

YOU SEE MAMA

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You stare at the picture of your mama who died in May 2020. Her eyes are still as beautiful as the waterfronts of the black sea. You can see her iris highlighting the compassion she had grown for a lifetime. Match it with her smile and recall the last time you corporeally laid your eyes on it. You had a video call; you were at home, lying on the couch and she was somewhere in Kigali at the hospital. Dive deeper into the memories and recall how she told you that she was not doing fine even though she tried to hide it with a sluggish grin. You knew she had diabetes but this time she was getting worse with the Coronavirus she had tested positive for, four days earlier. Recall how startled you were and how you strived to conceal your emotions but ended up shedding tears. Then, suddenly feel a grip on your torso and turn around in a haste with the tears still rolling down your cheeks. Your papa is sitting next to you on the settee. He has grown an agitated and yet contorted face that resembles your grandpa's. You discern him taking off his big eyeglasses and sliding a little closer to you. He clears his throat and stares at you with understanding.

“Look, I know this is hard for you but you got to be a little strong,” he says.

You sob with sniffs for seconds then fall onto his chest and sob a little more.

“Papa, I hate this day. It always makes me sad,” you say.

“I know, Gatesi. Your mama was a phenomenal human being. I miss her so much,” he says.

“Papa, we need to be strong. That is what mama would expect,” you say, wiping away your tears with a handkerchief.

Papa nods.

You stand up and saunter towards your room. You notice your papa cleaning his eyeglasses on his kitenge shirt as he leads the way to the sink. Last night, you agreed that he will cook for you and then do dishes. You know he will make it because it is not his first time. You reach your room and fall on the bed. There is a blond pillow that looks like a jerry can-shaped teddy bear. It was your mama’s back in 2020. You cuddle it tightly.

You remember the good old days when your mama was in Nairobi. At midnight on the video call, she was with the same pillow. It was caressing her gentle cheeks and the strands of her raven hair. She had attended a seminar whose theme was on gender-based violence. You recall how she told you that she was enjoying her stay and that she’d come back in a week and think about giving birth to the sibling you’d been asking her for years; contending that not having one was the source of your loneliness. Your papa wanted it more but when your mama died, you both remade your minds and opted to remain a small family to take care of each other. As you remember this, you sob a little more then dash out of your room. You can sense the aroma of food and it is stunning. You know that your papa is a good cook but at this moment he is the best.

You watch him tasting the carrots and tiptoe towards him before you tap his shoulder.

“That is mama’s style!” you say when he turns around.

“Well, it is! Were you watching me? *Mana we!*” he mumbles.

“Yes of course! Do you remember how you hated cooking, cleaning the house or even doing dishes? Hmm! If it wasn’t for mama, you’d still think that men weren’t born to do those kinds of works,” you say, bubbly.

“Look, Gatesi, your mama taught me what a family is. I know I used to fight the feminist part of her but now I understand that she was right. Your mama was brilliant just like you,” he says then turns around to take the food from the stove.

You tell him how much you relish all he does and remind him that you are to leave to Gisimenti. He nods and tells you to get ready for lunch. You help him move the casseroles to the dining table. You are incredible together. If Papa–Daughter love was a person, it would reflect the two of you.

It is May 2040; twenty years have passed since the day mama died. You are 28 now and your papa is in his 60’s. His hair has turned grey but he’s still strong. You live in the compact neighbourhood that surrounds Amahoro Stadium which is also alongside the incredible wetland parks of Remera. Standing there on the balcony of your home apartment, you can glare at the amazing view of Kigali which is now a green city.

You descend the staircase to the ground floor then stride to the main road. You see a bus stop a few metres away and two ladies are standing there. You stand next to them and wait for the bus, which usually departs every ten minutes. You enter the bus which now drives through the Bus Rapid Transfer (BRT) lines. There are no more long queues like it used to be back in the days with your

mama. Nowadays, green transport has also been promoted; there are cycle lanes alongside the main road. You can see three young men and an old woman cycling along the way. On the left side, there is a paved pedestrian walkway. It looks so tranquil and comfortable to pedestrians. The people on the bus look so smart and stylish. They all seem busy doing their work. Some are just enjoying the free 6G Wifi. You are sitting with your papa, next to a young man who is reading *The Legend of Ruganzu of Kwanda*, an Africanfuturism novel that is trending globally. You've read it before and got inspired to write yours and so far you have penned ten pages.

On the topmost side of the bus behind the driver's seat, the president is addressing the nation and the event is being aired on national TV. She says that the country's economy has increased by 10% from January. You stare at her and wonder how brilliant and phenomenal she is. Right after, you recall that it was your mama's dream to see a woman running for the presidency and eventually being elected. You think of her excitement if she were still alive. You glance towards your papa. He seems to be in deep thought. You shake him and then lie on his lap.

As you lie down, you drift back to 2020 when you were not allowed to sit closer to a person in public buses due to COVID-19. You recall how everyone wore a face mask. At the time, your mama was in quarantine. She had been quarantined on her arrival from Nairobi. You think back to how she tested positive after a week and how you were scared of losing her. You recall all those sleepless nights when you prayed for her rapid recovery. You shudder remembering how your papa used to comfort you during those tough times. You remember how you cried on his chest when the Ministry of Health announced that your mama had gone the way of all flesh. You can discern everything in your vision but scratch that; you

have to be strong and the bus is already close to your destination. The passengers disembark the bus and so do you and your papa.

You are now at Gisimenti. It looks a bit crowded compared to your neighbourhood. The government has made it more of an edutainment hub. Along the way, you see schools, shopping malls and bars. Next to the bus stop, there is a garden with Rwandan cultural ornaments. You walk a few metres then descend to the Grand Sunken Plaza which is built underground. You've been going there since 2037 mostly after class. You can see an enormous shrine of a traditional Rwandan dancer, *Intore*. It is built in the middle of the plaza. The plaza also encompasses various shopping malls including your papa's jewellery shop which is next to the First Daughter's coffee shop. Most of the products in your papa's shop are from Senegal, Nigeria and DR Congo. He usually flies to one of these countries every first and third Friday of the month. He no longer flies to Dubai to retail products but sometimes he takes you there for vacation.

It is Friday, your papa was supposed to fly to Nigeria but has cancelled it because it is memorial day. You both respect the day your mama died. It is around 2 pm and you have to be at Rusororo before 3 pm. You've been looking for a place where you can get flowers. You notice a shop with flowers on the entrance and dash to buy the flowers as your papa is locking the door of his shop. You give your papa one packet of flowers as you both ascend the staircase that leaves the Grand Sunken Plaza. You log in to 'my taxi app' on your Mara smartphone and order a taxi. The taxi arrives and your papa tells the driver to take you to Rusororo cemetery where your mama was buried.

You can see plants and green hedges on the ends of the road and in the roundabouts as you drive along Kigali. You remember how your mama wished to see that and how she loved nature. You turn around to your papa then reminisce what happened in 2021.

“Do you remember the day we got the COVID-19 vaccination?” you ask your papa.

“Yes I do. I remember that we drove along here as we headed to the hospital,” he says.

“I was afraid to lose you because you were likely to get the virus. You had stopped wearing the face masks,” you whisper.

“Those face masks made me feel like as though I was suffocating...”

“I know but thanks to God who made us get through it all. I heard that the WHO and the World Bank supported our government.”

“Yes, I guess so. Even though Coronavirus took away your mama, we still have to thank God and I hope she’s doing fine in heaven,” your papa says staring at you.

You have reached the cemetery and you both know that the stay will not be awesome. You pay the taxi driver and head towards the reception and the security guards do their usual checks.

Stumbling through the aisle in the graveyard, you can see graves and they are startling. You reach mama’s grave but stand a metre away from it. You stare at your papa then shift your glance to the grave. There is the same picture of mama – the one you have at home. You bow once then trudge a bit forward and place the flowers on the grave. Your papa does the same. You are both holding back your tears. You hold your papa’s hand and nod, telling him to be strong. Now, you release your papa’s hand then knee before the grave. You stare at the picture of mama again.

“Mama, your daughter made it! She is now a strong woman. She will be promoted to be the Managing Director of Masaka Hospital and she’ll never cease to make you proud,” you tell mama and rise on your feet.

You move one step backward, bow again, and say, “Keep resting in peace, mama. I will always love you!”

You turn around and glance at your papa. He cuddles you with his lanky comforting arms. You leave the cemetery.