



For Men's Eyes Only

By Alexander Ikawah



Friday afternoons are for football, everybody knows that. There is a soccer pitch along the road that connects Manyanja Road to Umoja Estate that I sorely miss. I travelled to *ushago* in early March to wait out the pandemic and took my football boots with me. My mom's farmhand Lemuel* and I dribble and pass the ball on the lawn in the afternoons sometimes.

On the day we went into town to buy the football, Lemuel accepted Jesus Christ as his personal saviour. He had gotten himself in trouble the week before that. My mother had found him outside the property, in the bushes growing next to the nearby primary school. He was courting a young girl of school-going age. He is about twenty himself. My mother found the girl's younger sister waiting with a pile of firewood Lemuel had cut for them. The guilty betray themselves I suppose. When the girls saw my mother approaching, they ran. My mother ordered Lemuel to pack his bags immediately. He was out of a job. I watched him drag his feet as he walked back inside the compound, tears welling up in his eyes.

The week before Lemuel was found with the girl in the bushes, I had interrupted a transaction between them, although at the time I didn't realise that that is what it was. I had heard rustling behind the fence near the chicken coop and on going to investigate, found her standing by the corner of the homestead, waving at Lemuel. I was on the inside, so she didn't notice me until I asked loudly,

Itimo ang'o kanyo? What are you doing there?

Ne amoto', she ventured weakly before walking away. Fetching firewood.

Lemuel had been pruning the Grevillea trees along the fence and when I went outside. I saw that he had cut one branch and thrown it over the fence. I walked up to him and asked him about it.

Nyako no ne kwaya mana yien, he explained. The girl was asking me for firewood.

To ka yien e ma okwayo, opondo e tok chiel nang'o? If it is firewood she wanted, why was she hiding behind the fence?

An akiya. I don't know.

The task of fetching firewood often falls to young girls and puts them in the crosshairs of property owners. I didn't think much of it then. Only after he was caught with her did I begin to see that his position here gives him power that he can exploit. And to understand my full responsibility as his friend and employer.

Lemuel's life has not been easy, no doubt about that. He lost his mother to illness as a child and grew up being shuttled between relatives. A few years in one home, a few more in another. He never had a chance to go beyond primary school. He has had to work. His father is what we jokingly call in these parts a *terrorist*—no spelling mistake there. *Tero* is the notorious custom of wife inheritance as practiced in Luoland. It means his father has been absent even from his own home and children, mostly living in the homesteads of the widows he *terrorises*.

Lemuel has a curious mind though, always asking questions and cracking jokes. Lately he has been trying to learn English. I gifted him a book and a pen to help. It is now full of drawings, including a rough sketch of the plan of a semi-permanent one-bedroom house. Whenever he goes home, he does what we call *lawo nindo*—chasing sleep. He spends a few nights with this cousin then a few nights with another. He intends to build a house when the pandemic ends and is saving money to buy the materials. This time Lemuel dodged the bullet; for now, he is still working for my mom on tenuous terms as she decides his fate.

News of hundreds of thousands of young school age girls getting pregnant after falling victim to acts of rape committed during the COVID-19 lockdown came about a week after Lemuel's transgressions, as he was settling back into a regular routine. It came on the radio just as we sat down to dinner. My mother asked me to turn up the volume. And then she turned to Lemuel.

Be iparo gik ma nyocha awachoni? Mago to ang'o?

Can you remember the things I was telling you about the other day? What are those?

Koro iwinjo gik ma timore?

Do you hear what is going on?

Saa ni nyathi ma timo timbego manyo ich, omanyo korona, to be omanyo ayaki!

Right now a child engaging in such behavior is looking for pregnancy, Corona, and HIV!

Be uneno situations ma nyithindo kete ji?

Do you see the situations children put people in?

Lemuel, usually full of funny observations about news stories on the radio, knew to keep his mouth shut. He got an earful indeed. Lemuel tried to catch my eye across the dinner table but I did not interfere in their conversation. It reminded me of myself, making mistakes as a child and getting on my mother's wrong side. It struck me too, how hiring a worker on your property makes you responsible for their actions. Lemuel is now my mother's responsibility, like I once was.

After supper that night, as Lemuel prepared to wash the dishes and I prepared to feed the dogs, he commented on my silence. He calls it *kukula neno* when he is berated.

Eh ndugu, in iweya ka akula neno kenda ma ok iwach kata gimoro. Saa moro iremaga.

Eh brother, you let me get quarreled alone without backing me up. Sometimes you fail me.

It is at moments like these when men affirm each other in misogyny and violence. I wanted to break that cycle for him. We have our way of talking to each other.

Onyali kabisa. Kendo go ne nyasaye erokamano ni mathe e ma ne oyudi chieng' cha. In di sani in achiel kuom jokma oland ni omiyo nyithindo ich go. Kendo in di ne oluong nyaka nyingi e radio.

You thoroughly deserved it. You better thank God it is Mathee who found you that day. You would have been announced today as one of the people impregnating children. In fact, they would have mentioned you by name on the radio.

He grumbles.

Aaah, ndugu. In be saa moro iduoka chien. An timbego aseweyo.

Aaah, brother. Sometimes you take me backwards. I have quit those habits.

Though he denies having any untoward intentions, we all know that if my mother had not found him when she did, that girl last week might have been one of them. I can hear him complaining still as I head for the kennels. For his sake, and for the sake of young women everywhere, I hope he is listening. I know it will take more than small talk.

Fast forward to last Friday and I'm dribbling the ball near the fence that borders the eucalyptus when I hear cracking sounds from across the fence. I go to the fence and try to peer through the thorns. I see a shape, bent over the rocks among the trees doing something on the ground. They are on the property without anyone's knowledge or permission. I run to the gate and out along the fence to see who they are, and what they are doing on the property.

Turning the corner of the fence I come upon a teenage girl, 16 at most, with a small pile of dry sticks in the crook of her elbow. She is trespassing, gathering firewood. She is startled and starts to bolt but stops at the edge of the grove of trees because there is a climb and she still has the wood in her hands. She turns to face me, cornered. Her knees are shaking and her eyes are wide with fear. The news of those hundreds of thousands of pregnancies from the radio the night before comes back to me.

Kenyan government officials are famous for knee-jerk reactions to social problems, reactions that most often involve criminalising underprivileged youth, especially young men, and exacting violence upon them as a form of deterrent., Speaking about the shocking statistics, Ezekiel Mutua was quick to blame popular Kamba music. However, in the weeks that followed, a DCI officer raped a woman being held in police custody in Embu and police officers in Isebania in Migori County illegally detained a 12-year-old girl who had been raped by her father, also a policeman. Popular Kamba

music still?

Whenever the perpetrators are the police or older male figures with some power and influence, officials like Mutua can't seem to find the words to speak out against them. Their authority on morality, like police authority to perpetrate violence, is most present and powerful when underprivileged youth are its targets.

Our political culture and the letter and intent of our existing laws also play into this equation. Activists have renewed calls for the abolition of many current forms of policing and punishment following the brutal murder of George Floyd in the United States and among the many points being made is the observation that much policing work is intrinsically oppressive.

The law seems to place its enforcers and property owners—who also make up most of the political leadership and are mostly men—in a position of having “more human rights” than those who are less fortunate, and women. So one of the first questions a rape victim is often asked when reporting a rape is, “What were you doing there/at their house (on their property)?” As though being on someone else's property or on public land for whatever reason makes you less human and your body more deserving of violence and abuse.

It is thinking that has justified countless violations and endless police harassment of the poor who are arrested and often brutalised merely for existing in a public space. The rich and powerful seem to be freer to move at all times of the day and night. This issue of legality also crossed my mind as I stood before that young girl in the eucalyptus grove. Was she to blame for our encounter? Should anyone be blamed for trying to survive? If anything untoward had happened to her during that encounter, it should be me that would have been to blame.

It may well have been in a situation exactly like the one I found myself in that Friday afternoon that led to Lemuel's meeting with the girl he was caught with. A situation of unequal power and great vulnerability, a result of structural inequality. A situation where one's choice of action could have devastating consequences for the life of another. Lemuel certainly understands this. When I asked him what he might say to a young man such as himself facing a similar choice, he didn't hesitate.

We nyathi sikul otiek sikul. Mano e gima anyalo nyise.

Let a schoolchild finish school. That's what I can tell him.

So I know he understood the huge risks that his choices could have imposed on that girl's future. I believe that all over the country, similar encounters are happening every day and with greater frequency due to the lockdown. And men like Lemuel, like the police officers in Embu and Isebania—and like me—keep choosing to harm young women and girls for mere moments of selfish pleasure. Simply because we can. We must do better, as individual men and as a society.

Banning works of music and targeting violence against mostly underprivileged perpetrators will not achieve anything without quality sex education that equips society with the understanding of why crimes such as rape and sexual harassment are harmful and wrong. I believe that instead of deterring crime and violence, such actions create and cement a concept of “otherness” in the psyche of many people and convince them that they are a different demographic (from the rich and powerful), to whom the law applies randomly, illogically, and disproportionately. And they express this by developing a relationship with the law that is performative—only being lawful when consequence is imminent.

Criminality, especially where it relates to property laws and the rights of others, is seen as a normal and necessary part of survival. This has been the status quo, the normal, for so long that this culture

has permeated all of society, especially in leadership and political circles where policy is made. The poison has spread to the heart.

It seems that even though men are willing to see the victims of police violence as people with rights who are deserving of humanity and respect, we simply refuse to do the same for women in relation to sexual violence. It is easy to hate feminists and to say they exaggerate when they say men are this or that. What is difficult it seems, is to stand in front of a vulnerable young girl or woman and to see more than female flesh. What we do not seem to want to try is empathy. To put aside male sexual desire and imagine the human life within the body of a woman. The soul. To think of her as someone with hopes, dreams, parents, siblings, friends, children, a future.

The evil power we wish to keep safe and to ourselves as men it seems, is the power to use the bodies of others, especially women, for our own inconsiderate ends. And judging by the number of rapes perpetrated by male family members and friends against female victims, it seems this imperative matters to men even above family ties and friendship.

That afternoon as I saw the young girl off, it became clear to me how easy rape can be for anyone with property and power. How easy for those policemen. How easy for Lemuel. How easy for me.

The men who abuse girls and women are family, close friends, neighbours. They are breaking bread, smoking ganja, reading this article with us. They are playing football with us. They are you and me. We can do the most good within our closest circles, with ourselves and with each other. And we must, because it is becoming ever clearer that the only reason we have not been doing it thus far, is because far too many of us are also part of the problem. We must begin having conversations about rape with fellow men, it is urgent. For me and Lemuel now, and hopefully for you and your friends, Friday afternoons will have to be about more than just football. We need to talk.

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**Lemuel's name has been changed for reasons of confidentiality.*

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