

**KAYO  
MPOYI  
MAI  
MEANS  
WATER**

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Sample translation of pages 7-31, Kira Josefsson

Norstedts Agency  
linda.altrovberg@norstedts.se  
catherine.mork@norstedts.se

## ABOUT THE BOOK

This is a coming-of-age story set in Tanzania during the 1980s and the 1990s. Adi is born as seventh child to Kabongo and Amba Mukendi, a Zairean diplomat and his wife. The oldest children remain in Zaire, while Adi, her older sister Dina and their sickly little sister Mai live with their parents in Dar-es-Salaam. Every evening their father feeds them with words and punishes them for the slightest misbehaviour.

All families have their own myths and in Adi's case the ancient African tales of the ancestral curses are intermixed with the strict Christian God. The children are taught that the female body is something so unclean that it continuously must be chastened, and that given names hold so much power that they can fend off unrested spirits.

Adi is the young narrator who sees the world through a child's eyes. God is everywhere – sometimes in the shape of an ordinary boy with glasses and a notebook – and so is sex and the Devil.

*Mai Means Water* is a modern Bildungsroman, a story of how a girl is made. A tale of abuse that repeats itself in every generation. This is the story of Adi and her family, their curses and fates – from the cruelty of the Belgian colonists to the present day, as the siblings scatter around the world to escape the dark legacy.

## CHARACTERS

Great-grandmother's family:

**Grand Mère Mai** was born in 1875. She is married a man from the Tshipwaka line – a fictional line of the Kalonji family, of the Baluba people. They only had one child, **Luse Mulu wa Tshipwaka**. He was born in 1890.

Father's side:

**Luse Mulu wa Tshipwaka** (Luse Mulu) married **Kimpa Vita Bomina** (Kimpa Bomina), of the Bakongo people. Together they had nine children, of which three died at an early age. The oldest brother is called **The Master**. One of the two older sisters is called **Kimpa Vita Mujinga**. The last child in the family is a girl named **Ntumba**, born in 1940, after **Kabongo Mukendi** who is the father in this story. Kabongo Mukendi was born in 1936.

**Dinanga Kalua** is the woman who raises Kabongo Mukendi and his little sister.

Mother's side:

**Kalila mwa Mbuyi**, born in 1913, married **Kazadi Wakala**, born in 1920. Together they had ten children, all girls. The oldest daughter, who is also the mother in this story, is called **Amba Mbuyi** (later Amba Mukendi) and her twin sister is called **Imani Kanku**. They were born in 1944.

The family in the story:

**Amba Mukendi** and **Kabongo Mukendi** have seven children. They were born in the following order: **Kasamba**, **Luse** (Lu), **Kimpa**, **Kazadi** (Zo), **Dinanga** (Dina), **Tshadi I** (deceased), **Tshadi II** (Adi), **Mai**.

Other characters:

**Zuri** is the housekeeper in the Mukendi household.

**Papa Kabeya** is the father in the Kabeya family, the Mukendi's neighbours at Upanga 81.

**Mama ya Elombe** is the mother in the Kabeya family.

**Elombe** is the second oldest son in the Kabeya family.

**Moise** is the second youngest son in the Kabeya family.

**Mathieu Nzevu Elongo**, aka Monsieur Elephant, is "papa leki", the younger brother of Papa Kabeya.

**Dima** is Dina's best friend.

**Mama ya Dima** is Dima's mother.

**Koko** is Dima's grandmother. "Koko" means grandparent.

**Solene** is the second daughter in the Boboto family.

I gathered sheets and towels to build myself a nest.

I wanted to hatch a chicken of my own.

I stood on my tiptoes and took eggs from the basket on the living room table. A few eggs slipped from my fingers, fell and splashed my feet when they broke.

I put the surviving eggs in my nest. Then I dropped my panties, left them on the sticky floor, and went into the closet. The eggs were cold between my legs. I rubbed against them, tried to shift my weight closer to my knees, and waited. One egg was crushed under me and a sticky substance smeared along my thighs. There I sat, waiting, until the closet door opened. Feet had followed the tracks of broken eggs and stopped at the panties.

Hands pulled me from my nest.

Dirty child

Disgusting child

JANUARY – JULY 1989

# MONSIEUR ÉLÉPHANT

Monsieur Éléphant is our new twenty-five-year-old neighbor. He has moved in with his brother's family, the Kabeya family. They live underneath us on the lower level of Upanga 81 in the Upanga neighborhood, in the city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. He's a university student. Just like my Daddy he loves words. My word-obsessed Daddy, the mathematician and engineer who should have become a linguist. He learns words from the thesaurus and tears the pages out as soon as he's learned them. Just like Daddy, Monsieur Éléphant makes up songs. Just like Daddy he sometimes takes the melodies of famous songs and switches the words. But the words Monsieur Éléphant puts in are not from the thesaurus. He says they come from the depths of himself. He beats his hand on his chest, a dull sound that echoes over our roof terrace. The upper level of Upanga 81 consists of the roof terrace, our apartment and the stairs that lead to both, as well as the gate where someone once carved "up to paradise" with capital letters.

The sky is clear and the sun is shining on the concrete wall that is as tall as my shoulders and runs around the entire roof terrace. It is just the two of us here, unless you count the figures given life by the rain every time it runs down the wall and flushes the white color off. Figures dressed in mold have watched Monsieur Éléphant sneak up to the roof on his tiptoes and wait for me to come and play in the little house I've built there. It's a house held up by soda crates, an umbrella, and Mommy's worn pagne. With feet that won't be still, Monsieur Éléphant begins to sing his favorite song.

"She's the most beautiful girl in the world." He points at me.

"There is something in her eyes." He shakes his head and laughs.

"Something in her hands." He jumps around.

"Something behind her eyelids." He jumps closer.

“Mungu ibariki Afrika.” He blows air at me, so I laugh and have to close my eyes.

“She’s beautiful.” His fingers graze my eyes, lips, and my chin.

Only the mold men see Monsieur Éléphant paint my face with his long fingers. Below us my Mommy is in her bed with the growing peanut she’s swallowed. My twelve-year-old sister Dinanga, Dina, is at school. She told me that Mommy was in bed one day and breathed so heavily that she swallowed a peanut. There was a spirit living in that peanut, and it grew and grew. These days Mommy’s arms are always full with her growing stomach. Zuri, our maid with the cracked heels, is in the bathroom with the doors closed, using soap and lemon to wash blood from Mommy and Daddy’s sheets.

The hands of Monsieur Éléphant overflow with candies. He tells me he took a detour through a candy land on his way home. He remembered what I like; sweet, sour, and hard. No chocolate. He braved dangerous traffic full of drivers who did not brake when he ran across the street. He’d made sure to find my favorites even though a swarm of greedy school children appeared and plundered the candy mothers of their candy.

“Mungu ibariki Afrika”

He teaches me the real words that go with the melody. He asks me to take the stage, an old soda crate turned upside down, and tells me I need to be able to sing Tanzania’s national anthem when I start school in a year.

Then he watches, crouching in my little house. When I perform for him, he is moved to tears. He exclaims:

“God bless Africa, she is the world’s most beautiful girl.” I get so much candy that my pockets are filled full.

*Tubariki watoto wa Tanzania*, bless the children of Tanzania, I sing.

Mommy and Daddy are not at home because it is a special day, Tuesday the tenth of January 1989. The spirit that has been growing in Mommy's tummy is going to be our new sibling. They leave us home alone, me and Dina. Dina who serves me sausage in the morning instead of the customary marmalade sandwich. At the table she folds string between her fingers to make different patterns. I tug at one of the strings, ruining the pattern. Then I run off in the hope that she will chase me.

Mommy has bought a new wax cloth for this special day and put it on the dining room table. That's where I hide, underneath it where the air is thick of plastic and I am fully visible to my sister. She drops down next to me and tickles me until my tummy hurts.

In the afternoon we climb up to the roof terrace. What was left of my house has been cleaned out since a few days back. I wasn't able to save it after Daddy saw Monsieur Éléphant come down from the roof terrace. Now Dina says we must lock the door whenever Mommy and Daddy are not home, but she keeps forgetting to do it.

The mold men watch my sister and I as we put the braided mat with all its thousands of colors on the ground and lie down to look at the clouds.

"I see Europe," she says.

"I can't see anything," I reply.

She points at the sky. "You have to look carefully."

"Oh, now I see," I say and point at the sky.

When Zuri takes her leave for the day the sky is pink. The prayer call from the new mosque is so loud that the birds in the big mango tree take off in flight, an explosion of black.

We go back down to our apartment and Dina puts out the food. She asks me to keep watch from the patio, so I can warn her when Mommy and Daddy return. She wants to run down to see if Elombe, the second oldest of the Kabeya boys, is home. Like us, the Kabeya family are Zairians. Their Daddy works at the embassy just like ours and many others in the Upanga neighborhood. The border to Zaire runs around our yard. On one side is Tanzania, and the other India. Tanzania has

cows, goats, and chickens in their yard. Sometimes those children come over and we play together. In India there are large green hedges behind the stone wall. Nobody ever climbs over that wall.

On the side facing Tanzania are big black pipes. Zuri and the other maids wash our clothes in big buckets there. The lime tree is leaning heavily against the fence, with its roots in Tanzania and its fruits in Zaire. Wars break out where fallen lime fruits are thrown as grenades. When there are none, clay cakes suffice.

“You’re too small,” one of the boys next door says and shoves me to the side when I join them and crouch in the grass, hunting for lime fruits.

“Go back up Adi, and eat your food,” Dina orders and drags me to the house.

“Daddy will be so angry if you don’t stay here!”

We walk up the stairs. Down in the yard, the playful mood changes with the arrival of fifteen-year-old Elombe. The younger children are drawn to the older boys, who are carrying a cassette player. His friends are constantly laughing, and loudly. Dina is standing in our gallery, leaning against the railing and looking down at them.

“I’m going back down. You stay here and play with your paper dolls! And I want you to keep watch from the patio and warn me when you see our car, otherwise I won’t let you taste my chocolate bars.”

Dina goes into our bedroom and changes into her new blouse and denim skirt, clothes that are meant to be used only for church. Elombe always has this effect on Dina.

I position myself at the lookout Dina just abandoned. Dina looks pretty. The boys whistle when she comes out. She gives them a big smile. I would like to change what I’m wearing too, but all my best clothes are locked inside Mommy’s bedroom. I press my face against the curly ironwork railing that runs along the gallery leading to our door. It’s much rustier than those on the patio on the front of the building. The paint flakes off and falls. A piece gets stuck on my lip. It tastes like blood. I fiddle with the paint and blow down at the yard. I blow louder and with more force. Dina and the boys are talking about the singer Koffi Olomide.

“Koffi mentions my uncle in his latest song, did you know?” Elombe says.

“Monsieur Éléphant? No, you’re lying!” Dina cries theatrically.

“Yes. Listen, he says M. N. Elongo, Mathieu Nzevu Elongo. Nzevu means elephant,” Elombe explains to his Tanzanian friends. “He’s famous in Kin, my uncle. He knows important people.”

“Koffi will say the name of anyone who sends him money,” Dina challenges.

Everyone laughs. Elombe too. He stands up.

“I’ll show you the dance. You know when he...Can I show you, Dina?” Elombe makes a dance move and presses himself against Dina, who screams. The others laugh.

I pull off more pieces of paint and I blow and blow. I bang hard on the fence to dislocate more pieces. Everyone looks up.

“Get back in, you little devil!” Dina yells. The others laugh again.

I go inside and close the door hard behind me.

At dusk Dina and I sit on the patio, watching for our blue car. The sight of it would allow this special day to end, and we would get to meet our new sibling. Dina does not know why they’re not home yet, even though it’s almost dark. We make a game out of killing the mosquitoes. Dina gets blood on her fingers.

“It’s yours. You’re going to die,” she teases me. It scares me.

“I’m just joking,” she groans when I start to cry.

The electricity cuts out for the second time today and we hear the fridge in the pantry go quiet with an exhausted sigh. Dina says that we are going to bed. Mommy is not here to remind us about the evening prayer. Daddy is not here drinking his instant coffee and listening to Jim Reeves in his arm chair.

The following day, Daddy comes home for a short while in the morning. He eats breakfast, flips through his thesaurus, mumbles some words, but says nothing about what's going on with Mommy and our sibling. Before leaving, he tears out a page, crumples it, and puts it in his pocket. Then he leaves us with Zuri who has been limping since the morning. Dina asks what happened. Zuri tells us, and all the time she wants us to say yes to confirm that we are listening.

You know I always do the laundry before the sun is high in the sky,  
say *ndiyo*

So, it happened that I went down to do the laundry,  
but mister's white shirt, missus' white underskirt, they began to  
resist the force of the water

I bent down to have a closer look, because when clothes are afraid of  
water something is going on, say *ndiyo*

But the face that looked up at me from the water was not my own  
Mister's shirt reached its arms up like a drowning fisherman, it  
grasped me, pulled me down toward the face in the water, say *ndiyo*

The wet clothes snaked around my body. They found their way under  
my kanga and squeezed my thighs, say *ndiyo*

And I yelled, *shetani! shetani!*

Thanks be to God in heaven, my foot got caught on a root and I  
wrestled free of the hold of the water

And *shetani* ran away yes, he did

Zuri nods emphatically to indicate she has finished the story, and  
then she continues to iron the clothes.

"She's dumb," Dina whispers and opens her eyes wide. "A simple girl  
from the bush." Then she chases me and shouts that she's a *shetani* and  
is going to throw me in the black sewage that comes out of the drain at  
the back of the building.

In the afternoon, Zuri and Fatima, the Kabeya family's housekeeper, are standing by the gate. They are going to the Indian store on the corner. Zuri will buy the sweetened condensed milk we sometimes put on our bread slices. The guard Yusuf opens so they can pass through. He is a relative of Fatima's and has worked at Upanga 81 for many years. He lives in his own small accommodations behind the building.

"I like your blouse," Fatima says and touches Zuri's white blouse. Fatima is carrying Elombe's youngest brother, still a baby, on her back, and her clothes are badly worn. Every now and then Mommy gives Zuri clothes and sometimes, when the photographer comes by, Zuri gets to be included in the picture. On those days she moisturizes her heels with coconut butter.

On Sunday I wake up in an empty bed.

“Mommy,” I call out of habit and then I expect her to show her head in the door, tell Dina to get me out of bed, say there is bread and marmalade on the table. I hear strange sounds from the living room and I yell once more, louder.

“Dina!”

Dina is supposed to come pull the sheets off me, take me to the bathroom, turn the water on. When Shekila and his wife hear the faucet they’ll start fighting, per usual. They live in the hot water tank and suffer from loneliness. They can never agree which one of them gets to spy on me from the peephole at the top. Their jumping makes the water warm, Dina has told me. The water will rush out and fill the green bucket that is always in the bath tub. She will take a scoop and pour the water over my body and I will yelp because it never ever gets hot enough.

Neither Mommy nor Dina comes. My protest gets stuck in my throat and my eyes sting. I struggle with the sheets, which tighten their grip on me when I try to stand up.

“Mommyyyy,” is the sound that runs before me to the living room, where nothing is as it used to be. Mommy is sitting on the floor instead of the couch. The couch cushions are also on the floor and she is leaning against the wall. Everything in the room has been moved and all the adults are there, bent over with happy faces, looking down at the being in Mommy’s arms. A croaking sound comes from the blanket, like crows hidden in the leaves.

I throw myself at her. “Mommy!” But Dina grabs me and shakes me once.

“Careful,” she snaps. “Can’t you see the baby?”

The lump in my throat falls heavily on my heart and gives voice to sorrowful cries.

“Now, now, Adi,” Mommy says. “See, you have a little sister.”

There she is, lying in Mommy’s arms, all upset and wrinkled.

Mama ya Elombe is here, her maid Fatima, and Zuri who has bandaged her foot.

“She really is beautiful.”

“Someone offered to buy her,” Mama ya Elombe tells Zuri and Fatima even though mothers normally don’t gossip with the maids.

“He offered a fortune!”

Zuri and Fatima cover their mouths with their hands.

“He was a very odd man,” Mommy says in a weak voice. “He was Indian.”

“Perhaps he thought the baby was white,” Zuri says.

“Is she not the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?” Dina asks me.

The being in Mommy’s arms yawns. It trains its eyes on me. Dark.

I have heard the story about the snake they found in my bed when I was two years old. The year prior we had moved to Binza, leaving our life of misfortune in Mikondo. The year was 1986 and those were better times for the family. Daddy’s work at the university in Kinshasa had been recognized at a conference attended by old classmates from his time in Brussels. He had a steady job as a mathematician for the government, and he also was given an opportunity to travel to Tanzania to consult and be a mathematician for the Zairian government.

The house in Binza was a newly constructed urban villa with a red roof, running water, and electricity. The garden was carefully tended by Mommy and my older brother Kasamba, who was unemployed and instead helped out with the household. Mommy grew flowers, and there were paved paths that snaked among the flowers. Dina, who at the time was nine years old, had seen Daddy’s sisters dance on the paths and tease Mommy, telling her, you’re really living your best life now. Then they admired the flowers and noted that Kasamba, despite his unpromising future and general non-luba looks certainly had a green thumb. Dina has told me that the aunts always said a prayer when Kasamba served them food. “They were afraid he was going to serve them something he’d gotten from a ndoki. If they ate it their life would

be sacrificed in exchange for money, happiness, or something else that Kasamba might have gone to see a ndoki for.”

There is something wrong with big brother Kasamba, but nobody will say what it is.

Mommy and Daddy’s bedroom had a door that led to the garden. It was through that door the snake had slunk in, looking for shelter from the hard rain. Nobody believes me when I say I really remember this event. I remember that Mommy had left me to sleep on a towel with pillows all around. I had gotten hold of a pen and was chewing on it. I felt the bitter taste of ink on my tongue. I remember the snake had crawled in underneath the pillows and started curling around my legs. I began to cry. I remember the eyes. That is why the memory is so strong. The same eyes as now.

“She’s a spirit, not a child,” I exclaim but nobody pays me any mind. The fear is squeezing my head. The evil eyes are staring at me. Something terrible will happen to us, I just know that.

“You took the wrong child home!”

The adults laugh.

In the evening Jim Reeves gives thanks for the flowers that bloom and the fish that swim.

“We thank thee for the trees, and the deep blue sea,” Daddy sings along. That’s why Daddy always listens to Reeves in the evenings. If God did not hear the gratitude from our home, he would burn the palm trees in the yard. They would fall on our house and the curtains would catch fire. If God did not hear the gratitude, there would no longer be sweetened condensed milk in the cupboard in the kitchen.

If God did not hear the song, the nut Mommy swallowed would have killed her when she was at the hospital. The nut, which held a spirit, the spirit now in her arms. The one she cradles as though it were the only and the prettiest doll she owned. The one that could not get dirty and which, according to Dina, was stolen on the saddest of days by a rat the size of a dog.

The spirit had exhausted Mommy to the point that she almost died. Before Mommy went to the hospital, I had held her hand and asked her why, oh why she had been breathing so heavily in her bed. Her shocked exclamation and Dina's frightened face told me I had said something forbidden.

Dina pinched me when nobody saw. But I was grateful anyway, because if Daddy had been there, he would have slapped Dina and her revenge on me would have been terrible. Daddy hits Dina because that is what the Bible tells him to do, Mommy says, and because he has to police her words. Dina always says the wrong words. Daddy says that Mommy should teach her before it's too late.

When the spirit emerged from Mommy's body it wasn't breathing. Dina explains that it can't breathe air because it's been living in water. Daddy says he prayed and prayed. But the doctor said that the spirit had difficulties breathing, and that Mommy had lost too much blood. The doctors were certain they would both die. Daddy didn't sleep all Thursday night, and gave strength to his soul by filling himself with words. Synonyms for the word foi: faith, meaning, trust, authority, hope. The he filled the rooms with the words in song.

"I saw my father. The night before Friday," Daddy says, and closes his eyes. "And on Friday morning, as from a miracle, your mother's and your sister's condition had stabilized."

Mommy rocks the spirit which is still having difficulty breathing. Dina sits with her eyes on the math problems Daddy wants her to solve. Dina is just drawing circles in the book, but Daddy doesn't notice. He is wearing a tank top that exposes the strange mark on his shoulder. Long vertical lines with a circle in the middle, like the site where a branch once grew out of the tree.

"I can't stop thinking about the last thing he told me," Daddy continues with his eyes closed.

Lubambulu is the word Daddy normally uses to bring us into the story. Lubambulu means plank in Tshiluba.

*This is the story of how Kabongo Mukendi got the strange mark on his shoulder*

The year was 1936, in a city that was then called Élisabethville, in what was then Belgian Congo. A city later renamed Lubumbashi as part of President Mobutu's Africanization of the names of cities and people, in the country he named Zaire.

1936 was the year my father, Kabongo Mukendi, was born. His father had the name of Luse Mulu wa Tshimpwaka. Luse Mulu was one of only a few Congolese who lived in stately homes and who owned land. One of only a few who received guests in their homes, hosted multi-course dinners, played music on the gramophone and walked with a cane. In negotiations he promised to increase production at any cost and agreed that the black man needed discipline and guidance. Luse Mulu's desire to not be associated with history was so strong that he avoided looking too closely in the mirror; so, sang the bird sitting in the mahogany tree in the yard of the big house.

True to European fashion there was a landscaped garden behind the big house. In the shade of an angel with straight nose and curly hair stood three crosses. The gardener of the estate had limited reading skills. He sounded out the three short words carved into the wood. "Maaai." The same name three times. He weeded, tossed the fallen twigs, put three small leather bags in the earth at every cross. A secret ritual to prevent the girls' decomposing bodies from rising from the ground. The garden was his favorite place, an expression of splendor and control. An expression of civilization. When the gardener heard the scream from the house, he sang a lullaby for the dead, unaware that he was imitating the bird that flew around the area and narrated what it saw. Instead he

wondered where his shovel was. If it was a girl, he'd be ready. The last girl only lived a few days.

Luse Mulu had five living children, two of which were girls. Two malcontent and misfortunate girls, for whom he had broken custom and not named either of them after his own mother, Mai. The oldest girl he named Kimpa Vita Mujinga, after his wife who was a mukongo and had the name of Kimpa Vita Bomina.

As for Kimpa Bomina, she was named after a revolutionary prophet from the time there was a Kingdom of Kongo, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After the birth of his youngest daughter, who he named after a close friend's wife, he saw his future in a dream. His white friends would stop doing business with him and the black workers would join the uprising. The rebels would say he was the white man's henchman and that he had built his riches on top of the backs of his dead brothers. They would destroy his store and his sons would grow into uncivilized, uneducated profligates. Many nights the dream came to him. And each night he got up and filled his glass with palm wine. He would have drunk cognac like a real gentleman if he had only been allowed, but the law prohibited black men from drinking hard alcohol. To change the future of his dreams Luse Mulu decided to mollify the ancestors by naming one of his future daughters Mai. He would memorialize and honor the mother who had been forgotten and abandoned. Thrice after this decision Kimpa Bomina had a girl. Thrice, Luse Mulu stood listening to the sounds of the lucrative estate and declared that the girl was to be named Mai. Thrice, the girl died soon thereafter and was buried in the garden. She would carry one last girl. But that story, about when Kimpa Bomina was taken back by the water, must wait for a while.

In any case she was pregnant again, and cries could be heard from inside the house. Let it be a boy, Kimpa Bomina prayed when she felt the child on its way. She had been carried in by the gardener who had gone back out to the garden to sing for the dead and the old. Perhaps they would listen to a simple man's prayer and spare the estate of the death of another child.

Kimpa Bomina was laid on a pile of blankets in the room. Her aunt and Luse Mulu's cousins helped her birth her ninth baby. A child with hair on its back and teeth already in its mouth. It's a boy, her aunt cried. Bat, the cousins cried and laid the baby on a plank.

And it is this plank, this lubambulu, that is the origin of the strange mark on my Daddy Kabongo's shoulder. It wasn't an ordinary plank, either. It was a plank from the crate of tree planks his father had purchased to build his own piano. Because every civilized and evolved man must have a piano in his own home. But the project kept being pushed and the planks had been used for other things, like repairing the school house of the estate or the floor in the basement of the store, and one day as the surface on which a newborn baby was laid.

When Luse Mulu was on his death bed in 1946, he asked for his son and spoke with him. It was one of the few times in the life of the ten year-old boy.

"We have fallen behind, my son. Say what you will about the Belgians and the Europeans, but we have been held back by the old customs and ways of life. The rest of the world moves much faster than we do. They break mountains and possess deadly weapons. They find ways to master nature and they do it with such naturalness that it must be sanctioned by God, their self-righteousness. And evolution costs, a man must understand this. A man needs to know when the time has come to do all that needs to be done. It is important that the Europeans don't take it all and leave us, to whom the land actually belongs, without anything. That is all I tried to do, my son. I tried to do my part. That is my confession. But the elders only saw betrayal. They mocked my attempts and took the lives of my children. The future is dark for my offspring and my country. I have failed. But you are marked by the ancestors. You evil and mystic child. Only you have the ability to protect the family against the curse of the ancestors."

What name will she be given? Mommy and Daddy keeps answering that only God knows. Perhaps God also sees that spirits should not have human names and that is why he refuses to inspire Mommy and Daddy. But despite God's obvious resistance to welcome the spirit, Mommy rarely puts the little bundle down.

It still has trouble breathing. One night the spirit has such a hard time breathing that Mommy has to use her mouth to suck the mucus out of its nose. When I make disgusted sounds, Dina calls me shetani and says it is no wonder the snake found me, as terrible as I am.

New soda crates pile up on the roof terrace after Daddy's colleagues send gifts to congratulate us for the new sibling. Sibling, Mommy and Dina calls it, and wants me to stop saying spirit. It is a child. Spirit, I say and go to sit on the roof terrace, watching black clouds gather above the house. They look like the angry workers in Daddy's story. They suffer like the characters in the hell of the Bible. The ones Mommy follows with her finger when she tells us about God's punishment of man. That man must suffer when he tills the earth and that woman must suffer when she gives birth. God gave the hardest punishment to woman because it was all her fault.

The green mold men on the concrete wall whisper about girls who do anything for candy.

"I can't hear you," I say out loud.

I build a tower of soda crates and wait.

I build a stage and wait.

The door below is open. I hear the rusty noise when the wind sometimes hits it.

But I am the only person there all day, I and the black and angry cloud men who are waiting for a name.

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In the beginning of February, when Mommy comes to the room that I share with Dina to braid our hair, Dina once more asks what name the wrinkly little spirit is going to have. Mommy gets the stool out with the oils, the thread roll, and the comb and she doesn't answer.

"Mommy, can I have Rasta braids?" Dina moves on to the next topic. She no longer wants Mommy to make French braids or one of the threaded styles we have seen so many times. She wants Rasta braids like the American TV stars in the gossip magazines she buys in secret. Dina says there are a lot of people in school who have them, even the ambassador's daughter.

Mommy sucks air between her teeth and makes an annoyed sound.

"You first, Adi." She gestures for me to sit on the stool and begins the painful combing process.

"I am going to braid you like girls, because you are girls." Mommy divides the hair into sections, takes one section, twists black thread from the root to the top. When she's done the hair looks like a forest of trees with fluffy little crowns. Finally, she fells the trees by braiding them with each other in different patterns across our scalps. Most of the time she draws a spiral. Mommy says her grandmother always said there is a difference between the hairstyles of a girl and a woman. Mommy says that women have braided their hair in spirals ever since Zaire's independence in 1960, to symbolize how everything returns.

"But it's not fashionable anymore, Mommy. Having French braids. Everyone has extensions now." Dina sighs and crosses her arm across her chest.

"If you have extensions men will take you for a loose woman. Is that what you want?"

Dina protests with stifled screams and Mommy stops greasing the roots of my hair.

“Get a hold of yourself, Dina. There is nothing more dangerous for a girl than loose morals. I have warned you so many times.”

Mommy keeps working on my hair. From the office room we can hear the little spirit croaking. There is a thud from somewhere in the house and a car begins to honk incessantly on the street outside. But in the room where we are sitting the silence is heavy and suffocating. Mommy’s mouth makes smacking sounds when she talks again.

“Your little sister will be named Mai.”

Then she adds: “May God have mercy on us.”

## ABOUT KAYO MPOYI

My name is Kayo Mpoysi. I was born in Kinshasa, at the hospital in Ngaliema, where my father paid a whole month's salary each day until my mother was discharged. My childhood is full of such stories – you and your sister are the incarnation of your dead sister, you share the same soul – or – your little sister will be named after your great-grandmother in order to make peace with your great-grandmother's memory. They say she was left to die in captivity, so she cursed her own name. No child bearing her name has ever survived.

*Mai Means Water* is my debut novel. I did not want to write a story so close to myself that people would inevitably keep asking: is this your story? But my resistance was to no avail as I kept wanting to write about feeling improper, about feelings of shame and disgust. I often thought about my mother and wanted to put her silence into words. I also wanted to understand my father. I had a feeling that there was a pattern, that our family was unique and at the same time just like everyone else with our background, our history and our anecdotes.

In the end I did write my own history. But this is not a biography of my great-grandmother, my grandfather, my parents or my siblings. Instead I feel that I approached it in a way that the characters became representatives of an oppression that has been around for generations, the story of an affliction that repeats itself and is passed on, and an immortal hope for a better future that always triumphs, no matter what. I have re-written history and replaced my own memories with the story of a girl whose childhood is so similar to my own.

As I have been putting the finishing touches to *Mai Means Water* I have also started researching and writing my next novel, a story about a family in modern day Congo and the many challenges they are faced with.