

GROWING DREAMS

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“You are fired! You are fired! You are fired...” the words kept ringing in my mind as I slowly passed through Kibera, reputedly the largest tenement slum in the country with over 2.5 million dwellers. To be fired is one thing, but that they beat me up like a stray dog, I was still coming to terms with that three days later. I was terribly insulted. It hurts so much to know that many girls go through this torture every day. I pity those who are even younger than I am. You see, I am only fifteen years old. The younger ones wear scars like immortal gladiators who’ve been fighting all their lifetime.

Last week at the stroke of noon on New Year’s Day 2045, I refused to give a bribe to two guys from the electric company, so they cut off the power supply at SINNERS – a notorious local pub here in Kibera and a pit of sin for wild and rowdy men and women. Suffice it to say, in that pub you are forced to see what you shouldn’t see and hear what you shouldn’t hear.

Rumor has it that Mr. Benno murdered his older brother Wango Junior and took over the pub from him. But his outward image belied the rumor – a middle-aged stature with an overweight physique, simple in appearance, somewhat shy and too placid. I never saw him with a drink or a cigarette. He was the only father figure I’ve had since mine died. He has unsettled me a few times and I don’t like it when he says the stupid books I carry to read

during my breaks are making my head swell. But he started getting angrier and angrier ever since his pub was raided by some authority for underage drinking. Mr. Benno said he suspected me of having told someone who told someone else.

Then there were the rumours that I stole some of his premium booze and sold them outside the pub, in the streets, at a cheaper price. So, when the power supply was cut off, and the day the cops – not just any but those crazy, red-eyed Robotic Police - came to raid the pub, word spread quickly in the neighbourhood and the regulars stopped coming. On the second night, even the daytime strugglers did not show up. For the first time since I started working at Sinners, I feared for my life when Mr. Benno started shouting and spitting like a mad dog. When he threw a bottle at me, threatening to kill me, I ducked under the counter, and slipped away just on time. I know he would have had my hands burnt by one of his bodyguards or beat me to death. I'd heard he had done it to others. Since that night, my stomach has been grumbling for food. And I find myself wandering about looking for food in places I had never thought I would.

I've worked at Sinners since we closed school, which is about three months ago. Next week, the schools are reopening across the country, and I was looking forward to my would-be first salary. I had plans for it – I would clear last term's fees balance, pay next term's fees, buy a new uniform, buy food, and even buy some sanitary pads. You see, I never have sanitary pads so I either miss school or use a clean sock wrapped in toilet paper. The socks are absorbent, but they get bulkier and stain very quickly. The first salary, though small, would help.

This is not a country for people like us. Across River Kibera, just beyond the Kibera Dam, where the rich politicians and the slum

lords teleport or drive in flying vehicles is, Nairobi Metropolis City – it’s a sea of “parasitic structures” - modernist architecture attached with grids of moving pods developed in response to the need to solve problems such as high rent and lack of space. You can board any pod and it’ll adapt according to your needs. Each pod is complete with artificial ventilation and a sunlight simulator, designed so that the pods do not need windows. Instead, the walls are made up of screens that can be changed to form any desired backdrop. The structures inflate, providing their owners with a warm and dry place to sleep. They also shield residents from the dirty air they would have to breathe if they slept on heat grates directly. These parasitic pods have CloudFishers – an ingenious device that is designed to catch and condense fog into water droplets which, in turn, run down a stainless-steel mesh into a water storage container.

Mashimoni is where I call home. It’s one of thirteen villages that make up Kibera, where humans and machines are supposed to co-exist. But I’ve had to be my own parent. I’ve even learnt to stay clear of those robotic police who roam Kibera like vultures to prey and sniff for humans to terrorize. They’ll lock you up for just looking at them the wrong way. This village squats as a painful landmark – well all of Kibera is – but Mashimoni in general has been a little bit sour. As you can see, my life has been a little sour.

Nine years ago, I was scavenging with my father, Binda, my mother Wasse, and my two siblings, Ana, and Joe, 10 and 13 years respectively, at Mbolea Kuu – an extensive dumping site about a quarter kilometer from Mashimoni. It’s how we did it. At least that’s how my father termed survival. Looking keenly for trash to turn into treasure was what we did. Mostly it was coal - non-empty aerosol cans – that we fixed and re-sold- and sometimes food.

One day, we were at Mbolea Kuu when the Federal Government began testing their first ever *A.F.Vs – Automated Flying Vehicles*. My father had warned us time and again about these new machines that were meant to patrol for thieves and dangerous people in our neighbourhoods. We were to run and hide at the site of them. My brother, Joe, asked what we had done wrong. “Were we bad people?” he wondered. My father said we weren’t. It’s bad to be poor.

The first unit got underway flawlessly. We watched as they glided above us. Then away they went gracefully but imposingly. “Let’s work quickly and leave”, my father said, a disquiet in his voice. Soon after, came time for the second unit - about a dozen of them. These ones were a little bit amphibian-like, a little bit heavy, a little bit bigger but much intricate. Their engines growled with rage, like they were preparing for bloodshed. The roars startled a group of Marabou storks foraging all around us. I remember how quickly they deserted their breakfast – carrion and other food waste – and ganged up ready to get dirtier and uglier. They clattered their bills together in a battle cry and charged at the *A.F.Vs*. The air was thick with the noise of the furious birds swirling around the machines like angry wasps.

“Insufficient power! Heat Overload! Insufficient power! System failure!” We heard the panicky voices, moments later. We watched the unfolding battle above us in shock as the vehicles started to sway wildly – threatening to crash. Their alarms were screeching as the scavenging birds poked hard into them.

“Run!” my father bellowed in fear as the bellies of the *A.F.Vs* yawned malevolently at us. The *A.F.Vs* swerved dangerously in the air – then careened out of the sky and plummeted towards us. I remember running as fast as my legs could carry me. I passed Joe

who had a limp. I glanced backwards in time to see my father get to Joe, grab his hand, and push him forward. It was too late – they were pulverized.

“*Mwanangu! My Joe!*” Just ahead of me, my mother stopped and broke into tears as she registered what had just happened. While lost in the moment, a fast-spinning stray rotor blade sprang out at her from nowhere and decapitated her.

Everything happened fast. Too fast. Miraculously, I cleared the landfill and froze in position at a high ground. The now ablaze vehicles were spewing fireballs as soon as they hit the ground.

“Ana! Ana! Ana! Sister!” I looked around me and it dawned on me that my sister was not with me. Tears flowed down my face uncontrollably, blurring my vision. I walked back home alone. Nature had preserved itself by fighting off the machines. I lost everything that day. Some wounds remain sore forever.

Three years after that ordeal, every night I lay in this family makeshift shack that my neighbour Velma Inue helped me rebuild after acid rain corroded our old polycarbonate roofing sheets. My dreams are changing. They are full of green, and light and my mother is growing lush green plants – from mountain avens, saxifrages, poppies, cotton grass to white bell heather - while my father and siblings bask in their blooming serenity and quiescence. Maybe I can take Velma up on her promise to teach me to grow my own pumpkins. Despite her advanced age – 83 - she grows pumpkins that have survived the heat from excessive ultraviolet exposure and dry winds. She always asks me about my dreams. She can teach me how to plant and grow these things – maybe even grow the green from my dreams.

There are other dreams too. School has a place of escape for me. There, my friends – Taraji Pendo and Zawadi Guta – make me laugh. And on Sundays, I get to spend the afternoons playing Jump-Rope and Double Dutch with Pendo on the little patch outside their house. Ever since Pendo and Pendo’s mother, Zainab, said I was getting too thin, she makes sure I eat. Now with my job gone, I hope the pumpkins survive the scorching sun. I do not ever want to go back to the dumpsite – back to Mbolea Kuu. Zainab and her daughter are not rich, but they are not as poor as I am and Pendo’s cousin, Peter Muboro, who works as a software engineer for the Alpha Roboticops Company, lets us read his books and play his video games. Someday, I would like to write books and create survival video games.

At times like this, I wish I was one of these scavenging robot police flying A.F.Vs. They don’t fear death. Each is released to the world with a pre-installed –B.I.S.H.O.P.S– Biometrics Intense Self-Healing Operating System. This advanced program helps them to automatically self-repair damages without any external diagnosis of the problem or human intervention.

I’ve never seen a depressed robot and they can live for 100 years if pre-installed with B.I.S-H.O.P.S. I imagine it lubricates their internal systems so they do not need to eat or drink like humans do. But the way I see it, they must starve, and feed on blood and bone, for pain and shame. Perhaps they are designed to smell poverty from afar, for no poor person crosses their path and lives to talk about it. Velma tells me that humans controlled the police force, and they were brutal. But would they have been worse than these copper-legs and brass-arms marionettes? They are supposed to detect crime and prevent it from happening. But whoever created them, wired them to only go after the poor and the hungry. I read

in “Future of Transhumanism” that their *C-Pro, Cerebrum-Pro*, an intelligence program, also pre-installed in their brains, seems to be more powerful than the magic or witchcraft of our ancestors. They do come under fire for their brutality, but I’ve never seen them go to jail.

Over the last three days, this pain has reminded me of the things my father used to talk about. Like when Velma told me her dream would be to see a real President emerge from this neighbourhood. My art teacher says the same thing. During the last art class before we closed schools, she said the robot police roam poor neighbourhood because the law is bent in their favor. She said something about *The Wretched of the Earth* and that if Frantz Fanon rose from the dead, she would not be surprised.

It’s Sunday. I think I can get some good food from Velma. I will also ask her what a real President should be doing, so that one day when I become President, I can change things for the wretched of the earth. The last time I saw H.E. Richard Mubadi II, the Head of State, was during his much publicized visit in a hologram. He said:

“...We as a country have come from a very distant land. I know it You all know it. We all know it. We used to die here while waiting for the White people to send in funds. Diseases killed us. Polio crippled our people, HIV killed our people, flu and cold gave us headaches, COVID-19 almost wiped us all. Same can be said of malaria. But when I came into power, I did what no one else did. Not even my father. I brought in an automated system for my people. I replaced doctors, chemists and pharmacists with intelligent robots that can diagnose and manufacture medicine, vaccines, antibiotics, painkillers, or treat you right there and then. You are a privileged society and you deserve the best.

I know without any shadow of a doubt, my distinguished deeds will hand me down to the annals of history as the President who fought hard and defeated malaria completely.”

But here, in Kibera, the worst, most virulent form of malaria thrives. I almost died of malaria last year. We have become an experiment in sustaining poverty in the midst of plenty and the robot police guard the rich, making sure we remain in our place.

Oh! These feet. They still look bad, wounded and swollen. I know Velma has food and some herbs to make the pain go away. If she asks me about my dreams, I'll tell her my dreams are changing. I do not want to drive a flying vehicle, teleport, or live in a parasitic pod. . I'll tell her about this old book I read on “The Future of Transhumanism”. I've read its prologue over and over again. The author Cael Kamau Situmbi says, “As smart people evolve, so do their houses. The house understands the inhabitant and provides for their needs. So, you won't own a specific pod. You can board any pod and that pod will adapt according to your needs...”

My dream is to afford good shoes and create software that can remove the viruses of poverty, diseases, police brutality and violence.