

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF LITERATURE

Second Chance

(A novella)

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**A CREATIVE WORK SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
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AUGUST 2019

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research project is my original work and that it has never been presented for the award of a degree either in this or any other institution.

Signature_____

Date_____

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This research work has been submitted for examination with our full approval as the University Supervisors.

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DEDICATION

To my parents; for believing in me.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVELLA: *SECOND CHANCE*

Kasudi re-lives the most damning pronouncement she ever heard from her father: "You missed the university by one point of the cut off mark to the public universities. You will *never* see the inside of one." She had known what he meant. She was the first born in a large family that was hard on resources and therefore being taken to the university under the *expensive* Privately Sponsored Student Program, was out of the question for her. She had to contend with joining a Teacher's Training College. Her father had had the highest hope for her and she knew he was greatly aggrieved. He did not stop to think of what she had *gone through* in her acquisition of basic knowledge. Nobody asked her and so according to her, nobody cared. That was years ago.

She sits in her office as she plans a lesson. She has had the chance to go to the university again, and again, amid challenges of her search for identity, poverty, myths and misconceptions, financial constraints, rape, anger, obsession and disease among other issues.

Her best friend, Chemtai, has been there to help her every step of the way. She *listened* to her, visited her in hospital, took notes for her when she was sitting two academic year examinations for she had been denied them when they were offered because she had not cleared fees, and encouraged her when her father had suddenly fallen ill in their final year in undergraduate and his subsequent demise two weeks to her graduation. It is a story of a girl who views society as one that waits to pounce on her at every given opportunity. That society has undergone a great metamorphosis from the time she was growing up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to appreciate my supervisors: Dr Kitata and Dr Musonye, for their invaluable guidance and support.

I would also like to appreciate my parents for always encouraging me despite the challenges I faced in writing this project.

Lastly, I thank God for being faithful to me in my academic journey.

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1.1 Introduction

I chose to focus my research project on creative writing in prose. This is because creative writing inspires creative writers to write to and for the society. Literature serves the purpose of mirroring society to reflect its past, give its present and project its future.

The education of the girl child in Kenya has been a subject of interest to educationists, sociologists and scholars due to the mediocre marks posted in the Kenyan national exams as opposed to that of the boy child. A number of writers have written literary articles to address this status of the girl in her quest of education in the Kenyan society. This project addresses this issue and mirrors it through creative writing in the hope that this raises the consciousness of the girl and impacts positively on her education. Growing up, I saw what my friends, colleagues and acquaintances were going through. It was not different from what I was going through. Our experiences were similar in more ways than they were different. They only varied in the extent to which something happened to us; or, in the form of how it happened; with a few of us undergoing some experiences unique to us. I have been toying with the idea of illuminating these experiences with a view of engaging a girl somewhere. It is a show of solidarity for what girls go through to become women.

There are various literary works addressing the plight of the girl-child in the Kenyan context. I would like to add to those voices that already have. Besides, the media bombard us daily with images of the hero instinct as a male preserve on one hand; and on the other hand, the images of violence against women, her helplessness in the face of adversity, and what she ought to be, think and feel.

I suppose literary texts could serve to revise this identity question of a woman, exploring the fact that a woman wants recognition as an intelligent, sensitive human being who might not be an epitome of virtue but a normal human being capable of human errors and who is open to learning to support the social vision of a just society. Mwanzi in her thesis titled "An analysis of Children's Prose Fiction" asserts that children learn by identification (hence the need to impress their young minds with what is progressive). *Second Chance* seeks to navigate female issues for young readership, with a possible view of becoming one of the agencies of inspiring and empowering the girl-child, or even as a source of healing for maimed girls and women out there.

It is a novella that focuses on the plight of the girl child in the acquisition of an education in contemporary Kenya. It exposes societal strengths as well as its errors and excesses in its shaping of a girl child into a woman. The current affirmative action in Kenya towards an equality of the sexes could benefit a lot from creative literary works that act as an eye opener to the myriad of challenges the girl child faces in the acquisition of education, and the motions of becoming a woman.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The girl child is lagging behind in the acquisition of an education that could help liberate her from imposed mental slavery. I chose to create a fictional character in creative writing in prose (a novella) in an attempt to investigate whether the girl child is supported enough in her quest for education and whether she can flourish with or without that support.

1.3 Objectives

1. To create a female character who has an ability to define herself and her circumstances in the Kenyan contemporary society.
2. To demonstrate that the woman always has a choice, even in adversity.
3. To celebrate the success of Kenyan women, whether real or fictive, as an attempt at bridging the gap of gender inequality in Kenya.

1.4 Research questions

1. How can the Kenyan girl child show resilience in the quest of education from a point of disadvantage and define herself and her circumstances in the Kenyan contemporary society?
2. How does a biased culture impact negatively on the education of the girl child in contemporary Kenya?
3. Can a literary work that celebrates female hood help to bridge the gap of gender inequality in education in contemporary Kenya?

1.5 Justification

In current Kenya, the girl child performed dismally as compared to the boy child in the 2017 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education; as postulated in the Kenyan 'The Nation' and 'Standard' Media Groups. These voices have indicated that the girls scooped the top positions but overall, they were

beaten by the boys in that national examination. Creative writing has been growing and I would like to add to the debate in the hope that the novella will provide a role model for the Kenyan girl child. There is evidence of female heroines in literary texts produced in contemporary Kenya with a view of addressing the question of patriarchy and its restricting space where children's literature attempt to teach gender roles which are undergoing change from the stereotypical gender definition of a woman's space as a meek, industrious, care and food provider in the home as a preamble to motherhood to a more assertive, aggressive individual with her own conquests to discover and make whether in the home or outside those confines. The girls who are at a very impressionable phase of their life require more narratives that provide model characters that celebrate female-hood and explore the joys and challenges in the making of a woman whose major tool of liberation from this confining space is education. However, there is need for literary texts to highlight a female's education within a societal framework that exposes the myriad of challenges she faces in her quest for education and her subsequent emancipation.

In current Kenya, the situation is such that even with the many affirmative actions aimed at empowering the girl-child and providing her with equal opportunities in acquisition of education, she is still lagging behind in comparison to the boy-child. Myths and related social stereotypes in schools and families reinforce and emphasize gender boundaries which then manifests in this state of affairs, according to Chege and Sifuna in *Girls' and Women's Education in Kenya: Gender Perspectives and Trends*. Contrary to popular belief that girls beat boys in the 2017 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education; alternative voices (Standard and Nation Media Groups) have indicated that the girls only scooped the top positions but overall, the boys beat them in that national examination. This however underscores the fact that if the girl-child is supported enough by her society, there is a lot she can achieve to benefit this very society. Myths and related misconceptions in a patriarchal institution are not the only dragons that she battles in her quest for an education. A woman also battles stereotypical portrayal, violence, discrimination and castigation for a myriad of other social ills...

1.6 Literature Review

Prose should be clear, economical and precise. According to Harry Bingham in the article “9 Prose Writing Tips for Perfect Prose Style: How to Write a Great Prose”, a prose creative writer needs

to do a number of things: the writer needs to kill clichés, be accurate, keep it short, trust in the reader, cull adjectives used, mix the story's rhythms and work on nouns and verbs employed.

Bingham asserts that word choices and sentence constructions need to reflect on the intent and purpose of the writer. He adds that though paying attention to the acute detail is mandatory, a writer should edit his or her work to keep it short while reflecting the work's content material. Since the reader is smart enough to get the writer, he or she (the writer) should trust such a reader enough to narrate the story by cutting out redundancy, as well as by avoiding double adjectives which then weakens the first adjective used. Further, Bingham observes that short, strong sentences should be varied with the longer ones to reflect the mood and moment of the story and create variety.

Every day nouns and verbs tend to be a boring read. As such, Bingham suggests the use of tangier ones which then ignites the reader's imagination. Though he advocates for writing simply, he strongly suggests addition of some little flashes of genius which indicates a writer's commitment to caring enough to make a description magical.

In essence, what Bingham corroborates are the rules of the novelist: perspective, precision, proportion and harmony. Perspective makes a writer focus on the concept of ideology; precision ensures relevance and a clear manner of saying something; proportion relates the main idea to the ensuing sub themes; whereas harmony ensures the interconnectedness of sentences, paragraphs and ideas as they formulate chapters of the story.

The novel is a genre that is essentially an orientation toward totality. The novel is a work of art written in prose, dealing with imaginary people and is too long to be read in one sitting. David Kurnick in *The Novel (in Theory)* adds that it could also be defined as a belated, fragmentary version of a prior wholeness represented by myth or psychic content. According to Lukács, the psychology of the hero conveys the novel's self-awareness; Ortega Gasset posits that it is the interplay of perspectives on the narrated events that brings about this self-awareness; while Bakhtin asserts that the interplay of language and style is the one that gives the novel's self-awareness, Kurnick observes. The point of intersection of the above thinkers is that history is divided between modernity and tradition; and that the vision of the novel is to provide the literary testament to that division. Franco Moretti in *The Novel* stipulates that the novel is a paradigmatic

form of modernity *and* remains a crucial critical name for the ambition to navigate the contours of an increasingly globalized cultural scene. The definitive novel therefore aims at a discourse that is self-distancing and from a certain perspective, psychology and linguistics.

We have a wide range of thoughts on what a novel should be. As Hale in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* talks of the literary texts being both paradigmatic and problematic; *and* clear and opaque; Michael Mckee in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* posits that the realist novel has self-reflection and self-critique in line with the Post-modernist or Post-colonial thought. The deconstruction school of thought thinks that the novel illustrates a wide theory of language without engaging the specificity of form making the reading of one a psychological journey through philosophical terrain. The Marxists think the novel is a *bad guy* in the sense that it comprises debased forms of a once coherent genre by societies in the past; and a *golden key* for it is a privileged site for ideological processes in conjunction with invisibility in other realms of modern culture (Kurnick, 346).

According to Kurnick, the novel therefore is a critical genre that is characterized by a phantasm of totality, and features mostly recurrent themes such as: an orientation toward the big picture; a restless will to compare and to relativize; and a thematic obsession with the whole. The novel is the phenomenon that thinks that totality. In Mckee's words, the novel is the privileged object of popular and professional reading, hence the dual nature of the novel theory.

Generally, a novel or novella has a plot, a theme and a resolution. The characters employed expose the problem; build up the conflict to a certain climax which then calls for the need of a resolution. Theodor Adorno says on the novel: "the novel's true impulse [is] the attempt to decipher the riddle of external life" (Kurnick, 32). The novel therefore is expected to map the shape of the world, moving beyond the empirical into the metaphysical. Kurnick asserts that it should depict something happening, and to someone. As much as the novel shapes the culture and gives a reading for enjoyment, it should also mount a theory of narrative, or of a language, or of modernity (Kurnick, 2008).

There are many texts that comment on the girl-child in the Kenyan context and beyond. They address the notion of the irrelevance of the woman in a society where she is viewed as an accessory; and societal expectations and definitions of the successful woman as a subservient, domestic figure as opposed to a person who is competitive and assertive. Sadly, though, most literary works by male authorship seem to endorse gender stereotypes they have internalized through socialization. Pearson and Pope in *The Female Hero in the American and British Literature* seem to question this. They posit that "the first task of the female hero is to slay dragons that oppress women" for both men and women are capable of the heroic fete. A revolt against this embedded patriarchal literary authority in the African readership is possible.

Tony Mochama in the novella *Run, Cheche, Run*; deconstructs and rebuts the above patriarchal literary authority. In his novella, he makes Cheche Chepchirchir, the protagonist who is a girl and fourteen years old, prepare for the most wonderful race in her life: the race of running 1,500 metres in less than five minutes to save all those gathered at Mokongu Secondary School from a bomb planted by Ass La Sababu through their young recruit, Ahmed, a Form 3 boy. In the novella, Cheche is a girl who achieves a great heroic fete of saving lives; and in the process receives recognition in the form of an 'Elder of the Burning Spear' from the president live on national TV. Such narratives serve to provide young readership with a heroine they can look up to; and who can impact positively on their young, impressionable minds. The young readers are served with an alternative narrative to the proverbial patriarchal school of thought that seeks to portray the heroic fete as a male preserve.

Colomba Kaburi in *A Historic View of the Representation of Female Characters in Children's Fiction in Kenya* postulates that "gender role stereotypes are still prevalent in the Kenyan society and they still produce negative connotations" by examining children's literature from the 1960s up to 2008. This is an invaluable assessment given that children emulate behavioural models inherent in the books they read. When these models of behaviour are stereotyped, it disadvantages the sex that is unfairly represented for the liberation for such becomes hindered. Colomba posits that the African female has been "pigeon-holed" and needs to emancipate herself. In his survey, he paints the picture of an oppressed, morally restricted female figure that is considered an accessory and of a lower status as compared to the more often preferred male; and that is structured towards making

her serve the male which according to Kaburi, needs to change. Other voices he cites as concurring with him includes Ogundipe-Leslie in "The Female Writer and her Commitment" in Jones (ed) in *Women in African Literature Today* (143) who advocates for female emancipation even though men might view it as problematic and a betrayer of traditions that are often confused with women's roles. Colomba cites Frank in "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa" in Jones (ed) *Women in African Literature Today* who argues that male authored African novels define women as childlike and concerned with trivial things like hair plaiting or cooking which needs a spurn in favour of a creation of a safe, sane and supportive world for women.

In the novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *A Grain of Wheat*, the above is exemplified. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays women as the society regards them: weaker, subordinate, nurturers, caretakers, of little influence; and yet ironically, insinuates they are at the core of society which would disintegrate without them. Okonkwo, the protagonist, yields to a woman when Chielo wants to engage his daughter, Ezinma; the power rests with *Chika*, a priestess of the Igbo god that even Okonkwo who is an embodiment of the Igbo patriarchal tradition has to answer to; Okonkwo adores his daughter Ezinma who stands up to him, challenges him, contradicts him yet ends up commanding his full attention and respect. Achebe makes the bright Ezinma who dares to venture into the perceived preserve of the male character of bravery; strong-willed and adventurous retract into a "tractable, serviceable, and selfless daughter" as observed by Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* to harness Okonkwo's ego as a strict male code of masculinity who fails to appreciate her as she is but wishes she were a boy as opposed to the brother Nwoye that he (Achebe) allows to rebel against this masculinity and embrace the forbidden Whiteman's religion. Besides, Ezinma's mother Ekwefi who is a 'type' representative of females is content in being a molested and battered wife. No woman in the text rebels against this African patriarchal norm.

In the novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o seeks to cut into societal fabric and challenge it by creating a female character that is resilient and re-defines her circumstances. Wangari thrives even after she is ousted from her matrimonial home by her husband on the account of an alleged sexual incompetence. She ekes a living tilling land and educates her son single-handedly. Ngugi appeals to the universal character by introducing Margery, a white character who is neglected by

her husband to depict the plight of a woman in a patriarchal society that is not a confine of the African society thereby demonstrating that the female oppression transcends race.

Colomba also highlights the fact that the woman is portrayed as a prostitute that corrupts the moral code of the society; that she belongs in the village; or she is portrayed as a goddess who lures men to their death by citing Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. In the novel *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, Ihuoma's beauty is not appreciated. In the text, Emenike, Madume and Ekweme die as a result of their love for Ihuoma. Consequently, Ihuoma's beauty is something that men are called to be wary of in an effort to isolate her and make her miserable in the face of vulnerability of man; man cannot afford to lose his confidence before such a woman. Instead, the woman as demonstrated by Ihuoma is made to feel incomplete, vulnerable and unhappy without man's affection. She is because he is: it cannot be the other way round. And man is warned of her as a predator he should be wary of.

In the novel *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi fails to show the resilient female character he seeks to create in a historical continuum that seeks to oppress and exploit her: Mariamu leaves her abusive husband and turns for help to Brother Ezekiel who wants her for his sexual gratification; and Wanjia who has been sexually maimed before by Kimeria at an innocent age and forced to drop out of school, is continually harassed sexually and exploited by her boss at the bar where she is working; and she in turn recruits young girls into prostitution, creating a lucrative business and even in her prostitution, brags of wielding power over the men she sleeps with in an attempt to re-define her circumstances.

Kaburi also postulates that female heroism is devalued in oral narratives, for instance, the hunting narratives where men heroically kill game and boast of their prowess to an admiring female audience, citing Kenneth L. Donelson and Nilsen in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*; or, in folk-tales where females are rescued from giants by heroic younger males. The emphasis therefore should be on non-sexist texts which is a call echoed by Stinton in *Racism and Sexism in Children's Books*.

Even though the arrogant, destructive males frown at intelligent, self-managing and disobedient female heroes; and treat them as anomalies, as observed by Lehr in "Wise Women and Warriors" in S. Lehr (ed) in *Battling Dragons: Issues and Controversy in Children's Literature* (193), who

cares? This is the females' journey of liberation that is in the balance; to a point where hopefully, they are considered as human beings first. And this is where the feminist movement comes in. It gave birth to a literature that is sensitive to women's plight. I concur with Colomba: women need such literature in the contemporary society to remind mankind that they are first and foremost, human beings and so deserve a stage of fair play in the drama of life for them to realize their full potential and attain the highest of their aspirations as they work alongside the males to make this world a better place for both males and females.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye in "Atieno Yo, a Freedom Song" questions the societal treatment of the girl-child: she is a beast of burden, denied education and moral upbringing and condemned to die even in child birth as her offspring follows in her footsteps in the vicious cycle of poverty and a life of destitute existence. *Aminata* by Francis Imbuga seems to be the antidote that society needs for Imbuga empowers the female character to the point of attaining valuable education and what might be considered the highest aspiration that a girl can achieve in an African society, land inheritance, in the character of Aminata the lawyer. Female leadership is also explored when Jumba relinquishes his post of the leader of the elders to his wife, Rosina.

In the novel *The River and the Source*, Margaret Ogolla further explores female empowerment through the creation of fictional female protagonists that attain education up to the highest academic pinnacle thereby transcending societal oppressive lifestyle that is imposed on them. She also defies societal norms through the character of Verah who chooses not to get married but become a nun and introduces interracial relationships through Becky and John. Besides, she shows credibility by creating credible characters. For instance, Becky who leaves her White husband and shuns morals succumbs to the dreaded disease, HIV and AIDS, as an aftermath of a particular lifestyle rather than an impediment to the acquisition of education by a girl-child who falls victim to a grave injustice.

Second Chance is a work of art written in a realist realm, assuming mostly a first person narrative voice and embedded in the Maragoli and Digo societies of Kenya that seeks to add to the voices that stipulate that the children's literature in Kenya teaches gender roles that are biased. The project

is informed by information (through observation) on cultural values of the aforementioned societies which can be viewed as representatives of the larger Kenyan societal fabric as regards the motions the girl-child goes through to become a Kenyan female in a society that is slowly warming up to transformation from a rigid patriarchal space to a more accommodative one in terms of female participation.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

The novella shares characteristics with the novel and therefore it is structured in the theory of the novel. *Second Chance* is a novella that is structured in the Feminist theoretical framework that seeks to position itself in the thought that a woman is a social gender construct that emanates from a society that is patriarchal *and* which seeks to dominate her. In the *Laugh of the Medusa* by Helene Cixous, Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, "Either a woman is passive or she does not exist". She is made. She is a negative binary of the male: where the male is adventurous, she is expected to be timid; where he is rational, emotional; where he is dominant, conventional; and where he is active, she is expected to be passive. If active is associated with victory and passive with defeat, where exactly is the place of the woman in the society? This then denotes a patriarchal society where she finds herself in subjectivity in response to her societal expectations, if she complies, at the expense of her philosophies.

If she conforms, it would be as a result of her caving in to her societal role. This is where feminist movement steps in to address the role of the woman in a highly dynamic global society. It examines the yoke of patriarchy: discrimination on gender basis; skewed socio-economic relations; stereotyping of women; violence against women; and female objectification among other issues. It is a movement that occurred in waves: the first one addressed legal inequalities; the second one cultural inequalities and attitudes in a patriarchal society; the third ethnicity and race issues; while the fourth wave concerns itself with the craze around women and the social media and technology.

The African female seems to be lagging behind for she is still grappling with legal inequalities. Hers is a society that condones wife inheritance with little or no say from her as exemplified by Namibia even in the face of a high HIV infection rate; a society that dictates what she can or cannot wear as is the case of Uganda; or, a society whose men are thrown into panic with the realization

that "femininity is not synonymous with dependency and subordination" (Meer in *Struggles for Gender Equality: Reflections on the Place of Men and Men's Organizations*) and so pass a bill allowing its men to marry as many women as they want to keep them subjugated under that threat, as is the case of Kenya; a society that uses religion to relegate a woman to the privacy of her home from where she cannot pursue any other interest at ease; a society that is characterized by widespread poverty that seems to be celebrated, war, displacement and global marginalization.

In response to the feminist movement, many texts have come up to awaken the African society's consciousness to its treatment of her woman. For instance, in *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, Maiguru has been dominated for a long time by her husband, Babamukuru, who controls her money even though both of them are well educated. Dangarembga makes her rebel at the closure of the text by making her stand up for herself. Through Maiguru's experiences, Dangarembga exposes the errors and excesses in the African society. Another instance would be the experience of Tambudzai who is relegated to second-class citizenship behind her brother Nhamo, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She is the one whose education is put on hold in favour of her brother's, only to resume with the passing on of Nhamo. The author seems to be questioning the legitimacy of this state of affairs where cultural attitudes exonerate the boy-child over the girl-child for both are equally important in the perpetuation of societal legacy.

Chesaina Ciarunji in her anthology, *Joy Comes in the Morning*, highlights the plight of several children in fictional narratives that are based on true life experiences. It is as outrageous as it is preposterous that girls are molested by their own fathers; the people who are expected by society to provide primary protection for them against an often unjust world, especially towards the female. Jebet is repeatedly defiled by her father (in her home) from a very tender age of five years; while Ingrid is kidnapped and defiled by her father at the age of eleven; and the act is repeated until she falls pregnant so that her child's father is also his grandfather. In the same text, Bett is gang raped by her six colleagues for *committing the crime of* beating them in both the curricular and co-curricular activities yet she is a girl. The perpetrators in all the above cases of defilement are men raised or boys being raised in a society that seems to be grappling with the notion of the place of a woman in that very society: is *she* a necessary evil to be treated with disdain, maimed, and frowned upon for being female? It is a society whose consciousness has permeated even the

female psyche to the extent that a mother can throw away her new-born infant for being female; a society that has shaped Namvua's father into a monster that rejects her for being *female* and *physically impaired* at birth, and makes her mother refuse to accept the circumstances surrounding her birth; a society that mutilates its girls' genitalia and conspires to marry them off to much older men, as is the case of Savannah; a society that objectifies its female and marries a teenager to an elderly man fit to be her grandfather for seven goats – and does not care that he physically abuses her, as is the case of Atieno; a society that sells its young daughters into prostitution on the pretext of impoverishment, as is the case of Grace; and a society that condones polygamy and treats its woman as a commodity. Ciarunji seems to be questioning this state of affairs as she pokes on the consciousness of this society. In her fictional part of the narrative, she makes the girl defy all the odds against her to re-write *herstory* for the better.

In the same vein, Miriam Musonye in her novel *Flower of a Stump*, makes her protagonist – Achal Dong – defy all her odds to shape her world. Musonye makes Achal who is a South Sudanese refugee in Kenya overcome her traumatized war-torn past, displacement, loss of family, and identity crisis to evolve into a strong, young female; resolute in her pursuit of education as a ticket to the finer things in life that she craves. Even at a tender age, the writer makes Achal defiant in the face of an arranged marriage to an older man by her foster family; she seeks refuge in a shelter for vulnerable girls from where she re-unites with her brother, Majok.

The emergence of the 'Androgyny phenomenon' seems to strike a balance between the sexes and reduce the conflict of gender. In the novel *Nervous Conditions*, Lucia chooses to raise her child as a single parent, taking on a job and studying at the same time; and Nyasha refuses to fit into the societal slot of the ideal African woman. Towards the end of the text, Babamukuru starts engaging his wife more, making life for everyone bearable and progressive.

Alice Walker on Womanism feminist movement attempts to reconcile feminism with the concerns of the black community and the survival of her people, both male and female; and the promotion of dialogue in the community. It is from Walker's protest of mainstream feminism that Dangarembga and other African female writers can write and comment on matters that affect their immediate society in a bid to shape it. Odaga in *Literature for Children and Young People in*

Kenya advocates for cultural freedom where local and familiar themes that address the people's needs are employed. Women, therefore, are writing about women and celebrating them; making a commentary on their social fabric and exposing and challenging the explicit and implicit misogyny of male writing about women that has been the norm in the literary circles for far too long. The Feminist theoretical framework therefore refuses to echo patriarchal tyranny in the making of a woman and is a rebuttal to this inauthentic identity superimposed on her.

Colomba Kaburi (2014) makes a grim observation that in the traditional African society, women were raided together with cattle and taken care of by their raiders but in the contemporary society, such preyed upon women are considered a burden and have been abandoned to fend for themselves. In a world that is complex where very little is done in terms of protecting women, their crucial empowerment should probably come from literary texts that the girl child is exposed to: texts that create vivid female fictional characters that resonate well with success, with or without society's support. These kinds of resilient female characters might be what help to shape the worldview of the African girl-child so that she is not fully dependent on her society to be who she wants to be for that society might not always have all the answers to her challenges; and the novella *Second Chance* seeks to echo this philosophy.

1.8 Methodology

This intended work of art is packaged in a novella that depicts a girl and develops her in a narrative that celebrates female resilience in the face of adversity. It attempts to address the issue of the struggle of the girl-child in the acquisition of education in the Kenyan contemporary society; a society that might not readily support her whether intentionally or unintentionally. The methodology employed involves a close reading of primary and secondary texts to understand the narration of an experience through the female voice and perspective. It is a product of the interaction with girls in the Maragoli and Digo societies and is guided by the theory of the novel and feminism. The research project also involves a critical reading on materials on creative writing to expose me to the tenets of creative writing which include precision, exactness, harmony, perspective and proportion.

SECOND CHANCE

The Chapter Outline

Chapter One

For Every Cloud...

Chapter Two

Roots

Chapter Three

The House of Doom

Chapter Four

To Have or Not To Have

Chapter Five

Palaver on Stones

Chapter Six

The Conspiracy

Chapter Seven

The Handsome Devil

Chapter Eight

Trusted like the Fox

Chapter Nine

The Enigma

Chapter Ten

A New Dawn

Works Cited

CHAPTER ONE

FOR EVERY CLOUD...

I sat on the straight-backed chair in my exquisite study. It had very little but fashionable furniture. Along the wall behind me were books neatly arranged on shelves. These were books I had read as I tried to earn myself the most treasured of my memories: my education. I preferred looking at them as memories rather than possessions because of the processes I had endured to earn them. I had stocked quite a number of other books I had looked up on subjects that interested me or books which were recommended to me. My pen moved deftly over the paper on which I was planning my lessons for the following day. The time was 7:45 pm. My study window was partially open, letting in the evening breeze as the land breathed towards the sea. A gush of cold wind blew into my face, contrasting with the warm air in my room. The window curtains fluttered around me. It was blissful; this cool air on my face. I looked out into the fast-descending darkness. I loved these quiet moments I had to myself. If I willed it, I could sit for several minutes doing absolutely nothing. I had done so on numerous occasions. My mind would not be still, though. It always wandered to something that I had encountered in my day-to-day events, or even several years ago. My attempt at meditation had the amateur shade. I lacked focus on any single thing for all those minutes of stillness. My mind was always racing. I promised myself for the umpteenth time that I would enrol for a yoga class so that I get the gist of what it was all about. Try as hard as I could, I could not forget how I had reacted to what my father told me that fateful day that now seemed thousands of years away...

"Diana, come here," my father had called.

His voice was flat. I went to him at once, apprehensive and with a sinking feeling in my heart.

"I have your results - you disappoint me," he began. "You will never see the inside of a university. You missed the chance to join a public university by a point to the cut-off mark..."

I felt so small. I could feel myself sinking to the ground beneath me. As he carried on, I was no longer listening. Was there any logical explanation to what I had just heard? I was a relatively bright girl. I had topped my school in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination. I had no trouble remembering things unless I wanted to. I had once joked that I had a photogenic memory fit for a doctor. How could I have failed to make that impressionable mark for my State to consider funding my higher education?

My parents were most supportive in their own way. My mother mentored me from a very early age. She was my friend, my comforter, my music teacher and my spiritual leader. We sang spiritual songs in English, Swahili and some other language at night before I went to bed. Or, she told me stories. I so looked forward to these sessions that I loved the nights more than the days. When I got older, my mother started helping me with my homework. Where my mother left off, my father came in with perfect timing. He bought me story books that captured the height of my imagination at the time: *Moses in a Muddle*, *Moses and the Ghost*, *Moses in Trouble...* and I had quite a few collections of my own from school. I treasured English fairy tales: *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Golden Goose*, *Cinderella*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, among others. And so the journey to other world cultures commenced which I took with much zeal, never to turn back. With this exposure came numerous benefits. I was able to acquire the command of the English language pretty much easily as compared to my average peer, writing some essays that amused any would-be reader. I had started off reading stories written in my mother tongue; for example "Engoko Yagota", *The Lost Chicken*, from *Kosome Lulogooli* which translates to *Let's Read Maragoli*.

That was then, in my primary school. High school came with the much anticipated bravado and adventures. I remember being hailed by the adjacent boarding primary school on my first school day.

"Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!" the students sang, milling excitedly along their school fence.

Those girls were sufficiently disappointed when they realized I was not joining them.

"Imagine she is going to high school!" I could distinctly make out their voices.

And they peered out at me and my father from behind their towering barbed wire fence, reinforced by some blue gum. Maybe my very tiny stature confused the primary school kids for even though I had just celebrated my thirteenth birthday, I was very tiny. Is it any wonder then that one of the girls in high school asked me to climb onto her back as I was being whisked away to the hostels? Then my nightmares began. I met Wambilianga, a witty Form 2 girl who prided herself in being the narrator. She was my bed-mate, the girl who slept on the bed next to mine. In fact, our beds were so close that they touched each other. She most impressed me by her style of narration though her narratives made me re-visit *Moses and the Ghost* a million times over. The only difference was

that this time the ghost was real. I would dream of a dancing leg, totally independent of its body, poking at me in the dead of night; or the distinct sound of stiletto shoes of a lady I could not see which haunted me even when I awoke; or my legs dangling from my bunk bed, seemingly having been left so by some mean ghost. And I would wake up to find myself drenched in my own sweat. Or, was it sweat? To my horror, for the first time since I was three, I, Diana Kasudi, wet my bed consecutively for three days and was embarrassed because I had to air my beddings every day.

"My daughter is there anything troubling you?" my Form 3 *mother* asked anxiously.

"I am afraid of ghosts..." I almost whispered.

"Ghosts are figments of our imagination, let them not scare you," she soothed.

"But Wambilianga says they are here: the dead priests and nuns who were buried on this compound!" I volunteered.

"Forget what she told you, she is making it up. She is fascinated by hyperbole which she has just been introduced to in Literature," my *mother* continued. I never wet my bed again.

CHAPTER TWO

ROOTS

I practically lived in the library where I read everything I could lay my hands on. That was my best moment in high school. It is a world I never moved away from. Perhaps, it is an aspect that gave the greatest influence on my personality. I wanted to be the ladies I read about: strong, independent, and confident, and with a mind to take on the world. To get there, I gathered I had to do exceptionally well in my academic work. My main challenge was how to study. I had heard all my life that I was to work hard, whatever that meant. What exactly was working hard? What did I need to do? I asked around and received honest answers but sometimes ridiculous in their description.

"Become a book worm," one said.

I conjured up all images of worms, trying to decipher which one I was to become. I had to be a book as well or something like that. My teachers were good but in this respect, they too failed me. My father simply said '*Kula book*' which meant I was to *eat books*. I struggled to learn how to study from the students who had been in a boarding school. It was not easy, learning from observation only at the time. Besides, I was not a very good observer then. I was preoccupied with how I looked and where I lay with the girls who called themselves the Four Stars. They were a bunch of very beautiful girls with a high sense of self-esteem, something I thought I lacked. I did everything I could to fit in with them. My only challenge was that I was not as confident as they were. How could I? I was fifteen when I discovered that the man I adored might not have sired me. I had been raised all my life in a Maragoli culture. Everything I was stemmed from this culture that I felt blessed to be a part of and now to think any differently made little sense to me.

Most of my Bukusu friends thought my dialect was queer and did not really quite fit in with the rest of the Luhya tribe. That feeling was mutual for I found their dialect strange too but since we had many common words we decided that both were one language but with variations. And now this culture I had been accustomed to and which I claimed for my own might not be my own, after all. What was I then? In the conversation I had stumbled upon, my aunt said I was from the Kenyan Coast. She was in an animated talk with my paternal grandmother and did not hear me enter the room. All talk ceased immediately.

"Do you need anything, Sweetie?" my aunt queried.

"Um... no. I wanted to talk to grandma but I can always come back later," I responded and fled out of the room, my mind in a whirl.

From the coast? Exactly what did they mean? Could that rumour be true... that my father could not sire children? The rumour had it that he had lived with another 'mother' for ten years without a child. When he finally kicked her out, she re-married and bore children. Then my father married my mother. But didn't my grandma say that one of my brothers looked exactly like my grandfather? There was no picture of my grandfather anywhere in my grandma's house.

"You only have to look at your brother to decipher what your grandpa looked like," my granny explained when I enquired of him.

"So, what was this entire hushed coastal story? That's all so confusing!" Cloty interjected when I told her the story once.

"Exactly!" I quipped.

Nevertheless, I fancied that I was Salima, the girl whose father worked at the coast. I had very scanty knowledge about the Kenyan coast that I had gathered from Salima, and the coastal tunes we used to sing as children. When we went for ball games and I was approached by a handsome young man from Lamu called Kibe, I was hooked. It was not because of his looks even though he was a bewitchingly handsome lad. He was a tall, brown lad and quite attractive in assured yet humble manner. He would tell me all I wanted to know. And he did talk of the Swahili culture, the blue Indian Ocean, the ferry, the Swahili dishes and even belief in genies! I was mesmerized as I pictured all that in my very over-active mind. I longed to go and see it for myself. My parents had always supplied what they could to make me and my siblings feel cared for. We did not lack for the very basic essentials in life. Now, for the first time I doubted I had everything. My birth certificate read I was born in Kinango Hospital in the then Kwale District in the Coast Province. Could it be that my parents simply lived there at around the time I was born? I often wondered how Kwale looked like. My mother, who was always present in our lives, did nothing to alleviate my growing curiosity. If anything, she barely talked about it. Her information about Kwale had to be dragged out of her and when she did talk, it was in an abrupt manner. She allowed no questions on the subject which often left me wondering why she was not forthcoming on this issue. On the

whole, I hoped the whole paternity issue was just a bad rumour; dark-skinned fathers could sire light-skinned kids.

Thank God I had many other interests or I would have gone insane from over thinking about my identity. I played volleyball. My games teacher encouraged me on all occasions, even when I waited for the ball with my two separate fists and hit it right back high into the air without making it cross the net.

"Very g-o-o-d Kasudi!" he called out, replacing the /g/ with /k/ and /d/ with /t/ sounds.

He always amused me with his pronunciation of words. I had never heard of such an accent in English before. I remember him teaching us about farm tools and equipment in Agriculture.

"This is a burdizzo, mmh, a burdizzo. Can you all say *a burdizzo!*" he stressed.

"A burdizzo!" we chorused after him, substituting sound /b/ for /p/, /d/ for /t/ and /z/ for /s/, just as he had said it.

However, he protested at our pronunciation and wrote the word on the chalkboard. We realised our error and burst out laughing. Those were some of my light moments. I was also in the school Music and Drama Club so my time was pretty much taken up.

One day when we were out for the Kenya Music Festival, I pretended to know more than I let on when I was approached by a boy from one of our many admiring boy schools. I acted cocky with him and won the hearts of my secretly admired clique. I was accepted. We changed our name to the Five Stars. I masked that I was a very innocent girl with no experience whatsoever in boy-girl relationships. If my friends knew the real me, they would know that I practically hid myself from boys. On one such occasion, a boy I had gone to primary school with unceremoniously showed up at my home. I ran to the house and locked the door. I was in Form 2. Later, my little brother reported the incident to our mother thus:

"A white boy with a really long nose came here. He called Diana but when she saw him, she rushed to the house and locked herself up. The boy knocked on the door many times and went away when Diana refused to open up."

My friends could never find this out; I would rather die first. I had a good reason for behaving in the manner I did. My mother had told me without mincing her words that she was Maasai and if any of her daughters ever entertained thoughts of boys she would circumcise her. My father, on a different occasion, told me he would put a bullet through me and dance on my grave.

"Would you turn out differently having been influenced by such parents?"

"I don't think so," affirmed Cloty.

Well, I did not dare to deviate from their ideal of a good girl. However, what I treasured that much was snatched away from me in less than five minutes by a man who I considered a stranger. I had regarded and held him in such high esteem for his mannerism around us, with his never-ceasing pieces of advice; he turned out to be a bundle of contradictions. How was I to know he was a monster? I was only sixteen. I wanted to die. Later on, I tried killing myself by jumping from a river bank during the school holiday. Not long ago, I had stood on this river bank with my friends. I had had no care in the world. It had been a very enchanting place to be, but not on that day when I felt the emptiness in my life. For the first time in my whole life, I talked to myself. I had a serious talk with self and my Maker. I was a staunch Christian from a tender age.

"God, please forgive me for what I am about to do. I have tried to be a good girl, pious and all, but I have failed you. But wait a minute, will He understand? Will He forgive me for knowingly committing suicide? Where is *HE* now? Or, at the time I was molested? Why did He allow it? Is there retribution for what I am about to do? Can you be forgiven ever for planning to do evil?"

And I wavered in my resolution. I had committed to serving God when I started having Bible studies from Emmaus Bible School on a radio programme while in Class Seven. I should not have contemplated suicide, I reasoned as I crossed myself and asked God to forgive me. I would try to live with it. It was better than hastening to meet Him when I knew the only thing awaiting me was judgement.

And so I hid that troubling episode from everybody. I frequented the library solely to read novels. The books offered me a world in which I could lose myself. I lost interest in everything else, including the music I once had passion for. I started skipping those afternoon Chemistry and Biology practical classes in favour of the library. Funny enough, the teachers never noticed it or if

they did, they did not care. Whenever we had CATS (Continuous Assessment Tests) or even examinations, I placed my current novel beneath the book I pretended to be reading. The teachers did the rounds to ensure we were studying. The worst moments were when the deputy principal himself came inspecting what we were doing with our preps time. I would sit there, staring at the pages and turning them over until it was safe to go back to my novel again. I would pretend he was not there. And as usual, the deputy principal would find a reason to mention my name. Then I would look him in the eye. Once he had observed that I had that bad habit of looking someone straight in the eye.

"Diana, no man is ever going to eat your beauty. You must work for what you want to become. Life is not as easy as you think ... " he would go on and on in his characteristic Ugandan accent.

His wide nostrils flared up with every word, his fingers caressing his wide chest as he talked. Rumour had it that he had seven wives. Under normal circumstances, I would have appreciated his advice, especially since I was now in Form Four. However, these were no ordinary circumstances. One evening several months ago, he had called me to his office, allegedly to discuss the school music team matters. He was the Music and Drama Club patron while I was the entertainment prefect and the school soloist for the traditional songs and dances. It was eight in the evening. Of course I responded immediately to his call. It would be suicidal not to: he was the school deputy principal. On arrival at his office, however, I noted with concern that something was amiss. He was breathing heavily, and appeared annoyed over something.

"Diana, these police officers your father is sending here are not good for you," he began.

I was stunned. This completely caught me unprepared. Only two police officers were sent monthly by my father to give me pocket money and other personal effects, considering they came from this part of Kenya. My father worked far away from my school and my home. My mother was equally far away. My father therefore entrusted his colleagues and of course they never let him down. It beat my logic that my teacher would be distrustful of them when they had never done me any wrong.

"Yes? Just admit it!" he roared angrily.

The loud voice shook me from my reverie.

"Sorry Sir, I didn't get you," I responded.

"I said your grades are going down because of this ... boy!" he said, holding up the picture of Kibe.

I was confused. Was it his imagination that my performance had dwindled because of Kibe or the cops he had mentioned earlier? What did he *know* about me anyway? I almost laughed to his face for his obvious ignorance but thought the better of it. What did Kibe have to do with anything? He might just be a boy but he respected me. He was a good influence on me; I believed that apart from the males in my family, good men existed out there. I had heard of too many nasty experiences my friends had gone through. At that point my mind wandered. Kibe was a dream; my dream. I would marry him some day if he asked me to. I loved him. He was simply known in our circles as White because his skin was very fair. His school volleyball team cheered us on whenever we were in a tournament, a friendly encounter or school ballgames. The brandishing of the picture in my face jolted me back to reality. I wondered how the deputy principal came by the letter and the picture, but not for long.

"The reason you are not into your studies is this boy! Why do you want to throw away your future because of him?" he bellowed. "You can have his letter but I will keep the pictures."

I picked the letter and turned to leave. Then he grabbed me from behind, turned me over and forced himself onto my lips in the most horrible way while he touched my bosom and tore at my clothes... I was too stunned to move or make a noise. The gruelling experience seemed to last forever. Then casually, ever so casually as if what he had done was normal, he let me go and murmured that I was a very beautiful girl. And once more I felt like the accursed Ihuoma that boys in my village nicknamed me when I rejected their advances. Ihuoma was a leading character in Elechi Amadi's novel, *The Concubine*. She led men to their death. The difference in my case was that, the man did not die. I did not feel any better, though. I wished he had had a heart attack, or something. Did it not happen in the movies? He had the body size that was prone to heart attacks. I thought I was in a movie for things were moving so slowly for me. It was as if I was watching someone else collect herself, the soiled clothes... the bathroom after preps and the scrubbing until I felt pain from the hard scrub. What a horrible experience! I could have screamed; but would that not attract the attention of everyone who would have found him in the act? I could never live with

such public humiliation. If nobody knew then I could try to live with it. My only worry was what would happen to me if I fell pregnant. I would kill myself. I could never face my parents. *Life is one big irony*, I mused. I was in a reputable mission school, a girls' boarding school where it was generally considered safer for girls in comparison to a day school or a mixed school, and my father made a living ensuring that Kenyans were safe from criminals. I smiled ruefully, almost bitterly. Who wouldn't?

"Wow! That's quite a story. So, what did you do?" Cloty asked.

"What about?" I responded.

"The whole saga, my friend. It sounds so surreal... but what do I know?" she volunteered, almost sympathetically.

"I let it slide; who knows what the future holds? Well, I never went back to that monster's office. And of course my defiance led to my much publicized demotion in front of the whole parade of girls. I was just relieved when it all ended. I swear, though, had that monster ever forced himself on me again, I would have exposed him. So what's your story?" I concluded.

"One day I will tell you about it," Cloty promised. "Stay safe, my friend," she added, and was gone.

When I met Kibe during ballgames following my encounter with my teacher that term, I realized with a sinking feeling that he no longer appealed to me. I acquired a new interest: my love for food. All I was crazy about were my novels, food and volleyball. During school holidays, my mother became most sentimental as she relived the past she never talked about. She said that I was a Digo alright, and that my father had died leaving her in the family way. My mother had run away to escape marriage to an old man when she encountered my father. I did not think much about it after having agonized on the issue for almost two years. It could wait for a later date, or the story could still change. I knew my mother: I could smell trouble, and vowed to be there for her so I devoted myself to being the best daughter my mother could ever wish for.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOUSE OF DOOM

I completed my high school education and eagerly awaited the results. My craze for novels had been put aside when I realized that my high school years were coming to a close and I had to pass my exams if I wanted to be like the ladies I fancied. I knew I was pressed for time but was not a quitter; I would give the exam my best shot. And so night and day I exerted myself on matters to do with books with the same zeal I had exercised earlier in my free reading. My father wanted me to make him proud. However, I knew I was doing this for myself so I would be proud of it one day. I knew I was a night owl so when other girls went to sleep I studied late into the night and was up by 6 o'clock to start another day. The days flew by. The K.C.S.E. examination came and went during which time I could have passed for a zombie. I was hardly aware of my surroundings. It was on a light note that I packed and glanced at the school that had almost been like a second home to me -- almost.

At home, things seemed different. My mother had given birth to another girl. Actually, in a span of the four years I had been away in the Catholic school, there had been an addition of three children to the family: a boy and two girls. The house was packed. When did all this happen? I found myself musing over it and realized that I had been away too long. During school breaks, I went to live with my father and Mama visited with the youngest sibling only. I had a room to myself which I made as comfortable as possible. My typical day began at 7 o'clock in the morning, something I constantly fought over with my mother.

"Get up, Diana! The sun is already up," my mother woke me up in the same manner, every day.

"But Momma, I stayed up late yesterday," I groaned.

I preferred waking up at 8 o'clock. My mother held her ground, so seven it was. I swept, mopped, dusted and washed utensils before breakfast was served which was always tea with milk and a light snack. At first I was very understanding, reasoning that it was the country folks' way of life in rural Kenya. I was tolerant too for I dared not offend my mother in any way.

After breakfast, I found myself doing the dishes again, cutting grass for the cows, making several trips to the well to fetch some water for the household and the animals. By lunch time, a meal would be served and we would sit down to a hardly balanced meal consisting of mainly carbohydrates and a little vegetable. After lunch, it was more trips to the well, looking after my younger siblings, doing the dishes again and finally retiring to my room with a novel from my friend, Omar. It was a favourite past time for me considering that my peers were all still in school. I had just celebrated my seventeenth birthday when I stepped out of high school. Supper interrupted my reading, but soon I got back to it. My mother was not impressed by this habit. She wondered why I read every time I got the opportunity. She attributed my migraines to reading too much and wanted me to cut down on the same.

"Diana, you cannot read the whole night! Take a break now," says she.

"Sure Mama, I will be done in just a moment," I respond.

Then hours would pass by without me retiring to bed. I did not mean to defy my mother; I just could not help turning another page. And each time, I promised myself that it was the last one I was reading. But I found it interesting and without meaning to, read up to the wee hours and then fought with my mother over waking up time. One night my mother was fed up with what she termed a peculiar behaviour. She called from her bedroom and I promised to go to sleep. At 3 o'clock at night, I was still reading. My door suddenly burst open and in stormed Mama. Without uttering a word, she took the kerosene lamp and marched away. Left in darkness, I had nothing to do but to reflect on my life till I slept. Sleep did not come easy, though. More often than not, it eluded me. My father had told me in no uncertain terms that he would take me to college when he wanted. I was not to complain about anything. If I did not like it at home I could as well get married. *How I wish I had not skived those Biology and Chemistry practical lessons! I would have earned that extra point I needed to be funded at the university by my government; my B- was not good enough*, I often mused.

"You will have reduced my burden," he had said.

I remember going to my bedroom to cry myself to sleep. What had happened to my once loving father? Did he no longer have a heart? Was he dragging his feet because of that rumour

surrounding the circumstances of my birth? Why had he accepted me if the rumour was true? If only I could voice my concerns to him...

It was four years now since I sat for my high school examination. Most of my peers had now completed their basic education and moved on to college. I was angry, especially when suitors started flocking my home in search of what they called a Form Four leaver for their relatives who were lawyers, doctors, court prosecutors or some other profession. What was wrong with those young men? *They must be too ugly to approach any girl*; I mused and chuckled to myself in spite of everything. Whoever heard of a man needing assistance in choosing his bride in this era?

"He wants a girl who is fresh from high school. He will take really good care of her," they cooed. *The worst part of it all is that I am not present during such talks. Why do they talk about me as if I am some object subject to negotiation? I will patiently wait for my mother to relay what I overheard but feign ignorance until she is through; then I will give her a piece of my mind*, I fumed. *There is no way I am going to prop up some man to live his dream while I become a stay-at-home Mama.*

I remember once I told my mother in a moment of anger that there were enough children in the home: another one was on the way. It did not go down well with her. She reported it to my father who almost beat me up had my Momma not intervened.

"I didn't tell you for you to beat her up," she said. "I only wanted you to warn her of her unbecoming behaviour."

"Don't you get enough to eat? Or, have I asked you for any assistance in bringing them up?" he yelled at me and as my usual habit, I sought refuge in my room.

Didn't he know I was bringing them up already? I was left with the babies, the cows and the household chores not to mention lunch preparation for my siblings still in primary school by my mother on her numerous trips to funerals, weddings, women groups or some other function. *I am not a normal teen-ager*; I must have told myself this for the umpteenth time. *Do others go through what I go through?* However, every time I felt overwhelmed, I reminded myself that I was doing it only once in my life. *I will never do it again*, I consoled myself.

And so I went about the chores, steeling myself against tears. *If I am expected to act like a small adult and not a teenager, for the sake of peace, that is who I will become*, I resolved.

Things took a nosedive when I was in my fifth year of stay at home since my high school. Some of my siblings were now in high school and it seemed the family's finances were overstretched.

"There is no way I am going to sell milk in that God - forsaken place!" I protested to my mother's suggestion. "What will people think of me?"

"Diana, you have your life to live; and it should never be pegged on what people think, my girl," my mother advised, contradicting herself for I knew she cared what people thought most of the time.

"But Mama, are we paupers now?" I queried.

"Kasudi, times are hard. Your father has issues with his salary. Besides, your siblings have drained our financial reserve. They are now in high school, in case you haven't noticed. Until your father's salary woes are resolved, you will sell milk to buy the sugar we need," she returned.

"There is no way I will sell milk!" I was almost frantic now.

"Very well, as you please," she returned.

Tea was served without sugar, and the bland taste made me reconsider my decision. I didn't mind the errand at all. I got up in the morning and walked several kilometres to find a willing buyer of our only cow's milk. The rest of the cows had been sold off to pay fees. My journey took me through a marsh land with thick bamboo trees. I did everything I could to find a dry spot and get across the dancing make-shift of a bridge to get to the other side of the valley where a steep hill was waiting for me. The valley was always dark on those early mornings. With a thudding heart I ran across it, glancing several times in different directions. I only paused at the top of the hill, huffing and puffing. I caught my breath briefly before continuing on my way lest the other sellers beat me to the selling spot. My milk was always in a tightly-corked bottle. It was usually only half full. However much food we fed our cow, it seemed to have a philosophy of 'one bottle only per milking'. We sold half of the milk. Once I arrived at my destination, I waited until some customers came through. I then looked at them imploringly, hoping they chose my milk over the other

suppliers'. I was always in my high school sweater, my protection against the biting chill. Sometimes a customer went for my milk, making me smile as I counted the shillings and crossed over to the shop to buy an eighth of a kilo of sugar. I then marched home in high spirits, pleased that I would take my tea with sugar. On a number of occasions though, nobody bought my milk. That meant trekking back home dejectedly with the knowledge that I would take sugar less tea with no snack to accompany it and be expected to still carry out my chores without fail until the next scrambled meal.

On one such day, it had all started out wrong. I had left home as usual for my morning errand when after making it to the top of the hill; I had a rude shock awaiting me. There stood a young man with the most frightening bloodshot eyes I had ever seen. I stopped short and held my already belaboured breath. I thought I was going to pass out. For a moment, the man glanced at me. As for me, my legs would not move however much I willed them. This young man was haggard in appearance: he had very dirty, tattered clothes with unkempt hair and a daredevil look in his eyes. The red eyes were very intense. It was as if he was looking right into my soul. I could see Satan looking at me from behind those eyes. For all I knew, the man could be the manifestation of Satan himself. He had a load of some sort in a sack that he kept shifting from one shoulder to the other. We regarded each other in silence: one in apprehension; and the other in a most incomprehensible manner. Then, without warning, the man shot towards me. For several seconds, I remained rooted to the ground, unable to move. Finally, I seemed to grow wings on my feet and fled as if all the devils were after me. It was too late when I realized I was running in the wrong direction. I felt that my life depended on this escape. The man was in hot pursuit, and he could run!

When I saw that he was likely to catch up with me, I dashed into the first home I came across. Luckily, the owners were around and apparently knew the man. One of the members took a machete and stepped menacingly up to him. The raving lunatic stopped short, stooped his back and silently walked away. Apparently, he was a well-known trouble-maker in that village in which I was a stranger. The villagers knew he was crazy therefore steered free of him for he was an aggressive person who could force you to drink the sour milk he carried around in a filthy jerry can, or worse still force himself onto an unfortunate woman.

It was half an hour later when I left that home and headed to the milk-selling spot. I knew I was late but walked on, cautiously, not daring to let my guard down. I could hear my own heartbeat.

Handling a human being was hard enough without adding obvious insanity to the mix. I arrived safe and found the place deserted. After lingering around for a few minutes, I decided that our fate was sealed for that day. I trudged home heavily, tasting the sugar-less tea on my tongue long before it was served. I did not look forward to it. I even contemplated skipping it altogether. *If my family were much smaller, would my life be this difficult? I know what lunch will be: small, crooked and sick-looking sweet potatoes washed down with a cup of water. By supper time, I will be literally starving. So would be my siblings. No wonder supper times have been reduced to eating contests as if to determine who can eat the fastest,* I thought bitterly.

When I voiced this to some of my childhood friends, they attributed it to the many children in my home and advised me to talk to my mother about it. I could not do it; I did not wish it. My humiliation when I had tried to do so was still rife in my mind.

I admired the ease with which my friends seemed to be sailing through life. None of them had more than three siblings. They seemed to have everything. They wore decent clothes, styled their hair and put on decent shoes. I often felt left out in their presence for I was in the same yellow attire that had now grown threadbare, had my mother's shoes on which I stuffed with crumpled paper to make them fit, with my natural hair that broke combs that were unfortunate enough to pass through it, and beneath all that, a bra I had patched with several thick white yarn to make it function like a bra. I was relieved no one could ever guess it. Once I complained to my mother and a dress was bought for me. I was thrilled and hopeful as I tried it on. When I was dressed, however, the smile faded from my lips... the dress was too long with a design only fit for an old granny. To make it short, I yanked it up my waist and tied a belt below it. I must have been quite a sight to behold for everyone stared at me whenever I passed. I reverted to my yellow threadbare dress.

There were times when there was no food at all in my home. Though this was far in between, it left me with several ideas running through my head. *I will look for a man willing to take me in and enrol me into a college. I will repay him, even with interest. Or, I will look for whoever wanted a house-help and do the job while I saved the money for my college fee,* I resolved and felt better. My challenge was the execution part of the plan. I had to be discreet about it for if my parents ever found out, they would never allow it.

One day, one of my peers was holding a newspaper.

"Did you just buy a newspaper?" I asked.

"Yes. I have been sent by my father," replied Betty.

"Do you mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all, but be quick about it."

I snatched the newspaper and went straight away to the job alerts. I saw it, hidden in a corner: a white man was looking for a tutor and nanny for his six-year-old disabled girl. I quickly memorized the address and handed back the paper with an excuse that I was off to some errand. I sped home, running the address over and over in my mind. After applying for the post, I enclosed a picture as was requested and borrowed some stamp money from my mother. Of course I was asked about it. I was ready; the letter was an application to some college. After posting it, I crossed my fingers as I awaited the response. I always volunteered to go to Mbale market that was several kilometres from home. I knew I had to walk all the way but did not mind. There were the famous *bodaboda* motorcycles for transport for those who had money. My mother was happy when I volunteered to shop but for me, it provided an opportunity to visit the Maragoli Post Office to check on the feedback on my job application I had placed earlier on. After several disappointing trips, the response came. I was hired! *All I am to do is to present myself, and my fare would be reimbursed! Can life get any better?* I thought gleefully.

I was too happy to eat that day. My misery was now how to raise the fare needed. I did not stop to think about how I would find my way in a strange place. After much thought, I decided to look for casual employment around me. *I am good at digging. If I can convince my mother that I need to do it to raise money to buy what I don't have, will she consent? Will I hurt her feelings? But, do I have much choice?* I agonized.

"You don't need to have what everyone else has!" my mother admonished.

"But mother, it is what I don't have!" I cried. "Look at me! I have no bra, no shoes, no decent clothes or pants and my hair is a mess!"

"When I get money, I will buy them for you," she reasoned.

"And when is that going to be? Mama, I am a big girl now. Let me earn money to take care of what I need, please," I begged.

When I was being such a sweetheart, even my mother could not refuse me anything if it was within her power to provide. I was granted permission to work and soon, I was putting away money as soon as I earned it for my impending journey. I needed two thousand shillings. By the end of the first week, I had six hundred shillings. I worked harder and raised one thousand, eight hundred shillings. I needed a little over two hundred shillings to top up my fare and to buy snacks along the way. Another two weeks had gone by. I had become mellow and my mother was grateful that I no longer glossed over my challenges. For me, however, my mind was pre-occupied with how it would be like in Ukunda and that I was leaving behind my miserable existence. I had no idea that Ukunda was in Kwale, my district of birth. I mused that when I came back home, I would be in college just like my friends and would walk with my head held high. Afterwards, I would land a good job and help ease the situation on my mother.

It was in this blissful state that I went about my chores every day. *Just a few more shillings and I will be on my way to freedom*, I thought blissfully.

One evening, my mother came from the market with a concerned look on her face.

"Diana, come here," she called.

"Yes?"

"You wanted to go to Ukunda! What, are you crazy?"

I knew when I was beaten. But how could *she* have known? Did anything ever escape her?

"Yes Mama. I didn't want to go, I am going!" I answered back defiantly.

"No you are not," she simply said, handing me a letter.

My heart did a flip flop. No, it was not possible. I was now ready for this journey. I had even booked a bus: I was travelling in two days' time. What could possibly go wrong? Everything had gone according to plan. I checked out the stamp. It was from Ukunda. With trembling hands, I

fished for the letter. I did not even care that it had been opened. *Oh God, let this be good news*, I prayed fervently.

I sat still for a long time. Why didn't I pass out? It would have spared me the ensuing pain. There was a big lump blocking my throat. *Oh God, I can't breathe! Am I having a cardiac arrest?* I panicked. My heart felt like someone had stabbed right through it, turning the knife over a million times. The pain was endless. I must have been in a trance for I saw my mother's lips move but could not make out what she was saying. After what seemed like an eternity, I felt a pair of gentle hands on my shoulder, giving me a little shake. What had the letter said? Yes, I had taken too long to show up and Fuks had found someone else. How could he? Did he know the pains to which I went just to get that chance in life? I was angry, so angry that I wanted to lash out at Fuks, at my mother... at everyone. Life could be unfair. Maybe some not-so-deserving girl had got the job, with no intention of using the money to better herself! I could not cry. I did not eat that day or the following day. I felt sick to my stomach. My mother was concerned. She was touched at the price her daughter was willing to pay to enrol herself in a college; she told me so. I laughed in spite of myself. What if she knew of my other option?

When my father came home at the end of that month, I heard them talk in raised voices. My parents had always been civil with each other. I meant to walk away, eavesdropping was a bad habit. But I was worried. I did not like my parents fighting. Whatever it was, I hoped it was not about me. Nevertheless, my legs led me to the adjacent room from where I followed the conversation.

"No! This has gone on for far too long! It has been five long years since she completed high school, what are you waiting for? A pregnancy? Do you want her to elope with some God-forsaken man?" my mother shouted.

"She is my daughter! And she goes to college when I say so!" he roared back haughtily.

"Fine," said my mother in a small but calm voice. "Have it as you wish. I have never packed my stuff. This time, I am doing it. This is *my* first born child. If she is not going to college, how can I know that the others will be educated ever? Why did you want them anyway? Don't try to look for me; take care of your children."

All was quiet. I felt strange. I was horrified that my parents were fighting because of me. At the same time, I was happy that for the first time in her life my mother had stood up to my father. I was proud of her. All along I thought my mother was my enemy, conniving with my father to make me wait to go to college forever. I did not know how my father would respond, though. He was the law. He was revered by all family members, including his older siblings. His Mama worshipped the very ground he walked on. And he enjoyed this status accorded him by family, neighbours and even fellow cops as I observed while I lived with him in Nakuru. I was not prepared for what followed next.

"Okay, let us not break up over this," he said resignedly. *Is that my father? I cannot believe my ears! What is wrong with him? Is he feeling sick?* I worried.

That evening, he put a call through to his Kisii friend who called his cousin in an Adventist college. The following Monday, I was on my way to the college's School of Education. It did not matter that I was a term late. I determined to do my best to catch up. And I did. Upon graduation two years later, I was the best student in School Practice and the second best overall student in the national examination. I was secure in the knowledge that I mattered, after all. *He loves me! That rumour about him not being my father couldn't possibly be true,* I smiled contentedly.

Did it mean that the issues surrounding my family's finances had been resolved? I anticipated a better future as I braced myself for the unknown tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE

Children were little angels most of the time. That was my impression when I started working with them.

"Madam! Teacher!" I looked about me. I was the one being addressed! *Fancy that! For some time I have just been Diana or Kasudi. Now I am addressed with so much respect! And by both the young and old. Life is almost funny. Do I feel confident enough to assume my profound title?* I thought amusedly.

For days on end, I toyed with the idea of having a child. My ideal child was a girl. I had heard of how one could plan to have a child of one's preferred sex. One of my friends who went to a local university taught me about this subject that she had been introduced to in Psychology. I knew the conventional way was to get married and start a family. However, I did not see myself getting married any time soon. I wanted to further my studies. I was determined to prove my father wrong. How dare he claim that I could not go to the university just because my government was not paying for my higher education?

I had had a difficult childhood. Apparently, I was not the only one feeling the strain of being born into a large family.

"When I grow up, I will have only two kids," one of my brothers vowed to me.

"And I will only have one," I returned.

"That's not wise. What if death strikes?" he asked.

"Mama Amin lost all her three children in an accident as her family came back home from Marsabit. Remember?" I queried.

"Yes, I do. Poor Mama Amin. Thank God she was blessed with other kids later," he observed.

"Yes, God is good," I concurred. "But, do you now get my point? Do people give birth to many kids so that some of them live while others die?" I pressed.

"I don't think so," he responded.

“Very well spoken,” I said. “I do not wish for my future child to re-live my experience.”

Growing up, I had not always experienced poverty. It had struck at a time when the majority of my siblings had joined high school. I came from a large family that had only one bread winner. My Mom had been convinced to be a stay-at home Mom upon her marriage to my dad. She told me she relinquished her duties as a teacher in a primary school in Msambweni when she met my father. I could understand why they thought they had enough money; I was the only child then. When the family expanded to include new members, the change was not commensurate with the family income. In addition, my father's emissary never gave my mother the money my father gave out to her while he was on relieving duties at a place he could not easily access social services. And the impact shook up my teen-age pretty badly. Still, even after I was armed with this knowledge, I vowed to myself that I would never have a large family. Large families needed a bigger income to maintain. It was common knowledge that certain countries enforced policies that advocated for fewer children per family head. This in turn helped such governments plan adequately for their services to their people. They were not overwhelmed like the governments with population explosions. What determined a government's success in service delivery to its people was what happened at the basic unit of the society, the family, besides good leadership at the family and the national level.

Considering my childhood experiences, I was convinced that it was not yet time for me to have a child. I did not have the resources with which to give my child a decent life. I would have one when I was fully prepared. Besides, I had my parents and siblings to support for as long as I could.

CHAPTER FIVE PALAVER ON STONES

One day I saw an advertisement in the newspaper. A local university was recruiting new students. I had kept an open eye for this chance since I started working. I did not mind that it would cost me half a million shillings, money which I did not have. I placed my application and hoped to hear from the university. And for the first time since employment, I applied for a loan. I waited and waited for response. Every time the mail man came in, my heart rate involuntarily shot up, and I hovered around the delivered mail like a moth round a glowing lamp.

"Any mail for Diana?" I would address no one in particular.

My anticipation would turn into melancholy following the dwindling of the bunch of letters at hand. After three months, I became restless and decided to go on a holiday. I was in Mombasa at the end of that year when the response came but nobody told me about it. I was almost down to the last cent.

When I came back home, I went about my business as usual. One of my sisters came to visit. We had a pep talk and caught up on a lot of issues.

"Oh, I almost forgot. There is a letter for you from a certain university. Had you applied?" my sister asked as an afterthought.

"What? When did it arrive?" I asked.

"Last December while you were away," Patience stated.

"And nobody thought of notifying me? I was in touch the whole time!"

"Mother said there was no way you could raise half a million shillings," she responded.

"Nonetheless, I should have been informed!" I cried.

I had every reason to despair. I had spent my loan and was left with thirty five thousand shillings only. I went home to see my mother. My father was also around.

"Please, make me understand why you sat on my university admission letter," I started, after our customary greetings.

"Where will half a million shillings come from? We can never raise that much money," my mother said.

I found my dad's response more unsettling.

"You want to join the university, yet you see your siblings behind you. You already have a job, for God's sake!" he chimed.

If they could not see the need for me to follow up my dream, I would not make them. It was my journey to make. However, I did not tell them this, I gently told them that I would be of more use if I pursued my education and made something of myself. We never discussed the subject again, until one evening when I visited home. My mother broached the subject. I gave a detailed response: I had talked to a friend who encouraged me to join even if I had a huge fee balance. My friend advised me that I would have to pay up just before examinations or write to the Registrar of Academic Affairs to request for permission to sit exams.

"You know, it is a good thing you did not listen to us," my mother started. "Do you know why your father took forever to get you into college?"

"No," I answered guardedly, not certain of where this was leading.

"He was under a lot of pressure from his people. They tried to convince him that he had done enough for you. A girl should be given basic education to find her way in this world. Once she is married off, if her husband wants more from her he should make it happen. It is unfair for your father to shoulder the whole burden of educating you only to benefit someone else."

I winced at that word. *Burden*. It was not the first time it had been used in my reference. *Burden. Is that all I am, a burden? Am I a burden? Is it because I happen to have been born with a biological make-up different from the male? Is that why there are so many slots for me to fill without protest? Is it fair to privilege one individual over the other solely based on one's anatomy? Who gets to decide who should get privileged, and why? What is wrong with treating a male and a female as equal but with competencies in different ways that complement each other, and*

therefore accord the two equal opportunities? Is it a mistake to be born female? What would the world come to if every child that was given birth to was a boy? Surely, a world full of males without females would lead to the death of the human race. The converse is also true. Why do my people not see that? What blinds them? What did my mother say? Aha! "... your father to shoulder the whole burden of educating you only to benefit someone else." Is it not the responsibility of parents to accord their children their rights until they are adults? Education is one of those rights. Why do my people insist on seeing a wife instead of a daughter in this respect? For God's sake, I am not even a wife yet! I am sure that even if I got married, I would still take care of my parents in line with my African values. So what is my people's worry? It does not have anything to do with benefiting someone else for ideally, this is the essence of life. People need each other. After all, if what they say is true, wouldn't other people's daughters come to benefit my people? There must be another reason for treating girls differently, but what is it? I wished I had a conclusion to my musings.

Growing up, I had been told how to behave and what to think.

Sit like a girl! Why are you climbing trees, are you a boy? Wagwa anakasaza? Is that what you will do in somebody's home? In whose home will you cook? And who will marry such a toad! Girls are not to whistle, someone will hear you! How dare you fight boys? Play will not get you a good husband! A good woman must know how to take care of the home! Since when did girls swing on trees, and slide? Gymnastics are for boys, you will show people your pants! Why groom yourself, who are you going to meet?

It was endless... Just like that, fun was removed from my childhood. The boys, on the contrary, were allowed the motions of life from childhood to adulthood. There was always an excuse for what the boys did.

"Boys will be boys," the women would quip.

I, however, devised ways of experiencing life away from that critical eye. As long as I was not caught, I could have a few escapades of my own. However, I ended up getting caught on most occasions. There was one time I decided to go swimming with my friends. We had been fetching firewood in thick woodland when we came across a river. It was on a hot afternoon on a weekend. Nobody talked; we all stared at the beckoning water. I had never swum before. I had however

heard tales of what a wonderful experience it was. I had also been assured I did not need to know how to swim. All I needed was guts. Well, I had plenty of those so I vowed to swim at the first opportunity. As I stared at the still water, this thought haunted me. I knew I had to exorcise it. I looked into the faces of my comrades and discerned the same thing. Slowly, we started undressing. We remained in our pants and dived into the water. I was a sensible girl. I lingered at the bank, observing my friends keenly. When I was sure I had got it right, I dived into the water. I was not prepared for the stinging of my eyes and nose by the water. Soon, however, I acclimatized and wished I could swim forever. I no longer envied my brothers. I was in Disneyland myself. *It must feel like this*; I could not help thinking to myself. Megan, my pen pal from West Seneca in the United States, wrote to me constantly and told me about the roller coaster, the big wheel, or was it Fred's wheel? And, something to do with the circus. It was so much fun... Laughter made me force myself back to the moment. To my horror, a group of boys were on the river bank, daring us to come out of the water. How could we? We were practically naked!

It must have been a long time that they stood there, and we were very frightened with nothing to do other than remain hidden in the water. The sun would soon go down. I was concerned and wondered how I would explain my lateness. The boys must have found something better with which to amuse themselves for they left us alone. Gratefully, we left the now cool water and went in search of our clothes. The little devils had moved them elsewhere. We had to make skirts out of the large leaves close by to shield our exposed waists for it was awhile before we stumbled upon our clothes. These very leaves could make very good soap. We had lathered it in our hands many times before and used it to clean ourselves. As we made our journey back home, we each came up with an excuse to present to our mothers. We were glad most of our fathers were miles away, working in far off towns.

She was waiting for me at our farm's boundary.

"And where do you think you are going at this time?" my mother asked in a strangely calm voice.

"I... I... I am afraid we had an accident," I mumbled.

I could have kicked myself. What kind of accident could I formulate? My mother would see right through every other lie I came up with. Besides, I had no particular accident in my head right now.

I was bad with words for I always said the most incredulous things if I was to speak on a spur of the moment. A surprise as was my case then only worsened my predicament.

"When I get home you should be there," my mother dismissed me.

My mind was racing. How I wished it was not very dark, I would have run away to my grandmother. I had done so many times in the past. My granny shielded me from my enraged mother who seemed to lose all sense when angry. *Whatever she does, let her not circumcise me*, I implored my Maker. I almost winced in pain when I recollected the many forms of punishment my mother meted out on me. I did not know which one to anticipate. I crossed my fingers.

"So, what was the accident again?"

"We were swimming... I swear I didn't want to... my friends kept laughing at me and chiding me until I joined them!" I gasped.

"The accident," my mother repeated, making me feel silly.

"Oh yes! So I joined them. I almost drowned, Mama. You know I never swum before."

"Diana, don't make things worse. Where were you?"

"I was collecting firewood. My friends forced me to swim."

"Naked," my mother observed.

"No!" I gasped.

"Naked. Your clothes are dry." *God, why did you have to make her so bright?* I pondered miserably.

I was tempted to say that we had been in our clothes and so had waited for them to dry afterwards. I however felt this would lead to more questions whose answers I could not make out. I had better stay close to the truth.

"We were swimming when boys showed up..." and I poured out everything.

I felt better. Finally, I had told the truth. I hoped for a lighter punishment as if telling the truth was the only requirement in my circumstance. My mother asked me to go to her. I obeyed and closed my eyes. I did not want to see the mocking eyes of my second sibling. He always acted as my superior by virtue of him being a boy, something I loathed and for which we often fought. I felt the now too familiar pinch on my skin. My mother used her long nails on her thumb and forefinger. She went for my inner thighs. *Why? Why won't she use the cane on me like she did with my brothers? The cane is better. The teachers use it on my bottom but it doesn't hurt as much. I tense and hold the muscles on my behind until the caning is over. That lessens the pain. But not with pinches on the thighs! Could I come up with an invention that worked in the same way on my thighs?* I agonized.

I opened my eyes. I could see fresh peels of my skin with red patches all over my thighs. Was that blood? I cried in pain and agony till I could cry no more. Just when I thought the worst was over, Mom put me in a large basin of cold water and bathed me. The excruciating pain that followed was worse than the pinches. Did she add salt to the water? It pinched so! Why was Mom so incensed with my punishment?

I got my answer when I was much older and she no longer treated me like a child. She was a second born in her family. Before her was a boy. Her parents had been very poor. Her father scrapped a living from doing odd jobs for people. He used his meagre wages to take care of his large family. When my mother and uncle joined high school, they were frequently sent home for fees. Her father would hide among the cows he was grazing or in the nearby grasses given that he was always at a vantage point and saw them first. Soon, it was decided that the boy was to continue with his schooling but the girl to be married off. The fact that she was the brighter of the two did not count. My mother was in Form 2. I think she never got over that aspect of her life. Sometimes, she seemed to be possessed by a demon, especially when I did something wrong. It was as if she expected me to be infallible. This is something she did not extend to the boys. With time, however, I got out of my teen-age woes and began to appreciate my mother more for who she was. We even became best of friends. I confided in her on numerous occasions. On the other hand, I started noticing cracks in my once perfect relationship with my father. I often found myself comparing how he treated me to how he handled my brothers.

I remember one time when we stayed with my father for the school holidays. A public holiday was fast approaching and I could not wait to see for myself what I only caught glimpses of on TV. I loved to see the men and women in uniform march. This was my opportunity to see them perform in the stadium. I longed for the day. My friend's mother was a cop.

"I will go with my mother!" Ciku excitedly announced to me.

"And I will go with my father!" I bragged.

The night before, I was too happy to eat. I had heard my father tell my mother that he would take the children to Afraha Stadium. I had never been to a stadium before. On the material day, I could not eat breakfast. I dashed to the bathroom, bathed and impatiently waited for my mother to give me what to wear. For the umpteenth time, I made for my parents' bedroom.

"How do you expect her to feel, she has been looking forward to this day!"

That stopped me in my tracks.

"You don't expect me to tag girls along to the stadium, do you?" my father queried.

"You promised to take the children to the stadium, dear," my mother responded.

"I meant the boys, for practical reasons. What if the girls needed to relieve themselves?"

I did not wait for more. I fled out of the house and onto the balcony, my eyes full of tears. From the balcony, I watched my brothers board the police jeep and drive off. That was not the only time I felt left out. After that episode, I sadly watched my brothers excitedly prepare to go to the stadium to watch football with our father on several weekends. I loved football but no one cared that I did. I was expected to have no inclination whatsoever towards it. From that time on, I felt placed on the side-line to watch and listen to my brothers' prowess. I would run to my room to read story books and wait for that one time I was sure to beat them. At the end of every school term I proudly handed over my report card to my parents, unlike my brothers. Even though I would be at the top of my class, my father would find something to complain about while my mother simply stated that I had tried. It was never good enough. I can never forget how my father responded to my Kenya Certificate of Primary Education results. I had topped my class with 404 marks. I was the talk of the village. I felt very important until my father deflated my ego.

"So you got 80 % in Maths. The way everyone keeps going on about it made me think you scored 90% or 100 %."

And my mother stated in that characteristic manner of hers that I had tried. It never deterred me from my quest for knowledge, though. If anything, it fuelled it further. My being in class made me feel very much alive in all aspects. I often thought about Cinderella, the girl in one of the English fairy tales I had read. She never gave up on kindness and courage, even when her step-mother and sisters stepped up their mistreatment of her. But, why would my parents put me through so much suffering? Maybe I was a mistake that should never have happened in the first place.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONSPIRACY

The university towered before me. I walked through the gates. I could hardly believe myself. *I am here! I belong here... Do I?* I thought. I hesitated and shifted my luggage uncomfortably into my left hand. The place was milling with students... university students. They were dressed in all sorts of attire. And they all looked very assured in their measured steps. Some were noisy; others hurried to a secret destination only known to them. Did anyone feel scared like me? *Always do what you are afraid to do*, one of the numerous Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophies crept into my consciousness.

I straightened up and walked tall, with a lot of expectation. Once I had gone through the registration process, I sat in a class of around two hundred students. I wanted to pursue English and Literature in English. Some of my colleagues raved about Quantitative Skills, a Mathematics course we were required to take as one of our common courses. I was among the quieter lot that was just grateful for this second chance to join the university and looked forward to make the most of it.

"I signed for English and Literature, why would anyone offer me Maths?" someone grumbled.

"There must be something wrong with this university!" volunteered another.

"Well, that is what you get when you sign up for a course in a university inclined towards Science and Technology," the one who came to be known as Mr Truth offered and everyone laughed.

That ended that conversation and soon everyone was enjoying the intrigues of a higher institution of learning. There were only two places in my life where I felt I was in my element; a term I had borrowed from Radhika Lee's autobiography, *Rainbows in My Clouds*. That was when I was in class as a student or a teacher. I became so alive that I never wanted it to end.

As days progressed, I acquired some lexical items that I used whenever I talked to Chemtai, a friend I had made. Chemtai was so similar to what I stood for that I could not thank God enough for our meeting. She understood me like no other person ever had. Not even Cloty came close. I considered her as a soul mate. Chemtai never complained about anything; she only gave her

impression of everything. She was very self-driven; ambitious yet magnanimous. In her, I saw my reflection. I soon became her best friend. We hit it off and immersed ourselves in books. Our academic zeal and prowess were in sync. We were always in the same group unless the lecturer assigned us to different groups. It was only a matter of time before we found ourselves competing in a healthy manner. I came to learn I could depend on my friend for anything. We shared our aspirations, fears and victories.

As I basked and marvelled in the knowledge of scholars before me, someone else sought to bask in my hard-earned cash. At first, I did not know who it was for my payslip showed that my money went to a credit facility without naming it. A Good Samaritan connected me to someone in my employer's office who fed me on the information that my money went to a company called Blue Limited. I was hard on cash as it was and did not think someone would be ruthless enough to play tricks with my remaining few shillings. I was wrong. It seemed there were some unscrupulous companies out there. I needed a clean payslip if I was to access a top-up to my previous loan to pay for my fees. Blue Limited purported to have loaned me 462,000 Kenya shillings. Without a loan, I could not sit my exams. For the first time since I joined the university, my education was threatened. Once I started something, I liked to follow it up to completion. I did not want to defer my studies. I wrote to my employer complaining about a certain Blue Limited company. I waited for months on end without any response. Where were these people's offices? I could not rest until I found out where they were located. I was directed to the nearest branch. I did not sleep on the day I found out about their whereabouts. I tossed and turned as wave after wave of emotion swept through me. *How dare they take my money? Who gave them my personal employment number? How come my employer can effect a deduction on my pay without any authorization or verification by me? Isn't it a crime?* I fumed.

When I paid them a visit, I hit the roof.

"I want you to answer me this one question: how did you get my personal number? I never heard of you nor did I come to you for anything."

The manager looked stupefied for a moment before he recovered and asked for time to check their records.

"It must be a fraud committed by one of our rogue agents. We have since dismissed him," he added.

However, I did not let him off the hook.

"I insist that you tell me exactly how this could be. I never heard of you. How come you have my personal information? And why haven't you rectified your so-called fraud? How could you let whoever did this to me go scot free? I could sue you for fraud!" I returned.

"Please, calm down," implored the manager. "We will look into the issue."

"Meanwhile, I demand an immediate stoppage and a refund of my money!"

After several phone calls and emails, a stop order was issued to my employer and a copy handed to me. However, when it came to my refund, it took several visits and another tug of war before the money was released. I was grateful when I received a clean payslip several months later and immediately placed an application for a top-up loan. I paid up for the first two years and found peace within me. I did very well, surprising myself in the process. Chemtai also surpassed her targets and we treated ourselves to a wonderful meal in a prestigious hotel in town. I basked in this academic glory, but not for long.

When I began my third academic year, Blue Limited resurfaced. This time the company was taking an even bigger deduction from my pay. I was dumbfounded! What could be so difficult? If my employer had a record on me, which they did, they could read from my file that I had never approached Blue Limited Company. What kind of game was being played and by who? Why would they authorise another deduction to the same Blue Limited Company without any signed document by me? *My employer has received my letters categorically stating that I have never entered into any financial agreement with Blue Limited. On what grounds have they allowed another deduction? What horrifies me is the fact that once the deduction has started, it takes more than a year to get it stopped,* I could not help thinking.

I wrote letters both to Blue Limited and to my employer. When it was finally answered, it was to notify me that I was a third party and that as such my wishes could not be granted. Could I sort out the problem with Blue Limited? It was my turn to be stupefied. *I am a third party indeed, when my money is being taken without my consent! What is the world coming to?* I thought miserably as

I made as if to grip at the tight knot that formed in my tummy. *Someone is plotting to send me to an early grave.*

That name, Blue Limited, was enough to send me into a rage. I fancied that there were so many people with *fat* payslips; why was Blue Limited so keen on me? I resolved to involve a lawyer. The fraudulent company referred me first to another branch several kilometres from where I was; then later on to their headquarters at Chester House in Nairobi. That meant additional costs for me. Meanwhile, I was living below the poverty line. Chemtai listened to me and offered any help that was within her means. She even bought me meals sometimes, from her very slim pocket. Chemtai came from a large family too and was taking herself through the university education. Money was hard to come by. And just like me, she had no social life, and did not care for a man to supply her needs. Such men were known as *sponsors*. They always had strings attached to what they gave. We believed in a woman's independence and so did not indulge in that act of making easy money. We had our dignity to protect, we reasoned. Besides, we were hopeless romantics who believed in a relationship with the right man and for the right intentions.

I was not living from hand to mouth: I was much lower than that. I was on my knees. On several occasions, my mother sent my younger siblings to me with maize flour, vegetables and some milk over the weekend. As I did not have a refrigerator, I could not keep the perishables for longer than three days. For the rest of the days, I ate my maize meal with some salt or ate some porridge for supper. All the while, I found solace in my job and studies. I never had time to brood over anything; I was grateful to be in good health.

"Good morning class!"

"Good morning madam!" chorused the eager students.

"Today, we are going to learn about the noun gerund..."

I was always so cheerful that the young eager faces looking up to me could never guess that behind my smile lay a dark secret that so wounded my soul. When I visited Chester House, the Blue headquarters, I was full of expectation. I was hoping to find answers. These people did not know the pain they had caused me.

"You cannot sit for the exams. Your debt is too much! You must pay the university 130,000 Kenya shillings if you are to sit this exam. Just write a letter to the effect that you are deferring the exams to a later date," there was a note of finality in the dean's voice. *Oh God! When is all this going to end?* I thought bitterly of my predicament. I was in my Third Year, and would have given anything to sit the exam with my cohort. *Why does this company forever etch itself on my payslip? My friends are simply topping up on their loans and continuing their studies without any hitch. If only these people could stop and think of what they are doing to me!*

That afternoon after my encounter with my dean, I went to my house and cried my heart out. I could do without decent food but to miss the exams? It pained me that at that instant, my colleagues were sitting for their exams. Here I was, in my house, with no exams to show for the hard work I put in that semester. Life is not fair. Thank God when I packed and walked away, Chemtai was in tow. She escorted me up to the stage. I might not have made it to the stage in one piece for tears blinded me. The pain in my stomach made me wonder whether I was developing an ulcer. It was becoming a nuisance.

I was not allowed to sit my second semester exams either. When I went back for my final year, I knew I had to do something if I was to consider myself a graduate at the end of that academic year. My lawyer wrote many letters addressing the fraud and addressed them to Blue Limited; the nearest Officer Commanding Police Division, the OCS of my local police station, and to my employer. He advised me against going to the media houses, promising to take it to court should the fraudulent company fail to honour his letters and if my employer ever reinstated the deductions to the company upon stoppage. My lawyer, Imani, was a fatherly figure to me. I broke down during our last conversation and he invited me over to his office where he consoled me as he wrote what he called his last correspondence to Blue Limited. He promised to take a different action should need arise. But I despaired. *The lawyer has written so many letters without any effect so far, I observed. Is life worth living anymore? Why should someone be so keen on frustrating me in this democratic world and go unpunished?* I was on the verge of doing something stupid to myself; my mother was escorted to my place at ten that night to talk some sense into me and to keep me company. We slept on my narrow bed.

Armed with this one last letter, I walked through the Blue Limited doors at their head office and demanded to see the manager. As usual, the one I talked to claimed that he was in a meeting. I had been in the cat and mouse game long enough to know how such people operated.

"Would you care to leave your request with me?" the man was still talking, with an exaggerated courtesy.

I did not care for niceties at this stage. *If I could I would slap you for lying to my face*, I thought. I looked him in the eye and demanded to know who they were working with at the TSC, the fellow who had given them my personal information and who reinstated deductions even with the quite a handful of Blue Limited stop orders in my file. He would not answer, that much was clear to me. I handed him the letter and sat down to observe his reaction as he read it. His face betrayed no emotion as he went through it. Once he was through, he told me to wait. He made phone calls and after several minutes, I walked out through those damn doors with the copies of the stop order. This time I personally took it to TSC at Upper Hill and handed it to my employer, alongside a personal letter I had written.

My joy knew no bounds when within a short period of time; I received a copy of the letter from my employer sent to the manager of Blue Limited. He had been ordered to pay up all *monies* the company owed me with immediate effect or it would be deducted from its dues. At the end of that month, the money was in my bank account and my payslip was clean. I hopped onto a motorbike and headed to my home. I could not wait to share the wonderful news with my family.

"It is about time. You have suffered enough," my father said.

"Whoever has been behind this, we may not know him; but, oh Lord, for every tear my daughter has shed, please make it count!" was my mother's prayer.

I topped up my loan, paid up my fee arrears and wrote to the university, requesting for the exams I had missed. My personal circumstances may not have changed much but I was content that my education was no longer threatened. I had no fee balance and could now rest easy. I delved into my books and spent most of my time in the library. Thank God by now I knew what it meant to study, unlike in my high school years. I had come across two very vital books talking about how to study: I was to revise everything I was taught daily in forty eight hours, before some of it was

deleted from my memory (I observed this religiously); a good student always read ahead of the teacher; I was to make my own summary notes from my notes in class and from what I had read on a topic on my own; and for the difficult facts I was expected to remember, mnemonics would suffice. I exposed myself to as many questions tested on my area as possible, coming up with the answers each time. When exams neared, I slept for seven hours. Sleep was vital for my brain to rest and rejuvenate. During exams, all I was to do was to revise my short notes and the questions (with answers) and calmly wait for the paper. It did not irk me that I had four major exams to prepare for that year...

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HANDSOME DEVIL

It had taken me a pretty long time to be comfortable again with men. I was very busy with my work and studies, I reasoned. My demanding job required me to go to class even in the evenings for remedial lessons.

My alarm went off. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. I stretched my hand and groped in the darkness to switch it off. My eyes were tightly shut. How come the nights were getting shorter? Surely I couldn't have slept for seven hours already! I lazily stretched my lean frame, yawned, and snuggled myself into a foetal position as I hugged my warm blanket tightly around me. What had that motivational speaker said to my students? I counted: 5-4-3-2-1; and reluctantly got up. I did not want to doze off and be late for work. After my morning ritual, I set off to work. I went straight away to conduct my first lesson, thanks to my habitual early preparation of lessons. During breaks, I reviewed my lessons, marked learners' books, planned for the next lessons and updated my professional records. I left at 5.30 pm only to go back at 7 pm for the evening remedial lessons. I finally got to my house by 8 o'clock, freshened up and slept to get up at 3 o'clock for my studies. My schedule was busy so I hardly had the time or the energy to pursue anything else. Saturdays were considered work days before the government came in with the ban on weekend lessons. On Sundays, I went to church and came back to my humble abode to do some laundry. The weekend was spent, paving way to the ever busy week ahead.

So when I fell in love again, it came as a sheer surprise. I was in my Third Year at the university and on my first School Practice. It was in our local boys' high school. I was introduced to the teaching staff members. Fortunately, I knew two of them for they were my colleagues at the university. I looked around me and committed everything to memory. These days, I was a keen observer unlike before. I was always a quiet person, though. I only talked when I deemed it necessary to do so. Some mistook my demeanour for shyness until they encountered me in a discussion. As I sized up my new surroundings, I discerned that confusion over who I was on my new comrades' faces. We were six of us on the School Practice: three of us from my university, and the rest from two other public universities.

I mingled with everybody. They made me feel at home. The students, too, were exceptional. The boys were eager to share their knowledge and expand on what they knew. I became acquainted with the other teachers on School Practice and started getting to know them better. However, there was this young regular teacher who always interrupted our moments. He was a young handsome man with a boyish look. He taught Physics and Chemistry, so I gathered. I did not take much notice though for I was always busy with one thing or another. Besides, I regarded this young intruder in the same manner as all young men... restless, and looking for fun. I was wiser from that naive girl who trusted so blindly that she got herself burnt. I could sniff men's intentions from far, I asserted to myself.

As days flew by, I found this attractive young man in my proximity most of the time. I was literally bumping into him every time I was in the teachers' staff room, turned a corner, at the school canteen, and later on, on my way home. He introduced himself. He was Jamal. He was polite and at the best of his behaviour. He also had a fine sense of humour, something that appealed to me more than anything. Was there any other better way to unwind your day in the midst of a very fast-paced life where your every move was dictated by the clock? I was grateful to have a distraction at a time when so much was going on in my life, especially with the infamous credit and loaning facility that insisted on haunting me. Was there anything that ruffled him up? Every time I glanced at him, he was taking it easy, even when someone was making fun of him. He was not sensitive and I often wondered why he was that cool. I wanted to find out more. I waited for him to reveal himself to me, with time. I had read *Trusted like the Fox* by James Hadley Chase, and was well aware of the proverbial wolves in sheep-skin. Time always brought out the covert in an individual. I therefore kept my eyes and ears wide open.

A considerable amount of time passed before he asked for my number. I took his instead and waited for one week to elapse before giving him a call. Meanwhile, he taunted me every day.

"I gave you my number, why haven't you called me, dear?"

"I am just a little busy right now. I will give you a call one of these fine days," I responded.

When I finally did, he simply told me goodnight. He then called me every night after this to wish me a good night. With time, I was annoyed with myself on realization that I actually looked forward to these goodnight messages. One day I fell sick and excused myself to go to hospital. Jamal must have missed me in the staffroom for he called me. Soon, he was on his way to meet me. He met me on my way to the pharmacy. He then offered to buy me lunch. I ordered chips and chicken; Jamal watched me nibble at my food.

"Um, you could be wondering why I have been pursuing you. I find you very attractive and would like to get to know you," he started. "Don't get me wrong, I know this may not be the best time but I cannot hold it in any longer."

"Oh, I see," I stated simply.

Is that okay with her? He wondered and for a moment, seemed to waver in his resolution to woo me. *It is probably her present condition,* he countered his fear.

He cleared his throat and carried on.

"I want to be straight with you. I am a single father of two girls aged seven and three. They live with my mother at home."

My mind was racing. So he had a family!

"If you don't mind, I really should be going now. I need to rest," I said, surprising myself by how cool I sounded.

"Of course," he said, pushing away his unfinished food and signalling the waiter for the bill.

"I will give you a call later this evening to find out how you are doing, okay?"

"Okay."

That night, I did not sleep well. Who was the mother of his two children? Was he divorced? Could I handle a man with two children? I hoped to start a family at the right time and have one child... he already had two! I must have fallen asleep for when my alarm sounded, it was already dawn. I freshened up and headed for work.

Three months later, I was sitting at a table with him at a prestigious hotel. *He wants to impress me alright*, I mused. I had come to a decision. It had been a difficult one. It is not every day that you wake up from being single to having a man and children on your hands. However, I needed to know more.

"Before I tell you what I have decided, I would like to know where the children's mother is."

"Actually, they are from different mothers. My eldest daughter is from a relationship I had right before I joined the university. The younger one is from a one-night-stand after my higher education."

"Oh..." was all I could manage.

"Don't be scared. I have since learnt my lesson, and all I want now is to build a strong connection; hopefully with you."

I looked at him. He was looking earnestly into my eyes, with those eyes I found so irresistible. In spite of whatever feeling was arising within me now, I mellowed under that look. He said one was married to someone else but did not know where the other was. *Diana, focus!* I told myself. *The guy has two women in his life connected to his children. Baby Mommas, as the Americans call them. Can you handle it? Can he be trusted? He looks genuine...* and I looked at him again.

"Yes, I will be your girlfriend." *What am I saying!* "Two children are quite a handful for me but I am willing to try and forge a relationship with you," I surprised myself once more.

Back at my place, I went through my goals in life. I wanted a family after my studies. I had one more year to go. If I allowed this man into my life now, would he be supportive of me? Would he be an obstacle? Besides, I was never the kind to multi-task, contrary to that notion about women. I decided I would date this man and see where it led, but at the same time, try to keep my head while at it. I rummaged through my college books and discovered I did not have past papers for my courses. I had forgotten to pick them up. An exam was looming large. I called my class representative. He was a very caring young man, always available when we needed him. But my friend, Cloty, begged to differ.

"I forgot to pick those past papers you gave out last semester. Let me know when you are in town so that I can come to pick them up, please."

He was in town, he said. Luckily, he had just been at a colleague's earlier that day to deliver them and was only too glad to make me copies. I felt blessed to have him as my *Rep* as we fondly referred to him, a feeling I knew I shared with my classmates, well, apart from Cloty. We had elected him unanimously and he had proved we were right in doing so. During those first days at the university, he had approached me. My response was for him to wait till I cleared my studies. I had no intention of taking on something that would jeopardize my studies even before I started. As I sat with him in the small class of English and Literature students, I got to know him better and decided he was the last man I could ever date. He was huge, ruggedly handsome and obviously a man of the people. The girls just loved him, but not I. He repulsed me with his way of thinking. I thought he was an ideal man in my grandmother's world, not my own. He had a tendency of defending almost ruthlessly the traditions I considered obsolete. There was once a discussion on bride price. He felt it was very necessary for it gave the man an opportunity to pay for what he treasured and which would be his possession forever for him to cherish. *And to treat as he deemed fit*, I could not help interjecting.

I, on the contrary, felt that this custom gave excessive power to the man and turned the woman into his property thereby denying her an equal leverage in the relationship. I wanted it to be done away with so that a man and a woman could enter a marriage as a couple that was equal but with complementary roles instead of the *you-owe-me* kind of relationship.

Chris would have nothing of the sort. Instead of arguing intellectually, he personalized the issue and told me that he could have me for free then go on and pay for the one he fancied. I had no further discussions with him unless required by my course work to do so and thus I kept our interaction at an arm's length. I had long learnt to pick my battles.

From then on, our relationship was defined by our position in class. He appeared respectful though, which made it easier for me to suffer him. After giving him direction to my place, I folded up my laundry and looked forward to meeting my boyfriend later on that evening. Jamal had become regular in my house. On one occasion, my father bumped into him. He hastily introduced and excused himself. I found it strange when I thought of it later. Why would he run off like he did?

Was he simply shy or was there something about my father that he was afraid of? I told myself I had to be patient and wait for his response when I asked him about it afterwards. It was now five months since we started dating. Jamal was an easy person to talk to. Sometimes I saw him look agitated over the phone but did not want to read too much into it: maybe he was having a rough day. It troubled me though for of late, he seemed more agitated. Someone had whispered to me that he was married. Of course I dismissed her. I was not the type to believe in hearsay. I waited for an opportune time to ask Jamal about it.

"Do you want me to take you home for you to ascertain whether I have a woman there or not?"

I felt silly. That ended the discussion. A knock on the door dragged me out of my reverie.

"Just a moment!" I called out and hastened to unlock it.

"Hey Chris!"

"Hey you, what's up?"

"Nothing much. I am just whiling away the last minutes of the day. It's 'me time' so I was lost in my own meditation. Welcome. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, I'm good," he responded, "just came as fast as I could. I am heading back to my place and it's quite a distance from here, you know."

"Thank you for sorting me out at such a short notice," I said as I took the papers and went into the inner room to keep them.

My house comprised of two rooms that I liked to call the living room and the bedroom-cum-kitchen. My stove stood on a table on the opposite side of the wall where the bed stood. At the foot of the bed was a clothes rack, my only suitcase and the dressing mirror that I had never looked into since I joined the higher education class. I was bent over my pile of books on the stool in a corner for only a minute. I straightened up to turn back to the sitting room where I had left Chris watching the TV. He had to leave now; my boyfriend would soon be here and sometimes his jealousy took him over board. He always allowed me to explain myself after he had flown into a fit of rage and jealousy. I loved that vulnerable side in him but hated the confrontation. I almost jumped when I saw Chris at the entrance to my bedroom.

"Chris! You gave me such a fright. Is there anything you need? You could have just requested from the sitting room, you know," I was speaking very fast, my heart in my mouth.

Something about him made me scared. He did not respond; neither did he move. I looked at his bloodshot eyes and felt rather than saw the heaving of his chest. I looked around for something to fling at him should it be warranted. There was nothing. My utensils were nicely laid out on a rack outside my house to dry. I knew that look. What had that article I had read said? 'Victims often placed themselves in precarious situations that always worked against them.' *Have I? All I have done is request for papers, and play the nice host. What have I done to warrant this?* I was not going to let it happen to me, again. Screaming was not an option; the estate was full of my students. *How would I face them afterwards?* I desperately made an attempt to go past him to the sitting room. If only I could get to the door... Chris would not budge. He made a solid wall between me and the other room. I knew he was huge so I used all the energy I could master to shove him out of the way. How I wished I had my phone with me! He caught me easily and pushed me backwards, towards my bed.

"I don't want to hurt you, you know that I love you," he hissed through clenched teeth.

I tried to reason with him.

"You know about Jamal. I told you the second time you made a move on me. Please, let me go. You don't want to do this," I implored.

"How would you know?" he said, exerting himself for I was struggling with every ounce of energy within me. "Jamal came after me. I approached you first. What makes him the better man? Why couldn't you love me like you love him? What does he give you that I cannot? What does he have that I don't have?"

"You don't understand! He... "

The rest of my sentence was smothered by a wild kiss that tore at my lips. I fought until I could fight no more. I lay there, bruised, whimpering softly. *What is wrong with me? Once is bad enough, but twice?* I had never felt so wretched before. Why had I not foreseen this? It was my fault. If only I had gone to pick the damn papers by the roadside! If only I had received them at the door and let him go his way! If only...

"Please be quiet," he was saying, "I love you. Let me show you that I love you."

What kind of a person was he? How could someone violate another in a most personal way and still claim to love her? Was his mind that twisted?

"I told you so!" Cloty's shrill voice cut through my consciousness. *Oh! If only I had listened to you my friend! You warned me that Chris was such a brute but I did not listen.*

"I told you of how he held a pen-knife to my throat and forced himself onto me. Diana, did you believe me? No! You said he could not be possibly that crude even after discovering his way of thinking. Diana, don't you remember the way he ruthlessly defended archaic traditions in class? That's your *Rep* for you. And that is how he will always be; no matter how many times you choose to sanitize his thinking," Cloty tormented me.

"Oh dear! I should have listened to you, Cloty. Why did you have to transfer colleges? I could do with a friend like you right now. I really need you. You know what I am going through," I moaned.

There was a knock on the door. I did not remember locking it... I had not. *Oh my God! What was Jamal going to think?* I rushed towards it, my eyes blinded by my tears. Jamal walked in and I flung myself at him; sobbing, clinging.

"What is wrong, Sweetie?"

I looked around. He was sitting there, on my couch. I was enraged. I pointed at him.

"He...he... "I could not finish.

I rushed to the bedroom and cried some more.

"He what?!" he was alarmed.

He had followed me to the bedroom. He rushed back to the sitting room. Chris was gone.

Jamal came back to where I was. He hugged me.

"Hush. Tell me what happened."

My phone rang. Jamal picked it up. It was Chris. I could only hear what Jamal was saying.

"Hello? Hello? Come and see what you have done! No, just come. I want us to talk; come back!"

The connection went dead.

"Diana; why was the door locked?"

"I... I... I did not even know it was locked. I came here for only a minute and... "

"Why would you come to the bedroom?"

"I ... "I began. The phone rang.

"No! You are talking to me. If what you have done is good, why do you run away? You are not talking to her, you pig! Come here and face me! What do you want to tell her?"

And he ended the call. When it rang the third time, he switched it off, removed the line and destroyed it. He was going to buy me another one; he promised.

"Dress up, you are not sleeping here today," he said. "Will you stop crying and dress up? I will leave you here alone!"

All I wanted was for all of it to go away. How could I make it go away? I knew talking helped, but how do you even broach the subject? I did not want any judgement passed on me. If I talked to my mother, I was sure there would be a lot of that. The only people I could talk to without fear of reproach were my friends, Chemtai and Cloty. I badly wanted to talk to them now. They would understand me. But Jamal was calling so I made a mental note to talk to them at the earliest opportunity the following day.

By the time I went to campus for my final year, Chemtai knew what had transpired. She hated Chris with venom. She had respected him before but this episode changed how she regarded him.

"I will do everything for him to realise that *I know!*" Chemtai vowed when I told her about it.

Had it not been for my incessant admonition, she would have shouted from the top of the building for all to get to know what a beast our class representative was. I did not tell her what had befallen Cloty and made her change colleges. It would have been too much for Chemtai to contain herself and keep her promise. I knew her. As for me, I ignored Chris every time he looked my way. I never

talked to him ever. My heart rate involuntarily quickened every time the man looked at me; and it was not beating for joy. I thought I would have a heart attack one day from my heart's somersaults. It was sheer torture seeing him every day, knowing he went about his life without the slightest remorse. In fact, he seemed not to have any recollection of the incident whatsoever. It was as if it had never happened, and this infuriated me. I had thought of going to the police the very day it happened but dismissed it for I had heard numerous accounts of how ugly the interrogation was:

"Sema ulikubali. Si mlisikizana?" Just say it was consensual. Didn't you agree?

I loathed having to deal with the police on such matters. If I had learnt some defence skills from a Martial Arts class, none of this could have happened to me. When your enemy outmatched you in strength, you needed technique to outwit him.

"No one will ever abase me again in that manner ever," I vowed to myself.

I took whatever I could from my pay and put it aside for the sole reason of enrolling for karate lessons. I was determined to acquire some defence skills. In the contemporary world where people were always stretching the meaning of rights and freedoms, anything was possible. The available option for me was taekwondo.

On my first day in that class, I went through some stretching exercises that reminded me I was not as fit as I prided myself to be. Then it was time for the aerobics and the intensity that comes with it. I was short of breath within a very short time. I waited for the passing out which I was sure could no longer be at bay. My chest was burning, and the coach pushed.

"One! Two! Three! ... "

Every time I responded, he shouted for more power. I was doing some defence skills, then blocks and finally, kicks. I kicked from the sides; I kicked from the front; and I kicked from the back. The coach demanded for higher kicks so I stretched myself and ran out of energy. I was given a two-minute break to walk around. And the whole process re-started. After what seemed like an eternity, the session ended with "Tae-kwon-do is the best!" It had run for one hour. With subsequent classes, I became fitter and did not struggle like before. If anything, I was always looking forward to the next lesson. It was not because it was less hard; I loved the energy that was involved and the good feeling that always accompanied it afterwards. Even though I had been training for only a month,

I felt confident that I could take care of myself if required to do so. My training began by running around the large gymnasium ten times. This was then followed by stretch ups for the whole body, including the feet and the neck. Then the kicks followed, the blocks, the punches and lastly, what the coaches called the self-defence skills. This confused me. Wasn't the whole thing about self-defence? The coaches were young lean men and very enthusiastic at what they did. They tightened their tummy muscles and demanded that the trainees punch them. I gave my best shots but they never seemed to ruffle them. They stood there with their arms akimbo, demanding for more power. It was hard throwing a punch and shouting "Ready!" but in the Chinese language. And the shout had to be an equally enthusiastic one. I psyched myself to go through the whole training, however hard it proved to be...

I dreamt that I was fighting someone I could not see clearly. This proved tough and frustrating. I would throw a punch and discover the person just disappeared only to re-appear in a different place. The more I tried, the more the person played tricks on me. I was not sure whether it was a man or a woman. No, I could not give up.

"I know I can! I know I can! I know I can!"

I woke up saying it...

"My friend," Chemtai volunteered once. "Never give up on life. I was betrothed to a certain young man while in college. Upon graduation but before we married, I discovered I had fallen pregnant with his child. You can imagine how I felt when I went to visit him and found him with a young wife. She was also pregnant."

"Uh-oh!" I interjected.

"She was a minor; a primary school girl. I didn't know whether to be upset or to sympathize with her," she concluded.

"Oh, I am so sorry dear," I said.

"Well, don't be. I have since made peace with myself. We have only one life to live; why make it miserable by dwelling on the past?"

"Exactly!" I exclaimed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TRUSTED LIKE THE FOX

That Saturday, I felt like sleeping the whole day. I did not eat anything for I had lost my appetite. I was drifting in and out of sleep till 3 o'clock in the afternoon. My neighbour had not seen me. She came to the window of my bedroom and called out.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone home? Diana, are you okay? Diana!"

I heard her from far but did not respond. I wanted to get up but could not. I was tired; very tired. I had gone to bed my usual time. I could not explain my exhaustion. The neighbour called again.

"Let me sleep," I whispered.

"No! Open the door. If you are unwell and cannot walk, crawl. But I need you to open this door this very minute!"

I knew her. It was my cousin, the landlady's daughter; and she was not going to go away until I listened to her. I pulled myself together and crawled with all the determination I could master. I collapsed at the door. Thankfully, I managed to unlatch it. Ivy wondered what was wrong with me. She needed to rush me to hospital. She asked if I had eaten anything. I had not, and did not care for any meal.

"I want to sleep, Ivy. Let me sleep."

Ivy left me on the couch and went looking for a motorbike to take me to hospital. Luckily, the parking was not far from the home. Soon she was back. She bundled me onto the bike and left for hospital. With some considerable effort, I had managed to text my boyfriend to the effect that I was unwell. Jamal was attending his masters class in a nearby town. Before long, he was on his way back and walked into the hospital just as they were wheeling me to the doctor's room. He took over the wheeling. I was grateful for such a caring boyfriend. Not every man puts his dream aside even for a few minutes to attend to the needs of his girl. I was lucky. I looked up to the sky and thanked the big guy above. Jamal was just perfect for me.

I was admitted. Several tests were done on me. By evening, my family members were present. My mother could not watch over me that night for she was ailing. She suffered from chronic bronchitis and was under attack. My sister offered to watch over me but Jamal would not hear of it. He was going to stay. And stay he did, for the nine nights I was hospitalized. One test revealed I was anaemic: my blood count was at 4.2. I was going to be transfused that very night. It went without a hitch. By morning, I was dying to know what was really wrong with me. Anaemia was nothing new to me. I had first been diagnosed three years ago when I collapsed in a lecture room. A gynaecologist discovered upon close examination and several tests that I had hormonal imbalance. This in turn triggered very heavy bleeding during my menstrual period which then made me lose six to eight pints of blood monthly. The condition had deteriorated over time for it had gone untreated. Some doctors called it menorrhagia and so handled it at that level. The gynaecologist helped improve my condition. I was put on blood boosters, on and off. This time, however, I suspected there was more to it. After the transfusion, I expected to get better. Instead, I realised I was still very weak. Besides, the medics kept insisting that the head surgeon wanted to see me once he was free: he was a gynaecological surgeon. So I was detained at the hospital indefinitely. Medics came in with trays of drugs, injected me, gave me pills to swallow, and then left. Finally, the chief surgeon appeared and ordered for me to be transported to his clinic for an abdominal scan. He later explained to me that my uterine wall thickened a lot in preparation for a possible pregnancy each month accounting for the uncontrolled blood loss every time it did not happen. It was also possible that owing to the hormonal imbalance and endometriosis, the whole area beyond the uterine wall was triggered to shed itself and thus added to the mess. I was glad I now knew what ailed me. I was taken back to the county hospital. On day nine, just before I was discharged, a jolly-looking nurse walked in. She gave me the medicine I was now used to. The intravenous fluids had run their full course. It was the pills for now.

"Do you know your status?" the nurse asked casually, busying herself with tidying up the tray of medicines she had wheeled in.

"Yes."

"When did you take the test?"

"Last year."

"I see. What was the result if I may ask?"

"It was negative," I responded, observing the nurse's every move.

"You are supposed to do a follow-up test after three months. Did you?"

"Yes, and it was still negative. Is there anything you want to share with me, Sister?"

"Not really. You know it is good to be taking this test regularly, especially if you are sexually active. If it turns out you are still negative, you can work towards keeping it that way. But should it be positive, you can always seek help. It is good to constantly know your status."

The nurse was not just engaged in small talk. That much I gathered.

"Have you done a test this year?"

What was she implying? It was September, exactly six months since I gave myself to Jamal. Could he be...? I quickly dismissed the thought.

"Diana!" the nurse called. "Did you hear what I just said? Do not be alarmed. It's good to know one's status at all times, that's all."

"Of course; Sister."

"So when do you wish to have another test?"

"Even right now is fine by me," I said.

I did not doubt myself. However, I did not like the way the nurse was going on about it. I would prove to her that she had nothing on me; she had better go and busy herself with sicker patients. I was sure the idling nurse was needed elsewhere. The nurse dispelled my earlier feelings for she said it was procedural and there was nothing alarming about it. I asked God for forgiveness for thinking that Jamal, of all the people, could be living with HIV and yet fail to use protection with me. He was the sweetest person I had ever met; well, apart from when he was being jealous. He was very considerate and always wanted the best for me. I was still reeling from the fact that he had faithfully stayed by my side every night for the period I was admitted. *Which man does that, apart from a very special one?* Hospitals are the last places in which one could seek

accommodation. The beds are never comfortable; someone might emit some horrible groan as he breathed his last; the place is stuffed with that acrid smell that is typical of a hospital... and the list goes on. It was an act of selfless love that made Jamal stick with me. I was not sure if we traded places, I would have done the same. He was a hero, my hero, and deserved a medal.

The nurse drew out the testing kit she had already armed herself with. She started explaining to me what I already knew. Nonetheless, I listened patiently.

"We will put a sample of your blood on this kit. If you see one line forming, it means you are negative. But if you see two lines forming, the interpretation is that you are positive. I want you to read the result to me."

One line formed. I sat very still, hardly breathing. I was about to sigh the *I told you so* relief when I saw another line form halfway; almost shyly. I just sat there, seeing without seeing. The nurse asked me what I saw. Without looking, I told her I was positive. *HIV Positive*. I did not know what to think, do or say. My life flashed before me. Where did the rain start *beating* me? I had not led a promiscuous life. I had gone through high school without any knowledge of a man; well, almost. As a young adult in college, I had been infatuated by only one man but even then, my philosophy was "No condom, no sex". I was now more mature, knew what I wanted and saw a potential life partner in Jamal. With him, I let my guard down. He professed that he loved me, provided for me and sought to protect me at all times. According to Steve Harvey's book *Act like a Lady, Think like a Man*, such acts indicated that Jamal really loved me. He could do nothing to harm me. My mind wandered to the one who had molested me not long ago. Could it be Chris? But Chris had just come into my world. My head was one web of confusion. Did it matter who had done this to me? How was knowledge of who I owed this to going to change anything? I was HIV positive. I was slowly dying. Isn't that what they said? You died slowly until when it was finally over, you didn't even notice it. I wanted to be like that doctor who had killed himself rather than agonize as he waited for death. It was better to die before you became quite a spectacle and people started pointing fingers. I had always thought myself strong; this was a real test for me. Oh, the nurse was saying something...

"Yes?" I looked at her without seeing her.

"You have been sitting there, motionless, for a long time. I said you can scream, cry, throw yourself on the floor or run wild; I am here for you. Do whatever you want."

And she waited for the flood of emotions she was sure to follow. She thought the shock would be over soon and I would start losing my mind. It never happened. I did not want to scream, cry, throw myself on the floor or run wild. I wanted to think. No; to meditate. I did not have a child. That was the only regret I could come up with. Why had I waited so long? Aha! I had believed in the fairy tale wedding to a shining knight-in-armour. All around me, some of my peers had decided it was less baggage getting a child and raising it up as a single mother rather than sticking with the proverbial conventional marriage. On this one issue, why had I insisted on tradition? By now, I could be having a child who would carry on my legacy, someone with my DNA. Did I even have a legacy? *How will I be remembered while gone? Will I be remembered at all?* Some white couples nowadays decided not to have any children and were very much in sync with their decision... like that couple I attended religious meetings with. Why was it such an issue for me that I did not have a child? Was God punishing me for how I had felt and expressed myself as a teenager? If He was, then He had such a fine sense of humour. I remembered all the times I met some of my childhood friends, most of whom education beyond high school had not featured. They had several children and would ask me how many I had. My mother and aunt had since stopped asking me to get pregnant. The last time they did, I was categorical that that was the last thing on my mind. And it was definitely not the ultimate: I had more pressing things to do with my time. Looking back now, I agonized over why I had never paid attention to them. If only I could rewind time by a year!

Then I had one other regret: an even bigger one which swallowed the first one. Why in God's name had I taken loans to pump into that institution? For all I knew, I might not be around to graduate come next year. I had spent a little over half a million Kenyan shillings on my tuition and personal effects on a university degree that would never benefit anyone. I wondered how long I had to live. How I wished I had squandered all that money and then waited for death. If only I had known! For what was I studying? My future looked bleak. No, what future? I had none. I could only exist now, in the moment. Slowly, what I had dreaded the most materialized before my very own eyes. If I had known how my life would turn out, I would have become a nun. It was much better than facing this monster before me.

My mind focused on Jamal. *What will become of him? How will I break the news to him?* I could not carry on as usual and pretend nothing was amiss. But on the other hand, I could not find it within me to tell him a line like, *Oh, I found out I am HIV positive.* How was I to break the news to him? How would he react? What would become of us? Life had suddenly become so difficult that I hardly understood it. Before, I knew what I wanted and had it all laid down in the form of goals. Now I was not so sure. My life had suddenly become complicated and unpredictable. I looked at the nurse. How lucky and secure she was in the knowledge that she was negative! She could afford to smile down at me and tell me that it was going to be okay. How could it ever be okay? How was I to tell my mother that her beautiful Diana had fallen prey to the *electricity* as it was known in the village? The day I was discharged from hospital, I listened to my mother sighing with relief that it had been nothing serious.

"I was afraid that you had a big disease like cancer or God forbid, HIV/AIDS," she said and crossed herself. "I am going to buy you beetroot and blend lots of it so that you can take the juice every day until there is so much blood in you that your body will go into shock from too much blood."

I smiled in spite of myself. I hoped an opportunity would present itself for me to break the news to her. I worried that my mother might not be strong enough to take it well. She had wanted so much for me. This was surely going to be a bitter anti-climax for her. Right now, she was grateful to God for taking her daughter through the illness unscathed. She was also full of praise for *that young man* as she called Jamal, for taking such good care of her daughter. I pushed these thoughts out of my mind. I was to focus on myself. I was called by Chemtai.

"We have just done a Continuous Assessment Test (CAT). Imagine the lecturer is adamant that he is not going to re-issue it to absentee students. We informed him of your illness but he does not want to relent."

Chemtai had been to the hospital. It did not matter that she had to sit through lectures from 7 o'clock in the morning to 7 o'clock in the evening. In spite of the workload, she created time to visit me. She was the only student who visited me and for that kind gesture from her, I loved her to death. I would treasure her forever. *If I were a man, Chemtai would be my ideal partner.* I missed out on most of what my mother was saying.

"He is the one, my girl. You have done well."

"Thank you, Mama."

So, Jamal was in my parents' good books. I knew that when my mother spoke, she spoke for my father as well. I had never introduced any man to my dad. Jamal was the first one. It had been an impromptu meeting that day they bumped into each other in my house. I could now talk to my father as a friend. It never used to be like that. Before, he had been aloof: he was the father and we were the children. He was not to mingle with the children. He was to see to it we were provided for. And he had taken good care of us until he was overwhelmed by our number. Then the family had struggled. Emotional bonding was not of importance. I had had a glimpse of that side of him during my early years; then my father had evolved into this unapproachable guy that we saw once in a while and who treated us like criminals. With him, we were always guilty until proven innocent. To know that he approved of my choice of man meant a lot to me. I was waiting for the day I formally introduced them. My dad and I had since amended our relationship. He even voted for the new constitution the very first time it was given to the Kenyan people solely on the grounds that it recognised the rights of the girl child as well; at a time most of the men in Kenya were against it. He also talked of giving me a piece of the land he had bought in Nandi.

Once I was alone, I brooded. I wondered what my life would be if I would have the opportunity to live a little longer. At the hospital, the nurse had taken me to the Comprehensive Care Centre, commonly known as the CCC. Everyone in the hospital knew what it was about. I had never heard of it. When I got there, I was consoled that I was not fighting it alone. I just had to take a look around; the nurse tried to assure me. The medics took my weight. I weighed 48 kg, down from 56 kg. My immunity was at 98. I was told that it was bad.

"Normally, if a person's immunity falls below 200 for a Person Living with HIV and Aids (PLWHA), we are to start him or her on medication immediately. Yours is way below that but you don't have to worry. There are patients we have revived with the immunity at zero. You have to adhere to everything we tell you if the medication is to work effectively for the desired result."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we have a problem. You could develop resistance for the drug which means it will not help you."

"Then I will die."

"Not necessarily. Some people have opted not to take the drugs. A handful of people live on and are alive today. But the majority who were in denial have been buried. The most important step towards a normal life is acceptance of the fact that you have this condition for the rest of your life and need the drugs to suppress it; for life."

Normal. Nothing will ever be normal again for me. My world turned upside down when I read that test result on that hospital bed in room 13 in that county hospital. Normal was no longer in my vocabulary. I deleted it. I looked at the faces of all those patients around me and shuddered. Some had eyes popping out; some looked like they could be blown away by wind any minute, apparently lost in their own world. But some could still afford a smile: they talked their lips away as if they did not have a single care in the whole wide world. Would I fit into this world? Could I? Could I play this hand I had been dealt by life? This was my world now. The only thing that comforted me was the sight of children. *If they can strive to survive, so can I,* I thought.

"You could live up to 47 years with the medication. A research has backed it up," the medic continued. *Oh my, that is a pretty long time,* I mused. There was one question on my mind.

"Will I be able to have a child?"

"Of course yes," the medic seemed amused. "You will only be required to check in with your doctor who is the only one capable of giving you a clearance."

"Oh, one more thing. Should you decide to use the Anti-retroviral Therapy, you should be aware of the side effects. You could lose flesh on your face and other body parts which would be re-located to your mid-torso, you could have a rash on your skin that would clear when your body adjusts to the drug, you could feel nauseated, or you could end up with an itching skin, among other effects," he explained. "However, these effects are manageable."

I had seen some people with the rash on the skin. In my community, that was how we knew someone had the virus. We did not know it was one of the reactions of the medicine the patient was taking. I did not want to announce my status to everybody. When I was handed the pills, I kept them for several days without taking them. What if I developed the telling rash? I prayed for a different side effect. My people were mean to any PLWHA. They literally killed them. The virus

did not kill two of my former schoolmates; stigma did. People stopped talking when they saw someone they suspected of having the infection. They pointed fingers and whispered. The victims felt their eyes on them. These were the discreet ones. But more often than not, the rest were more candid. They shouted (especially the young males) obscenities to the victim or said some really hurtful things.

"Hey, make sure you take those pills as prescribed!"

"She was electrified!" and they would burst out laughing.

"A girl should learn to keep her legs together!" another would goad.

"Hey, now you can keep it in your pants. No one is interested!"

"The virus is passing!"

"A corpse is passing, do you see it?"

"Talk of the walking dead," another would respond.

Dealing with the knowledge that one had *that* condition for the rest of one's life was tough enough without constant reminders and cruel goading. One could even pretend for a while that the condition did not exist and get to enjoy what was left of one's life just to get through the days, one day at a time. Why were other people not supportive? How much would it cost them to be kinder? *When your frame of mind is shattered, don't you need some understanding?* I bemoaned this. I had never been the type to point fingers or gossip about the unfortunate victims of that deadly disease, or any other misfortune. What I had done was to keep a safe distance from such people for I was scared to death about contracting the virus. It was funny how I had insisted on protection to my younger siblings and students only for me to fall victim. It could befall anyone. That was my conclusion. I also concluded that for as long as stigma existed, the beyond zero generation advocated for in Kenya would remain a distant dream, or worse still, a mirage. Stigma stopped people from disclosing their status. An HIV positive man met a negative female in a society where men wielded most power in a relationship. He then did as he pleased and if he did not use protection, risked infecting the unsuspecting partner. It was easier for a man to choose to protect

himself and the partner than for a woman to choose to do so. Sadly, the former replicated itself in my environs. It did not have to be that way, though.

There were campaigns insisting on the value of assertiveness of the youth. They were the most vulnerable group. Interestingly, they also wielded the power over what happened to them to a fairly large extent. They could combat the HIV/AIDS prevalence if they willed themselves to.

"All you have to do is say NO to unprotected sex!" shouted the huge activist with the microphone.

"She is going to shout herself hoarse, just watch," one of the youths in attendance nudged her friend.

"For God's sake, pay attention!" her friend admonished.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the activist continued, surveying her crowd. "If you cannot abstain from sex, would it kill you to be honest about your dealings?"

Chuckles could be heard from amongst the crowd. I was soaking all I could from this sensitization.

"Yes, I reiterate, abstinence is the better option for all of you young fellows," the activist was not deterred. "However, I will not sweep anything under the carpet. If some of you cannot abstain, use protection or stay faithful to your partners."

I vowed to positively impact the lives of the youth I interacted with. I shared what I knew about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I advocated for abstinence as the best choice ever, faithfulness for those who had carnal knowledge and protection for the errant ones. I created a healthy rapport with my students. For those I guided, abstinence was always the song. For those I counselled, however, I did not shy away from drumming into them that protection would go a long way in impacting positively on their health. The young ones opened up to me.

"Teacher, is it true that by the age of seventeen, a boy should be a father?" One of my students once asked me.

He had lingered in class a little longer after the bell sounded for lunch. This was not the norm.

"My dear, it is not true. Where did you hear that?" I asked.

"My friends tell me so. They have threatened that if I don't get myself a girlfriend, I should forget about our friendship," he returned, looking distraught.

"Well, are you ready to be a father? Can you provide for a baby?" I pressed.

"Um... No," came the response.

"Then don't feel pressured into what you are not ready for, dear. You have your whole life ahead of you. Pre-marital sex predisposes you to all sorts of nightmares: an unplanned baby, emotional stress, an estranged relationship with your folks and conscience, or God forbid, Sexually Transmitted Infections including the mother of them all - HIV/AIDS. Can you handle it?"

The boy squirmed in his seat.

"Handle... what?"

"Everything!" I tested.

He kept quiet for such a long time that I had to intervene.

"I thought so. It is better for you to lose friends who are keen on leading you astray," I concluded.

For those pushed into premarital sex by poverty, I always stressed to them that it was better to be poor but in good health than rich and in poor health.

"The bottom line is when one is in poor health, one is the poorest person of them all, in spite of how rich they may be," I would advise.

I hoped to touch a young life somewhere. I did not want my very young siblings or students to fight the same demons I fought on a daily basis. It was a tough battle. Taking a combination of pills every day and hiding while at it for the rest of one's life was a very daunting task. Besides, unlike for other terminal illnesses, the PLWHA had to make sure that the pills were taken at a specific time of the day, every day. This was regardless of the activities one chose to engage in or

some social or even formal activities the individual had no control of and which could interfere with his or her timing for medication.

After agonizing over it for days, I decided to disclose my condition to my closest sister. A nurse had insisted I should for at times I might be too sick to collect my medication by myself.

"Oh, Diana!" was all she managed to say.

She was on the brink of tears. For the first time since it all started, I was glad that the condition had chosen me over my sister. I was not sure she would have coped well. She had the habit of taking everything to heart. She begged me to take the pills.

Patience was a dark witty girl. She always had something to retort back to anyone who crossed her path. She had a perfect set of teeth, and a bewitchingly beautiful face with dimples to match. She was a little tall and very slender. In high school, she was known as *Mosquito* because of her small size. Looking at her now, I was grateful she would finally find peace in the knowledge that sisterly rivalry was out of the question for us. Patience had never been over the fact that I was very light-skinned, beautiful on the inside out and with a brain to match. All our life until now, I had sensed her distaste in everything I was. I did not understand why it was so for if I could, I would easily trade places with her. I knew my own weaknesses. The most devastating for me was the awkwardness I experienced when it came to expression in the social sphere, unlike my sister. I was a loner, and preferred it that way. I could talk for hours on end on a subject I was passionate about in an intellectual set-up but when it came to a one-on-one conversation with somebody, I became dumb. In contrast, my sister was this robust, outgoing and amazing person to be in company with. She loved playing hockey. Her only flaw was her sensitivity. I paled in comparison and thought my company was at best boring.

"I don't want to lose you, Diana. Please take the medicines. What is the big deal if you develop a rash? It is better than a premature death and six feet under. Besides, you have your exams coming up. For you, we are talking of four major exams plus the Fourth Year CATS. You need to be strong, please. I want you to have your degree."

Patience was already through with her university education. She was two years younger than me. She had been whisked off to the university immediately she cleared high school on a Privately

Sponsored Student Programme. Maybe our father had learnt his lesson from keeping me waiting too long after high school. Or, maybe Patience was more special for she had no paternity issues. Regardless, I was happy for my sister. I attended her colourful graduation from one of the public universities, and the bash thereafter. Those were the happy days when I had been carefree. When it came to my own studies, I was no longer sure it was what I wanted. For what was I going through that torturous journey of acquiring a degree? I did not have a child; I had a virus. I was on medication but everything remained precarious. My life was now precarious. I was told to avoid stress at all cost. Well, whoever heard of exams with no stress? I had thirsted for this education, but my current condition made me lose interest in everything, including my studies. I could as well lie around and wait: wait to live, wait to die.

I started taking my drugs. Jamal was away for a week. He had visited his children and mother. In his absence, I thought of a thousand ways of delivering the bad news to him. I felt wretched for being responsible for taking him from his children. I prayed for things to go smoothly once I started talking and hoped he would hear me out without interruption. He came to see me that evening.

"I missed you, my love," he said as he hugged me. "My goods are finished," he joked.

I only attempted a smile and busied myself with the preparation for supper. Afterwards, I looked at how jovial he was and faltered in my resolution to tell him. I wrestled with it. He was saying something about his children but I was not paying much attention. I cleared my throat. He knew this was a prelude to talking so he stopped and looked at me.

"Well?"

"I...You know that I love you very much and would never hurt you, right? I mean, intentionally."

"Why do I have the feeling you are going to tell me something bad?"

"It is because I am. On the last day in hospital..." and I told him.

I hoped he would say something, anything. After what seemed like an eternity, he whispered:

"Will you bury me if I die before you? I would like you to bury me."

I hugged him. I did not know how to feel. It was too good to be true. Ever since I learnt of my status, I had heard a lot for I had kept an open ear. There were tales of married men who divorced their wives on the spot when the virus was involved. He was not married to me, yet he contemplated dying with me! He had introduced me to his only brother but I did not read too much into it. With tears streaming down my face, I looked upwards to my Creator and could not thank Him enough. I was blessed beyond measure. When I mentioned to him my waning interest in my studies, he dismissed me.

"You only have a condition which requires you to take care of your nutrition, that's all. Don't throw away your life. Look at it like a second chance at life."

Second Chance. It sounded good. When I tried harder, I saw that this condition made me appreciate life more. I no longer took anything for granted. I knew life could be snatched at a moment's notice. I lived it. I tasted it. Jamal brought me DVDs of uplifting gospel music. He sometimes sang along. I was mesmerised. How did he learn of the songs? He was Muslim! I did not wonder for long. He told me at one point he had belonged to his high school Christian Union Club but had reverted back to Islam. He became very supportive; teaching me almost everything there was to know about my condition. He said he had attended a course on APHIA II Plus. I had a very imaginative mind. As much as I appreciated what he was doing for me, my mind went into overdrive. Why was he behaving that way when it was supposed to be *me* to make him feel better? Why had he taken in what I had told him so casually? He did not seem perturbed in any way yet for my part, sleep at times evaded me. I was not one to snoop around but for the first time in our relationship, I found myself snooping around his house whenever I went there. I did not know what I was looking for. It baffled me that I was taking drugs while he was not; and that my health had failed but his had not. I did find something. It did not reveal much. He had been at a Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre (VCT) ten years earlier. It was not a crime; in fact, it was encouraged for everyone. I myself had visited one just the previous year. So what was I looking for? Hoping for?

My mother was a woman who had some quiet pride about her. This showed in how she carried herself around and her manner of interaction with other people. She was a magnanimous person as well. When her daughter fell ill, she dropped everything to be there for her. She did not care that she had a bronchial attack. She took her usual medication and ensured she was available to comfort her *baby*. For nine days she made that five-kilometre trek to the hospital. The chill that

came from riding a motorbike in such weather stopped her from boarding one. She was like the shepherd who left the 99 sheep unattended to look for the one sheep that had strayed in one of Jesus' many parables. She could only rest in the knowledge that all was well with all her children. She was a leader in her church and strived to maintain that image. When she heard of rumours in the women cycles pertaining to me, she was livid with anger. She refused to believe the hearsay and went to confront the perpetrator who was a nurse at the local dispensary. How could she insinuate that her daughter had acquired the deadly virus?

At the dispensary, she had no patience for pleasantries. She went straight to the point and waited for the nurse to come clean.

"Mama Diana, don't be that way. Do you remember the last time we met at the hospital?"

Of course she did. The nurse had been nursing her ailing diabetic husband in a room not far from where her daughter was placed. He had died. Was this her way of grieving; trying to make her feel bad in order to feel better about herself? But what a cruel way to go about it! She did not say anything; she waited for her to continue.

"Well, I happened to bump into that nurse who took care of your daughter. I asked her what was wrong with Diana and she said that she had fallen prey to that killer disease. I was genuinely concerned about your girl."

"Really! When you asked me about her didn't I tell you what the doctor had told me; and that same nurse you are talking about? How come she told you a different story?"

"I don't know. Probably she was waiting for your girl herself to tell you. Do you know she has had this condition and been on medication for 12 years? Apparently, you don't know your daughter that well."

"So you felt obligated to let me know. And this is your way of doing it; gossiping behind my back?"

"Um, actually I have been meaning to let you know. I.. "

"Have a good day, Sister," she cut her short.

I was with my parents at the local hospital. My father had come for his diabetic clinic.

"Diana, tell me dear," my mother started, "Have you been taking ARVs for 12 years?"

"What?!"

"That Sister I introduced to you says so. She claims the nurse who treated you told her."

"No, Mama. It is not true." *Whoever spread that rumour about me?* I wondered.

"What I want you to do is go for an HIV test. If you are negative, I am going to face all those women who are talking about you. I will not spare them."

My father was very quiet through this exchange.

"So what if she has the virus? It came for human beings. My daughter is one, the last time I checked."

I laughed. My father made me feel real good. It felt good that someone close to my heart did not seem to mind whether I was positive or not. *Maybe one day I will pluck the courage to disclose it to him. However, my major concern is my mother. She seems to mind so much what people say. I want to come clean with her and give her some peace,* I thought.

On the day I told her, Patience was present. It was in my house. We had just finished watching a Nigerian movie, my mother's favourite. I did not care much for such movies. I just sat there through the whole of it for my mother's sake. I was glad I showed her a movie whose overriding theme was HIV/AIDS. My mother cried herself silly throughout the whole show.

"My children; always take care of yourselves. This thing is really messing up people's lives. Promise me you will. We are told in women forums to educate you. Our slogan is *Chiring'ana uyaviri. Keep silent and bury them.* If we don't tell our boys and girls about the sock for sex, we will bury them. I don't want to bury you. Make me rest easy."

"I can't make that promise, Mama," I started.

"What do you mean you can't? Don't start with me, girl! Let bronchitis kill me, not you. This is not the time for you to be your usual stubborn self. Listen to me!"

"No, I need you to listen to me, Mama. On the last day of my hospitalization, I took the test. I have the virus."

My mother stared at me. Her jaw dropped. After a long time, she appeared to have recovered herself.

"Are you going crazy? What did they do to you at that hospital?"

She searched my face. It was written all over it. No, there must be a mistake somewhere. Her daughter could not possibly have it. This happened to other people's children. There must be a mistake. She looked at Patience. *She knew!* How dare they keep it from her!

"How long have you been keeping this from me?"

"Only for a few weeks now."

My mother held her head in her palms; that was very typical of her when she was distressed. Nobody talked. Only the TV made noise that no one listened to.

"Oh! Oh! I tried to raise you right, my children. I did. Oh!"

She was lost in her own world for what seemed like an eternity to us. When she did talk, she addressed my sister.

"Please, take care of yourself. Don't be a prostitute."

That cut me like a dozen knives. I fled. In the safety of my bedroom, I cried my heart out. My mother had just called me a prostitute! What did she know about me? Had she really ever cared for me? It was the last reaction I had anticipated. I knew my mother's pride would be wounded. I also knew my mother would not take it very well. But I had never even in my wildest dream contemplated that my mother would put that label on me. I wanted to die. Patience must have sensed something wrong. She came to me and tried to comfort me. She then reported it to the mother who came to the bedroom to comfort her daughter. She said all the nice things she could think of and apologized profusely. I hushed. I could not begrudge my mother but the damage had been done. From that moment on, I withdrew from social life. I felt safe in my house, watching the TV and keeping to myself.

Soon after my friend Chemtai visited. I hugged her and sobbed dearly. Chemtai thought it was because of my predicament with Jamal. I had shared that I accidentally discovered he was already married. He had dropped off his first born at my place and gone on a work retreat. The little girl had been excited over one of my dresses, claiming that it looked just like her step-mother's.

"Honey, how would you know? Have you met her?" I asked her.

"Yes! She is at granny's home. At Dad's home," she responded.

"Oh! I see. So you and Rahma are Daddy's children... and your stepmother his wife," I probed.

"What about that small girl? She is also Daddy's girl!" the little one responded.

"Of course, honey. And the little girl," I said with a smile to the little eager face looking up to me.

Inside, I felt far from it. I wanted to die. So there was truth in rumours. He had denied it three times. I believed him and chose to ignore further rumours. I was played for a fool and played right into it; that hurt real deep.

"Oh Jamal, why? Why didn't you just tell me you were married to begin with? Oh Lord, I can't take this anymore. I appreciate the fact that you are Muslim and your faith allows you to marry up to four wives if you can treat them all equally. But surely, I deserved to know the truth from you to make an informed decision. Why couldn't you see that?" I spoke to his portrait looking down at me.

I doubled over on the couch I had slumped on as soon as the little one hopped off to play. I cried my heart out. Could it ever get worse? Misery indeed loved company. In a short span of only six months, my life had gone terribly wrong.

"We had been such a lovely couple, what went wrong? Where are you Jama... l?" I cried and rolled on the carpeted floor I had slid to. "You took me hiking, to the movies, to the concerts, to the resort beaches and national parks... And I was very happy and felt like a princess. I felt loved and secure in the sense that I belonged. I opened my heart and let you in unreservedly. You healed my wounds. My anger subsided. Before, I had been on the verge of enrolling for an anger management class or signing up to consult a shrink. Now, my bleeding heart aches so much that I am afraid a heart

attack might follow. How could you profess to love two people at ago? Is it possible to emotionally share yourself like that with more than one person? Please don't tell me it was one big lie. If only you were here now!" I was distraught.

I cried in agony until I was spent. I finally lay on the floor, sniffing.

He came back from the trip. I was ready. I treated him like before. Then at bedtime, I attacked.

"So, now that I know you have a wife and not two children but three, how do I fit in?"

He closed his eyes and slept, or pretended to, nailing the last nail in the coffin. Afterwards, he sought an audience with me to no avail. It was only when he started appearing at my work place that I decided to listen; not that it would have changed anything. He had wanted me to fall in love with him, he said by way of explanation. Then he would have me introduced to his family. He added that all his people, including his wife, were aware of his tie to me. *So I was the only fool*, I thought bitterly.

"I need you to leave now, and never come back," I was barely audible.

"What?!"

"You heard me. Don't feign ignorance."

"You don't understand, I... "

"I don't want to. Leave."

I folded my hands across my chest and glared at him. He knew how angry I could get and how much damage I was capable of inflicting. I had undergone such a transformation since that guy touched me. He had once visited my gym unannounced and could not believe how much energy and zeal I displayed in my moves. He wanted to say something but hesitated when he saw my colleagues looking at him. He turned to go. At the door, he turned to look back.

"If I can't have you, no one else will. I put my rubber stamp on you, remember?" and with that he was gone.

"What did he mean by that? Are you okay?" asked a concerned colleague.

"It's nothing, really. I am going to be fine. Thank you."

I finally found the answer to what disturbed me. I closed that chapter of my life for good. I numbed my pain and resolved that the only thing I had left was myself and my studies. I purposed to excel and graduate that year.

I had a month to my final exam for my last semester ever on campus. I worked tirelessly to give it my best shot. Caught up in all this craze of books, reports from home indicated that my father was not doing very well. His health was deteriorating at an alarming rate. He had lived with diabetes and high blood pressure for as long as I could remember. During this time, he had been rushed to hospital thrice for slipping into unconsciousness. On this particular day, my alarmed mother called me. She wanted me to get home as soon as possible. I hopped onto a motorbike and proceeded home. I sensed despair in my mother's voice. My mother implored me to join her in taking my father to a different hospital for the local one was treating him for malaria yet the test result had been negative. He had come home on a sick leave. I took my father to the famous Aga Khan Hospital. It was a reputed private hospital. By this time, he was spitting like a woman in the family way. My Mom and brother had taken him earlier on in the day to a doctor in a referral hospital. The doctor examined him and implied that my father was not that sick. He however told them to go back on Monday for him (the doctor) to run some tests on Dad. It was Saturday.

"Huyu mzee anatembea hivi ndiye mnasema ni mgonjwa sana?" he joked. Is this walking man the one you claim to be very sick?

They had been dissatisfied and sought a second opinion. When I joined them, we were also joined by Patience. At Aga Khan, our father was examined by a general practitioner who requested for several lab tests. The results were not encouraging: my father's kidneys had failed and the condition at that point was irreversible. His creatinine level was above 7,000. The medics marvelled that my father was in a position to walk with such a high toxicity in his body. He was admitted and operated on that very night, and a catheter inserted for dialysis that commenced right away. Our mother stayed behind for the night. He stayed in the ward for four days after which he was discharged. We kept taking him back thrice every week for dialysis. This was not enough but we were stretched on finances. After two weeks, a friendly doctor advised us to have a referral to a public teaching and referral hospital to cut down on expenses. We heeded. We also organized for a mini-

fundraising for our father's national health insurer only paid 2,300 shillings out of his costly dialysis expenses. By this time, we had exhausted our loaning options.

The only referral hospital with that kind of facility was about four hours away. We usually spent the better part of the day travelling. On arrival, my father would be admitted. The doctor would prescribe the medication needed and we would go round chemists looking for it. Finally, at night we would sit by his bed as the dialysis machine ran. I kept offering my father the tin he spat in at intervals. It had been offered him at Aga Khan. The spit stank like hell. I dared not close my eyes; I had seen an acquaintance's father die right there. I sat there, looking at my dad. He was my icon, the one who had always insisted that I associate with people of my calibre. I was at a very tender age so I looked up that word in a dictionary. My father was my world in my formative years. There had followed a period of turbulence and uncertainty. There was once when I dated a police constable. It was during my visit to my father three years after high school. The guy in question was from Meru. I tried to be as discreet as I could. However, I should have known better: I was the daughter of a Senior Sergeant, living in a police estate and surrounded by cops. When the truth came out, my father beat me almost to pulp. He did not use the cane: he gave me mighty blows on my head. I tried to duck but most of them landed on me. A precious watch he treasured which he had received as a gift from an Indian friend snapped and fell at my feet. I picked it up amidst the blows and handed him, hoping to pacify his anger.

"Here, your watch, Daddy."

My father calmly picked it up, put it on the table and resumed the blows. It was the first time ever in my life that he hit me; and the last. Later, he demanded for a two-page apology he was going to file. The young man was transferred to God-knows-where. It was an incident I never forgot.

Afterwards, I got real scared of even just answering a hello from my admirers. And they were many. On one such occasion, I was in town with my parents. My father was in front, I was in the middle and my mother at the rear. A young man who appeared smitten by my beauty stepped up to us. My father had stopped to talk to somebody, making everybody stop. The young man boldly looked me in the eye, right under my parents' noses, and said hello. I did not know how to behave. My mother sprang into action. She looked at the youth spitefully, as if he was a dangerous insect

that needed to be squashed. Then, she did what seemed to me as preposterous: she grabbed me from behind and roughly pushed me forward.

"Genda!" *Move!*

"Diana, Mummy, you can go to sleep my child," my father brought me to the present.

One day on my usual permission trips to my boss's office, she blurted out:

"Diana, I am just wondering. Are you the only child in that home?"

How could I make her understand that I was the only one whose circumstances were such that I could take care of my father? I chose to remain silent. Had she been allowed to, my boss would have learnt that only three of us lived in our county. My sister was heavy with child and sickly while my brother was in a private institution that required him to report to work first before proceeding to hospital after he had attended to his duties in case he fell sick. Asking for permission would mean taking our father to hospital by four in the evening. However, permission would be for that evening only and since it took two days to get our father served, he could never make it. My eldest brother was in Nairobi while the rest were in college or high school with the youngest one in Class Five. Permission was granted. I sighed with relief. Of late, it was only my father and I. The Eldoret chill had proved too much for my mother whose health had deteriorated. At one point, I had a hard time attending to both my parents. I had come from our usual trip with my father to find my mother very sick.

"Have you been to hospital?"

"Yes, I went to the dispensary. I was given ventolyn and amoxylin. I don't seem to get better, though."

She was a pretty bad sight. I called in my uncle's wife and requested her to stay with my father. The only other person in the home was the ten-year old *baby* of the family. My heart melted when the lady said she would stay and look after dad. I called my work place and requested for an extra day, took my mother to hospital and listened pensively as the doctor talked of admitting her. I also called the sickly Patience and told her to try her best to check on our father. My mother was still in hospital when I took my father to his next dialysis. When we came back, he insisted on seeing

her so I begged the security to allow us in. It was past visiting hours. They must have sympathised with my situation for they allowed me to wheel him upstairs to see my Mama. As I wheeled him, I cried silently while attempting to appear normal in my conversation; my father could not see my tears. I looked at my parents conversing and asked God to intervene. Why did it seem that He had abandoned us? Only last year, I had buried my paternal grandmother. My father had been devastated. Granny was the only anchor he had known for his father had died young of diabetes. He himself had been ten. His mother had been pregnant with my youngest uncle. I was equally shattered. In my early years, I had often sought refuge in her. We were very close. I was named after her own mother, taking on both her names. With a heavy heart, I had requested the benevolent scheme for a bus to transport my granny to her final resting place. Six months later, I was back at the same scheme for the bus. This time, it was for my oldest uncle who had succumbed to the complications of diabetes. My cousins had begged me to go for the bus. I shuddered at the prospect of going there, again. I was greatly relieved when my mother was discharged. Other good things were in store for us. The then Cabinet Secretary of Health, Professor Anyang Nyong'o, donated dialysis kits to Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Teaching and Referral Hospital. Now, my trips with my parents were only forty minutes away.

I went back to college with a lighter heart for that final semester. I had forgotten all about books for two reasons: I was too pre-occupied with death and dying, owing to my condition, and my father's illness. My Psychology lecturer had taught me in the Human Growth and Development course that it was a stage affecting people above 64 years. I was only barely half that age but could not help obsessing over it. What happened to someone when he or she died? The Christians and Muslims concurred that a person went to either paradise or hell. The Christians cited the example illustrated at the cross when one thief asked Him to save Himself and save them too but the other begged for forgiveness. He begged Jesus to remember him in paradise. Jesus assured him that he would be with Him in paradise that evening. Yet, the Jehovah's Witnesses disputed this. They believed when people died, they stopped existing until that day that Jehovah would bring them back to life after re-creating the earth. I had just joined this Christian sect. I did not know what to accept but all I knew was that I obsessed over death. In the novel, *The Greatest Miracle in the World* by Og Mandino, the rag picker addresses the protagonist by insinuating that to live is better than to die. I would have given anything to know the answer for me to make a decisive decision

on my life. For the first time, I found myself struggling with last minute assignments. I knew I could have done better.

'We define ourselves by our actions. But it doesn't mean we have to live by our own definition'. I could not help remembering this piece of advice from a TV series titled Grey's anatomy. We cannot always shake the mistakes of our past... but we can get up and join in the good fight... for change. Shonda Rhimes' advice would stick with me for a long time to come. I was grateful for watching that particular episode.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ENIGMA

Since my childhood days, I had been mesmerised by Bible stories. I listened as my mother narrated them to me and preferred going to heaven during those moments. I did not want to wait. My mother talked me out of this kind of thinking and succeeded as I grew older. I did a short stint at a Bible school in my final two years of Primary Education. In high school, I enrolled in the Christian Union Club and remained loyal until issues of my identity came up. As a young adult, I left my Quakers Church for the Seventh Day Adventist faith. With time, however, life happened to me and I stopped practising the Christian faith altogether. I stayed away for a long time.

After my break-up with Jamal, I started reading the novel that I picked at my sister's place, *The Greatest Miracle in the World*. It was a novel written by Og Mandino, based on his true life story. I created time for it as I juggled my work with studies. It was most captivating for me. I found myself moving back into time to when I was in high school and the years after, at home. I could not help turning another page. By the third day, I was almost done. I paused when I came to this part where I was instructed to be committed to reading it every day for the next a hundred days. I was also to wear a white wisp of cloth on my sleeve during this time.

When I was ready, I started reading it. It was the most amazing experience ever for me, in context and out of context. The paragraphs that lay before me gave me such a sense of peace as I had never experienced before. I was in God's presence. I would be reading and see glitters on those pages. I felt empowered and for the first time ever since I was born, I understood the meaning of life and my purpose in that life. Even the looming exams were no longer an issue to me. I trusted Him and knew all was going to be well. Strange things started happening to me. I always found help in all my endeavours even where I was least expecting it. It was as if everything was aligning itself for my successes, small and big ones.

This was at a time when my life was rocky. I hardly had enough to go by on day-to-day basis. I knew I was living below the poverty line, on less than a dollar a day. On around three occasions, God took care of me in a very personal way. I visited the bank for my pay. It was past the fifth day

of the month. When I got into the ATM booth, I picked a fifty-shilling note from the floor. It was wet.

"Wow! Thank you God," I rejoiced. "I did not have a single shilling on me. I was going to sleep hungry if I did not find money in my account."

As I had feared, there was no money. Yet, I did not despair like before. I looked at the heavens, gave thanks again and went to buy a bun which I ate with black tea for supper. I was careful to save a few shillings for the next few days.

After that encounter, I did have two others on the following two consecutive days. It was always a wet fifty-shilling note. On the fourth day however, I did not pick any money; my salary was waiting for me in my bank account, in full. There were no ghost deductions. My joy knew no bounds. I was too afraid to share that experience with anyone. My fear was that no one might understand or appreciate it like I did. Worse still, I did not want someone planting any doubt in my mind hence spoiling my miracle.

"I am in Your presence dear God; I hope it is forever. Thank you for revealing Yourself to me in a most personal way," I praised Him.

This experience was timely. I was thankful that I realised I had been concerning myself mostly with things that did not matter much. I was the greatest miracle in the world, and could help others feel that way too. I did not have to harbour any more anger inside me. I forgave all the men who had wronged me and prayed for their deliverance. I was grateful that God made me come across Mandino's book.

It was with a heavy heart that I received news of the death of my class representative on reporting back to the university. He died of meningitis attack. This was something I would have celebrated in my former state of mind, but not now. After several years, I found myself wondering what became of my high school deputy principal.

On the first Saturday of my first week at campus, I received a phone call. It was a number I had not saved.

"Yes?"

"Diana! Imagine Jamal is no more!" a voice at the other end sobbed.

I did not feel anything; and that troubled me. I could not feel sad, cry nor sigh with relief. Involuntarily, Jamal's parting words at our break up came back flooding my mind and haunting me. I had succeeded in blocking them for the past one month. What was happening to me?

"Cancel! Cancel! Cancel! Cancel! Cancel!" I told myself.

Who was that woman calling me?

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" came the voice.

"Yes. Who is calling, please?" I enquired.

"It is Jamal's wife. He told me so much about you that I felt you ought to know. We are burying him today; do you think you can make it? Mesaid is not doing very well and I thought since you lived with her before, you could help soothe her."

Could I bear seeing him again, even though in death? He had made me promise to bury him if he died before me. But how had he died? He was in excellent health the last time I saw him. When I enquired about this, I was told that he had been killed in a road accident. He alighted from a shuttle to buy some water to drink. As he crossed the road to get back, an oncoming vehicle hit him, flinging him off the road and killing him instantly.

"Let the dead bury the dead."

I looked wildly about me. Who had said that? I was sure a voice had said it to me, yet there was no one looking at me right now. Everybody was buried in books. In fact, nobody seemed to have heard it. Was my mind playing tricks on me? I sent my condolences, excused myself and hung up.

That night, in the safety of my bed, I prayed. I asked for forgiveness for anything I might have done wrong and slept like a babe.

CHAPTER TEN

A NEW DAWN

In my Fourth Year, I was hardly in class that second semester. I was studying while preparing for the second semester Third Year exams as well. My faithful friend took notes and photocopied them for me. I would hop onto a motorbike, move from the town campus to the Main Campus to sit for an exam, and come back to join my colleagues while I tried to catch up with what they had been up to. It was a crazy schedule.

"I feel for you dear. Will you graduate with us?" a notoriously noisy classmate once asked me.

I chose to ignore her. One day, I was on the Main Campus at around 10 o'clock. My phone rang for a long time. I did not answer it; I was busy preparing for an afternoon exam. When it rang again I decided to check who it was. Chemtai was calling. I received it immediately. My friend reliably told me that a certain lecturer was bringing a CAT at 11 o'clock that day. I tensed. I had never had time to look at that course! I mounted a motor bike and went through the notes on the bouncing motor bike. The short-cut was a rough road. When I got to the town campus, I went straight to the venue and read some more. I saw a man walk in with a pile of papers; I took him to be the course lecturer. I put away my stuff and waited. Soon, I was done and on my way back to the Main Campus. I had been the first to submit my answer script. I knew time was of essence. I now had less than two hours to prepare for the afternoon exam. There was no time for lunch. I bought myself some sweets that I kept pushing into my mouth even during exams. I wanted to keep hunger at bay. After a gruelling three hours, I handed my paper in and made to leave the lecture hall. I was stopped by my Head of Department.

"Do you know this guy?" he asked, gesturing to a tall gentleman at his side.

"No, Doc," I responded.

"That is interesting, because you are going to sit his paper tomorrow. Go."

I left. I was still thinking about it. I had sat for papers handed me by people I had never seen before but what was I to do? If I had a chance of graduating that year with my class, that exam was my best shot. I verified that what was offered were the courses I had done so it did not worry me that completely different people were going to examine me. Besides, I had collected material from the

regular students and done the necessary preparation. I prayed for good health during those trying moments. As I walked back to the town campus, I thought about what my Head of Department had put me through sometimes back. When I had reported back to the university following my discharge from hospital, I had gone to that lecturer with my medical report. If he had said he was not going to re-issue his CAT to absentee students, I knew he meant it. He was a no-nonsense person. I needed him to prove that at the time he had given out his CAT I had indeed been on a hospital bed. However, he did not even look at the report. Instead, he told me to find out from two of my colleagues what he required of us. Little did I know I was going to be heartbroken! My colleagues informed me that the lecturer insisted that I was never sick at the time I claimed to be.

"You don't know Diana! That girl has been scheming for me. Don't joke with her. She is not what she seems to be. She is very clever and dangerous," it was alleged the lecturer had stated even when they persisted that I had been sick.

I had gone to my friend, Chemtai, reported this and broken down. How could that lecturer think of me in such a manner? Had I ever been unprofessional in our interaction? I had encountered him before on limited occasions. I searched for answers but there were none. I was grateful to him nevertheless for giving me and my two colleagues a take-away CAT. Later at the end of that year, I met this lecturer again in his office. I was clearing from the university.

"Hey, Diana! How are you today?"

"I am fine thank you, Doc."

"What brings you here?"

"I am clearing with the university, Sir."

"Really!"

He turned to his secretary and asked him to confirm that I had been cleared as far as exams were concerned. He confirmed it. The lecturer then turned to me. He offered his hand for a handshake and congratulated me.

"Tell me one thing though, why did you keep postponing your exams? Just be honest."

I could tell that this guy had already committed to the Machiavellian school of thought-he was doubtful and wary of anything I was bound to say. I hoped after hearing me out, he would realize how wrong he had been about me.

"Sir, I had fee arrears. I had some people who encroached themselves on my payslip which made it difficult for me to access loans, Sir. I wrote to the university several times begging for exams but apart from two occasions, I was turned down."

"If you say so. I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, Doc."

I was happy when I cleared the Third Year exams, well, almost cleared. I was left with only one exam for the Project Appraisal course which I was to sit for when it was offered again. The exam was on the same day as my Fourth Year final exams. I did everything I could to make sure I studied and revised well. I did not behave the way I had done in high school. I knew that sleep was an important component for the well-being of my brain. I slept by 9 o'clock and was up by 4 o'clock in the morning. God had been good to me. I had cleared my outstanding fee balance; thanks to my employer and an unexpected grant.

"Safaricom calling... who am I speaking to?" a voice said at the other end.

Who did *they* expect to have picked their call?

"I am Diana," I answered guardedly.

"On behalf of the Kenya Safaricom promotion, I am pleased to inform you that you have won a million Kenya shillings. You are our millionaire from Mombasa region; don't hang up for we will let you know of how to claim your prize in a moment..."

Was it a joke? A prank call? I blinked several times; that was about all I could do. Scammers! It hit me like a thunderbolt. No... the number looked genuine. But so had the other one that had called me not long ago. I had talked to a man on social media who claimed to be from the UK. How could I doubt him when his country code matched the UK one on Google? After several phone calls, he claimed to have sent me a gift for my birthday-an ipad, a laptop and a card. All I had to do was to

claim it from a certain Alpha Courier Services. But alas! Before I did, two successive Kenyan lines called, confirming they had my gift but there was a problem.

"What problem?" I asked.

"Did you inform your sender that no cash is allowed in the parcel?" they queried.

"He didn't mention it," I returned.

"Well, the scan reveals the parcel has a thousand Sterling Great Britain pounds. This is a very serious offence, don't you people know?"

I didn't. I told them so.

"You would be required to pay a hefty fine under normal circumstances. However, we can let you off the hook with a few shillings. *Tusaidiane. Let's help each other,*" came the voice.

"How much?" I asked.

"A hundred dollars," was the response. "We are going to send you a *paybill* number. Your parcel will be delivered to you once you have wired the money," the voice concluded.

"Okay; but I am bringing the money to you in person. Where are you located?" I asked.

"At the Moi International Airport in Mombasa."

"You are lucky," the airport officials informed me. "Never fall prey to their game," they warned.

They did not exist, and had switched off their lines.

"Hello! Hello!"

"I am still here..." I said softly.

This time however, it turned out to be a genuine call.

When I cleared my outstanding fee balance, all I had to do was to study and sit for exams. In the right frame of mind, I sat for my final exams. My father called the previous night to wish me success and let me know he was not doing too badly.

Assured, I sailed through exams. I was thankful that I finally knew how to study and prepare for exams. A book on tests had done this for me. I had retrieved it from amongst my father's things, in conjunction with another book, *Success through a Positive Mental Attitude* by Napoleon Hill and Clement Stone. The later book managed to convince me that I could accomplish anything as long as I set my mind on it. The limit could only be in my mind.

I packed my belongings jovially on the last day. Chemtai and I went round hugging friends and saying goodbye with tears in our eyes. We knew chances were we would never meet again. A certain Literature lecturer had always joked about this in class and implored us to do something together for our remembrance. We had thought the parting day was so removed from us, now here we were. Afterwards, we went to the stage together and then parted ways. We promised to stay in touch.

It was two weeks to graduation. It had been postponed to fit into the Chancellor's itinerary. The Chancellor was a very busy man: he was the President of the Republic of Kenya. I was still running to and from the university, tracking some missing marks. I had five missing CAT results! The exam results were out, including the one I had sat for in another campus two counties away. A colleague offered then to put me up for the night when I went to sit for it but I neither wanted to impose nor feel caged. I checked into a guest house where I requested for a self-contained room. As I was doing my last minute revision, there was a blackout without a backup. My mind did what it did best in such circumstances - it shut down. A power outage was the last thing I needed. I slept and hoped against hope that when I awoke, power would be back. My alarm sounded at exactly 3 o'clock. I awoke instantly. I turned over, switched it off and kicked back the warm bedding. I did a cold bath and busied myself with the revision.

By 6 o'clock, I was ready for breakfast. How was I to get to the campus in this strange town? With a thudding heart, I began the daunting task of asking around. Time was ticking. It must have taken only a few minutes but it felt like forever. At 7 o'clock, I was at the venue with a whole two hours to revise my work. I thanked my Silent Partner and checked that the calculator was working. Nothing should go wrong. Some of my colleagues had failed in this particular exam, I was aware of what was at stake.

Then the exam was issued. I began by testing the calculator. *Oh, no! Dear God!* I cried silently. *This cannot be happening!* I slumped over my seat with my head in my hands. The course lecturer came over to me and rescued me by offering his own calculator. Talk of the Good Samaritan. After three hours I handed in the paper, secure in the knowledge that I had done my best. Now it seemed so far away though only three months had elapsed...

That Friday, my father called. He wanted to know whether I was still graduating. My parents had come round to respecting my choice.

"Yes Dad. I checked with the faculty. I am graduating with honours!"

"Good. You know I am too sick to attend, right? I will be here at home, waiting for you. I am going to throw you a party for a job well done."

"Yes, father. Thank you."

On Saturday, my mother called. I had just finished putting my clothes out to dry.

"Yes Momma?"

"Come and see how your father is behaving! Come as quick as you can."

I just sat there. I did not move. I remembered the last time I took my father for dialysis: it had been three days ago. He was in intense pain. His body ached, around the part where kidneys are located. This man I had revered as a child, loathed as a teenager and become friends with in my later years cried. This was the first time I ever saw him cry. It hurt me so bad that I went to hide in a slightly shielded part of that room and let the tears come out freely. I was overwhelmed with emotion. I was a staunch believer in God, so were my parents. Where was He now? I prayed amidst my sobs.

"Dear God, Father Almighty, forgive us our sins. We have lost the way, knowingly and unknowingly. Please, remember us. Father, I am crying to you right now for you to heal my father. I know you can, if it is in your will. He has suffered enough. You have all the power, just heal him please, or take him. Don't let him go on suffering like this any longer. We are human beings; we can only take so much. Above all, let your will be done and not mine. It is in Jesus' name I pray and believe. Amen."

A nurse found me and comforted me. He told me I was to be strong and let the doctors and God do their work.

"You have to be there for your father, dear. He is calling for you right now."

I went to find my father.

"Mummy, clip my nails."

I did it with my eyes cast down for fear that he would see my tears. I wept for him. My heart also bled for the sheer fact that this dialysis might be the last one in a long time. We had exhausted our financial account and needed to source for funds quickly for the next dialysis which was just four days away. I had no idea how we would pull it off this time round. My father's call for the doctor to request for something for the pain brought me out of my turbulent world of thoughts.

The phone shook me out of my reverie. My mother was almost frantic in her call for me. I looked for a taxi and headed home. I found him writhing in agony from side to side. His face had turned an ashen greyish blue. And those eyes that looked at me were very white. His greetings were not his usual lines.

"I am dying, Diana," he stated in a matter- of- fact tone.

No, he could not die.

"No, you are not dying, *Fathee*," I addressed him by our favourite Kenyan slang we had stuck with.

"I tell you I am dying!"

I put a sweet into his mouth. Maybe his sugar level had dropped dangerously low. I then teamed up with my youngest brother and the taxi driver and bundled dad into the waiting taxi. He could not walk. I sat in the front seat with the driver. My mother and brother sat beside my father. Off we zoomed.

All the while, my father groaned that he was dying. He ordered us to roll down the windows. He felt hot. We could not; the windows were already down. I twisted in my seat to face him and held

his hand to encourage him. My mother and brother pinned him down so he could not hurt himself from all his writhing.

"Are we there?" he asked.

"Almost; Dad."

I lied and hated myself for it. This was the second time he asked since we left home moments ago. He squeezed my hand and then fell silent. I kept turning back and staring at him. Upon inquiry, the weary youth reported to Mama that dad was sleeping. My mother's position did not accord her a better view. But I was troubled. The eyes I saw were neither closed nor blinking; they were sort of dilated and facing the wrong way.

He is in a comma. He must be in a comma. We are almost there. He is going to be in good hands soon. He cannot die. Not now. We need him. We are still very young! He cannot die now. I am not yet ready to lose another father. I have very many young siblings who need him, I told myself.

Once we got inside the hospital, my brother and I had no time to go looking for a wheelchair as directed by a certain nurse. We carried our now very heavy father to the consultation room. The doctor requested the other patient to step out for a moment. Our mother had remained in the car, crying softly. We defied her when she told us that all the doctors in the world could not save our father.

"Baba Leshau, please look at my dad."

The doctor was a parent in my school. He examined my father for quite a while, looking for any sign of life in him, and then shook his head. When he looked at the two pairs of hopeful eyes looking up to him, he sat down and held his head in his hands.

"There is nothing I can do madam. He is gone."

My brother's tears streamed silently down his face. I could not cry. I caressed my father's head as I talked to him while making him more comfortable. I buttoned his shirt and yanked up his trousers that had gone down a little too much. It had not occurred to us to look for his belt. Then I kissed his forehead and watched as the coroner wheeled him away...

Exactly two weeks later on my graduation day, I felt the way I had felt at my father's funeral: in a movie where I was an observer. I stood like an automaton when my name was called out and heard without comprehending when the President gave us the power to read and do all that appertained to that degree. In the party back home, there was no celebration from me and my siblings, no matter how much those in attendance tried to make us liven up. Our father's fresh grave was sitting right outside the door, on the right side of whoever entered the gate to the homestead.

Something snapped in me. I could no longer stay at home. I started planning on how to find the other family and see what became of it. I was full of expectation. I would do all I could to fit in with the Digo culture. They were my people; my father's people. They welcomed me with mixed feelings. I could tell who wanted me around or not by looking into their faces and eyes. I was a very good observer, almost childlike. My grandmother wanted to get to know me. As for the rest, they would be a part of my life if I converted to the Islamic faith. What they did not know was that I had been put through it by Jamal on the day he asked me to marry him. I came from my bath to find his sitting room full of men in kaftans. They made me denounce Christianity and embrace Islam; then he gave me the name *Shamsa* that meant *the Sun*. I reverted to my original faith with the end of our relationship. I did not enlighten them on my encounter with Islam. My uncle was particularly loud. I looked at his wagging finger:

"Let no-one deceive you. If you don't want to be alienated and discriminated against at family events, you should convert to Islam. Otherwise, it is going to be very tough on you."

I shifted my gaze to my very young female cousins; most of them were clutching babies. They were married. I shuddered as I pondered what life they had been reduced to and worse still, the fact that they didn't know any better. I was as courteous as possible in dealing with them for the few days I was around them even when I distinctly heard them whispering behind my back *nimvyele* meaning that I was old. They could not understand why I was still single and childless. I was in my thirties. I finally went my separate way. I purposed to visit my granny whenever I could.

"Can I ever date again?" I must have asked myself a million times. "Maybe if I went on-line... "

There followed a brief period of on-line dating when my loneliness became overbearing. I could not date in the conventional manner, owing to my status. I met a young Congolese man I felt comfortable with, disclosing my status to him from the safety of my laptop. He did not mind; a

few months later, he left his country and joined me. He was a very handsome, God-fearing man. He undertook to prove to me that he was negative but loved me just the way I was, baggage and all. I was grateful to have him in my life. I had not dated anyone since my ordeal with Jamal. I took my medication as prescribed, exercised and took care of my nutrition. Before this young man joined me, I took a lab test for the viral load which indicated I was undetectable: the virus was not detected by the test. It had been fully suppressed. I had read on Google that for such a person with my status, when the viral load was undetectable one could not infect anyone: something that was abbreviated as U=U (Undetectable=Untransmittable). Besides, I did not engage in carnal knowledge for as long as I was single so when I fed Tim with this information, he opted not to use any protection for as long as this state of affairs remained.

One and a half years down the line, a pregnancy occurred. Oh boy, weren't we jubilant! We were very excited at the prospect of raising a child together. Tim was particularly proud, kissing the still flat belly at every opportunity. He had been very insecure in the relationship before the pregnancy for try as much as he could to show how much he loved me, I could never respond in kind. I knew I was hurting his feelings and prayed daily to God to intervene and make me reciprocate his love. However, I could not bring myself to fall in love with this amazing man that God had placed in my life. Falling in love was illogical; it just happened. No amount of prayer or willpower could bring it about. I should have known better. All I could do was to assure him of my love but he demanded more which I could not give.

It was five days since our wonderful discovery. I was seven weeks pregnant. I developed a backache and slight spotting. Tim rushed me to hospital. The scan was not promising; the pregnancy was detached on one side of the uterus. The medics called it a threatened abortion. After all interventions failed, the gynaecological surgeon and his team operated on me. A further investigation revealed no anomalies: it had just happened. Tim and I did not know how to grieve after this loss. I was angry I had lost my male baby while he was distrustful of me. He accused me of taking medicine to terminate the pregnancy because according to him, I did not love him enough. Finally, the only logical thing for us to do was to separate.

I nursed my aching heart for a long time; grieving for the much anticipated but departed child we had named Bahati. We had felt lucky to be parents, my condition notwithstanding, hence the choice of the name.

A year after our break-up, Tim informed me on social media about another child he was expecting. I was happy for him, especially when I learnt he was still free of the virus. We remained friends. As for me, I resolved to live my life to the fullest. I appreciated it every single day and thanked God for a second chance at life.

"Mama, will you read me a story?" queried the beautiful wide-eyed mulatto girl, interrupting my thoughts and looking earnestly into my eyes.

"Of course, my princess," I quipped.

I looked down at the lesson plans I had been making for the following day. They could wait; my daughter came first. I was happy I had followed through the adoption process. This bundle of joy so filled my life with joy that I did not want for anything else.

"I will live for her today; and maybe tomorrow... tomorrow..." I vowed.

As I kissed the sleeping beauty and tucked her in, I wandered to my earlier thoughts.

"Well dad, I went to the university, again, and again," I murmured and softly closed the door behind me.

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