



THE
SPONSOR

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K. Kimuyu is a writer based in Nairobi, where he is currently working on his first poetry collection. *Lust Love & Longing* and his third novel. *Kesbo & Malkia*. When he is not whacking away at the keyboard, you can find him taking long walks, or stopping to buy anything consumable by the roadside.

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K. Kimuyu

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Editor: Michelle Korir

Cover design: Stephen Njogu

Author's website: www.kisauti.com

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The city has a style, and the people wear it like the latest fashion.

- Nairobi

1.

The Family

MZEE AJABU DID not know when his family fell apart. It was not one thing; it was many little things. He could not even tell you the tipping point. But it was on his 67th birthday.

He came home as usual. He did not expect a party—he had been with his family for over 20 years now, and in none of those years had they celebrated his birthday. He expected the usual. A hot meal prepared by his wife, a shower, and hopefully, good sleep.

But something was different this birthday. His youngest child, Olivia, who had just cleared high school, was pregnant, and she wanted to be in his good books before she broke the news to him.

She loved her dad, despite whispers from her big sister, Wairimu, of him stepping out on their mom. She claimed to have seen him not once in town—arm in arm with young college girls.

Their sibling rivalry would not allow Olivia to take anything she said seriously. She wanted to show her big sister that she was superior to her. She had already taught Wairimu how to get pregnant, and soon, she would teach her how to get a husband.

Olivia had gone with her brother, Fred, to the supermarket, and they had bought cake, ribbons, and balloons, then gotten back to decorate their living room. There was no hurry; Mzee Ajabu usually came home late in the night, and tonight was no different.

Fred alerted them when he heard the sound of their father's Range Rover.

"Switch off the lights! He's here, he's here," he said, giddy with excitement.

They broke into song when he walked through the door, staggering because he had taken three fingers of Jack Daniel's at Muthaiga Country Club. But not even that could dampen their spirits.

Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday to you...

They sang merrily, startling him as he closed the door behind him, and he realized pleasantly that tonight he would have to break his tradition.

Mrs. Ajabu joined in from the kitchen, carrying the cake, which had three candles sticking out of it.

Happy birthday dear Dad,

Happy birthday to you.

They sang some more as Mzee Ajabu huffed and puffed on the candles. His wife's face almost curled into a smile when he started breathing heavily.

"Breathe, Dad. We don't want death at a birthday," Fred said, and everyone giggled.

“What wish did you make, Dad?” Olivia asked cheerfully after he had blown them out.

“A happy and united family,” Mzee Ajabu said proudly.

Just then, the lock on the door turned, Wairimu entered, and the mood changed. She was in a short dark thing that she called a dress, revealing most parts of her thighs, arms, and dipping cleavage. Her mother had long gotten tired of shouting at her, and her father had long gotten tired of telling her mother to talk to her.

She started walking towards her bedroom, and without notice, Mzee Ajabu grabbed her wrist. “Where are you coming from at this hour, Wairimu?” he asked, anger having replaced the pride and joy on his face. “I asked you a question, young lady.”

Wairimu stared at him as if he was a brick wall.

“You’re going to start working from tomorrow, and I no longer want to see you dressing like a prostitute,” Mzee Ajabu barked, his hand digging into her wrist.

“You mean like the prostitutes you’re cheating on Mom with?”

The words seemed to have sobered Mzee Ajabu. He got up and, with lightning speed, slapped her twice. She wrenched free and ran to her bedroom, sobbing. Nobody talked after that. They all disappeared into their rooms, except for Mrs. Ajabu, who sat beside her husband with a plate of hot food as she had always done.

2.

Mrs. Ajabu

MRS. AJABU SAT on the edge of their king-size bed, drinking wine from a large wine glass as Mzee Ajabu snored like a wild boar beside her. She knew what it meant to be the woman behind a successful man. She looked at his face and fought the urge to take a pillow and smother him till life left his body.

She took a swig from her wine glass, trying to wash from her mouth the taste of all those years she had endured him. She remembered the days when they were young, living in a shack made of timber and *mabati*. The days when Mzee Ajabu would come home drunk as a sponge and vomit all over the floor before pissing his pants, and she would be the one cleaning up after him in silence.

That was before the money came and the infidelities followed just as quickly, and she was the one staying behind to hold together the family even when it was slipping through her fingers like sand.

She was the one turning a blind eye and submitting to him, mind, body, and soul, even when her heart ached from his sins. She had thought of leaving but to where? To build another man and end up in the same shoes?

She took another swig and stared into the distance. Of course, sticking to the marriage had its benefits. They had built a family with two beautiful daughters and a handsome son, but she feared for the people they would turn out to be because of the mother she had been to them.

She moved her buttocks from left to right on the bed to get comfortable and wondered what they thought of her as a mother.

She was not on the best of terms with either of her daughters, Wairimu especially. She had beaten her up not once because of her insolence. A hint of a smile touched her face when she thought of her son, Fred. He was her lighthouse, the one who would save her.

She drank her wine and gazed at her husband. He was sleeping so that his big belly faced the ceiling. Maybe she could burst it with a needle, like she would a balloon. A smile curled on her face at the thought.

She looked at him and felt silly that she had once contemplated leaving him and taking nothing with her. If she ever left, she would take everything from him. The woman behind a successful man deserved nothing short of his success, she decided while emptying her glass.

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