

# THE DOING AND UNDOING OF JACOB E. MWANGI

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**E. Lily Yu received the 2012 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer and the 2017 Artist Trust/Gar LaSalle Storyteller Award. Her fiction can be found everywhere from “McSweeney’s” to “Terraform” to Tor.com. Stories of hers have been finalists for the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards, and have been reprinted in eight best-of-the-year anthologies. Lily’s first tale for us examines the lives of some underachievers and . . .**

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On Sunday after services, Jacob Esau Mwangi beat a hasty retreat from the crowd that descended upon his beaming parents and Mercy, who on this rare visit home between Lent and Easter terms was displayed between them like a tulip arrangement.

“What a daughter! Be a famous professor soon.”

“You have not forgotten about us common people? Cambridge makes all the children forget. They act so embarrassed when they come home—”

“Funny to think they both come from the same family.”

“It’s very strange, isn’t it?”

“Where did he go anyway, that Jacob boy?”

Jacob, outside the chapel’s blue acrylic domes, caught the first flying matatu without regard for where it went.

He glowered out the window at the holograms of giraffes and rhinos that stalked the streets, flashing advertisements both local and multinational. A lion yawned and stretched among the potted plants at the center of a traffic circle, the words DRINK MORE JINGA COLA scrolling along its tawny flanks.

Twenty-five years ago, the gleam and gloss of digital advertisements had divided the globetrotting Kenyan Haves from the shilling-counting Have Nots who shopped

at tin-sided street stalls with painted signs. Now that that partition was obsolete, humanity had split itself into Doers and Don'ts. Jacob's mathe and old man were devoted Doers, an architect and an engineer. Every month they asked Jacob if he had created anything lately, and every month, when he gave them a cheerful shrug, they flung up their palms in ritualized despair.

The matatu halted and hovered while more people crammed on.

Jacob had no stomach for returning to his apartment, a windowless box in Kawangware that he had picked specifically for its distance from the family manse. He unrolled his penphone and selected Rob's name.

sorry can't

dame. tell u later

hey, game time?

what's going?

sawa

Outside the window the tidy six-story buildings of Kibera Collective flashed wholesome mottos in LEDs. *Pick up after yourself. Harambee. Together we can remake the world.* Jacob frowned absently, mapping his route in his head. If he swapped matatus here, the next would take him as far as Black Nile Lounge. The Black Nile was his usual base, though he'd venture as far east as the Monsoon Club if Rob was joining. You did that for a brother.

And Rob was his brother in all the ways that mattered, just as his gaming group was his true family: Robert and nocturnal Ann from Wisconsin and Chao from Tennessee, as well as sixty guildmembers from places as exotic as Anchorage and Korea who formed a far-flung network of cousins and in-laws, as full of gossip and grudges and backbiting and broken promises as the real thing. They were all Don'ts, of course. Doers played too, intermittently, but the Don'ts slaughtered them all, every match, always.

The no-man's-land between the Doers and Don'ts was as close as anything came to a war these days. Though the lines were deeply entrenched and wreathed in verbal barbed wire, and battles pitched as often in PvP as over dinner tables, no real bullets were ever fired. There had been little of that since the days of the Howl.

No one liked to speak of the Howl, of the blood that darkened and dried in the streets, of the mind virus that had reawakened after a century of dormancy to sow chaos and fear.

For out of the Howl had come the great Compassion, when, like a strange flowering in a sunless cave, the fervent prayers of adherents of every faith and the ferocious meditations of the variously spiritual, bet-hedging, and confused had reached critical mass, triggering a deep immune response in the human psyche. As if struck by lightning, the five billion survivors of the Howl had let the rifles and knives fall out of their hands, then embraced, or dropped to their knees and wept.

It was like God Himself sat down and talked with me, Jacob's mathe liked to say, and his old man would nod solemnly, yes, that was how it was.

By the fiftieth time he heard this exchange, Jacob was ready to pitch a can of Jinga Cola at each of their heads. He had not known the Compassion, having been born shortly afterward, and was thoroughly sick of hearing about it.

During the three years that the Compassion lasted, dazed legislators in every country redistributed wealth and built up healthcare and social services, while the wealthy deeded entire islands and bank accounts to the UN. Petty crime and begging vanished from Nairobi's streets. House gates were propped open. Askaris found no work and opened flower stands and safari companies. Kibera shantytown self-organized, pooled surplus funds, and built communal housing with plumbing and internet.

Gradually, as memories of the Compassion faded, life returned to a semblance of

normalcy. Rush-hour drivers again cursed each other's mothers, and politicians returned to trading favors and taking tea money. But there remained a certain shining quality about life, if looked at the right way—or so Jacob's elders said.

The most important outcome of all that ancient history, as far as Jacob was concerned, was the monthly deposit in his account that the Kenyan government styled Dream Seeds, distributed to every resident not already receiving a stipend from another government. This paid for Jacob's bachelor pad and now, as he touched his pen to a scanner, for the Black Nile entry fee, a handful of miraa, and a bottle of beer.

The man in the booth assigning cubes handed Jacob a keycard marked 16 and said hopefully, "Maybe a Kenyan game today, sir? My brother's studio, I can recommend—" "Maybe another day, boss."

"You cannot blame a man for trying. Japanese fantasy war sims again?"

"Good guess."

"I like to know my customers." He sighed. "I don't know how we will compete, you see. Our industry has just been born—theirs is fifty, sixty years old."

"You will find a way," Jacob said, to escape.

The door to the VR cube hissed open. Jacob lasered the title he wanted on the wall—*Ogrefall: Visions of Conquest*—then donned the headset and gauntlets, which stank of sweat. In a higher-end establishment the gear would be wiped down with lavender towelettes between uses, and tiny pores in the wall would jet out molecules of the scent libraries shipped with the games, odors of forest and moss, leather and steel, but Black Nile was a business scratched out of hope and savings from jua kali, the owner a Doer to his core, and the game loads were all secondhand.

Jacob launched the game and became a silver lion with braided mane, ten feet tall and scarred from battle. Ann and Chao were already online, knee-deep in the corpses of ogres and the occasional unfortunate Doer, their whoops of joy ringing in his ears.

"Hey! No Rob?" Ann asked.

"Some dame," Jacob said, placing his paw over his heart. "He's a goner."

"You say that every time," Chao said. "And you're always wrong. Rob gets bored faster than anyone else I know. I give her fifteen minutes, max."

Ann said, "We're storming Bluefell right now. Figured you two'd be along. I don't know what we'll do without Rob."

"Let's run it," Chao said. "Rob will catch up to us."

They battled their way up a snowy mountain, pines creaking and shaking lumps of snow down on them. Ice demons lunged and jeered and raked their faces. Ann died. Chao died. Jacob died. Their vision went black, and then they found themselves at the foot of the mountain.

"Again?" Chao said.

Again they wiped.

"This is bullshit," Ann said. "I give up."

"Hi, guys," Rob said. "What are we playing today?"

"Told you," Chao said.

"Where are you?" Jacob said. "And where's your girl?"

"Took you long enough," Chao said. "Twenty-four minutes. A new record."

"She's here with me. We're at Monsoon. Trying to skip the tutorial. Hang on."

A moment later, there she was. Purple-haired and elf-eared, in novice's robes.

"Good," Ann said. "Five's more than enough, even with an egg. Here, I've got a spare bow."

The new girl looked around. "Wow, they pushed their graphics to the limit. But they're still using the Conifer engine—ooh—and it has that vulnerability they didn't do a full distro patch for. I wonder what happens if—"

Jacob blinked. She was suddenly wearing a gallimaufry of gear, harlequin in color

and decorated with the taste of a drunken weaverbird. But her character now displayed a respectable power level.

Ann and Chao stared in horror.

"What? Is it the colors? I can change those—give me a cycle—"

"Robert," Ann said, very slowly. "What does she *do*?"

"Oh, I'm a programmer, mostly. I make indie games with two friends from university. Ever heard of *Duka Stories*? That was us."

"Guys—" Rob began.

"She's a Doer," Chao said. "You picked up a Doer."

"This is Consolata. We've been dating for three months."

"It's nice to meet you! What do you all do?" She turned toward Jacob, sparkling with hope.

Jacob growled.

"Fuck this," Ann said, and logged off.

Chao said, "Not cool, man. Not cool at all. Hit me up when she's history—or don't, I don't care."

And he was gone.

"Did I do something wrong?" Consolata said.

"I—" Rob sighed. "I didn't know they'd be like that."

"Really," Jacob said. "You did not know."

"Nah, Jacob—"

"There is a reason why we do not cross the line. Doers are evangelical. Listen to her. Next thing, you'll be an entrepreneur, or a community leader, shaking the hand of every aunty in church. You will shake their hands, and you will say, I feel so sorry for that Jacob boy, he never applied himself to anything. Chao, oh, what a waste of intellect. Poor Ann, I'm sure she could have been amazing at anything, if only she tried—"

"Because of a dame? You think a dame could do that to me? What's eating you?"

"Mercy's home," Jacob said, letting his lion-face curl into a snarl.

"Ee. I see. I'm sorry—"

"No. Not today," Jacob said, and logged off. He tore the gauntlets from his hands. Then he saved the game logs to his phone, to remind himself of what a rat Rob was, and stormed out of the Black Nile. It was ten long and dusty blocks home. Jacob stomped and swore his way up the concrete stairs.

At the top, Mercy was waiting for him.

"Look," she said, matching him step for step as he backpedaled down the stairs, "I don't like it either, Jacob, kweli, all the church ladies up in my face with 'When are you going to get married, I have a nephew just your age.' Once I got away I took a taxi here—"

"Go back to Cambridge and all that stupid grass you can't touch, and all that colonial-in-the-metropolis crap you like so much."

"You do read my emails." She beamed. "I had wondered."

"Get lost."

"You have potential up to here, Jacob. You are crackling with the stuff. The problem is, you don't see it yourself."

"Mathe put you up to this."

"Nobody put me up to this. What I wanted to say was—Jacob, wait. As soon as I have a job, which will be soon, I'm interviewing all over Europe right now—as soon as I'm settled, I want to pay for your university. All you have to do is pick a course."

"I hate to break it to you, sis dear, but these days university is free. So take your money and—"

"I don't mean university in Kenya. Maybe China. Tsinghua University? Shanghai Tech? Maybe the U.S. Wherever you like. Dream big. Some travel would be good for

you.”

“Mercy,” Jacob said, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. Four steps above him, she wobbled on her acrylic heels, clinging to the balustrade. “This is all I want. I’m happy. Leave me alone.”

“If you think I’m going to just—”

“Yes. You are.”

“Well,” Mercy said, “You have my number. When you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

“Ee, twenty-two years and you’re still as fussy as an infant.”

“Kwaheri, Mercy.”

He stepped sideways and waved her down the stairs. Mercy descended. Before she passed him she put a hand on his shoulder.

“I care about you,” she said. “Would I be this obnoxious if I didn’t?”

“Please, find a nice wazungu or wahindi at Cambridge to torture instead of me. Try the maths department. I hear they’re just as odd as you are.”

A hawk-eyed taxi driver slowed and hovered at the curb.

“Bye, Jacob.”

“Piss off, Mercy.”

And Jacob went up to his tiny room and flung himself down, wondering why it felt like an elephant had stepped on his chest.

Something important that he’d overlooked tickled the back of his eyelids until he awoke.

Ah. Jacob rolled over in bed and grabbed his penphone. There, in the previous day’s logs, was the anomaly: the moment when Consolata went from starter gear to a hodgepodge of expert-level bits. The game logs showed a line of code injected at the exact time she twisted her left hand into a complicated shape like a mudra.

Jacob searched online for the snippet of code and found lengthy discussions of a developer-mode trigger in three unpatched, two-year-old, Conifer-based games. After an hour or two of reading he thought he had the gist of it.

As Jacob, clearly the first customer of the day, came in, the man at Black Nile yawned and waved his hand over the array of keycards.

“Any of them. Be my guest.”

Jacob loaded *Ogrefall* first. Pasting in the code snippet from his phone, he contorted his left hand—here a silver paw—into the shape he remembered and had practiced that morning.

*Blip.*

His rare and beautiful endgame armor was gone. It had been replaced by an eye-smarting farrago of gear. Only now each item showed a purple variable name floating over its center. He could have kicked himself for his carelessness—the Nebula Paladin set had taken sixty-four hours to complete—but wonder and fascination won out over regret. Holding the same awkward mudra as before, Jacob tapped his lotus-stamped breastplate and toggled the number at the end of the variable.

The lotus transformed into a winged lion rampant, the metal from silver to bur-nished gold.

When Jacob raised his eyes, he noticed that the ice demons hissing and swooping nearby had variables too. Soon he was sending them jitterbugging this way and that and spiraling helplessly off the edge of a cliff.

Was this what the world looked like from the other side?

The other two games that the tweaker forums mentioned, a historical shooter and a haunted-house platformer, permitted similar manipulations. Jacob stood in the middle of floating words and numbers, changing the world around him with hardly

more than a thought. He had become a god in these three small worlds. Ann and Chao would explode from envy. He suppressed a grin.

Then the screens went dark, and the harsh after-hours lights in the cube flashed on. Jacob struggled out of the VR rig, perplexed. He prodded buttons and lasered the empty wall. Nothing happened.

The door clicked, and the manager came in.

"Sorry sir," he said. "Your account has been banned for cheating. Same thing happened over at the Monsoon Club yesterday. We got the automated warnings just now, straight from Japan. One-month ban from all Japanese games. Very sorry about that."

The room spun. Perhaps *Oakley's* graphics had been subpar.

A month? Ann and Chao wouldn't wait a month. They'd find some new Don't, fresh out of secondary school or the military or a ruined thirty-year marriage, to replace him. To replace both him and Rob, now.

"I can see this is not easy news, sir. Not easy for me, either. You are a loyal customer."

"All Japanese games."

"Correct."

"What about other regions?"

"Cross-platform automatic two-week bans in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australia."

"But not Africa?"

"Not Africa. We're not advanced enough to be asked to sign those agreements yet."

"I think—" Jacob swallowed. "I think I'd like to try *Duka Stories*, if you have it."

The manager smiled. "Of course. Supporting the local economy, local artists, local products, that is one of my business goals."

Consolata's game turned out to be a simple duka simulator. Jacob had to clear the ground, hammer the corrugated iron sides of the shop together, and stock its shelves with what he blindly guessed might appeal to the neighborhood. The art was hand-painted, probably by one of Consolata's friends, the music easy and old-fashioned. The grandmothers who stopped by for spices pinched his cheeks and told him in quavering voices how glad they were to have him there, only couldn't he make an exception for them on the prices, everything being so expensive these days?

By the end of his first day in business, an hour into the game, Jacob was bankrupt and rapt.

Six hours later his business had been flattened twice, once by a student protest, once by askaris demanding protection money. Each time he built it up again, making brightly lettered promises to his worried customers. In the meantime he sent his painted children to school in uniforms with books and pens and crayons, an accomplishment that turned his heart to sugar. The game lacked the gloss that he was used to, but he had met the person who had created it. All of this, from three women!

An impossible thought arose in him. He refused to look at it directly. No, never. Maybe for money. Enough money. And only for a while.

"Boss," he said, emerging from the cube, "you said your brother runs a game studio?"

"He does," the manager said.

"Would he give me a job, do you think?"

"You should ask him yourself." The manager closed the game of bao he had been playing on his ancient iPhone, a bashed-up brick of third-hand tech, and pulled up a number.

"Yes, I have a young man here, regular customer, plays all the new games, wants to know if you have a job for him." He turned to Jacob. "He says go ahead, send him your portfolio."

"My portfolio?"

"Yes, art, music, design, whatever it is you want to work in. He says he doesn't

have a portfolio. Hm? Okay. My brother says you should take courses in those things, whatever interests you, and come back when you can *do* something.” He set the iPhone down.

“Thanks,” Jacob said, because there was nothing else he could say. He slouched out of the Black Nile, brow furrowed with thought.

\* \* \*

Since there was nowhere else to meet, he invited Ann and Chao to visit his spruced-up duka, where they stood around sipping virtual sodas and blocking customers from their programmed paths.

Chao said, suspicion dripping from every syllable of his Southern drawl, “Run that by me again.”

“I’m going to take some university courses so I can get a job, and then when I have enough saved up for a VR rig of my own, I’ll quit and game full-time, twenty-four-seven.”

Ann said, “I think the only person you’re fooling is yourself.”

“Don’t be like that. You have no idea how much a rig costs in Nairobi. It’s not like the U.S., where, what, one third of your monthly stipend buys one? More like two years’ stipend for us. I want to game, but I also need to eat.”

“If you say so,” Ann said.

“Plus they’ve banned me from all Japanese-owned servers for a month, and other major regions for the next two weeks. This way I can *do* something.” Hearing his own words, he stopped.

“So these courses,” Chao said. “They’re in . . . management? Administration?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

“Okay. That’s almost as good as not doing anything. I wish you’d said something earlier, though. We could have crowdfunded you a console, as a guild.”

“My parents would never let me live that down.”

“We’re going to miss you,” Ann said abruptly. “I mean, Robbie, and now you . . .”

“Hey,” Jacob said. “I’ll still be online. And I’ll still game with you, once this ban is done.”

Her character hugged his. “Don’t let the Doers get you.”

“I won’t.”

“If you see Rob—” Chao said.

“Yes?”

“Never mind.”

\* \* \*

It was, in fact, on a gleaming skybridge of the Chiromo campus of the University of Nairobi that Jacob next saw Robert, two thick textbooks wedged under his arm. Rob walked quickly, with purpose, in the flood between classes; then, with a start, his eyes met Jacob’s, and his face broke into a pleased and embarrassed smile.

“You caught me,” Rob said.

“What are you studying?”

“Astronomy. I wanted to discover a planet, as a kid. Somehow I forgot. Then somebody reminded me.”

“You and Consolata—”

“Still together.”

“Good for you.”

They stood there awkwardly, toe to toe, as students streamed past.

“So what brings you here?” Rob said eventually.

“Intro to Programming.”

“What? Here? You?”

“And some art classes.”

"Art!" Rob laughed, his teeth flashing.

"I'm going to design games. Please don't tell Mercy."

"I'm not a monster." Rob paused. "You'll have to, though. Eventually. And if you're serious, Ann and Chao—"

"That will bite."

"It will. Also, so you know, I would never say—"

"I know."

"We should play together sometime," Rob said, punching his shoulder. "Consolata's releasing her new game next month. It's called *Love and War: The Story of a Doer and a Don't*. There'll be a party. You should come."

Jacob smiled. "If the beer's good, maybe. Maybe I will."

The two of them knocked knuckles with half-embarrassed, half-conspiratorial smiles. The sun beat down hot and golden on the campus as they passed and went their separate ways, each chasing, in his own heart, down a twisting road, the dim and indeterminate beginnings of a dream.