

# THE APPLICATIONS

By

**B.Karanja Wa Njama**

Kandle saw the strange look in her eyes and imperceptibly ordered his siblings from the room with a twitch of his head. They left in silence. Fi and Jerry-Mouse knew everything about the loan and were part of their father's persistent campaign to extract the necessary approval from their mother. It was needed to finish paying for the BuruBuru house and start building the family residence in Thome.

Alone once again, Kandle took his mother's hand, leading her into the sitting room like a small girl, bopping his head all the while.

'Run DMC,' Kandle said. 'That is the rallying cry for all single women, Mum. Run DMC. Bust A Move. Can apply to you...'

'I remember when you were just a boy ... you would cry when you woke up to a frying breakfast thinking it was the sound of rain. Even now you still hate breakfast ...'

'... Run DMC also applies to married women who need to support their husbands,' Kandle said with some alarm, his head pausing in mid-bop.

'Mum! Sign the forms. Please. Look around you. BuruBuru isn't what it used to be.'

'Is your Dad the unseen head of this household? ~umenyerere m~uno when you get married?' Mrs. Karoki read pointing at the framed words on the wall.

'You are the only one who can do this. You do not have any loans and the bank loves you. Can't you see we have to leave?'

'I will not help him pay for his projects, even this house. Even the house in Thoome I will not be part of it. Caitani! R~iu no ~urathie w~ira? Waregire gweha ny~umba n~ik~i?' And you Kandle? What about your job? When are you moving to your own place?

'Yeah, still in PR. That B.S. factor that any serious kampuni in Kenya has to have,' he muttered. A new track he liked, Jam On It, came on so the head bop developed into a shoulder jig and his mother's eyes lit up in excitement.

'Arr yu travl'in on the rightr trav'lin trav'lin. Arr you travl'in on the rightr trav'lin trav'lin. Arr you trav'lin on the rightr road,' she wailed. Kandle decided to try and get his mum to sign the loan forms another time.

He would have to face his father that evening.

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At Buru Buru Primary School where she taught, no one really minded the new and improved Mrs. Karoki after a month or two. She stopped going to school to teach and only appeared now and then to wander around the empty school fields, talking to the crows and the kites that wheeled in the sky. When it rained she could be found sitting in empty classrooms in the evening, hours after the children had left.

This went on till a new headmaster was appointed to the school under the new Board of Education Application Rules and he chased her away from the school. He also declined to forward her name to the Ministry of Education when they asked for a new salary roster. An efficient cog at the Ministry however automatically added her name to the list, tsk tsk-ing with annoyance at the oversight. Karoki Faith he wrote, and Mrs. Karoki

continued to draw a salary for exactly five years, when she achieved the optional retirement age of 50 and got her pension. Mr Karoki bribed several individuals for the pension to be paid out. Mrs Karoki did not bother with the money for the next two years. Money was one of the foreign and hostile smells around her.

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Mrs. Karoki's sisters had been receiving reports about her state of mind for months before they decided to take action. Those were desperate days in Kenya, and, like many middle-class Kenyans, they opted not to 'see' certain insanities. It was hoped that insanity unvarnished by attention would allow an easy return to normalcy. When it became clear that Mrs. Karoki was not going through a momentary lapse, they decided to call a family council. Of the sisters, only the second born, Grace, was still living with a man. First born, Mrs. Hannah Macharia and last-born, Beth were in various degrees of separation from their men and could understand the snarl in their sister's mind. They had succumbed themselves to a state of waking up and not enjoying the sun on your face in the morning. Mrs. Macharia and Beth were not unfamiliar to the fact that a woman could lose hope. But it offended them to the marrow that a woman could give up. They believed a woman could walk through a brick wall. Resignation was a feature of men.

Mrs. Karoki's three sisters summoned her to their childhood home in Matuko village in Maragua. Their step-sister, Tabiza (pronounced Tabeetha), once their father's favorite, was not invited. They arrived in two cars: Mrs. Karoki and Beth in a wine red 190 Mercedes and Mrs. Hannah Macharia and Grace in a twin cab Hilux. The black wire-meshed metal gate, the first of its kind in the village, had faded to a dull brown. It still looked as strong as ever, as resolute as their father, even in his rusty years. Mrs. Macharia made sure she drove in first; after all she was the first born. She made a spectacle by revving the 4 by 4 vehicle again and again, as if to awaken the still countryside.

The house was one of the first stone homes in Muranga district and had aged well. On the left was a small orchard which produced hard little green mangos and small sour green lemons. Their father was buried in the small orchard, under graying fruit trees, some of them more than fifty years old. All the privileged isolation of the homestead, where their father had once entertained Scottish missionaries, had changed. Hutted homesteads had cropped up everywhere.

'Muranga is starting to look like Kafete. People everywhere,' Mrs. Macharia observed once they got out of the cars. The long rains had just ended and the green of the countryside was fierce. The only thing that had not changed was the small nearby forest on the other side of the homestead.

Once they were received by Wanjiku, the old limping woman who now took care of the homestead, the sisters cooked like they always had. Mrs. Hannah Macharia was all instruction, Grace lit the fire blowing through an old brass pipe and Beth peeled potatoes and carrots and shelled the peas. Mrs. Karoki ignored these rites. As everyone went about their business she studied the rafters in the small hut that they were all in. No one told her they were waiting for her to get one of the chickens that were fluffing and rooting around in the red dust outside. If Tabiza had been invited she would have been a second pair of

idle hands. Her role back in their girlhood had been to take care of her father's foibles: heating his tea, cleaning his pipe, trimming his whiskers, and listening to him hold forth. The women spoke about many things as they worked - past acquaintances, the state of Matuko Girls Secondary School, and the effects of the new Maragua dam on the area. Sleeves were rolled, stockings surreptitiously tucked away and old headscarves tied around heads. Mrs. Macharia removed her shoes but changed her mind about walking around barefoot. In the midst of all the activity and after a suitable period they started on what had brought them back home. Mrs. Macharia began with a vague edict built on common experience.

'Sister,' she said to Mrs. Karoki as the others looked on and nodded. *Ihiga riega r̄itiringanaga na th̄io njega.* A good millstone does not meet a good miller. Good husband and good wife seldom meet. Your husband is a good man. Mrs. Karoki took this as an insult. By default, what her sister had said was that she was a bad wife by virtue of having a good husband. A good man is not necessarily a good husband, Mrs. Macharia tried to explain. At least he was financially responsible and the Karoki family had never lacked for anything. Beth saw that Mrs. Karoki was not persuaded by these subtleties. The good intentions of the sisters were in doubt. Mrs. Karoki surprised them all by bursting into giggles. Beth who had been stirring vigorously over the pot was enshrouded with steam. Mrs. Karoki pointed at the halo-effect around her sister saying: ' *Uhana mami t̄ūi wainam̄ir̄ira nȳunḡu-in̄i.* Mungu asifiwe.' You look so much like mum when you bend over the pot. God bless.

With this the sisters remained quiet for a while till Grace spoke.

'*W̄ui, W̄ui. Ngai kāi meciria n̄i moru-̄i.* Meciria. Thoughts, thoughts. Too many thoughts ...' Too many thoughts are dangerous. Like many second-borns she was ignored. After Grace, or rather Mrs. Nkendi, married a Meru man the sisters took their father's cue and ignored her ambitions and life choices.

'Things don't always go as we want them to. Maundu riimwe nimathukaga,' Beth tried to restart Mrs. Macharia's efforts to get the council underway.

'Thoughts ... things of the world ... whatever. Whatever you call them. It is foolishness to call it an illness...madness ... like some people in our family are calling our sister's problem.' Mrs. Macharia flashed Beth a warning look. They had agreed to avoid any references to mental health.

'What I'm saying is that I understand what our sister, Faith ...' Mrs. Karoki smiled vacantly at the use of her girlhood name, '... is doing. At least some of it... it doesn't matter what anyone says ... even us who don't understand. She'll come and explain once she thinks the time is right,' Beth said with a rushed sigh.

Beth was approaching forty and after three children, still held the plump, dimply clean dark prettiness of her youth. She was not given to unnecessary acts of divulgence and none of the sisters knew what had really happened to her marriage. The broad strokes, they knew, were that her last child, a boy, had been sired by her boss. A white man. Now they listened.