

TRANSITIONS

by

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Someone is yelling and banging at the door.

“Kamau! Kamau!”

My dad? Ai? Kwani what’s happened? Who wants my dead dad?

The door opens and out comes a burly figure, dressed in a magnificent navy blue uniform. A cap with embroidered golden wings sits on the fat round face.

“Kamau! The captain and the rest of the crew are all in the Crew Coach downstairs...waiting for you!”

Ohh-o! Someone is addressing me by my surname! And it’s the Flight Purser, boss of any Inflight Crew, who is doing all that yelling.

It’s also 0500 hrs GMT, and exactly two hours before our flight back to Nairobi takes off. In twenty minutes time, I should be all showered and dressed up and flashing a permanent 10,000 watts smile - at least - at a crew of passengers of very different degrees of sophistication and persuasions, onboard flight KQ 120J.

Two hours ago, one of the people at the Front Desk at the Holiday Inn Heathrow or Intercontinental Hotel Zurich or Athens, and I can’t even remember where else, tried to place a wake-up call to my room lakini wapi, nothing happened. So here I am now inside my very worst nightmare possible.

I awake with a start.

Hot sweat is streaming from my body and soaking the bed.

How I dread these nightmare-causing early morning flights.

My mind’s eye zooms around the darkened room, sensing the multi-channeled giant screen telly on the gleaming mantelpiece. The mini-bar with miniature liquor bottles. Beer. Chocolate bars. Nuts. At the furthest end stands the electric kettle. NESCAFE and NESTLE HOTCHOCOLATE. Camomile and Fruit n’ Spice herbal teas. Instant soup. Sugar. Milk. Biscuits.

On one beige wall rests a perfect Van Gogh replica, next to a Joan Mira Print of bold black strokes criss-crossing a splashed, sprinkled and scribbled rainbow.

But in the very next installment of that very same second? My wide open eyes catch a glimpse of the illuminated radio clock blinking the real time at me.

2:35am, 2:35am, the clock mocks.

5 years later in Nairobi, Kenya.

A Pentecostal choir of dogs howl at a distance. Cats play bitch, cursing. A horny mosquito decided to seduce me...

Damn! Now I'll have to get up and kill that blood sucking mini vamp, because malaria's just too dear a disease to have in these days of inflation and 'very bad economy'.

Aiee! I try to move and my spring bed squeaks and squeals like rats on heat, the paper-thin mattress dipping, curving and curling with every movement made. I land on the ground with a thud and blindly feel my way to the electric switch surrounded by the snores, vinegary human gas, plus French-accented sleep-talk of my sleeping roommate Aminata the Lovely.

"Mah Njeeri! He was reech!"

This is how Aminata usually greets me each morning.

"A beautiful man! A white! Reech!"

Aminata then swans around our 12' by 12' room; dancing around the small iron table and two wooden chairs between identical camping beds that all stand on a crackling vinyl carpet. "We go to dis 'otel..... Beautiful! Biiiiiig! With a lot of mzungu man, yo!!"

Unlike me, Aminata never has nightmares about her past. She's always engaged in fantastic movie-like dreams that always end up with her riding off in a stretch limousine towards the setting sun, accompanied by a super rich white dude. Reech!

I kill mosquito Dead. Knock, knock. Who's there? Amos. Amos who? Amos Kito...

Sorry Amos Kito, I say to the tiny red smear on the wall.

Other spots and similar smears decorate our room. Like greasy finger prints from a myriad of past lodgers. Strands of reddish blonde synthetic hair flapping on peeling brown paint. Something black. Something purple. And something else yellowing green for which tissue paper was surely invented.

Then cockroach.

Bigger than ones that get blended together with centipedes, grade worms and beetles the size of Brazil, into some smoothie from hell, in that popular TV programme called FEAR FACTOR, where the drinker of the horror soup eventually gets to win \$100,000.

However, my attention is not 100 percent on the goliath roach. It's totally focused on the table and Aminata's loaf of bread plus the Blue Band margarine beside cutlery engraved MKGH.

Ancient faded papers posted on the four walls say Mama Koi Girls Hostels' Rules and Regulations. These rub shoulders with calendars from 1980, 1992 and 1976, plus J.Lo's famous butt in a recent publicity poster, Janet Jackson's widely-spaced 'dashboard'.

Together with a mile of pictures featuring anonymous blue-eyed blond male persons, pulled out of old magazines - I imagine -courtesy of Mam'zelle Aminata. There're also ripe bananas and a hard Jaffa orange inside the thin black plastic bag supposedly well hidden under Aminata's bed.

9:45am

"Your meeting is when?" Aminata is carefully studying her face in the mirror over our solo metal sink. Thin perpetually perplexed eyebrows. Studded tip tilted nose. Polished skin. She opens her mouth wide and checks out her tongue. Then teeth. And then adds more pink lipstick and a generous splash from Jean Paul Gaultier's woman shaped perfume bottle.

"10:30" I reply.

"Emille my brother bring 'is ka. We drop you." Aminata takes a mouthful of coffee plus a generous bite off a fresh fat mandazi doughnut from the cafeteria down the corridor. SWISS CAFE it's called. And is ran by Mama Koi's rather matronly daughter Koi. I start to salivate.

"Emilie? Mmm....Last month it was Jean Claude, my cousin from Rwanda". The other month Otey, "my uncle from Ghana". And there's even been one or two Chinese looking chaps, who are recently discovered long lost twice or thrice removed relatives, I suppose.

“Didn’t man evolve in Africa?” I can hear Aminata explaining, hands on hips in that threatening West African way?

11 a.m. British Council Auditorium. It’s buzzing.

A well-fed rather young red haired man from the podium seizes the microphone.

“Foist a’ d loik to welcome you all to this hare Writers Creativity Workshop”, his lips pout and pluck like a goldfish. “As we have limited tow a’ d loik us to foist introduce ourselves, one ata toim, beginning with that laidey ova there.” He points at me. The others around him remain mum.

“Richford Clarke from BBC Wales will start us off. Ty will be soived at 12 sharp.

Barbara there’ ll taike ova till lunch toim, at one thatcy. Ok? Ok!”

Standing up on rubbery feet, I soak in the many eyes stinging at me.

“Eh ... Thank-you. Thank-you Mr. Wilfordshire, Mr. Clarke, Ms. Barbara and all of you ladies and gentlemen for inviting me here today.” I feel the pairs of ears cocking and noses twitching in a natural quest of scenting me out. Who the hell is this one now, they seem to say. What the fuck could she have written surely, they obviously are asking. I ignore them all and yodel on.

“Thank-you very much for having me here today”, I reply. “It’s a great privilege and honour to be involved in this workshop, where I hope to learn all that I can learn and benefit as a writer. Thank-you. Thank-you very much” Words that have always been my childhood sweethearts desert me at this juncture and my mind goes blank.

Finally. And after a long pregnant silence, Mr. Wilfordshire asks me the hardest question, “What is your naime?”

“Eh...eh.. actually my real name, eh what I mean to say is, my official name is Margaret Kamau, but I eh, usually choose to use Njeeri as my writing name, which is actually my home name really... “

In the fog of apprehension and intimidation that now surrounds me, I hardly hear the command “NEXT!” which prompts the smooth flowing tirade from the others; fellow workshoppers, dapper and draped in sophistication, well cultivated execution, articulation

and finesse that I only last experienced as long words read in the last book that I read I dunno when.....

Hey. Am Symone Ghiroba and I work....

Hi. Am Atieno. I work at...

Wassup. Joey's mo name and I do graphic!"

Cheserem...

Mary...

Raju...

Ashley...

"So..." she's completely bald and has an eyebrow ring and dark brown lipstick that matches her dark brown eyes. "You said ati you're called?..."

I feel my own cornrows tighten around my head like a sisal baseball cap. Wanjera, the expert hairstylist at Embu Town, had made the kamatana lines extra fine and extra tight "to last at least two months".

My sensible Sunday Best outfit of matching blouse plus pleated long yellow skirt, bought during the last market day before relocating to Nairobi, at Manyatta township which is only twenty minutes from Mount Kenya, now feels, and maybe even looks, like a colourful polyester tent billowing in the sun in a typical Saturday afternoon wedding reception party. Compared to the sea of casual jeans and sweatshirts surrounding me. And ai? A whole Asian-Muhindi girl actually saying 'ati' like a true Nairobiian!

Kwani when did this transition take place?

Before I left the city of my birth after quitting the career of my fantasy in search for self and the ritual song of my soul, my art, Muhindi young women wore long dark hair and were ideally slim virgins-in-waiting, who strictly concentrated on learning the delicate art of being a very good wife and mother.

They might have been allowed to polish up their mathematical skills, perhaps for when they began their prescribed life-long part-time job at their father-in-law's shop in Ngara or Parklands, only after they'd successfully produced sufficient offspring. Where they'd henceforth supervise the daily selling of clothing materials, a hundred different spices or corals. With the ever-present help of Kalonzo or Wanyonyi, the ever faithful African

Shop Assistant, who'd been assisting shop since World War One... Kwani when had this new breed taken over?

I remember the Asian girl's question about my name. Which is a question that catches me off guard nowadays. Much more than the shock of enjoying one-on-one attention focused on any part of my person, and especially my mind. Which might be - or not - a natural side effect from my recently-ended exposure to the hive-like traditional African network of my parents' village, where everybody's role in life is precisely prescribed by virtue of their sex and age.

"Eh... Margaret Kamau", I manage to mumble. " - actually Njeeri..."

She's tall but curvy and takes a delicate sip from her long thin brown cigarette. She then blows perfect rings towards the high ceiling of the auditorium. "Rita Shah", she smiles. It takes me a while to digest that she's just introduced herself to me and not just called me a name. My right hand begins to twitch. We are now all having sandwiches the size of matchboxes at the recess young Wilfordshire mentioned.

"Nyeery! You said ati you're from?..."

"Upcountry, eh... I went to shags for a long break and I only just got back to the city last month... but I ...eh... was born right here in Nairobi, actually..." I over-explain my recently ended upcountry sojourn as usual.

"Oh. So you now work for?..."

Again I'm caught off guard.

"Eh... .nowhere, eh, I mean, I'm self-employed... a freelancer."

"Oh. So, who have you been writing for then?" Meaning, in Nairobi culture at least, are you important enough? Are you worth knowing? Do you have important connections? Will you amount to anything? Plus the very equally important, Should I waste my time on you?

"Ah... this and that, here and there... .heh.heh." Meaning that for the longest time, I've only had one or two stints with wannabe tabloids who pay their writers peanut husks in year-long installments. A column in a magazine that died after only two belches. A stint with a porn rag whose staff writers remain anonymous as a policy...

"Oh."

Rita's interest is almost dead now, so I very quickly jump in. "BBC! Eh... I write for the BBC..!"

Of course I forget to mention that that, once upon a time, that snap I took of gaka, my grandmother, picking coffee, was accepted for publication by one of the BBC's World Service magazines. For their regular SNAPS page where even Maasai herdsmen and Gikuyu chicken fanners often have their stuff accepted. This bluff ensures that I henceforth belong to the important enough, worth knowing, has connections, will amount to something and the time wasted on me will not be time wasted at all social category... "Huh'!"

The brown eyes light up, interest resurrecting.

Rita sips her cigarette. I sip my tea and bite my matchbox sandwich, then Barry White's voice asks. "What about the BBC?"

Joey is slender. Has illegally smooth skin. Perfect white teeth, Musky. Expensive. Wassup.

"Eh...am fine, thank-you". I swallow my tea and finish off my sandwich. My tummy still growls in protest nonetheless, because thinly margarine loaf and a hard Jaffa orange stolen from Aminata's secret stash at 2:36am just doesn't cut it. Again I wonder what we'll have for lunch. And again my hand feels abnormally hot.

Rita and Joey lock lips.

"Nyeeery works for the BSC", she smiles.

Joey's dark eyes smoulder.

Okay, they didn't. But dark eyes on handsome men are supposed to smoulder, right?

What really happened was totally different, totally mortifying. As Joey pulled a seat, my right hand shot up from me quicker than a blink.

Rita stopped smoking. Joey's mouth dropped open. And my renegade limb stood poised in midair, begging for a handshake. Handshakes are as African as black is, after all. A reflex action. A natural reaction.

The poor guy gulped. Rita gulped. And I gulped too after a while, as I tried in vain to pull down the aforementioned stray appendage. So Joey shook it, almost blushing. A limp, sweaty, shaking-virgin handshake.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, as I observed a thick rope of shiny sweat pop on Joey’s fine forehead - long, wide and smooth just like my dead father’s.