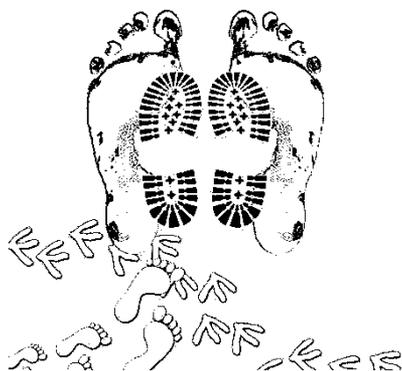


THE BOY WITH SHOES



A Kenyan Childhood

HILLARY LISIMBA AMBANI

MYSTERY BOOKS

The Boy with Shoes!

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For

The late Jumba Mamesa

*You made English beautiful, effortlessly
I didn't just learn, I experienced
I found love in English, and English opened its arms to me
Sad you never got to see my writing come alive
You should have waited a little bit longer to see me make you
proud.*

*To your grave, you took a lot of wisdom and language
I try, very hard, to keep your legacy alive,
I hope one day I can make a language champion too
Some say the little things I write inspire them—I don't know
I just write!*

*They never showed me where your bones lie, nor let me bring
you flowers.
You, too, didn't bid me farewell, you just left—
And that was cruel of you.
Well, I doubt anyone knew just how much you flowed in my
blood.
Heroes don't die,
They forever remain engraved on the hearts of those they
touched.*

*Tears poured freely as I wrote this poem, I still mourn my
English champion.
This book is my little way of saying 'Thank You'.
It's the much I could do.
Now you can rest in peace,
Your legacy lies herein.*

*Signed,
Son of Man.
Born to tell stories to touch lives.*

Also for:

Those who made this possible:

My parents, Mr and Mrs Ambani, for the fists of steel. I was naughty and that is why this book exists in the first place. You also made sure I got sufficient education to help me fit in modern day society.

Tope, Anthony, Anne, Nelly (Rest in peace), and Julliet. You were the gears in the system that interwove to create this entire plot.

My high school English teacher, Mr. George Masinde, for picking the language orphan left by Mr. Mamesa and crafting me into the prose writer I have become. I owe you another book.

Mr Erick Livumbazi Ngoda, my editor, for helping re-arrange my ideas into something sensible.

Brenda Oloo (Mermaid): The dotting wife, mother to my son and anchor in my adult years. You took over parenting me from my parents and you've done an excellent job.

Milan: In him my heir lies. In his veins my blood flows. In his existence, I have reason to look forward to another day. Now that is the next writer.

My fans: You are the reason I write. I became your servant and it's a wonderful place to be. For you I'll always write.

Lydia N. Njuguna, Patricia L. George, and
Cassandra Mathews: wonderful strangers who believed
in a young man's dream and turned it into a reality.
Words aren't sufficient to express my gratitude.

God: That would need a whole book to talk about.
He is everything I needed and more.

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PREFACE



This is a true reminiscence, a recollection of my formative years growing up in the village. I have come to realize that it was a rich experience that taught me many valuable life lessons. Although some still make me cry and others make me light up with joy, all the memories are dear and deep inside my heart. They are all indelibly etched in the sands of time. Most people who grew up around the time I did would relate and empathize, because it seemed like every parent during our time read from the same script, every school operated the same way, and every village had the same characters. Some of these stories could sound fictitious to those growing up in the present day but they will definitely strike a nostalgic cord in those with similar experiences.

Hillary Lisimba Ambani, 2018

CHAPTER 1

AN IMBECILE IS BORN



NEWLY MARRIED TO a young man who had put her up in one of the most beautiful houses in the village, Mom's life was growing from strength to strength. Her job as a teacher won her love from church members, parents to the children she taught, fellow workmates, and ordinary villagers. A woman, like her, who made her 'own money' in the '90s earned a place among the 'who is who' in the society. The norm was most women stayed home and waited for the men to toil and bring the bacon home. Wait, let us replace 'bacon' with something cheaper, like beans. Most men who went out not only came home smelling of cheap liquor, but also

demanded food from the same women they had left with no money. I lost count of the fathers I passed lying on the roadside after one too many, waiting for their lovely wives to come drag their drunk souls home.

It is, therefore, safe to say that Mom was living the Kenyan Dream ... but there was a problem: the only son she had given birth to was the proper definition of imbecile. She named me after one of the most famous doctors of our time, Dr. Lisimba. The only undoing was that my surname is Luhya for Mongoose, doctor in the picture or not. For the same reason, the name 'Lisimba' was not fully embraced by the family, because families share surnames passed on from generation to generation. All my sisters have some other cousin or niece with their maiden names; Savai, Afandi, Eboso, or some other family name. The names keep circulating as new babies join our family, so much that many a time when we are at a gathering you have to specify 'the small Savai' or 'the chubby Eboso' lest six people respond at the same time. It is only that these gatherings are rare these days—we forgot family ties and only meet at funerals.

Back to my name, Lisimba has never been given to anyone else, it is like the whole extended family silently protested against it. Even my own four-year-old son has internalized all my other names but somehow refused to grasp that particular one. That is what happens when you go naming your kid after tiny crafty stubborn animals just because you picked the name from a doctor.

I choose not to take this lying down, though. Remove 'Li' from the same name and you are left with 'Simba', the king of the jungle. Now that makes sense, doesn't it? Dogs named Simba in my village not only have a personality but are known to be fierce. So, if some comfort can be gained from that then I left that mongoose crap and joined the winning side; and that's how early in life 'The Den Diaries' was born. Lions have dens, mongoose have holes; the lion roars and everything around goes into hiding, the mongoose

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hears simple noises and scampers into hiding. Who in their right mind wants to be associated with that kind of mediocrity? Not me. The LION it is.

I have never been told the exact time of the day that I came, kicking and screaming, into this world. Only the date is deemed important to record perhaps, mine being Friday, 10th May, 1985. The location of birth is recorded as Pumwani Maternity Hospital, the largest maternity facility in Kenya. Further details surrounding my entry into the world are scanty, but I have with time come to question a lot of things. First, that facility has had numerous scandals of babies being exchanged when their mothers are still confused and weak from labour. Which means I could easily be a child of affluence who should by now be sitting in a rocking chair in a compound with an Olympic-size swimming pool sipping mojito to the sound of birds chirping on trees.

However, I live in a lower middle class apartment jostling for space with giant cockroaches during the day and enormous mosquitoes at night. I always confirm my jalopy has working jumper cables and a tow-rope in the trunk before leaving lest it 'dies' on me out there. Being broke is just sad, isn't it? Secondly, I'm constantly confused with an artist named Rabbit (shares this love for animals). He is into creative writing with a similar style as mine and is Luhya like myself! Coincidence? Who knows, one of these days I'll drag myself to a lab and run DNA tests.

I am the first born, an only son, which automatically meant I was a mini-parent. My parents didn't have much back then; just two huts, a handful of brown chicken, one emaciated cow, and God. When you are born of a family that is still trying to find a bearing, you suffer together with your parents, and when their little money runs out, they look at you with such thoughts as, 'if we didn't have this third mouth, we would probably have some more.' They also make all their parenting mistakes on you and the society understands. Even as a trial and error kid, a guinea-pig, you

are expected to be as straight as an arrow, as if someone tapped you one day while in the womb and said he was there for a crash course on discipline. You become some sort of a magician's dove; raised a mistake, turned out a masterpiece.

Mothers usually bear the brunt, because fathers easily conclude your wailing into one sentence—he wants to breastfeed—and only one person in that household has that ability. Sometimes one wonders why men were given this useless pair on the chest, but then imagine a man's chest without breasts. When you do well at school, the father guards that victory as his own, when you fail the same father avoids it like the plague— *wewe tu ni mjinga kama mamako*.

First-born sons gave fathers pride and agony in equal measure. Pride because they went to work and their first result was a male made them feel like a bull. It brought about an air of importance knowing there's a ready heir to continue the family lineage and inherit their property. Well, it is not like most had anything to call an inheritance, maybe just debts for those that spent their twilight years drowning in illicit liquor. The agony was that sons were darlings to their mothers—some sort of connection even scientists haven't done well at explaining—so, fathers hang on and sometimes throw tantrums to remain relevant. The weak ones kept distance, pretending to be out there working when they actually were tired of how upside down another little being turned their cul-de-sac.

First-borns can easily break young marriages, because a once active sex life metamorphoses into a cot of cries and poop. The couple walk around with red sleepy eyes from lack of sleep, many times fighting over who should clear the poop or feed the baby at night. Sex dry spells hit an all-time high because the baby 'refuses' to move from the matrimonial bed to the crib. Mothers side with their 'angel', allowing the baby to sleep spreadeagle between them. One minute the baby is on top of the new parents' heads, the next minute is threatening to drop from the bed to the ground, then the two

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have to put up with another round of wailing, kicking, and whimpering.

Ever been a father and wanted to say ‘son of a gun’ then remembered the gun in question was you? By morning, the young wife-cum-mother-of-your-child keeps talking about breastfeeding, washing the baby, getting millet flour for the baby, immunizations that are due for the baby ... now add an imbecile like me to the equation and suicide hovered around like a debt collector.



Growing up and schooling in the village was mayhem. First, you were weaned on cow milk and porridge, then raised in napkins which had to be washed over and over at the rate you soiled them, and a baby that’s being weaned poops things that are unprintable. Add first-born to that list and you were doomed from the word go. If my example is anything to go by, first-born kids are also born specifically for punishment. I was more than once blamed for the mistakes of my younger siblings; half the time being whipped on their behalf. For some reason, African parents are slap-happy. By the time they are threatening to punish a mistake you are already juggling between holding onto balance and rubbing off the pain on the cheeks courtesy of slaps you did not manage to count.

First-born sons, however, do not look at their mother straight in the eye and challenge whatever she says, however idiotic it is. Most mothers would be quick to remind you that they breastfed and wiped your ass so you have no right of expression. Wasn’t breastfeeding and cleaning poop a rider when they made their decision to bring a baby into the world?

It was a crime to try to block those slaps. It was considered a murder plot against your mother.

“Ati umefanya nini? Heeeee, unataka kuniua sasa, sindio?”

That simple act of saving yourself some pain would be repeated everywhere whenever people spoke of bad children. If someone praised you on the road for being well mannered, your mom would interject;

“Nooo. Polite? Let him not pretend here, this one almost killed me the other day!”

That was mom, always tagging along a little would-be murderer and reminding villagers that I may not be armed but was very dangerous. A child who blocked the parent’s slaps was a threat to society, everyone had to be wary.

Dad worked in Nairobi and visited once a month, most probably the day his salary reflected on the account. He loved traveling at night, so we would go to bed as usual on Friday evening and wake up to an additional member the following morning. You did not have to struggle much to know he was around even as he snored the night’s journey away. Mom was up and down around the house fixing meals with more vigour than we were used to.

The realisation came as bad news; that all the unpunished mistakes throughout the month would be read out and punished at supper time. Dad would wake up and start barking orders at everyone, like a hungry lion traversing the jungle. His hoarse voice sent shivers down everyone, including the farm workers and Bobby the family dog. His being away was in a way a blessing to us, but then again it deprived us of the paternal love we needed at that developmental stage. It created a long-term relationship breakdown that we have to this day not fully recovered from.



Nestled in the quiet land of Maragoli is Chotero village, the place I call home. Although it is considered an agricultural zone, girls are more fertile than the farms. During the planting season, the villagers woke up early every morning to drop maize and bean seeds into holes sunk in the ground the

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previous day. The lazy one was usually asked to go to the farm a little later, his or her role being to cover up the holes with soil. After that much toiling, the farms produced maize cobs the size of a home theatre remote control. It was like the land of my birth badly needed to break away from some generational curse, otherwise the mathematics of planting crops, waiting for three months then eating the harvest in two weeks did not sit well with me.

Where we lacked in fertility, Chotero enjoyed the abundance of circular grass-thatched mud huts with a long pole protruding at the peak. It was like those little umbrella-like structures came with lightning arresters. The rich few roofed their houses with iron sheets, mostly done way before I was born because by the time I was mature enough, they were all brown and rusty, evidence of how much the weather had beaten them. When boys came of age, they were advised to start life in a grass-thatched house, then upgrade with time to iron sheets roofs.

But the years moved so fast that before one knew it what was meant to be a temporary structure had become his family house and at least three children had been created under it. I am being modest by putting the child-count at three, because my boys fill this earth with wanton disregard for family planning. Consequently, school fees would start choking the poor young man, and the dream to upgrade to an iron-roofed house flew out of the window. Those that were lucky enough to escape the village and land a job in the city had higher chances of building better houses. The problem with those in the city was, however, that most opened their eyes to partying and womanizing, until their bosses slid a termination letter under their desks one morning. The brighter ones would hit the road, find another job and change their lifestyles, investing back home in case the new boss followed in the footsteps of the previous one.

Most grass-thatched houses had four rooms; lounge, bedroom, kitchen, and animal room. In other words, our

fowls had a whole room to themselves in the family house. I think whoever came up with the line 'chicken came home to roost' had spent time in my village. Your worth was determined by how big your sitting room was, and whether there was a different part for the dining area. A long cupboard rested on the wall with no window, the more affluent one with see-through glasses from which you could view the household's cutlery and crockery which were only used when visitors came over. All the other days the family made do with rusted cups, torn plates and plastic tumblers as cockroaches roamed through the collection tucked away in wait for an event.

There were three types of cooking points for the kitchen. One was the traditional three stones, the other a slight improvement of the stones called the modern-jiko which operated on chunks of wood instead of firewood, and the proper charcoal *jiko*. This third one was mostly lit on weekends to cook heavy meals like beans, maize, or the mixture. Dangling from the kitchen roof was a stack of firewood, replenished almost daily by the girls who were tasked with fetching dry pieces of wood and tree trunks from around the village. The moneyed bought full trees, chopped into smaller pieces and stashed them on that overhead 'store' to dry from the kitchen heat.

The pit latrine and bathroom were proper green structures in the sense that one 'grew' them with plants that had heavy dark leaves. All one needed was to plant many of them in a circle or square, and after a while a green structure would rise from ground up. The opening meant for the door would be covered with a towel or old blanket, and just like that a construction problem was solved.

Hedges surrounded most compounds, save for one or two who were wealthy enough to afford barbed wire. Gates to these compounds were either next to the main road or facing a footpath that linked to the main road.

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A house was proof that a young man was now eligible to move to the neighbouring village and get a girl and find a way to bring her back to our village. But winning a girl in that village was a long tedious process and you would not have gained the courage to approach a girl from elsewhere before honing your skills on those around you. First, no boy approached the said girl alone; just in case she said no. That crop of girls would not say no and leave it at that, they always followed the rejection with a series of loud insults. This left those around in stitches as you tried to muster some energy to take your dejected soul back home.

In such scenarios, go-betweens came in handy. These were the self-proclaimed 'macho' boys who didn't fret about approaching a girl. They knew way too early in time that approaching a girl would only yield two answers; 'No' to mean 'I'm game but just playing hard-to-get' or silence which meant a dead end. They would go to the girl, present your case, convince her on your behalf then arrange a meeting to 'introduce' the two of you. By the time this introduction was done, the girl had been wooed fully and was already yours; you only had to pick from there. Both the boy and girl would be too shy to look into each other's eyes, so the girl's would be chewing fingernails or mauling and shredding leaves and tiny branches of the nearest trees and thickets while the boy would be doodling on the ground with his big toe.

The go-between was then promoted to relationship messenger. All mail would go from one party to the other through him or her. This was, however, an expensive affair because the correspondent had to be paid by the boy before offering the services. Payment would include an oval bottle of 'Yu Body Jelly' for a female correspondent and hard cash for a male. However, the bigger budget would go into impressing the girl.

A boy would have done anything possible to get some money, buy a few things and give them to the correspondent. The risk was that most correspondents edited the list of

items before delivering them to the intended destination, so chances were that half the package would not get there. Go-betweens were shrewd business people, unless it was one of those cool brothers who didn't mind you dating the sister.

When an assignment like that presented, they would do due diligence on the target then wait in the bushes, camouflaged like leopards, to 'push' (escort) the girl to or from the river. Permission to 'push' was never granted, you imposed yourself and yapped all the things your mind could muster, as she struggled to outpace you, balancing the heavy load on her head. She could give you one-word answers or a forced smile, but that was a sign that she was willing to let you hang around, because a girl that didn't want you only needed to say two words—"*Nitaambia Mamangu*"—and you stopped right in your tracks. A girl reporting that you were talking her into partaking 'bad manners' with you while she tried to be a responsible daughter was tantamount to murder. You were lucky if her father lived and worked in the city, because only the mother would show up at your door that very evening, a *leso* around her waist, stand arms akimbo then hurl insults at you for spoiling children, and your mom for bringing into the world a Billy goat always on heat.

The well-tamed mothers would be silent and patient, let the other mother finish howling across the neighbourhood and go back to her house, then offer you warm water for a bath. While bathing, as naked as the day you were born, your mother would storm into the bathroom with a pair of slippers or a piece of wood. You wouldn't want to be in the same room with your irate mother, slippers/the cane in hand, you naked, afraid and freezing. Even a raising the hand without actually hitting you felt like gunshot, and crying was a felony ... crying meant you looked down upon her punishment. When the slippers didn't seem to administer what she had in store, her fingers kicked in. I still have pinch marks imprinted on my thighs as evidence.

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It was a different story if the same information reached the girl's father. They were civilized not to come into another man's compound and spew venom, maybe because they had been worse during their time, or scared the your father could be home then things get ugly. Men don't fight at fellow men's compounds, not in front of kids screaming or cheering, and not when you could easily go back home with missing teeth then your own kids become the laughin stocks for having a self-inflicted *kibogoyo* father.

Imagine being at a gathering and someone asks “*Samson, meno ilienda wapi?*”

“*Haiya, hujaskia? Alienda kupigana juzi kwa Ambani wakagonga meno. Huyu sasa ni kibogoyo tu.*”

“*Sasa mahindi utakula vipi?*”

“*Mgani? Mahindi hawezi. Huyu sasa ni wa uji tu.*”

It is not like they would be saying this behind your back, no, you would be seated with them, mouth shut, not sure whether to say something, laugh along, or feel stupid.

So to mitigate future embarrassments, the girl's father would watch you from a distance, know your routine, then waylay you. Some even made plans with the daughter to accept your ‘push’ then he would appear from nowhere wielding a machete or a whip beat the crap out of you. So you would be there, facing imminent death, while the girl you wanted watched and laughed at how her father was tackling a manner-less son of a woman. That is also the reason daughters tend to gravitate towards their fathers, because in them they see protection, real love and the one man who is serious when he promises to be there for her through thick and thin.

Being beaten over a girl was information you had to keep top secret, because if your own parents got wind of it, there would be another session so you dashed to the river, washed your face and limbs to erase any evidence, then waited for the swelling to subside before walking back home a humble young man.

A lot has changed, because would-be agricultural farms have since become settlement land. Some of my folks have (against Luhya culture) sold ancestral land to people from ‘foreign’ tribes who are using it for high-rise buildings and private schools. The macho men of our society are adopting new ways of life among them styling hair, piercing ears, and getting down with fellow men. The girls we chased around and got beaten for now chase the boys, and go-betweens have been replaced by a little mobile phone applications like Whatsapp, Telegram, Facebook, and many others who conduct social analytics and recommend girls for you. Fathers have no one to waylay, and the unlucky few who fall victim to thrashing can no longer keep the information to themselves because one screenshot spreads past the village at the click of a forward icon. Mothers no longer go to people’s compounds to stand arms akimbo; they are busy meeting at cafés to do table banking and apply for *chama* loans. Village life became boring.

CHAPTER 2

WELCOME TO SCHOOL



WHEN OUR HOUSE-help decided not to show up for work one morning, Mom tagged me along to the school she taught and dumped me with the nursery school kids while she took on her usual teaching duties. By the time she came to pick me over lunch hour, I was part of the system; too deeply immersed to take a step back. She hurriedly assembled some pencils, drawing books and crayons then crocheted a blue and white shoulder-sling school bag. She now had company every morning to work in the form of a young boy waddling behind her like a duck. Mom and I were now like two peas in a pod, only that the bigger pea understood what

was going on, among them the fact that I had helped her put the need for a nanny aside, albeit temporarily.

Mutsulyu Primary School sat at the junction of two roads, one leading to Lyaduywa and the other Mbihi, the way to my home. The lower part of it was hidden by a badly planted hedge with loopholes through which truants made their way out. The gate was just an opening with no structure to give it the name. It was a state of mind, and both teachers and students knew which part was the no man's land and where the school compound started without the demarcation. A signpost with the school name painted on it stood a meter away from the imaginary crossing line, threatening to collapse any time. The writings, though defaced, were precise:

MUTSULYU PRIMARY SCHOOL
P.O. BOX 82, MARAGOLI

No motto, no fancy graffiti, nothing. Such academic arrogance!

The classroom block was an inverted L-shape, with the staffroom holed at the meeting point between the horizontal and vertical axes. The shorter side of the L was lower primary, the longer upper primary—classes four to eight. In front of the classroom was an assembly area, denoted by a tall wooden pole on which the Kenya flag was hoisted every morning Monday and Friday. That flag was more than a symbol of patriotism, as it ushered us back from the weekend and sent us away after a long week of assignments and the cane.

At the Assembly Area, stones were arranged in four concentric circles like a stadium; the smallest circle for class one and two, all the way to class eight on the outside. A student's name would only be mentioned during assembly because he or she either did something exceptionally good or was involved in what would ordinarily pass for simple

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misdemeanour like making faces at a girl. All the other times it was teachers threatening us with failure, the cane, or being ‘chased to bring fees.’

The classrooms were simple halls with wooden windows and floors smeared in either clay or cow dung. They reeked of dust and jiggers. Some were in so bad a shape that water had to be sprinkled on before they were swept. The interior walls were dotted with charts and diagrams on manila papers—hand made by teachers, some not as creative. Eyesore is the word, but we had to put up with them either way. Inside the classes it was desks were arranged in three columns, the first column near the door a preserve for the top performers, the middle for the average, and the column at the far side . . . you know who. On the desks sat three students, usually two boys and a girl at the centre or vice versa, an arrangement we hated to high heavens. It was only in our teen years after struggling to approach girls that we realised we should have grabbed those chances with both hands.

Our uniform was a startling ensemble of yellow shirts, a maroon pair of shorts, and maroon pullovers. The shorts were hardly long enough to touch the knees. The girls wore long maroon dresses with shades of yellow on the belt and collar, and green and yellow bloomers for games kits. Half the pullovers in the school were chewed at the edges (not chewed by rats, but by the very same wearers as a pastime) and had elbows protruding out.



My life took off in 1992 when my Mom’s youngest brother, Hudson, joined our household while I was joining Class Two. Hudson’s second name is Vodohi, Luhyia for ‘mud’, ‘*matope*’ in Swahili. The first two letters were slashed to leave it at ‘Tope’, and it worked perfectly. Everyone called him ‘Tope’. His introduction brought about two significant

changes in my life. First, I now had a best friend, and second, Mom could now shake me off her back. Tope was two years older than I was but, thanks to his small body frame, we easily passed for twins. He was my first real secondary attachment, the one I nurtured social skills on. Forget Bonnie and Clyde, we were inseparable and troublesome.

Tope's class was separated from mine by a wall but no ceiling, so whatever transpired in the other room was heard across loud and clear. With teachers shouting themselves hoarse, we knew who performed well there, who had received a tongue-lashing and who had received a beating for submitting an assignment late. Their terror was their math teacher; Madam Zubeda, who doubled up as the school headmistress. She light-complexioned, short and plump. She had a penchant for huge handbags and enormous earrings. She spoke with the authority of a court judge, walked like a big bad bully, and had a love affair with the cane—forever meting out justice to Tope and his classmates. Like Mom, she was a harsh. It was impossible for her lesson to end without someone being caned, and for that my class was forced recipient of collateral trauma.

Maths was always taught in the morning, when your mind was still recovering from breakfast and the long walk to school, or the hide and seek you had gone through trying to circumvent the morning routine chores at the school. One of rote prayers was that Madam Zubeda never became my teacher, because maths was not nice to me either on the other side of the wall. On this particular prayer, heavens know why, God was deaf. I have never forgotten that fateful day Madam Zubeda walked into our class clutching a black handbag and announced that she would be teaching us ... MATHEMATICS! I almost dropped out of school that very day.

While she lay down the rules of engagement, I sat at my desk rubbing the goose bumps on my trembling thighs. I heard very little of what she said; all I remember was a below-

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the-knee dress accentuated by large round green earrings that kept swinging from side to side. The horrifying beatings we had hitherto just experienced in the abstract from beyond the wall had come home. Her introductory meeting came to a completion without anyone being punished, but I had been lost in my own world that I failed to hear a critical point.

One of her first orders was that the following day, each one of us was to bring fifty counters. Counters small sticks cut to the same size and used to help in counting during the lesson. The idea was that if you were told to add twelve to thirteen, you would count twelve out of the bunch, then another thirteen, put them together and give the total. That was by all means meant to make calculations easier but somehow that move made little sense when you were not cut for numbers. The other problem with Madam Zubeda was her lack of patience, so even with the help of sticks, would-be easy arithmetic seemed difficult. She would write an equation on the board and before anyone counted the first bunch, she would be shouting out people's names to give answers.

“Twelve times twenty . . . Lisimba!”

In such a case, that pressure forced the mind to shut down, and more often than not you would give the wrong answer. The result was instant thrashing. For reasons I have never understood, maths equations were always called problems. I started associating mathematics with problems and the cane. The subject freaked me out, made me feel stupid, and killed my confidence. A part of me died to mathematics, never to be resurrected even by the subsequent friendlier teachers.

All Hail Mr Mamesa!



Mr Jumba Mamesa was introduced to the school on assembly one cold morning, and something about him struck me. He was slender, not so tall, and donned a snow-white shirt, pitch-black pants and dark brown shoes with dangerously pointed fronts—sharp shooters. His hair was well-cut and trimmed. Even after the assembly his image lingered like a ghost that refused to be exorcised. It was like I had found a piece of me that was lost for eons.

We went to class for the day's lessons. I sat at my desk and waited for Madam Zubeda's imposing figure to storm in. Instead, the new teacher walked in. His pronunciation made English sound way cooler than anything I had learned since that first morning I learned doodling. He added intonation to his words, stressing what needed to be emphasized and relaxing on the negligible bits. He announced that he would be our English teacher, taking over from our now immediate former English teacher who was retiring. Language, check ... style, check ... youthfulness ... check! English was reborn. Hillary was born. Life had new meaning!

Mr. Mamesa was likable, a favourite even when he punished us. He did not have to threaten us for vowels and tenses to stick. He did not ask us to kneel down on the cold floor or shout at those who failed to grasp some concepts. He, at no point, joined other teachers on the weekly disciplinary committees where pupils sat on one side, teachers the other then all mistakes committed would be read out and the culprits whipped in turns by each teacher. Mamesa was more student than teacher; he was part of us, and together we became as thick as thieves. He sparked inside us a new perspective of learning, a fresh passion for

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the language that had been muzzled for a while. I started living for English. As difficult as other teachers made life, English became the ointment that soothed all the irritations. On days Mr Mamesa was absent for whatever reason, I felt sickly, as though a part of me had been taken away.

He was not the conventional *Read with Us* or *Neighbours* teacher. We sang during English lessons, recited poems, had language competitions, debates—name it.

*In and out, the bamboo forest
In and out, the bamboo forest
In and out, the bamboo forest
Who will be my partner?*

We sang the song countless times, and every time it felt fresher than the first.

*When I was walking, I met an elephant,
The elephant told me, I want to dance with you!*

To the enjoyment of everyone in class, we enacted a scene in *Read With Us*, that involved a family pulling and pulling at a cassava until it came out and everyone fell with a thud.

One day, Mr Mamesa came to class and called out; “Nebert, picture this. One morning you wake up late, rush to the sitting room, gobble down a cup of tea then it burns your tongue. You go to the window and spit it all out. While this is happening, you are trying to fasten the buttons on your shirt, combing hair, and gathering books into your school bag. What do we call that kind of state?”

We tried a number of guesses, then he gave us the simplest answer I have ever heard for a question that cracked my head so much;

“You are in a great hurry, Nebert,” that’s the answer. No one ever forgot what a great hurry looked like since that day,

even proven *dwanzis* (dumbs). Every class and school had one or more of those.

To English I was like a junkie, every lesson like a badly needed dose of methamphetamine. Mr Mamesa always brought us story books that we read and narrated the stories to the rest during lessons. We were a team working together as equals but captained by a wonderful young man in official wear. He taught us every subsequent year. Sadly, he was transferred to another school when I was in class 6, but the passionate love for English he had planted and nurtured inside me remained strong.

I don't even remember saying goodbye. We closed school one time, and when we came back from holidays, his position had been replaced. They should have consulted his students before transferring him, as he would have moulded us into the new generation Shakespeare. Years later, I heard that Mr Jumba Mamesa, my English champion, had not only passed on but was even buried. The news was broken sledgehammer way, leaving me to deal with the grief and mourn in my solitude.

Although Mr Mamesa was just doing what he enjoyed and was paid to do, I doubt he knew how much impact he had on me, us. He was touching a whole generation to come. In me he left a language orphan when he breathed his last.

Many years after the fact, I am still in denial and yet to heal from that loss. Etched in my heart are his footprints that will be carried to my own grave, never to be erased by the hands of time.

The only other subject that came close to the love I had for English was Kiswahili, taught by another jovial soul from the Coastal region where the language was born. His name was Ken Muhambi. His excellent command of Kiswahili laced with proverbs, sayings, and anecdotes from Mombasa, some too hyperbolic to be believable, always made moments with him worth looking forward to. Mr Muhambi was also a born artist, one of those talented cartoonists who are never

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discovered. Most of his lessons thrived on illustrations, like a movie storyboard, which made his lessons easy to understand. He was good looking by all standards—athletic body, light complexion, always dressed in smart casual. Whenever he went to visit his people at the Coast, he brought a coconut to class, which we would break and divide it amongst us.

Mr Muhambi made us write lots of *insha*. They would involve either a quotation or a proverb that you needed to infer and write a story on, or a continuation of an already started story. This continuation was a bit tricky if you missed out on the hidden expectation from the onset, as you would blubber about things that didn't make sense and give yourself six out of thirty marks for getting your name, class, and school right.

Kiswahili rejected Benard Buluku, one of my classmates, and it never changed its mind.

The instructions were simple: write an *insha* with the title *Kikulacho Ki Nguoni Mwako*. This literally translated to 'the bug that bites you is in your own clothes'. There had to be a moral lesson at the end that you have to bring out write about friends who are close to you yet betray you.

Buluku wrote:

*Kikulacho ni mdudu hatari.
Akikuingia kwa nguo atakuuma uskie uchungu.
Juzi kikulacho aliingilia rafiki yangu kwenye
nguo. Nikamvambia, "Chunga kuma kikulacho
nguoni mwako!"
Hakuniskia.
Ilipofika jioni alikuwa amevimba mwili wote.
Funzo: Lazima tujihadhari sana na kikulacho.*

Mr Muhambi read it out aloud before the whole class as an example of what not to write. We laughed so hard, and from that day on, Buluku earned the nickname 'Kikulacho.'

Boy got four marks, out of thirty. What a Return on Investment!

Now, as fate would have it, Muhambi's good looks, amazing Kiswahili, and athletic body soon became the source of his woes. Turns out that the ladies (both students from our school and random villagers) crushed on him like tons of bricks. A list was released. I have always believed they were just crushes that took it a little too far, but then no one can tell where a man walks under the cover of darkness. Again, what can a boy, hardly fifteen years old, know about his teacher's after-school rendezvous?

News of the never-ending fist fights in the area for him reached the district education office. He was transferred to I don't know where, and apparently died later on during my confused post-primary school years when I was stuck between boy and man.



School buses have revolutionized how children go to school. Nowadays, they are picked from different locations and delivered as a bunch to school, so if the bus arrives late it is the driver who is answerable. It was man for himself during our time. You arrived alone, therefore fully responsible for your lateness. Life was more difficult for children whose parents skipped schools nearer and enrolled them kilometres away. The intention may have been good, because performance is what mostly informed such decisions, but the burden of arriving in school on time was shouldered by the pupil.

Back then, we went to school in the morning, went back home for lunch, came back for the afternoon lessons then back in the evening. How children who lived far off they managed to concentrate in class the whole morning, run around the school compound at break time and still have energy left to go for lunch and back barefoot is a mystery. I

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always struggled to make it to school on time yet I lived not far away. I wondered what time those who lived far away had to wake up, prepare, have breakfast, and still make it in time.

Perhaps the one wrong thing the Ministry of Education allowed in that era was corporal punishment, even for mistakes like coming to school late regardless of how far you came from. Not that they did not know shoes were a luxury to over ninety-five of the students, nor that the village had no street lights therefore risky for children to walk to school that early. They made going to school a herculean task even for those who were passionate about education.

Mondays were the days with the highest number of latecomers. How your week was depended on the time you arrived in school on Monday. School prefects aided and abetted teachers in making your week miserable by standing at the strategic school entry points and noting down those who were late. On most occasions, ninety-nine percent of the student population made it to those list more than once. The lists were then forwarded to the teacher on duty just before we went in for the morning remedial class, who would choose to either give punishment immediately or read them out during assembly.

One of the most difficult weeks was when Mr Alumasa was on duty. Whoever walked through the school gate after him—even if it was 5 a.m.—was considered late and eligible for punishment. You would struggle so much to wake up early, skip breakfast and run all the way to school only to see a long queue of pupils lying heads down at the school entrance. You had the option of joining them awaiting punishment or changing course by hiding in one of the many bushes nearby, keeping track of proceedings as you planned on how to sneak to school unnoticed. Hiding in the bush was only beneficial if you did it without being discovered, so you hoped that no sneaky school neighbour would spot and frog march you to the staffroom ... and there was no shortage of sneaky neighbours.

One day, sprinted all the way from home only to spot Mr Alumasa gathering students at the gate. He had not spotted me, or so I hoped, but I decided I was not going to join the group. I had not woken up too early to get punished. Was 6am late? I dashed to the usual hiding bush behind the school, did my squat then plotted the next move. I could see more and more students running to Mr Alumasa, getting their five strokes of the cane and going to class. At one point, I considered surrendering and getting over and done with it, but I was not one to rescind on my decisions. In my head, forces of good and bad were at war: one reprimanded me for trying fate while the other stood by the idea that I would be foolish to put in all that effort then still surrender to the cane. My heart palpitated and pounded like a mill, I was worried it would jump out of my chest. My skin was all goose bumps, blood boiling such that even with the chilly temperatures, my palms dripped with sweat.

Do I just go man? I asked myself.

‘No! Mr Alumasa is pushing things too far,’ the devil whispered in my ear.

Well, the devil won. Nonetheless, an opportunity to sneak behind Mr Alumasa when he was distracted did not present itself as I had envisioned. I waited, nothing. 6.30a.m. ... 7:00a.m ... 7:30a.m ... 8:00a.m! By the time the assembly bell sounded, I was still sitting behind the bush, the morning cold now biting, my palms clammy and every part of me going numb with regret. This was it; my day to drop out of school had finally come.

I did some quick calculations: *Go back home ... and do what? No, bad idea.* Our village had snitches rutting out truants every other day. That none of them had spotted me in the bush for all those hours was enough luck for the day. I could not get lucky longer. *How about the river nearby There are guava trees you can hide under and sit on, like a leopard, then walk back home over lunch hour like you just came from school. Brilliant idea!*

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Things went well as far as I was concerned, to the point of locating the tree that could offer me the best concealment. I wished. Turned out someone had seen me and snatched me out to Mom, complete with my exact location.

I first thought I was dreaming when I heard my name being called by a commanding voice I had heard a thousand times. Under the tree stood Mom, her gaze fixed on me. Her look told it all; I was to either get down the tree and face her wrath or get down and face her wrath! I obliged, prepared psychologically for the long day ahead. It was only mid-morning but I felt like I had lived for a whole week between waking up and that moment. The kicks and slaps did not stop as she escorted me all the way to school. She was stopped countless times by whoever we met and asked what her young man had done. She would explain, share *a tete-a-tete* then continue slapping me. I wished for the earth to open up its jaws and swallow me alive, but well, *siku ya nyani ikifika kila mti huteleza*.

“*Wewe* (slap) *kazi yako* (kick) *ni kutoroka shule* (slap), *si ndio?* (slap slap) *Unajua* (slap) *vile tunasumbuka* (kick) *kulipa fees?* (slap) Eeh? Hillary! (slap)

I was presented on a silver platter to Mr Alumasa. He stood there smiling, thirsting for my blood. This was going to be a serious case, and punishment was direct death or something very close ... which would still end up in death. I made a silent prayer, like the Biblical thief on the cross beside Jesus, that God would forgive and accept me into His Kingdom.

Mr Alumasa asked me to sit down, disappeared and re-appeared with the deputy head teacher! Now the situation was deteriorating fast: I was getting nailed on the cross by two people, TWO!

“Hillary,” the Deputy started.

“Yes?”

“What is happening? Even you? A position one every term can skip school and go hide?”

Mom stood there, giving me that eye I hated. This was an unexpected turn of events by all means. A student being given a chance to respond to a case before being 'murdered' was a lifeline I wasn't sure how to clutch on, it didn't happen this side of the Sahara. When you were in the dock in the court of adults, you were guilty as charged.

I composed myself and went ahead to explain everything as exactly as I could remember that morning. It was like a little court session; the School versus Hillary, with the plaintiff being my own mother. Representing myself, I told the esteemed court that by all standards I did not come to school late, that 6 a.m. was still too early for any primary school kid to be categorized as late, and that it was unfair to put so much effort into keeping time and get beaten at the end of it. My emphasis was on the fact that deciding lateness based on the time the teacher on duty arrived was finding reason to punish students but nothing educational. I added that the school had instilled fear instead of respect in us, and turned teachers into bullies rather than our protectors. It is this fear that made us tolerate punitive legislation without voicing our concerns because we lacked a listening ear. At that point I did not care. What could have gone wrong had gone wrong anyway. I was already in the dock and punishment was guaranteed.

I was heard!

Would you believe it? I was not just let scot-free for standing up against an uncouth law, but an announcement was made on assembly that 7 a.m. was the official time to be in school. Anyone walking into school from 7.01a.m. onwards was late, earlier than that was good time. I may have put my life and future on the line, but my little way changed a draconian law, without a single placard, nor student demos. Every time I remember that morning, I blame myself for not nurturing the lawyer in me. I would probably have grown into one of the most revered lawyers this world has seen.

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Blame it on Mr Mamesa, he made me see Literature as my forever end game.

CHAPTER 3

MEET 'MARGARET THATCHER'



THE WORLD KNOWS Margaret Thatcher as not only Britain's first female Prime Minister, but also for her rigid and uncompromising political views. This stand earned her the title 'The Iron Lady'. Madam Jane Ambani, the woman who gave birth to me, was a total replica of that Thatcher character, at least in word and deed.

If early years' photos are anything to go by, she was a gorgeous petit damsel with a modelesque body in her maiden years. By the time I was born, the years had turned her into a slightly dark sizeable woman with a no-nonsense face. She retained the natural black African hair that was always

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combed into a flowing curl that fell on her upper back. Mom loved floral dresses, her favourite being blue and red flowers. A beautiful mushy woman from early on, I think I know why my old man saw her and put an end to his search for a lifetime partner. She is sarcastic, in a very annoying way. She must have picked it from her own mother, our *Guku*, who is one of the most wonderful women I have set my eyes on.

Mom was a P1 teacher then, a career she always told me she settled for because they grew up in so much squalor that when she finished high school she knew her education journey had come to an end. However, a Good Samaritan offered to pay her tuition, and the only option being teaching college. You should hear her highlighting how she plans to follow that dream of becoming something bigger, like the country's president, now that she has some money. That makes me scared, very scared. Having grown up by her side, I pray that her dream never comes true. Being woken up with whips just when the early morning dream was hitting high gear for a mistake you made the previous day or earlier and played hide and seek until bedtime hoping she would let go was tough. No, she didn't, not even if you avoided her for a whole week. The only way to get away with a mistake in that compound would have been to walk around dressed like an eskimo, then sleep during the day when she was away at work. Otherwise, the five or so minutes you let your guard down, a slap fell on your face. Those slaps were so hard your eyes would be wide open but all you could see was total darkness as your head spun in circles.

Only teachers' kids can relate with how difficult it is to be in the same school your mom or dad teaches. It is like a little prison, an extension of your home. Every move you make is usually seen through the eyes of your parent; you become some sort of 'big brother' to everyone, because you are a teacher's child. It was an unforgivable crime to make a mistake in school because it tainted her name. After the high

expectations placed on pastor's children, the next category is teacher's children.

Mom taught Art and Craft in my class. It always felt to me like there was tension between us during her lessons, probably because she always gave me those eyes of 'try anything stupid and see me kill you now'. Another tricky bit was that whenever we had exams and she released the results, fellow students always looked at my score at the corners of their eyes. It was like they suspected I was given a leakage or my paper marked with some leniency. They didn't know that she was too harsh to even let anyone near her home office. None can live some of these moments for long; suicide would be the way out.

Away from school, I have always seen myself as an ex-convict from the Madam Jane Correctional Facility, so much that even in adulthood, with all the beards, I am still paroled. The good thing about being in such a set-up is that you are forced to always think way ahead of the 'officer' and circumvent the system.

Being denied food as punishment was the norm in our household. However, it was illegal for you to decide not to eat. Being locked out of the house for you to meditate on your mistake was acceptable, but staying out on your own to do the same meditation was a crime. It was basically the way Kenya operates now; change the constitution to fit this particular project, someone capitalizes on the same loophole for a contrary gain then everyone is up in arms about how people need to adhere to the constitution. See that? My mom should have been a politician; I have never doubted her sentiments.

Mom, or let us stick to Thatcher, was not very receptive to ideas on the family meal plan from anyone else. She was like an African government procurement officer; sending out requests for prospective suppliers to apply for tenders but with an already existing decision.

"Unataka tukule nini leo?"

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“Mimi nataka tukule nyama.”

“Ooh. Sawa. Si babako ako na butchery huko Mbale? Enda ulete kilo mbili kutoka huko.”

Of course Dad never even dreamt of operating a butchery, let alone owning a butcher’s knife. In fact, I have never seen him move close to anything being slaughtered. I therefore concluded that he sees us, slitting animal throats, as murderers of some sort. He never gets late when meat is on the table though; hands already washed, probably even prayed 10 minutes before the meal arrives on the table.

Thatcher also loathed her child walking in an outfit that was either too loose or faded.

“Hillary! Tembea kabisa na nguo imetoboka kwa sababu wewe ni yatima!”

“Madam Jane alikuwa akaacha watoto wakihangaika.”

Earning her trust was another uphill trust. I knew this was a lost cause when I observed a trend on Sundays. She would give you a five-shilling coin for offering at the church, but throughout the service her eyes would be fixed on you, taking them off you when her participation in the church choir was required. These gazes were to deter you from walking out in case you were tempted to visit the shop opposite the church compound to buy sweets with the offering money. This was done against the backdrop of her repeated warning that if you ever ‘ate’ God’s money, He would plant a huge pumpkin on your forehead as punishment. Either she knew her threat was far-fetched, or she believed that her son was willing to risk a pumpkin forehead in favour of sweets.

She pursued further education and moved from the P1 category to Special Education, which also meant that she had to change schools and give us ‘breathing space’ at school. It was also a perfect opportunity for Tope and I to break away from that ‘Madam’ bondage, build our individual identities and successfully live double lives. On the outside, we were the good well-behaved ‘Madam protégés’ but on the inside

Hillary Lisimba Ambani

we were afflicted with misdemeanour, felony, mischief, and recklessness.