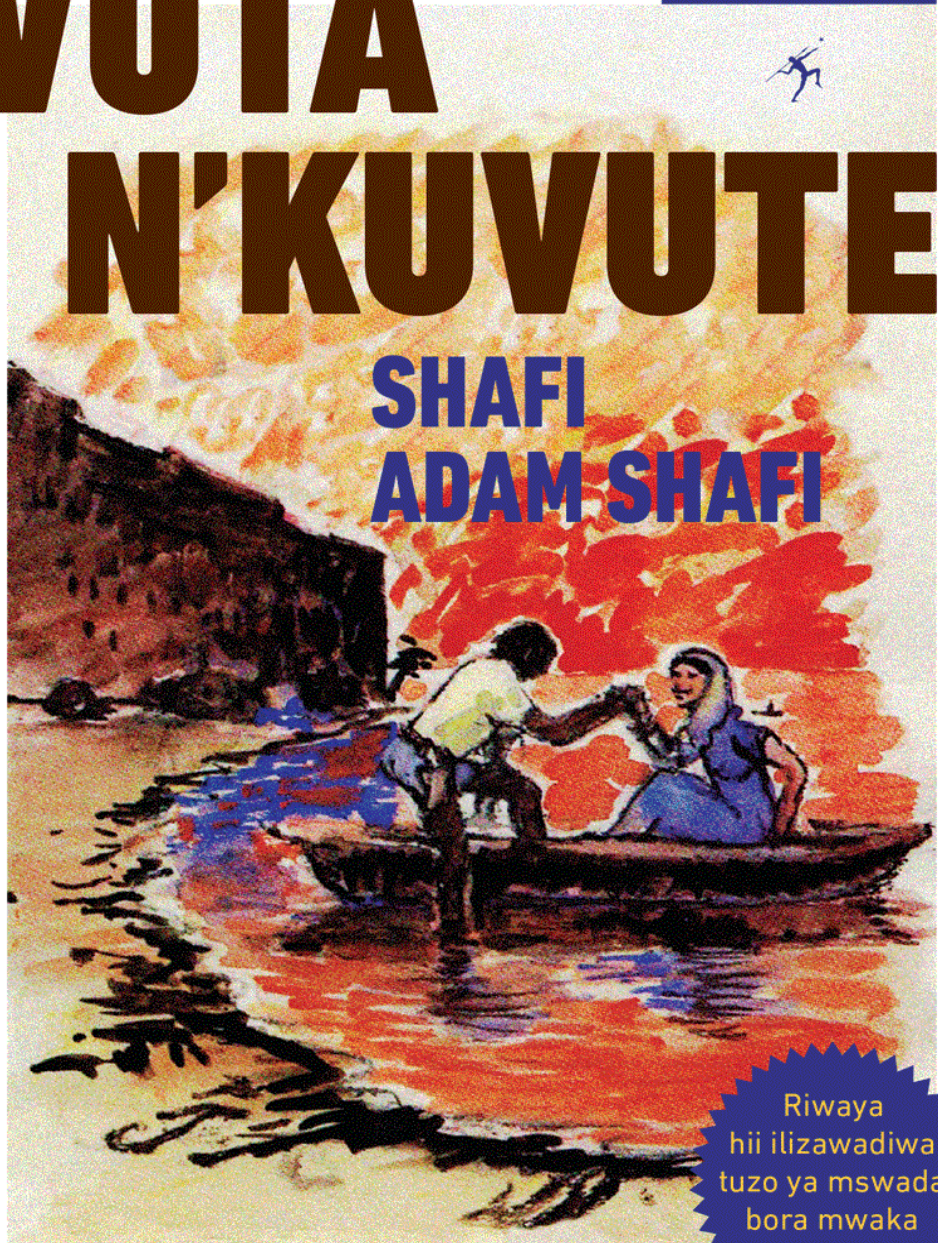


Ama kwa kweli, ni riwaya inayomfurahisha yeyote anayependa hadithi tamu iliyoandikwa na lugha fasaha." – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

SANIFU MPYA

VUTA N'KUVUTE

SHAFI
ADAM SHAFI



Riwaya
hii ilizawadiwa
tuzo ya mswada
bora mwaka
1998

PULL AND I'LL
PULL BACK

Shafi Adam Shafi

English translation by Matthew J. Quinn

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CHAPTER 1

Soon after she began menstruating, Yasmin was wedded to her husband, a member of her Ithnashiria community who lived near her in Mtendeni.

Her husband had absolutely nothing in common with her. Neither in age, nor in terms of personality, for when Yasmin was a young girl just fifteen years of age, her husband Mr. Raza was a fifty two year old elder. Yasmin had been but a newborn child, incapable of understanding anything, back when Mr. Raza had begun to grow old.

She had agreed to be married only to please her parents. She herself had no desire to be married to a man old enough to be her father. When they went out anywhere she hated to be seen with him, and even that day when they had gone to the movies, she

hadn't wanted to sit next to him.

Yasmin had a small, round face like that of a cherry tomato, and big eyes that always looked they had been crying. She had a small, thin nose, and underneath it were arranged two pretty lips that were never at rest on account of her proclivity for laughing, which showed off two rows of pretty teeth. Atop her head was a shock of healthy black hair that fell gently down and rested atop her shoulders. She wasn't tall, but wasn't extremely short either, and her bowed legs only added to her attractiveness whenever she walked.

Yasmin didn't like to be married to her husband one bit; she had wanted very much to get a young husband her own age. She would've liked to get a husband who anyone would have looked at and said, "Yasmin has really got a fine husband." She wanted very much to love, but she hadn't a husband worthy of loving. She wanted a partner who would truly show her love, who would shower her with all the love in his heart.

As is the custom of many Indians in East Africa, Mr. Raza was a prominent businessman in Mtendeni, Zanzibar, where he ran a big retail goods shop. The shop was right next to the road, so it was always flooded with buyers in need of all kinds of things. This person wanted a sack of rice, that one a bushel of cherry tomatoes, another half a shilling's worth of curry powder, and all the time Mr. Raza fighting to be heard over the noise of his customers. Once she was married to him, Yasmin became Mr. Raza's main assistant at his store.

Not being in love with Mr. Raza, along with having to work in his shop every day, made Yasmin hate married life with her husband. She would have preferred death over surrendering her body to that man. At night she was so exhausted that she slept soon after laying her head down upon her pillow.

Even after falling asleep, it was not a peaceful one; often she would be awoken by the deep, raspy voice of her husband calling out to her from the front room, asking her this or that question.

“Yasmin! How many rice cakes did Ms. Mashavu bring today?” Mr. Raza asked as he busied himself with the day’s accounting. Yasmin wouldn’t respond to these questions and continued to slumber. During these times Mr. Raza was truly busy and wouldn’t tolerate any joking around, not even a little; often-times Yasmin heard him becoming angry and arguing with himself. When this happened, he’d usually lost money on something. His complaints about losses never ended, and there wasn’t a single day where you’d hear him say he’d made a profit. This was a secret about which only he knew himself.

As he crunched numbers, Mr. Raza smoked one cigarette after another, the smoke from these cigarettes filling the whole house with their terrible scent. After finishing with his accounting, Raza went straight to bed, where he found Yasmin sleeping peacefully.

Mr. Raza’s room was filled with clutter. Bags of flour, bunches of bananas, boxes of tea leaves and cans of milk. The walls of the room were adorned with just two pictures. One was of the Arabic names Fatma,

Ali, Hassan, and Hussein, all written out in decorative script. The other was of a man on horseback, all five of his fingers spread out as he waved. There was a beautiful teak chair, sculpted decoratively on its sides and feet. Mr. Raza had bought this chair in Darajani at the market. On the other side of the room was a chair for playing the marimba, and above it a shelf that had been nailed to the wall. Dirty clothes hung from the shelf, and on the last peg hung a small rosary.

The room didn't look a place for someone to rest peacefully. It looked like a place to merely pass the night, rise, and continue with business as usual in the morning. When Mr. Raza entered the room after finishing his work, he was silent. He merely got undressed and threw himself down on the bed. Then he'd toss and turn restlessly. Sometimes he slept face down on the mattress, other times he'd stand up suddenly and switch on the light to search for a cigarette and a match. When he found them he'd light his cigarette and smoke half of it, fumigating the room with its smoke before laying himself back down on the bed. Sometimes he'd turn towards Yasmin and start to feel and press on her, calling to her and asking, "Yasmin are you already asleep?" Yasmin would be fast asleep, far away in her youthful dreams. Mr. Raza would turn her here and there and keep pressing on her; Yasmin would awaken suddenly but immediately fall back to sleep.

As usual, suddenly Mr. Raza got up and switched on the light. He got a match and took out a cigarette from the pocket of a shirt hanging on the shelf. He lit

it and began to smoke, inhaling deep breaths, filling his lungs with smoke. He exhaled the smoke all at once from his nose and mouth, and this time instead of just smoking half, he finished the whole cigarette. Smoke filled the whole room, so much so that Yasmin began to choke in her sleep. She coughed until she awoke, but then laid back down again; when she put her head back on the pillow, Mr. Raza switched off the light and laid down with her, embracing his wife.

“You shouldn’t bother me sir, I want to sleep.”

“Why are you sleeping so early? It’s only 8pm. Wake up, let’s talk,” Mr. Raza intoned. Yasmin ignored him and went back to sleep.

Mr. Raza got up again and switched on the light. He looked at his wife and began to take in her beauty. This was indeed the only time of day Mr. Raza got the opportunity to do so. Mr. Raza laid back down after switching off the light, and this time he turned Yasmin so that she was face-to-face with him. She wanted to turn back away when she felt his beard scratch sharply against her, a four day old beard he hadn’t had time to shave.

She could feel the wrinkles of his face against hers, and every breath she took was filled with the scent of cigarette smoke. Yasmin turned her face this way and that to escape from her clever husband and once more fall back to sleep.

The nights weren’t long enough for Yasmin; morning always arrived too soon, and with it work at the store waited for her as usual. She never had any recollection of what Mr. Raza had been up to the night

before; no matter what, at night she could only be found in another world, the world of sleep. Mr. Raza wasn't passionate about his wife, and vice versa. The life of these two people was a product of fate; neither of them were satisfied, and this suffused Yasmin in a state of misery. She looked at the world as if it were against her, for it had cursed her with a husband of an entirely different generation who wasn't even a little bit attractive.

Even though Yasmin spent much of her time at the store, she managed to find time to hang out with her neighbor Mwajuma. Mwajuma was an African girl whose playful personality and constant jokes made Yasmin break with social expectations discouraging Hindi people from associating with Africans.

It was no wonder that Yasmin gravitated towards her, for she was the attraction of the neighborhood. Children, teenagers, the elderly - everyone had their reasons for conversing with her. They'd go there to listen to her jokes, to bask in her happiness, or to learn from her infinite wisdom.

She was a young woman, not more than twenty-five years of age but, her slim appearance made her look younger than that. She had a strong voice; when she talked, all the neighbors knew that Mwajuma was around.

She had a thin, perfectly slender face, and eyes that rolled so much her friends gave her the nickname "crazy eyes," for she rolled them so much that you couldn't tell whether or not she had been drinking. Other neighbors said she was nutty.

She was of medium height, and when she dressed up in her favorite outfit - one kanga around her hips and another thrown over her shoulders, her hair plaited into four braids - you couldn't pass by without looking at her immediately. Whenever she got an opportunity, Yasmin escaped and visited Mwajuma at her house. She was the only person Yasmin told stories to about the problems she faced living with her elder husband.

One day Mr. Raza had finished his accounting early and entered their bedroom. He sat on the teak chair and smoked his cigarettes without speaking to Yasmin, who was lying motionless under his gaze. She had spread herself out on the bed, staring up at the ceiling beams as if to count them. She was lost in her thoughts of how to avoid her husband, but every time she put her mind to it she couldn't come up with a suitable excuse.

Mr. Raza, with part of a cigarette dangling from his lips, began to say, "These days business has dried up. Every time I do the accounting I just see losses. That rich friend of mine in Kibaniani has refused to lend me some things because I've yet to pay him for the things I took last month. I'm surrounded by debts and have no idea what to do." Yasmin just looked at him; she had no response, for business matters weren't on her mind at all.

"I can't continue with this kind of business, I need to find another place to open up shop," Mr. Raza continued to complain, clutching what remained of his cigarette with the tips of his fingers. Yasmin ignored

all of this and turned on her other side, falling asleep shortly thereafter. By the time the sun had risen and morning was upon her, Mr. Raza had left to open his shop.

Not a month had passed before Raza wrote to Mamdali, his uncle living in Mombasa, and explained to him his business problems. Mamdali, a native Zanzibarian, had gone to Mombasa a long time ago. He was well-known there, and due to his established reputation, had an outsize share of responsibilities in Mombasa's Ithnashiria community. He had a magnificent store on Salim Road, and many other businessmen were familiar with him. He was highly trusted - it wasn't hard for him to take out a credit of even 100,000 shillings from any of the area's rich merchants.

Soon after receiving Raza's letter, Mamdali responded by advising him to move to Mombasa and start a grocery business, which would be highly profitable for him.

Yasmin and her husband were sitting in the front room eating lunch. Mr. Raza was thinking about how to broach the subject of moving to Mombasa. They continued to eat for some time without speaking to each other before Mr. Raza began, "My dear wife, I think it's best that we leave Zanzibar."

Yasmin was struck with shock, unaware of how this matter had come about, or even how it had reached the point of leaving Zanzibar. "Why?" she asked.

"Ala! I thought I told you that business isn't going well these days."

"So we should leave Zanzibar and go where?"

“Mombasa.”

“Then what will we do?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“That my uncle has replied to the letter I sent him.”

“Aa, no you didn’t tell me.”

“Ala! I must have forgotten. My uncle replied to the letter I sent him, advising me to move to Mombasa and open up a grocery store.”

Yasmin dropped her gaze to the floor, a piece of chapati still in her hand.

“What do you say?” Mr. Raza asked, eager to know what his wife would say.

“Ah! This life you and I are living is making me miserable. I’d feel better if you sent me to my family’s when you leave for Mombasa,” Yasmin replied timidly, still clutching the piece of chapati in her hand.

Yasmin was afraid of angering her husband due to the mutual understanding between Raza and Yasmin’s parents. She felt that to bother one’s husband was equivalent to bothering one’s own parents, even though Yasmin had absolutely no desire to live with Mr. Raza. She wanted to be rid of him but didn’t dare bring herself to say these words to him. She begged her husband to return her to her family’s home, but he steadfastly refused.

Mr. Raza began to work out the details of the journey until everything was arranged nicely. His and his wife’s passports were ready, and all that remained was for him to tell Yasmin which day they would leave.

He waited for a suitable time to do so; there was no other window of opportunity except at night.

Raza had already smoked his cigarettes as usual, and both of them had laid down to sleep. "Yasmin," Mr. Raza said slowly.

"Yes sir?"

"Our trip has been planned out - we'll leave the day after tomorrow, travelling for four days by boat. We'll pass through Pemba and Tanga."

"So you didn't pay any heed to what I said to you earlier?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you that you should send me home, that you should leave first and I'll follow you there later."

"Drop it - you and I will go together!" Mr. Raza said, angrily this time. Yasmin didn't dare try to discuss it with her husband; it wasn't her custom. She remained silent. It wasn't long before sleep took hold of her as usual.

The next day, Mr. Raza didn't open his shop up, and the neighbors had heard rumors that Mr. Raza and his wife were moving away. That day Mr. Raza and his wife went to work closing everything up for good. They packed everything up in big boxes as Raza smoked his cigarettes constantly, one after the other. Everything was finished at 7pm. Yasmin figured she'd better ask her husband for permission to go say goodbye to her mother in Kiponda. Permission was granted, and Yasmin bathed and changed her clothes quickly, setting out a short time later.

Around 8pm she found her mother sitting on the

couch in her front room. Before she managed to greet her, Zenabhai unleashed a torrent of words on her child, speaking in broken Swahili on account of being separated from her family and other Swahili people for so long.

“Why have you come at this hour by yourself?”

“I’ve come to say goodbye to you ma.”

“Where are you going?”

“So Mr. Raza hasn’t told you.”

“Told me what?”

“We’re going to Mombasa to open up shop.”

“Raza hasn’t been here for a whole month, I thought he was sick.”

“Ah! He’s fine, he’s just been busy.”

Yasmin didn’t stay at her mother’s for long; after speaking with her briefly, she left to return home.

As she walked, Yasmin thought it would be unwise to leave without saying goodbye to anyone in the neighborhood, so before she arrived at her house, she stopped by her girlfriend Mwajuma’s place.

Knock, knock, knock, she pounded on the door. “Hello, anyone inside?”

“Who is it?” a voice boomed from inside.

“Me,” Yasmin replied.

Then Mwajuma opened the door, a lit candle in her hand. “Oh! Yasmin, what are you doing here at this hour? Is everything fine?”

“Everything’s fine, I’ve just come to say goodbye to you.”

“You’ve come to say goodbye ... come inside then.”

“Ah! I’m in a hurry, I can’t come inside. I mean,

I didn't tell my husband I'd be coming here, he only knows that I've gone to Kiponda to see my mother. If I'm late it'll be a big deal; you know, that man gets jealous like no other."

"That won't do, just come inside, even if just for two minutes," Mwajuma insisted.

"Ah! You know how my husband speaks to me, and once he starts he'll never stop."

"Ah, my sister, you shouldn't let that bother you, all old men with young wives speak like that, don't worry yourself."

"Alright I'll come in for a little bit."

Mwajuma ushered Yasmin into the front room. She raised the wick of the candle in her hand so they could see each other better, then welcomed Yasmin to sit on a bench in the room before pulling out a rug to one side and sitting down herself.

"Ehee! So explain to me where you're going again?" Mwajuma asked with a smile, her voice low and quiet.

"My husband and I are leaving for Mombasa."

"I heard people talking about this in the neighborhood but didn't believe any of it."

"He! There's no secrets in this world - the neighbors already know about this?" Yasmin asked, dumbfounded.

Mwajuma got up from her spot on the rug and sat on the bench next to Yasmin. Sliding close to her, she asked in a hushed voice, "I hear you don't want to go with him?"

"Ah! Mwajuma, I haven't even told you that. Put a lid on that..."

Yasmin turned her wrist and was startled when she saw the time. “Lo! It’s 9:45. Lord! I can’t talk anymore, I need to get home. Goodbye, God willing we’ll see each other again.”

“Alright girl, goodbye. Even I’ve got somewhere to be. I look like this because I was going to bathe before you came, today there’s a big dance in Mpirani, the dancers are coming from Dar.”

“Alright, well if we don’t see each other again then this is goodbye,” Yasmin said sadly.

“Thank you sister for coming to say goodbye. Don’t forget to send me a letter when you get to Mombasa.”

Yasmin left quickly and headed back to her place, filled with worry. After cutting through two or three alleyways she was back. Opening the door slowly, she entered the front room to find Mr. Raza sitting in a chair, swollen up like a hippopotamus.

“What took you so long?” Raza asked loudly in anger, the smoke from his cigarette pouring out from his nose and mouth.

“The conversation with my mother lasted forever, I had to stay and listen to her go on and on. You know how it is when she gets to talking.”

Raza took a deep breath, as if unloading a heavy weight from his shoulders, “Alright. It’s late now, let’s go to bed.”

The day of their trip arrived. They were awakened at dawn by the loud voice of Jamatini’s prayer callers, amplified by loudspeakers which carried the deep male intonations clearly to Mtendeni and every surrounding

area. Yasmin gathered all the luggage that had been prepared the previous night. They ate breakfast, and when they finished they got dressed. Once they had finished dressing they looked as if they were headed off to be married, Mr. Raza's elderliness notwithstanding. Then Raza began to joke with Yasmin, "I told you we'd travel by boat, but I lied to you. We're going by plane. Have you ever boarded a plane before?" Raza asked, his smile deepening the creases of the wrinkles that lined his face.

Yasmin didn't reply but simply stood there smiling; if you'd have seen her, you'd have said she was elated to hear that she'd be travelling by plane. At 10:30am the two of them were among the crowd of other passengers inside Zanzibar's airport. After the madness of conversing with the officials at the Immigration Department and the guards at customs, they finally boarded their plane. Soon they were floating in the air above Unguja, the wind blowing straight at them from the ocean. They left the beaches they were so familiar with behind, circling the island as its palm trees waved ostentatiously in the wind. They sat shoulder to shoulder inside the plane, Mr. Raza making room for Yasmin by the window so he could point out to her the wondrous sights below.

Although Yasmin was in awe of the view below her, the peace she felt from taking it all in was disturbed by Mr. Raza, who was talking and pointing things out to her constantly. They climbed higher into the sky, and after awhile they heard the voice of the flight attendant notifying them that they were beginning

their descent. They began to approach the beach separating Mombasa from the sea, and after a brief time they landed at Mombasa's airport. So well-known was Mamdali that he had arrived at the airport and entered the restricted area where other citizens were forbidden to go. He received Yasmin and Mr. Raza happily and respectfully, the thrill of their arrival causing him to ask questions at a rapid clip. A new Vauxhall was waiting for them outside, and after a short drive they reached Mombasa's city limits.

When they arrived at Mamdali's home, they found it had been prepared for their visit; everything had been arranged perfectly in the front room of the house, which was adorned with all kinds of decorations. Hindi songs floated soothingly from the large radiogram sitting against one wall of the room, and Mamdali's great-grandchildren, curious to see their visitors, flitted in and out.

After just one week, Mr. Raza had arranged everything with Mamdali's help. A big produce shop was opened. There was no vegetable one could want that wasn't sold there. Spinach, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, peas, cooked cassava, and all kinds of other vegetables.

Mr. Raza rented a nice home and festooned it with all kinds of decorations in the same manner as Mamdali's home. His room was now decorated attractively, a far cry from his room in Mtendeni that had been filled with miscellaneous clutter.

His home was on the second floor of a large building with three balconies. The window on the eastern

side of the house looked out over Kilindini Road as it unfurled itself directly towards the harbor. The western window faced the window of the neighbor's house. The homes in the neighborhood were ancient and built one next to the other, with groups of them separated from each other by a narrow paved road that surrounded the neighborhood. The thick walls of dirt, limestone, and rock reduced the heat inside the homes, so that when afternoon arrived and the sun scorched everyone in Mombasa, the "old Mombasa" was the best place to be.

This was indeed the neighborhood where Mr. Raza began his life in the city of Mombasa - in the afternoon he was at the market, in the evening he was at home. But his life here was different than in Unguja, where his wife assisted him in the business of selling chili peppers and curry powder. In Mombasa he operated his grocery by himself, while Yasmin remained at home.

And in old town Mombasa, an area without any shops, every afternoon was quiet as everyone who remained at home kept to themselves.

Although helping Mr. Raza with his work had bored her, it had kept her active; by the second week Yasmin felt restless inside the house and smothered on all sides by loneliness, without anyone to talk with. During the day she stared out the windows. The only comfort she had was the Hindi songs she listened to from the big radiogram broadcasting from one side of the front room.

But it wasn't enough for Yasmin to just sit there

and listen to the singers, and one time she stood in the middle of the room and danced. She swayed her body back and forth, swinging her breasts and batting her eyes. She waved her hands up and down, darting back and forth the way an eel swims through underwater caves and resembling an experienced belly dancer from any Hindi film. Every day she did this under the assumption that she was alone, far away from the prying eyes of anyone who might be shamefully spying on her. But it was only Mr. Raza's eyes who looked on shamelessly, and one day when Yasmin was dancing happily, Mr. Raza was an audience of one to her show. She danced for him, undulated on his lap, and kissed him on the cheeks, and it was then that Mr. Raza felt that life in Mombasa was excellent, that business was going well for him, and that Yasmin made him happy beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Day broke pleasantly that Sunday, large clouds spread out across the sky like an umbrella protecting Mombasa from being burnt to a crisp. Mr. Raza left early to run to the market, for that day of the week is when foreigners and others of means do their shopping for the entire week ahead. Unlike everyone else, for whom Sunday is a day of rest, and some of whom sleep until 10am if they are hungover from the previous night, for businessmen Sunday is just another workday. A day for making money.

Yasmin had risen still feeling happy from the day before, when they had gone to the movies and wandered around the shops. They had returned content, a feeling which grew as the pair joked and entertained

each other back at home.

After drinking tea, she felt the house weighing down on her, once more surrounded by loneliness; to chase it away she put on some music. She danced passionately, standing in the middle of the front room twisting and turning to the music. She had no idea that her dances these days had attracted an adoring fan who watched her without her knowing. Today when she had finished, the onlooker decided to congratulate her by applauding and exclaiming, "Good Lord."

When she turned to look out the window, the window that faced that of her neighbors', she was startled to find a young girl observing her dance routine. They held each other's gaze, but Yasmin couldn't stand the young girl's brazen stare, her eyes like shining searchlights. She slammed the window shut, and that was the end of her dancing that day.

She wasn't embarrassed as she realized that her dancing had attracted an observer other than Mr. Raza; sometimes she had asked herself, "What kind of dancing is this, with no one watching? Even giningi dances have an audience!" Starting that day a routine began: once Mr. Raza had left to sell groceries, the front room of the house became a dance stage, with Yasmin performing for her neighbor. She was an adolescent of average appearance. She had sharp, light brown eyes and long, straight hair the color of pepper. Under her nose one could see the faint outline of a moustache demonstrating that she was only just reaching adolescence. Her dark black eyebrows sprouted

from both sides of her face, approaching each other to meet at the bottom of her forehead. Relaxed at the window, she watched the woman dancing before her.

The head of the record player slipped as it reached the end of the disc and the singer concluded her song; when it was over, Yasmin gathered herself and looked over at the girl, who proceeded to ask, "Who taught you?"

"Myself," Yasmin replied, throwing her head back to toss her hair behind her.

"You could be an excellent chakacha dancer; have you seen that dance before?"

"Not yet."

"Do you want to see it?"

"Yes."

"On Saturday Ali Mkali is performing in Sarigoi, want to go?"

Yasmin leaned on the window sill, face to face with the girl, thinking about how to respond. Her mind drifted away, caught up in a desire to know more about chakacha dancing. She'd heard its praises sung many times before; many of its songs she'd ceased to hear about, while others persevered. Songs like "Innuendo," "Banana Plant," "Don't Tell Me," and many others; not a day would go by without her hearing them two or three times on the radio, and she quite enjoyed them. Straightening herself up, she looked at the girl. "I'll let you know," she said to her.

What lie should she invent so that her husband would give her permission to leave on Saturday night. She was still a newcomer to Mombasa town, without

a reliable neighbor or guide, no uncles or aunts - without anyone even to help craft an excuse for asking permission.

The girl had given her a difficult test, and she was nowhere to be found for the next two days, then three. Yasmin continued with her usual dancing in the front room, but every time she glanced at the window she saw the space empty, the window closed shut. She turned up the radiogram's volume in case she was far away, so that at least she'd hear a sign that the dancing had begun, but the girl still didn't show up. Where was she? Four days, then a week passed.

Yasmin began to feel as though she had offended her onlooker, be it with her dancing or by some other error. She'd offended her neighbor - a young girl at that. It was as if while shrouded in darkness she had glimpsed a light to give her hope, and then suddenly that light had disappeared. Her thoughts of chakacha dancing dissolved in her mind, and the songs she listened to were no longer those she had danced to, the ones that would remind her of the now-distant girl. Sunday blew by like a reckless kite cut from its string, without Yasmin remembering that that was the day she had been waiting for, when she'd prepare her cover story so she'd be granted permission to leave and go listen to Ali Mkali.

Now she realized that it wasn't the chakacha dancing she desired, but rather that girl, who she thought might possibly alleviate her sadness, for the girl was almost her age. She would have been happy talking and laughing with her, enjoying her presence. The

absence of that girl was like a gust of wind that hit Mr. Raza's home and swept away the nascent happiness that had begun to sprout in that house. Eventually Mr. Raza himself sensed that his wife's cheerfulness had disappeared; when he could no longer bear to ignore it, he abruptly asked, "Why do I see you like this all the time now?"

"Like what?"

"Like right now!"

"What do I look like?"

"These days..."

Before Mr. Raza could finish, Yasmin jumped in. "What do you see these days?"

"You're sullen all the time; you don't even dance anymore."

You mean you married me so I'd dance for you? If you want to be entertained go to the movies! What's the matter with *you*?"

Everything about that night had been routine. Mr. Raza had bathed and wrapped a towel around his waist. Seated in a chair, his right hand hanging onto his left, he swung them back and forth, a cigarette in his hands as he enjoyed his usual deep drags.

It was precariously close to falling but he gripped it between his middle and index fingers. He was sitting there with his mouth open, as though he had just been slapped, neglecting the cigarette smoke as it uncurled slowly from his mouth and spread across the room. "What did you say?" he asked, more smoke bellowing from his mouth.

"You didn't hear me?" Yasmin asked, sitting defi-

antly in her chair, staring curiously at Raza without a trace of worry, her nose wrinkled up, smiling with the brazenness of a child running through her veins. Mr. Raza saw then that things were out of balance – of how this had transpired he had no idea – while Yasmin stood her ground. He emphasized to himself that he needed to show her who was in charge: "You have no manners these days!"

"Where are they being sold? Hey, show me where and I'll go buy some."

Without realizing what he was doing, Mr. Raza stood and tossed his unfinished cigarette aside, seizing Yasmin and raising his hand in the air.

"Let go of me, or I'll scream bloody murder until the whole neighborhood is looking out their windows."

"You! I plucked you from destitution! You have nowhere to go poor girl, but today you've decided to be an insolent brat, huh?"

"Who? Me? What are you..."

Before she could finish, Yasmin felt a giant slap; stars of every color shined before her eyes. The front room glowed brilliantly before fading into a dark, empty void. "What are you..." She felt the second slap hit her. Yasmin toppled over like a sack, gasping for breath like an asthmatic.

Mr. Raza was neither smart nor stupid; he came to his senses as his hands shook and the words he wanted to say lodged in his throat. He wanted to lift Yasmin up from where she had fallen, but Yasmin suddenly sprung up, ran towards the door and threw it open in a flash.

Mr. Raza chased after her, cursing and swearing, leaping down the stairs two at a time. But before he reached the first floor, the towel he had wrapped around his waist opened and fell away, leaving him as naked as the day he was born. What was initially embarrassing had now become scandalous; he realized he'd have to abandon the chase. "Possessed by the devil, that girl," he cursed. Yasmin was lost to the city of Mombasa.

When he finally went outside he had no idea in which direction she had gone; he circled the building aimlessly, bare-chested and with only the towel wrapped around his waist. Had he encountered a security guard, no doubt he would have been taken for a thief. The rest of the day passed, then the next, and the rest vanished after them, one after the other, with no sight of Yasmin as he mournfully shut himself up inside his home.

CHAPTER 2

Yasmin arrived in Zanzibar after twelve and a half hours, approaching from the west by boat, where the sun was setting in a sky adorned with gold and purple clouds. All the passengers had disembarked and were going their separate ways except for Yasmin, who stood dumbfounded outside the gate to the pier with nothing more than the basket in her hand. A number of porters buzzed around her like flies around a carcass, each one wanting to know if they could carry her bags for her.

Yasmin didn't engage any of the porters; she merely looked at them as if they were insane. Her body may have been present but her thoughts were far away, as she pondered and asked herself, "Now where should I go?" She debated with herself, "Should

I go to mama's place? If I go she'll just swear at me and won't let me stay. Uncle's place? Ah! If I go he'll chase me away and humiliate me in front of the whole neighborhood."

Yasmin asked herself plenty of questions, but didn't find any suitable answers at all. She began to press on, slowly leaving the harbor with basket in hand, but as to where she was headed she herself had no idea. Taxi drivers hustled their services but at that time, Yasmin's total assets added up to five shillings - to get in a taxi was an expense she couldn't afford, even though she was tired and gripped by hunger.

She shuffled towards the Deep Water cinema. Then straight until she reached "Passing Show." She turned right, eventually arriving at Amar Waga. There she turned down a narrow street in the Deep Water neighborhood, walking until she reached Rasam, where she wanted to stop and rest but spurred herself onward. She continued straight towards "Dagger Club," and after a few more steps she stood before the door to her uncle's home. Before announcing her presence, she gave herself some encouragement and advice. She knocked on the door, which was opened by her uncle's wife. "Yasmin!", she exclaimed, notes of shock and surprise registering in her voice.

"Is uncle here?" Yasmin asked without first offering a greeting.

"No, he went to Jamatini. Why have you come so suddenly? Is everything alright in Mombasa?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Please don't ask me so many questions right now, I'm hungry and tired. I'd like some food if you have any, then we can talk."

Yasmin sat down in a chair and placed her basket on the floor. Her uncle's wife went into the kitchen and began frying some food. Yasmin salivated at the delicious scent wafting from the kitchen – soon she'd be eating until she was completely full.

But before the feast's preparations could be completed, she heard a knock at the door; when she went to open it, she found her uncle waiting outside.

"Why are you here right now? When did you arrive? And where is your husband?" Yasmin didn't know how to respond. She said nothing, struck silent by her confusion.

"I'm asking you, where is your husband?" Yasmin's uncle repeated.

"He's in Mombasa. I'm back because I can't live with him anymore."

"What do you mean? You can't live with Raza?"

Yasmin's uncle stepped through the door and entered into the front room, seating himself in a chair. "Enhe, explain yourself.

Yasmin lowered her head, filled with fear as she explained, "Uncle, I tell you truthfully, I cannot live with Mr. Raza. I definitely don't love him, and I don't want to be with him. I agreed to be wedded to him only to please you all."

"If you can't live with Raza fine; we have no place for you here," Yasmin's uncle boomed, loud enough to make the neighbors come to their windows. "We

all must live with our decisions; you've made yours, now go on and find someplace to go. Go on, get out!" her uncle exploded.

Yasmin hesitated as she looked at her uncle, teardrops welling up and slowly sliding down from her pretty eyes.

"I'm telling you to get out! Be on your way! Go find someone you love."

"Where should I go? Is this not also my home?" Yasmin asked mournfully.

"This was your home before you were married. We gave you a husband so we could relieve some of our stress and burden around here. Now that you've run away from your husband, find a place to go yourself."

Yasmin's shoulders slumped; she had no idea what else to do. She slinked slowly outside, and when she crossed the doorstep, her uncle slammed the door behind her, cursing and swearing. All the neighborhood windows were crowded with onlookers watching Yasmin as she left with basket in hand, feeling as if she'd had cold water dumped over her. She asked herself, "Should I go to my mother's?" before thinking, "Aa, if I go there it'll be even worse."

She continued on her way until she reached Darajani, where she stopped for awhile. She reached into her bra and pulled out the five shillings she had hidden there, staring at them as she considered what kind of food they could afford her. She walked until she found someone cooking cassava, buying a few pieces for two shillings. Stepping off to the side she began to eat, thinking as she tried not to cry that in the

past she would have only eaten cassava when she felt like it; today she was doing so out of necessity. She devoured it all, then wiped her mouth clean.

She returned to her thoughts of where to go next. This disaster and the troubles that had befallen her left her with no idea of what to do. Then a thought came to her: “Best bet is to find Mwajuma; maybe she can help me.” She went straight there. When she knocked on the door Mwajuma’s voice replied welcoming her in. Mwajuma opened the door to find Yasmin there; surprised, she asked, “What’s up sister?”

“Ah, a lot has happened. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Come into the kitchen, we’ll cook something up.” Mwajuma herded Yasmin inside and ushered her to sit as she prepared to begin cooking.

“Enhe! How has life been in Mombasa?”

“Terrible my sister. Life with the old man got the best of me. I’ve been unhappy and depressed, so I saw it best to come back home to my parents. I went to my uncle, who chased me away like a goat, and I’m afraid to go to my mother’s because I already know what she’ll say.” Yasmin paused to catch her breath. “Now I don’t even know where to spend tonight,” she continued as she put down the basket she’d been clutching. It felt heavy even though its contents consisted only of a robe and two or three pairs of clothes that had been given to her by a neighbor in Mombasa. Maybe a toothbrush and some toothpaste as well, but nothing more.

“My poor sister. What advice have you been

given?" Mwajuma asked with genuine sympathy.

"None whatsoever. I've come to your place to hear from you. Please, help me sister, help me deal with this humiliation!"

Mwajuma looked at Yasmin and nodded her head. "You're welcome here sister, we'll manage to squeeze in here, although there's only one bed," she said as she led Yasmin to the room, wiping her hands clean on the cloth wrapped around her chest.

Yasmin was welcomed inside the room. Upon entering she sat down on the bed and took a deep breath, drowsy and burdened by all of her worries. Mwajuma left Yasmin to rest and quickly returned to her cooking. After a short time she had prepared a delicious batch of coconut rice, topped with a vegetable and banana sauce bursting with flavor. Fortunately Mwajuma had nowhere to be that night; after eating, they both went to sleep. Yasmin fell quickly into a deep sleep, so drowsy was she. She awoke suddenly maybe once, to slap away a mosquito or a bedbug that was biting her, but by that time the sun had already risen. She heard Mwajuma in the kitchen hastily scrubbing the dishes from last night, and from outside came the noise of mortars being pounded by a pair of workers.

A little while later, tea was ready; as they drank, Mwajuma looked hurried. After throwing back the rest of her tea, she began to search for her veil. She put it on and stood before the tall mirror in her room, powdering her cheeks and applying mascara to her eyes. She combed her short hair, which she hadn't yet braided that day, then turned to face her guest.

“I’m leaving now for my tailor in Mbuyuni; going to see if my robe is ready. I’ll be back right after.”

“You’ll find me here when you get back,” Yasmin said sadly, looking for some sympathy.

Mwajuma went out, leaving Yasmin by herself to yet again confront silence. The only sounds she heard were the voices of the people selling fish or vegetables loudly announcing their business as they walked by.

For Yasmin the silence was deafening; her head was filled with thoughts tumbling over each other noisily in a way that anyone would find unbearable, and she herself was no exception. She got up from the chair she was sitting in and went to the bed to lie down. The bed was covered tastefully with a rose-colored sheet with flowers woven in the middle. She rolled around the bed, clutching one of the two pillows wrapped in pillowcases the same color as the bedspread, embracing it before stretching herself out face-down. Then her thoughts started up again as she asked herself how to deal with her life now that she was on her own and yet still a young child, as early in her life as rice that has just been swallowed. How would she guide herself? How long would she live with Mwajuma, someone whom she knew only through sporadic conversation? What would her family say when they heard she was living on the coast with an African? All kinds of thoughts like these swirled and tumbled around her head.

She turned towards the tall mirror hanging on the wall; as if it was calling out to her, she stood and walked over to it. Her thoughts dispersed for a

moment as she admired herself in the mirror. She looked at herself from different angles, then grabbed a comb sitting atop a small table in the room and began to comb her hair back behind her. Disliking the outcome she saw in the mirror, she combed it to the side instead. She turned this way and that, unsatisfied. Closing the door, she went back to the mirror and removed her robe so that only her indoor clothes remained.

She put her hands on her hips and twisted this way and that. Turning to scrutinize her backside, she still felt discontent. She took off her bra to reveal her breasts; taking them in her hands, she weighed them playfully. She spun around front to back; suddenly, as if she'd been spooked, she stepped away from the mirror and quickly donned her clothes. When she'd finished she threw herself on the bed, lying face-down. Soon her eyes began to droop.

The thoughts that soon came to her would be expected of any child as pretty as her in a similar situation, one whose days were stressful and miserable, who feared she'd never be loved by a handsome boy her age, and a Hindi boy at that. A boy who would accompany her as they held hands walking down the street, his friends looking on with envy. "How has this happened to me?" she asked herself. Maybe her time with Mr. Raza had cast misfortune upon her, or maybe she'd been cooped up inside for so long that boys hadn't even had a chance to know about her. But before she could answer all these questions for herself, her thoughts returned to the more immediate

problems of her daily life. She continued to ponder these until she fell asleep.

Yasmin was finding the realities of her new life daunting; although she had crossed the sea to leave Mombasa behind, she felt caught between these old and new chapters of her life. She knew almost no one in this new chapter; all her dealings with neighbors in Mtendeni had only been on account of Mr. Raza's shop, nothing more. It had been pure good luck that she had known Mwajuma, and only then because their personalities were similar.

Mwajuma, although a child of poverty, possessed a wonderfully kind spirit and unrivaled generosity. She was ready to welcome anyone into her home, no matter how little they had. Her heart overflowed with sympathy: whenever she had the means to do so, she would help anyone at all who explained their problems to her.

Furthermore, she was a girl who couldn't be bothered about time, who used the freedom of her lifestyle to do as she pleased. She was always ready to do something exciting, without caring what others would say. Every Saturday she never failed to go out dancing; she was a huge fan of Arabic music. Within the large community surrounding Arabic music, she was a well-known member of her group "White Medicine" for singing in a soft, clear voice. With no sign of the bride, you could arrive at any wedding to find Mwajuma already there, dancing alongside her fellow girls. Back at her home, young men and women who clearly didn't live there would come and go. She didn't care

what the neighbors said about it, be it good or bad, for she did whatever she pleased.

At 1:30 that afternoon, Mwajuma returned from her errands out on the town and found Yasmin asleep. Although she didn't want to disturb her, the sound of her changing clothes was enough to awaken her.

"Did I wake you?" Mwajuma asked, feeling bad that she had disturbed Yasmin.

"Ah, I wasn't really tired, sleep just got the better of me," Yasmin said, stretching. "You just got back?" she asked.

"Yes, but I didn't find my tailor. I'll try again tomorrow."

After changing her clothes, Mwajuma went into the kitchen and prepared some food to eat. After eating she cleaned up here and there around the house, and a conversation between her and Yasmin started up.

"I always knew you didn't want to be with Mr. Raza," Mwajuma began, certain that Yasmin would open up.

"Ah, I never did want him myself; my parents married me to him, and I didn't want to disappoint them," said Yasmin with a smile, her teeth glinting like marbles.

Yasmin and Mwajuma continued to gossip about Mr. Raza for awhile. They built him up and broke him down before their chat turned to stories of Mombasa: of the city's charm, of the sprawling Kilindini area, of the many shops spread throughout the Salim Road area, of all the vibrant activity taking place there day and night. Cloth and decorations of all kinds filled the

insides of these vibrant shops. Having spent the most time in Mombasa, Yasmin held the floor as Mwajuma listened.

She remembered much about the city of Mombasa, but as her life there had been inextricably intertwined with Mr. Raza, they occasionally resumed their discussion of him. Mwajuma and Yasmin talked so much that you'd have thought they hadn't seen each other for ten years. They chatted amiably into the evening, at which point two young men entered. After calling out their welcome, the pair entered before either of the girls could respond, bursting inside and heading straight to Mwajuma's room.

"Hello sister-in-law! How are things?" asked Salum, who stood in the doorway hanging on to the wooden frame with one hand, his other hand in the pocket of his khakis. His friend stood next to the bed on which Yasmin sat in the middle, clutching a pillow in her hands.

"He! You have a Hindi guest today?" Salum asked, still standing in the doorway. He looked at Yasmin, who he'd never seen before, with undisguised intentions.

"Aaaaa! Be quiet, come sit over here." Betraying neither anger nor happiness, Mwajuma ushered Salum to sit in a chair, but Salum instead went straight over to the bed and sat himself down next to Yasmin.

Salum stared at Yasmin, looking her over from the crown of her head down to her big toe before asking, "How are you sister?"

Yasmin gave a simple monotonous reply, as if

struck by the shock of seeing something she wished she hadn't. She quickly stood up and moved down to the far side of the bed. Salum backed off, turning to face the guest he had brought with him to Mwajuma's that day.

"Roger sit here, don't worry."

Then Salum turned to Mwajuma and said, "Sister, my friend here is from Dar es Salaam. We met last year when I went there for Easter holiday."

"Welcome Roger," Mwajuma said to him.

"Why is your guest avoiding me?" Salum asked, interrupting Roger and Mwajuma's greetings to each other.

"Eh! You came in here like a crazy fool, went straight to the bed and started to gape at this girl."

"Roger, come and sit man," Salum said to his friend, who was still standing on the other side of the bed out of respect for the two girls.

Roger smiled and slowly crossed the room, sitting down in a chair in front of the mirror. Salum turned to Yasmin again, smiling casually as though he hadn't a care in the world. "So, you're fine?" he asked. "I'm fine," Yasmin replied, in a quiet voice laced with fear and worry.

"Why are you so afraid sister, are you thinking..."

"Leave her alone," Mwajuma interrupted him. "What do you want from her? And where have you been today?"

"I was wandering around the neighborhood," Salum replied, relaxing on the bed.

"Now what?" Mwajuma asked.

“What do you mean?” Salum asked, throwing a question atop hers.

“Go and meet with the old man out back.”

“That is indeed what has brought me here,” Salum said. He stood up and reached into his pocket, pulling out a handful of coins, keys, and crushed up cigarette packets. He counted out the coins, nodding his head approvingly upon completion. Then he left without saying a word, while Mwajuma began to prepare the house for the night ahead. She opened a small cupboard next to Roger, who was still sitting but clearly surprised that his friend had left without an explanation.

Mwajuma got out four glasses from inside the cupboard, stacking them one inside the other so that they resembled a small tower. She went out with them, leaving Roger and Yasmin by themselves. The two of them said nothing, as though they were mute. It wasn't long before Mwajuma returned with the glasses in her hand, having scrubbed them clean. After removing the cloth draped atop of it, she arranged the glasses on the table.

As soon as Mwajuma had set the glasses down, Salum entered with something wrapped up in his shirt. He stopped in the middle of the room, then looked at Roger. He unbuttoned his shirt and took out a green bottle, which had been expertly stoppered with the leaf of a banana plant. Raising the bottle up, he swirled the liquid around, each slosh disappearing as soon as it reached the top of the bottle.

“Aha. What a treasure this is - only the best from

Mr. Kiroboto. This isn't your typical watered down garbage, where you drink the whole bottle and don't feel a thing - just half of Mr. Kiroboto's will do the trick," Salum explained as he uncorked the bottle.

The cork popped out and Salum poured a little of the alcohol onto the table, then lit it with a match. Small cassava-colored flames arose, burning off the alcohol until it was all used up and the fire died out.

"You see, as I said, this is Mr. Kiroboto's finest," Salum crowed. He tipped the bottle and began to pour its contents into the glasses arranged atop the table.

Before he had finished Mwajuma began to complain, "Ala! Why are you pouring such big shots? What are you up to today?"

"Aaaa, Mwajuma, now you're pretending not to know the custom of making the first shot the biggest? What about your guest, should I give her some?" Salum asked, gripping the bottle and holding it above the glass nearest Yasmin, ready to pour. "Ala! I forgot, Yasmin doesn't drink - or will you try a little?" Mwajuma asked as she turned to Yasmin.

"What is it?" Yasmin asked, surprised.

Salum straightened up, looked Yasmin in the eye and asked, "You still don't know what this is? It's alcohol, will you drink it?" Yasmin said nothing, but hunched up her shoulders and shook her head.

Discouraged, Salum said regretfully, "Ooo, I didn't know you didn't drink sexy. Why didn't you tell me Mwajuma, should I get her some soda? But never mind, when we finish this bottle we'll go get another,

then pass by Ashuru's, he should have some cold sodas."

Then Salum looked at Mwajuma and asked, "Now sister, do we have any snacks?"

"I have nothing," Mwajuma replied.

"Alright then bring some water; drinking this stuff straight would be rough," Salum advised. Mwajuma rose quickly and left, returning soon thereafter with a ladle full of water.

"Let's drink, drink to the health of our guest, Ms. Yasmin," said Salum, raising his glass and looking at Yasmin with a smile. Everyone raised their glass and downed down their drinks, grimacing at the taste. Then the ladle of water was sent around, each person gulping down two or three mouthfuls.

"Aaaa! Zanzibar alcohol is the best, better even than Dar's," said Roger, nodding his head, his face scrunched up even after chasing his drink with water.

"You know bro, this kind of alcohol is the kind you drink slowly and enjoy," Roger advised, but no one said anything in response. Salum just continued to pour out more shots one by one, and the group continued to drink until the bottle was finished.

"Roger," Salum called out, "come with me to Mr. Kiroboto's so we can get another bottle. I'm only tipsy, I need more to calm my mind."

Without contest, and without any reply, Roger got out a packet of cigarettes and sent it around the room. Taking out a match, first he lit Mwajuma's, then Salum's, and finally his own. He took two long drags, filled his lungs with smoke, and slowly opened

his mouth to release two small puffs of smoke. Then he and Salum left together.

When they reached the road Salum advised Roger, "We're going to drink some more ourselves at Mr. Kiroboto's then get a bottle to bring back. But first let's stop by the store and get a soda for that pretty girl. And some snacks too."

They started through the alleyways, Salum in front and Roger behind him, like a tail. Salum charged down every street, with Roger not knowing where he was being led. When they finally emerged from the narrow alleys, they found themselves in front of an open square surrounded by wooden homes plastered with mud and stone. Ahead they could see a verandah, its coconut palm leaf roof hanging low over a garden. Cucumber, oranges, tangerines, some grapefruits, and inside a tray filled with water were some well-grown cucumbers.

There were also piles of spinach, coconuts, and unripe bananas. Off the side were bundles of cassava.

Salum paused for a moment, as did Roger, like guards obeying an order from their commander. Salum turned, looking first to his left, then his right. He spotted a group of people dressed elegantly from head to toe in white robes and waistcoats, some of them with shawls draped over their shoulders. Some of them wore socks that had been washed and ironed immaculately. Everyone in the group had a book in their laps that they were studying intently: one of them taught from it as the others listened closely.

Salum listened in on the group a little but didn't

understand anything they were saying. This was all new to Roger; he had never encountered a scene like this before. He didn't even know where they were going. He tried to trust Salum's judgement but eventually his impatience got the better of him. "Oha, why the hell..." he began to ask, but before he could finish his question Salum moved ahead towards the grocery store, Roger following behind as usual.

They walked towards the store's verandah and sat on the bench. Roger stopped short, standing behind in confusion. "Sit down," Salum ordered him.

"Why is no one here bro?"

"Just sit," Salum commanded again.

Roger acquiesced, but just as he sat down someone came out of the store. He was middle-aged; he wore a T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off and was barefoot. Salum asked him for the price of some ripe bananas, then that for tangerines, before finally asking whether alcohol was available. They ordered just a quarter of a bottle, which they gulped down immediately and chased with tangerine slices.

Roger took out his packet of cigarettes, removing one for himself and giving another to Salum. Both of them lit up and inhaled quickly. After two or three puffs, Salum put his out in his hand and listened to the alcohol talking in his head. Then he quieted his mind enough to focus on the group before him, whose discussion of Islamic inheritance rules held his attention: if a father dies, how much of his wealth does his brother get, how much goes to his brother, and so on. Eventually he lost interest and turned his

back on the group.

None of their discussion concerned him, he thought. His father had died long ago and left him nothing. "Mr. Kiroboto," Salum called out. The man wasn't far away; one never needed to call for him more than once, ready was he to provide for his customers. Mr. Kiroboto arrived immediately, and the young men ordered another bottle as planned. After disappearing inside, Mr. Kiroboto returned with one. Salum didn't hesitate to take it, bundle it up, and hide it in his shirt, all with such skill that no one would be able to spot it.

When they left Mr. Kiroboto's they headed for Ashuru's. They found the shop surrounded by people in need of various items. When their turn arrived they purchased two sodas, a giant heap of fried fish, and some hot peppermints. Roger glanced inside his packet of cigarettes; seeing only a few left, he bought another packet before the pair started out again, this time walking faster for fear of being caught with alcohol. When they arrived back at Mwajuma's they found the girls waiting eagerly, and Yasmin asked so many questions about what had happened while they were out that Salum quickly tired of answering.

"We're a little late," Salum acknowledged, sweat streaking the front of his shirt. He stood in the door and caught his breath, then unbuttoned the long-sleeved shirt he was wearing. He opened the door wide and threw up the curtain to let in the pleasant breeze blowing in from the yard.

"Here's some snacks," Salum said as he set down

the fish bundled in newspaper. Then he unwrapped the bottle of alcohol and placed it on the table along with the two bottles of soda.

“Now our gathering can continue,” Salum pronounced. He approached the bed and sat down where he had been before, next to Yasmin. Roger, moving carefully so as not to spill the bottle of alcohol sitting on the table, went over to the chair. He placed his carton of cigarettes on the arm of the chair before slowly lowering himself down into it.

“Should we open your soda for you?” Salum asked Yasmin. Yasmin held her face down, her expression a mix of shyness and embarrassment. She raised her eyes to meet Salum’s.

“Just open the soda man!” Mwajuma commanded suddenly. Salum ignored her. Upon seeing that Yasmin wouldn’t answer his question, he stood and took out the bundle of peppermints from his pocket. He spread them out on the table and welcomed Yasmin to them with exaggerated deference. Turning to her, he said, “If you don’t want any soda, take a peppermint.”

Rather than display anger, Yasmin just smiled at the scene Salum was making. She reached out to take a peppermint and popped it in her mouth.

“Salum...” Mwajuma muttered in exasperation, picking up one of the sodas. She left the room with it and returned after opening it. “Roger, please get out a class from the cabinet.”

Roger did so and handed it over to her. Mwajuma filled it with soda, pouring slowly to ensure it wouldn’t bubble over. She gave it to Yasmin, who thanked her

quietly.

Now the flow of shots from the bottle of alcohol resumed as before. After just two or three more, their voices began to rise, especially Mwajuma's, little by little as their conversation meandered through various topics. After an hour, the air inside the room was filled with cigarette smoke and noise as everyone simply spoke their minds rather than listen to each other.

Mwajuma's mood inspired her to serenade her guests, and what a show they received. Mwajuma sang songs of various styles: Arabic, unyago, chakacha, and even some dance music. In the middle of one of her songs, Salum, who by all appearances appeared to be in a good mood, stood suddenly and shouted, "Hey ... when you die ... you don't rot!"

Roger gave him the evil eye as if to say, "Why are you disturbing this peaceful night?"

Then Salum stood and circled the room, twisting his hips to the rhythm of Mwajuma's song. Mwajuma continued to sing without paying him any mind. Now the room was beginning to feel too small for the festivities within it. As Salum careened about, he knocked into his friends without care and jostled the table on which their drinks sat. A particularly forceful knock sent him tumbling backwards onto the bed where he had been sitting next to Yasmin. When he raised himself up he met Roger's eyes directly across the room, who was looking at him like a leopard ready to attack a group of penned-in cattle.

"What's gotten into you, *brother*? You're ruining everyone's time!"

Salum gathered his composure and sat up straight. "You fool! Who are you to tell me that, especially in this house?" Salum struggled noisily to stand, his face filled with anger. Mwajuma stopped her singing. All eyes were on Roger and Salum now.

"Listen, I don't problems in my home! If you two want to fight go outside!" Mwajuma yelled.

Curious neighbors began to step out of their homes; some were wrapped in kangas, another held a crying child, and someone on a bike came to a stop to find out what the commotion was all about.

"Usually you're a good listener and keep quiet Roger, now today I have to put you back in line!" Salum proclaimed airily. He leapt towards Roger, but tripped and fell on the table, knocking over all the glasses.

Their party took a turn for the worse. Yasmin sat there in shock, thinking about the likelihood of Salum getting slapped for his behavior. All of her hopes rested with Mwajuma, who she knew could resolve any situation facing her.

Such a scene wasn't new to Mwajuma; she had been witness to many arguments just like it. She rearranged the table as best she could, then firmly told him, "Go home and sleep, don't ruin our good time. Your friend is enjoying himself; your behavior makes you look like his child."

Salum stood and brushed himself off, wiping his hands on his soda and alcohol soaked shirt.

"Salum, these days you only cause problems when you drink. Just quit. A little is all it takes for you

to go wild. Just stop drinking! And quit being so aloof, you're just standing in the doorway!" Mwajuma admonished him.

Yasmin's heart didn't slow down until she saw Salum take a seat. "Did all the alcohol spill out?" Salum asked casually, as if nothing had happened. "*Come on* Roger, let's go get another one."

"No more, it's enough for the night," Mwajuma ordered.

It was then that their raucous night came to a close. Salum and Roger left together, as if they had never been arguing in the first place.

CHAPTER 3

Everything about that night had been new to Yasmin. Her whole she had been cloistered inside; everyone she had ever known lived in the immediate vicinity of her, or had been Mr. Raza's frequent customers. She knew no one but them. Yet she had been well aware that there was a bigger world "out there," people of every different personality: argumentative, peaceful, soulful, abusive, generous, stingy.

It had been her first time meeting people like those young men. Meeting Salum, someone prone to sudden mood swings, unhappy one moment, jubilant the next. Always speaking cleverly whatever was on his mind. Then there was Roger, a visitor from Dar es Salaam, who spoke only to ask or answer questions, his temper restrained but evident. Mwajuma knew people like

them existed, she had just never had the opportunity to meet them in person like she had that day.

Life inside Mwajuma's home went on as usual after that, varying only with the inclinations of the friends and supporters who visited them. They came and went without staying long, one person after another, men and women, old and young. Many of these people would come by unannounced; one person even entered without knocking. As a result, Mwajuma's home was not an idle place typical of other young people's homes. As time went on she was becoming the person that people in need thought to approach first.

When Yasmin moved in with Mwajuma, she wasn't the type to go out often. She would just remain inside, as is typical of young girls her age. Mwajuma, on the other hand, was inclined to go out often for all kinds of reasons, walking the streets as she pleased.

Yasmin wasn't thrilled with being stuck inside all the time, and Mwajuma didn't like leaving her behind as though she were a widower. Both of them enjoyed going out to walk alongside their friends, but Yasmin feared that Mwajuma would consider her an inconvenience if they went out together. For her part, Mwajuma was afraid to invite Yasmin because she thought that as a Hindi girl, Yasmin wouldn't want to be seen hanging out with an African girl like herself, thereby discouraging other Hindi youth from talking to her.

But one day, as they sat in the kitchen drinking tea, Mwajuma couldn't stop herself from broaching the subject. "Hey, today let's go out together sister.

Aren't you tired of staying inside?" Yasmin's heart blossomed like a flower, so happy was she to finally get the opportunity that she had been waiting so long for, and that she hadn't dared to bring up herself without knowing for sure whether or not Mwajuma would want her along.

"Where should we go?" asked Yasmin excitedly.

"Mbuyuni. I'm going to see the tailor about my dress."

So after finishing their tea, the girls bathed, put on make-up, and applied a little perfume. Half an hour later, they checked themselves in the mirror before walking out to the street, headed for the tailor's.

They found Mr. Nondo surrounded by a crowd of women, cloth scattered on both sides of his ancient sewing machine. He was busy trying to finish up with the articles of clothing that he had promised the women would be ready for pick-up that day. Upon seeing Yasmin, Mr. Nondo said, "Your dress still isn't ready. I still have to finish the zipper. Come later, maybe eight hours from now, it'll be ready then."

"But sir you know that tomorrow is Sunday. I already explained everything to you the day I brought the cloth," Mwajuma said dejectedly. She had left home with high hopes that she'd find her dress had been mended.

"Let me see it," Mwajuma asked, wanting to make sure the job was indeed almost complete.

Mr. Nondo sifted through the piles of cloth surrounding him and pulled out a green dress with little white buttons. "Here it is," the tailor showed her

before placing it aside. "There's just a little left to do, but as you see I'm swamped with other work. Don't worry, you'll be able to come get it later today."

After exhorting him to finish, Mwajuma bid the tailor goodbye. Then she and Yasmin went on their way.

The pair went inside every interesting shop they passed, browsing for cloth, henna, and earrings. Inside a bookstore they flipped through the newspapers in search of photos of famous actors. They roamed the Mkunazini theater, checking out the announcements for upcoming new movies. And in the "Capital Tea Room" they cooled off with some orange juice.

Yasmin was unable to walk too freely; every time she spotted someone from her Hindi community, she had to hide herself from sight. Despite this, she enjoyed many of the sights along the way.

After wandering for awhile, the pair returned home. Yasmin was tired out, unused to walking on foot for such long periods.

At 1:30pm Mwajuma left for the tailor's once again. This time she was finally able to collect her dress, and she returned home filled with happiness now that her Sunday plans were complete.

"At home she found Yasmin sleeping. Without a second thought, she woke her and showed her the dress. "I've got my dress, girl."

Mwajuma unwrapped the bundle she had picked up from the tailor's and withdrew the dress. She stripped off her street wear, then donned the dress over her underclothes to ensure the tailor had done as

she had asked. She turned this way and that, looking at her sides, her front, and then her back to make sure the dress looked perfect on her.

“How do I look?” Mwajuma asked Yasmin, checking to see if she could spot any defects as she stood before the mirror, twisting around in various angles.

“That tailor did an excellent job,” Yasmin acknowledged groggily, still not fully awake.

Mwajuma took off the dress and folded it carefully before placing it inside the cabinet, where it awaited her Sunday plans.

When Sunday arrived, with the dress ready as planned, Mwajuma’s plans were on track. Mwajuma always anticipated such days with much eagerness, excited from the moment she awoke. She would sing all kinds of songs as she went about her household chores: some Hindi music, some Arabic music, and whenever she sang in Swahili, her voice would float out into the street, forcing any individual with a heart to stop and listen.

“So Yasmin, what are your plans today?” Mwajuma asked. “I don’t think you’ve had a chance to experience Sunday nights here,” she added. They were sitting in the kitchen, Mwajuma peeling bananas and Yasmin assisting her with various other tasks, as Yasmin hadn’t ever peeled bananas before in her entire life.

“What’s going on today?” Yasmin asked.

“Today? Mwajuma asked, shocked, her eyes open wide.

”Seriously sister, it’s like you’re a visitor in your

own town. Today the whole town is celebrating: there are kukata and shoka dances in Raha Leo, a wedding street dance in Kiembe Samaki, and in Malindi there's Arabic dancing."

Yasmin opened her mouth as if to say something, but before she could manage Mwajuma jumped up towards her and asked, "So sister, you'll go and brighten everyone's eyes, right?"

With sadness in her voice, Yasmin replied, "Ah! Even if I wanted to, I've nothing to wear. All I have are these clothes, I fled Mombasa without taking any of my belongings."

"It's not a problem sister, I have a beautiful dress that'll fit you, I think you'll like it."

Mwajuma worked to convince Yasmin to accompany her so she could show her Sunday nightlife, and eventually Yasmin agreed.

In the evening, Mwajuma ironed their clothes and gave Yasmin her dress, which looked just right on her.

People began to gather in Raha Leo early, so that by 9pm the dance hall was overflowing with people. The dancing was in full swing, the dancers swinging about madly. The women were dressed beautifully, each wanting to look more attractive than her companions. Their make-up, which had been so carefully applied, was threatened by the sweat that trickled down their faces. The smell of sweat, along with that of the cigarette smoke that filled the hall and the dust kicked up by the dancers, all clashed with the scent of women's perfume.

The dancing was uncoordinated; each person danced

as they pleased. It was impossible to tell those who knew what they were doing apart from those who didn't, so absorbed was each person in their own moves.

The commotion of the festive mass of people, along with the sound of guitars and trumpets, could be heard from afar. Those feeling tired from all the dancing spread out on all sides of the dance hall, both inside and out. Clouds of smoke floated around the outside of the hall as people barbequed meat, so some walked even further away to escape for fresher air. Other threw themselves down in the grass surrounding the Raha Leo gardens.

Upon arriving at the door of the dance hall, Yasmin was awestruck. "Lo! Why is it so crazy in here?" she asked hesitantly. "Aa I don't think I should go inside."

"Sister, there's nothing to worry about, everyone is just enjoying themselves. Haven't you heard about Raha Leo? What are you afraid of?"

Yasmin thought twice, but eventually she decided to go in. They bought tickets and threw themselves into the pandemonium inside.

Within the dance hall Yasmin was anonymous; there was nobody who knew her or who would recognize her. Despite there being no chance of a family member seeing her and shaming her for attending, she pulled her black veil down over her face out of habit.

As was the case with many others, Yasmin had to stand by herself at the side after failing to find an empty chair. This was no problem for Mwajuma, who

leapt straight into the crowd upon entering the hall, dancing up a storm with no sign of being tired.

She danced until the musicians took a break, then went to find Yasmin, who had hidden herself off to the side, standing bolt upright.

"Have you been standing here this whole time?" Yasmin smiled but said nothing.

"Let's go find a place for us to sit," Mwajuma suggested.

After circling the hall they finally found two chairs. As they sat, several people that knew Mwajuma came up to them offering drinks and snacks. Many of them were struck by the beauty of the new girl accompanying Mwajuma, and often young men would sideline Mwajuma to talk to Yasmin.

Sometimes Yasmin was offered beer, but as she wasn't a drinker people would give her soda instead, which she drank until she could drink no more.

A half hour after sitting down to rest, the festivities resumed. Mwajuma immediately got up to dance.

She left Yasmin sitting alone in her chair. This time the dancing called out to Yasmin, and she pulled aside the veil that had been covering her face. She wanted to join the mass of dancers, but the scene before her was still too overwhelming, the chaos too intimidating. Her eyes were focused on the crowd when suddenly she was startled by a young man who stopped directly in front of her swaying like a wind-battered coconut. She raised her eyes to look at the youth, who offered his hands and said, "Let-t-t's g-g-o d-dance."

"I don't know how," Yasmin replied.

"I-I'll t-t-each y-y-you," he replied as he swayed, clutching a bottle of beer in his hand.

"Thanks," Yasmin responded with a smile that revealed her pretty teeth.

"L-Let's go, d-d-on't just s-sit there," the youth said as he pulled Yasmin forcefully by the hand.

Overcome by anger, Yasmin admonished him, "There are so many women here to dance with, why does it have to be me?"

"I k-k-know, it's y-you I w-want."

Yasmin didn't want to continue her conversation with the drunkard, who she didn't know nor want to know. She turned to watch the people dancing to the beat of the music and ignored the boy, who pulled a chair up next to Yasmin and began to ask her, "So w-w-what's your n-name?"

Yasmin turned to look at him indignantly and asked him, "Man what do you want with me?"

"He! I s-said we should d-dance but you r-r-refused. N-now I'm just a-asking for y-your n-name. Don't b-be this w-way sister."

"Why do you want to know my name?"

"So we c-can k-know e-each other b-better?"

Without waiting for her to reply, the boy downed his beer and stood to get another one. Before leaving he turned to Yasmin and asked her, "So w-will you drink b-beer or n-not sister?"

"I don't drink."

"OK, I-I'll b-bring s-soda."

"Thanks but I've already drank way too many."

Then the youth left, lost in the sea of people. He didn't come back for Yasmin again.

The dance continued until 2am. Unused to being up so late, Yasmin's eyes had become heavy with drowsiness by then.

When the dance ended, a group of youth that knew Mwajuma was waiting for the two girls, and they all walked home together.

“People of a similar nature are brought together by routine.” But I don't know if Yasmin and Bukheti were of a similar nature; one was a dancer, the other a spectator. Yasmin danced, Bukheti looked on. This was indeed their routine. Yasmin would dance, twisting and swaying her hips to impress her beauty upon Bukheti, who watched rapturously. Then one day their routine was abruptly shattered. Each time she went to the window, expecting to quench her desire to watch Yasmin dancing, she found the window tightly shut. There was no sign of anyone. The voices of Hindi singers never returned. The home had closed in on itself: completely silent. Bukheti guessed they had moved away. “But why would Yasmin leave without even saying goodbye?” she wondered.

Just as the joy of Yasmin's home had lifted Bukheti's spirits, the sad emptiness now infecting her house left Bukheti unhappy. Just as Yasmin had spent several days hoping to see Bukheti, to dance for her, Bukheti now did the same, pining for Yasmin. Every day she was at the window hoping for a glimpse of her, be it of her dancing or even just of her sparkling eyes.

A month later, as if she was dreaming, Bukheti heard a loud chorus of Hindi singers from where she was sitting. The sound escaped from its source and flowed into her heart, which soared with happiness. Yasmin must have returned, she thought; the song must be her calling me. Bukheti bolted up and towards the window; looking through the second window of the home, she saw Mr. Raza standing with a cigarette in his mouth, inhaling big puffs of smoke that clouded the entire window. From where he was standing he looked insane. His shirt was open, his chest a forest of white and black hair. His shoulders were hunched up, as though he were sick to his stomach. His eyes looked empty; he had trimmed his beard, its white and black hairs struggling to overcome the others. His head was full of gray. When they met each other's eyes, Bukheti asked without a second thought: "How are you Mr. Raza?"

He acted as though he didn't hear. Bukheti asked again, "How are you Mr. Raza?"

"I'm fine!" he replied, as though he had been forced to, still smoking his cigarette and exhaling heavy clouds of smoke.

"And how about my sister?"

"Which sister? You have a sister here?"

"Doesn't my neighbor Yasmin live here?"

"How do you know Yasmin?" Raza raised his voice angrily. "You! I bet you were a bad influence on my wife, gossiping and encouraging her. If you don't know, fine, I'll tell you. She's not here, she went back to her place in Zanzibar. And she's not coming back."

Raza slammed the window shut as Bukheti stood there.

She was unable to see Mr. Raza's anger dissipate into depression. Yasmin was but a child, yet capable of dealing such a blow to the heart. Mr. Raza was truly despondent. Wandering around his home and muttering to himself, he cursed Yasmin and Bukheti: Yasmin for running away, and Bukheti for toppling him back down into grief.

A little while later, around 10pm, old town Mombasa was completely quiet, in stark contrast with the night life that boiled over in Mombasa city. Bukheti sat by herself in the front room, her house filled with loneliness. The lamp that was to one side of the room was covered in mildew, such that barely any light escaped. The room itself belonged to a widower, which was evident in the haphazard arrangement of everything inside it.

Two wicker chairs sat in the room: one against the right wall, the other other against the left, their seat cushions ensconced in dirty covers. A small table sat beneath the window, covered in newspapers. A worn-out rug covered the floor. A wicker couch sat in the middle of the room, upon which Bukheti sat, lost this evening in her thoughts of Mr. Raza's runaway wife.

If Yasmin really had returned to Zanzibar, she should follow her there and bring her back to Mombasa. For both Mr. Raza and Bukheti, Mombasa just wasn't the same without Yasmin.

Bukheti knew nothing about Zanzibar except that

which she had heard secondhand. The island was regarded highly in Mombasa. She had an uncle there who ran a mango shipping business in Muyuni, sending them to Mombasa from Zanzibar. “I’ll go visit my uncle, and when I come back I’ll bring Yasmin with me,” though Bukheti. From that moment, Bukheti began seriously considering travelling to Zanzibar in search of Yasmin.

As she did so, she thought of Mr. Raza, who these days resembled a beggar with his gray face, complaining to himself like a crazy person out of work. The neighbors had begun to call him nicknames like Raza *chakram*.

For Bukheti, this trip from Mombasa to Zanzibar would be her longest ever, and in a way it would symbolize the magnitude of her adoration for Yasmin and her desire to seek her out. Bukheti had never left home before, but she’d heard the stories of those who had set sail themselves: their struggles against the monsoons coming from both the north and south, the sea swelling angrily around them. She’d heard of the fierce waves generated by the currents of Mwana wa Mwana north of the island, violently rocking boats on their approach to the island. She’d listened to the stories of boats sinking, taking the lives of their passengers with them. She knew people who had experienced all of this before as they sought mangoes in Muyuni or oranges in Ndijiani.

She’d never gone off in search of mangoes or oranges herself, let alone a girl who’d disappeared as fast as lightning, dissolving before her very eyes. From

where she was sitting on the wicker couch, she conjured up an image of Yasmin as though she were dreaming. There she stood before Bukheti, a single cloth wrapped around her chest, her hands raised high, eyes made up, her jet black hair swirling to and from above her shoulders, the sway of her hips like a spinning top, flying around the room in step with the song “*oh chanda*” from the film *Awara*. Then Bukheti stood suddenly, as though she had been awakened from her slumber, took out some paper and a pen from the table, and began writing a letter to her uncle. It was time to go to Zanzibar.

CHAPTER 4

Several months passed. Yasmin was steeped in her new Swahili life, a little of which was growing on her. There was still much with which she was unaccustomed, especially regarding Swahili people themselves. On top of that, it wasn't easy for her to forget her own people, even though her uncle had chased her away for acting so scandalously.

Many days she thought of her mother, and once she dreamt of her with a fierce desire to see her. Unable to cast the idea aside, she rose early that day, resolved to go out and visit her. Undoubtedly she'd already heard all the stories about her leaving Mr. Raza, that these days she was a vagabond – and all the other irreputable stories about her. But Yasmin encouraged herself, donned her veil and set off for Kiponda.

That day dawned beautifully, amiable clouds dotting the sky as they had the past two or three days, with only a drizzle here and there. The weather was calm, and groups of people from the direction of Ng'ambo were flooding into town.

As she walked, Yasmin's head spun thinking of the hostility she'd face upon meeting her mother. She thought of how she'd reply once the interrogation began. So lost was she in her thoughts that she was shocked to finally find herself in Kiponda, standing before the door to her mother's house. "Should I do this or not?" she asked herself. But her mind had already been made up, and so she stepped up and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" a sharp voice called out from inside, the voice of her mother she knew so well. The door was opened and she found herself face-to-face with her mother.