

## **BLACK WIDOW**

**BY: EMILY KHALAYI WEKULO**

He watched the pair in disgust. His stomach turned and a frown of desperation formed on his neatly shaven face. How long have they been up there? They even had a home in his wall! He was appalled. The two creatures, oblivious to the disgust they were causing their host, went about their coupling business. They crawled in a certain rhythm that made him stop and watch. The male was peacocking and the female was responding. Then it dawned on him that they were the widows. The foolish male had not noticed that there were no flies in this room, and he was going to be a juicy, hairy legged snack after mating. Clever ones waited till the female fed before approaching it.

Nalianya pitied the male spider. He had wanted to hit them with a broom but then, he thought: why not smash the female after she had feasted on the male? There was something about this particular group of spiders that clouded his heart. They reminded him of the bitter facts about his ironically weak masculinity that was coated in the sweetness of being the only son, with women around him causing both his heroism and downfall. He wanted to save the male, but the secret fear that they aroused in him kept him rooted in the middle of his immaculately kept living room. He scanned the other walls looking for any other invader, but they were as clean as a button.

The portraits of his three sisters and himself in their graduation regalia, on the western wall, smiled back at him, neatly arranged. His mother and father in their traditional wedding attire stared back at him on the eastern wall. He looked away immediately, like a guilty child. On the northern wall, a collage of his achievements as a senior government official made his chest expand. He loved his job. His gaze landed back on the southern wall. The spiders were at war. The female, was quickly turning the male into a meal. He chose to ignore the pair, walked past the dining area, perused the fluffy white cushions on the velvet divans, straightened the glossy glass and mahogany coffee table, switched off the 82 inch Samsung NU 8000 that majestically sat on the wall, picked his briefcase, switched on the alarm system and locked the door behind him.

The neighborhood was calm, the aura of riches and accomplishment created by the neatly designed Victorian houses, modern apartments and clean roads that lead to various individual compounds. It was home to the country's affluent, and being counted one of them flooded his whole being with

pride. He started his Lexus and drove past the watchman who was waving enthusiastically at either him or the car. Nalianya avoided the grin on the watchman's face since it reminded him of his late father. This was one of the usual less occupied days in his work calendar. There were no delegates from other countries and the president was satisfied with his work. His ministry was the most efficient and productive among the seven which run the government. The most skilled engineer in the country, like his late father, Nalianya had long since been appointed to the role of Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Infrastructure, Roads and Public Works. He was also the only son in the family, with three sisters ahead of him. He was the last born, the apple of everybody's eye in the family. As he drove to his office, he thought of his family and promised to call his eldest sister Nanyama who was like a second mother to him.

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Nanyama had raised him. She took him to school, housed him and watched him grow into the man he was. She had saved him from the misery of living in the village and going to a local day school like the rest of his siblings. Being the only son, she had ensured that he received the best education, and had sent him to a boarding school following which he was admitted to one of the best universities in the country. As a sign of gratitude, he had done everything in his power to stay at the top, win very bursary that the school offered to exemplary student, and had made his sister proud. Nalianya had graduated with a first class in engineering, and won the presidential scholarship, followed by successful doctoral study abroad. Being the eldest child, it is expected that once your parents sacrifice their wealth- their standard and quality of life- for your education, you should get a job and take over the responsibilities of helping them raise younger siblings. Nanyama had done it so perfectly that every one of them, Nanjala, Nafula and Nalianya, respected her with every fiber of their being. She was a surrogate parent after their father gone. Father never stopped reminding Nanyama on how he had sacrificed his happiness to send them to school; "I would be drinking with my friends right now in a bar, but I have to drink *changaa*, so that you can go to school," he would roar, amid hiccups after taking the local brew.

Their mother would be nodding in agreement to avoid abuse and physical blows if she dared dispute his 'wisdom'. All of them knew their father was lying. They knew he spent all his money on local brew and brought home nothing but obscenities and abuse. Mother, however, always

reminded them to respect their father, and covered up for his shortcomings by taking loans to keep the family finances afloat. Being a nurse in the local dispensary, she was entitled to a few favors and these helped her see them through education and other basic needs.

When Nanyama finished her studies and graduated from university as a Pharmacist, Nanjala and Nafula moved into her house to escape their father's mistreatments. They were both in secondary school. Nanjala joined a teaching college and Nafula joined a beauty college against their father's will. He called her a 'wild oat', intended as a term of criticism and abuse, and asked their mother to show her who her father was. Nafula, being a natural rebel, ran off to the neighboring country with a man she had met in college and was only seen on her father's burial day. The day of the funeral had been full of rain and cloud, and flashes of regret, pity, and loathing, swirling in the black sky above.

Nalianya, named after their great grandfather who had been a paramount chief in the colonial government, was their father's heartbeat. The boy was introduced to 'local brew' at the age of three since their father took him with him everywhere. The old man had waited for a son for ages. What use were daughters to him? When Nalianya was born, he was elated. For some reason, he stopped abusing and beating their mother. He came home regularly and later took early retirement to run his own company which subsequently collapsed after complete mismanagement, taking with it the last cent of his pension money. When news that Nafula had run off with a man reached him, he drowned himself in *chang'aa*. A strange illness that attacked him later and which his doctor told him would kill him unless he gave up alcohol, indirectly saved him from being completely destroyed by his addiction

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The secretaries were punctual as usual. His office smelled fresh and was neat, just as he liked it. At the age of thirty two, he had plenty of influence in hundreds of people's lives, and by virtue of his status in the Ministry they dared not disobey him. He demanded order, neatness, efficiency,

accuracy and perfection and he got exactly that. After signing a few documents, he decided to take a break and talk to his sister.

“*Mwana wa mayi,*” he introduced the conversation after Nanyama picked up on the third ring.

“*Ese uyusi mutua,*” she responded.

He always referred to her as ‘my mother’s child’, and she called him ‘our lastborn’. The two shared a unique bond which left Nanjala lonely, especially after the disappearance of Nafula.

“When am I meeting my in-law?” Nanyama asked him in a matter of fact fashion. The question always spoilt his day. He had no woman in mind and their mother and aunty Nambuye, their father’s nosy sister, had threatened to find him a wife two years ago.

“You know, I am not into women, Nanyama,” he answered sharply.

“What do you mean? You cannot be a *sumba* forever”, she replied. Nalianya knew where this conversation was headed. The earlier easy-going conversation with his sister was now at risk of turning sour. He loosened his tie and reclined deeper into the couch. He had left the office to talk privately in the meeting lounge, away from the secretaries’ ears. “I will find someone one day. But you know I have no time for such trivial pursuits. With all these meetings every day, how will I even find time for a wife? I will be marrying for my neighbors and I don’t want to raise house-boys’ bastards.” He talked on without giving his sister a chance to respond. Her calmness and apparent unwillingness to interrupt him made him nervous. What was she up to? It was very out of character for her; she always demanded that he listened to her and to some extent, she was always right.

“It’s okay if you say so. But mother thinks differently,” there was a trace of desperation in her voice.

“*Simakulu,* don’t do this to me. What is going on with her?” he asked, alarmed by her remarks.

He called her *simakulu*, ‘eldest’, when he needed a favor.

“Mother and *senge* Nambuye, are bringing you a wife,” she said candidly, then hung up.

What was that? He wanted to scream into the phone but the call was already dead. What did she mean, they were bringing him a wife? Why would they do that? He wanted to call his mother

immediately but was suddenly unsettled. Was it a joke? But Nanyama never joked. What would he tell his mother? That he would find a girl soon and take her home? He had said that over ten times already and if the truth be told, there was no girl. He couldn't find a girl.

There were girls, but none was good enough to be his wife. They were after his money, and some were too fake and shallow for his liking. He wanted someone who was perfect. How could he tell his mother he had a plan? The old woman saw through him and dismissed every excuse he had previously come up with for not being married. For some strange reason, the black widows he saw on his wall earlier that morning came crawling back into his mind. He suddenly stood up and rushed past the secretaries, locking the door behind him. He couldn't breathe. The spiders were large, black and hairy. The large brown patches looked like huge drops of blood on their abdomens as one struggled to overcome the other. The female grew bigger, and then swallowed her male consort alive.

"Excuse me sir," a secretary popped her head around the door. "Is everything okay? Should I call a doctor?" He was lying on the desk and sweating profusely. Papers and files were strewn over the floor. "What?" he croaked. "Sir, take some water. You're having a panic attack," the secretary insisted. She ignored his dismissal and went ahead to unbutton his shirt after loosening his tie.

"I'm not sick. I just hate spiders," he mumbled, gulping the sparkling water the secretary had given him. The spiders caused him deep anguish every time they came to his mind. Why did the male's life depend so much on their female counterparts? The most vital aspects of both existence and survival of these species depended on the females. It bothered him that even when the male knew the looming danger, he had no choice. Just like Nalianya himself. The secretary was not buying the spider tale. She called his doctor despite his protest.

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A strange illness had attacked his father one morning. The night had been long and he'd returned from *Mama Pima's*, the brewer, filled with alcohol, with venom. He abused everything and everyone that came his way. Nalianya had come home for holidays and Nanjala had come to visit as well. He had brought gifts and shopping for his mother from Nanyama, and money for his father, who then spent all of it on liquor. That morning, he was awakened by commotion from the main house and a shrill scream from Nanjala. He thought father was attacking their mother, so he

leapt from his bed, unlocked the door of his *esimba*, the boy's house, and rushed to the location of the noise. What he saw froze his blood, and he staggered in panic. Nanjala rushed to his side with a stool and made him sit.

Nalianya hated it when his heart failed him. He was supposed to be the main arrow in his father's bow: the arrow that never missed an eye. He was supposed to be the spear that goes through the buffalo's head without bending. Yet, panic always overwhelmed him. His heart just failed every time he went in to shock. It shamed him. He would later go from doctor to doctor trying to seek an explanation, but was fobbed off with simple words – guesses- about phobias. He would then resort to believing the many myths his mother and aunt Nambuye fed him about being the only son. Being born amongst women would be his downfall, they said. If mother had tried harder and had had another son, it would have lifted the curse.

Had he not fulfilled all the requirements of the clan's forefathers? Had he not stood on open ground, in the biting cold, naked, with clay all over his body, to face the knife? Had his father not watched with gratification as blood flowed down Nalianya's legs, seeped into the red earth to quench the thirst of their ancestors? Had his grandfather not spit on his chest and declared him the lion of his father's loins? Had he not fought the mysterious *kwena*, The Tachoni Clan Leopard, with the rest of the young boys in the village to fulfill the *khulichana* customs? What had he not done to be a full part of the clan? Why had he always been a weakling? How was it his sisters and mothers fault? Seeing his father, *maramba*, the wasp, as the rest of the village referred to him, sprawled on the floor, his neck horribly twisted, crying like a baby, was a blow. It hurt more than the claws of The Leopard which had sunk into his back, tearing off the flesh as if he was some kind of prey. Father never cried. He never cried. What was this thing that had attacked him? Mother called a few doctor friends and they all shook their heads in disbelief when they saw their father's neck. What could have twisted it so severely? Aunty Nambuye, nosy as usual, was already on their mother's case, claiming that she had cast a spell on father. Mother, from that day, cried day and night.

Nanyama was called back home and she came with a stash of pain killers for father, from the company she was working for. She suggested that father should be screened for bone cancer, but the doctors in the referral hospital declared him to be cancer free after drilling a hole in his pelvis. Nanyama tried reaching Nafula who dismissed the idea of coming home to see her rapidly

deteriorating father. She said he was not her father. When father heard this, he turned to the other side of the bed, as far as his twisted neck would let him, and refused any further food or water.

Mother begged, cajoled, quarreled, screamed herself hoarse and even called her elder in-laws to talk to him, but father refused to open his eyes or his mouth. One by one, everybody gave up. Soon, the village inhabitants began talking in whispers, with their hands clutching at their faces, waiting for father to breathe his last. Mother was on her knees all night, declaring protection and forgiveness from anyone whom father might have wronged. Nanyama retreated in defeat and went about her duties of providing for the family. Nanjala cried herself to sleep, cursing the sorcerers in the village who wanted to destroy the family because the children were highly educated and therefore not to be trusted. Nalianya was torn between taking care of his father's needs and protecting the women in his life from attacks and accusations made by their father's relatives. Aunty Nambuye, with the rest of the aunties, scolded their mother and gossiped about her attire, her perfume, her self-indulgence at the expense of their dying brother. Nafula never showed up.

On one day, everybody got up, greeted the day, and then went about their daily business. Mother went about boiling herbs to take care of father's bed sores, Nanyama cleaned the compound and made breakfast, Nanjala screamed at peeping neighbors who were trying to gather the latest gossip about father. Nalianya was cleaning father and the room he slept in. Aunty Nambuye, was on her way with more herbs in one hand and a local prophet by her side. Only Nalianya was allowed in her father's room now because it was taboo for girls to see him in the grip of this strange illness. When mother walked in, Nalianya updated her: his father was clean and had not even stirred, and had just slept. Mother stared at the bag of bones lying stiff on the bed. His head did not move. There was no twist in the neck, but his mouth was half open.

"Foolish child!" Mother screamed, "Giving me a weakling was not enough, he had to be foolish as well?"

Nalianya was lost. What had he done? Mother never before berated him in this fashion, and it stung like a hornet sting.

"Your father is dead! Look at him." She shouted the words then left the room, wailing.

Nalianya could not breathe, such was his panic. The room was spinning. The screams of his sisters and the village women echoed in his ears. On the wall, just above his father's head, he saw a huge

black widow, its hairy legs spread out, menacingly moving towards his father's face. Its abdomen was fat with eggs. He wanted to smash it with a shoe, but his hands couldn't lift anything. He sunk on his knees and prayed silently, without taking his eyes off the spider, that someone would come in the room in time.

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The doctor asked Nalianya to go home and take a rest. Nalianya regretted not smashing the spiders on the wall that morning before leaving the house. He asked his secretary to call his cleaning lady to go and put the house in order before he left the office. He also requested a chauffeur, something he rarely did. The doctor had recommended counselling for his phobia of spiders, and this had embarrassed him. The cleaning lady was arranging the flowers on the front porch. He was relieved when he saw her. She was good at what she did, and her work was always meticulous. She couldn't have missed the spiders but he decided to ask anyway.

"There was a cob web on the wall today, did you take it down?" He asked after greeting her.

The lady nodded with a smile. She had been cleaning for him for years and understood his needs. She had found him strange when she first met him but as time went by, she grew accustomed to his ways. The pay was good and she did the job perfectly, as the boss wanted it.

"You have guests, sir," the woman announced.

"What guests?" Nalianya was surprised. He was not expecting anyone. Only his sisters knew where his home was, and they always called before visiting. His mother had visited twice and on both occasions he had had to ask his driver to pick her up from town since she couldn't have made the journey alone. "Your sister and three other ladies. I know your sister so I let them in," she responded, her eyes fixed on the rose bushes she was spraying. He suddenly remembered the conversation he had with his sister. Were they bringing him a wife today? She hadn't mentioned this to him. Perhaps she didn't want to warn him. The last thing he wanted that afternoon was to have a confrontation with these women. He didn't want to spend even a second with a woman from the village. He was a public figure for heaven's sake! How could he ever introduce a woman with no class to his social circle? What about the neighborhood? He imagined a rotund woman with an Ankara scarf on her head, dusty cracked feet, waddling into his immaculate house and felt a quiver of fear. He wouldn't let them force a woman into his world. He slowly walked to the



living room, recognizing his mother's perfume. She had used the same perfume since he'd been a little boy. She stood to embrace him. Aunty Nambuye was reclining in his favorite couch, her small form looking even smaller against its size. Her thin lips tightened in a mean smile. He stretched out his hand in greeting. Nanyama was blocking the inner door with her large torso, and held a tray of glasses. He looked around the room for the fourth guest.

"She's making juice in the kitchen." Nanyama had read his mind. Their eyes met for the first since he had walked into the room, and then they spoke.

"It's your fault Nalianya. You should have done this a long time ago." Nanyama read his mind again.

He was blaming his mother. How could she let Aunty Nambuye do this to him? He could have figured something out. He could have met a woman he liked, sooner or later. But he knew that for now he had no plans to marry. There what if he had the fate of a male black widow? There were too many women in his life already. His sisters, mother, and aunts who constantly bothered him, irritated him.

Aunty Nambuye started her usual diatribe. "Our son, your father is screaming from the grave. He needs to be named. Your mother isn't getting any younger. Will you let her join your father in the next world without first holding new grandchildren in this one?"

Didn't it concern him that he was the only son and therefore the only one who could bring forth a new generation? He never went near swimming pools, he never went on a merry-go-round, he avoided bridges, and he never ate wild meat; he was too set in his ways. Why would they force him to marry? Why had he not heard his father's screams himself? If his father wanted him to marry, he would have raised this with him directly. He opened his mouth to order them to leave his house but it was closed equally quickly when a tall, slender, curvaceous, chocolate brown vision of youth and beauty entered the room, carrying a jug of orange juice. "The cabinet secretary shouldn't stare," Nanyama commented with amusement. All would be well after all.

