

## HORTON EATS A HUTU

by Tony Mochama

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By the time the sun began to dip behind the orange coloured building to the west of her balcony, Margaretta Goretti Mkimbizi was on her fifth *Kingfisher* drink –strawberry, orange, violet, *pintage* red and rose - and was beginning to think she would have been better off with the woodpecker cider; although she had the distinct sensation of a nest of woodpeckers pecking away at the insides of her skull.

The book she had began to read, something written by someone called R.L. Stine (why did so many of these writers from abroad enjoy operating with just the initials of their first two names?) was lying on the soft couch she kept out on the balcony, with its spine supine.

It was called *It Came From Beneath the Sink* and featured a teen called Kit, and her brother Dan, and something *evil and fearsome* that lived in their new house, a malevolent entity that lived beneath the sink. Which reminded Margaretta Goretti, 46 year old widow of Mike Mkimbizi who five Augusts ago, after one of his customary ‘until I am totaled’ (as he used to boast) whiskey drinking sprees had slammed his silver-gray Mitsubishi Lancer, *KRL 876*, into a tree on the way home, to this very apartment on the fifth floor rooftop in *South ‘A’* estate, that he had brought on mortgage, initial deposit paid down way back in the May of 1980, that she needed to be rid of the evidence of her afternoon mini-binge.

Deposit this silica + soda ash + limestone = glass shizzle in the black polythene beneath the sink.

Mike Mkimbizi had, *must* have died instantly, going by the mangled mess his body was in the morgue. *Tachne noir de la sclerotique* – this was the technical description of why Mike’s eyelids had remained wide open after death. He must have seen the tree, last minute, his eyes widened in horror. But why did it have to be in French or Spanish or Latin, like the olde Catholic masses that always made Margaretta Goretti feel a little bit guilty? His death was ruled an accident. But

the hard drinking preceding the driving had been a suicidal precursor. *This* Margareta Goretti knew in her heart as surely as she knew her oldest child and only son, Horton, had been born on April Fool's morning in 1975, a date pregnant with pranks ('*a bouncing baby boy?*' an old college friend had told her after she informed him by dial telephone from the *Mater Misericordiae* hospital, '*Margareta, that's a nice one, but I'm onto the day, nyeh, can't fool me*') and something that Horton sort of held against her.

*Resentment* – a word as hard as a bag of cement abandoned in a basement.

"Mum," he had actually voiced it out loud on his sixteenth birthday. "You could have had me on the second of April, or," and here Horton's teen voice cracking like a scratched vinyl record had gotten higher, "you could have pushed *harder* and gotten me on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March. April Fool's Day? Like, really, *seriously?*"

"That's not exactly how baby delivery works, Horton," Margareta had said mildly. But the complaint had registered in her head. Like her husband's death, and many other things after Mr. Mike Mkimbizi -Whiskey Drinker *supremo*'s - tragic demise, the unfortunate date of Horton's birth had come to look like her fault, or at least something had she been more alert, more on the look-out, done something a little different, pushed *harder*, would have turned out differently or been altogether averted. In other facts, Mrs. Mkimbizi had developed a deep-seated class 'A' guilt complex that always asked for the seat beside the aisle to see which passengers were likely to later trip her up.

Guilt gremlins sneaking around like Kremlin assassins.

The other thing she always felt, ever since her husband's sudden demise, was *fearful*. Frightened about the fragile nature of the future, anxious about her son, apprehensive about her daughter, panicky about the mortgage on this flat, jittery about her job, on the edge of every ledge, jumpy lest it be discovered that she was rapidly descending into day time drinking.

Horton would soon be home, she needed to put away, throw, get rid of, the empty *Kingfisher* bottles in the black plastic trash bag beneath the sink. Margareta didn't need her son, needlessly

so, thinking she was a daytime stay-at-home home drunk *weekends*. Which, come not to think of it, she was! *Sort of a Saturday sot*. She pushed the blue thought away. Into the sink with it!

Horton was at that age when one has just put a toe into young manhood and is now suspicious of mom's moods. He might begin to think she was despondent, or worse, *depressed*. When all she was really doing was getting a little bit of wine buzz before her newly minted into adulthood twenty year old lad came home.

And then they would really celebrate.

Margaretta hustled the *Kingfisher* empties and cradled them in her arms, stumbling just a little bit after misjudging the height of the stair step from the balcony that led directly into the kitchen. As she laid out the offending *Kingfishers* into the very bottom of the black plastic trash bag, careful not to break them or even clang them together, not that it mattered - her 18 year old daughter was blasting *Boys 2 Men* full throttle from the fortress of her bedroom -, Margaretta Goretta's nose caught the distinct scent of *cannabis sativa* wafting in over the balcony and into her current air space beneath the sink.

'*Can we go back to the days where our love was strange? Can you tell me how a perfect love goes wrong? Oh God give me a reason, I'm down on bended knee ...*' That was her eighteen year old daughter, Cynthia Mkimbizi, nursing her first heartbreak on the first weekend of the April school holidays, instead of attending to her revision and yet the national school exams, **KCSE**, that would determine the rest of her life were just round the corner. Where was her fear?

And who on earth in their apartment block was smoking weed? The villain of this heartbreak was a 19 year old rogue called Bryan Ingwe who walked around *South 'A'* estate with a swagger and shorts swaddled around his butt and a box hair cut and huge *Fubu* sneakers whom Margaretta didn't care for at all, and who had dated Cynthia all of December and ignored her all of her first full day back home from boarding school, this April.

Hence the heartbreak!

Margaretta G. Mkimbizi sincerely hoped it was only Cynthia's heart that *that* rogue, Bryan, had broken. Last December, Cynthia's favourite songs from behind the banged-hard-shut- and locked

door of her fortress had rather worrying lyrics like “*I’ll make love to you, like you want me to, and I will not stop,*” and “*when you love someone, then something –something-something,* then a very aggressive male voice, that quite frankly sounded a little deranged to Mrs. Mkimbizi saying, “*ain’t nah-baddy humpin’ around,*” and managing to convey, in its fervent protestations, the exact opposite message.

Who was smoking weed, so brazenly, so very brazenly, a few floors below her balcony, and were they not scared of being reported and arrested? The sentence for folks being found in possession of *bhang*, routinely given out by very junior magistrates in Kenya, third class resident magistrates they called them, like smelly people in a train compartment carrying live chicken, was anywhere between six months to two years in the cooler slammer, *slammer cooler*. Margaretta couldn’t remember the slang for *gaol* in 1995, but she was sure that bad boy, Bryan Ingwe, knew all the slang he needed to seduce the young ladies of the neighbourhood.

Margaretta shut out the *Boys and Men* by sliding the glass door that separated the balcony from the remainder of the house on its rails, and thought again how the view was the very best feature of this flat, never mind that her late hubby Michael had nicknamed it ‘*Flat broke*’.

“It is our home,” Margaretta Mkimbizi had said.

“It is a bone in the banker’s jaws,” Michael had replied, “It leaves us finished”.

*Flat Broke* still had five years’ mortgage left to run until the year 2000, never mind that one of the Margaretta’s friends, Fiona Mafinyo, was 100% convinced the world was going to end in mayhem anywhere between Monday September Sixth and Friday December, 31<sup>st</sup>. 1999.

Also, something called Millenium Bang that would shut down every computer on the planet!

The thought depressed Margaretta Goretti.

Not so much the end of world, that could perhaps be exciting, knowing we were all going to go out, together, in an almighty bang like the dinosaurs sixty something million years before after *that* asteroid hit in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Group death sure beat the Quiet death –the excruciating one that begins with symptoms and diagnosis and then doctors and indecipherable diagrams. The kind of death that Margaretta Goretti *feared* and felt sure was waiting for her, the one that ends with a terminal interminable period in a hospital bed with all sorts of pharmaceutical products—*prednisolone, metoclopramide, calcium gluconate, polystyrene sulfonate* and adult diapers – doing the *danse macabre* of the apothecary at the finish line of the long goodbye. Tree deaths were preferable by the opposite of infinitesimal to the quiet deaths, including but by no means exhausted by cars running into trees at full speed necks dangling from ropes like photographs of past misdeeds hanging from crucifixes and trees falling on folk like woodcutters and picnic-going passersby and just guys resting in the shade of these dangerous trees, or if in places like Masinde and Muliro, couples copulating with abandon under God’s own Green Lodges. What was there not to be afraid of? ‘You have nothing to fear but fear itself,’ had said that smart-aleck young American president thirty five years ago in the mid-October of 1960; but he had no idea then that Fear was a Grim reaping sniper called Ozzie in a hoodie with a long range *Mannlicher-Carcano* rifle fitted with a telescopic sight & camouflaged in the sixth floor dust of a Texas School Book Depository building -three years, a month and a week away in the future.

*‘Cut down the tall trees’.*

The sun was coming down sharp and hard, silently slipping beneath the sky horizon like a smooth coin disappearing into a purple-coloured slot machine, and even before the dark came in, the lights were coming on in the building across the road and opposite their apartment building. The cars on the flyover that was smudged into sky background seemed to soar beneath clouds shot through with sunset red, looking like cotton candy dipped in *Bloody Marys*. Which made Margaretta Goretti think of menses and if her daughter had missed any thanks to that horrid Bryan Ingwe *boy* with his *Fubus* and box cut and horrible slithering shorts.

At 46, Mrs. Mkimbizi still didn’t feel ready for the wizening title of ‘Grandma.’

She did, though, feel the strong urge for another drink, something stronger than a *Kingfisher*, (that was for softies and oldies), a Scotch, maybe, and she wondered what it would be like for her, a middle aged woman, to walk into a Saturday night bar, and sit all alone at the corner, in the middle of the 1990s, knees pressed hard against the counter and raise a little finger and whisper to the young barman, ‘*Excuse me, please sir, may I have -*’. Was she too fearful of going out? The smell of the *bhang* bit her nostril hairs hard, shit was drifting up from the second floor balcony. She tried to remember what the gossipy caretaker Munyaka Mutiso had told her about the two young men who had moved in three floors below the Mkimbizis, just a week before. They had fled a civil war in the Congo and come to Kenya? Was that the story? The UNHCR (*United Nations High Commission for Refugees*) was footing their rent while waiting to finalise asylum for them in some country in Europe? (Margaretta Goretti, no slouch herself when it came to being a nosy neighbor, had peered into their black polythene bags out on the second floor corridor, the day before, as they awaited collection, and confirmed the caretaker’s tale as there were a few canned food cans (empty) in the trash, with the label ‘UNHCR’ on them). These cans were mostly soup/beans/biscuits.

### *Boys 2 Men.*

Margaretta Goretti thought of the *Nando’s* pizza she would order the second her birthday boy, Horton, walked in; their special birthday pizza since his seventeenth birthday, with mayonnaise and things called pepperoni on its mountain crater surface. Italians *ate* so many things. Did Horton Mkimbizi, now 20, ever consider how lucky he was to be growing up in a peaceful nation like Kenya when he kept bugging her to buy him attire she could not afford? To push *harder*?

A television memory from the previous year occurred to Margaretta. A long shot of a dirt road full of chopped up bodies in colourful clothes.

### *The war in Congo.*

She retched, drew in a sharp breath to gulp in the evening air and the sweet scent of cannabis *sativa* got mixed in with her saliva. Mrs. Margaretta Mkimbizi wondered whether 46 was too old an age for a mother to start smoking weed.

She wondered where on earth her son Horton was.

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Horton was sitting on the second floor of their flat building, three floors below his mother, although it was the tall fellow with what looked like an axe-cut across his forehead, Ndindiliyimana Ntabakuze, (not that Horton would ever be able to pronounce it) who was actually directly below his mother, smoking spiffy and sending the puffs upwards like forlorn prayers to a forgotten god.

The other fellow, Twagiramungu, was a short and very stocky fellow, bald headed, with big bulbous eyes, thick lips, seriously frayed *Safari* boots which he wore without socks, a rubber bangle with ‘ **POWER** ’ inscribed on it and a vest that must once upon have been white but now looked like it had been washed and hang out to dry at the very moment that acid rain happened. Twagiramungu was talking as he cooked *matoke* (steamed plantains) in the living room, talking non-a-stop as he made the *ibihaza* – pumpkins mixed with beans, boiled without peeling – speaking, loudly complaining about how the *United Nations* fed them on canned biscuits like dogs.

Here, Twagiramungu shouted over Horton Mkimbizi, sitting on a stool in the kitchen cum living room to Ndindiliyimana on the balcony – ‘*Is that not so, Ntabakuze?*’ Ndindiliyamana nodded vacantly, and blew more grass smoke upwards to be received by a grateful far-from-a- goddess middle aged lady three floors up, who was beginning to entertain thoughts of sending her 20 year old son three floors downstairs to ‘invite the Congolese boys for pizza,’ the moment he walked in.

“In Rwanda we had a wide variety of foods to eat,” Twagiramungu said, his forehead shiny with sweat from the pleasant thought of sweet potatoes, manic about manioc. Here, Bagasora paused to maniacally struggle with the *bugali* – paste meal of maize and water – on a second pot in the living room. “ *Isombe*, that is mashed cassava leaves mixed with fried fish. *Ikinyigu*, that is ground nut paste...”

Horton Mkimbizi was beginning to wonder if it had not been a mistake to accept this traditional Rwandese food-obsessed man's offer to come in for a glass of *Ubuki* – fermented honey alcohol, 12% strong, for his twentieth birthday.

*Here is what happened.*

Bagasora Twagiramungu was taking the garbage in the black polythene bags issued by the apartment complex caretaker out to the hallway when Horton's face appeared above the first floor stairwell.

"Hallo?" Horton said politely

"*Bonjour* young man," Twagiramungu said. "No hurry in Africa."

"Actually, I'm just dashing up to have dinner with my Ma and Sis,"

Horton had said. Then because it was Saturday night, when young men were suppose to be dashing out to go for dates and dances with their darlings, he had added, by way of explanation, almost apologetically- "It is my birthday, they are family..." (helpless *you-know-how-it-goes* shrug here, designed to win a resigned sympathy).

But Bagasora, with a hearty "happy birthday, *monsieur*," had dragged him in for a happy 20<sup>th</sup> birthday drink, the 12% *Ubuki*, sat him on a stool and started the non-stop culinary talking as he cooked, like a soccer commentator during an action packed match.

Ntabakuze, with what Norton caught as a dark look, had straight away stood up when the birthday boy came in, and with the most perfunctory of head nods, gone, or rather stalked out to smoke.

"We had *umustima wa w'uburo*," Twagiramungu was saying.

"That is millet floor paste. It tastes very good with *ikinyiga*, the ground nut paste. Nothing taste better than *ikinyiga* with *umustima*."

Horton thought this man Bagasora was becoming that loquacious bore who can sound like the re-run of a rural radio program on something fascinating like soil erosion – *momonyoko wa udongo!*

Thinking of radio, the *ubuki* (12%) was making Horton bolder. He swiveled on his stool, away from Bagasora's incessant banter to face the outsider man whose brown complexion seemed lit fiery red from inside by the light of the sunset slanting in from the west as the day drained of its colour, like a t-shirt left too long in a *Jik* detergent wash.

"What is your favourite radio station?" Horton asked

"*Radio Television des Millnes Collins*," Ntabakuze said, and Twagiramungu cursed at him loudly in Kinyarwanda,

"Radio television?" Horton cut in. "Isn't that like an ..." he struggled to remember the word from Mrs. Kamande's English literature class from the early 1990s, "... oxymoron?"



“The *Inyenze – Inkotanyi* shut it down in Kigali last year,” Ndindiliyimana said this so savagely, the last of his blunt auto-spat itself out of his mouth.

“Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom,” Horton Mkimbizi said. He really did need to pee. But he also planned to retch loudly then rush out like a wretch, signaling he felt ill, dash up three floors to the safety of their home. These two gentlemen were no Congolese.

Twagiramungu threw a forefinger with a missing top in the bathroom’s general direction, and then the short temper cook was already heading to the balcony to remonstrate with Ndindiliyimana.

The bathrooms and main bedrooms on every alternating floor of this building had been placed in direct opposite order, which is how Horton Mkimbizi, needing to pee, instead found himself in a room with a mattress on the floor and a strange red light from a solitary bulb and pictures hanging from a clothesline, once he had shut the door behind him. In this room, the wooden floorboards seemed to tilt dramatically to the left, so that Horton held on to one wall for a second, like a new deck boy on a keeling ship, to steady himself.

He could faintly hear Bagasora Twagiramungu in a rage, yelling at Ntabakuze, catch that phrase, ‘*Inyenzi-inkotanyi*,’ but now that he was clearly in the wrong ‘B’ room, a strange red- coloured Satan child under the shade of the forbidden tree in Eden, waiting to be tempted, the urge to urinate had all but disappeared

There were pictures hanging on nylon & wire clotheslines strung up across the room, like rows of condemned men after the sentence of mass hanging has happened, and there was a twenty year old April Fool baby’s curiosity to be sated. He let go of the wall, the water from some upstairs apartment – maybe even theirs – giving it an odd convex bulge, like something just about to divulge some fearsome secrets in an informational deluge. Like a suspect confessing his sins.

At first, Horton thought the first picture, of a naked girl, was a porn epic, like the ones in the *Play boy* magazines complete with authentic black instead of Swedish white. Horton kept a hidden secret in his bedroom, one that he lived in mortal fear of discovery, under his mattress – a secret his mother had long uncovered, and then covered up again in maternal embarrassment, wondering what on earth had gone wrong with her children since their father died.

She had felt a flush of burning resentment at her MIA husband, who she was now sure had deliberately fled into death having lived a cowardly life full of pusillanimity. The villainy of

being one of life's general pussies! Why was he not here to tell his son: '*Horton, boys who masturbate looking at dirty pictures such as these ones eventually go blind!*'?

Where was he to put the fear of God into his only begotten son, Horton?

Then Horton saw that the naked girl, a stripling no older than 19, had wide open terrified eyes that stood out even in the black – and- white print of the photo graph that there was a powerful hand with a rubber bangle on the wrist with the inscription '**POWER**' on it.

The second photograph on the clothesline was of a baby on the ground. Not upright and on all fours the way toddlers on the ground are supposed to be but flat and lying horizontal across that road.

A *Safari* boot with *déjà vu* written all over it loomed over the tiny tot and even the shaky blurred quality of the shot, as if this act had shocked the snapper slightly, could not hide the sheer horror of what was going on in the photograph.

'*Inyenze!*' That is what they called the Tutsis. Horton Mkimbizi had an audio –memory recall from BBC radio *circa last April*.

That word had become common in the days, then the weeks, then the months following his nineteenth birthday, a terrifying words coming through the radio on the news from next door.

'*Inyenze*' = Roach.

The door of the bedroom darkroom creaked open, and Horton Mkimbizi began to scream but instead snatched at the nearest large object on a small table just below the row (of condemned folks) which just so happened to be a FED – *Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhihinsky* – camera, built like a Soviet tank and solid as a rock.

Ndindiliyimana Ntabakuze walked into the darkroom (bedroom) with a long, *looong* machete raised over his head, poised to strike and Horton prepared to make his last stand against this *mtu*, only to realize that it was Ntabakuze's shadow thrown up against the wall.

Only his eyes were *pangas* as he assessed the situation. The damage of discovery. Horton figured out Bagasora had send him to his room, like a naughty boy, only this naughty boy's mischief was of the documentation of the *Inyange* militia's activities in '94. He also figured out he might not live to see the second day of his twentieth birthday.

"What are you doing with my FED camera, *inkotanyi?*"

"I-I-I was just loo-loo-loo – looking a bit at it when yew ..."

“It was a gift to me from the French legion who trained us in Paris in 1992. They noticed my natural flare for photography. They spotted my *talent*.”

“I am sorry,” Horton said, and he was. Better he had gone blind from his sins of the flesh, than seen any of this. *Ī am so sorry*.

He had piddled all over the floor of the red eyed darkroom with the angled floor and bulging wall, and now his urine was flowing on a small down gradient towards the axe- scar faced photographer’s mattress.

Fear gripped him like a vise. Apprehension, alarm, dread, terror, horror, trepidation, consternation, it was like a nursery rhyme from a child’s nightmare.

Dismay, fearfulness, distress, foreboding, the bugbear and *bête noir*, they all held him. And Horton at twenty shuddered and trembled, quaked, quivered and quailed, and still the specter before him went on speaking, caught up in his own soul-cleansing confessional, not giving a goddamn shit as he spoke to this boy, now that his sins had become too big for the priest’s box. Besides, hadn’t that Catholic father Jean-Bedel Rwamuhizi bid his Tutsi flock to come get shelter from the massacres in his church in Nyarubuye, then gone into his padre’s back office and phoned Rudolpho Gacumbitsi, leader of the Inyanges, and just said cryptically ‘I have the tall trees in the store’ before dropping the phone handle back into its cradle?

“My mother was Tutsi, so when it was time to go and *mahere aruhande*, that is to go from one place to another, chopping the tall trees down, to prove my loyalty to the *Inyange*, I had to go. ‘Begin with her,’ Gacumbitsi said, ‘to show your loyalty to The Work.’ We went in a green government pick-up truck to her house, and I went in with three of my colleagues. My younger sisters, I have six of them, were all there. I chopped her up with my sharp new machete. The machetes were a gift from the philanthropist, Felicien Kabuga so we could do the work in a clean manner. My youngest sister picked an axe as I cut her *maman*. She cut me here on my forehead.” Ndindiliyimana’s voice was remote, his eyes empty. He may as well have been an icy planet orbiting some distant quasar somewhere in the wasteland Siberia of space, too far out to fathom “Get out of here!” he continued in that automaton’s voice. “We do not have enough food for three in this house. Go and eat with your mother.”

Horton Mkimbizi – the family name means ‘*he who chases*’ - ran out of that room so fast he almost skidded on his own pee and fell.

Bagasora Twagiramungu, still making food in the sitting room in his frayed Safari boots in the spot exactly vertical beneath the Mkimbizi's main bathroom sink, looked up startled and said, his good humour back: "Young man, more *ubuki*? Or you'd prefer *Ikiyage*, our Rwandese sorghum beers?"

Horton shook his head and opened his mouth to try and smile and say that he was okay. But then he retched and Twagiramungu looked alarmed at the prospect of this boy throwing up all over the *isombe* and bugali delicacy he was so looking forward to – after all, these meals were now his only connection to home – and was relieved when the young man, without a word, barged his way out of the flat and he heard footfalls ascend the stairs.

Bagasora shook his big bald bug head. The young people of today in urban Kenya were of such weak constitution nowadays, like their blood was mixed with *vin ordinaire*!

It was all those pizzas and *viazis* they ingested with the introduction of South African chains like Steers and *Nando*'s that came with two-for-one offers on 'Terrific Tuesdays' and '*Whack 'Em* Wednesdays' and '*Terrible Thursdays*.' If the mother of this boy from upstairs had brought him up on *ibihaza* and *umustima*, then he would not be so easily sick, and as Twagiramungu knew, one never knows when even the Nation requires a man to be strong.

Horton only made it to the fourth floor before the *liquidy* feelings in his guts lurched down to his knees, like the time when he was small and had plunked himself into his father's office chair and the whole contraption just sank suddenly to a lower level.

*This feeling of his knees turning to jelly, was it also fear?*

It stirred in him a watery sensation, like he was wading through porridge (*did Bagasora have a word for 'uji'?*) as he used the stair banister to *sokota* himself up to the fifth floor.

He was disoriented and short of breath, and at that moment felt as if his childhood asthma that had suddenly disappeared – his mother gave credit to her then pastor Habel Olembo, now a big-time prophet 'Able Abel' whose favourite quote on KBC TV Sundays was Isaiah 41:10– had just returned in similarly abrupt fashion.

"*So do not fear, for I am with you; I will strengthen you and help you and uphold you with my righteous right hand.*" And here the Prophet would stretch out his capable right hand, and the discerning viewer, like Horton, could not tell whose right hand was culpable of the pro-offered comfort.

Able Abel or God.

The words of a song being played at high volume wafted out into the corridor as he hit the fifth floor landing: '*Growing up can be a pain/ you're not a man until you come of age ...*'

Boys to Men – *what a thoroughly silly name!*

In the darkness crowding the day's edges out, Horton leaned against the ledge of the family flat's kitchen window that looked out the common corridor on his elbow, waiting to be weaned of worry, chilling for the fear to leave his legs so that they may once more return from *jell-o* to muscle and bone that are so easily rendered apart under the right wretched circumstances; before leaning out to ring the doorbell that would let him in.