

Peter KIMANI
From *Before the Rooster Crows*

In this chapter the protagonist, Muriuki, and his girlfriend, Mumbi, with whom he has reunited after an arduous search, travel from the Kenyan city Gichuka to the harbour city of Pwani where American marines have just arrived on a peacekeeping mission. Mumbi has resolved to peddle flesh to the soldiers – one last job, as she puts, and raise enough money to secure their future. Muriuki accepts... grudgingly This dalliance takes a tragic turn and alters their lives, and that of their country.

Muriuki was in a lousy mood when they checked in at Watalii Hotel. After six hours of travel, he felt fatigued and drained.

To add to his sour mood were the lingering thoughts of betrayal; he felt he had betrayed his mother and his siblings.

Though they now seemed so distant and remote, he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. All the way, he questioned the wisdom in accepting Mumbi's offer – if it could be called that.

For the umpteenth time, he was tempted to jump off the train and return to the village – back to his people and his old life. The life of honest toil and brief respite; hard life interspersed with moments of earnest laughter; the life of pilfering the home-baked *mandazi* from the watchful eyes of the seller, after a day of back-breaking toil at Kwa Nyakang'ei.

The life of relaxed, easy evenings at Kwa Nyagaceke where they converged to listen to the village "reporter" and the latest news on the BBC; the life of rainy nights and dragging beds to safer areas. The real life.

Sitting by the pool at the restaurant, he surveyed the place and decided it was the kind of place he might never have set foot in his lifetime. It was patronized by scantily dressed white women who sat on the laps of bare-chested men. This is the kind of place he would have wished to observe keenly and relive his experiences to his colleagues at Gichagi. But in his present state, the anger and the tension in him could not accommodate that.

"Where are all the waiters?" He asked to no one in particular.

"One can stay a whole day without being served," Mumbi replied, shrugging helplessly.

He noted a bevy of waiters swarming round a group of white tourists refilling their glasses after every sip. He observed this for some time, watching with a cool detachment as if it did not affect him. He tried to catch the attention of one of the waiters but it was all in vain. He tried again, but without success. When one waiter turned slightly while pouring fresh wine into a glass, Muriuki shouted, "Hey! Hey You! Hey!"

A few white heads turned to face him, looking quizzically at him as if to say, "Man, people here speak in a mannered way."

Eventually, a waiter turned to him.

“I’m talking to you!” Muriuki shouted. “Have you no ears?”

The scene quickly drew a big crowd of curious tourists and to avoid further embarrassment, the waiter went over to him.

“What do you want?” He demanded in a hostile voice.

“What do you think I want?” Muriuki countered.

The waiter swallowed hard but did not say anything.

“Why do you keep us waiting this long,” Muriuki was on the attack again. “Why do you treat me so in my own country?”

No answer came forth.

“Is it because I am black? Or is it that I have no money?”

His voice was rising, and a sudden hush fell on the merry-making crowd. All the attention was focused on the unfolding drama. Sensing the welling tension, the waiter asked desperately, “What do you want?”

“I want you to answer my question,” Muriuki replied.

Awash with shame, the waiter started to drift away.

“Wait!” Muriuki snapped. The waiter stopped in his tracks.

“Bring us food. The two of us.”

“What will you have?”

“What do you have to offer?” The harsh tone could still be traced in Muriuki’s voice.

“Meat, fish or fowl?” The waiter said in a small voice.

“Meat,” Muriuki replied.

“Rare, medium or well done,” he pursued.

Muriuki was a bit confused. “Well done,” he said.

“Do you want that served with baked potatoes, fluffy rice or pasta?”

“Baked potatoes.” He chose what sounded familiar.

“What kind of dressing? Dijon, Italian or American?”

Muriuki was lost. Had the waiter sensed his ignorance, and was now testing his wit, he wondered. He felt demeaned. It is true this was his first time to learn that food was dressed, but the waiter had no right to make a fool of him.

As he opened his mouth to speak, with a tirade of abuses at ready, Mumbi asked softly, “Do you serve African buffet?”

The waiter nodded.

She turned to Muriuki. “What do you think, dear? Should we try the buffet?”

“Sounds fine,” Muriuki said.

“Then get us two plates,” Mumbi said to the waiter. Once the waiter drifted away, Muriuki gave a sigh of relief, although he was also impressed by his own courage.

The white tourists, who relished every moment of the argument, now looked disappointed that it had ended so fast and in an anti-climax. They loudly said that it was disheartening for an African to discriminate against his brethren.

Muriuki could not understand his new-found courage. It wasn't courage really, but a feeling of freedom that he never knew existed. Daring anyone to a duel.

Freedom in its totality, without a worry. It was the kind of feeling that enveloped him during his school days every Friday. Friday evening was the day to slide on the mud without caring if their shorts were soiled, and to retire at night without worrying what time to wake.

It felt like Friday again; but instead of soiling his shorts, he was careless with his life. He did not care what happened to him, and would court trouble even with the full knowledge of its implications. He could not tell why he felt the way he did. Maybe it was the realization that having gone this far, having undertaken such an unthinkable mission, nothing else mattered. He had gone too far in his self-destruction orgy to care about anything anymore. He felt like a drunk who, after realizing that he had spent the better part of his money on drink, resolves to burn the remaining lot since it wouldn't make a difference.

Naturally, such drunks do not burn their money silently; they make fuss and pick quarrels. He had the same fury now, but since no one appeared to challenge him, he vented his steam on the food.

There was a brief struggle as he battled with his knife and fork, making loud clutters as he did so. He switched the knife and the fork from one hand to the other, and his attempts to scoop food ended in a mess as the fork slid off the plate and splashed food on his face and clothes.

Undeterred, he cleared off the mess and put the utensils down. He rolled his shirtsleeves and settled on the food with bare hands. He ate hungrily, furiously.

The white patrons next to him looked away, either too disgusted by his eating habit, or too scared to look at him.

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As they strolled down the beach, Muriuki's anger subsided. Mumbi leaned on him playfully. She had slipped into a multi-coloured *kikoi*, which flapped gently against the cool ocean breeze.

They met curio hawkers, but none pestered them.

"You see, your face looks so gloomy, you are scaring away the hawkers!" Mumbi chuckled. Muriuki smiled but did not say anything. He regarded Mumbi for a moment then shook his head.

"What is it?" Mumbi pursued. "What are you thinking?"

"I will not tell you," Muriuki responded, a wry smile playing on his lips. She looked so beautiful and he wanted to tell her so. But he decided against it.

“Why?” she smiled, “*Ki-ngoro gitibotanaga*,” which meant an unspoken word never triumphed. “I will not say it...”

The sight of scantily dressed tourists distracted their attention. The hawkers approached them with their well rehearsed rhetoric: *You must buy this piece and keep it in memory of Africa*. Some tourists replied that they had just arrived, and it was too soon to buy anything to take home. Others said they had better things to “remember Africa.”

“This is funny,” Muriuki observed, the grimace reappearing on his face. “How come we are not being pestered to buy anything?”

“Do you want to buy something?” Mumbi offered, the playful tone still filtering through.

“No, I don’t have the money but...”

“Precisely!”

“Precisely what?”

“The hawkers know that.”

“How do they?”

“What do you mean? They can see you are black.”

“So?”

“So they know you don’t have any money.”

“Does that mean all black people are poor?”

“No, Mr Muriuki,” Mumbi said, so that the “mister” sounded deep and drawled.

“Let’s put it this way; every black man and woman on this beach has come to do business, and every white man and woman has come to have a good time.

“Sun and Sand, that’s what they call it on the hotel brochures. So the hawkers can easily tell, just from the colour, which skin has come for sun and fun and which hasn’t...”

“But what does that mean?”

“You don’t seem to get it, do you? They say you shine a shilling upon another to get a reflection. The white skin is a shilling to them. And their curios are their shillings. Why shine it on a dark, poor skin like yours...”

“Hey Mumbi, look...” Muriuki whispered, drawing Mumbi’s attention to a couple of young black men strolling down the beach, with old white women tugging along. They both fell silent to absorb the shock.

When the randy youths and the old women had trooped beyond hearing, Muriuki turned to find Mumbi choking with laughter. She burst out loudly, laughing till she rolled to the ground. Muriuki joined in, hesitantly at first, and then in loud guffaws that neither could stop the other. They were in a fit.

It was Mumbi who sobered first, “Did you see the last one? The one in black tights?”

Muriuki nodded, still laughing softly.

“Who does she remind you of?”

“Who?”

“Guess...”

“Uhhmmmm...”

“She reminds me of Nana.”

“Oh, yes, that’s Nana’s age-mate without doubt.” And with the joke, they roared afresh till their ribs ached.

Nana was Gichagi’s oldest inhabitant. What continued to fascinate people was Nana’s strong eyesight and sharp memory, which was only matched by her insatiable thirst for the traditional brew, *muratina*.

“This is what keeps me alive,” she used to say. Since *muratina* was outlawed in Gichagi, and the village chief was notorious for raiding homes where *muratina* was brewed, Nana gained fame when she stood her ground and refused to hide her gourd.

“If you take my *muratina* away,” she fearlessly told the chief, “Then you are taking away my life. Who is this *kamwana*, so unashamed as to wish his grandmother dead?”

The chief had walked away crestfallen. He had been christened *kamwana*, a derogatory term for a man with grown up children. He never returned to Nana’s, who continued to make and enjoy her drink, a privilege nobody else enjoyed.

Mumbi rose suddenly and said urgently, “Oh, my goodness! I almost forgot I was supposed to meet Waruiru.”

“Who is Waruiru?”

“A friend from Gichuka. She also arrived here this morning. She said we should meet and plan where to go in the evening.”

“So, where does that leave me?” Muriuki asked seriously.

“Marooned in the Indian Ocean,” Mumbi smiled, straightening her *kikoi*. She added, “I will sure meet you at the lodging.”

“Okay,” Muriuki said heavily.

“Come on! Cheer up! Why the long face? It’s not like I’m gone forever...”

“Okay, you go on. I will join you later.”

“Alright. I will be with you soon.”

Muriuki hesitated for a while, unsure whether to walk on, or to sit and watch the sea waves form and ride on the water surface, before sizzling into a bubble that frothed on the sea sand, making a hissing sound as it did so.

He turned to watch Mumbi walk away. He had never seen her this jolly. Even in those Gichagi days, she was a little reserved, shy and somewhat coy. Now she seemed to have discarded her garb of reservation to enjoy her life, even ‘laugh to the ground.’

It was like she had unburdened herself suddenly: to express herself without fear of being judged. She had found supreme happiness.

Now there she was, walking on the beach barefoot, the loose end at the back of her *kikoi* flapping away, like a child strapped at the back, waving a furtive goodbye to a dear friend.

She seemed confident in her gait: well measured, calculated. A woman marching confidently towards life.

Muriuki sat on a spot and watched the expanse mass of blue water. Dusk was fast approaching, and water was returning to the shores after the day's sojourn, making a lapping sound as it hit the shores.

He tried to absorb the meaning of what he had seen: where did his people go wrong, that young men unashamedly clung to the old women as their lifeline? Why did the hawkers have to trail the tourists all day with the hope of striking a sale?

Something was terribly wrong.

Almost naturally, his thoughts focused on his own life. It dawned on him that he, too, had been caught in the same web. He and Mumbi were equally trapped. Or did they not travel hundreds of kilometers, in the hope of getting some dollars if Mumbi sold her body?

He was no better than the hotel waiters who swirled round white patrons to pick coins that fell off when they turned to fart. Reflecting further on the tourists, he realized that tourists were considered a high premium by everyone.

That's why the government reserved huge tracts of rich, arable land for game reserve, where tourists could retreat and throw biscuits to the giraffes and watch the lions mate. On their way out, they could drop a few coins at the entrance, enough to pay for the official and unofficial pay for the wardens manning the gates.

In the meantime, famine swept through the country because people had been pushed to the deserts where nothing but sand grew.

Further down the line of prostitution were the tour companies who decorated their vans with the colors of the rainbow and catchy slogans – like prostitutes gearing up for a night out.

When he rose to go, the soothing sound of the ocean was gone, and replaced by a furious, angry roar. It's as if the ocean, too, was upset by the great sacrilege it had witnessed and borne for so long.

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