

POLEMICS



PANDEMIC

A Short Story

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Fumo Baraza turns on the bed and immediately clasps the metal rod at the side to keep him from falling over. He curses under his breath. Accustomed to his king-sized bed, this coffin-like structure with a mattress as thin as sliced ham sinks under his enormous weight. He shifts again, this time more carefully as the rickety bed squeaks under the pressure. He places one hairy hand on his big round belly which seems to hoard all he has eaten for the 65 years of his existence, and uses the other to reach for his phone. The digital display shows it is 7am and the notification tab shows numerous missed calls and messages. He immediately swipes and dials his wife. The rest can wait.

“*Baba Ken*, I have been trying to reach you. How are you doing?” Not long ago, this question would have caused his face to crease but now a smile forms on his face. Human emotions are surprisingly agile.

“I have been fine *Mama Keto*,” he says, rearranging his features to a poker face. “Just one more week to go and I will be home.”

“Can’t wait. Staying home alone is already taking a toll on me. Any new updates?”

“None so far. I will update you if anything changes. Meanwhile, stay safe, and please pass my regards to Keto and Thani when you talk to them.”

“Maybe you should call them for a change?”

Mr. Baraza mutters something incoherently and hangs up. The conversations are short but it is a start. After 37 years of marriage, love had lost its lustre for reasons he could not fathom. They had grown so much apart that the only link between them and evidence of their relationship was their children. A huge rift had grown between them and before long, conversations became questions, demands or commands. Conversations were also timed just like the cock crowed at specific times. When they addressed each other, they only used ‘*Baba Keto*’ or ‘*Mama Keto*’, Keto being their firstborn son, to mask their feelings of strangeness towards one other.

Over the past week however, things changed. They spoke every day and even laughed once. Distance seemed to bring people closer together. *I would need to look for another name to address my wife*, he thought as he made his second call.

“Heard your back *Mheshimiwa*! How was the trip?”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to use the honourable title on me. Mr. Baraza will do just fine. I still haven’t made the deal so things are the same just as when I left.”

“What do you mean? I thought last you spoke to the investors they were interested in a partnership and test the first sample of crude oil.”

“Yes I thought so too but they are still considering, as they said.”

“Now that this pandemic is affecting the globe, everything is coming to a standstill don’t worry. Anyway, how many days to go before they release you?”

Mr. Baraza tries to suppress his laughter as he knows that this is far from the truth. Either his right-hand man was trying to pacify him after his recent political loss, or he was just too optimistic and blindsided to see that there would be no deal after all. Knowing him, he knew the former was more likely.

“Release? You are making it sound like I’m in prison. But I need to get out of here. I need to get things back on track. You know how things have been ever since we lost the last election campaign,” Mr. Baraza decides to cut to the chase.

Mr. Baraza hangs up the phone and before he can wonder what do to with himself the rest of the day, a middle-aged nurse walks in. Her attractiveness is buried under her stern look that show from her eyes and frown on her forehead. Mr. Baraza could bet that she is wearing a permanent smirk under the surgical mask covering her nose and mouth. Ever since he came to this hospital, Mr. Baraza noticed that the nurse always seemed to be carrying the weight of the world under her eyes and on her hunched shoulders. She always had this look of tiredness and Mr. Baraza could possibly understand why.

“Not complaining about the view today, are you Mr. Baraza?” she interrupts his thoughts.

Although she jokes, Rick finds it strange that her expression is almost always the same, like her facial futures have nothing to do with her emotions. He reads her tag, *Nuru* and tries to reconcile her name with her attitude, but fails.

“I honestly do not enjoy looking at parked ambulances,” Mr. Baraza replies.

“Well, this is definitely not a five-star resort overlooking the beach, now is it?”

“Clearly not.”

Mr. Baraza watches her draw back the curtain as sunlight pours in, yellowing the room.

“How are you feeling today, Mr. Baraza?” Nuru finally speaks.

“Same as yesterday. I still don’t understand why I need to be here.”

“I’m sure you don’t want me to revisit that symptoms for this virus takes 2-14 days to manifest. In that case, we need to monitor you for a remainder...,” Nuru trails off scanning a piece of paper gritted on a clipboard.

“Seven days,” Mr. Baraza jumps in.

“Yes that’s right, seven days,” Nuru speaks as she approaches closer to him. “I need to take your temperature, here.”

After about a minute of silence, Nuru holds up the thermometer in white latex gloves and frowns, adding more vertical lines to the already existing ones between her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Mr Baraza asks concerned.

“Your temperature has risen slightly by two degrees. Are you flushed or having a fever?”

“Not at all. I feel fine. Should I be worried?” Mr. Baraza asks sitting on the bed.

“Not yet. I will monitor you over the next hours, but meanwhile breakfast will be served.”

As she exists, Nuru turns at the door.

“Oh and expect a roomie tonight. With the rise in cases, private rooms now have to be shared. The hospital is getting full and this is the last batch we are admitting.” She now seems to be speaking to

herself, "You are the lucky ones; the rest will have to be quarantined in some nearby school. Arrangements are being made as we speak and..."

As if reading his baleful expression, she stops, "don't worry, we will partition the room."

Mr. Baraza sinks back on the bed and checks the news on his phone browser. *8 new cases, 70 total cases, 9 recoveries, 5 deaths. Worldwide, 300,000 cases.* He had grown accustomed to checking daily alerts that appeared to be a hellish scoreboard. He decides to do further research and wades through the information:

Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Common symptoms include, fever, dry cough, and tiredness.

A tang of uncertainty grips him and he exits the browser window.



The abandoned streets of Nairobi spell doom and the City under the Sun has been eclipsed. It was only a few weeks ago that the City was full of life, but Thomas is too busy reflecting on his trip at the back of a taxi that he fails to take much notice. However, it seems unusual that the graffiti buses pumping with music are not threatening to remove the taxi's side screen or hit the bumper. Most of the, 'moving clubs' are driven and touted by young men who find it hard to maintain the 4-second driving rule. Vendors on the curbs are no longer selling clothes and shoes laid out under splayed gurney bags and looking left and right. Not only are they usually in the lookout for customers but for *Kanjo*, City Council cops whose presence signal it is time to hold the eaves of the gurney bags with their merchandise and play a game of catch-me-if-you-can, arrest-me-if-you-do or try-your-luck-next-time-if-you-don't. The feeling of emptiness threatens to seep into Thomas but thanks to the lack of traffic, they pull up at their destination before long.

Kwema referral Hospital stands like a misplaced block by the highway. The poor architecture and fading blue and brown paint does no justice to its reputation as the Country's second largest medical centre for research. After a procedure of searching and sanitizing, a middle-aged nurse leads him to a room. Her demeanour is stern, and although she is probably in her early 30s, her haggard look ages her all the more. She checks his temperature in silence and finally asks a series of questions which she notes down half-heartedly with a scribble. Thomas tries to peer if she has indeed written anything or just drawn doodles.

"Please follow me," she says sharply.

They walk in silence, amplified when they reach the corridors. A doctor in a white coat and blue surgical mask approaches them. From a distance, he looks like the angel of death holding back tales of doom and destruction. When they cross paths, the nurse exchanges brief pleasantries and the hallway resumes to its silence. The only sound is that of his suitcase rolling on the tiled floor like a continuous growling of the stomach. Thomas feels unusual to be dragging a suitcase in a hospital and he tries to imagine that he is checking in at a hotel, but the smell of concentrated disinfectant won't let him. At the far end of the wing, they make a corner and into a hall and he is directed into one of

the rooms with an odour of medicine mixed with detergent, one worse than that of the hallways. Thomas bets he will most likely leave the hospital sick compared to how healthy he came.

The room is partitioned with a blue curtain and he is led to the other end. Without the bed, a chair and bedside table, the room could be considered empty. When the nurse leaves, Thomas starts preparing to change into the dull hospital gown splayed on his bed. He is startled by a voice from the other side of the curtain.

“Welcome, patient-to-be.”

“Thank you but...,” before Thomas can complete his sentence, the voice interjects.

“Absurd, isn’t it? coming to hospital without being ill, eh?”

At this point, Thomas is uncertain of what to say to this stranger. His voice sounds like that of a man used to issuing commands and having his way, and he decides to retain his reply. Forgetting to change, he opens his suitcase and unwraps his trophy tucked between the layers of jeans. He sets it at the corner of the room, making a light thud.

“Something heavy you got there,” the voice speaks again.

“Oh it’s just a trophy, that’s all,” Thomas replies.

“You must have done something important to earn that.”

Thomas stands stiff looking at his name inscribed in a deep calligraphy, a smile forms at his face.

“That’s what they tell me.”

“May I see it?”

“The trophy?”

“If you don’t mind, son.”

Thomas separates the curtain with the back of his palm and is almost taken aback by what he sees. His eyes are greeted by a large man lying on the bed. His enormous belly looks like a capsized ship in the middle of the Indian ocean. His gray afro is well groomed but not as thick as the Jacksons. His thick ring finger is encircled in a gold signet ring that demands attention. Beside him lay two large phones making him seem like a man of importance. Even in the ridiculous hospital gown, the man carries an air of importance, prestige and influence about him.

“This is nice,” the man holds up the trophy and turns it, examining it like a piece of blood diamond. He stops at the inscription, squints his eyes and reads it aloud, ‘Winner, The Africa ICT Innovation Award, 2020. Awarded to Thomas Sankara Shomari.’”

He hands back the trophy to Thomas smiling, revealing a gold tooth flashing on his right canine.

“I see you are named after the legendary Thomas Sankara. What was it he said again, ‘Kill Sankara and thousands of Sankaras shall be born’. I guess you are one of those reborn, not in Burkina Faso but right here in Kenya.”

“I didn’t know you know him sir,” Thomas’s face lights up.

“Call me Mr. Baraza. Your peers may not know him but I am old enough to know celebrities of our times. He was referred to as ‘Africa's Che Guevara’,” Mr. Baraza says with a smile.

“One of my favourite quotes of his is, ‘We must learn to live the African way. It is the only way to live in freedom and dignity’,” Thomas says.

“We can stay up all night recalling the great Sankara’s quotes, but I now need to get some rest. An old man like me needs to get enough rest,” Mr. Baraza says, placing his feet one by one on the bed like logs.



Thomas is woken up by the sound of rain dropping. He instinctively lunges his long bony legs out of bed and scans around the room. After a few seconds, he remembers his surroundings and sinks back on his bed with a chuckle. Back home, the sound of rain means that either he or his younger brother place a bucket at the corner of their room, which also doubles as the living room and the kitchen. Their two-roomed mud house topped with corrugated iron sheets has been weather beaten and holes in the roof received anything from the sky. After many attempts of plugging all sorts of materials to block the holes, they noticed that some things are beyond repair.



Mr. Baraza rouses to a distinct murmur. He strains his ears to catch where the sound is coming from, and notices it is from the other end of a curtain. He assumes Thomas is sleep talking and reaches for his phone to look at the time. It is a few minutes past 6 am. When he puts his phone back down, Mr. Baraza notices that the murmur is distinct like that of a prayer.

When the sound dies out, he asks, “So did the Man upstairs tell you when we will be out of here?”

“I will remember to ask next time. Now I was just giving thanks.”

“Let me guess, thanks for your trophy? You know you earned it yourself, you should thank yourself.”

Although Mr. Baraza was raised Anglican, along the way he shed off any religious beliefs and never ascribed to any form of religion since. He believed God left humans to run this world. Nothing more, nothing less.

“If you knew where I come from then it can’t have been by myself. You see, people have always taken from me, but God, God has always given me. So I have Him to thank.”

“Let me tell you one secret son, this world is give and take. You give some to others, you take some from others. It’s called symbiotic existence. You might not understand it fully now but when you are as old as me, you will understand that nothing, and I say nothing, ever falls from the sky. You take as much you can and give when you can. It’s just the way of the world.”

“But some things are not ours to give. As much as we would like to, they can only come from God. Like happiness, contentment and peace. Are you a happy man?”

No one has ever asked Mr. Baraza such a question and he never had time to consider if he was happy.

“Happiness is just an illusion. The figures in my bank account are not.”

“And would you say you are content, Mr. Baraza?”

Mr. Baraza lets out a roaring laugh before responding, “There is always more money to make, and I intend to make as much as I can. Haven’t you heard? stay hungry, stay foolish.”

“I heard this story once, Mr. Baraza. There was a certain rich man whose farm produced good crop. At one point, the harvest was too much that he did not have any space left to store his crops. So he decided that he would tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and goods. And once he is done, he would tell himself this; ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.’ So...”

“*Kijana*, that man is wise. Doesn’t your generation say, work hard, play hard?” Mr. Baraza interrupts.

“Yes, but the story does not end there. So God said to Him, ‘You fool! This very night, your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ Then...”

“Wait let me get this straight,” Mr. Baraza interrupts. “So God comes into the picture after the man has made it in life? Where was He all along?”

“Well, the story doesn’t say, but I guess God was giving the rich man time to turn to him because the story ends with God saying, ‘This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God’.”

“There you again with your God. God this, God that...”

As Mr. Baraza speaks, the door cracks open and the Nuru enters, clutching her clipboard and thermometer. Her dull face matches her dull scrubs.

“I see you are calling God an awful lot today Mr. Baraza,” she says as she draws back the partitions so she can have a look at both Mr. Baraza and Thomas. Thomas is sitting on the bed and Mr. Baraza is stretching.

“Do you believe in God, Nurse?” Mr. Baraza asks between a yawn.

“Well, I gave my life to God last week, but I am not sure if He has taken it,” Nuru says with a shrug.

“Why do you say that Nurse?” Thomas asks, not expecting the conversation to spiral this way.

“I’m still fighting the same demons as before. Leave that, look around you, everything is still the same. In fact, everything seems to be worse. Just yesterday, a six-year-old died from this Virus. A six-year old. How do you explain that?”

“I told this young man that God left us a long time ago, but he would not listen.” Mr. Baraza turns to Thomas, “See what I was telling you?”

“Some things are beyond our control, but God is still in control, in the good and the bad. We just need to pray things get better,” Thomas says.

“Well let’s trust scientists rather,” Mr. Baraza replies, sitting upright.

“Even science needs God.”

“I see the President inspires you, Thomas.”

“But what he said is true, Science does need God.”

After checking their temperature, Nuru goes to Mr. Baraza's bedside.

"The hospital called and they will send to us the tests result today."

This is the first time Thomas has ever heard her speak in such a low tone. When she exits the room, the room falls silent until Thomas finally speaks up.

"What tests was she talking about?"

"Before my trip, I had gone for my usual check-up at my hospital. I was ever fatigued and had bowel changes and eating problems so my doctor run some more tests on me. Oh it's probably nothing. I can guess the report will recommend a healthy diet and more exercise for an old man like me."



Nuru was always present when Doctors delivered sad news to patients and their families. Over the years, she had mastered how a patients' faces would at first be tight as a drum, trying to guess where the doctor was heading to. She could tell those who are hopeful and ones who have been accustomed to disappointments. The hopeful ones would fix their eyes right into the doctor's eyes, as if trying to track his thoughts and waiting for a tolerable verdict at last. The ones who life had disappointed would always dart their eyes across the rooms, or fixate their look at the doctor's pen, coat or anything inanimate. They had already take the blow before it was even served.

Now, she was about to deliver sad news herself. She could not stand how a patient's face contorted in pain and agony when they received a diagnosis. It was like life was being sapped out of them, and she knew they would not remain the same. Even though Nuru had witnessed that numerous times, she always felt weak and would drown in a drink to lift her spirits, and get on with her shift. If only the doctors were not all busy, she thought to herself as she approached the door. She wonders what Mr. Baraza's baseline state is, hope or disappointment? Neither suited him, he looked like he knew his place in the world, and seemed to hold life at the palm of his hand like a magician holding a crystal ball.

She enters the room, holding an envelope with the test results, and makes a beeline to Mr. Baraza's bedside.

"I need to talk to you Mr. Baraza. Although I would have preferred this to be done in a private space, we are trying as much as possible to minimize movement of those quarantined."

Mr. Baraza places his phone face down and sits on the bed. Nuru pulls the only chair in the room and hands over the envelope to Mr. Baraza. After what seems to be a long explanation in a muffled voice, Mr. Baraza breaks into a loud laughter that to dims the lights for a second.

"You mean I have cancer?"

He draws the curtain and addresses Thomas who is reading a thin book.

"She says I have cancer," he immediately turns back to Nuru, "Are you sure it's not this virus going around? I guess an old man like me can't keep up with the trends, even when it comes diseases."

He lets out a dragged laughter that borders a choke and loss of breath.

Thomas places his book down and manages to say, "I'm so sorry to hear Mr. Baraza."

“Don’t be sorry yet. They only located a tumour on your stomach lining, they don’t know if it’s cancerous or not. That is why we will transfer you to the hospital first thing tomorrow. Your doctor also needs to have a word with you,” Nuru says.

Nuru is not too surprised by Mr. Baraza’s reaction. She knew too well such kind of men. Men whose ego were beyond hope or defeat. Men who expect all the odds to favour them and if they don’t, they somehow made sure that they did, regardless of the expense. Men who made woman like her bitter, hopeless and disappointed. She recalls when she received news of her pregnancy beaming and rushing home to tell her fiancé what she thought was good news, little did she know her life would change forever. It all started with such a laugh from her beloved, and then she would be carrying disappointments everywhere like a tortoise carries its shell.



The day seems to be lasting an eternity for Mr. Baraza. After incessant calls to his wife and a few friends, he sits by the window, watching a car nestle under a stationary ambulance at the parking lot. How he wished he could find such shelter now that he felt exposed, weak and vulnerable. It is funny how life can take such a drastic turn in a short period of time. Mr. Baraza chuckles at the thought of how he made things happen so easily. A flash of money or a mention of his affiliations was enough to turn anything to his favour. He recalls especially how when he was in a hurry, he would make the necessary calls and the traffic police on his route would allow cars on his lane to pass, closing off other routes for even close to 30 minutes. Even patience had a price tag and he paid heavily to avoid getting stuck in the Nairobi traffic. It was even more amusing when he rode with one of his politician friends. The car entourage would put on lights and sirens like an ambulance and speed off on the opposite lane of the road, leaving a look of aghast to commuters stuck in traffic for hours. If now only he knew the price of death, and he would definitely cheat it.

Thomas casts glances at Mr. Baraza who seems to be in deep thought by the window.

“Are you alright Mr. Baraza?”

Mr. Baraza does not even turn to look at Thomas but says as if in a trance, “You know today I googled that story you told me. I saw that it was the Parable of the Rich Fool drawn from the Bible, Jesus’s words. So God is punishing me?”

“Not at all Mr. Baraza.”

“I am a dying man, or soon will be.”

“You will be fine. Besides, you will get treatment if it happens to be cancer.”

Mr. Baraza laughs, “Even our best facilities are not well equipped with cancer treatment. And with this pandemic, I certainly cannot travel abroad,” he lets out a snigger before proceeding. “I guess now even my money can’t help me. How unusual.”

Mr. Baraza stands and paces the room. He thinks of his wife and his two sons and realizes that he doesn’t know much about them. All he knew was that somehow they grew up on toys and money, and were now all grown and living abroad. He wondered if he would get to a chance to see his sons once more and spend time with his grandchildren. He now longed to hear the laughter of a child and not the clinking of glasses in broad boardrooms or wasteful parties.

He stops pacing and sinks on the bed, deflated and says, "I have been selfish. That's my problem."

"What?" Thomas asks, surprised

"I was an obscure figure to my wife and kids. I only ensured that their bank accounts were full but I never got to know what they did with the money. You know, what they liked. I never even spent time with them, I was busy working. Leave that, I never even cared about anyone, unless they were talking money. The longest conversation I had were business deals. Ever since you got here, I did not even try to know more about you," Mr. Baraza's looks up and his eyes flicker. "Tell me all about yourself son?"

"I don't think it is necessary, Mr. Baraza."

"It is necessary now my son. You can't say no to a dying man, can you?"

"I guess not. What would you like to know Mr. Baraza?"

"How old are you? Let's start there."

"I'm 25, sir."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

Thomas hesitates but manages to finally say, "Not really. There is this girl I like, but she is way out of my league."

"Let me tell you another secret son, no woman is ever out of your league however they may seem. Yes, they may be out of your reach but once you draw closer, you will see they are not. But men nowadays are cowards, sissies and so they don't try. Women are complex, yet simple. They look like need much, yet at times only need love, genuine love. We all need love." Mr. Baraza changes the subject as quickly as he raised it, "So where are you from?"

Thomas mentions he lives in the City's largest slum, but omits details of leaking roofs, scarce water and electricity, communal toilets, and tourists from all over the world flocking to get a glance of the definition of poverty, taking snaps of them.

"Such as smart looking boy like you is from the slum?"

"Just because we are poor doesn't mean we don't care of ourselves as much as we can."

"It's a shame I have never been to the slum yet in the last bi-election, I funded one of the candidates. I pumped in so much money for the campaign after a good politician friend of mine told me he was a good investment. We were sure we would win. We gave large sums of money to the youths to make the ballot favour us, but I guess even the poor can be disloyal. That was my major loss and it created a dent in my pockets. So when I heard that oil was discovered in the Northern part, I, with other politicians were the first to jump on the opportunity, looking how to export and make a cut. Come to think of it, I never once thought how the locals could benefit. I only took from them and gave to the rich and ruthless, because I was rich and ruthless."

Thomas sits quietly and watches Mr. Baraza, who now embodies their rich landlord who occasionally rolled up in his Range Rover to collect dues from a dozen tin-roofed houses around, then drove off. Mr. Baraza shakes him out of his thoughts.

"I had so much money and influence and I did nothing meaningful. I somehow forgot to live the African way, as Sankara says. The Spirit of Ubuntu left me and now..." Mr. Baraza raises his index finger as if shushing himself. "Now I know what to do. How much money do you need?"

"What money Mr. Baraza, I don't understand?"

"How much money would it cost to make your precision farming idea a reality?"

"I don't think I need money, besides I got great sum of money alongside the award."

"No, take it as my gift to you. If I die, at least I know I made an impact. If I live to see it, the better."

"But I do not want to cause a dent further in your accounts. Use it for your family."

Mr. Baraza laughs hysterically and finally speaks, "When a rich man tells you he is broke, he still has a couple of millions in his accounts. Besides, my children are all grown up and do not accept my money and my wife has plenty of her own."

Mr. Baraza reaches for his jet-black suitcase at his bedside and removes a cheque book. He scribbles fast and tears two leaves. As he hands them to Thomas, Nuru enters without warning.

"It's Christmas already and I see that you Mr. Baraza is Santa."

"What?! One million? Is this right Mr. Baraza?" Thomas explains.

"It's the least I could do, son."

"It seems like today everyone's life is changing," Nuru says smiling.

"Well, yours also seems to have changed. You are smiling Nurse and that is unusual," Mr. Baraza says.

Nuru adjust herself and sits on the chair, placing her clipboard on her lap carefully in a theatrical manner.

"Since I am excited to share this news and have no one else to tell, I guess I can tell you guys. So remember I mentioned the six-year-old who died from the virus? Well, I have a daughter, same age. When I heard the girl had died, the only thing I could think about was my daughter. What if it was her?" Nuru takes a deep breath and proceeds, "When I learnt I was pregnant with her, I was so excited, but when I told my fiancé the news, he sat me down with a smug look and said we were not ready for a baby and asked me to abort. When I refused, he simply left. Since then, I was filled with anger, bitterness and even got depressed. I groped in darkness for a long time even though my name *Nuru* means light, ironic isn't it?"

Both Mr. Baraza and Thomas keep silent, stunned that the serious nurse is showing emotions.

"After my daughter's birth I started drinking, even at work just to feel numb. I did not take good care of her and eventually my parents took her in," Nuru's face switches to a smile, "But after what I just saw a few minutes ago, I know what to do. You see, a patient in a ventilator was in critical condition. He was gasping heavily and his chest was rising and falling dramatically and I thought he would die, but he finally made it. At that moment, I saw God in the gaps and realized that God is with us in our struggles and if we hold on to Him, we come out alive. It might be after one long gasp, or as many as fifteen, or twenty or a million, it doesn't matter. This pandemic for sure is teaching me how to fight and live."

“Well, lucky you. For me it is certainly teaching me how to loose and die,” Mr. Baraza says.

They all turn facing Thomas.

“And you Thomas? What has the pandemic teaching you?” Mr. Baraza asks.

“Well, I guess it has been teaching me to be in between fighting and loosing, living and dying.”