

Sikuku¹

A short story by Doseline Kiguru²

I am leaning on the stairways' railing listening to this woman talking to her friend in a language that is so foreign to my ears that I don't even bother to figure out what they are talking about. The whole time she is chewing at some succulent thin-skinned red fruits. Her lower teeth sink into the fruit while the upper lid, toothless, holds the fruit in place before her hand expertly removes the partly eaten fruit from the mouth and repeats the procedure again and again, fruit after fruit. The red juice from this strange seedless fruit is now dripping slowly out of the corners of her mouth when she finally faces me and says, "six thousand shillings a month." Then she reaches into a pocket in the front of her apron. The pocket is placed lower in the apron and given her seated position on a low stool it looks like she is removing the fruits from her groin. She continues to savour the red fruits as I stare at her in exhaustion. I have spent hours looking for a room. I don't want to spend another day in the cheap dorm room that is always full of loud mouthed loafers whose speed to snatch bread from your slightly open suitcase is almost rivalled by the bedbugs' eagerness to suck you dry as soon as you get into bed. "Life is hard in Nairobi" was a constant phrase in my father's house and was especially dished out more generously in the few days before my departure to the city to study. So I am prepared for the tough life but I need to get my own room. A new friend from college suggested that it would be a good idea to get a room on River Road or in Ngara. That way I would not have to budget for transport into town. This friend who has been in Nairobi a few months longer than I also let me in on another survival tactic – we do not have to buy vegetables but we would instead keep following closely on the heels of the

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kanjo vehicle as it grazes through downtown Nairobi harassing hawkers, and then we would hurriedly pick up the few tomatoes, potatoes, carrots and broken spinach leaves that are usually left behind as the hawkers scamper away from the dreaded kanjo.

But the house hunting business is tough and almost every room is taken or uninhabitable. I am almost giving up. A quick calculation of the value of the Shilling in Nairobi tells me that six thousand Shillings is too much for a room in this tenement. But night fall is slowly blanketing, and this is my last option. "I will pay for it," I say resignedly.

"The room. There is somebody else. She has not yet come back for the new semester," says the fruit eating lady, who I later learn is one of the owners of the tenement building. Her friend has by now moved to stand near the door and is fumbling with a bunch of keys tied around her waist. I look at the woman chewing the red fruits and she doesn't look at me straight in the eye. She once again deeps her hand in her groin and fishes out another fruit. By now the corners of her mouth are red but she is not making any effort to wipe the juice away. I do not respond. She continues, "You can only stay for a short while."

"When is she coming back?" I ask.

"I don't know. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe next month, maybe never," she answers before adding in a low tone, "she is also from ushagoo like you." I want to ask her whether she thinks the standards of her tenement can even compare to the buildings in my ushagoo but I can't. I do not want to go back to the dorm room. She then gives a nod to her friend by the door who opens it and leads me in. As soon as we step inside, we find ourselves confined to a little corridor. There is the distinct smell of old age, ancient and expired spices blending in with the years of sweat left by the many tenants who have passed through this apartment. It reminds me of Grandma's house just before she died and before my uncle's widow moved in with her children who always smell like garlic and dhania. That sharp smell of decay and life mixed together. On the left is a kitchen with its sink full of rotting dishes but the stench from the sink cannot drown the overall living decay of the apartment. The corridor is so narrow that my guide has to walk sideways to get to a door at the very end. As she walks through though, her hips and breasts keep glazing the walls and leave behind lines drawn from the soot, dust, curry, and oil that coat the greasy wall.

We are at the farthest door and she pushes it open and then leaves. There is a double bed and a thin mattress carelessly thrown over it. There is a closet at one corner, a lone chair and a low cabinet near the window. The window opens into the street below. I open the closet and it is full of clothes. This is clearly someone else's room. I take out a pair of khanga from my luggage bag, spread one on the bed, lie down and cover myself with the other. I will think about looking for a room of my own after the much-needed rest.

A strange humming lulls me to sleep and soon I am floating away. Am floating on a sea of red and am too tired to do anything. I spread my arms and legs and allow the thick red sea to carry me wherever it wants. I am alone. Scared. Hungry. Thirsty. I try to open my mouth to drink but I can't. My jaws are locked. The strange hum has now changed to a mournful dirge. The distinctly male voice keeps rising, etched with pain at its pitch. Soon the voice is calling. The name sounds very familiar and yet I cannot really point out where or with whom I have heard that name before. Hands reach out under me and lift up and I'm hanging somewhere in mid-air. But what a wonderful feeling of bliss! I am too tired to do anything and too comfortable to try anyway.

I wake up later and it is already dark. The smell of food is overwhelming, and hunger is eating at me like safari ants on the fleshy insides of a ripe avocado. I walk to the kitchen at the end of the corridor. It is dark but the smell of food is too strong. It is almost nauseating. I run my hand over the wall just inside the kitchen to find the switch, but the bulb does not flicker on. The smell of food is too powerful it keeps me glued there, sniffing everywhere. I am just about to start searching blindly for that food when a shadow passes near me and goes to what I assume is the sink. There is the clinking of plates and spoons as the water starts to run.

"You... you... you startled me!" I manage to say to the shadow. "I didn't hear you coming in," I add before a voice eventually comes out of the shadow, soft and honey-like. "I'm sorry," he says, pulling his words a bit too far and too familiarly. Like someone I know or someone I once knew. "You just woke up and left!" I concentrate more on the beauty in the voice before it hits me. How would he know I just woke up and left? But before I can ask, he answers to my hunger pangs. "I made some food for you," I can feel the smile in his voice. Or am I just imagining it? "In this place, everyone makes their own food and cleans up after themselves. But I made some for you!"

I follow him out of the kitchen, along the corridor and before I can register my surprise, he is already turning the knob on my door and we are inside my room. It is not as dark as the kitchen. The streetlight below throws some light into the room and he is no longer entirely a shadow. He is just a little bit taller than me and a flower-patterned jacket accentuates his shoulders, and a tummy that is on its first stages of becoming a full blown pot belly is visible. He moves expertly around my room and bends down near the window before scooping something from a metal pot onto a plate which he then brings to me. I am still standing in the middle of the room and he gently leads me to sit on the bed.

“Do you need a spoon?” he asks.

“Yah!”

“Coming up!” and he rushes to bring it and we both laugh but the tension does not melt. As he places the spoon in my hand, his fingers brush against mine and I realise that he is too cold. Poor young man, how cold will he be in August when Nairobi almost freezes over? I place the first spoonful into my mouth.

“Biryani!” I almost scream, with my mouth full.

“Oh! So you know? Do you like it?”

“Are you kidding me? I love Swahili food!” I say in between spoonfuls.

He takes the only chair in the room and seats opposite me, watching as I enjoy his sumptuous meal. He watches as I fill my spoon, and then my mouth, with yellowed fluffy long grained Pishori followed by pieces of beef so well cooked and browned they look like chocolate bars. My hunger knows no embarrassment. I save the kachumbari for last – to savour the sour chilled taste of salted red onions with thinly sliced cherry tomatoes.

“You like Pishori? I prefer basmati rice but I can’t afford it. But if you like Pishori better, there is a friend of mine who drives a matatu between Meru and Nairobi every day. We could ask him to buy us a bag of Pishori at Mwea.” I just want him to stop talking and let me eat in peace but since he seems to be in a mood for words, I ask, almost ungratefully, “Why are you in my room?” He doesn’t answer. “They told me that it belongs to another girl who has not yet reported for this semester,” I continue prodding.

“Ah! She won’t come back,” he says it so confidently that I begin to fear. After a short pause, he continues, “She couldn’t stand me and yet this is also my room.” I try to interpret the emotions behind his tone. I can’t quite figure it out but am sure it is not anger. I have so many questions still lingering on my

mind, but the power of sleep is pulling me more strongly than the hunger that had pushed me to the kitchen. "At least let me know your name," I say as I lay back on the bed, struggling to keep my eyes on him. But he doesn't answer. He just stares at me as his figure slowly fades away. Or is it my eyes that close slowly?

Next morning and he is gone. Not even a trace of him, or the biryani we had for dinner. Could I have imagined it? I head to college to register as a new student. I must find a room of my own, I tell myself. But the whole day is wasted on queues. Queuing at the students' welfare office, queuing at the registration desks, queuing at the HELB offices to demand for the money they promised. After queuing at the supermarket to buy groceries, I eventually get home when the streetlights come on. And he is already there. In my room.

"We need to talk," I say, feigning anger.

"I know," it is almost a whisper, "but you better eat first."

Tonight he has made ugali dengu and I cannot say no. Each one of us gets a bowl of dengu. We sit on the floor, our backs against the bed, a large plate of ugali between us, the streetlight shining in on us from the street below through the open window. We eat slowly, in silence, savouring every little morsel. Before long, our bowls resting on our thighs, we are googling "how to make a healthy dinner" on my phone. Most the recipes look uninteresting, with ingredients unfamiliar and strange. We laugh together at "halloumi salad with pomegranate and dill". We are laughing because we know we can't get the ingredients we would need for this in downtown Nairobi and that even if we did, we would never be able to afford them. Instead, we settle on a grilled fish recipe because we know we can cheaply get fish in Gikomba if we went late in the day when the sellers are almost giving up and are willing to sell for half the price.

"Are you real?" I ask, out of the blue, making the question look light.

"What do you think?"

He waits for my answer but it doesn't come. He pushes the now empty plates under the bed, gets up from the floor and removes a pair of bed sheets and a blanket from the closet. He continues to make a bed on the floor, humming that strange sad tune. I also get up from the floor and get into bed. The strange hum lulls me to sleep and I swear I could hear it the whole night. He is not there in the morning when I wake up, but I know that he will be there when I come back home in the evening. I spend the day walking around town and familiarising myself with the new place, all the time hoping to catch a glimpse

of him around a corner. In the evening, the first thing I ask him is his name because I have gained enough courage in the last few days. He doesn't hesitate. "Sikuku." I do not offer to tell him my name. I assume he already knows. We make dinner together and manage to be done before the other housemates come home. Then we sit down in our usual place on the floor, our backs leaning against the bed.

"I am sorry for lodging in your room like this. I did not know that there was another tenant in this room," I start, "And I don't think they know either," I say this with my chin pointing upstairs where the owners of the tenement building live. He doesn't say anything. So I add, "And am grateful for the food. I really love your cooking."

"It feels nice to cook for somebody. The other girl who used to live here would never eat my food. She was scared, I think. I don't know," he looks sad and I want to be able to reach out and help. But he reaches out for me first, and I fall into his arms. He is still too cold and feels too light for a man of his size. But it feels great to be in his arms. He pulls me away from his chest and holds me at arm's length, looks into my eyes and says, "My dear, in this city, this is the only place that can accommodate me."

I do not want to ask the next logical question, "why", because I am too scared to know the answer. I get up and crawl into bed, covering my whole body to try and stop my shivering. I don't want to look at him anymore. But even with my eyes closed tight under the covers, I can still visualise him. I can still smell him. I can't get him out of my senses or my mind. "Ok," I say as an afterthought, "You can share the bed with me. It is big enough anyway." I feel him move from the floor where he was still seated, stride over me like a shadow and settle on the farthest side of the bed, away from me. Maybe he will be warm under the covers, I tell myself. But in the shadows, I cannot tell where exactly he is on the bed. There is no sinking of the mattress as his weight shifts to the bed and I cannot feel his breathing either.

I am slowly sliding into deep sleep. Arms reach out for me and we are moving through air. No. We are gliding through the air like two shadows in a dance. I can no longer tell whether I am asleep or awake. Sikuku is taking me home to attend a feast in Eastleigh. I think it is a wedding ceremony. There are people in bright orange, blue, red, pink, purple and white clothes eating halwa, kaimati, biryani, pilau, chapati, samosa. More food and drinks keep coming in and we are all eating and dancing and laughing and there are tears in our eyes. Wait. Are those tears of joy or sadness? I think we are at a funeral

and everyone is dancing and stuffing themselves to keep the pain away. I turn to Sikuku to ask him about this place he has brought me and he is not there. I shout his name until my voice is hoarse and there is a drumming in my ear. Another shout – this time not from me.

I'm back in our room and Sikuku is still sleeping. The other housemates are knocking loudly on the cardboard wall that separates us and they are shouting at me to shut up.

"We have heard enough of Sikuku in this house!"

"She is as crazy as the other one!"

And soon the housemates are all shouting and knocking at my door, "Sikuku is dead! Sikuku is dead!"

I turn to Sikuku who is now awake, and he pulls me closer to him. Into that embrace which is always cold but comforting. He shouts back at the housemates in a language I do not understand and his voice rings throughout the house. Then everybody is screaming in fright and they are all running around, the sounds of falling and scattering pots, spoons, and cooking sticks everywhere. Soon, the house is quiet again. Only the tap tap tap of the water droplets falling into the dirty sink. "Don't mind them. I will keep you safe," he assures me, and I don't want to get out of his cold embrace. "Are you afraid of me now that you know?" he asks so softly I almost think that I imagined it. "I think I have always known," I say, as softly. We are pressing our bodies close to each other. I seek out his mouth in the darkness. My mouth on his feels like a long awaited and well-deserved dessert. The one that your mother used to give you after you had carefully eaten your spinach, your carrots, your broccoli. It takes me to the pleasant taste of hot chocolate fudge served with vanilla ice cream. The more we kiss, the colder I get, and I am scared but I cannot stop.