

From Book 3 of *Babilon Falling* by Billy Kahora: The Inheritors, 1997

Daughter Fi

Her mind kept getting stuck in reels of past Kenyan highlights of her life. And they mostly involved Mum. There was that Year of Her Headaches. Then the Year of Her Talking To Herself. The Year of Her Laughing Without Stopping. The Year of Walking Around The Estate. These episodes came to Fi in the gym, at OneAfrica. In the fucking club. Walking on North Carolina Avenue.

It was only weeks later after it first came before she finally managed to open The Letter. She'd thought about telling her friend Soma about Mum when they'd first met. But nah. It would colour Soma's vision of her as a Kenyan princess and mess up their equilibrium. She'd already told Soma a lot. Effacing the parts that were even vaguely related to Mum, which had meant downplaying the Buru Estate parts and how badly she'd wanted to Check Out of that. She'd concentrated on being at Msongari Girls and The Red Hill Princesses who had been the apex of her social desire, back then in high school. She'd also exaggerated about mad Ghanaian Hawa of her First Year at American Uni. And how chick had taken Fi to some crazy Maryland Kenyan party that had cured her of all things Kenyan in the US. Then, crazy Laura and beautiful Zack – the strange couple that had been her best friends before Soma in her Second Year. But she'd left out Mum and her never-ending shame about Buru and living in Eastlands.

The Letter from Mum. It was actually two letters. Or rather a note and a letter. The note was from kid bro Kabugua.

Siz,

What's up? How's the U.S? Dolla bills. Mum wanted me to send you greetings. But I also thought you know what I haven't spoken to you my siz in years. Us guys are just chillin. But I'm a bit broke. Can you hook me up with just 200 dollars. I have a lot to tell you by the way.

But this was nothing compared to Mum's letter. When she'd started reading things started crawling on her scalp.

Dear Wangare, You asked me to sign the forms that would take you to America.

Mum, sign these forms so that I can go to America to ... do communications for development ...

Those were the last words from my only daughter.

You stopped becoming a young girl a long time ago.

You said you will only go to private schools and even sometimes you did not come home and stayed with friends over the holidays and your father let you ...

Now I was told you were in America there ...

I write you this letter to remind you that I am your maitu and I will be your only maitu ... we only have one maitu in the world.

My maitu died before I was your age, and you will not want to miss the way I missed her

Even a card you cannot send to say that you are okay ... even if you write to my sister Beth your dearest Auntie and you refuse to write to me. Why is this?

I also hope you have not forgotten you were raised in the church, and I always did my best in this but then you refused and you even told me that you did not believe in God. And I thought you had become a Jehovah Witness like that girl, Night. and her family who went to America. So do you see them there in America. You cried so much when she left.

One day maybe you will come to the church I have started with some women who are now my friends for life ...

Your Maitu.

After Fi was done reading the strange letter, she'd lay back in bed and pulled the duvet over herself and resisted the howl that threatened from inside her. At some point she picked up the phone and started dialling Soma's number and then put it down.

Was there anything she could have done for Mum in those last years before she Checked Out of Kenya and Checked Into the US. Fi had always imagined people went mad spectacularly. That they woke up one day and started screaming and then they were thankfully taken to Mathare. But peeps she knew did the normal thing and went to see or were taken to Kenya's no 1 shrink, Dr Frank Njenga. She now realized that she did not quite know the details of what had happened those years that Mum had gone mental. She had wilfully blocked it all out. Been too busy trying to Check Out of Kenya. She'd Checked Out of 499 and Buru successfully but she now knew that's why she had decided to Check Out of Kenya because of Mum. And yet here she was spending waking hours on all those past years. It was as if she could not fully Check Out. Kenya was following her through Mum.

Firstborn Kang'a

Mum. She had tried to kill his habit of using his hands when he spoke for years. Kang'a suddenly remembered before that her trying to stop him being left-handed. Forcing him to use his right hand when he was a kiddo and there was a time he could use both. So many other of her mathe projects trying to make him perfect. He should have known then. Her potential for Mathare mental hospital. Again, he tipped his swallow to force the thing that wanted to burst out his chest away. A ki-big aruru bird.

He moved away from the direct rays of August sunlight streaming through Zanze's expanse. Irritating. But inside way from the windows, it was nice and chill after all the pandemonium outside. There was nothing like the smell of yesterday's late night Pillies and Tuskeys, sickly sweet perfume tempered by Elianto Frying Oil from the kitchen, Vim cleaning liquid splashed everywhere. This combi, the best smell ever – better get most of it while he still had breath left in him.

Right in the middle of CBD entropy on the fifth floor of Kenya Cinema Plaza, Zanze's big thing being on fifth floor was its coasto vibe. The ma-palm trees on the walls, and then margaritas and daiquiris though none of these jungu drinks were served at the bar. Drinking above it all, looking down on the city and its minions. It held a big beach party every last Sato of the month. A life-size Marilyn Monroe look-alike smoked a long cigarette with elaborate holder in her lips painted on the wall behind the bar. What the fuck. Staff wore huge sombreros and ridiculous tropical shirts on weeknights and weekends. Later today, staff would start arranging potted palms around the dance floor.

Of course, he'd known about Zanze before joining Eagle bank. Everyone knew the spot. But it is when he was posted to the Harambee Avenue branch that he had it had grown on him sawa sawa. Zanze was fucking pretentious, but he loved it for the last year it had been a second home away from Mum's shenanigans. Dad had organised the Eagle bank gig when he'd been kicked out of campo Nairobi Uni two years ago. What would the man say after he was gone? That he had done all he could for him. The cackle started in his chest, and he paused it. Would he have a well-attended funeral? Mum. Oh fuck. He had to go and see her.

Lastborn Kabugua

It was when his father transferred him to Aga Khan Hospital to recover from the mob beating in Mukuru Twin Citi that Gerald 'Giant Rat' Kabugua Karoki started hearing the ma-conversations. It was like he had ma-Satans in his head. It made him think of Mathe and that time she had

started talking to herself. He lay in his narrow hospital bed – senseless to the world, but he could feel his blood. It sounded like the sea One God. It was like his heartbeat was following the hospital machines. He let the ma-conversations from his Buru childhood wash over him. Ma-lectures, ma-instructions and ma-threats that were supposed to make him as a child show good manners. Stay inside the famo’s Buru high stone walls that Fathe had built. But also drive him to Kilimani Junior Academy in the famo’s the ma- Toyotas they had over time till Fathe graduated to real cars. Mark 11 (he remembered the car moties more than anything) – wearing that Kilimani Junior grey sweater under an Oxford-blue blazer, with a small ki-Latin school motto kwa chest: *Deux. Patriae. Ecclesia.* God. Country. Church. Yellowman. Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge. Maybe his head was knocking like Mathe and he was in Mathare. He had tried to save her and look what had happened. Why?

In his semi-comatose state, the ma-conversations were conducted by Fathe and Mathe in Kiuk ma-shrubs; Ingrish picked in bits and pieces from Brito ma-missionary school teachos from the strangely named ma-schools – Kamahuha, Kahuhia and Njiris. Every moment when he was growing up, they never shut up about these schools. In his deep sleep, he re-lived those ma-early years the family drove through Nairobi from Eastlando to west of Uhuru Highway to Kilimani Junior. Ati if he, Kangs and Fi went to those school they would make something of themselves. Okay then. What was he doing in hospital listening to Yellowman. Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge Zungu zungu kuzungu zenge.