



KENYA: Lucy the manager

“Wewe!” (you!), she yells out to a tousle-haired girl. “Kuja hapa sasa!” (come here, right now!). Her voice is sharp and loud; her Kiswahili commands can be heard 100 metres down the street, let alone a few paces away, where her young daughter plays in the dirt. The dusty girl jumps up and runs to her mother, a silhouette in the doorway of the café, looking out for her evening customers.

Lucy is dedicated to Blue Kuku Café. Ever since that first day, when she was given the chance to run it as her own small business – cooking and providing local foods for impoverished people - she recognised instinctively that success or failure of the venture was her sole responsibility. Put simply, it was imperative she make it work for the sake of her ten-year-old children: twin siblings whom she has nurtured and struggled to raise and educate, ever since those days when she herself was in secondary school. As a result, she now puts every ounce of heart, soul and devoted muscle power into this daunting task.



Lucy and her twins in 2018

Lucy is also dedicated to God, and though not a Muslim, “InshaAllah” (God willing) are the words that often pass by her lips. But in some ways her work in the café also conflicts with Godly pursuits, because the long hours required to run the business, dictate that she spends much less time singing, dancing and generally worshipping her saviour, in a nearby church: something she loves with a passion to do.

The Blue Kuku manager, a vivacious and outgoing young lady, now in her late twenties, is an orphan. Her parents died together in a horrific road accident when Lucy was just seven years old. She was an only child, following the death of her elder brother, then a baby boy, a few years before. After the tragic accident she was taken away from her sleepy village on the shores of Lake Victoria, to live with her father’s brother in the coastal city of Mombasa, a whole day and night’s bus ride from the family home.

This was a massive change for the young girl: to lose both parents, as well as the village home she had known since she was born, only for this to be replaced by a new home and new people in a busy city, on the other side of the country. What does she remember of those momentous days, more than twenty years before, which shaped her new life?

“My parents were travelling to Nairobi by bus when the accident happened,” she recalls. “You know how roads are in Kenya: it happens all the time. They were taken to hospital and after two days my mum died. My dad was so upset he refused to stay in hospital and came back to the village, where, after five more days he also passed away.”

“I was beside the bed when my father died. I was very sad; he had bad injuries to his neck and his legs. I threw soil on his coffin. Many people came to the funeral, because I think he was a very good man who loved his wife ...and he loved me too ... very much.”

With tears in her eyes she continues: *“I often remember when they were alive. My mum had a shop in the village and my dad was a high school teacher. He taught English and Maths. We used to attend church every Sunday, usually the first service, which was in English.”*

Most people in the rural areas of Kenya are deeply religious and for the Luo tribe, in the far West of Kenya that religion is largely Christian. Because her parents were Jehovah Witness devotees, they were monogamous, unlike some other families in the same region, where polygamy was still quite common, even at that time towards the latter end of the Twentieth Century. In a way, polygamy might have been good for her, because she would have had a second or third wife to turn to, but in her circumstance, there was no one nearby to take that responsibility.

The one who did come forward to accept the task was an older brother of Lucy's father: a mid-ranking civil servant, who though disabled and wheelchair bound, was reasonably well off. This newfound step-dad was an affable figure - a lover of movies and music who was kind and accommodating to his brother's only daughter - but the same could not be said of the man's wife and her son (his step-son) who were both jealous of this interloper from the village: this seven-year-old child who had come to disturb their peaceful existence in Mombasa.

The new father was loving and generous, buying Lucy clothes and gifts on a regular basis, which only served to fan the flames of hatred from his wife (and in turn from her son) towards the young girl. She was a pretty and petite seven-year-old and her step-dad identified with the grief she must have been going through in losing her parents, yet the others in the house were not at all interested in such aspects; they could only think of themselves and how best to make life difficult for this young child who had landed in their midst.

The young girl quickly decided to escape from this bitter-sweet existence and ran away to a favourite aunt who also lived in Mombasa, in fact within walking distance of the stepfather's place. This of course could not last long and soon the step-dad had reclaimed his new daughter, telling his wife and her son: *"If Lucy can't stay in my house, then you will both have to go."* To which the wife retorted, *"Why do you buy school shoes and presents for Lucy, yet you don't buy for my son. It's not fair."*

It was not a happy home, but Lucy continued to stay there when her step-dad was around, then when he travelled away for work, she would go to stay with her nearby

aunt. But even when the dad was working locally it was not easy. He worked long hours in the Mombasa office during the day and during his absence, from early morning to evening, Lucy would be told to clean the house and cook her own food, before and after school. This was when she was still only eight or nine years old.

At a later stage Lucy was sent to live with another aunt, back in the West of Kenya, on the other side of the country. The lady was a stereotypically tough matron of a boarding school, looming large over the young girl and physically abusing her. It turned out to be even worse than her home in Mombasa. She had to clean and cook, was bullied relentlessly and even whipped with a leather belt. Then one day one of her friends said to her: *“Why do you continue to stay there, when you are treated like a slave by that horrible woman?”*

The next time the leather belt came out, Lucy screamed at her tormentor: *“Today is the last day you will ever try to whip me with that belt.”* On that same day she left the house and walked for three hours back to her grandmother’s home in the village she had left seven years before, after her parents died. By then she was 14 years old.

Back at home, with her grandmother, Lucy was happy for a while and had progressed to the second year in high school. Then disaster struck once again, for on her first flirtation with sex and as a virgin, she was made pregnant by the neighbour’s son, who was in his final year of secondary school and three years older than she was. To compound the problem of becoming a mother whilst in her mid-teens and still at school, it turned out that she was to give birth to twins. Once the facts were known, she was packed off yet again, to live with her step-dad, who had by then been promoted and had moved to Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya.

Now, the stepmother really had an axe to grind. *“You see,”* she said to her husband, as he sat in his wheelchair, considering the issue of Lucy and her new predicament, *“Your dear little girl couldn’t keep the boys away from her pussy, could she? Now look at her. With her swollen belly is she still such a sweet young child?”*

But the lady’s husband was not for turning. He was a good man whom Lucy had always respected. He had introduced the Jehovah Witness faith to her extended

family and was perhaps the main reason for the young girl's religious fervour. The man recognised his stepdaughter's mistake but refused to condemn her. He stuck by her, knowing full well that mistakes can and often do happen: she was not the first, neither would she be the last female to fall into this trap. He took her back into his fold to care for her during pregnancy and reiterated to his wife, *"If you don't want to live with Lucy and help her through this difficult time, then you and your son will have to go from my house."*

A few months later Lucy went into labour in a Nairobi hospital, with her stepfather by her side. She gave birth to healthy twins: her daughter she named Darren and her son she called Keith. At the time of their birth she was just 17 years old.

So how did our young café manager cope with the burden of motherhood at such a young age? Well, it was by no means easy: it is hard to imagine dealing with one baby in those circumstances, let alone two.

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TO BE CONTINUED In the second part of this story - *Lucy the manager* - we will find out what happened to our young lady between the birth of her twins and her arrival at the Blue Kuku Café, some ten years later.