

DEAR INA

Aarnie Dushime (Burundi)



Dear Ina,

Remember our favourite poet? Warsan Shire? She once said, *“Document the moments you feel most in love with yourself – what you’re wearing, who you’re around, what you’re doing. Recreate and repeat.”* Although I do not think I have entirely found myself yet, I see this letter to my old self as proof and reminder that a new journey has begun. A journey towards discovering who I truly am, and what it means for me.

It started in the autumn of 2018, when I bumped into Axel, my high school deskmate, in Portland, Maine at the famous 207 bar. It was my first time there. Weeks before, after a stupid truth or dare game, I was dared to spend two hours at an exclusively Burundian bar. They knew I never spoke highly of my fellow Burundians. The diaspora community is just draining. They party every day and they don’t aspire to anything in particular. My parents had always warned me that abroad, people generally succeed when they stay away from their communities. Anyway, here I was at the bar because of a stupid game. Well, except that it wasn’t that bad, actually. The music was extraordinary – I really didn’t know Burundians sang good songs.

I remember sitting at the furthest table of the room, in a low-key dark corner with a friend I had just made that night. We ordered tequila shots.

“Ready for another one?” she said, after having posted her third story on Instagram asking people whether she should have another shot. They voted yes.

Eyes closed, I felt a burn slowly spreading inside my mouth and on my tongue as I poured the liquid down my throat, after licking a good amount of salt. We both dropped our glasses and reached for the slices of lime in the middle of the table. While I was still shivering from the bitterness of lime in my mouth, somebody approached our spot.

“Ina? Ina Katia? Is that really you?”

I was still recovering from the icy reaction I got from the lime (why don't I ever get used to this?), and I turned my face up to see who had recognised me.

“Erega I saw you dancing earlier and was like, I know this woman! You have changed so much! You look amazing.”

Axel Ntahe. After these years. What are the odds of meeting an old classmate in a foreign country? I got up to hug him.

“It is so sweet to see you! You look great too. Haha and your beard has finally grown.”

We awkwardly laughed together. He waved hello at my new friend.

“So, how come I have never seen you around? Where in the States do you live?”

“Oh no. I don't really live here. I am here for work.”

“Oh work? That's interesting. What do you do?”

“I’m on contract. The organisation I work for in Burundi sent me here to hold a number of conferences,” he explained as though he were tired of being asked how he ended up here.

I congratulated Ntahe for his job and said I was happy for him. I also let him know that I would travel to Burundi in June of the following year. There was a final mourning ceremony to be held, dedicated to Uncle Ngabo who had passed months ago.

“Uncle Ngabo? Oh, I remember how close you two were. I am so sorry to hear he passed on.” He grabbed my left arm to comfort me. I retrieved my hand from his grip, even though his soft touch reminded me of how I had a crush on him in high school. But that’s a story for another day.

Our little chitchat got interrupted by his friends calling him. They had to leave.

“Oh, before I go, listen, if you’re still around later in June, please come by our high school reunion. I am sure that people will be happy to see you again.”

“Hmm, nah. Thank you. I don’t plan on staying in Burundi for that long. I need to come back here real quick.”

“C’mon, Ina! The event only happens every five years. You don’t wanna miss that. Trust me.”

“I don’t want to promise you anything. I might already be back here by the time the reunion happens.”

Nevertheless, he handed me his business card and waved goodbye.

“Ready for another one, sis?” my new friend asked. Mind you, she was now live on Instagram for a talent show.

“Oh my God, don’t tempt me. I have an early morning tomorrow.”

She frowned. “Okay hun, one last round and you let me go.”

On my way home from the bar, I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that Ntahe had made it here just for a job. How was that even possible? A Burundian person with a Burundian education working in the United States of America? This couldn’t be true.

Needless to remind you that though I was born to Burundian parents, I am no Burundian. I am American, my mother came here when she was six months pregnant. She gave birth to me, waited for me to get my American passport and American birth certificate, and took us back home to Burundi.

Between Mother doing my hair, and Father walking with me at Jardin Public, I never lacked for anything while growing up. They kept me quite busy by having me join activities after school. There was the national swimming team every Tuesday and Thursday, and the poetry club at the American Corner in Kamenge every weekend. While my age-mates were enrolled in clubs that taught traditional dances and songs, my parents sent me to read books at the American embassy.

“People who cling to their culture and traditions never prosper, darling. A waste of time! That’s why people living in the rural areas lead poor lives. But you, my little American, have got to evolve and live a life worth living,” my father would say, “at all costs.”

Of course I once asked my parents why I was born in America and not in Burundi. They said my future was brighter as an American. They would often remind me how blessed I was to have a secure future. “People will respect you, Ina, and you

can get any job you want with that passport,” mother often said, after giving me countless examples of unemployed people with good diplomas.

My parents were poisoned when I was fourteen. According to Uncle Ngabo, my parents had enemies who were jealous of them and their successful businesses. My father was the number one car dealer in the country, and my mother owned many spots at the marketplace. But you know, in a country where inequality hits hard, people will not appreciate your success; they will take all your belongings and kill you. I then went to live with Uncle Ngabo until junior year of high school, when it was time for me to come home to America, where I belonged.

Uncle Ngabo became my parental figure as he pushed me to keep up with the good grades. During the nights he was not teaching me to play chess, he would share with me anecdotes on his life. When Uncle Ngabo was younger, he had put his trust in the wrong people, thinking they were his friends. “Don’t repeat my mistakes,” he’d advise me. They betrayed him and submitted his family name on the list of people who were supposed to be decimated because of their ethnicity. Uncle Ngabo managed to flee to Kenya where he lived in a refugee camp for four years before coming back to a sort of stabilised Burundi.

Uncle Ngabo died of cancer in May 2018. He smoked a lot. I didn’t make it to the burial ceremony because I had just started my new job at a high tech company. I’m sure he would have understood. There was a final mourning ceremony happening in June 2019 anyways, and I was happy to finally pay my respects to him.

Recall that at the beginning, I didn't want to spend a long time in Burundi. There was nothing for me there. Well, except the food. But Keza insisted. Maybe she thought I needed more time to process her father's death, Uncle Ngabo?

So, June came.

I landed at night, and a charming heat welcomed me as I took a step forward out of the plane. I could hear mosquitoes, frogs, and other intriguing species making a concert-like noise from the tall grass that surrounded the airport.

Seeing how illuminated the city of Bujumbura had become blew my mind. There were light poles almost everywhere. *Burundi did get better*, I thought to myself.

I won't spend time describing the mourning ceremony. It was boring and nothing worth noting happened. The high school reunion, on the other hand, was full of surprises.

I arrived when the drummers had just started their performance to announce the beginning of the event. They were about 20 drummers, aligned in a circle and wearing the colours of the country's flag; red, green and white. They were fiercely beating the drums and chanting some songs in Kirundi. I observed one drummer turning his stick around his neck three times, before jumping and landing on his feet in a proud scream. I got caught in the enchantment, and could not even pick my phone to film. It felt as if the drums were directly speaking to me. They were loud, and my ears were beeping. I couldn't hear anything else. I didn't want to hear anything in fact, except the drums. As the drummers synchronously slammed their sticks on the cow skin that constituted

the top of the drum, and then its wooden sides, my heart felt the beat, again and again. I shed a tear.

“The American is crying, huh?” Ntahe had stepped from behind me. I wished he hadn’t seen me that vulnerable.

“Can’t I admire this culture in peace? Argh!” I said, as I greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

Ntahe escorted me through the whole night, re-introducing me to people who might have forgotten me.

“Who in the world can forget the American?” shouted Ciza, as he came to embrace me. I was impressed to see that most of my classmates had turned out well, unlike my parents’ predictions. Even Perera, who had failed three grades in a row was there, very well dressed, and throwing jokes around the room.

The time came for the fundraising, at the end of which a voting would be held. The most voted project would get the most money. They shared projects about sexual education, alcohol and drug policy in order to raise a self-aware generation. I was impressed by their ideas.

Of all the presentations, Perera’s blew my mind. See, I was so used to seeing her failing that I didn’t know she actually was capable of doing anything right. I remember the second time she failed a grade. We were all going into 10th grade, and she had to retake 8th grade. Everybody in the neighbourhood was talking about it. “Nijimbere’s child has brought shame on her family! Again!” my mother announced with a threatening voice, as a way of saying, “Don’t you dare do the same!”

She continued, “*Nakajuju karya*. She will for sure end up tending her father’s sheep back in the village. She has no future with a brain like that.”

However, that night, I saw a Perera I didn't know. She didn't look like her 'mistakes.' She looked confident and very happy. At that moment, it didn't matter that she graduated three years after us. Everybody was cheering for her and wishing her success as she was campaigning to become the next member of parliament.

"And you? What good thing do you bring to us, Miss America?" Ntahe shouted.

"Why can't you just call me by my name?" I was kind of embarrassed. "You mean your American name?" somebody in the group responded, after which the whole room laughed.

All eyes were on me, now. People laughing and fingers pointing at me. It felt like I was in the wrong room, because I didn't have a Kirundi name. I was triggered. My night was ruined.

Antways, let's fast forward to the morning where, as we were having breakfast, Keza asked me to join her on her work trip in the countryside.

Side note about Keza. She is very different from her father, Uncle Ngabo. She is caring and doesn't like to see people suffer. Her work involves visiting people living with disabilities, noting their needs, and presenting them to the governor's office. She is demanding that everyone, despite their disabilities, be given easy access to facilities. She has already made a remarkable impact in Bujumbura. Now, buses are equipped with doors that enable wheelchairs to enter.

"Oh, by the way," she said, while spreading her bread with avocado, "I'm moving to Gitega for work, indefinitely. My job has grown considerably and I can't keep up with papa's business here in Buja. I could use a brave and intelligent hand."

“And you really think I’d give up the US for this? You’re funny, Keza.”

“Why not? People make good money here. Plus, this is home. You can’t stay *there* forever.” She bit into her bread, leaving green traces around her mouth. I realised I should have picked avocado too, instead of eggs.

“Why do you associate with those people, anyways?” I ask, while taking a sip of *icayi*.

“If I don’t, who will, Ina?” She was looking straight into my eyes.

“I don’t know. They should learn to live for themselves and not depend on outside help. That’s how courage is built.”

“So you think that you are where you are today solely because of your effort?”

“Of course.”

“Cut that crap, Ina! If it weren’t for your parents, for *my* father, the education you got, you wouldn’t be where you are today.”

I took another sip of *icayi*.

“Why do you hate us anyways? What’s so baaaaaad about being a Burundian?”

“The answer is simple: look at this country! Total mess and BS everywhere.”

“So what are you doing to clean it up?”

“It’s not my job to do.”

“Ohh, ‘Coz you’re American, right? That passport of yours is just PAPER! Your blood is Burundian!”

Her sarcastic laughter echoed three rooms away from the kitchen, before she continued, “Listen, just come on my work trip with me, and see why it’s important to me.”

As I reluctantly travelled with Keza in the rural areas, I realised I had built wrong assumptions about the place. People weren't doomed to poverty or misery. They just have different lives.

So, "*What's so bad about being a Burundian?*"

I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with it. I have never thought about it. Or maybe, nobody has ever taught me to love Burundi, Burundians, and *our* culture.

Days later, as boredom hit me, I went to spend time in the room where my parents' affairs had been kept since their passing on. I guess I was hoping to find something that would remind me of the sound of my mother's laughter. The place felt like a sanctuary or an antique museum because of the smell of old. There was a small box marked *Katia stuff*. I opened it by tearing the tape apart. On top was a torn book with a yellow cover, the one mother used to read to me before bed. I nervously opened it, and a photograph fell on the ground alongside a small red card. In the photograph, I saw my parents holding a baby dressed in white. There was liquid being poured on the forehead of that child. *Is that me being baptised?* I instantly grabbed the card to read what was inscribed: *Ikarata y'ibatisimu. Inangoma Katia. 1995*. I stood up and turned on the light to confirm I was reading clearly. Well, I knew that 1995 was the year my mother and I came back to Burundi: I was three. But did that mean my name had been Inangoma Katia all along?

"Keza! I have a Kirundi name!" I had tears in my eyes as I rushed into Keza's room that Sunday afternoon.

"Inangoma?" Keza replied, with surprise 'why are you surprised' face.

"Wait, you knew?" I was baffled.

"Technically, I didn't know you didn't know. Everyone has a nickname. I thought you knew that was yours."

“I am so angry, Keza. It looks like I’ve been lied to my whole life. I thought I wasn’t Burundian because of my name. And why do all my documents say Ina instead of Inangoma?”

“Girl, trust me, even if you were just *Ina*, you’d still be Burundian. You wanna know something? Inangoma means beholder of power. Isn’t that beautiful?”

Why was I called Ina while growing up? Apparently, when white people were writing my name on the birth certificate, they accidentally omitted the second part of my name. My mother hadn’t bothered correcting them. Since I wasn’t meant to become a Burundian she thought it was perfect. She told everyone to simply keep it short and call me Ina, her little American. Only God and the church knew I was Inangoma.

Well, Ina?

I could go on for days, but may this letter remind you that months ago, you hated Burundi and today, you’re starting to develop feelings for her and her people. It was certainly shocking to learn your real name is Inangoma. And you hold power apparently.

Gosh. I am left with so many questions. Were my parents’ view of life correct or they were just projecting their insecurities on me? All I knew is that my stay in Burundi has changed me and I can’t wait for my next trip there.

Yours truly,

Beholder of Power,
Inangoma Katia