

**2023 KALEMBA**  
**short story prize**  
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## *Animals*

### **Mutale Chisulo**

*Wow, so that's a zoo?* Lulu thought. She wore her *lion-painted cardboard mask* as she watched Children's World on ZNBC. The box-shaped tube TV only displayed in black and white. The kids in the show were visiting a zoo and being educated about the different kinds of animals found there. When they arrived in the reptile enclosure, Awe and wonder beamed from their faces, and gasps escaped their lips.

When a dark brown ball python was shown, her body sank deeper into the worn brown leather sofa as the snake's eyes turned to the camera. Scared and intrigued, she couldn't take her eyes away from the screen. Hypnotized, it coiled back to prepare for a strike, and when it had her for the taking, it attacked-

"Iwe! Iwe! what show is this!" came a deep angry male voice behind her.

She turned her head up to face Uncle Kevin. He was dressed in blue overalls, a grey backpack, and car keys in his left hand; his eyes were red from lack of sleep and were fixed on her. Her heart was thumping fast as his eyes penetrated through her lion mask and into her eyes.

"It-It's chi-children's world," she stuttered. The Kids in the show began laughing, she turned to assure herself they weren't laughing at her. They were laughing at the cameraman, who was composing himself and steadying the camera.

With his free hand, he gestured for the remote impatiently. She grabbed the remote and gave it to him. He shook his head as he began to surf the channels.

"Insoka. Why would you be watching snakes?" He sighed and allowed himself to be calm. "You can't be watching things that scare you Lulu."

She was scratching the torn part of the seat cushion with her forefinger, observing its white cotton, "That's first time it's scary uncle. It-t-ts very fun."

He tried to find something suitable for her to watch but came upon nothing but grown men talking politics and channels that had no signal with rainbow bars. *Children's world*, she wished.

He changed the channel back to ZNBC. She smiled through her mask. The kids made their way to a fossil exhibit, observing animal skulls. She heard his boots moving closer, and he rested himself next to her. She turned to him as he placed the remote, bag, and keys on the arm of the sofa, studied her mask, and angled his body toward her. He stretched his arms around her head to untie the cardboard lion.

"Let's see you," he said. He smelled of toothpaste and morning breath.

He removed it and took his time to look at her scar in the form of a line across her face from forehead to jaw, with a few other small line marks across her face. She remembered her uncle telling her that dogs had a taste of her skin and how when she woke up at Levy Hospital, she couldn't remember the attack. Ever since then, she has been scared of dogs.

He smiled at her, "My Lulu."

*I'm ugly*, she thought. He poked at her belly playfully. "Why do you look so sad on such a beautiful day?" he asked. She giggled at his poking hands, but when he stopped, her frown formed again.

"I think- I think animals are beautiful, but they made me ugly."

"Who said you're ugly?"

*You're thinking it, and so are those kids. You're thinking it!* "Other kids on Tv look beautiful; they not damaged like me, ah!" She told him with irritation in her voice.

"Stop thinking like that, you're beautiful. I don't want that kind of talk. No one said you're ugly but you, tell yourself you're beautiful everyday, okay?"

He lifted her chin up and smiled. "I will," she smiled back.

"You will what?"

"I'll say I'm beautiful."

"No, you aren't."

*I'm not?* She looked baffled. A playful grin came across his face.

"You said--"

"It doesn't matter what I said."

*Ohhh*, she realised. "I'm beautiful uncle Kevin!" She shouted.

He gave a gentle laugh, "That's right, and don't you forget it." He grabbed his bag and keys and gave one last look at her, raising his hand to softly touch her cheek.

"I'll be back tonight. You can make food for yourself; just add water in everything." Uncle Kevin wasn't much of a cook, so the house meals mainly consisted of fruits, boiled, and heated maize, milk, purchased cooked meat, rice, and porridge. Lulu could heat it up on the stove if she needed anything.

"I know," she said.

"And remember..." he tilted his head at her, wanting her to say the rest of the sentence.

"Don't go outside when you're not here." She finished the reminder for him.

Kevin made sure that Lu understood the dangers of other people around the neighborhood. The same neighborhood, he told her, was filled with the dogs that bit her, and the dog's owners never sent them away but let them wander in the streets freely. That always made her sad. The only thing she wanted was to play with the other kids, but she could sense the anger her uncle had towards the neighbors, and she did what he asked.

Thirty minutes after he left the yard with his wreck of a car, the show ended, and the signal went down; it did that sometimes. She eventually got bored of changing channels and turned off the Tv. She opened one of the display cabinets and got out a box of cassette tapes that were bundled together. She searched the box to find a tape labeled, *Various artists*. She opened the radio's tape holder, inserted the tape in, sank the play button, and it came alive with a loud guitar. Unlike all the other tapes, which only had one artist and one style, Lulu

liked the surprise and uniqueness of *various artists*... even though she played it a hundred times, it was just cool and different, like her.

After the dancing had ended, she could barely stand, she lied on the cold tile floor and gave herself a few minutes of rest in the silence of the living room. In that moment, she was happy, she thought of no dogs, the image of her scarred face never came to mind, and the beautiful faces of other children she did not covet. Until she heard the laughter of them playing outside, she could hear their shouting and loud arguing over how others were not passing the ball.

She couldn't do anything about it but stay inside, and Kevin made sure of it. He always thought that someone could have broken in if many people knew that she was staying home alone for a long time. He worked long hours in a factory an hour away from home, leaving late and arriving late. He was never social never liked talking to the neighbors or even saying hello. She nicknamed him "overprotector". He was amused by that.

The Kids in the neighborhood had never seen her face, the dog incident occurred two days after they moved into the new neighborhood before she made any new friends, and the chances of her having to make any were slim with her uncle's orders.

She imagined going outside and playing with the other kids, how she could score all the goals, and how they would all lift her up and proclaim her as the soccer champion. *I'm good at soccer*, she thought, *I can take them all on very easily*. Her hideous face reminded her not to.

"They'll all run away." She got up, made cereal, and took it in by the kitchen counter. Her uncle promised to buy bread every time, but he always forgot. "I'll buy it tomorrow," he would say, and the next day he would return with bananas and heated corn he bought from street vendors. Lulu didn't mind; she knew how tiresome her uncle's work was.

The cereal was cold and crunchy, so she poured some sugar. *Perfect*, after sugar came the sweetness, and she took it in faster. She forgot all about the other kids and enjoyed her happy meal.

"Bola!" a voice came from outside the house. She just minded her serial and how sweet it was. "Ba neighbor Bola!" the shouting

continued, with other young voices joining in. Bola! Ba neighbor Bola! Bola! Bola! Hello Ba neighbor, Ba neighbor Bola!

Curious about the voices, she left her serial to investigate the callers and went into the living room on her hands and feet like a ninja, put on her lion mask, and made sure the walls concealed her as she headed for the windows. She pinched the edge of the curtain and took a peek outside.

Five kids outside the wire fence were looking into the yard. "Ba neighbor!" a young boy without a shirt called out. They wanted the ball made of plastics and rubber bands that was in the yard of unkempt grass.

One might assume that they could have easily jumped in, got the ball, and ran away, but Kevin told Lu about how he was less known by many in the neighborhood to be thought of as rude. "They can let their dogs roam free, harm my niece, not apologise and think they can still talk to me?" he would say. "No way, my Lulu, we don't talk to bullies. They are the ones who're rude."

But as she leaned against the wall and heard them outside making jokes and just being playful, wondering whether they should jump into the yard or not, she just wanted to join them. "What if he's watching us?" One kid asked. "You heard my brother; the man will catch us and sell us when we enter."

*Sell them? Uncle Kevin?* She thought. The kids went on about monsters in the house. How the monster sees everything from inside the house. *Do they mean me?* They kept on calling, and she started to panic. Uncle! Give us the ball, uncle! Bola, Bola uncle! She wanted to obey her uncle's strict orders to stay inside, to ignore the calls to danger-No-adventure. She desperately wanted to play; if she gave them the ball, they would invite her to play. *Wow, to play with other kids. There is no way I'm staying inside this house!* She made up her mind. They came to her; this was her only chance that she'll never get again.

She headed for the kitchen, and her hand dug beneath a fruit bowl by the kitchen counter filled with bananas and oranges, and up came some chrome-colored keys. They were spare keys that Kevin left just in

case of an emergency. *This was an emergency. I'll show them that I'm not a monster, I'll show them!* She thought.

In excitement, she put on her flip-flops and rushed to the front door.

"He's coming out," she heard one of them say. Excitement couldn't describe what she was feeling. She unlocked the door..... Stopped before she opened it. She imagined them running away when they would see her real face. How they would send the dogs after her. The ugly scar, the ugly face. *I won't show them my real face. They'll only see the beautiful lion.*

She finally opened the door. The kids went quiet as their eyes landed on Lulu's. She stayed by the door, hand on the handle. "What's that on her face?" Said the shirtless boy, laughing as he said it. The other four were a girl with a skipping rope, two dirt-covered boys riding a mini broken-down electric car with only three tires, and another boy with a rubber slingshot.

"Can we have our ball back?" asked slingshot. "It's right by your door." Lulu left the door handle and stepped outside. She surveyed the area and saw the street populated with kids who played hopscotch and flew kites made of Shoprite plastics and thin wooden sticks. *Wow.*

"What's your name?" asked the girl with the jumping rope. "My name is Samantha."

"I'm Lulu," she said. She bent down and grabbed the ball with both hands. "There are no monsters here."

"My brother said there was," said the shirtless boy.

"There isn't," She demanded.

"Come and play with us - what's that on your face?" asked Samantha. The two boys in the mini car left off to play.

"It's just a mask."

"Why're you wearing a mask?" asked the shirtless boy.

"Why aren't you wearing one, ah!"

"Twe Chanda, stop bothering her," Samantha told the shirtless boy.  
"Are you coming Lulu?"

"Yes," she said excitedly, walking to the gate and handing the ball to Chanda.

"You know how to skip ropu?" Samantha asked. "I can skip betta than anyone."

"Can you show me?" Lulu asked as they all headed down the street. Not realizing that she had left the front door open.

#

The township street was untarred, a gravel road. When cars passed by, the kids would move aside, and before the dust settled, they would return to their fun. Women washed their clothes in colorful large dishes, houses in construction were attended to by men without shirts, and garden boys tended to their owner's yards.

Lu had never imagined seeing so many people, not even her imagination gave it justice. In that moment, she never wanted to go back to her house, she wanted to play with her new friends forever. *Why did you hide me from this Uncle Kevin?* She thought as Samantha and her played tag with other new girls, she met.

She wanted to stay and hear the loud laughter of the other kids, she wanted to see their faces more and more, to play, to laugh... But the sun was setting. A big-boned woman with short, plaited hair stood by an electric gate of a house as she called for Samantha.

"I'll be theya just nowu, mommy!" Samantha shouted. She was still teaching Lulu the right way to skip rope. The rope always hit Lulu's front legs, and she never managed to skip. They kept going until the big-boned woman was suddenly by them, took the rope with a hard hand from Lulu that the masked girl moved back in fear. That feeling of fear hit her as if familiar.

"S-s-so-sorry, I'll be-behave," She stuttered.

The woman gave her a quizzical look and turned to Samantha.  
"When I say come home you come home."

"I just wanted to play with my new friend Lulu."



The woman studied Lulu up and down... and relaxed her shoulders as if noticing how afraid Lulu was. "That is a beautiful mask."

"Th-thank you," she replied, still a bit frightened.

"I'm sorry I scared you, don't be afraid ayi?" she gave Lulu a soft pat on her shoulders and turned back to Samantha. "It's just that this one doesn't listen." The soft pats made Lulu uncomfortable, she didn't know why. *She's just an angry mom, don't be afraid.* She thought. *I've seen angry moms on TV before; they care.*

"Lulu is fun mommy; she must come and play with me at our house."

"Where do you stay Lulu?" asked Mom.

*If she comes over, uncle will know that I left the house?* "I live around here."

"She lives over by that house," Samantha said, pointing at Lulu's house. *Yaba!!* Lulu regretted that.

"Oh, so you were the new neighbors who came. Can Samantha come over and play with you tomorrow?"

"Of ..."

... *Course*, she almost finished until Chanda came from behind her and snapped off the mask from her face. "I want to see!" He demanded, and boy did he see, did everyone see.

"Iyeeeeee," whispered the mother. She let her hands hold her mouth then.

*No. Oh no, no, no,* Lulu began to panic. Samantha stepped behind her mother, a bit startled at the sudden reveal. The mother's eyes stayed on Lulu, focused on the scars; she turned to Chanda, who looked disgusted, with the mask still in his hand. She snatched the mask away from him and offered it back to Lu. A kind gesture, Lulu stepped closer to her, received the folded and wrinkled mask, and ran off to her house.

*They saw me, they all saw me.* She entered the yard and into the house, grasping for breath. *They saw me. I'm ugly. I knew it, I knew it!* She

got through the gate, entered the yard, and into the house she realised had been left open.

She locked and leaned against the door, allowing herself to drop to the cold tiles. Her hands crumpled the mask into a small ball. She began to cry, her voice a silent hoarse, not wanting the house to hear. *Everyone knows*. She thought.

When the tears dried, her eyes were clear to see that the Tv was gone.

#

The dark night came so suddenly upon her that she couldn't even hear her uncle's car arriving in the front yard. She was sleeping on her bedroom floor, which sometimes felt better than a mattress. When she heard the gate slam shut, the fear in her began to rise. *It's just a tv*, she assured herself.

That gave her strength, and she went and stood by the bedroom doorway, eyes on the front door straight ahead as it unlocked. He entered with a backpack and keys in hand, a gospel song on his lips. He had a smile on his face so wide you could say that his day went well. His mud-stained boots came off on the worn-out mat as he shut the door.

"Lulu," he sang. Turned around, and his eyes met hers. "Come here," he said. His arms opening for a hug as he said it. Not realizing the empty space of the display where the TV used to be. She stepped forward in small steps, that he realised something was wrong.

"What's wrong?" He asked when she came and stood by him. She couldn't say anything. He looked around as if wanting to see if someone else was there, and that's when he noticed the Tv that was usually on when he arrived wasn't there anymore. "Eh-Eh," he muttered. He knelt down to inspect for wounds. "Did someone hurt you? What happened here, Lu?" he asked worriedly, his work stench stinging her nose.

She began to cry. "I'm sorry Uncle Kevin, I didn't mean to do it I just wanted to play with the others".

A questioning look came across his face... He stopped the inspection and stood up in his own time. His eyes never leaving hers. "You left the house when I told you not to?"

"The kids with the ball, and then I came and the tv wasn't here," she said, losing herself trying to explain. "I went into the phone book and called the..."

She never even finished the sentence when the sirens were heard. He went and peeped outside the window to observe the police car. He turned back to Lulu and studied her face, seeking the answers within her eyes, and the answer was given by the tears that began to fall down her cheeks.

"If you start crying it will be worse for you trust me," he warned her. "Go to your room."

In that moment, she never saw the fun Uncle Kevin she knew; she saw something else. When she stood there and silently stared at him in disbelief, he firmly held her arm and dragged her into the bedroom. He thrust her onto the bedroom floor and left the room without haste.

The fast kiss with the floor and his hard grip snatched a *memory* of how he undressed and touched her where it felt weird. She tried to refuse him once upon a time, she knew it was wrong but didn't know why; she just knew it hurt. He was drinking a nasty-smelling drink, its glass container broke on her face, the tiny pieces remaining on her. She was crying, crawling, he couldn't hear, the drink was strong, he held her hair with a hard grip, so firm he dragged her by it, lifted her small, frail body, and let the corner of the wall meet her face that she passed out.

*It hurts*, she thought. Her hand traced the line of the scar across her face. It all made sense then, being alone, staying in the house for days, not having any friends, being ugly to look at it all made sense to her then. There were no dogs, after all; she knew animals were beautiful.... It was all Uncle Kevin. Her fun and loving uncle. *What did I ever do to him? Why does he hate me so much? Did he hurt me by accident? Am I remembering well?*

The police came with a hard hand on the door, thinking everyone was asleep. She heard him wait until the second time they knocked,

until he opened the door. She forced herself to get up and peek by the bedroom doorway. He opened the front door halfway so they wouldn't peek inside the house. "Good evening, my name is Officer Brie, and my partner here is Officer David," said a female voice.

"Okay," Kevin said, very uninterested.

"You live alone here sir?"

"How can I help you?" he asked firmly.

"By answering our questions, you answer, and we'll be on our way." The female did the talking.

"Can I answer your questions in the morning? It's late, and I just arrived," he said. His hand on the door, making sure the officers didn't see the inside of the house.

"Sir do you live alone here?" She asked again.

"I live with my niece."

"May we see her please?"

"I think she's sleeping I don't want to wake her up-Listen, she called you?"

"No, another woman did, she said there was something *unusual* happening by your residence and as a good neighbor she reported it for your well-being that is all."

"Well, we're fine here."

"Sir it's urgent, your niece didn't do anything illegal if that's what you're worried about, we just need to see her, that's -"

"Lu!" he burst. "Come here." She was shivering, but she went to him, she did. By the way, he eyed her, he looked regretful, bursting out loud like that. Lulu walked to the door with bare feet on the cold tiles and her head down. Before he revealed her to them-"She fell down a bike and onto a sharp rock in another neighborhood where we came from, so she has bruises," he said.

*What should I say?*

When the officers saw her, they couldn't take their eyes off her. They didn't look shocked, as if they had seen this before. Officer Brie

and David had on their khaki uniforms. Brie bent down to Lulu's eye level and lifted her chin up. Lulu wanted to cry, but she held back her tears; Brie smiled as if to reassure her. "Do you feel safe he-"

"Hey, don't ask her that, what are you doing?" he demanded in anger as he pulled her back into the house. That firm grip again, she touched her scar.

*He could have hurt me by accident.*

"Sir, I want to talk to the girl."

"No. You're asking her if she's feeling safe, she's safe, what is this, what do you people want?" he asked.

*He protects me. He wouldn't hurt me.* The scar gave a sharp sting, and she lightly touched her face. She remembered his red eyes the day he slammed her face against the wall with glass bottles still on her face.

Brie patted the air with her hands, signaling for him to calm down, "I need you to allow me to speak to the girl."

"No, my niece and I were having a great night and you come here asking if she's alright as if-"

"It hurts," Lu said in a loud whisper. Not realizing she said it out loud. She looked at the officers, then at her uncle. *I'll be good, uncle*, she thought to herself.

"What hurts Lu?" Brie asked again.

"Imwe! My niece -"

"The dogs bit me, uncle said so; that's why I'm ugly," She said, rubbing her eyes as she looked up at her uncle. "Ayi Uncle? It's true the dogs bit me and made me ugly ayi?"

"Mr. Kevin, is it dogs or a bike she fell off it's not making sense."

Kevin looked angry. *Don't make him angry. He does things when he's angry, I remember.*

"All this can be solved if I can talk to the girl alone for a few seconds. That's all," She reassured. By then, the neighborhood was coming out to see what was happening.

Kevin shook his head and held her tighter by her arm. She felt unease.

“She has nothing to say, sorry if we worried our neighbors but we’re...”

She freed herself from his grasp. The officers noticed.

Brie sighed a tired sigh. She dropped her head to face Lulu. “You know, Lulu, I have a little girl just like you back home. She tells me when she’s sad when she’s happy ... and when she’s afraid. Are you afraid, Lulu?”

*He’ll hit me if I say anything wrong. He doesn’t like me saying the wrong things. But it hurts.*

“Baby it’s alright, it’s alright look at me,” Brie reassured her with a smile.

Lulu turned to her uncle, his eyes yelling for her not to say anything, she turned back to Brie, whose eyes bloomed with hope.

“It’s okay baby,” Brie reassured again.

*I want-I want- I don’t want to stay here; uncle beats me. He beats me. He beats me. It hurts.*

“He hurts,” Lulu finally cried. “He hurts. He hurts me, and I don’t know why!” she cried. She looked up at her uncle. “Why do you hate me, uncle?” mucus sliding into her mouth. “You beat me, and I don’t know why!”

“This is shit. Keep her it’s fine,” Uncle Kevin told them. David made himself the blockade between the girls and Kevin. “All of you!” Kevin informed the neighborhood. “I never touched that girl!”

She heard how he shouted his innocence and pointed at David to stand back away from him. David never did a thing, like a statue, he never moved until Kevin kept poking him and slapped him once in aggression.

His poking fingers were met with arms from David, who dragged him outside the house and pinned him to the ground. Kevin struggled but did not prevail. Lulu began to cry her eyes out, unable to contain

her tears. Brie lifted her and took her to the car as her cry echoed throughout the neighborhood.

