



By Aleya Kassam



Dear Kenya,

My beloved. Home to my beating heart and 48 million other heartbeats. Beneath your soil, our ancestors sleep, and underneath your sky, our children dream. In you, we walk around, carrying our loves and our fears, taking one step at a time, one foot in front of the other, 48 million pairs of footsteps, everyday, echoing from corner to corner, hoping, always hoping, that you will take care of this tenderness that sits nestled in our throats.

But, Kenya, do you know what things are being done in your name?

Because I don't believe you would allow the sun to continue to emerge from your ocean and the moon to glide behind your mountains, everyday, if you knew the things that I know.

So I feel I must tell you.

But, Kenya, do you know what things are being done in your name?

Last week, a group of mothers peered in through the holes of a small room in Kibera, watching their children seated together on the floor. The mothers held their breath as they searched for any light in their little babies' eyes. Your babies. But the eyes of these little children, your children, had become black holes from sucking in the kind of trauma no little child should ever have to experience.

So we tried to make our children, children again. We played games. But even childhood games take

on a sinister tone at a time like this.

Let's play Hide and Seek.

We begin. The children quietly arrange themselves, instinctively knowing where best to escape being found. A soft mattress covers a soft skull. Silent. To make noise is to be revealed. To be discovered. To be silenced. By now, they are used to hiding, had spent the last few days hiding, listening to the hailstorm of bullets on mabati roofs, and hiding. Clutching each other and hiding. But for some, hiding was not enough.

Kenya, did you smell the fear in the air as your little children watched their fathers being pulled from their homes?

Let's play Chinese Whispers.

Kenya, did you smell the fear in the air as your little children watched their fathers being pulled from their homes?

We sit in a row. One of the adults begins with a word. They cup their palms around the tender ears of a little boy and whisper *Amani*. The little boy turns around. He cups his little palm around the little ears of a little girl and whispers. And it goes on. Little palms to little ears. Until they reach the last person. The little boy speaks out loud the word he has heard. *Imani*. The word has changed form, from ear to ear, whisper to whisper. *Amani* becomes *Imani*. From peace to faith.

Kenya, did you hear the sound of baton pounding bone, as those entrusted to protect became enforcers of peace?

Let's play Police and Robbers.

We stand in a circle. One hand atop the other. The other hand under another. Interlinked and intertwined. The children sing. They giggle. Finally. One hand receives a smack, then swooshes through the air to deliver another hand a smack. Until they reach the part in the song where everyone falls down screaming when the robber is shot.

Kenya, did you hear the sound of baton pounding bone, as those entrusted to protect became enforcers of peace?

Kenya, did you feel the warmth of fresh blood seeping out of flesh and into your soil?

These are the things that are being done in your name.

Yet many say it didn't happen. They didn't hear the screams, didn't see the bodies, didn't feel the pain. So what do you tell the 3 month old who can identify the sound of a gunshot? What about the 1 month old whose eyes still stream from the teargas? What about the woman whose brain has shut down to save herself from her memories?

Do you tell them they are making the nightmare up?

That their realities are not real?

That they don't exist?

Move on, they say. But how do we move at all when the very heart of us is broken? Yet they insist, we must leave the past behind, and we must move forward. For you. For Kenya. It's always about you, Kenya. But what about us? What about us, Kenyans? Don't we matter at all?

Yet many say it didn't happen. They didn't hear the screams, didn't see the bodies, didn't feel the pain. So what do you tell the 3 month old who can identify the sound of a gunshot?

Sometimes I wish you would please just leave us alone.

You are not us.

You are scenic untouched landscapes for foreign tourists to drink up with their thirsty dollars. You are a beacon of stability and peace to show off to the world what new Africa looks like. You are high speed internet and shiny highways.

You are Kenya. And we are just Kenyans getting in the way of your progress.

But it's not really about you, is it? It never was. Yet you let it happen. You allow our pain to be silenced, our reality to be ignored, our fear to be stoked. And I don't know how to keep living in a Kenya where we pretend we are ok when really, we are so shattered at the core, the splinters keep drawing blood. I don't know how to keep living in a Kenya where we are as frightened of speaking the truth as we are of each other. I don't know how to keep living in a Kenya that doesn't care about all Kenyans.

Yet they insist, we must leave the past behind, and we must move forward. For you. For Kenya. It's always about you, Kenya. But what about us? What about us, Kenyans?

But what I do know, is that if we don't confront our ghosts this time, pluck them out of our history, lay them down, examine them, look them in the eye, expose their ugliness and speak them out loud, one by one, we may not have a Kenya next time.

Yes. You may disintegrate, Kenya of mine.

Because in five years time, those little children will be young adults. The trauma that lives under their skin will have marinated into hard bitterness. What they may not understand is that the pain they feel is not fresh. It has lived in all of our bodies for decades, festering and deepening in strength as it is passed down silently and often unknowingly, generation to generation. And one day these grown up children will ask us, when you smelled the smoke, what did you do?

And we will say, we sang our throats hoarse with patriotic songs of peace and clasped our hands tight in prayer breakfasts. Look at how our bleeding blisters weep from building this nation? Aren't you proud of how we ignored our pain and went back to work?

But what I do know, is that if we don't confront our ghosts this time, pluck them out of our history, lay them down, examine them, look them in the eye, expose their ugliness and speak them out loud, one by one, we may not have a Kenya next time.

But when the children try to respond, they will be gasping, all our children will be gasping for air, trying to breathe through the suffocation of despair.

By then Kenya, when they come for you, we won't know anymore how to speak out, because we were silenced when you allowed this to be done in your name. And you, Kenya, when you say to us, but I am yours and you are of me. They will simply say. You are not us.

And it will be too late.

By Aleya Kassam

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