

VUMILIA

BY KANENGO DIALLO

Before he died, Baba told me that numbers would be my undoing.

My fascination began when I was seven. When we would hear the secondary schoolboys at the Malambo river talk about their lessons from school. Back then, it was tradition for some of the Ilemera Secondary School boys to stop by *our* Malambo and smoke their ‘Mala-boro’ cigarettes before making their long walk home. Amina, Maisha, the twins, and I would hide behind the rocks when we knew their arrival was close. The boys always stood on the grass near the river’s bend, competing to see how far each could hock spit into the water. They lit one cigarette with a matchstick (stolen from one of their mama’s kitchens), then huffed and puffed it between the six of them. It was economical – yes – but now I know each boy must have only managed two puffs before they had to snuff it.

When we were seven, those Ilemera boys were as foreign as the *mzungu* missionaries – white teachers from England who came to plant clinical, brown-bricked churches and ‘spread the gospel’ at the primary and secondary schools surrounding our village. Oh, how my Bibi hated those mzungus! My grandmother, who was 95 years old, still clung to the world she knew before the White Man imposed himself on her. On us. Mama made her go to church once and Bibi heckled the nuns who stood outside, handing out small cups of sacramental wine and pieces of ‘the host’. She yelled at the ones she could see from her vegetable field when they drove past in their black square cars. ‘*Rudi kwenu* – go back, leave us alone!’

The missionaries came to our village in Ilemera in 1998, my seventh year. When the girls and I first saw them, we agreed that their skin was pink and not white. Amina’s mama told us that mzungus don’t like our hot seasons. ‘That is why they wear those black glasses and hide in the shade – their skin is not made for our heat.’ The mzungu women wore tan and pocketed trousers, like their men. The men wore hats as big as our winnowing baskets. The young ones, barely out of secondary school, would help deliver malnourished babies at the small clinic they built that year. I remember Maisha telling us about her mama and how she met those mzungu medical students when she gave birth to Maisha’s little sister. They all carried smooth fat Bibles in their palms.

I felt that the mzungus were a thrilling addition to our landscape back then. Maisha once told me that there were many more of them in Dar es Salaam. There they had built bigger churches, orphanages, and expensive bank buildings. They drove Range Rovers, and our aunties were always scrambling to leave the village and go work as *dadas* – or ‘housegirls’, for those Dar es Salaam mzungus. The money was good, and our aunties who made it sent some of it back to their children and elderly relatives every month.

The mzungus spoke ‘Ingirish’ and taught it to the Ilemera schoolboys and girls. We would imitate the pinched words we heard Pastor John say at Mass on Sundays: *Afurikan* – African, *bibol* – Bible, *congeri* – congregation. At the Malambo, the Ilemera boys flourished their sentences with English words like *fellars* – fellas, *teecha* – teacher, and *me I no* – I know that.



Our youth gifted us with an invisibility that we exploited often. Stealing fruit from the market and bathing naked in the Malambo was something we would grow out of. We liked to think that the Ilemera boys could not see us – the five foolish girls who hid behind the millet rocks, listening to their ‘Big Boy Talk’.

One day, after snuffing out their cigarette, the boys started discussing ‘reproduction’.

‘Imagine, Sir says that two cells make one whole! I am one whole!’ said Jiti, the tall one. Instinctively, we knew that Jiti was the leader of the pack. At that age, boys start to show their proclivity for control. In small groups, only one can wield this power. He calls the others ‘idiots’ and then crowns himself the emperor of the idiots.

The dark one, whose name we never learnt, started picking up sticks, giving one to each of his friends. ‘But *fellars*, the *teecha* failed to tell us about the sticks,’ they all sniggered with their sticks in hand, giddy to discuss the forbidden in the privacy that only the Malambo could provide. Finally, the dark one yelled, ‘The Form Six boys say that one stick must enter a small hole! That is real reproduction!’ The giddiness dissolved and the boys collapsed into communal laughter, jumping, and shoving each other around like grasshoppers. We were entranced as they took off their clean white shirts and started driving their sticks deep into the muddy ground of the riverbank, over and over again.

That dry season of our seventh year, the twins no longer bathed with us. On the day of the sticks, it was just Amina, Maisha, and I at the Malambo. Doto and Kulwa were at home for the fourth day, washing clothes at their mother’s request. For Doto and Kulwa, their womanhood commenced with those long days helping their mama around the house.

‘We cannot come to the river tomorrow,’ they would say, their eyes teeming with the first swells of pride.

‘Mama wants us to wash the clothes again.’ – Doto

‘She said we rinse them very well and Baba is pleased!’ – Kulwa

That dry season, Doto and Kulwa had left us behind and crawled beyond the threshold of girlhood. Maisha, Amina, and I still danced in the shallow pools of the Malambo, our chests as flat as the concave rocks that our mamas grounded millet on.

When the boys left, we walked over to the sticks in the mud and picked them up. What was this business about sticks and holes? At Sunday School, learnt about the soul. We knew the soul makes a person, not two cells and sticks. We were curious and resolved to ask our mamas when we returned home from bathing that evening.

When I grew older, I learnt what the boys meant by cells, sticks, and holes. They meant that a child is the biological union of two cells: one from their baba and their mama. Two halves that create a whole. At seven years old, I asked Mama, ‘If there are two souls that make a child, how come I only have one?’ She laughed a big belly laugh and pulled me onto her lap.

‘Betty, you know before those Christians came, the traditional Sukuma said that we are begotten from eight people. *Kibuta na Migongo* – you have eight souls, a little bit from each of your ancestors.’

I wriggled off her lap, displeased with the answer. 'Mama, why do the secondary school boys talk of two sticks then? That two sticks make one whole person?'

Mama pinched my cheek. 'Eh-eh! So, this is where you bring this nonsense from? You must stop listening to those rough-rough boys. When you go to secondary school, they will teach you the right things for girls. Two sticks!'

Baba was home from work that evening. He was a gardener for a mzungu family near Victoria and worked from dawn to sunset before returning home. That evening, Baba was sitting on the couch, and Mama pushed me off her lap so she could go fetch his millet beer from the kitchen.

Baba told Mama to stop telling me such things. 'Maria, do not feed our daughter those lies,' he told her. 'Betty will not go to school, no man will take a girl who reads books and does not know how to cook good *ugali*.'

For Baba, school was the most merciless thing that a girl could condemn herself. 'Why waste money and go to school when you should be at home, preparing to be a wife?' He wanted me to learn how to cook and brew millet beer to double my dowry. Education was for boys who could leave home for universities in Mwanza city or Dar es Salaam and elevate the family's name. When I turned 10, I still didn't understand this. My three older brothers were already in school for years and I supposed it was my turn. I asked Baba when I would start. Baba threw his hands in the air and laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed so hard that his wrap almost fell from his waist and his beer from his hand.

'Betty, do not kill me today! School? With what money? For what reason? No man will take a girl who reads books. *Acha hayo mawazo* – stop those silly thoughts today.'

'I want to learn numbers and letters, Baba.'

'Numbers? Those numbers of yours will not make you a good bride. Numbers will only make your head heavy!'

Baba drank from his beer and told me to go away with my nonsense.

I did not go to school until we found Baba dead in his bed, lying in his own urine.

All my life, my Baba was a mystery to me. I can't remember much of him now, but it is fitting how he slipped out of my life with the same mystery that he came into it with. Mama would tell others that it was 'all that drinking' that killed him. I can recall the small burial we gave him at Pastor John's church, and that was the end of that.

I started school two months later.



Baba said that numbers would be my undoing, but I know now that the real trouble was how men looked at me.

My 15th year began with the first trickle of April's long rains and my first signs of menstruation. Mama gathered me into her arms like a newborn and announced with theatrics: 'You are now a woman!'

That school year, the boys stopped stomping and hocking spit on the ground where my friends and I walked. They stopped pulling down my skirt whenever I turned my back on them for too long during break time. They even stopped segregating themselves from the girls of Form Nine. Some broke away from their large packs to share their maize and peanuts with the girls between classes.

It first properly happened to Amina. Towards the end of the year, a classmate, Obedi, had chased her down, and instead of pushing her or pulling her skirt, he asked her if he could carry her books. Amina accepted – all the Big Girls said this happened when boys wanted to 'take girls out'. Obedi never took Amina out (they did not know where 'out' was), but he always ferried her books from Mathematics to Religious Studies, and sometimes, he would pat her once on the bottom when she turned to walk away after thanking him. They became 'boyfriend and girlfriend', and they sometimes kissed, but only behind the restroom building and not while sitting in a tree, like the American song we all sang at them described.

Then it was my turn. When I walked to the bus station alone after prep, I wasn't invisible because I became what the boys called a 'prime girl'. The type of girl they would wait for after lessons and follow around. At first, I welcomed their whistles. They felt like a choral initiation into the game of attraction. Those boys who whistled at me saw things that Mama and even my friends could not. The whistles were welcome until the sound started trailing me like a permanent stench. Until I turned every corner with their eyes attached to my body like parasites, searching me so hard I could feel them burrowing underneath my shirt, my vest, my skin. It was the year that I learnt to suppress the swing of my growing hips.

Teachers were looking as well. The sirs summoned me from the obscurity of shaved heads and pleated skirts to the front of their desks and asked me to return marked classwork to my peers. My Geography teacher, Mr Maharage, had a habit of ducking his eyes so low that they caressed my breasts and like a reflex, I hunched my shoulders forward to interrupt his view. The madams stared too, but their mouths did not curl with longing. Instead, they formed hard sneers that trembled with saliva – a sign of nausea.

'Look at the way that one moves her body,' I once overheard one madam say to another.

'You can tell she will be very easy; she is looking for trouble,' the other said.

I remember being confused. How else was I to move from point A to B?

Mama also looked at me in a certain way. When she welcomed me home, she would make my youngest brother, Charles, run to greet me at the door and collect my school things. When I entered the home, Mama stood up from her sewing machine, hugged me tight, then pulled me away and gasped, as though I had transformed into an amputee or a stranger bringing expensive gifts.

'Everyday Betty, you are becoming finer and finer.' Once, she turned to my four brothers and yelled, 'Can you see how your sister is becoming so fine? Her skin is the sun! She is a real beauty, one day she will make a wonderful bride.'

Soon after arriving home, if everyone was occupied, like a ritual I would dash to our shared bedroom and look at my reflection in the small, cracked mirror. My image stared back at me. A girl twice removed. I tugged at the fat around my waist and pressed my resisting breasts flat against my chest. That school year, I found myself looking at all kinds of mirrors. In the pools of potholes, brown and unforgiving. In the bonnet of dark-coloured cars, short and warped. And when I was desperate, I found myself in the reflection of spoons speckled with porridge. If I stared too long, my heart stammered, and my head hurt. *What is it that they see?* I sometimes thought with hot tears pricking my eyes. *What is it that makes men yell at my bottom and the madams kiss their teeth?* Maybe it was for my sanity's sake, or whatever it was suddenly made itself apparent. But one day, it became completely noticeable because whenever I looked at myself in the mirror from then on, all I could see was the version of me that others desired and despised. In the potholes, car bonnets, and spoons, I saw a beauty that was made for me. And like other prime girls, I learnt how to contain, maintain, and use it.



My heart is stammering now as I sit in Mama's living room. Almost 17 years have passed since that school year. I am sitting on Baba's favourite couch with the total weight of my body on my hands. When my hands become numb and painful, I pull them out from underneath me and fold my nightdress at the knees so that the hem no longer touches the sisal carpet below. I part my thighs to disrupt the warm sweat forming, then join them again only seconds later. Many minutes pass. A gigantic pain shoots through my left eye, making it water, but it soon dies down to a persistent throb. I pick at the two red plastic nails lifting from my cuticles as a distraction.

I want to condense myself. This is the second time today that I feel the despairing intensity of this thought. To swallow myself whole, beginning with my feet, like a snake. To wrap my arms twice around my torso until they pinch my body into neat, disappearing halves. I want the ceiling above my head to fall and pulverise me. If I can help it, I will confine my existence to as little of this couch as possible. I can't move, not a single arm or leg, but every process in my body wants to defy this command. Soon I will need to get up for the toilet.

Earlier this morning, I left my two sleeping children with the housegirl at home. I adjusted their mosquito nets and retrieved the money I had hidden underneath my son's mattress. There was no time to change into something presentable and little else that I own balloons beyond the contours of my body like this nightdress. It contains my whole being well.

'Aunty, can I get you water or soda? There is Coca Cola in the fridge.' I look up at the plump girl who stands at the entrance of the kitchen room. Her face is unfamiliar, but I know she's some distant relative my Mama has employed to work for her. Her expression is of someone who thinks it's a compassionate act to ignore the humiliating distress of others. I imagine that the housegirl feels pity for me. Still, she reacts in irritating shifty movements, smiling and crossing her arms behind her back to compensate for her critical eye and the contradictions in our two conditions. Her objective is to serve me, her madam's guest, with practised obedience.

'I will have water,' I say.

The housegirl hesitates at the door, as though anticipating that I will change my mind. I remember that I'm expected to choose the Coca Cola – that Mama would have bought it for guests. When Mama

arrives home, she will ask me if I've had that Coca Cola to drink, and if I say no, Mama will assume that the housegirl hadn't offered it to me in the first place.

'Coca Cola is fine.'

The housegirl smiles. Having escaped a certain scolding from Mama, she disappears into the kitchen and returns with the Coca Cola in a crystal glass with lemon and ice.

The housegirl leaves and I am alone. The throbbing in my eye starts again. I should have asked her to bring some ice in a rag, but I know that I must now wait for Mama's arrival to ask. The housegirl will avoid entering the living room again now that her most important obligation of welcoming me with a drink is complete.

I check my watch – the time is 11:36 am and by now, my husband must know that I am no longer at home. I switch on my phone and see the four missed calls and two messages under his name:

4 Missed calls from Simon

10:19am – Simon: My darling, pls come home, Patricia needs her milk. You know that the dada cannot feed her that formula milk, she won't take it.

11:02am – Simon: Betty, sitaki huu mchezo – do not play games with me.

I can hear Mama's Toyota come into the gate and the housegirl runs from the kitchen to the front door to greet her.

Mama enters the living room with a flurry of instructions for the girl.

'Esther take the bags from the car; there is fish in there so you must do it *chap chap*,' she instructs. 'Have you taken the clothes inside? It looks like it will rain soon.'

I stand up from the couch to kneel and greet her. '*Shikamoo* Mama – how have you been?'

Her instructions for Esther stop when she sees me and her flurry sours to a scowl. 'Betty, do not greet me when you have not visited for two years– what is the meaning of this!'

'Mama, you know –'

'*Mama, you know!* I do not want to hear it, Betty!' She imitates me in this cruel way when she feels afraid.

Mama's questions pivot. 'Why are you here Betty? Simon is very worried at home. The children are looking for you.'

I clench my teeth so hard that I can feel it in my bad eye.

'He hit me Mama.'

The words fell out of my mouth, tumbling one after the other but the sentence sounded bulky. Like someone else has spoken it. 'He hit me and now my eye is big and black like an insect's.'

Mama does not say anything for a minute. She just stands at the door staring and staring. From the corner of my eye, I can see Esther retreat to the safety of the kitchen. I can feel that Mama is experimenting in her mind with the most efficient things she can say to make me return home.

'You were being a bad mother.' Mama's words are sharp and dismissive. 'Men get angry, Betty. Simon said you almost overdosed Michael. You could have killed the child.'

So, this is the story that Simon has told his mother-in-law about me. A week ago, I was the one who was caring for our son who was sick with malaria.

'Mama, I didn't overdose Michael. It was only an extra paracetamol that I gave him for his headache. When I told Simon this, he hit me and pushed me to the ground.'

Another minute passes.

'Betty, please go home and stop this nonsense. You are being stubborn.' There is a misplaced softness in Mama's tone. She does not meet my eye and avoids looking at the purple and shiny one.

Mama's expression is blank; I cannot read it. 'Wait here,' she finally says and leaves for her room to change out of her colourful *kitenge* church dress.

I am alone again.

Maybe I am a wretched mother. I entertain this thought as a new distraction.

Wretched mother, wretched mother, wretched, stupid mother. Replaying the thought is soothing like when you press a bruise that you have spent so long nursing. Eventually, the pain subsides into a self-righteous and familiar sensation. It loses a little bit of its power.

I am a bad mother and a horrible wife. This second thought is a deliciously painful addition.

No one pities me because I am bad. This one doesn't make as much sense. There can only be one bad person in a story: Simon.

I dismiss the idea altogether. My life is not a story and there was a time when Simon was not bad. There was a time when he was the sun. When he was my friend, and then my lover. When he saw all that was good in me and protected it.

I begin reflecting on it all now, trying to trace everything back to the single moment when my marriage went stale.



I met Simon a few months before my 16th year. He was one of those men who drank at the pub across from my secondary school. The ones that jeered at us Ilemera girls on our way home from school. There

was always a small group of them. Wealthy businessmen congregated there to drink behind their Benzes and Range Rovers and away from their wives. They sat on stools, listening to the jaunty music playing on the old overhead radio, and sharing around bottles of *Kilimanjaro* and *Konyagi* drowned in Sprite.

Maybe it started going stale the very first evening that I saw him. Simon was drinking with the other businessmen, but it must have been his first time because I had never seen him before then. He was younger and more attractive than his peers. He stood out amongst the older ones with protruding beer bellies straining against their stiff shirts.

Even before he opened his mouth to say anything, I was looking at him from across the street, daring him to join in with the other men in their chants of asking me to lift my skirt for them, to come over and let them show me a good time. He saw me and laughed at the others. He told them to leave me alone.

One evening a few months later, when we were together in bed, I told him that that was the exact moment that I knew I could love him. He laughed. 'How could you say that it is when you "knew you could love me"? Why not that you loved me then and there?'

Now I realise that there was a malicious amusement behind his defence of me that day at the pub. He was not defending me, not truly. He differentiated himself for my attention, like a male peacock showing off its plume. I think that when he looked at me that day, he saw a weakness in me. He knew those men talked to me like that every day and that I wanted someone to make it end.

Maybe it all went stale before I introduced him to Mama. We began dating shortly after we met and spent two years together in secrecy. After school, he picked me up in his Benz and took me to Mwanza city, letting me buy whatever I wanted in those towering malls. He picked me up late when Mama and the boys were sleeping and dropped me home at 6 am.

The secrecy was not because he had a wife or anything like that. He was 37 when we met, and I thought it peculiar that a man of his age and status had not yet found a beautiful young wife to care for.

'You can be my beautiful young wife,' he told me when I asked about it. Finally, it was my turn to laugh but he was serious.

I did not bring it up again because I thought it unwise to ruin something good with too many questions.

We dated for two years before he proposed when I was 18. Maisha, Amina, and the other girls discussed university, and I told them I would be married soon. They showered me with fawning jealousy. '*Hee hee hee*, Betty is set for life with her handsome and rich businessman!'

We eloped after we told Mama, who shook me so hard that day that I can still feel the tremors in my body if I think about the memory enough. 'You stupid, stupid girl. You have spat on your father's name!' Mama slapped me once and hard across my face, and I collected my clothes in my school bag and left home. We reconciled after Patricia's birth.

Maybe the tumour in our marriage emerged when I had the miscarriage. I was just three months along when Simon found me on the bathroom floor with blood streaming down my thighs, like two rivers. He would not look at me. I had failed. The housegirl and the gardener, Juma, were the ones who took me to the hospital so that the lovely nurse could scrape my womb clean, and I could try again.

When Patricia was born, there was another failure. I wanted very badly to give Simon a first-born boy. He would not touch me for weeks, and I ate dinner alone, the baby suckling on my breast at all hours.

When Michael was born, I was the happiest I've ever been. I saw the first true joy in Simon's eyes since our wedding day. He held Michael so often that Patricia, who was only two, would scream for her baba to hold her too. I had done something right, and we were finally a family.

But things metastasised fast. Simon frequently travelled for work trips around Dar es Salaam, advertising solar-powered panels in the towns and villages of remote districts. Sometimes, he travelled 'outside' and returned with sealed bags of duty-free perfumes and chocolates from unpronounceable European cities.

I would spend hours unpacking his bags while he slept. I remember how I unrolled his mass of ties and pink lacy underwear, almost the size of a child's, tumbled out. I threw the underwear into the kitchen dustbin and never mentioned it to Simon.

I remember when I packed for that trip. How I folded each *kitenge* tie and counted the exact number of underwear he would require – even accounting for accidents. 'Eh, heh woman! How old do you think I am?' he had asked me.

'Old enough for you to soil your underpants!' I teased, and he spanked me on the bottom and grabbed my breast with humourous spite when I bent over to place two more white briefs in his suitcase. My breasts were always tender from breastfeeding, and I had told him that I disliked being touched there.

Even when I slathered my skin with *Ambi* skin-lightening cream every morning and ate less and less until my stomach disappeared and hunger was my friend, Simon no longer grabbed my breasts in his funny way or slapped my bottom when I dropped something. He only touched me at night when he thought I was asleep, rolling on top of me and leaving me with moisture between my legs before rolling off and returning to his snores.

I had only told Aunt Jija, my elderly neighbour who became my friend, about the pink underwear. She laughed and said that it would always be in a man's nature to be unfaithful. She joked that the Bible forgot to mention the third part of womankind's punishment for Eve's transgressions: she must fight until eternity to keep her husband's eye from wandering.

'He will go to another woman and then come back and say your name in a sweeter tone than before,' she said. Aunt Jija's husband had passed away years before I met her, when we moved into that wealthy neighbourhood in Bugando.

'First, it is my sweetheart, then my darling, then one day, he collapses on the bed without a word to you or your children, ha!'

So, I continued with my skin bleaching and my measured eating. Maybe this is what marriage was about: seeing the possibility of happiness just beyond the horizon and being aware that it is actively drifting away. My marriage was like a window that got murkier with time.

But when Simon hit me three nights ago, after the dispute about the paracetamol, it didn't feel like nature had ordained it. It felt like a punch in the face. When I left this morning, I wasn't scared that

Simon had hurt me or that he could do it again. I was scared because he acted as though nothing had happened. That I had deserved this for being an evil woman. So, like the day we eloped, I took the money I'd saved from allowances, and boarded the first bus for Ilemera.



Mama returns from her room. Her grey cornrows that were hidden underneath her stiff, bobbed wig are now exposed. Her entire body looks greyer compared to when I saw her last. She has changed into a brown *deraa* – her nightdress and joins me on Baba's couch without a word.

Mama does not look at me. Instead, she stares at her hands and begins her sermon.

'Betty, when you left me all those years ago, I hated you with all the love of a mama. This is not what I wanted for you – to run into the arms of the first man who calls you the sun.

'You do not know that I cried every night for three days. I called and prayed for you. You did not let me finish my duties as your mama, and I despised you for that.

'At school, they teach you numbers but not the truths of life. The ugly truths that I, as your mama, must tell you. You did not let me tell you anything and instead, you slipped into the night, only for you to call for me years later when you became a Mama yourself.'

She isn't crying, just staring at her hands which are laced together now.

'Betty, your Baba drank like a fish. He sometimes came home at odd hours, and I once found him collapsed outside the door reeking of beer and vodka. I never let you or your brothers see a single thing. *Nilivumilia* – I endured it all. When your father passed away in his sleep, a pathetic man who had robbed us of everything, I was set free.

'What I wanted to teach you before you went out into the world was this: *vumilia* – endure whatever happens to you.'

Mama looks up at me now; her sermon is almost over.

'Betty, you must run far away from that man. You must not endure this. You will take those children and make a new life for yourself. That is what you must endure.'

Mama isn't crying, but I am. It's painful, and my bad eye is now sealed shut.

We talk until the evening sets in. Then, Mama asks if I have had the Coca Cola to drink. I say yes.