

**2020 KALEMBA**  
**short story prize**  
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## *Junta or Divorce*

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I was naked and locked in a one-roomed house, in the ghetto. A woman I had chased out of my life and sworn never to see again, lay on my bed.

No clubbing and drinking. No more hot, dangerous women who made my life depraved. Especially not the one snoring on the bed. I'd sworn a week ago, but now here I was, rekindling the same fire that burnt me. I sat on the edge of the bed and cupped my head in my hands. What happened last night?

I had vague recollections of a nightclub: Some dense riveting lights, dark throbbing music and transparent plastic cups filled with something bitter, and something sweet. The sweet part, called the mixer versus the bitter part, the notorious junta. Next to me, my "chilepule baby", the hot, dangerous woman. Pamela. How many times had she broken my heart? Apparently, a zillion. How many times had she mended it? Frankly speaking, none. Why had I not divorced her all this time? Junta, or love, or perhaps a mix of the two? Only three possible answers.

I got up, lurched to the corner of the room, and picked up a two-liter container of water. With no cup in sight, I tilted the mouth of the container to mine.

'Coo. Coo. Coo', the water gurgled down my throat. It wasn't thirst. No. A glass of water could easily quench thirst. I was dehydrated. Junta must have turned my mouth and throat into an arid desert. I drank the water until my stomach sagged. Then, I ran my tongue over my teeth and felt the texture of carpet debris.

Where the heck was my toothbrush? My eyes searched the room, not on the windowsill, not in any obvious place. The rats must have dragged it outside, so I rubbed a wet finger against my teeth.

'Screech. Screech.' Passed my tongue across the teeth one more time. Ok. Better than before. After that, I held a hand in front of my mouth, exhaled, and sniffed. Yuck! If I wanted to get rid of mosquitoes once and for all, breathing on them would do the trick. How was it even possible for breath to smell that bad? I looked around for toothpaste but couldn't find it either.

A throbbing headache set in. The filthy one room was devoid of bare essentials: soap, bathing tiles, cups, and Panadol (even ARVs sure)

I took a mouthful of water, swirled it round my mouth, and spat it outside through the ever-open triangular window.

“Ela, mwatufwishila,” snapped a man passing outside my window.

I didn’t say anything, not even sorry. It’s the ghetto and he passed too close to the house. That was his mistake; you don’t go sauntering close to an open window like that in someone else’s territory. One of the rules of the ghetto is when you walk too close, you get spat on or see things you don’t want to behold with your eyes.

The light through the window grew bright enough for me to see even the darkest parts of the room clearly. I cast my eyes over the bed as Pamela rolled onto her back and snorted once. The blanket swept across her chest, and the corner of her lips twitched in her smooth, dark- skinned face. Sleeping beauty? No, Mugabe would argue with that. In fact, if Pamela were a character in *Beauty and the Beast*, she would be the beast. The evidence was all over the room, somebody ought to have taken a picture of it.

High heels, one slung near the dishes, the other on the corner of the bed. Panties in the middle of the room, bra at the foot of the bed, dress under a chair and a wig, flung near the door. Pamela! No woman could be so wild. But my clothes, where were they? I put down the container, bent backwards, and peered down under the bed. There, my ripped jeans lay. Couldn’t remember shoving them down there though, could have been done in a rush whatever happened last night.

I reached under the bed, hooked the trousers with my foot, kicked them into the air, caught them, and, using the chair for balance, I slid them on. I had a fifty on me when I went “Kumalila Ngoma”. I fumbled in all the pockets and fished out a chi K5. That would do for a bottle of junta in the morning. No more going to Black Mountain, there was an avalanche two days ago, which buried ten men ‘ama guys’ to death. R.I.P. Jerabos, lucky I took my day’s

off. I could have been one of them, buried alive under that black heap of soil and rock.

I slid the money back into the pocket. My shirt lay trapped under the pillow where Pamela now rested her head. I tugged on the sleeve, taking care not to wake her. Or else she would follow me to the local tavern. Not enough junta for two I'm afraid. I tugged harder and the shirt came free, sending me staggering backward 'tcha' right into the little bedside stool.

A bottle of junta teetered on the stool's edge, fell onto the sparse concrete floor, and shattered. The crash echoed through the room and through my skull. I held my breath and stood still, but Pamela's eyes remained closed. I put on the creased shirt, eyeing the shattered bottle, the jagged cracked top half of the bottle seemed to glare at me with vampire teeth, saying, *I'm going to devour you. Watch your steps.* I narrowed my eyes, clenched my jaws, and glared back. *Go to hell, Junta. What would I say if Pamela woke up and asked where I was going?*

Last week, I had vowed never to drink again and went a week without junta. Going without it had taken more tears, bottles of milk, loneliness, and many prayers than I cared to count. It had been out of my system. And now this hangover again I had to get rid of it. But first, I needed to sneak out without waking Pamela.

Beyond the shards of glass, the timberland boots stood side by side near the door. If I stepped there and there and there, past Pamela's wig, I could reach the door without shredding my feet.

I took one step. Two steps. Three...

'Ouch!' Stepped on a trailing piece of glass. I hopped on one leg to the door, examined my foot, and saw a streak of blood. *Junta is hitting me back.* The cut was not so bad. I dabbed the blood with a sock and jumped into my Tim boots. Then I opened the door and stepped outside, carefully closing it behind me. I took a deep breath and went off to the tavern.

The music blaring, I sat outside with a bottle of junta on the bench next to a speaker, overlooking the street. The benches on my right were empty, except one on which a man lay on his back, a half-filled container of opaque beer under the bench next to him. *Sobering up with a nap first.*

"Atishani wetata?" somebody called.

I swiveled my head round.

*Oh, no.* Kocha, the *free diver*, approached me with a grin. He was going to dive into my junta, for free. I scowled at him.

"Ela, don't call me wetata. Just call me by my name."

"Er, Ama Jojo, can't just receive my greetings." He sat down on the bench, his eye on the junta. "Ka Boz, zoono. Chalikale."

"Ah, iwe fyonse chalikale. Help yourself." I handed him the bottle and eyed him as he gulped the vile liquor. He handed it back half empty, his face creased.

"Mwalapangapo nakambi?" he said in a muffled voice, rubbing his chest.

"No. Have you given me money to buy another one?" I put the bottle to my mouth and forced myself to gulp down the other half.

"Wetata, don't finish it."

As the junta raced down my throat, I grimaced, passed the bottle to Kocha, and clutched my hand to my chest. Rough and bitter, junta, melting my heart. Ugh!

"Tefintu," I said, rubbing my chest.

"I'll buy one too, Ama Jojo."

Kocha wasn't just diving? Long life to the buyer. Long life to Kocha. *This time, junta will go down my throat like water.* I smirked. "Pangapo wetata. Twisheko, zoono."

"No problem, Ama Jojo," he said, and started singing along the music blaring out of the speaker.

"No woman, no cry . . . No—"

He paused, emptied the bottle, and then added a question. "So, wetata, are you divorcing your wife this year?"

*Divorcing.* I chuckled. The junta had begun its glorious effect already. My chuckles never bubbled out so easily.

"I'll tell you. Just buy the junta."

He chuckled too.

"Ok. Don't worry wetata. I'll be right back."

He went inside and I remained thinking about the divorce. No. I shook my head. I could chase Pamela back to her parents but divorcing her wouldn't be easy. I spread my fingers and started counting.

One. *Because I'll need money to file for a divorce. Even if it were cheap, I'd need to find money to take me into town, where the courts are located. K12 bus fare, there and back. That's two bottles of junta. Plus, mixer.*

Two. . . I stuck on the second finger. A wave of dizziness, a fuzzy sensation, rolled through my mind. I shook my head. Must be junta clearing everything off my mind.

No further reasons. No divorcing Pamela.

*"No woman, No cry..."* the music went on.

I hung my head down and pointed to the sky.

*"No woman. No cry..."*

But Kocha was taking too long. I stood up, staggered to the entrance, and poked my head inside the tavern. No sign of him on the counter. That liar, that diver, he must have used the back exit and ran away, leaving me with a craving. I turned and headed to the street, to my "chilepule baby".

My little redbrick house still looked closed when I approached it. I extended my hand and exerted a little push on the door, couldn't open it. Gave it another push, still hard to open. Must be locked from inside. I knocked. *Never natured the habit of knocking on my own door before.* But my knock seemed to have stirred somebody, or something. There was a noise inside, a sudden loud commotion.

*Big rats fighting.* It struck my mind.

But rats don't make that much noise.

Pamela. In trouble? No!

*"Pamela, are you ok?"* I called out. *"Open the door."*

She could not respond.

*"Pamela."* My voice came out so loud even dead people could hear it. There was no reply. I knocked hard on the door.

First, I heard a groan (of somebody who's just woken up). Then a voice (of somebody who's trying so hard to cry).

*"Darling, you're back."*

Something was wrong. All the junta escaped my mind. And I was too broke to get some more.

*"Open the door."* My heart thumped. Pamela has done it again. Only this time it's worse.

A man in my house?

*"Open the door, Pamela."*

"I'm dressing up." (That's a lie. And a big one too)

Dressing up? I couldn't believe that, so I went around the house to the small triangular window. It was crammed with pieces of clothes, so no one could see what was going on. I shoved the clothes through the window and peered inside. A man stood by the side of the door, buttoning up his shirt, and sweat dripping from his face. Pamela stood facing him, her back to me, with a *chitenge* material wrapped round her chest. The man must have seen me through the window as I obstructed light and cast a shadow. I heard the door click open at once, and by the time I dashed back in front of the house, he had already taken to his heels.

I failed to pursue him. That ripped my heart. I turned and gnashed my teeth. And kicked and kicked. And moaned.

"Why?" I glowered at Pamela as she came out of the house. "Pamela. Why?"

Her response was nerve racking and boggling.

"You didn't leave anything for dinner. What was I supposed to do?" And she looked away.

I bit my lip, and looked around for something, but I couldn't find anything to hurl at her, so I chased after her with my bare hands as she scurried round the house. Apart from Olympic athletes on TV, I never saw a woman run so fast. She dashed into our neighbour's house and shut the door. I came to a halt, bent down, and clutched my chest. Heart attack? Sort of. My heart thudded against my ribs at once. I wailed long with anguish. That must have been the pain people feel when they are about to die.

"Pamela, you have killed me." (Or was it because of junta? Maybe it could account for what happened next.)

What happened next? Pain. A mighty pain rushed down my chest like molten lava. And I started crying.

*Real men shed no tears.*

I forced back my tears, and marched into my house, sobbing. A rancid scent of adultery lingered about the room. I creased my nose and started throwing all of Pamela's personal effects and items including her panties, bras, shoes, bags and clothes outside. But then, when I pulled the beddings off the bed, a wallet fell down onto the floor. Not mine, not Pamela's either. I picked it up, opened it,

and saw a couple of five-kwacha notes. The best thing to do? Keep it until the owner comes back, or take it to the police? No, that's worse than committing adultery. So, I shoveled all the money out of the wallet, crammed it into my back pocket, and hurled the useless thing outside. The pain was suddenly all gone, my head no longer ached. It was as if nothing had happened. It struck me that I was no longer broke, and could use the money to buy enough junta to satisfy my soul, or could I use it to go into town and file for a divorce? I weighed up my options and finally decided to do what would come to mind when I stepped outside.

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## Glossary of Terms

**Atishani:** Hi, hello; how are you.

**Chalikale:** It has been a while.

**Chilepule baby:** A femme fatale, a dangerous woman.

**Ela:** Hey

**Fyonse:** Everything

**Iwe:** You

**Junta:** General term for any strong drink with high percentage of alcohol.

**Ka Bols:** A strong drink with 43% alcohol.

**Kumalila ngoma:** Nightclubs, bars, etc.

**Mwalapangapo:** Will you buy a beer or alcohol.

**Mwatufwishila:** You have spat on me.

**Nakambi:** Another one.

**Pangapo:** Make a round. Buy a beer.

**Tefintu:** Things are not good at all.

**Twisheko:** Let's chat or talk.

**Wetata:** (Male) buddy.

**Zoona:** Sure thing, surreal

