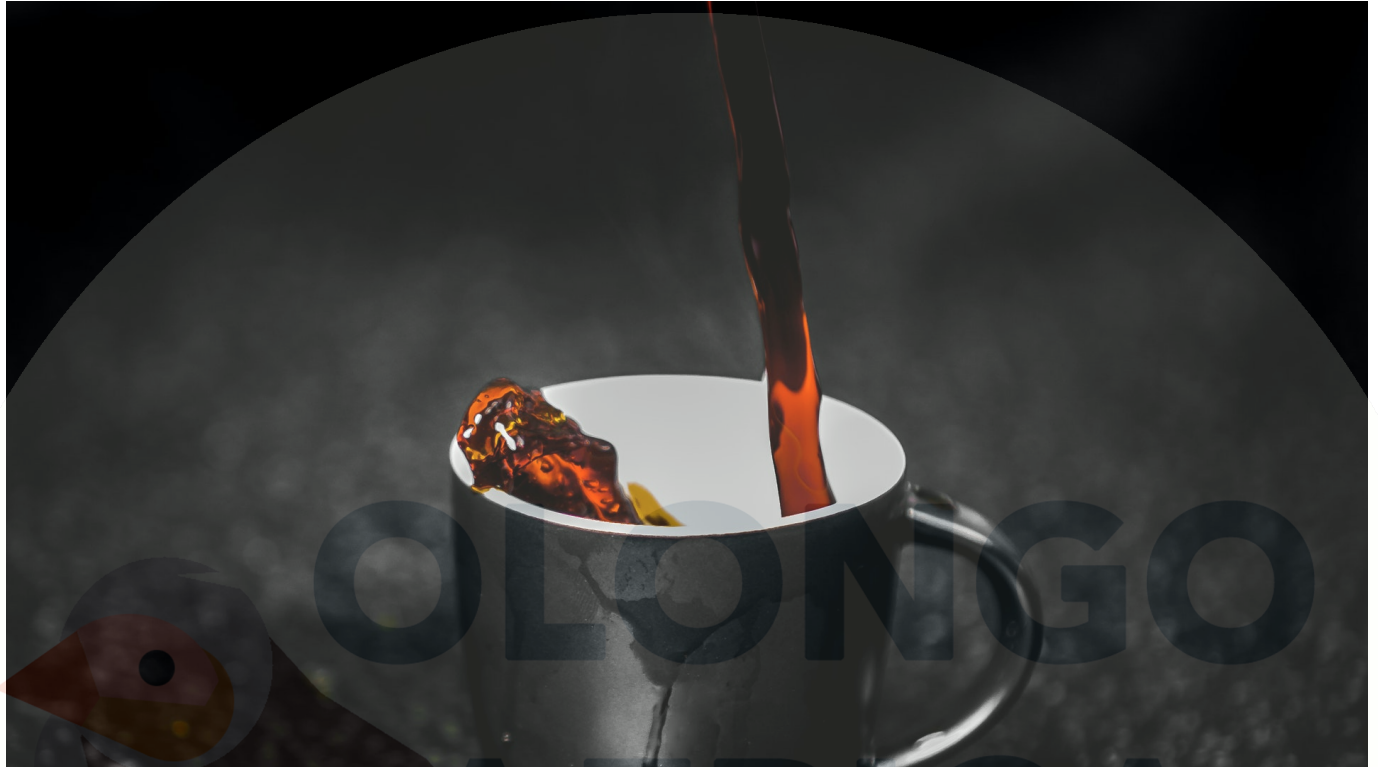


Kaldi's Friendly Poison

Kóíá Túbòsún

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My name is Kaldi, the legendary founder of coffee from Ethiopia. I might have died many years ago, but my spirit is on an important mission to Nairobi. Our hero, Jonah the depressed writer and I were united by my friendly poison, which I discovered in the year of Our Lord 850 AD. The truth is, I never thought the leaves of the plant my grazing goats had accidentally nibbled on and got excited enough to capture my attention would centuries later put me and Jonah in the same room.

I first appeared to Jonah on a Tuesday night, after six years of drinking my beverage. Our hero had just finished the third cup of coffee when I whispered in his ear, "I can't ignore you any further." I watched with curiosity as a cloud of surprise clouded Jonah's face. His eyes seemed to have widened. He thought his mind was playing games. To clear his head, Jonah picked the empty mug from the table and carried it to the kitchen. I wasn't planning to leave him alone.

I sometimes make Jonah's left eye twitch. Sometimes I feel like laughing out loud when I remember Jonah never thought someone *or something* could take over his mind. When our hero's eye twitched two more times, I hoped he would get the gist. But Jonah thought the twitching meant something bad would happen. That the demons in his dreams would finally get to him. I watched as he flashed that impish smile resembling a mad person's.

We should examine Jonah's mental state. Writing the last novel manuscript had brought our hero close to insanity. No one wanted to look at the manuscript. His writer friends had abandoned him, and only the bells of death rang in his mind. Every day he hoped not to wake up to his landlady harassing him over unpaid rent. At least our hero would completely lose his mind over something reasonable. The waves of life had marooned our hero on an island of loneliness. He would sleep all day, and the good people who used to give him editing jobs seem to have moved to a different world.

Even Jonah's mother seemed to have stopped making things happen. Though his mother had passed when he was aged nine, our hero believed she still visited him from time to time. Later on, the people in heaven seemed to have completely forgotten him. Jonah resulted in the singularity of life. He had been used to that kind of life to a particular degree, for he had been an only child all along. Jonah thought of death as the beast which condemns people to loneliness.

Jonah's life changed forever the Tuesday he wished for death. I couldn't allow our hero to go on with his plans to take charge of his own life. Six years of him taking my poison everyday like religion convinced me he had enough faith in my cause. Jonah and I seemed to share important things. Did you know the history in school texts is rather shallow? I would like to reveal that my childhood was never fun. When I lost my mother aged nine – just like Jonah, my people decided herding goats was the best thing I could do all my life. Which was a friendly curse, because I ended up discovering coffee, the simple beverage which has brought Jonah and I together.

And I happened to have been an only child as well. So I feel Jonah and I could be brothers. If I hadn't appeared to him that Tuesday, he won't have lived to see the following day. I understand our hero doesn't have a lot of respect for life, but maybe it's only through carelessness we are able to discover ourselves. The coffee he has been taking for six years has learnt to confuse his thinking. No one can convince him life is worth anything. He has learnt to doubt everything. When he didn't seem to trust in anything, when nothing seemed to satisfy him, life became meaningless.

Three months from now Jonah will be thirty years old. Although our hero's writing has gotten somewhere, all he seems to care about is memories. Believing memories are all people should live for, he never cares being remembered or some shit. When I appeared to Jonah that night, he was in a dark place. The real event behind Jonah's twitching eye happened the following Tuesday. Google had first lied to him that it was the caffeine. Though he never really cared, Jonah would feel good to see something or someone new.

It turned out to be both. I was especially concerned that my beverage had for those years confined our hero into just one sexual memory. In came Magdalene. Come to think of it, don't you think a woman has to be in every man's life? That's just the way of the world, even from my time. When our hero had met Magdalene in a book launch last year, she had confessed her love for Jonah's writing. He never figured she had fallen with the writer as well!

Jonah had been a shy person since childhood. Maybe that's part of the ingredients which flavoured Jonah's life as a writer. I had planned things with Jonah's awakening to be a straightforward affair. At thirty-six years old, Magdalene was experienced enough in the ways of the world to change our hero's life forever. Being a single mother, her daughter had for the last few months made it hard to explore the world. So when Jonah invited her to his house he liked to call Room Seventeen, she was game. Despite Jonah being used to girls who demanded bus fare, this strange creature hired an Uber to Room Seventeen.

Jonah noticed Magdalene's curiosity when, upon appearing in his house, she wanted to know the origin of Room Seventeen. Our hero sat on the far side of the sofa sitting at the left side of the house, while Magdalene relaxed at the other side, near the black door. When Magdalene noticed his hesitation, she smiled at him.

"Jonah, why are you seated so far?"

Our hero eyed the empty space on the sofa, the empty pillow separating him from Magdalene. Our

hero was always so sensitive he had been used to sitting a little far to female friends. Magdalene didn't await an answer, but she edged closer to our hero, wriggling her generous buttocks to fill the empty space on the pillowcase. Clasp her left hand behind Jonah's waist, she looked up and leaned on him. Jonah felt the little man between his legs develop muscle. He gulped from the heart and decided to send his right hand around Magdalene's waist and took in her sweet perfume.

"Room Seventeen?" Magdalene asked. Jonah had forgotten her question.

"It's a story too boring for a beauty like you."

"I have all day."

"I just like the name, okay?"

"I'm curious to know why."

"You're so persuasive you should have been a lawyer. Okay, the truth is, around three years ago, I was living with my cousin in a small estate called Riverside - somewhere off Outer Ring Road between Kariobangi North and Baba Dogo and Mathare North. A neighbour above our house had an interesting Wi-Fi network called Room Seven. When I moved here to Jubilee Estate in Kahawa West, my bedsitter house's doorpost was written 'Room Seventeen'. So when I moved to this one-bedroom, I inherited the name."

"Wow! You are quite the artistic type. And from your Facebook page I understand you began writing your first novel manuscript in the bedsitter."

Jonah smiled and nodded.

Though Jonah was never the girls' guy, Magdalene's visit would change a few of the things he believed in. He would get a clue of someone to refer to as a partner in the near future.

"Jonah, let's make something."

That a girl sat so close to our hero seemed to have robbed him of concentration. The thought of making a meal for his visitor had only clicked in his mind after the visitor herself had spoken of food. Our hero's believed that sharing meals was a good way of making memories.

"I have rice here," Jonah said, momentarily shifting his hand on Magdalene's waist.

"Okay, Jonah. Rice it will be."

"I'm going down to get some stuff. What do we need?"

"Meat, garlic, potatoes, meat, ginger."

He wrote the supplies in a piece of paper. Magdalene's gaze on our hero's hand demanded an explanation.

"I have a short memory span. Call it the memory of a squirrel!"

Magdalene laughed, faking a squint whether Jonah had a memory of a squirrel really. The plan was for our hero to get the items at the nearby shop, while Magdalene cleaned the dishes. Before our hero left the house, Magdalene asked him to pour her some water in the large basin lying near the meko gas. According to Magdalene, getting used to a house manager had made her back too stiff to

bend. Twenty minutes later, Jonah came back with the supplies in a yellow paper bag. He noticed that Magdalene had already set some rice on the meko gas. She was still in the long white t-shirt he had given her to change before leaving for the shop. She had said she needed to change out of her dress.

"I didn't put on either a bra or a panty," Magdalene had told him.

Presently, while the rice boiled on the fire, Magdalene requested Jonah to massage her back. Our hero seemed to think with the bulging head in his trousers. He never questioned his working head why Magdalene wanted him to massage her. Magdalene peeled off the oversized t-shirt and lay on her back on the sofa. Her generous Mount Kenya seemed to be inviting Jonah to a feast.

The next minute, our hero found himself on bed, massaging Magdalene's upper back. I increased the intensity of twitching in Jonah's eye. The twitching had started minutes ago, and Jonah couldn't tell where it really came from. I already know the sight of a naked woman can blind most men, but I wanted to signal to our stupid hero that Magdalene wanted something more than just bony fingers kneading her back. Trying something new is what exported Jonah's hand into the pot between Magdalene's legs.

Our hero stroked the fire with his forefinger. When he kissed Magdalene on the lips, Jonah heard her moan then felt her hand go for the little man struggling for freedom in his pair of coloured shorts. With her hands and mouth, Magdalene performed miracles to Jonah's little man. Jonah sent a willing hand to caress Magdalene's breasts from the other side. When our hero tried to break Magdalene's bread from behind and missed the spot, she guided him with her fingers. Our hero's thrusts and groaning gained momentum with the rising tempo of his twitching eyes. Because I had for six years been preparing Jonah for this experiment, it took him a long while to groan with real pleasure. Jonah's energy seemed to have transported Magdalene to a different world, for her moans punctuated each and every thrust. The twitching stopped when our hero groaned with real pleasure and poured his seed in the garden of Magdalene's farm.

That was the day for the first time in his life Jonah burned food. Recalling the rice cooking on the fire, our naked hero stepped out of the bed and rushed to the kitchen. The rice was really burnt but it was still edible. It seemed like sex had peeled off Jonah's shyness. As Jonah and Magdalene ate in their nakedness all the while snuggled into each other on the sofa, our hero wasn't sure what to feel about the experience. A part of him wished to have a more serious thing with her.

That Tuesday, Jonah started to believe that he had discovered a unique theory, that women enjoyed sex more than men. He was convinced that Magdalene had enjoyed their little experiment more. All he did was only to thrust, and maybe that sense of him satisfying the woman was all it had been for him. That feeling of having accomplished something, of making a woman cry without shedding tears and, if you're lucky, shouting your name.

After the meal, he escorted his woman to the bedroom to change. A simple touch on the shoulders had made Magdalene kneel and guide Jonah's hard little man into her.

After this brief affair, Jonah started fighting some attachment issues.

"Maggie, can you stay for the night?"

"Sorry, I can't. I have work to do."

"Sawa. I would love to see you again."

Jonah kissed her.

I was clapping for our hero, overjoyed how fast he had been able to learn the delicate game of seduction. I knew the obsessive person he was there wasn't any going back.

As I might have earlier said, I had initiated Jonah's twitching to give him more things to live for. Now that he had a possible date to think of, our hero had to live some more. I admired Jonah's courage to pursue a single mother. Not just that, a woman who was almost six years older. Forget Magdalene as a big single mother and her age, but also think of her as a woman in conflict with her own sexuality. I knew Magdalene would help him with his own identity. That maybe Magdalene would help calm Jonah's troubled soul and fulfil the old-age prophecy of the woman behind the man. The little our hero believed in would soon be challenged in ways he had never thought possible. Only memories matter in his troubled world.

Jonah's left eye twitched again a week later. The twitch found our hero wriggling on bed at three hundred hours, the angel of sleep had abandoned him. Instead of wasting time, he sat up, yawned, awoke and walked to the sitting room. His system began with a start when he discovered that the house's main door was ajar. Our hero soon felt the presence of someone else in the house, and, facing the door, he saw Magdalene open the door. He rubbed his eyes, unsure if what he was seeing was a ghost or a real person.

"Maggie, is that you?"

A smile later, Magdalene approached and kissed on the lips the statue Jonah had temporarily transfigured into. After that, she wrapped his stiff body in an embrace, and disengaged slowly.

"Yes, it's me."

"I don't believe you."

"Would you like to see the scars in my palms?" Magdalene spread her hands on either side. Our hero forced a dry laughter to compliment Magdalene's endless river of smiles.

"Then why would you visit so late?"

"It's alright. You need to take a deep breath," she said, then motioned him to the sofa, the sofa in which the two lovers had cuddled last Tuesday. Despite the storm still ranging in Jonah's heart, a part of him thought the Universe had sent Magdalene to help him complete his current manuscript. He made a mental note to fictionalise Magdalene's visit in his book. The truth is, I had persuaded Magdalene to revisit Room Seventeen. That she was a poet I thought would help him.

"Okay, Jonah, you wanted to know how I got here?"

"Yes."

"Around an hour ago, after taking a coffee in my place, my left eye twitched. The coffee inspired my brain in ways I don't know how to explain and the first thing I thought of was coming here."

Magdalene didn't have much time to prepare. She had gently lifted her sleeping daughter from her shoulder and placed the little one on the bed. She would be back by daybreak. Then she had driven to Room Seventeen.

When Jonah at first fell for Magdalene, he couldn't understand what she really saw in him. Magdalene seemed to love the things Jonah had come to hate about himself, but had to live with after all. Maybe it was a good thing our hero had all along maintained a sense of originality in an unkempt beard which Magdalene never seemed tired of caressing. She kept praising his athletic body, which, if she weren't blinded by love, could have noticed was simply thinness. The biggest exercise our hero took part in was walking after every evening of writing. He never really cared for keeping fit, but he wanted to remind himself that the world was bigger than the one he created between pages.

Magdalene lived in a three-bedroom house in the other part of Kahawa West – off Kamiti Road. The morning she visited Room Seventeen, she requested Jonah to accompany her home.

"I don't think that's necessary, Maggie."

"Come on, maybe we could chat more in the car."

"We can talk right now."

"I want to get back before my baby wakes up."

"Okay, and take care of the potholes."

Minutes later, Magdalene's Toyota Wish was slowly driving along Jubilee Drive, trying to avoid the potholes dogging the Drive sandwiched between flats. While the PCEA corner and the road there graduated into the first traces of tarmac joining Church Avenue, Magdalene momentarily stole a glance and smiled at Jonah.

"Jonah, what would you do if I told you you're going to be referred to as Baba Andrew?" Our hero laughed, convinced that Magdalene was simply teasing him. But her voice had carried a note of seriousness with it. Jonah shook his head, imagining the most creative way of incorporating a baby into his novel manuscript. When our hero kept quiet, Magdalene drove on, soon rounding the Kamiti Prison Corner and speeding along Kamiti Road. Branching off the main highway through Kiamumbi Road, the Toyota Wish passed a poster saying Bulawayo Street. Jonah felt Magdalene's neighbourhood sounded interesting. When the car slowed down at Uganda House, our hero threw a glance outside and saw a poster welcoming everyone to Uganda Road. Magdalene soon eased into a large gate she had opened with a remote.

Again, Jonah wandered what kind of a woman Magdalene was. She seemed too well off to associate herself with a broke writer.

"Darling, welcome to Uganda!" Magdalene announced, taking Jonah out of his reverie.

"Thanks. If you had drugged me on the way here I would have thought we are in the land of Museveni."

"Ha-ha-ha! Funny as ever."

"God One!"

"Well, most of the roads and avenues around this upper part of Kiamumbi are named after countries and world cities."

"That sounds lovely."

"Listen, Jonah. I'm in love with you."

Magdalene clearly belonged to a higher class than Jonah. She was as lonely as our hero, and she never spoke of her daughter's father. When Jonah didn't respond, Magdalene carried on.

"I think we belong with each other in many ways. I happen to have researched a bit about you, and I understand you're orphaned and an only child like myself. So I feel my baby would grow up under your perfect fatherhood."

"It seems you discovered stuff we have in common. I have to compliment your research skills."

"I guess I was curious enough to comb through your Facebook and Twitter. I just wanted to know why I felt so at peace with you."

"I guess you know now."

"Yes, and I would like to repeat that we're going to have a second baby, Andrew."

"So you were serious about that baby thing in the car?"

Yes, babe, I'm pregnant for you!" And she slowly passed a palm across her tummy.

Our hero didn't need to feel anything. He had learnt to equate everything.

"Oh shit! I remember last Tuesday I didn't use a condom."

"You don't need to be scared; you're not the one to carry the baby, are you?"

"But how can you know you're pregnant after just a week?"

"Trust me, I know."

"Let's say you're correct. Then what if the baby happens to be female?"

"Then Andrew would still be her name. Besides, don't you think Andrew blends well with your own name?"

The Tuesday Magdalene broke news of Baby Andrew, Jonah's eye twitched. Maybe it was the coffee, but with Magdalene pregnant, Jonah felt in three months he would see his own baby. Sometimes Jonah wondered how the biology of impregnating happened. It was the first time in his life to make a woman retch in the morning, to make a woman develop a craving for cake. He had thought his zero feelings for the daughters of Eve won't allow him to put a woman in the family way.

Magdalene loved women, despite having a daughter. She had been married for three years, but when she realised she never loved her husband, she ditched him and decided to follow her persuasion. The Tuesday she had visited Room Seventeen for the first time she had been stressed. Magdalene had been recovering from a breakup. She had been dating this lovely girl until around a month ago. Magdalene had given her heart to the relationship, and she felt broken when her lover decided to leave her for a man.

After discovering this story, Jonah didn't judge her. Maybe that's something she loved about him.

"Jonah, if I had parents, do you think they would disown me?"

"Why?"

"Because I love differently."

"If I were your father I would love you even more."

"Go on and make me blush."

"Society should accommodate more diversity."

"Spoken like a philosopher!"

"If you say so. I think you already know I neither feel for girls nor boys."

"So I should count myself lucky?"

The two would-be lovers threw their heads back and laughed for a long minute until tears flowed along their cheeks.

Jonah's and Magdalene's was a relationship between two broken people. Jonah at first was surprised how swiftly he had blended into family life. Whenever Magdalene's six-year-old daughter referred to him as dad, he would be shocked but delighted at the same time. Though our hero had decided happiness was never meant for him, he enjoyed the peace of his current life.

With time, Magdalene became Jonah's muse. Our hero wrote more frequently, and she never accused him of ignoring her. Every day, Magdalene could take Jonah around the neighbourhood.

"Let's take a walk," Magdalene told Jonah one Tuesday afternoon.

Despite her bulging stomach, Magdalene seemed to walk faster than Jonah along Uganda Road. At the junction of Uganda Road and Aramati Road, Magdalene bought some sugarcane at a stall. Walking down Aramati Road chewing the sugarcane, the two lovers marvelled at the huge mansions lining the road.

Magdalene held her sugarcane with her right hand, while her free hand clasped Jonah's. They passed Santiago Street, then Quito Street. Next, Rabat Street branched up and down Aramati Road. Jonah and Magdalene soon passed Pretoria Street, and walked along the bushy path called Aramati Close. After rounding the corner at Aramati Thingira, they could see a mass of water at a distance. Our hero felt his heart jump with bliss. Having noticed Jonah's fascination with the water of Kiamumbi Dam, Magdalene tightened her grip on his hand. She feared he could walk straight into the water. Unknown to Jonah, Magdalene had read an excerpt of his manuscript, in which a depressed protagonist drowns in a mass of water.

Three days ago, Magdalene's twitching eye had warned her something would happen. She was sure it couldn't be her baby. While Jonah and Magdalene walked along the dam's banks carpeted with low grass, our hero was imagining his protagonist drowning in the serenity of the water. Though Jonah believed that death was the only way out of the miserable world, he presently felt his body stiffen.

"Maggie, do you think drowning is a peaceful way of dying?"

The wrinkles which had just crept into Magdalene's face signified her shock.

"You mean like Virginia Woolf?"

Magdalene's straight-forward answer told Jonah she must have read his copy of *Mrs Dalloway*.

"Jonah, I read your copy of *The Hours*. Virginia Woolf's suicide note at the beginning was just chilling."

Jonah and Magdalene sat on the grass. The wind could now and then sweep over the lovers' heads to initiate waves on the dam's water. As Jonah stared at the water as if expecting it to give him the power of speech, he felt Magdalene tug at his hand. She gripped his hand so tightly he couldn't think of freeing himself.

"I can't pretend to understand what you or rather your book's main character is going through."

"Where's that coming from?"

"I understand that you write from a familiar point of view."

"What's all this foreplay for? If you were a person in my manuscript, I would kill you for dragging the story too much."

"Ha-ha-ha. You're a sick man. Anyway, I wanted to say I'll always be there for you."

"That's romantic."

Magdalene's intuition amazed him. Our hero knew that Magdalene wasn't aware he had thrown his demons at his own protagonist. He liked the act of taking charge without waiting for some god's last minute. Maybe that's why he had felt so at peace when he had at first spotted the water. Jonah believed that drowning felt like falling asleep. That drowning was the perfect way of dying. If you were brave enough to fill your pockets with stones like Virginia Woolf, then water would close your twitching eyes and take you to eternal sleep.

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