

SEEA SICK



BY RAY MWIHAKI

KABI

We had gone from catching the glimmer in strangers' eyes when our paths crossed on Kimathi Street, one of us ducking from the greening alleyways made ripe by the faecal gifts left behind after the city stole the night, to scrolling for eyes and smiles that tickled us out of our daze. As the days grew cold, we sunk deeper, covered by the cloaks our shadows stitched for us. All of us fighting to own our minds and the world trying to control them.

Letters no longer took weeks to arrive. In mere seconds, a light would flick on and allow the bells to announce the birth of a new chain of conversation. Everyone was watching, connecting, consumed by the screens held in our hands and those we shoved in our children's faces. The truest connections were those we created online. The people on the web got us in a way those around us wouldn't. They understood our afflictions; they too, had heard the voices. Some of them knew how to pull you out of the well where darkness dwelt and others knew the right word that got you trapped.

In those days, when our unrest was arrested by our screens, my own darkness had threatened to stay. I rarely left the cot in the dark yellow and teal room in House no. 28A, let alone the Racecourse area. Chera would mop up after me when she got back from her important job. I had lost mine at Racecourse High. "You take too many sick days and always look like a woman in mourning when you do show up."

Unlike Mr. Musembi and my family, Chera did not hate me for it. She asked me questions, listened and built an app that cheered me up and dangled frozen yoghurt dates as a bribe, every Thursday. I looked forward to that. We renamed all the flowers on the path between The Workspace and the quaint organic frozen yoghurt kiosk. I'd walk into the lobby springing at the possibilities waiting at the counter.

I was early for my date with Chera that Thursday. She must have known because my broken phone screen announced a message from her:

LOOK UP.

I did as instructed. The raising of my head was scored by the hum of a thousand gasps from the gathering crowd, watching on their phones as Chera attempted to fly.


I ran to her and at the exit to The Workspace I begged her to stay but her eyes rolled back and

the space around me got warmer. In my head, a chaotic choir of echoes rose. I had seen two others fail to fly. Friends of mine, whom I loved most. The rest were stuck in their homes in front of screens announcing death after death, feeding addiction after addiction, drinking the essence of their selves. I too reached for my phone to dry my eyes with its glow. No longer looking out for the birds that sang the joys of life or the butterflies that fluttered into my heart and made me long for Chera.

My body recognises this feeling now. The loss, the despair, the disease, the exhaustion that kicks you in the shins and floors you. I should have been ready but are we ever ready to bleed, to watch life leave through those eyes that were once so full, so shiny, so important?

House no. 28A became a haunting, so I packed my bags and left before the Ministry of Health vowed to keep Nairobi's workforce sane enough to work, and watch. Khamisi welcomed me back to my parent's home, a house I had shunned for its resistance to change. It was just as I left it. Children played outside and danced in the night. Khamisi kept the sheep, chicken and cows fat enough to feed a village and the farm lush and green. It smelt like the perfume of the forest- fresh cut grass, young eucalyptus and honey.

For the first time in a long time, I was at peace.



"Kabi, tell me...this thing they are calling Nurobi...is it a new city inside Nairobi or is it that Nairobi disappeared overnight with all our people?" Khamisi asked, scratching milky coconut flesh off its woody husk. "I keep trying to call Hassan. His number rings funny and no one picks up."

"He probably thinks you're trying to borrow money," I say, flipping the pages on the homework books I brought home from school. "Ah, I don't know. It's all changed so much." I blinked and saw myself in Nairobi, 10 years ago, needing to talk to someone from my old support group after finding Chera alive on one of our child-saving expeditions. I either found my people in their homes or at their places of work, looking perfectly fine but completely unresponsive. The only person that spoke to me was Lemaiyan's neighbor, Kamaa. He had watched over Lem as she unravelled. Feeding her, taking her for walks. Kamaa assured me that everything was now under control. Lem didn't cut or scream in the dead of night. She was doing well and never missed a day of work. That was unlike the Lem I knew, yet not as strange as Chera being alive, neutral and drugged amongst the rest of them. Kamaa offered me milk for the babies I carried. One that I got at No. 28A and another that I pried from his mother's arms at the bus park. Before I left, he said, "You're doing the Lord's work, Kabi. These babies will be the ones who save us all."

"I hear Nairobi is where people get cured of madness," Khamisi said.

"Hmm, madness...such a diminishing word. I'd much rather use the term fault lines of the mind."

"I don't believe in madness. It's imagined only by the rich so the world affords them privileges that impoverish the rest of us. Nonsense."

The words landed on the pages I was marking, heavy enough to cause a page to rip in my hands.

"Oh my, Khamisi, we all have these fault lines. You have them too. The difference is how deep the faults go and how we care for ourselves."

"Well, at least mine haven't got me trapped in Nairobi...ah, Nu-robi- whatever!"

I remembered the drones buzzing around the city like a swarm of killer bees. They nearly captured me as I looked for my group among the mob of holographs at the Archives.

"You keep obsessing over the case you brought from Nairobi. Do they hold the secrets of life?" Khamisi asked with a sneer.

"They hold the secret to freedom. If I can figure them out." I went into the house to retrieve the case. "It's time I got Bichi on this. She's quite skilled around computers."



CHERA

In the dead of this night, the friend in my head inches closer to Nu-robi and away from all the warmth she has known. She penetrates the city's drone-dotted borders lit by the united purring of the audience under the Seea©. Her steps charge the sanitary surface, announcing the entry of unidentified filth. My spirit swells with the expectation of doom.

Your 1AM-dose-of-Amitrypline-10mg is brought to you by Kantro and Kanta. Kantro and Kanta, walk the way you like! Nod now to buy this pair at 30% off.

She stops to look for my hologram at the National Archives. She reads every word in the information box above all of our heads, our ailments, our fantasies, the last word we ever said, the ads served, medication constituted by the Seea© since installation and the last meal we tasted.

*Enjoying your dream?
You'll be back to it in a short while.
YOU HAVE A NEW ASSIGNMENT:
Create marketing communication for
Chuz Yoh Snak.
Target Audience: 6-14 years
Dosage: 8× 4 Daily for 3 weeks
Additional Information: Uploaded.*

GENERATE

...



...
...

Warning!
Wrong Direction.
Give it another stab in 5...4... 3... 2... NOW!

*Choose Chuz and get on a taste adventure better
than anything your eye has seen. Whatever snack
you dream of, Chuz Yoh Snak delivers.*

Improvement Detected.
One down, seven more to go.

In that sea of holograms, my essence lives in
assembly. She finds me there waiting for the
Seea© to declare me awake.

*Chera Waiswa, the time is now 415Hrs on May
18th 2045. You will reboot in 15 minutes.*
*Weather today: Partly cloudy with light showers in
the evening.*

Stay home. Stay Safe.

She looks at me in a way no other has before-
-with warmth and slight pity. Her hand
stretches towards me and tastes the pavement
when she finds nothing but laser light. Her feet
skid on the polished path as she scrambles to
get up. The streaks pulse and squeal under the
raw roughness of her mud-lubricated tread.
The Nu-clean wheezes towards her, hovering
just above the path, sucking in the dirt.

Warning! Breach!
Warning! Breach!
Unidentified object!
Warning! Breach!

The Nu-clean sends an alert through the Seea©
interrupting my connection with my friend.

Chera Waiswa, your pulse rate is elevated.
*Keep calm and nod your head to receive 15mg
Diazepam.*
Brought to you by ThisnThat.
ThisnThat, get the joy you deserve.

Connection is restored and I find her looking
into a security guard's eye. His head is cocked;
right eye ajar, eyeball rolling wild, saliva oozing
and Seea© uploading. She pours a drop of
purple liquid in his eye.

Good Morning!
Your-5:30AM-dose-of-Gabapentine-10mg
Is brought to you by WackoWhacko Pharmacy
Refilling your prescription code in real time
Directly to your Seea©
No pills. Just Be.

1.....

2.....

3.....

March! March 234! March 234! March 234!...

My friend has joined the march with her clumsy step. She wiggles and bobs as we rise and fall.

The faster you march, the better your meals.

March to keep the Seea© alive

and keep you going.

Twelve steps left.

This morning's march is brought to you by Funnyzone.

Blink to begin your daily comedy broadcast.

My friend has found my body walking up the mismatched steps outside House no. 28A. She holds my hand as we get into the lift. The butterflies lost in time are with me once more, if only in my mind.

Unidentified emotion.

The Seea© is searching for the right formulation for your affliction.

Brought to you by NCHD in conjunction with Uber Light Industries, Common Man Logistics, Brighter Technologies, FunnyZone, Baran Industries, Selta Tech, UBUNTU, Philemon AI, Lazlo Health, Wazoo Medical and ThisnThat.

My friend guides my face to hers and pours a few drops of purple goo in my eye. Her rotund face smiles when my right eyeball follows the left to her direction. It is a familiar face, hers.

"By God, it's working!"

"It is—"

"You can talk!?" Her voice knots in a near squeak.

"I-i c-an?" I startle myself and even louder I say, "I can!"

The words reverberate in my ear. It is as pleasant as the wine of a cotton bud in the ear in the early morning.

The Seealens© melts into a stream of tears as my friend aspirates it from mine. She hugs me and whispers that it is okay. I believe her.



When day breaks and its yellow centre bathes you with warmth and lightness, do you feel its warmth? The last time I felt this to my core was early January 2020. Mangoes were in season. Our neighbors sat on their balconies sinking their teeth into their fifth mango, letting the juices drip onto the ground. I stood on my balcony counting starlings, sipping on my coffee as I waited for my love to get up. We were to go on a date later that day.

Today, I see the clouds break and pour the yolk out past the Seea© and onto my friend and me. I feel every single bit of it—the joy of a new day and the loss of my greatest love.

"So, what now?" I ask.

**A PART OF ME LONGS FOR THE
BROADCASTS THAT OCCUPIED MY
DAY. THERE WAS NO WAITING. NO
LONGING. NO THINKING. NOTHING
BUT BROADCASTS.**

"You seem too young to be out here on your own, friend. What is your name?" I ask.

"Oh, my manners! I am Bichi."

"You have one name like a dog?"

She laughs like wind on a sunny day.

"Did I say anything funny?"

"No. My mother says things like that."

"Where is she?"

"Just outside the city."

"Thank you for your visits, by the way. It can be so lonely here."

Bichi fingers the edge of the chequered curtains. "My mother made me do it, then I started to enjoy connecting to you."

"Why me?"

"Mama says you're special."

I scan the drab walls till I find her by the window, calm and thoughtful. "Today, it feels that way."

Our smiles are similar, my friend's and mine. Her lips quiver before they curve upward and sink the philtral dimple outwards.

"Who's your mother?"

"She's some kind of Lilith, stealing babies in the ni-" She chokes and coughs.

I laugh. She shoots me an eye that tells me I shouldn't. I stop.

"I'd love to meet her."

"She's waiting."

The last time someone waited for me, I jumped out of the fourteenth floor window of my software firm to meet her. She was sad. I was sad. Our friends were all battling something or another. Our meetings turned into wakes; for lost dreams, love, health, life... My Kabi had lost all sense of herself and I had let go of the strings that held her up. It should have been a good day. A great day, in fact. The AI I worked on for most of our life together had finally been bought by people who could scale it up. Help more than just my Kabi. Yet I felt so broken, so empty, so desperate.

The lights on the Seea© begin to dim.

"We should go," Bichi says.

"Is it safe?"

My words cast a shadow on Bichi's face. She looks at me without quite seeing me and drapes her backpack over her shoulder, guiding me to the door.

"Remember to keep your head down," she says, and I obey.

We walk out under the Seea©. Red, crazed hologram eyes triggered by a glitch. A drone hovers above us, it floats above our heads like those pesky flies at a nyama choma joint. I wonder if those are still there. Nothing beats a nice juicy chunk of roast meat dunked in hot salsa and tapped in salt on a worn chopping board.

We are statues in an alley until I sneeze and we become targets.

"Are those bees? We'd better lie on the ground!"

"Those, right there...those are drones."

I gasp.

The streets were devoid of trash cans or trash that could offer cover. The border is within sight but the Seea© is on high alert.

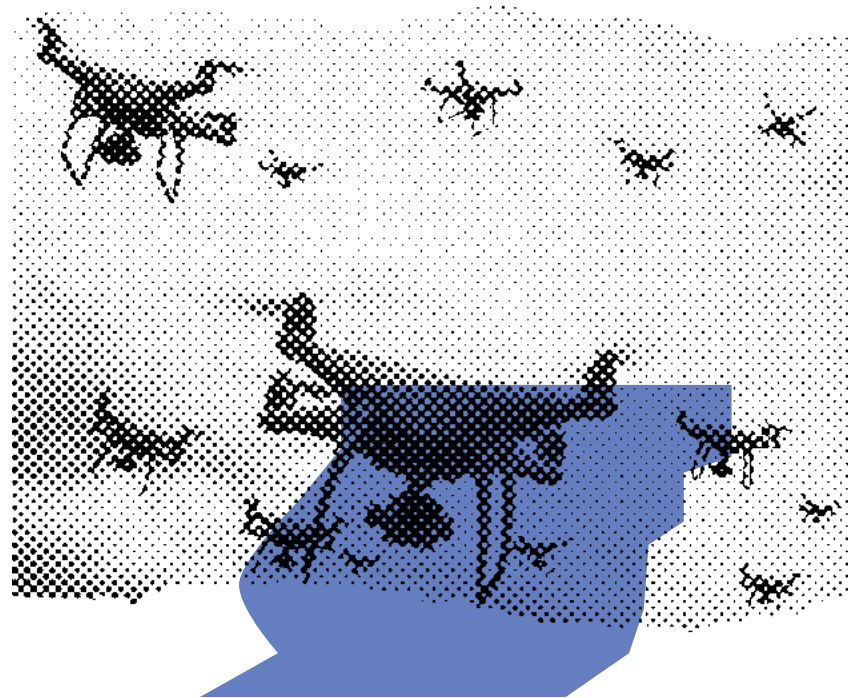
"Run!"

The first line of drones is visible below the holographic Seea©, charging, aiming and swooping in for the kill.

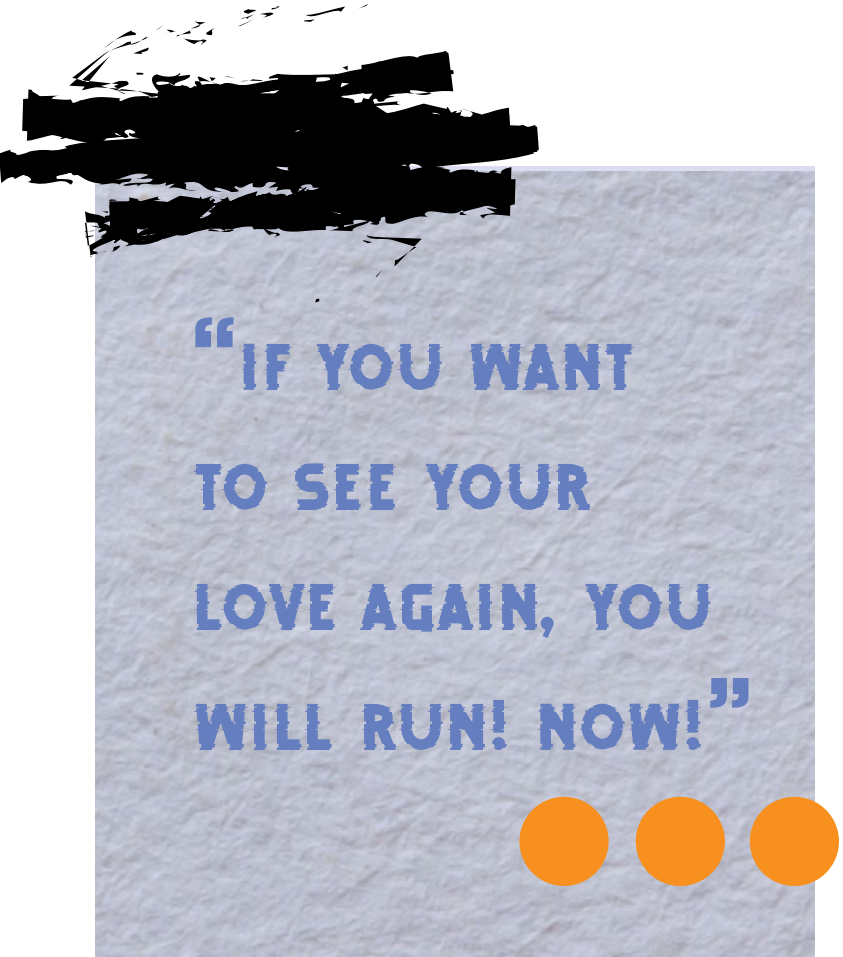
"We can't outrun those drones!"

"But we can try!"

Bichi lets me run ahead and into a manhole. She jumps in after me, nearly cutting the flow on my foot. The drones aren't far behind and Bichi is determined to stop them. She is possessed by the spirits of all the women who decided that life must go on, on their own terms. She riffles through the forgotten bits and bobs and finds a power cable dangling just low enough for her to grab. The drones dive into the darkness and find Bichi waiting; worn, forgotten electric cable in hand ready to make



barbeque. The Seea© sends one envoy down first. She swings at it and catches its propellers. It warms us as we run deeper and deeper. The rest come in droves, menacing little creepers sent in for the kill. As Bichi lights them up like torches guiding us through the wilderness, one slips through and buzzes around my head, balancing right before my eyes. It is either the laser it shoots that stirs Bichi or the drum bursting screams escaping my throat. Either way, she turns round and whips it with her cable. "If you want to see your love again, you will run! NOW!" Bichi says.



**“IF YOU WANT
TO SEE YOUR
LOVE AGAIN, YOU
WILL RUN! NOW!”**

And I do.

My heart plays heavy bass in my ears. I feel Bichi's hand take mine and my feet whirr, barely touching the ground.

"We're safe. They are gone." Bichi said, tagging at my hand to slow me down.

"They will find us and take us back." I say, wiping the snot off my nose with the back of my hand.

"Well, they aren't here now. Let's live till they catch us."

Music chokes the air as we exit the tunnel onto a field of maize and avocado. Fire-warming dancers draw an audience in the distance. The flames crackle and pop as we approach, causing the greys on the old woman's hair to shine. Hers is a smile I know but cannot place. She sees us and jumps, bringing the dancers towards us.

"Why didn't you tell me who she was to you?" Bichi said, kicking the bag she's dropped. "You never tell me anything important!"

The dancers run straight to Bichi to bombard her with questions and make pleas for gifts.

The woman takes my hand, leading me towards the warmth of the bonfire. Her hands are as soft as the midwife in my dream that time I birthed a child I didn't know I made.

"I remember you." My voice squeaks a little.
"You kept your word."

"What do you mean?"

"You said you'd find me. It might have been a dream but--"

"Oh."

"-a human voice is hard to forget when all you hear is electronic noise."

"Then you should remember Bichi too. Do you?"

"Mother?" Bichi asks, "Is she the one?"

She reaches out to me, cupping my face in her hands.

"It is time you met." The woman said as she gestured to the children to scurry.

"But, she's your Chera!"

"Kabi?" I ask.

"In the flesh!"

The glimmer in her eye is one I can remember.
The love I lost had found me.

