for me, you know.” Wanjala shrugged. “I’m only here because my father made me.”

“Then I suggest you make the most of it, all the same. Start digging.”

The young man studied the shovel as if an alien artifact had mysteriously found its way to his hand. “What are we supposed to find, anyway?”

“Anything that tells a story. Anything at all.”

Glad to be rid of his bothersome student (if only for a while), Kwame made the rounds checking on the progress of the other groups. The assortment of items they deemed important went into a small box provided to each pair. Kwame picked up a few samples and took a few minutes to discuss the finds.

“I found that smoking pipe,” Makena announced proudly. “Looks expensive, don’t it?”

Kwame turned it over in his hand. “How can you tell?”

“My father smokes one, but his looks like he made it in his workshop.”

Lighters, clothes, pieces of furniture, photographs, and bits of electronics were among the many items collected, catalogued and boxed. After three hours on location, the iota of excitement that might have been present earlier petered out and the exercise grew old. Also…

“It’s past time for lunch, Mr Kwame,” Wanjala announced, rubbing his tummy for emphasis. For once, he elicited supportive nods from most of his fellow classmates. “After digging dirt all day, the least you can do is treat us to pizza.”

Kwame prided himself in being a competent tutor, and every competent tutor knew when not to cross the fine line between his students being awake and retrogressing to the previous weekend’s keg party.

He raised his arms to quell the imminent revolt. “Alright, alright. We can call it a day. Pull up your pegs, roll up your ropes, pack up, and carefully make your way to the bus.”

Kwame watched as the students slipped and slid up to the school bus parked on the road. A sad lot, in his opinion. Save for Kamaria and Makena who were in his class on full academic scholarships (the institution had to seem competent, somehow), the rest were to college what the indigenous *githeri* was to gourmet cuisine. And as unpalatable as the situation was, Kwame was as much out of options as were his students.

He bent down to pick up the box Wanjala had left behind and caught a glint off the corner of his eye. He followed the glimmer to one edge of the shallow depression he and his most inept student had made.

*Shit. It’s a piece of glass,* he thought before the scientist in him took over. *But what if it turns out to be something else entirely?*

What if, indeed? It would make for a great talking point in class.

*“You see, thee benighted, young, not-so-eager to learn minds, sometimes the most innocuous item on a dig site turns out to be the most significant find of all. Innocuous means harmless, Mr Wanjala.”*

He scraped the dirt off, ferreting out a perfectly-preserved rectangular piece of glass affixed to a larger mould of plastic material.

*What the…?*

The more of the artefact he exposed, the more a sense of you-must-be-shitting-me washed over him. *How could this be?* He removed a handkerchief and wiped clean the undeniably astounding find—an old-fashioned flip phone. Save for a few minor scrapes, it appeared undamaged even after an eight-storey building collapsed upon it.

“Hey, Mr Kwame,” Wanjala called from the bus. “Are you coming or what?”

Kwame stashed the phone into his pocket and joined the students in the bus for an uneventful ride back to the campus. The professor in him could hardly wait for the following Monday’s class to analyse the treasures they had brought back from their short road trip. That, and the load of work awaiting him back at the campus meant that the phone dug out of the abandoned lot lay inside his pocket all but forgotten.

On his way home that evening, the old-fashioned flip phone rang.

2

Two weeks since the eventful outing with his class, Kwame sulked in a gloomy corner of Kimathi Conference Hall at a party in honour of one of the professors who had made tenure. While his cohorts thrived at social congress, Kwame’s chronic diffidence and self-advocated indifference to anything jamboree condemned him to a perpetual wallflower. Though physically in the building (as polite convention dictated), his mind wandered off, dreaming of far off realms unblemished by the scourge that was humanity.

His peace came asunder as a woman with a pleasant-going-on-plastered face weaved through the throng of boisterous partygoers and set a beeline for him.

“Please don’t, please don’t,” he prayed silently, unaware that he was whispering the words. “You have a choice of prey at your disposal. Some of them might even enjoy the company of an all-consuming Basilisk.”

The woman came to a stop a foot away from Kwame, swaying to and fro like an air dancer in a fake blond wig and heavy red lipstick on fat lips. She switched her glass from the right hand to the left and thrust forward five unsteady digits.

“Hi,” she said, somehow managing to drag the word into a two-second syllable. “So nice to see you here. I’m Sandy. Sandy Karanga.”

Kwame shook her hand. “Oh, hi Sandy. I’m Dr Kwame Amadi. Nice to meet you… again.”

“Again?”

“We shook hands not more than half an hour ago.”

“Yeah?” Still teetering, she knitted her eyebrows, narrowed her eyes, and burped as loudly as a woman wasn’t supposed to in the beau monde. “You’re right. What the fudge? Musta gone right through one hemisphere and out the left.”

“Hemisphere?”

Sandy barked a broken laugh and tapped her temple. “The old noggin’, is what I mean. The old joy juice kinda makes it all porous, you know?”

“I wouldn’t say I do.” He raised his glass of mocktail. “Only pear and rose punch for me. But I’d hate to see your booze take all the blame, Sandy, seeing as we pass each other in the Lecture Hall 2 corridor almost daily.”

“We do?” She looked even more mystified than before; a feat Kwame would never have given her credit for. “But you know what they say, right?”

“What do who say?”

Pride steadied her long enough to deliver a practised line. “The advantage of a bad memory is that one enjoys several times the same good things for the first time.”

Kwame pretended shock. “They say that?”

“Friedrich Nietzsche did.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Pray tell.” She ran a long, manicured nail along the lapel of his jacket. “How be these hallway encounters you speak of, good man?”

“Oh, forget it.” He waved his hand nonchalantly. “It’s nothing.”

“No, please.” She lay her hand on her bossom where her modest breasts choked under the torturous grip of a red silk shirt. “I feel… and this is coming from the bottom-est part of my heart, I feel like I have something to atone for, you know? A correct to wrong. I mean, a right to correct.” She howled a woozy laugh. “See what I’m saying?”

“Please, excuse me.” Kwame reached inside the breast pocket of his corduroy jacket and produced a phone that hadn’t rang, making sure to keep the back facing Sandy. “I have to take this call.”

Sandy touched her armpit and sniffed her fingers. “Nah.” When she looked up, Kwame had snuck away and out of the ballroom.

Alone in the dark, the welcome chilly night biting into his cheeks, and the background awash in the muffled cacophony of inebriated revellers sifting through the doors, Kwame finally found the pluck to make the call he should have made ages ago, convention be damned.

“Hi, honey,” Zuri answered the phone, sounding nothing at all like someone who had put in a sixteen-hour shift at work. “How’s the faculty shindig shaping up? You calling your workaholic wife to make her jealous?”

Kwame scanned the lighted dials of his wrist watch. Ten minutes after ten and too long since the soiree became a snoozefest. “I want to go home.”

“What? This early? C’mon, hon. It’s not even eleven. I guess no one’s drunk at the party.”

“Sandy is.”

“Sandy? Which one is Sandy again?”

“Tight shirts, short skirts, freshman English Lit.”

“Oh, *that* Sandy.” A soft laugh. “Did the liquid courage finally bring her out of her giggly shell? ‘*Dear, handsome, Mr Amadi. If only you knew how your dreamy eyes and large, manly hands make my knees go all gooey when we bump into each other in the hallway.’*”

“I wish. She didn’t even know I existed before today. What time will you be home?”

“Me? Not until late. The girls decided to take this new handsome doctor out for drinks after work. You didn’t think you were the only one having a good time tonight, did you?”

A slight tinge of misplaced jealousy streaked across Kwame’s heart and disappeared as fast as it had come. “Sounds too quiet in the background. Your shindig must be as boring as mine if not more so. What do you say we both blow our joints, go home and split a glass of mock mojito between us?”

“How about we split the second? I’m staring at the bottom of my first.”

On the drive home, Kwame’s mind floated back to another night fourteen days ago. An evening much like this one when a large half moon hung low in the sky and the few stars visible through the city’s smog twinkled away. The car radio was off, just the way Kwame liked it, the roads nearly deserted and the usual urban noise a low murmur. All had been as it should be, save for a little extra ache on his bones from the added ordeal of a field excursion with his students.

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”*

A sharp tune had torn through the interior of the vehicle. Though vaguely familiar, it was out of place and shouldn’t have been ringing in his car.

“What the fuck!” Kwame screamed, veering off his lane and into the fast lane.

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”* the ditty kept on.

He worked to calm his nerves, taking huge gasps of air and exhaling slowly. That slacked up his breathing, but his heart still raced at a clop, and his fingers squeezed the steering wheel in a death grip.

“Calm down, Kwame,” he said to himself. “There’s got to be a perfectly good explanation for this.”

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin tiiiiiin…”* the tune persisted as he steered back past the slow lane and onto the shoulder, caressed the brakes and brought the vehicle to a stop.

The melody stopped, and for a moment a strange silence persisted. Even the vehicles rushing past on the road seemed to do so without a sound.

Kwame looked around. *Could I have imagined it? Maybe it was all in my—*

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”* came the tune again.

Kwame jumped, and his heart began dashing again. He whipped his head back—nobody in the back seat. *Where the heck is it coming from?*

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”*

It was close, too close. As if he was making the sound himself. He began patting his body. First his breast pockets, then his trouser pockets. His hand stopped on the outer pocket of his coat. Something there—a lump.

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”*

Slowly he slid his hand inside the pocket, wrapped his fingers around a smooth blocky object. He pulled it out fast and threw it onto the passenger seat.

“Good gracious!” he yelled and put a hand on his heaving chest. “It’s that bloody flip phone.”

Now he recognised the tune. It was Tárrega’s *Gran Vals,* but little comfort the discovery brought him. The old phone had been buried under a foot of debris for God knows how long. It shouldn’t be ringing. *Should it?*

*“Tintintin-tin, tiiiiiin…”*

The phone’s screen was bright blue and across it a sentence in black caps scrolled from right to left:

INCOMING CALL…

When the absurdity of the situation hit him, he almost slapped himself. He threw his head back and barked with relief.

“Wanjala,” he said, “you stupid little shit.”

It now made all the sense in the world. Wanjala, infamous for his affinity for pranks, must have placed the phone inside the trench hoping Kwame would happen upon it and mindful of the heebie-jeebies it would instil upon his victim.

Confident that he had solved the mystery, Kwame picked up the phone, flipped it open and hit the “Receive” button.

“Mr Wanjala,” he said, “this is not funny. Not one bit.”

“Finally!” said a man’s relieved voice on the other end of the call. “Thank God someone answered.”

“Thank God?” Kwame laughed. “What did you expect? I’d be scared to death?”

“Trust me, I do not mean to scare you, sir,” said the caller who sounded nothing like Wanjala. “If anything, *I* was the one who was afraid no one would answer.”

“Who are you?” Kwame barked, a little of the earlier panic returning. “Did Wanjala put you up to this? Whoever you are, you and Wanjala are in a huge heap of trouble, mister. Wait till I—”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned that name. I am not him and he put me up to nothing.”

“Then who are you?”

“Simply put, I am the owner of the phone you’re now holding.”

Kwame scoffed. “Yeah, that explains everything.”

“Sir, if you would please indulge me for a second, where did you happen upon my phone?”

“No, you tell me. Where did *you* leave your phone?”

“Fair enough. Last I remember having it was at Serenity Towers. Is that where you found it? Are you a friend of Darius?”

Now Kwame was confused more than anything else. “Who’s Darius?”

“Look, let’s cut to the chase, shall we? That phone contains some crucial addresses and other information that is priceless to me and I’ll do anything to get it back. I’m willing to reward you for returning it.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes, sir. This has nothing to do with Wanjala, whoever the—wait! Your voice. It sounds very familiar. Do I know you?”

“How am I supposed to answer that? I don’t even know you from Christ.”

“Oh my God!” The excitement in the caller’s voice was unmistakeable. “It is you, isn’t it? Jesus Christ! Kwame Adala, right?”

“How do you know…”

“It’s me. Muhammed Juma.”

The name registered immediately.

“Sod off!” Kwame cried. “Muhammed…” *No freaking way! What are the odds?* “Mohammed Juma from college?”

“I’ll be damned. What are—”

The connection died.

“Juma?” Kwame called. “You still there?”

He brought the phone down from his ear. It too was died.

Kwame and Juma had been best friends in their first three years of college, only to fallout and spend the rest of the time actively avoiding each other. It had been more than twenty years since the two had spoken. Twenty years was long enough for old wounds to heal and old passions to reignite.

The strange call had left a thousand questions swirling inside Kwame’s head. How had Juma’s phone ended up buried at the former site of Serenity Towers? Who was Darius?

*And how serendipitous (or not) is this bizarre reunion?*

Kwame spent the next few days searching for a compatible charger that would revive the old phone. It took one week before he found one and charged the phone, but Juma had blocked the caller ID and Kwame had no way of reaching him. Two weeks since that one call, the phone stayed in Kwame’s pocket, but Juma was yet to call again. And Kwame did not expect him to.

He had done an online search to see how his friend had fared all those years they had been apart. Juma had been dead for ten years.

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Under the dim light of the single low-watt bulb hanging over the tiny balcony behind their three-bedroom flat, Kwame gazed upon the light haze beyond the dark blocky silhouettes of the neighbouring middleclass flats.

“I’m so tired,” he said, setting his drink on a small wicker table.

Next to him on a matching wicker two-seater, Zuri slid closer and snuggled up to her husband. “Didn’t you say you didn’t dance at the party?”

“It’s not just the oafish bashes.” His voice was low, almost melancholic. “It’s the oafish characters in the oafish bashes in the oafish institution. No matter how hard I try, I never feel like I belong. And everyone lends a hand, oblivious as they are of my existence. Not just Sandy, mind you. *Everyone*. The dean, the chancellor, the senate…” He cocked his head towards his wife. “Do I have such a forgettable face?”

She ran a hand over his cheek. “You have a handsome face, dear. It’s your brain I worry about.”

“I doubt Koba would notice me on his grass should my foot wander.”

“Koba?”

“The groundsman. He’s anal about people straying off the paths, and once he addressed me as Mr Abdala.”

“You’re not invisible, silly.” Zuri laughed and caressed his arm.

“Wait!” Kwame pulled away. “What do you mean it’s my brain you worry about?”

“I mean… you think too much.”

“I don’t.” He looked away. “I allocate every issue its requisite amount of thought.”

“See? You overthought that statement.” She pulled him back to her. “Relax, dear. I know what’s bothering you, and it’s going to be fine. Your research paper will go through this time. Fifth time’s the charm?”

“Seventh.”

“Oh, dear.”

“My point exactly.”

She lifted her glass and took a sip. “Bleh. I’ll need something stronger if I have to sit here and listen to more of your griping.”

“More?” Like a shadow, sadness clouded his eyes. “I don’t complain that much, do I?”

“I don’t know. Just the requisite amount necessary, I guess?”

He ribbed her playfully. “I see what you did there.”

“You’ve earned it.”

“The right to gripe? Damn right, I have.”

“Jabari wasn’t even born and Stella was only a year old when you started work at Green Valley. After fifteen years as a lecturer, you shouldn’t have to beg for tenure. That party should’ve been for you. They owe you that much, at the very least.”

“Three of those years as a senior professor, mind you.” He started. “Wait a minute.”

He pried the glass out of her hand and took a small sip.

Zuri giggled. “What are you doing?”

He handed her the glass. “Nothing. I wanted to make sure your mock mojito is indeed mock.”

She laughed some more. “Why? Because I said you deserve a promotion?”

“When did you convert from Miss Patience to…”

“To what?”

“This. This… Sheena queen of the jungle. Wait till my wife comes back and finds you here in your tutu.”

“To hell with your meek wife, Kwame.” She squared up to him. “You know what you should do? You should walk into the Chancellor’s office and give him a generous piece of your mind.”

“Right now?” He made as if to stand up.

She punched his arm. “I’m serious, Kwame. It’s about time you stood up for yourself.”

“So, you mean tomorrow?”

“First thing in the morning.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday, dear.”

*Punch!*

She shook her head. “First thing Monday morning.”

“But Monday morning is Tribal Rites. I love that class.”

“Fuck Tribal Rites! You march right into Mr Bokole’s office and you tell him it’s either he keeps his word or Tribal Rites gets it.”

“You want me to hold a class hostage? Ha-ha. What’s got into you?”

Deflating, she sank back onto the couch. “The new doctor.”

Kwame shot up, stiff as a steel rod. “The new doctor got *into* you?”

“No, dummy. He gets on my nerve.”

“Please tell me you’re being facetious. You mean to say he’s real? You took him out for drinks and whatnot?”

“That was a joke.”

“Phew! For a second there—”

“He got the corner office.”

“He what? No, way.”

“Yes, way. Six years I’ve been waiting for Dr Wale to retire—”

“Or die.”

“I never said that.”

“But you thought it.”

She punched him again. “Can we get back to my griping?”

“Sorry hun.” He kissed her hand. “Go on.”

“Guy’s not been in the hospital a minute, and he gets the best view.”

“How did your boss explain it?”

“No relocation budget. Can you believe that? And you know what I told him? I’ll move my own damm desk if money’s the issue. But no, it has nothing to do with moving a few files. It’s all about balls.”

“Balls now? What balls?”

“The testes dangling between Dr Danilo’s legs.”

“Who’s Dr Danilo?

“The new guy. Aren’t you listening?”

“New guy, balls, corner office. Got it.”

She stood up. “I’m gonna check up on Jabari. He’s had a cough for a couple days and I gave him a menthol rub.”

“Okay, Dr Adala. I hope a six-year-old isn’t your last patient tonight.”

“Huh?”

“I feel a swelling coming up around here…” He took her hand and put it on his groin. “Feel it?”

“Oh, my. That’s not good. We need to take care of it as soon as possible.” She paused halfway through the open door. “Say, I’ll be visiting the steam chamber soon as I’m done with my current patient. You know, in case you…”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Kwame shot to his feet and began writhing out of his jacket as if it had suddenly caught on fire. “I’ll get the shower going.”

3

The next call on the flip phone came on Sunday afternoon.

Zuri and the kids had left for church, leaving Kwame alone at home. Jabari thought his father was too busy for church (as his dad had explained), Stella opined her father considered himself too good for church folks, but Zuri knew better. She had long since learned never to discuss religion with her husband, lest she triggered a twenty-point debate on the comparison between modern religion and ancient rites, which her husband was vigorously partial to.

“Now, lemme tell you why ancestral veneration beats anything monotheistic,” Kwame would start and seemingly go on nonstop.

Wearing nothing but boxer shorts and a brown bathrobe, Kwame reclined on the couch in the living room, his legs propped up on the coffee table. The papers he was grading sat on his lap while reruns of M\*A\*S\*H played on the TV.

“Henry,” Hawkeye said on the forty-inch screen and Kwame went word for word with Alan Alda for the rest of the sentence, “you have no idea what it’s like sharing a tent with a guy who thinks he’s all twelve disciples!”

“You, funny Hawkeye, you,” Kwame added with a sly grin.

*“Tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin, tintintin-tin…”*

He’d thought himself past jumping every time the dang flip phone rang, yet his feet swung off the table as if they had suddenly grown a brain of their own, scattering the papers on his lap. The luxury Lamy fountain pen flew out of his hand and landed nib-first on the table, ruining the cherished gift. (*Zuri will have a goat.)*

Kwame was cursed with a curious, analytical mind (as he was wont to advise anyone who cared to listen) and he intended to get to the bottom of this most elaborate hoax. But anyone would be excused for being a little uptight every time a dead man reached out through the phone.

He fished the damned thing out of his pocket and checked the screen. Still no caller ID.

“Hello?” he said.

“Kwame?” said the same voice from before, the same voice that sounded very much like Juma’s, if only a little more ragged around the edges. “Thank you, my friend. Thank you for picking up.”

“Why? Did you not expect me to?”

“I know what you’re thinking and trust me, this is not some Sheng Long bullcrap. It really *is* me.”

“You knew I’d google you, didn’t you?”

“I’d have expected nothing less from the Kwame I knew back then.”

“Is that so? Forgive me, but if I may be bold enough as to ask, how have you managed this first of a kind feat of calling from the afterlife?”

Juma chuckled. “I wish I have. That would be something, wouldn’t it? Imagine possessing the ability to talk to your dear grand—”

Kwame sprang to his feet. “You need to cut this crap, whoever the fuck you are, you hear me? This is gone far enough. Whatever your con is, *you* trust me it won’t work. Not this time, not on me.”

A brief silence followed before Juma said, “You kept the phone.”

“So?”

“So, you’re curious. You always have been. But more than anything, I wanna say I’m sorry one more time.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve thought about it all these years and it doesn’t look like I said it enough. Or truly convincingly.”

The temperature in the room went up a notch. “The hell are you blathering about?”

“Nala.”

Kwame bunched his hand into a fist. “Now, you wait one goddamm minute. How do you—”

“I shouldn’t have, Kwame, that’s the high and low of it. Back then I tried to justify it, in my head, you know? You guys had broken up and she came to me for consolation then one thing led to—”

“Stop it! Stop it!”

“You’re right. There was no excuse for it.”

Kwame flopped back onto the couch feeling older than ever before. “Is this why you’re glad *I* picked up your call, Juma? So you can apologise for screwing my college girlfriend two decades ago?”

Juma snickered. “C’mon, Kwame, you gotta give me more credit than that. Allow me a minute to explain, alright?”

“There’s nothing to explain. That ship’s already sailed. Long past gone, *my friend*. If I held a grudge for every single thing I went through in college, I’d have gone insane by now.”

On the television, Max Clinger said, “If I had all the answers, I’d run for God.”

“Here’s what I don’t understand, Juma,” Kwame said, leaning forward as if Juma sat on the other side of the coffee table. “Why are you playing dead?”

“The simple answer is, I owned Serenity Towers.”

4

On Monday morning, Kwame penned—*Tribal Rites*—in red on a white board and turned to his audience of thirteen curious souls. “Who can give me an example of a known tribal right?”

Pronto, Kamaria’s hand went up at the front of the class.

Kwame nodded. “Okay. How about we start with Miss Kamaria?”

“So what’s new?” Wanjala snickered.

Kamaria ignored him. “The Maa people spit on someone as a sign of blessing, starting from early childhood when infants are spat on to wish them a good life.”

“Very good, Miss Kamaria. But is it all Maa people, or is the practice prevalent among a particular tribe within the Maa group of communities?”

“Who cares?” Wanjala reclined so far back in his seat it creaked.

Kwame looked up. “What was that, Mr Wanjala?”

“I don’t give a flying hoot what anyone does it for.” Wanjala looked around. “You spit on me, I bash your fuc—your freaking teeth in.”

“Watch your language, Mr Wanjala. By the way, what tribe do you belong to?”

“What does it matter? *Sir?”*

“Can you familiarise the class with a tribal rite from your community?”

A smattering of veiled laughter broke out.

Wanjala shot warning glimpses this way and that. “Where I come from, we break the bones of anyone who dares jibe us.”

“And what community is that?” Kamaria shot. “The Imbeciles?”

Wanjala stood a little too fast and rammed his upper thighs into the desk, eliciting more chuckles from his classmates. Wincing, he wagged a finger at Kamaria and slinked back into his chair. “I’ll get you for that, bitch.”

“Okay, that’s it.” Kwame pointed to the door. “Out of my class, Wanjala, and report to the dean’s office.”

Wanjala got to his feet carefully, retrieved his bag from the back of the chair in front and swung it over his shoulder. “You’ll be hearing from my father.”

“I’ll put together a welcoming committee. Goodbye.” Kwame returned his attention to the class. “Now, where were we?”

A shy hand in the middle of the class rose halfway up. “I’ve heard of herdsmen who ride bulls in Ethiopia.”

Kwame smiled. “You’re right, Miss Amina. Young men of the Hamar tribe in the Omo Valley, Ethiopia, become fearless bull riders in a coming of age ceremony. And you know what? They jump on prize bulls while naked as jay birds.”

This time around, the laughter was open and full-throated.

“There’s also the giant, circular lip plates of the Mursi people,” Kwame continued, “a beauty modification dating back thousands of years. But my favourite is the *niricha hakhi nzetu*, a demon-chasing ritual of the Kauma people, one of the Mijikenda at the coast.”

“You mean like an exorcism?” another student asked.

“Not exactly. *Niricha hakhi nzetu* means “leave us alone.” It’s a long-forgotten rite that was performed in a sacred forest, a *kaya*, which is a place of prayer. It was meant to exorcise demons, not out of a single person, but away from the community.”

“The entire community would be possessed?” asked the student.

“That’s why it’s so fascinating.” Kwame grew more animated. “You see, according to lore, each time a soul had exhausted its use here on earth, an entity from the underworld would visit the people and ferry the soul to eternity. But sometimes the entity would overstay its welcome, resulting in the deaths of many other people who, purportedly, weren’t supposed to depart yet. *Niricha hakhi nzetu* would then be performed to chase the entity back to the underworld.”

“But, sir.” Kamaria cocked her head in contemplation. “Isn’t that what your paper is about?”

“My paper?” Taken aback, Kwame stepped close enough to whisper. “How do you know about my paper?”

Kamaria shied away, averting her lecturer’s searing gaze. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know—”

“Sorry for what?”

“I work part-time in the chancellor’s office and…”

“And what?” Kwame breathed hard and his eyes blazed with rage, though he couldn’t tell for sure why he was losing control. “Out with it, Kamara. You read my paper?”

“It was in a garbage bin, sir. I only—”

The rest of her plea fizzled into thin air as Kwame sped towards the door. He careered down the corridor, down two flights of stairs and onto the grassy expanse between the lecture halls and the administration building, his breathing now out of control, his heart marking a dangerously high rhythm trying to sate the need of a body working beyond its capacity.

“Hey, you!” From across the lawn, Koba shook a rake at the man tromping over his prized grass. “Get your dirty feet off my St. Augustine.”

Kwame flashed the old man a middle finger. “Fuck you, Koba. You and St. Augustine can kiss my arse.”

The chancellor’s office was on the third floor of the modern glass cage. Kwame could hardly breathe when his foot hit the last landing.

A young female member of staff in six-inch heels pattered over and asked, “Are you okay, sir?”

Kwame had seen her around the campus but he didn’t know her by name.

Bent in half and speaking in spurts, he said, “You know how it feels when you get punched in the gut?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

He looked her in the eye. “Do you want to find out?”

The would-be-Good Samaritan scuttled away, her stilettoes tapping a receding dirge down the hall.

Kwame sorted out his breathing, wiped sweat off his brow and walked with (*hopefully*) a modicum of dignity to the chancellor’s office.

Upon swinging open the door (*a little too hastily*), the chancellor’s secretary rose and raised her hand. “If you’re here to see the chancellor, I’m afraid he’s in a meeting at the moment.”

Kwame said, “Who else would I be here for?” And headed for the inner office.

The secretary ran after him. “Sir?”

At the door, Kwame stopped and swung around. “I’m warning you, miss. Right now, I’m channelling a tribe that’s fond of bashing people’s freaking teeth in.”

A confused look fell upon the woman. “What?”

Kwame shook his head and entered the chancellor’s office.

Behind a desk the size of a mountain, Chancellor Bokole craned his head towards the door. “I said I wasn’t to be disturbed, Sissy.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Sissy the secretary began before Kwame shut the door in her face.

He looked from the expensively-clad, rotund head of the college to the other man in the room. “Mr Pago, what a stroke of luck that my immediate boss happens to be exactly where I need him.”

The head of the Humanities Department looked over his shoulder. “I beg your pardon?”

Kwame pulled up a chair and sat next to Pago across the desk from the chancellor.

“Mr Adala,” said Bokole, “as you can see, we were in the middle of—”

“An important meeting?” Kwame cut in. “Aren’t you always? This shouldn’t take much of your time. I only need to know the progress of my paper. You know, they one you submitted for peer review uhm… what, three months ago?”

“Oh, that?” Bokole waved a chunky hand adorned with rings on every finger but the thumb. “I’m yet to hear from the review board, but I’d say a decision should be coming in any day now. Was that all?”

“No, Mr Bokole. I’m afraid that’s not all. Not even close.”

Bokole deposited his meaty arms on the desk and burned Kwame with beady eyes hooded under bushy, unkempt eyebrows. “In that case, do you mind stepping out and making a proper appointment?”

“Nah.” Kwame sat back and crossed one leg over the other. “I’m afraid the hour of the dance is upon us, chancellor.” He turned to Pago. “So, my boss, are you too aware of this?”

Mr Pago was cursed with the kind of face that looked to be in perpetual pain. “Aware of what?”

Kwame patted the other man’s thigh (*a little too roughly*). “My paper, silly. The one being ‘reviewed’ by the board of my peers.”

“I handed your work to the chancellor, if that’s what you mean.”

“I am very sure you did.” Kwame swivelled towards Bokole. “Because it somehow ended up in Mr Bokole’s garbage bin.”

“What?” Pago looked appropriately surprised. (*Or is he merely acting?*).

Kwame studied the chancellor’s face, already aware of what was coming.

*“The garbage bin? Where would you get such an awful idea? You are an important part of this institution, Mr Adala, and getting your paper published in a peer-reviewed publication would do loads of good to our academe.”*

“Yes,” Bokole said instead, nodding for emphasis. “Because in the garbage is where it belonged.”

“What did you say?” Kwame’s jaw hung loose. Bokole admitting to the truth so openly was like a slap to the face. “Lemme get this straight. Are you admitting to chucking my work in the garbage bin?”

“Mr Adala.” Bokole toyed with the massive ring on the middle finger of his left hand. “I have to say I do not in the least understand your fascination with…” He looked at Pago. “What was it again?”

*“Niricha hakhi nzetu,”* Pago supplied.

“Yeah, that. A subject rooted in conjecture and not any conceivable facts.”

“Conjecture?” Kwame roared. “I’ve spent years researching this subject and I fail to see how, of all people, a glorified balloon in an expensive suit is in a position to make that judgment call.”

Bokole bit his lip. “I understand your frustration, Mr Adala, and for that reason, and that reason only, I’ll let your impudence slide this *one* time. Unfortunately, for you, that is, I care too much for this institution to subject it to the ridicule of our learned peers. If you care to write a paper on another credible subject, this glorified balloon in an expensive suit will be all too glad to approve and take it through the process.”

5

“Oh, honey.” Zuri reached across the hospital’s cafeteria table and patted her husband’s hand. “That sounds awful. Does the man have no filters?”

“I swear, hun, I could hardly contain the urge to reach over and squeeze the life out of him with his stupid ascot.”

“Bokole dons an ascot? Mama Mia. What a weirdo. But you didn’t, did you? Please hun, please tell me you didn’t strangle the man who signs your cheques.”

“Not anymore, he won’t.”

Zuri sighed with relief. “Thank God, for that. Now, what we need to do is work on damage control.”

Kwame frowned. “Damage control?”

“There’s bound to be some sort of fallout from your… your escapade, for luck of a better word, don’t you think?”

He disengaged his hand from hers. “What happened to Sheena?”

“Who?”

He attempted a terrible imitation of Zuri. “*“To hell with your meek wife, Kwame. You should march into the Chancellor’s office and give him a generous piece of your mind.” That* Sheena.”

“I didn’t think you were going to do it.”

“What did you expect me I’d do?”

“Not follow my words to the letter, Kwame. I supposed you’d be more… tactful, not to tear your boss a new one.” Her brow creased in contemplation.

“What now?” Kwame asked.

“This morning, I had this weird feeling. Call it a woman’s intuition, educated hunch or… I don’t know. A sort of foreboding, you know? Like you were going to…”

“Act a fool?”

“To do something rash. I even tried calling you but your phone was dead.”

He exhaled. “Well, too late for all that.”

“Too late for what?”

“What did you call it, damage control? The fallout is rather permanent.”

A large invisible weight descended upon Zuri’s shoulders. Against all good judgment and fearing the worst, she heard the words she least wanted to utter tumble out of her mouth. “Hun, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I quit.” Once more, Kwame exhaled deeply, and with the outrush of air went the wretched load he had borne throughout the one-hour drive from the college to the hospital. “Wow! That felt good.”

“But it shouldn’t.” Zuri’s hands shook. “It shouldn’t, Kwame. You must go back and do something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Beg? Grovel? Between the mortgage and the kids’ private tuition… You know we can’t afford to keep going on my salary.”

Kwame lay his hands on hers. “Don’t worry, dear, I’ll find a way.”

She withdrew her hands, sat back, and stashed them into her armpits.

‘Oh, c’mon, dear,” he pleaded. “Not the mope.”

“I’m serious, Kwame. I won’t have you throwing our lives away because you had a ‘moment’”. She drew air quotes around the last word and proceeded to her feet. “I have to go back to work.”

He reached out but she was too far for his groping fingers. “Wait, Zuri. There’s more.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I can’t do this, Kwame, not right now.”

“Please, sit down.”

“Yeah? Don’t you think you’ve ruined my day enough as it is?”

“But this is good news.”

“Great!” Zuri flapped her arms. “Why did I not think of that? Behind every quitting comes good news.” She planted her hands on the table and drilled her eyes into his. “What’s the good news, dear husband, you don’t get to go to prison?”

“No, dear wife, the good news is, I have a new job.”

Zuri did not move a muscle, not even a twitch.

“It’s in a small town called Port Heya,” Kwame went on in his most placating voice. “We’ll need to relocate, but that’s not the best part.” Still eliciting no reaction from his wife, he pushed on. “I’ll be head of the archaeology department, hun. Me. Head of department, not toiling under humanities or some other dopey boss.”

Zuri blinked. “Are you done?”

“There’s a nice private school for the kids, and guess what? The college will cover most of the tuition.”

“Oh, really? Lemme guess. And since you’ll be making oodles of money, I won’t have to bother working. I’ll be home baking pies and singing in the rain. Am I getting warm?”

“There’s no call for sarcasm, Zuri.”

“But there is call for lies? Is this how you intended to placate me? By feeding me flimflam?”

“I’m serious. There’s an open position for head of paediatrics in the local hospital.”

“Really?” Zuri resumed her seat. “This I’ve got to hear. So tell me, hun, how did you manage to bag us all these wonderful jobs immediately after you got fired? Sorry, after you *quit* your current job?”

For a few seconds, he allowed her to simmer, savouring what he hoped would be a *coup d'etat* and not the more likely calm before the violent storm.

“Last week, or was it two weeks ago?” he said calmly. “I got a call from a friend. Or should I say, an acquaintance, back in college.”

“Which friend?” She counted off her fingers. “Hakim? Omare? Hassan? I know all your friends. Or maybe it’s Addo, the dimwit who changes the oil in your car.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Tell me that again when I accept his offer to fake a medical conference and accompany him on a weekend to Zanzibar.”

“He did that?” Kwame rolled a fist. “That goddammed bastard! Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Like you told me about the offer from your so-called ‘friend’ from college?”

“I wasn’t gonna take him up on it, Zuri. I only talked to him yesterday and he assured me the position is still open. Don’t you see? This is a good opportunity for us to leave this godforsaken city and start over afresh.”

For a long while she said nothing. Then she sighed deeply and stood up. “Kwame, I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re lying and when you’re not.”

“But I’m not lying.”

“I know! And that’s what scares me to the bone, because you know damm well there’s no way I’m quitting my job and my life here to follow your dream to some mythical village. But be warned, if you insist on—”

The overheard intercom chimed on. “Paging Dr Adala. Paging Dr Adala. Please report to ICU, stat.”

“Well,” Zuri said, “saved by the bell. I guess one of us has to work, right? I’ll see you at home, Kwame.”

She turned and left.

Zuri could be as stubborn as a mule if she so wished, and swaying her had always been an uphill task. As Kwame watched her walk away, he wondered what remained in his arsenal to sell her on his proposed relocation. After several fruitless minutes, he left the table and paid for their *chai* and *mandazi.* At the door, on his way out, he ground to a halt as if he had run into an invisible wall. A gem of an idea had crept into his mind.

*I’ll arrange for a conference call with Juma. That should convert her.*

He removed the flip phone from his pocket. Though it had a full charge that morning, it was stone-cold dead.

6

On Friday morning, the fifth day since Kwame quit his job at the college, three disparate but equally odd events turned the tide firmly in his favour.

Zuri had been summoned to the emergency room at four o’clock that morning, automatically delegating the morning regimen to her husband. As he got the kids ready for school, Kwame noticed a sudden downturn in Jabari’s health. The slight cough Zuri had been treating was not taking to the medication, and the boy could hardly draw enough air into his lungs without gasping like a trout out of water.

Once he saw his daughter Stella to her school bus, he rushed Jabari to St. Joseph Medical Hospital where Zuri worked. As a close family member, it was against hospital policy (*“Unethical too, honey.”*) for Zuri to attend to her son.

“I can,” she insisted. “I’m not busy.”

“What do you mean?” Kwame asked. “You’re ever busy.”

A tall Asian doctor in a white lab coat approached them. A name tag reading, “Dr Makita” hung on a lanyard around his neck next to his stethoscopes. Kwame recognised the name. He was his wife’s senior and head honcho of the medical staff.

Dr Makita softly pried Jabari out of Zuri’s arms. “I’ll take care of him, Dr Adala. Please, consider what we talked about.”

As the doctor led Jabari away, Zuri retired to the waiting area, her husband in tow.

“What was that all about?” Kwame said.

Her head dropped. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Kwame took her hand. “We’ve always shared, hun. Wanna talk about it?”

She handed him her phone.

He turned it over in his hand. “I don’t understand.”

“Check the last call.”

A twinge of apprehension—

*Please God, let it not be that she’s having an affair with the new handsome doctor*

—shot through Kwame’s heart as he switched on the phone and navigated to the call log. Confusion replaced apprehension. “I still don’t get it.”

“I got a call from the hospital this morning,” Zuri said.

“I see it. Five-oh-two. So?”

“When I got here, there was no emergency.” She inspected his face for a reaction.

“But…”

“Dr Danilo was the on-call doctor and he’s been here all night.”

“So… who made the call?”

 “Apparently, no one. Dr Makita thinks I have trust issues with the new doctor and that’s I came in the pretence of an emergency. And guess what? This isn’t the first time either. Remember when you were here on Monday and I was called to the ICU?” She shook her head.

“But it can’t be. *Someone* paged you. I heard it.”

“It’s been happening all week. Yesterday I was summoned to an empty room and no one would own up to the page.” She implored her husband with sadness in her eyes. “Am I losing it?”

“Of course not, dear.” He caressed her arm. “Maybe you’re just exhausted, is all.”

*What about you, Kwame?* his inner voice said. *Were you also exhausted when you talked to Juma via a dead phone? Your wife couldn’t get through to you, remember?*

“Dr Makita says—” Zuri’s started before her phone chimed.

They both started and stared at the phone as if it were a pet rock suddenly come to life.

Kwame recovered first. “It’s Stella’s school.”

“Put it on speaker.”

“Good morning, Mrs Adala,” said Mrs Jimbo, the school’s principal. “I’m calling to check on Stella. Is she okay?”

“I…” Zuri stammered. “I don’t quite follow, Mrs Jimbo.”

“Today is the third day that she hasn’t reported to school. Is she not home sick? She’s never missed this many classes, so, naturally I assumed…”

Zuri turned to Kwame.

“She got on the bus right before I came here,” he said.

“Mrs Adala?” called principal Jimbo. “Are you there?”

“I’ll stay with Jabari,” Kwame offered. “You go find out what’s going on with Stella.”

\*\*\*

Most of Saturday morning going into late afternoon they spent parking—well, mostly giving orders to two monosyllabic, acquiescent gym buffs as large as mountain gorillas.

“Where did you get these specimens?” Zuri whispered as she and Kwame took a break in the kitchen while their reticent guests hauled a hefty armoire down the stairs to the moving truck. “They look like they can lift a city bus between them with zero effort. What are they, Nubians?”

Kwame almost choked on a sip of water. “What’s that about?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. They’re both dark as night.”

“I didn’t.” He shrugged. “But I guess you’d pick up on that sort of thing.”

“Because I’m a doctor?”

“Because you’re a woman. Dudes don’t check out other dudes.”

“You must be stuck in the sixteenth century. Do you by chance happen to be on speaking terms with Monsieur Shakespeare?”

Beaming, Kwame kissed her on the cheek. “It’s nice to see your humour has grown back since last night.”

“Keep trending carefully, my friend.” She shoved him away playfully. “Floor is still lava.”

“Noted.”

“A2Z Movers? On your friends’ uniforms.”

“Oh, that.” Kwame swallowed another sip of water. “It’s a professional moving company.”

“Is it?” Zuri said, wearing suspicion like a full-face mask. “We only agreed to move this morning. How did you find a *professional* moving company so fast?”

“Erm… Juma.”

“Your mysterious friend?” Her scepticism grew. “He seems to have all the answers, doesn’t he?”

“I only called him to say we were on board. He suggested the movers. Worth it, don’t you reckon?”

She walked out without another word.

The rest of the day passed in relative quiet. Stella, already brooding for being grounded for skipping school, grumbled minimally for the additional punishment of having to pack up her stuff, not to mention leaving the city and her friends behind “forever”. Once her frail pleas fell on deaf ears, she reverted to her regular weapon of choice—silent treatment. On another day, a healthy Jabari would have posed a ton of questions at every turn. Now devoid of energy from a cocktail of medications and lungs that won’t cooperate, he inquired once or twice what the fuss was all about, accepted the offered explanation (“We’re going on holiday, dear.”) and fell back on his bed in a zombie state between awake and asleep.

With all the beds gone in the moving truck, the family had to overnight on bare mattresses on the floor, a prospect that Stella could not bring herself to face, and for which she threatened to spend the night seated. The phrase “Suit yourself” from her father was met with a generous roll of her eyes and a murmured, “I might as well just die.”

“Three days of playing hooky,” Zuri whispered later that night. “You think it’s about a boy?”

Kwame sighed and clamped his eyes shut. “Two whole days I’ve been asking myself that question,” he whispered back.

“And?”

He rolled over to face his wife. “I’m glad we’re moving. It was either Port Heya or prison for first degree murder.”

“Me too.” A few seconds later, Zuri started. “Hold up. Which one were you going to kill, Stella or the boy?”

“Both.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They chuckled silently.

Snuggled between them, Jabari snored softly.

7

“Is it just me or has this day started on a glorious note,” Kwame said early that Sunday morning as he stuffed a flat screen TV near the top of a nearly packed boot of the family’s black Toyota Noah. “I mean, look at it. Not a cloud in the sky. Even the city air kinda smells fresher this morning.”

Zuri walked up, a boxed mixer in her hands. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Oh, no. It’s safe. See? I wrapped a blanket around it.”

“I’m not talking about the TV. *Not a cloud in the sky… The air smells fresher…* It’s a done deal, Kwame, we’re moving. Now you’re only preaching to the choir.”

“I never liked that statement. ‘Preaching to the choir.’ If anyone needs a stern sermon, it’s the choir. Those assholes need saving more than every person in the regular pews, you know what I’m saying?”

“Such didactic language in front of the kids.” She raised the box. “Where do I put this?”

“I don’t know.” He looked about. “Looks full to me. Can’t you…”

“Leave it? Is that what you were about to say?”

“It’s just a mixer.”

“Is it, Kwame? Is it *just* a mixer? Like your wedding band is *just* another ring, hmm?”

He made to touch her but she shrunk away.

“C’mon, hun,” he pleaded. “Let’s not make this into a fight, okay?”

“Fine. Let’s leave the TV. That should make enough room for the mixer.”

Several dark thoughts danced around Kwame’s mind. A few seconds later, the clouds passed and the day turned beautiful once more.

“Here.” He put out his arms. “I’ll take it.”

He opened the rear door of the vehicle and set the box on Stella’s lap.

“What the heck, dad?” Stella cried.

“Language, Stella.”

“What are you gonna do, dad? I’m already grounded.”

“For a week, missy. I can make it two, if you like. Or three. Or until you finish college. Wanna try me?”

She averted his gaze.

“You could make a game of it, you know,” Kwame said. “Now that you’re grounded and your electronics confiscated, you could entertain yourself going over the specs of your mum’s special mixer. Here’s an interesting titbit. ‘All-metal gears and 1.5HP, 1100W copper motor.’ Whatever does that even mean? That should keep you occupied for a while, no?”

All impediment overcome, they set off and following an interminable half hour of blaring silence, the city skyline fell out of view behind them. Before them, to as far as they eye could see, stretched Mombasa Road, a long black spear stabbing the horizon far in the distance.

“Port Heya, here we come,” Kwame announced in the melodic voice of a circus showman.

Riding shotgun, his wife sat ramrod straight, her gaze aimed at the endless tarmac ahead. In the seat behind her, Stella was a mad statue staring out the window at the rushing scene, the box on her lap as misplaced as a snowman in the middle of Turkana. Kwame twisted the rear-view mirror towards his son. Sound asleep, Jabari was as peaceful as a still, moonlit lake on a cloudless night, his stuffed toy donkey (*“His name is Hugsy, dad.”)* clutched firmly to his bossom.

“C’mon, guys,” Kwame pleaded, “can we try for a little cheer? It’s a *looong* drive to the coast. How about a song, huh? Suggest a driving song. Anyone?”

For the next two hours, the silence ratcheted up to near-insurmountable levels and a funereal gloom took up every inch of the vehicle. Kwame tried the radio. On Capital FM, Sinéad O’Connor crooned *Nothing Compares to You,* and on the next station, Johnny Cash was *Hurt*.

*I hurt myself today*

*To see if I still feel*

*I focus on the pain*

*The only thing that's real*

On 81.4 FM, Greg Mangana had lost all the customary flair that could, on a whim, turn depression into gold. “My fellow Manganacians,” he said in a low unusually melancholic voice, “I don’t care what you dub it—aliens, ghosts, rupture, the return of the Messiah—whatever rocks your boat, someone has to get to the end of these mysteries. And I know what some of you are probably thinking, ‘What do I care? It hasn’t happened to me.’ That’s right. You can make your Tiktok videos and social media memes about it all you like because *it hasn’t happened to you*. Those people… those families that disappeared without a trace aren’t your folks. Then again, cancer or freaking AIDS is only a ‘them’ disease until it happens to you or kin you love, right?

“You know what this reminds me of? The Bermuda Triangle. Remember how that had us all on tenterhooks? Ships and planes and people disappearing without a trace inside a triangle in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. As uber-mysterious as they come. So eerie it had to be aliens, right? Nah! Too farfetched. Let’s leave that to the UFO nuts. What about a government conspiracy? This sounds much better. Why? Because nuclear weapons were being tested under the ocean all the damm time. Sounds more credible, right? Or is it ‘credibler’? Is there such a word? Who knows, man. If aliens gave us anything, it’s the blasted English language. Whoa! Whoa! Hold up, Manganacians. I just thought of something. The English were settlers here. That means they *were* aliens. So, aliens *did* bring us the English language. Boom! Mind blown. But that’s a story for another day. Back to the abductions.”

“What’s he talking about, mom?” Stella asked, leaning forward.

“It’s alive! It’s alive!” Kwame proclaimed boisterously. “And it speaks.”

“It’s just Greg Mangana, honey,” Zuri said. “He’s the reason people no longer listen to the radio.”

Stella said, “I thought that was because of the internet.”

“But there’s radio on the internet,” Kwame chimed in. “And you can even download it to your phone. No such luxury when I was growing up, kiddo.”

“They’re called blogs, dad, not radio.” She reclined and crossed her arms over her chest. “Does anyone care to tell me where we’re going, or do I have to act surprised when we get there?”

“I’m glad you asked, honey.” The orthodox bubbly Kwame was back. “Port Heya is a small town fifty kilometres from Kilifi town in Kilifi county. That’s along the coast.”

“Duh. I know where Kilifi county is. I take Geography in high school, remember? But I never heard of Port Heya, or whatever.”

“Banda Ra Salama?”

“What?”

“Have you heard of Banda Ra Salama?”

“No.”

“Dakacha? Jarabuni? Luswani?”

“Okay, dad, I get it. We’re headed to the middle of nowhere.”

Zuri twisted towards her husband. “Come to think of it, do you have proper directions to the place?”

With the slightest of hesitations, Kwame said, “According to Juma—”

“According to *Juma?”*

“Yes, hun, Juma. The person who lives there, remember? He said we should take a left turn once we get to the town of Mariakani.”

“If you give me back my phone,” Stella said, “I could Google it.”

“Contrary to popular belief, young lady,” said Kwame, “and by that, I mean the collective that’s your generation, Google isn’t the answer to everything.”

“With all due respect, dad, all we need is directions, not answers to everything.”

Kwame turned to Zuri. “Did you hear what your daughter just said?”

“But I said ‘With all due respect’,” Stella protested.

“That’s no excuse, Stella,” Zuri snapped. “Apologise to your father.”

“I’m sorry,” Stella mumbled.

“What was that?” Zuri cupped her ear.

“I said I’m sorry, alright? And maybe you too should apologise for saying dad’s been acting all crazy lately.”

Kwame and Zuri locked eyes.

Behind them, Jabari shouted, “Look, dad. An elephant.”

8

Eight hours dragged longer than anyone had anticipated, even Kwame and his seemingly indefatigable gung-ho attitude. At hour five, the afternoon sun peaked, bathing everything below it with unrelenting heat. The family stopped for fish and rice at Voi. Kwame loved it, Zuri thought it a tad too dry, and Stella promised to vomit it all up within the hour. All the while, Jabari piloted an invisible plane around the restaurant, forcing his delighted mother (*“Who’d have thought he’d be this peppy today?*) to pack her son’s lunch to go.

As the others enjoyed generous scoops of cold, welcome ice cream, Kwame left in search of a petrol station to fill up the car. He found a rudimentary depot so ancient it might have refuelled Noah’s Ark. The single pump was more rust than paint and a shack behind it hunched under a battered roof and looked ready to crumble at the hint of a gale. By its door, on a stained wooden folding chair, sat a man as old as the establishment, sporting a long dirty-white beard to match a shock of grey hair around a shiny bald expanse. His beady eyes shone with intensity.

The old geezer cocked his head to one side, jetted a fat globule of brown tobacco juice, and through a set of stained rotting teeth said, “Welcome to hell, son.”

Kwame gagged a little. “Beg your pardon?”

“The sun.” He tipped one eye skywards and back. “Brings to mind fire and brimstone, don’t it? Or a good argument for *Sanātana Dharma*, eh?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Hinduism, my boy, the scape artists.”

“Uh, okay. Do you have petrol?”

The man stood with some effort, hitched up his stained overalls and spat out more tobacco. “Regular or X-tra mileage?”

“What’s extra mileage?”

“That’s X-tra with an ‘X’, son. Cleans your engine.” He offered Kwame a rotten smile. “Or so they tell me.”

“Regular, I guess? Fill her up.”

“Good choice. We’re fresh out of X-tra, anyway.”

*A few pawns short of a set, are we?* Kwame thought.

“What was that?” said the old man as he unhooked the pipe and primed the pump. “My ears ain’t what they used to be, you see.”

*That wasn’t out loud, was it?* “Nothing. I said not—”

“From the city, aren’t ya?”

“What gave me up?”

“You just did.” *Splat!* “It’s my ears leaving me, not my eyes, you see. I get a good sight of your lot every day, off to the beach for a break from the missus. Can’t live without em’, can’t choke em.” He smiled again. “Or so they tell me.”

Kwame wished he was elsewhere. “How much will it be? The petrol.”

“It’s still going.” The man shook the pipe. “He’s a thirsty monster, ain’t he? I’d turn around if I was you.”

Kwame paused with his fingers between bills in his wallet, his breath caught in his throat. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“No, you said you’d turn around if you were me.”

“Say, ever heard the one about the graveyard?”

“No.”

“There are people dying to get there!”

The old man burst into uproarious laughter, slapping his thigh and spraying out a cloud of tobacco juice.

Kwame was more so convinced the man had a few loose nuts bouncing around his noggin.

“Oh, nice one.” He shook a bunch of bills at the man. “Tell you what, I think that should be enough petrol.”

“You said fill her up, didn’t ya?”

“I know what I said but I’m running late and it’s taking forever.”

“In a hurry, aren’t ya?” The old man shook the pump handle, replaced it on its cradle, and screwed the vehicle’s petrol cap shut. “Say, what did the axe murderer say when he was in a hurry?”

“Look, I don’t know and I really don’t—”

“He said, ‘Chop chop!’” More guffaws.

“Here.” Kwame slapped the money into the old man’s hand and got into the car. “Keep the change.”

The man appeared suddenly at the driver-side window. “That’s what gets you, ain’t it? It’s change, you see. That’s what gets you.”

Once back at the restaurant, Kwame said little as he hustled the others into the vehicle.

“What’s got into you?” Zuri asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I did.” said Kwame. “It pumps petrol.”

He resumed the drive down Mombasa road, the old man’s image stuck in his head like a bad jingle.

*“Heard the one about the graveyard? Have ya? Have ya?!”*

Everyone else was in good spirits. Zuri synced her phone’s playlist to the car radio and led the rest in singing along. Stella took her time to warm up then began blaring at the top of her voice, tapping the beat on the back of her mother’s seat. Jabari made up words and tried to out-sing everyone else.

*R-E-S peace it is*

*Find out why it’s mean to me*

*R-E-S peace it is*

*Take care of CCP…*

Jabali Africa, Sauti Sol, Mariah Carrey, Whitney Houston. No one was immune to complete butchering of their art.

An hour later, Stella shouted, “Mariakani!”

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An hour later, they were at each other’s throats.

“You said sixty minutes from Mariakani we’d be making the next left,” Zuri shouted. “It’s been two hours, Kwame. Two hours and we’re stuck in the back of beyond.”

“The back of beyond?” Kwame shot back. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“You know what doesn’t make sense? I’ll tell you what doesn’t make sense. You can’t call Juma and ask for those directions again. *That* doesn’t make sense.”

“His number is on the phone and it’s dead.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What other phone?”

“The flip… Never mind.”

She squared up to him. “Oh, no, Kwame, I mind. Since when do you have two phones?”

He sighed. “Can we talk about this later? Right now, we need to get back on track.”

“Dad,” Stella said, “let me Google it. It’s so much easier that way.”

Kwame’s heart dropped but he had run out of options. He turned to Zuri. “Let her.”

Zuri threw up her arms. “Finally, something that makes sense.”

The way Stella lit up, one would be forgiven for thinking she was the goddess Gbadu receiving the keys of fate from Mawu, the supreme deity.