

Life As a Game

An excerpt from

Life As A Game

An Original Screenplay by Alex N. Nderitu
www.AlexanderNderitu.com

FADE IN ON

EXT. KIBERA SLUMS – NAIROBI. AFTERNOON.

THE ENTIRE SLUM

The unintended by-product of rapid rural-urban migration and one of the largest ghettos in all of Africa. Makeshift mud, wood and tin houses huddle perilously close together in a crescent-shaped valley.

EXT. KIBERA SLUMS. AFTERNOON.

A MUNICIPAL FIELD NEAR THE SLUM

The field is no Wembley Stadium – it's an oblong grassy patch where the ghetto kids come out to play. The grass has been worn out in parts by running feet and the passage of cattle (There are actually a couple of cows grazing at the far side of the pitch!). On the near side is a sign with fading, peeling paint. On it, the words 'Property of the Nairobi City Council' arch over the Council's green-and-yellow coat of arms.

A gang of about fifteen boys plays soccer in the middle of the 'football field'. They vary in age from six to eighteen and the game they're playing has 'makeshift' written all over it – the goals are defined by tall sticks stuck into the ground, the ball is made of papers pressed together and bound by nylon strings (Not a particularly bad thing since none of the boys is wearing shoes – footwear is precious and is carefully removed before playing football or racing) and the players flagrantly flout the rules of organized soccer (The two sides are not evenly matched, there's a lot of pushing and pulling, shouting and so on). Nonetheless the boys are having a blast. They zip to and fro kicking the ball; they dribble, tackle, strike, score. THEY'RE ACTUALLY QUITE GOOD AT IT.

The dust rises in clouds.

A player puts the ball past the goalkeeper and celebrates by leaping into the air and completing a somersault.

A speeding player sprawls onto the ground after being tripped by an opponent. He wakes up in a rage and nearly starts a fight with his nemesis.

Two of the older boys jostle for the ball. They are tagging at each other's clothes and laughing as they compete for superiority. Their feet stomp the ball such that it loses shape. They stop tussling. One of them picks up the ball, pats it into shape and re-introduces it to the game.

An athletic, short-haired, eighteen year-old boy gains the ball and starts towards the opposition's goal. This is Tom "Bazooka". He impressively tackles an opponent but soon finds himself cornered by two more. As he looks for an opening, a teammate rockets past him.

TEAMMATE

Bazooka! Bazooka!

Bazooka passes the ball to the runner. The two opponents now turn and chase him. As he reaches the goal area, he finds himself cornered. He kicks the ball back to Bazooka who blocks it with his chest and bounces it off his knee before delivering a powerful kick that sends it on a trajectory towards the goal.

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THE BALL

It soars through the air like a canon ball. Its long trajectory ends in

A MASSIVE BOMB EXPLOSION

PULL BACK TO REVEAL THAT WE ARE NOW IN

INT. VIDEO SHACK. KIBERA SLUMS. EVENING.

THE VIDEO SCREEN

An action-packed movie is playing. Bomb explosions, trigger-happy soldiers, speeding army jeeps, the whole kit and caboodle.

THE AUDIENCE

It's so dark you can't make out any particular person. DARK SHAPES keep their eyes glued to the screen. Light from the screen flickers over their faces. The sounds of war are audible – the chatter of a machine gun, a jeep revving up, an army officer barking orders.

A KNOCK

One of the dark shapes – this one belonging to the VIDEO OPERATOR – opens the door a crack. Bazooka peeps in.

BAZOOKA

Is G3 there?

VIDEO OPERATOR

(Shouting into the gloom)

G3! You're wanted outside!

A dark shape from somewhere at the front rises and heads for the exit.

EXT. VIDEO SHACK. KIBERA SLUMS. EVENING.

Bazooka and two of the players we saw playing ball earlier have assembled outside the video shack which turns out to be a wooden room somewhere in the ghetto. Next to the door is a blackboard on which the titles of currently showing movies have been chalked up: FACE/OFF, LORD OF WAR, DIE ANOTHER DAY, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE etc. It's not hard to see where the ghetto kids get nicknames like "G3" and "Bazooka" from. At the top of the blackboard are words: 'LATEST ACTION MOVIES - 5/= EACH'

CHRIS aka "G3" -18, short dreadlocks – emerges from the screening room.

G3

Yo, whazzup?

BAZOOKA

You didn't come to play ball today.

G3

Yeah, I decided to just watch movies. This is the third movie I'm watching today.

BAZOOKA

Checkit. We wanted you to show us that new place you told us about.

G3

Can't we go tomorrow?

(Conspiratorially)

They're about to start showing the pornos.

BAZOOKA

You and your porno movies! Don't you ever get tired of watching the same things over and over again?

G3

Tell you what. I'll take you as long as you're buying.

BAZOOKA

Fine. Let's go.

G3 leads them through the labyrinthine paths of the ghetto. Bazooka is dangling the homemade ball they were playing with earlier as if it were a vanquished foe's head. They arrive at a house with a door wide open but a translucent net across the doorway for privacy.

It's a den where *chang'aa* – an illicit brew – is prepared and sold.

INT. NEW CHANG'AA DEN.

The boys enter.

The place looks like a livingroom because that's what it is – somebody's livingroom. There is a well-worn sofa set around a low table. A small radio broadcasts in Swahili. An OLD MAN in a threadbare suit and hat sits in one of the chairs, intoxicated. Sitting opposite him, listening to the radio, is the CHANG'AA SELLER, a slatternly middle-aged woman. She rises to invite the boys in.

CHANG'AA SELLER

Karibuni, vijana (Welcome, boys)

The boys seat themselves.

G3

Unauzaje hiki kinywaji chako? (How much are you selling your drink?)

CHANG'AA SELLER

Shilingi tano kama kawaida (Five shillings as usual)

G3

Lakini ulianza hii kazi majuzi kwa hivo hatujui kama unielewa ama niaje. (But you just joined this business recently so we don't know if you're good at

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it or what.)

BAZOOKA

Tupatie ya kuonja kwanza. Ikiwa ni nzuri tutanunuwa sote.
(Give us a sample, first. If it's good, we'll all buy)

CHANG'AA SELLER

Sawa (Ok)

She produces a tiny glass and pours a water-like liquid from a jerry can into it. She hands it to Bazooka.

Bazooka downs the drink in one gulp and a very interesting thing happens: First, he contorts his face as if he just took strong medicine and then he wags his tongue as if it's on fire and then he closes his eyes and shakes his head as if to get rid of imaginary cobwebs. After the drama, he opens his eyes, faces his drinking buddies and delivers his verdict:

BAZOOKA

It's good!

A burst of activity as the boys satisfactorily make their orders. The CHANG'AA SELLER produces more glasses and starts to minister to the new customers.

EXT. NEW CHANG'AA DEN. NIGHT.

Bazooka and company emerge from the shebeen, drunk and disorderly. They laugh and shout as they stagger towards their homes.

They come across MARION - a tall, sexy, 21-year-old girl in a short sleeveless dress and stiletto heels. She's wearing make up and slinging a handbag. She looks out of place in the ghetto.

G3

Look, Bazooka! It's your sister!

BAZOOKA

For the hundredth time, she's my *half*-sister.

The gang lets out a few cat-calls. Marion snobbishly ignores them and continues on her way.

G3

(Calling after her)

Hey, Marion! Off to work?

The gang laughs suggestively.

G3 (CONT'D)

How come you only work at night? The only women who work at night are nurses, cops and...

BAZOOKA

Hey, G3 why don't you shut up and leave her alone?

G3

I thought you said she wasn't your sister.

BAZOOKA

Just leave her alone, okay?

G3

You know where she goes at night, don't you? Let me put it in rhyme. Er...er... 'I have a friend called *Bazooka* and his sister is a *hooker*...'

In an instant, Bazooka has him by the shirtfront. He backs him up against a wall as the others jump in to pry them apart. The TEAMMATE Bazooka passed the ball to earlier that day manages to drag Bazooka away from his adversary.

TEAMMATE

He's drunk!...Just leave him alone...Just leave him

Bazooka shakes himself loose, glares at G3 who is being held back by the rest of the gang and saunters away.

EXT. BAZOOKA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

Like the chang'aa den, it's a small wooden structure lost in the anonymity of the slum. It has a blue door with peeling paint and the number 9 scrawled on it.

Still fuming, Bazooka opens the door.

INT. BAZOOKA'S HOUSE. NIGHT.

The house is actually one big room partitioned using bed sheets. SAM, Bazooka's 6-year-old half-brother, sits in the livingroom area watching a small black-and-white TV set. In a corner of the room, Bazooka's mother, MAMA TOM, cooks *githeri* (traditional meal composed of maize and beans) on a paraffin stove.

Bazooka enters.

Sam loses all interest in the TV. He runs to his brother who scoops him up as if he were the father.

BAZOOKA

Yo! What's up, my man! What are you doing?

SAM

Watching TV

BAZOOKA

Ok, let's watch it together.

He flops into a sofa with Sam sitting on his lap, arms round his neck.

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MAMA TOM

Tom, hebu chukua huu mtungi uchote maji. (Tom, grab this container and fetch water.)

Tom dislodges Sam and goes to the kitchen area but as he picks up the empty container...

MAMA TOM (CONT'D)

Hiyo ni pombe unanuka? Si afadhali ungenunua kitu cha maana na hizo pesa? Nafikiri hiyo kito imedhuru akili yako! (Is that alcohol you're reeking? Should have spent that money on something Important? I think that stuff has messed up your brain!

Tom carries the several-gallon plastic container out of the house and returns a few beats later lugging it with both hands, water swishing inside.

INT. BAZOOKA'S HOUSE. LATER THAT NIGHT.

Bazooka, his mother and baby bother sit around the livingroom table, eating *githeri* while the TV runs in the background, nobody watching.

EXT. HORIZON. DAWN.

An enormous blood-orange sun rising.

A cock crows.

EXT. KIBERA SLUMS. MORNING

LONG SHOT OF THE SLUM

It looks as if the slum is burning. Multiple trails of smoke snake their way into the sky from the collage of tin roofs that comprises the ghetto.

EXT. KIBERA SLUMS. MORNING

CLOSER SHOT

We now see that the smoke trails are coming from the countless wood and charcoal fires that have been lit not just inside homes but along the narrow pathways of the ghetto. Some women are frying *mandazi* (buns), fish, ground and chips. Others are preparing tea and *uji* (porridge). These are then sold to passers-by, especially the armies of young men trooping towards the Industrial Area a few kilometers away. They hope to find manual jobs among the myriad factories there.

A few drunkards stagger home or lie on the filthy ground like broken dolls.

INT. BAZOOKA'S HOUSE. MORNING.

BAZOOKA

He is lying in a bed without a duvet. He stirs to wakefulness and slowly struggles out of bed. He's not excited about the prospect of another day in the ghetto. He steps over SAM who is lying on a

mattress on the floor because he sometimes wets his bed. Indeed he has already done so this day.

KITCHEN AREA

Bazooka laboriously lights the paraffin stove. It initially gives off black smoke but later clears up. Bazooka pours some of the water he fetched the previous night into a 'sufuria' (saucepan) and places it on the stove. He opens a lone cupboard, grabs a Tetrapak of milk and adds it to the water. He removes a pack of tealeaves from the cupboard and pours some into a sieve which he then places on the mouth of a tea pot. He retrieves the now-boiling water and cascades it through the sieve and into the pot. He pours some into a metal cup and adds sugar. From the cupboard, he removes half a sliced bread loaf. He takes two slices and starts settles down on the sofa to enjoy them with his tea.

Marion enters, sans makeup but still wearing the sexy outfit from the previous night. Bazooka watches her like a hawk.

MARION
Sasa? (How are you?)

BAZOOKA
Poa (Cool)

MARION
Man, I'm beat! I just want to collapse.

(A beat)

Why are you looking at me as if I'm a stranger?

BAZOOKA
Marion, where do you go at night?

MARION
To work, where else?

BAZOOKA
Yes, but *where*?

MARION
I am a waitress, okay?

BAZOOKA
Where do you waitress?

MARION
Why are you interrogating me? Kwani wewe ni CID?
(Why are you interrogating me? Are you a CID officer?)

BAZOOKA
It's just that there have been rumours –

MARION

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Should you be worried about rumours or should you be worried about getting a job? What are you doing sitting here when the other guys are looking for work in Industrial Area? I am the one who bought that tea and that bread you're taking so you better treat me with more respect!

Mama Tom emerges from her partition wearing a nightdress.

MAMA TOM

Makelele ni ya nini asubuhi hivi, eh? Nini inaendelea?
(What is the noise for this early in the morning, eh? What's going on?)

MARION

(pointing an accusing finger at Bazooka)
Huyu mtu sijui nini mbaya naye. Badala ya kutafuta kazi ananiuliza maswali ya ujinga! (I don't know what's wrong with this person. Instead of looking for work he's asking me stupid questions!)

MAMA TOM

Mbona unasumbua dadako mapema hivi? (Why are you bugging your sister this early in the morning?)

BAZOOKA

I just asked her a simple question.

MARION

Why don't you mind your own business?

BAZOOKA

Why are you ganging up on me? Is it a crime to ask a question?

In a huff, he leaves the house

MAMA BAZOOKA

(Calling after him)

Na usirudi hapa ukinuka pombe! (And don't come back here smelling of alcohol!)

EXT. THE MUNICIPAL FIELD. KIBERA SLUMS. LATER IN THE DAY.

Ghetto boys are playing soccer with a home-made ball as usual. Bazooka is one of the players. A pocket of spectators watches the action. Among them is the OLD MAN we saw in the shebeen the previous night.

G3, in perfect form, enters the frame, jogging. Bazooka, still sore from what happened the previous night, growls audibly. G3 approaches him.

G3

Bazooka, I'm sorry about what I said about your sister -

BAZOOKA

Half-sister

G3

Whatever. I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I was drunk, man.
So are we cool?

Bazooka is not too keen on renewing their friendship. He pauses for a few beats.

BAZOOKA

Sawa (Ok)

G3 folds his hands into fists and extends them at waist level. Bazooka makes fists of his own, brings them down on G3's and holds them for G3 to repeat the ritual. Wounds healed, they rejoin the match which has continued despite Bazooka's absence.

BAZOOKA (CONT'D)

(As they get back into the game)
G3'S on our side!

Having G3 on his side pays dividends. G3 intercepts a pass from one opponent to another and starts towards the goal. Challenged by opponents, he uses his large body to push them out of the way, as if he's playing American Football. While still a respectable distance from the goal, he takes aim and strikes. The goalkeeper shifts to and fro, positioning himself for a save, but G3 kicked the ball so high up it appears to be coming out of the sun. As the goalkeeper raises a hand to shield his eyes, the ball flies past him.

G3 celebrates by snapping into a 'Slim Jim' – he presses his thighs together, contracts his shoulders and daintily treads on a straight, imaginary line, taunting his opponents.

On the sidelines, the few spectators cheer, clap etc. Their attention is suddenly grabbed by something off-camera.

A SLEEK BLACK MERCEDES

It is long, impressive and lovingly polished. It slowly cruises into the frame and makes a stop. Almost simultaneously, the driver's and front passenger door open and two men in business suits emerge. The driver is DAN MILLER – 50, slim, graying hair. The passenger is "FANTASTIC" FRED – 55, short, stocky.