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## PROLOGUE

The madness of the December wind, heavy with its raucous heat, was sweeping through. We could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, fading away, its heat moving through the town. The heat and its faithful ally, the dust, seeping into the seams and folds of everybody resident in Kisumu that December and making our bones heavy. Column after column of sandstorms. Grass stalks, long deadened and yellowed, marching from one compound to the other. Empty water bottles, rolling down roads and side-streets and curbs, depositing themselves into the culverts of the city. And, above them all, the drone of air conditioning units upon air conditioning units, portable fans in gardens, and rickety ceiling fans straining against the strength and heaviness of the heat, the ripening of forgotten pineapples inside boiling cars, the humming of little children too listless and lazy to move about. Yet Mrs. K was indifferent to it all.

Six in the evening was a boring time in these pseudo-gerontocratic suburbs of Kisumu, a boredom whose severity was worsened by Mrs. K being alone in the house. Bayo had left the house earlier to go and visit her friend who she hadn't seen for months and months, and this was the only reason Mrs. K had not begrudged her when she had come to her room earlier to ask, "Ma, Misore is here, in Kisumu, can I go see him?". Any other time Mrs. K would have seen to it that the girl stay in the house and finish the chores she had been skirting all day long: the washing of the curtains, so dusty this hot December, the removal of the vitambaa from the couches and sofas and TV, and their subsequent replacement with the spring fresh yellow ones Mrs. K had picked out earlier. And whose job was it to make sure that supper was hot and ready by seven o'clock if Bayo went off gallivanting? But not today.

Mrs. K's husband, Bayo's father, was in the little room just by the door, the room he had taken time to decorate — his new hobby, he called it — the room with the venetian blinds and the easy chair and the tiny Ramtons fan pumping away and the TV and the pile of books on the floor and the newspapers bedecked on the beige sandared pouffe. When asked what he did in his little room — his den, he liked to call it, though Mrs. K filled with mirth whenever he did — he would say that he had been reading, either a treatise on political inquiry or a treatise on the dangers of globalization or a treatise on sports and development in Africa, always a treatise, this man — when Mrs. K wanted to make fun of him, she would lower her voice and ask, slyly, whether he had read the treatise on men who were unable to cook? — but Mrs. K. knew better, knew that he spent his evenings asleep in that room, a newspaper flung across his chest, and therefore, by virtue of being asleep, he was useless, as far as entertaining Mrs. K went, and she was, for all intents and purposes, alone in the house.

However, in her solitude, there was a vague ringing that wasn't quite a sound, but a feeling that settled into Mrs. K's bones, and left her with an indecipherable malaise. Earlier that morning, her husband had asked if everything was fine, but she'd shrugged off his concern, murmured that everything was fine, dear, thank you for asking. But everything was not fine, dear, thank you for asking. A week ago, she had been at Mama Odhis's when Mama Odhis had let slip something that had been troubling Mrs. K ever since. Mama Odhis and Mrs. K. were friends, such good friends that wherever one of them was the other was bound to be somewhere nearby. Whenever the two of them were together, they would play this game — that's what their husbands called it, a game, though the two women chagrined at the epithet — where, when whoever was supposed to leave her friend's house would get up to go, her friend, the host, would declare that she would walk her just down the road, *hapo tu kwa barabara*, but after the walking to the road the stories would catch again and they

would talk and talk until the host would declare that it was time she went back to the house to look after her people and her friend would, valiantly, offer to walk her back home, for the darkness had settled in already, and darkness was safer for two women walking together than for one woman walking alone, and they would go back to wherever they had been an hour ago, and there, again, the stories would catch, until the other would declare that she had to return home to see how her people were doing. Often, this coming and going back would go on for hours, but, with time, the husbands had wisened up and so, whenever one of them, either Mrs. K or Mama Odhis, was observed offering to walk her friends down a little ways, *hapo tu kwa barabara*, then whoever's husband was present would intervene and, he would be the one to walk his wife's guest down the road, where she would get her matatu or tuktuk back home.

On that particular night, what had happened was that Mama Odhis had been walking Mrs. K to the road, her friend had said something that had left Mrs. K worried. She remembered that her mind had been drifting, drifting in and out about a conversation about Rosa and the man who had stolen the election from her.

"They, his goons," Mama Odhis had been saying, "took the ballot box and tossed it into the pool, can you believe? Hapo tu Aga Khan."

Mrs. K had nodded absent-mindedly, nodded that, no, she could not believe.

"Now she's not on the ballot. Hivyo tu. And we all know she won that nomination. She's been stolen from. Can you imagine a worse thing?"

Mrs. K had nodded again, affirmed that, no, she could not imagine a worse thing. "Me if they play the same games with our man, those people will see."

Had Mrs. K's mind been there she would have been quicker to realize that Mama Odhis hadn't been talking about the pastoral elections when she said this. Instead, it was only when she was back home, only after she had made sure that Bayo and her father had had their supper, that she had realized that 'our man' was not Pastor Tiberius, the man of God. Only then did Mrs. K realize that her friend had been talking about the other elections, the national elections. Only then did it occur to her that Mama Odhis's our man was Agwambo, the man of the people, that those people were not the boy Jeremy's supporters in the pastoral elections, but that those people were Kibaki's supporters, and the people perceived as being his supporters and sympathizers — the other side. putrid

In the days after this conversation, Mrs. K's mind had been in a whorl. Even as the putrid heat and listlessness of December humidity assailed her, Mama Odhis's words echoed in a region of her brain. Mrs. K had been careful not to see her friend ever since, preferring to coop herself inside her little sanctuary, offering platitudes about how she needed to take care of her husband, her snoring husband, what with his blood pressure and hypertension running in his family. Plus, if it was needed, she would add that she wanted to spend time with her daughter, and that her other daughter, the daughter domiciled in the US who no one had seen for years, meant to call, and she couldn't be out of the house when she did. *Me if they play the same games with our man, those people will see*. The more Mrs. K thought about these words the more she wondered whether Mama Odhis knew that a lot of people in these parts considered her, Mrs. K, one of those people. *Those people*. Mrs. K didn't know which was worse, Mama Odhis's knowing, or not knowing, because while one meant that even in the eyes of her closest friend, her *chanda na pete* friend, Mrs. K was, and would always be, considered one of *those people*, the other meant that her closest friend, her *chanda na pete* friend, was blind to Mrs. K's fears and insecurities.

This is what it came down to, always. Tribe. Mrs. K had imagined that her suburban existence cushioned her from such vagaries. But then, always, at every election cycle, here was something to remind her. Sometimes it was a stranger, and this time it was a friend, but here it was all again.

Mrs. K had been in Kisumu so long her Kikuyu-ness had receded so far into the cold reaches of her mind, that she had forgotten it existed. It crept out every once in a while, like when her mother had still been alive, in the middle of one of her phone calls home, she had confessed her burning distaste for Dholuo, but added that since the people around there spoke no other language, she was obliged to speak it. But then her mother had died, and she had lost the one connection that bound her to Ichaweri, and these people, the people of the lake, Jokisumo, had become her people. Sometimes, Mrs. K wondered whether, in become a Nyakisumo she had hidden herself too well, so well in fact that she had become a lie. But then, was Ruth a lie? Ruth, who would later become the mother of nations, the mother of the mothers and fathers of Christ, who had declared to Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God," was she a lie? The people of the lake had become her people, but now this, this warning that *these people will see*, she didn't know. Was she these people? Was she a Nyakisumo?

She didn't know. She would add it to the list of things whose knowledge she lacked. Like how she didn't know that, behind her back, the women of the tabernacle were whispering, pointing out that she was not one of them, that she had never been one of them, and would never be one of them. Like how she didn't know that her daughter, when asked how old she was, had taken to replying that she was children-bring-me-water-to-wash-my-hands years old. Like how she didn't know that her other daughter, the one living in the abroads, had long ceased being an active part of her life, and would never be despite all the phone calls Mrs. K persisted in making. Like how she didn't know that The Tabernacle, the structure that had been a core part of her life ever since she came to Kisumu, would stop being this, and that she would never venture there ever again. Like how she didn't know what Simo, the ghost of the brother taken away from her too early, wanted, or that he would soon disappear, never to bother her again.

In the meantime, she would continue doing the things whose knowledges she possessed. She would cook, ugali, brown and thick with the millet her husband loved, and fish procured from the woman at City Market who assured her that her fish was not from China. She would clean and dust and mop the house, a thing she had started doing in the evening rather than in the morning, because she had discovered that Simo was more active in the morning, and whenever he appeared, she got blinding headaches which made her unable to muster the concentration to do any sort of work. She would continue to mother Bayo, as she had mothered her sister, because that's what mothers did, and she would not be accused of having failed to mother her child. When Mrs. K was younger, she had wondered whether this was all she was ever meant to be, a mother. She used to be someone, but then she got married and become Mrs. K, and then became Mama Bayo. But what about her own self?

When people looked at her, what did they see? Did they see her, or did they see her for the people who were attached to her? Whenever Mrs. K thought these things she would wish for a do-over, for a chance to cut her hair and start afresh. At these moments, a stealthy ennui would creep in, the sort of ennui that one couldn't confess to one's husband. Still, she had fought it, and here she was all these years later, a mother. Fine, she had made her peace with being a mother. Even Mary had been a mother, and she would be the most important woman in the promised Kingdom above. But she would not be a terrified little woman, no, this, she would not be. Whatever Mama Odis said about *those people*, Mrs. K would not be a stereotype.

## CHAPTER ONE

Sitting on a low stool in her kitchen, Mrs. K sipped her tea. The tea was a lime tea in which cloves and ginger had been simmered. She thought about Bayo. How to begin to understand this child's mind. Only a single memory held up. There was a day in November 1999, all the more beautiful for coming suddenly, after a long period of heat and humidity. It was one of those mornings which declares itself, with a boastful extravagance of rain and coldness and wet earth, as a true beginning, as a new portal to elemental joy, and she was walking in town with Bayo, past the bus stage at Kisumu Boys High School, down beyond the mitumba sellers and matatu manambas who dotted the walls of the high school, then left into the quiet abandonment of the Somali shops and onto the winding narrow path that led to Bhagini Samaj Nursery School. Bayo was excited and talkative. She would have been nine, just started to get into her tennis. Then, as they neared the road that divided them from the sports ground, it happened. A car came screeching down the road, a white Toyota station wagon, the kind they called an olwenda. Behind it billowed what appeared, from that distance, to be a green polythene bag. It appeared to be stuck to the back of the car. As the car rolled to a stop in front of them, the movements around her seemed to cease. The women hawking clothes went mute, the muezzin in the mosque opposite them was suddenly silent, the touts at the matatu stage in front of the mosque were no longer calling for fares, and the road was devoid of everything else but the car, and billowing piece of plastic behind it, which as Mrs K looked revealed herself not to be that. It was a girl. Her uniform was green, and her head was trapped beneath the back left wheel of the car. Then it was not. The girl, she lay on the hot tarmac. Mrs. K's heart thumped. Mrs. K screamed. Later, Bayo would tell her about this, but she couldn't remember the screaming. Instead what she remembered was a trailer steaming down the road. What she remembered was the girl's body lying on the tarmac, the green of her tunic bright in the noontime sunshine. What she remembered was the trailer coming closer, and no one thinking about the girl. What she remembered was calling the guard at the school to take her Bayo, and then diving into the road, and pulling the girl off the road. The trailer would probably have seen her. [Right?]. Or not. Mrs. K didn't know. What she remembered was carrying the girl, and jumping onto a bodaboda, and riding with urgency into the hospital down the road. What she couldn't remember was how she got home, or how Bayo got rescued from the watchman's station at Kisumu Boys High School. How flimsy and asinine her memory was at times, but Mrs. K remembered how, for years, after that, and on and off in her adolescence, Bayo would wake up screaming, having dreamt about an olwenda, and a green polythene bag, and her giant trailer, and she, Bayo, was the girl on the tarmac.

In this temporal moment, sipping her tea, Mrs. K remembered the girl, and remembered her brother, and felt, more than ever before, the unease that had inflamed into a proto-terror since the evening of Mama Odhis's comments. Her unease seemed to envelope her in a never-ending sea, a sea that extended past her, and into the house, and the neighborhood around them. The unease was not confined to the neighborhood around them. It seemed to rise with the turbulence of the brown pond in the quarry next door, a quarry that had been swollen by the rains that had begun to pound Kisumu, and in the evenings spread across the city like a mental escarpment which everybody could feel., Aa quiet and malign thickening, inseparable from the coolness of the rain, well-concealed within its spreading beneficence.

Something was coming to an end, Mrs. K felt. In town, the crowds gathered around the jacaranda trees on the main street, conferred in urgent groups, suggesting a secret between them. Young boys strode the streets, a little taller than everyone else, their strides more aggressive, distracted even from the catcalling that kept their minds sated for hours on end. The police officers seemed depressed as they stood at the street intersections in their blue, and seemed to have forgotten the chirpy confidence with which they harassed the traders at the market, a fact that at other times might have consoled Mrs. K, but in the now made her wary. Something was about to happen.

The town had been filling up slowly, invisibly, for many days, in a manner that suggested the usual crowdedness of December. But then, and it seemed purely chance at first, Mrs. K began to detect a

design. New hawker stations appeared across the town, like death in the night, and the owners of these stalls never seemed to have the small denominations their customers sought. Mrs. K imagined the hooting sounds of the matatus crisscrossing Kisumu had a muffled, apologetic sound, where once they had been bright and exuberant. The workmen who erected new worksites across the city, sat at their stations all day, but whenever she passed by they seemed to never be at work, only looking idly at the passersby around them. In the Nakumatt in town, Mrs. K had to abandon her purchases at the till, for the queues in the supermarket grew alarmingly long, and everybody around her only seemed to have one item to buy. The beggars in town were new, and calmer about the dire states of their affairs, almost as if they expected the emptiness of their hats, almost as if they were there only as a stopper, until the real action started.

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A blanket of heat in the sky, like a curtain's sudden sweeping. The birds in the quarry next to Mrs. K's house stopped their tuning, the streets went mute. The city turned to orange, house lights turned on in the dusk.

Two people were coming down the lane. One of them was tall and sharp, in a brown kitenge dress, a scarf around her neck, even though it was December in Kisumu and hot. The other was short and vivid; a light flickered in him that caught the eye and held it. Their names were Mrs. K and Pastor Tiberius.

They were late.

What luck, running into him on her way back to the house from the market. They had walked back together.

Inside her house, the meeting had started. They were talking about the church elections. Mrs. K sat down at the back of the room. Pastor Tiberius took his seat at the front. He stopped the meeting. It was no longer important what had been said before his arrival.

"We will win this thing," he said. "But you have to be up to the task."

To Mrs. K, these words expressed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, and the wonder which the congregation had enjoyed these years past would continue, unabated. She was fringed with joy. Her house was a place of joy. The settees, the pouf, the table she'd gotten at a clearance sale in Milimani, the sound of jacaranda trees, their bipinnate and feathery leaves falling with each advance of the heat, crows cawing, brooms shuffling, dresses rustling, the cutlery in the kitchen being knocked against each other. All these were colored in joy.

Now, someone took control of the conversation, with a ten-minute monologue. He told them how wonderful it was to be in this room with the Lord's anointed, Pastor Tiberius, and to feel in his soul the blessings the pastor's presence gave each of them. Mrs. K frowned. She longed to take her husband aside and tell him that this someone had pubic hair growing from his ears.

"But we have to acknowledge that we could lose mana like this," the someone said.

"Nonsense," Mrs. K said, with great severity. The room turned towards her. "How can we act as if we will lose? Is that what Christ expects from us, to imagine losing? He with his glory?"

The men nodded. Pastor K smiled. The someone continued. Mrs. K sighed. She was above this. Her

mind flew away. Outside, the sun had disappeared. It was seven at night. End of the year. Chill.

In the distance, Mrs. K heard the twinkling of a Christmas song. The First Noel. In the house next door, someone was watching the news loudly.

Pastor Tiberius was speaking. He was speaking about the elections.

There were two elections. The first, which the people in Mrs. K's house, all members of the Tabernacle of the Current-Day Believers in Mamboleo Kisumu, thought more important, was a church election where the church officials for the next year would be selected. There had never been an election in this church that Pastor Tiberius had led since its inception, but this year the church had been seized by the democratic spirit.

The second elections were the national elections. Someone was vying for president against someone else. Pointless, this jostling for earthly power when Christ was almost cometh.

At the back of the room, Mrs. K's attention wavered. She was tired of having to listen to all these men in her house. Where was her daughter? In her room no doubt, hiding herself. A picture of her was to Mrs. K's left, on top of the cabinet, Bayo in matutas, four maybe five years old, laughing at something behind the camera.

At the outermost reaches of the cabinet top, other photographs: the family on the front lawn, Mrs. K and her husband in matching khaki outfits, and their two daughters, Bayo six, and the other threatening teenhood, both of them in frilly yellow dresses Mrs. K had gotten from Kampala; another family shot, this time at Impala Park, Bayo on her sister's shoulders, her father's arms wrapped around the two of them and Mrs. K, Lake Victoria swaying behind them; a picture of Mrs. K and the women she helped at her charity, Women in The Community Humanizing, Mrs. K cross-gartered. How apt. Then, in a belle epoque metal frame tinged with verdigris was a picture of Mrs. K and her brother, Simon, flush with the tingle of youth, the two of them in their cricket uniform, Simon all padded up and with a bat across his shoulders, a lazy grin on his face, this picture taken a week before he died. Behind this picture was one of Mrs. K and her husband (who was talking now) on their honeymoon. Next to them, just poking into the picture, was the fender of a car — certainly not theirs, and further off, a matatu peering over a garden hedge. It had been a good honeymoon, Mrs. K always said, two weeks spent with her husband in Marsabit as she accompanied him on his work tours to Northern Kenya. She was wearing a purple, collarless blouse. The neck scarf and the beige belt around her waist may have been an inside joke between the two of them. Her face was round, her cheeks puffed up, but the effect was not exactly jovial, for the smile she gave the camera was not wholehearted enough to part her lips, and, rather than wrap her arms around her husband, she had clutched them across her midriff. He, by contrast, was leaning into her left side, his mouth open as if at a laugh, holding her left arm with both hands.

The cabinet was a mess. Inside it were strewn church bulletins, landscaping brochures and cooking guides, and, within the pages of these, various letters and cards: wedding invitations, harambee invitations, prayer session invitations; letters from girls and women congratulating Mrs. K for the latest award her charity had won, which she took pleasure from reading, and others querying whether they could join the various programs she offered. The latest, scribbled with green ink on paper on which the watermark was a KPLC logo, was from Pastor Tiberius, informing her about a girl whose KCPE marks had attained her admission at an elite girls' high school whose fees she was unable to pay. Mrs. K had read and reread this sheath of papers, but today they seemed to arouse in her the foretaste of a new romantic vigour. She saw them in prospect — dirty girls from Obunga and Manyatta and Nyalenda and Nyawita, in their brown, pockmarked clothes asking her, could she please help them, with this and that and this? — in the hours in which she was most herself.

Around her, it had gotten darker. Mrs. K considered turning on the brighter lights, but to do that was to risk walking to the other side of the room, and having all the eyes turn towards her. On most days she didn't mind it. Today, however, she felt suffocated. The effect of suffocation was heightened by the dark-stained paneling reaching from the floor and covering the ceiling, and by the room's only painting, a vast canvas that hung above the fireplace that had been unlit since its construction — made unnecessary by the racuous heat endemic in Kisumu all-year long. The portrait, an oil rendition of Christ the Redeemer, hung next to one of a vaguely aristocratic family — father, mother, three children and a German Shepherd — posed in what Mrs. K assumed was a royal European manner. No one knew who these people were, but it is likely Mrs. K, coming across the portrait in an online expat marketplace, thought they would lend an impression of solidity to her household. Next to these people, the graduation photos: Mrs K and her husband, in their respective universities in the time before they knew each other, each of them the epitomes of humility between their proud parents.

On the walls were a barrage of house signs, dainty rectangular plaques with messages from the Lord. There was one that read, "Christ is the head of the home, the unseen guest of every meal, the silent listener to every conversation." A second one said, "I can do all things through the Lord God who strengthens me." A third sign simply said, "He listens." It was to this third one that Mrs. K veered to whenever she was assailed by thoughts of her brother, and the headaches started.

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