

Sew My Mouth

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My lover can only love me behind drawn curtains. The bed must not creak or the neighbours will hear us. On Friday evening, when her parents come to visit, my lover cannot love me because they want her to marry a man. We all sit at the small brown rectangular dining table beneath the high serving-hatch that opens to the kitchen. My lover and I sit on one side, her parents on the other. She sits facing her father, who is tall and meaty. He laughs like a big drum. He eats like a big drum too; his inside is large, empty and hollow. He is shoving big ugali mounds into his mouth.

I think that her mother must know, because mothers see the air that mixes between lovers. Her mother must know because she is studying me like a specimen. She narrows her eyes, tightening her brow at the same time. Crow's feet choke the mole next to her left eye. Her face is lined around the eyes, but is otherwise as smooth and deep brown as a loquat seed. Small grayish bushes peep from beneath her blue headscarf; hers is a good strong hairline, just like her daughter's, one that extends far down into her forehead. I turn to my left, and my lover is making concerted conversation with her father, nodding, smiling, matching his raucous laughter, pouring extra words into the natural silences that occur in conversation, pouring her father wine and more wine until his speech slurs and his light brown cheeks turn pink and shiny with sweat, until his big-drum laughter grows and grows and threatens to swallow our little matchbox flat.

We are eating ugali and creamed sukuma, with kuku kienyeji that I bought at the butcher's for one thousand shillings. I know that my lover's mother likes avocado, so I bought ten of them, each for forty bob. But my lover's mother does not touch them, and neither does she touch the plate of food that I served her.

When I first met her she was pleasant, jubilant even, because I had found her daughter a place to stay near the university. Over and over again, she had said, "God bless you." After seven years, however, her genuine and earnest god-bless-yous had disintegrated into a liquid and guarded hostility, which now seeped through her narrowed eyes as she studied me. Three hours ago she had bustled in, just before my lover's father, a dark blue mermaid kitenge hugging her hips and flaring at her calves, her hair hidden in a matching scarf, her arms laden

with baskets of produce from the farm, hugging and kissing us on the cheeks and saying, “How are you, my daughters?” “My daughters, I have brought you cabbage and potatoes and peas...” “You look well, my daughters...”

My daughters, my daughters, another person would have thought that she loved me like a daughter, but I had known otherwise. I had known because I had learned to unearth true intentions, gleaning them like long translucent bones buried deep within tilapia fish. My lover’s mother had not been speaking with her mouth, from which her many *my daughters* had fluttered out. She had been speaking with her eyes, which had refused to surrender to the smile on her mouth.

She is still staring at me, eyes equal parts curious and hostile. I think that perhaps she thinks that dreadlocks are unbecoming, even if I have pulled them up into a ladylike bun that make my eyebrows feel unusually high; even if I have clipped Magda’s dangling earrings onto my un-pierced earlobes. Perhaps she can tell that the black dress with a pink flower print that I bought for today was bought for today, and that I am not in the habit of wearing dresses. I wonder if she can see, with those narrowed eyes, that the dress is too small, that the fabric is cutting into my armpits, that I am sweating under my arms. The food is growing cold, and white Kimbo droplets begin to float on the soup. My mind is running here and running there, out of breath, offering me one reason or another for this woman not liking me. It is trying to convince me that I do not know what she is thinking, it is running careful circles around the truth, it is telling me that she hates me for reasons I can fix.

But I know. I know what she is thinking even before the curiosity in her eyes evaporates, leaving hard hostility behind; before she flings heavy black tar into the air mixing between my lover and I, before she flattens that tar with a roaring steamroller, when she turns to my lover, smiling, full lips flattened against gleaming teeth, asking, “Mami, when you will get a husband? And a nice house?”

The skins of the unwanted avocados shine like my lover’s father’s light brown cheeks. He is drunk.

On Friday night, after her parents leave, we hold hands and pretend that we are outside. We walk in Nairobi. Our matchbox flat becomes the large sprawling city. The two bedrooms are the suburbs. We live in the bigger of the suburbs, the one with generous pavements and many

trees. We leave home and walk along the corridor, which is the highway to town. The kitchen, found just before we get to town, is Fagi's wooden Coca-Cola box-shaped shop. We lean through the serving hatch and ask for a one-litre Fanta Orange that we put in a paper bag. We hold hands again. We imagine that Fagi says, "What a lovely couple!"

Then we get to the Central Business District. The sitting room, which is also the dining room, is the CBD. The wall unit that almost touches the ceiling is the Times Tower. We look up and say, "How tall! How long did they take to build that?"

At last we go back to our house in the suburbs after spending the whole day bumping into rough fabric sofas and smooth aluminium matatu chests, into polished wooden stools and grey concrete buildings, into sweaty people and dining chairs with proud long backs, all of these fitting, as if by magic, in the small CBD of our flat. When we get to our bigger room, we lie on the same bed. If our lover's mother were to come in and find us, she would exclaim, "My daughters!" This time, her mouth would slacken, unable to smile. Her eyes would become round, un-narrowed, because whose arm was whose? Whose skin was whose? Whose leg was whose? Our body parts would be mixed up together like pieces of meat in a stew, in a sufuria without a lid, exposed because the lazy blanket had fallen off in the middle of the night.

The next day, Saturday, Magda is gathering water in her palms and lifting it onto her body. The wide blue plastic basin is perched on a stool, the whole arrangement a castle chess piece. First she is gathering up only as much as a dog's tongue because the water is cold, then she is gathering up more, then I hear no more water because she is scrubbing, and then I begin to hear larger and louder water as it pours over her body, and the thirsty drain, as it drinks it up. She comes out wrapped in a white towel and asks me if I have seen the nail-cutter, and I want to tell her that it is in the second bedroom, on the desk by the window. Keep your nails short: school rule or *lesbianology*? But this is when Magda's vibrating phone stirs us. It is a text from Thomas, our neighbour, to say that he is at the door. As Magda rushes to dress, I rush to mix the blankets on the bed in the smaller second bedroom, trying to make it look slept in, tossing some of the red towels that clutter the bed into the cupboard, throwing a pair of jeans onto the floor, opening the curtains. Magda and I scamper around our matchbox flat like rats; I think of green rat-poison pellets floating in a glass of Fanta Orange. I want to lie down for a

bit, and cry for a bit, but I hear the sound of the door opening and I hear Magda saying loudly: “Thomas! Mambo!”

And thus, Thomas has fractured our gentle reverie. Magda is louder now, fussing over him, very much like her mother, “Sasa wewe, what will we cook for you? Do you want tea? How is job?” Her crotchet-braid weave bobs as she rushes from the kitchen to the sofa to the dining table, reheating food and setting a stool before him. “Tom, dear, how much chilli do you like in your food?” – “Maji ama Coke?” – “I’m sorry that this is taking so long!”

Thomas glows under Magda’s uxorial light; he is smiling as he watches her shuffle about. Madga smells like Nivea body lotion, good food and three fat future children, two boys and one girl. Thomas, twenty-nine, wants to be with her, would marry her, on his thirty-second birthday, at the Holy Family Minor Basilica in town, him dapper in a black suit, her veiled in all-white, his family on the pews on right and hers on those on the left. I know all this because I trawled through the Whatsapp messages he sent Magda, all of them unanswered, arranged one after the other like rectangular stones on a stepping-stone pathway. He would marry her, but here I am. I sit quietly on the adjacent sofa. I know how to shrink myself to live. My father taught me how to make myself smaller. First, he taught my mother, then me, then my three little bald sisters, one after the other, each of us with big-big eyes yearning to be enough for a man who wanted a son but got four daughters, each next one with rounder eyes and a bigger forehead, foreheads made to look even bigger because any trace of hair was promptly shaved off. To look neat for school, my father had said, to keep boys away, my father had also said. My mother promised me hair as soon I finished high school. I and my egg head had made ourselves so small that our father could not see us. I know now that if I make myself small enough to almost disappear, I will be left alone to live.

But Magda swells up, she is swelling up now, big like her big drum father, big like her afro weaves, hiding herself under loud layers, showy like her fabulous mother. When her parents are far away in Eldoret, when Thomas leaves, when I have fallen asleep, and when all the lights are off, my lover goes into the smaller bedroom. There, with the steady, solitary and painful focus of a chicken trying to lay an egg, she peels off all those layers. Perched on her red towels and locked away from me, she prays, shakes, and rakes razors across the skin of her inner thighs.

There is nothing like Madga’s hair. It is the darkest of clays, which she moulds into many shapes. Buns, braids, cornrows, weaves, mixtures of two or three or all of these, shrunken

tiny afros or picked spherical ones, wigs, hats, sometimes with her front hair showing, and finally, cloth hair – scarves twisted and bunned at the back. My hair is weak and fine, and can only grow long in dreadlocks, and even then, it never is voluminous. So Magda’s hair is even more beautiful to me, the good strong hairline, the many shapes, the balls of shed hair like cotton strewn all over the dresser. The only thing that I like more than her hair is her skin. It is darkest between her thighs, and there, on each side, I find short, black and precise scars, arranged like gills.

On TV, a politician says that there is no space for gays in Kenya. Thomas says, “I support him. Can you even imagine a *dick* in your *ass*?” He takes a slow sip from the glass of Coke that Magda has set out for him, and licks his lips. With a prodding half-smile, he adds in a lower voice, staring straight at Magda, “But I *support* the L. That one I most definitely *support*.” He is the kind of man from whose mouth sentences slide easily, ropes curling into nooses encircling women’s waists. My jaws grow hot as I imagine him masturbating to *lesbian porn*. He adds, “But how many letters are there in that thing again?”

There is a stilted pause in the conversation. There is too much to ignore, even for Magda. Perhaps she is thinking that he knows. What would follow then would be to wonder what the implications of his knowing would be. In the end, Magda recovers from the brazenness of it all, strangling the too-long pause with a big laugh, flinging it under her loud layers, almost screaming-laughing, and saying, not even sarcastically, “Thomas you are so funny! Oh my gosh! *How many letters are there in that thing!*”

Marionettes are sinister because they are controlled by strings that lead up to the devil. If I were to pinch a normal person, they would frown or slap my hand away or cry out or pinch me back. But if I were to pinch a marionette, its empty eyes would just stare back at me, wooden and smiling, dancing and clapping.

Magda turns to me laughing, repeating, “*How many letters are there in that thing!* Don’t you think that’s so funny?” Her eyes are clear and round, her mouth stiff and stretched into a smile, straight teeth arranged dutifully, kernels of white maize on a cob. Her voice is thick brown, millet porridge, rich and homely; sugary and buttery, but tinged with something bitter – very likely lemon juice, straight from the lemon.

Underneath puppets’ veneers are knives that will slice your throat in your sleep. White wriggly maggots under a lush and pretty log.

Thomas interjects, “Magda, you look so pretty when you laugh like that. Let me take a picture of you. Where is your phone? Mine’s just gone off.”

I am shrinking, crawling, deeper under the bed, Thomas’ words trailing after me. I am thinking of the night months ago when Thomas had banged on the door, speech slurred, *I want to see Magda, I want to see Magda*, how we had put off the lights and tiptoed to the smaller bedroom, waiting under the bed for the banging to stop and for him to leave, how the thick puddle of low thrum anxiety nestled at the base of my throat had exploded into hiccupping panic as I had heard the door burst open, as I had clung to precious Magda, under the weight of her red towels, the dusty underside of the bed choking the both of us. How my mouth had remained sewn.

The next morning Madga had mopped up the muddy footprints that tracked from the door through the sitting room all the way to the corridor. He had not got to the bedrooms. I had gone out and found a serious fundi with a pencil behind his ear. He had fixed the broken door and added a new grill, with fat metal bars, standing tall and straight like askaris.

On Sunday morning I wake up, and Magda is not next to me. I try to open the door to the second bedroom but it is locked. I feel faint, so I go to the balcony for some fresh air. On the street below, at the bus stop just outside our building, matatus snarl in the dust like wild cats. It is hot. There are hardly any trees or pavements. Then I notice that all the red towels are gone from the hanging line. I rush back to the second bedroom, and through the door I say, “Magda, are you okay? Open the door, please.”

“Give me some time alone, please.”

Her voice is weak and watery, like strungi, poor people’s milk-less tea. Worry makes it difficult for me to reply calmly, “Okay. How much time?”

No response. I coax some more, but not even the watery weakness reappears. I want to bang on the door. I want to scream MagdaMagdaMagda, but the neighbours will hear me. So I sew my mouth. But the trapped Magdas remain at the base of my throat, popping like fried oil. Then they are flowing downwards, still popping, burning the inner walls of my body, shaking me. I think that I should cook some tea that I will not drink, because perhaps the smell will calm me down. I am shaking as I cut open the plastic milk packet with a knife, and halfway

through this, the packet slips and bursts on the floor. I drop the knife, I forget the tea, I am sobbing, sinking to the tiled floor, the hems of my heavy cotton sweatpants wetting with milk, like wicks.

When Magda and I had talked about God, she had said, “You don’t understand. It is God who keeps me alive.” I had wondered where I could get some of this God of Magda’s. He had sounded like the beef cubes I add to potato stew when it gets too bland.

Still I had not understood. This God business had outgrown me. It was like an old sweater I wore as a child, now too small and scratchy. My God was not gentle like Magda’s; my God was like my father, whose house breathed only after he had left. But now staring at the diamond patterns on the ceiling, crying-convulsing, with milk soaking my scalp, my back, my panties, my legs, I begin to mutter, God please, God please. It is now only me, and Magda, and Magda’s good God.

My heavy cotton sweatpants are stubbornly wet, but the milk on my cotton T-shirt is drying and sticky on my back. I am no longer convulsing but I am still sobbing softly, kneeling at the door of the smaller bedroom and trying out each of the keys in the pile I found in a basket on top of the fridge. The sixth turns the lock. The door flings open. The room is dark, the curtains are drawn. There is a smell of zinc. I switch on the light. Magda lies naked on her red towels, her dark thighs a mess of red. I kneel beside her. She is breathing.

But my lover’s mother will love her and will crush her. She will take her daughter’s heart and crush it between her narrowed eyes, between eyelids heavy and strong with love that cuts with the strength of diamonds. Magda, twenty-seven and weary of this crushing love, will grow louder and bigger to hide her crushed heart. Like an agitated turkey, her feathers will fan out, her face will fill with blood. Later she will think it unfair that a heart should bear this crushing alone. She will make her thighs bleed again. At least this is what I tell myself because even though she is lying there bleeding and barely breathing, I do not want to call her parents without her consent. But mostly, I am afraid that if they take her away, I may never see her again.

It is like she has given birth to the devil.

I mend her thighs. She leaves after two weeks. In the end, her mother is the person that she goes back to, tail between legs, heart in hands, wanting it soothed. After she cut herself, a quiet voice told me that it was my fault. That it was the thing that mixed up the air in between us that was cutting her. That it had grown too big for the only place in which I could love her. It had become too much, too raucous. It had swallowed us. It had shrunk me. And it had cut her thighs, every year for three years, always a few days after her parents' visit. I stopped meeting her eyes when I changed her bandages twice a day. I stopped talking to her, responding wordlessly to her needs for drinking water, the toilet, bananas, the bhajias fried in a shack directly opposite our building.

I expected her to leave. When the rain went and the sun came, my father did not fret that the rain had gone. It was time for the maize in the fields to ripen. And so after the scars had healed, like the rain, like a patient discharged, Magda put on her red maxi skirt and left with a small bag.

But the house is heavy with my beloved. I cannot sleep in the bigger bedroom because her hair is on the dresser, not to mention in the smaller bedroom, where she had given birth to the devil. I sleep on the rough fabric sofa, maroon with gold-thread flowers. I refuse to touch the mixture of towels, blood and red dye in the basin on the balcony. One day I feel that I do not want to see anyone, not a soul, not even a cockroach, ever again. So I call my boss to quit my PR job where I am obligated to wear short grey skirts. He tells me he has already given away my job because I did not show up for three weeks and didn't respond to his calls. I cook and cry. From the sofa, I begin to design websites for a living. When money gets tight, I take up Magda's old job at a DVD shop a few minutes' walk from the flat.

One evening, two months later, I come back home from the DVD shop and know that Magda is back because the towels hang stiff and foul on the balcony, now a dull orange after bleeding out all their dye. I expected that she would leave, and now I accept that she has come back. She comes out of the kitchen. Her hair is gone, cropped close to her scalp. I am not sure whether her cheekbones had always been so high, her eyes so big, her irises so large, floating like cocoa beans in milk. It had been seven years of seeing only her hair.

That night we sleep heads touching, breathing each other, arms around each other. I roll over to face the other side and Magda moves with me, her nose at my nape, her arm still wrapped around me. Even though neither of us had contacted the other, I had spent all this time expecting that she would come back. So I am glad that I no longer have to expect. But I am also stifled by the suddenness of her return. I know that it is the rain's place to come unannounced. But I also know that Nairobi November skies tend to be heavy and cloudy like grey wet blankets, ones that mother spirits wring to drench the city. The question is: is the coming of rain in Nairobi in November expected or unexpected?

It is perhaps a matter of weather in relation to climate. The weather is mercurial: in the morning it wants pink lipstick, and by noon it has decided that today is a red-lipstick day. Some days it ties its arms around me, and other days it cannot meet my eyes. If the weather is a yellow banana peel racked with black scars, then the climate is what is inside. It is the way Magda squeezes my hand under tables when I have sewn my mouth so tightly that I can hardly breathe. It is the certainty that is the great big engine that is her heart: how it runs on butter and Baringo honey, and how it warms me, melting open my stitches.

Therefore, if a particular Nairobi November day appears sunny from inside the house, then what do we say to someone who goes out to the salon to flat-iron their hair, expecting that the straightness will last for at least a week and a half, and then does not have an umbrella in their bag on the very day that the rain decides to come the way that Jesus said that he would, kinking their expensive straightness? Is the coming of rain in Nairobi in November expected or unexpected? We can say, yes, it is your fault, the rain was expected, this is November, why didn't you have an umbrella, you just go home and style your afro. We can also collect in a corner and decide that no, it is not your fault, the rain was unexpected, it has been sunny for the whole day, imagine, it only decided to rain once you stepped out of the salon, pole sana, let us curse heaven together. There are things that are both expected and unexpected, and the rain is one of these things.